

“What a man my husband is ...
Flying machines to which telephones and
torpedoes are to be attached occupy
the first place just now.”¹



1857-1923

Miss Mabel Hubbard knew she was accepting a challenge when she agreed to marry the brilliant and quirky inventor, Alexander Graham Bell. He became her life's work—and what a body of work it was.

The romance and lifelong partnership began in Massachusetts in 1873. He was a Scottish emigrant, teaching elocution to deaf students in Boston. She was one of his pupils. Mabel had lost her hearing at the age of five because of scarlet fever. Isolated by silence, she would have eventually lost her speech as well, if not for her determined parents. Gardiner and Gertrude Hubbard were wealthy and willing to go to great lengths to keep their daughter integrated in the hearing world.

At 16, Mabel was an accomplished lip reader and a creative listener, recently back from studies in Germany. She was not instantly impressed with her new teacher, thinking him old (at 26) and unkempt. But she paid attention and came to enjoy his ideas and his company. He found her captivating and became a frequent visitor to the Hubbard home.

Gardiner Hubbard was a patent lawyer and financier with a keen interest in the telegraph business. Coincidentally, Alec was experimenting in his spare time with ways to improve telegraph transmission, an offshoot of his fascination with sound and hearing. Gardiner Hubbard offered to co-finance Alec's experiments in exchange for a business interest in any new patents. It made perfect sense: If Alec were to woo Mabel, he would need more than a teacher's salary and an interesting hobby. He agreed to the partnership, but struggled to balance his priorities. Alec's first love was his work with the deaf, and the telegraph experiments threatened to interfere with that. He might well have abandoned the patent race if not for Mabel. He needed to know if she would have him. Mindful of her youth, he waited a year then threw himself at her mercy. Mabel wasn't sure about the match, but agreed to let him court her, which he did with fervor.

1 \ Newlywed Mabel writing to her mother in 1877. Quoted by Liliias Toward in *Mabel Bell: Alexander's Silent Partner*, 45.

Mabel and Alec with Elsie (left) and Daisy, in 1885.



Mabel accepted his marriage proposal on her 18th birthday. Soon after, she wrote to Alec: “My darling, I warned you before we were engaged that though I might love you very much, I could not do so in the passionate hot way you did ... I would give you more if I could but I cannot help my nature.”²

Nevertheless, Mabel got down to work, organizing Alec’s life and their future, and making a very successful go of it. Without Mabel to keep him on track, Alec might never have completed his prototype of the telephone in time for its triumphant debut at the Philadelphia Exhibition in 1876. With his first patent secured, Alec was on his way to becoming a wealthy man.

Mabel’s telephone stock gave her a 30 per cent stake in the company. Alec kept a token 10 shares (0.2 per cent).

Alec and Mabel were married in 1877. The gifts they exchanged were generous and meaningful. She gave him a piano and urged him to play, although she could not hear the music. He gave her a cross necklace—a symbol of her faith—and 1,497 shares of the newly formed Bell Telephone Company.

Soon Mabel and Alec had two daughters: Elsie (born 1878) and Daisy (born 1880). They were overjoyed with their growing family and hoped for more children. Sadly, they lost two sons at birth.

The Bell family travelled extensively, maintaining a home base in Washington, DC. In the summer of 1885, they planned a sailing vacation through the Bras d’Or Lake region of Cape Breton, with a stopover in Baddeck. They fell in love with the landscape and the rural Gaelic culture, which reminded Alec of his native Scotland. The family returned to Baddeck the following summer and began scouting for property. They set their sights on a point of land overlooking Baddeck Bay, opposite the village. It took time to convince the various landowners to sell, but the Bells

² \ Charlotte Gray. *Reluctant Genius*, 120.

Mabel loved ideas; but she wished to see them organized and put to good use. Her ability to focus balanced Alec's leaps of imagination.

eventually acquired 600 acres. Alec named the land Beinn Bhreagh (pronounced *ben vreeah*), meaning Beautiful Mountain in Scottish Gaelic. Their first home on the estate, the Lodge, was completed in 1889. A few years later, they settled into the homey-elegant Beinn Bhreagh Hall.

The Bells dreamed of making their summer estate agriculturally self-sufficient and intellectually vibrant. To that end, they added extensive gardens, livestock, barns, and homes for workers, as well as a playhouse for the children, boathouses, and a large laboratory for Alec.

