

# MAN OF MARVELS - CLARENCE BICKNELL

A Talk by Renchi Bicknell

Together with Marcus, Susie and Vanessa Bicknell

Given to The Glastonbury Positive Living Group

November 15th 2018

*Renchi Bicknell, the writer of this presentation made in Glastonbury in November 2018, is the great grand nephew of Clarence Bicknell. Read more about him and the context of this talk at the end of the paper.*



“Welcome be to every guest,  
Come he North South East or West” ...

Words of hospitality painted alongside orange lilies in Clarence Bicknell’s mountain house The Casa Fontanalba where we shall return later...

This evening I hope to share something of the story of my Great Great Uncle Clarence and even touch on a connection to Glastonbury and the Blue Bowl

through Dr John Arthur Goodchild.

Yesterday 140 years ago Clarence noted in his diary that he “dined with Dr Goodchild at the Grand Hotel” ...that was in November 1878.

Dr Goodchild was 27 and Clarence had just celebrated his 37th birthday. Both were starting new posts in Bordighera - Clarence as chaplain to the Anglican Church and John Goodchild as the English doctor. Both were about to embark on different transformational journeys.

It is amazing to think that in 20 years time Clarence would be discovering many thousands of rock engravings in the Alpes Maritimes and that Dr Goodchild would be completing his inspirational Celtic work “The Light of the West”. Then most dramatically in 1897 on his way back to Bordighera,





staying at the St. Petersburg hotel in Paris, Goodchild receiving a massive paranormal psychic experience when a disembodied voice told him that the cup and platter he had purchased in Bordighera in 1885 and then stored with his father in London for ten years, had once been carried by Jesus and that it was now time to produce it openly so certain facts about the life of Jesus might be known. The Cup ( or Blue Bowl

as it was later called) (photo above left) was to be a powerful influence in shaping the thought of the century to come....the voice continued to tell him... Take the cup to Bride's hill in the women's quarter at Glastonbury in Somerset

Among the other entries in Clarence's 1878/1879 diaries we found 4 more references to meetings with Dr Goodchild (shown in Annex 2 below) which at least confirmed my suspicion that they were well known to each other though where it went from there is something of a mystery, as there are no further Clarence diaries to refer to. Possibly Dr.Goodchild or their mutual friend and neighbour George MacDonald might have written material that might shed light on this. The entry that particularly seemed to capture the enchantment and innocent exploration of their new surroundings was from March 24th 1879 Clarence wrote ..

I went by train to Ventimiglia to go on with my sketch by the river mouth... the swollen and muddy torrent gave me no reflections.. and I had other troubles to contend with.. I broke my bottle of wine and water in the bag and soaked it.. and once nearly lost my best paint brush in the stream.. some blue flax and another new plant were growing near the river... about 12.30 Miss Callaway arrived.. we walked further up the Roya valley.. where presently Dr Goodchild joined us, made a slight pencil sketch then went on flower hunting up the valley; returning in an hour or so's time with a bouquet of blue anemone lepatica... return (that evening) to reading and mat making.

Since the arrival of the railway station in 1873, Bordighera was rapidly changing from a quiet fishing village into a community of international artists free thinkers and wealthy winter visitors ,it's charms not lost on the 44 year old Claude Monet who visited in 1884 and declared

"Everywhere is so luxuriant; it's gorgeous to behold.... I can be bold and include every tone of pink and blue.. it's enchanting, it's delicious !.."

So on to the projection of the film.. initially titled “There is no God but Nature”

## THE MARVELS OF CLARENCE BICKNELL

It is an 18 minute film<sup>1</sup> directed by Rémy Masségli with Renchi as Clarence and Vanessa as the mysterious Alice Campbell.

Then.. to look in more detail at Clarence’s botanical art, Marcus and Susie took us away on a magic slide show detailing CB’s evolution of geometric and kaleidoscopic flower paintings and their connection to the Arts & Crafts Movement...

