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Edith Abbott (1876-1957)

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EDITH ABBOTT (1876–1957)

Abbott was the first woman dean of a graduate school in an American university and, simultaneously, the first dean of the first graduate school of social work in the nation. Her leading role in social work overshadowed her deep roots in sociology, in which she was a major scholar of her day. She was a prolific author (Marks 1958) and specialized in the study of women's rights and wages. Her life was dedicated to the eradication of social inequality facing blacks, immigrants, people in poverty, and laborers. Abbott championed the use of statistical data at the University of Chicago during an era when this activity was considered "women's work" in sociology.

BIOGRAPHY

Edith Abbott was born on September 26, 1876, into a well-established, argumentative, and honorable family that moved to the Nebraska frontier just before her birth. She was encouraged to be independent and to follow intellectual pursuits. Her parents, Elizabeth Griffin and Othman Abbott, moved to Grand Island, Nebraska, after their own pioneer childhoods in Illinois. Edith's mother was a feminist, abolitionist, republican, and Quaker who was part of the movement for women's higher education (she graduated from Rockford Seminary in 1868). Her remarkable background was matched by her husband, a soldier in the Civil War, a frontier lawyer and banker, and the first lieutenant governor of the new state of Nebraska. His feisty struggle for survival is recounted in his autobiography (O. Abbott 1929), an account that Edith urged him to write. The Abbotts had four remarkable children of which Edith was the second. Two years after Edith's birth, her equally talented sister, Grace Abbott, was born (November 17, 1878). The family's politically exciting life was visible as early as 1882

when six-year-old Edith "helped suffrage" by sharing her bed with Susan B. Anthony when Anthony stayed with the Abbotts on her national campaign for women's suffrage.

Edith was sent to Brownell Hall, a private school in Omaha, in the autumn of 1888. She graduated from Brownell with honors, as the valedictorian and winner of a gold medal for achievement, in 1893. This upper-middle-class training halted abruptly with the economic depression of 1893. Heavy losses at the Citizens National Bank, where her father was a director, stockholder, and attorney, caused the collapse of the bank and the Abbotts's finances. Honorably, Othman Abbott and his children worked for years to repay all the depositors who lost their savings when the bank failed. This difficult effort sharply curtailed the schooling of Edith and Grace. When they visited the Columbian World's Fair in Chicago and first saw the fledgling University of Chicago in the summer of 1893, it was one of their last fun expeditions as students, but it foreshadowed their future work.

From 1893 to 1895 Edith Abbott taught at Grand Island High School in Nebraska. From 1893 to 1901 she also struggled to continue her higher education. She enrolled in correspondence courses, summer sessions, and then full-time study at the University of Nebraska. Finally, in 1901, she graduated with a bachelor of arts degree. The University of Nebraska was then at a high point intellectually. She studied with Louise Pound, a noted linguist; Roscoe Pound, Louise's brother and the founder of sociological jurisprudence; and E. A. Ross, an eminent sociologist. Her friends included Willa Cather, later a major novelist. From 1901 to 1903 Abbott enrolled in graduate classes and taught at Lincoln High School.

During 1902 she attended summer school at the University of Chicago and was noticed by political economists J. L. Laughlin and Thorstein Veblen. With their backing, she received a fellowship in political economy from the University of Chicago in the fall of 1903. At Chicago she studied with W. I. Thomas and Sophonisba Breckinridge* in sociology, and graduated with honors and a Ph.D. in political economy in the spring of 1905.

After graduation Abbott took jobs in Boston with the Women's Trade Union League and the Carnegie Institution. In the latter position she worked with sociologist Carroll D. Wright and continued her statistical studies of women's work. She lived at Dennison House (cofounded by Emily Greene Balch*), and in 1906 went to London (on a Carnegie fellowship) where she attended the University of London's University College and the London School of Economics and Political Science. She studied with Beatrice Webb* and Sydney Webb, the Fabian Socialists, lived at St. Hilda's Settlement, and observed militant English suffragists (Abbott 1906b). Her favorite course, taught by Beatrice Webb, was "Methods of Social Investigation." Abbott reproduced this training at the University of Chicago when she subsequently offered a sociology course with the same title and structure from 1913 to 1920. The Webbs' studies of the poor laws

and advisory commissions also were incorporated in Abbott's later writings (e.g., Abbott 1929).

