



# Libraries, Mrs. Stowe, and Me

E. Bruce Kirkham

The first annual Kirkham Lecture given to the  
Friends of the Alexander M. Bracken Library  
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# Introduction

On March 28, 2001, the Friends of Alexander M. Bracken Library assembled at the Ball State Alumni Center for their annual meeting. E. Bruce Kirkham, professor emeritus of the Ball State University Department of English, spoke to members and guests about “Libraries, Mrs. Stowe, and Me.”

At the 2000 meeting, Provost and President of the Friends Board of Governors C. Warren Vander Hill announced that “future presentations at the Friends Annual Dinner shall be known as the Kirkham Lectures” to recognize Professor Kirkham’s twenty-five years of service as the founding executive secretary of the Friends of Bracken Library. After enjoying a year of retirement in Maine with his wife Kathleen, Dr. Kirkham returned to Ball State and the Library Friends to deliver the first Kirkham Lecture.

E. Bruce Kirkham joined the English faculty at Ball State University in 1968 and became a full professor in 1980. During his academic career, he earned a national reputation as a Harriet Beecher Stowe scholar. In addition to numerous articles, reviews, and conference presentations, his books include *The Building of Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *Indices of American Literary Annual and Gift Books, 1825-65*, and *A Concordance of the Plymouth Collection of Hymns and Tunes*. He received many grants throughout his tenure, including two from the National Endowment for the Humanities that supported his research into the correspondence of Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Dr. Kirkham has truly been a friend of libraries, especially Bracken Library. When Bracken Library opened in the mid-1970s, he conceived the idea for the Friends organization and then proceeded to guide it until his retirement in 2000. In addition to his many accomplishments as executive secretary of the Friends, he received N. E. H. grants for workshops that were designed to improve linkages between Indiana secondary school teachers and libraries. In 1999-2000, he and his wife Kathleen donated a research collection of editions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to the Ball State University Libraries’ Archives and Special Collections.

I am pleased to enable friends who were unable to attend the annual meeting to enjoy Dr. Kirkham’s remarks through this publication.

John B. Straw  
Executive Secretary

# Libraries, Mrs. Stowe, and Me

by E. Bruce Kirkham

Although I can't figure out whether the pattern is inherent or imposed, it seems, when I look back on it, that it was inevitable that I would spend more than thirty years in libraries around the country searching for information about Harriet Beecher Stowe. As Melville's Father Mapple would put it, I am bound by a three stranded line: libraries, family history, and Harriet Beecher Stowe.

A number of years ago, as some of you will remember, Susan Toth spoke at this dinner and described her life-long love of libraries. She said that night that her strongest memory of the children's room of her public library was the smell, that mixture of paper and glue and dust and children, but my strongest association is not olfactory but tactile, and it wasn't in the public library. In fourth grade, Mrs. Peck allowed me to help check books out from the school library, and what I remember best is the feel of the pencil that had the little date stamp attached to the eraser end as I very carefully pressed it exactly in the center of the little block on the check out slip in the back of the book. It was there, I guess, in that quiet room filled with knowledge and adventure on the second floor of the Mamaroneck Avenue Elementary School that my love of libraries began.

My junior high and high school libraries opened to me the worlds of Victor Hugo and Jules Verne, Howard Fast and C. S. Forester, and John Steinbeck and Ernest Hemingway. But it is my college libraries that I remember most fondly. They were places where I could find what I needed to know for my course work, but also what I wanted to know, and more importantly what I had no idea was there to know. And, of course, they were just such wonderful places to be.

Lehigh University's Linderman Library is gray and gothic with towers and tall windows. A two-story reading room runs from east to west. It was there I read Eugene O'Neil's *Mourning Becomes Electra* and half way through realized with astonishment that this was a modern retelling of the Aeschylus trilogy I'd read the previous semester. I had no idea that authors could do that. It was there I read in the elephant folio volumes of the *New York Times* daily accounts of the battle at Gettysburg. I read John Cleland's *Fanny Hill: or, Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* one afternoon in the rare book room. It didn't circulate, because it was a first edition. As a graduate student, I had a carrel that looked out of the top of one of those gothic windows. I sat there at my desk in 1961 watching spring return to the Lehigh Valley and searching for political elements in the poetry of John Keats for my master's thesis.

The Louis Round Wilson Library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill was six times the size and more than six times the experience. My first serious bibliographical article was about a book entitled *A Voyage to Carolina* by John Lawson published in London in 1709. I was trying to show that the book had not been, as it was thought, a best seller that went through many editions, but a worst seller, copies of which subsequent owners of the same printing shop tried to sell under different title pages. Because the Carolina Collection had multiple copies of each of the several eighteenth century editions, I was able to complete the research without leaving the room.

