

# Clarence Bicknell

## Did his escape from the liturgy of the church free his right brain to work more effectively with his left brain?

Marcus Bicknell, 16 August 2016

Clarence Bicknell was a good artist, a creative spirit, a musician, a poet, a free thinker and was in tune with the entire world – the holistic world. His botanical watercolours, his arts-and-crafts decorations, his interest in comparative religions, Esperanto and pacifism all bear testament. At the same time he read maths at Cambridge, wrote well-structured books, corresponded with scores of like-minded researchers and was rigorous in recording, tabulating, storing and assessing his botanical and archaeological finds. These are the characteristics of a person whose right and left brains worked well together. What is meant by this?

*“Those whom society deems to be geniuses have the ability to use logical left brain thinking in conjunction with the power of the creative right mind.” Jyl Lytle.*

The left and right hemispheres of our brain process information in different ways. While we have a natural tendency towards one way of thinking, the two sides of our brain work together in our everyday lives.

The right brain of the brain focuses on the visual, and processes information in an intuitive and simultaneous way, looking first at the whole picture then the details. Right brain is non-verbal and intuitive, using pictures rather than words.

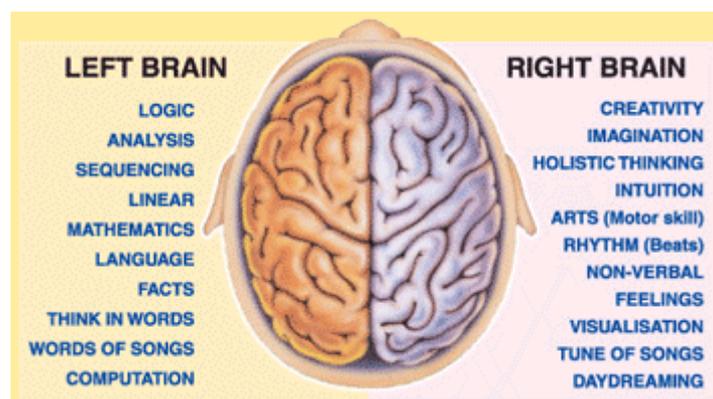
The focus of the left brain is verbal, processing information in an analytical and sequential way, looking first at the pieces then putting them together to get the whole. Left brain thinking is verbal and analytical.

### An example

The best illustration of this is to listen to people give directions.

The left brain person will say something like “From here, go west three blocks and turn north on Vine Street. Go three or four miles and then turn east onto Broad Street.”

The right brain person will sound something like this: “Turn right (pointing right), by the church over there (pointing again). Then you will pass a McDonalds and a Walmart. At the next light, turn right toward the Esso station.”



## Right or wrong?

Though right-brain or non-verbal thinking is often regarded as more 'creative', there is no right or wrong here; it is merely two different ways of thinking. One is not better than the other, just as being right-handed is not 'superior' to being left-handed. What is important is to be aware that there are different ways of thinking, and by knowing what your natural preference is, you can pay attention to your less dominant side to improve the same.

Modern society and the educational system tend to discriminate against the right hemisphere and nonverbal forms of intellect. Experiments show that most children rank highly creative (right brain) before entering school. Because our educational systems place a higher value on left brain skills such as mathematics, logic and language than it does on drawing or using our imagination, only ten percent of these same children will rank highly creative by age 7. By the time we are adults, high creativity remains in only 2 percent of the population.

The right hemisphere is mainly in charge of spatial abilities, face recognition and processing music. It performs some math, but only rough estimations and comparisons. The brain's right side also helps us to comprehend visual imagery and make sense of what we see. It plays a role in language, particularly in interpreting context and a person's tone.

As for whether a person is right-brained or left-brained or even [right-handed or left-handed](#) the uses and preferences of the brain's two sections are far more complex than just a simple left vs. right equation. For example, some people throw a ball with their right hand but write with their left.

The brain carefully balances and assigns control of certain functions to each side it's all nature's way of ensuring that the brain ultimately splits up tasks to maximize efficiency. Most people are right-hand dominant which is actually controlled by the left side of the brain.

**"Brain asymmetry is essential for proper brain function,"** professor Stephen Wilson of University College London told Live Science. "It allows the two sides of the brain to become specialized, increasing its processing capacity and avoiding situations of conflict where both sides of the brain try to take charge."

