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Pagination in **blue brackets** refers to page numbers in the original article: e.g., [ 73 / 74 ] indicates the end of page 73 and the beginning of page 74. Footnotes are **in red** for greater accessibility.

## John Maynard of Lake Erie: The Genesis of a Legend

By G e o r g e S a l o m o n

<sup>1</sup>Two or three generations ago, the legend of John Maynard, the heroic pilot of Lake Erie, was widely known not only around Buffalo but all over the United States and even abroad. How he rescued the passengers and crew of a burning steamship at the cost of his own life was told in both verse and prose, and recited in uncounted parlors and lecture halls. Today he is almost forgotten in this country; but, as we shall see, his renown lives on overseas in a foreign tongue.

Whether this hero of song and story was a real or mythical personage does not seem to have been investigated until long after his fame had waned. Frederick J. Shepard apparently was the first to suggest, in 1927, that the legend of John Maynard might have been derived from the conflagration of the steamship *Erie*, off Silver Creek, New York, on August 9, 1841, in which a wheelman named Luther Fuller was burned to death at his post. Shepard also identified the various literary renderings of the story.<sup>2</sup>

The findings of this inquiry were recapitulated, with some additional information, by Marvin A. Rapp, Manfred P. Fleischer and others.<sup>3</sup> However, all accounts to date are full of rumors, guesswork and loose ends. Thus, Shepard and his successors make much of a report according to which Fuller did not really die in the fire, but survived instead, under [ 73 / 74 ] an alias, to a rum-soaked old age; but they do not examine the exceedingly shaky evidence for this connection. They do not explain how the various renderings of the story came into being, nor do they account for such intriguing details as the renaming of the hero from Fuller to Maynard. The present documented history of the legend provides solutions to these puzzles and some others.

The history of the *Erie* disaster has been told many times. The facts are well authenticated: the explosion of several turpentine jars, incautiously placed above the ship's boilers; the lightning-like spread of the flames through the freshly painted vessel; the shortage of lifeboats; the scenes of bravery and despair; and the horrifying death toll of some 200 persons. Detailed reports of the catastrophe appeared in the Buffalo newspapers and were widely reprinted in other cities. In addition, the proceedings of the coroner's jury which investigated the conflagration were printed in the local press and elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> The many later descriptions in books and pamphlets<sup>5</sup> seem to be based wholly or mainly on these accounts.

At least three crew members were reported to have lost their lives in ways comparable to those later attributed to the legendary John Maynard. The second engineer, John Allen, was trapped while trying to keep the ship's machinery going, and perished in the fire.<sup>6</sup> A wheelman, Jerome McBride, was rescued with 26 other persons by the steamer *De Witt Clinton*, but died of burns a few days later.<sup>7</sup> And Luther Fuller, the wheelman on duty, stayed at his post amid the flames, precisely as Maynard was later (to be) credited with doing. The ill-fated ship's captain, Thomas J. Titus, subsequently testified:

...I was the last person who left the *Erie*; when I left her, I heard much confusion but saw no person: I think Fuller *remained at the wheel and never left it until burned to death*; he was always a resolute man in obeying orders.<sup>8</sup>

Still another wheelman, James Lafferty (sometimes misspelled Laverty or Loverty) came to a less heroic end. He was picked up by the *Clinton* and for many decades lived on ingloriously in his home town of Erie, Pennsylvania, finally becoming a town drunkard who begged his way around the local taverns with a fiddle.<sup>9</sup> He died, about 87 years old, in the Erie County Almshouse, on November 22, 1900.<sup>10</sup>

After his death, poor Lafferty innocently became the cause of a persistent libel against the memory of Luther Fuller. In 1912, an aged carpenter in Erie, Andrew W. Blila, reportedly claimed that Fuller had not in fact died on the *Erie*. He had escaped, so the story went, after everybody else was gone; had lived on under the alias of James Rafferty; served a prison

sentence for counterfeiting; became a notorious tippler and cadger of drinks and died at the age of 87 in the Erie County Almshouse, on November 22, 1900!<sup>11</sup> [ 74 / 75 ]

Blila claimed to have been employed on the *Erie* as a call boy at the time of the catastrophe, although this cannot be confirmed.<sup>12</sup> He also said he knew Fuller when both were young, in their mutual home town of Harborcreek, just outside Erie. Be this as it may, the details that Blila cites leave no doubt whatever that his statement regarding Fuller's alleged later years arises from confusion with Lafferty's old age. Although frequently retold, the story affords no valid grounds for doubting that Fuller really died a hero's death.

## II

About four years after the disaster, the *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser* printed an anonymous short story which was plainly inspired by the tragedy, but wishfully replaced what was, with what might have been.<sup>13</sup> Here the hero is called not Luther Fuller but John Maynard, and his exploit has taken on the form as we know it: he saves every life on board but his own.

The complete text follows:

It was on a pleasant May morning that a steam vessel was riding at anchor, opposite the town of Buffalo, on Lake Erie. You know, I dare say, that Erie is one of those sea-lakes for which America is so famous; and as you stand on its shore, and see the green waves dashing in one after another, you might well think you were looking at the green ocean itself. The *Jersey* – for that was the name of the steamer – was dressed out with many  
 5  
 10  
 bright flags; the Blue Peter, the signal of immediate sailing, was at her main-mast head; porters were hurrying along the narrow quay that juts out into the lake; boatmen quarrelling with each other for passengers; travellers hurrying backwards

15 and forwards to look for their luggage; friends  
 shaking hands and bidding each other farewell;  
 idlers lounging about, with their hands in their  
 pockets; cab drivers jangling for a larger fare;  
 and all the various kinds of bustle and confusion  
 20 that attend the departure of a packet from a water-  
 ing place.

