

Rummagings, 4: John Maynard in Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*

by D.M.R. Bentley

Towards the end of "The Mariposa Bank Mystery" in Stephen Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912), the "hero" of the sketch, Peter Pupkin, finds himself "suddenly exalted into the class of Napoleon Bonaparte and John Maynard and the Charge of the Light Brigade," a glorification that is, of course, as unmerited as it is "wonderful" (113). But who is John Maynard? In his notes in the 1960 McClelland and Stewart education edition of *Sunshine Sketches*, D.H. Carr provided an explanation of the reference that Carl Spadoni reiterates in the "revised and expanded" version of Carr's notes that appears in the 2001 Broadview Literary texts edition of Leacock's book:

John Maynard [is] the hero of a poem of the same name in the *Ontario School Reader*. Maynard was the wheelsman on a boat that burned on Lake Erie. He stayed at his post until all the passengers had left the ship. (Spadoni ed. 164)

Helpful though this is, it raises further questions about the authorship of the poem in the *Ontario School Reader*, the identity of John Maynard, and the nature of the incident that made him a hero—questions whose answers may cast new light on one of the most beloved episodes in *Sunshine Sketches*, "The Marine Excursion of the Knights of Pythias" (Chapter 3).

The first of these questions is the most easily answered: the poem "John Maynard," subtitled "A Ballad of Lake Erie," was written by the American poet Horatio Alger, Jr. (1832-1899), whose Ragged Dick, Luck and Pluck, and Tattered Tom series of novels for boys have made his name almost synonymous with the American Dream that wealth and fame can be achieved in the land of the free by anyone who is optimistic, virtuous, and hard-working. Written and published near the beginning of Alger's prolific career, "John Maynard" describes events that took place on Lake Erie in an unspecified year. Shortly after leaving an unnamed port "One bright midsummer day, / The gallant steamer 'Ocean Queen'" is engulfed by "fire and smoke" from an "insidious flame" that "No human efforts [can] ...avail / To quench." Obedient to the Captain's order to "'run the ship on [Page 5] shore,'" John Maynard stands "calmly at the wheel" as the "flames approach with giant strides," "scorch his hands and brow,"¹ and disable one of his arms. When the "steamer touches shore," "Three hundred grateful voices rise / In praise to God," and the poem concludes with a paean to John Maynard:

... where is he, the helmsman bold?
The Captain saw him reel,—
His nerveless hands released their task,
He sank beside the wheel.
The wave received his lifeless corse
Blackened with smoke and fire.

God rest him! Never hero had
A nobler funeral pyre!

Not only was "John Maynard: a Ballad of Lake Erie" reprinted in numerous American anthologies of the eighteen seventies, eighties, and, 'nineties (see Salomon 85), "but during the same period" "it was one of the most popular pieces at 'exercises' held by schools and societies.... Without it no oratorical contest was complete" (Herbert R. Mayes, qtd. in Salomon 84). As George Salomon observes in "John Maynard of Lake Erie: the Genesis of a Legend," Alger's poem was "America's favorite rendering of the legend" (82).²

The fact that "John Maynard: a Ballad of Lake Erie" was the best-known but not the only treatment of its legendary hero makes it the most likely target of the allusion in "The Mariposa Bank Mystery" and also raises the possibility that Leacock was familiar with one or more different versions of the legend. Since Leacock could read German he may well have known "John Maynard" (sometimes called "Wir ist John Maynard") by Theodor Fontane (1819-1898), a ballad that was first published in 1889 and, in Salomon's words again, "soon became a favorite in...German-speaking countries and, unlike Alger's [poem], gained a permanent place in literature" (86). If so, he would have seen the legend set, not on the *Ocean Queen*, but on the "Schwalbe" (*Swallow*) and reaching its fiery climax as the steamer nears Buffalo (see Fontane 287-88). Leacock may also have known "The Pilot—a Thrilling Incident," a more moralistic prose rendition of the legend by mid-nineteenth-century "America's leading apostle of temperance," John Bartholomew Gough (1817-1886), that was first published in the eighteen sixties (Salomon 79-82). Almost certainly the primary, if not the only source of both "John Maynard: a Legend of Lake Erie" and "Wir ist John Maynard," "The Pilot" was "printed...in several [Page 6] elocution books" of the eighteen seventies and 'eighties that probably stayed in print and use for many years after their initial appearance, including one—*Osgood's American Sixth Reader for Schools and Families* (1873)—in which it is accompanied by a truncated version of Alger's poem (Salomon 85). The very presence of an allusion to the legend of John Maynard in "The Mariposa Bank Mystery" testifies to its persistence in the minds of readers in Canada as well as the United States until well into the twentieth century.

