This new, highly readable English translation broadens the audience for Corinne Chaponnière’s 2010 French-language biography of Henry Dunant, the visionary behind the Geneva Conventions and the Red Cross. The book tells the improbable story of how an ordinary Swiss citizen, without official backing from any government, brought the leaders of fractious mid-nineteenth-century European states to the table to agree upon rules and methods for limiting the human impact of war. It then details Dunant’s precipitous decline into poverty and disrepute and his long efforts to rehabilitate himself, culminating with his sharing of the inaugural Nobel Peace Prize in 1901.

When Chaponnière, a veteran Swiss-Canadian journalist and scholar, published the original version, francophone reviewers heralded the work as the first thorough biography of Dunant. They rightly praised Chaponnière for avoiding hagiography in favor of a thorough, nuanced approach that explored the complications and contradictions in Dunant’s long life.[1]

In the new version, translator Michelle Bailat-Jones preserves the author’s light, anecdotal tone and presents the work with her cinematic storytelling style and careful attention to biographical detail. As a result, the biography may capture an audience larger than its core readership. It is obvious that Chaponnière spent years in the archives poring over Dunant’s voluminous correspondence and other writings to untangle the facts of Dunant’s life from the myths that he and others created for their own purposes. Scholars of humanitarianism, philanthropy, and nineteenth-century Swiss history will consequently find the material relevant to their interests. But Chaponnière and Bailat-Jones also tell Dunant’s story with an accessible mix of enjoyment and sympathy that may capture the attention of any serious biography aficionado with a curiosity about the history of the Red Cross movement.

Chaponnière begins with the tale of how Dunant, born in 1828 into the pious Protestant Genevan bourgeoisie, became a humanitarian entrepreneur while pursuing colonial business ventures. After failing at school, Dunant worked as a clerk at a Genevan business concern involved in Algeria, which was then being brutally colonized by the French. Outside of work hours, Dunant and a few other young men formed a prayer group, which they then organized as the Swiss branch of the Young Men’s Christian Association, originally founded in Great Britain in 1844. During the 1850s, Dunant struck out on his own to pursue a
series of increasingly quixotic and grand economic ventures that aimed to exploit Algeria’s land, forests, and water resources. Lacking family wealth, he managed to convince his fellow Genevans and others to invest larger and larger sums in these schemes over the years, despite the schemes never showing a profit. As Chaponnière shows, his approach involved assiduously cultivating a circle of contacts among elites, writing a book that aimed to establish his expertise on North Africa, and, above all, pursuing his ventures with a tenacity that bordered on insanity.

This first part sets up Chaponnière to retell the origin story of Dunant and the Red Cross in a way that strips it of its usual hagiographic trappings. In the traditional version, which is familiar to anyone involved with one of the world’s 192 national Red Cross or Red Crescent societies or the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Dunant was a saintly Swiss citizen with a handlebar mustache who just happened to find himself in the middle of a bloody battle in Solferino, a town in present-day northern Italy where forces for Italian independence and their French imperial allies were battling those of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. According to the legend, this Swiss gentleman spontaneously alit from his carriage to tend to the bloodied combatants of all sides who lay in agony on the battlefield, crying out in thirst and desperation. As he carried these men to the local church in improvised stretchers and wheelbarrows (and wearing a white suit nonetheless!), he lamented the inadequacy of the aid available to them. Suddenly, he hatched the brilliant idea of creating permanent, organized groups of volunteers to offer neutral aid to all wounded combatants, to prevent this horror from ever being repeated. He then devoted his life to make his dream a reality, sacrificing his own health and financial well-being in the process.

But through Chaponnière we learn what Dunant was really doing in Solferino. Obsessively focused on his colonial ventures, he had traveled to the battle area in a desperate attempt to meet with French emperor Napoleon III. He sought from the emperor an imperial concession to access a waterfall in Algeria necessary to run his windmills. Dunant carried with him a book that he had written and published specifically to give to the emperor—a work of bald flattery that portrayed Napoleon III as the one true descendant of Charlemagne. The emperor had accompanied his troops to battle, so Dunant had to ride close to the action, risking his own life and that of the carriage drivers whom he had hired. Dunant nevertheless failed to gain his concession, or even to secure a meeting with the emperor. He did not even arrive at the battlefield until days after the battle had occurred—a fact that contradicts his sensationalistic account in the book that he later published on the episode, Un souvenir de Solferino (A Memory of Solferino [1862]). In fact, it was only after failing in his quest to meet the emperor that Dunant stayed to aid the townspeople in improvised, largely futile efforts to relieve the suffering of wounded combatants from the nearby battle.

Chaponnière then insightfully shows readers how Dunant employed the same skills that had enabled him to gain backing for his colonial ventures to promote his new humanitarian ideas: cultivating a broad network of influential people; writing a persuasive, bombastic book to position himself as an expert on the idea; and pursuing his goals with fierce tenacity. Displaying his marketing acumen, Dunant first created a “buzz” about his ideas by sending individually tailored copies of Un souvenir de Solferino to the monarchs of Europe as well as many members of the nobility. (A lover of aristocracy, Dunant despised democrats as radical rabble.) The book’s positive reception by royals and aristocrats led to its wider popularity, which then prompted several benevolent-minded Genevans to join with Dunant to form a committee focused on putting his ideas into action. This committee, headed by the lawyer-philanthropist Gustave Moynier, held a series of international diplomatic meetings that culminated in
the Geneva Convention of 1864. Eventually it became known by its current title, the International Committee of the Red Cross.

