

John Dos Passos

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OBSCURING HULL HOUSE— HIGHLIGHTING MALE PREDOMINANCE IN *U.S.A.*

by

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A paper by one of my students, a male undergraduate about twenty years old, once referred to *U.S.A.* as a “masculine novel.” He did not go on to explain this term, as the point was only incidental in his liking the trilogy. But his designation has remained in my memory, and it provides a starting point here for a train of my own thoughts.

Dos Passos has fifty-three sections of impressionistic autobiography interspersed among other parts of the trilogy. These sections are about the development and experiences of a boy, later a young man. Thus in “Camera Eye (5)” the author tells of playing “the battle of Port Arthur in the bathtub,” and in “Camera Eye (6),” which depicts events in an English school, an American boy in a Rough Rider suit challenges him to a fight.

We note too that the assembled trilogy has a preliminary section, titled “U.S.A.,” which begins: “The young man walks fast by himself. . . muscles ache for the knowledge of jobs”—the roadmender’s, the fisherman’s, the engineer’s, etc.—all jobs typically limited to men back then. And *The Big Money*, the final volume of the trilogy, concludes with the section “Vag.” The young man, destitute here, tries to hitch a ride, as automobiles speed past. A similarly destitute young woman would even now attempt hitchhiking at a much greater risk to herself than would a male counterpart.

The forty-nine sections of narrative fiction in the trilogy relate the lives and careers of twelve major characters, six of each sex. Twenty-six sections are on the men, twenty-three on the women. But the first six are on Fainy McCreary, or Mac—his rooting in socialism, his youthful wanderings, and his episodes with women.

Of the major fictional women characters in *U.S.A.*, three are attracted by and fall into the orbit of J. Ward Moorehouse, a highly successful, slick, and ethically vacuous public relations entrepreneur. One, Janey Williams, becomes his secretary. The final section in the trilogy is on Mary French, a left radical journalist who four times

subordinates herself to men of action in strikes or labor politics: Gus Moscovski, G. H. Barrow, Ben Compton, and Don Stevens. She comes close to being the tragic heroine of the narrative, and might be a noticeable counterweight to the preponderant masculinity of *U.S.A.* were it not for the Biographies. Only one of them is of a woman, and twenty-six are of men. The Biographies are typically in staccato rhythm—suggesting to me activity, not passivity.

They are of labor leaders, politicians, businessmen, industrialists, financiers, writers, scientists, inventors, artists, intellectuals and entertainers. I list them by name, or designation, in the order in which they appear:

In *The 42nd Parallel*: Eugene V. Debs, Luther Burbank, Bill Haywood, William Jennings Bryan, Minor C. Keith, Andrew Carnegie, Thomas Edison, Charles Proteus Steinmetz, and Bob LaFollette.

In *Nineteen Nineteen*: John Reed, Randolph Bourne, Theodore Roosevelt, Paxton Hibben, Woodrow Wilson, The House of Morgan, Joe Hill, Wesley Everest, and the Unknown Soldier.

Also in this issue . . .

Richard Layman, “A Readiness to Attempt Great Things: John Dos Passos’s First Novel” / 5

John Dos Passos, Chapters from “Seven Times Round the Walls of Jericho” / 7

Abstract of Ph.D. Dissertation / 12

And in *The Big Money*: Frederick Winslow Taylor, Henry Ford, Thorstein Veblen, Isadora Duncan (the only woman), Rudolph Valentino, the Wright Brothers, Frank Lloyd Wright, William Randolph Hearst, and Samuel Insull.

Let us turn again momentarily to the narrative of *U.S.A.* There Mary French, following her junior year at Vassar, gets a summer job at Hull House, Jane Addams's settlement house, in Chicago. After her father, a physician in Colorado, dies fighting the influenza epidemic of 1918 she returns to Hull House, rather than go back to college for her senior year. But following a stay there she leaves, tired of the society of old maids, and wanting to work in the business and industrial world. Experiences in Pittsburgh lead her to do publicity work for the union in the Great Steel Strike of 1919.

After "Camera Eye (46)" and "Newsreel LII," which follow the narrative section of Mary's activity in the strike, we come to the Biography of Isadora Duncan. Would not one more Biography, of Jane Addams (1860-1935) or her friend Alice Hamilton (1869-1970), both extremely effective people who interested themselves in labor and industrial conditions, have been in order somewhere about here?

The careers of both would have fitted into the time frame of *U.S.A.* Addams was born five years after Eugene V. Debs. She was well-known nationally, and her autobiography *Twenty Years at Hull-House* (1910) became a best-seller. The daughter of a Hicksite Quaker—though a man who backed Abraham Lincoln in the Civil War—she refused to support America's participation in World War I. For this she got much abuse—newspapers and politicians attacking her as a traitor and a fool. In 1919 she suffered bitter attacks for her participation in Quaker efforts to get food to starving children in Germany. In summer 1927 Addams sent an open letter to Senator Borah of Idaho,

the Chairman of the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, urging him to endorse a request for commutation of Sacco's and Vanzetti's death sentences on the ground of strong foreign criticism. For this she was denounced for unconstitutional and unpatriotic behavior.

