

Books and Reviews

A FORM OF GRATITUDE

*The Life of Angela Limerick **

Angela, Countess of Limerick, was a major figure in the British Red Cross and in the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement during the years following the Second World War. Vice-Chairman of the British Red Cross Executive Committee from 1946-63 and Chairman of its Council from 1974-76, Vice-Chairman of the then League of Red Cross Societies from 1957-65 and Chairman of the Standing Commission from 1965-73, Angela Limerick travelled regularly and extensively on Red Cross business, visiting nearly every region of the world, and played an increasingly important and influential role at international statutory meetings of the Movement for 27 years. The controversies and challenges facing the Red Cross and Red Crescent during that period were very much part of her life; in many respects, these same concerns - growing politicization, internal disunity and the need for the Movement to adapt to changing circumstances, remain relevant today, and are well reflected in this biography.

What kind of a woman was she? Perhaps it is obvious to say that Angela Limerick had a remarkable personality: purposeful and highly intelligent, yet compassionate, friendly, optimistic, devoted, courageous, with a great sense of humour. She lacked pretension and focused on the practical. She sought to adopt a professional, forward-looking approach, whilst at the same time holding steadfast to principle. Unfailingly courteous and hard-working, she inspired by her example.

The book is admirable since it reveals the whole person: for instance Angela could be highly critical of others (usually not without justification); although she could master a brief and cut to the centre of an issue, Angela was not an intellectual; her tireless work on behalf of the Red Cross and other causes posed the inevitable conflict between her family life and her career commitments, a struggle well-known to many Red Cross/Red Crescent devotees, voluntary and salaried. But it was Angela's stable and happy home life that enabled her to undertake so much of what she did for the Movement, and which gives the book its title: "A Form of Gratitude".

* *A Form of Gratitude - The Life of Angela Limerick* by Donald Lindsay, Chid Press, East Crinestead, 1992, ix + 305 pp., £19.95 plus postage. Copies can be obtained by writing to the British Red Cross.

The volume sets Angela Limerick's life in its historical context, a period of rapid social and other change in Britain and elsewhere. Born to an upper middle class English family in 1897, she lived as a child in Romania. She then served as a Red Cross nurse during World War I and was in charge of the London Branch of the British Red Cross during the bombing of London (called the "Blitz") in World War II. There is much material from diaries and personal correspondence, arranged in an interesting way, with numerous humorous and telling anecdotes. Sensitive matters are handled sympathetically but objectively; some parts, such as the separation of Angela's family during World War II and her husband's death much later, are quite moving. The cognoscenti might spot a factual error about the Geneva Conventions; others might quibble about the western or British view given of historical events, or question whether it is entirely correct to say that the work of the League had been suspended during the Second World War. However, these are minor matters and certainly do not detract from the overall story.

The life of Angela Limerick shows how the Red Cross/Red Crescent attracts people who become completely dedicated to what the Movement stands for; Angela herself served over 60 years. She believed that by upholding its Fundamental Principles, the Movement could continue to make a unique, worldwide contribution to humanity while at the same time changing its structures or activities to meet modern conditions. It was Angela's acknowledged impartiality respected by governments, her position as an official and a firm supporter of the League (now the Federation) and her understanding of the special role of the ICRC in relation to the Geneva Conventions that enabled her to provide strong and fair leadership as Chairman of the Standing Commission. She declined at the age of 76 to accept a third term in that position.

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement as it is today was built by the efforts of people like Angela Limerick. To understand her life can deepen one's understanding of the Movement. She believed passionately in what Red Cross/Red Crescent workers in the former Yugoslavia and elsewhere give their lives for. Her life could be an example to all those, perhaps especially young people, unsure of their values or goals in a time of what may be particular uncertainty.

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