But presently the anchor was hove, the paddles  
 began to turn, the sails were set, and, leaving a  
 broad track of foam behind her, the *Jersey* stood  
 25 westward, and held on her course for the town of  
 Erie. It was a bright-blue day; and, as hour  
 after hour went by, some mingled in the busy con-  
 versation on politics; some sat apart, and calcu-  
 lated the gains of the shop or the counting house;  
 30 some were wrapped up in the book with which  
 they were engaged; and one or two, with whom  
 time seemed to hang heavily, composed themselves  
 to sleep. In short, one and all were like men  
 who thought that, let danger come to them when  
 35 it might, at least it would not be that day.

[ 75 / 76 ]

It drew towards four in the afternoon, and the  
 steamer which had hitherto been keeping the mid-  
 dle of the lake, stood southward; Erie, the place  
 to which it was bound, lying on the southern side.  
 40 Old John Maynard was at the wheel; a bluff,  
 weather-beaten sailor, tanned by many a burning  
 summer day, and by many a winter tempest. He  
 had truly learnt to be content with his situation:  
 none could ever say that they had heard him re-  
 45 pine at his hard labor and scanty pay. He had,  
 in the worst time, a cheerful word and a kind look  
 for those with whom he was thrown; cast often  
 enough into bad company, he tried, at least, and

generally succeeded, in saying or doing something  
50 for its good. He was known, from one end of  
Lake Erie to the other, by the name of honest John  
Maynard, and the secret of his honesty to his  
neighbors was his love of God.

The land was about ten miles off, when the cap-  
55 tain coming up from his cabin, cried to a sailor,  
“Dick Fletcher, What’s all that smoke I see com-  
ing out from the hold?”

It’s from the engine-room, sir, I guess,” said  
the man.

60 “Down with you, then, and let me know.”

The sailor began descending the ladder by which  
you go to the hold; but scarcely had he disappear-  
ed beneath the deck, when he came up with much  
greater speed.

65 “The hold’s on fire, sir,” he said to the captain,  
who was by this time standing close to him.

The captain rushed down and found the account  
too true. Some sparks had fallen on a bundle of  
tow; no one had seen the accident; and now not  
70 only much of the luggage, but the sides of the ves-  
sel were in a smouldering flame.

All hands, passengers as well as sailors, were  
called together, and two lines being made, one on  
each side of the hold, buckets of water were pass-  
75 ed and repassed; they were filled from the lake,  
and flew along a line of ready hands, were dash-  
ed hissing on the burning mass, and then passed  
on to the other side to be refilled. For some  
few moments, it seemed as if the flames were sub-  
80 dued.

[ 76 / 77 ]

In the meantime, the women on board were clus-  
tering round John Maynard, the only man unem-

ployed who was capable of answering their ques-  
 tions. “How far is it to land?” “How long  
 85 shall we be getting in?” “Is it very deep?” –  
 “Is there no boat?” “Can they see us from the  
 shore?” The helmsman answered as well as he  
 could. There was no boat; it had been left in Buf-  
 falo to be mended; they might be seven miles from  
 90 the shore; they would probably be in in forty min-  
 utes; he could not tell how far the fire had reached.  
 “But, to speak the truth,” he added, “we are all  
 in great danger; and I think if there were less *talk-*  
*ing* and a little more *praying*, it would be the bet-  
 95 ter for us, and none the worse for the boat!”

“How’s her head?” shouted the captain.

“West sou’west,” answered Maynard.

“Keep her sou’ and by the west,” cried the captain.

“We must go ashore anywhere.”

100 It happened that a draft of wind drove back the  
 flames, which soon began to blaze up more furious-  
 ly against the saloon; and the partition betwixt it  
 and the whole hold was soon on fire. The long  
 wreaths of smoke began to find their way through  
 105 the sky-light; and the captain seeing this, ordered  
 all the women forward. The engineer put on his  
 utmost steam; the American flag was run up, and  
 reversed in token of distress; water was flung over  
 the sails, to make them hold the wind. And still  
 110 John Maynard stood by the wheel, though now he  
 was cut off by a sheet of smoke and flame, from the  
 ship’s crew.

Greater and greater grew the heat! the engin-  
 eers fled from the engine room; the passengers  
 115 were clustering round the ship’s bow, the sailors  
 were sawing planks on which to lash the women;

the boldest were throwing off their coats and waist-coats, and preparing for one long struggle for life. And still the coast grew plainer and plainer; the  
 120 paddles, as yet, worked well; they could not be more than a mile from the shore; and boats were even now starting to their assistance.

“John Maynard!” cried the captain.

“Aye, aye, sir!” said John.

125 “Could you hold out five minutes longer?”

“I’ll try, sir.”

And he did try; the flames came nearer and nearer; a sheet of smoke would sometimes almost suffocate him; his hair was singed: his blood  
 130 seemed on fire with the great heat. Crouching as far back as he could, he held the wheel firmly with his left hand, till the flesh shriveled, and the muscle creaked in the flame; and then he stretched forth his right, and bore the agony without a scream  
 135 or a groan. It was enough for him that he heard the cheer of the sailors to the approaching boats; the cry of the captain, “the women first, then every man for himself, and God for us all.” And they were the last sounds that he heard. How he  
 140 perished was not known, whether dizzied by the smoke, he lost his footing in endeavoring to come forward, and fell overboard, or whether he was suffocated by dense smoke, his comrades could not tell. At the moment the vessel struck, the  
 145 boats were at her side; the passengers, sailors, and captain leaped into them. or swam for their lives; all, save he to whom they owed everything, escaped.

