

1852

# Did a Novel Start the Civil War?

Published 160 years ago, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* captivated—and bitterly divided—America

BY DAVID S. REYNOLDS

**O**n January 1, 1863, Harriet Beecher Stowe attended a concert at the Boston Music Hall to celebrate Abraham Lincoln's expected signing that day of the Emancipation Proclamation.

When news came over the wires that the President had signed the decree, freeing (at least theoretically) millions of slaves in Southern states disloyal to the Union, the hall

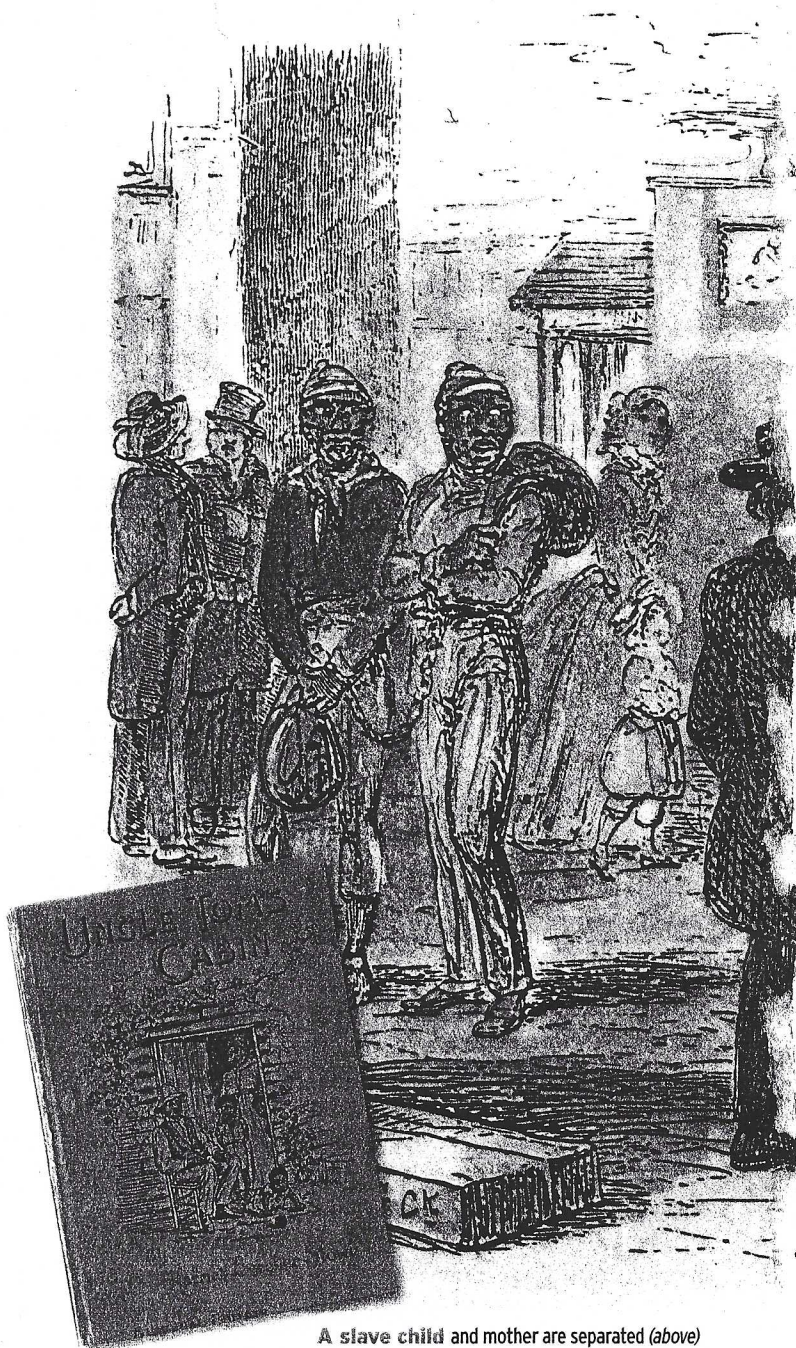
erupted with applause. Three cheers went up for Lincoln. Three more followed for William Lloyd Garrison, mixed with hisses from those who didn't like the controversial abolitionist. And when Stowe was spotted on a balcony, another chant swept the hall: "Harriet Beecher Stowe! Harriet Beecher Stowe!"

