

Clarence Bicknell and George Macdonald:

Figureheads of Society in Bordighera

By Susie Bicknell
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George MacDonald and Clarence Bicknell both settled in Bordighera in 1878.

George was already an established literary personality with a large family and little money. Clarence was unknown with no particular vocation except as a priest, a bachelor (which he remained) and with enough private means to support himself. Within a few years, they had established themselves



as pivots of society in Bordighera. However, it is strange not to know how much contact they had with each other, considering how much they had in common as stalwarts of Bordighera.

They both had stints as priests. Reacting possibly to his Unitarian upbringing, Clarence, when he left Cambridge, favoured a return to a more Catholic orientated Anglican Church. Ordained in 1866, Clarence was a curate in a tough parish in Walworth, Surrey and then from 1873 spent six years on and off at Stoke on Tern with the rather mysterious "Brotherhood of the Holy Spirit" created by Roland Corbett which pursued High Church Anglo-Catholicism. But by the late 70s, the Brotherhood must have lost its allure for Clarence, and he travelled considerably, going as far afield as Morocco and possibly New Zealand. He ended up in Bordighera in 1878 invited by the Fanshawe family and became chaplain to the Anglican church there.

Eighteen years older than Clarence, Scotsman George MacDonald also started with a religious calling. He left Aberdeen to study Congregationalism at Highbury Independent Theological College. After three years, he became pastor in 1850 at a Congregational Church in Arundel, Sussex. However, three years later, he was forced to resign, accused of heresy as his sermons became more and more imbued with mysticism. His parishioners liked him though, for his sincere pastoral care. He was a striking man, tall with blue eyes, long dark hair, and a long dark beard, who continued to impress with his preaching in Manchester and Bolton.

This work did not provide enough funds to support George's ever-growing family. In true Victorian tradition, his adored wife Louisa produced a child nearly every year during the 1850s and they eventually ended up with eleven children, four of whom died. He resigned from the Independent ministry and became a lay member of the Church of England and decided to pursue his literary vocation. He had started with two poetry books but in 1858, he published "The Phantastes" which was his first success and the first of many fantasy and fairy-tale novels. He said "I write, not for children, but for the child-like, whether they be of five, or fifty, or seventy-five." Throughout his life, he also published volumes of sermons and wrote non-fantasy realistic novels on Scottish life.

MacDonald's reputation became such that he moved in the top literary circles, acquainted with Tennyson, Dickens, Wilkie Collins, Trollope, Ruskin, Lewes, and Thackeray. A photo exists of MacDonald with this group. Maybe the photo was taken by Lewis Carroll, a well-known photographer as well as writer of the Alice books. MacDonald's children were so enthusiastic when the Alice books were read to them that Carroll was encouraged to present them for publication. What a good decision that was.



Image, above: The Macdonald family with Lewis Carroll

MacDonald's rise to top literary circles had been helped in 1856 when Lady Byron became a patron. In 1867 he moved into the large house known as "The Retreat" in Hammersmith (later to belong to William Morris after MacDonald's move to Bordighera). And in 1872 he went on a lecture tour in the States. He was an influence on Tolkien and C.S. Lewis.

But health-wise, things were not so good in MacDonald's large family. The "family attendant" – as MacDonald called tuberculosis - was hovering over them and the decision was taken to find a home on the Italian Riviera. Queen Victoria, having enjoyed reading his books to her children, had accorded MacDonald a Civil List pension in 1877, and friends clubbed round to help him build a very large house in Bordighera. While this was being built, a year or two were spent in Nervi (a popular sea resort suburb of Genoa) and Portofino.

So in 1878, just as Clarence arrived also, the MacDonalds installed themselves in Bordighera where they spent the winter season for the next 20 years. The curative powers of the local air were not enough to prevent MacDonald's second eldest daughter dying the year they arrived. Another three were to die, the last was Lilia in 1891, Macdonald's first born and favourite daughter.

Clarence did not last long as the Anglican Chaplain. Within a year he had resigned. He gave up active participation in church matters. He asked not to be referred to as "The Rev." He ceased to wear a dog collar.

He was later to say in a letter to a friend, "I fear I have become rather narrow about all church things, having become convinced that the churches do more harm than good & hinder human progress, & look upon the pope, the clergy & the doctrines as a fraud, though not an intentional one." But he decided to stay in Bordighera and bought the "Casa Rosa" from the Fanshawe-Walkers. This large house (for a bachelor) remained his home till he died. It is right next door to the Church (no longer consecrated) and now divided into flats. We do not know if Clarence decorated the Casa's interior walls as profusely as he did his house in Casterino or if he received as many visitors there as he did at the Casa Fontanalba.

In the 10 years between 1907 and 1917 that Clarence had visitors to the Casa Fontanalba, over 250 people made their way up the twisty mountain road from St Dalmas de Tende to Casterino. Clarence was usually only there from June till September so having from 15 to as much as over 40 visitors in a season must have kept him and his helpers the Pollinis pretty busy! Sometimes large families of 5 or 6 would come. Clarence still fitted in his work on the engravings and regular botanical studies. Decorating the house itself must have taken some time: would it have been finished for the 19 visitors who came in 1907? And would visitors have been expected to follow his strict schedule and his vegetarian diet? And did some of them stay the night?

But back in 1880 and no longer occupied by his chaplaincy, Clarence – besides his botanical and archaeological interests – devoted himself to philanthropic projects for the local Italians and animating the British community.

