

THE BURDEN OF RITUAL: ALEXANDER GRAHAM BELL'S CRITIQUE OF CHRISTMAS-GIVING, 1893

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Christmas has become too commercial. When a journalist writes, "[m]ost people are so fagged out, physically and mentally, by the time Christmas Day arrives that they are in no condition to enjoy it," and concludes that "the season of Christmas needs to be dematerialized," we understand what he means. In fact, "Christmas has become too commercial" has become a cliché—was even a cliché when the *New York Tribune* printed it in 1894.¹ Yet we persist in buying—and giving.

Beginning with Marcel Mauss, anthropologists, sociologists, and even market researchers have created a rich and fascinating literature about why we give gifts. The rough framework holds that gift-giving has three parts: giving, receiving, and returning the gift. This last act, which may mean giving a gift to the original giver, or passing the gesture on to a new participant, is crucial in that it initiates yet another chain of three-part connections. A relatively simple idea, but anthropologists claim that this three-step ritual binds a society together. To refuse to participate at any point courts social isolation. Pioneering scholars have studied gift-exchange in small-scaled societies, searching for clues about the nature of social interaction at all levels. Others challenged or expanded upon their work. To the extent that theories about gifts have been applied to late twentieth century society, we understand better how this particular ritual reinforces familial relationships and fuels a considerable portion of yearly sales.²

The subject of gifts might be a rich one for historical scholarship as well, but even as other disciplines have propped the door open, few American historians have ventured in. As a group we have been much

¹ The author added, "[a]s soon as the Thanksgiving turkey is eaten, the great question of buying Christmas presents begins to take the terrifying shape it has come to assume in recent years." "The Seamy Side of Christmas," *New York Tribune* (December 24, 1894), 6.

² The list of scholars is extensive, but see Theodore Caplow, "Gifts and Kin Networks," *American Sociological Review*, 47 (June 1982): 383-392; David J. Cheal, *The Gift Economy* (London: Routledge, 1988); Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls, ed. Mary Douglas (New York and London: Norton, 1990); Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, trans. James Harle Bell, et al (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), chap. 2; Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Gift in Sixteenth-Century France* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000). For introductions to the range of scholarly inquiry about gift-giving, see, for example, Davis, *Gift*, 3-10; Maurice Godelier, *The Enigma of the Gift*, trans. Nora Scott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Alan D. Schrift, ed. "Introduction: Why Gifts?" *The Logic of the Gift* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 1-42.

more interested in the everyday life of the market economy, material acquisition, consumer culture, and the like. This work has given us insight into the way our culture works and what it values, but it has created a literature that leaves little room to see other dimensions in the world of goods. Gift rituals have often been understood as vestiges of primitive culture, compensation for religion, the private work of women, and ultimately as having little importance or effect. I propose that historians need to intervene more boldly in the study of gifts.

The discipline of history can illuminate the cultural uses of gift-giving rituals in ways that help us understand the complexities and paradoxes of modernity, and its overlapping spheres of private sociality and public commerce. Looking at gift-giving as a form of ceremonial economy, not simply as rehearsed and repeated generousities or a nostalgic bid for the restoration of communal ties, may enable us to examine a range of behaviour that critiques as well as reinforces dominant values over time and in varieties of social space. For even if Levi-Strauss is correct in arguing that we are governed by a universal structure of the unconscious that compels gift exchange,³ we are still left with the task of discovering what those practices might mean at a given time in a given society, and to its diverse inhabitants.

