

CLA/16

Correspondence between
Arthur Edward Clabburn (1849-1901)
and
Robert Louis Roumieu (1814-1877)

1869-1871

Transcribed and annotated by John Barnard
[Updated 2 April 2020]

Background and Notes

Transcript of Letter CLA/16/1 (Arthur Clabburn to Robert Roumieu, 25 May 1869)

Transcript of Letter CLA/16/2 (Arthur Clabburn to Robert Roumieu, 5 Nov 1871)

Transcript of Letter CLA/16/3 (Robert Roumieu to Arthur Clabburn, 7 Nov 1871)

Image of Letter CLA/16/1

Image of Letter CLA/16/2

Image of Letter CLA/16/3

Background and Notes

These letters were inherited by the descendants of Arthur Edward Clabburn, and relate to an early love affair of his with Emilie Isabella Roumieu (1852-1929), the daughter of Robert Louis Roumieu. I found them in an envelope inscribed in the handwriting of my grandmother, Arthur Clabburn's daughter Ethel, "Dad's letters to Mr Roumieu".

Robert Roumieu was a successful and well-known architect, of French Huguenot extraction, whose buildings include the extraordinary Victorian Gothic vinegar warehouse (now offices) at 33-35 Eastcheap in the City of London, and the Islington Literary and Philosophical Institute (now the Almeida Theatre).¹ He also built a number of warehouses for the firm of Crosse and Blackwell, and this probably provides the connection with both the Crosse and the Clabburn families; early in 1869 Arthur Clabburn's sister Mary Louisa (then aged 19) married Edmund Meredith Crosse, heir to the tinned food firm.²

It is indeed quite possible that Arthur and Emilie (aged 17) first met at that wedding. 21-year-old Arthur was a young army officer, having been commissioned an Ensign in the 75th Regiment of Foot the previous October.³ By May 1869, however, his regiment had been posted to Hong Kong, and it was in this context that he wrote the first of his letters (CLA/16/1) to Emilie's father, asking for his consent to a sort of unofficial engagement with Emilie.

1 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Lewis_Roumieu

2 GRO Marriage Index, 1869 Q1 Blofield 4b 324

3 Army List 1871

This was presumably granted, and the second letter in the collection (CLA/16/2) is dated thirty months later (5 Nov 1871), and was written from Arthur's parents' home in Norwich, where he was presumably home on leave. Arthur now recognises that there is no immediately foreseeable prospect of his being able to marry Emilie, and though he remains deeply attached to her, he feels that it would not be right to continue to bind her to him indefinitely. He says that he lives "in hope of something coming in my way which may enable me to give up the Army, and thus to attain my wishes" – is this perhaps the gentlest of hints that a substantial dowry from Robert might make that possible?

The handwriting in Robert's reply (CLA/16/3), dated two days later, is rather difficult to decipher, but he offers no such way out, instead acknowledging Arthur's courage in sacrificing his feelings, and hoping that he and his daughter will continue to be able to receive Arthur as a friend.

Arthur was moved to the half-pay list the following July (1872)⁴ and finally left the army in March 1875, pursuing his career as a freelance artist. Later the same year Emilie was married to Alexander (sometimes shown as Alec or Alex) Coghill Wylie (c. 1852-1908),⁵ and Arthur married Rosey de Pearsall (probably aged about 16) in November 1877.⁶

Emilie may have regretted not continuing to wait for Arthur to be in a position to marry, as her marriage to Wylie was not a happy one and in 1883 she divorced him on grounds of adultery and violence, winning custody of their two children.⁷ He is supposed to have had an affair with her sister Christine (though I can find no other record of her), and later fled to Australia to escape his creditors, where he married Ida Ross, on whom he fathered the feminist lesbian author I.A.R. Wylie (1885-1959).⁸

It seems probable that at some point Emilie re-established contact with Arthur, or more likely with his widow after his death in 1901, and returned the letters Arthur had sent to Robert Roumieu, as I can see no other way in which they can have passed to Arthur's descendants. Emilie never remarried and died in London in 1929.⁹

There is another indirect connection between Emilie's and Arthur's families. In 1906 Arthur's nephew Edmund Mitchell Crosse (the only issue of the 1869 marriage of Arthur's sister Mary Louisa to Edmund Meredith Crosse) married Emilie's niece Leda Mary Roumieu¹⁰ (daughter of Emilie's brother Reginald St Aubyn Roumieu). My mother related a story from her mother (Arthur's eldest daughter Ethel) that, following Arthur's death, the Crosse family gave some financial assistance to the then impoverished Clabburns – perhaps it was Emilie herself who organised this, remembering her youthful love for Arthur.

