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Review of Literature

HULL HOUSE WAS FOUNDED ON the near west side of Chicago in 1889 and became the most famous social settlement house in the United States, if not the entire world. Only twenty years after opening, it mushroomed from a second-floor rental space in an old dilapidated house to a well-planned, multi-purpose building complex encompassing a city block.¹ By its very size, Hull House stood apart from its community.²

Thousands of people—neighbors as they were called in settlement lingo—passed through its doors on a weekly basis to participate in a myriad of social, educational, and political activities.³ These activities ranged from the mundane to the radical. There were clubs for girls, boys, women, and men; classes on art, music, literature, drama, and philosophy; lectures on socialism, Christianity, and suffrage; basketball games in the gymnasium, which also housed public bath facilities; groups organizing picnics and groups picketing unfair labor practices; clinics caring for baby health and teaching nutrition to young mothers; and meetings on improving sanitation and garbage

collection. Hull House even had a coffee shop that provided reasonably priced hot lunches for working people, as well as breakfast and dinner for its staff.

Its activities intersected with and impacted the lives of many neighborhood people.⁴ They were not the only ones, however, attracted to Hull House. A “salon in the slum” is how one historian described the magnetism of Hull House.⁵ As a salon in the slum, Hull House became the place for budding reformers, esoteric intellectuals, foreign princes, and idealistic journalists to gather. At the least, such people would visit, have dinner, and engage in stimulating conversation. British journalist William Stead spent his evenings relaxing and talking with the folks at the house while researching his book, *If Christ Came to Chicago*.⁶

The regular work of Hull House relied on people other than visiting dignitaries and obscure revolutionaries. In order to maintain its multi-faceted programs, Hull House needed workers and leaders. People from the middle- and upper-middle classes filled these roles. These people, both women and men, led the clubs and classes, planned the picnics and parties, protested the neglect and corruption of government or business, and managed the calendars and balanced the budgets of this growing institution.

Many of the people who volunteered their time and energy did so on a sporadic or temporary basis. As a result, they remain as anonymous to us as the thousands of neighbors who used the Hull House facilities. At most, their involvement may be recorded by their unidentified presence in a black and white snapshot or by a brief reference in a *Hull-House Bulletin*.⁷

Other workers were involved in Hull House over longer periods of time, as popular club leaders or wealthy patrons. Louise deKoven Bowen, for example, who lived most of her life in a mansion on Astor Street in a wealthy section of Chicago, was present at Hull House almost daily for more than forty years.⁸ She served in a number of different roles, as Woman’s Club President, Hull House Trustee, and Treasurer. She was also benefactor *extraordinaire*, providing the funds to build Bowen Hall (which housed the Boy’s Club) and donating seventy-two acres of land in Waukegan, a community forty miles north of

Chicago on Lake Michigan, to establish a Hull House Country Club in memory of her late husband.⁹

The social settlement concept, however, centered on the role of resident. Residents were workers who lived at the house (or in its compound). They usually paid their own room and board through outside work and volunteered their time and skills to the life of the house. The presence of residents made social settlements different from other organizations in the late nineteenth century, such as mission agencies or institutional churches.¹⁰ Indeed, the idea of individuals moving into a neighborhood—settling in as neighbors—gave the movement its very name. The settlement movement was a conscious attempt of middle- and upper-middle-class folks to cross boundaries of class and ethnicity, and to connect with others usually identified as different from themselves on a human, everyday basis.

Hull House has been the focus of many studies through the years. Most of these studies originated from within the broad disciplines of history and sociology. As a way to summarize the multitudinous research on Hull House, I have categorized the materials into four parts: (1) those works focusing on specific people, namely, on Jane Addams or one of the other Hull House workers; (2) those studies analyzing the involvement of women in the social settlement movement, and the variables of home, profession, and ideals of Victorian womanhood; (3) those works alluding to or evaluating the religious underpinnings of settlement workers; and (4) the most contemporary critiques of Hull House which center on issues of race and class.