So we have learned both from the film and Marcus and Susie’s beautiful presentation that by the 1890’s Clarence had gone up to the high mountains in search of particular rare flowers like the legendary *Saxifragia florulenta*. But now together with the Alpine flowers came a new compulsion!

“The fascination of the rocks has made me neglect my special hobby.. and I have spent the greater part of my time in making drawings and taking notes of the rock figures”

Undaunted by the great distances to be walked and the frequent thunderstorms in the remote area around Mont Bego, Clarence determined, with the assistance of his right hand man Luigi Pollini to record the complete rock engravings of both the Vallée Des Merveilles and the Val Fontanalba. To discover record and classify these engravings occupied them the best part of twelve summers and then only in the window from June to October when they were free from snow... By 1913 they had made black wax rubbings of over 1,200.. often in difficult conditions.. for example

Wednesday 11th August 1909 - “The rain kept us til lunch, then eased then rained again for a long time and we were kept under shelter... finally it ceased but the furious wind made work difficult, however we rubbed a few new figures.. The great discovery of the day and perhaps all days was made by Luigi near the stream bank among the fallen rocks... he shouted out “I have found the chief of the tribes!” Clarence saw this strange shamanic figure as “ a devil-dancer with outstretched arms and fingers and small turned in feet.”



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<sup>1</sup> You can view this film at any time using the link on the home page of [www.clarencebicknell.com](http://www.clarencebicknell.com)

His instinct with the rock engravings was to employ the same methods he had acquired as a botanist and field naturalist.. as he said “We are only collectors of facts and must leave to others the task of studying them more profoundly.” Yet in all his painstaking, comprehensive and scientifically sound collecting and subsequent sharing of his knowledge I get the sense that he never lost touch with the great mystery and sense of wonder at his discoveries.....

NOW at this point ....close your eyes... take a deep breath..... I want to take you on a journey.. walking up with Clarence .. up into the high mountains... at first for hours through the climbing ranks of larches.. noticing the carpets of lilies and orchids and aquiligias.. then on to the steep stony climb above the tree line... noticing the vivid rock gardens of jewel like saxifrages... up here you may hear the whistle of marmots.. the scampering of the chamois.. the bells of mountain goats.. the tinkling singing of mountain streams.... as you look up you see rocks of smooth polished pink... almost like a school of pink coloured whales.. with a strong magnetic attraction.. and above these waves of pink rock... the sacred mountain..... Now among the coloured rocks you begin to distinguish some pecked stone markings... almost like a magic language... perhaps with Clarence we sense the presence and can hear the voices of our prehistoric friends mingled with the marmots’ whistle and the music of the falling streams... we can almost expect to find some of them carving their figures and emblems.. and be able to ask them who they were... whence they came and what was the meaning of their work ..... then after deeply absorbing the sacred time and energy of this place ..give thanks to it’s guardian spirits.. and then very gently I invite you to return ... down through the scattered rocks...down past the small lakes before dropping back to the larch trees.. return.. back to the rooves of human habitation.. and finally return back to this time and this room.....where I invite you also to take a break, enjoy a cup of tea or coffee. This break will also give you an opportunity to try out your own wax rubbing techniques using materials that include replica rock engraving designs, skilfully routed on to wooden blocks by my cousin Marcus. Also during this break you may have time to explore my extended Time Line which tracks various parallel lives and events between 1840 and 1920 giving prominence to Clarence Bicknell, John Arthur Goodchild and George MacDonald... After the break we will return to the turn of the century...

Break

In 1900 Clarence was returning from visits in England and stopped to visit the Paris Exposition Universelle - this immense world cultural and trade fair was characterised by the Art Nouveau style and seeds of modernism. Clarence was impressed by inventions such as moving pictures of animals and Edison's phonograph.. tho he wryly remarked that what had astounded him most was the price he had to pay for 2 potatoes in a restaurant !

In 1900 Bordighera was buzzing with artistic and spiritual characters; George MacDonald the well known writer of fantasy tales was for many years Clarence's immediate neighbour and he was sympathetic both to Clarence's ecumenical and social agenda as well as Dr Goodchild's quest for a more woman-centred religion.

