

Clarence Bicknell – Letters to the Baroness von Taube

Clarence Bicknell did not keep many of the letters he received from friends or researchers in his network. But in some cases the letters he write were kept by the recipient. This is the case with his letters to the Baroness Helene von Taube from 1909 to 1914. Quotes from these letters were used by Christopher Chippindale in his academic papers in the 1980; the letters give insights into Bicknell's personality and opinions which are hard to glean elsewhere. Therefore, in support of Valerie Lester's research for her forthcoming biography of Clarence Bicknell, Susie and Marcus Bicknell located this collection of letters, studied, photographed and logged them.

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)



The collection of some 400 letters is unloved and uncatalogued. It is bundled into a folio file box. The letters were given in 1931 to the Natural History Museum by the Baroness's son, Baron Otto von Taube, after a brief exchange of letters (as part of the collection) with the museum's secretary G.F. Herbert Smith.



Of interest to the Clarence Bicknell researchers were copies of the photo of the Esperanto group of Bordighera ("Antauen") and negatives of this photo which could possibly be original negatives. However it is not known if the Baroness is in the photo (the noble lady on Bicknell's left in the photo is Rosa Junck) nor how active she was in supporting Bicknell in the universal language and the annual congresses.

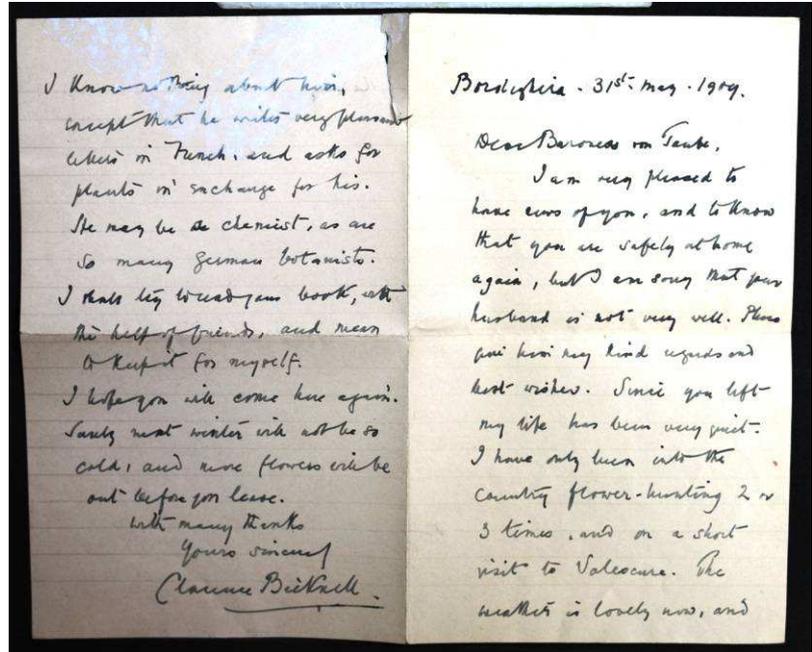
Clarence Bicknell's friend Baroness Helene von Taube was the wife of Baron Otto von Taube (1833-1911), a landlord. The von Taube family is of Danish, Estonian and German descent and has a long history. She refers in letters to her husband's long illness and his eventual death in 1911; the Baron is buried in Testacho Cemetery in Rome whence many of the Baroness's letters to Bicknell are written.

Helene von Taube's mother was the Grand Duchess Elena Pavlovna, a publicist and editor. Her father was Count Alexander Friedrich Lebrecht Michael Arthur Nikolaus von Keyserling, a Baltic German geologist and palaeontologist, and politician. In his letter to the Natural History Museum in

1931, her son calls her father a naturalist, which gives some background to Helene's interest in Bicknell's botany. Helene wrote her father's life story¹ published in 1902.

Her son gives Helene's death as 1st December 1930. The gift of the letters to the NHM was in 1931. The son signs himself Baron O. v. Taube, Dr. Jur. el Phil. but he could be the art historian, poet and novelist (1879-1973) referred to on several web sites.

Bicknell most likely met the Baroness in Bordighera in about 1909 when she came to stay in one of the great spa hotels, often the Hôtel des Iles Britanniques. Much of the correspondence is about botany, so we imagine that the Baroness made contact with Bicknell and asked his advice on plants she might have collected. Behind the botanical exchanges lies the growth of a friendship of respect and sympathy.



