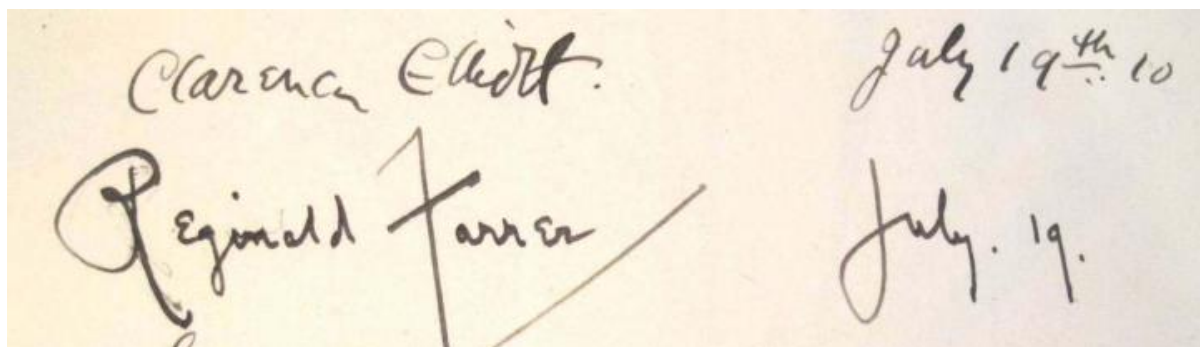


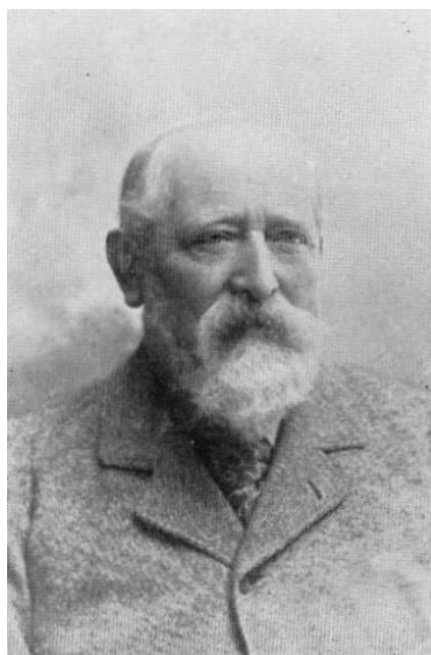
Clarence Bicknell and Reginald Farrer, 19 July 1910

By Graham Avery

The visitors' book of Casa Fontanalba, Clarence Bicknell's summer home in the village of Casterino in the Maritime Alps, records the visit on 19 July 1910 of the botanists Reginald Farrer and Clarence Elliott. Who were these men? Why did they visit Bicknell? What was the sequel?



Clarence Bicknell



Clarence Bicknell (1842-1918)¹ is best known for his pioneering investigation of the prehistoric rock-engravings of the Maritime Alps, but his work in the field of botany was also important. It was his interest in flowers that took him into the mountains where he first encountered the mysterious rock-engravings known as the *Meraviglie*. He wrote “I am only an amateur botanist, and have gone up into these neighbouring mountains in my summer holidays in order to study their Flora; but the fascination of the rocks has made me neglect my special hobby.”² Bicknell's discipline as a botanist was a crucial factor in his contribution to the study of rock-art, for it was through his meticulous drawing, photography, listing, classifying and publishing that the rock-figures emerged from the obscurity of antiquarian speculation into the light of scientific investigation and analysis.³

Clarence Bicknell arrived in Bordighera in 1879 as chaplain to the Anglican church, and soon made a circle of friends among the international community and local people. He began to

¹ For fuller accounts of Bicknell's life see Bicknell (1988) and Lester (2018)

² Bicknell (1902) pages 5-6

³ See Chippindale (1998) page 44 for an assessment of the techniques of Bicknell as an 'amateur' in relation to the work of 'professional' archaeologists. The topic is pursued in more detail in Chippindale (1984)

draw and record the local flora, and his watercolours were the basis for his book *Flowering Plants and Ferns of the Riviera and neighbouring mountains* (Trübner, London, 1885) followed by *Flora of Bordighera and San Remo* (Gibelli, Bordighera, 1896). It was in 1881 that he first saw the rock-engravings of the *Meraviglie*, and in 1887 he made drawings of them, but it was not until the summer of 1897 when he rented a house in the mountains in Val Casterino that he devoted himself to the exploration of the rock-figures. He presented papers on the subject to the Ligurian Society of Natural Sciences at Genoa in 1897 and 1898, and published *The prehistoric rock engravings in the Italian Maritime Alps* (Gibelli, Bordighera, 1902) and *A Guide to the Prehistoric Rock Engravings of the Italian Maritime Alps* (Bessone, Bordighera, 1913). Bicknell's work is recognised as a milestone in the investigation of the petroglyphs, and it "remains the fundamental method for the professional study of this major component of the prehistoric art of Europe".⁴

