POINTING THE FINGER: DEBATES ON DEAF SCHOOLS AND EDUCATION IN THE NINETEENTH AND EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY IRISH PUBLIC SPHERE

This article takes a historical look at the education of deaf children in Ireland in the century before independence, from the perspective of the public sphere. It will be argued that despite the wider debate in Europe and North America between proponents of use of sign language and supporters of 'oral' methods, this debate affected public discourse around Irish deaf schools to only a small degree. Instead, disputes between schools that occupied Irish headlines related to issues of religion, territorial rivalries, and especially the issue of residential education versus day-schooling for deaf children and language tuition. Ireland remained largely a country where sign language was widely used in deaf schools. However, one school, the Claremont Institution, changed its methodology to oral methods, and the article also examines some rare public expressions of discontent among deaf people around this new educational regime.

Keywords: deaf history, Irish Sign Language, deaf education, sign languages, deaf community

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INTRODUCTION

The history of education of deaf[1] children in nineteenth century Europe and North America is often viewed as centering on the prolonged debates between advocates of the 'manual method' (use of sign language) and the 'oral method' (focusing on teaching speech and use of residual hearing), with the latter gaining ground during the nineteenth century, and eventually becoming dominant in deaf schools worldwide during the twentieth century (Lane, 1989; Branson & Miller, 2002). This narrative forms a foundation for much of the historiography of deaf education and deaf communities during this period. This article builds upon an exploration of Irish deaf history in the article by Leonard (2023) to show that Ireland's experience diverged somewhat from this narrative; all but one of the major schools for deaf children continued to use either sign language (or a 'combined method'[2]) well into the twentieth century. It will also be shown that Ireland's public conversations about deaf education during this period were less to do with these methodological debates, than other factors – territorial rivalry, religion, and especially in the early half of the century, whether a residential institution for deaf children, or a 'day-school' approach, was the best approach. Nevertheless, some interesting exceptions existed where educational methodology became a central focus, and these will be described.

[1] Within this essay, I use the term *deaf* to refer both to individuals who experienced a prelingual or postlingual experience of a hearing loss, who may have attended schools specifically for deaf children (and who therefore were likely to have acquired and learned a signed language); I also use the term to refer to prelingually deaf individuals who may have been uneducated, but were likely to have used a form of sign language or gestural communication with friends, family and neighbours. I do not use the widespread 'deaf/Deaf' convention used to refer within the field of Deaf studies in the English language. This convention distinguishes 'culturally Deaf' individuals who use a sign language, and are part of a Deaf community, from 'deaf' individuals who are described as being deaf merely in an audiological sense; see for example Harlan L. Lane, Robert Hoffmeister and Benjamin J. Bahan, *A Journey into the Deaf-World* (San Diego, 1996). I instead follow, among others, researchers such as Annelies Kusters, Maartje De Meulder, and Dai O'Brien who note an emerging preference to use only "deaf", partially due to concerns about a rigid binary distinction between d/Deaf identities. Such a clear cut distinction would be "an oversimplification of what is an increasingly complex set of identities and language practices, and [this] multiple positionalities / multimodal language use ... is impossible to represent with a simplified binary." Very specifically, they feel that using Deaf is "anachronistic when writing about deaf history"; Annelies Kusters, Maartje De Meulder and Dai O'Brien, 'Innovations in Deaf Studies: Critically Mapping the Field' in Annelies Kusters, Maartje De Meulder and Dai O'Brien (eds), *Innovations in Deaf Studies: The Role of Deaf Scholars* (Oxford, 2017), pp 13–14. See also Cormac Leonard, 'Deaf People in Ireland: Education, Poverty, and the Law, 1851-1922' (Unpublished PhD thesis, Trinity College Dublin, 2023), pp 26–28.

[2] A popular set of teaching methods throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which combined vocal articulation and signing. See Jan Branson and Don Miller, *Damned for Their Difference: The Cultural Construction of Deaf People as 'disabled': a Sociological History* (Washington, D.C., 2002), pp 182–186.