He had died the death of a Christian hero – I  
 150 had almost said, of a martyr; his spirit was com-

mended into his Father's hands, and his body sleeps  
in peace by the green side of Lake Erie.

When and by whom was the actual event transmuted into this flight of fancy? In Dr. Rapp's opinion, the story of Fuller's heroism had become a widely repeated local folk tale by 1845. The *Helmsman* story, he thinks, is a somewhat modified recording of this tale by a traveling writer. Rapp does not discuss whether the supposed storytellers or the author of the printed piece transformed the disaster into a rescue, although he definitely attributes the change in the hero's name to the latter.<sup>14</sup>

I have found no evidence of any such oral transmission or popular mythmaking. An editorial note preceding the story in the *Advertiser* betrays no familiarity with folk tales or legendary hero[e]s. The local editor would have been in a position to know of such matters. But he does not even refer to Fuller; all he says is this:

THE HELMSMAN OF LAKE ERIE. — The story under this head in today's paper will recall to the recollection of many readers the heroic self-sacrificing devotion of McBride, the Helmsman of the *Erie*, who, during the awful burning of that boat, remained at his post until nearly consumed by the flames and when further effort was unavailing. The story is well told, but by one more familiar with the nav[i]gation of the ocean than that of the lakes. Boats do not ride at anchor off Buffalo.

Indeed, there is positive reason to believe that John Maynard came into being, not as a folk hero like John Henry or Casey Jones, but as a literary creation: for the story's two most conspicuous departures from the facts of the *Erie* fire can be traced with fair likelihood to printed sources.

One of these is the renaming of the hero. The author discarded Fuller's name — presumably to avoid the impression that a factual account of the *Erie* conflagration was intended.<sup>15</sup> The name adopted instead was apparently not pulled out of the air. Among the members of the coroner's jury was a certain Robert H. Maynard; in all likelihood, the author saw the name in the published proceed- [ 78 / 79 ] ings and borrowed it, consciously or otherwise.<sup>16</sup> To assume that he hit on it independently would stretch the limits of coincidence.

The helmsman's success in rescuing everyone on shipboard except himself also seems to have been suggested by a printed source: an anonymous book entitled *Steamboat Disasters and Railroad Accidents in the United States*.<sup>17</sup> In this gruesome work a detailed report on the *Erie*, including a long elegiac poem, is directly preceded by a narrative headed: "Conflagration of the *Phoenix*, on Lake Champlain, on the Night of September 5, 1819; wherein, owing to the Commander, not a Soul was Lost." To a writer with any imagination, the dramatic possibilities of merging the two incidents must have been plain.

That the author depended on printed information for at least some of his raw material is very likely inasmuch as he was working at a distance. Not only was he unfamiliar with Buffalo Harbor, [his vocabulary, as Shepard and others have pointed out, suggests that he was an Englishman],<sup>18</sup> but certainly an American writing for Americans would not have thought it necessary to explain at the outset what the Great Lakes are (lines 3-8).

Even with these clues, unfortunately, the author's identity remains a mystery. Not only does the story lack a by-line, but the introductory note sounds as if even the editor did not know whose work it was – which makes it virtually certain that "The Helmsman of Lake Erie" was not originally written for the Buffalo paper. Shepard conjectured that it might have been borrowed from another periodical, and the absence of any credit, combined with the British locutions, points to it being an unauthorized reprint from a British publication.<sup>19</sup>

### III

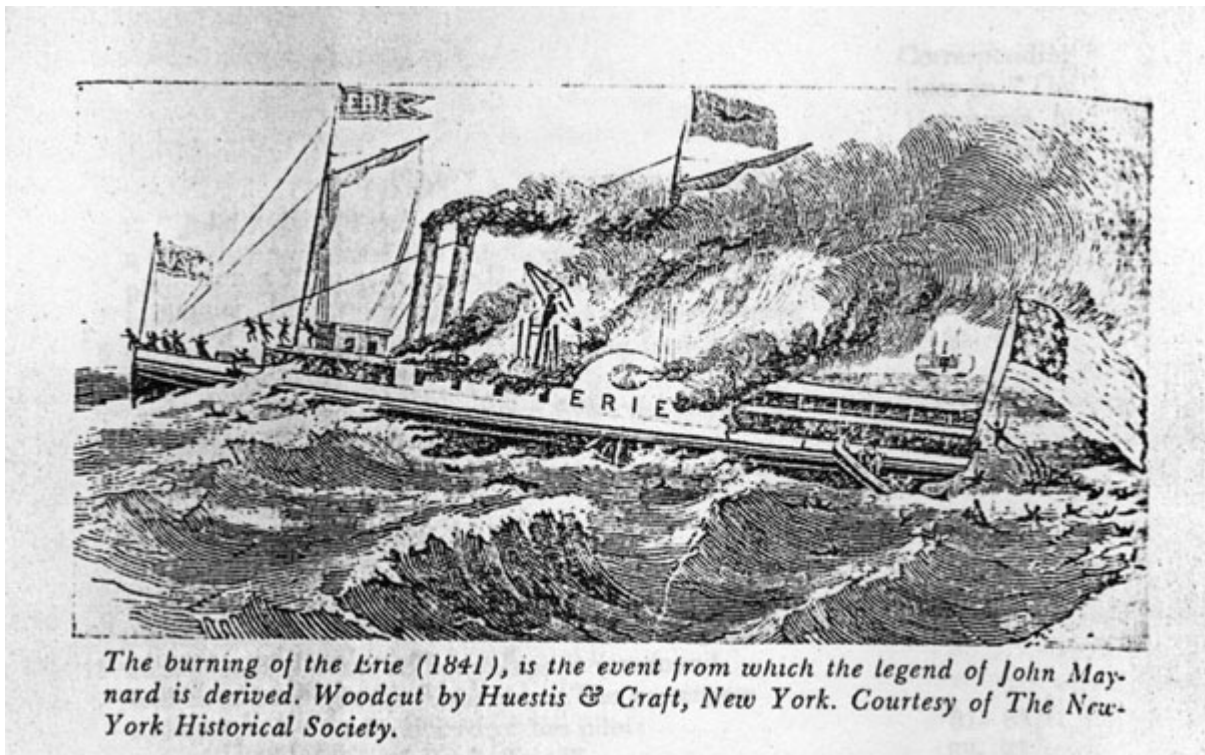
"The Helmsman of Lake Erie" appears to have been quickly forgotten, but not until it had been noticed and the survival of the Maynard legend assured by a once famous man, John Bartholomew Gough (1817-1886).

