

Fighting In The Shadows: Untold Stories Of Deaf People In The Civil War

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Review

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Lang, Harry G. *Fighting in the Shadows: Untold Stories of Deaf People in the Civil War*. Gallaudet University Press, \$39.95 ISBN 9781563686801

Out of the Shadows: Deaf People and the Civil War

Harry G. Lang's *Fighting in the Shadows: Untold Stories of Deaf People in the Civil War* is an impressive text even before one lifts the cover. Large and heavy, the size of a coffee table book, a quick flip through the pages reveals beautiful formatting, with numerous photographs and images of primary source material.

But the design isn't the only impressive thing about this book. Lang, scientist-turned-historian and Professor Emeritus at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at the Rochester Institute of Technology, has skillfully woven together dozens of stories from and about deaf and hard of hearing Americans who lived through the Civil War. Lang is right to point out that the history of deaf people during the Civil War era is almost entirely untold, and while historians have, on occasion, acknowledged the deafness of certain individuals, no one has used deafness as the central focus of inquiry into the era. This volume is clear proof of Douglas Baynton's maxim that disability history is everywhere, if only we look for it.¹

The book deftly charts the many interconnections between historical themes – reform, education, combat, and disability, to name a few – that are typically treated as independent. For example, the first chapter of the book explores the links between the antebellum deaf education movement and abolition. Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, the hearing educator and early proponent of sign language, served as a kind of interpreter for the enslaved men tried for the *Amistad* uprising. Gallaudet spent days in the jail, working with the West African men to develop a sign language they could use to overcome their language barrier. Harriet Martineau, the British writer, thinker, and abolitionist, lost most of her hearing at age twelve, which William Lloyd Garrison saw as a positive, at least

when it came to the criticism she received in the United States for her politics: “Miss Martineau, by being deaf, is not troubled with the gabble of voluble tongues.”(9) Further, Lang includes the ways that deafness was used strategically, especially by escaping slaves such as William and Ellen Craft, who posed as deaf master and hearing servant to escape bondage. Such stories demonstrate just how interconnected deaf activism and abolition were in the years before the Civil War.

The book includes some real revelations – to me, anyway. The “wig-wag” system of communicating with flags used by the U. S. Signal Corps, was first developed as a communication device for the deaf by Albert James Myer, a hearing man, who later adapted the system for use by the military. Frank Beard, war-time cartoonist and illustrator, was deaf. John Wilkes Booth learned a bit of sign language to communicate with his friend Laura Redden, largely so that she could help him write love poetry for his fiancé. Confederate James Longstreet’s unshakeable calm may have stemmed from superior resolve, but it could also have been because his partial deafness inured him from some of the chaos of battle. The famous (infamous?) South Carolina fire-eater Edmund Ruffin believed his intense depression after the Confederate defeat was partly the result of his deafness, writing that “no one who is not as deaf as myself can conceive the miserable condition of isolation, & virtual exclusion from conversation & all personal social intercourse, in which I have been paced & confined by that infirmity.” (165)

Tales like these are both the strength and weakness of *Fighting in the Shadows*. The stories demonstrate that though historians may see Civil War history and disability history as distinct fields, they overlap and interconnect in critically important ways. By exploring the experiences of average deaf people and by placing focus on the deafness of well-known figures, Lang reminds us that disabled experiences and disabled people are an integral part of the history of the Civil War era. The many stories in the volume can also be something of a weakness, however, as the book sometimes feels packed with trivia without a central organizing thesis other than the desire point out the presence and importance of these figures. But as so many of these stories have heretofore gone untold, that in itself is a worthy goal, and the resulting book is a pleasure to read and to display.

Sarah Handley-Cousins is a historian and writer living in Buffalo, New York.

¹ Douglas Baynton, “Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History,” in *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, eds. Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky. (New York: New York University Press, 2001).