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## Insulting Jean Massieu: debating representational control of deaf people in mid-19th century Britain.<sup>1</sup>

It never became completely clear who first insulted the memory of the famous French ‘deaf-mute’<sup>2</sup> Jean Massieu, or indeed whether it had actually been insulted at all. But, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1876, Dr David Buxton, the director of the Liverpool school for the deaf, penned the following, putting a rather abrupt end to a eleven-month dialogue of published exchanges between himself and a deaf man by the name of Robert Armour:

The unfavourable suggestion in reference to poor Massieu’s moral character came from himself [Armour] alone<sup>3</sup>... I have determined to say no more on the subject... the controversy has now become not only wearisome, but useless, and I respectfully decline to take any further part in it.<sup>4</sup>

The ‘controversy’ in question did not, in fact, concern Massieu’s ‘moral character’ but the more profound question of Massieu’s abilities as a ‘deaf-mute’. For the Frenchman was known within the field of deaf education as proof that those born deaf could not only learn but, with the right teacher and method, reach heights of philosophical mastery that few people of more ‘normal’ audiology could hope to attain.<sup>5</sup> That this was a truism was always proven by citing examples from an 1815 report of a public demonstration given by Massieu,

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<sup>1</sup> Sincere thanks must go to John Lyons – for support, patience, and proof-reading of this article, Norma McGilp – for ideas and sources, and to the two peer reviewers, whose suggestions considerably improved this article. Thanks too to the Leverhulme Trust, who funded the three-year project entitled ‘Scripture, Dissent and Deaf Space: St Saviour’s, Oxford Street’ (Feb 2014 – Jan 2017) which generated the data from which this article was written. All errors of fact or interpretation are, of course, my own.

<sup>2</sup> Nineteenth century terms like ‘deaf-mute’, ‘semi-mute’ and ‘deaf and dumb’ are no longer considered appropriate by deaf people, and are typically eschewed by those involved in Deaf Studies. In an essay about 19<sup>th</sup> century deafness, however, it is impossible to avoid them by replacing them with modern terms that carry more modern meanings. In this essay, therefore, I reluctantly, but freely explain and use of the terms ‘deaf-mute’ and ‘semi-mute’ as they applied in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I do not, however, use ‘deaf and dumb’ except in quotes or in reference to quotes. ‘Deaf and dumb’ carried a distinct medico-diagnostic sense in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that is at odds with this essay’s focus on identity and ability (see Buxton’s discussion of the construction of the term ‘deaf and dumb’ in the *Chambers’ Encyclopaedia* 1872). It has also become inadmissibly insulting because of the association between ‘dumb’ and ‘stupid’, and so has been avoided so as not to distract from the more nuanced reading that ‘deaf-mute’ and ‘semi-mute’ allow.

<sup>3</sup> Buxton was right, Armour was the first of the two to explicitly use the term “moral character”. In his defence, however, Armour was only putting a ‘moral’ label on what Buxton had already described as “oddities of conduct”. *Magazine Chiefly Intended for the Deaf and Dumb*, February 1876, Vol IV, No 2: 59.

<sup>4</sup> *Magazine Chiefly Intended for the Deaf and Dumb* (henceforth MCIDD) December 1876, Vol IV, No 48: 184

<sup>5</sup> For the mobilisation of the ‘normal’ within disability and deaf studies, see Lennard Davis 1995 *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the body*. London: Verso

and of the “...most remarkable definitions and answers” that he gave to questions posed from the floor.<sup>6</sup> For example:

Hope – is the flower of happiness.<sup>7</sup>

Gratitude – is the remembrance of the heart.<sup>8</sup>

Eternity – is a day with no yesterday or tomorrow, a line that has no end.<sup>9</sup>

Massieu’s definitions elicited nothing but amazement for the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. By 1862, however, Buxton was claiming in the new *Chambers’ Encyclopaedia* that this accepted truth was, in fact, a myth; and that “... those who are acquainted with the subject [know], that the so-called definitions, of *Hope, Gratitude, Time, Eternity, &c.*, were not Massieu’s at all, but those of his master, the Abbé Sicard.<sup>10</sup> When Buxton’s article was reprinted in 1872, and then cited in an international deaf educational journal, Armour took exception to the claim and challenged the respected teacher publicly in the pages of the UK’s only significant ‘Magazine, chiefly intended for the Deaf and Dumb’. Buxton responded in self-defence. In the ensuing debate, the Massieu question was quickly side-lined in favour of a more searching exploration of what deaf people (like Armour) might be capable of and might be expected to achieve within the system of deaf education (like the one run by Buxton).

In late summer 1876, however, the debate turned sour. Buxton reinforced a point of argument by making flippant reference to Massieu’s well-known—but until that point, respectfully avoided—behavioural eccentricities.<sup>11</sup> When Armour questioned whether the educator was trying to score points by raising doubts about Massieu’s ‘Moral Character’, Buxton retorted that he had made no mention of morality, and blamed Armour for putting words in his mouth. From that point, the debate disintegrated into a public tit-for-tat of

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<sup>6</sup> Laffon de Labadat, a collection of the most remarkable definitions and answers of Massieu and Clerc, Deaf and Dumb, to the various questions put to them at the public lectures of the Abbe Sicard in London: 1815

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*: 35

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*:133

<sup>9</sup> Sicard, 1800: 405

<sup>10</sup> *Chambers Encyclopaedia: a dictionary of universal knowledge for the people*. Vol III: 1862: 442

<sup>11</sup> Massieu was readily acknowledged by his peers, and by history since, as a harmlessly eccentric collector of objects (for example, watches and keys) which he wore in numbers, and consulted continually. He was also known, although less readily in public fora, for having sought solace upon the death of the Abbé Sicard in the embrace of those working the Bois de Boulogne. It is likely to be this latter behaviour that Armour and Buxton allude to in their discussion of whether or not his ‘moral’ character is linked to, or can be inferred from his more eccentric ‘behavioural oddities’.

‘who said what first and why’, only ending as first Buxton (see above) and then Armour claimed a moral high-ground win by resorting to indignant silence.

The argument painted both men as rather petty, an oddly damaging outcome to a debate that, on the surface at least, appeared puzzlingly unnecessary. At the time of writing Buxton was already a well-known and well-published, internationally respected expert in deaf education, and Armour was a national prizewinner in a deaf compositional competition. Neither man needed to chase or defend their personal reputation. Furthermore, since the *Chambers’* article in question was a reprint of one that had originally been published in 1862 and referenced internationally since, it was old news. There was little to gain from either man attempting to catch a horse that had bolted long ago. Why did they not simply acknowledge their differences, and sidestep the more embarrassing consequences?

Even if debate were to ensue, there was no need for it to occur publicly. Buxton and Armour knew each other: they were neighbours, living only a few miles from each other, and even attending the same signed church services for the Liverpool deaf community. It would have been a minor matter to simply meet and discuss their disagreement. And yet both men appear to have been helpless to avoid becoming embroiled in a discussion that not only quickly moved beyond the evidence (or lack of it) of Massieu’s authorship of a series of philosophical titbits, and into a deeply emotional tangle, but that did it in a very public way.

Was it simply a matter of public pride that drove both men to such a confrontation? Or was there a deeper motivation that made such an emotional and public confrontation inevitable? Did the apparent ‘quibbling’ over Massieu’s definitions, and over the integrity of his moral reputation, actually mask a far more profound debate; one that reflected more significantly upon the wider deaf community? Was Massieu, in fact, a ‘cypher’ for how the deaf community saw itself at the time, and how they were seen by others? Was the debate, then, more about the deaf community’s representative power, and about how that representative power might be maintained, or wrestled away by non-deaf educators, like Buxton?

By asking these questions, exploring the evolution of the debate, identifying the key issues at stake, and exploring how those issues were left as loose ends as the debate

disintegrated, this article lays out the issues that were most pertinent both for the deaf community, and for those involved in deaf education, at a period when the very nature of deaf people's humanity was being debated, and their place within wider human society decided.<sup>12</sup> They are issues that speak about specifics of expertise, identity, ability, and representation of those considered 'deaf-mute'. And as will become clear, allowed those responsible for deaf education an apparent ambivalence towards methodology, as long as they felt that a carefully constructed, and deep-seated philanthropic need to help deaf people was recognised and satisfied.