Bicknell at Casa Fontanalba

After renting accommodation in Casterino for a number of years, Bicknell decided in 1904 to build a summer home there: a two-storey house with a verandah, designed by Robert MacDonald, which he named Casa Fontanalba after nearby Val Fontanalba.



From 1906 until his death in 1918 he stayed here each summer, with his servants Luigi and Mercede Pollini, pursuing his investigations in the mountains and receiving visitors. In the house he maintained two visitors' books: the *Casa Fontanalba Visitors' Book*⁵ which lists all his visitors, and the *Book of Guests in Esperanto*⁶ which gives brief biographical notes on the

⁴ Chippindale (1998) page 12

⁵ Bicknell (2017)

⁶ Bicknell (2022)

visitors who stayed overnight, written in Esperanto, the international language for which Bicknell was an enthusiast.

An interesting report on a visit to Casa Fontanalba in 1913 was made by Alberto Pelloux, whose name, together with that of his wife Bianca, appears in the *Casa Fontanalba Visitors' Book* for 12 August 1913, and also in the *Book of Guests in Esperanto* where he is described as 'Captain Alberto Pelloux. Initially for many years in an Alpine Regiment, and later a staff officer, he was glad to leave the army and dedicate himself entirely to mineralogical studies⁷. In 1912 he classified and reordered in a wonderful way the minerals in the new city museum of Genova. His father, General Luigi Pelloux, was once Minister of War⁸'.

On the day after his visit, Pelloux wrote to his mother 'Bicknell's house is a thing really worth seeing. You've no idea how he's fitted it out with drawings and pictures, all made by himself on rainy days! It's wonderful to think that he did all this himself. His life up there is ordered according to the hours of the day, for example everyone has to get up at half-past-five, eat at half-past-ten, have dinner at five, and go to bed at half-past-eight at the latest, so as to use all the hours of daylight ... You should see Bicknell's house, it's beautiful, and his garden is so well kept, with strawberries, redcurrants, and so on. I can tell you, it's worth going there just to see the house, for it gives an idea of the prodigious activity of this man, who is full of a sense of poetry and art. He has a book, all painted with flowers, for the signatures of people who go to see him; another similar book is for those who stay the night there, and for them there are a few lines of biography in Esperanto. Then in one room, on the walls, are all the initials of his guests, within an ornamental design. We left in the morning at six, and our initials were already in place'⁹.

Luciano Minozzi, son of a friend of Bicknell, recollected that 'in the morning the guests and their host got up very early and dived into the cold water of a nearby stream, even if the weather was cold and they didn't wish to bathe; then everyone was free until lunch, but had to do something useful not only for himself but for the community, and report on it at the meal. After eating (vegetarian food, since Bicknell was a crusader for animal protection) guests had to wash their own dishes because it did not seem fair that Luigi¹⁰, a man like any other, should do it for everyone else. In the afternoon there was a compulsory excursion until dinner-time. The place was like a boarding school, or a house of correction, for meals were strictly regulated; only vegetarian food, no fish, no eggs, not even milk or butter, but instead salad, roots, and broth made from vegetables or fruit. As for a certain kind of convenience, Bicknell was quite stubborn; he had banned the renowned English toilet, so famous in those times, and preached that it was immoral for a man to keep waste matter in his house; to go out in the open air was not only poetic, healthy and decent, but useful for the plants'¹¹.

⁷ Alberto Pelloux (1868-1948) was President of the Italian Geological Society in 1934

⁸ Luigi Pelloux (1839-1924) was also Prime Minister (*Presidente del Consiglio*) of Italy in 1898-1900

⁹ Letters of 13 & 15 August 1913 quoted in Bernardini (1972) page 18. This was not the first visit of Pelloux to Casterino; Bicknell (1913) page 27 mentions that this 'learned mineralogist' was with him there in 1902

¹⁰ Bicknell's servant Luigi Pollini

¹¹ Bernardini (1972) page 18, apparently derived from a book by Minozzi dedicated to his father.

