In 1929, a German journalist pointed out that no place seemed more suitable for providing the setting of a world-class novel than the League of Nations in Geneva. With its sentimental tragedies, intrigues and pseudo-diplomatic comedy, he described the League and its surroundings as a ‘politico-social panopticon on the international stage’.\[1\] Representing a profound innovation in international relations, the League of Nations stimulated cultural production in the 1920s and 1930s in manifold ways. There were numerous poems, songs, comics and even musicals featuring the League. In 1938, for instance, George Bernard Shaw published his drama *Geneva. Another Political Extravaganza*, a piercing satire of the League of Nations. Shaw is but one example of a rich – yet, barely studied – cultural history of the League of Nations.

This blog post tries to redeem this lack of scholarly interest, by focusing on novels about the organisation. Central motifs of the literary field that emerged around this new international creature were not only the hope in the capacities of the newly founded organisation and the frustration about the limits and setbacks of the League’s diplomacy, but also the mystical allure of a new kind of diplomatic site. In the following parts the blog post explores the literary production of officials working in the League; novels on the League during the time of its existence; and the literary afterlife of the world organisation, respectively.

**The Death of a Diplomat – International Civil Servants as Authors**

During the time of its existence, the League of Nations inspired a couple of its employees to process their experiences in literary form. One of the best-known examples is British journalist and author Vernon Bartlett who led the League’s London Office before he joined the BBC: In 1927, he teamed up with his colleague from the Economic and Financial Section of the League, Per Jacobsson, a Swede who later became Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund. Bartlett mentioned to Jacobsson his difficulties in writing commercially successful detective stories, and after being dared by Jacobsson’s...
The diplomatic milieu around the League provides the context of an entangled crime story. A diamond disappears, a secret treaty is stolen, a German diplomat murdered: nothing less than peace in Europe is hanging in the balance. With neither the police of Geneva nor other diplomats able to solve the case, only the two protagonists can prevent a diplomatic crisis: a British servant of the League of Nations and a smart American ‘newspaper girl’. The two characters represent the core innovations of the League of Nations: an independent international administration and the inclusion of modern mass media.

The book was a success. It was subsequently translated into eight languages, and turned into a silent film entitled *The Man with the Limp*; a second book, *The Alchemy Murder*, similarly set in an international milieu, followed in 1929. Despite their publishers’ best efforts, Jacobson and Bartlett decided against giving up the “real” League to pursue fictional writing full time, and their third book, *Murder on the Golf Course*, was never published.
Within the Secretariat, there were other authors with a much higher literary output. Hilary Aidar St. George Saunders, for instance, who worked as a translator and précis writer for the League of Nations before he became a World War II chronicler, left an extensive body of work of fiction. He published the fantasy novel *The Devil and the XYZ* in 1930, writing with Geoffrey Dennis, the head of the League’s Translation Services, under the pseudonym Barum Browne. Together with his colleague in the Secretariat, John Leslie Palmer, however, he wrote about forty (!) books (under their joint pseudonym of Francis Beeding).

Most of these spy novels feature a fictitious head of the British Secret Service as protagonist, and most of them rely on a League of Nations background. Their 1928 novel *The Six Proud Walkers* features an evil cabal which tries to manipulate world events in order to fulfill their ruthless aims. The murder of Italian workers in Albania by men disguised as Serbian soldiers triggers a series of events which provoke a capricious Italian dictator named ‘Caffarelli’ to declare war. According to one reviewer, the novel displayed how important the League was in order to “restrain these dangerous forces”.

In another novel, *The One Sane Man*, the antagonist, a wealthy financier, tries to use the power provided by a weather manipulation machine to gain control of the League of Nations. His ultimate goal is to abolish national rivalry and initiate a commission composed of international experts which would guarantee justice and equality throughout the whole world. Of course, he is stopped by the protagonist – but the plot draws heavily on contemporary discourse on internationalism, the global role of economic entanglements, the role of experts and specialists, and the aim to overcome national resentments.

