



## CHAPTER TEN

# THE ROCK ENGRAVINGS

It is a hellish place, with figures of devils and a thousand demons engraved everywhere on the rocks.

Pierre de Montfort<sup>152</sup>

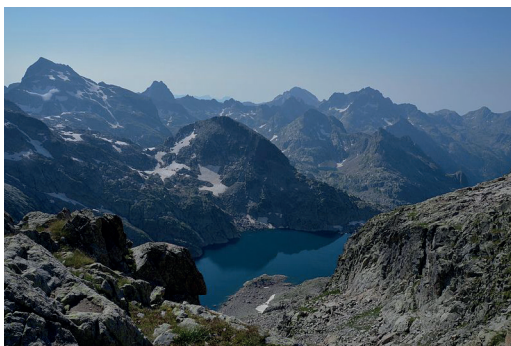


Soon after coming to winter in the Riviera in 1879, I heard of the Meraviglie, and two years later walked up there from San Dalmazzo with friends, returning the same evening. It was in the early days of June, and as there was so much snow upon the rocks we saw very little. In September of 1885 I went there again, having slept at the Miniera. [Mines near the Lac des Mesches between St Dalmas and Casterino that produced zinc, silver and lead.] This time I was able to explore more fully, saw figures on both sides of the Vallone and lake, and made about 50 drawings in my sketch-book.

So wrote Clarence in Chapter III, 'The Story of Our Own Explorations', in his book *A Guide to the Prehistoric Rock Engravings of the Italian Maritime Alps* (1913).<sup>153</sup>

The Vallée des Merveilles, the Valle delle Meraviglie of which Clarence had heard, was the site of rock engravings in the region of Mont Bégo, higher up in the Maritime Alps than he had so far been. Situated between the Col de la Madeleine and the Col de Tende, in the mountainous border region between France and Italy, the region was covered by permanent ice in the Quaternary period, but is now, in the lovely words of Gabriella Parodi, 'furrowed by deep valleys and gorges, rich in grand circuses, and constellated with many, many lakes.'<sup>154</sup> Thirty-five thousand images engraved in the Bronze Age onto flat rocks in the open are only free of snow from June to October; Clarence located and made copies of 12,000 of them.

To reach the carvings, Clarence had to travel to Ventimiglia by train, and then hire a coach and horses to follow the Roya valley gorge, with its precipitous limestone cliffs, up to St Dalmas.



The Lac Long, Mont Bégo and Mont Clapier seen from the northwest, the Gelas pass.

Mont Bégo (2,872 metres high) dominates the Vallée des Merveilles, the Val Fontanalba and the Valmasque, where the rock engravings are found. Viewed southeast from the Chiappes de Fontanalba.

C.B., *Breil-sur-Roya, February 1882*, watercolour.

By mule or on foot, he travelled from St Dalmas up the steep path to Les Mesches (the lake at Les Minières) and then southwest until veering north into the Vallée des Merveilles, a deep defile in the shadow of Mont Bégo. (English-speakers today use the French name Vallée de Merveilles, rather than Valley of Marvels. The Italian

name Valle delle Meraviglie was used in Clarence's time. The upper Roya valley, including Tende, La Brigue, Casterino and the Bégo mountain area, became part of France in 1947. San Dalmazzo is now St Dalmas.) There the valley opened up into the wild and desolate Val d'Inferno, the Valley of Hell. This valley was not alone in bearing a threatening name. The surrounding mountains also bore titles such as Devil's Mountain and Shaking Mountain, names given in the Middle Ages, when mountains were regarded as fearful objects. As late as 1878, Edmond Blanc wrote about the area: 'The summits of Monte Bego, of the Capelet and of the Cima del Diavolo, seem to be immense skeletons of an infernal divinity. Here reigns the silence of the tomb and if anyone speaks in a loud voice to give a little life to this horrible solitude, there is no responding echo.'<sup>155</sup> The area's reputation did not discourage Clarence, who had few limits when he had a goal in mind. Even though the walk from St Dalmas to the Merveilles was 20 kilometres up and 20 kilometres back down again, with an altitude gain of 1,400 metres,<sup>156</sup> he took it in his stride.

The rock carvings of the Vallée des Merveilles had been mentioned in print as early as 1690 by Pierre Gioffredo (1629–1692) in his *Histoire des Alpes Maritimes*, but Gioffredo had not

seen the rocks himself. He had received information about them from Onorato Laurenti (born Honoré de Laurens), a parish priest at Belvedere, west of Mont Béggo. Laurenti may not have seen them either but heard about them from hunters or herdsmen. Gioffredo claims that ‘the authors of these spirited jokes were probably only shepherds and herdsmen who wished to while away their idle hours.’ This claim was reasonable, but in 1821, in his *Voyage aux Alpes Maritimes*, François Emmanuel Fodéré speculated that the carvings had been made by Carthaginian soldiers, in the army of Hasdrubal, on their way back to Africa because ‘the writing was neither Greek, nor Latin, nor Arabic, but one might conjecture was Punic.’<sup>157</sup> And in 1864, Elisée Reclus, in his *Villes d’Hiver*, wrote that the mountain people claimed the rocks were engraved by the soldiers of Hannibal.