4 Army List 1873

5 GRO Marriage Index, 1875 Q2 Strand 1b 866

6 GRO Marriage Index, 1877 Q4 Rochford 4a 420

7 Atkinson, Diane (2018). *Rise up, women! : the remarkable lives of the suffragettes*. London: Bloomsbury. pp. 398–9, 436, 479, 525, 564. Cited at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I._A._R._Wylie

8 I. A. R. Wylie, *My Life with George: An Unconventional Autobiography*, New York: Random House (1940). Cited at <https://neglectedbooks.com/?p=1379>

9 Index of Wills and Administrations. Will proved 13 Aug 1929, London (folio 2032)

10 GRO Marriage Index, 1906 Q4 Paddington 1a 53

Letter CLA/16/1 – Arthur Clabburn to Robert Roumieu

Original envelope postmarked on rear "Hong Kong MY 26" [26 May 1869] and on front "London JY 10 69" [10 Jul 1869]. Addressed to R. Roumieu Esq, 7 St George's Terrace, Regents Park, London.

H.Q. 75th Rgt.
Hong Kong

May 25 / 69

Dear Mr Roumieu

I must write to you in order to gain your kind consent to a request of mine that will no doubt surprise you. You must have noticed my conduct and the attention I paid to Miss Roumieu at Cromer. Although only having had the pleasure of seeing her for a short time there has or rather had, grown up a deep attachment between us, which soon increased to love. I never really confessed my love until the day I came to your house when we had (Miss Roumieu & I) a long talk on the subject which ended in our giving each other each other's love.

I left England in a manner that must have surprised you, but I gave the reasons & excuse to Miss Roumieu in a letter, which I hope you may see. I pointed out my [lowly?] prospects and left it for her to decide whether we should remain on the same footing as ever at the same time giving my own opinion and wish on the matter.

Miss Roumieu kindly consented to remain in the same position as before I left England, and consented to wait for me.

You will see that we have corresponded and my [sincere?] wish & [] is to gain your consent to continue it.

Please excuse this [abridged?] letter. Hoping to hear from you soon, with kind regards to Mrs Roumieu,

I remain
yours very truly

A. E. Clabburn

Letter CLA/16/2 – Arthur Clabburn to Robert Roumieu

Sunny Hill
Thorpe
Norwich

Nov 5th / 71

Dear Mr Roumieu

I think I need hardly tell you that I am deeply attached to your daughter, and had my worldly position been better than it is, I should long since have asked your permission that a recognised engagement should exist between us, for I have the happiness of believing that Emilie returns my affection – but with so little to offer and feeling as I do about marriage in the Army, I should not now have the audacity to mention the matter to you, did not Emilie earnestly beg me to do so. And I feel she is right, that the present state of things places her in a very unsatisfactory position. I spoke to Emilie just before leaving England. I have no doubt it was wrong, but I was young, and had seen but little of life, and my feelings overpowered my prudence.

It then seemed to me that marriage under any circumstances was the supremacy of happiness. But I have since had more experience of military life, and from what I have seen and known I must tell you as I have told Emilie, that I will never marry while I hold my commission. You will wonder then why I write. I do so that our position may be recognised by you, and I write with the entire consent of both my father and mother, with whom your daughter is a great favourite. I have not at present anything more to look forward to than a military life; my father can add but little to my pay, but still I live in hope of something coming in my way which may enable me to give up the Army, and thus to attain my wishes. I can wait – but is it cruel to bind Emilie?

I am so deeply interested, that I am not a fair judge so I am told, so I place myself in your hands. I shall be anxiously expecting an answer. We all [] in kind regards to Mrs Roumieu and yourself, and love to Emilie.

I remain
Yours very sincerely
A.E. Clabburn
H.M. 75th Regt.

Letter CLA/16/3 Robert Roumieu to Arthur Claburn

My dear Sir

Nothing can be more like the feelings of dear honourable gentleman than those you express in your letter of the 5th inst. just received [joined?] with the window of looking you [] in the face.

It is now useless in [] [] [?]ing] to [] seeing the situation that you accept in respect of my daughter. [] it has given me great [] [] to say [] that a combination of circumstances should have placed you both in [] [] position [] the [] [] forced your probable [] holding [] [] [] [] [] of the [].