Addams and Cohorts

In its early decades, Hull House comprised an amazing group of residents. Long-term residents included not only co-founders Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr, but also Mary Keyser, Julia Lathrop, Florence Kelley, Alzina Stevens, and Alice Hamilton. Many books and articles have been written about Jane Addams, some of which are solid academic works and others which reflect an idealized, mythical, and saintly Addams.¹¹

Historian Jill Conway suggested that Addams came to be seen as a sage or prophetess and is remembered and studied

because she epitomized the nineteenth-century “stereotype of the female temperament.”¹² Conway said women such as Addams were celebrated and uplifted because their wisdom was designated as coming from innate femininity. The role of sage contrasts with the category of expert. Women experts or scientists such as Florence Kelley, Julia Lathrop, and Alice Hamilton, were not celebrated or remembered because they did not fulfill nineteenth-century feminine ideals.

Another historian, Gerda Lerner, said women’s history generally has been done on two levels—compensatory history and contribution history. Scholars focused on Addams because of the perception that she was exceptional in comparison to other, more ordinary women. Lerner referred to this interpretation as compensatory history. At the same time that attention was granted to Addams in this compensatory manner, she was not granted innovative interpretations. Rather, she was perceived as supporting the traditional male historical framework of the progressive movement, and interpreted only in terms of how she contributed to predetermined historical frameworks. Emphasis on Addams’ contribution to progressive politics misfocused her significance. Lerner concluded:

[Therefore], Jane Addams’ enormous contribution in creating a supporting female network and new structures for living are subordinated to her role as a Progressive, or to an interpretation which regards her as merely representative of a group of frustrated college-trained women with no place to go. In other words, a deviant from male-defined norms.¹³

The interpretations offered by Conway and Lerner help explain twentieth-century North American historiography. Addams came to be solely identified with Hull House and Hull House with Addams. Historians generally overlooked or forgot the fact that other very capable, talented, and spirited reformers—who were Addams’ friends and companions—lived and worked at Hull House. This occurred despite the fact that the first biography of Addams written after her death by her nephew, James Weber Linn, contained a chapter devoted to six other women

of Hull House: Ellen Gates Starr, Julia Lathrop, Florence Kelley, Louise deKoven Bowen, Alice Hamilton, and Mary Rozet Smith. Linn wrote: "A biography of Jane Addams that did not include special mention of this group would be absurd."¹⁴

Few scholars have focused on these other women of Hull House. Indeed, in comparison to the sources available on Addams, the research is deficient. Just before her death in 1935, Jane Addams wrote a biography of Julia Lathrop which remains the only major source on Lathrop's life.¹⁵ The life of Alice Hamilton, with a focus on her medical research work, was examined in a 1967 biography by Madeleine P. Grant.¹⁶ A collection of her personal letters with helpful commentary by Barbara Sicherman has added a fuller dimension to Hamilton's long life, family, friends, and work.¹⁷ No major biographical work has been published on Ellen Gates Starr, who was a key figure in the Hull House group. Still, most of the women of Hull House were given brief sketches in *Notable American Women: A Biographical Dictionary, 1607-1950*.¹⁸

Other than Addams, the most research on a Hull House woman has been on Florence Kelley. Josephine Goldmark, a friend and younger colleague of Florence Kelley, wrote a rather idealized yet very personal book about Kelley in 1953. Dorothy Rose Blumberg later wrote a biography focusing on Kelley's social action.¹⁹ Kathryn Kish Sklar edited the autobiography of Kelley, which was a reprint of articles originally published in various issues of *The Survey Graphic*. More significantly, Sklar has spent the last ten years researching and writing a biography of Kelley which examines her tremendous influence within women's political culture in the United States.²⁰

Most of the biographical work to date on Hull House women, including that on Addams and Kelley, has emphasized their political actions and agendas. Relatively little attention has been directed toward other aspects of their lives, from their interpersonal relationships to their religious motivations. Rebecca L. Sherrick examined the public persona of Hull House women in light of their personal lives in her 1980 dissertation on the women of Hull House. She discovered that several key Hull House women shared similar childhoods and college experiences. Sherrick argued that Hull House provided women

with the opportunity to utilize their abilities in progressive politics and society while at the same time fulfilling nineteenth-century ideals regarding women's home roles.²¹

