From Gleam of Light to Seedbed of a National Institute: The Canadian Free Library for the Blind, 1906–1918¹

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“For the library to have to close would be a terrible blow to the Blind, especially to me. I don’t know what I would do if it were not for our Library. I am of a melancholy disposition, and as I must depend solely on myself for reading, if I am deprived of what literature we have in raised print, I fear to think what would become of me.”² So wrote Kitty Curry to the Canadian Free Library for the Blind (CFLB) in November 1914, at a point when the exigencies of the First World War had redirected vital donations away from the support of the institution she so valued.

Founded at a meeting of blind men and women in Toronto on 9 November 1906, the CFLB had just passed its eighth anniversary when it received this letter from Kitty Curry. The first Canadian library of its kind to operate outside of a school for the blind, the CFLB maintained an independent existence until 1 January 1919, when it merged with the newly-formed Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB, est. 1918) to form its Library and Publishing Department.

The spectre of closure that haunted Kitty Curry in 1914 regularly preyed on the minds of the CFLB’s librarians and Board of

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² Kitty Curry to the CFLB, 13 November 1914, Canadian National Institute for the Blind Papers (hereafter CNIB Papers), Library and Archives Canada (hereafter LAC), MG 28, series I233, vol 3, file 3-13D.

Management for most of the independent years of the library's existence. However, despite ongoing financial struggles, the early loss of its founding librarian, several shifts in location, and a collections' practice complicated by multiple systems of embossed print, in the period between 1906 and 1918 the CFLB grew from a small, local initiative to a library that commanded a nationwide membership and offered a range of auxiliary services. The CFLB was certainly a gleam of light in the darkness for its founding librarian E.B.F. Robinson, and after his premature death in 1908 it would become the seedbed out of which today's well-known CNIB would grow.

The following historical account of the CFLB relies heavily on the modest archive that survives. The main archive comprises a minute book for the library's annual meetings, as well as seven dedicated files located within the vast CNIB collection held at Library and Archives Canada (LAC).³ Selected business correspondence and an incomplete set of annual reports by the librarians and secretaries form part of the archival record. Unfortunately, evidence of members' day-to-day interactions with the library is absent and their reactions to the library and its offerings are sparse. No comprehensive catalogues of the CFLB's holdings between 1906 and 1918 appear among the papers, and no granular circulation information that would allow us to follow the reading habits of individuals is present. As a result, details about the reading habits of the adult blind in Canada at the turn of the twentieth century cannot be discerned in any great depth from the source materials. Nonetheless, the archive does make clear that, during the first two decades of the twentieth century, the CFLB positioned itself as a determined early advocate for literacy and library services for the blind in Canada. From that original commitment, it began additional outreach activities to ameliorate the circumstances under which the Canadian blind lived and worked. This broad interpretation of the role that a library can play within the community it serves eventually led to the CFLB's involvement in the formation of the CNIB, an institution into whose embrace it then enfolded itself.

³ The CFLB Minute Book, 1906–1918, is located in LAC, CNIB Papers, microfilm reel M-3795. These seven files are all located in LAC, MG 28, I233, CNIB Papers: five files marked “Canadian Free Library for the Blind” (files 3-13a to 3-13e) are located in volume 3; one file marked “Canadian National Library for the Blind” is found in volume 5; and one file marked “E.B.F. Robinson” is located in volume 85. Some references to the CFLB appear in other files in the collection, but most of the contents of such files focus on the period after 1919.

Reading Systems for the Blind during the Long Nineteenth Century

The Canadian Free Library for the Blind can be located historically in an international and national continuum of institutional supports for the blind focused on education and literacy. While efforts to teach the blind date back to earlier centuries, Valentin Haüy's work in late-eighteenth-century France represents a significant milestone in relation to literacy and reading systems. Haüy established l'Institut des Aveugles in 1784, a school for the blind at which he pioneered the reading of embossed print using the Roman alphabet in a round italic typeface that looked very similar to handwritten script.⁴ Haüy produced his students' books by making two important modifications to the established letterpress process. Normal type shows letterforms in reverse, which appear correctly on paper after leaving a mirror image of themselves in ink. Haüy, by contrast, had type cast that was not in reverse. Second, he used an extra strong press to effect an impression of sufficient strength that it embossed the other side of the sheet, thereby enabling tactile reading.

A major drawback remained after Haüy's innovations: the curved shapes of the letters of the Roman alphabet did not lend themselves to swift recognition through touch. By the 1820s, others were beginning to modify the Roman alphabet to facilitate reading with the fingertips. Edmund Fry of London introduced a system of plain Roman capitals that became popular in England and was partially adopted in the United States, albeit with changes. James Gall of Edinburgh created a triangular form of Roman type that drew on both upper and lowercase letters. In the United States, where two of the first schools for the blind began operations in the early 1830s (in Boston and Philadelphia), Samuel Gridley Howe also developed an angular version of the Roman alphabet using lowercase letters. Known as Boston Line Type, it became a dominant form of embossed print for the blind in the United States from the 1830s to the 1880s. By the late 1860s, however, Philadelphia printer N.B. Kneass had produced a competitive line-letter type that combined the angular lowercase letters from Howe's system with the uppercase letters favoured in Philadelphia Line Type, a rival system to Howe's that

⁴ For a detailed overview of reading and writing systems for the blind, see Gabriel Farrell, "Fingers for Eyes," chapter 8, and "Battle of the Types," chapter 9, in *The Story of Blindness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956) 93–104; and Elizabeth M. Harris, *In Touch: Printing and Writing for the Blind in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington: National Museum of American History, 1981).

had been pioneered in the 1830s by Julius Reinhold Friedlander of the Pennsylvania Institution for the Instruction of the Blind.

Running counter to these various forms of line letter or line type, as they were known collectively, were systems that moved away from the principle that embossed printing be readable by the sighted. In the late 1830s, Thomas M. Lucas of the United Kingdom produced a stenographic system that combined straight lines with curves and dots, while James Hatley Frere proposed a system of phonetic characters. In the 1840s, Englishman William Moon, who became blind in early adulthood, began with the Roman alphabet, but modified it so radically that it was not intelligible to sighted readers without knowledge of the system. He stripped down the letters until he arrived at nine simple characters that could be set up in different formations. Moon Type, as it was called, became particularly favoured as a reading system for those who lost their sight in adulthood. Unlike the other forms of embossed type discussed above, it found an international following into the twentieth century.

Notwithstanding the inroads made by Moon, it was the “dot” or “point” systems of embossed printing that would take firmest hold by the end of the nineteenth century, in part because they were a more effective means of tactile reading, but also because they provided the blind with a form of text that they could both read and write. In the end, a young, blind Frenchman named Louis Braille devised the most enduring of these dot systems. Inspired by a dot communication system developed by retired French artillery captain Charles Barbier for military purposes, Braille developed a system through the 1820s and into the 1830s that was based on a three-by-two cell (three dots high, two wide) that fit comfortably under the fingertip; he associated specific letters of the alphabet with particular combinations of dots. From the mid-nineteenth century forward, Braille’s system steadily prevailed over other forms of embossed type, first in France and then in other European countries and beyond. In Britain, Braille’s dot combinations for the alphabet were retained as the basis of British Braille (or English Braille), but by 1905 this English-language system evolved into a three-grade system: Grade One contained fully spelled out words with no contractions; Grade Two represented a moderately contracted form of the system; and Grade Three offered a highly contracted version that almost approached shorthand. While Grade One was used for initial training in the system, Grade Two represented the standard level for a literate reader of British Braille, and the majority of British Braille books came to be produced in that grade.

Louis Braille's system was introduced into the United States in the mid-nineteenth century, but competing dot systems subsequently emerged in that country. New York Point was developed at the New York Institute for the Blind in 1868 and by 1915 was being taught at roughly 50 percent of schools for the blind in the United States.⁵ It diverged from Louis Braille's system in two important ways. First, whereas Braille had applied what he called a "principle of logical sequence" in developing his dot representation of the alphabet,⁶ New York Point used a "frequency of occurrence principle" by which the fewest dots were associated with the most common letters in English words. Second, New York Point reoriented the cell so that it was only two dots high and had a variable base length. American Braille appeared at the Perkins Institute in Boston. In this system, a frequency of occurrence principle was also embraced in the representation of the alphabet but Braille's three-by-two cell was retained. (For visual examples of some of the type systems described above, see fig. 1.)

Figure 1. Sample of six embossed-type systems used in English-speaking countries during the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Howe = Boston Line Type; Braille = British Braille; Wait = New York Point. Joseph M. Stadelman, "Education of the Blind," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia: An International Work of Reference on the Constitution, Doctrine, Discipline, and History of the Catholic Church*, ed. Charles G. Herbermann et al., vol. 5, *Dio-Fath* (New York: The Encyclopedia Press, 1913), 310.

⁵ That is, twenty-seven out of forty-six American schools. Statistic cited in La Cerise, "Blind Librarian Wants to Help Our Blinded Soldiers," [1915], reprinted in *Our Blind Soldiers and the Canadian Free Library for the Blind* (Toronto: The Bryant Press, 1916), 8.

⁶ Farrell provides the following explanation of Braille's "principle of logical sequence": "a line made up of the first ten letters of the alphabet, using the upper two rows of dots or symbols, forms the basis for succeeding rows. The second line, beginning with the eleventh letter, *k*, is an *a*, with the addition of the left-hand dot in the third row of the cell, and so on through *t*. The remaining letters of the alphabet, plus enough symbols to make the third row of ten, are formed by adding the two dots of the third line of the cell, and the fourth row is made by adding the lowest dot on the right-hand side of the cell" (*Story of Blindness*, 99). The "symbols" to which Farrell refers were originally the accented letters in French.

A fundamental problem of the “frequency of occurrence” principle was that the frequency of particular letters varied across the written languages that used the Roman alphabet. Moreover, three competing point systems in English alone meant that blind readers had restricted access to embossed-print material unless they learned all of them. From a production standpoint, the presence of multiple systems limited the range of works issued since standard works had to be printed in all three systems. These problems finally came to a head after the turn of the twentieth century. In 1917, after intense years of consultation and debate, the American Association of Workers for the Blind abandoned both New York Point and American Braille, and instead adopted the base alphabet code used in British Braille. However, instead of embracing fully the contractions associated with Grade Two British Braille, it opted to make “Grade One and a Half Braille” its new standard. As the name suggests, Grade One and a Half represented a compromise between the two levels: it used only a subset of the contractions associated with Grade Two British Braille, and even among that restricted list some inconsistencies of practice prevailed.⁷

Early Canadian Schools for the Blind: Literacy Training and Circulating Libraries

The century-long “battle of the types” made an impact on Canadian institutions created after the mid-nineteenth century to teach the blind. Whereas in 1861 the report of the superintendent at the school founded by the Society for the Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb, and the Blind (est. Toronto, 1858; later relocated to Hamilton) speaks vaguely of the “reading of raised characters” by the blind children, in 1864 there is evidence of books printed in Moon Type underpinning its Library for the Blind of Canada West – thanks to a donation of volumes from Moon himself.⁸ At the French-language

⁷ See Robert Irwin and Ruth E. Wilcox, *A Comparative Study of Braille Grade One and a Half and Braille Grade Two* (New York: American Foundation for the Blind, 1929).

⁸ “Superintendent’s Report for 1861,” *Third Annual Report of the Society for the Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb, and the Blind for the Year 1861* (Toronto: 1862), 8; “Library for the Blind,” *Sixth Annual Report of the Upper Canada Institution for the Deaf and Dumb and for the Blind for the Year 1864* [Hamilton, 1865], 6. The latter report indicates that 175 books composed the library, including works of history, geography, biography, hymns, and scripture, as well as maps. Moon’s

Institut des Jeunes Aveugles de Nazareth (est. 1861; later, simply l'Institut Nazareth) in Montreal, it is unclear precisely to what form of embossed print students were initially exposed, but from 1865 Louis Braille's dot system was embraced for reading and writing. Father Benjamin-Victor Rousselot, the visually-impaired priest who founded the school in collaboration with the Grey Nuns of Montreal, reaffirmed this commitment to Braille at the end of the decade after touring several schools for the blind in the United States. He witnessed students working with other forms of embossed print and determined none to be as effective as Braille's system.⁹

After the Halifax Asylum for the Blind (later the Halifax School for the Blind [HSB]) opened its doors in 1871,¹⁰ students there variously received instruction in Boston Line Type, Moon Type, and British Braille, the last of the three being used more with older students.¹¹ By the mid-1880s, however, the school's superintendent, C.F. Fraser, who himself was blind, felt a strong preference for Braille. "After thirteen years experience as an instructor of the blind," he wrote in his report for 1886,

and after having given a most impartial trial to the several line and point systems now used by them, I am convinced that the ordinary line letter is unsuited to the sense of touch; ... Leaving out of the consideration the large-sized Moon print, the cost of printing books in which is nearly double that of the ordinary Roman and lower case letters [that is, line-letter types], it may be said that at least 50 per cent more persons can be taught to read in the point system than in the smaller line characters; add to this that the point print can be written as well as read, and that by its use the blind can study independently of a teacher; I think it must be obvious

system is described in the report as "an embossed type for the Blind, so perfect in its form, and uniform in its arrangement, that the blind man or woman of seventy years of age may, with ease, feel its characters, and learn to read."

