

**WHO WROTE**  
**“THE HELMSMAN OF LAKE ERIE?”**  
**AN EXAMINATION OF TWO CANDIDATES:**  
**CHARLES DICKENS AND JAMES FENIMORE COOPER**

**BY**  
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**INTRODUCTORY NOTE**

The article at hand will consider the legitimacy of claims expressed both in the past and present favoring Charles Dickens’s authorship and those claims only recently entertained of James Fenimore Cooper’s role in writing the 1300-word sketch which gave rise to the legend of John Maynard.

**I.**

**THE 1996 AND 1927 CLAIMS THAT DICKENS WAS THE AUTHOR**

It is common knowledge that affirmations of Dickens’s authorship of “The Helmsman of Lake Erie” crop up every so often in newspaper reports. Unfortunately, the reports are scanty and generally void of solid argumentation, all of which can only leave a critical reader wondering, “Can there be anything of substance behind the rumor?”

**A) 1996: THE BUFFALO NEWS**

The latest newspaper account of Dickens’s authorship to my knowledge, which Anne Huberman of the *John Maynard Home Page* kindly sent me several years ago, was taken from the *Buffalo News*. In the unlikely article entitled “Dickens’ Desk Lends Hand to Help Hartford’s Needy,” there was, somewhat out of the blue, a reference to Dickens composing “The Helmsman of Lake Erie!” Tacked on somewhat like a vagrant postscript, the lines read as follows:

Jeane-Marie Wenckheim Dickens, wife of a Dickens’ descendant, said Dickens celebrated his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday in Hartford in 1842.

That was around the time he wrote “The Helmsman of Lake Erie” about the heroic John Maynard, who allegedly lost his life bringing his passengers safely ashore at Buffalo. It was a fictional account based on the 1841 tragedy of the paddle wheel steamer *Erie* that burned off Silver Creek and whose real heroic helmsman is now believed to be one Luther Augustus\* Fuller. – *Buffalo News*, Dec. 1, 1996

\*The wheelsman’s correct name is Augustus Fuller.

[Quotation marks were not used in the article and have not been used here so as to avoid the impression that the final paragraph is a statement by Jeane-Marie Wenckheim Dickens.]

Before commenting on this assertion, it may interest the reader to know that Dickens's mahogany desk and walnut chair, which were put to good use in writing *Great Expectations*, were auctioned off for \$855,000 in London in June 2008, the proceeds going to charity. Although the attempt was made to contact Mrs. Wenckheim Dickens to find out if the statement was her own or merely that of an enterprising journalist, no response was forthcoming. Whether Dickens's 30<sup>th</sup> birthday on February 7, 1842, while spending four days in Hartford, Connecticut, is intended as the alleged date of composition, or whether the statement "*that was around the time...*" should allow a few months' leeway, the very notion of Dickens penning "The Helmsman of Lake Erie" in the first few months of 1842 must be rejected. Dickens was too preoccupied with America and Americans during his tour while gathering his impressions for his *American Notes* [1], which was published in October, within four months after his return to England. He was also beleaguered by "levees" of handshaking by crowds of warm-hearted yet far-from-shy Americans, happy to see England's young, famous, and prolific [2] writer on their native soil. In many cases disgusted by American manners, Dickens may even have suffered a mild attack of "culture shock:"

"Nor could he escape such disagreeable incidentals of American life of the period as spitting, lack of hygiene, suffocating stoves, and the bolting of food (on all of which most English travellers commented.)"

- *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), Vol. 3, "Preface," p. xi.

But assuming he had, after all, composed "The Helmsman" during his visit, why keep it a secret for three years and then have it published anonymously? (Rather the reverse should have been much more prudent and might well have saved Dickens considerable heartache: publishing "The Helmsman of Lake Erie" in his own name in 1842 and *American Notes* anonymously at a much later date!) At the beginning of his American tour, young Dickens was lionized. A sketch published by Dickens during his American tour would have created a sensation, for his popularity in the United States had not yet been tarnished either by *American Notes* (1842) or *The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843/4).

## B) 1927: FREDERICK J. SHEPARD

Frederick J. Shepard was the first researcher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to attempt to make sense out of the legend of John Maynard. He was active in studying the folklore and legends of the Great Lakes. Admirably equipped to do so given his position as reference librarian of the Buffalo Public Library, he took a keen interest in local history. As a former newspaper editor of the *Buffalo Courant*, he knew how to formulate his thoughts.

In his 1927 article entitled "A Wandering Legend of Lake Erie: John Maynard" [3], it was Shepard, who rediscovered the original 1845 sketch entitled "The Helmsman of Lake Erie." This sketch had been superseded in 1859 by John Bartholomew Gough's abridged prose version

and by Horatio Alger, Jr.'s "John Maynard, A Ballad of Lake Erie," composed in 1866. Shepard unearthed two publications of "The Helmsman of Lake Erie": one from the *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser* (September 12<sup>th</sup>, 1845) and yet another Buffalo, New York publication, the *Western Literary Messenger* (October 4<sup>th</sup>, 1845). The two newspapers Shepard had found remained the unquestioned sources of the legend until the advent of digitized historic newspapers in the last decade, which vastly expanded the scope of research while also reducing the time necessary for such searches.

As of October 2018, the original publication of "The Helmsman of Lake Erie" on British soil has been ascertained in the *Church of England Magazine* (London, England). The first publication on American soil was in the *Poughkeepsie Journal and Eagle* (Poughkeepsie, New York). The number of newspapers and periodicals has been expanding with new discoveries every year. [4]

Shepard, in his 1912 article "Myths of the Great Lakes" [5] had already argued that the burning of the steamboat *Erie* on August 9<sup>th</sup>, 1841, provided the historic frame of the legend as presented in Gough's prose sketch and Alger's ballad. At this point in time, Shepard was not yet aware that an anonymous 1845 prose sketch entitled "The Helmsman of Lake Erie" existed and was the ultimate source of the legend of John Maynard. The reason for the delayed discovery may be quite simple — the date of publication in 1845, four years after the conflagration of the *Erie* in 1841, is hardly where a researcher would look first.

Because of a confusion of dates, Shepard in 1912 placed Alger as the source of Gough's sketch. In his article of 1927, "A Wandering Legend of Lake Erie: John Maynard," Shepard, relying too much upon Alger's sister's faulty memory, still insisted upon the year 1862 as the date of composition of Alger's ballad. Alger's revealing essay entitled "How I came to Write 'John Maynard'" was printed in *The Writer* in the year 1895. [6] In this article, Alger specifically cites a very hot summer evening in 1866 as the time frame in which he composed his ballad. The assertion of 1912 that Alger had served as the model for Gough's prose sketch is neither reaffirmed nor rescinded in 1927. It is, at the very least, evident that Shepard was still unaware of Alger's article of 1895, although now he had indeed found the anonymous 1845 prose sketch. As in 1912, Shepard in 1927 was still convinced that the loss of the *Erie* on August 9, 1841, provided the historical impetus behind the Maynard legend. Then there was the temporal proximity of Dickens's visit. Recalling Charles Dickens's first tour of the United States and Canada from January to June of 1842, only months following the *Erie* disaster, Shepard saw sufficient grounds for asserting that Dickens was the anonymous author. As no comments have been found in newspapers from 1845 to 1860 alleging that Dickens had composed the 1845 sketch, Shepard must be viewed as the first researcher to have seriously entertained the connection

## II.

### “BRITISHNESS” & CHARLES DICKENS

Shepard’s argumentation that the anonymous author of the 1845 sketch “*seems to have been the product of an English visitor,*” who used “English words and expressions” (i.e., which an American would shun), deserves close attention. It is when considering the “Britishness” of the vocabulary and (according to Shepard) the “*unquestionably English title*” that Shepard quickly builds his case for Dickens’s authorship:

“One cannot help suspecting that it may have come from the pen of Charles Dickens, who had visited the neighborhood in 1842 and may have here picked up its suggestion; at any rate there is an indication of his literary style.”

