

Clarence Bicknell (1842-1918) and George Macdonald (1824-1905): Figureheads of 19th Century Society in Bordighera

By Susie Bicknell, November 2019

Clarence Bicknell and George MacDonald came to settle in Bordighera within two years of each other, Clarence in 1878 and George in 1880. In many ways they were very different. George was already an established literary



personality, preacher and lecturer. Clarence was unknown, with no particular vocation except as a priest, a bachelor (which he remained) and with enough private means, thanks to his wealthy father, to support himself. Within a few years, they had established themselves as pivots of the local community. George continued his successful writing career while Clarence became a renowned botanist and archaeologist.



George's home and Clarence's museum became cultural centres, not just for the ex-pats but for the people of Bordighera.

EARLY LIFE: BICKNELL

In their early lives, they were both priests. Reacting to his Unitarian upbringing, Clarence, when he left Cambridge, favoured a return to a more Catholic-orientated Anglican Church. Ordained in 1866, Clarence was a curate in a tough parish in Walworth, Surrey and then from 1873 spent six years on and off at Stoke-on-Tern with the rather mysterious *Brotherhood of the Holy Spirit*, created by Roland Corbet, which pursued High Church Anglo-Catholicism. But by the late 70s, the Brotherhood lost its allure for Clarence, and he travelled considerably, going around Europe, the Mediterranean and North Africa. He ended up in Bordighera in 1878 invited by the Fanshawe family and became chaplain to the Anglican church there.

EARLY LIFE: MacDONALD

Eighteen years older than Clarence, Scotsman George MacDonald also started with a religious calling. He left Aberdeen to study Congregationalism at Highbury Independent Theological College. After three years, he became pastor in 1850 at a Congregational Church in Arundel, Sussex. However, three years later, accused of heresy as his sermons became more and more imbued with mysticism, he was forced to resign. His parishioners liked him though, for his sincere pastoral care. He was a striking man, tall with blue

eyes, long dark hair, and long dark beard, who continued to impress with his preaching in Manchester and Bolton.

This pastoral work had not provided enough funds to support George's ever-growing family. In true Victorian tradition, his adored and resilient wife Louisa produced a child nearly every year during the 1850s and 1860s till they eventually ended up with eleven children, four of whom died. Having resigned from the Independent ministry and become a lay member of the Church of England, he decided to pursue his literary vocation. However, his strong Christian faith never left him and this faith pervades his literary work. He started with two poetry books, but in 1858, he published *The Phantastes* which was his first success and the first of many fantasy and fairy-tale novels. He said "I write, not for children, but for the child-like, whether they be of five, or fifty, or seventy-five." Throughout his life, he also published volumes of sermons and wrote non-fantasy realistic novels on Scottish life.

MacDonald's reputation became such that he moved in the top literary and artistic circles in England and also in the US, acquainted with John Ruskin, Mark Twain, Lord Alfred Tennyson, Dickens, Wilkie Collins, Trollope, Lewes, and Thackeray, as well as some of the Pre-Raphaelites, like Edward Burne-Jones. Lewis Carroll was a well-known photographer and family friend. MacDonald's children were so enthusiastic when the draft Alice books were read to them that Carroll was encouraged by George to present them for publication. What a good decision that was.



The Macdonald family with Lewis Carroll

MacDonald's rise to top literary circles had been helped in 1856 when Lady Byron became a patron.

But health-wise, things were not so good for Macdonald (who was asthmatic and had eczema) or for his large family. The “family attendant” – as MacDonald called tuberculosis - was hovering over them. The decision was taken to find a home on the Italian Riviera.

In 1879, Clarence had met George and Louisa Macdonald at the religious retreats organised by the influential Lord and Lady Mount Temple at their Broadlands home in Hampshire, England. Clarence corresponded with Louisa and he encouraged and helped them to come to Bordighera. The Macdonald family had already rented homes in Nervi (a popular sea resort and suburb of Genoa) and Portofino.

At this time, the Macdonald’s finances had improved: Queen Victoria, who approved of his work and gave his book *Robert Falconer* to all her grandsons,¹ had accorded MacDonald an annual Civil List pension of £100 (now £11,000) in 1877, and friends had also clubbed round to help him, so he could afford to build a very large house on a plot of land in Bordighera sold to him by the Fanshaws (Clarence’s close friends), right in the heart of the English community and next door to Clarence’s Villa Rosa.

So in 1880, the MacDonalds installed themselves in Bordighera where they spent the winter season for the next 20 years. However, their hopes of better health for all the family were not fulfilled. The curative powers of the local air were not enough to prevent the death of MacDonald’s second eldest daughter, Grace, in 1884. And Macdonald’s first born and favourite daughter, Lilia, died in 1891. His children’s deaths had a huge effect on his writing and his faith.

