

“LOOK WHAT YOU STARTED HENRY!”

History of the Australian Red Cross Society 1914-1991

Leon Stubbings'¹ history of the Australian Red Cross Society is first and foremost the story of men and women who have forged and served the National Society between 1914 and 1991. Recalling his own memories and drawing information from tonnes of historical records and interviews with hundreds of people, the author tells us simply and familiarly of the Australian Red Cross volunteers — men and women in the midst of the action, in wartime and peacetime, *in the national territory and beyond it*. This is Leon Stubbings' intention: to place the main emphasis on people because, for him, “Red Cross is people”.²

Like scenes from a play or a film, Leon Stubbings' book is laced with appealing and sometimes moving anecdotes of people who mean much to him — doubtless to make us feel more deeply the commitment of these men and women to the Red Cross, their enthusiasm, but also their difficulties and the hopes they held in vain.

The reader is carried along in space and time, vicariously experiencing, through their eyes, the First and then the Second World War, then action in several Asian and African countries before finally coming home. This long journey will have shown him how the Australian Red Cross Society, newly founded in August 1914, came through its immediate baptism of fire with flying colours, quickly getting organized to play its part as an auxiliary to the medical services of the Australian armed forces and engaging in extensive

¹ Leon Stubbings, *“Look what you started Henry!”*, Australian Red Cross Society, Melbourne, 1992, 316 pp.

Mr. Leon Stubbings joined the Australian Red Cross Society in 1949 and was appointed Secretary-General six years later, a position he held until 1988. During his 38-year career, L. Stubbings went on many relief and development missions in Asia and Africa. He represented his country's National Society in the governing bodies of the League of Red Cross Societies (now known as the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies) and was a member of many of the Movement's committee and study groups. He participated in particular in the working group on the revision of the Movement's Statutes from 1982 to 1985 and for ten years, in the Commission on the Red Cross, Red Crescent and Peace.

Honoured by seven National Societies, Leon Stubbings was awarded the Henry Dunant Medal in 1989, the highest distinction given by the Movement.

² *Ibid*, p. IX.

activities abroad for the benefit of Allied troops, in close collaboration with the Red Cross Societies of friendly countries.

In his account of the First World War, the author follows step by step the *work of volunteers within Australia, of men and women who came forward of their own accord to collect warm clothes and money or to pack food parcels, to care for sick or wounded soldiers and give them moral support or run convalescent homes for them.*

Eloquent anecdotes abound. On the Western front the Australian Red Cross helped the British Red Cross Society to establish a fleet of motor ambulances, which totalled 2,500 at the end of 1916. This service, which enabled the Red Cross to transport the wounded quickly to field hospitals or to hospital ships, was particularly efficient. The author writes that "On one occasion a soldier left for the front at 7 a.m. from Charing Cross [in London], reached Calais, was motored to the trenches, wounded within an hour and was back at hospital in England at midnight of the same day!"³

Secure in the experience gained during the 1914-1918 war, the Australian Red Cross resolutely prepared to face the Second World War. "We must be ready for anything", said Mrs. Alice Creswick, the Principal Commandant of Red Cross Women's Personnel in 1940. "There is a job in the Red Cross for every man, woman and child in Australia and every one of us has a duty to do that job".⁴ After large-scale recruitment of volunteers during the period between the two world wars and training them in first aid, home nursing and hospital visiting, in 1940 the Australian Red Cross extended its services; it provided assistance to captured enemy wounded being treated in military hospitals, created the Transport Corps of ambulances and trucks and the Red Cross Cycle Corps, responsible for delivering urgent messages and parcels, and set up social services. Thus when US servicemen left Australia in December 1945, leaving behind war brides and fiancées, the Australian Red Cross, at the request of the American Red Cross, provided assistance and moral support to these women and their children and eased their journey homeward.

These anecdotes should not obscure the important role played by the National Society in the various theatres of operations during the Second World War. The author shows, for example, the persistent efforts of the chairman of the Australian Red Cross Society, Dr. J. Newman Morris, to come to the aid of Australian prisoners in Japanese hands. Since the Japanese government refused to allow the Australian Red Cross to send food and medicines to Australian prisoners of war and internees, Dr. Morris negotiated with the government for long months, but to no avail. It was only via ICRC delegates and Swiss diplomats, to whom he sent money for the prisoners, that they were able to obtain the necessary supplies. During the war in the Pacific the selfless endurance shown by Australian Red Cross volunteers in field

³ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

hospitals in Malaysia and New Guinea was remarkable. The Society's nurses working at the hospital in Torokina were sometimes under considerable strain, fearing the attack of Japanese suicide squads at any moment. Yet this did not stop Lyn Davies and her colleagues from providing the hospital with an icecream-making machine and serving 12 gallons of ice cream per day to some 600 patients.

