Deaf Characters in Literature

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By

Paul Dakin

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This book is dedicated to my wife Jean,
who has shown me what it means to be deaf.

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Figure 6-1: Image advertising the film *Sign Gene*. With the permission of Pluin.

FOREWORD

As with the publication of many books, *Deaf Characters in Literature* has been a long time in the making. It develops a rich and lucid consideration of how hard of hearing people, and those completely deaf to sounds of spoken language, are represented in British and American imaginative writings of the past three centuries. The book explores the changing expression, pitch, and resonance of portrayals of deaf people in novels, plays, poetry, and comics directed at adult audiences, and it also discusses deaf roles and characters in films.

Paul Dakin has long been interested in understanding why hearing authors write deaf characters into their works. A general practitioner who worked for most of his career in a busy practice in north London that served many deaf people, Paul dates the stirrings of his interest in deaf cultures to the waning of his wife's hearing, which began some forty years ago. He and his family turned to a signing patient of the practice to teach them British Sign Language, after which the practice gained a reputation for the care it provided to the health and communicative needs of deaf people. This was the medical and experiential context that engendered an interest in the history of deafness and brought Paul to study for the MA in Literature and Medicine at King's College London, in 2006. As part of his many forays into literary studies at this time, he researched an outstanding master's thesis, which dangled before his examiners many of the ideas and findings he has developed and elaborated in *Deaf Characters in Literature*.

His monograph shows that the deaf characters of imaginative literature typically occupy very minor roles that convey little about the lived reality of being deaf. In contrast to the much fuller characterisations of hearing protagonists, deaf characters often function merely as props. And although the stockpile of literary tropes which writers have employed has changed over time, many of the earliest images, dramatic devices and metaphors have proved remarkably persistent, such as figurations of the deaf as isolated and alienated, which continue to feature in more recent media and genres.

As a prelude to discussing these issues, Paul furnishes expositions and plot summaries for readers like myself who are not familiar with many of the works examined. While taking account of theories of deafness and disability studies without becoming in thrall to them, he shows how

enmeshed deaf people have been in cultural stereotypes, which find expression in stock characters who appear morally deficient and cognitively impaired. Deaf listening practices may be caricatured for comic and narrative purposes and the rich multisensory soundscapes they construct-which go beyond an auditory deficit model of communication–can be misunderstood or ignored by authors. And even when deaf people are represented in a positive light, their characterisation can read as over sentimentalised, hollow correctives, rather than as positive depictions in their own right. These negative images are not necessarily intentionally meant but originate in societal views of people with many different types of sensory impairment, which are unconsciously absorbed and expressed in imaginative images that have influenced, and in turn been influenced by, the mission and methods of deaf education over the past two centuries.

This book has opened my ears to the depth and extent of the marginalisation of non-hearing people as human subjects in literature. Yet it senses, too, a gathering interest in deaf experience and a tendency on the part of recent hearing, non-hearing and signing authors, to develop more rounded and positive images of deaf people. *Deaf Characters in Literature* has certainly been worth the wait. It is an important contribution to sensory history, to d/Deaf cultures, and to their flourishing.

Brian Hurwitz
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PREFACE

Forty years ago, my wife started to become deaf. Since then, she has worn progressively more powerful hearing aids, allowing her to retain no more than a minimal level of hearing. There is a strong likelihood that my wife will become completely deaf, as did her mother. As a family, we decided to learn British Sign Language (BSL) so that we would have a means of communication in addition to verbal speech. Having always worked in the National Health Service (NHS), my wife spent several years supporting deaf pupils in a mainstream secondary school, before eventually returning to work in the NHS once more. Meanwhile, one of the patients in my London general practice became our sign language tutor. He encouraged other profoundly deaf people like himself to register with us, as they preferred to attend a comparatively deaf aware practice which had a signing nurse and a signing doctor.

In 2006 I joined the first cohort of part-time postgraduate students to study for a master's degree in Literature and Medicine at King's College London. When the time came to choose the topic of my dissertation, I selected "deaf characters in literature", and was surprised to find how little had been written about the subject. The research this entailed, combined with the experiences of the many wonderful deaf people that I encountered, prompted me to carry on this fascinating journey of discovery.