These questions of representation and power have long been acknowledged within the historiography of minoritised communities including, perhaps most pertinently, people with disabilities; a group who, in the 1990s, countered their historical disempowerment by adopting and mobilising the medieval sovereignty policy of "Nihil de nobis, sine nobis", or 'Nothing About Us Without Us', as their recognition campaign slogan.<sup>13</sup> The power of representation is also widely discussed within the historiography on deafness and deaf people, with a parallel focus on uncovering and challenging knowledge that has been historically constructed 'about' deaf people, but 'without' them.<sup>14</sup> Recently, however, as disability history has moved from simply charting occurrences of "random misfortune

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<sup>12</sup> The events described in this paper occur on the eve of the 'Congress of Milan', an infamous event that has a huge presence in Deaf history, representing the point at which education that had, to that point, been predominantly 'manual' (i.e. the acquisition of knowledge through sign language) was replaced by methods that were predominantly 'oral' (i.e. the acquisition of knowledge through speech (lip) reading). A consequence of the latter method was the rejection of sign language as a valid long term communicative choice for deaf people. Post-Milan, deaf children were required to learn to speak before they could learn to read speech. The result was devastating for educational attainment. See Paddy Ladd's (2003) *Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood*. Multilingual Matters, for an exploration of the immediate and long-term consequences of the Milan Congress and of Oralism upon the wellbeing of the Deaf community.

<sup>13</sup> There is no scope within this article to provide any detail regarding non-disability or non-deaf minority literatures. I have, however, alluded to some parallels along with other authors in, for example, Batterbury et al 2007, 'Sign Language Peoples as indigenous minorities: implications for research and policy', *Environment and Planning A* 39(12), pp. 2899-2915. Core texts for the emergence of the disability rights movement, are the 1976 'Fundamental Principles of Disability', including the foundational declaration of the 'Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation' available at <http://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/files/library/UPIAS-fundamental-principles.pdf> (accessed 26/09/2016, 10:10). Also work by the key disability theorist Michael Oliver in 1990; *The Politics of Disablement*, Basingstoke: Macmillan. An introduction to more recent work on representation within Disability Studies is Lennard Davis' 'Disability, Normality, and Power' in his 2013 *Disability Studies Reader*. Routledge: New York.

<sup>14</sup> See Ladd 'Deafhood', See also Frank Bechter's 2008 depiction of deaf people as 'pinballs' in someone else's (in this case, Disability Studies') game: 'The Deaf Convert Culture and its lessons for Deaf Theory', in Bauman, H-D. (ed.) *Open your eyes, Deaf Studies Talking*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 60-79. Laura Mauldin's 2016 *Made To Hear*. Minneapolis: Minnesota. Is the most recent work to explore these questions, tackling the growing assumption of the link between bio-engineering and deaf identity.

inflicted on individual bodies and minds”<sup>15</sup> to explore the construction of ‘disability’ as a concept, an embodied experience and a socio-cultural phenomenon, deaf academics too have begun to question the integrity of previously-useful categorisations and identities.<sup>16</sup> Where histories of deafness and of deaf people constructed in the 1980s and 1990s, for example, focused on detailing the historical emergence and oppression of an imagined ‘Deaf community’,<sup>17</sup> more recent contemporary and historical analysis has begun to interrogate the construction of that community, and the diversity of its membership and experiences.<sup>18</sup>

This shift towards the critically descriptive is particularly important to our understanding of the deaf community in the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century; a period that saw the management of deaf people in society—previously uncoordinated and open to any comers—given over to an increasingly professionalised cadre of recognised experts.<sup>19</sup> Deaf people entered the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century as a loosely identifiable scattering of individuals whose place in the world was largely down to the ability of any given individual to hear, sign, speak, read, write, work or otherwise make their way within wider society. Deaf people emerged from that period as a clear community whose ‘need’ had coalesced into only a few tightly constructed representational catch-alls, with the destiny of any individual largely determined by the category in which they found themselves placed.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Douglas Baynton, in the Disability History Association Spring 2011 Newsletter, page 15. Accessible online at <http://www.dishist.org/DHASpring2011newsletternoocom.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> For work on this from the disability side, see Barnes, C. (2000) ‘A working social model? Disability, work and disability politics in the 21st century’, *Critical Social Policy* 20(4), pp. 441-457, Finklestein, C. (2001) *A Personal Journey into Disability Politics*. Leeds: University of Leeds, Centre for Disability Studies. Tom Shakespeare ‘The Social Model of Disability’, 2013, in Davis ‘The Disability Studies Reader’ (op cit), pp 214-221. The whole of that ‘Reader’ explores the need to critically interrogate the taken-for-granted nature of ‘Disabilities’. For work from the Deaf side, see Ladd’s ‘Deafhood’. Breivik, J. (2005) explores the variety found within a single national setting in *Deaf identities in the making: Local ties, transnational connections*. Washington DC: Gallaudet University Press. For an article that brings disability and deaf work in this area together, see Michel Friedner and Karen Weingarten’s significant text on ‘Disability as Diversity: A new Biopolitics’, at <http://somatosphere.net/2016/05/disability-as-diversity-a-new-biopolitics.html> (accessed 26/09/2016, 10:30)

<sup>17</sup> Martin Atherton offers a good exploration of deaf people’s ‘imagined community’ in his 2016 *Deafness, community and culture in Britain. Leisure and cohesion, 1945-1995*. Manchester University Press. For the origins of ‘imagined’, see Benedict Anderson 1993 *Imagined Communities*. London, Verso.

<sup>18</sup> Annelies Kusters and Michele Friedner (and others including myself) explore both contemporary and historical examples of transnational deaf similarity or diversity in their 2016 *It’s a Small World: International Deaf Spaces and Encounters*. Gallaudet University Press.

<sup>19</sup> For notes on this process, see Harlan Lane’s (1999) *Mask of Benevolence*. Dawn Sign Press: San Diego, and Branson and Miller’s 2002 *Damned for their difference. The cultural construction of deaf people as disabled. A sociological history*. Washington DC: Gallaudet University Press.

<sup>20</sup> This is, in part, the argument presented in this paper. For a broader example of a similar ‘consignment’ to treatment based on long-obsolete historical categories, see work on the French State’s treatment of deaf

The paper is presented in three sections. The first is a general introduction to the debate from Armour's point of view. The second presents the two main exchanges of the debate, and begins to explore why it was that Buxton was unable to withhold his contribution. The final section opens up more fundamental questions about how the different categorical divisions of deaf people emerged, and how they served a complex range of aims, from the need of those overseeing deaf education to be seen to be working effectively, to the more philanthropic desire to work in deaf people's best interests. The paper concludes by connecting the Armour/Buxton debate to wider historical events in deaf history, and by considering its reception in the traditional accounts of that history.

### **The place of deaf people in 19<sup>th</sup> century histories**

Before any more specific study can be undertaken, however, it is important to gain some understanding of the context against which the debate between Buxton and Armour occurred by outlining what we know of British deaf people's lives in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>21</sup> Our first stop might be their representation in the popular fiction of the time. Notable here are two characters; Sophy in Dicken's 'Doctor Marigold' and Madonna in Collins' 'Hide and Seek'. Both were created by the authors to move away from sensationalist and ill-informed presentations of deaf people's reality and to present a more accurate and banal representation of deafness and of deaf people's lives.<sup>22</sup> Both authors, however, find the relationship between deafness and marginality inescapable to the extent to that their books debate not whether deaf people should be marginal, but rather what margin they should inhabit. Sophy is rescued from the circus, Madonna is rescued *by* the circus. Both are defended for their decision to shun speech, and to embed themselves into the bosom of a

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people in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, in Gulliver 2009, *DEAF space, a history*. Unpublished PhD, University of Bristol. UK.

<sup>21</sup> A number of general historical works describe the history of the Deaf community. Most notably the focus is international: Oliver Sack's (2012) *Seeing Voices*, Picador; Harlan Lane's (1999) *The Mask of Benevolence*. Dawnsign Press; Branson and Miller's (2002) *Damned for their Difference*. Gallaudet University Press; Jonathan Rée's (2000) *I see a voice*. Flamingo. Scholarly histories of the British Deaf community have typically lagged behind those written to focus on either the American or French Deaf communities; see Rebecca Edwards (2012) *Words Made Flesh*, NYU Press; Lane's, 1984, *When the Mind Hears*. Random House; and Anne Quartararo's, 2002, *Deaf Identity and Social Images in Nineteenth-Century France*. Gallaudet University Press. A good background can, however, be gleaned from reading across general works on Deaf history, for example Peter Jackson's (1990) *Britain's Deaf Heritage*, Pentland Press; Paddy Ladd's *Understanding Deaf Culture* (op cit); and by reading the historical sections of more specific works; Hannah Lewis' *Deaf Liberation Theology* (2007: Ashgate); and the works of the British Deaf History Society press (see <http://www.bdhs.org.uk/shop-3/>)

<sup>22</sup> See Jennifer Esmail's analysis of both characters and their authors' intentions in her 2013 *Reading Victorian Deafness*: Ohio University Press. Athens.

signing community. Clearly, even if Victorian society was beginning to explore the need to legitimise deaf people's life experiences, it still associated them with freakery, and with the inability to establish a legitimate place for them in mainstream thought.