DAY-SCHOOLING VS RESIDENTIAL

The first school for Irish deaf children, known as the National Institution for the Education of Deaf and Dumb[3] Children of the Poor, generally known as the Claremont institution (Pollard, 2006), opened in 1816, and maintained a position as the largest Irish school for deaf children until at least the 1850s. Other schools began to be established around the country throughout the nineteenth century. Figure 1 lists the schools established specifically to cater for deaf children during the period before Irish independence.[4]

Figure 1: Schools established for deaf children in Ireland, 1816 - 1922. (Taken from Leonard, 2023, p. 63)

Name of Institution	*Location*	*Year Opened*	*Year Closed*	*Religious Ethos*
National Institution for the Education of the Deaf and Dumb Poor (Claremont Institution)	Glasnevin, Dublin City	1816	1978	Church of Ireland
Cork Day School for the Deaf and Dumb	Cork City	1822	1846	[Non-denominational]
Devine's Private Seminary for the Deaf and Dumb	North Strand (later Ranelagh and Firhouse), Dublin	1825	unknown	Church of Ireland
Dublin Day School for the Deaf and Dumb	Dorset Institution, Dublin City	1826	1866	Church of Ireland
Belfast Day School (later Ulster Institution for the Deaf, Dumb and Blind)	Belfast, Co. Antrim / Down	1831	(still open)	Presbyterian / Church of Ireland
Kilrea school	Kilrea, Co Derry	1834	1836-7	Church of Ireland
Miss Wright's Deaf and Dumb Institution	Moneymore, Co. Derry	1842	1863	Church of Ireland
Derry and Raphoe Diocesan Institution for the Deaf and Dumb	Strabane, Co Tyrone	1846	1871	Church of Ireland
St Mary's School for Deaf Girls	Cabra, Dublin City	1846	(amalgamated)	Roman Catholic
St Joseph's, Prospect, Glasnevin	Glasnevin, Dublin City	1851	1857	Roman Catholic
St Joseph's School for Deaf Boys	Cabra, Dublin City	1857	(amalgamated)	Roman Catholic
St Marie of the Isle	Mercy convent, Cork City	1858	1900	Roman Catholic
St Joseph's Institution	Mercy convent, Rochfordbridge, Co Westmeath	1892	1940s	Roman Catholic
Castlewood College, Private Oral College for the Deaf	Rathmines, Dublin City	1903	unknown	Unclear

The most marked policy difference that initially exercised educators of deaf children was the question of which was a better fit for deaf children: residential institutions, or day-schooling. It was in fact dissatisfaction with central residential institutions specifically Claremont and calls for more local day-schooling, which were the impetus for the establishment of a number of Ireland's other deaf schools. Examples include Cork's Day School in 1822, another in Belfast in 1835, with another proposed for Limerick in 1839.[5] A Dublin Day School was established at 49 Sackville St (now O'Connell Street) under the auspices of the Dorset Institution. This establishment was, some years later, officially described by the Irish Census Commissioners (1854, p. 23) as a "preparatory school" for Claremont (and may indeed have functioned as such in later years). However, it was originally not formally associated with Claremont and was founded specifically for "children who could not find admission" to that school.

[3] Please note that in this article, terms currently considered offensive such as 'deaf and dumb' and 'deaf mute' are used in their proper historical context, in quotes from books or newspapers from the past, or within the names of institutions or organisations.

[4] Schools which catered predominantly for hearing children but partially also to deaf pupils, such as Hennessy's school in Cork City (see later in this article), have been omitted from this list.

[5] A 'Limerick Day School' was proposed at public meetings, funds were collected, and enquiries made in the press into the whereabouts of local deaf children, but the school appears never to have been established (see *Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb*, 1826, June 17; *Education of the Deaf and Dumb*, 1840, April 11.).

