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Reporting the Death of Charles Kingsley: The Early Biographical Reaction in Newspapers and Magazines *

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Charles Kingsley was a man eminently worthy
of a biography.

Melbourne Leader 1877

The Victorian clergyman and author Charles Kingsley died on 23 January 1875. His biography, the typical massive Victorian ‘life and letters’, rendering a public tribute to the deceased, was published within two years by his widow (Kingsley 1877). Of course, like so many Victorian biographies written by members of the family or friends, it was inevitably subjective. Still, the fact that Mrs Kingsley’s account of her late husband sold well and went through numerous editions indicates the lasting interest in the man. The numerous reprints of Kingsley’s works by Macmillan too, including the 28 volumes of the uniform *Works* (1879-1885), testify to the impressive popularity of his writings during the three decades following his death. Sixty years passed before a new biography appeared (Thorp 1937), and as new material continued to surface, another five were published between 1948 and 2006, providing more complete assessments of Kingsley’s life and works and reflecting the continuing academic interest in the figure of Kingsley (Pope-Hennessy 1948; Martin 1959; Chitty 1974; Colloms 1975; Klaver 2006).

Jonathan Conlin captures the essence of Kingsley for readers and scholars today in his online article for *Oxford Bibliographies*: “Novelist, Christian

* This article was invited by the Editorial Board and the Editor-in-Chief.

Socialist and Church of England priest, Charles Kingsley's prolific literary output, sanitary crusades and 'Muscular Christianity' seem to epitomise the bustling Victorian man of faith and letters. Kingsley packed a lot of activity into a relatively short life (1819-1875), including a good deal of controversy (most famously with John Henry Newman) and anguished struggles with himself. A strong rather than subtle mind, Kingsley saw intellectual activity as a pendant to physical activity". Only two of Kingsley's published works are mentioned in Conlin's introduction: *Westward Ho!* and *The Water-Babies*. Few critics today would question this twenty-first-century assessment. But what were the immediate reactions in the weeks following Kingsley's death? What did his contemporaries think of a man who during his life had seemed a most controversial public figure? To these historical opinions biographers and critics have paid little or no attention.

1. NINETEENTH-CENTURY BIOGRAPHY AND THE OBITUARY

With the increasing availability of digital newspaper archives, unprecedented insight into the public estimate of the achievements of notable figures can be gained. Much interesting information on the reactions to a person's death, for example, can thus be gleaned from local, national and overseas papers. The death notices and obituaries reveal what contemporaries thought were the important basic facts in a person's life and which achievements would have a lasting influence on future generations. Although obituaries often contain unique, instantaneous reactions, in form and purpose they have much in common with the articles in biographical dictionaries, and often are the precursors, and indeed the sources, of the entries in the *Dictionary of National Biography* (1885-1900).

Nineteenth-century biographical writing followed a series of formal dictates. The raw materials for such writing were singled out by James Field Stanfield, a pioneer in the field of biographical criticism: "Country, sex, temperament, condition, associates, and pursuits, considered generally, with habits, opinions, principles, and tendencies, effected by them through the different stages of life" (Stanfield 1813, 86). He further outlined the "true and practical materials of biography" in an elaborate table which reads like the contents page of any Victorian biography and which can be summarized as follows: (1) Parents – rank in life – time of birth; (2) Infancy – sickness and

health – early natural disposition; (3) Childhood – siblings – companions – sports; (4) Adolescence – schools – tutors – books – amusements; (5) Youth – studies – dress – habits – friends – marriage; (6) Manhood – connections – travels – opinions – public distinction – profession – works; (7) Age – public reputation – family – friends – death – funeral (Stanfield 1813, 159-61).

