H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Brian H. Greenwald, Joseph J. Murray, eds. *In Our Own Hands: Essays in Deaf History, 1780-1970.* Washington DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2016. 288 pp. 39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-56368-660-3.

Reviewed by Martin Atherton (University of Central Lancashire)

Published on H-Disability (January, 2017)

Commissioned by Iain C. Hutchison (University of Glasgow)

This collection of twelve chapters brings to light some new perspectives on the history of Deaf people, investigating previously ignored or under-researched aspects of Deaf life. Each contribution takes agency and activism as its starting point, with each chapter demonstrating how Deaf people sought, achieved, shared, or were denied a role in the decision-making process about their own lives. Topics addressed in the book include Deaf history staples, such as education, religious groups, and welfare organizations, but drawing on Deaf perspectives and experiences, together with more innovative topics, such as societal attitudes to Deaf African Americans and the campaigns for Deaf citizenship that provided an example for Deaf people across the globe.

As eleven of the twelve chapters focus on the United States, the potential implications and wider consequences are not always addressed, but they do provide a template for further research in other countries. Because of the predominance of American Deaf history, the book would have been better presented as a social and political history of Deaf Americans, rather than being representative of the Deaf experience outside that country. This inward-looking perspective continues within many of the chapters, with little context for the struggles of Deaf people in comparison with other minority groups. One chapter that does achieve this contextualization is the examination by Carolyn MacCaskill, Ceil Lucas, Robert Bayley, and Joseph Hill of the place of educational establishments in supporting the citizenship rights of black Deaf Americans. They show how segregation of black and white pupils was just as much a part of the Deaf experience as it was for hearing people in many parts of the United States, and it is shocking to learn that the final site of racially segregated Deaf education (in Louisiana) did not close until 1978. On a more positive note, many states dispensed with separate black and white Deaf schools in the early 1950s, setting an example that reflected the experience of hearing students in those states. Staying with the theme of education, Motoko Kimura demonstrates how the gradual imposition of oralism as the predominant method used in Chicagoâs Deaf schools between 1874 and 1920 saw the gradual erosion of Deaf autonomy as Deaf pupils were subsequently absorbed within the wider public school system in the city. Not only was Deaf autonomy lost, but Deaf childrenâs educational experiences and achievements were also seriously compromised.

Editor Brian Greenwaldâs chapter offers fresh perspectives on the ultimate irony of Alexander Graham Bellâs (1847-1922) involvement with the eugenics movement as a motivating factor in bringing Deaf people together by giving them a common cause to rally against. The work of the National Union of the Deaf (NUD) in opposing the eugenics movement by (apparently) compromising their position as the representative voice of Deaf Americans is the focus of Melissa Malzkuhnâs chapter. In this, the way in which Bellâs ideas were supported by some influential people in the Deaf world, such as Edward Miner Gallaudet (1837-1917), is contrasted with the systematic collection of practical and scientific evidence that undermined the arguments of the eugenicists.

Anja Werner employs the vastly underused resource of popular newspapers as the basis for her extensive ex-

amination of public attitudes toward Deafness. Drawing on over 1,200 English-language newspapers over a thirty-five-year period that focuses on important developments in Deaf education, Werner illustrates the way in which popular misconceptions were both disseminated and perpetuated in the pages of these publications. In doing so, she shows how, although attitudes changed, these changes were not necessarily for the better, moving from mere objectification of Deaf people as less than fully human to essentially interesting subjects for scientific and medical experiment and rectification. Other chapters look at the struggles of Deaf people to overcome such attitudes, which were evident even in the work of religious groups, and the roles of legislators in dealing with Deaf peddlers and beggars who were unable to find suitable employment due to the failings of the education with which they had been provided.

Breda Cartyâs chapter sits somewhat at odds with the rest of this book in that it does not concern itself with the United States, but instead looks at the long battle that Deaf Australians fought in order to have some control over their welfare organizations. Carty shows how Deaf agency was first achieved then taken away from the Deaf organizers of welfare organizations, only for breakaway groups to be formed in an attempt to reestablish some degree of Deaf autonomy. This discussion is set within the wider context of citizenship campaigns by Australian women and Aboriginal peoples for a greater degree of control and input into their own lives and the decisions made for and about them. Therefore, this is in many ways the standout chapter of the book as it also shows how the efforts of Deaf Australians were reported in other countries, mostly notably Britain, and had an impact on growing Deaf activism far beyond the shores of Australia.

This is an interesting and informative book that adds to our understanding of Deaf peopleâs campaigns for greater autonomy and there is a great deal of detail given about individual and collective campaigns. Some contextualization within the wider social and political environment would have made for an even stronger story, but there is plenty here to attract anyone interested in Deaf history or indeed the history of oppressed minority groups.