

Letter from Mabel Hubbard Bell to Eliza Symonds Bell, June 23, with transcript

Letter from Mrs. Alexander Graham Bell to Mrs. Alexander Melville Bell. Grand Hotel de France, Bordeaux, June 23rd (1888) My dear Mrs. Bell:

We were so glad to hear from Grace the other day that — “Mrs. Bell came to see me looking so well and bright.” It is very nice indeed to be able to think of you out of doors again, feeling well and thinking of going to Colonial Beach. I suppose that you must be there now. I hope it is as pleasant there as we have found it in “La belle France.” I don't think I ever in my life knew more perfect weather than that of this last month, the sun sufficiently warm and bright and the air wonderfully fresh and exhilarating, rendering it a joy even to breath it. No wonder the Frenchman is so passionately devoted to his country and thinks there is none other to compare with it. The part of it through which we have travelled cannot compare in natural beauty or grandeur with much of our own country or other parts of Europe, but so much of man's care and labor has been given to it that I cannot believe there is another land that has so much of the sweetness and loveliness of home about it. It is like a bride dressed lovingly and with care for her bridal all her defects concealed or covered with flowers and her beauties brought forward and made the most of. One loves one's handiwork and surely every acre of ground here shows man's labor. There are no waste patches miles long as at home, no monotonous stretches of waving grass as far as eye can reach unrelieved by tree or shrub. Everywhere is variety, everywhere the look of small prosperity and of comfort belonging not to one man, but to many.

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We find ourselves everywhere, almost the only foreign tourists. While we found Paris crowded to overflowing with Americans and English, and my Uncle Eustis Hubbard had to

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delay reaching London because there was no room for him, —here in Provincial, France the American seems almost unknown, and we have shared the grand old Cathedrals only with the neat whitecappedpeasant women at their prayers, and the beautiful historic castles with no one. Nothing could be more delightful. I don't know whether you care for history, or are interested in seeing exactly where Henry of Guise was killed, or the door against which Charles VIII struck his head and died, but I am — it makes them seem so much more real.

Tomorrow we leave Bordeaux for Biarritz, a fashionable French seashore place right on the Spanish frontier. We hope the Commission will allow Alec to join us there and go up to P?? in the Pyrenees where we expect to stay until it is time for us to go home. I think it will be refreshing to see snow mountains once more, we have not seen any for nearly twenty years, at least I have not. We have been buying a lot of wine here, and I hope you and Mr. Bell will drink a lot of mine, some of it is really delicious. My father's wine merchant who is also the agent of the Rothschild's took us down the famous Medoc country which before the late diseases attacked the wines was said to be the richest bit of land in the world. They told us that Baron Rothschild paid five million of france for his bit of land (less than 400 acres I think) and that his income from it in one year was 1,750,000 one million seven hundred and fifty thousand francs. They are much pleased with the prospects of the vintage of 1888 as the snow and frost this spring killed the poisonous eggs. 3 The vineyards certainly looked as if they were in a most prosperous condition. Owing to the care and precision with which the vines are kept trimmed at the same height, two feet, as you look over the wide expanse of green rolling upland the vineyards look like meadows of long waving green grass. They told us that each vine averaged from twenty-five to thirty bunches. But the amount of care which is bestowed upon the wine from first to last is something unimaginable to the uninitiated. The vines' leaves are for instance covered four or five times during the season with a preparation of sulphate of copper to keep off mildew, then three or four times during the season women go through the vines tying down the branches and then men drive gentle horses or oxen between the

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rows plowing up the ground on each side the vines. I could not believe until I saw it that there was room between each row for a horse or oxen to pass along without treading on the precious vines, but we watched several of them for some time and none ever make a mistake even in the difficult operation of turning out of one row into another which they did sided only by an occasional word from the plo?man. When the grapes are gathered they are passed through a press and sieve and then the juice is poured into immense hogsheads where they are left to ferment for 25 days and then are placed in wooden casks and deposited in a long cool shed where they remain for a year. During this first year all wines are syphoned carefully out of the casks four times, and the best five or six times and the casks carefully purified from the sediment. It is three years before the wine is considered fit for bottling and five more before they drink it. They insist that no alcohol is mixed with these wines, they are absolutely the pure juice 4 of the grape. And you should see how they handle the bottles! The care they took really made me think of the priests with the Host. They said it was to keep the sediment from stirring. I bought some wine of such a fine quality that each grape was out off with scissors! What does Mr. Bell say to all this? At the Chateau Lafitte the Rothschild's place, they showed us the Baron's private cellars, immense vaults divided into four long corridors in one of which was bottled wine of different brands valued at two hundred thousand dollars. This they told us was generally given away by the family to their friends. In the other three corridors were three rows of casks against each wall twenty-seven casks deep, thus 162 casks in each corridor. Besides this there is a sample cellar containing sample bottles from each years vintage beginning with the year 1798.

Pray forgive me if my letter smacks too much of wine, but what else can you expect of a letter from Bordeaux? Why the very air is full of it. Give my love to Mr. Bell and my cousins. When Alec comes I will fill my letter with him, at present all I know is from occasional telegrams saying that he is very much pleased with the impression he has made on the Commission. Mr. Hitz wrote me that they had expected to be satisfied with

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one interview, but they have asked for more again and again. I think we may be very proud of our son and husband.

Your loving daughter, Mabel.