

Eleanor Smith and Her Circle: Female Patronage, Cultural Production, and Friendship at Hull-House

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1 Introduction

For almost fifty years Eleanor Smith (1858–1942) directed the Hull-House Music School. Through its portals hundreds of neighborhood children were introduced to the great canon of Western musical culture. They were taught to read and write music; they participated in choral groups, cantatas and operettas and became familiar with a classical music repertoire. They also learned ethnic folk songs and dances of their own and their neighbors' backgrounds. Many studied instruments and participated in ensembles. Some were asked to play in the Hull-House symphony orchestra alongside professional musicians. Smith, who composed the music for the *Hull House Songs*, several cantatas, and a number of operettas was aided in her work by talented teachers and supported by the collaborative efforts of two extraordinary Hull-House women: artist Enella Benedict (1858–1942), who headed the Hull-House art studios and Art School for more than four decades, and Edith de Nancrede (1868–1936), the director of children's and young adults' theatrical productions, who came to Hull-House in 1897 while a student at the Art Institute of Chicago and remained at the settlement until her untimely death in 1936. Music, art, and drama students tended to develop relationships with their teachers over many years. They knew Hull-House primarily from these long-term associations. A music student recalled, "You see, we never got too close to Jane Addams although we saw her quite a bit. But she was always busy—either going places or probably out of town" (Eleanor Carroll Farwell Oral interview transcript, July 14, 1981, 10, Hull-House Oral History Collection). Nancrede, Benedict, and Smith *were* Hull-House to them as much or more than Addams. Yet Smith, Benedict, and Nancrede have been treated as secondary or tertiary residents marginally related to the reform activism associated with the progressive movement (Davis, 1967).

Few historians have made the connection between its innovative cultural pedagogy and its reform politics and, instead, have focused on the latter, emphasizing the way the settlement run by women empowered female social feminism, advanced professional careers, promoted women's trade unionism,

and engendered the emerging welfare state (Sklar, 1985; Muncy, 1994; Payne, 1988; Gordon, 1994; Fitzpatrick, 1994). Overlooking the settlement's cultural leaders is surprising because for quite some time there has been a focus on Hull-House as woman's space, but even here the focus has been on the political or redemptive, not the performative (Sklar, 1985; Spain, 2001; Hayden, 1995). James Weber Linn, most likely with his Aunt Jane Addams's help and her approval, since she read the draft of the manuscript before she died and annotated it (Linn, 1935: vii-viii), also chose six women of the many who were resident at Hull-House, as those closest to Addams: Ellen Starr, Julia Lathrop, Alice Hamilton, Florence Kelley, Louise Bowen, and Mary Rozet Smith (129–150). Enella Benedict and Edith de Nancrede are mentioned in passing and Eleanor Smith is not mentioned at all. This certainly can account for the erasure of Eleanor Smith and her circle from the history of Hull-House; after Linn's, no serious biography of Addams is written until 1973 when historian Allen F. Davis published *American Heroine: The Life and Legend of Jane Addams*. Eleanor, Edith, and Enella are not mentioned at all by Davis. Addams recognized the cultural work that had been accomplished by Smith and her circle in *The Second Twenty Years at Hull-House's* (1930) chapter, "Play Instinct and the Arts," but the sense of friendship and the excitement of innovation of the early years is absent. Only when you read the collection of oral interviews of former students does the cultural work come alive. One of the few books to capture this is Shannon Jackson's *Lines of Activity* (2000) which relies on interviews. This chapter attempts to recapture the initial enthusiasm and creativity that led to the large body of work produced by Smith with the collaboration of Benedict and Nancrede. They were the architects of the less examined but nonetheless *major* work of the Hull-House founders: the experiment with new democratic roles for art, music, dance, drama, crafts, literature, and storytelling in American life. Although these women worked in cultural and educational institutions run by men during most of their careers, they found at Hull-House, working with co-founders Jane Addams (1860–1935) and Ellen Gates Starr (1859–1940), and the financial support of Mary Rozet Smith (1868–1934) and Louise deKoven Bowen (1859–1953), something otherwise missing: an environment that *empowered* them and *unlocked* the creativity of themselves and their students. Other institutions, like the public schools, offered the opportunity to work with the children of immigrants, but under bureaucracies such teachers as Smith did not control.

This chapter introduces the three women biographically and in the context of Chicago as a center of a thriving women's political culture in the Progressive Era (Flanagan, 2002; Schultz, 2001: xxvi-xxviii) that nurtured the work undertaken at Hull-House. Addams's and Starr's early efforts to bring the arts to the