

The Value of a Flawed Source: The Register of the Missions to Outdoor Blind for Edinburgh, the Borders and the Lothians, c.1903–10

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Missions to Outdoor Blind were established in Scotland from 1857, the first such Mission serving Edinburgh, the Scottish Borders and the Lothians. While the Edinburgh society produced detailed annual reports, which contain some anecdotal information about the people with sight loss that it aspired to serve, it appears that no concerted effort to maintain a proper Register occurred until the early 1900s. That ledger ultimately held more than 1,100 entries, but its compilation was haphazard and incomplete. However, the Register nonetheless proved to be a valuable resource, one which formed the core to a fifteen-month RNIB Scotland project, which has enabled the reconstruction of life experiences of people with sight loss 100 years ago. This article explains not only the challenges presented by the incomplete nature of the Register, but discusses the special value of a resource that gives insight to the lives of blind people who were largely outwith the influence of blind asylums, schools and workshops in the conduct of much of their daily lives.¹

Catriona Burness, senior research officer for RNIB Scotland, tells the story of how, when appointed in 2012, one of the first tasks allotted to her was clearing the desk of Jimmy Cook (1928–2012), following his very recent and unforeseen death.² A former Chair of the organisation, Jimmy had been a collector of various memorabilia relating to blind history. Hidden among the treasures that he had accumulated for his personal interest was a haphazard register of people with sight loss who had lived in and around Edinburgh from approximately 1903 to 1910.³ A few months later, RNIB Scotland asked me to evaluate their various documentary artefacts relating to blind history in the south-east of Scotland dating from the foundation of the ‘The Edinburgh

¹ The author wishes to express thanks to the research and archive volunteers who assisted with this project, to Catriona Burness and colleagues at RNIB Scotland, to the National Records of Scotland, to Lothian Health Services Archive, and to the other repositories where staff provided facilities and support. He also wishes to thank the two anonymous referees for their thoughtful comments.

² ‘Obituary: Jimmy Cook, Labour councillor, trade unionist and community activist’, *The Scotsman*, 12 September 2012.

³ C. Burness, ‘Foreword’, in I. Hutchison, *Hearing Our History* (Edinburgh, 2015), xi.

Society for Promoting Reading amongst the Blind on Moon's System' in 1857. These documents consisted of various printed sources, notably the society's annual reports. While these items contain a wealth of information and data, the handwritten Register of people with sight loss living in the south-east of Scotland during the Edwardian era was seen, despite its many incomplete entries, as being a valuable resource that might enable light to be thrown upon individual blind people who were beyond the institutional framework of the Edinburgh Blind Asylum, its workshops in Nicolson Street, and its school at West Craigmillar.

When the society was first formed, its mission was firmly focused on teaching blind people, living in the community, to read tactile print. In the decades that followed, its objectives gradually expanded beyond this initial *raison d'être*. By the dawn of the twentieth century, the society aimed:

To seek out the Blind in [the counties of Edinburgh, Linlithgow, Haddington, Peebles, Selkirk, Roxburgh, and Berwick], to visit them in their own homes, to teach them to read with the finger, and to supply them with books from the Society's Library, 20 St James' Square, free of charge; to aid the poor amongst them as far as our Benevolent Funds permit, and in every way possible to seek the advancement of their spiritual and temporal welfare.⁴

So, by the period covered by the Register, the society also assumed a modest welfare role, one that expanded in 1907 when a substantial legacy, bequeathed by brother and sister Alexander and Elizabeth Jamieson, enabled the launch of a scheme of pensions for blind people who were in particular distress.

My report on the sources, which were subsequently deposited with the Lothian Health Services Archive (LHSA) at the University of Edinburgh, identified the Register as a unique document. RNIB Scotland successfully submitted a funding bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund. After a tender process, I was appointed as the project historian for the 'Seeing Our History' investigation, on which research volunteers, some with sight loss, traced individual lives at the National Records of Scotland (NRS), while archive volunteers at the LHSA transcribed the handwritten Register. Additional research through other repositories shed further light upon some of the individuals whose lives were traced, selected solely on the richness of archival records to allow reconstruction of their life stories. Outcomes included a book, entitled *Feeling Our History*. This explored themes on outdoor blind lives with ten biographical explorations from case studies investigated. A series of podcasts were then scripted for broadcast on the RNIB's Insight Radio (now Connect Radio). They were given increased longevity on the station's website, and by a further publication, *Hearing Our History*, which showcased the podcast

⁴ LHSA, GD52/1/1/3 The Edinburgh Society for Promoting Reading amongst the Outdoor Blind (ESPROB), Forty-fifth Annual Report, 1904, 1.

transcripts.⁵ Both publications were produced in several formats in an effort to ensure maximum accessibility, these including large print, braille, e-book and audio.

The Register of Outdoor Blind follows a pattern that will be familiar to researchers whose work involves admission registers for hospitals, asylums, and various other institutions and organisations. On the whole, such institutional registers were meticulously written up and maintained, but this could not be claimed of the Register of Outdoor Blind. The pages of the Register show that it was purpose-printed for standardised usage by missions to the outdoor blind by a stationery supplier, and it followed a pattern that had already become well established and in wide use in Victorian Scotland (Plate 1).

The front instructional page of the Register gave quite explicit guidance on how the manuscript pages that followed should be completed. Left-hand preprinted pages were to be headed up 'Male' and right-hand pages were designated 'Female'. So it was suggested that, in numbering entries, 'the numbers will run parallel on each page – i.e. they will both begin at number one'.⁶ Such a system may have worked for the Edinburgh society's missionaries if, from the outset, they had adopted a running sequence of blind people as they came to their attention. However, their decision to allocate separate pages to different localities made such a system impracticable.

Each page consists of columns beginning with one for the allocation of the intended unique number for each entry, and then with additional columns for name, address, place of birth, age when sight was lost and 'at present', cause of blindness, reading ability 'before losing sight' and 'from raised type', religious denomination, how employed and weekly earnings 'before losing sight' and 'at present', weekly alment 'parochial', i.e. under Poor Law provisions, and from 'other sources', date of discovery, date of removal or death, and finally, a 'remarks' column.⁷ What is missing is a column recording when cases were first logged with the society. This presented volunteer researchers with initial challenges in dating their subjects.

