Crossing boundaries: Harriet Beecher Stowe as literary celebrity and anti-slavery campaigner

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This essay examines Harriet Beecher-Stowe as a literary celebrity who became an early example of a 'celebrity activist' or 'celebrity humanitarian' by attempting to use her fame as a novelist to promote the abolition of slavery in her native United States during her tour of Great Britain in 1853. Following recent work on field migration and contemporary celebrity activism, the essay examines the causes, methods and consequences of Stowe's attempt to use her fame first to establish her credentials as an active abolitionist, an area in which she had little previous track record, and then to mobilise influential opinion in Britain behind the cause (e.g. Tsaliki *et. al*., 2011, p. 11; Kapoor, 2012). It concludes by examining the long-term impact of her intervention in British anti-slavery and comparing her success or otherwise with that of modern celebrity activists, drawing out some of the difficulties which faced her as a pioneer in this field.

In 1852, the appearance of anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became the publishing event of the nineteenth century. Within week of its US publication, pirated editions were circulating in Britain, and as many as twenty stage adaptations eventually did the rounds. The novel was read on trains and omnibuses, while balladeers sang about it and popular scenes and characters appeared as 'merchandise' in prints and pottery figurines (Wilson, 1941, 324-30; Kohn, Meer and Todd, 2006, xi-xxxi; Wood, 2000, 143-214). Lax international copyright meant its author, Harriet Beecher Stowe, did not see a penny of the money it earned in Britain, but this did not prevent her from becoming an overnight literary

celebrity. Early in 1853, Stowe travelled to Britain for what was part promotional tour, part literary pilgrimage, part anti-slavery crusade (Hedrick, 1994, 234-50). She was expected to perform the role of literary lion, but Stowe's own ambition was to use her celebrity capital to promote the cause of the slave. As she told the abolitionist senator Charles Sumner: 'I can make leading and judicious minds there understand points where they may essentially serve us. I can influence and shape the *tone* of articles and journals. I can enlist those to speak who *must* be heard. So I hope. *The public opinion of the world* is our last hope' (Wilson, 1941, 334-5).

Stowe can plausibly be seen as a nineteenth-century fore-runner of such modern-day 'celebrity activists' as Bono or Angeline Jolie. Though operating in a very different international and technological context, her goals were essentially similar: to stir empathy for an oppressed and disadvantaged population among an audience separated from the objects of their compassion by vast gulfs of distance, culture, wealth and race (Mitchell, 2016). In making the leap from novelist to campaigner, Stowe's status as a previously a-political woman author gave her two distinct advantages. First, her lack of formal involvement in American abolitionism allowed her to position herself above the internecine strife that had paralysed the movement since it split in 1840, and to appear as a unifying figure (Hedrick, 1994, 235-6; Donald Ross, 2006). As an American, Stowe stood outside the domestic divisions of British Anti-Slavery caused by debates over free-trade (Morgan, 2009). According to Victorian gender ideology, as a woman and therefore apolitical by nature, Stowe was also assumed to possess superior moral sense which allowed her to take a disinterested view of complex issues such as slavery (Morgan, 2004). Unlike the American women who had caused controversy by trying to take their places as delegates at the 1840 London Anti-Slavery Convention, Stowe maintained her feminine respectability by allowing her brother and husband to speak for her at public gatherings, restricting herself to addressing

'private' women only meetings whose proceedings were not reported in the press. Stowe's second advantage was the novel form (in both senses) of her intervention in the anti-slavery debate. This allowed her to tap into a larger audience beyond the usual purchasers of anti-slavery literature, such as the first-person 'slave narratives' which had proliferated over the previous decades. British audiences were quite familiar with seeing serious socio-political issues explored in this way, *pace* 'Condition of England' novels such as Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil* (1845), Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848), and Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke* (1850).[1] As author of the biggest-selling novel of the decade, Stowe could interest a whole new audience in the plight of the American slave.

There was no question, however, that Stowe's literary celebrity was what drew the crowds. In Scotland, Charles Beecher believed her reception outstripped both the 'Lind Mania' and 'Kossuth Fever' he had witnessed in the United States (Van Why and French, 1986, pp. 36). Heading south, she was practically smuggled into Birmingham for a private meeting with the radical Quaker Joseph Sturge, leader of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, before journeying to London as the guest of the Duchess of Sutherland (Stowe, 1854, pp. 92-3). During a grand reception in her honour at Stafford House, the Duchess's London residence, she was presented with an address from the 'Women of Great Britain' to the 'Women of the United States', signed by half a million women, who urged their American sisters to apply their moral influence to the abolition of slavery. The presentation cemented Stowe's position as a transatlantic anti-slavery emissary, by-passing state channels to communicate directly between the peoples of two proud nations.

The aristocratic gathering at Stafford House was of a different character from the earnest meetings of the provincial middle-classes whom she encountered in cities such as

[1] The genre had a resurgence after the publication of *Uncle Tom*, with the appearance of Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854) and Gaskell's *North and South*, (1854-5).

