Fall 2004

The Maxfield Family

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African American 
Collection of Maine

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Book Review


Calvin College English Professor Gary Schmidt begins his latest novel by intro-
ducing the reader to Bostonian Turner Buckminster, who “had lived in
Phippsburg, Maine, for almost six whole hours,” and “didn’t know how much longer
he could stand it” (p. 1). The only son of
Phippsburg’s newest clergyman, Turner is
more interested in lighting out for the
Territories than becoming part of the new
community. Under the watchful eye of
widow Mrs. Cobb and routinely pummeled
by the deacon’s son, Willis Hard, Turner
finds nothing appealing about Maine.
Until he meets Lizzie Bright. Thirteen-
year-old Lizzie Bright Griffin grew up on
Malaga Island, as had many generations of
her family before her. She routinely rows
her grandfather’s dory between the island
and the mainland; she goes clamming
almost daily; she talks to and touches
whales. According to her grandfather, also
a minister, Lizzie is “the closest thing to
glory he’ll ever see on God’s green earth”
(p. 39).

Schmidt uses Turner’s visit to Malaga
to offer a dignified, reverent description of the island and its people:

Together [Lizzie and Turner] climbed up
to the center of the island, where the trees
were thick and high. She showed him the
groves, and they stood quietly together
and were careful where they set their feet.
Then back up the shore to the south end
of the island, where shingled one- and
two-room houses clamped themselves to
the rocks like oysters, glad to be there
and not needing anyone’s say-so” (p. 60).

In essence, Lizzie Bright is a fictionalized
account of several concurrent conflicts. At
the center of the novel are Phippsburg’s
religious and political leaders who seek to
remove Malaga Island residents and raise
their community in the name of economic
development. The long-time residents of
Malaga Island fight to retain their homes
and their way of life in the midst of overt
racism and characterization as squatters.

Turner Buckminster has various battles of
his own. He struggles, both physically and
eventually, to find his place in
Phippsburg, while trying to convince the
community, including his own father, not
to disturb Malaga. Lizzie Bright and Turner
Buckminster also go to lengths to maintain
their friendship. Surprisingly, Mrs. Cobb,
who began as Buckminster’s nemesis,
becomes his greatest ally. Reverend
Buckminster ordered his son to play piano
symphony for Mrs. Cobb each afternoon. Mrs.
Cobb allows Lizzie to enjoy the music,
although her place is on the floor at Cobb’s
feet.

Schmidt’s novel turns on the tragic
resolution of the Malaga Island. The
Island’s residents are institutionalized.
Phippsburg’s tourist interests are protected,
but its financial windfall does not material-
ize. There are no winners in this story;
every major character in the novel loses
someone or something dear.

One of Schmidt’s most moving and well-
crafted scenes comes at the end of the
novel, as Turner experiences the bitter-
sweet triumph of rowing the dory into deep
water and touching a whale:

“With his hand still on the whale and
the whale’s eye on him, he wept. He wept
for Old Mrs. Hard, and he wept for Mrs.
Cobb, and he wept for his father, and he
wept for Lizzie Bright. . . . Then he
remembered that she would never hear
anything in this world again. So he had
no one to tell of this thing most beautiful
and most wonderful” (p. 217).

Although Lizzie Bright and the
Buckminster Boy is a youth novel, both
the subject and the writing style make it
suitable for adult readers. Gary Schmidt’s
work is literally picturesque, historically
rooted, and highly engaging. It is a
sobering look into the moral dilemma of
Malaga Island in 1911 and 1912, providing
what the author calls the “backstory of
Malaga” (p. 218). He invites his readers to
contemplate his construction of the
injustice that was Malaga Island.

Recent Publications

The following books were reviewed in recent issues of the American Historical Review, the journal of the American Historical Association (AHA). They may be of interest to readers of the Griot.


Berlin follows five generations of enslaved African Americans, from what he calls the eighteenth-century “Charter” generation through the nineteenth-century “Freedom” generation.


Hanson focuses on how Bethune valued Black women’s social and political power. The biography explores Bethune’s creation of the Daytona Normal and Industrial Institute for Negro Girls, her role in the National Association of Colored Women, and her founding of the National Council of Negro Women.