## The Nay-Sayers

In a two-year study published in the journal [PLOS One](#) in 2013, University of Utah neuroscientists scanned the brains of more than 1,000 people, ages 7 to 29, while they were lying quietly or reading, measuring their functional lateralization – the specific mental processes taking place on each side of the brain. They broke the brain into 7,000 regions, and while they did uncover patterns for why a brain connection might be strongly left or right-lateralized, they found no evidence that the study participants had a stronger left or right-sided brain network. [Jeff Anderson](#), the study's lead author and a professor of neuroradiology at the University of Utah says:

"It's absolutely true that some brain functions occur in one or the other side of the brain, language tends to be on the left, attention more on the right. But the brain isn't as clear-cut as the myth makes it out to be. For example, the right

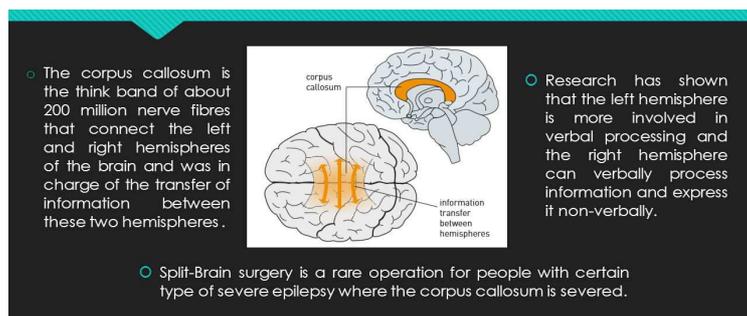
hemisphere is involved in processing some aspects of language, such as intonation and emphasis. “

### Some history

How, then, did the left-brained/right-brained theory take root? Experts suggest the myth dates back to the 1800s, when scientists like Arthur Ladbroke Wigans, discovered that an injury to one side of the brain caused a loss of specific abilities. Wigans collected autopsy results and published “*Duality of the Mind – a New View of Insanity*” in 1844 stating “... man must have two minds with two brains, and however perfect their union in their natural state, they must occasionally become discrepant”. His findings were all the more startling when some of the autopsies he examined showed that the person with the right brain entirely absent had appeared to be perfectly normal before death

The concept gained ground in the 1960s based on Nobel-prize-winning "split-brain" work by neuropsychologists Robert Sperry, and Michael Gazzaniga. The researchers conducted studies with patients who had undergone surgery to cut the [corpus callosum](#) – the band of neural fibres that connect the hemispheres – as a last-resort treatment for epilepsy. They discovered that when the two sides of the brain weren't able to communicate with each other, they responded differently to stimuli, indicating that the hemispheres have different functions. Saying “stick out your tongue” brought no response. But holding up a photo of someone sticking out their tongue would bring a chuckle.

Sperry’s studies demonstrated that we live under the substantial, deep spell cast by the left hemisphere. The left likes flying solo, shaping our cognitive processes unopposed. We live wittingly under its hypnotic, egocentric enchantment. But as the Jesuit priest Anthony De Mello wrote, “Spirituality means waking up. Most people, even though they didn’t know it, are asleep. They are born asleep, they live asleep, they marry in their sleep, they breed children in their sleep, they die in their sleep without ever waking up. They never understand the loveliness and the beauty of this thing we call human existence”.



### Whole brain thinking

The world is awakening to the fact that there is more to the human mind’s capability than what it’s used for regularly. Whole brain thinking has the potential to change the world. Those whom society deems to be geniuses have the ability to use logical left brain thinking in conjunction with the power of the creative right mind. Their minds use whole-brain thinking.

By activating the right brain so that it works in conjunction with the left brain, we are able to unlock powerful thought processes. It is possible for any normally

functioning human being to [learn how to learn](#), either through classes or through exercising the brain privately.

Everyone uses their left and right brains to function normally. Societies and governments are organized using left brain functions and concepts. However, right brain functions, such as the ability to conceptualize architecture or write long-term city ordinances requires the implementation of right brain based thinking.

## **Creativity**

Creativity is imperative to building for greatness and sustainability. The collective awakening to the fact that our brains can be used to a much fuller extent is driving the need to learn how to activate the right brain. Almost every functioning human being has the power to use both sides of their brains, though triggering creativity may be more difficult for some than others. Triggering creativity begins with introspective cleansing.

Creativity is most simply defined as the use of the imagination to generate original ideas. Creativity can be used by any normally functioning human being working in any field. People are born with the natural ability to come up with completely original ideas, alternative solutions to problems, use some sort of language to communicate with other humans, and conceptualize imaginary objects through story-telling for entertainment purposes.