It was not until 1868 that the botanist Matthew Moggridge – father of John Traherne Moggridge whose book on the wildflowers of the Riviera had impelled Clarence to produce his own volume on the subject – wrote about the carvings. Accompanied by a fellow naturalist and friend of Bismarck, Herr Dieck, Moggridge made a two-day trip up into the Vallée des Merveilles to see for himself the ‘Marvels’ about which they had heard so much from the local people. Unfortunately, the weather was too wet and they were unable to take any rubbings and casts, so Dieck made quick pencil sketches while Moggridge scouted out new subjects. Moggridge was sceptical about their being the work of Hannibal’s soldiers because ‘Hannibal, in that country, plays the same role as Caesar, Oliver Cromwell, and his Satanic Majesty in England.’<sup>158</sup> That is, he was everywhere but nowhere in particular.

Other explorers followed, having heard about the rock engravings, but they often failed to locate them. They spent far more time arguing about the provenance of the carvers than patiently examining the carvings, copying them, and collecting data.

Already fascinated by the alpine flora that flourished during the short summers in the mountains, Clarence’s excursions took him higher and higher as he sought rare species that eluded him at lower levels. But his trip to the Vallée des Merveilles in June of 1881 was a disappointment because any flowers that had dared to raise their heads were covered by a spring snowfall, as were the rock carvings themselves. However, his return in September of 1885 was far more satisfactory. Snow had not yet fallen on the valley and the autumn light cast low shadows that made the incisions much more visible than they were in the flat light of high summer. He sketched about 50 of the figures, fascinated by what he saw. It would not be until 1897 that he saw them again.

In the meantime, he spent his summers between Italy, England, Ireland, Switzerland – and Germany in 1894, where he spent 16–19 August at Bayreuth wallowing in Wagner, attending *Lohengrin*, *Tannhäuser* and *Parsifal* on successive days. He had been captivated by Wagner, as is evident from certain books in his library, such as *How to Understand Wagner’s Ring of the Nibelung* and the libretti of *Siegfried*, *The Twilight of the Gods*, *The Rhinegold* and *The Valkyries*.

Clarence decided not to travel abroad in the summer of 1897, but instead to head back up the Roya Valley and into the Mont Béggo region to indulge in cool weather and the opportunity to botanise at ever greater heights. He knew he would find unusual Alpine plants flourishing among the acidic rocks, plants unlike those that prospered in the alkaline, calcareous rock of most of the

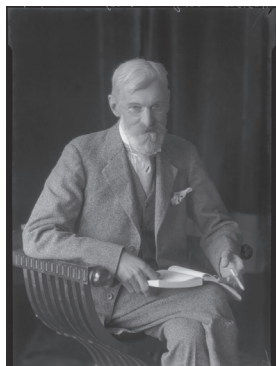


C.B., *Casterino looking North*  
6.7.97, sketch, 1897.

Alpine chain. He told Burnat that he intended to occupy himself with the study of *Hieracium* (hawkweed) to annoy Saverio Belli, the specialist in this flower and with collecting plants for exchanges.<sup>160</sup>

He rented a house for the summer in the hamlet of Casterino – sometimes called la Maddalena because of the chapel located there – from Arturo Pellegrino of Tende, on the recommendation of Émile Burnat, who had previously stayed there. Signor Pellegrino's house must have been quite commodious because it could house Clarence, his house guests, and his domestic staff, who consisted of his cook Maddalena and Luigi Pollini.

On his arrival at Signor Pellegrino's, Clarence was accompanied by his nephew Arthur Berry, Edward's brother, and he was awaiting the arrival of his protégé, the tenor Pietro Zeni. The next visitors to arrive were another nephew, James Berry and his wife, Dr (Frances) May Dickinson, an anaesthetist. This couple had the reputation for having friendly altercations in the operating



Lafayette, *Sir James Berry*, half-plate  
nitrate negative, 1 September  
1928.



Lafayette, *Frances May (née  
Dickinson), Lady Berry*, half-plate  
nitrate negative, 1 September  
1928.



The staff at Pellegrino's house are on the stairs with Luigi Pollini at the top. Clarence is sitting on the bottom step next to Dr May Dickinson Berry, Sir James Berry, 'aunt Manin' with the sick chamois, and 'Luigi Cameriere' according to a pencil-written note on the back of the photo.

theatre of the Royal Free Hospital.

They brought with them ropes and ice axes and the intention to climb Mont Bégo and Mont Clapier. They may not have been the most relaxing of visitors, but gained Clarence's gratitude for the medical care they paid to a little chamois, orphaned when its mother was killed by someone whom Clarence scornfully called 'one of those so-called "sportsmen" for whom no life is sacred.'<sup>161</sup> One can hear the hiss as he utters the words 'so-called "sportsmen"'. He continues the tale: 'A goat came three times a day to give it milk, but, even though the little creature appeared to be in good health for some time and was quite tame, playing and climbing and descending the stairs behind us, she suddenly fell ill.' At that point, the Doctors Berry called upon their combined professional skills in the hope of saving her, but she died within half an hour 'to our great sorrow.'

By 7 July, Clarence was able to write to Burnat that 'we are well settled here . . . we have everything necessary, and the air and water are very refreshing after the heat and dust of the Riviera . . . every day I jump into the river, and I eat like a wolf.' It is worth bearing in mind that the river water was snow melt. 'My nephew thought he would be roughing it in this place so far



C.B., *Saxifraga florulenta*, watercolour. UniGen.

*Saxifraga florulenta* like to hide among the rocks. 2017. Courtesy of Elisabetta Massardo.

from civilization, but [he found] that it was not a bad thing to have for a dinner in the mountains good soup, trout, cutlets, tomatoes, salad, cheese, fruit and tea ices (that Luigi made with snow and which were exceptionally good).’

