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**‘Britain has taken the lead’: an exploration
of British involvement in World Refugee
Year 1959–1960**

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‘Britain has taken the lead’: an exploration of British involvement in World Refugee Year 1959–1960



Figure 1: ‘World Refugee Year fundraising station’, Ipswich (October, 1959), Oxford, Oxfam Archive: COM/5/1/29.

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Introduction

‘The Appeal brought everyone together in a united effort which led the world and raised over four times as much money as was originally intended.’¹

– Baroness Elliot of Harwood, President and Chairwoman of the United Kingdom Committee for World Refugee Year

On 5 December 1958, a resolution to begin a ‘World Refugee Year’ was passed at the Thirteenth Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations (UN), with fifty-nine votes in favour, nine against and seven abstentions.² The Year had been proposed by the United Kingdom to help alleviate a number of pressing refugee crises: 162,000 Europeans were still displaced after World War Two; there were over a million Arab refugees in the Middle East, a million Chinese refugees in Hong Kong and about 10,000 White Russians in China or Hong Kong – in addition to internal refugees in countries such as India, Pakistan, Korea and South Vietnam.³ World Refugee Year (WRY), therefore, had two distinct aims: to focus interest on the refugee problem to encourage additional financial contributions from governments, voluntary agencies and the general public, and to encourage additional opportunities for permanent refugee solutions through voluntary repatriation, resettlement or integration on a humanitarian basis.⁴ Whilst the UN was to play a role as a ‘coordinator and source of information’, the humanitarian campaign would primarily consist of ‘a series of national efforts’.⁵ The campaign was a great success: ninety-seven countries and eighty international non-governmental organizations took part.⁶ Funds were raised to finish the clearance of the refugee camps in Europe and considerable progress was made in the legal protection of

¹ Oxford, Oxfam Archive (hereafter OA): COM/3/1/12, World Refugee Year: The Report of the UK Committee 1st June 1959 to 31st May 1960, 10.

² OA: COM/3/1/12, ‘The World Refugee Year’ UN pamphlet, 5.

³ OA: COM/3/1/12, ‘WRY: The Report of the UK Committee,’ 11.

⁴ OA: COM/3/1/12, ‘WRY: The Report of the UK Committee,’ 12.

⁵ OA: COM/3/1/12, ‘The World Refugee Year’ UN pamphlet, 6.

⁶ *United Nations Year Book 1960*, Office of Public Information United Nations (New York, 1960), 357.

refugees.⁷ WRY was described in the *UN Year Book (1960)* as ‘one the most remarkable humanitarian enterprises on record’.⁸

This dissertation seeks to examine Britain’s instigation of and participation in WRY at the official, public and NGO levels, through a humanitarian framework. As this study will explain, the idea for World Refugee Year originated in Britain and the British public’s response to the campaign from June 1959 to June 1960 was ‘overwhelming’ in terms of both level of engagement and financial contribution.⁹ This dissertation therefore sets out to understand why the British government sponsored WRY, and why the British public responded so positively, raising over four times the original target. As Michael Barnett and Thomas Weiss have asserted, ‘humanitarian action is a creature of the world that produces it’; as such, studying Britain’s involvement in the campaign can enrich our understanding of British society in the late 1950s.¹⁰ This dissertation also seeks to understand the significance of the campaign for British NGOs, and specifically Oxfam. It will examine whether the campaign can be seen as a defining moment in British humanitarian history thanks to its impact on Oxfam’s funds, reputation, connections and direction.

Thus far, WRY has been largely neglected in historiography. Peter Gatrell’s recent monograph is the first study of the campaign but, unlike this dissertation, it does not focus solely on British participation, instead it offers a general overview of the campaign and the refugee crises from the perspective of a historian of displacement rather than humanitarianism.¹¹ Becky Taylor has also explored WRY but, whilst she concentrates exclusively on Britain, her work is an analysis of the British government’s change of

⁷ *UN Yearbook 1960*, 358.

⁸ *UN Yearbook 1960*, 359.

⁹ OA: COM/3/1/12, ‘WRY: The Report of the UK Committee,’ 9.

¹⁰ M. Barnett and T. G. Weiss, *Humanitarianism Contested: Where angels fear to tread* (Oxford, 2011), 5.

¹¹ P. Gatrell, *Free World? The Campaign to Save the World’s Refugees 1956-1963* (Cambridge, 2011).

immigration policy in response to the campaign.¹² Accordingly, this is the first study that explicitly examines the British public's engagement with the campaign and assesses the significance of WRY for Oxfam.

Consequently, this dissertation predominantly interacts with two broader historiographies. Firstly, it speaks to the burgeoning literature that examines the impact of decolonisation on British society. In recent years, historians have revised the 'minimal impact thesis' put forward by historians such as John Darwin, who maintained that the end of empire had little effect on society.¹³ Contemporary historians discern a myriad of ways in which the end of empire impacted British culture and identity. Case studies by scholars such as Wendy Webster,¹⁴ Jordanna Bailkin¹⁵ and Stuart Ward¹⁶ have highlighted that 'habits of mind associated with colonialism'¹⁷ survived well into the twentieth century. This dissertation seeks to add to this historiography by demonstrating how the loss of empire was linked to the origin and success of WRY.

Secondly, this dissertation will use humanitarian history as a framework. Michael Barnett's groundbreaking work, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*,¹⁸ has been called 'a welcome foundation on which scholars of empire interested in humanitarian discourse and action can build'.¹⁹ This dissertation seeks not only to supplement this key work but also to question it. Both Barnett and Thomas Weiss have devised a chronology of humanitarianism

¹² B. Taylor, 'A Change of Heart? British Policies towards Tubercular Refugees during 1959 World Refugee Year,' *Twentieth Century British History*, 26 (2015), 97-121.

¹³ J. Bailkin, *The Afterlife of Empire* (California, 2012), 11.

¹⁴ W. Webster, *Britishness and Empire 1939-1965* (Oxford, 2005).

¹⁵ Bailkin, *Afterlife*.

¹⁶ S. Ward (ed.), *British Culture and the End of Empire* (Manchester, 2001).

¹⁷ Webster, *Britishness and Empire*, 3.

¹⁸ M. Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca, 2011).

¹⁹ R. Skinner and A. Lester, 'Humanitarianism and Empire: New Research Agendas,' *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 40 (2012), 730.

that views 1945 to 1989 as a singular period of action,²⁰ which they call ‘neo-humanitarianism’.²¹ This study will evaluate whether their assessment of this period as one of continuity is appropriate or whether, in fact, the change introduced by WRY was so significant that it should be accounted for in histories of humanitarianism.

This dissertation will also speak to a school of historians who have begun to examine British humanitarianism within an imperial framework.²² Their work shows examples of analogous British engagement with humanitarian action in the 1950s and 1960s, and of the ways in which imperial benevolence can be identified in humanitarian campaigns in the aftermath of empire. As Robert Skinner and Alan Lester observe, ‘much work remains to be undertaken on the intersecting fields of imperial and humanitarian history’.²³ This study strives to contribute to this expanding literature.

This examination of Britain’s role in WRY will use a range of sources, drawing upon substantial primary research, including several files so far unexplored by academics. The extensive Oxfam archive has provided many sources relating to both the UK Committee of World Refugee Year and to Oxfam specifically. This archival material has been supplemented with sources from the BBC Written Archives and online newspaper archives to give a broader understanding of the experience of WRY in Britain. In addition, Parliamentary discussions from the Hansard online archive and documents produced by the United Nations have been

²⁰ Barnett and Weiss, *Humanitarianism Contested*; M. Barnett and T. Weiss (eds.), *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics* (Ithaca, 2008); T. G. Weiss, *Humanitarian Business* (Cambridge, 2013).

²¹ Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, 7.

