

Letter from Clarence Bicknell, 23rd August 1911

Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London

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ICS 86 - Ferguson Papersⁱ

ICS 86/9/3/39

15 Letter from Clarence Bicknell, Tenda, [?Switzerland], (*sic*) to John Fergusonⁱⁱ in Ceylon declining an invitation to Ceylon and giving personal news.

25 Transcribed by Marcus Bicknell 16th September 2014 info@clarencebicknell.com
Words in italics are not perfectly legible.

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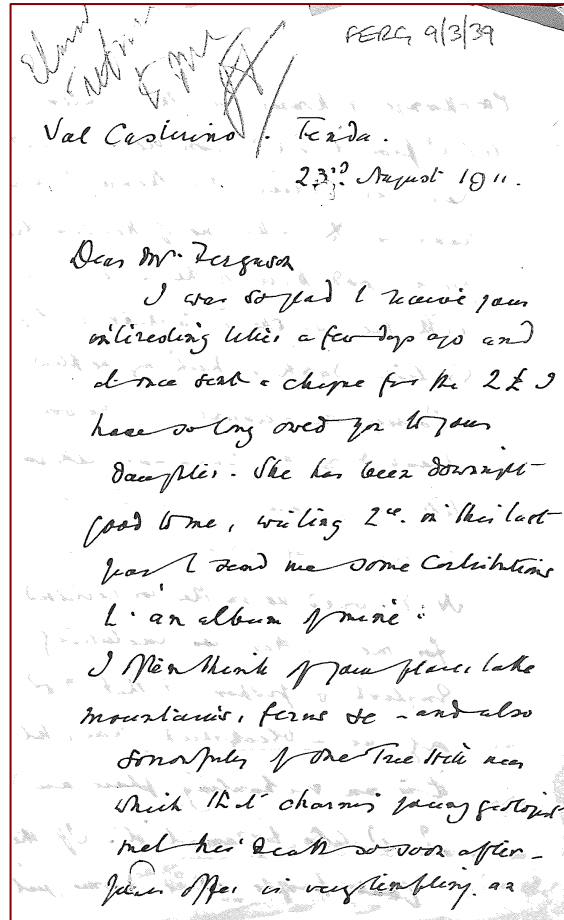
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Val Casterino, Tenda

23rd August 1911

Dear Mr Ferguson

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I was so glad to receive your interesting letter a few days ago and at once sent a cheque for the £2 I have so long owed *you for your daughter*. She has been downright good to me, writing 2nd *on their last year*, and send me some contributions to an album of mine. I often think of your place in the mountains, ferns &c., - and also sorrowfully of one Tree still near which that charming young geologistⁱⁱⁱ met her death so soon after – your offer is very tempting as an...

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...exchange of houses for the winter, but I fear it is not possible. A brother^{iv} has lately died and I *think* I shall have to take one of his daughters for a good part of the time to live with me, as she is a cashier at the English Bank, which my nephew Berry, on account of a nervous breakdown^v, has given up. *All you tell me of your works in wood and garden is "very interesting"*. I suspect N.E.^{vi} would be rather too civilised for me, rather too *exclusively* English & proper and that I could only be a black sheep there,

70 but it is an enchanting place and I should like to *visit* it. If the *Coas* people, whose names just

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... now escapes me *are* still keeping their Pension *there and if by chance* to see them
75 please remember me kindly to them. I liked them much. I am often in the mountains in my cottage cultivating salad &c., hunting for plants & continuing to explore among the *heath's* rock region where I still find more & more prehistoric engravings. I have not yet read Prof Seligmann's book on the Veddas^{vii} but hope to *get* it some day. I do not think I ever thanked you for the 2nd part of your lecture or speech on Ceylon
80 industries &c. Please give my kind regards to your wife and tell her that the necklace^{viii} was just what...

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... I wanted and gave great pleasure to my faithful man's wife – my man, if you
85 remember, who figured as Mrs Bicknell in the Ceylon newspapers & ships' lists of passengers!

We have had a splendid summer here – it seems to be the only place where it has not been exceptionally hot. There is no mountain summer climate that I know if like that
90 of the Maritime Alps – where there is never a wet foggy season as often in Switzerland & never a hot one.

With my best wishes

Yours very sincerely

95 Clarence Bicknell

ⁱ Archival history of the Ferguson papers: Donated to ICS by Professor Sir Cyril Henry Philips, formerly Professor of Oriental History at SOAS, in 1990. Scope and content : Papers of John Ferguson CMG, Assistant Editor, later Proprietor and Editor of the Ceylon Observer 1861-1913, and member of the Legislative Council for Ceylon 1903-1908; also some of his uncle Alastair Mackenzie Ferguson CMG, Assistant Editor, later Proprietor and Editor of the Ceylon Observer 1846-1893.

