

Disability History Association Podcast
Interview with Philippa Campsie
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Caroline Lieffers: Hello and welcome to another episode of the Disability History Association Podcast. I'm Caroline Lieffers.

Kelsey Henry: And I'm Kelsey Henry.

Caroline Lieffers: And it is our pleasure today to be talking with Philippa Campsie. Philippa recently published a brilliant article in *Disability Studies Quarterly* entitled, if I can Anglicize his name, "Charles Barbier," or *Charles Barbier* (French pronunciation), "A Hidden Story," which substantially revises our understanding of the origins of raised point writing. Philippa, thank you so very much for joining us today.

Philippa Campsie: I'm delighted to be here.

Caroline Lieffers: We have a lot to talk about today, but we want to start by celebrating the fact that you are an independent scholar, since I think independent scholars don't get nearly as much recognition as they should. How does historical scholarship fit into your life?

Philippa Campsie: Well my undergraduate degree was actually in History. I went to Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia and I studied History and Biology and did an undergraduate thesis in the History of Science. So there is a link there. I then worked in publishing and I went back to university to do a master's degree in Urban Planning as a mature student, and even became an Adjunct Professor in the Department of Geography and Planning at the University of Toronto. And the rest of my career was as a freelancer, freelance researcher, writer, and editor. But I've done a number of historical - a lot of my research was historical. Even for urban planning, looking into policy histories and things like that. I've always had an interest in how things develop to the point where they are now. I also have a fascination with France. I spent a year in France going to university. And since 2010, my husband and I, my husband is Norman Ball, he's a historian, a historian of technology, we try to get to Paris once a year, when travel was still possible. And so in 2010 we started a blog called *Parisian Fields* where we explore all kinds of little stories that we find, many of them historical stories. So history has always been part of my life, but I'm new to Disability History because of this story. I just wanted to find out more about a particular person.

Kelsey Henry: I don't know if Caroline you mentioned this already, but both of us have a background in the History of Science and Medicine, so we're both sort of familiar with the History of Science, History of Medicine to Disability History pipeline. I feel like it's a fairly common drift between those two fields. So it's really exciting to learn a little bit more about how that was your transit into disability history.

But let's dig into thinking about and talking about your article together. So your article rewrites kind of common understandings of the origins of Braille, the Braille writing system or reading system, in really exciting ways. And I'm wondering if you can give us the Spark

Notes, or Coles Notes, version of the story that has been circulating more widely over the last 60 or so years. What's the usual narrative that's told?

Philippa Campsie: Well I'm going to start with "Once upon a time," because so many of these stories are actually written for children. It's surprising how many children's books focus on Louis Braille. There are some for adults, but I would say they're far outnumbered by children's books. And the story in those and most books is: once upon a time there is a little boy called Louis Braille, born in 1809. He loses his sight, as the result of an accident and then an infection, when he's about three years old. However, he's a very bright little boy and he gets the opportunity to go to a special school for blind students in Paris. He comes from a village that's to the east of Paris. He does very well at the school and when he is about 12 years old, he started the school when he was about nine I think. And when he's about 12 years old, a military officer comes to the school to demonstrate a method of writing that he has developed to allow soldiers to communicate at night on the battlefield without lighting a lamp that might betray their position. This method works quite well, it's very simple. But it's a bit cumbersome, it takes a lot of space on the page. It's just letters or sounds, there's no punctuation, there's no capitalization, you can't use it for numbers or arithmetical symbols or music or all of the other things that the students want to do with it. But they can at least use it to communicate amongst themselves and to take notes. Louis, being a bit of a child prodigy, points out these errors to Barbier. And Barbier is not particularly receptive to them. So Louis, alone and unaided all by his little self, he goes and creates the system that we now use around the world today. End of story.

Kelsey Henry: Thank you so much for walking us through that and I think it's so fascinating what you were saying about how the history of Braille's life story has typically been delivered and framed for children, which does kind of influence the more fairy tale, like hagiographic, impulses -

Philippa Campsie: With the obligatory villain provided by -

Kelsey Henry: Yes, of course!

Philippa Campsie: Charles Barbier always gets to play the villain.

Kelsey Henry: Right.

Philippa Campsie: I've even seen a movie that they made of it, and he's wearing this ridiculous uniform - it looks like something out of *The Nutcracker*. And he's really being quite offensive to Louis Braille, saying, "Oh, you know, you can't be expected to do this and you can't be expected to do that," which is, as we will see, complete fiction.

Kelsey Henry: Yeah, I remember you mentioning in the article kind of this David and Goliath archetype.

Philippa Campsie: Yes, so then the little boy is portrayed as sort of this little golden-haired child and things like that and there's the evil Barbier in his uniform. People really play it up.

Kelsey Henry: Well I'd love to hear a little bit more about how you became interested in this history. I can imagine that you encountered this particular framing of the relationship between Barbier and Braille, and as you start doing more archival research, you recognize

the distortions or the peculiarities and the way that the story's been spun, I can imagine that that really piqued your interest as a historian. And I know that we're going to rewrite a lot of the story that you told us throughout this podcast conversation today, but I'm wondering if you can say a little bit more about how you became so fascinated in this history to begin with. Were you very intentionally searching for the origins of raised point writing or did the story kind of just find you by accident?

Philippa Campsie: Oh, definitely the story found me. As I say, I'm a newcomer to Disability History. But we were in Paris, it was December 2016. And my husband, as I mentioned, my husband Norman Ball is a historian of technology and he had become very, very interested in the technology associated with communication with and among blind people. And there's a wonderful museum in Paris, the Museum of Blindness, which is housed in the building, it's called the Association Valentin Haüy. And it's a training center for adult blind people and it's right beside the school, the regular day school for school aged children, which is now known as the Institut National des Jeunes Aveugles, which means The National Institute for Young Blind People.

