

Clarence Bicknell and Reginald Farrer, 19 July 1910

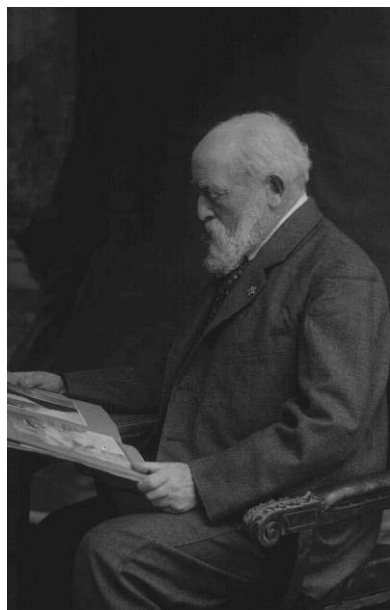


By Graham Avery

The visitors' book of Casa Fontanalba, Clarence Bicknell's summer home in the Maritime Alps above the Italian Riviera, records the visit on 19 July 1910 of Reginald Farrer. Who were these men? Why did Farrer visit Bicknell? What was the sequel?

Bicknell the botanist

Although Clarence Bicknell (1842-1918)¹ is now known for his pioneering investigation of the prehistoric rock-engravings of the Maritime Alps, his earlier work in the field of botany was important. In fact it was his interest in the mountain flowers that took him into the mountains where he first encountered the mysterious rock-markings known as 'Meraviglie'. He wrote "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."² It has been argued that Clarence Bicknell's discipline as a botanist was a crucial factor in his contribution to the study of rock-art, for it was through his meticulous drawing, photographing, recording, listing, classifying and publishing that the rock-figures emerged from the obscurity of antiquarian speculation into the light of scientific investigation and analysis.³



Clarence Bicknell arrived in Bordighera in 1879 as chaplain to the Anglican church, and soon made a wide circle of friends among the international community and the local population. He began to draw and record the local flora, and his watercolours were the basis for his book 'Flowering Plants and Ferns of the Riviera and neighbouring mountains' (Trübner, London, 1885) followed by 'Flora of Bordighera and San Remo' (Gibelli, Bordighera, 1896). It was in 1881 that he first saw the rock-engravings of the Meraviglie, and on a visit in 1887 he made drawings of them, but it was not until the summer of 1897 when he rented a house in Val Casterino in the mountains, 1560 metres above sea level, that he devoted his full interest to the exploration of the rock-figures. He presented papers on the subject to the Ligurian

Society of Natural Sciences at Genoa in 1897 and 1898, and this led to the publication of 'The prehistoric rock engravings in the Italian Maritime Alps' (Gibelli, Bordighera, 1902) followed by 'A Guide to the Prehistoric Rock Engravings of the Italian Maritime Alps' (Bessone, Bordighera, 1913). His work is recognised as a milestone in the investigation of the petroglyphs, and it "remains the fundamental method for the professional study of this major component of the prehistoric art of Europe".⁴

Bicknell at Casa Fontanalba

After renting accommodation in Val Casterino for a number of years, Bicknell decided in 1904 to build a home there, a two-storey house with verandah designed by Robert MacDonald; the house was named Casa Fontanalba after Val Fontanalba, higher up in the mountains, where Bicknell had discovered many rock engravings.



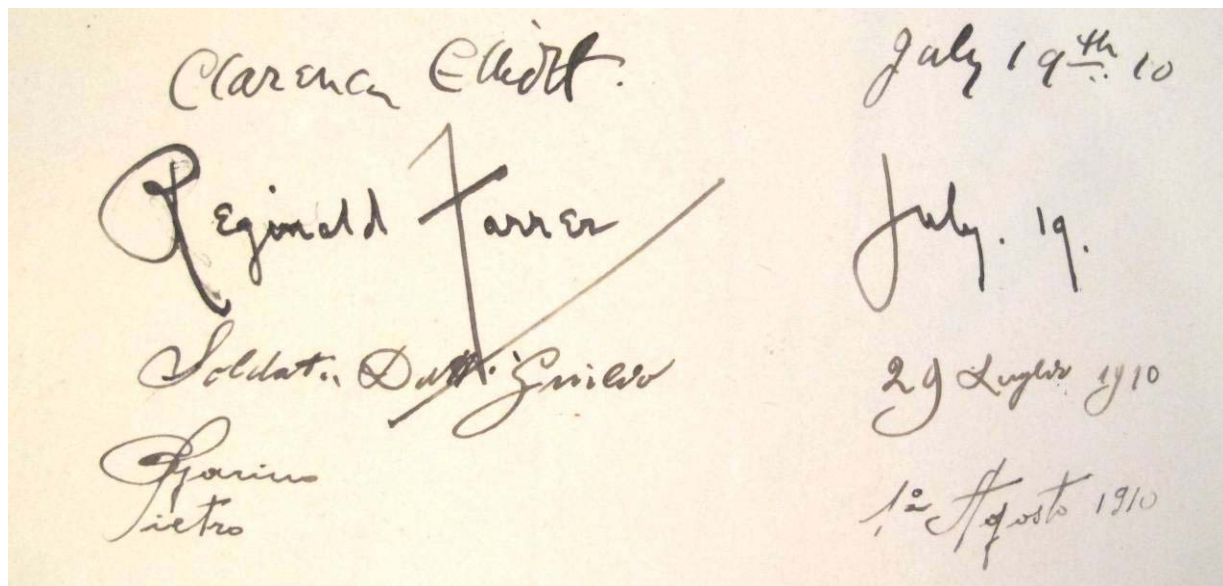
From 1906 he stayed here each summer with his servants Luigi and Mercede Pollini, pursuing the investigation of the rock engravings. At the house he kept a visitors' book and a book of friends.⁵ The visitors' book lists the names of persons who came to see him – friends and acquaintances from Bordighera and visitors from further afield, including botanists and archaeologists from a number of countries. In the book of friends he made brief notes about those who stayed as guests; these notes were written in Esperanto, the international language created by Ludwig Zamenhof, which was another of Bicknell's passions.⁶

