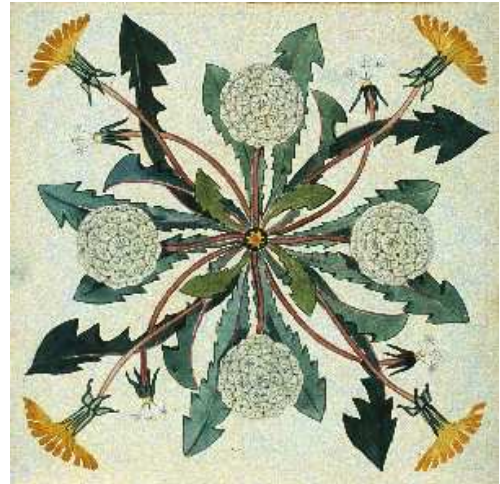


Clarence Bicknell's Passion for Flowers Revealed in his Art

By Susie Bicknell, October 2017

Clarence Bicknell had many talents and interests, but clearly his passion for flowers was supreme. It was in their depiction that he gained the most enjoyment and satisfaction.

The *Arts and Crafts* movement clearly influenced his already strong sense of design. Like the members of the movement, he did not limit his artistic endeavours to sketching and painting: he decorated ceramics, did poker work, made rugs and furniture and wanted to improve his techniques until a ripe old age. The dominant features of all these media were plants and flowers.



A childhood surrounded by artists and great works of art

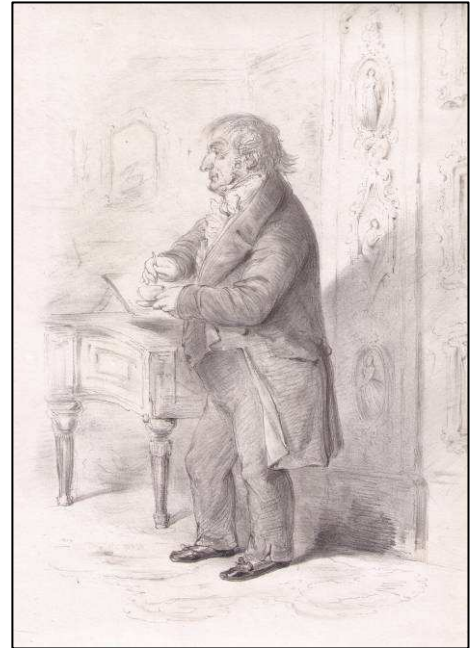
As a child, Clarence was surrounded by works of arts by the likes of Turner, David Roberts, Clarkson Stanfield, Landseer, William Collins, Etty and Callcott and would certainly have had impressed upon him the importance of art. His father, Elhanan Bicknell, was a respected art patron and collector, and one of a new breed of art patron, the fortunated businessman. *The Star* of 28th April 1863 described him thus 'a man not even pretending to resemble a Genoese or Florentine merchant prince but simply and absolutely a Londoner of the middle class actively occupied in business'.. Elhanan had made his fortune through wale oil. Another similar collector was Joseph Gillott, who had made his fortune with his invention of the steel pen. Clarence's father had a strong personal taste and after a visit to Italy to see works by Old Masters said to Clarence's cousin Edgar Browne that he had seen nothing that he would "give a damn for". He concentrated on contemporary artists, although he did have a couple of Gainsboroughs and a Van Dyck. However, despite being distantly related to Constable's wife, Maria Bicknell, he had no works by Constable.

As he was keen to commission new work, he usually bought directly from artists rather than using dealers. As a result, many of the artists were friends whom he entertained at Herne Hill, the family home. David Roberts was one of his closest friends and they were buried side by side in Norwood Cemetery.

Clarence would have met many of these artists. Herne Hill was enlarged to house his father's increasing art collection. Although the family lived upstairs, Clarence would no doubt have been allowed as a child down to the new dining room, and to the new drawing room in which Turner's oil paintings were hung. His father had already bought 8 Turner paintings by 1844 ¹. and in the end he had 10 oil paintings and 18 watercolours.

¹ source <http://www.sothebys.com/en/news-video/auction-essays/old-master-british-paintings-evening-sale/2014/11/market-turner.html>

Clarence was only three when, at Christmas at Herne Hill in 1845, the Count d'Orsay, an amateur portrait artist, dandy, and man of fashion, and Sir Edwin Landseer devised a little plot to defeat Turner's antipathy to having his portrait painted. Whilst Turner chatted with a guest over a cup of tea in the drawing-room, suspecting nothing, D'Orsay placed himself as a screen beside him to hide, when necessary, Landseer, sketching Turner at full length in pencil on the back of an envelope. Landseer gave what he had done to D'Orsay, who after re-drawing it at home and enlarging the figure to eight inches in height, sold it to J Hogarth, print-seller in the Haymarket, for twenty guineas.² (image, right)



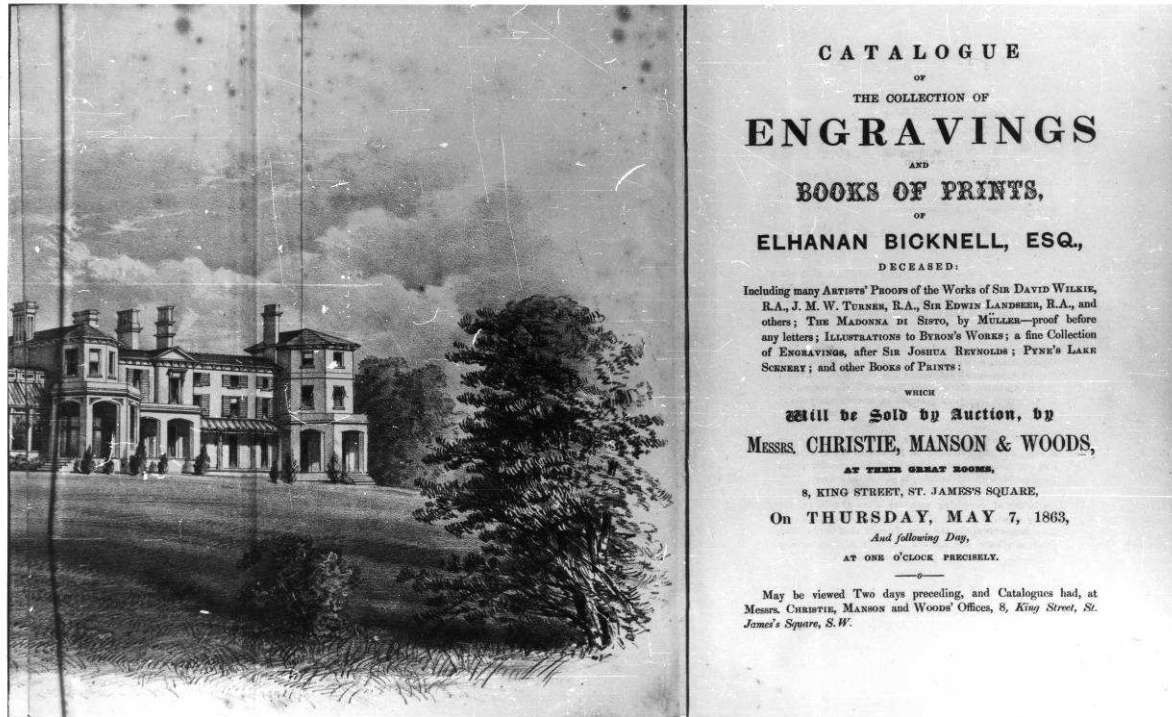
In 1861, Clarence was 19 and had just started at Cambridge University when his father died. What would have been his feelings that this great art collection he had grown up with was to be dispersed at auction at Christie's in April 1863? The auction certainly aroused great interest. A preview in the Spectator of 27 April 1863 says:

