Volume 24, Number 3 2002

Forbidden Signs

reviewed by Patrick Oberholtzer
Gallaudet University

Power, according to the Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary, is possession of control, authority, or influence over others. Douglas Baynton's *Forbidden Signs* is a study in the use of power by hearing people and its consequences for the deaf during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Baynton does an excellent job of describing the conflict between manualists and oralists that has dominated deaf education for many years. The author takes the debate beyond the usual arguments and incorporates cultural changes that occurred within United States society from antebellum days to the close of the Victorian Era.

Baynton asks why oralism displaced sign language as the preferred method of teaching deaf children in the United States. He explores the heyday of sign language during the days of Thomas H. Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc and how religious mores of the time called on educated men to teach the deaf in a pure and natural manner. Nativism and specialization flourished during the Victorian years and it seemed like a really good idea that deaf people become as much as possible like everyone else so that they could fit in. Deaf people needed to become normal and oralists said they knew just how to fix them. Female teachers specializing in oral methods swept into deaf education and male signing instructors (manualists) and deaf teachers quickly exited deaf education in the years following the Civil War. By 1900 oralism was firmly entrenched; it would dominate deaf education for the next 70 years.

The heart of much of the debate in this book rests on how hearing people chose to perceive the deaf. The author addresses this powerful role directly: "Paternalism was what nineteenth-century manualists and oralists had in common. Both of them saw deafness through their own cultural biases and sought to shape deaf people in accordance with those biases. Both used similar clusters of metaphors to forge images of deaf people as fundamentally flawed, incomplete, isolated, and dependent, and both used that imagery to justify not only methods of education but also the authority of the hearing over the deaf. This was constant." Hearing people decided what was best for the deaf. It is from this history that we come to the debates of our own day. It is interesting to note how many "new ideas" in deaf education are really repackaged old ideas from long ago.

Well documented and amply referenced, this book adds much to the history of deaf education in the United States. It should be considered part of core collections on deaf education, and it nicely complements Richard Winefield's *Never the Twain Shall Meet* and John V. Van Cleve and Barry A. Crouch's *A Place of Their Own*. The work is not only

important for deaf education collections but also provides unique perspective for researchers and students interested in women's history and social change in the United States during the nineteenth century. Highly recommended for all libraries.