An interesting report on a visit to Casa Fontanalba was made by Alberto Pelloux⁷, a friend and correspondent of Bicknell. His name, together with that of his wife, appears in the visitors' book for 12 August 1913, and in the book of friends he is described as 'Captain of the Alpine Regiment'. On the day after his visit he wrote to his mother "Bicknell's house is a thing really worth seeing. You've no idea how he's fitted it out with drawings and pictures, all made by himself on rainy days! It's wonderful to think that he did all this himself. His life up there is ordered according to the hours of the day, for example everyone has to get up at half-past-five, eat at half-past-ten, have dinner at five, and go to bed at half-past-eight at the latest, so as to use all the hours of daylight ... You should see Bicknell's house, it's beautiful, and his garden is so well kept, with strawberries, redcurrants, and so on. I can tell you, it's worth going there just to see the house, for it gives an idea of the prodigious activity of this man, who is full of a sense of poetry and art. He has a book, all painted with flowers, for the signatures of people who go to see him; another similar book is for those who stay the night there, and for them there are a few lines of biography in Esperanto. Then in one room, on the walls, are all the initials of his guests, within an ornamental design. We left in the morning at six, and our initials were already in place."⁸

Another recollection came from Luciano Minozzi, son of a friend of Bicknell, who wrote that “in the morning the guests and their host got up very early and dived into the cold water of a nearby stream, even if the weather was cold and they didn’t wish to bathe; then everyone was free until lunch, but had to do to something useful not only for himself but for the community, and report on it at the meal. After eating (vegetarian food, since Bicknell was a crusader for animal protection) guests had to wash their own dishes because it did not seem fair that Luigi⁹, a man like any other, should do it for everyone else. In the afternoon there was a compulsory excursion until dinner-time. The place was like a boarding school, or a house of correction, for meals were strictly regulated; only vegetarian food, no fish, no eggs, not even milk or butter, but instead salad, roots, and broth made from vegetables or fruit. As for a certain kind of convenience, Bicknell was quite stubborn; he had banned the renowned English toilet, so famous in those times, and preached that it was immoral for a man to keep waste matter in his house; to go out in the open air was not only poetic, healthy and decent, but useful for the plants.”¹⁰

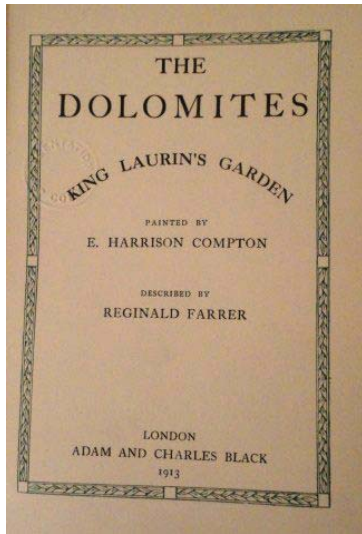
Clarence Elliott & Reginald Farrer at Casa Fontanalba

For Tuesday 19 July 1910 the visitors’ book records the names of Clarence Elliott and Reginald Farrer.



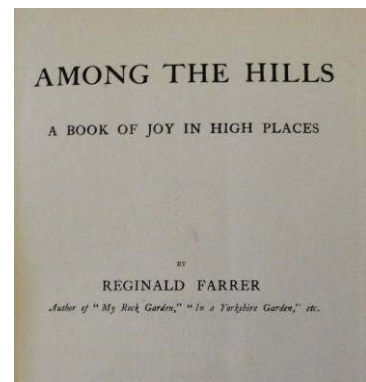
Clarence Elliott (1881-1969) was a collector and writer on alpine plants, who had established a nursery at Six Hills, Stevenage, and revised and re-edited in 1907 the classic work ‘Flowers of the Field’ which was first published in 1853 by the Reverend C. A. Johns and has remained in print ever since.

