

Clarence Bicknell – in Private

Musings from Marcus Bicknell, Clarence's great grand nephew, with images from the family collection, discussion over questions and comments, to follow the projection of the 18-minute film *The Marvels of Clarence Bicknell* by Rémy Masségia at the monthly meeting of *The Friends of the Riviera* in the Museo Bicknell, Bordighera on Saturday 20th July 2019

Introduction

The events which celebrated the 2018 centenary of the death of Clarence Bicknell focussed on his botany, his work on the rock engravings, his art and his role in Bordighera from 1878 till 1918. Maybe it is time now to delve into his personality and private life... was Clarence a scientific giant or a man with a lisp who left his family and his church to be on the Riviera? ... was he an English parson who spent the first 38 years of his life with men, or the grey-haired and wise gentleman who spent much of his spare time on the coast and in the mountains with women?

What moved Clarence, what led him forward through life and what motivated him to create so many artworks and artefacts, 43,000 pieces stored in universities and museums across Europe? What was his private life like and how did he relax? Why did he come to Bordighera, and were the reasons similar to those which bring foreigners to settle in Bordighera even now?

Marcus Bicknell, Clarence's great grand-nephew and one of the six researchers for the 2018 biography *MARVELS: The Life of Clarence Bicknell* by Valerie Lester who, like Marcus, shared Clarence's genes, thinks the English speakers of Bordighera are ready for a more in-depth discussion of Clarence's personality.



Young Clarence; insecure, sensitive, vulnerable?

Clarence Bicknell has a reputation, in northwest Italy and in botanical and archaeological circles, for authoritative research, clarity of thought, championing causes and strength of character. But it was not always so. Up to the age of 36 years, when he came to Bordighera, Clarence was a solitary figure, sometimes insecure, seeking in vain the right path in life.

His mother's love, short-lived



He was the thirteenth child of Elhanan Bicknell, whale oil millionaire and the toast of London's art collecting world. Clarence was so much younger than his siblings that when his mother Lucinda died in 1850 he was not allowed to her death bed with the others¹. He writes in the bible she left to him "She took leave of her elder children separately". This must have been a trauma because he was very close to his rather beautiful mother who took him out looking for flowers and taught him to paint watercolours.

Clarence's mother Lucinda died when Clarence was 8

He spent time not just with his brothers and sisters but also with his cousin Edgar Browne, the son of Lucinda's brother Phiz, the illustrator of Charles Dickens' books. Edgar was born like him in 1842, and lived in nearby Thornton Heath. Each boy had a pet donkey, and Edgar and his siblings even had a goat that pulled the younger Brownes around in a cart.

Six of Clarence's siblings in 1841, Sidney, Percy, Herman, Ada, Matilda and Edgar. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Clarence grew up in Herne Hill, the grandiose mansion of his father Elhanan, rich whale-oil merchant and art collector.



Speaking with a stutter

Browne described his uncle Elhanan as a large, handsome, red-faced man, and his Bicknell cousins as all above average in personal appearance and intelligence. He adds an interesting note about the way they talked. '[Elhanan had] a rather thick utterance, which in his children became converted into an extreme difficulty with the letter 'r'. In order to improve their speech some of them, at all events, were taught elocution by a distinguished actor of the day, Alfred Wigan. Whether it was owing to his efforts, or some other reason, the difficulty disappeared as they attained adult age.' Perhaps this was not so in the case of Clarence. G.B. Briano writes in *Vita Esperantista di Genova e Liguria dal 1900 al 1975*, 'According to the testimony of a contemporary, Bicknell spoke Esperanto fluently, even though he suffered from a slight stutter which he had from birth.'ⁱⁱ



The privileged, if slightly sad, life Clarence led is immortalised by this picture of him with his donkey. The look on Clarence's face is wistful, even unhappy.

Neglected by his father

Part of Clarence's unhappiness was the severity of his father's nature, the pomposity which followed from his success in life, and the distance he took from the young Clarence. He took no interest in his education. At the death of his beloved mother when he was only eight, the world that Clarence knew had split asunder. Shortly after Elhanan's wedding to his fourth wife, in 1852 two years later (which none of the children attended), he decided it was time for little Clarence to be parcelled off to board with Rev. J. Edwards's school in Dorney, Buckinghamshire, a strange decision because Edwards had the reputation for preparing young men for entrance to Cambridge, a university of which Elhanan did not approve because of its religious requirements. Elhanan was a staunch Unitarian while Edwards and Cambridge propounded the Trinity and a straightforward Anglican church. It is as if Elhanan no longer cared about his youngest son.

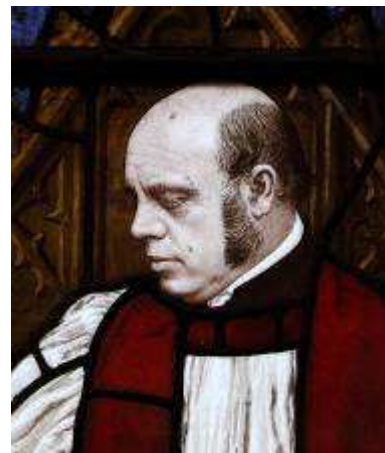
Edwards did his job well, in that Clarence got confirmed into the Anglican church and won a place at Trinity College Cambridge to read mathematics in 1861. The very name of the college, Trinity, must have sent shudders up Elhanan's Unitarian spine. But then Elhanan died six weeks after Clarence began his studies at Cambridge. Clarence was already committed to his studies, and after his recent conversion to the Church of England it would have been disconcerting to be subjected to the full blast of his father's Unitarianism at the funeral. Clarence was now truly an orphan, and

there seemed to be no escape from death because two weeks later, on 14 December 1861, Prince Albert died. The husband of Queen Victoria and Chancellor of Cambridge University, he was a national, if not universally beloved, figure whose early demise at the age of 42 shocked the country. In concert with the funeral held at Windsor, the entire city of Cambridge came out to watch their own city's spectacle in honour of the Prince Consort. The churches muffled their bells and rang the dumb peal.

Two years later, Elhanan's art collection was sold at auction at Christies. It turned out to be the art sensation of the season. Potential bidders flocked to preview the works while they were still in the gallery Bicknell had constructed in his Herne Hill mansion. Outside the house carriage after carriage lined up in the road, the occupants waiting their turn for a chance to take a look at one of the largest collections of modern British art ever accumulated. The majority of the heirs agreed that it should be sold rather than bequested to the nation. The first day's sale of oil paintings and sculptures broke all records for British art by realizing the unheard-of sum of £58,600, or roughly £127,000,000 in 2017 money. Clarence's share, carefully invested, would set him up for life; it is this inheritance which enabled Clarence to live after 1879 without a paid job, to create this Museum in Bordighera, other significant buildings and endowments.

