

## Beauty and Faith in the Nineteenth Century: Clarence Bicknell 1842-1918

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This paper examines the changes in Bicknell's religious outlook and the triggers which caused his abandoning the church for botany, art, archaeology, writing, languages, philanthropy and Esperanto. The excerpt from *The Marvels of Clarence Bicknell*, the 2016 film by French director Rémy Masségli, shown at the symposium, highlights Bicknell's moment of revelation – and throwing off his dog collar – a year after arriving in Italy. The film can be viewed in full on the home page of [www.clarencebicknell.com](http://www.clarencebicknell.com).

Clarence Bicknell was a good-natured, creative, disciplined, nature-loving polymath who renounced the idea of a single God, his religion, but never lost his faith. He could have become a contented vicar who enjoyed collecting flowers, but... his life took a different course and he excelled in many of the disciplines he turned to.

### Growing up in Herne Hill – his father Elhanan Bicknell

Clarence Bicknell (1842-1918) was the thirteenth child of Elhanan Bicknell (1788-1861) who had made a fortune in trading sperm whale oil for lighting and lubrication, funding the whaling ship expeditions, the majority of which never made it back to London. Elhanan was 21 when he was taken into the existing whaling business of John Walter Langton (1746-1822) some 40 years his older. Although he moved into Herne Hill within ten years, it took 30 years before Elhanan's wealth was enough to start buying art. He was already 50 years old when in 1838 he bought his first works by Turner (1775-1851) at Christie's, two watercolours of Himalayan mountains which were designs for White's *Views in India*. Elhanan collected paintings by Gainsborough, Roberts and Turner and housed them in a mansion called simply Herne Hill<sup>ii</sup> which he enlarged as required for the collection.



Most previous accounts of Elhanan leave the impression that he bought art because he could, an *arriviste* in the sense that he liked to be the first to adopt an unknown painter, Turner being the prime example. He liked the position in society which this gave him. Turner, Landseer, Stanfield, Etty, Collins, Roberts, Denning, Callcott, Phiz, and Baily were his dinner guests so it is not surprising their neighbour John Ruskin was frequently there and with him at the Royal Academy. There is no evidence that Elhanan bought and sold art to be a philanthropist. He was self-opiniated, to the extent that he once got his hanky out and made a change to Turner's *Whalers* (image, right) the evening before the Royal Academy opening. Elhanan must have appreciated the natural world but, for example, he never owned a Constable<sup>iii</sup> so we can discount the idea that Elhanan liked the countryside and nature of Constable's great paintings; on the contrary, many of Elhanan's prized canvases are of grandiose scenes from the Grand



Tour. Nothing in the written record suggests that Elhanan collected art as a celebration of God's work or of his faith; his church-going and his charitable donations seem to be for him in a separate compartment from art.

Elhanan was a Unitarian<sup>iv</sup>. His father William had been partly educated at Wesley's school at Kingswood, Bristol, and always entertained John Wesley in Blackman Street when he came to preach at Snow's Fields. Another divine among the most cherished friends of Elhanan's parents at Winchester at this time, after whom he was named, was Elhanan Winchester, author of *Universal Restoration*<sup>v</sup>. Elhanan worshipped at the Unitarian Chapel in Essex Street, The Strand, although from time to time he probably attended the Effra Road Chapel, Brixton, for he is reported to have been a substantial contributor to the foundation of that chapel<sup>vi</sup>. But only one of Elhanan's thirteen children, Henry Sanford Bicknell, was a Unitarian. Elhanan's underlying faith must have encouraged everyone in the family to see the merit in all religions and in all gods but there is no evidence of Elhanan spending time with Clarence discussing comparative religion. Even if Clarence practised in the Anglican Church for some twelve years, he later might have felt his father's favour for an open-minded, non-creedal religious approach focusing on individual freedom and reason

In 1861, in an act of flagrant rebellion against his father's Unitarianism and as a first step in his ever-deepening attachment to high church Anglicanism, Clarence had himself baptised into the Church of England at the church of St James the Less in Dorney, Buckinghamshire. This move was encouraged by Mr Edwards, his schoolmaster in Dorney, as part of his preparation for university.

The biggest contribution Elhanan made to Clarence's life was money. Elhanan died in November 1861 - Clarence was 19 and at Cambridge - and in spring 1863 the auction of Elhanan Bicknell's art collection took place at Christies. It turned out to be the art sensation of the century. Potential bidders flocked to preview the works while they were still in the gallery Bicknell had constructed in his Herne Hill mansion. Outside the house carriage after carriage lined up in the road, the occupants waiting their turn for a chance to take a look at one of the largest collections of modern British art ever accumulated. The grand total raised by the auction of Bicknell's art collection was £78,271, a value in 2026 of £11.7 million. His real estate generated even more. No wonder that this sum, along with the amount raised at the property sale, ensured



Turner: *Giudecca, La Donna della Salute and San Giorgio, 1841*



Turner: *Blue Rigi, 1842*



*The park of Bicknell's house Herne Hill*

economic independence for Elhanan Bicknell's heirs. That very same year, 1863, a newly wealthy and independent young Clarence made his first trip to Italy and Switzerland.

Clarence's siblings achieved little with their inheritance. Herman travelled in the Middle East, was a writer and translator and was the first westerner to enter Mecca undisguised. Marcus's great-grandfather Percy died penniless after the failure of what remained of the oil business. But Clarence invested successfully – thanks to his nephew Edward Berry, banker to the British in Bordighera – and was able to travel and to build schools, libraries, a museum and a hospital throughout his life.

## Growing up in Herne Hill – his mother Lucinda

It was Clarence's mother who spent time with her youngest child. Lucinda née Browne, a talented artist, pianist, harpist, singer and linguist, was interested in the children's physical education and insisted that they perform calisthenics and went on mountain walking trips to Derbyshire and N. Wales. She passed on to Clarence a passion for playing the piano and singing, for walks in the country the natural world, collecting and painting flowers. She was the aunt of Phiz, Dickens' illustrator, and would have shared with him her pride in Phiz's artistic accomplishments. Lucinda was a fine water-colourist herself. She died in 1850 when Clarence was seven, but she had made her mark on the boy.