It was at the Wilson Library that I met the first of the many really outstanding reference librarians in my life, Patricia McIntyre. She knew her collection of several thousand volumes so well that she could sit at her desk in the center of the room and point to any book I asked for: "The book you want is the red volume in the center of the second shelf under the middle window." In the fall of 1966, over Thanksgiving break, the collection was reclassified from Dewey to Library of Congress and all the books reshelfed. Amazingly, within a week she could do it again.

And finally the Ball State Library, not yet "Brackened." Many of you will remember that warren of halls and stairs through which students and faculty wandered. When I arrived here in 1968, Special Collections was called Rare Books, or more familiarly, The Cage, because the books were shelved behind Anchor Fencing at the north end of the reference room. By the time the Alexander M. Bracken Library was dedicated in 1976, the old library had become a warehouse with a few chairs.

Ah, the delight of those first few days in Bracken: space, chairs, tables, carrels, light streaming through the windows, empty shelves only half filled with books. Now Bracken memories: the dedication of the building; faculty/staff Christmas carry-ins, the tables groaning with food; the initiation of course related library instruction under Ray Suput's leadership; the Carol Sings; the celebration of one million books; the introduction of computer terminals and the departure of the card catalog during Michael Wood's tenure; the introduction of garden statuary; and the Decennial celebration. So many good memories.

My present library in Augusta, the Lithgow Public Library, is a not a whole lot larger than my high school library. I've come full circle.

The second strand. As many of you may have guessed, I come from a long line of storytellers. But all the stories weren't jokes. On both my mother's and father's side, I am of English and Dutch descent: Foster, Meeks, Hall, Van Tassel, Vanderpool, Buckhout. And they were here pretty much from the beginning. My Buckhout ancestors came from Leyden to New York in 1694; the Fosters were living just north of New York City at the time of the Revolution, and thereby hangs a tale.

My aunt Emily died in 1983 at the age of 95. When she was a girl in the 1920s, she asked her maiden aunt Maria if she could join the Daughters of the American Revolution. Now, as you all know, to join you must be able to prove descent from someone *who fought* on the American side in that war. The emphasis is important, as you will see. My great aunt reminded Emily that during the Revolution, Westchester County was called the Neutral Ground. There, roving bands of Patriots, and Tories, and outlaws called “cowboys” took whatever they could find to support their cause. Aunt Maria said that when she was a little girl, her grandmother, Elizabeth Foster, told her that when she was a little girl during the Revolution, the children were taught to play in the road in front of the house, and if they saw anyone they did not recognize, they were to run to the house crying “Stranger! Stranger!” The women immediately hid all the food, and the men slipped out the back door and hid in the swamp.” Emily did not apply for a DAR membership.

I also heard family stories from the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. My great Aunt Maria never married, but she owned and ran the farm. My grandfather was a carpenter and was away most of the day. When she was told by the neighbor who helped to slaughter pigs that he was getting too old to help in this hard work, my great aunt said, “Why, Pete. What am I going to do, a woman here all by myself?” He replied that the Good Book said that one must take care of the widows and the orphans but said nothing about the old maids.

And so the next step, a more formal family history, a genealogy, was a logical step in my life. Before mouse fingers replaced our feet, research could only be done by visiting a library. The sign outside might well have read “Research facility. Physical presence required.” And so in high school and college, I went to a lot of them. I started with the local public library, and then the local historical society library, and then the New York Public Library. And then I turned to primary sources, wills and deeds mostly. I started with the Westchester County Court House and waded through documents with phrases such as “This indenture made the seventh day of July in the year of Our Lord 1794, the thirteenth year of independence” and “I, John Quincy Adams Buckhout, being of sound mind.” Ultimately, I visited all the courthouses from New York City to Albany on both banks of the Hudson. And when the deeds and wills and church records failed to provide the answer, my wife, Kathy, and I walked the cemeteries, looking for the Foster plot or the Van Tassel plot, hoping to find the elusive birth date or the family relationship suggested by the size and the position of the stones.

Where does Mrs. Stowe come in? She enters in the spring of 1964. I was studying the nineteenth century American novel under C. Hugh Holman at Chapel Hill. He had lectured that morning on Henry James’ revisions of his works for the definitive New York edition. After class, I reminded Mr.

Holman that a few weeks earlier he had said that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was first published in a newspaper before the installments were collected into the novel. Had Mrs. Stowe, I asked, revised the newspaper text for the book? He first responded, "No, she hadn't," but then corrected himself and said, "I don't know. Why don't you look into that for your course paper?" And thus the third strand.

