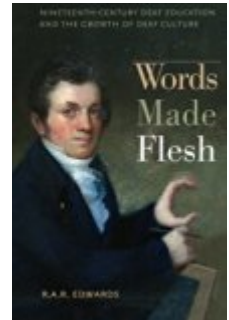


**R. A. R. Edwards.** *Words Made Flesh: Nineteenth-Century Deaf Education and the Growth of Deaf Culture.* History of Disability Series. New York: New York University Press, 2012. vii + 255 pp. \$25.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-4798-8373-8.



**Reviewed by** Stéphane-D. Perreault

**Published on** H-Albion (October, 2015)

**Commissioned by** Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth (Red Deer College)

*Review Editor's Note: The spelling in this review has been copyedited to an American standard by H-Net.*

Studying the history of deaf people, particularly that of their education from the late eighteenth century onward, illuminates broader social and cultural issues. In *Forbidden Signs: American Culture and the Campaign against Sign Language* (1996), Douglas Baynton, for example, cogently demonstrates how reactions to deafness reflected larger preoccupations with national cultural identity in the late nineteenth-century United States. Susan Burch's work, *Signs of Resistance, American Deaf Cultural History, 1900 to World War II* (2002), highlights challenges deaf people face in belonging and participating in the wider economy in the twentieth century. Both of these seminal works point to key issues of cultural affirmation in the face of repression and correspond to a long-standing trend in the history of the d/Deaf,[1] which reaches back at least thirty years. R. A. R. Edwards's *Words Made Flesh* adds another brick to that edifice, and it provides a counterpoint to

many of the standard tropes that focus almost exclusively on the debate in teaching methods to the deaf. Instead of emphasizing the differential power relations between deaf and hearing, Edwards's work points to the many connections and collaborations between these two groups in the early years of deaf education in the United States, before the resurfacing of a conflict of methods that she finds more complex than simply that of oralists versus manualists. This book demonstrates that studying the history of specific groups of people who do not neatly fit within the ethnic/racial/national boundaries is useful to understanding broader historical dynamics, in this case intellectual and educational history in particular.

Deaf history has been an active field of study particularly in the United States, in part thanks to the existence of Gallaudet University and the scholarly activity of its faculty and graduates. Edwards teaches at another postsecondary institution with a significant deaf student population: the Rochester Institute of Technology. Her intellectual roots and interpretive frameworks differ

from the ones that stem from Gallaudet. The predominance of this university has led to some well-enshrined ideas that form the structure of the basic historical narrative of deaf history well beyond the borders of the United States, some of which Edwards espouses, and some from which she takes some distance.

Broadly sketched, the received storyline starts with the arrival in 1817 of Laurent Clerc, a Deaf educator from France, to Hartford, Connecticut, to cofound the American Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb, later renamed American School for the Deaf. Clerc had been recruited from the foremost school for the deaf in France, the Institution nationale des sourds-muets, located in Paris. Clerc came to the United States at the invitation of Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, a hearing educator who was commissioned to find teachers of the deaf in Europe. Gallaudet and Clerc pursued an essentially “manual” teaching philosophy and practice, using sign language to teach the deaf and encouraging the development within their school of a vibrant Deaf community of signers. The received story tells of the expansion across the United States of a state-sponsored network of schools for the deaf, many of them staffed by American School for the Deaf graduates who pursued the same manualist philosophy and replicated the educational model of their alma mater. And all was well in an expanding and diverse Deaf community in the United States until about mid-century, when various social, cultural, and economic pressures coalesced to challenge the use of signs in teaching.