In a letter written on 15 September 1897 to Arturo Issel, Clarence mentioned James and May Berry:

My nephew, who together with his wife, were with me in Val Casterino, returned to England (by bicycle) via Ivrea, Aosta, il piccolo S. Bernardo ecc. If only I had known that you were staying near Ivrea! I would have asked you to meet him. This would not have been annoying for you because he is a truly distinguished young man, one of the best surgeons in London, and is much taken up with geology.<sup>162</sup>



Arturo Issel (1842–1922), archaeologist at the University of Genoa.

The most arresting statement in this paragraph is that James and May travelled back to England by bicycle; they may well have arrived by bicycle too. Just imagine the mountains they rode up and down as they left Italy, a feat that James managed to accomplish in spite of having one leg shorter than the other. May was nothing if not a modern woman, dashing and brave. She would have taken well to bicycling bloomers, which were all the rage in the 1890s.

‘I am very, very happy with my stay here,’ wrote Clarence to Burnat in August. He was thoroughly enjoying the fresh air, his plunges into the river, and his treks into the mountains, especially a long circuit from Casterino via the Minières to the Lac des Merveilles by the col to the Basto lake and a descent from Valmasque, finally returning to Casterino.

‘We did so well, my nephew and I, in 11 hours with plenty of stops.’ Nonetheless, the seemingly indestructible Clarence was not exempt from human frailty. As he told Burnat, ‘In recent days I have had to stay at home, spending much time in bed, having really annoying haemorrhoids which prevent me from walking.’<sup>163</sup>

Clarence had one other complaint: the lack of interesting wildflowers in the area, and he confessed to Burnat that ‘botanically I have done very little. It is much less rich here than at Val Pesio, and even when I climb up to the lakes of Valmasca, d’Agnel, the Meraviglie, and M. Bégo (where nothing escapes the goats!) I always find the same old plants.’ And he had spent many fruitless, frustrating hours searching for the rare *Saxifraga florulenta*.

His persistence paid off. By the end of the summer he related to Burnat that he had finally found that elusive plant in bloom. Although Clarence does not describe the actual moment he saw it, the great plant collector Reginald Farrer (1880–1920) was extravagant in his description of his sighting of it in 1910 on the Col de Cerise: ‘Grey obscurity enveloped all the slope, swirling and shifting, lightening and darkening. And now the sharp zigzags of the track brought me up against the buttress of Mercantour. For an instant the mist dissolved into a pearly shade. And in that momentary rending of the veil I found myself looking straight into the face of *Saxifraga florulenta*.

For a moment I could not believe my eyes; for another moment I felt convinced, insanely, that some botanist must have put the rosette there as a practical joke . . . Then, when my reason had ceased rocking on its seat, I rent the welkin with a cry of triumph.’ After his great yell, Farrer calmed down and ‘in awe-stricken silence contemplated for the first time the Ancient King of his race, the most wonderful plant in all the ranges of the Alps.’<sup>164</sup>

The Ancient King is a large and rare succulent with a small range, found exclusively within the central section of the Maritime Alps between Tende and Argentera. Fussy about its location, it finds its preferred home in crevices of acidic rock, often hiding in hard-to-reach spots. Year by year, over decades, its fleshy leaves multiply into a perfect rosette until it is mature enough to flower. Then (the eloquent Farrer again); ‘Up from its heart comes a stout glandular spike which develops into a stocky spire, of some eight or ten inches, very thickly set with nodding flowers of a purple rose, most wonderful to see.’ Its 40 or more bell-shaped flowers are impossible to miss. But that’s it; once having achieved its reproductive climax, it withers and dies. No wonder the Ancient King used to be the emblem of the modern-day Parc National du Mercantour, which includes the Vallée des Merveilles and the Val Fontanalba.

The rock on which the Ancient King flourishes is the same acidic rock – schist, sandstone, and granite – that presented such excellent purple, orange, green and yellow patinated faces on which to carve petroglyphs. As Christopher Chippindale points out, ‘On these inviting surfaces are inscriptions of all periods: prehistoric figures totalling upwards of 50,000; an obscurely obscene Roman message (Gascou, 1976); renaissance names and blazons; shepherds’ and highwaymen’s marks; recent tourist graffiti; and even Provisional IRA slogans.’<sup>165</sup> Modern graffitists have tended to use metal tools to inflict their contributions, but the prehistoric artists used a different technique, namely repeatedly hammering into the rock to peck out little cupules, and with them forming lines. Chippindale suggests that their tools were made of quartz,<sup>166</sup> and Clarence suggests quartz too, or other hard stone, not metal, since no trace of metal had ever been found near the engravings. About the artists’ technique, he says: ‘The little round holes . . . vary in diameter from one to five millimetres, and are of about the same depth.’<sup>167</sup> He claims that for the majority of figures two tools were used, one as a chisel, one as a hammer.





C.B., *Farm and hay stooks in Val Casterino*, watercolour.



'The voices of our prehistoric friends were mingled with the marmot's whistle'.