Abbreviations were suggested to the missionaries for indicating the circumstances of each case of sight loss: *Cat.* – cataract, *Inf.* – inflammation, *Am.* – amaurosis, *Acc.* – accident, *Fev.* – fever, *S. P.* – Small Pox, *Meas.* – measles, *Watr.* – water in the head, *Sep.* – separation of retina.⁸ This guidance illustrates some common causes of sight loss at the beginning of the twentieth century, but in practical terms it was guidance to which the missionaries did not adhere. Sometimes they made such entries in full, while in other instances they adopted abbreviations of their own, meanings of which were not always obvious. Indeed, it would appear that some instances of the recommended

⁵ I. Hutchison, *Feeling Our History* (Edinburgh, 2015); Insight Radio – http://www.insightradio.co.uk/seeingourhistory#.WjL8ytJL_cs; Hutchison, *Hearing Our History*.

⁶ LHSA, GD52/9 'Register of the Outdoor Blind' (The Register), 1.

⁷ LHSA, GD52/9 The Register.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

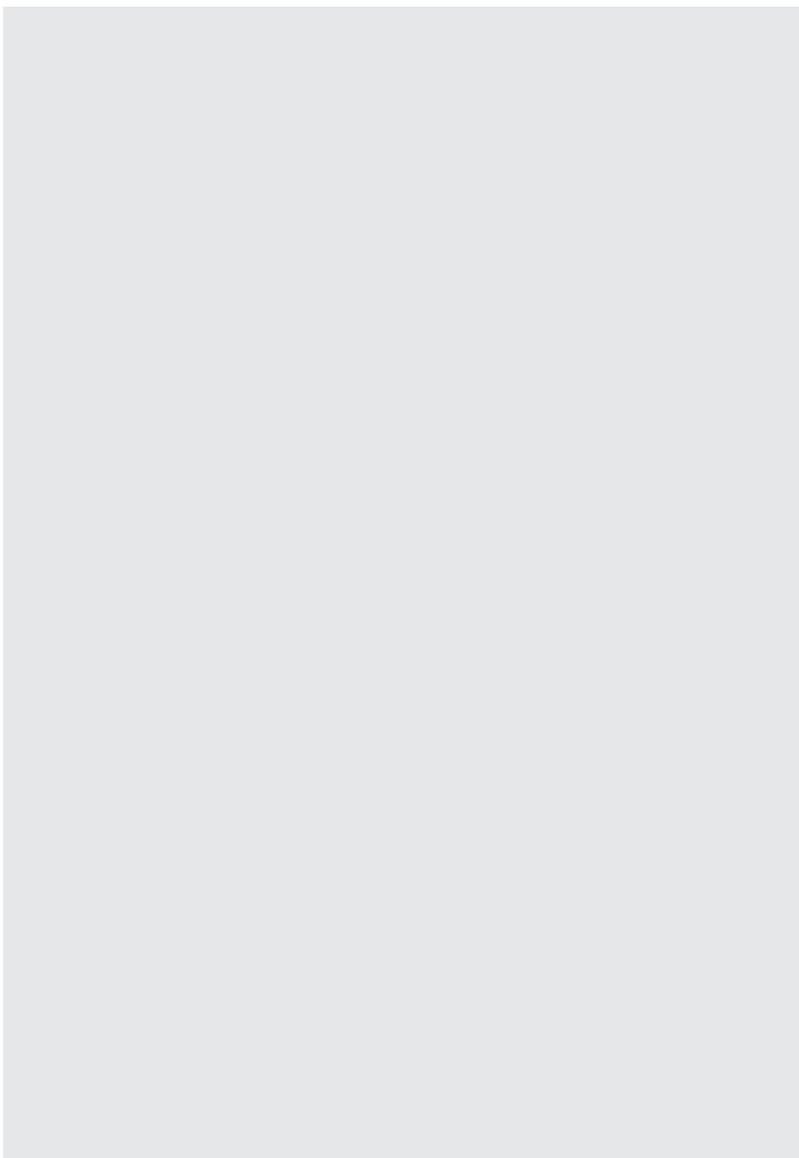


Plate 1 Page from Register of the Outdoor Blind, LHASA GD52/1/1/3.

abbreviation *In.* were used, not to indicate inflammation, but to suggest loss of sight from infancy.

Two options were proposed for entry against the ‘Religious Denomination’ column, namely *P* – Protestant, or *R* – Roman Catholic. Even in an erratically compiled Register such as this, in a denomination-sensitive society such as Edwardian Scotland, this was not always specific enough for some individuals. So while there are entries such as ‘Pro’ and ‘RC’ in abundance, other entries to be found include ‘Epis’ (Episcopalian), ‘EC’ (Established Church, i.e. Church of Scotland), ‘UF’ (United Free Church of Scotland), ‘FC’ (Free Church of Scotland), ‘PB’ (Plymouth Brethren), and ‘Meetings’. These variable religious designations combined both specificity and ambiguity, while the society, despite its founding aim of ‘plac[ing] in the hands of the poor Blind ... the Word of God’,⁹ instructed its missionaries, through its Rules, that ‘Proselytism from one Church to another [is] not allowed’.¹⁰

Guidance was also given for the completion of columns on marital status (‘conjugal condition’ is the term used), place of birth, and whether employed, unemployed (but able-bodied), or ‘infirm’ (and therefore unemployable). Questions on reading ability are of particular interest given that the society’s self-designated role was ‘Promoting Reading amongst the Blind’. The simple instruction to the missionaries was that, ‘In the columns for Reading, both before and after losing sight, it may be more convenient to use the terms *Yes* and *No* as the case may be.’¹¹ As was becoming apparent, the missionaries needed little encouragement to engage in brevity, although in addition to the recommended ‘yes’ and ‘no’, to be entered in two columns headed ‘able to read before losing sight’ and ‘able to read from raised type’, they chose to employ a third designation, ‘GL’. This meant ‘Getting Lessons’, but no indication of progress and ability was recorded. Therefore, people being accorded some skill in reading raised type might be highly experienced and with a high degree of aptitude, or might at best be able to laboriously decipher little more than the characters of the alphabet. Moreover, no indication is given as to whether individual people’s reading skills were in Moon or braille, both of which were taught and endorsed by the society by the early twentieth century, or if indeed familiarity might be with another form of raised type, such as Alston which had played a role in Glasgow from the 1840s.¹² At the

⁹ LHSA, GD52/1/1/1 ESPROB, First Annual Report, 1858, 15–16.

