

Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Annie M. Sullivan, January 21, 1892

Washington , D.C., January 21, 1892. Miss H. M. SULLIVAN, Teacher of Helen Keller ,
Perkins Institution for the Blind, South Boston, Mass .

Dear Miss Sullivan :—Allow me to thank you for the privilege of reading your account of how you taught Helen Keller, which you have prepared for the second edition of the Souvenir issued by the Volta Bureau. Your paper is full of interest to teachers of the deaf, and it contains many valuable and important suggestions.

I am particularly struck by your statement that you gave Helen books printed in raised letters “ *long before she could read them,*” and that “*she would amuse herself for hours each day in carefully passing her fingers over the words, searching for such words as she knew ,*” etc.

I consider that statement as of very great significance and importance when I try to account for her wonderful familiarity with idiomatic English. She is such an exceptional child that we are apt to attribute every thing to her marvellous mind, and forget that language comes from without, and not from within. She could not intuitively arrive at a knowledge of idiomatic English expressions. It is absolutely certain that such expressions must have been *taught to her* before she could use them; and if you can show us how it was done, teachers of the deaf all over the world will owe you a debt of gratitude.

The great problem in the education of the deaf is the teaching of idiomatic language.

I am sure that instructors of the deaf will support me in urging you to tell us all you can as to the part played by books in the instruction of Helen Keller. We should like to form an

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idea of the quantity and quality of the reading-matter presented for her examination “long before she could read the books.”

How much time did she devote to the examination of language which she could not understand, in her search for the words that she knew? I would suggest that you give us a list of the books she has read, arranging them, as well as you can, in the order of presentation. Teachers of the deaf find great difficulty in selecting suitable books for their pupils; and I am sure they would thank you especially for the names of those books that have given Helen pleasure, and have proved most profitable in her instruction.

You say, “ *I have always talked to Helen as I would to a seeing and hearing child, and have insisted that others should do the same,* ” etc. I presume you mean by this that you talked *with your fingers* instead of your mouth; that you spelled into her hand what you would have spoken to a seeing and hearing child. You say that you have “always' done this. Are we to understand that you pursued this method from the very beginning of her education, and that you spelled complete sentences and idiomatic expressions into her hand *before she was capable of understanding the language employed?* If this is so, I consider the point to be of so much importance that I would urge you to elaborate the statement, and make your meaning perfectly clear and unmistakable.

Yours very sincerely Alexander Graham Bell