“Most people have heard of the late Mr. Bicknell's collection of pictures, but probably not many, besides his personal friends, and such few lovers of art as would be at some pains to gain admission to the sight, had till very lately seen them, or possessed any distinct idea of the treasure stored in the owner's pleasant house at Herne Hill. These pictures, collected with so much care, and (rarer still) with such great taste, are now, by Mr. Bicknell's death, condemned to final dispersion. And in the large and well-lighted gallery of Messrs. Christie and Manson all the world has during the past week been at liberty (of which, judging by the crowded state of the gallery, it has largely availed itself of its permission) to feast its eyes on some of the best works of our best artists. Before sunset to-day this goodly company of pictures will be scattered to the four winds by the auctioneer's hammer”.

Little did this previewer know how right he would be. Many of the 104 lots sold at this auction are now scattered around the world in museums and in the homes of very wealthy individuals. The auction included ten Turners. The preview goes on to describe the two Venetian paintings up for auction by Turner:

The two pictures of Venice—" *The Campo Santo* " and the " *Giudecca, &c.*"—are the latest specimens here of Turner's painting. They are each remarkable for their special character. Both are essentially Venetian; but though the boats are not more gaily decked, and the sky does not glitter more keenly in the one than in the other, yet the feeling inspired by them is widely different, the latter picture being as busy and gay as the former is solemn and still. How this difference is produced may, by studying the two works, be partly apprehended. Much, no doubt, is due to the difference in composition, and especially to the shapes of the masses. But, after all, there will remain an unexplained residuum for which I cannot account. I am compelled, as I am content, to say that a great genius is here whose stops I do not know, the heart of whose mystery I cannot pluck out.

² source http://www.clarencebicknell.com/images/downloads_news/dulwich_society_the_herne_hill_art_set_dec2014.pdf



The title page of the Christies catalogue of the sale of engravings (12 days after the sale of the paintings and sculpture) shows Elhanan's house at Herne Hill which was Clarence's home for 19 years.

Again, little did this previewer know that the painting of the "great genius" with "unpluckable mystery", the "*Giudecca, Santa Maria, Della Salute and San Giorgio Maggiera*". was sold for £20.5 million at Christie's in New York on 22nd November 2006 to Stephen Wynn, a Casino magnate and art collector. At the time this was the most expensive pre 20th century British painting ever sold³. Its companion painting, probably commissioned by Elhanan at a later date, "*The Campo Santo*", is now in the Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio.



Venice: Giudecca by Turner



Venice: the Campo Santo by Turner.



Another painting in Elhanan's collection sold at the auction was Sir Edwin Landseer's "*Two Dogs. Looking for crumbs that may fall from the great man's table*", (image left) now a national treasure of a painting, as it is often featured on postcards and greeting cards. It is now in the Wallace Collection, London.

³ This record was beaten later by another Turner "Rome Aventine", sold in 2014 for £30 million.



Elhanan's collection was, as the Spectator preview points out, not strong in figures but very strong in landscapes.

If we are seeking to find influences on Clarence's own artistic leanings from his father's collection, maybe the prevalence of great landscapes surrounding him in his home drew him towards these rather than figures. Gainsborough's "Repose" (image, left) would perhaps have remained in Clarence's memory as akin to his own feelings about the

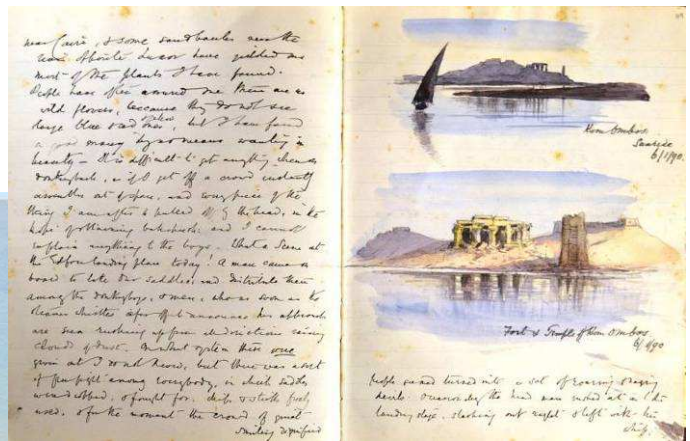
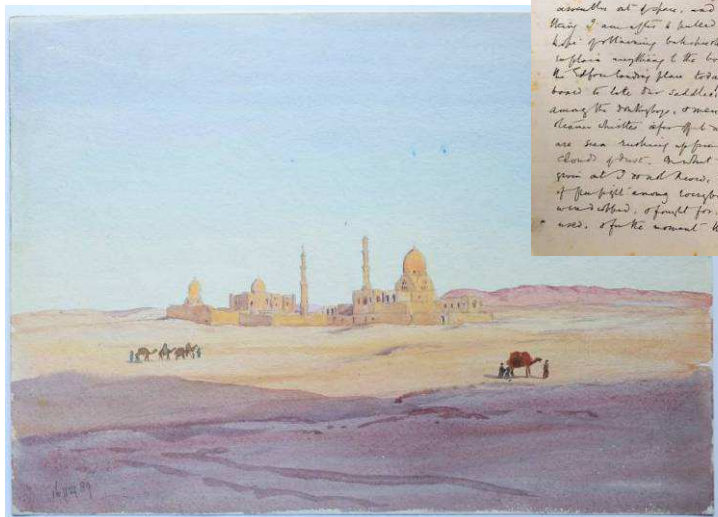
countryside that he loved more and more the older he grew.

Clarence depicted landscapes much more often than humans and animals.