## Maths at Cambridge and religious influences

At Trinity College Cambridge, although he earned an M.A. in mathematics, Clarence fell under the thrall of Anglican thinkers like Rev. Joseph Barber Lightfoot, a distinguished New Testament scholar, a classicist, a mathematician, and an amateur geologist. In 1862, the year after Clarence went up to Trinity, Lightfoot became the Hulsean Professor in the Faculty of Divinity; he had been chaplain to Prince Albert, honorary chaplain to Queen Victoria and Bishop of Durham. After Lightfoot's death in 1889, *The Times* wrote in his obituary that 'his belief in Christian truth and his defence of it were supported by learning as solid and comprehensive as could be found anywhere in Europe, and by a temper not only of the utmost candour but of the highest scientific capacity'. Lightfoot's capacity for biblical scholarship and analysis of the highest order made a forceful impression on Clarence, who subsequently demonstrated an equally strong commitment to scientific scholarship. Lightfoot also enjoyed gathering together a group of like-minded students and taking them on expeditions. What could have appealed more to Clarence than accompanying him on walks in the countryside, all the while discussing Nature and the nature of religion?

While he certainly studied mathematics, Clarence spent a great deal more of his time pondering the divine, a very consuming activity of the period. 'It is arguable that during the nineteenth century, British people of property and influence were more obsessed with religion than at any time before or since', points out John Prebble, who cites John Addington Symonds's description of his undergraduate days at Oxford in the 1860s: 'We talked theology at breakfast parties, and at wine parties, out riding and walking, in college gardens, on the river, wherever young men and their elders met together.' It is all too tempting to imagine Clarence punting and pontificating with friends.

Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* had been published in 1859. Clarence found himself caught up in a whirlwind of scientific and religious debate. Darwin's work, like Luther's *Ninety-five Theses*,

had turned religious thinking on its head and was still the subject of much vehement debate. The young Clarence, in his need for stability, was not yet ready to be shaken up by the concept of evolution or anything that deviated from Biblical 'truth'. He was more attracted by the leaders of the Oxford Movement who came to speak at Cambridge, arguing that the future of the church lay in the revival of high church principles. Anglo-Catholic in its intent, the Oxford Movement's structure and formality greatly appealed to Clarence, even as it would have been anathema to his father. The Movement was initiated in Oxford in 1833, inspired by the Reform Act of 1832 which included Catholic Emancipation, and had as its prime movers John Henry Newman, Edward Pusey and John Keble, all great writers of tracts. Believing that the Anglican church had become flaccid in recent years, they desired to return it to its energetic pre-Reformation roots. They wanted to re-instate the ancient traditions and rituals of the early church's liturgy, vestments, incense and devotion to the Eucharist. They even set about forming religious orders for men and women and regarded themselves as missionaries within their faith. The movement was divisive, with critics calling its members 'Dissenters' or 'Tractarians' and claiming that it reeked of Rome to such a degree that some bishops refused to appoint its priests. This censure meant that only the poorest and least desirable of parishes would welcome Anglo-Catholic priests and thus, paradoxically, the Anglican high church began to prosper at the lowest level of society.

## In the Anglican church in London

The moment Clarence attained his degree, he turned away from the study of mathematics and entered holy orders. In 1866, he was ordained a deacon in the Church of England. His inheritance allowed him to be extraordinarily generous when he entered the church, and later to travel widely and pursue his passions for botany, archaeology and philanthropy with a free mind and an open purse.

Clarence was a young man in robust physical, spiritual and financial health, primed to devote himself to a cause, in spite of the fact that he had no home, no parents and scant contact with his scattered siblings. He found employment in 1866 as a curate at St Paul's, Lorrimore Square, in Walworth, London (image c.1900, right). He was joined at St Paul's by two like-minded friends from Trinity, Herbert George Morse and Frederick William Puller. The three young men, whom the vicar John Going called his 'three gallants', toiled assiduously for the good of their deprived parishioners earning 16 shillings a year— all the while celebrating the Christian faith in the most flamboyant and ritualistic Anglo-Catholic manner possible. Clarence's endowment permitted him to be charitable even in his first job. Rev. Going and the gallants encouraged parishioners to send their families to the school which they built, for the most part using funds contributed by the clergy. Clarence donated the then enormous sum of £1,000 to the cause.



Rev. John Going, an Irishman in his thirties, was a zealous, warm-hearted man, who did not merely think and talk about returning the Church of England to its pre-Reformation roots, but put his words into action. During the many services he led, including the Eucharist, he and his curates dressed in gorgeous ceremonial garments; they swung incense; the choir sang; and the organ thundered. He invited some of the strongest preachers in London to give sermons. This was religion as theatre, and the people of Walworth thronged to a church that provided such glorious entertainment. Attendance at St Paul's soared. But John Going did not merely indulge in panoply and theatricality; he was deeply concerned about the welfare of his parishioners. He and his curates travelled door to door in the poorest sections of Walworth, assisting families in their misery, and ministering to them during a terrible smallpox epidemic. It would not be the only time that Clarence would put his own safety at risk in the service of others.



Clarence Bicknell, 1870s

Clarence found himself swirling in the midst of a heady, divisive religious stew. He had to contend with accusations of *Popism* in his work place, and he was wrestling with the memory of his father's Unitarianism and a slew of controversial, much read works about evolution. He also had to come to terms with the wide proliferation of marginal sects like the *Bible Christians*, the *Children of God*, the *Convulsionists*, the *New Forest Shakers* and even the ecstatic raving and shaking of Mary Ann Girling, a self-claimed woman saviour right on his doorstep - *Walworth Jumpers*, otherwise known as the *Girlingites*.

