

Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Mabel Hubbard Bell, September 26, 1875, with transcript

About Brantford spiritualism & Bro Melville Melville House, Brantford, Ont., September 26th, 1875. Dear Miss Mabel,

I was very much amused at your astonishment on learning that grapes flourish here in the open air.

Poor Canada is sadly maligned in the United States. To most Americans the very name is suggestive of fur coats, seal-skin caps, and — forty degrees below zero!

Now the fact is that the climate of Ontario is superior to that of any of the New England States — at least if Brantford is a fair sample of the rest of the Province. It seems very strange to Boston people to find in this place persons ignorant of the dread significance attached to the words “East Wind” in the New England States. The East Wind here is always welcomed as a friend, instead of being avoided as an enemy.

We can't pretend to rival you in scenery although we have some very lovely views here and there. The great defect of the country is its flatness. Mountains are at a premium! Add to this the interminable forest. Go where you will in Canada your horizon is bounded by trees! You seem to be perpetually in the midst of a clearing!

The country a few miles from Brantford presents everywhere a curious half-finished kind of appearance. The fields are full of stumps. Here and there some solitary giant tree — a relic of the primeval forest — stands mourning over the remains of its companions — to show how recently the land has been reclaimed from the wilderness.

My father's house is built upon the “Tutelo Heights” on the banks of the Grand River.

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On the edge of the sand-cliff in his orchard is a grassy depression shaped so like a couch that we call it the “sofa-seat”.

This is my dreaming place! Miles and miles of country lie extended below me like a huge map. The Grand River comes from the extreme left — flows to my very feet — and winds off into the distance on the right.

When I lived here I used to spend hours and hours at the “sofa-seat”. It was my custom in the summer time to take a rug, a pillow, and an interesting book to this cosy little nook — and dream away the afternoon in luxurious idleness. It seems to me that pleasure is a species of pain! At least I think there is much of sadness in the delight experienced in gazing at a beautiful landscape.

I hope you have had a great deal of this kind of sadness in Bethel. From what you tell me, and from what I have gathered from others, Bethel must be a lovely place. I agree with you in hoping that tourists and others will not make a highway of it.

Allow me to add the wish that no ambitious farmer be allowed to “improve” the land.

Utilitarianism never looks to beauty. Nature will not be dictated to! She is loveliest when left to herself!

It will be long before civilization mars the wild beauty of this region!

I am sorry you have had such poor weather for your visit. I hope you may yet have a few days of sunshine for your projected visit to the White Mountains.

I envy you with all my heart or rather — I envy Miss True !

I am sure you will return to Cambridge all the better for your trip.

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I leave Brantford tomorrow (Monday) for Toronto — where I have friends. After staying there for one day it is my intention to proceed to Montreal — probably by water if the weather is propitious. I long to experience again the sensation of shooting the Rapids. Visions of the Thousand Isles too flit before me. I shall return to Salem via Portland — and hope to be in Cambridge some day this week.

The subject of “Spiritualism” is one that interests me exceedingly although I haven't a particle of belief in the reality of the manifestations.

I think I have read the pamphlet you allude to, although I cannot now remember the details of the incident narrated.

The impression left upon my mind by the book was that the writer was an honest investigator — and (like Robert Dale Owen) a sincere believer in Spiritualistic Doctrines.

I did not doubt — nor do I now disbelieve — that the phenomena were actually witnessed as related.

What does puzzle me is that any sane man can for a moment refer these phenomena to a supernatural source — merely because he happens to be ignorant of any natural cause that may explain them. Strangest of all is the infatuation that can associate these “juggler's tricks” with the sacred feeling of the presence of the unseen dead.

In our utter ignorance of all that passes after death — it would of course be folly to assert positively that the spirits of those we have loved may not still be in existence.

Still the question arises:

Supposing this to be the case could they be conscious?

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I — for one — cannot conceive how a person can experience sensations without senses to perceive them by .

I cannot conceive of “thought” and “consciousness” without a brain . A little bit of bone pressing 5 against the brain renders us oblivious of ourselves and of all the world. Even sleep steepens us in forgetfulness.

How then can a man whose bodily nature has been dissolved in the grave, think and act as spiritualists would have us believe? Some however get over the difficulty by giving to spirits new bodies — or by placing them inside the bodies of still living people. To the former class belongs the medium in whose presence Katie King made her appearance.

This apparition was not only visible but tangible ! She not only appeared to Robert Dale Owen — but she placed her arms lovingly around his neck!

He wrote a long and interesting article about Katie King — and after its publication discovered that he had been deceived.

A friend — sorry to see him the dupe of unprincipled persons — told him where to find the woman who personated Katie King.

He found her and recognized her! She confessed that she had been paid so much per night by the professed “medium” for performing her part!

His mortification was so great as to overturn his brain — at least many persons give this as the cause of his insanity.

However that may be he is now confined as a 6 lunatic — surrounded by the spirits of departed friends. I have heard it said that the insanity of Mrs. Lincoln is another sad instance of the effect of spiritualistic ideas upon the mind.

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I should like to witness some of the manifestations I have heard so much about as I have not the remotest idea how some of them have been managed.

I have however seen much more wonderful things performed by scientific jugglers than have ever been shown by mediums.

I have seen a wax hand — (placed upon a glass table) — write with a pencil answers to questions given by myself and others.

I have seen a woman suspended bodily in the air without any visible means of support. I have seen a human head — (placed in a dish on a dinner-table) — open its mouth and converse and sing in the most natural manner in the world.

I have seen a real live man dismembered before my eyes. First one arm was cut off — then a leg — and finally his head! The headless body moved about the other leg and arm to show that the man was still alive!

Although I do not understand how all of these things were managed — still I should rather believe that my senses had been deceived , than that any supernatural cause had been at work. Indeed in these cases there was no pretence of anything beyond jugglery.

There seems to be a natural instinct in the human mind to refer all phenomena — (the causes of which are not understood) — to supernatural agencies.

You say that you are inclined to think “there must be some truth in Spiritualism or it would not be so widespread and count so many adherents”&c.

If you have not read it — I think it would interest you to read Dr. Carpenter's excellent little treatise on “Epidemic Delusions”.

The spread of the Dancing Delusion — and of Witchcraft — in former times — is as incomprehensible as that of Spiritualism in our own. Such facts show us that a belief may

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be very widespread — and count very many adherents — and yet may not be true . Let us hope at least that it may be so in regard to Spiritualism.

My brother Melville and I were at one time much interested in Spiritualism. We made a solemn compact that whichever of us should die first would endeavor to communicate with the other if it were possible to do so. I little thought that in one short year he would be in his grave. I well remember how often — in the stillness of the night — I have had little seances all by myself in the half-hope, half-fear of receiving some communication. I suppose that spiritualists would say that I failed because I went to work with an unbelieving heart — but I know that I was willing and anxious to give the matter a fair trial — and honestly tried my best without any success whatever.

It is now between five and six years since my brother died, but nothing has happened to make me alter my opinion concerning Spiritualism.

But where am I running to? You must be tired out if you have succeeded in reading as far as this.

I fear you may not care to receive such bulky epistles from me — so I shall stop now in case I may be tempted to write more!

With kind regards to Miss True and to yourself,

Believe me Yours very sincerely, A. Graham Bell. Miss Mabel G. Hubbard, Bethel, Maine.