ⁱⁱ John Ferguson was born in Tain, Easter Ross in 1842. He was educated at Tain Royal Academy, then trained as a journalist at Inverness and London before going to Ceylon in 1861 to take up a position as Assistant Editor of Colombo Observer, under his uncle, the proprietor and editor, Alastair Mackenzie (AM) Ferguson. He was to remain with the paper (renamed the Ceylon Observer in 1867) for nearly 50 years, initially assisting his uncle but gradually taking a more senior role, and becoming the proprietor and editor on his uncle's death in 1892. Ferguson developed an active role in the political, commercial and cultural affairs of Ceylon. He took a particular interest in the development and expansion of the railway system, and became closely involved in the tea, coffee, coconut, rubber and other planting trades for which he compiled and published statistics in his annually issued 'Handbook and Directory of Ceylon'. His interest in these trades also led to his founding and publishing the 'Tropical Agriculturalist', a journal covering planting in all tropical regions, which began in 1881 and continued under his control until 1904, when responsibility for it was assumed by the Agricultural Society. Ferguson was very active in the Cinnamon Gardens Baptist Church (as was his uncle), and lectured on many of his interests. He travelled overseas from Ceylon on several occasions, and was often invited to speak on Ceylon on his travels, which took him to Australia and New Zealand; Japan, China and North America; and back to Britain. In 1903 Ferguson was awarded the CMG, and in the same year was appointed as a member of the Legislative Council of Ceylon. In this role he continued to support his interests, such as extension of the railway system and supporting trade. He resigned in 1908, and in 1912 returned to Britain for the last time, and he died there in 1913. He was married twice: firstly in 1871 to Charlotte Haddon (died 1903), by whom he had two sons and two daughters; secondly in 1905 to Ella Smith, who survived him. Alastair Mackenzie (AM) Ferguson, the uncle of John, was born in Wester Ross in 1816. He came to Ceylon in 1837 as one of the staff of JA Stewart Mackenzie, the newly appointed Governor. After holding various posts, he became assistant editor on the 'Ceylon Observer' in 1846, under the then owner, Dr Elliott. In 1859 Dr Elliott sold the newspaper to Ferguson, who was himself joined by his nephew as assistant editor in 1861. From 1879 he took a lesser role in the production of the 'Observer', but continued to contribute material, while in 1880-1 he was the Ceylon Commissioner to the Melbourne Exhibition. He was awarded the CMG shortly after this event. He made return visits to Britain in the 1860s and 1870s but not thereafter for health reasons; however he continued to make visits abroad to India and Australia. He became a highly respected figure in Ceylon, and like his nephew was very supportive of the planting trades and railway development. He died in 1892.

<http://www.ulrls.lon.ac.uk/resources/ICS86.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ No obvious correlation on the internet with this "charming young geologist" who died around 1911. Please email info@clarencebicknell.com if you can suggest who this might be.

^{iv} The brother is Percy and the niece is Nora. 3 siblings of Clarence died in 1911:
 On 13th September near Stansted in Kent - **Ada Bicknell**, b. 1831, Elhanan's 7th child and mother of Edward Berry (1861-1931) of Bordighera;
 On 16th October in Brighton, Sussex - **Sydney Algernon Bicknell**, b. 1832, Elhanan's 8th child, business man and author;
 On 10th August in Burnham, Bucks - **Percy Bicknell**, b.1836, 10th child of Elhanan, Master of the Vintners, lived in County Tipperary, inherited Elhanan's share of the whale and candle business which collapsed in 1902, died broke, Marcus's great grandfather.
 Clarence's letter was written on 23rd August, so the brother whose death he refers to is Percy. We have no evidence that Clarence was close to Percy, and because of his business difficulties, Percy might have distanced himself from the family. There has been some doubt in the records about the date of Percy's death (some show 1909) but this letter from Clarence confirms 1911. Percy had two daughters alive in 1911, Nora Matilda and Linda Mary. We have no information about Linda Mary (d. 1929 in Burnham where her mother survived until 1932) and she does not feature in any writings of Clarence. **Nora Matilda Bicknell** signed the Casa Fontanalba visitors' book on 12th June 1907 and 8th June 1912 and she was the object of an entry by Clarence in his VIP book in Esperanto in 1907 alongside a water-colour of *Anemone narcissiflora* L. We can safely assume that it is Nora who worked for the English Bank in Bordighera and for whom Clarence proposed to provide accommodation. This is the first evidence of Nora's life in Bordighera.

