

A close look at some primary material relating to the life of Clarence Bicknell — located at the International Institute for Ligurian Studies and the Museo Bicknell in Bordighera

Much has been written about Clarence Bicknell's work as a botanist and archaeologist, both by himself and others, but scant attention has been paid to the full scope of his life. With the centenary of his death approaching in 2018, his relative, Marcus Bicknell, has decided to celebrate the life of this fascinating Victorian/Renaissance man with a biography, a documentary film, and exhibits of his works. Marcus has chosen me, also a relative of Clarence Bicknell, to be the biographer.

I have recently spent three fascinating weeks in Bordighera, working at the International Institute for Ligurian Studies and the Bicknell Museum, where it has been my privilege to study primary material relating to Clarence Bicknell. The material in the Institute includes collections of letters written by Bicknell to his nephew Edward Berry,¹ to Alberto Pelloux,² and to various other friends and colleagues.

Prior to my arrival in Bordighera, I had read selections from Bicknell's letters to the botanist Émile Burnat and to the archaeologist Émile Cartailhac. These letters, for the most part, concern his botanical and archaeological work. In contrast, the letters to Pelloux and Berry deal almost exclusively with Clarence's daily life and his thoughts, and even include a little gossip. They are effervescent and full of wit, and in some cases include cartoon sketches.

It is easy to think of Clarence Bicknell, steeped in archaeology, botany, philanthropy, and Esperanto as an entirely work-driven man, a serious scholar to end all serious scholars, and indeed he is that. But the picture that emerges from his personal

¹ Edward Berry

² Alberto Pelloux (Crema, December 10, 1868 - Bordighera, 1948) was an Italian mineralogist. Eldest son of the President of the Council and Minister Luigi Pelloux, he reached the rank of lieutenant colonel in the army. He was professor of mineralogy and applied paleontology at Genoa University and director of the Natural History Museum of Giacomo Doria. He described new mineral species, contributing, in particular, to the knowledge of the mineral deposits of Libya, Albania and Sardinia. Among his major publications, as well as numerous notes and memories of scientific journals, the highlights are his contributions on the geographical description of the Valle d'Aosta (Rome 1901) and minerals Gran Paradiso (ed. CAI, Torino 1909) and Vesuvius (ed. English New York 1927). Member of the Accademia dei Lincei, Pelloux was president of the Italian Geological Society in 1934. Its rich mineral collection is preserved at the Museum of Earth Sciences, University of Bari. In his memory has been given the name of *pellouxite*, a mineral found in the Apuan Alps.

letters is of a very human human-being, a man who takes time to enjoy himself, even as he lives the most Spartan of lives, a man who appreciates to the fullest the two places in which he lives, Bordighera and Casterino, a man who is full of curiosity, a man who lives up to his own strong ideals, a man whose pacifism is severely shaken by the events of the First World War.

According to Peter Bicknell, Clarence Bicknell was “intensely affectionate and emotional . . . and the haste with which he threw himself into new intimacies was a standing joke amongst his old friends.”³ Alberto Pelloux was a case in point. In the last few years of his life, Bicknell found in Pelloux a soul-mate, someone to whom he could express himself wholeheartedly. In his early letters, Bicknell writes in fluent, grammatically-correct Italian about a wide range of subjects, but as time goes by he writes occasionally in English, presumably because Pelloux wanted to improve his knowledge of the language. His first letter to Pelloux is dated 1902, at a time when Pelloux was living in Bordighera at the Villa Caterina with his parents.

In two of the early letters, in 1903 and again in 1905, Bicknell describes his visits to his family in England. He talks about his adverse reaction to his native land. He had become used to the slow pace and clean air of Bordighera and Casterino, and he found the bustle and pollution of London appalling. “The buses are full, the streets a heap of automobiles, bicycles, etc. Yesterday a young man was squashed between two buses . . . [I] am seeing many women on bicycles in the middle of omnibuses, and it’s a wonder that there’s not a calamity all the time.”⁴

Clearly missing the weather in Bordighera, he writes from England in 1905: “It has rained or been foggy every day since I arrived, and one day there was a thick London fog, the very worst, when even the lamps were invisible and people were lost in the complete darkness . . .” But there were compensations for the weather. He continues: “On Thursday I went to Oxford and saw very interesting things from the Cretan palace of Knossos and also a magnificent collection of things lately discovered in prehistoric Egyptian tombs.”⁵

³ Peter Bicknell, “Clarence Bicknell, His Family and His Friends.” *Rivista Ingauna e Intemelia*. N. 1-4, Gennaio-Dicembre 1989. *Atti del Convegno sul Centenario de Museo Bicknell*. P. 6.

⁴ CB to Alberto Pelloux, 1903. Doc. 10. (Pelloux collection.)

⁵ CB to Alberto Pelloux, 24 Oct. 1905. Doc. 3. (Pelloux collection.)

Bicknell writes to Pelloux in 1906 about his anxieties over the completion of his house — Casa Fontanalba — up in the mountains at Casterino. “I dare say we shall manage it somehow and if not and I succumb to the anxieties and am buried at Lago Verde, you will have to come up and plant potatoes over me.”⁶ Then on 27 August 1914, he expresses his sorrow and concern over the outbreak of World War I. He cannot sleep at night for worry about his family in England and his nephew at the front. The only relief he can achieve from his anxiety comes when he is outside, gardening.