Anyway, so my husband was there, and he was absolutely absorbed in looking at all these amazing machines that they have, all kinds of different designs of machines to write in Braille, some of which claim that they could write in both Braille and regular type, and all kinds of things. Anyway, so I'm there and I pick up a book, a French book by a guy called Pierre Henri, *La vie et l'oeuvre de Louis Braille*, so *The Life and Work of Louis Braille*. I started reading it within a few pages I encountered this guy, Charles Barbier. I'd never heard of him before. But I thought, well now that's interesting because I didn't know much about Braille and I didn't know that he wasn't the one who had the original idea to communicate with raised dots. I assumed that that was his idea. And the idea to communicate with raised dots in a way that did not attempt to reproduce the shapes of the letters of the alphabet. And he did not invent the tools for doing it, the sort of blunt punch that you use and the framework for creating these letters - that was Barbier. I'd never heard of this guy. So I go to the curator of the museum - her name is Noëlle Roy -- and say, what do you know about Barbier? And she sort of looks to me and says, are you interested? And I think, I guess so! And she said, well in 2001, members of his family gave us a whole bunch of his papers. She said, I've catalogued them but nobody's really read them. And I thought, okay I'm here, I don't see anybody else lining up to do this. So I said sure I'll take a look. I had no idea what was going to be in them. And I don't even know quite what I'd planned to do. I just thought the book showed that there wasn't much known about him and I thought, well, I could probably fill in some gaps here. I can probably find out a bit more about him. Maybe I can, you know, flesh out the Wikipedia article or something like that. I had modest ambitions.

But over time I read the books - there were books in there, there were letters in there. And also the school, the Institut National des Jeunes Aveugles, in its library, there are a lot more letters. There were letters written by Barbier to the school and in the box there were letters written to Barbier that were in his possession when he died. And I also found some more materials at the Museum of Louis Braille in Coupvray, in his birthplace. So that's a, that's another good source of information. And it was only gradually that I realized, wait a second, the story is wrong. You've got it all wrong, guys! He clearly invented his method, he didn't invent it for the military, he invented it for blind people. All sorts of things that happened in the story don't happen in real life. But I never expected that I was going to say, wait a second, just about everything in that story is wrong and we need to rethink it.

Caroline Lieffers: Wow, this is incredible and I'm really looking forward to unpacking all of the different pieces of the story that you were able to rewrite for us. Let's start with a little bit of setting the scene, the background. The late 18th and early 19th centuries were already kind of a period of change for blind people in France, even before Barbier shows up on the scene. So, can you tell us a little bit about the Revolution in attitudes and education that was already starting to happen.

Philippa Campsie: Yeah, so, France is among the first places that offers a formal education to blind people. The name that I mentioned before, Valentin Haüy - it took me a while to learn how to say that name, it's an unusual name - he was the first person who, that we know of, who is commonly accepted to be the first person who thought, wait a second you know we are, we are wasting the lives of blind people. Before he started his school, if you were blind, you were okay if you had a wealthy family because they could support you and get people to read to you. And some wealthy blind people did become quite literate, simply by having somebody read to them all the time. But otherwise, most people, there was very little opportunity to learn any skills to become independent, to earn a living, and most of them lived in abject poverty. It was quite dreadful and Valentin Haüy was scandalized by the mistreatment of them. People made fun of them and bullied them, and it was awful, and many of them had to beg on the streets.

So, starting with one student and expanding to create a school, Valentin Haüy opened the school before the French Revolution, so early in the 1780s. And it was actually sort of favored by royalty and so forth. And he created a way to teach students to read by making raised letters, so thick paper and you needed a very special printing press to do this, to raise these letters. And they were cursive letters and the students had to - not even block letters - but cursive letters, the students had to trace. The books took up an enormous amount of space and were very hard to produce, and if the students learned to read with them, that was one thing, but learning to write, they couldn't produce them for themselves. Some of them, including Louis Braille, learned how to write in a way that sighted people could read, but they couldn't write in a way that other blind people could read. That school closed during the French Revolution, the students were transferred to a hospital and that was a very dark period, they weren't getting any kind of education. They may have had some rudimentary skills training at that point but - And throughout that period, so not just the Revolution, but also the Napoleonic period. The school was re-established at about the same time that the monarchy was re-established. So 1815 is Waterloo, Napoleon moves off the stage finally, and the monarchy is re-established. And this has been a royal institution, so it is re-established in about 1816.

Caroline Lieffers: Excellent. Thank you so much. I'd love to hear a little bit more about Charles Barbier, his background, and his early work on alternative writing systems.

Philippa Campsie: Oh, he was born, he was born in Valenciennes, which is in the eastern part of France. Minor aristocracy, he and two of his brothers go into the military. The officers in the military were all members of the aristocracy. He spent about eight years in the military, but when the revolution comes you don't want to be in the King's army. And so, he left. They estimate that about half of the officers in what had been the Royal army left the country. A lot of them went elsewhere in Europe, or to England, but Barbier went to the United States. And at first, I wondered why, and then I discovered he had a brother there. One of his brothers, another military guy, had gone there. So he goes to the states in 1792. And he first spends time with his brother in Baltimore and then he moves to Kentucky. There are a couple of French communities in Kentucky. He earns a living teaching French, but also teaching and practicing surveying, which is something that he

would have learned as an artillery officer. He may have been in the United States for as long as 10 years. I don't know the year he came back. I have not yet been able to figure out exactly when he returned, but there was an amnesty for the people who had immigrated during the revolution. Napoleon proclaimed an amnesty, so he was free to come back. But he had made enough money through, as far as I can tell, investing in land in Kentucky, that he was now quite independently - I don't know about independently wealthy, but he was independent. He didn't have to work for his living when he came back and he certainly did not rejoin the army. People often place him in Napoleon's army, but he did not rejoin the army.

He followed his own passion and his passion was alternative methods of writing. He was fascinated by them. The first thing he created that was published, I guess, was a form of shorthand. Very complicated! I have a photocopy of the book and there is absolutely no way I can make head or tail of it. I've tried. It's just far too hard, it's a very complicated method of shorthand. And there were already plenty of other methods out there that people were using, I mean all the, during the Revolution, the records of the debates were taken in shorthand. There were other competing ones that are very well established. But the end of the book contains a very interesting little appendix in which he's moving in the direction of simplified writing. And in this appendix he has created what he calls *écriture coupée* which means "writing with cuts." And the idea was that if you were somewhere and you didn't have access to pen and ink, you can still make a note on paper using a knife. And of course in the days before ball points and fountain pens, and things like that, if you wanted to write you had to have a pen and a bottle of ink. It was something that you might not have if you were out in the field somewhere or traveling. So he creates this idea of *écriture coupée*, you make a fold in the paper and then your cuts are oriented in relation to that line that has been created by the fold. So you could in fact take a note of something important and read it back to yourself if you use this method. And this sort of sends him in a different direction. So in 1815, six years later, so the book on shorthand came out 1809, in 1815 he publishes the book on which everything else is based. They have a copy of it in the library, but you can read it yourself on Google Books. It's out there now. It's got about 30 pages of text and 12 diagrams and it presents 12 different forms of writing for a range of purposes. The very earliest forms are very simple forms of writing that are designed for people to use if they have no experience of writing and no literacy and they can they can try this as a very simplified way of capturing their thoughts on paper.

