Chapter 1

Life

Harriet Beecher Stowe's life mirrored that of many other white, middle-class women of her generation. But her highly productive writing career set her apart in a number of ways. While other nineteenth-century American women authors like Catharine Maria Sedgwick, Fanny Fern (Sara Parton) and Frances Harper also had notable success, Stowe was unusual in the range of genres she helped shape and in her ability to call upon diverse resources to support her work. Many of her professional opportunities derived from her family connections, which mitigated gender-based constraints faced by other women of her day.

Beecher lore and community vision

Stowe's Beecher family lineage had a significant impact on the way her contemporaries perceived her. During her lifetime, family members and friends worked hard to create an image that would appeal to her reading audience. During her declining years, her son Charles Stowe wrote the first authorized biography, where he cast *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as "a work of religion" guided by the same republican principles that had motivated the Declaration of Independence and "made Jefferson, Hamilton, Washington, and Patrick Henry anti-slavery men."[1] Around the same time, Florine Thayer McCray, a Hartford neighbor,

prepared another biography. McCray built her book to a rousing conclusion celebrating "the noble legacy" of Stowe's writings and "the priceless heritage of her personal example."[2] Close friend Annie Fields published *Life and Letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe* in 1897, just after Stowe's death, reinforcing the message that the author's career had been unselfishly dedicated to the anti-slavery cause. The cumulative power of such texts initiated a meaning-making *process* distinctive from the actual historical person Harriet Beecher Stowe. Therefore, we need to recognize that much of what we think we know about her – such as the anecdote Annie Fields told about Abraham Lincoln's crediting Stowe with starting the Civil War – is strategic lore that should be read critically.[3] However saintly the initial guardians of her heritage painted her, Stowe's life was more complex than the legends they promoted.

This collaborative enterprise of representing "Harriet Beecher Stowe" in an array of nineteenth-century texts was also supported by the author's own astute management of her career. Though her reputation would always remain tied to her major bestseller, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, she capitalized on that milestone with later writing in a range of genres, while helping to shape the development of American literature. Overall, she was unique in her time for the breadth and influence of her work as an American woman writer.

At the heart of her success was a vision of New England life as a stand-in for an idealized America. This view of Protestant, middle-class New England as representing the best of republican values would permeate her writing, even in those moments when her satirical pen highlighted its flaws. In drawing on imagined versions of a moral social order, Stowe tapped into a tradition beginning as far back as the founding of New England in the 1600s. In the colonial era, Puritan settlers saw their new home as an extension of England but also as a special domain of God's chosen people. Over time, progressing toward a new republic, the highly literate, middle-class leaders of New England maintained their ties with the home country (for example, in choosing place names) but also formed a distinctive American identity organized around their regional culture. Thus, "creating New England, that is, imaginatively drawing the boundaries of regional identity, involved an ongoing process of cultural negotiation."[4] In the nineteenth century, Stowe's Beecher family members contributed to this agenda through social activism and self-conscious cultural production.

Stowe's own unending search for an ideal community, grounded in deep religious principles but also in a recognition of human frailties, would shape her life choices as well as her writing. In family moves to antebellum Cincinnati, her multiple journeys to Europe, the Stowes' extended trips to Florida, and her "model housekeeping" designs for homes back in New England, we can see

a parallel to Stowe's literary imaginings of utopian communities. Meanwhile, even as she drew on increasingly varied contacts with cultures different from her native region, these moves into new geographic and psychic spaces did not ever dislodge her deep-seated ties to a traditional vision of American social virtue.

A Beecher education for social agency

From the outset, Harriet Beecher Stowe's upbringing envisioned possibilities for cultural influence both enabled and constrained by her gender. Born in 1811, she grew up in Litchfield, Connecticut, where her father worked as a Congregational minister. The seventh child of Roxana Foote Beecher and Lyman Beecher, Harriet came into a family that set high expectations for all its children. Yet, conscious of the limitations she would face as a woman, Lyman Beecher is reported to have said early on that he wished Harriet had been born a boy, since she showed signs already of being able to outshine her brothers.

