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THE BOYS FROM OZ: MARK COLLIS



Mark Collis

by

Harold E Hayward

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The Need for Trained Ministers

As Churches of Christ gradually spread across Australia in the late nineteenth century, there developed an urgent need for trained ministers. Initially, ministers came from England from whence some members had migrated but when the supply of ministers from that source dried up a request was made for assistance from the United States.

One of the first of the American trained evangelists to come to Australia was British born Henry S. Earl. Earl was educated at Bethany College during the presidency of Alexander Campbell. He arrived in Melbourne in 1864 following a short ministry in England. He was enormously successful as a missionary – his arrival marked the beginning of a stronger evangelistic emphasis among the churches scattered across the colonies. He later spent time in Adelaide where he was equally successful. Ironically, the success and growth in churches encouraged the need for more trained ministers. Efforts were made in some churches to improve biblical literacy and speaking skills through “mutual improvement societies”, Adelpian training classes and the like. Some graduates from these classes went on to more formal ministry training.

Thomas Jefferson Gore arrived in Adelaide in 1867 along with Green L. Surber. Both Gore and Surber were trained at Kentucky University, Lexington. Surber stayed in Melbourne but Gore moved to Adelaide. Earl and Gore recognised the need for a more biblically literate communion. Gore established the Adelaide Bible Students’ Training Class. Earl was commissioned to visit the United States to raise funds for the establishment of a Bible College along the lines of the College of the Bible in Lexington, Kentucky. Accompanied by A.T. Magarey, Earl left Australia in January 1870 and returned ten months later. They only had limited success in attracting funds. Despite attempts over the years to maintain momentum, the Adelaide Bible College project eventually lapsed. Lack of communication across the colonies (there were no Conferences) and rivalry between Adelaide and Melbourne regarding a location for a College impeded progress.

Collis – Early Background

Mark Collis came under the influence of Gore who encouraged him to “try to preach”. It’s likely that Collis was a student in Gore’s Bible Students’ Training Class. Among Collis’s acquaintances was Eliza Davies, then at Hindmarsh, who knew Alexander Campbell well and was a personal friend of John W. McGarvey who trained under Alexander Campbell. The friendship with Davies continued up to her death in 1888.

Collis was born in London, England, on 21 September 1851. When he was three years old his family migrated to South Australia. At 16 years of age he left school and became a grocer’s

clerk. As a young man he attended a Baptist church but did not join because of what he later called “their peculiar doctrine of salvation”. Collis struggled with the contemporary Baptist idea that one had to show evidence of a Holy Spirit “experience” to be assured of salvation. Later, he was deeply influenced by the preaching of Earl and was baptised by him at the Grote Street, Adelaide, church. The influence of that congregation never left him. He began preaching part-time at a small church not far from Adelaide. Because of demonstrable talent, he was urged to make preaching his life’s work. Despite the reservations of his parents, Collis decided to do just that.

Full-time Ministry Training

Given his association with Gore and Davies, it is not surprising that Collis decided to study at the College of the Bible (Kentucky University) under the tutorship of McGarvey. In the company of Mr. and Mrs. Gore and Eliza Davies, he left Adelaide on 21 April 1874 to travel to Kentucky via California. The party had stopovers in Melbourne and Sydney where Gore and Collis had opportunity to visit churches and preach. His preaching in these centres was well received. An item in the “Australian Christian Advocate”, in May 1874, notes that Collis preached to a large and attentive audience in the Temperance Hall, North Fitzroy, and that “as a speaker the preacher evidenced not inconsiderable amount of native talent which, developed by training, should render him a useful and successful advocate of the gospel in its simplicity and primitive order”. There was little alternative for Australians wishing to undertake training for ministry but to travel overseas.

