

## **Oralism – a sign of the times? - The contest for deaf communication in education provision in late nineteenth-century Scotland**

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In 1880, the International Congress on the Education of the Deaf in Milan stipulated that speech should have ‘preference’ over signs in the education of deaf children, but the mode of achieving this effectively banned sign language. Endeavours to teach deaf children to articulate were not new, but this decision placed pressures on deaf institutions to favour the oral system of deaf communication over other methods. In Scotland, efforts were made to adopt oralism, but educators were faced with the reality that this was not good education practice for most pupils. This article will consider the responses of Scottish educators of deaf children from the 1870s until the beginning of the twentieth century.

### **Introduction**

In 1880, the International Congress on the Education of the Deaf, meeting in Milan, passed several resolutions that were to have long-term effects on the deaf community and on the provision of communication skills and education. Two key resolutions stated:

1. The convention, considering the incontestable superiority of speech over signs in restoring the deaf-mute to society and giving him a fuller knowledge of language, declares that the oral method should be preferred to that of signs in the education and instruction of deaf-mutes.

2. Considering that the simultaneous use of articulation and signs has the disadvantage of injuring articulation and lip-reading and the precision of ideas, declares that the pure oral method should be preferred.<sup>1</sup>

The resolutions had the effect, not only of forcing the communication means of the hearing on to deaf people who felt more comfortable with manual communication, but of excluding deaf teachers from many institutions providing education for deaf students.

The debate surrounding the efficacy of the manual method of communication (sign language and finger-spelling) and the oral method (lip-reading and articulation) was not new in 1880. L'abbé Charles-Michel de l'Epée (1712-1789) is credited with establishing, in Paris in 1760, the first school for teaching 'deaf-mute' students by sign language. In the late eighteenth century, schools for deaf pupils opened in other European cities, notably that in Leipzig in 1778 by Samuel Heinicke (1727-1790) who advocated the oral system and whom Zina Weygand has described as 'a bitter enemy of the abbé de l'Epée.'<sup>2</sup> Kyle and Woll note that 'conflict arose between the German (Heinicke) and French (de l'Epée) systems when Heinicke declared all other methods to be useless and pernicious.'<sup>3</sup>

In Scotland, during the seventeenth century, the linguistic philosopher George Dalgarno (1626-1687) developed a form of finger-spelling, while in 1760, Thomas Braidwood (1715-1806) opened a school for 'deaf' pupils in Edinburgh where he taught them to 'speak'. Laurent Clerc (1785-1869), a student of de l'Epée and of his successor, l'abbé Roch-Ambroise Sicard (1742-1822), was sceptical of Braidwood's claims to success, believing that he 'taught primarily rich, hard-of-hearing pupils.'<sup>4</sup> Kyle and Woll acknowledge that not all of Braidwood's pupils were 'deaf' and that, although his fame 'is based on his success in developing speech in his pupils,' he employed signs as well as speech, pooling the French manual system and German oral

system, producing what became known as the English system, or ‘combined’ system.<sup>5</sup> Braidwood’s methods gained praise from the diarist Dr Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) who, during a singular visit to Braidwood’s school in the 1770s, proclaimed that ‘the improvement of Mr Braidwood’s pupils is wonderful ... it is an expression scarcely figurative to say they hear with the eye.’<sup>6</sup> However, about 1783, Braidwood relocated his school to London where he continued to appeal to a wealthy clientele and remained secretive about his methods,<sup>7</sup> although Branson and Miller suggest that this was prompted by failure to attract philanthropic support in Edinburgh and it was an annual royal grant that lured him to London.<sup>8</sup> McMillan argues that Braidwood was one of several pioneers of deaf education that oralists claimed as their own as they ‘massaged history’ and ‘propagated the myth of a glorious revolution.’<sup>9</sup> Institutions for deaf children with broader appeal opened in Edinburgh in 1810, Glasgow and Aberdeen in 1819, and Dundee in 1846. Donaldson’s Hospital, which accepted hearing as well as deaf pupils, opened in Edinburgh in 1850.<sup>10</sup> In 1883, Smyllum Orphanage, run by the Sisters of Charity at Lanark, opened a ‘Blind and Deaf-Mute School’ for Catholic children.

While de l’Epée and Heinicke had opposing views on the roles of the signing and the oral systems, it would appear that these models were not generally adopted by the total exclusion of the other. In the United Kingdom, Kyle and Woll note that:

In the early part of the [nineteenth] century the methods used were mainly the combined system with an emphasis on articulation and speech, although this gradually gave way by mid-century to an almost total reliance on sign as the mode of communication, and on written language as the means of access to English.<sup>11</sup>

However, Kyle and Woll continue: ‘It is clear that a significant mode of change had arrived in the 1870s and many schools had begun to employ oral teachers and were trying out these methods with *selected pupils*’ [my emphasis].<sup>12</sup>

Thomas J. Watson completed a comprehensive study of deaf education in Scotland in 1949. Watson concluded that oralism had been inadequately embraced by Scottish residential institutions for deaf education by the close of the nineteenth century. He believed that ‘Scotland ... had lost her pride of place as a pioneer in the realm of deaf education’ because ‘the institutions had to overcome the inertia of tradition before new methods could overcome a satisfactory trial.’<sup>13</sup> It is apparent that Watson believed that the advance of deaf education should be a progression from the ‘silent system’, via the ‘compromise of the combined method’ to the superiority of the oral system,<sup>14</sup> and, indeed, in 1967, he argued that gesture should be discouraged and that ‘the important thing is to establish the principal of talking.’<sup>15</sup> Watson was writing during what Corry McMillan describes as the ‘dark ages’ of deaf education, the period between 1945 and 1970 when pure oralism was at its peak.<sup>16</sup> However, Watson’s view was echoed in 1980 by the highly respected historian, Olive Checkland (1920-2004), who saw the twentieth-century suppression of the combined method in favour of the oral method as ‘enabl[ing] many deaf to live constructive lives apparently little hampered by their disability.’<sup>17</sup>