Reginald Farrer and Clarence Elliott

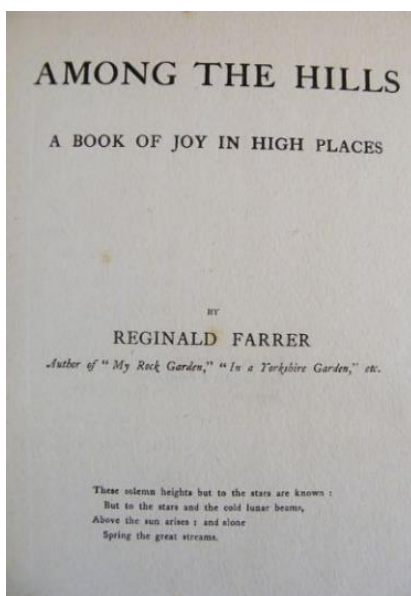


Reginald Farrer¹² (1880-1920) was an author and plant collector who had a nursery at Clapham in Yorkshire. He published many articles and books including *My Rock Garden* (1907), *Alpines and Bog Plants* (1908), and *In a Yorkshire Garden* (1909). Later he published books about his travels in Asia in search of plants to bring back for cultivation; it was on a plant-hunting expedition in the remote mountains of Upper Burma that he died in 1920. Farrer was ‘virtually the patron saint of rock gardening for much of the twentieth century’¹³, and the Latin names of no less than 34 species or varieties of plants have the epithets *farreri* or *farreriana* or *reginaldii*¹⁴.

Clarence Elliott (1881-1969) was a horticulturalist whose nursery at Six Hills, Stevenage, specialised in alpine plants. He re-edited in 1907 the classic work *Flowers of the Field* which was first published in 1853 by the Reverend C. A. Johns and has remained in print ever since.

Farrer’s book *Among the Hills* (1911)

Farrer, who had visited the European mountains regularly since his youth, made an eight-week botanical tour in France, Italy and Austria in 1910, and published an account of it in *Among the Hills: A Book of Joy in High Places*.



¹² For fuller accounts of Farrer’s life see Illingworth & Routh (1991) and Shulman (2003)

¹³ Elliott (2011) page 20

¹⁴ Illingworth & Routh (1991) pages 43-54 (*Plant Names Commemorating Reginald Farrer* by W.T. Stearn)

Arriving by train at Modane on 22 June, Farrer investigated the flora of Mont Cenis and then went on to Bobbio Pellice and Terme di Valdieri, where Elliott, his companion for the rest of the tour, joined him. On 13 July they walked over the Passo Ciriegia, where Farrer exulted on finding the rare plant *Saxifraga florulenta*¹⁵, to which he gave the name ‘The Ancient King’.

After staying at Boréon and Saint Martin Vésubie, Farrer and Elliott travelled by bus and train via Nice to Ventimiglia, where they took a horse-drawn carriage to San Dalmazzo di Tenda (now St. Dalmas de Tende¹⁶) where they stayed in its ‘one charming hotel, conspicuous alike for comfort and cheapness’¹⁷.



Grande Albergo, San Dalmazzo di Tenda

After making an excursion to nearby cliffs to find *Primula Allioni*¹⁸ they walked up to the village of Casterino, known then as La Maddalena because of its chapel dedicated to Santa Maria Maddalena. Farrer describes the visit in the following way: ‘Down upon San Dalmazzo from behind, steeply between pine-clad ranges of granite, descends the Valley of the Miniera de Tenda, up which you can wander into the high heart of the Maritimes, either following the main glen, or diverging (as I shall make you do, and as you may wish I hadn’t) along its right-hand branch, which becomes the Casterino Valley and then the Valmasca Valley, and ultimately brings you to the foot of Monte Bego’s sacred peak, deified by a race now forgotten, which filled the rocks around its base with barbaric carvings, never to be deciphered by the historian’¹⁹.

¹⁵ Farrer (1911) pages 158-71

¹⁶ Local place-names have changed as a result of the transfer of the region from Italy to France in 1947; San Dalmazzo di Tenda is now San Dalmas-de-Tende

¹⁷ Farrer (1911) page 241

¹⁸ Allioni’s Primrose, named after Carlo Allioni (1728 -1804), professor of botany at Turin

¹⁹ Farrer (1911) page 242

After a description of San Dalmazzo, and eight pages on *Primula Allioni*, Farrer continues: ‘*Aquilegia Reuteri*²⁰ is yet another of the special glories that distinguish the Maritime Alps above the other European ranges. If you want to see it in character you must ascend the Valley of the Miniera de Tenda. And the Valley of the Miniera, besides being granitic, is very long and very steep and very hot and very dull²¹.



