

BOOKS AND REVIEWS

DAUGHTER OF DESTINY

*The strange and fascinating story of
the founder of the American Red Cross*

Clara Barton's tenacity, courage and efficiency in caring for the wounded and dying on the battlefields of the American Civil War remains a source of inspiration. The strange and fascinating story of her life is told in Neuring B. Foster's "Daughter of Destiny"¹, which pays glowing tribute to this exceptional woman who founded the American Red Cross.

The biography's first volume provides a vivid account of Clara Barton's childhood, her career as a primary school teacher (which she began at the age of 15), her years of public service in Washington, her humanitarian work for the victims of the Civil War and her stay in Europe, where she came into contact with the Red Cross.

In the chapters dealing with her childhood years, the reader is most struck by little Clara's adoration of her father. His tales of warriors, patriots and adventurers were, she said later, what prepared her for long periods spent with the army in the field. Her mother is described as a practical, level-headed woman whose interest focused on her home. It was she who instilled in Clara the common sense that never let her down when it came to finding pragmatic solutions to the unforeseeable problems that arise in the midst of war when even the most vital necessities are lacking. Another formative experience in Clara's childhood was the two years of devoted care she gave to her brother David, who had a serious accident when she was eleven years old.

The author describes the adolescent Clara as nervous and shy, extremely imaginative and sensitive. What was it that enabled such a diffident girl to become a decisive young person who shrank from nothing, neither the challenge of teaching, embarking on a career in Washington—in a world where being a woman was an immense handicap, as it was subsequently on the battlefield—nor even her travels throughout the country after the war to tell the American people what its soldiers had endured? It was probably the clarity with which she perceived her goals, her independence of mind and her conviction that she bore a responsibility towards humanity that enabled Clara to overcome her shyness and adolescent fears. To tell the truth, some of the many excerpts from her writings quoted by Foster leave the reader troubled

¹ Neuring B. Foster, *Daughter of Destiny*, The Biography of Clara Barton, Volume I, a Hearststone Book, New York, Carlton Press, Inc., 1989, 138 pp.

by the self-satisfaction with which she describes her work. Like Henry Dunant, Clara Barton seems to have been a very sensitive individual but not without a certain vanity, pardonable no doubt in someone who did so much for humanity.

In the part dealing with the Civil War, Foster himself is often silent, leaving contemporary accounts to set the scene. Like "A Memory of Solferino", the biography of Clara Barton portrays in great detail the agony of wounded men left uncared for to await death alone, of those who did receive treatment but in such overcrowded conditions that they were sometimes trampled underfoot, and of starving prisoners dying in large numbers of scurvy. These are harrowing narratives, especially as they correspond all too closely to present-day reality. Except, perhaps, that the sense of honour so often mentioned in the last century seems somehow quaintly old-fashioned in relation to many modern conflicts, where the civilian population is a prime target and terror is used as a means of combat.

After the Civil War, from 1865 to 1869, Clara Barton was assigned by President Lincoln himself the task of tracing the 80,000 people reported missing in connection with the conflict. Following Lincoln's assassination Barton was, says Foster, faced with sluggishness and indifference on the part of the U.S. administration, which provided her with only a tent, some equipment and a small supply of postage stamps. She initially drew on her personal fortune to set up an office, hire 12 assistants and draw up a plan to trace the missing. She was helped by information from unexpected sources, such as a list containing the names of 13,000 soldiers who had died in Andersonville prison. The list had been secretly copied by the soldier responsible for drawing up the original; he had feared that the document would be deliberately destroyed as soon as the conflict was over.

The book ends with Clara Barton's trip to Europe, where she was sent by her doctor for health reasons. According to her, she was contacted in Geneva by members of the International Committee for Relief to Wounded Soldiers², who were concerned about the United States' refusal to sign the Geneva Convention of 1864. This was the first time she had heard of either the Convention or the Red Cross. In 1870, still in Europe, she was apparently asked once more to help, this time in assisting victims of the Franco-Prussian War. This gave her a chance to see the Red Cross in action as an effective neutral organization and she decided to return to the United States to found a national society there. A previous attempt to do so, made by the Reverend Henry W. Bellows, appears to have foundered on the failure of an ill-informed American public to understand the purpose of the Red Cross.

Let us hope that this volume will be followed by a second so that the reader, whose interest has been whetted when the book comes to a rather abrupt end, can follow Clara Barton's activities back in the United States. Neuring B. Foster's account of this first period of her life is a captivating and

² (which was to become the International Committee of the Red Cross in 1876).

obviously admiring portrait of a woman of action. More precision in the citing of sources and a rather more critical approach to Clara Barton, to whom the author tends to ascribe only good qualities, would make for a more satisfying second volume.

At a time of growing awareness within the ICRC, the League and a number of National Societies that women must take part not only, as has always been the case, in the actual work of the Movement but also in the planning and supervision of that work, books like this are an opportune reminder to the public of the qualities of women who have dedicated their lives to the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in the past.

Marion Harroff-Tavel

GOSSES DE GUERRE

*Children for whom war is not a game
but a daily reality**

Alain Louyot, foreign correspondent for the French magazine *L'Express*, has reported for the past twenty years from most of the hot spots of the world. In the course of his career he has been deeply affected by the faces of child combatants – in Beirut, Belfast and Gaza, in Mozambique and Angola, in the mountains of Eritrea and the ghettos of South Africa.

According to a UN study quoted by the author, there are today over 200,000 combatants under the age of fifteen, often forcibly enlisted and indoctrinated, who kill, torture and fight side by side with adults.

Family and social pressure, the author points out, are enough to convince children to enrol as combatants. This is because they can easily be manipulated and often view bearing arms as a rite of passage on the road to adulthood. Drawing on interviews with psychologists, soldiers, nurses and parents, the author explains how children become combatants and how this experience affects them permanently.

Gosses de guerre consists mainly of personal stories, such as that of Ali, a child taken prisoner when he was 13 years old. Ali's memories of his childhood, a time adults brought up in normal circumstances usually recall as care-

* Alain Louyot, *Gosses de guerre (Youngsters in War)*, Robert Laffont, Paris, 1989, 245 pp.