

George E. Condon

Ach! Wer Ist John Maynard?

When Hildegard Kroeger was growing up in a little town in the Black Forest of Germany, she had to commit to memory the epic story of that heroic American, John Maynard, as immortalized in a poem by Theodor Fontane.

Her husband, Dr. Peter Kroeger, who is a research scientist in Cleveland with the General Electric Co., was raised in Hamburg, Germany, but he also had to learn by rote the inspiring tale of heroism starring John Maynard.



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As a matter of fact, almost everyone who went to primary school in Germany is familiar with the great John Maynard and his wonderful self-sacrifice as the helmsman of the passenger ship that caught fire on a trip from Detroit to Buffalo.

"THE FIRST THING we wanted to see in America," agree the Kroegers, "was Lake Erie, because that was the lake John Maynard had sailed on. Then we wanted to see Buffalo, because it was on a Buffalo shore that John Maynard had beached his burning ship. Lastly, we wanted to see John Maynard's grave. Then we found out that nobody in America ever heard of poor John Maynard! It's very strange!"

It is very strange.

"Who was John Maynard?" I asked the kids.

"Is he on television?" they answered in childish treble.

"The treble with you kids is that you don't study your school stuff," I said.

"Who is John Maynard?" I asked one of my more erudite colleagues.

"HMMM," HE SAID, after pondering the question. "Ken Maynard was a very big

hero in the silent films. Maybe John Maynard was his brother or something. I give up. Who was John Maynard?"

I pulled Theodor Fontane's poem out of my pocket and read:

"John Maynard!

Wer ist John Maynard?

John Maynard war unser Steuermann,
aushielt er, bis er das Ufer gewann,
er hat uns gerettet, er tragt die Kron',
er starb fur uns, unsre Liebe sein Lohn.
John Maynard.

"The heck you say," whistled my colleague. "He must have been quite a guy."

"I'll read you the rest of the poem," I said.

"No thanks," he said. "Later maybe."

That's an American for you. Always in a hurry. Too busy to hear how John Maynard's ship caught fire when it was 20 miles out of Buffalo, and how John Maynard stayed at the wheel and guided the burning craft onto a Buffalo beach, thus saving all the passengers but losing his own life. He was the only casualty.

A LOT OF POETS WROTE about this heroic American; among them no less a literary figure than Horatio Alger Jr. The story of heroism went all around the world and became part of the literature of many nations, including, as we have noted, that of Germany. But poor old John has been forgotten in America.

"I wonder if people from Europe visit John Maynard's grave in Buffalo?" mused Hildegard Kroeger.

"An interesting question," I said. "I wonder?"

I called a knowledgeable Buffalo Evening News writer, Dick Burke, and put the question to him.

"Golly," said Burke. "John who?"

Wer ist John Maynard?