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# Citizen

*Jane Addams and the Struggle for Democracy*

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is an independent scholar whose articles on Jane Addams  
have appeared in the *Journal of Women's History* and *Gender and History*  
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## AFTERWORD : SCHOLARSHIP AND JANE ADDAMS

What many consider the most notable aspect of Jane Addams's life—that she worked not for the interests of her own class but, as it has been commonly put, “for the poor”—heightened her reputation in her own lifetime but has diminished it in ours. To a degree, this interesting shift in her public standing was simply a by-product of history. As American society lost its unexamined trust in white women of wealth and discerned the condescension implicit in their reform methods, it was inevitable that Addams would be transformed from “saint” to sinner. But the unthinking admiration with which she was treated in the decades immediately after her death in 1935 was unhelpful in any case. Addams deserved a closer analysis.

In the mid-1960s, she began to receive it. In essays and other forms of critical analysis, historians, literary critics, and others set aside the usual admiring framework to wrestle with the complicated issues, including those of class, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, raised by Addams's life, work, and writings.

For biography, however, the situation has been different. There has been a smattering of popular biographies of Addams, including one published by her nephew James Weber Linn in 1935 (and a steady flow of juvenile ones). At the same time, scholarly biographies, that is, works that use original research to achieve new interpretations of a life, have been as scarce as hen's teeth. Until 2004 only one, Allen F. Davis's 1973 work, had been published.<sup>1</sup> By the opening years of the twenty-first century, a new scholarly biography of Jane Addams was long overdue.

Addams began her public life in 1889, and by 1910 her activism on behalf of workers, immigrants, women, children, and world peace and her public presence of gentle, inclusive civic-mindedness, conveyed in her many lectures, magazine articles, and books, had earned her the respect and affection of a wide portion of the American public. Although her pacifist stance during World War I and her continued progressivism in the conservative years of the early 1920s undercut that reputation for a time, it was restored in the 1930s, particularly after she received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931. When she died in 1935, she was once more one of America's most admired women. As late as the centennial of her birth, in 1960, she was as

widely admired as Eleanor Roosevelt, with whom she was often compared.<sup>2</sup>

It was the centennial that brought her to historians' attention.<sup>3</sup> In 1960 the left-liberal historian Henry Steele Commager wrote an essay in the *Saturday Review* praising Addams's genius for administration and moral philosophy, and another left-liberal historian, Merle Curti, gave an endowed lecture titled "Jane Addams on Human Nature" at Swarthmore College. These essays soon received wider circulation. Commager's became a short foreword for a new Signet inexpensive paperback edition of *Twenty Years at Hull House*, and Curti's was later published in the *Journal of the History of Ideas*. Also in 1960, the up-and-coming historians Anne Firor Scott and Allen F. Davis, the latter a former student of Curti's, both wrote about Addams's dealings with a Chicago ward boss, one in *American Heritage* and one in a state history journal.<sup>4</sup> All of these pieces took Addams and her work at face value and were written in a tone of warm appreciation.

The fresh interest in Addams also coincided, however, with the emergence of a group of radical, or New Left, historians.<sup>5</sup> The question of the day soon became whether Addams was a radical. Not surprisingly, historians differed regarding the meaning of the term. In 1961 Staughton Lynd tentatively claimed that she gradually became one because of her increasing alienation from society. The following year Daniel Levine, in the essay "Jane Addams: Romantic Radical, 1889–1912,"<sup>6</sup> said she was a radical because of her vision of "an all pervasive welfare state" and her commitment to a "social ethic." Levine was the first to raise the important question of class bias. Although he did not doubt Addams's commitment to the ideal of "social unity," he argued that, unknown to herself, Addams at times "looked with condescension on her neighbors." In an essay that was otherwise overwhelmingly positive in its assessment of Addams, Levine gently sounded the first note of skepticism on a subject that had long needed examination.<sup>7</sup>

