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Introduction

Justice for all children is the high ideal in a democracy.

—GRACE ABBOTT

Grace Abbott led a lifelong fight for justice on behalf of those least able to claim justice for themselves—a cause that she saw as crucial to a larger “struggle for fundamental change” within society as a whole. This belief was central to Abbott’s career as a reformer and government leader—from her early days at Jane Addams’s Hull House settlement, through her years as director of Chicago’s Immigrants’ Protective League, and culminating in her influential tenure as chief of the U.S. Children’s Bureau in Washington DC.

In addition to her lasting achievements for children and immigrants, Abbott also took an important part in the struggle to establish women’s role in government, including her breakthrough accomplishments as the first person sent to represent the United States on a League of Nations committee and as the first woman in American history nominated for a presidential cabinet post.

Throughout her impressive career, Abbott held a deep belief in the power of well-crafted words, as this volume makes clear. She published extensively, her name becoming familiar to readers of, on the one hand, scholarly journals such as the *Social Service Review* or the *American Journal of Sociology* and, on the other, to the much larger audiences available to her as a columnist for the *Chicago*

Evening Post and through articles for *Parents* and other popular magazines. Abbott's books and articles on the educational needs of immigrants, the history of child labor law, the casework responsibilities of juvenile courts, and public-relief policy became standard texts valued by succeeding generations of social workers and public-policy analysts.

But if Abbott saw writing as a vital tool for reform, she also appreciated the unique powers of the spoken word and visual images for communicating ideas, and she embraced her era's newest technologies from radio to motion pictures. She was, with her weekly NBC radio series, one of the first American women regularly broadcasting to large national audiences over the airwaves and was an avid proponent of the educational applications of lantern slides and movies. As Abbott explained, her goal at the Children's Bureau was not just to speak to experts and specialists but "to reach the public"—by whatever means worked best for them. It was this pragmatic sense of "equalitarianism" that led Abbott to such diverse honors as receiving the Gold Medal of the National Institute of Social Sciences, while also being named one of the "Twelve Greatest Living American Women" in a nationwide poll conducted by *Good Housekeeping* magazine—both in the same year!

This collection of Abbott's speeches and essays, divided into sections based on her work for immigrants, children, and women, allows easy access to a group of lively but until now unpublished archival or out-of-print sources. These excerpts illuminate the life and thoughts of an early-twentieth-century American who deserves recognition, and they focus attention on a network of reformers who were joined together by interconnected social welfare crusades. The essays also comprise a series of first-hand explanations of early-twentieth-century progressivism, and they serve as case studies on the impact of the growth of the federal government in the early twentieth century, when ideas about private versus public responsibilities were uniquely in flux. Finally, they act as a measuring stick by which to judge the possibilities of progress.

Appropriately, Abbott's older sister, Edith Abbott, provides introductions to two of this volume's sections of essays. Grace Abbott made numerous lifelong alliances with fellow female reformers, but her first and most important was the bond she forged with her sister. Indeed "partnership" inadequately describes a relationship that included shared living quarters, joint research and writing, and fiercely mutual admiration. The Abbott sisters of Grand Island, Nebraska, possessed reformers' zeal as a family birthright. Their mother, Lizzie, a Quaker and ardent abolitionist, was an early feminist. Her girls, Grace once wryly explained, were born believing in the cause of women's rights.

Among those rights was equal opportunity for education. Both Edith and Grace, first trained as schoolteachers, soon sought additional schooling at the University of Chicago. Founded in 1891 with bequests made by John D. Rockefeller Sr., the university quickly became a major force in American higher education. When Edith Abbott arrived in Chicago in 1903, with Grace soon to follow, the city was a boomtown, and the university was its intellectual center, a champion of new ideas and new disciplines—particularly sociology, social work, anthropology, and psychology.

Their search for higher education made the Abbott sisters members of a growing company of white, middle-class women who enthusiastically embraced the chances an urbanizing, professionalizing society offered for a life outside the confines of the home. By 1900 more than eighty-five thousand of these women were students at over one thousand colleges; more than a million female graduates were already employed in white-collar jobs as teachers, librarians, office staff, nurses, and social workers.