Clarence and the Church, an uneasy relationship

Clarence attained his B.A. in Mathematics in 1865 – mathematics dominated all other subjects at the university in those years – and his M.A. in 1873. While he certainly studied mathematics, he spent a great deal more of his time pondering the divine, a very consuming activity of the period. He had fallen under the spell of his first tutor at Cambridge, the quaint, erudite, pious and fearless Rev. Joseph Barber Lightfoot who enjoyed gathering together a group of like-minded students and taking them on expeditions. What could have appealed more to Clarence than accompanying his tutor on walks in the countryside, all the while discussing Nature and the nature of religion?



A whirlwind of scientific and religious debate

Clarence found himself caught up in a whirlwind of scientific and religious debate. Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* had been published on 24 November 1859; like Luther's *Ninetyfive Theses*, it had turned religious thinking on its head and was still the subject of much vehement debate. The young man, in his need for stability, was not yet ready to be shaken up by the concept of evolution or anything that deviated from Biblical 'truth.'

Clarence was a young man in robust physical, spiritual and financial health, primed to devote himself to a cause, in spite of the fact that he had no home, no parents and scant contact with his scattered siblings. As a newly ordained deacon in the Anglican church, he found employment in 1866 as a curate at St Paul's, Lorrimore Square, in Walworth, Surrey, about three miles south of the Thames and three miles north of his old home at Herne Hill. He was joined at St Paul's by two like-minded friends from Trinity, Herbert George Morse and Frederick William Puller. The three young men, whom the vicar John Going called his 'three gallants', toiled assiduously for the good of the parish earning 16 shillings a year – all the while celebrating the Christian faith in the most flamboyant and ritualistic Anglo-Catholic manner possible.



This photo of Clarence in his chaplain's collar and coat is from the 1870s so he could be in Walworth or Stoke-upon-Tern. His beard, receding hairline and cold eyes make him look older than his thirties.

When Clarence received in 1873 the invitation to join the Rev. Rowland Corbet's brotherhood, the Societas Sancti Spiritus, at Stoke-upon-Tern, in Shropshire, 120 miles northwest of London, he leapt at the opportunity

to lead a religious life in the countryside, along with a chance to indulge himself in another of his passions: botany.

Rev. Rowland Corbet

Corbet had built a school on his father's land and was rebuilding the parish church. During Clarence's time at Stoke-upon-Tern, the brotherhood consisted of twelve men, either priests or laymen preparing for the priesthood. They were referred to as missionary priests and they lived in an open community, as opposed to a closed monastery. The group of twelve was astonishingly well-educated: four, including Clarence and Rowland Corbet, were Cambridge graduates; five were Oxford graduates; and the others were products of Lichfield Theological College. They lived in a one-storey building with a cloister just east of the parish house.



Men

The image of the clerics fishing by a stream is not of Clarence and his friends but it could be; one imagines a life in the brotherhood relatively cut off from the world, from women and from anything but religion.



In fact much of Clarence's life from leaving home for boarding school at age 10 till arriving in Bordighera at age 36 would have been in the company of men. He attended a boys' boarding school. He went to Cambridge University which was entirely men until 1947. The religious thinkers he fell in with were men. His Cambridge colleagues in the parish in Walworth were men. The brotherhood in Stoke-Upon-Tern was composed of men.

If one starts from the premise that all humans, certainly all men, are subject to the temptations of the flesh, then it would be tempting to think that certain of Clarence's male friends might have been more than friends. If Clarence had turned out to be a gay and celibate priest who had enough money from an inheritance to go travelling and to practice botany, you and I would not find this at all surprising. Many others went this route.

His sketchbooks and diaries, for the brief periods they are available, mention men he went on walks with, botanising or talking about redemption. Brother Parrett accompanied him on his first trip to Bordighera but departed as soon as he noticed Clarence's affection for the Fanshawe ladies, mother and daughter!



Clarence engaged Giacomo Pollini, a married man from Lake Maggiore, to help him very early in his existence in Bordighera, as soon as he got back for the second time in 1879, for keeps. Clarence described him as an outstanding cook, a keen fisherman with such sharp eyes that he could spot a mushroom on the opposite side of a valley.⁷² Giacomo's then five-year-old son, Luigi, would prove to be Clarence's invaluable colleague in later years. In acknowledgement of their admiration for their employer, Giacomo and his wife Marianna named one of their daughters Clarenza.

Clarence was a thoughtful and generous employer who inspired loyalty in two generations of the same family. He treated the Pollinis as though they were his family, paying no attention to social barriers, and far preferring their company to the gossipy world of the English colony. Some *mauvaises langues* pretend that Luigi might have been more than a friend to Clarence on all their travels but Luigi (photo right, 1912 at the Esperanto Congress in Krakow) was happily married to Mercede (from 1902) who quickly became one of Clarence's faithful domestics.



The most essential male friends to Clarence were botanists (Moggridge, Burnat, Briquet), archaeologists (Arturo Issel, Emile Cartailhac), philanthropists (like Giacomo Viale) many Esperantists and the men around in Bordighera.

I discuss his new openness to women after the revelation of Bordighera under “Women” below.