The Dublin Day School's first teacher was Samuel Gordon, a former Claremont teaching assistant (Pollard, 2006). Gordon was forthright in advocating for numerous provincial schools around Ireland for deaf children; there were simply not enough Irish deaf children being looked after in Claremont, he explained, compared to their numbers around the country, and he also supported their education alongside hearing children in their local schools, "without the necessity of their removal to a great distance from their homes" (Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb, 1826, May 27, p. 3). Gordon also believed that deaf children in residential institutions could not then benefit from mixing with hearing people, and consequently, the "artificial language" they learned (in other words, English) "is never used amongst themselves"; as a result "their progress [with English] is, and must naturally be, slow and deficient" (Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb, 1826, June 10, p. 3). Five years after starting to receive pupils, Gordon stated that "[e]xperience has shown the [Dublin Day School's] Committee, that as the eye is the principal inlet of knowledge to the deaf and dumb, the most effective mode of availing themselves of the advantages of it, is by constant intercourse with society, and the natural and consequent exercise of their curiosity"; this was far preferable to "plac[ing] him in an isolated house, where he meets none but his companions in misfortune, and sees little beyond the walls that encompass him" (Gordon, 1831, pp.10-11). Gordon had little faith in any benefits of deaf children socialising with each other; indeed he feared "the injury they sustain in their continual association with each other", a drawback that "every one admits" (Deaf and Dumb: to the Editor of the News-Letter, 1831, p. 4)

The committee of the Claremont school and its supporters were publicly ambivalent about the Dublin Day School's establishment. Gordon's public letters to newspapers outlining his views sparked replies defending Claremont, and the tone of correspondence became bitter. A disruptive scene at Claremont's annual meeting followed a few weeks later; Gordon publicly and angrily accused the Claremont committee, and specifically their secretary Charles Orpen, of failing to support the new Day School; comments from many attendees, however, showed a firm support for the residential approach, noting that pupils' interactions with each other in a institutional setting contained much educational value (Pollard, 2006; Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb, 1826, June 17; Deaf and Dumb Institution, 1826). Gordon later recalled the period as "the most illiberal and indeed malevolent opposition [to the Dublin Day School] by persons connected with the Claremont Institution" (Gordon, 1831, p. 7).

Belfast's deaf school was embroiled in a similar debate about which approach was superior. Many deaf pupils from Northern Ireland were sent to Claremont in Dublin to be educated during the 1820s. However, in 1824, a Belfast schoolmaster named William McComb had begun educating a young deaf boy named William Loudin locally, in his school at Brown Street. By using book plates from the Edinburgh Institution, McComb had been getting on well in educating Loudin (Belfast News Continued: Deaf and Dumb, 1825). Belfast proved to be fertile ground for the idea of local day schooling. In 1831, a Claremont pupil exhibition meeting in Belfast aimed at establishing a fundraising auxiliary group turned out badly when a deaf pupil being exhibited showed problems in responding to simple questions. This, together with concerns about the costs associated with educating children all the way down in Dublin, led some at the meeting to wonder aloud about establishing a local school instead (Deaf and Dumb, 1831, March 4).

Samuel Gordon, still smarting from his alleged treatment at the hands of Claremont, jumped at this opportunity, and urged Belfast to set up a day-school, offering to send them a teacher (Deaf and Dumb: to the Editor of the News-Letter, 1831). He delivered a series of lectures in deaf education to Belfast's citizens (McClelland 1965). The first of these was attended by none other than Orpen, accusing Gordon of having been "turned out of Claremont… for knocking down a pupil" (Deaf and Dumb – Mr. Gordon's Lecture, p. 2). Both William McComb and Charles Orpen of Claremont then began a correspondence in the *Belfast Newsletter* and *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, mostly in relation to whether Claremont was under an agreement with the Edinburgh school for deaf children to keep its pedagogical methods secret. Some weeks later, a Belfast Day School for the Deaf and Dumb was established, with George Gordon, brother of Samuel, as its first teacher (McClelland, 1965; Deaf and Dumb, 1831, May 17). New premises were open in College St in 1836, and then for the new Ulster Institute for the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind in 1845 at Lisburn Road.

Despite the early interest in local day-schools in Irish cities, however, as the nineteenth century wore on, the institutions to survive were those that offered boarding to pupils. The Cork Day School closed in 1846, and the Dublin Day School in 1866. Belfast's day-school changed its approach entirely; the school had struggled to get funding, and it was only when it began to also accept blind pupils and - significantly - accepted boarders, that it found its financial footing. While a day-school continued as part of the enterprise, the number of boarders soon far outnumbered day pupils (McClelland, 1965; Ulster Society, 1855). The schools at Cabra, Belfast and Claremont (and from 1892, Rochfortbridge, Co. Westmeath) became primarily residential institutions, concerned with maximising pupil numbers and therefore, income; interest in smaller local day-schools seemed to fade. Ironically, concerns around day-schooling versus centralised residential schools re-emerged – somewhat flipped around - when the Derry and Raphoe Diocesan School for the Deaf and Dumb opened in Strabane in 1846, leading a local correspondent to write that

