

Rowan Williams: A Review of *Hammar skjöld: A Life*

(University of Michigan Press)

The name of Dag Hammarskjöld, the second Secretary General of the United Nations, is probably none too familiar to a generation born after the seventies; but this book makes crystal clear what many in an older generation are vaguely aware of – that Hammarskjöld was one of the most significant moral influences in international politics in the decades immediately after the war, and that he almost single-handedly shaped the vision for international co-operation and crisis management that we struggle to realise and, however reluctantly, take for granted across a great deal of the globe. If we largely assume that the United Nations, imperfect as it is, is the only viable forum for brokering international conventions and agreeing on responses to serious crises, it is Hammarskjöld we have to thank for this. And if we also feel intense frustration at the ineffectiveness of the UN as an active peacekeeping force, its failure to offer protection to those most at risk or to exert sanctions against tyrants, this book will help us understand the roots of this, both in Hammarskjöld's own scrupulous attempts to prevent the UN becoming an intervening power in its own right and in the consistent refusal of major powers to collaborate on sustainable protocols about this and their blinkered loyalty to 'bloc' interests. If you want to know why the UN can't and won't sort out the nightmare of Syria, many of the answers lie here.

But we may as well get a couple of headline issues out of the way first. During his lifetime and after, Hammarskjöld was widely assumed to be homosexual, and these rumours were eagerly encouraged by those who wished – in an unquestioningly homophobic era – to undermine his moral credibility. Roger Lipsey devotes one chapter to this, which is a model of sobriety: no speculation, no claims to sensational new information, simply a careful setting out of what little evidence there is one way or another. His conclusion is that Hammarskjöld might have been homosexual; but on the facts presented here, the only real supporting evidence would be that he never married, which doesn't get us very far. There is no trace of either heterosexual or homosexual affairs. Lipsey notes briefly the surprising closeness that developed between Hammarskjöld and the sculptor Barbara Hepworth (whose wonderful and iconic monument to him, *Single Form*, now stands outside the UN headquarters in New York), and comments perceptively, "It was probably better than a romance: it was sincere love and care, seeing with the same eyes". We have to face the possibility that Hammarskjöld was that most alarming of sexual deviants in twenty-first century eyes, a willing and self-aware celibate.

Then there is the matter of Hammarskjöld's death. The plane crash in which he was killed in 1961, in the course of attempts to negotiate a peace between the warring factions in Congo, has always been surrounded by murk: conspiracy theories are a natural enough consequence. But in this instance we are obviously dealing with something more than just paranoid fantasies. On any showing the handling of the investigation into the crash was appallingly inept. And whether or not it was deliberately so, the unanswered questions about the numerous reports suggesting sabotage or assault remain disturbing. Lipsey makes good use of the latest – very impressive – survey of the issues by Susan Williams, and concludes, with her, that there is an overwhelming case for a reopening of the investigation. It is possible that there was CIA involvement; perhaps

more likely that local enterprise on the part of supporters of the breakaway regime in Katanga and their white mercenary allies was directly responsible – with what degree of tacit encouragement from elsewhere we are likely never to know. The fear and hatred of the UN on the part of the Katangan elite, struggling to hang on to their share in the profits of colonial exploitation by subverting the independent government based in what is now Kinshasa, was bitter and violent. Hammarskjöld's death was undoubtedly what many of them wanted, in the belief that this would secure their freedom from 'interference'. The irony is that Hammarskjöld was struggling against many in his own circle who wanted more direct military intervention. The long-term result of all this brutality and selfishness can be seen in the continuing tragedy of Congo today; but that would need another article to itself.