The crowd was convinced that Stowe had helped make this moment possible

with her anti-slavery best-seller *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly*, published a decade earlier.

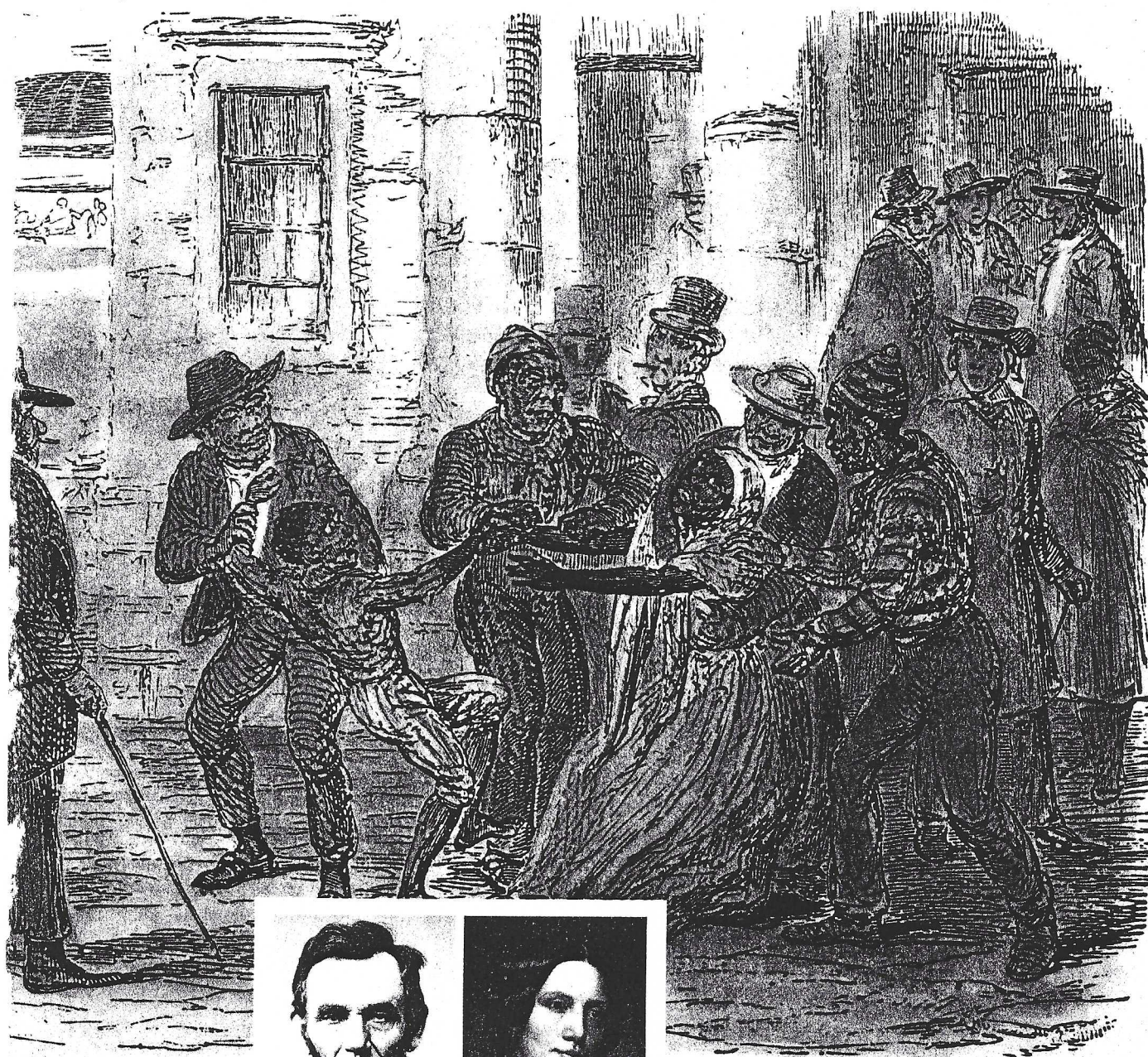
Lincoln himself may have felt the same way. A month before the concert, Stowe had visited him in the White House to urge him to issue the proclamation. He is said to have greeted her by saying, "Is this the little woman who made this great war?"

