



# THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA MONTHLY LETTER

VOL. 52, NO. 9

HEAD OFFICE: MONTREAL, SEPTEMBER 1971

## *A Salute to People of Courage*

THERE ARE 28,000 blind men, women and children in Canada, people who have lost their sight through war, accident or disease. Every year more than 1,700 Canadians of all ages are made sightless.

To become blind is to have your known world come tumbling down, and those who set themselves to rebuild it in harmony with their handicap deserve a salute.

Even those who can see find difficulty in adjusting themselves to modern conditions. Multiply this difficulty by the deprivation of sight; limit the means of communication with fellow-men; handicap a person by inability to make a living in ordinary ways, and you have a picture of the grievous burden under which blind people labour.

It is not so many years ago that people thought the place for the blind was at home, cared for by members of the family, or in an institution, living in a darkness unrelieved by contact with the world, doomed to inactivity.

Today, blind persons show the desire and the capacity to overcome their disability in many areas formerly thought to be beyond their reach. They seem to have as their motto: "I need only be defeated if I am willing to be."

The Chairman and President of this Bank said in an address as Honorary Chairman of the Quebec Division of The Canadian National Institute for the Blind a few years ago: "The terrible calamity of blindness cannot be overemphasized. The blind want not only sympathy but opportunities for establishing themselves as independent and useful social personalities. And who is to give them such opportunities but those of us who are blessed with the supreme gift of eyesight which they have lost? I have admiration and respect for the persons who are blind and are, nevertheless, making much of life with the help of The Canadian National Institute for the Blind."

### *What blindness means*

Most of our knowledge is obtained through sight and hearing. Sight gives us messages and information,

embracing form, direction, distance, and the line and speed of movement. When we lose our sight we find this knowledge shut out, and being forced to depend upon others to supply it is not a happy role. But there are additional disturbing losses. Isolation is the most important fact about blindness. Blind people are cut off from the socializing influences which play upon most of us. The marvel is that they are able at all to penetrate the walls which shut them off from their fellow-men.

Blindness does not necessarily mean the complete absence of sight. Definition of the term states that those who see, after correction, at twenty feet or less what is normally seen at two hundred feet, are recognized as blind by the various governments.

That degree of blindness, from no vision up to one-tenth normal vision, blocks or impairs the normal education of children and the vocational efficiency of adults.

A booklet published by the Department of National Health and Welfare reports that about one person in every eight hundred of the total population of Canada has poor enough vision to be considered blind. Every year some 2,000 Canadians lose their sight; one child in every four needs some kind of eye treatment; thousands of accidents to the eyes occur annually in factories, kitchens and gardens; some 100,000 people over forty suffer from glaucoma, and half of them do not know it.

These are stark statistical facts that give poignancy to our thoughts about blindness, and urgency to the work of coping with the problems of prevention and amelioration.

### *The CNIB was born*

The Canadian National Institute for the Blind was incorporated under the Dominion Companies Act in March 1918 as a non-profit philanthropic organization to serve in the social and economic rehabilitation of the blind and to promote the prevention of blindness.

Financially supported through the donations of public spirited citizens, annual appeals and government grants, the CNIB serves blind Canadians of all



ages and in all walks of life. Its efforts are directed toward making life happier and easier for the sightless, and restoring their confidence and independence.

Its attack is four-pronged: prevention, treatment, adjustment, and education.

Prevention includes giving information to the public so that people may avoid and prevent the things that cause loss of sight.

Treatment means giving to those whose sight is threatened both advice and material aid.

Adjustment means helping those who have lost their sight to fit into their new dark world without undue suffering.

Education means providing tutorial services to enable blind persons to retain their essentially human qualities by preparing them to hold honourable, satisfying and self-supporting positions.

The aim of the Institute is the complete rehabilitation of the blind. It gives them what is the greatest word in the vocabulary of a handicapped person: *hope*. One of the triumphs of the CNIB is selling the blind to themselves; convincing them that the loss of sight is not the end, but that there is a way out, a path over, or a passage through.

