*Enrico Dal Lago and Kevin O'Sullivan*

# Review Article: Prosopographies, Transnational Lives, and Multiple Identities in Global Humanitarianism

Bruno Cabanes: The Great War and the Origins of Humanitarianism 1918–1924, Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014, vii + 390 pp., ISBN: 978-1-107-60483-4.

Jay Winter/Antoine Prost: René Cassin and Human Rights: From the Great War to the Universal Declaration, Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013, xxiii + 376 pp., ISBN: 978-1-107-65570-6.

Marian Moser Jones: The American Red Cross from Clara Barton to the New Deal, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013, xxviii + 365 pp., ISBN: 978-1-4214-0738-8.

Alex Wright: Cataloguing the World: Paul Otlet and the Birth of the Information Age, Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, 350 pp., ISBN: 978-0-19-993141-5.

## Introduction

The first challenge that confronts any historian of human rights—and of humanitarianism more broadly—is that their subject "fundamentally denies having any history whatsoever."[1] If rights are accorded to an individual simply by virtue of being human, the teleology tells us, then they are independent of time and place. That interpretation was visible in early histories of human rights, which tended to view them as "a saving truth, discovered rather than made in history."[2] Yet the "inchoate" field that Kenneth Cmiel described in 2004

1 Devin O. Pendas: Toward a New Politics? On the Recent Historiography of Human Rights, in: Contemporary European History 21:1 (2012), pp. 95–111, p. 97.

2 Samuel Moyn: The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History, Cambridge 2010, p. 6. For examples of those early syntheses of human rights, see Lynn Hunt: Inventing Human Rights:

DOI: 10.13154/mts.57.2017.159-174 Moving the Social · 57 (2017) · p. 159–174

has taken significant strides forward in the past decade.[3] The search for new questions and new threads of inquiry has revealed a history of great complexity. Some scholars have looked to specific movements, such as decolonisation, to unlock that narrative.[4] Others have focussed on the fortunes of a wide variety of institutions and agencies that shaped our understanding of rights.[5] Still others have been drawn to biography as a way of unravelling the social, political, cultural, and geographical contexts in which rights were made.

In the scholarship on humanitarianism, however, historians have, to date, largely neglected this biographical dimension. This review article argues that we need to focus again on individual personalities, incorporating the insights of the model of new history of humanitarianism that we outlined in the introduction to this special issue.[6] In particular, biographies written with the nuances of transnational historical scholarship would allow us to capture the multiple identities of neglected and yet important historical actors. That multiplicity of identities that shaped humanitarianism was, in most cases, intimately linked to the transnational dimension of their lives. Reviewing a small, but important group of recent studies that focus on the biographical dimension of humanitarian activity, this article argues that biography is a particularly apt method for illustrating how voluntary activism adapted to different circumstances, and how humanitarian agents acted as buffers between alternative realities. In essence, in prosopographies and biographical studies, both the ability to shift identities and engagement in transnational dialogue between different layers of humanitarian intervention are laid bare as clearly visible components of humanitarian action. At the same time, nationality also played an important role either in strengthening or weakening the identity of humanitarian agents and the ultimate outcome of their work. In calling for increasingly nuanced biographical

A History, New York 2007; and Micheline R. Ishay: The History of Human Rights: From Ancient Times to the Globalisation Era, Berkeley 2004.

3 Kenneth Cmiel: The Recent History of Human Rights, in: American Historical Review 109:1 (2004), pp. 117–135, p. 119.

4 On human rights and decolonisation, see Roland Burke: Decolonisation and the Evolution of International Human Rights, Philadelphia 2010; Fabian Klose: Human Rights in the Shadow of Colonial Violence: The Wars of Independence in Kenya and Algeria, Philadelphia 2013; and Daniel Maul: Human Rights, Development and Decolonisation: The International Labour Organisation, 1940–70, Basingstoke 2012.

5 See, for example, the essays by Chris Moores and Rob Skinner in this special issue. See also Jan Eckel: The International League for the Rights of Man, Amnesty International, and the Changing Fate of Human Rights Activism from the 1940s Through the 1970s, in: Humanity 4:2 (2013), pp. 183–214; Matthew Hilton: International Aid and Development NGOs in Britain and Human Rights Since 1945, in: Humanity 3:3 (2012), pp. 449–472; Rob Skinner: The Foundations of Anti-Apartheid: Liberal Humanitarians and Transnational Activists in Britain and the United States, c.1919–1964, Basingstoke 2011; and Peter Slezkine: From Helsinki to Human Rights Watch: How an American Cold War Monitoring Group Became an International Human Rights Institution, in: Humanity 5:3 (2014), pp. 345–370.

