Nothing to Write Home About: Children's letters home from deaf schools, 1890-1910

Mike Mantin

Throughout the nineteenth century, deaf education in Britain in grew from the private and profit-making concern of a select few individuals to a ubiquitous picture of deaf institutions. Despite a number of attempts at state intervention, deaf education remained primarily a voluntary concern, with a committee usually made up of local elites and religious figures. This meant that institutions would be engaged in a constant attempt to raise money and support. As such, they struck a wavering balance between education and exploitation. They were as concerned about spreading the word about their supposedly tragic and afflicted children, as they were about educating them.

My paper today is a study of letters from one deaf school in Swansea, which were printed in the Institution's Annual Reports. I'll be asking what these can tell us about children's experiences, child-teacher power relations and the public image of the institutions. They're an excellent distillation of the complexity of studying special education in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: they give some idea of the children's lives, but they also contain assertions of authority, revealing much about the social and religious agendas of their teachers and financial subscribers

Deaf education in the 19th century

Deaf education in Britain took its time to become widespread, due to the reluctance of its early teachers to share their methods. Thomas Braidwood, a mathematics teacher who became involved in deaf education after being approached by an Edinburgh merchant to teach his deaf boy to write. Braidwood founded the first British deaf school there in 1764,

providing education to one pupil.[1] From there, Braidwood and his family held something of a monopoly on British deaf education, profiting from wealthy families and keeping their methods a closely-guarded secret. After 1820, however, deaf schools expanded, as assistant teachers at Braidwood's academies began to open their own schools. By the 1870s, the number of deaf institutions in the UK had reached 25.

Amongst these was the Cambrian Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, which was founded in Aberystwyth in 1847, before moving to Swansea three years afterwards. In many ways it was a typical deaf institution: it took in pupils for instruction and boarding, and offered the religious and moral training common in all Victorian schooling. Yet it also differed in a number of areas – from the 1870s until 1914, it had one of the only deaf headmasters in Britain, and it refused to use corporal punishment or force its children to learn speech.

Charity and deaf education

But like almost all deaf institutions of its time, the Cambrian was an entirely voluntary affair. It was founded by what they deemed 'private benevolence' and funded by voluntary donations and school fees to be paid by parents, though occasionally these could be subsidised by Boards of Poor Law Guardians. State funding for special schools at this time was confined to a very limited set of grants, though there were some attempts to integrate deaf children into special classes in mainstream schools, most notably by the London School Board from the 1870s. Most deaf *institutions*, however, relied crucially on money from wealthy local elites and philanthropists.

Much effort was made on attracting the attention of potential subscribers. The committee of the Cambrian Institution held public meetings and demonstrations all over Wales to raise funds, in which pupils were introduced to a fascinated public, and tested on their abilities.

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[1] Jackson, *Pictorial History of Deaf Britain* (Winsford, Chesire, 2001), 52; B. Grant, *The Deaf Advance: A History of the British Deaf Association* (Edinburgh, 1990), 2

They were presented as ‘miracles’, proof of the supposed wonders of special education. In these events, making money clearly took priority over demonstrating their children’s abilities – at one demonstration in 1849, the committee wrote to the headmaster of the Birmingham Institution requesting that they ‘send a Boy in the advanced class of their Institution to accompany Mr Rhind, the Principal, in his intended tour throughout South Wales.’ When they declined, Rhind reluctantly took two of his own pupils with him.[2]

This highlights the complex range of motivations behind Victorian and Edwardian special education. Sally Tomlinson criticises the assumption that voluntary special education was built solely on a ‘powerful ideology of benevolent humanitarianism’, suggesting instead that historians focus on the economic needs, social control and power struggles which came with it.[3] At demonstrations, pupils could be seen as little more than passive objects of charity: they would be supposedly rescued from a life of misery, taught language, morals and religion, with the aim of making them useful members of society.

Branson and Miller are keen to point out these ulterior motivations, and further criticise what they deem the ‘pursuit of social honour’ which lay behind much charitable involvement in special education.[4] Certainly, involvement in and donations to deaf institutions was intrinsically related to social status, as the donators’ aid allowed them to distance themselves from their ‘helpless’ subjects. The philanthropy on display at the institutions formed a key part of elite culture. Charity work would be publicised and acknowledged in the press and around the community, allowing them to publicise their contribution to ‘saving’ the deaf children. For the deaf institutions of Victorian and Edwardian Britain, the search for money and publicity was as important as the education itself.

