



Martin Atherton. *Deafness, Community and Culture in Britain: Leisure and Cohesion, 1945-1995.* Disability History Series. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016. 224 pp. \$27.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7190-9978-6.

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Prior to the introduction of sign language and schools designed for the deaf in the early nineteenth century, deaf individuals were often isolated not only from the "normal world" but also from each other. Consequently, such entities as educational, charitable, and religious-based societies were among the first to establish institutions to address the needs of this population during that period, and their efforts would engender the development of deaf clubs and societies in the mid-twentieth century. In *Deafness, Community and Culture in Britain*, Martin Atherton examines the history of deaf clubs in postwar Britain and the social, cultural, and psychological benefits that involvement in such clubs afforded its members. He argues that it was in deaf clubs where deaf people "first experienced what might be regarded as a normal life,... one in which they did not form a misrepresented and misunderstood minority" (p. 50). Much like the use of sign language, which contributed to the formation of group identity and self-identity in the deaf community, in many ways deaf clubs allowed for and encouraged participation in leisure and sport and represented a central factor in the creation and vitality of Britain's deaf community.

This book is primarily targeted at audiences specializing in deaf studies, but it will also appeal to scholars interested in disabilities studies, as well

as the social and cultural histories of clubs and community life. *Deafness, Community and Culture in Britain* is divided into nine chapters, with the first and final chapters serving as the introduction and conclusion, the latter considering the future of deaf clubs in Britain. The remaining seven chapters are fairly chronological in scope and explore such different themes as the social impact of poor laws, the influence of deaf-sponsored newspapers, and the ways deaf clubs served their members through leisure, cultural, and sport-related activities. Drawing on deaf clubs in northwest England as a case study, Atherton argues that due to the area's varied urban and rural settings, such as factory towns, coalfields, and satellite towns, this particular region serves a "microcosm of all aspects of the wider deaf experience in post-war Britain" (p. 2).

The first organized network of deaf societies, according to Atherton, appeared soon after the change in the 1601 Poor Laws, a set of laws that categorized the poor into two distinct groups—the deserving and the undeserving. In short, the deserving poor were those whose poverty was through no fault of their own. The undeserving poor, on the other hand, were poor because of personal vices, such as laziness or other character flaws. In his telling, deaf societies and clubs trace

their origins to the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, a set of laws that essentially made it more difficult for "deserving" individuals to claim relief from religious or philanthropic agencies. Following the change in legislation, and in direct response to the "suffering deaf people were experiencing as a result," Atherton argues, deaf societies began to form (p. 40). Though this shift in legislation coincided with the creation of new societies pertaining to the deaf, the author's use of the term "society" in this historical context is a bit confusing. For example, in describing philanthropic organizations, such as the Edinburgh Deaf Society, which were created to provide gender-specific vocational training in such trades as printing, shoemaking, and needlework, as well as church-related missions that were established for the deaf to guarantee that they received spiritual instruction, it is unclear how institutions and organizations fit the typical description of a society or what would later become a club in the postwar era. More important, such organized societies do not necessarily fall within the parameters of how the author has characterized "community" in this book, which he borrows from linguist Carol Padden's definition. For Padden, there are three common features of a community: the sharing of common goals, a shared geographic location, and the freedom to organize the social life of its members.[1] While Padden's definition itself is certainly not being called into question, the context in which it is used by Atherton and the ways such terms as "society," "clubs," and "community" are used interchangeably at times and over fairly broad historical time periods are rather confusing. Readers who are unfamiliar with these terms, especially with regard to how they applied to the deaf community and the ways their significance shifted over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, might wish for more analysis of how this process evolved over time.

