

JANE ADDAMS AND AMERICAN URBAN REFORM

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Jane Addams was the most famous of a group of idealistic Americans who tried to humanize the industrial city at the turn of the century. Influenced by John Ruskin and other European writers, as well as by their own experience, they moved into working-class neighborhoods, and from their outposts in the slums they tried to transform the urban landscape. They fought against child labor and tried to improve housing. They pioneered in establishing kindergartens and they were leaders in progressive education. They tried to ease the process of Americanization among their largely foreign-born neighbors. They worked to improve city government, to build parks and playgrounds, and to bring a sense of community to the city. Their ultimate goal was to eliminate poverty and to promote equal opportunity. Sometimes they were naive, often they betrayed their upper-middle class background. Their crusades were at best only partly successful. Yet one hundred years later as we seem to be enveloped in another age of greed, another time of urban crisis, Jane Addams and her co-workers, and their efforts to change the urban environment, and to promote a better life for all, seem worth recalling.

Jane Addams was born in Cedarville, a small village in northern Illinois, not far from the Wisconsin border. Her father was a wealthy and influential businessman, miller, farmer and politician. Despite a rather complex family and a step-mother with whom she did not get along, Jane Addams had a normal, active, rural childhood. Like a great many others of her generation she left the small town to move to the city, but she had a warm affection for her hometown, a real sense of place, and she returned frequently even after she became famous. Memories of her rural childhood, and the sense of community in the small town became a reference point for evaluating and understanding the massive changes and the growth of industrial cities that took place during her lifetime.

Jane Addams was one of the first generation of college women. A few young

women had attended Mount Holyoke, Oberlin, or one of a small handful of other colleges before the civil War, but they usually received the equivalent of a high school rather than a college education. It was not until the founding of Vassar in 1861, Smith in 1872, Wellesley in 1875, Bryn Mawr in 1886, and the gradual movement toward limited co-education at Cornell, Harvard and a number of state universities in the mid-West, that college education for women in the United States became a reality. Jane Addams wanted to attend Smith College, in part because it had the same high standards for admission that the best men's colleges maintained. But, her father insisted that she stay closer to home, so in 1877 she enrolled at the Rockford Female Seminary (later Rockford College), which did not even have collegiate status when Jane Addams entered. She planned to transfer, but she stayed on to graduate in 1881. To be a college woman, whether at Vassar or Rockford, took some courage in 1877. Just four years earlier Dr. Edward H. Clarke, a professor at Harvard Medical School, had written a little book, *Sex in Education*, in which he argued that higher education for women would interfere with the reproductive system and lead to nervous prostration and a general decline of health. But, Jane Addams was determined to become a college woman, and her college years were crucial to her later career.

But, what did a woman college graduate do in 1881? There were very few fields open to women other than teaching, a career she rejected. She tried medical school, but dropped out after a few months. She traveled in Europe. She cared for her sister's children. She had bouts of illness and near nervous collapse. It took her eight years of floundering before she found something useful to do with her life. She discovered her calling on her second European trip in 1888. In her autobiography, *Twenty Years at Hull-House*, she argues that it was at a bull fight in Madrid that she finally realized the folly of study and travel and decided to do something creative and real with her life. Her letter, however, indicates that it was more likely in London that she made her decision. She was traveling with her college friend, Ellen Starr, when she visited Toynbee Hall, the pioneer university settlement in the East End of London.

Years later, Jane Addams in writing about the influences behind the settlement movement always divided them into the «subjective necessity» and the «objective need». By «subjective» she meant the need for highly educated young people like herself to find something meaningful to do in a world that was fast becoming divided between those who worked with their hands and those who worked with their minds. College-educated women felt especially cut off and isolated from the real world of the cities. The objective need for settlements was obvious to anyone who observed the slums of the great cities where millions were crowded into poor housing, where disease and death haunted the lives of adults and children alike.

During the summer of 1889 Jane Addams and Ellen Starr tramped around Chicago trying to find a place to launch their shemc. They finally settled on a dilapidated mansion formerly owned by Charles J. Hull (thus the origin of the name Hull-House). The house was one of the few in the area to survive the fire of 1871, then Jane and Ellen discovered

it, there was a saloon, an office, and a storage floor, with an undertaker and another saloon next door. In the beginning, they rented only a portion of the house. But, when they moved in on September 18, 1889, along with a housekeeper, whom they hired, they thought of it as a home not an institution.

Jane Addams and Ellen Starr had few definite plans when they moved into Hull-House. They furnished the house, unpacked the pictures they had purchased in Europe, invited their neighbors in, and began doing what they knew best—teaching, lecturing, and explaining their art objects. They organized a readings group to discuss George Eliot's *Romola* and they set up an art exhibit. One of their programs at Hull-House was esoteric, romantic, even patronizing. But, the founders were flexible and willing to change. They discovered a need for child care so they started a kindergarten. They began classes in English, and organized clubs and social evenings for the mothers in the neighborhood. They invited labor unions to meet at the settlement, organized cooperative residence for working women, and in 1893 they started a music school.