Young Harriet attended an unusually progressive school, the Litchfield Academy. She excelled in John Brace's composition class, her favorite. When she won a writing contest and had her work read aloud at a school exposition, she was excited to see her father's intent interest in her text – even before she had been identified as the author. If Lyman Beecher's rapt listening marked the writing as worthwhile, Harriet would declare in a memoir years later, she knew she had achieved a meaningful accomplishment.

At age 13, Harriet became a boarder at the Hartford Female Seminary, then led by her eldest sister Catharine. The younger sister quickly moved from student to assistant teacher. Even though Harriet's later success as the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has obscured this period in her professional development, it is important to recognize the connections between her literary arguments for women's social influence and this early experience.

Later, during Catharine's long absence for a rest cure, Harriet served as head administrator. In exploring ideas about female learning through collaboration with other young women attending the seminary, Harriet Beecher came up with a governance plan less hierarchical than her sister had used. Harriet's was a system based on collaborative "circles" for team management. Her letters to Catharine during this period reflect the younger sister's enthusiasm for teaching, but also for institution-building.[5] Reflecting on the expanding possibilities for women's education, Harriet was envisioning the first of many utopian programs that she would promote over a lifelong career as a reformer.

The reputation of the Hartford Female Seminary grew so much that it attracted bright young women from the midwest and south as well as from New England.[6] Thus, this work exposed Harriet to a broader range of social interaction than we might expect. By adding more challenging elements to the curriculum than was typical in most young women's institutions, the seminary had also earned praise from advocates for female education, including Sarah Josepha Hale. A pioneer in the field, the seminary provided an apt training ground for students – but also for the Beecher sisters themselves.[7] The one discouraging challenge impeding the institution was financial. Catharine eventually became so frustrated with supporters' inability to raise a substantial endowment that she welcomed an invitation from her father to relocate to Cincinnati, Ohio, then considered an outpost of the American west.

Navigating Cincinnati as a cultural "contact zone"

Arriving in Cincinnati in 1832, Catharine and Harriet laid out ambitious plans to open schools for children and young ladies, while their father headed up Lane Seminary. Writing to her friend Georgiana May back east, Harriet declared: "We mean to turn over the West by means of *model schools* in this, its capital" (qtd in Charles Stowe, *Life*, p. 72).

Harriet's years in Cincinnati represented a defining time in her life, since her experiences there promoted her growth as both a teacher and a writer, and later as a married woman juggling domestic activities with authorship aspirations. In the antebellum era, Cincinnati represented many of the possibilities associated with a thriving American culture. Though less refined than New England, the city was attracting numerous settlers from the northeast, and this group aimed to transplant the values of their home region into this western crossroads.

Central to this endeavor, for those in the Beecher family's social group, was the Semicolon Club, a combination social and literary society. Stowe was at first so nervous about presenting her writing that she carried out elaborate steps to conceal her identity as author of one early sketch. Although most of the texts by the club's members were never formally published, but simply presented orally at their regular gatherings, the opportunity to have her writing shared publicly marked an important stage in Harriet Beecher's development as an author. Harriet actually captured an award for "Uncle Lot," an 1833 piece she originally wrote for the club and afterwards submitted to a contest. The prize money for this narrative sketch, which was published in James Hall's *Western Monthly Magazine*, affirmed her writerly aspirations. In addition, the vision of New England life that she achieved in her Semicolon Club sketches

helped define one of the longstanding agendas for her publishing career. By the mid 1840s, in fact, she had written enough sketches to create a book-length collection, *The Mayflower*.

Despite residing in Ohio, many of the club members still viewed New England as both home and an ideal site of American culture. This stance is evident in an ornate book, *The Semicolon*, which the club published locally.[8] In one of *The Semicolon*'s sketches, for example, New England flowers carried west for replanting in the new soil there are equated with the larger political and cultural goal of refining the region.