Primula Allionii



Aquilegia reuteri

We were told that it took two hours of easy sauntering to reach La Maddalena, up in that divergence of the Miniera which leads to the right, and is called the Val Casterino; and we found that it took three and a half hours of solid stodging. I draw a veil over the feelings with which we viewed our informant, and the Miniera generally. Nor did our welcome at La Maddalena quite correspond with our heat and our weariness, our hunger and our thirst. Not to put too fine a point upon it, our hosts were scantily pleased to have two total strangers dropping in on domestic bliss “*en villegiature*” among the wild mountains. They eyed us with fridity as we climbed over the garden-railing, and indicated that tea might be obtained, perhaps; but that the meal was over, and the fire gone out, and the bottom of the kettle fallen through. And, pray, what would you say, then, or I, or any normal person, if we retired into the remotest Alps for solitude, and then saw two strange figures toiling up into our garden, armed with trowels and collecting tins?²²

But there are bright spots in even the Valley of the Miniera. And the brightest of all is a slope quite blue with *Aquilegia Reuteri*. This occurs just at the divergence of the side track towards La Maddalena, and a little way short of the silver mine in the main valley, from which it takes its name. Here, on a bank of very stony, grassy rubble, the Columbine abounded in rich profusion of blossom, and just below in the gravel bank, by the path, *Campanula stenocodon*²³ was in flower. And Reuter’s Columbine is certainly a glorious and lovely thing, when one sees it at its best²⁴.

²⁰ Reuter’s Columbine, named after the French botanist George François Reuter (1805-1872)

²¹ Farrer inserts here a footnote: ‘I’ve been severely rebuked for saying this, and of course, it isn’t true. But it was true to me, the day I mounted the Miniera. What closer approximation to the truth can you expect?’

²² Farrer (1911) page 251

²³ Cottian Bellflower

²⁴ Farrer (1911) pages 251-2

After discussing the Columbine and the Campanula for a further two pages, Farrer concludes with the reflection ‘One ought to know more of the Miniera Valley. Perhaps some day I may return there, when the bottom has been restored to the kettle. For the wide glade of La Maddalena is beautiful. The boulders are sheeted with *Primula marginata*²⁵, and bushy with *Dianthus sylvestris*²⁶.

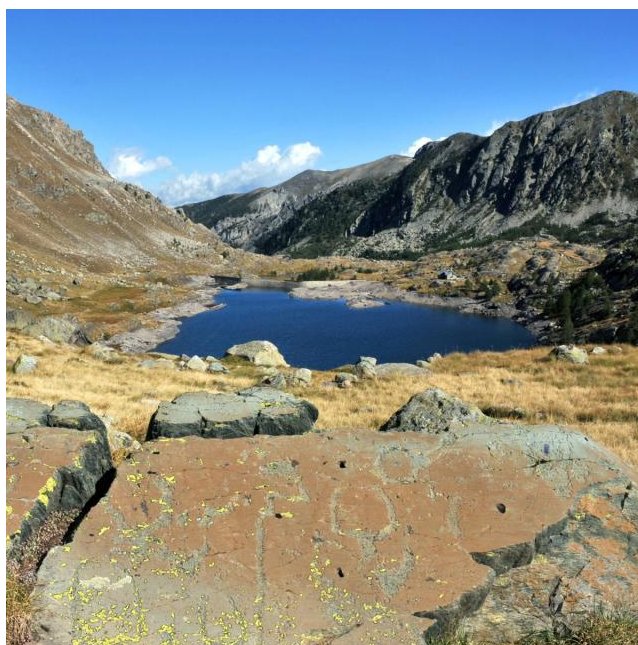


Campanula stenocodon



Primula marginata

High over the head of the valley loom the grisly precipices, the snow-fields, and the naked peak of the Rocca del Abisso. Round to the left at the foot of this goes curling the Casterino Valley, and becomes the Val Valmasca, leading towards the holy Monte Bego, and the Lakes of Marvels, and the rock-carvings which are the ‘Marvels’ that give the lakes their name.