Collis was the third Australian to seek ministry training in the United States. Between 1867 and 1905 over ninety young Australians made that pilgrimage. Of these about seventy went to the College of the Bible at Lexington (which emerged from Kentucky University) where the main drawing power was McGarvey. Many of these young men stayed in the United States – some married, others had opened up for them fruitful ministry careers there. These statistics underlie the growing urgency to establish a national theological college in Australia. Needless to say the educational model which evolved in Australia was that of a Bible college. Unsurprisingly, McGarvey’s material was widely used at the College of the Bible¹ which was established in Melbourne in 1907.

Upon arrival at Lexington, Collis learned that due some upheaval McGarvey was no longer teaching at Kentucky University. His first thought was to return to Australia. However, he was persuaded to stay one year and study under Robert Milligan, president of the university. A subsequent reorganisation within the University brought McGarvey back to a newly formed College of the Bible – one of three Colleges within the university.² So Collis stayed on. He bonded strongly with McGarvey whom he described as “the most uniformly good preacher I have ever heard”.³

Early Ministries



Mark Collis 1900

During his time at the re-formed College of the Bible, Collis had several student ministries. After some seven years of study he graduated with honours both from Kentucky University and the College of the Bible. It had been his intention to return to Australia but in 1881 he married a young lady from Kentucky, Mary Cassel Gibney, and stayed. Following graduation, he entered upon a full-time ministry at Midway Church of Christ. This appointment brought him into contact with the Kentucky Female Orphan School, getting to know many of the girls and baptising them. It was at the Female Orphan School that Eliza Davies served her apprenticeship as Assistant Matron and learned the practical and educational skills that stood her in good stead in Australia. The Orphan School remained close to Davies' heart and it was to the pupils of the School to whom her book ("Story of an Earnest Life") was dedicated. It is difficult

not to see Davies' influence in Collis's decision to accept the appointment to Midway. Collis was the executor of Eliza Davies's estate, which made substantial bequests to the Female Orphan School, the Ladies Auxiliaries' of the Broadway Christian Church (where Collis later ministered) and the College of the Bible – all interests close to Collis's heart.

Collis visited Australia in 1884 and on his return to Kentucky was invited to accept appointment as professor of English at Kentucky University. As he felt his call was to preach, he was reluctant to accept but was eventually persuaded, occupying the position for six years. He retained his connection with the Female Orphan School and was elected to its Board in 1885. He served as its chairman for more than 40 years.

Call to Broadway Church, Lexington

In 1892, he accepted a call to the historic Broadway Church in Lexington. He was very effective in that role and ministered there until 1930. Many were added to the church and it became one of the largest Disciple/Christian churches in the USA. But notwithstanding these gains, there were some difficult times for both the communion and the local church. Three issues dominated: the use of instrumental music in public worship; the role of missionary societies and the inroads of higher criticism.

The music issue had simmered at Broadway for many years and was of immediate concern to Collis. McGarvey, now President of the College, was strongly opposed to the use of music in public worship. He had served in ministry at Broadway in the 1870's, still preached there occasionally and continued as an elder. But the organ had been introduced into other Disciple churches and had been in use for some forty years at the Midway church, where

Collis had previously ministered. Largely out of respect for McGarvey, the issue had not been considered at a congregational meeting.

On 9 November 1902, a resolution by the church to further postpone consideration of the matter was lost. McGarvey foresaw the inevitable and sought letters of transfer to another church for himself and his wife. This separation from his former mentor was a painful experience for Collis but their friendship survived the McGarvey separation, and he continued to consult with McGarvey on matters concerning the church's welfare. A vote on the issue was held on 23 November 1902. While the votes were being counted, Collis warned members that having participated in the vote, the minority were obliged to accept the majority decision. A substantial majority voted to use instrumental music and all but eight "no" voters accepted the verdict.

Use of Instrumental Music in Worship

Some saw McGarvey as uncharacteristically weak on the music issue.⁴ His argument was primarily based on the silence of the New Testament on the matter. He had consented to the use of instrumental music in Sunday School Departments and had no difficulty in worshipping with congregations that did use it. He even returned to Broadway from time to time to preach. The use of instruments in public worship was for him a matter of personal conscience, but he was not prepared to deny their use to others.