As a discipline biography was often compared to history. It was a common notion that “History has been considered as ‘Philosophy teaching *by example*’; and Biography, although it affects less dignity, and aspires to less distinction, may fairly lay claim to a similar definition” (*The Annual Necrology* 1800, iii; emphasis mine). Stanfield too sustained a utilitarian principle of life writing. He underscored that the genre “may assist in developing the principles of man’s active and moral nature [...] the object being truth, and the end instruction”, that “[t]he two great ends of biography are – to obtain a deeper insight into the principles of the human mind, and to offer examples to practical observation and improvement” (Stanfield 1813, 85, 145). The moral example was not limited to the full-blown ‘life and letters’, but fully applied to the concise biographical entry in a dictionary as well. This clearly emerges from the preface to the 85 volumes of the French *Biographie universelle ancienne et moderne* (1811-1862), which was in many ways the forerunner of English biographical writing in dictionaries and obituaries during the latter half of the nineteenth century. It stated that “biography offers profitable examples to men of all conditions, and provides moralists with the material for their deepest meditations [la biographie offre des exemples profitables aux homes de toutes les conditions, et fournit aux moralistes la matière de leurs méditations les plus profondes]” (*Biographie universelle* 1811, vi), and the second edition reiterated that without a didactic purpose “biography is nothing more than a tag without feeling and without a soul; a dry compilation devoid of moral sanction and philosophical authority [la biographie n’est plus qu’une nomenclature sans mouvement et sans âme; qu’une sèche compilation dénuée de sanction morale et d’autorité philosophique]” (*Biographie universelle* 1843, v-vi).

Victorian readers expected an extended obituary to follow, in varying degrees of detail, the basic biographical materials as outlined by Stanfield, and at the same time reflect in its subject a moral instance for society.

2. THE REACTIONS DURING THE WEEK FOLLOWING KINGSLEY'S DEATH

Mrs Kingsley writes that her husband fell ill with pneumonia on 28 December 1874 (Kingsley 1877, ii.456). He died little over a month later on 23 January 1875 at the age of 55. During the last days of his illness Charles Kingsley's condition was closely followed by the press as medical reports were regularly sent by telegraph from Eversley to various correspondents. *The London Times* alone reported on Kingsley's health on 9, 11, 18, and 21 January. When he died at midday on Saturday 23 January, the news was telegraphed to citizens all over the English-speaking world. Numerous newspapers in Britain, the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand placed obituaries within a week after his decease, many others within the second week. No papers being published on Sunday, leading British papers such as *The Times*, *The London Evening Standard*, *The Morning Post*, *The Pall Mall Gazette*, and *The Edinburgh Evening News* managed to publish full obituaries in the first possible issue on Monday 25 January.

These first obituaries gave general information about Kingsley's life. They all mentioned, neatly following Stanfield's decalogue, such biographical facts as his place of birth Holne in Devon, his schooling under Derwent Coleridge (the poet's son), his time at King's College in London and his studies at Magdalen, Cambridge. They also brought up his descent from an ancient Cheshire family which distinguished itself under Cromwell, his father's rectory in Chelsea, his own parish in Eversley, the canonries he filled in later life, and a list of his publications. This information had been readily available in Britain since the 1860s in a number of biographical dictionaries, such as, for instance, Charles Knight's *English Cyclopaedia* (1867, 714-15), *The Imperial Dictionary of Universal Biography* (1863, 94-95), *A Dictionary of Contemporary Biography: A Handbook of the Peerage of Rank, Worth, and Intellect* (1861, 226), and *Men of the Time. Biographical Sketches of Eminent Living Characters* (1859, 422-24). In America the basic facts of Kingsley's life had also been promulgated in Allibone's *Critical Dictionary of English Literature* (1872) and in McCarthy's *Modern Leaders* (1872, 211-22).

After the first death notices on 25 January most other papers, national and regional, followed suit with detailed articles over the next few days, some of them reprinting information taken from these early obituaries, especially from *The Times*. Interesting evidence of this borrowing can, for example, be found in the obituaries published a week after Kingsley's death on 30 January

in the *Cheshire Observer*, the *Reading Mercury* and the identical articles that appeared in the *Hemel Hempstead Gazette and West Herts Advertiser*, the *Tamworth Herald* and the *Monmouthshire Beacon*, which all, following the obituary in *The Times*, erroneously printed Kingsley place of birth as Holme (as in the hamlet in Bedfordshire) instead of Holne (Devon). Even if this spelling mistake is already present in *The Imperial Dictionary of Universal Biography* (1863), the wording of the biographical facts suggests that these newspapers used *The Times* rather than this biographical dictionary.