Besides removing opacity from an allusion in "The Mariposa Bank Mystery," a knowledge of the nature and textual manifestations of the legend of John Maynard brings with it the intriguing possibility that Leacock may have been counting on his readers' knowledge of the legend as a foil for "The Marine Excursion of the Knights of Pythias" and, moreover, may have drawn some of the ideas and skills that he uses to comic effect there and elsewhere in *Sunshine Sketches* from "The Pilot—a Thrilling Incident" or even the real-life incident upon which it and, hence, the poems of Alger and Fontane ultimately derive.³ Certainly, it is difficult to read "The Pilot" (which is brief enough to be quoted in its entirety) without hearing resonances in Leacock's descriptions of the sinking of the *Mariposa Belle* and the burning of the "Beacon on the Hill":

John Maynard was well-known in the lake district as a God-fearing, honest and intelligent pilot. He was a pilot on a steamboat from Detroit to Buffalo. One summer afternoon—at that time those steamers seldom carried boats—smoke was seen ascending from below, and the captain called out:

"Simpson, go below, and see what the matter is down there."

Simpson came up with his face pale as ashes and said,

"Captain, the ship is on fire."

Then "Fire! Fire! Fire!" on shipboard.

All hands were called up. Buckets of water were dashed on the fire, but in vain. There were large quantities of rosin and tar on board, and it was found useless to attempt to save the ship. The passengers rushed forward and

inquired of the pilot:

"How far are we from Buffalo?"

"Seven miles."

"How long before we can reach there?"

"Three-quarters of an hour at our present rate of steam."

"Is there any danger?"

"Danger! here—see the smoke bursting out—go forward if you would save your lives."

Passengers and crew—men, women and children—crowded the forward part of the ship. John Maynard stood at the helm. The flames burst forth in a [Page 7] sheet of fire; clouds of smoke arose. The captain cried out through his trumpet:

"John Maynard!"

"Aye, aye, sir!"

"Are you at the helm?"

"Aye, aye, sir!"

"How does she head?"

"Southeast by east, sir."

"Head her southeast and run her on shore," said the captain.

Nearer, nearer, yet nearer, she approached the shore.

Again the captain cried out:

"John Maynard!"

The response came feebly this time, "Aye, aye, sir!"

"Can you hold on five minutes longer, John?" he said.

"By God's help, I will."

The old man's hair was scorched from the scalp, one hand disabled, his knee upon the stanchion, and his teeth set, with his other hand upon the wheel, he stood firm as a rock. He beached the ship; every man, woman, and child was saved, as John Maynard dropped, and his spirit took its flight to its God.

(qtd. in Salomon 81)

If nothing else, "The Pilot" and pieces like it in various nineteenth-century anthologies of materials for recitation and readers for "schools and families" suggest that Charles Dickens and Samuel Clemens were not the only writers from whom Leacock learned the mastery of crisp dialogue, judicious detail, and mounting suspense that he turns to comic purposes in *Sunshine Sketches*.

The real-life incident that is generally believed to have spawned the legend of John Maynard occurred off Buffalo on August 9, 1841 when a steamer named the *Erie* caught fire and sunk with loss of some two-hundred lives, including that of the wheelman, Luther Fuller, who was said to have been burned to death at his post (see Salomon 73-75). Reports of the *Erie* disaster appeared in numerous newspapers and provided the basis for accounts in such works as James O. Brayman's *Thrilling Adventures by Land and Sea* (1855) and James T. Lloyd's *Steamboat Directory and Disasters on the Western Waters* (1856), any one of which might have come into Leacock's hands and provided part of the inspiration for the comical non-disaster of the *Mariposa Belle*. But it is the anonymous and untitled short story in which Luther Fuller becomes John Maynard and the *Erie* disaster is given a happy ending for all but the wheelman that most closely anticipates "The Marine Excursion of the Knights of Pythias." First published in the *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser* on September 12, 1845 [Page 8] and subsequently reprinted in the *Western Literary Messenger* and *The Spirit of the Times* in the same year, the short story is too long to be reprinted here. Nor is this necessary, for its resonances of setting, detail, and tone with "The Marine Excursion of the Knights of Pythias" [Page 9] are most audible in its two opening paragraphs:

