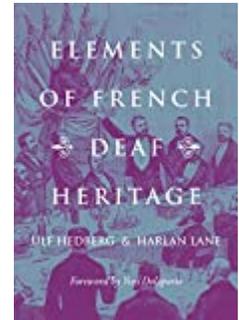


**Ulf Hedberg, Harlan Lane.** *Elements of French Deaf Heritage*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2019. Illustrations, tables. 222 pp. \$55.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-944838-56-0.



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The signs for HEAR and HEARING, ethnologist Yves Delaporte states in the foreword of Ulf Hedberg's and Harlan Lane's *Elements of French Deaf Heritage*, are different both in French and in American Sign language. The first denotes the audiological ability to hear, the other belongs to the world of those who function in the hearing world, as opposed to those who are deaf. The "signs HEARING and DEAF," he writes, thus "function as two ethnonyms" that "split the world in two anthropological categories, 'us' and 'them,' as all ethnic groups do" (p. 9). In recent years, the claim that American deaf people form an ethnic group has aimed to place them alongside the older categorization of a sociolinguistic or cultural minority, or to replace that categorization altogether. It had first been explicitly made for American deaf people by Harlan Lane—a hearing psychologist long involved in deaf studies—and archivist Hedberg in the early 2000s.[1] This has mostly been a US framework, while deaf people and organizations in other parts of the world have not necessarily chosen this framework. While the exact reasons

for these different frameworks remain to be explored, it certainly has something to do with the fluid and internationally divergent definitions of ethnic groups, and the different rights, status, and political resources (or lack of) available to ethnic minorities in various countries.

Without engaging with these debates, *Elements of French Deaf Heritage* classifies French deaf people as an ethnic group by identifying ethnic markers, such as group identity, shared history, and myths. Hedberg and Lane undertook the tremendous task of combing through around twenty thousand pages of primary sources—school chronicles, the deaf press, memoirs, etc.—to identify French deaf schools and leaders, organizations and events, and French deaf artists active in the nineteenth century. They organize this content in four chapters, each with a short foreword on characteristics of ethnic affiliation. In its organization, the book is a chronicle or short encyclopedia, although one that would have profited from more thorough editing. While the entries seem to have been written to be read in isolation (some pas-

sages are repeated verbatim), they often refer to earlier entries. The reader may, therefore, sometimes become frustrated and confused by the piecemeal information on various people, institutions, or events. When read separately, the cross-references often remain unclear and are hard to follow. Perhaps the sometimes seemingly unfinished nature of the book is due to the fact that Lane passed away in 2019 before seeing the project through to completion.

The first chapter focuses on schools as crucial locations of “ethnic acculturation.” A short introduction explains how schools often served (and still serve) as the first location where deaf children meet other deaf people, learn sign language, experience cultural and community norms, form lifelong friendships, and find, in deaf teachers, important role models. This introduction is followed by a chronological list of the 106 deaf schools founded in France since the eighteenth century. They cover the schools’ histories from their foundations to the present or until their closure. Listed are founding figures, notable alumni, and ties with important events or organizations. Not least, they chronicle in detail the debate over the use of sign or spoken language as the preferred or exclusive method of education. Here the authors state that education in French Sign Language was the norm during the nineteenth century, a claim they use to argue (rightly) that deaf children today should have a right to education in sign language. Yet their own research reveals a much more piecemeal history in which attitudes toward sign language depended on the respective school founder: were they deaf or hearing and where did they receive their own education? This fine-grained picture is in accordance with recent research in European deaf history that has made visible variations in approaches to deaf education between the apparent monoliths of French manualism and German oralism.[2] The history of French schools for the deaf also shows the important role of the church and religious orders in providing education and the effect of secularization during the late nineteenth cen-

tury. Here, as elsewhere throughout the book, there is a missed opportunity to engage with French social and political history. As it is, the authors just mention in passing that there might be a connection between the insistence that deaf people speak French and the wider policy of linguistic unification during the French Third Republic, a theme that would have been well worthy of exploration. This is also a missed opportunity to engage comparatively with the larger scholarship on deaf history, for example, with Douglas C. Baynton’s work on deaf people’s changing position in the increasingly nativist nineteenth-century US, *Forbidden Signs: American Culture and the Campaign against Sign Language* (2011).

The second chapter, “Founders of the Deaf-World,” presents short biographies of fifty-one prominent deaf people and their affiliations with other deaf people and institutions. All but three of them are men. The entries are presented within five subchapters that aim to offer a periodization of French deaf history. Here, a short overview of the key events and developments characterizing each of these periods would have been highly useful. Instead, the reader has to piece together this information from the individual bibliographic entries. Of the five periods, the first three, covering the time before, during, and after Abbé de l’Epeé and Abbé Sicard reformed deaf education during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, cover ground typically described in the history of deaf education but offer the additional benefit of giving attention to the often overlooked and crucial role of deaf people. The following section on the “deaf revolt of 1830,” when students of the Paris School for the Deaf who, in 1830, protested against the fact that many of their teachers did not know how to communicate in sign language, has the most potential of offering new insights to deaf history in English.