Although it is of interest which basic details of a person's life were public knowledge, the mere fact that these were reported in the press does not offer much new historical or biographical insight. What is more rewarding in the obituaries is the assessment of the deceased's achievements. Admittedly, one can hardly expect balanced criticism here – “it is hardly by the coffin of a great man that a fair or impartial estimate of his character and rank in the world of mind can be formed” (*London Evening Standard* 1875, 2a) – but the specific qualities of the deceased that writers singled out in the obituaries can still tell us something about what was ultimately appreciated and valued in public figures by their contemporaries. Laurel Brake has argued that the first DNB's “very value for us lies in its peculiar combination of accuracy and individual perspective” (Brake 1994, 184). The same is true, to an even greater extent, of the obituaries of public figures.

3. THE ASSESSMENTS OF CHARLES KINGSLEY'S CAREER IN THE NEWSPAPERS

It is not surprising that most obituaries concentrated first and foremost on Kingsley's literary career. It is remarkable, though, that there was hardly any consensus on which work would earn him a place in the world of letters. Although critics today agree that only *The Water-Babies* is still read, titles that occurred repeatedly in the obituaries included *Westward Ho!*, *Hypatia*, and, surprisingly, *The Saint's Tragedy*.

The *Edinburgh Evening News*, for example, limited itself to mentioning only two of his publications, concluding that Kingsley “has distinguished himself as a dramatic and lyric poet” and linked this statement to *The Saint's Tragedy*. As proof that the late author “mixed much with working men” the obituarist also mentioned *Alton Locke*, but did not dwell on its literary

merits. Similarly the *Western Mail* thought that “[a]s a novelist, his works will be ranked among our later classics” but singled out only two of Kingsley’s works, specifying that *Alton Locke* made him a “power among the working class”, while it was *Westward Ho!* that he is “best known by” (4e). The *Pall Mall Gazette* too concentrated on a handful of works only. It maintained that Kingsley was best known for *Westward Ho!*, *Hypatia* and *The Saint’s Tragedy*.

The London Times, *The Illustrated London News*, *The Spectator*, and *The London Evening Standard* gave more complete accounts of Kingsley’s writings than the papers above. *The Times* held that *Westward Ho!* was “the most vivid and stirring of his novels” although it was “less brilliant and picturesque” than *Hypatia*. Similarly the *Illustrated London News* concentrated on *Westward Ho!* as the novel that “will keep its place in the favour of English readers longer than anything else he has written” (103). *The Spectator* thought that it was difficult to rank Kingsley as an artist, as he was a “poet by genius and a novelist by habit”. Thus his poem “The Sands of Dee” “may be sung for centuries to come”, while his works of fiction merely contained moments or flashes of outstanding quality. If one had to single out one of his works of fiction, it was *Yeast* that was “fullest of his genius” (142), the very novel that *The London Evening Standard* deemed “a subject of regret” (2b).

The repeated mention in the papers of the closet play *The Saint’s Tragedy* is intriguing. While *The Times* thought that *The Saint’s Tragedy* “is all but forgotten already” – which, in fact, adequately describes its status today – *The London Evening Standard* maintained that it was a work which “has not received the attention from the critics which it unquestionably merits” (2b). This last stand has undoubtedly to do with the qualities Charles Kegan Paul too discerned in the play. In 1877 Paul wrote in *The Westminster Review* that “reading this tragedy now, after many years, the old feelings have awakened in us which made Kingsley’s name so much to a knot of young University men, none of whom, perhaps, thought with him in their later life, although his influence lifted them in those days above self-indulgence and sloth, and was the motive cause which made them take what part they could in the battle of life” (391). When Paul re-published this article six years later in 1883, he added that one finds in the play “the notes of a chord which was echoed back from the hearts of many young men who wanted, and thought they had found, a leader” (118). In fact, the *Morpeth Herald* reminded its readers that in 1848 “the Union Debating Society at one of our universities could dispute as to whether the ‘Saint’s Tragedy’ is not the greatest drama of the century” (7e)!

