



Seán Lester (1888–1959), was an Irish diplomat. He was born on 27th September 1888 in Woodburn, Carrickfergus, County Antrim. His parents were Robert John Lester, a grocery shop owner in Belfast, and Henrietta Mary Lester.

At 17, he started his journalism career with the unionist North Down Herald in 1905, where he worked alongside Ernest Blythe. In Belfast, he discovered the Gaelic League and, like Blythe, he was a Protestant who was profoundly impacted by nationalism. He joined the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) in 1908. He joined Sinn Féin in 1909 and was the chief reporter for the Dublin Evening Mail and the Dublin Daily Express. On Easter, 1916, when leader of the Irish Volunteer Force, Eoin McNeill, issued orders cancelling any Volunteer activities, many members did not engage

in the 1916 Rising. Lester was one of these who stayed away, due to McNeill's order.

In 1923, due to his friendship with Blythe, Lester started working in the Irish Free State Department of External Affairs, in the publicity department, eventually becoming the director of publicity (1925–9). In April 1929, he took the role of Irish Free State's permanent representative to the League of Nations in Geneva, a position he held until January 1934. In this role, he was responsible for shaping the policy on behalf of the Free State, within the League of Nations. Together with Gerard O'Kelly, the Irish representative to France, he played a crucial part in the Free State's successful election to the League Council (September 1930). In Geneva, he represented Ireland at several international conferences, and served as Irish representative on the Council of the League from 1930 to 1933 when the minister for external affairs was unavailable. Lester also participated in the League of Nations preparatory commission for the disarmament conference and represented Ireland at the disarmament conference sessions from 1932 to 1933. He was the president of the conciliation committee for the Peru–Colombia (Leticia) and Bolivia–Paraguay (Gran Chaco) disputes. According to an obituary in *The Times*, 'the rights of small nations and minorities brought out his particular abilities'.

Lester's belief in the League and the role of small states within it caught the attention of the League's secretariat. In autumn 1933, he was seconded to the secretariat, becoming the first Irish diplomat to serve in an international institution. In January 1934, he became the League high commissioner for Danzig (Gdansk). Danzig was ceded to Poland from Germany, after World War I. His responsibilities were primarily diplomatic in nature, mediating between German and Polish factions in the city. Lester reported to Éamon de Valera in 1934 that all parties - Poles, Germans, and Danzigers - believed an Irishman would understand and defend their respective positions, and his task was to find a compromise among them.

After returning to Geneva in February 1937, Lester was promoted to the role of deputy Secretary-General of the League. His role was largely administrative until the onset of World War II in 1939, when he was tasked with salvaging the remnants of the discredited League. His strong belief in the League brought him into conflict with the pro-Nazi secretary-general, Joseph Avenol, who was expecting a German victory and wanted to make the League more favourable towards the Axis

powers. Lester was against this move and was supported by Adolfo Costa du Rels, the president of the League Council. After Avenol resigned, Lester became the acting Secretary-General on 4 September 1940, a role he held until 1946. During the war, he stayed in Geneva, continuing the non-political work of the League with a minimal staff. He was committed to maintaining the League's structure for the postwar era and later stated, 'In normal times I would not have accepted the post of secretary-general, but I could not refuse it with the world falling about our ears.' He found these years to be the most challenging of his life, as not only was the League's future as an institution uncertain, but also a German invasion of Switzerland was a distinct possibility until 1943.

In 1945, Lester represented the League at the San Francisco conference that founded the United Nations, but he was not given a role in the new organization. It was intended to symbolize a fresh start, and it was believed that former League officials might negatively influence it. Being a citizen of a neutral state, Lester was also viewed with disdain after the war. In 1946, he prepared for the final Assembly of the League, which began on 8 April and retroactively awarded him the title of full Secretary-General from 1940. His last responsibility was to formally dissolve the League and dispose of its assets. The League of Nations officially ceased to exist on 31 July 1947.

Lester retired to Recess, County Galway, where he enjoyed fishing and gardening. Although he had received offers, he did not work for the Irish government again. There was some speculation about him running for the Irish presidency in 1945, but this didn't come to fruition. The Woodrow Wilson Foundation honoured him for his distinguished service in maintaining the League during the war in 1945. In 1956, Lester was appointed for six years to the Irish national group that nominated candidates to fill vacancies in the membership of the International Court of Justice. He passed away on 13 June 1959 and was buried alongside his wife in Clifden, County Galway.

For more details on this entry, refer to the National Database of Irish-language biographies (Ainm.ie).

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