Away from the luxury of fictional debates, however, the need to secure recognition as legitimate members of wider, mainstream, human society was a real challenge for deaf people; one that was particularly felt by those either deaf from birth, or who had become deaf early enough in life that it affected their ability to acquire or sustain a knowledge of spoken language. Prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, demonstrating that 'humanity' had most typically relied on a viva-voce ability of some kind. In a world where even few non-deaf people could read or write, speech was considered a reliable external manifestation of interior intelligence.<sup>23</sup> However, as dawn broke on deaf education in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, and deaf people taught to read and write through sign language began to filter up from the ranks of pupil to teacher, the written word became the 'bridge' between deaf people's visual culture, and more mainstream, speech-oriented society. Over time, it was the written word, used in demonstrations and in compositions and competitions (of which more below) that became the primary technology through which deaf people could demonstrate their human legitimacy.<sup>24</sup>

Initially, that deaf people could be taught to write in any form and so could open up a window through which their intelligence could be spied, attracted the amazement of society who had previously understood that deaf people unable to speak were largely sub-human. Over time, however, the notion that deaf people might be taught to read and write became banal, to the extent that the judgement of intelligence was no longer whether a deaf person was able to write at all, but how well they did so. This, however, posed a problem for one particular group of deaf people; if those who had become deaf after acquiring spoken language could master a written form of a language with relatively less effort, those who had never heard the language at all found it far harder.

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<sup>23</sup> Early tutors brought in by wealthy parents to school their deaf children would focus on training their wards to pronounce their own names as a way to satisfy the Roman "Si enim vox articulata eis natura concessa est" see Susan Plann's (1997) *A Silent Minority*. University of California Press, page 18).

<sup>24</sup> For the wider social current around the shift from the oral to the written as authoritative, see Walter Ong's (1982) *Orality and Literacy; technologising the word*. Routledge.



By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, attitudes in deaf education had begun to crystallise around this two-tier system. Directors of deaf schools, eager to impress funders, parents, local dignitaries, and other professional educators celebrated the successes of those late or accidentally deafened children who excelled in writing. At the same time, they pondered what to do with the deaf-mutes who didn't. As the habitual analysis of those two groups was explored again and again in increasingly systematic and scientific ways,<sup>25</sup> a truism began to emerge; unable to hear, unable to speak, unable (apparently) to learn a great deal, there was little that could be done for deaf-mutes beyond 'comforting them in their affliction' and waiting until such time as science delivered a more definitive solution.

It was in support of this discourse that Buxton originally discounted Massieu's wisdom sayings as charlatanism. And in the face of that assertion that Armour came to Massieu's defense as one who had broken the mould, jumped the fence, and demonstrated unequivocally that expert opinion about the capacities of deaf-mutes was, quite simply, wrong.

## 1.0 Introducing Armour

In January 1873, the United Kingdom saw the first print run of the *Magazine Chiefly Intended for the Deaf and Dumb*. Published by what was to become the Royal Association in Aid of the Deaf and Dumb (RADD), and edited by Samuel Smith, the RADD's first ordained missionary to deaf people, the *Magazine* ran from 1873 to 1878<sup>26</sup> appearing in monthly editions that were printed in London, available from depots in London and Edinburgh, and was widely distributed to an audience that was—as the title suggests—*chiefly* deaf, but that also contained "... many who can hear and speak".<sup>27</sup> Initially focused on religious and moral matters, but covering "many other subject besides religion, which the deaf and dumb could

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<sup>25</sup> This analysis, to unpick and understand the needs and true nature of those in need of philanthropic support was a key element of a more instrumental 'interventionist' philanthropy that arise at the same period; a movement that Henry Mayhew described in 1880 as an 'extraordinary change of feeling which has taken place of late years'. See Jerry White's *London in the 19<sup>th</sup> century*. Vintage, from pages 428 and following for a description of how Mayhew's " 'feeling'... had the reform of manners at its heart" (p. 429).

<sup>26</sup> Indeed, became through transfer of editorship and ownership. See Martin Atherton's description of the evolution of the Deaf Press, available online at [http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/events/disabilityconference\\_archive/2006/papers/atherton2006.pdf](http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/events/disabilityconference_archive/2006/papers/atherton2006.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> MCIDD: January 1873, No. 1, Vol. 1, page 1

read with pleasure”,<sup>28</sup> the *Magazine* served as an easily accessible way to get information to deaf people but also as a vehicle to carry information *about* deaf people to the philanthropically-minded supporters of ‘Institutions’ and ‘adult Associations’ for deaf people.<sup>29</sup>

One key way that the *Magazine* achieved this second mission was by encouraging deaf people themselves to contribute, often as submissions for ‘essay competitions’.<sup>30</sup> These pieces served two clear purposes; allowing those better able to showcase their talents, and inspiring those less able to ‘try and improve’ their reading and writing to match the level of performance of their better educated peers. Although initially predominantly religious in content, Smith’s early commitment to allow the “best educated deaf-mutes [to] write on whatever subject they please, and show how well they can do it”<sup>31</sup> ensured that, as time went on, the ‘Compositions of the Deaf and Dumb’ section of the *Magazine* provided deaf people with considerable freedom to express themselves.

The winner of the 1875 essay competition, with his essay on “The first and second advent”<sup>32</sup> was Robert Armour. Armour was born in 1836 in Kilmarnock, Ayrshire.<sup>33</sup> His ability to perceive sound was, apparently, quite typical until he was deafened at the age of 18 months by an undefined illness.<sup>34</sup> Thereafter, he was schooled at the Glasgow Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, before moving to England to apprentice as a glass stainer, finally settling in Liverpool from approximately 1863.

Whether Armour retained any lingering knowledge of the English that he had heard into his childhood is not clear. What *is* known, however, is that even before he moved from glass staining to missionary work, he exemplified a strong ability in written language, and a

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<sup>28</sup> “Religious instruction being the most important, we shall have “Pictures from Scripture History,” also Sermons, explanations of Scripture doctrine, &c. “The lives of good men,” whether they are deaf and dumb, or whether they can hear and speak will be given as examples to others.” (MCIDD, No. 1, Vol. 1, page 1)

<sup>29</sup> Ibid: 1

<sup>30</sup> Most of the competitions were run for prestige only. Some, however, offered a small monetary prize. The competition announced in April 1875 for “the best Essay on “Irreverent Speech”, written by a Deaf and Dumb person” was sponsored by Mr Melville, Principal of the School for the Deaf and Dumb, Llandaff, who made £1 available to the winner.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid: 2

<sup>32</sup> The essay subject was announced inside the front cover of the January 1875 edition. MCIDD 1875, Vol III, No 25.

<sup>33</sup> Census 1851: Lanarkshire, Ed: Glasgow Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, page 5, Household schedule number 1, line 9, roll CSSCT1851\_141.

<sup>34</sup> Census 1911: Everton, Lancashire. Reg district 455 (North Everton), Ed 20, Piece 22503.

keen desire to learn. During his time at school, he remembers being selected to demonstrate his ability to experts<sup>35</sup> and his interest and ability to read meant that once he had left the classroom, he had continued to indulge a strong interest in the history of his own deaf community. As he did, he was inspired by a growing mental pantheon of deaf community figureheads. One figure whom he found particularly inspirational was Jean Massieu, who despite having been born deaf and grown up initially without any education, had—through careful training with his teacher, the abbé Sicard—learned to write examples of wonderfully prosaic and grammatically accurate French<sup>36</sup> and showed an uncanny ability under public demonstration conditions, to provide definitions of abstract concepts requested by the audience.

Massieu's trademark definitions often formed part of a narrative of pedagogical discovery, which combined the Enlightenment's fascination with sign language and its potential for universal communication with the discovery that through visual encounter, even those living speechless, less-than-human lives could be restored to thought.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, some works, like the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, asserted that, since Massieu, it was not uncommon for other deaf people to have achieved similar erudition.<sup>38</sup> From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, however, those commentaries were gradually being replaced by less exuberant articles written by a generation of teachers and missionaries to deaf people who, although they were equally<sup>39</sup> convinced of the expediency of sign language, brought personal

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<sup>35</sup> The tradition of public demonstrations is as old as deaf schooling. Initially used by early tutors like Jacob de Pereire to gain recognition for his work from knowledgeable societies, by the 1770s public demonstrations by the Abbé de l'Épée were being used to showcase successful teaching methods, and to elicit public interest and support; they were so popular that they were advertised (in England no less) as some of Paris' most popular tourist events and the final demonstration in 1774, was sold out twice over. In Victorian times, although demonstrations continued to serve the purpose of pedagogical display, they had become less public and were more often offered by school directors as a way of being accountable to experts, parents, trustees, and other supporters.