Clarence had literary aspirations too, though of a lighter variety than MacDonald's. As Peter Bicknell writes:

"His delight in playful fantasy has much in common with the nonsense of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll. He loved puzzles, riddles, jokes, puns and parlour games. For Margaret Berry he made a botanical version of the popular Victorian game of happy Families"

And Clarence's fantastical works were wonderfully illustrated. He did a series of albums, one a year, dedicated to his nephew Edward Berry's wife, Margaret. Peter Bicknell describes one of these albums as follows:

"The last dated 1914 is an elaborate fantasy, The Triumph of the Dandelion in which the flowers compete for the crown of the Beauty Queen of Fontanalba. Page by page each flower presents her claim in enchanting drawings, supported by descriptions of her charms (sometimes medicinal) in prose and in verse (often facetious)"

The "Museo Bicknell" is his great creation. It was opened in 1888 to provide a cultural centre for local history. Concerts, plays and exhibitions were held there, many of them fund-raisers for local charities. Later an additional library was built. (For more detail see www.clarencebicknell.com) With a British population in this period of between 5000 and 7000, there was no shortage of potential audiences.

Meanwhile, MacDonald's large home became a cultural centre in itself. This excerpt from Angela R. Barone's 1990 PhD thesis "The Oak Tree and the Olive Tree: The True Dream of Eva Gore-Booth" gives a vivid description of life there:

"*Casa Coraggio*, the name given to the construction in Bordighera, was linked with the family motto: "Corage! God mend all" (the imperfect spelling is

deliberate, as the motto is an anagram of George MacDonald). The house was fenced by a thick row of trees and bushes, its outside walls were covered with ivy and evergreen creepers. Inside, there were numerous large rooms, furnished with disparate items and with the walls painted in vivid colours. In the large and luminous kitchen Louisa (his wife) used to cook in large quantity for her numerous family and guests - the door of *Casa Coraggio* was constantly open to the local villagers as well as to friends, acquaintances, unknown guests coming from Northern Europe to meet the artist philanthropist or to recover their health in the sunny Italian weather and to avail of the generosity of George MacDonald.

“In a large store-room one could find all sorts of costumes, theatrical props and disparate objects. In the sitting-room of over 130 square metres, the MacDonalds organised concerts, mainly directed by Louisa, lectures and oratorios, held by George, *tableaux vivants* and plays, staged and acted by



the whole family, and fancy-dress balls and charity parties for the local community. George and Louisa, with their children, lived their most happy days in *Casa Coraggio*: they made an ecumenical meeting-point of their own house in Italy, sharing with the others whatever was in their possession and doing everything in their power to help the villagers who had so generously accepted them in their community.”

Image, above. A part of the MacDonald's enormous living room where plays, lectures and all manner of activities took place

On Wednesday afternoons MacDonald gave readings of Shakespeare and Dante. A local fisherman or florist might find himself next to an English aristocrat such as Lord Mount-Temple who wrote in his memoirs;

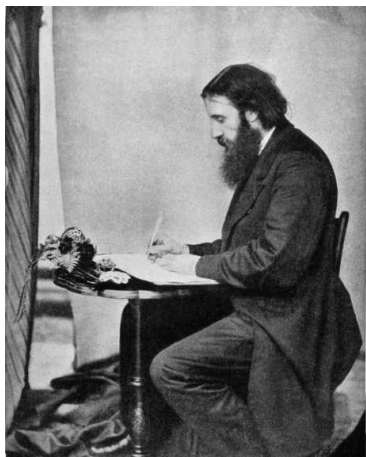
“That house, Coraggio, is the very heart of Bordighera, the rich core of it, always raying out to all around, and gathering them to itself”.

Some of the English community were apparently a bit shocked by the goings-on at this house with lots of Italian children around over Christmas and the eclectic gatherings that took place.

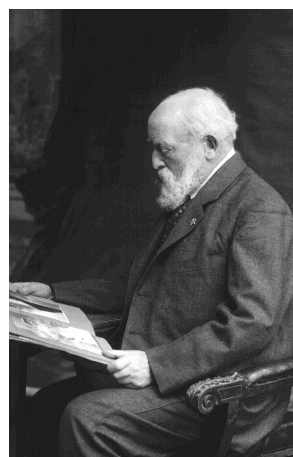
In 1896 Eva Gore-Booth and Gertrude Roper, both in their mid-twenties and from widely different backgrounds, met and fell in love at the *Casa Coraggio*. They went on to live together, Eva abandoning her aristocratic upbringing, and became well-known campaigners for vegetarianism, the abolition of capital punishment, antivivisection, women's suffrage and pacifism.

The last great event held at the MacDonald's home was their 50th Wedding Anniversary in 1901. Louisa died (exhausted one imagines) the next year. George by then was in a wheelchair and returned to live in Haslemere with his son Greville where he died in 1905.

So we wonder if Bicknell and Macdonald frequented each other's gatherings and events? After all, they lived only 100 yards from each other. They certainly had some similarities: very welcoming, open and caring. Both helped after the bad 1887 earthquake. MacDonald's huge living room became an emergency hospital. In 1917, Clarence's Museum was used for war victims, as was the Casino. Clarence remarks in a letter to Pelloux in the same year "What a good thing it is to see useless or mischievous places being turned to good account".



George and Clarence may both have been pivots of Bordighera society, but both also had passionate and time-consuming interests. They were not dilettante ex-pats just wintering on the Riviera. Clarence concentrated on botany, archaeology and Esperanto, MacDonald on his writing (he wrote 20 books while in Bordighera).



But as far as we know, they were not great friends, or even very well acquainted. Why not? Clarence used Robert Falconer MacDonald, one of George's sons and an architect, to design the *Casa Fontanalba*, but so far that is the only sign of contact between them. Perhaps it was simply that Clarence was an outdoor person and George an indoor person.

This paper prepared as a research paper for the Clarence Bicknell Association website www.clarencebicknell.com where many other papers can be found on the downloads page.

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