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Book Review

In Our Own Hands: Essays in Deaf History, 1780-1970

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Joseph J. Murray, Eds.
Gallaudet University Press.

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In Our
Own
Hands

Essays in
Deaf History
1780-1970



Brian H. Greenwald
and
Joseph J. Murray, Editors

Feminist theorists have defined the constructs of “autonomy” as both a characteristic of human subjectivity and a quality that emerges in actions and decisions; where “agency” involves both collective action and individual self-reflection often directed toward culture and politics (Kathryn Abrams, 1999). In examining these notions in Deaf history, Brian H. Greenwald and Joseph J. Murray have compiled an excellent resource that provides numerous examples illustrating how deaf people have attempted to maintain self-direction in a world entangled by diverse commitments and influenced by social norms and multiple overpowering factors.

In Our Own Hands: Essays in Deaf History, 1780-1970 includes twelve meticulously-researched essays on such topics as public perspectives about deafness that have changed (or not) over time, the struggles of Black Deaf Americans for citizenship and quality education, conflicting views on appropriate schooling and religious services, and barriers to self-direction emerging as part of a larger system of social and political inequality. Several authors deal with the formidable challenges presented by the American eugenics movement, the development of autonomy and agency while confronted by the influence of Alexander Graham Bell, and the medicalization of deafness, in particular through research on hereditary deafness. One chapter delves into how the authoritarian control of hearing people in New South Wales and Queensland in Australia deflated efforts of deaf people to attain equality through breakaway

social organizations; and several essays focus on individual advocates for Deaf citizenship such as Alice Taylor Terry in California and Rev. Robert Capers Fletcher in the Southern Deaf community.

These writings on autonomy and agency are rich in detail and provide new information not found in previously published resources, and, as a collection, they present a solid foundation on which scholars and advocates can build to further our understanding of such issues as authorization and constraint and how we are socially embedded in a process of transformation.

Due to the heterogeneity within the Deaf community, defining the “self” in Deaf history is a complicated challenge. This we see, for example, in the discussions of perceptions held about deaf people shared by speakers at Presentation Day at Gallaudet College (now Gallaudet University) and the impact of Darwinist thought, anti-immigrant movements, and oralism. There was political strife in Chicago during the educational reforms that were attempted in the late 19th century as conflicts arose about the establishment of day schools. In New York City, deaf members of St. Ann’s church struggled against the reorganization imposed on them by those with paternalistic attitudes. Both the National Association of the Deaf and the National Fraternal Society of the Deaf led the campaign against peddling. These are just a few of the many episodes described in this volume.

Recognizing and reflecting on the internal and external influences on the development of autonomy and agency are critical to effecting positive change. The authors’ local and regional accounts clearly demonstrate how the Deaf community has struggled to conceive its goals and values, and distinguishing them from those that were externally imposed. *In Our Own Hands* may help lead to steps that will embrace engagements with others and further reflect on the notions of agency.