Abbott returned to Boston in 1907 to work with Emily Greene Balch* in the then eminent Department of Economics and Sociology at Wellesley College. Abbott's female friends in Chicago did not forget her, however, and she was invited to take on a new role in a basically new institutional structure amid her former allies. To the shock of her Boston friends, Abbott accepted the untried Chicago job. In the fall of 1908 she began work as director of social research in the Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy, then sponsored by the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago. She resided at Jane Addams's* Hull-House until 1920 with her lifelong friend, faculty colleague, and mentor, Sophonisba Breckinridge. Other residents included Grace Abbott (Edith's younger sister) and many other notable women.

This trio (Breckinridge and the two Abbotts) became a research and administrative powerhouse for one another, for other women scholars, and for oppressed people. Chicago and Hull-House were the scene of many controversies in which Edith Abbott was in the forefront. She worked, for example, to support the women workers who went on strike against the Chicago garment industry in 1910; joined the Progressive party in 1912; became a board member of a black social settlement (the Wendell Phillips Settlement); and fought Chicago's corrupt political machine. Breckinridge and Abbott (1912), with the support of Jane Addams, opposed the antisuffragist Minnie Bronson in national debate. Further, Abbott and Breckinridge organized a major conference in 1912 that recognized the plight of urban children as a scholarly and political issue. Abbott was labeled a "radical" as a result of these activities, and was plagued by red-baiting, as were her activist friends, including Jane Addams, Emily Greene Balch, Sophonisba Breckinridge, and Florence Kelly* (Lemons 1975).

From 1908 until she retired in 1943, Abbott was an industrious and illustrious member of the faculty of the University of Chicago. She worked from 1908 to 1920 under the administration of the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago. She taught as a lecturer in social statistics in sociology from 1913 until 1920. When the School of Social Service Administration was founded in 1920, she was appointed associate professor of social economy, and from 1924 to 1942 she was the dean of the School of Social Service Administration.

Abbott pressed for administrative positions for women, and thus established the female control of social work that endures to the present (Bernard* 1964). Abbott, her sister Grace, and Breckinridge were major leaders in the formation of public policy affecting women, children, industrial relations, and immigration. They helped to establish the profession of social work as an academic occupation, raising its prestige and power to act as a force for social change. Abbott and Breckinridge cofounded the *Social Service Review* in 1927, and it soon became (and remains today) the leading journal in social work. They established a tradition of sound research and political advocacy on behalf of the powerless,

especially women. Unfortunately this tradition lost its momentum among today's more conservative social workers. Ironically, Abbott is, at times, considered part of this conservative, status quo outlook (e.g., Platt 1977), even though she spent her life opposing the reification of elitist social structures.

Abbott assumed many public roles as an adviser and consultant (Costin 1983). She worked to establish the Social Security Act, for example, in 1934. She also maintained her many international ties, especially her British connections to Fabian socialism.

Abbott was professionally active in the American Statistical Association, the American Economic Association (serving as vice-president in 1918–1919), the Women's Trade Union League, the American Sociological Society, the National Consumer's League, the National American Women's Suffrage Association, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the National Urban League, and the Women's City Club of Chicago. She served as president of the National Conference of Social Work and as president of the American Association of Schools of Social Work.

Edith's younger sister, Grace, died in June 1939. Edith, who nursed her until the end, experienced profound grief. She continued to work, however. From 1942 to 1953 Abbott was dean emeritus of the School of Social Service Administration. Officially retired, she continued her work (e.g., Abbott 1943) but slowed the pace of her commitments. A marked decline in her activities was precipitated in 1948 when Sophonisba Breckinridge died. Abbott moved back into Hull-House in 1949, and red-baiting began anew with the McCarthy era. She was not personally attacked as viciously as before, but her hopes and ideas were severely undermined by this new threat. She was, moreover, an elderly outsider to the diminished life that now characterized Hull-House. She returned in 1953 to Grand Island, Nebraska, where she lived with her brother, Arthur, until her death on July 28, 1957. Her last years were painful. Physically, she became blind. Professionally, she was the last of her generation of progressive women sociologists. She was enrolled in the Women of Nebraska Hall of Fame in 1975, an honor she would have relished.