²² A. Bocking-Welch, ‘Imperial Legacies and Internationalist Discourses: British Involvement in the United Nations Freedom from Hunger Campaign, 1960–70,’ *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 40 (2012) 879– 896; M. Hilton, ‘Ken Loach and the Save the Children Film: Humanitarianism, Imperialism, and the Changing Role of Charity in Postwar Britain,’ *The Journal of Modern History*, 87 (2015), 357-394; A. Jones, ‘The Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) and the Humanitarianism Industry in Britain, 1963-85,’ *Twentieth Century British History*, 26 (2015), 573-601; J. Burkett, ‘The National Union of Students and transnational solidarity, 1958-1968,’ *European Review of History*, 21 (2014), 539-555.

²³ Skinner and Lester, ‘Humanitarianism and Empire,’ 731.

used to gauge the tone of official discourses around the campaign. This wide variety of primary sources ensures that the project's analysis is as comprehensive as possible.

This dissertation is comprised of three chapters. The first investigates Britain's official role in World Refugee Year, highlighting the campaign's British origins and its wider context: Britain's volatile place in the world order at the time and its impact on the government's involvement. The British public's keen participation in WRY is the focus of the second chapter, which looks at the range of public participation and demonstrates how the whole society engaged with WRY. It will then analyse why the public embraced the campaign, and what it tells us about British identity in this period. The final chapter is concerned with the importance of the campaign for NGOs, using the case study of Oxfam. It explores the huge impact on Oxfam of taking part, and considers whether WRY was a key moment in humanitarian history that has hitherto been understated in historiography.

Chapter One - Britain's Official role

In spring 1958 British journalists Timothy Raison, Colin Jones and Trevor Philpott, together with Olympic athlete Christopher Chataway, published an article in the political quarterly *Crossbow*, a 'forum of the progressive wing of the British Conservative Party',²⁴ entitled 'Wanted: A World Refugee Year'.²⁵ The piece highlighted the vast numbers of post-war refugees still waiting for resettlement in Europe, in addition to the refugee crises in China and the Middle East. The article argued that the crises presented 'an opportunity both for the Conservative Party and for Britain'²⁶ – and that this opportunity lay in 'the declaration of a World Refugee Year'.²⁷ The writers argued that the British public would 'warmly welcome'²⁸ the idea of a humanitarian campaign to counter Britain's negative international reputation:

The task of creating stable, independent nations in the period of transition from Empire to self-governing Commonwealth must often force upon Britain the role of tough imperialist bully: small boys have to be prevented from throwing stones in Cyprus, African terrorists must be executed in Kenya and communist agitators locked up in Singapore.²⁹

The authors suggest that, while 'the British people may be convinced of the need for these thankless tasks ... they cannot be inspired by them'.³⁰ As a result, they call upon the government to lead this 'imaginative, altruistic campaign' in order to 'dispel a prevalent feeling of frustration' amongst the British.³¹ They envisaged that the initiative would make Britons proud of their country once more, while also improving Britain's tarnished international reputation.

²⁴ Gatrell, *Free World*, 10.

²⁵ OA: COM/3/1/12, 'WRY: The Report of the UK Committee,' II.

²⁶ OA: COM/3/1/12, 'Wanted: A World Refugee Year,' *Crossbow*, 78.

²⁷ OA: COM/3/1/12, 'Wanted: A WRY,' 78.

²⁸ OA: COM/3/1/12, 'Wanted: A WRY,' 78.

²⁹ OA: COM/3/1/12, 'Wanted: A WRY,' 78.

³⁰ OA: COM/3/1/12, 'Wanted: A WRY,' 78.

³¹ OA: COM/3/1/12, 'Wanted: A WRY,' 78.

Following publication of the article, the ‘value of this proposal was immediately recognised by a number of people in the United Kingdom with a detailed knowledge of the refugee situation’.³² Only a few months later, a British resolution was submitted to and passed in the UN, activating the campaign across the world.

In the UK a committee was established to oversee WRY. It had four explicit objectives: to assist the remaining refugees in Europe under the mandate of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees; to help resettle the Europeans in China; to aid the Chinese refugees in Hong Kong; and to help the Arab refugees.³³ The committee included the key decision makers, indicating that Britain was firmly behind the campaign: its patron was Queen Elizabeth II, whilst the vice patrons were Prime Minister Harold Macmillan and the leaders of the main opposition parties, Hugh Gaitskell (Labour) and Jo Grimond (Liberals).³⁴

However, despite the apparent backing of the British government – the UK Committee acknowledged its vital ‘support and sympathy’³⁵ – in reality it ‘was at best ambivalent’ towards the campaign³⁶ and was focused on ‘gesture not substance’.³⁷ Chataway, one of the founders of WRY, recalled:

There was a good deal of opposition within the government. The Treasury weren’t very keen to open up another way of spending money. The Home Office was distinctly unenthusiastic. In fact completely opposed because they thought it would mean more refugees being brought into Britain.³⁸

The government’s lack of genuine enthusiasm is evident in its small financial contribution to the campaign – just £100,000 – even though Macmillan made it clear from the outset that

³² OA: COM/3/1/12, ‘WRY: The Report of the UK Committee,’ 11.

³³ Reading, The BBC Written Archives (hereafter BWA): R7/238/1, ‘Objectives of the UK Committee.’

³⁴ OA: CPN/3/1 ‘World Refugee Year: A mass revolt against the scandal of the age.’

³⁵ OA: COM/3/1/12, ‘WRY: The Report of the UK Committee,’ 13.

³⁶ Taylor, ‘A Change of Heart,’ 105.

³⁷ Taylor, ‘A Change of Heart,’ 105.

³⁸ ‘Legendary British runner recalls WRY.’ <http://www.unhcr.org/51a625079.html> [accessed 25.04.16].

Britain's role in WRY would be to provide 'money' rather than to accept more refugees.³⁹

Parliamentary records expose tensions over the level of government engagement: in a debate on 5 May 1959, Labour MP Jim Griffiths questioned the government's monetary contribution, claiming that 'the overwhelming majority of people in this country would welcome a much more generous contribution in keeping with our international status'.⁴⁰ Similarly, Labour MP Fenner Brockway referred to the government's contribution as 'a woefully pitiful sum'.⁴¹

However, as Taylor has revealed, the government was forced by public and, perhaps, political pressure to take on more responsibility as the year played out. Despite initially claiming that Britain could not receive any refugees, by the end of the year the government had accepted nearly 700 with multiple health conditions.⁴² In addition, the government eventually contributed £400,000,⁴³ suggesting that it increased the sum due to the strength of public sentiment, as reflected in newspaper headlines such as 'No more – Yet – from Government for World Refugee Year'.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, whilst the government was reluctant to pour substantial resources into WRY, it recognised its potential value in improving Britain's reputation and reasserting its place on the world stage. As the *Crossbow* article indicated, decolonisation was a growing foreign policy issue, with Britain cast as a 'tough imperialist bully' seeking to prevent the further loss of its colonies. Moreover, WRY 'was not too long after Suez [an abortive attempt to seize control of the Suez Canal] and so Britain's name internationally was not as sweet smelling as it might

³⁹ Gatrell, *Free World*, 97.

⁴⁰ Hansard Parliamentary Archives: 5 May 1959, vol. 605 cols. 206-7.

⁴¹ Hansard Parliamentary Archives: 11 May 1959, vol. 605 cols. 830-2.

⁴² Taylor, 'A Change of Heart,' 119.

⁴³ OA: COM/3/1/12, 'WRY: The Report of the UK Committee,' 41.

⁴⁴ 'No more – yet - from Government for Refugee Year,' *The Guardian* (London), 29 April 1960.

be'.⁴⁵ Historians see the Suez Crisis of 1956 as the defining moment that 'seemed to confirm that [Britain's] pretensions to independent world power were at an end'.⁴⁶ It appears, then, that WRY was a useful propaganda tool for the British government, enabling it to claim to be exhibiting moral leadership at a time when its international actions were under scrutiny and British influence was diminishing.