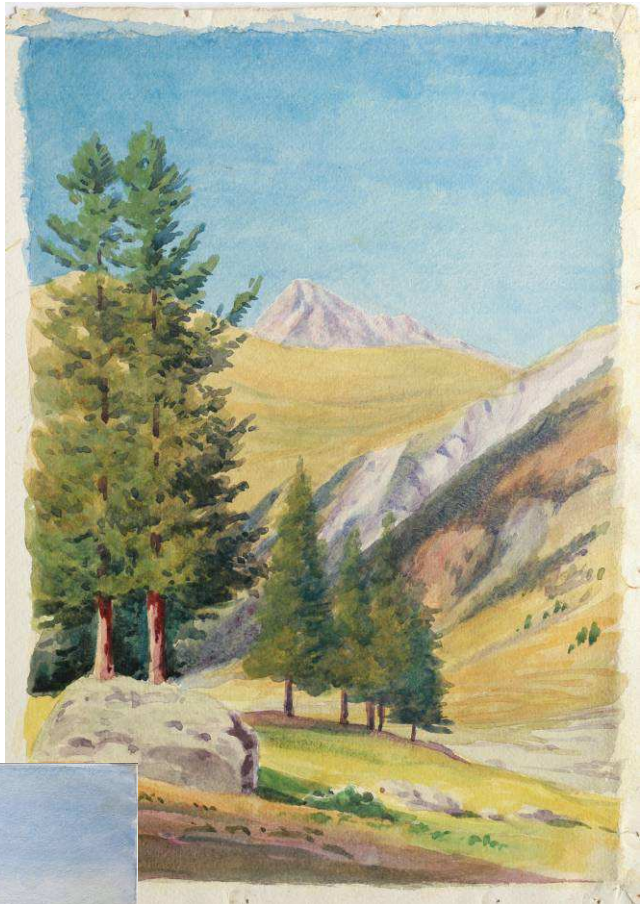
Clarence's own landscape and seascape work

Clarence was a competent landscape and seascape artist, even if he was not driven to emulate on a grandiose scale the work of the great artists that featured during his childhood life. Like so many of his Victorian contemporaries on their travels, he recorded his trips with sketches and watercolours.

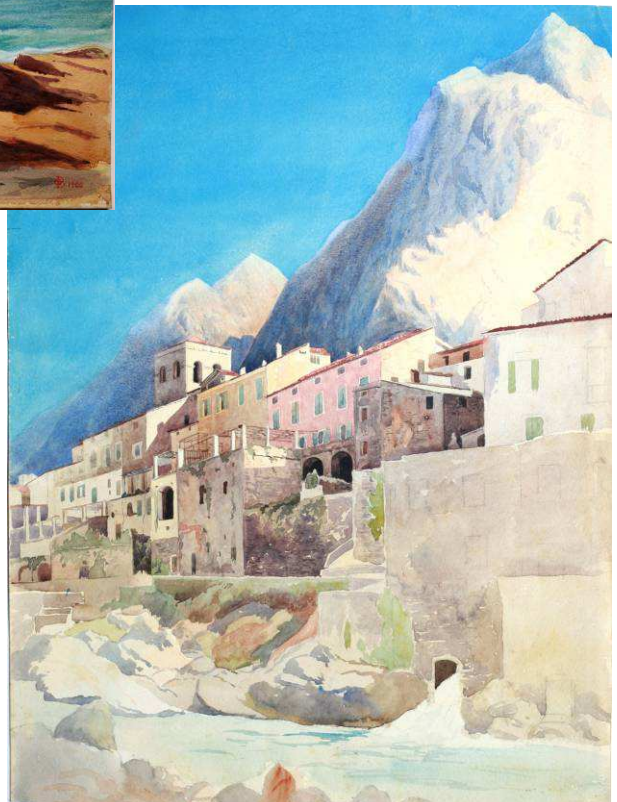
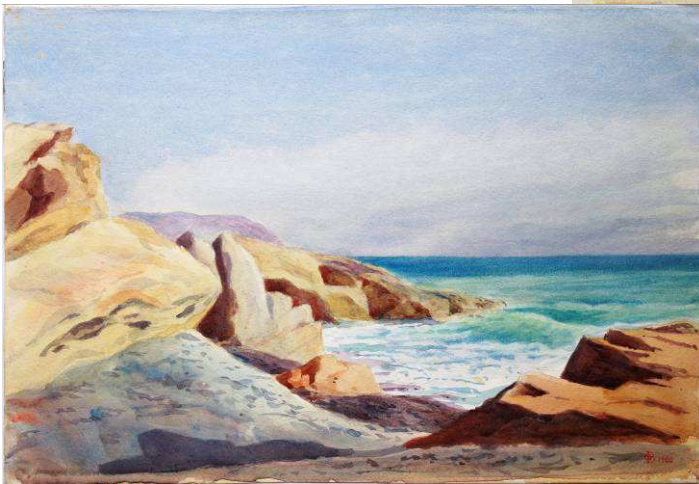
His diaries, particularly of his trip to Egypt in late 1889, are illustrated with delightful little sketches (a sample page, below right, and a mosque near Cairo, below left).



He also did many watercolours of the mountain landscape round his beloved Casterino mountain home (right, with drawing pin holes from having been exhibited).



Clarence seems to have been less inspired by Bordighera, where he spent more time than at Casterino. There is one attractive view of the sea at Bordighera (below), and another of Breil-sur-Roya (below, right), where he must often have stopped on the long trek from Bordighera up to St, Dalmas-de-Tende and Casterino.



Clarence's Botanical Art

According to his niece Margaret Berry (Bio sketch 1918), Clarence was from an early age drawing and painting the wild flowers that he collected. His mother Lucinda was a talented artist. But it was only when he settled in Bordighera in 1878 and botany became his principal interest that he developed his skill as a botanical artist. Within 5 years he had done over 1,100 botanical watercolours. In 1885, he published "*Flowering Plants and Ferns of the Riviera*" with 82 plates and notes on 280 species. His obituary in the *Journal of Botany* states that the idea for the book "was suggested by J.T. Moggridge's "*Contributions to the Flora of Mentone*" (1864) whose author had exhorted others to follow his example... the plates with two or three specimens being figured on each...are accompanied by good descriptions, the provenance of the specimens figures being stated".

The two images below are black-and-white proofs of plates from *Flowering Plants and Ferns of the Riviera*, coloured by hand by Clarence (Bicknell family collection).



Clarence was greatly respected as a botanist, as is evidenced by his communications with many of the leading botanists of the day such as Emile Burnat in Switzerland and Harold Stuart Thompson in the UK (who in fact used some of Clarence's plates in his own book "*Flowering Plants of the Riviera*" published in 1914).

The two images below are from *Flowering Plants and Ferns of the Riviera*, but, this time, full-colour plates from a finished copy of the book.



Clarence's second most important botanical work, "*Flora of Bordighera and San Remo*", published in 1896, did not have illustrations. This may have been because he was becoming more and more absorbed by the study of the prehistoric rock engravings up in the Maritime Alps, and where he would later spend 12 summers up in the hamlet of Casterino. There he became entranced by the Alpine plants which he continued to study, while at the same time recording the engravings.