William Charles Morro, a former student of McGarvey's, records an illuminating anecdote about him:

McGarvey had a zest for life and he carried this enthusiasm into his home. He loved singing; he loved to play the flute; he loved to join with his family in producing music either vocal or instrumental. Mark Collis tells that, when McGarvey was far advanced in years, after he had withdrawn from the Broadway church Collis stopped at his home one Sunday night on his way to church to consult him on some matter and found the family gathered around the piano, which his daughter was playing. He himself was playing the flute and his grandchildren were playing other instruments. They had formed a family orchestra and in the language of the Psalmist were making a "joyful noise unto the Lord". To the use of instruments by individuals, families or similar groups, McGarvey was not opposed. His objection ... was solely to their use in the worship of the church.⁵

The wider issues that began to plague the communion were of less immediate concern to the Broadway church. The introduction of Missionary Societies was supported by Alexander Campbell and McGarvey was comfortable with that position, but it did not sit well with fierce advocates of local church autonomy and came to be associated with "liberalism" and "open membership". The mission issue was resolved in Australia by the evolution of Conference structures (based on the British model) which gave local churches representative participation on the Committees that oversaw missionary and other joint activity.



J.W. McGarvey - President of the College of the Bible, Lexington

Higher Criticism and Liberalism

Liberalism or modernism came more with the employment of professors who had been educated at universities like Yale and Harvard. The conservatism of men like McGarvey and Grubbs was based on a hermeneutic that saw the Bible as the inspired Word of God. Liberalism views the Bible as a collection of documents that can be subjected to the same philological and historical criticisms as other literature. It results in a weakened soteriology, with the advocacy of social justice rather than proclamation of the gospel.

The College of the Bible was criticized for not having had a very large theological library. McGarvey relied largely for his research (which included a visit to Palestine) on his own books and a shrewd ability as a biblical exegete. His exegetical approach was based on treating the whole Bible as “salvation history,” culminating in the events described in the New Testament, and explaining scripture by other scripture. It had been said of him that “McGarvey did not teach about the Bible, he taught the Bible”. He saw scripture itself was the only commentary one needed.

It was along the lines of these three issues: instrumental music, mission societies and modernism that the Restoration Movement in America began to fracture into the divisions that still plague it. But McGarvey did not live long enough to see the worst of this fracturing. He died in October 1911. Much could be said of McGarvey but it suffices to say it was he who imparted the zeal and the skills of some the early evangelists of Churches of Christ in Australia such as Walden, Bagley and Dickson.



Australian Evangelists D.A. Ewers, G.T. Walden, T.G. A. Bagley and P.A. Dickson c.1900.
Walden, Bagley and Dickson all studied under McGarvey.

New Building at Broadway

Collis was not unaffected by the wider issues but he never lost his focus on local church agendas. With many additions to membership the Broadway chapel was proving inadequate. This had been a cause of concern to Collis for some time. One Sunday, in February 1916, he spoke of the inadequacy of the building in his sermon. Later that day, while he was eating his dinner, a telephone call came through with the message that the church was on fire. According to a tradition, Collis leisurely ate his meal before wandering down to see what all the fuss was about.



Current Broadway Christian Church 2016

Notwithstanding the concerns of some elders, a new chapel was erected and opened. On its opening, a local paper noted its dedication and added:

This comment [about the dedication] would be far from complete if it did not recognise the service of the beloved pastor of the church, who has laboured without thought of himself. He has seen the congregation under his leadership become one of the largest in the state and has largely by his devotion to duty made it possible for the building just dedicated to have been planned and erected during a period beset with many difficulties.⁶

That chapel with its magnificent Greek portico still serves the Broadway congregation today.

