

Two Missing Links:
Harpers 1854 & The Living Age 1860
An evaluation of two newly discovered
John Maynard texts

by Norman Barry

The attempt to trace publication of the legend of John Maynard in newspapers and magazines in the 40's, 50's and 60's of the 19th century is a thorny task. Too many collections are incomplete, too many publications have simply vanished and few are online for the stay-at-home researcher. It is with a feeling of deep gratitude that I cite the Cornell University Library's "Making of America" online collection of American history. In this collection I was able to find two non-regional articles, one published in New York City in 1854, the other in Boston in 1860. The two articles (cf. **Appendix I**) serve as "missing links" – bridging an apparently inexplicable publishing gap of twenty-one years – the time between the anonymous 1845 *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser's* "The Helmsman of Lake Erie",¹ and Horatio Alger's first encounter with John Bartholomew Gough's "The Pilot – A Thrilling Incident" in 1866, as documented in Alger's 1895 article, "How I Came to Write 'John Maynard'".² George Salomon, on page 79 of his revealing *Niagara Frontier* article, states: "*The Helmsman of Lake Erie*" appears to have been quickly forgotten, but not until it had been noticed and the survival of the Maynard legend assured by a once famous man, John Bartholomew Gough (1817-1886)."³ On page 80 of the same article, Salomon cautiously places the publication of the Gough article "by 1866 at the latest", as in that year, by Alger's own account, Alger composed his ballad based on Gough's prose rendering. Salomon's assessment must be revised in two respects: neither was the "Helmsman" forgotten, nor were the intervals between publication so lengthy.

¹ *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*, September 12, 1845

² Horatio Alger, "How I Came to Write 'John Maynard'", *The Writer*, VIII (1895), pp. 182-183.

³ George Salomon, "John Maynard of Lake Erie: The Genesis of a Legend", *Niagara Frontier*, Autumn 1964, vol. 11, no. 3, pp. 79-80.

But let us first turn to the actual material at hand. The 1854 *Harpers* account is an eye-opener in that it provides two revelations:

The prologue contains the only known biographical note on the legendary “John Maynard”. First, there is the astonishing anecdote claiming Maynard had hearkened from Massachusetts (one recalls Alger’s own “Eastern-born” invention⁴) and had distinguished himself “*some three or four years ago*” (ll. 9-10) through an act of bravery by removing a keg of gunpowder from a burning building, thus saving the lives of endangered firefighters (-Cf. **Appendix II**). Of course, the time sequence is illogical as John Maynard had died “*a great many years ago*”(l. 28). There is nonetheless an implicit hint that John Maynard himself had been a firefighter.

Secondly, the distinction between a military and a civil hero (ll. 1-8 and 139-142) is made by the Editor in both his prologue and epilogue, with laurels for heroism bestowed to a far greater degree upon the civil hero. This distinction is particularly helpful in defusing a potential conflict between two heroes of Lake Erie, one a military, the other a civil hero: the victorious Commodore Perry in the Battle of Lake Erie (1813) and the legendary John Maynard.

Apart from some minor alterations and the significant deletion of the first 35 lines of the *Advertiser* account, the *Harpers* article basically follows the 1845 account verbatim. The deletion of the first 35 lines could theoretically account for similar deletions in both the Gough and Alger renderings.

Some alterations in the 1854 text include:

- 1) An unfortunate deletion in the *Harpers* article led to the absurdity of John Maynard being “*tanned by many a stormy tempest*” (l. 30) instead of “*tanned by many a burning summer day, and by many a winter tempest*” (ll. 41-42, *Advertiser*)
- 2) Details in the *Advertiser*, such as Maynard never complaining about “scant pay” and “hard labor”, and that he was “cast often into bad company” (ll. 44-48) are omitted.

⁴Salomon, *ibid*, p. 84: “*Not knowing Maynard’s antecedents (“where he was born...I am afraid will never be ascertained”), the Massachusetts-born Alger arbitrarily makes him an Easterner (35).*”

- 3) When Fletcher goes down to see the cause of the smoke coming out of the hold, he is told to make “no noise – no alarm – quietly, now” (l. 44). This note of caution is not to be found in the original text.
- 4) In line 119, John’s “*muscles cracked in the flames*” instead of “*the muscle creaked in the flame*” (ll. 132-133, *Advertiser*). Fortunately, neither of these macabre versions was adopted by either Gough or Alger.