While many of this first group of highly educated American women attended gender-segregated institutions, Grace and Edith Abbott chose coeducation. The early-twentieth-century Midwest was notable for its number of colleges and universities that allowed women and men to study together. Therefore, the world of reform this volume illuminates was not exclusively a female one. Not only did Grace

Abbott study with men, and along with them help create the new professional fields of social work and public welfare administration, she also lived with them at Chicago's Hull House, the famous Halsted Street settlement begun by Jane Addams in 1889, as part of what Edith Abbott affectionately called "a very argumentative family group."

Grace Abbott, born a decade after the end of the Civil War in 1878, belonged to a generation of women that was the least likely to wed in all of American history. Certainly the carnage of the war reduced the availability of potential husbands; nonetheless, that fact alone cannot explain the significant percentage of female never-marrieds in the United States at the turn of the century. The lure of nondomestic possibilities was powerful, and college graduates dominated the ranks of single women. Included among them were Grace and Edith Abbott as well as Jane Addams, Ellen Starr, Sophonisba Breckinridge, and Julia Lathrop—all close friends, Hull House residents, and fellow advocates of immigrants', children's, and women's rights.

Grace Abbott, then, typified women's emergence into public life at the turn of the century. A professional career and marriage, as she notes in these pages, rarely mixed. However, Grace Abbott's contacts always reached beyond exclusively female circles. If women numbered among her allies, so, too, did men: English reformer Sidney Webb, prominent legal scholar Roscoe Pound, and New Deal insider Harry Hopkins.

What bound them all together was a shared status as progressives (reformers who gave their name to the era from 1870 to 1920). A movement—not a political party—progressivism demanded both social and political change. And while progressives sheltered under an umbrella belief that America could be a better place for all, they differed on many specifics. Some thought trade unions should be discouraged. Others, with whom Grace Abbott cooperated, wanted such organizations to thrive at home and internationally. Some were pacifists, as was Grace. Others ardently advocated American use of

force abroad, as did Theodore Roosevelt. The causes embraced by progressives spanned a huge gamut including advocacy of special juvenile courts, demands for improvements in urban housing and sanitation, crusades to purify food and ban alcohol, and efforts to regulate corporations. No single person embodied all causes or all aspects of progressivism; nor did progressives reach consensus on even one cause. Grace Abbott's acceptance in 1908 of a position as the first director of Chicago's Immigrants' Protective League drew her quickly into an issue about which debate was notably fierce—the rights of immigrants.

At the height of the progressive era, between 1890 and the outbreak of World War I, more than fifteen million newcomers arrived in the United States. Though the proportion of immigrants was not remarkably different from earlier decades (about 16 percent of the total population), the sources of immigration were. Before 1880 most had come from northern Europe, particularly the British Isles, Germany, and Ireland. By the beginning of the twentieth century, more than eight out of ten came from southern and eastern Europe. They were Italians, Greeks, Hungarians, Russians, and Poles. They were not Protestants, not English speakers, and not, many said, as easily assimilable as the earlier “Anglo-Saxons” had been.

Progressivism was a crusade spurred by faith in progress—and by fear. Optimists enthusiastically saw possibilities for social betterment. Pessimists demanded change, lest class wars and ethnic divisions shatter the nation. Many progressives expressed both emotions, but Grace Abbott clearly belonged to the optimists, and her writings on immigration in this volume reflect that.

Immigrants, Abbott felt, needed to be protected from fraud and exploitation. They needed practical warnings about abusive employment agencies and clear guidance about licenses for work in trades. They didn't need to be “molded” after “some approved American pattern” or be put in a room and told about “American ideals.” And her fellow countrymen need not feel that the use of any other language was a menace to standard English. Moreover,

Abbott, well trained in the emerging rules of sociology and social welfare work at the University of Chicago, was a fervent advocate of scientific investigation and on-site fieldwork. As Chicago filled with hundreds of thousands of immigrant girls from Poland, Russia, Hungary, and Croatia, Abbott was not content to accept hearsay. Instead, in 1911 she traveled alone to eastern Europe to collect data for *The Immigrant and the Community*. Published in 1917, the book (excerpted in this volume) was the first to gain Abbott widespread national attention. *The Immigrant and the Community* provided a nuanced portrait of Chicago's newcomers—and a ringing challenge to “the stupid race prejudices” of native-born Americans.