Leeds, and was closer (though on a grander scale) to the reception of other literary lions. However, Stowe's transition from literary celebrity to international abolitionist was not necessarily a smooth one. The very success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in creating empathy between white readers and black slave characters, notably through the eponymous Uncle Tom's relationship with the innocent white child, 'Little Eva', was a potential weakness. The novel was attacked in *The Times* as an ill-informed and overly sentimentalised portrayal of slave existence, exaggerating its horrors for cheap emotional impact (Fisch, 2004). As a white northern woman, Stowe could be written off as a sentimental meddler: an ignorant Mrs Jellyby who should be bestowing her benevolence on her own family or her poorer neighbours.[2] On the other hand, veteran abolitionists were sceptical of her lack of anti-slavery pedigree. They believed the new 'converts' to the cause, particularly the fashionable aristocratic ones, were drawn solely by Stowe's fame and would quickly forget their abolitionism once she returned to the United States. Stowe's second hand perspective on slavery compared unfavourably with the first-hand accounts provided by escaped slaves such as Frederick Douglass, who himself had generated great public interest during his visit to the United Kingdom a few years earlier (Murray, 2016). Thus Stowe, in common with modern celebrities attempting 'field migration', stood accused of dilettantism and ignorance of her new field, and risked rejection by its self-appointed gate-keepers (Giles, 2015).

Stowe was quick to counter accusations of ignorance and sentimentality. In 1853 she published *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which provided sources and testimony corroborating the veracity of important episodes and characters in the book (Stowe, 1853). The *Key* firmly established Stowe as a slavery 'expert', with expertise being an accepted way for nineteenth-century women to develop effective public identities (Gleadle, 2012). However, during her

[2] Interestingly, *Bleak House* was being serialised at this time in *Household Words* from March 1852 to September 1853.

British tour Stowe's critics continued to look for ways to undermine her credibility. Their opportunity came when it transpired that the gowns she had ordered for her reception at Stafford House were manufactured by sweated labour. *The Times* printed a letter from a seamstress accusing Stowe of taking advantage of 'white slaves' in Britain while campaigning to free black ones in the United States (Fisch, 2004). Stowe eventually responded to these accusations in her travelogue *Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands*. Here she neatly skewered the 'white slavery' canard, noting that while some dressmakers were clearly able to stand up for themselves by writing letters to *The Times*, black slaves had no such recourse, being kept deliberately ignorant by their masters and banned by law from being taught how to read or write (Stowe, 1854, 196-7).

Perhaps the episode which most clearly underlines Stowe's ambiguous status as campaigning literary celebrity was the presentation of a Scottish National Penny Offering, got up by the 'Ladies of Edinburgh' to honour Stowe's literary and humanitarian achievement. The form of this collection, which eventually totalled the equivalent of $20,000, was chosen so that even Stowe's humblest readers and admirers could contribute. Its intention was partly to recompense Stowe for loss of royalties on British editions of her book, but there was an assumption that she would use the proceeds to advance the cause of abolition. After Stowe left Britain there were pointed questions about what had happened to the money, and Stowe was forced to produce a statement of expenditure in 1856, though she only accounted for around thirty percent of the total (Hedrick, 1994, pp. 246-8). There was never an explicit statement of whether the money was for personal or public use, while precedents such as Daniel O'Connell's 'Tribute' of 1830 and Richard Cobden's testimonial of 1846 had largely gone towards paying private debts, though with the justification that this prolonged the recipients' public careers. Still, the episode muddied the waters over whether

Stowe's primary aim was abolition of slavery rather than self-promotion or personal profit: an accusation which still bedevils modern celebrity humanitarians (Mitchell, 2016, p. 290).

Just as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* burst the confines of genre and was able to float free from its original literary moorings, the fame of its creator allowed her also to transcend the role of literary lion and re-invent herself as a celebrity activist. It could be said that Stowe's British sojourn illustrates the pitfalls of celebrity humanitarianism, producing effervescent froth at the expense of lasting change. In fairness though, Stowe was operating against a background of underdeveloped transnational institutions and organisation. The transatlantic Anti-Slavery movement was divided by arguments over tactics and conflicting allegiances to charismatic but often mutually hostile individual leaders. Today, Stowe's successors benefit from their involvement with a range of international NGOs and UN agencies which often make systematic use of celebrity 'ambassadors' (Huliaras and Tzifakis, 2011, pp. 26-7). She was also tackling a highly controversial issue. Today, modern celebrity humanitarians lobby affluent governments to help the citizens of poor, developing countries, tending to steer clear of controversial issues such as American foreign policy (Huliaras and Tzifakis, 2011, p. 29). By contrast, those Stowe wished to relieve were the legal property of citizens of the United States. This explains why the British state, in the persons of the Queen and Prime Minister, held aloof from her efforts (Wilson, 1941, 385-6).[3] Even in 1853 the US had sufficient potential to disrupt British interests in Canada and the Caribbean, that relations with her were not worth sacrificing to the crochets of a mere author, however famous. Despite these disadvantages, as one of the most famous women in the English-speaking world, Stowe was momentarily able to focus attention and effort on an impressive scale. In this she was aided by the general supportiveness of a rapidly expanding newspaper press and the social

[3] Though this may have strengthened Stowe's standing as an 'unofficial' sub-diplomatic emissary between the British and American peoples. The Duchess was also known to be one of Queen Victoria's closest intimates.

influence of her aristocratic patrons. However, her visit failed to halt the long-term decline of the British anti-slavery movement, or to heal its internal divisions. Anti-slavery was eventually reinvigorated by the American Civil War and Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation; it took the intervention of a President, rather than a novelist, to make the difference.

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