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"A Living Thing is Born": The League of Nations and the Contemporary World

PATRICK FINNEY

On 14 February 1919, addressing the third plenary session of the Paris Peace Conference, US President Woodrow Wilson read out the draft League of Nations Covenant and famously declared: "a living thing is born". The Covenant, Wilson explained, was of necessity a relatively brief framework document, since it had not been possible "to foresee the variety of circumstances with which this League would have to deal" or to prescribe in detail "all the machinery that might be necessary to meet differing and unexpected contingencies". Yet for Wilson this was a prime virtue rather than a vice: it meant the League was endowed with flexibility in responding to emerging issues and crises and would have the capacity to evolve and mature in pursuit of its core goal of the "guarantee of peace". [1]

For several decades after the end of the Second World War conventional historiographical opinion damned Wilson's view as naïvely optimistic. The League's failure in a succession of collective security crises seemed to have demonstrated that the Covenant's vaunted flexibility in fact amounted to a fatal lack of precision, rigour and automaticity. Moreover, far from adapting and growing into a "vital thing", as Wilson had on another occasion prescribed, the League seemed to have lapsed into senescent impotence long before its existence was formally terminated in 1946.[2]

The new historiography which this collection both showcases and advances has, of course, challenged these judgements through multiple acts of reframing. It has supplanted the narrative of the League as simply an experiment in failure, moving beyond narrowly realist interpretations focused solely on collective security to consider the full range and enduring legacy of the League's endeavours, especially in technical and humanitarian fields.[3] In reconstructing the work of ardent internationalists pushing up against the prerogatives of state sovereignty as they struggled to protect the rights of ethnic minorities, combat people trafficking and forced labour and promote global health, we seem to encounter recognisably modern forebears. Hence the League has been resurrected as an object of contemporary

[1] Wilson: 'Address'.

[2] Wilson: '"Vital Thing"' (the text of a speech in Paris on 25 January 1919).

[3] The indispensable starting point for consideration of these reframings is Pedersen: 'Back'.

concern and a site for meditation upon the political and ethical problems of the present: far from it being now a dusty irrelevance, the attentions of the new historiography have infused the League with life.

One of the crucial moves involved here is the resituating of the League within a larger normative internationalist project. Rather than conceiving of it as a discrete endeavour rooted in the specific contingencies of the inter-war period, it is being rethought as part of wider and ongoing intellectual and institutional attempts to transcend the primacy of nation-states and to develop global civil society.[4] On the one hand, this entails locating the League as part of a thicker landscape of internationalist institution-building and activism in the inter-war years: the League drew strength from and animated a dense and complex network (or perhaps, "force field", to adapt Susan Pedersen's term[5]) of other individuals and organisations interested in cooperating to resolve technical and political problems and improve the human condition.[6] On the other hand, it is to place the League within a longer chronology stretching from the late nineteenth century, when international organisations and transnational entanglements began to proliferate, through to a post-Cold War present in which non-state actors and globalising flows of capital, people and ideas have loomed so large that they triggered a transnational turn in historical studies (of which this writing on the League is one manifestation).[7] This in turn contributes to sustaining the core argument of the new historiographers "that internationalisms were central to the major political questions and themes of the twentieth century: war and peace, imperialism and nationalism, states and state-building".[8]

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[4] See, for example, Sluga and Clavin (eds): *Internationalisms*.

[5] Pedersen: *Guardians*, 5. Other ways of expressing this include the 'Greater League of Nations' referred to by Emil Seidenfaden and Hagen Schulz-Forberg's notion of the League as a 'dot connector'. Similarly, Simon Jackson and Alanna O'Malley have referred to the League and UN "not as unified actors, but as 'platforms' for both formalizing and splintering political ideas and international norms, and as laboratories and toolkits of legal and technical procedures": 'Rocking', 9.

[6] Laqua (ed.): *Internationalism Reconfigured*.

[7] On the turn to transnational history in general, see for example Saunier: *Transnational History*.

[8] Sluga and Clavin: 'Rethinking', 6.