## In the high Anglican church in Shropshire

Clarence had fallen under the spell of the Rev. Rowland Corbet, a mere three years older than himself, who had preceded him at Trinity. After graduating from Cambridge with a degree in theology, Corbet became a fellow of St John's College, Oxford, where he was exposed to the leading lights of the Oxford Movement. A particular influence on him was the Rev. Richard Meux Benson, founder of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist. Corbet's father, Richard Corbet, was lord of the manor in the parish of St Peter's, Stoke-upon-Tern in Shropshire, and in 1869 he nominated his son as rector of St Peter's. The move to Shropshire offered



Rowland an opportunity to construct a church because the original medieval building had burned down. Using the family's considerable funds, he set about rebuilding the church (watercolour by Clarence Bicknell on arrival, right), but first erected a school that could be used on Sundays as a chapel of ease until the church itself was ready for services. At the same time, Corbet founded his own religious community, the *Societas Sancti Spiritus* or *Brotherhood of the Holy Spirit* (Clarence's brotherhood emblem, left), closely based on Benson's community. He drew to it like-minded priests desiring a return to the early Church within a close community of brothers, and sought and gained the benediction of Pope Pius IX for his new brotherhood, on condition that the brothers say the canonical hours together.



Bicknell left Walworth to join Corbet's *Societas Sancti Spiritus* at Stoke-upon-Tern in Shropshire in late 1873. While St Paul's had operated in a noisy, over-populated parish, rattling with the sounds of carriages and trains, resonant with the cries of hawkers, prey to diseases like cholera and smallpox, and often smothered in London's smoke and fog, St Peter's, with its nine hundred parishioners, was set in the middle of nowhere, beside a stream, surrounded by green fields, sweet with the scent of flowers in the fresh air, chirping with birdsong, and now buzzing with the effort of building the new church for Corbet. The villagers pitched in, providing time and energy.

The brotherhood consisted of twelve astonishingly well-educated men, *missioner priests*, living in an open community, as opposed to a closed monastery. The parish house itself was spacious enough to host conferences and retreats attended by theologians, priests and interested participants who arrived from all over the country – and even from abroad. The stables and carriage houses were located on the south side of the parish house, with a forge close by, much used owing to the frequent missionary journeys the brothers undertook on horseback or in horse-drawn carriages. Clarence himself went on missions to Edinburgh in 1874 and 1875 to found a temperance society on the lines of the one he ran at Stoke-upon-Tern which he named *The Guild of the Holy Redeemer*.



Image in St Peters, Stoke-upon-Tern.  
These may or may not be Corbet's missioner priests

## Darwinism, nature ... or faith in one God?

Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* made an immediate impact upon its publication on November 24, 1859. The entire first print run of 1,250 copies was sold out on the first day, immediately fuelling widespread public debate, international attention, and controversy. Its scientific acceptance was a more gradual process. It took a decade or two for the scientific community to accept that evolution (descent with modification) was a fact. Some remained sceptical of natural selection as the primary driver of evolution, leading to a period sometimes called the *Eclipse of Darwinism* (roughly 1880s–1930s), where other mechanisms were favoured. Clarence was in his second year at Cambridge and getting settled with his Anglicism when Darwin triggered a new debate. Bicknell's later work as a *citizen scientist*<sup>vii</sup>, his objective scientific methods, his respect of Linnaean taxonomy, and the well-thumbed copy of Darwin's book in his collection all suggest he took natural selection – and science in general - as seriously as the omniscience of God.

During his walks in the Shropshire countryside, Clarence had the opportunity to notice the subtle, seductive workings of nature and found himself, perhaps unconsciously at first, becoming an evolutionist and drifting towards a life of observation, outdoors, even as the ritual and rote of the Anglo-Catholic Church slowly began to lose their appeal. The extreme nature of Corbet's teaching was now testing his faith, certainly his faith in one God. Rowland Corbet came back from his travels on the Italian Riviera during the winter of 1876 with wonderful tales to tell of Bordighera, a pretty little town, sun-drenched and filled with flowers, just over the border from France and within easy reach of the Maritime Alps. He had been invited there by Mrs Rosa Fanshawe, the self-appointed empress of the English community, a widow who spent the winter season with her daughter in Bordighera at the Villa Rosa. Clarence paid close attention to what Corbet had to say about the charm of Bordighera – and its flowers.

## Leaving England, and his doubts about religion

Clarence gave his last lecture to his Temperance Guild on 4 December 1877. The topic was, presciently, *Flowers*. He left the country, invited to stay with Mrs Fanshawe in Bordighera where he would be considered for the post of chaplain in the Anglican church for a year. Her invitation to leave Stoke-upon-Tern for the Italian Riviera was the turning point in Clarence's life. When he arrived in Bordighera, his writing, even his daily diary, showed the speed with which his eyes were opening.

Clarence continued to thirst for clarity of thought on his religion. Once he began to travel, he became more and more interested in the varieties of belief and less in the dogma of an individual religion. After his first winter in Bordighera, where his faith was sorely tested, he attended the Broadlands conference of August 1879. These conferences were religious retreats, organised annually between 1874 and 1888 by William and Georgina Cowper Temple. They invited broad-minded European and American speakers, as well as English friends and friends of friends to participate. Although they did not apparently practice spiritualism at the Broadlands conferences, the Cowper-Temples were renowned for their use of it. Clarence may have dabbled in it too. While recounting incidents about the success of dowsing is not exactly spiritualism, he nonetheless wrote letters about it in 1879 to *The Spiritual Magazine*; and he was an associate member of the Society for Psychical Research in 1887

Rowland Corbet was a regular attendee and speaker at the conferences, and it is likely that he proposed that Clarence attend in August 1879. Clarence was completely smitten by the open-mindedness of the group. In the short period of the conference, he cemented several long-lasting friendships with the Mount-Temples themselves, Emilia Russell Gurney, the writer and mystic George MacDonald and his wife Louisa. Clarence's thank-you letter to Mrs Cowper Temple reveals how much he was basking in the spirit of ecumenism displayed at Broadlands. One sentence is particularly striking:

*It was very refreshing to me, after so many years of controversy & discussion to find that so much might be said and done with so very very little of what dear Mr. Macdonald called the "impertinence" of thrusting our own particular opinions in other people's faces.*

Clarence corresponded with the beautiful Emelia Gurney, a widow and nineteen years his senior. He became deeply attached to her and they entered into a lengthy exchange. His letters to her were steeped in religious turmoil. One of 1879 in the Shropshire archives may be a mere draft, so rambling its thoughts, so poor its handwriting. It sounds as though Clarence is reeling incoherently in religious intensity. He writes:

