

Civil War Obscura: Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly.

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Feature Essay: Civil War Obscura

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Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly*. First Published by John P. Jewett, 1852. Illustrated Classic published by Seawolf Press, 2019-2020. SOFTCOVER \$8.11, HARDCOVER \$22.95, ELECTRONIC \$2.99 from amazon.com. ISBN 1952433002 pp. 501

It occurred to me that, for all the times *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has been referenced in my reading, I had never actually read the book. Why would I? The Civil War is over, and slavery is illegal, so what good would it do to read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* today? Is curiosity reason enough? I ordered a copy of the book and dug in. Yes. It is as awful as possible in some places. It is evident that author Stowe got her information about slavery second or third hand. Some scenes are so memorable in a corny nineteenth-century way that they have become familiar cliches for any antislavery novel. Even so, there are some exciting surprises. Stowe's insights into the minds of mid-nineteenth-century Americans make *Uncle Tom's Cabin* a book worth reading in 2021.

If someone is not familiar with the history of this substantial offering, *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or Life Among the Lowly*, is an antislavery novel by American author Harriet Beecher Stowe. It was published in 1852 and had a profound effect on attitudes toward African Americans and slavery in the U.S. It has been said that President Lincoln met author Stowe and asked her if she was the woman "whose little book had started this big war." *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was the best-selling novel of the nineteenth century and the second best-selling overall book, following the Bible. The sentimental story tries to depict the reality of slavery, although Stowe had no personal experience with the practice. Her overarching message is that Christian love can overcome something as destructive as the enslavement of fellow human beings.

Although raised as a Calvinist, Stowe had more liberal ideas than her family about predestination. She was active in abolitionist circles and fought the idea of predestination that was so much a part of the Second Great Awakening. This early 19th century religious phenomenon swept through the eastern United States and spread Protestant evangelical religion through revivals and emotional preaching. It not only attracted hundreds of converts to a variety

of Protestant denominations but sparked several reform movements, including abolitionism. Stowe's entire family was involved with this movement somehow, either as preachers, teachers, or the wives of such. From the Second Great Awakening point of view, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is more clearly about religion than slavery. Stowe spoke for many northerners with her declarations of sanctity. However, the North gets as many reminders as the South does that sanctity can become sanctimonious.

The book features Uncle Tom, a slave around whom the stories of other characters revolve. He is in no way a Step-and-Fetch-It character, as his name might indicate. He isn't even as old as the illustrations in the book make him out to be. He lives on a plantation with a “kind mistress” and her ne'er-do-well husband, and he has a wife and young children. He can read enough to make sense of a much-tattered Bible, and he maintains a Christian attitude of love and forgiveness rather than a Calvinist worldview. His master, Mr. Shelby, has run up debt that causes him to sell several of his slaves, including Tom and young Harry, the son of Mrs. Shelby's maid Eliza. Eliza takes her son and runs North, and Tom goes with the coffle to a boat that will carry him to the slave market in New Orleans. Before he gets there, he is purchased by Mr. St. Clare as a friend for his young daughter Eva. St. Clare ends up asking his cousin Ophelia, a New England Yankee, to come live with them. Ophelia is Stowe's representative of northern abolitionists who want to free enslaved people but also harbor deeply seated racist and discriminatory views.

Yes, this is the Eliza who escapes slavecatchers by crossing the river on ice floes, and yes, this Eva is the little girl whose protracted deathbed scene is an example of the worst of American Victorian fiction. Read about them for no other reason than to remind yourself never to write something like this yourself. Once that is well past, Tom finds himself sold to another stock character, the plantation owner Simon Legree. Nothing but misery ensues, but during this phase of the book, readers finally get a good definition of the difference between Calvinism and a more Christ-centered view of Christianity. As Tom and others are beaten to death by Legree, Tom's constant referral to his Bible keeps him focused on the future. Jesus said that forgiveness and good works are the keys to Heaven, not predestination. Tom's life is an embodiment of this New Testament point of view. And this is the reason I feel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is still worth the time and effort it takes to read.

Civil War history is more than following battle plans and moving red and blue lines on a map. The study of history has finally acknowledged that understanding the minds of the folks who lived at the time is vital to understanding why they performed the actions for which they are remembered. Likewise, understanding the role of religion is critical to understanding a biblical defense of slavery, abolitionism, and the breakup of the major Protestant faiths immediately before the Civil War was declared. Whether your interest is in that famous Calvinist “Stonewall” Jackson, the mind of Charles Colcock Jones that saw slavery as defended by God, or the common soldier who “offered it up” just before he aimed his gun and moved forward, understanding differences of faith makes things clearer.

Inspired by the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, which effectively made Northerners responsible for enslaved people who had fled the South, Stowe decided she should do “something” about the situation. Her concern about the exclusion of the Christian spirit of forgiveness results in her black characters—Tom in this case—taking on the role of Jesus. To understand Americans in the 1860s is difficult enough. At least we have Harriet Beecher Stowe to remind us of their complex moral lives and the decisions they made concerning human bondage. For these reasons, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is still worth the read.

Meg Groeling received her Master's degree in Military History, with a Civil War emphasis, in 2016, from American Public University. Savas Beatie published her first book, The Aftermath of Battle: The Burial of the Civil War Dead, in the fall of 2015, and she has written First Fallen: The Life of Colonel Elmer Ellsworth, which Savas Beatie also publishes. In addition, she is a regular contributor to the blog Emerging Civil War. She and her husband live with three cats in a 1927 California bungalow covered with roses on the outside and books.