### *The CNIB services*

Even when a blind baby is still in the cradle the CNIB Children's Department is ready with help and advice to parents.

Parents of pre-school age blind children are counselled in the special care and training required to ensure normal development, and the Institute cooperates with schools for the blind and with the parents in arranging the education of blind children.

For newly blind adults, special adjustment training is provided. They may move into a CNIB centre for a period of several weeks. The trainee is led to examine his feelings about blindness and to learn to cope with them. He is helped to set realistic goals. He is helped to adjust to family, home and community.

Elderly and homeless blind persons are eligible to live in one of the modern residences located in twenty-one cities. These are not "homes" in the institutional sense, but are designed for active sightless senior citizens, where they may reside in comfort at moderate cost. The residents receive supervised care, but are encouraged to live their own lives.

Through agreement with two United States organizations the Institute makes it possible for any eligible blind Canadian to receive a guide dog free of charge, and it provides a month-long training course.

A mobile eye care unit, a joint effort of the Lions Club of Weston, which financed the cost of a \$20,000 van, and the CNIB, which supplied medical equipment costing \$10,000, has been provided to Newfoundland.

The Institute has helped other countries, too. The United Nations has used the CNIB in a consultative capacity, and borrowed members of its staff to give technical assistance in the development of rehabilita-

tion services. Arthur N. Magill, its Managing Director, spent two years at Cairo setting up a centre for the blind which served as a pilot organization for the Middle East. Colonel E. A. Baker, a former Managing Director of the Institute, became President of the World Council for the Welfare of the Blind.

All the CNIB services require technical knowledge and management skill of a higher order, but behind them, making them meaningful and vital, are the understanding and sympathy of the CNIB personnel. Their experience of blindness, their regard for the dignity of the individual, and their insistence upon sound welfare and rehabilitation concepts, form the basis of the Institute programme and provide the secret of its success.

Much of the success of the work of the CNIB is due to the energetic and self-sacrificing efforts of the sightless district administrators who go wherever there is a blind person who needs help.

Rehabilitation teaching has been a part of the programme since the beginning. The teachers, who are blind, encourage and help the newly blind person by patient friendly direction, in the disturbing transition from a vision-centred world to a life of sound and touch. They give training in Braille reading and writing, in handicrafts such as knitting, mat making and leather work, and in activities associated with home-making.

### *Education and employment*

There are schools for the blind at Brantford, Halifax and Vancouver, and three in Montreal. More than 250 blind students are enrolled in Canadian universities.

Introduction of electronics in commerce, science and education sparked a pilot course in computer programming for young blind men and women in 1965. Sponsored jointly by the University of Manitoba, the provincial governments and CNIB, blind operators are being trained as programmers for firms and institutions using electronic processing.

The CNIB has the first centre dedicated solely to training the blind: the Arthur V. Weir National Training and Vocational Guidance Centre in Toronto. It will educate blind persons from all provinces for rewarding careers in a society becoming increasingly complex.

There are more than a hundred home study courses offered to blind persons.

As a result of this educational effort, the blind are no longer thought of as unemployable handicapped persons.

The general public for many years associated blindness with incapacity for work. Employment of the handicapped was practically non-existent, and street-corner pencil-selling was common among blinded war veterans.

Then the Ottawa Association for the Blind offered training and employment for the adult blind in a broom



factory. In 1918 the CNIB took up the task. By 1920 there were 138 men working in the department's shops, and 45 women in the women's department making reed baskets and doing machine sewing, machine knitting and loom weaving.

In 1928 a simple lunch counter, manned by a blind person, was opened in a factory at Welland, Ont. In 1929 the tobacco stand became a source of employment. Before long the lunch counters and tobacco stands could be found in many industrial plants and government buildings.

Today, CNIB is one of Canada's leading industrial caterers. Blind or partially sighted people work as managers, cashiers, dish-washing machine operators, receivers and stock-handlers, serving industry, government and universities all across the country.

Blind persons are entering many skilled occupations. The CNIB employment department, manned by blind specialists, surveys plants and develops new kinds of employment for blind applicants. More than 2,100 sightless Canadians hold full-time positions in regular industry, the professions, CNIB catering, and in executive offices.