*Dearest Friend, ... Is not the devil just the temptation to learn of the inward by the outward which we cannot – and to try and make the transitory order the witness to the eternal, which it is not and cannot be – Christ's temptation notably to wish to be sinless these conditions God manifested outwardly with glory, worship, power? In fact to deny that God, or Being is good, though at present it is manifested of faith – The horrors we see & the pains we feel do not shew forth – [or] – they are as the vestige of 'Clouds & thick darkness'. [And so on. Then the voice suddenly changes, and Clarence returns to the mundane:] Goodbye. I like your letters – they always come as cups of cold water to a pilgrim in a thirsty land.*

This letter is written to a lady who must have also expressed her doubts about the church as it was presented to her. He sympathises with her in words which defend the church but which leave some space for her (like him) to dream of a less-confined theological existence.

Time and again, Clarence tried to pin down *the Ineffable* and jostled with a very slippery *Creator* as he came to terms with the dreadful, disorganised mess called religion. What Clarence's tabulating

mind needed most of all was order, truth and evidence. Clarence's decision to move to Bordighera provided the answer to how he wanted to live his life, but perhaps not the one he expected.<sup>viii</sup>

## To Bordighera as chaplain – continued doubts

Clarence felt immediately at home in Bordighera in the Fanshawes' Villa Rosa. It was a newish house, built ten years previously by the Fanshawes themselves. Mrs Fanshawe and her husband, the Rev. Charles Fanshawe, began going regularly to Bordighera for the winter season bringing their daughter Rosa Ellen.

Clarence became enchanted by Bordighera, soon buying the Villa Rosa from Mrs. Fanshawe Walker and making it his home for the rest of his life. At that time Bordighera was almost an English colony. Indeed, towards the end of the century the English outnumbered the native Italians. It preceded the French Riviera – Menton, Monaco, Cannes etc. – as a popular winter resort. Foreign visitors, many of whom became residents, flocked there for the winter sun in a climate which was considered particularly beneficial for sufferers from the still incurable disease of tuberculosis. In 1873 the Bordighera Lawn Tennis Club was the first such club after Wimbledon.

Clarence Bicknell had arrived in his own particular kind of heaven. His Road to Damascus moment of revelation turned out to be the flowers, the sea, the mountains, the sun, so unlike what he had known in dour Victorian England... and even, the evidence shows, women. He had immediately taken to Mrs Fanshawe and this diary entry shows he was doubting and trivialising religion, even in the presence of the doyenne of the church society there;

*'Our hostess delightful – we talk of many & deep things – & oh how we do laugh sometimes at the pickle of the world, & the ideas men have of God & the ways & beliefs of Christians.'*

Elements of doubt about God creep into his diary entries and letters for many years. On 4<sup>th</sup> April 1888, Clarence expressed his sorrow to Emile Burnat, his friend and celebrated botanist in Geneva, on the death of his mother;

*'I hope that He who understands everything, and loves more than we do, has done all for the best – but I doubt this sometimes. It seems to me impossible to console friends when they are suffering, but at least one can say to oneself "be more of a friend, stronger, more good, and ease to the extent that one can the sorrows of this life with sympathy and love," and that is how I am thinking right now. You were blessed to have your mother for such a long time . . . I lost mine, an irreparable loss for a child, when I was seven years old.'*

He felt liberated. He realised that he could embrace the other interests in his life, botanising in the hills, painting watercolours, writing, learning other people's language and understanding other faiths.

*Oh how lovely this country is – at first I was disappointed, but it seems to grow in beauty & I think continually of the words "Blessed are the eyes that see the things which ye see."*

Clarence truly believed that All Saints could be a universal church, even as, later in his life, he would believe in a universal language. He later wrote in the diary that religion should be 'a common worship of all sects, & all men in a truly universal church'. His religious doubts continued to grow over the first year in Bordighera. He found the church there too ritualistic, too dogmatic and too chauvinistic. He gave up any active participation in church matters, asked not to be referred to as "The Rev." and ceased to wear a dog collar. To break away from the Anglican church completely was an impossible act since a person ordained as a priest continues to be in holy orders unless subject to expulsion by the Church. Clarence was not expelled. He did not send a letter of resignation to the

Bishop of Gibraltar; he did not need to since, like his predecessors, he was appointed for just one season. Nor did he give up his faith – that is, his personal convictions, his trust and belief in a higher power or spiritual concept. It was religion he doubted, the organized system of rituals, doctrines, and some in the community who enforced them. His biographer says he did not give up his faith in the teachings of Jesus but I have not found any mention of Jesus in his diaries and letters. When he writes about Christ, for example when describing a painting in a church, he abbreviates it to X. Christmas was written Xmas, a habit which has proliferated 150 years later.

The fact that Bicknell left the Chaplaincy after one season was quite normal (all his predecessors had done so) and he did not leave prematurely (he served for 7 months, while his immediate predecessor served for 6½ months). The register shows that on various occasions during his Chaplaincy the offertory was ‘for the poor’, ‘for some special cases of sickness and distress in Bordighera’, ‘for the Hospital Fund’ and ‘for the poor & for the Hospital Fund’. In the last case, the money was given to the Parrocho (the Roman Catholic parish priest). It may well be true that his association with the local priest and local causes provoked criticism.



*Ezio Benigni. The English Church in Bordighera in about 1900. BibCiv*

There is a pattern we can detect in his letters and diary entries that Bicknell was in favour of an ecumenical approach to faith and that he had doubts about one God and about the Bordighera parishioners. It is more likely that Bicknell became disillusioned with the church than that the church rejected him. Apparently he considered becoming Chaplain at Bordighera on a permanent basis; in November 1879 he wrote to his friend Louisa MacDonald;

*‘I feel pretty sure, after last winter, I should not be acceptable as regular chaplain. They said some of them I taught heresies, etc. that I taught and said many wrong, or at least very partially true & very many foolish things, I have no doubt, but to myself my gospel seemed truer and better than what I had originally learnt of men’. In a letter to another friend he wrote ‘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’.*

As a fraud. That’s a strong word.

