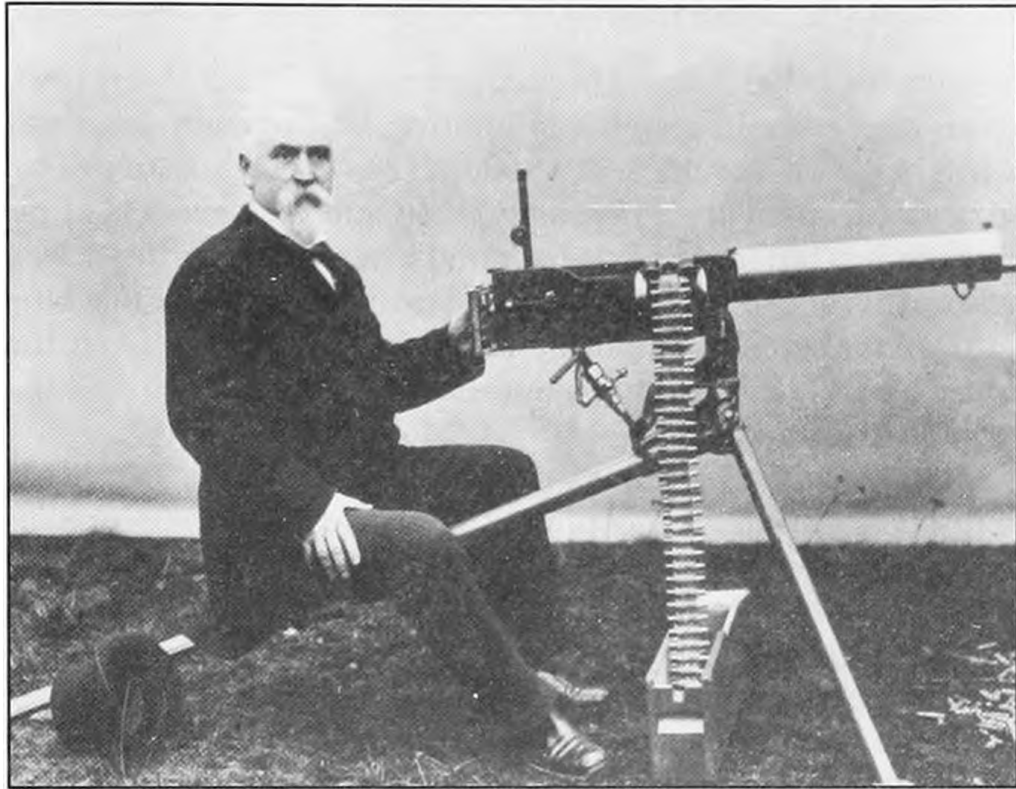


CHARLES SHAIN

SIR HIRAM MAXIM AND HIS GUN
A LITERARY TRAIL

Hiram Maxim, born near Sangerville, Maine, in 1840, enjoyed a brilliant career as an inventor and self-promotor. His best-known invention, the Maxim gun, proved appallingly successful during the British imperialistic ventures in Africa at the turn of the century and later in World War I. In this article, Emeritus Professor Charles Shain traces the literary usages for Maxim's invention, both as noun and as a verb – describing the scything action of the gun as it mowed down an advancing foe. Charles Shain published and taught in the field of American Studies at Carleton College and for twelve years was president of Connecticut College. Mr. Shain and his wife have edited two Maine anthologies: THE MAINE READER (Houghton Mifflin) and GROWING UP IN MAINE (Down East Books). The Shains live in Georgetown, Maine.

