

American Heroine: Life and Legend of Jane Addams

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In the 1930s, a group of schoolgirls went to the Henry Street Settlement in New York City to interview Lillian Wald, explaining that their teacher had assigned them to "do" her. Wald found out that the girls had "done" Jane Addams the year before, and she asked if they had ever seen Miss Addams. "Oh sure," one of them replied. "We saw her in 'Peter Pan.'" Such, according to Allen F. Davis, is the price of fame—public figures are never seen as their true selves. *American Heroine*, his biography of Jane Addams, deals with her changing and distorted public image over the course of a forty-five year career.

Davis maintains that the public thought of Addams as a saintly (Protestant) Madonna; a shining example of moral courage, forthrightness, self-sacrifice, and love of humanity; the essence of true womanhood (although for a fifteen year hiatus, 1915-1930, people called her a traitor and Bolshevik because of her pacifism and concern for civil liberties.)

He further claims that she herself carefully nurtured and protected this "saintly" reputation, thus contributing to a major distortion of her significance. Addams was not at all a spiritual, self-sacrificing "lady," but a shrewd, capable, aggressive businesswoman and propagandist. Rather than adhering to well-defined principles, she functioned primarily as a conciliator, a compromiser, and an administrator. Instead of being a disinterested, selfless public servant, she acted from a need for adulation and affection.

This new biography of Jane Addams makes an important contribution to the history of the social justice movement and Progressivism in the early 20th century. Davis uses Addams' voluminous correspondence, the papers of her correspondents, contemporary newspapers (especially her clippings), and the new writings on women's history and education to give us the first complete and detailed account of her life. (The picture of her college days at Rockford Seminary is particularly interesting.) In the end, though, Davis' own evidence does not support the contention that Addams and her public conspired to deceive us about her.

Historians often need to penetrate "images" to understand the real persons beneath, yet they sometimes downplay the importance of the myth-making process itself. The public creates heroes and heroines to serve socio-psychological needs which, if explored, tell us a great deal about the period. In Jane Addams' case, Davis makes only one comment as to why the public worshipped her: She soothed the guilt of people in her own class by working to alleviate poverty and suffering. There was much more involved, however, in the public's creation of "Saint Jane." Other philanthropists, other champions of the poor and needy, even other settlement workers and reformers worked as hard and wrote as widely as she did. Why Jane Addams as saint? Why weren't those schoolgirls "doing" Florence Kelley? Grace Abbott? Alice Hamilton?

The answer to Addams' popularity lies in her social philosophy. For her the conflicts of the late nineteenth century resolved themselves into one question: What could be done for the large numbers of the lost and alienated in contemporary society? How could people help the confused and estranged children of immigrants, disabled workingmen, those living in neighborhoods neglected by the city, youth with no education or place for wholesome recreation, overworked mothers forced to be breadwinners, workers with obsolete job skills or none at all? Unlike philanthropists, radicals, or her fellow reformers, she did not try to solve those problems by giving her money away, or through promoting sweeping socio-economic changes, or with violent social revolution.

Jane Addams believed that democracy meant associated living; warring groups in society must know and understand each other in order to work out mutually agreeable and beneficial solutions

to social problems. She provided a place (Hull House) and a presence (her own) which facilitated such discussion. She attempted, quite successfully, to draw together different classes of women—the Louise Bowens worked with the Mary Kenny O'Sullivans. Yet businessmen and male labor leaders also met and talked at Hull House. She joined civic organizations and women's clubs, encouraging them to set up industrial committees, discuss social evils, and encourage dialogue with members of the working classes. This knack for helping people work together impressed and relieved a public terrified by the prospect of violent social upheaval. In an era of partisanship and class conflict, her name lent an aura of community, justice, and calm to any cause. In helping the lion and the lamb learn to live together, Jane Addams earned her "sainthood."

Addams' image suffered in the years 1915-1930, as Davis rightly notes. But the causes involved more than the public's disdain for her highly publicized pacifism during World War I. For the public had actually begun to show impatience with Progressive social reform before 1914. Many of the attacks on Addams after 1915 came from a general weariness with reform and the spirit of slow, careful negotiation and compromise which she represented. The war required quick decisions, instant acceptance of authority, unquestioning loyalty—the antitheses of Jane Addams' method of solving human problems. She never believed in the "bad guy" as a group, whether German or communist. Instead she confined her anger to individuals who betrayed the public trust.

Although he does not fully explore the making of "Saint Jane," Davis' analysis of her changing public image is convincing. But he is on much shakier ground when he accuses her of complicity, charging that she contrived to have people think of her as a saint, with a religious cause; she posed as a traditional woman, though acting very differently; she failed to take firm moral stands; and, finally, that she did all this to satisfy an insatiable need for adulation and affection. In the introduction to *American Heroine*, Davis says that he concentrated on Addams' correspondence and clippings rather than her books, because "she was more important as propagandist and publicist than as an original thinker." This statement, correct in assessing the nature of her influence on society, leads him to understate the extent of her self-consciousness. He thus neglects a large body of evidence showing that Jane Addams presented herself honestly and critically to the public.

For example, Davis complains that in *Twenty Years at Hull House*, the first volume of her autobiography, Addams neglected the importance of her father's influence, her early religious experiences, her college days, her illnesses and her social position in determining her future life. Wishing the public to see her as a mystical, religious figure, she wrote of a "conversion" experience in Spain. During a bullfight, becoming suddenly aware of the contrast between her life and the poverty around her, she decided to live among the poor.