The London Evening Standard ultimately predicted that Kingsley would be remembered above all by the “genuine and spontaneous” novels *Westward Ho!* and *Two Years Ago*. Their publication, the author remarked, “had the effect of doing for Devonshire [...] pretty much the same thing as was done by Sir Walter Scott for the Highlands” (2b). The *Evening Standard* was not alone in comparing Kingsley to Walter Scott. The comparison was also brought out by the *Western Daily Press* and by the *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*. Admittedly, both papers were in a sense biased, as they were regional papers catering for a readership in the South-West, but the comparison with Scott was also evoked by Thomas Escott in *Belgravia*, who maintained that Kingsley was, “as a historical novelist, in *Westward Ho!* scarcely inferior to Scott in *Ivanhoe*”, and a writer in the hugely successful *Illustrated London News* thought *Hereward the Wake* very superior to the historical works by Bulwer Lytton and equal to Scott’s tales. Richard John King in *Fraser’s Magazine* too evoked the comparison with the Scottish author (403). Such comparisons, of course, were meant to imply the highest possible praise. But, as the *Bath Chronicle* wryly commented, “[i]t is foolish to predict immortality for any popular author in days when the Waverley novels are almost unread” (5c).

4. THE ASSESSMENTS OF CHARLES KINGSLEY’S CAREER IN THE PERIODICALS

The instant biography offered in the mostly anonymous obituary notices published during the first week following Kingsley’s death were necessarily incomplete first reactions, written to meet immediate publishing deadlines. Fuller accounts of his literary achievements, written at comparative ease, were reserved for a handful of longer articles published in the monthly periodicals, including *Fraser’s*, a magazine for which Kingsley himself had regularly written, *The Congregationalist*, *Belgravia* and the American *Appleton’s Magazine*.

In *Fraser’s Magazine* the Devon antiquarian and poet Richard John King singled out *Hypatia*, *Westward Ho!* and *Two Years Ago* as the novels by which Kingsley would be remembered: “They have carried his name and his reputation into every land where English is spoken, and to every country where sound literature and high purpose are honoured and recognized” (403). He found *The Water-Babies* “charming”, although *Hereward the Wake* was “hardly one of the pleasantest” of his novels. The writer in *The Congregationalist* did not select

any specific work, but recognized them all, no matter the deficiencies that can so easily be found in all of them, as coming from the pen of a genius (250). Edward Burlingame in *Appleton's* shared such appraisal: "With men of a certain age he will always be famous; with them his books are practically immortal, and they have an eternal youth in each new generation" (205). Burlingame, however, thought *The Water-Babies* one of "the least of his books" (204).

Compared to these in-depth assessments, the article published by Macmillan, who had been Kingsley's publisher since 1855 and who was to cash-in considerably on Kingsley's collected works (1879-1885) in the years to come, was disappointing. All that appeared was a very meagre black-rimmed obituary by Arthur Helps in the March issue of their magazine. Helps wrote that "[t]his is not the time to discuss the peculiar merits of Charles Kingsley's writings" (375). One might ponder the meaning of this statement, seeing that henceforth *Macmillan's Magazine* remained quiet on their best-selling author. Perhaps Arthur Helps meant to write a second, longer piece on Kingsley for the magazine, but he himself died shortly after completing the obituary. The fact remains that Macmillan did not commission any other writer for a full essay on Kingsley, and in 1877 Mrs Kingsley published her biography with the London publisher Henry King rather than with Macmillan.

The discordant British assessments of Kingsley's literary merit were echoed in the press of English speaking territories overseas. Burlingame's positive attitude in *Appleton's* was shared by *The Canadian Monthly*, whose author, the social reformer Agnes Machar, saw Kingsley's place as "prominent in the literature of the nineteenth century", and held that, while his literary fame would not rest on his poetical writings (250), *Westward Ho!* "must always seem to many the flower of Kingsley's imaginative genius" (249). John Dyer in the *Penn Monthly*, on the other hand, maintained that Kingsley's "best work was his poetry. He was made for a lyric poet and might have been the Burns of the nineteenth century" (201).

Most of the estimates and predictions made in 1875 have not been borne out by time, as most of the works listed in the obituaries are rarely read outside the academic circle today. Thomas Escott predicted this when he wrote that "the place which Kingsley will probably occupy in English literature is not so large as one might be led to suppose from the prominence of the attention that his works attracted during their lifetime" (83-84). Similarly, but more aggressively, *The Daily Alta California*, in a brief death-notice that ran to less than a hundred words, maintained that "it is not likely that he will occupy a high place in the estimation of the future" (2b).