> it would be much better for the deaf and dumb to be educated in a large institution - such as that of Belfast - than to be brought up in an institution like to that established in Strabane - where, from the limited sphere within which

> it is proposed to conduct its operations, the number of pupils must necessarily be few, where they must separate and be dispersed each day after school hours, and thus in a manner unlearn all that they have been previously taught. (Correspondence: Deaf and Dumb Society of Strabane, 1847).

TURF WARS

The preceding examples hint not just at genuine disagreements in whether residential versus day-school environments were preferable, but mixed with this, concerns to protect the number of pupils, and consequently, the amount of funding – be it from fees charged to parents, private charity, or poor law support – that schools benefitted from. Claremont was unable to accept more than a fraction of Ireland's deaf children due to limited funds, but when new schools became established, rather than hailing them as a welcome development for the field, they were sometimes the object of suspicion or criticism from Claremont. The education results of the Cork Day School for deaf children were dismissed contemptuously in the pages of Claremont's reports, and rather than multiple schools on a regional basis, Claremont urged the support of a single school – themselves (O'Shea, 2010 pp. 70-72). This could emerge on a regional basis too, and smaller schools might have to argue for their own existence; when the Derry and Raphoe Diocesan Institution opened in Strabane in 1846, a fierce correspondence followed between the school committee and a correspondent to the *Tyrone Constitution*, who wondered at the need for such an institution, given the existence of a "magnificent national one which has just been completed in Belfast". (Correspondence: Deaf and Dumb Institution in Strabane, 1847)

As the century progressed, some of the disagreements between schools were more clearly about defining regional spheres of influence. Claremont and the Ulster Institute came into conflict specifically in relation to the question of territory. After what had been described as a period of "mutual rivalry" (Arrangement between the Claremont and the Ulster Associations for the education of the deaf and dumb, 1846), an agreement between the two schools was reached in 1846, where henceforth Claremont would accept pupils only from the three provinces of Ireland outside Ulster; at the same time, an agreement was made to transfer, between the two schools, newer pupils coming from Ulster and outside Ulster to the appropriate institution (Ulster Society for Promoting the Education of the Deaf and Dumb and Blind, 1846).

A similar rivalry over financial 'turf' arose, though far less in the public eye, among Catholic deaf schools. At the time, local Boards of Poor Law Guardians were empowered by the Poor Relief (Ireland) Act 1843, Section 14 to contribute to the education of poor local deaf children (Leonard, 2023; Jones, 2023; Jordanstown School, 2007). Many of these Boards, all over the country, had developed long-standing funding relationships with deaf schools, particularly the Cabra schools in Dublin. The Catholic Cabra schools, St Mary's and St Joseph's were overseen by the Catholic Institution for the Deaf and Dumb (CIDD) and these residential institutions eventually became the largest schools for deaf children in the United Kingdom; they were also, until 1870, the only Catholic institution. However, in 1892, a new school for Catholic deaf girls, ran by the Sisters of Mercy, opened at Rochfortbridge, Co. Westmeath. There were some indications that St Mary's were not keen on their teachers transferring to other schools like Rochfortbridge (O'Connell, 2016). Rochfortbridge put much initial effort into persuading local Boards of Guardians to send prospective deaf pupils to Westmeath instead. A controversy on the issue developed in Drogheda, where the Guardians had approved sending all eligible deaf children in future to Rochfordbridge, and an agreement was made to withdraw deaf children from Cabra and transfer them. Drogheda Guardian R. J. Heeney was confused at this rupture in practice, believing it was "a slur on Cabra to take the children away" and asking that "the Board act with reason and common sense" (Drogheda Board of Guardians, 1892, October 8; Drogheda Board of Guardians, 1892, November 12). Nor were the parents of the children happy; the mother of Mary Jane McCabe wrote to the guardians that her daughter "was well treated at Cabra [and] she wished her to remain there; otherwise she herself would take charge of the child." (Drogheda Board of Guardians, 1892, 3 December)