I ended up expanding that textual study into first a dissertation and then a book that describes the various drafts of the story and traces the sources for the characters and events in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. To find the answers to the questions this study posed, I had to go to libraries and read all that had been written about the characters and events, and the writing of the book. Then I had to try to track down anything else Stowe might have encountered that found its way into the book. So I went to newspapers and magazines of the period, biographies of famous and infamous contemporary figures, and to letters. First just Mrs. Stowe's letters, then other Beecher family letters.

I found the letters in two places. Some had been published in the biographies of Mrs. Stowe written by her friends and family members, but many letters were available only in the original manuscripts. So off I went again to libraries: The Harriet Beecher Stowe Center in Hartford; The Clifton Waller Barrett Collection in the Alderman Library at the University of Virginia; the Beecher Family Papers in the Sterling Library at Yale; the Beecher Family Papers in the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America at Radcliffe College; the Manuscript Department and the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collections at the New York Public Library, and The Henry A. Huntington Library in Pasadena. And I read and read, and found two more things: first, the unpublished letters contained very valuable information not available in published sources, and second, many of the letters in the published sources were inaccurate transcription of the originals.

The biographers had done strange things with the texts. They had changed punctuation, changed spellings, changed words and phrases, omitted whole paragraphs, and in numerous instances, added dates to undated letters and, occasionally, created whole letters out of bits and pieces from several letters and assigned a date to the whole which was not present in any of the parts. In short, the texts of the published letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe were not trustworthy. So I undertook to create the definitive edition of the letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe.

The first challenge was to find all the extant, original letters. Ball State English Department chair Dick Renner found the money to hire two student secretaries and to provide the postage for a survey. This was, again, the pre-mouse pad age, so one secretary typed inside addresses on the mimeographed letters and another typed the 5,000 envelopes. We mailed one to every library

in the United States that I thought might conceivably have a Stowe letter. We found over 1,000.

With the help of department chair Daryl Adrian, I assembled copies of the letters, and put each in a file folder with recipient, location, holding library, and a date or tentative date, and filed them in three five-drawer filing cabinets. When the original for a published text had not survived, I copied the printed text and filed it. There are over 2,500 file folders.

The next step was to transcribe the manuscript texts fully and accurately. Then each person, place, or event Mrs. Stowe mentioned in each letter must be identified so that the modern reader can know exactly what she is talking about. This can be as simple as noting that when she says she “rode the cars” she means she took the train, or as frustrating as trying to identify “Good Old Mrs. Franklin” who lived in Cincinnati sometime in the 1850s, or looking for the “good old hymn” with the line “they all are clothed in spotless white and conquering palms they bear,” and it is never the first line. And that is what, with the help of grants from the Ball State Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities, I have been doing for the last twenty-five years.

Well what, you might ask, have you found? Well, here for your pleasure, are a few passages from the letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Although the complete canon of her works numbers thirty-seven books and hundreds of essays, Harriet Beecher Stowe is best remembered for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It is fascinating, I think, to watch the idea of that work emerge in her letters. The Stowes had been active in the anti-slavery movement when they lived in Cincinnati in the 1830s and 40s. They had moved to Brunswick, Maine, in July of 1850, but husband Calvin returned to Cincinnati that fall to finish out his teaching contract at Lane Seminary. The Fugitive Slave Law, which not only declared open season on all free blacks in the United States, but punished with a fine and imprisonment all who attempted to aid them in their escape from slavery, had infuriated the Stowes along with all others who worked toward the abolition of the peculiar institution.

Writing to Calvin toward the end of December 1850, Harriet appends a note to the end of a letter written by their son, Henry. She begins by asking Calvin to thank sister Katy for her note and promising to answer it. And then she writes, “As long as the baby sleeps with me nights I can't do much at any thing—but *I shall do it at last*. I shall write that thing if I live.” There it is. The beginning of her magnum opus. The book that will change not only her life, her country, but the world. But, of course, she doesn't know that. So she continues “Anna's geography is almost done –.” And then back to slavery again, hesitant, indecisive. “What do all you folks think about the slave law... To me it is incredible amazing—mournful—I feel as Aunt Mary said—I feel

as if I could be willing to sink with it were all this sin and misery to sink into the sea.” But then back to the family. “I am so glad there is a prospect of Fathers sermons being printed at last. Kate could not do a better work and it is high time.” And she draws the letter to a close with “The children are talking about your return daily. Afftly Yours H.” And she puts her pen down, starts to fold the letter, and then stops. Picking up her pen she adds “I wish Father would come to Boston and preach on the Fugitive Slave law as he once preached on the slave trade when Mrs Judge Reeves was crying in one pew and I in another—I wish some new Martyn Luther would arise to set this community right.” And then back to family “Fred sends a first love letter to Sarah the cut papers are to be given with it” (Harriet Beecher Stowe to Calvin Ellis Stowe, 29 December 1850. Harriet Beecher Stowe Center). And so, tentatively, uncertainly, unfocused, Harriet Beecher Stowe will begin to write.