A large part of the book is devoted to the assistance given by the Australian Red Cross after the war to several Asian and African countries in situations of conflict or hit by natural disasters. During the Korean War, the Red Cross provided food, medicines and hospital supplies to several centres and helped in the exchange of prisoners. It was active in Malaysia in 1945-1946 during the Communist uprisings and organized village clinics, dispensaries and house-to-house visits for the benefit of the people in the communities. In 1957, when the Federation of Malaya Red Cross Society was established, Leon Stubbings was invited to review its organization and structure. Later, the Australian Red Cross gave considerable help to the National Society, meanwhile known as the Malaysian Red Crescent, in coping with the tremendous influx of boat people. The activities of the Australian Red Cross also extended to Nepal, where it set up a primary health care programme in 1980; to Kampuchea, where medical teams have been in place since 1988; and to Viet Nam, where the Red Cross had been providing assistance to the wounded and sick and organizing social services since 1962.

By describing the part played by the Australian Red Cross in a number of protection and assistance programmes undertaken by the ICRC and the League, the author revives memories of major events in the history of the Movement in the last thirty years and its response to them, for instance the Nigeria-Biafra conflict in 1967, the war and drought which hit Somalia in the 1980s, the internal disturbances in Uganda, and the drought in Ethiopia from 1973 to 1975. The extent to which the Australian Red Cross supported the international organizations of the Red Cross and sister National Societies is illustrated by the activities of its medical and surgical teams, its provision of medical supplies and equipment, its social services and intensive fundraising campaigns, not to mention its specific activities to foster the development of sister National Societies, for example in Nepal and Papua New Guinea.

The author devotes some 100 pages to the activities of the Australian Red Cross in the national territory. By alternating facts, anecdotes and statistics, Leon Stubbings draws a vivid picture of the work of the National Society in the fields of health (disease control, health education and hospital services, including such sophisticated services as beauty therapy and music therapy), welfare services, disaster relief and blood transfusion services. He also devotes two chapters to fundraising and to the Junior Red Cross.

The book does not draw to a close without an account of the two Red Cross organizations in Geneva, the League of Red Cross Societies and the ICRC, and the relations of the Australian Red Cross with them. He rightly mentions the important role played by some of its leading members in the

various bodies of the Movement and in the committees and study groups set up to reinforce its structures.

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In this book the reader will not find in-depth analyses of the policy of successive directors of the National Society or learned statements on the development of its structures. Leon Stubbings does not claim to be a historian. He writes, first and foremost, as a Red Cross man — that is who he is; that is how he feels. He leaves the historian the task of writing the definitive history of the Australian Red Cross Society. Leon Stubbings' book is a forceful and fascinating portrayal of the history of an idea, namely that selfless assistance must be given to every suffering individual, and of the work of the volunteers of the Red Cross who have devoted themselves to this idea with verve and perseverance. At the turn of each page, the reader can feel how much Leon Stubbings cares for these volunteers, how fondly he speaks of them or makes their voices heard through excerpts of their correspondence or diaries, how delighted he is to show these photographs of men and women — smiling, caring and at peace with themselves.

The way in which he tells the story reminds us inevitably of Dr. Marcel Junod's *Warrior without Weapons*.⁵ It illustrates what Jean-Georges Lossier wrote of solidarity: "So long as Red Cross-mindedness is maintained even the least Red Cross tasks are full of consolation and reward",⁶ of personal commitment when we feel that "our acts of aid will take on the moral significance of active protest against violence, barbarity and injustice in every form".⁷

The book is therefore a message of hope. In his brief closing chapter on "The Future", the author relates the concern of some of the Society's leaders that the Australian Red Cross may come to see itself as a large corporate business and not a voluntary organization. But these fears are quickly dispelled by Leon Stubbings' confidence in the value of the Red Cross and the enthusiasm of its volunteers, those "ordinary people with a special ingredient".⁸

Jacques Meurant

⁵ Marcel Junod, *Warrior without Weapons*, ICRC, Geneva, 1982.

⁶ Jean-Georges Lossier, *Fellowship, The Moral Significance of the Red Cross*, La Baconnière, Neuchâtel, 1948, p. 42.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 50.

⁸ Leon Stubbings, *loc. cit.*, p. 315.