

Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Mabel Hubbard Bell, March 28, 1901

Mrs. A. Graham Bell c/o & Co 6 rue Scribe Paris, France 1331 CONNECTICUT AVENUE,
WASHINGTON, D. C. March 28, 1901. My Dear Mabel: —

Your note of March 10 just received in which you say “inaugurate a new departure in book making by publishing a book all pictures just connected by a few words”.

You evidently have been reading my thoughts across the Atlantic, and I suppose you have received ere this my proposition to publish a book of this sort relating to flying machines. I enclose a picture-letter for you relating to rainfall, following out the ideas given in my last letter to Daisy. Haven't time to elaborate, hope you will be able to make something of my notes. I shall simply say: —

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INTERRUPTED. By woman newspaper reporter of N. Y. Journal

Well — — no it is not well.

INTERRUPTED. With a cup of tea. By Aileen, who wants to know whether I have finished that letter to you I began two weeks ago. She has been in a number of times since and finds me always at work on it.

Much interested in your ideas concerning “not universal suffrage — but universal suffrage with two conditions only” — Education — and labor. A certain amount of education and a certain amount of property earned by the voter (not inherited or possessed excepting by the labor of the individual. I would like to expand on this subject but won't.) Shall simply say that I don't agree with you at all.

That people who were entirely uneducated cannot vote as intelligently as those who are goes without saying, but to my mind that is no reason why we should disfranchise, but it is a reason why we should educate. I have no doubt that a man who has never had a gun in his hand would be less able to come near the bulls eye ³ than a trained marksman, but that is no reason why we should deny him the right of possessing fire arms with which to protect his home and his property. It is not necessary to force a gun upon him and if he is allowed to have the gun he may have some chance — by practice — of becoming a marksman.

The negro slaves were illiterate and without education and were denied the right to vote. Then those who had the right to vote denied them education — it became a (legal) crime to teach a negro to read and write. He was not permitted to defend himself with a gun because he did not know how to shoot; and he was not permitted to learn how to shoot because he did not have a gun.

Your proposition simply means what is very obvious to a thoughtful mind, that the republican form of government cannot exist unless the mass of the people are educated. Therefore it follows as a natural consequence that you have only two alternatives (1) to abandon the Republican form of government (which you propose to do the moment you limit the suffrage); or to educate the mass of the people.

I believe in the republican form of government, and so believe in the compulsory education of the people at public expense. It is a dangerous precedent to establish — to take away from any individual HIS RIGHT TO PROTECT HIMSELF — and this is what you do when you deny him the right to vote. Revolutions — blood shed, assasination — have been the outcome in the past of denying ⁴ the ignorant a means of making their wants known.

The ignorant will always be a danger to any community — let us have as few of them as we possibly can. But just as soon as we GAG those we have — will they express their sentiment by acts instead of words, — blood shed and violence instead of argument. And as a question of right — under republican institutions — the ignorant have as much RIGHT to be represented as the educated.

And so with women — who are — on the average more intelligent and better educated than men — at least in America. The bulk of the men go to work early, and the preponderance of girls in the high schools of the country is very marked. The girls who receive a high school education so

enormously outnumber the boys as quite to outweigh the preponderance of males receiving a university education. While women do not, excepting in very exceptional cases, reach as high a point in education as men, still, taken as a whole the general level of intelligence and culture is, I think, indisputably higher among women than men, and the difference becomes more marked as you go down in the social scale.

In fact, there is no comparison between the mental condition of the men who follow the lower manual occupations in the United States (ordinary laborers, farm laborers, and other unskilled workers) and the women who come from the same families. The women stand upon a much higher intellectual plane because they have received a greater amount of education. And yet what monstrous inequality from a political point of view.

I am quite sure that you are much better able to vote intelligently than a farm laborer who can neither read nor write, and yet you are denied the right to vote — if you so desire — and he is not. One half of the whole population — and that the more intelligent half — is utterly disfranchised.

In the interest of the republican form of government and in the interest of the community at large it is surely unwise to draw lines of any sort limiting the exercise of that which is a RIGHT. Exclude women, and exclude men who have only an imperfect education, and what have you left? A MINORITY OF THE POPULATION, and where is your republican form of government if a minority rules. You have an oligarchy and not a republic.

If only the educated can vote, they not only rule the uneducated, but have the power to prevent the latter from being educated — a dangerous power to place in the hands of a class. If women are excluded men not only rule the affairs of women, but have the power to PREVENT women from ever getting a franchise unless THEY (the men) choose — an equally dangerous power.

To have a right and to exercise it are two very different things. I may have a right to keep fire arms in my own house for my own defence, and yet I may not possess a gun or a pistol. I may not care to own a gun or a pistol and you may not care to have me but suppose that a legislature should decide by law that I must not own a gun or a pistol, or have — in my own house — any means of — myself — defending my own life and property — then I say they infringe my private right to defend myself: And, as sure as Equity is higher than Law so surely will self defense be no crime, though all the laws of the land be against it.