As Lawrence James observed regarding Britain's increasing subservience to the United States at the time, 'filling a supporting role did not come easily to the servants of a nation, which had grown accustomed to being at the centre of the stage'.⁴⁷ WRY was an opportunity for Britain to regain some prestige, supporting Emily Baughan's argument that, since the 1920s, Britain had been determined not to be 'overtaken by America in matters of relief'.⁴⁸ Alternatively, humanitarian aid would 'serve as a mark of the empire's on-going importance on the world stage'.⁴⁹ The moral leadership the British government claimed through its role in WRY can therefore be viewed as an attempt to compensate for Britain's decline in other areas and as part of a longer-term project to exert British influence over world affairs.

Brian Harrison has asserted that in a period of British international decline – which he dates from 1951 to 1970 – there were six different roles 'competing for attention': as an imperial power; as exemplifiers of democratic government; as a role model for diplomatic skills; as a 'middle way' between capitalism and communism; as a cultural exemplar; and, lastly, as a moral leader for the world.⁵⁰ This last appears to be the role adopted in the context of WRY,

⁴⁵ 'Legendary British runner recalls WRY.' <http://www.unhcr.org/51a625079.html> [accessed 25.04.16].

⁴⁶ J. Darwin, *Britain and Decolonisation: The Retreat from Empire in the Post-War World* (Basingstoke, 1998) 167.

⁴⁷ L. James, *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire* (London, 1994), 529.

⁴⁸ E. Baughan, "'Every Citizen of Empire implored to Save the Children!'" Empire, Internationalism and the Save the Children Fund in inter-war Britain,' *Historical Research*, 86 (2013), 128.

⁴⁹ Baughan, 'Every Citizen of Empire,' 128.

⁵⁰ B. Harrison, *Seeking a Role: The United Kingdom 1951–1970* (Oxford, 2009), 543.

as time and again discourses generated by the British government and the UK Committee for Refugee Year emphasise Britain's leadership, as for example in the UK Committee's moving description of the plight of the refugees:

Each refugee represents a human tragedy – a tragedy of needless suffering, lost home and homeland, wasted talents and mute despair. Each one deserves sympathy and help; together they make one vast problem that is a load on the conscience of the world – a load that MUST be lifted.⁵¹

However, the same pamphlet goes on to declare that 'Britain has taken the lead in World Refugee Year – a year of simple humanity',⁵² highlighting Britain as a country setting an example to the rest of the world amidst widespread suffering. Similarly, a 1959 *Daily Mail* article claims that 'the Premier has said Britain could be proud at having put forward the idea',⁵³ whilst another argues, 'we should be proud to think that this great movement began with a British resolution'.⁵⁴ Auguste Lindt, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, stressed that WRY 'was born in Great Britain', continuing: 'I hope that Great Britain knows that it is giving the example to the world, that many voluntary agencies, many governments, many public opinions are following'.⁵⁵

Overall, the evidence suggests that political concerns were a central plank of Britain's official involvement in WRY. Decolonization, the Cold War, the Suez Crisis and Britain's declining global status, all combined to make the government increasingly wary.⁵⁶ Although the government was reluctant to contribute substantial resources, its public discourse was indisputably one of pride, continually stressing the British roots and leadership of the campaign. As Gatrell has remarked, Macmillan's initial insistence that Britain could not

⁵¹ OA: CPN/3/1 'WRY: A mass revolt against the scandal of the age.'

⁵² OA: CPN/3/1 'WRY: A mass revolt against the scandal of the age.'

⁵³ 'MacMillan pledges £100,000,' *Daily Mail* (London), 2 June 1959, 9.

⁵⁴ 'The Waif of our Time' *Daily Mail* (London), 2 June 1959, 1.

⁵⁵ OA: COM/1/5/1, Script from the First Annual Oxfam Conference, April 1959.

⁵⁶ H. McCarthy, 'The League of Nations, Public Ritual and National Identity in Britain, c.1919–56,' *History Workshop Journal*, 70 (2010), 127.

accept any refugees ‘did not stop him from developing the theme of British generosity with gusto’;⁵⁷ rather, the government stressed the importance of the British public’s financial contribution to the campaign, which, as Chapter Two demonstrates, would be astonishing.

⁵⁷ Gatrell, *Free World*, 97.

Chapter Two - Public Participation

The British government hoped most of the nation's contribution to WRY would come from the public – it was not disappointed. The original campaign target of £2 million was raised to £4 million in response to the public's generosity, and the final amount appropriated in Britain for WRY was a staggering £9,119,349⁵⁸ (to stress the magnitude of this sum, it can be compared to the £500,000 normally raised in a year by voluntary agencies for refugees).⁵⁹ Although the *Crossbow* article that prompted WRY had anticipated a positive reaction from the British public, the response was on an unexpected and unprecedented scale. Timothy Raison, one of the architects of WRY, declared: 'The most exciting thing has been the way the big contributions have been matched by the small ones, and that all sorts of ordinary people have supported the Year with an intensity that is still hard to believe'.⁶⁰ The UK Committee's Final Report argued that WRY was 'a story of thousands of people through out the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland who made their individual contributions', adding, 'no appeal has ever been so successful in such a short time'.⁶¹ This chapter demonstrates first that all sectors of British society took part in the campaign, regardless of geographical region, class or age; it then argues that the main reason the public engaged so heavily with the campaign, raising the highest amount out of the ninety-seven participating countries,⁶² was because it reinforced a long-held vision of British imperial benevolence.

This chapter adds to a body of literature that examines other humanitarian campaigns in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Jodi Burkett, for example, has argued that the National Union of Students in the period 1958–1968 did not show 'solidarity' with others across the world; on

⁵⁸OA: COM/3/1/12, 'WRY: The Report of the UK Committee,' 41.

⁵⁹OA: COM/3/1/12, 'WRY: The Report of the UK Committee,' 41.

⁶⁰OA: COM/3/1/12, 'Message from Timothy Raison,' WRY Finale RAH Programme.

⁶¹ OA: COM/3/1/12, 'WRY: The Report of the UK Committee,' 9.

⁶² *UN Year Book 1960*, 361.

the contrary, ‘they showed more longstanding British feelings of “obligation” and “responsibility” or even “paternalism”’.⁶³ Burkett maintains that the ‘habits of mind associated with imperial philanthropy and trusteeship carried on’.⁶⁴ Anna Bocking-Welch has made parallel statements about the Freedom From Hunger Campaign, which, she claims, simply ‘repackaged’ colonial intervention.⁶⁵ Likewise, Andrew Jones argues that, ‘The loss of global power status led to a range of responses within Britain, and profound questioning about the nation’s direction in the post-colonial world’.⁶⁶ He proposes that: ‘Humanitarian philanthropy offered one possible vision of what this role could entail, repackaging the traditional ideas of British benevolence and trusteeship which underpinned colonial rule for a new age’.⁶⁷ In a similar vein, Jordanna Bailkin, in her study of Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), argues that the development of the humanitarian industry and the creation of VSO in 1958 were closely linked to the end of empire.⁶⁸ All these historians affirm that the loss of the British Empire had an effect on the Metropole, specifically influencing how the public re-created Britain’s role as a benevolent power by taking part in international humanitarian campaigns akin to WRY. Jones’s argument that humanitarian philanthropy offered Britain a new direction will be shown to ring true for WRY, as both the government and the public seized the opportunity to define themselves in this period of great change for Britain.

At the opening ceremony of WRY on 1 June 1959, the Lord Mayor of London called for support ‘throughout the length and breadth of the United Kingdom’.⁶⁹ The campaign was indeed nationwide: 1,090 local committees were established during the year to coordinate

⁶³ Burkett, ‘National Union of Students,’ 542.

