

# Book review Mary Roll-Vallanjon, Editor

## Eric Drummond and his legacies - The League of Nations and the beginnings of global governance

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London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019 (361 pp including illustrations, tables, figures, text boxes, comprehensive references and bibliography). In the series *Understanding governance* (Series Editor R.A.W Rhodes, Professor of Government, University of Southampton). ISBN 978-3-030 04731-3; ISBN 978-3-030-04732-0 (eBook).

**“The League of Nations did not fail because of its principles or conceptions. It failed because those principles were deserted by those States who had brought it into being.”  
Winston Churchill, 1946**

The book is divided into three parts: (1) the life and achievements of Eric Drummond; (2) the creation of an international civil service; (3) the legacies of the League.

One hundred years ago, on 28 April 1919, at the Peace Conference held in Paris, the League of Nations Covenant was approved, and its first Secretary-General was appointed: Eric Drummond, the youngest and the longest-serving of those who have held that post in either the League of Nations or the United Nations. The League came into formal existence in January 1920, with 42 members.

The initiative of establishing the League's functions lay with this first Secretary-General, who had very clear and modern ideas of what he wanted to achieve. After entering the British Foreign Office in 1900, he was already working on the idea of a "League of Peace" in 1916. He was to show himself to be a principled, trustworthy and conscientious leader. He began his work immediately after his appointment, in a back room of his London house. The actions he took were decisive in shaping the impartial character of the international civil service.

The book first describes Drummond's early life and character. Born in 1876 into a traditional Scottish family, he put into practice the motto of his clan, *Advance with caution*. His favourite pastime as a child was fishing, and it remained his main recreation throughout his life, especially when he was facing the stress of "the most impossible job in the world" (according to Trygve Lie, the first Secretary-General of the UN).

He left the League in 1933, and returned to the Foreign Office (as Ambassador to Rome until 1939). He retired in 1940. He had been a lifelong smoker and died of lung cancer on 15 December 1951. His eulogy was prescient: "Drummond will come into his full recognition as having conceived and then constructed one of the new, permanent elements of world life".

The League helped to stabilize nations and to protect vulnerable populations in the years after the First World War. It demonstrated that the way towards building a better world was through nations acting together. The International Secretariat conceived by Drummond fostered a wave of new approaches and ventures which were ahead of the times.

His tenure was also associated with the "spirit of Geneva" and with the establishment of that Swiss city as the centre point of global diplomacy. The Palais des Nations was inaugurated in 1936. Unfortunately for posterity, Drummond's own private papers were destroyed at the beginning of the Second World War, when it was feared that Switzerland might be invaded.

Part II of the book outlines in detail the work of the various sections, going in-depth into the personalities and successes or failures of their directors, and gives a careful analysis of the reasons for the League's inability to prevent international conflict. The reluctance of the great powers to act through the League sealed its fate. In spite of its political impotence however, it continued to have a strong influence in the economic and social fields right up to its dissolution.

The final Part of the book shows the large-scale absorption of League programmes, practices and staff into the United Nations and its specialized agencies, and focuses on the men and women who were at the heart of this "great experiment" in global governance. The issues covered include the essence of the multilateral system, and how the structures, functioning and management of the international civil service have borrowed much from the early days of the 1920s. The many continuities in the areas of political and humanitarian work are outlined.

Finally, there is a comparison of the life of an international civil servant then and now, and a description of the continued evolution of Geneva as a centre for multilateralism.

One hundred years later, the UN is an intrinsic element of the global world order. This book will tell you about the first person, and many people, who made it happen.

*Although this scholarly work was originally designed for use by academics and students of international affairs and governance, it is of particular interest to international civil servants, past and present.*