Reginald John Farrer¹¹ (1880 –1920) was a traveller and plant collector who had founded the Craven Nursery in Clapham, Yorkshire, and published in 1907 the popular book ‘My Rock Garden’ followed by ‘Alpines and Bog Plants’ (1908) and ‘In a Yorkshire Garden’ (1909). Later he published books about his botanical excursions in the Alps and Dolomites (image, left) and his travels in China in search of plants to bring back for cultivation; it was in the remote mountains of Upper Burma that he died in 1920. As botanists, Elliott and Farrer have attained more fame than Bicknell. In horticultural circles Farrer is known as ‘the father of rock gardening’, and flowers have been named after both of them: in the case of Elliott it is *Saxifraga* ‘Clarence Elliott’ and in the case of Farrer the Latin names of no less than 29 plants bear the epithet *farreri* or *farreriana*.¹²



The meeting of these botanists with Bicknell is of particular interest since Farrer described it in a book published in 1911, and later mentioned Bicknell in a book published in 1919.

Farrer, who had visited the European mountains regularly since his youth, made a six-week botanical tour in France and Italy in 1910, and published a description of it in the following year in ‘Among The Hills: A Book of Joy in High Places’ (image of the front cover, right). Arriving by train at Modane on 22 June, he investigated the flora of Mont Cenis and then went on to Bobbio Pellice and Terme di Valdieri, where Elliott, his companion for the rest of the tour, joined him.



On 13 July the two walked into France over the Passo Ciriegia, where Farrer exulted on finding *Saxifraga florulenta*¹³ (image, left). This large rare plant, whose English name is ‘The Ancient King’, was noted and depicted also by Bicknell¹⁴. After staying at Boreon and Saint Martin Vesubie, where they made further botanical excursions, Farrer and Elliott travelled by bus and train via Nice to Ventimiglia, where they hired a horse-drawn carriage to San Dalmazzo di Tenda (now St. Dalmas-de-Tende¹⁵). Here they stayed, presumably at its “one charming hotel, conspicuous alike for comfort and cheapness”¹⁶ and after making an excursion to nearby cliffs to find *Primula Allioni*¹⁷ they walked up Val Casterino to the locality then known as La Maddalena because of its chapel dedicated to Santa Maria Maddalena (now the village of Casterino).

Farrer describes the visit in the following way “Down upon San Dalmazzo from behind, steeply between pine-clad ranges of granite, descends the Valley of the Miniera de Tenda, up which you can wander into the high heart of the Maritimes, either following the main glen, or diverging (as I shall make you do, and as you may wish I hadn’t) along its right-hand branch, which becomes the Casterino Valley and then the Valmasca Valley, and ultimately brings you to the foot of Monte Bego’s sacred peak, deified by a race now forgotten, which filled the rocks around its base with barbaric carvings, never to be deciphered by the historian.”¹⁸

After a description of San Dalmazzo, and eight pages on *Primula Allioni*, Farrer continues: “*Aquilegia Reuteri*¹⁹ (image, right) is yet another of the special glories that distinguish the Maritime Alps above the other European ranges. If you want to see it in character you must ascend the Valley of the Miniera de Tenda. And the Valley of the Miniera, besides being granitic, is very long and very steep and very hot and very dull (Farrer inserts here a footnote: I’ve been severely rebuked for saying this, and of course, it isn’t true. But it was true to me, the day I mounted the Miniera. What closer approximation to the truth can you expect?). We were told that it took two hours of easy sauntering to reach La Maddalena, up in that divergence of the Miniera which leads to the right, and is called the Val Casterino;

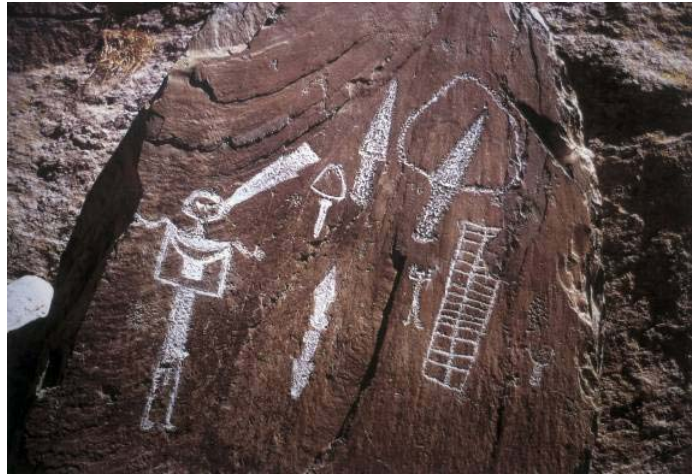


and we found that it took three and a half hours of solid stodging. I draw a veil over the feelings with which we viewed our informant, and the Miniera generally. Nor did our welcome at La Maddalena quite correspond with our heat and our weariness, our hunger and our thirst. Not to put too fine a point upon it, our hosts were scantily pleased to have two total strangers dropping in on domestic bliss “*en villegiature*” among the wild mountains. They eyed us with frigidity as we climbed over the garden-railing, and indicated that tea might be obtained, perhaps; but that the meal was over, and the fire gone out, and the bottom of the kettle fallen through. And, pray, what would you say, then, or I, or any normal person, if we retired into the remotest Alps for solitude, and then saw two strange figures toiling up into our garden, armed with trowels and collecting tins?”²⁰