The third chapter, “Ethnic Affiliation in the Deaf-World,” provides an overview of deaf organizations and the deaf press as important factors

for establishing ethnic affiliations. The informative chronological list of nineteenth-century deaf organizations shows how widespread these were in France. The chapter also provides a short history of congresses on the deaf, where hearing people defined how deaf people should live, act, and learn. Most famous is the 1880 congress in Milan where hearing educators passed the resolution of banishing sign language from deaf schools in favor of the exclusive use of oralism. Lane and Hedberg contrast these meetings with the international congresses of the deaf—1889 in Paris, 1893 in Chicago, 1896 in Geneva, and again in Paris in 1900—where deaf people advocated for the use of sign language and for their right for equal participation in society. Whether one needs to define these meetings and their activities of “honoring founders, narrating legends, visiting cultural sites” as one of the “hallmarks of ethnic groups” is a more disputable claim (p. 146).

In chapter 3, Hedberg and Lane also look at the history of the French deaf press and its role in creating a sense of community. The opinions expressed in the different newspapers and journals reveal the debate and conflict among deaf people between sign language versus oralism and about deaf people’s role in society. The authors attribute this “extensive in-fighting” to the “truth ... that when an ethnic group cannot safely express its anger to its overlords, it will express that anger instead to its peers in ‘horizontal’ violence” (p. 150). Certainly, these conflicts mirrored the values of the larger hearing society, but this interpretation fails to engage with the by now considerable scholarship on multiple, intersectional, and sometimes conflicting deaf identities. Readers might like to know, for example, how French deaf people’s identities were affected by the stark political and social changes in nineteenth-century France—revolution overturning monarchies, the founding of the Third Republic and its mission of cultural unification, and the shift from an agrarian to an industrial society. Likewise, it would have been useful to see an exploration of deaf people as part of differ-

ent communities, as, for example, Mark Zaurov has shown for German deaf Jews in *Gehörlose Juden: Eine doppelte kulturelle Minderheit* (2003). Hedberg and Lane, in contrast, present a deaf history that is almost exclusively male and allows for no ambiguities or intersectional identities.

The fourth and final chapter turns to deaf people in the arts. Over almost thirty pages, it provides an interesting overview of their life and work and path into the arts. The mostly short biographic entries provide a starting point for future research on the influence of these deaf painters and sculptors on the French art scene in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is followed by a short appendix that lists the characteristics of ethnic groups and the ways French deaf people fulfill them, and, strangely, by a longer appendix doing the same for American deaf people. These two added-on parts highlight the tension or mismatch between the book’s chronological organization and content, and its claims about ethnicity, which often seem superimposed. Hedberg and Lane’s use of ethnicity is perplexingly one-dimensional, based on a rather simplified reading of Anthony D. Smith’s *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (1986). Smith’s larger work, however, spanned the 1980s to the 2000s and was influenced by the ethnic revival of the 1990s and not the least by the attempt to understand the atrocities committed in the name of ethnic purity. These aspects of ethnic identities and communities, and with it the huge field of ethnic studies, are completely omitted by the authors. There cannot be any question that deaf people form sociolinguistic communities that need to be recognized and protected in their linguistic and cultural rights. Whether to call them ethnic communities seems to me mostly a matter of political framing in more or less receptive national settings. Pursuing this framework, however, warrants a critical and comparative engagement with the larger scholarship.

Notes

[1]. See Harlan Lane, "Ethnicity, Ethics, and the Deaf-World," *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education* 10, no. 3 (2005): 291-310; and Harlan Lane, Richard Pillard, and Ulf Hedberg, *The People of the Eye: Deaf Ethnicity and Ancestry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[2]. For example, see Florian Wibmer, "Zur Geschichte der Gehörlosenpädagogik in der Habsburger Monarchie," in *Zwischen Fremdbestimmung und Autonomie: Neue Impulse zur Gehörlosengeschichte in Deutschland, Österreich und der Schweiz*, ed. Marion Schmidt and Anja Werner (Bielefeldt: Transcript, 2019), 323-50; and Rebecca Hesse, Alan Canonica, Mirjam Janett, Martin Lengwiller, and Florian Rudin, *Aus erster Hand Gehörlose, Gebärdensprache und Gehörlosenpädagogik in der Schweiz im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Zurich: Chronos, 2020).

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