- Frederick J. Shepard, “A Wandering Legend of Lake Erie: John Maynard,”  
*Buffalo Evening News*, Saturday Magazine, July 16, 1927, p. 9

#### A) “THE UNQUESTIONABLY ENGLISH TITLE”

The title of the anonymous sketch is “The Helmsman of Lake Erie.” As “Lake Erie” is obviously American, Shepard must have referred to “helmsman.” A glance at the distribution and frequency of the word “helmsman” in Dickens’s and Cooper’s works should more than suffice to make the “unquestionable” questionable:

a) The distribution of “*helmsman*” in James Fenimore Cooper’s works:

*Miles Wallingford* (1x), *The Pathfinder* (1x), *The Deerslayer* (1x),  
*The Pilot* (2x), *The Pioneers* (1x), *The Wing-and-Wing* (1x),  
*Mercedes of Castile* (5x) = 12 instances

b) The distribution of “*helmsman*” in Charles Dickens’s works:

*A Christmas Carol* (1x), *American Notes* (1x) = 2 instances

The possibility of allegorical connotations and of “helmsman” referring to the helmsman of the “ship of state” received no consideration, neither by Shepard in 1927 nor, much later in the 1960’s, by the John Maynard researcher George Salomon.<sup>[7]</sup> Nonetheless, it should be recalled that “The Helmsman of Lake Erie” fits neatly into that watershed event in American history, the long-impending and final death of General Andrew Jackson on June 8, 1845. The spirit of the deceased General and former President at the helm, the ship’s passengers and crew representative of the American Nation, the “helmsman” steering his vessel towards the saving shore of America, while offering his life for the good of his country: thoughts of this order were expressed both in eulogies and poetry to “Old Hickory.”<sup>[8]</sup>

## B) "BLUE PETER"

The "allusion to a 'blue peter,' which on the ocean is the name given to a small flag that indicates a vessel is about to sail,..." and "a reference to the Buffalo government pier as the 'quay'" seemed sufficient proof to Shepard for the sketch's "foreign birth." What should be clear is that Shepard did not consult the writings of Charles Dickens. Had he done so, he would have ascertained that Dickens never once uses the term "Blue Peter." On the other hand, James Fenimore Cooper, America's national writer in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, uses "Blue Peter" four times in his final sea novels, *Jack Tier* and *The Sea Lions*, both of which were completed in the years 1848-49.

## C) "QUAY"

The supposedly British word "quay" is used by Dickens 24 times, whereas Cooper uses this designation 105 times (48 of which were in one novel, *The Bravo*).

Perhaps it is of help to see exactly how the word "quay" is used in "The Helmsman of Lake Erie:"

"...porters were hurrying along the narrow quay that juts out into the lake;"

- "The Helmsman of Lake Erie," lines 13-15

We note that two major elements occur in the sentence: "porters" and "quay." In the first two sentences of Cooper's *Gleanings in Europe: England*, Letter I, we read:

"It was a fine February day when we left the *Hôtel Dessin* to embark for Dover. The quay was crowded with clamorous porters,.... "

Even "a fine February day" does not seem terribly at odds with "a pleasant May morning" (line 1) in "The Helmsman of Lake Erie."

Turning to Dickens's *Martin Chuzzlewit*, the reader will find the following passage:

"---he became a great frequenter of the market-places, bridges and quays, and especially the steam-boat wharves [=my emphasis];..."

- *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Edited with an Introduction and Notes by Patricia Ingham, (London: Penguin Classics, 1999, updated 2004), Ch. 40, p. 585

Dickens uses "wharves" in conjunction with "steam-boat," not "quay." While his steamer was taking on supplies in Cleveland, the Mayor of that town wished to go on board the steamer to pay his compliments, but Dickens, after already being besieged by "a party of gentlemen" at six in the morning was hardly in the mood:

"At 6 in the morning a party of gentlemen planted themselves opposite our little State room (it was an uncommonly tight fit, even for a State room) and stared in at the door

and windows while I was washing, and Kate [=his wife Catherine Dickens] lay in bed. I was so incensed at this, that I straightway went to bed, and when the Mayor came, refused to see him.” - *The Letters of Charles Dickens* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), Vol. 3, p. 219, To David C. Colden, From Clifton House, Niagara Falls, Twenty Ninth April 1842 [9]

Apart from the early morning “siege,” tension was heightened by a jingoistic Cleveland newspaper article advocating war with Britain due to the dispute over the Maine-Canadian boundary. Consequently, the Mayor of Cleveland was refused entry. The Mayor’s reaction is described by Dickens as follows:

“His honor took it very coolly, and *retired to the top of the wharf* [=my emphasis], with a big stick and a whittling knife, with which he worked so lustily (staring at the closed door of our cabin all the time) that long before the boat left the big stick was no bigger than a cribbage peg!” - *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, Vol. 3, p. 209, To John Forster, From Niagara Falls!!! (upon the English Side), April twenty-sixth, 1842.

In his *American Notes*, Dickens describes his hasty departure from Sandusky:

“We were taking an early dinner at this house, on the day after our arrival, which was a Sunday, when a steamboat came in sight, and *presently touched the wharf* [=my emphasis]. As she proved to be on her way to Buffalo, we hurried on board with all speed, and soon left Sandusky far behind us.”

– *American Notes*, Edited with an Introduction and Notes by Patricia Ingham (London: Penguin Classics, 2004), vol. II, Ch. 6<sup>th</sup>, p. 218

In both instances, “*wharf*” – and not “*quay*” – is used.

Finally, it should be pointed out that the very first page of Cooper’s *The Headsman; or, The Abbaye des Vignerons* (1833), describes a vessel departing from Geneva on Lake Lemman on what shortly will become an eventful and perilous voyage to Vévey. Needless to say, the harbor installations of Geneva are described by Cooper as a “*quay*.” [10]

#### D) “WAISTCOAT”

It is significant that George Salomon in his study of the 1845 sketch also accepted Shepard’s argumentation that the author of “The Helmsman” must be British. Although relying in great part upon Shepard’s groundwork in 1927 and the discovery of the *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser* and the *Western Literary Messenger* (which Salomon believed were the only two newspapers to have carried the sketch) while rejecting Shepard’s depiction of the later dissolute life of the *Erie*’s wheelsman Luther Fuller, Salomon selected only one word, the English-sounding “*waistcoat*,” as the litmus test for a foreign author.

“...the boldest were throwing off their *coats and waistcoats* [=my emphasis] and preparing for one long struggle for life.”

“The Helmsman of Lake Erie” (1845), lines 136-139

Yet even in this instance, the question of English origin is far from clear. Cooper uses “*waistcoat*” in four of his novels, but – admittedly – “vest” is his favorite designation. [11] What I believe Salomon overlooked (as I have myself for some time) is that “*waistcoat*” should not be viewed in isolation but *in context*. The expression, “*coats and waistcoats*” is a *collocation*, or perhaps to be more to the point, linguistic *Siamese twins* [12]. Running a spot check [13] on this, I have the following results: the writers Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell (English), Tobias Smollett (Scottish), Charles Dickens (English), William Makepeace Thackeray (Calcutta) and Oscar Wilde (Irish) all use “*coats and waistcoats*.” Two American writers, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Mark Twain, also follow suit:

“Without much extravagance of eulogy, the spectacle might even be termed splendid; for, according to the fashion of the times, the ladies shone in rich silks and satins, outspread over wide-projecting hoops; and the gentlemen glittered in gold embroidery, laid unsparingly upon the purple, or scarlet, or sky-blue velvet, which was the material of their *coats and waistcoats* [=my emphasis].

Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Twice-Told Tales*, “Lady Eleonore’s Mantle” (Dec. 1838)

“We hired the only guide left, to lead us on our way. He was over seventy, but he could have given me nine-tenths of his strength and still had all his age entitled him to. He shouldered our satchels, overcoats, and alpenstocks, and we set out up the steep path. It was hot work. The old man soon begged us to hand over our *coats and waistcoats* [=my emphasis] to him to carry, too, and we did it: one could not refuse so little a thing to a poor old man like that; he should have had them if he had been a hundred and fifty.”

Mark Twain, *A Tramp Abroad* (1880), Ch. 34, 1<sup>st</sup> paragraph

Reversing the process, I have tried “*coats and vests*.” The result, as might be expected, was no British writers – but also no American writers. The reason is straightforward: the words “*coats*” and “*waistcoats*” simply go together. In this sense, if Cooper started off with “*coats*” and was considering whether to follow up with “*vests*” or “*waistcoats*,” the result is obvious.

### III.

#### “BRITISHNESS” & JAMES FENIMORE COOPER

##### A) THE WRITTEN WORD

James Fenimore Cooper’s first attempt at fiction was in 1820. The resulting novel, *Precaution*, was “promising:”

“It [=Precaution] was a professed delineation of English manners, though the author had then seen nothing of English society. It had, however, the honor of being adopted by the country whose manners it described and, being early republished in Great Britain, passed from the first for an English novel. I am not unwilling to believe what

is said of it, that it contained a promise of the powers which its author afterwards put forth.”

- W. C. Bryant, “Discourse on the Life, Genius, and Writings of James Fenimore Cooper,” Delivered at Metropolitan Hall, N.Y., February 25, 1852 in James Fenimore Cooper, *Precaution* (Michigan Historical Reprint Series), p. 7.

