

# Reading the Past

ONCE IN A WHILE we are reminded that even scholarly history can be inspiring. For me, *The Education of Jane Addams*, by Grinnell College history professor Victoria Bissell Brown, is such a reminder. Jane Addams is a true American hero, and Brown clearly affirms that common wisdom. The irony, as Brown shows us so engagingly in her account of Addams's coming of age, is that Addams became such a hero only after she abandoned the ambition to be a hero and decided instead to be a servant in the cause of democracy.

In 1889 Addams established Hull-House, where she and her associates lived among and provided services for a working-class community on the north side of Chicago until her death in 1935. Her success at Hull-House provided the platform for her to become a leading voice advocating many of the reforms associated with the Progressive movement.

Much has been written about Addams's work at Hull-House and beyond. Now Brown has combed through a large body of correspondence and other sources to provide a provocative account of the ideas, events, and personal relationships that shaped the person who became the Jane Addams of Hull-House fame. Almost every chapter of this amazingly rich book contains a couple of paragraphs that I wanted to read aloud to the nearest person—paragraphs that distill the forces that shaped

Addams's character and the way she responded to those forces. One of these paragraphs from the introduction sums up the entire book: "*The Education of Jane Addams* is about how a daughter of America's small-town prairie elite was transformed by the dignity of her own philosophy. . . . The story told here traces Addams's evolution from an ambitious, arrogant youth caught up in heroic dreams of individual triumph to a young woman humbled by ill health, family duty, and spiritual doubt. It examines the process of emotional and philosophical growth that allowed the young Jane Addams to transcend the conceits of her youth, and then follows her path to Chicago, where she sought salvation in collective, cooperative action and enjoyed greater fame and success than she could have imagined in her schoolgirl fantasies. Her dreams of a life as a public figure carried her furthest, it turned out, when she folded ambition for herself into ambition for democracy."

Through all of the changes in her ideas and her character, the central image Brown conveys of Addams is that of a mediator. That has made it difficult for subsequent reformers to adopt her as a model: "Any nonpacifist movement that attempts to enlist Addams

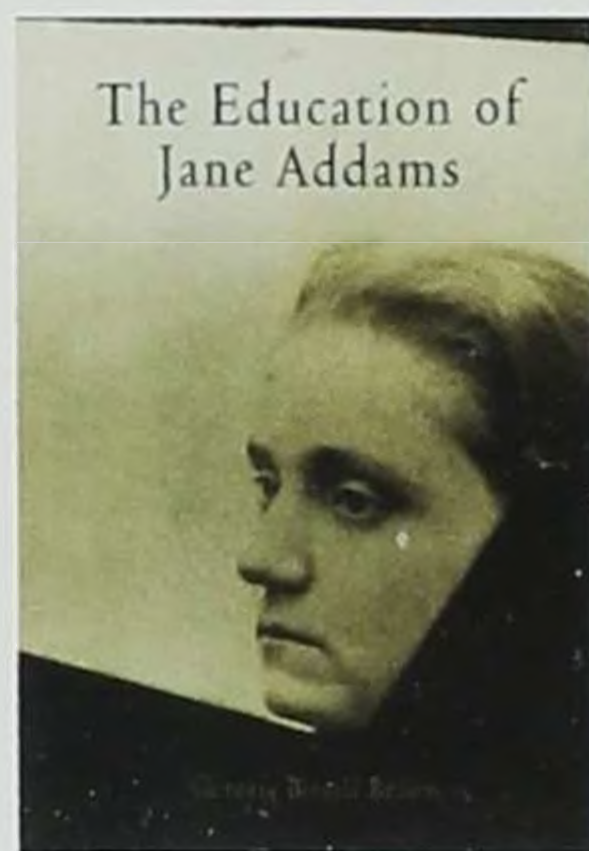
as its advocate winds up disappointed because her words are never as angry, as exclusionary, as damning of the other side as our partisan passions desire."

This is a book about ideas. Brown takes us inside a mind that the feminist philosopher Charlotte Perkins Gilman said had "more 'floor space' in it than any other I have known. She could set a subject down, unprejudiced, and walk all around it, allowing fairly for every one's point of view." And it is remarkable just how good a guide to the depth of her thinking is her voluminous correspondence with family and friends. But this history of ideas, as befits its subject's personality, has a distinctly social cast. We do see how Addams distills and adapts ideas from the books she reads and from the large social and political movements of her time. But Brown devotes even more space to showing how Addams continually revised her ideas based on her day-to-day interactions with family and friends, with coworkers and patrons and working-class neighbors. Human relationships provide the context for the development of Addams's ideas and religious views and the shaping of her character. The book is also full of keen psychological insight without lapsing into the sort of psychoanalytic speculation that can be burdensome or fanciful in lesser hands.

The result is a remarkably perceptive account of how the devoted daughter of a well-to-do mill owner and banker in a small midwestern town became a heroic advocate for working-class residents of the city perhaps most identified in the late 19th and early 20th centuries with industrialism and labor strife. Only the last third of the book deals with her Hull-House career, showing how the ideas she had developed by her late twenties were enacted in the neighborhood surrounding Hull-House, and how interactions with the neighborhood residents further refined those ideas. The book ends in 1895, five years after Hull-House had been established. Addams would live for another four decades, "never abandoning her post as head resident at Hull-House but continuously expanding her sphere of influence beyond Chicago, beyond Illinois, and, ultimately, beyond the United States."

Brown's admiration for Addams shines through on every page, even as she recognizes her flaws (most notably, her tendency to distance herself from the people closest to her). Iowans can hope that this book will stimulate interest in such similarly committed women as Flora Dunlap in Des Moines, Mary Treglia in Sioux City, and Jane Boyd in Cedar Rapids. Beyond its historical value, the book can also serve to inspire all of us who struggle to define our responsibility in the world. For that reason, it may be particularly valuable for young people struggling with a sense of their vocation.

—by Marvin Bergman, editor of *The Annals of Iowa*



*The Education of Jane Addams*, by Victoria Bissell Brown. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. viii, 421 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95 cloth.