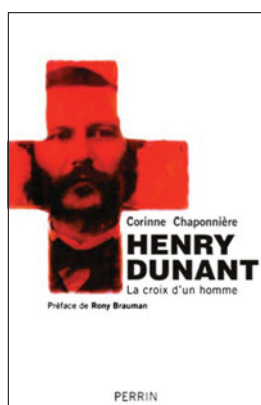


BOOKS AND ARTICLES



Henry Dunant: La croix d'un homme

Corinne Chaponnière*

Book review by François Bugnion, an independent consultant in international humanitarian law and humanitarian action, and the author of more than fifty books and articles on international humanitarian law and on the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Mr. Bugnion is a Member of the International Committee of the Red Cross.

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The biography of Henry Dunant that we've been waiting for

No Swiss historical figure is as well known outside his country as Henry Dunant (1828–1910). From Paris to Bangkok, capital cities have honoured his memory by naming a street, a boulevard or a square after him. Around the world, millions of Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteers seek to follow his example and his ideas. Even the founders of organisations established in opposition to the Red Cross, such as Médecins sans Frontières (Doctors without Borders) and Médecins du Monde (Doctors of the World), acknowledge him as the father of the modern humanitarian movement.

And yet, until recently, we had no comprehensive biography of Dunant in French, based on primary sources. There were, of course, interesting compilations, particularly those by Marc Descombes and by Gérard Jaeger, and above all the

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Actes du Colloque Henry Dunant, held in Geneva in 1985.¹ In 2010, on the 100th anniversary of Dunant's death, Roger Durand published a short biography based on a lifetime of tireless research; however, this work – in paperback format – was limited to the essentials.² We still lacked a comprehensive biography.

This gap was incomprehensible, and all the more so considering that Dunant's life was among the most tragic imaginable. Published in 1862, his book, *A Memory of Solferino*, brought him fame throughout Europe and opened all doors to him; as the founder of the Red Cross and promoter of the first Geneva Convention, he received numerous medals and decorations, yet that only made his downfall, brought on by financial ruin, all the crueller. Having sat at the tables of kings and princes, Dunant would know poverty and hunger, live in slums and experience the shame of wearing rags, before being awarded the first Nobel Peace Prize in the twilight of his life.

The lack of a comprehensive biography was all the more regrettable in that, for over thirty years, Geneva has had a centre of excellence on Henry Dunant. Founded and run by Genevan historian Roger Durand, the Société Henry Dunant (Henry Dunant Society) brought together a wealth of documentation that made it possible to explore nearly all aspects of the Red Cross founder's life and work. For instance, the Society inventoried some 4,500 letters written by or addressed to Dunant, which had been kept in various archives. These included public archives, the repositories of the countless associations that Dunant founded or with which he became involved, and family archives in Switzerland, France, Germany, and elsewhere. The twenty-four volumes of the Society's *Bulletin*, supplemented by numerous thematic publications, constitute a virtually inexhaustible mine of information.

For this reason, Corinne Chaponnière's work, *Henry Dunant: La croix d'un homme*, could not be more timely. Its publication coincides with the celebration in 2013 of the 150th anniversary of the founding of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and it heralds the commemoration in 2014 of the 150th anniversary of the First Geneva Convention, the starting point for contemporary international humanitarian law.

On the basis of the Society's work, as well as her own research, Corinne Chaponnière gives us a portrait of Dunant stripped of the false legends and mystifications that had embellished his memory, sometimes at his own instigation. It is the portrait of a man, not of the monument that some hagiographers saw fit to build, in spite of the documents and sometimes in spite of Dunant's own testimony – but it is a far more human and believable likeness. In this book we see Dunant without his halo but resembling each one of us, with his tremendous qualities and his terrible faults, his visionary genius and his tragic tendency to build

1 Roger Durand (ed.), *De l'utopie à la réalité: Actes du colloque Henry Dunant tenu à Genève au Palais de l'Athénée et à la chapelle de l'Oratoire les 3, 4 et 5 mai 1985*, Société Henry Dunant, Geneva, 1988.

2 Roger Durand, *Henry Dunant 1828–1910*, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and Société Henry Dunant, Geneva, 2011.

castles in the air, his surges of enthusiasm and his chasms of despair, his extravagant generosity and his petty miserliness.

What emerges is the picture not of a saint but of a man driven by a consuming ambition: to escape the middle-class environment to which he belonged by virtue of his birth and family, and to rise to the level of the great men of his time. He accomplished this through an accident of history – his arrival at Solferino on the evening of 24 June 1859, soon after one of the bloodiest battles of the nineteenth century had ended, leaving 6,000 dead and more than 30,000 wounded on the battlefield – but also through a stroke of genius. Dunant bore witness to the battlefield's horror in his book, *A Memory of Solferino*. Above all, he drew from that ghastly vision two ideas that would have a remarkable destiny: the Red Cross and the Geneva Convention. In this way, he achieved the fame to which he aspired.

He was not to enjoy it for long. As he had neglected his financial affairs, the business that he led went bankrupt. From one day to the next, Dunant was ruined, dishonoured and forced into exile. He was expelled from the ICRC, which he, more than anyone else, had helped to found.

Dunant devoted the rest of his life – forty years – to efforts to restore his reputation and to regain his former role as guiding spirit of the movement of which he rightly considered himself the founder. Thanks to an unparalleled communication strategy, he achieved this aim with the award of the first Nobel Peace Prize in 1901.

Chaponnière is able to avoid the trap of hagiography because Dunant's legacy – the Red Cross and the Geneva Conventions – is sufficient to cement his place in history; thus there is no need to embellish his memory. She manages to skirt the trap of exaggeration because Dunant's life was steeped in tragedy; thus there is no need to add to it. By quoting hundreds of excerpts from Dunant's letters, she recreates the infinitely complex personality of the Red Cross founder – a brilliant visionary, but a dangerous schemer; a creator of genius, but beset, as an old man, by delusions of persecution, seeing enemies and spies everywhere, even among the children playing under the windows of the asylum where he found refuge.

Chaponnière writes with a historian's skill, but a novelist's flair. She brings to life not only her character, Dunant, but also those whom he met along the way and who helped to shape his destiny – his mother, Gustave Moynier, General Dufour, Napoleon III, Léonie Kastner, and others. As a result, once you've opened this biography, you won't be able to put it down – you'll read it in one go. Lastly, the author is aided by an unusually elegant style, a way with words and a sense of drama, so that you read her book not only with great interest, but with relish.

It is understandable, therefore, that Dr. Rony Brauman has honoured this work with a fine preface – a stirring tribute from one of the co-founders of Médecins sans Frontières to the founder of the Red Cross, and a stark reflection on the fate, ambiguities, and limits of humanitarian action, from Solferino to the civil war now tearing Syria apart.

This biography leaves the reader with only one regret: that the editor did not see fit to enhance it with illustrations. It would have been of great benefit to provide a few portraits that would allow readers to better visualise the man whom they discover on page after page, as well as other key figures. There is certainly no shortage of sources; ever concerned about his image, Dunant left us excellent photographic portraits of himself not only as a white-bearded old man, at the time that he received the Nobel Prize, but also in his youth, during the founding of the Young Men's Christian Associations, and then in his prime, when the Red Cross was founded. The publisher, Éditions Perrin, will undoubtedly fill this gap in the next edition and in the publication of the translations, for this work is clearly destined to burst out of the boundaries of the French-speaking world.