I want to thank Professor Brian Hurwitz and the Centre for the Humanities and Health at King's College who encouraged and guided my academic interests. I am indebted to Arun Krishna, our friend and BSL teacher, who patiently endures my attempts to sign, and constantly reminds me to "practise, practise, practise". I thank Jean, my wife, for her support during the prolonged task of bringing this book to completion, my daughters Anna and Sarah, and my son Jonathan, who persistently prompted me to begin the work in the first place, as well as advised on some of the layout. I thank my grandchildren who allowed the time and space to finish this project. Finally, I am grateful to the deaf patients and friends who enabled me to glimpse inside the deaf world.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to many people and institutions. The British Library in particular deserves my thanks, as does that wonderful resource, the website archive.org. I acknowledge the inspiration gained from the excellent book *The Quiet Ear* compiled by Brian Grant. My gratitude is extended to Professor Brian Hurwitz, who not only graciously agreed to write the Foreword but enlightened and encouraged me at King's College London.

I appreciate the kind permission given to reproduce the following:

British Deaf History Society: Image of the fingerspelling alphabet chart from *The History of The Life and Adventures of Mr. Duncan Campbell*, 1720.

Getty Images: Photograph of the statue by Thomas Woolner entitled *Constance and Arthur*.

Pluin: the image of the poster from the film *Sign Gene.*

Deaf Life Press: excerpt from *On his deafness and other melodies unheard* by Robert Panara.

Gallaudet University Press: excerpts from *The Mute's Lament* by John Carlin, and excerpts from *Poetry of the deaf and dumb* by Luzerne Rey.

Penned in the Margins: *Echo Pt 3*, *After Reading 'Deaf School' by the Mississippi River, Dear Hearing World (after Danez Smith)*, all from *The Perseverance* by Raymond Antrobus.

INTRODUCTION

Comparatively little attention has been paid to the subject of deaf characters in literature. Much of the material that does exist tends to focus on the study of American sources, with fewer examples drawn from British authors. This probably reflects the origin of many of the researchers, as interest in deaf culture and history is more widespread in the United States. Nonetheless this is surprising, considering the long and extensive history of British literature that includes a moderate number of deaf characters. I have attempted to redress the balance by exploring examples of deaf characters originating from both sides of the Atlantic.

The first chapter, *Speakers and Signers-the History of Deaf Communication and Education* outlines themes that are crucially important in understanding the historical background and contemporary context of a fictional deaf character, and may be reflected to varying extents in the portrayal given by the author.

Chapter Two, *Goldilocks, Gifted, and Granny–the Portrayal of Deaf Characters in the English Novel* is the foundation of the book. The chapter addresses the representation of deaf characters in mainstream novels for a predominantly hearing audience and explores the existence of stereotypes and tropes. I should point out that I followed certain guidelines to help me focus on specific areas. The first of these is that I selected examples of deaf characters only found in British and American texts. Deaf characters can also be discovered in French and Russian novels that are readily available as translations, but books written originally in English contain the majority of deaf characters. More importantly, I am aware that the experience of authors, and the deaf people upon whom they might choose to base their characters, may differ quite considerably between different countries and cultures. This preserves some degree of historical and cultural continuity as British and American authors share a common language and elements of a common heritage. However, there remain significant differences between these two contexts, including a separately evolved deaf history, totally different sign languages, and a deaf community in the United States that is much bigger, more organised and strident, and possesses a more obvious and distinct identity, when compared with that in the UK. The chapter also largely avoids the plethora of material written for children, much of which is overtly educational and has the intention of being instructive and

aspirational for deaf children or is designed to promote understanding and deaf awareness amongst hearing children. I could not even begin to duplicate the extensive review of children's books containing deaf characters that appears in Sharon Pajka's magnificent blog,[1] and encourage anyone interested to explore this excellent resource. Therefore, the chapter focuses on novels written primarily for adults. I have also excluded books written by deaf authors specifically for the deaf community, as the author and reader share a common experience that is probably unknown to the majority of the population, and the texts are unlikely to be intended for mainstream consumption. I am primarily interested in discovering more about how and why hearing authors should choose to write about deaf characters, how far the information and characteristics described reflect the experience of the writer, and whether this represents the attitudes of the hearing majority of which they are a part. The chapter also excludes short stories, as it is my belief that a novel gives the author more scope to include and develop deaf characters within the larger text.