The arduous work of botanical and archaeological recording

A review of "*Flowering Plants and Ferns of the Riviera*" in *The Gardeners' Chronicle* of London⁴ states:

"The figures are accurate as far as they go, but they are rather the rough memoranda which the collector makes for his own use, than the detailed drawings required by the botanist. Nevertheless, from the point of view of the botanist and gardener Mr Bicknell is a benefactor of his kind, for a series of generally faithful drawings, whatever their technical defects, cannot fail to be of great service... There is then ample room for Mr Bicknell's work, and we trust we may speedily welcome a second series".

⁴ From the article by Graham Avery "Botany" published on www.clarencebicknell.com

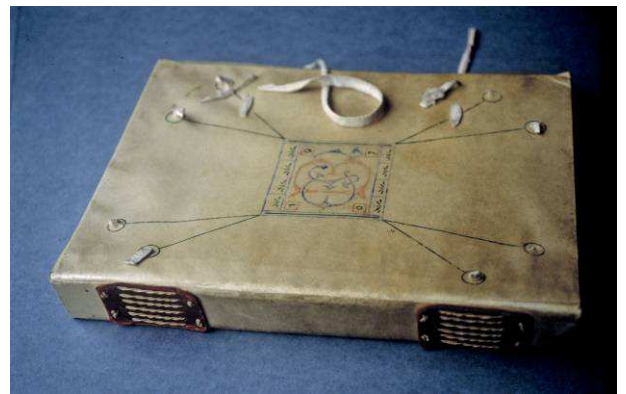
Clarence was very competent but maybe not at his best or happiest when simply recording botanical specimens. Clarence had originally started going up into the Maritime Alps to extend his botanical research but from 1897 onwards he became more and more absorbed by the study of the prehistoric rock engravings that he had been told existed in the Mont Bégò area. Drawing and painting accurate botanical figures was painstaking work but just as demanding mentally, and even more exhausting physically, was recording the 11,000 plus rock engravings that he did with the help of Luigi Pollini. They spent long hours walking up to the flat rocks, then kneeling to make rubbings of the rock engravings on paper with wax, and descending back to Casterino. Clarence spent his evenings annotating the work of the day, and from 1906 did this work in his newly-constructed own home, the Casa Fontanalba.



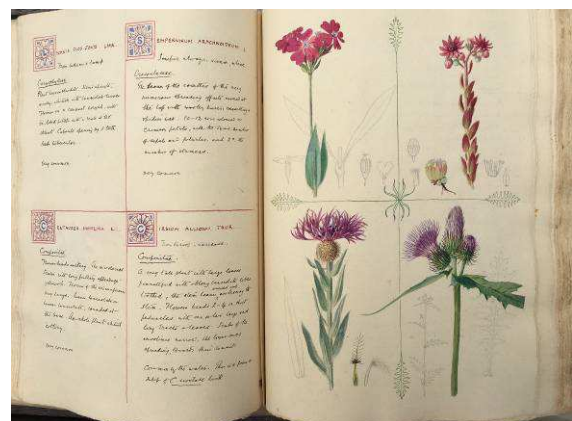
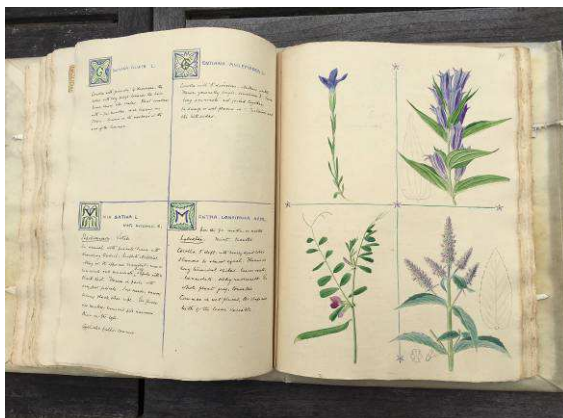
photo right: Clarence with one of his rubbings.

Creative Release in the Vellum Albums: *Children's Picture Book of Wild Plants*

Clarence's artistic talents flourished when he could let his creative and design skills come to the fore and when he could do more than simply record accurately. Floral subjects dominated, especially in the many vellum-bound albums he made for relations and friends. At least 14 of these albums exist, representing hours of work, but work which Clarence clearly loved to do. The inspiration to do these albums was provided by Margaret Berry, married to Clarence's nephew Edward Berry living in Bordighera. Peter Bicknell explains in his 1988 article on Clarence:



“Shortly after her marriage (in 1897), 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 are now in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, as part of their outstanding collection of flower paintings.”



Clarence's *Children's Picture Book of Wild Plants*, in the Bicknell family collection, is carefully designed and colour coordinated, with 4 plants illustrated on the right often with a frame, and on the left a description of each plant. Clarence, in this and many of the albums, delighted in taking the colours and details of flower as motifs for the frame and for decorative capital letters.



For the short botanical description, the first letter of each plant is within its own design, often in the style of an illuminated medieval manuscript, as with the "V" of "Veronica" pictured left.

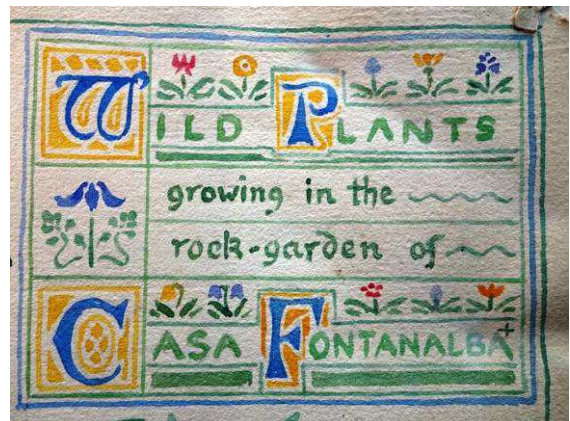
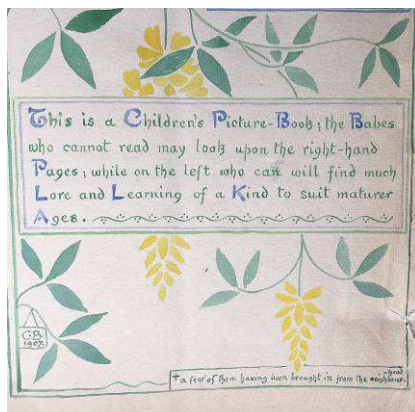
He continues inside the book:

"This is a Children's Picture-Book; the Babes who cannot read may look upon the right-hand pages; while on the left who can will find much Love and Learning of a Kind to suit maturer Ages.
 "... a few of them having been brought in from the neighbourhood"
 "Good luck to you"

Having written that, Clarence then launches into a botanically-detailed directory of 200 flowers, with a full description of each species, including the plant's medicinal properties. Clearly he thought the children that visited the Casa Fontanalba were very advanced in their nature studies... or should be.

