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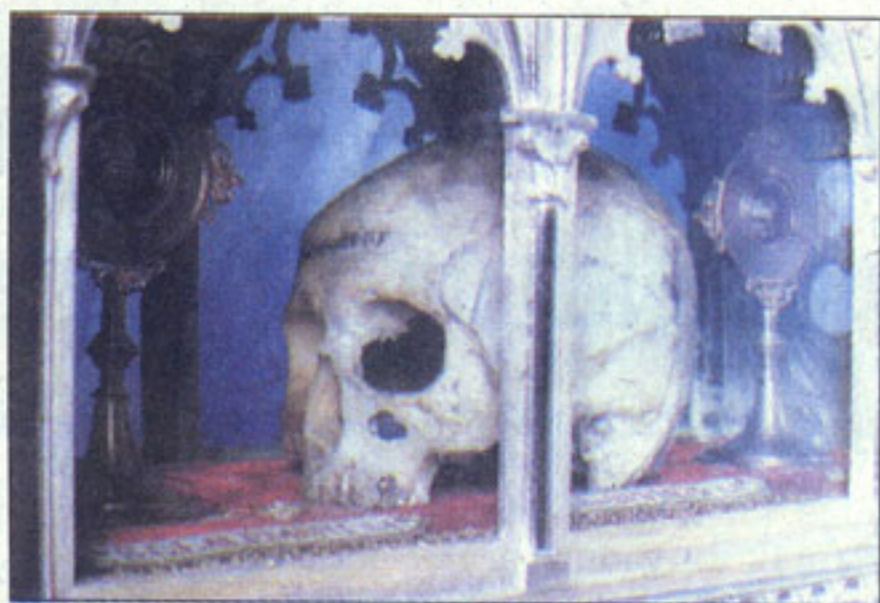
# ARTS

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THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

## 25 Rooms of Wonder



### Ottawa author Charlotte Gray dives into the nation's treasures

BY PAUL GESSELL

Ottawa history writer Charlotte Gray feels she has simply not been paying enough attention to poor Alexander Graham Bell and his wife, Mabel.

An in-depth look at the Bells was to have been Gray's next big book, a follow-up to her much-acclaimed biographies of Mackenzie King's mother, the Ontario pioneer sisters Susannah Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill, and the poet Pauline Johnson.

But other projects, other peoples' projects, keep interrupting Gray's research on the family whose name appears on phone bills across North America.

"Oh, dear, the poor old Bells," Gray exclaims over lunch at the Canadian Museum of Civilization. "They're getting a bit neglected. I'm dying to get back to them."

But first she has to do a cross-country tour for the next few months promoting a most unusual book, *The Museum Called Canada: 25 Rooms of Wonder*. (At home, Gray and her family call the weighty picture book, *The Brick Called Canada*). The Ottawa launch

will be held Thursday evening at Library and Archives Canada on Wellington Street.

The museum community is abuzz. This book is probably the best promotional vehicle for history museums one could ever imagine.

Gray's name, and only Gray's name, appears on the cover of this \$65 Random House of Canada creation. But Gray is the first to admit the book is a collaborative effort. It wasn't even her idea. As the dust jacket proclaims, Sara Angel "created, curated and produced" the 708-page book containing hundreds of pictures of museum artifacts from across the country that trace the history of Canada from the days of the dinosaurs to space exploration.

Gray's role was to write a short essay about one artifact from each of the "25 rooms of wonder." As a popular history writer second in fame only to Pierre Berton, Gray's role was also to provide some star power to the more anonymous team of researchers, designers, editors and others who did most of the heavy lifting. Angel, in particular, did much lifting.

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JEAN LEVAC, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Charlotte Gray's latest book, *The Museum Called Canada*, has the museum community abuzz. Divided into 25 chapters, or 'Rooms of Wonder,' the book contains hundreds of pictures of artifacts that trace the country's history, from the days of dinosaurs to space exploration.

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### Gray: Entertaining essays

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Angel is the founder and director of Otherwise Editions, a Toronto company that specializes in creating innovative illustrated books. Angel took her idea for *The Museum* to Random House and convinced the company to publish it. Gray was soon brought on board to sift through artifacts selected by Angel and decide which ones could be spun into lively essays.

Gray chose wisely. The most entertaining essay is undoubtedly the one about the skull of poor Father Jean de Brébeuf, who was fatally tortured by Indians in 1649. Amid a feud between some Quebec City nuns and Jesuit priests in 1925, the skull was cut in half. Now, in a quintessential Canadian compromise, half the skull rests in English Canada, at the Martyrs' Shrine Church in Midland, Ont., and the other half in French Canada at Quebec City's Hotel-Dieu Chapel.

The result of the Gray-Angel collaboration is a product meant to be considered as a virtual museum rather than as just an ordinary book. The "museum" is divided into "rooms," not chapters. They include the Entry Hall, Fossil Room, Hall of Ice, First Peoples Room and continue thematically, rather than chronologically, until we get to the final two rooms, the Rights Auditorium and the Earth and Sky Atrium. People who look at this material, Gray notes casually, are "museum visitors" rather than "readers." Yes, it sounds hokey. But it works.

This is not a coffee-table book. Its dimensions are like that of a really

thick novel, but not as thick as Random House's other risky publishing venture this fall, the 1,400-page novel by neophyte Paul Anderson called *Hunger's Brides*. This brick, as Gray might call it, reveals more than most people will care to know about a dead Mexican nun named Juana Ines de la Cruz.

**In this case, Charlotte Gray is the talent brought in to write up someone else's idea. While she likes the material, the author is also eager to return to her biography of the Bells.**

This is the second consecutive book conceived by others that Gray was conscripted to author. Previously, there was *Canada: A Portrait in Letters 1800-2000*. Gray was also conscripted this year to serve as a judge for the Giller Prize, which entails reading almost 100 novels. Being a light sleeper, books were often read between midnight and dawn. And Gray was conscripted to be one of 10 celebrities appearing in a forthcoming series of CBC television programs featuring nominees for the role of the greatest Canadian who ever lived (Gray is sworn to secrecy about the person she has to champion on national television).

"The (museum) book is like the television program in that I'm the on-air

talent and the director is the one who has the big idea," Gray says. (The "talent" is the sometimes pejorative term television folk use to describe whatever celebrity they put on the tube to lure viewers to their show).

Gray is not complaining about the various projects she has helped construct, but the projects have come at the expense of the project dearest to her heart, the Bell biography.

Gray certainly seems to have loved working on *The Museum*. She says the book changed her view of Canadian history. Her previous projects dealt only with the last two centuries. This book opened her eyes to the richness of "pre-colonial history." It also made her realize how much of Canada's history, for both aboriginals and the early European arrivals, is wrapped up in the North.

"Now we're so south oriented, now we're so oriented to the United States, the band of settlement within 100 miles of the United States border."

Once the focus of attention was on Hudson's Bay, the search for the Northwest Passage and other aspects of the northern hinterland.

But as much as Gray loves all of her recent projects, she is eager to return to telling the story of the Bells.

"I long to get back to constructing a narrative," she says.

There is still much work to do. The Bell biography will likely not be completed for another two years. And that's providing Gray does not get conscripted into being the "talent" for yet another project conceived by someone else.