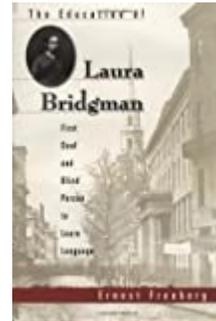


H-Net Reviews

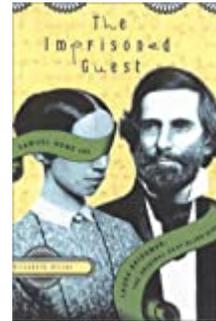
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Ernest Freeberg. *The Education of Laura Bridgman: First Deaf and Blind Person to Learn Language.* Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2001. 264 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-00589-1.



Elisabeth Gitter. *The Imprisoned Guest: Samuel Howe and Laura Bridgman, the Original Deaf-Blind Girl.* New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2001. 341 pp. \$26.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-374-11738-2.



Reviewed by Hannah Joyner (Takoma Park, Maryland)

Published on H-Disability (November, 2001)

The “Embodied Argument”: Investigating Laura Bridgman

Proceeding Helen Keller by roughly fifty years, deaf-blind Laura Bridgman was born in New Hampshire. In 1829 at two years of age she lost both her sight and hearing after a bout with scarlet fever. Beginning when she was seven years old, Bridgman was educated at the Perkins Institution for the Blind under the leadership of Samuel Gridley Howe. Although extraordinarily well known in her own day, Bridgman was overshadowed fifty years later by Helen Keller. Two wonderful new biographies again bring Bridgman and her education to the fore. Ernest Freeberg’s *The Education of Laura Bridgman* and Elisabeth Gitter’s *The Imprisoned Guest* allow histo-

rians to see how Bridgman’s life and Howe’s life were intricately intertwined. As Gitter writes, “She created his life, just as he created hers” (Gitter, 8).

One of the strongest parts of Ernest Freeberg’s narrative is his analysis of how and why Samuel Gridley Howe became involved in Bridgman’s education. Freeberg shows that, in addition to the “quest for righteous adventure” (Freeberg, p. 28), Howe was interested in two central questions of human nature: What was the importance of human senses in the development of the mind? And what was their importance in the development of the soul? Howe believed that Bridgman, whom he believed unblemished by cultural influences, was the perfect subject for experiment. As Freeberg says, “Laura’s

deafness and blindness had not made her a bizarre exception to the human condition but rather had transformed her into a prototype, an example of the innate potential of all children” (Freeberg, p. 3).

As Howe began his experiments with Bridgman, his commitments to Unitarian beliefs, Conscience Whig thought, phrenology, and a variety of liberal social reforms informed his thinking. Unlike Lockean philosophers who argued that a newborn’s mind was a blank dependent upon the senses for all thought, Howe believed human beings had an innate ability to learn. He presented language to Bridgman via the sense of touch and she quickly absorbed what he taught. Howe promoted the idea that Bridgman learned eagerly for the pure joy of education.

When considering questions of the soul, Howe wished to prove false Calvinism’s doctrine of original sin by showing that Bridgman had an inborn sense of right and wrong. By portraying her as a pure being uncorrupted by the society around her, Howe wished to prove that human beings were not inherently scarred by sin. As Freeberg states, “In his mind, this child had restored the reputation of Adam and Eve” (Freeberg, pp. 103-104). He also wanted to demonstrate that humans had a natural connection to God. Shielding her from all discussion of spiritual topics with anyone other than himself, Howe intended to show that Bridgman would spontaneously embrace religion. By exposing her to the wonders of the natural world, she would naturally come to believe in the abstract Christianity of the Unitarians rather than the orthodox dogma of Calvinism.

In order to prove the innate goodness of humans, Howe presented Bridgman as a sentimental heroine, a good little girl resigned to her disability. When constructing the Laura Bridgman of his institutional reports, Howe combined the rhetoric of scientific experimentation with the conventions of Victorian fiction. In his early reports, she was always cheerful and obedient, a model child. He disguised Bridgman’s naturally rambunctious nature and her outbursts of frustration in an effort to prove children were not born under the curse of original sin and therefore not in need of stern punishments.^[1] Howe seemed to “turn Laura into a symbol, a rhetorical tool” (Freeberg, p. 89), less concerned about her as a person—as pupil or soul—than he was about her as an experiment.