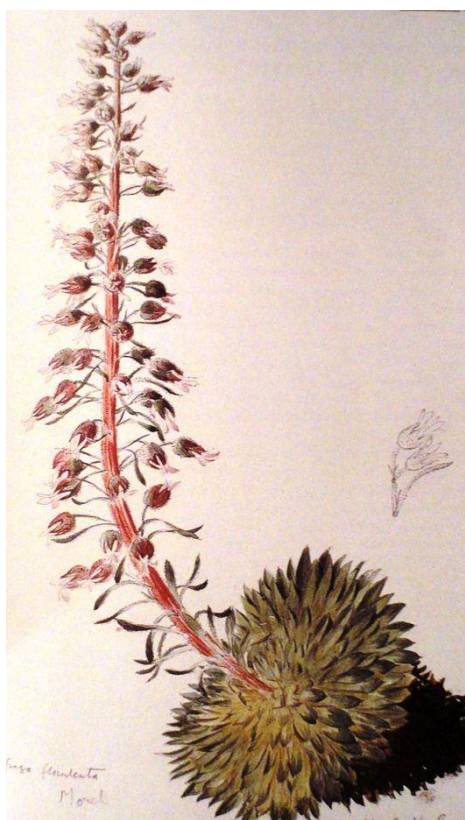


Rock carvings in the Vallée des Merveilles

²⁵ Marginate Primrose

²⁶ Wood Pink

On Monte Bego the King of the Alps²⁷ again holds his court; and the Val Valmasca is sacred to an even auguster plant than *Eritrichium*. For those gaunt granites mark the extreme easterly limit of *Saxifraga florulenta*²⁸.



Saxifraga florulenta
(depicted by Clarence Bicknell)



Saxifraga florulenta

After this, Farrer and Elliott went on to Tenda, Limone, Cuneo and Turin, re-visited Mont Cenis, and completed their tour of the Alps at Storo near Lago di Garda.

Farrer's account of his meeting with Bicknell resonates with frustration and embarrassment, and prompts a number of questions. Why did Farrer and Elliott make the visit? Did they know Bicknell already? Had they read his works on botany and rock-art? How did they know that he was living at La Maddalena? Why does Farrer omit to mention Bicknell's name? In what follows, I offer answers to these questions.

Farrer's letter to his mother (1910)

Three days after his visit to Casa Fontanalba Farrer wrote a letter to his mother²⁹. This letter, hitherto unpublished, gives a very different account of his meeting with Bicknell:

²⁷ *Eritrichium nanum*

²⁸ Farrer (1911) page 254. *S. florulenta* was found here also by Bicknell, see Chippindale (1998) page 31

²⁹ Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh Archives, GB 235 RJF/2/1/2.

Hotel de l'Europe, Limone, July 22 [1910]

You must be feeling very chilly & neglected indeed my dear now that your natural protégé³⁰ is no longer there³¹. I hope that both you & he will have a good time. Indeed of course the time of fine weather in the Alps (if not in England) is now at hand so that Zermatt & so on should be looking glorious.

This country is very odd & strange: of no attraction as mountain-scenery, really, for the hills are only limestone crags, and their slopes have all the internal lavender-clad aridities of the Mediterranean coast. However the plants are very rewarding: a rarity in almost every glen, though the rest of the scene is neither verdant nor brilliant. I have sent many boxes - ten indeed already so you can imagine how well we have been doing. But they mount up, these boxes: if you have a loose fiver or tenner, send it on to cheer me on the Mt. Cenis, if you wish me ever to return to your side, & not remain for ever in pawn at some outlandish consulate! San Dalma³² is an attractive little place, but we are glad to be edging Northward again, to the high places & the snow. It was very hot in the Roja valley, though cooling breezes, it is true, play for ever up and down the chestnut woods of San Dalma. We had four days there in all: a rare plant for each day's object.

Once we were sent up to see a Mr Bicknell, a botanist, in a remote glen, which we were told was a two hour's stroll. Unfortunately our informant was, as we afterwards found, a known champion walker (a Dr Walker³³ of Bordighera, with a foreign accent) – the stroll turned out a trudge of 3½ hours, at the end of which old Bicknell merely offered us Vermouth (which I hate) and no information that I didn't know before. His nephew was there, the Consul of Bordighera (Berry) whose fat wife, the fattest woman to be found here, in a country of fat women, discovered in me a violent likeness to someone of my name, who afterwards on enquiry and analysis, proved to be Minna³⁴!