Religious turmoil

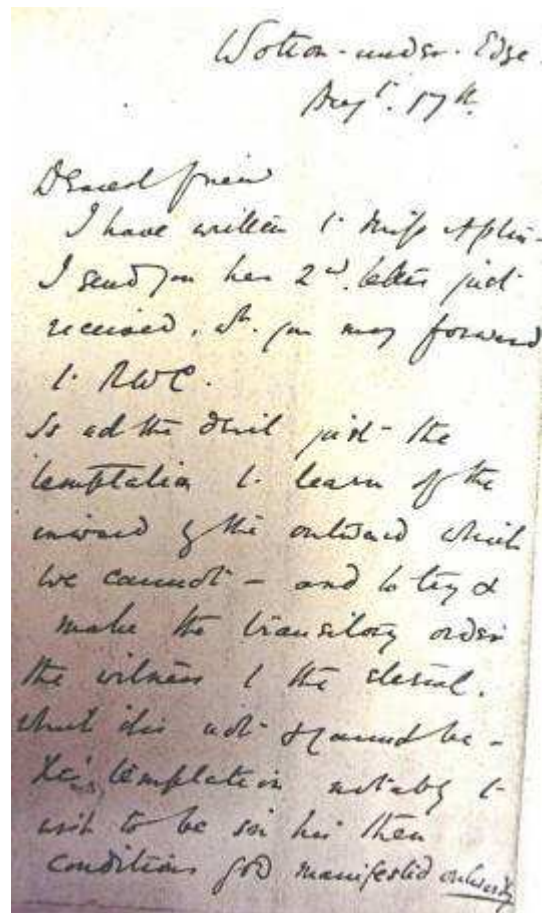
In the meantime, in Stoke-upon-Tern, Clarence continued to thirst for clarity of thought in his religion. He became more and more interested in the varieties of religious experience and less in the dogma of an individual faith. His letters to her were steeped in religious turmoil. One to Emelia Gurney (portrait, right), a widow and nineteen years his senior, is rambling and incoherent in religious intensity. He writes:



“Dearest Friend, ... Is not the devil just the temptation to learn of the inward by the outward which we cannot – and to try and make the transitory order the witness to the eternal, which it is not and cannot be – Christ’s temptation notably to wish to be sinless these conditions God manifested outwardly with glory, worship, power? In fact to deny that God, or Being is good, though at present it is manifested of faith – The horrors we see & the pains we feel do not shew forth – [or] – they are as the vestige of ‘Clouds & thick darkness’.”

And so on.

Then the voice suddenly changes, and Clarence returns to the mundane: “Goodbye. I like your letters – they always come as cups of cold water to a pilgrim in a thirsty land.” These are the words of a man who does not believe the creed he is promoting, who is in turmoil, and who is suffering.



The need for change

Clarence would not have known that he needed a change, that his life in the church was grinding to a halt, that his life was leading nowhere. The story of his life between Cambridge and Bordighera, in the church in England, highlights how scintillating and life-changing was the revelation of his new life on the Riviera. We can now understand what grasped him on his arrival here, and what void was filled by the colour, flora, smells, people, mountains, adventure, wisdom and celebrity.

Our perceptions of Bordighera

This paper about Clarence is addressed to the English-speaking community of Bordighera in 2019. Clarence's world here between 1878 and his death in 1918 must have been very different to today. Or was it? Are there significant similarities?

There are two major differences between Clarence's Bordighera and yours today. The first is that at the end of the 19th century you could be mistaken thinking the Bordighera was essentially a delightful colony for the winter visitors from all over Europe. The tennis club, the tearooms, the church, the frequent social events, the bank, and the medical attention required for tuberculosis and the other conditions which brought some here, combined to make a thriving society alongside the Italian locals. We are sitting in the Museo Bicknell in front of the stage where the international community presented its plays and concerts, rivalled only by the theatre in George McDonald's house next to the Anglicana.

The second difference is the extraordinary growth rate and commercial activity of the town in Clarence's era. Foreign money was pouring in to construct the wonderful villas that you see around us, Bischoffsheim (now called the Villa Etelinda), Coraggio, Elena, Fanshawe, Garnier, Monte Verde, Patrick, Rosa, Rossa, Valentina, and of course the numerous and large hotels. Commerces sprung up to support the influx of well-heeled foreigners. Imagine the boost to tourism and the economy when the railway arrived in Bordighera in 1872. I dare say you love Bordighera today for its peace and quiet, to escape from the society you came here from, not the thriving hub of the late 19th century.

Why are each of us in Bordighera today?

I ask everyone in the room today, especially those who came from abroad, to think about their own situation here. How did you arrive here? Why did you come? What did you expect to find? Were you escaping from something? How did the sights, smells and sounds of the Italian Riviera strike you and influence you? What satisfaction have you draws from your friends here and the life you now lead?

In the six years I have been working on Clarence, mostly in the research team for the biography *Marvels* which came out in June 2018, I found myself asking Clarence these same questions. The book's author, the late Valerie Lester, and we found so many letters and diaries written by Clarence that I feel he did answer us.

Why was Clarence in Bordighera?

Clarence had his reasons for staying here. But he had the flimsiest of reasons to come here for the first time, on 30th September 1878. How did that happen?

Rowland Corbet, Rector of Stoke-upon-Tern and founder of the Societas Sancti Spiritus in which Clarence worked, came back from his travels on the Italian Riviera during the winter of 1876 with wonderful tales to tell of Bordighera, a pretty little town, sun-drenched and filled with flowers, just over the border from France and within easy reach of the Maritime Alps. He had been invited there by Mrs Rosa Fanshawe, the self-appointed empress of the English community, a widow who spent the winter season with her daughter in Bordighera at the Villa Rosa. Clarence paid close attention to what Corbet had to say about the charm of Bordighera – and its flowers. During his walks in the Shropshire countryside, Clarence had the opportunity to notice the subtle, seductive workings of Nature and found himself, perhaps unconsciously at first, becoming an evolutionist too and drifting towards a life of observation, led outdoors, even as the ritual and rote of the Anglo-Catholic Church slowly began to lose their appeal. After five years of living in a little village in a close-knit brotherhood, with all the stresses and strains of a small religious community, lacking the leavening influence of female company and scant contact with the outside world, Clarence began to feel the need to broaden his experience. Probably at the instigation of Rowland Corbet, Clarence had been invited to stay with Mrs Fanshawe in Bordighera where he would be considered for the post of chaplain in the Anglican church for a year. Mrs Fanshawe was ‘an ebullient personality whose enthusiasms were contagious ... socially esteemed as the person to know ... quick to seize opportunities to help people but not without a view to her own advantage ... also something of a gossip.’

The Revelation

The film you have just seenⁱⁱⁱ hinges on the moment when Clarence steps out of the doubts in darkness of his religious existence into the sun, heat, flowers and wildlife of the Italian Riviera. This moment of revelation (film still, right, Renchi Bicknell playing Clarence) is beautifully done by the film’s director Rémy Masségia, and it is a metaphor for changes in his life which were not just his abandoning his role in the Church. He throws off his dog collar and becomes quickly a man of the world, a man fascinated by people, by travel, by languages, by research and researchers and by the active life of a polymath. Starting with botany and the publication^{iv} of his drawings of the wild flowers of the coast and the mountains here, he moved on to archaeology and his discovery and copying of 11,000 of the rock engravings of the Vallée des Merveilles. In later life he created drawings based on



flowers but with poems and stories in Victorian whimsy which set him apart from being just a botanist. And in the 40 years when he was based in Bordighera his output was 47,000 different drawings, copies, pressed flowers, diaries, sketches and letters. In a world without children, without an iPhone and without a television, Clarence was able to dedicate himself every day to his works.