Chapter Three, *Communication, Correction, and Community-Recurring Themes in the Portrayal of Deaf Characters in the English Novel* explores how such portrayals reflect the reality of deaf experience and refers to an alternative set of deaf narratives. The chapter considers themes that often appear in the context of deaf characters including the use of silence, modes of communication, education, medical involvement, and community, and provides a template for the exploration of deaf characters in the other types of literature studied later in the book.

The guidelines offered in Chapter Two continue in principle throughout the book, so that Chapter Four, *Stereotypes and Superheroes–Deaf Characters in Comics* considers only deaf characters created for English language comics and graphic novels and intended for a mainstream readership. That audience may of course include children, but comics generally, and especially those produced by DC and Marvel, tend to have an older clientele consisting mainly of teens and young adults. The chapter looks at how deafness is represented visually and the themes that deafness is used to convey. In particular, the chapter explores the portrayal of deaf superheroes and whether these depictions can be considered aspirational or simply become another type of stereotype, the 'supercrip'.

Chapter Five, *Verse and Video–Deaf Characters in Poetry* includes a number of autobiographical examples provided by deaf poets as well as characters created by hearing writers. Although this would appear to breach

[1] Sharon Pajka, "Deaf Characters in Adolescent Literature", accessed April 25, 2021, https://pajka.blogspot.com./

the guidelines outlined above, it is impossible to consider contemporary deaf poetry without including notable works that express the anxiety and anger of the deaf writer, and provide insights into their lived experience that are intended for a mainstream and largely hearing readership. The chapter also includes examples of visual poetry based entirely on sign language.

Chapter Six, *Sound, Subtitles, and Signing–Deaf Characters in Drama, Television, and Film* addresses issues related to a medium based in sound as well as vision. The representation of deaf characters in drama is considered, as is the move towards identifying deaf people increasingly as sign language users in television and film. I also consider the trend in visual media towards more authentic portrayals of the lives of deaf people as production companies employ more deaf advisors and deaf actors.

Throughout the book I use the term "deaf" to refer to all deaf people. There has been a relatively recent convention on both sides of the Atlantic to describe people as either deaf with a lower case "d" or Deaf with an upper case "D", depending on their personal histories and cultural affiliations. The deaf are likely to have become deafened later in life, continue to use verbal speech, and identify primarily with the hearing culture to which they have always belonged. The Deaf are usually born without hearing, or have become deaf early in life, tend to use sign language as their first language, and identify primarily with a signing-based culture.[2] When referring to both groups together the term d/Deaf is sometimes used. I have employed these distinctions in the past but have decided against their use in this book for a number of reasons. Many of the imaginative deaf characters were created before these terms existed making it inadvisable to ascribe them to either group in retrospect. In more contemporary examples the author may not have had the knowledge, or if they did, the intention, to categorise their character in this way. In real life it is for the deaf person to determine how they want to be identified and described. This may or may not be straightforward as the terms present two distinct ends of a wide spectrum of deaf life, rather than the complexity, subtlety, and overlap, that often reflects the individual's experience. The use of "deaf" referring to all deaf people is also considered to be more inclusive,[3] and avoids the danger of virtue signalling, an emotive subject for some deaf people,[4] in an academic context.

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[2] Paddy Ladd, Understanding deaf culture: in search of deafhood (Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters, 2003) xvii.

[3] H-Dirksen L. Baumann and Joseph Murray (eds), Deaf Gain (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014) xiii.

[4] See Chapter Six.

CHAPTER ONE

SPEAKERS AND SIGNERS – THE HISTORY OF DEAF COMMUNICATION AND EDUCATION

The ability to communicate is fundamental to human society. This may be through vocal speech or the use of visual forms. Vocal speech is actually more than just the exchange of meaningful sounds, and involves subtle visual cues produced and observed as body language and para-verbals.[1] These are largely sub-conscious, whereas gestures are more deliberate and are meant to emphasise or aid the understanding of what is being said. Sign languages are not simply glorified gestures or mime, but are sophisticated and codified forms of communication that have developed in different eras and in a wide variety of settings. For instance, signing is referred to in the Talmud, and was also used by monks during their periods of religious silence. Sign language developed, and was considered valuable, among indigenous peoples in Australia, southern Africa, and the Plains tribes of the United States.[2] The need for profoundly deaf people to use a visual form of communication will be obvious, and its existence was recognised by hearing observers. Plato wrote about deaf people using sign language, and Leonardo da Vinci advised artists to learn how to represent gestures in their subjects by studying the deaf.[3] However, throughout history, deaf people have lived an isolated existence within hearing societies, and were often misunderstood, mistreated, and marginalised. In ancient Greece and Rome, it was even permissible to kill deaf and dumb children up to the age of three, though under Jewish law deaf people were viewed as vulnerable people who needed protection. In most societies, deaf people had few or no legal rights and were not allowed to marry.[4] During the Middle Ages and the Industrial