THE END OF THEIR FORMAL CHURCH LIVES

Clarence’s formal life in the Church did not last as long as Macdonald’s. Within a year he had resigned as the Anglican Chaplain in Bordighera. He gave up active participation in church matters. In his correspondence with Louise Macdonald, he asks if “Mr Macdonald saw any light about my idea of taking Mrs Fanshawe’s private house and chapel For use of the English as a regular church” and other activities. However, he felt that this wouldn’t work as some of the English residents thought he had taught heresies in his year as Chaplain, as he held an ecumenical standpoint. He asked not to be referred to as “The Rev.” He ceased to wear a dog collar. He was later to say in a letter to a friend, “I fear I have become rather narrow about all church things, having become convinced that the churches do more harm than good & hinder human progress, & look upon the pope, the clergy & the doctrines as a fraud, though not an intentional one.”

George, like Clarence, did not want to be divisive on his arrival in Bordighera. He knew the power of his preaching and the loyal following he might create in this new community. He preferred to restrict his preaching to his own home

¹ Rolland Hein, *George MacDonald, Victorian Myth-Maker*, Nashville, 1993, p 288

rather than risk creating divisions in the established local church community. He says in “Weighed and Waiting” (which he was writing at the time):

“The ruin of a man’s teaching comes of his followers, such as having never touched the foundation he has laid, build upon it rubble, hay and stubble, fit only to be burnt....the more correct a system the worse will it be misunderstood”²

TWO SPECTACULAR HOMES

George MacDonald and the Casa Coraggio

Before moving to Italy, between 1867 and 1875, the MacDonalds had rented a large house in Hammersmith, West London, overlooking the River Thames, called *The Retreat* (which belonged to William Morris, leader of the Arts and Crafts movement after MacDonald’s move to Bordighera). The numerous children had grown up being read their father’s own fairy tales as well as Lewis Carroll’s



Alice books. Their mother Louisa encouraged drama and was a good musician. They held an open house on Sunday evenings, with tea, a play, another meal and concluded with MacDonald reading and a prayer. Parties were held to celebrate the great rowing boat race held every year on the Thames between Oxford and Cambridge Universities. They had constant visitors, including Ruskin who gave them a grand piano, Lord Alfred Tennyson and Mark Twain.

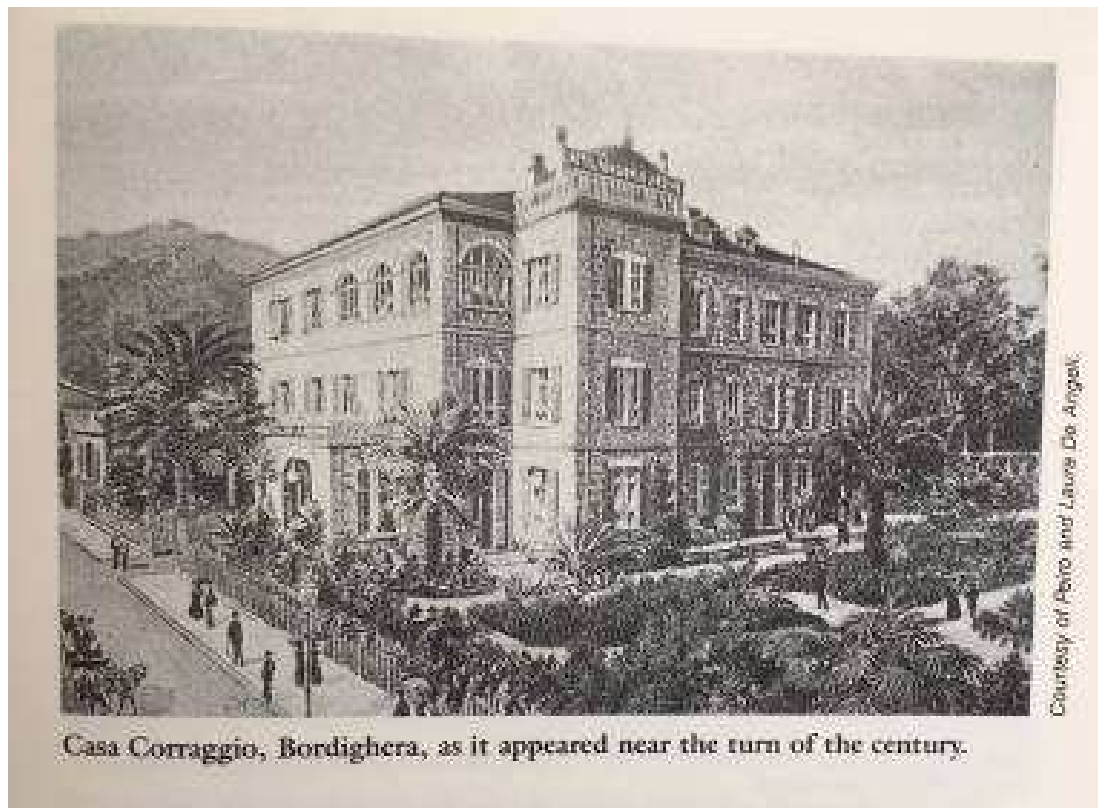
So having chosen to live in Bordighera, the family wanted to continue their tradition of holding drama and musical events in their home. After years moving and renting homes for reasons of finance, health and the size of the family, Casa Coraggio was the first house that the MacDonald family owned.