Whether he actually said it or not isn't



A slave child and mother are separated (above) in an illustration from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which awakened many Americans to the horrors of slavery.





President Lincoln and Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. He is said to have asked her, "Is this the little woman who made this great war?"

clear and doesn't really matter: At the time, many believed that Stowe and her book had in fact brought on the Civil War.

Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in protest against the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, which instituted fines for federal officials who didn't arrest runaway slaves. The novel set sales records and became an international sensation soon after it was published in 1852. In its first year, 310,000 copies were sold in

the U.S. and more than 2 million worldwide. And because reading the novel aloud was a favorite pastime of families and literary groups, it likely reached many more people. "*Uncle Tom* has probably 10 readers to every purchaser," *The Literary World* declared in 1852.

What accounts for the novel's unprecedented success? Stowe knew how to appeal to a wide audience. She skillfully used images from virtually

every realm of culture—including religion, sensational pulp fiction, and popular entertainment—and brought them together in memorable characters and two compelling anti-slavery plot

*Adapted from Mightier Than the Sword:*

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lines: the Northern one, involving the escape of the fugitive slaves Eliza and George Harris and their son, Harry; and the Southern one, tracing the painful separation of Uncle Tom from his family in Kentucky when he is sold into the Deep South.

Unlike other writers of her day, Stowe channeled these popular images to make a crystal-clear social point: Slavery was evil.

### Uncle Tom in the South

Her message spread far and wide, even to those who had never heard of the novel: The countless plays adapted from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* made converts to the anti-slavery cause everywhere.

Indeed, many people who had celebrated the recapture of fugitive slaves in the early 1850s did an about-face by the middle of the decade. One British professor attributed the shift to the Uncle Tom plays. He noted that night after night, audiences screamed and cried at scenes with a strong anti-slavery message and that "public sympathy turned in favor of the slave."

One slave-holding South Carolina planter agreed. "Perhaps a slaveholder might have succeeded in catching his 'property' as late as last year," he grumbled in 1854, "but he certainly

could not do so since 'Uncle Tom' and his troupe caught the popular fancy."

Of course, without the 1860 election of Lincoln, an anti-slavery Republican, it's likely that the Civil War would not have begun when it did, in April 1861, because the secession of the 11 Southern states, which triggered the war, would not have occurred.

But *Uncle Tom's Cabin* played a key role in the rise of the anti-slavery Republican party. It shaped the political scene by making the North, formerly largely hostile to anti-slavery reform, far more open to it. The novel and its iterations in plays, essays, and tie-in merchandise in America and Europe—including Tom-related card games, jigsaw puzzles, spoons, and handkerchiefs—paved the way for the public's openness to an anti-slavery candidate like Lincoln.

By 1854, one journalist noted a growing shift among voters: "Much of anti-slavery truth, heretofore discarded . . . as fanatical, is now received and read by all. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, thundering along the pathway of reform, is doing a magnificent work on the public mind."

At the same time, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* stiffened the South's resolve to defend slavery and demonize the North. Most Southern states discouraged the book's sale, and some criminalized it. "The wide dissemination of such dangerous volumes," a Virginia newspaper said, could lead to "the ultimate overthrow of the framework of Southern society."

