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Liberty Befits All

Stowe and Uncle Tom's Cabin

— ◆ —

ROBERT E. WRIGHT

Upon finishing reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin, or Life among the Lowly* (hereafter *UTC*),¹ Lord Cockburn claimed that it “has done more for humanity than was ever before accomplished by any single book of fiction” (qtd. in R. R. 1896). It has more work to do yet. It may seem strange in the twenty-first century to extol a text that makes a point so basic that it hardly seems worth making: *slavery befits no human being, enslaved or enslaver*. But when this point is stated in positive terms, *liberty befits all*, the book's relevance to a world still characterized by paternalism, trade restrictions, and wage-and-price controls looms large. More poignantly, nonchattel forms of slavery, such as the convict-lease system and debt peonage, persisted in the United States long after Emancipation (Oshinsky 1997; Blackmon 2008), and a significant remnant survives to this day in the form of the carceral state (Alexander 2012).

In sundry forms assigned euphemistic labels such as *sex trafficking* and *forced labor*, slavery persists globally as well,² and in *UTC* all its major characteristics, including post-traumatic stress disorder and premature aging, find ample expression. Enslaved woman Hagar “might have been sixty, but was older than that by hard work and disease, was

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1. Many editions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* exist. All references herein are to Stowe [1852] 2005, and subsequent citations to the novel give page numbers only.

2. No scholar has done more to document this than Kevin Bales. See, for example, *Blood and Earth: Modern Slavery, Ecocide, and the Secret to Saving the World* (Bales 2016).

partially blind, and somewhat crippled with rheumatism” (101). A biblical passage, Matthew 25:43, quoted in *UTC* refers to prison as a sort of slavery (264). And the cruelest master in the book, the infamous Simon Legree, treats his slaves like modern enslavers do, as disposable people (Bales 2004): “I don’t go for savin’ niggers. Use up, and buy more, ’s my way;—makes you less trouble, and I’m quite sure it comes cheaper in the end” (288). Legree later claims, as modern enslavers also do, that he rules by might because “there’s no law here, of God or man” (304). Legree and several other enslavers in the novel also hold women, “fancy” ones with light skin, as sex slaves in the modern style (79, 93, 161, 280, 307, 372). Like modern enslavers, Stowe’s masters leverage alcohol and family members to control fancy girls, prime hands, and recalcitrant slaves (309, 318).

Unfortunately, modern slavery finds unwitting but thankfully empirically weak support in the books of certain Ivy League historians.³ Their fame will fade, though, because as a Buffalonian noted in 1855, “only works of genius and benevolent utility endure the corrosions of time” and remain in humanity’s collective consciousness. “Long after” the authors of lesser works “shall have been utterly forgotten,” he predicted, “De Foe will be held in honor for his Robinson Crusoe, and Harriet Beecher Stowe be revered and honored for the glorious humanity” evinced in *UTC* (*North American and United States Gazette* 1855).

Harriet Elisabeth Beecher (1811–96) drew her first breath in Litchfield, Connecticut, the seventh of thirteen children born of preacher Lyman Beecher (1775–1863). Her mother, Roxana Foote (1775–1816), died when Harriet was just six years old. Despite the early death of their mother, the Beecher children proved a precocious bunch; Harriet enrolled in Hartford Female Seminary, a school run by her sister Catharine (1800–1878), where she received a classical liberal education. Three of Harriet’s brothers, Edward (1803–95), Henry (1813–77), and Charles (1815–1900), became ministers and abolitionists of note.

In 1832, Harriet moved to Cincinnati with her sisters and her father, who headed up Lane Theological Seminary (1829–1932) there. She fit right into the burgeoning Hogopolis, the women of which an Austrian traveler believed possessed “a high taste for literary and mental accomplishments” (qtd. in *North American Review* 1828, 417). This western boomtown perched above the Ohio River, the border between slave Kentucky and free Ohio, where Harriet interacted with free blacks and slaves as well as with Lane Seminary professor Calvin Ellis Stowe (1802–86), whom she married in 1836 (R. R. 1896).

