

## The Mysterious *Swallow* in Theodor Fontane's "John Maynard"

My own interest in Theodor Fontane goes back to the year 1969, when my deceased wife Beatrix Barry was asked by the Chairman of the German Department, Professor Tracy, to do a research paper for the University of Western Ontario in London (Postgraduate Studies) on Fontane's ballad with special emphasis placed on its historical origins. It should be pointed out that London, Ontario is only about 20 miles north of Lake Erie. Unfortunately, I no longer have the research she did back then. Yet the assignment fascinated me at the time and has haunted me for decades.

The crux of the problem in finding historical links is that Fontane's ballad refers to a helmsman named John Maynard, who has never been identified and thus remains in the misty realm of legend, and a steamboat disaster involving the *Swallow* on Lake Erie, a disaster which never took place as there are absolutely no records of a steamboat by that name catching fire on its voyage from Detroit to Buffalo. To make matters even more complicated, the epithet, "The Hero of Lake Erie", can only be attached to Oliver Hazard Perry (1785 – 1819), whose singular victory against the British in the Battle of Lake Erie (1813) made him a household word to be eulogized into the 1850's:

"The Hero of Lake Erie" by Henry T. Tuckerman ( *Harper's New Magazine*, Dec. 1853, pp. 76-77), composed on Sept. 10, 1853 in New Port, R.I., where Perry was finally laid to rest, 7 years after his death:

Electric cheers along the shattered fleet [i.e., the British fleet],  
With rapturous hail, her youthful hero [Perry] greet;  
Meek in his triumph, as in danger calm,  
With reverent hand he takes the victor's palm;

His wreath of conquest on Faith's altar lays,  
To his brave comrades yields the meed of praise;  
With mercy's balm allays the captive's woe,  
And wrings oblation from his vanquished foe!

While Erie's currents lave their winding shore  
Or down the crags a rushing torrent pour,  
While floats Columbia's standard to the breeze,  
No blight shall wither laurels such as these.

One of the major disasters on Lake Erie, which has been cited as a possible source of Fontane's ballad (one need only consider the memorial plaque in Buffalo) is the sinking of the elegant side-wheeler *Erie*. Possibly 250 passengers died (many of them immigrants from Germany and

Switzerland seeking new homes in the West), and – intriguingly – roughly \$180,000 in gold and silver disappeared into the murky depths.

A short but provocative article that I have only recently discovered (cf. the English translation, "More about 'John Maynard': The Ship's Name, The *Swallow*" in *Fontane Blätter*, 1967, no. 4, pp. 153-154, 156) convincingly solves the question of where Fontane himself hit upon the name of his ship: the German poet Emil Rittershaus was a contemporary of Fontane's and a friend with whom he was in close touch. Although Rittershaus and his poetry have long since been forgotten, in his own day and age he was quite famous. One of his ballads, published in 1871, was entitled "A German Heart" and involved the conflagration of a steamer strangely similar to that of the *Erie* in 1841. It is all but certain that Fontane was familiar with Rittershaus's ballad. The protagonists were, incidentally, German. The details are, in several instances, reminiscent of the unfortunate *Erie*. And to top it off, Rittershaus's steamer was named the *Swallow*!.

The *Erie* tragedy occurred on August 9, 1841 (a hot summer month). The "Erie" had left Buffalo and was heading for Cleveland and Detroit (the wrong direction if we consider Fontane's ballad). There has been some speculation as to whether the helmsman Luther Fuller may have heroically remained at the wheel until overcome by the flames. On the other hand, there have also been backbiting comments about Fuller surviving, changing his name and leading a disreputable life until his death in penury 59 years afterwards. But no matter how one evaluates Fuller's character and the likelihood of a truly heroic deed, it should be noted that most of the hapless passengers were not saved. The *Erie* was simply too far removed from a "saving shore".