Elizabeth Gitter reminds us how much the conventions of gender shaped Bridgman’s life, especially as she matured into a young woman: “Her sex, as much as her

blindness or deafness, determined the course of her life” (Gitter, p. 7). Bridgman’s gender shaped the opportunities bestowed on her, the limitations she faced, and her own responses to the circumstances of her life. Gitter shows that Howe chose Bridgman to be his first deaf-blind pupil partly because she was a young girl, a symbol of innocence and purity. Unlike many of the male blind pupils at Howe’s school, she was not provided with the tools of self-sufficiency. Instead, she was constricted in the role of saintly martyr, a role Victorians saw as feminine.

One source of frustration for Bridgman was the intense system of discipline that Howe and her other teachers embraced. In an effort to teach her self-control, her teachers required total obedience to their commands. Although Howe did not endorse the severe discipline meted out by Calvinists, his punishments could be just as devastating. He deemed Bridgman’s misbehaviors moral lapses. Often her infractions were simply attempts to exert an independent will by such actions as choosing where to hold her handkerchief, when to vocalize, and what secrets to keep from her teachers.

Every lapse in obedience was met with her teachers’ expressions of disapproval and disappointment. If Bridgman continued to express her will, they withdrew their love and often their physical presence, sometimes leaving her in solitary confinement for days at a time. Bridgman found a gender-appropriate way to respond to such frustrations: she refused to eat, once going from one hundred thirteen pounds to seventy-nine pounds. Using the vocabulary of self-starvation, Bridgman was able to exert power in one of the only venues open to her.

Her teachers’ unwillingness to answer her questions about spirituality was another source of pain for Bridgman. Because Howe wanted to prove that his pupil would spontaneously accept his religious beliefs, he delayed providing her with religious training. He told her other teachers and eventually all those who read his annual reports that he wanted no one but himself to answer her questions about religion. He, however, left for an eighteen-month trip abroad during the period of her most intense questioning. Bridgman peppered him with letters full of religious questions, most of which he did not answer. Her other teachers simply told her to ask Howe. “Why cannot I know?” lamented Bridgman (Freeberg, 160).

Bridgman’s quest for religion and Howe’s long absence contributed to a growing rift between the two. In 1846 when Howe returned from his eighteen-month hon-

eymoon after his marriage to Julia Ward Howe whom he met at an exhibition of his pupils, he “turned on [Bridgman] with a sudden and surprising vehemence” (Gitter, 158). Howe often ignored her, stating that he was disenchanted with the girl-turned-adolescent who failed his tests and ruined his experiments. Freeberg and Gitter offer quite different explanations of why Howe abandoned Bridgman.

Howe claimed that his rejection of Bridgman was rooted in her growing interest in religious beliefs contrary to his own. During his long absence, Bridgman had turned to a more orthodox God: an intimate being, a Father. Howe believed his experiment had been undermined by Calvinists who opposed his decision to withhold formal religious training from Bridgman. Perhaps her teachers during his absence or perhaps her numerous visitors had instructed her in evangelical Christianity. At any rate, when Bridgman found solace in a religion opposed by Howe, he was furious and targeted his anger at the teenaged girl.

Freeberg, accepting Howe’s claim that the reason for his disillusionment with Bridgman was her religious transformation, analyzes the reasons why orthodoxy was so appealing to Bridgman. Because of her status as a female, a child, and a disabled person, Bridgman was aware of her weakness more than her strength. She therefore sought a religion that would offer her compassion rather than moral challenge. Freeberg points out that a God who could release Bridgman from sufferings would have appealed to her more than Howe’s abstract author of the universe.

“Taking a fatherly interest in the daily trials of His children,” writes Freeberg, Bridgman’s conception of God “offered her the promise of protection from the unpredictable forces” always surrounding her (Freeberg, p. 155).

