

BOOKS AND REVIEWS

A NEW BIOGRAPHY OF HENRY DUNANT

Mr. Carl Vandekerckhove, Director General of the Flemish branch of the Belgian Red Cross, known for his Dutch translation of *A Memory of Solferino*, has just published a biography of Dunant¹ in Dutch, under the title: *J. Henry Dunant, Dream and Action*. This book is the outcome of extensive research in Dunant's unpublished documents preserved in Geneva. The text is accompanied by many illustrations.

The book was launched in December 1978 in the course of a ceremony attended by Prince Albert of Belgium, National President of the Belgian Red Cross Society. We quote below some parts of a speech by Mr. Hubert Lampo, a Flemish writer of repute:

"Carl Vandekerckhove was prompted to write this book by a powerful impulse and inspiration. It is of course a scientific work, a historical biographical panorama based on a wealth of documentary material, but the reader does feel that the writer had a need to dilate on the life of a man whom we know not too well although his spirit lives on in the Red Cross which he founded.

The author realized that to bear witness was not enough; that he had first to adopt a sincere and objective approach without compromising historical truth, and second to undertake, from the point of view of people living at the end of the 20th century, a new perspectivist, moral and philosophical study of the subject.

A reading of this account of Henry Dunant's life shows clearly that throughout his life, in his triumphs and his setbacks, Dunant's spiritual vigour was tremendous. He did things that no one else had ever done. What is more, he did things that no one had even thought possible.

In my opinion, that was the miracle of Dunant's life, a miracle made possible only by his unequalled creative imagination. Dunant, who in many respects reminds us of Tolstoi, was unquestionably a man

¹ Carl Vandekerckhove: *J. Henry Dunant, Droom en Daad*, Brussels (Belgian Red Cross), 1978, 408 pp.

of infinite goodness. When I think of what he achieved, it seems to me that the word "goodness" does not go far enough to describe what he achieved or at least set afoot in spite of attacks and opposition, and we must not underestimate the contribution made by his outstanding intelligence. But even the most intelligent are conditioned by environment and to throw off that constraint needs genius and vision. The genius... the visionary...

The author follows Dunant through the years, in his negotiations and in his writings which gave rise to ideas which for us, in 1978, are familiar, to structures which are inseparable from the contemporary world: the Red Cross, the United Nations, Unesco, abolition of slavery and of the death penalty, emancipation of women, humane working conditions, social legislation that really works, consideration for the handicapped, the aged, orphans and waifs and strays; the notions of "open city", "snipers"... In Henry Dunant's time, all these ideas were wildly utopic, and perhaps even incomprehensible; but they have been brought into being as if by a miracle.

Carl Vandekerckhove's book, *J. Henry Dunant: Droom en Daad*, portrays a man who really was a benefactor of mankind. It describes the extraordinary work which Dunant did in a world in which his dreams had never before been dreamed, and much less translated into action and practical reality.

These are the reasons why, in my opinion, this new biography of Henry Dunant is an exceptional book with a message of vital importance. The message is that one man alone, with courage and imagination, can make a profound change in the world..."

International Review of the Red Cross congratulates the author and the Belgian Red Cross for this fine book. We believe that preparations are being made with a view to its translation into French and English.
