

## CLARENCE BICKNELL, PHILANTHROPIST AND PERSON OF IDEAS

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for the Twilight Club, Hartford, Connecticut, 2014.

A year ago, I was invited by the Italian Esperanto Federation to give a lecture at the Museo Biblioteca Bicknell, in Bordighera, a town on the Ligurian coast between Sanremo and the border with France. This corner of Italy, where the mountains come down to the sea, is a place of tiny fishing villages along the rocky coast, small fertile coastal valleys, hill towns built back from the shore centuries ago for protection from Barbary pirates, rich botanical diversity, and, accordingly, spectacular gardens. Behind the villages and the seaside villas rise the southern reaches of the Italian Alps, the terrain growing rapidly bare and rugged as it rises, but cut through with deep and luxuriant valleys whose steep sides cast them into shade. The difficult terrain meant that the railway came late to the area and that only a narrow strip of land along the shore could be developed, so that, despite the occasional Mediterranean watering-place, the area carries with it a sense of antiquity and continuity. The high hills assure a mild climate and the abundant rain contributes to the richness of the vegetation.

I had been asked to lecture on the life and achievements of Clarence Bicknell, the Englishman who in 1888 built the Biblioteca Bicknell, now the headquarters of the International Institute of Ligurian Studies, part of the Università degli Studi di Genova. Bicknell was an early adept of Esperanto and a minor poet in that language. He was also an amateur botanist and archeologist of considerable sophistication.

Bicknell built his library to serve the English community of Bordighera. English interest in the Ligurian coast had been stimulated by the publication in 1855 of a popular novel, *Doctor Antonio*, set in the region, the work of an Italian refugee in England, Giovanni Ruffini.<sup>1</sup> Of

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<sup>1</sup> The publisher of a recent edition of the book describes it as follows: "Stranded by a coach accident in a small Osteria on the Italian Riviera, Sir John Davenne and his beautiful, delicate daughter Lucy come to terms with this strange land, its people and their customs. Under the guidance of the mysterious Doctor Antonio they slowly grow to love the country and its people; even as it is being torn apart by the unification struggle. Reaching an explosive climax against the backdrop of the uprisings of 1848, this tale of love and loss on the Riviera presents a rich tapestry of Ligurian life and English society in the mid nineteenth century. Writing from exile in England, Ruffini combined a keen eye for the quirks and mores of the English aristocracy with an exile's longing for his homeland. Both are drawn with skill and affection and he adds contemporary commentary on the many injustices of the age. Today it gives us a window into the past and is a wonderful example of classic writing from the golden age of Victorian fiction."

course, Livorno, to the east and south, known to English sailors as Leghorn, had long been a haunt of the English: Shelley was cremated on the beach at Livorno following his drowning on a trip to visit Byron and Leigh Hunt. It was one of the places that Keats considered for the easing of his consumption before he settled on Rome. Genoa, too, had its English community. Now, following the Third War of Italian Independence in 1866 when the Kingdom of Italy was largely united, the English began to arrive in Liguria in considerable numbers. They settled on Bordighera for their residence.

Before long, Bordighera boasted a large English community, indeed was one of the most popular Mediterranean locations for English sufferers from tuberculosis, its air being deemed particularly pure. Its temperate climate attracted English residents and visitors in considerable numbers – the healthy as well as the sick, so that soon English residents of the town actually exceeded Italian residents. Shops and banks opened to serve them, and an English church was built. A weekly newspaper in English was published, chronicling the comings and goings of English visitors. An English community with a church, a bank, a weekly newspaper, and a genteel population must be in want of a library. Clarence Bicknell supplied it.

The library has remained relatively untouched since the time of its construction. The parcel of land on which it is built, situated on the Via Romana close to some of the grander 19<sup>th</sup>-century houses behind the town, was once a part of the legendary gardens of the citrus magnate Francesco Moreno. When Moreno lost all his money in the mid-1880s, much of the land became available for building – but not before Claude Monet had spent the early months of 1884 in Bordighera painting some of his most memorable paintings in these gardens. Another local figure of importance was the architect of the Paris Opéra, Charles Garnier, who built his own villa in Bordighera and designed a number of other buildings in the town.

