Preface

It is important to stress at the outset that this book does not provide a full history of Unicef and the fields of activity in which it has engaged over the past 50 years. Jim Grant, who asked me to write the book, envisaged a sequel to my earlier volume, *The Children and the Nations*. This was published by Unicef in 1986 (a shorter edition was published with Macmillan Australia in 1987) and covered Unicef’s history until that time—its 40th anniversary. However, this second book is not a ‘Volume II’. I did not want to impose upon the reader any need to refer back to information given elsewhere. I have, therefore, adjusted the original brief by enlarging the historical perspective.

The first chapter contains an encapsulation of the entire Unicef story; and subsequent chapters, covering the various themes—child health, nutrition, education and so on—all begin with a review of how ideas evolved over several decades. Therefore, although the main period covered by the book is the decade and a half between 1979 (the International Year of the Child) and 1995—a period that coincides with the leadership of Unicef by the late James P. Grant—there is sufficient ‘what happened before’ to enable what has happened recently to be viewed within the framework of evolving ideas and practice. Those who need more detail can refer to the earlier volume. On specific subjects, readers may also want to refer to the Unicef History Monograph series, many of whose titles are mentioned in the bibliographic references.

To some long-standing associates and ex-staff members of Unicef, the approach adopted may seem to over-stress Jim Grant’s Unicef, and overglorify its—and his—accomplishments in comparison with the past. A considerable effort has been made to avoid the trap of projecting Unicef as springing newly formed into existence at the advent of Grant. This is not a version of the organization he would himself at all have supported, although some of his most ardent admirers have been known to imply it on his behalf. One ex-Deputy Executive Director, Margaret Catley-Carlson (1981-83) asked me to be sure, even in a contemporary review, not to understate the contribution of
E.J.R. (Dick) Heyward (Senior Deputy Executive Director 1949-81). It was her view—a view not in any way intended to be critical of Jim Grant—that Heyward had created a Unicef strong enough to withstand the maelstrom that Grant unleashed upon it. I understood this to mean the careful shaping by an earlier generation of leaders of a decentralized and relatively flexible organization, whose strength is in the field and grounded in local realities; an organization that has always valued highly the contribution of local national staff; and an organization that also, from its inception, cultivated popular support among civil society through its National Committees in industrialized countries and its Greeting Card Operation. This organizational character is unique within the UN system.

In some ways Grant might have liked the Unicef culture to be more attuned to unquestioned acceptance of directives from the executive centre. But at the same time he fully appreciated that these strengths of Unicef, while they must occasionally have seemed more like rocks in his path than a rock on which he might build, ultimately worked in favour of his grand designs. Certainly he showed great skill in persuading and enthusing the organization in all its many corners—staff at headquarters and overseas, National Committees, partner NGOs, the Executive Board, Goodwill Ambassadors, volunteers and associates—to believe in his vision and lend their energies to his initiatives. But without the existing strengths of Unicef, those initiatives might never have led where they did.

All of this I have tried to convey, but the importance of earlier leaders and thinkers in shaping the mission and its organizational expression can do with some reinforcement here. And if Dick Heyward was the most remarkable and the main intellectual powerhouse over more than 30 years, some others must also be mentioned: Dr. Ludwik Rajchman, Unicef's chief founder and first Board Chairman; Maurice Pate and Henry Labouisse, Unicef's two previous distinguished Executive Directors, both of whom were crucial in helping to build the unique character and strength of the organization; and Nils Thedin, the elder statesman of Unicef's Executive Board for many years. All their names appear in these pages, but not with the length of credit to their outstanding contributions that would be their due in a book with a less contemporary focus.

Apart from the existence of a fairly thorough previous history, there are, I believe, two arguments in favour of a book about Unicef that primarily covers 1979-95. The first is to do with the extraordinary changes in the international environment, coupled with increasing consciousness concerning the many predicaments of children in contemporary society, that have taken place in the
last decade. When I wrote *The Children and the Nations* in 1984-85, there was really only one framework within which to examine Unicef’s record: the effort to bring about ‘development’ in the regions collectively known as the third world or the ‘South’. Almost everything (other than emergency relief) in which Unicef had been involved since the 1950s, in either the context of programmes or advocacy, had been directed at improving the well-being and family life circumstances of children disadvantaged by gross poverty in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Ever since the 1960s—a defining period in the Unicef story—the energies of the organization had been devoted to claiming on behalf of children a special priority within activity that formed part of this great post-colonial crusade. Under Jim Grant, that sense of organizational mission did not change, but other trends have recently overlaid and even begun to supersede it.

