

TRAINING BLIND WORKERS IN THE COLONIES

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Blindness is at once a social menace and an economic challenge and the cost of supporting blind people in colonial territories runs into millions. But schemes for industrial training in Africa are now setting a pattern for other territories.

Six years ago, the British Empire Society for the Blind was incorporated as the first organisation of its kind to operate in the Colonial Empire. Its task could be summed up in the fact that there were a million blind men, women and children in British colonial territories—three times the blind population of Britain and the U.S.A. put together—and that nine-tenths of this blindness was estimated to be preventable.

In 1945, five years prior to the incorporation of the British Empire Society for the Blind, the Colonial Office and the National Institute for the Blind set up a joint-committee to investigate blindness in the colonies. This Committee soon realised that it was confronting a major social problem. After studying all available facts in the United Kingdom, it sent a delegation to Africa and the Middle East. Twelve colonies were visited during a ten-month tour covering 35,000 miles.

Grim Facts.—The resultant report pointed to the fact that the four West African colonies alone had a blind population of at least 300,000; that in Northern Nigeria, one person in 70 suffered from blindness, and one in seven had eye disease. In an extensive area of the Northern Gold Coast, onchocerciasis, a blinding disease carried by the Simulium fly, attacks half the population.

In some villages of this area—known locally as the "Country of the Blind"—investigators found that a fifth of all male

adults were blind. In East Africa, their report stated, at least 15 per cent of the population was affected by trachoma. In some areas, the infection was as high as 80 per cent. School examinations in different provinces of Tanganyika showed that up to 66 per cent of the children suffered from this eye disease.

In Central Africa, investigations pointed to the fact that, in Nyasaland alone, there was a blind population of between 20,000 and 25,000, including 3,000 young people, or twice the number of blind school children in England and Wales. Trachoma and conjunctivitis, endemic throughout most of the Middle East, were major causes of blindness and disability in Gibraltar, Malta, Cyprus and Aden.

Human Suffering and Economic Loss.—Behind these grim facts, as the B.E.S.B.'s first annual report in 1950 explained, is a tragic story of human suffering and economic loss. Most blind people in the colonies live as family dependants, or as beggars wandering from town to town in search of alms. Blind children were often exploited by beggars' guilds, and there was evidence that a few African tribes still practised infanticide of blind children.

Quite apart from the human suffering, food, clothing and shelter for the million people who were producing nothing represented a loss to the colonies of at least £10 million per annum. To teach a blind man

a trade costs less than to support him in idleness for five years. Basketry, weaving, mat-making, pottery and leatherwork were all suitable occupations—trades in fact on which the European blind had built up their tradition of skill and independence.

But to give the impression that no action had been taken up to 1950 to deal—however inadequately—with this great social problem would be unjust. In a number of colonies, resolute action to prevent blindness and to care for the blind had been taken by governments, missions, voluntary societies and individual workers.

Central Organisation.—This, then, was the background against which the British Empire Society for the Blind was incorporated in 1950 to act under the direction of an executive committee whose first six members were appointed by the Secretary of State for the Colonies and the National Institute for the Blind. This committee was empowered to take action in every territory of the British Colonial Empire to prevent blindness and to advance the education, training, employment and welfare of the blind.

The day-to-day direction of the work of the Society was entrusted to Mr. John Wilson, O. B. E., who, although blind himself through an accident at school, won a scholarship to Oxford, having learnt Braille and studied at the Worcester College for the Blind, and then obtained an Honours degree in Jurisprudence and a diploma in Social Sciences and Administration. At 21, Mr. Wilson had been appointed Assistant Secretary of the National Institute for the Blind. It was in this capacity that he became secretary of the Committee of the Institute which the Colonial Office set up to investigate blindness in the colonies. He was

a member of the small delegation touring Africa and the Middle East.

Towards the end of last year, Mr. Wilson returned from a three-month tour of Uganda, Tanganyika, Zanzibar, Kenya, Northern Rhodesia, Nyasaland, Southern Rhodesia and the Bechuanaland Protectorate. Earlier in 1955, he visited British Guiana, Trinidad, Barbados, the Leeward Islands, Jamaica and the Bahamas.

"Our job in these, and indeed in all colonial territories," Mr. Wilson told me in an interview at the Society's offices in London "is to mobilise all forces which can be brought to bear on the problem of blindness, and working in co-operation with international agencies, governments, missions and social welfare agencies in the colonies.

