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The Writing of Harriet Beecher Stowe's The Pearl of Orr's Island

by E. BRUCE KIRKHAM

THE STORY of the writing of *The Pearl of Orr's Island* has been available in general terms for a number of years.¹ However, recently discovered letters and an examination of the texts of its first publications reveal new information about the composition of the story, Mrs. Stowe's writing habits, and her relationship with publishers.

Begun just after she published her most famous novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Pearl* took almost a decade to complete. In July of 1852 Mrs. Stowe wrote to her husband, Calvin,

I seem to have so much to fill my time, and yet there is my Maine story waiting. However, I am composing it every day, only I greatly need living studies for the filling in of my sketches. There is "old Jonas," my "fish father," a sturdy, independent fisherman farmer, who in his youth sailed all over the world and made up his mind about everything. In his old age he attends prayer-meetings and reads the "Missionary Herald." He also has plenty of money in an old brown sea-chest. He is a great heart with an inflexible will and iron muscles. I must go to Orr's Island and see him again. I am now writing an article for the "Era" on Maine and its scenery, which I think is even better than the "Independent" letter. In it I took up Longfellow. Next I shall write on Hawthorne and his surroundings.²

She obviously had many irons in the fire, and all, at that point, seemed to be connected with Maine. Longfellow and Hawthorne had both graduated from Bowdoin College in Brunswick where Harriet had written the *Cabin* and where the family had lived for the past two years before moving to Andover the summer of 1852. Maine was much on her mind as she began a story more pleasant to write than the *Cabin* had been, of children and pine trees, and surf, and rocks, and quaint, lovable folk.

1. Charles Edward Stowe, *The Life of Harriet Beecher Stowe* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1891), pp. 186-187, 327; Annie Fields, *Life and Letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1897), pp. 168, 170-171, 285-288; Charles Edward Stowe and Lyman Beecher Stowe, *Harriet Beecher Stowe* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911), pp. 244-247; Lyman Beecher Stowe, *Saints, Sinners and Beechers* (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1934), p. 203; Forrest Wilson, *Crusader in Crinoline* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1941), pp. 300-301, 463-467, 476-478; Edward Wagenknecht, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: The Known and the Unknown* (New York: Oxford, 1965), p. 171; Noel B. Gerson, *Harriet Beecher Stowe* (New York: Praeger, 1976), pp. 154-157.

The accuracy of the telling varies greatly. Fields misdates letters, Lyman Beecher Stowe missed the date of book publication by three years, and Gerson has the months of serial publication wrong. Wilson has the best overall account.

2. Charles E. Stowe, p. 187; Fields, p. 168; Stowe and Stowe, p. 244. The *Era* letters appeared in *The National Era* on August 5 and September 9, 1852. They bore the titles "Letter from Maine, #1" and "Letters from Maine, #2."

Although the initial reception of the *Cabin* had been favorable, within a few months an anti-*Cabin* flood began to swell. In order to "prove" that her fiction was based on fact, Mrs. Stowe spent the remainder of 1852 and part of the next year assembling instances parallel to those she had described in her book. She culled newspapers, wrote letters, read law books, and compiled *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* published in 1853. Then she left for Europe and a triumphal tour. The following year she wrote of the trip in *Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands*, adding another to the many travel books so popular at mid-century. In 1855 she tried to satisfy the demand for work by the author of *Uncle Tom* by collecting thirty-five of her previously published sketches and stories and seven of her poems in a volume called *The May Flower*. Yet her public wanted still more; another *Uncle Tom*, if you please. And so she wrote *Dred, A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*, based on Nat Turner's revolt. The book was not well received, and she returned to Europe, this time to Italy for almost a year.

Shortly after her return from Europe, her oldest son, Henry, nineteen, a freshman at Dartmouth, drowned in the Connecticut River. After the body was brought home to Andover and buried in the family plot, Harriet, Calvin, and youngest son Charlie, made a pilgrimage to Brunswick to revisit the places where the family had been so happy. The trip helped her through her grief and revitalized the Maine story. Charles Foster suggests that she returned to work on the story "through the fall and most of the winter" hoping to send it off to the new *Atlantic* magazine.³ But the grief was too strong, and she turned instead to write the *Minister's Wooing*, a tale of Revolutionary New England, drowning, and loss of faith.