Feminism was part of the radical agenda emerging in the early sixties, and it also had an influence on Addams scholarship. In 1963, Anne Firor Scott was the first to raise the important subject of gender in her introductory essay for a new edition of Addams's first book, *Democracy and Social Ethics*. In addition to stressing Addams's contributions as an intellectual, she analyzed Addams's ideas about women and briefly explored her relations with women and men. The following year, Jill Ker Conway, a young graduate student in history at Harvard University, took the gender theme in a different direction. In her essay "Jane Addams: American Heroine," Conway set forth two original theses. The first was that Addams's tremendous



fame was the result of her determination to conform her personality to the American definition of “feminine excellence,” by which Conway meant “activism and participation in a masculine world” and a determination to “redeem [that world] from the baser masculine passions.” The second was that from childhood Addams had possessed an “extreme drive to power.”<sup>8</sup> The latter point was a startling one to make about a woman whose modesty and selflessness were much celebrated.

Meanwhile, radical historians remained interested in Addams’s radicalness. One was Christopher Lasch, Henry Steele Commager’s son-in-law. Elaborating, perhaps, on arguments begun at the dining room table, Lasch entered the debate with a probing biographical essay published in 1965 in his *New Radicalism in America*. He called attention to the previously uncritical treatment the reformer had received at the hands of friends and essayists. “Her admirers,” he wrote, without mentioning names, “fabricated . . . their own version of her life, pious and sentimental.” Declaring Addams both an intellectual and a radical (which he defined as a person interested in “the reform of education, culture and sexual relations”), he also addressed the issue of class, writing, “[W]hat made the sons and daughters of the middle class so suddenly conscious of conditions they had previously ignored[?]”<sup>9</sup> The answer, he thought, was their desire to rebel against their class and, as in Addams’s case, to reject their class’s devotion to “the aesthetic principle.” Grasping the complex nettle of gender in a second essay, “Woman as Alien,” he argued provocatively that the “feminist impulse” was an aspect of that same class revolt. Somewhat contradictorily, he also posited that “feminists” such as Addams were “obsessed” with the idea that a woman who “pursued a masculine ideal . . . had betrayed her own femininity.”<sup>10</sup>

Fresh insights about Addams were now plentiful, but there was still only one biography of her, the one by her nephew Weber Linn. The late 1960s, however, saw the publication of two appreciative assessments of her reform ideas wrapped in semibiographical packages. In 1965 John C. Farrell completed his dissertation, which was published two years later as *Beloved Lady: A History of Jane Addams’s Ideas on Reform and Peace*. In 1971 Daniel Levine published his *Jane Addams and the Liberal Tradition*, which dealt mainly with Addams’s involvement with progressive reforms and politics after 1900. Farrell did not address the question of whether Jane Addams was a radical, but Levine did. She was a radical, he argued, because she was impatient for change.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, in the early 1970s, the historian Allen F. Davis took up the biographical task. Denying that Addams was a “radical” without defining what he meant by the term, he built in other ways on all that had gone before, particularly on Conway’s and Lasch’s intriguing essays, as well as his own work on the history of settlement house leaders and progressive reform.<sup>12</sup> In 1973 he published the first scholarly biography of Addams, *American Heroine: The Life and Legend of Jane Addams*.<sup>13</sup>

Of necessity, his research was groundbreaking. He was the first to dig deep into the Jane Addams papers, which were scattered widely across the country. Among other things, he fully documented the origins of her “saintly reputation” in the early newspaper coverage Addams and Hull House received. Indeed, it was this material, as well as the copious words of praise her friends wrote about her in later years, that persuaded Davis to argue his main original thesis: Addams had gained fame not as a by-product of her pursuit of personal excellence and power, as Conway had said, but because she had sought the thing itself. His disapproval of what he saw as her desire and ability to manipulate her public reputation to feed her overweening ego became the underlying theme of the book.