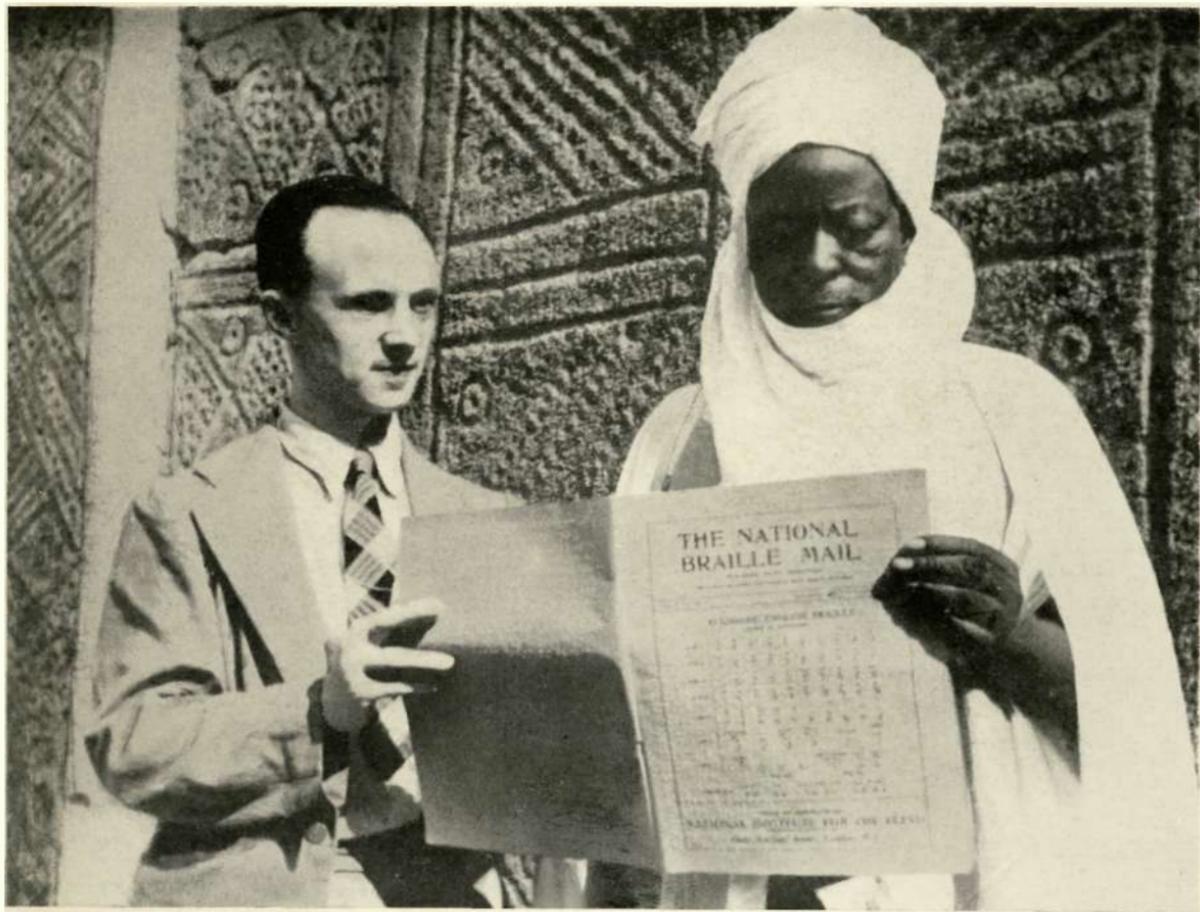
First Five Years.—To indicate the achievements of the Society during the first five years to 1955, Mr. Wilson quoted from its last annual report.

"In a score of territories, which together contain more than two-thirds of the population of the British Colonial Empire, the foundations have been laid of a permanent system of blind welfare. The number of blind children at school has doubled; the number of blind adults in training has increased ten-fold. Thirty new schools and training centres have been established, six more are being built and an additional eighteen have been planned. Braille alphabets have been devised for practically every written language in the colonies. Teachers and blind welfare workers have come to the U.K. for special training from 16 different colonial territories.