To those Bronze Age people spending long summer days up in the mountains, what temptation those rock faces offered to create *something*, something whose mystery is still the subject of debate. Clarence sensed the presence of those carvers: '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.'<sup>168</sup>

Although Clarence had seen the rock carvings in the Vallée des Merveilles in 1885, it was not until he stayed in Val Casterino in the summer of 1897 that he became aware of another large collection in nearby Val Fontanalba. He had joined the Italian Alpine Club in 1890,<sup>169</sup> and in 1897 he wrote to the secretary of the club, asking for information about the Merveilles. Clarence describes what had happened: 'He referred me to Dr. Fritz Mader, an Associate who had a thorough knowledge of the Maritime Alps, and who spent his summers in Tenda. It was then, through the full and courteous reply to a letter that I wrote to Dr. Mader that we first heard of there being inscriptions in the valley near us, and we immediately went up to search for ourselves.'<sup>170</sup> Mader was a young German alpinist, writer of Baedeker guides, and natural historian.

By August, Clarence was able to write to Burnat: 'I'm very charmed again by the Meraviglie and more than ever absolutely convinced that the inscriptions – that is, the old ones – are prehistoric. I'm in correspondence with Dr Mader of Tenda (who speaks of you) and he has given me lots of information on the subject – he also tells me that similar inscriptions have recently been found in Val Fontanalba – that's what I thought when I saw the same kind of rocks there. In a few days I will begin a series of excursions – I would like to find them and draw them.'<sup>171</sup> He did just that, as Mader recounts: 'Recently a learned botanist, Monsieur Clarence Bicknell of Bordighera – where he founded a public museum with a free library and a conference hall – spent three summers (1897, 1898 et 1901) at the Pellegrino house in Val Casterino; when I told him there were inscriptions in the Val Fontanalba that he had not yet encountered, he set about studying them and ended up copying about 650.'<sup>172</sup>

Clarence greatly appreciated Mader's help and his industriousness – in 1900 Mader published a 450-page guide-book to the Riviera in German – but the young man had certain shortcomings, as Clarence explained to Burnat: 'He is very well-educated, intelligent, but so deaf. He does not wish to use an ear trumpet, and today I have a terrible sore throat.'<sup>173</sup>

The Val Fontanalba, secluded and far from the acknowledged path towards Mont Bégo, is nowhere mentioned in the literature until 1886, when Professor Emanuele Celesia of Genoa and his colleague, Professor Bacchialoni, plus the Tende schoolmaster and two guides, set off from Tende and made the long ascent. On the way, they encountered two goatherds who knew of the engravings and were willing to help locate them. The report that Celesia published of this excursion,<sup>174</sup> together with seventy drawings, was the first account of the rock engravings in the Val Fontanalba. Later, Clarence criticised some of the drawings and allowed that Celesia's paper was 'chiefly a treatise on the Phoenicians, whom he considers to have been the authors of the engravings.' He continued: 'This is all that has been written about Val Fontanalba till lately and the region was forgotten and unvisited till we ourselves in the summer of 1897, twelve years later, went to spend the summer in Val Casterino.'<sup>175</sup>

Clarence had already visited the Val Fontanalba earlier that summer, walking very close to the engravings without seeing them. As he says, '

I had, only a few weeks previously been up the Val Fontanalba for the first time with a nephew. The sight of some chamois on the snow slopes in the distance enticed us on and, when near the foot of Monte Bego, we decided to come back another way crossing over the rocks to the foot of M. Santa Maria. We passed over a number of smooth yellow rocks, and I remember observing that they were exactly like those at the Merveilles, but intent on looking for plants and choosing as far as possible the grassy strips rather than the rocks, I noticed no figures, though I now know that I must have passed quite close to many.'<sup>176</sup>

Armed with the advice of Fritz Mader, who had informed him of Celesia's report, Clarence sallied



C.B., Lago Verde, August 11, 1897, in pocket sketchbook.

Ezio Benigni (attributed), Rock engravings 'near the upper margheria'.





Luigi Pollini rubs a rock engraving while Clarence and Mahdi relax. Possibly the photograph was taken by Alice Campbell.

forth again with Edward Berry, and at once came across a number of engravings just beyond the Lago Verde.

Thereafter, he and Luigi quickly established a working routine, leaving Casterino as early as 5 in the morning and making the hour-and-a-half trek up into the Val Fontanalba before they reached the area of the rock engravings. ‘At first we made some 450 small drawings, but seeing that they were far from satisfactory, we procured large sheets of paper from Tenda and began to take pencil rubbings. We made about 211 of these in 13 long days.’<sup>177</sup> They invited Ezio Benigni, Bordighera’s pre-eminent photographer, to join them and record the engravings, and he took some startlingly good photographs with his large, professional camera.

‘What is a field naturalist to do? First, to search and find. Then, to record and describe. Then, to classify’, writes Christopher Chippindale, a devoted student of and writer about Bicknell since the 1980s. ‘All these things Bicknell did.’<sup>178</sup> Clarence’s work that summer was the beginning of his 12-year compulsion to describe the rock engravings using methods not unlike those used in his botany, noting place and date, copying and recording them.

Later Clarence commented on this compulsion.<sup>179</sup> ‘I am only an amateur botanist, and have gone up into these neighbouring mountains in my summer holidays in order to study their Flora; but the fascination of the rocks has made me neglect my special hobby; and I have spent the greater part of my time in making drawings and taking notes of the rock figures’.

When he wrote to Burnat on returning to Bordighera in September, Clarence admitted that he had paid scant attention to wildflowers that summer in light of the discovery of so many interesting rock engravings. He allowed that, though beautiful, he did not find Casterino and the Valmasque botanically rich, although he and Luigi had often dined on wonderful *uva spina* [gooseberries], raspberries, bilberries – and mushrooms.