The 1860 *New Age* article is, apart from very few minor alterations, identical to the 1869 Gough account, which Salomon cites.⁵ As recorded in line 49 of the 1860 account, Gough’s rendering was successful in making an impact upon his audience: “[Sensation].” The *New Age* article also provides an insight as to how Gough attempted to transpose a maritime anecdote into a moral injunction to abstain from alcohol. The notion that “it is worth a greater effort to save a man from moral ruin – to save a child from drunkenness than from fire” (ll. 50-53) may be a noble sentiment, but it hardly requires the ultimate sacrifice of a “John Maynard”.

As the *New Age* article clearly demonstrates, publication of Gough’s own version of “John Maynard” was by 1860 “at the latest”, at least six years earlier than Salomon’s own cautious time frame. It may also be assumed that Gough’s composition was either in 1859 (at the earliest!) or in the same year the October 27 Boston article was published. The Editor explicitly points out that “*the following anecdote*” had been “*related in one of his recent [my emphasis] speeches*” (ll. 5-7). Thus the time sequence 1845 (anonymous writer, the local *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*) – 1854 (abridged version of 1845, nationwide, *Harpers*) – 1860 (J. B. Gough’s rendering, nationwide, *The New Age*) – 1866 (the year of Horatio Alger’s composition) would suggest that the article had been much more accessible than has thus far been assumed. Gough did not need the research skills of an antiquarian to find the 1845 article. It was still in print, with only some changes and deletions, at the national level.

⁵George Salomon, , *op. cit.*, footnote 22, p. 80: “Floyd B. Wilson, *Wilson’s Book of Recitations and Dialogues* (New York: Dick & Fitzgerald, n.d., copyright 1869, pp. 27-28. The

text quoted below is from another, undated but apparently identical, printing of the book: the New York Public Library's copy is defective."

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APPENDICES I & II

The following three texts were found with the MOA search machine of Cornell University Library's online Making of America Collection

(http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/moa/moa_search.html)

Appendix I

A) *Harpers New Monthly Magazine* , Vol. 9, Issue 49 (New York City: Harper and Bros., June 1854), pp. 565-566:

"Editor's Drawer"

THERE seems somehow to be a great difference
in the world's estimation between a civil and a mil-
itary *Hero*. But some deeds have been recorded
of noble heroism in private, unmilitary station,
5 which have not been excelled on the hardest-fought
field that ever tasked the strategy or tested the
bravery of the most renowned of the world's great
generals.

He was "as brave as Napoleon," who, some
10 three or four years ago, at an extensive fire in some
inland town in Massachusetts, having heard that a
keg of powder was stored in an apartment of a
building that was on fire, entered through the gath-
ering flame and smoke, and without saying a word
15 to impart fear to those who were endeavoring to
quell the conflagration, bore from the burning build-
ing the already half-charred repository of the dread-
ful elements whose explosion would have carried
"swift destruction" to a score of his fellow-men,

20 and deposited it in a place of safety. *There* was a
“brave man” – brave in a good, a humane cause.

John Maynard was a brave man – one of the
“bravest of the brave.”

Do you remember him, reader? Probably not.
25 If you have heard of him at all, you have forgotten
him. But his name is recorded “in the dispatches”
of *Humanity*. He was nothing but a helmsman,
a great many years ago, of a steamboat, called “The
Jersey,” on Lake Erie. He was a bluff, weather-
30 beaten sailor, tanned by many a stormy tempest;
but he had a good and tender heart in his bosom,
and was called “Honest John Maynard” from one
end of Lake Erie to the other.

It was about four o’clock in the afternoon, and
35 the nearest land, in the neighborhood of the town
of Erie, on the southern shore of the lake, was
about ten miles distant. The captain, coming up
from his cabin, called out to a sailor:

“Dick Fletcher, what’s all that smoke coming
40 out of the hold?”

“It’s from the engine-room, I guess,” said the
man.

“Go down quick and see,” said the captain, “and let me know.”
No noise – no alarm – quietly, now.”