Hull-House was not the first social settlement in the United States, there were at least two others that were founded earlier, but Hull-House quickly became the most famous. The fame and influence of Hull-House was directly related to the talented people attracted to the settlement. The Hull-House group shifted and changed over the years and the physical plant expanded, eventually growing to thirteen buildings that occupied more than a city block. There were men as well as women. Edward Burchard, a young college graduate who later became the Secretary of the National Community Center Association, was the first male resident; there was also George Hooker, Director of the Chicago City Club and an expert on city planning, Francis Hackett, a writer and editor, Gerard Swope, later the president of General Electric, and many other including Charles Beard, the historian, and William Lyon Mackenzie King, the future prime minister of Canada. Others closely associated with Hull-House as visitors, supporters, and advisers were Richard T. Ely, the economist, John Dewey, the philosopher and educational reformer, and Henry Demarest Lloyd, the muckraking journalist. Yet, for all the impressed men it was the remarkable group of women who made Hull-House famous and influential.

Among the most important in the early years were Julia Lathrop and Florence Kelley. Lathrop came from much the same background as Jane Addams. Her father was a successful lawyer and politician in Rockford, Illinois; her mother, a member of the first graduating class at Rockford Seminary, was an early advocate of woman suffrage. She went to Rockford, as did Jane Addams, but then she transferred to Vassar. But after college she moved home and worked for her father in his law office. She saw Jane Addams' appeal as a way to live up to her college ideals. She moved to the settlement in 1890 and quickly became one of its most important residents. She was a talented executive who was appointed a member of the Illinois Board of Charities in 1893. She helped to organize the first Juvenile Court and the Immigrant Protective League. In 1912 she was appointed the first head of the Children's Bureau in Washington.

Florence Kelley, before she came to Hull-House, had experiences quite different from Jane Addams, Ellen Starr, and Julia Lathrop. The daughter of a congressman and judge, she grew up in an upper-class family in Philadelphia. After graduating from Cornell, she applied for graduate work at the University of Pennsylvania, but they rejected her application because she was a woman. Not to be denied she enrolled at the University of Zurich, one of the few European universities that took women for graduate study in the social sciences. In Switzerland she discovered socialism and married a Russian physician. She translated one of Friedrich Engels books into English. After she returned to New York, her marriage collapsed. In 1891 she moved with her three children to Illinois, in part because the divorce laws were more lenient than in New York. She was a large woman, energetic and determined. She was an important addition to the Hull-House group.

There were other women as well. Mary Kenney O'Sullivan and Alzina Stevens had experience in the labor movement. Alice Hamilton was trained as a physician and became a pioneer in industrial medicine and the first women professor at Harvard Medical School. Grace and Edith Abbott came from Iowa to Hull-House. Edith along with another Hull-House resident, Sphonisba Breckinridge, became pioneers in the new field of social work at the University of Chicago, while Grace became director of the Immigrant Protective League before replacing Lathrop as head of the Children's Bureau. Hull-House became a training ground for the first generation of professional women who moved on to the universities, government and municipal agencies, where they became writers, researchers and executives, as well as reformers determined to improve life in the cities and to solve the worse problems created by industrialism. But, Hull-House was more than a training ground; it was a stimulating place to live, and a place for an alternative lifestyle for a large number of single women (and a few men). Most residents had their own rooms and a certain amount of privacy away from the turmoil of the settlement activities. They also ate in the common dining room, for Hull-House was served by cooks and maids. It was around the dining room table (over which Jane Addams presided) that the residents could talk over problems, plan reform campaigns, and debate social theories with the distinguished guests who often dropped in, not for the quality of the food, but rather for the quality of the conversation. Henry Demarest Lloyd once called Hull-House, «The best Club in Chicago». Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who later became famous for «The Yellow Wallpaper», and *Women and Economics*, was so stimulated by the common dining room that she later suggested an ideal apartment house where the individual units would have no kitchens so women could be freed of the drudgery of preparing meals.

Hull-House was an exciting place to live, but just outside the door were all the problems, the dirt, disease, and despair that made the city a terrible place to live for those trapped in the slums. Nothing disturbed the settlement workers more than the sight of little children, under sized and underfed, forced to work long hours in factories. The first Christmas, the Hull-House residents were shocked and surprised when they

