

## Harriet Beecher Stowe

The daughter and sister of famous Congregational clergymen, Stowe (1811–1896) caused a sensation in 1852 with the publication of her *Uncle Tom's Cabin, or Life Among the Lowly*, arguably the most popular and influential novel of the 19th century. Although it is widely credited with intensifying the sectional crisis by vivifying the horrors of slavery for a wider public, there is no evidence that Lincoln himself ever read the book. However, in June 1862 he did borrow from the Library of Congress a copy of her 1853 companion volume, *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin; Presenting the Original Facts and Documents upon which the Story is Founded*. Several months later Stowe finally met Lincoln at the White House, where, according to Stowe family tradition, he greeted her with the words: “Is this the little woman who made this great war?” Stowe originally wrote this portrait for the *Christian Watchman and Reflector*; it achieved greater circulation when it was reprinted in the magazine *The Living Age*.

## Abraham Lincoln

The revolution through which the American nation is passing is not a mere local convulsion. It is a war for a principle which concerns all mankind. It is THE war for the rights of the working classes of mankind, as against the usurpation of privileged aristocracies. You can make nothing else of it. That is the reason why, like a shaft of light in the judgment-day, it has gone through all nations, dividing to the right and the left the multitudes. *For* us and our cause, all the common working classes of Europe—all that toil and sweat and are oppressed. *Against* us, all privileged classes, nobles, princes, bankers, and great manufacturers, and all who live at ease. A silent instinct, piercing to the dividing of soul and spirit, joints and marrow, has gone through the earth, and sent every soul with instinctive certainty where it belongs. The poor laborers of Birmingham and Manchester, the poor silk weavers of Lyons, to whom our conflict has been

present starvation and lingering death, have stood bravely *for* us. No sophistries could blind or deceive *them*; they knew that *our* cause was *their* cause, and they have suffered their part heroically, as if fighting by our side, because they knew that our victory was to be their victory. On the other side, all aristocrats and holders of exclusive privileges have felt the instinct of opposition, and the sympathy with a struggling aristocracy, for they, too, feel that our victory will be their doom.

This great contest has visibly been held in the hands of Almighty God, and is a fulfilment of the solemn prophecies with which the Bible is sown thick as stars, that he would spare the soul of the needy, and judge the cause of the poor. It was he who chose the instrument for this work, and he chose him with a visible reference to the rights and interests of the great majority of mankind, for which he stands.

Abraham Lincoln is in the strictest sense *a man of the working classes*. All his advantages and abilities are those of a man of the working classes; all his disadvantages and disabilities are those of a man of the working classes; and his position now at the head of one of the most powerful nations of the earth, is a sign to all who live by labor that their day is coming. Lincoln was born to the inheritance of hard work as truly as the poorest laborer's son that digs in our fields. At seven years of age he was set to work, axe in hand, to clear up a farm in a Western forest. Until he was seventeen his life was that of a simple farm laborer, with only such intervals of schooling as farm laborers get. Probably the school instruction of his whole life would not amount to more than one year. At nineteen he made a trip to New Orleans as a hired hand on a flat boat, and on his return he split the rails for a log cabin and built it, and enclosed ten acres of land with a rail fence of his own handiwork. The next year he hired himself for twelve dollars a month to build a flat boat and take her to New Orleans; and any one who knows what the life of a Mississippi boatman was in those days, must know that it involved every kind of labor. In 1832, in the Black Hawk Indian War, the hardy boatman volunteered to fight for his country, and was unanimously elected a captain, and served with honor for a season in frontier military life. After this, while serving as a postmaster, he

began his law studies, borrowing the law books he was too poor to buy, and studying by the light of his evening fire. He acquired a name in the country about as a man of resources and shrewdness; he was one that people looked to for counsel in exigencies, and to whom they were ready to depute almost any enterprise which needed skill and energy. The surveyor of Sangamon County being driven with work, came to him to take the survey of a tract off from his hands. True, he had never studied surveying—but what of that? He accepted the “job,” procured a chain, a treatise on surveying, and *did the work*. Do we not see in this a parable of the wider wilderness which in later years he has undertaken to survey and fit for human habitation *without* chart or surveyor’s chain?