“That house Coraggio is the very heart of Bordighera, the very core of it, always raying out and gathering them to itself”³

The Casa Coraggio was designed to have a huge room that could house over 200 people; here they had had the space to create the way of life that they had in London. MacDonald actually took 3 days off from writing to plan the house.

² Hein p 327

³ Lord Mount Temple, *Memorials*



“If ever a room more than justified the idea of its planning, it was that room. It was a home place, or concert room, theatre or dancing room, oratory or dining room.”⁴

They moved in before Christmas 1880 but money ran out for furnishing. Louisa had for some time taken the initiative of putting on fund-raising plays in which the children starred both in England and Italy, Genoa and Porto Fino.

MacDonald said “We are now a sort of company of acting strollers – I mean strolling actors”⁵. So successful were the “strolling actors” that they are regarded as instrumental in making theatre more acceptable to middle-class Victorians.

They resumed immediately the style of life they had led at *The Retreat* by organising *tableaux vivants* for that Christmas. These *tableaux* became a feature of Christmas in Bordighera, were “generally viewed as the highlight of the year’s community activities”⁶. Invitations were sent out to the English one night and the Italians another. The family were delighted that over 100 Italians attended.

The MacDonald’s large home became a cultural centre in itself. A flag would be flown from the house “when charades were going to happen”⁷.

⁴ Greville MacDonald, *George MacDonald and his Wife* p 508

⁵ Hein, p 315

⁶ Hein, p 374

⁷ Seeking source

The following excerpt from Angela R. Barone's 1990 PhD thesis *The Oak Tree and the Olive Tree: The True Dream of Eva Gore-Booth* gives a vivid description of life there:

"*Casa Coraggio*, the name given to the construction in Bordighera, was linked with the family motto: "Corage! God mend all!" (the imperfect spelling is deliberate, as the motto is an anagram of George MacDonald). The house was fenced by a thick row of trees and bushes, its outside walls were covered with ivy and evergreen creepers. Inside, there were numerous large rooms, furnished with disparate items and with the walls painted in vivid colours.

"In the large and luminous kitchen Louisa (his wife) used to cook in large quantity for her numerous family and guests - the door of *Casa Coraggio* was constantly open to the local villagers as well as to friends, acquaintances, unknown guests coming from Northern Europe to meet the artist philanthropist or to recover their health in the sunny Italian weather and to avail of the generosity of George MacDonald. In a large store-room one could find all sorts of costumes, theatrical props and disparate objects.

"In the sitting-room of over 130 square metres, the MacDonalds organised concerts, mainly directed by Louisa, lectures and oratorios, held by George, *tableaux vivants* and plays, staged and acted by the whole family, and fancy-dress balls and charity parties for the local community. George and Louisa, with their children, lived their most happy days in *Casa Coraggio*: they made an ecumenical meeting-point of their own house in Italy, sharing with the others whatever was in their possession and doing everything in their power to help the villagers who had so generously accepted them in their community."

A part of the MacDonald's enormous living room where plays, lectures and all manner of activities took place



On Wednesday afternoons MacDonald gave readings of Shakespeare and Dante. A local fisherman or florist might find himself next to an English aristocrat such as Lord Mount Temple⁸. Furthermore by 1882, the Macdonalds welcomed the youth of Bordighera to dances with Louise playing waltzes. Lily the eldest daughter said "Our boys, and in fact the whole of young Bordighera, have gone mad on the subject of dancing."⁹

⁸ A great supporter of MacDonald, a.k.a. William Cowper-Temple of the Hampshire retreat Broadlands

⁹ Rolland Hein, p 338

Greville wrote “To these entertainments, Italian children of the town would joyfully come, a circumstance that gave offence to certain English. But they had to be even more disturbed on another occasion with a concert that was given, and the entire proceeds were given towards wiping off the debt on the new Catholic church in the town.” ¹⁰

The MacDonalds’ close friend and benefactor, Lord Mount Temple was not one of these disapproving English. He describes how the Macdonalds on Christmas Eve visited the homes of the poor and invalid, and invited “the peasants” into the Casa to see the *tableaux vivants* and to hear the carols... how the local Catholic priest Giacomo Viale was grateful: “This delighted the good father Giacomo.....as a mark of true Christian feeling and Catholicity.” ¹¹

In 1896 Eva Gore-Booth and Gertrude Roper (photos, right), two women both in their mid-twenties and from widely different backgrounds, met and fell in love at the Casa Coraggio. They went on to live together, Eva abandoning her aristocratic upbringing, and they became well-known campaigners for vegetarianism, the abolition of capital punishment, antivivisection, women’s suffrage and pacifism.