And on the back page:

"Now if you say "Oh! What a show of plants!", I beg your pardon – this book is finished, but not so the treasures of my Garden!" CB 1908



Vellum Albums: The Casa Fontanalba Visitors' Book

Over twelve years, Clarence received over 250 visitors who made their way up the mountain road to his home in Casterino, the Casa Fontanalba. When he moved into the house in 1906, he prepared a vellum album with each right hand page illustrated with a flower and matching border, leaving the left hand blank for his visitors' signatures. Fittingly, on the day of his death, there is a eulogy from his faithful friend and helper, Luigi Pollini, opposite a Forget-Me-Not (*Myosotis*). Edward and Margaret Berry (Clarence's nephew and his wife) continued to use the house and the album until the 1930s.

This list of visitors includes famous archaeologists, botanists, writers, Esperantists, soldiers and politicians, and shows the wide range of Clarence's interests and the company he kept. The visitors' names, published on the internet in 2013, have triggered new research findings.

Art print reproductions of this book from the Bicknell family collection are available for purchase (www.clarencebicknell.com).



Vellum Albums: The Book of Guests in Esperanto

Clarence created a more elaborate book, in the Bicknell family collection, for the more favoured and frequent visitors, close friends and family, with the guest's description in Esperanto on the left page and a flower on the right.

Clarence was a great believer in the universal language Esperanto and felt it could be a formula for world peace. He attended international congresses, taught it to friends and used it in poems and whenever possible. There are pages ranging from eminent botanists and archaeologists to three dogs, Leo, Capi, and Clarence's much loved Mahdi.

On the left is the page to Jean Briquet, illustrated with a gentian, one of the most renowned of Alpine flowers. On the right, Clarence's page for himself, illustrated in fine Arts and Crafts style.



Below left is for Leo, a dog. Below right is the page dedicated to the eminent French archaeologist, Emile Cartailiac, suitably headed with Clarence's montage of some of the prehistoric rock engravings. On each page Clarence uses a matching colour and motifs on both pages.



Vellum Albums for Margaret Berry: Flowers, Fantasy and Fun

Nearly every year from 1897, Margaret Berry gave Clarence a new album and he returned it to her at the end of the year fully illustrated. Seven of these albums are now in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge University, whom we thank for the right to show these images. Creating such books was very much in the Victorian tradition. Illustrated poetic books were popular gifts to be treasured and prominently displayed in the drawing-room whether in London or Bordighera. Some of Clarence's albums – such as *Children's Picture Book of Wild Plants* – had serious botanical descriptions opposite each painting, but in the albums for Margaret Berry, Clarence let his design and poetic inspiration flow.

Each album has a theme and often includes a play on words such as the *Book of Berries* for Margaret and Edward Berry, and *The Posy*, a book of poems (*la poésie* in French) decorated with appropriate flowers. The album dated 1911 contains a 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 flowers compete to win *The Order of the Golden Lion*. Page by page each flower presents its claim in drawings, prose and verse. The poetry may seem somewhat sentimental now but these books were intended to give great pleasure and to amuse the recipient. Furthermore these illustrations had the added quality of incorporating the innovative arts-and-crafts design influences that abounded at this time.



Images from The Fitzwilliam Museum collection of albums. In the page above right Clarence manages to include his great belief in the universal language Esperanto:

“Yes, Esperanto” answered Mr Sage, “It is the only language with a high ideal and which unites people of all nations in a bond of brotherhood and peace. I’m learning it myself, I now only wear a green star with 4 points, but when I have learned it, I shall wear one with 5....” Then came great cheers from the common but intelligent crowd”.

In “The Triumph of the Dandelion”, Clarence reveals his ever-growing passion for wild rather than cultivated plants. No wonder the commonest of wild flowers wins the procession! Note that the Order of the Golden Lion is in fact a dandelion in the shape of a lion!



Arts and Crafts as a Way of Life

The Arts and Crafts Movement in England was in full swing in Clarence's lifetime. He would no doubt have had lots of sympathy with the main tenets of the movement, born of a reaction to many of the disastrous effects of industrial manufacture and unregulated trade both on society and culture. Mass production meant that the workman no longer had any part in the creative process. In the 1860s and 1870s, artists, designers and architects began to pioneer new approaches to design and the decorative arts. The aims included bringing back into prominence the notion of the artisan artist-craftsman and taking inspiration from nature. John Ruskin and William Morris were the two most influential figures behind the movement. By the 1880s, many other societies and guilds were formed with the same ideas, and these spread across to the continent (for example, *Art Nouveau* in France, *Stile Floreale* or *Liberty* in Italy and *Modernista* in Spain).

It is clear that Clarence was attracted to the design themes of the movement. He may well have had contact with The Peasant Arts Society founded in Haslemere, Surrey in 1897. One of the founders of this society was Greville MacDonald, eldest son of George MacDonald⁵, Clarence's illustrious and close neighbour in Bordighera. This society rejected mass consumer products and was determined to revive lost country crafts, setting up workshops and weaving houses. It believed in the restorative and simple pleasures of home-making. Clarence loved his mountain home, the Casa Fontanalba, decorating it inside with floor to ceiling paintings of his beloved flowers, copies of rock engravings and with proverbs and sayings in Esperanto. Robert MacDonald, Greville's brother, was the architect. If Greville had ever visited the house after Clarence's move there he would have appreciated his simple taste in furniture set in its almost theatrical setting of hand painted walls, shutters and artefacts that were one man's hymn to the exuberance and beauty of the natural world. The interior of the Casa is an Arts and Crafts masterpiece. Sadly, images of his wall designs cannot be shown, but are similar in style to those of Walter Crane shown here. Morris's words in *The Lesser Arts of Life*, 1882, "Whatever you have in your rooms, think first of the walls; for they are that which makes your house and home" come alive in Clarence's decorations.

Similarities can be found in Clarence's design work and the figureheads of the Arts and Craft Movement. Below are some comparisons:

A tree design by Clarence...

and Charles Voysey's tree

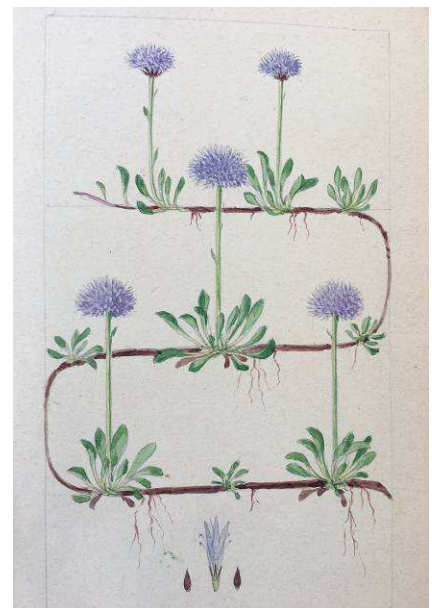


⁵ George MacDonald (1824-1905) was a Scottish author, poet, and Christian minister. He was a pioneering figure in the field of fantasy literature and the mentor of fellow writer Lewis Carroll

