

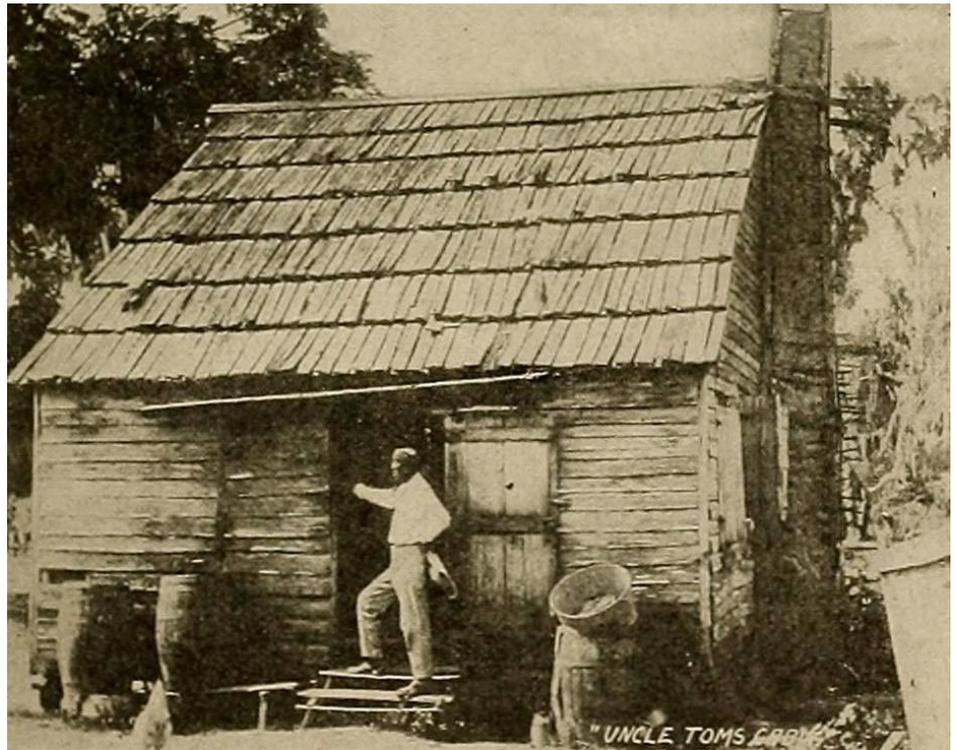
Uncle Tom's Cabin

By Stephen Railton

The important place of “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” in 19th-century American history is acknowledged in every textbook on the subject. The role of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 novel in the story of 20th-century American film is not nearly so well known, though it deserves to be. Even if you don’t count comedic adaptations like “Uncle Tom’s Gal” (1925) or “Topsy and Eva” (1927), or animated send-ups like “Uncle Tom’s Bungalow” (1937) or “Uncle Tom’s Cabana” (1947), or the more recent made-for-TV version (1987), on the basis of the nine silent movies that were released between 1903 and 1927 it probably still holds the record as the most frequently filmed

American book. The earliest “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” made by the Edison Company in 1903, is not just the first movie to use written titles between scenes; it was released two months before Edison’s “Great Train Robbery,” making it arguably the first American dramatic film. Vitagraph’s 1910 production was the first “three-reeler.” And the specific film we’re interested in – the five-reel version directed in 1914 by William Robert Daly for the World Film Corporation, the sixth “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” movie – was the first film ever to feature an African American in a starring role; until then all the Tom’s, as well as all the other named black characters, were portrayed by white actors in blackface.

Early film makers were attracted to Stowe’s story for reasons that had little or nothing to do with its social message. Because they were working in a medium that was both new and constrained by technical factors like the length of a reel and the lack of a soundtrack, they liked stories that were already familiar to their viewers. By the time the movies came along, American audiences knew “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” as well as any primitive tribe knows its ancestral myths. Of course, in 1914 the story they were most familiar with was not Stowe’s written text, but the many theatrical transformations of it that had been touring the country continually for over a third of a century. Sam Lucas, the seventy-two year old black man whom World cast as Tom, had already played that



*This scene from the film was included with an article in *The Moving Picture World*, August 22, 1914. Courtesy [Media History Digital Library](#).*

part several thousand times in the “Tom Shows,” as these dramatizations were called. The Tom Shows entertained white audiences by marrying the pious sentimentality of Stowe’s story with the high-spirits and racial stereotypes of the minstrel show, and their ideological power explains, for example, why one-fifth of Edison’s “Uncle Tom” depicts slaves dancing.