Reconsideration of an author's worth through time is inevitable. The history of literature abounds with such reassessments. Brenda Colloms, describing Kingsley as "one of the foremost of the Victorian 'forgotten worthies'", rightly remarked that "those who typify their day are usually rewarded in their lifetime but undervalued or misunderstood by succeeding generations. We look at the past through a distorting mirror, and the more recent the past the more unreliable our view" (Colloms 1975, 13). As such, the obituaries provide us with an impression of the time rather than with qualities of intrinsic lasting value. They may, however, lay claim to accuracy in the way they convey *contemporary perceptions* of a person's personality, his social influence or his moral worth.

5. A SENSE OF PERSONAL BEREAVEMENT

The nineteenth-century novel is replete with sentimental deathbed scenes and heart-wringing expressions of bereavement. The habit of openly expressing grief, which for modern readers seems to border on a morbid fascination with death, was for many Victorians an attempt to communicate "sorrow, love, and faith as honestly as they knew how" (Jalland 1996, 4). Little of this practice, however, is part of the late-Victorian obituary. Admittedly, the notices of deaths in the "Births, Marriages, and Deaths" columns were often terse and factual because such notices could be inserted for free when only name, place and day of death, and age were mentioned but were charged as advertisements when extra particulars were inserted. But even the longer obituaries, to which such pecuniary restrictions did not apply, are but little subject to the fallacy of "transference" (Edel 1987 [1959], 66-67), even in cases in which the obituarist had known the deceased personally. Still, in the obituaries of Kingsley, a *public* display of emotion is expressed and boundless grief as a *private* reaction is repeatedly mentioned.

The articles reporting Charles Dickens's death in 1870 concentrated on the enormity of the bereavement, which reflected for millions of readers both the loss of one of England's greatest authors as well as the loss of what they had come to see as a personal friend. Thus, of Dickens's death *The Times* wrote that "[t]he loss of such a man is an event which makes ordinary expressions of regret seem cold and conventional. It will be felt by millions as nothing less than a personal bereavement" (1) and *The Daily Telegraph* lamented the loss

of “a man of such rare genius [...] who] made his way straight to the hearts of all his millions of readers” (3d). *The London Daily News* wrote of Dickens that “of no literary man of modern times can it be so truly said that he was equally known to the public as an individual and as an author” (4f). The writer was wrong, though, in seeing this as unique for Dickens, as Kingsley’s death elicited very similar reactions of public and personal loss. *The Western Daily Press*, for example, expressed the sorrow felt at the news of Kingsley’s death: “It must be a long time since there has been such a general feeling of loss and bereavement” (3d), while both the *Bath Chronicle* and *The Morpeth Herald* wrote that “[t]he death of Canon Kingsley will be felt throughout England, and indeed in every English-speaking community, as a personal loss, if it be not mourned almost as a family affliction” (5c) and that “lovers of literature have to deplore a writer who had become almost a personal friend” (7e).

The similarity between these reactions of personal loss to Dickens’s and Kingsley’s deaths hides some essential differences though. Dickens was a master storyteller and creator of fictional characters who kept writing novels to the very end of his career. Moreover, in the two years before his death, he extensively toured Great Britain on a farewell reading tour. During these popular readings, which were no less than carefully staged performances, the author managed to create a direct and enticing bond with his listeners, which, in turn, enhanced “the wider and keener appreciation of the writings themselves” (Kent 1872, 21). Kingsley’s literary reputation, on the other hand, was based on a mere handful of novels he had written back in the 1850s, while his public image had been blotted by the unfortunate controversy with Newman in 1864 and his defence of Governor Eyre in 1866. Still, in 1875 many people were deeply distressed when they heard or read the news of his death. The writer in *The Spectator*, in one of the few overtly critical obituaries, observed that “[w]e do not know that Canon Kingsley is a loss to the nation, for premature as his death may be said to have been, he had probably done his best work”. He nevertheless had to admit that “there are few cultivated Englishmen who can have received the news without a keen regret. To all who could read him intelligently he had become a personal friend” (141). An anonymous writer in *The Congregationalist* too wrote that the circumstances of Kingsley’s death no doubt evoked “kindly and sympathetic feelings” and hushed “all adverse criticism”, but underlined that this consideration could not explain the “general outburst of sorrow [...] which was the more remarkable, because Canon Kingsley was the very last man to court popularity; and in various ways had, from time to time, exposed himself to keen stric-

tures” (245). But the point was that “everywhere and at all times he spoke and acted as an Englishman [...] one with spirit so manly and noble, and with heart so true [...] it was as a man that he was most to be honoured” (246).

