



# Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life

*Joan D. Hedrick*

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"Up to this year I have always felt that I had no particular call to meddle with this subject....But I feel now that the time is come when even a woman or a child who can speak a word for freedom and humanity is bound to speak." Thus did Harriet Beecher Stowe announce her decision to begin work on what would become one of the most influential novels ever written. The subject she had hesitated to "meddle with" was slavery, and the novel, of course, was *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Still debated today for its portrayal of African Americans and its unresolved place in the literary canon, Stowe's best-known work was first published in weekly installments from June 5, 1851 to April 1, 1852. It caused such a stir in both the North and South, and even in Great Britain, that when Stowe met President Lincoln in 1862 he is said to have greeted her with the words, "So you are the little woman who wrote the book that created this great war!"

In this landmark book, the first full-scale biography of Harriet Beecher Stowe in over fifty years, Joan D. Hedrick tells the absorbing story of this gifted, complex, and contradictory woman. Hedrick takes readers into the multilayered world of nineteenth century morals and mores, exploring the influence of then-popular ideas of "true womanhood" on Stowe's upbringing as a member of the outspoken Beecher clan, and her eventful life as a writer and shaper of public opinion who was also a mother of seven. It offers a lively record of the flourishing parlor societies that launched and sustained Stowe throughout the 44 years of her career, and the harsh physical realities that governed so many women's lives. The epidemics, high infant mortality, and often disastrous medical practices of the day are portrayed in moving detail, against the backdrop of western expansion, and the great social upheaval accompanying the abolitionist movement and the entry of women into public life.

Here are Stowe's public triumphs, both before and after the Civil War, and the private tragedies that included the death of her adored eighteen month old son, the drowning of another son, and the alcohol and morphine addictions of two of her other children. The daughter, sister, and wife of prominent ministers, Stowe channeled her anguish and her ambition into a socially acceptable anger on behalf of others, transforming her private experience into powerful narratives that moved a nation.

Magisterial in its breadth and rich in detail, this definitive portrait explores the full measure of Harriet Beecher Stowe's life, and her contribution to American literature. Perceptive and engaging, it illuminates the career of a major writer during the transition of literature from an amateur pastime to a profession, and offers a fascinating look at the pains, pleasures, and accomplishments of women's lives in the last century.

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