Only three other studies examine the group of women in the context of Hull House. Kathryn Kish Sklar examined the women of Hull House during the decade of the 1890s. She discussed the women's friendships and support for one another as well as revealing connections the women of Hull House had with other reformers, who were almost always men. Sklar argued that the social power of the women of Hull House came from both their internal (i.e., Hull House group) and external (i.e., extra-Hull House ties) support networks.²²

The work of Sklar was validated and extended in a 1991 study by Robyn Muncy. Muncy focused on the political and social reforms the women of Hull House undertook and argued that their success was due less to their connections with one another than to the interconnections they established with more powerful male reformers. The metaphor of a political dominion was used by Muncy to analyze both the independence and the dependence of the women of Hull House.²³

In regard to this specific project, a 1986 article by Virginia Kemp Fish was most useful.²⁴ Fish discussed what she called the Hull House circle, the groups of women that lived and worked at Hull House during different time periods. Writing from a sociological perspective and utilizing biography and history, she examined the friendship networks that resulted in successful reform work and the overlapping of personal and public activities. Fish argued that Jane Addams and Hull House became the lifelong leitmotif of the inner circle of Hull House women: "Friendships begun there endured, were strengthened and reinforced by the same and overlapping interests, organizational memberships, and social reform efforts."²⁵ Fish identified two circles of Hull House women. The first circle comprised Julia Lathrop, Florence Kelley, and Alice Hamilton, who came to live and work at Hull House between 1890 and 1897. A later circle developed in the first decade of the twentieth century and included Grace and Edith Abbott and Sophonisba Breckinridge. This project expands upon the first circle of Hull House women as identified by Fish.²⁶

Overall, previous research on individuals connected to Hull House has focused on Addams, with some work done on Kelley and Hamilton. Regardless, the few works that explore the interconnections between the Hull House women are significant. Research such as that provided by Fish has been foundational for this project, especially in its identification of the key women of Hull House and its focus on friendship ties.

Women's Space

Hull House was primarily a women's community, although it was one of the first settlements to provide housing for women and men as well as for married couples and families. The fact that it was women's space is not surprising since between the years 1889 and 1914, three-fifths of all social settlement residents were women.²⁷ Most of these women were single, white, and college educated.²⁸

Women embarked on settlement residency for many different reasons. Some joined because of curiosity, wanting to know how the poorer classes lived, or desirous of adventure, wanting to expand their personal life experiences. Some joined because of a sense of idealism, wanting to personally address the social problems of the late nineteenth century. Some joined because as the first generation of college educated women, they had nothing else to do short of domestic duty (marriage and motherhood), grade school teaching, or missionary service.

Psychological interpretations have often been used to explain the attraction of late-nineteenth-century women to the social settlement movement. Probably the most significant biographer of Addams, Allen F. Davis, said in 1967: "[A]mong the many influences that combined to create the settlement impulse, anxiety, alienation, and guilt were important."²⁹ A contemporary of Davis, Daniel Levine, suggested that the social settlement movement provided a public outlet for essentially internal feelings:

Restlessness and unhappiness in turn drove many strong-willed and capable women into social reform or social service of some sort. The temperance, settlement

house, and suffrage movements all benefitted from the leadership of this sort of woman.³⁰

Gerda Lerner would argue that to wholeheartedly accept the interpretations of these scholars would be to engage in writing history by placing women in a “male-defined world.” The interpretations of Davis and Levine negated the experience of white, middle-class women during the last decade of the last century. Social historian and theorist Christopher Lasch provided a more positive framework than either Davis or Levine for the reality of restlessness which afflicted well-educated, elite women in the late nineteenth century. He contended that restlessness was existent because such women had no place to focus either their abilities or their energies.³¹ Jane Addams used the term “family claim” versus “social claim” to summarize what many nineteenth-century women attempted in stepping out of their prescribed female roles of domesticity into public roles of reform.³²

Some scholars have suggested that the women who chose social settlement life were attempting to replicate college dormitory living or, at the least, expand the concept of home into the larger society.³³ For example, Judith Ann Trolander wrote that one of the important factors regarding social settlements was that they provided not only an occupation but also a home. In so doing, social settlements provided a legitimate option to privileged women seeking alternatives to traditional roles:

