



Biographical Note from Encyclopædia Britannica / Micropædia:

“Burritt, Elihu (b. Dec. 8, 1810, New Britain, Conn., U.S. – d. March 6, 1879, New Britain), U.S. crusader for peace and a code of international law, perhaps the first to strive to convince the entire public (as opposed to a minority of intellectuals and moralists) of the necessity for peace. Burritt came to be known as “the learned blacksmith” in reference to his early trade. Teaching himself 50 languages by the age of 30, he acquired an awareness of comparative philology and the interdependence of languages, that partially inspired his belief in the interdependence of peoples and the irrationality of war. He supported the plan of William Ladd, founder of the American Peace Society (1828), for a congress of nations to formulate international

law and for a court of nations to interpret that law. From 1848 he organized peace congresses in Brussels, Paris, Frankfurt am Main, London and other cities. For several years he wrote, for insertion in European newspapers, a succession of single pages called Olive Leaves, presenting pacifist arguments with emphasis on an international law code.”

Elihu Burritt and “The Helmsman of Lake Erie”

In Elihu Burritt’s *The Mission of Sufferings*, published in London in early 1867, the reader finds on pages 95-99 an embellished version of “the Helmsman of Lake Erie,” which was plucked out by several British newspapers for their weekly issues:

01)	02 Feb. 1867	<i>The County Express</i> (Brierley Hill, Stourbridge, Kidderminster and Dudley News)
02)	09 Feb. 1867	<i>Cheshire Observer</i> (for Cheshire County, England, & North Wales).
03)	09 Feb. 1867	<i>Bucks Herald</i> (Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire).
04)	12 Sep. 1868	<i>Halifax Courier</i> (West Yorkshire, England)

Burritt’s rendering was based on John Bartholomew Gough’s abbreviated version of the anonymous 1845 sketch. That Burritt was often referred to as the “learned blacksmith” becomes quite apparent upon consideration of his rendering. Not only is his “Helmsman” superbly crafted; it is, in many ways, a Gough version par excellence.

Burritt heightens the helmsman’s sacrifice by transforming an old, white-haired man into a much younger married man with children – one who sacrifices not just himself but, through his selfless act, places his immediate family in jeopardy. In other words, Burritt’s John

Maynard has much more to lose: a life only half lived, his family, and the question of their fate without him.

Emil Rittershaus's ballad "A German Heart" ("Ein deutsches Herz"), although not a "John Maynard" poem, is the fountainhead of the three German Lake Erie poets: Rittershaus, Luise Förster (whose *nom de plume* was Ada Linden) and, the culmination, Theodor Fontane. Rittershaus's protagonist is also willing to sacrifice himself for a helpless German woman and her child, even though he, too, is married and has children.

In a nutshell, the difference between the 1845 version and those of Gough and Burritt rests upon the following factors:

- a) Deletion of the Buffalo harbor scene and Buffalo as the consequent destination of the steamer instead of Detroit
- b) Deletion of the activities of the passengers on board
- c) Dramatic irony as found in the 1845 version is lacking in both Gough and Burritt: "In short, one and all were like men who thought that, let danger come to them when it might, at least it would not be that day."
- d) Deletion of the religious characterization of John Maynard and his "love of God." The Burritt rendering places great emphasis upon Maynard's record as a competent and experienced pilot, who has weathered the fury of many a storm. (On the other hand, we read: "But one summer day came *after three years of sailorship* (my emphasis), when he was to show the latent forces of his inner nature to the full.")
- e) "Simpson" assumes the role of "Fletcher" in both the Gough and Burritt versions.
- f) The cause of the fire (1845: "Some sparks had fallen on a bundle of tow") is changed ("There was resin and tar on board").
- g) Deletion of numerous measures taken on the steamer during the fire (only the "bucket" scene is retained).
- h) The helmsman's spirit ascends into heaven at the conclusion of the 1845 version and in later Gough versions. Maynard's ascension is missing in the Burritt rendering.

Gough, a temperance crusader, transposes the thrust of the tale for his own ends, which is basically saving a man's life from the evil of alcohol. Burritt, on the other hand, dramatically creates Maynard's excruciating "Passion" and incredible staying power as that of a Christ figure without the necessity of a pious ending. His deed speaks for itself. It should be noted that the original 1845 sketch that spawned both the corrupted Gough and the Burritt versions was so realistic that most readers (Gough and Burritt included) were incapable of distinguishing between fact and fiction. To them, John Maynard was real – a martyr and a saint.

One particular blemish in the Gough and Burritt versions should be mentioned. In the Burritt rendering we no longer have the frightened women questioning an impatient Maynard. Instead, the questions are from the captain. In the Gough version, not women but the passengers in general ask the questions. Also, neither the Gough nor the Burritt versions add Maynard's 1845 pronouncement:

“But to speak the truth,” he added, “we are all in great danger, and I think if there were a little less *talking*, and a little more *praying*, it would be the better for us, and none the worse for the boat.”

Fontane’s dramatic repetition of how many minutes to Buffalo is most effectively anticipated by Burritt: three quarters of an hour – five minutes – two minutes – one minute.

A collocation of the three earliest renderings (1845 – 1859 – 1867) has been added.

Norman Barry, Bad Schussenried, July 2019