It was on a pleasant May morning that a steam vessel was riding at anchor, opposite the town of Buffalo, on Lake Erie. You know, I dare say, that Erie is one of those sea-lakes for which America is so famous; and, as you stand on its shore, and see the green waves dashing in one after another you might well think that you were looking on the great ocean itself. The Jersey— for that was the name of the steamer—was dressed gaily with many bright flags: the Blue Peter, the signal of her immediate sailing, was at her main-mast head: porters were hurrying along the narrow quay that juts out into the lake; boatmen quarrelling with each other for passengers; travellers hurrying backwards and forwards to look for their luggage; friends shaking hands and bidding each other farewell; idlers lounging about, with their hands in their pockets; car-drivers jangling for a larger fare; and all the various kinds of bustle and confusion that attend the departure of a packet from a watering place.

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

("Helmsmen on Lake Erie" 419)

Did Leacock know these paragraphs and, as much to the point, *could* he have known them? Was the short story from which they came reprinted later and more accessibly than in the *Western Literary Messenger* and *The Spirit of the Times*? Its author's vocabulary, description of Lake Erie as "one of those sea-lakes for which America is so famous," and lack of familiarity with Buffalo harbour have led Salomon, Frederick J. Shepard, and others to speculate that it was either reprinted from a British source or written by a British traveller, perhaps, Shepard conjectures, Dickens, who crossed Lake Erie from Sandusky to Canada in 1842.⁴ The likelihood that Leacock knew the short story seems as remote as Dickens' authorship of it, but its resonances with "The Marine Excursion of the Knights of Pythias" remain an intriguing by-product of the allusion to the legend of John Maynard in "The Mariposa Bank Mystery" and a valuable reminder of the relationship between the sinking of the *Mariposa Belle* and the marine disaster genre that would shortly find its most spectacular subject in the sinking of the *Titanic*. It is Peter Pupkin who is explicitly and ironically likened to John Maynard in *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*, but his closest parodic counterpart in the book is surely Josh Smith, who raises the *Mariposa Belle* from the "mud bottom" of Lake Wissanotti and then takes the place of Christie Johnson "at the wheel in the pilot house":

"Smith! Get Smith!" is the cry. Can he take her in? Well, now! Ask a man who has had steamers sink on him in half the lakes from Temiscaming to the Bay, if he can take her in? Ask a man who has run a York boat down the rapids of the Moose when the ice is moving, if he can grip the steering wheel of the *Mariposa Belle*? So there she steams safe and sound to the wharf! (51-52)

Notes

1. These quotations are from the electronic version of the text listed below. See also Alger's *Grand'ther Baldwin's Thanksgiving* 45-50. [\[back\]](#)
2. It is also similar in subject and treatment to "Casabianca" (1829) ("The boy stood on the burning deck / Whence all but he had fled..."), a hugely popular and later notoriously melodramatic poem by Felicia Hemans (1793-1835) that is based on the death of Louis Casabianca (1755-98), a Corsican naval officer, and his thirteen-year-old son at the Battle of the Nile (see Hemans 369). Indeed, "The Ballad of John Maynard" probably owes a substantial debt to "Casabianca," which concludes with a similar question ("The boy—oh! where was he?") and a similar tribute ("...the noblest thing that perish'd / Was that young faithful heart!"). As Gerald Lynch has pointed out, Leacock himself "was fond of referring" to Hemans' poem for comical purposes (Letter to the author). [\[back\]](#)
3. The suggestion that part of the inspiration for "The Marine Excursion of the Knights of Pythias" came from (a) printed source(s) is not incompatible with the contentions of A.R.M. Lower, J. Russell Hale, and others that Leacock based the sinking of the *Mariposa Belle* on an actual incident involving a steamer on Lake Erie, most likely the near-sinking of the *Longford* in October 1898 (See Lower, *passim*, *Sunshine Sketches*, ed. Gerald Lynch 164-69, and *Sunshine Sketches*, ed. Carl Spadoni, lxxix-lxxi and 180): as only to be expected of the author of *Literary Lapses* (1910) and *Nonsense Novels* (1911), Leacock uses literary texts throughout the book to liberate the comic possibilities of actual incidents and characters. [\[back\]](#)
4. See Salomon 79 for a sceptical response to Shepard's conjecture, and Dickens' *American Notes* 2:143-207 for his travels in Ohio and Canada. [\[back\]](#) **[Page 10]**

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