The adamantly abolitionist couple helped several slaves on their way north to the safety of Canada before 1850, when Calvin took a position at his alma mater, Bowdoin, in Maine. That year, grieving over passage of the Fugitive Slave Act and the death of her young son Samuel, Harriet (hereafter Stowe) conceptualized

3. For critiques, see Wright 2017 and Magness 2019.

UTC. As Northerners debated the Fugitive Slave Act, which by force of law turned all citizens into slave catchers, Stowe found herself incensed as she realized that “these men and Christians do not know what slavery is” (qtd. in *Liberator* 1852a). So she set off to shake their very souls and in the process heal her own through characters who strive to save their children from lifetimes of drudgery or defilement.

A gifted writer and prolific author, Stowe, before succumbing to dementia in 1888, penned a dozen novels, a score of nonfiction books, and numerous articles. None of her other productions, however, rose to the prominence of *UTC*, which, though technically in the juvenile genre, proved every author’s dream, the right book at the right time. If published just five years earlier or five years later, it may have ended up an historical footnote, like Eliza Lee Follen’s *The Liberty Cap* (1846) or Anna H. Richardson’s *Little Laura, the Kentucky Abolitionist* (1859) (see De Rosa 2005). *UTC* instead remains one of the most widely read fictional accounts containing a clarion classical liberal message, *liberty befits all*.

For those unfamiliar with the plot, *UTC* opens with Arthur Shelby, a financially stressed Kentucky farmer planning to sell (Uncle) Tom and Harry, son of his maid Eliza, to slave trader Haley. Eliza and Harry slip away in the night before their family is shattered by the transaction, but Tom is sold Down the River. During the voyage, Tom befriends an equally pious white child, Eva St. Clare, whose father, Augustine, buys Tom and by degrees turns over to him the administration of his business and home in New Orleans. St. Clare later buys Topsy and charges his racist but abolitionist cousin Ophelia with her education.

Meanwhile, Harry, Eliza, and George Harris, Eliza’s runaway husband, shoot and wound slave catcher Tom Loker. The trio leave him with Quakers before safely entering Canada. Among the Friends, Loker heals, repents (324; see also Stowe 1853, 194), and begins trapping animals instead of people.⁴

Eva eventually becomes ill and before dying shares a vision of heaven that induces Ophelia to swear off racism, Topsy to embrace education, and St. Clare to promise Tom’s manumission. Before St. Clare can set Tom free, however, he perishes trying to break up a brawl, and his widow, Marie, reneges on the promise and sells Tom at auction. The atheist Legree purchases Tom and tries to work him on his Louisiana plantation. Legree, though, soon comes to hate Tom for his piety and recalcitrance. Despite Legree’s determination to break him, Tom retains his Christian faith and allows Legree to martyr him rather than reveal the location of two of Legree’s runaway slave mistresses, Cassy and Emmeline.

Moved by Tom’s Christ-like forgiveness of all who have wronged him, Legree’s vicious black slave drivers Sambo and Quimbo convert to Christianity. Arthur Shelby’s son arrives too late to buy back Tom before he dies, but he buries Tom and frees his own

4. For a short survey and bibliography of fur-trapping mountain men, see Wright 2019a.

slaves upon his return to Kentucky. Cassy and Emmeline make it to Canada, where they are led to Eliza, who turns out to be Cassy's daughter. All travel to Liberia via France, still two icons of liberty when Stowe wrote.

In the custom of the day, the antislavery paper *The National Era* serialized Stowe's narrative before it appeared in book form in March 1852. The initial print run flew off the shelves and apparently soon became a Sabbath school standard in the North (*Peoria Journal* 1853). The novel soon sold more than a million copies in the United States, Great Britain, and elsewhere abroad, and it eventually became second only to the Bible on America's nineteenth-century best-seller list (*Frederick Douglass's Paper* 1852c; *Liberator* 1852b). As late as the 1890s, it ranked only behind *David Copperfield*, *Ivanhoe*, and *The Scarlet Letter* atop the list of novels most frequently signed out of a sample of important public libraries (*Daily Inter Ocean* 1893).