From the Editor’s Desk

How time has flown! It is already the fall of
2004, making the 2004-2005 academic
year the Griot’s eighth year in print. Not to be left out of
the current make-
over trend, the Griot
is getting some
freshening up. The feature known as a “A Place in Time” will continue to highlight materials from the African American Collection of Maine. In addition, each issue will review a book from the Collection and will keep readers abreast of some of the most recent publications in African American history and culture. This issue of the Griot begins unraveling the mystery of the
Maxfield family and reviews a new novel.

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McAllister studies William Brown’s short-lived African Company (also the African Grove Theatre), located in New York City from 1821 to 1823.


McHenry constructs a history of African American literacy from the 1830s through the 1920s by focusing on the associational lives of Black readers. The author diverts attention from the fact of Black literacy to its use in constructing Black social and political identity.


An account of Michael Healy and Eliza Clark’s ten biracial children whose “ambiguous” skin color and features allowed them to pass for white. One of the Healy children, James Augustine, became the United States’ first African American Catholic Bishop; his brother, Patrick, served as president of Georgetown University. A welcomed complement to Albert S. Foley’s Bishop Healy: Beloved Outcaste (1954).


A collection of Painter’s previously published essays on the American South from the antebellum period through the turn of the twentieth century. The collection reveals why Painter remains an important American historian.


Waldrep explores the history of lynching from its beginnings in revolution-era America through the 1998 murder of James Byrd, Jr., in Jasper, Texas. Waldrep explores the form, use, and discourse of lynching across the United States.


Wallenstein’s text examines three hundred years of U.S. law and social history concerning interracial marriage. He places particular emphasis on the one hundred years leading up to the Loving v. Virginia (1967) Supreme Court decision that allowed interracial marriage in all states, including the then sixteen states that prohibited it.

A Place in Time: The Maxfield Family

One of the most recent donations to the African American Collection of Maine is an arrangement of photographs (reproductions) of the Maxfield family. They were donated by Muriel Deering Christopher of Biddeford Fossil; she had purchased the item at an Arundel flea market from a man who had bought it at auction in Biddeford. The arrangement features a total of fourteen extended family members: Mrs. Ella Woods, Mrs. E.A. Maxfield, and M.C. Maxfield and his children—Walter, Harriett, Lena, and Genevia. Also pictured are M.C. Maxfield’s siblings: Mary, Elizabeth, Stafford, Herbert, Gateswood, Belden, and Miles. The evidence may be lean, but research is helping to unravel the Maxfields’ story. The United States census locates at least some members of the Maxfield family in Hanover County, Virginia, just north of Richmond. Stafford Maxfield was born in Virginia in 1840, and was a farmer in 1880. His wife, Amanda, kept house and took care of their seven children: Mary, Lucy, Martha, William, Harriet, Miles, and Gertie. Another Maxfield family was headed by Hubert (also Hubert) and Louisa Maxfield. During the 1870s, they had five children of their own: Lucy, Mary, Harriett, Clara, and Hubert. By 1880, Louisa Maxwell was widowed and parented her five children—aged one through ten years—on her own. This is where the trail ends right now. It is difficult to find the Maxfields in Virginia census records after 1880, and the family may have emigrated from the south during this era. Maine records locate various Maxfields in Maine—some with the same first names. However, they are identified as White, rather than Black. It is possible that some of the Maxfields that appear in Maine censuses had light complexions and were, therefore, misidentified by census takers. The 1880 manuscript census for Virginia identifies Louisa Maxfield and her children as “mulatto,” an archaic term indicating that they were bi-racial or that they simply had fair complexions. According to the 1880 census, there was an African American with the Maxfield surname living in Maine. Machias-born Joseph Maxfield lived in Deering, Cumberland County. A brickyard laborer, Joseph Maxfield boarded with a local family. No documentation has been located, thus far, to link Joseph Maxfield with the Virginia Maxfields. Clearly, more work will have to be done to solve the Maxfield family mystery; any future updates will be posted in the Griot.