[1] Dakin, Paul. "Speech without Sound: Signing as 'Body Talk'". In Body Talk in the Medical Humanities, ed. Jennifer Patterson and Francia Kinchington (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019), 236-245.
[2] Dorothy Miles (ed), British Sign Language (London: BBC Books, 1988) 13.
[3] Nicholas Mirzoeff, "The Silent Mind: Learning from Deafness," History Today No. 7 (July 1992): 19-25.
[4] Jonathan Ree, I See A Voice (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1999) 94-95.

Revolution, populations migrated increasingly from rural areas to towns and cities, allowing more profoundly deaf people to congregate together and formulate a common local sign language. It should be remembered that in every age there would have been far more deaf people who were moderately rather than profoundly deaf, and would not have purposefully sought out the company of other deaf people. They simply struggled to hear, and were pushed to the margins of conversations, family, and work. Because their plight was not so obvious or readily observable, they remained largely overlooked both by contemporary reports and historical examination.

The first mention of deaf people using signs appeared in England in 1450, in a book entitled *History of the Syon Monastery at Lisbon and Brentford.* Some of the signs identified are used today. The first description of people actually signing in England was in 1576 from the marriage of Thomas Tillsye, with the fact recorded in the marriage register. The earliest English reference to lip-reading and signing dates from 1602, when Richard Carew observed the deaf servant Edward Bone reading lips and signing to another deaf man in Cornwall.[5] Towards the end of the sixteenth century, the first known teacher of the deaf was working in Spain. Ponce de Leon, a Benedictine monk, was asked to teach deaf children born to Spanish noble families. The families experienced a high rate of hereditary deafness due to inter-marriage. The rights and inheritance of deaf people, even those who came from wealthy families, were severely limited by law, so powerful clans wanted their deaf children to write and speak well enough to satisfy the courts. Sir Kenelm Digby recorded the results of this teaching in 1623, as he had seen a deaf man reading lips and using vocal speech while visiting Spain.[6] In 1644 John Bulwer, a physician at Gray's Inn London, published a treatise entitled *Chirologia or the Natural Language of the Hand. Composed of the speaking motions, and discoursing gestures thereof.* The book was illustrated with the typical handshapes used by the profoundly deaf people he had encountered. Some of the signs are used in British Sign Language (BSL) today. Two years later, Bulmer produced *Philocorpus, or the Deaf and Dumb Man's Tutor*, dedicating it to two deaf brothers. The book inferred that specific education was needed to improve communication for deaf people. Bulwer wrote,

> What though you cannot express your minds in these verbal contrivances of man's invention; yet you want not Speech, who have your whole Body for a Tongue, having a language most natural and significant...[7]

[5] Peter W Jackson, Britain's Deaf Heritage (Edinburgh: Pentland Press, 1990) xiii.
[6] Ree, I See A Voice, 100
[7] Miles, British Sign Language, 15

Samuel Pepys wrote of meeting a deaf and dumb boy who signed, and Francis Bacon referred to sign language with the wonderfully evocative phrase "transitory hieroglyphics".[8] Reports from Spain about Ponce de Leon's methods and Bulwer's book stimulated interest in the ways in which deaf people could learn and communicate. Rev Dr William Holder (the brother-in-law of Sir Christopher Wren) taught speech exercises to deaf people. Thomas Dalgarno recognised a form of signing that was not based on spoken English in 1680. He had developed the standard two-handed signed alphabet by 1678, which was later systematised by Rev Dr John Wallis, a clergyman and Professor of Mathematics at Oxford.[9] Wallis had already produced a manual alphabet for spelling out words. Some of the signs he described remain in use today. The alphabet and teaching methods of Dr Wallis are referred to by Daniel Defoe in *Duncan Campbell*, written in 1720, the first novel to have a deaf man as its main character.