Not only did Clarence turn from the Church to these secular works but he also found himself liberated in the way he could make intense friendships with women as much as with men, and in some cases relationships which went deeper.

We^v have found no evidence that Clarence ever enjoyed a full-blown, body and soul relationship with a man or woman. Brother Parrett, that ‘naked Apollo’, could be a candidate, but the ease with which Clarence bade him farewell and took up with Rosa Fanshawe Walker seems to rule him out. Like many men of his generation, particularly those of the Anglo-Catholic priesthood, he apparently preferred the single life, although he cared deeply about his friends and relatives, developed crushes on individuals both male and female, and adored his domestics, whom he called his Italian ‘family.’ But what about the human need for touch? Rosa Ellen Fanshawe Walker is the likeliest female candidate for a relationship, as mentioned above.

After his arrival in Bordighera we find that women who might otherwise have had just a professional relationship with Clarence, such as in botany, art or Esperanto, become in many cases very good friends. He writes of them and to them, in several notable cases, in a most affectionate way, so much so that in some cases, as Valerie analysed in *MARVELS* and as I relay below, it could be imagined that the relationship could have progressed to intimacy.

So the “revelation” in Bordighera and his leaving the Church of England, could also have been a moment of epiphany in respect of women too. If he had been cut off from women, he now has plenty to commune with. If he was shy or felt that his station in the church obliged him previously not to commune with women, then the revelation was also the realisation that he could now be direct and affectionate with women. He might have consciously realised that throwing off his dog-collar also liberated him in respect of relationship with women. I do not for a moment suggest that he became sex mad and approached women in a different way, but I do think he quickly became more open to civil relationships with women and subsequently to cosiness.

Women!

Chapter 12 of Valerie Lester’s biography of Clarence Bicknell, *MARVELS*, is entitled WOMEN! The first of his lady friends, in fact the first two, mother and daughter, were encounters on his first day.

Mrs Fanshawe and her daughter Rosa Fanshawe Walker

Mrs Fanshawe^{vi} provided accommodation from the first night for Clarence and his travel companion Brother Parrett in the Villa Rosa, which still stands just to the west of the Anglican Church, the “Anglicana”. On the second day Bicknell took Brother

Parrett to the rocks by the Saint Ampelio Church to bathe in the Mediterranean but he found that Parrett couldn't swim and he had to pull him out. Instead of heaping his attention solely on his travel companion Parrett, Clarence fell with enthusiasm into the thrall and into the social circle of not only Mrs Fanshawe but of her daughter Rosa Fanshawe Walker^{vii}, who like her mother had been widowed in the previous few years. Rosa was an essential part of Clarence's life in Bordighera; hardly a day goes by in Clarence's first two years in Bordighera without Rosa being mentioned;

They go everywhere together, on endless walks, shopping, services in the parish church, moonlight strolls, and occasions like this: 'Took Mrs W. to the Paradise in the Nervia valley where we were caught in a storm & got a good wetting.' and 'Mrs W. unfortunately hurt her knee somewhat in a fall coming down the loosely rocky path.' Valerie Lester concludes "It would have been hard not to touch each other^{viii}"

A rather posed photo, which the unidentified ladies are enjoying more than Clarence. No photo in the family collection or in Bordighera is identified as being either of the Fanshawe ladies



Either Brother Parrett read the signals of Clarence's changing affections or he was homesick; he departed Bordighera less than 3 months after arriving. Mrs Fanshawe appointed Bicknell to be chaplain of the new church she was building. Bicknell left Bordighera in June 1879 (his appointment was just for the winter) but the attraction was too great and he was back in the autumn and chose to live in Bordighera for the rest of his life.

Clarence and Rosa, the daughter, remained close friends. After she sold the Villa Rosa to Clarence in 1880, Rosa Ellen lived just a few steps away in the Casa Fanshawe on the Via Romana. In 1885, she converted part of the house into a Casa di Salute – a clinic for poor women and children – in memory of her mother. It is easy to wonder why they did not marry; Rosa Ellen was an eligible widow and Clarence an eligible bachelor, thrown together by circumstances. Perhaps he was daunted by her nine-year seniority and, if she was anything like her mother, her rather dominant personality. And perhaps she could not envision returning to live in the Villa Rosa, by then stuffed full of pressed flowers, with watercolours drying on clotheslines all over the house.

In 1900, 22 years later, he wrote that Rosa, the daughter, was his best friend in Bordighera^{ix}.

Clarence's life in Bordighera and at Casterino was full of women: his sisters Ada and Lucinda; his nieces Nora and Linda; Margaret Berry, his niece by marriage; Ellen Willmott, the famous horticulturalist; Rosa Junck, the Esperantist; his avowed best friend, Rosa Fanshawe Walker; the mysterious Scottish lady, possibly Alice Campbell, with whom he spent time during the winter of 1883 in Finalmarina and again in 1897; and later on, starting in 1909, the Baroness Helene von Taube, with whom he had what was probably the last deeply felt relationship of his life.

Louise Jopling

Louise Jopling, who stayed at the Villa Ruffini, was a painter, the first woman to be admitted to the Royal Society of British Artists, and a supporter of women's suffrage. She was interested in botany and walking in the countryside, so she and Clarence were naturally drawn to each other. She gave him news about the London art scene, and her friends included 'Jimmy' Whistler; Everett Millais; John Singer Sargent; George du Maurier; 'Kitty' Perugini, the artist daughter of Charles Dickens; and Marcus Stone and Luke Fildes, each of whom had illustrated just one of Dickens's novels – as compared with Clarence's uncle, 'Phiz', who illustrated ten of them.

Louise Jane Jopling (1843–1933), portrait by John Everett Millais, 1879. National Portrait Gallery



Mrs Jopling wrote about their friendship: 'One of the best friends I ever had, I met that winter – Clarence Bicknell. He had a beautiful little Villa, called the Villa Rosa.' About her, Clarence said: 'She is a famous walker.' High praise indeed. Clarence was also impressed by her painting skill. In her studio at the Villa Ruffini, she was 'busy at work on 2 life size oil paintings of Indian Rajahs grandly dressed out with decorations & jewels . . . she is to receive 700 guineas for them, not a bad sum for a young woman to earn in one year.' Mrs Jopling was one of the foremost British woman painters of her generation.