In his time, Gough was America's leading apostle of temperance. A native of England, he came to the United States at the age of 12 and soon entered the bookbinding trade. As a young man, he became a drunkard, but was converted to total abstinence in 1842. Thereafter, he devoted his life to the fight against alcohol and lectured with immense success both in the United States and in his native land.

Gough's lectures and writings abound with anecdotes, parables and jokes. He continually gathered tales illustrating man's depravity or nobility, as the case might be, and the evils of drink.<sup>20</sup> Evidently, he had a reliable memory for such morsels:

I was constantly on the lookout, in travelling, conversation, reading, strolling the streets, in society, for illustra- [ 79 / 80 ] tions , or facts, that I could use for temperance lectures; not exactly storing them in my mind, but letting them float to the surface, ready at the moment when required.<sup>21</sup>

Since brave seamen and ships in distress were favorite subjects at the time, many heroic tales with a nautical cast swam into Gough's ken – among them “The Helmsman of Lake Erie.” He turned the story into a brief prose narration or recitation entitled, “The Pilot – A Thrilling Incident”; unfortunately, he nowhere tells us when or for what occasion. The earliest publication that I have found dates from 1869,<sup>22</sup> but, as we shall see below, the piece must have been in print by 1866 at the latest. It soon became a popular number; though apparently not included in any of Gough's own works,<sup>23</sup> it was printed with his name in several of the period's countless elocution books.<sup>24</sup>



Though Gough does not name his source, the piece beyond doubt derives directly from “The Helmsman of Lake Erie.” Simpler and briefer as it is, it contains hardly an element without a counterpart in the older story.

Gough made one important alteration: he routed the ship toward Buffalo, from Detroit – no doubt because he thought a thrilling escape most dramatic just before the end of the voyage. In addition, he [\[End of page 80 / Continued on page 82\]](#)

THE PILOT – A THRILLING INCIDENT [ p. 81 ]		Corresponding lines in “The Helmsman of Lake Erie”:
	John Maynard was well-known in the lake district as	50-53
	a God-fearing, honest and intelligent pilot. He was	
	pilot on a steamboat from Detroit to Buffalo. One	
	summer afternoon – at that time those steamers seldom	
5	carried boats – smoke was seen ascending from below, and	54-65
	the captain called out:	
	“Simpson, go below, and see what the matter is	
	down there.”	
	Simpson came up with his face pale as ashes and	
10	said,	
	“Captain, the ship is on fire.”	
	Then “Fire! fire! fire!” on shipboard.	
	All hands were called up. Buckets of water were	72-78
	dashed on the fire, but in vain. There were large quan-	
15	tities of rosin and tar on board, and it was found	
	useless to attempt to save the ship. The passengers	
	rushed forward and inquired of the pilot:	81-85
	“How far are we from Buffalo?”	89-93
	“Seven miles.”	
20	“How long before we can reach there?”	
	“Three-quarters of an hour at our present rate	

	of steam.”	
	“Is there any danger?”	
	“Danger! here – see the smoke bursting out – go	
25	forward if you would save your lives.”	
	Passengers and crew – men, women and children –	114-115
	crowded the forward part of the ship. John Maynard	
	stood at the helm. The flames burst forth in a sheet	110-112
	of fire; clouds of smoke arose. The captain cried	
30	out through his trumpet:	
	“John Maynard!”	
	“Aye, aye, sir!”	
	“Are you at the helm?”	
	“Aye, aye, sir!”	
35	“How does she head?”	96-99
	“Southeast by east, sir.”	
	“Head her southeast and run her on shore,” said the	
	captain.	
	Nearer, nearer, yet nearer, she approached the	119-121
40	shore.	
	Again the captain cried out:	123-126
	“John Maynard?”	
	The response came feebly this time, “Aye, aye, sir!”	
	“Can you hold on five minutes longer, John?” he said.	
45	“By God’s help, I will.”	
	The old man’s hair was scorched from the scalp, one	129-135
	hand disabled, his knee upon the stanchion, and his	
	teeth set, with his other hand upon the wheel, he stood	
	firm as a rock. He beached the ship: every man, woman	144-148
50	and child was saved, as John Maynard dropped, and his	
	spirit took flight to its God.	150-151

shifted the time from May to summer; he named the sailor who reports the fire Simpson instead of Dick Fletcher; he had Maynard rather than the captain order the passengers forward; and he explained the absence of lifeboats as normal practice, whereas in “The Helmsman” the boat (one boat!) had been left behind for repairs. Three details were added: the rosin and tar on board, the captain’s speaking trumpet, and Maynard’s posture amid the flames with “his knee upon the stanchion, and his teeth set.” In every other way, Gough’s narration follows its model though much detail – including the name of the ship – is omitted.