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[2] 1849 minutes
[3] Tomlinson, *Sociology of Special Education*, 27
[4] Branson and Miller, *Damned for their Difference*, 125

Newspaper reports of the Cambrian's public demonstrations reveal the qualities its attendees wanted to see in the children: a 1863 report in the newspaper *The Cambrian* wrote, 'It is gratifying and cheering to find that the liberality of the inhabitants of the Principality, but more especially of Swansea, has built so noble an institution, where so large a number of children are educated, housed and maintained, and fitted to become, not only a useful member, but really and truly ornaments to society.'[5] This demonstrates that the institution clearly had pressure from its subscribers and local supporters to turn its pupils into their vision of an ideal citizen, overcoming a tragic affliction and joining in the local community.

The curriculum offered at deaf schools also corresponded to these prescriptions. Alongside writing, language and arithmetic, the core lessons included religion and 'manners and general training.' By becoming religious, literate and morally conscious, deaf children could (they believed) integrate into hearing society, and begin to achieve salvation. Many deaf schools also taught their pupils skills to become members of the workforce, and ensured their extracurricular activities were of a 'useful' nature. Thus the inner workings at deaf schools very much reflected the kind of life its subscribers thought would be best for them.

Annual Reports

It's with this in mind that I'd like to look at the Annual Reports sent out by the Cambrian Institution to its existing and potential subscribers, and sometimes the children's parents. These were documents of about 30 pages with the very clear aim of appealing to potential donators and to impress their committee and subscribers. It always included a report of the year's events, details of school timetables and diet plans, and even instructions to parents on taking care of their deaf children in holidays and after school and, somewhat sinisterly, how to avoid them getting married to another deaf person. They're essential sources for the

[5] *The Cambrian* 1863

historian of special education: they offer glimpses into life in the institution, but more noticeably they reveal the many motivations and interests lying behind special education.

From 1892, these Annual Reports began to include letters written by the children to their parents back home. According to the Report, 'The subjects were not proposed to the writers; no assistance was given them; their attention was not called to their errors; nor has any alteration or correction been made in the papers.' Obviously even the most optimistic historian needs to be sceptical about these claims: the letters are almost always in excellent written English with a few quirks, and the subject matter often raises questions. See, for example, this letter from a twelve year old boy, who had been at the institution for four years, to his parents – and remember it's apparently completely unaltered.

He begins with a standard set of questions (in perfect English) to his parents: 'I hope you are in good health. Are you, my brothers and sisters, friends and relations well? Is my brother Benjamin well? Is he working in a pit? I went to town, with David Griffiths last Saturday.' After discussing his town visit he continues: 'The Right Honourable W.F. Gladstone M.P. is the Prime Minister of the Queen now. Lord Tennyson died on October 6th. He was the English great poet laureate. His body was taken in London.' He goes on, 'There are hundreds of people dying by cholera in China. The New Lord Mayor of London is a Roman Catholic. His name is Mr Alderman Knill. The late Mr Benan is dead. He is a Frenchman. He was a clever man. His body was buried in the cemetery in France. He was a little man.' And so on. It is hard to believe the Report's claims that they have been unaltered and written without outside influence: the somewhat bizarre list of political events displayed only seems to be passing down the knowledge and opinions of the teachers.

Other letters were clearly selected because they put the Institution's education in a positive light. A 14-year-old girl's mention of the Queen, for example, acted as a public opportunity

for the 'moral and religious training' offered by the Cambrian to shine through. She writes that the Queen is 'our sovereign and the Empress of India. The Queen is an old lady, and is a true Christian woman.'[6] The selection process for these letters was clearly one which valued anything which could demonstrate knowledge, morals and religion.

When viewed in the context of Victorian philanthropy, with its emphasis on money, publicity and status, these letters seem only to serve as cynical publicity for the Institution. Their inclusion in the Report tries to convince the reader of the children's abilities, morals and knowledge. They raise important questions about the children's agency and the teachers' and committee's power: was this really what they were interested in and what they wanted their parents to know about?

For the historian, they are of course extremely problematic – they are hugely influenced by the teachers and committees of the school, and possibly doctored. D.G. Pritchard highlights this, arguing that the work reprinted in Annual Reports was 'obviously false' and only existed to please their subscribers, who expected to see achievement having paid for the school.[7] Even at the time, they faced damning criticism from fellow headmasters. At an 1881 Conference of Headmasters of the Deaf, J. Scott Hutton of the Ulster Institution in Belfast spoke out against the 'insipid performances (chiefly a re-hash of remembered crudities, partly descriptive, partly didactic, partly speculative, purely imitative, and wholly worthless) which sometimes figure in "reports" and elsewhere as "specimens of original composition".'[8] Thus the manipulative qualities of the letters clearly did not go unnoticed at the time either.