These examples might suggest that fictional writing was above all an activity in which men of the higher ranks of the Secretariat engaged. But there is at least one female author from the second division who published about the League: Alice Ritchie worked for the League’s Registry from 1921 to 1923 as a clerical assistant before she was fired for insubordination. Roughly five years after she left the League, in 1928, Ritchie published a novel about the Secretariat titled *The Peacemakers*. Ritchie wrote about the lives of her colleagues from the second division of League employees: typists, clerks and the many other minor officials – many of them women. A central motif of the book is the boredom of both office- and everyday life in the small town of Geneva – as part of an isolated international community – and how the League’s servants coped with this situation.
Last, there were writers in the League Secretariat who were not interested in the organisation as a literary subject. Geoffrey Dennis was one of them. Nonetheless, he was seen as being part of an “internationally-minded generation”. His book *Harvest in Poland*, for instance, which took his readers on a spiritual journey across Europe, was described as a “hybrid between the intranational and the multinational conceptions of society.”[13]

**Mystery at Geneva – Novels about the League of Nations**

Of course, numerous books were also written by authors who had not worked in the League, but were, nonetheless, drawn to its cosmopolitan environment. As a rule of thumb, these publications were usually rather critical about the world organisation.

The very first novel written about the League was probably *Mystery at Geneva. An Improbable Tale of Singular Happenings* (1922).[14] The well-known author Rose Macaulay, an ardent supporter of the League and the feminist movement, attended the General Assembly in 1921 as a special reporter for the *Daily Chronicle* and subsequently wrote her book. Her protagonist, Miss Montana, was introduced to the world of diplomacy at the “heaven of secretaries”, the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, but was dismissed for making the sloppy mistake of spelling ‘parliament’ with a small ‘p’. A couple of years later she disguises herself as her bedridden lover, the journalist Henry Beechtree, in order to attend the League’s annual conference. Clearly, the novel makes a statement about the lacking acceptance of women in international relations – even after the Covenant of the League supposedly opened things up with its famous article 7.[16] From there on, the book turns into a highly intricate international mystery novel: an evil conspirator captures one delegate to the Genera Assembly after another. Most of the characters of the book are skilled spoofs of people from the League milieu: For example, British delegate Arnold Inglis who is lured into a trap by the fascinating language of a Greek woman is a barely masked parody of British internationalist Gilbert Murray, Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford.

Swiss author, journalist and gastronomer Marcel Rouff never actually worked for the League of Nations, but lived in Geneva during the interwar years. He was the editor of the local socialist newspaper *Tribune de Genève*. In 1926, he published the novel *Les Temps Révolus. Sur le quai Wilson* which represents a fierce literary left-wing attack on the League.[17] Already in the preface, the book is labelled an “histoire d’une disillusion”: The protagonist, Morchaud, is a smart and idealistic young man who works as personal secretary at the League of Nations in the early 1920s. The immediate context is the Geneva Protocol for the Pacific Settlement of International Disputes of 1924. For Morchaud, the protocol is a symbol for the potential of collective peacekeeping efforts. When the ratification of the protocol fails after the British Government withdraws its support, Morchaud’s disillusionment begins. He realizes that for the national diplomats, the League is but a new stage for their imperialistic power plays.

In a similar vein, Swiss crime author Friedrich Glauser, who was a patient in a psychiatric institution in Geneva during the First World War, noticed how the arrival of the League changed the social composition of the city. His first crime novel *Tee der drei alten Damen* [The tea of the three old Ladies] explores the deep transformation of the quiet city caused by the arrival of the League institutions.[18] Again, Geneva is seen as a stage for the imperial power politics, rather than a democratic assembly of equal states.
Many authors used literary means to express their utter disappointment with the League and its failure as a platform for collective peace-keeping. Hans Habe, who was Geneva correspondent of a Czech newspaper, wrote a novel entitled Tödlicher Friede – ein Liebesroman mit politischem Hintergrund [Deadly Peace – a romance with a political background].[19] The context of the story is the turbulence and discussions in Geneva at the time of the Munich Agreement of 1938. He depicts Geneva in unrest with the Swiss citizens already preparing for the outbreak of war. The newly-inaugurated Palais des Nations is considered by them as a marble-made beacon guiding enemy bombers rather than a symbol of world peace. The publication of Habe's book provoked a scandal: After a complaint from the German embassy, the Swiss government confiscated the book, and Habe was forced to re-publish it in the United States of America where it was a success and subsequently translated into 16 languages.

