

ADDRESS TO MEMBERS OF AUSTRALIAN RED CROSS  
(TASMANIAN BRANCH)  
ON THE OCCASION OF THE CENTENARY CELEBRATION  
BY MRS FRANCES UNDERWOOD  
IN THE GARDENS OF GOVERNMENT HOUSE, TASMANIA  
21 FEBRUARY 20014

On the 10<sup>th</sup> of August, 1914 a letter appeared in the Mercury newspaper. Written by Lady Helen Munro Ferguson, wife of the Governor-General and under the banner;

*'Australian Red Cross Society  
Suggestion from Lady Munro Ferguson.*

The letter read:

*To the Editor of "The Mercury."*

*Sir, The outbreak of war has aroused universal feelings of patriotism. Every member of the community is anxious to take some part in the defence of the Empire. The best field of activity for non combatants and especially for women, lies in providing for the sick and wounded but to ensure the utmost result from the effort of every individual, and also to prevent overlapping and duplication such assistance must be organized. In all countries this work is being undertaken by the National Red Cross Societies. It is therefore proposed to form an Australian Branch of the British Red Cross Society and a central council is being established on which Lady Ellison Macartney and the wives of the Governors of others states have already agreed to serve'.*

On Friday 14th August 1914 a public meeting was held at the Hobart Town Hall. The notice convening the meeting read;

*'The War Crisis*

*Womens Meeting*

*A public meeting of the women of Hobart ...."will be held tomorrow afternoon (Friday) at 3 o'clock to consider how the Women can best assist their country in the present crisis."*

The minutes of the meeting show that it was well attended by a large number of ladies. After much discussion and debate about how best to proceed and whether the clothing and hospital comforts would be for Australian or British soldiers, the meeting was adjourned until 19<sup>th</sup> August when a number of resolutions were passed including;<sup>1</sup>

*'that it is desirable to form a Committee at Hobart in association with the Central Council for Red Cross Work in Melbourne, and that this committee be called the Tasmanian Central (Red Cross) Association.'*<sup>2</sup>

And, so began Tasmania's significant contribution to the largest humanitarian movement in the world; an organization that grew out of one man's vision, Henri Dunant's vision, in response to the unimaginable sights of human suffering he witnessed on the battlefield. The movement now comprises over 97 million volunteers worldwide and prides itself on being neutral, impartial and independent. That is certainly something to celebrate.

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Red Cross Tasmania Minutes of Inaugural Meeting 14<sup>th</sup> August 1914 Town Hall, Hobart

<sup>2</sup> Minutes Adjourned Meeting of Women Mayors Court Room 19<sup>th</sup> August 1914

Henri Dunant proposed two very practical measures to alleviate suffering: an international agreement on the neutral status of medical personnel in war and the creation of a permanent organization for practical assistance for the war wounded<sup>3</sup>. The first led to the Geneva Convention and the second became the Red Cross. In 1901 he was awarded the first Nobel Peace Prize, sharing it with pacifist Frederic Passy.

There are many faces of the Red Cross Movement; the Australian Red Cross which was launched in Government House Melbourne on 14 August 1914; The Red Crescent; and The International Committee, the keeper of a humanitarian code of conduct and three times winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1917, 1944 and 1963.

Every day, right across the world, members of the Red Cross movement are working to alleviate the suffering of those caught up in conflicts and natural disasters. Every day here in Tasmania members of the Red Cross are at work; in the blood bank and in the clothes shop; in proactive initiatives to help the vulnerable, such as the Save-a-mate ,the Prisoner Support Program; and the recently completed Doing it Tough Appeal, and in many other innovative programs being offered in youth and education services. Many volunteers have responded to interstate emergencies such as the floods in Queensland and bush fires in Victoria; and of course, just over a year ago here in Tasmania Red Cross played a central and very effective role in supporting, and bringing relief to, those affected by the bush fires on the Tasman Peninsular.

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<sup>3</sup> Moorehead, Caroline *Dunant's Dream* Pub. Harper Collins London 1998

As well as these initiatives Red Cross Tasmania is dedicated to promoting international humanitarian law through the appointment of a Humanitarian Law Officer and through lectures and education. We have Red Cross and the Geneva Convention to thank for the development of Humanitarian law and ultimately Henri Dunant, who could not possibly have imagined how his vision would pan out into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, nor could he have imagined the challenges that have been posed by the nature of modern conflict and its weaponry which seem to keep the world in a perpetual state of emergency. In consequence there are always millions of innocent civilian victims, requiring humanitarian aid delivered by the Red Cross Movement. It is tempting to agree with philosopher Alain Finkelkraut's observation that "Barbarism is not the prehistory of humanity but the faithful shadow that accompanies its every step."<sup>4</sup> However, Dunant never lost hope and nor should we! He didn't give up! Nor should we!

As you know 2014 also marks the centenary of the commencement of World War One. Obviously the two centenaries are closely linked. So it is fitting that on this occasion we should recall the work done by the International Committee of Red Cross for it was founded just over 150 years ago and provided serious humanitarian work during WW I. In doing so our thoughts turn not only to those who were killed or maimed in *that* war and their families but also those who died or were injured in World War Two and all other violent conflicts in which Australia has been involved in the last one hundred years. As well as remembering their bravery we should, in this significant year, as Dunant did all those years ago, think about what each of us can do to alleviate the suffering of so many people who have been or who are caught up in armed conflict

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<sup>4</sup> Alain Finkelkraut as quoted in Clive James *Cultural Cohesion* Norton Paperback USA 2013

and we should honour those who have died in their efforts to bring peace, by each one of us seeking ways to establish the peace they died for.

In our country and in our State, Red Cross has indeed, given great service. In 2010 Red Cross Tasmania was recognised by the Hobart City Council for best practice in volunteer management. I am very proud to be patron of Red Cross in Tasmania. All the members should be proud too for it is a privilege to work as members of such an important and prestigious movement whose principles, attitudes, practice and emblem signifying protection, have been woven into the fabric of Australian Society for 100 years as an exceptional role model of the power of humanity; the power, in fact, of you and me when we respond wholeheartedly to the call of those in need as all of you have been doing for many years. I congratulate you all and urge you to keep up the good work. Keep unlocking that power of humanity. I wish you a wonderful year of reflection and well deserved celebration beginning here in the beautiful gardens of Government House entertained by excellent music from the Australian Army Band Tasmania, the Australian Defence Force being another fine institution that has so often worked alongside Red Cross both in times of war and in times of peace.

And now I have the great honour of cutting the ribbon to signify the commencement of a year of celebrations of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this magnificent organization.

Thank You