6 See Dal Lago/O'Sullivan: Introduction.

studies, this review article also argues that, while we should continue to investigate and produce more sophisticated biographies of well known, but not necessarily well researched, humanitarian leaders, we should also look to the lives of less well known, but no less important, humanitarian activists.[7]

One possible model for the type of nuanced biography that we have in mind is provided by the life of Josephine Butler.[8] It is extraordinary that no major biographical study of Josephine Butler has appeared in recent years, especially given the importance and breadth of her humanitarian vision and activities. Partly, this is a reflection of the paucity of scholarship on female 19th-century humanitarian leaders; in fact, as Abigail Green has convincingly argued, even though "female leadership, mobilisation, and activism emerge as a letimotif in several recent accounts of humanitarian politics ... [they are] rarely addressed explicitly."[9] This is also partly a reflection of the difficulty in writing a biographical study of an activist involved in different humanitarian causes both nationally and also on a truly transnational scale.[10] In fact, Josephine Butler was well connected with the great 19th-century campaign for abolitionism through her own antislavery Anglican father, who corresponded with Giuseppe Mazzini—the Italian nationalist who was also a strong abolitionist—and through her own Quaker acquaintances.[11] As Abigail Green has pointed out, "for Butler, 'abolitionism' served to connect the early to mid-nineteenth-century worlds of transatlantic antislavery and Mazzinian radicalism with the international structures and globally configured humanitarian mobilisation of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century."[12] As a result, while she became acquainted with prominent American abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, Josephine Butler adopted the old abolitionist idea of the similarity between the exploitation of slaves and the exploitation of women, and it is in this sense that we have to see her campaigns against

7 The most recent surveys of humanitarian history have little to say in terms of an approach that focuses on biographies of transnational humanitarian activists and reformers. See especially Michael Barnett: Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism, Ithaca 2011; Brendan J. Simms/D. J. B. Trimm (eds.): Humanitarian Intervention: A History, New York 2011; Samuel Moyn: The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History; and Samuel Moyn: Human Rights and the Uses of History, London 2014.

8 For the latest reappraisals of Butler's life, see Helen Mathers: Patron Saint of Prostitutes: Josephine Butler and a Victorian Scandal, Stroud 2014; and Anne Summers (eds.): Gender, Religion and Politics: Josephine Butler's Campaigns in International Perspective (1875–1959), in: Women's History Review 17:2 (2008).

9 Abigail Green: Humanitarianism in Nineteenth-Century Context: Religious, Gendered, National, in: Historical Journal 57:4 (2014), pp. 1157–1175, p. 1166.

10 See Anne Summers: Female Lives, Moral States: Religion and Public Life in Britain, 1800–1930, Newbury 2000.

11 On Mazzini's abolitionism, see Enrico Dal Lago: William Lloyd Garrison and Giuseppe Mazzini: Abolition, Democracy, and Radical Reform, Baton Rouge 2013.

12 Abigail Green: Humanitarianism in Nineteenth-Century Context: Religious, Gendered, National, p. 1166.

the Contagious Diseases Act and against prostitution—especially through her foundation of the International Abolitionist Federation—as campaigns to abolish provisions that perpetuated women's exploitation.[13] Thus, while Josephine Butler stands at a crucial juncture in the history of modern humanitarianism in ideological terms, she also provides scholars with a unique opportunity to study a combination of nationally and transnationally focused humanitarian activities—a crucial feature in the type of nuanced biographies of humanitarian activists that we advocate.

Ishbel Gordon, Lady Aberdeen, provides another possible model of a humanitarian activist who thought and operated in a transnational dimension.[14] Remarkably, no major recent biography exists of Aberdeen's life in that sphere. Similarly to Josephine Butler, Lady Aberdeen was a female philanthropist fighting at the same time to improve health and living conditions among the general population, and for women in particular, and moved freely between both sides of the Atlantic world. The British imperial dimension, however, was crucial in framing her understanding of transnational humanitarianism, since she firmly believed that her philanthropic efforts would contribute to make "better", healthier citizens in a more responsible local government structure, while still retaining Canada and Ireland within the boundaries of empire.[15] Consequently, in her energetic transnational activities in both locations—in Canada in 1893–98, where she organised the National Council of Women of Canada and the Victorian Order of Nurses, and in Ireland in 1906–1915, where she founded and presided over the Women's National Health Association—she created female philanthropic organisations as a means to improve the standard of living in Britain's colonial societies, and thus in the British Empire as a whole.[16]

These brief overviews of some of the most striking features of Josephine Butler's and Lady Aberdeen's lives show that biographical studies of humanitarian activists with transnational agendas offer the potential to investigate a host of different issues that characterised the development of humanitarianism.[17] On the one hand, the late 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed the peak of the imperial humanitarian moment,

13 See Ian Tyrrell: Reforming the World: The Creation of America's Moral Empire, Princeton 2010, pp. 20–24.

14 Doris French Shackleton's important biography of Lady Aberdeen is now more than a quarter of a century old; Doris French Shackleton: Ishbel and Empire: A Biography of Lady Aberdeen, Toronto 1988.