The synchronic and diachronic dimensions of this move can both be illustrated by a case study focusing on my own place of work, the Department of International Politics at Aberystwyth University. In their contributions, Søren Friis, Hagen Schulz-Forberg and Tomoko Akami have discussed other institutional developments linked to the League that promoted the more systematic development of academic thinking about international relations. However, the founding of my Department – which will be celebrating its centenary in 2019 in parallel with the League - was certainly another crucial step in the establishment of the discipline of International Relations (IR).[9] It occurred when industrialist and philanthropist David Davies of Llandinam, together with his sisters Gwendoline and Margaret, endowed a Chair at the (then) University College of Wales, Aberystwyth in 1919. The Chair was eventually named after Woodrow Wilson, and from the beginning the link between the Department and the League was explicit. Repulsed by what he had witnessed serving on the Western Front, Davies intended the Chair "in memory of the fallen students of our University for the study of those related problems of law and politics, of ethics and economics, which are raised by the prospect of a League of Nations and for the truer understanding of civilizations other than our own".[10]

Thereafter, through the inter-war years this small West Wales seaside town became a vibrant if unlikely hub for internationalist thinking. Successive holders of the Wilson Chair lectured and wrote on the League and international politics: one landmark publication was *The League of Nations in Theory and Practice*, co-authored in 1933 by Charles Webster and the Department's junior lecturer Sydney Herbert.[11] Davies himself was a tireless and generous campaigner for League causes and a major figure in the British League of Nations Union. In 1926, at his initiative, Aberystwyth hosted the annual congress of the International Federation of League of Nations Societies. Over two hundred delegates – their travel and

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[9] For some time, the creation of the Wilson Chair was proclaimed – and not just by those with a vested interest in Aberystwyth - as the single key moment in the establishment of the discipline. This claim is no longer sustainable in the light of recent disciplinary historiography that has drawn attention to longer term intellectual antecedents and prefiguring developments elsewhere in the world: see, for example, de Carvalho, Leira and Hobson: 'Big Bangs'. Yet it was nonetheless a very significant development in disciplinary history.

[10] John, Wright and Garnett: 'International Politics at Aberystwyth' 86.

[11] Webster and Herbert*: Theory and Practice.*

subsistence expenses underwritten by Davies personally - spent a week in receptions, lectures, debates and excursions to local sites of historic interest; there was even an opportunity to watch the League-produced 1925 documentary film “on the evils of war and the benefits of the League”, *Star of Hope*, at the Imperial Cinema. Local people participated avidly in the proceedings and University staff served as guides and interpreters, though the atmosphere of international amity was slightly soured when a member of the audience at a public meeting heckled the German delegate Count Bernstorff – “What about the *Lusitania*? … You dirty dog. You dirty German!” – and had to be removed from the University Hall by the local police.[12]

The academic work of the Department was also hallmarked by contestation over the League project. As the 1920s wore on, Davies developed very distinct ideas - set out at length in his 1930 book *The Problem of the Twentieth Century* - about the need to strengthen the League and to establish an international police force with monopoly possession of the most powerful weapons to swiftly punish delinquent aggressors.[13] He was therefore dismayed when successive Wilson Professors evinced considerable scepticism about the viability of collective security. This culminated in the 1940s with a vitriolic campaign against E. H. Carr – Wilson Professor from 1936 and author in 1939 of *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, often viewed as a canonical realist text[14] – that only concluded with Davies' death in 1944. His efforts to sustain and develop the League, Davies wrote with fury in June 1942, “have been hindered rather than helped by the holders of the Wilson Chair”.[15]

Despite this gloomy verdict, the Department clearly deserves a place in the thicker history of inter-war internationalist endeavour intertwined with the League that has begun to emerge. Engagement with the League experiment was also very important to the evolution of the intellectual project of IR as a whole, even if it is too simplistic to see the inter-war period as simply consisting of a “great debate” between idealism and realism, as was once commonly thought.[16] Moreover, although conceptual debates in IR have of course moved on

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[12] Davies: ‘International Peace Congress’.

[13] Davies*: Problem.*

[14] Carr: *Twenty Years' Crisis*.

[15] Porter: ‘E. H. Carr’, 36-67, quote at 55.