[Women] sought not only an occupation but a substitute for traditional family life. . . . Residence in the settlement house was a lot like [the college dormitory]. Furthermore, since the stated purpose was to help the poor, young women who eschewed family obligations to be settlement residents could hardly be accused of selfishness. The semi-protected environment of the settlement house was respectable, and the camaraderie among the residents provided an alternative to family life.³⁴

Historian Carl N. Degler also argued that the social settlement, and later, social work, was an acceptable occupation for

nineteenth-century women because it simply extended the boundaries of the home into the larger society:

The settlement house, in short, was the extension of women's traditional role into the tenement and the slum. It enlisted all the sympathy, understanding, warmth, and emotion which were ascribed to women by the principle of separate spheres. Although settlement-house work was literally outside the home, and a profession that not infrequently deflected women from marriage and motherhood, it nevertheless was easily accommodated to the idea of separate spheres. It did not contradict the popular view that women and men were different and properly engaged in different spheres of work. At the same time, however, settlement work clearly offered a career and useful service to educated women.³⁵

Other scholars have pointed out how settlement work initiated and supported the emerging social science fields. Early research conducted through Hull House and other social settlements provided a wealth of data for the nascent discipline of sociology.³⁶ In fact, in 1895 the Hull House residents published *Hull-House Maps and Papers*, a book which Mary Jo Deegan said started the Chicago school of sociology.³⁷ Deegan also argued that the significance of the work of Hull House residents was not fully recognized because it was done mostly by women outside an affiliation with an educational institution such as the University of Chicago.

This kind of research indicates a crucial link between the need for occupational opportunities as well as alternatives to traditional home life. In this way, the need for women's space existed on a multidimensional plane. Women were not restless simply due to internal psychological problems, but were restless because their choices were limited in both private and public arenas. Women needed both public and private (or personal) space within nineteenth-century society, space that would allow them to use and develop their skills, and space to live as independent adults. Both goals were interrelated.

Religious/Spiritual Ideals

Few scholars have pointed out the religious motives for settlement women. Of those who do, some argue that such religious motivations emerged from late-nineteenth-century liberal Christianity. Historian Clarke Chambers, for example, wrote that many social settlement leaders used Christian rhetoric to express ideals of nineteenth-century humanitarianism:

Steeped in nineteenth-century humanitarianism, many settlement leaders expressed their motives in words and tones familiar to a Bible-reading and Bible-believing generation. They echoed the cries for social justice of Old Testament prophecy, and took seriously the redemptive power that Christ released in the New [Testament]. . . . They sought not “righteousness” for a “scattered few,” but “a more abundant life for all.”³⁸

The religious motivation of settlement women has usually been interpreted as humanitarian or humanist. This is especially apparent when compared to the religious motives of women who got involved in more traditional evangelical work such as city or foreign missions.³⁹ Unlike these latter women, religious proselytizing was not the goal or vision of settlement women. Rather, they wanted to engage in service to humanity based on principles all people—Protestants and Roman Catholics, for example—could affirm. The women of Hull House sought to be religious in the broader understanding of the word, meaning that their motivations were spiritual rather than religious. They advocated a “religion of humanity,” as Mina Carson argued in a book on settlement folk.⁴⁰ Put differently, the women of Hull House did not seek the religious conversion of others, but attempted to draw upon common religious principles shared by a variety of people and to engage in service to humanity.

Scholars have debated the question of how social settlement women received their religious ideals of service to humanity. The ideal of service may have emerged out of patterns of self-sacrifice prescribed for Victorian women. In this regard, ideals of Victorian womanhood, with the corresponding principles of

mothering altruism and inherent female moral characteristics may explain the desire to engage in service embodied by the Hull House women.⁴¹

Jane Addams perhaps best expressed the religious foundation and service ideal of the social settlement movement in an early article called "The Subjective Necessity for Social Settlements." She saw involvement in the social settlement as an attempt to humanize Christianity and, at the same time, make religion less sectarian. Addams wrote that the early Christians "believed in love as a cosmic force. . . . They identified themselves with slaves. . . . They longed to share the common lot." She identified young people in the nineteenth century as seeking this aspect of Christ's message:

They resent the assumption that Christianity is a set of ideas which belong to the religious consciousness, whatever that may be, that it is a thing to be proclaimed and instituted apart from the social life of the community. . . . The Settlement movement is only one manifestation of that wider humanitarian movement which . . . is endeavoring to embody itself, not in a sect, but in society itself.⁴²

