

Emile Burnat – The Film

By Graham Avery

In 1997 the Museo Nazionale della Montagna of the Club Alpino Italiano produced a documentary film on the Swiss botanist Emile Burnat (1828-1920) entitled 'Il sentiero delle orchidee - Emile Burnat in Valle Pesio'. This note summarises and comments on the film (27 minutes) which can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cW9txVhLtx4>. In the Annex is a summary of the screenplay for those who do not understand Italian.

The film opens with Burnat at the age of 80 reminiscing about his botanical exploits in the mountains, and continues with a series of flashbacks to episodes of his life. The main source for these episodes is Burnat's autobiography¹.

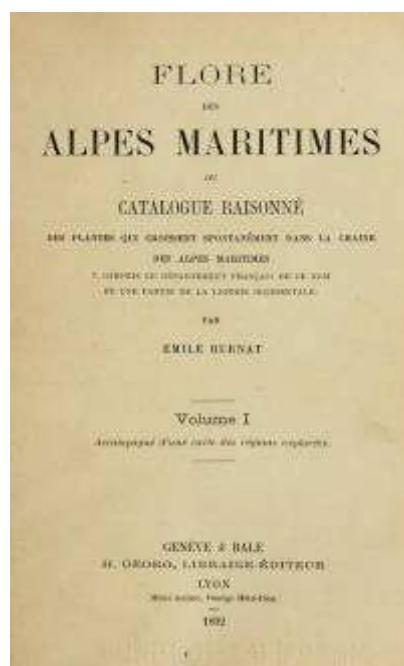
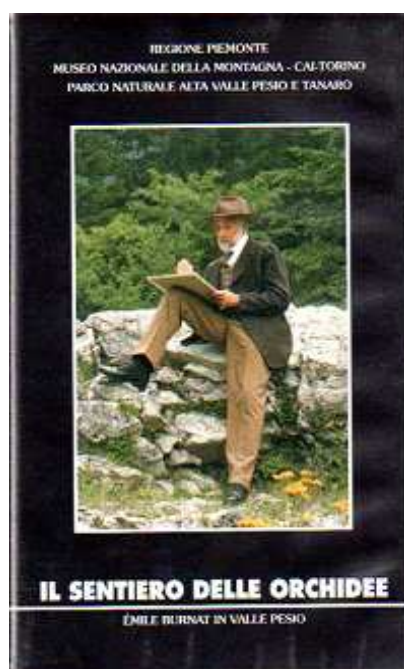


Burnat retired at the age of 40 from work in Alsace as an engineer and businessman to pursue his love of botany from his home in Vevey, travelling in search of plants to many parts of Europe. In 1872 he took his daughter Marianne to recover from illness at Val di Pesio in Piemonte,

where they stayed for three months at Certosa di Pesio, a monastery converted into a hydrotherapy resort. From here Burnat explored the mountains, and it was here that he decided to devote himself to the study of the flora of the Maritime Alps.

The result was his monumental *Flore des Alpes Maritimes* published in seven volumes², image of the cover, right. In the summer months from 1872 to 1914 he made regular botanical excursions in the mountains, with a team which grew to include assistants, a cook, tents, and mules carrying 800 kilos of equipment. His field of activity was extensive, including the whole of the Maritime Alps in France and Italy, and he returned several times to Val di Pesio in the Ligurian Alps, which for botanical purposes he grouped together with the Maritime Alps.

Burnat's assistants included John Briquet, who was Director of the Geneva botanical garden, and François Cavillier, who was in charge of Burnat's *Herbier*. These two men figure in the film, and it was they who edited Burnat's autobiography and contributed amusing anecdotes



¹ Émile Burnat, Autobiographie publiée avec une étude sur le botaniste et son œuvre, des souvenirs et documents divers par John Briquet et François Cavillier, Conservatoire botanique, Genève, 1922

² Flore des Alpes Maritimes; ou, Catalogue raisonné des plantes qui croissent spontanément dans la chaîne des Alpes Maritimes y compris le département français de ce nom et une partie de la Ligurie occidentale, par Émile Burnat, H. Georg, Genève & Bâle, 1892-1931

about his encounters with local inhabitants³. These anecdotes feature in the film: Burnat and a friend, presumed to be doctors because they are botanists, are asked to attend to a woman in childbirth; Burnat and his ‘caravan’ of botanists, suspected of being French invaders, are detained by Italian soldiers; a shepherd throws rocks at Burnat, who retaliates by firing a revolver. The alpinist Victor de Cessole honoured Burnat in 1903 by giving the name ‘Cime Burnat’ to a mountain in the Maritime Alps.



In 1885 Burnat met the British botanist Clarence Bicknell (1842-1918)(image left) who lived in Bordighera, and they formed a life-long friendship with regular exchanges of letters and visits to each other’s homes⁴.



Bicknell botanised on several occasions in Val di Pesio, and in 1888 Burnat joined him there at San Bartolomeo di Pesio. Today the ‘Stazione Botanica Alpina E. Burnat / C. Bicknell’ managed by the Parco naturale Alta Valle Pesio e Tanaro commemorates the contribution of the two botanists to the exploration of the region (image, above right).