It may seem that by 1897 Clarence’s summer life was focused entirely on rocks and flowers, but from his home in Bordighera during the rest of the year he took leave from his scientific observation to attend social gatherings, lectures, the opera, and the theatre. For instance, in a letter to Arturo Issel, he writes that he had visited the botanists Gibelli and Belli in Turin, but that ‘The Duse cheated us, announcing at the last moment to the Turinese public that she was remaining in Milan and not performing in Turin, which meant that I like many other people who had already bought tickets a few weeks ago lost out. Naturally the company returned our money, but not the cost of the trip nor our faith in the lady.’<sup>180</sup> The Duse was Eleanora Duse (1858–1924), the great Italian actress.

In the same letter, Clarence tells Issel that he tried out ‘a few kinds of Camera Lucida . . . but I ended up buying a pantograph’, a device which would have enabled Clarence to reduce in size copies of his drawings.

Clarence returned to Casterino in August 1898, having spent the previous three weeks in

hectic London, followed by a few relaxing days in the bliss of Ada's garden in Kent doing nothing but reading and writing or walking in the woods and fields. Back in the mountains, he tried another method of recording the engravings, and recounted that with better paper and heelball, he and Luigi did better work.

Heelball is a mixture of lampblack and hard wax, manufactured for giving the dense black colour to the heels of shoes. He had also been convinced that photography was an extremely good method of recording the truth. Not wanting to own a camera as cumbersome as Benigni's, Clarence invested in two small versions, a Kodak and a Frena. Luigi took over as photographer and carried all the photographic equipment, along with much else, such as food, water, and paper on which to make rubbings of the engravings. By the end of the summer, Clarence crowed that they brought home 538 rubbings in their 12 visits and about a hundred photographs. They also carried away two small pieces of detached rock each with a horned figure on it, one of which Clarence kept for the Museo Bicknell, the other he sent to the British Museum.<sup>181</sup>

Here are excerpts from the accompanying letter:

Bordighera, Italy  
1 September 1897

Dear Sir,

I have been spending the summer in a valley of the Maritime Alps, about 4 hours walk from Tenda. In and above the Fontanalba, at 2 hours walk from us, the rocks are covered with figures, similar to the well-known ones by the neighbouring Laghi delle Meraviglie . . .

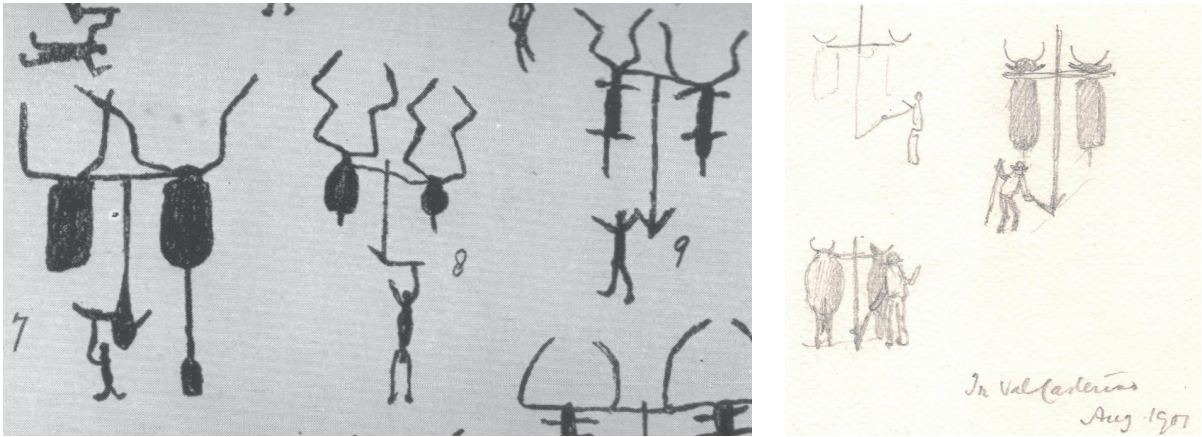
I have spent so far 11 long days up there, exploring and making some drawings and rubbings, and yesterday I and my servant managed to bring home a piece of rock, detached from a large rock surface on which we counted about 308 figures, with a figure on it of which I will send you a rubbing.

I write to ask you if you care to have this for the B. Museum? . . . The thing, whatever it be, figured on the rock, is one of the commonest types. It has always been taken for granted by the numerous writers . . . that they are heads of sheep, goats, cows, chamois, ibex, deer, elks &c &c. *Perhaps* some may be, but I am inclined to think they more probably represent insects . . .<sup>182</sup>

Clarence soon revised his opinion about insects being the subject matter, deciding that the drawings represented the horns of cattle, ploughs, and property boundaries. Chippindale writes 'Bicknell's key insight was to recognise the pictures of ploughs. In these two of the horned forms



Clarence mailed this rock with an engraving of a horned figure to the British Museum in 1897.



Clarence's key insight was to recognise the pictures of ploughs. On the left, some of many rock engravings of a plough drawn by two oxen, from Clarence Bicknell *A Guide to the Prehistoric Rock Engravings of the Italian Maritime Alps* (1913). On the right, a sketch of August 1901 in Val Casterino that demonstrates how clearly Clarence saw what the rock engravings were showing.

are joined together by a yoke linked to a shaft with a ploughshare. The ploughman is sometimes drawn in behind.'

