

The Dyslexia Archive: Introducing a New Project in the History of Dyslexia

Robert Evans

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First, a word about my own place in the enterprise to be described below. I'm an outsider to dyslexia studies. My career was in history teaching and research, and nowadays in retirement I remain passionate about my subject, as a whole approach to life. Hence my belief that the history of dyslexia matters.

Why dyslexia? I'm not dyslexic myself (at least, I didn't think I was till I started word-processing!), though I have close friends who are. At Oxford University I had experience of it – especially as an examiner, marking scripts which carried a disability coversheet (but we were told to take no notice of it in the mark we awarded). Some of those scripts displayed real imagination and creativity. Professional enquiry into the history of linguistic interplay, from Wales to Eastern Europe, sensitized me to the often contested issues of language acquisition in relation to pedagogy, society, and politics. I've had long experience of primary schools, with their wide range of special needs and reading difficulties. Lately I've been helping to fund local projects to help children enjoy books.

So, on a hunt for new challenges, I've linked up with colleagues and experts (of whom more later) who propose to explore the history of dyslexia: its study, its treatment, and the debates and arguments to which it has given rise. The topic is, we find, surprisingly neglected. Of course some valuable scholarly work exists; but it is scanty, rather dry, and little related to current concerns, or to other kinds of historical development which might have a bearing on it. One kind of ready testimony to that comes from the websites of dyslexia institutions, which tell us so little about their own history. Another is provided by the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Of its 60,000 entries 12 include mention of 'dyslexia', and 10 of 'dyslexic'. Even among those, only two deal with a professional who worked in the field: Macdonald Critchley (1900-97), 'neurologist'; and Jean Augur (1934-93), 'educationist'.

We're just at the start of the project, but it's already clear that it affords fascinating prospects, precisely *because* the condition that we now generally call dyslexia has evolved in such protean ways. The body of evidence which we plan to collect and examine promises to be correspondingly elusive, disparate and controverted. There have been chronic problems of definition, wide varieties of response, and a gamut of implications and impacts. It's therefore no bad thing, maybe, if some of us come to the field with so little prior knowledge or presuppositions. I'll outline **four** investigative strands in our planned activity.

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The **first** strand in what we propose is a proper exploration of milestones in the classification and interpretation of children's reading difficulties. Let me remind you of a few key episodes and give you the flavour of them. It all began with medics. In Britain the conventional date is 7 November 1896, a Saturday, when William Pringle Morgan, an Irish-trained GP who had settled at the thriving little resort of Seaford, on the sunny south coast of England, published a brief note about the case of a 14-year-old boy with 'congenital word blindness'. In fact a Scottish ophthalmologist had already picked up on the same issue. James Hinshelwood described similar cases around grey industrial Glasgow, and reflected on the brain damage or deficiency that caused them – it was he who first realized that such trouble with words did not necessarily involve trouble with figures as well.

But it's time to remind you too that the subject was always an international one. A German clinician, Adolph Kussmaul, had already identified 'word blindness' (he thought it sounded better in Latin: *caecitas verbalis*) in the 1870s. Kussmaul was good at coining words – he invented the name Biedermeier for the central-European decorative style that had surrounded him in the bourgeois households of his youth. Another German, Rudolf Berlin, an ophthalmologist settled in Stuttgart, first used the term 'Dyslexie' in 1887: he defined it as 'Erschwerung des Lesens [durch] materielle Erkrankung des Gehirns', an 'aggravation of reading through material disease of the brain'. And the next breakthrough also came from abroad: the initiatives in the USA from the 1920s associated especially with the neurologist Samuel Torrey Orton and

his notion of ‘strephosymbolia’ i.e. the phenomenon of misread and malformed words (metathesis etc).

That introduced a phase of increasingly subtle, but also increasingly controversial findings. Psychiatric and then pedagogic approaches led in time to what came to be called verbal and phonological deficit analysis. But everywhere this was still rather low-level activity: random and uncoordinated, so far as I can see, and with little link to schooling or the practical needs of children. Meanwhile the pioneers had been largely forgotten: Pringle Morgan’s obituary in the *British Medical Journal* 38 years after his original piece in the very same periodical didn’t even mention his interest in dyslexia.