Dos Passos took note of Jane Addams during World War I. Addams on returning to America in 1915 from an International Women's Congress mission to seek "continuous mediation" of the European War, had spoken at a mass meeting in New York's Carnegie Hall. There she said that before bayonet charges the European armies had to give their soldiers strong drink. For this, Richard Harding Davis, an author and journalist, attacked her bitterly for insulting the Allied soldiers. After Dos Passos got to the French front in 1917, he wrote his friend Walter Rumsey Marvin: "Jane Addams account that the soldiers were fed rum and ether before attacks is true. No human being can stand the performance without constant stimulants—"¹

Although there were a number of notable women with Jane Addams in Hull House, Alice Hamilton seems to me the most memorable. A member of a prominent Fort Wayne, Indiana, family, she was already a physician when she went to live in Hull House in 1897, having received her M.D. degree from the University of Michigan in 1893. After she decided that she wanted to study bacteriology, she sailed for a year's study in Germany in 1895. On returning, she studied for another year at Johns Hopkins University, and then accepted an offer to teach pathology at the Woman's Medical School of Northwestern University, in Chicago.

For some time she had been dreaming of doing settlement house work. "I had a conviction," she later wrote, "that professional work, teaching pathology, and carrying on research would never satisfy me. I must make for myself a life full of human interest." When Addams wrote her in the summer of 1897 that a residency at Hull House was available, she quickly accepted it. Dr. Hamilton lived there for twenty-two years, and afterwards came back for several months a year while Jane Addams was alive.

Her experiences at Hull House led to an interest in industrial diseases. "Living in a working-class quarter, coming in contact with laborers and their wives," she wrote in her autobiography, *Exploring the Dangerous Trades* (1943), "I could not fail to hear tales of the dangers that workingmen faced. . . ."² This led to a career of investigating industrial diseases—e.g., lead poisoning, silicosis, nitrous fume poisoning.

Although industrial medicine was a recognized field of study in Europe, physicians in the United States ignored it.³ As a result, when Harvard University's Medical School decided to offer a degree program in that field, it could find no qualified male candidate to teach in it. Although Harvard had never had a woman professor in any subject, and the Medical School did not admit women as

THE JOHN DOS PASSOS NEWSLETTER

The Newsletter seeks to promote scholarship on and interest in Dos Passos' writings and biography, and will publish short articles on these subjects. It will also publish news items, notes, letters, and queries on these and other relevant matters. Among these matters are work in progress, manuscript locations and accessions, bibliographies, and textual scholarship.

For return of manuscripts, contributors should send, along with their submissions, stamped envelopes addressed to themselves. They should address all queries and manuscripts to the editor, Melvin Landsberg, Department of English, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045-2115.

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students, it appointed her as Assistant Professor of Industrial Medicine in 1919. She arranged to spend the fall semester of each year teaching at Harvard, and a good part of the spring working at Hull House. Her continuing engagement in the field culminated in her standard textbook *Industrial Toxology* (1934; revised with coauthor Harriet L. Hardy, 1949).

During her life she played a prominent part in many social and humanitarian causes. Along with Jane Addams she went to Germany in 1919 with a Quaker mission for famine relief, and like Addams was accused of being pro-German when she set about raising money to feed the children.

Hamilton was interested in the Sacco-Vanzetti case almost from the start. She was a member of a small committee, including the editor of the *Springfield Republican*, that met with Governor Fuller of Massachusetts in August 1927 and asked him to commute the sentences of the condemned men. Later she was with a group of people who kept a death watch for Sacco and Vanzetti in Boston, and two years later she spoke at a memorial service for them. In the course of the Sacco-Vanzetti affair she very likely had acquaintances in common with Dos Passos, and in her autobiography she listed him as among "the army of the arrested."⁴

Alice Hamilton first got to know Germany in 1895, during her year studying bacteriology there. She was in Germany once more in 1915, accompanying Jane Addams in a delegation of women from neutral countries seeking to shorten the war and bring about "a peace without victory." And in 1919, we have seen, she was again there with Jane Adams.

She went to Germany later on a Karl Schurtz Foundation fellowship awarded to her in 1932. By early spring 1933, when she left for the country, Hitler had come to power. After traveling about Germany for nine weeks, using old friendships and acquaintanceships to gain entry among Germans, she returned in revulsion at what she saw and heard, especially regarding the treatment of Jews. Upon leaving Germany she wrote Jane Addams from aboard ship: "The Statue of Liberty will give me a real thrill for the first time" (July 1, 1933).⁵

Back in the United States, she wrote articles and spoke publicly against Nazism and even, in late August 1933, met with President Franklin D. Roosevelt at Hyde Park. Her articles on Nazism in the *New York Times* were: "An Inquiry into the Nazi Mind," August 6, 1933, section 6, and "The Youth Who Are Hitler's Strength," October 8, 1933, section 6. In *Harper's* she published "The Plight of the German Intellectuals" (January 1934), and in the *Atlantic* "Hitler Speaks: the Book Reveals the Man" (October 1933), an exposition and acute analysis of *Mein Kampf*. Besides these she had three long articles in *Survey Graphic*, a journal on social conditions: "Below the Surface" (Sep-

tember 1933), mainly on the situation of German Jews; "Sound and Fury in Germany (November 1933), on labor and social services among the Nazis; and "Woman's Place in Germany" (January 1934).