I wish to begin my essay by introducing evidence in the form of two letters written in 1893. One was written by Alexander Graham Bell to his wife Mabel shortly before Christmas. The second is from Mabel to Alec (as she preferred to call him) sent four days earlier.⁴ These two letters, in total about eleven pages, have in them the intimacy of nearly twenty years of marriage, its frictions and familiarities. They also contain a lively quarrel about giving Christmas presents. The Bells' argument centres on deeply personal issues, which are in turn directly tied to the turbulent times in which they were written. The 1890s comprised a remarkable decade, one informed by increasingly stark differences between rich and poor, the rise of a massive consumer marketplace of manufactured goods, the emergence of the New Woman, and other dramatic changes. It was also a decade in which the custom of Christmas-giving had begun to take, according to the Tribune, a

³ On this point, see Godelier, *Enigma*, 118-124.

⁴ Alexander Graham Bell to Mabel Hubbard Bell, 14 December 1893; Mabel Hubbard Bell to Alexander Graham Bell, 10 December 1893, in Alexander Graham Bell Family Papers (hereinafter AGB Papers) (Series: Family Papers, Folder: Mabel Hubbard Bell, Family Correspondence, Alexander Graham Bell, June-December 1893) [database online] available from <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/bellhtml/bellhome.html>, American Memory, Library of Congress [hereinafter cited as AM/LoC]. All quoted material in the text refers to these two letters, unless otherwise noted.

"terrifying shape."⁵

As inventor of the telephone, Alexander Graham Bell was an important participant in the age and its culture. He was born in Scotland. While still a young man he moved with his family to Canada and then, by himself, to Boston. For a period of time he made a living by teaching deaf children, following, after a fashion, his father's life's work. He grew increasingly fond of one young student named Mabel Hubbard, and in 1877 they married. Shortly after, Bell, along with his father-in-law and another investor, formed Bell Telephone Company, and he then gave all but ten of his 1,507 shares to Mabel. They had two daughters, and while not as rich as some might think never had serious money worries. Their marriage seemed to be happy.⁶ In December 1893, Bell was staying at Cape Breton in Nova Scotia, where their sprawling and turreted home at Beinn Bhreagh had just been completed. Mabel was on her way to spend Christmas at their home in Washington, D. C., a three story brick mansion just off Dupont Circle.⁷ Accustomed to sending long letters to each other when they were apart, Bell wrote about many things to his "dear little wife" that December 14. However, by page three his irritation had surfaced over one topic. "I am very glad I am not in Washington at this time—" he wrote,

for Christmas has been spoiled for me by the indiscriminate present-giving with which I am so little in sympathy. . . . There is no one who enters more heartily into the spirit of Christmas—and of present-giving than I—in its proper place. Indeed I rather think you have on former occasions blamed me for my extravagance in the purchase of presents for children—My objections do not touch children. By all means make the children happy—and let us buy all the presents for them that we may desire. I have nothing to say to that and am in full sympathy with you there. Buy presents also for servants—that seems to me all right too. But surely even you admit that the indiscriminate giving of presents is overdone but you don't know at what point it should stop.

Bell counselled stopping with the children and servants. Gifts to one's friends had in America become, he wrote, "ridiculous" and "hurtful," with "no

⁵ "Seamy Side," *New York Tribune*, 6.

⁶ Robert V. Bruce, *Bell: Alexander Graham Bell and the Conquest of Solitude* (Boston: Little Brown, 1973), 223-224, 238, 293, 296. See also Helen Elmira Waite, *Make a Joyful Noise: The Romance of Mabel Hubbard and Alexander Graham Bell* (Philadelphia: Macral Smith, 1961).

⁷ Bruce, *Bell*, 299, 301.

heart behind them." They were given only because it was Christmas. "I want none of them," he concluded, and signed the letter, "Your loving husband, Alec."

Just four days earlier, on December 10, Mabel had written the letter that elicited Alec's attack. "I spent a lot of money yesterday," she had written, "but really I haven't been very extravagant except thrice and I wish I hadn't now . . . I can't help it, we must give presents . . ." Christmas giving had "its foundations in the human heart, and cannot be done away with without freezing the heart," she argued. Toward those who would not accept presents she felt "more coldly and less inclined to feel friendly . . . the year through, and I feel the same way too towards you," she added pointedly. "You chill me, and because I can't do anything for you therefore in a degree I love you less."