However, it is worth noting Robert Niven’s description of the difficulties inherent in the oral system:

Lip-reading is a laborious method of communication. The child is taught to watch the face of the person talking and to associate the shape of the lips with the meaning of the words. At the same time, he is taught to put his own lips into the right shape to express sounds and words – and not only his lips, the whole complicated apparatus of speech employing tongue, teeth, palate, vocal chords and muscles of respiration. Progress is slow and the final result is often an adult who can communicate only with other deaf people and with a limited number of hearing people.<sup>18</sup>

Paddy Ladd, a deaf social worker, is succinct about the difficulties that oralism creates for deaf children: ‘We need language to lipread and to guess, as lipreading is at least 75% guesswork. So deaf children lose vital years chasing around this vicious circle. By the use of the oral-only system, you are killing and impoverishing the deaf world.’<sup>19</sup>

In considering the immediate post-Milan experience in Scotland, this article makes use of contemporary records of Scottish deaf education institutions. These often suggest that, in the aftermath of the Milan Congress of 1880, there was a strong feeling that the oral method of communication should be regarded enthusiastically as representing progress, innovation, science and modernity. Robert Smith suggests that:

At the time of the Conference, there was rivalry between schools, and Oralism was seen as a modern doctrine; but the crux of the matter was probably that teaching deaf people to speak was much more socially acceptable. Hearing people for the most part did not understand Sign Language, and what people do not understand they often fear, or at best do not value.<sup>20</sup>

Neurologist Oliver Sacks writes that advocating pure oralism was ‘perhaps ... in keeping with the spirit of the age, its overweening sense of science as power, of commanding nature and never deferring to it,’<sup>21</sup> while Douglas Baynton, linking the rise of oralism over manual communication as paralleling the trajectory of evolution theory over the theory of creation, notes: ‘The value of speech was, for the oralists, akin to the value of being human. To be human was to speak.’<sup>22</sup> In Scotland, the ethos of ‘progress’ was linked to the rise of the middle classes who, in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, dominated the voluntary sphere and the social services that it delivered. As Morgan and Trainor observe, their lifestyles were shaped by education, work and religion, while their motivation was spurred on by religion, humanitarianism, social anxiety and zeal for personal distinction.<sup>23</sup> Deaf

children who could articulate, it was widely believed, would be better prepared to enter the world of work and financial independence in adulthood, and would be better equipped to receive the benefits of both education and the word of God.

It is not therefore surprising to find suggestions in the records of Scottish deaf institutions that there were conscious efforts to embrace the ‘modern doctrine,’<sup>24</sup> despite Watson’s accusation of there being an ‘inertia of tradition’.<sup>25</sup> But they also show that there was nonetheless a sustained high level of scepticism towards oralism reinforced by first-hand experience. As McMillan puts it: ‘There were significant pockets of resistance [to oralism] in Yorkshire and Scotland, not to overlook the USA, and change was gradual and uneven.’<sup>26</sup> Evidence does not suggest that this resistance in Scotland was motivated by aversion to ‘English’ linguistic imperialism as may have been the case in Ireland or India.<sup>27</sup> However, equation of sign with ‘nature’, primitiveness and savagery, while English language and speech represented access to culture and education,<sup>28</sup> do resonate with philanthropic perspectives in late nineteenth-century Scotland.

### **Scottish deaf institution teaching policy post-Milan.**

There were five residential institutions in Scotland in 1880, yet Scotland was not represented at the Milan Congress. Indeed, the Congress was dominated by oralist delegates from Italy and France, with only a handful of delegates from England, USA and other European nations,<sup>29</sup> perhaps because the main language used was French.<sup>30</sup> Yet the decisions reached by the Congress had international repercussions. By 1880, the tide of oralism as a teaching system had already cast its ripples towards Scotland where the Glasgow Institution introduced it in 1876, and the Edinburgh Institution, having dismissed it in 1872, did likewise in 1879.<sup>31</sup> Alfred Large, head of deaf

education at Donaldson's Hospital from 1863, pioneered the 'combined method' in Scotland as an alternative to the 'silent method'. Olive Checkland notes that, under the 'combined method,' 'finger spelling was used initially, after which attempts were made to get pupils to speak.'<sup>32</sup> However, she argues that:

This type of compromise reinforced the hold of the silent method. Results came easily and encouraging progress could be made with finger spelling. The oral methods were heartbreakingly slow, and once finger spelling had been learned, pupils rarely persevered with proper speech.<sup>33</sup>

Signing was effective, while oralism was not only difficult to inculcate but, because of the need for smaller classes and individual attention, it was expensive to teach, an important consideration for institutions dependent on charitable support. Yet oralism was not automatically dismissed by headteachers constrained by financial and teaching resources or by 'inertia of tradition'.