WARS OF RELIGION

Behind some of the disagreements between deaf schools was a religious dimension, influenced by factors that were inescapable; in Ireland during this period, religion could not fail to be a source of contention within and between institutions more often than not established expressly to save souls and ensure deaf children had a knowledge of God. Indeed, the Catholic schools in Cabra had a foundation story which painted Claremont as a somewhat nefarious Protestant proselytising institution; the account of CIDD founder Fr Thomas McNamara was that he had witnessed a group of Claremont pupils walking past his church in Dublin, and their teacher signing that they would go to hell if they entered (McNamara, 1879)[6]. In fact, almost all of the Protestant-ethos schools in Ireland had been accused

[6] The question never seems to have arisen in Irish deaf historiography how McNamara - who had no knowledge of any sign language at this time - could possibly have interpreted this information correctly from what he saw the teacher signing.

of proselytism; accusations had also been levelled at the Belfast and Moneymore schools of accepting Catholic pupils and educating them in the Protestant religion (Correspondence, 1851; The Souper Abroad, 1858). One widely publicised 1852 case, for example, mentioned a Catholic deaf boy and girl named Shanahan, sent to Claremont by their father; when Shanahan heard his children were being educated as Protestants, he demanded him back, but in the case of his son Denis, this was refused by Claremont. The case ended up in the Court of Queens Bench, with Denis expressing a wish to stay at the school. The case generated much opprobrium from Catholic commentators (Pollard, 2006; Court of Queen's Bench – Saturday, 1852). Counter-claims came from Protestants about interference by Catholic priests and nuns in deaf pupils' religion (Pollard 2006, pp 185-92). An aspect less tangible was the presence of inter-denominational sectarian rivalry between Church of Ireland and Presbyterians, which underlay some of the rivalry between Claremont and the Ulster Institution, respectively (Arrangement between the Claremont and the Ulster Associations for the education of the deaf and dumb, 1846).

THE QUESTION OF METHODS

These themes (residential vs. day-schooling, religion, and territory) around deaf education were those mostly expressed in the Irish public sphere. Wider debates in Britain, Europe and North America around the use of sign language versus speech were reflected in some Irish press coverage, and sometimes, emerging oralist practice in other countries was occasionally pointed to as exciting and novel. But this did not translate into any kind of public appetite for a re-examination of Irish deaf education methods. For the most part, educational practice in Irish deaf schools (whether oral or manual) remained praised in a blanket fashion within the pages of Irish journals and newspapers.

There were some occasional glimpses in the press of strong views on the subject of methodology and language throughout this period. The Cork Day School, opened in 1822, may have used sign language (O'Shea, 2010, pp. 68-70). Another school in Cork City, run by Patrick Hennessy, offered private tuition to hearing and deaf children; however, Hennessy made it clear that the education there would be of a very different character. The school was established in 1833, in the Leitrim Street area, delivering "commercial and mathematical education", and its master "from time to time, having successfully educated some deaf and dumb Children, could accommodate a few Boarders of that description, who would enjoy in his family domestic care and parental kindness." (Leitrim-Street School: Commercial and Mathematical Education, 1834) Deaf pupils were, significantly, "not allowed to practise signs, mimickry or awkward gesticulation as in other Schools". Eight years later in 1847 Hennessy still emphasised that "Mute Scholars are initiated in a similar Course [as hearing pupils] … without using symbolical or awkward gesticulations as practised in other Schools" (Mr. Hennessy's School, Devonshire-St, Leitrim, 1839). This may have been a dig at the Cork Day School, which nevertheless seems to have outlasted Hennessy's experiment; he ceased advertising places for deaf pupils in Cork newspapers in 1848.

The 1880 Milan Congress of educators of deaf children has widely been pointed to as having both far-reaching and ominous consequences for the position of signed language in deaf education, and therefore to the quality of that education (Lane,1989). It is important to bear in mind however that this Congress at Milan merely passed a resolution, which schools around the world were under no obligation to follow; while influential, the resolution was far from decisive on the progress of oralism through deaf schools in the United Kingdom (Branson & Miller, 2002; Atherton, 2021). Of this momentous resolution, very little was said in the Irish press. The Catholic Institution for the Deaf and Dumb tersely referred to it only to insist that it was financially impossible to abandon the use of sign language in their classrooms at that time (Catholic Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, 1881, p. 17). Some oral instruction had begun in the Ulster Institution from 1878 under their principal Scott Hutton, but by the end of 1881, the school still insisted on caution and that radical changes would not be taking place just yet (Ulster Society for Promoting the Education of the Deaf and Dumb and Blind 1881, p.5; Maginn, 1905).