#### IV

Gough’s “Pilot” must have been printed by 1866. For in that year it fell into the hands of Horatio Alger, Jr. (1834-1899), then on the threshold of his career as a producer of rags-to-riches stories. Alger recast his find in ballad form, creating what came to be America’s favorite rendering of the legend.

Many years later the author himself described the genesis of the poem. In the summer of 1866, he had heard “The Pilot” read during a children’s service at the Five Points Mission in New York and, upon inquiring about the origin of the story, had been referred to “a weekly religious paper of recent date in the reading room of the Young Men’s Christian Association.”<sup>25</sup> There he learned that “it had been used by John B. Gough in one of his popular lectures,” and that evening he found himself inspired, despite oppressive summer heat, to turn the prose piece into verse. He sent the stanzas “to a juvenile magazine published in Boston,” received a fee of \$3.00, and thought that would be the end of it; but to his great surprise the poem soon began to be widely reprinted in recitation books.

Alger added that he knew nothing about his hero beyond what was to be found in the ballad. He believed Maynard to have been a real person, but “who he was, where he was born, and where he performed the heroic act which has made his name so widely known I am afraid will never be ascertained.”<sup>26</sup>

The poem was published in the January 1868 issue of *The Student and Schoolmate*, a children’s magazine in which Alger’s first full-length work, *Ragged Dick*, had just appeared.<sup>27</sup> In this authentic edition, the ballad reads:

**JOHN MAYNARD***A Ballad of Lake Erie*

'Twas on Lake Erie's broad expanse  
 One bright midsummer day,  
 The gallant steamer Ocean Queen  
 Swept proudly on her way.

5 Bright faces clustered on the deck,  
 Or, leaning o'er the side,  
 Watched carelessly the featherly [*sic*] foam  
 That flecked the rippling tide.

Ah, who beneath that cloudless sky  
 10 That smiling bends serene  
 Could dream that danger awful, vast,  
 Impended o'er the scene, –  
 Could dream that ere an hour had sped  
 That frame of sturdy oak  
 15 Would sink beneath the lake's blue waves,  
 Blackened with fire and smoke.

[ 82 / 83 ]



*The hero facing the flames.*

*Wood engraving in the first printing of the ballad, "John Maynard,"*

*by Horatio Alger, Jr. (1868). Courtesy of the New York Public Library.*

A seaman sought the Captain's side,  
 A moment whispered low;  
 The Captain's swarthy face grew pale,  
 20 He hurried down below.  
 Alas, too late! Though quick and sharp,  
 And clear his orders came,  
 No human efforts could avail  
 To quench th' insidious flame.

25 The bad news quickly reached the deck,  
 It sped from lip to lip,  
 And ghastly faces everywhere  
 Looked from the doomed ship.  
 "Is there no hope – no chance of life?"  
 30 A hundred lips implore.  
 "But one," the Captain made reply,  
 To run the ship on shore."

A sailor whose heroic soul  
 That hour should yet reveal,  
 35 By name John Maynard, Eastern-born,  
 Stood calmly at the wheel.  
 "Head her south-east!" the Captain shouts,  
 Above the smothered roar,  
 "Head her south-east without delay!  
 40 Make for the nearest shore."

No terror pales the helmsman's cheek,  
 Or clouds his dauntless eye.  
 As in a sailor's measured tone  
 His voice responds, "Aye, aye!"  
 45 Three hundred souls, the steamer's freight  
 Crowd forward wild with fear,

While at the stern the dreaded flames  
Above the deck appear.

John Maynard watched the nearing flames,  
50 But still, with steady hand  
He grasped the wheel, and steadfastly  
He steered the ship to land.  
“John Maynard, can you still hold out?”  
He heard the Captain cry:  
55 A voice from out the stifling smoke  
Faintly responds, “Aye, aye!”

But half a mile! A hundred hands  
Stretch eagerly to shore.  
But half a mile! That distance sped,  
60 Peril shall all be o’er.  
But half a mile? Yet stay, the flames  
No longer slowly creep,  
But gather round that helmsman bold  
With fierce impetuous sweep.

65 “John Maynard!” with an anxious voice  
The Captain cries once more,  
“Stand by the wheel five minutes yet  
And we shall reach the shore.”  
Through flame and smoke that dauntless heart  
70 Responded firmly still,  
Unawed, though face to face with death,  
“With God’s help I will!”

The flames approach with giant strides,  
They scorch his hands and brow,  
75 One arm disabled seeks his side,  
Ah, he is conquered now!

But no, his teeth are firmly set,  
 He crushes down his pain,  
 His knee upon the stanchion pressed  
 80 He guides the ship again.

One moment yet, one moment yet!  
 Brave heart, thy task is o'er,  
 The pebbles grate beneath the keel,  
 The steamer touches shore.  
 85 Three hundred grateful voices rise  
 In praise to God that He  
 Hath saved them from the fearful fire,  
 And from the engulfing sea.

But where is he, that helmsman bold?  
 90 The Captain saw him reel, –  
 His nerveless hands released their task,  
 He sank beside the wheel.  
 The wave received his lifeless corse  
 Blackened with smoke and fire.  
 95 God rest him! Never hero had  
 A nobler funeral pyre!

In the *Student and Schoolmate* printing, a footnote names the source of Alger's inspiration:

The incident upon which this ballad is based occurred some years since, and has been used by Mr. Gough as a powerful and effective illustration in one of his lectures.