Clarence Bicknell's tulip design, and the great French designer Eugene Grasset's waterlilies;



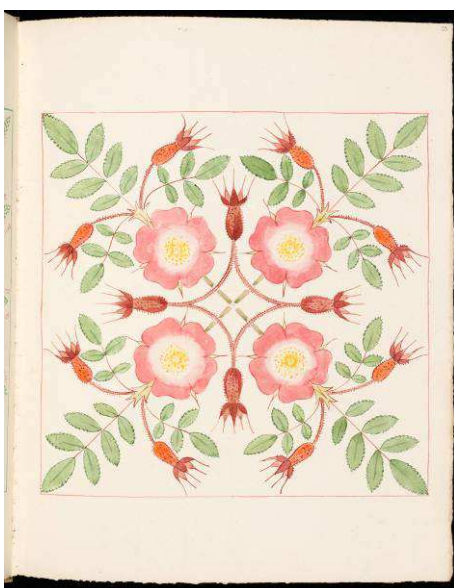
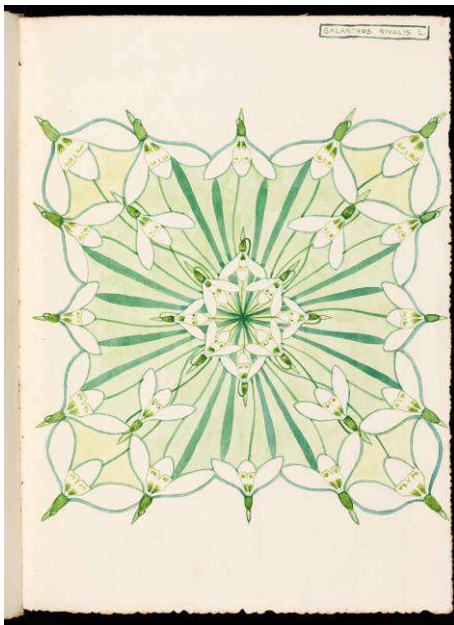
Below left: two wallpaper designs by Walter Crane and, right, two pages from Clarence's *Guest Book in Esperanto*.



The Kaleidoscope Effect

Some of the most striking and successful images of all of Clarence's art are in the Margaret Berry albums kept at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. In these particular images, Clarence has created floral patterns very much in the tradition of "Arts and Crafts" leaders like William Morris and Charles Voysey. However, Clarence's patterns have a symmetrical square form rather than the more common repeat motif.

He could well have used a two- or four-mirror kaleidoscope such as the model shown here to achieve these symmetrical effects. Kaleidoscopes and other optical instruments were very popular in the Victorian era and became a common feature in the parlour.

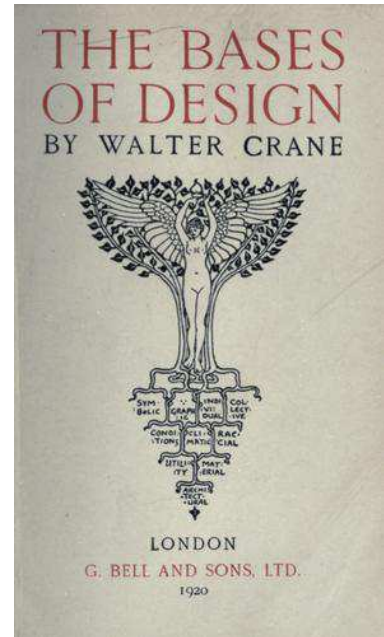


The Desire to Improve and to Learn Artistic Skills

Clarence owned many books that confirm his great interest in design and decoration, particularly relating to the Arts and Crafts movement. “The Bases of Design” by Walter Crane (1904) was a survey of design culminating in Crane’s own aesthetic principles with hundreds of illustrations. His preface reflects sentiments that Clarence would have agreed with:

My main object, however, has been to trace the vital veins and nerves of relationship in the arts of design, which, like the sap from the central stem, springing from connected and collective roots, out of a common ground, sustain and unite in one organic whole the living tree.

In an age when, owing to the action of certain economic causes the chiefest being commercial competition the tendency is to specialize each branch of design, which thus becomes isolated from the rest, I feel it is most important to keep in mind the real fundamental connection and essential unity of art : and though we may, as students and artists, in practice be intent upon gathering the fruit from the particular branch we desire to make our own, we should never be insensible to its relation to other branches, its dependence upon the main stem and the source of its life at the root.



Wall paper designs by Walter Crane that could have influenced Clarence’s floral designs on the interior walls of the Casa Fontanalba.

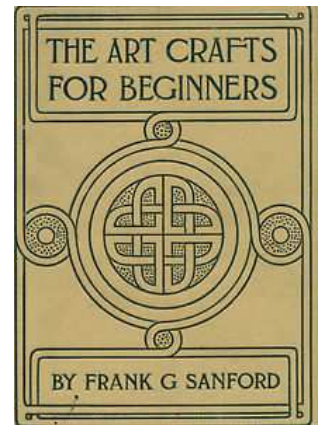
“Modern British Domestic Architecture and Decoration” by Charles Holme was surely bought by Clarence when he was thinking of how to decorate the Casa Fontanalba. Its preface says:

“That decoration should be handicraft, untouched by machinery, seems the surest way back into the main paths of beautiful invention from which our art has strayed”

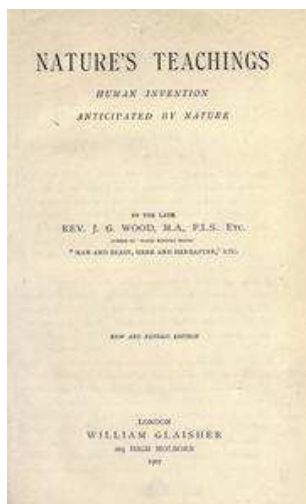
Clarence might also have sought inspiration for the Casa from “The Birth and Development of Ornament” by F Edward Line, with its suggestions in “floral design, principles of ornamental art, practice heraldry and practice of symbolism”.

This review in *The Spectator* of 20 October 1906 of Frank G. Sandford’s “The Art Crafts for Beginners” (image, right) which Clarence owned gives a somewhat singular view of self-improvement:

This is a book of practical directions for those who have a feeling and desire for doing artistic work, but find themselves in need of instruction. It begins with a chapter on "Design," introduced with a wise caution that it is not every one who can design. Some must be content with mechanical skill and the artistic perception of what is good in other men's creative work. Then follow chapters on "Thin Wood Working", "Staining and Polishing", "Pyrography", "Sheet-Metal Work" other "art crafts" and "Bookbinding." We cannot but think that much employment might be found for anyone who could do good work in this last department to suit "the too common shallowness of the human purse."



