

# THE ADMINISTRATION OF INSTITUTIONS FOR THE BLIND IN LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY BRITAIN

John Oliphant

## Abstract

No modern society has ever been so strongly convinced of the power of private charity to remedy every social ill as was Britain's in the Victorian period.

Although the idealization of philanthropy has abated somewhat since the first Thatcher administration's eulogies on 'Victorian values', there is an increasing tendency, particularly in the U.S.A. and Great Britain, to turn to privatization in a search for efficiency, flexibility and lower cost in social administration.

An examination of the organization and functioning of institutional education for the blind in Victorian Britain, until now regarded as one of the most successful examples of private endeavor suggests that the calls for state intervention towards the end of the nineteenth century were a response to a situation where, at administrative level, truth had been suppressed, institutional performance and results clearly did not match the resources made available, complacency reigned, and corruption was not unknown. Furthermore, evidence exists of grave lapses in professional ethics on the part of managerial committees and staff.

The roots of the problems lay in the isolated, parochial approaches to selection and induction at managerial level, a lack of transparency in reporting on achievements, the low educational aspirations of the educators, and a short-sighted concern for immediate profit in the workshop. Widespread resistance to 'interference' from the state delayed reform. More recent failures in privatized ventures indicate that, perhaps, the problem lies in certain misconceptions inherent in the philanthropic approach.

## Keywords

blindness      charity      institutional administration      disability studies

## Introduction

In evaluating from a historical distance the efforts of earlier societies to confront their social problems there is a great temptation to indulge in drawing up moral balance sheets and to apportion blame. That temptation is particularly strong where the objects of study are as unsympathetic as the majority of those concerned in the running of institutions for the blind in Victorian Britain appear to have been.

However, when all historical allowances have been made for the generally prevailing notions of the era, such as the obsession with formal religious instruction and the insistence on self-sufficiency of the individual, here with little allowance for disability, there is enough evidence to suggest that hypocrisy, exploitation and discrimination, apart from the documented cases of sexual abuse and financial misdemeanors found, cast a shadow over what was achieved for the blind before state intervention.

Given the enduring weakness of human nature, corruption is unlikely to disappear from social administration, but the purpose of this short article is to identify points of weakness and failure that lie between the noblest impulses and their execution in the field of social welfare.

### Early Institutions for the Blind; aims and priorities.

Europe's first institute for the education of the blind alone opened as the Liverpool School for the Indigent Blind in 1793.<sup>1</sup> Its aims, priorities, organization, structure and administrative form remained the model for the numerous institutions in Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The Liverpool School was founded by a ship owner, William Rushton, who was so appalled at the consequences of an outbreak of malignant ophthalmia on one of his ships that he provided for the establishment of an institution to benefit the blind in his home city. Predictably he turned to a man of the church to put his scheme into practice, the Rev.H. Danett. In his 'Plan' for the Liverpool School, Danett stated his objective as 'to supply this neglected class of our fellow creatures with such a portion of religious knowledge as may reconcile them to their situation and teach them to be easy and contented'.<sup>2</sup> The school continued to hold religion as its chief aim and in 1819 erected a chapel said to be an exact copy in its dimensions of the Temple of Zeus Pan-Hellinus on the island of Aegina. The school and its

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1 Valentin Haüy's Institute des Jeunes Aveugles in Paris, founded a few years earlier, was for the deaf also.

2 Rev. H.Danett, Plan, Liverpool, Dec.1<sup>st</sup>. 1790. Thomas Bickerton Papers. Liverpool Public Library.

chapel became such a source of pride for the city that, in 1850, when the arrival of the railways forced the school to relocate, the chapel was dismantled stone by stone and re-erected at the new site in Hardman Street. The extraordinary expense involved did not deter the Management Committee who were concerned that it might be replaced by a structure 'unworthy of the town'.<sup>3</sup>

In other British cities, civic pride soon decreed that work for the blind, begun in humble ventures, should be carried out in establishments reflecting the importance of the local community. By 1837, when the Abbé Carton was sent to Britain by the Belgian Ministry of the Interior to report on the education of the blind there, he concluded that 'an inexhaustible philanthropy and lavish subscriptions have permitted of palaces being built for these institutions'.<sup>4</sup> The neo-gothic splendor of the buildings at Edinburgh and Manchester he found particularly striking.

