

**Scott Myers-Lipton, 2021**  
**Edwin Markham, “The Man With the Hoe” and Tower Hall**



**Historical Background:**

Charles Edward Anson Markham, an 1872 graduate from the California State Normal School in San José, the predecessor of San José State University, wrote “The Man With the Hoe”, a poem that has been described as “the battle-cry of the next 1,000 years”. After Markham’s graduation, he lived in a small house at 432 South 8<sup>th</sup> Street, just off campus, and it was there that he penned “The Man With the Hoe” (see below). The poem was inspired by Jean-François Millet’s painting “L’homme à la houe”, and it has been described as one of the most successful poems of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, earning Markham over \$250,000.<sup>1</sup>

Over the years, Markham stayed connected to the campus. In 1904, Markham wrote a poem for the student publication, “The Normal Pennant”, and in 1915, he returned to San José to give a lecture to over 400 people. At that lecture, President Morris Daily described Markham as “the most distinguished graduate” of the school. In 1928, Markham served as a judge to a student poetry contest, and in 1932, the campus celebrated his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday by hosting an assembly.



**Event:**

Today, Edwin Markham is recognized with a plaque on the left corner of the first and oldest building at San José State University (i.e., where the people are gathered in the above photo).

However, the poem on the plaque is another Markham poem entitled “Outwitted”, which focuses on the less controversial themes of forgiveness, love, and inclusion.<sup>2</sup>

**“The Man With the Hoe”:**

Bowed by the weight of centuries he leans  
Upon his hoe and gazes on the ground,  
The emptiness of ages in his face,  
And on his back the burden of the world.

Who made him dead to rapture and despair,  
A thing that grieves not and that never hopes,  
Stolid and stunned, a brother to the ox?  
Who loosened and let down this brutal jaw?  
Whose was the hand that slanted back this brow?  
Whose breath blew out the light within this brain?

Is this the Thing the Lord God made and gave  
To have dominion over sea and land;  
To trace the stars and search the heavens for power;  
To feel the passion of Eternity?  
Is this the Dream He dreamed who shaped the suns  
And marked their ways upon the ancient deep?  
Down all the stretch of Hell to its last gulf  
There is no shape more terrible than this—  
More tongued with censure of the world’s blind greed—  
More filled with signs and portents for the soul—  
More fraught with danger to the universe.  
What gulfs between him and the seraphim!  
Slave of the wheel of labor, what to him  
Are Plato and the swing of Pleiades?  
What the long reaches of the peaks of song,  
The rift of dawn, the reddening of the rose?  
Through this dread shape the suffering ages look;  
Time’s tragedy is in that aching stoop;  
Through this dread shape humanity betrayed,  
Plundered, profaned and disinherited,  
Cries protest to the Judges of the World,  
A protest that is also prophecy.

O masters, lords and rulers in all lands,  
is this the handiwork you give to God,  
This monstrous thing distorted and soul-quenched?  
How will you ever straighten up this shape;

Touch it again with immortality;  
Give back the upward looking and the light;  
Rebuild in it the music and the dream;  
Make right the immemorial infamies,  
Perfidious wrongs, immedicable woes?

O masters, lords and rulers in all lands,  
How will the Future reckon with this Man?  
How answer his brute question in that hour  
When whirlwinds of rebellion shake the world?  
How will it be with kingdoms and with kings—  
With those who shaped him to the thing he is—  
When this dumb Terror shall reply to God  
After the silence of the centuries?<sup>3</sup>

## FOOTNOTES

### Chapter 1

<sup>1</sup> Annette Nelson, “Edwin Markham, Famous Poet, 1872 Graduate of the California State Normal School,” *SJSU’s Legacy of Poetry*, [www.sjsu.edu/people/annette.nellen/website/markham.htm](http://www.sjsu.edu/people/annette.nellen/website/markham.htm) (accessed September 2, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Nelson, “Edwin Markham, Famous Poet, 1872 Graduate of the California State Normal School.”

<sup>3</sup> Edwin Markham, “The Man With The Hoe,” *Poets.org*, <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/man-hoe> (accessed September 2, 2017).