Anne Firor Scott, reviewing Davis’s book, thought Davis had badly misunderstood Addams. She questioned his theory that, in Scott’s words, Addams “carefully nurtured an inaccurate view of herself as ‘sage and priestess,’ as a self-sacrificing leader.” Scott believed that Addams deeply desired to be good and, although she did not disagree that Addams also wanted to be admired, she noted that she took unpopular stands when her beliefs demanded it.<sup>14</sup> Rosemarie Redlich Scherman, a graduate student at the City University of New York who was working on a dissertation on Addams in 1973, agreed, noting in another book review that in his effort to “shatter Addams’s self-sacrificing image,” Davis “loses sight” of two of the most important aspects of Addams: her “significance as a social thinker and the middle-class feminism that turned her into a leading social activist.” These critiques had little effect. For three decades, Davis’s book would stand as the definitive interpretation of Jane Addams. And for three decades, no new scholarly biography of Addams would be written.<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile, however, scholarship in the fields of women’s history, settlement history, immigrant history, ethnic history, psychohistory, labor history, the history of rhetoric, social history, the history of sociology, the history of education, reform history, political science, and urban history—all fields directly relevant to Addams’s life and work—made striking progress,



and scholarship concerning Addams herself reflected this.<sup>16</sup> The issues first raised by Curti, Lynd, Levine, Scott, Conway, and Lasch were further examined in various scholarly articles, and new issues regarding Addams's possible racism, ethnic prejudice, and lesbianism were also raised.<sup>17</sup>

Addams's ideas were also explored. Over the years, scholars in the fields of sociology, education, and, more recently, political science, religion, and philosophy have treated them in depth.<sup>18</sup> Jean Bethke Elshtain recently edited a selection of Addams's writings and published a study that examines some of the dominant ideas in several of Addams's books in a partially biographical context. The philosophers Marilyn Fischer and Judy Whipps have edited a masterly four-volume collection of Addams's writings on peace.<sup>19</sup> The indefatigable editor of Addams's papers, Mary Lynn McCree Bryan, has published them on microfilm, and has begun to publish a selection of the papers in book form.<sup>20</sup> The University of Illinois Press has reissued six of Addams's books.<sup>21</sup>

The publication of two scholarly biographies of Addams, Victoria Brown's *The Education of Jane Addams* (2004) and the present work, carry this renaissance of interest in Addams further. Both books cover the first four decades of her life, during which time she first emerged as a social reformer on the national stage. (This book concludes in 1899; Brown's study takes the story to 1895.) Brown's main argument is that in the decade after her graduation from Rockford Female Seminary in 1881, Addams "underwent" a "real ideological conversion . . . from Carlyle's ethic of heroic stewardship to an ethic of democratic humanitarianism."<sup>22</sup> She also highlights Addams's role as a mediator in the complicated dynamics of the Addams-Haldeman family. My book traces a more gradual process of change and examines the influences that lay behind it, particularly those of books, friendships, and experiences. I believe that it was only toward the end of the 1890s that she acquired the reform agenda and understanding of her own humanity that are now familiar to us all.

There are several reasons for doing a half-life. Perhaps the most compelling is the need to explore answers to the question that Lasch, Conway, and Davis were among the first to raise: Why did Addams, despite her birthright of privilege, become a reformer? Only a close examination of her life before Hull House and of her early years there can supply the answers. Another question is how her early experiences at Hull House shaped her moral philosophy and her reform theories, methods, and agenda. The field of Addams scholarship requires more clarity regarding this subject.

The early and later Addams are often blurred. Scholars have often quoted Addams's post-1900 writings, particularly her memoir, *Twenty Years at Hull House* (1910), to document her views in the 1890s, creating a misleading impression that she held mature theories about democracy and social ethics from the settlement's beginnings. I have made a particular effort in this book to restrict myself to contemporary sources as much as possible and to track shifts in her perspective, particularly as reflected in her speeches, carefully over time.

To understand Addams's early development as a citizen I have also relied on the rich contributions of scholarship of the past thirty years. The relevant subfields of social history—urban, labor, reform, education, cultural, immigrant, settlement, black, and gender—were modest in size in the 1960s; now they dominate the scholarly landscape. Intellectual history has also thrived. Three strands of studies have proved particularly relevant: those on ideas about women and culture,<sup>23</sup> those on American democracy beyond the borders of party, especially regarding women's engagement,<sup>24</sup> and those on the political activism of working-class people of both genders and its links to culture.<sup>25</sup>

One of the contributions of feminism, be it first- or second-wave, has been to take the ideas of women and their development as thinkers seriously. Scholars have long known that Addams was a voracious reader from childhood on; in this biography I connect her reading to her life choices and the early development of her thinking about society. Placed in this context, her decision to start a settlement house can for the first time be understood as marking an important intellectual breakthrough for her. In addition, the writing she did throughout the 1890s, when analyzed with strict respect for their chronology, the books she was reading, and the chronology of events, including her friendship with the philosopher John Dewey, tracks further fascinating developments in her thinking. In this light, her increasing doubts about her inherited ideology of individualism and her strengthening commitment to the ideas of social Christianity and its reform method of cooperation emerge as key to understanding her conscious transformation into a new kind of citizen.