The statement in the quotation above, to the effect that Cooper’s fledgling novel *Precaution* “passed from the first for an English novel,” should serve to point out quite clearly that the gulf between American and British English in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was not necessarily as deep as is commonly supposed nowadays. [14] A gifted American writer could, if he so chose, pass for British. It will be noticed, however, that as Cooper’s powers developed, his interest in establishing an American literature, sovereign in its own right, intensified. Perhaps Dickens’s recent visit provided the motivation for the following passage:

“Bryant is worth forty Irvings, in every point of view, but he runs a little into the seemly school. I see he begins to fire a little at Dickens, who, by the way, is doing precisely what I looked for, from him. This country must outgrow its adulation of foreigners, Englishmen in particular, as children outgrow the rickets. It will not happen in your day, - much less in mine.”

- *The Letters and Journals of James Fenimore Cooper*, Vol. IV, p. 306, Letter # 686. To Rufus Wilmot Griswold, from Otsego Hall, Cooperstown, August 7<sup>th</sup>, 1842

## B) THE SPOKEN WORD

Another aspect about Cooper and “Britishness” deserves mention. When speaking, Cooper (and his family!) could easily be mistaken for English:

“You know we usually pass for English on the continent of Europe; and I have long since given up the attempt to explain.”

*Gleanings in Europe: Switzerland* (Cooper Edition), Letter XIV, p. 131

That Cooper was not merely taken for English by continental Europeans for whom English was not their mother tongue can be seen in the following example:

“The next day our French party was replaced by another, and the master of the house promoted me to the upper end of his table, as an old boarder. Here I found myself, once more, in company with an Englishman, an Irishman and a Scotchman. The two former sat opposite to me, and the last at my side. The civilities of the table passed between us, especially between the Scotchman and myself, with whom I fell into discourse. After a little while, my neighbor, a sensible shrewd fellow enough, by way of illustrating his opinion, and to get the better of me, cited some English practice, in connexion with “you on England.” I told him I was no Englishman. “No Englishman! – you are not a Scotchman?” “Certainly not.” “Still less an Irishman!” “No.” My companion now looked at me as hard as a well-bred man might, and said earnestly, “Where did you learn to speak English, so well?” “At home, as you did – I am an American.”

*Gleanings in Europe: The Rhine* (Cooper Edition), Letter XX, pp. 196-197



Given young Cooper's wilderness upbringing in the environs of the pioneer community of Cooperstown, it is not immediately clear just how the boy was able to develop such a cultivated pronunciation. Cooper's beloved and refined sister Hannah (1777-1800), who died in a tragic riding accident when Cooper was not quite eleven years of age, expressed, for instance, concern that her brothers "had been bred in the woods" [Hannah Cooper to Issac Cooper, 6/25/1798, Judge Wm. Cooper paps., box 19, Hartwick College Archives, Oneonta, N. Y; quoted in Wayne Franklin's *Early Years*, p. 12].

It would thus seem that James acquired his "British polish" not in childhood but as a young man. I would suggest a strong influence through the Loyalist DeLanceys and Cooper's young wife Susan Augusta DeLancey Cooper (twenty-seven days short of her nineteenth birthday when the wedding took place on New Year's Day, 1811; Cooper, born on September 15, had only turned twenty-one two months earlier). The following passage by Susan Fenimore Cooper emphasizes her mother's qualities of speech:

"Our precious Mother was so loving and patient with us. I seem to hear her sweet musical voice now as she talked with us. She had a remarkably sweet voice in conversation; my friend Mrs. Hamilton Fish said to me one day years ago, 'I always thought that when novelists spoke of musical voices of their heroines in conversation it was pure romance, but Mrs. Cooper's voice is melody itself.'"

James Fenimore Cooper (the grandson), *The Legends and Traditions of a Northern County*, (New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1921), p. 211.

An ongoing literary exchange between Cooper and his wife, whereby Cooper was obliged to read passages to Susan, is clearly stated in the following passage:

"Every chapter of the *Spy* was read to my Mother as soon as it was written, and the details of the plot were talked over with her. From the first months of authorship, to the last year of his life, my Father generally read what he wrote to my Mother."

*Ibid.*, p. 210.

One of Cooper's common objections to an American woman was her voice. Perhaps Susan's clear (i.e., "British") pronunciation tended to render the defect in American womanhood even more apparent:

"Even Mrs. Trollope admits that American women, (perhaps she ought to have said the girls,) are the most beautiful in the world, while they are the least interesting. Mrs. Trollope wrote a vast deal of nonsense, putting cockneyisms into the mouths of Americans, and calling them Americanisms, but she also wrote a good many truths. I will not go so far as to say she was right in the latter part of the charge, but if our girls would cultivate neater and more elegant forms of expression; equally avoiding vulgar oh's and ah's! and set phrases; be more careful not to drawl; and not to open the mouth, so as to call "hot," "haut," giggle less; speak lower; have more calmness and more dignity of manner, and *think* instead of *pulsating*, I would put them, for all in all, against any women in the world. They lose half of these defects when they marry, as it is; but the wisdom of Solomon would come to our ears with a diminished effect, were it communicated through any other than a neat enunciation. The great desideratum in

female education, at home, is to impart a graceful, quiet, lady-like manner of speaking.” *Gleanings of Europe: The Rhine*, Letter XXVI, p. 243

That the quote above is not an isolated instance, may be seen in the following from *The American Democrat*:

“While it is true that the great body of the American people use their language more correctly than the mass of any other considerable nation, it is equally true that a smaller proportion than common attain to elegance in this accomplishment, especially in speech. Contrary to the general law in such matters, the women of the country have a less agreeable utterance than the men, a defect that great care should be taken to remedy, as the nursery is the birth-place of so many of our habits.”

*The American Democrat*, vol. 37, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing Classic Texts, 2010), “On Language,” p. 78

In *Gleanings of Europe: Switzerland*, Cooper refers to “the purity of [his] pronunciation” as a major reason for his passing for British (p. 148). In a letter to his son Paul, Cooper refers to the importance of handwriting and “declamation,” the latter in the sense of accentuation. As Cooper’s own handwriting was hardly exemplary [Cf. Franklin, *Early Years*, particularly p. 207], he states rather jokingly that “I am living proof of the importance of such an accomplishment.” Yet his success in the field of elocution is strongly hinted at through his recommendation to “read aloud:”

“Attend to your declamation. Read aloud, slow, articulating every syllable. The art of reading is easily acquired. Your natural utterance is quick, like my own. A quick utterance is never dignified, and you should correct yours. The whole secret is to give time to the syllables, which prevents halting between words. A drawl is my aversion. I have none – you should have none.”

*Letters and Journals*, vol. IV, p. 426, Letter no. 745, to Paul Fenimore Cooper, From Hall, Cooperstown, Nov. 9<sup>th</sup> 1843

#### IV.

#### CHARLES DICKENS AND LAKE ERIE

An amusing anecdote on Charles Dickens’s visit to the Lake Erie Region in 1842, is at the beginning of an anonymous article entitled “The Lake that Tosses and Tilts” [15]:

“Charles Dickens, a better novelist than sailor, arrived at Cleveland by steamer from Sandusky during his American tour in 1842. He was mighty glad to get off the boat.

“‘It’s all very fine talking about Lake Erie,’ he said on his arrival, ‘but it won’t do for persons who are liable to seasickness. It is almost as bad in that respect as the Atlantic. The waves are very short and horribly constant!’”

- *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, June 9, 1963, p. 10

Dickens penned these lines when safely “upon the *English* Side” (the word “*English*” was underscored ten times!). [16]

Dickens's sole interest at Buffalo was having a hurried breakfast and collecting his English letters, which had been forwarded there, before rushing off to the Canadian side of Niagara Falls:

a) "We called at the town of Erie, at eight o'clock that night, and lay there an hour. Between five and six next morning, we arrived at Buffalo, where we breakfasted; and being too near the Great Falls to wait patiently anywhere else, we set off by the train, the same morning at nine o'clock, to Niagara."

– *American Notes*, vol. II, Ch. 6<sup>th</sup>, p. 219

b) "We reached Buffalo at six this morning; went ashore to breakfast; sent to the post-office forthwith; and received – oh! who or what can say with how much pleasure and what unspeakable delight! – our English letters!"

