

I'LL HOLD ON!

Theodor Fontane's ballad of John Maynard, the helmsman who faced death undaunted, superbly illustrated by Tobias Krejtschi

“Fire!” shouts a burly sailor on board a stout paddle-wheel steamer. Clouds of smoke rise, and the ship rocks menacingly on the green lake.... This could have been the scenario, in the summer of 1841, of a catastrophe on Lake Erie along the border between Canada and the United States. For, as we know, shortly after the steamer had left harbor, fire broke out. All efforts failed to reach the saving shore. The ship sank, and many lost their lives.

In 1886, Theodor Fontane, allowing himself a generous quantity of literary license, transformed this account of the tragedy into a ballad. [1] It was named *John Maynard*, after the protagonist, the helmsman. Filled with passengers, with “hearts ... free and happy,” the steamer sets out on Lake Erie. As the fire spreads out, becoming ever more dangerous, a dialogue of questions and answers shouted back and forth between the captain and his wheelsman takes place. And the last “response echoes with a fading voice, ‘Aye, aye. Sir, I’ll hold on!’”

In his picture book for children, Tobias Krejtschi presents this central message in a cartoon balloon. The powerful dialogue between the Captain and his helmsman receives prominence using balloons with print set against a light background. This becomes even more noticeable, for Krejtschi illustrates the impending shipwreck in dark, ominously yellow, and foreboding green colors. In the midst of a scene of horror, shrouded in darkness, the bristle-bearded helmsman struggles to “hold on.” It is here that Krejtschi zooms in on the helmsman, who literally jumps out of the page at the reader.

The successful pictorial sequence of these thrilling scenes bears testimony to the skill of the young artist. Krejtschi’s illustrated *John Maynard* was the winning entry in a competition of the Hamburg University of Applied Sciences, selected by the jurors for publication. The way Tobias Krejtschi tackles the end of the ballad is also masterfully executed. The rescue of the passengers and the death of the helmsman are depicted in a background of yellow-ocher, the warmth of which serves to underscore the ballad’s underlying motif that “no man is an island,” that our fates are bound up in one another.

Through the medium of this bright underlying color, Krejtschi frames his illustrations of scenes from the plot of Fontane’s ballad with an outer plot that is his own creation. In the first scene of Krejtschi’s frame story, the reader is confronted with an old man, holding a curious little girl by the hand. While walking along the banks of Lake Erie, the little girl notices the name John Maynard on a tombstone, and has the old man in the blue striped jersey tell her the story.

The pages that follow reveal what happened on board the steamer. On those pages, however, we notice, time and again, a little boy wearing a jersey with blue stripes. At the end of the book the old man in his blue striped jersey and the girl in a red dress with a striped apron are sitting on the bank of the lake. (The old man still has the slingshot he carried with him as a boy.) [2] They talk about bygone times and look at old snapshots.... It becomes clear that John Maynard’s story is also that of the old man.

A tale which can still hold us spellbound –and a thrilling new achievement in illustrated books for children.

Elisabeth Hohmeister

Die Zeit, No. 48, November 20, 2008

Theodor Fontane/Tobias Krejtschi (III.):

John Maynard

(Berlin, Germany: Kindermann Publishing Company, 2008); 24 pages,
14.50 euros
(recommended for children six years of age or
older)

ISBN 978-3-934029-31-6

The book can be ordered through www.Amazon.de .

Biographical information on (and a very good picture of) Tobias Krejtschi can be found at the following site:

<http://hammer.txt.de/Hammer/TXTSIAutor/20188-Tobias-Krejtschi>

The Kindermann series of children's books entitled "Poesie für Kinder" [Poetry for Children] is one of the best in Germany. Other poetic works for children by this highly reputable publishing house may be found at:

<http://www.kindermannverlag.de/oesie-fuer-kinder.htm>

Annotations:

1) The abridged 1860 version of John Maynard by John Bartholomew Gough and the original anonymous 1845 version of "The Helmsman of Lake Erie" have been overlooked. Fontane did not himself create the legend of John Maynard, but based his ballad on Gough's rendering, which was a modified and abridged version of the original "Helmsman of Lake Erie," first published on August 30, 1845, in the *Baltimore Sun*.

The question whether Fontane might indeed have read about the *Erie* tragedy has received new impulses from the German article on "The Loss of the *Erie*" in the *Gewerbe-Blatt für Sachsen*, kindly provided by Mr. Lutz Weide in January 2009. Cf. Norman Barry, "An Investigation of American Source Material Used by the *Gewerbe-Blatt für Sachsen* in Leipzig Germany on October 8th, 1841, under the Heading "Loss of the Steamboat *Erie*:" http://homepage.mac.com/joel_huberman/JohnMaynard/SCAEssay.pdf, p. 19; and *Schlussfolgerung der Untersuchung des Artikels „Der Untergang des Dampfbootes Erie“ in dem Gewerbe-Blatt für Sachsen vom 8. Oktober 1841:* http://homepage.mac.com/joel_huberman/JohnMaynard/Zus.pdf, p. 2.

Fontane's steamer is the *Swallow*. Krejtschi depicts an actual swallow on four separate pages – no doubt representing the spirit of the *Swallow* and of John Maynard, that still live on in our hearts and minds.

2) An observation added by the translator.

**Translated by Norman Barry, Dec. 14, 2008,
Annotation #1: updated March 2009**