

Congo House / African Training Institute, students

The school known initially as Congo House, or the Congo Training Institute, and later rebranded the African Training Institute, was established in Colwyn Bay in 1890 by Rev William Hughes (1856-1924), a Welsh Baptist minister and former missionary in the Congo Free State. In his short time in central Africa Hughes developed pessimistic views on Africans' likelihood of adopting Christianity via traditional methods of conversion. When ill-health forced Hughes to abandon his missionary career after three years in 1885, he took two youths home with him from Africa. One was a ten-year-old named Kinkasa (c. 1875-1888), whom Hughes reports mysteriously to have found on his way to his mission station. He was joined by the eight-year-old Nkanza (1882-1892), whose mother had reportedly agreed to his departure after Hughes had redeemed him from enslavement.

Kinkasa and Nkanza travelled in north Wales with Hughes. They participated in his public lectures and sermons as specimens of African life and as examples of the potential of African youth for education and Christianity. They recited hymns in their own language, Welsh, and English, danced to African music, and wore African dress over the top of their suits. At this time Hughes decided to import more young Africans for practical education and religious training in what he regarded as the medically and morally healthier environment of north Wales. By preparing students both as catechists and as artisans, he expected them to return to their homelands as self-supporting missionaries who could spread the word of God without recourse to Britain's mission institutions. By 1890 he formed a committee to oversee his work and to help attract support from subscribers, upon whose generosity his plans relied. He founded a school in a large residential building on Nant-y-Glyn Road, which he renamed Congo House. In 1891 he secured patronage from two prominent figures in the European partition of central Africa, the Welsh explorer [Henry Morton Stanley](#) (1841-1904) and Leopold II (1835-1909), king of the Belgians and ruler of the Congo Free State.

Between 1888 and 1893, European missionaries sent to Hughes a further nine students from the Congo and the Cameroons. The school was established in Colwyn Bay, and the pupils' lives became more sedentary. Schoolwork became routine, and many of the male students were entered into apprenticeships with local tradespersons. Some of the pupils from this period were celebrated and keenly supported by the local community in preparation for their return to Africa. One of the new students from the lower Congo, for example, Frank Teva Clark (1875-1927) kept up correspondence with Hughes as well as other families in Colwyn Bay after his successful four-year residence in Wales, at the end of which Teva Clark voyaged on to central Africa as a missionary. His achievements were among the stories of success fondly recalled by Hughes in public writings seeking to attract support for the scheme. Teva Clark's time in the limelight was explained as the natural consequence of personal qualities, which marked him out as a potential trailblazer for Christ in Africa. Individuals such as he successfully negotiated the demands and expectations made upon the students to appear as living proof of the redemptive power of cultural transformation in line with the same ideologies of race and empire which justified Europeans' violent acquisition of African resources.

Not all students experienced Colwyn Bay in this way. Life there imposed specific, racialised and gendered behavioural expectations on the students. The few female students were more closely associated with Hughes's family life, and their educational experience differed from the boys and men. Another Congo-born intake, Ernestina Francis (1883-1914), for example, who stayed at Congo House the longest of all students, only left upon marriage to an African-American student, Joseph Morford (dates unknown). Having arrived in 1891, at age eight, Ernestina Francis embarked to join Morford in West Africa in 1906. While many of the male students studied medicine, another of the young female students, the Congo-born Lulu Coote (1890-1964), was trained as a nurse. She became one of the relatively few students who continued to reside in Britain for most of her life after time in the school.

After initially drawing all his intakes from the Congo, in 1893 Hughes visited Africa again and established recruitment depots in the German-occupied Cameroons, the Republic of Liberia, and the British Niger Coast Protectorate. In other parts of British West Africa, including Sierra Leone, Lagos, and the Gold Coast (Ghana), African supporters of Hughes's venture formed sub-committees that provided financial assistance and publicity, and helped select new trainees. In the 1900s the catchment of Congo House expanded further to include small numbers of arrivals from southern Africa, the USA, and the Caribbean. Brought together by their shared racial heritage, this student body was highly diverse in terms of nationality, social and cultural background, age, and places of origin.

Backed by wealthy patrons or parents in Africa, many of the later students were older than the first arrivals and regarded Congo House as a finishing school to prepare them for university. While some would enter clerical careers, others moved on to work in industry, teaching, medicine, and law. When resident in Britain, some entered public life by petitioning the authorities and the people on colonial injustices which affected them and their compatriots. Kwesi Ewusi (c.1881-1924) and Joseph A. Abraham (dates unknown) from the Gold Coast, for example, were associated with early Ethiopianist and pan-Africanist organisations in Britain. While studying at university, the Nigerians Ayodeji Oyejola (b. 1876) and Akidiya Ladapo Oluwole (dates unknown) were among the students who took on public-speaking engagements, which raised money for charitable causes in Britain, before they left to commence prominent careers as surgeons in west Africa. The South African Davidson Don Tengo Jabavu (1885-1959) would become a pioneering educator and a founder of the All African Convention, which rallied against segregationist policies in his homeland. In his time as the only African academic at the University of Fort Hare, Jabavu taught a young Nelson Mandela. Jabavu's daughter, Noni Jabavu (1919-2008), was an important author and journalist.

In total, around 90 students, including three girls and young women, attended Congo House, according to lists published by Hughes. The overall number is unclear as we lack records other than Hughes's published statements, which would be called into question amid a libel case in 1911 which effectively closed the school and ruined Hughes. While it might be tempting to look at stories such as Jabavu's as evidence of the value of Hughes's scheme, it is important not to assume or overstate the importance of the students' brief stays in north Wales as part of their development, which often included education in other, more established institutions, in Britain, Africa, and elsewhere. The students' experiences of Colwyn Bay could vary considerably, moreover. In its latter years, a small number of individuals registered as students were involved in controversies. Finally, though not perhaps unusually for the time, Congo House was also a place of illness and death - for Hughes's own family as well as his students. Among the students who died while in Colwyn Bay were the two original arrivals: Kinkasa, whose death in 1888 was, according to a local surgeon, owing to a residual bout of sleeping sickness, and Nkanza, who succumbed to heart failure on 3 April 1892.

Author

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Further reading

'Students of the African Institute, Colwyn Bay', Y Bywgraffiadur Cymreig / Dictionary of Welsh Biography, People's Collection Wales

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