The challenge was repudiated. In 1924, the National Origins Act embraced fears about post-1880 immigration instead of Abbott's confidence that great ethnic diversity was a source of America's strength. Through the 1960s America's immigration policy severely restricted the number of new arrivals, which was governed by a quota system that favored peoples of northern-European background.

By 1924 Abbott had refocused her energies, left Chicago for Washington, and embraced another progressive cause: children's rights. In 1917 the first director of the United States Children's Bureau, Julia Lathrop, convinced her good friend and fellow Chicagoan to accept an appointment as head of the agency's newly created Child Labor Division. In 1921 Abbott succeeded Lathrop as the bureau's second director. The Children's Bureau, established by Congress in 1912, was itself a progressive victory, reflective of the fact that the desire to improve conditions for children united many in the movement.

The writings in this volume illustrate another progressive trait: the embracement of expanded federal regulatory authority. Even during its period of greatest influence at the height of the New Deal, the Children's Bureau remained small. Between 1917 and 1933, when an ailing Grace Abbott resigned to teach in the University of Chicago's Graduate School of Social Service Administration, the bureau rarely had as many as two hundred employees. Nonetheless, it prophesied the emergence of a more powerful federal government.

Indeed, the excerpts included here implicitly downplay the importance of that change. Abbott quite sincerely thought that all reasonable people should support universal programs of health insurance for children and standardized national codes of child labor. Healthcare, she indignantly wrote, was not to be considered the same as “rugs or motor cars”—with the rich granted higher quality simply because they were able to afford it. The only people who opposed a federal constitutional amendment regulating child labor were those who “. . . were indifferent to the object for which federal aid is sought [or] . . . unfortunately for the children, . . . [those who] like the crazy patchwork quilt of state laws which so unequally protects American children.” Not even all progressives agreed with such ideas, which could fairly be called revolutionary, though Abbott never referred to them as such.

The proposed Twentieth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, passed by Congress in 1924 but never ratified, was the product of standardizers’ frustration. Granting the federal government authority to limit, regulate, and prohibit the labor of all persons under age eighteen, it embodied a reform agenda far ahead of even most official state rules for child labor, which generally held the upper limit of childhood at age sixteen. Even federal occupational censuses usually listed all workers over that age as adults. And most early-twentieth-century Americans applauded full-time work after age fourteen.

The so-called Child Labor Amendment was a response to Supreme Court rebuffs. In 1917 Abbott came to Washington as head of the new Children’s Bureau division established to administer the Keating-Owen Law. Passed in 1916, Keating-Owen closed interstate commerce to the products of “oppressive” child labor; these “products” were defined in the bill as anything produced in a quarry or mine that employed children under age sixteen or anything produced in a factory that used child workers under age fourteen. When the U.S. Supreme Court declared the act unconstitutional, angry supporters immediately reintroduced it as Title XII, an amendment to the Revenue Act of 1918. Referred to by Abbott and almost ev-

everybody else as “the Child Labor Tax Act,” the amendment sought to kill the same bird with a different stone. If the federal government could not control child labor through the U.S. Congress’s power to oversee interstate trade, then it could tax it to death. Title XII imposed a 10 percent federal tax on the annual net profits of any industry that employed underage workers, using exactly the same definitions employed by Keating-Owen. The Supreme Court, which had declared Keating-Owen an unconstitutional misuse of the Commerce Clause, promptly damned Title XII as an equally unconstitutional “privilege” tax. Taxes, it decreed, should be levied for fiscal, not social, purposes.

Furious advocates of federalized standards for child labor campaigned for a constitutional amendment, which the Supreme Court could not thwart. However, both Keating-Owen and the Child Labor Tax Act reflected national preoccupations with larger problems caused by the United States’ entrance into World War I, rather than national support for centralized control of child labor law. At a time when its attention was focused on mobilization, a distracted U.S. Congress passed both bills with little debate. Each, however, was a hollow victory, though Grace and Edith Abbott thought otherwise. Neither made any mention of street selling, domestic service, or seasonal agricultural labor—the occupations of the vast majority of young laborers. At best, each covered about 5 percent of all child workers. Keating-Owen and the Child Labor Tax Act were easy concessions for national politicians to make to a vocal, well-organized, anti-child labor coalition.