Agreeing with Freeberg, Gitter states that Bridgman “wanted a warm, embracing deity who would work compensatory miracles in Heaven, a Savior who would ultimately open her eyes and ears and loose the sting of her tongue” (Gitter, p. 147). This God-the-Father was simply, for Howe, the rhetoric of evangelical sentimentalism. Howe could not respect her beliefs or accept that hers was a “unique and heartfelt religious experience” (Freeberg, p. 189). What Howe saw as a failure, the two authors agree, was actually evidence of Bridgman’s own independent beliefs. Bridgman formally joined her family’s Baptist church in 1863 when she was in her early thirties.

Howe’s early participation in education of the blind was informed by a belief in the equality of blind people and their potential to integrate into sighted society. His disillusionment and disappointment with Bridgman, however, coincided with his new belief in the 1840s that “the blind were different, that their sensory deprivation had serious physical, intellectual, and moral consequences” (Freeberg, p. 198). His change of heart about the abilities of blind people clearly influenced his views of Bridgman, just as his beliefs about her shaped his understanding of the blind as a whole. As Freeberg writes, “[Howe’s] disappointment with the person she had become and the disillusionment he felt about the talents and prospects of his other blind students were mutually reinforcing. In both cases, he concluded that his students had not fulfilled his expectations because he had not accounted for the effect that their handicaps would have on their minds and souls” (Freeberg, p. 203). One final time Howe used Bridgman as a symbol for his arguments, this time about the damaged minds and souls of disabled people.

Gitter suggests that Howe turned his back on his pupil for additional reasons. First, “the great romance of her rescue from darkness was over” (Gitter, p. 158) and there was little more for a hero seeking adventure to do, nor for an experimenter to learn. “What more could she contribute?” (Gitter, p. 174). Now the work with Bridgman was more mundane, polishing her language skills and simply teaching her what one would teach other pupils. In addition, Howe no longer had room at the center of his heart for Bridgman. Now he had a wife and infant daughter for whom to care. As Gitter summarizes, “Laura had outlived her emotional usefulness to Howe” (Gitter, p. 174).

Bridgman’s blossoming womanhood might also have been a reason for Howe’s change of heart, Gitter suggests. When she was young, her gender added to her appeal. As Howe noted, a young girl with disabilities had a far greater ability to arouse public sympathies than an adult man would. But when Bridgman approached puberty, her maturing body removed her from the role of “ethereal angel” (Gitter, p. 170) and cast her as a sexual being. “It may be that Howe turned against Laura in part because he could no longer imagine her—and himself with her—as naively, and therefore as guiltlessly, as he had before,” analyzes Gitter. “She had spoiled his stories simply by growing up” (Gitter, p. 173).

After Bridgman’s fall from Howe’s grace, she remained a pupil at Perkins until she was twenty years

old. After her education was completed, Howe offered to provide his former pupil with a home at Perkins for the rest of her days. However, he left her without a permanent companion. Her former teachers all left Perkins for other jobs and for family, leaving the aging Bridgman surrounded by young blind pupils who could not communicate with her well. The youngsters saw her as an oddity rather than a friend and the staff were often perturbed by her presence. She moved back and forth from Perkins to her parents' home in New Hampshire, always isolated and often desperately unhappy. She died in 1889 at the age of fifty-nine.

As Howe did in his early days, Freeberg and Gitter both believe that blind people are equals to sighted people and deserving of both education and rights. Also like Howe, the authors assume that Bridgman's education with blind peers rather than deaf peers was appropriate. Howe believed that an education within the deaf community would have limited her intellectual achievements and circumscribed her life. American Sign Language, according to Howe, was little more than pantomime. He did not understand that Sign was a language with a grammar and vocabulary of its own. Although both Freeberg and Gitter are aware that his were contentious statements even in Howe's day, both authors seem to take Howe's interpretation at face value.