The last great event held at the MacDonald’s home was their 50th Wedding Anniversary in 1901. Louisa died (exhausted one imagines) the next year. George by then was in a wheelchair and returned to live in Haslemere with his son Greville where he died in 1905.

Clarence Bicknell and the Casa Fontanalba

His adored house up in the alps, the Casa Fontanalba, may not have been as large as the Casa Coraggio, but it was – and still is – just as spectacular.

Although his role as Chaplain ended in 1879, Clarence stayed in Bordighera and bought the Villa Rosa from the Fanshawe-Walkers. Although this house was large for a bachelor, it remained his home except for the summer when he could travel up to the mountains... and reside there. The Casa Fontanalba that he built in in the small hamlet of Casterino, 60 kms north of Bordighera at 1,565 metres altitude, was the home dearest to him and where he died. Clarence had originally come up into the mountains to find new territory away from the coast for his botanical work. He had become engrossed in recording the prehistoric engravings and had, therefore, built a summer home up there in 1906.

¹⁰ Greville MacDonald p 508

¹¹ Greville Macdonald p 511

One could call the Casa Fontanalba the epitome of his life's work because it is a work of art in itself. It only has two small reception rooms and two main bedrooms, but the walls of these rooms and the stairwell are decorated floor to ceiling with exquisite floral motifs and with friezes incorporating rock engravings, mottos in Esperanto, and the initials of his visitors. William Morris's words in *The Lesser Arts of Life*, 1882: "Whatever you have in your rooms, think first of the walls; for they are that which makes your house and home" come alive in Clarence's decorations.

Clarence's friend Albert Pelloux wrote:

"Bicknell's house is really worth seeing. You've no idea how he has fitted it out with drawings and pictures, all made by himself on rainy days! It's wonderful to think that he did all this himself... It gives an idea of the prodigious activity of this man, who is full of a sense of poetry and art... In one room, on the walls, are all the initials of his guests, within an ornamental design. We left in the morning at six, and our initials were already in place."¹²

In as much as Clarence helped the MacDonalds to locate to Bordighera, so the MacDonalds helped Clarence with his mountain home. Robert MacDonald, George's 3rd son, was the architect, and Clarence may well have been influenced by Greville, George's eldest son, who was a founder member in 1897 of the Peasants Art Society in Haslemere, England. This society embodied the tenets of the Arts and Crafts Movement that was in full swing at the time, both in Britain and on the continent, which rejected the effects of the industrial revolution both on society and art. Clarence's work in the Casa Fontanalba is no doubt influenced by the Arts and Crafts style. Ironically, Clarence did not own this home, and sadly it is not possible nowadays to view its wonderful interiors, but these illustrations from his albums reflect the style he used.



¹² Valerie Lester: *Marvels: The Life of Clarence Bicknell* p 158. Albert Pelloux was professor of mineralogy at the University of Genoa, the eldest son of Prime Minister Luigi Pelloux and attained the rank of lieutenant colonel of the army.

The lifestyle that Clarence led in the Casa Fontanalba may have been simple and somewhat austere, but Clarence in his own way was no less welcoming to all comers than George and his family. Clarence's beautifully illustrated *Casa Fontanalba Visitors' Book* and the *Book of Guests in Esperanto*, reveal that in the 10 years between 1907 and 1917 that Clarence welcomed visitors to the Casa Fontanalba, over 250 people made their way up the twisty mountain road from St Dalmas de Tende to Casterino. Clarence was usually only there from June till September, so having from 15 to 40 visitors in a season, on top of the long days working in the higher mountains on the rock engravings, must have kept him and his helpers, the Pollinis, busy. Sometimes large families of 5 or 6 would come. And, like the MacDonaldis', Clarence's visitors came from a variety of backgrounds, whether Italian or English, eminent botanists and archaeologists, or the shopkeeper from Bordighera. Interestingly, no MacDonaldis, even Robert, the architect, appear in the visitors' books. And would visitors have been expected to follow his strict schedule and his austere diet? And many of them stayed the night. Despite all this, Clarence still fitted in his field work on the engravings and his regular botanical studies.