If the Beechers and their contemporaries saw themselves as civilizers of a still-rough western region, they also found that Cincinnati was bringing them into a dynamic space of cultural diversity – what Mary Louise Pratt has called a "contact zone."[9] With the slave state of Kentucky just across the Ohio River, New England-bred residents – often for the first time in their lives – came into regular contact with slave owners and slaves. Harriet Beecher herself visited a Kentucky plantation in 1833, soaking up images she would revive years later when writing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Meanwhile, the slavery issue was becoming increasingly intense in Cincinnati itself. Debates raged among students at Lane Theological Seminary and, even more disturbingly, abolitionist advocates trying to work in the city were coming under direct assault. Stowe herself would write in a letter that a mob attack on the anti-slavery periodical co-published by J. G. Birney and Gamaliel Bailey was appalling enough to "'make converts to abolitionism'" among her family members (qtd in Charles Stowe, *Life*, p. 84).

In January of 1836, Harriet married the widower Calvin Stowe, a teacher at Lane Seminary. Harriet's letter to her old friend Georgiana May, written less than an hour before the ceremony, conveys some ambivalence about a marriage that would nonetheless endure: "Well, my dear, I have been dreading and dreading the time, and lying awake all last week wondering how I should live through this overwhelming crisis, and lo! It has come and I feel *nothing at all*" (qtd in Charles Stowe, *Life*, p. 76).

Though Harriet and Calvin's marriage would be a long one, successful by measures of the time, it was not without tensions. One of these revolved around Calvin's sexual needs, which played out both in his wife's many pregnancies and in Harriet's sometimes taking long vacations on her own. Another stress point arose from Calvin's penchant to criticize, on the one hand, and Beecher family members' tendency to interfere, on the other. In 1846, Harriet sought temporary escape by visiting the popular "water cure" in Brattleboro, Vermont. But she wrote to Calvin regularly while enjoying the hydrotherapy there, and she bore her sixth child, Samuel Charles, almost exactly nine months after her return to Cincinnati.

Besides her trips back east, Stowe used regular letter-writing to Georgiana May and others throughout the years in Cincinnati to maintain her strong ties with New England. Thus, even though she published relatively little during the first decade of her marriage, Stowe was an active writer, often examining large-scale social issues in her correspondence. When the time came to leave Ohio and return to New England, she was poised for more public writing addressing questions tied to the conflicts she had observed firsthand in the west.

Composing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* while housekeeping in Maine

Stowe moved to Brunswick, Maine, in April 1850, during the height of the US debates over slavery. After almost two decades working in Ohio, Calvin Stowe had accepted a call to Bowdoin College. Harriet found the task of setting up a new home quite challenging, even though she was enthusiastic about this return to her native region. Calvin had been left behind in Cincinnati, where he had one more term of teaching at Lane Seminary. In letters and periodical pieces, Harriet used imagery calculated to portray herself as an isolated, even beleaguered, domestic manager. Yet she was on the verge of beginning her most famous publication, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Stowe and her fellow family members had been appalled by passage of the Fugitive Slave Law. The new legislation required northerners to return any escapee to slavery, so those who had positioned themselves as anti-slavery but who had resisted full-fledged abolitionism were suddenly in a quandary. Before, they could distance themselves from the sins of slaveholders; now, if confronted with a runaway, they must either break the law or have their own morality sullied by following its dictates. For Stowe, passage of this act was a turning point. Stowe's father, Lyman Beecher, had earlier opposed efforts by students at Lane Seminary to take an active stand for abolition, and Stowe had followed his lead in assuming an anti-slavery stand short of outright abolitionism. But with encouragement from her younger brother, Henry Ward Beecher, and another brother and sister-in-law, Mr and Mrs Edward Beecher, Stowe shifted her position to a more activist stance.

However inspired she was by righteous indignation over the Fugitive Slave Law, Stowe was also quite aware that her writing could bring dollars into her family's restricted coffers. Calvin had hoped that his new salary would be adequate to their needs, but Harriet learned that housing in Bowdoin could not be had for the $75 per month he had budgeted. Committed to having her

writing generate income, she rented a large house for $125, even though it clearly needed repairs.[10]

By this time, Stowe had already published in Gamaliel Bailey's *National Era*, an anti-slavery periodical. Her contributions had been sentimental stories and humorous sketches (e.g., "A Scholar's Adventures in the Country") like those she had written in Cincinnati, rather than polemical assaults on slavery. Soon after passage of the 1850 compromise legislation, however, she had submitted "The Freeman's Dream," a parable calling up a resolute Christ to condemn a farmer for failing to help a runaway slave family. Appearing in early August, this piece apparently encouraged Stowe to see the *Era* as a space where she could combine the familiar gendered modes of her earlier writing with a newly politicized voice. When Bailey sent her a generous check to encourage more submissions, Stowe determined to write a piece that would rally opposition to the new law.

