

A Response to “Experience, Exchange, and Education: The Hull House Women, an International Network, and Chicago’s Immigrant Population,” by Alice Bailey Cheylan

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Hull House was founded in 1889 and was transformed into a museum in January 2012. The groundbreaking social work of Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr, as experienced by the thousands of American immigrants who were touched by the work of Chicago’s settlement center Hull House in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is examined by Alice Cheylan in her article “Experience, Exchange, and Education: The Hull House Women, an International Network, and Chicago’s Immigrant Population.” Cheylan expounds on the solutions found regarding the difficulties faced by the diverse immigrant population (exclusion, prejudice and stereotyping, language and cultural barriers, to name a few), solutions which centered on women-led community outreach activities as well as diverse in-house educational opportunities of a more or less vocational nature. Integration into responsible and active civic life through participation in democratic processes in order to improve living and working conditions in impoverished areas was an overarching objective of the Hull House project.

Inspired by similar European initiatives, Hull House is an example of a successful women-led initiative that showcased the practical and organizational abilities of educated American women working in a challenging field. Cheylan subtly links the opportunities afforded to women outside the home through volunteer work and implies that Hull House had benefits both for those receiving support and for those providing it. The experience acquired through the settlement house project allowed a select few women to contribute to the wider political sphere on a local, national and international level, thereby enabling them to break out from

the confines of a patriarchal society. Was it inevitable that “[o]ver time the settlement movement became more politicized, and many of the women who lived or had lived there were appointed or elected to important government positions where they were even more influential in their community service”? Maybe so; for once the genie is let out of the bag, capable women cannot be stopped.

Cheyland does the reader a two-fold service with her article for she highlights not only an innovative American institution but also an important American activist. Jane Addams, like the successful British social activist Isabella Caroline Somerset (Lady Henry Somerset 1851-1921), is an example of a pioneering top-down social worker who was also heavily involved with the international peace movement. Somerset championed Francis Willard’s “Do-Everything” approach to helping the poor, offering help in different areas (health, education, work, suffrage, etc.) through a network of temperance organizations. She wrote a little-known novel, *Under the Arch* (1906), which highlights the chasm between the social classes regarding the dire problems of poverty, while at the same time focusing on a handful of upper-class social activists working in the field on practical solutions—getting their hands dirty as it were. Cheyland recounts that “Jane Addams and the other residents worked together to better the living conditions in the run-down tenements of Chicago’s 19th district,” and there are certainly parallels here with what Somerset advocated. The timeline is also identical, and this is probably not a coincidence. Addams directs her attention to the immigrant communities in particular, however, while Somerset is more inclusive.

The benefits of hard labor and the possibility of advancement through education were well recognized by Addams and translated into the many different classes provided by Hull House to the poor. Cheyland mentions the Sloyd System of education from Scandinavia as being popular in America, but Addams was also following in the footsteps of many others such as Samuel Smiles’ mid-19th-century Self-Help movement in Britain, which provided the poor workers with opportunities for self-improvement through attendance at Working Men’s Institute lectures. He lauded manual labor and believed that through education economic, social advancement was possible and this is patently a tenet of Addams too. The transnational connection is ever-present.

A further salient point addressed by Cheyland is that of the benefits of multiculturalism. Without actually using this modern term, Addams makes it clear that she was a believer in its benefits. In the section “Experience,” the efforts made to help the immigrant communities retain their diverse cultural roots are detailed, these being seen as a benefit both for the newcomers and the established Amer-

icans themselves. Addams thought prejudice and stereotyping could be counteracted by meaningful contact between cultures, and although Americanization is recognized by Cheylan as a practical outcome of some of Hull House's cultural policies, the idea that assimilating was essential to being accepted is one of Addams' beliefs (the proverbial Melting Pot).

In the end, Cheylan contributes to our growing knowledge concerning the transatlantic connections of pioneering educated women who fought to throw off the patriarchal chains and artificial barriers erected by their predecessors. Hull House and its female volunteers worked for the noble cause of inclusivity which is so important in today's world.

About the Author

Joanne Paisana is a lecturer in English Culture at Minho University, Portugal, specializing in the 19th and early 20th centuries. She is interested in transatlantic women's movements and has written on the female pioneers of the temperance societies as well as on the voluntary sector in general.



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