Might Alec nonetheless have a point? "No. I am right," she declared, "and you are wrong. All the rest of the year one is absorbed in one's own affairs . . . at Christmas thought of others is obligatory . . . and the heart is opened and warmed until it embraces all mankind . . ." "There—Will you read all this stuff?" she asked. "Well it all means I love you and nothing hurts me so as to feel this barrier of different feelings between us." She closed her letter, "Goodbye, Your Mabel."

Here we have a micro-example of what anthropology tells us. To give a gift requires acceptance, for behind gifts often lie vulnerable feelings. To refuse a gift, or to fail to return one, invites consequences. Yet, for Alec, his refusals either to give or receive were themselves based on deep emotion. Christmas had been "spoiled" by "indiscriminate present-giving" (note, he did not say "present-getting"), a reaction related only in part to its financial aspect. Alec more forcefully criticized giving on the grounds of its immoderation, shallowness, and immorality, an argument that he applied especially to children. The custom, he reasoned in this same letter, which

teaches children to buy valuable presents for Tom, Dick and Harry, with other people's money—and then say that they have given these presents themselves—is morally harmful to the children themselves. . . . Such presents are meaningless unless the children really give them And if other people pay for them—is it right and proper—is it even truthful to allow the children to say (falsely) that they gave them. There is something morally wrong about it.

Nor was it that Bell didn't like to give gifts. If a family member or a friend needed a loan of \$100, or maybe even \$300, Bell did not hold back.⁸ At least once he gave a business acquaintance a set of telephones, for

⁸ Bruce, *Bell*, 293-295.

which he received a sincere and appreciative thanks for his generosity.⁹ That may have been business, sound or not, but Bell's letters also show him to have taken great pleasure in the conspiracy of giving. When Anne Sullivan was to be married, Bell colluded with his friend Helen Keller to surprise her. Keller supplied the money, and Bell purchased the gift.¹⁰ Nor did Bell regard himself as stingy. He reminded Mabel, you will recall, that even she had accused him of being too extravagant. But in this instance, in this December, Alec's views could be summarized simply: too many people were getting too much stuff for no good reason. A waste of money, time, and spirit. And unlike Mabel, Bell knew how to draw the line.

None of these arguments made sense to Mabel. "I can't help it," she declared, "we must give gifts." Otherwise, the world would fill with frozen hearts, chill and cold. She feared that Alec had refused to weave himself into the social fabric, or would do so only on his own limited terms. As for Mabel, she would continue to weave.

The Bells, in most ways a very special couple, nonetheless voiced concerns and tensions that spoke of the age. Some have to do with gender. Scholars have remarked upon the psychological fate and social reinforcements that render men in general far more tied to individualistic values and women far more connected and identified with networks of friends and relations.¹¹ The man who created a revolutionary communication system had lingered at his mansion in Nova Scotia, more comfortable in its isolation. The woman who lived in a world of silence because of her deafness had chosen to rejoin the whirl of family and friends that populated her rich social world during Christmas.¹²

Alec's arguments against gift-giving also revealed the culture's emphasis on individualism, self-sufficiency, and order. He identified the limit of gift-giving (to dependent children and servants) and declined to cross it.

⁹ William L. Carpenter to Alexander Graham Bell, 7 December 1887, AGB Papers (Series: Subject File, Folder: The Telephone, Correspondence, 1875-1918, undated) [database online] available from AM/LoC.

¹⁰ Helen Keller to Alexander Graham Bell, 13 April 1905; and Alexander Graham Bell to Helen Keller, 14 April 1905, AGB Papers (Series: General Correspondence, Folder: Helen Keller, 1888-1918, undated) [database online] available from Ibid.

