

**UN history matters to all of us in BAFUNCS -
a review of Eric Drummond¹ by Sir Richard Jolly²**

This new biography of Eric Drummond, the first Secretary-General of the League of Nations, by four of our BAFUNCS colleagues, all longstanding former UN staff members, makes an important contribution, well summarized in the attached review. The book, brilliantly written and based on most careful research, traces how Drummond, a Scottish Etonian with impeccable integrity and sense of public service, helped create the international system of which all BAFUNCS members have been part. Each of us has experienced something of the ups and downs, successes, failures and compromises of the UN and its different parts as they exist today. For us, the underlying message of the book is encouraging. It shows how long-run positive achievements may ultimately outweigh the apparent difficulties and failures of the short-term, when international action gets swamped by political crises, economic disagreements and even war.

Drummond's early efforts to establish and defend internationalism from crude national interests are impressive. He was a pioneer "in achieving cooperation among nations and establishing the first international machinery designed to achieve political consensus, global economic advancement, social progress and better living standards; cooperative arrangements with sovereign governments to allow international personnel to work within their borders and respect and tolerance for other cultures." This, the authors comment, "is the foundation for people living together in peace..."

Although Drummond was more of a secretary than a general, his steady, self-effacing style enabled him to achieve some

¹ David Macfadyen, Michael D.V. Davies, Marilyn Nora Carr and John Burley, [Eric Drummond and his Legacies: the League of Nations and the Beginnings of Global Governance](#), (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019)

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impressive innovations, notably a vision of a truly international civil service, in which staff-members of whatever nationality, were truly independent of their governments and expected to live by the highest standards of public decorum. This was often, then and more recently, one step beyond where governments were prepared to go. The book identifies 1927 as the first year of 'the loss of innocence' when these high standards began to erode.

Of great interest is their point that the rise of Hitler and the Nazi party did not mean the end of the League's successful endeavours. The achievements in extending the broader mandate of the League into areas of economic and social policy were bold, path-breaking and sustained, truly astonishing for an international organization of the time. Statistics on a standardized basis were recognized to be essential if negotiations were to be properly informed. James Meade and Richard Stone, each later to win a Nobel prize in Economics, devised what became the SNA, the System of National Accounts, still in use today as the basis for GNP estimates. This was needed in the 1930s for implementing Keynesian policies to reduce unemployment and later, during the war, for ensuring economic space for essential consumption while maximizing priorities for arms and military production.

The 1927 World Economic Conference can be claimed to be the first global economic conference in history, with the United States and the Soviet Union actively participating in spite of not being members of the League. This conference paved the way for commodity agreements in the 1930s. The 1933 World Economic and Financial Conference, the last official event for Drummond, was less successful. By then, Hitler and the Nazi party were in power and Japan had withdrawn from the League. Efforts to tackle unemployment and the depression by global action were pretty much a failure.

Social policies of the League extended into health, nutrition, women and children's needs and with more success. In each of these areas, the League was pioneering for its time and laid the foundations for the UN, including establishing predecessor programmes which led to the creation of the WHO, FAO, UNESCO and UNICEF. The League also developed a system of technical assistance, providing experts when requested and developing practices later used in all parts of the UN, but especially in UNDP.

Although the League pioneered many of the arrangements adopted by the UN 25 years later, this was initially kept secret during war-time preparations of the UN, in order to ensure support for the UN. After all, the Americans had never joined the League and the Russians had been kicked out.

One area mostly of failure was in the employment of women. The League was initially far ahead of its time in requiring that "All positions ...shall be open equally to men and women." In practice, "Women from the Great Powers found quotas were filled by male compatriots who, unlike them, had essential experience in international politics...". Nonetheless some highly talented women did reach senior positions, though usually starting out in secretarial positions. (This will hardly be a surprise to many BAFUNCS members!)

Nancy Williams with First Class honours in Classics started as a stenographer just to get her foot in the door and was soon running "virtually single-handedly" the League's personnel division, albeit with the title of "Second Division clerk" and at a salary several times below that of the man who succeeded her some years later!

Gertrude Dixon had a Doctor of Science degree and experience as a biology lecturer. She had the job of Private Secretary to the great French internationalist, Jean Monnet, Drummond's deputy – but she was only promoted in 1929.

The American Florence Wilson, who had attended the 1919 Peace Conference, was taken on to establish the League's Library but, the authors add, at a very low rank, even though she had the post of Chief Librarian. (Today the UN library in Geneva is an international gem, far beyond the UN library in New York in almost every respect.) Nor was competition from the men always of the highest. Apparently, one male candidate for a librarian's job was asked how he would classify books. He replied that he would put the big books on the big shelves and little books on the little shelves. He did not get the job!

The German-born Lady Mary Blennerhasset joined as a translator in 1919 with perfect English, French, German and Italian and proficient Spanish and Portuguese. Drummond was pressed to give her the same pay as a man -and in this case Drummond agreed, though, the authors comment, Drummond "had a soft-spot for titles"- hardly a sign of his sensitivity to gender issues.

Rachel Crowdy was perhaps the most influential and committed of the League's pioneering women. She had trained as a nurse and worked as a volunteer nurse in the World War, ending up in charge of all Voluntary Aid Detachments on the continent. But when offered a job by Drummond, she modestly hesitated, arguing that there were other women more qualified. But eventually, she accepted, believing that "even if there was only a 50% chance of the horrors I had seen in France being prevented, I must cut in on this League of Nations gamble." She became the most notable senior woman, was supported by the International Women's movement and worked from within to get issues of importance to women on the League's agenda.

In short, many BAFUNCS members will find this a fascinating and important book to read, with much to add to their own experiences when talking to others – whether to friends,

grandchildren or even to schools. This book provides well-documented stories to include about the long-run effects of principled action and examples of the good results which may not come immediately but are important and pathbreaking for the longer run.