

A GLANCE THROUGH THE REVIEWS

The Legacy of Clara Barton, by Gertrude Samuels. *The New York Times Magazine*, February 1961.

In April, 1861, a small, calm, sturdy woman in her fortieth year, her thick dark hair bunched back behind her ears, her long, straight dress free of fashionable crinoline and stiffening, moved quietly among the ragged and bloody men of the Sixth Massachusetts Regiment. Some of them were her former pupils. The men had suffered a surprise attack by Southern sympathizers as they passed through Baltimore, and were being quartered in the unfinished Senate Chamber in Washington, and many were wounded.

That night the woman worked tirelessly to nurse and minister to these "well-punished fellows." Next day, she organized her own small army of Negro porters to carry boxes of food, medicine and supplies, bought with her own funds, to the troops from her home state.

Soon after this episode, in the opening days of the Civil War, a unique order from the Military Department headquarters authorized her to "Pass—Daily—over the Bridges & within the lines * * * By order of General Mansfield, Commanding."

Thus there began to unfold a fascinating drama—the single, bold, determined effort of one woman to serve mankind on the battlefield. The woman was Clara Barton, volunteer nurse and founder of the American Red Cross. . .

Born on Christmas Day in 1821 in Oxford, Mass., the daughter of a farmer-soldier who had fought the Indians, Clarissa Harlowe Barton seemed an absolute conformist to tradition. In the nineteenth century when feminine reserve and delicacy were emphasized, she was a painfully shy, lonely, timid New England girl who feared strangers. She fainted when she saw the village slaughterer bludgeon an ox.

One childhood experience had a lasting effect on her life. Her brother suffered injuries during a barn raising, and Clara was his constant nurse between her eleventh and thirteenth birthdays, rarely leaving his side until he was cured, giving him the prescribed leeches and reading to him.

At 18, she became a teacher in North Oxford, and was so terrified at first that she began her classes by reading from the Bible—the Sermon on the Mount—presumably to reassure herself rather than the young people she confronted. She was to love the human race—but not one man enough to marry him. One suitor who made a fortune in the California gold rush begged her to accept \$10,000, which she banked in New York as "too sacred to use," until she drew upon it for the troops.

She was working—pioneering—as one of the women copyists in the Patent Office in Washington when the Civil War broke out. That April of 1861, when she cared for her old schoolboys in the bloody and dragged “Sixth Mass,” she reached the turning point of her life.

Britain then had its Florence Nightingale, the “Lady of the Lamp,” who had fought against angry family and public opposition and gone with a handful of nurses to the Crimean War front in 1854. She had found conditions intolerable for the sick and wounded in the filthy hospital wards; her self-sacrifice and revolutionary methods that brought order, cleanliness and decent treatment for the individual soldier constitute one of the great human events of that time.

It is not known how profoundly Clara Barton was influenced by Florence Nightingale, but the British nurse's effort must have inspired her since it represented what she yearned to do herself. From early youth Clara had been motivated by a deep need to help people in trouble. Now she responded to American suffering by lighting her own lamp amid the horrors of the Civil War. (The two women never met, although they exchanged “friendly messages.”)

At first Clara had to struggle against her own self-doubts and conquer her innate timidity. When she had overcome her inner struggles, she was faced with detractors. Everywhere Army officials rebuffed her. People were shocked at the idea of a woman going to the front.

Her first success came with a quartermaster in charge of transportation, who was so “pressed and anxious and gruff,” she wrote in her diary, that she burst into tears when he asked what she wanted. To get to the front, she blurted out—with the supplies she had in her lodgings and at a warehouse.

He stared at the tearful, stubborn little woman, then quietly issued an order for wagons and men to load them, gave her a permit, and told her, “God bless you.”

It was the first of many journeys. Often her wagon was ahead of the ammunition. Once as she bent to give a wounded man water, a bullet cut through her sleeve and killed him. She cradled another dying boy who believed she was his sister Mary. The Army surgeons came to depend on her. The men under fire began to watch for their “angel of mercy.” She became known as the “American Florence Nightingale.”

A born nurse, she would instinctively appear in the critical areas, bringing up crucially needed bandages, and cotton lint, stanching or dressing wounds, holding the candle steady while a surgeon operated, administering the chloroform, performing minor operations by removing bullets from surface muscles, even cooking pots of soup, gruel and applesauce for the hungry, homesick boys.