– *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, Vol. 3, pp. 208-9, April twenty-sixth, 1842

The New York *Weekly Herald* printed the following report from a correspondent in Buffalo, dated May 8, 1842:

"Mr. Charles Dickens arrived here in the morning early, took breakfast, and then hastened down to Niagara, without stopping to look at the Falls. He crossed the river at the ferry, and secured lodgings at the Clifton House, and not till then did he appear to take any interest in the grand cataract. I cannot blame him, however, for desiring to stand upon British soil while gazing upon this sublime spectacle. He remained at the Clifton House until Thursday last, when he left for Montreal via Toronto and Kingston. Our citizens were disappointed of seeing him, and many of them incline to think him no 'great shakes after all,' deeming that his genius ought to be measured by the extent of his respect for their city and them." [17]

Not even an Indian reservation close by could induce Dickens to lengthen his stay. There is also no indication that Dickens took any interest in the harbor installations of Buffalo. [18]

It is difficult to avoid the impression that Dickens was not so much drawn by the majesty of America's greatest natural wonder in the 1840's, Niagara Falls, as by the possibility of seclusion and withdrawal from unwanted crowds of Americans. Dickens, his wife Catherine, and her maid Anne enjoyed ten days of relative isolation in a thoroughly British environment at the Clifton House Hotel [19] with various outings to the Cataract, which they could hear from their hotel windows. Dickens's tense state of mind, his need to retreat from the American masses, his longing for the "English" world, his sense of homesickness, all come to the fore in the following excerpt:

"This is the only place we have had to ourselves, since we left home. We came here last Tuesday; and stay until next Wednesday Morning. Directly I arrived, I yearned to come over to the English Side, and ordered the Ferryman out, in a pouring rain, for that purpose. It fortunately happens that there really is no point of view to see the falls from, properly, but this. They are under our windows. But in any case, I should have come here. You cannot conceive with what transports of joy, I beheld an English Sentinel – though he didn't look much like one, I confess, with his boots outside his trousers, and a great fur cap on his head. I was taken dreadfully loyal

after dinner, and drank the Queen's health in a bumper – in Port, too, and by no means bad Port – the first I had put to my lips, since leaving home.”

- *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, Vol. 3, p. 226, To Thomas Beard, From Niagara Falls (Upon the *English* side), First of May – Sunday - 1842

Assuming that Dickens had indeed received information on the conflagration of the *Erie* on August 9, 1841, while residing at the Clifton House, he might have taken some interest in the fact that many of the women and children on board the ill-fated *Erie* had suffered from seasickness, just as he had, for the lake on that unfortunate day eight months earlier had been rough. Yet there is no reference to sea-sickness in “The Helmsman of Lake Erie” and children are not even mentioned.

The *Plain Dealer*'s statement that Dickens was “*a better novelist than a sailor*” should be taken seriously – particularly with regard to the plain fact that Dickens was not a writer of nautical tales as was Cooper, who had also served as a sailor in his youth.

## V.

### JAMES FENIMORE COOPER AND LAKE ERIE

Cooper, America's ultimate authority on naval history in the 1840's, which was established by the publication of Cooper's *The History of the Navy of the United States of America* in 1839, viewed Lake Erie within the context of the Battle of Lake Erie on September 10, 1813, the first time in American history that an American fleet defeated a British fleet. Unfortunately, the American victory was afterwards marred by a dispute between the commander of the American fleet, Oliver Hazard Perry, and his second in command, Jesse Duncan Elliott. Perry had been obliged to desert his badly damaged ship, the *Lawrence*, and seek refuge in Elliott's vessel, the *Niagara*, before launching a concerted counterattack on the British. Although at first praising Elliott's conduct, Perry afterwards stated that he was “screening” Elliott and that Elliott was responsible for the loss of the *Lawrence*. Cooper, adhering to the evidence, defended Elliott, pointing out that Elliott had not been “*enabled*” to join in the action because of a “*want of wind*.” The acrimony that the dispute unleashed continued long after Perry's untimely death in 1819 (in fact, it is still simmering to this very day in some academic circles). Only by Cooper's intercession on Elliott's behalf was it possible to vindicate Elliott. It should be pointed out that Perry reaped the laurels of victory and was often referred to as “The Hero of Lake Erie.” The sobriquet should have been stated more humbly, “One of the *Two* Heroes of Lake Erie.” In other words, the question of “heroism” on Lake Erie before 1845 had been effectively poisoned by the Perry-Elliott dispute. Is it mere chance that a new and untarnished hero, one who needed no argument to establish his claims, was invented in “The Helmsman of Lake Erie” in 1845?

At the beginning of this article, Charles Dickens's desk was referred to in conjunction with the legend of John Maynard. It seems only appropriate at this point to mention Elliott's dying gift to his friend and vindicator James Fenimore Cooper in December 1845. Elliott bequeathed Cooper his writing desk, which he had acquired allegedly from the estate of Andrew Jackson. The desk had been used by Jackson when in Boston:

“I am writing on Gen. Jackson’s desk.” [20]

*The Letters and Journals of James Fenimore Cooper*, Vol. V, p. 145, “To Paul Fenimore Cooper (Cooper’s son), Heads, 26<sup>th</sup> May, 1846.” Also, cf. p. 147, fn. 7.

Of course, the reader may say, “Why yes, all this is well and good, but where are the links from Buffalo to Cooperstown that would suggest that Cooper may have taken a *personal interest* in the fate of the *Erie*?”

A lifelong friend and neighbor of Cooper’s was Judge Samuel Nelson (Nov. 10, 1792 – Dec. 13, 1873). Judge Nelson was Chief Justice of the State of New York from 1837 to 1845. In 1845 he was appointed Associate Justice of the United States Supreme Court by President Tyler.

The judge accompanied a 12-year-old boy named Levi Beebe from Cooperstown to Buffalo. At Buffalo, on August 9, 1845, he placed Levi in charge of the Paymaster of the *Erie*. The boy was on his way home to Cleveland. Young Levi Beebe became a hero that night. Against amazing odds and in spite of badly burnt hands (one might recall “The Helmsman of Lake Erie,” lines 153-158) the young man was able to survive the conflagration of the *Erie* through his stamina and bravery. Indeed, reports on Levi are lengthier than those on Augustus Fuller [21], the controversial wheelsman who either died in the course of his duty or was able to save himself in the nick of time. As would be expected, Levi was not only celebrated throughout America but particularly in Cooperstown. Under such circumstances, it is difficult to believe that all the details of the sinking of the *Erie*, the various acts of heroism and the many tragedies were not a common staple of conversation, not merely for the Nation but also for the natives of Cooperstown and James Fenimore Cooper.

There is even a sequel to Levi Beebe’s *Erie* adventure. The question most readers might ask is *why* Judge Nelson personally accompanied the boy to Buffalo. As it turns out, there were close links between the Beebes of Cleveland and the Nelsons of Cooperstown, for Judge Nelson’s son Rensselaer Russell Nelson (1826-1904) was to marry an Emma F. Wright Beebe on November 3, 1858. In “Marriages in Cooperstown’s First Presbyterian Church for the Years 1800-1863,” Emma F. Beebe of Cooperstown married William F. Wright of St. Louis on Sept. 27, 1849. [22] What was far from clear in the *Letters and Journals* [vol. V, p. 284, Feb. 15, 1848, fn.1] is that Emma was a widow. Emma F. Beebe was also from Cooperstown! It is obvious that Rens had known Emma at Cooperstown from childhood. And, finally, the reason for young Beebe to seek a military academy so far from home was quite simply that he had relations in Cooperstown. The Beebes of Cleveland and the Beebes of Cooperstown may be taken to represent an extended family with whom the Nelsons, even in 1841, seventeen years before Rensselaer and Emma were finally to marry, were quite close.

## VI.

### THE NAME OF THE STEAMER

Shepard, in his 1927 article, makes the following statement regarding the name of the vessel in “The Helmsman of Lake Erie” and in Horatio Alger, Jr.’s “John Maynard: A Ballad of Lake Erie:”

“In this prose narrative, the name assigned to her is the *Jersey*, which rivals *Ocean Queen* in its inapplicability to a Great Lakes boat.”