⁶⁴ Burkett, ‘National Union of Students,’ 542.

⁶⁵ Bocking-Welch, ‘Imperial Legacies,’ 893.

⁶⁶ Jones, ‘The Disasters Emergency Committee,’ 599.

⁶⁷ Jones, ‘The Disasters Emergency Committee,’ 600.

⁶⁸ Bailkin, *Afterlife*, 238.

⁶⁹ BWA: T32/1241/1, WRY Meeting, Speech by Rt. Hon. The Lord Mayor, 1st June 1959.

fundraising efforts,⁷⁰ spread right across the United Kingdom: 893 in England, 103 in Scotland, 78 in Wales and 16 in Northern Ireland.⁷¹ The Final Report praises these committees and the general ‘response through out the country: from cities, towns and villages’,⁷² confirming that all areas of the UK engaged with WRY.

Support for the campaign was widespread. Oxfam professed that ‘funds come from all sorts and conditions of men’,⁷³ and its 1959 news bulletin neatly captures this variety:

Local events are being organised up and down the country by individuals, churches, and other groups – garden parties in country houses, bring-and-buy sales in back yards, church bazaars, toy services, house to house collections, coffee parties, film shows and concerts. A new play has been specially commissioned for WRY by the Spode House Play Committee and the production at Hawkeshead Priory near Rugeley raised £81.... Many centres have organised exhibitions and as a result of one last month in Barmouth £230 was collected.⁷⁴

Particularly remarkable is the claim that even ‘a man in prison sent 10s’ to WRY,⁷⁵ emphasising that, probably for the first time, the campaign featured all levels of society, with people participating in a multitude of different ways.

Contributions to WRY came from people of all ages. Oxfam highlights that it was not only adults who took part, but also young children like ‘Janet May, aged 6, and her little brother Simon, aged 3¾ of Romford’, who ‘sang carols to their parents’ and sent the small pool of money they collected to the appeal.⁷⁶ Many schools organised group contributions: ‘One girls school in Southend sent us 40 large blankets – the result of a term’s hard work.’⁷⁷ Similarly,

⁷⁰ ‘£9 million from Britain for World Refugee Year: Europe’s camps empty within 2 years,’ *The Guardian (London)* 19 Jul 1961, 11.

⁷¹ OA: COM/3/1/12, ‘WRY: The Report of the UK Committee,’ 21.

⁷² OA: COM/3/1/12, ‘WRY: The Report of the UK Committee,’ 9.

⁷³ OA: CPN/3/1, ‘Clearing-House for Compassion,’ Philip Baron.

⁷⁴ OA: COM/1/9/1/1, Oxfam Bulletin, September 1959.

⁷⁵ OA: CPN/3/1, ‘Clearing-House for Compassion,’ Philip Baron.

⁷⁶ OA: COM/2/5/1, ‘Oxfam News Release,’ 5th January 1960.

⁷⁷ OA: COM/2/5/1, ‘Oxfam News Release,’ 5th January 1960.

the Final Report of the UK Committee thanked ‘the countless voluntary workers from old age pensioners to the youngest school children’.⁷⁸

It is clear that WRY infiltrated British society; the question remains as to *why* people got so involved. In part, the unprecedented public support can be attributed to the efficiency of the UK WRY Committee and its ‘intense publicity campaign’.⁷⁹ The Central Committee produced an ‘impressive mass’ of material to raise awareness, including 5 million leaflets, 5.5 million lapel flags, more than 4.5 million house-to-house collection envelopes, 400,000 collecting-tin labels, 350,000 windscreen labels and more than 400,000 posters.⁸⁰ The committee also effectively promoted the campaign in the media: Leslie Kirkley, Chairman of the Publicity Sub-Committee, successfully persuaded ‘the press, the BBC and the commercial television companies to give the maximum possible time and space to items about refugees’.⁸¹ Indeed, the BBC’s ‘list of programmes relating to WRY’ amounts to ten pages, demonstrating the vast amount of coverage the campaign received.⁸² Similarly, the newspaper archives reveal the many stories published about WRY. ‘A New World for Christina’ in the *Daily Mail*, for example, detailed the resettlement of a family who had lived in eleven different refugee camps but were finally getting a home in Surrey prepared by the local community: ‘Villagers, local organisations and traders had given nearly all the fittings and equipment. A grocer had even stocked the larder’.⁸³ Touching stories like this spurred the public on to raise more money. A particular fund-raising success saw politicians and journalists live like refugees in a mock refugee camp at Crystal Palace: the men ‘lived on a shilling a day, cooked their own meals and underwent the questioning and counselling that is the inevitable lot of the

⁷⁸ OA: COM/3/1/12, ‘WRY: The Report of the UK Committee,’ 10.

⁷⁹ OA: COM/3/1/12, ‘WRY: The Report of the UK Committee,’ 41.

⁸⁰ OA: COM/3/1/12, ‘WRY: The Report of the UK Committee,’ 17.

⁸¹ OA: COM/3/1/12, ‘WRY: The Report of the UK Committee,’ 14.

⁸² BWA: R34/1131, ‘Programmes Relating to World Refugee Year.’

⁸³ ‘A New World for Christina,’ *Daily Mail* (London), 9 June 1961, 6.

refugee’.⁸⁴ The public visited the ‘camp’ and the journalists wrote compelling accounts of their experiences, which consequently encouraged more donations from the public.

A BBC Audience Report on a WRY documentary called *Mission to No Man’s Land*, which attracted 6 million viewers,⁸⁵ sums up the campaign’s extensive coverage: the report noted that some viewers had complained that the “‘continual bombardment about refugees on TV” was beginning to dull the appreciation of the problem’,⁸⁶ signalling the dominance of WRY in the British media. Indeed, Oxfam attributed much of the success of WRY to the media attention, as it had ‘given to many for the first time murky glimpses into the separate world of the refugee’.⁸⁷ Overall, the evidence suggests that the UK Committee’s publicity materials and extensive use of the media played a vital role in increasing public support for the year.

Another factor explaining public generosity towards WRY was the thriving state of the British economy at the time: in 1957, two years before the start of the campaign, Prime Minister Harold Macmillan memorably pronounced that, ‘Most of our people have never had it so good’. He boasted: ‘Go around the country, go to the industrial towns, go to the farms and you will see a state of prosperity such as we have never had in my lifetime – nor indeed in the history of this country’.⁸⁸ Certainly, ‘the late 1950s saw rising living standards throughout the country’.⁸⁹ According to Gatrell, this newfound prosperity raised anxieties that benefited WRY, as people felt that ‘the fruits of affluence could be distributed to refugees in far-flung locations, turning dilapidated living quarters into modern habitation’.⁹⁰ This contrast

⁸⁴ OA: COM/3/1/12, ‘WRY: The Report of the UK Committee,’ 15.

⁸⁵ BWA: T6/388/1, ‘Mission to no man’s land’, Letter to Stanley Wright from Norman Swallow, 10th February 1960.

⁸⁶ BWA: T6/388/1, ‘An Audience report on Mission to No Man’s Land’, January 1960.

⁸⁷ OA: COM/1/1/1/1, Oxfam’s 1958-1959 Annual Report, 1.

⁸⁸ ‘1957: Britons have never had it so good,’ 20th July 1957.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/july/20/newsid_3728000/3728225.stm [accessed 05.04.16].

⁸⁹ James, *Rise and Fall*, 594.