Clarence's new career as an amateur archaeologist was off to a flying start. He was fascinated by the engravings. He applied the techniques he used when collecting flowers to document the engravings: he would list them, copy them, and describe where and on what date they were found. However, his methodology was simple and he realised its shortcomings, stating 'we are fully aware that if scientific men had had the opportunities we had, they probably would have made more important discoveries. They would have known where best to have looked for the traces of habitations or burial places of the prehistoric sculptors, and might have found what we have failed to do, and shed more light upon their mysterious work. We are only the collectors of facts, and must leave to others the task of studying them more profoundly.'<sup>183</sup> Nonetheless, the mere collector of facts wrote about the engravings that winter, and delivered his paper at the Società Linguistica in Genoa. The following year he wrote another paper for their bulletin. It is notable that he only ever wrote one article about the engravings for a British publication,<sup>184</sup> and did not join any British archaeological societies, having distanced himself from his roots and academic archaeology.

In claiming he was merely a collector of facts, Clarence was being far too modest. His painstaking documentation of the engravings is an enduring record of their existence and condition at the beginning of the twentieth century, a record that can forever be consulted. His recording of details is far more useful to modern-day scientists than any amount of wrong-headed speculation about their provenance by eminent archaeologists. Chippindale confirms 'Bicknell's efforts make his work the model for work a century later.'<sup>185</sup>

All the same, by the beginning of 1899, Clarence had begun to formulate his own theory about the people who carved the rocks. He told Burnat that he felt 'they were, at least in part, farmers and I believe they cultivated the ancient terraces of Fontanalba –between 1000 and 1500 years before J.C. – and I also believe, without doubt, that they went there for their

religious festivals.<sup>186</sup> Apparently the Sorcerer, the most mystical of the rock engravings, was having an effect on him.

‘Happily we were always haunted by the thoughts of our prehistoric friends who seemed to be calling us back again,’<sup>187</sup> wrote Clarence about the gap of two years when he and Luigi did not revisit their discoveries. He did not resist their call; in 1901, he rented Signor Pellegrino’s house again, where he anticipated a visit from Émile Burnat, telling him that a wonderful meal awaited him on arrival, made from everything delicious they could forage: sorrel soup, trout from the river, purée of Good King Henry [goosefoot], many varieties of mushroom – all exquisite and very good for the health – and a salad of dandelion and salad burnet.

In a collection of letters<sup>188</sup> to Clarence’s best friend, Rosa Fanshawe Walker, his niece Margaret Berry sheds light on everyday life at Signor Pellegrino’s house in Casterino.

The first letter, written on 15 August 1901, describes how Clarence and Edward, her husband and two domestics, Maddalena and Libera, head off at 6.30 on a ‘short’ walk, returning for lunch at 11.30. Margaret admits to staying behind and lazing around in a deck chair, wrapped up in a rug and all her winter clothes, while Luigi keeps house. ‘The Uncle is very well and fat and sunburnt and distinctly “good” . . . He seems thoroughly happy here, and enjoys every minute of the days, always “so busy there is not a minute to spare” and “no time to read.”’ She continues:

Rob [Margaret’s dog] is very happy here and is much interested in and rather afraid of 6 rabbits which are loose about the house and yard and which are to be killed shortly to feast Mr and Mrs Pellegrino’s daughter and son-in-law and family who are arriving on Friday, tomorrow.

The utter peacefulness of this is perfect. No rings at the bell . . . Nothing to do but to eat. Sleep. Vegetate. Read, write, work as one’s fancy prompts or wander about in the grass and the rocks or by the rushing river side.

You will be glad to hear that the smell in the WC is not so bad as it was and that it has been cleaned and whitewashed and is really respectable outwardly. What it is inwardly I do not know . . . I am going to make minute enquiries about the cleaning out of the horrible pit, but perhaps it is best to leave it while we are here and not rake up horrors of smells in the effort to clean it out . . .

No sign of lack of food here as yet. *Far* too much to eat at every meal.<sup>189</sup>

For Margaret to complain that there was too much food tells us that Maddalena was overproviding and that Clarence himself was putting on weight.

She wrote again to Rosa on 23 August, describing the pattern of the days in Casterino. Clarence and Edward consumed a breakfast of coffee and ‘large wedges of toast and butter’ at



Luigi Pollini, *Le Sorcier* (The Sorcerer), photo IISL.

6.30. Margaret indulged her 'natural laziness' for another half hour. 'The Uncle continues to think me lazy and ignorant and a "fine lady" into the bargain, and despises me accordingly. But I am bearing up nevertheless, and continue to darn socks, and make the beds and pick gooseberries for dinner in the most approved domestic style.' Clarence and Edward went for long walks every other day, alternating them with short walks. But one day Margaret stirred herself enough to join the entire household – Clarence, Edward, Luigi, Maddalena, Libera and Celestino (Luigi's brother) – on an expedition to Lago Verde and the rocks beyond it. Margaret was deeply stirred by the experience:

I saw the wonderful drawings and sat by and watched the squeezes and rubbings being taken . . . Quite the finest scenery I have seen yet is in Val Masca at the head of this valley and at right angles to it, where the mountains tower above one, and the torrent roars beneath, while the gorge narrows and heightens till one realises one's littleness amid all that grandeur and ruggedness, and one wonders at the centuries that have passed and left their traces only in glacier slides and wrecks of trees brought down by avalanches. It is a wonderful sight certainly, and when one turned a corner, out of the darkness and gloom of the rugged valley, to see the distant peaks of the French mountains with the glory of the sunset behind them, and felt the glow of the red and yellow rays on one's face, it was like the opening of the gates of Paradise after the long dark valley was past.