¹⁰ LHSA, GD52/1/1/2 ESPROB, Thirty-ninth Annual Report, 1898, 15.

¹¹ LHSA, GD52/9 The Register, 1.

¹² James Gall introduced simplified tactile letters in Edinburgh in the late 1820s, followed by a system by Mile and McBain of the Edinburgh Blind Asylum, c.1832. Alston of the Glasgow Blind Asylum developed another style in 1837, but by 1880 it had only a small following in Glasgow while Moon was the firm favourite nationwide, being developed by William Moon of Brighton in the 1840s. See R. Meldrum, *Light on Dark Paths: A Handbook for the Parents of Blind Children, the Missionary Teacher, the District Visitor, and all who seek in any way to be ‘eyes to the blind’* (Glasgow, 1883), 16–20. Scotland’s second mission to

close of the Register's active use, 141 people (72 females and 69 males) were credited with being able to read raised type and another 43 people (18 females and 25 males) were recorded as receiving lessons.¹³

Arbitrary allocation of pages to localities included both specified areas of the capital and broad landward catchments in the Border counties and Lothians. Pages of the Register of the Edinburgh society were also allocated to what the missionaries chose to call the 'Migratory Class' of blind people. Within the geographical parameters, as previously described, left-hand pages recorded Males and right-hand pages recorded Females. On the first three pages of the Register – for Greenside, an area of tightly packed high-rise tenements behind where the Playhouse theatre stands today, and for 'North Side', a vague descriptor for an area that included much of Edinburgh's 'new town' – an attempt was made to give each entry a number, but this was quickly abandoned. Because the Register was organised by locality, it would very soon have been apparent to its compiler that, with the progressive addition of new names under the various localities, it was impossible to efficiently enumerate individuals using a simple progressive numbering sequence.

It might be expected that the name column would provide a succinct starting point from which the research could move forward. However, the project research volunteers were challenged in a number of ways. For example, females' forenames were frequently omitted, especially for married women who were simply entered as, for example, 'Mrs Murray' (the first female Register entry). Efforts to trace the life of 'Miss Sanderson', resident in Joppa Road, Portobello, were thwarted when it was found that two elderly spinster sisters, Jane and Mary, lived together and the 1901 census return did not identify either sister as having sight loss.¹⁴ There was the occasional individual who was identified by a vague entry such as 'woman'.¹⁵ Addresses were given for most entries and alterations indicating changes of address were of additional help to the research volunteers in tracing members of an often mobile population. Beyond the address column in the Register, its compilers became much more erratic in recording information.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the day-to-day activities of the society were dominated by three figures, John Brown, Charles Ness and Christopher Cairns. Brown was the society's first teacher and missionary. He had been in post since 1857 and it was his task to visit people with sight

the outdoor blind, the Society for Promoting Reading among the Blind was set up in Glasgow in 1859, and in 1861 was renamed as The Glasgow Mission to the Outdoor Blind; it favoured the Moon system. See H. Dunbar, *History of the Society for the Blind in Glasgow and the West of Scotland, 1859–1989* (Glasgow, 1989), 9, 21.

¹³ LHSa, GD52/9 The Register.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 39; NRS, 1901 Census, Portobello, 9.

¹⁵ Examples of such vague register entries include, 'Wilson boy', Greenside, 2; 'woman', Dalkeith, 43; 'two sisters', Eskbank, 43; 'woman', Colinton, 45; 'Irish woman', Dalmeny, 45; 'woman', Hawick Poorhouse, 57; 'Miss G', Leith Walk, 93.

loss throughout the society's catchment area to offer tuition in the reading of tactile print. For most of his career, this instruction was exclusively in the Moon System, a system developed by William Moon (1818–94) of Brighton, and it was only in the late 1890s that braille, developed by Louis Braille (1809–52), was also slowly accommodated by the society.¹⁶ Brown was firmly dedicated to Moon, although, in 1898, he conceded the merits of braille: 'For the education of the young, [braille] is the best yet invented, and it is enjoyed by those adults yet able to master it.'¹⁷ Ultimately, he considered it to be a young person's art and difficult to master by those people who lost their sight in adulthood and who found the dots of braille difficult to interpret by a time in life when fingers had lost some of their sensitivity.¹⁸ In 1898, because of poor health, Brown retired from teaching, although he remained the society's superintendent until his death four years later on 11 February 1903.¹⁹ He was succeeded as senior teacher-missionary by Charles Ness, who had been assisting Brown since 1879, while Christopher Cairns, appointed in 1886, also continued in post.²⁰

It is perhaps inconceivable that the society had been in operation for almost half a decade without maintaining any formal record of the blind people to whom it pursued outreach. Certainly, across the ten societies that covered Scotland by the beginning of the twentieth century, there was concern about inadequacies in the maintenance of 'a common register or roll book' by each society. At this point, the issue therefore appears to have been two-pronged, namely the general principle of all societies maintaining adequate records of outdoor blind people in their respective areas had to be addressed, but a system should also be set in place that used a standardised format across all societies, no doubt in order that comparable national statistics could be periodically produced. Consequently, it was agreed at the June 1906 Scottish Out-door Blind Teachers' Union Conference, held in Paisley, that all societies should 'be provided with a roll book similar to those used in Glasgow'.²¹

¹⁶ The Fortieth Annual Report, 1899, shows the words 'Braille System also taught' added in parenthesis to the Society's already wordy title.