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After World War II the conceptual history of dyslexia began to combine with institutional forms: bodies that worked to address the needs of sufferers and to exert pressure on their behalf. This brings me to a **second** research strand: the sociology and politics of dyslexia. In the USA the legacy of Orton lived on: an eponymous Society was founded after his death which soon thereafter renamed itself the International Dyslexia Association. It published the first professional journal in the field, entitled initially *Bulletin of the Orton Society*, then from 1955 – using a good historians’ word – *Annals of Dyslexia*.

In the UK the 1960s and 1970s proved to be foundation decades. We need to ask what was the wider explanation for that. A key initiative came from the long-standing Invalid Children’s Aid Association (it had been founded back in 1888, with the motto ‘to every child a chance’), which set up a Word Blind Centre in 1962. Though the terminology was traditional, several of its outcomes were novel and enduring. Sandhya Naidoo worked there and gained the experience to produce her influential text on *Specific Dyslexia* in 1972. Tim Miles also worked there; he and his wife Elaine then moved to Bangor to set up their path-breaking Welsh dyslexia centre. Marion Welchman too, one of the first to examine dyslexia in the family situation, proceeded from the Word Blind Centre to act as chief founder of the British Dyslexia Association in 1972.

Meanwhile, in those busy decades, Margaret Newton grappled with dyslexia from 1965 as a lecturer at the new Aston University where she evolved the innovative Aston Index. In London the speech therapist Bevé Hornsby founded her International Dyslexia Centre, and Helen Arkell in 1971 set up the institute which took her name, and later moved out to her home village, Frensham in Surrey. That was likewise the county – and one wonders why – which supplied the operating base for the Dyslexia Institute. It was established in 1972, the same year as the BDA.

All this activity dynamized understanding of the importance of social, environmental and cultural factors for diagnosis and treatment of dyslexia. In that respect it coincided with novel research on reading difficulties, like that conducted around 1970 with all 10-year-olds on the Isle of Wight. Much enquiry came to be made into family circumstances and their relation to community and schooling, and into linkage with co-occurring disorders and handicaps. That was evidently part of the new world of social intervention from the 1960s and also, since most of the names I've been citing are female, of the women's movement of the day. There's a chapter to write here in the changing history of gender relations: about middle-class women who still had time on their hands, but already nursed new ambitions for a public role.

Much of this endeavour looks like fragmented enterprise, seeking individual and local remedies. But increasingly there was also concerted action in the public sphere. The first mention of the cause in British legislation seems to be in the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act of 1970, which made some provision for what it called *acute* dyslexia (only). Then came the lengthy Warnock Report in 1978 on 'The Education of Handicapped Children and Young People', which acknowledged that 'public awareness of dyslexia and autism is due largely to voluntary effort'. Full government recognition was achieved as late as 1994. The most important outcome of that has been the Rose Review, actually two separate evaluations, one about phonics, and then a larger one on 'identifying and teaching children and young people with dyslexia and literacy difficulties', which reported in 2009.

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Our **third** strand is the experience of dyslexia: case-studies, memoirs, reports of symptoms and treatments. There have been some detailed and colourful accounts

from the very beginning. One of Hinshelwood's almost illiterate lads in the early 1900s was football-mad: every week he read a magazine called *Referee* and thus learned to recognize complicated vocabulary like 'goalkeeper', 'forwards', and 'dribbling'.

Of course we have by now plenty of reminiscences, some of them classic texts by dyslexics and their parents or teachers: examples are Helen Arkell's multilingual story and Tim Miles' circumstantial narrative of his career. However, we need *contexts* too, to establish the typicality of some paradigms as well as the individuality of personal experiences. Potentially there is scope for an oral history sub-project focused especially on 'survivors': witnesses to past campaigns, teaching methods, diagnostic tools and the like.

