

McGregor, R.P. (1898). Recent events among the Deaf of Germany. Proceedings of the Fifth Convention of the National Association of the Deaf held at Philadelphia, Pa., 23-26 June 1896. pp. 43-27. Fulton, MO: Henry Gross.

THE PROSCRIPTION OF SIGNS.

That signs have been under proscription in most parts of Europe for over a century is well known to you. Upon to within a decade, however, the deaf of this country had happily escaped this curse upon their happiness and usefulness. That this curse, for we can not look upon the proscription of signs in any other light, has reached this country is due to several causes, prominent among which is that we are living in an era of reform. The wave of reform has struck and overturned about everything in its path, including the Bible. The old fashioned Hell is too hot for the reformers, Sheol being about the right temperature to suit them. Under the circumstances it is not surprising that signs should come in for their share of reform; so it has come to pass that the fiat has gone forth that signs must be proscribed both in our schools and out. But as the great mass of God-fearing people still stick to the old fashioned Bible of their fathers, so the deaf still stick to their signs despite the outcry made against them. In this is matter at least they are inclined to the belief that reform is not always progress.

If the reformers simply wished to reform the sign language we would not complain, but meet them with open arms. Their method, however, is too drastic. It resembles too much the way the man proposed to reform the dog's crooked tail—by cutting it off close behind the ears!

It is true that there are a great many things in this world that are constantly in need of reform, and these are not a few—political interference with our schools for instance, that need to be proscribed; but the sign language is not one of them.

Under the wise, fostering care of the pioneers of deaf-mute education in this country, the Gallaudets, the Peets, the Turners, the Fosters, and many others whose honored names you will readily recall, the language of signs reached a perfection of clearness, accuracy, eloquence and power, unknown in any other part of the civilized world. And the results attained by its use in our schools, and out, were and are still the envy of the deaf of Europe; so much so that they are now, and have been for many years, agitating for the lifting of the proscription against signs in their own countries. In other words, the wave of reform is rolling just the other way over there.

Is it not a little curious then to see signs just beginning to be proscribed in this country? And by whom? By the deaf themselves? Not by any manner of means! They have a deep-rooted conviction that their *happiness* is bound up in signs, and they grapple them to their hearts with hooks of steel.

By whom, then, are signs proscribed?

By a few educators of the deaf whose boast is that they do not understand signs and do not want to; by a few philanthropists who are otherwise ignorant of the language; by parents who do not understand the requisites to the happiness of their deaf children and are inspired with false fears by the educators and philanthropists.

These few have banded together and, backed up by unlimited wealth, send forth men and women who travel all over the country from Maine to California the year round, insidiously creating and fostering everywhere a false, a forced, an artificial sentiment against signs. They also have access to the public press and, making use of impecunious and sensational writers, seek to make what is old appear new and convince the uninitiated that what is white is black. And worst of all they ignore the deaf themselves in their senseless and mischievous propaganda against signs. Professing to have no object in view but the benefit of the deaf, they exhibit an utter contempt for the opinions, the wishes, the desires of the deaf!

And why should we not be consulted in a matter of such vital interest to us? This is a question that no man has yet answered satisfactorily.

We are not opposed to speech-teaching and lip-reading. On the contrary we appreciate them at their full value and are eager to learn to speak and read the lips, but, at the same time, we have forced upon us by actual and bitter experience the limitations of these accomplishments, and in a manner that no one in the full possession of his hearing can either appreciate or understand, and we are thankful that God in his goodness has given us something to fall back upon to facilitate free, untrammelled communication among ourselves, and that is—Signs. We do not object to speech, but we do most strenuously object to the proscription of our signs—our own language.

And why can not speech-teaching and signs exist side by side? Why should there be any antagonism between them? Why this irrepressible conflict?

The teachers of speech contend that signs prevent the acquisition of speech, and others who use the manual alphabet to the exclusion of signs claim that they hinder the mastery of English. These are the main indictments brought against signs, but this is neither the time nor place to discuss them. It is sufficient to say that the deaf themselves utterly repudiate both counts, and their own experience upholds them in their position and nothing can shake their abiding faith in the utility of signs.

