

Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Alexander Melville Bell, Eliza Symonds Bell, Carrie Bell, April 16, 1871, with transcript

Copy of a letter written by Alexander Graham Bell to his parents and Carrie. 2 Bulfinch Place, Boston, Mass., April 16th, 1871. Dear Papa, Mama and Carrie:

Since my “regular” letter to you last Sunday evening I have sent you a paper containing a Yankee poem I think Papa could manufacture into something good — two papers — (containing a notice of the Examination and a letter for me) — and a hurried scrawl just to show you I had not forgotten you. I received your second letter last night. I am glad you like your new friends the Ballacheys(?). If I mistake not it was Mrs. Ballachey that called on Papa about a month ago, on a begging expedition for some charity. If it is the same, she lives on the “ Back street of Mount Pleasant .” You say there are 3 sons and 3 daughters. Give me full particulars of the latter when you write!!! If the country is looking half as green as it is here, it must be beautiful. The weather has been very changeable — but nothing like snow has made its appearance. The “plants coming up” in your letter reminds me that Mrs. Wallack has been giving me careful instructions about the planting out of water-melons which instructions I am to convey to you with her kind regards.

Water-melons are not to be planted near any kind of vine , nor near another kind of melon. If your melon is near a cucumber bed — the melon w ill taste like a cucumber ! — if near a squash it will be to all intents and purposes a squash ! So be careful.

You might have a patch of melons among potatoes or near anything not a vine.

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If green snakes are coming our already I suppose I may expect to hear next of a bull-frog being caught — and eaten. Has Davie got hold of any more ground-hogs or musk-rats?

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Please look in the drawing-room for a music book of mine. It is large in size and marked "Music" outside. Inside are a lot of Melly's pieces — or rather a lot of music that belonged to Mr. Nauman. You will recognize them by the frequency of "Shadow Pictures" by Mayer. You will find in the book Mendelsohn's song of the "The First Violet" — please send me the words in your next letter.

And now for an account of my doings since last Sunday. Monday morning came and with it came Mr. King. We walked over to the school and I was introduced to the teachers and scholars.

The Principal is Miss Fuller — a "y oung lady" (I compliment her by the epithet) who seems particularly qualified for her position. I never saw Love , Goodness , and Firmness so blended in one face before.

Next came Miss Bond, Miss True and Miss Barton.

Miss True I can't say I am in love with. First impressions may be incorrect — but she seems to have a far higher opinion of herself than any one else has. However we shall see. I don't like her manner with the children either. She seems to be always out of patience with one or other of them. However, as I said before — we shall see .

Miss Bond — I should think is the oldest of the four. I don't know whether to like her or not. I am rather inclined to the former. She is by no means pretty and wears specs. sometimes.

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Miss Barton, I suppose is the one Papa w arned me of (?!!) for she does rather incline towards prettiness. She is a Miss Fuller with more animation about her. Evidently has her whole heart in the children. I should think has a very high opinion of her own powers, at the same time seems to have very good natured abilities. I think she is the best teacher of the four. She manages her class with the firmness of a man, and is never out of temper with the children. Miss Fuller I think most of however. Her abilities seem very great, but

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she is very modest about them, and she is overflowing with genuine goodness towards the children.

So much for the teachers — now for the pupils. There are about 32 or 33 of all ages from 6 or 7 up to 18 or 19. They are chiefly girls. I don't think there are more than six boys. My first impression of them was very favourable, and I have seen no cause to alter it.

We did no work with Visible Speech on Monday. Miss Fuller and the others exhibited their pupils to me that I might see their present condition. One young lady, Isabella Flag, talks very well indeed. The only sounds she gives incorrectly are [???], [???] and [???] Her style of speaking also is peculiar — being syllabic like the French. An interesting feature in her case — at least to me — is, that she inflects her voice naturally . I find the school-hours are from 9 till 2. So I will have a long afternoon. I hope I may get a few stammering pupils to fill up spare hours.

As I did not wish to interrupt work, as the teachers 4 were preparing for an examination on Wednesday I went home at one o'clock. I reached the door at the same time as a gentleman who was calling on me. I found him to be Dr. Hill . He was very kind — and asked me to accompany him to the State House. He looked ill and was very feeble. It seems that 10 days ago he had an accident. A tree or a part of a tree fell against him and broke one of his ribs. I thought it was rather a risk to venture out at all. He not only walked to the State House with me but obtained the key of the copula (which is closed to the public during the sitting of the Assembly) and took me to the summit. A magnificent view burst upon our sight whenever we entered the little room above the dome.