That leads me to the **fourth** and final strand: the Archive itself. We seek to build up a collection of documents relating to all three areas of dyslexia study:

- a/ a record of published and unpublished contributions to the theoretical and practical debates;
- b/ materials for the history of relevant institutions, including centres and schools, campaigns, policy statements, reports, and so on; and
- c/ written and oral testimony of individuals affected by, or involved with, dyslexia.

We have already made a start, by assembling some important papers relating, e.g., to the London Word Blind Centre (and we've been negotiating with the Miles Centre at Bangor too). We already have interviews with, e.g., Mary Warnock, Elaine Miles, Sandhya Naidoo, and Helen Arkell.

The Archive will be housed (initially at least) at St John's College Oxford. Subject only to requirements of confidentiality – and we shall look to its professional archivist for guidance on the latest data-protection and related issues – the items will be available to all scholars, practitioners and the interested public. We shall exploit this documentary base to show, as best we can, the relevance and utility of a historical perspective in making better sense of the significant movement with which you're all involved. And that, we hope, might also help build a more rigorous and coherent case for dyslexia in the competition for funds and public influence.

Finally the team. There will be an establishment of four, all based at St John's.

- Maggie Snowling – a psychologist who is especially interested in the nature and causes of children's reading difficulties and how best to ameliorate them (the archive owes its inception to her initiative).
- Kate Nation – an experimental psychologist who leads a team researching into language and cognitive development, especially into children's reading difficulties.
- William Whyte – a historian of modern Britain, in particular its social and cultural aspects.
- Ian Miller – a historian of medicine, notably of medical ethics.

The newest member of the team is Ian Miller, just appointed to a post-doctoral position from a strong field. From autumn 2016 he will devote himself full-time to the project for two years, under the institutional aegis of the Oxford University History Faculty. His priorities for these 'scoping' years are still being established: they will include networking and conferences; building a website and other forms of publicity; and bidding for larger grants in the future.

The Dyslexia Archive is envisaged as a national project in the first instance. We already have associates in this country: Steve Chinn, a very well-known practitioner, and Victoria Murphy, an expert in bilingual and second-language learning. But we need to be sensitive from the outset to the project's international setting, to the very different paradigms displayed elsewhere by the history – and the non-history – of dyslexia (or however it has been described locally). We shall seek collaboration with any equivalent enterprises abroad, especially in relation to the multilingual and interlingual aspects of the subject. Meanwhile I append a **questionnaire** which summarizes our immediate aspirations and invites responses to an initial appeal for assistance.

Questionnaire

The History of Dyslexia Project at the University of Oxford

Dyslexia is the subject of intensive research by psychologists and educationalists. It has not, however, been studied by historians. Yet dyslexia has a history, even if it is one that has yet to be told. The first paper was published in the British Medical Journal in 1896, and in the last fifty years there have been significant advances both in understanding its causes and in finding ways of remediating it. At the same time, people with dyslexia and, still more, the parents of children who are dyslexic have campaigned for better treatment. Both these trends have shaped public policy and practice in schools. There is also a history to be written about the experience of being dyslexic.

This project is a collaboration between psychologists Kate Nation and Maggie Snowling and the historians Robert Evans, Ian Miller and William Whyte. It is funded jointly by The John Fell Fund and The Wellcome Trust Institutional Strategic Support Fund at the University of Oxford.

At the heart of this research is the dyslexia archive. It is an attempt to provide the first repository of material relating to the subject. This already includes the archives of pioneering experts on dyslexia, and a series of oral testimonies. We hope to build on this with the acquisition of new material, and would be very grateful for your help in expanding this resource.

Your name:

Your contact details:

Archival material (letters, files, conference proceedings, etc) which you could make available:

Suggestions for individuals we should interview:

Suggestions for groups, institutions, organizations, or specialists schools we should contact:

Any other comments.

Please return to William.whyte@sjc.ox.ac.uk or Professor William Whyte, St John's College, Oxford, OX1 3JP. If you do not wish to be contacted by us again, please tick this box