As Chaponnière correctly points out, the original Geneva Convention combined hardheaded, conservative realism with daring optimism. By getting European states to support creation of permanent battlefield aid societies and to agree not to target wounded enemy combatants in war, the ICRC founders implicitly acknowledged that warfare was inevitable and that the best they could do was to limit its human damage. Even though weapons at the time were becoming much more deadly and nation-states were piling up ever-larger stores of armaments, the Genevans did not even broach the subject of trying to outlaw war altogether. At the same time, Chaponnière notes, Dunant and his co-founders had the audacity to believe that they—mere private citizens, who held neither landed title nor the official power of government office—could bring the leaders of numerous governments together to sign an official treaty governing their conduct during war. They also dared to believe that the signatories would actually keep their promises. This dare paid off. While these promises have not always been honored during the 150-plus intervening years, they have formed the foundation for a body of international humanitarian law and a set of international humanitarian institutions upon which succeeding generations have built.

Chaponnière could have chosen to stop here and focus her biography on this stunning humanitarian feat, along with Dunant’s other less-known benevolent work. Doubtless, such a one-sided biography would have drawn accolades among some of the Red Cross faithful. But instead, she remains faithful to the archive and reveals how Dunant’s less-than noble activities soon caught up with him.

During the 1860s, according to Chaponnière, Dunant’s Algerian venture and humanitarian projects became messily intertwined in a way that even an apologist for colonialism would find unethical. Dunant brazenly capitalized on his Red Cross connections to garner additional partners for his increasingly larger colonial ventures and then openly deceived his investors to get them to bail him out on an ill-timed investment in an Algerian quarry. When the financial house of cards that Dunant had constructed came crashing down in 1867 and his backers lost all their money, he was immediately ostracized by Genevan society and forced to resign from the ICRC. He left Geneva for Paris and never returned to the city of his birth. Moynier, leader of the ICRC, became a lifelong enemy.

Chaponnière devotes eight chapters to Dunant’s post-1867 life. During this period, we learn that Dunant, though a penniless pariah, persisted in launching one failed benevolent venture after another to rescue his reputation and gain needed income. Although she sympathetically portrays him as an increasingly paranoid, sick, and isolated man, haunted by the specter of his creditors in Geneva, she does not let him off the hook for his failure to take responsibility for his part in their financial losses or to seek regular employment to support himself. Instead, she allows us to see how his narcissism allowed him to stubbornly cling to the narrative that he was a blameless, persecuted victim of malevolent forces from Geneva.

In the last few chapters, we learn how Dunant rehabilitated himself in the 1890s. When a new generation of admiring, if naive, disciples discovered him in his pauper state and brought him favorable press attention, Chaponnière shows, he skillfully seized the opportunity to deploy these admirers as proxies to successfully campaign, over a period of years, for him to gain the much-coveted inaugural Nobel Peace Prize in 1901. He shared the prize with Frédéric Passy, the French architect of international arbitration and founder of the League of Peace (Ligue Internationale et Permanente de la Paix [1867]). The receipt of this prize redeemed Dunant in the eyes of the world, apart from his former associates in Geneva. When
he died in 1910, at age eighty-two, he had regained a measure of worldwide renown.

The last seven chapters may prove a bit too exhaustive for the casual reader. They are also quite depressing, as they portray Dunant suffering setback after setback and never gaining insight on his own role in his defeats. However, they do, importantly, indicate how Dunant’s humanitarian thinking developed over the years, away from the Geneva Convention’s approach confined to limiting war’s damage and toward outright pacifism. Though he did not originate the idea that international courts of arbitration should replace warfare as a means for resolving international disputes, he spent decades promoting this idea through his writings. In later years, he also formed a close alliance with Austrian-Bohemian pacifist Bertha von Suttner, author of the well-known 1889 novel Die Waffen neider! (Lay Down Your Arms). Dunant contributed to von Suttner’s newsletter and became a vocal advocate for outlawing war. This shift in the thinking of the Red Cross founder holds significance in relation to critiques of the movement that arose in the twentieth century. (Andrew Carnegie, for example, refused to give money to Red Cross societies because he thought they did not advance the cause of peace but instead made war more palatable by appearing to soften its negative consequences).[3] While Dunant may have been unable to steer Red Cross societies in the direction of pacifism, it is notable that his later thinking predicted this twentieth-century critique of the movement.

Overall, the new translation of Chaponnière’s book successfully captures the contradictions of Dunant’s long, fraught life: his simultaneous involvement as a younger man in high-handed humanitarianism and self-serving colonial capitalism, as well as his later embrace of pacifist idealism while hewing to his antidemocratic views. In doing so, the volume successfully familiarizes anglophone readers with a complex humanitarian actor whose life and legacy should be better known to all of us.

Notes


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