More immediately influential for Britain and Ireland was a Royal Commission, established in 1885, which began to inquire into the education of deaf and blind children, among others. The Commission's final report in 1889 declared that oralism should wherever possible be adopted in deaf schools in Great Britain and Ireland (Royal Commissioners, 1889; Lysons, 1973). The Commission seemed particularly disappointed by failure in Ireland to keep up with international oralist trends, and critically observed the "less advanced character" of Irish deaf education in this regard. By 1889 in Ireland, the "pure oral system has made but little progress, and is at present practised only in the Claremont school, and even there to a very limited extent" (Royal Commissioners, 1889, p. cxvii).

In Ireland as a whole, the Commission's recommendations did not translate to new educational policy; indeed, in response to the report, a group of British and Irish deaf school principals dissented publicly - revealing a broadly similar Irish stance, with signatories including Br. Reddington of St Joseph's in Cabra, Mother Maher of St Mary's, and James Bryden of the Ulster Institute. The letter expressed a hope "that the pure Oral Method will not become the general system of instruction throughout the United Kingdom". While signatories felt that speech and lip-reading

could be taught as extra subjects to pupils showing aptitude for such instruction, they continued to support the "Combined Method" - i.e. the bulk of instruction carried on by "the finger alphabet and signs". (Deaf Mute Education, 1889; E. A. F. 1890). In defiance, then, of the Milan resolutions and Royal Commission recommendations – or perhaps more accurately, in dismissal of them - sign language in some form remained present in deaf classrooms as far as Ireland was concerned.

Some Irish developments showed an adherence, however, to worldwide trends towards the oral approach. The school at Claremont was the one deaf school in Ireland that followed the direction deaf schools were following worldwide after Milan and the Royal Commission report. They changed over rapidly to an oral system of teaching in 1882 (Pollard, 2006). Yet the switchover's success, according to contemporaries, was questionable. A long-time Claremont supporter, Revd. H.H. Dickinson, gave evidence to the Royal Commission in 1887, and stated that five years after the change in approach, he was not at all convinced of its success, commenting that deaf pupils had seemed far happier under the signing system (Royal Commissioners, 1889, pp 644-5). The change also led to public criticism from deaf leaders themselves. A nameless contributor to the *Irish Ecclesiastical Gazette* in 1885 stated that the new oral system was "almost useless" but yet "our dear old Claremont institution, that did so much good long ago, is now actually prohibiting the use of the finger and sign language among its pupils" (Dublin Deaf and Dumb Association, 1885). Maurice Hewson, a deaf Protestant missioner closely associated with ex-pupils of Claremont, questioned the new approach's effectiveness:

> When I am informed by my speaking friends that they cannot understand (except with great difficulty) the unearthly sounds of a deaf mute orally taught, and when I also find my poor deaf mute brother unable to understand from the lips what a gentleman speaks slowly and distinctly, it is time to object to this lazy system. Let the oral system be taught in addition to the old system if you wish… I… wish to have my deaf mute brethren able to communicate with their friends (The Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb, 1885).