Annual reports and minute books of the Scottish institutions indicate prolonged debate and evaluation of opposing teaching methods. The only records not to have survived are those for the Dundee Institution, which had a modest cohort of pupils. Drysdale, its founder and headteacher from 1846 to 1880, was deaf, as was his successor, James Barland,<sup>34</sup> and so the oral system would have attracted little enthusiasm from them. However, even Dundee was not totally immune and, in 1881, the matron gave instruction in articulation to some children.<sup>35</sup> Aberdeen also had a modest number of students, but teaching policy post-Milan was an ongoing dilemma for headteacher Alexander Pender. At its inception, the Aberdeen institution specifically proclaimed that it should be 'established on the best model' and so had 'applied to the celebrated Abbé Sicard, Director of the Royal Deaf and Dumb Institution in Paris, whose genius in the discovery, and success in the application, of the proper means of instruction, are so well known' and added that, in 1818, it had

sent in a young man for a year of training in Paris.<sup>36</sup> Sicard is traditionally placed in the signing discipline of teaching, but he was a figure of some ambiguity. Fischer and Lane note that Sicard thought that the deaf person was ‘similar to primitive man’ and likened teaching deaf people to ‘the meritorious act of creating a human being,’ but he accepted that ‘signs in teaching [are] absolutely necessary’ and that ‘the teacher must learn his pupil’s signs just as the pupil learns the words.’<sup>37</sup> Rée writes that ‘to Sicard ... signs were little more than an educational method, a classroom technique for explaining the meanings of written words to deaf children,’<sup>38</sup> while Eriksson notes that Sicard ‘modified de l’Epée’s sign language in an effort to improve upon it, but only succeeded in complicating it.’<sup>39</sup> However, Fischer and Lane also note that Sicard ‘was extremely committed theoretically, both with regard to the deaf pupil’s person and to sign language.’<sup>40</sup> To this aspect of Sicard’s legacy, the Aberdeen institution had committed itself. (The fickle nature of Sicard is perhaps demonstrated by Laurent Clerc who, having gained his master’s approval to go to USA with Thomas Gallaudet (1787-1851) to establish a deaf school there, discovered that Sicard had written to his mother urging her to withhold her permission.)<sup>41</sup>

In 1877, Franklin Bill, headteacher at Aberdeen institution since 1859,<sup>42</sup> compiled a report ‘on the subject of Oral Teaching from information he had received from America and other places which was read and highly approved of, but because of the detail he wanted to compile a second report.’<sup>43</sup> Aberdeen was in tandem with the Glasgow and Edinburgh institutions in considering the oral method at this time. However, there is no trace of Bill having compiled his second report, or of any commentary from him on the Milan Congress, but Watson asserts that ‘in the early months of 1877 instruction in lip-reading and articulation was begun, and early results seemed to promise well.’<sup>44</sup> In 1881, his place was taken by Alexander Pender who



remained headmaster until 1919. Raised by signing deaf parents, it was not until Pender entered Donaldson's Hospital, aged eight, that he was identified as 'hearing' and was engaged in voice training. Watson concludes that 'a man with such a background would obviously find it difficult to adapt himself to the oral methods coming into vogue when he took office at Aberdeen.'<sup>45</sup>

In November 1883, after he had been instructed to spend his holidays 'to the acquisition of the German or Oral system of teaching the deaf mute child'<sup>46</sup> at the Deaf Institution in Ealing, England, Pender wrote a report. He recorded that Ealing had thirteen boys aged eight to twenty under the instruction of three male teachers and four female resident students. The bias speculated by Watson is given some validity by Pender's report:

Now, at this school there will be found among the inmates a nobleman's daughter, the offsprings of a banker and a brewer, as well as children of independent means – all the pupils here belong to the well-to-do and "upper ten". When such is the case it is very easy to insist upon the child's detention at school for a long period. To be plain, what about the class I have specially to deal with – the working man's child... This is a system too expensive for the working man.<sup>47</sup>

However, Pender's scepticism was motivated, not by a prejudice against oralism, but by the practicalities of length of training, cost, and pupil-teacher ratios at the charitably-funded Aberdeen institution. Indeed, in his report to the governors Pender recorded that he had introduced techniques from Ealing. He stated:

The children seem delighted with the idea of such prospects [speech], and meeting with such encouragement from them I have been teaching it diligently, and would now crave of your permission to continue my endeavours... To assist me in carrying on the method I would beg of you to give me a spatel (a substitute for the fingers to guide and press the tongue) and also a hand mirror (to concentrate the attention of the pupil on the motions of the mouth) and a few bladders (to strengthen the pupils' lungs in the exercise of filling and re-filling).<sup>48</sup>

While Pender expressed caution about how many working-class children might be able to learn articulation, he was clearly prepared to persevere with the oral method. In 1885, Aberdeen Institution had twenty-one students and reported that ‘instruction in the oral system to the elder children continues to be given with a considerable degree of success.’<sup>49</sup> The Chairman reported that he had ‘conversed with one of the boys by the labial signs’ and complimented Pender ‘on the gratifying results he had obtained.’ Alexander Pender was commended for his ‘great zeal’ with ‘oral or labial training [which] was yet in its infancy,’ while it was acknowledged that he ‘had to work on such bodies and such brains as he got, and these none of the best.’<sup>50</sup> A year later, the Institution’s ‘remarkable progress’ in oral instruction was demonstrated through ‘public examinations’ of students, but the Provost of Aberdeen acknowledged that ‘there were some [pupils] who were unable to express themselves orally.’<sup>51</sup> It would therefore appear that, even where there were doubts over financial and teaching resources, and the suitability of articulation, Pender and the Institution’s directors embraced efforts to teach by the oral method with a certain enthusiasm, not least by the apparent promise of the ‘new’ orthodoxy to bring the speech of hearing society to deaf people.