“But there are bright spots in even the Valley of the Miniera. And the brightest of all is a slope quite blue with *Aquilegia Reuteri*. This occurs just at the divergence of the side track towards La Maddalena, and a little way short of the silver mine in the main valley, from which it takes its name. Here, on a bank of very stony, grassy rubble, the Columbine abounded in rich profusion of blossom, and just below in the gravel bank, by the path, *Campanula stenocodon*²¹ was in flower. And Reuter’s Columbine is certainly a glorious and lovely thing, when one sees it at its best.”²²

After discussing the Columbine and the Campanula for a further two pages, Farrer concludes with the reflection “One ought to know more of the Miniera Valley. Perhaps some day I may return there, when the bottom has been restored to the kettle. For the wide glade of La Maddalena is beautiful. The boulders are sheeted with *Primula marginata*²³, and bushy with

*Dianthus sylvestris*²⁴. High over the head of the valley loom the grisly precipices, the snow-fields, and the naked peak of the Rocca del Abisso. Round to the left at the foot of this goes curling the Casterino Valley, and becomes the Val Valmasca, leading towards the holy Monte Bego, and the Lakes of Marvels, and the rock-carvings (image, right) which are the “Marvels” that give the lakes their name. On Monte Bego the King of the Alps²⁵ again holds his court; and the Val Valmasca²⁶ is sacred to an even august plant than *Eritrichium*. For those gaunt granites mark the extreme easterly limit of *Saxifraga florulenta*.²⁷



After their excursion to La Maddalena Farrer and Elliott continued their tour by going on to Tenda, Limone, Cuneo and Turin, and re-visited Mont Cenis at the end of July.

Questions concerning the visit

Farrer’s account of the excursion resonates with frustration and embarrassment, and prompts a number of questions that merit examination. Why did Farrer and Elliott make the visit? Did they know Bicknell already? Did Bicknell know them? Why does Farrer omit to mention Bicknell’s name? Had they read his works on botany and rock-art, or at least know of them? How did they know that he was living at La Maddalena?

Although Farrer omits to mention Clarence Bicknell’s name, or the name of the house, there can be no doubt (even without the evidence of the visitors’ book) that it was Casa Fontanalba that they visited. Was Farrer’s concealment of the owner’s name from his readers motivated by a wish to avoid further embarrassment, either for himself or for Bicknell? Even though his name is not mentioned, some readers would surely have guessed it. However, it should be noted that Farrer also omits to mention the name of Clarence Elliott, who is referred in the book only as ‘my companion’.

Farrer’s comment that ‘the meal was over, and the fire gone out, and the bottom of the kettle fallen through’ could be interpreted as implying that these were pretexts for the refusal of hospitality. But it is entirely plausible that the meal was over, for we know that the evening meal was taken early at Casa Fontanalba. Although the visitors received ‘frigid looks’ they were not turned away, but invited to sign the visitors’ book, and presumably entered the house. The reference to ‘our hosts’ in the plural must mean Bicknell and his two servants; there is no mention in the visitors’ book of other guests being present at the time.

Although Farrer omits to explain why they chose to go to La Maddalena, it seems clear that they went not only to explore the local botany but to see the local botanist. What did Farrer know at this time about Bicknell? As we shall see, he later described him as “a famous English botanist” and he must already have known of Bicknell’s books on the flora of the region, published in 1885 and 1896, although there is no evidence that he actually consulted them. Had he done so, he might well have mentioned Bicknell as a botanical authority alongside the others frequently cited in ‘Among The Hills’ (Barla, Bonnier, Brémond, Burnat²⁸, Correvon, Matthews, Maw).

The remark that they were ‘total strangers’ implies that Farrer and Elliott had not previously met Bicknell; they were of a different generation, Farrer being 40 years younger than Bicknell, and there is no evidence that Bicknell had visited England in the preceding decade. It also implies they had not written to inform Bicknell of their visit in advance. Although this was contrary to the norms of polite behaviour, it was perhaps understandable since their tour does not seem to have followed a pre-defined timetable. Nevertheless, they could have sent a message from their hotel at San Dalmazzo.

At San Dalmazzo the local people would surely have known that the eminent foreigner was in residence at La Maddalena. Locally Bicknell was well-known; Baedeker’s guide in its entry for Bordighera²⁹ mentioned “the *New Museum or International Free Library*³⁰ (image, right) founded by Mr Bicknell and containing a reading-room, a concert-hall, a small library, a unique collection of the flora of the Riviera, a collection of minerals and an archaeological collection (including fragments and casts of the rock-inscriptions)”.



The identity of the informant who said that the walk would take only two hours is obscure. If the visitors had read Bicknell’s ‘Guide to the Prehistoric Rock Engravings of the Italian Maritime Alps’ published in 1902, they would have seen that three hours was given as the walking time from San Dalmazzo to La Maddalena³¹; or if they had read the entry on San Dalmazzo³² in Baedeker’s guide they would have seen that “a bridle path leads to the W. to (3 hrs) Casterino”.