Later Ministry

Collis continued in ministry until 1930 when at age 78 years he retired. During the years of his ministry at Broadway it is estimated that 6,328 members were added to the church. A grateful church agreed to pay his salary for the remainder of his life – there being no pension scheme for retired ministers in those days. He died in 1955 at the age of 103. But for much of his time in retirement he continued to give, returning half his salary to the church, visiting the sick and helping to raise funds to pay off the debt on the chapel he had built. Because of failing hearing and eyesight he spent the last nine years of his life in the Good Samaritan Hospital (formerly The Protestant Hospital) which he had named many years before. But he retained his marriage licence and sense of humour almost to the end. Robert Shannon notes:

When he was 100 years of age he performed his last wedding. His nurse was planning to get married and asked Collis if he could perform the ceremony from his hospital bed. He replied that he would. Then he thought about one of his sons in a nearby city who had not been as attentive as he thought he should have been. So he sent him a short letter. It only said that on a certain day he was going to marry his nurse! That got his son's attention.⁷

Collis somehow managed to combine an effective local ministry with a significant involvement in the wider communion and in the community. From 1897 until 1909 he spent much time fund raising for the Female Orphan School. He secured a number of large bequests. He continued to serve the interests of the School as a Trustee and finally as the Chair of Trustees. Giovannoli writing of his contribution says:

His devotion to the interest of the school and to the welfare of the girls committed, to its care has been one of the outstanding and dominant characteristics of his extremely busy life. In times of trouble and discouragement his faith and wise counsel were bulwarks of strength to all.

For twenty-five years he was a member of the board of curators of Kentucky University. For the same period, he was trustee of Hamilton College and the College of the Bible, serving for many years as its board chairman. He only resigned from the board of the College in 1918 when the College "took a sharp turn left". He sought unsuccessfully to deal with that problem by appointing a committee to consider the issues. However, when the matter could not be resolved, he resigned to devote his attention to other Restoration Movement related pursuits. He was a member of the Clarke Fund (which became the Christian Restoration Association) and played a part in the founding of the Cincinnati Bible Seminary.⁸

Evaluation

Throughout his life Collis managed to successfully balance his commitments to his local church with service to the wider communion and the community. He was gracious and kind to members of other faith communities but never lost his devotion to New Testament Christianity. For him “the truth should be spoken in love. The pulpit is not the place to display war paint.”⁹ Looking back over his own life in 1943, Collis commented:

I tried to be true to the vows I took when I was set apart to the ministry.... I preached that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation and that there is no other way by which we can be saved. I preached that the church in its organisation and worship follow the example of the church described in the New Testament. In all my preaching I desired to please God. If it pleased men, I was gratified. But the pleasing of men was not my chief concern.¹⁰

Apostolic succession is understood by some as being conveyed by the “laying on of hands”. But apostolic succession might be better considered as the passing on of “the faith once for all delivered to the saints”. Behind the ministry of Collis stands the shadow of McGarvey; further back are the shadows of Gore and Earl who baptised him in the old Grote Street, Adelaide church. Collis lies in the historic Lexington Cemetery, almost literally in the shadow of McGarvey’s gravestone.



Harold E Hayward
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For background information regarding Eliza Davies please see Occasional Paper No. 14 "Dedicated to her Pupils: An Appraisal of the Life and Work of Eliza Davies".

Endnotes

¹ Now Stirling College.

² The College of the Bible operated under the charter of Kentucky University until 1878. A reconstituted College of the Bible was established in 1877 and operated under its own charter from 1878.

³ Giovannoli, H "Kentucky Female Orphan School: A History", Midway, Kentucky 1930 Ch. XVI.

⁴ Ficklin, H.S, "McGarvey, and the Course of Digression at Lexington, Kentucky", *The Gospel Guardian*, 1959, Parts I-III.

⁵ Morro, W.C. *Brother McGarvey*, Bethany Press, 1940 pp 43-4.

⁶ Quoted in Shannon, R.C. "An Australian in the Land Up Over," *Christian Standard* July 30, 2000, 14.

⁷ Shannon, 14.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Quoted in Shannon, 14.