The rise of competing approaches to the education of the deaf stemmed, in part, from changes in educational practices in Europe, which increasingly favored “oralist” teaching techniques, forcing deaf students to lip-read and to use spoken language. This, in the United States as well as in Europe, was meant ostensibly to facilitate the social and economic integration of the deaf, but it can also be seen as part of an agenda of oppres-

sion of the deaf as a linguistic minority. With the rise of nationalism in Germany, Italy, France, and the United States during the period of national reconstruction that followed the Civil War, ideals of national identity came to the forefront of debates about education, leading to increasing pressures in the field of deaf education to have the deaf become part of the national community by speaking rather than signing. The turning point of that transformation in pedagogical approaches is generally situated at the international congress of deaf educators held in Milan in 1880, which adopted resolutions to encourage the exclusive use of oral methods in deaf education across the Western world, leading to an increasingly systematic implementation of oral education in deaf education, a trend that would last until late in the twentieth century.

The application of oppressive educational approaches focused on learning spoken language and developing lip-reading skills stunted educational programming for the deaf outside these basic skills, which led to further marginalization of deaf adults in educational attainment and job opportunities. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the work of William Stokoe in the linguistics of American Sign Language (ASL) led to its eventual recognition as a full-fledged language, but it did not immediately alter teaching methods. The linguistic approach led to renewed interest in signed languages and the attendant cultural identity of deaf people. A cultural awakening for the d/Deaf ensued, which coincided with movements for civil rights and decolonization in the 1960s. The movement culminated in the “Deaf President Now” protest at Gallaudet University in 1988. Following a week-long series of demonstrations by Gallaudet students, the university’s board of governors consented to replacing the hearing person they had chosen and to appoint the first Deaf president in the history of that institution.[2] This could be seen as the history of the American Deaf community coming full circle, opening possibilities for the deaf in a world where new challenges coming

from the medical and technological realms—namely, the cochlear implant and associated surgical treatments—increasingly challenged Deaf identity by situating deafness squarely within the medical domain, negating its cultural dimension.

*Words Made Flesh* does not fundamentally challenge this historical narrative, but it brings important nuances to it. Whereas most of the literature focuses on the period after the arrival of oral teaching methods, Edwards revisits the first fifty years of deaf education in the United States, before the peak of the signs versus speech controversy. She situates the manual approach to deaf education within a complex philosophical, religious, and cultural framework in the intellectual community of antebellum northeastern United States that explains why the manual approach was initially preferred. She successfully portrays the intense cultural and intellectual ferment that gave rise to deaf education in the United States. She also devotes an entire chapter to the question of the type of signs that were used in education, a point that most historians dealing with the question raise only in passing, seeing that debate as epiphenomenal. Edwards argues that it was in that debate over manual methods that the use of signs for education was undone, which in itself makes this an original contribution to the field. This book also speaks to current controversies while ostensibly focusing on a period when deafness was an interesting intellectual question, and deaf people were looked on, at least by those who took an interest in their well-being, as capable of full participation in society. The underlying message is that if there was once a golden age for signs, maybe all hope is not lost for the Deaf.

*Words Made Flesh* is divided into two parts, articulated on the fulcrum of chapter 4: chapters 1 to 3 focus on the establishment and expansion of deaf education using sign language until the 1840s, emphasizing the collaborative relationship established between deaf pupils—and then adults—and their hearing educators. This culminates in

chapter 4 in a multilayered exploration of what made up Deaf life in the 1840s. The second part details in three chapters the undoing of that golden age. It proceeded by what Edwards sees as a common front of oralists and supporters of “methodical signs” against what had become a vibrant Deaf community having its own culture. This was increasingly perceived as a threat to the integration of the deaf into the nation at a time when the United States was buffeted by the Civil War and the Reconstruction period that followed, culminating in 1867 in the opening of the first oral school in the nation.

