CHARLES KINGSLEY:
VICTORIAN PREACHER WITH A
MODERN MESSAGE

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M.A. (Wales), Ph.D. (Lond.), D.Litt. (UOFS)

INAUGURAL LECTURE DELIVERED ON ACCEPTING THE CHAIR OF
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ON FRIDAY, 17TH AUGUST, 1979
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Mr Chancellor, members of the Council, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen:

Charles Kingsley, Professor of Modern History, Rector of Eversley, Chaplain to the Queen, and Canon of Westminster, is remembered today as a writer of old-fashioned novels and children's stories (on the strength of *Westward Ho!* and the *Water-Babies* alone), and as a crusader for Christian Socialism, and perhaps as an exponent of 'muscular Christianity'. Yet he was foremost a preacher of stirring didactic sermons. Much of what he wrote (which ranges from natural history to sociological tracts in addition to his literary and religious writings) is forgotten today because he wrote (as the *Edinburgh Review* observed in 1877) 'of the present, and for the present'. His writing, meant for immediate effect, was undoubtedly careless. 'As it first flowed from his pen it went before the public, and so remains'.2 Fanny Kingsley, in her biography of Kingsley, regarded her husband's rapid creativity a mark of his genius. It is, perhaps, the remote topicality of his writing which makes it less powerful — or less popular today; but the dramatic 'present' character of Kingsley's style — particularly as exemplified in his sermons — cannot be denied. It is easy to see that his spoken words, as recorded in the sermons, must have had an almost magical, and very dramatic, effect on his congregation, coming, as they do, so directly from the heart rather than from the head.

As a preacher, Kingsley was pre-eminently a teacher — a theological or Christian didactician. Though largely a moral exhorter, he was primarily an expounder of Scripture. He explained at length the present relevance of the Bible, and the present reality of God's providence in the affairs of men. He believed in his divine calling. In July 1848, when he was writing his first novel *Yeast*, he wrote to F.D. Maurice, expressing his belief 'that One is guiding me, and driving me when I will not be guided, who will make me, and has made me, go His way and do His work, by fair means or foul'; he believed that God had made him a 'parish priest', and that, like Jeremiah, he could not ignore the urge to preach, for God had made his Word 'like fire within my bones'.4 This was more strictly an urge to teach, for Kingsley's special province was his educative work as preacher and writer. Not only are his novels imbued with socio-religious polemics, but the sermons themselves are distinctly didactic, in theme as well as structure. It may be well to consider Kingsley's style as a preacher before looking more closely at his message — as represented by two of his 'contemporary' (non-historical) novels.

* * * * *

Kingsley was a plain and honest speaker, a dashing cavalry leader rather than a subtle strategist. The blunt pugnacity and dramatic instinct we sense in the sermons are a feature of the man himself. It is interesting to note some of the contemporary reports of his manner. Justin McCarthy gives a full account of how he could 'conquer his audience' in spite of his uncouth way of speaking. Though his appeal was largely emotional (not rational), he was
unquestionably famous for his power and fluency as a preacher. The
occasion was a meeting in London when Kingsley addressed a largely
'Cockney audience' on the social suffering of the poor:

Rather tall, very angular, surprisingly awkward, with thin, staggering legs, a
hatchet face adorned with scruffy gray whiskers, a faculty for falling into the
most ungraceful attitudes, and making the most hideous contortions of visage
and frame; with a rough provincial accent and an unctuous way of speaking,
which would be set down for absurd caricature on the boards of a comic
theatre... But he has a robust and energetic plain-speaking which soon struck
home to the heart of the meeting. He conquered his audience. Those who at
first could hardly keep from laughing; those who, not knowing the speaker,
worried whether he was not mad or in liquor; those who heartily disliked his
general principles and his public attitude, were alike won over, long before he
had finished, by his blunt and blunt earnestness and his transparent sincerity.
The subject was one which concerned the social suffering of the poor. Mr
Kingsley approached it broadly and boldly, talking with a grand disregard for
logic and political economy, sometimes startling the more squeamish of his
audience by the Biblical frankness of his descriptions and his language, but, I
think, convincing every one that he was sound at heart. ...3

It is easy to see, from this description, that Kingsley would have had a blunt
oratorical manner in the pulpit, a dramatic vigour of delivery combined with
an earnest sincerity, or honesty which would have gone a long way towards
off-setting the impression of fustian. This, as well as his dramatic and
didactic manner, is apparent in the remarks of the Church Quarterly Review
(1877):

What he did was to teach and preach with all the resources of a striking
manner, with a never-failing fund of illustration, and a profound and
contagious earnestness, some few striking truths. These he held and taught with intense
and passionate energy ...4

