

Introduction

In the 1521 publication, *De Inventione Dialectica*, the pioneering humanistic educator Rudolf Agricola made the statement that deaf people can be taught a language. This is one of the earliest positive statements about deafness on record. Further back, in the shrouded mists of antiquity, references to deaf persons tended to be negative, as in the *Mishnah*, the collection of traditional rabbinical interpretations of Jewish law; in the writings of the Roman lawmaker Justinian; and in other works up through the Renaissance. The most vicious pronouncement probably is that attributed to Aristotle: "Those who are born deaf all become senseless and incapable of reason."

Practically all of these early discourses on hearing loss and on deaf persons were written by people who were themselves not deaf. It was not until the last 100 years or so that accounts written by a number of deaf persons appeared in print. These were shaped by actual experience and perception rather than by theory, assumption, and observation.

In *Deaf Heritage* Jack R. Gannon, profoundly deaf since the age of eight, has for the first time attempted to bring together a narrative of "the deaf experience" in the United States over the past century. Just what is "the deaf experience?" Hilde Schlesinger and Kathryn Meadow comment in *Sound and Sign*: "Profound childhood deafness is more than a medical diagnosis; it is a cultural phenomenon in which social, emotional, linguistic, and intellectual patterns are inextricably bound together."

Recognizing the need for some kind of documen-

tation of the multi-faceted history of this unique minority group with its distinctive visual culture, three years ago the author began the formidable task of gathering materials relating to the origins of schools, programs, organizations, and events relating to deaf people in this country. Reviewing old and yellowed publications and photographs, meticulously following up on information tips and sources, interviewing old-timers and checking and verifying, Mr. Gannon continued to file, analyze, and classify and, in the process, found himself always learning something new.

Fascinated by this wealth of information about deaf persons and their environment, he soon confronted the twin constraints of time and space and the need to become selective if this introductory history were to be published during the centennial of the National Association of the Deaf. It is hoped that *Deaf Heritage* is but a beginning of a continuing compilation and closer examination of the impact of deafness on persons, their achievements, and their traditions. This valuable chronicle should prove helpful as a text in courses on deaf culture, in orientation-to-deafness seminars, in teacher and counselor preparation programs, as a reference source, and simply as interesting literature.

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THE
ABBE SICARD,

SUCCESSOR OF THE ABBE DE L'EPEE,

*And Director of the Institution for the Education of the
Deaf and Dumb,*

IN PARIS,

PRESIDENT OF THE ROYAL INSTITUTE OF FRANCE, &c. &c.

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