Edwards’s perspective is informed by two interpretive frameworks: prosopography and literary theory. She relies on prosopography, focusing on individual histories and on interpersonal relations amongst key historical actors as keys to historical change, to highlight some of the intellectual trends that pervade some periods and that durably shape deaf education. One example is the “Yale influence” over the thinking that shaped the programming of the first schools for the deaf. The author also uses literary theory, relying for inspiration on Christopher Krentz’s work on Deaf literature in the United States (*A Mighty Change: An Anthology of Deaf American Writing, 1816-1864* [2000]), to tease out some of the meaning of the sources she uses. While she also quotes the work of Baynton, Burch, and other historians of the deaf, she eschews the main interpretative framework developed by Baynton around the influence of nationalism on reactions to Deaf culture in the later nineteenth-century United States. These interpretive choices both make Edwards’s work interesting and original and make some of her conclusions less convincing. The originality of her methodology and the intuitions she brings forth will, one hopes, encourage further research to help fill some of the gaps she identifies.

The first three chapters explore how the dispersed deaf individuals in the northeastern United States came to form a Deaf community and cul-

ture by the 1840s. This process, Edwards argues, was the result of combined influences from the intellectual culture of humanists at Yale University; from related notions of model citizenship inherent to Christian evangelical faiths; and, of course, from the essential ingredient of an educated French Deaf man, Laurent Clerc, whose very presence made it not only possible but almost inevitable for early deaf educators in the United States to use sign language in teaching. This combination of factors led to the abandonment of “methodical signs” in teaching, and to the creation of the Deaf community Edwards portrays in chapter 4.

Chapter 1 is dedicated to the exploration of the intellectual underpinnings of the movement that led to the creation of the American School for the Deaf in 1817. Edwards points to the humanist Timothy Dwight, president of Yale University from 1795 to 1817, as a core influence in the early unfolding of deaf education. Under his influence, sign language was construed as a means to achieve a higher form of citizenship, of educating the deaf in the core religious and philosophical principles that were necessary to make them into “virtuous citizens” (p. 18). Language modality (signs) did not matter, as long as teaching reached the soul. This opened the possibility for Gallaudet, when he was sent to England in 1816 to study methods of educating the deaf, to look favorably on educated Deaf people like Clerc, whom he saw at a London demonstration of the Paris school. This, and a variety of issues related to the requirements posed by English and Scottish educators, led to the crucial choice of Gallaudet going to France. Clerc and Gallaudet became cofounders of deaf education in the United States, with Clerc providing intellectual credibility, as an educated “virtuous citizen,” to the budding educational enterprise (p. 25). Clerc also tested the boundaries of social acceptance by marrying a deaf woman, but the couple’s success in raising (hearing) children as well as his overall contribution to education allowed “cultural expectations for Deaf people [to

be] defined in Deaf terms” (p. 27). Throughout this chapter, Edwards emphasizes the importance of the personal connections among Yale intellectuals, Gallaudet, Clerc, and a host of other people in collaborating in what was a Whig social reform project that was likely to influence other initiatives for people living with disabilities. That influence on the broader world of disability, however, remains less clear in Edwards’s analysis, most likely because it would have required considerable research outside the scope of this book.

Chapter 2 explores the diverse sign systems that coexisted in deaf education at the beginning of the nineteenth century. First, sign language proper, which is a system of handshapes and movements having its own syntax and logic, evolved into ASL. Not only was this language complete in itself, but it also became a marker of belonging into the culturally Deaf community for physically deaf people and their hearing allies. Second were “methodical signs,” the system of communication invented by the Abbé de l’Épée and used at the French school for teaching. It resulted from the codification of spoken words into handshapes that corresponded to spoken and written word order and syntax. The result was cumbersome and rarely used as a means of communication among the deaf, who preferred sign language. Edwards explores how methodical signs were eventually abandoned in the United States. Third was the manual alphabet, consisting of twenty-six handshapes with which to spell words. While it was part of sign language, its use was generally restricted by signers to words that did not have a convenient sign. However, nineteenth-century educators entertained the hope that handshapes could be learned by the hearing to communicate more efficiently with the deaf without requiring the learning of sign language itself by the hearing. As Edwards makes plain, that hope never materialized, and the burden of adaptation fell on the shoulders of the deaf.