Grand Days – League novels after the League

Literary interest in the League dwindled after the organisation dissolved in 1946, and the Cold War soon provided a new background for imaginative novels. This is particularly visible in Ian Fleming, the writer of the James Bond novels: Fleming, who studied at the University of Geneva, worked at the League Secretariat in the summer of 1930 while preparing for the Foreign Office entrance exam. He was deeply disappointed by his experiences in the Secretariat, and considered the League as a waste of money and paper.[20] Though none of his later novels were situated in a League of Nations context, they were regularly placed in Swiss settings. In Fleming's 1959 novel Goldfinger, James Bond visits the small Alsatian Brasserie Bavaria and reflects on how this restaurant used to be frequented by diplomats, journalists and international civil servants during the time of the League of Nations.[21] In historical novels, then, the League seldom provides the setting. There are, however, two notable exceptions.

Though the first two volumes of Swiss international civil servant-turned-author Albert Cohen’s Solal tetralogy (Solal (1930) and Manceclous (1938)) were published in the 1930s, his best-known work, Belle du Seigneur, was published in 1968, long after the League’s dissolution. Protagonist Solal who had already joined the League in the previous volumes is by the third volume Under-Secretary General. He witnesses how the rise of facism and antisemitism profoundly changes life in Europe. Solal, being of Jewish descent, finally resigns, deeply wounded by the League’s passivity. In Belle de Seigneur, the rapid decline and failure of the League is not merely caused by forces beyond its control, but because the institution itself is defective and degenerate.

Probably the most famous books on the League within the historian’s community are the volumes of the Edith trilogy by Australian author Frank Moorhouse, which feature the life of fictitious Australian League of Nations civil servant Edith Campbell Berry: Grand Days (1993), Dark Palace (2000) and Cold Light (2011).[22] One of the main reasons for their popularity among historians is their meticulous composition. During the research for his books, Moorhouse not only talked to numerous contemporaries such as Canadian League of Nations servant Mary McGeachy, on whom Edith Campbell Berry is loosely modelled, but he also worked in a multitude of archives and libraries around the world, including, of course, the League’s archives in Geneva. The result are three extremely well-researched novels and, as Susan Pedersen puts it, “surely the only work of fiction to explain the League's filing system.”[23]
The three volumes follow the life cycle of the League, from early optimism (Grand Days), to the gloomier days of fascism and nationalism (Dark Palace). In Cold Light, the seasoned League-veteran Berry returns to Australia in the 1940s where she supports the establishment of the Australian diplomatic service. Thus, Berry’s experience with the League plays a key role in the process of Australia becoming an independent international actor.

Conclusion

Novels were a medium through which broader discourses on the League penetrated everyday culture. At the beginning of the League’s existence, most of the books are characterized not only by curiosity but by hope and belief in the world organization. This character changes profoundly over time: the diplomatic crisis of the late 1920s and 1930s manifested itself in the novels, as the League of Nations is increasingly portrayed as a helpless pawn in the hands of imperialistic and fascist powers.

And though in the present, it has become very quiet around the League, the novels of Moorhouse demonstrate the literary potency the League setting still has. The demand of the 21st century for orientation in the face of international challenges already stimulated the revival of the League as a scholarly topic. One can only hope that this is followed by new novels, too.

References

[4] Its original title was Das Geheimnis von Genf.
The League of Nations was an international diplomatic group developed after World War I as a way to solve disputes between countries before they erupted into. Seven months later, he returned to the United States with a treaty that included the idea for what became the League of Nations. Republican Congressman from Massachusetts Henry Cabot Lodge led a battle against the treaty. Lodge believed both the treaty and the League undercut U.S. autonomy in international matters. The League of Nations was an intergovernmental organisation founded on 10 January 1920 as a result of the Paris Peace Conference that ended the First World War. It was the first worldwide intergovernmental organisation whose principal mission was to maintain world peace. Its primary goals, as stated in its Covenant, included preventing wars through collective security and disarmament and settling international disputes through negotiation and arbitration. Other issues in this and related treaties

[18] Friedrich Glauser Der Tee der drei alten Damen, Zurich 1996.


