

Clarence Bicknell:

Esperanto as a means to universal understanding

It seems sad to read in Olga Kerziouk's European Studies blog on the British Library website¹ and in Ulrich Lins' book *Dangerous Language* that from the earliest days of Esperanto governments were quick to see potential dangers to their authority in the message spread by Esperanto. For Clarence Bicknell (1842-1918), Esperanto was a universal language which was not only an expression of peace but also a means to furthering peace. Imagine the torment he suffered when the world went to war in 1914 feeling that if only people could speak a common language, conflict could be avoided. He died in the mountains above Bordighera on the Italian-French border in 1918, in the last weeks of the war, too soon to know that peace had been declared.

Clarence Bicknell was initially a man of letters, an artist, author, traveller and pastor. Born in London, he was the 13th child of Elhanan Bicknell, whale oil magnate and art patron; after studying at Cambridge University he became an Anglican priest, and from 1879 lived in Bordighera on the Italian coast between Menton and Genoa. When he threw off his clerical collar because of the narrow-mindedness of his Anglican congregation in Bordighera, he did not just dabble in nature; he became one of Europe's most respected botanists, botanical artists and archaeologists with a widespread network of like-minded researchers.

Bicknell (his photo, right, shows the Esperanto star on his lapel) learned Esperanto in 1897, having previously studied Volapuk which was planned as an international language before being largely superseded by Esperanto. He must have started writing in Esperanto around 1900 because his piece *La Piemonta Valo Pesio* (The Piedmont Pesio Valley) appeared in the collection *Esperantaj Prozajo* (*Pieces of Esperanto Prose*) in 1902 edited by Louis de Beaufront. He attended the first major international gathering of Esperanto-speakers which took place in Boulogne-sur-Mer, France, in 1905, at which the creator of Esperanto, the Polish ophthalmologist Ludoviko Lazaro Zamenhof, gave the keynote speech. Around this time Bicknell began writing poetry in Esperanto and became the first laureate of the Internaciaj Floraj Ludoj (International Floral Games) held in Barcelona, Spain, in 1909. His original poems ("popular but somewhat primitive"¹)



¹ <http://blogs.bl.uk/european/esperanto/>

appeared in contemporary periodicals including *La Revuo (The Review)* (1906-1914) and *The British Esperantist*. Many poems, however, remained in manuscript form.

In 1966, Kalocsay wrote in his study on Bicknell in *Norda Prismo (Northern Prism)*: “One can ponder on C. Bicknell’s learning Esperanto at the age of 55 and his being probably over 60 when he produced his first poems, having to strive more than ten years before he succeeded in expressing himself directly in poetry.”

Bicknell was also a translator into Esperanto of works including Thomas Macaulay's *Horacio* in 1906; Tennyson's *Gvinevero (Guinevere)* in 1907, Julian Sturgis's *Rikoltado de la Pecoĵ* (the one-act comedy *Harvesting the Pieces*), *Ŝakludo* in 1915 (from Giacosa's *Una partita a scacchi* 1915) and William Wordsworth's *La Narcisoĵ* (*The Daffodils*) published in 1926.

Clarence contributed greatly to the first Esperanto collection of Christian hymns, *Ordo de Diservo*, 1907 (²). The first four hymns (not counting the *Doksologio*) are original works of his, and the fifth is one of his translations. He produced a number of hymns that are still in use (seven translations and one original in *Adoru Kantante* (1971), and nine texts in *Adoru* (2001).

The walls of his mountain home, the Casa Fontanalba, and other items like the umbrella pots in the Museo Bicknell in Bordighera (photo, below), are painted with inscriptions in Esperanto. His VIP book at the Casa Fontanalba consists of mini-bios of the people who visited him, all in Esperanto. See the reproductions in the row of images at the bottom of this page.



² <http://www.hymnary.org/hymnal/OdDs1907>

He was active in work on behalf of the blind, and transcribed many Esperanto books into Braille. He gave financial support to Esperanto organisations, transcribed Esperanto texts into Braille produced several of them as publications. He gave Esperanto lessons to Bordighera residents, founded an Esperanto group in Bordighera (photos, below), and remained its president until his death.



This ardent activity makes it clear that Esperanto was not just a hobby for Bicknell; it was a passion. But then this is the measure of attention he devoted to all his life's activities; the church, botany, art and archaeology.

Following his break with organised religion, Bicknell strove for religious tolerance, for a world in which people of different beliefs could nonetheless see eye-to-eye and live in peace. In fact the high church dogma of the Brotherhood of the Holy Spirit³, of which he was a member back in England, was precisely one of the factors which drove him away from organised religion.

As he approached the end of his life, he grasped Esperanto as a means by which he could contribute to greater understanding between people. He thought of Esperanto not just as a “universal language” but also as a means to achieving universal understanding. If people could talk to each other, then they would find their differences unimportant. Bicknell had assuaged his thirst for charity by building poor-houses and hospitals over a period of 40 years and by helping the injured and homeless in the 1887 earthquake which hit the Riviera so hard, but he felt that his efforts here were too “local” and not international.

Esperanto was different. Esperanto had a broader geographical base and thousands of followers from different countries. He felt that his personal efforts would have an impact on a larger stage than just Bordighera. I believe he felt that efforts he made in writing in, and promoting, the language would have a significant impact on improving the chances of human understanding by subjugating man's addiction to war. It is sad to admit that he, and the Esperanto movement, failed to prevent World War I.

Marcus Bicknell, 30th December 2016

³ http://clarencerbicknell.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=62:bicknell-rowland-corbet&catid=14&Itemid=168&lang=en

Note

Clarence Bicknell, my great-great-great-uncle, is the subject of new work by several researchers in support of Valerie Browne Lester who is writing his biography in time for the centenary of his death in 2018. The web site www.clarencebicknell.com is a treasure trove of both academic and more whimsical articles about him, all listed on the Downloads page there. Not only are there pages in English about his Esperanto activities, but also the whole web site is translated into Esperanto – click the Esperanto flag top left. I say “translated” despite many of the pages being Google translations in the hope that one of the readers of this article might be passionate enough to volunteer to perfect the translations... and maybe add more about Bicknell’s love of Esperanto. Contact us at info@clarencebicknell.com

The 18-minute documentary “The Marvels of Clarence Bicknell”, produced in 2016, is available in English, French and Italian at www.vimeo.com/clarencebicknell and will be available in Esperanto in the first quarter of 2017.

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