<sup>36</sup> "made rapid strides in the acquisition of every kind of knowledge. He is at present distinguished by his intelligence, acuteness, and general information; and is not only conversant with literature, but expresses himself with facility, clearness, and elegance." EB 1842: Vol II: 652

<sup>37</sup> Umberto Eco, 1995. *The search for the perfect language*. Fontana Press.

<sup>38</sup> EB 1842, Vol VII: 659

<sup>39</sup> Perhaps more convinced. There is good evidence that the early commentaries owed little to direct knowledge, and much to an Enlightenment mysticism that combined amazement at the fact that deaf people could be educated at all, with an ideology about sign language and its metaphysical nature as a 'universal language'. These contrast starkly with later articles which were just as convinced of the value of sign language as most practical way to communicate with deaf people (see below, on the expediency of visual language), but were informed less by Enlightenment exoticism, and more by daily personal experience of interacting with and teaching deaf people.

experience of working in deaf education.<sup>40</sup> As Armour began to raise his eyes from glass staining towards missionary work, it was this new generation who were beginning to bring their own daily realities to debunk mythologies established upon the writings of earlier commentators.

The *Magazine* was one of the mouthpieces for that new literature, albeit—because of its primarily pastoral focus—a gentle one. Another was an American journal; the *American Annals of the Deaf and Dumb*. Published from 1848 as a voice disseminating “information concerning so large and so interesting a class as the deaf and dumb constitute”<sup>41</sup> the *Annals* were something of a homologue to the *Magazine*; and were widely available in the UK, where articles written primarily by those spearheading American deaf education informed their UK colleagues, and the members of organisations like the Royal Association.

In April of 1875, the same year that Armour’s prizewinning essay appeared in the *Magazine*, the *Annals* carried a review of just such a revisionist piece; the *Chambers’ Encyclopaedia* entry for ‘Deaf and Dumb’.<sup>42</sup> The author of the *Chambers’* article was Dr David Buxton, one of the UK’s most long-standing and best-respected teachers of the deaf. As noted above, Buxton lived only a few miles from Armour in Liverpool, and was a regular preacher to the signing church that Armour attended. Moreover, he was the director of the local “Institution for the Deaf and Dumb”; the same school that many of Armour’s deaf friends in the city had attended, and a regular contributor to the *Magazine*, whose pages he used to advertise public demonstrations of the pupils from his own school.

Stating that “The extravagant statements sometimes made concerning the talents and achievements of the deaf and dumb Dr. Buxton exposes and condemns”<sup>43</sup>, the *Annals* review cites a long section of the *Chambers’* article, including Buxton’s assertion, seen above, that “It is very well known to those who are acquainted with the subject, that the so-

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<sup>40</sup> Again, there is good evidence that those who wrote articles, such as the one that appeared in the EB, had no direct knowledge of deaf people at all.

<sup>41</sup> *American Annals of the Deaf and Dumb* (henceforth ‘Annals’), Vol 1, No. 1, October 1847: page 1.

<sup>42</sup> The *Chambers’* is included in a list of works recommended for inclusion in a ‘reference library’, the *American Annals of the Deaf*, Jan 1875, page 29. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, is not included.

<sup>43</sup> *Annals*, April 1875: 113

called definitions, of *Hope, Gratitude, Time, Eternity, &c.*, were not Massieu's at all, but those of his master, the Abbé Sicard."<sup>44</sup>

In early 1876, the *Magazine* received a unique deaf 'Composition'. Written by Robert Armour, it was neither a sermon nor a solicited competition essay. Instead, it was a freely authored opinion piece. Sticking to his earlier commitment, Smith allowed it to be published. It appeared in print in February 1876.

## **2.0 The debate**

The correspondence between Armour and Buxton occupied the pages of the *Magazine* for some eleven months, with letters from Armour (published over two months: February and March 1876), replied to by Buxton (April/May 1876), countered by Armour (August/September 1876), and then concluded by Buxton in October 1876. With each contribution apparently being considered an 'article' rather than correspondence by the Editor, Armour's contributions were published under 'Compositions of the Deaf and Dumb',<sup>45</sup> while Buxton's were simply published as standalone essays.

From October 1876, as the original discussion descended into the significantly less informative accusations of moral insult which featured in this papers' introduction, the editor of the *Magazine* no longer considered their exchange 'essay-worthy' and they were relegated to the status of open correspondence. By December 1876, Buxton had publicly withdrawn from the debate, leaving Armour to claim (a very hollow) victory in January 1877.

This section primarily focuses on the subjects covered during Buxton and Armour's initial exchange. It does so in two sections. The first focuses on the primary objection raised by Armour to Buxton's original article on the 'Deaf and Dumb' as it appeared in the *Chambers'*. The second outlines a number of additional but significant topics that emerge throughout the essays. The two are separated by a biographical return upon Buxton's work.

### **2.1 Debating Massieu, the example**

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<sup>44</sup> See *Chambers*: Vol III, 1872, Entry for 'Deaf and Dumb', page 442, second column, final paragraph.

<sup>45</sup> In the 'Buxton' months (April, May, June, July, October and following) other 'Compositions of the Deaf and Dumb' were featured. Armour's publications, therefore, did not entirely monopolize the space available to deaf people during this period, although see below for a wider discussion of the potential impact of the exchange on semi-deaf publication following.

The title of Armour's composition "How a child of silence stormed the temple of grammar", and the opening paragraph, in which he proposes to "discuss the important question mooted in certain quarters—"Did he [Massieu] really write the so-called brilliant definitions of gratitude, hope, eternity, time, &c." quickly make his intention clear. Nor does he take any time in identifying the 'certain quarters', pointing specifically at "Dr B., the author of an admirably written article on "Deaf and Dumb" in *Chambers' Encyclopaedia...*"<sup>46</sup>; admirable, but apparently misguided, for Buxton "adduces no evidence not quotes any authority in support of his disclaimer".<sup>47</sup>

Buxton knew that his historical evidence he offered was weak. In fact, he almost revelled in it. What is now known about him [Massieu]?" he asks.

Probably no English writer who has quoted him ever saw him. The Collections of Definitions and Answers of Massieu and Clerc... was published in 1815. How much was known of the real condition, and proper intellectual status of the deaf and dumb in 1815? Who had studied the subject? Who understood it? How many opinions which had then been formed about it, have stood the trying test of time? Who amongst us, who are teachers of the deaf and dumb to-day, would adopt, as our own, the opinions and views which were held in 1815? <sup>48</sup>

One who was not a 'teacher of the deaf and dumb' but who was 'deaf and dumb' himself, and who was persuaded by evidence about Massieu, was Armour. Sidestepping de Labédat's 1815 report, he points Buxton to Massieu's deaf birth, his early years in a family with deaf siblings, and his passage from rural isolation to blossom under the careful tuition of the Abbé Sicard.<sup>49</sup> Perhaps most importantly, were the public demonstrations at which he displayed his unique talent not transparent events, attested to by impartial and incorruptible witnesses? Were people not amazed by his abilities?<sup>50</sup>

Certainly, replies Buxton; certainly they were amazed, but not by Massieu's 'definitions' which were so out of character with either his, or "any deaf man's diction" as to surely leave no doubt at all as to their provenance; "short, terse, pointed, and metaphorical

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<sup>46</sup> Emphasis in original. Note the Victorian mania for referring to individuals by their initials. Presumably, here, the aim is not anonymity (see Sarah Flew, Unveiling the anonymous philanthropist: Charity in the nineteenth century, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, Vol 20, Issue 1, 2015: 20-33), but allows Armour to critique Buxton without offering any form of implied offence.

