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Harriet (Elizabeth) Beecher Stowe

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About this Person

Born: June 14, 1811 in Litchfield, Connecticut, United States

Died: July 01, 1896 in Hartford, Connecticut, United States

Nationality: American

Occupation: Writer

Other Names: Stowe, Harriet Elizabeth; Stowe, Harriet Elizabeth Beecher; Crowfield, Christopher; Stowe, Harriet; Beecher, Harriet Elizabeth

Updated: Sept. 5, 2003

PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Family: Born June 14, 1811, in Litchfield, CT; died July 1, 1896, in Hartford, CT; buried in Andover, MA; daughter of Lyman (a Congregational minister) and Roxana (Foote) Beecher; married Calvin Ellis Stowe (a professor of Biblical literature), January 6, 1836; children: Eliza and Harriet (twins), Henry, Frederick, Georgiana, Samuel, Charles. Education: Attended Ma'am Kilbourne's School, Litchfield Academy, and Hartford Female Seminary.

CAREER:

Early in her career, assisted sister, Catherine, with teaching at Hartford Female Seminary, Hartford, CT, and taught at Western Female Seminary, Cincinnati, OH; writer, 1834-96.

AWARDS:

First prize in Litchfield Academy essay contest, c. 1823; first prize in *Western Monthly* magazine contest, 1834, for story "A New England Sketch."

WORKS:

WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

- *Prize Tale: A New England Sketch*, Gilman, 1834.
- *The Mayflower; or, Sketches of Scenes and Characters among the Descendants of the Pilgrims*, Harper, 1843, expanded edition published as *The Mayflower and Miscellaneous Writings*, Phillips, Sampson, 1855.
- *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life among the Lowly*, two volumes, Jewett, Proctor & Worthington, 1852.
- *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin: Presenting the Original Facts and Documents upon which the Story is Founded*, Jewett, Proctor & Worthington, 1853.
- *Uncle Sam's Emancipation: Earthly Care, a Heavenly Discipline, and Other Sketches*, Hazard, 1853.
- *Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands*, two volumes, Phillips, Sampson/Derby, 1854.
- *The Christian Slave: A Drama Founded on a Portion of Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Phillips, Sampson, 1855.
- *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*, two volumes, Phillips, Sampson, 1856, published as *Nina Gordon: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*, two volumes, Ticknor & Fields, 1866.
- *Our Charley, and What to Do With Him*, Phillips, Sampson, 1858.
- *The Minister's Wooing*, Derby & Jackson, 1859.
- *The Pearl of Orr's Island: A Story of the Coast of Maine*, Ticknor & Fields, 1862.
- *Agnes of Sorrento*, Ticknor & Fields, 1862.
- *A Reply to "The Affectionate and Christian Address of Many Thousands of Women of Great Britain and Ireland to Their Sisters, the Women of the United States of America,"* Low, 1863.
- *Religious Poems*, Ticknor & Fields, 1867.

- *Stories about Our Dogs*, Nimmo, 1867.
- *The Daisy's First Winter, and Other Stories*, Fields, Osgood, 1867, revised edition published as *Queer Little Folks*, Nelson, 1886.
- *Queer Little People*, Ticknor & Fields, 1867.
- *Men of Our Times; or, Leading Patriots of the Day*, Hartford Publishing, 1868, published as *The Lives and Deeds of Our Self-made Men*, Worthington, Dustin, 1872.
- *Oldtown Folks*, Fields, Osgood, 1869.
- *Lady Byron Vindicated: A History of the Byron Controversy, from Its Beginning in 1816 to the Present Time*, Fields, Osgood, 1870.
- *Little Pussy Willow*, Fields, Osgood, 1870.
- *My Wife and I; or, Harry Henderson's History*, Ford, 1871.
- *Pink and White Tyranny: A Society Novel*, Roberts, 1871.
- *Oldtown Fireside Stories*, Osgood, 1872, expanded edition published as *Sam Lawson's Oldtown Fireside Stories*, Houghton, Mifflin, 1881.
- (With Edward Everett Hale, Lucretia Peabody Hale, and others) *Six of One by Half a Dozen of the Other: An Every Day Novel*, Roberts, 1872.
- *Palmetto-Leaves*, Osgood, 1873.
- *Woman in Sacred History*, Fords, Howard & Hulbert, 1873, published as *Bible Heroines*, 1878.
- *Betty's Bright Idea: Also Deacon Pitkin's Farm, and The First Christmas of New England*, National Temperance Society & Publishing House, 1875.
- *We and Our Neighbors; or, The Records of an Unfashionable Street*, Ford, 1875.
- *Footsteps of the Master*, Ford, 1877.
- *Poganuc People: Their Loves and Lives*, Fords, Howard & Hulbert, 1878.
- *A Dog's Mission; or, The Story of the Old Avery House and Other Stories*, Fords, Howard & Hulbert, 1880.