Edward Berry, Clarence Bicknell and Margaret Berry at Casa Fontanalba c. 1910

³⁰ Probably her younger son Sidney Farrer, born in 1888

³¹ Apparently they were staying in Switzerland, in or near Zermatt

³² San Dalmazzo di Tenda

³³ Possibly a relation of Mrs Rosa Fanshawe Walker of Bordighera, from whom Bicknell had bought Villa Rosa in 1880. She married Dr Sanderson William Matthew Walker in Torino 1870, but he died in 1876

³⁴ Minna S. Farrer, born 1869, daughter of Sir William J. Farrer (solicitor to Queen Victoria) a distant relation of Reginald Farrer

The evenings at San Dalma were delightful: we sat out in a balmy scented darkness, with little fragrant zephyrs blowing from the vines in flower, and watched the most wonderful fireflies turning themselves on and off, as they hovered against the dark velvet background. I had no idea that the alps, even the Southern ones, produced such marvels. It was almost like being at night in the depths of the jungle round Polonnarua³⁵. Another nice thing are the white strawberries – sickly and pale, perhaps, to look at, but of a rich fruity flavour far exceeding that of any fat red sort of the garden.

We greatly wanted to get plants. The Riviera was looking extraordinarily unchanged as we passed along it: summer & winter seem to make no difference at all to the hard and brilliance of the coast. But the Mediterranean was glorious in green & blue & violet: & the warmth was like something tangible. But in vain, between Nice & Ventimiglia, did I look for a sight of Cannes or the Esterel.

We are here for two nights in hope of *Ranunculus alpestris*³⁶: then the Mt. Cenis again for four solid days of clear mountain air. After that, hot Storo³⁷, then cool (I hope) Mte Baldo³⁸: then boiling Botzen & Salurn³⁹, to wind up, after all, if we can manage it, with a dash at Misurina⁴⁰ & *Potentilla nitida*⁴¹! London about the 14th or 15th I expect. I am so glad this year, to have covered so much new country & seen for the first time so many well known plants at home. But there is no display here now: all is dust & lavender (I have sent home one fine big-flowered form).

Yours affectionately, Reginald Farrer

A few days later he wrote another letter to his mother from the Hotel de la Poste, Mont Cenis, on July 27, of which the following is an extract:

‘My dear, your welcome letter & cheque were a great satisfaction: the latter perhaps I may hope to repay... Limone was our last of the Maritime Alps – a horridish place with a hotel ill-kept by a former maid of the fat Mrs Berry. We had two nights there, for an expedition after *Ranunculus alpestris* which we did not get. But a marvellous journey next day to Turin...’

Farrer’s book *The English Rock-Garden* (1919)

Farrer later mentioned Bicknell in the book *The English Rock-Garden*, which he wrote in 1913 and corrected for the press during the winter of 1914 when he was in China, though its

³⁵ Farrer visited the garden city of Polonnarua in Ceylon in 1908

³⁶ Alpine buttercup

³⁷ Storo, west of Lago di Garda, was Farrer’s base for excursions to Cima Tombea

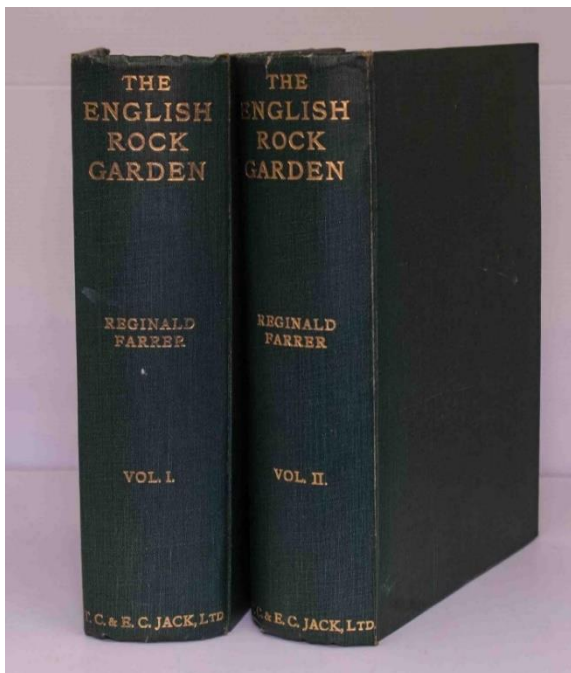
³⁸ Monte Baldo, east of Lago di Garda

³⁹ Botzen (Bolzano) and Salurn (Salorno), at that time in the Austrian Tirol, now in Italy

⁴⁰ Misurina in the Italian Dolomites

⁴¹ Pink cinquefoil

publication was delayed until 1919 by the War. This *magnum opus* describes every species of Alpine plant, with a total of about 10,000 entries and more than 1,000 pages.