Ada Berry

Clarence's oldest sister Ada Berry remained the favourite of all his siblings. After the death of his mother when he was seven years old, Ada, then 21, assumed the role of parent to her little brother and they formed a close, lasting bond. He made sure to visit her on all his trips back to England. After his visit there in October 1903, he brought her back to Bordighera, where she, in turn, relaxed in Clarence's garden and consulted with her son Edward and his wife Margaret, Bordighera residents, about their plans to build the Villa Monte Verde. Ada had been a widow since 1875, and a busy widow at that, with her strong commitment to education.

Edward Berry

I include Edward Berry here, under "Women" because he was the essential link between Clarence's sister Ada (just above) and Margaret Berry (just below).

Of Ada's six children, it was Edward Elhanan Berry who played the most important role in Clarence's life. In 1891, when he was 30, he left London and moved to Bordighera. Most commentators say he went for health reasons; if that is the case the Bordighera climate and those long walks in the mountains with Clarence worked a miracle as Edward survived to a commendable age of 72. Of course the presence of his uncle Clarence would have made Bordighera an obvious destination. Soon after arriving in Bordighera, he set up and ran an agency for Thomas Cook, with whom he had prior connections. He also set up a bank, named after himself, and an agency which found housing for British visitors and took care of their freight. He was a problem solver for the English colony and quickly became the man to consult on any aspect of Bordighera life. His advertisements in the *Journal de Bordighera* made the following claims: 'Houses and flats to let – Villas and building sites for sale – Luggage forwarded to all Countries, and insured against loss by theft, etc. Excellent storage accommodation – Pianos on sale and hire – Wines and spirits specially selected for invalids, also India and China teas kept in stock – Houses and furniture insured against theft.'

There is speculation that Edward Berry successfully helped Clarence invest his capital, what remained from the inheritance from his father. In addition to his industriousness in the business world, Edward was an indefatigable hill walker, and it must have delighted Clarence to have a blood relative at hand, the son of his sister Ada, who enjoyed wandering in the Maritime Alps as much as he did. In 1897, Edward was appointed British Vice Consul for Bordighera and in the same year got married to Margaret Serecold who had lived with her family in Bordighera since 1890.

Edward and Margaret Berry;
their passport photos in the Bicknell Family Collection.



Margaret Berry

Margaret Berry, née Serecold, was the wife of Clarence's nephew Edward Berry. Clarence loved spending time with her and she was a great support to him in various ways. She brought with her a fund of humour, warmth, generosity and a sense of family; and she loved her new uncle dearly.

Margaret Berry at 32 years of age

She was inclined to see him through rose-tinted glasses, but even so we learn a good deal about Clarence's character from her biographical sketch:

“He was truly ‘all things to all men’, yet always himself – a vivid personality, loveable, upright, sincere and modest and he gave with open hands to all who needed help, material or spiritual. His door was always open to the sick, the sad and the afflicted, and English and Italians alike went to him as to their best friend for sympathy, advice and assistance. Intensely affectionate and emotional, he was inclined to violent prejudices from which he could not always easily free himself, and the haste with which he flung himself into new intimacies was a standing joke amongst his old friends. He showed his disapproval by coldness and reserve rather than by actual anger, and no one who incurred his displeasure would easily forget the expression of his keen blue eyes. But his habitual cheery manner and his merry laughter endeared him to everyone, and his eccentricities and the vivid radiance of his imagination made him the most delightful of conversationalists. He delighted in puzzles, riddles and jokes, and saw humour everywhere. He was never idle for a moment, and got through more work in a day than another man would accomplish in a week.”

An expedition up the Roya Valley. Margaret is on the right. The other two ladies are not identified but one wonders if either of them is one of the Fanshawe ladies. The lady in the middle has the inclined head, high-necked blouse and long skirt of Alice Campbell in other photos.

There is a sense of self-deprecation in Margaret's letter to Mrs Fanshawe Walker in a letter of 1901 from Casterino, but I think “despises me accordingly” only refers to Margaret's laziness. Certainly she feels herself subservient to Clarence and her husband Edward when in the mountains.

“The Uncle continues to think me lazy and ignorant and a “fine lady” into the bargain, and despises me accordingly. But I am bearing up nevertheless, and continue to darn socks, and make the beds and pick gooseberries for dinner in



the most approved domestic style, as if it was the form of occupation I specially delighted in. The Uncle and E. go for long walks about every other day, and short walks on the off days. Sometimes I go too, but they are rather too much for me, so I shall continue my lazy ways and not try many more.”

Otherwise Margaret’s ebullience was catching, and she committed herself wholeheartedly to Bordighera and its inhabitants. In 1904, she and Edward laid the foundation stone for the magnificent Villa Monte Verde, the home they would build on the hill above the Via Romana, where they reigned like the king and queen of Bordighera. When Clarence died, Margaret continued as Clarence’s executor, continuing his good works including fun-raising for the poor of the town, until she left to go back to England in 1936.

Edward Berry, “The Uncle” Clarence and Margaret Berry on the veranda of the Casa Fontanalba, probably about 1912.

Her strong relationship with Clarence over 28 years, exemplified by the exchange of vellum albums almost every year, is a key part of this paper. Margaret features firmly in my assessment at the end of this paper of the purging of Clarence’s files of any personal letters or notes about relationships with people.



Nora and Linda Bicknell

Nora and Linda Bicknell, daughters of Clarence's brother Percy^x, began showing up at the Villa Rosa on a regular basis. Nora evidently thought highly of Bordighera, and made her home and her living there for several years, working as a clerk in Edward



Berry's bank, and she had her own business as a photographer and maker of greeting cards and calendars, often donating the profits from her sales to charity. She and Clarence later travelled together.

Rosa Junck

Esperanto caused Clarence to spend more and more time in the company of Rosa Junck. Born in 1850 in the town of Tabor in Bohemia (now in the Czech Republic), Mrs Junck, née Bilek or Bilekova, had arrived in Bordighera in 1890. A widow and an exceptional linguist, she set herself up in business as a language teacher. She and Clarence translated works into Esperanto and wrote articles for magazines, and they both played important roles at the Boulogne congress in 1905. But sometimes their Esperanto work took a different turn. In a letter to Alberto Pelloux in 1906, Clarence relates: 'The other day Mahdi [his dog] and I have sat in the garden translating into Esperanto. Mrs. Junck wants me to act with her in the next Geneva Esp. Congress, in a comedietta of De Amicis, *La floro de l'pasinto*,²²⁵ which she has translated, but as she is the heroine I am not invited to take the lover's part (who is, she does not tell me). I have declined.'



