

HENRI HAYTER, EARLY BRAILLIST

Among the collection of embossed books belonging to the Valentin Haüy Museum, one merits particular attention. It is a sizeable volume and, despite its poor appearance today, the precious vellum covering its spine shows the value which was once attached to it. When opened, a note in ink on the verso of the cover indicates the title, *Géographie de la France* [*Geography of France*], and that it was written in 1832 by “Monsieur Hayter” in early abbreviated braille; which in fact is no longer legible. An old index card adds that there was also a *Géographie de l’Asie* [*Geography of Asia*] and that both of them were written “avec l’imprimerie mobile de Mr. Hayter” [with Mr. Hayter’s mobile press].

Edgard Guilbeau, who founded the Valentin Haüy Museum in 1886 and was its first curator until 1894, explained that Henry Hayter had reminded Louis Braille of the existence of the letter w, a character absolutely necessary to write the English language.¹ Otherwise, the inventor would have forgotten it. However, this character does exist in French, at least since Charlemagne’s time, to write words coming from Anglo-Saxon. For a long time, considered in France as a foreign letter, it was relegated to the end, as in the original braille alphabet.

Henry Hayter (1814-1893) was the son of Sir George Hayter, a painter who was knighted by Queen Victoria in 1842. He was the third child, blind, from a marriage of his father, who was not quite seventeen years old, to Sarah Milton, twenty-eight. The couple separated two years after Henry’s birth.² The child was educated at the “Institution des jeunes aveugles” [Institute for the Young Blind], in Paris.

Henry Hayter is linked to another book in the museum, a small one, devoted to a musical notation in Lucas’ system, a shorthand which uses straight lines, curves, and circles.

A few lines written in ink on the back of the cover, partially hidden by a braille label added later, allow us to read the owner’s name, Henry Hayter, and provides the detail “professeur de musique” [music teacher] and a Paris address, rue de Vaugirard [Vaugirard Street].

Henry Hayter is also quoted at the end of a letter written in ink dictated to a secretary by John Bird, who was blind, but who nevertheless wanted to sign and write the addressee’s name personally (unfortunately indecipherable):

[Illegible number] Duke Street Grosvenor Square W.

Oct 4 h 1874

Dear [illegible name]

¹ Edgard Guilbeau, « La question du w dans l’alphabet braille », *Le Valentin Haüy*, n°2, janvier-mars 1928, p. 37

² en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Hayter

Should you be able when in Paris to reach so far at the School for Blind Children situate I believe Rue de Sèvres, I will thank you to ask for M. Victor, if still alive and there, and should you find him there please to remind him that I visited the School frequently when in Paris 25 years since with John. At the Exhibition of 1851 in England I first learned from M. Foucault of the Quinze-Vingts that the Alphabet of M. Louis Braille was in general use in Paris, but that all mention of it was suppressed through M. Guadet's influence, who wished that his own [illegible word] system should have all the credit. I do not wish a large frame for writing Braille's system, because I have the very one from which Mr Tomlinson had the sketch taken for the Wood cut for his Cyclopædia; but I will thank you to bring me one or two specimens of the smaller size to carry in the pocket, generally about 4 inches long sufficiently thick for strength, and about 1 inch wide, with two Rows of quadrangular holes corresponding to the three grooves below, or rather on the wood or metal below.

If you can also obtain a small specimen of the best kind of paper they have in use as well as 2 or 3 square inches of the "Cuivre jaune" M. Victor uses for making Stereotype-plates. Should you see him remember me kindly to M. Victor and to anyone else who may remember me.

I remain yours very truly

John Bird

PS: enquire if M. Hayter be still connected with the Institution. He is the son of the late Sir George Hayter who painted the Coronation of her Majesty and enquire also of M. Claude Montal and his daughter Clementine.

This letter is inserted into a booklet from the Valentin Haüy Heritage Library, *Cyclopædia of Useful Arts*, to which John Bird makes reference in his letter. A chapter is entitled "Printing for the Blind". We read that "John Bird has visited the continent, for the purpose of inspecting the various institutions for the instruction of the blind (...)". The man he called "M. Victor" is Victor Laas d'Aguen, one of the sighted pupils trained by the Institute of Paris to assist the blind. He became supervisor in 1841 and, around 1849, suggested using stereotypy to emboss braille³. François Foucault was a friend of Louis Braille, with whom he conceived, in 1842, a "Printing Key-Frame", an apparatus to form, with dots, writing that could be read by the sighted⁴. As for Joseph Guadet, main teacher for the boys, subsequently then Director of studies at the Institute of Paris, he founded a pedagogical periodical, *L'Instituteur des Aveugles* [The Blind's teacher], in 1855, to promote the use of braille.

³ Edgard Guilbeau, *Histoire de l'Institution Nationale des Jeunes Aveugles*, Paris, Belin Frères, 1907, p. 73

⁴ Zina Weygand, « Un clavier pour les aveugles ou le destin d'un inventeur, Pierre François Victor Foucault (1797-1871) », *Voir Barré* (Périodique du Centre de recherche sur les aspects culturels de la vision – Ligue Braille, Bruxelles), n°23, décembre 2001, p.35

Another insert was added into the booklet, a cutting from the *London Mirror*, dated February 19th 1870, written by John Bird, entitled “The Battle of the Types for the Blind”.

We must keep Henry Hayter in mind when thinking about this transitional period of competition between systems before the complete adoption of the braille code, which *Touching the Book* so well illustrates. The first book in braille was printed by an Englishman at his own expense, and very soon after the publication of the braille code. Henry Hayter was eighteen years old when he printed *Géographie de la France* in 1832: Louis Braille was twenty-three and a teacher at the Institute for the Young Blind of Paris. Three years previously, Braille had published his *Procédé pour écrire les paroles, la musique et le plain-chant au moyen de points et disposés pour eux* [*Method for Writing the words, music and plainchant with dots for the use of the blind and arranged for them*]. This first edition, in 1829, contains some signs which combine, not only dots, but also dashes, and offers shorthand. In the second edition, in 1837, there are still some abbreviations, but no more dashes, which are not sufficiently perceptible by the finger. Indeed, *Géographie de la France* shows some of these composite braille signs.

Throughout the nineteenth century, exchanges between blind people spread beyond national frontiers and stimulated the circulation of knowledge and skills. These documents prove this. Above all, they testify to the attempts of the blind themselves to appropriate the braille code.

The Museum’s iconographic collection contains a portrait of Henry Hayter. There is no date on this photograph, which was taken in a domestic interior, possibly an apartment or perhaps a scenery setting in a studio. There is a panelled wall in the background, a curtain on the right side, and a Louis XV armchair on the left, on which Henry Hayter has placed his hat. The man looks mature and has real presence. He stands straight, but not too much so. His face is oval, his hair thrown back reveals a high forehead. His eyelids are lowered, he boasts a thin moustache. He is dressed in an elegant redingote; his trousers and his shirt are light. Around his neck is a dark scarf tied as a cravat. He holds in his hands, at the level to his belt, a very little item, that cannot be seen: could it be a stylus to write braille?

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