It will perhaps be recalled that the Gough rendering of 1860 made no mention of the *Jersey*, as the steamer was named in the original 1845 prose sketch. Gough’s steamer sailed anonymously. As a result, Alger, whose ballad was based on Gough’s version, invented the name *Ocean Queen*. That the steamer’s name could have been a sobriquet for Buffalo would obviously explain Alger’s choice:

“‘The Queen City,’ Buffalo’s most common moniker, first appeared in print in the 1840s, referring to the city’s status as the second largest city in New York State after New York City. ‘The Queen City’ was also used during the 1800s to describe Buffalo as the second largest American city on the Great Lakes after Chicago.”[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buffalo,\\_New\\_York](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buffalo,_New_York)

The Great Lakes were so large that they were often compared to the sea or ocean. The 1845 version of “The Helmsman” (which Alger never saw) even began with the following comparison:

“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 Helmsman of Lake Erie,” lines 3-9

Certainly, the name *Jersey* must have seemed a strange choice as the name of a steamer which had never sailed on Lake Erie. As the 1845 sketch is definitely an American product, in which the *Jersey* finds the “saving shore,” not on Dickens’s favored Canadian (or *English*) side but on the *American* side of Lake Erie, the name must refer to the State of New Jersey. In my article entitled “The Author’s Signature: The Good Ship *Jersey* in ‘The Helmsman of Lake Erie,’ and the Significance of the Geography of New Jersey in the Works of James Fenimore Cooper,” the multilayered symbolism of “Jersey” is discussed.[\[23\]](#)

Whereas the word “Jersey” is pregnant with meaning for Cooper, it is basically an empty concept for Dickens with two insignificant references to the Channel Islands as part of a heading, to a “Lord Jersey,” again as part of a heading, and one, involving banknotes, to New Jersey (in *Reprinted Pieces*, “The Detective Police”).

Both Theodor Fontane and Ada Linden borrowed their own steamer’s name, “die Schwalbe” [=the *Swallow*] from the poet Emil Rittershaus, who had already used it in his own moving ballad of Lake Erie, “Ein deutsches Herz” [=“A German Heart”]. [\[24\]](#) Ritterhaus had incorporated a number of the unfounded rumors disseminated by the press surrounding the April 7, 1845 *Swallow* tragedy into his own 1871 ballad. The steamer’s name “Jersey” was replaced by the more poetic “Swallow.”

## VII.

### DICKENS'S SHARP FALL IN POPULARITY IN THE UNITED STATES IN THE MID-1840'S AND HIS REBOUND LATER

Dickens's *American Notes* (1842) was put out in the second half of the same year as his visit to the United States and Canada. Due to Dickens's disenchantment with much of what he had experienced in the United States, his description was not met with general approval by patriotic Americans. Feeling as if he had been unfairly subjected to scathing criticism in the States, Dickens then sought revenge in his *Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-1844). This additional foray continued to poison Dickens's widespread popularity in America in the mid-1840's. Dickens's comment:

“I gather from a letter I have had this morning that Martin [Chuzzlewit] has made them all stark raving mad across the water.”

*The Letters of Charles Dickens*, vol. III, p. 541: “To John Forrester, 15 August 1843”

The upshot of the latter work led Dickens to describe himself as

“The Proscribed One. Oh breathe not his name.”

*The Letters of Charles Dickens*, vol. IV, p.5, “To C. C. Felton,” 2 January 1844, and footnote 4, p. 5

In all fairness to Dickens, it must be mentioned that this was a short-term “lovers’ spat,” such that, by the time of Dickens's second and final visit to the United States in 1867/68 (when his health was failing), Dickens could conclude his last reading to an American audience in New York City with the following words:

“I shall often realise you as I see you now, equally by my winter fire and in the green English summer weather. I shall never recall you as a mere public audience, but rather as a host of personal friends, and ever with the greatest gratitude, tenderness, and consideration. Ladies and gentlemen, I beg to bid you farewell. God bless you, and God bless the land in which I leave you.”

*Speeches Literary and Social*, “Speech: New York, April 20, 1868,” p. 172/264

## VIII.

### TWO DIRECT QUOTATIONS IN “THE HELMSMAN OF LAKE ERIE”

“The Helmsman of Lake Erie” far surpasses the run-of-the-mill tales that served as the common staple of America's newspapers in the 1840's. The simple fact that it could literally be chopped to pieces by Gough in 1860 and even in this mutilated and amputated form still serve as a source of inspiration for poets in the United States, England and Germany must suggest that it contained, at the very least, a spark of genius.

To see just how draconian the abridgment was, refer to [“Comparison of a Typical 1845 Anonymous "John Maynard" Text with John Gough's 1860 Version of the Story.” \[25\]](#) For a comparison in German, see [„Ein Vergleich - Die zwei amerikanischen Vorlagen der Legende](#)

von John Maynard: Der anonyme Urtext von 1845 und die stark gekürzte Fassung von J. B. Gough aus dem Jahre 1860“. [26]

While conducting rather tedious word comparisons, I lucked upon two amazing direct quotes in the 1845 text, the first one taken from Dickens's *The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit* [27], issued in monthly installments from 1843 to 1844:

“Every man for himself, and God for us all.”

1) “...then he [=John Maynard] stretched forth his right [=hand], and bore the agony without a scream 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, and then *every man for himself, and God for us all* [=my emphasis].” And they were the last sounds that he heard.” - “The Helmsman of Lake Erie,” lines 156-163

2) “Tom, Tom! The man in all this world most confident in his sagacity and shrewdness; the man in all this world most proud of his distrust of other men, and having most to show in gold and silver as the gains belonging to his creed; the meekest favourer of that wise doctrine, *Every man for himself, and God for us all* [=my emphasis] (there being high wisdom in the thought that the Eternal Majesty of Heaven ever was, or can be, on the side of selfish lust and love!); shall never find, oh, never find, be sure of that, the time come home to him, when all his wisdom is an idiot's folly, weighed against a simple heart!” - *The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit*, Ch. 39, pp. 581-

582

The singular aspect is that the meaning of the *Chuzzlewit* quote is turned upside down in “The Helmsman” quote. Whereas *Martin Chuzzlewit* follows the traditional import of the sixteenth-century proverb in the sense of selfishness, crass egotism, and a lack of caring for one's fellow man, in “The Helmsman” the situation is reversed: John Maynard is in the process of sacrificing his life for his fellow man. There is no way to read an impure heart into the lines. In other words, in a very quiet manner which most readers might not even notice, the message behind Dickens's *Martin Chuzzlewit*, to the effect that Americans are greedy, money-minded, grasping creatures, has been transformed to show that “a simple heart,” such as that of a John Maynard, is capable of the ultimate act of self-sacrifice. It seems highly unlikely that Dickens would subject his own novel to ridicule. An American writer, such as Cooper, would feel less compunction.

The second quotation can serve as a signature. It is common knowledge that Cooper's mastery of nautical jargon was without peer. Indeed, many a reader was at a loss as to what most of the maritime terms referred to. Yet a quotation that is singularly Cooperian has been located in *Homeward Bound* (1838), with its highly symbolic title:

1) “How's her head?” shouted the captain.”

“West-sou-west,” answered Maynard.

- “The Helmsman of Lake Erie,” lines 111-114 [*my italics*]

2) “How's her head?”

“West-south-west, sir.”



The *Jersey* is “*homeward bound*.” Not for Canada or the “*English* side,” but for the American shore. The Captain’s order:

“Keep her sou’ and by west,” cried the captain. “We must go ashore anywhere.”- “The Helmsman of Lake Erie,” lines 115-116

## IX.

### WHERE WAS DICKENS IN APRIL AND MAY OF 1845?

*The Church of England Magazine* published “The Helmsman of Lake Erie” on June 7, 1845. The *Swallow* disaster in the Hudson river occurred on April 7, 1845. That Captain Squires of the *Swallow* was the very man who rescued survivors of the *Erie* tragedy of 1841 offered sufficient linkage between the two steamboat catastrophes to fire the imagination of a writer with profound knowledge of America’s waterways. The loss of the *Swallow* also explains the gap of nearly four years between the *Erie* conflagration and publication in *The Church of England Magazine*. In this narrow time frame, it may be assumed that authorship occurred between late April and May (allowing a two-week steamer passage from America to England and a two-week window for details of the wreck and questions of responsibility to filter through). Question: Where was Dickens? Answer: Touring Italy – Rome, Florence, and Genoa in the months of April to June. [28] The question of Dickens even having access to British press coverage of the *Swallow* tragedy, let alone possessing the knowledge to combine it with the *Erie* while abroad in Italy, is not even worth serious consideration.

## X.

### GEORGE ORWELL’S CRITICAL ESSAY ON CHARLES DICKENS

One of the best critical essays on the writings of Charles Dickens was the product of another giant of English letters, George Orwell. [29]

#### A) A “HARMLESS” DICKENS?

Of course, an American will be hard put to accept one of Orwell’s opening statements, but one should keep in mind that he is addressing an English readership:

“*Dickens seems to have succeeded in attacking everybody and antagonizing nobody*”  
(p. 1).