While deaf individuals did not necessarily engage in leisure activities that differed from their hearing counterparts, it was the broader social, cultural, and psychological benefits that made

these relationships particularly impactful. Benedict Anderson's notion of the "imagined community" (*Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* [1991]) figures heavily into Atherton's analysis of Britain's deaf community and the clubs they eventually formed. Drawing on Anderson's theory of the "imagined community," Atherton suggests that the representation of such a community "could be found on a couch, in a holiday camp or even on board a cruise ship.... The location was less important in terms of understanding the reality of 'the deaf club' than the people who engaged in a particular activity" (p. 9). The network of deaf clubs that was established allowed deaf people the opportunity to "develop notions of identity based on mutual deafness and a communal form of social, cultural, and linguistic expression" and thus to contribute to the formation of self-identity and group identity (p. 75). In addition to examining how societies and clubs were formed, Atherton explores the theoretical underpinnings of the emotional and psychological rewards that arose from participating in various clubs, sporting events, and cultural activities, such as attending the cinema. In this sense, "deaf clubs provided both a geographical centre for the deaf community and a social network through which existing notions of community and identity could be maintained" (p. 60).

Throughout the book, Atherton underscores the importance of *British Deaf News* (1955-95), as well as its predecessor *British Deaf Times* (1945-50), two publications that not only helped disseminate news but also kept the deaf community informed of local social events. When members of a community read the same newspaper or text, they built the same "cultural values and ideas," and the sharing of such values and ideas allowed for their large-scale transmission, thus contributing to the development of what Anderson referred to as "nationhood" (p. 76). Here Atherton argues that *British Deaf News* built a camaraderie with its deaf readers and, to some degree, served as a means of communication between deaf people for the first time

in the era before such technology as email and textphones. This discussion, especially Atherton's focus on community-based reporting, is interesting, but it suffers from what many historians of print culture would argue can be difficult to pin down: what does self-reporting actually reveal and to what degree can historians rely on these figures? Relatedly, while print runs provide data as to how many copies were printed, such figures do not necessarily inform us how many people actually read its contents or how far-reaching the influence of a particular message was. In addition to exploring the role of print culture, it would be interesting to see how the deaf community developed and shared its "cultural values and ideas" by incorporating oral testimonies from former club members.

Increasing urbanization throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries contributed to dislocation of different social groups but also led to growth in leisure activities. These coinciding forces, Atherton asserts, gave deaf individuals, who would have otherwise been geographically isolated, the opportunity to be gathered together in contact with those of similar background and shared language in order to develop cultural attachments. He describes deaf clubs as "a direct response to this social dislocation, providing opportunities for socialising and sharing leisure activities that had not been previously available" (p. 70). The degree to which deaf people shared similar backgrounds or experiences, other than the fact that they were deaf, is unclear from Atherton's analysis. For example, in his discussion of deaf clubs and organizations, he mentions that there was a keen class distinction and that deaf clubs have traditionally been working class (and primarily white) with few members of the professional class. While he highlights that the perception that deaf people from minority ethnic backgrounds were reluctant to join remains "open for debate," there is little mention as to whether or not

there was equal membership among men and women (p. 55).

As the first scholar to examine the inner workings of deaf clubs in Britain, Atherton certainly had his work cut out for him as availability of sources, such as personal testimonies, is limited. However, it is rather surprising that the bibliography does not list any secondary sources on deaf history or studies predating the book's 2012 original publication date. In addition, the author's primary evidence is largely drawn from two sources: the publications *British Deaf Times* and *British Deaf News*. While this book is undoubtedly intended to provide insight on how deaf clubs operated, such institutions certainly did not exist in a vacuum. More historical context on how deaf clubs and their members interacted with the broader community (and nation) would have been beneficial. The reader is left with little to no understanding of how British policy or trends—social, cultural, or political—might have influenced or affected the deaf community, which lends itself to a myopic recounting of how the clubs functioned in northwest England. In particular, Atherton makes some very interesting points about economic disparities and social class that existed within the clubs and the ways these phenomena played out within sporting teams as well as the relationship that existed between deaf teams and their hearing counterparts. This work is certainly a conversation starter and is a welcome addition to the field of deaf history.

Note

[1]. Carol Padden, "The Deaf Community and Deaf Culture," in *Constructing Deafness*, ed. Susan Gregory and Gillian M. Hartley (London: Pinter Publishers, 1991), 40-45.

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