

Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Mabel Hubbard Bell, April 1889, with transcript

ALEXANDER GRAHAM BELL TO MABEL (Hubbard) BELL Beinn Bhreagh, C. B. Nova Scotia. Saturday, April twenty-something, 1889. Dear Mabel:

Behold the latest spelling of Beinn Bhreagh according to the Rev. Mr. McKenzie — see his letter enclosed. Mr. McInnis has started a lot of men collecting white pine (*pinus strobus*) on Washabachtak — Mountain white ash and sugar maple — but he does not know where to find the locust (*Robinia psendacacia*). I have told him also to find some willows. Don't you think you could get Mr. Gibson to send a lot of cuttings from the old willow tree in Cambridge.

I am very much pleased with the site of the new house — the more I see of it the more I like it. The frame of the house is up (excepting the roof) — The tree trunks that are to form the verandah poles are cut and ready to be placed in position. I must say I am a little doubtful about these posts. The wood of course is not seasoned as the posts have just been cut — and I cannot tell how they will look until they are actually in position. There is a great deal more stone work about the house than I had any idea of. I believe you could actually utilize the space under the house for a cellar floor if you want. You could have billiard room and kitchen there if you want. The house does not touch the ground anywhere and is ten feet from it at one end. This introduces the query, will the house stand the heavy gales that sometimes visit these parts? It would be rather awkward to have the house toppled over into the harbor below! The different parts of the house are being rivetted together with iron. And iron posts protrude from the masonry below to which the verandah posts and etc., will be rigidly attached. It looks therefore as if it will require a two-fold enmoan hurricane to move 2 the building from its place.

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The house-boat grows towards completion. The two halls are in position for launching — and the platform timbers have been set in place ready for decking. The double halled structure attracts great attention — and Mr. Embree says he has had at least 100 curious visitors for the past few days. I reached Hawkesbury last Saturday and went carefully over the plans with the Embrees. Large cakes of arctic ice were floating in the straights impeding navigation. No steam vessel excepting the “Norwegian” (the ferry boat) ventured into the ice. The Boston steamer “The Carroll” bound for Prince Edward's Island had been ice-bound for some days. On Sunday the wind and the tide changed and the ice began to leave the straights. A whole lot of schooners that had been imprisoned for days set sail towards the gulf of St. Lawrence although the gulf seemed one mass of ice-floes so far as could be seen from Port Hastings where I stayed.

Some of the Schooners were caught in the ice and were carried along helplessly for unknown parts — The others returned to anchor in the straights and wait for better times. Monday the straights were clear and not an ice-floe in sight. “The Carroll” went to her destination — and it was thought that the “Neptune” would come from Sydney and Baddeck reaching the Straights Tuesday morning.

Tuesday morning wind and tide had turned bringing back the ice in huge quantities — and bringing back the helpless schooners. The smoke-stack of the Neptune was seen in the distance heading for Port Mulgrave — but it was thought hardly possible for her to penetrate the ice as she was a paddlewheeler — and her paddles might 3 become broken.

The “Norwegian” started from Port Hastings with the mail for Mulgrave — and many were the speculations as to whether she would reach her destination or be imprisoned in the ice. She was carried far out of her way but by dint of ramming the ice-floes at full speed — she succeeded in cutting her way through. I was recommended to stay on Cape Breton Island if I wanted to go to Haddeck, for if I once crossed the straights it was extremely doubtful whether I could get back again for a week. So I did — and I watched the smoke-stack of the Neptune through a field glass — hoping that she too would not

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go to Mulgrave. She however was making the most of an open lead in the ice where she was and pushed on — finally reaching Mulgrove in safety. Then the ice closed in — until there was not a particle of water to be seen anywhere. The whole straight — and the gulf of St. Lawrence as far as the eye could see was one vast field of snow covered ice. The ice closed in round the schooners at anchor and many of the crews walked to shore on the ice carrying poles or cars in case of accident. Ice formed on the roads and a little snow fell. It seemed strange to find winter here — when a little time before — only a few days — I had been picking orange-blossoms and fruit off the trees in Florida.

