

ULSTER HISTORY CIRCLE



FRANCIS MAGINN (1861-1918)

Maginn was born in Mallow, County Cork on 21 April 1861. His father was a Church of Ireland vicar. At 5 Maginn became deaf due to scarlet fever and his father sent him to the famous Royal London Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb on Old Kent Road, where he excelled. At age 17 he was offered a junior teachership in the Royal London Asylum's Margate Branch where he remained for five years. He went to the National Deaf Mutes College at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C.. America had a profound effect on Maginn, who felt he now had the ability to achieve a higher level of attainment. As a result of his three years at Gallaudet Maginn felt that the British approach to deafness was one of injustice and that his life's work would be to enhance the quality of life of the deaf in the United Kingdom.

Maginn returned to the Ireland in 1882, and became president of the first British association to further the cause of the deaf and dumb. While it recruited 239 members, it failed in 1889. A Royal Commission on the Blind and Deaf & Dumb (1887-1889) proposed to standardise the education of 'handicapped' people. The legislation supported the use of the 'pure oral method' of education and discouraged deaf people from marrying for fear of producing a 'deaf race'. Rev. William B. Sleight, the chair of the British Deaf & Dumb Association sat on the commission and signed it in 1889 with reservations.

In January 1890, a national conference for the deaf was held in St Saviour's Church for the deaf in London. Here, Maginn presented his views for improving the deaf education system in Britain. He proposed forming a National Association for the Deaf, and said that the American "Combined Methods" education system, which incorporated fingerspelling, signed English, lipreading and Manualism approaches that facilitated oral communication in the deaf such as Total Communication combined with sign language, works and should be brought to the UK.

The conference agreed that there should a representative association for the deaf community in the British Empire. It was named the "British Deaf And Dumb Association." Although Maginn argued against it the steering group agreed to allow hearing members who took an active interest in the welfare of the deaf, provided they were proposed by five deaf people. Maginn hotly disagreed with this decision, objecting to the idea of the "benevolent paternalism" of the hearing friends of the deaf. The Association championed for the use of sign language in deaf schools rather than just Pure Oral Systems. The Association was formed in Leeds with William Sleight, a hearing man, being elected Chairman. Maginn was given the role of regional vice-president; an honorary position with no real powers, which was a blow to his confidence. Maginn gradually withdrew from the Association and concentrated his energy on Ulster Institute for the Deaf.

Despite his failure to challenge the attitudes among deaf missionaries in the UK and Ireland, he gave up went back to Belfast to focus on his work as the Superintendent at the Ulster Institute for the Deaf where he was much appreciated by Ulster's deaf community. He died in Belfast in 1918.

Location of plaque: Wilton House, 5 College Square North, Belfast

[The Ulster History Circle erects blue plaques in public places throughout the province to commemorate people who have made a significant contribution to the community locally, regionally or in the wider world. Not all are well known and many have been forgotten in the place where they were born or worked.]