Critical Essays on Harriet Beecher Stowe (review)

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Studies in American Fiction, Volume 9, Number 2, Autumn 1981, pp. 284-285 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/saf.1981.0017*

The failing of Chace's book lies only in what he chose not to do. Grand cultural pronouncements can often arise from particular personal encounters, especially in the intellectual circles of Manhattan. Contemporary political events other than Stalinism may well have affected Trilling's darkening sense of liberal possibilities. And surely it is not unimportant that Lionel Trilling was the first Jew to be appointed to the English Department at Columbia. In her retrospective essay, "Lionel Trilling, A Jew at Columbia," Diana Trilling recalls an afternoon when Emory Neff, Chairman of the English Department, called upon the Trillings to say that he hoped Trilling's appointment would not be a wedge for the hiring of more Jews. About Trilling's involvement in all three of these areas (New York, political events, faculty relations), Chace provides us almost no information. Because all three may well have influenced the words Trilling left us, they will eventually have to be considered. In the meanwhile, however, Chace has happily provided us a fine study of the works themselves, one to which anyone interested in Trilling will wish to return.

Middlebury College John P. McWilliams, Jr.

Ammons, Elizabeth, ed. *Critical Essays on Harriet Beecher Stowe.* Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1980. 307 pp. Cloth: $18.50.

It is hard to believe that a collection of essays on the work of Harriet Beecher Stowe can legitimately be described as *fascinating,* but such is the case. Ammons' collection includes reviews and essays contemporary with the 1852 publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as well as later essays; comments on Stowe's other novels (*Dred, A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp; The Minister's Wooing; The Pearl of Orr's Island,* and others); and a range of commentary on Stowe as writer. The collection closes with four essays grouped under "Reminiscences," among them pieces by William Dean Howells and Henry James.

The facets of Stowe's career are clearly drawn through the juxtaposition of materials: Her hesitant beginning as writer, with short stories that fit the local color designation; the always questioned fame after the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin;* her defenses against that derision (both sexist and religious, as well as racist); and her continued successes (and embarrassments) as writer.

Ammons' introduction, though brief, is informative about both personal and critical matters. Her style is succinct; it has to be because there is a great quantity of material to be discussed. Probably no American writer has so divided the critical world, and Ammons' assessment gives us some understanding of the vicissitudes of that critical profile. From George Sands' praise of her as "consecrated" to George F. Holmes' attacks on her "shameless disregard of truth and of those amenities which so peculiarly belong to her sphere of life," Ammons' selection of essays paints the canvass of taste coerced into cultural respectability which varied by age. One surprising note is that there was so much freedom, such allowance for the woman writer, in the mid-nineteenth century. Another surprising tendency is that toward closure of opportunity in the mid-twentieth century. But the most pervasive impression of these published opinions is the undervaluation of Stowe's work, regardless of the time comments appeared. One can only wonder at the real motives behind those critical comments that scoffed at "structure" and "sentiment."

Among the finest of the late essays are those by Ammons herself, Lawrence Buell (on Calvinism in *The Minister's Wooing*), Ellen Moers, and Dorothy Berkson. Add these to the classic appreciations by Edmund Wilson (from *Patriotic Gore*), Anthony Burgess, and Charles Dudley Warner and one has the possible picture of Stowe's worth: cultural commentary subordinated to the passion of real-life relationships, art that treats human characterization (whether black or white) as primary, fiction that dwells on preventable tragedy rather than tracts that pronounce. As Ammons reminds the reader in her introduction,

> George Sand called her [Stowe] a saint; Emerson said *Uncle Tom's Cabin* "encircled the globe"; Tolstoi cited that novel as one of two possible types of good art in his day, implicitly ranking it above even his own *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace*. . . . George Eliot credited to her the inspiration for her own novel about prejudice, *Daniel Deronda*; Paul Laurence Dunbar described her as "prophet and priestess" to his, and all American, people.

Indeed, what other author anywhere received 562,848 signatures in praise of a novel? As Charles Dudley Warner describes the occasion,

> one of the most remarkable documents which resulted from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was an address from the women of England to the women of America, acknowledging the complicity in slavery of England, but praying aid in removing from the world "our common crimes and common dishonor," which was presented to Mrs. Stowe in 1853. It was the result of a meeting at Stafford House, and the address, composed by Lord Shaftesbury, was put into the hands of canvassers in England and on the Continent, and as far as Jerusalem. The signatures of 562,848 women were obtained, with their occupations and residences, from the nobility on the steps of the throne down to maids in the kitchen. The address is handsomely engrossed on vellum. The names are contained in twenty-six massive volumes, each fourteen inches high by nine in breadth and three inches thick, inclosed in an oak case. It is believed that this is the most numerously signed address in existence.

Information like this, the wide range of critical commentary, and the sense of the 130 years of history is aptly combined in Ammons' volume, which should be useful for any reader interested in Stowe, American literature, or women's writing.

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