The vision and the priorities of the founders and maintaining donors, whether emphasizing religious virtue or imposing architectural standards, imposed a pattern on the development of blind educational institutions that did not always have the most effective results for the recipients of their charity.

It should be remembered that the development of education for the sighted poor in Britain had similar private and religious origins, so it is not realistic to condemn the fact that the state's response to evidence of the inadequacies of voluntary provision came so late and was initially somewhat feeble. As Norman Gash pointed out, 'No assessment of Victorian social responsibility is complete that does not take into account what was being done by private philanthropy outside the Poor Law'.<sup>5</sup> In the early 1860s, annual expenditure by private charities in London alone was close to £7million, a sum equal to the entire official poor relief expenditure for the whole of England.<sup>6</sup> Where the blind in Britain were concerned, the great acceleration in the founding of private charities in the middle of the century, when 154 charities were begun in the 1850s alone, saw new institutes opening in Exeter, Aberdeen, Birmingham, Plymouth, Cardiff and Leeds. In 1800 there had been four, by 1830, ten and in 1871 there were fifty three in all, augmented by visiting societies and miscellaneous local charities.<sup>7</sup>

Carton had suggested, 'A public institution which is always before the public eye has a power of attraction that the isolated blind man does not always possess. People are proud of having a blind asylum,

3 Wagg, J., *A Chronological Survey of Work for the Blind*. (1930) p.14.

4 Abbé Carton, C., *The Establishments for the Blind in England; a report to the Ministry of the Interior and of Foreign Affairs*. (1838)

5 Gash, N., *Aristocracy and People, Britain 1815-85*. (1979) p. 331.

6 Sampson Low, Jr., *Charities of London*. (1862)

7 Turner, M., and Harris, H., *A guide to the Institutions and Charities for the Blind in the United Kingdom*. (1871 edition)

they look upon it as a national glory, and so they like to contribute to its reputation.<sup>8</sup>

With these splendid edifices and their well clothed inmates in the heart of their cities, communities were further reassured by the fact that many institutes enjoyed the patronage of the local aristocracy. As early as 1806, the Prince of Wales had visited Liverpool's School and offered his patronage.<sup>9</sup> On his accession, Lord Sidmouth wrote to Lords Stanford and Warrington that, 'His Majesty expressed his intention to continue his Illustrious Patronage to that very laudable charity'.<sup>10</sup>

The connection between royalty and the upper classes and charities for the blind strengthened through the 19<sup>th</sup> century and exists to the present. In 1875, Thomas Armitage's British and Foreign Blind Association had Queen Victoria as its Patron and The Duke of Marlborough, the Marquis of Salisbury and three earls among its Vice-Presidents. The role of Britain's elite in furthering improvement in conditions for the blind was somewhat removed and ceremonial in nature until Elizabeth Gilbert persuaded a number of ladies from the nobility and later Queen Victoria to employ blind workers in their households and later, in the 1880s, Hugh Lupus, Duke of Westminster to actively campaign for a Royal Commission to investigate conditions for the blind in Britain. This commission was finally appointed in 1885 and reported in 1889, exposing many disturbing truths about the provisions made for the blind in British society, and making unfavorable comparisons with state-led initiatives abroad, particularly in Saxony.

Thus, for much of the century, managers and administrators of blind educational institutions, shielded by the patronage of the mighty and not threatened by the docility of their charges, were able to foster a sense of complacency in society regarding the functioning of their establishments. Their annual reports, composed internally, went to great lengths to assure the reader that sufficient religious exercises were carried out and that financial management was sound. Carton commented on the frequently compulsory religious singing and at the Glasgow Asylum for the Blind in the 1830s the Superintendent read the Old Testament every morning, the New every afternoon, and oversaw the learning of Psalms by rote.<sup>11</sup> This detailed reporting of the religious activity within dominated the annual reports of the institutions until well into the second half of the century. Subsequently, the Royal Commissioners who toured the land from 1885 to 1889 to report on the condition of the blind observed a slight weakening of the emphasis on religion within the institutions<sup>12</sup> and by 1901, Birmingham had eliminated all reference to religious

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8 Carton, *op. cit.*, p.36.

