

Valerie Browne Lester 1939-2019

It is with great sadness that we announce the death of Valerie Lester. Despite the quiet progression of metastasising melanoma since 2012 and the threat of imminent demise since 2017, Valerie continued to be largely symptom-free, and spent 2018 living life to the fullest - writing, travelling, laughing and loving. She succumbed peacefully in hospice care near her home in Hingham, Massachusetts, on Friday 7th June with her children Toby and Alison at her bedside.

Valerie's bio on the Clarence Bicknell Association website www.clarencebicknell.com reads as follows:



Valerie Browne Lester, born 1939, an independent scholar, writer, and translator living in the Boston area, is descended from Clarence Bicknell's grandmother and is therefore another family member on the team. She is the author of *Fasten Your Seat Belts! History and Heroism in the Pan Am Cabin* (1995), which is a history of Pan American told in the voices of its cabin crew; and *Phiz, The Man Who Drew Dickens* (London 2004), a biography of Hablot Knight Browne, Dickens's principal illustrator (who was also her great-great-grandfather). Her biography of the great Italian printer Giambattista Bodoni (1710-1813) *Giambattista Bodoni: His Life and His World* was published by David Godine in September 2014.

In addition to her books and her translation of Alain-Fournier's *Le Grand Meaulnes* (*The Magnificent Meaulnes*, 2009), she has written poetry, plays, and articles, including "A Bird's Eye View of Nepal," for *The Atlantic Monthly*.

Valerie spent her early childhood in the West Indies, and then went to boarding school in England and Switzerland. She became a flight attendant for Pan Am in 1962, and flew for two years before marrying a passenger, Jim Lester. A psychologist, musician, and member of the first American Mount Everest Expedition, Jim subsequently became a writer and published *Too Marvelous for Words: The Life and Genius of Art Tatum* (1994). Together they raised two children, the writers Toby Lester and Alison Jean Lester. During Toby and Alison's childhood, Valerie worked and studied part time at Harvard. She completed her B.A. at George Washington University and her M.A. at Georgetown. Valerie taught English and Western Civilization at George Washington University for 10 years, and then worked as a writing tutor and workshop leader at the U.S. Naval Academy for seven years. She now devotes her time to her own writing and makes sure that the subjects she chooses take her to interesting places.

From 2014 to early 2018 she was devoted to researching and writing *MARVELS: The Life of Clarence Bicknell, Botanist, Archaeologist, Artist*, published by Matador in June 2018, for which she spent months at a time in Bordighera, Italy, and at the home of Susie and Marcus Bicknell near London. Three months before her death she completed her first novel *The West Indian*, a fascinating and rip-roaring prequel to *Wuthering Heights*, published by Mason & Fraser, 2019.



But the facts of her life hardly do justice to a lady of fine intellect, a passion for facts, warm interest in people around her and dedication to making every moment of her life productive and enjoyable.



We in the Clarence Bicknell centenary project experienced all this and more. Valerie first reached out for the Bicknell family in 2000 when researching her biography of Phiz; his aunt Lucinda was Marcus Bicknell's great great grandmother and the mother of Clarence Bicknell, so the family link made for an immediate and warm contact. Marcus introduced Valerie to the scions of the Bicknell family and the seeds of the work on Clarence Bicknell were sown then. Valerie was a founder committee member of the Clarence Bicknell Association from 2013 and participated in all aspects of the five year research and publication programme leading up to the 2018 centenary of Clarence's death.

By the time her *Giambattista Bodini: His Life and World* was published in 2015, Valerie was already engaged in the five-year research into Clarence Bicknell. With the support of Graham Avery, Christopher Chippindale, Helen Blanc-Francard, Susie Bicknell, Marcus Bicknell and the staff of the Museo Bicknell in Bordighera, Valerie made the most intensive study of the available archives; diaries, botanical water-colours, travel sketches, archaeological field studies, and correspondence.

Valerie read over a thousand letters, many to other botanists and many previously unseen, such that she got under the skin of the man and was able to write the biography with Clarence's "voice". The scholars, librarians, clerics and experts that Valerie tapped and touched during this work are listed with joy in the acknowledgements of the book.

By a master-stroke of planning and Valerie's determination in completing such a daunting task, *MARVELS: The Life of Clarence Bicknell, Botanist, Archaeologist, Artist* was published in June of 2018, the centenary year. Events were held in Bordighera and Parma (Italy), Tende (France), Cambridge (England) and Hingham (USA) to launch the book and celebrate Clarence's talent and output. In the last two years of this work, she and her closest family and friends knew she was under the threat of the cancer, but she delivered herself to her work and her life with extraordinary gusto, never once complaining or slacking.

We mourn the passing of a good friend, a bright intellect, a person full of life and a warm human being. She enriched the lives of everyone she touched and she leaves a rich legacy.

Marcus Bicknell 10 June 2019

