

Harold Porter

December 20, 2010

## **The Most Famous Man in America's Sister**

I knew it would be a unique gift, an incredible blessing, to spend three months last summer, my wife and I alone, both now retired, nestling together under the Michigan pines in our recently secured cabin on the edge of the Little Muskegon River. There would be no T V, no computer, no direct phone – only books, lots of books, and an excellent library in a nearby village.

The stage was now set so there would be no excuse. Two books I had long put off would be the first off the shelf – beginning with the longest, and heaviest, *War and Peace*. Accomplishing the first goal, I found there was indeed much to relish about Tolstoy's masterpiece, but too much to share here. Except to say that Tolstoy, Christian pacifist that he was, mentor to Gandhi and King, could be self-identified with one of his characters in the novel who shouted, "seize the moments of happiness, love and be loved! That is the only reality in this world, all else is folly."

Well I would agree with Tolstoy, for is it not true there is no other God than this, the God of love.

Exhaustively enriched, I moved on to my second-book-resolution written by a contemporary of Tolstoy, but closer to home, very close indeed, that of Harriet Beecher Stowe and her, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

I don't know why I had never read this book. I certainly have spoken on racial issues before. In fact, my first sermon on race was in the first year of my very first church forty-nine years ago.

I think what kept me from reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was Uncle Tom, himself. I had fallen into the current pejorative view, that an Uncle Tom was a symbol of blacks who acted subserviently to whites. And I thought that if a black person, or any person for that matter, who did not have the courage to demand their full civil rights and their equal status as children of God, then I didn't really want to support them.

The irony was that in our twenty-seven years of living in Cincinnati, Betty and I have lived in or near Walnut Hills where, at the corner of King and Gilbert, the Harriet Beecher Stow Home exists, inviting all to visit. But we never did, until a few weeks ago. All because I wasn't keen on Uncle Tom!

But finally, I read the book. And I was overcome. I couldn't put it down. I quickly discovered that it was not only well written, but its message was still fresh, and more sophisticated than I had been led to believe. I quickly read it again. I also understood why, in Langston Hughes' estimate, it was, "the most cursed and discussed book of its time."

Certainly, I was immediately pleased to discover that Uncle Tom was no timid traitor to his race, or to the human race. He was a gentle, compassionate Christ figure who was murdered because he would not betray the whereabouts of two runaway slaves. In truth, the book is revolutionary not cowardly. One could understand why it was immediately banned in Russia and why it was Lenin's favorite book as he grew up. And there is much truth in what Lincoln was alleged to have said to Stowe when they first met: "So this is the little lady who started this big war."

Harriet lived in Cincinnati for eighteen years, coming here with her father, Lyman Beecher, the most prominent Puritan preacher of that day. Beecher was called to the Presidency of Lane Presbyterian Seminary and Pastor to what is now called The Covenant-First Presbyterian Church, located downtown on Elm at Eighth. Beecher was attracted to coming here knowing Cincinnati was the fastest growing center of the West. He felt it was his mission to help save it from Catholics and Unitarians or, as he said, all of the West would be lost.

Lyman was a classical Calvinist whose God was more unforgiving than loving. He had thirteen children. His seven sons all went into the ministry while the daughters would make their mark in education, literature, and feminist causes. All the children were raised to be a force for good, to bring heaven to earth. It was said of Lyman Beecher that he was "the father of more brains than any one in America."

During the tension leading up to the Civil War it was also said that "the country is divided between the good and the bad and the Beechers."

All of the children would eventually reject the more dogmatic and judgmental views of their father's theology, but they loved him and would remain a very close family, always enriching one another. Years later, one of the chief reasons Mark Twain would move to Hartford, Connecticut would be to live in the Beecher enclave and next door to Harriet. He wrote of them, "Puritans are mighty straight-laced and they won't let me smoke in the parlor, but the Almighty don't make any better people."

