



Aileen Fox at Casa Fontanalba



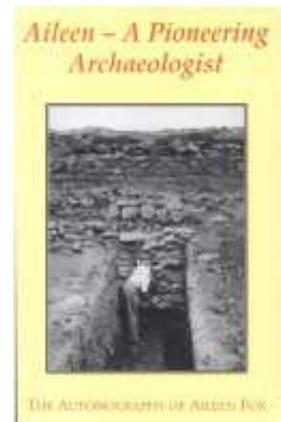
By Graham Avery

After Clarence Bicknell's death in 1918, his summer home at Casterino passed into the care of Edward and Margaret Berry. A young Englishwoman who visited Casa Fontanalba in 1927 and 1928 left an interesting account of her experience in her autobiography *Aileen – A Pioneering Archaeologist* (Gracewing, Leominster UK, 2000)

Lady Aileen Fox (1907-2005) and her husband Sir Cyril Fox (they married in 1933) were both archaeologists: he was Director of the National Museum of Wales (1926 -1948) and she was Lecturer in Archaeology at Exeter University (1955 - 1972).

Aileen described in her autobiography how she grew up in an affluent middle-class family in London, where her father Walter Henderson was a lawyer, living first in Kensington and later in Surrey. At Cambridge University from 1926 to 1929 she studied English literature at Newnham College.

It was botany that brought Aileen to Casterino. Her father was interested in alpine plants, and Aileen accompanied him on several summer expeditions, hunting for flowers in the Alps in the footsteps of the botanist Reginald Farrer¹. Having been at Mont Cenis in 1924² and the Dolomites in 1925³, they came to the Maritime Alps in 1927⁴:



“Father and I were on the last of our plant-hunting expeditions, travelling to San Dalmazzo di Tenda in the Maritime Alps, in pursuit of the rare *Primula allionii*, which grew in the crevices of the limestone rocks. After a week, we found we had exhausted the local flora and, hearing that there were prehistoric rock-engravings as well as Alpine flowers in the higher Casterino valley, set off on a three-hour walk, with our baggage on a mule, accompanied by a guide. We put up in a very modest inn, and after our evening meal were agreeably surprised by an invitation, conveyed by a manservant, to visit Mr and Mrs Berry at their Casa Fontanalba on the opposite hillside.

“James⁵ Berry was a nephew of the late Clarence Bicknell, a talented amateur botanist and artist, who had lived at Bordighera and had built an attractive little house in order to study the rock carvings as well as the flora. Mr Berry knew exactly where to find them on the rocky slopes when he took us up the Val Fontanalba the next day. We were both much impressed, and so was Miles Burkitt⁶ when I told him what we had seen.

“When the Berrys came to England that winter it was arranged that they would lend Casa Fontanalba to us and the Burkitts for a month the following summer [1928], complete with their servants, Giuseppe and his wife, Matilde, to run the house and cook for us. We had Clarence Bicknell’s illustrated book *Prehistoric Rock Engravings* (1913)⁷, as well as Giuseppe to be our guide.

“Peggy and I spent long hours lying on the smooth glaciated rocks above Fontanalba warmed by the July sunshine, making rubbings, with my father and Miles looking on. No English archaeologist had visited this remote area other than Bicknell. The subjects were mainly agricultural: horned oxen, rendered schematically sometimes pulling a primitive plough (*ard*) and followed by a ploughman; there were also curious rectangles that Bicknell thought might represent fields and perhaps settlements. Very similar but more elaborate imagery has now been recorded in the Val Camonica in northern Italy.

“We made an arduous day-long expedition with mules to the Lago delle Meraviglie, now Lac des Merveilles since the region was restored to France. It was an awesome barren landscape at the foot of Monte Bego (2,873 metres). There we recorded the important engravings of daggers and halberds which were the best evidence for an early Bronze Age date for the series.

“In the evenings, after a delicious Italian meal, Peggy and I blew fixative on our large sheets of rubbings, and we discussed with Miles the significance of the symbols. It was noticeable that most afternoons dark clouds gathered over Monte Bego, usually culminating in a small thunderstorm, and Miles’s deduction that the mountain had been a cult centre, with symbolic offerings of stock, land and weapons carved on the rocks around it, still seems plausible.

“I found the whole thing most absorbing: unconsciously I was learning the techniques of systematic archaeological recording, and about the influence of the environment on human activities, though I had no intention of pursuing the subject further. So far as I was concerned it had been a very good holiday.”⁸

On his return to Cambridge, Miles Burkitt published an article in a British archaeological journal on ‘Rock Carvings in the Italian Alps’⁹.

On her return to Cambridge, Aileen thought of becoming a librarian, but after her final examinations she worked as an assistant on an archaeological excavation at the Roman site of Richborough Castle in Kent, and this led to her decision to become an archaeologist.

In the course of her long life (she lived to the age of 98) she conducted excavations in Wales, England and New Zealand. According to an obituary ‘Aileen Fox will be remembered principally for her work in the Iron Age and Roman periods, she made significant contributions to the study of periods from the Neolithic to the Middle Ages. She was also one

of the few academics who have presented their learning to children, writing *Roman Britain* (1961) with Alan Sorrell. Her finest book was *South West England* (1964) in the *Ancient Peoples and Places* series¹⁰.

Although Aileen never revisited Casa Fontanalba, she later acquired an important link to Clarence Bicknell: in 1936 her sister Mari married Clarence's great-nephew Peter Bicknell¹¹.

Graham Avery - 30 May 2014

Endnotes:

¹ According to page 31 of *Aileen – A Pioneering Archaeologist*, her father's interest in alpine plants was stimulated by *Among The Hills - A Book of Joy in High Places* by Reginald Farrer (Headley Brothers, 1911). This book recounted Farrer's journey in the Alps in 1910, including a visit to Casa Fontanalba where he met Clarence Bicknell. For that encounter, see *Clarence Bicknell and Reginald Farrer, 19 July 1910* by Graham Avery published at http://www.clarencebicknell.com/images/downloads_news/obh12_avery_bicknell_and_farrer_v4.pdf

² *Aileen – A Pioneering Archaeologist* pages 32-3 describes their stay at Mont Cenis: they were 'following closely in Farrer's footsteps' and would have consulted Chapters II & III of his book *Among The Hills*. At their hotel they met the botanists Clarence Elliott & Walter Ingwersen, who had known Farrer: in fact, Elliott was Farrer's companion in 1910 when he visited Casa Fontanalba

³ Here they would have consulted Farrer's *The Dolomites - King Laurin's Garden* (A&C Black, 1913)

⁴ Here they would have consulted Chapter IX of Farrer's *Among The Hills* for its description of the flora near San Dalmazzo (including *Primula allionii*) and on the way to Casterino.

⁵ His name was Edward, not James

⁶ At Cambridge Aileen had been introduced by her friend Sophie Fry to Miles Burkitt, University Lecturer in Prehistoric Archaeology; his wife Peggy was Sophie's sister.

⁷ *A guide to the prehistoric rock engravings in the Italian Maritime Alps* (G. Bessone, Bordighera 1913)

⁸ *Aileen – A Pioneering Archaeologist* pages 44-5

⁹ *Antiquity* Vol. 3, 1929, pages 155-64

¹⁰ *The Independent*, 16 December 2005

¹¹ Mari Bicknell, dancer and choreographer, founded the Cambridge Ballet Workshop. Her husband Peter Bicknell, architect, mountaineer, writer and teacher, was the author of *Clarence Bicknell (1842-1918) Essentially Victorian* published at http://www.clarencebicknell.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1&Itemid=139&lang=en