However, the letters are one of few ways for historians to achieve a picture of everyday life in these institutions, owing to a lack of memoirs and interviews of the children. If studied very

[6] 1895-6
[7] Pritchard, 43
[8] Headmasters' conference 1881

carefully, some of the letters can be read as sources for institutional life. They provide insights into what the children did in their leisure time, details of which are almost impossible to find elsewhere. A letter from a 15-year-old girl, sent home at Christmas 1900, sheds light on this: 'The Conjuror will come here to play tricks on the 19th. He will come here from Cardiff. He is deaf and dumb. He will play tricks for us and he will play again for the Adults on the 26th. We shall enjoy with Christmas Tree, Treat and to see the Conjuror very much.' Again, it's unlikely that the girl chose to write this of her own accord, as every other letter printed in that year's Report mentions the Christmas Tree and Treat, but this letter provides a rare insight into some of the entertainment and leisure opportunities for the Deaf community in Swansea – it's also notable that the Conjuror was himself deaf. Thus while the letters are unlikely to criticise the institution, they are still useful artefacts of life as a deaf child in Swansea.

The picture became more complex, however, when the Annual Reports started including past pupils' correspondence next to letters from current pupils. Some are full of shining praise for the Institution, and once again, often seem like nothing more than an advertisement for the school and an example of its success. A past pupil, who became deaf at 4, wrote to the headmaster in 1904, saying: 'Every day I am thinking how dearly I love my school. I wish to never leave it. I feel as if it were home.' She also describes her new life as a dressmaker, saying: 'I hope I shall be able to make out everything people want when i finish learning my trade'. The letter acts as a recommendation for the school: the girl misses it, and her success in trade corresponded with the school's and its subscribers' wishes to make its pupils into what it deemed useful members of society.

But the rest of the letter seems like a genuine insight into the problems which former deaf pupils could face in their new lives: 'I rather like to be with the deaf than with the hearing people, as there is no one who can talk to me as all do in school but never mind, I can lip-read

people well and they know what I say. I talk well at home whenever some-one talk to me but if I sometimes don't know what they say, they always write it down.' If the letters really were nothing but advertisements, it is worth asking why they included descriptions of deaf workers struggling with language. These comments on the difficulties of lip-reading do not immediately strike as something which casts the Institution in a positive light. But it does show a reluctant attempt by the girl to integrate into hearing society, which readers of the Report will have undoubtedly appreciated.

Other letters from past pupils were even less straightforward. The 1911 report includes a letter from a youth 'lately apprenticed', born to deaf parents, who openly dislikes his work: ''I feel quite accustomed to my work but I should rather like to evade any questions as to my liking of the trade. Really and naturally, I have a dislike of it because I feel it is only a work for the brain and fingers. At first when I started to work, it seemed to me very interesting, but it has gone dull to me... but I shall do my utmost to be patient and stay there at the trade for it might be of any use to me afterwards.'

He continues by praising his schooldays, reminiscing: 'The recollection of my old schooldays is still fresh in my memory. I think it was the happiest time of my life.'

It is hardly surprising that a rose-tinted account of life in the Cambrian Institution was printed, but it's notable that such a bleak description of his current employment was also included. There is, perhaps, a deeper layer of meaning behind their inclusion in the report. It could be read as a validation of the practice of confining deaf people to meaningless manual jobs: like the dressmaker, he is seen to be content with being 'useful', even if he doesn't enjoy his work.

Conclusion

No definitive reading can of course be taken from these, but they pose important questions to historians. When viewed in the context of Victorian and Edwardian philanthropy, they can appear in many ways as nothing but advertising tools. The letters home from pupils demonstrates the political and social knowledge which would have been appreciated by readers of the Annual Reports. They probably say more about the wants and needs of the subscribers and teachers than the children themselves. But this is important in itself – it demonstrates a consistent power struggle between the children and the people who were using them to further their own interests. This in itself makes them vital sources for the historian wishing to understand the many different factors and relationships which went into deaf education. The more negative letters about deaf children's trades pose further problems, and suggests these went beyond simple publicity tools.

Moreover, when studied critically, the children's own experiences may shine through. The letters provide a glimpse into the everyday life and leisure of children studying in deaf institutions, albeit clouded by a clear influence from outside sources, and a very selective inclusion process. As such, they are curious and hugely useful reminders of the complexity of studying deaf education in history.