

Fighting Mary McDowell and her

Long-Reaching Social Reform

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If a political candidate today had the resume that Mary McDowell did in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, she would likely be a front-runner. McDowell did not do anything halfway; she committed herself to a number of causes and made significant impact in each. Whether it came to street sanitary reform, women's rights, or the Chicago settlement houses, McDowell used her care and compassion to enact change wherever she went. Mary McDowell's work in the Chicago settlements, women's suffrage, and in sanitary reform displays the intersection between the fights for racial, gender, and socioeconomic class equity.

Before Mary McDowell became a Chicago change-maker, she spent her youth in Cincinnati, Ohio. She was born on November 30th, 1854 to Malcolm and Jane Welch Gordon McDowell. Her family's move to Chicago in the mid 1860s was driven by her father's work; his recognition for distinguished service in the Civil War allowed him to successfully open a steel rolling mill (Hamilton, 2002, p. 256). McDowell's father also had mission of aiding the less privileged; he made sure that the people working for the rolling mill were treated fairly and their families were taken care of. When Mary was a young adult and the family was settled in Evanston, Mary's mother became ill and unable to care for her six young children. This required Mary to return home from the Hull House and become responsible for taking care of her five younger siblings. When a settlement house was to be built in the Chicago Stockyards, Jane Addams recommended McDowell to take charge of the settlement.

McDowell's Micro Practice

Many know of Mary McDowell through research of other Chicago reformers, Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr of the Hull House. The women worked parallel to one another for much of their early adulthood, but not until McDowell lived at Hull House as the resident kindergarten teachers did their missions intersect. McDowell, then 40 years old, impressed Addams in her dedication towards Hull House, and Addams eventually recommended McDowell to start and take charge of a new settlement house in Packingtown, the area behind the Union Stockyards. Packingtown was an area of great violence and discontent due to poverty and unsanitary conditions. For this reason, McDowell felt it even more important to offer a location in which there could be programs for adults, families, and children in the neighborhood to keep them off the streets. The University of Chicago Settlement House eventually offered gymnasiums for children, a visiting nurse program, a Mother's Club, classes for children including woodworking, sewing, cooking, and arts and crafts, and various other clubs that the residents could join.

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From that point on she was able to organize classes in English, nutrition and hygiene. McDowell provided access to vocational schools, bathing facilities, concerts, lectures and clubs to the people around the Union Stockyards. “At the settlement house McDowell provided classes in arts and crafts, sewing, and cooking, and she established a library and formed various clubs and groups to help immigrants adjust to American society” (Hamilton, 2002, p. 256). McDowell inarguably possessed the interpersonal skills necessary to guide her in the leadership of the University of Chicago Settlements, including her teaching skills of multiple subjects alongside Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr.

McDowell’s Macro Practice

McDowell’s work on the ground in the Settlement House influenced her main focus; larger socio-political change. McDowell was extremely apt at mobilizing people behind larger issues, such as the municipal waste situation in the city, women’s involvement in politics, and how to adequately support the poor (“Chicago Tribute,” n.d., para. 4). McDowell worked both on the ground and at the decision-making table, and that was a large part of her success; it is far more difficult to advocate for people who you do not know on a personal level, or haven’t seen in their typical state. Living in the University of Chicago Settlement House, McDowell knew firsthand how unclean and difficult those living situations were in that area of the city, and that motivated her advocacy further. “Recognizing the link between quality of life and the physical environment, McDowell fought to close open garbage pits, drain pools of stagnant water and install sewers” (“Chicago Tribute,” n.d., para. 3). She organized protests to raise awareness about the unclean conditions that were unlivable. Her account of the way their demands were received was as follows:

The orders issued by the unions that every place must be left as clean as on Saturday night, that no material must be left out to spoil, that the stock handlers must feed and water stock until all were cared for, so the animals would not suffer, were obeyed to the letter. The women, who were always the hysterical ones in the past...came out as quietly as did the men. The superintendent of one of the largest plants said, “It is a remarkable experience for the stockyards. We have never had such a strike before.” (“Mary McDowell,” 2014, para. 33)

McDowell’s micro practice and macro practice aligned in an ideal way, and helped her move social reform forward on a larger scale.

McDowell’s Dedication to Social Justice

Poverty and unemployment were all too common among Chicagoans, but especially in the packing district, where McDowell resided. Labor rights and unionization became a large piece of McDowell’s social justice efforts. In 1903, McDowell played a significant role in the founding of the National Women’s Trade Union League, and she was appointed the organization’s first president.

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McDowell's and Jane Addams' paths intersected once again as the two women helped convince President Theodore Roosevelt to fund a study focused on women in the workplace. In regards to labor, McDowell explains the hardships butchers went through in the meatpacking industry, and their extremely long work hours.

When I would ask why the people came from work at all hours of the day and in the evening, I was told that the killing had to go on until there were no cattle left to be cared for overnight; and when in my greenness I would ask why a packing industry could not keep cattle overnight when farmers did it very well, I was surprised to learn that because it cost something to feed and water them, men must butcher often sixteen hours at a stretch. It was then I learned for the first time how it happened that when in the morning these men, women, and children went out to work, large numbers of them could not tell whether they would return home for supper, or work from one to sixteen hours. ("Mary McDowell," 2014, para. 9)

McDowell facilitated strikes to demonstrate against large companies and corporations like these packing companies that underpaid and mistreated their workers. Their success in raising wages was limited, however their efforts most certainly pushed the conversation forward. "It was not until the 1930s that labor organizations were strong enough to effect better wages and conditions, but the years of organizing and bringing workers together for common cause in a democratic process were not wasted either" ("Mary McDowell," 2014, para. 36). McDowell recognized the injustices of the labor system in Chicago, and she did her part as an ally to use her privilege and her voice on the National Women's Trade Union League to advocate for the rights of those being disenfranchised.