In 1859-60 she visited Europe for the third and last time. Italy again, and the Brownings, Ruskin, and others made it the most memorable trip. Awed by what she saw, she was moved to begin, not another travel sketch, but a novel, *Agnes of Sorrento*. Upon her return, June 16, 1860, she contacted James T. Fields, editor of the *Atlantic*. He wanted a serial, a New England story. Although she had *The Pearl* waiting in the wings, ready to go on, she insisted that *Agnes* was what she wanted to write; therefore it must be what Fields would publish. Reluctantly, Fields gave in.

During this period Theodore Tilton, editor of the New York *Independent*, a Congregational newspaper to which Harriet's brother, Henry Ward Beecher, contributed weekly sermons, approached her about writing a piece. Harriet agreed, planning to use her Maine story to fill the bill. There should have been no problems. The *Atlantic* was a monthly, and *Agnes* was a story she wanted to write. The *Independent* was a weekly, but *The Pearl of Orr's Island* was already well along. No prob-

3. Charles Foster, *The Rungless Ladder* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1954), p. 86.

lems at all; the scheme was flawless. Two sources of income at once for very little work. How could it fail?

The announcement of her "NEW STORY" appeared in the *Independent* December 6, 1860. To be called "The Pearl of Orr's Island: A Story of the Coast of Maine," it would begin in the first issue of the new year. On December 18 she sent Tilton the "second number of [the] *Independent* story." She would be visiting Brooklyn "the day after Christmas" and would like to stop by the office and "correct the proof of both numbers while there." The text should be "just to my mind." Tilton, she added, had seen "in the coals what was coming and I see in the coals that I am in for it, for the thing begins to stir and feel round and the children like it—and the likelihood is it will run thru as many more numbers—woe is me—who have it to do." In a note she added that "the first number is shorter than any of the others will be—because it came to exactly a right stopping place."⁴ The first installment of the piece that was to run "three or four numbers" appeared January 3, 1861.

Soon things began to go wrong. The pressure mounted swiftly, for *Agnes* also demanded her time. She wrote to her daughter, Hatty, from Andover on January 9, 1861, "I am writing now full steam, seventeen or eighteen pages a day to get ahead of my *Independent* story." There was no time to let the girls look the story over in manuscript; "you will have to read it in the papers."⁵ Four days later she wrote, again to Hatty, "I am writing tooth and nail (so to speak) to get on with my two stories—the first four numbers are finished—I wonder where each one comes from. What will come of it, I don't know—People seem to like it quite to my surprise."⁶ On January 16 she explained to Fields that nothing of *Agnes* had been forthcoming because "I wanted to get myself out of the immediate pursuit of the *Independent*" and "reread my little darling, for whom I have a particular love." The writing of *Agnes* "gilds this icy winter weather. I write my Maine story with a shiver and come back to this as to a flowery house where I love to visit."⁷ By the same mail she sent the first installment of *Agnes* which appeared in the May issue of the *Atlantic*.

Affairs did not improve; instead, they got worse. Writing both *The Pearl* and *Agnes* was more than she was able to do. When she wrote to Tilton on March 12, she endorsed the proof sheets, which had only one error ["seine printed for seive"], and dropped a bomb: "I begun ignorant what would turn up—thinking possibly I might make a dozen [she

4. The original is in the Stowe-Day Foundation Library in Hartford, Connecticut. Quotations from all letters in this study are published with the kind permission of the holding libraries and Mr. David B. Stowe, Mrs. Stowe's literary executor.

