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# Jane Addams: Spirit in Action By Louise W. Knight

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*Jane Addams: Spirit in Action.* By Louise W. Knight. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2010; pp xi + 334. \$28.95 cloth.

**P**rogressive Era reformer Jane Addams is recalled best as synonymous with the U.S. settlement house movement, having cofounded the nation's first and largest settlement house, Hull House in Chicago in 1889. President Barack Obama, himself a proud former community organizer in the City with Big Shoulders, points to Addams as inspiring the engaged, immediate grassroots approach to social transformation he heralded as a chief bona fide in his presidential bid. But Addams's boundless reforming spirit led to a list of nearly Herculean career accomplishments in controversial campaigns for free speech, peace, civil rights for women and racial and ethnic minorities, and on behalf of workers, including child laborers. Addams was the first American woman (and second globally) to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, and cofounded the NAACP, the ACLU, the first national women's trade union organization of the twentieth century, and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, which she led as its first President. Vice President of the premier woman's suffrage organization (NAWSA), she also served as a board member of myriad influential socially progressive groups. Courted for support by Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, with whom she sometimes openly sparred ideologically, Addams herself occasionally was hoisted as a presidential prospect despite being denied, as a female, the right to vote. Honors bestowed on her far-reaching lifework

continue: in 2006, ten prominent historians placed her among the 100 most influential figures in U.S. history.

The common temptation to perceive greatness as imprinted at birth, however, is skillfully disabused in Louise Knight's meticulous, insightful, and often poignant biography, *Jane Addams: Spirit in Action*, which traces the complicated odyssey of a well-heeled idealist—initially conflicted by her material privilege, disappointed by gender-codes confining her ambitions, and haunted by familial ghosts and duties—into the pantheon of U.S. political idols. Of particular interest to rhetorical scholars, Knight weaves into Addams's arresting tale her early baptism into public speaking, writings that shaped her expression in public forums, rhetorical strategies she employed, and platform failures as well as successes. A prolific speaker, Addams penned ten books despite an exhausting schedule and the pressures of persistent ill health and complex familial duties. Knight's biography is a tour de force and merits space on the shelves of anyone, scholar and citizen alike, interested in mining national progress and identity through tales of individuals who devoted their lives to charting a new national course.

Chapter 1, "The Dreamer," recounts significant early imprints on Addams, forming the admixture of trepidation and confidence that marked the first three decades of her life. The daughter of the township's wealthiest industrialist, who also was a state legislator with strong views on moral duty, Addams lost her mother and sister when she was two and six years old, respectively; at four, she suffered spinal tuberculosis that left her self-conscious of her crooked back; and at eight, she experienced a seismic familial shift with her father's remarriage to a stern and demanding widowed mother whose constant fury nurtured Jane's early tendency to conflict avoidance. Forbidden to attend Smith College, she nonetheless was exposed to texts by and about women at Rockford Theological Seminary, including work by Margaret Fuller. Following exposure to Cicero and others, she inaugurated the seminary's intramural public speaking event and competed as the first woman in the Illinois intercollegiate oratorical contest, placing fifth behind second-place winner, William Jennings Bryan.

Chapter 2, "Freedom Seeker," reveals ways material privilege fails to vaccinate against common human struggles. Following the assassination of President Garfield by a deranged family friend and her brother Weber's institutionalization for paranoid schizophrenia, her father died during a vacation he had taken to ameliorate stress. Overwhelmed by pressing familial duties, including the care of her hostile, dependent stepmother, Jane suffered

a nervous collapse that was diagnosed as moral failure—a diagnosis that she internalized. A European jaunt to heal exposed the fragile Jane to transformative experiences via the writings of Tolstoy and Mills and the sights of London slums, birthing her plan for a U.S. settlement house.