⁹ Susanne Commend, *Les Instituts Nazareth et Louis-Braille 1861–2001: Une Histoire de Coeur et de vision* (Sillery, QC: Les éditions du Septentrion, 2001), 45.

¹⁰ In its early years, the school was also known as the Halifax Institution for the Blind. In 1884, its name was legally changed to the Halifax School for the Blind.

¹¹ See, for example: *Fifth Report of the Board of Managers of the Halifax Asylum for the Blind*, 1875 (Halifax, 1876), 11; *Seventh Report of the Board of Managers of the Halifax Asylum for the Blind*, 1877 (Halifax, 1878), 10; *Thirteenth Report of the Board of Managers of the Halifax Institution for the Blind*, 1883 (Halifax, 1884), 10.

that the continued publication of books in line characters is mis-directed philanthropy.¹²

The following year, Fraser reported the school's complete "abandonment of the line letter for the point letter," and indicated that students at the school used "Braille point writing ... [to] take down the[ir] lessons from dictation, preserving their manuscripts for future reference."¹³

The Ontario Institution for the Education of the Blind (later the Ontario School for the Blind [OSB]), which was founded in Brantford in the early 1870s after provincial authorities determined that blind and deaf children should henceforward be taught separately,¹⁴ followed a similar trajectory from line to dot systems. In its case, it initially taught the Kneass line-letter system, but in 1874 also introduced New York Point, its major advantage over the other system being, of course, that it could both be read and written by the blind. The OSB's choice of New York Point over British Braille would ultimately set it apart from all other schools for the blind not only in Canada, but throughout the British Empire.

New York Point predominated in the OSB's literacy training into the twentieth century.¹⁵ However, after the United States adopted the base alphabet code of British Braille in 1917 and officially moved to Grade One and a Half Braille, New York Point was slowly phased out at the OSB and replaced by the new American system. Since Grade One and a Half Braille used only forty-four of the contractions associated with Grade Two British Braille, students of the institution still faced limits on their access to British Braille books. Any reader who wanted to take advantage of the full range of Braille books available in English had to learn the remaining contractions

¹² *Sixteenth Report of the Board of Managers of the Halifax School for the Blind, 1886* (Halifax, 1887), 11–12.

¹³ *Seventeenth Report of the Board of Managers of the Halifax School for the Blind, 1887* (Halifax, 1888), 11.

¹⁴ Euclid Herie, *Journey to Independence: Blindness – The Canadian Story* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2005), 25–26.

¹⁵ Undated newspaper article by Margaret R. Chandler, Archives of Ontario (hereafter AO), RG-2-204, Ministry of Education, Ontario School for the Blind, box 5, file "Scrapbook 1977–78," p. 262; and Verne Edquist, ed., *Centre Walk: Former Students of the Ontario School for the Blind (The W. Ross Macdonald School) Recall School Memories* (North York: Devondale Publishing, 1993), 12, 20.

(and variations). By the mid-1920s, Superintendent W.B. Race was committed to helping OSB students do this.¹⁶

The schools for the blind based in Ontario, Quebec, and Nova Scotia all developed institutional libraries of embossed books to support their students' learning and entertainment. Over time, each of these schools also established circulating libraries to extend access to books to former students and to other blind and visually impaired Canadians: circulating libraries were founded at the HSB in 1881 (to serve the three Maritime provinces and Newfoundland, all of which supported the school), the OSB in 1898 (to serve Ontario), and at l'Institut Nazareth in 1914. Books for these circulating libraries were purchased from the United Kingdom, the United States, and France, or produced in-house at the schools. In building their collections, the schools exhibited a preference for books in the dot system and language that each taught. In addition to British Braille, the HSB's circulating library also offered titles in Moon Type.¹⁷

The school-based circulating libraries were facilitated after 1898 by the Canadian Postmaster General's pioneering decision to allow embossed literature for the blind to travel by mail for free, an innovation for which both Fraser at the HSB and Principal A.H. Dymond at the OSB had lobbied.¹⁸ After its creation, the CFLB too would benefit from this postal privilege. In 1916, the concession was extended to Newfoundland, despite the fact that it remained, at that time, an independent dominion rather than part of the Canadian Confederation. In time, the postal privilege would be adopted by many other countries. The United States instituted it as early as 1899 for works circulated within its own territory.

The Founding of the CFLB, and Its Three Librarians

By the time the Canadian Free Library for the Blind formed in 1906, libraries dedicated to the blind had already appeared in other countries. In 1882, Martha Arnold, a British woman blinded in

¹⁶ W.B. Race to S.C. Swift, 10 February 1926, AO, RG 2-204, Ministry of Education, Ontario School for the Blind Papers, box 2, file "CNIB-S.C. Swift Chief Librarian 1925-26/52)."

¹⁷ *Raised Print Books for the Blind / Origin and History of Embossed Printing / Interesting Facts about the Circulating Library of the School for the Blind, Halifax, N.S.* (Halifax: Halifax Printing Co., 1895), 10.

¹⁸ Herie, *Journey to Independence*, 35, citing *Hansard* for 1 April 1898.

childhood, established the Lending Library for the Blind (later the National Library for the Blind) as a private charitable venture, initially using a room in her home in Hampstead, London, to house the institution.¹⁹ That same year witnessed the founding of the Pennsylvania Home Teaching Society and Free Circulating Library for the Blind in Philadelphia, while in the mid-1890s a blind man in New York with a private collection of embossed books launched the New York City Free Circulating Library for the Blind. In 1896, New York became the first US state government to involve itself in dedicated library services for the blind when it created the New York State Library for the Blind in order to provide embossed books to the adult blind.²⁰ In all three countries – Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States – embossed reading matter was recognized as prohibitively expensive for purchase by most blind people since a text that could be ink-printed in one volume took up multiple when transformed into embossed form. Until dedicated libraries for the blind emerged, the only recourse for library service came through the circulating libraries of schools for the blind or small collections tucked away in public libraries.

When the CFLB came into being in late 1906, it was the first library of its kind in Canada to exist separately from a school. In general, social efforts to ameliorate the conditions of the blind in nineteenth-century Canada had been confined to educational institutions designed to provide blind children with a basic education and some vocational training that might help them sustain themselves in adulthood. Of course, many people lost their sight as adults; yet, even at the close of the nineteenth century, there existed few dedicated supports for blind adults in Canada. One significant exception was the Home Teaching Society for the Blind, an affiliate of the HSB. Established in 1893, the Society dispatched a teacher to instruct the adult blind in their own homes. It also provided practical instructions to parents who found themselves with blind children.²¹

¹⁹ Mary G. Thomas, *Royal National Institute for the Blind, 1868–1956* (Brighton, Sussex: printed at Brighton Herald, 1957), 25–26.

²⁰ “History,” NLS: That All May Read..., Library of Congress, National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS), last modified 17 September 2012, http://www.loc.gov/nls/about_history.html#one, “Service Prior to 1931.”

²¹ *Thirtieth Annual Report of the Board of Managers and Superintendent of the Halifax School for the Blind* (1900), 34.

The lack of supports available to blind Canadians was no doubt linked to the relatively small – and declining – portion of the total population they represented in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1891, when Canada had a total population of over 4.8 million, only 3368 blind were recorded: 1839 male, 1529 female. Of those, 2464 (73%) were identified as unable to read or write.²² Of the 1227 blind then living in Ontario, 158 (12.88%) were enrolled at the school for the blind in Brantford.²³ By 1901, when the country's total population stood at almost 5.4 million, national and provincial figures for the blind had dropped a little: the census of that year recorded a total of 3279 blind – 1891 male, 1388 female – with 1063 resident in Ontario. The figures for the blind for 1911, by which time the total population had grown to over 7.2 million, closely resembled those of 1901: 3238 total, 1850 male, 1388 female. That year, 1077 lived in Ontario.²⁴ Given that approximately one-third of blind Canadians lived in Ontario at the turn of the twentieth century, it is not surprising that Ontario gave rise to the first independent library for the blind.

In the view of the CFLB's founding librarian, Edgar Bertram (Bert) Freel Robinson, the amelioration of the conditions of the blind depended "upon the formation of associations of the intelligent blind themselves."²⁵ He esteemed, in particular, the UK-based British and Foreign Blind Association (BFBA),²⁶ and advocated that similar initiatives be undertaken by the blind in Canada. Founded in 1868, the BFBA was the inspiration of Thomas Armitage, a London physician who began to lose his sight in adulthood. The first act of the Association had been to undertake a study to assess the best form of embossed print (it chose Braille); in the succeeding decades, it created the largest printing house for the blind in the world. The

²² All national population figures are drawn from "Section A: Population and Migration," Historical Statistics of Canada, Statistics Canada, last modified 22 October 2008, <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-516-x/sectiona/4147436-eng.htm>, table A2-14: "Population of Canada, by province, census dates, 1851 to 1976." Statistics for the blind in 1891 are drawn from *Census of Canada 1891, Bulletin No. 16, The Insane; The Deaf and Dumb; and The Blind* (Ottawa: Department of Agriculture, 1893), 16, 21.

²³ E.B.F. Robinson, *The True Sphere of the Blind* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1896), 250.

²⁴ "Infirmities of the People for the Year 1911 as Enumerated Date of First of June," *Bulletin XVII, Fifth Census of Canada* (Ottawa: 1913), 2.

²⁵ E.B.F. Robinson, *The True Sphere of the Blind*, 166.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 187–88.

BFBA, subsequently renamed the National Institute for the Blind (NIB) and even later the Royal National Institute for the Blind, also concerned itself with the education and employment of the blind.

In all three of the BFBA's areas of engagement – education, employment, and reading and publishing – Robinson took a keen interest. Born in Stouffville, Ontario, on 20 April 1872, Bert Robinson was the son of Wesley Robinson and Arvilla Freel, and a graduate of the Ontario Institution for the Education of Blind, which he attended from 1883 to 1890. Several years later, he graduated from Trinity University in the University of Toronto, distinguishing himself as prizeman in philosophy. In 1896, he published *The True Sphere of the Blind*, a book-length work issued by subscription under the imprint of William Briggs of Toronto. During the same decade, Robinson served as president of the newly formed, Toronto-based Blind Self-Help Club.²⁷ Prior to the formation of the CFLB, he also produced two periodicals: in the mid-1890s, *Gleams of Light*, a bulletin issued in New York Point; and, beginning about 1905, *The Quest*, a quarterly print journal about the blind, which may have been issued under the auspices of the “Associated Blind.”²⁸

As the foregoing makes clear, by the time Robinson spearheaded the meeting in Toronto in November 1906 that resulted in the CFLB, the initiative represented the latest in a series of undertakings on behalf of the blind in which he had been engaged since the mid-1890s. As an organization, the CFLB stands out historically as one of the earliest founded in the twentieth century with a specific objective of improving the quality of life of blind Canadians. In the next decade, a number of municipally or regionally based associations of or for the blind would appear in Montreal (1908), the West (1912/13), Ottawa (1914), the Maritimes (1914), and Ontario (1916).²⁹ In fact, the Montreal Association for the Blind (MAB) provided Canada with a second circulating library outside of a school in 1908, when it launched one in support of the English-speaking blind of Quebec. At first, the MAB also served as a social club and a sheltered workshop

²⁷ Ibid., 191–92.

²⁸ E.B.F. Robinson to Hon. W.J. Hanna, 8 May 1905, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13e.

²⁹ “Schools and Services for the Blind in Canada,” pp. 10–12, CNIB Papers, vol. 13, file “History of the Work for the Blind.”

for the blind, but in 1912 it extended its mandate by building a residential school.³⁰

Robinson and about a dozen others signed the application for incorporation for the CFLB.³¹ One of Robinson's main co-organizers was F.W. Johnston, who had earlier served as secretary of the Blind Self-Help Club when Robinson was president. In the case of the CFLB, Johnston became the first president, remaining in the position until June 1915.³² Robinson took on the role of secretary as well as the remunerated position of librarian. Like Johnston and Robinson, all of the board members were blind.

In his work as librarian, Robinson was aided by his father, who provided space in his home in Markham to house the library's collection, and by his sighted wife, Marion, who agreed to assist him with the library's day-to-day operations. The daughter of George Maynard and Marion McDonald, Marion Robinson met her husband while she was a schoolteacher and married him in January 1907 at the age of twenty-three – two years earlier than originally planned so the library could be launched.³³ According to the annual report of 1907, Bert Robinson received a salary of one thousand dollars per annum, with the proviso that, with this salary, "the Librarian [was] to supply all furniture, fittings, etc., except new shelving, record books, etc., [and] to provide suitable room with heat and light, and to pay any sighted assistant he may require."³⁴

The earliest books acquired by the CFLB were those donated by Robinson himself. They included books he had received as school prizes, as well as college texts that his father or friends had painstakingly reproduced in embossed form to facilitate his university education. After the library's official opening on 1 July 1907, the latter of these volumes were in high demand.³⁵ In *The True Sphere of the*

³⁰ "History," MAB-Mackay Rehabilitation Centre, 2009, <http://www.mabmackay.ca/modules/pages/index.php?id=4&language=en&menu=4&sousmenu=6>.

³¹ Other names on the incorporation papers included: James Common, Robert J. Coughlan, Benjamin Crew, Charles R. Clarke, Robt Gaunt, E.W. Hermon, A.H. Johnston, M. Kenning, Carl B. Lloyd, J.E. Shaughnessy, Alfred Thurlow, F. Thurlow, and A.H. Wilson. CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13a.