In Rittershaus's ballad of a steamer disaster, a German mother and child are floating in the lake, the mother desperately clinging to a plank to save not just herself but also her little boy. A fellow German struggling in the waves and nearly spent, happily spies the plank and, thinking of his own wife and children, grabs hold. The woman, tears in her eyes, begs for the life of her child as she knows the plank is not big enough for all three. The man lets go, thus sacrificing his own life. Rittershaus places his ballad in the tradition of immigration and emigration (the woman was on her way back to Germany; the heroic protagonist, had already been assimilated and was a citizen of "the State of Wisconsin"). It should be noted that – historically - only one woman (a highly publicized fact) was rescued from the *Erie* blaze. She was, however, the only passenger wearing a life preserver and she was given an oar as

further support. [Cf. *THE NIAGARA COURIER*---EXTRA.Lockport, Thursday Morning, August 12, 1841: "Disaster on Lake Erie!"  
[http://homepage.mac.com/joel\\_huberman/JohnMaynard/1841.html](http://homepage.mac.com/joel_huberman/JohnMaynard/1841.html) ]

The devastation wrought by the *Erie* disaster is also alluded to, even a capsized lifeboat. The catalyst of the disaster in Rittershaus's ballad was, however, a foolish captain who could not resist accepting a wager of ten bottles of whiskey (which was later upped ten dollars) that he could reach the next harbor within an hour:

"I'll put up bottles of whiskey ten  
 That in one hour this old ship cannot make harbor by then!"  
 "Though one and one half, its always been,  
 yet not more than an hour shall pass by,  
 For my ship is the *Swallow*, and, like the swallow, she does fly!"  
 [My translation]

Though admitting that his ship was "ramshackle and moldy" ["morsch und faulig"], he cynically took solace in the fact that it was "insured to the hilt." The objection that he was endangering the lives of all the passengers was unscrupulously dismissed as irrelevant: "Now a passenger is only freight. So get your lives insured!"

Fontane's "John Maynard" makes no mention of a lone woman survivor, let alone the fact that there were (140!) Swiss and German immigrants among the passengers [cf. William Ratigan, *Great Lakes Shipwrecks and Survivors*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, April 1980 (fourth printing), p. 188]. In all probability, the ultimate source of Fontane's version of "John Maynard" is a man named John Bartholomew Gough, one of the most influential orators of his day, a man highly regarded in both the United States and Britain, who was the leading apostle of temperance. Just as Gough's prose rendering of "John Maynard" (apparently first published in 1860: cf. Norman Barry, "Two Missing Links: *Harpers* 1854 & *The Living Age* 1860 / An evaluation of two newly discovered John Maynard texts") had inspired Horatio Alger, Jr. to compose his own ballad in 1866, it may with reasonable certainty be assumed that similar circumstances applied to Fontane (cf. the English translation of George Salomon's "Who Is John Maynard?").

A tantalizing consideration is whether Fontane's ballad can stand alone as the product of a literary tradition without the actual *Erie* tragedy of 1841. Scholars have identified several American and British versions of "John Maynard", all of which had been written long before Theodor Fontane continued reworking and reinventing the saga of "John Maynard".

John Hay's ballad of Jim Bludso[e] of the *Prairie Belle* was published in *The Pike County Ballads* in 1871, the very same year in which Emil Rittershaus's ballad was published. "Jim Bludso[e]" may well have been in circulation in pamphlets and broadsides before that date. [ - Refer to the following site: <http://angam.ang.univie.ac.at/k525ss00/Vo2305.htm>]. Hay's ballad, which dovetails neatly with the heroic and self-sacrificing helmsman, is strongly reminiscent of the gutsy and distinctly American vernacular Mark Twain made use of. "Bludso[e]" enjoyed incredible popularity in the States, ranking as the best-known poem in the 1870's and selling up to 3 million copies.