UTC also spawned a theatrical adaptation that played to large audiences at New York's National Theatre (*Frederick Douglass's Paper* 1852b). At least eight songs based on the novel, including the sweet "Little Eva, Uncle Tom's Guardian Angel," found large audiences among the sheet-music set (*Frederick Douglass's Paper* 1852a; Wilson 1972). The novel also inspired merch, including *UTC*-theme board games, ceramics, and wallpaper. Critics attributed the gaudy commercialization of *UTC* to "catchpenny imitators" who sought to fill "their sails while the wind still blows," but the Boston parents who named three hundred babies "Eva" clearly were not animated by such base motives (*Frederick Douglass's Paper* 1852b).

In a letter written a year and a half after the publication of *UTC*, Stowe claimed that her work had had four effects: (1) softening the rhetoric of extreme abolitionists; (2) swelling the ranks of moderate abolitionists; (3) instilling self-confidence in free blacks; and (4) reducing racist attitudes toward African Americans throughout the country (qtd. in Stowe 1853, 124). No direct data with which to test Stowe's claims exist, but the 1850s clearly represented a sea change in Northern attitudes toward slavery that constituted a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for sectional war.

When Stowe met with President Lincoln in November 1862, he reportedly addressed her as the author of the book that started the Civil War. Lincoln likely proffered the comment tongue-in-cheek, as his understanding of causation waxed too nuanced to attribute the great conflagration to a single cause. Indeed, Stowe and her daughters described the meeting as "real funny" and "droll" (qtd. in Hedrick 1994, 306). Although Stowe's prose alone had not the power to foment a civil war, her book's influence on public opinion, North and South, remains difficult to exaggerate (Wehner 2011).

Within a year of *UTC*'s release, an editor in Fayetteville, North Carolina, asked where Stowe's book would tend. "Why to *disunion!*" was his immediate and passionate reply. "There has never," he claimed, "been as strong a blow struck against this Union" (*Fayetteville Observer* 1852). That editor understood that *UTC*, like most works of fiction, does not analyze but instead leverages narrative structures to lead readers to self-discovery. It does not try to persuade with reason but rather invades readers' emotions,

intensifying what each already senses about slavery. According to the reviewer for the famed British periodical *Blackwood's Magazine*, readers of *UTC* remain “a willing captive to the last” (reprinted in *Frederick Douglass' Paper* 1853). Through what Stowe called a word picture of slavery, *UTC* creates great sympathy for the enslaved among those who already feel slavery's moral turpitude. “It leaves a bitter and malignant impression on the mind,” the Fayetteville editor explained, “an idea that all the slaves in the South are saints, and all the masters demons” (*Fayetteville Observer* 1852). The basic rationality and humanity of Stowe's slave characters enraged enslavers the most because the story makes clear that human chattel can never be whipped into cattle.

Wherever *UTC* went, a sympathetic journalist proclaimed, “prejudice is disarmed, opposition is removed, and the hearts of all are touched with a new and strange feeling, to which they before were strangers” (*New York Commercial Advertiser* 1851). Even before the novel appeared, the serialization was credited with “quietly but surely working out a mighty moral and social change” (*New York Commercial Advertiser* 1851). Even apologists for slavery admitted that the story drew people in “by degrees, without perceiving it, till at the end he finds himself a sympathizer with John Brown” (*New York Herald* 1859).

Some Southerners thought that *UTC* portrayed slaves, masters, and the South realistically, for a work of fiction, and with nuance, if at times too much panache (Stowe 1853). South of the Mason–Dixon line, though, Stowe's story was cursed as often as it was discussed,⁵ and it aroused great hatred of abolitionists among enslavers and their minions. Critics dismissed the literary merits of the novel, attributing the considerable commercial success of the “abolitionist fable” to the way Stowe “cunningly devised” it (*Frederick Douglass' Paper* 1852b).