We do not know very much about the Villa Rosa, Clarence's Bordighera home. It is right next door to the Anglican Church (no longer consecrated) and now divided into flats. Did he decorate the walls as profusely as he did his house in Casterino and did he receive as many visitors there as he did at the Casa Fontanalba? The answer is probably not: from 1880 and when no longer occupied by his chaplaincy, Clarence – besides his botanical and archaeological interests – devoted himself to philanthropic projects for the local Italians and animating the British community.

This manifested itself in his opening in 1888 of the *Museo Bicknell*. Destined to provide a cultural centre, concerts, plays and exhibitions were held there, many of them fund-raisers for local charities. Later an additional library was built. With a British population in this period of between 5,000 and 7,000, there was no shortage of potential audiences.



MacDONALD: THE MAN OF WORDS

Between 1851 and 1897, Macdonald created over fifty works including novels, fairy tales, plays, essays sermons, and poems. Rolland Hein, MacDonald's biographer, says "he and his friend Lewis Carroll are perhaps the two finest writers of children's literature of the 19th century". All his works are imbued with his profound religious faith and his insistence on justifying the ways of God in his own fashion meant that he defied orthodoxy provoking criticism in many quarters. But it was also this anti-dogmatism that attracted so many Victorians. He believed in the power of imagination to rouse spiritual belief. At the time he had a big following on both sides of the Atlantic, even having, as we have seen, the approval of Queen Victoria. Maybe he lost popularity in the Edwardian era through the heavy religious sermonising overtones in some of his works. But now, however, his renown is growing again with the realisation that he was one of the first great fantasy writers.



At work: George writing, photo taken by Lewis Carroll

A 2018 award-winning documentary *The Fantasy Makers*, directed by Michael Hall and featuring Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, acknowledges the significance of Macdonald alongside J.R.R. Tolkien (*Lord of the Rings*, *The Hobbit*) and C.S. Lewis (*The Tales of Narnia*). The film trilogy of *Lord of the Rings*, and then *The Hobbit*, all directed by Peter Jackson, and then the 3 films from *The Tales of Narnia* (*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*) have been some of the highest grossing films ever made. J.K. Rowling, the creator of Harry Potter, has said she was influenced by the *Inklings*, a literary group of academics and writers started by Tolkien and Lewis in the 1930s.

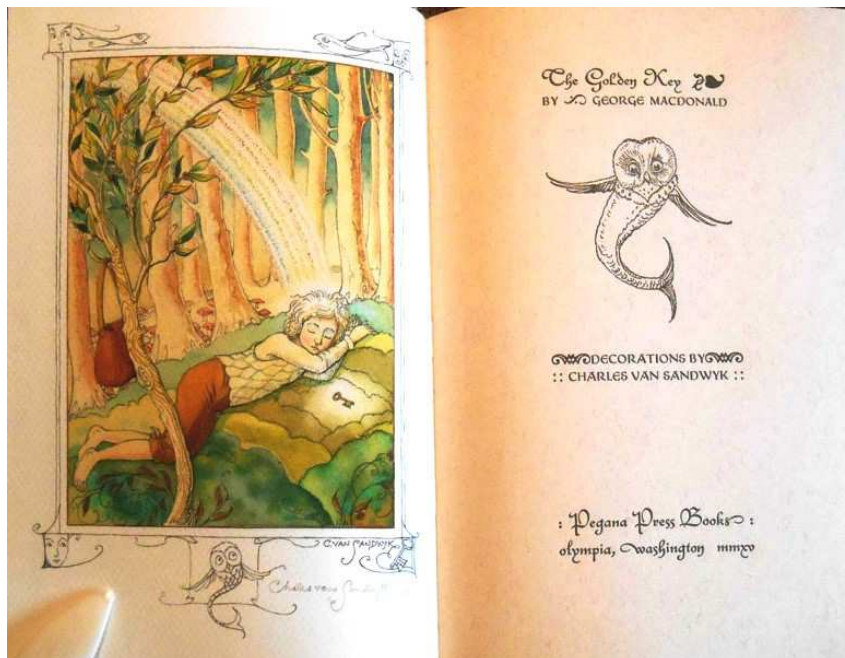
C.S. Lewis (1898-1963) said of MacDonald (1824-1905) "I have never concealed the fact that I regarded him as my master; indeed I fancy I have never written a book in which I did not quote from him. I know nothing that gives me such a feeling of spiritual healing, as being washed, to read MacDonald." C.S. Lewis once remarked that his debt to George MacDonald's writings was "almost as great as one man can owe to another . . . I know hardly any other writer who seems to be closer, or more continually close, to the Spirit of Christ Himself" ¹³

J.R.R. Tolkien (1892-1973) admired and maybe grudgingly acknowledged MacDonald's influence. His goblins and trolls created in the 1930s show a clear similarity to MacDonald's created in the 1860s. Both *The Father*