Margaret again talks about food in a letter on 3 September:

I have seen no signs of starvation as yet tho' I am constantly being told that we are on the verge of it. However, some kind providence always seems to step in and supply the special want; either a sporting shepherd brings in a chamois (very tough and nasty!! . . .) when we have no other meat left, or a neighbour 'lends' us some bread, when ours runs short . . . We eat many funghi, wild raspberries, wild green gooseberries and wild spinach.

And then she describes an 'enormous' outing they had taken that day, starting at 6.20 a.m., 'I on a large and stalwart mule.'

We went over what seemed to me miles of Uncle C.'s red inscribed rocks and very marvellous and interesting they are . . . We lunched up at the top at 10.30 and did not get home till 5.20 so I was almost faint with hunger. E had to give me whisky at 3 to keep me going, but 4 ½ hours on a mule's back and 3 ½ on foot over *very* rough ground, not to mention being out in this very strong air for the whole day, are calculated to take it out of one. Since dinner I have recovered and feel almost myself again except for stiff legs and very shaky knees, so it shows it was only want of food.

Margaret writes again two days later.

The Uncle and E. have again gone up to their beloved rocks for the day and will return, I suppose, as usual, about 5 o'clock, famished and thirsty and very hot and sticky, but nevertheless triumphant with their day's work. Each new rubbing always seems to me remarkably like the last, but I do not dare say so, for there is such intense pride and satisfaction in the 'new' ones that I cannot betray my ignorance and want of perception in thinking



Edward Berry, Capi, Clarence Bicknell and Margaret Berry on the balcony of the Casa Fontanalba.

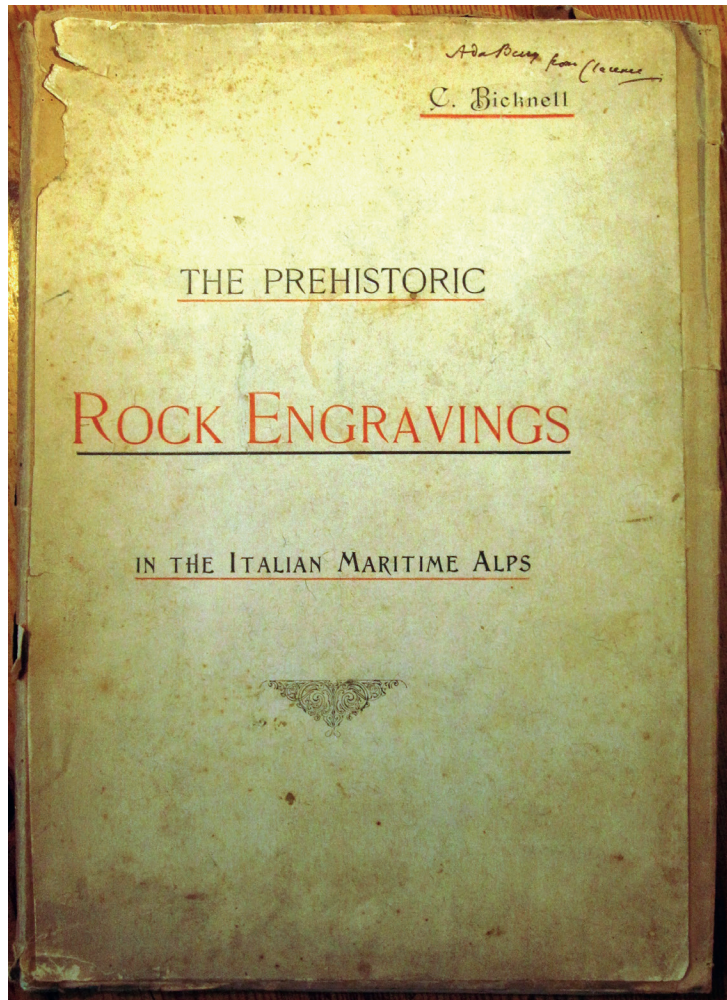
them all alike. Once you have seen a plough and oxen's heads and horns and a weapon and a plan of a 'property' and a skin, you have seen it all, and the differences are only to ring the changes in size and shape of these. However, they are as happy as happy can be over it, and Rob enjoys these long days on the rocks as much as they do, for he cheerfully and diligently hunts marmots all day long but needless to say, never catches one.

For the first time during Margaret and Edward's stay in Casterino, they had to dine indoors that night because it was wet and cold outside, but Margaret consoled herself, saying: 'but we are indeed lucky to have had three weeks of such splendid weather', and then she continues, 'I am still contentedly lazy, and have not written so much as one article for that haunting and terrifying "Journal."' Here she is referring to the *Journal de Bordighera*, the very proper 'voice' of the English colony.

Meanwhile, Clarence was keeping up his correspondence with Burnat, and on 26 August described the various expeditions he had taken during the summer: 'I went many times up to Val Fontanalba, once up Monte Bego, and then to the Col del Vej del Bouc, passing by some horrible places at Lac d'Agnel.' He was disappointed to find nothing at Mont Bégo, but happy to find



*The Prehistoric Rock Engravings in the Italian Maritime Alps.* This 1902 first edition is dedicated by Clarence to his dear sister Ada.



prehistoric figures when descending through rough rocks to Val Valauretta. Clarence’s remark that he went many times up to Val Fontanalba sounds rather casual, but he and Luigi were, in fact, working hard to catalogue, photograph and make rubbings of the extensive collection of rock engravings they had discovered there.