¹¹ See, for example, Nancy J. Chodorow, *Reproduction of Motherhood: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978, 1999); and Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

¹² Bruce, *Bell*, 321. Bruce notes that one of Bell's "significant characteristics" was his value of privacy, 310.

However, not far beneath, he had an equally powerful reason. He confessed his remembered humiliation at being unable to return a gift. "I have so often in the past, been mortified by the receipt of valuable presents from friends—which I was too poor to be able to return—," he wrote to Mabel, and therefore he "determined—when I should have funds of my own—that I would do my best both by precept and example—to put a stop to the custom of giving valuable presents to adults—by neither receiving nor giving them myself . . ." His ban, it seems, even precluded his wife from giving him a present. The real point, as Mauss first stated, was that a gift entailed an obligation.¹³

Alec conceded that children might give (not just receive) presents, but only if they used their own money to buy them, "—or better still should be made by their own hands—and hearts." The idea that gifts should be homemade emanated at least in some part from an idealized and literal version of the self-made man. Emerson's short essay, "Gifts" (1844), addressed the essence of the argument. Faced with the chore of reciprocating a gift, Emerson rejected flowers and other such offerings as insincere. At last he determined that the only real gift was the gift of self. The poet, for example, should give a poem.¹⁴ It would seem that Alec, like Emerson, intended to free himself from the polite or formal duty to return a gift. Moreover, his wish that the heart be expressed through the hands emphasized the giver's valuation of himself and assumed the recipient's appreciation of the gesture's significance. For both Emerson and Bell, the gift was a calculated risk, devoid of hidden languages or meaning, lacking false or insincere motive, and disconnected from monetary or emotional debt. Alec, the individualist, straightforwardly refused to use gifts to alter power relationships. He saw giving a tangible expression of self (a poem or a telephone) sufficient and proper, with the other person's need not necessarily a factor.

Mabel did not accept this thinking. She used gifts as a connection that strengthened a tie and reshaped a specific aspect of the receiver's life. The gift and the thought that went with it reinforced each other, rather than stood for each other. Here's how Mabel expressed it: "[y]ou say you will take presents made for you, but that does not help the matter one bit." She continued, "[i]t is the love behind the gift that makes its value, and which may be as good . . . with an expensive bought gift as with a made one, and what is more like love than to seek to see what the loved one needs and desire to satisfy that need?" She asked, "[i]f Papa needs an inkstand badly

¹³ Mauss, *Gift*, 5.

¹⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Gifts," *Essays and English Traits*. Vol. V. The Harvard Classics (New York: P F Collier, 1909–14; Bartleby.com, 2001 [online] available at www.bartleby.com/5/. [November 21, 2003].

why must I make him a book-mark which he doesn't need when I can buy the inkstand and my time would be better employed in doing something else?" Giving what one "knows" that another needs (Mabel's view) is very different from giving a symbol of one's self (Alec's view).

At no place did Mabel indicate that she was initiating a gift cycle because she wanted to cultivate or elevate (or destroy) a relationship. Yet, like the majority of women of her day, and certainly of her class, she moved in a world of meaning shaded by intuition, manners, and keen observation. She expressed herself in ways that seemed to reach toward others, ever watchful for the exposed points where attachments could be made. She saw the gift as a connecting arch that acknowledged the identities, and probably the vulnerabilities, of the recipients.¹⁵ This might require creating many gift relationships, the rankings of importance signalled by the type of gift. Hand-made gifts, in this case, would be socially uneconomical. Purchased gifts had, by definition, a price that helped create a hierarchy of giving. Indeed, catalogues and newspaper advertisements in the late 1880s and '90s provided ready-made market guides that could easily be transferred to the gift market.¹⁶ By contrast, Bell and Emerson, who felt that giving something representative of themselves was not only sufficient but preferable, could not appreciate either the quality or quantity of effort that a gift economy entailed. (Nor did they value the implicit power ceded to department stores and advice columnists to help sort this complex array of relationships.)