³² S.C. Swift, "A Brief Account of the Establishment, Growth and Aims of the Canadian Free Library for the Blind," 1916, p. 7, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13c.

³³ Mrs. E.B.F. (Marion) Robinson, "The Beginning of the Library for the Blind in Canada," p. 2, CNIB Papers, vol.3, file 3-13E.

³⁴ "Second Annual Report of the Canadian Free Library for the Blind [1907]," p. 6, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13E.

³⁵ Marion Robinson, "The Beginning of the Library for the Blind in Canada," 3.

Blind, Robinson recalled, “when I was at college many text-books were copied out by my blind friends for me,” and then added, “I will volunteer to do the same for any blind persons who are candidates for university honours.”³⁶ His sense of indebtedness and his commitment to help others in their educational ambitions offer another motivation behind his determination to establish a library.

The sudden death of Bert Robinson to typhoid on 7 November 1908 was an early blow for the fledgling CFLB. To rescue the library from closure, Marion Robinson offered to take over the position of librarian later that same month if the Board of Management would raise the necessary funds to maintain the organization financially.³⁷ Up to that point, canvassing for funds had numbered among the librarian’s responsibilities, although it is clear from the organization’s minutes that within six months of its opening Bert Robinson had already been finding it difficult, in the midst of his other duties, to find sufficient time to pursue fundraising.³⁸ Marion Robinson held the position of librarian for almost five years, apparently without assistance. In this role, her duties included corresponding with members in embossed writing, arranging and varnishing monthly catalogue sheets, packaging and shipping outgoing requests, and receiving and unpacking returned items.³⁹ Whether her responsibilities included selecting and ordering books, as her husband had done, remains unclear; that function may have been undertaken by one or more members of the board.

During her tenure, Marion Robinson oversaw the library’s removal in October 1911 to the West Toronto branch of the Toronto Public Library (TPL) located at the corner of Annette and Medland Streets. Once there, the CFLB was housed in two rooms without charge through the intervention of the TPL’s chief librarian, George Locke. Marion Robinson packed and shipped all of the books from Markham, and then in Toronto carried them “in a few at a time, with only my own pair of hands,” because the shipping company had unloaded them on the sidewalk. Once resident in Toronto, her hours of work for the CFLB were reduced to about five and a half days; however, she found it necessary to work for the TPL directly on Saturday afternoon and evening “to make ends meet.”⁴⁰ The move

³⁶ E.B.F. Robinson, *The True Sphere of the Blind*, 192.

³⁷ Marion Robinson, “The Beginning of the Library for the Blind in Canada,” 4.

³⁸ Minutes of 13 January 1908, Minute Book of the CFLB.

³⁹ “The Canadian Free Library for the Blind,” hand dated 14 September 1911, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13E.

⁴⁰ Marion Robinson, “The Beginning of the Library for the Blind in Canada,” 4.

to Toronto may have increased her personal living expenses, and she also had a son to support, one who was born just months prior to her husband's death.

A memoir penned by Marion Robinson in 1956 makes it clear that salary issues prompted her decision to leave the position of librarian in the late summer of 1913 and return to teaching. Archival records suggest that, in 1909 and 1910, she was to receive a salary of \$600 per annum.⁴¹ Her own recollection was that the members of the board, "[a]t no time, were ... able to raise sufficient money to pay the salary agreed upon." The treasurer's report for 1912 confirms that she received only \$550 that year,⁴² possibly a \$50 shortfall on her agreed upon salary. According to her memoir, in 1913 Sherman Charles Swift, who had succeeded her husband as secretary on the board, proposed on behalf of the library's management a revised salary of \$400, followed by annual increases of \$50, to a maximum of \$600. Swift himself had described \$600 as a "nominal" salary when writing the minister of education two years earlier,⁴³ so the proposal to decrease that amount by a third suggests that the CFLB was experiencing a serious financial pinch. On the other hand, Marion Robinson's memoir also records that when Swift subsequently took over from her as librarian, he was hired at a salary of \$1200, which she attributed to his being a man.⁴⁴ References to the salaries of the librarians are sparse, but the minutes of a special meeting of January 1916 do note that, in the upcoming year, the librarian (Swift) would be paid a salary of \$1350, and possibly even \$1500, if funds allowed.⁴⁵ This evidence supports Marion Robinson's assertion about Swift's starting salary. At the same time, a letter of August 1916 reveals that the salaries to all staff members in the library the previous year had been \$1200, and by then the staff included not only Swift but also "two sighted lady assistants."⁴⁶ So Swift, like Bert Robinson before him, may have been expected to pay any staff he hired as well as himself out of the salary designated to him. Still, even with those assistants on the payroll, it is probable that he took home a greater salary than Marion Robinson.

⁴¹ S.C. Swift to Hon. R.A. Payne, 31 January 1911, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13e.

⁴² "Treasurer's Report for the Year 1912," CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13A.

⁴³ S.C. Swift to Hon. R.A. Payne, 31 January 1911, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, File 3-13E.

⁴⁴ Marion Robinson, "The Beginning of the Library for the Blind in Canada," 5.

⁴⁵ "Minutes of Special Meeting," 10 January 1916, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13D.

⁴⁶ CFLB (no author) to Lieutenant-Governor, New Brunswick, 10 August 1916, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, File 3-13C.

Other factors than gender bias may also have been at play in the transition of librarians. First, the board may have wished to see the prominent position of librarian held by someone who was blind. That preference would certainly have been consistent with the view that the blind themselves needed to play the dominant role in ameliorating their conditions. Second, the intention may have been to remunerate Swift for the positions of both librarian and secretary since he retained the secretary position after taking up the role of librarian. His secretarial reports of 1911 and 1912, produced before he became librarian, suggest someone who was emerging as a policy-maker within the organization. Holding the dual roles of secretary and librarian would have let him put policy into practice more effectively. In addition, it may be that Swift, as part of the secretary's role, took over the function of selecting and ordering embossed-print materials for the library after Bert Robinson's death. Marion Robinson taught herself New York Point, but Swift appears to have known all three point systems, which would have facilitated the purchasing of materials for the library.

After he became librarian in the late summer/early fall of 1913, Swift emerged as the dominant voice in the CFLB's affairs. Born in Petrolia, Ontario, in 1879, Swift was blinded in a gunpowder accident at age eleven. He completed his early education initially at the OSB and then, after his parents moved to the United States, at the Michigan State School for the Blind. For his secondary education, he returned to Petrolia, where he attended a regular high school and completed his studies with practical aid from family and friends. Next he achieved a bachelor's degree in modern languages at McGill University (1907) and then a master's degree from the Faculty of Education, University of Toronto (1908). On graduation, he applied for a teaching certificate but was denied by the Ontario Ministry of Education for reasons of his blindness, so for the next five years he earned his living by offering private lessons in modern languages.⁴⁷ In later years, his facility for languages led him to serve as a proofreader of embossed-print works produced in French, Spanish, German, and Latin by the American Printing House for the Blind. Swift also wrote poetry, and in 1934 his *Voyages of Jacques Cartier* was published, a work that he co-authored with T.G. Marquis.

Swift held the dual roles of librarian and secretary for the remainder of the CFLB's independent existence. After the merger with the CNIB

⁴⁷ "Dr. Sherman Charles Swift, LL.D.", pp. 1-3, CNIB Papers, vol. 49, file 5.

in 1919, he retained the position of librarian, and served as head of the Library and Publishing Department. His long tenure rendered him the library's institutional memory and de facto historian. Even during the period prior to the merger, Swift's activities included drafting a "Brief Account" of the library's history to 1916. When F.W. Johnston read it, the CFLB's former president applauded Swift for acknowledging Bert Robinson as the original force for "bringing the library into existence," but criticized the lack of credit given to Marion Robinson:

You will pardon me for adding that in this statement, it seems to me, that [*sic*] not nearly sufficient credit is given Mrs. Robinson for her work before Mr. Robinson's death, but more particularly, through the trying time immediately following the event. I doubt if Mr. Robinson could have carried the practical work of the library along to the point it had reached at the time of his death, had it not been for Mrs. Robinson's help, and after that, had it not been for Mrs. Robinson's pluck and hardwork [*sic*], I am satisfied that the library must have been compelled to close its doors. For one, therefore, I should like very much to see more credit given Mrs. Robinson, and I think the space you have given me could well be spared to her.⁴⁸

It remains unclear whether Swift did revise his text. The typescript in the archives of this "Brief Account" includes only a single sentence about Marion Robinson – "After this sad event [i.e. Bert Robinson's death] his widow, a sighted lady of most kindly and unselfish character, was appointed to fill his place which she held till September 1913, when the present librarian was entrusted with the work."⁴⁹ – so it is probably the draft that Johnston saw. Sherman Swift held the position of librarian at the CNIB until his death in 1947.

Financing the CFLB, and the Impact of the First World War

Financial stability was ever a concern for the Canadian Free Library for the Blind. Organized as an Association Library under the Ontario Libraries Act, it fell within the purview of the provincial Department of Education. The CFLB received an initial grant of two hundred

⁴⁸ F.W. Johnston to S.C. Swift, 1 March 1916, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13D.

⁴⁹ Swift, "A Brief Account of the Establishment," 4–5. Note that Marion Robinson's account said that Swift took over as librarian in August 1913 rather than September.

dollars from the Department of Education to support the purchase of books.⁵⁰ However, an appeal early in 1908 to the minister of education, Robert A. Payne, to provide the library with a grant sufficient to cover its maintenance costs (salaries, rent, heat, and light) was unsuccessful.⁵¹ Still, the regular provincial grant toward book purchases, first provided in 1907, increased intermittently over the succeeding years, and by 1918 had reached seven hundred dollars per annum. Appeals for support made to other provincial governments during this period garnered some success: in 1915, for example, Manitoba and Alberta each provided a grant of two hundred dollars, and Alberta appears to have maintained the same level of commitment in subsequent years.⁵² The federal government, by contrast, denied a request from the CFLB for a direct grant, stating that it could not assist one charity without aiding others as well;⁵³ nonetheless, free postage for the circulation of embossed literature – a privilege already in place in Canada and after 1916 extended to Newfoundland – made the federal government a substantial and enduring contributor to the library's operations.

Since government grants were not sufficient to cover the library's costs, fundraising was a crucial administrative activity for the CFLB and arguably the most difficult. After the loss of Bert Robinson as its primary canvasser in late 1908, the board sought the services of an agent, Arthur Gate, who worked on commission. Some concern emerged after Gate's first year of collecting because his efforts had been undermined by an earlier canvass by another organization benefiting the blind.⁵⁴ Even so, the library continued to retain his services for the next two years. Then in April 1912 Gate resigned after being reprimanded sharply by the board for "making representations that greatly exaggerated what we are actually doing."⁵⁵

⁵⁰ For information about the original organization of the library, see "Supplement to Secretary-General's Report for First Quarter, 1917," vol. 3, file 3-13A; and S.C. Swift to E.A. Baker, 31 May 1922, vol. 5, file 8, both in CNIB Papers.

⁵¹ Minutes of 13 January 1908, Minute Book of the CFLB.

⁵² La Cerise, "Blind Librarian Wants to Help Our Blinded Soldiers," 13. In his year-end report for 1918, Swift noted that the Government of Alberta had granted, that year, two hundred dollars in two instalments. Swift, "Report of the Secretary-General and Librarian of the Canadian National Library for the Blind for the Year Ending Dec. 31, 1918," p. 2, CNIB Papers, vol. 5, file 8.

⁵³ S.C. Swift to L.M. Wood, 11 May 1917, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13B.

⁵⁴ Minutes of 10 January 1910, Minute Book of the CFLB.

⁵⁵ F.W. Johnston to Messrs. Perkins, Ince & Co., 23 November 1914, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13c.

Gate's resignation intensified the financial troubles of the library. By August 1912, Gate began to canvass the CFLB's donor lists on behalf of the Dominion Tactile Press (DTP), a company of his own creation. The CFLB's board only became aware of the situation in the autumn when fundraising letters it sent out elicited surprised responses from regular donors, who believed they had given to the library earlier in the year. According to Swift, receipts secured by the library "showed that they were made out as if coming from us, the words 'Dominion Tactile Press' being, however, written below 'Canadian Free Library for the Blind.'" ⁵⁶

While Gate did subsequently acquire legal incorporation for his company under the laws of Ontario, as well as printing equipment from which he produced an embossed periodical, *The Premier Magazine*, and a number of works, the archives of the CFLB make it clear that the library's officials considered these efforts primarily a front for the fraudulent collection of funds. ⁵⁷ In an analysis of DTP dated January 1914, the CFLB noted that all of the titles published or projected for publication by the press were already available in raised print; moreover, those which had already been issued by DTP were primarily printed in the least popular embossed type system in Canada, riddled with compositional errors, and "so poorly bound as to be useless." ⁵⁸ A later piece of correspondence alleges that it was the practice of Gate's agent, T. Hope Churchill, to visit local libraries and leave behind copies of DTP's publications in exchange for a letter acknowledging the organization's services to a community, and then canvass the local area on the strength of that endorsement. ⁵⁹ Whatever one's estimate of DTP's business practices, it is clear that the canvassing activities of this company until about 1917, when Gate died and DTP ceased operation, made an impact on the library's capacity to fundraise. Gate's family was aware of the animosity with the CFLB, and after his death, his daughter indicated she was willing

⁵⁶ S.C. Swift to H. Champion, 27 November 1914, CNIB Papers, vol. 8, file "Dominion Tactile Press 1913-1938."