I enjoyed the cold however much more than the heat of Florida. For the first time for months — I have been able to take exercise without perspiration. I have certainly walked not less than six miles a day since I came to the island. I never felt better in my life. I enjoy exercise and want to walk or row. I have been all over Beinn Bhreagh and intend camping out on the top of the mountain 4 tomorrow — (Sunday). I shall enjoy the solitude of the mountain top — better than the gloomy sabbath of the good christians here. Mr. McInnis has the old barn at the top of Beinn Bhreagh in camping out order — and has taken up there — the box in the hall used for holding things from the yacht. Oil-stove, canned goods, yacht blanket, and etc., etc., have all been stowed into the box for my comfort.

As you row towards Beinn Bhreagh it seems as though the house were built on the very edge of the cliff — and is in danger of sliding down. Quite an ocular deception when you climb up there — you find there is room for a good broad road between the house and the cliff. From the windows you can look right down into the harbor.

On Tuesday evening the ice in the straight loosened a little — the Norwegian came over with the mail to Port Hastings — and I returned with her to Mulgrave. It was a beautiful sight to see her ram the huge ice-floes — splitting them in two and forcing her way through the crack — where a sailing vessel — or a paddlewheeler would have been helpless. I took a berth on the Neptune so that she could not start without me — if the ice opened. Mr. Jim Dunlap — high sheriff — of Victoria — and his bride — (the sister of John A.

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Macdonald — M. P.) were on board. They had been married in Boston — and were then on their way home to Baddeck.

I found Mr. McCurdy (senior) on board also — with Mrs. William McCurdy and her little boy. All well.

On Wednesday morning — I woke up and found the vessel in motion. She had escaped through a lead and was in St. Peter's inlet beyond the Canal. We reached Baddeck in the evening before dusk. A 5 beautiful day. The whole town was gay with boating. Flags of all sorts and descriptions (excepting the American Flag) flying from all sorts of buildings. A large crowd and a whole battalion of small boys on the wharf to meet the steamer — They greeted us with a hip-hip-hurrah as we neared the dock — and a cry of “there they are”.

All this turned out to be in honor of the High sheriff and his bride. I stayed at the hotel all night — but night was reduced hideous by the serenaders who made their appearance. They blew on horns and they drummed on tin-cans and they shouted in discord “For he's a jolly good fe-e - llow which nobody can deny.”

Three or four parties of serenaders made their appearance — and were let into the dining room, where they were regaled on bride's cake and port wine. Then quietness settled down upon the scene — and Baddeck became itself again.

Thursday morning I drove to Crescent Grove and had hardly lighted on the Verandah — when a pair of great dirty black paws were placed upon my shoulders — (nearly knocking me down) and there was Leo — fairly howling with delight over my unexpected appearance. He was fairly frantic with joy — so I sat down on the verandah steps and took his great shaggy head in my arms — and gave him a good hug — while he howled and howled to the amusement of Jim Dunlap who had driven me down. And then there came a procession past the end of the verandah — of four sheep in indian file. First there was Minnie — followed by her daughter Nellie — followed by her son, what's his name, and a

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little baby lamb born only a few days ago. Minnie also has a lamb born today so there will be five in the procession when 6 the children arrive.

Mr. McInnis has given full instructions to the carpenters to build the house for Elsie and Daisy — and it will be ready by the time you arrive.

I am very much dissatisfied with the care that has been taken of the sheep. We have hundreds of acres of as good sheep land as there is in the world and our sheep have never set foot upon it. They have been penned up on low marshy land for over a year. Sickness broke out among them — and there they were all penned up together sick and well — like the prisoners in Andersonville prison. As a result nearly half of the sheep have died! And yet no change has been made — nor have we been notified of the fact of this great mortality.

I have ordered the survivors — about fifty in number — (the well ones) to be turned loose on the top of the mountain and left to themselves — confident that nature will be more kind to them than that. Wildcats — eagles — or wolves wouldn't take fifty per cent. There is no sickness among others' sheep — Their sheep are free and have roamed the hills in ice and snow — and are well. Our sheep have been penned up together on marshy ground — and coddled and physicked — by ignorant people — and half of them have died. We have about fifteen lambs so far — and expect many more about May 1st. Two pairs of twins have made their appearance. They helped themselves yesterday from a baby's nursing bottle — as nicely as could be — but did not seem to care much for the artificial method. The mothers have nourishment enough for them — and they will probably do well enough.

With much love to Elsie and Daisy — and a heartfelt for yourself.

Your loving husband, Alec. Mrs. A. Graham Bell, Washington, D. C.