



Harriet Beecher Stowe 1811-1896

Harriet Beecher Stowe was born in Litchfield, Connecticut, on June 14, 1811, the seventh child of the renowned preacher Lyman Beecher. "Wished it had been a boy," he remarked. Although he doted on his daughters, he would have preferred Harriet to be another son who could follow him in the pulpit.

By the age of six, Harriet was reading adult books, but hated writing. That soon changed. One of the greatest triumphs of her life came when she was twelve. She saw her father's face brighten when an essay on immortality was read anonymously. How Lyman beamed when it won first prize and he learned that it was his daughter's work.

In spite of her aptitude for reading, Harriet found it hard to understand her father's sermons. They might as well have been written in Choctaw for all the good she got from them. His Calvinist God seemed unfair to her. But one day when she was fourteen "a certain pathetic earnestness in his voice" caused her to listen to the sermon more closely than usual. She began to cry. As they came home from church, she told her father that she had given herself whole-heartedly to Christ.

The children of Lyman and Roxanna Stowe had a huge impact on the Christian world. All seven sons became ministers, then the most effective way to influence society. The oldest daughter, Catherine, pioneered education for women. The youngest daughter, Isabella, was a founder of the National Women's suffrage Association. Harriet believed her purpose in life was to write. Her most famous work exposed the truth about the greatest social injustice of her day – human slavery.

Isabella, Harriet's sister, pleaded with her to write in reaction to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. This act ordered free citizens to help arrest and return runaway slaves. Anyone helping to shelter or feed an escaping slave was subject to a \$1000.00 fine. Isabelle wrote in a letter to Harriet, "Now, Hattie, if I could use my pen as you can, I would write something that would make this whole nation feel what an accursed thing slavery is." Harriet's response is quoted as, "I will write something. I will if I live," she vowed.

"I will write," Harriet promised. But autumn of 1850 gave way to winter. The year changed and she made no start on the promise to write. Her mind was blank. Night after night she sat in front of her fire, but no satisfactory idea came until one cold Sunday morning in February, as she took communion. She saw in her mind's eye an old slave undergoing a brutal beating but forgiving his tormentors as he prayed for them. Harriet accepted this as a vision direct from the Lord – a miracle.

She hurried home from church and wrote down a few scenes. Ideas now whirled through Harriet's mind like snowflakes in a blizzard. She would need a full novel to tell the story. Thus *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was written and printed in installments between 1851-1852.

Although Harriet wrote many other books and stories, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was her best. Harriet tried to show African-Americans as fully human – men and women in the image of Christ. The novel had its critics – from patronizing or stereotyping the black slave – to the biggest criticism of all: being too Christian and the frequent referencing of faith.

Today *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is acknowledged as an outstanding work of American fiction, notable for its vivid characters; Uncle Tom, Simon Legree, Eva and Topsy are unforgettable. Whatever critics say, Harriet wielded her pen as an instrument for justice. Her faithfulness to God's promptings and visions were realized. Her book draws a powerful emotional response from the reader.