In 1836 our backwoodsman, flat-boat hand, captain, surveyor, obtained a license to practise law, and, as might be expected, rose rapidly.

His honesty, shrewdness, energy, and keen practical insight into men and things soon made him the most influential man in his State. He became the reputed leader of the Whig party, and canvassed the State as stump speaker in time of Henry Clay, and in 1846 was elected representative to Congress. Here he met the grinding of the great question of the day—the upper and nether millstone of slavery and freedom revolving against each other. Lincoln’s whole nature inclined him to be a harmonizer of conflicting parties rather than a committed combatant on either side. He was firmly and from principle an enemy to slavery—but the ground he occupied in Congress was in some respects a middle one between the advance guard of the anti-slavery and the spears of the fire-eaters. He voted with John Quincy Adams for the receipt of anti-slavery petitions; he voted with Giddings for a committee of inquiry into the constitutionality of slavery in the District of Columbia, and the expediency of abolishing slavery in that District; he voted for the various resolutions prohibiting slavery in the territories to be acquired from Mexico, and he voted forty-two times for the Wilmot Proviso. In Jan. 16, 1849, he offered a plan for abolishing slavery in the District of Columbia, by compensation from the national treasury, with the consent of a majority of the citizens. He opposed the an-

nexation of Texas, but voted for the bill to pay the expenses of the war.

But at the time of the repeal of the Missouri Compromise he took the field, heart and soul, against the plot to betray our territories to slavery. It was mainly owing to his exertions that at this critical period a Republican Senator was elected from Illinois, when a Republican Senator in the trembling national scales of the conflict was worth a thousand times his weight in gold.

Little did the Convention that nominated Abraham Lincoln for President know what they were doing. Little did the honest, fatherly, patriotic man, who stood in his simplicity on the platform at Springfield, asking the prayers of his townsmen and receiving their pledges to remember him, foresee how awfully he was to need those prayers, the prayers of all this nation, and the prayers of all the working, suffering common people throughout the world. God's hand was upon him with a visible protection, saving first from the danger of assassination at Baltimore and bringing him safely to our national capital. Then the world has seen and wondered at the greatest sign and marvel of our day, to wit; a plain working man of the people, with no more culture, instruction, or education than any such working man may obtain for himself, called on to conduct the passage of a great people through a crisis involving the destinies of the whole world. The eyes of princes, nobles, aristocrats, of dukes, earls, scholars, statesmen, warriors, all turned on the plain backwoodsman, with his simple sense, his imperturbable simplicity, his determined self-reliance, his impracticable and incorruptible honesty, as he sat amid the war of conflicting elements, with unpretending steadiness, striving to guide the national ship through a channel at whose perils the world's oldest statesmen stood aghast. The brilliant courts of Europe levelled their opera-glasses at the phenomenon. Fair ladies saw that he had horny hands and disdained white gloves. Dapper diplomatists were shocked at his system of etiquette; but old statesmen, who knew the terrors of that passage, were wiser than court ladies and dandy diplomatists, and watched him with a fearful curiosity, simply asking, "*Will* that awkward old backwoodsman really get that ship through? If he does, it will be time for us to look about us."

Sooth to say, our own politicians were somewhat shocked with his state-papers at first. Why not let *us* make them a little more conventional, and file them to a classical pattern? "No," was his reply, "I shall write them myself. *The people will understand them.*" "But this or that form of expression is not elegant, not classical." "*The people will understand it,*" has been his invariable reply. And whatever may be said of his state-papers, as compared with the classic standards, it has been a fact that they have always been wonderfully well understood by the people, and that since the time of Washington, the state-papers of no President have more controlled the popular mind. And one reason for this is, that they have been informal and undiplomatic. They have more resembled a father's talks to his children than a state-paper. And they have had that relish and smack of the soil, that appeal to the simple human heart and head, which is a greater power in writing than the most artful devices of rhetoric. Lincoln might well say with the apostle, "But though I be rude in speech yet not in knowledge, but we have been thoroughly *made manifest among you* in all things." His rejection of what is called fine writing was as deliberate as St. Paul's, and for the same reason—because he felt that he was speaking on a subject which must be made clear to the lowest intellect, though it should fail to captivate the highest. But we say of Lincoln's writing, that for all true, manly purposes of writing, there are passages in his state-papers that could not be better put; they are absolutely perfect. They are brief, condensed, intense, and with a power of insight and expression which make them worthy to be inscribed in letters of gold. Such are some passages of the celebrated Springfield letter, especially that masterly one where he compares the conduct of the patriotic and loyal blacks with that of the treacherous and disloyal whites. No one can read this letter without feeling the influence of a mind both strong and generous.