President Hill then pointed out the details of the view — and gave me a great deal of useful and curious information about Boston and its neighbourhood.

After viewing the Panorama we descended and entered the Senate House and President Hill explained to me the mode of voting — and the object of the bill that was being discussed and the chief points on both sides of the question. I left the Assembly with a

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feeling that I would like to know more of that man — and I hope I may soon have another opportunity of meeting him.

In the evening Mr. Wallack, Mrs. Wallack, Miss Fisher and I went to hear Arrah na Pogue. Dominick Murray is a perfect study in Michael Feeney. I was disappointed with Vandenhoff. As a whole I was disappointed with the piece. The sole good point in the piece is Dominick Murray. I have seen him play the part in 5 London and I was pleased to observe him again. I shall visit the Globe again shortly as I wish to study him.

Tuesday morning I went to the school at 9 o'clock. Miss Fuller recited the Lord's Prayer slowly to the children who sat with clasped hands watching the motion of her lips. After Prayers I took the younger children in a class to try and convey the meaning of the symbols to them. I drew a face. They pointed to the different parts upon their own mouths. I then rubbed out all except nose — lip-point — front — back throat. They pointed as before and before half an hour was over all the youngest children could sign the names of the following classes of symbols — whether back — front — lip-point, etc. [???] As we were afraid of tiring the children we thought it advisable not to proceed further. The children themselves were highly delighted. It was certainly a triumph to see even the youngest toddlers catching the idea so quickly.

I may say the teachers were thunderstruck. Miss Fuller told me she had tried hard to master the system from the book — and though fully convinced of its great value, had had great fears about the possibility of communicating the symbols to the children. I went over the same ground with the elder pupils — but after signing , made them articulate the names of the symbols.

While the other classes were going on, I took individual pupils to try their voices and see how far they could go. [???] is universally mispronounced, except in the case of Isabella Flag. 6 It is made with the mere tip of the tongue. Would it not be better when we come to deal with sounds to represent their faulty [???] as [???] and the correct as [??]? Please

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answer this point. What is the difference between “[???” a vowel and “[???” a consonant? Is it a mere difference of length or is there a real organic difference? I have been observing my tongue in the mirror while saying such a word as “bott le - l ifter” and there seems to be a difference between the two ells.” The consonant [???” has visibly more “fronting” than the vowel. This may be owing to the succeeding “front — vowel” ([???”) but I observe the same peculiarity in such a combination as “battle-laugh” where a back vowel succeeds the consonant.

Is the vowel — [???” — and the consonant [???”? If not — in what lies the distinction?

A clergyman was giving some instruction to a class of deaf-mutes the other day. He had been speaking (in signs) about Job being afflicted with boils. To be quite certain that he was understood — he asked a boy what he had said. The little fellow wrote upon the black-board “ God boiled Job seven days ”!!! You may imagine the minister's astonishment.

Spent Tuesday evening at home preparing a large alphabet for permanent reference in the school-room — and in reading an account of Papa and myself in the “Proceedings of the Seventh Convention of American Instructors of the Deaf and Dumb — held at the Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, Indianapolis, Indiana, August 24th, 25th, and 26th — 1870.”

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I enclose a copy of the portion of Dr. Isaac Lewis Peet's speech to the Convention about us.

Wednesday morning came and I went early to the school. A few minutes before 10 o'clock I took a class to convey to them an idea of the meaning of a few of the symbols, so as to produce the sounds from them. In this I was very successful. At 10 o'clock the Committee assembled and I was introduced to Dr. Allen and the others. Professor Seymour from Hartford was also present; and two or three ladies. The children were exhibited by their

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teachers. You have the account in the Boston Journal I sent. Mr. Washburne put several questions to the children. They understood him perfectly and answered vocally. I gave a short explanation of Visible Speech — having distributed some alphabets among the assembled company. I illustrated how the meaning of the symbols could be conveyed to the Deaf and Dumb, by teaching a class before them. Then these children translated the signs into positions of the mouth, and produced the sounds intended — to the great delight of the company. Their astonishment was immense when I informed them that the class before them had only had about half an hour's instruction altogether , and yet they already comprehended the meaning of the letters and produced their sounds. I then explained how, given any one sound, you could perforce produce others. I illustrated this point by producing perforce the Gaelic “U” from Professor Seymour by means of [???], and the English [???] from [???]. But here Prof. Seymour objected — stating that the lips were not necessary for [???] as he could make it with the lips wide open. I explained the “back” modification that produced the effect. Illustrating the point that generally “back” actions resembled in sound “lip” actions by reading a few sentences without moving my lips — substituting [???] softly done for [???] etc. Professor Seymour objected that the difference between sonants and surds for instance [???] and [???] was not properly understood — that the symbols [???] and [???] though very ingenious did not represent the difference. He said that [???] did not differ from [???] in merely having no voice, as he could whisper [???] and yet it was different from [???].