¹⁷ LHASA, GD52/1/1/2 ESPROB, Thirty-ninth Annual Report, 1898, 4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ LHASA, GD52/1/1/3 ESPROB, Fortieth Annual Report, 1899, 2; GD52/1/1/3 Forty-fifth Annual Report, 1904, 2.

²⁰ LHASA, GD52/1/1/1 ESPROB, Twenty-first Annual Report, 1880, 1; GD52/1/1/1 Twenty-eighth Annual Report, 1887, 2.

²¹ LHASA, GD52/1/5/1 Minutes of the Out-door Blind Teachers' Union 1882–1913, 6 June 1906. When the Union held its first annual meeting in 1882, there were nine outdoor blind missionary societies and their work was claimed to cover the breadth of Scotland. These societies represented Aberdeen Town & County, City & County of Perth, Dumfries & c., Dundee, Edinburgh, Fife & Kinross, Forfarshire, Glasgow & West of Scotland, and Stirling, Clackmannanshire & Linlithgowshire: Meldrum, *Light on Dark*

While this decision might seem to pinpoint the rationale that brought about the compilation of the Edinburgh society's Register, the process nonetheless remains problematic. There was no system adopted in the Edinburgh Register to indicate when entries were made, but its compilation appears to have begun, not in 1906, but in 1903. The origination of the Edinburgh Register apparently preceded the decision to adopt a nationwide system – or was backdated. Maintenance of the Register for the approximately eight years during which it was used was undertaken by two people. The initial entries were written in a rather spidery style, not particularly clear to read but on the whole decipherable. If the dating is accurate, its authorship could not have been John Brown because he died at the beginning of that year. Could the job have been delegated to Christopher Cairns as the junior partner in the remaining team? What we do know is that the later entries were made by the senior missionary, Charles Ness. Ness had a very neat style of writing, but with certain unique swirls and flourishes that caused the volunteer transcribers some challenges and resulted in some inaccuracies – which unfortunately impacted on the volunteer researchers' abilities to follow up cases that had been wrongly interpreted in transcription. Ness served as the secretary of the Scottish Outdoor Blind Teachers' Union from 1894 and it was the Union's minute books, from that year written and signed by Ness, which reveal the role that he had played as the second compiler of the Register.²² The circumstances of the transfer of the duty of maintaining the Register are not revealed, but Ness took on a significant rewriting of the Register during his tenure, yet without deleting original entries that he now chose to re-enter afresh. The result was the duplication of many entries, but without any attempt at cross-referencing. The large-scale duplication only became apparent once the 'Seeing Our History' project was well under way and research volunteers discovered instances where two of them were researching the same individual, but from different Register entries.

The incomplete compilation, and its frequent repetitions of entries, do not make the Register suitable for meaningful quantitative analysis. Nonetheless, some trends can be gleaned from the document. For example, when the register fell into disuse in 1910, it contained 988 'current' entries, plus a further 181 deletions as a consequence of death or removal. The geographic and gender divisions were as follows:

Paths, 58–79, 150. The areas covered by societies changed periodically; Brown of the Edinburgh society travelled widely, including voyages to Shetland.

²² LHSA, GD52/1/5/1 Minutes of the Out-door Blind Teachers' Union 1882–1913, 9 June 1894. However, Ness had been 'Clerk of Conference' to the Union for its annual meetings from at least 1887: GD52/1/5/1 'Proceedings at the Sixth Annual Conference of the Scottish Out-door Blind Teachers' Union', 23–4.

THE REGISTER OF THE MISSIONS TO OUTDOOR BLIND

	Females	Males	Total
Edinburgh	301	262	563
Leith	41	40	81
Midlothian	32	34	66
West Lothian	11	19	30
East Lothian	35	47	82
Peeblesshire	12	3	15
Selkirkshire	24	15	39
Roxburghshire	32	21	53
Berwickshire	26	17	43
Berwick-upon-Tweed	7	9	16
Total	521	467	988

As the focus of the society was people beyond the reach of the blind asylum and school, there were only a couple of instances of children recorded, these being outwith the age range of the blind school role. Only around 20 per cent of entries were what might be considered complete, and where ‘age now’ was entered there was sometimes a year entered, but for the remainder ‘now’ could have been anywhere between 1903 and 1910. This data nonetheless suggests a fairly even age spread:

	Female	Male	Total
Up to 25	13	12	25
26–35	11	24	35
36–45	18	20	38
46–55	11	35	46
56–65	23	25	48
66–75	19	30	49
76 and over	12	13	25
Total	107	159	266

The causes of sight loss were noted for 252 entries and these display substantial diversity. However, the greatest causes were accident (61), cataract (37), inflammation (29), optic nerve (29), and consumption (16). Most causes are fairly evenly spread between men and women, but two major causes are an

exception: of the 61 people having sight loss due to an accident, 55 were male, while of the 16 cases attributed to consumption, 14 were women. Religious affiliation was noted in 315 instances, 266 of these under the broad category of Protestant, followed by 27 Roman Catholic, and 8 Episcopalian.²³

Although there were in excess of 1,100 entries in the Register, duplicate entries meant that there were perhaps less than 700 distinct individuals. While this was still a considerable sum of people to be recorded over an eight-year period, there were a significant number for whom the detail was so scant that they were difficult, if not impossible, to research. It therefore quickly became apparent that an investigation into the lives of outdoor blind people in the south-east of Scotland should be a qualitative one that pursued individuals who had left a clear footprint on census records and Birth, Death and Marriage registrations, rather than a quantitative one that would try to identify all outdoor blind between 1903 and 1910. What this strategy quickly demonstrated was that there was no typical blind person on the Register. Every life experience was unique and experiences through an individual's life course could demonstrate significant diversity.