In the 1900 Bruckmann guide to Bordighera, with suitably Art Nouveau cover, of which I have here a facsimile copy, both Clarence and Dr Goodchild feature but both in such muted and polite formal articles that you would hardly guess the true intensity of their work and lives. .... Dr John Arthur Goodchild had stayed true to his psychic instruction and only when his father died in 1897 returned to England and then to the isle of Beckery in Glastonbury to find the right place to conceal the Cup.. he was led to hide it within Bride's Well close to the river Brue (photo right).



Then for the next few years he made an annual summer pilgrimage to the well.. waiting for a woman , or as it turned out to be a triad of women to find it - and find it they did in 1906 thanks to the remote psychic pin pointing of Wesley Tudor Pole in Bristol..... Clarence in 1897 had discovered Esperanto the universal language invented by Ludovik Lazarus Zamenhoff... and in the year 1900 Clarence wrote to the Journal de Bordighera

"I greatly desire to interest my fellow-country men in the new international language called Esperanto. I have already been able to translate some works of Shakespeare, Goethe, Pushkin, Tolstoi and others and have corresponded with persons of 4 nationalities... nothing can help more than the possibility of intercommunication in the same tongue."

Clarence's energy in the cause of Esperanto knew no bounds, he engaged all his household and travelled with Luigi and Mercede to the very first International Congress in Boulogne in 1905 and subsequently to Cambridge in 1907, to Barcelona in 1909, Cracow in 1912 and then in 1914 he collected 6 blind Esperantists from Turin

with whom he had been sending poems and communications in Esperanto typed out on a Braille typewriter .. and travelled with them to the Paris Congress.

Esperanto was of course also an idealistic movement that agreed with Clarence's own social ideals of peace, equality and emancipation, non-violence and freedom... I feel he was comfortable with a more 20th century universalism and I sense him enjoying the Esperanto anthem...which we could all sing together:

Malamikete de las nacjes,  
Kado, Kado, jam Tempesta  
La Tot'Homoze in familje  
Konunigare so deba

Hostile barriers between peoples/fall, fall, it is time!/ the whole of humanity/must come together as one family.

From 1906 Clarence was able to move into his newly built summer house, Casa Fontanalba in the remote hamlet of Casterino, in reach of both the Vallée des Merveilles and the Val Fontanalba. The poem we heard in the film 'In this our simple mountain home, no riches will be found beside the welcome of our friends and nature's charms around'.....was translated into Esperanto in the hallway, and like the whole of the rest of the house, decorated with mural flower designs and further Esperanto proverbs and sentences.

"As the house was built to enable us to continue our studies of prehistoric rock figures...of which some 6,000 or more represent horns of various forms and sizes, and which without a doubt had to the sculptors some special religious or symbolic meaning: horns have been painted in all parts of the house (109) in all inside and out especially over doors and windows to prevent the entrance of evil spirits, goblins etc.!" (Evidence of these and other strange tales can be found in Clarence's 1907 Folklore notebook)

An example of a saying on a window shutter reads "Volanta kuro ne lagicas de kuro" .....*a willing leg is not tired of running.*

These art nouveau, or arts and crafts inspired decorations, reminiscent of William Morris's house at Kelmscott, fused together Clarence's personal passion for flowers, the rock engravings and the universal language of Esperanto.

This coordinated jewel of turn-of-the-century art, was shared by visitors who could also share Clarence's 5.30 start, mountain stream bathing, vegetarian food from the

wild and from the vegetable garden and strenuous walking – the willing leg not tired of walking into the higher mountains to record ever more engravings.

The twelve happy summers between 1906 and 1918 were eclipsed by the shadow of war, though Clarence still managed to come out from Bordighera where he had turned the Museo Bicknell over to convalescing soldiers.