At the very end of the book there's some very complicated ones, which are intended for a form of cryptography that could be used by diplomats to write secret messages. One of them looks like a musical notation on a staff. Five lines and these little dots, but where the dots are placed and connected in a certain way that forms the message. And in about the middle is one that involves raised points. The introduction to the book makes it very, very clear, this is for blind people to use. They can read it by touch and it makes perfect sense. I mean if you think, what is the audience for stuff that can be read by touch, there's maybe a few officers in the field and then there's a whole bunch of blind people, I mean there's a much bigger market for this. Why anybody would ever think that, you know, that it would be for the military - but no, it was invented clearly and specifically for blind people. He had done a little testing, but it was kind of speculative. I don't know that he was absolutely sure that it would work. But he thought it was worth a try and the illustration includes one of the tools required for producing these dots, so he had also invented the particular equipment that was necessary. And so, this little 1815 book is sort of where it all starts in the story.

Caroline Lieffers: It's fascinating. I love hearing about the materiality, like the technology, the knives, the tools. So fascinating.

Kelsey Henry: Yeah, Philippa, thank you so much for giving us a really comprehensive sort of genealogy of the way Barbier's thinking and actually production of different kinds of alternative writing systems, how they evolved over time. One thing that we're both really curious about and we know our listeners would love to know more about - Why was Barbier so interested in creating alternative writing systems in the first place, and especially a phonetic system of alternative writing? And what did that have to do with his intended audience?

Philippa Campsie: Well, the book had many intended audiences, but the remainder of Barbier's life shows that what he really, really was trying to accomplish was universal education. He actually, if you'd asked him how he saw himself, he might have said he was an inventor. He might have said, I'm an educational reformer, or a would-be educational reformer. And the introduction to the book, it's sort of where he, it is a bit of a manifesto. He felt very strongly that it took far too long to teach people to read and if you have to work for your living either on a farm or as an artisan, or in a shop in a city, you don't have that kind of time. You can't spend years and years and years of your life learning how to write and read. So, most of them didn't. Literacy levels were very low and writing is very difficult and spelling is worse, spelling is impossible. And he felt that part of the problem, and this gets to his idea about writing phonetically, he said part of the problem is our alphabet. It's full of holes but it's also redundant. You can create the same sound with more than one letter, so the sound produced by a "k" can also in some cases be produced by a "c" or a "q." So there's redundancy in it, but there's also missing letters. So certain letters you have to have combinations of letters to produce a certain sound, such as you know, "ch" or "sh." You have to have the two letters in order to represent the sound. He said the ideal alphabet would have one letter for each sound, no more, no less. One sound per letter, very simple. So he felt that things had become over complicated and he wanted to radically simplify things so that, and I don't think he was thinking that people necessarily had to learn reading to the point where they could you know read Molière or anything like that. He just felt that in their work they need to be able to capture their thoughts and they need to be able to transmit their thoughts to other workers, to their family members, on paper. And there had to be a simpler way to do this than the one that they had at the time.

So he created, the early methods in that book were created very specifically to be the simplest possible form of writing that he could come up with. And so you didn't have to - I mean when you think of the writing at the time, and reading his letters I got to see lots of it, it's very complicated, it's very difficult. Manipulating a pen is difficult! So he wanted to radically simplify the way in which people who didn't have access to formal education could at least note down things for themselves, for others, for posterity. And thought, that won't take them too long to learn, they don't have to give up a lot of work time to do this.

Kelsey Henry: Thank you so much for that. I'm wondering how do these insights about Barbier's history and kind of his motivations for developing an alternative writing system, which as you just described, primarily was intended for blind people, but was also in service of his larger goal of universal education. How do these insights change our understanding of Braille's origins and his motivations? And as I'm talking, I'm curious about if Braille had any sort of a shared interest in universal education or if that wasn't a part of Braille's story at all?

Philippa Campsie: That's a very good question. I don't think he did, but I haven't read all of - I've read all of Barbier's correspondence, I haven't read all of Braille's - so I couldn't really comment on that. What I did find interesting and a bit surprising is that Barbier's attitude towards the school was not what you might expect. He didn't see the students at

the school as his ultimate audience. Yes, they were blind students, but he thought, relative to the people I'm really trying to reach, they're privileged, they're in a school, they've got years to learn all these skills in a school. And the people he really wants to reach are the people who don't have formal education. His idea was that in fact the students would learn the method and teach it to other people. They would go out there and teach other people. One of the expressions that turns up a lot in his letters is either "les aveugles de dehors," or "les ouvriers de dehors," which means either "the blind people outside the school" or "workers outside the school." Those were the people he wanted to reach. He even had the idea that the students shouldn't really bother learning this until they were just about to graduate and then they would learn it just before they graduated. And he donated hundreds of sets of equipment which you would give to them and then they could take it out and teach it to other people. A completely unrealistic and utopian idea because, of course, how are they going to earn their living doing that? They have been trained to earn their living either as musical performers or skilled tradespeople or something of the sort, they weren't actually being trained to be teachers. So it's kind of, he had this funny idea that the school was kind of going to be a clearinghouse for a simplified method of education and that the students - and it seems he had every confidence that students were capable of doing this - were just going to take it out and teach it to everybody else. He had no hesitation in thinking that they could do that, but that's not actually what the school was formed to do, so you can see how he butted heads with the administration.

Caroline Lieffers: Did he invest his own money in getting all these sets created? Did he have a workshop going in his attic (laughs). Can you tell us a little bit more about how these were actually generated?