Ten cases studies were developed in detail for showcasing as project outcomes – although the scope to develop additional detailed vignettes of peoples' lives as outdoor blind is considerable. Indeed, an invitation to address Deaf History Scotland prompted the idea of seeking out deaf-blind lives, several being found linked to the Edinburgh Blind Asylum, but also one case on the Outdoor Blind Register. Cases examined for 'Seeing Our History' included Lizzie, a victim of circumstance; Georgina, the mattress-maker; Bella, the rebel piano teacher; Mary, the portrait artist's daughter; John, good boy turned bad; William, the horseman; Thomas, the goldsmith; and Nelly, the household manager.

The first two cases listed might be judged to have had tragic outcomes. However, people with impairments, in these cases sight loss, should not be viewed as 'victims' of a disability – although they may have faced times when they were victims of society that could be short on understanding and empathy. Lizzie Hoseason (1873–1914)²⁴ entered Edinburgh's blind school on 1 October 1889, where it was noted that 'she became blind [when] she was 15 years old', on the recommendation of the parochial board of St Cuthbert.²⁵ This gave her only one year from which to benefit from the blind school's tuition, notably in reading tactile print. In 1898, Lizzie was described as a domestic servant when she gave birth to a daughter, Sophia.²⁶ Lizzie's mother had died only four weeks earlier, and Sophia was born in Craiglockhart Poorhouse.²⁷ Ten years later, Lizzie was admitted to Bangour Village Asylum and she died there in

²³ LHSA, GD52/9 The Register.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 21, 85.

²⁵ Records of Edinburgh Blind Asylum and School (REBAS), Register of Admissions 1793–1963, 21, No. 847.

²⁶ NRS, Register of Births (RoB), Parish of Colinton, 9 November 1898.

²⁷ NRS, Register of Deaths (RoD), District of Newington, 12 October 1898.

1914 where she had been described as depressed, debilitated, and experiencing religious delusions.²⁸ Her daughter, Sophia, had been boarded out since she was ten years old, the composition of boarding arrangements suggesting that networks were at play among members of Edinburgh's blind community.²⁹ Lizzie was one of only two cases for whom we have photographs. Bangour Village did not record Lizzie as blind, but her photograph suggests, through the opaque appearance of her eyes, that she certainly had impaired sight. But that may have been the least of her troubles by this period of her life.

Georgina McDonald (1871–1914)³⁰ also ended her days in a mental institution, Murthly Asylum, the parochial asylum for Perthshire. Georgina's parents, William McDonald and Marion Kirk both had sight loss and they met in Edinburgh's blind asylum workshops. Their blossoming romance resulted in Marion's pregnancy and the affronted directors dismissed William and Marion from the patronage of the institution.³¹ However, they married and had a long and stable relationship, Georgina being their third child.³² Georgina's parents died in 1896 and 1899.³³ Georgina had first been recorded as blind when she was thirteen.³⁴ By the 1900s, she was not only living independently, working as a mattress-maker for the blind asylum workshops, but she was also supporting her older sister, Helen, and Helen's five children.³⁵ However, by 1919 Georgina was experiencing her first of several mental asylum admissions, initially prompted by apparent harassment from intolerant neighbours.³⁶ It is interesting that, although she had lived all her life in Edinburgh, Georgina was not accorded residence by the city's inspectors of poor, and she was cast upon the parish of her deceased father, Murthly in Perthshire.³⁷ When she entered Murthly Asylum, the Scone inspector of poor did not consider her to be mentally disturbed, although her mental well-being did appear to decline during the next six years as she alternated between mental institutions,

²⁸ LHSA, LHB44/29/1 Bangour Village, Female Casenotes, No. 1387; LHB44/11/2 Register of Lunatics, No. 2; LHB44/21/1 Register of Deaths.

²⁹ NRS, 1911 Census, Edinburgh St Leonards. Sophia was boarding in a household of ten in which another boarder, and the head of the household, were listed as 'totally blind'.

³⁰ LHSA, GD52/9 The Register, 21, 85.

³¹ REBAS, Minute Book 5, 10 April 1854, 94–5.

³² NRS, RoB, District of Canongate, 3 October 1871; 1871 Census, Edinburgh Old Church.

³³ NRS, RoD, William McDonald, District of Newington, 18 September 1896; Marion McDonald, District of Newington, 28 April 1899.

³⁴ NRS, 1901 Census, Edinburgh St Leonards – enumerator's remark.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ LHSA, LHB7/51/104 Royal Edinburgh Asylum (REA), Casenotes, 22 September 1919, 785.

³⁷ LHSA, LHB7/51/104 REA, Casenotes, 9 October 1919; LHB7/40/5 REA, Discharge Register; Dundee University Archives (DUA), THB30/3/1/67 Murthly Asylum; Perth and Kinross Archive (PKA), Scone Parochial Board minutes, 19 September 1919.

boarding out and unsuccessful attempts at independent living.³⁸ She died in Murthly Asylum in 1925 of pulmonary tuberculosis.³⁹ It was a sad demise for a blind woman who at one point had been totally independent while also taking on wider family responsibilities of support. The records for Georgina threw up several irregularities, such as uncertainty over when she lost her sight compounded by varying definitions of blindness and vast disparities in her parents' ages in census returns. It seems that, in reality, her mother and father were both unaware of their own ages with any certainty and this was only clarified by the tracing of baptismal records.⁴⁰ The cases of Lizzie Hoseason and Georgina McDonald highlight how sight impairment need not be an impediment to independent living, but how external factors might aggravate sight loss to the detriment of mental well-being.

Organisations set up to aid blind people, benevolent as they may have been in their intentions, had their own agendas and they expected the full submission of those they reached out to. They laid down rules and they expected these to be adhered to. Historian Olive Checkland has argued that Victorian philanthropy had a range of aims, including social and economic, and in addition to supporting poverty and disadvantage, was often designed to enhance the self-perception of donors and collectors through their acts of giving.⁴¹ Outdoor blind societies might be seen as fulfilling what Checkland calls 'the pietistic urge' of their promoters and their salaried missionaries.⁴² Gilbert Macculloch, superintendent of Edinburgh's blind school, gave a sense of these expectations when he wrote that some of their number who considered themselves to be 'down-trodden', 'assume[d] a position – in thought and feeling, at least – antagonistic to those who would be, and probably are, their very best friends'.⁴³ Yet it may be argued that such individuals merely wished to exert some agency, to have some control over their own lives.⁴⁴ One of our cases who did just this, with success, was Isabella Wood (1868–1964).⁴⁵ Bella entered the blind school at the age of eight.⁴⁶ She lost her sight through cataract when

³⁸ PKA, Scone Parochial Board Minutes, 14 October 1919.

