

THE LEFT ATRIUM

Book review

Love and invention

Reluctant genius: The passionate life and inventive mind of Alexander Graham Bell

Charlotte Gray

HarperCollins Canada; 2006

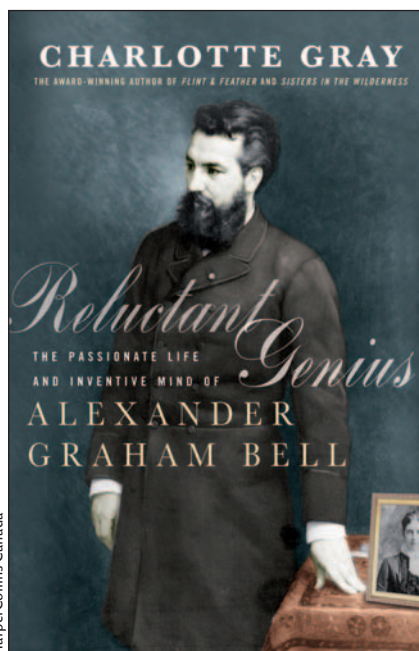
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Most Canadians know that “Alec” Bell invented the telephone, used it first in Canada, spent summers in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia — and that’s about it. Read Charlotte Gray’s aptly titled book and you will discover that there is so much more to know about this intriguing man and his most amazing life. He was so much more than the inventor of the telephone.

In this very readable account, Gray relates the love story of Alec Bell, a slightly neurotic, slightly egomaniacal, poorly educated but highly curious Scot, and one of his pupils, a deaf teenager named Mabel Hubbard, the clever and determined daughter of upper class Bostonians. Mabel had lost her hearing at the age of 5, apparently due to a streptococcal infection. She was fortunate in having loving parents who did everything in their power to keep her in the mainstream in terms of communication and society, including hiring the young Prof. Bell, a teacher of the deaf. Bell, whose mother was hearing impaired, was following in the footsteps of his father, Melville, who had devised a system of “visible speech” to aid in the acquisition of speech in hearing impaired individuals. Bell was a strong believer that deaf people should not be segregated, contrary to what was becoming the norm at that time.

Bell was befriended by Mabel’s family, spending many a Sunday playing



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and singing the Scottish ballads and hymns that so delighted him. Over the course of a couple of years, he fell passionately in love with Mabel. This was a love so powerful that he could hardly think, eat or work for thinking of Mabel. It is charming to think that a “geek” of that era could be so besotted, and the story as Gray tells it, with anecdotes and letters, allows the sincerity of his feelings to illuminate the story.

The social chasm between the teacher and the Boston debutante was so great at the time, that nothing short of a huge commercial success with the telephone was going to allow this match to go forward. Bell knew it and Mabel saw it even more clearly. Gray paints a colourful picture of Mabel’s scheming, planning, cajoling and encouragement as well as the practical help that her patent lawyer father offered in bringing the telephone to

commercial success. Bell invented the telephone to get the girl.

Once done with the telephone, Bell moved on to other things, for he had no interest in business or indeed in money for its own sake. His invention of the telephone allowed him a lifetime of exposure to the great scientific and inventive minds of the day as well as the resources to pursue myriad other interests. These ranged from the genetics of hearing loss to a keen and lifelong interest in the development of flying machines, the mechanics of tetrahedral construction and the development of the hydrofoil.

Gray does a very good job of simplifying the science of the telephone and Bell’s other experiments. The story is also rich in its depiction of the peaceful summers that the Bells spent in Cape Breton, where Mabel, ever the efficient manager, ensured that Alec got the uninterrupted time he needed. The book relates the sacrifices that Mabel made to live with this quixotic and difficult man.

Near the end of the book, Gray tells a story of the Bells, very senior in years, going for a ramble through the woods near their summer house. They reach the lake and strip for a swim, later arriving dishevelled and in high spirits back at the house. They had a love that remained fresh and original, and undiminished over a lifetime.

One of the amazing things in this story is the lack of reference to the handicap of Mabel’s deafness. I think this is because the Bells never thought of her deafness in that light and that is one of the most wonderful parts of this tale.

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