⁹⁰ Gatrell, *Free World*, 37.

between the ‘old and the new’ is clear in figure 2, which portrays the stark contrast between the modern new apartment blocks constructed for the refugees alongside the squalid huts in which many of them still lived. Oxfam claimed that in Germany, for example, 60 per cent of refugee families still lived in ‘primitive’ housing such as barns or cellars.⁹¹ In particular, media coverage around Christmas 1959 drew attention to the great disparity between British affluence and the plight of refugees. The *Daily Mail* told its readers that, ‘More and more money is made and spent. The rising tide reaches its flood at Christmas, more cars, goods, toys’.⁹² The same article took the opportunity to remind readers that ‘there are many left behind by the wave of prosperity’, chiefly ‘the many refugees who dwell in exile’,⁹³ encouraging them to donate to WRY. Clearly, such appeals could only be effective – as they were – if the public had money they could afford to contribute.



Figure 2: ‘The old and new; blocks of new flats for housing refugees rise above the squalid huts,’ in WRY: The Report of the UK Committee, OA: COM/3/1/12.

⁹¹ OA: COM/1/1/1/1, Oxfam’s Annual Report 1959-1960.

⁹² ‘Time for Reflection,’ *Daily Mail* (London), 24 December, 1959, 1.

⁹³ ‘Time for Reflection,’ *Daily Mail* (London), 24 December, 1959, 1.

However, while publicity and the thriving economy may partially explain why the campaign was so fruitful, neither factor was exclusive to Britain. As a UN report stated, ‘Everywhere the professional media of publicity were exploited to the full’.⁹⁴ Moreover, other Western countries that contributed to WRY, such as the United States or France, were also enjoying economic prosperity. In light of this, WRY’s remarkable success in Britain cannot be simply credited to the media or the economy. Instead, it can be attributed to the fact that WRY offered the British public an avenue through which to fulfil the benevolent imperial role that they conceived for themselves.⁹⁵ The British had long been bound up with ideas about benevolent leadership and public philanthropy, which had built an image of the empire as an uplifting force that acted to affect a mutually beneficial transformation of the world and its peoples.⁹⁶ This established perception was founded in the belief that the distant sufferings of colonised ‘others’ were inextricably connected to the everyday lives of Britons and that Britons could, and should, do something about these sufferings.⁹⁷ Arguably, participation in WRY allowed the British public to act out this role.

Crucially, as already mentioned, WRY occurred at a time when Britain’s declining imperial role was coming increasingly into question. Although many of the British colonies were officially still intact in 1959, Britain had already lost India, Burma, Sri Lanka and Ireland (1947–48), and Ghana, Malaya and Singapore (1957).⁹⁸ Meanwhile, Macmillan’s infamous February 1960 ‘Winds of Change’ speech seemed to confirm that Britain’s days as a great

⁹⁴ OA: COM/3/1/12, ‘Meeting a Challenge,’ The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Geneva, 2.

⁹⁵ For detailed discussions of imperial benevolence from the 18th century to the present see: H. Gilbert and C. Tiffin, *Burden or Benefit? Imperial Benevolence and its Legacies* (Indiana, 2008).

⁹⁶ D. Lambert and A. Lester, ‘Geographies of colonial philanthropy,’ *Progress in Human Geography*, 28 (2004), 323.

⁹⁷ Lester and Lambert, ‘Geographies of colonial philanthropy,’ 330.

⁹⁸ Ward, *British Culture*, 22.

colonial power were coming to an end.⁹⁹ Whilst the effect of decolonisation on the British public is intensely debated, WRY can be seen as an example of Britons compensating for their waning imperial status by helping refugees in Europe and other places beyond colonial territory. According to author Elspeth Huxley, the British without their empire were like ‘crusaders without a cross and youth without a cause’.¹⁰⁰ Consequently, WRY offered them a fresh cause around which to rally. The *Daily Mail* declares that ‘British generosity has widened its horizons, becoming more internationally minded’, suggesting that decolonisation has not lessened Britain’s characteristic imperial benevolence.¹⁰¹ Instead, WRY demonstrates that in this period humanitarianism became a ‘vessel through which society could construct a new sense of national purpose; it amounted, in essence, to a benign re-imagining of imperial compassion for a postcolonial world’.¹⁰²

Imperial benevolence is reflected initially in the language in which the plight of the refugees is discussed. The employment of ‘darkness and light’ tropes, in particular via the UK’s WRY symbol designed by Dame Laura Knight (figure 3), mirrored common references to empire in terms of light and dark to ‘describe racial difference between “The African and the white man,” but also to denote perceived levels of civilisation’.¹⁰³ In the Mayor of London’s discussion of the symbol, he urged the public to ‘grab that hand’ and lead it ‘from the dark depths of despair into the warm sunshine of hope, happiness and security’,¹⁰⁴ presenting the British as an uplifting, benevolent force. In addition, high-profile assertions that refugees

⁹⁹ ‘Macmillan speaks of winds of change in Africa,’ 3 February 1960. http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/february/3/newsid_2714000/2714525.stm [accessed 04.04.16].

¹⁰⁰ A. Bocking-Welch, ‘Imperial Legacies,’ 884.

¹⁰¹ Pearson Phillips, ‘Your Heart, I Find, is Still in the Right Place,’ *Daily Mail* (London), 11 November 1961, 6.

¹⁰² K. O’Sullivan, ‘Humanitarian encounters: Biafra, NGOs and imaginings of the Third World in Britain and Ireland, 1967–70,’ *Journal of Genocide Research*, 16 (2014), 304.

¹⁰³ E. Baughan, ‘Every Citizen of Empire,’ 134.

¹⁰⁴ BWA: T32/1241/1, WRY Meeting, Speech by Rt. Hon. The Lord Mayor, 1st June 1959.

lived in a ‘separate world’¹⁰⁵ – the mock camp at Crystal Palace was promoted as ‘how the other half live’¹⁰⁶ – created an ‘otherness’ about refugees that echoed Britain’s discussion of its imperial subjects.¹⁰⁷ Hall has argued that, since the nineteenth century, Britain had habitually defined itself in relation to its imperial subjects, meaning that British identity was continually formed ‘by the outside’, in a ‘making of self through the making of others’.¹⁰⁸ In a similar manner, Britain’s depiction of the ‘otherness’ of the refugees in a ‘separate world’ helped to create a solid identity and positive purpose for Britain as it sought to define itself in the same terms of light and hope, in contrast to the darkness and desperation of the world of the refugees.



Figure 3: ‘WRY Symbol,’ Oxfam and WRY pamphlet, OA: CPN/3/1.

The established identity of British benevolence is reflected throughout reports of Britain’s efforts for WRY. One article on the subject confidently asserts that, ‘The British people

¹⁰⁵ OA: COM/1/1/1/1, Oxfam’s Annual Report 1958-1959.

¹⁰⁶ ‘The Master of Badminton fills his 26 bedrooms,’ *Daily Mail* (London), 21 April 1960, 16.

¹⁰⁷ For a discussion of ‘The Other’ in relation to Britain see: L. Colley, ‘Britishness and Otherness: An Argument,’ *Journal of British Studies*, 31 (1992), 309-329.

¹⁰⁸ C. Hall, ‘What did a British World mean to the British? Reflections on the 19th century,’ in P. Buckner and R. D. Douglas, *Rediscovering the British World* (Calgary, 2005), 24.

secure and settled in their homes, their families, and their islands, have *always* responded to the needs of hunted ones, and they will heed this latest plea'.¹⁰⁹ Similarly, a BBC report claimed that, 'Britain has been described as a country where voluntary effort is particularly strong, and where private people are ready to get together to get things done'.¹¹⁰ It suggested that the accomplishments of WRY had shown 'that this characteristic hasn't been weakened by the provisions of the welfare state',¹¹¹ confirming that generosity towards people in need was judged a key characteristic of the British people. Equally, future Prime Minister Alec Douglas-Home remarked a few years later, in 1962, on the 'British genius for voluntary effort and coordination',¹¹² corroborating it as a crucial part of British identity that Britons were both aware and proud of. The Final Report of the UK WRY Committee argues that, 'The efforts of the local World Refugee Year campaign united citizens in a sense of civic unity',¹¹³ underlining how the campaign struck a chord with the British people by allowing them to exercise their distinctive brand of benevolence in a time of otherwise confused national identity.

