

Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Spiritual Life

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Review

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Koester, Nancy *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Spiritual Life*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., \$24.00 ISBN 978-0-8028-3304-4

A New Look at an Important Antebellum Figure

This volume is the first biography of Harriet Beecher Stowe to focus on her religious background, with particular attention paid to how her beliefs influenced her life and life's work. It is part of a series of religious biographies published by the Christian publisher, Wm. B. Eerdmans, a series that includes many books on subjects who are not usually considered, primarily, as religious figures. The study is premised on the contention that historians and literary critics have illuminated Stowe's literary and social reform work at the expense of her Christian faith. The author, Nancy Koester, is a historian of Christianity and ordained Lutheran minister. Thus, the biography sticks close to the religious details of Stowe's life, including the influence of her preacher father, her struggle with the harsh tenets of New England Calvinism, her marriage to the theologian and professor Calvin Stowe, and an account of how Stowe's religious beliefs shaped her commitments to abolitionism and moral reform, more generally. The author also tells a story about denominational conversion: of Stowe's relationship to the history and practice of Puritanism in New England and her turn from her father's Congregationalism to a gentler Episcopalianism in adulthood. The author notes that this struggle also shaped Stowe's fiction: "her struggles to free herself from New England Calvinism, while honoring her father and following Jesus, form the heart of some of her best fiction" (xi).

After chapters that follow the traditional form of biography, detailing Stowe's family background, education, coming of age, and marriage, Koester chronicles the writing and publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, serialized in the *National Era* in 1851 and published as a novel in 1852. A chapter devoted to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* focuses on Stowe's use of scripture throughout the novel. Two subsequent chapters outline Stowe's activities during the Civil War. These

include Stowe's appeals to the British to come out in support of the North, her mixed feelings of pride and anxiety over her son, Fred, fighting for the Union, and of course, her famous meeting with Lincoln at the White House in December 1862, a month before the President would sign the Emancipation Proclamation. Koester also chronicles Stowe's many writing ventures during the War, including the publication of two novels and several contributions to the *Atlantic Monthly*, including a series of "domestic articles" written under the pen name Christopher Crowfield. In this series, Stowe pointed to hearth and home as stabilizing forces amidst the unsettling chaos of war.

The book's sources are largely drawn from nineteenth-century autobiographies, biographies, and correspondence, including *Life and Letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe* (1898), *Life of Harriet Beecher Stowe: Compiled from Her Letters and Journals* (1890), and the *Autobiography of Lyman Beecher* (1865; 1961), as well as material drawn from the Beecher Family Papers at Yale and the Beecher-Stowe Family Papers at Harvard, among other collections. While direct quotes from these sources provide many intimate details about Stowe's life and aid with the readability and accessibility of the biography, academic readers may find that the author too often takes personal reminiscences and memories as historical truth. Furthermore, while a closer look at Stowe's religious beliefs is indeed an important task, the biography does not offer a radically new portrait of Stowe, or of her world. In other words, the biography begs the question: how does a fuller account of Stowe's spiritual life transform how we understand Stowe, beyond a demonstration of her faithfulness? How, moreover, does a focus on Stowe's spirituality help us to tell a different story about the nineteenth-century United States? The study is certainly appropriate for the general reader and is likely to be enjoyed by those who want to know more about Stowe's religious beliefs. Scholars and specialists, however, may be more satisfied turning to those primary sources—the autobiographical materials, journals, and correspondence—cited throughout Koester's biography.

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