She concluded by arguing that the social settlement reflected the "renaissance of the early Christian humanitarianism." It was occurring, she said, without much writing, philosophizing, or talking, but "with a bent to express in social service, in terms of action, the spirit of Christ."⁴³

Jean Bethke Elshtain, a political ethicist, reviewed the life and action of Addams and wrote that scholars must come to understand Addams as a social theorist whose basis was Christianity:

Addams viewed her world through the prism of Christian symbols and injunctions, purposes and meanings. These gave her world its shape . . . [and] conviction that the moral life consists in "the imitation of Christ," not in abstract obedience to a formal model of moral conduct.⁴⁴

The aim of Hull House, Elshtain said, was to “meet the needs of Addams and others like her to put their beliefs into practice, to lead lives of action To serve but in serving to reveal oneself.” According to Elshtain, late-nineteenth-century society, though “[p]aternalistic, hypocritical, and stifling,” especially toward its women, instilled in its young people through Christian religious principles a final conviction that a “*human* life is one lived with purpose, dignity, and honor.”⁴⁵

Stephen Kalberg, a scholar in the field of social work, reviewed the lives of selected people involved in the settlement movement. He discovered settlement leaders were not raised in environments of liberal Christianity, an assumption often made by historians. They were raised in homes that upheld staunch religious principles as well as participation in political action. Kalberg argued that both these factors were necessary in directing individuals into settlement work:

If either traditional religious or political perspectives had been taught to them exclusively, the career reformers might have become leaders in the churches or joined one of the many political movements of their day. . . . In effect, they sought a synthesis of the two socialization orientations—the religious and the political—dominant in their homes.⁴⁶

If Kalberg’s thesis is correct, it is possible to view the women of Hull House as combining both religious and reform ideals. In so doing, they expanded the definition of religion and anchored reform in spiritual principles. Acknowledging and using the prescribed Victorian roles in society, the women of Hull House redefined ideals regarding their responsibility as guardians of the home and of true religion. Much to their surprise, they became reformers within the larger social context, as Robyn Muncy noted:

Settlement workers did not set out to become reformers. They were rather women trying to fulfill existing social expectations for self-sacrificing female service while at the same time satisfying their need for public recogni-

tion, authority, and independence. In the process of attempting to weave together a life of service and professional accomplishment, they became reformers as the wider world defined them.⁴⁷

The kinds of activities offered by social settlements were replaced in later years by community or neighborhood centers, and the leadership switched from being primarily female to being almost exclusively male.⁴⁸ The leadership transition resulted in the emergence of social workers, people who were both specifically trained and salaried.⁴⁹ Concomitantly, the religious underpinnings of social work lessened. Clarke Chambers found that latter generations of social workers were embarrassed by the religious idealism of the initial social settlement workers:

[A]lthough the official and private statements alike of settlement leaders continued to proclaim spiritual motives and goals, the religiosity of the pioneer generation began to pale in the 1920's and the younger generation tended to build other, though often related, rationales [for their work]. The younger generation, entering settlement work during the interwar years, tended to be embarrassed at times and sometimes impatient with the unashamed piety of their elders.⁵⁰

The fact is that the social settlement movement in the nineteenth century was very much a spiritual and—to a certain extent—a religious movement. The women of Hull House were motivated in their work by the ideals—and the shortcomings—of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Kathryn Kish Sklar, in a paper presented at the 100th anniversary of the founding of Hull House, argued that it was only after 1920 that women's political culture in the United States lost its anchoring in religious and moral authority. The factors that explain why this is the case need further study. While the scope of this project does not allow for a detailed analysis of the early twentieth century, some of the factors contributing to the loss of religious and spiritual ideals become clearer by looking at the experiences the women of Hull House had with dominant Christianity in their day.