In summary, the British public's response to WRY can be regarded as symptomatic of their established identity as a benevolent imperial power. Whilst the media were undoubtedly important in spreading awareness of WRY and economic prosperity enabled citizens to donate generously, these factors alone do not explain why the British people gave so much more than other countries. The campaign's success can instead be attributed to the fact that it gave the British public a new avenue through which to exhibit the imperial characteristics of guiding and giving, which they believed had for generations distinguished their national character.

¹⁰⁹ 'The Waif of our Time,' *Daily Mail* (London), 2 June 1959, 1.

¹¹⁰ BWA: R34/1131, 'The Ockendon Venture – a Fresh start in life for D.P Children,' 2 January 1959.

¹¹¹ BWA: R34/1131, 'The Ockendon Venture – a Fresh start in life for D.P Children,' 2 January 1959.

¹¹² Burkett, 'National Union of Students,' 546.

¹¹³ OA: COM/3/1/12, 'WRY: The Report of the UK Committee,' 23.

Chapter 3 – Oxfam’s Experience

WRY was described in 1961 as ‘one of the biggest operations in the history of charity’.¹¹⁴ Certainly, the total raised of £9,119,349 suggests it had extensive implications for British voluntary agencies working with refugees,¹¹⁵ which in previous years had collected on average £500,000 a year.¹¹⁶ This chapter uses the NGO Oxfam as a case study to assess the impact of WRY on the charitable sector and its future development. The Oxford Famine Relief Committee (Oxfam) was established in 1942 in response to famine in occupied Greece. From 1942 until the 1950s it concentrated on famine relief and refugee aid through out Europe.¹¹⁷ It is a revealing window into NGOs’ experience of WRY, as it raised the second largest amount (£781,629) of the British NGOs that took part, and the campaign appeared to have a significant effect on the agency.¹¹⁸ This section will propose, however, that participation in WRY was not only a key moment in Oxfam’s history, but arguably changed the ground rules for NGOs at large.

Some scholars, however, do not see WRY as such a significant moment in humanitarian history: Barnett and Weiss have presented a chronology that regards 1945–1989 as a singular period they label ‘neo-humanitarianism’.¹¹⁹ As Barnett sums up the period:

World War II, decolonization, and the Cold War created a new space for imagining new kinds of commitments to the welfare of more populations overlaid by superpowers striving to harness humanitarian action to their interests.¹²⁰

¹¹⁴ Phillips, ‘Your Heart, I Find, is Still in the Right Place,’ *Daily Mail* (London), 11 November 1961, 6.

¹¹⁵ *UN Yearbook 1960*, 359.

¹¹⁶ OA: COM/3/1/12, ‘WRY: The Report of the UK Committee,’ 41.

¹¹⁷ Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, 117.

¹¹⁸ M. Black, *A Cause for our Times* (Oxford, 1992), 61.

¹¹⁹ Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, 30.

¹²⁰ Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, 31.

Their chronology, therefore, ignores the momentous changes that this chapter will show occurred after 1960. It is this dissertation's view that WRY's impact should be explicitly recognised, and that this chronology of humanitarianism should be divided into distinct periods: before and after 1960.

It should be noted that some historians have already begun to break down the singular period of humanitarian action proposed by Barnett and Weiss. Clare Saunders, for example, has distinguished the periods before and after 1960 in her narrative of humanitarianism. Indeed, she argues that the shift in humanitarianism was largely due to the closure of refugee camps during WRY, which meant for most British NGOs that 'their issue frontier needed to be extended',¹²¹ supporting the view that WRY was a significant, albeit underplayed, moment in humanitarian history. In the same way, Gatrell acknowledges that WRY 'helped finance a much enhanced role for UNHCR and NGOs of various stripes',¹²² further supporting this study's viewpoint. Whilst Gatrell does not overtly discuss the implications of WRY for Oxfam, he does concur that later humanitarian campaigns reflected ideas pioneered by WRY. For example, he argues that the British charitable campaigns Band Aid (1984) and Live Aid (1985) engaged public opinion in a similar fashion.¹²³ Jones concurs with Gatrell, arguing that the end of WRY 'marked the emergence of a new phase in humanitarian action'.¹²⁴ Gatrell and Jones thus both support this study's argument that WRY was a key moment in the history of humanitarianism, not only in the way it furthered the influence of NGOs like Oxfam, but also because it set precedents for successive humanitarian campaigns.

¹²¹ C. Saunders, 'British Humanitarian Aid,' in N. Crowson, M. Hilton and J. McKay (eds.), *NGOs in Contemporary Britain: Non-State Actors in Society and Politics since 1945*, 553.

¹²² Gatrell, *Free World*, 248.

¹²³ Gatrell, *Free World*, 247.

¹²⁴ A. Jones, *British Humanitarian NGOs and the Disaster Relief Industry 1942-1985*, PhD Thesis, University of Birmingham (2014), 75.

Notable financial growth was the first significant consequence of WRY for Oxfam. Oxfam's Annual Report 1958–1959, which reflects the early impact of the campaign, acknowledges that 'the past year has been something of a milestone in the history of the Oxford Committee' because for the first time its income had 'topped half a million pounds'.¹²⁵ This report explains that 'WRY began four months before our financial year ended', and yet, despite this short time, 'income between June 1st and October 1st 1959 was nearly 100 per cent up on the same period for the previous year',¹²⁶ evidencing the dramatic financial growth that WRY induced. The greatest results can be observed in the subsequent Annual Report 1959–1960, which reflects the impact of 'two thirds of WRY's special efforts',¹²⁷ showing that the publicity and impetus generated by WRY helped Oxfam to 'top the million' mark in its fundraising.¹²⁸ This dramatic increase in donations can be viewed in the table below (fig 4), which clearly depicts the rise from the start of WRY in 1959.¹²⁹ The report also documents that 'the Gift Shops takings averaged over £700 a week in 1959–1960, as against £396 a week in the previous year',¹³⁰ indicating that Oxfam experienced growth across all of its fundraising platforms due to its involvement in WRY.

Furthermore, the initial rise in income due to WRY proved not to be a temporary phenomenon. As a *Daily Mail* article in late 1961 noted, 'To their surprise, their income is keeping up to the World Refugee Year level'.¹³¹ Oxfam's Annual Report 1960-1961 and its income table, confirms this continual rise in revenue (fig. 5). The evidence suggests, therefore, that WRY was a key moment in Oxfam's history, as the momentum it generated acted as a foundation from which Oxfam continued to expand.

¹²⁵ OA: COM/1/1/1/1, Oxfam's Annual Report 1958-1959.

¹²⁶ OA: COM/1/1/1/1, Oxfam's Annual Report 1958-1959.

¹²⁷ OA: COM/1/1/1/1, Oxfam's Annual Report 1959-1960.

¹²⁸ OA: COM/1/1/1/1, Oxfam's Annual Report 1959-1960.

¹²⁹ OA: COM/1/1/1/1, Oxfam's Annual Report 1959-1960.

¹³⁰ OA: COM/1/1/1/1, Oxfam's Annual Report 1959-1960.

¹³¹ Pearson, 'Your Heart, I Find, is Still in the Right Place,' *Daily Mail* (London), 11 November 1961, 6.