In fact, what many chose to remember, and gleaned eagerly from his literary works, was Kingsley’s early practical work as a Chartist parson with a group of similar-minded men called the Christian Socialists, his unwavering visiting and emphasis on hygiene in his own parish, his involvement in providing opportunities of proper instruction for the lower social orders, his love of truth and honesty, his emphasis on a healthy body, or, to sum up, “the type of all that is excellent, energetic, God-fearing, chivalrous, in a country clergyman: the friend of the poor, the priest militant of the suffering, striving to realise in his life the model of that Christian righteousness which he proclaimed in his sermons, the same out of the pulpit as in it” (Escott 1875, 74).

For English-speaking nations Kingsley mattered as an expression of the essence of the British identity: “here we continually encounter the rough vigour of the old Saxon spirit which he inherits, and the swift bounding blood, sparkling with its crimson health, that tingled in the veins of the Commonwealth’s men” (*Sydney Morning Herald* 1875, 7c). “If Saxon e’er was Saxon to the core [...] / This man was Saxon” (*Punch* 1875, 55).

The estimation of Kingsley’s person and character in the obituaries was therefore invariably positive. Although many writers, and Kingsley himself in the first place, deprecated the notion of what had come to be called ‘Muscular Christianity’, the sound principles of Kingsley’s initial idea of *mens sana in corpore sano* were generally accepted. Moreover, he had become for many of his generation a point of reference, something that even those who were most critical of his actions could not deny. His ideals offered guidance in a fast-changing world and helped to recover solid English qualities in a time of transition when people felt in “a very Yeasty state of mind” (Kingsley 1879, 312): “There are those who can never forget that, widely as they have differed with Charles Kingsley, they have only gone forward on the path he once showed them; and that, whatever were his failings and incompleteness, his was just that one influence which, at a time they needed a guide, stirred them up to live manly lives, and play their parts in the stir of the world” (*Examiner* 1875, 125).

Although Kingsley was a master at descriptive writing and unquestionably produced some fine artistic moments in his works, his contemporaries ultimately put more emphasis on his social influence than on his artistic qualities. When *The London Evening Standard* underlined that he left “a very

distinct impression on the men and the books of his time” (2a), the author referred to the way Kingsley’s writings inspired a way of living. Such clearly was the view of Agnes Machar: “There are few, perhaps, of the younger generation of writers who do not owe to his writings much of high impulse and noble inspiration” (249). Kingsley was thus essentially seen as influential to readers of his own time. Escott correctly observed that “No man has written in the course of this century – not Tennyson or Carlyle – who so accurately appreciated the temper of his times as Kingsley; who entered so fully to the service of his *contemporaries*, spiritual and material” (1875, 84; emphasis mine). Charles Kegan Paul concluded that “it is much to have moved the feelings of any time as Kingsley moved those of that in which he lived [...]. His biography will take its place among the records of those who have swayed the forces of their time” (Paul 1877, 392, 393).

These views help to explain the success of Kingsley’s works during the last decades of the century. When, after his death in 1875, his extreme stands on a series of questions were mainly forgotten, only the influence on the people of his time was remembered by the generations that grew up with his writings, and to which Mrs Kingsley’s biography and Macmillan’s numerous reprints of his works gave new life. It also explains Kingsley’s waning fame at the beginning of the twentieth century, when those generations who had found inspiration in his works for a moral and noble way of living had passed away.

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ABSTRACT

There has long been a lively academic interest in the Victorian author, Christian Socialist and Church of England priest Charles Kingsley. Yet it is only as a minor author that he takes his place in English Literature. As a thinker he is hardly influential today, and as a consequence his works are little read by the general public. Apart from his children's book *The Water-Babies*, few of his published works are still in print. But what were the assessments of his importance in the weeks following his death? What did his contemporaries think of a man who during his life was a most influential, and often very controversial, public figure? This essay looks at the reactions in the obituaries that appeared all over the world in the first weeks following Kingsley's death. These publications are a measure of what people in 1875 thought were his best works and his main qualities, thus revealing to what extent, at the time of his demise, his contemporaries still thought him representative of their generation.