In the entry on *Primula marginata* Farrer writes ‘In nature, this loveliest blue Primula of our Alps is a rare species; extremely abundant, indeed, but only in a small limited district ranging from the Maritime chain up through the Cottians ... the gardener is particularly recommended to go the valley of La Maddalena, above San Dalmazzo de Tenda, not only because there *P. Marginata* exists in the most rampant profusion and the most riotous and lovely degree of variation, but also because that valley is further occupied by a famous English botanist, one Mr Bicknell, who has there a house and spends long summers, in the course of which he asks nothing better than to show the treasures of his hills to all such fellow-collectors as desire to see them.

Therefore in asking him for guidance, the gardener will not only be gaining profit but giving pleasure also – a holy and pleasing thought⁴².

Ingwersen’s criticism of Farrer (1932)

In an article published by the Alpine Garden Society in 1932⁴³ the plant collector Walter Ingwersen⁴⁴ described *Among the Hills* as ‘a book that should be read by all lovers of alpine plants who are fortunate enough to visit the Alps’. But he also criticised Farrer because: ‘He takes a needle-sharp revenge on a dweller in a high valley of the Maritime Alps, who did not welcome him as a collector, fearing, wholly unnecessarily, ill effects on the floral beauties surrounding his dwelling place, for it is amply evident that Farrer was no marauder of the hills, but was one who would rather content himself with a fragment of a rare plant than rob a rock of all its glory.’



⁴² Farrer (1919) vol. 2 pages 153-4

⁴³ Fisher (1932) pages 34-8

⁴⁴ Walter Ingwersen (1883-1960) worked with Clarence Elliott and later founded a nursery in Sussex

Ingwersen's reference to Farrer's 'needle-sharp revenge' was taken up in 1991 by the botanist W.T. Stearn, who wrote: 'Having received a frosty reception at La Maddalena, Farrer was well aware how much the Rev. Clarence Bicknell (1842-1918), author of *Flowering Plants and Ferns of the Riviera* (1885), hated visitors to his valley!'⁴⁵ Following Stearn, Nicola Shulman wrote in her biography of Farrer: 'The Rev. Clarence Bicknell detested other plant collectors in his valley, and had once repelled Farrer when he tried to visit him there'⁴⁶.

Ingwersen's remark that Bicknell feared 'unnecessarily' that Farrer would deplete the local flora, was misplaced. Bicknell had good reason for suspicion: Farrer and Elliott arrived 'armed with trowels and collecting tins', and during their tour in the Alps they had collected many boxes of plants. In an 'Afterword' in his book *Among the Hills* Farrer deplored the fact that 'Strange stray women have gone about accusing me of 'devastating' regions and valleys of the Alps.... Come, come. On a given range a given species dwells. But that range is many miles long, incalculably vast and high, and the populating species can be calculated by the million and the many, many million. What a mighty void shall I then leave in even half a mile of slope if I pluck thence a hundred plants or so?'⁴⁷ Later Farrer argued against plant protection on the grounds that 'there is no such thing as a rare plant' and 'you cannot exterminate an alpine species'⁴⁸.

Stearn's statement that Bicknell 'hated visitors' and Shulman's remark that he 'repelled' Farrer were simply incorrect. In the summer months Bicknell welcomed visitors to Casa Fontanalba, where they were greeted by verses painted on the walls inside the entrance 'Welcome be to every guest, Come he north, south, east or west' and 'Go he north, south, east or west, God speed every parting guest'. The Visitors' Book of Casa Fontanalba records a total of 310 visitors in the period 1906-16, including 24 botanists. In addition to Farrer and Elliott, they were Fritz Mader from Tenda (1906), Harold Stuart Thompson from Bristol (1907), Lino Vaccari from Rome (1908), Emile Burnat, Ernst Wilczek, John Briquet, François Cavilier and Emile Albrezol from Geneva (1909), Louis Lutz and eight other members of the *Société botanique de France* (1910), James W. White and Cedric Bucknall from Bristol (1911), Henry Correvon and Théodor Katz from Geneva (1914), and Renato Pampanini from Florence (1916)⁴⁹. Lutz and the French botanists visited Casa Fontanalba on 4 August 1910, two weeks after Farrer and Elliott, and in his report Lutz wrote 'the venerable philanthropist and botanist of Bordighera, Mr. Clarence Bicknell, received us in his chalet with his usual affability'⁵⁰. Thus, Farrer's remark that Bicknell 'asks nothing better than to show the treasures of his hills. In asking him for guidance, the gardener will not only be gaining profit but giving pleasure – a holy and pleasing thought' was a statement of fact,

⁴⁵ Illingworth & Routh (1991) pages 43-54 (*An Introductory Tribute to Reginald Farrer* by W.T. Stearn)

⁴⁶ Shulman (2003) page 97

⁴⁷ Farrer (1911) pages 322-3

⁴⁸ Farrer (1919) Vol I pages liii-lvi and 333-39

⁴⁹ For more on these persons see Avery (2022)

⁵⁰ *Session extraordinaire tenue dans les Alpes-Maritimes pendant les mois de juillet-août 1910* in *Bulletin de la Société Botanique de France*, 1910, page xcix

rather than a ‘needle-sharp revenge’. However, the elevated phrase ‘a holy and pleasing thought’ is at least ironical, if not satirical.