[16] There were in reality no coherent and homogeneous ‘idealist’ or ‘realist’ positions: moreover, ‘rather than being driven by metaphysical concepts such as realism or idealism, the debates of the time were dominated by more prosaic and pragmatic concerns linked to the

considerably since, the discipline has nonetheless continued to wrestle with issues around the prerogatives of the state, the anarchical nature of the international system and the causes of war which the League also confronted. Hence it is legitimate to conceive of IR as one of the longitudinal strands within the larger internationalist enterprise of which the League was also a part. In Aberystwyth, too, the preoccupations of the Department have ebbed and flowed over the decades amidst personnel changes and larger intellectual shifts. Yet as its centenary is celebrated it remains distinctively hallmarked by the normative rationale that underpinned its founding: "understanding the diverse facets of world politics (politics, law, economics, ethics) in order to mitigate organised violence".[17]

The second move – related but distinct – which has lent the League new contemporary relevance is the rethinking of its role in the longer history of modern global governance. In one sense, this is a matter of institutional continuities. The founders of the United Nations (UN) took pains to distance it from "its purportedly 'failed' predecessor" in an "act of diplomatic theatre": dramatizing the rupture, and presenting 1945 as an entirely fresh start, was intended to enhance the new organisation's legitimacy. Subsequent generations of historians all too often endorsed the trope of the League "as a salutary failure, the indispensable political counterpoint and analytical premise of the UN's rise".[18] Yet while the UN was undoubtedly shaped in some ways by the negative exemplar of the League experience, recent work has uncovered myriad continuities in personnel, organisation and approach between the older body and the new, especially in technical and humanitarian fields. This historiography constitutes a powerful corrective to the view of the League as a dead end wrong turn, something closed off; rather it reinscribes it as an intrinsic element in "the genealogy of our … present".[19]

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immediate problems of international affairs': Ashworth: *International Thought*, 171, and more broadly 134-180.

[17] Department of International Politics: 'Centenary'. Anecdotally, I can confirm that the League remains a very palpable presence in Aberystwyth during this centenary year, and not only for the undergraduate students taking my optional module on 'The Dream of Internationalism: The League of Nations and its Legacies'.

[18] Jackson and O'Malley: 'Rocking', 1-2. Issues of continuity from League to UN are also discussed in Torstern Kahlert's chapter.

[19] Pedersen: 'Foreword', xi.

As well as resuscitating the League as an object of attention, this development raises important interpretive questions about the nature of global governance in the present and the past. Mark Mazower's tour de force history, *Governing the World*, underlined the implication of the network of post-1945 international organisations with both US power and the emergence of neoliberalism, confounding any simplistic coding of internationalism as an inherently progressive force. Moreover, as Mazower writes the League into the pre-history of the UN system, that body too becomes implicated as an avatar of neoliberalism (as is explored in a very literal sense by Hagen Schulz-Forberg here).[20]

There is an understandable temptation – as Susan Pedersen has remarked – for "a history aimed at recovery" to fall into a "celebratory" mode.[21] Historians engaged in any revisionist historiographical enterprise, rescuing their subjects from the damnation or condescending neglect of posterity, can be prone to become fondly protective of them. In this instance it is extremely easy to portray figures such as the young internationalist idealists of the League secretariat as tragic heroes, fighting an ultimately vain but noble battle to transcend the constraints of sovereign power, preserve peace and protect human dignity as the world descended into the catastrophe of the Second World War. Yet it is vitally important to resist such urges – as the authors in this volume do – in order to mount a critical appraisal of the politics and legacy of the League experiment.

Such an appraisal must take account of the myriad varieties of internationalism that swirled around and through the League of Nations project in the inter-war period. It is not just that there were fascist and communist internationalisms that rubbed up against liberal internationalism; that latter ideological project was itself fractured and fissiparous, with statist, reformist, radical and pacifist variants. (This point is readily demonstrated by Marco Moraes' analysis of the affinities between Secretary General Joseph Avenol's vision for a technocratic League and fascist internationalism.) Moreover, it would also be fruitful to widen our perspective further to take fuller account of internationalist visions generated at the "peripheries" by non-western or otherwise "subaltern" actors.[22]

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[20] Mazower: *Governing*.

[21] Pedersen: 'Foreword', xi.

[22] This is a core aim of Jackson and O'Malley (eds): *Institution*; note also the recent large scale research project, *The Reluctant Internationalists*, led by Jessica Reinisch at Birkbeck College, University of London http://www.bbk.ac.uk/reluctantinternationalists/.