Kingsley was a compelling preacher, patently sincere, given to homely
images and down-to-earth advice. It is not surprising that he faced an early
objection of being too colloquial in his style — by Dr Sumner, the Bishop of
Winchester, when Kingsley went up for his priest’s orders. It was this very
peculiarity, according to Fanny Kingsley, which ‘arrested and attracted his
hearers, and helped to fill a very empty church’.5 There is, as the Edinburgh
Review observed in 1877, nothing abstract about his sermons, ‘nothing
which the clod-cloughing mind could not readily lay hold of and understand’.6 To some, the Edinburgh
Review goes on to observe, his colloquialism ‘may seem to verge on profanity’, though in fact it was ‘strictly
the expression of an intensity of religious feeling, which...understood no
work of God too small to be spoken of, and no work of the devil too homely
to be denounced’7. We may ask, was it an intensity of religious feeling, or
emotional energy, which sometimes precipitated in a style of tautological
rhetoric? It is surely uncontrolled zeal which resulted in the bombast and
bathos of an emotionally-charged confirmation sermon preached at
Eversley in 1847. The sermon MS, hitherto unpublished, and at present in
the Parish Collection at the Firestone Library, Princeton University,
illustrates Kingsley at his worst, and, paradoxically, at his most powerful.

An impression of power is produced by the impetuous verbal flow, the
rough, energetic feeling, the lacerating language which is nevertheless
softened by a vein of tenderness — of concern for the young Christians —
and the denunciatory statements. But the repetitive rhetoric, the
exaggerated sense of threat, and what one might call a declamatory relish,
make one ask if Kingsley was not being carried away by a form of
emotional intoxication rather than religious fervour. No doubt the young
Christians who comprised the congregation were petrified by the almost
melodramatic style, their hearts literally ‘failing them for fear’ as they were
made aware of the ominous danger of a ravenous devil — if the obtuse
theatricality of the preacher’s manner was not self-defeating, that is, in
destroying the illusion of reality. The church at Eversley is itself small,
conducive to an intimate bond between preacher and congregation; the
overwhelming effect of the sermon, with its rising tide of feeling, and with
the rough, even harsh8 voice of the speaker, might be imagined:

What is overcoming the wicked one? Overcoming the temptations which he
puts into our hearts — To pride — To spite — To foul & filthy desires — That if
possible, he may make us like himself — proved selfish — monsters — Out of
tune with heaven & earth — Thus ... laughing at all that is honest & pure ... 

And believe me, my friends — he and his evil spirits are not far from any one of
us ... He walks about like a roaring lion whom he may devour.

And believe me, too, he fights harder to gain the souls of the young than he
does the souls of the old — Because he hates to see things healthy, thriving &
growing — Therefore he especially hates young people — He hates joy — He
hates to see all their merri ment low & brutal — He hates tenderness & love —
Therefore he tries to make them selfish & hard hearted — He hates to see things
that they may wither away, & bring no good fruits to perfection — He hates to
see a flower blossom, or a tree bear fruit — & just so he hates to see your soul
bud & blossom, & become beautiful & noble ... Amen. Above he hates to see
anyone useful — Therefore he especially tries to get hold of the young, & make
them selfish, unprofitable useless to God & man, before they have the chance
or the power of doing any good at all — that he may keep them useless —
weeds hurtful & poisonous weeds if he can — through their whole lives, to get
as much mischief as possible out of them — believe me young people — The
great awful devil — The prince of hell hates you — You hate you doubly — With
such a deep mean bitter spite as only devils can feel — He hates you doubly
because you are young — He hates you doubly because you are going to be or
have been confirmed.

(First Sermon after Confirmation Sunday morning Sept. 26/47 Eversley)9

By far the greatest number of Kingsley’s sermons were never prepared for
the press. As Rev. W. Harrison in his preface to the anthology of Kingsley’s
sermons All Saints’ Day10 points out, they were written out very roughly —
sometimes at an hour’s notice — and were only intended for delivery from
the pulpit. The above extract, very slightly edited, was clearly written
straight off, as the emotional inspiration took hold of the author — as might
be suggested by the constant hammering on the same point. The impulsive
haste of composition is borne out by the use of dashes in lieu of
punctuation. As he wrote he barely waited for the ink to dry, which is frequently smudged: where one page lies upon another, the ink has come off on the facing page. The aural impact of his preaching style may be deduced, not only from the speed of composition (which may be assumed to coincide with speed of delivery), but from the colloquialism, for it is particularly in the unedited (unpublished) sermons that one detects the rhythm of natural speech.