Henry Ward Beecher was the most famous of Lyman's sons. Debby Applegate received the Pulitzer Prize a few years ago for her biography of Henry, titled *The Most Famous Man in America*. And, as a preacher, indeed he was. But it was Harriet, his sister, who would become world renown, the most publicly successful woman of her century.

Harriet was 24 when she came to Cincinnati. Her major biographer, Joan Hedrick, writes: "The eighteen years Harriet Beecher spent in Cincinnati...was the cradle of her career. Unlike her father ...within a year her tolerant views of Catholics won her the praise of John Baptist Purcell, bishop of Cincinnati. She was a New Englander when she came (West); by the time she left she was an American."

I was impressed to learn that Harriet became a very active member of the Semi-colon Literary Club which included most of the prominent men and women of Cincinnati. It also met on Monday nights at our same hour. Years later, Harriet would assemble her club papers to be included in her book, *The Mayflower*. The Semi-colon Club disbanded during the early 1840's but it nevertheless, in Harriet Beecher Stowe, gave birth to the most prolific writer of the 19th century.

After it disbanded, several of its members, including Samuel Chase, Judge Timothy Walker, and William Green helped form our present Literary Club, but like most literary clubs in the East, was only for men.

Stowe, in her years in Cincinnati, in spite of it being a time of great growth and excitement, found life here a great challenge. She faced poverty, endless household chores, a demanding marriage, the birth of six of her children, theological and cultural battles, reoccurring race riots, periods of depression, and several cholera epidemics, one of which took the life of her youngest child, Charles.

So when her husband, biblical scholar Calvin Stowe, was called to the faculty of Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, it was no surprise that she was eager to leave Cincinnati. It was in Brunswick, shortly after moving there that she wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

While she had by now published several articles and one book and was eager to write about anything desperate for money, the impulse to write *Uncle Tom's Cabin* came not to put food on the table, but because of two crucial events. The first was the passing of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 which commanded all citizens to aid in the capture of any runaway slaves. That, and the Supreme Court's Dred Scott decision, in effect made slavery a protected national institution and made the North as complicit in slavery as the South.

This totally incensed Harriet. She was especially enraged with Daniel Webster for supporting the new law thinking it would save the Union. Stowe didn't believe that the Union should be saved at the expense of its God given constitutional principles, and wrote to her brothers that if she had a pulpit, as they did, she would not stop preaching on it.

But the second reason Harriet felt called to write *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was her own antipathy of slavery and her firsthand experience of its injustice, especially experienced while here in our city. With the unbearable pain of losing her son Charlie, she clearly identified with countless mothers caught up in slavery who had their children torn away from them and auctioned off at the slave market, never again to be seen.

Harriet, who believed that there is no higher moral agency than a mother's love, a constant theme in the book, thought that what was essentially wrong with slavery was that it tore families apart, corrupted sexual fidelity, and was plainly a horrendous and unredeemable sin against God's creation. It deserved God's harshest judgment.

Her decision to fight it by her pen came when challenged in a letter to the family from Isabella Beecher, her sister-in-law:

“Now, Hattie, if I could use a pen as you can, I would write something that would make this whole nation feel what an accursed thing slavery is.” As her children remembered, Harriet stood up and announced, “I will. I will if I live.”

She immediately wrote to the editor of the periodical, the *National Era*, that she wanted to deal with slavery by portraying several graphic sketches; “to be simply that of a painter.” In doing so she wanted to be fair to the individuals involved for she held no animosity with Southerners, but to make it picture clear what this cursed, unredeemable institution of slavery entailed.

Her story grew and grew, week after week, with a new chapter appearing every Friday for nearly a year. Fifty thousand would read it in its serial edition, and then, just a few months later, on March 20, 1852 it was published in hard cover. 5,000 copies were sold the first two days, and over 300,000 the first year. It was the first book in the USA to reach a million copies and it became the single best selling novel in the world, translated into 58 languages in Harriet’s own life time. It remains the most translated book besides the Bible today.