^v This is the first evidence of a nervous breakdown which Edward Berry might have suffered; Bicknell was very fond of Berry and it is unlikely that this statement was anything but fact. Berry not only ran the British Bank in Bordighera but was also the British Vice-Consul and the representative of travel agent Thomas Cook. He had handled these tasks since 1881 and had supported his wife Margaret and Clarence in his botanical pursuits and the construction of the Casa Fontanalba. He had built his own house in Bordighera in 1904. These 30 years obviously took their toll. After Clarence's death in 1918 he and Margaret continued to use until 1936 the Casa Fontanalba in the mountains and wrote a book "At the Western Gate of Italy" published 1931.

^{vi} The reference "N.E." is not evident but it could be a place name. Indeed, there is a city of Ceylon called Nuwara Eliya in the hill country of the Central Province. The city name meaning is "city on the plain (table land)" or "city of light". The city is the administrative capital of Nuwara Eliya District, with a picturesque landscape and temperate climate. It is located at an altitude of 1,868 m (6,128 ft) and is considered to be the most important location for Tea production in Sri Lanka. John Ferguson was closely involved in the tea trade and might have had a house there to which he had invited Bicknell.

vii Charles Gabriel Seligman FRS (24 December 1873 – 19 September 1940) was a British physician and ethnologist. His main ethnographic work described the culture of the Vedda people of Sri Lanka and the Shilluk people of the Sudan. He was a Professor at London School of Economics and was highly influential as the teacher of such notable anthropologists as Bronisław Malinowski, E. E. Evans-Pritchard and Meyer Fortes all of whose work overshadowed his own. After several years as a physician and pathologist, he volunteered his services to the 1898 Cambridge University expedition to the Torres Strait and he joined expeditions to New Guinea (1904), Ceylon (1906-1908), and Sudan (1909-1912, again in 1921-1922). In 1907 Seligman had accepted a government invitation to study the Veddas in Ceylon, resulting in a book by him and his wife 'The Veddas' published in 1911. (His wife, Brenda Zara Salaman (q.v.) whom he had married in 1905, was greatly involved in the Royal Anthropological Institute and became his collaborator in ethnology and an anthropologist in her own right.) Together they conducted an ethnological survey in Sudan (1909–10, 1911–12), later jointly published as 'Pagan Tribes of the Nilotic Sudan' (1932). Seligman was appointed to a lectureship in ethnology at the London School of Economics in 1910 and became part-time professor of ethnology at the LSE in 1913. In the 1920s Seligman with his wife entered the field of Chinese, Korean and Indo-Chinese art. Correspondence with H.R.H. Hall (q.v.), newly appointed Keeper of the Dept of Egyptian & Assyrian Antiquities at The British Museum, refers to him having "a short holiday in Paris to see museums, pictures etc. I still have to take life very gently and want to minimise my efforts as much as possible, but I do want to see de Morgan's stuff from Susa and have it explained to me [by a curator at the Louvre] (ME archives, letter dated 12 September 1924). There is sporadic correspondence in various departments (e.g. ME, 24/2/36, filed under "G"; January 1937). Seligman continued to hold the chair of part-time professor of ethnology at the LSE until 1934 when he retired due to ill health and following methodological disagreements with a fellow LSE academic and former student (protégé), the social anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (q.v.). Seligman's wife continued to develop their joint collection after his death which was bequeathed by her in both their names to the Arts Council for a period of ten years (during which time an exhibition was held in London in 1966: 'The Seligman Collection of Oriental Art') on the understanding that afterwards the collection was to be divided between the British Museum (the majority of pieces) and the Victoria & Albert Museum. Seligman published 'The Melanesians of British New Guinea' (1910); 'The Veddas' (1911 jointly with his wife); 'The Pagan Tribes of Nilotic Sudan' (1932, jointly with his wife); 'Egypt and Negro Africa: A Study in Divine Kingship' (1934); 'The Races of Africa' (1930); and various contributions to the 'Proceedings of the Royal Society', 'British Association Reports', 'Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute', 'The Lancet', and 'The British Journal of Psychology'. Seligman was a member of the Karlbeck Syndicate (q.v.) - for collecting Chinese antiquities. The Museum has approaching 4,400 items collected and/or donated by Seligman and his wife including over 2,200 photographs principally taken in Africa and Europe (Crete). Of the 2,200 or so 'Seligman' artefacts, around 1,700 come from Oceania (nearly all from the Cook-Daniels 1904 expedition to New Guinea) and around 270 are from China and 130 from Africa. Source British Museum <http://collection.britishmuseum.org/id/person-institution/62945>

viii This could be the leather-strapped pendant with a green stone typical of Ceylon still in the possession of Marcus Bicknell.



Comments and updates to info@clarencebicknell.com please.
Further information at www.clarencebicknell.com