

Veditz's Obituary for Alexander Graham Bell

The Jewish Deaf October 1922, pp. 13-15

De Moruis Nil Nisi Bonum

[About the Dead Men Say Nothing Unless Good]

By George W. Veditz

Alexander Graham Bell is dead.

He was one of the greatest benefactors of the human race. Through his invention he added to the span of life of every inhabitant of civilized countries where telephone is used, for whatever contrivance saves time adds to one's hours of life and there is perhaps no greater time-saver than the telephone. The young man or woman of twenty-five years of today has lived more, has seen and experienced more than the ancient champion exemplar of longevity who, tradition says, saw the seasons change and re-change nine hundred and sixty-nine times. The telephone, by saving countless steps, countless minutes has been among the agencies that made this possible.

When one stops to analyze the thousand and one ways in which the telephone enters into our daily life one is amazed. It is one of the modern wonders of the world. The seven wonders of the old time world were the products of thousands of toilers, often driven by the lash, but our modern miracles were the achievement of single brains. Beginning with the invention of gunpowder by the monk Berthold Schwarz and of the art of printing by John Gutenberg, of Mayence, through the successive advancements of the race marked by steamship, the automobile and aeroplane: the telegraph, and its children, the telephone, phonograph and radio; Daguerre's invention and its latest development, the cinema; each had its birth in an idea, an ideal, sprung from some single mind.

The achievement of the telephone is Bell's alone. It has been improved and perfected by the discoveries and suggestions of others, but the fundamental idea of conveying speech and sound over long distance was Bell's, and for this conception the world will everlastingly remain his debtor. The world rewarded him with a large fortune, but many, many times short of the service rendered. It was fitting that when his body was lowered into the rock-hewn grave at Beinn Bhreagh, the thirteen million telephonic tongues in the United States should be silent for the space of sixty seconds. That they, like the tongue of their originator, should become everlastingly silent, would be a calamity.

By giving it the telephone Alexander Graham Bell became one of the world's greatest uplifters. As such those who cannot hear join those who can hear in paying tribute to his name and memory.

It should be added that a more courteous, affable gentleman never existed, nor one possessed of a character more flawless.

The deaf as a class have had little cause to love him because of the nature of his interference in their affairs. Neither his great inventor nor his great wealth rendered him infallible, but the fame of the one and the glamour of the other made him the most powerful and influential figure in America deaf-mute education for thirty years past.

He chose to use this wealth and influence along lines that have been constantly condemned by the great mass of the educated deaf of our country.

He denied these educated deaf the privilege to decide which methods and means of education were best for the younger generation of their kind.

In this respect he was like the pigeon that defends its nest but not its eggs or young. He was concerned more with the manner of their education than with the deaf themselves.

He never attended their conventions or meetings for their own sake and to joy in the evidence they afforded for the advancement of the class.

He interfered with their personal liberties by trying to prevent their intermarriage. The deaf would have accepted the findings contained in his famous brochure "A Deaf Variety of the Human Race" with equanimity and would have listened to its deductions had it been presented to them with any measure of kindly tact, but when, before submitting it to the deaf themselves, he submitted it as a Memorial to Congress with the undisguised suggestion that federal laws be enacted to prevent such marriage, he failed absolutely of the accomplishment of his purpose. Nevertheless the deaf are today more alive, perhaps, to the dangers of the intermarriage of certain case among them than any others. Their own common sense will lead to the consummation of the purpose Bell desired, and this without any of the undesirable publicity and stigma the manner Dr. Bell's presentation to Congress of his Memorial brought about.

But the bitterest resentment of the deaf was brought about by Dr. Bell's interference in their educational system.

He did not invent the oral method. It existed nearly one hundred years before Bell was born. Nevertheless the propaganda given this method at Bell's instance has taught the great American public to believe that this method is a new, a very recent discovery.

He founded the Volta Bureau with the purpose of subsidizing this propaganda. In 1894 he hired the late Dr. Philip Goode Gillett, then ranking with Edward Miner Gallaudet as the greatest of American educators of the deaf to tour the country and use his persuasive arguments and eloquence to induce the heads of our schools to adopt the oral method. It was not so much the education of the deaf, per se that Dr. Bell was interested in as the oral method.

He literally sought to Prussianize our deaf school system.

He failed.

For the rest he manifested but small interest in the actual affairs of the deaf.

He was invited to attend a great national convention and with other leading advocates of his tenets to meet an equal number of leading deaf in a discussion of his method.

He declined.

He was invited to contribute to the Endowment Fund of the National Association of the Deaf.

He declined.

He was invited to contribute to the Moving Picture Fund of this Association.

He declined.

Finally as evidence of his utter ignorance of the processes obtaining in our American schools for the deaf I will quote the following excerpt from a letter written me in answer to one which I asked a delineation of his position on certain resolution adopted by the World Congress of the Deaf at St. Louis in 1904, and re-iterated at the Convention of the National Association at Norfolk in July 1907. I may later on publish this letter in full:

“You hold that the sign-language should also be employed in schools for the deaf; though why deaf children should be obliged to learn two distinct languages which one is sufficient, your resolution fails to state. In my opinion necessity alone could justify this and necessity has not been shown.”

Had Dr. Bell been at all familiar with our American schools for the deaf, he would have known that our pupils are OBLIGED to learn but one language, and that language is English. He would have known that the sign language is never taught in our school-rooms. He would have known that in Combined System schools the only persons really trying to LEARN the sign-language are or were hearing persons, desiring to acquire the best and readiest means of thought-conveyance to the deaf. He would not have been blind to the fact that even in “pure” oral schools is a sign-language always exists, used surreptitiously when the taskmasters are not looking.

Dr. Bell’s influence upon the American deaf has been negative. They would have welcomed him with open arms and gloried in his interest in them had this interest been expressed in a manner they could approve. He did not choose this last.

‘Tis true, ’tis pity; Pity ’tis, ’tis true.