As late as 1903, Teddy Roosevelt read Jim Bludsoe to his children while his wife was away:

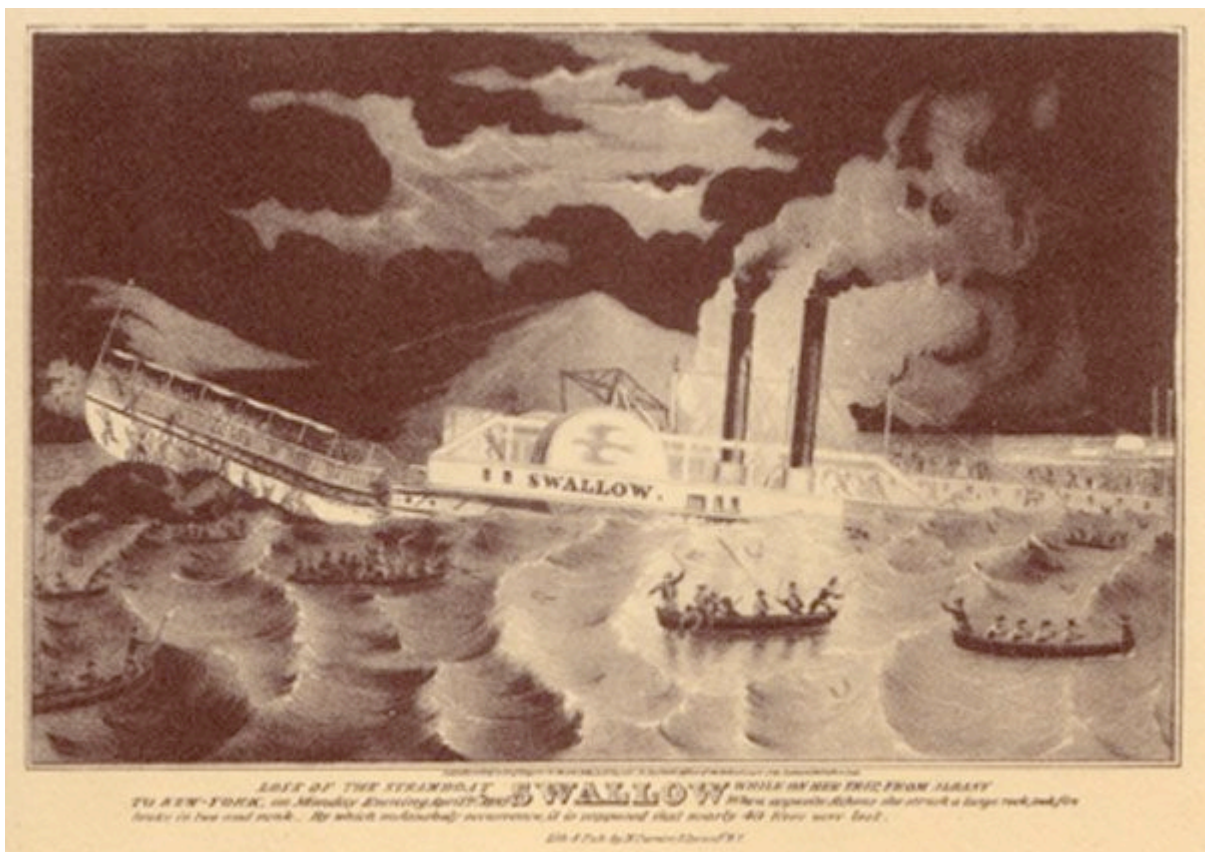
"Once I read them Jim Bludsoe, which perfectly enthralled them and made Quentin ask me at least a hundred questions, including one as to whether the colored boy did not find sitting on the safety valve hot". [ - <http://www.bartleby.com/53/37.html>]

Horatio Alger's "John Maynard" was published in *Grandther Baldwin's Thanksgiving* in 1875, but first appeared in *Student and Schoolmate*, a reader for children in January 1868. It is Alger's ballad (in standard American English) which most resembles the Fontane version of the ballad (also avoiding dialect or vernacular). It must be remembered that Gough's rendering, which Fontane generally follows, is prose, not verse. There are, however, basic differences in the structure of Alger's and Fontane's ballads:

Alger immortalizes the helmsman's staying power in spite of the flames while Fontane is also bent on creating suspense through his adroit use of the time remaining to reach shore (and salvation): 30 minutes, 20 minutes, 15 minutes, 10 minutes to the saving shore. (And a race against time in this context can be associated with a completely different kind of race, as seen in Emil Rittershaus's "A German Heart").