The library is approached down a narrow driveway. The twisted trunk of an enormous and ancient *Ficus Magnolioides* overshadows the entrance gateway, indeed has largely pushed it aside. This tree (descended from the first specimen, brought to Italy from Australia by Lord Howe two hundred years ago), along with the impressive wisteria that now envelops the façade and much of the rest of the building, causes the library itself almost to fade into nature. Inside the building bears a resemblance to a church interior. It is now a large meeting hall containing books and manuscripts on the region, many of them formerly belonging to Bicknell, along with his collection of butterflies, geological specimens, and the assorted accoutrements and personalia of a Victorian amateur scientist and archeologist.

Thanks to the diligence of living members of his family, we know quite a lot about Clarence Bicknell. I have always been aware of his existence because of my interest in Esperanto, but of late my own investigations have receded in importance before the positive avalanche of

information now available on the Internet. The comments that follow come from an assortment of sources, some recent, some less so.

The story really begins 173 years ago – to be precise, on October 27, 1842. On that date, Clarence Bicknell was born into a large and affluent family in Herne Hill, Surrey, just outside London. His grandfather, William Bicknell (1749-1825), was a largely self-made and self-educated cloth merchant with a passion for ideas, particularly mathematics – so much so that he sold his prosperous business in 1789 to open a boys' school dedicated to Unitarianism, at a time when this rationalist faith was establishing itself in Britain (the first congregation was established at the Essex Street Church in London in 1774 and the first Unitarian society began in 1791). Among William Bicknell's early acquaintances were the brothers Charles, John and Samuel Wesley. John regularly stayed at the Bicknell house on Saturday evenings when he was preaching at Snow's Fields, Southwark, on Sundays – a guest whose presence was not without danger to life and limb, since this was the period of anti-Methodist riots. On two occasions in Southwark, John Wesley was stoned by angry mobs. For a while, the young William Bicknell was sent to school at Kingswood, an establishment founded by John Wesley in Bristol. He developed a great love of music, playing the spinet, harpsichord, and organ.

Clarence's father, Elhanan Bicknell (1788-1861), William's son, followed, indeed exceeded, his father in business acumen, launching a whale oil refining company at a time when whale oil (spermaceti), extracted from the blubber of whales, was widely used for illumination, a role that it continued to play for much of the nineteenth century until kerosene on the one hand and electricity on the other superseded it (readers of *Moby Dick* will be familiar with the details). Elhanan had a financial interest in a fleet of whalers that plied the South Seas. But he also followed his father in his range of avocational interests: he maintained the family's Unitarianism, and he also, indeed primarily, devoted his considerable fortune to patronizing artists and collecting their works.

Clarence was the thirteenth and youngest son of Elhanan (who was widowed three times and married four: Clarence was the son of his third wife, Lucinda). The family home in Herne Hill was frequented by many of the major figures of the artistic world of the time, among them John Ruskin (a neighbor), the painter J.M.W. Turner, and the poet and historian (and statesman) Thomas Babington, Lord Macaulay. Macaulay (we might note) though not himself a Unitarian, defended the Unitarians before the House of Commons in the case of the Dissenters' Chapels Bill, a successful attempt to ameliorate a legal decision to the effect that only Trinitarians might benefit from trusts established for the welfare of the Christian religion.

Elhanan's extensive art collection contained works by Gainsborough, Landseer and others, and no less than thirty works by Turner, many of them acquired before Ruskin began his championship of Turner's work. It seems likely that books on whaling that Elhanan lent to

Turner stimulated the artist's interest in whaling (the subject of several of his paintings). Indeed, one of the Turners in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum, entitled *Whaling*, was painted specifically for Elhanan (of it, the novelist Thackeray declared, "That is not a smear of purple you see yonder, but a beautiful whale, whose tail has just slapped a half-dozen whale-boats into perdition; and as for what you fancied to be a few zig-zag lines spattered on the canvas at hap-hazard, look! they turn out to be a ship with all her sails."). Clarence's uncle on his mother's side<sup>2</sup> was Habelot Knight Browne, known to the world as Phiz, the illustrator of Charles Dickens.