Bulwer identified the need for deaf education in 1646, but it wasn't until the following century that the first deaf school was founded. Before this time, teachers of the deaf like Ponce de Leon were independent pioneers. Another of these educators was Henry Baker, the man whom Daniel Defoe's daughter married in 1727. The first deaf school in the UK was established in 1760 by Thomas Braidwood, who taught oral and finger communication in Edinburgh. This private school was visited and enthusiastically described by the writer Samuel Johnson.[10] Braidwood later moved to London to set up another private school, and then the first charitable school in Bermondsey in 1792. The free school moved to Old Kent Road in 1803 and one of its teachers was Braidwood's nephew Joseph Watson.[11] Watson had been working for his uncle since 1784. Braidwood and his family taught both oral and finger communication and published *On the Education of the Deaf and Dumb* in 1809, in which they state their opposition to signed versions of the spoken language. Wilkie Collins' fictional deaf character Madonna attends The Deaf and Dumb School in the Old Kent Road, and Collins' great friend Charles Dickens followed his example by sending his deaf character Sophie to the same establishment.[12] A contemporary description notes that the Old Kent Road school accepted one hundred and

[8] Ree, I See A Voice, 122
[9] JJ Kitto D.D, "The lost senses. Part I. Deafness. The Land of Silence," Edinburgh Review, No. 207 (July 1855): 124-5.
[10] Macleod Yearsley, "Deafness in Literature," The Lancet, (April 14, 1925): 746-747.
[11] Jackson, Britain's Deaf Heritage, 23
[12] Paul Dakin, "Literary portrayals of deafness", Clinical Medicine, No. 3 (June 2009): 293-4

ten pupils in a twenty-four year period, while similar schools started to appeared elsewhere in the country.[13] Between 1800 and 1850, fifteen schools for deaf children started in the UK.[14] The founder of the school in Exeter, Mrs Charlotte Hippisley Tuckfield, wrote the book *Education for the People* in 1839 in which she extols the virtues of both signing and vocal exercises. This was typical of deaf education in England at the time. Schools encouraged a variety of methods of communication by teaching signing as well as exercises to encourage lip-reading and vocal speech, thus attending to the needs of a wide variety of deaf children.

There was a different emphasis in France. The great pioneer l'Abee de l'Epee, who became known as the "Father of the Deaf", had taught deaf students since the middle of the eighteenth century, and established a free deaf school in Paris in 1755. In l'Abee's school, pupils were taught mainly in sign language, as well as how to read and write, with some speech lessons only introduced in later years. l'Abee's methods, carried on by his successors, attracted wide interest, so that many teachers of the deaf visited Paris from all over Europe and beyond. In 1816, Thomas Gallaudet came to Europe from the United States to learn more about teaching the deaf. He first visited the Braidwoods in London and then travelled to Paris. Impressed by what he saw, Gallaudet invited Laurent Clerc, a deaf pupil who had become a teacher at the Paris school, to return with him to Connecticut. A great deal of historical information about the development of deaf education in Europe and America, including statistics from the United States, and illustrated with deaf biographies, can be found in a single volume.[15] In 1864, the school for the deaf that Gallaudet founded was finally established as a college in Washington DC, its charter having been granted by Abraham Lincoln. Gallaudet, named after its founder, remains the world's only deaf university. Gallaudet was critical of the emphasis on speech he had seen in the teaching provided by many European deaf schools, and at this time, the college used mainly sign language with a few speech exercises permitted.

The growth of deaf education, seen in different parts of the world, encouraged large numbers of deaf children to live together and learn to communicate with a shared language. This segregation from the hearing world forged a sense of community,[16] allowing groupings of deaf people to

[13] Rev W Fletcher, The Deaf and Dumb Boy (London: JW Parker, 1843).
[14] Jackson, Britain's Deaf Heritage, 38
[15] John R Burnet, Tales of the Deaf and Dumb, with miscellaneous poems (Newark: B Olds, 1835).
[16] Rosemarie Garland Thomson, Extraordinary Bodies (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) 35-36.

