
THE AGGRESSIONS OF ALEXANDER.

By C. R. Barns.

The two most interesting chapters in the history of education among the deaf in America are those which deal, the one with the achievements of Gallaudet and Clerc, and of the instructors who followed in their path; the other with the aggressions of Alexander—that Alexander whose surname is Bell, and whose middle name reminds one of a popular cracker. The work of Gallaudet, Clerc and their disciples was along constructive, progressive and pre-eminently rational lines. Casting aside the plan long so popular in Europe, of endeavoring to thwart nature by substituting a wholly forced and unnatural method of communication where she had denied to some of our race the gifts of speech and hearing, these truly scientific men sought rather to work in harmony with her, by developing the means she had herself provided, in the language of signs. In their hands this language was developed into a wonderfully flexible, expressive and beautiful system. It appealed at once to the intelligence of the deaf pupil. It involved no physical torture, no long, blind, groping after hidden meanings. Under the influence of the manual system, intelligence quickly brightened, knowledge was rapidly acquired, the translation of signs into written words on the blackboard led finally to such facile use of pencil and paper, in communicating with the hearing world, as was often a matter of astonishment to the educators of that world. Pupils thus taught were found to surpass, in many cases, those who had enjoyed the alleged "superior advantages"

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of the schools for the hearing. A friend of mine—Samuel T. Harris—the valedictorian of his class at Brown University, once jokingly said to me that, since the deaf seemed to make so much better progress at school than the average hearing child, he wondered why Providence had not made everybody deaf!

If the work being so efficiently and beneficently done in the schools for the deaf prior to the arrival in this country of Aggressive Alexander, in 1872, could have been carried on without the intrusion of the pernicious fad of oralism, there is little doubt that thousands of the deaf of America would today be living on a higher intellectual plane, as well as on one of higher social enjoyment and industrial efficiency. Alexander had inherited his father's devotion to the fad of so-called visible speech. He became the foremost propagandist of the pure oral method. As such his coming to America might well be compared, in its blighting effect on the education of the deaf, to the landings of the famous yellow fever ship which once sailed up the Mississippi River, distributing the plague at every place where she stopped.

Dr. Bell's success in the work of spoliation among our schools has been largely attributable to two factors: First, that of his own admittedly powerful personality; second, the adroitness with which he has worked upon the misguided affections of parents, who have eagerly listened to his claims that oralism provides "something just as good," or nearly so, in place of the lost hearing and speech. In his personality he combines with a ponderous intellect an equally ponderous egotism and the stubbornness of the Scotchman, whom no evidence as to the falsity of a belief once accepted will induce him to abandon it. Add to this the endowment of a vast fortune from his invention of the telephone, which fortune he has shown himself willing to spend with a lavish hand in crushing those who refuse to accept his word as law in the education of the deaf, and we can begin to realize how the defenses of rational methods have suffered from his attacks. He has been spoken of as a "live wire." In the sense that a human "live wire" is a "shocking" fellow, this is no doubt true, for verily the shocks he has given us have been many. The Volta Bureau, founded by him, is appropriately named, since Volta, whom Alexander sought thus to honor, was the inventor of a new apparatus for giving shocks to mankind, and the bureau, since its first establishment, has been doing a shocking work for a false system.

But the aggressions of Alexander have been by no means confined to his attacks on the only rational system of teaching the deaf. He has attacked the segregation of deaf children in large institutions, as tending to their segregation in the community after they shall have left school. And this natural drawing together—something through which the deaf now find so much social happiness—is to him something horrible. For he finds that, drawn together in such a companionship as is often unattainable by them among hearing people, our young men and maidens are prone to fall in love with one another, and to marry. He declares that this will lead to the production of "a deaf variety of the human race." So he would break up the schools, scatter the pupils, forbid the assemblies and church services and entertainments which now go so far to make life worth living for the deaf; and thus would he protect our race against so great a calamity! It counts for naught with him that statistics show that only a few more deaf children are born to deaf parents, in pro-

portion to their numbers, than are born to hearing parents. It matters not that Nature constantly works for a return to the normal, so that deafness after a few generations disappears from families in which it was once frequent. For the mighty Alexander has said it, and before his egotistical assertion of superior knowledge all censuses and sciences must bow!

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Other very offensive policies of aggression pursued by Alexander have been: 1. The employment of paid agents to influence legislators in favor of the oral method as more progressive and up-to-date than the well-tried manual method—whereas the manual is in fact the more modern of the two, and the only method under which satisfactory progress is possible with the whole body of the deaf. 2. His custom of picking out “orally-taught” pupils, who were well advanced in speaking and general education before they became deaf, or some miraculously endowed prodigy like Helen Keller, and trotting them out as examples of the superior results attained by the oral method—the fact being, in Helen Keller’s case at least, that all the foundations and most of the superstructure of her educational development were laid and erected by the manual method. Add to these offensive courses the course that he and his Volta Bureau have pursued in forcing out of the schools for the deaf the highly educated and peculiarly well-qualified deaf teachers, who were there finding the most fitting employment for their talents, and we have a list of aggressions which should seemingly satisfy the rancor of the most vindictive enemy of the deaf.

But the tale yet lacks a climax. Behold, then, the crowning achievement of Alexander the Aggressor, in the invention of the telephone! This is a performance for which, with the hearing world, he no doubt deserves unstinted credit. But the previous and later history of his dealings with the Children of Silence makes us almost believe it was prompted, not by scientific ambition, not by any desire to serve his fellows, but by a pure deviltry which found delight in inventing something which none of the deaf might use! Just think of the hundreds of thousands of jobs, many of which were before open to the deaf as well as to the hearing, but from which they are now excluded because they cannot use the ‘phone! As a contrivance for making the deaf man “feel small,” the telephone beats the world! And the glory thereof is the brightest jewel in the crown of Alexander the Aggressor.