Harriet Beecher Stowe, by Nancy Koester

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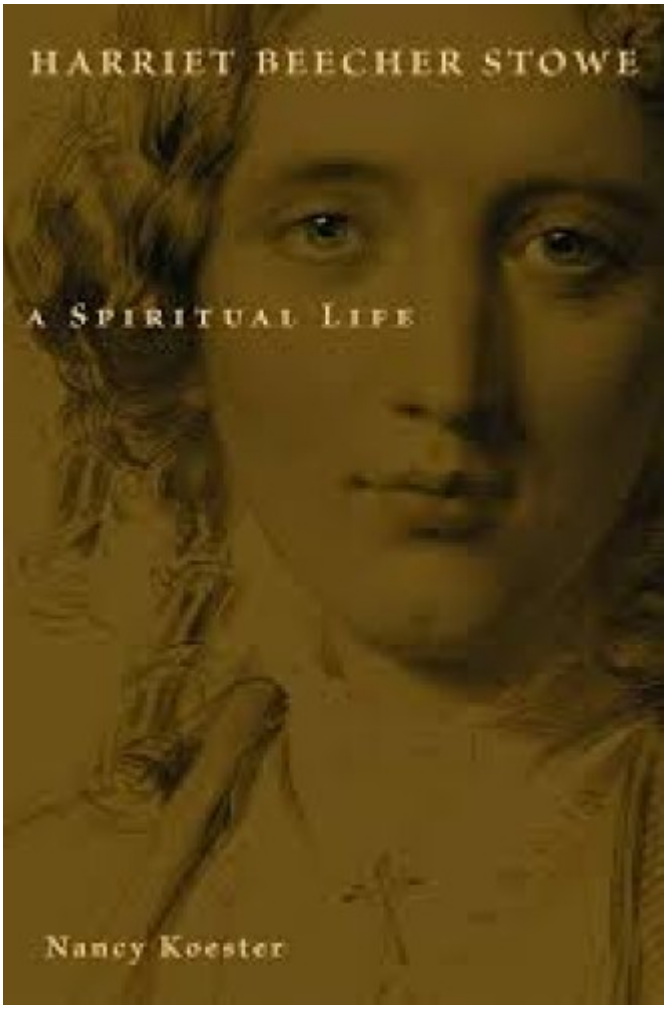
In Review



Harriet Beecher Stowe

By Nancy Koester
Eerdmans

"I am sick of the smell of sour milk, and sour meat, and sour everything, and then the clothes will not dry, and no wet thing does, and everything smells moldy; and altogether I feel as if I never wanted to eat again.” So complained Harriet Beecher

Stowe to her husband, Calvin, nine years and five children into their marriage. This is not the Stowe with which most readers are familiar—the “little woman who made this big war,” as Abraham Lincoln reportedly said about the famous author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

The Stowe of Nancy Koester’s new biography is a deeply spiritual but overburdened woman whose 85 years, spanning the bulk of the 19th century, saw her constantly juggling her roles as daughter, sister, wife, mother, and author. This is a Stowe brought to life in relationship with others and with her God. As Koester writes, “What makes us truly human in any race or time or place, [Stowe] thought, is our capacity to be in relationship: first with God, and then with other people.” Just as Stowe struggled to reconcile the pressures of domestic life with her calling as an author, so she also struggled to reconcile the judgmental God of her ancestors with the loving God for whom she longed.

Koester, a historian of Christianity in America who teaches at Augsburg College and is an ordained Lutheran minister, develops the themes of relationship and balance over the ups and downs of Stowe’s life. As the sixth child of Lyman and Roxana Beecher, Harriet was born into a loving family orbiting around a dominant but devoted paterfamilias. Koester metaphorically describes how Lyman dedicated himself to renovating the cold and stark theological house of New England Calvinism for 19th-century Americans who wanted a more welcoming abode. Lyman softened the predestination of his Puritan forebears and opened the doors of the old house to any who would willingly come in and help with the renovations. But Lyman remained committed to the idea that anyone who did not come in of his or her own accord—anyone who did not have a conversion experience—could not be welcomed or saved.

Harriet also devoted herself to renovating the house. But, like many of her siblings, she rejected her father’s uncompromising conversionism for the hope that “probation does not end with this life, and the number of the redeemed may therefore be infinitely greater than the world’s history leads us to suppose.” Though she had always had faith in a sympathetic God, the key event that led her in this direction was the death of her beloved son Henry at the age of 19 in 1857.

Henry had died, unconverted, by drowning in the Connecticut River when he was a student at Dartmouth. His premature death, not the publication and wild success of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, is the biography’s turning point. This is because Koester is

primarily invested in describing Stowe's spiritual life instead of covering ground already well trodden by other scholars. Koester uncovers the quiet, day-to-day joys and sorrows of marriage and child rearing, Harriet's visits to churches and cathedrals overseas, the pleasure she took in God's natural creation, and the physical illnesses and depression she and her loved ones soldiered through. This is a Stowe whose turn to the liturgical and sacramental Episcopal Church and then to spiritualism later in life makes perfect sense, as she rejected the harsh iconoclasm of Puritanism and sought meaningful connection with those she had loved and lost.

Of course, Harriet's writing career also receives plenty of attention in the volume, but Koester weaves Stowe's many short pieces and books into the fabric of her life instead of primarily using her life to illuminate her writings. Here we see hints of tension between the God of love and mercy whom Stowe pursued throughout her life and the God of justice and judgment who underlies her antislavery texts. Though Stowe has been criticized for depicting Uncle Tom as submissive and long-suffering, she promised in her most famous novel that "those who protect 'injustice and cruelty' will surely call down 'the wrath of Almighty God!'" And in her second antislavery novel, *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*, Stowe put this prophecy in the mouth of an angrier and more proactive African-American character, Dred, "a prophet who calls down God's wrath on sinners." Stowe needed both attributes of God, it seems, which is why she struggled to adapt the deity of her forebears and to reform the church from within rather than leaving him and it behind for the comfort of Universalism or the antiestablishment stance of William Lloyd Garrison.

Koester efficiently summarizes Stowe's major and lesser-known works, detailing the social and political context behind their publication, and she discusses Stowe's writing process and the support she received, especially from her loving husband and her famous siblings Catharine and Henry Ward Beecher. The narrative flows smoothly, though sometimes at the expense of in-depth analysis. For example, although Koester acknowledges that Harriet was "limited by her own assumptions about race," she almost always rises above the insidious paternalism of antebellum racial thinking in Koester's respectful rendering. So while Koester acknowledges that Stowe's depiction of slave religion was a form of "racial stereotyping," she surmises that "it also describes Stowe herself. *Her* mind was impassioned and imaginative, always attached itself to hymns and pictures, always working in a vivid and pictorial way." One wonders if this is not itself a form of gendered stereotyping; other scholars have suggested that Stowe knowingly conformed her narrative voice to

antebellum expectations of how women’s religiosity was supposed to be expressed.

While Koester is at her best when writing of Stowe’s family relationships, it would also have been illuminating to see more about Harriet’s relationships with the domestic workers who made possible the white, middle-class privilege of her education and writing time—from the indentured African-American servants who cooked for the family when Harriet was a child, to the former slaves and the live-in assistants who cooked, cleaned, and raised her children while she was away for months at a time courting publishers and promoting her books.

Koester has accessibly translated an exemplary 19th-century life for a 21st-century audience. Her Stowe is a woman to be admired and emulated but who also is recognizable to today’s readers in her struggles to find a balance between her work and her spiritual life.