<sup>47</sup> MCIDD: Feb 1876, Vol IV. No 38: 30

<sup>48</sup> MCIDD: April 1876, Vol IV. No 40: 58-59

<sup>49</sup> MCIDD: Feb 1876, Vol IV. No 38: 28

<sup>50</sup> *ibid*: 28-29

withal... all characteristics of the Abbé Sicard's style, both in his writings, and in his speeches:". <sup>51</sup> No, what caused the amazement in Massieu's responses was simply "wonder... that the deaf and dumb could be taught anything [at all]." <sup>52</sup>

Indeed, replies Armour. Massieu's skills not only persuaded the French Government that the "question of the teachability of the deaf and dumb [was] thus satisfactorily solved" <sup>53</sup> in France, <sup>54</sup> but "the thrilling story of Massieu's successful scholarship" <sup>55</sup> also travelled to the far shores of America where they were a "powerful *stimulus*" <sup>56</sup> to the educational work of Massieu's old Parisian 'rival' Laurent Clerc. <sup>57</sup> Far from being a charlatan, Armour declares, what Sicard's example demonstrates is that the right pupil, allied with the right teacher, the right system and, above all, "*perseverance on both sides*" <sup>58</sup> could not fail to produce an inspirational success. He concludes that "It is impossible to over-estimate the beneficial influence which Massieu's scholarly fame has since exercised on the cause of deaf-mute instruction not only in France, but also in the rest of the civilised world". <sup>59</sup>

Buxton agrees about the reach of Massieu's influence, but not about its benefit. The issue, he states, is not really whether or not Massieu did what he is purported to have done. The issue is the careless reporting of his reported genius. Had he been represented as an "exception—one man out of a million—an intellectual giant, and the only one in a whole generation—then no harm would have been done, and no one would have complained". <sup>60</sup> Instead, "After the famous answers and definitions of Massieu and Clerc had been trumpeted forth to the world as the *bona fide*, spontaneous and original replies of two deaf-mute youths, then the credulous public ran to the other extreme, and expected that the deaf and dumb should know everything." <sup>61</sup> The result, he complains, is the imposition of

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<sup>51</sup> MCIDD: April 1876, Vol IV. No 40: 60

<sup>52</sup> Ibid: 58

<sup>53</sup> MCIDD, February 1876, Vol IV. No 38: 29

<sup>54</sup> And thereafter quickly in Prussia, and Germany, and 'even the little kingdom of Denmark soon afterwards...' (ibid)

<sup>55</sup> Ibid: 29

<sup>56</sup> Ibid: 29

<sup>57</sup> Armour appears convinced that Clerc and Massieu were rivals. Further down on the same page he writes "How emphatic the testimony from an old rival of Massieu!... Mark how gracefully he [Clerc] merged the bitter reminiscences of his school-day rivalry in the one prevailing sentiment of personal admiration for the talents which had thus deservedly earned for his friend a niche in the temple of fame." Ibid: 29.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid: 30

<sup>59</sup> Ibid: 29

<sup>60</sup> MDCIDD: April 1876, Vol IV. No 40: 59

<sup>61</sup> Ibid: 59

ridiculous expectations upon anyone involved in deaf education. With the public now assuming that it is a trivial matter for teachers of the deaf to unlock genius in any deaf-mute, any failure to do so becomes, by default, “disappointment on all sides. Parents are disappointed, subscribers are disappointed, the public are disappointed, the reputation and possibly the funds of the Institutions suffer, and the whole blame falls upon the unfortunate teacher.”<sup>62</sup>

## 2.2 Buxton’s bind

Buxton’s reply to Armour is clearly motivated by his own reputation as a teacher, and by his desire to manage expectations that others had of him and of his school. Buxton’s desire to avoid that disappointment, however, seems not to be entirely personally motivated. Outlandish claims, he says, lead only to disillusionment. A realistic understanding of what deaf education and deaf educators can do, on the other hand, serves the deaf community. It is this ‘realism’, and the goodness of the intention behind it to be genuine, both for deaf people, and for their teachers, that sits at the root of Buxton’s actions.

“For a great many years of my life I have taught the deaf and dumb—lived with them, worked for them, helped them, and pleaded for them...” he says.<sup>63</sup> “I believed that I was doing a real service to the deaf themselves” he says.<sup>64</sup> “It was to check [the mischief of unrealistic expectations], and not to disparage Massieu, or deprecate or discourage my deaf friends that I wrote the passage in question”.<sup>65</sup>

Even before his more significant reply was published, however, Buxton had insisted that the editor of the *Magazine* insert a pre-emptive reassurance to the readership that he [Buxton] was “prepared with a reply, which however he withholds until the article by “R.A.” [Armour] is completed. But he wishes us to make the assurance promptly that he is as incapable of making such a statement without authority, as he is of wounding the feelings of the deaf and dumb, among whom the largest and best part of his life has been spent”.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid: 59

<sup>63</sup> Ibid: 58

<sup>64</sup> Ibid: 60

<sup>65</sup> Ibid: 60

<sup>66</sup> MCIDD: March 1876, Vol IV. No 39: 46



Buxton's repeated assurances speak of a bind in which he found himself, not least because of his writing of the original *Chambers'* article. Buxton entered deaf education in the 1830s, at a time when the field was still dominated by the quasi-mystical presence of individual 'saviours of the deaf' who were celebrated for having "torn off the swaddling in which the... indifference of man had, for centuries, smothered [deaf] minds".<sup>67</sup> He had been an observer, and then a contributor, to the development of a deaf educational system initiated by men like Dr Harvey Peet in the States and Charles Baker in the UK that was much more concerned with statistics and scientific pedagogy. For Buxton, the challenge of educating deaf children was the challenge of how to take those who "know almost nothing, because they hear nothing... neither read, nor write, nor hear, nor speak; who cannot ask you for Information when they want it, and could not understand you, if you wished to give it to them",<sup>68</sup> and provide them with some notion of literacy, and the basic wherewithal to learn a trade.

As his career evolved, therefore, Buxton would have watched with frustration as his own experience of deaf education; the challenges, successes and failures, were constantly contested by the expectations of parents and others, informed by authoritative, but increasingly outmoded information. One particular offender was the Encyclopaedia Britannica, which published the first authoritative article on the 'Deaf and Dumb' in 1818 in which it made the now-familiar claim that that "[deaf] pupils... undergo public examinations, and never fail to gratify and astonish crowded audiences, *particularly by their remarkable promptitude in defining abstract terms...* and the specimens of composition which are produced not only manifest much good feeling and accuracy, but sufficiently controvert the assertion, that none of the deaf and dumb can ever be taught to write grammatically."<sup>69</sup> This article was then repeatedly reproduced without significant updates so that, in 1842, it was essentially the same, even reprinting original dates and data, and commentary that referred to them as current.

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<sup>67</sup> Cited from the introduction to the 1835 Parisian 'Deaf-Mute Banquet' (in Société Centrale (1842) Banquets des Sourds-Muets Réunis pour fêter les Anniversaires de la Naissance de l'Abbé de l'Epée. Tome I. Paris: Chez Jacques Ledoyen), page 19. The reference is to the work of the Abbé de l'Epée, the celebrated originator of French public deaf education who is referred to as the 'Messiah' of deaf people for his work.

<sup>68</sup> Chambers. Vol III, 1872: 442

<sup>69</sup> EB 1842: 657. Emphasis added. These claims were backed up by publications like the 1845 "Essays by the Pupils at the college of the Deaf and Dumb, Rugby, Warwickshire" which Buxton clearly thought were unrepresentative of an average deaf child's linguistic attainment.

By 1858 Buxton had had enough, and challenged the *Britannica's* editors, but was firmly rebuffed.<sup>70</sup> When, therefore, as the relatively new director of the Liverpool school in 1862, he was offered the opportunity to write an entry on the 'Deaf and Dumb' for the new *Chambers' Encyclopaedia*, he jumped at the chance. When he penned that article, however, and directly cited Massieu's definitions as an example of early deaf educational charlatanism, he had no way to know that he would eventually be called to defend his words not only against a man who identified himself as a deaf-mute and who had partaken in similar demonstrative proofs of deaf-mute ability, but one who was also a close personal acquaintance, and who held Massieu to be a personal hero.

Buxton's effusive reassurances of goodwill towards deaf people, then, were probably most immediately embarrassment at having offended exactly the kind of person that he felt he was helping. It is worth bearing in mind his more deep-seated motivation to do good by deaf people more generally as we move into the second exchange between him and Armour – if, indeed, we can call such a one-sided narrative an 'exchange'.

### **2.3 Debating Expertise**

The second exchange between Armour and Buxton differs from the first exchange in one important regard; it is written by only one pen - Armour's. It is, however, no less an exchange. Armour gives voice to a 'pseudo-Buxton', which he then manipulates to play a role. Buxton is not his only creation. Armour draws upon other characters, notably those representative of the American deaf educational system: Dr Harvey Prindle Peet and Edward Minor Gallaudet, to create a triangular exchange that is more 'theatre' than debate; an exploration of the challenges and ideologies of deaf education, played out between deaf people on the one hand, and non-deaf educators of the deaf on the other, with the pseudo-Buxton uncomfortably in the middle.

The starting point for the exchange is Buxton's assertion that what he does, he does for the good of deaf-mutes. Armour applauds this. However, he then wonders out-loud what that 'good' actually means? When Buxton dismisses Massieu as a charlatan, ridicules

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<sup>70</sup> For a number of reasons, not least because of Buxton's tone, and the fact that the original article was written by Roget, a gentleman that the editors considered "not likely to have made 'the most ludicrous errors of fact'" of which Buxton accused him. See below for further examples of Buxton's tendency towards ill-advised outrage, and its reception. The exchange can be read in *The Athenaeum*: Buxton's letter (No 1595, May 22, 1858: 666) & response from EB publishers Adam & Charles Black (No. 1597, June 5th, 1858: 722).

examples of deaf-mute writing as ‘delusion’, and presents an inflated account of the near impossibility of educating deaf-mute children to any significant level of literacy, what ‘good’ is Buxton doing?