In this chapter and the following, Edwards points out that the American School for the Deaf did not itself teach sign language, but rather used it to teach written English as a means of communication. A standard sign language evolved from the presence of deaf pupils who brought with them home signs, the influence of the French Sign Language brought over by Clerc, and the cultural influence of deaf pupils from Martha's Vineyard, where prevalent hereditary deafness had made signing a common feature of hearing and deaf people alike.[3] Edwards depicts the emergence of sign language in teaching as the result of a collaborative relationship between hearing educators who needed to learn the language to teach their pupils and the pupils themselves. The educational principle at the basis of this approach is now called bilingual-bicultural, a label Edwards uses as shorthand, although it is technically anachronistic. It rested on the assumption that deaf pupils, if they were to learn to communicate with the hearing using written English, required first to master their "native" language of signs, so that they could develop intellectually and learn how to communicate. To humanist educators trained in the classics, this was akin to learning ancient languages. The founding in 1833 of the New York School for the Deaf, which immediately chose to do away with methodical signs, marked the full acceptance among hearing educators of the deaf of the principles of bilingual-bicultural education. The argument over teaching methods was however not closed forever and would eventually return, because, Edwards argues, the use of sign language actually empowered the Deaf, even to the point that they could exercise leadership over the hearing.

Chapter 3 uses the annual reports of both the American School for the Deaf and those of the New York school to draw up a portrait of life in residential schools for the deaf. It starts with the stories pupils wrote of their arrival at school. In these retrospective stories, the recurrent themes were that the new pupils discovered that they

were not alone and that they could belong to a group of people with whom they could communicate without barriers, although the process of learning signs was not necessarily easy for everyone. These narratives emphasize how deaf children felt isolated in their own families, how previous attempts at public schooling had failed, and how they blossomed the moment they set foot in the school for the deaf. Edwards explores the complex process of creating and assimilating sign language within the schools, which contributed to durable attachment by alumni to their schools. This provides an opportunity to examine the complex issue of race relations, as both schools accepted students regardless of race. The sources do not really allow any analysis of the level of racial integration within the school culture, but they do raise the issue of perceptions of southern parents whose children were sent to school in New England, presumably absorbing intolerable ideas on racial toleration. The author avoids a facile conclusion that commonality of deafness made racial difference more acceptable than it was for the hearing, and she admits that this topic is ripe for further research into students' racial self-perception. The idea that ties this chapter together is that school constructed a Deaf identity among the pupils, one that was accepted and even encouraged by hearing educators, and that fostered a golden age of cultural Deafness in the United States. Identifying what made up this cultural apex is her focus in the following chapter.

Chapter 4 marks the turning point in the structure of the book between the building of a Deaf community in the United States and attempts at undoing Deafness. This chapter runs fifty-two pages long and is divided into ten subsections, each describing an aspect of nineteenth-century Deaf life. Edwards presents it as "a kind of tour of the nineteenth-century Deaf world" (p. 89). This includes early organizations and events they facilitated, deaf nationalism, experiments in education, churches, the Deaf press, the work world, gender and race, and a nod to material culture.

The treatment of each section is quite uneven. The sections on organizations, nationalism, and the press are probably the best, as they present a living community that has its own complex social organizations, and that skillfully relates to the hearing world at large. While these sections highlight the leadership and agency of several key people within the community and succeed in showing the Deaf as historical agents, this analysis could have benefited from an exploration of other leaders of their respective Deaf communities abroad. The work of Christian Cuxac and Bernard Mottez on the Deaf in France and their banquets comes to mind.<sup>[4]</sup> This also applies to the detailed exploration of the Deaf press (independent and school-based), which remains contained within the United States. Edwards's portrayal leaves the impression that the Deaf in the United States, after initial contact with Europe at the time of the founding of the American School for the Deaf, evolved entirely separately from what was, in reality, a rather tight-knit international network of educators of the deaf and community leaders on both sides of the Atlantic. This kind of "American exceptionalism" applied to Deaf history does pervade much of the author's interpretation and does not suit this area of historical study. Nevertheless, her close observation of the various associations and organizations allows her to highlight the individuals involved and the peculiarities that made the Deaf community in the United States unique, which is a worthwhile project.

