
The Social Ties of Transatlantic Copyright: Harriet Beecher Stowe, Maria Cummins and Sampson Low

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Abstract

In order to publish their works in authorized editions in Britain, American women writers had to navigate the complexities of transatlantic copyright. Before 1854, this involved arranging with publishers for prior publication in Britain; after 1854, writers had to be resident in Britain when their book was published to secure a British copyright. My paper argues that, for women writers, these copyright arrangements created not just legal and financial transactions, but social bonds. The language of friendship and obligation in letters between American women writers and British publishers is more than sentimental rhetoric. Harriet Beecher Stowe and Maria Cummins relied on the hospitality of their publisher, Sampson Low, as well as his business skills, to publish authorized editions of Stowe's *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853) and *Dred* (1856), and Cummins's *El Fureidis* (1860). As women in a foreign country, Stowe and Cummins relied upon Low to ensure their own, as well as their books' mobility in transatlantic spaces. Letters and diaries at the Harriet Beecher Stowe Centre, the University of Virginia, and the Open University show how Low hosted both Stowe and Cummins in his son's home, collapsing boundaries between business dealings and social ties. Low's family assisted Stowe with her literary production, and her packed schedule of visits, especially after the departure of her husband in 1856. For Cummins, who travelled to England alone, Low interspersed the business of publishing with introductions to British literary society, and European fashions. My paper explores how these social relations translated into cultural prestige, as Stowe and Cummins gained symbolic capital in Britain and America from the transatlantic circulation of themselves and their books. As well as producing authorized editions, I argue that the social ties of transatlantic copyright increased the cultural cachet of American writing on both sides of the Atlantic.

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