⁵⁷ DTP titles already published, or projected for publication, in 1914 were, in whole or in part, *Paul and Virginia*, *The Deserted Village*, Gray's *Elegy* bound with John Gilpin's *Ride*, *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, *Enoch Arden*, *Rape of the Lock*, and *The Rosary*. "Analysis of Letter from Dominion Tactile Press to a Prospective Contributor, Dec. 23, 1913," CNIB Papers, vol. 8, file "Dominion Tactile Press 1913-1938."

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ E.A. Baker to D.A. McArthur, 20 September 1937, MG 28, I233, CNIB Papers, LAC, vol. 8, file "Dominion Tactile Press 1913-1938."

to see the firm's equipment go to an organization dedicated to the blind, as long as it was not the CFLB. These assets eventually ended up in the hands of the OSB.⁶⁰

In the wake of Gate's resignation in 1912, the CFLB abandoned the practice of hiring a collector on a commission basis; instead, it focussed its fundraising efforts on its already established method of newspaper appeals, and instigated a practice of direct solicitation by circular.⁶¹ After the First World War broke out in the summer of 1914, the library found its sources of donations further imperilled and made a special request to Canadian newspaper editors to run a series of prepared articles about the CFLB into which appeals for donations were embedded. "Our work has been seriously threatened by the shrinkage of financial support experienced since the outbreak of war," explained Johnston in his covering letter of November, "for with the exception of some subscriptions repeated by former contributors, we have received not one cent from any source, public or private, since the beginning of August."⁶² In one of the prepared texts provided by Johnston – "What Canada Should Do" – it was noted that the CFLB found it difficult to raise a thousand dollars each year through donations.⁶³ The treasurer's report for 1912 suggests that even that figure may have been generous: in 1912, less than seven hundred dollars were donated through a combination of canvassing, circular appeals, and direct donations.⁶⁴ Of course, as noted above, donations in 1912 and 1913 were undermined by Gate's activities.

A savvy creativity marked several of the prepared articles submitted by Johnston to Canadian newspaper editors. "The Blind and the War News," for example, took the form of an exchange between a blind man named Tom Browning and a sighted citizen optimistically named Mr. Philo Goodheart. In a brief walk with Mr. Goodheart from the street corner to the mailbox, Tom explains that he keeps abreast of news of the war through an embossed paper, and thus enlightens the gentleman about the capacity of the blind to read with their fingers. Once they arrive at the mailbox, he opens the package

⁶⁰ AO, RG 2-204, Ministry of Education, Ontario School for the Blind, box 1, file "Dominion Tactile Press Limited 1918–1922."

⁶¹ Swift to Champion, 27 November 1914; and Swift, "General Report for 1912," pp. 1–2, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13E.

⁶² F.W. Johnston to [newspaper editor], 9 November 1914, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13D.

⁶³ "No. 5. What Canada Should Do," CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13D.

⁶⁴ "Treasurer's Report for the Year 1912," CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13a.

he is carrying to reveal “several of the most remarkable books” Mr. Goodheart has ever seen. Measuring “about fourteen inches long by twelve in width and one inch in thickness,” these volumes disclose pages “covered with lines of curiously arranged dots, looking for all the world like an area of human skin covered with chicken-pox.” What Mr. Goodheart sees before him, Tom reveals, represents only a small portion of the more than thirty Braille volumes that make up Green’s *History of the English People*, the complete set selling at a prohibitive cost of approximately twenty-seven dollars. When Mr. Goodheart queries Tom on the source of his books, Tom describes the Canadian Free Library for the Blind but concludes that “the present war has endangered the existence of our greatest source of literary supply by turning philanthropy into other unusual channels.” Moved by his chance encounter with Tom, Mr. Goodheart mails a donation to the library the following day.⁶⁵ Thus, in a brief but effective narrative, the CFLB sought to educate the general public about the literacy of the blind, their limited financial capacity to purchase personal copies of embossed books, and the work and financial needs of the library, while acknowledging the exigencies of the war and expressing its loyalty to Great Britain through Tom’s choice of reading material.

What the board did not anticipate in 1914 was that the war would soon heighten public awareness of blindness to a degree not previously experienced. In 1896, Bert Robinson had been able to state unequivocally that, since blindness did not affect a large percentage of the total population, “nothing approaching a general interest is taken in the blind”;⁶⁶ however, after 1914, battle-inflicted injuries resulted in a small, but highly publicized, increase in adult blindness among the Canadian population.⁶⁷ The CFLB acted on the greater awareness that ensued. In October 1915, a feature article about the CFLB – “Blind Librarian Wants to Help Our Blinded Soldiers” – appeared under the by-line of “La Cerise” in the Toronto *Star Weekly*. This article was subsequently reprinted by the library as part of a booklet entitled *Our Blinded Soldiers and the Canadian Free Library for the Blind* (1916), with the text of the article preceded by copies of the alphabet and musical notation in British Braille, and followed by a poem about blindness authored by Swift, as well as a donation

⁶⁵ “The Blind and the War News,” CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13D.

⁶⁶ E.B.F. Robinson, *The True Sphere of the Blind*, v.

⁶⁷ For a detailed account of this phenomenon, see Serge Marc Durlfing, *Veterans with a Vision: Canada’s War Blinded in Peace and War* (Vancouver and Toronto: University of British Columbia Press, 2010), 2–8.

form. La Cerise's article provides a brief overview of the history of embossed printing, comments on the expense of its production, and identifies the services provided by the CFLB. In the final paragraph, readers are advised: "Now, Mr. Swift wants to get in touch with those brave soldiers who have given their country their dearest possession, their eyesight, that he may give them fresh courage, yes, and a fresh start in life, by teaching them both to read and use the typewriter."⁶⁸

Swift's disclosure to La Cerise anticipated his formal proposal in December 1915 to Ontario's deputy minister of education, A.H. Colquehoun, that the library might participate in training newly blinded servicemen. "It will be readily admitted that the first necessary step in the education of a blind adult is a knowledge of tangible reading and writing," Swift explained: "Without this knowledge the blind man is cut off from the whole world of useful material and becomes a burden to himself and others. This first step is quite within the power of the Canadian Free Library for the Blind and I am willing and anxious to personally superintend the teaching of the Braille system of tangible reading and writing to blinded soldiers. And I am also in a position to supplement such instruction with a knowledge of typewriting whereby the blind are enabled to conduct private or commercial correspondence with the sighted world."⁶⁹ Several years before the war began, the CFLB had established a secondary service of providing instruction in embossed-print literacy to those blinded in adulthood or otherwise falling outside the reach of the existing schools.⁷⁰ As a result, the CFLB appeared to be in an immediate position to offer such services, and Swift contacted the Military Hospitals Commission in Ottawa too, which agreed to let the library know when blinded soldiers returned to Canada.⁷¹ The CFLB did help blinded servicemen find employment after their return to Canada,⁷² as it did the civilian blind as well,⁷³ but circumstances conspired against the library's full realization of its original offer of support.

Public perception or anticipation of the number of war-blind exceeded the reality. According to Andrew Macphail, during the First

⁶⁸ La Cerise, "Blind Librarian Wants to Help Our Blinded Soldiers," 13.

⁶⁹ Swift to A.H. Colquehoun, 14 December 1915, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13B.

⁷⁰ Swift to Hon. R.A. Payne, 31 January 1911, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13E.

⁷¹ Durlinger, *Veterans with a Vision*, 37.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 38.

⁷³ CFLB (no author) to the lieutenant governor, Nova Scotia, 21 October 1916, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13C.

World War a total of sixty-six Canadian servicemen (four officers and sixty-two of other ranks) survived injuries that left them blind in both eyes.⁷⁴ Historian Desmond Morton, in turn, has recorded that, in the end, 178 members of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) were discharged as blind, “but fewer than half had lost their eyesight through wounds.”⁷⁵ Further service personnel, who suffered eye injuries but not outright blindness before their discharge, would lose their sight in later years.⁷⁶ Once the immediate medical needs of those blinded during the war had been met in hospital, blind CEF personnel were sent to St. Dunstan’s Hostel for Blinded Soldiers and Sailors, the special, UK-based rehabilitation facility established in 1915 by British newspaperman Arthur Pearson, or back to Canada, where their options were to attend the HSB as an adult, seek services from the MAB, or return directly to their families.⁷⁷ While the war remained ongoing, fortune favoured those who found themselves at St. Dunstan’s.⁷⁸ Created with the war-blind specifically in mind, St. Dunstan’s respected the adulthood of the service people sent there, unlike the HSB, whose own rules had been developed with children in mind.⁷⁹ Two Canadian officers who passed through St. Dunstan’s very early in the war – Edwin A. Baker and Alexander G. Viets – both returned to Canada in 1916 and soon found themselves recruited to the board of the CFLB. After meeting Baker and Viets and learning about the quality of St. Dunstan’s training, Swift emerged as an advocate of the hostel as the first option for the rehabilitation of servicemen during the war.⁸⁰

⁷⁴ Andrew Macphail, *Official History of the Canadian Forces in the Great War 1914–1919: The Medical Services* (Ottawa: King’s Printer, 1925), 280.

⁷⁵ Desmond Morton, *When Your Number’s Up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War* (Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1993), 193, 256; and Desmond Morton, *Fight or Pay: Soldiers’ Families in the Great War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2004), 135–36, 138.

⁷⁶ Durlinger, *Veterans with a Vision*, 42, 53.

⁷⁷ Herie, *Journey to Independence*, 50.

⁷⁸ Canadian accounts of St. Dunstan’s can be found in James H. Rawlinson’s memoir, *Through St. Dunstan’s to Light* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1919); and Marjorie Wilkins Campbell, *No Compromise: The Story of Colonel Baker and the C.N.I.B.* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1965), 14–28.

⁷⁹ For an account of the experiences of blinded service personnel sent to St. Dunstan’s versus those returned to Canada immediately after hospitalization for rehabilitation and resettlement, see Durlinger, *Veterans with a Vision*, 24–32 and 36–47.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 37–40.

Another factor that inhibited the CFLB's rehabilitation of Canadian service personnel was its temporary closure and removal to new premises in 1917. When the TPL required the return of the rooms in which the CFLB had been housed for free since late 1911, it plunged the library into further financial urgency. The board negotiated the purchase of a large, if dilapidated, residence at 142 College Street, which stood on property owned by the University of Toronto. According to Baker's biographer, Marjorie Wilkins Campbell, the board paid six thousand dollars for the house – half of the original asking price.⁸¹ Most of the library's surplus budget for 1916 went to the down payment on the building,⁸² so further funds were needed to refurbish the interior to meet the needs of the library. The CFLB favoured this particular site because it not only offered ample room for the collection but also held the potential for proper classroom space for teaching typewriting, shorthand, telephony, and salesmanship, plus room to establish a printing and publishing operation of embossed-print materials.⁸³

The university contributed to the cause by offering the library a nominal lease of one hundred dollars per annum, a substantial concession since it had originally hoped to generate eight hundred dollars per annum from the property.⁸⁴ A local group of women formed the Canadian Women's Association for the Blind (CWAB) with the immediate purpose of raising the funds and volunteer labour to address the building's interior refurbishment. Their efforts alongside those of the Chateauguay Chapter Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire ensured that the building was cleaned, decorated, and furnished before the library reopened its doors in spring 1917 at its new location and under the slightly revised name of the Canadian National Library for the Blind. The Peel County Women's Institute added to the appeal of the new premises by donating a piano. In an effort to facilitate the general work of the

⁸¹ Campbell, *No Compromise*, 43.

⁸² Swift, "Report of the Secretary-General of the Canadian National Library for the Blind for the Year Ending Dec. 31, 1917," p. 3, CNIB Papers, vol. 5, file 8.

⁸³ [CFLB] to Board of Governors, University of Toronto, 23 November 1916, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13C.

⁸⁴ Swift, "Supplement to the Secretary-General's Report for the First Quarter, 1917," 10 April 1917, p. 2, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13A. In *No Compromise*, Campbell indicates the reduction was from five hundred to one hundred dollars, but I have opted for Swift's figure since his comment was written at the time while Campbell's probably came from a recollection later.

library, the CWAB contributed \$1500 in cash. During 1916 and 1917, further substantial cash donations arrived from the Women's Musical Club of Toronto, the Teachers' Franchise League, the Blind Aid Committee of the War Relief Fund, and the Barrie Soldiers' Aid. The last of these was an organization of young women who initially stipulated that their donation be directed to the war-blind; however, this group was persuaded to remove the restriction in order that all members of the library might benefit from the donation. The extent of the collective generosity from various women's groups led Swift to conclude, "it is to the women of Canada that the blind must look for the largest measure of practical philanthropy so necessary to the ultimate solution of our problem."⁸⁵

Other notable funding activity marked 1917. Beginning that year, the CFLB benefitted greatly from the fundraising efforts of Toronto businessman Lewis Wood, who had been made aware of the library's financial difficulties by Baker, the two of them having become acquainted at a party held by Toronto newspaper publisher John Robinson, Baker's future father-in-law. Although some members of the board were initially against bringing a sighted individual into the library's management, Baker argued his point successfully, and Wood joined as chair of a newly created finance committee.⁸⁶ Also in 1917, further donations arrived that were officially targeted for the war-blind; by then, the library had stopped issuing appeals specific to this group, "feeling that their ultimate number in this country would be too small to justify such a step." However, in the face of ongoing and spontaneous donations designated specifically for Canada's war-blind, the library sought the counsel of the Military Hospitals Commission in Ottawa, which gave it permission to accept these donations and put them to use to serve all members of the library.⁸⁷ Finally, in 1917, a bequest of five hundred dollars enriched the library's finances, the first instance of such a gift.⁸⁸

In the wake of the library's return to full operations under its new name and at its new location in the spring of 1917, the energies of the board became increasingly focused on the creation of a national

⁸⁵ Swift, "Report of the Secretary-General of the Canadian National Library for the Blind for the Year Ending Dec. 31, 1917," 10. References to donations by the various women's groups appear throughout the report.