A wood engraving [ cf. p. 83 ] shows a youthful John Maynard at the wheel; for Alger, unlike his predecessors, does not describe the hero as an old man. Other details, too, have been discarded: Maynard is no longer explicitly characterized as "honest" and "intelligent"; the starting point and destination of the voyage remain unidentified; the lack of boats and the presence of inflammable materials are not mentioned, nor is the captain's speaking trumpet;

and the passengers' anxious inquiries about the distance and sailing time to shore no longer appear in the dialogue.

On the other hand, Alger adds some touches of his own. He gives the ship a new name, *Ocean Queen* (line 3),<sup>28</sup> and sets the number of passengers at 300 (45, 85). Not knowing Maynard's antecedents ("where he was born...I am afraid will never be ascertained"), the Massachusetts-born Alger arbitrarily makes him an Easterner (35). When the fire is reported, the captain goes below deck to investigate (20); and after their rescue the passengers thank God (85-88), which they had neglected to do in Gough's rendering.

In style and structure, Alger's version is a good deal more sophisticated than its model. A prediction of disaster (9-16) sets the mood. Maynard does not make his appearance until the panic reaches a climax (33-36). In Gough's narrative, smoke envelops Maynard even when the captain first orders him to steer shoreward; in Alger's, he evidently is not hidden from sight until later, and a dialogue is added at the point when the captain can no longer see him (53-56).

To the modern reader the ballad may nevertheless seem conventional and wooden, but the contemporary public thought otherwise. "For twenty years," says one of Alger's biographers, "it was one of the most popular pieces at "exercises" held by schools and societies . . . Without it no oratorical contest was complete."<sup>29</sup> Alger included the piece, now titled simply "John Maynard," in a slim volume of [ 84 / 85 ] verse he published in 1875,<sup>30</sup> but by this time the editors of anthologies had already begun to reprint it.

The anthologists did not do well by Alger. Some of the reprints do not name him as author; and all or most of those published before the turn of the century present a mangled rendering in which twelve lines (53-64) are deleted, leaving four others (49-52) hanging as an odd half stanza.<sup>31</sup> This conspicuously disfigured text seems to have originated in Osgood's book, where it appeared side by side with Gough's "Pilot".<sup>32</sup> The deleted passage contains the dialogue (lines 53-56) between Maynard and the captain which Alger added to the story line borrowed from Gough; Osgood may well have cut it to make the ballad conform to the companion prose piece. That later anthologists did not restore the full text would seem to be due to no deeper reason than carelessness.

Paradoxically, the legend of John Maynard was to find its most durable form in a foreign language, at the hands of an author who never saw the United States: the German Theodor Fontane (1819-1898).

Fontane is known as the father of the realistic middle-class novel in Germany, and also as a distinguished writer of occasional and narrative verse. Early in life he became thoroughly familiar with English literature, an interest deepened by repeated stints as a newspaperman in England during the 1850's. Before and after these visits, he belonged to a literary club in Berlin in which the ancient Scottish folk ballads were favorites; his "Archibald Douglas," first read in 1854, transposes the Scottish style into German with magnificent effect, and has become his best-known work.

In his later years, Fontane returned to the ballad form, now adapting it wholeheartedly to the contemporary world of railroads, steamships and colossal engineering works. Again the English-speaking countries supplied much of his inspiration. When a large new railroad bridge near Dundee in Scotland collapsed during 1879, plunging a passenger train into the Firth of Tay, he turned the incident into a dramatic ballad, which became an over- [ 85 / 86 ] night success. Probably about the same time, he wrote his version of "John Maynard,"<sup>33</sup> a close counterpart, in structure and style, of the poem about the Tay disaster.

Though Fontane seems to have left no record of his source, internal evidence leaves little doubt that he, like Alger, worked from Gough's "Pilot". His rendering contains several details found in none of the other versions: the ship (here called *Schwalbe*, i.e., "Swallow") is bound for Buffalo from Detroit; the fire occurs just before the end of the voyage; and the captain uses a speaking trumpet.<sup>34</sup>

But though Fontane used the same raw material as Alger, what he made of it is vastly different. Instead of formal stanzas, he employs lines of loose, at times almost prosaic, rhythm, simply rhymed in pairs. Where Alger's narration is rhetorical, Fontane's is concise, even clipped. Dialogue is used freely and dramatically, and the story is reduced to essentials: for example, the efforts to put out the fire are not described. Alger makes little of the drama of diminishing time and distance. Fontane turns the ticking-away of precious minutes into a

recurrent theme (“still twenty minutes to Buffalo,” then “fifteen”, finally “ten”), steadily building up tension toward the climax.

Unlike his predecessors, Fontane was not content to lay the hero to rest without suitable honors. In a freely invented epilogue, thousands of Buffalo’s grateful citizens accompany Maynard to a flower-covered grave, while all the church bells toll in the hushed city. With the brief, moving words graven on the tomb, the poem closes.

Fontane’s ballad soon became a favorite in the German-speaking countries and, unlike Alger’s, gained a permanent place in literature. Probably few Americans living today could identify John Maynard; but thousands of miles away in Central Europe, generations upon generations of school children still memorize the record of his heroic deed.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> For advice and assistance, I am indebted to Dr. Richard G. Salomon, Professor Emeritus of History, Kenyon College, Gambier, Ohio; Miss Alice J. Pickup, Librarian, Buffalo & Erie County Historical Society; Miss Esther Klugiewicz, Erie (Pa.) Public Library; Miss Evelyn Vradenburgh, Congressional Library, Boston; Mr. Joachim Schobess, Librarian, Theodor Fontane Archive, Potsdam, East Germany.

<sup>2</sup> Frederick J. Shepard, “A Wandering Legend of Lake Erie: John Maynard,” *Buffalo Evening News*, July 16, 1927.