Claremont adopted an inflexible attitude to its oral methodology, and in 1908, this led to public criticism in the press. A young deaf boy, Norman Dormer, was sent to Claremont by the Rathdown Board of Guardians, but was rejected from the school - apparently because his conduct was incompatible with their oralist approach to teaching. The following month, a request was made to the Rathdown Board on behalf of another Protestant deaf boy named Frederick Thompson for assistance in sending him to Claremont, but some Guardians were set against any such course of action owing to the recent treatment of young Dormer (Rathdown Guardians, 1908, September 26). There followed strong and sustained criticism by the Guardians of Claremont's decisions and methodologies, reproduced and added to in the local Wicklow and Dublin press. One Guardian, Thomas Hewson - brother of Maurice Hewson, and someone with a good deal of experience of deaf people – strongly criticised Claremont's methods: "The whole cause of the trouble was the attempt … initiated some 25 years ago, which was the compulsory education of the deaf and dumb under one - the oral - system… So keen were the managers of the Institution about the oral system that if they believed any boy was not an apt pupil, he was condemned and sent out." Hewson's criticisms revealed the influence of a social class dimension in the transition to oralism: "The oral system [was] in great favour among the upper classes, because their [deaf] children could sit in the parlour, smile and nod with the rest, and pass unheeded; but it was not the system best adopted to the greater portion of the community" (Rathdown Guardians, 1908, October 3). Francis Maginn, a well known deaf leader and missioner in Belfast, urged the Rathdown guardians to send Dormer to the Lisburn Road school, a request that was eventually granted (The Claremont Institution. Discussion at Rathdown Board of Guardians, 1908; Rathdown Board of Guardians, 1908). The incident even spurred the deaf community of Belfast to send a public letter of support to the Rathdown Guardians, in which they censured Claremont and declared that its "system … is in narrowness pernicious to the mental development of children" (Rathdown Poor Law Union, 1908). This was a rare example indeed of a high-profile Irish debate on deaf education methodologies.

Elsewhere, there were independent Irish oralist private tutors who advertised in the press, and more significantly, there was Castlewood College - a school ran by Walter Newburn in the 1910s in Rathmines (Pollard, 2006). In Newburn's approach, "Speech, Lipreading and Writing are taught simultaneously; no signs and no finger alphabet are allowed: these are fatal to the acquirement of perfect speech and Lipreading" (Newburn, 1909, p.9). However, it is important not to exaggerate the importance of these developments. Newburn's private oral school seems to have been short-lived. Meanwhile, pupil numbers at Claremont were in almost continual decline during this period. The Ulster school contained more pupils than Claremont by at least 1861, and Claremont's remained below thirty from the 1890s onwards (Leonard, 2023). The school's influence had waned considerably, and its new oralist approach from the 1880s did not reflect Irish deaf education more generally.

The Irish Catholic deaf educational scene functioned quite separately from that of Irish Protestant communities (Leonard, 2023), but was united internally in terms of methodology; Rochfortbridge used sign language until its closure in the 1940s. English Catholic deaf educators may have supported oralism, but not in Ireland; in 1887, Fr Thomas McNamara, co-founder of the Catholic Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, initiated a heated correspondence

in the *Irish Ecclesiastical Record* with Edward Dawson, his opposite number in the Catholic oral school in Boston Spa, Yorkshire. McNamara forcefully listed the advantages of the 'sign method' and criticised oral education on a number of fronts (McNamara, 1887a; 1887b; 1887c; & 1887d; Dawson 1887a; 1887b). However, even Dawson had to conclude after witnessing a Cabra public examination of pupils in 1881 "that in the matter of education, as well as perhaps in all other matters, it stood first among all the public schools for the deaf and dumb in the kingdom" (Dawson, 1887a).

In the decades after joining their peers in rejecting the Royal Commission in 1889, the Cabra schools seemed happy to adhere to their long tradition of sign language-based education, the success of which had been recognised and praised for decades by the likes of Dawson and others. The granting of Irish independence and the new Irish Free State seemed happy to continue to allow deaf schools to decide their own approach. Cabra's position as a deaf school using sign language seemed secure by the 1940s, and this afforded the Catholic deaf community with a good deal of educational and linguistic continuity. Indeed, to some male ex-Cabra pupils, the addition of oral classes was looked upon with some amusement, and written off as a mere novelty or fad. Some letters from deaf ex-pupils on the topic during the 1940s display an amused and dismissive tone to its usefulness; Peter J. Kelly wrote in 1942 that he had

> always had very poor opinion of those taught on [the oral] system. Indeed they are to be pitied. Generally they are very backward in expressing their ideas in words or sentences... What good are those lip readings [*sic*] when they leave school? No one outside understands them... Fancy trying to pretend to have what we have not been blessed with (Kelly 1942).

Yet from the 1940s, educational practice in the Cabra schools began to change completely, first in St Mary's and then in St Joseph's, in ways that Peter Kelly could never have envisaged, and the effects of these changes on the language and education of Irish deaf people are still being discussed, and indeed, experienced to this day.

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