

# Rediscovering Jane Addams in a time of crisis

*By Rutherford H. Platt*

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On July 9, 1915, before a packed Carnegie Hall, Jane Addams crossed her Rubicon.

At 55, Addams was world-renowned as co-founder of Chicago's Hull House, advocate for the oppressed, and pillar of the American progressive movement, who was often described in the press (to her discomfort) as "Saint Jane."

But after her speech at Carnegie Hall, her public persona changed from "saint" to "complacent and self-satisfied woman" and much worse. Even Theodore Roosevelt who had invited her to second his Progressive Party presidential nomination three years earlier now disowned her as "poor bleeding Jane" and a "Bull Mouse."

As Martin Luther King would be condemned for denouncing the Vietnam War a half century later, Addams committed the heresy of using her great moral authority to assail the war raging in Europe. As chair of the 1915 International Women's Congress at The Hague, Addams had just returned from delivering a mediation proposal developed by that body to the leaders of warring and neutral powers, including President Woodrow Wilson and the pope.

This unseemly meddling in the affairs of men triggered a right-wing onslaught against her and her women colleagues. As recalled by Addams in a 1930 memoir: "The journalistic attack continued for week after week in every sort of newspaper throughout the country. . . It also brought me an enormous number of letters, most of them abusive."

Undaunted, Addams co-founded and for years headed the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom which continues today. In 1931, she became the first American woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize (shared with Nicholas Murray Butler, president of Columbia University).

After her death in 1935, the political sage Walter Lippmann wrote that Addams reflected "the mystic promise of the American democracy . . . which reached its highest expression in Lincoln."

Addams biographer Allen F. Davis wrote that Eleanor Roosevelt, who assumed the Addams' commitment to civil rights and internationalism, was "soon to replace her as the most loved and most hated woman in America."

Today, Jane Addams is no longer either loved or hated; she is practically unknown. Many people, other than social work professionals and women's history scholars, react to her name with blank stares or, worse yet, confuse her with Abigail Adams.

She is seldom recognized as a seminal political thinker and activist, and mentor to powerful reformers like Florence Kelley, Alice Hamilton, Frances Perkins, Harold Ickes and Eleanor Roosevelt.

Nevertheless, many of our neighbors and fellow citizens are now carrying on the work of Jane Addams and her allies, possibly without realizing it. The Pioneer Valley is fertile ground for activists pursuing the same struggles that she waged: human rights, immigration, public health, social justice, world peace.

On Nov. 11, a free daylong public forum will be held at Edwards Church in Northampton on “Rediscovering Jane Addams in a Time of Crisis.” The program is supported by Mass Humanities and other donors in association with the Traprock Center for Peace and Justice.

The keynote speaker will be Louise W. Knight, author of “Citizen: Jane Addams and the Struggle for Democracy” (2006) and “Jane Addams: Spirit in Action” (2010). Panelists will include humanist scholars, practitioners in fields Addams influenced and representatives of vulnerable populations. Audience discussion will be encouraged.

Nov. 11 will be declared “Jane Addams Day” in Massachusetts through a joint legislative resolution co-sponsored by Senate President Stanley Rosenberg of Amherst and Rep. Aaron Vega of Holyoke.

This year, Nov. 11 also will be the 99th anniversary of Armistice Day (now Veterans Day). As in France, the forum at Edwards Church will observe a minute of silence at the “11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month” to honor those whose deaths she tried so desperately to prevent.

The forum will conclude at 4 p.m. with a medley of gospel songs to celebrate how much of Addams’ vision has been achieved while preparing to confront the perils that lie ahead.

Registration information is available at [www.facebook.com/RediscoveringJaneAddams/](http://www.facebook.com/RediscoveringJaneAddams/).

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