In 1872, the Glasgow Institution for the Deaf and Dumb congratulated itself on the success and benefits accruing from many years of teaching sign language.<sup>52</sup> This policy changed in 1877 after a deputation returned from witnessing ‘the very wonderful mode of teaching called lip-language’ in England.<sup>53</sup> A decision that all new admissions would be taught this method followed - although it was recognised that this would require smaller classes, more teachers and increased financial resources.<sup>54</sup> At the time of the report, an experiment in lip-reading had been running for two months and its advocates enthusiastically stated that ‘the greater the success

of the oral method the less would be the dependence on the use of signs and of the finger alphabet.<sup>55</sup> The directors appeared to be seduced by the apparent promise that the ‘miracle’ of speech might be delivered by this ‘new’ innovation. Within one year, fifty children, of whom twenty-one had been born deaf, were receiving language instruction under the oral system,<sup>56</sup> and within two years, three-quarters of the children (out of 117 pupils) were under this method.<sup>57</sup> However, in the same year (1879), Mr. Thomson, headmaster of the institution and keen advocate of the oral system, hinted that problems arose, especially with older children in whom ‘the organs were too rigid.’<sup>58</sup> He was concerned at the slow progress using oralism, finding that the ‘practice of Articulation and Lip-reading necessitates attendance at school for eight or nine years.’<sup>59</sup> Of the Milan Conference’s decision, the Institution cautioned:

We have very grave doubts of the expediency of abandoning the sign system and adopting the oral method *exclusively*. The Glasgow Institution is a public one, where the majority of children belong to the poorer classes, who could not afford to allow their children to remain so long at school as would be necessary for them to become proficient in the Oral training, while many of the children have not the capacity of being taught by the oral system, and it requires all the energy of the teacher to bring them to understand and converse by the sign system.

.. my Directors would be disposed to give a preference to the adoption of the mixed system, and have in the meantime, felt constrained to carry out this mode of instruction in their school.<sup>60</sup>

Interestingly, signing charts, which had been reproduced in the Institution’s annual reports until 1877, were re-introduced in 1881. Oral work continued, but three years later, John Kerr, Inspector of Schools, while commending the work of the Glasgow Institution, expressed concern at the effort demanded by lip-reading instruction:

It seems proved that *some cannot learn speech by lip-reading*. It is certain that it *requires long and irksome training*, so long and irksome that many other things which it is desirable pupils should be taught, and which they could easily be taught by signs, *must be postponed or at any rate much retarded* by confining the instruction to lip-reading. A large proportion of deaf-mutes belong to a social class who cannot afford either the time or money for perfection of lip-reading and speaking.<sup>61</sup>

The Institution conceded that sign-language could be taught to proficiency in about six years, while lip-reading required nine, yet was reluctant to reduce its commitment to the latter.<sup>62</sup> However, by 1886, it was professing adherence to the ‘combined’ system. Kerr maintained his reservations about the oral system, both at the Glasgow Institution and at Donaldson’s Hospital in Edinburgh, because of the time required and its impingement upon the children’s need to learn practical skills.<sup>63</sup>

Edinburgh Deaf and Dumb Institution also discussed the oral method in 1872, but dismissed it with realisation, not just of the teaching difficulties, but of the distaste expressed towards it by deaf people. The 1872 Report stated:

The method of instruction pursued in the Institution is the same as that adopted in nearly all Institutions in Great Britain, and is known as the French system – or teaching by signs – on account of its having originated in Paris under the benevolent Abbé de l’Epée, in the year 1760, and, to the honour of our country, a school was commenced in the same year in Edinburgh on the same system by Thomas Braidwood. This system has been continued up to the present time with most satisfactory results. There is another system, which is called the Dutch or German system, or teaching articulation and lip reading, concerning which several articles have lately been published in the newspapers and periodicals. It is a system that can be carried out with advantage only to extraordinary acute pupils, and chiefly to those children who have had their hearing for a few years; but it would be a waste of time and labour on the part of the Teachers and Pupils to attempt this method in a miscellaneous school. The process is a very slow one, and the pupils not being able to modulate their voices, their articulation is harsh and monotonous, and in many cases painful to listen to. One of the great

objections to the time and labour being devoted to this system is, that the Deaf and Dumb themselves have no pleasure in articulating speech, but prefer to converse by writing or finger language.<sup>64</sup>

However, in 1879 the Edinburgh Institution formed an oral class, which a year later consisted ‘of Pupils taken from the youngest children, and is taught exclusively upon this principle, and with such success that [the headmaster] advises its continuance.’<sup>65</sup> In 1881, the Institution declared that ‘a fair trial has now been made,’ and there was an air of discouragement when it was stated that ‘the Pupils continue slowly to improve in speaking, but even yet they can only be understood by those who are accustomed to them,’<sup>66</sup> a sentiment that continued until 1885 by which time Edward Illingworth had succeeded James Bryden as headmaster. Illingworth had been principal assistant at the Yorkshire Institution at Doncaster where articulation had been introduced during the previous decade.<sup>67</sup> A marked change of policy appeared and, in 1886, it was being claimed that ‘the Pure Oral System ... is the most beneficial,’ that ‘Pupils are making very satisfactory progress both in speaking and lip-reading, and appear thoroughly to appreciate it,’ and that ‘signing among the Pupils is forbidden in the Schoolroom, and discouraged at all times.’<sup>68</sup> Those students who did not respond to oral methods, it was noted, were ‘taught on the ‘Silent (not Sign) System’ ... entirely by finger spelling and writing.’<sup>69</sup> The ‘waste in time and labour’ with which the oral system was dismissed in 1872, had now won favour as producing ‘very satisfactory progress’ and, while this might have been affected by the wider influence enjoyed by oralists after Milan, in the case of the Edinburgh Institution, it would appear to have been a direct result of the differing preferences of Bryden and Illingworth.