By March, the work was underway. On the ninth she told Gamaliel Bailey, the editor of the Washington, D. C. abolitionist paper, *The National Era*, that she was “occupied upon a story . . . embracing a series of sketches which will give the lights and shadows of the ‘patriarchal institution’ written either from observation, incidents which have occurred within the sphere of my personal knowledge, or in the knowledge of my friends. I shall show the *best side* of the thing, and something *faintly approaching the worst*.” But she had no conception of where this thread will lead. “The thing may extend through three or four numbers. It will be ready in two or three weeks” (Harriet Beecher Stowe to Gamaliel Bailey, 9 March 1851. Boston Public Library.) The first installment appeared June 5, 1851; the last, with a few missed installments, on April 1, 1852. The book appeared on March 20, 1852. The first run of 5,000 copies was sold within a week; by the end of the year, 300,000 copies had been published in the United States. Harriet, a faculty wife remember, had hoped to make enough money for a new black silk dress. Her first royalty check was for \$10,000, many times her husband’s salary.

Harriet was an author, but she was also a mother. She had “the Twins,” Eliza Tyler Stowe and Harriet Beecher Stowe, in 1837. There followed Henry Ellis Stowe, Georgiana May Stowe, Frederick William Stowe, and in January 1848, Samuel Charles Stowe. Eighteen months later Samuel Charles died in a cholera epidemic. In July of 1850, Stowe gave birth to Charles Edward Stowe, later her biographer. The following December writing to an old friend from her Cincinnati days, Harriet said, “My little seigneur, the ‘reigning baby’—is as much like the departed one as one mould of clay can be to another—only of his age he is larger and he is a little fairer—I often think what you said to me—that another child would not fill the place of the old one that it would be another interest and another love—so I find it—for tho he is so like I do not feel for him the same nor do I feel for him that same love which I felt for

Charley—It is a different kind—I shall never love another as I did him—he was my ‘summer child’” (Harriet Beecher Stowe to Sarah (Howe) (Mrs. Diarca) Allen, 2 December 1850. Alderman Library, The University of Virginia).

Summer child or not, Charles Edward, the baby of the family, was spoiled by his father, and probably by his mother. Father was teaching at Andover Theological Seminary, but Mother didn't like the teachers or the curriculum at the Andover Academy, so she sent Charley to The Gunnery in Washington, Connecticut, a progressive school founded by Frederick William Gunn.

Charley was not a happy student. He wanted a gun like all the other boys had. He lied. He cheated. He was miserable at Gunnery. In late May of 1864, age fourteen, he ran away to sea. On June 6, Harriet wrote to Mr. Gunn.

“My boy came home to me after four days experience of sailor life, heart broken at leaving the ship—pining for the sea like a school girl for her home.

He had been so happy—he had got his outfit all prepared—his plans of life laid he had eighteen dollars a month and no expences—he would save his money and then at the end of six months if he could get his fathers consent he would go on board a square rigger and make thirty two dollars a month—and he *wasn't* sea sick, and had done man's work for four days, shoveling and cleaning etc and liked it.

When I told him of the grief he had caused his father he seemed taken aback—and said “I wrote to him, and I thought that tho he might not be willing to send me yet when he knew that I really could earn eighteen dollars a month he would be glad—and I could save money, for I should have no expences.—and instead of being a drag and expence I could be sending home money.—I was willing to work and work hard—the Captain told me that he was short of hands and that I must do man's work and I did it and liked it. The other sailors grumbled about the provision and work but I liked every thing I never ate with such an appetite or felt so well”—and then came a whole list of instances of men in New York ship owners—dock masters etc who had risen from before the mast and he was going to do it

—I let him tell all through and then I took up my line of reply.