The land itself was well suited for the wide-ranging experiments that interested Alec—from sheep breeding to mechanical flight. “You are a man of brilliant talents,” Mabel wrote. “But your mind is so fertile it is always drawn off by every new idea that comes up; you like to fly around like a butterfly sipping honey, more or less from a flower here or another flower there.”³ Mabel loved ideas; but she wished to see them organized and put to good use. Her ability to focus balanced Alec's leaps of imagination.



Mabel in her study at Beinn Bhreagh, 1922.

³ \ Gray, 117.

Mabel managed the estate and the family's finances. She also maintained an active interest in Alec's work—recruiting staff, reviewing records, translating technical articles from German to English, and developing photographs—all with an eye to her husband's scientific legacy. When it appeared that Alec might be losing confidence in his flight experiments, she devised a plan. In 1907, she organized the Aerial Experiment Association (AEA), a research group led by

Mabel is still admired in Baddeck for her community involvement. In 1891, she started the Young Ladies Club of Baddeck. The club continues today as the Alexander Graham Bell Club and is believed to be the oldest continuously operating women's club in Canada. Mabel and Alec are also credited with inspiring or sponsoring the first Home and School Association in Canada; the first lending library on Cape Breton Island; and Canada's first Montessori classroom, set up in a Beinn Bhreagh warehouse for their grandchildren and a few young friends from the community.

Alec and including four young engineering innovators: Douglas McCurdy, Casey Baldwin, Thomas Selfridge, and Glenn Curtiss. Mabel contributed \$35,000 of her own money (equivalent to almost \$1 million today) to finance their work for 18 months. In that time, the AEA built four working airplanes and made aviation history with the Silver Dart, the first piloted heavier-than-air machine to fly in Canada.

When the AEA disbanded, Alec and Casey Baldwin turned their attention to perfecting the hydrofoil hydrodome (the HD), a super-fast boat designed to skim or "fly" over the water. Mabel contributed funds and encouragement, and followed their progress in detail. The three of them hoped to secure a government contract to build a fleet of high-speed submarine chasers. The contract never came, but Casey Baldwin did succeed in setting a world water speed record of 114 kph (63 knots) on Bras d'Or Lake in 1919.

Alec died peacefully at Beinn Bhreagh Hall in 1922 from complications of diabetes, with Mabel at his side. He was buried at the top of his beautiful mountain. Mabel rallied her strength to ensure that Alec's work and his memory would endure. A month after the funeral, she wrote: "Mr. Baldwin and I have today signed a contract whereby we agree together that we will continue to carry on the work that Mr. Bell, Baldwin and I have been carrying on—so far as it is possible to do so without Mr. Bell. This agreement is to last for ten years and calls for an expenditure of \$10,000 a year for experimental work to be at Baldwin's sole discretion."⁴

Mabel measures the pull on a kite as it flies over Beinn Bhreagh. Kites were essential tools in Alec's flight experiments.



4 \ Toward, 204–05.

Casey Baldwin did continue their work, but Mabel could not. She died of cancer six months after Alec, at the Maryland home of her daughter Daisy. The following summer the family brought her ashes back to Beinn Bhreagh for burial in Alec's grave, under a simple marker. As she wished, "the real, the big and lasting memorial"⁶ lives on in the science, technology, community spirit, and family pride that Mabel cultivated throughout her life.

⁶ \ Toward, 198.

And now ...

Cassandra Dorrington and **Cynthia Dorrington** are modern-day champions for teamwork and innovation. Their company, Vale & Associates, has offered human resource management and consulting to small and medium-sized organizations in Canada, the United States, the Caribbean, and Africa. The company name is a nod to Vale Road, the street in New Glasgow where they grew up.

Cassandra is the big-picture thinker; Cynthia sees the details. "Know your strengths," they advise, "and empower each other to succeed."

Cynthia admires Mabel Bell's positive outlook. "Mabel had an ability to bring people together, and she focused on that. She didn't let her hearing loss define her."

Cassandra points to the value of differences in building a strong team. "Where Alec's strengths waned, Mabel excelled," she notes. "Differences, if applied in the right way, can unite and strengthen a team."

Cynthia and Cassandra share a commitment to community service—a value they learned from their parents. They have served in mentoring and executive roles for more than a dozen organizations, including the Black Business Initiative; Techsploration (encouraging young women to pursue non-traditional roles in science, trades, and technologies); the Canadian Progress Club, Halifax Cornwallis (supporting women and children in need); and others.

For the Dorrington sisters, success is a family affair.

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Baddeck, and That Sort of Thing first appeared as a serial in *Atlantic Monthly*, from January to May, 1874, and was later published as a book. It inspired Alec and Mabel's first visit to Baddeck.

IMAGE CREDITS

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