WITH SISTER, CATHERINE BEECHER

- *Primary Geography for Children on an Improved Plan*, Corey, Webster & Fairbank, 1833.
- *The American Woman's Home*, Ford, 1869, revised and enlarged edition published as *The New Housekeeper's Manual*, Ford, 1874.

UNDER PSEUDONYM CHRISTOPHER CROWFIELD

- *House and Home Papers*, Ticknor & Fields, 1865.
- *Little Foxes*, Ticknor & Fields, 1866.
- *The Chimney Corner*, Ticknor & Fields, 1868.

COLLECTIONS

- *The Writings of Harriet Beecher Stowe*, sixteen volumes, Houghton, Mifflin, 1896.
- *Life of Harriet Beecher Stowe Compiled from Her Letters & Journals*, edited by son, Charles Edward Stowe, Houghton, Mifflin, 1897.
- *Life and Letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe*, edited by Annie E. Fields, Houghton, Mifflin, 1897.
- *Harriet Beecher Stowe* (includes *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Minister's Wooing*, and *Oldtown Folks*), notes and chronology by Kathryn Kish Sklar, Library of America, 1982.

OTHER

Also contributor of short stories and nonfiction to numerous periodicals.

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS:

Uncle Tom's Cabin has been adapted for the stage many times; George Aiken wrote a dramatization that was performed continuously in various theaters in the United States from 1853 to 1934. A musical version was also produced, as well as a 1987 television adaptation by John Day.

Sidelights

Although Harriet Beecher Stowe was widely renowned as the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Theodore R. Hovet asserted in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* that "she not only wrote some of the finest regional novels in American literature but was also a steady contributor of short stories to widely circulated family publications." Still, as Millicent Lenz noted in another *Dictionary of Literary Biography* entry, her significance in literary history is largely founded upon the one novel: "*Uncle Tom's Cabin* is one of the few works by an American woman writer of her time still read today," wrote Lenz. Stowe herself "was one of the most influential women of the Victorian Age." Her strong views against slavery and her success as an author put her much in demand as a respected lecturer both in the United States and abroad.

Stowe was born on June 14, 1811, in the parsonage in Litchfield, Connecticut, the seventh child of the famous preacher, Lyman

Beecher, and his first wife, Roxana Foote. Her mother died when Stowe was four years old, but her oldest sister, Catherine, at the age of fifteen took over the care of the younger children. Their father soon remarried, and Stowe had a good relationship with her stepmother, Harriet Porter Beecher, but Catherine still remained the most important person in the young girl's life. When Stowe became depressed after her mother's death she was sent to visit her grandmother and aunt on a farm on the shore of Long Island Sound. While there she learned to read well and for the first time met black people. They were indentured servants; and the fact that they were not treated as equals deeply disturbed the young Stowe.

Back in Litchfield in 1816, Stowe spent five years at "Ma'am" Kilbourne's school, where she was an avid student. Searching for books to read she found a dusty copy of *The Arabian Nights* in her father's attic and read it many times. Eventually her father opened his library to her. One day he read her the "Declaration of Independence." In his *Harriet Beecher Stowe*, Noel Gerson recorded her reaction to this document from her writings: "I was as ready as any of them to pledge my life, fortune and sacred honor for such a cause," Stowe wrote.

At the age of ten Stowe was enrolled in the Litchfield Academy, where she soon became first in her class. Before she was eleven she wrote her first composition, and at twelve she won first prize at the school with her essay, "Can the Immortality of the Soul be Proved by the Light of Nature?" In 1824 Catherine Beecher started a school for teenaged girls in Hartford, Connecticut, and Stowe was one of her first pupils. While there she discovered poetry and began writing an epic poem she called "Cleon," about an early Greek convert to Christianity. However, her sister felt that poetry was rubbish, destroyed her poem, and put Stowe to work teaching a class on Butler's *Analogy* to girls her own age.

In 1832 Dr. Beecher was chosen as president of Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati, Ohio, and the family moved into a large house in Walnut Hills. They had many relatives in that city; her uncle, Samuel Foote, took Stowe to the theater to see Shakespeare's plays, which she found enchanting. She also joined a literary society, the "Semi-Colon Club." Fellow members included Salmon P. Chase, who introduced her to the anti-slavery movement. Other acquaintances included Calvin Ellis Stowe, a professor of Biblical literature at Lane Theological Seminary, and his wife, Eliza, with whom Stowe became a close friend.

About the same time, Catherine Beecher started another school she called the "Western Female Institute," where Stowe was a student and later a teacher. The sisters wrote a geography textbook which was used at the school for many years. In 1833 Stowe wrote an article about grammar and punctuation, for which she received fifty dollars. With this sale and the writing of her story, "A New England Tale," Stowe had found her career. In that same year she crossed the Ohio River and saw a southern plantation for the first time, an experience that provided her with the setting for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

When her friend, Eliza, died the author looked after the widower, fixing his meals and mending his clothes; and in January, 1836, they were married. The new Mrs. Stowe kept busy writing short stories, essays, and articles for the *Western Monthly* magazine. In September, 1837, she gave birth to twin daughters and took care of all the household chores and the babies as well, although writing continued to be her most important activity. She used her first earnings to hire a housemaid. By the 1840s she was writing mostly romantic, small town fiction for *Godey's Lady's Book*.