Philippa Campsie: Yes! There was a set that he displayed - they often had kind of expositions of new inventions and at one of those, he says he displays his tools, and they were made by a blind person. At this point Barbier is not living in Paris, he's living in Versailles, and so is this other person who creates the tools. And there were three tools originally, eventually they were condensed to two. There was something called the "tablette" which was basically the support on which you would put the paper and it had grooves in it that would allow you to press in and create these dots. And then there's the punch that is used to create the dots. And then a thing called a "guide-main" which is just a guide to make sure that the dots lined up vertically. So, yes, I don't know whether this fellow created them to his specifications or whether he made a prototype and then somebody else made more of them. Apparently there were some accessory tools that could be used for creating the tools, all which could be done by blind people. He had in mind that they could, it could be self-perpetuating. They could carry on and create more of the same as long as they needed it. But he did, out of his own money, pay for hundreds of sets to be given to the students.

Caroline Lieffers: Thank you so much for the description of the technology, that's just fascinating. Can you tell us a little bit more about this method of writing that Barbier developed? Because there are commonalities with the Braille system that we recognize today, but it was different so, can you walk us through that a little bit?

Philippa Campsie: Yeah, the book that he wrote in 1815, and all twelve of those methods are based on a grid, well two grids really, but the idea of a grid. At the time, the French alphabet didn't commonly include the letter "W." It occurred in proper names, but it wasn't part of French words. And so it's a 25 letter alphabet which fits neatly into a grid of five by five. So you would have the grid and the cells of the grid were numbered by row and column. So "A" is row one column one. "B," "C," "D," "E," you know row one column five,

all the way down to "Z," which was row five column five. Which meant that the key to the system was the place of the letter in the grid. So everything had two digits attached to it. "A" was 1,1, "Z" was 5,5, and everything in between. So those numbers could be replaced by symbols, simple symbols – a circle or square or triangle, or something like that. And a combination of two of them would create a letter. The one he created for blind people was the simplest of all because the number of the dots simply represented the place in the grid. So there were dots lined up vertically, and if the letter you were trying to represent was in the fourth row and the second column, you would have four vertical dots followed by two vertical dots. Together those two formed the letter. So it was very easy to do, you just had to count the dots. It didn't involve remembering which symbol represented which number. It was actually numerical itself. So it didn't take long to learn, it was very easy to learn. And because you can sort of think about it and think, yes, I can see how you would do that. And even if you don't remember where anything is, you can just count on your fingers to find out which two numbers you need to represent any particular letter of the alphabet.

There was a second grid, as I mentioned, and that was the sounds. So this is where he's moving to phonetic spelling. That was a grid of five by six because he identified 30 sounds in the French language - unique sounds. But the method was the same. So it was a two part method and the dots and things, but you could spell things phonetically. So you had an option. Everybody says, well, you know, it was all phonetic. Well, no, you can use it for just regular spelling. Everything normal that the students had already learned to do they could do with this system just using the alphabetical version.

Caroline Lieffers: That's so neat that he had kind of built in both options, right, so people have a choice, presumably, as to which one they preferred or felt most convenient at a particular time.

Philippa Campsie: Yes!

Caroline Lieffers: It's really, really creative. So he has these sort of model systems, he's writing about them in this 1815 book that you mentioned. How do these actually get into the Institution Royale des Jeunes Aveugles? Like what's the process there, and of course we mentioned that Louis Braille's famously a student there. So what happens once these systems move inside the walls of the school?

Philippa Campsie: Well, as I mentioned the school is reestablished in about 1816 and Barbier writes to the director, who isn't the least bit interested and brushes him off. Which is kind of understandable, he's trying to get the school going again. They've already got all these books, you know, with the old method. So a lot of people dump on the previous director for not having seen the potential, but he really did have other fish to fry that time. But anyway, that director gets fired a few years later, in about 1821, and is replaced by a new one. And Barbier knows somebody who's on the conseil d'administration, you know, which is like the Board of Directors of the school, who presumably alerts him and says, you know try again with this guy, he might be more receptive. And he is and he isn't. It's a funny story. And so the new director, his name was Alexandre-René Pignier. And he's universally thought to be a much better director than the preceding one and a much, much, much nicer person to the students. The other guy had been rather tough on them. So Barbier writes to him and Pignier does everything he can not to meet Barbier. He loses the first letter, he *does* respond to the second letter, but he makes appointments and doesn't bother to show up. He keeps Barbier at a distance, but it's not that he's not interested in the ideas and he does something very smart. He gives the material - so Barbier has obviously sent the tools and some instruction information - and he gives it to one of the

senior students, at least I think it's one of the senior students, rather than one of the teachers. And says, look you try it, and if it works, teach it to the other students. Which is really smart. I mean he thought, if it's going to work then the students have got to be able to teach it to themselves and amongst themselves, and so this student did.

I have a theory about who the student was and he was, like Braille, he was a person who went on to later teach at the school. He'd been at the school for quite a long time, so he would have been in his late teens at that time. And, yes, it worked and it could be demonstrated, so they do a demonstration for the conseil d'administration. The very simple thing and they've done this, they do this at different points along the way, but you have two students, one of them is sent out to a different room. While that person is out of the room, the first student is asked to take dictation of something that they haven't heard or seen before, so one of the directors would have given them a quotation, or just some random piece of text. The student writes it down from dictation and then the student who's been sent out of the room comes back and reads it flawlessly and everybody's very impressed, and they say, great, use it! So by the time Barbier finally gets that longed-for meeting with Pignier, the students are already using it. That's about the middle of 1821, in about June. And then the students are already sort of off to the races with it and using it to take notes, and it was - I mean it was so important to them because, finally, they could take notes. They can take notes that they can read again, they can take notes that they could give to other students and they could read it.

They couldn't do that before. The only - they could read printed books and they could do a form of writing that could be read by sighted people, but now they could finally write something down and read it back to themselves. This is huge, this is absolutely huge. And the students realize this is huge. And even though the method had all the problems of, you know, no punctuation, no mathematical symbols and so forth. I call it a sort of proof of concept. It worked. They show it worked. It was a feasibility test. They could demonstrate it and it worked. So that was sort of - it really must have landed with quite a crash. You know immediately, of course, not just Braille, but all the students think, Oh well, you know you could do this with it, you could that with it, and try this or try that. They had something and it worked.

Kelsey Henry: One thing that is really standing out to me as you're talking, Philippa, is the ways that Barbier's raised point writing system actually was a highly portable system and improved the mode or the medium of communication between students. And that was a very, very particular and special quality of this writing system.