One of these is the end of the cold war and the huge sea change in international affairs that it has brought about—a change which has major repercussions on the old East-West, North-South dichotomies that provided the context in which the ‘development’ idea so long retained its potency. The loss of old certainties has helped to reveal that this idea—of an imagined community of nations undergoing an identical process of transition from the pre-industrial to the modern state—has run its historical course. At the same time, the Unicef mission has been deeply affected by the rise of the international human rights agenda, in particular the rise of children’s rights and their encapsulation in the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child; this is now the most ratified international human rights instrument in history.

Meanwhile, the negative impacts of some aspects of ‘development’—such as rapid industrialization and urbanization—on the cohesion of family life and on childhood itself have moved much closer to the centre of social policy concern in developing and industrialized countries alike. The overall effect is of increased attention to children and childhood as an important issue in its own right, rather than as a subset of the ‘development’ agenda. There is a mounting awareness in the world at large of the need to identify policies that will protect children and young people from the fallout of economic and social distress, as well as from the disastrous effects of the ‘new world disorder’ of pervasive violence and conflict. The seeds of many of these changes may have been present in 1986, but in 1996 they have become dominant characteristics of the framework within which any international mission on behalf of children must be examined.

The second justification for a book on the period that more or less coincides with the tenure of Jim Grant’s Executive Directorship is Jim Grant himself. At
present, it is unfashionable among historians to describe the ebb and flow of human affairs as dominated by heroic exploits and personalities. I myself subscribe to the view that it is the conjoining of forces rather than of individually decisive actions that bring about major changes of direction in public affairs. Any apparently instrumental role that an organization such as Unicef (or its chief executive officer) may have is, according to this view, mainly a reflection of the fact that it represents an organized expression of a cause at a time when that cause is rising in public popularity. I have been careful to attribute the rise of children on the international agenda that has occurred in the past 15 years to a number of trends, some of which have been slowly maturing over at least five decades and longer.

However, I also believe that it would be almost wilfully incorrect to downplay the influence certain individuals can have and have had on events. In the context of the recent story of the children’s cause, the late Jim Grant was in a class by himself. He was an example of that rare type of leader who not only anticipates how a wave in public and official perceptions is forming and positions organizational efforts to take advantage of it, but he actually managed to help create the international wave on behalf of children, and even the ground swell out of which it was formed. I do not believe any larger claim could be made on behalf of a particular individual in their chosen field of human endeavour.

The way in which, through Unicef, Grant engineered the partnerships and the political action that propelled forward the children’s cause during the 1980s and early 1990s is really phenomenal. Every new announcement of the identification of a major political figure—Hillary Clinton, for example—with the children’s cause is, in part, a product of a seed sown by Jim Grant. I find this evidence of his advocacy of the children’s cause so striking that it has caused me to rethink my views on the nature of potential relationships between people and events.

Under Grant’s leadership, Unicef became an instrument for making happen things that were much larger and more significant than its size or character would ever have given grounds to expect. Some of this may be fortuitous; some is certainly due to people all over the world who made Grant’s cause their cause and laboured to fulfil his vision. He himself always wanted to share credit with as many people as possible—partly because of his generosity of spirit, partly out of commitment to a common rather than a personal quest, partly out of a strategic sense that this encouraged them further. But much of it is due to him—to his energy, his optimism, his acuity, his unconventionality, his lack of self-importance, his capacity to transcend and to circumvent so as to keep his
and others' eyes on the prize, and his refusal to accept that the undoable could not be done.

Many tributes were paid to Jim Grant at the time of his death and memorial service in February 1995. There was a quote from George Bernard Shaw he liked a great deal, which was used in the 1995 State of the World's Children report and in many memorial tributes, about life being like a great blazing torch that he had managed to get hold of for a while. I also have a quotation from George Bernard Shaw that I find especially apt for Jim, and I would like to add it here: 'The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.' Both as a reasonable man and as an unreasonable man, Jim Grant's contribution to the cause of children was immense. And if the frequency with which his name appears in these pages in comparison with that of others sometimes makes it seem as if he stood like a metaphorical Colossus over Unicef during his regime, the fact is that he did.