¹³ Hein, foreword, p 16

Christmas Letters and *The Hobbit*, particularly the latter, demonstrate a clear borrowing of MacDonald's conception of the subterranean race of the goblins, as depicted in *The Princess and Curdie* and *The Princess and the Goblin*. Tolkien acknowledges the similarity more than once, in his letters, alluding to "the goblins of George MacDonald, which they [the goblins of Middle-Earth] do to some extent resemble".¹⁴

MacDonald's fairy tales are the dreamlike and surreal. In one of his most beloved stories, *The Golden Key*, a boy searching for a key at the end of a rainbow, a frightened girl in fairyland who gets tangled in a tree, is saved by a flying fish, led to an old woman's home



where the fish is eaten, but transforms into a fairy, they both enter a valley of shadows..... and the tale continues until, now old, they enter the rainbow.

In contrast to the fantasy, *Robert Falconer*, one of MacDonald's most popular serious novels (and Queen Victoria's favourite) tells the tale of a young man's search for God and the meaning of life. After the death of his parents, Robert's grandmother takes him in. Although she loves and cares for him, she adheres to an austere lifestyle and strict religious doctrines. He is torn between the severe Christianity of his grandmother and the loving God he feels he knows. Robert was MacDonald's favourite character, reflecting his great faith.

MacDonald was not only powerful and prolific with the written word but also in the spoken word. His lecture tours in England, Scotland, the US and the Italian Riviera brought in welcome revenue to bolster the MacDonald's continually fragile finances. He usually lectured on Dante and Shakespeare but on his US tour included Robert Burns as well, where he impressed with his Scottish accent and never using notes.

¹⁴ (Tolkien, *Letters* 185)

[https://www.snc.edu/northwind/documents/By_genre_or_topic/Influences, Contemporaries, and Collaborators/Reluctantly Inspired= George MacDonald and J.R.R. Tolkien - Jason Fisher.pdf](https://www.snc.edu/northwind/documents/By_genre_or_topic/Influences,_Contemporaries,_and_Collaborators/Reluctantly_Inspired=George_MacDonald_and_J.R.R._Tolkien_-_Jason_Fisher.pdf)

BICKNELL: THE MAN OF PICTURES

Clarence's talent lay in the visual. Whether it was his botanical studies, the recordings of the prehistoric engravings, the decoration of the Casa Fontanabla or his imaginative designs, his output was exceptional.

As a child in his home at Herne Hill outside London, Clarence had grown up with great paintings by British artists such as Turner, Gainsborough, David Roberts, Clarkson Stanfield and Edward Landseer. In fact his father commissioned several works by Turner, that include some of his best known such as *The Blue Rigi* and *Giudecca*.

However, Clarence was less interested in emulating these grandiose art works than in drawing and painting the wild flowers that he, as a child, had collected with his mother Lucinda, sister of Phiz and a talented artist. When Clarence settled in Bordighera in 1878, botany became his principal interest and he developed his considerable skill as a botanical artist. Within 5 years he had done over 1,100 botanical watercolours and in 1885, he published *Flowering Plants and Ferns of the Riviera* with 82 plates and notes on 280 species. He donated over 3,300 of his botanical plates to Genoa University and another 1,100 are in other museums and collections.

Clarence was greatly respected as a botanist, and was a driving force in a network of many of the leading botanists of the day such as Emile Burnat in Switzerland, Augusto Béguinot in Genoa and Harold Stuart Thompson in the UK, with whom he exchanged samples and correspondence.



At work: Clarence taking rubbings of the prehistoric engravings

From 1897 onwards, Clarence became more and more absorbed by the prehistoric engravings. He was fascinated – one could say obsessed – by these mysterious visual representations by prehistoric man and spent many years recording more than 11,000 engravings. In the following sentence, taken from his *Guide to the Prehistoric Rock Engravings of the Maritime Alps*, we sense his wonderment:

“Sometimes we have felt that the voices of our prehistoric friends were mingled with the marmot's whistle and the music of the falling streams, and almost expected to find some of them carving their figures and emblems, and to be able to ask them who they were, whence they came, and what was the meaning of their work.”

The presence of the Arts and Crafts style in the decoration of the Casa Fontanabla was also evident in the many vellum albums that Clarence created for family, friends..... and himself. Clarence's artistic talents

flourished when he could let his creative and design skills come to the fore and when he could do more than simply record accurately.

At least 14 of these albums exist, representing hours of work. In those he did for his niece Margaret Berry, now in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, he included his own element of fantasy: perhaps not fantasy like MacDonald, but fantasy none-the-less. Each album has a theme and often includes a play on words such as the *Book of Berries* for Margaret and Edward Berry, and *The Posy*, a book of poems (*la poésie*) decorated with appropriate flowers.



