

## Bell biography richly detailed

*Weaves tapestry of 19th-century life as well as inventor's accomplishments*

### Reluctant Genius

The Passionate Life and Inventive Mind of Alexander Graham Bell

By Charlotte Gray

HarperCollins, 448 pages, \$37

Reviewed by Chris Rutkowski

HE was an obsessive, high-strung eccentric who was irritable, moody and frequently got migraine headaches.

When he was too energized to sleep, he would sometimes play the piano all night, insensitive to babies' cries. He was a companion and advocate of the deaf-blind icon Helen Keller, who admired him and dedicated her autobiography to him.

He designed and financed the flight of June Bug, the Canadian aircraft that won the *Scientific American* trophy for manned flight in 1908. (The Wright Brothers had not entered the competition.)

One hot summer in 1911, he used an ice box, a fan and a fire hose to convert an empty swimming pool into Canada's first air-conditioned room.

And, of course, he invented the telephone.

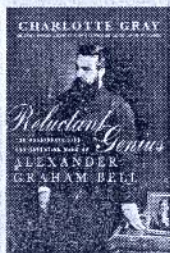
In *Reluctant Genius*, a delightful, richly detailed biography, noted Ottawa-based writer

Charlotte Gray is not content to simply relate the story of Alexander Graham Bell and his inventions. She weaves a beautiful tapestry of life in the late 19th century, centred on the Bell family and household.

"Alec" Bell was born in Scotland in 1847. After graduating from London University, he emigrated with his family to Brantford, Ont., when he was 23. Within five years he was living and teaching in Boston, where he did much of his creative work.

He became a U.S. citizen in 1882 but maintained a summer home on Cape Breton Island, where he eventually moved. He died there in 1922.

Using such sources as Bell's own



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copious notes archived in the U.S. Library of Congress and journals of his wife, relatives and friends, Gray paints a portrait of a man consumed by insatiable curiosity.

He was, arguably, destined to produce an invention related to sounds. As children, he and his brother once played a practical joke by animating a mechanical throat they made of rubber and wood, making it "speak" at will.

His father, Melville, was a speech pathologist who had invented "visible speech," a method for teaching the deaf to talk. Bell's mother was partially deaf, and his wife, Mabel, also deaf, had been one of his students when he was teaching elocution at Boston University in the 1870s.

Gray manages to portray the sense of urgency Bell faced when trying to beat Thomas Edison in the race to first produce a "talking telegraph."

When he was finally successful and began marketing his revolutionary device, politics and corporate intrigue pitted Bell against Western Union, whose telephone linemen may have sometimes cut its rival's lines.

In 1878, American households could choose from two competing telephone companies (a precursor of the cell-phone wars of today). Legal battles and challenges to his patent dogged Bell for decades, causing him extreme anxiety and costing huge sums. Nevertheless, the Bell Telephone Company prevailed, and its founder became a very wealthy man.

However, Gray, who has written biographies of several Canadian women, makes it clear that Bell might have languished in obscurity were it not for his wife's faith in him. Bell might have lost to Edison had Mabel not tricked her husband into travelling to the Philadelphia Exhibition of 1876, where new inventions were to be assessed by a panel of judges for financing.

Gray expands and gives flesh to other aspects of the Bell mythos. His first audible words through the telephone were indeed his call to his assistant Tom Watson for help after spilling battery acid on himself.

She relates the simple historical fact that the event occurred in Boston, dispelling any notion of the invention being Canadian.

She portrays Watson as a brilliant engineer who managed to translate Bell's scribbles into a working device. She similarly shows how Bell's



SUPPLIED PHOTO

Alec and Mabel Bell strolling in the garden at Beinn Bhreagh.

entourage, including his wife, extended family, assistants, investors and children, all shaped the inventor's life and allowed his creativity to flourish.

Even the environment of his many residences in Scotland, the U.S. and Canada each contributed to his genius through their inspiration and impact on his life.

But it was his love for Mabel, mother of their four children, that drove Bell onward. While they were apart during his many travels, they wrote one another often, their letters gushing

with superlatives of affection.

Beyond the telephone, Bell invented and held patents for tetrahedral building design, early aircraft and hydroplanes, the latter which he tried to get into production for military application.

Yet he distanced himself from the evolution of his most important invention as it changed the lives of millions of people.

Chris Rutkowski is a Winnipeg writer.