⁸⁶ Campbell, *No Compromise*, 42-44; and Herie, *Journey to Independence*, 42-43.

⁸⁷ Swift, "Report of the Secretary-General of the Canadian National Library for the Blind for the Year Ending Dec. 31, 1917," 17-18.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

institute that could address the whole range of concerns associated with blindness. Swift, Charles Carruthers (president of the board), and Charles Dickson (honorary president) were in the thick of these activities, as were the new recruits, Baker and Viets. The older board members had felt the need for such a national institute for a number of years: the library had long fielded queries about an array of issues related to blindness even as it continued to fulfill its original mandate of circulating embossed reading materials. Consultations with existing local, provincial, and regional voluntary associations dedicated to the blind met with mixed responses. Nonetheless, the board forged ahead with its vision of a nation-wide institute. In his annual secretary's report of 1917, Swift summarized the situation thus:

Everywhere but in the world of the Canadian blind you see a getting together of allied interests, a centralization of directive force, an elimination of superfluous machinery and duplicated energy. With the Canadian blind this is not the case. Each section has its local organization wholly independent of all others. Until this library was established little or no intercommunication existed among these various societies and the blind in one part of our country scarcely knew of the existence of their brethren elsewhere. Of late, however, there has been growing a feeling that matters do not stand with us as they should. The various associations are finding it increasingly difficult to raise money for their local needs. Legislation is hard to obtain on account of the weakness of the influence of the local blind. Healthy growth is rendered almost impossible because of isolation. A desire is now apparent to create an organization of a truly national character, whose duty it shall be to co-ordinate effort, to prevent overlapping, to conserve energy, to make possible the free exchange of ideas, to secure necessary legislation, and to collect money for the assistance of the cause in all parts of the Dominion.⁸⁹

With the assistance of Toronto lawyer George Plaxton, who worked on a pro bono basis, the group drafted articles of incorporation for an entity to be called the Canadian National Institute for the Blind. The Halifax Explosion of 6 December 1917, which left another thirty-seven Canadians completely blind and more than 450 others suffering the loss of one eye or sustaining some injury to their eyes from shattered glass, only affirmed the need for such an organization.

The CNIB received its charter on 30 March 1918. In August of the same year, Baker, who was serving as the institute's first vice-president,

⁸⁹ Ibid., 15–16.

also began a remunerated position in the newly created federal Department of Soldiers' Civil Re-establishment. He was charged with working on a program for the training and after-care of Canada's war blind. In these dual capacities, he spearheaded the establishment, in January 1919, of Pearson Hall, a CNIB training facility based in Toronto that was modeled after St. Dunstan's and through which the Canadian war-blind, as well as other blind Canadians, would be able to seek rehabilitation services.⁹⁰ That same month, the CFLB officially threw in its lot with the CNIB, to become its Library and Publishing Department.

Membership, Collection, and Circulation

While the board and the librarians experienced ongoing anxiety over the finances of the Canadian Free Library for the Blind during much of its independent existence, they also took satisfaction in the steady increase in the size of the library's membership, circulation, and collection. (See table 1.) Between July 1907, the month it officially opened, and December 1918, the library's membership increased from twenty-six to 572. The latter figure probably represented about one-sixth of the blind population in Canada by 1918. The collection, which was typically counted by volume rather than title (many embossed works comprised multiple volumes), grew from seventy-five in July 1907 to approximately six thousand by the end of 1918.⁹¹ In addition, the library held almost 1600 pieces of music by the close of 1916. Circulation figures recorded for the six months during which the library was operational in 1907 indicate the loan of 996 items. By the end of December 1918, annual circulation neared ten thousand items.

⁹⁰ Campbell, *No Compromise*, 46–48; Herie, *Journey to Independence*, 55–57; and Durlinger, *Veterans with a Vision*, 57–63.

⁹¹ Minutes of 13 January 1908, Minute Book of the CFLB; Swift, "Librarian's Annual Report 1918," CNIB Papers vol. 5, file 8; and "Activities of the Canadian National Library for the Blind," CNIB Library, Toronto, IRC, file "CNIB Library – History."

Table 1. CFLB End-of-Year Annual Statistics, 1907–1918.⁹²

A dash indicates that no figure has been located.

Year End	Membership	Collection	Circulation
1907 (July – Dec)	59	441 volumes	996 items
1908	—	—	3150 items
1909	109	1138 volumes 413 pieces of music	3537 items
1910	109	1485 volumes 442 pieces of music	3511 items
1911	133	2290 volumes 776 pieces of music (145 v. destroyed)	3599 items
1912	182	2913 volumes 1088 pieces of music (103/123 v. destroyed)	5971 items
1913	—	3675/3677 volumes 1340 pieces of music	6716 items
1914	Approx. 310	3580 volumes (1059 titles) 1579 pieces of music	Approx. >7000 items
1915	Approx. 416	Approx. 4257	—
1916	476	5200 volumes (1200–1400 titles)	—
1917	—	—	—
1918	572	Approx. 6000 volumes	9737

⁹² This table has been compiled using the Minute Book of the CFLB and the following items from the CNIB Papers: “Some Particulars Re Canadian Free Library for the Blind Incorporated Under Ontario Libraries Act, Nov. 9th, 1906”; “The Report of the C.F.L.B., 1907”; Marion Robinson, “Librarian’s Report for Year Ending Dec. 31, 1912” (all in vol. 3, file 3-13E); “Literature & Music Statement,” 22 December 1914; Swift to R.A. Payne, Minister of Education, [1914], p. 2 (vol. 3, file 3-13D); Swift, “Librarian’s Annual Report 1918” (vol. 5, file 8); “1913 Stock Statement”; Marion Robinson, “Librarian’s Report for Year Ending Dec. 31, 1911”; Marion Robinson, “Librarian’s Report for Year Ending Dec. 31, 1910” (vol. 3, file 3-13A). The following sources were also used: “Activities of the Canadian National Library for the Blind,” 12 March 1919, CNIB Library, IRC, file “CNIB Library – History”; and La Cerise, “Blind Librarian Wants to Help Our Blinded Soldiers,” 10. The use of “Approx.” in the table signals a year when the figure did not come from a year-end report but from another source that was close to the end of the year.

When the library was first founded, as per the “Associated Libraries” section of the Ontario Library Act, members were apparently required to pay one dollar per annum, or, as a result of a concession from the Department of Education, donate a book each year valued at such an amount, in order to remain voting members.⁹³ That concession no doubt accounts for the high number of donations recorded at the second annual meeting of January 1908. According to the minutes, “One hundred and fifty three volumes, of the value of One hundred and Seventeen Dollars and Seventy cents ... were contributed as donations mainly by the members themselves.” In 1912, a new set of rules and regulations came into play, membership in the CFLB now available to “any blind person in Canada forwarding a certificate of good character, signed by some responsible party, or by paying One Dollar in money.”⁹⁴ The certificate – or the dollar – were required only once. Membership under these new rules entitled an individual to loan an item for a month, the borrower being subject to a fine of two cents per day on overdue items. Unpaid fines, or the failure to borrow at least one work during the year, disqualified a member from voting during the annual meeting.⁹⁵

Throughout its history, the CFLB worked to extend its reach beyond a local membership. At the time of its inception, the membership drew largely from the Toronto area. Part of the effort of the first year included a drive to alert blind persons throughout Ontario to the existence of the library. The daily press in Toronto and Hamilton, as well as newspapers in other parts of the province, facilitated this effort through the free insertion of notices about the CFLB. Nonetheless, the librarian of the day, Bert Robinson, felt that such appeals were obviously limited because “the blind themselves do not see these notices and the sighted friends who do are not often by to tell of them.”⁹⁶ By 1912 the library’s focus had shifted from achieving a provincial to a national membership. In his secretary’s report for 1912, Swift identified “finding blind persons in our widespread Dominion” as one of the two major difficulties of the preceding year. (Funding was the other.) He went on to cite the library’s two primary methods for seeking out potential members. First, “a semi-

⁹³ Swift to E.A. Baker, 31 May 1922, p. 2, CNIB Papers, vol. 5, file 8.

⁹⁴ Minutes of 13 January 1908, Minute Book of the CFLB.

⁹⁵ “Rules and Regulations of the Canadian Free Library for the Blind, Toronto, Canada,” 25 October 1912, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13D.

⁹⁶ E.B.F. Robinson, “Second Annual Report of the Canadian Free Library for the Blind,” CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13E.

annual article dealing with our undertaking and published in all the leading papers throughout Canada." The article included a request to those who read it to submit to the CFLB the name and address of any blind person they knew. Second, "a direct appeal to our members themselves to send in the names and addresses of their blind friends not yet members of the library." Once a name and address were acquired, the library would write the potential member with news of the CFLB and its services. Swift acknowledged that these methods had generated new members, but felt that the whole process would have been much improved if registration of the blind were to be undertaken by the provincial governments.⁹⁷

While Ontario, and particularly Toronto, dominated the CFLB's membership throughout the 1906 to 1918 period, by the time of the merger the library did have members throughout the country. The librarian's report for 1912 indicates that, by that year, the CFLB claimed members in eight of the nine provinces, but 77.5% of its membership remained Ontario-based. (See table 2.) Of the Ontario members, 26% were located in Toronto.⁹⁸ Although no overt membership breakdown by province is available for any year after 1912, circulation figures for December 1918, the last month of the library's independent operation, were divided geographically. Of those items circulated, 59.8% went to addresses in Ontario, 10% to Quebec, 7.9% to British Columbia, 9.7% to the Maritime provinces, and 9.7% to the Prairie provinces. (See table 3.) Toronto circulation represented 29.2% of the Ontario figure.⁹⁹ If one compares the annual circulation for Ontario in 1912 against the monthly circulation for the province in December 1918, one finds a decrease from 82.6% to 59.9%. This difference suggests a significant increase in members from outside the province during the intervening years. In his annual secretary and librarian's report for 1918, Swift claimed annual circulation for Ontario that year to be "nearly 54 per cent."¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Swift, "General Report for 1912," p. 1.

⁹⁸ Marion Robinson, "Librarian's Report for Year Ending Dec. 31, 1912."

⁹⁹ Percentages are based on Swift, "Report of December 1918," CNIB Papers, vol. 5, file 8.

¹⁰⁰ Swift, "Report of the Secretary-General and Librarian of the Canadian National Library for the Blind for the Year Ending Dec. 31, 1918," CNIB Papers, vol. 5, file 8.

Table 2. CFLB Membership and Circulation for 1912:
Breakdown by Province¹⁰¹

Province	Number of Members (/182)	Circulation (/5971 Items)
British Columbia	3 (1.6%)	45 (0.8%)
Alberta	4 (2.2%)	152 (2.5%)
Saskatchewan	6 (3.3%)	202 (3.4%)
Manitoba	6 (3.3%)	208 (3.5%)
Ontario	141 (77.5%)	4930 (82.6%)
Quebec	11 (6.0%)	278 (4.7%)
Nova Scotia	7 (3.8%)	122 (2.0%)
New Brunswick	4 (2.2%)	34 (0.6%)
Prince Edward Island	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

Table 3. CFLB Circulation for December 1918:
Breakdown by Province/Region¹⁰²

Province	Circulation (/723 Items)
British Columbia	57 (7.9%)
Alberta	33 (4.6%)
Saskatchewan	9 (1.2%)
Manitoba	28 (3.9%)
Ontario	432 (59.8%)
Quebec	72 (10%)
Maritimes	70 (9.7%)
Newfoundland	2 (0.3%)
United States	20 (2.8%)

The monthly report of December 1918 also recorded a small amount of circulation outside of Canada, something that would not have been anticipated based on the regulations set out in 1912. In December 1918, Newfoundland claimed 0.3% of circulation, and the United States 2.8%. In another report penned by Swift in 1930, he recalled that readers in Newfoundland had approached the CFLB as

¹⁰¹ Marion Robinson, "Librarian's Report for Year Ending Dec. 31, 1912."