My experience of life both acquired and [] is distinctly opposed to any long prospective engagement in [clouds] & [] the prospects of both parties and [] [] frequently [] [] affections of [] [] into [] objection to be [] in the [] of either one or both parties such is [] a [] [] to the affections which every [] [] should seek to [] [] a []. [] which every prudent parent would make an effort to prevent.

A thoughtful [] affectionate father who has not neglected to [] the experiences of others [] [] [] []. I should [] [] [] in the shape of an engagement between you to gradually fall to the ground so that we may receive you [] as a friend and respect you as one who knowing what is right and wise has had the courage and good feeling to do []. [] the sacrifice of his feelings.

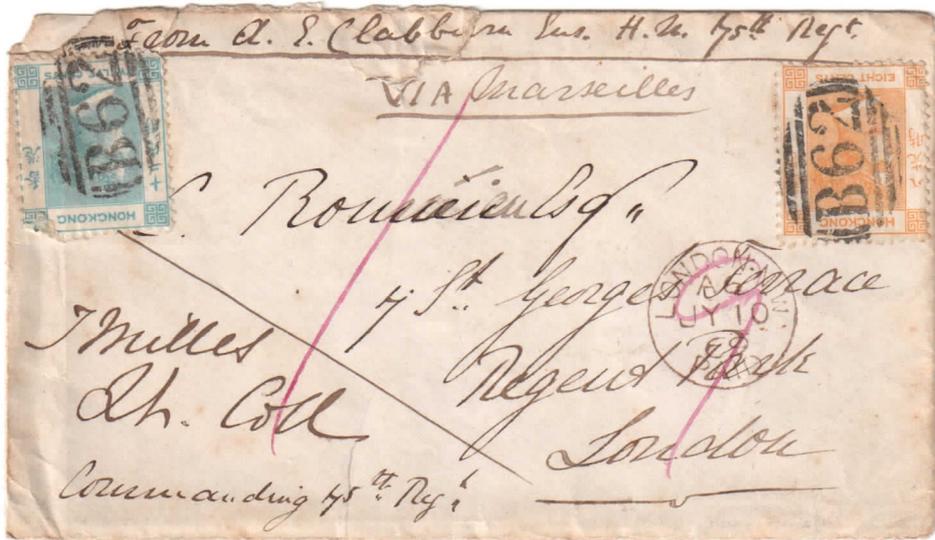
Better is to [] [] expectations of your [] [] [] which I [] [] though our [] friends [] it [] [] to [] you [] [] in life of [] your [] [] to people [] []. A [] [] will I hope [] [] [] [] I have above.

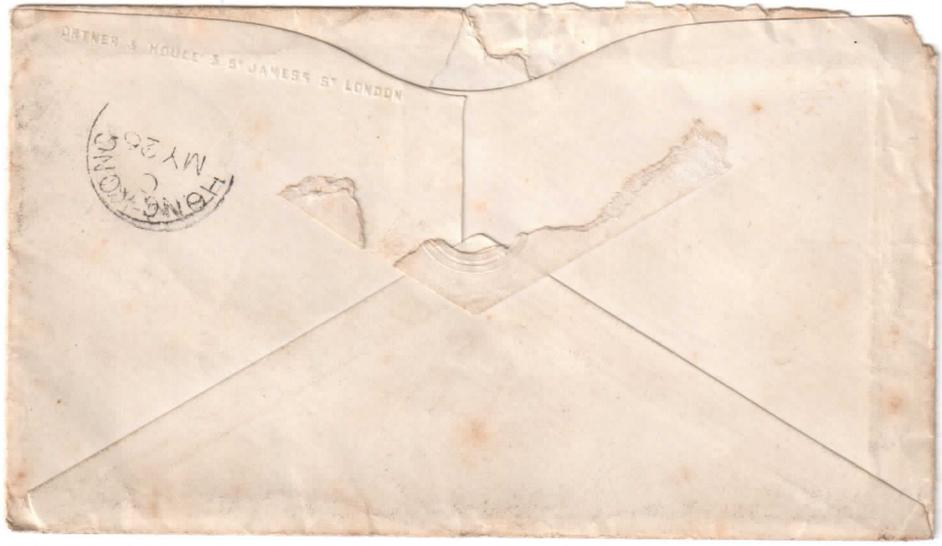
Sincerely yours very truly

R. L. R.

Nov 7th 1871

[Added in another hand – presumably that of Emilie Roumieu – completing the initials R.L.R.“oumieu (My Father)”, with a further indecipherable line below]





H. No. 45th Regt.

Hong Kong.



