

Earthquakes, Tsunamis, and Mother Nature: Charles Kingsley's Implacable Ecology

Charles Kingsley's nature writing for children emphasizes the importance of attending to Nature's signals. In *Madam How and Lady Why* (1870), the child interlocutor wants to know why God allowed the catastrophic earthquake in Arica, Peru (27). The narrator-teacher offers the same explanation offered in *The Water-Babies* (1863): people who don't read Nature's warnings have only themselves to blame. Kingsley's personified forces, whether the fairies Mrs Bedonebyasyoudid (Mrs B) and Mrs Doasyouwouldbedoneby (Mrs D) in *The Water Babies* or *Madam How and Lady Why* in the book of that name, stress Nature's legibility as a motherly guide and disciplinarian. That Nature's discipline so often has fatal consequences might seem to mark her as wicked or at least as terrifying; however, Kingsley's narrator emphasizes Nature's law-abiding predictability.

Recent critical treatments of Kingsley's science writing have discussed Kingsley's unexpected links between a material world rooted in maternal bodies and a transcendental world surveyed by the Christian God (Prystash 2011); his ecocritical synthesis between material fact and imaginative ethics (Hamlin 2012); and his use of a personified Mother Nature (Sheley 2012). I propose that Kingsley's depiction of Nature corrects the sentimental Mother Nature often associated with childhood and offers a feminine nature with more pertinence to twenty-first century ecological crises. Kingsley's taxonomies of feminine Nature as mechanical (*Madam How*, Mrs B), as teleological (*Lady Why*), and as ethical (Mrs D) have implications for how readers relate to nature, especially in relation to the implied (male) child reader. Kingsley's Nature teaches, judges, and executes. Human children, through induction and experimentation, have the responsibility to learn how things work and respect for natural process. Healthy societies understand Nature's warnings, read her signs, and work within her guidelines. Doomed societies do not. No power can abrogate Nature's mechanisms or mitigate catastrophe if her warnings are not heeded.

Kingsley's affirmation of nature's power puts the onus on humans to accept their place in the larger scheme of the world. Though he exhibits confidence that European scientific advances make the world better, Kingsley warns readers that any action must be guided by respectful observation, moral awareness, and teleological humility.