¹⁰² Swift, "Report of December 1918."

early as 1913 to request access to the library's holdings. The prohibitive expense of circulating the books as far away as Newfoundland, during an era when it was not yet part of Canada, led the library to lobby the Canadian and Newfoundland governments for a bilateral agreement allowing the free postage of embossed-print materials between the two dominions. Its effort was successful and an agreement took effect 1 January 1916.¹⁰³ Although a similar postal agreement with the United States did not exist during this period, the CFLB may have decided to circulate its holdings south of the border in a spirit of reciprocity since some US libraries for the blind, such as the New York State Library at Albany, made their embossed-print works available to Canadian residents.¹⁰⁴

The CFLB's collection included embossed books, periodicals and music. Organizations in the United States and Great Britain represented the most significant suppliers of these publications.¹⁰⁵ The substantial commitment to music no doubt arose from the fact that musical ability was strongly encouraged among the blind in the early twentieth century: learning to sing and play musical instruments were skills that could be acquired for pleasure and entertainment; for many, music also offered a vital means of generating income – as musicians, music teachers, or piano tuners. An early order for the collection included requests for works by (or possibly about) Beethoven, Chopin, Mozart, and Mendelssohn.¹⁰⁶ One member revealed in a letter of 1911, "In my occupation as a Music Teacher, the Library has provided me with music which would otherwise have been beyond my reach. It supplied me with literature which every musician knows how to appreciate, and which is so necessary to successful music teaching."¹⁰⁷ That same year, another member similarly confirmed the value of the musical holdings: "I have not only found the reading of the books useful, but also the raised type music and instruction for teaching."¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ Swift, "Report of the Chief Librarian, 1929–1930," CNIB Library, IRC, file "CNIB Library – History."

¹⁰⁴ Swift to R.A. Payne, Minister of Education, [1914], p. 4, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13D.

¹⁰⁵ Swift to P.C. Layton, 15 December 1913, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13B.

¹⁰⁶ Order form for the American Printing House for the Blind dated 8 February 1908, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13B.

¹⁰⁷ Enod M. Loop to Sir, 23 January 1911, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13E.

¹⁰⁸ Eva Johnson to S.C. Swift, 26 January 1911, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13E.

In building the collection's textual holdings, emphasis was placed on adult reading matter, since the school libraries served children. Even the circulating library at the OSB showed the latter tendency, if the description of one CFLB member was accurate: "Of course, there is the circulating Library at the Blind Institute [in Brantford], but most of its readings are in the educational line, and would not be much pleasure to those outside the school."¹⁰⁹ The CFLB had some works associated with children (e.g., Grimm's Fairy Tales), but its general range of books included biography, fiction, history, poetry, religion, science, travel, and reference for adult readers.

The CFLB archives indicate that catalogues of the library's holdings were regularly produced, but none is preserved in the archives. Insight into specific titles purchased for the library is thus generally limited to two order forms for the American Printing House for the Blind (APHB, est. 1858, Louisville, Kentucky). These documents list orders made in the years 1907, 1908, and 1910. The forms tend to lack authors' names and shortened versions of the titles have been used, so identifying the works is not always possible, although some, such as Shakespeare's plays, are obvious. For 30 October 1907, only two items appear, both works of poetry: *The Deserted Village* and *Saul and Other Poems*. For 1908 and 1910, the orders were more substantial – about sixty titles in the first case, and slightly over forty in the second.¹¹⁰ The size of these two orders provides a sense of the range of purchasing in the earliest years of the library. In both years, one finds:

- 1) reference and practical works (e.g., "Handbook Punctuation" [1909], "How to Knit & Crochet" [1909], "Wait's [New York] Point Primer" [1910]);
- 2) classic and more popular literary works (e.g., "Pilgrim's Progress" [1909], "Twelfth Night" [1909], "Gray's Elegy" [1909], "Early English Ballads" [1909], "Jungle Book" [1909], "Middlemarch" [1910], "David Copperfield" [1910], "The Virginian" [1910]); and
- 3) non-fiction (e.g., "Bacon's Essays" [1909], "Conciliation [with the] Am[erican] Colonies" [1909], "Gladstone" [1909], "McMaster's Hsty U. S." [1910], "Napoleon" [1910], "Leading Facts French Hst'y" [1910], "Emerson's Essays" [1910]).

¹⁰⁹ Lillie Leonard to Friend, 22 January 1911, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13E.

¹¹⁰ See order forms for the American Printing House for the Blind dated 8 February 1908 and 3 June 1910, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13B.

Fiction may have dominated the library's textual holdings from early in its history. About half the titles ordered from the APHB in 1910 comprised classical literature and more popular fiction. Early the following year, one member praised the library as "a source of much comfort, entertainment and instruction," one that had relieved "the long tedium of the lonely isolated hours." All the same, he wished "that we did not have so much light reading[. A] good tale is a source of recreation to the mind, but we need often something more solid. I would like to have some of Ruskins works in the Library. [A]lso more of Van'Duke's [*sic*] etc. I am one of those who like[s] to 'dig deep.[']"¹¹¹

If the second glimpse into purchasing patterns provided by the librarian's annual report of 1918 reflects the general practice of the preceding eight years, then fiction was clearly prominent in the CFLB's collection. Of the 759 books acquired in 1918, the proportions broke down as follows: Fiction: 490 (64.56%); Biography: 82 (10.8%); General: 59 (7.77%); History: 34 (4.48%); Poetry: 30 (3.95%); Reference: 30 (3.95%); Science: 9 (1.19%); Travel & Description: 9 (1.19%); Religious: 8 (1.05%); Shorthand: 6 (0.79%); and Uncategorized: 2 (0.26%). Although these figures suggest that only a small number of religious works may have been acquired by the library, one patron who was a minister still found enough works to support his vocation. In a letter of 1911, he described the library as lending "inexpressible assistance ... in my work as a minister of the Gospel, since it supplies the raw material with which such men must work."¹¹² The accountant's report for 1907 also reveals that a "Point Print Bible" supplied by the American Bible Society was one of the earliest works purchased for the library.¹¹³

Most books in the collection were in English, but a portion of them were in French, German, or Italian. This is not surprising, given that Swift held a bachelor's degree in modern languages and is said to have been fluent in seven languages. In addition, language, like music, was an area of study in which the blind were seen to have strong potential to excel. As a result, language training was to be encouraged, particularly since it also enhanced possibilities of employment. In 1913, Swift noted in a letter that "French books,

¹¹¹ M.D. Scott to Sir, 20 January 1911, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13E.

¹¹² Letter of A.T. Barnard, [c. January 1911], CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13E.

¹¹³ "Second Annual Report of the Canadian Free Library for the Blind," [1907], p. 8, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13E.

both in Braille and [New York] Point, are now in constant demand, as we have a number of French Canadian readers, as well as others who are studying or reading French.”¹¹⁴ For French-Canadian members, the CFLB may have been attractive for two reasons: first, l’Institut Nazareth did not operate a circulating library until 1914; second, even when it did begin to do so, the CFLB’s holdings may have had offerings that would not have been found in a library of Catholic affiliation. In 1914, observing the Roman Catholic Church’s *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* would have been an issue for l’Institut Nazareth when building its circulating collection.

Swift’s letter of 1913 went on to reveal, “Our books in other languages are also largely used, especially by studious persons in and out of schools and colleges. I myself have opened a department of mail instruction in French, German, Italian and Latin and have two or three pupils who report progress very satisfactorily to themselves and to me.”¹¹⁵ It is not clear whether Swift offered these instructional services for free, simply considering them an integral part of the library’s work, or charged a fee. Whatever the situation, these language courses – like the teaching of embossed writing systems to the blind noted earlier – constituted important extension work on the part of the organization. No doubt such auxiliary services contributed to the CFLB’s developing perception of itself as an appropriate entity out of which to nurture the future CNIB. The library’s decision to serve as a supplier of embossed writing materials and equipment at cost represented another significant form of extension work. In one of his later secretary’s reports, Swift revealed that the library engaged in “supplying blind persons in many parts of the Dominion with Braille paper, typewriters, Braille and New York Point slates, and playing-cards.”¹¹⁶

The multiple and competing systems of embossed type active in North America during the first two decades of the twentieth century ensured that the CFLB found it inherently challenging to build its collection and serve its membership effectively. (See table 4.) A breakdown of its holdings by type system in December 1914 provides insight in this regard. That year, whereas all 1579 pieces of its sheet music were in New York Point, the textual holdings ranged through

¹¹⁴ Swift to P.C. Layton, 15 December 1913, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13B.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Swift, “Report of the Secretary-General of the Canadian National Library for the Blind for the Year Ending Dec. 31, 1917,” 2.

a myriad of type systems. New York Point dominated, claiming over 75% of the titles, while British Braille accounted for over 10%.¹¹⁷ Archival evidence indicates that the CFLB actively purchased titles in multiple dot systems; however, line-letter volumes were most likely donated since they would have been produced in systems of embossed type that had already faded in popularity by the time of the library's inception. In 1914, line-letter volumes represented 5.67% of the CFLB's holdings, but it is quite likely that this category encompassed more than one form of line type (e.g., Boston Line Letter, Kneass Line Letter).

Table 4. CFLB's Textual Holdings by Embossed-type System,
December 1914¹¹⁸

Type System	Number of Titles (/1059)
New York Point	798 (75.35%)
British Braille	108 (10.2%)
Line Letter	60 (5.67%)
French Braille	45 (4.25%)
Moon Type	26 (2.46%)
American Braille	12 (1.13%)
Italian Braille	8 (0.76%)
German Braille	2 (0.19%)

Until the end of 1912, much of the purchasing was directed toward titles in New York Point. Bert Robinson was most familiar with this system,¹¹⁹ and it is the one to which he introduced Marion. Since the membership of the CFLB in its earliest years was predominantly Ontarian and New York Point was the system with which they were most familiar, it made sense to focus on it. Swift's secretary's report of 1912, however, signalled an intention to acquire more titles in British Braille and American Braille in the coming year, arguing that "several hundred blind readers would thus be reached and benefited, who are now outside the influence of the C.F.L.B."¹²⁰ If the library wished to

¹¹⁷ "Literature and Music Statement," 28 December 1914, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13D.

¹¹⁸ "Literature and Music Statement," 28 December 1914.

¹¹⁹ E.B.F. Robinson, *The True Sphere of the Blind*, 145.

¹²⁰ "General Report for 1912," 2-3.

extend its reach beyond Ontario, it was imperative to start acquiring more Braille titles. American Braille was not taught in Canada, so the impetus was toward British Braille. It had been taught at the HSB exclusively for twenty-five years, and the English-language school for the blind established in Montreal in 1911 also opted for it. The breakdown of holdings for 1914 indicates that British Braille was indeed preferred over American. (See table 4.) A letter from late October 1914 reveals that most of that advance occurred during that year, noting besides that the acquisitions included “much fiction of the most fascinating description.”¹²¹

By the time Swift produced his secretary’s report for 1912, the CFLB may have not only begun to recognize the limits of what it could still acquire in New York Point but may also have realized that it would soon need to take a stance in the rising “Uniform Type” debate. In a circular letter issued in January 1915 the library claimed that it had, by then, almost exhausted the catalogue of the American Printing House for the Blind. At that time, the American operation produced its books exclusively in New York Point. The circular also stated that the library planned to focus more and more of its future budget on titles printed in British Braille, the major international source of which was the NIB in the United Kingdom. In addition, this letter identified the CFLB as having “placed itself formally on record as favoring British Braille.” In other words, it had decided to be an advocate for British Braille in the debate over a uniform dot system for English. In its effort to facilitate what it called “the great Braille revival that is sweeping over the continent,” the library offered its members British Braille alphabets and primers free of charge. “We do not intend, on this account, to neglect readers of any other system,” a second letter dated the same day assured, “but we shall henceforth bond our energies to the building up of a complete library of British Braille works, and to the inducing of the Canadian Blind to learn to read them.”¹²² The decision to take the side of British Braille had been decided internally at least half a year earlier. In May 1914, Swift had privately revealed the library’s intention to Philip E. Layton, founder of the MAB, who applauded this decision in a letter to another of the CFLB’s board members: “I rejoice to note ... that the Canadian Free Library is going to be one of the first to give its

¹²¹ F.W. Johnston to Friend, 30 October 1914, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13D.

¹²² Circular letters from the library dated 1 January 1915, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13D.

support to British Braille,” wrote Layton. “I see no other solution of the vexed problem. This will mean then that blind people all over the world will have one alphabet and one system of reading [in English], the same as their seeing brethren.”¹²³

Two heated letters sent to Ontario’s Department of Education in late 1914, the first by Principal Gardiner of the OSB and the second by Swift at the CFLB, reveal that the library’s advocacy of British Braille over New York Point was not appreciated by Gardiner, who also questioned the necessity of the CFLB itself. Gardiner apparently was consulted about the CFLB after the minister received a request from the library for two thousand dollars per annum to support the purchase of British Braille books. In responding, Gardiner argued that the CFLB was redundant in light of the OSB’s own circulating library and suggested that it represented “needless duplication of labour and of expense” and an unnecessary extra burden on taxpayers, who already supported the OSB and its circulating library. He took particular exception to the CFLB’s criticism of New York Point, and its claim that it was losing ground to British Braille. In his view, British Braille, with its adherence to Louis Braille’s original dot assignments for its base alphabet code, fell short of the merits of both American Braille and New York Point, both of which had adopted the “frequency of occurrence” principle in designing their base codes. He also favoured New York Point for its variable base length, which removed the limitation of sixty-three symbols associated with a rigid three-by-two cell. Finally, in a postscript that responded to the library’s suggestion that the amount of British literature was limited in the New York Point system, Gardiner countered with a catalogue that would reveal “there is no scarcity of books by British authors in New York point print.”¹²⁴

After he received a copy of Gardiner’s letter to the Ministry, Swift responded at length to the principal’s several criticisms. To the suggestion of the library’s redundancy, he estimated that, in the eight years of its existence, the CFLB had placed “in the hands of the Canadian blind ... more than four times as many books” as the OSB’s circulating library had in the sixteen years since its creation. On the matter of expense, Swift stated that “this splendid achievement has been brought about with the expenditure of less than \$3000.00

¹²³ P.E. Layton to F.W. Johnston, 21 May 1914, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13D.