This chapter deals less satisfactorily with the deaf at work and with issues of gender and race, most probably because of the difficulty of finding written traces to explore these topics fully, especially within the scope of the doctoral dissertation from which this book originated. Regarding work, Edwards has interesting examples of how printing became such an important occupation in the Deaf community, but as she points out, it really flourished after the period under study. She does show that farming was probably the most com-

mon occupation for the deaf in the early nineteenth century, and that this would have posed challenges related to social isolation. Gender and race are chiefly explored through the lens of a few exceptional individuals, such as Eliza Boardman, wife of Clerc, and Sofia Fowler, wife of Gallaudet. While these are indeed interesting portraits of a few unique individuals, little effort is made to point out that while these socially prominent women represented a positive image of Deafness to the hearing elites in whose social circles they operated, they were not typical of the average d/Deaf woman's experience. The situation of the Mentrash family as an illustration of the situation of deaf African Americans is better presented as atypical, but it is the only example used, which, by the author's own admission, is not to be construed as representative. The issue of race relations and its possible relation to changing perceptions of the deaf in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is brought up throughout the book, but this only succeeds in opening an area that really would require further study. In this area, Edwards's intuitions are interesting, but not grounded in enough evidence to allow any conclusions to be drawn, and she remains humble in expressing what she admits are hunches. The social history of deafness could have been better explored through a careful reading of the "personals" in the Deaf press, which would possibly have been one element to add in the transformation of the dissertation into this book.

Edwards portrays aspects of the life of the Deaf community in the northeastern United States that are unique, and then others can be related to the experience of the deaf in various parts of the world, such as what I have seen in my own research in Canada. There were many parallel developments (if not similarities), including divisions brought by race (in the United States), that could in some ways be compared to confessional (Catholic versus Protestant) relations in Canada. Further, the section on "material culture" in this chapter brought forward the colorful figure of

Thomas Widd, a Deaf man of British origin who was the first principal of Montréal's Mackay School from 1870 to 1883 before he moved to the United States. His description of a contraption connecting an alarm clock to a pillow suspended above the head of the sleeper shows both cleverness and humor. These openings onto realities shared by the deaf across the world do suggest the necessity for more research into what made Deaf communities similar and unique in various parts of the world where education of the deaf had made it possible for the Deaf to form communities and to leave behind sources for historical research.

The last part of this chapter, on material culture, also serves to transition into the challenges that the Deaf were to face in the second half of the nineteenth century. The use of slates, which many deaf people carried to communicate with the hearing, is pointed out as a problem. A Deaf man humorously recalled scaring someone in attempting to communicate by writing on a slate. This anecdote segues into the author's argument about the emerging perceived necessity of teaching speech and lip-reading to the deaf, essentially to facilitate the life of the hearing, who feared a dynamic Deaf culture. The chapter portrays a lively community, one that, Edwards points out, was about to sustain an all-out attack that cannot be singly attributed to oralism, but that owed some of its success to a resurgence of interest in methodical signs as well.

Chapter 5 attributes this change of mindset largely to two men: Horace Mann and Samuel Gridley Howe, both from Massachusetts, who would become champions for oralism after an eye-opening visit to Prussia in 1843. Mann was a lawyer and legislator, whereas Howe was the principal of the Perkins School for the Blind, and he became the chair of the state's Board of Charities in 1862. Howe was particularly known for his work with Laura Bridgman, a deaf-blind girl who was the object of his theological and scientific interest in

the 1830s.[5] Neither man had any experience with deaf education. They assumed that their humanitarianism and Howe's interest in the blind qualified them to pass judgment and to propose reforms aimed at breaking what they perceived as the "clannishness" of the deaf who had attended residential schools (p. 152). They harbored a view of education that favored what would be called "integration" in the 1970s: the idea that every student should follow the same common curriculum and should not be segregated in separate schools. Edwards argues that Howe's stance was rooted in his disappointment with how the experiment with Bridgman had turned out, which made him see disabled people as objects of charity rather than people to be educated. This position could not be more opposed from that of early educators of the deaf, and Howe did not have the benefit of a close collaboration with an eloquent Deaf educator as Gallaudet had with Clerc.