Philippa Campsie: Mind you, that's the one thing that - in one way, Barbier, *because* it was so simple, it didn't meet with the same kind of problems that Braille later met with. Because you could learn it very quickly. If you already knew your alphabet you were away to the races. So they could learn it very quickly and so could the sighted teachers. Because the idea of creating something that only the blind are using - a lot of sighted teachers find that a little threatening, like are they writing notes about me in there? But no, the teachers could learn it as easily as the students. Braille by comparison takes a while to learn, you know. It really does take days, week, even months of study to really master Braille. But this thing was just so simple, so it didn't threaten anybody. Nobody felt, okay, you know they can use this but, if need be, we can pick up whatever they've written and read it ourselves. It's quite easy to do, it makes a difference.

Kelsey Henry: So I'd love to talk a little bit more about this fated moment that's been told, and retold, rehashed many times: the first contact between Barbier and Braille. So

when did they first make contact with one another, how did it actually go, and how is the story that you ended up telling, that was rooted in the archival sources that you found, different from the story that you'd first encountered about that initial contact?

Philippa Campsie: Well, the letters that Barbier wrote to the school are the ones that are still held in the library of the school. And it took me a while because in that particular library I was not allowed to either photograph or photocopy anything. I had to transcribe it, which took a long time. But I'm in the middle of transcribing a letter that Barbier wrote to the school in 1833 and I'm just sort of mechanically doing the words and I think, wait a minute, wait a minute, he's never met Braille! It's 1833 and he's never met Braille. Braille has published his own version four years earlier. And Barbier's asking, I hear you have this other version of my system, would it be okay if I can see a copy of that? And somebody sends it to him and the very next day he writes to Braille saying, wow, that's amazing! Congratulations, well done!

So they don't meet right away. And he doesn't even find out about the system. So at this point Braille was 24 years old and the library there has about 10 letters that Barbier wrote to Braille. He just, he wrote ordinary letters. He apologizes for not using Braille's system. But he's kind of getting on, and it's, as I say, it's not an easy system to learn. So he writes just ordinary letters to Braille that somebody would have had to read aloud to Braille. Braille writes back to him because Braille knows how to write to sighted people. Braille was capable of writing letters to his own parents, for example, back in Coupvray. So they have a correspondence, they meet several times. There's a third person, a friend of Braille's, who is often part of those meetings, and the relationship is extremely friendly. They kind of agree to differ about the whole spelling versus phonetic system. Barbier still thinks it needs to be phonetic, you know, so that everybody can learn it, but Braille's moving in a different direction. But they don't seem to - that particular difference of opinion doesn't seem to have harmed anything. So yeah, Braille is an adult when they meet. And he's actually halfway through modifying his first version to make the second version of Braille, which is the one we have now.

Kelsey Henry: Thank you so much. I'd love to hear a little bit more about how and why you think the story, really the story of the relationship between Barbier and Braille, when they met, the kind of influence that Barbier had on Braille, how that story came to be so distorted. And what, based on all the research that you've done, what do you think were some of the motivating factors when you consider the ways that this story has been conveyed? What were some of the narrative appeals of distorting the story in particular ways?

Philippa Campsie: Well the first the first distortion is why Barbier came up with this method at all. This idea that he created it for the military. I trace that back to that very first book that I read in 2016 by Pierre Henri, the biography of Braille. Pierre Henri was himself blind, he was a professor at the University. But the materials that Barbier left behind, none of them are accessible for the blind. And he did not, clearly, did not see the book written in 1815 and had no idea that this one method of writing - there was a context to it, it was part of a whole series of different methods of writing. All he knew was that Barbier had created this form of writing and he perhaps wondered why. And I'm just going to read the one sentence that kind of sent everybody off in the wrong direction. This is my own translation from his French: "As a former captain of artillery, Barbier had perhaps once felt how useful it *could be* for officers in the field to be able to write messages in the dark and later read them with their fingers." That's it. He's clearly speculating, saying, might have thought this, it might have crossed his mind. He's not sure that that's what Barbier

was doing. He just says, you know he could have thought that. But he didn't. But everybody's taken that as fact as if that was exactly what Barbier was doing and has written about it thereafter. And nobody has bothered to go back and say, well, you know what exactly what's he doing what was he trying to do, and who was he trying to reach. Because nobody read the book. And the other one, the one about the early meeting or early contact between Barbier and Braille when Braille is quite young comes from Pignier himself. So in the 1850s, Pignier writes a short biography of Braille. By this time Braille has died. Braille dies in 1852. Barbier died in 1841. So they're both dead, neither of them can contradict anything he says. So he decides, Pignier decides, I'm going to write my version of events. And again, here's the exact words that he wrote, again, my translation from the French: "Louis Braille, like other students, studies the method, and with the sagacity that characterized him, indicated to Monsieur Barbier several improvements and resolved certain difficulties with the writing - little problems for which Monsieur Barbier had long sought a solution." Complete fiction. Total fiction. Didn't happen.

There were no - they didn't change the writing. Certain difficulties with the writing? It's like points, there was no way to change it. You either use the method and write little points, or you didn't. There wasn't anything that changed about it, it never changed. You notice that Pignier also doesn't actually say they did this in person. He says it could have been a letter, in his invention. He doesn't say they actually met because, after all, they didn't. He just says that Braille pointed this out to Barbier. And again people have rushed in and filled in the story and created this dramatic encounter between the saintly little child and the evil captain. And go and sort of run with that, because it makes a good story and, heavens, don't let the facts get in the way of a good story. And it's a way better story! I mean it's much more dramatic than the real story which is that they quite liked each other and they met when they were adults, you know, that's not so dramatic.

Caroline Lieffers: So these distortions have obviously affected how we think about Barbier. As you just said he becomes this villainous figure, right? But they also affect how we have come to think about Braille, right? So can you talk us through some of the implications for this distorted story having made its way into the popular imagination?