¹²⁴ H.F. Gardiner to C.W. James, Secretary, Department of Education, 4 November 1914, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13D.

of money directly chargeable to taxation." Swift met with scorn the suggestion that the two libraries competed unnecessarily. "The more libraries of this nature there are, provided the number of blind readers justifies them, the better for the country as a whole." He then went on to ascribe education as well as entertainment to the library's activities since it was committed to teaching tactile reading to those who lost their sight in adulthood, or who had failed to achieve adequate tactile literacy as children. "It is the business of this library to hunt out such unfortunates and prove to them that they can learn and to provide them with the means of doing so," he asserted.

Swift's letter also reveals a preference for British Braille over either of the American point systems for reasons cultural as well as technical. "For both New York Point and American Braille[,] the United States are the only source of supply. The result of this," he argued, "is that every graduate of the Ontario School for the Blind goes out into the world the product, not of a British institution of learning, but of one whose very breath of life is drawn from beneath the Stars and Stripes. The contention that many works by British authors are available in New York Point is a mere quibble, for it is the study of history which, more than anything else, moulds a national patriotism." He argued that there were only two historical "works of value" in the American point systems (Green's *Short History of the English People* and Montgomery's *History of England*), a stark contrast, he felt, to the many historical and other works reproduced that had a strongly American focus (e.g., Dodge's *Bird's Eye View of Our Civil War*, McClung's *Boone and Other Pioneers*, Riis's *The Making of an American*). In concluding his discussion of the cultural limitations of works in the two American systems, he queried, "are such works conducive to the creation of a healthy Canadian spirit? And are not our blind boys and girls as much entitled to love their own country and the empire it belongs to as the American blind are to love the United States?" While not an educator in the conventional sense, Swift did hold a master's degree in education and may well have felt he had the authority to speak to the educational limitations of works available in the two American point systems.

Swift also countered Gardiner's technical criticisms of British Braille. Louis Braille's system for devising the alphabet, he explained, "is built up systematically, so that a person having once mastered the first ten letters, can form the rest according to rule. [New York] Point has nothing but purely arbitrary characters." He also insisted that British Braille had established standards for things like punctuation,

whereas “[New York] Point has a standard for very little except confusion and uncertainty.” As an example, he indicated that in the CFLB’s collection he could find New York Point volumes that used four different methods to signal a period. On the issue of the length and expense of British Braille versus New York Point books, Swift noted that, with the adoption of revised British Braille [i.e. Grade Two British Braille] early in the twentieth century, the length of British Braille volumes had typically become shorter compared to those of New York Point. He estimated that inter-pointed¹²⁵ Grade Two British Braille contained 14 percent more text per sheet than New York Point. In addition, while the average cost of a British Braille volume now stood at approximately seventy-three cents, a New York Point volume typically cost about eighty. Even greater savings resulted, of course, because the British Braille volumes now contained more words per volume. Finally, Swift attributed better production values to the British Braille volumes he acquired from Britain in comparison to those New York Point volumes he purchased from the United States. “[British] Braille works are a pleasure to read, so carefully are they printed, so correct and with such perfect dotting,” he asserted. “[New York] Point works are bristling with mistakes of all kinds, while the dotting is generally very poor. Modern language texts in [New York] Point are a disgrace, while we have yet to find a serious error in any work of this nature coming to us from Britain.”¹²⁶ Swift’s commentary about “dotting” most likely referred to the clarity of the embossed dot when it emerged from the press. Less strongly embossed dots would wear out more quickly under the passage of fingers over the text; once that occurred, a volume had to be removed or replaced, which added to operational costs.

There is no evidence to suggest that the Ministry of Education acceded to the CFLB’s special request of 1914 for extra funds to purchase British Braille works. However, in 1917, the NIB did materially aid the library’s efforts to increase its British Braille holdings by donating five hundred dollars worth of books and music.¹²⁷ In 1918, the library’s acquisition of English-language titles in Braille

¹²⁵ Inter-pointed printing referred to Braille that was printed on both sides of the page. Printing on the back side of the sheet was offset so as not to interfere with the dots already embossed on the front.

¹²⁶ Swift to Hon. R.A. Payne, Minister of Education, [c. Nov. 1914], CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13D.

¹²⁷ Henry Stainsby to S.C. Swift, 30 March 1917, vol. 3, file 3-13C; and S.C. Swift to Mrs. Leach, 22 May 1917, vol. 3, file 3-13B, both in CNIB Papers.

(probably both British Braille and the new American Grade One and a Half Braille) was almost ten times greater than that of New York Point, new production in the latter system having been officially abandoned the previous year in the wake of the US decision to use the same base alphabet code for point printing as the British. On the other hand, the library's circulation of New York Point volumes in 1918 still exceeded that of Braille by a ratio of more than 5:4.¹²⁸ Nonetheless, circulation of even four volumes of Braille for every five or so of New York Point suggests a significant expansion in the CFLB members' reading of Braille. The increase in Braille books in the library's holdings no doubt attracted new members residing in other provinces, who would have been most familiar with British Braille; moreover, the increased circulation of Braille can also be attributed to the library's efforts to teach it to those who had originally been trained in one of the American dot systems.

How did members feel about the CFLB? Only about a dozen letters from members appear in the archives, so that question remains difficult to answer with authority. With the exception of Kitty Curry's letter from 1914, the letters that do exist date from January 1911 and were prompted by a request from Swift for testimonials about the value of the library. He wanted to use these testimonials as evidence in a package directed to the Ontario Minister of Education, who he understood had been advised by unspecified persons that the CFLB had "no right to be further supported by the Government of this province" because Ontario was already supporting the circulating library of the OSB.¹²⁹ Although not written spontaneously, the letters do convey that the CFLB meant a great deal to some of its members. For one female patron in Toronto, "[The library] has been to me a very great benefit indeed, having brought to my knowledge literature containing many useful subjects which otherwise I would not have acquired, besides the great pleasure it is to have something to read during leisure hours which helps to bear with my affliction instead of brooding over it."¹³⁰ In a similar vein, another stated, "Speaking for myself, the C.F.L.B. has been of the greatest service, both as regards instruction and entertainment that I might never otherwise have

¹²⁸ Swift, "Librarian's Annual Report 1918," CNIB Papers, vol. 5, file 8.

¹²⁹ Swift to Payne, Minister of Education, 31 January 1911, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13E.

¹³⁰ Maud Young to Swift, 30 January 1911, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13E.

enjoyed. I should be very sorry indeed if the Library were compelled, for lack of funds, to bring its circulation to an end.”¹³¹

Most of the testimonials were brief, but Enod M. Loop of Aylmer, Ontario, sent a two-page, handwritten letter in response. “I have much reason to feel a strong personal interest in the C.F.L.B.,” she wrote:

Like a flood of sunlight to chase away the clouds, it came into my life. First it was just my strong wish for “something to read” that made the Library attractive to me ... The something to read which the Library provided proved a source of much helpful encouragement.

I found myself planning new ways and means of financial support, and my friendly correspondence with the Library helped me to solve many of the problems with which I was confronted.

The letter further revealed that, in addition to facilitating Loop’s efforts as a music teacher, the library provided materials “of valuable assistance” for her church and Sunday school work. Moreover, this letter also stated that the CFLB had offered, from time to time, some “remunerative occupation” in point printing.¹³² The letter reveals nothing further about this remunerative activity, but it is possible that Loop engaged in some local production on behalf of the library.

The CFLB’s Local Production of Embossed-Print Materials

Although it acquired the lion’s share of its collection from foreign sources, the Canadian Free Library for the Blind did produce a small amount of embossed-print materials locally, an area of endeavour that would grow after its merger with the CNIB in 1919. Educational materials, short fiction, and, to a very modest degree, Canadiana appear to have been its focus.

American and British publishing houses for the blind supplied the CFLB with most of its embossed-print materials. However, what could be acquired from these organizations did not match what was available to the majority of sighted Canadians. International publishing houses for the blind were not in a financial position to produce embossed-print works in the same amount or diversity as the ink-printed materials of conventional publishers, who issued their works for a much larger market. Transfer of an ink-print text into

¹³¹ H.G. Valiant to S.C. Swift, 24 January 1911, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13E.

¹³² Enod M. Loop to Sir, 23 January 1911, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13E.

embossed print was, in many ways, an act of translation, with much of the attendant expense that this implies.

For a Canadian library for the blind such as the CFLB, acquisitions were further complicated by the meagre amount of materials by Canadian authors or on Canadian subjects available from international suppliers. If a work of Canadiana did make it onto the list of a foreign publisher, then it certainly could be purchased, and one example of this appears in the CFLB archives: the library's 1910 order to the American Printing House for the Blind included a request for "Heart Ancient Wood,"¹³³ which was likely Charles G.D. Roberts's *Heart of the Ancient Wood*, published in both the United States and Canada about a decade earlier. The American publication of Roberts's book helps explain why the APHB issued it.

In Canada, some domestic production of embossed-print works occurred at the HSB and the OSB, both of which owned the requisite stereotyping and printing equipment by early in the twentieth century to produce publications in multiple copies. The focus of the production at the schools, however, was on textbooks for classroom use rather than works of general adult appeal. In his 1914 letter to the Ministry of Education, Principal Gardiner commented that the OSB's libraries included "hundreds of volumes of Ontario Public School Readers and other school books produced in our own printing office."¹³⁴ In turn, some annual reports of the HSB note recent issues from the school's press: in 1901, for example, the school produced embossed editions of *The Practical Speller* and *Practical Method for the Pianoforte*, and in 1906, *Commercial Arithmetic*, *Topics in Canadian History*, and *The Sight Singing of Music*.¹³⁵ (The reproduction of music-related texts for classroom use reinforces the emphasis on musical training for blind children.) No reference to acquisition of embossed-print titles produced at the HSB or OSB appears in the archives of the CFLB, but it is certainly possible that some embossed works were acquired from the two schools.

The CFLB's own production, with the exception of its catalogues, seems to have concentrated on reproducing, in embossed form, single

¹³³ Order form for the American Printing House for the Blind, 3 June 1910, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13B.

¹³⁴ Gardiner to James, 4 November 1914, 2.

¹³⁵ *Thirty-First Annual Report of the Board of Managers, and Superintendent, of the Halifax School for the Blind* [1901], (Halifax, 1901), 16; and *Thirty-Sixth Report of the Board of Managers, and Superintendent, of the Halifax School for the Blind* [1906], (Halifax, 1906), 14.

copies or very short-run editions. During the first two years of the CFLB's existence, Bert and Marion Robinson responded to the needs of a blind undergraduate student by transcribing textbooks only available in print. Marion Robinson read aloud from each text while her husband embossed it, possibly by hand using a slate and stylus specifically designed for point writing, but more likely mechanically using one of the typewriter-like devices (e.g., the Kleidograph [for New York Point], the Braille Writer, or the Perkins Braille) that had become available after 1890 for point writing. An invoice from December 1907 for printing and/or binding services of a number of items suggests that Bert and Marion Robinson also engaged in other forms of local production in the first year: short stories from American and British magazines (*Ainslee's*, *Munsey's*, and *The Strand*), Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, and Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale*.¹³⁶ The reproduction of Pope and Keats may have related to the needs of a university student, but the transcription of short stories probably responded to a more general demand for popular and contemporary fiction. The reproduction of short stories, a highly popular genre at the turn of the twentieth century, simply may not have been taken up by the American and British publishing houses of embossed print. After her husband's death, Marion Robinson taught herself New York Point in part to continue this effort. For the duration of her librarianship, she "copied short stories from magazines to augment our stock."¹³⁷

A second and innovative effort to increase the library's holdings of short stories emerged in 1910, when the CFLB introduced a semi-annual story-copying contest. Swift's secretary's report of that year indicates that these contests had a two-fold purpose: first, "to provide the Library with a constant supply of modern high class fiction," and second, to improve the grasp of CFLB members on issues of composition and spelling. "It is a woeful fact that many, perhaps most, of the graduates of our Ontario Institution for the Blind are very weak in respect to orthography, punctuation, syllabication, paragraphing, and the orderly arrangement of thought when written," Swift stated in his report. Noting there had been a demonstrable improvement in these areas between the first and second contests of 1910, he added, "Our library is intended to be educational in its activities and this is

¹³⁶ Invoice from E.N. Kane & Co. to CFLB, 14 December 1907, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, 3-13E.

¹³⁷ Marion Robinson, "The Beginning of the Library for the Blind in Canada," 3.

the first active step in that direction; for no person can enter upon such a contest without feeling himself called upon to pay close attention to the literary form and the mechanical arrangement of the piece he is copying, thus being led to an observation of the laws of composition."¹³⁸ Swift does not reveal the number of submissions to these contests nor does he indicate how many entries were sufficiently well done to become part of the collection. None of these efforts in local production, either by the Robinsons or contestants, appears to have involved any consideration of copyright.

