

## Hentz, Caroline Lee Whiting <sup>[1]</sup>

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By Mary Kelley, 1988

**1 June 1800–11 Feb. 1856**

Caroline Lee Whiting Hentz, novelist, was born in Lancaster, Mass. Her father, John Whiting, who served as a colonel in



"Caroline Lee  
Whiting Hentz,  
1800-1856,"  
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the Revolutionary War <sup>[2]</sup>, was descended from Samuel Whiting <sup>[3]</sup> who came to the colonies in 1636 and became the first minister in Lynn, Mass.; her mother was Orpah Danforth Whiting. Little is known about her childhood except that she supposedly wrote fiction, drama, and poetry as an adolescent.

On 30 Sept. 1824 she married Nicholas Marcellus Hentz <sup>[4]</sup>, an emigré who had fled his native France with his family in 1816. The following year she, her husband, and their first child, Marcellus, began their residence in Chapel Hill. She devoted herself to the care of the five children who were born in the first decade of their marriage: Marcellus died before his second birthday, but Charles, Julia, Thaddeus, and Caroline survived their parents. Her husband accepted an appointment as professor of modern language and belle lettres at The University of North Carolina <sup>[5]</sup>, taught French, and spent his spare time in entomological studies. She found the years in North Carolina satisfying and nostalgically recalled the "kindness, warm feeling, hospitality, and union of Chapel Hill."

In the fall of 1830 Nicholas Hentz, who was described by his son Charles as "a rolling stone; never abiding long in one place," moved the family to Covington, Ky., where he found employment as the head of a female academy. From that point on, Caroline Hentz divided her energies between teaching in various female academies and writing short stories and novels. Beginning with the academy in Covington, she and her husband supervised and taught in girls' schools in Cincinnati, Ohio; Florence, Tuscaloosa, and Tuskegee, Ala.; and Columbus, Ga. Her ambivalent reaction to the teaching profession was reflected in her relatively negative attitude towards her duties along with a recognition that her efforts were necessary in the support of the family: "School again—Alternate coaxing and scolding, counsel and reproof—frowns and smiles—oh! what a life it is—oh woe is me—this weary world! I am often tempted to say—Yet man is doomed to earn his subsistence by the sweat of the brow and the fire of his brain and why not woman also?"

Simultaneously, she was constantly writing fiction and issued dozens of short stories and twelve novels before the end of an extremely successful career during which she gained a popular and national audience. Her first novel, Lovell's Folly <sup>[6]</sup>, appeared in 1833; her last, Ernest Linwood <sup>[7]</sup>, was published in 1856. Mrs. Hentz's literary endeavors were motivated partially by the need to supplement the family's income, and her correspondence with publishers indicates that she sought to profit from the increasing demand for sentimental-domestic fiction, a genre that addressed itself to women and their concerns.

Aside from the financial motivation, she sought in her fiction to fulfill a dual purpose. The first was rooted in a transplanted but undeviating loyalty to the antebellum South. Setting nearly half of her fiction in the South, she attempted to defend that section's commitment to slavery. She claimed that the institution of slavery was misunderstood by Northerners and in fact benefited Southerners, both white and black. Convinced that the misunderstanding stemmed at least in part from the antislavery writings emanating from the North, she responded directly to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* <sup>[8]</sup> by defending slavery in *The Planter's Northern Bride* <sup>[9]</sup>. She noted in a letter to her publisher that Stowe's characterization was completely inaccurate: "Slavery, as she [Stowe] describes it, is an entirely new institution to us." In her preface to the novel, she described relations between whites and blacks in positive terms, writing that "we have been touched and gratified by the exhibition of affectionate kindness and care on the one side, and loyal and devoted attachment on the other."

Her second and more important literary purpose expressed concerns regarding women and their status in society that went beyond sectional boundaries. Along with other women writers of the nineteenth century who focused on women and

the home in their fiction, she sought to promote and legitimate the role of women in society. Arguing that women were different from—and morally superior to—their male counter-parts, she emphasized that women were the primary inculcators of a virtue and morality necessary for the maintenance of the social fabric and that women performed this function most effectively by remaining in the home and providing models for their husbands and children. Women, she felt, should provide a peaceful haven for their husbands and serve as their spiritual guides. They should also mold their children's character and prepare them for the tasks assigned by society. In short, woman in her fiction was seen as the controlling force in the family, and the family in turn was portrayed as the institution upon which society depended for its continuance and survival.

During the 1840s, Mrs. Hentz's familial responsibilities increased in proportion to the decline of her husband's health. She maintained their last girls' school in Columbus by herself but soon decided that her pen was the surest path to security. She had already produced some short stories and two novels during the years in which she had combined teaching and writing, and the reaction to them determined her decision to concentrate on writing alone to support herself and her family. As she commented, "I am compelled to turn my brains to gold and sell them to the highest bidder." Increasing her production to a startling degree, she achieved her aim, writing eight novels and five collections of short stories all of which were published in the first half of the 1850s.

While visiting her son Charles during the winter of 1855–56 she contracted pneumonia in Marianna, Fla., died, and was buried there. Her husband died nine months later and was buried beside her. Both had joined the Presbyterian church in 1835.

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### Additional Resources:

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### Authors:

[Kelley, Mary](#) <sup>[18]</sup>

### Origin - location:

[University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill](#) <sup>[19]</sup>

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[Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, University of North Carolina Press](#).<sup>[20]</sup>

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