

The Record of the Royal Geographical Society 1830-1930

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London: Royal Geographical Society

1930

CHAPTER VII

MARKHAM'S MASTERY

1893-1905

THE years which marked the turn of the century were momentous in the history of the Society as in that of the world. Methods of transport depending on the combustion of coal and the use of steam were supreme by sea and land, while as yet oil fuel and internal combustion engines were only in an early experimental stage, and electricity derived from water-power was just coming into use on short railways or for lighting towns in the neighbourhood of great Falls such as Niagara. The submarine cable, that crowning garland of Victorian civilization, was hardly challenged by wireless telegraphy, although there was a dawning hope that that invention might some day solve the last problem of longitude by radiating true Greenwich time around the globe. There was a hint of future possibilities also in the attempts of aviators to find a perilous new path for the traveller above the barriers of land and sea.

The general use of solid rubber tires had at last brought smooth perfection to the hansom cab, that ubiquitous gondola of London, which was gliding all unsuspected straight to its long home in a museum. Pneumatic tires and the chaingearred safety bicycle wrought a revolution in those years which set every one on wheels, and for a time the pedal cycle was the fastest machine on the road, passing all else and passed by none. London traffic began to be a problem expressed in frequent jams of vehicles, with restive horses and indignant drivers. The Augean task of cleansing the London streets kept a swarm of boys darting with dustpan and brush amongst the horses' feet, and crossing-sweepers still lingered at a few points in the West End clearing a narrow path through the slimy mud which oozed thick in wet weather, or through the no less filthy dust of dry days. Amidst the endless procession of omnibuses in Regent Street in 1893 those of the Metropolitan Railway Company towered pre-eminent with a red umbrella fixed over the driver's head, and three horses harnessed troika-fashion symbolizing the triple accommodation segregating first, second, and third class passengers. Once an order of the Police brought a season of almost Sunday freedom to

the wayfarer in the West End by stopping the “ crawling” of empty hansoms looking for a fare. Soon thereafter strange “horseless carriages” began to appear to the terror of horses and the despair of those responsible for regulating traffic. There was talk of prohibiting citymen from attempting to reach their offices in the noisy, smelly contraptions which were continually breaking down and causing traffic blocks. A wise man wrote to *The Times* to prove that the internal combustion engine could never be applied to omnibuses, for it was impossible to raise power enough to start a heavy vehicle on an incline. The impossible was accomplished in a short time, and the curious reaction began by which the roads promised to resume something of their importance in pre-railway days, though clouds of poisonous dust precluded all hope of high speed upon them. Tube railways were introduced, their clean electrical traction contrasting with the old Underground and its sulphury smoke.

The formality of dress and manners had come to its height as the nineteenth century drew near its close. Few gentlemen ventured to appear at any afternoon function save in a frockcoat and silk hat; but at the dawn of the twentieth century an under-current of rebellion began to set against the tide of convention and the sudden currency of the adjective *fin-de-siecle* betokened an awakening to the imminence of changes in mental attitude as well as in external conditions.

The Jameson Raid and the South African War were generally viewed as troublesome incidents, few recognized in them the forerunners of the more tragic developments that were maturing in the womb of time.

Against this background of seething events and tendencies the domestic history of the Royal Geographical Society shows in its proper setting. Changes in the highest places came in ¹⁸94 when the Duke of Edinburgh ceased to be a British subject on becoming reigning Duke of Saxe Coburg-Gotha, and was succeeded as Honorary President by the Duke of York (now King George V). The death of the great Queen in 1901 closed the Victorian Era in Geography as in much else. King Edward VII, who had always taken a strong personal interest in the Society, accepted the position of Patron, and continued the annual grant for the provision of two Royal Medals. He enforced the condition that no award of these medals should be made public until he had personally given his approval to the choice of the Council. The Duke of York became Vice-Patron and the position of Honorary President fell into abeyance.

On the withdrawal of Sir Mountstuart Grant Duff the first thought of the Council was that he should be succeeded as president by a public man of high rank and administrative ability not swayed by the new *fin-de-siecle*

ideas. The Earl of Northbrook, whose previous tenure of the office, although short, had been highly successful, was first approached. On his refusal, the Secretaries acting under the instructions of the Council applied to two other eminent personalities with a like result. It had been suggested that the quarrel over the admission of ladies might be most speedily forgotten if a geographer of world-wide reputation were appointed. Clements Markham was the next on the Council's list, and the obvious choice. He was absent in Sicily at the moment but his acceptance came quickly in a joyous telegram.