Though Stowe was lucky to have an editor eager for her submissions and a publication suited to her anti-slavery goals, she was not so fortunate in having day-to-day living arrangements that would support the composition of her most ambitious narrative to date. With her husband still in Ohio, Harriet was supervising repairs on the Maine house. Feeling the stress of this assignment, along with the burdens of mothering a large brood of children, she was hardly in a position to write a novel-length narrative. Yet, she was well aware that publication was the readiest tool at her disposal for aiding the family's pressing financial situation. In this regard, the *Era*'s format, accommodating serialized installments, was a benefit. She could squeeze in snatches of time for writing between her other maternal duties, which included managing a small family school and overseeing housekeeping arrangements. Frustrating though the frequent interruptions to her writing would be – and Stowe's letters to her husband say that crying babies and household emergencies constantly intervened – she at least could spread out the narrative in manageable segments. In fact, over the course of serialization, which ran from June 1851 to April 1852, Stowe missed her deadline only three times.

The serial was so popular that it attracted new subscribers to the *Era* and encouraged Stowe to bring the narrative out in book form. Negotiations with one publisher broke down based on the firm's prediction that anti-slavery writing would not sell well. But Stowe soon found another publisher, John P. Jewett. When the first edition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* came out in the spring of 1852, Stowe's first novel became a bestseller of unprecedented proportions. Virtually overnight, the woman who had not long ago depicted herself in a sketch for Sarah Josepha Hale's compendium of women's biographies as

"retired and domestic," a "teacher" and a "mother to seven children," became a celebrity author.[11]

Traveling as an international celebrity

Once *Uncle Tom's Cabin* exploded into the American literary marketplace, it was quickly exported to Europe. With the anti-slavery movement having become increasingly popular in England, Stowe was invited by abolitionist leaders of Great Britain to visit there. In this era before international copyrights, Stowe was not reaping benefits from the many pirated editions of her book being sold overseas. But she was astute enough to realize that making direct contact with her readers in Europe could pay any number of dividends for her career. So she eagerly embarked for England in 1853, on the first of several European trips, with several family members in tow.

Stowe's determined efforts to manage the international dimensions of her publishing enterprise underscore ways in which, despite her self-depictions as a modest housewife, she was already dealing assertively with professional authorship. Indeed, Stowe's careful self-presentation during her European travels as a humble, gentle, ladylike figure needs to be viewed with critical awareness. Clearly, she garnered social, political, and even financial rewards from such moves. For example, on her first trip to Great Britain, she secured not only a petition of support for the anti-slavery movement in the United States, but also valuable gifts that became family heirlooms. A journal her brother Charles maintained during the Stowes' first trip to England is telling. Recounting an exchange with his sister's supporters in Edinburgh in April 1853, for instance, he noted:

> Mrs. Douglas [Stowe's hostess] produced a beautiful box of *papier-mâché*. Inside were all ladies' working articles and a beautiful *agate cup* about the size of a saucer cut out of Scotch pebble, as it is called. A beautiful work of art, of a dark wine color. This cup was filled with gold pieces. There were just 100 sovereigns, which Mrs. Douglas said her husband had laid aside for Mrs. Stowe *herself*. The penny offering was for the slaves. This was for *herself*.[12]

While happily accepting such gifts and accolades from enthusiastic fans, Stowe also followed through on her goal of negotiating copyrights that protected her family finances. Travel in Europe also enabled Stowe to provide her children with access to cosmopolitan society at a level beyond what she and her siblings had achieved in their youth. At one point, for instance, Stowe left

her twin daughters to study in Paris. In addition, European travel inspired Stowe with new topics for her writing, including a travel book (*Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands*) and a novel set in Italy (*Agnes of Sorrento*).