The death of his father in 1861 led to the breakup of the family home at Herne Hill. Clarence, having early shown a talent for mathematics, perhaps inherited from his grandfather, entered Trinity College, Cambridge, to study for a BA in that subject. While successful in his mathematical studies, he rapidly grew interested in many other things, particularly botany, for which he developed his considerable artistic talent, and humanitarian endeavors. Upon graduation, abandoning the family's devotion to Unitarianism, and no doubt influenced by the Anglo-Catholic Oxford Movement, he decided to take orders in the Church of England, was ordained as a deacon, and was assigned as a young curate to the poor and difficult parish of Walworth, in South London. In due course he was ordained as a priest. The parish was operated by the Order of St. Augustine, one of a number of Anglican orders founded in mid-century in imitation of Rome by devotees of the Oxford Movement, anglo-catholic in its orientation. Arriving in Walworth he threw himself and his inheritance into his ministry – including serving his parishioners during the smallpox epidemic of 1871-2, a massive outbreak that carried off some 50,000 souls across the British Isles and hit London particularly hard.

Walworth, the area around the Old Kent Road, the very heart of cockney London, was for a time the center of the Walworth Jumpers. Otherwise known as the New Forest Shakers, the Convulsionists, or the Girlingites, this religious movement was founded by Mary Ann Girling, who in 1858 and again in 1864 was visited in her bedroom in Ipswich by Jesus Christ. On the second occasion, Jesus announced the Second Coming and bestowed on her the stigmata to prove it, at which point she abandoned her family to preach celibacy, chastity, and the end of the world in the streets and fields of Suffolk. Driven out by the locals, in 1871 she moved to London and a railway arch in Walworth, where she preached to crowds numbering in the thousands until in the following year hostile mobs moved her and her followers on. At this point she settled at New Forest Lodge in Hampshire with (ultimately) 160 of her followers. The community lasted, on and off, for fifteen years, but never prospered, perhaps because, while the community established a degree of self-sufficiency by cultivating the land, Girling forbade

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<sup>2</sup> Or possibly his cousin: there is some question as to his family provenance since, while he was raised as Lucinda's brother, he may have been the illegitimate child of one of her sisters.

any external economic activity, thereby making it impossible for the community members to sell their products to others outside the community.

Likely exhausted by the mix of rampant disease and religious enthusiasm to which the neighborhood had succumbed, in 1872 (the same year as the departure of Mrs. Girling and her followers), Bicknell departed Walworth to join the Brotherhood of the Holy Spirit, a religious community in Shropshire, to which several of his former Cambridge acquaintances belonged. It seems that the life of pious devotion, perhaps tied to his scientific interests, led him into a period of religious doubt. Abandoning the Brotherhood, he began to travel – to Ceylon, New Zealand, Morocco. He spent time in Majorca – and finally came to Bordighera.

To Bicknell Bordighera seemed like paradise. In 1878, invited by the Fanshawe family to assume the role of chaplain at the English church, he immediately accepted. As of 1879, Bordighera and its surroundings became his place of residence for the rest of his life.

But his official role as local pastor soon became irksome. His general unhappiness with the dogmatic, chauvinistic and conservative views of the church was made specific by criticism of his cooperation with the local Catholic priest, Padre Giacomo Viale, in alleviating the suffering of impoverished Italian workers in the area around Bordighera, an incident which elicited consternation among his Anglican superiors, no doubt fearful of apostasy (or perhaps simply of Italians). He soon resigned from the Church of England priesthood in disillusionment with organized religion. He wrote 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."

This was, of course, a period of doubt for many a Victorian believer. Darwin's *Origin of Species* came out in 1859; his *Descent of Man* followed in 1871. Thomas Henry Huxley's *Evidence as to Man's Place in Nature* appeared in 1863. Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, with its questioning of the Almighty, had appeared in 1850. Gerard Manley Hopkins, tormented by religious doubts, entered the Catholic priesthood in 1877, just a year before Bicknell moved to Bordighera. Bicknell adopted a position not unlike that of many other doubters caught between science and religion: while preserving a general belief (one step up, in other words, from agnosticism, the term coined by Huxley to describe his own condition), he dedicated himself to understanding not the supernatural but the natural, and to serving his community in other ways than through organized religion. In certain respects, though not formally, he reverted to the Unitarianism of his father and grandfather. Already interested in botany, he made it his primary avocation, along with an interest in geology and an abiding interest in internationalism. He was an early adept of Esperanto, seeing in the possibility of its adoption the chance of moving beyond narrow nationalism to a new community of understanding and of enduring humanitarian values

that transcended the nation-state. In this, too, he was a creature of his time: this was the period in which the first international organizations were coming into being, and in which curiosity about the world, combined with the means to travel that world, was imbuing many with a faith in the ability of science to overcome the shortcomings of the old way of national politics.