Kingsley's strong feeling, masculine language and militant tone are features of his writing which W.R. Greg aptly typified in the following account of his style in 1860:

...he reminds us of nothing so much as of a war-horse panting for the battle; his usual style is marvellously like a neigh — a ha! ha! among the trumpets; the dust of the combat is to him the breath of life ... and he wields his tomahawk with an unregenerate heartiness, slightly heathenish no doubt, but withal unspeakably refreshing. It is amazing how hard one who is a gladiator by nature strikes when convinced that he is doing God service.11

As a gladiator by nature, Kingsley lacked the satirical subtlety of a Thackeray, or the humorous irony of a Dickens. Even in his novels one is frequently aware, from the patronizing and moralistic tone, of the pulpit with its elevation above the level of the congregation. As a dynamic and dramatic preacher he was capable of compelling attention — but because the sermons (and many of his novels) had the blunt effect of a cudgel, they have not been transmitted to us as memorable prose.

* * * * *

Much of Kingsley's gladiatorial preaching is evident in his novel Alton Locke (1850), which is narrated by a young Chartist tailor who becomes a poet of the people. In the person of Locke, Kingsley is protesting against the exploitation of the poor by the aristocracy. While still a young apprentice tailor, Locke is forced into the putrescence of sweatshop life where workmen starve and die of disease. Later an old Scots bookseller, Sandy Mackaye (modelled on Carlyle), encourages him to become a Chartist poet. He tries to promote his literary interests through Cambridge University, where he is actually befriended by members of the aristocracy; there is Dean Winnaday, the Dean's daughter Lillian (who is little more than a sawdust doll with whom he falls in love), and Lillian's resolute cousin, Eleanor Staunton, who later becomes a Christian Socialist. Locke is persuaded by the Dean to strip his poetry of its revolutionary content, and it is ironic that he is later imprisoned for his accidental involvement in a Chartist riot. His romantic love for Lillian turns to ashes, for she marries his self-seeking cousin George. While he suffers disillusionment in his own life, Locke also becomes thoroughly disenchanted in what he sees in the orthodox clergy as represented by his hypocritical cousin who chooses the Church as a means of rising into the aristocracy. The social exclusivism of Victorian Christianity is attacked in George's 'orthodox' religion: 'Carry out the Church system', he says, 'that's the thing — all laid down by rule and method'. Rigidity of doctrine, or rigidity of tradition, effectively results in the

The last page of a sermon preached at Eversley in 1846 and 1849, entitled 'The Lord Is at Hand'. (From the Parish Collection, Princeton University Library.)
churches being filled, in Locke's words, with the 'rich and respectable, to the almost entire exclusion of the adult lower classes' (p. 247). Yet, he says, in Judea it was the common people who heard Christ gladly. And so, on personal, political, and spiritual levels, Locke's socialist fervour is dampened if not extinguished. His political involvement is followed by his devastating illness and repentance of Chartism, or political activism. But the novel ends with his spiritual rebirth — his simple acceptance of Christianity before he dies.

With its autobiographical form the novel follows the pattern of a Christian testimony — a life which becomes more desperate and purposeless until, completely broken down, the repentant sinner rejects any further reliance on his own resources and accepts Christ as his sole raison d'être and sustaining strength. Locke's name is thematically significant, for his autobiography is a gradual unlocking process: a lock which is finally broken to admit the regenerating power of Christ who said, 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you'. This, undoubtedly, is the abiding message of Alton Locke — the priority of the Kingdom of God, not Chartism or immediate political ideals. The novel's eponymous apprentice tailor and poet is, in fact, modeled on the working-class poet and radical Chartist, Thomas Cooper, who became converted to Christian orthodoxy, largely through the influence of Kingsley.

In spite of Locke's final conversion, however, one feels that his heated political commentary expresses Kingsley's views. One is aware of the author's gladiatorial sermon-style in Locke's many direct addresses to the reader. In speaking of the oppression of the masses his direct addresses break the illusion of reality and interrupt the narrative flow: on these occasions it is clearly the voice of Kingsley the political sermonizer which breaks through Locke's personality:

Ay, respectable gentlemen and ladies, I will confess all to you — you shall have, if you enjoy it, a fresh opportunity for indulging that supreme pleasure which the press daily affords you of insulting the classes whose powers most of you know as little as you do their sufferings. Yes; the Chartist poet is vain, conceited, ambitious, uneducated, shallow, inexperienced, envious, ferocious, scurrilous, sedulous, traitorous. — Is your charitable vocabulary exhausted?