The album dated 1911 contains a procession of the flowers of Fontanalba to celebrate the coronation of King George V; the last dated 1914 is an elaborate fantasy, *The Triumph of the Dandelion*, in which flowers compete to win *The Order of the Golden Lion* (image, left). Page by page each flower presents its

claim to the prize in drawings, prose and verse.

In other albums, Clarence appears to follow the advice of Walter Crane (1845-1915), a leader of the Arts and Crafts movement, who in his books *Bases of Design* (1898) and *Line & Form* (1900), which Clarence owned, advises his readers how to turn natural forms into designs, saying that the plant must first be understood in detail, including how it grows, its character and form. Design 'must build upon some sort of a plan, or a geometric controlling network or scaffolding, so as to give it unity, rhythm, and coherence.' Clarence certainly does this in these particular albums, where his designs resemble the tiles of William de Morgan and William Morris.



CLARENCE AND GEORGE DID NOT LIKE THE “VIE MONDAINE”

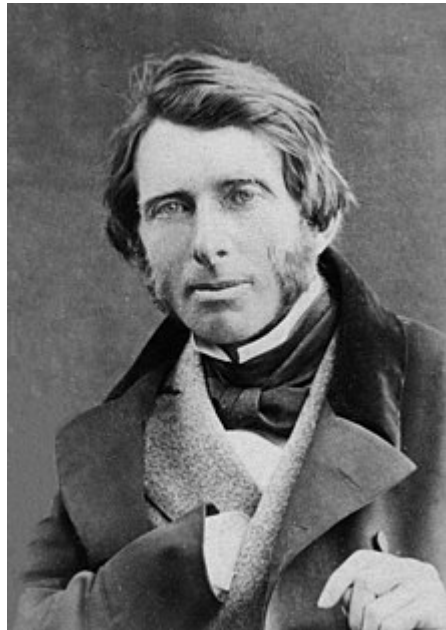
Although stalwarts of Bordighera society, both men often tired of what they – as such hard-working individuals – considered the superficial side of the expat community. Greville MacDonald describes his father’s unhappiness “in Bordighera’s stifling, chattering little community, with its constantly flitting additions from pleasure-seeking, wealthy trippers”.¹⁵

Clarence expresses similar views in a letter to Baroness Helene von Taube: “I am so sick of all the ordinary tea party, church-going people who are so conventional and such gossips and so little of an international spirit”.¹⁶

George could retreat into his huge home with his large family and focus on his writing (he wrote 20 books while in Bordighera). Clarence escaped up to the Casa Fontanalba where he was so happy with the long-serving Luigi Pollini, his wife Mercede and his cook Maddalena.

LINKS TO JOHN RUSKIN

John Ruskin, art critic, philosopher and social reformer, (image, right) was one of the most celebrated figureheads of the Victorian era.



Ruskin supported MacDonald in many ways: he encouraged MacDonald to try for the Professorship of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres at Edinburgh University (he didn’t get it); he came to the MacDonald’s first event at *The Retreat* in 1868, financing a grand piano and with a gift of five Turner engravings; he introduced MacDonald to Octavia Hill who with Ruskin’s patronage led a project to renovate some London slums; and became good friends of the family inspiring invitations for the underprivileged to come to events at *The Retreat*.

MacDonald acted somewhat as a go-between between Ruskin and Rose La Touche in their ill-fated romance. Ruskin, after the annulment of his unconsummated marriage to Effie Gray in 1854, and at the age of 47, developed an infatuation with Rosa la Touche and proposed to her when she was only 17. Not unsurprisingly, her parents whisked her back to Ireland, but she was still undecided about Ruskin by the time she was 21. In 1872, a

¹⁵ Greville MacDonald, *George MacDonald and His Wife*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1924, p.509

¹⁶ Valerie Lester, *Marvels: The Life of Clarence Bicknell*, p 62

friend of both sides, MacDonald arranged for Ruskin and Rosa to meet at *The Retreat* during that summer, but Rosa remained undecided and in fact died in 1875. It was a celebrated affair.

Clarence's link to Ruskin is through his father Elhanan Bicknell. Elhanan had made a fortune through his whale oil business and became a determined and discerning art collector. He built a large house, Herne Hill, just outside London, where Clarence, as his youngest child, grew up surrounded by wonderful paintings and accustomed to visits by well-known artists. Ruskin's parents were next door neighbours, and Ruskin visited often. Elhanan had started collecting and commissioning Turner, and Ruskin in his great book *Modern Painters* defended Turner (and also the pre-Raphaelites). Turner and Ruskin dined at Herne Hill in the 1843 and 1844. Clarence, born 1842, was only 2 and 3 at the time, but as he grew older, he must no doubt have been aware of the significance of his father's choice of paintings.