Donaldson’s Hospital was opened as a charitable educational facility in Edinburgh in 1850 and it competed with both the Edinburgh and Glasgow

Institutions. In February 1881, the proceedings of the Milan Conference were laid before a meeting of the governors at Donaldson's, but these drew little comment other than that Alfred Large, the headmaster, should be permitted to attend a similar conference proposed to be held in London 'if he shall consider that to be expedient.'<sup>70</sup> In the course of attending the conference, Large visited several schools adopting pure oral methods.<sup>71</sup> Donaldson's had taken advice from the Glasgow and Edinburgh institutions about teaching methods during its formation in 1849 and had adopted the combined method. In 1889, in Royal Commission evidence, Large outlined a combined system of manual alphabet, pictures, writing and articulation, but with signs not being used 'more than we are compelled to do in order to explain matter to the children.'<sup>72</sup> However, Graham Philip shows that, by 1887, a pure oral class for approximately twelve children was in operation.<sup>73</sup> Through the 1890s, the reports of the Inspector of Schools indicate that oral education gained in ascendancy, but not to the exclusion of signing, a situation that continued until Donaldson's combined with the Edinburgh Institution in 1938 when Montgomery notes that 'sign language was abolished.'<sup>74</sup> Donaldson's, which by 1903 had 226 resident pupils of whom 116 were deaf,<sup>75</sup> maintained a commitment to the combined method under both Large and his successor, Brown, although it was not used exclusively. In that year, twelve pupils were being taught by the oral system, eighteen under the manual system, and eighty-six received instruction under the combined method.<sup>76</sup> Information on the Smyllum Blind and Deaf-Mute School is scant, but in 1889 Smyllum Orphanage recorded that 'the Deaf Mutes are taught by ... the "sign system" which has been found the most expeditious and effectual means of enabling them to interchange ideas with each other and the outside world.'<sup>77</sup>

During the last three decades of the nineteenth century, the Scottish deaf institutions flirted with oralism to varying degrees, ranging from open enthusiasm to cautious scepticism. Oralism was represented as scientific advancement, and favoured by some hearing teachers. Directors were also conscious of the fundraising possibilities presented by public displays of pupils showing proficiency in articulation to gullible audiences unaware that they were often being presented with notably bright pupils who might not have been born deaf, and who had been well-rehearsed for these occasions.

### **Scottish school boards and day schools**

Compulsory education in Scotland for children aged between five and thirteen years was introduced by the Education (Scotland) Act of 1872. The Act made no special stipulations for children with disabilities. Administration of education under the Act fell to school boards in each parish. Without a specific obligation to make provision for deaf (or blind) children, school boards rarely did so until the Education of Blind and Deaf Mute Children (Scotland) Act of 1890 decreed schooling until the age of sixteen. However, there were exceptions, notably in Greenock (1883), Dundee (1885) and Glasgow (1886).<sup>78</sup>

The Greenock class evolved from a private venture instigated in 1878 by the wealthy philanthropist and inventor, Alexander Graham Bell (1847-1922).<sup>79</sup>

Although Bell was later to state that ‘in my preference, oral methods come first; the manual alphabet method second; and the sign-method method last; but my heart is with teachers of the deaf whatever their method may be,’<sup>80</sup> he was vociferously opposed to the ‘de l’Epée language of signs’,<sup>81</sup> which he differentiated from ‘natural signs’,<sup>82</sup> and called ‘a language of pantomime.’<sup>83</sup> In the USA, he was also driven by

an agenda of assimilating American multicultural and multi-linguistic society into a homogenous English-speaking one,<sup>84</sup> and replicated the view of Joseph Watson (1765-1829), Braidwood's nephew, that signing was a 'barbarous speech' that needed to be replaced 'by teaching the language of the country where [deaf people] reside.'<sup>85</sup> Bell's school in Greenock therefore followed the oral system, and when its role was taken over by Greenock School Board in 1883, a teacher was solicited from the oral school at Ealing.<sup>86</sup> Dundee School Board's provision for deaf education arose, according to Thomas Watson, 'on pure oral lines' and from its dissatisfaction with the Dundee Deaf and Dumb Institution, noted as having deaf headmasters from its inception<sup>87</sup> and representative of what Checkland cites as 'conservatism... [and] well-trodden ways.'<sup>88</sup> In Glasgow, Govan School Board, in 1886, made provision for deaf education. This occurred because of pressure by parents on the school board to honour pledges made by members during their election campaigns of the previous year. While the Board 'decided from the outset that the children would be taught by the oral system, the teaching of the deaf by means of speech and lip-reading, in preference to the silent methods of signs and finger spelling,'<sup>89</sup> parents demands were motivated by their desire for day-school education rather than by a particular methodology.<sup>90</sup> The first teachers recruited for the Govan class came from Glasgow Deaf and Dumb Institution<sup>91</sup> at which time its directors considered 'the combined system...to be the only practical way of teaching in the Glasgow Institution.'<sup>92</sup> William Mitchell of Glasgow School Board, which adjoined the area covered by Govan, noted that the Glasgow board 'never saw its way to open classes for Deaf mutes in its own Schools... The Langside Institution had adopted the newest methods .... and earned the highest recommendation from the Inspectors.'<sup>93</sup> This was a reference to Glasgow Deaf and Dumb Institution – of which Mitchell was a director.