Although Farrer’s references to the rock carvings show that he knew of the Meraviglie, his description of them as ‘rocks ... with barbaric carvings, never to be deciphered by the historian’ is another indication that he had not read Bicknell’s book. If he had, he would surely have been less dismissive of them. He may perhaps have been relying on the same source as Baedeker, who referred to the Meraviglie as “rocks of slate inscribed with rude drawings of unknown antiquity.”³³

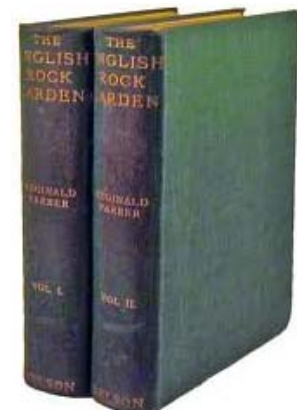
Bicknell himself may possibly have known of Farrer's and Elliott's botanical activities and publications. Subsequently he must have seen Farrer's book 'Among The Hills'³⁴ but we know nothing of his reaction to it.

Let us make an effort of imagination concerning the visit of Farrer and Elliott to Casa Fontanalba. Plainly, after their walk of three hours, they were exhausted and thirsty, and Bicknell was surprised by their unexpected arrival. There would have been embarrassment on both sides. Farrer's account reveals nothing of what they discussed, but we can suppose that after introducing themselves Farrer and Elliott would have asked about the local flora, talked of their recent excursions, and discussed the work of other botanists. When they entered the house to sign the visitors' book, perhaps Bicknell would have shown them his own botanical books and paintings.

They had other interests in common: Farrer had already travelled to Japan and Ceylon, and would later visit China and Burma, while Bicknell in the 1870s had been to Ceylon, New Zealand, Morocco and Majorca³⁵ and later in 1914 planned a visit to Japan³⁶. By the standards of contemporary society, both men were unconventional: Bicknell was a vegetarian, an internationalist, and a lapsed Anglican priest, while Farrer was a novelist *manqué*, an unsuccessful politician, and (since his visit to Ceylon) a Buddhist. Both were intellectually curious and open to new ideas, but had strong opinions on certain matters.

Farrer's last word

Farrer mentioned Bicknell in the book 'The English Rock-Garden' which he wrote in 1913, and corrected for the press during the winter of 1914 while he was in China, although its publication was delayed until 1919. This *magnum opus* in two volumes (image, right) describes every species of Alpine plant, with a total of about 10,000 entries and more than 1,000 pages.



Concerning *Primula marginata* (image, below right) Farrer writes "In nature, this loveliest blue *Primula* of our Alps is a rare species; extremely abundant, indeed, but only in a small limited district ranging from the Maritime chain up through the Cottians ... Naturally it varies copiously, and the gardener had best go and choose his forms. He is particularly recommended to go the valley of La Maddalena, above San Dalmazzo de Tenda, not only because there *P. Marginata* exists in the most rampant profusion and the most riotous and lovely degree of variation, but also because that valley is further occupied by a famous English botanist, one Mr Bicknell, who has there a house and spends long



summers, in the course of which he asks nothing better than to show the treasures of his hills to all such fellow-collectors as desire to see them. Therefore in asking him for guidance, the gardener will not only be gaining profit but giving pleasure also – a holy and pleasing thought.”³⁷

A revival of interest in Reginald Farrer in recent years has led to the publication of two books about him, both of which select this passage for quotation. In 1991 W.T. Stearn commented “Having received a frosty reception at La Maddalena, Farrer was well aware how much the Rev. Clarence Bicknell (1842-1918), author of *Flowering Plants and Ferns of the Riviera* (1885), hated visitors to his valley! Farrer’s barbed remarks, however, missed their target. Publication of *The English Rock-Garden* was delayed until October 1919; Bicknell died in July 1918.”³⁸ Nicola Shulman in her 2003 biography of Farrer commented in a footnote “The Rev. Clarence Bicknell detested other plant collectors in his valley, and had once repelled Farrer when he tried to visit him there.”³⁹ These authors interpreted Farrer’s praise of Bicknell, and his recommendation to readers to visit him in the mountains, as malicious revenge for his own unhappy experience in Val Casterino. But is this correct? What really happened on 19 July 1910?

Stearn’s statement that Bicknell ‘hated visitors to his valley’ is not supported by any evidence other than the passage quoted from Farrer’s book, and is contrary to what we know about Bicknell from other sources. The same is true of Shulman’s remark, probably derived from Stearn, that Bicknell ‘repelled’ Farrer, implying (incorrectly) that he drove him away from his house.

