



Lydia Maria Child

Lydia Maria Child's life can be interestingly viewed as a precursor of the lives of Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, for some of Child's early writing was devoted to the domestic advice area in which Catherine Beecher later shone, and she also published inflammatory abolitionist work years before Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

But Lydia Maria Child's interests ranged much wider than either of those. She was born to upper-class Bostonian parents, whose fears for her marriage proved correct: though she loved David Lee Child and shared with him an exemplary companionable, childless marriage, he was never able to support her in the fashion of the times, and they sometimes lived in near poverty. Much of her writing therefore was motivated by the simple need for money.

She had already begun writing as Lydia Francis, publishing in 1824 and 1825 two works of historical fiction set in early New England. They sold well and in 1826, she began publishing the first American children's magazine, a bimonthly called *Juvenile Miscellany*. Her 1828 marriage only reinforced her career, for although David Child was a Harvard graduate, his quixotic idealism interfered with his ability to earn a living as a lawyer. Their family needs can be seen in the subject matter of the first book written by the bride only a year after her wedding: *The Frugal Housewife* (1829) was one of America's earliest domestic advice books and presaged the home economics movement by a half-century. Immediately popular, it went through twenty-one editions in the first decade after publication. Child followed it with *The Mother's Book* (1831), and the same year, continued her interest in children's literature with *The Little Girl's Own Book* – another audience identified by her far earlier than most.



Not content to stay in the limited realm of domesticity, however, Child also wrote in 1829 *The First Settlers of New England*, which was not a history of the English Colonists as its title might imply, but rather a book on the area's Native American tribes. Though this is sometimes cited as indicative of her evolution from her family's conservatism to her husband's concern for oppressed minorities, she already had revealed unusual empathy for Native Americans in her very first book – *Hobomok* (1824) was a love story that featured a colonial woman and a Native American man.

Whatever the impetus, Lydia Maria Child's political identification was clear by 1833, when she published her most famous work, *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans*. By carefully spelling out the realities and complexities of slavery, her appeal brought many influential personalities to join the Child's friend, William Lloyd Garrison, in abolitionism. It also created an uproar among family friends, who bankrupted Child's magazine by cutting off their children's subscriptions to *Juvenile Miscellany*. Like Maria Weston Chapman, Lydia Maria Child found herself ostracized.

Unlike Chapman, however, she was not naturally an organizer or even a joiner. She never attempted to lead meetings or speak on abolitionism, though Child nonetheless showed courage by continuing to write on the subject throughout the 1830s, and the American Anti-Slavery Society rewarded her with election to its executive committee in 1840. Meanwhile, the sales of her work in other areas suffered from the controversy over slavery. Her attempts to return to a female audience with the biographical *Good Wives* (1833), *The History of the Condition of Women* (1835), and *The Family Nurse* (1837) were not very successful, though an 1836 romantic novel sold better.

She joined her husband during the late 1830s in an agrarian enterprise doomed to fail; like Louisa May Alcott, whose writing supported her father's family while he experimented with utopian agronomy, Lydia Child soon needed income. In 1841, she moved to New York and edited the weekly *National Anti-Slavery Standard* for two years before internal abolitionist conflicts took their toll and she resigned. Her next publishing project was the two-volume *Letters from New York* (1843-45), a collection of correspondence columns she had written for a Boston newspaper. Her observations on the city and times proved surprisingly successful, and the work was reissued almost a dozen times during the next three decades.

For part of this era, the Childs maintained an early commuter marriage while he worked as a journalist in Washington and she in New York. They returned to Massachusetts in 1850, settling permanently in Wayland in 1852. Though she became increasingly reclusive there, her literary horizons continued to expand. Demonstrating her prescience again, she published first *Fact and Fiction, A Collection of Stories* (1846), a book that was sympathetic to women engaged in illicit sex, and followed it less than a decade later with *The Progress of Religious Ideas* (1855). In this three-volume work of comparative religion, Child rejected the common belief in revealed truth and instead viewed religions as having evolved along with human development. Meanwhile, she kept the bills paid with periodical articles, inspirational anthologies, biography, more children's literature, and abolitionist works.

During the Civil War, she edited *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), for ex-slave Harriet Jacob, and at the war's end, she cared enough about the publication of other, similar people that she paid personally for *The Freedman's Book* (1865). Two years later, she published her last novel, and the following year returned to the subject of her youth with *An Appeal for the Indians* (1868).

David Child died in 1874, and his grieving widow, who had increasingly isolated herself from all but him, found the energy for only one more book, *Aspirations of the World* (1878). Lydia Maria Child died at age seventy-eight, the author of more than two dozen books and countless periodical pieces. Had she written nothing else, she would be remembered for one of her enduring children's pieces: a Thanksgiving favorite, her 1844 "Over the River and Through the Woods" was sung even before Thanksgiving was an official holiday. Her reputation as one of America's first literary women was secure when two years after her death, John Greenleaf Whittier did her the honor of publishing Lydia Maria Child's biography and two volumes of her correspondence.

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