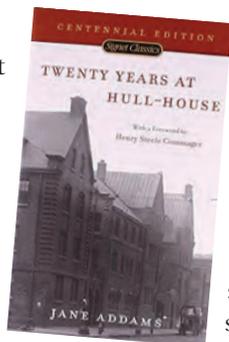


Jane Addams:

A great Illinoisan whose views should be remembered

By John Hallwas

In recent years, I have been speaking about, and encouraging people to read, some of our state's finest autobiographies, so they might relate more deeply to the Illinois experience. One of those books is Jane Addams' *Twenty Years at Hull House* (1910), which both records her early life and discusses the great settlement house that she opened in Chicago—130 years ago this month. An inspirational figure, she was once the most admired American woman, with her views widely reported and discussed, but today, few people know much about her. As her writings and speeches reveal, she was a great voice for social vision, humanitarian service, and world peace.



She was born on September 6, 1860, at Cedarville, near Freeport. Her mother died when she was two, but Jane was looked after by older sisters and later by a kindly stepmother. She idolized her father, a civic-minded mill owner, a state senator, and the wealthiest man in town. He had known and admired Lincoln, and partly for that reason, young Jane felt “the invigorating and clarifying power of Lincoln’s influence,” as she says in *Twenty Years at Hull House*.

She graduated from Rockford Seminary (soon to be a college) in 1881, and was committed to high ideals—especially service to the public—but she struggled with illness, depression, and lack of a specific purpose. Jane Addams endured a long identity crisis. She traveled abroad twice during the 1880s, and while in London she viewed life in the slums, attended lectures on social work, and visited Toynbee Hall (a settlement house). So, she decided to return home and start a similar facility in Chicago.

Working with a college friend, Ellen Starr, she sought support from religious and private sources and then

searched for a suitable location. She found a large but dilapidated home on South Halsted Street, where Italian, German, Polish, Russian, and Bohemian neighborhoods came together. In 1889 Hull House was surrounded by tenement buildings, factories, saloons, and alleys full of garbage. The cultured young woman had moved into a slum.

Addams had two goals in mind: she wanted to help those who were trapped in poverty, and she wanted to provide an outlet for the talent and energy of idealistic, educated people, especially young women. As she later said, she intended “to make social service . . . express the spirit of Christ” and “to interpret democracy in social terms.” So, her intentions reflected both the Social Gospel and the Progressive Movement, which would have their greatest impact after the turn of the century.

At first, Hull House was simply a cultural center. In an attempt to educate and uplift the underprivileged, it provided classes, lectures, receptions, and clubs, both for youngsters and adults. But Addams rapidly broadened her purpose. The poverty, filth, and sickness that engulfed local residents was more than she had anticipated. As she later recalled, “We were asked to wash the newborn babies, to prepare the dead for burial, to nurse the sick, and to ‘mind the children.’” So that’s what they did. As time went by, the Hull House staff started a day nursery, took in battered wives, cared for unwed mothers, helped people find legal aid, dispensed medicine, established residences for single working women, provided lunches for school children, assisted the elderly,



Jane Addams, about the time she attended Rockford Seminary.

and instructed mothers in nutrition.

Addams also spoke widely and effectively on such topics as “The Problems of Poverty,” “Charity and Social Justice,” and “The Objective Necessity of Social Settlements”—drawing public support for Hull House efforts while enlarging public awareness of struggling people.

Addams and her associates also campaigned for various labor and social causes. As she said in a 1910 speech about labor legislation in Illinois, for example, “a settlement is drawn into the labor issues of its city” because “the present industrial system thwarts our ethical demands, not only for social righteousness but for social order.” Of course, in the late nineteenth century, she and her associates “found many pathetic cases of child labor,” even some involving “incredibly small children,” so they campaigned for preventive legislation.

Among the many social problems that Addams spoke out against was prostitution. In a 1912 speech, for example, she showed great sympathy for young women who become involved in the sexual trade due to the need for money, often “to fulfill family obligations,” and she lamented “the demoralization of unwilling victims in order to make



Jane Addams as a child in Cedarville.

them commercially valuable.” She also called for a future in which “it will become impossible to sell the young and heedless into degradation.”

No wonder Addams became a renowned national leader in the field of social reform, and Hull House soon contained the most talented group of social activists to serve at one location in American history. There were, for example, Julia Lathrop, who helped to organize Chicago’s first Juvenile Court and the Immigrant’s Protective League—and later headed the United States Children’s Bureau—and Florence Kelly, who made Hull House a hotbed of labor agitation, as she organized unions, walked picket lines, and lobbied for child labor laws.

Under Addams’ leadership, Hull House continually expanded, until, by 1910, it encompassed thirteen buildings and had a staff of forty residents who served more than 2,000 people a day. It was a model for various other social agencies across the country. And Jane Addams became a national heroine, an American saint. She was honored from coast to coast as both a social reformer and a feminist leader. No woman in the country was more admired.

And then the Great War came. Addams spoke out vigorously against it, and she founded the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom in 1915—two years before America became involved in the European conflict. But her pacifism ran counter to the popular American view that the war was a righteous and glorious affair. Despite her idealism and social concern, expressed in many speeches, she began to draw widespread criticism. She later explained her ardent pacifism in a now obscure book titled *Peace and Bread in Time of War* (1922). Of course, many historians have since



Jane Addams reading to children at Hull House.

viewed World War I as an unnecessary episode that produced horrible consequences for millions of people.

Also, after the war and during the Red Scare, the hysterical public felt that all pacifists were radicals and communists bent on subversion. So, Addams was viewed by some as a dangerous figure and a traitor.

Nevertheless, the aging reformer spoke out courageously against anti-alien bigotry and continued to be a leader in the international peace movement. Moreover, she always linked her anti-war activism with her focus on the cause of humanity. As she said in a 1930 speech, peace is “not merely an absence of war but the nurture of human life,” and it must be sought “by men of all nations who are determined upon the abolition of degrading poverty . . . and ignorance.” So, social evils are all linked and must be replaced by human concern.

The controversial crusade of Jane Addams

was partially vindicated in 1931, when she became the first woman to win the Nobel Prize for Peace. She died four years later.

Fortunately, Jane Addams is not forgotten. Her wonderful impact on the lives of untold thousands of disadvantaged Chicagoans is mentioned in history books, and is conveyed in the Jane Addams Hull House Museum, at 800 South Halsted Street. But her view that humanitarian commitment is deeply connected with the ideals of democracy, her conviction that personal experience with the struggle of others helps us grow spiritually, and her belief that good social conditions for all create the foundation for world peace are just some of her great insights that are no longer recalled by most people but shouldn’t vanish from public consciousness. Especially in our current American era, when commitment to others across social class, ethnic, and national divisions has become a renewed public concern, her voice should be remembered. 

Jane Addams, as peace advocate around the time she founded the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom.

John Hallwas is the author or editor of thirty books related to Illinois history and literature, and he speaks widely on a variety of historical topics. A long-time member of the ISHS, he can be reached through his website: www.johnhallwas.jimdo.com.