<sup>3</sup> Marvin A. Rapp, “John Maynard – Lake Erie Hero,” *Inland Seas*, XII (1956), 3-15; Manfred P. Fleischer, “John Maynard – Dichtung und Wahrheit,” *Zeitung für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte*, XVI (1964), 168-173. See also articles by Rollin Palmer, *Buffalo Evening News*, October 27, 1945; Ed Kowalewski, *ibid.*, January 2, 1947.

<sup>4</sup> *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*, August 12-17, 1841; *New York Herald*, August 16-20.

<sup>5</sup> For example: *Steamboat Disasters and Railroad Accidents in the United States* (revised ed., Worcester: Warren Lazell, 1846), pp. 239-252; James O. Brayman, editor, *Thrilling Adventures by Land and Sea* (New York: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1855), pp. 250-257,

reprinted *Inland Seas*, IV (1948), 195-199; James T. Lloyd, Lloyd's *Steamboat Directory and Disasters on the Western Waters* (Cincinnati: James T. Lloyd & Co., 1856, pp. 121-126; Harlan Hatcher, *Lake Erie* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1945), pp. 163-164.

<sup>6</sup> *Advertiser*, August 11; *New York Daily Express*, August 17. Allen's name in *Express*, August 16.

<sup>7</sup> *Advertiser*, August 11 and 13.

<sup>8</sup> *Express*, August 17 (reprinted from *Advertiser*, August 12); italics in the original. Also in *Herald*, August 16.

<sup>9</sup> John Miller, *A Twentieth Century History of Erie County, Pennsylvania*, I (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Co., 1909), pp. 662-663. Miller mistakenly asserts that Lafferty was at the wheel during the fire.

<sup>10</sup> Information from Erie County Hospital. (Mrs. Darleen Hohne, Secretary) in letter dated September 23, 1964.

<sup>11</sup> Shephard, *op. cit.*; repeated by Rapp, Fleischer and others. Blila's full name and trade from *Erie City Directory*, 1899.

<sup>12</sup> He once described at length how he was saved by McBride and picked up by the *Clinton* (Miller, *op. cit.*, I, pp. 663-664); but his name does not appear with McBride's and Lafferty's on the list of persons taken aboard by that ship (*Advertiser*, August 11; *Erie Weekly Gazette*, August 12), nor in the provisional lists of the lost.

<sup>13</sup> *Advertiser*, September 12, 1845. The story was soon reprinted, with trifling changes, in a local magazine, the *Western Literary Messenger* (October 4, pp. 134-135). The reprint credits the *Advertiser*.

<sup>14</sup> Rapp, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>15</sup> The same reason probably applies to the change in the name of the ship, from *Erie* to *Jersey*. Alternately, the author may have felt that a lake, a city (line 26) and a ship all bearing the same name might be confusing or monotonous. I have not been able to determine why the name *Jersey* was chosen.

<sup>16</sup> R. H. Maynard is mentioned, for example, in the *Advertiser*, August 17, and the *New York Herald*, August 16, 1841. During 1840, he lived on Seneca Street east of Washington Street and was a trustee of the Buffalo Orphan Asylum. *Buffalo City Directory, 1840*, pp. 21, 116.

<sup>17</sup> *Op. cit.* The copyright notice indicates that the first edition of this work was published in 1842, by Dorr, Howland & Co. of Worcester, Mass. Neither Fuller's exploit nor R. H. Maynard's name is mentioned in this account.

<sup>18</sup> For example, he uses the word "waistcoat" (line 117), which even then was a Britishism. "This under garment is now generally called in America a *vest*." Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, II (Springfield, Mass.: G. and C. Merriam, 1845), p. 928.

<sup>19</sup> British books and journals enjoyed no copyright protection in this country until 1891 and were pirated with complete impunity. Sir Paul Harvey, *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), pp.884-885. Shepard suggests that the author may have been Charles Dickens, who visited the Lakes in 1842; but it is hard to see why Dickens, then close to the height of his fame, should have published anything anonymously.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, his *Platform Echoes, or, Living Truths for Head and Heart* (Hartford: A. D. Worthington & Co., 1886).

<sup>21</sup> *Sunlight and Shadow, or Gleanings from My Life Work* (Hartford: A. D. Worthington & Co., 1881), p. 349.

<sup>22</sup> Floyd B. Wilson, *Wilson's Book of Recitations and Dialogues* (New York: Dick & Fitzgerald, n.d., copyright 1869), pp. 27-28. The text quoted below is from another, undated but apparently identical, printing of the book: the New York Public Library's copy of the 1869 edition is defective.

<sup>23</sup> The piece does not appear in Gough's *Platform Echoes, Sunlight and Shadow*, his other autobiographical writings, or the numerous lectures by him in the James Black Temperance Collection, now in the New York City Public Library.

<sup>24</sup> For example, in Robert McLain Cumnock, *Choice Readings for Public and Private Entertainment* (copyright 1878; 9<sup>th</sup> ed., Chicago: Jansen, McClurg & Co., 1882), pp. 91-92. A version with minor variants, entitled simply "The Pilot," appears in: Lewis B. Monroe, *Public and Parlor Readings: Prose and Poetry* (copyright 1872; Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1876, pp. 55-56; Lucius Osgood, *Osgood's American Sixth Reader for Schools and Families* (Pittsburgh: A. H. English, 1873), pp. 176-177; [Phineas Garrett, editor,] *The Speaker's Garland and Literary Bouquet*, vol. VI, no. 23 (copyright 1885; Philadelphia: P. Garrett & Co., 1889, pp. 202-203.

