

Fritz Mader, Pioneer of Natural History

By Graham Avery, Vice-Chairman of the Clarence Bicknell Association

Fritz Mader (1872-1921) alpinist, geologist, botanist, glaciologist, speleologist and photographer, was the son of the pastor of the German-speaking church in Nice. He was educated at a French Lycée in Nice, at a Gymnasium in Heilbronn, and at Leipzig University. He worked in Leipzig for Baedeker, the publisher of travel guides, but returned regularly over a period of 25 years to visit his parents in Nice, or at their summer home in Tenda¹ from where he explored the surrounding mountains.

His doctoral thesis at Leipzig was on the physical geography of the Maritime and Ligurian Alps, and his guide-book to the Riviera included many excursions in the Maritime Alps. He published more than 50 articles, mainly on the natural history of the Maritime Alps, in journals of Italian and French societies such as the *Club Alpino Italiano*, *Club Alpin Français*, *Société des Lettres, Sciences & Arts des Alpes-Maritimes*, and in English in the *Gardeners' Chronicle*.

Mader played a key role in 1897 in launching Clarence Bicknell (1842-1918) on the work of recording the rock engravings in the Maritime Alps which led to Bicknell's international recognition as a pioneer in the study of prehistoric rock art².

It was through my research into Clarence Bicknell that I became interested in Fritz Mader. He deserves to be better known as a pioneer of the natural history of the Maritime Alps, and I am now engaged in writing his biography.

One of Mader's first articles, published in 1896 at the age of 24, when he was studying in Leipzig, began with this passionate declaration of his love of the mountains:

“Blessed is he who, having his regular place of work in a great industrial city, in the midst of interminable flatlands, may nevertheless have the time and opportunity to spend part of the year in the Alps! Thus it is that I, tired of my life's monotony and my many studies, have travelled every summer for the last six years from Leipzig to Tenda, where my parents pass their holidays. It's there, in that invigorating climate, among the mountains that call to me to visit them, that I have been able to renew my strength and calm my nerves, and to discover a natural world that is so worthy of attention and study. During the cold foggy winters in Leipzig, it has been a comfort to study the publications that I have found on the Alps and Alpine matters, and to put together what I could write myself about the mountains that I have explored, on the basis of observations made with my own poor means, or the findings of other visitors. My work is no doubt full of gaps and defects, but what above all has encouraged me to pursue it is my love of the Alps, in which I have spent the best days of my life.”

¹ At that time in Italy, now known as Tende since its transfer to France in 1947

² See my article *Egregio Signore, Fritz Mader's correspondence with Clarence Bicknell in 1897* published at https://clarencebicknell.com/wp-content/uploads/mader_bicknell_correspondence_1897_avery_2020.pdf

The article continues with an amusing account of an excursion made in 1893:

“In Tenda I made the acquaintance of Mr. W. Symington, a Scotsman who had already toured the Swiss Alps and the Mediterranean lands. He expressed the desire to know the Maritime Alps, so I suggested that he accompany me on an excursion, on condition that he accept my plans. On 17 August he and I left Tenda, in the company of 4 other men and 10 young ladies, and after a very happy day we spent the night at Casterino. On the 18th two young men and the 6 best ladies accompanied us to the lower lake of Valmasca, where they left us and we continued the same itinerary that I made in 1892. After staying overnight at the huts of Tetto Nuovo, we climbed Cima del Diavolo. The passage below Passo del Trem was a new thing for Mr. S. who was not used to jumping from one boulder to another, or climbing such big rocks. He held back, but finally we reached Cluots in Val Gordolasca, where we spent the night in a hay-barn.

“On the next day we went back up the valley to Vastera Barma, where the floor of the Club Alpin Français shelter was so muddy that we decided to spend the night in the open. Not far away we lit a fire of rhododendrons, wrapped ourselves up, and covered our feet with dry grass. It was a fine, mild night. At 5.00 the next morning we made our way through the grand, grassy amphitheatre of La Fous, surrounded by high mountains, and then by a good path from the Clapier lakes up to a kind of terrace just below Passo Pagari. The weather was beautiful (you could see the sea), so I suggested to Mr. S. that we make the ascent of Clapier. After some difficulties, at 10.30 we reached the top, where the air was so calm that one could have lit a match. On the biggest cairn was a stick with a handkerchief, placed there by Lieutenant Cornaro in October 1892. We stopped for three-quarters of an hour, and took three photographs.

“I decided to go down to Passo Pagari on the west side, crossing the upper part of a sloping snowfield and then through debris to reach its base. This becomes narrow, and stops abruptly above a sheer wall, so that anyone trying to cross there would, if he slipped, make a deadly somersault. Not wishing to risk the leap, or ascend again, I decided to keep to the rocks on the right, which we descended with the aid of our hands, finally reaching the top edge of the western snowfield of Clapier, which has a slope of about 30 degrees. We had no ice axe, crampons, or metal-tipped sticks, so there was nothing for it but to slide down. I could hardly restrain my laughter when I saw Mr. S. roll down, legs and arms in the air, with his effects flying here and there; he tried to sit on his wool jacket, but it went up on high. On my side, the slope was steeper, and after leaping over a narrow deep crevasse, I was impelled downwards with dizzying speed on hard and uneven snow, jolted and shaken by jumps of increasing speed and size. If it had been higher, I think I would have broken my bones, but I only tore the skin of my fingers trying to stop myself. Then I saw Mr. S. attempting in vain to regain his jacket. I did the same, and managed to carve steps, first with the tip of my camera-stand, then with a wretched penknife, and returned by sliding down again.

“We reached Passo Pagari at 14.00. According to the map we needed to descend alongside the Maledia glacier, which begins on the northern side, and having crossed a small crevasse, I followed its lower part, thinking that Mr. S. was behind me. But when I turned around, I couldn't see him, and he didn't answer my cries, which made me very anxious. As I was climbing the front moraine, I saw him descending rapidly an easy slope to the east. This was the only time that we were separated, and he didn't complain. We then took the hunters' road,

with wonderful views of Lago Bianco, the snow and the surrounding mountains. We managed to reach San Giacomo just before 21.00, after 15 hours' walk with only two hours' rest.

“On the next day we went up the valley to the lower gias Monighet, where the engineer B. Sacerdote was making a topographical survey with his assistants. He received us with splendid courtesy, and offered us a good dinner and lodging for the night. The next morning, we took leave of these gentlemen, and went up a mule track to the upper gias, and then down into the Lourousa valley, whose scenery is among the most grandiose in these parts. During the whole journey to Terme di Valdieri we found water at only one place, since the Lourousa stream flows almost continuously under masses of boulders. Its murmurs were like the torments of Tantalus.

“A strange incident showed how even in the mountains there can be danger when one least expects it. A mule, belonging to woodcutters encamped nearby, stood in the road with its back turned to us. I tried to pass, but he gave me two kicks that would have shattered my knees if they hadn't hit my camera-stand. After 21.00 we reached Terme di Valdieri, where we were greeted by festive music. But it wasn't in our honour. The waiters were not happy to see our brigand-like appearance, which contrasted with the beautiful dresses of the ladies and the brilliant uniforms of the officers.”

Extracts from *Escursioni e studi nelle Alpi Marittime*, Fritz Mader, Bollettino del Club Alpino Italiano Vol. XXIX No 62 (1895-96) 1896, pp 181-259 (my translations)

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