

Michael Ignatieff

Dag Hammarskjold

When Dag Hammarskjold's body was recovered from the crash site in Ndola, Zambia, where his chartered DC 6 went down on the night of September 17 1961, searchers also found his briefcase. Inside were a copy of the New Testament, a German edition of poems by Rainer Maria Rilke, a new novel by the French writer, Jean Giono and a copy of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber's *I and Thou* in German. What other public man of his time would have left such austere intellectual remains behind? There were, however, other finds among the wreckage less easy to understand, signs of another Hammarskjold that escaped easy classification. In his wallet, also found on site, were some copies of American newspaper cartoons mocking him, together with a scrap of paper with the first verses of 'Be Bop Alula' by Gene Vincent and His Blue Caps. Apparently

there had been more sense of fun deep inside him than he ever allowed himself to express in public.

During the flight, Hammarskjold had been working on an English translation of Buber's work. He had met Buber in Jerusalem in 1958, and there is a picture of the two of them seated across a desk, the old Jewish prophet and the spry, bow-tied Swede in a suit smiling at each other. Hammarskjold regarded Buber as a spiritual soul mate and liked quoting Buber's apodictic remark: "The only reply to distrust is candor." In a jolting aircraft travelling through the night sky over the Congo, a tortured country then torn apart by civil war, Hammarskjold managed to complete five pages of translation on legal notepaper, in his minute hand—some said it looked like Japanese—and these pages also survived the crash. Some of the last words he wrote were versions of Buber's most difficult lines:

“In the beginning is relation. . .

“This is the exalted melancholy of our fate that every Thou in our world must become an It.”

\*

The story of Dag Hammarskjöld’s life necessarily begins here, not only because clues to his elusive inner life were strewn across the crash site but because the crash itself has never been conclusively explained. His colleague and first biographer, Brian Urquart, always attributed the crash to pilot error and dismisses the conspiracy theories that have sprung up around Hammarskjöld’s fate, but the new biography, by Roger Lipsey, gives considerable attention to the possibility that Hammarskjöld was murdered. Zambian charcoal burners working in the forest near the airport that night, and interviewed by a succession of investigators in the years since, have always claimed they saw another plane fire at Hammarskjöld’s aircraft before it plunged to the earth. In

2011, a British African scholar, Sue Williams, re-ignited the debate over his death in a book entitled *Who Killed Dag Hammarskjold?* She speculated that the mystery plane might have been a Belgian fighter aircraft working for the Katangese rebels. Hammarskjold had plenty of enemies who wished him harm: white racist Rhodesians opposed to his support of African liberation; Belgian mining interests aligned with the breakaway province of Katanga that he and the UN were trying to bring to heel; the American CIA and the Soviet KGB, each locked in battle for control of the Congo, and each hostile to Hammarskjold's overall goal of letting the Congolese decide their own future for themselves. A man can have many enemies, but it doesn't mean his death couldn't have been an accident.

In 2012, a panel of distinguished retired jurists, including Richard Goldstone, agreed to review the evidence about his

death once again. Their report is still awaited, but it's hard to see how, with more than fifty years gone by, they can resolve the mystery of his death, any more than biographers can unravel the mystery of his life.

Roger Lipsey's new biography is a compelling and elegantly written attempt to unravel the mystery, to make sense of a man who was at once a secular power-player and Christian philosopher, earnest mystic and a Machiavellian man of action. Lipsey does not try to compete with Brian Urquart's magisterial biography of the public man. Instead, he has provided us with a map of the bleak, forbidding but exalted landscape of Hammarskjöld's inner life.

All his life, this shy, understated Swede who never married, who once showed a female journalist around his New York apartment with the wry words, "Is this monastic enough for

you?” and kept everyone guessing about his sexual orientation (he was probably asexual) eluded easy definition or media capture. No one suspected, when he was chosen for the job in 1953, that he would turn out to be the Secretary General who more than any other came to incarnate in life and death the soul of the UN as an institution.