Mann and Howe were not bringing in entirely new ideas; their position recalled ideas that held sway prior to the 1760s experiments of the Abbé de l'Épée, who used signs to develop a form of public education accessible to the deaf. By the 1840s, however, oral methods that previously had been used by expensive private tutors were now used in schools, such as the ones Mann and Howe visited in Prussia in 1843. These schools regularly held public exhibitions of their best pupils to demonstrate their skill at speech and lip-reading. The movement for oralism had grown in popularity across Europe, and by the time Mann and Howe were in Prussia, it had spread to Italy and France, where the institution founded by the Abbé de l'Épée was already including speech and lip-reading in its program. This international context is unfortunately missing in this chapter, which leaves the impression that somehow Mann and Howe were unique and trailblazing if ultimately wrongheaded.

This chapter is an interesting character study, one that Edwards pursues in an essay that chal-

lenges Harlan Lane and Douglas Baynton, who in her opinion neglected Mann as a factor in the rise of oralism in the United States by focusing on generational change and cultural transformations brought about by the Civil War.[6] However, Edwards's argument leaves a lot to be desired as it does not provide enough context to understand the reasons Mann and Howe apparently had such influence—or even to assess whether they indeed did—over decisions that would eventually bring about an oralist triumph in the United States. The argument that somehow they had the right connections to make the change happen is simply not supported by enough evidence. By the end of chapter 5, the reader is left to wonder what happened between the 1844 publication of Mann's report on his visit to Prussia and the opening of the Clarke School in Northampton in 1867, since Edwards establishes a direct causal link between the two. Twenty-three years is a long period; the exploration of what happened in the interim is left to the following two chapters.

In chapter 6, Edwards contends that the manualist educators who argued, by the 1850s, for a return to the use of methodical signs (rather than using sign language in teaching) were unwitting allies of the oralists. Her argument rests on the premise that both methodical signs and oralism stemmed from a view of the deaf as objects of charity having to adapt to the conditions of the hearing world, whereas early manualists focused on developing the mind of the deaf students, trusting that they could communicate with the hearing by writing. Much of the argument in this chapter rests on conflicting notions of what constitutes language, and which mode of expression was considered legitimate. It illustrates a gradual shift toward seeing users of sign language as “oral failures,” denoting a slower intellect and a resistance to integrate in the wider hearing world (p. 168). To Edwards, these changes in perceptions emerged in the 1840s as an unanticipated result of the success of manual educators in educating deaf people, who had created for themselves com-

munity organizations, newspapers, and churches. It also stemmed from the unwillingness of incoming hearing educators to rely on their pupils to learn how to sign before they could actually teach them, seeing the students' signs as unrefined in regard to an ideal sign language.

Edwards explores the changing rhetoric around language and perceptions, asking why signs that were previously seen as graceful and “natural” to the deaf were increasingly being perceived as a mark of shame. In particular, the facial expressions inherent to sign language were increasingly labeled “grimaces,” denoting an increasingly negative perception of signing in general (p. 170). This exploration of evolving perceptions of language is done at the level of discourse and theory, without exploring the sources of this increased hearing normativity. In many places, the author attributes the emerging normativity to a group she loosely labels “oralists,” but which she also argues included those who wanted to reintroduce methodical signs and fingerspelling in lieu of sign language in education. Edwards quotes Lennard J Davis's work in this regard (*Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* [1995]), without anchoring her argument into the surrounding evolving culture that explains the emerging normativity she sees at work and labels “oralism.” Her discussion centers mostly on debates in the deaf education journal *The American Annals of the Deaf*, without acknowledging the changing culture and broader intellectual trends in the United States at the time, especially around immigration. The nod she gives to Charles Darwin on page 173 could, for example, have been an interesting way to bring in emerging scientific and pseudo-scientific discourses on what constituted humanity. Her argument ends up being circular and not entirely convincing, but it still offers intuitions that are worth pursuing. For example, her allusions to the association of visible signs of deafness to a certain level of intelligence begs for research into the history of perceptions and measurement of intelligence. She