Mabel's letter suggested categories or types of gifts that joined her impulses with the recipients' needs. She admitted that she had been profligate when she bought "Mamma a plush carriage robe, which cost sixty dollars, but then I wanted her to have it so awfully much, not because it was Christmas, but because it seemed to me so appropriate for her, what I wanted to wrap her up in." Here, Mabel saw her forthright use of money as a method for transforming a purchased commodity into a visual and tactile representation of how she regarded her mother. Through a strange twist only available through the performance of ritual, this gift validated the giver at least as much if not more than it expressed the recipient. And its success as a gift depended on how well this could be confused.

Mabel had other equally indirect ways of expressing herself through

¹⁵ Caplow, *Gifts*, 391. Caplow points out that ethnographic literature suggests that in any society "ritualized gift giving . . . is a method of dealing with relationships that are important but insecure." Ibid.

¹⁶ Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 43; Caplow makes a similar observation in his Middletown study. See Caplow, 389. For an example of such a taxonomy of gifts, see Jeanette Weir, "250 Gifts for Christmas," *Ladies' Home Journal* (December 1903), 47.

gifts, ones that literally wielded and welded the influence she had grown to value. She gave Dr. Radcliffe's children "something very nice because I loved their father very dearly." She used another gift, a dress, to repair social damage, which Alec was at least privy to if not the cause. Mabel also asserted her need to present gifts to her friends, sisters, and their children. These did not need to be expensive, but she felt them just as necessary.¹⁷ In none of these instances did Mabel put the first emphasis on the monetary cost, but rather on what the purchased gift signified. For this reason, Alec's refusal to accept presents posed an especially grave barrier. As Mabel wrote, giving gifts was a way of loving, and he had barred that love. She didn't tell him she loved him less because of his attitude, but that he had thwarted her self-expression of love to him. He had censored her emotions and therefore disallowed her connection.

The Bells' exchange, albeit only a glimpse into a private and idiosyncratic world, can nonetheless help to illuminate a key historical moment. It is an artifact of the tensions and ambivalences of the end of the nineteenth century. The great economic takeoff of the middle of the century had by then become a full blown dynamo of productivity. Natural abundance, perhaps the most defining aspect of the New World, had been reinvented as manmade abundance. The mounting quantities of material goods overflowed and collected in the mirrored and brightly-lit new shopping emporia. Fabrics, doilies, chairs, ties, gloves, shoes, hats, brooches, and anything else one could possibly imagine, in varieties of colour, size, texture, quality, and price, filled their shelves and countertops.

The surfeit of goods and wealth challenged the prevailing Puritan ethic that stressed the accumulation and hoarding of riches as the path to salvation. Goods graded by price and quality give rise to a vocabulary of consumer free-expression. Whereas once frugality and self-sacrifice had been admired feminine attributes, aspects of republican virtue associated with spiritual superiority, merchants, advertisers and the pressures of competitive society increasingly emphasized the practical and pleasurable qualities associated with spending.

Thrift and waste underwent a strange redefinition in which the double world of seduction and salvation were not entirely antithetical. Women, once thought to be safely sequestered in a domestic sphere, found themselves welcomed into the world of retail stores as cherished consumers. Shopping, almost wholly devoted to family and home, became

¹⁷ Mabel had asked for gift money before, explaining to Bell on one occasion, "I cannot go home empty handed to my friends can I? I have something for all in Canada, only my own friends are not provided for, and they have done much for me." Mrs Alexander Graham Bell to Dr Alexander Graham Bell [1880?], AGB Papers (Series: Family Papers, Folder: Mabel Hubbard Bell, Family Correspondence, Alexander Graham Bell, July-December 1880) [database online] available from AM/LoC

a new chore and joy for the growing numbers of middle- and increasingly wealthier upper-class urban women.¹⁸ And while price mattered, value also mattered, and still held them to their old morality—the ability to save—even as they spent money. Mabel Bell characterized this point when she claimed to Alec that she had spent lot of money, but had not been extravagant.