In the 1920's and 30's, he struck his Swedish contemporaries simply as a reserved but ambitious young man searching to measure up to his father, a dour and prickly man of principle, who had been a highly unpopular Prime Minister of Sweden during the first world war. His mother worshipped her son and introduced him early in life to Christian devotional literature. The young Hammarskjold trained as an economist and by the second war, when Sweden kept neutral, he held a succession of important offices in the central bank and finance ministry. Sweden supplied iron ore to the Nazi war effort and allowed

German troops to cross its territory to occupied Norway and Finland. When Hammarskjold went to London on an economic mission during the war, he would have learned just how morally ambiguous, even repugnant, neutrality could seem to people fighting for their lives against the Germans.

It was the British, in fact, who picked him out of the list of compromise candidates to replace Trygvie Lie as Secretary General in 1953, when it became apparent that the Soviets would block the most visible candidate, the General Assembly President, Lester B. Pearson of Canada. Anthony Eden, British Foreign Minister, had met Hammarskjold at meetings on European post war reconstruction and assumed, quite mistakenly, that the unassuming Swede would give Her Majesty's government no trouble.

In his seven years at the top of the UN, he astonished everyone who thought he would be nothing more than a genial Nordic cypher. He transformed the role of the Secretary General from a recording secretary for the Security Council into an independent international problem solver, with immense if fluctuating moral authority; he professionalized the UN civil service, giving it an esprit de corps and an independence of national governments; he pioneered UN peace-keeping and did more than any Secretary General, before or since, to articulate what the UN should stand for. But he also led the organization into the Congo, the crisis that claimed his life and almost destroyed the UN.

The biographer's challenge is to figure out how Hammarskjold's secret inner life made possible his complex public achievement. The key to that inner life is a small diary, found after Hammarskjold's death on the bedside table of his



apartment on East 73d St. in New York, neatly typed out and apparently ready for publication. When the diary appeared posthumously in 1963 with the title *Markings* it caused a sensation, some Swedish journalists sneering that it revealed Hammarskjöld's Christ complex, others his closet homosexuality. In reality, as Lipsey shows, it is a classic in a tradition of devotional mysticism going back to Blaise Pascal's *Pensees et Opuscules*, and Thomas a Kempis' *Imitatio Christi*. *Markings* is a series of dated diary entries that run from the 1930's right up to the eve of his death, written in gnomic, elusive, haiku-like forms that strive for effect yet escape pretentiousness because of their devastating candor. *Markings* is less the diary of a Secretary General than the self-scourging reflections of a desert mystic from the early Christian church:

“He is one of those who has had the wilderness for a pillow, and called a star his brother. Alone. But loneliness can be a communion.”

Those seeking to understand why Hammarskjold seemed, in his friend W.H. Auden’s words to be “a lonely man, not a self-sufficient one,” have pondered the following entry in *Markings*:

“You cannot play with the animal in you without becoming wholly animal, play with falsehood without forfeiting your right to truth, play with cruelty without losing your sensitivity of mind. He who wants to keep his garden tidy does not reserve a plot for weeds.”

*Markings* is also lit up, from time to time, by the glow of an intense personal faith:

“The light died in the low clouds. Falling snow drank in the dusk. Shrouded in silence, the branches wrapped me in their peace. When the boundaries were erased, once again the wonder: that \*I\* exist.”

Or again:

“God does not die on the day when we cease to believe in a personal deity, but we die on the day when our lives cease to be illumined by the steady radiance, renewed daily, of a wonder the source of which is beyond all reason.”

Roger Lipsey is a patient, discrete and compassionate guide to Hammarskjöld’s inner world. His previous work includes studies of noted eastern and western mystical thinkers, including Thomas Merton and his biography can be read as a study of how an underground Christian mystical tradition

bubbled up to the surface in Hammarskjold's life and became the secret source of his life and thought. Hammarskjold did not dabble in the spiritual. He knew the mystic tradition by heart and works by Master Eckhardt, Thomas a Kempis and Jan van Ruyssbroeck were constant companions. Hammarskjold's spiritual search wandered far and wide but it always came back to his Christian roots. Unlike his contemporary John Foster Dulles, Eisenhower's Secretary of State, Hammarskjold never made a public spectacle of his faith, but there is little doubt that he did believe he was doing Christ's bidding. Brian Urquart found a curious little note in Hammarskjold's hand in his speech accepting a second term as Secretary General in 1957:

Hallowed be Thy name  
Thy Kingdom come  
They will be done.  
26 September 57  
5:40

During his time as Secretary General, as he travelled the world, Hammarskjold added Buddhist, Chinese and Japanese spiritual sources, plus Martin Buber, to his personal book of common prayer and in the process created an idiosyncratic personal synopsis of the world's mystical traditions.