(Alton Locke, p. 52)

Here the Chartist poet shows himself to be quite worthy of the scurrilous epithets he anticipates from the aristocratic reader; his tone is insufferably arrogant and it is little wonder that it invoked the wrath of what, elsewhere, he calls the 'vocal press' (p. 26). The Times took up the challenge, and felt obliged to warn the reader against Locke's 'charge of democracy against aristocracy' — 'Reader, do not believe it! Be more faithful to your brother labourer, and refuse to accept these perverted utterances ...' Kingsley's style is undoubtedly overcharged, when his social realism becomes almost contrived through the author's uncontrolled fervour — as happens when he describes the notorious Jacob's Island region in London with its open sewer from which the tenement dwellers drew their drinking water. But his
writing is not, as a recent critic has maintained, always overheated in its excitement — 'intrusive, lascivious, thrilled at its own capacity for shock'. If anything, his graphic verbs suggestive of bestial subsistence, and his double, sometimes triple, adjectives, betray his indignation, or express his Christian involvement in suffering and his desire to stir people up, as he once put it, 'with the tongue of St James':

From the butchers' and greengrocers' shop the gas lights flared and flickered, wild and ghastly, over haggard groups of slip-shod dirty women ... Blood and sewer-water crawled from under doors and out of spouts, and reeked down the gutters among offal, animal and vegetable, in every stage of putrefaction. ... (Alton Locke, p. 93)

And he goes on to describe the 'narrow, brawling torrents of filth, and poverty, and sin, — the houses with their teeming load of life ... piled up into the dingy, choking night'; and, in an emotional outburst, he concludes with a tautology of epithets: 'A ghastly, deafening, sickening sight it was' (p. 93). Undoubtedly something of the garish effects of transpontine drama is produced. But Kingsley is merely employing the melodramatic techniques which writers like Dickens and Mrs Gaskell were using for social reform; melodrama is not indulged in for its own sake, but becomes the legitimate outlet for the author's righteous Christian anger.

With its exposure of the sweatshop life of destitute tailors, and its radical vision of social oppression and social realism in vivid scenes of starvation and squalor, Alton Locke was considered subversive and reactionary by Victorian critics. Nevertheless, Carlyle welcomed the work as 'a new explosion, or salvo of red-hot shot against the Devil's Dungheap' — words which, in fact, suggest a dynamic political content rather than a message of passive Christianity. And yet Kingsley's central vision was religious, not political like Disraeli's in Sybil. Although Kingsley was a self-confessed Chartist, Alton Locke is not all fretful tract. It is really a Christian novel, written in the spirit of his sermons which never failed to emphasize, on the one hand, the Gospel message of the Kingdom of God, and, on the other, personal salvation or reform.

Few critics have given the concluding chapters of Alton Locke their due importance. With their position at the end of the novel, they drive home the author's chief message, which is that of spiritual democracy; and they are written with the suasive rhetoric of an evangelistic preacher, which is frequently the quality of Kingsley's sermons:

... the priesthood alone, of all human institutions, testifies of Christ the King of men, the Lord of all things, the inspirer of all discoveries; who reigns, and will reign, till He has put all things under His feet, and the kingdoms of the world have become the kingdoms of God and of His Christ. (Alton Locke, p. 425)

These words are spoken by the resolute Eleanor Staunton who, in the words of a recent critic, is 'a kind of Christian Socialist rector in skirts'; in the novel she serves as Kingsley's spiritual mouthpiece, and in the passage just quoted preaches on the active role of the Church in bringing about the Kingdom of God on earth. Notice the similarity of her words (based on Rev. 11:15) to those used by Kingsley in his advent sermon 'The Kingdom of God' (1849):

Yes, I say, Christ's kingdom is a kingdom of health and deliverance for body and soul; and it will conquer, and it will spread, and it will grow, till the nations of the world have become the kingdoms of God and of His Christ. Christ reigns, and Christ will reign till He has put all His enemies under His feet. ... (Alton Locke, p. 9)

The rhythm, the emotional fervour, and the tone of positive assurance, are exactly the same in both passages. Admittedly Kingsley's vision was a fusion of his political and his religious ideals; but this is because he saw God as actively concerned with, and engaged in the affairs of men — in as much as He became manifest in the flesh, in the person of Jesus Christ. In Alton Locke the author's Chartist ideals, in fact, are subservient to his religious-evangelical purpose, and in this sense his vision is closely Carlylean as defined by Basil Willey: 'democracy', in order to survive, must be born again; it must 'unlearn its economic idolatries, cease to be self-seeking and mechanical, and recapture its soul by returning to its own inmost ideas, which will turn out, on reflection, to be those of Christianity'. Yet for Kingsley liberty, equality and fraternity were not to be found in Carlyle's God, a mere 'formless Infinite', but in the God of the Bible, and specifically in the Gospel of the 'glad tidings of the Kingdom of God', as preached by Christ. Thus in converting Locke from Chartist to Christ, Eleanor Staunton tells him 'to look for a state founded on better things than acts of parliament':

That state, that city, Jesus said, was come — was now within us, had we eyes to see ... Call it the church, the gospel, civilization, freedom, democracy, what you will — I shall call it by the name by which my Master spoke of it — the kingdom of God. (Alton Locke, p. 407)