15 See especially Val McLeish: Sunshine and Sorrows: Canada, Ireland, and Lady Aberdeen, in: David Lambert/Alan Lester (eds.): Colonial Lives across the British Empire: Imperial Careering in the Long Nineteenth Century, New York 2006, pp. 257–284.

16 On Lady Aberdeen in Ireland, see Maureen Keene: Ishbel: Lady Aberdeen in Ireland, Dublin 1999. On Lady Aberdeen in Canada, see Veronica Strong-Boag: Liberal Hearts and Coronets: The Lives and Times of Ishbel Marjoribanks Gordon and John Campbell Gordon, the Aberdeens, Toronto 2015.

17 On the importance of the period 1870–1920, see especially Emily S. Rosenberg: Introduction, in: Emily S. Rosenberg (eds.): A World Connecting, 1870–1945, Cambridge 2012, pp. 3–27.

which in turn provided a particularly strong influence on both Josephine Butler and Lady Aberdeen and led them to engage in philanthropic activities and to campaign for women's rights firmly within the boundaries of an English-speaking imperial framework.[18] On the other hand, the tail end of that moment of acceleration, in the aftermath of the First World War, led to the breaking of European empires, the consolidation of modern concepts of humanitarianism, and the creation of global, cooperative and professional humanitarian organisations that operated transnationally—in a way that both Josephine Butler and Lady Aberdeen had advocated in their own time.[19] The four books we have chosen to review also adopt this transnational biographical approach. They focus on the lives of individual humanitarian actors as a way of understanding the development of humanitarian concepts and practices in the transition from a European-dominated world to a world of international humanitarian ideals and agencies. In this way, we can utilise the lives of those philanthropists who contributed to that transition and who, in the process, reinvented their own identities, to uncover the deep social, economic, political, and cultural undercurrents that shaped humanitarianism in its specific historical contexts.

## A Representative Life of a Transnational Reformer

Jay Winter and Antoine Prost's biography, *René Cassin and Human Rights: From the Great War to the Universal Declaration*, has elements of that approach.[20] René Cassin was born in 1887 to a family of prosperous middle-class Jews in Nice, and his diverse experiences as professor of law, disabled war veteran, French delegate to the League of Nations, member of the Free France administration in London during the Second World War, co-architect of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize (1968), are used by Jay Winter and Antoine Prost to tease out the peculiarities of human rights history. To them, context is key: René Cassin's story provides a "history of the struggle for human rights in a specific time and place", and lays bare "the prejudice and presuppositions" that shaped the rights agenda in its contemporary form.[21]

18 On the imperial dimension of humanitarianism, see Emily Baughan/Brownen Everill: Humanitarianism and Empire: A Preface, in: Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History 40:5 (2012), pp. 727–728.

19 On these issues, see especially William Mulligan: The Great War for Peace, New Haven 2014.

20 René Cassin has also drawn the attention of other scholars of human rights in recent years. See, for example, Glenda Sluga: René Cassin: Les droits de l'homme and the Universality of Human Rights, 1945–1966, in: Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann (eds.): Human Rights in the Twentieth Century, Cambridge 2011, pp. 107–12; and the book by Bruno Cabanes under review here.

21 Jay Winter/Antoine Prost: René Cassin and Human Rights: From the Great War to the Universal Declaration, Cambridge 2013, pp. xix, xxi.

They begin with the story of René Cassin the young man, trained in law, before moving chronologically through the various stages of his career. At each turn, we are introduced to the intellectual and diplomatic milieus in which his ideas of human rights were formulated. The experience of conflict looms large. René Cassin, badly wounded in battle in October 1914, never returned to active duty during the First World War, but his experience led him to a lifetime's work campaigning for disabled veterans. It also confirmed in him one unshakeable principle: that individual justice was grounded not in charity but in rights. That principle was reaffirmed in the Second World War, through the key role that René Cassin assumed in shaping the juridical structures of Free France, but also through his personal experience of fleeing to London, and that of his wider Jewish family in war.

Jay Winter and Antoine Prost use René Cassin's story to thread a narrative of human rights that was anything but static. Personal relationships were vital in shaping René Cassin's thinking. In 1940s London, for example, he renewed relationships and discussions with prominent individuals such as Paul-Henri Spaak (Belgian socialist leader, whom he had met in Brussels in 1935) and Eduard Beneš (with whom René Cassin had formed a friendship while Beneš was in Geneva as Czech foreign minister). He also made new acquaintances; meeting with William Beveridge, architect of the British welfare state, helped René Cassin to the realisation that "the war was about rights, and so would be the peace."[22] Physical locations played an important role in constructing René Cassin's transnational ideal of human rights. As a member of the French delegation in Geneva in the 1920s and 1930s, for example, he witnessed at first hand the failures of internationalism in the face of assertive state sovereignty. In London, he was part of a vibrant intellectual environment in which ideas of the post-war order were being developed. At each stage, we bear witness to René Cassin's development into a champion for "truncating the sovereignty of the state and advancing the right of individual petition against violations of rights in the state in which he or she lived."[23] Those experiences were, in turn, vital in shaping his contributions to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, finally published in New York in 1948.

