

BIOGRAPHY

The real Pa Bell — Ma, too

**Reluctant Genius:
The Passionate Life
and Inventive Mind
of Alexander Graham Bell**

By Charlotte Gray
HarperCollins, 467 pages, \$36.95

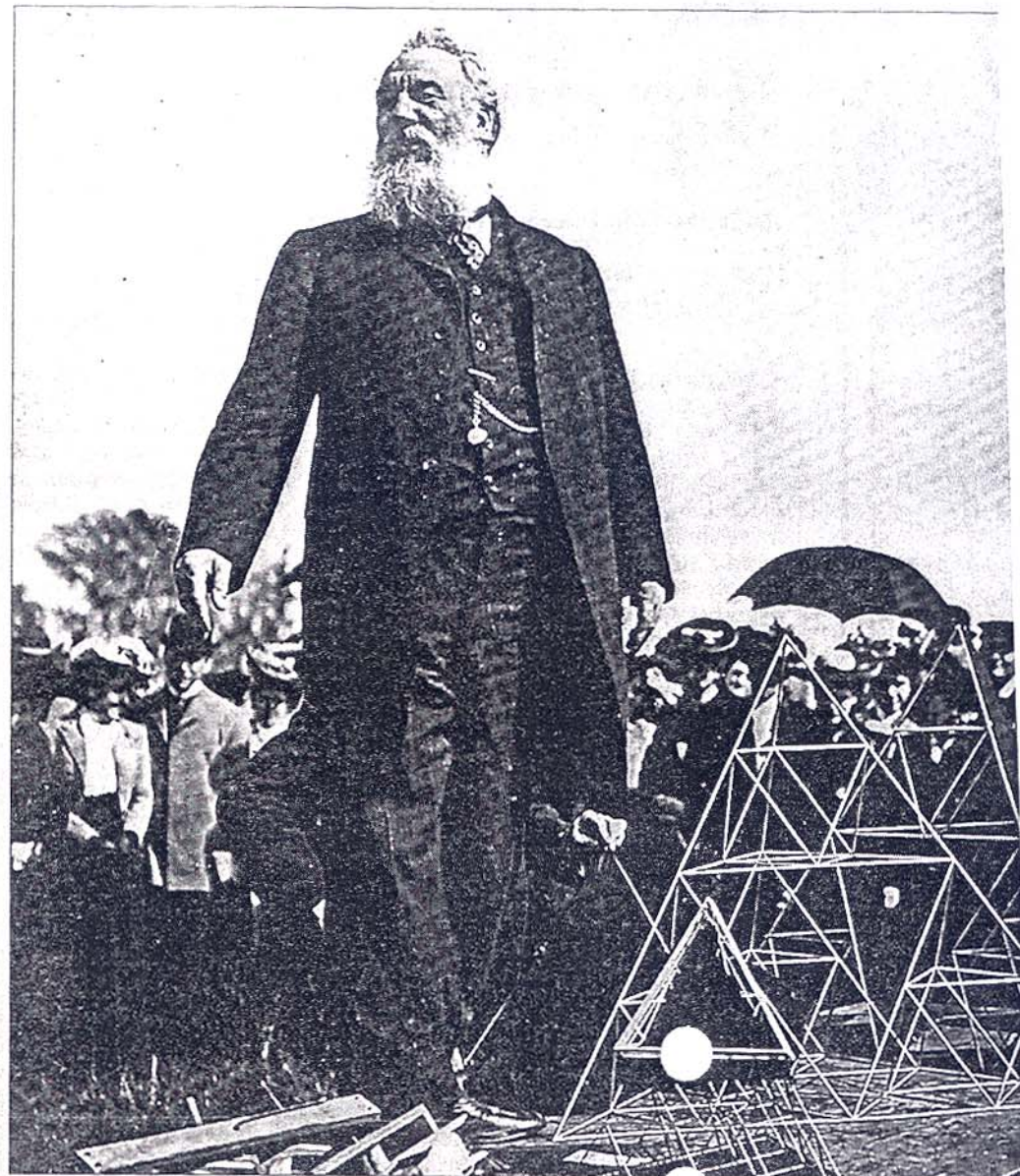
REVIEWED BY STEPHEN R. BOWN

Chances are you have one in your pocket or purse, or get annoyed when one rings in a restaurant, public transit or theatre. Telephones are perhaps the most ubiquitous piece of technology in our world. The version we use today, tiny, cordless and programmable, is much more advanced than the first prototypes. But the basic concept — of voice being transmitted over great distances using electricity — has remained fundamentally unchanged from the late 19th century, when it was conceived and designed by a creative genius working at night in his tiny apartment. Those were the heady days, known sometimes as the golden age of invention, when self-taught amateurs could dream up world-changing technologies and tinker in their sheds to produce working models.