45 The sailor went below, and in a minute came
back:

“*The hold’s on fire!*”, captain.”

The captain rushed down and found the account was but too true. Some sparks had fallen on a
50 bundle of tow; no one had seen the accident; and now not only much of the luggage, but the sides of the vessel were in a smouldering flame.

All hands, passengers as well as sailors, were called together, and two lines being made, one on
55 each side of the hold, buckets of water were passed and re-passed; they were filled from the lake, flew along a line of ready hands, were dashed hissing on the burning mass, and then passed on to the other side to be refilled. For some minutes it seemed
60 as if the flames were subdued.

In the meantime, the women were clustering round John Maynard, the only man unemployed who was capable of answering their questions.

65 “How far is it to land?” asked one.

“How long shall we be getting in?” inquired another.

“Is it very *deep*?” asked a third, in an agony of terror.

70 “Can they see us from the shore?” demanded a fourth, in tones of terror.

The helmsman answered as well as he could:

“There was no boat; it had been left at Buffalo to be repaired;” they might be seven miles from
 75 shore – they “would probably be in in forty minutes;” he “could not tell how far the fire *had* reached”, &c; “but,” he added, “we are all in great danger; and I think if there were less *talking* and a little more *praying*, it would be all the
 80 better for us, and none the worse for the boat.”

“How does she head?” shouted the captain.

“West sou’ west, sir,” answered Maynard.

“Keep her sou’ by west,” cried the captain; “we must go ashore *any where!*”

85 Just at that moment a draft of wind blew back the flames, which soon began to blaze up more furiously against the saloon; and the partition between it and the hold was soon on fire. Then long wreaths of smoke began to find their way
 90 through the skylight; and the captain seeing this, ordered all the women forward.

The engineer put on his utmost steam; the American flag was run up, and reversed, in token of distress; and water was flung over the sails,
 95 to make them hold the wind.

And still John Maynard stood by the wheel, though he was now cut off by a sheet of smoke and flame, from the ship’s crew.

Greater and greater grew the heat. The engineers

100 fled from the engine-room; the passengers were clustering round the vessels bow, the sailors were sawing off planks on which to launch the women; the boldest were throwing off their coats and waist-coats, and preparing for one long struggle for life.

105 And still the coast grew plainer and plainer; the paddles, as yet, worked well; they could not be more than a mile from the shore; and boats were even now starting to their assistance.

“John Maynard!” cried the captain.

110 “Aye, aye, sir!” said John.

“Could you hold on five minutes longer?”

“I’ll *try*, sir.”

And he *did* try The flames came nearer and nearer; a sheet of smoke would sometimes almost
 115 suffocate him; his hair was singed: his blood seemed on fire with the great heat. Crouching as far back as he could, he held the wheel firmly with his left hand, till the flesh shriveled, and the muscles cracked in the flames. And then he
 120 stretched forth his right, 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 – every man for himself – and God for us all!”
 125

And these were the last sounds he heard.
 How he perished was never certainly known.
 Whether dizzied by the smoke, he lost his footing
 in endeavoring to come forward, and fell overboard,
 130 or whether he was suffocated by the dense smoke,
 his comrades could not tell.

At the moment the vessel struck, the boats were
 at her side; passengers, sailors, and captain leaped
 into them, or swam for their lives. *All*, save he to
 135 whom they owed every thing, escaped.

The body of John Maynard sleeps in peace by
 the side of green Lake Erie; his spirit was com-
 mended to his FATHER'S hands.

Better than fame won at the cannon's mouth in
 140 the ardor of conquest; far better than battle "for
 that which perisheth," is the lasting renown of this
 soldier of Humanity.

It is a pleasure to think that when years have
 rolled away his memory will be perpetuated, even
 145 in these desultory pages.

**B) *The Living Age*, Vol. 67, Issue 856 (Boston: Littell, Son, & Co, 27 October 1860),
 p. 213:**

JOHN MAYNARD. — John B. Gough, the cel-
 ebrated temperance lecturer, who has returned
 to the United States, from a visit to his native
 England, and who is announced to speak at
 5 Cooper Institute on next Monday evening, re-

lated in one of his recent speeches, the following anecdote : –

“John Maynard was well known in the Lake district as a God-fearing, honest, intelligent pilot.