Jay Winter and Antoine Prost's biography of René Cassin provides a very real insight into the individual relationships, the lived experiences, and the sheer serendipities that shaped human rights. René Cassin's was just one of several voices that contributed to the final text of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but reading its origins through the eyes of one who helped to frame it leaves us with a richer understanding of how it was constructed. We must be careful, however, to appreciate the limits of the biographical

22 Jay Winter/Antoine Prost: René Cassin and Human Rights: From the Great War to the Universal Declaration, p. 163.

23 Jay Winter/Antoine Prost: René Cassin and Human Rights: From the Great War to the Universal Declaration, p. 221.

approach. Lives such as René Cassin's are also important for what they leave out. It is difficult—even in the case of a relatively lesser-known figure such as René Cassin—to navigate the territory between histories of élite international citizens and the translation of their ideas into a popular cause. His ambiguous attitude to the question of human rights in the Algerian War, for example, revealed the limits of his "universalism" and the shadow of empire that hung over the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Jay Winter and Antoine Prost's fudge—emphasising René Cassin's support for "progressive decolonisation"—is revealing in itself.[24] As he did in the case of post-war Palestine, René Cassin brought the baggage of his formation as a French (and Jewish) citizen in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to how he understood the application of rights. The absence of gender from René Cassin's thinking is equally telling. The long struggle to define women as "human" under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights framework (to quote Allida Black) might be outside the remit of a biography of René Cassin, but it remains integral to understanding how the Declaration was interpreted.[25]

## Political Prosopographies and their Connections

René Cassin appears again, as one of five representative lives that Bruno Cabanes uses to build a prosopography of humanitarianism in the early 20th century in *The Great War and the Origins of Humanitarianism, 1918–1924*. The first of those biographies focuses on René Cassin as the champion of war veterans' rights in post-war France. The life of Albert Thomas, French Minister for Armaments during the First World War, and later director of the International Labour Organisation (1919–32), becomes a vehicle to explore the nature of international co-operation and the development of ideas of social well-being on a transnational scale. Fridtjof Nansen's career as League of Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is used to examine ideas about international law, the movement and treatment of refugees, and the tensions between national and international institutions. The most fruitful application of the prosopographical approach comes in chapter four, on Herbert Hoover's role as head of the American Relief Administration. Understanding Herbert Hoover's nationalism and his belief in spreading American influence is key to explaining the American Relief Administration's response to famine in Russia in the early 1920s, the complex motivations for humanitarian relief that it highlighted, and the importance of the First World War in defining relief as an international obligation. The book concludes

24 Jay Winter/Antoine Prost: René Cassin and Human Rights: From the Great War to the Universal Declaration, p. 278.

25 Allida Black: Are Women "Human"? The UN and the Struggle to Recognise Women's Rights as Human Rights, in: Akira Iriye/Petra Goedde/William I. Hitchcock (eds.): The Human Rights Revolution: An International History, Oxford 2012, pp. 133–155.

with a study of Eglantyne Jebb, founder of the Save the Children Fund, and her role in re-defining humanitarianism through the rights of the child and the role of children in the post-war order.

At each step, Bruno Cabanes' aim is to link the lives of those individuals with their social, political, and geographical contexts, and in so doing to recreate the history of humanitarianism in the aftermath of the First World War. He succeeds—to a point. The five stories presented here do a good job of describing the scale of the crisis, the vast reach of the war, the problems that arose in its aftermath, and the ways in which they transformed humanitarianism. Place, as in Jay Winter and Antoine Prost's book, is also vital: the links that Bruno Cabanes draws between his protagonists provide us with a glimpse of the transnational contexts in which ideas of humanitarianism took shape. Those stories were also important in highlighting the limits of humanitarianism as an international ideal. In the case of the Russian famine, for example, it became clear that attempts to spread American influence through aid were not always welcomed by the locals: "They were struck by the humiliation of watching foreigners, speaking a language they did not understand, interfering in Russia's internal affairs."[26]