In the 1850s, a cultural civil war erupted as some thirty anti-*UTC* novels appeared, and numerous minstrel shows parodied *UTC* in skits and ribald songs (Lott 1993, 9). Abolitionists lambasted both, calling one of the first hack jobs, *Uncle Tom's Cabin as It Is*, “a miserable abortion” (*Milwaukee Daily Sentinel* 1852). The fact that the culture war lasted far longer than the Civil War itself—as late as 1899, the chair that Stowe reputedly sat in while penning *UTC* remained revered in the North, and in the South a new book purporting to refute *UTC* was published to much fanfare—attests to *UTC*'s enduring legacy and importance (*Milwaukee Daily Sentinel* 1897; *Charleston Weekly News and Courier* 1899; *Raleigh News and Observer* 1899). Traveling *UTC* shows were so ubiquitous throughout the 1870s and 1880s that five different ones visited Atchison, Kansas, population fifteen thousand, in the winter of 1881–82 alone (*The Globe* 1881)! At least one *UTC* troupe, headed by Stowe's nephew John F. Stowe, continued to tour through the end of the century (*Atchinson Daily Globe* 1889; *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier* 1898; *Portland Morning Oregonian* 1898; *Central City Weekly Register-Call* 1899).

5. Yes, I borrowed this turn of phrase from Langston Hughes.

In response to critics' claims that her novel was unrealistically too hard or too soft on enslavers, Stowe in 1853 published *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, an extended discussion of the "mountain of materials" she used as background for *UTC*. *Key* serves as an indispensable source for scholars because it makes absolutely clear Stowe's thinking on many subjects, including, most importantly for our purposes here, her views on liberty, the love of which she believed drove slaves to resist in sundry ways, even at the risk of torture and death (Stowe 1853, 89). Slaves, she believed, innately understood liberty: in *UTC*, St. Clare declares they possess "the rude instinct of freedom" (198) and agrees with Tom when he explains that he would "rather have poor clothes, poor house, poor everything, and have 'em mine, than have the best, and have 'em any man's else. . . . I think it's natur, Mas'r" (198). Slaves, however, remained quite purposely alienated from the main means of procuring their liberty: education and true religion. As St. Clare notes, "[J]ust begin and thoroughly educate one generation, and the whole thing would be blown sky high" (197).

Stowe concentrates on life and liberty rather than on property because property rights are meaningless without the right to liberty or life. Most poignantly, slaves could not own property in any legal sense because they *were* property (Stowe 1853, 108, 112). In one scene, Tom's wife, Chloe, and Mrs. Shelby note that it "an't no use in niggers havin' nothin'!" (83) because anything they possess could and likely would be taken from them, and they would have no legal recourse to get it back.

Stowe understood more clearly than most that slave codes essentially delegated the coercive and sanguinary powers of the state to slaveholders, "good" ones as well as bad (Stowe 1853, 103–4). Plain and simple, slavery constituted "absolute despotism, of the most unmitigated form" and "in no sense a system for the education of a weaker race by a stronger . . . apprenticeship . . . guardianship" (Stowe 1853, 120–21). In other words, Stowe saw through the charade of paternalism. In the preface to *Key*, she notes that scenes "made bright by the generosity and kindness of masters and mistresses, would be brighter still if the element of slavery were withdrawn. . . . What is peculiar to slavery," she continued, "is evil, and only evil, and that continually" (1853, iii). Human bonds, in other words, are weakened, not strengthened, by physical and legal restraints on liberty.

Like *UTC*, the nonfiction *Key* makes clear that slaves were every bit as human as their masters. Perhaps the most poignant testimony was that of a pious Kentucky slaveholder who noted that her house slave was "as intelligent and capable as any white woman I ever knew, and as well able to have her liberty and take care of herself" (qtd. in Stowe 1853, 12).

Like Ayn Rand (Schneider and Horton 2012), Stowe can be criticized for telling rather than showing—that is, for allowing her characters to deliver long soliloquies describing their thoughts rather than showing readers what they believe through their actions,⁶ as Herman Melville does brilliantly in *Billy Budd* (Alvis 2019). She also

6. This is the difference between common dreck and timeless art, according to Robert McKee (1997).

sometimes addresses readers directly, often with clunky transitions but sometimes with commentary on subjects that might have been better handled by characters, such as the paradox of allowing the internal slave trade while outlawing international imports (113). Such literary conventions were common when Stowe wrote, however, and her characters' actions repeatedly reinforce the novel's underlying theme that *slavery befits no human being, enslaved or enslaver*.