Clarence got to know Louisa, wife of George MacDonald, celebrated writer and evangelist, even better after they moved to Bordighera in 1880. They were neighbours and buddies. In a letter of 1883 to Louisa, Clarence expressed anxiety about the damage a place like Bordighera with its tight English enclave might wreak on his philosophy:

*There is especial danger of being considered (or becoming) very schismatical in spirit. I do myself, rightly or wrongly, long that Mrs. F’s chapel should be a place as it has hitherto been, where a larger gospel might be taught, where any man lay or clerical might be invited to speak out what God had taught him – and where the ‘Church’ might be declared to be more Catholick than Italians or English seem to realise, and Xt more the all and the in all. I fancy if one offered the chapel for regular English services & reserved to oneself the above-mentioned rights, one would do all that seems true and good. My only difficulty is the answering the question: ‘Ought a youngish man of 37, strong and well off, to take what seems an easy post abroad in a pleasant climate & where the difficulties and opposition seem likely to be greater than the encouragements (and this I thought your husband might*

*see some light about)' and 2, which I only can answer, and of course hardly with a yes: 'Are you, C.B. fit for this'? But one's answer to all questions is 'God'*

As with the 'Dearest Friend' letter (page 7 above) this last sentences reveals that Clarence really does not know whether he should have remained a priest, whether there was on God, and whether he could serve such a narrow-minded flock.

On his way to Egypt Clarence went to a service in a Greek orthodox church in Athens in January 1890, and reflected on the uniformity of worship.

*'I am always more and more impressed with the certainty that popular worship is the same, under different forms & that there is next to no difference between the Jewish & Egyptian temples or the Greek ones or the R. Catholics. They all have a mystery, with priests & sacrifices & hidden places & sacred objects, and gods [whether] they be called Jupiter, Osiris, St Joseph or any other name . . . still the apparent reverence of these Greek church people is pleasant to see, and making the cross hundreds of times & kissing pictures & all the rest of it may make them happy. Perhaps the simplicity of the Mahometan mosques impresses me most, if only the women were admitted too.'*

Bicknell's disenchantment with an over-managed church included the people close to it. In later life, 1912, he wrote to an Esperanto devotee Baroness Helene von Taube<sup>ix</sup>,

*I am so sick of all the ordinary tea party, church-going people who are so conventional and such gossips and have so little of an international spirit.*

In the same year, 1912, he inveighed against what he saw at Lourdes and the trends in modern church teaching.

*'These multiplied devotional pilgrimages, excitement of miracles . . . What have they to do with the religion of the heart & the welfare of the people and the increase of interest in the poor & suffering? I think that miracle superstition is very unhealthy, and all the advertising of Lourdes very bad.'*

## In Bordighera as a botanist and artist

In his second year, Clarence immediately became involved in the secular activities of the English colony – activities leading to the building of his museum, the foundation of the International Library, the organising of lectures and concerts and so on. But he was also deeply involved in giving generous active and financial help to the poorer of the resident Italians, notably after the severe earthquake in 1887.

Clarence's principal passion was the study of botany and a love of flowers. The richness of the flora of Bordighera and its neighbourhood was for him one of its main attractions. In them he found a wonderful source of inspiration. He immediately set about collecting the plants and recording them in explicit and attractive watercolour drawings. By 1884 he had made over a thousand of these drawings, 104 of which he selected as illustrations for his *Flowering Plants and Ferns of the Riviera and Neighbouring Mountains*, published in 1885 (a typical page, right). For



these lithographic plates the original drawings were all redrawn. They show his highly developed sense of design combined with skill in producing accurate and informative botanical images. Eventually 3,349 of his botanical drawings were deposited in the Botanical Institute of Genoa University. He also created a remarkable herbarium of dried specimens which is also at Genoa. In a productive life Clarence created over 40,000 watercolours, sketchbooks, herbaria and rock engraving copies archived in a dozen museums in ten countries.

Botany was considered a healthy pursuit, offering refreshing exercise and mental stimulation. As Susan Orlean comments in *The Orchid Thief*, 'By the nineteenth century curiosity had changed. It might have been the moment when cynicism was born. The Industrial Revolution was proving that not all man-made advances were perfect and many could be awful . . . Nature by contrast seemed pure and bewitching.' Botany also offered the opportunity for women to meet interesting, albeit sometimes eccentric, men who shared their interest in and curiosity about the subject. Botany was considered to be pious, because the study of nature – God's handiwork – confirmed His creative powers. Clarence Bicknell never wrote such specific affirmations. But there are glimpses as late as 1879, before his definitive move to Italy, that he thought of God as the creator...

*Saturday June 7th [1879]. I reached Stoke Rectory where I had started more than 8 months before, little thinking I sd. be away so long, or find all so changed on my return. I must end, just expressing here, my deep gratitude to my kind friends in Italy, whose friendship in every way has been so thorough & so true, & to God the Author & Giver of all good things.'*

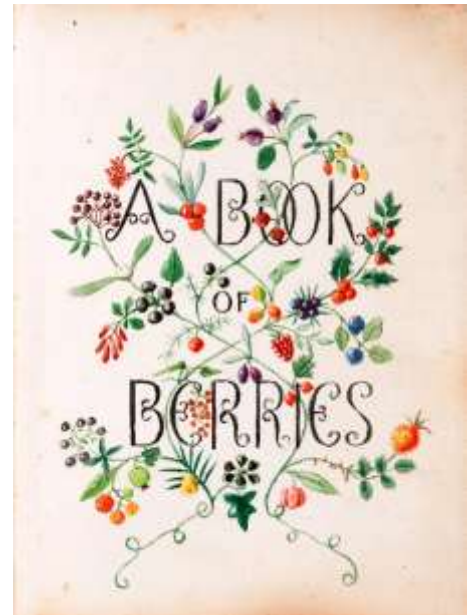
Everything we learn about Clarence's love of nature, his appreciation of the light and the mountains, of his infectious energy and his philanthropy tell us that they were expressions of his faith, that is, of his personal conviction and belief in a higher power or spiritual concept, from his arrival in Italy to his death 40 years later. But it must have seemed so obvious Clarence that he did not see the need to write it down. The example just above (*God the Author & Giver of all good things*) is the last where he uses such words. His faith was similar to that of those today who pull back from the structure, liturgy and the managed church but who find much to celebrate in nature and generosity to feed their faith.