Dickens’s *American Notes* (1842) and his *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843/1844) successfully antagonized the American public. His fear of revolutions is reflected in *A Tale of Two Cities* (certainly some Frenchmen may have found that work a gross exaggeration). An American might ask what Dickens thought of the American Revolution and no doubt would have been antagonized by the response. A black just after the Civil War might have been antagonized by Dickens’s judgment that blacks would never possess the intelligence to vote. A trade union member might also have felt that Dickens was unwilling to accept social change.

## B) THE “LITTLE MAN” IN JACKSONIAN AMERICA

Through the influence of Andrew Jackson, American society was being rapidly transformed into a true democracy to accommodate immigrants from Europe, westward expansion and the interests of the common laborer. The question of the inherent dignity and worth of the “little guy” and his inner potential to do good was taken seriously, not only in American politics but also in literature. The sketch “The Helmsman of Lake Erie” with the old weather-beaten wheelsman John Maynard, who did not “*repine at his hard labor and scanty pay*” [lines 51-52], is a case in point.

Orwell makes the following statements regarding Dickens’s approach to the proletariat:

1) “He [=Dickens] is vaguely on the side of the working class – has a sort of generalized sympathy with them because they are oppressed – but does not in reality know much about them; they come into his books chiefly as servants, and comic servants at that.”

(p. 10)

2) “It was as well that there should be ‘a space between us’, you see. However Dickens may admire the working classes, he does not wish to resemble them.”

(p. 14)

Certainly, there is nothing servile or comic about John Maynard. Orwell adds:

“The ‘gentleman’ and the ‘common man’ must have seemed like different species of animal. Dickens is quite genuinely on the side of the poor against the rich, but it would be next door to impossible for him not to think of a working-class exterior as a stigma.” (p. 14)

No stigma is attached to the “working-class exterior” of John Maynard, who in fact enjoys a solid reputation and respect:

“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 Helmsman of Lake Erie,” lines 57-61

The fact that Dickens did “look down” on Americans and feverishly sought to allow “*a space between us*” is apparent during his American tour of 1842. There was a reason for Dickens to “seek refuge” on the “*English side*” of Lake Erie. Orwell, on the other hand, ignores 1842 and *American Notes* altogether and only considers Dickens’s later work, *The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit*. While playing down the book’s effect on Americans, Orwell writes:

“The only place where he [=Dickens] seems to display a normal hatred of foreigners is in the American chapters of *Martin Chuzzlewit*. This, however, is simply the reaction of a generous mind against cant.” (p. 12)

### C) DICKENS AND THE AGE OF MACHINES

Perhaps one of the most decisive reasons for rejecting Dickens as a possible author of “The Helmsman” is Dickens’s inability to describe the workings of machines. A vessel is in several instances even labeled by Cooper as a “vast machine” [30], the workings of which are meticulously and realistically described. Dickens, on the other hand, is a completely different sort of writer. To quote Orwell:

- 1) “He [=Dickens] shows no interest either in the details of machinery or in the things machinery can do.” (p. 19)
- 2) “Wonderfully as he can describe an *appearance* [Orwell’s emphasis], Dickens does not often describe a *process* [Orwell’s emphasis].” (p. 18)
- 3) “Science is uninteresting and machinery is cruel and ugly (the heads of elephants).” (p. 20)

On a strictly technical level, “The Helmsman of Lake Erie” describes *the process* of saving ship and passengers. The measures taken are realistically presented in rapid succession, even if none of those measures actually applied to the 1841 *Erie* conflagration, supposedly the historical “core” behind the legend. Machinery, as such, is neither “cruel” nor “ugly” in “The Helmsman.” In fact, the *Jersey* is dolled up with a feminine touch: “dressed out/dressed gaily with many bright flags” (line 11).

### D) THE “UNNECESSARY DETAIL”

With regard to Dickens’s “style” of writing, Orwell mentions “the *unnecessary detail*” (p.22):

“Everything is piled up and up, detail on detail, embroidery on embroidery. It is futile to object that this kind of thing is rococo – one might as well make the objection to a wedding-cake. Either you like it, or you do not like it.” (p. 24)

In “The Helmsman,” narrative is cut short. When John Maynard is bombarded by a series of questions by panic-stricken women on board the *Jersey*, he silences them in the bluff manner of an experienced mariner:

“To speak the truth,” he added, “we are all in great danger; and I think if there were less talking and a little more praying it would be the better for us, and none the worse for the boat.” (lines 106-110)

The virtue of a quiet ship is extolled by Cooper in a number of instances. One example, only one year before “The Helmsman” was written, is from *Afloat and Ashore*:

“Order, on board ship, is out of the question, without coolness, silence and submission. A fussy sailor is always a bad sailor; calmness and quiet being the great requisites for the profession, after the general knowledge is obtained. No really good officer ever makes a noise, except when the roar of the elements renders it indispensable, in order to be heard. In that day, French ships of war did not understand this important secret, much less French privateers. I can only liken the clamour that was now going on in

the *Dawn*'s lee gangway, to that which is raised by Dutch fish women, on the arrival of the boats from sea, with their cargoes."

- *Afloat and Ashore or, The Adventures of Miles Wallingford*, Cooper Edition/AMS, Part II, Ch. XVI, p. 226

Indeed, Maynard's simple yet moving reply to the captain's question may strike the reader as singularly tight-lipped:

"Could you hold on five minutes longer?"

"I'll try, sir." (lines 146-148)

A simple, clipped response is not uncommon to Cooper and was used with singular effect in *The Last of the Mohicans*:

"My child!" said Munro, speaking quick and wildly; "give me my child!"

"Uncas will try," was the short and touching answer.

The simple, but meaning assurance was lost on the father, who seized the piece of gauze, and crushed it in his hand, while his eyes roamed fearfully among the bushes, as if he equally dreaded and hoped for the secrets they might reveal.

(*The Last of the Mohicans*, Cooper Edition/SUNY, Ch. 18, pp. 184-185; *Leatherstocking Tales*, The Library of America, vol. I, pp. 682-683; Feb. 1826)

#### E) DICKENS AND RELIGION

At the end of Orwell's article there is a quote in which Dickens belatedly recommends the Christian faith to his adult son, claiming that he, Dickens, prays twice a day. It may strike the reader that if a parent is incapable of setting an example for his children when they are young, the notion as an "afterthought" years later can either be regarded as a weakness of character or sheer hypocrisy. In any event, although Dickens was capable of sublime religious effusions (the description of Niagara Falls admittedly comes to mind [31]), the role of religion in determining the conduct and destiny of man is *not* a major characteristic of Dickens. As Orwell bluntly puts it:

"In any case he cannot properly be described as a religious man." (p. 27)

The "Helmsman of Lake Erie," on the other hand, may be viewed as a depiction of the heroism of a deeply religious man, John Maynard, who is both honest and self-sacrificing *because of* his "love of God," and not because, with the help of "apparitions," it finally dawns upon him that he has made a terrible mess of his life. Maynard is not a reformed Ebenezer Scrooge of *A Christmas Carol*, whose "changed character" remains difficult to swallow and whose belated altruism is hopelessly incompatible with his former life. Maynard does not play Christmas games or find Christianity "fun." We may ask ourselves where in Scrooge's frivolous soul is there a gram of heroism. Could he have saved the lives of all on board the *Jersey* while selflessly sacrificing his own? Can such a Dickensonian hero be viewed as anything more than

the hollow “deacon” in the following quote, who – for fear of his own untimely end – pays lip service to Christianity without the inner faith to stand up for what his religion calls for?

“It is one thing to be a deacon, and another to be devoted to the love of God, and to that love of our species which we are told is the consequence of a love of the Deity.”

- James Fenimore Cooper, *The Sea Lions*, (Cambridge Scholars Publishing Classic Texts, vol. 33, (Newcastle upon Tyne: March 2010), Ch. II, p. 17

While the “converted” Scrooge has an easy go of achieving self-redemption by bandying about the pound notes he has long hoarded (i.e., “buying his way to heaven”), Maynard undergoes the pain of crucifixion through a baptism of fire. The notion of a Christian martyr is basically foreign to the light-hearted Victorian “feast of pageantry” characteristic of a Dickens Christmas.