5. Original in Folder 106, Beecher Family Papers, Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College.

6. Folder 106, Beecher Family Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College.

7. The Henry Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino, California.

first wrote “fifteen” then crossed it out] numbers at most and have done—But it wouldn’t be done so— . . . I now find that to bring it fully out to the end I design as many more numbers must be written.” Her other commitments, i.e. *Agnes*, demanded her care as she felt she must have “six months in advance” by May 1. She therefore proposed a plan.

The story logically and properly has two [“four” crossed out] *parts*—the first designed to *create* and individualize the characters and scenery making them all real persons and places to the readers—It includes the childhood and educating influence under which the “Pearl” was formed—This part will close in about three numbers.

Part second will take my hero and heroine up at maturity and a story will follow thereupon—Now this first part I shall bring to its logical close in about three more numbers and then I desire the courteous reader to consider the next three or four months as the years during which these young people are growing and prepare to meet them again in Part II which will commence in November and extend to the New Year. I shall in the interval go to Orr’s Island and elaborate every thing carefully and hope thus the story may close the year with as much favor as it began. This is the *only* course I can possibly take in the premises—

In the Autumn Miss Roxy, and Miss Ruey, Captain Kittridge, and all hands will be ready to open the drama with a hero and heroine grown up to their hands and so we shall begin and end the year with our pencil with a recess for hot weathers. I hope you like this idea. You have no idea how this weekly writing exhausts me. I shant try it again in a hurry, but hope to have it all ready before we start again.⁸

Tilton had no alternative. If she wouldn’t write, he couldn’t publish her story. In the April 4 issue of the *Independent* he published the following notice:

Dear Mr. Tilton: With this number ends Part First of the “Pearl of Orr’s Island.” Part Second will be ready to appear in the Autumn, and will extend through the year.

In order to give the story the finish and completeness I wish, it will be necessary for me to revisit those scenes once more and see them in their summer glory. Time has somewhat diminished my recollection. I hope to be able to write the second part around the very scenes under the shadow of the very pine-trees which first suggested the idea.

Very truly yours

Harriet Beecher Stowe

It appeared to Harriet and her English publishers, Sampson, Low, & Son, that it might be a good time to tap the British market. The *Independent* was not widely read in Britain, and Mrs. Stowe was a popular writer. Accordingly *The Pearl of Orr’s Island: Part I* was published in 157 pages and received for copyright deposit June 4, 1861.⁹ Fields, Harriet’s American publisher decided to wait until the book was finished.

Things went well with *Agnes*, and Tilton waited for his author to return. She wrote short pieces for the *Independent*, letters really, over

8. James Fraser Gluck Collection, Buffalo and Erie County Public Library, Buffalo, N.Y.

9. Letter to the author from Alison Gould, British Library, 24 April 1978.

the summer when moved by political turmoil.¹⁰ All these pieces were welcomed by Tilton, but what he really wanted was another installment of *The Pearl*.

"November" she had told him. Autumn arrived, and all Tilton received was a letter demanding more time. "It has been impossible for me to recommence *The Pearl of Orr's Island* as soon as I had expected viz on the first of November." She had been ill; ruined her eyes staring at the brilliant colors of dogwood leaves in fall. "Besides," she said, "it was necessary that my English story [*Agnes* was being published simultaneously in the *Cornhill* magazine] should be put beyond the reach of failure and reverses." Since it had started first, it must be ended first. Should she fail, she might lose "all my success, my literary reputation," might "ruin my future in the English publisher's world." Since Tilton was the owner of the "silver tongue" which "drew me into this scrape against my better judgement, . . . that same silver tongue must smooth my way out of it. . . . I cannot," she stated simply, "begin in the *Independent* till the 1st week of December—perhaps not then—you must make the best story you can for me.

Tell the world the truth—probably on consideration, it is the best thing to be told—that you persuaded me to begin for the *Independent* against my better knowledge—that I only made an agreement to write *four numbers*—that the four numbers were taken possession of by the spirits who bewitch my wits . . . and cantered off with—that Miss Roxy and Captain Kittridge and all the rest *would* come and would spin yarns till I was obliged to *save my health* to put a stop for a season.