³⁹ NRS, RoD, Parish of Little Dunkeld, 10 November 1925.

⁴⁰ NRS, Old Parish Records (OPR), Scone, William McDonald, b. 9 November 1826; OPR, Tranent, Marion Kirk, b. 12 September 1828.

⁴¹ O. Checkland, *Philanthropy in Victorian Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1980), 5.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 30.

⁴³ G. Macculloch, *Story of a Blind Mute* (Edinburgh, 1881), 54.

⁴⁴ This was certainly true when it came to development of intimate relationships and prevailed beyond the post-Second World War period. See Fred Reid's novella, which he describes as a 'fictional history', but is inspired by his 'own experience of love and learning in a residential special school for the Blind': http://www.fredreid.co.uk/talking_book.htm.

⁴⁵ LHSA, GD52/9 The Register, 49, 111.

⁴⁶ REBAS, Register of Admissions (RoA), No. 633, 11 October 1876.

aged two.⁴⁷ She appears to have flourished throughout her schooling and, upon completing her education, was retained as a pupil-teacher. However, at the age of 21 she was dismissed because of ‘disobedience to the orders of the Headmaster and the Lady Superintendent’.⁴⁸ Other cases of dismissal, notably from the Nicolson Street workshops, show that lost patronage in the provision of employment could be cataclysmic to economic survival.⁴⁹ However, Bella, it seems, was an independent woman who set herself up as a piano teacher and appears to have thrived in freelance employment for the remainder of her working life.⁵⁰ At the age of 67, she sought admission to the Royal Blind Asylum’s Thomas Burns Home for Blind Women where she lived until the grand age of 95.⁵¹

Another apparently strong woman, Mary Howie (1882–1964)⁵² died in the same year as Bella Wood.⁵³ When Mary’s mother, the daughter of a hay carter, married Lindsay Howie, from a prominent Edinburgh family of portrait artists and photographers, it no doubt appeared that she was moving up in the world.⁵⁴ However, by the time Mary was eight, her mother was a widow and had returned to her own kin for support in raising her children.⁵⁵ Mary, blind from infancy, first appeared on the Register for Outdoor Blind in 1905 when she was 23 years old.⁵⁶ At that time she was living in a tenement at 16 Lochrin Place along with her widowed mother, widowed grandmother, and younger brothers.⁵⁷ By her later years, Mary continued to live at 16 Lochrin Place, alone and independent, albeit probably within a world of relatively compact boundaries that delineated a living environment that provided all of her needs.⁵⁸

In flagging up male case studies from Edwardian Edinburgh, there are again mixed experiences. Many people on the Register encountered

⁴⁷ Ibid.; NRS, 1871 Census, Parish of Penicuik.

⁴⁸ REBAS, Minute Book No. 9, 8 December 1890, 442 and 22 December 1890, 447–8.

⁴⁹ For example, see two instances relating to Thomas Manderson, REBAS, Minute Book No. 4, 10 August 1846, 370 and Minute Book No. 7, 9 April 1867, 20, which are discussed in I. Hutchison, *A History of Disability in Nineteenth-Century Scotland* (Lewiston, 2007), 210, 312–13.

⁵⁰ NRS, 1891, 1901 and 1911 Censuses, Parish of Penicuik.

⁵¹ REBAS, Minute Book 2, 16 February, 95, and 6 April 1936, 7122; Minute Book 1964/5, 5 November 1964, 2013; NRS, RoD, District of Newington, 4 September 1964.

⁵² LHSA, GD52/9 The Register, 11, 73.

⁵³ NRS, RoD, District of Morningside, 26 February 1964.

⁵⁴ NRS, Register of Marriages (RoM), District of St Giles, 1 October 1880.

⁵⁵ NRS, RoD, District of Newington, George-Frederick Lindsay Howie, 23 October 1890; 1891 Census, Parish of St Cuthbert; LHSA, REA, General Register of Patients 1888–93, 105.

⁵⁶ LHSA, GD52/9 The Register, 49, 111.

⁵⁷ NRS, 1911 Census, Parish of St Cuthbert.

⁵⁸ NRS, RoD, District of Newington, 4 September 1964.

sight loss late in life from the likes of degenerative eye conditions. Thomas Smellie (1831–1904)⁵⁹ had variously worked as a jeweller journeyman and a goldsmith.⁶⁰ His occupation, carried on through five decades, would have been demanding of the eyes. Thomas, who always seems to have been an employee rather than an independent craftsman, was 70 years of age when his sight failed, causing him to lament that he was ‘not able [to work]’.⁶¹ He could not survive without employment and had to seek charitable aid, which he eventually secured by way of a pension from the ancient Trinity Hospital Committee.⁶² It is probable that it was this committee that directed him to the Society for Outdoor Blind who placed him on the Register in February 1904. The society recorded that he could read raised type.⁶³ Perhaps his trade had given him a sensitive touch that made him a fast learner. However, it was all to no avail as he died later that year, a skilled man whose loss of sight had thrust on him the need for charity.⁶⁴ Had he lived just a little longer, he may have been one of the first recipients of the initial old-age state pensions.

William Finlay (1845–1906)⁶⁵ died not long after Smellie. He lost his sight in the prime of life, doing the job he loved, working with horses (Plate 2). It was a freak accident, a kick to the head from one of his horses that resulted in injuries which led to the gradual loss of his sight. As a consequence, he could no longer undertake his job as a farm manager and he felt obliged to move from Currie, Midlothian, to urban Leith and Edinburgh where he undertook comparatively menial jobs until his sight totally deserted him. He had been widowed by this time and it fell upon his two daughters to care for him, a dependence which was very frustrating to him. In addition to the archival sources in the NRS, our team was fortunate that a broadcast about the ‘Seeing Our History’ project was picked up by Sheena Irving, his great-great-granddaughter, who not only had written testimony recorded by Annie Turnbull, one of Finlay’s daughters, but was able to provide a photograph of the man himself, posed with one of his prize horses.⁶⁶ In this image he was

⁵⁹ LHSA, GD52/9 The Register, 10.

