

B O O K S

J. HENRY DUNANT¹

by

Willy HEUDTLASS

The head of the Press and Broadcasting Service of the German Red Cross in the German Federal Republic, Mr. Willy Heudtlass, had already, in co-operation with Mr. Anton Schlögel, Secretary-General of that National Society and Mr. Götz Fehr, former head of the Junior Red Cross, produced a book in 1958, in which he recalled the historical significance of the Battle of Solferino and the leading rôle taken by Dunant in the founding of the international movement, which had originated in his own mind when he was caring for the wounded in the Chiesa Maggiore at Castiglione.² Mr. Heudtlass has now produced another book this time entirely devoted to Henry Dunant.

The sub-title "Founder of the Red Cross, originator of the Geneva Convention" at once shows that the author has sought above all to collect authentic documents and refer to various sources in order to throw light on a personality whom one knows has been the subject of so much discussion, some people being of the opinion that he had less merit than had been said. These criticisms seem very far away today and it would appear that no one would take it upon himself to diminish the part taken by Dunant in the foundation of the Red Cross, nor in the production of the book *A Memory of Solferino*. Mr. Heudtlass himself refers to his work "Eine Biographie in Dokumenten und Bildern", thus asserting his determination to base himself on the archives, photographs and documents which he has been able to assemble together and which contribute to give a living and complete picture of Dunant.

¹ W. Kohlhammer Verlag, Stuttgart, 1962.

² *Solferino, ein Anfang, ein Zeichen, ein Ruf an alle*, Verlag Schiller, Essen, 1958.

This is in fact the first time that so much important information has been collected about Dunant, items of personal information which, even if Mr. Heudtlass considers them to be of interest, are not taken literally by him, but are rather clarified and sometimes corrected in the light of material which he reproduces in his book. A number of reproductions are to be found at the end, which include several hitherto unpublished documents from the archives of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva, of the "Bibliothèque publique et universitaire de Genève", as well as those of Dr. Manfred Müller at Gelsenkirchen. These reproductions serve to illustrate the introduction which is preceded by two prefaces. One of these is by Mr. Carl J. Burckhardt, member of the ICRC, and the other by Dr. A. von Albertini, President of the Swiss Red Cross. The introduction briefly analyses Dunant's character and the origin of his misfortunes. It concludes : " This tortured soul finally finds peace. If the last part of his life brings, unfortunately much too late, a crowning homage of gratitude as well-merited recognition together with honours, it cannot be considered adequate recompense for all the setbacks of his existence. This does not, however, in any way affect Dunant's work, a work which was much too great to be destroyed by human errors."

Mr. Burckhardt says amongst other things :

" The experiences of the battle-field of Solferino in 1859, which overwhelmed this young Genevese, lacking connections as well as influence, resulted in producing a sense of " vocation " in him, something which is always remarkable in a man. From him was to spring spontaneously and with a really creative impulsion one of the great directing ideas of modern times. Once he had placed himself in the service of this idea, he subsequently devoted his whole life to it, in spite of the lack of understanding and the scepticism of his contemporaries, with such energy that he succeeded in awakening the consciences of many people. Then, extending it far beyond its original meaning, he made an ethical postulate of it, one of fellowship and the reconciliation of peoples, which was to be of great effect. Today the Red Cross numbers 160 million members.

Dunant possessed this faculty of compassion to such a high degree that it became his dominant impulse surpassing all others.

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As a sort of counter-balance he therefore opposed to the egoism of politicians, greedy for power, land and favours, acting on behalf of various groups and people, a power which worked in silence and whose very essence was one of love. All he accomplished, alone, in spite of his own failings and contradictions in a suspicious world, was to be repeated and widely put into practice by others. On quite a different level, people who were infected by his proselytizing zeal, created the necessary conditions for the accomplishment of his mission, by adapting them to universal requirements. On some occasions they even had to oppose him, its promoter, in order to make his work practicable. As a result there was inevitable injustice, misunderstandings which always exist, causing Dunant to suffer in consequence. However, amongst those who laid solid foundations to his work, one sees fine figures such as Guillaume Henri Dufour, the wise peacemaker, who was prominent for his organizing ability.

Mr. Heudtlass possesses the merit in particular of having, with a keen scrupulousness for fairness, discarded many spectacular and sentimental myths about the unjust treatment to which Dunant was said to have been subjected. He does not hide, and this with much respect, Henry Dunant's real character. He is also aware of the dignity shown by the Red Cross, its work, the proofs of its efficiency, its problems, the dangers it ran and its setbacks as seen throughout the tragic years of the last world war. He knows the immense difficulties facing this institution, difficulties which are renewed day after day."