Conclusion

What really happened at Casa Fontanalba on 19 July 1910? The accounts given by Farrer in his letter to his mother and in his book *Among the Hills* are typical examples of his style - florid extravagance, enlivened by wit and malice. One should not take them at face value, or underestimate his capacity for exaggeration. In his memoirs Osbert Sitwell, Farrer’s second cousin, recalled that ‘although he possessed the capacity to be extremely considerate, he was impish by nature’. Mary Herbert, wife of Farrer’s friend Aubrey Herbert, wrote to her mother ‘Mr. Farrer is, I believe, a malevolent gnome, with a wish to be fascinating but an ill restrained bitterness of tongue’⁵¹.

We may reconstruct the episode in the following way. Before visiting Bicknell, Farrer and Elliott were ‘total strangers’, and Farrer knew nothing of Bicknell’s publications (otherwise, he would have mentioned them). Farrer and Elliott were ‘sent up to see’ Bicknell by a Dr Walker of Bordighera (described with an ironic pun as ‘a champion walker’). They did not inform Bicknell in advance of their visit, which was contrary to the norms of polite behaviour, but perhaps understandable as they were not following a pre-defined timetable. Nevertheless, they could have sent a message from their hotel. After an uphill walk of three and a half hours, they arrived exhausted and thirsty, and Bicknell was surprised by their unexpected arrival.

Farrer’s remark that ‘the meal was over’ reflects the fact that evening meals at Casa Fontanalba were taken early; his comment that ‘the fire had gone out, and the bottom of the kettle fallen through’ is amusing, but probably a fiction. He implies that the visitors were not made welcome, but in fact they were offered vermouth (one of Bicknell’s favourite drinks, even if Farrer disliked it). They engaged in polite conversation with Bicknell (even if he offered ‘no information that I didn’t know before’) and Farrer talked with Margaret Berry⁵². They probably inspected the ‘treasures of the hills’ in the garden of Casa Fontanalba. Before leaving Casa Fontanalba, they were invited to sign the Visitor’s Book.

Farrer omission of Bicknell’s name in his book *Among the Hills* was in line with his omission of the names of other persons, including Elliott whom he referred to simply as ‘my companion’. He was following a social code according to which it was impolite to mention in publications the names of one’s family and social acquaintances.

What did Clarence Bicknell and Reginald Farrer have in common? Both had strong opinions, but were intellectually curious and open to new ideas. Both were interested in travel: Farrer had been to Japan, China and Korea in 1901, and Ceylon in 1906, and would later visit China

⁵¹ Shulman (2003) page 60

⁵² He describes her unflatteringly as ‘fat’ (the photo at page 9 above suggests that she was far from slender)

and Burma, while Bicknell had been to Ceylon in 1908, and later planned to visit Japan⁵³. They had botanical acquaintances in common: Farrer knew H.S. Thompson, who had visited Casa Fontanalba in 1907, and Henry Correvon, who visited it in 1914.

On the other hand, Bicknell was of a different generation, 38 years older than Farrer. Farrer collected flowers not only for their beauty but also for commercial reasons, sending boxes of plants back to his nursery. Although Bicknell took some local plants for his garden at Casa Fontanalba, he picked flowers in small quantities to dry for his herbarium or for botanical exchange. Bicknell was a vegetarian, an internationalist, and a lapsed Anglican priest, while Farrer was a novelist manqué, an unsuccessful politician, and a Buddhist.

Their meeting at Casa Fontanalba on 19 July 1910 was their only encounter. Farrer's published report of it is enigmatic, and we have no record of a response by Bicknell⁵⁴. What is clear is that Farrer was sufficiently impressed by their meeting to report it in an amusing letter to his mother, to publish a characteristically extravagant account of it, and later to commend Bicknell for his willingness to show to visitors 'the treasures of his hills'.

Graham Avery, October 2022

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⁵³ He decided not to go to Japan in 1914 because his servant Luigi was not strong enough to accompany him

⁵⁴ A copy of *Among the Hills* found its way later into Bicknell's library in Bordighera

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