⁶⁰ NRS, 1871, 1881, 1891 and 1901 Censuses, Parish of St Cuthbert; Edinburgh City Archives (ECA), SL152/1/17 Trinity Hospital Minute Book No. 17, 23 September 1902, 411.

⁶¹ LHSA, GD52/9 The Register, 10.

⁶² ECA, SL152/1/17 Trinity Hospital Minute Book No. 17, 23 September 1902, 411. Smellie was granted a Trinity pension on the ‘lower scale’ of £15 per annum; On 29 February 1914, his pension was increased by his reclassification to the ‘higher scale’ (SL152/1/18 Trinity Minute Book No. 18, 1903–10, 19).

⁶³ LHSA, GD52/9 The Register, 10.

⁶⁴ NRS, RoD, District of Morningside, 15 October 1904.

⁶⁵ LHSA, GD52/9 The Register, 24.

⁶⁶ NRS, RoD, Mary Finlay, District of St George, Edinburgh, 12 February 1888; 1891 and 1901 Censuses, Parish of St Cuthbert. Testimony from Annie Turnbull (née Finlay) (1876–1954), 11 September 1938, courtesy of Sheena Irving.



Plate 2 Image of William Finlay. Courtesy of Sheena Irving.

in his prime, and it provides a stark contrast with that of Lizzie Hoseason, taken near the end of life, frail, her head steadied for the camera by one of the attendants at Bangour Village Hospital. William Finlay was not institutionalised following his sight loss, but his independence was insufficient to compensate for the reliance that he felt upon his girls. He loved to read, but he found the laborious task of tracing raised type with fingers that, used as they had been to farm labour and working at the blacksmith's forge, were of low sensitivity when it came to deciphering the embossed pages of the large volumes supplied by the society's reading room and library.⁶⁷

Robert Ponton (1857–1932)⁶⁸ also appears to have lost his sight in mid-life, first being listed as blind when he was 42 years old and then a 'retired shepherd'.⁶⁹ The circumstances and the extent of his sight loss are unclear. Indeed there had often been elements of family subterfuge evident, notably when it came to what his widowed mother was prepared to reveal to census enumerators. One motivation was her wish to protect her oldest daughter, Christina, from the scandal of not one, but two illegitimate births by declaring herself the mother of these grandchildren in rural Haddingtonshire, but

⁶⁷ Annie Turnbull, 11 September 1938.

⁶⁸ LHSA, GD52/9 The Register, 40, 102.

⁶⁹ NRS, 1901 Census, Parish of Gladsmuir.

elements of low literacy and casual census enumeration may also have come into play.⁷⁰ However, by the beginning of the twentieth century, Robert and two brothers (one of these was actually a nephew) had moved to Perthshire and, for a time, there appeared to be a degree of comfort and prosperity for the threesome.⁷¹ Circumstances changed with the death of the older brother and the marriage of the nephew which occasioned his move to Dundee.⁷² Robert was not shown as blind in the 1911 census; this census operated under changed criteria from that of earlier decades, and now required 'blind' to mean 'totally blind'.⁷³ So perhaps Robert retained some residual vision. Without the support of the other two men, Robert nonetheless seems to have lived independently, moving to Perth city. It was there that he died of bronchitis at his tenement house in Pomarium Street. Having last been seen at 11 p.m. on 4 March 1932, he was found expired in his bed at 5 a.m. the following day.⁷⁴ It would be nice to think that Robert saw out his later years with an independent spirit and died peacefully in an environment that was totally his own.

Such a demise was not the outcome for John Richardson (1852–1914) another man from Edinburgh's rural hinterland.⁷⁵ John lost his eyesight during childhood and although there are inaccuracies, or subterfuge, in reporting his age, notably to an earlier blind school in Gayfield Square, by the time he was nine he was a pupil there, learning raised type and other skills.⁷⁶ His admission had been arranged by the parochial board for the parish of Oxnam and supported by his family.⁷⁷ He appears to have flourished during his early adult life, being employed by the blind asylum where he was described as being of 'good character' and quickly increasing his weekly wages from 6s. 6d. to 7s. 6d.⁷⁸ By middle age he was employed at the blind asylum as a mattress-maker, well-paid among the crafts supported by the Nicolson Street workshops.⁷⁹ However, from 1896 he found himself in regular trouble with his

⁷⁰ NRS, George Ponton, Parish of Stenton, 29 October 1870; Alexander Ponton, Parish of Whittingehame, 11 November 1879; 1871 Census, Parish of Stenton; 1881 Census, Parish of Garvald.

⁷¹ NRS, 1911 Census, Parish of Fowlis Wester.

⁷² NRS, RoD, Thomas Ponton, District of St Giles, 30 April 1912; NRS, RoM, Alexander Ponton, District of Perth, 2 August 1912.

⁷³ This created the anomalous situation whereby some pupils at the Royal Blind School should not have been recorded as 'blind', although the enumerator had the presence of mind to record the level of sight loss for each pupil in his return (NRS, 1911 Census). In the 1950s, in his novella, Fred Reid describes how pupils' sight loss was categorised by terms such as 'totals', 'partials', and 'good partials'.

⁷⁴ NRS, RoD, District of Perth, 5 March 1932.

⁷⁵ LHSA, GD52/9 The Register, 16, 20, 80.

⁷⁶ NRS, 1861 Census, Parish of St Cuthbert, Blind School, 2 Gayfield Square, Edinburgh.

⁷⁷ REBAS, Register of Admissions 1793–1963, 12, No. 466.

⁷⁸ REBAS, Minute Book No. 6 1861–1866, 278–9, 363, 368–9.