Chapter 3, “Activist,” is perhaps Knight’s richest chapter, recording the intricacies for Hull House’s design, Addams’s depletion of her inheritance to finance the endeavor, her gradual immersion into labor union politics and woman’s suffrage, and her discovery of her own views and voice, including her philosophical conversion from ingrained faith in genteel benevolence as social remedy to embracing gloves-off savvy political activism to secure her father’s fabled “inferiors” their own agency. Conceived in the 1890s when Chicago unemployment rose to a stunning 40 percent, Hull House boldly offered an unprecedented co-ed experience, a health clinic, kindergarten, daycare, evening educational programs, and the like. Strongly influenced by outspoken political activist and Hull House resident, Florence Kelley, and the devastating Pullman Strike, Addams joined the Civic Federation, a conglomerate of industrialists, labor officials, and community activists. Her refusal to take a side on the strike disappointed labor unions but gave her a bird’s eye exposure to political corruption, prompting her to forego patronizing charity in favor of securing workers’ own economic power. Such experiences likewise triggered her passionate conversion to women’s rights, especially to securing the vote. Although Addams sometimes publicly argued that women have not abused power because they had little, at other times she strategically advanced the shop-worn expediency argument: “Women needed the vote to develop as citizens and fulfill their ‘civic duties’” (100).

Chapter 4, “Political Ethicist,” details her beginnings as a peace activist, her forays into penning her evolving moral philosophy, her troublesome antilynching speech predicated on faulty assumptions of black rapists, her controversial advocacy of due process for the assassin of President McKinley, her immersion into child labor reforms, and the origins of her intimate relationship with Mary Rozert Smith, with whom she shared a devoted decades-long relationship equivalent to marriage. Knight rightly expends numerous pages analyzing Addams’s wrong-headed stumble in her lone antilynching speech but perhaps too generously suggests her failure was linked to lack of personal experience. Knight is far stronger when analyzing Addams’s book, *Newer Ideals*, (hated by Roosevelt) critiquing the book’s “militarism” and lack of linear logic even as she judges that it “was a cogent, conceptually bold book” and “the most intellectually ambitious book she

would ever write" (136). Here and elsewhere, Knight points to the prophetic ethos of a privileged woman who aligned with immigrants, workers, African Americans, and other marginalized groups when demonized "otherness" threatened to unravel fundamental national principles.

Chapter 5, "Politician," explores further Addams's immersion into labor politics and her tempestuous relationship with Roosevelt and a Progressive Party, which played chess in its platform with woman's suffrage, peace, and the rights of African Americans. She viewed as a "colossal moral failure" (175) her party's rejection of a civil rights plank and refusal to seat African Americans, but she did not resign as a delegate, which Knight attributes to her commitment to the woman's suffrage plank. These pages especially engage the tensions and complex decisions guiding Addams's navigation of political pragmatism and her moral beliefs.

Chapter 6, "Dissenter," chronicles her concomitant rise internationally as a spokesperson for world peace and diplomacy, and her precipitous fall from grace in the United States for her principled opposition to World War I. Her tireless work for social justice eventually rehabilitated her public ethos, but the rabid criticism of her as unpatriotic left enduring psychic scars.

The final chapter, "Ambassador," further treats Addams's far-reaching international work, including her ambivalence about the League of Nations, her free speech activities surrounding the infamous Palmer Raids, Eleanor Roosevelt's assuming the mantle of human rights advocate at the United Nations, and Addams's death at 74 following decades of escalating chronic illness, which prevented her from receiving her Nobel Prize in person. Particularly poignant is the treatment of Addams's awareness of growing cultural obsession with sexual relationships and the risk thus posed by her decades-long bond with Smith, even as the degree of their intimacy remained captive to speculation. Knight writes, "Jane would have said perhaps the important thing was not where she and Mary loved sexually but that they loved" (263).

Knight's biography is a well-written, well-researched, inspiring, incisive, and reflective book, published on the 150th anniversary of the birth of a woman who is remembered as a larger-than-life figure, but who herself suffered the disappointments, insecurities, and travails of the "ordinary" folks to whom she dedicated her fortune and life's energy to empowering. *Jane Addams: Spirit in Action* is worth every penny of its sticker price and more.