



Addams, Jane (1860-1935)

by Luca Prono

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Jane Addams.
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American reformer, social worker, founder of the Hull House Settlement in Chicago, and peace activist, Jane Addams received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931. Her involvement in same-sex relationships has consistently been hidden or minimized by official biographers.

As a cultural feminist, Addams argued that the dominant male values at the turn of the twentieth century contributed to such tragic circumstances as poverty, urban blight, and war. It was therefore, she believed, the duty of women, with their superior social and emotional awareness, to propose alternative models of living.

Addams's vision of a humane, communitarian society in which justice, freedom, mutual support, and individual achievement are the preeminent values is her enduring legacy.

Addams was born into a well-off and locally influential family in Cedarville, Illinois, on September 6, 1860. Her mother died when she was only two years old, and she suffered from tuberculosis of the spine. When she was eight, her father married a cultured but domineering woman who would attempt to instill traditional values into her independent-minded stepdaughter.

Addams completed college at the Rockford Female Seminary in 1880 and went on to study medicine briefly at the Philadelphia Women's College, when ill-health caused her to leave school.

During the 1880s, she traveled with Ellen Gates Starr, a former classmate at the Rockford Female Seminary, who was Addams's first deep emotional attachment. In England, the couple observed the British social reform movement's attempt to alleviate urban poverty.

Addams was especially intrigued by the settlement houses of London, centers found in slum areas that were occupied by social workers mostly university-educated young men--who provided services to the local community. She was impressed that in these settlement houses the poor were served without the condescension and paternalism that characterized traditional charitable enterprises.

Hull House

Back in the United States in 1889, Addams and Starr, inspired by what they had seen in England, founded Hull House, a settlement house located in Chicago's poverty-stricken 19th Ward, populated largely by European immigrants. The key to the success of Hull House, which eventually grew to encompass some 13 buildings, was that Addams and her colleagues listened to their clients and attempted to respond to what the clients perceived as their needs.

They established day care centers for children of working mothers, opened adult high schools, provided cooking and sewing classes, and helped mediate between their clients and local government officials.

By 1900, Hull House was established as a popular center of political, educational, and social activity. As a result, Addams became well-known as the inspiration for a nationwide settlement house movement.

Work in Hull House and other settlements gave Addams and middle-class women like her the opportunity to be both socially useful and independent, an opportunity that was denied the majority of women at the time.

Hull House, in particular, provided an outlet for the intellectual and practical abilities of the young women who became its directors. Without such an outlet the fate of these young women, Addams wrote in her autobiographical volume *Twenty Years at Hull-House* (1910), would be comparable to that of "the other great mass of destitute lives."

Addams published books about the effects of industrialization on immigrants and the working poor, as well as two books that chronicled life at Hull House.

Pacifism

Strongly influenced by the writings of Leo Tolstoy, Addams considered herself a pacifist and strongly opposed American intervention in World War I. She organized demonstrations against the war and spearheaded the formation of the Women's Peace Party in 1915. From 1919 until 1929, she served as president of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.

Addams's stand against the war, along with the publication of her controversial book *Peace and Bread in Time of War* (1922), seriously eroded her popularity in the United States. She was described as a "silly old maid," as "un-American," and as a "communist," especially when she defended immigrants during the Red Scare of 1919-20. However, her tireless activism for peace was rewarded in 1931 when she received the Nobel Prize.

Relationships

Addams is usually presented as an asexual American heroine who gave her life to the poor. Her biographers describe her as a woman who "remained largely untouched by the passionate currents that swirled around her," and as "a conventional lady with pearls." Yet, there is clear evidence that Addams actually had a passionate private life that was devoted not to men but to women.

She had at least two long-term same-sex relationships, which might best be described in the language of the day as "romantic friendships" or "Boston marriages": first with Ellen Starr, who persuaded Addams to found Hull House; and then with Mary Rozet Smith, a wealthy, college-educated young woman who worked at and helped support Hull House.

The latter relationship began in the early 1900s and lasted until Smith's death in 1934. Its intensity is detailed by the letters and poems that the two women wrote to each other.

Although Addams and Smith lived at a time when lesbian identity was still being shaped, they clearly understood themselves as forming a married couple. Addams wrote to Smith during a period of separation: "You must know, dear, how I long for you all the time, and especially during the last three weeks. There is reason in the habit of married folks keeping together."

Addams was honored for her work for world peace at the twentieth anniversary congress of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom in May 1935. Soon after the congress, on May 21, 1935, she died, aged 74. Her passing was mourned throughout the world, but especially by the poor of Chicago.

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About the Author

Luca Prono holds a Ph.D. in American Studies from the University of Nottingham, where he taught courses in American culture and Film Studies. He has published articles on Pier Vittorio Tondelli, Italian Neo-Realism, and American Radical Literature, as well as on contemporary representations of homosexuality in Italian films.