In her efforts to push for municipal waste cleanup, McDowell appealed to the citizens of Chicago by comparing the city to people's households. The status of trash and waste disposal in the late 1800s and early 1900s was quite dire; there were slaughterhouses, garbage dumps, and heavy industrial pollution around the Union Stockyards. McDowell investigated the garbage disposal around the area and suggested the implementation of incinerators to burn garbage in the city instead of throwing it in dumps. She also was instrumental in funding a sewer to dispose of the waste produced by the meat packers and the stockyards.

All of these initiatives were under the same premise — treat the city streets as you would your own home. This led to the feminization of urban cleaning movements — or the heavy involvement of women in the protests to keep the streets clean. Since women were traditionally the housekeepers and cleaners of their own households, the linkage between the streets and a home encouraged women to feel responsible for advocating for a better and cleaner system. "By encouraging women to political action — both inside and outside the electoral arena — McDowell gave women a voice in their governance and

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greater control over the structures that role their lives” (Mason, 1997, p. 73). In hindsight, some scholars challenge the ways in which these movements were presented to women, since they capitalized upon the traditional role of a woman as a housekeeper (Mason, 1997, p. 75). While McDowell did not necessarily challenge this stereotype, her language appealed to a larger audience than it would have if she had been radically against traditional gender roles. In this way, McDowell combined her passion for sanitary reform and for women’s suffrage to create a more livable society for the citizens of the stockyards.

In addition to gender equality, McDowell was far ahead of her time in advocating for racial tolerance. “She was years ahead of most of her fellow citizens in regard to race relations. As early as 1919, she instigated the establishment of an Interracial Cooperative Committee of Women’s Clubs. Some 80 Women’s Clubs, black and white, participated and, of course, Mary McDowell was elected its president” (“Mary McDowell,” 2014, para. 46). While race was not an issue she spoke heavily about, it was clear that racial integration was part of her idea of a just society and loving one’s neighbor.

McDowell fought tirelessly for the causes she believed in, which begs the question: what gave her the energy to keep fighting? One huge motivator was her faith. McDowell believed,

The things that are common to all are stronger than the things that are different to all. It is difficult for us to be simply human, to know each other as brothers and sisters. Yet that is religion in all its essence. God the Father, human beings our brothers. My democracy and Christianity must be blended. Are not both loving God with all your heart and your neighbor as if he were yourself? (“Mary McDowell,” 2014, para. 12)

Faith drove her love of others, as well as her long and drawn out efforts towards a more livable city of Chicago. As McDowell made many personal choices in living a life of social reform, including never marrying and not having children, faith surely was a guiding force that grounded her in her beliefs.

One might ask why there are few written works by and about Mary McDowell when she had a hand in so many influential social movements. One reason could be that women, like McDowell, who lived in the 19th and 20th centuries were not given opportunities to author their own narratives. The lack of writing centered on McDowell’s life could be because, even during their time, Jane Addams was a higher profile and more well-known than McDowell, and because of this McDowell is not a household name like Jane Addams is (Schultz, 2007, p. 13). Another reason McDowell does not have her own written story could be that McDowell chose to spend her time in the community and in the Settlement House rather than writing articles and books. It is hard to believe that she had time to fight for gender equality, labor justice, sanitary reform, racial integration, and run the University of Chicago Settlement House; it is no wonder that she might not have had the time to report on all of those things herself. While

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these are indeed speculations, the lack of literature on many female social reformers of this era is a trend that cannot go unnoticed.

As many social reformers of her era, McDowell never married or had a family. She retired from her work at age 75 in 1929, and she passed away at age 82 in 1936. The sacrifices she made in her personal life speaks volumes to her dedication to social reform, especially during a time when women were expected to fulfill traditional gender roles set out for them. The University of Chicago Settlement House and her social activism were her sole dedications, and the effects she had in her career live on far past her death.

Mary McDowell's early responsibilities towards her siblings and her home life surely impacted her drive towards giving back to her community and fighting for social change. Women living during the late 1800s and early 1900s were discouraged from participating in the workforce, nevermind enacting large-scale social and political policies and change. Mary McDowell pushed through the obstacles that stood before her with determination and passion, and that is what allowed her to make valuable strides towards instilling equitable labor laws, leading the University of Chicago Settlement House, upholding women's suffrage and political rights, and proposing lasting sanitary legislation in the city of Chicago. With the help of many along the way, such as Jane Addams, McDowell proved that women can and should raise their voices in the name of politics, and have their voices decently heard. McDowell's life shows that activists do not have to choose only one issue to rally behind, but that it is possible to fight for many intersecting causes over the course of a lifetime. Her dedication to improving the physical, emotional, and mental lives of those around her is her legacy, and it's something towards which any politician, social worker, and human being should strive to embody.

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