

**On the utter neglect of the eyesight question in Board of Trade enquiries into shipping disasters : a criticism of the President of the Board of Trade's reply (Feb. 1st, 1895) to the deputation of ophthalmic specialists / by T.H. Bickerton.**

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*With Mr. Bickerton's Compliments*

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ON THE UTTER NEGLECT OF THE  
EYESIGHT QUESTION IN BOARD  
OF TRADE ENQUIRIES INTO  
SHIPPING DISASTERS.

A CRITICISM OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD  
OF TRADE'S REPLY (FEB. 1ST, 1895) TO  
THE DEPUTATION OF OPHTHALMIC  
SPECIALISTS BY  
T. H. BICKERTON,  
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INFIRMARY.

READ (AUG. 2ND, 1895) IN THE SECTION OF  
OPHTHALMOLOGY AT THE ANNUAL MEETING  
OF THE BRITISH MEDICAL ASSOCIATION,  
HELD IN LONDON.

ALTHOUGH the public memory is notoriously short, it will hardly be forgotten that on the 1st of February last a deputation from the British Medical Association and the Ophthalmological Society, waited upon Mr. Bryce, who then occupied the position of President of the Board of Trade, to urge the adoption of more precise

tests for the eyesight in the examination of the mercantile marine and railway employees.

It is no compliment to the gentlemen who formed that deputation, or to the carefully prepared case which they laid before the Board of Trade, that the visual test question is precisely in the same position as it was then. Possibly the President of that overburdened department of Government—the Board of Trade—thought that he was doing well by the deputation when he gave it courteous hearing, and that nothing further would result from his neglect to take action upon this important matter. In fact, Mr. Bryce in his reply to the unanswerable arguments brought to his notice seemed to resent the mere suggestion that the Board of Trade had not pursued the most enlightened policy possible in dealing with the question of Sailors' Eyesight.

It may, perhaps, seem a little ungracious to criticise that reply at the present juncture; earlier action, however, on our part would have constituted a breach of the unwritten law of etiquette in such matters. It was promised us that the subject should receive careful consideration, and, as the wheels of officialdom run proverbially slow, a policy of passive waiting, in the hope that the result of this promised "consideration" would ultimately be vouchsafed, was practically the only line of action open to us. Mr. Bryce, too, it should be remembered, merely voiced the opinion of the permanent officials of the Board of Trade, and it is against their policy of inertia that my criticisms are directed, rather than at the statesman who was then their head and mouthpiece. Mr. Bryce

asserted that his "department had shown due diligence in dealing with the matter."

At this stage of the colour-vision and eyesight question it is perhaps unnecessary to expose the utter impudence and presumption of such a claim. It is well known that the "diligence" of the department, to which is entrusted the safeguarding of the travelling community by land or sea has manifested itself, first in refusing to admit the danger of the colour-blind factor, and subsequently, when compelled by facts to abandon this untenable position, in stubbornly resisting any effort which sought to eliminate visually afflicted persons from serving on our railways or in our mercantile marine.

The action of the Medical Profession in persistently pointing out the dangers arising from visual defect, and suggesting the adoption of remedial measures, has been until quite recent times regarded in the light of mere faddism; and so long as discussions and recommendations were confined to the Medical Press, the subject was a closed book to the public, and the Board of Trade treated the views of those competent to give an opinion with undisguised contempt. That the rights of the case were unknown to the public may be gathered from the fact, that though the dangers of employing colour-blind men as sailors were first pointed out in 1855, a leading daily paper stated in 1888 that "too much fuss is made about the supposed deficiency." For such a statement the public press may rightly plead ignorance. But no such plea can be put forward by the Board of Trade. They were well aware of the researches of Dr. Wilson (Edinburgh), whose work on "Colour-

Blindness," published in 1855, will ever be a living monument to his labours; and they knew well of the efforts of Dr. Jabez Hogg—to whose admirable exertions I believe we owe the first Parliamentary Return on "Colour Vision";—of Mr. Brudenell Carter, of Cantor Lecture fame; of Dr. Brailey (London); and last, but not least, of Dr. Joy Jeffries, of Boston, U.S.A., whose work on "Colour Blindness" has done more than any other to point out to the English speaking people, its dangers and detection.

But to all advice the Board of Trade turned a deaf ear, and I believe it was not until I enlisted Dr. Farquharson's assistance to direct Parliamentary attention to the question, that the public began to be awakened to a due sense of the needless peril to which sea-goers were subjected from visually afflicted sailors, and the Board of Trade to see that they had the public and not the Medical Profession only to deal with. For when once the vital importance of the matter was pointed out to the General and Shipping Press, their voice has not ceased to make itself heard in the cause, and it has done incalculable good towards educating the nation to understand aright the risk which must ever accrue to lives and shipping property from colour-blind and defective-sighted officers and look-outs.