MAJOR THEMES

Women's wages and occupations were powerful, organizing themes in Abbott's writings. She early critiqued Harriet Martineau's* account of women's occupations in the United States (Abbott 1906a). Abbott's (1910) first book, *Women in Industry*, is a massive, comprehensive statement on women's work in the marketplace. Evolving from earlier work with Sophonisba Breckinridge on census data on the employment of women, Abbott developed a complex, thorough analysis of women in various industrial areas: factories, cotton mills, and the clothing and printing industries. She recorded the historical antecedents of women's industrial labor as well as relevant contemporary public opinion. She produced an invaluable history of early labor movements and occupational

structures, as well as the more specialized topic of women and industry. Abbott's concern with women in the marketplace echoes that of other Chicago female sociologists (for example, Amy Hewes*).

Abbott embraced a pragmatic agenda for improving the lives of other oppressed people: immigrants, blacks, juvenile delinquents, children, the poor, and laborers. She typically explored institutional inequities that could be documented statistically.

Breckinridge and Abbott (1912) coauthored *The Delinquent Child and the Home*. This work systematically documented the myriad problems faced by urban youths. Abbott and Breckinridge (1916) again collaborated to write *Truancy and Non-Attendance in the Chicago Schools*. They were committed to a policy of education until age sixteen, and they examined the many factors that lead to school absence, such as poverty, mental and physical defects, lack of knowledge of the immigrant parents and child, and delinquency. Documenting the existence and extent of missed school days and the historical development of compulsory education, Abbott and Breckinridge suggested pragmatic remedies. Their arguments are still timely and the controversy is still lively.

Abbott, Breckinridge, and their associates (1936) documented the problems of inadequate housing over a period of decades. *The Tenements of Chicago, 1908–1935* is a massive study of housing conditions and poverty in Chicago. The book resulted from twenty-five years of study and cooperative research with dozens of students (cf., Lucile Eaves*) and is based on house-to-house canvassing of 151 city blocks, including visits to 18,225 apartments. The problems Abbott and Breckinridge noted, such as unenforced housing regulations, understaffed city inspection services, high rents for substandard housing, and large numbers of unemployed people suffering from the social stresses of broken families, ill health, and lack of education, are as relevant today as they were more than forty years ago. The careful documentation of these problems provides an excellent basis for understanding the historical dimensions of these same issues today.

Abbott's (1931b) vision of social work as an aggressive, policy making, and controversial profession is clearly specified in *Social Welfare and Professional Education*. Written partially during the Great Depression, the book advocates government-sponsored, guaranteed employment centralized and organized through public agencies. Abbott authored several writings on social work training, history, and professionalization (e.g., Abbott 1937).

Abbott (e.g., 1924, 1926, 1941) wrote a series of books on immigrants in which she used a documentary method keyed to case histories, social history, and statutory legislation (for further discussion, see the entry on Sophonisba Breckinridge). Finally, Abbott also specialized in the study of crime and juvenile delinquency. Her work for the National Commission on Law Observance and Enforcement resulted in one of the earliest and most comprehensive analyses of Mexican immigrants and their encounters with the criminal justice system (Abbott 1931a).

CRITIQUES OF EDITH ABBOTT

The major biography of the Abbott sisters, Edith and Grace, is by Lela B. Costin (1983). Costin provides a useful narrative of these remarkable sisters who aided and reciprocally supported each other as people, friends, and colleagues. Costin greatly expands the information known about their lives and influence, but does not analyze their intellectual contributions, their work in sociology, or their complex mixture of conservative and radical practices. Costin omits the women-centered focus of the Abbotts's lives and leaves untouched the growth of that focus from a network of vital women who worked cooperatively together for decades.

Sandra Stehno's (1988) analysis of Abbott and Breckinridge's work with black children in Chicago provides the complexity and depth needed to explicate the intellectual features of Abbott's work. Stehno's archivally based study details the commitment of Abbott and Breckinridge to children of color and to the generation of public responsibility in an often heartless capitalist society.

Steven Diner (1977) wrote a meticulous analysis of the work and role of *The Social Service Review*. Although his study is oriented to social work historians, it is helpful to all scholars studying Abbott and Breckinridge. Hill (1989, 557–665) documents Abbott's relatively more powerful position vis-à-vis Hattie Plum Williams* in the world of "women's work" in sociology.

Abbott was a talented, conscientious scholar, educator, and social reformer who often was overshadowed by the fame and writings of her close friends and colleagues at Hull-House, especially Jane Addams, Sophonisba Breckinridge, and her sister, Grace Abbott. Today, Edith Abbott remains little known outside the field of social work, but her writings are a witness and a tribute to her sociological talents and contributions.

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