One example of the authors' basic acceptance of Howe's interpretation of Sign is seen in their subtitles: while Gitter states that Bridgman was "the original deaf-blind girl," for Freeberg she was the "first deaf and blind person to learn language." Julia Brace, a deaf-blind woman who lived in the Deaf community, is discounted. Brace began her education at the Hartford Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb at age eighteen. Old enough that the school did not provide academic training for her, Brace nevertheless became proficient at the language used by those around her and became part of the community in Hartford. Howe believed that although she could use "a system of gestural communication useful in the small, tribal world of the asylum," the deaf-blind woman "failed to learn language" (Gitter, p. 72). By the elevation of English over Sign, Howe made Brace's achievements seem negligible.[2]

Both Freeberg and Gitter do mention the role of Sign in Bridgman's life. Although Howe later tried to break her of the habit of signing, he himself used signed words to teach Bridgman English. For example, he "resorted to one of Laura's own signs for likeness—he held his two forefingers together, suggesting identity" (Freeberg, p.

36). This description is very similar to the American Sign Language word for likeness.

Without any analysis, the authors present evidence that suggests that Bridgman did in fact communicate with more than mere gesturing with her childhood friend Asa Tenny. Gitter describes him as "mentally impaired" (Gitter, p.50) and "linguistically impaired" (Gitter, p. 53) while Freeberg calls him "eccentric" (Freeberg, p. 102), but both agree that he was an outcast in his community. Freeberg describes Bridgman's account of communicating her thoughts and questions to Tenney. Gitter shows that Tenney signed himself: "Using signs to communicate," the young girl's adult friend taught her how to collect the hen's eggs in the barn (Gitter, p. 51). Gitter reveals that Tenney urged Bridgman's parents to educate her among the deaf with the use of the language of Sign. "Laura was improving in that verry language...before leaveing home," the man wrote Howe (Gitter, p. 54). Was Tenney merely referring to a set of agreed-upon gestures or was he possibly referring to formal Sign? The authors do not discuss why Tenney suggested such a thing, nor do they investigate the possibility that Tenney knew something about deaf education and the deaf community.

Had Bridgman been educated within the deaf community, perhaps things would have been different at the end of her life. Although Howe did not wish to teach her a language that would restrict her to communication with a small group at an institution, Bridgman always lived with either her family or Perkins. Many of Bridgman's peers at Perkins learned fingerspelling in order to communicate with her, but as she aged and her peers graduated, she was increasingly isolated linguistically even at Perkins. Had she attended a school for the deaf such as the Hartford Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb, Bridgman would have learned not only a language but a style of communication understood by all of the pupils at the school. Like Julia Brace, she would be able to live there for the rest of her days surrounded by a community. Away from the general society's discomfort about disabled people's ability to marry and have children, perhaps Bridgman might even have created a family of her own within the Signing community beyond the Asylum's walls. Perhaps she would have been just as unhappy and isolated at the end of her life, but such questions would lead Freeberg and Gitter to question how much Howe rescued Bridgman and how much he condemned her to a life set apart from others.

These two histories of Laura Bridgman's life are beautifully written and thoroughly researched. Coming out at

the same time, the two books are receiving a great deal of attention by the mainstream press and garnering attention for the topic of disability. Laura Bridgman is an appealing woman who deserves to be widely known. These two studies offer fascinating interpretations of her life. Freeberg writes convincingly about Howe's political and social beliefs. He also offers an insightful discussion of Bridgman's religious reasoning. Gitter adds more information about the Bridgman's life away from Howe, as well as a fascinating analysis of how gender influenced her life. Neither writer, unfortunately, is especially adept at dealing with the importance of Bridgman's deafness. In short, although these two biographies are engaging, perceptive, and thoughtful, there is still room for yet an-

other investigation of Laura Bridgman.

Notes

[1]. For more on Victorian sentiments about disability and about Howe's portrayal of Bridgman specifically, see Mary Klages, *Woeful Afflictions: Disability and Sentimentality in Victorian America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

[2]. Differing accounts of Julia Brace can be found in Harlan Lane, *When the Mind Hears: A History of the Deaf* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984) and Gary Wait, "Julia Brace," *Dartmouth College Library Bulletin* 33 (November 1992).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-disability>

Citation: Hannah Joyner. Review of Freeberg, Ernest, *The Education of Laura Bridgman: First Deaf and Blind Person to Learn Language* and Gitter, Elisabeth, *The Imprisoned Guest: Samuel Howe and Laura Bridgman, the Original Deaf-Blind Girl*. H-Disability, H-Net Reviews. November, 2001.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5683>

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.