Ideas about democracy and experiences in politics interweave both in life and in biography. Because Addams could not vote or run for office as a young woman, her rising desire to shape public policy had to find other outlets. She discovered them under the tutelage of female and male union organizers, politically active women's organizations in Chicago such as the



Illinois Woman's Alliance and the Chicago Woman's Club, her savvy friend Florence Kelley, and the grassroots Civic Federation of Chicago. The story of how these friendships and experiences prompted her to revise her understanding of the meaning of democracy and of politics has never before been adequately told.

More broadly, this book for the first time places Addams firmly in her times. If one breaks down Addams's civic contributions through the year 1899, they divide into three categories: her role as co-founder and head of Hull House, her role as a leader of reform, and her role as a public intellectual. In all these roles, scholars have tended to treat her ideas as *sui generis*, that is, they are not sufficiently compared to those of other settlement leaders, other leaders of reform, including union leaders, and other public intellectuals. One contribution of this work, I hope, is to situate her thoroughly in the thinking and events of her own period. For example, Addams's close work with labor unions in the 1890s can be put into proper context for the first time thanks to the excellent new work of labor historians.<sup>26</sup> When her interest in voluntary arbitration and the workers' reform agenda are understood in relation to the history of trade unionism in Chicago and its impressive record of political action, Addams's contribution emerges as far more cooperative than groundbreaking. Men and women workers, it now becomes clear, were her teachers in ways that we have not previously appreciated. This and other efforts to contextualize make it possible to see what she learned from others and what she contributed herself. These insights, I hope, will contribute to a deepened understanding of the progressive era when it was first emerging, before 1900, in the cities and the states.<sup>27</sup>

*Citizen* is intended to show how Jane Addams was born to one life and chose another and how she was transformed by that choice. Her self-expectations were strongly shaped by her femaleness and her upper-middle-class consciousness and status, yet she found a way to break with resulting social pressures even as she partly conformed to them. Her emerging feminism, though not fully robust in 1899, was one result. Her increased willingness to examine and selectively reject the dominant beliefs of her class was another. Her deepening humanity was a third.

Her story, compelling in itself, fascinates further because it intertwines with crucial social developments in nineteenth-century American society. In her first four decades, she went from a life of rural agriculturalism to urban industrialism, from accepting a narrow definition of "American" as



native-born or northern European to embracing a broad definition that included all races, ethnicities, and nationalities, from a belief in an elite practice of democracy to a belief in a more inclusive one, from the assumption that women without the vote were excluded from shaping public policy to an understanding that voteless women could be deeply engaged, and from a belief in an ethic of individualistic benevolence to a belief in an ethic of cooperative justice. The story of Addams's early life reveals how democracy as an idea and as practice reshaped her ambition and gave her a new understanding of herself as a citizen.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Louise (Lucy) W. Knight, an independent scholar, has worked on this book for two decades. She first became interested in Jane Addams in college after reading Addams's memoir *Twenty Years at Hull House*. Determined to understand her better, she began by investigating the early years of the settlement movement and Addams's place in it. Along the way she published articles on Addams's management style, her leadership of the settlement house movement, her views on the responsibilities of philanthropy, her famous speech on the Pullman Strike, and her college education in the skills of oratory. While working on the book, Knight was also fundraising for Duke University, Wheaton College in Massachusetts, and a Boston settlement house, United South End Settlements. Earlier in her career she covered federal education policy and politics as a journalist in Washington, D.C. A resident of Evanston, Illinois, she currently consults on management and planning for foundations and nonprofit organizations and teaches a course in the history of public persuasion in the Communication Studies Department of the School of Communication at Northwestern University.

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