develop and flourish in many towns and cities. As deaf people became better educated, they could find more skilled work with higher pay, and this new level of comparative prosperity allowed them to be regarded for the first time with some measure of greater esteem within hearing society. This in turn prompted a shift in legal recognition, so that the first interpreter for the deaf was used in court in Glasgow in 1817.[17] This rising self-confidence prompted a desire to mix in deaf social settings, with the first Mission club opening in Glasgow in 1823. It is interesting to note that at the end of the nineteenth century, signing was accorded royal approval when Queen Victoria learned how to finger spell in order to communicate with her daughter-in-law, later to become Queen Alexandra, who had been deaf since her teenage years. Queen Alexandra attended St Saviour's, the church for deaf people in Oxford Street. The vicar was Rev FWG Gilby, the hearing child of deaf parents who had learnt to sign as a boy.[18]

Unfortunately, approval and acceptance were not commonly experienced by deaf people. Ignorance and prejudice among the hearing were the norm, leading one commentator to write that

> …few groups in history have suffered such sustained and uncomprehending cruelty as the so-called 'deaf-and-dumb'[19]

and another from personal experience, that

> …the unconscious object of their charity neither hears nor answers their sarcasm.[20]

The emerging deaf community was even perceived to be threatening by some hearing people, who were worried that the deaf would live separately and become independent from the hearing world. Alexander Graham Bell is famous for inventing the telephone, a device designed so that his deaf wife could hear. The inventor's father was a teacher of the deaf, therefore Bell was familiar with the oral methods of teaching deaf children. Bell was deeply concerned that if deaf people continued to sign, they would distance themselves increasingly from the hearing world and would never fully integrate within hearing society. Bell was also influenced by some extreme eugenic beliefs which were in vogue at the end of the nineteenth century that encouraged him to call for a ban on deaf people marrying and having

[17] Jackson, Britain's Deaf Heritage, 81
[18] "History of British Sign Language", University College London, accessed May 11, 2023, https://www.ucl.ac.uk/british-sign-language-history/.
[19] Ree, I See A Voice, 85
[20] Kitto, "The lost senses. Part I. Deafness. The Land of Silence," 117.

children. We shall see in a later chapter that these views are reflected in the character of Dr Booth in *A Silent Handicap*. Bell believed that sign language was the key to the integrity of the deaf community and intent on undermining it, used his prestige and money to promote the sole use of oral methods of teaching that were already gaining ground in deaf education in the United States and Europe. This move coincided with the growing belief encouraged by colonialists that signing was associated with "uncivilised" parts of the world, that it was by its very nature primitive, and that it appealed to the degenerate animal emotions rather than to the intelligent mind. These arguments fuelled the pre-existing struggle for dominance between two conflicting strategies of deaf education, as deaf schools and teachers of the deaf had become increasingly aligned either with methods rooted in signing or those based on vocal exercises. This was a continuation of the public disagreements at the end of the previous century between l'Abee de l'Epee and Pereire, both influential French deaf educators who represented the signing and oral factions. The repercussions of this dispute were to profoundly affect the future of deaf education and the deaf community on both sides of the Atlantic up to the present day.

The considerable forces ranged against the use of signing culminated in 1880 at the notorious second international congress of deaf educators held in Milan. The conference was hardly international since ninety per cent of the delegates attending originated from either Italy or France. Deaf people who taught in schools were specifically banned from attending, so that the only deaf person who was actually present at the proceedings was a member of the small American delegation.[21] The oralist leaders had already signalled the outcome, so it was no surprise but still a shock, when the congress voted overwhelmingly in favour of a motion to teach deaf children exclusively by the use of vocal methods. This vote had far-reaching implications that reverberated throughout deaf schools in many countries. As a result, the Royal Commission of 1889 recommended that deaf children in the UK should be taught according to oralist methods. The 1893 Elementary Education (Deaf and Blind Children) Act accepted the Milan decision and provided the legal framework that allowed speech-led teaching to dominate in British deaf schools. Sign language was outlawed within educational establishments, and its use in the dormitories and playgrounds was punished. If students expressed their preference to continue to use signing, this was taken as a refusal to improve their inferior and unhealthy state and therefore morally suspect.[22] Since ninety per cent of deaf children are born