also tantalizingly hints that oralism was strongest in the southern states, an idea that would merit exploration and that could possibly nuance some of her own interpretations rooted in the north-eastern states and their intellectual elites.

Chapter 7 brings the discussion home by focusing on the debates preceding the creation of a school for the deaf in the state of Massachusetts in 1867. Edwards parses the transcripts of a committee of the state legislature struck in 1866 to study the question. Here, we see educators from the American School for the Deaf, in Hartford, Connecticut, facing Howe (Mann died in 1859) and Gardiner Greene Hubbard, both oralists from Massachusetts. The element of the “home support” factor is interestingly eluded from the analysis, when it seems that it would have been the first factor in making Massachusetts legislators favor Howe and Hubbard’s presentations, as the representatives of the Hartford school would have been seen as trying to take advantage of Massachusetts subsidies to out-of-state students. It is noticeable that nowhere in this book are financial considerations even raised, when they probably played a key role in the switch to oralism in many places as is indirectly suggested when the question of the qualification of teachers for the deaf is raised. This is one case of historical analysis eschewing the very practical realities of life to favor a discussion of ideas when the question of money was most likely foremost in the minds of the legislators.

Massachusetts legislators faced two options: either to continue sending Massachusetts pupils to Hartford or to open a local school. The question of which teaching method would be favored if a local school was opened was implicit: if pupils attended the American School for the Deaf in Hartford, they would use sign language as the mode of communication. The language to be used in the proposed school in Massachusetts was theoretically an open question, although oralism was implied, and thus the argument centered on sign

language versus oralism. Edwards skillfully reveals the discussion’s multilayered character, such as the prominence of issues of class and gender in the debate. Hubbard, for example, associated social class and teaching methods by arguing that the deaf were being taught “above their class” by learning skilled trades in Hartford (pp. 197-198). Further, class associations were made between blindness as a middle-class condition and deafness as a working-class condition, a topic that deserves further study. Hubbard predictably used his daughter Mabel (later Alexander Graham Bell’s wife) as an example. Mabel had been educated by a private oral tutor and “passed” for hearing, a point of pride for her future husband (p. 194). The oralist argument rested then at least in part on this one success story as well as on assumptions about the nature of language and of deafness. As a counterpoint to the arguments made by Hubbard and Howe, the representatives of the American School for the Deaf put forward their expertise as educators of the deaf, cautioning the legislators against being lured by performances of orally trained deaf people that only look spectacular on the outside but do not amount to true education. However, class arguments situating the deaf as merely “working class” here worked against higher intellectual aspirations and associated to other factors to eventually sway the Massachusetts legislators in favor of opening the Clarke School in Northampton, the first oral school for the deaf in the United States. This event marks for Edwards the true turn to oralism in the United States. What happened later on resulted from a process that gained a life of its own and that can be attributed to the work of Mann, whose “spirit” was repeatedly invoked during the debates by Howe in referring to their 1843 visit of Prussian schools (p. 193).