You suggested that you wanted the story to run over into the New Year—that is my view—It is my view that the half our readers have already got by their own showing has made interest and amusement enough to justify their subscription and it is a finished volume by itself—and that to pursue it into the new year would be right and fair—*But if not*—What do you say.—By printing two numbers a week you could get all in this year perhaps—but would it not be fair and right to let it run over.

You can use the war excitement as another reason for the delay—It is so—It has used the time and what is more the *strength* necessary for my purpose.¹¹

What was Tilton to do? In the November 21 issue of the *Independent* there ran a six paragraph "Card" which made the excuses Harriet had suggested and concluded "The story will resume the 1st of December." Because Tilton had described it in the November 28 issue as "this popular and beautiful story, said to be the best which the renowned author has ever written," Harriet introduced the installment with a forty-one line notice, pleading embarrassment at such terms to describe her "pale and colorless" story. "No great romance is coming," she said, "no strange and wonderful adventures of outward life." Simply a "rustic . . . woodland" tale of children now grown older living on an island in Maine.

10. See Margaret Hildreth, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Bibliography* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1976), pp. 116-138 for Mrs. Stowe's contributions to the *Independent*.

11. Gluck Collection, Buffalo and Erie County Public Library.

On January 18, 1862, she wrote to James T. Fields from Andover about a segment of the *Agnes* manuscript and then said, "as to the Pearl, you have the first part in the English edition and when I have finished the other I shall give it all to you."¹² Fields could begin to set type. The end was almost in sight, but working with the deadlines he had given her, "I could not finish up both works *Agnes* and *Pearl* and get them to England so as to have them [Sampson, Low] print and have ready to issue on the 1st of April. It is too much risk to say so—Will you publish on the 1st of May and let me put the *English* date at the seventeenth of April?"¹³

The Pearl of Orr's Island, two parts in one volume, was received for copyright in the British Museum April 19; the final chapter appeared in the *Independent* of April 24; the American copyright deposit was made May 1, 1862, as they had planned.¹⁴ It had taken ten years, but it was finished.

A collation of selected passages in each of the three versions gives another perspective on the story of the writing of *The Pearl*. Although I have not done a page by page collation, I have compared the first thirty-five lines or so of each chapter as they appear in the *Independent*, the 1861–1862 British edition, and the 1862 American edition. For the first seventeen chapters, there are only three significant variants among the three texts.

The first is an editorial addition. On page 43 of the British edition a note explains that when Miss Ruey Toothacre spoke of "the janders" she meant "Jaundice."

The second variant appeared as the result of a letter Harriet wrote on April 8, 1861. In the March 28 issue of the *Independent*, Mara Lincoln had been called Pennel, her maiden name. Harriet asked the twins to make the correction and "send it to Mr. Fields."¹⁵ Since the correction appears in the British and American texts, both Sampson, Low and Fields must have been setting from corrected *Independent* tear sheets.

The third variant is much more extensive. At the end of chapter seventeen, after a few paragraphs in which Harriet speaks of the future development of Mara, Moses, and Sally, the *Independent* text reads:

Here, for a season, let us leave them, and when ten years have passed over their heads—When Moses shall be twenty, and Mara seventeen—we will return again to tell their story, for there will be one to tell.

We part with our weekly readers now for a period of some few months, which they are requested to consider the equivalent to these ten years.

Then the somber spruces of Middle Bay and Orr's Island shall be lighted up once more by

12. Harriet Beecher Stowe Collection, Clifton Waller Barrett Library, University of Virginia Library.

13. January 25, 1862. Stowe-Day Foundation.

14. Letter to the author from the British Library (see note 9) and from Leonard N. Beck, Curator of Special Collections, Library of Congress, 19 April 1978.

15. Folder 114, Beecher Family Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College. The original is misdated 1862 in another hand.

the scarlet brilliancy of the rock maple—when the creeper shall hang like a crimson pennon from the crags—and the larches stand in feathery gold in the purple haze of Indian summer, our readers will find our little history in these columns again.