[21] Jackson, Britain's Deaf Heritage, 114
[22] Mirzoeff, "The Silent Mind: Learning from Deafness," 19-25

to hearing families, deaf schools had played an indispensable role in teaching, preserving, and passing on sign language. Signing was now used only at home within deaf families or secretly in schools, although it was still permitted within deaf clubs and promoted by deaf periodicals and the publication of illustrations of signs. Many deaf people were outraged. The British Deaf and Dumb Association was founded as a direct response to the decision of the Milan conference and the consequent attempt to eradicate sign language and undermine the integrity of the deaf community. At its first congress in 1890, the delegates defiantly declared,

> …the Association indignantly protests against the imputation...that the finger and signed language is barbarous. We consider such a mode of exchanging our ideas most natural and indispensable. [23]

In the first half of the twentieth century, speech-led views in the UK became further entrenched, so that sign language was completely absent in deaf schools and deaf teachers were no longer able to practice. However, in the United States, signing was preserved largely because of the pre-eminence of Gallaudet as an educational institution. This regressive impact on the lives of generations of deaf people lasted until the 1970s, when it was shown by academic studies that oral methods alone produced limited results and were not as effective as had been first thought.[24] [25]

In the 1960s, William Stokoe's research at Gallaudet proved that American Sign Language (ASL) should be considered a true language from a linguistic standpoint.[26] He also codified ASL and laid the foundations for a new approach to deaf education. There was increasing recognition that deaf education should teach the whole spectrum of deaf children, some of whom would be profoundly deaf, while others wanted to retain their place within hearing families, some preferred to sign, and others used technological aids and looked to improve hearing and speech. In the 1960s, the Total Communication method of deaf education was launched in the United States which included learning by finger spelling, sign language, speech, reading, writing, and assistive technology. Since then, it has been common on both sides of the Atlantic to have a more liberal outlook that

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[23] David Brien (ed), Dictionary of British Sign Language/English (London: Faber and Faber, 1992) x.

[24] Ladd, Paddy. "The Modern Deaf Community". In British Sign Language, ed. Dorothy Miles (London: BBC Books, 1988) 27-43.

[25] Mirzoeff, "The Silent Mind: Learning from Deafness," 19-25

[26] Petitto, Laura-Ann. "Three Revolutions: Language, Culture, and Biology". In Deaf Gain, ed. H-Dirksen Baumann and Joseph J. Murray (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 65-76.

advocates a combination of signing and oral-auditory approaches. This is thought by many deaf educators to give the majority of deaf children the best educational opportunities,[27] although this view has been challenged.[28] Some schools have sought to develop a "bilingual-bicultural" model that recognises the reality of living as a deaf minority within a hearing majority and seeks to negotiate the tensions that exist between the two.[29]

As signing developed over many years through consistent use and educational involvement, it became much more complex than the simpler and more common forms of visual expression. Sign language involves not only the hands, but also body posture, lip patterns, and facial expressions. One or both hands create shapes that flow into one another. Some signs are iconic and easily recognisable, while many are symbolic and require specific training to understand. Size, speed, and position of the hand shapes express variations and emphasis. Specific signs are still used for finger spelling and numbers. A variety of multi-channel signs change their meaning depending on shifts of body posture and facial expression. Sign languages, such as ASL or British Sign Language (BSL), the name adopted in the UK in 1975, have developed in many different parts of the world over many centuries.[30] They continue to evolve, and have very different styles, handshapes, syntax, and grammar, with regional variations existing within a national sign language.[31] Despite the popular opinion of hearing communities to the contrary, there is no universal and international sign language, although similarities exist between certain hand shapes in different systems.

Knowing the history of conflict between movements supporting oral speech or signing in deaf education explains why

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[27] Evans, Lionel, "Total Communication". In Constructing Deafness, ed. Susan Gregory and Gillian M. Hartley (Milton Keynes: The Open University, 1991), 131-136.

[28] Lynas, Wendy, Alan Huntington and Ivan Tucker, "A Critical Examination of Different Approaches to Communication in the Education of Deaf Children". In Constructing Deafness, eds. Susan Gregory and Gillian M. Hartley (Milton Keynes: The Open University, 1991), 125-130.

[29] Padden, Carol, "From the Cultural to the Bicultural". In Cultural and Language Diversity and the Deaf Experience ed. Ila Parasnis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1996), 79-96.

[30] Brien, "Dictionary of British Sign Language/English", x

[31] Cath Smith, Signs Make Sense (London: Souvenir Press, 1994) 33.