His knowledge of plants and his artistic talents led him to focus particularly on the remarkably diverse botany of the region. His illustrated notebooks and published works testify to the depth of this interest. Many of these materials are to be found in Italian libraries and at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge and have recently become the subject of increased scholarly interest. His most important published contribution to botany was *Flowering Plants and Ferns of the Riviera and Neighbouring Mountains*, published, with Bicknell's own illustrations, in London by Trübner and Company in 1885 (the Sterling Library at Yale has a copy). This pathbreaking work documented numbers of species previously unrecorded. Nor did Bicknell's interest in botany end there: it remained a major preoccupation for the rest of his life. Some one hundred of his pressed flowers and plants are now in the collection of the Oxford University Herbaria.

While the library was his greatest philanthropic contribution to the community, he was also generous in his support of the poor of the region, particularly following the earthquake that struck the Ligurian coast and southern France in 1887, and he was a steady contributor to causes associated with the blind.

Bicknell's interest in the idea of an international language was first aroused by the publication of Volapük, a language created by a German priest, Johann Martin Schleyer, in the early 1880s. Although there had been many attempts at creating a language for international use before Schleyer, Schleyer was successful in gathering a considerable following among people interested in international travel and in working to create a more peaceful world. But Volapük proved hard to learn and Schleyer was distinctly dictatorial in his attitude to his language and its adepts, so that the numbers dropped off rapidly.

At this point, in 1887, Esperanto appeared on the scene, the work of Lazar Ludwik Zamenhof, of Warsaw. Bicknell learned Esperanto in 1897, becoming one of the pioneers of the language when it first came to Italy at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Along with the Bohemian Rosa Junck, a resident of Bordighera, he founded an Esperanto society in the town (the members were photographed standing in front of the library), which soon began offering courses in the language and attracted the sympathetic attention of local visitors – including the well-known short story writer Edmondo de Amicis. When de Amicis died in Bordighera in 1908, the Esperantists accompanied his body to its burial in Torino. Junck and Bicknell also started an Esperanto society in Milan in 1906. At about this time Clarence's guest book was signed by the prominent French Esperantist Louis de Beaufront.

Bicknell was one of six residents of Italy to attend the first World Congress of Esperanto in Boulogne-sur-mer in 1905 and he participated in several other congresses, including the one in Cambridge in 1907. He led a group of blind Esperantists to the abortive Paris congress in 1914, stopped dead in its tracks after its opening day by the declaration of war.

Following in the footsteps of Zamenhof himself, Bicknell soon began writing poetry in Esperanto. His original and translated work appeared in Italian and British Esperanto periodicals and in the literary journal *La Revuo*. He contributed translated and original hymns to the *Order of Service According to the Prayer Book of the English Church* published on the occasion of the Esperanto Congress in Cambridge in 1907. Nine of his hymns are included in the ecumenical prayer book *Adoru* (2001), the most widely used collection of Esperanto hymns today. He was also awarded a prize in the Floral Games, the *jocs florals*, Catalan poetry competitions revived in 1909 as part of the World Congress of Esperanto in Barcelona.

Bicknell could not be described as a major poet in Esperanto, and much of his work is no longer read. He was one of the early adepts of Esperanto who eagerly sought to explore the flexible possibilities of Esperanto as a poetic language and to help build a corpus of original and translated literature. One of his original poems, entitled *Aŭtuno* and heavily indebted to Keats's *To Autumn*, appears in the most comprehensive modern anthology of Esperanto poetry, compiled by William Auld and published in 1984. He translated a collection of poems by Tennyson (*Guinevere and other poems*, 1906) and a long poem by Lord Macaulay, also published in 1906. In 1915 his translation of a one-act verse comedy by Giuseppe Giacosa was published in Italy.

While Bordighera and the adjacent hillsides were a paradise for a botanist, Bicknell, ever adventurous, widened his investigations to higher and higher elevations, particularly to the northwest of the town. Soon he was organizing expeditions into the mountains every summer. Eventually, in 1905-06, he built a summer home far up in the mountains in what was then still Italian territory but is now (as a result of the Franco-Italian settlement of 1947) part of the French department of Alpes-Maritimes. The materials for the Casa Fontanalba, as it was called, had to be carried up by mules, since there was no way of reaching the area by wheeled traffic. The house still exists. In Bicknell's day, the area was used as a firing range by the Italian army, something which must have grated on Bicknell's pacifist nerves.