Even in 1918 in his 76th year he took a six hour walk and tired himself a little too much, the following day on Monday he stayed at home and on Tuesday 17th July he went to rest on a chaise longue on the balcony in plain view of the mountains and a quarter of an hour later he ceased to live.. without suffering. In Luigi's words " Good soul rest in peace, rare of the rare I lose you in flesh but never in the spirit.... and if one day we meet afresh I shall be most happy to start again to go through another life with you."

#### AFTERWORD from Renchi

This talk was followed by a lively Q&A session from an audience of over 60 people. Questions ranged from topics about Clarence's spiritual belief to the issue of whether C.B. knew anything about the Blue Bowl.

In any case Susie Marcus Vanessa and I ventured out the next morning to the spot beside the river Brue where Bride's Well had been situated.. now only marked by a single stone that received our offering of flowers, our prayers and thanks for two very different souls in a different time.

My main sources from which I have quoted and borrowed extensively are Valerie Lester's wonderful biography *MARVELS; The life of Clarence Bicknell*, Christopher Chippendale's *A HIGH WAY TO HEAVEN* and Patrick Benham's *THE AVALONIANS*.

## Annex 1 The Context Of This Talk

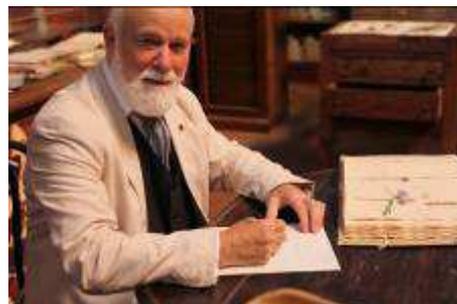
A note by Marcus Bicknell as webmaster of [www.clarencebicknell.com](http://www.clarencebicknell.com) where this is published.

Renchi Bicknell, the writer of this presentation made in Glastonbury in November 2018, is the great grand nephew of Clarence Bicknell. He is the son of Peter Bicknell, Cambridge architect and lecturer, who looked after the Bicknell collection of Clarence Bicknell books and drawings until his death in 1995, and who wrote in 1988 a mini-biography Clarence published on the [www.clarencebicknell.com](http://www.clarencebicknell.com) web site.



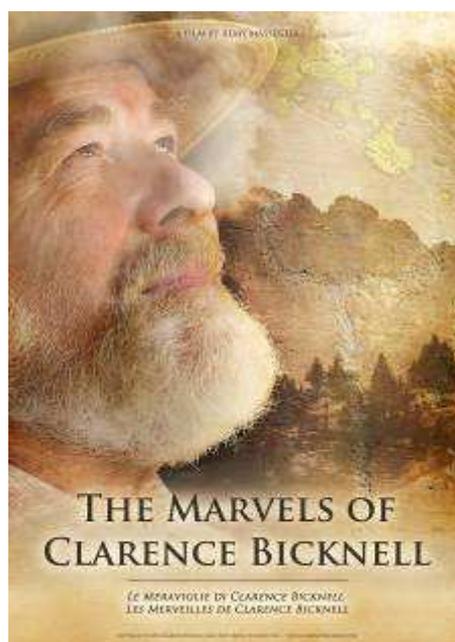
Renchi is an artist and writer living in Glastonbury with his wife Vanessa (See photo left). His approach to life and his spirituality put Renchi in an ideal position to assimilate Clarence Bicknell's character and soul. His portrayal of Clarence in the 2016 film documentary *The Marvels of Clarence Bicknell* by French director

Remy Masseglia was therefore more than convincing; his resemblance to Clarence is also uncanny (movie poster, below right).



With this in mind, this account of Clarence and Dr Goodchild of Bordighera and Glastonbury takes on a powerful significance. Is this what Clarence would have believed about the Blue Bowl? It is certainly a more emotively told story than laying out academic research.

