



Hill Bookshelf: Addams Was a One-Woman Reform Machine

Sept. 7, 2010

By Debra Bruno

Roll Call Staff

In an era when women rarely went to college and were expected to be obedient and quiet, Jane Addams never quite fit the mold. Born in 1860, Addams was a headstrong girl in a prosperous family, encouraged by her father to think for herself and always ready to right wrongs and speak out.

And now, a new biography of the reformer — who, of course, grew to be a headstrong woman — brings us a full portrait of one of the more transformative characters in American history. “Jane Addams: Spirit in Action,” by Louise Knight, details the life and times of the woman best known for founding Hull House, the country’s first settlement house. Addams had a résumé that seemed to encompass several lifetimes; she was also a suffragist, a peace activist, a founding member of the NAACP and a labor reformer. The list of organizations she founded and led is too long to mention.

There didn’t seem to be a progressive cause Addams wouldn’t tackle. She fought for the eight-hour workday (note to D.C. types: This is considered normal today), limits on child labor, the end to poverty and the growth of civil rights.

Her philosophy was shaped by intellectuals such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, who wrote in his lecture, “Man the Reformer,” “What is a man for but to be a Reformer, a Remaker of what man has made; a renouncer of lies; a restorer of truth and good, imitating that great Nature which embosoms us all, and which sleeps no moment on an old past, but every hour repairs herself, yielding us every morning a new day, and with every pulsation a new life?”

Those words could have anticipated a character like Addams, who appeared in photographs even as young as 12 to be a solemn girl with an unflinching gaze, already apparently mulling the world’s injustices. Her earliest dream was to become a doctor so she could work with the poor, but her father refused to let her go to Smith, the new women’s college. Instead, she contented herself with attending the Rockford (Ill.) Female Seminary, where she “stalwartly refused all urgings to convert” (she considered herself a deist like Emerson) but where she also developed her philosophical grounding.

That grounding led her, after the death of her father, to realize that she didn’t need to practice medicine to help the poor. And reading John Stuart Mill’s book “The Subjugation of Women” helped her realize that, as Knight writes, “she was not required to lead a life of numbing leisure. She could listen to her conscience.”

And so, when she read an article about a new kind of project in London where aid workers lived among the poor as their equals as a way to help enrich their lives, Addams knew she had found her mission. She visited Toynbee House in London's East End and returned home ready to start her own settlement house.

The idea was that young, privileged adults would pay to live at the home. She bought a home in one of Chicago's immigrant neighborhoods and named it Hull House after its former owner, Charles Hull, a real estate magnate. "As neighbors they would form social ties with the working people in the neighborhood and, along with other nonresident volunteers from across the city, would organize clubs and classes in their spare time. Charity — caring for the sick and elderly, assisting in family crises — would be provided in a neighborly way but would not be the house's main task," Knight writes.

This was a new kind of venture that sought to avoid the attitude that others know what's best for the poor. It was a brave experiment in a city in which 78 percent of the population in 1889 was foreign-born or the children of immigrants.

Addams didn't stop with the settlement house. She took on workers' rights when she saw the conditions workers faced on the job. She took on public sanitation when she realized the rat-infested conditions immigrants lived in. She took on women's suffrage when she saw how little power women had in changing government. She took on the cause of peace when she was horrified that the United States went to war with Spain over Cuba. She took on civil rights after lynchings increased in the 1890s.

In fact, Addams fashioned herself into a one-woman reform machine, seemingly unable to look away from any issue that caught her attention. And that's one of the drawbacks of this biography. It's hard not to get bogged down in the multitude of organizations, platforms, causes and committees that Addams had a hand in. The woman was indefatigable; even on her travels, she always had edification more than pleasure in mind. After one trip to Egypt, she came home and wrote an essay about her experiences.

The one cause that brought her the most public condemnation was her peace work, especially during the fervent nationalistic period of World War I. Speaking invitations dried up, and Knight describes the time as "the loneliest of Addams's life." Even after the war, Addams tried to raise money to help the starving citizens of Germany, a cause that was as unpopular as her pacifism. Pundits called her "the most dangerous woman in America."

Ironically, Addams was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931 for her unwavering pacifism and many speeches promoting peace. She was the first U.S. woman to win the prize.

Her modern legacy continues in a positive light. Today, the Jane Addams Hull House Association, based on the historical Hull House, serves 60,000 people in Chicago, and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom has branches in 37 countries.