Ellen Willmott

Clarence had been hunting high and low for the perfect botanical pin with which to skewer his specimens when he first met Ellen Willmott, probably in 1901 at La Mortola, the home of Sir Thomas Hanbury whose impressive gardens cascaded down a cliff just outside Ventimiglia. Miss Willmott later bought property two miles away at Boccanegra, where she, too, created a spectacular garden, also cascading down the cliff. Clarence corresponded with her for years, and watched the development of this



garden, providing plants and seeds for it, but his first letter revolved around the thorny topic of the aforementioned botanical pins. He also sought her advice about which fungicidal medicines he could use to destroy the disease that was attacking the cardboard on which he mounted his drawings.

Sixteen years younger than Clarence, slim, rich, good-looking with curly, ginger hair, devoted to gardening, always in a hurry, bossy like his beloved sister Ada, Ellen Willmott was bound to appeal to Clarence, even as he appealed to her. As Audrey Le Lièvre points out in her biography, 'Ellen Willmott valued above all things companionship with a man of intellect and stature who shared her own interests.' Unlike others, Clarence was not daunted by her, even though her horticultural credentials could have intimidated a lesser man. She had become a member of the Royal Horticultural Society in 1894, and only three years later received its Victoria Medal of Honour, inaugurated that year to celebrate the Queen's Diamond Jubilee. Along with Gertrude Jekyll, she was one of only two women out of sixty recipients to get the award. She was also elected to the coveted RHS Narcissus Committee, and over the years won numerous RHS Orders of Merit and gold medals, particularly for her groups of rare daffodils. In 1904, she was one of the very first women elected as a fellow of the Linnean Society.

In spite of her status as a horticulturalist, Clarence did not hesitate to castigate her for not thanking Luigi for his gifts of seeds, and pestered her to inform him whether the seeds had germinated. He did not live to see Miss Willmott's downfall at the point when she had to sell off her overseas properties and say goodbye to Boccanegra. She had been extravagant to a fault, and at one point employed 104 gardeners²²⁴ at Warley, her magnificent estate in Essex, where, in its heyday, it is estimated she grew 100,000 varieties of trees, plants and shrubs. Over sixty species were named after her or after Warley. 'Miss Willmott's Ghost' (*Eryngium giganteum*, the giant sea holly) is the plant most identified with her, and she delighted in secretly spreading its seeds in her friends' gardens so they would not forget her, the subsequent plants gleaming silvery grey-green and spectral in the twilight.

Baroness Helene von Taube

Unlike the story of Alice Campbell, below, no mystery surrounds Baroness Helene von Taube, thanks to a lengthy and loving correspondence. Clarence met the amateur botanist Helene von Taube in late 1908 or early 1909, when she came to Bordighera from Weimar seeking warmth and sunshine for her ailing husband, Baron Otto von Taube (1833–1911). Born in 1845, she was three years younger than Clarence. Her father was Count Alexander Friedrich Lebrecht Michael Arthur Nikolaus von Keyserling (1815–1891), a geologist, paleontologist, botanist and zoologist of Baltic German descent, and her mother was Gräfin Zenaida Cancrin, of Russian descent. Helene had three children, Otto, Marie and Helene, the last of whom died of tuberculosis during the course of Clarence and the baroness's correspondence.

They never called each other by their first names, and their letters, while ostensibly about botany, are a lode of information about their lives, their joys and sorrows and their philosophies. The collection, written between 1909 and 1915, was donated by the baroness's son to the Natural History Museum in London, the majority of the letters being from Clarence, but they include a few of Helene's drafts in response (photo of the collection in its museum case below).

She did not write to Clarence in her native German, but in a rather flowery, expressive English. Clarence always wrote in English, except for his last two letters, dated 1914 and 1915, which were in Italian, presumably because it was a less dangerous language than English in which to communicate with Helene in Weimar during World War I.



When one digests the sum total of their letters, the writers' deep devotion to each other is apparent. Clarence wrote to Helene in a manner in which he never revealed himself to anyone else, and Helene poured out her feelings of joy and sorrow to a man whose ability to listen and comfort had no equal. They became soul mates, and there was even an undeniable ripple of attraction between them. Clarence's first note, from January 1909, possibly written before he had even met Helene, reads:

'Madame, The wild plant you sent me is *Globularia Alypum L*, common in our dry hills, a characteristic Mediterranean plant . . . I shall be very pleased to tell you at any time what little I know about flora and show you my herbaria and drawings or dried specimens.'

After that first 'Madame', Helene was always 'Dear Baroness', and Clarence was 'Dear Mr. Bicknell!' They set up meetings, either at the Villa Rosa or at the museum . . .

'I hope you will often come to the museum, or into my garden.' 'As the weather is bad you probably will not expect me; but anyhow I cannot come . . . as I have a touch of bronchitis. Perhaps tomorrow or the next day.' 'Please settle whether you will dine with me today or tomorrow.' 'I could see you pm (but only for a few minutes) before dinner. I say a few minutes because I give an Esperanto lesson to 4 people at 5.30. I am glad that you will come again to lunch. Next time we will make proper preparation.' 'Come & sit in my garden when you like, but now one has to come in by the back gate.' Helene wrote in similar fashion: 'Could I see you to-morrow Wednesday at 9 ½ o'clock in the morning. If not, leave me at your door a message, when I could see you to-morrow Wednesday ne fut-ce que pour un quart d'heure. I would come except at 12 till 1 o'clock, when I have an appointment already. Or were it possible to come to our hotel for you? between 2 and 4 o'clock? From 4 to 5 I am going to Mrs. Berry reception. I pass your door in every case at 9 ½ hour to-morrow and I shall enter if you are at home.'

Increasingly, as time went by, Clarence became exasperated with the narrow English colony, the oppression 'in Bordighera's stifling, chattering little community, with its constantly flitting additions from pleasure-seeking, wealthy trippers.' Clarence, in a letter to Baroness Helene von Taube, stated: 'I am so sick of all the ordinary tea party, church-going people who are so conventional and such gossips and have so little of an international spirit.' Clearly he would much prefer to be with her, at her side or in her arms, talking about botany and the mountains.