Creative people leave a lasting impression upon societies and tend to make big differences where others fail. Some creative people make very important discoveries that they never have the chance or do not want to share with the world, such as Nikoli Tesla and his secret to free, unlimited, easily accessed electricity. Creativity is wasted if it is never shared.

## **Clarence Bicknell's intellectual turmoil**

After his schooling in a vicar's home in Dorney, Buckinghamshire, Clarence Bicknell went to Trinity College Cambridge to read maths. But he was soon in the thrall of religious thinkers, older men and his contemporaries, under the influence of the Oxford movement and the thinking which was to become Rowland Corbet's *Societas Sancti Spiritus*, (the Brotherhood of the Holy Spirit). From 1868 to 1878 Bicknell toiled in the church and his brain in its liturgy. The high-church thoughts of those around him were difficult to rationalise. The differences in detail between one part of the church and another, between one colleague and another and between one part of the world and another were all perplexing to him. His mathematical and logical left brain was not able to master the exotic and creative mumbo-jumbo filling his right brain; for many people this conflict can lead to manic-depression and nervous breakdown.

Indeed, some of Bicknell's letters from the end of this period show massive insecurities and doubts. His "Dearest Friend" letter of August 17<sup>th</sup> <sup>1</sup>, probably to Mrs Russell Gurney of the Broadlands religious retreat centre, is for most readers racked

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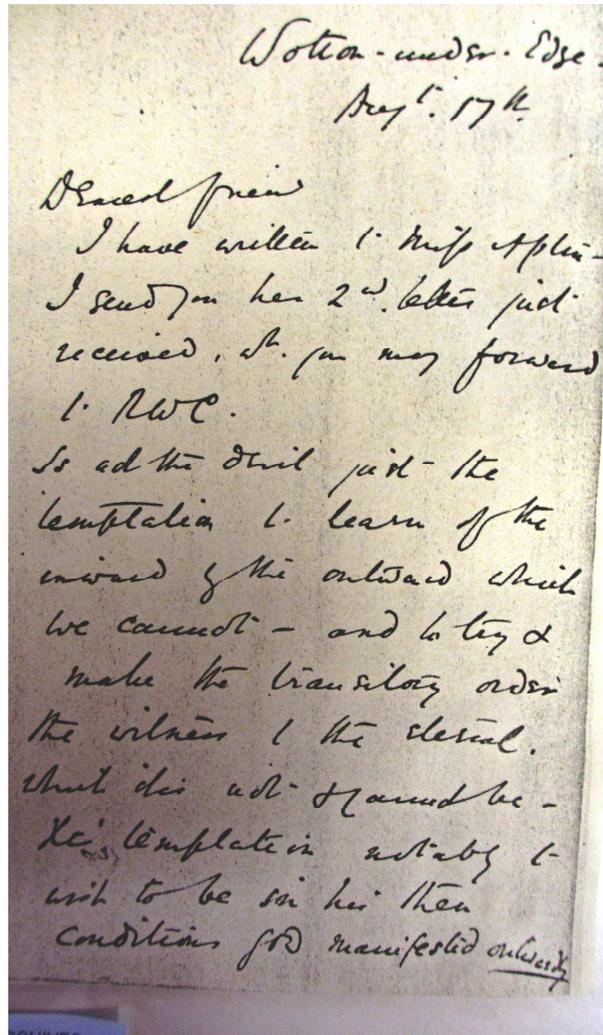
<sup>1</sup> The letter's date has no year, but could be 1880

with pain, contorted ideas on religion and conflicts. The whole letter is in Appendix 1 but a sample shows how close to nonsense the text is:

'Is not the devil just the temptation to learn of the inward by the outward which we cannot – and to try and make the transitory order the witness to the eternal, which it is not and cannot be – Christ's temptation notably to wish to be sinless, these conditions God manifested outwardly with glory, worship, power? In fact to deny that God, or Being is good, though at present it is manifested of faith – The horrors we see and the pains we feel do not show forth – or – they are as the vestige of "Clouds & thick darkness."

Nervous breakdown?

Even if Bicknell suffered mental anguish he would find ways, in the next few years, to get on top of it. He was able, consciously or not, to encourage the two parts of his brain to work together.



Wotton-under-Edge.  
May 17th.

Dear friend  
I have written 1. Miss Appleton  
I send you her 2<sup>d</sup>. letter just  
received. It. you may forward  
1. RWC.