Race and Class

Recent scholarship has identified class and race issues inherent in the settlement movement generally and in Hull House specifically. Thomas Lee Philpott raised concerns regarding the allocation of leadership roles within Hull House to white, middle-class people rather than to the neighbors who were to benefit from the many programs.⁵¹ This paternalism of Hull House workers resulted in their inadvertently engaging in the regulation of the lifestyles of the poor. As a consequence of this paternalism, negative outcomes resulted from good intentions. For example, Hull House has often been praised for establishing the first public playground in the city of Chicago. Philpott pointed out, however, what is usually not noted, which is that a block of tenements had to be destroyed to establish the playground. The “dispossessed tenants . . . mourned their loss of homes” and, quite understandably, came to regard the Hull House workers as callous.⁵²

From late-twentieth-century perspectives and understandings of mutuality and multiculturalism, the lack of shared decision-making power and direct involvement of the neighbors is problematic. Reflective of a Victorian mind set, the worker/neighbor division shows the presence of strict class, ethnic, and race divisions within nineteenth-century society. Historian Rivka Shpak Lissak said that Hull House workers wanted to eliminate these divisions by simply assimilating ethnic working-class neighbors into middle-class, white Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture. Only unintentionally did Hull House work lead to the growth of pluralistic ideals within the larger society.⁵³ Other scholars have also studied the settlement house and its role in immigrant assimilation, acculturation, and Americanization.⁵⁴

Another historian, Gwendolyn Mink, similarly argued that the formation of the welfare state was based on class and race assumptions; namely, that white, Northern European, middle- and upper-middle-class Protestant women needed to uplift the poor, working, African American, Central or Southern European Catholic or Jewish immigrants, and instill, especially in mothers, values suitable for future U.S. citizens.⁵⁵ Mink suggested that these desired reforms were not based on white supremacy but on the desire for race improvement (a common

nineteenth-century term used to refer to the human race). But Thomas Philpott suggested that Jane Addams and the workers of Hull House simply showed no understanding of the difference between economic and racial injustice.⁵⁶

Issues of race and class need to be acknowledged when examining the women who comprised Hull House. By and large, they were privileged women and had luxuries not available to other women of the nineteenth century. Their ideals regarding class and race were reflective of the dominant white, middle- and upper-middle-class Protestant culture of their time. Today, we easily identify inherent classism and racism in some of their thoughts and actions. These characteristics cannot be ignored in doing a historical study. Still, it is inappropriate to apply late-twentieth-century standards to nineteenth-century persons. People must be understood in relation to their own time and historical judgments need to be historically grounded. This does not mean, however, that contemporary critiques are unnecessary or irrelevant. Acknowledging limitations and past injustices is crucial, and provides insight for our present culture and our attempts to create a more just society.

Summary and Aims

Previous research on Hull House women and the settlement movement can be summarized as follows: (1) Addams has been remembered and uplifted because she embodied acceptable and exceptional conceptions of nineteenth-century womanhood, which her cohorts, who have been largely ignored, did not symbolize. (2) White Protestant women of the middle- and upper-middle classes, especially those who were college educated, pushed the boundaries allotted to them regarding their place within the larger society and how they were to live their personal lives. (3) Religious ideals, perhaps more accurately labelled as spiritual ideals, were a significant basis for the involvement of settlement workers and motivation for their vocational ideals and life. (4) Hull House women generally perpetuated attitudes of classism and racism because of their own social location and their general ignorance of the consequences of their well-intentioned behaviors.

This project is a new contribution to the historical and sociological works that have already been done on Hull House. By engaging in a study based on a group rather than on an individual, the multifarious nature of Hull House becomes clear. Yet the problem of source materials then arises. Because so many of the women are not well known, autobiographies and biographies, combined with scant other primary and secondary sources, become the basis for interpretation. Despite this limitation, a wide range of experiences and visions of some of the Hull House women seep through to the present time. These women were all talented and skilled. Addams, the leader of their house, was not any more exceptional than many of her friends and associates. These women show not only the significance of higher education for women and the ensuring possibilities for female professionalization, but the centrality of claiming vocational dreams and the essentiality of a solid friendship base and shared community. They show the importance of seeking an ultimate sense of meaning that encompasses all that we are, do, and say, even if this means breaking down, ignoring, or redefining certain societal understandings of gender distinctions, private and public divisions, and orthodox religious assumptions. In this way, the women of Hull House provide not only a window into the past, but a reflection back into the present. We learn about ourselves and our society as we explore the world of the women of Hull House.