Alice Campbell

Mystery surrounds the Scottish lady whom Clarence first met in 1883 and saw again in 1897. Hard as we try, we cannot identify her, but it is possible that she is the Alice Campbell, whose relationship with Clarence is still much whispered about in Bordighera.

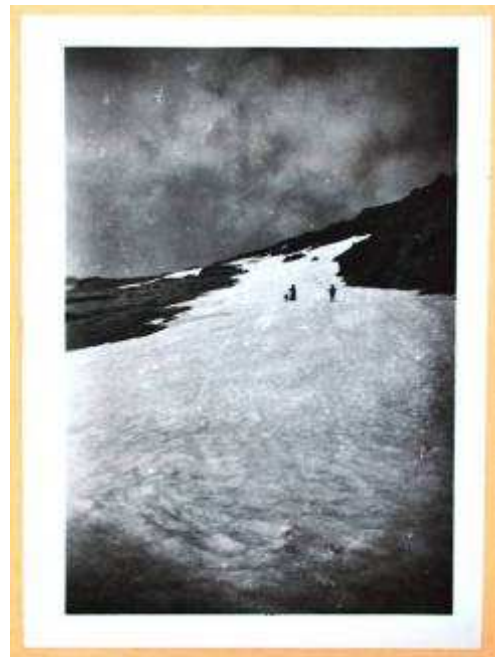


Nino Lamboglia (1912-1977) of the Museo Bicknell wrote of Clarence's death "Bicknell... suddenly died, from a banal ingestion of poisonous mushrooms, returning from a day in his mountains, and buried in Tenda, as he had desired, near his faithful companion Miss Alice Campbell". If fiction there is, Lamboglia was the first to disseminate it. Enzo Bernardini who is still alive changed this rumour to one in which Clarence was unable to be buried next to Alice.^{xi}



The hard evidence is as follows.

a) Several photographs of Clarence Bicknell feature a well-dressed lady (and Mahdi his dog) up in the mountains accompanying him. These photos are in the mountains, probably in the Val Fontanalba before 1907^{xii}. The Museo Bicknell print of the photo of them sitting on a rock (right) is marked in black ink "Clarence Bicknell, Mahdi, and Mme Alice".



Livio Mano^{xiii} identifies the lady standing in the photo with CB outside the Museo Bicknell (next page), and in the top right photo on the Chiappes (above), as Miss Alice Campbell. But in the absence of any primary source cited we must assume that this is drawn from Lamboglia and/or Bernardini, i.e. repetition of the apparently-unsubstantiated fable.

b) "Miss Campbell" of Menton signed the Hanbury Gardens visitors book^{xiv} on 29 November 1909.

c) No such lady is the object of a contemporary written record. No such lady is recorded in Bordighera's newspapers, concert cast lists or other records.

d) No such lady signed the Casa Fontanalba Visitors' Book or the Berrys' Villa Monte Verde visitors' book.



e) We are aware of no letters from or to Bicknell which refer to this lady, despite numerous notebooks, sketchbooks and 1,385 of Bicknell's letters being available to us for research.

When Enzo Bernardini was writing about Alice Campbell, he interviewed the redoubtable 'Miss Muriel', that is, Muriel de Burgh Daly, who was old enough have known Alice. She responded indignantly to his questions:

'About that woman I do not intend to speak.'

It sounds as though Bordighera, at least the tea-drinking gossips, did not approve of her liaison, or whatever it was, with Clarence.

In the photo on the right, the lady on the Chiappes of the Val Fontanalba is wearing walking trousers and a hat which would have been fashionable in the 1920s. Her head is turned away from the camera as if to avoid being identified later. The clothing is different from the other photos of Alice Campbell but the body language and body shape are similar. She is on her own, without Pollini or other helpers. Was Clarence the photographer?



My favourite candidate for Alice Campbell is Lady Angela Mary Alice Campbell (née Ryder) a Scottish aristocrat, wife of Colin Frederick Campbell, 1st Baron Colgrain. If this is the case then we are talking about a splendidly beautiful woman, even in her old age when these photos in the National Portrait Gallery in London.^{xv}

My arguments are given on the www.clarencebicknell.com web page referred to in the endnotes to this paper. In brief, this Alice Campbell responds to most of the criteria set in trying to identify Clarence's friend. Bernardini remembers that Alice Campbell was the daughter of a



railway owner in Britain. Indeed the father of Alice Campbell née Ryder was Henry Dudley Ryder (1863-1939), a direct descendant of Thomas Coutts, was a director of Coutts and director of the Cardiff Railway Company.

There is no evidence of Alice Campbell née Ryder having been in Finalmarina in 1897 but a letter from Bicknell to Issel (Professor of Archaeology at the University of Genova) of 20 November 1898, confirms "I remember perfectly the walk I took in 1883 with that Scottish Lady I mentioned in my letter" so the presence of a Scottish woman in Clarence's life is confirmed. Note the capital L, meaning Lady is in the wife of a Lord, in this case the 1st Baron Colgrain.

To be honest, after my thirty years living with Clarence's papers and memories, I cannot be certain who Alice Campbell was. The mystery of Alice Campbell persists to this day, and our research continues^{xvi}.

A life of love redacted?

So we ask, if Clarence was so affectionate to women and if there is an idea that one or other might have been companions, or more, then why is there no record? Why is a particularly affectionate relationship not mentioned in letters or in third party accounts?

Why is all written mention of Alice Campbell totally absent from the 37,000 artefacts, many of them written, left behind by Clarence. I mentioned above that when Enzo Bernardini interviewed the redoubtable Muriel de Burgh Daly about Alice Campbell, she responded indignantly to his questions: ‘About that woman I do not intend to speak.’ So there was something going on. Something which should not be spoken in the polite “tea-drinking” society of Bordighera. Something to hide? A full-blown affaire? Certainly there would be those that though it most unsuitable for a female Scottish aristocrat (if that is who she was) to spend time alone with “a gentleman” (if that’s what he was) alone in the Casa Fontanalba and up in the valleys of the rock engravings.

Luigi Pollini, his wife Mercede (from 1902) (photo right from the group shot of the Bordighera Esperanto Antauen) and Maddalena the cook would have known all of Clarence’s friends, and would have known of or guessed at his relationships if there were any. They never spoke or wrote of them.