To some people, this may seem a small figure when laid alongside the total number of blind persons in Canada, but an explanation is found in the age composition of the blind. Some 46 per cent are over 65 when they lose their sight; 1,800 are children under 20 still going to school; 7,500 are women with household responsibilities.

### *Physical aids*

Research into sensory aids has made great strides forward since 1629 when King Charles I of England granted a charter to the Spectacle Makers' Guild and 1760 when Benjamin Franklin, of Philadelphia, invented "bifocals".

There are under test several devices designed to convert printed type into tonal patterns, so that the blind may read by hearing the type. The Lexiphone, built through substantial grants from the CNIB by Dr. Michael Beddoes of the University of B.C., is an instrument designed to translate the printed page into sound. The words on a page move past a scanner and the different shapes of the letters produce musical phrases which the blind reader must learn to interpret. Work is proceeding to reduce the 42-pound machine to a practical size.

The handicap of being shut off from ordinary reading matter has been met by a number of devices, the most widely used being Braille, Talking Book records, and tape recordings.

The Talking Book was introduced in 1935, and today the CNIB national library has 10,000 Talking Tape books (1,800 titles) and 25,000 records (900 titles). There are ten Braille magazines, two of which are in French. Every day more than three tons of touch-type and recorded books are mailed across Canada.

Through the work of the National Advisory Committee on Music, CNIB's music department has provided a wide variety of services to blind musicians. The catalogue of Braille music, eight volumes, lists 15,000 titles from Bach to blues. Numerous blind persons have found success as choir leaders, organists, music teachers, concert artists, night club entertainers, television artists and piano tuners.

"Just what is Braille?" is a question some may ask. In 1829 Louis Braille, who had been blind since the age of five, invented an alphabet in which the characters are formed by an arrangement of raised dots on paper. The signs are purely arbitrary, not in the form of letters. There are six points placed in an oblong, with three on the vertical sides and two horizontal. There are 62 possible combinations of these six points.

Louis Braille, of whom it is said on his memorial tablet: "He opened the doors of knowledge to all those who cannot see," is buried in the Pantheon along with the other illustrious dead of France.

Braille has been adapted to every language and dialect, even the complex Chinese ideogram. The Royal Bank Monthly Letter is done into Braille in English and French, and distributed through the CNIB to about 825 blind persons.

The Canadian Council of the Blind is an organization of clubs of blind persons inaugurated in 1944 and now numbering 80 clubs with 4,500 members.

The Council, working in harness with the CNIB, has as its objectives: to promote the well-being of the blind through higher education, profitable employment and social association; to create a closer relationship between the blind and sighted friends; to promote measures for the conservation of sight and the prevention of blindness.

The well known White Cane Week, sponsored jointly by the Council and the CNIB, endeavours to inform the sighted as to the capabilities and limitations of the blind.

### *Many outstanding careers*

The blind often develop qualities of the mind beyond anything known to those who have sight: a visual imagination and a retentive memory.

It is a long fight back from the despondency of the ultimate darkness, but many, if not most, of those who are stricken do make the grade, and some do so with a sense of exhilaration. John Milton, whose greatest prose work is the *Areopagitica*, that dynamic appeal for freedom of the press, became blind when he was 44, and dictated his immortal poetry to his daughters. He said: "be assured that I neither regret my lot nor am ashamed of it."

The case of Helen Keller has excited the admiration and wonder of mankind. Society does not expect individuals who become blind and deaf before they are two years old to overcome their difficulties so brilliantly. She was seven years old before she started to learn. Within a few months she knew words by the



finger alphabet, and she went on to learn to talk. She became remarkable for her intellectual accomplishments, and wrote several books.

Canada's Lieut.-Col. Edwin A. Baker, O.B.E., M.C., Croix de Guerre, obtained his degree as an electrical engineer at Queen's University in 1914. In 1915 he was wounded at Mount Kemmel while serving with the Canadian Engineers and lost the sight of both eyes. He became interested in work with and for blind persons, and he was among the founders of the CNIB in 1918.

