

LIBRARY WORK WITH THE BLINDS IN GREAT BRITAIN

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At the date of the last census (1901), there were 32,823 blind persons in Great Britain ; 25,317 in England and Wales. 4,253 in Ireland and 3,253 in Scotland. Most of these are able to read by touch one or other of the systems of embossed literature ; the older blind preferring the Moon system and the younger the Braille.

In the interests of these blind persons numerous organisations are actively engaged, in fact few countries can show a wider propaganda for the education and employment of the blind than exists in this country. Our institutions mostly have for their objective the amelioration of the conditions of the blind in all respects, and therefore the provision of reading matter and its distribution form but one phase of a many-sided activity, although a very important one.

There are few societies organised for these ends that have not libraries of books in relief, and whilst this section of institutional work hardly admits of treatment under the heading « libraries », it cannot be wholly disregarded as practically the bulk of the provision and distribution of literature for the blind in Great Britain is the result of the work of the many philanthropic foundations.

The only special instance of a library for the blind distinct and apart from any other range of effort on behalf of the sightless, is the Incorporated National Lending Library for the Blind (125 Queen's Road, Bayswater, London, W.), a library of between 11,000 and 12,000 volumes in the Moon and Braille types, which is annually augmented to the extent of a thousand volumes. It was founded in the year 1882 and became incorporated 16 years later. The librarian is Miss E. W. Austin.

It is a subscription library, the annual fee for membership varying from two guineas to five shillings according to the circumstances of the applicant. Books are distributed to all parts of the United Kingdom and it is estimated that some 5,500 blind readers are reached directly by the National Lending Library.

The difficulty encountered in the expense of carriage is great, but needy blind are afforded some assistance in this matter from a sum of money held in trust for this purpose. During the year 1908 the daily average circulation reached 250 volumes. In addition to direct service with the blind, the National Lending Library loans collections of its books to over 50 local institutions in different parts of the country, and some 20 municipal libraries also avail themselves of this source for the periodical acquisition of books for circulation amongst the blind in their particular districts.

Under the heading « libraries » mention should be made of the extensive permanent collections of works in relief forming part of the stocks of the larger municipal libraries.

In these cases the books have been added in the course of years, either from donations or by purchase, and they are circulated free of charge to local blind residents on application. These municipal efforts have resulted in the circulation of hundreds of thousands of works amongst the blind, but further comment on this phase is reserved for the closing portion of this report.

When we come to consider the institutions which exist (in part) for the production of books in relief, the range of enquiry broadens considerably. Of these there are a good

number, but as many only touch the work on a small scale it has been thought only necessary to treat at any length with the major societies.

The two main societies, both in point of date of foundation and general importance, are the Moon's Society and the British and Foreign Blind Association.

Moon's Society for embossing and circulating the Holy Scriptures and other useful books for the Blind (to give its full title) was founded by Dr. William Moon in the year 1847. Its headquarters are at 104 Queen's Road, Brighton.

Dr. Moon conferred upon the blind a great boon in the invention of the system which bears his name. From the time of its foundation this Society has been actively engaged in the production of books in relief, together with other beneficial work. Books in Moon type have now been produced in over 400 languages and dialects, the bulk of the earlier work being confined to the Bible and its separate books, whilst a recent list shows in addition some 600 books of a general character in English and another 350 in other languages. The book production is executed from stereotype and electrotype sheets which, at this date, number close upon 100,000 and which are carefully preserved for future use.

The British and Foreign Blind Association was founded by Dr. Thomas Rhodes Armitage in the year 1868 and this event marks the introduction into Britain of the system devised by M. Louis Braille. This association is by far the most prominent organisation for the blind in our country and has for its objects the promotion of education and employment for the blind. It works for the most up-to-date methods of teaching, and for the production of all accessories to the education of the blind. The production of books in relief naturally forms a great part of its usefulness, and in addition to the possession of a large library approaching 20,000 separate works of varying volumage in m. s. form, it produces a great number of books in several languages from stereo plates, the character of these books being most varied, covering as they do the main lines of educational subject-matter. About 7,000 vols. and 10,000 smaller pieces

are printed in the catalogue of this association. The report of the British and Foreign Blind Association for 1908 indicates that 5,500 plates were stereotyped in that year alone, and 2,300 copies of new books were embossed during the same period, in addition to magazine productions. This society publishes an abridged edition of the « Daily Mail » newspaper in Braille type each week, and has a circulation of nearly 2,000 copies weekly. Owing to limited accommodation, the Association has been compelled to construct new premises which should be in occupation about the time this report is under consideration. The new buildings will cost about £ 30,000 to construct and equip, and will provide accommodation for about 100,000 volumes. The present address of the Association is 206 Great Portland Street, London. W., and the new premises are being erected in the same thoroughfare, within a few doors.

A third society responsible for embossed book production is the Royal Blind Asylum and School (West Craigmillar, Edinburgh, Scotland). It was founded by a Dr Johnson in 1793 and became incorporated in 1898.

It was not until the year 1890, however, that printing was commenced. The range of its productions do not compare with either of the beforementioned societies' outputs, being mainly confined to magazine matter and shorter works (music chiefly). They issue a considerable amount of other matter, however, amongst which figure several standard works.

There is a school in connection with this institution and here some 2,000 books are kept for the exclusive use of inmates.

Amongst other publishing societies may be mentioned:

The London Society for Teaching the Blind to Read. (10, Upper Avenue Road, Swiss Cottage, London. N. W.);

Royal Normal College for the Blind. (Westow Street, Upper Norwood. London. S. E.);

College for the Higher Education of the Blind. Worcester, and several smaller organisations, but the output of these is incomparable to that of the two principal associations. It must be remembered, however, that nearly all the bodies

working on behalf of the blind concern themselves in no small way in the production of books in m. s. form, for their own use or for wider circulation.