Many people, Henry Kissinger among them, have said that the exercise of power is a process of depletion, in which you gradually use up every intellectual resource you originally brought to the task. In Hammarskjold's case, he seems to have deepened and renewed his inner intellectual resources during his time in the public glare. Besides Buber, he translated Djuna Barnes, arranged for Eugene O'Neills' *Long Days Journey Into Night* to be performed in a Swedish theatre, and instead of reading out bland equivocations written for him by staff used his speeches to articulate the public philosophy of an institution that, when he took it over, was only eight years old.

It was Hammarskjold who wanted Beethoven's Ninth Symphony played on UN Day, who tried, in everything he wrote, to make the UN the institutional voice for the human longing for unity and equality. It was Hammarskjold who said the UN was "work[ing] for that harmony in the world of man which our forefathers were striving for as an echo of the music of the Universe."

His mystic inner life served as a lonely man's refuge from the pressures of office as well as a well-spring of that serene inner calm, that Urquhart was trying to describe when he talked about 'the weird Garboesque Swedishness' of the man. His loneliness made him awkwardly dependent on the staff members of the 'little republic' in his personal office. He was blessed with some truly extraordinary colleagues, the redoubtable Urquhart as well as Ralph Bunche, the black American who had won the Nobel Prize for negotiating the Arab-Israeli ceasefire of 1948. They

were powerful personalities, but they didn't mind taking orders from him. He seemed to have thought long and hard about what it was to exercise authority:

'Your position never gives you the right to command. It only imposes on you the duty of so living your life that others can receiver your orders without being humiliated.'

His staff never saw him lose control or composure not even during the Suez crisis of 1956, for example, when after weeks of pressure and going without sleep, Hammarskjold, with the help of Lester Pearson of Canada, came up with the idea of a UN peace-keeping force to patrol between Israelis and Egyptians in Sinai. He could even be funny under pressure, as when he quipped to Bunche, once the peace-keeping force had been approved, "Now ,Corporal, get me a force!"

Lipsey's Hammarskjold does bridge the inner and outer lives of the man and it raises the difficult question of whether it will be public or the private man who is likely to be most remembered. *Markings*, Lipsey argues, belongs in the grandest tradition of mystical autobiography and Hammarskjold's wisdom deserves better than ending up on fridge magnets. Just as Marcus Aurelius' public life has faded while the *Meditations* continue to shine a light down into the present, Lipsey believes we will remember *Markings* and forget the mission that drew him to his death at Ndola. I'm not so sure. His public career still matters, and it makes his inner life all the more remarkable.

That September night in 1961, as he flew to his death, Hammarskjold's mission had been to rescue the UN from the "Congo inferno" as he liked to call it, the mission he had initiated in August 1960 to save the newly independent



Congolese republic from dissolution and civil war. Hammarskjold had marshaled nearly 20,000 military and civilian personnel, but by September 1961, the mission was in dire trouble: on the ground factional violence was flaring, while in New York, the great powers were each accusing Hammarskjold of backing the wrong side. His closest colleagues had never seen him so depressed. Just before he flew to Ndola, the UN's representative in Katanga, the erratic Irish writer and diplomat, Conor Cruise O'Brien had authorized an assault on the Katangese rebels which failed providing the Russians and Americans with further ammunition in their campaign against Hammarskjold. After the UN attack on Katanga, the Katangese leader, Moise Tshombe, fled to nearby Rhodesia, then under the control of the British. When Tshombe signaled that he was willing to meet the Secretary General in Ndola, Hammarskjold seized on what he thought was a chance to negotiate the end of the Katangese secession. He must have

