

Jean Henri Dunant: father of the Red Cross and Nobel laureate

Today, the International Red Cross is the largest humanitarian organization in the world. This year marks the 100th anniversary of the death of its founder, Jean Henri Dunant. The details of his life and achievement are both incredible and sad.

Dunant was born in Geneva in 1828. His father was a prosperous business man and the family were devout Calvinists. He was not a particularly scholarly youngster, but did, at an early stage of his life, show his strong feelings towards his less fortunate fellows. As a youngster he joined the Geneva Society for Alms-giving and, at the age of 19 years, formed a group with his friends for bible study, assistance to the poor and visits to prisoners. In 1852 he founded the Geneva chapter of the newly formed Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA).

At the age of 21 years, in 1849, young Dunant joined a Swiss bank as a trainee. In 1859 he left banking and purchased a large area of land in Algeria, then a French colony, with a view to cattle and grain farming. Now Dunant ran into a snag; he could not get through the local bureaucracy with regard to obtaining the essential water rights to his new property. Not a man to let things like this upset his plans, Dunant decided to go directly to the Emperor Napoleon III. The fact that Napoleon happened to be in Italy at that time, leading a French army in support of the Italians in their war against Austria, was no deterrent!

Dunant reached Napoleon's headquarters at Solferino in Lombardy on the evening of 24 June 1859, on the very same day that the two armies had met at one of the bloodiest battles of the century. Some 38 000 dead, dying and wounded soldiers lay on the field with no apparent attempt to care for them. Dunant set to work to

organize aid in the nearby town of Castiglione; makeshift accommodation was set up in churches, barracks and private houses. Only two medical officers, themselves wounded, were available; Dunant appealed to the French and arranged release of Austrian doctors who had been taken prisoners of war, himself standing as their guarantor. He raised money to provide food and dressings; it seems that he was everywhere.

Seeing Italian soldiers evicting wounded Austrians from a church, Dunant called out 'Stop, you must not, they are our brothers', and 'Sono fratelli' – 'they are our brothers' in Italian – became the name attached to this ad-hoc relief operation. In

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1862, Dunant published 'Un souvenir de Solferino' at his own expense and distributed it widely. He described the dreadful carnage and the attempts to relieve the suffering, and proposed that an organization be set up to assist the wounded in any future conflict.

On 17 February 1863, a small committee was set up in Geneva, which included Dunant, to implement this suggestion, and this date is considered to be the founding date of the Red Cross. In October of that year, representatives of 16 countries met in Geneva to discuss the care of wounded soldiers and the Swiss flag, with its colours reversed, the Red Cross, was adopted as its emblem. The following year, 1864, in a conference in Paris organized by the Swiss government, 12 countries signed the first 'Geneva Convention'.

By now, poor Dunant was playing less and less of a role in the new organization – his only job at this meeting was to organize the delegates' accommodation. Worse still, he had been neglecting his business. By 1867 he was declared bankrupt, disgraced and was removed totally

from the Geneva committee. He left Geneva, never to return to that city.

Dunant moved to Paris, lived in penury and was even reduced to sleeping on park benches. He travelled from country to country, relying on hand-outs from old friends. Amazingly, he continued to write articles and pamphlets on humanitarian topics. During the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, he founded a society to succour prisoners of war, he campaigned against the slave trade and he supported European Jews in their aim to establish a homeland in Palestine, then part of the Turkish empire.

In 1892, Dunant moved into a hospice in the small Swiss village of Heiden, where he stayed for the rest of his life. (Today, it is a small museum dedicated to his work.) Then, in 1901, Dunant's name was announced as the first recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, for his work in founding the International Red Cross Movement. He shared the prize with the Frenchman Frederic Passy, a pacifist who had collaborated with Dunant.

Dunant, now depressed and reclusive in spite of receiving numerous other awards, died in October 1910, 100 years ago. In accordance with his strict instructions, he was buried without ceremony or followers in a cemetery in Zurich – a sad end to an extraordinary life.

Today, the organization comprises the International Committee of the Red Cross, with headquarters in Geneva, that provides independent neutral assistance to victims of war and armed violence. It carried out magnificent work during the two World Wars and in all conflicts since. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies coordinates and directs international assistance following non-conflict disasters. National societies are found in 186 countries worldwide and others are being formed; there are an astonishing 97 million volunteers. All this is a living memorial to Jean Henri Dunant. **BJHM**

Conflict of interest: none.

Professor Harold Ellis is Emeritus Professor of Surgery, Guy's, King's and St Thomas' School of Biomedical Sciences, London SE1 1UL