Margaret Berry would also have known all of Clarence’s friends, and would have known of or guessed at his relationships. His is where the finger of suspicion points when it come to redaction of Clarence’s records after his death. Margaret was very close to Clarence, in awe of him and saw him through rose-tinted spectacles. The matronly British wife of Clarence’s nephew Edward, banker and British vice-consul, could not possibly admit (to others or to herself) that Clarence had affairs. I think she would have felt it her duty to remove and destroy any evidence of any behaviour by Clarence which she, and she alone, would consider unsuitable.

In the Bicknell Collection we have substantial files left by Margaret Berry which pertain to Clarence after his death. It is clear that Margaret and Edward Berry were executors in Italy of Clarence’s will. They both continued the fund-raising for the Museo Bicknell and for the Istituto Internazionale di Studi Liguri; there are minutes or meetings and accounts. They had access to the Casa Fontanalba even though the Count d’Alberti had only given Clarence use of the land on which it was built during his lifetime. Even after Edward Berry died in Rome in 1931, Margaret continued the work in Bordighera and the visits to Casterino until 1936 when she returned to her Serecold family’s home in Taplow 35 miles west of London. More than any single person immediately after Clarence’s death, including lawyers if there were any involved, Margaret had access to all of Clarence’s papers in both Bordighera and Casterino. It would have been she who sifted through them. It would have been she who exercised her judgement how to protect Clarence’s reputation, how to perpetuate for ever his reputation as a giant of Ligurian archaeology and botany, a significant



philanthropist, Esperantist, pacifist and how to prevent anything tawdry escaping into the rarified air she sensed around her in Bordighera. One wonders how much role Edward her

husband played? One wonders if Guido and Mercede Pollini looked on in horror as string-bound packets of letters to Clarence were thrown on the fire. One wonders why, as Clarence kept for posterity (now in the Bicknell collection) so many envelopes with amusing variations of the spelling of his name, the contents of these envelopes are absent.

There is another possible reason. Maybe Margaret was jealous. Maybe the down-trodden niece felt she deserved the sort of affection that some of Clarence's other lady friends got.

She did a good job. Margaret Berry, if my thesis is correct, got rid of so much written material after Clarence's death that our six recent years of research could not find a single written shred about Alice Campbell who for Enzo Bernardini, Muriel de Burgh Daly and others had an intense (shocking for some) relationship, an affair, with Clarence.

I sometimes think it would be nice to know about Clarence's loves and to feel him as a strong human driven as all of us by affection and love. But Margaret has denied us this experience, as was often the

case in Victorian times. This precedent was set when Queen Victoria died; her daughter Princess Beatrice went through all her journals and removed anything which might upset the royal family. Most of the originals from 1840 onwards were destroyed. From this and other example Margaret Berry would have thought it the normal thing to do and in the interests of her recently-deceased uncle and life-hero. Prior to the Victorian era and after, such mass redaction of people's correspondence at their death was not so common and society was less prudish about knowing the truths of people's love lives.



Note that the 1,545 letters written by Clarence and analysed by Valerie Lester for MARVELS were stored in distant collections such as the British Museum, Natural History, London (letters to the Baroness Helene von Taube), Conservatoire et Jardin Botaniques, Geneva (Burnat) , Florence University (Sommier) and collections in Bordighera and Genoa. These were letters out of the control of Margaret Berry so she would not have been able to suppress or destroy them. The letters to the Baroness Helene von Taube are the only ones we found which have any nuances of a relationship in them (see above) and these are the only letters in quantity from Clarence to a female we found. There might still be collections of letters from him elsewhere. Who knows?

Maybe his letters to Alice Campbell are locked away in a musty chest of drawers in Scotland.

2



End Notes:

Large chunks of text, as shown in the end notes and elsewhere, are taken from *MARVELS: The Life of Clarence Bicknell* by Valerie Lester whom I thank again. It seems more honourable to her not to muss with a text which is so perfect.

The photos are from the Bicknell Family Collection unless otherwise credited.

www.clarencebicknell.com

Marcus Bicknell, 11 July 2019

ⁱ Valerie Lester *MARVELS* p.11

ⁱⁱ Valerie Lester *MARVELS* p.8

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Marvels of Clarence Bicknell*, Rémy Masségia, 2016

^{iv} Clarence Bicknell, *Flowering Plants and Ferns of the Riviera and Neighbouring Mountains*. London: Trübner, 1885.

^v This paragraph from Valerie Lester's *MARVELS*

^{vi} Mrs Fanshawe Walker was a pillar of the new British society in Bordighera but it is not clear when she settled there. The foundation of the Anglican church in Bordighera dates back to 1863 thanks to the first British guests who resided here from October to May, some settling permanently. The first faithful gathered in prayer at the "Hotel d'Angleterre", today known as Villa Eugenia, located in Via Vittorio Emanuele 218. With the rapid rise of the British population, the bishop of Gibraltar appointed a pastor for the city of Bordighera, Reverend Henry Sidebottom. When the Hotel d'Angleterre also became too small, the community of believers was hosted by Mrs. Walker Fanshawe in her private chapel in the park of Villa Rosa. In 1873, Mrs. Fanshawe donated a portion of its park to build a real church. There was of course a fundraiser to which Charles Henry Lowe also contributed and the church was called "All Saints Church". Eventually the British population had a true place of worship, which also became a centre for social life, where every Thursday afternoon the pastor received for tea the most active members of the city. The small church was enlarged in 1883 and in 1890, when two aisles, a new sacristy and a room for the organ were added.

^{vii} Rosa Ellen Fanshawe was born 9 February 1834 at the Rectory in Fawley, Bucks, so she was 8 years older than Clarence and aged 44 when they first met.

^{viii} Valerie Lester *MARVELS* p.130

^{ix} Letter to Burnat 27 April 1900. Valerie Lester *MARVELS* p.131

^x Marcus's great-grandfather

^{xi} Valerie Lester *MARVELS* p.207

^{xii} Mahdi, Clarence's dog, in the photos, died in 1907.

^{xiii} Livio Mano, ed. "Bicknell e il suo museo." Comune di Cuneo, *Novel Temp: quaderno di cultura e studi occitani alpini*. N. 37. Edizione Soulestrelh, November 1990, p. 25

^{xiv} Source; Gisella Merello 17 November 2017

^{xv} www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp84600/lady-angela-mary-alice-campbell-ne-ryder

^{xvi} updated regularly on the Clarence Bicknell web site at https://www.clarencebicknell.com/images/downloads_news/alice_campbell.pdf