thought his famed negotiating skills could not fail him. “Leave it to Dag” was the phrase of the time. Had he not negotiated the release of US airmen with Zhou Enlai from Chinese prisons in 1954? Had he not persuaded Nasser and Ben Gurion alike to accept the UN peace-keepers ? Had his negotiating skills not helped Eisenhower to withdraw US Marines from their brief and ill-conceived landing in Lebanon in 1958? Why wouldn’t his presence work wonders with a Congolese renegade? At the same time, he was desperate for a breakthrough. From the top-secret cable that he sent to Ralph Bunche on September 15, just before his death, we can see how truly hemmed in he was. Ralph Bunche was reporting from New York that President Kennedy and Secretary of State Rusk were furious with the UN, worried that the Soviets were gaining influence in Africa at their expense; while Nikita Khrushchev had launched a highly personal and highly public attack on Hammarskjold’s neutrality and competence. Hammarskjold had stood up to

Khrushchev's attacks, but privately he was admitting to friends that the 'crazy' Congo mission was threatening to spin out of control and do fatal damage to the UN itself. Perhaps when he flew to Ndola he was not hubristic after all just desperate. Whatever his motives, he paid for the gamble with his life and the gamble, so odd for a man so dogged and disciplined, has shadowed his reputation ever since.

In the Congo, he led the UN into a chaos of great power rivalry, imperial chicanery and lethal political score-settling, and he may have been naïve, or blinded by his earlier successes, to believe he could have extricated the honor of the UN and his own intact. The costs of the operation nearly bankrupted the UN and contributing countries like France and Belgium refused to stump up for the bill. His successors were forced to wind down the Congo mission and declare victory. The UN could claim it had succeeded in averting full-scale civil war in the

center of Africa; it had re-integrated the secessionist province of Katanga; henceforward Congo did not break into pieces. That, his defenders would claim, was Hammarskjold's legacy. Yet with the passage of time, it has become clear that he had been deluded to think the UN could bring order to Congo. For a time in the late 60's and 70's, it is true, there was order of a sort under the kleptocratic dictatorship of Mobutu, but once his 30 year reign disintegrated, once Congo's neighbors—Rwanda, Tanzania and others—sent troops in to support various factions and plunder the place, the Congo disintegrated once again.

The UN is still in the Congo, fifty years on. The Security Council may be deadlocked on Syria, but the great powers are only too happy to send the UN into Sisyphean tasks of stabilization that they have no real interest in dealing with. It was ever thus. Hammarskjold said nothing when the Russians marched into

Budapest and crushed the Hungarian revolution. He said nothing when the Chinese crushed the Tibetan uprising in 1959. He had no role in the Berlin crisis of 1961. This is the Machiavellian pact that even a Secretary General of his stature has to swallow down: the permanent members of the Security Council will only allow the UN to act in those places—Congo, for example—where there is no vital interest of theirs that opposes decisive action. Just as in the 1950's, so now in 2013, the UN is utterly blocked in Syria, but it can do the Congo. The same Security Council that has been deadlocked over the catastrophe in Syria is capable of authorizing a deployment of 3500 troops with the mandate to forcibly disarm various rebel groups in Congo and restore central government authority. What began with Hammarskjold continues, and with just as much chance of success as in his time.

He did so much to define what the UN is that it is impossible not to ask what he would have made of the fact that the UN is still in the Congo fifty years later, still mired in impossible tasks, still disappointing those who believe in it, yet still holding a flicker of hope for a divided world.

If the Hammarskjold that you take as your own is the yearning and mystical idealist, it is hard not to believe that this Hammarskjold would be deeply disappointed by what happened to his dreams. But there was always another Hammarskjold, the disabused realist, the risk-taker who took the flight to Ndola because he thought it might, just might, make a small difference, I'm not sure he'd be surprised at all at how the UN and the world turned out in the fifty years since he boarded the flight that ended his life. For the world we have now—where violence contends with hope and the outcome is never clear—is a world he understood only too well, and a

world he cared about too much to allow himself the easy  
escape into disillusion.