Yet, there are also serious shortcomings in the prosopography of humanitarianism that is presented here. The problem lies in Bruno Cabanes' choice of representative lives. As Bertrand Taithe rather pithily noted, "If you were to ask my students about the heroes of humanitarian aid in the first half of the Twentieth [*sic*.] century you would have essentially the same list."[27] A study of prominent figures such as René Cassin, Albert Thomas, Fridtjof Nansen, Herbert Hoover, and Eglantyne Jebb does little to challenge the existing narrative of humanitarianism. In fact, biographies of this type run the risk of replicating the discourses of the élites to which their leading figures belonged. To adapt Mark Mazower's warning about the post-1945 period, "the protagonists of these accounts [often] turn into visionaries and heroes—inspirations for our drabber and less strenuous times."[28] Bruno Cabanes' cast were all members of transnational communities that shaped our understanding of humanitarianism as a global enterprise. Yet, their experience was not typical of the thousands who engaged with, or were employed in, the humanitarian effort during and after the war. The glimpses that Bruno Cabanes provides into the world of American Relief Administration volunteers in Russia aside, we are still some way short of a prosopography of those "ordinary" aid workers. Such a study would help in revealing the diverse opinions that shaped agencies like the International Labour Organisation, Save the Children Fund, and the American Relief Administration, as well as the Red Cross

26 Bruno Cabanes: The Great War and the Origins of Humanitarianism, 1918–1924, Cambridge 2014, p. 236.

27 Bertrand Taithe: The "Making" of the Origins of Humanitarianism?, in: Contemporanea 18:3 (2015), p. 491.

28 Mark Mazower: No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations, Princeton 2009, p. 6.

movement. It would also provide an insight into those who went on to become leaders of the agencies that shaped humanitarianism in the post-Second World War moment. Research into recipient narratives—the history of what it was like to receive aid—lags even further behind.

Bruno Cabanes' argument that the First World War marked "the origins of humanitarianism" is also highly debatable. As we argue in the introduction to this special issue, and as Kevin O'Sullivan, Matthew Hilton and Juliano Fiori have argued elsewhere, the history of humanitarianism is marked less by genesis moments than periods of acceleration.[29] Bruno Cabanes makes a compelling argument for the post-1918 period as a critical one in the history of humanitarian intervention, yet many of the struggles that his protagonists faced were not new. Humanitarianism had long been used as a vehicle for national ideals, though the extent of the American foray into that field in the post-war era was novel—as Julia Irwin's and Kimberly Lowe's contributions to this special issue also illustrate. "Expertise" had equally been highly valued by humanitarian organisations long before the war. Nick Cullather and James Vernon might be surprised by Bruno Cabanes' claim that it was in Russia in the early 1920s that "the definition of hunger […] gave way to the more complex notion of malnutrition, which involved a qualitative nutritional deficiency."[30] Equally, Rebecca Gill's work on British humanitarianism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries provides ample evidence of aid's long history of "professionalisation."[31]

## Humanitarian Leaders' Lives and Changing Practices of Activism

Within a discussion of prosopography focused primarily on paradigmatic life case studies of humanitarian activists, such as those provided by Jay Winter and Antoine Prost, and Bruno Cabanes, it might seem rather incongruent to review Marian Moser Jones's *The American Red Cross from Clara Barton to the New Deal*, the first major study on the American Red Cross to appear in sixty years, together with Julia Irwin's *Making the World Safe*.[32] However, there are two fundamental reasons why this is not the case. In the first

29 Kevin O'Sullivan/Matthew Hilton/Juliano Fiori: Humanitarianisms in Context, in: European Review of History 23:1–2 (2016), pp. 1–15.

30 Bruno Cabanes: The Great War and the Origins of Humanitarianism, 1918–1924, p. 225. See Nick Cullather: Hungry World: America's Cold War Battle Against Poverty in Asia, Cambridge 2010, ch. 1; and James Vernon: Hunger: A Modern History, Cambridge 2007.

31 Rebecca Gill: Calculating Compassion: Humanity and Relief in War, Britain 1870–1914, Manchester 2013.

32 Julia Irwin: Making the World Safe: The American Red Cross and a Nation's Humanitarian Awakening, New York 2013.

instance, Marian Moser Jones describes her book as an "organisational biography"[33], an expression that suggests to us the possibility of extending the concept of biography to a humanitarian organisation as a whole, thus studying the latter as a living body. On the other hand, though, Marian Moser Jones suggests a particularly useful way to employ the above concept when she gives substance to her claim by providing, effectively, "a survey of the history of the American Red Cross from the perspective of its leadership."[34] Thus, Marian Moser Jones focuses most of her book on the lives of Clara Barton and Mabel Boardman, who headed the American Red Cross between the 1880s and the First World War, providing the organisation's blueprints in terms of structure and activities and leading to its steady rise in importance in both national and international humanitarianism.