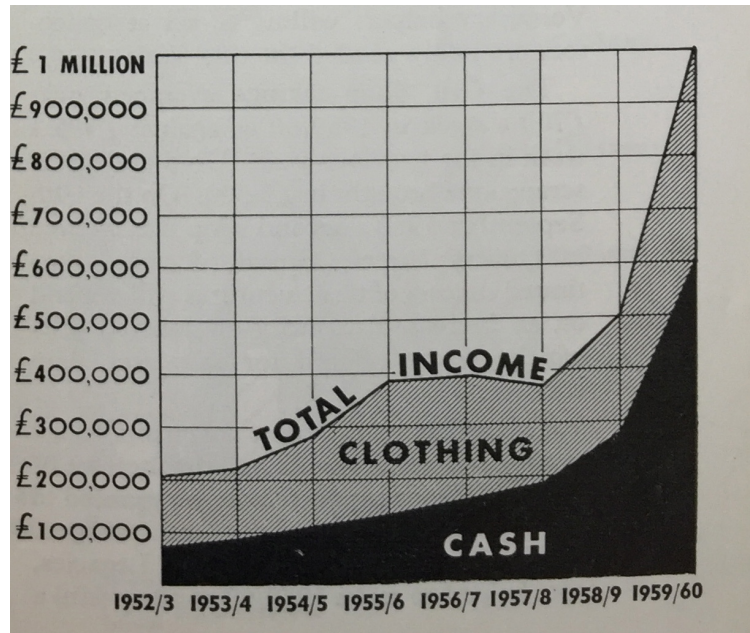


Figure 4: 'Income Chart', Oxfam's Annual Report 1959-1960, OA: COM/1/1/1/1.

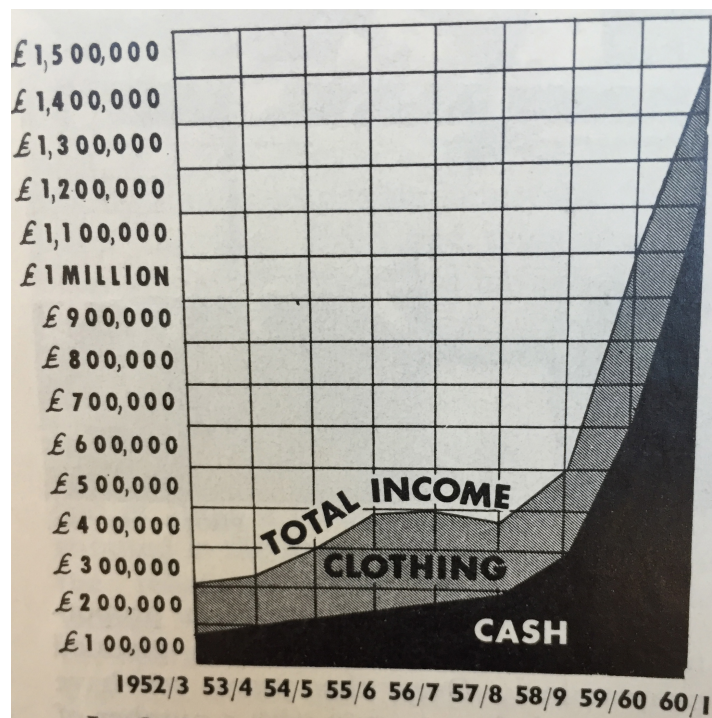


Figure 5: 'Income Chart,' Oxfam's Annual Report 1960-1961, OA: COM/1/1/1/1.

An expansion of the staff at Oxfam was the second impact of WRY. The Annual Report 1958–1959 explains that, because of the 'new interest' in refugees generated by WRY, Oxfam

‘were forced to take additional office space and recruit extra staff’.¹³² For example, 1960 saw Oxfam set up an office for the first time in the north of England.¹³³ The organisation’s enlargement is evidenced further by the fact that from January 1960 – halfway through the WRY campaign – it began to produce a new publication called ‘Oxfam News Release’.¹³⁴ The publication’s purpose was to ‘tell Oxfam staff and others closely involved in the work, what is being done at home and abroad’,¹³⁵ signifying that the organisation now needed a newsletter to keep its staff coordinated and informed about its growing operations.

Linked to this, WRY helped to raise Oxfam from being a local to a nationally recognised organisation. Maggie Black has claimed that Leslie Kirkley, secretary for Oxfam, foresaw WRY as an opportunity to ‘elevate what was still essentially a provincial niche onto a much broader national stage’.¹³⁶ His prediction was right, as in its Annual Report 1961–1962 the organisation boasted that ‘today Oxfam is a household name with a yearly income of over £1.5 million’.¹³⁷ Whilst the highly publicised Congo Famine (1960) was arguably another factor that helped to propel Oxfam to its newfound national status,¹³⁸ WRY should be regarded as the most important reason for Oxfam’s enhanced reputation. It was WRY that gave Oxfam, for the first time, a platform that reached a national audience. As it said in its twenty-first anniversary celebration pamphlet in 1962, as a consequence of its involvement in WRY, ‘Oxfam is now firmly part of the country’s life and is registered as a permanent charity’.¹³⁹

¹³² OA: COM/1/1/1/1, Oxfam’s Annual Report 1958-1959.

¹³³ OA: COM/1/1/1/1, Oxfam’s Annual Report 1959-1960.

¹³⁴ OA: COM/2/5/1, ‘Oxfam News Release,’ January 1960.

¹³⁵ OA: COM/2/5/1, ‘Oxfam News Release,’ January 1960.

¹³⁶ Black, *A Cause for our Times*, 59.

¹³⁷ OA: COM/1/1/1/1, Oxfam’s Annual Report 1961-1962.

¹³⁸ OA: COM/1/1/1/1, Oxfam’s Annual Report 1960-1961.

¹³⁹ OA: COM/1/1/1/1, ‘21 Years of Oxfam.’

The final advantage that WRY brought Oxfam was international networking, as the campaign exposed the organisation to influential people in the international humanitarian sector. Above all, the International Committee for World Refugee Year – formed as a ‘forum for an exchange of views by National Committees, Voluntary Agencies and the United Nations Refugee Agencies’¹⁴⁰ – was a unique opportunity for Oxfam. The committee was the first time in history that such a large number of voluntary agencies had worked together for ‘one common objective’.¹⁴¹ In particular, the two conferences that were held in 1960 and 1961, where Kirkley was on the UK delegation, provided him with an unprecedented forum in which to meet and discuss humanitarian issues with other international voluntary organisations, as well as key figures in the UN.¹⁴² All of these interconnected factors – financial expansion, personnel growth, national recognition and access to an international humanitarian network – confirm that World Refugee Year represented a paradigm shift for Oxfam.

Another consequence of WRY was that, within the space of just a year, Oxfam’s work shifted from a predominantly Eurocentric approach to a strong focus on Africa: its Grants and Supplies Distribution Tables featured in the Annual Reports 1959–1960 and 1960–1961 show how Europe went from being the largest recipient of donations to one of the smallest (see figs. 6 and 7). The reports for the years immediately before WRY (1957–1958 and 1958–1959) clearly show Europe’s previous importance to Oxfam, suggesting that the development represented a complete change in direction.¹⁴³ Indeed, Oxfam publicly acknowledges a significant ‘decrease in help to Europe’ in its 1960–1961 Report, while confirming that ‘before October 1960, Oxfam had only supported relief work on the fringes of the African

¹⁴⁰ OA: COM/3/1/12, The International Committee for World Refugee Year 1959-1961, 1.

¹⁴¹ OA: COM/3/1/12, The International Committee for World Refugee Year 1959-1961, 1.

¹⁴² OA: COM/3/1/12, The International Committee for World Refugee Year 1959-1961, 50.