Some idea of Clarence's character is given in the appreciations written by his nephew Edward and Margaret Berry after his death.

*He roamed over the hills seeking rare flowers, but noticing everything – small insects, birds, stones, light and cloud effects, and talking in his gay and eager way to everyone he met... His lively conversation, full of sparkling wit and humour and the wonderful letters that he used to write, illustrated with pen and ink sketches, are precious memories to those who were privileged to call themselves his friends... He was greatly loved by the Italian population... who recognised in him an unfailing helper and adviser in all their needs material and moral. The familiar figure, in loose flannels, with open collar ... with an immense grey felt hat on his head, was always welcome... Intensely affectionate and emotional, he was inclined to violent prejudices, from which he could not always easily free himself and the haste with which he threw himself into new intimacies was a standing joke amongst his old friends.*

The relationship between Margaret and Clarence is beautifully illustrated by the story of the vellum albums. Shortly after her marriage Margaret saw in Lorenzini's shop in Siena some exquisite books of superior drawing paper elaborately bound in white vellum. She bought one and gave it to Clarence. He was delighted. A few months later he gave it back to her, now filled with flower designs. Next time Margaret was in Siena, she bought one and repeated the gift; and again Clarence returned it to her transformed. This became a ritual. At least once a year until the outbreak of war in 1914 an album was exchanged and dedicated to Margaret Berry.

Seven of these albums are now in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. Each album has a theme – for instance, one is a book of marguerites for Margaret; one is a *Book of Berries* for the Berrys; another is a book of flowers from the Val Fontanalba; another is a book of poems decorated with appropriate flowers. The album dated 1911 is a coronation 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 the flowers compete for the crown of the Beauty Queen of Fontanalba. Page by page each flower presents her claim in enchanting drawings, supported by descriptions of her charms (sometimes medicinal) in prose and in verse (often facetious).



An album in the family collection is the *Casa Fontanalba Visitors' Book*, each opening of which has a mountain flower with arts-and-crafts border (*Tulipa australis*, image right) and space for the signatures of his guests on the other. Another such is the *Children's Picture Book of Wild Plants* of 1908 which is a complete botanical catalogue of 404 wild plants, each with an immaculate water-colour drawing, that grew wild in the garden of the Casa Fontanalba. The book ends with the couplet,

*Now if you say, Oh what a show of plants.  
I beg your pardon.  
This book is finished; not so the treasures  
of my garden."*



Clarence continually expressed his preference for wild plants rather than garden varieties. His delight in playful fantasy has much in common with the nonsense of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll. He loved puzzles, riddles, jokes, puns and parlour games. For Margaret Berry he made a botanical version of the popular Victorian game of *Happy Families*.

His childish sense of fun often invaded the area of scientific order. His drawing of a cat on a log is the title on the cover of his official catalogue of the 10,000 rock engravings which he identified in the Vallée des Merveilles. Sometimes scientific order invaded the area of fun – when, for instance, as an inveterate collector, he mounted and catalogued his collection of misaddressed envelopes: “Al Illustrisimo Signor Bick – Bihl – Bigi – Bequenelly – Boiocinello – Bicknelli Florence – Binil Milord Clarence – Madame Brickerelle – Egregio Signor Bicnet Franco” are some of the names that rewarded him for his enormous correspondence. He must often have signed his name illegibly in the hope of adding to the collection.



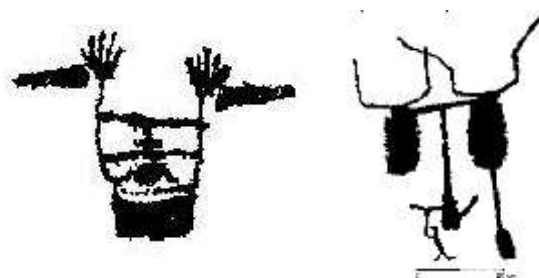
As an artist he was versatile. He would try any medium. He had a particularly strong sense of design; he did poker work on bellows and boxes; he made furniture; he made rugs of many coloured wools; he decorated ceramics, such as the splendid umbrella stands for this museum. Late in life he was studying a new method of

sketching in sanguine and pastel, under the instruction of two Belgian artists, father and son Van Biesroech.

## The rock engravings and his Casa Fontanalba

It was not till 1905 that Clarence embarked on the enterprise of building a house for the summer at Casterino. He had first visited the Vallée des Merveilles on the west side of Mont Bego in 1881. With further visits in 1897, 1898, 1901 and 1902, and the discovery of more rock engravings in the upper Fontanalba valley, on the Casterino side of Monte Bego, the study and recording of the engravings (images of *Le Sorcier* and *Oxen* right) had become almost as absorbing of his energies as the flora; and Casterino was an ideal base for the field work of both activities.

The Casa Fontanalba, always referred to by Clarence and his English friends as 'the cottage', was designed by the British architect Robert Macdonald, in the very British sub-Georgian tradition of the Empire. It is neither Italian nor French; nor is it a 'cottage' nor a 'chalet'.



*Outside the Casa Fontanalba, left to right: Marco Novello, Clarence Bicknell, Capitano Alberto Pelloux, Signora Bianca Pelloux, Luigi Pelloux. All four guests signed the Casa Fontanalba Visitors' Book on 12 August 1913. Frontispiece of MARVELS by Valerie Lester*

Luigi Pollini, son of his faithful servant Giacomo, and now Clarence's constant companion and assistant in his work, referred to by Clarence as his 'factotum', built garden sheds, garden paths, bridges, planted trees and prepared and tended a fruitful kitchen garden. The house was furnished with extreme simplicity "with wooden bedsteads, American folding chairs, without wardrobes, carpets or hangings". Clarence himself carried out an elaborate scheme of decoration based on conventional interpretations of the flora and the engravings... with much use of patterns horns over doors and windows, to prevent the entrance of evil spirits, goblins, witches etc., all combined with sentences and proverbs in Esperanto.