I told him that there was a mixture of what was truly respectable, with what was very wrong in what he had been doing. That it was wrong for him with so little consideration for his father to take his case into his own hands—and dilated on all the consequences that might have ensued—On the other hand it was respectable to be willing to go to work immediately—and to hard work—that he had not run away for a spree or for amusement but with a definite and well considered plan of earning his own living The fault of his plan I told him was this—that it was premature—that he was not yet sufficiently educated to rise at sea—that he wrote a miserable hand and was a poor speller and did not understand book keeping or accounts and that if he

went to sea in this state he would be and remain a mere low ignorant common sailor all his life

—If he really wished to go to sea, I wished him to go prepared to rise to be something more than that—that if he would go to work now energetically acquire a handsome hand—reform his spelling, learn book keeping and accounts—we would use our influence to get him a good ship and let him try the sea.

There is a commercial school here in Hartford where Commercial Arithmetic writing spelling book keeping are the special branches and in that we have placed him

He begins to day—and seems to like the school. I have fitted up his room and we have him now between us once more—

Charley is in the midst of the general break up that precedes manhood—and in this stage of things such passions are often kindled Charleys passion is for the sea—it is a passion and there is no more use opposing a boy who is in love with the sea than one who is in love with a woman— The course we pursue is exactly what my Father took with Henry Ward at the same age under the same circumstances—It gains time for us—he looks forward now to a year of preparation as Henry did when he went to Mount Pleasant

I am sorry dear friend you have had so much trouble with Charley—he will settle down bye and bye and the waters will become clear and he will do you justice One thing one sees—Charley has inherited from his father a physical constitutional love of the sea. He has been every vacation coasting with his father—he has read a library of sea stories—and so when he was put to latin and felt that he was constantly behind hand constantly at the tail and appearing to disadvantage approbateness which is very strong in him was exacerbated and kept constantly saying in his ear— ‘there is something you can do a line where you can do well and be praised you can be first rate in something’—and so he fled to it

When I asked him if he would not after all, like to go back [to Gunnery] he answered firmly no—that he preferred to be where he was—I am perfectly sure He could not be *persuaded* to go back—and if forced back he could be kept only by force

—He is very much altered in some respects—no longer gay chatty talkative he is silent, inclining to be alone reticent—and brooding—He is no longer to be won by a kiss and a hug—he is not a little Charley any longer he is looking into life—longing for the things of manhood—and I speak more to his reason than to his sentiments—and since he will walk the precipice I try to steady his head—He is thrown on his responsibility—he under stands that he is now trying his plan and that we in good faith are giving him the means to do it—There must be men of the sea—and if he is called for that I will not dispute his vocation—

You could hardly advise us to force him back to you—and you will perceive at once why we keep him here and that it is from no lack of confidence in you—The object at *this time* of life for parents and teachers is not to have their own way—but to make a good man—not to preserve their authority but to preserve the boy—and if we should force Charley back, he would again go to sea, and this time would not be so artless as to send us the name of his vessel

His father is happy once more—happier in having Charley’s study opening from his own than if he were in the best school away—

—I wanted to put this responsibility onto your broader shoulders my good friend—but God has suffered it to come back on us—We cannot shirk “Our Charley”—I must try him myself—and may be some day he will even learn latin of me as my poor Henry did—at present he hates it with a most refreshing energy” (Harriet Beecher Stowe to Frederick William Gunn, 6 June 1864, Sterling Library, Yale University).

Finally, in the late 1880s, Harriet lost her favorite brother, Henry Ward Beecher, and her husband within a year of each other and, apparently, soon after, suffered a stroke. Her correspondence until her death in 1896 is sporadic, she has good days and bad days. On a particularly good day, February 5, 1893, she wrote to her old friend, Oliver Wendell Holmes.

“I must tell you my dear friend . . . Your lamp burns as brightly as ever. The oil in it has not run low leaving but a feeble gleam, as mine has done. . . . I am passing the last days of my life in the city where I passed my school-girl life. My physical health, since I recovered from the alarming illness I had four years ago, has been excellent, and I am almost always cheerful and happy. My mental condition might be called nomadic. I have no fixed thoughts or objects. I do not read much. Now and then I dip into a book, much as a hummingbird poised in air on whirring wings darts into the heart of a flower—now here—then there and away. . . .

I make no mental effort of any sort my brain is tired out. It was a woman’s brain not a mans and finally from sheer fatigue and exhaustion in the march and strife of life, gave out before the end was reached. And now I rest me, like a moored boat, rising and falling on the water with loosened cordage and flapping sail. . . .

I have come to the land of Beulah which is heaven’s border land, from whence we can see into the gates of the celestial city. And even now all tears are wiped from my eyes” (Harriet Beecher Stowe to Oliver Wendell Holmes, 5 February 1893. Library of Congress).

Harriet Beecher Stowe died July 1, 1896. Her last words were” I love you.”

And so, inevitable or not, there are the three strands which, for more than a quarter of a century, have bound together libraries, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and me.