What do we know of Bicknell’s attitude to visitors? Inside the entrance door of Casa Fontanalba were verses in English painted on the walls “Welcome be to every guest, Come he north, south, east or west” and “Go he north, south, east or west, God speed every parting guest.”⁴⁰ There was a regular stream of visitors; for the summer months from 1906 to 1917 the visitors’ book gives a total of 310 names, and the book of friends lists 120 persons. They included antiquarians, botanists, local residents from Bordighera, Esperantists, and friends and relations from Italy and other countries. Among the visitors from England were an accountant, a textile manufacturer, a Fellow of the Royal Geographic Society, and four persons described as botanists (Harold Stuart Thompson⁴¹, James W. White⁴², Cedric Bucknall⁴³, Philip F. Dickinson⁴⁴). This evidence contradicts the suggestion that Bicknell ‘hated visitors’. Concerning the rock engravings, it is said that Bicknell ‘was disappointed when the experts did not come to his mountain; if they did, then so briefly’⁴⁵ As regards the botanists, Farrer’s statement that Bicknell ‘asks nothing better than to show the treasures of his hills to all such fellow-collectors as desire to see them’ would seem to be a statement of fact rather than a malevolent fabrication. One could even interpret it as a desire on Farrer’s part to set the record straight after his earlier commentary in ‘Among the Hills’ where he wrote that Bicknell had ‘eyed him with frigidity’ but added ‘what would you say, or I, if we saw two strange figures coming into our garden’.

Nevertheless, one should not underestimate Farrer's capacity for unkindness or malice. In his books about the mountains he criticised the lack of skill of his walking companions, and in his books on gardening he derided other gardeners. Soon after marrying Farrer's friend Aubrey Herbert in 1911, Mary Herbert wrote to her mother "Mr. Farrer is, I believe, a malevolent gnome, with a wish to be fascinating but an ill restrained bitterness of tongue."⁴⁶ So we should be wary of interpreting his words on Bicknell as a sincere compliment; it may also be a teasing reference to what happened on 19 July 1910, and the elevated phrase 'a holy and pleasing thought' is at least ironical, if not satirical.

The meeting between Reginald Farrer and Clarence Bicknell on 19 July 1910 was, as far as we know, their only encounter. Farrer's report of it is enigmatic, and we have no record of what Bicknell thought, so we can only speculate on what happened. We know that Bicknell normally welcomed visitors, but on this occasion something evidently went wrong. Probably it was a combination of Farrer's social manner, which could be disagreeable, and Bicknell's strict schedule, which meant that it was too late for a meal. The absence of tea as a result of the problem with the kettle (mentioned twice) seems to have been the last straw for Farrer. At any rate, he was sufficiently impressed by his experience at Casa Fontanalba to record it in a vivid but elliptical account, and later to praise his host in a passage of intriguing ambiguity.

Graham Avery – April 2012

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- Shulman (2003): Nicola Shulman, A Rage for Rock Gardening: The story of Reginald Farrer, gardener, writer and plant collector, Short Books, London, 2003

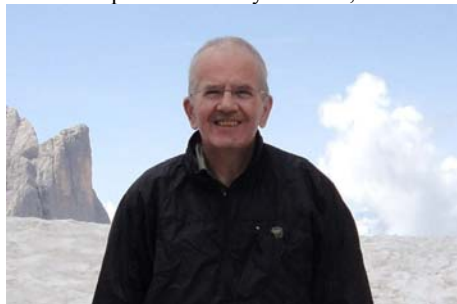
Notes

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- 1 See Bicknell (1988) and Chippindale (1998) for fuller accounts of Bicknell's life
 - 2 Pages 5-6 of Bicknell (1902)
 - 3 See page 44 of Chippindale (1998) for an assessment of the techniques of Bicknell as an 'amateur' in relation to the work of 'professional' archaeologists; the topic is pursued in more detail in Chippindale (1984)
 - 4 Page 12 of Chippindale (1998)
 - 5 The visitors' book and the book of friends have been transcribed and published online by Marcus Bicknell at <http://www.marcusbicknell.co.uk/clarence>
 - 6 For Bicknell's interest in Esperanto see pages 62-63 of Chippindale (1998)
 - 7 (1868-1948), later President of the Italian Geological Society; his father Luigi Pelloux, Prime Minister (Presidente del Consiglio) of Italy 1898-1900, had settled in Bordighera
 - 8 My translation of letters of 13 & 15 August 1913 quoted at page 18 of Bernardini (1972). This was not the first visit of Pelloux to Casterino; page 27 of Bicknell (1913) mentions that this 'learned mineralogist' was with him there in 1902
 - 9 Bicknell's servant Luigi Pollini
 - 10 My translation of page 18 of Bernardini (1972), apparently derived from a book by Minozzi dedicated to his father; page 59 of Bernardini (2001) relates a similar, but not identical, account from Minozzi
 - 11 See Illingworth & Routh (1991) and Shulman (2003) for fuller accounts of Farrer's life
 - 12 See 'Plant Names Commemorating Reginald Farrer' by W.T. Stearn at pages 43-54 of Illingworth & Routh (1991)
 - 13 See pages 158-71 of Farrer (1911)
 - 14 According to page 30 of Chippindale (1998) it was the quest for this plant that drew Bicknell to the Bego massif, where the rock engravings can be seen in the Vallée des Merveilles and the Vallée de Fontanalbe. The emblem of France's Parc National de Mercantour, now responsible for the protection of the area, was initially *Saxifraga florulenta* but (regrettably) it has been replaced by a generic symbol
 - 15 Place-names have changed since the transfer of the region from Italy to France in 1947
 - 16 Page 241 of Farrer (1911)
 - 17 Allioni's Primrose, named after Carlo Allioni (1728 -1804), professor of botany at Turin
 - 18 Page 242 of Farrer (1911)
 - 19 Reuter's Columbine, named after George François Reuter (1805-1872), French botanist
 - 20 Page 251 of Farrer (1911)
 - 21 Cottian Bellflower
 - 22 Pages 251-2 of Farrer (1911)
 - 23 Marginate Primrose
 - 24 Wood Pink
 - 25 *Eritrichium nanum*

