

Anique H.M. van Ginneken, *Historical Dictionary of the League of Nations*. Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, 2006. pp. 271. 18 plates. ISBN 0–8108–5473–2 (hbk). £46.00.

The trouble with the League of Nations is not just that misconceptions abound about it. This is true enough; but it is also correct to say that, despite being run on a shoestring, the work of the League was massively, almost unmanageably diverse. Geographically, of course, the League aimed at being a global organisation so, even though it always had a distinctly European bias, nonetheless it still had plenty of concerns stretching from Africa to the Far East. And then there was the sheer variety of topics it sought to address. Certainly the League was basically a security organisation, but it was concerned with security construed in the widest possible sense. So Article 23 of the Covenant of the League of Nations committed the t to take an interest in conditions of labour, people trafficking and dangerous drugs. Article 25 stated an interest in the ‘mitigation of suffering throughout the world’ which meant that the League became interested in, for instance, prisoners of war and refugees. The League had a section dealing with international aspects of health, there was a transport section, it dealt with minorities, established humanitarian conventions—the list could go on and on. Suffice to say that everything and anything from slavery in Liberia to White Russians in Constantinople, from opium in China to the rights of Swedes living in Finland, from the state of the Austrian economy to the health implications of pilgrimages in the Mediterranean region, from typhus in Poland to malaria in the Middle East all fell to the League of Nations.

These observations highlight why Ginneken’s book is very welcome indeed. The League may only have had an effective life of twenty years or so, but time and again even a serious student of the organisation comes up against names, committees or events which are either only half-remembered or else completely unfamiliar. This book provides a first class means of obtaining the necessary information to help fill out a picture quickly and reliably. True, some of the entries are a bit too short to be completely satisfying. The entry on the Phillimore Committee, a British body which drafted an early and influential plan suggesting how an international organisation such as the League might be constituted, is barely two lines long. The entry on the first Secretary General, Eric Drummond does not quite make it to eleven lines, and

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academic activist Gilbert Murray only gets a fraction over four lines. Now and again, it is also fair to say, the entries seem more concerned with providing information than raising issues of interpretation about the careers of some of these people. This might be said of the entry on Joseph Avenol, the General Secretary from 1933 to 1940, about whom James Barros made some particularly tough judgements (see *Betrayal from Within*. Yale, 1969). But nonetheless Ginneken's entries are always interesting, pertinent and reliable. Given the scope of her undertaking, this is quite enough.

And then there is the extent of the book. It is not actually 'just' a dictionary. It has a timeline covering eighteen pages and stretching from 1815 to 1946 which is packed with information. It does not just contain obvious material such as the date of the first Council meeting (16 January 1920) and the dates of the First Assembly (15 November to 18 December 1920), but it also contains the specifics of much less well-known events, such as the International Conference for the Repression of Terrorism (from 1 to 16 November 1937); and this is not all. The book comes complete with a short, more discursive essay covering the life of the League (which certainly highlights all the innovative work the organisation achieved), the text of the Covenant of the League of Nations, organisational tables and, arguably best of all, a forty page bibliography. The latter is arranged both by type of source (e.g. official publications versus general works) and thematically (e.g. economic and social issues, refugees and minorities etc. etc.).

The sheer scope of the book leaves no doubt at all that van Ginneken has put a tremendous amount of time and effort into preparing this extremely useful reference source. It is fortunate indeed, therefore, that the publisher has taken care to produce a really good quality finished product. The book comes high recommended.

Martyn Housden, University of Bradford.