Lincoln is a strong man, but his strength is of a peculiar kind; it is not aggressive so much as passive, and among passive things, it is like the strength not so much of a stone buttress as of a wire cable. It is strength swaying to every influence, yielding on this side and on that to popular needs, yet tenaciously and inflexibly bound to carry its great end; and probably by no other kind of

strength could our national ship have been drawn safely thus far during the tossings and tempests which beset her way.

Surrounded by all sorts of conflicting claims, by traitors, by half-hearted, timid men, by Border States men, and Free States men, by radical Abolitionists and Conservatives, he has listened to all, weighed the words of all, waited, observed, yielded now here and now there, but in the main kept one inflexible, honest purpose, and drawn the national ship through.

In times of our trouble Abraham Lincoln has had his turn of being the best abused man of our nation. Like Moses leading his Israel through the wilderness, he has seen the day when every man seemed ready to stone him, and yet, with simple, wiry, steady perseverance, he has held on, conscious of honest intentions, and looking to God for help. All the nation have felt, in the increasing solemnity of his proclamations and papers, how deep an education was being wrought in his mind by this simple faith in God, the ruler of nations, and this humble willingness to learn the awful lessons of his providence.

We do not mean to give the impression that Lincoln is a religious man in the sense in which that term is popularly applied. We believe he has never made any such profession, but we see evidence that in passing through this dreadful national crisis he has been forced by the very anguish of the struggle to look upward, where any rational creature must look for support. No man in this agony has suffered more and deeper, albeit with a dry, weary, patient pain, that seemed to some like insensibility. "Whichever way it ends," he said to the writer, "I have the impression that *I sha'n't* last long after it's over." After the dreadful repulse of Fredericksburg, his heavy eyes and worn and weary air told how our reverses wore upon him, and yet there was a never-failing fund of patience at bottom that sometimes rose to the surface in some droll, quaint saying, or story, that forced a laugh even from himself.

There have been times with many, of impetuous impatience, when our national ship seemed to lie water-logged and we have called aloud for a deliverer of another fashion,—a brilliant general, a dashing, fearless statesman, a man who could dare and do, who would stake all on a die, and win or lose by a brilliant

*coup de main*. It may comfort our minds that since He who ruleth in the armies of nations set no such man to this work, that perhaps He saw in the man whom He did send some peculiar fitness and aptitudes therefor.

Slow and careful in coming to resolutions, willing to talk with every person who has anything to show on any side of a disputed subject, long in weighing and pondering, attached to constitutional limits and time-honored landmarks, Lincoln certainly was the *safest* leader a nation could have at a time when the *habeas corpus* must be suspended, and all the constitutional and minor rights of citizens be thrown into the hands of their military leader. A reckless, bold, theorizing dashing man of genius might have wrecked our Constitution and ended us in a splendid military despotism.

Among the many accusations which in hours of ill-luck have been thrown out upon Lincoln, it is remarkable that he has never been called self-seeking, or selfish. When we were troubled and sat in darkness, and looked doubtfully towards the presidential chair, it was never that we doubted the goodwill of our pilot—only the clearness of his eyesight. But Almighty God has granted to him that clearness of vision which he gives to the true-hearted, and enabled him to set his honest foot in that promised land of freedom which is to be the patrimony of all men, black and white—and from henceforth nations shall rise up to call him blessed.

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