As early as 1881, he was guided by friends to see some of the petroglyphs from the Bronze Age that abound in the area, chiefly in the mountains above the so-called Vallée des Merveilles and the neighboring Val Fontanalbe. While the existence of these petroglyphs had long been known, it was Bicknell who first began to investigate them seriously, bringing his analytical and taxonomical skills as a botanist to bear on these remarkable and mysterious engravings. Over

the years, while his interest in botany remained as strong as ever, the discovery, mapping, and preservation of the petroglyphs became his life's work.

The area of the engravings is now contained within the French national park Mercantour, north of Nice and Menton. Their origins are shrouded in mystery. The area is inhospitable and barren, and unlikely to be favorable to settlement, indeed not even to the pasturing of sheep or goats, nor does it appear to lie on any natural trading routes. Its botanical characteristics are quite different from most of the surrounding region because its rocks, worn smooth by glacier activity, are of sandstone, and therefore acidic, unlike the limestone of surrounding areas. This in itself would have been enough to pique Bicknell's interest.

Bicknell's first visit to the area in 1881 was hindered by summer snow, but he returned in 1885 and drew fifty engravings. In 1897, he decided to return to the area to carry out a wider investigation, renting a house in the nearby hamlet of Casterino, northwest of the town of Tende. Casterino offered easy access to the Val Fontanalbe. On this occasion, he made 450 drawings, and, realizing that accuracy was important, 211 pencil rubbings. He also took photographs. From this point on, his investigations shifted from drawing to rubbing.

The following year he made 538 additional rubbings and brought back two specimens, one of which he gave to the British Museum, keeping the other for his own museum in Bordighera. By the time of his death in 1918, he had recorded no less than 12,718 engravings and published several studies of the engravings themselves. Much of this material was given to the University of Genoa because it exceeded the capacity of the library in Bordighera to protect and house it.

The reason for constructing the Casa Fontanalba was not only his botanical investigations, but primarily his investigation of the rock engravings.

Bicknell classified the engravings in eight categories: horned figures, ploughs, weapons and tools, men, huts and properties, skins, geometrical forms, and miscellaneous forms. His goal was not to interpret but to record. He left the latter to those professional archeologists and prehistorians who knew more about such matters than he did. Today, through comparisons with other engravings and drawings, and with some of the depicted objects themselves, we can date the engravings to the early bronze age, so between 2700 and 1700 B.C.<sup>3</sup>

He wrote up his findings in *A Guide to the Prehistoric Rock Engravings in the Italian Maritime Alps*, published in 1913.

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<sup>3</sup> Nor is this the largest concentration of petroglyphs in the general area: there is a still larger concentration in the Val Camonica, northeast of Bergamo. Wider circulation of documentation on bronze age engravings has allowed for comparative work and greater understanding of their origin than was available to Bicknell.

The Casa Fontanalba still exists, owned by the family from which Bicknell had rented the land for its construction. I have never visited, but I understand that it is decorated with wood carvings, including numbers of proverbs and the like in Esperanto. Fortunately, we have a fourteen-page notebook written by Margaret Barry, whose husband Edward was Clarence's nephew, recording a visit by the couple to the Casa Fontanalba in July 1906, soon after it was constructed. Clarence had a reputation for a sunny disposition, great fortitude and determination, and a penchant for jokes, practical and verbal. He loved animals, and solitude. He never married.

The coming of the First World War not only interrupted Clarence's plans for the Esperanto congress in Paris, but also a larger project for a trip to Japan by way of the newly completed trans-Siberian railway. Above all, they dashed his hopes of a better and more peaceful world than the one he was born into. Zamenhof, for Bicknell the great representative of internationalism, died, of a combination of a broken heart and excessive smoking, in 1917. Bicknell followed in 1918, in his 72<sup>nd</sup> year. But both legacies live on. Today you can visit the Musée des Merveilles in Tende, largely dedicated to Bicknell's discoveries, and of course the Museo Biblioteca Bicknell in Bordighera. I recommend it.

One wonders what it was that caused England to throw up so many amiable and highly productive eccentrics in the late nineteenth century. One thinks immediately of Edward Lear, or of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson. Was it boarding schools and cold showers, indifferent parenting, and athletics? Was it large families, large gardens, and large fortunes? Perhaps all these things led to lives of generosity and independence. These surely were the characteristics of Clarence Bicknell, an admirable yet eccentric Victorian if ever there was one.

### **Sources on Clarence Bicknell**

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