It is also necessary to gauge the ambiguities – even the dark sides - of many of the League's activities. Here the entwinements, or perhaps the co-implication, of internationalist and transformative aspirations with older currents of imperialist, civilizational and power political thinking loom large. This is most obviously evident with the mandates system, at once a powerful mechanism for the generation of proto-decolonising norms and a fig leaf for refurbished racist colonial domination (the latter point underlined vigorously in Florian Wagner's chapter and in the acerbic criticisms of Israel Zangwill related in Laura Almagor's).[23] By the same token, while the League valorised the production of objective knowledge as a means to overcome political and social problems and promote peace, the work of its experts was never ideologically innocent, not least because it was shot through with hierarchical Eurocentric assumptions, as Quincy Cloet demonstrates in his chapter. (It should be noted, moreover, that recent scholarship has underlined that the nascent social science of IR was also shaped and tainted by pernicious racial thinking.[24]) Equally, while noting positively the continuities between the League's global health work and that carried out under the UN, Niels Brimnes also underlines how the former was profoundly shaped and limited by colonial power relations.

The League minority protection system was also problematic. Whilst undoubtedly an ambitious and unprecedented attempt to protect the rights of racial, religious and linguistic minorities, paternalistic thinking ensured that the great imperial powers imposed obligations upon the new states of Europe that they would not assume themselves. Moreover, the architects of the system were primarily animated by the conviction that minorities constituted a problem in relation to the stability of the Versailles territorial and political order, rather than by revulsion at their oppression or sympathy for their political and cultural aspirations. Indeed, British and French policy-makers ultimately wished minority "problems" to be resolved by assimilation and often exhibited a strong antipathy to the minorities' "difference".[25] Similar criticisms could be made of the League's complicity in the Greco-Turkish population exchange, the full extent of which is uncovered in Mads Drange's chapter: while welfare considerations were not totally absent, the League's actions involved treating hundreds of thousands of individuals in a brutally instrumental manner.

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[23] Pedersen*: Guardians*.

[24] For example, Vitalis: *White World Order.*

[25] I sketched out this view in an early contribution to the new historiography: Finney: '"Evil"'.

Turning to the League's role in post-war economic reconstruction, success in stabilising the economies of several Central and Eastern European countries was a noteworthy achievement. But there were significant imperialist overtones to the way in which the League assumed oversight of their economies and imposed budgetary discipline; there is a lineage here through to "IMF stabilization schemes after 1945" and "European Central Bank schemes to achieve stability in credit-crunched Europe" in the very recent past.[26] From a different angle, other great powers looked askance at the role of the Bank of England in these reconstruction schemes, seeing them as a mechanism to establish the "veritable financial domination" of Britain.[27] Collectively, the rest of the League's functional work, which often involved similarly intrusive interventions, is also vulnerable to the recent critiques that have uncovered the dark sides of international humanitarianism.[28]

Further probing and untangling these complexities is one of the most important tasks for ongoing historiographical work on the League. This is essential not only to enhance our understanding of the League and inter-war internationalism themselves, but also to help us gain a firmer purchase on the intractable political and ethical problems of global governance in the present. The contributions in Part Two of this collection point to multiple productive avenues down which that research might proceed.

More generally, this collection *in toto* demonstrates how the League of Nations has become a site for international historians to deploy cutting edge techniques in transnational and cultural history and to work through innovative preoccupations. Part One underscores the fruitfully multi-faceted nature of the new scholarship. Locating the League within thicker and broader networks of internationalist activism in the inter-war years or the longer history of global governance does sometimes tend to blur the sense of it as a distinctive agent in its own right. Yet simultaneously a different strand in this historiographical enterprise is subjecting the League as an institution directly to close examination. The rich studies included here offer sociological and prosopographical insights into the personnel of the Secretariat and thought-provoking analyses of the League's bureaucratic practices, in line with the very best contemporary work on the social and cultural history of diplomacy.[29]

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[26] Clavin: 'Austrian Hunger Crisis', 277-278.

[27] Mazower: *Governing*, 151, quoting the Governor of the Bank of France, Emile Moreau.

[28] Hilton et al.: 'History and Humanitarianism'.

[29] See, for example, the work associated with the research network on *New Diplomatic History* https://newdiplomatichistory.org/.