I explained, in symbols, the difference between [???] [???] & [???] which was an entirely new point to him, and referred to its being an essential point in some of the Icelandic Languages — words having different meanings according as they were pronounced with [???] [???] [???]

These points led to a long discussion between Prof. Seymour and myself about sounds. In the course of argument he happened to refer to the clicks of the Zulus as unwritable so I wrote them and pronounced them for him. At last he expressed himself as thoroughly astonished at Visible Speech. Said he had been a student of sounds all his life — (He is a

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Professor of Language) — but had had quite a flood of light thrown upon certain points by Visible Speech. In fact there could not have been a greater triumph for the System.

Dr. Allen said that Professor Seymour had entered that room a great sceptic on the possibility of communicating articulation to deaf mutes — and asked the Professor before the Committee what he thought of the possibility now that he had seen the pupils and the 9 system about to be introduced. Professor confessed that he was thoroughly “converted.” He had no idea that any deaf mute could articulate so well as the one we heard read the report of Mr. Mackay's lecture, and he had no doubt Visible Speech would work wonders. By the bye I enclose a copy of this report, as it will give you some idea of the mental development of the young lady who wrote it.

The meeting broke up evidently much pleased and interested with their visit. The writer of the article in the Boston Journal was evidently not present — judging from the way he has jumbled things together.

I have sent copies of the notice and my letters in correction, to Uncle David, Uncle James, Mrs. Ottaway and to Prof. McGann of the Belleville Institute. I thought it as well to make Belleville cognisant of the work that is going on here.

Miss Barton informed me that Prof. Monroe was going to read to his class at the Normal School for Teachers in the afternoon — so I made up my mind to accompany her to the meeting. It seems this is the last meeting of the class this season, and so the Professor varies the proceedings by reading to the class instead of the class reading to him. I was surprised to find so many present. I made a calculation of the number of seats and found that there were sixty-two present — all ladies except Prof. Monroe and myself. I was very much pleased indeed with the readings. Prof. Monroe — as you know — has a fine voice and has complete command over it. Near the end of the readings Prof. Monroe came to me and said he would have great pleasure in introducing me to the audience, and asked if I would say a few words. This was a poser ! The idea had never entered my head!

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However I felt it would look foolish and boyish to refuse so consented. Of course I did not enjoy the rest of the reading much — but I determined to do the best I could. Arranged a few thoughts together during the little time left — and trusted to “check” to expand them and prevent a failure. It is wonderful what sheer “cheek” and impudence can do — I could not have spoken with less hesitation had I a paper before me . It was fortunate I did not know a soul in the audience to frighten me. Of course I said I had no intention, etc., etc., of addressing them — came to hear Prof. Monroe — was pleased — delighted. Had been asked to say a few words. Had been putting a few ideas together but really the excellent delivery of etc., etc., driven them out of head. Who could collect their thoughts while poor little Joe was dying or the charcoal man perambulating the neighbourhood. Referred to importance of teachers studying Elocution and carrying the practical part into school. Nearly all the bad delivery we hear in pulpit, bar, Senate — originates in school-room. Pointed out the natural Elocutionary powers of children — beautifully they inflect voices — emphasised their words, etc. — until they come to the difficulties of reading. Here they acquire an artificial manner of reading, etc. — gab — gab — gab — etc., ditto, etc., wind up that we would have accomplished a great work if we could produce a few speakers and readers like Prof. Monroe.

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Prof. Monroe then rose and complimented me upon my orthoepy — pointed out my pronunciation of “U” for their special notice. Said it was a particularly fortunate thing that I had unexpectedly come on that day. Opportunity of introducing me. He was standing there among them for the last time — and they would now have to appoint his successor. He could not say but perhaps I might be induced to settle in Boston, etc., etc., etc. He took a very affectionate leave of them all and many of the ladies were actually in tears. After the meeting he introduced me to Mrs. Mackay the wife of the lecturer who has made such an impression here. I read to her Alice Jennings's account of her husband's lecture and she wants a copy of it. Prof. Monroe with Mr. and Mrs. Mackay are to pay the school a visit shortly.

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I am afraid you are beginning to get heartily sick of my letter. If so pause here. I am giving you the history of this week — and I have only just finished Wednesday evening. I advise you to take a rest before proceeding as I have not half finished yet !!!!!

Interval of half — an — hour for Refreshments.