9 Liverpool School Management Committee, Minutes, September 18<sup>th</sup>, 1806 .

10 Lord Sidmouth to Lords Stanford and Warrington. July 1<sup>st</sup>. 1820. Liverpool School, papers.

11 Alston, J., *The Asylum for the Blind in Glasgow*. (1830) p.37.

12 Report of the Royal Commission on the Blind, Deaf and Dumb and Others of the United Kingdom, 1889, (c.5781) XIVXX.

instruction in its published aims and placed greater stress on the objective that pupils should be able to earn their livelihood 'by honest industry'.<sup>13</sup>

Apart from religion, the institutions wished to convey the impression that they offered the blind training and instruction necessary to their future self-sufficiency.

Given the cardinal importance of this principle in Victorian society, it was not unnatural for them to need to do so. Whether they achieved success is a legitimate question, since the communities certainly provided adequate funds for them to do so, and their annual reports indicate that the workshop soon replaced the chapel as the center of institutional life for the blind.

From the earliest phase, making the blind self-sufficient was stated as an institutional aim since, as Highmore wrote in 1810, '...he who enables a blind person without any excess of labour to earn his own livelihood does more real service to him than if they had pensioned him to a greater amount.'<sup>14</sup>

Carton felt that British institutions had embraced this idea a little too vigorously and that the blind were 'unfortunate creatures' who spent far too much time in the workshop compared to the blind on the continent. He did except the Edinburgh Asylum from this criticism and observed that it struck the best balance he had found between stimulation of the mind and the teaching of trades.<sup>15</sup>

In the early phase of its evolution, the British institute for the blind perhaps most closely resembled the 'industrial school', proposed by Locke in 1697 for pauper children to be taught to read and undertake useful occupation. These schools made a small cash payment to pupils when their earnings exceeded the expenses of their keep. These 'industrial schools' disappeared as the factory system expanded to employ more children, but the example of their financial management remained.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, institutions for the blind faced similar problems to the emerging factories. Resources were limited and running costs were to be kept as low as possible by economies in time, staff pay and general expenses. This led many asylums to so emphasize commercial viability that one historian was led to comment that 'no education in the accepted sense took place within'.<sup>17</sup>

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13 Edgbaston Institute. Annual Report. (1901) pp.16-18.

14 Highmore, A. Charities of London, *Pietas Londoniensis*. (1810)

15 Carton, op.cit., pp.5-9.

16 Miller, P.J., 'Factories, Monitorial Schools and Jeremy Bentham: the Origins of the Management Syndrome in Popular Education' in *Journal of Educational Administration and History*. July 1973.

As time passed the institutions became more firmly established and on a sounder financial footing but profitability remained their uppermost priority. This discrepancy between the aims of profitability of the institution, gained through the labour of its inmates and subscriptions, and the preparation of the blind individual for self sufficiency in later life that perhaps provides the key to any evaluation of the achievements of these establishments. Self criticism being entirely absent from their annual reports, the first doubts to be raised about the quality and effectiveness of their training are to be found elsewhere.

In 1860, the Secretary of the Milton Society For Improving the Social Position of the Blind wrote that there was a 'positive starvation' where the intellectual needs of the blind were concerned, and the successful institutions kept their pupils only six or seven years before 'dispatching them with a slight knowledge of a few very ordinary branches of study and a probably very imperfect skill in the practice of basketwork or mat making, and sometimes a very superficial acquaintance with music'.<sup>18</sup>

A few years later came the first rational criticism of effects of confinement on the blind. Apart from its psychological drawbacks, the author Hyppolite Van Landeghem argued, the financial aspects needed re-examination. Pupils at a London institution, referred to as 'exiles' from society, were found to cost £51 7s 3d a head to educate, while their average earnings were £72 12s 3d. Meanwhile goods sold to the public fetched £815 9s 1d while salaries of staff and officials cost £2148 16s 1d. With such overheads, it was clear that little of the money subscribed reached the blind directly and there were grounds for later arguments by the more militant of the blind community that the institutions existed more for the benefit of their staff than for that of the blind within.<sup>19</sup>

The Liverpool Asylum had also set the example of providing rudimentary instruction in simple trades, such as the making of whips, baskets and sail cloths. Carton had observed the stuffing of horse hair mattresses at Edinburgh, and the Royal Commission Report found that, entering the last decade of the century, one in five blind adults still strove to make a living through basket weaving. Only just over 8% survived through Music or piano-tuning.<sup>20</sup>

A close reading of the accounts contained in the Annual Reports offers a different perspective from the words of the Managerial Committee Reports. At Birmingham, for example, in 1884, over £1800 was received from sales while only £431 was paid in wages to the blind producers of those goods, and £974

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17 Pritchard, D.G, *Education and the Handicapped*. (1963) p.30.