When I accepted the assignment to do this book, he and I understood this would not be a hagiography, an unqualified paean of praise for a great man. His selection of me for the task is, in my view, a clear indication that that is not what he wanted. Life in Unicef under his leadership was not always comfortable and by no means excited only unqualified support from all sides and at all times. Some of the tensions and differences of view have been captured here, especially as far as the evolution of policy is concerned. However, I would very much have valued Grant's own views on the text, and I know he would have taken considerable time and trouble to give them to me. When I wrote The Children and the Nations, he and his then wife Ethel (who died in 1988) were among my most assiduous readers and commentators. It is a great sadness that he lived long enough to read only the first two chapters of this book. His death, however, has made no difference other than that I lost a valued critic. In all the outpouring of appreciation of his life and work in early 1995, it was my conviction not to change in any way what the book would contain, or to add any degree of praise or detraction because he is not still around. I am sure that is what he would have expected.

I have tried hard in this history, as in the last, to avoid writing a 'vanity book'. Most literature that Unicef puts out as public information—as in the case of any organization—is, essentially, propaganda. Even if it is not about Unicef but about its cause—children—the stance of the publication is: 'this is the world according to Unicef'. But in my books, the task has been to treat both Unicef and 'the world according to Unicef' objectively. So this book contains comment and it contains admission of mistakes and
naïve assumptions; to the limit of what is possible in a book commissioned by the organization itself, the book contains some of the tension in Unicef's world of human affairs without which human affairs would not be what they are.

For Jim Grant, this was a difficult issue. He always wanted everything and everyone to be better than they are. And he was afraid that if people got caught up in the tensions and dissensions intrinsic to the normal course of human affairs, the pace of the great movement he wanted to be a part and a leader of would slacken. And when things slacken, the strategic element of surprise—the momentum gained simply by being out in front—is lost. If you reveal your hand and open up discussion, the forces that spread doubt and disagreement have time to build obstacles to your advance. I know that there are many passages in this book, as in the last, that he would have wanted to discuss with me and over which he might well have pleaded an alternative case: on selective primary health care, for example; on the tardiness with which Unicef took up children's rights and child protection issues; on the degree to which water and sanitation and urban basic services became overshadowed by his 'child survival revolution'; and especially on Unicef's poor performance on gender and on family planning. But I also know he would have put his point of view to me, but never forced it. This is partly to do with his innate sense of respect for others. But it is also because he understood that if an account that claims to be historically accurate fails to be open and honest about what has not worked, its plausibility and credibility are suspect. On the occasion of the previous book, he said that he would respect my independence of view and he stuck to it. I'm sure he would have done the same on this occasion.

One other point of explanation about the textual content is necessary. Some commentators have regretted very much the lack of a personal touch—the mentions of individuals and their contributions other than those of Grant and a handful of top advisers and colleagues inside and outside the organization. I, too, regret this. But I found that any mention of one individual elicited a chorus of requests to mention 20 others. In a contemporary study this is understandable, but it makes the task of distributing credit virtually impossible. There seemed only one sensible course of action, which was to remove all names other than those of the indisputably significant, especially among those who were extremely senior, certain non-staffers, and a few staffers who are mostly mentioned in the context of other parts of their careers. To those many who look in vain for their names and those of colleagues, and richly deserve credit for their personal contributions to the cause, I apologize in advance.
The only remaining task is to acknowledge the help of many individuals in the preparation of the book. Apart from Jim Grant, to whom I owe the assignment, I would like to express appreciation to many of those who read and commented on the text: Manzoor Ahmed, David Alnwick, Sheila Barry, Robert Cohen, France Donnay, John Donohue, Brendan Doyle, Leo Fonseka, Gourisankar Ghosh, Jim Himes, Mehr Khan, Peter McDermott, Richard Jolly, Stephen Lewis, Bertil Lindblad, Erma Manoncourt, Nyi Nyi, Marti Rajandran, Jon Rohde, Michel Saint-Lot, Karin Sham Poo, Monica Sharma, Jim Sherry, Frances Stewart and Philip van Haecke. I would also like to thank the staff of Unicef offices in Brazil, Bolivia, Mexico, Indonesia, Thailand, India and Viet Nam, which I visited in the course of the book’s research, and the government officials, programme and project managers, and programme participants with whom I came in contact. As always, it is ultimately these people from whom the most telling information is derived, and by whom my viewpoint has been most influenced over the course of 23 years of research and writing in this field.

At New York headquarters, the staff of the Evaluation and Research Office have been unfailingly helpful and supportive, and in this context I must mention in particular Krishna Bose, John Donohue, Pierre Mandl, Ludette San Agustin and Philip van Haecke. Staff of the UK National Committee for Unicef also have helped with research, especially Harriet Goodman and Rachel Lavender. Finally, I would like to thank Shalini Dewan, Vicky Haeri, Mehr Khan and Stephen Lewis of Unicef’s external relations staff for their support for the project and its successful publication.

Maggie Black
Oxford, January 1996