A LOVE OF ANIMALS

Perhaps rather surprisingly, one of George's favourite activities was horse riding and his novels reveal this love. The family for a time kept both a horse and a cow at their home *The Retreat* in Hammersmith, and when they rented a house near Guildford, Louisa bought George a mare called Kitty, and two ponies for the children. Friends considered this a luxury for the impecunious MacDonalds but for George riding provided relaxation from the pressure of writing and lecturing. On his lecture tour in the US in 1871, he was admired for his skill at driving four-in-hand horses. There is no record of George pursuing his love of horses in Bordighera.¹⁷

Clarence had a pet donkey as a child and adored, in later life, his dog Mahdi, who accompanied him on his expeditions to record the prehistoric engravings. Mahdi is one of the first entries in *The Book of Guests in Esperanto*, along with two other dogs. Clarence was heart-broken when Mahdi died in 1907, but it seems his niece's dog, Robber (photo, right), took over his affections.



¹⁷ Rolland Hein, *George MacDonald Victorian Mythmaker*, Starsong, 1993, p.192, 245,271

FRIENDS OR JUST ACQUAINTANCES?

Clarence had met George at Broadlands at the religious conference; he had encouraged him to choose Bordighera as their home; he'd used Robert, George's son as architect for his beloved mountain home. But were Clarence and George that close? They certainly lived in close proximity, their Bordighera homes being only a few yards from each other. And Clarence probably attended the events at the Casa Coraggio. He certainly became a temporary member of "the company of strolling actors" in January 1882 when the MacDonalds performed *Twelfth Night* in the Theatre of Cannes. Clarence played Orsino, and Lily, one of MacDonald's daughters said he was, "a regular whopper of a stage duke in blue satin garnished with yellow" and his was the only costume they hadn't managed to make.

But as far as we know, there is no mention of each other in correspondence – apart from Clarence's early letters to Louisa. Perhaps they were too absorbed by their own busy lives to become close. Certainly they were far too industrious to become firm members of the tea-party and tennis set.

THEIR LEGACY TO BORDIGHERA

The memory of Clarence has been kept alive through the continued existence of the *Museo Bicknell* that he created, now under the wing of the Institute of Ligurian Studies. Its library is open for research, and no doubt Clarence would be delighted to see that his museum is very much still a cultural centre, holding many events for the local community despite its financial difficulties. With the help of the Clarence Bicknell Association¹⁸, several events took place at the museum and elsewhere to celebrate the centenary of his death in 2018 and a new entrance was built thanks to generous donations.

Clarence has recently become better known in England when the quality of his vellum albums held in the archives of the *Fitzwilliam Museum* in Cambridge was brought to the attention the museum's experts in 2017 by the Clarence Bicknell Association. As a result Clarence featured in a special exhibition at the Fitzwilliam, held in the summer of 2018, called *Floral Fantasies*. His work appeared alongside that of artists like Renoir, Redouté, Walter Crane and Gerard van Spaendonck. His designs have also been chosen for cards and calendars.

It's a different story with George MacDonald. Well-known in his day both in Great Britain and the US, he probably now has more of a following in the US. *The Marion E. Wade Center*, based at Wheaton College, Illinois, focuses on seven writers whose Christian faith was very much part of their literary work. Besides MacDonald, these writers are C.S. Lewis, G.K. Chesterton, Tolkien, Dorothy L. Sayers, Owen Barfield and Charles Williams. And there is a resurgence of interest in him as the father of fantasy writing.

¹⁸ www.clarencebicknell.com



But MacDonald is barely known in Bordighera. Of course, it is much more difficult there to arouse interest in him: his magnificent home is a block of flats and his books have never been well-known in Italy. But Bordighera could perhaps give more recognition to this man and his family who gave so much life to the town at the end of the 19th century. Maybe the *Museo Bicknell* could be the place where the dramatic atmosphere of the Casa Coraggio with its plays, concerts and *tableaux vivants* could be recreated from time to time: certainly an actor could be found to take on the role of the impressive-looking George, an imposing figure when he preached and lectured in the Casa Coraggio. Just remember that “a flag would be flown from the house when charades were going to happen”. And James Linton Bogle said at the time: “It was he that made Bordighera such an attractive place to so many English visitors”.¹⁹

Maybe MacDonald, alongside Clarence, could help make Bordighera a more attractive place to visitors, but to Italians and not just the English.



Clarence Bicknell's respect for George MacDonald is shown by his poem illuminated and hand-written by Clarence in one of the vellum-bound albums of Bicknell's stories and illustrations in the Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge.

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¹⁹ James Linton Bogle, *The Meanderings of a Medico* privately published 1928, pp138/9