The Casa Fontanalba was restored in the mid-1980s to its original form by the removal of some minor additions. Nothing remains of the garden which has returned to nature. Surrounding trees, mostly larches, have grown and multiplied so that the site looks very unlike it did when the house was originally built.

Clarence had become enthusiastically involved with Esperanto, the international language which had been thought up in 1887 by Dr. Zanenhof, an oculist in Warsaw. In it Clarence saw a medium which could unite mankind in peace and loving friendship. In a way which the Christian faith, with its acceptance of the tower of Babel, had failed to do. With characteristic energy he devoted himself to the cause, organising an Esperanto Centre in Bordighera, annually attending conferences from

Cracow to Barcelona (generally accompanied by Luigi), translating into Esperanto poems such as Macauley's Horatius, and winning prizes for his own Esperanto poems. In 1914 when war broke out he was in Paris looking after a party of blind Esperantists whom he safely escorted back to their homes in Italy. In his seventies he would rise at 5.30 in the morning to apply himself to the task of typing Esperanto poems in Braille.

The names of everyone who spent a night in the Casa were recorded decoratively on the walls of one of the rooms. And one of the vellum albums was filled with entries cataloguing these people with biographical notes in Esperanto.

The entry for Emile Cartailhac, Professor of Pre-History at Toulouse, who came to see the Merveilles, is decorated with a device which was frequently found amongst the engravings. This seems to show two pairs of horns, some straight lines and a human figure. It had been a great puzzle to Clarence, until one day he noticed and photographed a primitive plough drawn by two oxen still in use near Casterino, and realised that the horn shapes represented the oxen, straight lines the plough and the figure the ploughman. There had been no change since the bronze age.

The engravings had religious significance, both for the prehistoric shepherds who chipped them in the rock and for Clarence who realised that, here in the high mountains, early man was closer to their deity. The afternoon thunderstorms round the Mont Clapier added to the biblical dimension of the place, and still do today. Christopher Chippindale titled his book about Clarence *A High Way to Heaven (Clarence Bicknell and the Vallée des Merveilles)*.

It was at Casterino that Clarence made most of studies – rubbings, drawings and photographs – of the rock engravings. And it was at Casterino that he spent the happiest days of his old age. Luigi Pollini, who had become his gifted and efficient assistant, was his constant support. Clarence remained amazingly energetic. In 1914, when he was 72, he was planning a visit to Japan, travelling by the trans-Siberian railway; but he called it off, as he thought Luigi was not strong enough to accompany him. Those who knew him in his last years say that he was indefatigable. He would spend the day with his friends, energetically showing them the Vallée des Merveilles and the flowers, entertaining them enthusiastically. Then, when they had retired exhausted, he would get down to serious drawing, letter writing, or some other task. Next morning he would be up long before them, collecting specimens or drawing again.



On a sunny day in July 1918 Luigi carried Clarence Bicknell out onto the terrace of his 'cottage' where he died peacefully, in the surroundings which he loved, encircled by the mountains which he knew as 'The Gate of Heaven'.

Christopher Chippindale has pointed out that the humane rational spirit which Clarence Bicknell showed, particularly in old age, was characteristic of liberal progressive thinking of the period. He was a pacifist who devoted himself to works of war charity in times of war; an enthusiastic supporter of women's suffrage who deplored the excesses of the suffragettes; a vegetarian who never embarrassed others with his prejudices; a man of means who lived in simplicity and devoted his means to others; a master who treated his servants as friends, and embarrassed hosts and hotels by expecting his companion Luigi Pollini to be treated and accepted as a guest and not a servant.

## Clarence Bicknell today

The efforts since 2013 to bring Clarence's work to a wider public are based on the conviction that Clarence's intangible cultural heritage is worth preserving and spreading, while his tangible cultural heritage (like the Museo Bicknell in Bordighera - image right - for which fund-raising appeals are on-going, and the Casa Fontanalba, which is not open to the public) is worthy of support and recognition. As a result, Clarence is better known in 2018 than he was in 1918.



Researching this paper reminds me that I, as producer and backer, proposed for the film, an excerpt of which you have just seen, the title *There is No God But Nature*. We had even printed the posters for the openings at Bordighera and Tende when the great and good of Bordighera urged us to change it for fear of alienating many faithful in the town and elsewhere. We changed the title to *The Marvels of Clarence Bicknell*.

For those at this symposium who find difficulties with the 'managerialism' of the Anglican Church today, Clarence's continued ecumenical faith and devotion to the beauty of nature can give them some cause for optimism. Where most stories of a revelation refer to a layperson finding God, Clarence's went the other direction. After his leaving his father's Unitarianism to get baptised in the Anglican Church, the intellectual shenanigans of Corbet's sect, grappling with Darwinism and his deception at the narrow-mindedness of his ex-pat flock, . It is revealing that he continued to study and build bridges with people of other religions and was able to put his charitable values to such good causes.

Whether you as the reader are a believer, an agnostic, an atheist, an art-lover or a scientist, Clarence Bicknell had something in his make-up to please you.



## Sources

The primary sources for this paper are mostly the same used by me and Valerie Lester in researching her book *Marvels: the Life of Clarence Bicknell* (Matador, 2018)...

Valerie Browne Lester, born 1939, an independent scholar, writer, and translator living in the Boston area, was descended from Clarence Bicknell's grand-mother and was therefore another family member on the team. She authored *Fasten Your Seat Belts! History and Heroism in the Pan Am Cabin* (1995); 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*.

