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Words Made Flesh: Nineteenth-Century Deaf Education and the Growth of Deaf Culture
R. A. R. Edwards

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Nineteenth-Century Deaf Education and the Growth of Deaf Culture

R. A. R. Edwards

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Words Made Flesh: Nineteenth-Century Deaf Education and the Growth of Deaf Culture (The History of Disability)

Finally, *Words Made Flesh: Nineteenth-Century Deaf Education and the Growth of Deaf*

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Introduction

Deaf and hearing people share a common past. How could it be otherwise? Most deaf people are born into hearing families. Their lives and histories are *Words Made Flesh: Nineteenth-Century Deaf Education and the Growth of Deaf Culture (The History of Disability)* radically intertwined. Nevertheless, Deaf culture is not familiar territory for most hearing people. In fact, deafness is still largely understood by hearing people as a medical condition in need of a cure. For hearing people, the term “deaf” speaks of the body and its failings; it does not invoke a vibrant, subaltern culture with a language, community, and history of its own. It means deaf and not Deaf, or Deafhood, as it does for so many Deaf people.

This tremendous gap in perception, this imaginative audiological divide, shapes our present as Deaf and hearing people, much as it did our past. Arguably, today, the gap between Deaf and hearing people is wider than ever. It is a distance that can be traced to our shared history as deaf and hearing people. Scholars of various disciplines have begun to trace that shared history more closely, in an increasing number *Words Made Flesh: Nineteenth-Century Deaf Education and the Growth of Deaf Culture (The History of Disability)* of books in recent years. Most works explore the history of the American Deaf community from its origins in the nineteenth century into the early years of the twentieth century. This study relies heavily on the work of those scholars and, indeed, could not have been *Words Made Flesh: Nineteenth-Century Deaf Education and the Growth of Deaf Culture (The History of Disability)* written in their absence.¹

The outlines of this history are well established. The Deaf experience of the nineteenth century is the story of two interrelated and interdependent narratives. First, it is the story of the emergence of a Deaf community, created when deaf people were brought into contact with one another in large numbers for the first time in the nation’s history, when residential schools for the deaf were founded. Those schools followed the manual method; that is, they employed sign language in the classroom to teach their students. Physically deaf people, learning a signed language together in school, transformed their common experience of physical deafness into, first, a marker of their membership in a larger community, a deaf community, and then into Deafness, as a recognizable and distinct culture, one grounded in many ways in the use of this minority and gesturally based language.

Second, it is a story about the war of the methods in deaf education, a war triggered by the events of the first story. Manualists, supporters of the sign language, soon found themselves *Words Made Flesh: Nineteenth-Century Deaf Education and the Growth of Deaf Culture (The History of Disability)* challenged by oralists, supporters of the exclusive use of speech. It is, for many scholars, a story of decline, in which deaf people lost ground as their language, sign language, was slowly forced from schools. The oralists won the war of the methods, and as a result, by the time of the First World War, over 80 percent of deaf children were taught by the oral method, without any sign language. That oralist victory proved pyrrhic; historians and

linguists alike concur that the wholesale switch to the oral method undermined the quality of deaf education. By the time educational testing emerged as a pedagogical tool in the 1960s, deaf high school students were found to read, on average, at a fourth grade level, a result that would remain stubbornly consistent for the rest of the twentieth century.

If the results were so dramatically poor, why did oral education remain the standard for deaf children until the 1970s? Or, to put it another way, if it did not have the promise of educational success going for it, why did oralism win the war of the methods? Historians such as Douglas Baynton and Susan Burch have pointed to oralism's cultural appeal.² Oralists framed signing deaf people as foreigners in their own land, as people whose different language, sign language, alienated them from the mainstream of American life. A signing-based education was making deaf people more Deaf, oralists believed. They were using a communication system that visibly marked them as abnormal and handicapped people. Oralists were out to change all of that; as they understood it, they were on a quest to integrate deaf people into the normal (and hearing) mainstream. Oralists would bring the deaf into the hearing world, aiming in the process to eliminate the Deaf world altogether. Speech skills were meant to allow Words Made Flesh: Nineteenth-Century Deaf Education and the Growth of Deaf Culture (The History of Disability) the deaf to abandon the Deaf world entirely. The power of speech would free deaf people from the supposedly narrow constraints of the Deaf community.