26 Bicknell had also found *Saxifraga florulenta* in this area; the annotation 'Val Valmasca' is visible on his watercolour of it reproduced at page 31 of Chippindale (1998)
27 Page 254 of Farrer (1911)
28 Émile Burnat of Geneva (1828-1920) co-author of 'Flore des Alpes maritimes' (7 volumes 1892-1931), visited Bicknell at Casa Fontanalba on 27 July 1909
29 Page 106 of Baedeker (1906)
30 Now the Museo Bicknell
31 Pages 8 & 10 of Bicknell (1902)
32 Page 48 of Baedeker (1906)
33 Ibidem
34 Listed with call no XII P 13 in the online library catalogue of the Museo Bicknell; the book was probably acquired soon after its publication in 1911; the books with adjoining shelf numbers have publication dates of 1900 and 1908 respectively
35 Page 21 of Chippindale (1998)
36 He decided not to go (at the age of 72) because he thought his servant Luigi was not strong enough to accompany him, see Bicknell (1988)
37 Pages 153-4 of Farrer (1919) vol. 2
38 Page 5 of 'An Introductory Tribute to Reginald Farrer' by W.T. Stearn in Illingworth & Routh (1991)
39 Page 97 of Shulman (2003)
40 Page 56 of Chippindale (1998)
41 (1870-1940) Fellow of the Linnean Society, author of 'Alpine Plants of Europe' (1911), visited on 15-18 June 1907
42 Fellow of the Linnean Society, contributor to the Journal of Botany British and Foreign (1901), visited on 19 July 1911
43 (1849-1921), Organist of All Saints' Church, Clifton, visited with his wife on 2 August 1911
44 Philip F. Dickinson, visited on 23 August 1912
45 Page 44 of Chippindale (1998)
46 Page 60 of Shulman (2003)

About the author

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- 'Robert Schuman on Hungary and Europe', Hungarian Quarterly, 2010
- 'EU Expansion and Wider Europe' in 'The European Union: How Does it Work?', Oxford University Press, 2011
- 'The European External Action Service: new actor on the scene', European Policy Centre, Brussels, 2011

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In ‘Clarence Bicknell and Reginald Farrer, 19 July 1910’ I discussed the meeting that took place between these two botanists at Bicknell’s house in the Maritime Alps. I have now found (in the Farrer Collection at the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh) a letter written by him on 22 July 1910 in which he describes the meeting. A transcript of the letter, with notes on the places and persons mentioned, is below. I wish to express my gratitude to Leonie Paterson, Archivist of the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh, for assistance with my research.

This letter, written three days after the event, prefigures the account of the episode that Farrer published the following year in his book ‘Among The Hills’. It adds the following details:

- Farrer writes that when he and his companion (Clarence Elliott) reached the house, Bicknell offered them a drink of vermouth (‘which I hate’).
- They had a conversation with Bicknell, perhaps on botanical matters, which was uninteresting (‘no information that I didn’t know before’).
- Bicknell’s friends Edward and Margaret Berry were present, and Farrer talked with Margaret (described in very unflattering terms) about a mutual acquaintance
- The visit was not planned in advance, but suggested to them by someone locally (‘we were sent up to see’ Bicknell), possibly by the following person
- The person who misled them about the time needed to walk to the house is identified as Dr Walker (described with an ironical pun as ‘a champion walker’).

The letter thus complements and largely confirms the argument developed in my article.

- the main cause of Farrer’s disappointment was the long and exhausting walk, combined with inadequate refreshment on arrival (in the book he highlighted the lack of tea, not the offer of vermouth)
- Bicknell did not turn Farrer and his companion away from the house, as some commentators have suggested, but offered them a drink, engaged them in conversation, and introduced them to his friends the Berrys
- the letter illustrates well Farrer’s literary style: florid extravagance enlivened by wit and malice

Graham Avery

5 April 2013

Letter from Reginald Farrer, probably to his mother
(Farrer Family Collection, Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh Archives GB 235 RJF/2/1/2)

Hotel de l'Europe, Limone, July 22 [1910]