The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 caused Stowe to begin writing seriously. She read everything available about slavery, but had no idea for a book until, as Gerson related, during a communion service at the college chapel, "a vision suddenly filled her mind. She saw an old slave." Stowe was convinced that God had reached out to her, so she wrote down what she had seen. According to *Junior Book of Authors*, when she read her account to her children one little boy sobbed, "Oh, Mamma, slavery is the most cruel thing in the world."

The first episode of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* appeared in the *National Era* in March, 1851, and others followed weekly; like Topsy it "just grew" and grew for a year; then it came out in book form. The first printing of five thousand copies sold for fifty-six cents each. Before the Civil War began three million copies were sold. The book was a success all over Europe, too. It was translated into thirty-seven languages and was soon dramatized. The play was among the most successful ever produced in the American theater, and a musical version was also very well received.

To answer attacks on her novel from Southerners, Stowe compiled *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which contains case histories to verify the scenes in her book. As a result she was invited by the Glasgow Anti-Slavery Society to make a speaking tour of England and Scotland. With her husband and her brother, Charles Beecher, Stowe sailed for Europe, where she was enthusiastically received, royally entertained, and introduced to many famous authors and admirers. *Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands* is her account of this trip. On a second trip in 1856 she met Queen Victoria. She also became a close friend of Lady Byron, the widow of the famous romantic poet, Lord Byron. Their return to the United States was marred by tragedy, however, when Stowe's son, Henry, drowned in the Connecticut River.

During 1853 and 1854, Stowe wrote an average of one magazine article every two weeks, including stories and articles for *Atlantic Monthly*. The fear of the approaching Civil War did not slow her output of tales about New England life and her childhood. In 1859 the Stowes--this time with several of their children--sailed again for Europe, where they spent the winter in Florence, Italy, hobnobbing with many English and American authors. Stowe referred to this time as the happiest she had ever known.

When Professor Stowe retired from Andover Seminary in 1863, the family moved to Hartford, Connecticut, where they built a large home that they called "Oakholm." It was here during the Civil War that Stowe wrote magazine articles advocating finding jobs for the freed slaves and compassion toward the Confederacy once it had returned to the Union. She received so much mail during this period that she needed the services of two full-time secretaries to handle it.

With the coming of peace Stowe rented a cotton plantation in Florida, installed her son, Fred, as manager, and hired over a hundred

former slaves to work for her. The Stowes had planned to spend their winters there, but the project proved to be unsuccessful. Stowe then bought an orange grove in Mandarin, Florida, and founded a school for former slaves. Her contributions to the state earned her the approval of General Robert E. Lee and the acceptance of the Southern people. After the publication of *Palmetto Leaves*, Florida newspapers gave her credit for making the state popular.

By 1871 Stowe was beginning to feel her age, a feeling that worsened with the death of another one of her sons, Frederick, who was lost at sea while crossing the Pacific. Her twin girls never married; they took over the house work and secretarial duties for their mother, who was beginning to need longer periods of rest. The large house was getting to be too much for the family to care for, so they moved to a new home next door to Mark Twain's house in Hartford, Connecticut.

By 1876 Stowe was wealthy, famous, and lonely. Her husband's health was deteriorating, and she felt that her life's work was completed, although there was still a demand for her writings and she received invitations to give lectures. Her seventieth birthday, in 1881, was a national event; newspapers published editorials about her, and the school children in Hartford were given a holiday in her honor. Professor Stowe died in 1886; by 1890 Stowe was bedridden and no longer went out, not even to church. She died in her sleep at eighty-five years of age, on July 1, 1896, and was buried beside her husband in Andover, Massachusetts.

FURTHER READINGS:

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

BOOKS

- Adams, John R., *Harriet Beecher Stowe*, Twayne, 1963.
- Ammons, Elizabeth, editor, *Critical Essays on Harriet Beecher Stowe*, G. K. Hall, 1980.
- Crozier, Alice C., *The Novels of Harriet Beecher Stowe*, Oxford University Press, 1969.
- *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Gale, Volume 1: *The American Renaissance in New England*, 1978, Volume 74: *American Short-Story Writers before 1880*, 1988, Volume 42: *American Writers for Children before 1900*, Gale, 1985.
- Foster, Charles, *The Rungless Ladder: Harriet Beecher Stowe and New England Puritanism*, Duke University Press, 1954.
- Gerson, Noel B., *Harriet Beecher Stowe*, Praeger, 1976.
- *Junior Book of Authors*, H. W. Wilson, 1934.
- Kimball, Gayle, *The Religious Ideas of Harriet Beecher Stowe: Her Gospel of Womanhood*, Edwin Mellen, 1982.
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