At the evening in Glastonbury, 15<sup>th</sup> November 2018, Renchi addressed a crowd of the faithful, mostly those who live with, and communicate, the beliefs concerning Glastonbury, Joseph, the Holy Grail, the Chalice Well and the Tor. The audience found themselves involved with the subject not just with the projection of the film and Renchi's text, but also with silences, exploration of the mind, an imaginary walk up the Val Fontanalba and hands-on experience of rubbing the rock engraving reliefs reproduced in wood for the occasion (photo left). Of the forty events during Clarence Bicknell's 2018 Centenary this was the most characterful.



## **Annex 2 Clarence Bicknell diary 1878/1879**

Transcribed by Libby Peachey.

### **Excerpts mentioning Dr Goodchild.**

1878. Thursday, Nov. 14<sup>th</sup>

Dined with Dr. Goodchild at the Grand Hotel- A pleasant German artist one of the party- We played billiards ????, French billiards. There are some curious old pictures in the Salle-à-manger, once panels, now framed- We gained much information about the neighbourhood, climate &c. Home by 10p.m. to find some tea provided for us by good Mrs. W.

Sunday Decr. 8<sup>th</sup>

A lovely moonlight night, green stage - moonlight - Mr Schlosser & Dr. Goodchild gave us some useful hints about Genoa, & we went home about 10 p.m. rejoicing in the promise of fine weather on the morrow.

Sunday Decr. 15<sup>th</sup>

A cold day - chapel rather empty. Dr. Goodchild came to late dinner & Signor Tessitore, the organist & Bandmaster of Bordighera, to play to us & play some accompaniment for us- He performed some brilliant operatic overtures & fantasies on the Pianoforte for us, & Mrs. W. & I sang.

1879. Friday Janry 19<sup>th</sup>

Mrs & I went for a long walk early, after dinner - returning down a little lane by the Villa delle Palme, Mr A. Giribaldi's place. We went thro' the olives till we reached the Borghetto streat, crossed it on a plant, & then continued through olives & gardens of oranges & lemons, & where violets are being very largely cultivated, till we came out in the old Roman Rd. of Mrs Boyces - went this way partly to look for violets, & partly to see the chief habitats for scarlet anemones - there will be a grand quantity of the latter & all other flowers after the abundant rain, when the spring does come, but the old violet ground have been much altered thro' cultivation, & even plants wild did not seem abundant. Then facing up the Vallecrosia valley, by the right bank of the stream, we after a while climbed up the steeping side of the hill till we reached the Cima di Monte, as Dr Goodchild calls it, & came down after enjoying the glorious view of Perimaldo & the snow mountains, by the brick fields into the Borghetto valley- I went to the Grand Hotel to see the sick American lady.

Tuesday Janry 21<sup>st</sup>

Quiet rehearsal of scenes at the Hotel at 10- Mrs Fanshawe sent her daughter to S. Remo with Paul to help him in finding a place. I went to Mr Roses to a little music at 3 p.m. & then to the Ba. Hotel to see Miss S, ill, & Dr Goodchild's drawing - In the evening we had a grand dressing up, with the assistance of burnt cork, white tooth power &c.

Sunday Feby 2<sup>nd</sup>

A chapel full- After Evensong I went to hear the Band in the Piazza, with Imperiale conducting. The English never seem to go - either they disapprove of Sunday music, or are too proud to 'patronise' Bordighera music - I accompanied Mrs Hamilton & her little girl & we enjoyed it much. After a visit to the Ba. Hotel & to look at Dr Goodchild's last picture I returned for a quiet evening at home when we read Tyndall & Macdonald's Miracles-

Monday March 24<sup>th</sup>

I went by the 10.20 i.e. 10.40 or 50 train to Ventimiglia to go on with my sketch by the river mouth, the swollen & muddy torrent gave me no reflections, & a rising wind & drifting clouds made it not very comfortable, while the snow range was hidden & the colour everywhere poor - I had other troubles too to contend with - I broke my bottle of wine & water in the bag & soaked it & a sketch book &c - & once nearly lost my best paint-brush in the stream- Some blue flax & another new plant, were growing near the river-