Col. Baker helped to organize the first mass survey of school children in Toronto, a survey which led to the establishment of sight-saving classes, and the first national survey of the incidence and causes of blindness. As one outcome, the Department of National Health and Welfare started compulsory treatment of all infants' eyes at birth. As a result, the disease which formerly attacked babies' eyes is almost non-existent in Canada today.

To perpetuate the late Col. Baker's memory, the CNIB established the E. A. Baker Foundation for Prevention of Blindness. It will continue the interests he began during his 42 years of service, by providing scholarships, fellowships and grants to ophthalmologists and their allied services for research, equipment and facilities not available through other channels.

### *Preventing blindness*

Educating the public to the necessity of taking care of their eyes has been slow work. Eyesight is man's most precious sense, but it is notoriously abused and neglected.

The CNIB has recently produced new statistical information that will be in demand all over the world, and should be paid attention to by every person who still enjoys eyesight. The Prevention of Blindness Department made a national analysis of the causes of blindness in 2,033 clients registered in a year. It reveals that 225, or eleven per cent, had become blind through glaucoma, that insidious disease arising from a defect in the circulating system of the fluid in the eye, which destroys sight without the patient's knowledge. The cases occurred in the following age groups: up to 39 years, 2 cases; 40 to 49 years, 9 cases; 50 to 64 years, 27 cases; 65 to 80 years, 109 cases; 81 and over, 78 cases. This report more than emphasizes the need for periodical eye examination from middle-life on. If diagnosed early, glaucoma can be controlled through treatment.

Accidents which injure eyes are more commonplace than need be. The Wise Owl Club, which came under CNIB sponsorship in 1961, is made up of a distinguished group of people who prove this to be so. They are people who saved their sight by wearing safety glasses at work or in their home hobby shops.

The Eye Bank of Canada, set up in 1955 by the CNIB in co-operation with the Canadian Ophthalmological Society, provides the means by which corneal tissue from an eye no longer useful may be removed

and transplanted to an eye where it may restore sight. More than 2,000 corneal transplants have been performed, 80 per cent successfully.

### *Volunteer help*

It was volunteers who led in the formation of a better way of life for Canada's blind persons, and today the volunteer is still very much a part of the picture. Thousands of men and women and teen-agers give their help.

Some learn to transcribe print into Braille and to record books and papers to help high school and university students who are blind. Some visit CNIB centres and clubs to read, sew and serve tea, or to assist with recreation projects as escorts, coaches, drivers and good companions.

Some 7,000 sighted volunteers act on CNIB boards, committees and auxiliaries, assisting in the day-to-day living of blind Canadians.

Women have always been CNIB's right hand. In 1917 they formed the Canadian Women's Association for the Welfare of the Blind, and in 1919 they united with the CNIB to become the Women's Auxiliary.

Three housewives collaborated in preparation of a textbook for Braille transcribers.

### *People of courage*

People who are blind tackle their problems and face their difficulties with courage, but they need the understanding of their families, their friends, and the people in the community.

Friendship for a blind person is more than delicacy of sentiment. It entails an effort to understand the privations and difficulties of the blind and an obligation to help reduce them.

One thing above all others can be given by the family: encouragement. A blind person should not be allowed to undervalue himself. Among the poignant tragedies are those in which men and women have cried "impossible" too soon, and ceased their effort. The stimulation contributed by family and friends is a priceless aid in giving a blind person the inspiration to develop new talents and capabilities.

All through the ages human life has been conditioned by an instinctive sense of obligation by those most amply endowed to their handicapped fellow-humans.

This is not a responsibility born of necessity or imposed by governments. It is ethical and humane. It realizes the desperate dwindling hopes, the slow surrender to grim inevitable truth, of one who watches the dark curtain slowly descend or is suddenly blinded.

Pity gives way to sympathy, which means active participation in the distress and the struggle back to normal of the patient. It means doing all that is possible to provide opportunities for the blind person to establish himself as an independent and social personality.