You must be feeling very chilly & neglected indeed my dear now that your natural protégé is no longer there. I hope that both you & he will have a good time. Indeed of course the time of fine weather in the Alps (if not in England) is now at hand so that Zermatt & so on should be looking glorious. This country is very odd & strange: of no attraction as mountain-scenery, really, for the hills are only limestone crags, and their slopes have all the internal lavender-clad aridities of the Mediterranean coast. However the plants are very rewarding: a rarity in almost every glen, though the rest of the scene is neither verdant nor brilliant. I have sent many boxes - ten indeed already so you can imagine how well we have been doing. But they mount up, these boxes: if you have a loose fiver or tenner, send it on to cheer me on the Mt. Cenis, if you wish me ever to return to your side, & not remain for ever in pawn at some outlandish consulate! San Dalma is an attractive little place, but we are glad to be edging Northward again, to the high places & the snow. It was very hot in the Roja valley, though cooling breezes, it is true, play for ever up and down the chestnut woods of San Dalma. We had four days there in all: a rare plant for each day's object. Once we were sent up to see a Mr Bicknell, a botanist, in a remote glen, which we were told was a two hour's stroll. Unfortunately our informant was, as we afterwards found, a known champion walker (a Dr Walker of Bordighera, with a foreign accent) - the stroll turned out a trudge of 3½ hours, at the end of which old Bicknell merely offered us Vermouth (which I hate) and no information that I didn't know before. His nephew was there, the Consul of Bordighera (Berry) whose fat wife, the fattest woman to be found here, in a country of fat women, discovered in me a violent likeness to someone of my name, who afterwards on enquiry and analysis, proved to be Minna! The evenings at San Dalma were delightful: we sat out in a balmy scented darkness, with little fragrant zephyrs blowing from the vines in flower, and watched the most wonderful fireflies turning themselves on and off, as they hovered against the dark velvet background. I had no idea that the alps, even the Southern ones, produced such marvels. It was almost like being at night in the depths of the jungle round Polonnarua. Another nice thing are the white strawberries - sickly and pale, perhaps, to look at, but of a rich fruity flavour far exceeding that of any fat red sort of the garden. We greatly wanted to get plants. The Riviera was looking extraordinarily unchanged as we passed along it: summer & winter seem to make no difference at all to the hard and brilliance of the coast. But the Mediterranean was glorious in green & blue & violet: & the warmth was like something tangible. But in vain, between Nice & Ventimiglia, did I look for a sight of Cannes or the Esterel. We are here for two nights in hope of *Ranunculus alpestris*: then the Mt. Cenis again for four solid days of clear mountain air. After that, hot Storo, then cool (I hope) Mte Baldo: then boiling Botzen & Salurn, to wind up,

after all, if we can manage it, with a dash at Misurina & *Potentilla nitida*! London about the 14th or 15th I expect. I am so glad this year, to have covered so much new country & seen for the first time so many well known plants at home. But there is no display here now: all is dust & lavender (I have sent home one fine big-flowered form).

Y[ours] aff[ectionate]ly Reginald Farrer

Explanatory notes

This letter was written from Limone during Reginald Farrer's botanical tour in the Alps in 1910; the tour was later described in his book 'Among The Hills' published in 1911.

On July 27, a few days after this letter, he wrote another from Hotel de la Poste, Mt Cenis, again probably to his mother, of which the following is an extract:

'My dear, your welcome letter & cheque were a great satisfaction: the latter perhaps I may hope to repay... Limone was our last of the Maritime Alps – a horridish place with a hotel ill-kept by a former maid of the fat Mrs Berry. We had two nights there, for an expedition after *Ranunculus alpestris* which we did not get. But a marvellous journey next day to Turin...'

Places mentioned

Limone: in Italy (cf. pages 274-282 of 'Among The Hills')

Mt. Cenis: Mont Cenis on the border of France and Italy, where Farrer began his tour in June (pages 16-39) and to which he returned in July (pages 40-72)

Roja: river valley where Farrer made a number of excursions (pages 234-73)

San Dalma (San Dalmazzo di Tenda): San Dalmas-de-Tende in France (at that time in Italy)

Polonnarua: in Ceylon, visited by Farrer in 1908

Botzen (Bolzano) and **Salurn** (Salorno): in Italy (at that time in the Austrian Südtirol)

Storo: in Italy, west of Lago di Garda, Farrer's base for excursions to Cima Tombea

Mte Baldo: Monte Baldo in Italy, east of Lago di Garda

Misurina: in Italy, one of Farrer's bases for excursions in the Dolomites

Persons mentioned

Bicknell: Clarence Bicknell of Bordighera, who had a summer house in a high valley above San Dalmazzo (page 251) where Farrer signed the Visitors' Book on 19 July 1910

Walker: possibly the husband of Mrs Fanshawe Walker of Bordighera, from whom Clarence Bicknell bought his house Villa Rosa (the Anglican church was built in its garden)

Berry: Edward and Margaret Berry of Bordighera, friends of Clarence Bicknell

Minna: presumably a member of the Farrer family, possibly Minna Farrer, daughter of Sir William Farrer who died in 1911 (London solicitor and collector of Italian paintings; his country home, Sandhurst in Surrey, later became the Royal Military Academy)