Throughout the novel, enslavers also find themselves distorted by the peculiar institution. Marie, Eva's mother, can sell Tom despite the wishes of her dead daughter and husband because "from her infancy, she had been surrounded with servants, who lived only to study her caprices; the idea that they had either feelings or rights had never dawned upon her" (131). In another scene, Marie claims that "it's we mistresses that are the slaves, down here" (143) because she felt enslaved by the institution of slavery itself, by the utter impossibility of freeing her slaves or inducing them to serve her interests instead of their own. "They are just so selfish," she opined (144). Her husband, St. Clare, believes that either slaves have to be "spoiled" or both enslaver and enslaved "be brutalized together" as masters apply "whipping and abuse ... like laudanum," doubling "the dose as the sensibilities decline" (210).

Not even Legree sprang from innate evil. Born in the (relatively) slave-free North, he mastered cruelty as a slaveowner. When John Van Trompe discerns that he is learning that same lesson due to "the workings of a system equally bad for oppressor and oppressed," he moves to Ohio and frees his slaves (78). Eva repeatedly claims that slavery sinks into her heart deeply, as do the conversations where her mother mocks her for dreaming of freeing and educating their slaves so they can read the Bible. The little angel succumbs to her illness because she would rather die than live with the peculiar institution (185, 200, 224, 230, 233–35).

For Stowe, governments are ultimately responsible for slavery's crueler aspects. "If irresponsible power is a trial to the virtue of the most watchful and careful," she noted in *Key*, "how fast it must develop cruelty in those who are naturally violent and brutal!" Characters like Legree and Mrs. Blanton, she insisted in *Key*, can "only exist where the laws of the land clothe with absolute power the coarsest, most brutal and violent-tempered" (1853, 14). "Human nature is no worse at the South than at the North," she explained in another part of *Key*, "but law at the South distinctly provides for and protects the worst abuses to which that nature is liable" (34). Completely unchecked, she noted, was the power of masters over their slaves' lives and souls, a solecism in a Christian republic where only Jesus could be entrusted with such power (39).

Most powerfully, perhaps, Stowe provided a public-choice critique of slave codes, arguing that they are "designed only for the security of the master, and not with regard to the welfare of the slave" (1853, 72).

Of course, slavery also significantly affects those enslaved. Stowe's most powerful message comes not from what her account explicitly describes but rather from what it does not: the dull, docile stereotypes that pro-slavery pundits loved to laud. Stowe's Tom is no "Uncle Tom" in today's pejorative sense of an excessively servile black man.

Tom resists his enslavement throughout, even to the relatively benign Shelby, in rational and always nonviolent ways designed to meet his goals in this life and the next. The odd equation of Tom with servility stems undoubtedly from the influence of anti-*UTC* knockoffs, many of which depicted Tom as a “jolly, fat, contented working Negro” (*Milwaukee Daily Sentinel* 1852), and to some extent from his depiction in *Key*, which stressed how trustworthy certain pious slaves were (Stowe 1853, 23–25). The real enemies of African Americans are the slaves Sambo and Quimbo, drivers who violently uphold Legree’s tyranny by running down their fellow slaves with dogs and whips.

All the other major enslaved characters also resist their enslavement, invariably in rational ways, explicitly because they love liberty more than life. As George says, “I’ll fight for my liberty to the last breath I breathe. You say your fathers did it; if it was right for them, it is right for me!” (96). In another scene, he again asserts that “we’ll fight for our liberty till we die,” while making a distinction between manmade and natural law “under God’s sky” (168).

Several characters escape, aided and abetted by fellow slaves. Eliza’s famous icy dash across the Ohio, for example, can occur only because fellow slaves Sam and Andy slow her pursuers by many hours through a combination of subtle sabotage and strategic dissembling that trick the slave trader Haley into insisting on heading down a dead-end dirt road. Eliza, George, and Cassy escape in part because their light skin, intelligence, and education allow them to pass as white. But dark skin does not prevent other slaves from trying to escape, so Haley makes sure to put “yer prime fellers” into chains because they hate slavery “like sin” (85).