On deaf-mute terms, no ‘good’ at all. Not in the face of such compelling evidence to the contrary; evidence that demonstrates that deaf-mutes can succeed. Examples like the Frenchman Ferdinand Berthier for example, deaf from early childhood, and Claudius Forestier, deaf from birth. Neither man speaks, and yet both are shining examples of deaf-mute success, Berthier as celebrated teacher, recipient of the Legion d’Honneur from Napoleon III, and author of several books including a re-working of the Napoleonic code, and Forestier as the headmaster of the ‘Deaf and Dumb school’ in Marseille. If foreign examples are not sufficient, then there are also British figures; the barrister John William Lowe, for example, who was a “congenital deaf-mute”, but who still managed to qualify to the bar, and become proficient in over a dozen languages.<sup>71</sup> There are even international examples, like Laurent Clerc. Are the views of men like these, deaf-mute men, all highly literate and successful, not authoritative?

All of these examples achieved what they achieved, claims Armour, because they are intelligent, and because they worked hard. Why, then, should Buxton, be so determined that the ‘best’ that deaf-mutes could attain was mediocracy.<sup>72</sup> Where is his authoritative knowledge on deaf-mute capacities from? Does he listen to deaf-mutes themselves, and what they say about what they can achieve? Or does he listen, instead, to experts in his own professional field; men<sup>73</sup> who should be respected for their devotion to the deaf community, but who—instead of allowing their ideology to be shaped by evidence—have things the other way around.<sup>74</sup> Men like Peet, or Gallaudet, who are not open-minded enough to allow that deaf people might be as gifted as they appear, and who disallow the evidence on principle.<sup>75</sup> ‘Habitual sceptics’, he suggests who, if presented with a case like Lowe, would “shake their heads, and exclaim... “This is all fiction.” For it is pretty well known

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<sup>71</sup> MCIDD: August 1876, Vol IV. No 44: 115

<sup>72</sup> MCIDD: August 1876, Vol IV. No 44: 113

<sup>73</sup> And only men

<sup>74</sup> MCIDD: September 1876, Vol IV. No 45: 130

<sup>75</sup> MCIDD: August 1876, Vol IV. No 44: 116

that they hold that it is simply impossible for a born deaf person to master thoroughly one language, though it be that of his own country".<sup>76</sup>

Clearly, Armour acknowledges, Buxton has a professional obligation to respect the expertise of his peers<sup>77</sup>. But in this case, he is allowing his "anxiety to defer to the authoritative opinions of Dr. Peet and his equally distinguished... compatriots", rather than the authoritative opinions of deaf people themselves, guide him.<sup>78</sup>

Buxton, then, says Armour, must recognise that in order to pursue 'good', he must effectively make a choice between believing what deaf people say, and believing what others say *about* deaf people. He cannot hold to both, not as they increasingly diverge. For the best of reasons, Buxton's current trajectory is towards the latter. To do right now, therefore, Buxton must pick a different path. Will he do so?<sup>79</sup>

### 3.0 Fundamentals

It is clear that it is the 'body of experts' that is Armour's primary target, and not only Buxton himself. In fact, there was a great deal between Armour and Buxton about which they agreed:

First, both agreed that educational success for deaf people could only come about through hard work. While Armour refers to the need for extensive "brain work", Buxton highly commends

"all the efforts which they [deaf-mutes] make to improve themselves: being convinced that the best system and the best teaching will inevitably fail to raise them to high intellectual rank unless they strenuously and perseveringly exert themselves... The attainments of a well-educated deaf-mute are a far more striking

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<sup>76</sup> MCIDD: August 1876, Vol IV. No 44: 116

<sup>77</sup> Ibid: 114

<sup>78</sup> Ibid: 114. Buxton, of course, was not as free to make this decision as Armour might think. Buxton was well used to accepting the expertise of the institutions leading the advance in deaf education and had benefitted from that relationship considerably. He had been one of four men to be awarded, in 1870, an honorary doctorate by the Columbia Institute, managed by Edward Minor Gallaudet. (see Branson and Miller's 2002 *Damned for their difference*, page 172).

<sup>79</sup> It is fascinating to consider that Buxton did, in fact, move away from the expertise of people like E.M.Gallaudet by espousing Oralism. At Milan, Buxton voted for the oral method while Gallaudet remained true to Manualism.

testimony to the student's own hard work, than to any teacher... or any system of teaching."<sup>80</sup>

Second, on that 'system of teaching', both agree that only visual communication is valid for those who are deaf, directly locating the success of past and present educators in their use of the visual language of (in Buxton's case) "pictures... signs and gestures" and (in Armour's case) "pantomime".<sup>81</sup> Buxton brings the educational quest up to date by detailing how pupils in most UK schools are educated by use of the "finger alphabet... and writing" and finally suggesting that "articulation" might be explored "in some cases". Armour appears to agree, suggesting that the inclusion of oral content in education "possess[es] some valuable advantages for a very small section of the deaf and dumb, vis., those who have become deaf at a comparatively advanced age"<sup>82</sup> but is also keen to point out the limitations of a visual-oral educational method, stating that "we deaf mutes can be no means flourish under it—at least we never take to it kindly, so tedious and troublesome is its process as at present employed. And even our friends, the semi-mutes, tire of cultivating it, but almost instinctively gravitate towards the graceful language of [signs]".<sup>83</sup>

Finally, agreement about the effectiveness of visual education meant agreement about how to regard the rising debate about whether a sign-based or oral approach to education was most effective for deaf people. Despite the latter now experiencing a 'revival' from its "premature burial in M. Sicard's epoch"<sup>84</sup> states Armour, it is the former that offers greater proof of its effectiveness. The sign approach has, he argues, proven itself time and again to be the bedrock of success for those who are born deaf, those who are born hearing but become deaf in early childhood, and even those who become deaf in later years.<sup>85</sup> Buxton agrees. To the "the intolerant advocates of the "oral system"<sup>86</sup> his response is simple:

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<sup>80</sup> MCIDD: May 1876, Vol IV. No 41: 72

<sup>81</sup> "A class", he states "... thus cut off from all communication through the ear, can only be addressed through the eye". M: March 1876, Vol IV. No 39: 44

<sup>82</sup> MCIDD: March 1876, Vol IV. No 39: 43

<sup>83</sup> Ibid: 43-44

<sup>84</sup> Ibid: 43

<sup>85</sup> Ibid: 43-44

<sup>86</sup> May 1876, Vol IV. No 41: 72

“At present they are very eager in proclaiming what they *can* do. We are waiting to see them *do* it, and to find it successfully *done*. Then, and not until then, the two systems can be fairly compared. In the meantime, the world can easily see, and readily judge of what our [manual] system has done, by simply looking at its results.”<sup>87</sup>

Agreement on these three areas, if guided by deaf expertise, would have brought Buxton’s assurances of ‘good’ back into line with Armour’s expectations. Unfortunately, while these agreements appear to superficially offer common ground, they hide more profound differences which resulted in fundamental tensions between the two men.

### **3.1 Debating Deaf-mute identity**

First, while Armour continued to hold to his conviction that a deaf-mute, any deaf-mute “possessed of uncommon abilities or else of ordinary abilities, supported by the sturdy spirit of perseverance”<sup>88</sup> could be expected to “strive up to the standard of his hearing brothers”<sup>89</sup>, Buxton’s expectations were much more circumspect. For him, although individuals (like Armour, and possibly Massieu) demonstrated academic excellence, they were by no means representative of the whole ‘class’ of deaf-mutes.

“If I have erred at all, it is in not thinking of Massieu as an individual, so much as I did of the deaf and dumb as a class. I say he was not a fair specimen of the whole class, and to quote him as if he were is to do them [deaf-mutes] injustice by raising expectations which are impossible of fulfilment.”<sup>90</sup>

On the surface, this simply appears to bring Buxton into agreement with Armour’s assertion that those who are successful are deaf-mutes of ‘uncommon abilities’. A closer examination, however, suggests that this is only one way to understand what Buxton is saying. For rather than accepting that Massieu (and Armour, and by extension the other examples that Armour has mobilised) are exceptional, Buxton appears to have harboured doubts about whether they were not ‘fair specimens of the whole class’, because they should not be considered deaf-mute at all.

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid: 72. Emphasis in original.