The proposed Twentieth Amendment was a different matter. Passed by a U.S. Congress warned by prominent suffragists that millions of just-enfranchised female voters wanted national child labor restrictions, the Child Labor Amendment soon floundered. In 1924, within months of the amendment’s passage, Massachusetts held a popular referendum on the proposal. The defeat at the polls was so overwhelming that amendment supporters never again tried to submit the measure to the will of a general electorate.

If the Child Labor Amendment never generated widespread grassroots support, neither did the “Maternity and Infancy Revolution” embodied in the Sheppard-Towner Maternity and Infancy Protection Act, which was, like Keating-Owen and the Child Labor Tax Act, a federal bill administered by the Children’s Bureau. Sheppard-Towner provided federal matching funds to states, enabling them to set up well-baby and parent education programs. During its seven-year lifetime between 1921 and 1928, it focused on “child health conferences,” where trained nurses instructed young mothers about the proper care of newborns and toddlers.

Grace and Edith Abbott were right: Sheppard-Towner’s “nurse-teachers” dispensed all kinds of useful advice at a modest administrative cost. However, like federal control of child labor, federal involvement with health care was an idea ahead of its time, especially as politicians lost any fear of the fabled women’s vote and realized that the millions of new voters given access to the polls by the Nineteenth Amendment did not operate as a bloc. Women were not uniformly in favor of children’s federalized health care reform—or anything else. Although Grace Abbott thought all reasonable Americans should support the Children’s Bureau’s programs, millions thought that children’s work and health were not proper concerns of Washington-based bureaucracies. The Catholic Church raised alarms about unnecessary government interference, as did the new profession of pediatrics, worried that Sheppard-Towner nurses might promote the Children’s Bureau message that breast milk provided the simplest and most effective nourishment for newborns. The fledgling specialty, at the bottom of the medical pecking order, strongly advocated the superiority of bottle feeding, with physicians, of course, in charge of recipes for formula.

The Children’s Bureau was right: breastfeeding was best. But truth rarely trumps politics, especially the politics of emotion that childhood generates. Was Abbott’s agency right about other issues? Even in the early twenty-first century that question spurs debate. Like many other progressives Abbott initially saw Supreme Court

resistance to federal regulation of child labor as a blessing in disguise. Surely, she thought, the backward thinking of a few old jurists would stimulate citizens around the country to demand a constitutional amendment. Nothing of the sort happened. Supporters of the Sheppard-Towner act could not win renewal of enabling legislation, and the program died. Even a stalwart reformer such as New York's Governor Al Smith fretted that health care was not an appropriate federal function. Politicians, initially cowed by the specter of millions of new women voters tossing them out of office, soon relaxed. Lizzie Abbott dreamed of the power of female suffrage. Grace and Edith proudly marched for the vote. All of the Abbotts thought that the moral strength of female outrage at the ballot box could quickly change America. It did not. In fact, the sound that notably marked American politics by the end of the twentieth century was that of silence as women and men increasingly avoided the polls. The influence of political parties shrank, while that of influence-groups mushroomed. And fewer Americans thought government bureaucracies positively influenced the greater good.

Grace Abbott, in contrast, was a true believer, convinced that government action could solve problems, not worsen them. The Children's Bureau reached the apex of its influence during Abbott's lifetime, as she worked unceasingly to make it a model of the benefits that well-trained, scientifically minded public servants could bring to society. Even after her retirement from government, she stayed in close touch with New Deal allies and frequently returned to the Capitol as an expert witness. Her passionate testimony helped convince Congress to include Title IV, the Aid to Dependent Children Program (ADC), in the historic Social Security Act of 1935.

Social Security greatly expanded the federal government's role as a social policy maker. ADC embodied the kind of federal-state cost sharing that Congress had repudiated when it refused to renew the Sheppard-Towner Maternity and Infancy Protection Act. Nonetheless, the former gradually became a government program that millions, including millions of recipients, loved to hate.

Without Abbott, the Children's Bureau declined. By 1947 its chief no longer reported directly to the Secretary of Labor. As federal bureaucracy mushroomed, the Department of Labor shriveled. By the early 1950s the department had lost over half of its agencies and bureaus to other units of government. The Children's Bureau became a division within the Federal Security Administration, a non-Cabinet level agency. Then, after another round of major reorganizations during the Nixon era, it ended up as a shadow of its former self within the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Although the number of federal offices concerned with child welfare metastasized, cacophony, rather than clear leadership, characterized late-twentieth-century federal children's policy.