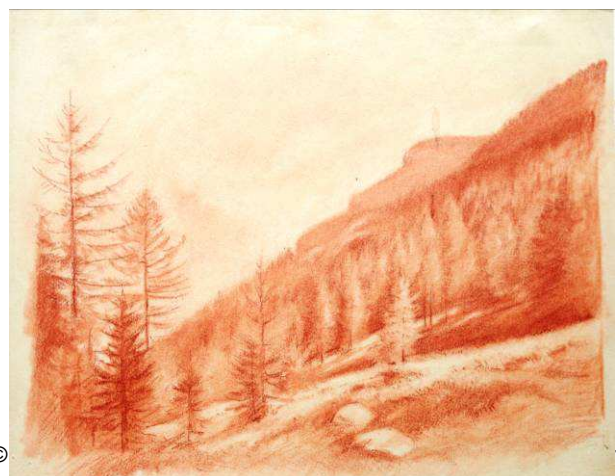
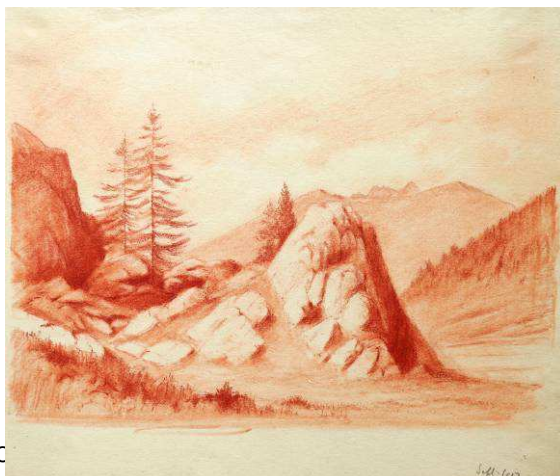
Perhaps this book helped Clarence with his pokerwork.



Clarence would certainly have enjoyed “Nature’s Teachings: Human Invention Anticipated by Nature” by J G Wood (1903) (frontispiece, left) with its detailed examples of man copying nature, ranging through springs and spirals, weapons from beaks and claws, suckers, grinders, drillers, wheels, domes, all of 500 pages with detailed comparative illustrations and lively text.

Besides his many books, Clarence also had lessons to improve his skills. He chose Jules Evarist and Jules Pierre van Biesbroeck, father and son painters from Ghent. Jules Pierre was a child prodigy: when only 15 in 1888, his large canvas (7.5 by 2.6 meters) was chosen for the Salon des Champs Elysées in Paris. However, before it could be shown, his naked figures had to be draped over. The two Jules must have come quite frequently to Bordighera, and Clarence devotes to him a page of his illuminated book of personalities in Esperanto. Jules Pierre painted the *Deposition* in the new Terrasanta Church, designed by the Paris Opera house architect Charles Garnier. Its construction was initiated by Giacomo Viale in 1886 but not finished till 1902. Perhaps Clarence got to know these artists through Viale who he knew well.

Under the Van Biesbroecks’ instruction, Clarence tried out a new technique in sanguine and pastel, of which two successful examples, done in 1907, are shown below.

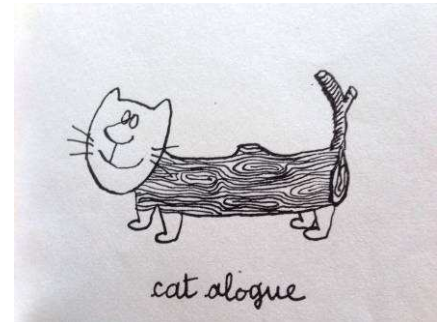


Playful fantasy and having fun with the Alphabet



Clarence's delight in playful fantasy occasionally encroached into his more serious work. On the left we show his frontispiece of an album in which a cat sitting on a log represents "catalogue" - "cat a log"

This very pun was an opportunity for fun that was not lost by the Parisian cartoonist Siné half a century later (image right).



Clarence very much enjoyed having fun with capital letters. All his albums are full of decorative letters often reflecting the plants and people they are referencing. *The Book of Guests in Esperanto* has many good examples; archaeologist Emile Cartailhac's initials are surrounded by engravings; farmer Grosvenor Berry's "GB" is embellished with cattle. In the *Children's Book* album, Clarence's illustrious literary neighbour in Bordighera, George Macdonald, has one of his poems initialled with an ornate "B". Here is the poem:

Better to have a loving friend
Than 10 admiring foes
Better a Daisy's earthy root
Than a gorgeous dying rose



Clarence's gardener Filippo Biancheri has his initials suitably illustrated. Robber, Margaret Berry's dog, has a fine "R".

Hard Work gave Clarence Artistic Fulfillment

The vellum albums and the decoration of the interior of the Casa Fontanalba represent hours and hours of work. The plates alone from the seven albums in the Fitzwilliam in Cambridge number well over 400, and the existence is known of at least seven other similar albums. He also did craftwork like ceramics, hand knotted rugs and poker work (pyrography: decoration of wood and leather with a heated metal point), to please and delight visitors whether at the Casa Fontanalba or his museum and home in Bordighera.

To the right is a picture of one of the two umbrella pots painted by him with flowers and Esperanto proverbs which are in the Museo Bicknell in Bordighera.

He even did a botanical version of the popular card game "Happy Families" for Margaret Berry (picture below).



This pokerwork bowl (below) was found recently in a market in Genoa by Fabio Negrino. The tools and the symbols of the rock engravings reveal that it must be the work of Clarence.



Contentment with Friends and Flowers

Clarence was a bachelor. He had neither a wife, nor the 10 or so children of a typical Victorian family, to take up his time and his resources. These lovingly-executed and time-consuming albums were his way of demonstrating his affection for friends and family. They show that Clarence had a creative talent that went beyond the dry and meticulous copying needed in his role as a botanist and archaeologist. And they confirm his love for the simple life he led up in the mountains, surrounded by his closest friends and by the wild flowers he venerated above all others.

Clarence wrote many letters to the Baroness von Taube, an amateur botanist who stayed in Bordighera. He often describes to her his great love of wild flowers and for the simple life he led up at the Casa Fontanalba

In a letter⁶ to the Baroness dated 4 June 1912 before leaving Bordighera to go to Casterino, he says:

“I am sad to leave home and my books and begin the life of a savage in the wilds, but the wild life is very pleasant, and one quickly reverts to an ancestral simian type (at least I do).”

At the end of the season of the same year on 6 October 1912, Clarence again writes to her upon his return to Bordighera after spending the summer up in Casterino. He tells her that on the way down how beautiful the autumn mountain-sides were with the larches turning and the bushes of myrtles. He adds:

“It is strange how I have gradually been losing my love for gardens to the country – any field or common hedge now interests me more than the best garden with all sorts of wonderful plants”

He often evoked the beauty of the mountainous landscape surrounding his home in Casterino. In another letter to the Baroness from Casterino on 10 July 1914, he says:

“This is the supreme moment when I look at my garden and marvel....I would not exchange this scrap of bank for all of the garden in Peradeniya, Ceylon, or that in Java or Kew..... what a blaze of colour. Every day I think I have never seen anything quite so beautiful... I keep saying so to the others. Maddalena (*his cook*) must consider me to be crazy.”

