



Uncle Tom's Cabin Reassessed

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Clive Barnes determines the relevance to today's young readers

Uncle Tom's Cabin Reassessed

Although not written for children, the anti-slavery novel **Uncle Tom's Cabin; or Life among the Lowly** was for many decades considered a children's book. But, despite its extraordinary political influence in fuelling the abolitionist cause of the 1850s, is this once best selling novel now better left as a work of historical interest? In this bicentenary year of its author, Harriet Beecher Stowe's birth, Clive Barnes reassesses the relevance of the novel that 'helped lay the groundwork for the civil war'.

Uncle Tom's Cabin was a publishing phenomenon. It was published first as a serial in 1851 and appeared as a book a year later. Only the Bible sold more copies in the U.S.A. in the nineteenth century. Until well into the next century, it lived on in many different forms: as a play, in abridgements for children, and in the early cinema. Now it is rarely read, except as an historical text, for reasons which are understandable but not entirely of its own making.

Uncle Tom's Cabin was possibly the first American protest novel, written as an explicit argument against slavery, and credited with doing more for the Abolitionist cause than conventional political agitation. Its main narratives follow the fate of two Kentucky slaves: Uncle Tom, a simple, dignified man of deep religious convictions who is sold away from his family, eventually to a plantation in the Deep South, where he is abused and murdered by his master; and young, courageous and resourceful Eliza, who escapes with her son to Canada and freedom, reunited with her runaway husband on the way.

A children's story?

Its history, as a story thought suitable for young people, whether in original or abridged form, is an interesting one. Reading it now, its mixture of melodrama, political and social argument, Christian piety, and (despite its impassioned assault on slavery) nineteenth century racial attitudes, would make it an unlikely book to give to a teenager. But in 1956, and reflecting opinion in the early years of the last century, Kathleen Lines recommended it to be read by eleven-year-olds and upwards, as a 'picture of a past regime' which, 'although written as an exposition of the evils of slavery' also showed 'the strong mutual affection, and respect possible between slave and master in the American plantation.'

Lines' comment about 'mutual affection and respect' touches on the way that the book, most often through abridged versions and unauthorised distorted dramatisation, notably in travelling 'Tom Shows' that frequently incorporated blackface minstrels, gradually became regarded as almost nostalgic for slavery. In these incarnations, by the close of the nineteenth century, its story and characters were brought in line with the segregation and disfranchisement of African-Americans in the South that followed the emancipation of the slaves in 1865.

This was a development obviously unintended by Stowe, whose hope for all slaves is embodied in Eliza's story, but its seeds can be found in her original work. Stowe argues that relationships of true mutual respect between slaves and their

owners are impossible under slavery; that any slave would prefer freedom to the kindest of masters; and that slaves and masters are degraded by the institution. Yet her acknowledgement of close ties between some masters and slaves was not only an acceptance of an observable reality but also shows her conviction, as a Christian, that even slaveholders might change their ways.

Christian conversion

Christian conversion is a theme of the novel, which is linked with the emancipation of its slave characters. Its main instruments being the saintly Tom, and angelic Eva, the daughter of the cynical but indulgent slave owner, St Clare. Eva turns her father towards Christ on her death bed, a conversion that prompts him to decide to free his slaves, although his own death prevents him from carrying his intention out. This was a redemption for which Stowe perhaps devoutly wished, but could hardly expect. At the close of the novel, the son of Tom's original owner, George Shelby does free his slaves. But Simon Legree, Tom's debased final master and murderer, is beyond redemption.

In later abridged versions, particularly those for younger children, the relationship between Eva and Tom, which, in the original, is based on their mutual religious devotion and empathy with all suffering humanity, becomes sentimentalised. Their image in the garden together becomes the most widely recognised representation of the story, a vision of the supposed innocence of relationships between white and black in slavery.

Many of the black characters which Stowe created in **Uncle Tom's Cabin** were later transfigured by other novels and films into belittling stereotypes which came to be resented by African Americans, a resentment that came to be projected back on to the original novel. Aunt Chloe, Tom's wife, the household cook, be-turbaned, homely and plump, who, in the novel, urges her husband to flee slavery rather than be sold away from her, becomes the faithful black 'mammy' familiar in later novels and films; and Topsy, whose belief that she 'just growed' arises from the fact that she has no knowledge of her parents and no education, is the prototype for many condescendingly amusing portrayals of black children, despite Stowe's characterisation being profoundly tragic. Among African Americans, of course, the term Uncle Tom came to mean someone who would do whatever his master told him and never stand up for himself.

It is not surprising then, that, following the American Civil Rights movement which began in the 1950s, **Uncle Tom's Cabin**, unlike some of its classic contemporaries, (say **Oliver Twist**) was no longer thought fit for young people's reading or viewing. It had played an important part in galvanising opinion against slavery but, having intervened decisively in history, it was history's victim.

* According to Will Kaufman

** Kathleen Lines, *From Four to Fourteen*, Cambridge University Press, 1956.

Clive Barnes has retired from Southampton City where he was Principal Children's Librarian and is now a freelance researcher and writer.

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