"Surveys to reveal the extent and causes of blindness have been conducted in areas containing twenty-four million inhabitants. New eye clinics have been established by governments in many territories and the



Surrounded by pupils of a Gold Coast School for the Blind is Mr. John Wilson, Secretary of the British Empire Society for the Blind who lost his sight at the age of 13, and his wife. The Society plans to open training centres to teach sightless people to lead active, useful lives.



Mr. John Wilson, Secretary of the British Empire Society for the Blind, describes the advantages of Braille writing to the Emir of Kane. A photograph taken during Mr. Wilson's recent tour of West Africa.

number of eye treatments has increased dramatically. International interest has been focused on some of the main causes of tropical blindness and important research and control measures are now being successfully undertaken."

"As a result of my last tour," said Mr. Wilson, "the Society decided for the next three years to concentrate its attention and much of its accumulated reserves on the problem of finding realistic employment for the blind in rural areas."

"We have already established that this sort of thing is possible. Blind Africans are being trained as farmers in Kenya, as village craftsmen in Central Africa, and for variety of rural occupations. During the next three years, the Society will collaborate in five experimental schemes which together will train 1,200 blind Africans for rural occupations, and, at the same time will build up a nucleus of trained instructors."

Community Projects.—Mr. Wilson described a basic village unit already in existence on the shores of Lake Mweru. It consisted of a group of huts, crude, mudbrick constructions with grass roofs, erected by the local people for a few pounds and staffed by two trained village instructors. There were thirty blind students being taught not Braille, arithmetic and polite manners, but the trades of their village. This was a fishing community where life is made up of nets, canoes, fish-curing and simple agriculture. No attempt was being made to "improve" these blind people; they were simply learning, successfully, to become average members of their tribe.

"Geoffrey Salisbury, the modest author of the scheme, warned me that it wasn't much to look at," said Mr. Wilson, "but it fitted into the village and that was what mattered."

The point about these schemes is that they are inexpensive to establish and maintain,

and the huts can be built by the local authorities for not more than £600. African teachers and instructors, recruited in the villages and trained either by a supervisor or at a centre such as Bwana Mkubwa or Salama, are readily available. At the end of the demonstration period, the centre, from which the African supervisor on a bicycle could maintain contact with up to 100 blind workers within a 50 mile radius, can be absorbed into the normal administration and life of the village.

"These schemes collectively," Mr. Wilson added, "might well set a new pattern of work for the blind, not only in Africa, but also for other 'under-developed' territories. Nothing like them has been attempted before in blind welfare."

Local Support.—What was the reaction to them by the local authorities?

"I can tell you about my experience in the Bechuanaland Protectorate, which is by no means unique. There the Government is extremely keen to introduce some realistic scheme of welfare for the blind. They regard it as one of their major social problems and have for some years been urged by the chiefs to do something about it.

"When I was there, the Divisional Commissioner at Lobatsi convened a meeting of the paramount chiefs, some of whom had come from as far as 700 miles, and we spent a whole day beneath a large gum tree on the lawn discussing my village training centre scheme. There was a murmur of incredulity as the Commissioner said that in Britain blind people read with their fingers, they work big machines in factories, earn their living and support their families. Then I read at random from the Braille Mail, and this, together with an attempt at writing Braille phonetically in the Chuana language, caused something of a sensation.

"By the end of the day a detailed scheme had been worked out. The only difficulty was to decide in which village to start, as all the chiefs wanted to get on with it. The five principal villages were selected and in each case the chief undertook to father the scheme. At other areas, we were to provide an expert to supervise it."

World Problem.—Further schemes of this kind have also been planned in Kenya and Uganda; in Tanganyika, there is to be a demonstration centre for village craftsmen; in Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland, it will be designed to take into account that the economy is based largely on the fishing industry; in Southern Rhodesia and Uganda, an attempt is to be made to train blind

African women in food-growing, family rearing and home-management.

The work of the British Empire Society for the blind and its affiliated organisations in 28 territories from the West Indies round the world and the Pacific has already been acknowledged as one of the most outstanding developments of voluntary social service in recent years. The United Nations has estimated that there are at least 10 million blind people in the world and that most of them live in areas removed from specialised medical and welfare services. Thus the leadership which the British Empire Society for the Blind is giving in this field—and its obvious success in terms of human and economic betterment—clearly has an importance beyond the immediate objective. (*New Commonwealth, London*).—BIS.