May 25/69.

Dear Mr. Nomin

I must write to
you in order to gain your
kind consent to a request
of mine that will no
doubt surprise you.

You must have noticed
my conduct and the
attention I paid to Miss
Nomin at Croner.

Although only having
had the pleasure of
seeing her for a short time



There has in latter
years, grown up a
deep attachment
between us; which
soon increased to love.
I never really confessed
my love until the
day I came to your
house, when we had
(Miss Norman & I) a long
talk on the subject,
which ended in us
giving each other, each

others' love.

I left England in a
manner that must
have surprised you,
but I gave the reasons
& excuse to Miss Rowland
in a letter, which I
hope you may see.

I pointed out my
steady prospects and
left it in her to decide
whether we should remain
on the same footing as ever,
and the same while giving
my own opinion & wish
on the matter.

Miss Rowley kindly consented
to remain in the same
position as when I left England,
and consented to write for
me.

You will see that we have
corresponded, and my

ambition wish & hope is
to gain your consent to
continue it.

Please excuse this abrupt
letter, hoping to hear from
you soon, with kind regards
to Miss Rowley

Remain

yours very truly
A. P. Laburne

Nov. 5th / 71.



Sunny Hill,

George, Vermont.

Dear Mr. Norman

I think I need
hardly tell you
that I am deeply
attached to your
daughter, and
had any worldly
position been better
than it is, I should
long since have

asked your permission
that a recognised
engagement should
exist between us, for
I have the happiness
of believing, that
I will receive your
affection - but with
so little to offer and
feeling as I do about

Marriage in the
Army, I should not
now have the audaci-
-ty to mention the
matter to you, did
not Emily earnestly
beg me to do so —
And I feel she is
right, that the
present state of
things places her
in a very unsatisfactory

position. I spoke to
Emilie just before
leaving England.
I have no doubt
it was wrong, but I
was young, and
had seen but little
of life, and my
feelings overpowered
my prudence.
It then seemed to

me that marriage
under any circum-
stances was the
supremacy of happi-
ness. But I have
since had more
experience of military
life, and from what
I have seen and
known. I must tell

you as I have told
Emilie, that I
will never marry
while I hold my
Commission.
You will wonder
then why I write.
I do so that our
position may be
recognised by you,

and I write with
the entire consent
of both my Father
and Mother, with
whom your daughter
is a great favorite.
I have not at present
anything more to
look forward to than
a military life;
my Father can add
but little to my pay,
but still I ~~live~~ ^{hope} in

of something coming
in any way which
may enable me to
give up the Army,
and thus to attain
my wishes. I can
wait - but is it worth
to bind Emilie?
I am so deeply
interested, that I am
not a fair judge
so I am told, so I
place myself in your
hands



Sony Hill.
Thorp, Dorset.

I shall be anxiously
expecting an answer
be all unite in
kind regards to Mrs
Norman and your-
self, and love to
Emilie

Remain

Yours very sincerely
A. S. Claburn

H. L. 75th Regt.

My dear Sir

Nothing can be more like the
feelings of an honorable man gentle
man than those you express in your
letter of the 3rd inst. just received joined
with the wisdom of looking your position
in the face I'd be now useless in my endeavor
to avoid seeing the situation
that you occupy in respect to my daughter
and it has given me great concern not to
say occasionally that a combination of cir-
cumstances should have placed you both
in an anomalous position rendered the
same embarrassing from your probable
features holding out no positive indica-
tions of change. My experience of life both
acquired and personal is distinctly opposed
to any long prospective engagements but clouds
& distracts the prospects of both parties and
what was frequently begun in affection
often degenerates into an obligation to be
met in the case of either one or both
parties and is a continuous restraint
to the affections which every wise person
would seek to avoid and a dangerous
condition which every prudent parent
would make an effort to prevent.

thoughtful and affectionate Parent
Father who has not neglected to gather
the references of others for his own use
I should wish every thing in the shape
of an engagement between you to gradually
fall to the ground so that we may receive
you simply as a friend and respect you
as one who knowing what is right & wise
has had the courage and good feeling to do it
even at the sacrifice of his feelings

Your letter is to assist our expectations
of your position joined with what I
naturally know through our mutual
friends renders it unnecessary to
reassure your prospects in life of which
you have taken to paper and imperfect
a view & which will I hope justify our
expecting what I have done

Remembering you very truly

Nov: 7th J. L. M. Brown
1871. (my father)

Ms. Lamb. A. 2. 101