In 1908, Sister Teresa Farrell, superioress of Smyllum Orphanage, urged removal of its Blind and Deaf Mute School from Lanark to Glasgow because parents wished to be closer to their children. Sister Teresa reported that, because of the Orphanage's rural location, 'many ignorant parents have sent their children to Langside ... to the loss of their faith.'<sup>94</sup> Although debates surrounding communication methodologies were present in the operation of day schools as these gained ground, the prime objective of parents of deaf students who attended these schools appears to have been their desire to have their children remain at home while receiving an education.

While it might be argued that implicit in deaf education agendas was the objective of bringing religious teaching to deaf children, religious inculcation had a pervasive presence in all education during this period. R. D. Anderson notes that, although the 1872 Education (Scotland) Act was intended to bring secularism to education provision, 'in the early years religious issues dominated [school board] elections, and there was a heavy presence of clergymen.'<sup>95</sup> Indeed, Helen Corr notes that it was not until 1905 that the Presbyterian churches relinquished control over teacher-training colleges in Scotland.<sup>96</sup> In 1870, the Edinburgh Institution expressed the need to rescue 'Deaf Mutes' 'from the utter darkness which surrounds them, thereby affording greater hopes of elevating their minds to the level of their Christian brethren,'<sup>97</sup> and in the aftermath of the 1890 Act, its directors appealed to its benefactors to continue their 'Christian charity'.<sup>98</sup> The Glasgow Institution, in demonstrating progress in sign language in 1872, noted that 'religious instruction sown... was the best means of giving security for a virtuous and happy life.'<sup>99</sup> Bible knowledge is noted as being part of the curriculum at the Edinburgh Institution where pupils were being taught under both the 'oral system' and the 'silent method' in 1888,<sup>100</sup> while Donaldson's was pleased to learn, in 1880, that former pupils

‘regularly attend a place of worship.’<sup>101</sup> The all-pervasiveness of religious education is apparent in children’s essay extracts in the annual reports of the Glasgow Institution, and while there was rivalry between the various Presbyterian churches and the Roman Catholic church in educational matters during this period, spreading of Christian values and practice was a moral agenda aimed at all segments of society, whether deaf or hearing, and across all modes of communication and education.

Following the 1890 Act, school boards were obliged to ensure the education of deaf children. While board day-school provision, using the oral system, gradually expanded, at the end of the century the residential institutions continued to educate 80% of deaf children.<sup>102</sup> That this resulted in prolonged rivalry and conflict is highlighted by a dispute in Aberdeen in 1914 between Aberdeen Deaf and Dumb Institution and Aberdeen School Board. Reverend James Smith of the School Board acknowledged that there was some duplication of effort between the Board and the Institution, and argued that the benefits to the children should therefore be given foremost consideration. Smith’s proposal was that ‘those capable of benefiting by the Oral System [should be] sent to the Aberdeen School Board school and the other class who were capable of benefiting only by the Sign and Manual Method [be] sent to Mount Street Institution.’<sup>103</sup> Further discussion surrounded the selection of teachers because of the belief that they were best placed to assess the children’s ‘capabilities,’ but it was conceded that individual teachers had personal biases in respect of teaching methods.<sup>104</sup> The Aberdeen institution reaffirmed its commitment to the ‘combined system’ ‘for children of the poorer classes at least ... the class from which the Institution children are mainly drawn.’<sup>105</sup> The School Board proposed that children initially be sent to its school for assessment under the oral system, but the Institution observed that the teacher at the board school currently believed that only two of

twenty-plus pupils were ‘incapable of benefiting by the Oral Method.’<sup>106</sup> The Institution felt that by this method of appraisal it would receive only a small number of pupils ‘and the Board will ultimately carry off all the pupils’.<sup>107</sup> Handwritten notes appended to the report by the Institution convey the acrimony surrounding the competition between the two bodies:

...Mount Street would only receive those whom the Oral School did not wish to keep or refused to have - in other words Mount Street would be the coup, [to which] the incapables and undesirables were consigned. Mount Street would be reduced to a mere convenience for the School Board’s getting rid of the poorest and least promising of the children for whose education it is responsible.<sup>108</sup>

The introduction of school board obligation by the 1872 Act and its clarification by the 1890 Act created an environment where public school provision favouring the oral system for deaf children came into conflict with the long-established institutions which now adopted the combined system for most pupils, and both systems now benefited from public funding. There were, however, other areas of conflict such as residential versus day provision, the need for both institutions and board schools to attract sufficient pupils in order to be viable, and the competing egos of the directors of institutions and school board members. The 1890 Act, by requiring school boards to provide ‘efficient’ education until the age of sixteen, was also recognition that a more generous timescale than provided under the 1872 Act was necessary to adequately benefit sensory-impaired children.