Throughout this discussion of the arguments brought forth to the legislators, Edwards repeatedly posits that the two sides failed to understand their respective positions. Yet the issue was not whether they “understood” each other but that

they fundamentally disagreed on what they considered to be the best interest of the deaf, and especially on who should decide what was in their best interest. Manualist educators had a history of empowering the deaf, and their contribution to the creation of a Deaf community stood as a testimony to their success. Oralists had little experience of the practical issues of educating the deaf, but saw themselves as benefactors who knew best. Each understood the other's position, but neither could agree, because, as Baynton and others, including me, would posit, proponents of manualism operated from an antebellum cultural context shaped by a religious viewpoint of virtuous citizenship, whereas supporters of oralism operated from the idea that there needed to be only one "national community" in the United States, an issue that would have been paramount in these years immediately after the Civil War. Edwards chose to disregard broader cultural, generational, financial, and ideological issues at stake in these debates in order to make a point about Mann's influence. This results in a weaker argument, even though in the discussion it raises important questions that would require further research.

The conclusion mostly highlights the oralist victory without mentioning the international context, particularly the infamous 1880 Congress of Milan. The focus is elsewhere and explicitly raises issues that were visible here and there between the lines about current educational practices. It is an indictment of ideological and philosophical assumptions about disability recalling those that led to oralism in the nineteenth century. It is surprising that the conclusion ends on a less-than-satisfactory return to the Bell-Gallaudet debate as a closing point, essentially repeating an argument made by Richard Winefield nearly thirty years ago in *Never the Twain Shall Meet: Bell, Gallaudet and the Communications Debate* (1987). That ending is, however, coherent with the approach taken by the author, which emphasizes socially prominent individuals and their influence on historical events. It also demonstrates the interpretive limits

of an approach that centers on the influence of key influential men of the past.

*Words Made Flesh* is an important contribution to the field, if only because of the many questions it raises as much as for the insights Edwards brings to the object of her study. The book would have benefited from further revision from the dissertation of the same title.[7] In the fifteen-year interval between the dissertation and the publication of the book, research into the overall cultural context could have enriched the argument. Exploring some of the key themes in an international perspective and a willingness to situate some of the prominent people, such as Mann, in the changing cultural context in which their ideas developed would have increased the relevance of the book.

In terms of presentation, this book is nearly impeccable. The index is complete and very useful. I only found the absence of a bibliography vexing: having to comb throughout endnotes to find the complete reference to a given work is tedious. Also, a bibliography might have revealed a broader research than that given by the footnotes. But this is nitpicking. This book remains a must-read for anyone interested not only in the history of deaf people in the United States but also to anyone curious about nineteenth-century American culture, particularly in New England.

#### Notes

[1]. Following a long-established convention in the field of Deaf studies, lowercase "d" deaf refers to the audiological condition of not hearing, whereas uppercase "D" Deaf refers to people who form a cultural community, generally defined by physical deafness and by the use of sign language.

[2]. John B. Christiansen and Sharon M. Barnartt, *Deaf President Now! The 1988 Revolution at Gallaudet University* (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 1995).

[3]. Nora Ellen Groce, *Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language: Hereditary Deafness on Martha's*

*Vineyard* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).

[4]. Christian Cuxac, *Le langage des sourds* (Paris: Payot, 1983); and Bernard Mottez, "The Deaf-Mute Banquets and the Birth of the Deaf Movement," in *Deaf History Unveiled: Interpretations from the New Scholarship*, ed. John Vickrey Van Cleve (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 1993), 27-39.

[5]. Ernest Freeberg, "An Object of Peculiar Interest': The Education of Laura Bridgman," *Church History* 61, no. 2 (1992): 191-205.

[6]. R. A. R. Edwards, "Speech Has an Extraordinary Humanizing Power': Horace Mann and the Problem of Nineteenth-Century American Deaf Education," *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, ed. Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 58-82.

[7]. R. A. R. Edwards, "Words Made Flesh: Nineteenth-Century Deaf Education and the Growth of Deaf Culture" (PhD diss., University of Rochester, 1997).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

**Citation:** Stéphane-D. Perreault. Review of Edwards, R. A. R. *Words Made Flesh: Nineteenth-Century Deaf Education and the Growth of Deaf Culture*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. October, 2015.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36617>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.