The feverishly determined amateur who invented the telephone was the Scottish-born Alexander Graham Bell, the subject of a revealing new biography by Charlotte Gray. Gray is the author of numerous acclaimed non-fiction books, and anyone with an interest in Canadian history has probably read at least one of them. Her latest should be equally well received.

Reluctant Genius: The Passionate Life and Inventive Mind of Alexander Graham Bell is a human rather than a technical biography of the famous inventor. Gray's focus is not on the minutiae of the technology or science of Bell's inventions, but on his personal life, particularly his 39-year marriage to Mabel Hubbard, the deaf daughter of a wealthy Boston family who, Gray convincingly shows, provided the good sense and stability that prevented the flighty and unstable Bell from self-destructing.

Mabel's father was also a well-connected patent lawyer with intuitive business sense, who pushed the energetic young Bell to complete his work on the telephone before consenting to his daughter's marriage. He then managed the transition from invention to patent-holding monopoly that made them all fabulously wealthy. Within a few decades of the first prototype telephone, millions of people were



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Bell's first demonstration of tetrahedral kites, in 1904 in Baddeck, N.S.: Inventor lacked 'killer instinct.'

connected.

Gray takes us through Bell's early life, from sooty Edinburgh and London, where his two brothers died of tuberculosis and he himself became ill, across the Atlantic to Brantford, Ont., and finally to Boston, where he was hired to teach at the Boston School for Deaf Mutes. It was in Boston that he met his wife and made his greatest scientific invention. The dishevelled young Bell emerges as a curious personality, volatile, independent and fanciful. He was easily distracted from individual projects, but so incredibly focused on his work in general that everything had to revolve around his idiosyncratic habits and peccadilloes. He was a man of incredible passion and creativity rather than a patient and clinical investigator.

Bell, of course, is known not only for his work on the telephone but also for his lifelong advocacy for the deaf, and his moral and financial support of the scientific journals *Nature* and *National Geographic Magazine*. His other inventions, many conceived at his beloved estate in Cape Breton, to which he retreated ever more frequently as he grew older, include early flying machines and hydrofoils. In 1909, history was made in Canada on Bras d'Or Lake in the *Silver Dart* flown by one of Bell's associates, the first manned flight in the British Em-

pire. A few years later, Bell, with young associate Casey Baldwin, designed and constructed the giant hydrofoil HD-4, the fastest boat in the world.

But despite his prolific output, Bell never made money from his later inventions and patents after the telephone, or even brought any to market, and he didn't seem to care. Bell spent his later years questing for one last great invention, but as Gray observes, he "lacked the killer instinct that would be the hallmark of so many successful twentieth-century innovators."

So much of this story is devoted to Mabel and her family that indeed the book could almost be considered a dual biography. This is certainly fair treatment, as the lives and dreams of both Alexander and Mabel were so closely intertwined. By blending the adventures of the young couple with the race to develop new inventions, defend patents and juggle a deluge of responsibilities — their professional and personal lives — Gray shows them as complex and intriguing individuals, not just historically significant caricatures.

With insight and grace, Gray, aided by an incredible wealth of personal documents about their lives, details Alexander's and Mabel's progression from youth through

parenthood to old age in a rapidly changing world. An example of Gray's thoughtful style is her description of a trip the Bells made to Scotland near the end of their lives: "Old friends were dead and gone. The Bell party drove up to Covensea, where Alec and Mabel had been so happy in 1878. But the wind blew a chilly drizzle in from the North Sea, and the stone cottages on the cliff top were in ruins. At a point in his life when he was ready to be swept by nostalgia, he was instead suffused with a sense of his own irrelevance."

Alexander Graham Bell died in Beinn Bhreagh, N.S., in 1922, surrounded by members of his large extended family. Mabel followed him five months later.

Reluctant Genius is neither a page-turner nor a quick read. Rich in detail and measured in pace, it will amply reward readers with patience. It is not only a fascinating book about an important inventor who, hyperbole aside, really did change the world, but also a good story about two lives well lived.

Stephen R. Bown is a writer living in Canmore, Alta. His most recent book, A Most Damnable Invention, was about Alfred Nobel and Fritz Haber, scientists and inventors who were Bell's contemporaries.