If the Society had been in the position of a daughter to Sir Roderick Murchison, it might be personified as a twin sister of Clements Markham; they were born in the same year, and grew up together on terms of the utmost confidence and affection. Markham had been a Fellow since 1854 when the rooms were still in Waterloo Place, and a member of Council continuously since 1862 throughout most of the occupancy of 15 Whitehall Place, and he continued on the Council until 1912, serving for fifty years, during all the Savile Row days. As Honorary Secretary for twenty-five years he had made himself the chief power in the Society after Murchison's death. In Mr. Freshfield's words: "he lived amongst two generations of men and ruled among the third." He was by nature strongly drawn to the traditions of the past, and required time and tactful persuasion to turn his mind to new ideas. Although ready to accept scientific facts he was never able to adjust his mind to scientific modes of thought. Consequently he was disturbed and alarmed by the reforming tendencies of Galton and Strachey, nor was he in sympathy with the views of Freshfield on geographical education. He thought that men actuated by such motives were doctrinaires, and when he used the word "Doctrinaire" Markham threw into it the full force of its dictionary meaning, "pedantic theorist, person who applies principles without allowance for circumstances." As he held strongly that a member of Council, and especially a Secretary, should always support the President with his whole heart, he could not remain in office during the presidency of Strachey and his successor.

Markham had retired from his official post at the India Office and, although retaining his seat on our Council, he preferred not to attend its meetings regularly, but utilized his freedom in travelling for health and pleasure. His pleasure lay in historical research amongst the libraries of Italy, Portugal, and Spain, and in cruises with the Training Squadron of which his cousin, Admiral A. H. Markham, was then in command. Thus he took no personal part in the tragi-comedy of the Lady-Fellows, though he was in full sympathy with the action of the dissentient Fellows and was glad that no more women were to be elected. There were no public utterances of

his to identify him with the controversy, and he was very willing to keep aloof from it save as a peacemaker.

Markham entered on his Presidency in his sixty-fourth year, but he was as fresh and eager as a boy following his favourite sport. The Polar Regions and South America always remained for him the most fascinating parts of the Earth; but his service in the India Office and the adventure of the Abyssinian Expedition brought Asia and Africa into a nearly equal place in his regard. The history of exploration was also very dear to him, and although this enthusiasm found its main outlet in his simultaneous secretaryship or presidency of the Hakluyt Society it kept constantly breaking through in his conduct of the Geographical Society. His love for Westminster School and its boys (more than once recognized in the Prologues to the annual Latin Plays) remained second only to his regard for the Navy and its midshipmen, and for the cadets of the nautical colleges for training officers of the mercantile marine. He entertained schoolboys and cadets at his house, 21 Eccleston Square, with the same lavish hospitality which he showed to distinguished diplomatists, explorers, and eminent foreign geographers. He often deplored his imperfect education, the result of the early sea-service required by the Navy in his young days; but he had an amazing power of absorbing knowledge. At times he may have failed in the exercise of a critical faculty, and his judgment was often swayed by his strong likes and dislikes; but a remarkable feature of his character was his almost complete control of temper, so that he could carry on a controversy in which he believed his opponent to be hopelessly, even dangerously wrong, with perfect courtesy and good nature.

Markham saw clearly that to be successful and efficient the Council must be representative of all interests in the Society, including not only members acquainted with particular regions of the Earth and with definite departments of Geography, but also administrators, statesmen, and men of affairs. He wished to include a fair proportion of young men, for he loved the spirit of youth, and he lamented the fact that few young men of capacity could find time to attend the Council meetings. Above all, he desired to lead the Council wisely, and to receive the fullest support from it in all his undertakings. He even tolerated a few “doctrinaires,” as they were useful as “objectors-general” whose opposition suggested amendments in the details of his schemes for the orderly progress of the Society. Markham studied his distinguished councillors with the attention that a college tutor bestows on his undergraduates. He had done the same with his masters at Westminster as a boy, and with his superior officers as a midshipman, making notes of their parentage and genealogy, their armorial bearings if any, their previous

careers, their personal appearance, their idiosyncrasies of character and behaviour, above all, in the case of councillors, their regularity in attending and the value of their suggestions or objections. In this way, when the annual list of the new Council was being prepared, he was ready to advise the retention or favour the removal of old members. Markham's Council was no haphazard crowd, but a carefully chosen team, the harmonious and effective working of which was the most earnest ambition of his life. Amongst those whose advice he was always ready to consider, and often to accept, were Mr. S. W. Silver, Sir Rawson Rawson, and Mr. G. S. Mackenzie on matters of finance, Sir George Robertson, Mr. Howard Saunders, Colonel G. E. Church, and Mr. E. G. Ravenstein on questions of exploration, and, on all matters, Sir George Goldie, Major Darwin, and Sir Thomas Holdich.

As a chairman at the evening meetings Sir Clements Markham (he received the K.C.B. in 1896) shone resplendent. His speeches were short, but they were instinct with the enthusiasms of a singularly ardent nature. As he spoke he seemed the embodiment of the romance of Geography; his bosom swelled, and his shirt front billowed out like the topsail of a frigate, and as his voice rose in praise of "our glorious associates" he often roused a rapturous response from his audience. It is doubtful if Sir Roderick (whose snuff-box was still placed ceremoniously in front of the President) had ever been happier or the cause of more elation in his hearers than Markham at his best. . . .