According to a publicity piece in “The Moving Picture World,” “Mr. Daly has chosen to follow the book rather than the stage version” (22 August 1914). There is some truth to this. The only time the film shows dancing slaves is the haunting shot it uses to help establish the world of slavery. In this scene there is a group of slaves in the quarters frenetically dancing, but that is off in the distance; in the foreground an aged slave woman somberly watches an old and lame slave limp diagonally across the screen toward the cabins in the background. On the other hand, the film certainly includes elements that derive directly from the Tom Shows, like depicting Tom himself as an old man. Some of its longest scenes involve the character Marks, a slave-catcher who plays a small role in Stowe’s book but who became a hugely popular source of comic relief on stage; when film audiences in 1914 saw Marks’ iconic hat and tiny donkey, they were already culturally programmed to laugh, and Daly gives them plenty of opportunities to do that.

While World's promotional campaign featured two of the film's white stars – Marie Eline, the “Thanouser kid,” playing Eva in the movies for the second time, and Irving Cummings, who plays George Harris, the mulatto who leads his family to freedom in Canada – and the other major enslaved characters are played by white actors, reviewers noted the “many colored players” who do appear in the movie, and consistently praised Sam Lucas' performance as Tom. For modern viewers his best moment probably comes when Legree demands he whip another slave. Until this moment, Tom's body language has expressed only his religious humility and racial deference, but in response to Legree's threat to kill him if he doesn't obey, Lucas stands straight up, folds his arms defiantly across his chest, and tells Legree he may have bought his body, but he doesn't own his soul. (This is also a good reminder that Stowe's Tom is *not* “an Uncle Tom,” and never sells out his fellow slaves.)

In 1914 movies were still competing directly with traveling theatrical troupes. Reviewers noted how well this movie uses location filming to do what no staged production could; Eliza escapes, for example, by running across real ice on the real Ohio River. Daly uses the particular language in which a camera records experience to speak on behalf of its black characters in two other places. Jim Vance, a runaway slave being hunted by a posse, is shown hiding in a tree while white men below him put up a wanted poster. In the middle of the scene the camera joins him on his tree branch, allowing white audiences to share the precarious perspective of a fugitive slave. Visually this moment is echoed and given much greater force at the end, in an event that occurs neither in Stowe's novel nor in any Tom Show. After Legree gives Tom a fatal beating, the slave whom Tom refused to whip finds a pistol and sets out to hunt down Legree in what the film's titles refer to as both “sympathy” for Tom and “revenge” against his oppressor. A slave hunting a master is already a striking reversal of familiar roles, but when this unnamed slave kills Legree the film takes its audiences to a place few previous American texts of any kind

had opened up: the idea of black violence in response to white injustice. Daly's camera shoots this event from directly behind the gun that shoots Legree, as if the viewer were standing in the black man's shoes. The shot is followed by close-ups of slaves, including the killer, smiling at the white man's death.

In some respects this scene still speaks for itself, as a challenge to racial complacencies. But in the larger context of the whole film and early motion pictures it may have spoken differently. For example, there is one other moment when Daly's camera placement adopts a radically subjective point of view: during George Harris' shoot-out with the posse, it puts the viewer in the perspective of one of the white slave catchers being fired on by the fugitives. Like the film's repeated use of the word “posse” in its titles, what this shoot-out reveals is the influence of Western movies like “The Great Train Robbery” on Daly's script. Just as the popularity of the Tom Shows pulled Stowe's story in the direction of their conventions, so the movie-watching public's appetite for Westerns seems to be reshaping “Uncle Tom's Cabin” in another way. It is at points like this, where the history of American film and the history of American culture intersect, that we realize how much “Uncle Tom's Cabin” can show us about both.

For more on this and the other film versions of Stowe's novel, see “Uncle Tom's Cabin & American Culture: A Multi-Media Archive” (<http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/>).

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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