About 12.30 Miss Callaway arrived & she & I then walked off up the Roya valley till we found a good view of the cliffs there, & where it seemed somewhat more sheltered - we encamped in the high road, & had consequently many spectators. Presently Dr Goodchild joined us, made a slight pencil sketch, & then went on flower hunting up the valley; returning in a hour or so's time with a bouquet of blue Anemone Lepatica - While with us Mrs. Walker, Mrs Callaway & R.W.C. came up on a carriage, hired at the Ventimiglia Station, the same fellow we had had before. They drove on up the valley & we sketched awhile longer & then clambered up under the cliffs for flowers finding a lovely mallow growing there in great bushes, & also several kinds of spurge, coronilla, maidenhair &c - the caves in the rocks seem lined & hung with ferns- Our party returned also with Hepaticas & then we all drove home, after a pleasant outing. Reading & mat-making &c at night.

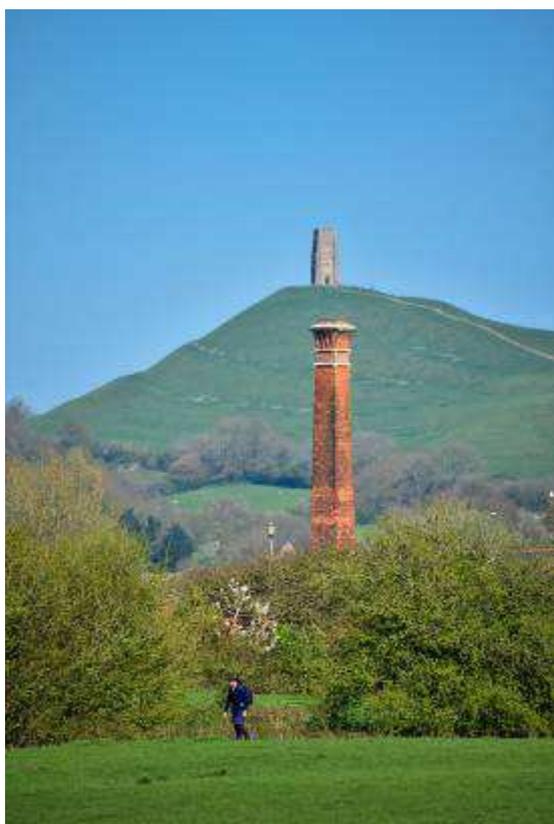
Thursday April 3rd

Heard today that the amateur exhibition of pictures, needlework &c at S. Remo was still going on - the Miss Browns & Dr Goodchild & a Miss Charlton & I had all sent contributions. Also Miss Patrick some picture frames, adorned with fircones, acorn cups, &c &c.

## ANNEX 3 Glastonbury

Glastonbury is a commercial and abbey town in Somerset. It attracts people with spiritual, [New Age](#) and [Neopagan](#) beliefs, and is notable for myths and legends often related to [Glastonbury Tor](#), a steep symmetrical hill near the town, concerning [Joseph of Arimathea](#), the [Holy Grail](#) and [King Arthur](#). Joseph is said to have arrived in Glastonbury and stuck his staff into the ground, when it flowered miraculously into the [Glastonbury Thorn](#). The presence of a [landscape zodiac](#) around the town has been suggested but no evidence has been discovered.

The [Glastonbury Festival](#), one of the world's biggest annual music festivals, is held in the nearby village of [Pilton](#).



The [Chalice Well](#) is a holy [well](#) at the foot of the Glastonbury Tor, covered by a wooden well-cover with wrought-iron decoration made in 1919. The natural spring has been in almost constant use for at least two thousand years. Water issues from the spring at a rate of 25,000 imperial gallons (110,000 l; 30,000 US gal) per day and has never failed, even during drought. [Iron oxide](#) deposits give the water a reddish hue, as dissolved [ferrous oxide](#) becomes oxygenated at the surface and is precipitated, providing [chalybeate](#) waters. As with the hot springs in nearby [Bath](#), the water is believed to possess healing qualities. The well is about 9 feet (2.7 m) deep, with two underground chambers at its bottom.[100] It is often portrayed as a symbol of the female aspect of [deity](#), with the male symbolised by [Glastonbury Tor](#). As such, it is a popular destination for [pilgrims](#) in search of the divine feminine, including modern [Pagans](#). The well is however popular with all faiths and in 2001 became a World Peace Garden.[101]