Kingsley's social vision, then, is wholly subversive to the hope of a divine kingdom being realized at a future time on earth, yet also in the hearts of those who are at present subject to Christ. In the foremost instance his perspective is a political eschatological one, for he believes in the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy concerning a future millennium, to be realized not so much by means of direct divine intervention as by means of God operating through the agencies of men. History, therefore, is conceived of as a state of forward progress, with democracy (the highest quality of civilization) in a state of being christianized. Eleanor tells Alton Locke: 'If, henceforth, you claim political enfranchisement, claim it not as mere men, who may be villains, savages, animals, slaves of their own prejudices and passions; but as members of Christ, children of God, inheritors of the kingdom of heaven, and therefore bound to realize it on earth' (p. 406).

Thus one's personal response to, and acceptance of, Christ is the beginning of one's involvement in the evolutionary process that will be culminated in the divine kingdom on earth — which was the ideal of the Zealots and the writers of eschatological prophecy. It follows that it is one's personal acceptance of Christ — the Kingdom of God being within one —
expression of Kingsley's belief that materialism and secular matters are in the hands of a divine Providence — the belief that all physical, scientific and social evolution is evidence of the gradual realization of the Kingdom of God. Indeed, the strong undercurrent of scientific interests in Two Years Ago expresses Kingsley's view that man's scientific conquest of Nature — his technological progress — is one phase of the divine Kingdom coming on Earth. All progress — scientific and social — is, for the author, reassuring proof of a wise and meaningful Providence, both in Nature and in the secular affairs of men.

This theological view of material progress is the main burden of Kingsley's sermon, 'The Fount of Science', preached at St Margaret's Church, Westminster, in 1851. The blessings of science and civilization are 'signs that the Lord God was really dwelling' amongst men.23 Kingsley's scientific mentor is Francis Bacon who stated that 'the pursuit of physical science clearly proceeds from Him, the Author of good, and Father of light'.24 For Kingsley this meant that 'liberty, law, peace, civilization, learning, art, science', were Pentecostal gifts, the fruits of the Spirit, even to the extent that nations that have not accepted the divine Kingship of Christ 'have in exactly that proportion fallen back into barbarism and bloodshed, slavery and misery'.25 This theory of human progress, or philosophy of history, Kingsley called the 'Gospel of the Kingdom of God'. It is difficult to judge whether he would have held to this view had he lived today, when godlessness and technological progress are not necessarily unrelated — though he would certainly have indicated the extent to which certain countries, in rejecting God, have indeed reverted to barbarism and bloodshed, and have re-enslaved the people under the banner of equality and freedom. In his own time his faith was severely tried by the setbacks of history: he was so emotionally involved in the spiritual progress of mankind that, in the year in which Two Years Ago was published, it is said that the sixty-year-old author suffered a mutiny depressed him, even evoking grave doubts about God's existence. Nevertheless, for Kingsley, crises of doubt — and involvement in suffering — were necessary religious experiences in the spiritual development of the Christian. All great thinkers, says Kingsley, 'have this one fact in common — that once in their lives, at least, they have gone into the bottomless pit, and there, out of the darkness, have asked the question of all questions — "Is there a God?"'.26

Behind the apparent posterity with which Two Years Ago opens is the dormant nightmare of cholera. But cholera, for Kingsley, did not mean a negation of secular-spiritual progress, as is clear from his three cholera sermons preached at Eversley in 1849. Much of the novel bears out his belief that disease, the result of sin, is nevertheless used to good effect by a just and loving Father.

Neither did the Crimean war dampen Kingsley's religious faith. The war, which might have been the greatest impediment for the belief that an economic and social millennium was in view, created no doubts in Kingsley's mind; he readily assimilated or rationalized it into his optimistic
philosophy of history. In *Two Years Ago*, the war serves a useful purpose, having a regenerative effect on the characters who rely too much on their own strength. Imprisonment in a Russian prison brings about the conversion of Tom Thurnall, the self-reliant, cheerful, devil-may-care hero whose eyes are finally opened to the ways of God in the affairs of men. This, in effect, is the Christian purpose of the book. It presents a theodicy — a justification of God — and is, at the same time, an evangelist’s plea that men should submit to Christ.