Some slaves resist by adopting their masters’ own views of them as ignorant children, even while perpetrating ingenious ploys designed to meet some quotidian goal, if only a few minutes of respite or diversion. Topsy is the master of such behavior in the St. Clare household, declaring herself “so wicked! . . . nothing but a nigger, no ways!” (238) whenever caught stealing, breaking needles, or otherwise misbehaving. She is far from alone as entire households of slaves manage to reduce their workload by embracing their infantilization, the widespread notion that “these servants are nothing but grown-up children” (147), and to increase their consumption by feigning the inability to understand “that [their] master’s goods are not [their] own” (181, 344). In *Key*, Stowe makes clear that most slaves tried to hide their intelligence from their owners so that their brains remained “of no use to any one but the wearer” (1853, 6).

The threat of servile rebellion also looms. As St. Clare notes, “[O]ur system is educating them in barbarism and brutality. We are breaking all humanizing ties, and making them brute beasts; and, if they get the upper hand, such we shall find them” (227). But Stowe’s slaves also leverage the Bible against their enslavers. Their songs and prayers are not about obeying the master but about crossing the river Jordan (the Ohio and other rivers) into Canaan (the North, if only on the way to Canada) and are of much higher quality than the performances forced out of them by their putative owners (Belasco 2000).

Stowe's enslaved characters also resist their bondage through direct appeals to reason. When told he should be dutiful, George asks his former master, "[I]f the Indians should come and take you a prisoner away from your wife and children, and want to keep you all your life hoeing corn for them, if you'd think it your duty to abide in the condition to which you were called?" (94).

Like most Northern whites, Stowe conceived of slavery in binary terms. Emancipation from chattel slavery meant freedom. Such Northerners even naively called former slaves "freedmen" or "freedpersons." This conception unfortunately later blinded them to the reality of the postbellum South, where many former chattel slaves entered into new forms of forced labor, including, most ominously, the convict-labor system abetted by the penal-slavery exception enshrined in the Thirteenth Amendment. These modern forms of slavery were even more hellish than chattel slavery because these slaves became cheap and hence disposable inputs to be used up quickly, not protected as valuable assets (see Wright 2017).

Even in the 1850s, the "ill use" Americans made of "the Red and Black races" was well understood, as was the fact that "a bondage worse than our Slavery" was possible (*New York Commercial Advertiser* 1851). In *Key*, Stowe herself called for the equal treatment of free blacks in the North (1853, 251–52). Yet abolitionists like Stowe also failed to stave off the rise of the predatory state and its suppression of civil and natural liberties. African Americans and Indians were the main victims of ill-conceived and illiberal government policies such as Jim Crow and the Dawes Act, but poor whites, immigrants and mountain folk in particular, also gravely suffered, especially at places such as Blair Mountain, West Virginia, and Ludlow, Colorado (see Wright 2019b). In the end, Stowe and other members of the Benevolent Empire certainly aided the cause of liberty but ultimately bequeathed to posterity a free country only in a relative, Churchillian sense of being freer than most other places or previous iterations of itself.

What America needs now are new *UTC*-like narratives, be they in the form of novels, films, or songs, showing from the heart how government makes "life among the lowly"—Indians, poor whites, Hispanics, women, immigrants, the undereducated, members of the LGBTQ community, despised religious groups, as well as African Americans—much harder than it would be if liberty were allowed free reign once and for all.

Ultimately, as Stowe shows, humans flourish or wither *together*. One group can extract rents from another for a time, but the expropriated group will resist by shirking work, destroying property, dissembling, running away, or even killing themselves, while the rent extractor's ability to do productive work or innovate slowly ebbs. The subject-citizens subject to capricious or onerous government levies likewise respond, while their rulers lose the ability to govern effectively.

So we might expand Stowe's key insight to say that rent extraction befits no extractee or extractor. Maximizing human flourishing therefore requires minimizing all forms of rent extraction, which of course means maximizing competitive markets for goods as well as for labor.

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