tried to give candy to some of the neighborhood children only to have them reject it. Then they discovered that these particular children worked ten hours a day, six days a week in a candy factory. They couldn't stand the sight of candy. The Hull-House campaign against child labor began informally with a lecture, an article or a discussion pointing out some of the horrors of little children being exploited by industry. The campaign from the first was led by Florence Kelley, who knew something about child labor before moving to Hull-House. She began to collect statistics and stories in the Hull-House neighborhood. The investigation became official when Governor John P. Altgeld appointed Kelley as a special investigator for the Illinois State Bureau of Labor, assigned to study child labor in the sweatshops of Chicago. For the settlement workers, however, investigation was merely the prelude to reform. After presenting their statistics to the Illinois legislature, they conferred with a committee sent to Chicago to check on conditions, helped draft a bill to be introduced in Springfield, the state capital and then lobbied for its passage. Their statistics and energy played a major role in the passage of the Illinois Factory Act of 1893, which provided for factory inspection and prohibited the employment of children under fourteen at night, or for longer than eight hours during the day. Two years later the Illinois Supreme Court struck down the law as unconstitutional. The settlement workers learned the hard way that they had to fight the same battle over and over again. Eventually they moved beyond the state to the national level and Florence Kelley, who became the director of the National Consumers' League in 1899, continued the fight for an amendment to the constitution. The amendment never passed, for abolishing child labor directly confronted some of the most powerful industries in the country.

The fight against child labor was not entirely lost for eventually many of the statistics and the carefully drawn maps of the Hull-House neighborhood showing occupation, ethnicity, and age were published in *Hull-House Maps and Papers* (1895), a pioneer study that stimulated other careful urban studies and led eventually to the development of urban sociology and a change in the laws. The Hull-House crusade against child labor also led to many other reform movements: attempts to improve housing, to promote better education, to build parks and playgrounds, even to promote a sense of community and neighborhood in the city.

A large amount of the Hull-House reform effort was directed at the immigrants – the Italians, Greek, Irish, Germans and East European Jews who live near the settlement. But, the Hull-House reforms were never only local. The settlement workers believed that what they learned in their neighborhood could apply to the nation. They organized the Immigrant Protective League. They tried to ease the process of Americanization. Jane Addams especially tried to promote the preservation of the old ethnic ways, and to ease the conflict between generations. The settlement workers tried quite consciously to promote their own middle-class values. For example, they tried to teach the recent immigrants how to live in uncluttered rooms, and to separate the functions of living into clearly defined spaces. But many of the recent immigrants were much more

comfortable mixing sleeping, eating, and working in the same space. To live neat and ordered lives in overcrowded tenements was often impossible in any case. Sometimes the settlement workers in their eagerness to wipe out child labor did not appreciate how much immigrant families depended on the wages of the young. And, in their appreciation of how devastating alcoholism could be, they failed to understand the role that beer and wine played in the social life of immigrant cultures.

The Hull-House reformers had less prejudice and greater understanding of other ethnic groups than most of their generation, but they did not escape the racism of their time. Hull-House was segregated. African-Americans were not welcome. The excuse was that if blacks came to the settlement, they would drive out the other groups. There were few blacks in the neighborhood in the era before World War I, and Jane Addams did help to found a settlement in a predominantly black area. She also was one of the founders of the N.A.A.C.P. and a leader in the fight for civil rights for all. Still from the vantage point of 1996 it seems odd that an institution that promoted democracy would restrict their efforts to whites only, but the entire progressive movement, which the Hull-House reformers were an important part, stood for progress for whites only.

Jane Addams worked hard to promote woman suffrage and women's rights. But she also argued that women had certain traditional roles, as homemakers, breadgivers, and mothers. She seems out of step with modern feminism, but unlike some of the other advocates of woman suffrage who believed that immigrant and poor women should not be given the vote, Jane Addams argued that these women, more than the upperclass, had the intelligence and the experience to use their vote wisely. She argued for what she called «municipal housekeeping». In a rural society a wife and mother could provide pure food and milk for her family by being a good housekeeper, but in a urban age a women needed to get into politics to make sure that the municipal water system, the trash collection, the market inspections worked well enough to prevent disease from spreading to her family. By the same token Jane Addams argued that it was necessary to pass state and federal laws, to promote reform on a national, even on an international level in order to promote safe neighborhoods.

One can argue, as several historians have, that Jane Addams and her co-workers were sentimental and impractical, that they were more interested in social control than in social reform. It is quite possible to survey the history of the past 100 years and to conclude that Hull-House and the entire Progressive-New Deal Society effort to solve the problems of urban America have failed. Chicago and other American cities still suffer from a high rate of crime, poor housing, inadequate schools, and recreational facilities, as well as racial and ethnic tensions that flare into violence and gang warfare. Institutions like Hull-House, the government, and other social agencies all seem to have failed to solve the problems of the truly disadvantaged in America.

If the story of Hull-House over more than a hundred years is the story of failure, it is also the story of success. Many of the poor did find encouragement at the settlement and were able to move out of the slums, and many of the programs initiated at Hull-

House helped to improve working and living conditions in Chicago and in America. The ultimate worth of the settlement and its attempts to deal with the overwhelming problems of the industrial city cannot be measured in one neighborhood or city, for the Hull-House. In a new age of greed the successes seem more important than the failures. On the occasion of Jane Addams' death in 1935, William Allen White, the editor of *The Emporia Gazette*, wrote: «She, more than any other contemporary American, represented through her leadership what might be called the altruistic element in a civilization that is on the whole too acquisitive».

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