How many years the transcription contests continued remains unclear since no reference is ever made to them again in the reports of the secretary or librarian. However, Marion Robinson's librarian's report of 1912 notes that only six short stories copied from magazines came into the collection that year.¹³⁹ This small number might suggest that the semi-annual contests did not last very long. On the other hand, a literature and music statement of the whole collection dated December 1914 reveals 143 titles (or 220 volumes) of hand-copied literature in New York Point among the library's holdings.¹⁴⁰ That figure constituted 13.5% of all "literature" titles in the holdings, or 6.15% if counted in volumes, a noteworthy number in both cases.

In 1917, the CFLB made a move to undertake local production activities in a more formal and systematic way. That year the library purchased twenty-five Braille machines and established its Transcribing Department.¹⁴¹ Over the next two years, Swift set about training several dozen women in the principles of Braille and the operation of the machines. Retrospectively, he would view the venture as a failure, the effort having produced too few individuals with a strong level of accuracy and an enduring commitment to the work. He stated unequivocally in 1923 that "the total amount of acceptable transcription received from that source was so small as not to justify the initial labour and time expended in instruction."¹⁴² Unfortunately, no details are provided about what was reproduced or how much of it was deemed of sufficient quality to add to the collection.

¹³⁸ Swift, "General Report of the Canadian Free Library for the Blind for 1910," pp. 1-2, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13E.

¹³⁹ Marion Robinson, "Librarian's Report for Year Ending Dec. 31, 1912."

¹⁴⁰ "Literature and Music Statement," 22 December 1914.

¹⁴¹ Swift, "Report of the Secretary-General of the Canadian National Library for the Blind for the Year Ending Dec. 31, 1917," 10.

¹⁴² Swift to F.W. Johnston, 3 April 1923, pp. 3-4, CNIB Papers, vol. 16, file "Library Dept. 1920-26."

A year after the launch of the Transcribing Department came the library's realization of a long-standing goal: the establishment of a printing and publishing operation. Interest in acquiring a press dated back to about 1910; indeed, one of the collecting objectives set before Arthur Gate had been to raise "a fund (an endowment) large enough to enable us to establish a publishing department for the purpose of producing chiefly Canadian literature in raised type."¹⁴³ Because of Gate's resignation, the financial difficulties that followed it, and the increasingly cramped conditions at the TPL location, the library shelved the project for several years.¹⁴⁴ Nonetheless, the board quietly retained the objective, which also had some traction with members. In early 1911, for example, one patron commented in a letter, "if we had a printing press of our own, we could do much better in the matter of books, for we could print our own standard publications. Books written by our own Canadian and British authors, and so be not altogether indebted to our American friends for our literature."¹⁴⁵ As for the board, in a letter to the Board of Governors at the University of Toronto about leasing the College Street property in late 1916, a representative of the library revealed, "There is no space [at the current location] for the installation of a proper printing department for the preparation of works by Canadian authors, of which our blind readers are at present deprived since almost the whole embossed book supply comes from the United States or Europe."¹⁴⁶ Then in the autumn of 1916, on the eve of the library's relocation, the Women's Musical Club of Toronto took up the cause. By 2 May 1917 this club had raised sufficient funds for the library to order a stereotype-maker and press from Cooper Engineering & Manufacturing of Chicago. American labour difficulties delayed the arrival of the equipment until late the following December.¹⁴⁷

In 1918, the library officially launched its printing and publishing operation. A library catalogue was more than likely one initiative of the first year since another motivation behind acquiring a printing press was to produce the runs of its embossed-type catalogues in-

¹⁴³ Swift, "General Report for 1912," 2; and Swift to Champion, 27 November 1914, 2.

¹⁴⁴ [CFLB] to Board of Governors, University of Toronto, 23 November 1916, CNIB Papers, vol. 3, file 3-13C.

¹⁴⁵ M.D. Scott to Sir, 20 January 1911.

¹⁴⁶ [CFLB] to Board of Governors, University of Toronto, 23 November 1916.

¹⁴⁷ Swift, "Report of the Secretary-General of the Canadian National Library for the Blind for the Year Ending Dec. 31, 1917," 9.

house. Less ephemeral in nature were two editions, in 1918, of the *Ontario Public School Primer*, both for what were then external clients: the first was embossed in Grade One British Braille for the CNIB's Home Teaching Department; the second was done in Grade One and a Half Braille for the OSB, relations with the school having improved with the arrival of Superintendent Race.¹⁴⁸ The stereotype-maker especially designed for embossed printing seems to have proved satisfactory, but Swift revealed in a letter to Race that he found the lever press wanting. By the end of the year, he had begun making impressions using an older, established form of technology previously adapted by the blind for printing: the clothes wringer – an Ajax wringer, to be exact. To make an impression, the stereotype was placed on a sheet of galvanized iron, which was then overlaid with a sheet of Oxford paper and a rubber blanket three-sixteenths of an inch thick. When the whole passed through the wringer, the blanket protected the dots. Swift chose the Oxford paper because it was fairly thin but tough, printed dry, and, once shellacked, held the dots admirably.¹⁴⁹ A gift of a ton of paper from the Provincial Paper Mills to the library supported the production of the OSB edition of the primer.¹⁵⁰

Beyond the two editions of the primers, which were logical to produce using printing equipment since they required more substantial print runs, no book-length work of Canadiana appears to have issued from the CFLB's press in 1918. Nonetheless, a concern for publishing a broader range of Canadiana may have manifested itself. In future years, Swift would recall that, during its first year in operation, the library's press issued some "materials of interest to book users," an effort that evolved in 1919 (after the CFLB's merger with the CNIB) into "the dignity of a true magazine," which took the name of the *Braille Courier*. Given that Swift, who would serve as the future magazine's editor, "laid it down as a principle" that the *Courier* "should be as Canadian as possible," it is probable that a portion of the "materials of interest to book users" issued by the CFLB

¹⁴⁸ Swift, "Report of the Secretary-General of the Canadian National Library for the Blind for the Year Ending Dec. 31, 1918," 1.

¹⁴⁹ Swift to W.B. Race, 5 December 1918, AO, RG 2-204, Ministry of Education, Ontario School for the Blind, box 1, "file 5 – CNIB – S.C. Swift, Chief Librarian, 1917–1924."

¹⁵⁰ Swift, "Report of the Secretary-General and Librarian of the Canadian National Library for the Blind for the Year Ending Dec. 31, 1918," 2.

in 1918 were specifically Canadian in content.¹⁵¹ Indeed, perhaps he produced these materials as a way of testing the demand for precisely such a periodical, one which he now had the capacity to produce in a print run large enough to provide all members of the library with their own copy of each issue.

Conclusion

The Canadian Free Library for the Blind emerges from the archival record as a vital, early-twentieth-century venture in ameliorating the conditions in which Canada's adult blind lived and worked. In 1906, almost half a century after the first elementary school for the blind was founded in the British North American colonies, services to support the adult blind remained scarce, with formal training in tactile literacy for those who lost their sight in adulthood largely confined to the efforts of the HSB's Home Teaching Society. In the case of blind Canadian adults already capable of reading embossed print, purchasing reading matter was often impossibly expensive while borrowing it from institutions remained limited to three sources: the tiny holdings in some public libraries, the limited collections of circulating libraries operated as auxiliary services by the Canadian schools for the blind based in Ontario and Nova Scotia, and those American libraries for the blind that were willing to send materials to Canada. Further limits on access ensued as a result of the lack of uniformity in the embossed type used by the English-speaking world, a complexity particularly felt in Canada, where the OSB had adopted New York Point and the HSB British Braille.

When Bert Robinson called a meeting of blind women and men in Toronto in November 1906 with the ambition of bringing forth an independent, circulating library focused on the reading needs of the adult blind of Canada, he acted out of a conviction that the most appropriate people to improve the conditions of the blind were the blind themselves. As a community, he believed, blind Canadians knew their own needs, struggles, and aspirations best, and as such were ideally placed to establish and operate communal organizations tailored to address their particular concerns. In the case of the CFLB, during its first decade the institution functioned with a Board of

¹⁵¹ Swift to Mrs. F.C. Lorway, 28 September 1928, CNIB Papers, vol. 12, file "Library Depart. – General, 1927–1930."

Management exclusively made up of blind men, although its second librarian, Marion Robinson, and all of its librarian's assistants prior to 1918 were sighted women. In the face of extraliterary issues raised on an ongoing basis by its membership, the library chose to interpret its mandate broadly. Over the course of its independent existence it launched an array of auxiliary services, including provision, at cost, of instruments of communication used by the blind, literacy training in embossed print, and classes in modern languages and typewriting, as well as more general employment services. By midway through the First World War, with its nascent ambitions affirmed by the two newly blinded servicemen now on its board, the CFLB self-identified as a national entity concerned with the needs of blind Canadians throughout the country. It felt that it could serve as a base from which to develop and launch a multi-faceted national institute for the blind whose reach, impact, services, and vision would be much greater than the library's.

Even so, the heart of the story of the CFLB between 1906 and 1918 remains that of any library – the bringing together of readers with the materials that they want to read. Although the voices of those readers do not emerge in great number from the archival record, the statistics available do reveal a steady increase in membership over a dozen years. From a base of twenty-six when it officially commenced in July 1907, the membership of the CFLB rose to 572 by December 1918, a twenty-two fold increase and a figure that probably represented about one-sixth of the blind population in Canada at that time. Ontario, the province with the most blind, claimed the largest part of the library's circulation, but the CFLB's efforts to reach westward and eastward, particularly from 1912 onward, proved sufficiently successful that by 1918 annual circulation outside of Ontario stood at about 55 percent. To facilitate these national ambitions, the CFLB's third librarian, Sherman Swift, expanded the library's holdings of British Braille, the point system that he valued most for both technical and cultural reasons and the one most used by blind Canadians outside of Ontario. With the support of the board, Swift officially aligned the CFLB with the advocates of British Braille in the contemporary debate over a standard embossed type for English. Once the library took up this position, it offered its members free British Braille alphabets and primers so that those originally trained in other systems could teach themselves the British system and gain access to reading materials only available in British Braille. Affirmation of the library's decision came in 1917, when the American Association of Workers

for the Blind rejected both New York Point and American Braille in favour of Grade One and a Half Braille, whose base alphabet code emulated that of the British system.

The archives reveal an eighty-fold increase in the size of the CFLB's holdings over its dozen years, but the precise contents of its collection remain elusive. The existence of multiple forms of embossed type obliged the library to acquire some titles more than once; others would have been available in only one format as a result of the production choices of suppliers. The library's broad rubrics for its holdings were "music" and "literature," with the former referring to musical scores and the latter encompassing periodicals, short stories, and books that ran the gamut from self-help and religion through history and biography to poetry and fiction. Fiction, including classic literature as well as contemporary, popular works, probably dominated the textual holdings through much of the period under examination. If one extrapolates from Swift's comments of 1914 to the minister of education – that is, the letter in which he noted the variance in historical titles made available by American versus British publishing houses for the blind – then in all likelihood American rather than British history held a more prominent role in the collection in the library's early years, with British history gaining ground from 1913 onward with the increased momentum toward purchasing British Braille titles from the NIB.

Neither the United States nor the United Kingdom could be relied upon for a steady flow of Canadian-authored works, however, and so CFLB members remained largely "deprived" in this regard. Heightening the library's holdings of Canadiana does not appear to have motivated the early efforts in local production by Bert and Marion Robinson, or influenced the introduction of the transcription contest. Nevertheless, concern about this lack manifested itself as early as 1910, when the idea of a printing and publishing department, chiefly to produce Canadiana, first emerged. Though never formally articulated, this preoccupation may also have factored into the founding in 1917 of the Transcribing Department, which seems to have been established to engage in singular and spontaneous acts of local production rather than in stereotyping works for larger print runs. The CFLB issued two editions of the *Ontario Public School Primer* from its new press in 1918 and some unspecified "materials of interest to book users," but overall at the time of its merger with the CNIB its publishing ambition remained in a nascent state.

SOMMAIRE

En novembre 1906, un groupe d'hommes et de femmes aveugles de Toronto créèrent la Canadian Free Library for the Blind (CFLB). Durant la douzaine d'années de son existence, cette association vit l'adhésion de ses membres s'accroître de 2 200 % et ses collections de 8 000 %. Cependant la CFLB faisait face en même temps à des difficultés financières, à un personnel précaire de bibliothécaires, à des problèmes d'emplacement et à de longs débats quant à décider du meilleur système d'écriture en relief à adopter. La CFLB débuta modestement comme institution locale mais ne tarda pas à regrouper en 1918 des membres à l'échelle nationale de la Colombie-Britannique à Terre-Neuve (y compris une poignée d'Américains) même si les Ontariens constituaient le groupe le plus nombreux. L'une des voies par lesquelles la CFLB prit son expansion se révéla être l'acquisition de livres rédigés au moyen d'un système d'écriture tactile autre que le New York Point (NYP), lequel était en usage à l'époque à l'Ontario School for the Blind mais non ailleurs au Canada. Au plus fort des débats sur la question, la CFLB se fit éventuellement le défenseur du braille britannique en fournissant aux utilisateurs du NYP tous les outils requis pour s'initier au système. Ainsi la CFLB édita dans les années qui suivirent un nombre limité de documents tactiles. En 1918, elle acquit de l'équipement en vue de produire des imprimés en relief tout en se fixant comme objectif de diffuser les livres canadiens qui n'étaient pas encore à la disposition des aveugles. Cette activité d'éditeur allait s'avérer des plus prometteuses lorsque la CFLB fusionna en 1919 avec l'Institut national canadien pour les aveugles.