



## ***JANE ADDAMS (1860-1935)*** ***Rediscovering an American Icon***

*Jane Addams was the first truly national female political leader in American history. . . She fought for labor rights, immigrant rights, women's rights and civil rights. She was a co-founder of the ACLU and the NAACP, and was a leader of the international peace movement.*

Biographer Louise W. Knight, Letter to *New York Times*, May 4, 2017

### **A WOMAN FOR ALL SEASONS**

In 1913, *Independent* magazine asked its national readership: "Who Is the Most Useful American?" Out of ten thousand replies, Jane Addams placed second—behind Thomas Edison but ahead of Andrew Carnegie and Theodore Roosevelt! At that time, Addams was the most famous and admired woman in America, but today her name is seldom recognized.

Jane Addams co-founded Hull-House in Chicago with Ellen Gates Starr in 1889 and thereafter oversaw its evolution into a world-renowned center of social service and intellectual ferment. She and her Hull-House allies fought for political and economic justice for women, children, factory workers, immigrants, and the poor. With the onset of World War I, her role in founding and leading the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom brought her years of vilification from militarists and anti-feminists (e.g., "the most dangerous woman in America"). In 1931, however, she became the first American woman to share the Nobel Peace Prize.

The New Deal adopted elements of the Hull-House social agenda into national legislation, concerning e.g., child labor, social security, minimum wage, public health, labor unions, and public housing. Two New Deal cabinet members had Hull-House ties: Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins and Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes. The enduring imprint of Addams and Hull-House may be traced in progressive domestic legislation from the 1930s to the Obama Administration.

After Addams died in 1935, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt assumed her mantle of leadership on civil rights, immigration, and internationalism. According to historian Allen F. Davis, Roosevelt would "soon replace Addams as the most loved and most hated woman in America."

### **WHAT SHE MEANS TODAY**

Today, Jane Addams is neither loved nor hated; she is barely known. But as columnist David Brooks has observed, she was a powerful role model and source of inspiration for today's generation of social activists: "Many of the social problems we face today — the fraying social fabric, widening inequality, anxieties over immigration, concentrated poverty, . . . are the same problems she faced. . . . And in many ways her responses were more sophisticated than ours." ("The Jane Addams Model," *The New York Times*, April 25, 2017).

The influence of Addams in today's quests for immigration rights, social justice, and peace was examined in a public forum supported by Mass Humanities on "*Rediscovering Jane Addams in a Time of Crisis*" (November 11, 2017). The video record of each forum session is available at:  
<https://digital.janeaddams.ramapo.edu/exhibits/show/rediscovering/intro>.

**To schedule a guest talk or for more information, please contact:**  
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