The fact that Clara Barton and Mabel Boardman identified themselves and were, in turn, identified with the American Red Cross provides a natural justification for focusing on their lives as the major constituent elements of an "organisational biography" of the American Red Cross. At the same time, by filling an important gap in the historiography of both the Red Cross and humanitarianism, through a particular focus on the exemplary lives of two female leaders of a major humanitarian organisation, Marian Moser Jones also invites to reflect upon the fact that hers is precisely that rare type of study of female humanitarian leadership, which Abigail Green has advocated.[35] We have already argued that biographies of figures such as Josephine Butler would enhance our understanding of the world of transnational humanitarianism in the 19th century. Marian Moser Jones' book makes an important contribution in the same direction, also extending the analysis into the 20th century, through its focus on Clara Barton's and Mabel Boardman's leadership in the history of the American Red Cross—a leadership that was at the heart of major changes in the formative and consolidational periods of the organisation and its structure and activities.

At the same time, Marian Moser Jones provides an exemplary case-study for another, equally crucial, reason. Effectively, the American Red Cross under Clara Barton and Mabel Boardman went from an organisation mostly concerned with humanitarian efforts in the United States to an organisation that extended its reach to other countries and ultimately played a major role in international relief actions at the time of the First World War. On the one hand, it is significant that this gradual development of the American Red Cross's international reach concided with the rise of the United States to the rank of major player in world politics. On the other hand, Marian Moser Jones' study provides a perfect example of how, starting from the leaders, all humanitarian "activists

33 Marian Moser Jones: The American Red Cross from Clara Barton to the New Deal, Baltimore 2013, p. viii.

34 Bronwen Everill: Review of Marian Moser Jones, The American Red Cross from Clara Barton to the New Deal, in: Journal of American Studies 48 (2014), p. 2.

35 Abigail Green: Humanitarianism in Nineteenth-Century Context: Religious, Gendered, National, pp. 1165–1169.

had to navigate different spheres, operating within local, national, imperial and universal contexts", according to Daniel Laqua.[36] Thus, Marian Moser Jones' study shows the importance of constructing biographies of leaders in humanitarian efforts, taking into account these multiple dimensions, which constantly interacted and were in tension with one another. These efforts ultimately found a crucial avenue of expression in the thrust toward coordination of transnational relief that characterised the First World War era, even though in the case of the American Red Cross a crucial transnational element was already present.

Marian Moser Jones traces the origins of the American Red Cross in Clara Barton's early efforts at providing relief for wounded Union soldiers during the American Civil War (1861–65), and later, at providing relief for civilians in the siege of Strasbourg during the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71). Though both framed by war, these two experiences convinced Clara Barton of the need for an American organisation that would function in humanitarian terms, equally in wartime and in peacetime, whenever and wherever relief was needed. After meeting Henri Dunant, supporter of a somewhat narrower idea of a neutral organisation dedicated only to the care of wounded soldiers, Clara Barton decided to create an American branch of the Red Cross that would contemplate a wider set of activities. As Branden Little has pointed out, "the interplay between Dunant's and Clara Barton's ideas illustrates the vibrancy of transatlantic humanitarian exchanges and the impact of the north Atlantic wars of national unification on the formation of humanitarian sensibilities."[37] Thus, Clara Barton proceeded to found the American Red Cross in 1881, infusing it with a strongly personalist character, given her insistence on centralising the activities, and imbuing them with a strong interventionist ethos. On one hand, Clara Barton identified herself, and was in turn identified, with the American Red Cross, because "Red Cross aid was conceived as personalised care for needed individuals", which obeyed to a logic of "gendering of compassion" and of images of maternal caring.[38] On the other hand, in widening the scope of the American Red Cross beyond the original Red Cross's concerns, Clara Barton "developed the concept of 'natural calamities'", which allowed the American Red Cross to provide relief in cases of epidemics, floods and droughts, together with caring for war victims.[39]

36 Daniel Laqua: Inside the Humanitarian Cloud: Causes and Motivations to Help Friends and Strangers, in: Journal of Modern European History 12:2 (2014), pp. 175–185, p. 181.

37 Branden Little: Continuity and Change: The Transforming American Red Cross and the Dynamics of Humanitarianism, H-Net Reviews, at: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39722 (accessed on 12 April 2016).

38 Rebecca Gill: Review of Marian Moser Jones, The American Red Cross from Clara Barton to the New Deal, in: Social History of Medicine 26 (2013), p. 168.

39 Jacob A. C. Remes: Review of The American Red Cross from Clara Barton to the New Deal by Marian Moser Jones, in: Journal of American History 100:3 (2013), p. 851.