- 10 He was a pilot on a steamer from Detroit to Buffalo one summer afternoon. At that time, those steamer seldom carried boats. Smoke was seen ascending from below, and the captain called out, ‘Simpson, go down and see what
- 15 that smoke is.’ Simpson came up with his face pale as ashes, and said – ‘Captain, the ship is on fire!’ Then, ‘Fire! fire! fire! fire on ship-board!’ All hands were called up. Buckets of water were dashed upon the fire, but in vain.
- 20 There were large quantities of rosin and tar on board, and it was 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
- 25 reach it?’ 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,
- 30 crowded the forward part of the ship. John Maynard stood at the helm. The flames burst forth in a sheet of fire; clouds of smoke arose; the captain cried out through his trumpet – ‘John Maynard!’ ‘Aye, aye, sir!’ ‘Are you
- 35 at the helm?’ ‘Aye, aye. sir!’ ‘How does she head?’ ‘South-east-by-east, sir.’ ‘Head her south-east and run her on shore.’ Nearer, nearer, yet nearer she approached the shore.

Again the captain cried out, ‘John Maynard!’

40 The response came feebly, ‘Aye, aye, sir!’

‘Can you hold on five minutes longer, John?’

‘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,

45 with his other hand upon the wheel, he stood firm
as a rock. He beached the ship – every man wo-
man and child was saved, as John Maynard
dropped, and his spirit took its flight to his God.

[Sensation]

50 “He sacrificed his life to save the lives of oth-
ers. It is worth a greater effort to save a man
from moral ruin – to save a child from drunken-
ness than from fire.”

Appendix II

Although the *Harpers* Editor, in the June 1854 article, refers to a fire in Massachusetts (lines 10-11) and a “keg of powder” (line 12), an event which may be fictional, I shall refer the reader to the great New York fire of 1835, in which gunpowder was removed from a critical magazine by the marines, an event which the New York Editor could no doubt identify with:

John Warner Barber, *Historical Collections of the state of New York: being a general collection of the most interesting facts, biographical sketches, varied descriptions, &c. relating to the past and present: with geographical descriptions of the counties, cities, and principal villages throughout the state* (New York: Clark, Austin & Co., 1851), pp. 190-191:

The following is an account of the great [New York City] fire in 1835, by which it is estimated that about twenty millions worth of property was destroyed.

“One of the most alarming and destructive fires ever known in this hemisphere, broke out on Wednesday evening, December 16th, 1835, in the premises of Messrs. Crawford & Andrews, situate No. 25 Merchant-street, in this city, which in a short time raged with such intensity as to defy the exertions of firemen, and others, who with equal zeal and promptitude were quickly on the spot for the purpose of stopping the ravages. The inutility of all aid was, however, soon perceptible, and all that could be done, was to remove what could in haste be got together, to such places as were deemed beyond the reach of the devouring element. With this impression, an immense quantity of goods were placed, for safety from buildings in the immediate vicinity of the fire, in the Merchants’ Exchange and

Reformed Dutch Church, where it was presumed they would remain free from danger: alas! the futility of human speculation; but a short time had elapsed from the time of such deposit to the whole being enveloped in flames, and these splendid buildings were soon reduced to a heap of ashes. The power of man was fruitlessly employed in attempts to stay its impetuosity, which every minute increased in the most alarming manner, spreading in all directions, and causing the utmost dismay and consternation through the whole city. Any attempt to convey to the mind a faithful description of the awfully grand scene that presented itself to the view of those who were witnesses of this dreadful catastrophe, must of necessity be feeble.[190/191]

“Of the Merchants’ Exchange nothing but its marble walls remain standing.

“Three or four vessels lying at the wharves on South-street were slightly injured in their yards and rigging. They were all hauled out into the river as soon as practicable.

“A detachment of marines from the navy-yard under Lieut. Reynolds, and of sailors under Capt. Mix of the navy, arrived on the spot at two o’clock in the morning. They rendered most valuable service. The gunpowder brought from the magazine at Red hook was partly under their charge. [-My emphasis]

“The cold during the whole time was excessive; the thermometer at zero. It may be easily supposed that this greatly paralyzed the exertion of the firemen. One sank under its effects, and was with difficulty resuscitated.”