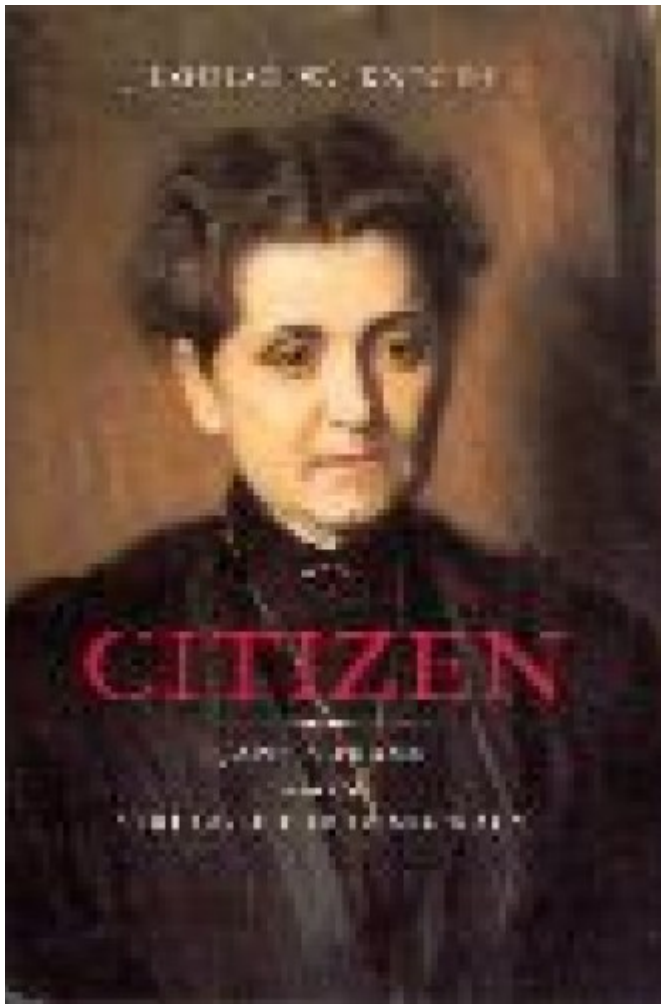


Saints and sinners

reviewed by [Sarah E. Johnson](#) in the [May 2, 2006](#) issue

In Review



Citizen: Jane Addams and the Struggle for Democracy

Louise W. Knight

University of Chicago Press

If you know about Jane Addams, you probably know the Jane Addams of Hull House, the Addams who worked for social justice, women's suffrage and world peace and

whose settlement house was a place where people met across racial, ethnic and class lines. Becoming this Jane Addams was an arduous process, as Louise W. Knight's fine biography demonstrates. The "struggle for democracy" in the title is Addams's own struggle to become a democrat.

Knight weaves together Addams's life and thought between 1860 and 1898 (this biography is a half-life) to show how an Addams born into a world that valued individualism, evangelical religion and moral absolutism became the Addams of social Christianity, pragmatism and a cooperative ethic in social, political and economic affairs. For nonhistorians, her ideas will probably be the most interesting aspect of the biography. Her life is also interesting, but the details of Hull House finances might not engage every reader.

Many of the issues Addams wrestled with on her way to democracy still hold purchase today. For example, Knight looks at the role of culture in Addams's thought. When Addams first conceived of her settlement, she imagined it as a place where working-class people could receive spiritual and intellectual sustenance from "high" culture. Two assumptions underlay this plan: that being cultivated meant living in sympathy with others and that high culture—reading the right books and seeing the right plays—led to such sympathy.

Yet as Addams lived among the residents of Chicago's 19th ward, her view shifted. She continued to believe that a cultivated person is one who puts oneself "into the minds and experiences of other people," but she grew skeptical of the idea that well-read people had a leg up on becoming sympathetic. She saw that supposedly cultured people often believed themselves superior to others and felt no need to enter into others' experiences because they thought theirs alone were good and true. Addams became convinced that living and working with others, particularly the poor, was a surer way to cultivation than reading the right books—not a popular message to armchair liberals, then or now.

Knight also explores what Addams meant by sympathy: understanding the logic of those with whom she disagreed. As the progressive Addams worked against the Irish political machine in Chicago, she maintained that true democrats needed to understand and sympathize with immigrants' decision to vote for corrupt politicians rather than reform candidates. Speaking in a time of great political polarization (this should sound familiar), she chided those who agreed with her for failing to understand the perspective of those who opposed her (a less familiar sentiment

these days). The feelings of self-righteousness that came from moral absolutism were, she believed, as present and as dangerous on the progressive side as they were on the conservative side. Those who really desired to cooperate with others and work toward social justice could not afford to divide the world into the morally obtuse and the morally pure.

Addams's commitment to sympathy and to social Christianity raises a salient question that Knight unfortunately does not explore. Sympathy with others led Addams to embrace pragmatism. Entering into the experiences of others taught her that ethics must evolve with experience. How she held together her pragmatism and her social Christianity, however, remains an open question.

To her credit, Knight pays more attention to Addams's religious background than many historians. She situates Addams in the social Christian movement (the preferred term in the 1890s for the Social Gospel movement) and shows her indebtedness to such Christian thinkers as Leo Tolstoy and Richard Ely. Yet it is unclear whether Addams believed that social Christianity was simply the best ethic available at the time, and one that could be discarded when society changed, or if she thought it possible to hold onto Christian faith while remaining open-minded toward the beliefs of others. It would, of course, be foolish to hope that Addams came up with a perfect solution to problems that continue to perplex us, but it would be useful to know whether she gave the issue any thought.

Knight's biography is a solid account of Addams's life that will challenge those who might want to locate themselves in her progressive political lineage. It is tempting to celebrate the progressive reforms Addams advocated and forget that her commitment to reform came out of the crucible of life among the poor. Addams also reminds us that those committed to social justice can be as self-righteous and unsympathetic (to use her word) as those who oppose it. For Jane Addams, becoming a true democrat demanded an uncanny ability to unite human sympathy with progressive political advocacy. No wonder she found democracy a struggle.