The book was a great literary event beyond what even she anticipated but it clearly met two of her goals. In the words of the book’s narrator after the scene of the torturous death of Uncle Tom we read her dual judgment: “Oh, my country, these things are done under the shadow of thy laws! O Christ! Thy church sees them, almost in silence!” p504 And again near the end of the book, these inhuman practices are all done “... beneath the shadow of American law, and the shadow of the cross of Christ.” p541 To Harriet, as to slavery, both her country and her church had failed God. It was time for both to repent.

But writing this prophetic oracle was also a great act of personal courage. It should be noted that Harriet was the only significant American writer to frontally attack slavery prior to the Civil War and that would include her New England colleagues, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Hawthorn, and Melville. She simply transformed the most unpopular subject of that day into the most popular literature in American History. Because of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a whole cottage industry sprang up: plays, music, and was the subject of the first American movie. Tolstoy considered it the highest form of literary art.

Most gratefully for her poor household, she received \$10,000 for the first three months of its publication. It sold even more in England but because of the absence of international copywrite laws, she received nothing. However, on her first trip to Europe, and with the unprecedented welcome there by the thousands everywhere she went, she returned with \$20,000 dollars made possible mostly by penny offerings from those wanting to help with the anti-slavery cause.

Returning, she immediately wrote two more books against slavery and would go on to write two dozen books including ten novels, countless short stories and news articles.

She would continue to make lengthy tours of Europe modestly enjoying her international status as her generations most famous writer. During the Civil War she would write to the women of Britain and France not to support the Confederates cause, as Lincoln had urged her to do, as did her brother, Henry Ward Beecher who delivered speeches during the war throughout the British Isles.

It is reported that Robert E. Lee thought that if it were not for *Uncle Tom's Cabin* huge success in Great Britain and Henry Ward Beecher's speeches that "the Confederacy would have secured diplomatic recognition by England and France and their material and moral support would have tipped the war to the Rebels." Lincoln felt the same. That is also why Lincoln asked that Henry Ward Beecher be asked to give the speech at the raising of the flag at Fort Sumter after the war because, as Lincoln said, "If it were not for the Beechers there would have been no flag to raise."

What is amazing about all of this is Harriet herself. Yes, fully an American, but forever the puritan pilgrim keeping in covenant with the God of justice and equality. Appropriately on her 70<sup>th</sup> birthday the literati of that day all gathered to celebrate her life. Whittier was the first to lift up a toast:

"To her, who in our evil time  
 Dragged into light the Nation's crime,  
 With strength beyond the strength of men,  
 And mightier than their sword, her pen."

And so much more could be said of Harriet Beecher Stowe.

But since this is a holiday paper let me conclude by suggesting that if you would like to read about the *First Christmas of New England* which was aboard the Mayflower off the shore of Cape Cod in 1620, read Stowe's beautiful but fictional story by that same name. No one has written about every day Puritan culture as well as she.

But in actual fact, the record of that first Christmas day was much bleaker than she portrayed and Christmas was not even celebrated. From the ship's log, our only record, we read that the men went ashore on Christmas and labored all day cutting trees and building shelters. At night, they returned to the ship and the only unusual activity that night was an extra portion of beer given to all.

Actually there would be no Christmas celebrations for the Puritans in New England for their first two hundred years of our founding...only Catholics, Lutherans, and Episcopalians did that.

Consequently, Harriet and the other Beecher children never celebrated Christmas in their home or in their church. Father Lyman believed it was a pagan custom. They didn't even celebrate birthdays. But Harriet had evolved. She saw God no longer defined by Calvin's strict theology but more as a strong and loving parent. She still believed all men do indeed sin, but they need not, and as to faith, she had learned it need not be a dark burden either, but a way to discover life and life in all of its abundance.

And so for the first time in her life, around the time of her seventh child, Harriet, radically for her, gathered all her family together around their very first Christmas tree on Christmas Eve. And there they would share gifts and sing all the new carols, especially those that highlighted the Joy and Goodwill that this child was meant to be for all the people.

For them it was a Holy Night and all was calm and all was bright.

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