

CLARENCE BICKNELL'S LETTERS TO LOUISA MACDONALD FROM THE YALE COLLECTION

Letters addressed by Clarence Bicknell (in Italy) to Louisa MacDonald (probably in England) in 1879. Source: The original letters are in the George MacDonald Collection, part of the General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, whom we thank. <http://beinecke.library.yale.edu>

Letters transcribed by Valerie Browne Lester in early 2017 in research for her biography of Clarence Bicknell, with further edits and notes by Graham Avery. These transcriptions and photos of the originals are made available on the Clarence Bicknell Association's website www.clarencebicknell.com



LETTER OF 30.12.1879

Dec. 30th. [1879 added in pencil by another hand]

Villa Diana

My dear Mrs. MacDonald,

Your letter makes me most anxious you should come out, and come soon. Could you not bring your husband out of the cold and fogs first of all.

I believe the villa, ground and all is to be sold for 1600 £, 1200£ to be paid down and the remaining on mortgage at 5%. This would give Miss Patrick a little income of 20£. Her mother is shortly going off to England, and if the daughter can earn a little by lessons, she will probably do well.

Mr Congreve the Vice Consul say it would be a good plan for you to have the villa for a month on trial; if you liked it well enough to purchase it, well and good, if not you might pay rent for it. I believe you could this winter well manage to let Miss P. have 2 rooms on the ground floor, if the rest of the house were freely yours. I will add a PS about the exact number of rooms on each flat, fireplaces etc.

& Believe me to be, with renewed wishes for the new year, yours sincerely,
Clarence Bicknell.

I am afraid no letter was lost, but I got confused thro the slowness of the posts. France has been so snow blocked that trains, if they came at all, were horribly late.

6 rooms & kitchen top flat

5next

6 or 6ground floor

(Drawing of a charming looking house)

House much like this. If Mrs de la Rue will only come, I shall be very glad.



LETTER OF 28 .11.1879

Villa Diana,

San Remo

Nov. 28th (*presumably 1879*)

My dear Mrs. Macdonald, You could not have done anything kinder than write to me so openly about your wants & cares & hopes. I am most grateful to you. I was away at Mentone to see a brother when your letter came & have only just returned. Mr. R. Noel tells me he has written some particulars about villas to you, but I gather they are all expensive ones. I heard the other day about an Italian one, not situated in the more fashionable quarter, but high up above the old town, to be had very cheap, and I suppose much cheaper still after Xmas. I shall go & see about that & make enquiries about Italian ones, as I believe you have been accustomed to them, & are also not very particular, so that the house is dry and sufficiently large to hold you all comfortably.

At the 3 places together you could probably ply your trade, as you say successfully. I mean that by travelling from one to the other I think you could get large audiences. But English abroad do seem to me extra hard to please, and, I think don't help on things seriously [*help repeated*] much, unless they are told very plainly in it "for a charity", when they become suddenly generous by taking 2 cheap seats, or 3 if they make a reduction, or if something is likely to please them

very much. It seems to me a pity they don't support the Italian opera company here; it is not Covent Garden nor Her Majesty's, but the people do their best, and the singers sing better than the hotel "artists." I and mine will anyhow come often to all your plays, if you will come among us, or do anything else we can. It would be a treat to have you and your husband here. I am speaking very familiarly too, but you were both so kind and friendly at Broadlands, and your husband's books have been a great help to me, and perhaps also, I may add that having got somewhat stranded myself in many ways, and in a great puzzle as to what I ought to be trying to do particularly, or clerically, I feel drawn to attach myself to any who at all hold out sympathetic hands and heart.

There are few folks at Bordighera at present, tho' the Queen being there may attract more, & make it a more fashionable place — report too says that if she likes it, she will have a villa there. But it is not unlikely that there is a house which would suit you there and be cheap. I know of one or two, and tomorrow (or today) will go off to see about them, & it is between Mentone & S. Remo, and a quiet place for writing with delightful walks for young people. If I were to be there next winter, I should indeed rejoice at your advent.

I hardly know what I said now in the letter which I asked Mrs R. Gurney to forward to you. I wanted to ask Mr Macdonald if he saw any light about my idea of taking Mrs. Fanshawe's house & private chapel— opening the former to receive poor sick people (or possibly a family) and while offering the latter for the use of the English as a regular English church, reserving it to myself to teach in or invite conferences & meetings of other than so-called religious kinds, viz plays, concerts, lectures, etc. I fancy this free use of it might be so disagreeable to the greater part of the residents or visitors that they would set to work to collect and build a church for themselves, consecrated, Gothic, etc. etc. I don't know. I feel pretty sure, after last winter, I should not be acceptable as regular chaplain. They said some of them I taught heresies, etc. that I taught and said many wrong, or at least very partially true & very many foolish things, I have no doubt, but to myself my gospel seemed truer and better than what I had originally learnt of men.

I only somewhat (nay much) incline to Bordighera because I feel doubtful if it is right to swallow up one's thought and desire to speak by settling down to the huge machinery or many all engrossing works of London, or to seek out a new sphere for myself when something here seems to present itself as true to me, tho' very difficult, no doubt. & also doubt if I ought to be biassed by the thought, now being

suggested to me by people, of large spheres versus small, many versus a few. While on the other hand in so small a place as Bordighera there is especial danger of being considered (or becoming) very schismatical in spirit. I do myself, rightly or wrongly, long that Mrs. F's chapel should be a place as it has hitherto been, where a larger gospel might be taught, where any man lay or clerical might be invited to speak out what God had taught him — and where the “Church” might be declared to be more Catholick than Italians or English seem to realise, and Xt more the all and the in all.

I fancy if one offered the chapel for regular English services & reserved to oneself the above-mentioned rights, one would do all that seems true and good. My only difficulty is the answering the question:

“Ought a youngish man of 37, strong and well off, to take what seems an easy post abroad in a pleasant climate & where the difficulties and opposition seem likely to be greater than the encouragements (and this I thought your husband might see some light about)”

and 2nd, which I only can answer, and of course hardly with a yes:

“Are you, C.B. fit for this”?

but one's answer to all questions is “God”.

I hope to let you hear more very shortly.

& Believe me to be, with very kind regards, Yours sincerely, Clarence Bicknell

Notes

The Queen: Margherita of Savoy, whose husband Umberto succeeded to the Italian throne in January 1878. She visited Bordighera for the first time in September 1879, returned several times, and in 1914 bought Villa Etelinda from Lord Claude Bowes-Lyon.

Mrs R. Gurney: Emilia Russell Gurney (1823–1896) who attended the Broadlands conferences. The register of All Saints Church records that her nephew Alfred Gurney (1843–1898) celebrated Communion on January 3rd 1879 when Clarence Bicknell was Chaplain.



POEM DATED 24.12.1879

A year without a sorrow
Or a cross,
No dread of any morrow
Bringing loss
Could it be?

A year of light, with shadow
Scarcely one:
Of fruits in every meadow
Thistles, none
Will it be?

A year of many roses
And few thorns
A year that brighter closes
Than it dawns
May it be

A year of God's unfolding
Wider wings
A year of man's beholding
Better things
It must be.

CB Dec. 24 1879



Valerie Lester 12 April 2017

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