This is certainly not simply a matter of recuperating mundane biographical detail or tedious administrative minutiae. So, Karen Gram-Skjoldager's study of the Supervisory Commission sheds important light on the power relations between small and great powers and between the institution of the League and its constituent members. Similarly, Haakon Ikonomou's analysis of the Translation and Interpretation Service unpicks the profound practical and symbolic significance of an ostensibly merely technical apparatus: facilitating international understanding was, after all, central to the League's transformative ambitions. Moreover, read carefully the microscale work in this vein does in fact link back to the other historiographical strands previously discussed. So Myriam Piguet underlines how the practical matter of gender balance in the Secretariat was intimately intertwined with the transnational feminist activism that contributed powerfully to inter-war internationalism. Equally, Torsten Kahlert and Gram-Skjoldager reveal more details about the continuities in personnel that were an important component of the larger story of the evolution of global governance as the League gave way to the UN.

The contributions in Part Three similarly demonstrate how the new scholarship on the League is squarely located in the vanguard of contemporary international history practice. It manifestly speaks – as the editors point out in their introduction – to the two core concerns which I have identified elsewhere as "narratives" and "bodies".[30] On the first count, scholars in international history and IR have lately become much more interested in how international actors present themselves through narratives, in terms both of identity projection and contestation over particular interests and issues.[31] The essays in the first section of Part Three enfold the League into this endeavour on several different levels.

Helle Strandgaard Jansen, Nikolai Schulz and Emil Seidenfaden analyse how the Information Section explicitly sought to tell a positive story about the League in the mid-1930s, even as its political power was in steep decline. Seidenfaden also explores the League's efforts – more negatively – to constrain the proliferation of false information through networking with media organisations and journalists. This again casts new light on how the League perceived the power both of "objective truth" and of global public opinion. Benjamin Auberer's essay on novels about the League deploys the interpretive device of narrative in a different but complementary sense. His contribution expands our understanding

[30] Finney: 'Narratives and Bodies'.

[31] For example, Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle: *Strategic Narratives.*.

of the diverse significances attributed to the League and brings into focus the importance of its afterlife in fiction.

The essays in the second section take up the rubric of "bodies", which is here shorthand for concern with the material. The recent "material turn" within international history comprises diverse strands, but some of the most productive involve gauging the political implications of lived experience, the sensory and the material environment. These are, for example, important themes within a major ongoing research project based at Nottingham University entitled "Conferencing the International" which examines diverse forms of inter-war internationalism as they were "manifested in their conferencing spaces". Focusing on certain key interwar conferences – including the League-sponsored International Studies Conference – the project explores how their geographical locations influenced their proceedings, how they were experienced ("how were spaces created and policed … and how can we recreate their multi-sensory character by reference to their sounds, smells, tastes and associated social intimacies?") and how their environments were created (in terms of venues and equipment, the training of staff and how "interactions between speakers and audiences" were "facilitated, reported and received").[32]

Such innovative approaches have enormous potential to reframe and deepen our understanding of internationalism and they are also on display in the contributions in this section. So Gram-Skjoldager's study of working conditions in the Palais Wilson is suggestive of how the physical environment in which the Secretariat operated shaped the lives of its members and perhaps constrained the achievements of the League. By the same token, Marco Ninno's account of the architectural competitions that led to the construction of the Palais des Nations reveals how the League sought to symbolically incarnate its internationalist ideals in concrete form; in recalling the slightly grubby episode of how Le Corbusier's path-breaking modernist visions were sidelined, it also casts fresh light on how the League remained hidebound by certain traditional modes of thought.

As League historians expand the possibilities of all these innovative approaches and preoccupations, they are not only fruitfully expanding our understanding of the League and inter-war internationalism; they are also providing inspiration for historians of other international organisations and for international history as a whole. This is yet another way in

[32] Quotes from the homepage of the *Conferencing the International: A Cultural and Historical Geography of the Origins of Internationalism, 1919-1939* project https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/groups/interwarconf/home.aspx.

which we can discern, a hundred years since its birth and over seventy years since its death, that the League in fact lives on.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

Old College, Aberystwyth University. From its founding in 1919 to 1965, the Department of International Politics was housed in 1 Marine Terrace, the small white house immediately to the left of Old College.

https://goo.gl/images/yoZYNx (copyright Aberystwyth University)