We thank our friends, especially the little people by many firesides, for the kind interest with which they have followed so very simple a story, and we hope that they may not lose their friendship for our characters so as not to wish to hear from them again.

Let them suppose in the interval, how Moses and Mara read Virgil with the minister, and how Mara works a shepherdess with Miss Emily which astonished the neighborhood,—but how, by herself, she learns, by divers trials to paint partridge, and checkerberry, and trailing arbutus—how Moses makes better and better ships, and Sally grows up a handsome girl and goes to Brunswick to the high school—how Captain Kittridge tells stories, and Miss Roxy and Miss Ruey nurse and cut and make and mend for the still rising generation—how there are quiltings and tea drinkings and prayer-meetings and Sunday sermons—how Zephaniah and Mary Pennel grow old gradually and graciously as the sun rises and sets, and the eternal silver tide rises and sets around our little gem, Orr's Island.

The American text reprints the passage, changes one or two words, and drops the second, third, and fourth paragraphs. The British text omits all five paragraphs.

The “farewell address” makes sense in the *Independent*. It should have been retained in the British text whose readers were left at a loss as to the future of the story. Since chapter eighteen follows immediately in the American text, the passage has no function and should have been cut. Perhaps Harriet sent her list of corrections to the wrong publisher; Fields should have been told to cut and Sampson, Low to retain.

In the second part of the book the number of variants increases markedly: only four of twenty-seven chapters are without them. As the *Independent* and American edition texts usually agree, and the British edition is at variance, it appears that Fields was setting from unrevised *Independent* tear sheets and Sampson, Low from copy heavily emended, probably by Mrs. Stowe.¹⁶

Omissions in a text may be attributed to eyeskip on the part of the typesetter; no authorial intervention is necessarily present. However, when words or phrases are added, it is more likely, without the presence of an editor, that the author is at work. Thus if a passage appears in the *Independent* but is dropped in the British text, it may be printer's error. If a passage absent from the *Independent* appears in the British edition, authorial intervention is likely. The pattern which develops in this second part argues Mrs. Stowe's hand at work.

Substantive variants of all kinds average about seven per page examined. A list of all would be tedious. I list below those variants of two or more words taken from the first page of the chapters noted. The chapter references are to the American edition as it is most accessible.

Chapter	<i>Ind.</i> & American	British
22	[omit]	on her left

16. Chapter division and numbering vary widely among the three texts after Chapter 17.

24	in fact	but which, in fact
26	in Florida connected	in the State of Florida connected; and, as many of them may prove to be relations of yours, I must apologize in advance for the liberty.
41	[omit]	anger, as if he could have willingly struck and con- tended with an invisible something that had pained him.

There are however, omissions in the British text which may be authorial. A line from which a printer drops a word or a clause makes no sense. In both the instances to be cited, ten or more words are dropped and the sense remains. On the first page of Chapter 31 in the American edition and parallel location in the *Independent* text is "how closely they may seem to simulate intimacy, confidence, friendship"; the words are dropped from the British text. Likewise on the first page of Chapter 42 the following, not present in the British text, is found: "blow the sea into one great waving floor of sparkling sapphires." If these are authorial corrections, the British text for Part II was set, at least occasionally, from manuscript, or heavily emended tear sheets.

It has long been obvious to readers of *The Pearl* that it is, in more ways than one, two separate books. Part I, written from 1852 through 1857, is essentially a local color tale of quaint folks and their ways on the coast of Maine. Part II, written in 1861-1862, is a sentimental Christian romance which happens to take place in New England. In Part II Mrs. Stowe's creative powers are weaker; she is less certain of herself, her topic, and her characters. The biographical background explains why she wished to be somewhere else, and the textual evidence suggests, through its indication of her indecision, how much she wanted to be there. She tinkered with the story, trying to make it better, and failed. Sarah Orne Jewett's verdict must be final: *The Pearl of Orr's Island* has "a divine touch here and there in an incomplete piece of work."¹⁷

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17. Sarah Orne Jewett, *The Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett*, ed. Annie Fields (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911), p. 47.