Susie and Marcus Bicknell's logging of the material is in three parts

1. This summary of the collection and excerpts from some of the letters
2. The photographs of each letter which are available on request, sample above. In most cases the envelope is photographed as well, sample below.
3. An Excel spreadsheet listing every photo, showing the date, provenance and destination

Note that the letters are not numbered or catalogued by the Natural History Museum so the number used here are the photograph numbers. The collection also includes some greetings cards made by Clarence (or possibly his niece Laura).



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¹ Graf Alexander Keyserling. *Ein Lebensbild aus seinen Briefen und Tagebüchern* zusammengestellt von seiner Tochter Freifrau Helene von Taube von der Issen (1902)

Sample extracts from the letters

779 1st Jan 1910 "Here are the two Daisy Books containing all the best things and also much rubbish."

780 undated. "But I shall not be able to tell you the name of the Ceylon plant. I know the leaf insect by sight. I saw very many in Ceylon and at the botanical garden they were breeding them in cages"
"I find my sister² very well; she looks younger and more beautiful, and is much as she was some years before her paralytic stroke. She is 78. ... You will be sorry to hear that by the doctor's advice Mrs Ray³ was sent suddenly home. She is very much worse and no operation is possible and I fear she will not live long. She has had a long life of suffering but I am very pleased for her good daughter and loving sons. ... She is in a nursing home in London."

788/789 Feb 1909 Visiting card "I shall very pleased to tell you at any time what little I know about flora and show you my herbaria and drawings"

833 28 Oct 1913 ? Postcard of Tende. Dinner Party with 2 old men, one cook ,Maddelena's dad, Mercedes, Luigi; all ate together: "the family" CB says

834. On leaving and packing up Casterino, not quite legible "....my beloved mountain cottage and the free life that I so enjoy. I dread the winter season"

0860 Postcard from Bordighera addressed to her at Nervi (Genoa) 22 March 1913
"A happy Easter to you. ⁴ I go to Valescure ⁵ today but return on Tuesday. My niece Nora will leave me on Thursday and on the 30th a nephew and wife will arrive.

0861 Postcard (photo of Bordighera Esperanto Group) sent from Bordighera 13th March 1913 arrived Firenze 14th March
"I am glad you will be here for the bazaar on the 29th"

0866 0867 Postcard Bordighera to Rome, 28 February 1913
"I shall miss my dear old Giacomo very much. 34 years is a long time and he was always faithful and true – I think of the English words of the gospel "Well done good and faithful servant". I am truly grateful to anyone who understands, but there are many of those that knew him well and always saw him here, who think it is not worth while troubling about only a servant"

0882 Letter Casterino to Wildbad Gastein, Austria, 6th July 1910
"I am very sorry to hear of your back troubles. Four weeks ago I was taken ill and could not move for 3 weeks. I had an illness called herpes in English, something caused by inflammation of the sheaths

² Clarence's sister Ada, 1831 - 13 September 1911 was his favourite sibling and he visited her occasionally in Wrotham, Kent. She was married to Edward Berry 1817-1875, shipowner and solicitor, and was mother to Edward Elhanan Berry (1851-1931) banker, vice-consul, Thomas Cook agent and writer of Bordighera.

³ Laura May Bicknell, wife of Charles Clayton Pennell Ray and daughter of Clarence's brother Henry Sanford Bicknell, who married David Roberts' daughter, died 16 Nov 1910.

⁴ Easter was 23 March in 1913

⁵ The only Valescure referenced in maps is the one near St Raphael, about 100km west of Bordighera along the French coast. This seems a long way to go botanising but species attributed to Bicknell by the University of Genoa (<http://www.anarchive.it/anArchive/herbaria/Cerca.do?sid=35613>) were found there as well as in La Foux (60km northwest of Nice in the mountains), the Esterel (between Cannes and St Raphael), Roquebrune, Sardinia, Corsica and Spain

of the nerves in the head and neck. I could not sleep at all on account of the pain for a long time: then followed some breakdown in stomach which quite finished me off, and I became very weak. When they allowed me I came up here on a mule with my niece Margaret Berry and I am now rapidly feeling better, but the Doctor will not let me go uphill or do anything [3 words indistinguishable]. However I can sleep and eat and walk about the gardens and pull up weeds but alas I may not go up higher to see all the gentians and anemones and the rhododendrons and other lovely flowers. So I have to send Luigi and I draw and read at home; but I hope soon to be allowed to take more exercise and work at the rock engravings. I have 2 Bordighera friends with me and when they go down my nephew and wife⁶ will come for 3 weeks as they cannot trust me take care of myself! ... My niece Mrs Ray⁷ is slowly dying and in great pain. Her sailor son wrote me a very nice letter. He is very sad. He said "She has always been the best and sweetest mother".