Clarence wanted everyone else to enjoy the mountain flowers as much as he did. The first page of the album of his fantastical competitive procession of flowers “The Triumph of the Dandelion”⁷ introduces us:

“To all those that love the mountain flowers and all those who do not, in the hope that some day they will, this account of a summer festival in Val Casterino is dedicated by one who was present to his great joy and profit”.

And, of course, the dandelion, that unwanted weed for most aspiring gardeners but one of Clarence’s favourite plant, is the winner in the story told by Clarence!

He didn’t enjoy the winters back down in Bordighera at all: in a letter dated 29 September to the Baroness von Taube, he describes how sad it is closing up his cottage: “There is always the thought, shall I return once more to my beloved cottage and the free life I so enjoy. I dread the winter season” . And just a year later on 6 October, he laments again to the

⁶ In the British Museum (Natural History) 103 Bicknell (Clarence) (1842-1918) - A collection of autograph letters written by Bicknell to the Baroness Helene von Taube during the period 1909-1914. NHM, 92 BIC. Available at South Kensington Botany (MSS BIC)

⁷ One of the albums in the Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge, reference PDP PD.11-1980

Baroness von Taube “I cannot stand the long winter here with the ordinary tea party church going people who are so conventional”.

Clarence was happiest when in the Casa Fontanalba up in Casterino, surrounded by his adored alpine flowers and with his close companions the Pollinis and Maddalena his cook. They were family to him rather than servants and they figure near the front of his Book of Guests in Esperanto.



Near the beginning of *The Book of Guests in Esperanto*, Clarence devotes pages Luigi and Mercede Pollini, Maddalena, his cook and his beloved dog Mahdi.

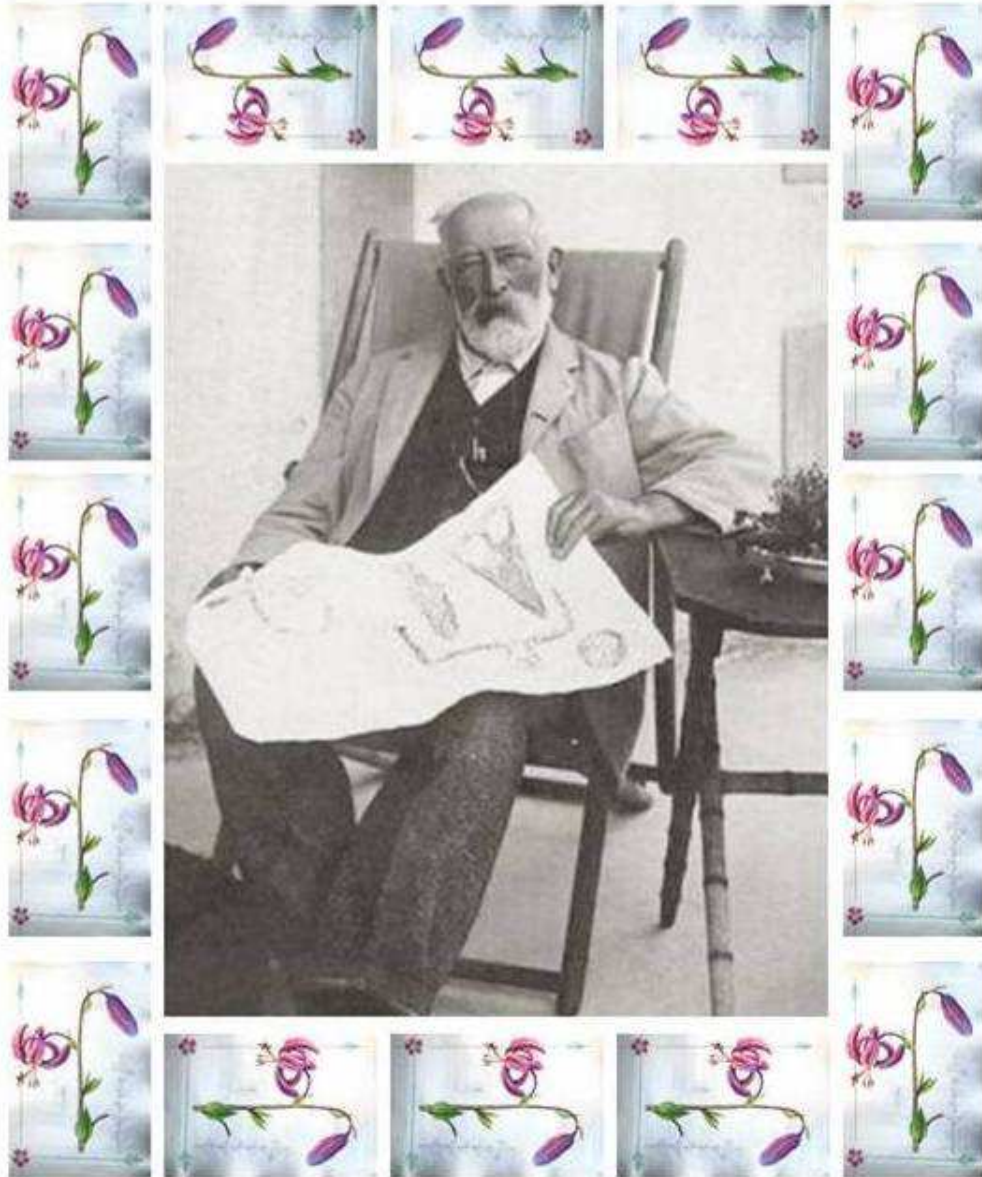


Left: a still from the film *The Marvels of Clarence Bicknell* with Clarence Bicknell (played by Renchi Bicknell, his great grand nephew) sketching the Martagon lily.

Right: one of the many paintings he did of this lily that abounds on the mountainside outside the Casa Fontanalba.

There is a belief held by families up in Casterino that Clarence wanted to be buried in the garden of the Casa Fontanalba surrounded by one of his favourite alpine flowers, the Martagon lily. He was buried in the cemetery in Tende and now has a respectful but rather ostentatious black marble plaque. Surely he would have preferred the lilies in the garden?

With this in mind, maybe he would even have preferred his memorial to be without words... just him and some beautiful flowers he had painted. We've made him one, in the Italian style as seen in the Tende cemetery, of a photo decoratively framed.



With thanks to Graham Avery, Marcus Bicknell, Helen Blanc-Francard, and Valerie Lester for their inspiration, encouragement and revisions to this paper.

I have benefitted from access not only to the family collection of Clarence Bicknell art but also to the watercolours in the albums at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, and watercolours of his in private hands on the Riviera.

Susie Bicknell, October 2017
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