On this last journey, Hammarskjöld was reading Martin Buber's classic *I and Thou*, which he was translating into Swedish. Throughout his adult life, he had been a regular student of the classics of spirituality, including *The Imitation of Christ* and the works of Meister Eckhart, as well as material from the Buddhist world. After his death, his private journal of meditation was published under the rather odd title *Markings* ('Signposts' would have been a better rendering of the Swedish), with an introduction by W.H. Auden. Lipsey – like other readers – obviously feels that this introduction did not do Hammarskjöld any favours: it has in places a curiously patronising tone, lamenting Hammarskjöld's relative indifference to conventional religious practice (he was not a regular churchgoer) and suggesting that he might have been less inclined to messianic attitudes of solitary suffering if he had been a more 'ordinary' churchman. This is a mild version of the snide comments made in the Swedish press during and after his life, accusing him of adopting a too self-consciously 'Christlike' posture in public affairs – compassionate, evenhanded, detached, and superior. But it is a strange judgement, and Lipsey is right to challenge it. Hammarskjöld was in an unprecedentedly isolated position; he had not only to create a global role, but – as they say of poets – to create a global public who understood it. His notebooks record what was in fact the wellspring of his sense of calling, and they should not be read as any kind of public self-dramatising. He was aware of flaws, aware of the vanity that can poison the solitary, aware inexorably of living daily with risk of one sort or another, risking the lives of other people as well as his own. We should read the notebooks mindful of the fact that the risk and the isolation were not the fantasies of self-pity; he did, after all, die in the performance of his role.

Lipsey is brilliant at reading the life in tandem with the meditations, so that we can see something of what was in Hammarskjöld's mind at points of crisis – not his thoughts about the details of a crisis but what was nourishing him internally. And the extensive reference to correspondence as well shows us Hammarskjöld unbuttoning with trusted friends, commenting with quiet irony on the infantilism of 'great powers' and the impenetrable self-importance of both politicians and bureaucrats. What is perhaps most interesting is his awareness of the need precisely to keep the position of Secretary General in some sense isolated because it had to become a symbol, almost a myth. The world needed the myth of a political perspective not dominated by local self-interest, and the SG had to embody that – which perhaps explains why he did not feel comfortable appearing as the supporter of any church or even the lover of any one person. The book reminds us of just how appalling the standoff of the Cold War was, and how much it prevented effective response to the real needs of small nations, from Congo to Tibet: it was these nations who most appreciated Hammarskjöld when he was being vilified by both the USA and the Soviet bloc (the record of the bullying, pigheaded stupidity of the Soviet

leadership, in and out of the UN, makes dismal reading; though the accounts of US attempts to destabilise his position are not much better, never mind the shabby chronicle of the Suez adventure with all its ineffectual lies and evasions). He had to put up with criticism both from those who imagined he had or should have direct executive power and from those who thought he was exercising too much initiative; but he carefully answered both, reiterating again and again that he was there to serve the entire spectrum of nations in the name of a convergent human welfare whose definition no one group owned exclusively. Among many powerful quotations about this vision, one has a particular simplicity and authority: "If [. . .] the recognition of human dignity means to give others freedom from fear, then [. . .] [It] is a question of the positive action that must be taken in order to kill fear". That is something that ought to be engraved on the desk of every statesman or woman, and contains more insight than any number of specific political or strategic analyses.

Lipsey's previous major work was a biography of the Sri Lankan philosopher and sage, Ananda Coomaraswamy, and an edition of his essays, so it is not surprising that this has something of the character of an intellectual and spiritual memoir. As such, it is masterly. It does, though, leave some questions about exactly how a vastly competent but not obviously charismatic Swedish civil servant of aristocratic background became the man who dominates this book. We learn something of an internal crisis in the 1940's, even a strong temptation to suicide: a crisis partially resolved by a recovery of the tough Lutheran ethic and piety of his youth, rather stoical and determinedly looking towards a more just and stable world. But there remains a gap; and perhaps in a life like this, there will always be a gap of some such kind, where we cannot exhaustively chart what it is that makes someone extraordinary, what makes them capable of creating what I called earlier a myth. One thing is plain: without that myth – whatever the failings of the UN as we know it – the postwar world would have been immeasurably more at risk. Hammarskjöld at least told us, as loudly and clearly as he could, that the vision of a world in which interests converge was a necessary exercise of the imagination. We need a good many more today to echo him.