

He was “troubled all his life by the timeless and universal human need to communicate,” says a biographer of Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone. And it was not alone through his invention but even more, perhaps, as a teacher of speech, that Alexander Graham Bell pursued that goal. He would rather be remembered as a teacher of the deaf, he told his family, than as the inventor of the telephone. And what a teacher he was! — enthusiastic, innovative, sympathetic, creative. Alexander Graham Bell’s family were no strangers to the communicative arts. His grandfather, for whom he was named, was a well-known elocutionist and actor in Edinburgh Scotland, where the younger Alexander was born on March 3, 1847. In addition to giving public lectures and dramatic readings, the elder Bell developed a considerable practice in the treatment of speech defects, such as stammering, lisping, and other impediments. He wrote two books, *Stammering and other Impediments of Speech* and *The Practical Elocutionist*, which used comma-like symbols to indicate word grouping and emphasis. In his middle teens, young Alec, as he was called, spent a year with his grandfather, who was at that time living in London. This experience had a lasting influence on his life, and it gave him a maturity and seriousness of purpose that made him seem in some ways considerably older than his years. Bell’s father, Alexander Melville Bell, gained a worldwide reputation as a teacher of correct speech and lecturer on elocution. When only a young man he began investigating the working of the vocal organs. Melville Bell, like his father, studied the anatomy of speech and approached his subject with scientific thoroughness. In 1864, he completed a universally applicable phonetic alphabet by which he could describe the manner of production of the sounds of nearly all known languages. He called this alphabet “Visible Speech” and its various symbols (thirty-four in all) showed how the vocal organs would be positioned to make a sound. 4. Alec and his brothers became quite adept at using the “Visible Speech” alphabet, reading the symbols and producing the sounds they represented. In demonstrations, linguists from various parts of the world dictated words to Melville Bell from a number of different “exotic” languages, dialects and accents (including American Indian languages Arabic, Hindi, Persian, Urdu, and many more), and his sons produced the sounds from the symbols their father had written down. Their performance was impressive, and a commentary in the *London Illustrated Times* proclaimed: “We cannot pretend even to guess at the horizons opened up by such an alphabet in the training of the deaf, the dumb, and the blind.” 5. Alec’s mother was a musician as well as an accomplished portrait painter, and her son was born with such a talent for music that from infancy he could play by ear and improvise at the piano. He was therefore given an extensive musical education and for a short while planned a musical career. He in fact did teach music for two years at a boys’ school. When he was about twelve years old, his mother lost her hearing; and there is little doubt that this misfortune intensified his sympathy for the deaf and his lifelong interest in helping to alleviate their difficulties in communicating. 6. In the summer of 1868, Melville Bell went on a lecture tour in the United States and Canada, leaving his son in full charge of his practice in London, where Alec also continued his studies at the university. When his father returned, Alec became a full partner in the work, continuing to teach while he studied the anatomy of the vocal apparatus at London University. His work met with great success, and his reputation flourished. The work he did revealed his outstanding talent for teaching.