The Blue Bowl and Dr Goodchild are not mentioned in the extensive Wikipedia entry for Glastonbury, but see the article on Revolv below, <https://www.revolv.com/page/John-Goodchild>. You cannot see it any more because it is kept under lock and key at the Chalice Well. There used to be weekly meditations where you could hold the bowl, however there were worries that grease from hands was wearing away the underside of it, which was probably true.

The Blue Bowl is a small antique dish purchased in Italy in 1885 by Dr. Goodchild of Bath, England. A vision convinced him that it was the Holy Grail. Another vision instructed him to bury the bowl at Bride's Mound in Glastonbury. This was reputed to be the site of an ancient chapel honouring the Goddess/Saint Brigid. In 1906, three women (!) found the bowl and gave it to their spiritual mentor, Wellesley Tudor Pole. Many years of archaeological examination ensued in an unsuccessful effort to date the bowl back to Biblical times. In the 1960s, Wellesley Tudor Pole entrusted the Blue Bowl to the care of the Chalice Well Trust.

## **ANNEX 4**            **Dr Goodchild**

**John Arthur Goodchild** (1851–1914) was a physician, and later author of several works of poetry and mysticism, most famously *Light of the West*. According to Benham (see below) Goodchild had a private medical practice in [Bordighera, Italy](#), serving mainly expatriate Britons. From 1873 until the early 1900s he stayed in Italy during summers and returned to the UK in winters.

Goodchild was an antiquarian influenced by [British Israelite](#) ideas and the [Golden Dawn](#) esoteric group. He was friends with [William Sharp](#) (who wrote as Fiona Macleod), who dedicated his final literary work *The Winged Destiny: Studies in the Spiritual History of the Gael* to Goodchild.

He saw [Glastonbury](#), [Iona \(Scotland\)](#) and [Devenish Island \(Ireland\)](#) as being a triune of holy sites in the [British Isles](#).

### **Works**

- *Somnia Medici* (1884) - poetry
- *The Sage of Sant' Ampelio* (1890) - fiction
- *A Fairy Godfather* (1890) - fairy tale
- *Tales in Verse* (1893) - poetry
- *Lyrics* (1893) - poetry
- *The Book of Tephi* (1897) - poetry
- *The Light of the West* (1898)

In *The Light of the West* Goodchild advanced the theory that under the influence of the Roman church, the feminine had become neglected in Christianity, and that it was the destiny of a revitalised [Celtic church](#) to restore the feminine to due prominence in Christian life and thought.

### **The Blue Bowl**

The story is told that, in February 1885, while visiting [Bordighera, Italy](#), Goodchild bought a "bowl and a platter" seen in a tailor's shop. They lay untouched in a cupboard for ten years.[1] Ten years later he felt "directed" by an intense psychic experience to take the "bowl" or "cup" to Bride's Hill, Glastonbury, Somerset, a place he had never previously visited. Arriving in August 1898 he concealed the "Cup" in a pond or sluice beside a thorn tree near the [River Brue](#). This place was reputedly known as the Women's Quarter, Beckery, and according to legend was linked to St Bride. Then, he waited for the future discovery of the cup "by women" as had appeared to him in a vision. He continued to visit the site every year from 1899 until 1906, except the year 1905.

Benham claims the cup was then found and became the focus of a Christian group, including Goodchild and [Wellesley Tudor Pole](#), based in [Bristol](#), who believed the vessel to have formerly belonged to Jesus. The object is reported to now be in the possession of the [Chalice Well](#) Trust, based in Glastonbury.

<https://www.revolvy.com/page/John-Goodchild>