It would be impossible to judge the amount of bookwork done for and by the blind with accommodation for about 2,500 pupils, all of whom have facilities afforded for reading; there are also 50 workshops employing close on 2,000 persons at such trades as the blind are able to follow, and these workshops naturally form in a sense centres for embossed book circulation to local blind.

Some 50 charities exclusively assist our British blind, and whilst they are mostly concerned in the provision of the necessities of life, the pensioners are often linked up with the many organisations that are interested in the circulation of books in relief.

Then again, the local educational authorities all over the Kingdom set up special schools for the instruction of the blind, and make special provision for the children in the way of books. A great number of periodicals are printed for the blind, and apart from the ordinary circulation which the several associations effect, many private persons interest themselves in more restricted distribution of this class of literature.

Great assistance in the production and dissemination of embossed literature is derived from the Executors of the Gardner Trust for the Blind. (Offices, 53, Victoria Street, London. S. W.), and an enormous number of works in both types are circulated through the agency of the Home Teaching Societies which are to be found now in most parts of the country. These Home Teaching Societies collectively possess thousands of books, and their officers undertake the home-instruction of the blind in special areas, and provide books for their perusal.

Similar work is carried out by the Indigent Blind Visiting Society, (Headquarters: 8, Red Lion Square, London. W. C.), in the Metropolitan area, but mainly at « centres » or classes where the blind attend weekly for instruction and assistance. This body has a large library, mainly in m. s. form.

Numerous other small societies exist in London, and, as has been said, the provincial districts are now fairly well served by home teaching societies, all interested in the circulation of embossed literature.

It will thus be seen that quite a net-work of effort is constantly in movement for the production, the writing and the circulation of books in relief, for or amongst the class for which they are designed. The total number of machine-printed or handwritten books available in these countries cannot be estimated, but it is safe to say that ample provision is made for the reading blind in Great Britain, numerically, although the distribution may be irregular or even though there may be cases where isolated blind persons are without books at all.

The range and scope of this accumulated literature has been greatly extended during recent years, yet there is still much room for improvement, or shall we say advancement. Distribution is the great trouble in all cases, but day by day, the work of the main organisations is becoming more and more sectionised and localised, and this splitting up of the detail work renders the task of bringing books and readers together much easier.

This report has but touched in the most general way the several organisations which demand consideration when the subject of enquiry is the production and distribution of books for the blind in Great Britain. It has not been considered necessary to reproduce much that is already in print in H. J. Wilson's admirable pamphlet on the « Institutions, Societies and Classes for the Blind » (obtainable from the offices of the Gardner Trust, 53, Victoria Street, London. S. W.). This little work is indispensable to anyone who wishes to grasp the enormous and beneficial work that is being done in this direction in England and Wales. The officials of the several associations are most ready with assistance and information for all who are interested, and the writer mentions with gratitude the help given by Mr. Henry Stainsby, Secretary to the British and Foreign Blind Association, whose thirty years' experience enables him to

utter the last word on all matters relative to the blind in Great Britain.

In conclusion, the work of the municipal library in connection with the blind needs a reference, since there seems to be a tendency, on the part of many local authorities, to regard this work as a part of the free library's programme.

As a result, many municipal libraries have undertaken either the acquisition of a special stock of books in relief as part of the permanent stock, or, the periodical loan of varying numbers of books from the National Lending Library or smaller institutions, in both cases circulating the books to local residents upon application, free of any charge.

Most of the municipal libraries have received a donation of a certain number of books in Moon type from the Moon's Society at some time during their establishment, but little development in the direction of permanent additions to such collections seems to have resulted. On the other hand, several towns could be mentioned where extensions have been made on a large scale: Birmingham, Liverpool, and Stepney (London. E.), being instances where the collection has justified the production of special catalogues of this class of books.

The loans from societies tend to increase in districts where little or no permanent provision has been made in the stock, the latest returns of the National Lending Library showing a good number of municipal libraries that are enrolled as borrowers. There can be no doubt that this practice would be increased if a reduction in the fees could be brought about, at present they are high rates at which the municipal libraries borrow.

There can be no doubt that in districts where no Home Teaching Societies exist, great advantage is offered the local blind by the library authorities circulating books in relief, but it is questionable whether this holds good in places that are traversed in the operations of a home teaching society. Such a society not only has books of its own, but actually takes them to the homes of the sightless (a great advantage when we consider the large number of invalid or

nervous blind), and moreover the visiting official is qualified to teach the various type formations which have varied somewhat in recent years as the authorities have striven to shorten the book matter by the introduction of contractions, etc.

If some more economical arrangement could be brought about between the large holders of books in relief and the free library authorities, there is much reason for adopting the practice of loan rather than the setting up of permanent stock for the use of local blind, because where loans are effected from some larger collection the matter thus periodically provided for local borrowers is constantly changed — therefore fresh. A permanent collection on the other hand tends to become dead stock in a few years, and, from a working experience of the two arrangements, the writer is disposed to advise the loan system in preference to the acquisition of permanent stock.

In any case, however, it behoves a local free library committee to make careful investigation of all measures in force locally for the circulation of books in relief before taking any action, otherwise there will be a possible overlapping and unnecessary expenditure. So well is the work of the Home Teaching Societies carried on, so wise is the growing amalgamation of these societies into geographical divisions, that few of the British blind need be without means for acquiring books, and the only question is whether, through the free libraries, the number of books available in any particular district need be extended. To no class of the community can the free library convey a greater boon than to the blind, but it becomes a matter for local circumstances to decide by what means this beneficial work shall be accomplished or assisted.
