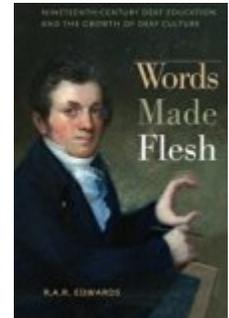


R. A. R. Edwards. *Words Made Flesh: Nineteenth-Century Deaf Education and the Growth of Deaf Culture.* History of Disability Series. New York: New York University Press, 2012. vii + 255 pp. \$25.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-4798-8373-8.



Reviewed by Jaipreet Viridi

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Commissioned by Iain C. Hutchison (University of Glasgow)

At age ten, John Crane lost his hearing. Lacking the ability to communicate with a hearing world, the “sting of social isolation” threatened to overwhelm him (p. 85). Not until entering a residential school for the deaf was “the ignorance of deaf mutes” cured and Crane was granted a new perspective of his life as a deaf individual (pp. 85-86). R. A.R. Edwards uses this tale to capture how education forced deaf Americans to rethink the meanings of their deafness and their place in American society. *Words Made Flesh* places deaf Americans at the center of their own history within the nineteenth century, as the “war of methods” in deaf education was a direct response to the unexpected transformation of deafness (audiological distinction) to Deafness (cultural/linguistic distinction). Beginning with Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc’s efforts in establishing the Hartford School (later American School of the Deaf) in 1817, and ending in 1867 with the Clark School, Edwards analyzes a crucial question: “If educators and administrators were so confident in their bilingual-bicultural method,

why didn’t it survive the century?” (p. 143). Why did oralists eventually triumph over the manual method and transform deaf individuals from bi-cultural-bilingualists with their own natural language of signs to monolingualists whose speech humanized them? *Words Made Flesh* offers a revisionist history of the “war of methods,” rooting the debates of deaf pedagogy in the 1850s as the meaning of deafness was transformed along with shifting visions of the broader American culture.

Words Made Flesh starts off with the standard narrative of how Gallaudet (1787-1851) and Clerc (1785-1869) introduced sign language to America. Chapter 1 lays the groundwork for analyzing how deaf Americans came to perceive themselves as bicultural-bilingual citizens at the same time as hearing educators were constructing the pedagogical foundations of deaf education. For instance, Edwards outlines how Yale president Timothy Dwight (1752-1817) not only oversaw the education of the first three principals of the American School—Gallaudet, Lewis Weld (1796-1853), and William Turner (1800-77)—but

also offered them a vision of American social life rooted in the virtuous citizen. Gallaudet, in particular, applied this vision: deaf people were part of the broader American culture and literacy provided them the key for inclusion. While the foundations for deaf education were being established, Clerc, a signing, nonspeaking user of English exemplified the potential capabilities and expectations of deaf individuals: if they could learn English in its written form as Clerc had, then they could fulfill other roles as American citizens—education, work, marriage, and child-rearing.

Examining the tenets of the manual method of deaf education, Edwards stresses that the cultivation of the natural signs of the deaf was the key to them learning the language of hearing. As chapter 2 outlines, upon arriving at residential schools and encountering other deaf individuals, deaf pupils abandoned the natural signs used at home to embrace the natural language of signs used at school. Developed through a “creolization process,” the natural language of signs was cultivated as it formed through uniformity; this was an essential step in the building of a Deaf culture as well as an integral element in how educators could teach them to read and write English. Sign language, in both natural and methodological modes, was considered crucial for bringing deaf children into contact with the wider intellectual world, even as educators disagreed over pedagogy. The New York Institution for the Deaf, for instance, abandoned methodological signs in 1833, arguing that it was better to teach children English directly, rather than an intermediate language. As Edwards emphasizes, “deaf children could not be expected to learn English without the use of sign language in the classroom” (p. 39).