One of the central themes of *The Chainbearer*, also an 1845 Cooper publication, is the question whether the agony a wounded dying man suffers can be ameliorated through his faith in God and the afterlife. An almost clinical test is conducted in that two dying men, one is the Chainbearer, a believer, the other Aaran Thousandacres, incapable of belief, are placed in separate beds in the same room. Their final hours and the extent of their suffering are compared. As might be expected, belief makes pain more bearable. Thousandacres dies a terrible death whereas the Chainbearer is able to accept his fate and yield to his God – in other words, he is able to free himself from the “chains” of this world for a new existence. The psychological study Cooper was conducting is compatible with the question of the agony the helmsman of Lake Erie suffered. The fundamental question of death and the proper mindset for encountering death had long occupied Cooper and is dealt with in a number of his novels. The decisive role religion plays in Cooper’s works has been all too often ignored.[\[32\]](#)

## XI.

### DICKENS VS. COOPER

#### CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Rumors, by definition, distort reality and are hard to stamp out, but there is often something in them which can be of value. Although Dickens can only be regarded as an uninformed choice for authorship, there is the encouraging aspect in the rumor that *the literary quality* of “The Helmsman of Lake Erie” is such that only the very best England had to offer was good enough. [\[33\]](#) In his *American Notes* and in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Dickens, in the mid-1840’s, was bent on portraying what was bad about America. *Encyclopedia Britannica* makes the following statement about *Martin Chuzzlewit*:

“In *Martin Chuzzlewit* he [=Dickens] tried ‘to resist the temptation of the current Monthly Number, and to keep a steadier eye upon the general purpose and design’ (1844 Preface). Its American episodes had, however, been unpremeditated (he suddenly decided to boost the disappointing sales by some America-baiting and to revenge himself against insults and injuries from the American press.)”

*Macropedia*, [Fifteenth Edition, 1986 Printing], Vol. 17, p. 268, 2<sup>nd</sup> column

The interests of the author of “The Helmsman,” on the other hand, lay elsewhere. He chose to depict the “little man,” a simple helmsman, a devout Christian, an American guiding his burning ship *home* to America, to show what Christian humility was capable of. The author’s task was creating the identity of the “Good American,” the *New Hero* of Lake Erie. Yet the tale, as Theodor Fontane was to note decades later, goes one step further. It provides the paragon of the Good Man, an ideal that finds true nobility not in an empty title but in the human soul.

In the German language there is an old adage, “*Warum in die Ferne schweifen, sieh das Gute liegt so nah!*“ A rough and rather deadpan translation reads “*You might go further and fare not so well.*” What the proverb conveys within the context of “The Helmsman of Lake Erie” is rather simple: “*Why look across the Atlantic when there is a much better candidate right on your own doorstep!*” Since Dickens must be ruled out, why not take the very best the young Republic had to offer: James Fenimore Cooper? America’s legend builder would not have been hard put to dash off a sketch of this caliber. The “simple heart” of John Maynard, whether depicted as Natty Bumppo of the *Leather-Stocking Tales*, Long Tom Coffin of *The Pilot*, or Andries Coejemans of *The Chainbearer*, all of whose honesty and “*love of God*” could move them to acts of greatness, these were the character types that moved not only Americans but also Cooper’s readers throughout the world.

In spite of the fact that the name Fenimore Cooper became an international household word in his own lifetime, he was not dealt with gently by the American press. After his death in 1851, his works were often relegated to “Children’s Literature,” perhaps one of the darker chapters in the history of American literary criticism. In this respect, it might be added that the anonymity of the author of “The Helmsman” was buried deep in *The Church of England Magazine* under the heading “Juvenile Reading.” The question of *why and how* America’s most famous author during the age of the Young Republic chose to bury “The Helmsman” in such a publication to assure his anonymity is discussed in my essay, “Two Transatlantic Passages: The Convoluted Path of ‘The Helmsman of Lake Erie’ to Poughkeepsie.” [34]

With regard to Dickens, there is no viable reason for him to have chosen anonymity, let alone *The Church of England Magazine*. Dickens had neither the British nor the American press to fear had he used his own name. It is even possible that his fall in popularity among his American readership in the mid-1840’s due to his *American Notes* and *Martin Chuzzlewit* might have, through “The Helmsman” publication, been somewhat cushioned. Unlike Cooper, Dickens was not hounded by the American Whig press nor by the Perry faction in the never-ending Perry-Elliott controversy. In short, there was no reason for him to “go underground.”

If there is a lesson to be learned in the Dickens – Cooper debate, it is to avoid guesswork. And this can only happen if we dust off our 19<sup>th</sup> century works of literature and start reading.

NORMAN BARRY, BAD SCHUSSENRIED,  
GERMANY, MAY 2010,  
UPDATED JANUARY 2021

## ANNOTATIONS:

- i) For the text of the original 1845 “Helmsman of Lake Erie”, cf. <https://johnmaynard.net/CofE.pdf> : *The Church of England Magazine*, No. 527, June 7, 1845, pp. 365-366.
- ii) For those interested in pursuing the question of Cooper’s authorship, turn to “Norman’s Cooper Corner” at [johnmaynard.net](http://johnmaynard.net).

1) The original title intended for the work was *American Notes for General Circulation*, with the implicit indictment that no sooner should the “The Notes” be published than they would be pirated by American publishers who had no respect for international copyright law. As it turned out, the prophesy was correct.

2) Dickens had already written the following works before arriving at Boston on January 22, 1842: *Sketches by Boz* (1836-1837), *Pickwick Papers* (1837), *Oliver Twist* (1838), *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839), *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), and *Barnaby Rudge* (1841).

3) Cf. Frederick J. Shepard, “A Wandering Legend of Lake Erie: John Maynard,” *Buffalo Evening News*, July 16, 1927, p. 9: <http://johnmaynard.net/Wandering.html>

4) Cf. <http://johnmaynard.net/DistributionHelmsman.pdf>

5) Cf. Frederick J. Shepard, “Myths of the Great Lakes,” *Express*, September 1, 1912: <http://johnmaynard.net/myth.html> <http://johnmaynard.net/Wandering.html>

6) Cf. Alger’s article “How I Came to Write ‘John Maynard’” in *The Writer* (Boston, Mass.: vol. 8, 1895, pp. 182-183): <http://johnmaynard.net/Alger.pdf>

7) The articles by George Salomon can be accessed online at Anne Huberman’s *John Maynard Home Page*:

a) George Salomon, “Who Is John Maynard?” in *Fontane Blätter* (Potsdam, East Germany), Heft 2, 1965, pp. 25-40: Translated into English by Norman Barry

<http://johnmaynard.net/SalomonEnglish.pdf>

b) George Salomon, “John Maynard of Lake Erie: The Genesis of a Legend” in *Niagara Frontier*, Autumn 1964, vol. 11, no. 3, pp. 73-86 & p. 104.

<http://johnmaynard.net/LegendGenesis.pdf>

c) For a translation of Norman Barry’s own updated article on John Maynard in the *Fontane Blätter* (the only comprehensive treatment of the genesis of the Maynard legend in a German journal since Salomon’s 1965 article in Germany), cf. Norman Barry, “Fontane’s ‘John Maynard:’ Newly discovered Source Material” in *Fontane Blätter* (Potsdam, Germany), 85/2008, pp. 150-170.

<http://johnmaynard.net/SourcesEng.pdf>

8) Cf. Norman Barry, “The Battle of the Heroes, The Creation of a New Hero of Lake Erie in the Backdrop of the Year 1845. The Jackson – Elliott – Cooper Connection”:

<http://johnmaynard.net/MaynardJackson.pdf>

9) It should be noted that higher officials than a Mayor of Cleveland were calmly turned down:

“Since I wrote the inclosed [sic] sheet, I have had an Invitation from the President [=John Tyler] to dinner. I couldn’t go: being obliged to leave before the day he named.” Cf. *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, Vol. 3, 1842-1843 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), pp. 120-121, To Albany Fonblanque, From Washington (Fuller’s Hotel) | Twelfth March 1842.”

10) A close investigation of Cooper’s wording and the events of that voyage from Geneva to Vévey on Lake Lemman has been the subject of an in-depth study in Norman Barry, “**James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Headsman; or, The Abbaye des Vignerons* and the Legend of Arnold von Winkelried: John Maynard’s European Roots.**” <http://johnmaynard.net/Headsman.pdf>

11) Cf. Norman Barry, “A Language Comparison of the Writings of James Fenimore Cooper and “The Helmsman of Lake Erie”, Entry No. 80 “Waistcoat,” <http://johnmaynard.net/COOPER.pdf>

12) Cf. *Wikipedia*, “Siamese twins “English language” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siamese\\_twins\\_\(English\\_language\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siamese_twins_(English_language))

13) Cf. Mark Lehmstedt ed., *English and American Literature from Shakespeare to Mark Twain* (Berlin: Directmedia, 2004), Digitale Bibliothek Band 59. Although the 172,483 pages are “only” a selection, the search takes a mere second and has thus been labeled a “spot check.” For more exhaustive searches, CDs containing the complete works of individual writers must be used. For example, Dickens scored two hits in the spot check, but six hits when checking all his works using a CD Shack Media CD entitled *Charles Dickens: Literature Collection*, 2007.