<sup>88</sup> MCIDD: August 1876, Vol IV. No 44: 115

<sup>89</sup> Ibid: 115

<sup>90</sup> MCIDD: October 1876, Vol IV. No 46: 150

Our starting point for exploring this might be a definition offered by Buxton in his original *Chambers'* article, who stated that deaf-mutes were:

“Persons who are born deaf, or who lose their hearing at a very early age [and so] are dumb also... persons who lose their hearing later in life are not to be classed among the [deaf-mutes]. Having learned to speak before their hearing was lost, they can readily communicate with others...”<sup>91</sup>

Buxton's view that deaf-mutes must have become deaf before they learn to speak was not universally shared, however. Other teachers of the deaf believed that 'deaf-mutism' was something that could be acquired later, perhaps even much later. This view was expressed even within the commentary generated by the debate. Colville Patterson, a teacher of the deaf who wrote to the *Magazine* to clarify the status of one of his ex-pupils, Goodwin, defended him as a 'deaf-mute' by stating that

“he lost his hearing when he was four year of age, and is totally deaf, he has also never been able to speak since that time... when he came here at the age of twelve years, he was as one born deaf, having only learnt the names of a few objects... [he] is not a “semi-mute” in any sense of the term.”<sup>92</sup>

While Patterson suggests that Goodwin became a deaf-mute having lost his hearing and then his speech, Samuel Smith, the *Magazine's* editor, who was himself an ex-teacher of the deaf at the Yorkshire Institute in Doncaster, tends back towards Buxton's view, but offers a much wider age band.

“ “semi-mute” is generally applied to those whose deafness is *acquired*, because if they have heard and spoken at four or five years of age, they possess a great advantage in the acquisition of language over those born deaf.”<sup>93</sup>

For Smith, then, any child who has become deaf, but who brings into that deafness sufficient experience of language that this gives them an advantage in their subsequent education is a 'semi-mute'.

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<sup>91</sup> Chambers 1872, op cit: 439

<sup>92</sup> MCIDD: September 1876, Vol IV. No 45: 132

<sup>93</sup> *ibid*

Armour would appear to largely agree with Smith, he suggests that while deaf-mutes are typically “deplorably backward in their mastery of written language” and must strive to reach any decent standard of idiomatic expertise, “the position of a semi-mute is somewhat different, since his mind has been tolerably well-stocked with idiomatical expressions, picked up in domestic intercourse before illness deprives him of his sense of hearing”.<sup>94</sup>

These definitions assume an archetype of deaf-mute. A modern perspective, however, quickly raises questions that demonstrate that such a loose archetype is still simplistic. Questions remain about how much audiological loss is required for it to be significant, how ages of onset and degrees (progressive or otherwise) of deafness affect what language a child might learn or how quickly they might lose what already know, how close a connection there is between acquired linguistic knowledge and the learned knowledge of how to read, and how much do other environmental, cognitive, behavioural, societal influences bring to bear. The spaces of play that are suggested by these questions all represent grey areas where the clear designation of deaf-mute might be challenged. This can be seen in a closer look at some of Armour’s examples:

Berthier, for example, is identified by Armour as a deaf-mute, despite having become deaf at the age of four.<sup>95</sup> Lowe, also, is cited by Armour as a deaf-mute. He became deaf at the age of approximately one, but had—by some mechanism—developed speech in a form that was intelligible to his family.<sup>96</sup> And what of Clerc who became deaf at the same age but, like Lowe, went on to master more than one written language? Even Massieu, growing up surrounded by the signing of deaf siblings, is ‘not a fair specimen’, having an early linguistic advantage Armour has to admit “in a great measure accelerated his progress while under M. Sicard’s tuition.”<sup>97</sup>

For Armour, the diversity of this group was no impediment. For Buxton, however, any evidence that someone failed to fit the archetypal deaf-mute mould, would exclude them from that category. Ultimately, without more widely-accepted definitions to rely on, the

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<sup>94</sup> MCIDD: August 1876, Vol IV. No 44: 115

<sup>95</sup> This age is generally accepted, although the French Deaf historian Yann Cantin (personal communication) has confirmed that sources are inconclusive.

<sup>96</sup> Lowe was a private pupil of Watson, and so would have received one-to-one oral training. MCIDD: July 1876, Vol IV. No 43: 108

<sup>97</sup> MCIDD: March 1876, Vol IV. No 39: 43



question of who was, and who wasn't a deaf-mute became increasingly a matter of personal opinion, with the deciding factor being whether they fitted expectations of what deaf-mutes should or should not be, and could or could not do.<sup>98</sup> Even this was sometimes embarrassingly counter-productive, as Armour demonstrated in August of 1876, when he judged the aforementioned Goodwin, who is identified by Patterson as a deaf-mute, to be a 'semi-mute' based on the quality of his writing!<sup>99</sup>

The most striking example of denying someone the status of deaf-mute concerns Armour himself. If Armour's first response to Buxton contains no references to himself, they dominate his second. He appears implicitly amongst those "many deaf-mutes of his [Buxton's] own acquaintance"<sup>100</sup>, and explicitly brings "the sentiments of [his] own nature"<sup>101</sup> to inform his thinking. He even pokes fun at himself in one moment, referring to Buxton's care to flatter the "*amour propre* of the *elite* of the deaf and dumb world."<sup>102</sup> In a parenthetical exchange about how well deaf people grasp particular areas of more complex idiomatic language, Armour also draws on his own experience to detail the stages that deaf-mutes typically pass through on their way to success.<sup>103</sup> Armour is even clear that there is a significantly personal investment in his defence of Massieu as one who has been 'spurred on' and 'cheered' by Massieu's example, one who has "cherished his glorious memory from the dawn of my feeble intellect".<sup>104</sup>

Troublingly for Buxton, Armour is a deaf-mute whose living example confirms the ability of other deaf-mutes to become, in the end, like Massieu. His presence in the narrative leaves Buxton with no choice but to understand that he is faced with living proof of deaf-mute ability. Buxton, therefore, has no choice but to question even Armour's deaf-mute status, suggesting that he is "one who lost his hearing in infancy, but he thoroughly

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<sup>98</sup> The notion that a deaf-mute, (or in modern-day terms; Deaf) identity might be recognised simply on the basis of 'behaving, or being as expected' is entirely valid within Deaf Studies. See discussion in Gulliver 2009, *DEAF space, a history*. Unpublished PhD, University of Bristol. UK.

<sup>99</sup> MCIDD: August 1876, Vol IV. No 44: 115

<sup>100</sup> *ibid*: 114

<sup>101</sup> MCIDD: September 1876, Vol IV. No 45: 130

<sup>102</sup> MCIDD: August 1876, Vol IV. No 44: 113

<sup>103</sup> *ibid*: 115

<sup>104</sup> MCIDD: Nov 1876, Vol IV. No 47: 165

*identifies himself with the deaf and dumb*, while he possesses a more perfect command of the English language than any deaf-mute I know”.<sup>105</sup>

### 3.2 Debating ‘the best’ for deaf people

Buxton’s careful phrasing brings us to the second fundamental difference between him and Armour. In common with the view that any mitigation of deafness itself was “beyond every effort of science, as well as of every prayer of love”<sup>106</sup> both men viewed deafness as a divinely ordained condition. Each, however, each differed in their view of how those affected by it, and the society in which they found themselves, should manage deafness.

Armour viewed deafness as a burden to bear.<sup>107</sup> However, while he could do nothing about its inevitability, he *could* do something about its effect on his life. Rather than mourn the loss of what he *might have had* as an unmarked member of mainstream society, Armour was fully invested in the deaf community. His vision of his responsibility—his ‘best’ if you like, or the right response to the divine opportunity offered to him by deafness—was to take what God had given, and develop it. Armour wrote

“In considering your verdict, remember that the Almighty Maker who gives the intellect, also guides it to the zenith of its power, whether its recipient be a person who rejoices in the possession of the previous blessings of hearing and speech, or one, who is unfortunately “silent in silence””.<sup>108</sup>

While Buxton shared Armour’s understanding that deafness was an opportunity for overcoming, he differed radically in his belief that all deafness was of that type. Some deafness, he reasoned, was not divine in origin at all – rather, it originated in human carelessness, or sin.

“How far this affliction is inevitable, and how far preventable by improved sanitary arrangements, by medical science and skill, by the prudence of individuals in avoiding marriage with blood-relations, or unions which are likely

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<sup>105</sup> MCIDD: April 1876, Vol IV. No 40: 58. Emphasis added.

<sup>106</sup> Originally written by a deaf man, Arthur Bather, this quote is drawn from the report of the address of the Archbishop of York, at the laying of the foundation stone for the church of St Saviour’s for the Deaf and Dumb, Oxford Street. *The Morning Post*, 6<sup>th</sup> July 1870: 7.