He is more cheerful in a 1915 letter to Pelloux’s mother, Catherine (to whom he sometimes writes in Esperanto). “Here we are, well established with everything in order, even the little plants brought from Bordighera, beets, lettuce, onions, leeks, etc. and the potatoes are out in the open under the earth. Blessed are they . . . On Saturday we went up the Val Casterino and collected plums, and came home with about 3800!! Yesterday, Sunday, I rested!”⁷

By 1917, Bicknell has become more and more distressed about the war, and for good reason. The results of the conflict were all too apparent in Bordighera. He writes to Pelloux in 1917: “On Monday we had a distribution of Xmas presents to the Italian hospital patients, and on Xmas day I went to see our Tommies eating at the H[otel] Angst. They had not eaten such a good meal for 3 years. The wounded from the front are coming here and soon we shall be full. Bordighera is quite full of men and movement. What a change. My Museo is given up as a Recreatorio for patients.”⁸ And then, in an undated letter, presumably from the same period, Bicknell writes: “We have over 500 refugees! What are we to do to help them to live and be clothed and work . . . ? The Victoria Hall is full, and the Casino, and the horses are in the public garden. What a good thing it is to see useless or mischievous places being turned to good account . . . We shall all be glad when this night is over and the day breaks, as it must some day. Till then, coraggio e fede.”⁹

Bicknell’s letters to Edward Berry are less descriptive and more chatty than those to Pelloux, but again they show his concern for the refugees flooding into Bordighera:

⁶ CB to Alberto Pelloux, 8 May 1906. (Bernardini collection.)

⁷ CB to Caterina Pelloux, 1915. (Bernardini collection.)

⁸ CB to Alberto Pelloux, 1917. Doc. 2. (Pelloux collection.)

⁹ CB to Alberto Pelloux, ND. (Bernardini collection.)

“They seem to have nothing, most of them, but a few had a sack & I saw one man with 2 fowls, poor things . . . How [the refugees] can all be fed, clothed etc. I know not . . . “ Then he quickly changes the topic and gloats: “I am coining money!! Sold my olives, picked up by ourselves, for 67.20 and I suppose they have not half fallen yet.”¹⁰

In another undated letter, Bicknell cannot resist sharing a little bit of macabre gossip with Edward: “Mrs Bonsignore had some months of awful pain in the summer — finger poisoned by a white-thorn spine (probably other poison getting into wound) till at last the finger was cut off & we talked nearly all the time of this cheerful subject, but washed it down with some good wine, while we gazed at the relic of her finger & bone carefully preserved in her purse.”¹¹

Bicknell adored his time in the mountains, his vigorous walks and ever-increasing discoveries of rock engravings, his botanizing, his garden, his easy companionship with his helpers, Luigi and Mercede Pollini, and his visits from scientific colleagues. He resented any time spent away from his beloved Casa Fontanalba, so it is not surprising to find him complaining to Edward Berry about an upcoming trip, even though he was a most devoted Esperantist: “Tomorrow we¹² start for Cracow [for the International Esperanto Congress]. What a journey & to be away a fortnight. I’ve always hoped I’d be able to make up my mind not to go, but I can’t; it seems a duty to go once more, but I dread the journey, hotels, crowds, meetings, excursions & am so sorry to leave this life of peace.”¹³

Bicknell writes the funniest letter of all to Edward Berry from Rome. He went there with his niece Nora, and took her on a most unusual tour of the city. Instead of visiting the usual tourist sites, they went four times to the cinema, walked along the new Tiber embankment, and he tells Edward, “I’ve shown Nora the gasworks and a splendid large new manufactory of pasta — and we’ve done a little shopping & I bought a new hat & sponge — and we have been up the 265 steps of the Capitol tower to get a view.” But Bicknell saves his best comment for last, revealing that he is always and ever will be a botanist: “All the chickweed here seems to be the sar. grandiflora with very large flowers.

¹⁰ CB to Edward Berry, 7 Nov. (Berry collection.)

¹¹ CB to Edward Berry. ND. (Berry collection.)

¹² He was accompanied by Luigi Pollini.

¹³ CB to Edward Berry. ND. (Berry collection.)

It is one of the best things in Rome but Baedeker does not mention it.”¹⁴

The Museo Bicknell (The Bicknell Museum)

In addition to the collections of rubbings, herbaria, butterflies, and artifacts that belonged to Bicknell, the Bicknell Museum is home to a large collection of photographs, mostly taken by Luigi Pollini, but also by Ezio Benigni, and others. The majority of Pollini’s photographs are of scenes in the mountains around the Val Fontanalba and the Vallée de Merveilles, where he and Bicknell made so many of their important archaeological discoveries. The quality of Pollini’s photographs remains superb, and they vividly bring to life the grand adventure of Bicknell and Pollini’s discoveries of the rock engravings. From the biographer’s point of view, the photographs are firm evidence that Clarence Bicknell was out there in the mountains, wearing his large, brimmed hat and carrying a long walking stick, with his dog Mahdi at his side, and his faithful assistant Luigi Pollini recording everything with his camera. To be able to “see” him at work a hundred years after the fact is a superb boon for a biographer.

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— Valerie Lester, 23 February 2015



Letters Clarence Museo Bicknell VBL 23Feb2015.docx

¹⁴ CB to Edward Berry. ND. (Berry collection.)