This distinction bears some examination, for I believe that it will also tell us something about the role of gift-giving's vigorous emergence as a feature of the modernizing culture. In the department stores, each item represented a lengthy chain of production. Along the way, from raw resource to finished good, its value increased. When the department sales manager directed his staff to display the store's merchandise attractively, he was, in effect, arranging a final viewing of the goods that had generated a great deal of wealth for many people. The last, profitable market step would be made when the shopper selected and paid for the item. Even as the article was being wrapped to be taken home, it began, in the language of capitalism, to lose value.

A glimpse at a late nineteenth century parlour, though, might indicate something different. The most clever women parlayed an object's declining market value into an accruing use-value, of which the old price tag was only a part. Layered Persian rugs, ferns, stereopticons, antimacassars, carpeted footrests, Turkish scarves, thick novels on carved book rests, silk piano shawls, and porcelain statuary sensitively and stylishly arranged not only made the parlour into a showplace of conspicuous consumption that attested to the family's economic status and the man's earning power, but showcased the homemaker's taste, efficiency, thrift, and prowess as a mother and homemaker. Goods, in effect, extended the woman's identity, confirming Baudrillard's observation about the inevitable tendency to substitute the fabricated world for the natural one.¹⁹ Increased use- value created an effective medium of power, one that, like hard cash, could be used both generously and powerfully, and at times simultaneously so.

A woman's care in the choice and presentation of gifts offered similar opportunities to speak and compete. Through gifts, both in the objects themselves and in the act of presenting them, yet another factor of value

¹⁸ Elaine S. Abelson, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving: Middle-Class Shoplifters in the Victorian Department Store* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 13, 28-31, 40.

¹⁹ Madame Merle, an American character in Henry James' *Portrait of a Lady*, 1881, exclaims, "we're each of us made up of some cluster of appurtenances. . . . It overflows into everything that belongs to us—and then flows back again . . . I've a great respect for *things*." Quoted in Orvell, 65. For Baudrillard, see Orvell, 50, referring to *Le Système des objets*, 80. Orvell argues that "[a]t every level of society individuals sought an elevation of status through the purchase and display of goods whose appearance accounted for more than their substance." Orvell, 49.

could be added. The process of giving—from selection or hand manufacture to presentation—skimmed along, crossed, and re-crossed a fine and often ornately limned division between two economies. First, purchasing a gift invigorated the market economy, even more so as stores stocked specialty goods to meet the demand for Christmas gifts. Items offered according to price and quality—more, nicer, better, finer, or exquisite stitching, for example—provided an index of value, which helped the buyer to make just the statement intended. Such precision allowed the object to attain a higher use-value by enhancing the effectiveness with which it conveyed its message or messages. Thus, a gift added value to the consumption cycles on both sides.

The social compunction to give gifts, smartly moderated, made the giver an arbiter of an economy. And the person most usually responsible for the gifts was a woman.²⁰ In the dynamic of use-value, the woman could assess how much to keep and how much to give.²¹ Moreover, by making a gift of something purchased, she conferred on the recipient membership in the same world of commodities, creating through ritual gesture a modern community. In this alchemy of ritual, gifts became the fabric of relationships.

It was not only the gift but also the wrapping that bestowed value. Paper and ribbon visibly signalled that an object was being transferred from a market economy of dollar value to an economy of social usefulness. As their world grew more socially and economically disordered, the urban middle-class throughout the last part of the nineteenth century worried considerably about how to represent themselves and to identify others as "genuinely respectable." Ironically, they also valued the art of deception.²² This "elaborate system of mystification," as Edith Wharton referred to it in *The Age of Innocence*, applied to parlours, to manners—and to gifts.²³ Bows and wrapping paper created a small secret in an age increasingly willed to be understood as rational and non-mysterious. Considering that most of the gift presentations were usually made by women, it was understandable that covering a gift made it a metaphor for hidden meaning and pleasure. Indeed, the paper dignified an object because it hid it. When

²⁰ Caplow, 388. See also, "Christmas Gifts for Men," *New York Times*, 21 December 1878, 4.