They are a unit in this the world over, while the opponents of signs are not agreed among themselves. Some of their authorities holds that signs may be permitted in teaching the younger pupils, as an aid in the acquisition of English, to be dropped as soon as they can express themselves in English; while others, equally high as authority, insist that no signs shall be permitted in the beginning of the course, but that they may be permitted after a sufficient command of English has been acquired. Still others insist that signs shall never be used even after the pupils have left school.

When doctors disagree, who shall decide?

The deaf themselves have decided. Like a stone wall they stand united, the whole world round, presenting a solid front to any interference in their use of signs.

They recognize that signs are liable to abuse, just as any other good God-given gift can be and is abused by His creatures, but that is no reason why the gift should be wiped off the face of the earth. They have always, sometimes strenuously and sometimes passively, resisted all attempts to proscribe their language. In point of fact, the proscription of signs is a proscription that does not proscribe, as is fully attested by pupils and graduates of pure oral schools where the use of signs is most rigorously forbidden under severe penalties.

The utmost extreme to which tyranny can go when its mailed hand descends upon a conquered people, is the proscription of their national language, and with the utmost rigor several generations are required to eradicate it. But all attempts to suppress signs, wherever tried, have most signally failed. After an hundred years of proscription in Germany and Austria, they still flourish, and will continue to flourish to the end of time.

What heinous crime have the deaf been guilty of that their language should be proscribed? By means of it they are enabled to enjoy social intercourse to a degree that artificial speech and writing can not afford; by its means they enjoy religious instruction and worship, things denied even the very best products of oral schools among the hearing; by its means lectures and other literary treats are open to them, and the amount of happiness it affords them is simply beyond computation. This being true, to proscribe signs or to deprive the deaf of them under any pretext whatever, is an act of Nineteenth Century tyranny which for refinement of cruelty deserves to be classified with the Seventeenth Century inquisition.

One of the most pitiable objects imaginable is a deaf person

orally taught whose command of speech is not sufficient to permit him to mingle freely with his hearing neighbors and friends, and who is, by the false kindness of well-meaning friends, denied the privilege of using signs and mingling with his fellows. Cases are not infrequent of such being driven, by their utter loneliness and isolation, to suicide or the Insane Asylum.

That our oralistic friends and others who wish to proscribe signs are sincere in their conviction that signs are "an evil thing," and that they believe that they are the salvation of the deaf from an educational and social point of view, we have not the least doubt; but that does not exonerate them from the evil consequences of their actions or palliate the vast injury they do to the deaf or the misery they cause. The Chinese in compressing the feet of the children are sincere in their belief that they are doing them a special favor, and the Spanish Inquisitors may have been sincere in their belief that they were saving the souls of their victims by subjecting them to the rack and flames; but that does not lessen the pain and deformity they caused or exonerate them from the responsibility of their needless infliction. They were mistaken and may be pardoned when they stand before the great White Throne upon the plea of ignorance, want of information or enlightenment. But no such plea will suffice for these tortures of the deaf in this enlightened age. They are fully informed of the feelings of the deaf, and if they choose to ignore their pleas, turn a deaf ear to their cries, shut their eyes to their tears, and their mute appeals for relief, upon them will descend the denunciation: "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it to me."

With the deaf all over the world to-day protesting, with all their might, with pen and tongue and hands, against the proscription of their language, no man can plead ignorance.

By all means let speech be taught to every deaf person to whom it promises the least benefit, and let finger-spelling be used for all it is worth, but at the same time EVERY teacher of the deaf should have a good knowledge of signs, and ALL the deaf, whether orally taught, finger taught, or sign taught, should and must have the benefit of lectures and religious services in the sign language.

This is the platform upon which all the deaf, without distinction of creed, color or nationality, stand to-day, and will stand forevermore; and may He who never turns a deaf ear to the cries of His children, no matter how humble they be, hear us and grant us relief from this unjust, this unreasonable, this inexplicable proscription of signs with which we are threatened in this country, "the land of the free and the home of the brave."

"O, speed the moment on
When wrong shall cease, and Liberty and Love
And Truth and Right throughout the earth be known
As in their home above."