Clara Barton's efforts were rewarded in 1882, when the American Government ratified the Geneva Convention, thus recognising the American Red Cross, and then in 1900, when the American Red Cross was granted a charter. However, by 1904, Clara Barton's strongly personalist and pre-eminently practical leadership had become outdated and she was replaced by Mabel Boardman. On one hand, also as a result of her own life circumstances, Mabel Boardman had a better and much larger, and more influential, network of acquaintances, which turned out to be particularly useful for promoting American Red Cross activities. On the other hand, she effectively presided over the American Red Cross's adoption of the type of managerial ethos that characterised the 20th century and that led to the rise of what Marian Moser Jones terms "organisational humanitarianism", with the consequent increasing substitution of volunteers with businessmen, and with the American Red Cross's participation in the Red Cross's momentous transformation into a powerful transnational organisation at the time of the First World War.[40] By recounting the history of the American Red Cross through the life stories of its two first leaders—exceptional female humanitarian activists with completely opposite styles and vastly different ideas—Marian Moser Jones has pointed the way for future studies of humanitarian organisations told through the biographies of their more significant leaders.

## Humanitarianism, Transnational Activism, and Modernity

When looking for recent model biographies of significant humanitarian activists, perhaps a less obvious choice would be Alex Wright's *Cataloging the World*, a book that focuses on the life of Paul Otlet—a turn-of-the century Belgian librarian much better known to specialists of information systems and networks than to historians of humanitarianism, since Otlet's projects preconised the basic current ideas at the heart of the Internet.[41] However, Paul Otlet's dreams of a modern repository of human knowledge accessible to everybody and shared globally by scientists and intellectuals working together is emblematic of the same milieu that gave origin to ideas of modern humanitarianism based on collaboration between nations and governments. Those ideas were popular from the start of the 20th century, and particularly in connection with the campaigns for world peace in the post-First World War period, which Paul Otlet supported wholeheartedly. In a way, then, Otlet's idea of a universally accessible knowledge that

40 Marian Moser Jones: The American Red Cross from Clara Barton to the New Deal, p. 117.
41 Alex Wright: Cataloging the World: Paul Otlet and the Birth of the Information Age, New York 2014.

would eliminate educational differences in a world characterised by the promotion of global peace responded to the characteristics that Bruce Mazlish has ascribed to modern humanitarianism "as a movement and an ideology" and as an effort to ameliorate "the worst issues of [capitalism and war], stepping in to assuage the iniquities of industrialism and to bind up the wounds of unrestricted warfare."[42]

Yet, Alex Wright's biography of Paul Otlet (1868–1944) also provides one of those still rare cases that challenge "the relative absence of literature dealing with nineteenth-century humanitarianism beyond Britain and the United States" since it focuses on the life of a Belgian citizen.[43] On one hand, the global and transnational scope of Paul Otlet's initiatives with regard to both globally shared information and world peace fits well within Michael Barnett's description of modern humanitarianism as "assistance beyond borders, a belief that such transnational action was related in some way to the transcendent, and the growing organisation and governance of activities designed to protect and improve humanity."[44] On the other hand, the ultimate aim of Paul Otlet's efforts, as of many of his contemporaries working in transnational and global scientific and humanitarian spheres, was the formation of a future, possible, world government that would guarantee world peace. This fits well with Mark Mazower's recent history of this influential modern concept, since we could say that "cataloging the world" made the job of "governing the world" a great deal easier.[45]

As Alex Wright clearly points out, as a late 19th-century European, Paul Otlet held the typical prejudices of every coloniser toward the colonised, and the fact that he was Belgian added a particular twist to these prejudices. Similar to many of his contemporaries, in his youth, Otlet began his involvement in transnational humanitarian causes by voicing his antislavery convictions, but he also supported schemes to send black ex-slaves back to Africa. Later on, Otlet's ideas about the superiority of European civilisation, and partly his nationalism, led him to believe that Belgian colonisation could only bring benefits to the Congo—not least because his own father had been involved in its initial phases. It was only well into the period that saw the denunciation of the atrocities committed by Leopold II's brutal colonial regime that Paul Otlet opened his eyes and admitted his error of judgement. Yet, these initial experiences with antislavery and colonisation provided a training of a sort for Otlet, both in terms of involvement in humanitarian causes, and

42 Bruce Mazlish: The Idea of Humanity in a Global Era, New York 2009, p. 69.
43 Abigail Green: Humanitarianism in Nineteenth-Century Context: Religious, Gendered, National, p. 1173.
44 Michael Barnett: Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism, p. 10.
45 Mark Mazower: Governing the World: The History of an Idea, London 2011.

also in terms of understanding how the world was connected through exchanges of information, with visible effects on a global public opinion that was rapidly rising in importance.[46]

Long engaged in the titanic effort of inventing a universal system of classification of information, akin to other scholars such as Melvil Dewey, Paul Otlet finally had his chance to put in practice his ideas in the aftermath of the First World War, at a time when utopian enterprises, both scientific and humanitarian, aimed at constructing a shared world for all humanity finally devoid of war. In the 1920s, Otlet first built a short-lived Palais Mondial (World Palace) in Paris, where the centre piece was a gigantic library intended to host universal knowledge in all fields, clearly classified, catalogued and accessible to everyone. This project became the basis for Otlet's life achievement, the "Mundaneum", which he described as "a Science, and encyclopedic synthesis, a science of the universal, embracing everything we know."[47] At its heart, the Mundaneum entailed the construction of a Universal Bibliography, a gigantic repository of human knowledge with 15 million entries stored in cards accessible to everybody for consultation through filing cabinets. It is important to point out that, even though it was highly utopian, Paul Otlet's project was not conceived in a vacuum, since it was part of the same vision for the world that gave impetus to the League of Nations, of which Otlet was a strong supporter.

