

Remembering Dag Hammarskjöld

Written by Peter Vale

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PETER VALE, AUG 11 2011

A month or so back in a second-hand bookstore, I spied a copy of Dag Hammarskjöld's book, *Markings*. He called it a "diary" – "a sort of 'White Book' concerning my negotiations with myself – and with God". We know from Brian Urquhart's *A life in war and peace* (Harper& Row, 1987), that *Markings* was almost not published. But, when it was, it became an instant best-seller.

As a student I'd owned a copy of *Markings*, but lost it. So, I bought the copy on offer, and then told the clerk that he'd missed a trick. This is the 50th Anniversary of Hammarskjöld's death in a plane-crash in the country now called Zambia. The date was 18 September, 1961, and the place was Ndola.

Who or what brought the plane down remains a mystery. Mechanical failure? Pilot Error? Or (more probably) the swirling winds of decolonization and white-minority rule which of course continued towards South Africa's first free election in 1994? Take your pick.

Unsurprisingly, many events commemorating Hammarskjöld have taken place, or will be taking place. At least one journal, the South African-based, African Journal of Conflict Resolution (11, 1) is entirely devoted to Hammarskjöld – especially his mission to South Africa which took place in January, 1961. Moreover, the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, the British UN Association and the Uppsala-based Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation will be running a day-long conference called "Dag Hammarskjöld, the United Nations, and the End of Empire" on 2 September in London.

Judging by the programme (pdf), it seems that (as usual) the great and the good of the British IR Establishment – including the former Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Douglas Hurd — will attend. This development is interesting, because the Brits (and the Americans) didn't really like Hammarskjöld when he was Secretary General of the UN. Interestingly, too, none of the speakers seem to come from the Third World — those states for which (as Brian Urquhart says) Hammarskjöld "had seen himself as champion and mentor".

Don't get me wrong, here. It seems to me proper that diplomatic historians, UN buffs and, yes, even the IR Establishment, should be thinking about the challenges which decolonisation presented the international system in the aftermath of the upheavals of the Second World War.

While sharing these interests in Hammarskjöld and his work, I'm also interested in his notion of service (both international and other) and how this has changed since his death.

This brings me back to second-hand books. The first book I read this year was a worn copy of *Castle Hill*, Hammarskjöld's memoir of his childhood in Uppsala. It tells of a care-free child, from a highborn family, who lived in a university town in a changing Sweden in the 1920s.

But, and *Markings* confirms this, patrician though his early life may have been, and spectacularly successful though his university studies were, he never broke with the idea that life's true calling was service to others.

As he put it, "From generations of soldiers and government officials on my father's side I inherited a belief that no life was more satisfactory than one of selfless service to your country – or humanity. This service required a sacrifice of

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all personal interests, but likewise the courage to stand up unflinchingly for your convictions”.

Today, this kind of talk seems strange – even olde worlde.

To be frank, it is deeply sentimental in an age in which “service to others” is often nothing more than corporate social responsibility. And yet, as we all intuitively know (or should know) we are adrift without service to each other. The difference, of course, is that social relations today are mediated by money – no, by finance capital – which turns on putting the interests of self before all others.

Now, surely, that’s the conceptual optic we should be using to remember Dag Hammarskjöld’s life and his work.

About the author:

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