During a stay at San Bartolomeo di Pesio in the summer of 1899 Bicknell found the rare plant *Cypripedium calceolus* (Lady’s Slipper Orchid in English, Scarpetta di Venere in Italian, Sabot de Vénus in French)(image right) and wrote to Burnat to report his find. Its discovery by Bicknell is mentioned in the film, and the orchid is seen in close-up at the beginning and end of the film. It was not until 1912 that Burnat himself found the plant near Certosa di Pesio⁵, and later it was considered extinct in Val di Pesio until it was rediscovered in 1992, thanks to Bicknell’s letter to Burnat describing where he found it in 1899⁶.



³ Autobiographie, pages 92-6

⁴ Graham Avery, Clarence Bicknell’s correspondence with Emile Burnat 1886-1917, at

http://www.clarencebicknell.com/images/downloads_news/burnat_letters_from_bicknell.pdf

⁵ Gallina, Ostellino Re, Contributi alla conoscenza della flora del Massiccio del Marguareis, in Rivista Piemontese di Storia Naturale 14, 1993, pages 43-50

⁶ Ivan Pace, Fiori delle Alpi Liguri e Marittime, Specie rare e itinerari tra Marguareis e Argentera, L’Artistica Editrice, 2017, page 4

Annex

Il sentiero delle orchidee - Emile Burnat in Valle Pesio

Summary of screenplay

(Elapsed time in minutes and seconds is shown in brackets)

(0'50) Emile Burnat, at the Hotel du Lac at 7 pm on Saturday 24 October 1908, reminisces about his youth. (1'20) Flashback to 40 years ago: he tries to climb Mont Blanc, but falls back down a rocky slope. (3'55) Burnat says 'Sul sentiero delle orchidee ce n'è una da più di cent'anni mai toccata da mano d'uomo ... *Cypripedium calceolus* ... un fiore che s'è fatta trovare solo da Bicknell, e io vado a sognarlo ... mai incontrato un *Cypripedium* in trent'anni che frequento la valle Pesio' (On the 'path of the orchids' there's one that hasn't been touched by human hand for more than a hundred years ... *Cypripedium calceolus* ... a flower found only by Bicknell, about which I dream ... I've never seen a *Cypripedium* in the thirty years that I've been visiting the Pesio valley). (4'50) Burnat and his daughter Marianne in the cloister of Certosa di Pesio (6'00) Burnat with Marianne in the forest. (7'30) A group of dancers. (8'35) Burnat botanising in the mountains: a shepherd tells him to leave, and throws rocks at him, he retaliates by firing a revolver. (9'35) Burnat and a friend at table in an inn: they have just arrived, and order soup: a serving-woman hears that they are botanists and asks 'are you doctors, expert in herbal medicine?' (10'25) A young woman in bed in labour asks for a doctor. (10.55) The serving-woman wakes Burnat and his friend and says 'aren't you doctors?' (11.40) The botanists decide to escape from the inn. (12.05) A local woman sees Burnat's caravan passing through the forest: he rides on a mule and wears a broad hat. (13'00) She reports to the sindaco (mayor) that the French have invaded, there are five or six of them, and one has a general's hat. (13'50) An Italian soldier with a rifle arrives at the botanists' camp and says 'you are surrounded'. Burnat explains that it all ended with a solemn drink with the soldiers. (14'15) At a water-driven mill, Burnat talks with two local men. One says to the other 'He's not like other foreigners (stranieri), he treats us like human beings (cristiani)'. (15'10) A man gives a tree-fruit to Burnat. (15'15) Burnat gives money to a priest. (15.30) He drinks fresh milk. (15'50) He makes a speech on Swiss national day at a camp in the mountains, with the Swiss, Italian and French flags: 'Viva la Svizzera! Viva il rispetto e la fratellanza tra i popoli' (Long live Switzerland, and respect and brotherhood among peoples!). A banquet follows. (16.50) Burnat prepares with reluctance for a ceremony to receive honorary degrees from Zurich and Lausanne. (17.50) Burnat and his caravan travel towards a col in the mountains: Briquet and Cavillier climb a rocky slope in search of plants. (20.20) Burnat calls to warn them of danger: flashback to his fall on Mont Blanc (20.45) On their return to camp, Burnat reproaches them for taking risks: they reply 'we have a surprise for you' and give him the plant *Euphorbia vulliniana*, its first discovery in the Maritime Alps. (21.25) Burnat recalls that de Cessole, after his first ascent of a mountain, named it 'Cima Burnat', and that Briquet and Cavillier later climbed it. (21'45) Burnat rhapsodises about the mountains. (22.20) He leaves for the degree ceremony. (22'50) In the mountains again, in camp, Burnat talks about his love of the mountains. (22'50) He says to himself 'Puoi stare certo che là i fiori continuano a fiorire' (You can be sure that the plants continue to flower there). (24'50) Dancers in the forest. (25'05) End.