



Henry Dunant at the time of the foundation of the Red Cross

Roger Durand

Henry Dunant

1828 – 1910

International Federation of Red Cross
and Red Crescent Societies

Henry Dunant Society

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Yesterday's utopia is often tomorrow's reality.

Henry Dunant

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CONTENTS

World famous yet little known	9
Henry Dunant, life and work	11
The family circle	11
A happy childhood	15
School, religious education, balls and the first undertakings	17
Young Men's Christian Associations	20
Business in Algeria	22
Scientific and literary ambitions	27
The battle of Solferino, the Samaritan of Castiglione	28
<i>A Memory of Solferino</i>	32
The Geneva Public Welfare Society	35
The International Committee of the Red Cross.	37
The constitutive Conference, 26-29 October 1863	41
Preparations for the diplomatic Conference, November 1863 - July 1864	45
The diplomatic Conference of August 1864 and the <i>First Geneva Convention</i>	49
Fame and the downfall: 1866-1867.	52
Bankruptcy and exile in 1867	56

Several attempts at getting back on his feet	58
The years of destitution and rivalry	61
The 1870-1871 Franco-Prussian war and the Paris Commune	63
The Universal Alliance for Order and Civilization	64
Protection for prisoners of war	65
International arbitration	66
The struggle against slavery	67
The dark years: 1875-1890	69
The founder rediscovered: Heiden	77
Old-fashioned feminism	79
In quest of the Nobel Peace Prize	80
Nine years of fame without repose	81
Utopia within reach	83
Chronology	85
Bibliography	89
Illustration credits	93
Acknowledgements	95

World famous yet little known

The historian trying to describe Henry Dunant¹ or the reader trying to understand him is brought face to face with a problem that matches his personality. Everything about him is contrast. He either shines to the point of dazzling or he plunges into such darkness that every trace of him disappears. Either his entrepreneurial energy makes one's head spin or his periodic disappearances from the land of the living leave one profoundly disappointed. In any case, he is both fascinating and irritating!

On the one hand, the philanthropist from Geneva belongs to the highly exclusive club of the ten men who are known throughout the world. Where is there a town without

¹ Let us settle from the outset the inevitable question of Dunant's first name. Although he was born and died as "Jean Henri," our hero wrote his name as "Henri," "J. Henri," "J. Henry" and "Henry." Although the latter spelling is not the one he most frequently used, we adopt it here as the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement has chosen to use it systematically.

To help the reader, we will refer consistently to the "Red Cross" although, for several years, various bodies of that organization had other titles, such as "International Committee for Relief to Wounded Soldiers" and "Relief Society for Wounded Soldiers." Likewise, we have harmonized philological aspects of the quotations such as accents, spelling, punctuation, capital letters and italics.

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Is there a more exceptional and tragic destiny than that of Henry Dunant? Having witnessed the dreadful consequences of the battle of Solferino (24 June 1859), he wrote a book about what he had witnessed – *A Memory of Solferino* – and drew from that traumatic experience two ideas – the Red Cross and the Geneva Convention – that made him famous throughout Europe. He did not enjoy such fame for long: in 1867, destitution was the price that he paid for a major bankruptcy. Once the guest of kings and ministers, he suffered hunger and the humiliation of having to wear patched and mended clothes. Such destitution did not prevent him from fighting for other generous causes: the protection of prisoners of war, the project of an *International Universal Library*, the rights of women, international arbitration, etc. After years of exile and misery, he orchestrated a recovery strategy which culminated with the first Nobel Peace Prize, awarded to him in 1901. He died in Heiden on 30 October 1910.

This short biography presents the essential features of the great philanthropist – his far-reaching vision, his enthusiasm and his generosity – without hiding his weaknesses and his persecution mania. It aims first of all at recalling Dunant's ideas, of which humanity may be proud.

Roger Durand, a historian born in Geneva, founded, on 24 June 1975, the Henry Dunant Society, which he has chaired and directed for the past 35 years. He published innumerable studies about Dunant, as well as important books about other key figures of humanitarian action, General Dufour, Elie Ducommun and Gustave Ador.

English translation by Ms Glynis Thompson.

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