<sup>107</sup> MCIDD: Nov 1876, Vol IV. No 47: 165

<sup>108</sup> MCIDD: September 1876, Vol IV. No 45: 132

to result in the transmission of constitutional defect... When the facts which bear upon the subject have been fully ascertained... it is to be hoped that we shall see the number of this afflicted class brought down to the point at which it may be considered due to causes which are beyond man's control, subject alone to the will of the All-wise, who revealed himself in the earliest ages of the world as the maker of man's mouth, of the Dumb and the Deaf, the Seeing and the Blind (Exod. iv. II). But while social science is prosecuting this important enquiry, Philanthropy has before her the work of educating these 'children of silence' ".<sup>109</sup>

Seen in these terms, the difference between Armour and Buxton is stark. While the former was largely ambivalent about whether deafness was good or bad, and therefore eager simply to welcome all those who felt and behaved as if they belonged to the 'deaf-mute' group, and urge them to excellence, the latter believed that it was his mandate to eradicate as many cases of carelessly genetically, or medically, or socially-conceived deafness as he could.

While Armour encouraged deaf people to strive to reach levels of attainment that legitimised their existence, Buxton watched carefully for every opportunity to prevent that legitimisation. Deselecting deaf-mutes who demonstrated academic excellence because they had become deaf too late, or retained some auditory ability, or had had atypically visual upbringings, or—ultimately—demonstrated an undefined ability that suggested that they were not typically 'deaf-mute', served a 'good' that was defined on a far more significant scale than that of deaf education alone; a 'good' that would see the number of cases of deafness in society brought down to the barest minimum possible.

For the moment, Buxton was committed to the philanthropy of education. It was, after all, all that he could do. However, it would only take one convincing breakthrough in either medical or social science for the barely masked eugenic content of the quote above to break the surface and for him to declare that henceforth he could set aside the need to comfort deaf people in their 'affliction', and begin instead to pursue that more radical, interventionist, socially-transformative 'best'. The ingredients for Buxton's open conversion

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<sup>109</sup> Chambers 1872: 440.

to the anti-sign language policies of the Oralist movement only a few years later, were now present.

#### 4.0 Conclusions

In January 1877, the deaf headmaster of the Cambrian Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, Benjamin Payne wrote to the *Magazine*. His letter would appear in December entitled “Deaf-Mutes v. Semi-Mutes”.<sup>110</sup> Situating his letter within the context of the Armour/Buxton debate, he offered an analysis of the forty deaf contributors whose work had been published in the four years that the *Magazine* had been in print. Only five, he claimed, were truly, ‘congenitally deaf’. The remainder, Payne claims, are “those whose deafness was acquired in various stages from infancy to manhood”<sup>111</sup> and “have been indiscriminately paraded... as deaf-mute writers”.<sup>112</sup> As a representational sleight of hand, suggests Payne, this practice was tragically dishonest.

“The majority of the deaf and dumb are... unable to understand, much less compose, the articles attributed to their class... and feel in regard to the Magazine “intended chiefly” for them that they ask for bread and get a stone.”

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If it took a year for the *Magazine* to publish Payne’s letter, it took rather less time to act on it. The ‘Compositions of the Deaf and Dumb’ section had only appeared in editions of the *Magazine* when there were compositions to publish. Now, with the deaf-mute status of the authors of those compositions called into question, it disappeared completely. In its place, appeared a series of warm and morally edifying, but rather anodyne wisdom sayings from a non-deaf teacher. What had perhaps originated as an attempt to make the *Magazine* accountable for its representation of the most vulnerable sub-section of the deaf community resulted in the removal of even the mildly exoticised ‘deaf-mute’ print space that had been available to them.

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<sup>110</sup> MCIDD: December 1877, Vol V, No 60: Front Cover. It is interesting to note that although this title appears in the ‘contents’, the letter itself carries the title ‘semi-mutes v. congenital mutes’. The clarification of this second title, and its uneven application to the letter only (and not to the contents, where ‘deaf-mutes’ would have been a more comprehensive draw) only serves as another example of the issues raised in this essay, and underlines many of its points.

<sup>111</sup> ‘Manhood’ here appears to have been a catch-all term for both male and female contributors.

<sup>112</sup> MCIDD: December 1877, Vol V, No 60: 188

<sup>113</sup> Ibid: 188

Buxton also disappeared from the pages of the *Magazine*. In 1878, he left Liverpool, moving to London where he took up a position at a training college for teachers of the deaf which promoted a more positive view of oral instruction. By 1880, his belief that he was doing the best for the deaf community remained intact, but had now found a new channel through which to flow. At that year's 'Second International Congress on Education of the Deaf' in Milan, he outlined how, in the (relatively) new philosophy of Oralism; an ideology that promoted the enforced dis-association of deaf people, he had found the social-science solution to deafness in society that he had previously sought.

"I demand for deaf people a system that teaches them and brings them up to be separate from one another... one that gives each student the speech of his country, and not the *signs* of his [deaf] class and that renders each on back to society full of confidence and well taught, to take up his obligations and find companions in that world... deaf people, educated by any other system remain both deaf and mute; those, however, educated by the [oral] system, *are no longer deaf-mutes.*"<sup>114</sup>

It will come as no surprise to learn that Armour did not share Buxton's view of the dangers of deaf association. Instead of rejecting other deaf people, he sought out ways to support and nurture Deaf spaces. His 'companions in the world' were his (deaf-mute) wife Catharine, his friends at the Liverpool Adult Deaf and Dumb Benevolent Society,<sup>115</sup> and others in the deaf church.<sup>116</sup> In 1877, he became a lay missionary for the deaf population of Liverpool, and by the 1890s, a 'Church Missionary Preacher'.<sup>117</sup>

Coincidentally, after pushing for the oral method in deaf education throughout the 1880s, in 1895, Buxton retired to also become a missionary preacher to deaf people, also preaching in sign language.<sup>118</sup> Meeting him that same year, the newly appointed chaplain of St Saviour's Church to the Deaf and Dumb in London, the Rev. F. W. G. Gilby reported that the once 'pure oralist' was now "using the method he had for a number of years been

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<sup>114</sup> Congress 1880: 244-5 (translated from the French, emphasis in original).

<sup>115</sup> Which he had founded in 1864. See Anthony Boyce, *Through the eyes of Robert Armour: on the first fifty years of the Liverpool Adult Deaf and Dumb Benevolent Society, 1864 – 1914*. Merseyside Society for Deaf people.

<sup>116</sup> Which presumably no longer included Buxton, since he moved away in 1878.

<sup>117</sup> Census 1891: Everton, Lancashire (St Polycarp). Ed 4, Piece 2951, Folio 115, Page 39

<sup>118</sup> Branson and Miller, op cit: 175.

cursing up hill and down dale... 'preaching to the deaf on his fingers!' ".<sup>119</sup> He continued his religious work until 1897, when he died, and was buried in Toxteth Park Cemetery in Liverpool.<sup>120</sup> Armour's grave is in Kirkdale cemetery, also in Liverpool, only a few miles away. In 2013, the Merseyside Society for Deaf People, the organisation that grew out of the 'Benevolent Society' visited it to pay homage to him upon the centenary of his death.

We can only wonder what the two men might have made of the event, or of discovering how death had brought them back so close together after years of circulating in ideas and communities so different from one another. It is those years of difference that are preserved by modern-day deaf community memory.<sup>121</sup> Armour is celebrated by deaf people for his service and leadership of the community, while Buxton has a reputation as a 'committed Oralist'.<sup>122</sup> Our close reading of their exchange, however, suggests that while differences between the two were sometimes major, sometimes minor, and almost always urgent they were also often less than entirely clear; muddled by personality, experience, ambition, emotion, ideology and a more or less critical approach to evidence. That the debate occurred at a time when the deaf community was being systematically re-authored through the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century means that it has typically been read through that period's afterlife, rather than its evolution. How much richer; ultimately even, despite the outcome, how much more empowering the historical understanding, as the texture of the period, exposed through the details of the exchange, is brought to light, and made available for examination.

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<sup>119</sup> Gilby, *Memoires*: 149. Copy available from the author.

<sup>120</sup> Buxton died in his home in Manchester. With thanks to Norma McGilp for this, and information about the cemetery locations of both Buxton and Armour's remains.

<sup>121</sup> The reference to memory here draws on Raphael Samuel's *1994 Theatres of memory. Vol.1, Past and present in contemporary culture*. London: Verso.

<sup>122</sup> Given his obituary in *The British Deaf Monthly* (Vol. VI., No. 67, May 1897), he seems to have been an unrepentant one. Rachel Sutton-Spence's words in Leila Frances Monaghan's 2003 'Many Ways to be Deaf: International Variation in Deaf Communities'. Gallaudet University Press. p.43. See Lane's (1999) *The Mask of Benevolence* for the notion of acting against deaf people's wishes for their own 'good'.