PART I

Contexts

CHAPTER 1

Harriet Beecher Stowe and the "Book That Made This Great War"

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"So you're the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war!" Lincoln's greeting to Harriet Beecher Stowe at their meeting on 2 December 1862 has become a commonplace of literary scholarship. The reference is to the colossal impact of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* – a global best seller and the first American novel to sell more than a million copies – and is supported by a number of indices: frenzied Southern attempts to counter its portrayal of slavery in a plethora of "Anti-Tom" novels; children's versions; dramatic adaptations leading to the growth of "Tom troupes" who performed nothing else; and the abundance of what we would today call "tie-ins": Topsy dolls, board games, Staffordshire figurines, wallpaper, sheet music, and even socks. In the run-up to the Civil War it was possible to read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* yourself, read it in abridged form to your children, see it on stage, weep over it into an Uncle Tom handkerchief, and recover over supper on an Uncle Tom plate. But did it cause the war? Daniel R. Vollaro has demonstrated that Lincoln's greeting is entirely apocryphal. The story persists partly because it reflects well on Lincoln and Stowe as kindred abolitionists, despite the initially moderate antislavery stance of both, in an intellectual climate where we are eager "to make literature a lever of social or political change".[1]

Was *Uncle Tom's Cabin* inflammatory? Or did it set out to promote union and moderation? Arguments have been made on both sides. Vollaro finds the influence of the novel in sparking the war difficult to prove. Most abolition leaders said comparatively little about it, especially the Garrisonians, and there were negative Northern reviews, although the invective from the South was unrestrained. (Stowe received death threats and was sent a severed slave ear in the post.) Mob violence against abolitionism was commonplace in the North, and many Americans remained ambivalent about slavery right up to the outbreak of war. Vollaro is persuasive but unfortunately confines his arguments to the novel per se, something of a straw target. He asks, "In what sense does a novel have

the power to move a people to battle?"[2] On the other side of the argument David S. Reynolds emphasizes the enormous authority of public opinion in America, and the extent to which Stowe molded it, redefining American democracy on a more egalitarian basis and aiming to rectify social injustice by offering fairness and improvement for marginalized groups. Reynolds argues that the novel was successful precisely because it appeared fairly conventional, exploiting elements of many different popular genres, appealing to religion, temperance, and antislavery interests, and particularly going a long way to winning Christianity for the antislavery cause. Arguably *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is less a novel than an anthology of nineteenth-century popular genres, including captivity narrative, jeremiad, spiritual biography, Gothic, the "dying child" story, tales of adventure, sermon, and temperance tale.[3] As Reynolds argues, its great popularity can be attributed largely to the fact that it advocated controversial, sometimes subversive reforms without straying into the merely sensational or the openly transgressive.[4]

The novel may be a "three-handkerchief" tearjerker – in 1852, Congressman Horace Greeley cried so hard over it on a railway journey from Boston to Washington that he had to get off in Springfield and spend a night in a hotel to recover – but there is in fact no sensation-mongering. The abused and sexually trafficked women remain pious, domestic, and ladylike, with the abuse in the past, offstage, or merely potential. Northerners are the worst slaveholders (Legree) and Southerners offer the most trenchant critiques of the peculiar institution (Augustine St. Clare). *Uncle Tom's Cabin* attacked the system of slavery, not individuals or sectional interests. This moderation was essential in a novel that mounted a direct challenge to American law. Stowe wrote in reaction to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which, by making it illegal to assist an escaped slave, effectively transformed the whole of the United States into a slaveholding nation. She set out to defend instead the "Higher Law," that of natural justice supported by morality and God. In an early incident in the novel (chapter IX) the wife of Senator Bird (who has just voted for the Fugitive Slave Law) appeals for his assistance in helping Eliza escape from slavery. In his wife's instant recourse to her Bible, Senator Bird is squarely confronted with the Higher Law argument, and soon finds himself out in the rain in the middle of the night transporting Eliza to safety. Obedience to God is what counts for Mrs. Bird, not the recently passed law.