You say “I do not want the right to vote which carries with it onerous duties for which I have neither time nor inclination”.

I presume you mean to say you “do not want to vote” for the “right” to do it exists quite independently of your wishes. I do not want you to vote; but I interfere with your perfect right to do so if you so desire, — if I attempt to prevent you from voting. That is my position un a nut shell. I do not recommend women to vote — that is a matter for themselves entirely to decide — but I have no right to prevent them from doing so. Men, having at the present time the sole legal power of voting, have abused their power by denying to women the exercise of what is a natural right under the republican form of government.

It is to my mind as clearly an abuse of power as the laws passed by the educated southerners making it a crime to teach a negro to read and write, and then denying to the negro the power to vote because he could not read or write.

I look upon the power to vote as the means by which a person can defend himself. It is the only means of self defense, excepting by blood shed and violence, therefore I would have universal suffrage by all adults, and educate the people to exercise the suffrage in a peaceful and proper manner.

The suffrage is their weapon of defense. It may be dangerous to place it in the hands of those who do not know how to use it, but the only way in which they can learn is — by using it, and we had better teach them how to use it than deprive them of the 7 means of defense altogether.

In other words, it would be better to educate the people how to carry on a republican form of government than to deprive them of the republican form of government and impose upon them an oligarchy or autocracy.

Good gracious, how I have run on, and I have not touched your property qualifications at all. Well, let me see if I can keep a good resolution and merely refer to them and not expand.

I must say I don't quite understand your two conditions of universal suffrage, but here I will remark that you don't have universal suffrage at all if there are conditions — because then it would not be “universal”.

You limit the voters to persons having a certain amount of education and a certain amount of property earned by themselves — (not inherited or acquired from others).

The greater portion of the wealth of the country consists of property inherited or acquired from others — very little of it belongs to the people who originally created it. In many cases the originators are dead and have been obliged to leave their property behind them. Someone has to take charge

of it. I don't suppose that you have arrived at that stage of socialism that you would recommend the government — as representing the people as a whole — to seize the property of deceased citizens and only allow persons to own that wealth which they have themselves created. If you are not prepared to advance to this position you must admit that the property should pass to private owners who did not themselves create it.

Under present conditions we must admit this, so that your proposition is that these persons may own the property they have received from others, but NOT BE ALLOWED TO PROTECT IT.

But, you may say “Oh, yes, they may protect it from robbers and thieves and all that sort of thing, if attacked and the law recognizes their ownership and the laws protection laws protect them in that ownership”

But who make the laws? The legislators. And who make the legislators? The voters. So your proposition comes to this, that this class of property — the bequeathings of the past — is to be placed in the exclusive control of those WHO DON'T OWN IT. It is only the people who EARN who are to have the right to vote. The idea being that the property of the millionaire shall be at the disposal of the working man and the millionaire himself not have the right to vote. An untenable proposition that surely will not work.

Underlying this is the idea — the false idea — that the owners of bequeathed property — are not earners. They receive their income FOR WHICH THEY DO NOT RENDER AN EQUIVALENT. This is your reasoning if there is any equity in your proceeding. But, they do render an equivalent. No man derives any income at all who does not render an equivalent. The millionaire receives an income only so far as he puts his property to actual use. He would get no income at all if he locked it up in a strong box and buried it in the earth. His property is used, and through its use the income comes. The amount of the income measures the value of the USEFULNESS of the property. He saves wheat instead of consuming it, and that wheat — planted instead of eaten — produces a hundred-fold, &c., &c.

The capitalist EARNs his income by utilizing his property for the good of the community, and if he did not utilize it he would have no income. I do not think therefore that your proposition to exclude persons who have inherited their wealth is a practicable one.

It is true he may have a vote — according to your plan — if he has the requisite amount of education. I do not see, however, why an ignorant man who has inherited a fortune has any less right to defend his property (by his vote) than one who has already acquired a good education.

As a final result, I am sorry to differ from you on every point you have raised, and I believe in universal suffrage, without qualification of education, sex, color, or property. I also believe that the safety of the republican form of government depends upon the education of the masses; and, as the interest of the community must outweigh those of the individual where they come into conflict it is the duty of the community to see that the individuals are educated, so that I believe in compulsory education and denying the right of parents to bring children into existence without INTERRUPTED mixed up I am afraid.

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Miss Safford suggests that it would be difficult to find an uneducated millionaire to be excluded by your rule — unless indeed the millionaire should be a female. I am afraid that a very large proportion of the persons who inherit their wealth are females. The laws of the country have left them so unprotected that their husbands and fathers seek to protect them by settling property upon them — and you would take away the protection afforded by the property by placing it at the mercy of THOSE WHO DO NOT OWN IT.

Good bye, Your loving husband Alec.

P. S. The picture-letter has been spoiled in the press-copying — Smudged and unreadable — so do not send it.

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