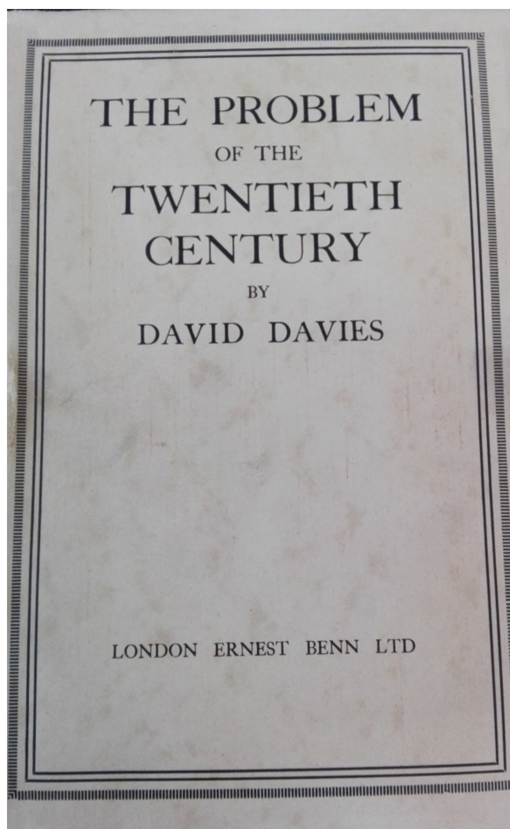
Tenth PLENARY CONGRESS of the INTERNATIONAL
FEDERATION of LEAGUE OF NATIONS SOCIETIES,
At ABERYSTWYTH.

The Local Committee Invites

to an exhibition of the Film "STAR OF HOPE,"
at the Imperial Cinema, Bath St.,
on FRIDAY, July 2nd, 1926, at 2-30 p.m.

Le Comite d'Organisation du Congres a Aberystwyth invite M.M. les membres du Congres a l'exposition du Film "Etoile de l'Esperance" au Cinema imperial, Bath Street, Vendredi le 2 juillet a 14h 30.

Invitation to screening of the League of Nations film, *Star of Hope* (1925), during the Congress of the International Federation of League of Nations Societies, Aberystwyth, July 1926. (Image taken from Elgan Davies, 'When Aberystwyth Hosted an International Peace Congress', *Wales for Peace*, http://walesforpeace.org/images/user/Aberystwyth%20Hosted%20an%20International%20Peace%20Congress.pdf, 2016 – copyright unknown)



THE PROBLEM
OF THE
TWENTIETH
CENTURY
BY
DAVID DAVIES

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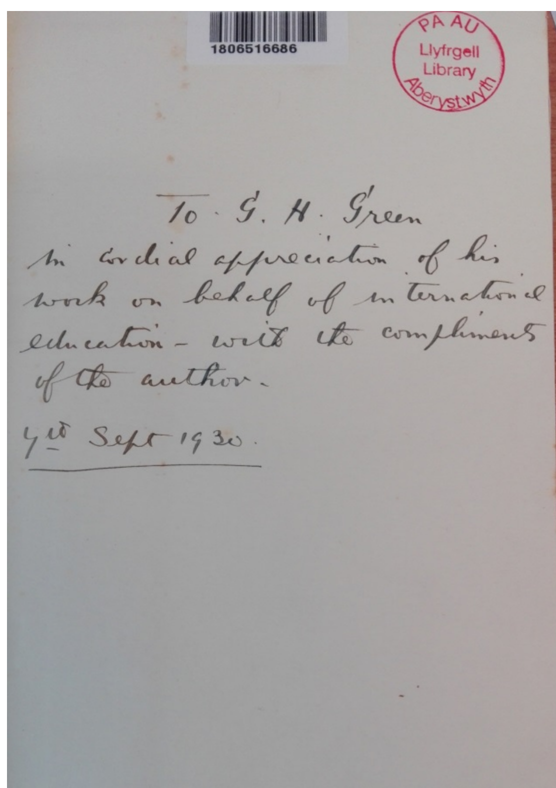

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To G. H. Green
in cordial appreciation of his
work on behalf of international
education – with the compliments
of the author.

4th Sept 1930.

David Davies, *The Problem of Peace in the Twentieth Century* (1930). Signed copy held by Aberystwyth University Library. (Photos by author)