As with *Alton Locke* and *Yeast*, Kingsley’s new novel about contemporary life supplemented his work in the pulpit. While it employs various narrative techniques to dramatize the message of the Broad Church, it does not obey the canons of criticism about which, Kingsley told a correspondent, he knew little and cared little for, since his novel was what he called ‘Christian art.’ For Kingsley, the true artist is dedicated to the plight of humanity. As one of a brotherhood — as a member of Christ’s body, or church — he cannot remain objective, nor portray ‘common life’ with its trivialities of fashion and ‘insipid respectability’. Concerned only with ‘what this world means, and what God is doing here’, he endeavours to show ‘how much of the heroic and tragic element, supposed to be dead, buried, and white-washed over, survives in modern society, ready to assert itself for evil and for good the moment a great cause or a great sorrow appears’.*

In *Two Years Ago* the author, the ubiquitous commentator, says that ‘the special and proper province of the poet’ is to aspire towards the ideal — an ideal which he identifies very closely with the Kingdom of God. For Kingsley the true poet is ‘still heroic in God’s sight’, wooling at the divine ushers to do ‘the doing of good’, descending into ‘dens of darkness and sloughs of filth’ to rescue the sinful and the fallen (p. 151). For him, true art was committed art. That is why, preoccupied with the heroic and the Christian, he fuses, in the protagonist, two divergent traditions: the conventional melodramatic tradition of the Resourceful Hero (seen at its best in the sensation novels of Charles Reade and Wilkie Collins), and the practical Christianity as conceived by the Broad Church. The marriage of the romantic, melodramatic tradition and the Christian tradition makes the novel a hybrid art form. Consequently, it runs counter to fiction and conventions of the religious novel, the protagonist moves from darkness to enlightenment, from sin to conversion. There is a collision between what the reader is led to expect of a hero and what is offered. Tom, in spite of his heroic stature, has a serious flaw, which is the very strength on which his heroism is based — his self-reliance. In his sermon ‘The Fall’, Kingsley points out that man’s righteousness consists ‘in looking up to God, trusting Him utterly, believing that He was to do God’s will, and not his own’. Yet by nature the Resourceful Hero of Victorian fiction is independent and self-willed, and has the happy power of always landing on his legs. He is not the product of original sin. From the Christian point of view man’s “fallen nature of itself is inclined to pride, to worldliness”, says Kingsley;* therefore Tom must be convicted of sin, and convinced of his reliance on God.

It is not surprising that Kingsley’s unconverted hero is a very paradoxical figure. The villain of the novel, a conceited poet who is driven to suicide through smouldering jealousy, might be said to have a greater need for grace, and to be better material — or a better challenge! — for the power of Providence. (In recent times, one thinks of Graham Greene’s sanctified sinners.) The villain Vassour, however, is excluded from salvation by his own weakness, whereas Tom, with his physical and moral fitness, has good potential for the salvation. He is like Tom the waterbaby who, through doing good, is able, eventually, to recognize and find good. Only after the waterbaby has rescued a lobster from a lobster-pot, are his eyes opened to the other waterbabies. Tom Thurnall has the courage to act bravely in order to grow spiritually strong. Similarly, Tom the waterbaby must prove his bravery in his hazardous journey to the Other-end-of-Nowhere before he can become a man and marry Ellie — ‘He has won his spurs in the great battle, and become fit to go with you and be a man; because he has done the thing he did not like’.*

All this means that the would-be Christian must take the heroic initiative before he can benefit from the initiative that Providence takes to help the sinner. Kingsley says as much in his sermon ‘True Abstinence’, which is really an exposition on athletic Christianity. We must exercise spiritual energy as far as we can, and then ‘let God do the work’.* Only when God sees you trying to be all this, will [He] help you to be so,* only when we ‘subjugate the flesh and keep our minds clear and strong enough’, will we be able to hear ‘the voice of God within our hearts’.* It is through man’s innate strength that Providence is able to guide him. And Tom Thurnall, though reprobate, has such strength. He is a man who ‘depend[ed] on nothing but himself’. He is really considerably more conceited, or self-inflated, than the anonymous working-class charistian of Alton Locke, but the author’s tone of general approbation puts the reader off his guard. In his sermons Kingsley could speak more harshly of self-will: ‘That root-sin of self-will first brought death and misery among mankind’. In spite of the author’s general approval of Tom, it is, nevertheless, Tom’s self-will which is the cause of his godliness, or religious apathy. Kingsley goes on, in his sermon ‘The Fall’, to say that it is the sin of self-will . . . which hinders sinners from giving themselves up to God; and that sin must be broken through, or religion is mockery and a dream.*

The novel, as a whole, is a dramatization of this statement, for Tom’s self-reliance is finally broken — although very casually and fortuitously — in the last chapter. But he does become more susceptible to grace as the novel proceeds. At first he represents the scientific agnosticism of his age: ‘All religions were, in his eyes, equally true and equally false. Superior morality was owing principally to the influences of race and climate . . .’ (p. 38). Tom, of course, is a determinist, not an environmentalist, and illustrates Kingsley’s belief in inward progress.
Progress is inward, of the soul... The self-help and self-determination of the independent soul — that is the root of progress...37

