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Jerry Rushford, *Pepperdine University*



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Edwin Markham and the Restoration Movement

JERRY RUSHFORD

Recently, I have been reading L. C. Sears' delightful autobiography entitled *What Is Your Life?* In recalling his graduation from the University of Kansas in 1921, Dr. Sears mentions that Edwin Markham, "The Dean of American Poets," was the commencement speaker on that occasion.

Edwin Markham (1852-1940), the author of "The Man With The Hoe," was called "the most talked-of literary man in America" by *The Saturday Evening Post* and "America's greatest poet" by *The New York Globe*. It was the opinion of *The San Francisco Chronicle* that "No other poem in the world ever attracted so much attention as Edwin Markham's 'The Man With The Hoe.'"

L. C. Sears was probably not aware of it as he sat listening to Markham's commencement address, but he and the great poet shared some common spiritual roots. Both men had been reared in religious homes that were affiliated with the Restoration Movement, and both men had graduated from Christian colleges that were spawned by this vigorous movement.

The parents of Edwin Markham, Samuel and Elizabeth, had been married in Michigan and lived for awhile in the town of White Pigeon near the Indiana state line. Elizabeth was a member of the Church of Christ in that community. Excited by John Fremont's vision of the great Northwest, several members of the Church of Christ decided to migrate westward in a caravan of covered wagons. *The Dictionary of American Biography* says: "The Markhams moved from Michigan to Oregon in 1847 with a company of Campbellites."

The Markhams settled in Oregon City, Oregon on the Willamette River, a few miles south of Portland. There they built a log cabin with a store attached on the front. Charles Edward Markham (he later took the name Edwin) was born in this log cabin on April 23, 1852. His parents were divorced soon after his birth, and "Charley" (as he was called throughout his youth) was raised by his mother.

Elizabeth Markham bought a wheat and sheep ranch in California's Lagoon Valley near Vacaville in 1856, and this was to be Charley's home for the next fourteen years. Many years later, Edwin Markham reflected back on these years:

From the time I was two years of age I had been an attendant on Sunday school and preaching. When I was herding mother's sheep on the Suisan Hills of California I had given a great deal of time to committing the Gospel pages to memory. As I walked the hills after the sheep I carried my little Bible in my hand. As I sat on great rocks watching

the day-star arise, and on through the sunny noons of California to the golden sunsets touched with the golden glory of God's handiwork, I read my Bible even as a ten-year-old boy.

My mind goes back to that ten-year period when I memorized most of the Gospels as I tended sheep like young David of old. I could repeat a hundred pages from memory as a child, pages of the Gospel of Jesus that I memorized while tending my mother's sheep. The Gospel of Jesus is the one thing that has had the most profound influence in my life.

The person who exerted the strongest spiritual influence on young Charley Markham was his mother. She was an active member of the Church of Christ in Vacaville, and she quickly introduced this way of life to her young son. As Markham later remembered:

She was a seeker after religious truth always and took me with her, even as a mere child, on these religious quests. She belonged to the Campbellite Church, known now as the Disciples. There was just enough controversy and clash of wits in that early church to satisfy her keen and vivid intelligence. In those days the Disciples specialized in Bible lore, and what was not known to them of immersion as the true form of baptism was not known to any group on earth.

I remember that now and then my mother would dress me and take me to what were called "revival meetings" or "protracted meetings," where all the celebrities of the church came, each of them dowered with immense beards and broad-bottomed physical bodies; preachers with voices like the seven thunders of Patmos; voices that could and did hurl thunderbolts of the fear of God into the most abject sinners.

In 1870, Elizabeth left the ranch and moved to San Jose to enable her son to attend the State Normal School. There Charley became friends with Dr. James Madison Case, a local physician who was an elder in the Church of Christ. It was also during his stay in San Jose that Charley obeyed the gospel. "I was immersed in a deep pool outside of the town somewhere," he later recalled.

One of the preachers who had a significant influence on Charley Markham's spiritual development was Alexander Johnston, the editor of *The Bible Expositor*. Markham said of him:

Among the great preachers of that church in those early days was Alexander Johnston, a tall, thin, wiry personality, with broad clifflike brows; long, skinny fingers like the talons of a vulture, and whenever he walked

across the floor of a church toward the pulpit he was the target of all eyes. He was a thoughtful man, crammed with Bible quotations and always ended his sermons with a terrific appeal to the terrors of the law.

Another observer wrote:

Johnston was a man of fine appearance well educated, and a fine preacher. In fact, along the lines of "first principles" he had few equals. He was a college-bred man, and at once took a leading place in the educational forces of the State among our people.

Johnston was making plans to launch a school in Santa Rosa in the fall of 1872 to be known as Christian College. Ever since Charley Markham's baptism, his mother had entertained thoughts of her son studying for the ministry, and now she urged him to enroll under Johnston's tutelage at Christian College.

Such was Alexander Johnston's rallying ability that he succeeded in gaining support for his enterprise. A splendid two-story frame building with all the necessary equipment was completed at a cost of twenty-five thousand dollars. On September 23, 1872, the doors of Christian College were opened to the public.

Charley Markham was a student at Christian College in the school years of 1872-73 and 1873-74. To make ends meet, he roomed in the bell tower with some other boys who did not have much money. He taught classes in grammar and mathematics in return for small stipends.

However, the two years of study at Christian College did not turn Charley toward the ministry. When he received his diploma in 1874, the twenty-two year old graduate went forth as a teacher. In future years, the young man who almost became a preacher in the Church of Christ went on to establish an international reputation as "the Dean of American poetry."

Markham's intimate involvement with the Restoration Movement came to an end with his graduation from Christian College, but he never outgrew the influence of the years he spent there. When he was eighty years old he told a friend about the church of his youth:

This church claimed to have no catechism and no creed. They claimed then that their only creed was the Bible; that any one could be received into the church who acknowledged Christ as Savior. I did that! He must also express a desire to live in conformity with Christ's teaching. I made that pledge and have tried to live up to it since that day.

Pepperdine University, Malibu, California 90265