It is often forgotten that in its first, newspaper appearance, the aim of the novel was to promote union rather than to attack the South. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was designed to reach out to a Southern audience through

serial publication in the *National Era*. The paper was explicitly antislavery, but its editor, Gamaliel Bailey, had been chosen because of his diplomacy and moderation, and his view that Southerners could be persuaded that slavery was more than a sectional issue.[5] Stowe carefully emphasized the goodness of Southern planters in an attempt to use the tactics of "moral suasion" and bring North and South together. The novel begins with the relatively benign Shelbys in Kentucky, moves on to Augustine St. Clare's lax household in New Orleans, and only at the close homes in on the horrors of the field hands' labor on Legree's plantation. The intention was not to attack the South but to attack slavery. Augustine St. Clare emphasizes that "The thing itself is the essence of all abuse!"[6] Stowe pointed out that she had known slaveholders who were otherwise just, upright, and generous:

> She felt that justice required that their difficulties should be recognised and their virtues acknowledged. It was her object to show that the evils of slavery were the inherent evils of a bad system, and not always the fault of those who had become involved in it.[7]

The objective was to convince readers that abolition was a Christian inevitability rather than the belief only of fanatics.[8] Stowe expected abolitionists to condemn the book as too mild, and Southerners to accept it as a fair representation.[9] The result, of course was quite the reverse.

The *National Era* was highly significant in other respects, particularly in building Stowe's enormous reader base, and in embedding the novel right into the middle of political discourse. Launched in 1847 as the organ of the American and Foreign Antislavery Society, it had some 17,000 subscribers in 1851, which the serial raised to 19,000 in 1852 and 28,000 in 1853.[10] Even so, publishers were wary of printing an antislavery novel. None had ever made a profit before. The firm of Phillips, Sampson turned it down, and John P. Jewett, a small publisher, only took it on at the insistence of his wife, publishing it ten days before the serial itself ended. Jewett, an astute promoter, ran a big pre-launch campaign with heavy advertising, used the sales figures to promote the book, made much of the book reviews, and encouraged international responses. Stowe sent out copies (to Dickens, Prince Albert, and Lord Carlisle, among others) and wrote different prefaces for the British, French, and German editions. Bailey meanwhile reported its success as a news item and sold copies from his offices. Almost as important as its mobilization of the antislavery cause, the novel also helped overcome prejudices against fiction itself. As Barbara Hochman has demonstrated, the novel is full of images of reading

and establishes a protocol in which readers are thoughtful, engaged, and imaginative. Tom has a well-marked Bible and is an active reader; slave literacy restores agency and subjectivity to the slave; the scenes of Bible reading help legitimize the novel for readers who would not normally approve of fiction. Where Garrison's *Liberator*, *Frederick Douglass's Paper*, and the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* printed fiction at the back of their issues, the *Era* put it in a prominent position on the front page, not separated from the other content but interlaced with political speeches, readers' letters, congressional debates, and news. Usually fiction in abolitionist papers was a form of light relief from the cause. Here by creating a dialogue with the texts that surrounded it, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* reshaped the relation between fiction and the network of ideas and images within which it was embedded.[11]

That network was also essentially in tune with the ideas of the Free Soil party. Michael D. Pierson has argued that Stowe should be located at the center of Free Soil political ideology.[12] Where Free Soil men tended to favor the slow disappearance of slavery, Free Soil women adopted arguments for immediate emancipation and focused on the moral issues of enslaving women and separating families. The men could thus look moderate and constitutional while the women advanced the cause in more radical ways. Of course, gender ideologies were often deployed in service of politics. The Republican Party, for example, cast their opponents as too aristocratic and hierarchical for an egalitarian America, and portrayed Democratic conservative views of gender as part of that hierarchical outlook. After she finished the serial, Stowe continued to write for the *Era* as a regular contributor. Bailey supported Free Soil presidential candidate John P. Hale in the 1852 campaign. Arguably, therefore, the moderation of the novel's purpose did not prevent its thorough saturation in and penetration of a political network, as well as its extension to an unprecedented range of readers. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was read by people like Lewis Tappan and James G. Birney who never read novels on principle. Lord Palmerston, who had not read a novel for thirty years, read it three times. The Shakers, for whom fiction reading was forbidden, had it read aloud to them in 1852. In this regard, the paratextual material was also cunningly deployed. Illustrations linked the book to images of the Bible and the advertisements referred to it as "a work," "a book," "a volume," or "a narrative" – anything but a novel. And for those who still hungered after facts, not fiction, Stowe swiftly produced *A Key to* Uncle Tom's Cabin (1853), substantiating her portrayal of slavery with plenty of documentary evidence.