18 Mitchell, A., *The Blind: Their Capabilities, Conditions and Claims. An Essay*. (1860) p.IV.

19 Van Landeghem, H., 'Exile and Home'. *The Advantages of Social Education for the Blind*. (1865) pp.VI - IX.

20 RCBD Report, p.67.

spent on materials and tools.

With a further £2000 from legacies and over £700 taken in fees, the wages paid to the 78 working pupils do not seem generous.<sup>21</sup>

Fragmented evidence of the length of the working day does exist, and it seems that, even by contemporary industrial standards demands made by management on the blind pupil- worker were stiff.

At Edinburgh in the 1830s, Carton noted that the day began in the workshop at 6a.m. while Liverpool advocated eight hours of instruction and employment. There, in 1893, pupils under 16 spent seven hours working in the workshop, two at least at prayer and a further two receiving 'worthwhile instruction'.<sup>22</sup> At Bristol in 1903 the pupils spent an hour in the workshop before breakfast and a further seven and a half there later in the day. The compulsory prayers, 'readings' and evening school left them little time for misadventure.<sup>23</sup>

The lot of the blind seemed hard enough under normal management of the institution, yet some fared worse when abuse went unchecked. It would perhaps be unreasonable to suppose that a century of institutional life would not produce a scandal of one sort or another, but since they have never been alluded to previously in published works on the subject I shall mention them here.

While the aristocracy, and occasionally royalty, lent their names as patrons of the larger institutions, it was the 'sub-aristocracy' of the leaders of the merchant classes who dominated administrative committees. In the summer of 1869 in Liverpool, a local grocer pointed out grave irregularities in the School's accounts, implying corruption or gross mismanagement at least. The city's Radical journal, *Porcupine*, took up the case of 'the cooked accounts'. The issue raised deep class antipathies and for a time stirred the city. Goodacre the grocer was made something of a local hero and *Porcupine* emphasized the discrimination involved, 'Between the position of the manager of a bank, an attorney, a cotton broker and other such exalted personages of the committee and Mr. Goodacre the grocer, the line of demarcation is broad and well defined.'<sup>24</sup> When the committee attempted to cover up the matter as a minor administrative error, *Porcupine* thundered, 'We have never known a case where tyranny and snobbery were so rampant and transparent as in the conduct of that committee.' Eventually, the furore subsided and the committee admitted to 'gross extravagance'.<sup>25</sup>

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21 Edgbaston Institute for the Blind, Annual Report. (1885)

22 Liverpool School, Annual Report (1893) 'Regulations.

23 Bristol Asylum, Annual Report. (1904) p.24.

24 *Porcupine* Vol.II, May 15<sup>th</sup> 1869.

25 *Ibid.* June 19<sup>th</sup>. 1869, p.120.

Similar local agitation against a Management committee of upper middle class management occurred in Edinburgh in 1898, in the face of a 'cover up' of a case involving the pregnancies of several young blind girls in the asylum. There was strong evidence that five male inmates had been coerced into admitting responsibility. A member of the investigating committee resigned in protest at the irregularities in the proceedings of the inquiry and the community was not completely reassured by the management's insistence that no breach of trust had occurred.<sup>26</sup>

But is not by scandal nor its avoidance that the vast work done in the name of voluntaryism for the blind can be judged. Indeed many of the harshest criticisms of the institutions were to come from those who had worked within, as statistics emerged and the conferences on work for the blind, which began in the 1870s, with the Vienna Conference on the Education of the Blind in 1873, brought exchanges of ideas and introduced novelties from abroad.

It was the aforementioned Royal Commission, at work from 1885-1889 that provides the fullest information on the achievements and shortcomings of Britain's institutions for the blind under private administration.

The response of institutions to the prospect of a Royal Commission, with state involvement its probable consequence indicates a division, with some administrators feeling their own interests could be damaged. The Commissioners reported that they had frequently found the view among management committees that state aid would kill philanthropy, 'the goose that laid the golden egg'.<sup>27</sup> The Director of Henshaw's Asylum in Manchester wanted state aid to be optional and for there to be 'no interference with existing institutions which are not to accept state aid'.<sup>28</sup>

This remarkable indifference to an opportunity to open up the institutions to a potentially great source of external funding and expertise suggests that many administrators preferred to retain their sense of power and independence of action regardless of the benefits to their charges. Given the exposure in the Royal Commission Report of so many deficiencies, both quantitative and qualitative, in voluntary provision, a certain self interest seems evident among these pillars of their communities.

