

BIOGRAPHY/John M. and Priscilla S. Taylor



From the cover of "Let Me Finish"

Intuitive inventor, angelic writer

Alexander Graham Bell lacked the killer instinct that would be the hallmark of so many successful . . . innovators," writes Charlotte Gray in her splendid new biography of the remarkable man who invented the telephone, *Reluctant Genius: Alexander Graham Bell and the Passion for Invention* (Arcade, \$27.95, 467 pages, illus.). "He remained a loner, driven by curiosity and philanthropic motives."

Bell was born in Scotland, the son of Melville Bell, a pioneer in elocution and the teaching of the deaf, and his deaf wife, Eliza. Young Alec soon became a professional assistant to his father, developing an interest in the deaf and his father's system of "visible speech" — a series of symbols that Melville Bell had developed to denote certain sounds.

Bell was "delicate" as a youth, and the family, in search of clean air, moved to Ontario, Canada, in 1870. Alec made his way to Boston where he taught at America's first school for the deaf. The enthusiasm that Bell brought to his teaching caused him to be much in demand.

He fell in love with one of his teenage pupils, Mabel Hubbard. In Ms. Gray's words, "Despite her youth and hear-

ing E. B. White, who died in 1985, is reading about him in the gentle but unsentimental memoir of his stepson, Roger Angell: *Let Me Finish* (Harcourt, \$25, 302 pages).

Mr. Angell carries off the role of raconteur with remarkable grace, sifting through his memories in a stream-of-consciousness style that reveals what he chooses to tell obliquely and with the same ease that marked his stepfather's writing. (As Mr. Angell notes, however, the ease is practiced: E. B. White revised the opening page of "Charlotte's Web" eight times.)

Roger Angell, who sent his first contribution to the *New Yorker* in 1944, became fiction editor there in 1956, taking over the very room his mother, Katharine Angell White, had once occupied (her Coty face powder was still in the closet).

If Mr. Angell found E. B. White to be "the most charming man I've ever met," who had a "readiness for play that lasted all his life," the depiction of his driven mother is more complex: More than once he recounts how his mother told him about the upcoming divorce from Ernest Angell:

"I did pretty well until she told me that Nancy and I would still be living at our house on Ninety-third Street

graph, especially in the question of whether simultaneous transmissions could be sent over a single wire. Bell was, in Ms. Gray's judgment, "an intuitive inventor, not a trained scientist."

Nevertheless, in about 1875 he discovered that sound could be produced by variations in the intensity of electric current, and the concept of the telephone was born. On March 10, 1876, Bell opened a new means of communication with the prosaic message, "Mr. Watson, come here, I want you." Although Bell would spend nearly two decades in defending his patents, the telephone made him a rich young man.

Bell's invention of the telephone overshadowed achievements that would have made any other person famous. He cooperated with Samuel P. Langley on heavier-than-air flight, and although it was the Wright brothers who demonstrated the feasibility of flight, Bell built a pioneering aircraft of his own. He also built the first successful hydrofoil, helped develop the photoelectric cell and invented an improved mechanism for the desalination of ocean water.

Bell lived until 1922, dividing his time between his home on Connecticut Avenue in Washington and a mansion on Cape Breton in Nova Scotia. As his beard turned white and his girth increased, Alec took on the aspect of a warm-hearted Santa Claus. He never lost interest in the problems of the deaf, and used 300,000 dollars of his own money to found a school for teaching speech to the deaf. He developed a lifelong friendship with the blind prodigy Helen Keller.

Bell emerges from Ms. Gray's fine book as a brilliant but disorganized inventor whose creations reached the world largely because of the marketing skill of Mabel and her father, Gardiner Hubbard. The author concludes that Bell's invention of the telephone "says so much about his genius — it evolved from his determination to help the deaf; a process of intuition, rather than calculation, prompted the crucial conceptual breakthrough."

Ms. Gray devotes considerable space to the sometimes-stormy relations between Alec and Mabel, but in so doing gives Mabel her rightful place as Bell's partner as well as his wife. "Reluctant Genius" is a winner.

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The next best thing to read-

gether on the farm in Maine, but he vowed never to inflict the pain of divorce on his children when he grew up — and then, of course, he did. (But with admirable restraint, all the author reveals about this is that the name of his wife changed from Evelyn to Carol.)

If his mother was a worrier and a non-hugger, his stepfather was so "morbidly shy" that he did not even attend Katharine's private burial in 1977.

But Mr. Angell found time shared with the Whites so delightful that, almost as if in compensation, he spends a lot of space extolling the virtues of his "sad, formidable" father, Ernest Angell, who "had no idea of what kids were like" but "who plunged right ahead with fatherhood," arranging adventures around town every weekend and trips to Montana, New Mexico, Nantucket or Missouri in the summers.

Naturally, the author reminisces a good deal about personalities and work at the *New Yorker*, including the fact that editor William Shawn occasionally rejected contributions by big names (John Cheever, John Updike and even E. B. White), while blaming the rejections on his "semi-independent" fiction editors.

The author notes that Mr. Shawn had no such option with his nonfiction writers, and "many a windy or arid or bottomless piece of reportage inexorably appeared in the magazine as a result."

Throughout, Mr. Angell insists that "memory is fiction — an anecdotal version of some scene or past event we need to store away for present or future use."

The memories he touches on stretch from details about growing up in the Depression, stolen afternoons at the movies and baseball ("a unique bond between my father and me") to recollections of crazy aunts, adventures with snakes, a madcap World War II stint in the Army Air Force as an instructor on the use of machine guns and a call on W. Somerset Maugham at his villa.

Curiously, the book contains no index and no illustrations other than one of the author in a life jacket on the dust cover.

Nevertheless, E. B. White would have enjoyed this book and so will any reader who loves good writing.

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