And now for a strange coincidence that occurred way back in 1970: I was enjoying a delightful fish dinner at the historic Griswold Inn in Essex, Connecticut (renowned for its maritime art

collection) when one of the lithographs hanging on the wall caught my eye. It was entitled "The Loss of the Steamboat *Swallow*" on her passage from Albany to New York on the Hudson River [pub. by J. Baillie, N.Y.!] Decades later, while checking into the history of the *Swallow*, I discovered that in its day and age, the *Swallow* had been one of the fastest steamboats on the Hudson. It was often engaged in races with the *Rochester* to see which was fastest. During one of those races (on April 7th, 1845), the *Swallow* hit a small island just above Athens, New York and sank shortly afterwards. The tragedy took place at 8:10 pm during a heavy snowstorm. About 40 of the 300 passengers on board died. The *Rochester* and the *Express* rescued most of the passengers although some had in fact been able to save themselves by jumping off the ship onto the island (the "saving shore"). The event received major publicity in Albany and New York, publicity which may well have been international. But if not, Currier and Ives, the most important 19th-century lithographic company in America, provided a moving illustration of the shipwreck which caught the American public's imagination. In other words, if there is more than a poetic *raison d'être* lurking behind the name "swallow", the name of the ill-fated historical *Swallow* - a most poetic choice symbolizing flight and speed! - could well have been enshrined in *both* Rittershaus's and Fontane's ballads.



Scanned from  
 Currier and Ives, Printmakers to the American People  
 by Harry T. Peters, 1942 edition, Doubleday, Doran & Co., New York  
 Plate no. 151.

The 1845 shipwreck on the Hudson River has several characteristics which lend themselves to both ballads:

- The very name of the steamboat (the steamboat in both Rittershaus's and Fontane's ballads is named the *Schwalbe* (*Swallow* in English)).
- The race against time and, in particular, against the *Rochester*, although transformed by Fontane in "John Maynard" into a race to save lives, is implicit in the "Loss of the *Swallow*". In Rittershaus's ballad, there is indeed a race (though not against another steamer) leading up to the catastrophe.

As a footnote, it should also be pointed out that the ballad of "Jim Bludsoe" also involved a race, although not on the Hudson or Lake Erie:

All boats has their day on the Mississip,  
 And her day come at last, -  
 The Movastar was a better boat,  
 But the Belle she wouldn't be passed.  
 And so she come tearin' along that night -  
 The oldest craft on the line -  
 With a nigger squat on her safety-valve,  
 And her furnace crammed, rosin and pine.

In the *Swallow's* case, a "saving shore" was present, in contrast to the unfortunate *Erie*, and the loss of life was far less than the 1841 *Erie* shipwreck. Rittershaus, however, was, at least in part, basing his ballad on certain elements in the *Erie* disaster, even if he allowed himself the liberty of a "non-existent" boat race, which – of course – may have been borrowed from the actual *Swallow* on the Hudson!

The first two lines of the second stanza of Fontane's "John Maynard" not only refer to the *Schwalbe* (*Swallow*). There is also an amazing reference to snowflakes:

"The foam from the waves hitting the prow of the steamer resembled snowflakes"\* . A tantalizing conjecture is whether the actual *Swallow*, which sank during a snowstorm – hence "snowflakes" – may well have been lurking in the back of Fontane's mind. The image of "snowflakes", if linked with the loss of the *Erie* in the hot month of August, seems strangely misplaced.

It should perhaps also be observed that Horatio Alger's version immediately points out the time of year when the tragedy occurs: "One bright midsummer day". The adjective "bright" suggests midday. Nowhere in Fontane's ballad is the time of year expressly stated. Also the time of day is suggested by the words "in the dusk" [tr. by Julie and Amy Huberman] or "in the twilight dim"[tr. by Burt Erikson Nelson].

The famous lithograph by Currier and Ives dramatically depicts the "Loss of the Steamboat Swallow" taking place in an eerie twilight. This can be contrasted with the *Erie*, which sank at night, as well as the *Swallow*, which sank when "the night was intensely dark"[-John H. Morrison, *History of American Steam Navigation*, Stephen Daye Press, 1958, p. 75].