Paul Otlet and his friend and close collaborator Henri La Fontaine (who had received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1913) originally conceptualised the Palais Mondial as "an 'intellectual parliament' for all humanity, in which the organization of knowledge would contribute toward philosopher Auguste Comte's vision of a rationally governed society."[48] At the pulsating centre of this society would be a "World City", which hosted, effectively, a "World Government." In this vision of a rationally governed global society, world peace, intended as a transnational humanitarian enterprise binding all societies into a single entity, played a major role. It is no wonder, therefore, that Paul Otlet chose as his closest collaborator a world renowned peace activist such as La Fontaine; it is equally no wonder that Otlet's dreams were eventually shattered with the coming of the Second World War. With his monograph, Alex Wright has not only rescued Paul Otlet from his relative obscurity among non-experts of media studies. Alex Wright has also shown clearly how a biographical study focusing on Paul Otlet's path-breaking ideas on shared knowledge and information on a global scale can help us to better understand the transnational

46 Alex Wright: Cataloging the World: Paul Otlet and the Birth of the Information Age, pp. 50–61.

47 Alex Wright: Cataloging the World: Paul Otlet and the Birth of the Information Age, p. 176.

48 Philip Ball: Forgotten Prophet of the Internet, in: Nature 509 (2014), p. 425.

humanitarian ferment characterised by highly utopian initiatives which aimed at securing world peace and constructing a world government in the aftermath of the First World War.[49]

## Conclusion

The books under review point us in the direction of a richer, more nuanced understanding of the history of humanitarian action. By using a biographical lens, they provide us with an insight into the lived experience of the individuals who were the building blocks of humanitarianism as an international enterprise. They lived in a world in which they shared, exchanged, and constructed ideas of intervention in a transnational context. While the specific activities of these individuals are explored at length in these four books, this transnational dimension of their lives is largely implicit, rather than explicit. What is not said in these books, in other words, is as important—if not more important—than what is said. The lives of countless rank-and-file humanitarian activists who remain largely unknown are as significant as the lives that these authors have chosen to focus on. In fact, these four books perpetuate the idea that the history of humanitarianism was shaped by a small number of "hero"-like individuals. We need to move away from "heroic" tales towards collective prosopographies that include the multitudes of aid workers whose activities constituted the everyday practice of humanitarianism on the ground. In doing this, we will finally be able to look beyond the altruistic veneer of humanitarianism and understand the complex real life experiences of the majority of those engaged in humanitarian activity, in their specific historical contexts. The opening of new archives of major humanitarian organisations, such as Oxfam, provides a perfect starting point for studies of this kind.[50] These, in turn, lead us to the next—and crucial—step: to read those archives against the grain in order to reconstruct the recipient narrative of humanitarian action. At present, those recipient voices remain largely silent in the treatment of humanitarianism's past.

**Enrico Dal Lago** teaches American History at the National University of Ireland, Galway. He researches on comparative slavery, abolitionism, and nation-building. He is the author of *American Slavery, Atlantic Slavery, and Beyond: The U.S. "Peculiar Institution" in International Perspective* (London, 2012); *William Lloyd Garrison and Giuseppe Mazzini:*

49 On these issues, see both Bruno Cabanes: The Great War and the Origins of Humanitarianism, 1918–1924; and Mark Mazower: Governing the World: The History of an Idea.

50 Oxfam's papers have recently been made available to researchers at the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

*Abolition, Democracy, and Radical Reform* (Baton Rouge, 2013); and *The Age of Lincoln and Cavour: Comparative Perspectives on Nineteenth-Century American and Italian Nation-Building* (New York, 2015).

**Kevin O'Sullivan** is lecturer in transnational and imperial history at National University of Ireland, Galway. His research focus on globalisation and decolonisation, particularly humanitarianism, development and NGOs. He is the author of *Ireland, Africa and the End of Empire: Small State Identity in the Cold War, 1955–75* (Manchester, 2012), and editor (with Matthew Hilton) of 'Humanitarianisms in Context: Histories of Non-State Actors, from the Local to the Global', special issue of *European Review of History*, 23:1–2 (2016).