⁷⁹ NRS, 1891 Census, Parish of St Cuthbert.

employers for drunkenness and eventually for theft of horse hair.⁸⁰ In 1899, he was dismissed and thereafter he experienced a fragile existence in Edinburgh's lodging houses during which he first came to the attention of the society's missionaries.⁸¹ It seems likely that they made little impression on John, so low had he sunk into poverty and waywardness. He was 62 when he died a pauper in Craighleith Poorhouse; alcoholism was recorded as the secondary cause of death.⁸² The journey of the blind boy from Oxnam for an education and craft, while initially successful, had clearly come apart at the very time that John should have been reaping the benefits.

Nelly Munroe (b.1889) was seventeen years old when she was recorded in the Register.⁸³ An invitation to address the 2016 Deaf History Scotland Spring Gathering promoted research on her case. Nelly was cited as being deaf-blind and, along with examples from the Royal Blind Asylum records, provided an opportunity to consider the experience of dual sensory impairment a century ago. Nelly came to the attention of the missionaries in 1905 who recorded that she lost her sight during infancy, but also said that Nelly could read normal print before becoming blind and had been 'at school!'⁸⁴ Nelly proved to be quite challenging to track down and this was partly because the Outdoor Blind Register contained not one, but several inaccuracies. Initial searches for Nelly in census and birth records drew a blank, but the Register placed Nelly as coming from Corstorphine and this was the key to tracing her father through Valuation Rolls.⁸⁵ In follow-on records that could be located from this, 'Nelly Munroe' was Helen Munro – she had not been blind since infancy and in 1901 was attending mainstream school.⁸⁶ The first decade of the twentieth century shows a changing Munro household through the death of Helen's mother, aged 37, and the arrival of her maternal Highland granny to care for the family.⁸⁷ Helen appears to have lost her sight, due to what the missionaries vaguely attributed to 'nerve', around 1905, after completion of her schooling.⁸⁸ It was, therefore, probably the missionaries who taught her to read raised type, by which time they were offering both Moon and braille. The missionaries also recorded Helen as being deaf, but she is not entered as deaf on the 1911 census which, as only accepting being 'totally blind' as representing blindness, also only recorded deafness if the person was profoundly deaf. Census enumerators

⁸⁰ REBAS, Minute Book No. 13, 12 May 1896.

⁸¹ REBAS, Minute Book No. 14, 24 July 1899; NRS, 1901 Census, Jubilee Lodging House; 1911 Census, Castle Lodging House.

⁸² NRS, RoD, District of St George, Edinburgh, 1 April 1914.

⁸³ LHSA, GD52/9 The Register, 45, 107.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁸⁵ NRS, Valuation Roll 1905/06, Parish of Corstorphine, 55, No. 759.

⁸⁶ NRS, RoB, Parish of Corstorphine, 25 June 1889; 1901 Census, Parish of Corstorphine.

⁸⁷ NRS, RoD, Jessie Munro, Parish of Corstorphine, 28 December 1899; 1901 and 1911 Censuses, Parish of Corstorphine.

⁸⁸ LHSA, GD52/9 The Register, 107.

also relied upon the information that they were given by householders and that information was not always a true reflection of reality. By this time, Helen's grandmother was 85 years old and she too had lost her sight. It is not inconceivable that Helen, now a young woman with double sensory impairment, nonetheless played a meaningful and fulfilling role in caring for her father, grandmother and brothers.

All of those who became deeply involved in this project agreed that it was a fulfilling exercise. The apparent poor compilation of the Register on the part of the missionaries presented both frustrations and challenges. The project was conducted within a tight time frame, which meant that one of the required outcomes, the transcription of the Register, was continuing when the research volunteers started work and they did not have benefit of access to the original manuscript as it was being digitised. The idiosyncrasies of Christopher Ness's handwriting style resulted in transcription errors, which at times thwarted the work of the research volunteers in seeking matches in the NRS. The transcription is intended to be available for future researchers so editing work was undertaken, but this was not possible until after the historical research had been completed. Greater synchronisation of the two activities, both of which were key commitments as project outcomes, would have been challenging, but in hindsight would have brought invaluable benefits.

The fragmented nature of the Register entries also inhibited an initial intention of undertaking a quantitative survey of outdoor blind people in Edwardian Edinburgh and the neighbouring counties. However, it quickly became apparent that research volunteers were identifying cases where some individual lives could be traced and reconstructed in detail. No attempt was made to cherry-pick interesting cases that might be considered diverse, yet the cases pursued turned out to be illuminating in their diversity. There was no such thing as a stereotypical blind person. Everyone was different and experienced their own unique blend of successes and traumas through different periods of their lives. They often went through phases in which agency and independence were exercised, but as in mainstream society, life might also prove to be fragile, and this became apparent as some of our cases encountered failing health or old age. Mental well-being could also affect outdoor blind people – family networks were shown to be exceedingly important and, if these fragmented, maintaining personal independence in isolating circumstances could be challenging. Yet people like Robert Ponton and Bella Wood seemed to flourish, while Georgina McDonald and John Richardson endured tragic declines as they neared the end of their lives. The 'Seeing Our History' research demonstrated that each case study represented an individual with a unique personality.

Interrogation of the Register, in tandem with missionary narratives in the society's annual reports, illuminates the evangelising agenda of philanthropy articulated across urban and rural communities by missionary teachers. They did this through combining instruction in reading tactile print with their goal of taking Christian scriptures to people whose loss of sight, in the missionaries' view, meant deprivation of faith and salvation. Their imperfectly maintained

Register proved to be a gateway to revealing a cross section of blind adults living in communities where their daily concerns, to a large extent, did not consist of learning to read Moon or braille and of accessing religious consolation. For most, their concerns focused on having personal independence and agency, of coping with loss of emotional support from family networks as family dynamics changed over time, and of confronting economic survival when many avenues of income generation were closed to them. Ability to manipulate tactile print and to contemplate religious writings did not address the daily challenges of securing food and shelter when family and other support networks had broken down.