The novel was very affordable; the cheap edition, "For the Millions," retailed at 37.5 cents. But for those who could not afford even that, or who could not read, there were the plays, which extended *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* impact to the lower classes en masse. Three months before the serial ended, the first dramatic adaptations appeared, often with happy endings (invented in the absence of any contribution from Stowe herself.) At the National Theatre in New York, the audience was lower class and not at all antislavery in its sympathies, and much has been made of their conversion from roughnecks who came to laugh at stereotypical minstrel antics to a weeping mob, hissing at Legree and cheering for Eliza. The play ran at the National for nine months and was performed fifteen times a week (three times in the morning, six in the afternoon, and six in the evening), after which the Howard troupe toured it to eastern and midwestern cities and then took it to London, Edinburgh, and Dublin. (There were at least twenty separate versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* onstage in London between 1852 and 1855.) The *Key* was dramatized in 1853 at the Troy Museum, with special trains running to the venue from Vermont and Massachusetts. The twenty-one different productions of Stowe's *Dred* also brought in the crowds.[13]

In terms of influence, it is worth noting that a slave narrative might take two or three years to sell as many copies to individuals whom a theater could seat in two nights. In New York, Purdy's held 2,500 people, the Bowery 3,000; in London, the Victoria held 2,000 in the gallery alone. Admittedly, some of these adaptations introduced material that was not in the novels, was racist, or offered compromises with slavery. It is easy to discount versions in which Eva ascended to heaven on wires, the cast performed on ice or on horseback, or the actress playing Eliza had to hurl pieces of meat behind her to induce a pack of bloodhounds to pursue her. Nonetheless *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was often the only play a nineteenth-century American ever saw. The plays also reveal just how inherently incendiary their subject matter was. Dramatizations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* frequently provoked audience riots. The Howard company narrowly averted a riot in Baltimore, purely because the audience were unwilling to boo the child star, Little Cordelia Howard, but when cast members, some of them Southerners, began to wear badges supporting secession, a mini civil war broke out in the troupe itself.[14]

These dramatic versions also demonstrate the fundamental misapprehension of critics who argue that Stowe somehow caused the Civil War – or indeed that she did not. Both arguments rely on the notion that the war was a defined event, with a clear beginning, middle, and end. In

fact, the war was under way already, an unstoppable development. Like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* itself, where the novel had already had an influence on dramatic adaptations before it had been completed as a serial or actually produced as a printed volume, the war was already in process when the novel was published, and continued well into the future. As Arna Bontemps argued, slavery was "a state of war."[15] Bontemps, for example, quite unapologetically depicted the 1839 Amistad rebellion as involving retributive acts of aggression (the killing of crew members by the former slaves). John Stauffer has argued that small civil wars broke out even before Fort Sumter in April 1861, when slave catchers tried to arrest fugitives in Boston or Pennsylvania, and especially in the Kansas-Nebraska conflict, which culminated across the country in John Brown's Harper Ferry raid.[16] Lincoln's greeting clearly referred to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but in her second antislavery novel, *Dred*, Stowe focused on the question of the extension of slavery and "Bleeding Kansas."[17] In 1854, the Nebraska-Kansas Bill created two new territories, Nebraska and Kansas, with local options on slavery. In 1855, when Kansas held its election, the pro-slavery camp resorted to vigilante tactics, sending in 5,000 supporters from Missouri, barring "Free Soil" men from voting, and electing a pro-slavery legislature. In 1856, another band of Missourians plundered and burned the "Free Soil" town of Lawrence, Kansas. Essentially what was at stake in Kansas was the possibility of the institutional extension of slavery to the whole of the United States. By the mid-1850s, America was in the midst of a racial conflict and had been for a considerable time.

Stowe placed this conflict in the all-encompassing Judeo-Christian time scheme, in keeping with her perfectionist beliefs.[18] Essentially perfectionists believed that before the coming of Christ, man was enslaved to sin, but that Christ had created a new Covenant, liberating man from that slavery. In the Old Testament, the whole universe was ordered according to a master-slave relationship. But slavery violated the spirit of the New Covenant because it is based on force, not love. All the Biblical references deployed by the pro-slavery camp were irrelevant; they belonged to the Old Covenant. The central scenes of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are based on this belief. Augustine St. Clare describes his Christian mother telling him of a future millennium when "all men should be free and happy" (344). He himself looks forward to "a mustering among the masses, the world over" (344). According to perfectionist theology, the underclasses would inevitably move toward freedom, and to repress them could only lead to violent – and futile – upheaval. For Stowe, therefore, Lincoln's election was not the result of political maneuvering, but the product of the social