Philippa Campsie: Well, first the one about creating something for the military, it makes it sound as if Braille take something that was designed for one purpose and uses it for a different purpose, for which it was not originally designed. Which again adds sort of luster to his name, but it's not in fact what happened. But that's perhaps a minor problem. I think the other one, the story about the little kid and the evil captain, is a little more - changes the story, the narrative quite a lot. Because what Pignier was trying to do, obviously, is make Braille look even more precocious than he actually was. That he's able to identify all these problems upfront and confront the inventor with them. And this gets back to why so many stories are written about Braille for children. Because Braille as an inventor is portrayed as a child. Well, he, I think, throughout his teenage years he continued to work away at an improvement to Barbier's system, he certainly started as a teenager. But his first book was published in, let me think...1829. So he's 20 years old when it's published. And the system that he created at 29 is not the system we use now. The letters are there, the letters of the alphabet - the 40 characters of six dots each - they exist. But what Braille was trying to do is make it much more flexible and have more uses. So mathematical symbols, punctuation, and musical notation are high up on the list. For those he has a different system that involves dashes. The 1829 book is available page by page on the Internet, you can look at it. And the opening stuff, you go, this looks familiar, and then you think, wait a second what's all this stuff with all the dashes? So he created the system with dashes and he obviously, it got tested by probably his colleagues and students at that

point, because he transitions from being a student to being a teacher. And they said, we find these dashes too confusing. It's hard to tell the difference between two dots side by side and a dash. And so he spends another eight years working that out.

In 1837 he finally publishes the second edition, which is the one in which it works. So the Braille that is used all over the world is the creation of a mature adult it's not the creation of the teenager. He's created one system, he realizes it's flawed, it's not quite as good as it needs to be. And he works on it and, eventually, he comes up with the system we have now. So this idea that this precocious little kid comes up with it sort of whole cloth is a problem. It's a big problem, and it also gives - I mean I think one of the reasons why so many books are for children is because it gives nothing for him to do in later life. I mean he invents Braille and then he has nothing to do but teach at the school and play the organ for the rest of his life and nothing further happens to him. No! He spends a long time coming up with this idea and fighting for this idea as well. He had a lot of support and a lot of people were wanting or hoping for him to succeed, but he's a mature adult when these things are happening. The system we use is the system that was created by a mature adult, not by a teenage student.

Caroline Lieffers: This is so interesting. I'd like to keep talking a little bit about the narrative that is being constructed here about disability and childhood and precociousness? Precocity?

Philippa Campsie: Precocity, I think.

Caroline Lieffers: I think, I think you're right. But there are surely, and I can see the wheels in our audiences' heads are probably already turning here, right? Are there lessons that we should be thinking about when we are consuming or contributing to this larger body of scholarship on disability and disability history?

Philippa Campsie: Well, I mean the first and really obvious lesson is, read the primary sources. I mean that's for all historians of any kind, anywhere, doing anything. Don't just repeat the last thing that somebody said, but actually go back and check the primary sources. Like I said, the 1815 book is on Google Books, anybody can do this.

Another one is the cult of heroes. And a very good parallel example, a book that I really, really admire is the book by Georgina Kleege called *Blind Rage*, where she talks about Helen Keller being held up as this saintly person who never did anything wrong and was always perfect and learned how to read and write and talk and do all these things and - you know sort of almost magically. And it's really discouraging if you are visually impaired or visually impaired and hearing impaired to try and follow that kind of model. And the same sort of hagiography, saintliness has become attached to Braille. He's rarely depicted as an adult. He's only depicted as a child, a brilliant precocious child who did this when he was, you know, knee high to a grasshopper. That didn't happen. And we sort of, he, it's not as colorful a story that he had to work on it for 16 years to come up with the version we have. Eight years to publish his first book and another eight to publish the second. But that's what happened.

And the other further thing that that is typical of the history of any kind of invention is the idea that people do it all by themselves. There's even a little book, one of the recent books published in France, and coming out of this meeting, you know, Braille versus Barbier and things like that, and Braille is saying to himself, oh, he's, you know, a powerful aristocratic member of the military and I'm just little Louis Braille, I'm all alone. And you think oh for

crying – no! You weren't alone! Pignier had his back the whole time! Pignier is incredibly supportive. He gives him time to work on his system, he does everything he can to promote it. His friends were supportive. They also were very enthusiastic and very helpful. He wasn't this solitary person trying to do something that nobody understood. Everybody totally got it. And they thought and they supported him to the best of their ability. He wasn't this outlier who was laboring a lot alone on his system. You know, I think every time he came up with a new idea, he tested it out of his friends and he said, you know, thumbs up or thumbs down and keep going. And Pignier was very, very supportive, so he wasn't this wasn't a solitary inventor any more than most vendors are solitary they all depend on other people to test their ideas, to help them, to create materials for them, whatever. So that's that's that that is the history of invention.

And perhaps, perhaps the other thing is the timing is very important. It's just after the revolution. And in the revolution everything's up for grabs. They were going to they're going to have 10 months in the year with different names. They were going to have, they're going to have 100 minutes in the hour. They were going to completely revamp time, let alone anything else, they were, they had all sorts of people who thought we just going to sort of sweep way everything the way it is now. All the traditions, all the conventions, and start from scratch. Which is a very interesting time. And so for both Braille and Barbier there is this sense that you could start anew, you could start anew. And so Barbier is trying to do that. He's trying to recreate how people write. Braille is trying to recreate how blind people communicate. So that context adds a certain something to the story that we might easily miss.

Kelsey Henry: Yeah, one thing that I was connecting as you were talking, Philippa, both about the history of invention and the myth of like the solitary genius. And the reasons why this depiction of Braille as a child prodigy, this, like huge emphasis on precocity - like the relationship between the two. It's easier to make an argument for kind of solitary genius when you're talking about a child prodigy, because someone who's younger, it's a less, like a more unschooled mind.

Philippa Campsie: An interesting point, yes interesting. I see what you mean. That's true.

Kelsey Henry: And I'm also thinking about, like, something that you asked, Caroline, about kind of the telling of disability history, and I'm thinking in particular about popular disability history that's made not for an academic audience, but perhaps for children with disabilities, children without disabilities, for more public consumption. There is this attachment to, like, the figure of the "supercrip" to like use disability studies terminology, or even something akin to inspiration porn which is like a crude way to frame it, but I do think it speaks to, kind of desires that a more public facing, like a public audience has, for a particular kind of disabled hero. That's sort of, the sort of force that that desire might have on perpetuating particular myths, even if they are disproven by primary sources.

Philippa Campsie: Oh that's a very interesting point, yes, I mean the sort of reality does not provide quite a satisfactory a story for that kind of consumption. So I feel like I'm pouring cold water on all these lovely dramatic episodes, but yes it, but I mean Georgina Kleege says, you know, on the other hand, these things can backfire on you and leave you feeling more helpless because you're not as brilliant as these brilliant people who've gone before you.