One should add that Mr. Heudtlass' study is always full of subtle shades of meaning and Dunant's relations with his colleagues of the Committee of Five, as well as with Geneva are treated objectively. He never states anything which cannot be corroborated by documentary proof, and this also applies to material concerning the verdict pronounced by a Geneva court as a result of unfortunate financial affairs in which Dunant had involved himself and which were to have disastrous consequences for him. One also knows of the opposition which existed between Henry Dunant and Gustave Moynier. Each of them had essentially different characters and they were to come into conflict over matters which they both had

at heart. They had both placed all their ambition, their intelligence and their hopes in the Red Cross. Committed as they were they could not accept any compromise. Dunant was the founder of a work which, owing to Moynier's considered and reasonable spirit, was able to be extended and deeply rooted in the legal world. In one passage of his book, Mr. Heudtlass illustrates this aspect of the relations between the two men, when he rightly emphasizes Moynier's part in the development of the Red Cross movement on the international level :

“ Moynier was made of completely different stuff to Dunant, a sensitive being who was enclosed in himself by various inhibitions. Moynier and his family enjoyed no less repute than did Dunant's family. A level-headed man of law, calculating and always very considered in his ways, he had acquired a certain reputation as President of the Public Welfare Society of Geneva, one of the most important welfare associations of Geneva. It would be unfair to him to pretend that utilitarian considerations mingled with his first flush of enthusiasm for Dunant's book. Since he showed a warm sympathy in his relations with Dunant immediately after its appearance. In short, today as yesterday, the part which we take in the misfortunes of our times is not necessarily motivated by anything other than a real desire to help others. Moynier had however intuitively grasped the very essence of the ideas contained in Dunant's book. These same ideas were to go far beyond the confines of public and private welfare, which were even then shackled by rules. Furthermore, when he first met Dunant, he came face to face with a man who had not yet thought how his ideas were to be put into practice.”

Mr. Heudtlass has been fortunate to have been able to make use of some completely unknown items : the papers left by General Hans Daae of the Army Medical Service to his family, in Oslo. These concern the award of the first Nobel Peace Prize to Dunant and several of these are reproduced in this book together with unpublished documents which the author was authorized to consult at the Nobel Institute. He has thus been able to give a more complete and balanced picture than previously had been the case of the

various interventions which took place on that occasion. He has also been able to show the preponderant part taken in particular by the German Professor Rudolf Müller and the Norwegian General Dr. Hans Daae, who pleaded with great insistence for the selection of their friend Dunant with the Great Elector of that time, the writer Björnstjerne Björnson. The latter wanted the first Peace Prize to be awarded to Frédéric Passy, with whom he was on intimate terms and to whom he had no doubt made promises. We know that finally the prize was shared between Dunant and Passy.

The author has also published hitherto unknown material bearing on Dunant's last years. Installed at Heiden, the latter tried to make a sort of explanation of the human drama which, if it is of little importance in the history of the Red Cross, is interesting for the light it throws on the mystical development which led the author of *A Memory of Solferino* to make descriptions on a large scale in which he allots a place to each of the great figures of history and of religious thought. Mr. Heudtlass shows the deep reasons for this development, which are made all the clearer for his having chosen to follow Dunant year by year, describing the sequence of events which were to contribute to alter the sensitive and idealistic character of his hero and to make a rebel of him, finding refuge in a purely personal faith and in ever-increasing solitude.

A human being is composed of both light and darkness and the author shows that the latter sometimes enveloped Dunant's life. He reproduces for example Mrs. Sonderegger's testimony on the relations between Dunant and her husband, which shows him to be self-willed and difficult.

Dunant had been one of the first to see an international world beyond nationalities. But he also knew how to approach leading personalities in various countries in order to speak unceasingly with them about his ideal. This also appears in the book under review, which contains the complete reports of the 1863 Conference and demonstrates the way in which the French, German, Netherlands, Swiss delegates, and those of other nationalities intervened. Similarly one can find trace of numerous echos awakened by the founding of the Red Cross, not only amongst humanitarian personalities such as Clara Barton, Florence Nightingale and others, but also with Napoleon III and in the courts of that period. This

is most interesting information on the important rôle played by different European countries during the earliest days of the Red Cross.

Finally, in an appendix one can find a summary of the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, as proof of Dunant's ultimate triumph, since he had, with the intuition of *genius*, already seen a hundred years ago, that mankind could not continue to exist or to make progress unless the whole world was bound by universal bonds of human fellowship. He saw it being enveloped by a spirit of active charity and gradually permeated by a sense of fellowship, which is that of the Red Cross, and which should, by its inspiration, lead to an era of peace. For the real Dunant, whom Mr. Heudtlass fully reveals, is the visionary who calls unceasingly upon each one of us to come to the aid of others, whoever they may be:

J.-G. L.