Chapters 3 and 4 show how the journey from “learning to be Deaf” to the “Deaf Way” began the moment deaf pupils arrived at school. Edwards uses a fantastic array of archival sources to narrate the sense of belonging and community that many students immediately recognized as their

own. This “happy discovery” showed the deaf that the changing social conditions of their deafness would provide them capabilities to become equal members of a larger society as useful, respected, and educated citizens (p. 54). Deaf organizations, newspapers, events, and employment all formed the basis of a Deaf culture that continued after graduation. Placing the stories of deaf individuals within the broader American consciousness, Edwards introduces numerous historical themes that tell us just how much is unexplored in deaf history. Race and segregated schools, for instance, remain a largely underrepresented area of deaf history; as Edwards notes, “black and white deaf students attended school together. They graduated side by side” (p. 134). They married, had children, went to work, joined the National Association of the Deaf (NAD)—though the NAD barred blacks in 1925, suggesting that the Deaf community adopted the mainstream set of racial values. Gender is another significant theme for examining deaf history. Edwards discusses how trailblazers Eliza Boardman (1792-1880) and Sophia Fowler (1789-1877), who married Clerc and Gallaudet respectively, exemplified how deaf women could lead similar lives as hearing women. To be a “normal,” a married woman was to raise good, civic-minded offspring, a trait that Boardman and Fowler demonstrated deaf women could do as well (p. 122).

One of the most interesting themes that Edwards raises is how material culture can reveal the experience of deafness and deaf lives in late nineteenth-century America. There has been much discussion and debate in recent historical studies regarding the “personhood” of hearing aids and cochlear implants, and how technologies can mark, stigmatize, or elevate disabled individuals. Sound studies have also demonstrated that urban centers revolved around a culture of aural-ity and that everyday technologies were made on the assumption that everyone can hear. How did the technologies of deafness construct the daily lives of deaf Americans in the late nineteenth cen-

tury and to what extent did the deaf rely on these technologies? For instance, Edwards outlines an 1869 article in *Deaf Mutes' Friend* that notified readers an “alarm continuance” was now possible to awaken sleeping deaf-mutes: a cord was attached to the alarm wheel of a clock, so rather than chiming at an appointed hour, a pillow is dropped to the sleeping face (p. 138). Material culture is only briefly discussed in the book, but provides an exciting opportunity for examining deaf experiences.

The second half of *Words Made Flesh* argues that as Deaf identity and culture was coming into fruition, the deaf were in danger of being left out of another vision of America. Edwards discusses how Horace Mann’s (1796-1859) *Seventh Annual Report of the Board of Education* (1844) set the foundation for the oralist campaigns against sign language. Mann based his educational philosophy on the Prussian model of practicality and efficiency, which he intended to apply to both hearing and deaf schools. Education was the cure that ailed all of America’s problems, from poverty, crime, disease, and ignorance, and could tie together all Americans under a common culture. The Deaf, Mann insisted, should not be left out of this vision, but share in the common culture they had to share in the same oral culture. Only speech could humanize them in the way writing and signing English could not. However, despite Mann’s proclamations, oralist arguments did not gain currency until the end of the nineteenth century as nativist, eugenicist, and anti-immigrant sentiments spread to the wider public imagination, creating a culture welcome for oralism. Edwards argues that oralist campaigns “touched off a wave of professional soul-searching among those working in the field of deaf education” by exploiting the debates in the manual camp (p. 144).

By the closing decades of the nineteenth century, it was apparent that the real target was not a pedagogical strategy, but Deaf culture itself. Pro-

ponents of methodological signs believed that deaf students could be made more hearing and less Deaf, a stark maneuver from the early years of the Hartford School when natural sign language was encouraged and allowed to thrive. As Edwards explains, the “preference for methodological signs signalled a preference for hearing culture over and against Deaf culture. By making deaf people monolingualists, by making English the only acceptable language for all, methodological sign manualists clearly intended to make deaf people culturally hearing” (p. 183). Along with oralists, methodological educators proclaimed that to be deaf was to reflect the vision of “normal” America: godly, educated, civic minded, and hearing. The founding of the Clarke School as a result of the Joint Special Committee of Massachusetts State Legislature only intensified further debates about deafness, sign language, and oralism, as deaf people were used to reflect a particular vision of what it meant to be American. Edwards’s *Words Made Flesh* is a remarkable contribution to the historiography of deaf education, emphasizing how the parallel histories of American deaf experience—the hearing and the d/Deaf—were integrated and woven together. By focusing on a particular time frame and tracing crucial themes, Edwards avoids painting broad historical strokes, allowing the stories of the d/Deaf to contribute to the making of their own history.

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