It is, in fact, through the self-help philosophy of the Samuel Smiles variety that Tom moves towards dependence on God. In this is the implicit ambivalence of Tom's character — or the spiritual ambivalence of Kingsley's theology — for while Tom's self-sufficiency is opposed to dependence on God, his self-help is the cause of his spiritual progress. Herein lies the unorthodoxy of Kingsley's Christianity, for though Tom is saved not by works but by grace, it is by virtue of his inborn strength to do good works that Providence can help him. This is, really, a Christian paradox. Tom receives help because he is worthy of help. When he exhorts Frank Headley, the curate, to preach on means to fight the cholera, the latter tells him that he 'would make a right good Christian' (p. 217). The author says of Tom: 'If he accepts cheerfully and manfully the things which he does see, he will be all the more able to enter hereafter into the deeper mystery of things unseen' (p. 225); and again: 'At least he is a man, and a brave one; and as the greater contains the less, surely before a man can be a good man, he must be a brave one first, much more a man at all' (pp. 225–6). It follows that the cowards, like the villain Vavasour, are lost and without hope. Providence has no power to save them. Kingsley's message is that God helps those who help their brothers. This, in fact, is Darwinism — natural selection or the survival of the fittest — within a Christian context. The result is divine selection.

In Two Years Ago it is primarily through the heroine (a woman) that Providence works to bring the hero to Christ. For Kingsley, the interaction of eros and agape (physical and spiritual love) was a perfectly legitimate — if not necessary — requisite for the divine initiative. Here it should be mentioned that Kingsley minimized the distinction between the flesh and spirit, for he was violently opposed to the Manicheism which condemned all natural impulses as evil. In his novels, therefore, a young woman is always the agent of Providence; through her feminine charm rather than logical persuasion, she helps the protagonist to find the Celestial City. Divine grace comes to Alton Locke through the resourceful Christian heroine, Eleanor Staunton; to Lancelot (in Yeast) through Argemone; and, to Tom Thurnall, through the significantly named Grace Harvey. In Two Years Ago Armworth, the genial banker and friend of Tom, says of women: 'I fancy sometimes that they were all meant to be the mates of angels, and stooped to men as a pis aller; reversing the old story of the sons of heaven and the daughters of men' (p. 412). That this expresses the author's view seems evident from his sermon 'Grace', preached at Eversley in 1856, where he speaks of the Greeks' concept of Charis:

they fancied that they [the three graces] were goddesses — spirits of some kind in the shape of beautiful, and amiable, and innocent maidens, who took delight in going about the world and making people happy and amiable like themselves...38

The incarnate angel motif is clearly embodied by Grace Harvey whose rescue of Tom from shipwreck is symbolic of the spiritual role she plays in
helping him to salvation. Throughout the novel it is love — divine and human — which she brings to bear on Tom. Unfortunately the reader's impression of the authenticity of her influence on Tom is offset by the obvious theatricality, or vein of melodrama, which colours her portrayal. She prays for ships at sea 'in her wild way, with half outspoken words', in a prayer that is really a theatrical soliloquy. Her clairvoyance is dramatized by externalization of detail, with close attention to dumb play or facial expression to assist the reader's visualization of scene; one has an unfortunate awareness of a stage actress:

And she stands looking out over the sea; but she has lost sight of everything, save her own sad imaginations. Her eyes open wider and wider, as if before some unseen horror; the eyebrows contract upwards; the cheeks sharpen; the mouth parts; the lips draw back, showing the white teeth, as if in intensest agony. Thus she stands long, motionless, awe-frozen.

(Two Years Ago, p. 52)

One is aware of a statuesque pose, unnaturally held. Even when she suffers the humiliation of being suspected by Tom of the theft of his money, the heroine's anguish is conveyed by external details — 'With hot brow and dry eyes she paced her little chamber, sat down on the bed, staring into vacancy, sprang up and paced again...'. (p. 174). In this respect she is not so different from the melodramatic heroines of Charles Reade. Nevertheless, Kingsley intended her to be a dramatic creation for, psychologically, she is internally melodramatic and changes, or matures, only under Tom's manly, practical influence, inasmuch as he changes through her gentle, Christian nature. They both respond to the good in each other. As the author (who was passionately opposed to celibacy in the priesthood) says in his sermon on marital happiness: 'True love is when two people love each other for the goodness which is in them.' So far as they become more like each other, Tom and Grace approach 'the likeness of Christ'. The Christian Remembrancer (October 1857) remarked that the discrepancy between the two is too pronounced: 'They are incapable of contact; there is never an instant's life in their intercourse. The one is flesh and blood, the other ghost or wraith.' There is little convincing contact, but this is due to the obstructive attitudes and the reliance on other techniques. The difference between the two is precisely what the author intended. It permits the interaction, with the ultimate union, of the flesh and spirit.