¹⁴³ OA: COM/1/1/1/1, Oxfam’s Annual Report 1957-1958; OA: COM/1/1/1/1, Oxfam’s Annual Report 1958-1959.

continent'.¹⁴⁴ This change was, in fact, so sudden, that Oxfam acknowledged in a 1960 bulletin that it might confuse the public about its purpose.¹³⁷

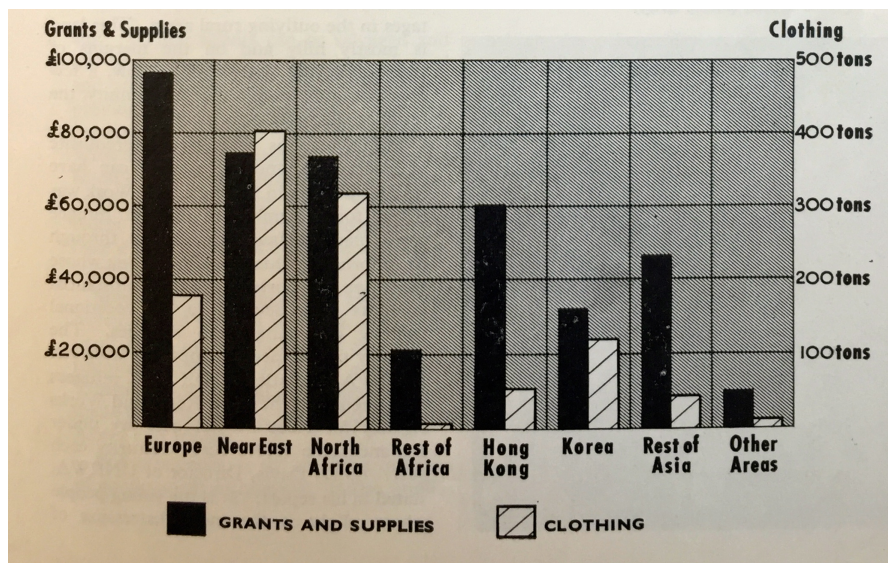


Figure 6: ‘Allocation of Grants and Supplies’ in Oxfam’s Annual Report 1959-1960, OA: COM/1/1/1/1.

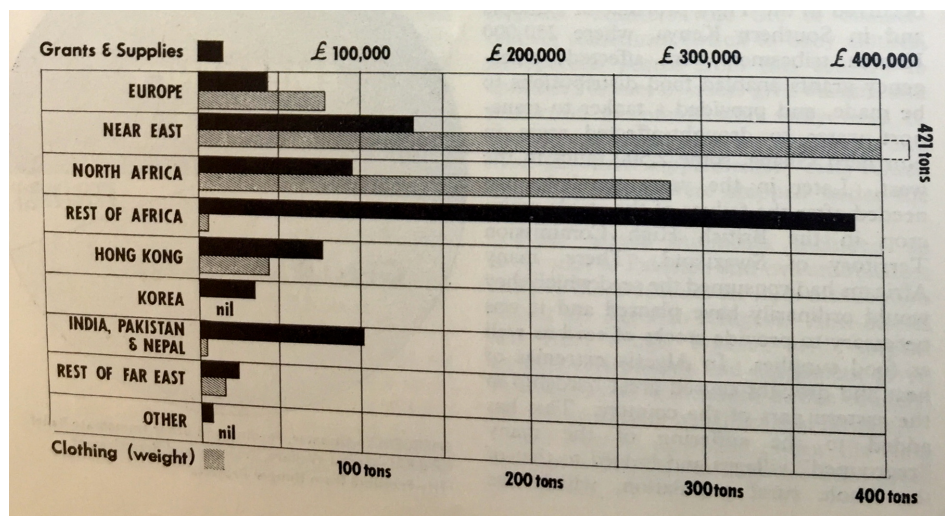


Figure 7: ‘Allocation of Grants and Supplies’ in Oxfam’s Annual Report 1960-1961, OA: COM/1/1/1/1.

A number of dynamics were responsible for this geographical shift in Oxfam’s work. Firstly, the newly introduced UN Decade of Development put an explicit emphasis on Africa.¹⁴⁵ Secondly, the rapid decolonisation of Africa in the early 1960s ‘drew increased attention to

¹⁴⁴ OA: COM/1/1/1/1, Oxfam’s Annual Report 1960-1961.

¹⁴⁵ Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, 123.

the hunger and poverty in the emerging third world,¹⁴⁶ and also opened up new territories for NGOs to work in.¹⁴⁷ Nevertheless, WRY should be regarded as the main reason for the shift, as it was this campaign that ‘finally swept away most of the [European] refugee camps’.¹⁴⁸ Consequently, Oxfam’s ‘grants for resettlement were reduced in scale and used to help fill gaps in the official UN or national programmes’.¹⁴⁹ In addition to its role in ending the need for aid in Europe, WRY also gave Oxfam, for the first time, the contacts and the funds necessary to precipitate the development in its operations to a global scale.

All in all, contrary to Barnett and Weiss’s view that 1945–1989 should be seen as a continuous period of humanitarian action, this study asserts that WRY should be considered a key moment in the history of both Oxfam and NGOs as a whole. As this chapter has demonstrated, WRY helped to elevate Oxfam, and other NGOs,¹⁵⁰ to significant new heights. It also led to a major shift in Oxfam’s operations, as WRY successfully cleared the European refugee camps that had previously been the focal point of most NGOs, and allowed the swing towards a Third World approach. While WRY was surely not alone in triggering this shift, it is certain that it played a vital part and its significance should be acknowledged in accounts of humanitarianism as a result. In addition, the campaign set many precedents for international cooperation that later campaigns, such as ‘Freedom From Hunger,’ could build on.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁶ Jones, ‘Disasters Emergency Committee,’ 578.

¹⁴⁷ Bocking-Welch, ‘Imperial Legacies,’ 880.

¹⁴⁸ OA: COM/1/1/1/1, Oxfam’s Annual Report 1961-1962.

¹⁴⁹ OA: COM/1/1/1/1, Oxfam’s Annual Report 1960-1961.

¹⁵⁰ Gatrell, *Free World*, 248.

¹⁵¹ Gatrell, *Free World*, 227.

Conclusion

This dissertation has studied Britain's role in World Refugee Year (1959–1960) in an attempt to enlighten our understanding of national identity in the period, and to investigate whether the campaign was a defining moment in the history of humanitarianism. In doing this, it has addressed the historical oversight of Britain's role in WRY and also attempted to contribute to our general understanding of the 1950s, a decade said to 'suffer from an image problem and an identity crisis'.¹⁵² Evidence suggests that, although WRY was a 'humanitarian campaign'; it was closely tied to the political circumstances of 1959. British politicians, despite the country's diminished status, continued to 'think and act as if they were the policy-makers and agents of a great power',¹⁵³ and used WRY as a vehicle to rectify Britain's tarnished reputation and exert moral leadership on the world stage. The British public's enthusiastic participation can also be explained by the political backdrop against which WRY occurred: the refugees provided an opportunity to project and reaffirm their long-held self-image of imperial benevolence in a time when their national identity was otherwise in a state of revision.

This study has also provided evidence that WRY should be regarded as a key moment in the history of humanitarianism: it led to a significant step change in the scale and scope of charitable activity, and should stand as an exception to Barnett and Weiss's view of a continuous chronology running from 1945–89. Analysis of the campaign's impact on Oxfam makes it clear that WRY ignited Oxfam's expansion and prompted a redefinition of the organisation from one that worked predominantly on emergency relief in Europe to one that focused on global development. As discussed, it also set major precedents as a global

¹⁵² Bailkin, *Afterlife*, 3.

¹⁵³ Lawrence, *Rise and Fall*, 529.

humanitarian venture, as it brought together for the first time international NGOs to cooperate towards a common goal, in addition to pioneering fundraising techniques.

While this dissertation is persuaded by Gatrell's assertion that this pattern was generic across the NGO sector, future research could supplement this analysis of Oxfam by examining the impact of WRY on other specific NGOs. Such research might perhaps reveal that the story of NGOs ascent is not a simple trajectory. Instead, it might indicate that it is difficult to produce a 'one size fits all' narrative for NGOs, despite Barnett and Weiss's presentation of one.

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