Kelsey Henry: Definitely, and I think this myth of solitary genius also kind of, it goes against other impulses in disability studies, but also in disability justice to focus on

collaboration and interdependence. So, like upholding stories of like, the lone inventor who strikes out on their own and doesn't need anyone isn't always or often, like, narratively useful for disabled people actually. Who, I mean, all of us need, need other people work alongside collaborators in every aspect of our lives.

Philippa Campsie: There's a huge amount of collaboration. I mean, in my husband's work he spent a lot of time trying to find out about the first important Braille writer, which was created at this school for blind students in Illinois in the 1890s. And yeah, the guy had an idea, but he had to work with somebody who's good with materials to realize a prototype and then figure out how to make it ready for production line, because this was the, it's called the Hall Braille Writer, and it was the first one that you could, it was inexpensive to make and you could roll out hundreds of them so the students could learn to use them. But yeah, a huge amount of collaboration went into that with various people bringing different techniques and different pieces of knowledge together.

Caroline Lieffers: Absolutely, that's such a great example. Thank you for that. We should swing back and talk about what happens to Barbier. Because in most of the histories of the invention of Braille, poor Barbier -- who's basically been cast in the role of the foil, or the villain for Braille -- basically just drops out of the story as the heroic Braille ascends, you know, to his position in the pantheon or whatever [laughs]

Philippa Campsie: Exactly! [laughs]

Caroline Lieffers: So what actually happens to Barbier, you know, for the rest of his life?

Philippa Campsie: Yeah, there are 20 more years of it so. Yes, the image is often of him disappearing from the story like Rumpelstiltskin, kind of stomping hard on the floor and just going through, but no, he lived for another 20 years and he continued to promote this idea of universal education. His theories were unrealistic and, in some cases, completely untested but he really believed in it and, at the time, he spent a lot of time trying to get his ideas adopted by what were called "salles d'asile." These are nursery schools and they were nursery schools for the children of the working classes that were generally set up either as public or charitable institutions. The first examples of them appear in the UK, I think. But at this time in the 1820s they're being set up in France, around Paris. And he thinks, well, the students in those schools, some of them may go on and get a further education but for some of them that may be all the education they're going to get. So why don't we give them a simplified form by which they can commit their ideas to paper and I've got the very thing for you. He writes to the Minister of Public Instruction, he writes to every friend he's got in any influential position anywhere to get them to support him, he gets nowhere.

They do set up a couple of demonstration projects that were still I don't think had even happened at the time of his death. One of them was going to be in Paris near the one in Versailles. But anyway, he published many more not really books, more like pamphlets on various sort of refining the method and trying to take a new angle added. But nothing else sticks. That one system that got used by the Institution Royale was the one system that went on to have a life of its own and the rest of them all died with him basically. But he it seems he remained optimistic to the end. The last letter that I've ever seen of his which was written about a month or so before he died, he's it it's not even clear who he's writing to, it's almost a rough draft of a letter that wasn't sent, but he seems to be writing to a printer with instructions for putting an advertisement and some kind of publication and looking for other places where he can advertise his ideas. So he never gave up hope that somebody somewhere would take these ideas and use them. And he also never gave up his

utopian version that if everybody could express themselves on paper then, it's not quite that we'd end up with world peace, but he felt that we could be, that citizens could be better political actors, that they would be more informed, and that that they could do better, that it would end sources of conflict and things like that. So he really did have this utopian idea that if everybody was able somehow to express themselves in some form of writing, however simplified, that many of the problems of the world would magically disappear. Yeah. So he died in 1841. He'd been ill for some time. In some of his late letters, he says, you know, he's not very well, but I don't actually know what he died of.

Caroline Lieffers: Thank you. It's really, I guess, heartening in a way to know that, even though none of his other systems caught on that he never gave up those ideals, right, and continued to work toward them.

Philippa Campsie: I mean, he's often depicted as a kind of cranky person. And he was a bit odd you know. You have to be odd to come up with that way of writing. Fortunately it worked. But people said he was sort of solitary and had no friends. As far as we know, he never married. But he had friends. The letters talk about visits and all sorts of things. And he wrote extensively to other people who are in the same field, and who were interested. And there were a lot of people who, who really thought his ideas for were very important and were not getting the attention they deserved, he didn't have his supporters. So he was, like Braille, he was not isolated. He had friends and he wrote to them. Sometimes they probably thought. oh gosh another letter from Barbier, here we go, because he's quite prolific. But anyway, he's not an isolated crank. He does try and, and, as I say it in the context, I mean, he uses the term in one of his books "emancipation intellectuelle," which was kind of a marketing ploy because it didn't mean exactly what he wanted it to mean, but it was something that was being discussed at the time: this intellectual emancipation. And so he jumps on the bandwagon, yes, here we are, I've got a method for it. And all kinds of ways in which he tries to sort of pick up on what other people are doing. And in the 1830s, so there's a revolution in 1830, and a new king comes to the throne, and this this there's a feeling that that sort of somehow democracy will be improved by this. And a lot of a lot of good promises made at the time of the 1830 revolutions. Most of which didn't actually pan out, but he sort of feels, okay there's, again, there's an opening here, there are people who care about same things I care about. There was a huge push for universal education, absolutely, he was not alone in thinking we've got to find a better way to educate people and to extend education to people who up until now has been unable to get an education. He's part of a whole group of people doing that. He's definitely not alone.

Kelsey Henry: Philippa how you've done such an incredible job of animating this article for our listeners and kind of taking us beyond the article as well, telling us more about what happened to Barbier in later life. But I know, we all know that when we're writing an article a chapter, what have you, that there's always more to say that, like winds up on the cutting room floor but you're like itching to tell to tell everyone. And I'm wondering was there anything else that you really wanted to say about this story that couldn't fit into the article that you haven't already mentioned?