For all their worthy dissertations on the 'usefulness' of their training and the hours spent in the workshop, the institutions, according to the Royal Commissioners, produced adults who were neither self sufficient

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26 *Blind Advocate*, Vol.I No.4. Dec.1<sup>st</sup>. 1898. The management responded in *Hora Jocunda* January 1899.

27 RCBD Report, p.13, para.14.

28 Buckle to Hull. Liverpool School, Papers, October 16th. 1889.

nor culturally stimulated. Of the 5848 blind adults interviewed, 4605 continued to need charity in some form and 3282 earned nothing. Only 58% actually practiced the trades they had been taught.<sup>29</sup>

Of all the conclusions that emerged from the Report, probably the facts most disturbing to the complacent management committees of Britain's institutions were those suggesting the superior vision and effectiveness of Saxon practices in blind education.

In the 1830s Samuel Howe, an independent American observer, concluded after an extensive visit to Europe that, 'the education of the blind may be divided into two classes, those established and supported by governments and those which owe their foundation and support to the charitable efforts of individuals: the latter are far more useful than the former.'<sup>30</sup> Sixty odd years of parochial mismanagement ensured, however, that by the time of the Royal Commission, the situation had changed. Observing that they had not seen one blind beggar on their travels in Saxony, the Commissioners pronounced, 'In philanthropy we may rival the Germans but in prudent organization, rational method consistently pursued and persevering determination to secure the desired, we have much to learn.'<sup>31</sup> They noted the quality of training, where far finer skills were imparted than in Britain, and that a considerably more sophisticated system of after-care was in place.

One further criticism of the narrowness of outlook amongst the separate institutional administrations was based on the failure to adopt a single method of type for much of the century. For several decades, five different versions of type were in use, including Lucas, Moon and Frere, and the ensuing waste from duplication in printing and storage held back the development of a wider literacy among the blind.<sup>32</sup>

The Report of the Royal Commission made subsequent state involvement in blind education inevitable. Assumptions on educability and pedagogic practice did not change overnight but at least a system of checks and balances was introduced through the mechanism of grants and inspection once the 1893 Elementary Education (Blind and Deaf Children) Act was finally passed.<sup>33</sup>

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29 RCB, Report, p.66.

30 Dr. S.G. Howe, Address to the Trustees of the New England Institution for the Education of the Blind. (1833) p.8.

31 RCB, Report, p.68.

32 See Rev.H. Blair, 'On a Uniform System of Printing for the Blind' in Transactions of the National Society for the Promotion of Social Science. (1869) pp. 410-418.

33 56-57 Victoria Ch.42 Elementary Education (Blind and Deaf Children Act).

Although the Royal Commission did not single out the administrators of blind institutions for explicit blame, or indeed attach to them particular responsibility for the shortcomings of the system as a whole, there were strident criticisms from 'below'. From its very first issue in 1898, the *Blind Advocate*, organ of the National League for the Blind attacked the commissioners for their reluctance to identify the administrators as the culprits, claiming that 'class bonds between them were too strong'.<sup>34</sup> Opposed to philanthropy in every form, the *Advocate*, quoting Mazzini, denounced charity as 'the crumbs thrown to you by the man who has stolen your loaf'. Direct state aid was its primary objective and the journal, edited by Ben Purse, a blind Manchester piano tuner remains a valuable but little known expression of turn of the century British Radical thought and rhetoric.

Considerable research has been done on the history of blind education since D.G. Pritchard, in 1963, described it as a relatively unknown field of social endeavour.

Certainly, there is now sufficient evidence to suggest that the later nineteenth century should not be regarded as an unblemished golden period where a Christian society, fiercely independent from the state, successfully resolved a newly defined social problem by individual and local means. Philanthropy clearly carries its own dangers, particularly where powerful individuals and class interests assume a right to dictate terms of engagement while external checks on ethics are discouraged or deemed unnecessary, thus endangering the concept of accountability.

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<sup>34</sup> *Blind Advocate*, December 1<sup>st</sup>. 1898.