These pages remind us of a very different, more innocent age. They also, finally, provide a means by which to assess the nature of progress and the realities of social change. Though the phrase "government servant" is still commonly used, how many people accept it as did Grace Abbott? From her girlhood to her death, Abbott was a pioneer—literally and figuratively. Her boldness made enemies. But even her harshest opponents never dared to call her "venal." No one thought her capable of accepting a bribe. She wasn't.

It is worth remembering that Abbott thought government work was a higher calling. She wanted to use state and federal legislatures as agents of social change and advocates for the weak. She did not accompany the phrase "Washington bureaucracy" with a disillusioned shrug. Even when she was the highest ranking female administrator in the federal government while serving as director of the U.S. Children's Bureau, she lived modestly. She returned to private life as a college professor. She never used her wealth of Washington contacts to financially enrich herself. She did not use her middle-class status or her elite university graduate degree as protective shields behind which comfortably to ignore "the terrors" life brought to those less fortunate. She wanted the emerging fields of social work and public welfare administration to serve as bridges for any in America who were left behind. She was, as Secretary of

Labor Frances Perkins notes here in a tribute, an “equalitarian.” Abbott did not see herself as innately superior to the Galician peasant drawn in confusion and loneliness to Chicago’s tawdry dance halls. She did not see herself as socially superior to anyone, and those who provoked her acidic pen were far more likely to ride in “handsome limousines” than in the other humble vehicles that caused “the Washington traffic jam.” What does it say about us that such a life might now be dismissed as overly naive?

Today many more people accept ideas that Grace Abbott embraced ahead of their time: cost-sharing partnerships between different levels of government and expanded public responsibilities for social welfare. These writings reflect that, but they also illustrate other stubborn realities that Grace Abbott herself acknowledged.

Many in the Washington traffic jam set their sites on meeting personally with a member of Congress. And, as Abbott notes in these pages, “[Congressmen] are really just as fond of children as I am. They are fond of their own children and their friends’ children, but they are usually not familiar with what is happening to many American children, and they often lack the imagination to translate the facts and figures which are presented to them in terms of actual children.”

Decades after Abbott’s death, America still mirrors the Congressmen who frustrated her. Talk about the rights of children is common. Few today would see a federal program that attempted to teach parents about good care for infants as revolutionary. Few would find that it crossed a dangerous line toward too much centralized government, especially if the funds were meager and the individual states were still largely in control. But a society far more comfortable with ideas about public regulation of all aspects of childhood is still one which, like Abbott’s Congressmen, lacks imagination and will. We remain a society of people who love our own children and ignore the suffering of other people’s children. We demand that no child be left behind, but leave plenty of children behind. Medicare, begun in 1965, was our first foray into nationally subsidized health

care for a designated group defined by age. It was designated for the old, not the young. We loudly proclaim that children should be protected first, but have allowed children to replace the elderly as the country's most impoverished.

We still talk about immigrants as potentially unassimilable threats to American jobs and ethical standards, with as little concrete evidence as those who made similar charges a century ago. And, finally, almost a century after the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, ambiguity still marks social attitudes about proper roles for women. Writing in 1933, Grace Abbott recalled a psychologist “who tells us that women [who] have proven their capacity in literature, in science, in art, in the professions, or in social services are not happy. They may imagine that they are, but he knows that they cannot be. . . . Moreover, someone is sure to suggest that the explanation of unhappy man is unhappy woman.”

Grace Abbott belonged to the first cohort of college women that faced hard choices between marriage and childbearing or a satisfying professional career. In part “to prove their capacity” in the social sciences, the Abbott sisters remained single. Such early-twentieth-century dilemmas have significantly diminished. Most professional women today are married with children. But have we truly gained the kind of cultural confidence Grace Abbott wanted—to judge talent for talent alone, free of gendered expectations?

This collection of Grace Abbott's writings allows readers to reimage past struggles and reassess present ones. Her joyful, witty, sometimes exasperated prose reaffirms the fact that being part of the struggle enhances humanity. Everyone deserves a “ticket of general admission” to the “fairgrounds” of American public life. No one should be “locked out”—by gender, by ethnicity, or by social prejudice. And how much worse, Grace Abbott also reminds us, it is “to be locked in” to an intellectually gated life of indifference to others.