### **Continuing doubts**

A generation after the Scottish institutions first began to consider the oral method and adopt it to varying degrees, doubts about its utility remained. This is demonstrated by caveats to statements that endeavoured to enthusiastically proclaim success and

progress. In 1896, a committee from Glasgow Institution, following a survey of forty-one experts in Britain, USA, Germany and Italy, concluded that oralism, although advantageous to children mastering it, had a low success rate; but that sign-language was of limited use in 'hearing' society where it was not understood. It recommended continuation of the 'combined' system, but that teaching of lip-reading and articulation should be more systematically developed.<sup>109</sup> Addison, the institution's headmaster, declared the success of this policy which included 'special pains [being] taken to give the pupil a command of simple *colloquial* English' [my italics].<sup>110</sup> Addison and Love made European tours of schools for deaf children between 1904 and 1906 which enabled them to study a range of strategies in Germany, Austria, Denmark, Schleswig, USA and Canada.<sup>111</sup> Despite the unrepresentative nature of the 1880 Milan Convention, these exchanges by the Glasgow Institution show that Scottish specialists in deaf education engaged with practices and experiences in the international arena. By 1914, the 'combined' method remained in use, but the debate over the benefits and deficiencies of sign-language and oralism was unresolved. Glasgow Institution concluded that, 'to the deaf child, the usual avenue by which language is acquired, is closed, and the work of impressing language forms on the brain has to be done through the eye, an organ not designed by nature for this purpose.' It therefore argued that 'deaf children need more, rather than less, schooling than hearing children, a fact which is often forgotten or neglected by those who should be first to appreciate it.'<sup>112</sup> It continued to use speech, lip-reading, writing and the finger alphabet which, four years earlier, it called 'The Old Scottish Combined Method'.<sup>113</sup> This description is possibly explained by figures presented by Addison, which indicated that, in 1895, in England 80% of pupils were taught by the oral system, compared to 16% by the manual system and 4% by the combined system,

while in Scotland 16% were on the oral system, 20% on the manual system, and 64% on the combined system.<sup>114</sup> The discourse of the late nineteenth century suggests that the difference between Scotland and England (and, indeed, Wales and Ireland) in teaching methodologies was linked to the economic status of the majority of the pupils in each country. Average pupil to teacher ratios in all four countries were largely similar which therefore appears to contradict notions that English institutions could provide teaching of greater intensity because a higher prevalence of privately-funded students, although the statistics do not relate information on the ages of students and length of education which might result in some distortion.<sup>115</sup> Following visits to institutions in Europe and North America, James Kerr Love, whose early research had been on ‘tone deafness’,<sup>116</sup> argued that it was wrong to teach by a single method because ‘the deaf [are not] a homogenous class’<sup>117</sup> and ‘universal application of the oral method is like fitting of all kinds of sight defects with one type of eye-glass.’<sup>118</sup> Indeed, in 1881, American professor of languages Edward Fay illustrated that there was considerable ambiguity about the extent to which schools and institutions employed their ‘preferred’ methodology, and the different meanings that terms such as the ‘combined system’ encapsulated.<sup>119</sup>

Aberdeen Institution also remained unconvinced by oralism and, in 1903, felt compelled to evaluate the views and practices of other bodies, namely Dundee School Board, Edinburgh Institution, Donaldson’s Hospital, and English institutions at Margate and Fitzroy Square, London. It sought opinions on the success of the Oral System of teaching ‘Deaf Mutes’ compared with Sign Language and the Combined System; whether ‘Deaf Mutes’ taught by the oral system continued to use it as adults; and whether children being taught by the oral system should be separated from those not learning or unable to learn under pure oralism.<sup>120</sup>

Dundee School Board thought the oral system best, but confessed that it had ‘no knowledge of the Combined System.’<sup>121</sup> It claimed that its children continued to speak as adults and knew of only one ‘who adopted the Sign Language after leaving school.’<sup>122</sup> Brown, headmaster of Donaldson’s, was not in favour of ‘deaf mutes’ being taught solely by one method and argued for the Combined Method, believing that ‘neither the pure Oral Method alone, nor the Sign and Manual Method alone [were] sufficient to educate properly all ‘Deaf Mutes’.’<sup>123</sup> Donaldson’s response continued: ‘The children are allowed to mix freely out of school. Mr Brown adopts the method to the child, and not the child to the method.’<sup>124</sup> Edward Illingworth, headmaster of Edinburgh Institution, gave a detailed and candid reply. Illingworth also rejected the Oral, and the Manual method, as doing some of the children ‘a great injustice’. He acknowledged that ‘there are great numbers that will never learn to articulate with any degree of distinctness, or to lipread with any facility or accuracy, and therefore the time spent (really wasted) in attempting to make these children articulate, could be much more profitably spent in giving them written language by the Manual Method.’<sup>125</sup> He made it clear that the Oral method was really only appropriate to children who had lost their hearing, and that children born deaf who could be taught to speak distinctly represented ‘a small percentage’. He also felt that only a small number of children taught by the Pure Oral Method were able to rely upon speech and lipreading after leaving school. Illingworth also disapproved of the segregation of children taught by the oral and manual systems, stating:

If they are separated, and they are *forbidden* to communicate with one another except by speech, then I say that it is the essence of cruelty, for the children do not know a word of language, either written or spoken, to begin with, and it is years before they have sufficient language by which to hold a conversation. The only means by which they can exchange ideas is by signs which they invent and which they all readily understand. If deaf children,

taught orally, are *not* forbidden to sign, then they will do so just as much when separated from the others as they would were they all together. [original emphasis]<sup>126</sup>

Edward Illingworth's views had changed considerably since his appointment at Edinburgh in 1885, while Alexander Pender, by instigating his small survey, was obviously concerned at lack of progress in Aberdeen after two decades of endeavour. The school boards favoured oralism, but the reply from Dundee suggests that, although there was frequent dialogue between schools and educators through correspondence, conferences and exchange visits, there remained a deep divide and ignorance between proponents of the different methodologies.