Slavery's defenders warned of the racial disruption the book might cause, including slave rebellions. At least 29 anti-Tom novels were published before the Civil War. Many portrayed abolitionists as racist and corrupt and tried to show that slaves in the South were far better off than free blacks in the North.

After *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* publication, Stowe continued to promote her anti-slavery message. She made sure

politicians she knew received copies of the novel, and she used whatever influence she could muster in the political scene—a forbidden sphere for women at the time—to challenge slavery. In 1854, she was horrified by the bill proposed by Senator Stephen Douglas of Illinois that threatened to open up the Kansas and Nebraska territories to slavery. She helped organize an anti-slavery rally in Boston and worked to distribute a petition against the bill. But to no avail: the Kansas-Nebraska Act became law.

### Stowe, John Brown & Lincoln

The pro-slavery efforts in Kansas, combined with the Supreme Court's 1857 ruling in the *Dred Scott* case, which said that blacks—slave or free—could never be U.S. citizens, led Stowe to embrace the anti-slavery warrior John Brown. Brown led a futile raid on Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in 1859, in an attempt to start a slave uprising and was later tried and executed for treason. Stowe called him "a brave, good man, who calmly gave up his



## The Road to the Civil War

**1850** Fugitive Slave Law

**1852** *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

**1854** Kansas-Nebraska Act

**1857** *Dred Scott* decision

**1859** John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry

**1860** Lincoln's election, 11 states secede

**1861** Attack on Fort Sumter: The war begins





Union artillery  
in Fair Oaks, Virginia,  
in 1862—one year  
into the Civil War

life to a noble effort for human freedom.”

Still, Stowe hadn't completely lost hope for a peaceful end to slavery. She was ecstatic over Lincoln's victory in the presidential election of 1860, though she thought the Republicans didn't go far enough in opposing slavery. She could hardly believe how far Northerners had come. It wasn't long ago, she wrote, that open expressions of anti-slavery feeling would have been considered “rank abolition heresies” that could only be whispered. But now Northern men, women, and children everywhere were debating slavery and its evils.

Not that Northerners had converted to radical abolitionism. William Lloyd Garrison and others like him were still widely considered extremists. Racism was rife. Eleven anti-abolition riots erupted in Northern cities between 1859 and the 1861 attack on Fort Sumter in South Carolina, which began the Civil War. Lincoln, trying to establish himself as a moderate, opposed abolitionism and John Brown before the war, focusing his

efforts on keeping the Union together.

Nonetheless, Lincoln's opposition to slavery was universally known. He had made that point resoundingly in his 1858 debates with Stephen Douglas while challenging him for his Illinois Senate seat. Lincoln stated, “I confess myself as belonging to that class in the country that believes slavery to be a moral and political wrong.” He was elected president in 1860 on an anti-slavery Republican ticket. Stowe knew that, on the deepest level, he and she were in accord.

#### **‘It Came to Me in Visions’**

Her respect for Lincoln grew during the war, which under his direction became increasingly aimed at emancipating the slaves instead of simply preserving the Union. Her involvement with anti-slavery politics is what led to her historic visit to the White House in December 1862, a visit she made, as she wrote, “to satisfy myself that I may refer to the Emancipation Proclamation as a reality and a substance not to

fizzle out at the little end of the hour.”

We don't know whether Lincoln was swayed by his interview with her, but we do know that the meeting was cordial and was followed a few weeks later by his signing of the proclamation.

After the war, Stowe felt that her novel had done its job. In 1866, she wrote a British friend that she had “been reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin* again—and when I read that book scarred and seared and burned into the memories of an anguish and horror that can never be forgotten and think it is all over now!—all past!”

That an author could have had so great an impact as Harriet Beecher Stowe seems unlikely, if not impossible—especially at a time when women had no political voice.

Stowe herself had a simple explanation for her book's power to change minds: God wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. As she once explained to a friend, “It all came to me in visions, one after another, and I put them down in words.” ●