

[Two and one half years after the publication of George Salomon's "Who Is John Maynard?" in *Fontane Blätter*, a revealing two-page article by the editorial staff of *Fontane Blätter* appeared. The staff had also consulted George Salomon, who, in their own words, had been most supportive. - Translator]

*Fontane Blätter*, 1967, No. 4, pp. 153-154, 156:

**More about "John Maynard":  
The Ship's Name, The *Swallow***

Where the steamer in Fontane's "John Maynard" got the name the *Swallow* has, until now, been unresolved. Walter Keitel's commentary in the Carl Hanser Edition (vol. 6, p. 959) only provides some uncertain speculation in this regard. In the sketch by John B. Gough, upon which Fontane apparently modeled his ballad, the name of the ship is not mentioned (cf. *Fontane Blätter*, No. 2, 1965, pp. 31-32).

Professor Horst Kirchner, the Director of the Archaeological Institute at the University of West Berlin, has submitted to the Fontane Archives a communiqué, which has solved the mystery.

In September 1871, a ballad entitled "A German Heart" by the then famous poet Emil Rittershaus (1834-1897) appeared in the German magazine, *Die Gartenlaube* (no. 38, pp. 635-636). The poem, a copy of which Professor Kirchner kindly forwarded to the Fontane Archives, has as its setting, as does Fontane's "John Maynard", the conflagration of a ship on Lake Erie. A passenger, a German by birth, who in America had apparently become hardhearted and a misanthrope, discovers that his heart is still capable of feelings of compassion in the hour of direst need: while drifting in the water, he fortunately finds a plank to hold on to; yet, instead of saving his own life (he ultimately drowns), he gives the board to a mother with her child, who were on their way back to Germany.

In Rittershaus's ballad, the fire on board results from the recklessness of the captain, who as a result of a wager was induced to overheat his steamer, which was barely seaworthy, in order to reach the harbor as quickly as possible. During the dialogue, which leads to the bet, the ship's name is mentioned: it is the very same name as in "John Maynard":

"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!"

It is hardly conceivable as an instance of mere coincidence that Fontane and Rittershaus should have made up the very same name of a burning ship on Lake Erie; on the other hand, it is highly probable, as Professor Kirchner has convincingly demonstrated, that Fontane read "A German Heart" at [153/154] the time of its publication. Only five weeks following the publication of Rittershaus's ballad in *Die Gartenlaube*, Fontane published an article of his

own in the very same magazine: an article about Wilhelmshöhe Palace by Kassel, where the former Emperor Napoleon III had been interned in the winter of 1870/71 (“An Emperor’s Prison”, no. 43, pp. 718-721). It therefore seems quite reasonable to assume that at that time Fontane was keeping up with each week’s issue of the magazine.

We have evidence that Fontane and Rittershaus remained in touch. In Fontane’s library, which is in part housed in the Fontane Archives, we have found a copy of Emil Rittershaus’s *Aus den Sommertagen*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, Oldenburg & Leibzig (the year of publication is missing) with a personal handwritten dedication: “To Theodor Fontane with regards and a handshake. Emil Rittershaus. Barmen, February 1890”.

Fontane must have kept the steamer’s name, the *Swallow*, in the context of a conflagration on Lake Erie, in the back of his mind until fourteen years later the prose rendering by Gough inspired Fontane to compose “John Maynard”. This can by no means be ruled out when considering Fontane’s excellent powers of recall. Moreover, it is possible that he reread Rittershaus’s poetry at a later date: after the first printing in *Die Gartenlaube*, Rittershaus’s *New Poems [Neue Gedichte]* were published four times from 1871 to 1874. Since Ritterhaus’s dedication of the book was in 1890 (and “John Maynard” was published in 1886), there is the real possibility that Fontane and Rittershaus were in direct contact during this period.

Professor Kirchner has also suggested that “A German Heart” may, by the way, be based on the same historical event as the legend of John Maynard: the blaze on the side-wheel steamboat *Erie* on Lake Erie on August 9<sup>th</sup>, 1841. In fact, a number of details suggest familiarity with this gruesome disaster. For example, one of the most frequently mentioned circumstances of the *Erie* blaze was that only one woman (a newlywed by the name of Mrs. Lynde from Milwaukee) survived; she was able to save herself with a floating piece of the wreckage, just like the mother in the ballad. Furthermore, newspaper reports described time and again how two of the three lifeboats the *Erie* was carrying capsized; in Rittershaus’s ballad the capsizing of one boat is described. And, finally, it should not be forgotten that the *Erie*’s passengers were for the most part immigrants from Germany and Switzerland: the main protagonists in Rittershaus’s ballad are Germans. As the conflagration of the *Erie* was regarded for decades as one of the most devastating disasters of that day and age, it may be assumed that Rittershaus had read about it in either a newspaper or magazine.

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(Professor Kirchner has given his consent to the preparation of this article by the editorial staff, which has received the kindest of support from George Salomon in New York).

Translated by Norman Barry, July 2007.