²¹ On this point, see especially Annette B. Weiner, *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), who focuses on inalienable possessions.

²² James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 26.

²³ Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 1920, quoted in Orvell, 42

opened, the item was no longer simply a mass-produced thing that could be bought by anyone with the right amount of cash. It had transformed into a social bond of unspoken and uneven codes exchanged between giver and receiver.²⁴ Ironically, then, Mabel could communicate through gifts in a way that eluded her husband who had invented the telephone.

A broader point follows from all this. A market economy is based on a concept of scarcity, regulated by the availability of money. We assume that money is the precious item to be hoarded, and if spent, should be spent wisely. However, the market economy only works if its most important things, the commodities or material goods (and not the money that buys them), are limited or removed from the exchange (i.e. bought). By contrast, it would seem that in a use-value economy, one whose role is intensified through gift rituals, the goods that are given are replications or shadows of the valued objects. In this case, these were generally found within the woman's household. That is, the gift symbolized the woman and her extended self (her taste). Mabel, then, suggested that she wanted to give something that the recipient wanted or needed, but the gift turned out to be a fragment of the giver's need. That is one reason why women gave sewing baskets, kidskin gloves, and silk handkerchiefs as gifts, but did not give money. In fact, the woman often had no money that was specifically her own. In giving, she could enhance her statements, creating interest, as it were, by making a bolder assertion of love and affection, and equally a more powerful remaking of the recipient in her own image and for her own use. The woman, often thought to be nearly absent from the world of goods and competition, could no longer be regarded as silent.

While the Bells may appear to have been in great disagreement, they actually expressed at least one similar thought. Both admitted to the excesses of the holiday. Alec agreed that gifts of a certain type were good; they should be handmade, paid for with available funds, and not indiscriminately given. Mabel suggested, later in this same December letter, that Christmas was a vine that had grown rampant: "[h]ow much easier and better just to trim your too luxuriant vine. It's very beautiful when kept within proper limits." "The vine needs trimming," she conceded, "but the principle [of giving gifts] I know is right." And she would be the one to decide the limits. This was a duet, in which the two voices alternated.

In the end, the Bells' dialogue about Christmas giving was not about gifts, but about the ways in which two people saw their role in society and sought to find a secure place within it through shaping their affinities with others. Their disagreements over the ritual of giving only intensified and

²⁴ Orvell points out that the "[o]ne dominant mode . . . was thus the tendency to enclose reality in manageable forms. . . . If the world outside the frame was beyond control, the world inside could at least offer the illusion of mastery and comprehension." Orvell, *Real Thing*, 35.

thereby clarified the difference between their perceptions and methods. Resolution was not the intention. Temporarily, at Christmas time, an alternative economy gained ascendancy. It emphasized, among other things, woman's role in the modern world. The rituals, with their excess of work, waste, anxiety, exhaustion, expense, and detail, highlighted the rationality of the modern world that sought to curb and contain those very excesses.

So much, then, for nostalgia. Christmas giving did not ritualize a return to gentler, more cooperative times. To the Bells and others in the late nineteenth century, it was, at least in part, a practical exercise. The rituals tested the culture's organizational principles and located its power bases. This historian's fascination with the Bells' letters is that they emerged from a liminal moment in culture, when such conditions of consumption and gift-giving were being formed. To be sure, their conversation—or argument—solved nothing. However, it may illuminate the burden of ritual not only for Alexander Bell, but for all of us. Rituals by their very nature acknowledge conflict and paradox. The rituals of giving gifts are not immune from these confusions, as our tacit, knowing appreciation of that 1894 *Tribune* writer reveals.