If we have devoted more space to Alice Hamilton than to Jane Addams, it is because Addams has been the far better-known figure. But both Addams and Hamilton may be considered together in our asking why only one woman, a dancer, was the subject of a Biography in *U.S.A.* Perhaps the answer lies in who had the economic and political power in the United States. Alice Hamilton, in her sixties, said of her country: "My idea is that the American man gives over to woman all the things he is profoundly disinterested in, and keeps business and politics to himself."⁶

For much of the time when Dos Passos was working on *U.S.A.*, he held to his view "all right we are two nations," enunciated in "Camera Eye (50)," which deals with and is situated by accounts of the final hours of the Sacco-Vanzetti affair. In Dos Passos' autobiographical *The Theme Is Freedom* (1956), he wrote: "It was somewhere during the years of the early New Deal that I rejoined the United States."⁷ In contrast, Jane Addams and Alice Hamilton, however aggrieved by political and judicial events, never severed allegiance to the system. They continued to work within it.

In birth, education, and manners, both Addams and Hamilton were parts of upper-middle-class America. As one of Addams's biographers has written of her success, "She was able to obtain gifts of money and service from the well-to-do and social elite in Chicago in part because she was one of them."⁸ Similarly Alice Hamilton enjoyed access to and good will from factory owners because of her social background, and sometimes through her class contacts.⁹ Perhaps there seemed too much of polite society and "uplifting" about Hull House for Dos Passos to care for it. His mother and he had suffered embarrassment, and probably humiliation, because of his birth out of wedlock, and this made him hostile to any tinge of social snobbery.

There was nothing of polite society about Emma Goldman, whom Dos Passos names three times in "Camera Eye (26)." Yet though Dos Passos found Goldman sympathetic, he wrote no Biography of her either.¹⁰ A likely reason for the 26-1 man-woman ratio among subjects of the Biographies is that Dos Passos wanted to depict a country dominated by males. So patent is his depiction sometimes that bits of the trilogy—e.g., "Camera Eye (6)"—are satires of American stereotypic masculinity. *U.S.A.* provides such a memorable picture of the United States that a maverick reader might fantasize on smuggling one more Biography, "Hull House," in as a counterpoise to "The House of Morgan"—with its succession of profiteers from misery.

Notes

1. Letter of August 23, 1917.
2. Alice Hamilton, *Exploring the Dangerous Trades* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1943), pp. 55-56 ("I had a conviction"); p. 114 ("Living in a working-class").
3. A major theme in the Biographies in *U.S.A.* is that American inventors and technical innovators, like Henry Ford, do not realize or care about how their achievements will affect society. American physicians' ignoring of industrial medicine—which then had no payoff in dollars—was in keeping with this attitude. Dr. Hamilton's work in the field sought to alleviate decades of destruction to workers' health due to manufacturing practices.
4. Hamilton, *Exploring the Dangerous Trades*, p. 276 ("the army"). In "Camera Eye (50)," about Sacco's and Vanzetti's executions, Dos Passos writes that "the old American speech of the haters of oppression is new tonight . . . in the mouth of a

Back Bay socialworker. . ." The social worker was Elizabeth Glendower Evans, who drew Hamilton, her close friend Katherine Codman, and later Felix Frankfurter into the case.

5. Barbara Sicherman, *Alice Hamilton: A Life in Letters* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 343.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

7. *The Theme Is Freedom* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1956), p. 103.

8. Allen F. Davis, *American Heroine: The Life and Legend of Jane Addams* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 106.

9. See Hamilton, *Exploring the Dangerous Trades*, pp. 8-9, 15.

10. When I asked Dos Passos about any influence Goldman may have had on his political or social views before 1936, he answered: "Seemed then as she does now a sympathetic but a slightly comic figure." Response to questionnaire from Melvin Landsberg, September 23, 1957.

To make chapters of John Dos Passos' unpublished novel "Seven Times Round the Walls of Jericho" more widely accessible and understood, we are reprinting two pieces, on Newsletter pages 5-11 below, from *Meridian*, Issue 8, Fall/Winter 2001, pp. 35-38 and 41-51. *Meridian* is a literary magazine produced semiannually "in association with the University of Virginia's M.F.A. Program in Creative Writing." The reprints appear here without change.

For further background on "Seven Times Round the Walls of Jericho," the reader should turn to p. 12 of this issue of the Newsletter.

We are grateful to Lucy Dos Passos Coggin for permission to reprint the chapters from her father's work; to Richard Layman for permission to reprint his introductory essay; to Melissa Cox Norris, of the University of Virginia Library, for giving us advice and sending us a copy of *Meridian*; and to Professor Jeb Livingood, of the University of Virginia, for essential information on *Meridian's* transcribing and publishing the chapters, and for giving us permission to reprint from *Meridian*. We are also grateful to Dr. Ruth L. Strickland, of the University of South Carolina, for allowing us to publish her dissertation abstract (on p. 12 below).