Philippa Campsie: How long have you got? [laughs] Actually, the way I wrote the, I wrote a much, much longer, I wrote as complete a biography of Barbier as I could. From that I extracted vertical so there's a lot left on the cutting room floor. So the original thing is about 100 pages long, so, among other things. subordinate characters. The article focuses mainly on Barbie Braille and Pignier and their relationships. There are all kinds of other secondary characters who have a role to play here. I mentioned some of these of these people who supported Barbier and his work, and all the various connections he had, and

lots of little stories about other people who were trying to do similar things to him. But their ideas didn't go anywhere either. So lots of characters, there are a whole bunch of characters, there's a big cast of characters only a few whom got into the article. I've also talked about a lot more context because, yes, the article doesn't really give you the whole post-revolutionary context or all the other people who were working on similar things at the same time. So I probably made Barbier sound more isolated than he really is when I'm trying to give the opposite impression, because I didn't have room to fit in the context. So, yes, the article is the tip of the iceberg. There's a lot more to say I and there's a lot more to find out. I mean I took it as far as I could up to a certain point. But new records become available all the time and new sources of information, and there are some side stories that I can usefully explore. So I need to finish that work too, of this longer - it may or may not ever see the light of day, but for my own satisfaction, I have to finish the story and do it justice.

Caroline Lieffers: That's really encouraging to hear. Our last question is one that we ask almost all of our guests, which is what's next for you? What else are you working on? You've mentioned that you will be going down some of these rabbit warrens.

Philippa Campsie: Indeed they are!

Caroline Lieffers: Is there anything you'd like to say about that or any other projects?

Philippa Campsie: Yeah, rabbit warrens. I went down such a rabbit warren with Barbier's American brother. We could do an entire interview on his older brother, but anyway, I mean, so that's the thing to finish. Another sort of subsidiary project which I have already embarked on - because everybody gets their information from Wikipedia, I have changed, I've already changed the English and French version of the Wikipedia story about Barbier. But there are a lot of other cross references, and so I need to track down all the places where they've got it wrong and fix it. I've written to the *Encyclopedia Britannica* online and some other reference works saying, you know, don't you want to get the real dope on the guy? So - not quite in those words - but anyway, I'm just sort of telling them that there, this is the story is incorrect, and as a reputable publication they might want to correct it. And continuing to write the blog so that's a little place where I can put kind of little histories of little things that I noticed. With a focus on Paris, because it is called *Parisien Fields* and it's all about Paris.

But I guess the other thing is that I like reading biographies. I have written several others. I wrote a biography of an obscure mid-20th century American writer, that also was something that seized me. I'm not quite sure why I had to do that, but somehow I found myself writing to his family, going and visiting his family, visiting his colleagues, and to write his story. I've written biographies of some of my own family members. And so, if I'm ever finished with Barbier, I think what I would try to do is write another biography, and maybe some of these subsidiary characters in the Barbier story themselves would make interesting, there's not a lot known about them, and certainly not known in English, some of these people are better known in French, but their names are unfamiliar to an English audience. And I thought there might be something there, that some of these other people who are also interested in universal education and things like that. There's a lot, a lot of stuff there that hasn't really, that I know of, been fully explored. I mean, if you, I'm not by any means the only person writing about these people, but there's not a lot out there. And certainly not for a popular audience. There are some academic works on some of these stories but as you probably realize from reading the article I'm not really an academic writer. I made my living for many years is what's called a plain language writer. And so

that's the way I write. I like to write so as many people as possible can understand what I'm talking about. So I think there are a number of stories that perhaps are locked away in academia that could use the same approach.

Caroline Lieffers: I wholeheartedly agree, and I have to say I want to particularly commend you for doing that legwork of going after the Wikipedia article and Britannica and so forth, because I think you're right that often we, you know, produce our research work and we sort of expect, oh, it will trickle into these places. But it may take decades for that to happen if ever, right? And so I really, this is actually a really important lesson I think for many of us to take, which is that when we do find this new material it can potentially be incumbent on us to go out and make those changes in those particular reference works to make sure that it has the impact publicly that we hope that it has, right? So.

Philippa Campsie: I mean it's easy to dump on Wikipedia because there is a lot of rubbish there but they do have rules and the rules say that it has to be an original story and that there must be no conflict of interest, but what they really want is connection to actual sources. And you often get a banner at the top of a Wikipedia article saying this story needs more support and needs more references. So, you know, they I think the people who run Wikipedia, I think their hearts are in the right place, I mean there are all sorts of cranks out there who are trying to pump out misinformation. But for an academic, it is actually a place to set the record straight on certain things and to link them to actual reliable sources. So the stuff on Wikipedia I've linked, not only to my own article but I've linked it to that 1815 publication that's online, so people can go and see for themselves. And Wikipedia is often a useful place to start because of the links to reputable sources. So yes, I mean I think I used to hold on hold my nose about Wikipedia but I have since written a bunch of articles. Oh, there are things came they came out of the blog I found out about, some things that came out of the blog and I thought you know there's no Wikipedia article on that, why don't I put one up? So it's a little difficult to get your head around the technology first and the coding and things like that, but after a while it becomes quite easy.

Caroline Lieffers: I think it's well worth the effort, yeah.

Philippa Campsie: Oh yeah, because that's where people are going to get their information.

Kelsey Henry: Right, and Caroline and I have interviewed like public facing historians who do that work in a wide variety of mediums, but we've never really touched on the importance of doing public history through Wikipedia, which is like, it's often the primary source that a lot of people go to access information when they're asking questions about historical figures and it's incredibly important work.

Philippa Campsie: And the other thing, just a little footnote. I had to fix the image that was on Wikipedia. So if you Google Charles Barbier you'll see two main images. One of them is of a man in a dark suit, a youngish man, dark hair, dark suit, with a sort of white shirt, and the other one is an older guy with a sort of combed forward hairstyle and very, very elaborate outfit on because he's wearing the Order of the Holy Spirit. He's not Charles Barbier. He's somebody called Hercule de Serre, who is somebody, because I mentioned, well maybe I didn't mention, Barbier's full name is Barbier de la Serre. When he went to the United States, he became known just as Charles Barbier, and he dropped the de la Serre bit. But, so somebody's going through old pictures thought de Serre and thought oh, that must be Charles Barbier de la Serre, well, no, it's somebody else, completely different

guy. And it's been used in an academic publications and all sorts of things. And you think, nobody checks their sources, but that's just me.

Caroline Lieffers: That's another great cautionary tale, so thank you for that.

Kelsey Henry: Thank you so much for joining us today Philippa. This has been such an incredible conversation and we're just so honored to have been able to speak with you about your work and we can't wait to read, watch, listen to whatever is next.

Philippa Campsie: Thank you very much. I really enjoyed the conversation.

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Caroline Lieffers: Thanks to everyone out there for listening or reading the transcript. Please join us again next time. Bye bye!