Deaf people understood this educational project quite differently, as an assault on their way of life, one that was determined to destroy their language, community, and culture. Unsurprisingly, they Words Made Flesh: Nineteenth-Century Deaf Education and the Growth of Deaf Culture (The History of Disability) did not perceive themselves as people in need of rescue from their own community. They did, however, want to be integrated, on both deaf and Deaf terms, into the hearing world. But their understanding of their community and its needs was disregarded by oralist educators, whose educational mission depended on maintaining their own view of deafness as pathological.

This history is nearer to the surface than either side imagines. It can be seen in 2011 most sharply in Indiana. The issue of deaf education has reemerged into the national news, as the Indiana School for the Deaf faces both financial and pedagogical challenges. The Indiana School for the Deaf has a long and proud history. It was founded in 1843 by Words Made Flesh: Nineteenth-Century Deaf Education and the Growth of Deaf Culture (The History of Disability) William Willard, a native of Vermont, who was educated at the American School for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut. The American School is the oldest school for the deaf in the United States, having been founded in 1817. William Willard became deaf at a fortunate time in American history. Going deaf at the age of six, Willard arrived at the American School at the age of fifteen, and attended the school from 1824 to 1829. He was therefore among the first deaf Americans to receive an education. He was a pupil of the school's most famous teacher, its Deaf cofounder, the Frenchman Laurent Clerc. Willard went on to become a teacher himself, working at the Ohio Words Made Flesh: Nineteenth-Century Deaf Education and the Growth of Deaf Culture (The History of Disability) School for the Deaf from 1831 to 1841. He moved to Indiana and founded the school for the deaf there in 1843, making the Indiana School for the Deaf the first state school to be founded by a Deaf American.

As with all American schools for the deaf at that time, the Indiana School employed what today would be called the bilingual-bicultural method of deaf education. That is, American Sign Language (ASL) was the language of instruction in all classes, and that language was used in turn to teach deaf students English. Teachers understood that their pupils would come to have a Deaf identity and would become culturally Deaf while at school. They would also be fluent in both English and ASL, and the aim of their education was to allow them to take their place in society as Deaf Americans. [Chapters 1](#) and [2](#) address the arrival of the French method of manual education in the United States and its transformation into the bilingual-bicultural model, first adopted at the New York School for the Deaf in 1833.

I argue that the Words Made Flesh: Nineteenth-Century Deaf Education and the Growth of Deaf Culture (The History of Disability) schools for the deaf were not simply “manual,” as they have always been described.³ In the antebellum period, the bilingual-bicultural approach to deaf education became the common standard of deaf education, and was in fact the American innovation in a Words Made Flesh: Nineteenth-Century Deaf Education and the Growth of Deaf Culture (The History of Disability) system of education largely imported here from France. The first residential school for the deaf in the United States opened in Connecticut in 1817. The Connecticut Asylum for the Education and Instruction of Deaf and Dumb Persons, Words Made Flesh: Nineteenth-Century Deaf Education and the Growth of Deaf Culture (The History of Disability) as it was originally known, eventually changed its name to the American School Words Made Flesh: Nineteenth-Century Deaf Education and the Growth of Deaf Culture (The History of Disability) for Words Made Flesh: Nineteenth-Century Deaf Education and the Growth of Deaf Culture (The History of Disability) the Deaf.

The opening of this and other schools began a fundamental transformation in the lives of deaf Americans, as Words Made Flesh: Nineteenth-Century Deaf Education and the Growth of Deaf Culture (The History of Disability) those who came together as students would begin to transform deafness into Deafness over the course of the antebellum period. Historians have known about this process of cultural emergence for some time, and many have pointed in particular to the decade of the 1850s as the period when Words Made Flesh: Nineteenth-Century Deaf Education and the Growth of Deaf Culture (The History of Disability) the subaltern Deaf culture emerged for the first time into the broader American cultural Words Made Flesh: Nineteenth-Century Deaf Education and the Growth of Deaf Culture (The History of Disability) landscape.

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