Stowe's *Sunny Memories* emphasizes her enthusiasm for Europe, including an attraction to aristocracy at odds with her supposed dedication to American republican values. Still, her incorporation of Europe into her writing and her world view was guided by her New England family's background. Her pilgrimages to religious sites were complemented by visits to literary landmarks such as the home of Sir Walter Scott, a childhood favorite. Drawn to some elements of Italian culture, she sought ways to synthesize such features as veneration of the Virgin Mary with her Calvinist frame of experience. Similarly, her friendships with leading European ladies like the Duchess of Sutherland were cast not only as professional literary connections but also around values associated with female Christian virtue. Overall, as she did with other cross-cultural interactions in her life, Stowe negotiated her relationships with Europe and Europeans through the framework of her Beecher family ties.

Re-envisioning New England domesticity

Stowe's continued identification with New England as a homeplace and the professional benefits she gleaned from this affiliation are clear in the eagerness with which she returned there after each of her European sojourns. Though she often complained about the pressures of domestic management, she reveled in the ways that her writing income enabled an upgrade in the family's house when Calvin took a post at Andover Theological Seminary. In these efforts, she joined other well-to-do New England women of her generation by acquiring new household conveniences and displaying signs of her family's wealth.

Stowe capitalized on homemaking as a theme by producing magazine sketches and a book on household management, *House and Home Papers*. She became adept at getting double duty from her texts about domestic life. For instance, in 1865, she wrote a series of pieces for the *Atlantic Monthly* that were later anthologized into an expensive gift book (Hedrick, *HBS*, p. 318).

The ambivalence in Stowe's attitude toward New England housekeeping in these years can be traced in part to her family's becoming increasingly dependent on her writing for financial support. In 1863, Calvin Stowe retired from his position at Andover. Then Harriet faced even more pressure to write for immediate financial reward. Longer narratives claimed her interest intellectually, but short pieces could bring in cash more quickly. Sometimes, during this middle phase of her career, she yearned for the chance to focus on a carefully

sequenced novel. Instead, she often found herself negotiating with multiple editors, seeking to put off one who was still waiting for a major project, while enticing another to accept a briefer contribution that could pay some bills right away. The need for high volume, in turn, led Stowe to encourage her unmarried twin daughters, Hatty and Eliza, to take over more day-to-day household affairs. At the same time, she was managing the education of the younger children in her large brood and dealing with her husband's ambivalent attitude toward her continued literary success.

Given the complex feelings Stowe had about her own domestic role in the decades after *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, we can see a tension between the writing in which she glorified New England home life – as in *The Minister's Wooing*, *The Pearl of Orr's Island*, and *Oldtown Folks* – and her distaste for daily running of her household. But she continued to seek an ideal model, both in her writing and in the creation of her family's own living arrangements.

In the 1860s, while the Civil War raged, Stowe supervised the building of Oakholm, a large, well-decorated house with features taken from the Italian architecture she had loved seeing in Europe. In Nook Farm, a stylish Hartford neighborhood where the Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain) family and her half-sister Isabella Beecher Hooker's clan also lived, Stowe trumpeted her professional success through domestic design. She hired the same contractor who had built Isabella and John Hooker's showplace, and she supervised every element in the construction, including the digging of drains and the architectural refinements.

In this as in other domestic enterprises, Stowe struggled to embody traditional housewifery while also sustaining a busy writing career. The tension between these goals could sometimes work to her advantage, however. She often invoked her pressing domestic duties to put off editors, while she simultaneously used her writing responsibilities to escape housekeeping chores.

The lure of the south

In 1867, Stowe traveled for the first time to an area along the St Johns River, where she and Calvin would construct a second home. Like the "snow birds" of today, for years the Stowes made regular trips back and forth between the north and south, spending summers in Hartford and winters in Mandarin, Florida.

Ever the educator and reformer, Stowe had been drawn to the idea of a southern home partly by a wish to contribute to the Reconstruction-era education of freed slaves. As early as 1866, she had written her brother Charles: "My plan of going to Florida, as it lies in my mind, is not in any sense a worldly