Graham Avery CMG FLS is a Visiting Fellow at the European University Institute, Florence, Honorary Director-General of the European Commission, Brussels, and Fellow of the Linnean Society of London. He has been a Senior Member of St. Antony's College, Oxford University, Secretary General of the Trans European Policy Studies Association, Fellow at the Center for International Affairs at Harvard University, and Fellow at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute, Florence. He is also a mountain walker, botanist, writer and researcher;

Susie Bicknell, Marcus's wife, has been a researcher and writer for the BBC, Midem/MipCom, Time Life Books, SES ASTRA, Rainwater Harvesting Ltd. She handled several functions for the production team of the 2016 documentary *The Marvels of Clarence Bicknell* with continuity, research, screenplay and costumes. She curated the exhibitions "Clarence Bicknell's Passion for Flowers Revealed in his Art" in Bordighera in 2017 and "Merveilles de Clarence" in the Musée des Merveilles in Tende in 2018.

Christopher Chippindale, a devoted student of and writer about Bicknell since the 1980s, lecturer in archaeology at Cambridge University; writer of *A High Way to Heaven* (Clarence Bicknell and the Vallée des Merveilles" (Conseil Général des Alpes Maritimes, 1998) also published in French and Italian language versions.

Reginald Farrer's publications on botanical excursions in Europe in the period 1899 to 1913, including the book *Among The Hills: A Book of Joy in High Places* (1911)

31 letters from Clarence to the Italian botanist Stefano Sommier in the library of the University of Florence; 700 letters and postcards from Bicknell to Swiss botanist Émile Burnat in Geneva's Botanical Garden; Oxford University Herbaria; the Conservatory and Botanical Garden of Geneva; the Botanical Library of the University of Florence; the Botanic Garden of Meise, Belgium; London Metropolitan Archives<sup>x</sup>; Bristol Naturalists' Society.

Rev. Katy Hacker Hughes at St Paul's Walworth, London; the Rev. Andy Ackroyd, warden Jan Wattleworth and Janice Bradley at St Peters Stoke-upon-Tern, Shropshire; Liz Young and Karen Young, Shropshire Archives in Shrewsbury; John Rooney, Archivist at the University of Southampton for information on Broadlands; Philip Bye of the East Sussex Record Office at The Keep; and Martyn Webster, who alerted us to the diaries of Clarence's brother Sidney there; Dr Daniela Gandolfi and her colleagues at the Museo Bicknell in Bordighera - the Istituto Internazionale di Studi Liguri - Dr Elena Risco, Dr Giovanni Russo, Franca Porrà, Dr Marta Garulli and Dr Bruna di Paoli.

Simona Beghelli of the Biblioteca Civica Internazionale, Bordighera (BibCiv); Carolyn Hanbury (Hanbury Gardens) and Ursula Salghetti Drioli Piacenza (Boccanegra Gardens); Università degli Studi di Genova, where Clarence's archaeological field notebooks and huge collections of pressed flowers and botanical watercolours are held, including Professor Mauro Mariotti, Director of Genoa University's Department for the Earth, Environment and Life Sciences, Dr Robert Hearn and Dr Raffaella Bruzzone, teaching and researching at the University of Nottingham and the Università degli Studi di Genova.

Hingham, MA, USA, Public Library; the British Museum (Natural History) for Baroness von Taube's letters; Christopher Mills at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew; the Fitzwilliam Museum and Hettie Ward, Emma Darbyshire; authors Michael Nelson (the Riviera); Brian Green (Herne Hill); Mark Howard (whales); Selby Whittingham (Turner's art); and Maddalena Cataldi (archaeology).

## Notes

When I comment in this paper on faith and religion I use the terms as follows. **Faith** is an internal, personal conviction, trust, or belief in a higher power or spiritual concept, often existing independently of structure. **Religion** is the external, organized system of rituals, doctrines, and communities that organize that faith. While faith is personal, religion is generally a collective practice. In some of the quotes from Clarence and his biographer Valerie Lester the distinction might not be so clear cut.

## End notes

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<sup>i</sup> Dr. Flora Armetta and Madeleine Emerald Thiele. <https://www.visualtheology.org.uk/call-for-papers-vtiiiiparttwo/>

<sup>ii</sup> [https://clarencibicknell.com/wp-content/uploads/elhanan\\_bicknell\\_herne\\_hill\\_mb\\_22feb2019.pdf](https://clarencibicknell.com/wp-content/uploads/elhanan_bicknell_herne_hill_mb_22feb2019.pdf)

<sup>iii</sup> Elhanan either did not know or did not acknowledge that Constable's wife Maria (m. 1816) had been born Bicknell. One wonders whether the relationship would have encouraged Elhanan to buy Constable, or the opposite.

<sup>iv</sup> Unitarianism is an open-minded, non-creedal religious movement emphasizing individual freedom of belief, rational thought, and social justice. Originating from 16th-century Protestant reform, it historically rejects the Trinity, affirming the oneness of God. Today, it is highly pluralistic, welcoming diverse perspectives including Christian, humanist, atheist, and pagan views.

<sup>v</sup> Christian Reformer, xviii. 56 [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Dictionary\\_of\\_National\\_Biography,\\_1885-1900/Bicknell,\\_Elhanan](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Dictionary_of_National_Biography,_1885-1900/Bicknell,_Elhanan)

<sup>vi</sup> The Bicknells Of Herne Hill - by Patricia M. Jenkyns...

[https://clarencibicknell.com/wp-content/uploads/bicknells\\_of\\_herne\\_hill\\_jenkyns\\_1986.pdf](https://clarencibicknell.com/wp-content/uploads/bicknells_of_herne_hill_jenkyns_1986.pdf)

<sup>vii</sup> [https://clarencibicknell.com/wp-content/uploads/clarence\\_bicknell\\_citizen\\_scientist\\_mariotti\\_2019.pdf](https://clarencibicknell.com/wp-content/uploads/clarence_bicknell_citizen_scientist_mariotti_2019.pdf)

<sup>viii</sup> Paragraph verbatim from *Marvels*, Valerie Lester, 2018

<sup>ix</sup> C.B. to Baroness von Taube, 1912-6-10. This item comes from a collection of autograph letters written by Bicknell to the baroness during the period 1909-1914. They are held at the Natural History Museum in London, call number: NHM, 92 BIC.

<sup>x</sup> ([https://clarencibicknell.com/wp-content/uploads/all\\_saints\\_archives\\_april2017.pdf](https://clarencibicknell.com/wp-content/uploads/all_saints_archives_april2017.pdf))