

THE SAINT IN WHITE

Formerly president of the Greek Union of Writers, Dina Vlachou is the authoress of a dozen or so novels and short stories. Her latest work is a fictionalized biography of Henry Dunant.¹ She was so deeply impressed by the personality of that renowned Geneva citizen that she did not hesitate to change his frequently used nickname the “man in white” to the “saint in white” for the title of her book. This is not therefore a decisive historical account; rather is it an attempt to make people more aware, especially young people, of the poignant life of the founder of the Red Cross.

Nevertheless, the book is based on sound historical documentation; the authoress makes discerning use of both *A Memory of Solferino*, the *Mémoires* and the best biographies on the subject. She has closely scrutinized the photographs of Henry Dunant and his contemporaries and recreated the feel of the period by minutely describing their clothing — wing-collars, bow ties, watch chains, sideburns and moustaches. She rounded off her research by a visit to Switzerland and seems enchanted by the old town of Geneva, the beauty of the lake, the view of Mont Blanc, and the Heiden region.

The book is divided into two parts. The first (ten chapters) retraces Dunant’s career in chronological order. It begins with Solferino and goes on to describe his return to Geneva, his painstaking work in writing *A Memory of Solferino*, the origin of the Red Cross and the setting-up of the ICRC, his travels and the meeting with the King of Saxony — all this leading up to the first-ever Geneva Convention of August 1864. The second part (six chapters) takes us to Heiden towards the end of Henry Dunant’s life where he reminisces about the difficult years in his past: bankruptcy, the secretive and final departure from Geneva, his wretched stay in Paris, the 1870 war, his life as a recluse in an old folk’s home in Heiden and finally recognition and being awarded the Nobel Prize.

The book starts at the *Chiesa Maggiore* in Castiglione, where Dunant was working flat out to care for the wounded and quench their thirst, bringing them

¹ Dina Vlachou, *Le Saint en blanc (The Saint in White)*, Elektronikes Technes, Athens, 1994, 127 pp. (in *Greek*). This review is taken from the *Bulletin* of the Henry Dunant Society, No. 17, 1995.

water in his own travelling flask. The scene is described in a vivid, moving way; the writer skilfully inserts, without any apparent discontinuity, earlier biographical details essential to understand Dunant and his compassionate response.

The following chapter recounts his journey in old Massimo's carriage to visit the Emperor and appeal for urgent help for the wounded of Solferino. The atmosphere of the beautiful, clear, moonlight summer night, with the scent of aromatic plants, the cries of nocturnal birds, and the rhythmic sound of horses' hooves along the road, is sharply contrasted with the horrific memories of the battlefield and the underlying fear of being attacked by prowling Austrian deserters. In this heightened state of awareness there came to his mind the *Grande Idée*.

This journey - which is echoed in the same few phrases at turning points in Dunant's existence - becomes a kind of ritual journey; at the approach of death it is transformed into a nightmare where, with old Massimo as his eternal coachman, Dunant is being conveyed along an endless path towards heaven.

The novelist highlights two people from Dunant's Geneva background: his mother and the aged gardener, Jean. The other members of his family remain in the shadow.

As he himself acknowledges in his *Mémoires*, Henry Dunant was profoundly influenced by his mother, a woman entirely dedicated to philanthropic ideas and charitable works. He also admits the influence which Florence Nightingale had upon him by her work during the Crimean War and that of the book *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher-Stowe. In the silence into which Dunant withdrew to write *A Memory of Solferino* and in the difficult years that followed, his mother was the only person who understood him and gave him courage and support. But whereas Western historians try to find a Freudian explanation, the writer quite naturally introduces the image of the Virgin and Child, which also appears on the title page of the book. For a Greek writer there is nothing untoward about this, but to Calvinist minds it would be utterly unacceptable, especially in the midst of the Revival - of which Henry Dunant was an ardent supporter.

The old gardener, Jean, was the benign deity who watched over the gardens of the Dunant family property "La Monnaie" and who laid out the superb beds of geraniums and red begonias. He was the one who showed Dunant himself, when he was a small child, how to plant a fragile cutting of a rosebush and tend it through the winter so that it would thrust its roots down deep and one day in May burst into bloom, with its head raised towards God. Dunant later chose the redness of this rose as the colour for the emblematic cross of his organization. This metaphor perfectly conveys the difficult beginnings of the institution.

When Dina Vlachou recalls the return of the man whom we are tempted to call the "prodigal son", she colourfully evokes the preparations for the meal which brought friends, relatives and neighbours together again, as well as the middle class living room lit with oil lamps, the embroidered table cloths, and the dainty side dishes. As the evening progressed, Henry Dunant felt more and more that

there was an invisible river separating him from these people who were solely concerned with their banal cares: their vineyards, their livestock, their pine forests. Then the young people began dancing to the music of an Alpine horn. Thus the setting is transposed into a rural one which might be appropriate for Heiden, but is totally out of place in an account of the middle class, city environment of Geneva. The descriptions of the landscapes and nature, the lake in particular, seem at times somewhat stilted, too similar to the stereotype views of Switzerland widely held in Greece; yet we must also recognize that the Swiss often indulge in equally idealized generalizations when speaking about Greece, and that Dina Vlachou's Greek readers will not be taken aback by her portrayal.

The novelist very skilfully summons up the passing of time, one season after another, whilst not burdening her text with dates; instead, in a few leitmotiv-like phrases she evokes the atmosphere of winter, for example, in the room in Geneva's rue Verdaine.

Dunant's career certainly reached its apotheosis when the representatives of twelve countries met within our walls and the original Geneva Convention was signed on 22 August 1864. The solemn and festive atmosphere within the city hall is strikingly rendered. The authoress adds, by way of a reminder, a few details about the International Red Cross Conferences of 1906, 1929 and 1949.

In the second part of the book: the novelist accords a special place to the symbol of water; the River Seine exercises a kind hypnotic effect on the by then uprooted and destitute Henry Dunant. The placid waters of Lake Constance, reflecting the snow-covered mountains, conjure up the image of a soul at peace as death draws near.

In conclusion, we hope that this book will receive the success it deserves and afford a better understanding of the origins of an institution which, as result of tragic events, is well known to all Greeks.

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