It goes without saying that neither Hay's *Prairie Belle* (obviously unsuitable), Alger's *Ocean Queen* ( - a most inappropriate name, which even Alger later regretted) nor the name *Erie* ( - a painful, unpoetic repetition) could possibly appeal to a poet (or poets!) writing about an act of heroism on Lake Erie. The first known prose version of 1845 (unfortunately anonymous and quite possibly of British origin) makes use of the inexplicable name *Jersey*, which Gough wisely deletes in his own shortened prose rendering. It seems clear that Fontane borrowed the ship's name from Emil Rittershaus. Whether Fontane was truly aware of the *Swallow* disaster on the Hudson River remains shrouded in mystery. But what about Rittershaus himself? If he had read about the 1841 *Erie* conflagration and partially based his 1871 ballad upon that historical event, the highly publicized 1845 disaster on the Hudson with the *Swallow* might well have caught his attention: the stuff of ballads, "the flight of the *Swallow*", thus being transposed to a new setting, Lake Erie, where a landscape of the imagination, a poetic "mosaic" is created, in which man can discover his own untapped courage and his own humanity, even if he must pay the ultimate price.

In conclusion, I would like to point out that the message "John Maynard" brings home is by no means mere "poetry", but rests on a solid American tradition. "By 1870, Mark Twain was the most extensively read author in America" ( - Edward Wagenknecht, Easton Press, Publisher's Preface, ii, of *Life on the Mississippi*). I refer to the following passage by Mark Twain in his autobiographical *Life on the Mississippi* dealing with his riverboat experience between 1857 and 1859: Chapter XLIV – Episodes in Pilot Life: "Men who Stick to their Posts"[Easton Press,

Norwalk, Connecticut, 1979, pp. 284-285]. In 1883, three years before the publication of Fontane's ballad, Mark Twain rendered homage to America's many "John Maynards":

"One of the pilots whom I had known when I was on the river had died a very honorable death. His boat caught fire, and he remained at the wheel until he got her safe to land. Then he went out over the breast-board with his clothing in flames, and was the last person to get to shore. He died from his injuries in the course of two or three hours, and his was the only life lost.

The history of Mississippi piloting affords six or seven instances of this sort of martyrdom, and half a hundred instances of escape from a like fate which came within a second or two of being fatally too late; *but there is no instance of a pilot deserting his post to save his life while, by remaining and sacrificing it, he might secure other lives from destruction.* It is well worth while to set down this noble fact, and well worth while to put it in italics [my emphasis], too.

The 'cub' pilot is early admonished to despise all perils connected with a pilot's calling, and to prefer any sort of death to the deep dishonor of deserting his post while there is any possibility of his being useful in it. And so effectively are these admonitions inculcated that even young and but half-trying pilots can be depended upon to stick to the wheel, and die there when occasion requires. In a Memphis graveyard is buried a young fellow who perished at the wheel a great many years ago, in White River, to save the lives of other men. He said to the captain that if the fire would give him time to reach a sand-bar, some distance away, all could be saved, but that to land against the bluff bank of the river would be to insure the loss of many lives. He reached the bar and grounded the boat in shallow water; but by that time the flames had closed around him, and in escaping through them he was fatally burned. He had been urged to fly sooner, but had replied as became a pilot to reply:

'I will not go. If I go, nobody will be saved. If I stay, no one will be lost but me. I will stay.'

There were two hundred persons on board, and no life was lost but the pilot's. There used to be a monument to this young fellow in that Memphis graveyard."

\*Other, more poetic translations: a) "As mist sprays her bow like flakes of snow" - Translated by Julie and Amy Huberman © 1996 and b) "Foam like snow the ship's bow rings"- Translated by Burt Erikson Nelson 1997.

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Three websites with further information about the Swallow:

**Hudson River Steamboats** (A chapter from Steamboat Days by: Fred Erving Dayton)

**Disasters of River Travel** (A chapter from Old Steamboat Days on The Hudson River By: David Lear Buckman, The Grafton Press, 1907)

**The History of Athens, New York**