> …communication is *the* underlying issue with hearing loss, regardless of severity.[32]

As a result, it has become a potent, and at times, emotive cultural identifier for many deaf people. The choice of a deaf person to primarily use oral speech or sign language is inextricably linked to whether they see themselves to be part of the hearing majority or a signing based deaf culture. In general, deaf people can be thought of as two distinct groups, with the overwhelming majority having become deaf later in life and continuing to identify with the hearing world of which they have always been a part. They have been termed deaf with a lower case "d". The much smaller minority of deaf people, usually unable to hear from birth or early childhood, use sign language as their first language, and see themselves as belonging to a linguistic minority who share a specific culture. They have been termed Deaf with an upper case "D". This results in two very different types of stories about being deaf. The personal narratives of the deaf majority have been described as "wounded", with their history of deafness characterised by damage, loss, medicalisation, exclusion, and isolation. In contrast, the individual accounts of Deaf signers are described as "warrior", with their experience of deafness characterised by the struggle for identity, the use of war metaphors, rights, and citizenship, and an unwillingness to be defined in relation to the hearing world.[33] There is a striking divergence in how members of the two groups understand the significance of their deafness. The "deaf" perceive it as a regrettable and marginalising loss that needs to be fixed, whereas the "Deaf" regard it not only as a key to their identity and community, but also as a call for battle to be accepted as a linguistic and cultural minority. There is, of course, considerable overlap between the two groups. Many "Deaf" people who sign use hearing aids and vocal speech, if only to a limited extent. Some "deaf" individuals learn how to sign. Although "wounded" and "warrior" narratives represent two extremes of the experience of deafness, the reality is much more complex and nuanced, with many people finding themselves relating to elements of both.

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[32] Zazove, Philip, Commentary on Lesley Jones and Robin Bunton, "Wounded or warrior? Stories of being or becoming deaf". In Narrative Research in Health and Illness, eds. Brian Hurwitz, Trisha Greenhalgh and Vieda Skultans (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2002), 203.

[33] Jones, Lesley and Robin Bunton. "Wounded or Warrior? Stories of Being or Becoming Deaf". In Narrative Research in Health and Illness, eds. Brian Hurwitz, Trisha Greenhalgh and Vieda Skultans (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2004) 187-204.

In recent years, there have been demands from Deaf people for sign languages to be accepted as distinct languages within their own countries. Following Stokoe's ground breaking work to prove that ASL had a syntax and grammar distinct from spoken English, many of the States of the USA have formally recognised ASL. In 1988 the momentum for recognition propelled a large number of deaf people to take part in the "Deaf President Now" demonstrations at Gallaudet University, demanding the appointment of the university's first deaf president in its one hundred-and twenty-four-year history. Demonstrations in the UK also succeeded in convincing the British Government to grant recognition of BSL in 2003, and legal standing in 2021. These instances of official acknowledgement were in response to the call from many deaf people that they should be accepted as a language group rather than as disabled, with some believing that they should be accorded a unique social status.[34] This is because some "Deaf" people believe that their culture, language, and community

> …constitute a totally adequate, self-enclosed, and self-defining sub-nationality within the larger structure of the audist state,[35]

and that they have more in common with other disabled people than those who share gender or race.[36] Some believe that the

> …shared sense of oppression of language, and hence of human potential, is at the very heart of British Deaf culture.[37]

There is a specific rejection of the medical model that perceives deafness as a condition requiring treatment, stating instead that it is only in matters of oral communication and education that deafness is a handicap,[38] as deafness cannot be considered to be a disability in a community that communicates exclusively by signing. Finkelstein's assertion that the "Deaf" have more in common with other disabled people seems strange considering that the basis of the argument supporting the ethnic model of deafness is built on a belief that deaf people are not in fact disabled. This

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[34] Paddy Ladd, "Understanding Deaf Culture. In Search of Deafhood". (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd, 2003) 230.
[35] Lennard J. Davis, "Deafness and Insight: The Deafened Moment as a Critical Modality," College English, No. 8 (December 1995): 881-882.
[36] Finkelstein Vic, "'We' Are Not Disabled, 'You' Are". In Constructing Deafness, eds. Susan Gregory and Gillian M. Hartley (Milton Keynes: The Open University, 1991), 265-271.
[37] Brien, "Dictionary of British Sign Language/English", 2
[38] Mirzoeff, "The Silent Mind: Learning from Deafness," 19