At the end of the same letter to Burnat, Clarence mentioned that love was in the air and was infecting his staff. He had been obliged to send Luigi off to his home at Lake Maggiore to visit his fiancée, a young woman whom Luigi had not seen for a year. In addition, his cook Maddalena was getting married at the end of October. His ‘family’ was expanding.

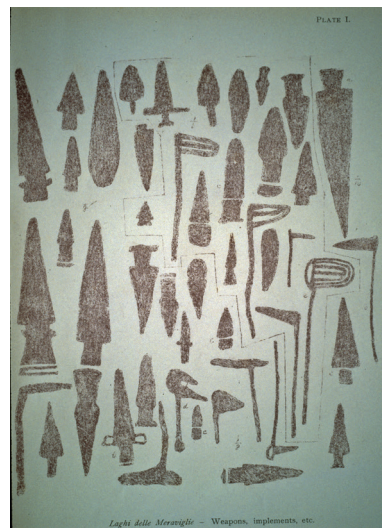
In an undated note – probably 1902 – to his new friend, Lieutenant Alberto Pelloux, a career soldier and mineralogist, Clarence cried out: ‘My Luigi is in love! Me too.’<sup>190</sup> Luigi’s love object was twenty-year-old Mercede Varesi, whom he brought back with him from Lake Maggiore to Bordighera on their marriage. Plainly, Clarence was taken with her too, and she certainly seems to have thrown



Mercede Pollini, born Varesi, in about 1910.



*Chef du Tribu (Head of the Tribe)*, a celebrated rock engraving logged by Clarence. IISL.



Clarence Bicknell, *Weapons and implements*, a plate from Clarence's *The Prehistoric Rock Engravings in the Italian Maritime Alps*.

herself into life in Bordighera in a creative manner of which he approved. On 5 February 1903, he wrote to Pelloux telling him that Mercede was working day and night making 500 paper roses for a ballet to be performed as a fund raiser for the tennis club.<sup>191</sup>

'Me too' in this note could mean that Clarence was in love with Mercede. Or perhaps he had someone else in mind.



Clarence's first account in English of his archaeological work was published in 1902 with the title *The Prehistoric Rock Engravings in the Italian Maritime Alps* (74 pages). He published the book in English but not in England, using the Bordighera publisher, Pietro Gibelli. The paper he gave in Italian at the Società Ligustica in 1897 had already been published in 1898 with the title *Le figure incise sulle rocce di Val Fontanalba* (23 pages).

His finds had also been reported in 1901 by Arturo Issel, his friend the paleontologist from Genoa, who had visited him in Casterino and had climbed with him up into the mountains. In 'Le rupi scolpite nelle alte valli delle Alpi Marittime',<sup>192</sup> Issel, the professional, is clearly speaking to his tribe, those men working the same field as he, but in other locations. He plunders Clarence's work on the engravings in the Mont Bégo region, and uses his photographs and dozens of rather odd negative reproductions of his rubbings – giving tribute, to be sure, where tribute is due.

For Clarence to lead the agreeable Professor Issel up into the Val Fontanalba and show him his discoveries was a great pleasure. It would have felt wonderful to discuss knotty issues such as the age of the engravings, their subject matter, and the question of who created them. They tried to solve these problems together, and came to much the same conclusions: the engravings represented, for the most part, ploughs, oxen and weapons, while a few appeared to have some religious, but absolutely no funerary, significance.

In his book, Clarence defined the engravings further, paying tribute to Issel in turn, but not always agreeing with his assessments. He writes clearly, concisely and authoritatively, describing the region, the rocks and the routes to take to find them. He talks about his own experience and, in his own clear manner, he (ever the list maker) further enumerates the engravings:

1. Horned figures
2. Ploughs
3. Weapons and tools
4. Men
5. Huts and properties
6. Skins
7. Geometrical forms
8. Miscellaneous and indeterminable figures.<sup>193</sup>

Both Issel and Bicknell found it difficult to draw conclusions about the artists – ‘It is a great mystery’, Issel would complain.<sup>194</sup> Clarence continued to study the engravings and to write about them for another ten years. In 1903 he published *Further Explorations in the Regions of the Prehistoric Rock Engravings in the Italian Maritime Alps* (39 pages) and in 1911 a second edition of *The Prehistoric Rock Engravings in the Italian Maritime Alps* came out. Then in 1913 he published his classic work, *A Guide to the Prehistoric Engravings in the Italian Maritime Alps* (136 pages), which was the summation of his research. In 1971 it was published in French and Italian, and in 2016 republished in English by Cambridge University Press. This book is still the authority on the engravings of the Mont Bègo region.

In 1913, Clarence wrote: ‘For the present then we can only say that the authors of the engravings were at least in part an agricultural people who possessed weapons some of which are believed to be those of the early bronze period, perhaps 1000–1500 B.C.’<sup>195</sup> He pointed out that the rocky valleys in which the engravings were found were not suitable for pasturage, and then stated: ‘We are inclined to think that many people must have gone there together and even then during a long series of years, but only for a very short time, and that they were not engaged when there in any other occupation, but went for the express purpose of cutting the figures.’<sup>196</sup>

As Clarence’s friend Émile Cartailhac said, ‘His techniques and his choices of rubbings show that he behaved like a naturalist of the terrain, trying to create thematic and analytic plates, in the way he knew best as a botanist . . . This way of working does not allow us to classify him in the category of archaeologists of his time, who were generally more historians and antiquarians, but were not as knowledgeable about the terrain as he was.’<sup>197</sup>

Clarence learned the landscape through his feet, by walking the mountains over many years.