Always there was a tender word to the wounded who waited for help. Sensitive to their psychological needs, she read to them—as she had read to her brother—wrote their letters home, prayed for them. In time, many women joined in her work at the front

Just before the end of the war, President Lincoln wrote :

“ To the Friends of Missing Persons : Miss Clara Barton has kindly offered to search for the missing prisoners of war. Please address her at Annapolis.”

For four years, she now worked without compensation, sifting through records to find who “ had fallen in battle, were lingering in prisons, or perished in some other way,” to bring a measure of peace to thousands of families, to place tablets of honor on the graves of “ unknown ” soldiers.

She could not realize then that her work on the battlefield was but the prologue to her life work—the creation of a great, nation-wide volunteer organization to succor victims in both war and peace.

In 1869 she went to Europe on doctor's orders for a rest. Instead, she found herself involved, during the Franco-Prussian War, in the preparation of military hospitals. More important, she became fascinated with the work of the newly created International Committee of the Red Cross. Founded by the Swiss humanitarian, Jean Henry Dunant, it was to work for the prevention of suffering and hunger of both victor and vanquished, in war and peace, without distinction of race or creed, and bound nations to an international agreement concerning those wounded in war. (In 1901, Dunant received the first Nobel Peace Prize.)

Twenty-two nations had signed the Treaty of Geneva, which developed Red Cross relief societies in those countries. Clara Barton was deeply moved by the fact that America had not signed, fearing “ entangling foreign alliances.”

Back home, she was to fight for ten years to convert America to the ideals of the international Red Cross. She fought almost alone, against the hostility of other societies vying for governmental approval. She wrote articles, lectured, advertised in the press, enlisted the churches in her crusade to get the Red Cross story told to the people. State Department doors closed in her face. She badgered politicians, generals, editors and three Presidents. She exhausted her energies and fell ill, but she had won.

On the night of May 21, 1881, assured that America would sign the Treaty of Geneva, she gathered fifty men and women in her parlor on I Street in Washington to found the American Association of the Red Cross. The next year, the Senate ratified the treaty, making her organization the link between the people and their armed forces.

But even before the United States signed the Treaty of Geneva, the Red Cross had gone to work in the Michigan forest fires of 1881, sustaining the dazed survivors and meeting their first needs with food, clothing and medical supplies. Within a few years, Clara Barton extended the work to all national calamities, including pestilence, famine and floods.

“ So it was done,” she wrote. “ I had waited so long and got so weak and broken, I could not even feel glad.” But her tenacity soon returned. Her thick brown hair now streaked with gray, she turned in her sixtieth

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year, at a time when many go into retirement, to the work that was to absorb her for the next twenty-four years: as the first Red Cross president.

She got relief to sufferers of the Mississippi and Ohio floods. She went on inspection tours of inundated areas, and developed a rehabilitation scheme for hurricane victims that one general described as the "statesmanship of philanthropy."

She went to Russia and distributed relief to the peasants suffering from famine. She became—at 76—a nurse on the battlefield again during the Spanish-American War, taking her relief supplies and skills to the Cubans. This time she had the help of Red Cross nurses. At President McKinley's request, she set up several Red Cross orphanages in Cuba for children left homeless by the war.

In 1900, the organization formally became the American National Red Cross by an act of Congress. It was operating under a Congressional charter, with the President of the United States as its honorary president. Clara Barton resigned from the Red Cross in 1904, and eight years later she died at the age of 91.

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In her lifetime she had become a legend. It was said that in her old age, she loved to wear her decorations from many lands as she gardened. She left behind forty diaries with her writings and poems. And she left behind something else that she must have known would be handed down for generations to come . . .

Walt Whitman understood what moved those like her. Shortly before the Civil War, the poet, then an editorial writer on *The Brooklyn Times*, later to become, himself, a volunteer nurse in that conflict, wrote:

"The brotherhood of humanity is looked upon as a fine phrase signifying but little or nothing. It may seem so, in the jostle and attrition of conflicting elements that make up the life-battle; it may seem selfishness is the universal rule, and sympathy only the rare exception—but let some great calamity, some overwhelming sorrow, touch the great popular heart with its unutterable pathos, and the phrase will be seen to possess some meaning, after all, despite the sneers of the cynics and the doubters."

In Clara Barton's life and legacy was the proof.