So ad the devil just - the  
temptation to learn of the  
inward of the outward which  
we cannot - and to try &  
make the transitory order  
the witness to the eternal.  
that is not - I cannot be -  
He's temptation notably to  
wish to be sinless then  
conditions of God manifested outwardly

### Clarence Bicknell's parting from the church

Bicknell developed the talent his mother Lucinda had given him for drawing flowers and painting them in water-colours. There is evidence that he spent time looking for and collecting flowers during his post-Walworth London time at Stoke-upon-Tern in the wilds of Shropshire. He continued this pastime when he arrived in Bordighera in 1878 and through the rest of his life. This was a release for him during the dark days of intellectual turmoil and religious doubt.

On the 14th of May 1879 his Bordighera congregation rose up in protest at his writing and presenting a prayer for St Ampelio, i.e. promoting Catholicism in a protestant church. Bicknell immediately tore off his dog collar and disappeared for about six months, presumably to re-establish his faith... in something.

Bicknell's rational and mathematical left brain could not assess what was going on in his right brain; philosophical turmoil and religious deception. The multiple ways in which humans interpreted God did not add up.

## Clarence the botanist

When he returns from the UK in later 1879, Bicknell devotes himself to botany. He explores the valleys behind Bordighera and he travels round the Italian Alps, Corsica and southeast France with an energy manifested by the number of botanical drawings he records in this period. We have a record of 110 drawings and watercolours in 1880, most of them kept now in the University of Genoa. There were none in the UK from May to November 1879, or, if there were, neither they nor a record of them exist today.

Bicknell becomes a botanist.

In June 1880 he travels back to the UK, at Stoke-upon-Tern, Cambridge, in Gloucestershire, Beckenham (possibly with his sister Ada). But if this trip were to seek religious solace and to make certain what he believed (was he a man of the cloth still, atheist, agnostic or a castaway?), his diaries and sketchbooks are crammed with botanical and artistic activity in the UK for the first time.

"Brain asymmetry is essential for proper brain function. It allows the two sides of the brain to become specialized, increasing its processing capacity and avoiding situations of conflict where both sides of the brain try to take charge."

Professor Stephen Wilson, University College London.

So the 1880 trip to the UK was probably in vain. The seeds of his deception in the church had led on that May day to a moment of revelation in his life, that flowers, sun, mountains and all of nature are just as meaningful as God, or more so. Rémy Masségli, the director of the 2016 mini-documentary on Clarence Bicknell, adopted the film title "There is no God but Nature – Clarence Bicknell" and depicted his leaving the church by a bold scene in which a cassocked Bicknell pushes open the doors from the inside of the gloomy Bordighera Anglican church and emerges in a white linen suite into the flora and heat of the Riviera.

Clarence's creative right brain is winning over his left brain.

His left brain has failed to assess and organise the religious turmoil of his right brain. The love of nature, his botany and his art have replaced religion in his right brain and he finds satisfaction in what he is creating. There is evidence in his writing that he relaxes, is happier and has turned a leaf, i.e. the left brain isn't worrying about its neighbour any more.

## Clarence the botanist and artist with method

If the left brain were not doing much then Bicknell would have been ill-at-ease about that. But his ability to tune the two sides of the brain to one objective enabled him to understand botany not just as creation and an art but as a subject which can be assessed and organised. He is rigorous in ticking off in the standard botanical works all the plants he finds on his walks and travels. Then he notes in

pencil in his preferred book the additional ones he has found. Under the influence of John Traherne Moggridge (1842-1874) a British botanist, entomologist, and arachnologist, he shares information about his new finds and helps others improve their botanical publications. This soon leads to him to realising that he should write his own book on the botany of his region; he had done over 1000 botanical drawings by 1884 and over 4000 are preserved today. Clarence Bicknell's oeuvre "*Flowering Plants and Ferns of the Riviera and Neighbouring Mountains*" was published in 1885 and a second book, a handbook, "*Flora of Bordighera and San Remo*" in 1896.

He collected and preserved over 22,000 flowers and plants, all of these existing in Bordighera, Genoa and in collections round Europe. He is a major name among systematic botanist in Liguria and Europe.

His logical left brain had found a new dimension and a new collaboration with his right brain.

### **Clarence the researcher, scientist**

When Bicknell stumbles across the prehistoric rock engravings of the Vallée des Merveilles and the Val Fontanalba, his two brains latch onto another great project. From 1897 for some 15 years he and his companion Luigi Pollini spent almost every summer in the mountains searching out these images in the most exhaustive manner, copying and mapping every one, categorising and recording them and storing them safely for sharing with other researchers. He has used the two-brain skills of his botany on a new discipline. Christopher Chippindale is among those experts who say "Bicknell appears especially competent in the roles of observer, recorder, collector and illustrator; his water-colours, if not as attractive as some, are very accurate. So he took the same approach to the rock-engravings."