As far back as December, 1877, Dr. Caldwell, Surgeon on board the historic Cunarder "Russia," wrote to the "Nautical Magazine" as follows:—

- (1) "I hold that the quality of eyesight that was good enough to steer clear of the old sailing packet, is by no means adequate to recognise surely and promptly the

lights of the modern steamer, where the time for reflection is often limited to seconds."

- (2) "That more collisions occur through mistaking coloured sidelights than almost all other causes combined."

The truth of the first statement, Dr. Caldwell goes on to remark, "is almost self evident, and will be conceded when one considers the increasing rate of speed as compared with the more leisurely progress of the days when steam was unknown. The history of accidents from collision, and the conflicting evidence with reference to the bearings of coloured lights, as exemplified in our law courts, will, I think, sustain the latter statement."

So wrote Dr. Caldwell close upon twenty years ago, and it speaks volumes for the "diligence" which the Board of Trade has exercised over this subject that we, in the present year of grace, should still be urging the adoption of remedial measures to safeguard the public from dangers which were so pertinently indicated so far back as 1876.

Apparently the Board of Trade take credit to themselves concerning the Royal Society's enquiry into the colour vision question. It is well known, however, that it was only after steady pressure, long continued, that such a step was practically forced upon the Board of Trade. The enquiry was a costly one, and its findings were quite in accord with the latest scientific teachings. But the Board of Trade, if we except their adoption of the Holmgren wool test, have done but little towards adopting the Royal Society's recommendations. Their action in

thus seeking advice, and then failing to act upon it, is clearly evidential that the enquiry was wrung from them with the greatest reluctance. They were practically compelled by the influence of public opinion to order it, and their subsequent neglect of its suggestions lays the Board of Trade open to the very serious charge of regarding the commission in the nature of a sop which the united forces of the medical profession and the press compelled them to throw to the Cerberus of public opinion.

The official position on the subject of colour-blindness and its risks is the illogical one which assumes the absence of risk, because among the direct causes of collision definite cases of the disaster being due to colour-blindness or to defective eyesight do not largely figure.

“It was certainly very remarkable,” said Mr. Bryce, “that an exceedingly small number of accidents, he might almost say, few or no accidents, at sea or on land had been so far traceable to this cause. He had, for some months past, carefully perused the reports of the courts of enquiry, and he had made most careful enquiries of the heads of the railway and marine departments, and had been assured that in scarcely any case had it been suggested, or so far as they knew could it be suggested, that defects of vision had been the cause of accidents.”

This is the buttress behind which officialdom shelters itself. The Board of Trade requires that death and disaster shall first take place before they will take the necessary steps to eliminate colour-blind and defective far-sighted subjects from occupying responsible positions on the decks and bridges of our merchant vessels.

Mr. Bryce, instead of perusing the reports he alludes to for months, might do so for years—for a lifetime in fact—and not find a single case in which the court finds that a vessel has been lost through the defective sight of some member of its or another vessel's crew. But, if Mr. Bryce will deign to peruse the reports in question with an impartial mind, first dismissing the official view that the risk from colour-blindness and defective vision is a mere bogey, raised by the medical profession and believed in by the press, he will have but little difficulty in learning that many collisions occurring at sea by night are of an altogether unaccountable character. The atmosphere may be clear, the respective look-outs alert, so that the approaching vessels are duly signalled and reported before the danger point is reached. In spite of this, collision occurs. Through what cause? The Board of Trade maintain the cause may be anything save and except colour-blindness or defective sight. The pre-conceived official view on that visual defect quite precludes any suspicion that the disaster was due to such a factor. Common sense would say, why in such cases is not the eyesight of the survivors of such catastrophes tested? Why, too, in cases where there is a glaring contradiction on matters of fact respecting the position of converging vessels, as manifested by their sidelights, does not the court insist upon the eyesight of the witnesses being tested? If such steps were taken I venture to assert that many an inexplicable disaster would be solved, and many an apparent case of wilful perjury would be explained.



I challenge Mr. Bryce and the Board of Trade to point to one single case out of the many thousands that have occurred, where, after collision, the Board have ordered an examination of the eyesight of the surviving officers and look-outs, and I submit that Mr. Bryce's misleading—not to use a stronger adjective—reply, was not of the kind to be expected from the responsible minister of a great public department. Rightly or wrongly, I felt at the time that, his reply was an evasion of the positive evidence laid before him, and was directed towards screening the permanent officials from the charge of apathy and negligence. Unquestionably it deceived—with a few notable exceptions—the public press, and not for the first time was the public gulled into a false feeling of security. Little did I think, such a striking proof of their negligence and incapacity would be so soon forthcoming.

It might have been thought that the somewhat inexplicable cause of the "Elbe" and "Crathie" disaster would have suggested to the Board of Trade officials the advisability of testing the eyesight and colour sense of the "Crathie's" look-out men. Apart, however, from the utter improbability of themselves deeming it advisable to sift this phase of the question, they even refused to do so when asked.

Thinking that in such a lamentable catastrophe as this, no stone should be left unturned in the endeavour to trace to its true source the cause of the disaster, I wrote to the Board of Trade while their enquiry was pending, suggesting the desirability of examining the eyesight

and colour sense of such of the "Crathie's" crew as were on deck at the time of the casualty.

In response to my letter, I received from the Board of Trade an autograph communication of which the following is a copy :—

Board of Trade, Whitehall Gardens, S.W.,

*May 20th, 1895.*

Dear Sir,

I am directed by Mr. Bryce to acknowledge receipt of your letter of yesterday's date, and to state in reply that the question of the powers of vision will be carefully borne in mind in the Board of Trade enquiry into the cause of the collision between the "Elbe" and "Crathie."

Yours faithfully,

(Signed) GARNHAM ROPER.

A perusal of the above letter clearly conveys the impression that the Board of Trade intended, or rather stated their intention, of examining the eyesight of the "Crathie's" look-outs. The enquiry, however, was duly held as announced, but the question of defective sight not being mentioned in the full reports appearing in the "Times," I therefore wrote again to the Board of Trade asking for a definite statement of fact as to whether these look-outs had actually been examined or no. In reply I was honoured with the accompanying :—

Board of Trade Marine Department,

7, Whitehall Gardens, *June 26th, 1895.*

Sir,

With reference to your letter of the 19th inst., asking whether the look-outs of the "Crathie" were examined as to their eyesight, and where you can obtain a copy of the evidence taken, I am directed by the Board of Trade to state that the witnesses were not examined as to their eyesight, and that

the evidence of both sides showed that colour-blindness had nothing to do with the cause of the collision.

I am, Sir,

Your obedient servant,

(Signed) INGRAM B. WALKER.

Colour-blindness or defective vision may or may not have had something to do with the disaster. But I maintain most emphatically that considering the awful nature of the catastrophe, and the unsatisfactory nature of the evidence forthcoming, that the Board of Trade should have tested the eyesight of the "Crathie's" look-outs, and that, in the face of these letters, their failure to do so constitutes a most serious dereliction of duty, and one which imperatively calls for Parliamentary action.

So much for Board of Trade persistency in escaping by any and every loophole from admitting that defective sight or colour vision *may* be productive of maritime disaster.

A few words now on the subject of the Board of Trade's present regulations as to the proper time when the tests for colour-blindness or defective sight should be applied. Instead of being enforced before the articles of indentures are signed—and this is the proper moment—the tests only become compulsory on a candidate applying for a certificate of mate. They are thus only applied after a tedious apprenticeship has been completed, and when the candidate has, by following the sea, unfitted himself for success in other walks of life. What are the rejected ones to do? Stay on shore and starve or go to sea? The public have an idea that the Board of Trade tests eliminate the visually imper-

fect from our Mercantile Marine. But is that so? The following letter shows that the only course open to the rejected is to go to sea, colour-blindness or defective sight notwithstanding.

It is the letter of a hardworking, sober, and industrious young fellow, a life-long total abstainer, one who would under kinder circumstances have become an ornament to his profession.

Failing, after being rejected for colour-blindness, to get a berth on shore, even at the paltry pittance of one pound per week, he was literally compelled to go to sea as an A.B. at a wage of £3 10s. per month. But let him state his own case:—

“I signed my indentures on 28th December, 1887, to Mr. S. J., Liverpool, for four years. I joined my ship at Cardiff, 1st January, 1888, and finished my term of apprenticeship. I was also nine months over my time in the same vessel as A.B. On arriving home I went to school to coach for second mate. I put in my papers 14th October, 1892 (Friday) and was told I was colour-blind. At the advice of my late Captain I took a short trip up the Mediterranean in a steamer belonging to Messrs L. (the voyage occupying a month). Again my sight was tested and was failed in the “greens,” but was told my sight in other colours was perfect. There was no hope for me to pass my examination, but at the same time there was nothing to prevent me going before the mast. I went away then in one of the . . . . . Company’s Royal Mail Steamers in which I have been seven voyages to S . . . . . During these voyages I have never had any complaints as to my ability to keep a proper look-out. This I did in a fast steamer for over two years. In conclusion I may state that my only prospect now is to continue as A.B. for the rest of my days.

(Signed) E. B. W.

By the courtesy of J. Clark Hall, Esq.,  
Registrar-General of Shipping and Seamen, I

hold in my hands the returns of those men failing to comply with the colour-blind and eyesight tests, from September 1st, 1894—when the new tests came into force—to July 25th, 1895. The numbers are truly appalling. No less than 76 failed on account of colour-blindness, and 89 for defective sight. Think for a few moments of what this means! Who can form the faintest conception of the depth of blank despair into which these poor fellows are plunged in an instant—victims of the crass ignorance, pride, and hardness of heart of gentlemen who, whatever they may be in private life, exhibit in their public capacity a callousness which cannot be surpassed, if paralleled throughout the length and breadth of the land. I have seen men, strong in the pride of manhood, men who would face any danger, and who are a credit to any nation, utterly broken down on hearing that their positions and livelihood—secure at one moment—are, through no fault of their own, swept away at the next.

For many years past we have told the Board of Trade that their adoption of imperfect tests and regulations has, by permitting the entry of colour-blinds into the service, constituted a serious double offence. By such laxity, not only have incompetent men been foisted upon the public as competent ones, but the inhuman procedure has been followed of granting certificates of competency which, on the introduction of reliable tests, would be rendered valueless to the possessor, and would consequently entail loss of occupation, or, in other words, ruin.

This constitutes a serious blot on the fair fame of our Government. We have recently

witnessed the effect of an attempt to despoil the Church of her own, and have observed the result of an effort to deprive the publican of his license without compensation. These bodies, however, being rich and powerful, have resisted the attempt, and the public voice has upheld their objection. But infinitely harder and more pitiable is the lot of the colour-blind officer. He has neither riches, influence, nor even a Parliamentary vote at his command; no redress is open to him—his only course is to quietly submit without even an opportunity of protest, and he is consequently plunged into the depths of despair.

The present Government has a clean page before it. Humanity demands, and a sense of right dictates, that these poor men be not cast adrift. Their names and addresses are known to the Board of Trade. Let Government see that, at the earliest opportunity, shore berths in Government Offices be offered to them, and thus in some measure they may be compensated for that loss of position and means of livelihood which, through no fault of their own, has unfortunately fallen to their lot.

If I am thought to be exaggerating the distress entailed, the recital of the following cases will carry conviction, where, perhaps, my mere statements would fail.

I have already recorded the case of Captain Smith who, after being at sea for 20 years, and in the possession of a Board of Trade's Master's Certificate, was accidentally found to be colour-blind and was dismissed his ship. The ruin of his hopes and home (he was married and had three children) so preyed upon his mind that,

though up to that time he had never had a day's illness, nor consulted a doctor, his health gradually gave way, and his death occurred in a little over twelve months after his dismissal.

A still more distressing illustration is to be found in the case of Captain F., who in April, 1895, was discovered, also accidentally, to be colour-blind. A quotation from a letter received from the House Surgeon of the institution in which he was an inmate, as a result of attempted suicide, will best describe his condition. "Early in this year the patient's certificate was endorsed 'Colour Blind,' in consequence of which he has been thrown out of employment. This has preyed upon his mind. He became sleepless and unsettled, and eventually tried to do away with himself by leaping into one of the docks. During his stay in hospital he was observed to be very melancholic, apparently taking no interest in his surroundings, and quite hopeless as to his future."

The bitter pathos of despair embodied in the above illustrations would be hard to parallel. Humanity and justice alike ask why the Board of Trade do not institute their tests so as to preclude a colour-blind or weak-sighted lad from embarking upon a sailor's life. The Medical Profession have long asked this question, the Shipping and General Press have long urged it, and what is even more reflecting upon the criminal ineptitude of the Board of Trade, the Committee appointed by the Royal Society and paid out of the public funds for the express purpose of considering this very subject made it one of, if not, their most important recommendation. Why should the Board of Trade seek

costly advice and then not act upon it? How long will the British nation tamely submit to such a manifestation of wilful perversity?

Their examiners can produce many such harrowing cases of a life of promise blasted as the above; still the evil is unremedied, although the means is so easily available.

There is, too, another aspect of the question. The sight examiners have to test candidates' knowledge of seamanship and navigation as well, and the new visual tests appropriate a great deal of time and entail much clerical work. The duties of the examiners are thus vastly increased. The work must be got through, however, and it is open to question if some section or other of the examination scheme does not suffer in consequence. On this ground alone, if on no other, a strong case is made out for expert examination. It is not the first time, by a long way, that the Board of Trade have been similarly indicted upon this same question. The matter is one of national importance, rather than one which calls for the intervention of the medical profession alone. What is to be done to bring the Board of Trade to its senses? It is little use interviewing the President of the Board of Trade, if like Mr. Bryce he is content to allow the officials of his department to continue the time honoured but criminal policy of refusing amendment. By such methods we may even do harm, for the press and public are bound to pay more heed to his reply than to the statement of our case. What then is to be done to make the British nation insist that the Board of Trade shall adopt a humane, an enlightened, and a less criminally stupid policy over this important question?