* * * *

One wonders why Kingsley's brand of 'muscular' Christianity should be regarded in our century with so much scorn. Literary critics today tend to adopt an attitude of cynical superiority towards him — because he endowed his heroes with overmuch spiritual and physical muscle, and because (apparently) he could speak naturally and with reverence of the love between man and woman. It is a strange quirk of fate that Kingsley, of all Victorian novelists, should lately have been held up as a figure of fun — in the recent publicity given to some of his private drawings which depict, in very literal terms, the union of the flesh and spirit. (One sketch is that of

Kingsley and his wife Fanny intimately embracing while ascending to heaven; another depicts the embracing couple aloft on a cross.) There are those who would see the Rector of Eversley as a sort of super sensualist with lurking eroticism below his gospel of divine love. Already in 1948 a critic felt disposed to see 'something most neurotic and nasty' in him. But Kingsley, for whom matter reflected spirit, regarded human love as a 'natural' medium for Providence. To quote Leslie Stephen: 'The love of man for woman, when sanctified by religious feeling, is, according to him, the greatest of all forces that work for individual or social good.' That view was expressed in 1877. One wonders why Kingsley's philosophy, when taken to its logical conclusion today, should be thought — in this permissive age — to undermine his integrity as a theologian and author. Is his moral vision — his social and spiritual message — any less valuable than that of Dickens, or inferior to that of so great a psychological moralist as George Eliot? He belonged, perhaps, to 'the second order of intellectuals', as Leslie Stephen phrased it. As an artist he was, no doubt, second rate. But this does not, surely, mean that his Christian didactics should be altogether depriated. His poetries were faulty because he believed in the practical manifestation of Providence — divine love and justice — in every life. Hence his 'Christian' art is not objective: the author's presence and views are far too obtrusive, his style too strident. But can we, who belong to an age of atheism, violence and sexual indulgence, devalue his integrity as a man and a Christian?

I would venture to say that what we need, today, is a literature with at least something of the moral and spiritual fibre as that which Kingsley propagated. In an age which seeks universal emancipation and the vindication of human rights, we need a literature that propoundes the development of spiritual muscle, and moral resilience, on the individual level. Kingsley's message to us — had he lived today — would be that if we wish to be free, we must be 'fit to be free'. He would have no doubt still maintain that it is one's personal acceptance of Christ — the Kingdom of God being within one — which is the most important step towards universal justice and freedom. The help and strength of Providence, Kingsley would tell us, will increase in proportion to the extent to which we acquire individual responsibility, and to the extent to which each member of society (regardless of class or cultural background) cultivates spiritual and moral resilience, or fitness. Kingsley, at any rate, would certainly have regarded much of today's literature as singularly lacking in moral and spiritual muscle. And, as far as the blatant treatment of human love (or sexuality) in today's literature is concerned, Kingsley would have been appalled — to say the least — at the total desacralization of what he considered a legitimate (or natural) channel of divine Providence.

With these observations, Mr Rector, it gives me great pleasure to confirm my acceptance of the Chair of English.
FOOTNOTES
The footnotes conform to the regulations of the MLA Style Sheet.
1. Edinburgh Review, CXLV (April, 1877), 446.
2. Ibid.
4. 'Charles Kingsley', Church Quarterly Review, IV (April, 1877), 232.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Justin McCarthy speaks of the 'vigour of speech' and 'rough voice' of Kingsley (Galaxy, ed. cit., p. 183); similarly the Edinburgh records that, in Westminster Abbey, his 'voice, more especially when raised in the occasional services in the nave, was harsh' (Edinburgh Review, ed. cit., p. 443).
9. MS in the Parish Collection in the Firestone Library, Princeton University, N.J.
16. In his Prefatory Memoir to the 1884 Macmillan edition of Alton Locke, Thomas Hughes quotes Kingsley as having declared in a public meeting on the People's Charter, 'I am a Church of England parson and a Chartist' (p. xix).
17. Raban, loc. cit.
20. Works, XXII, 237.
22. Ibid., p. 107.
25. Ibid., p. 122.
26. Page numbers are those of the 1884 Macmillan edition of Two Years Ago. (The Works of Charles Kingsley, Vol. VIII.)
29. Works, XXII, 418.
32. Works, XXII, 51.
33. Ibid., p. 57.
34. Ibid., p. 51.
35. Ibid., p. 421.
36. Ibid.
38. All Saints' Day and Other Sermons, ed. cit., p. 182.
39. Ibid., p. 158.
42. [Leslie Stephen], 'Hours in a Library', Cornhill Magazine, XXXV (1877), 427.
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