14) Cf. *The Letters and Journals of James Fenimore Cooper*, Edited by James Franklin Beard (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1964), Vol. IV, Letter 705, To Rufus Wilmot Griswold, [10-18 January 1843?]:

a) “I printed Precaution at my own risk. It was reprinted by Colburn, and had a certain degree of <small> success in both countries. The book was purely English in plot and design. <and> Many of the critical sages of this country, fancied they saw the evidence that it was written in England, and set up in this country> here as a mystification! The knowledge it betrayed of English society was of the most worthless and superficial kind, and yet I think it gained me more reputation in that way, than my own subsequent work on England [i.e., *Gleanings in Europe: England*] – a book written after six visits to the country, and under circumstances singularly favorable to observation!” (p. 341)



b) “Precaution was quite as much noticed as it deserved – most people, indeed, fancied it an English book.....” (p. 342)

15) Cf. <http://johnmaynard.net/Tosses&Tilts.pdf>

16) Cf. *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, Vol. 3, p. 208 & footnote 5, “Tuesday, April Twenty-sixth, 1842.”

17) Cf. *The Weekly Herald*, May 28, 1842, p. 284, c. 1-2.

18) The description of “*a steam vessel riding at anchor, opposite the town of Buffalo, on Lake Erie*” [“The Helmsman of Lake Erie,” lines 2-3], need not be regarded as a lack of knowledge of harbor installations at Buffalo, for – whether knowingly or simply by sheer luck – the description is correct for the year 1841. In 1842, however, the water level had risen and heavily-laden ships no longer needed to “*ride at anchor*” and be loaded and unloaded with small boats. As such, if Dickens were the author, it would be logical for him to describe harbor conditions as they existed when he arrived at Buffalo – conditions just the opposite from those in “The Helmsman.” Cf. “Navigation and Winter Ice on Lake Erie from 1821 to 1845, with References to Water Levels (With an Appendix of Newspaper Clippings dealing with Lake Erie and Buffalo Harbor)” -- an essay by Norman Barry: <http://johnmaynard.net/PleasantMM.pdf>

19) *LCD*, Vol.3, p. 211, footnote 2.

20) Cf. Norman Barry, “The Battle of the Heroes, The Creation of a New Hero of Lake Erie in the Backdrop of the Year 1845. The Jackson – Elliott – Cooper Connection”, pp. 16-17 & Ftn. 19:

<http://johnmaynard.net/MaynardJackson.pdf>

21) Cf. Norman Barry, “An Investigation of American Source Material Used by the *Gewerbe-Blatt für Sachsen* in Leipzig, Germany on October 8<sup>th</sup>, 1841, under the Heading “Loss of the Steamboat *Erie*,” pp. 12-19:

<http://johnmaynard.net/SCAEssay.pdf>

22) A reference to a “Miss Beebe” at the Coopers’ is in *The Letters and Journals of James Fenimore Cooper*, Edited by James Franklin Beard (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1964), Vol. IV, p.314, ftn. 2. Also, Vol. 5 (1968), p. 284, “On Tuesday, 15 February” [1848] (Journal XXXIII):

“Miss Beebe passed the evening with us, to take leave of us [=the Coopers].”

Footnote 1 (Vol. 5, p. 284): “Miss Beebe may have been Emma F. Wright Beebe whom Rensselaer R. Nelson, son of Judge Samuel Nelson, married on 3 November 1858” (*DAB*=Allen Johnson and Dumas Malone, eds., *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1928-1936), 20 volumes).

The inversion of the maiden and married name is misleading. Her name *before* marrying Rensselaer R. Nelson was thus Emma F. Beebe Wright.

For the marriage of Emma F. Beebe to her first husband, cf. “Wright, William F (S. Louis) – Beebe , Emma F. (Cprstn) – Sep. 27, 1849, p. 90 at “First Presbyterian Church – Marriages – 1800-1863, Cooperstown, NY,” cf.

<http://theusgenweb.org/ny/otsego/churches/cooperstownpresbyterianmarriage.htm>

23) Cf. <http://johnmaynard.net/Jersey.pdf>

24) John Bartholomew Gough’s rendering, which did not specify the steamboat’s name, served as the model for both Fontane’s and Linden’s ballads. Evidence suggests that Emil Rittershaus had access to Gough’s prose rendering and passed it on to both writers. Cf. Norman Barry, “The Triangle: Three German Lake Erie Ballads. Is Emil Rittershaus the Catalyst behind Ada Linden’s and Theodor Fontane’s ‘John Maynard’ Ballads?”

<http://johnmaynard.net/TriangleEng.pdf> in English or „Das Dreiecksverhältnis: Drei deutsche Eriese-Balladen. Ist Emil Rittershaus die treibende Kraft hinter Ada Lindens und Theodor Fontanes ‚John Maynard‘-Balladen?“, <http://johnmaynard.net/TriangleGer.pdf>

For information on the loss of the steamboat the *Swallow* on the Hudson River on April 7, 1845, cf. Norman Barry, “A Reevaluation of the Impact of the Shipwreck of the *Swallow* on the Creation of “The Helmsman of Laje Erie”: The Literary Transformation of Two Shipwrecks, One on Lake Erie and the Other on the Hudson River, together with a Time Frame for Smuggling a Manuscript to England:” <https://johnmaynard.net/Squires.pdf>

25) Cf. <http://johnmaynard.net/1845-1860.pdf>

26) Cf. [http://johnmaynard.net/1845\\_1860\\_Deutsch.pdf](http://johnmaynard.net/1845_1860_Deutsch.pdf)

27) The surname “Chuzzlewit” suggests the loose morals of its bearer:

“‘Chuzzle’ approximates ‘chisel’, a colloquial term for ‘cheat’. In chapter 1, Dickens plays on the ‘chiselled noses’ and ‘chiselling propensities’ of the Chizzlewit ancestors in a way that demonstrates his consciousness of this double meaning.”

Nancy Aycock Metz, *The Companion to Martin Chuzzlewit* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001), p. 17.

28) *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, Vol. 4, 1844-1846, pp. 289-323. In early July, Dickens was again home in England: Vol. 4, p. 325, 5 July 1845: “Once more in my own house!”

29) I wish to thank my good friend Dr. Gary Anderson of Zeppelin University, Friedrichshafen/Lake Constance, for referring me to George Orwell’s milestone critical essay entitled “Charles Dickens.” First published: *Inside the Whale and Other Essays* (London: March 11, 1940): [http://www.orwell.ru/library/reviews/dickens/english/e\\_chd](http://www.orwell.ru/library/reviews/dickens/english/e_chd)

30) For example, in *Afloat and Ashore*, *The Red Rover* and *The Water-Witch*.

31) Cf. <http://johnmaynard.net/NFDickens.pdf>

32) Cf. Norman Barry, “‘The Helmsman of Lake Erie’ in Light of the Role Played by Religion in the Fictional Writing of James Fanimore Cooper – or, The Secret Why the Good Man, When Dying, Does Not Groan:” <http://johnmaynard.net/MARTYRSDEATH.pdf>

33) Even George Salomon was willing to give Dickens passing consideration as a possible author of “The Helmsman,” although he may have merely regarded the question as rhetorical before responding in the negative. In “John Maynard of Lake Erie: The Genesis of a Legend” (see **Annotation #7**), fn. 19: Salomon writes:

“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.”

Of course, Salomon confused the years 1842 and 1845. In 1842, Dickens was lionized in America. By 1845, he was a “Proscribed One.”

In his German article entitled “Wer ist John Maynard?” (see **Annotation #7**), Salomon claims (without bothering to submit one piece of evidence) that *both* style *and* manner of depiction in “The Helmsman” are decidedly inferior to Dickens (p. 30). Yet Salomon does not stop there. The *ultima ratio* Salomon provides at the end of his paper, namely, that Fontane’s ballad has outlived all the American prose and poetic renderings due to Fontane’s *merits* as a writer and poet (in contrast to the *failings* of the American renderings) brackets out considerations of the role played by American history, social movements, and literary developments in the United States, all of which can obscure “the merits” of an individual writer and his work. And finally, if, as may be assumed, Fontane could indeed be inspired by the model he used, wasn’t there something in that model, a mere fragment of the original of 1845, that still contained the spark of great literature?

34) Cf. [http://johnmaynard.net/COOPER\\_HELMSMAN.pdf](http://johnmaynard.net/COOPER_HELMSMAN.pdf)