Bicknell's "*A Guide to the Prehistoric Rock Engravings in the Italian Maritime Alps*" first published in 1902 was the first substantive report on the rock engravings. It was so respected that it was reprinted with additions all the way to a last edition in 1913.

Chippindale adds "Bicknell worked in the spirit of the discipline he knew, that of field botany. In prehistory it turned out, the apparatus of antiquarian wisdom was more than an irrelevance; it was an actual obstacle. The chief reason for the high quality of Bicknell's work was his ignorance of what a professional would do to study the art. ... Where Bicknell thought himself only an amateur in these matters, in truth his were the requisite skills."

The way in which Bicknell's left brain and right brain cajoled each other through his fascinating life could have been a reason he was so successful in his non-religious undertakings.



### Sources:

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- Ucmas Canada
- Remy Melinda [LiveScience.com](http://LiveScience.com)
- <https://www.theguardian.com/profile/amy-novotney> Amy Novotney, The Guardian 16 November 2013
- Zen Mind Zen Horse by Allan J Hamilton MD (Storey, Boston USA, 2011)
- Split-Brain Surgery by Elisa Janami



## Appendix 1

**Transcript 16 Sept 2014 by Valerie Browne Lester and Marcus Bicknell  
of a letter from Rev Clarence Bicknell  
ref MI2152/12 in the Shropshire Archives  
as part of the Stoke-upon-Tern parish records.**

*Note Clarence usually writes to word "to" as a single vertical character with or without a dot to its right. Uncertain words are in [square brackets].  
"Xc" is transcribed as Christ here.*

<sup>i</sup>Wotton-under-Edge  
<sup>ii</sup>Augt 17<sup>th</sup>

Dearest friend

I have written to Miss [Apten.] I send you her 2<sup>nd</sup> letter just received, which you may forward to RWC<sup>iii</sup>. [i.e. Rowland Corbet]

[Is not] the devil just the temptation to learn of the inward by the outward which we cannot – and to try and make the transitory order the witness to the [eternal], which it is not and cannot be – Christ's temptation notably to wish to be [sin his] these conditions God manifested outwardly with glory, worship, power? In fact to deny that God, or Being is good, though at present it is manifested of faith – The horrors we see and the pains we feel do not show forth – [or] – they are as the [vestige] of "Clouds & thick darkness"<sup>iv</sup>. Like our corruptible body or [weakly-cut] clothes hiding him, hiding ourselves, our true selves. The office of religion, the duty of churches to strengthen our faith – the revelation of Christ to reveal the fact of the eternal being, religion, sacraments etc. to witness to this fact, and [enable?] to comfort oneself & one another's, & help as to [send one] 'as seeing him who is invisible -- not to do away with our sacrificial forms and the phenomena of the passing world – but to assure us they are passing. The veil which shall and must be rent, revealing hereafter the now invisible holy of holies.

But He is clothed in his creation with darkness – as we are - & his is the great sacrifice witnessed in the Cross etc. – [while] being clothed in light.

Goodbye. I like your letters – they always come as cups of cold water to a [pilgrim] in a thirsty land.

Yours ever affectionately,  
Clarence Bicknell

My kindest regards to all at Romsey—I hope Lady Mount Temple is now well again.

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<sup>i</sup> Wotton-under-Edge is a market town within the Stroud district of Gloucestershire, England. Located near the southern end of the Cotswolds, the Cotswold Way long-distance footpath passes through the town. There are suggestions that he spent leisure time there with a friend or friends.

<sup>ii</sup> It is possible that Bicknell's active time as a cleric at Stoke-upon-Tern was very short, maybe just 1875 to 1876 according to his signatures in the church register etc. The possibly dismissive tone of the letter could be indicating that this is late in his stay when he was becoming disenchanted with the creed of the Brotherhood of the Holy Spirit in particular and religion in general. This letter is most likely 1876. See more details at [www.clarencebicknell.com](http://www.clarencebicknell.com) including "Chronology".

<sup>iii</sup> Assumed to be Roland Corbett, vicar of Stoke-upon-Tern

<sup>iv</sup> Deuteronomy 5:22

"These words the Lord spoke to all your assembly at the mountain out of the midst of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness, with a loud voice; and he added no more. And he wrote them on two tablets of stone and gave them to me."

Deuteronomy 4:11

"And you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, while the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven, wrapped in darkness, cloud, and gloom"

Psalm 97:2

"Clouds and thick darkness surround Him; Righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne."