

New publication

‘Blindness and the Power of Inner Vision’

The inspiring story of Mike and Lil Bowen who met in the aftermath of the First World War

A biography of Advocate RW Bowen

By Hilary Marlow

Mike Bowen and the soldiers in his platoon were about to ‘go over the top’ and attack a German machine-gun post in the darkness of an early September morning in 1917. The Battle of Passchendaele was about to begin in the muddy fields of Flanders. High explosive shells were screeching overhead as both sides in the battle were preparing for the ‘Order to Attack’. Suddenly, the air around Mike was buffeted by a huge explosion and the ground shook and trembled as force of the shockwaves radiated outwards. An explosive shell had detonated close to the platoon as the soldiers crouched in the mud. The shell casing ripped apart and shards of hot metal flew out in all directions. One sharp fragment struck Mike’s head, tearing across the lower part of his forehead, slicing off the bone below his eyebrow and eye sockets. He was given first aid and transferred to the base hospital. When he regained consciousness, the awful truth hit him. He was unable to see and would never again enjoy the precious gift of sight.

Only ten years later, Mike Bowen (whose given names were Robert Walter) was a successful advocate in the Cape Town Supreme Court where he became known as a defender of the poor, under-privileged and discriminated, usually waiving his professional fee. Mike played a pivotal role in establishing the Athlone School for the Blind near Cape Town which opened its doors in 1927. This school admitted blind mixed-race children for whom educational opportunities had previously been denied. Two years later in 1929 he was elected to the South African parliament in which he developed the reputation of being an outspoken opponent of racial discrimination and defender of the rights of blind people.

An important aspect of the founding of the Athlone School for the Blind in 1927 was the role of the Anglican Church and those who believed in the concept of ‘practical Christianity’ by improving the wellbeing of poor and underprivileged people who suffered discrimination. One example of this was the provision of educational facilities for blind children where none had previously existed. The initial idea of the school came from an Anglican minister, the Revd Arthur Blaxall, who had emigrated from England to work as a missionary in the Cape Town diocese. His work brought him into contact with mixed-race families and several of the families had children who were blind and who had no school to deal with their special needs. Blaxall spoke to Mike Bowen who applied his legal and political knowledge to energise the procedures for establishing a school. The Anglican Church provided financial and administrative help in these procedures as well as finding a teacher of blind children. The Christian ethos became a part of the school curriculum which not only cared for the educational and material needs of the children but also their spiritual development.

How did the transformation, from a seriously injured and blind war veteran, into a successful barrister, parliamentarian and philanthropist occur? Four factors played key roles: Mike’s character and determination to overcome his disability; the medical staff who dealt with his injuries; the rehabilitation facilities provided by St Dunstan’s Institute (now Blind Veterans UK); the support and guidance provided by a determined woman, his wife Eleanor, who was known to her friends as Lil. The biography explores in detail the role played by Lil and her brother, Dr Harold Gillies who had pioneered surgical techniques for facial reconstructive surgery. Lil and Harold encouraged Mike to embark on a law career and Lil was the person who motivated Mike to enter politics and speak out for disenfranchised people who suffered racial discrimination. The biography also describes the pivotal role played by Lil and other public-spirited women in establishing humanitarian organisations.

The author has not offered an explanation of the phrase, ‘The Power of Inner Vision’, because he is sure that the reader will comprehend it after reading Mike’s story. Mike Bowen may have been physically blinded on the battlefield but his physical injury did not diminish his ability to envisage a better world and how to achieve it by having an optimistic attitude for his future life. It meant seeking and accepting help, grasping opportunities, learning new skills and cooperating with others to achieve goals. It was his power of inner vision which opened doors allowing Mike to succeed.

This carefully-researched, fact-filled and lavishly illustrated biography has just been published by Footprint Press in South Africa. There is a Foreword by Lord David Blunkett who was blind from birth but overcame his disability to become a leading politician and minister in the British government. The book is distributed in the UK by the Pettaugh History Society (online order, price £12.99 post-free) or from selected booksellers. 225 pages, 64 images, 8 in colour.