

Across the Street, Across the World: A History of the Red Cross in New Zealand, 1915 – 2015

by Margaret Tennant

New Zealand Red Cross (2015)

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Reviewed by Margaret McClure

Margaret Tennant is New Zealand's most experienced welfare historian. It is interesting to see her turn from a broad academic study, *The Fabric of Welfare*, to focus on a single, iconic institution in her history of the New Zealand Red Cross, *Across the Street, Across the World*.¹ Nevertheless the scope of this new work is extensive – it portrays the Red Cross both in the context of an international movement and within a century of changing life in New Zealand. Tennant makes excellent use of the organisation's archives, personal accounts from Red Cross workers, correspondence with government departments, and published works. This is an institutional history with a critical edge. While celebrating the achievements of the New Zealand Red Cross, Tennant analyses tensions within the organisation, rivalries with similar groups, and failures of vision in the mundane decades when crises were scarce. The result is a fully-fleshed account that illuminates issues faced by many charitable organisations.

The academic tone of Tennant's introduction to the story is out of kilter with a topic that embraces disasters and the capacity of ordinary people to be innovative and adventurous. The narrative gains pace as it traces the roots of the Red Cross in mid-nineteenth-century Italy and Geneva, its beginnings in New Zealand and its progress through a century to the recent Canterbury earthquakes. The first chapter describes the founding of the International Red Cross that followed Henry Dunant's account of the plight of wounded soldiers after the butchery of the battle of Solferino in Italy. His vision of providing skilled medical care to allies and enemy alike was adopted by four of his compatriots in Geneva and led to the First Geneva Convention in 1864. By the end of the nineteenth century the Red Cross movement had spread as far as Venezuela and Japan. Its principles were humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality.

The beginnings of the Red Cross in New Zealand were confused. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries anyone could adopt the Red Cross symbol – a company advertised a 'Red Cross sling' for prostrate cows (27). While groups formed haphazardly around the country, the Red Cross was slow to formalise its structure, partly because of its tangled relationship with the Order of St John. Both organisations shared the patronage of the Governor, Lord Liverpool, who fought to keep the Red Cross under the umbrella of St John. The return of wounded soldiers from Gallipoli highlighted the need for a consistent response. In 1915 a New Zealand Branch of the British Red Cross Society was formed; the public took it to their hearts, and by 1918 there were 60 Red Cross groups extending from Kohukohu to Gore.

Tennant's account of the response to wartime challenges is inspiring. Volunteers joined together in an industrial-style mass production of parcels for the front; in Christchurch the 'Bandage Department' sorted 138,000 articles to send overseas. Innovative local fundraising initiatives included the Taihape Farmers' Red Cross Art Union prize of 1000 sheep. However, funding disputes with St John continued for years and the New Zealand Red Cross did not gain formal independence from its British parent until 1931.

Between the wars the Red Cross pursued two missions, providing welfare services for First World War veterans and ensuring its readiness for future disasters. Meeting the latter goal involved training Voluntary Aid Detachments to support professional nurses and establishing Red Cross branches in schools to attract junior recruits. Tennant has a shrewd eye for class distinctions in these decades when wealthy men and women dominated the leadership roles

and only the rich could afford to represent New Zealand at overseas conferences. She also highlights the significance of gender in a period when local volunteers were women while office holders in Wellington were male professionals and businessmen.

The Second World War gave the Red Cross a renewed sense of purpose and groups expanded around the country. In Wellington 1200 women took turns on a production line packing parcels bearing Red Cross labels for prisoners of war. The Red Cross also integrated its work with the Joint Council in Britain, supplying musical instruments to maintain morale. At the same time Red Cross prestige was undermined when the money the organisation raised was diverted to the government's Patriotic Fund. The Red Cross welcome for the Polish refugees who arrived in New Zealand in 1944 laid a basis for future work with displaced people.

Tennant's grip on social context works well in conveying the post-war years when the Red Cross found it difficult to make its work exciting, and some members became obsessed with the minutiae of uniforms and drilling. The strong role of the state excluded the Red Cross from educating nurses and collecting blood – two domains in which the organisation earned prestige in other countries. Red Cross reports appeared in the women's pages of newspapers and American-style community groups such as Rotary drew men in new directions. At the same time a number of rivals competed for funding and a sense of mission. Red Cross initiatives such as Meals on Wheels became difficult to sustain as large numbers of women joined the workforce. New Zealand was not alone: in 1975 the scathing Tansley Report on Red Cross activities around the world found that health and welfare tasks had become too diffuse, and urged the organisation to focus on its unique role in emergencies.

The greatest challenge of the late twentieth century was to attract young men into the fold of an institution that the public saw as a ladies' knitting group. Initiatives in sending foreign aid workers to war zones from Vietnam to Uganda attracted a new generation of men and women who were young, fit, free and trained. These ventures became the flagship of the modern Red Cross. Jenny McMahon, a nurse, nutritionist and businesswoman, worked with an International Red Cross team in Mozambique that achieved 95% immunisation rates; she later survived being held hostage by armed militia in Sudan, and after her rescue arrived in Kenya 'casually elegant' and smiling (281). Her election as President of the New Zealand Red Cross broke with a largely male tradition.

The era from the 1980s to 2000s was difficult for the Red Cross. Tennant is even-handed in portraying the need for professionalism at headquarters despite regional hostility to corporate-style management, five-year plans, and demands for volunteers to be accountable to paid staff in Wellington. Members of many organisations will recognise the laments about change that went 'too far, too fast' (238).

The success of the Red Cross in rising to the challenge of the Canterbury earthquakes makes a fitting climax to the history. The International Red Cross sent experts on water and sanitation. Local workers carried out searches amid the rubble, linked families together (fielding 15,000 phone calls on the first night after the February 2011 earthquake), and managed \$128 million of government funds. Aware that Australian and US branches of the Red Cross had hoarded emergency funds for administrative purposes after Bali and 9/11, the New Zealand Red Cross handled its finances with care and emerged with its reputation enhanced.

Tennant's style slips into academic formality on occasions; the story loses impetus as it tracks administrative tussles, and acronyms become a bugbear in the later chapters. Such faults are balanced by quotations from members at the grass-roots level that convey a lively sense of New Zealand's provincial life. Boxes inserted in the narrative give generous space to outstanding women who took on regional leadership – Helen Lawry of Hawke's Bay,

imaginative in her philanthropy, and more ordinary women like Emma King who – when her shop was wrecked in the Napier earthquake – ‘calmly put on her hat, collected her bag, clambered down the hanging staircase, and made her way to the Red Cross depot to report for duty’ (119).

A book that honours a significant organisation should look beautiful if it is to sell well. Perhaps it is time for a public historian’s role to extend to lobbying for design quality. This volume is heavy to hold, and the old-fashioned layout is likely to deter the general public. Confining the coloured images to one section is disappointing when many Red Cross posters are so striking. The footnotes are excellent, but it seems odd to have no bibliography.

Nevertheless, *Across the Street, Across the World* is particularly valuable in an era when governments rely on community organisations expanding their roles. This book is essential reading for students and writers in the welfare field, and for CEOs, boards and supporters of voluntary groups. It succeeds as both inspiration and cautionary tale, reminding us that idealism and organisational conflict go hand in hand, and that faltering institutions are capable of renewal.

¹ Margaret Tennant, *The Fabric of Welfare: Voluntary Organisations, Government and Welfare in New Zealand, 1840–2005* (Wellington: Bridget William Books, 2007).