upheaval generated by an oppressive society. A revolution was already in train, which would lead to the establishment of a truly Christian society. Joan Hedrick has argued that looking toward Armageddon on the part of perfectionists helped set the stage for the Civil War, and that Stowe saw it as "the last struggle for liberty."[19] Stowe certainly detected the movement of revolutionary forces in current events. In the *New York Independent* she said that "John Brown is a witness slain in the great cause which is shaking Hungary, Austria, Italy, France; and his death will be mightier for that cause than even his success. The cross is the way to the throne."[20] Thus, the American Civil War was merely one part of a global struggle. Stowe changed her original subtitle from "The Man Who Was a Thing" to "Life Among the Lowly," putting slaves and lower classes together in one group.

As a result, in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the war between masters and slaves, Old and New Covenants, is cast in terms of aristocrat versus democrat. In the novel, Augustine has a twin brother, Alfred, who resembles their father who was "a born aristocrat" (344) and "[a] regular old Roman" (333). Augustine characterizes his twin as "as determined a despot as ever walked" (340), who believes only in the law of the strongest and is convinced that there must be a lower class, "confined to an animal nature" (340). In *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* Stowe explicitly described the two brothers as representing the two classes of men, the aristocrat and the democrat. The former, although potentially just, generous, and humane to those he considers his equals, is in her view entirely insensible to the humanity of the lower orders.[21] The democrat, in contrast, does acknowledge a common humanity, and examples like Augustine may be found in the South, perfectly able to see through the sophistry of slavery. Stowe argued that the aristocrat by position was not always so by nature, and vice versa; and that the democrat by nature did acknowledge "the sacredness of a common humanity."[22] In the *Key* she allowed that "man is par excellence an oppressive animal," but held that after Christ's coming, all institutions were based on love:[23]

> The relation of master and servant … was refined into a voluntary relation between two equal brethren, in which the servant faithfully performed his duties as to the Lord, and the master gave him full compensation for his services.[24]

Similarly, in *Men of Our Times* (1868) Stowe offered a series of biographies of eminent men, introducing them by asserting that the Civil War had not shattered the Republic but made it stronger because of its Christian, democratic nature as "the only permanent republic which ever based

itself upon the principles laid down by Jesus Christ, of the absolute equal brotherhood of men, and the rights of man as the simple ground of manhood."[25] For Stowe, all the working classes of Europe were on her side, including the laborers of Manchester and Birmingham and the silk weavers of Lyon, whereas the other side included all those who were holders of privileges and who sympathized with the South as a struggling aristocracy. God had therefore chosen Lincoln as his instrument with a particular appropriateness, "with a visible reference to the rights and interests of the great majority of mankind, for which he stood."[26] To hear Stowe tell it, Lincoln was a man of the laboring classes, and his election was a sign "to all who live by labor that their day is coming."[27] The Civil War was therefore part of a longer, global upheaval, already in process, and its result ultimately inevitable.

Nevertheless, Stowe did not assume that the millennial victory would be swift or easy, or that despotism would yield lightly to love. She advances this interpretation of events most clearly in chapter XXIII, "Henrique." The visit of Alfred and his son Henrique to the Saint Clare household is absolutely central to the novel, as its position close to the middle of the novel emphasizes. The chapter marks the turning point for Eva, whose death is appreciably hastened if not actually caused by the visit. The two brothers are introduced as representing a house divided, "opposites on every point, yet a mysterious tie seemed to unite them in a closer friendship than ordinary" (387). They have a vigorous exchange of views about slavery and revolution, but then swap it for a more harmless contest, a game of backgammon. The scene clearly suggests that North and South may differ but could still come together. Henrique is like his father, "a noble, dark-eyed, princely boy" (387). The characterization of Augustine (brought up in the North for his health) as Greek and fair and Alfred, the plantation owner, as dark and imperially Roman reinforces their opposition, but the flattering connection to classical civilization avoids criminalizing the South as in any way exceptional in its views. This is, finally, one more example of the opposition of aristocracy to democracy. Can South and North be brought together? The exchange of views between Augustine and Alfred puts them at opposite ends of the political spectrum. But is there a possibility of avoiding the coming conflict by love, figured here in the projected union of their two children, Eva and Henrique? Henrique is a twelve-year-old who already believes in force: he mercilessly whips his slave Dodo, and is completely astounded by Eva's Christian argument that as the Bible tells them to love everybody, so they must love their slaves. Augustine clearly hopes to promote a match between the cousins; he plans