<sup>25</sup> I have not succeeded in identifying this paper. The periodicals available during 1866-67 in the reading room used by Alger (listed in the New York YMCA's 15<sup>th</sup> Annual Report, at the YMCA Historical Library, New York) included at least two dozen religious weeklies; but most of these have proved to be unattainable. Only three have been fully checked, without success, from January through August 1866; *The Christian Advocate*, New York; *The Evangelist*, New York; *Sunday School Times*, Philadelphia.

<sup>26</sup> "How I Came to Write 'John Maynard,'" *The Writer*, VIII (1895), 182-183.

<sup>27</sup> *The Student and Schoolmate, an Illustrated Monthly for All Our Boys and Girls*, XXI (1868), 20-23. Contrary to the author's account, one of his sisters reportedly stated that the poem was first published about 1862 in *The New York Ledger* (Shepard, *op. cit.*: Fleischer, p. 169). Ralph D. Gardner's bibliography of Alger's writings, in *Horatio Alger, or the American Hero Era* (Mendota, Ill.: Wayside Press, 1964), describes the *Student and Schoolmate* publication as the first (p. 424), but elsewhere lists an anonymous printing in the *New York Sun* on an unspecified date in 1866 (p. 487). I have not found these supposed prior publications.

<sup>28</sup> "I called it Ocean Queen, not a very fitting name for a Lakes steamer, but I had no idea when I wrote the ballad that it would become so popular, or I would have tried to find a better

one,” Alger candidly wrote. (Letter to Henry Denny, March 6, 1893, quoted in Gardner, *op. cit.*, p. 487).

<sup>29</sup>Herbert R. Mayes, *Alger: A Biography Without a Hero* (New York: Macy-Masius, 1928), p. 162. Imitations surviving in recitation books also testify to the popularity of “John Maynard,” e.g., “The Ship on Fire,” by Henry Bateman (in Monroe, *op. cit.*, pp. 67-72), which borrows the “ay-ay” motif. However, “John Maynard” is not the prototype of John Hay’s “Jim Bludso of the Prairie Belle” (1871), nor do the two poems share a common source, as is asserted, respectively, by Shephard and Fleischer and by Gardner (*loc. cit.*). Bludso’s fate is modeled on that of Oliver Fairchild, a Mississippi River steamboat engineer whom Hay knew in his youth. See William Roscoe Thayer, *The Life and Letters of John Hay*, I (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1915), pp. 375-377.

<sup>30</sup>*Grand’ther Baldwin’s Thanksgiving, with Other Ballads and Poems* (Boston: A. K. Loring, 1875), pp. 45-50.

<sup>31</sup>The mutilated text may be found in Osgood, *op. cit.* (1873), pp. 177-178; Garrett, *op. cit.*, vol. II, no. 5 (1876; copyright 1874), pp. 21-23; Frances P. Sullivan, *Standard Recitations by Best Authors*, no. 2 (New York: M. J. Ivers & Co., 1883), pp. 25-26; Flora N. Kightlinger, *The Star Speaker* (Jersey City: Star Publishing Co., 1892), pp. 317-319; Henry Davenport Northrop, *The Peerless Reciter or Popular Program* (Philadelphia: Ellicott Publishing Co., 1894), pp. 164-166. The mutilated version consistently shows certain variants: line 68, “will” for “shall”; 69, “flames” for “flame”; 78, “the pain” for “his pain”; 88, “ingulfing” for “engulfing”; 92, “sunk” (sic!) for “sank”; 93, “corpse” for “corse”; 95, “Hero never” for “Never hero.” Another version of the disfigured text appears in [John Brandt Mansfield, editor] *History of the Great Lakes*, I (Chicago: J. H. Beers & Co., 1899), pp. 477-478: it is there described as a reprint from an unidentified newspaper, to which it had come “from the pen of” a certain Kate Weaver. The ambiguous wording leaves it open whether the lady may have tried to pass off the well known verses as her own; in any event, neither the editor of the paper nor the author of the *History* recognized them. The Weaver version may be recognized by the following earmarks: line 32, “ashore” for “on shore”; 72, “good God’s” for “God’s good”; 88, “And the” for “And from the”; 92, “sank” for “sunk.”

<sup>32</sup> Why did Osgood juxtapose the verse and prose renderings? Possibly because his most formidable competitor had done the same with a similar, extremely popular piece. In *McGuffey's New Fourth Eclectic Reader*, (Cincinnati: Wilson, Hinkle & Co., 1866; reprinted 1925), pp. 172-174, Felicia Dorothea Hemans' "Casablanca" – the familiar ballad in which "The boy stood on the burning deck" until overcome, faithful to his father's orders – is preceded by a prose paraphrase.

<sup>33</sup> First published in the 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Of his poems (*Gedichte*, Berlin: Wilhelm Hertz, 1889), pp. 179-181; not in the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of 1875. No full English translation seems to exist; a rather unsatisfactory rendering of the opening passage is printed in Palmer, *op. cit.*, and Fleischer, p. 173.

<sup>34</sup> Shepard and Fleischer mistakenly assume that Fontane modeled his poem on Alger's.

\* \* \* \*

**Notes on Contributors:**

[ p. 104 ]

MR. GEORGE SALOMON'S article on John Maynard is a study in folk literature, employing the techniques of textual criticism ordinarily reserved for belles-lettres. The author, who lives in Great Neck, N.Y., and is Research Editor of the American Jewish Committee in New York, writes: "Seventy-odd years ago my grandfather, a physician in Berlin, Germany, had among his patients the poet Theodor Fontane, who made the story internationally famous." Our reader will be interested to know that school children in Germany are still reading his poem, and the year rarely passes in which the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society does not receive several inquiries from abroad concerning John Maynard.