0891 Letter Casterino to Davos 30/07/1910

"We had three batteries of artillery here for nearly 3 weeks, and the soldiers chopped the lines, trampled down our garden, and have left the meadows near covered with paper, rags, tins and messes. Soldiers as individuals are very nice, but collectively they are an abomination."

Some soldiers, possible privates, signed the Casa Fontanalba visitors' book on 29 July 1910 – normally reserved for someone who had stayed a night – "Soldati Dott. Guildo" spelling uncertain.

0965 Letter on small card undated, probably 1910 according to von Taube note

"Dear Baroness. I have 2 guests today (the Prof. did not come yesterday but comes today) but they will leave in the afternoon, and I could see you pm (but only for a few minutes) before dinner. I say a few minutes because I give an Esperanto lesson to 4 people at 5.30. I am glad that you will come again to lunch. Next time we will make proper preparation. Yours sincerely, C. Bicknell.

0977 Letter Bordighera to Rome 31 March 1912

"...Padre Giacomo⁸ was brought back in an automobile a week ago and I have been to see him. He is better but I do not know if he will recover. We are in a great fix as he will not make his will and the houses which were bought for the Asilo are in his name. I believe that he has written that he hopes the comitals⁹ will carry on the work but that is not a will which the law will accept, and they will go to his sister. If he leaves them to me or any other individual, succession death duties must be paid, and the difficulty will be as great as before. Apparently the only thing to be done is to leave the house to the *Congregazione di Carità*¹⁰ which he hates, and I too because it does nothing. But we must hope that the committee will be able to raise sufficient funds to start the thing, though that is very doubtful, for after all the appeals sent to everybody in Bordighera only 200 francs has been given. And now we have to pay 180 frs. hospital expenses and 250-300 frs. to the surgeon. And will the Bordigotti, who are supposed to be so devoted to Padre Giacomo and so glad to have him back, give a sou towards these – all this not very encouraging."

Getting lazy about plant collecting as such hard work. Likes Luigi with him, but hosts don't always welcome him. Views on labour and capital.

997

⁶ Margaret and Edward Berry

⁷ Mrs Ray refers to Laura May Bicknell 1845-1910, the daughter of Henry Sanford Bicknell 1818-1880, Clarence's half brother. Laura married in 1872 Charles Clayton Pennell Ray 1846-1897. She died 16 November 1910, 5 months after this letter. Laura's "sailor son" was Basil Ray 1879-1953 (Union Castle Line captain) who is grandfather of Nick Ray, Cambridge architect, with whom Marcus has close contacts.

⁸ Giacomo Viale was born 27 February 1830 and died 16 April 1912. He was for 40 years the pastor and treasurer of the church in Bordighera. In 1894 he opened the *Casa di Provvidenza*, which later became *Ospedale Civico* (the Civic Hospital). He founded a hostel for the poor (*Asilo*) and provided daily meals for them. In the last years of his life he wanted to provide a safe haven for the elderly in the form of the *Ospizio di S. Giuseppe*. He paved the way for an orphanage, which was opened two years after his death.

⁹ Writing unclear. Could be "committee".

¹⁰ An Italian state institution created in 1862 and reformed in 1890 designed to meet the needs of the poor.

“The more I think about Lourdes and the trend of modern church teaching, the less I like them. Their multiplied devotional pilgrimages, excitement of miracles, never sufficient cult of the Madonna – what have they to do with the religion of the heart and the welfare of the people and the increase of interest in the poor and suffering. I think that myriade contradictions in the very healthy, and in the advertising at Lourdes very bad. “

1015 to 1018 4 June 1912

“I shall finish typewriting my new pamphlet about the rocks which I have already written once but which needs much alternation and correction. I do not feel sure if it is wise to publish this or not, as I have little (??) more to say, but I (and Luigi too) feel that after 11 years of continuous exploration a last word ought to be said, and that it is only fair to ourselves to say how hard we have worked. So we are busy packing (to go to Casterino)and begin the life of a savage in the wilds, but the wild life is very pleasant, and one quickly reverts (at least I do) to an ancestral simian (?) type.”

1032 6 October 1912

“It is strange how I have been gradually losing my love for gardens in comparison to the country. Any field of flowers or common hedge interests me more than the best garden with all sorts of wonderful plants” (Ruskin thought the same!! SB)

1030

“Perhaps I should come to Rome one day. I cannot stand all the long winter here. I am so sick of all the ordinary tea party, church-going people who are so conventional and such gossips and have so little of an international spirit”