But Davis' reading of her book seems sketchy. First, far from ignoring her father's meaning in her life, Addams devoted the entire first chapter to him. The young girl tried very hard to emulate her father's integrity, ideals, and miller's thumb. She barely mentioned Mary Addams Linn, the sister who brought her up, or her stepmother Anna Haldeman Addams. Jane Addams realized and stated plainly that the world and deeds of men had made the deepest and earliest impressions on her. Second, her Rockford chapter spoke of the missionary fervor at the seminary, and the girls' determination to do heroic things. Yet she resisted all attempts, some of them very determined, to pull her into the religious life. Third, though "The Snare of Preparation," a very moving chapter, glossed over her illnesses following her father's death and her brief attendance at medical school, she did make clear her depression and need for something to do. And fourth, Davis accuses Addams of intentionally falsifying *Twenty Years* by ignoring how much she enjoyed her trips to Europe, as attested by the many letters she wrote at the time. She didn't cry over poverty in the Old World, he says, but simply had a good time. Addams may indeed have liked travelling, but she also went on in these letters to express boredom and disgust with the passive life of travel and cultural spectatorship. Moreover, her famous essay, "The Subjective Necessity for Social Settlements," argued with remarkable candor that careers in social work usually developed from the internal needs of reformers, not the objective realities of poverty and misery. Finally, the

chapters on Tolstoy, and comments scattered throughout the book, demonstrate that Addams did not portray herself as a saint. She disapproved of handing out money and gifts to the poor, and rejected the Tolstoyan creed of living simply, though she admired him very much. She used her best silver at Hull House; art, music, books—all were important in the daily life of the settlement. Addams wanted the poor to live and appreciate life as she did. She wanted to lift them to her level of cultural sensitivity, and not merely accommodate, in saintlike fashion, to theirs.

What of the charge that Jane Addams wanted people to see her as a "lady?" Here Davis is describing a conflict that she shared with her society—but it was an honest confusion, with no attempt to distort. Many of America's first generation of college women could not decide how to use their education; marriage and a career seemed mutually exclusive. Some tried "men's" careers, but did not succeed—partly because of specific proscriptions (like those which barred Florence Kelley from the University of Pennsylvania's law school), and partly because of more diffuse pressures emphasizing that careers were not for women. Social work represented a safe, middle ground. The Hull House residents worked mostly with women and children. They wrote about the bad effects of industrialization, urbanization, and immigration on family life. Some overcame their conflicts and moved into professional careers: Julia Lathrop and Grace Abbott served as state and federal officials; Edith Abbott, Sophonisba Breckinridge, and Alice Hamilton taught at universities. But Jane Addams remained a "gifted amateur." She believed, wrote, and often said that women had special gifts—intuition, wisdom, patience, tact, and the healing touch. She used all these in her work, and probably did not realize that she needed her business and political sense as often. If she deceived anyone, it was herself.

It doubtless reassured the public to see educated women worrying about children and family life—not really stepping out of the "feminine" sphere. Yet Jane Addams did no disservice to feminism. She urged housewives and society matrons to serve on school boards, committees to draft social legislation, clubs. She told them that it no longer sufficed to raise their own children properly; in a troubled society, they must help other children who came from families where there was no security.

Davis calls her a compromiser, an equivocator arousing the fury of more committed types like Margaret Haley (Chicago Teachers' Federation) and Rosika Schwimmer of the women's international peace movement. To an extent, he is right. Addams did not believe in conflict when it destroyed the unity of the community. She opposed class struggle. She supported the trade union movement because she approved of workingmen banding together to help each other, but she urged them to advance the cause of the whole society. What he forgets is that Jane Addams took many unpopular and lonely stands during her public life, for which she was villified even at the height of her "sainthood." Mentioning the incidents, Davis seems unaware that they negate his thesis.

Examples abound. Those committed to a specific political or economic ideology often fought her. The middle and upper classes sometimes felt Hull House ought to be more religious, and less open to radicals and anarchists. Labor found it suspicious that Addams sought money and involvement from the wealthy and socially prominent. When President McKinley was assassinated, her defense of those arrested and incarcerated without due process brought her great criticism. Even in the 1920s, at the height of the Red Scare, she spoke for civil liberties. Most importantly, she opposed World War I. From the time war broke out in Europe until the United States entered, Jane Addams worked vigorously for peace. Her coworkers, a mercurial and difficult group, gave her much anxiety by quarreling among themselves. She attacked "mindless" patriotism that drove men into battle under the influence of drugs and liquor; probably nothing ever brought her as much criticism. She disapproved of the Ford Peace Ship, and did not sail on it, yet refused to condemn it because it just might have an effect in Europe. The press criticized her for her "support" of the plan; her peace movement colleagues for her "disapproval." When Congress declared war, many of her friends in the social settlement movement and peace organizations dropped their antimilitarism for the duration. Jane Addams forfeited popular respect

and the honors and titles ordinarily hers to continue her pacifist stand. She used her remaining influence to speak in favor of food relief programs for Europe.

Did Jane Addams crave adulation—wanting, above all, to be loved and admired? Davis says she did—she kept a file of her press clippings and functioned best with a loving, uncritical disciple—first Ellen Gates Starr, and then Mary Rozet Smith. Yet Davis admits she kept scurrilous and obscene clippings as well as laudatory ones. For every Mary Rozet Smith who attended her, there was a Louise Bowen, an Edith Abbott, a Graham Taylor—strong-willed, opinionated people who disagreed with her at times, yet remained her lifelong friends. Florence Kelley, a tough, domineering woman, went to peace conferences in Europe to "black J. A.'s boots and carry her bags."

One wonders, finally, why the fuss? The myth of Jane Addams, saint, was never universally held, nor is its distorting effect so serious. When one knows her more clearly, she becomes far more interesting and admirable. Complex and human, loving this world too much to be a saint, she truly was a heroine, providing creative and compassionate solutions for her own and society's problems.