## **Conclusion**

As the early decades of the twentieth century advanced, oralism was to have a profound effect on education provision to deaf children. Paddy Ladd demonstrates the emotion that this policy, pursued through much of the twentieth century, continues to stimulate when he refers to its protagonists as 'a bunch of criminals'.<sup>127</sup> The prolonged ostracisation of manual communication was instigated, not only by the 1880 Milan Congress, but by orthodoxies advocating oralism in the previous decade. The Scottish institutions felt obliged to accommodate oralism for a variety of reasons, but foremost among these was their belief that it represented the future in a world being driven by science rather than tradition. As Douglas Baynton suggests, oralists were concerned with scientific naturism, evolutionary theory and national community, and placed their view of modernity before the romantic past and biblical antiquity to which they believed that the manualists were clinging.<sup>128</sup> The Scottish institutions wanted to believe, and wanted their supporters to believe, that articulation was being embraced with enthusiasm and was proving successful. However, by the end of the century, there was widespread consensus that the pure oral method only worked with

a small number of children and that the combined method remained the most effective means of providing education and effective communication. The oral method was supported by certain administrators, teachers, and indeed parents who wished their children might speak, but there was also awareness in many quarters that prolonged and tedious oral teaching caused distress to deaf students, while requiring more time, more teachers, and therefore more money. It impinged upon other education, especially training for a trade, which also had monetary implications for deaf people and for wider society. Sustained efforts were given to oralism despite its disadvantages, but by the beginning of the twentieth century even some professionals, who had devoted their lives to persevering with articulation, felt that it was failing to work except for a small proportion of students.

It is a debate which remains unresolved. In 1945, government regulations, following similar rulings in England and Wales in 1944, recognised the diverse needs of individual children in terms of education provision for partially deaf and profoundly deaf children. They did not address communication methods, and dilemmas remained on how to evaluate individual needs.<sup>129</sup> In 1964, a Committee appointed to report to the Secretary of State for Education and Science on ‘the possible place of finger spelling and signing’ in educating deaf children in England and Wales (but which included some Scottish evidence) failed to come to any firm conclusions. It nonetheless reported that it had found no advocates for either a pure oral system or a pure manual system,<sup>130</sup> yet it concluded that ‘there are stages at which oral methods alone are likely to produce the most satisfactory results irrespective of the aptitudes and characteristics of individual children.’<sup>131</sup> More recently, Bencie Woll, a professor of Sign Language Studies, argued in 1998 that ‘the British Deaf Community must be regarded as a bilingual community, with individual members



exhibiting varying degrees of fluency in BSL, written and spoken English.’<sup>132</sup>

Simultaneously, Linda Watson, a lecturer in deaf education, suggests that ‘the use of any formal sign system has no place within natural auralism [and] there is concern that the use of sign language will encourage the deaf child to begin to rely more on vision than audition.’<sup>133</sup> Perhaps the last word should be reserved for an anecdote from John Hay, a former headmaster of Donaldson’s and now lecturer in deaf studies at the University of Wolverhampton. During an educational visit to the Soviet Union in 1977, Hay and three other signing members of the group found that they could easily identify and converse with signing Russians, placing them at a distinct advantage over English-only speaking members of the group. Hay commented, ‘Deaf people are never at a loss for words in any country in the world. They make simple signs and gestures understood by all regardless of race, creed or nationality...’<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Lane, *When the Mind Hears*, 106.

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<sup>6</sup> Samuel Johnson, *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, 381.

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<sup>8</sup> Jan Branson and Don Miller, *Damned for Their Difference*, 110-111.

<sup>9</sup> Corry T. McMillan, "Changing Standards of Education, 1950 to 1990: Using Statistics to Test Historical Myths." *Deaf History Review* 1 (2004).

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- <sup>111</sup> James Kerr Love, *Plea for the study of the deaf child*, 6, 8, 12.
- <sup>112</sup> GIDD, "Annual Report, 1912", 6-7.
- <sup>113</sup> GIDD, "Annual Report, 1908", 6.
- <sup>114</sup> W. H. Addison, *The present state of deaf mute education*, 8. The figures compiled by Addison indicate that 549 children were attending schools for the deaf in 1895, 284 boys and 265 girls. *Ibid.*, 5.
- <sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-8.
- <sup>116</sup> James Kerr Love, "On the limits of hearing".
- <sup>117</sup> James Kerr Love, *Plea for the study of the deaf child*, 5.
- <sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.
- <sup>119</sup> Branson and Miller, 161, 255-257.
- <sup>120</sup> AUA, ADDI, "Report on Methods of Teaching in response to requests from Aberdeen Deaf and Dumb Institution, 1903".
- <sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Paddy Ladd, “Deaf Culture: Finding It and Nurturing It”, 12.

<sup>128</sup> Douglas C. Baynton, *Forbidden Signs*, 9.

<sup>129</sup> Thomas J. Watson, *The education of hearing-handicapped children*, 11-14.

<sup>130</sup> Department of Education and Science, *The Education of Deaf Children*, 58.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>132</sup> Bencie Woll, “Development of signed and spoken languages”, 66.

<sup>133</sup> Linda Watson, “Oralism – current policy and practice”, 76.

<sup>134</sup> John Hay, “Courtesy, Humour and Adjustment to a Mad World”, 32.