One hundred years ago a new word, *Maxim*, was being added to the English language, as a noun and as a verb. Its first appearances recorded in the Oxford English Dictionary fell between 1885 and 1903. The noun named the world's first automatic machine gun, invented in England by Hiram Maxim, an American born near Sangerville, Maine in 1840. The verb, *to Maxim*, described the effectiveness of the gun as it mowed down an advancing foe: the scything metaphor became the standard idiom for the gun in action. The Oxford Dictionary cites usages



After a distinguished career as an electrical inventor, Maxim patented his automatic gun in 1884. In the above photo, he sits with his gun, ca. 1900. It had already achieved literary recognition as an instrument of British imperialism in Africa. *Maine Historical Society Collections*.

in Kipling's poetry and in newspapers. A usage not cited can be found in a *Manchester Guardian* article of 1895: "One of the chief topics of talk at Derby week was on the subject of the Maxim gun and its inventor. A couple of these deadly, not to say devilish, engines of war are introduced in one of the acts of the Drury Lane drama, 'Life of Pleasure.'" The word Maxim had a vivid life and was still in circulation in the 1930s.

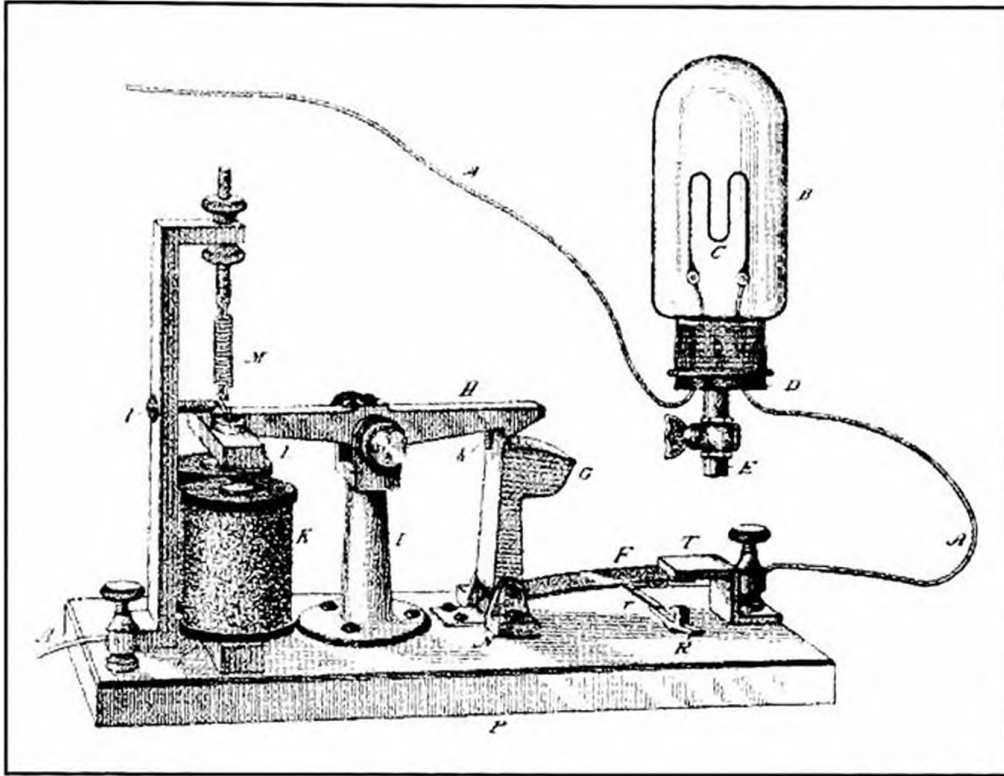
Hiram Maxim came of age as the oldest in a family of eight children growing up in near-poverty in backwoods Maine. Isaac

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Maxim, his father, moved his family from one small Maine town to another without seeming to improve his fortunes. Isaac was a mechanic who could design and build a water wheel to run his grist or turning-lathe. Hiram watched and built models of his father's machines. His first boyhood invention, a spring-driven automatic mouse trap, looked ahead to the design of his machine gun. As a captured mouse entered its prison cage from the business end of the trap, its movement set up the bait and the trap for the next mouse.

In his autobiography, *My Life*, Maxim contrived to invent himself as a supremely confident, assertive personality preparing to become one of the geniuses in what has been called the age of the inventor in America. Before his life was over he had invented, among other things, the carbon filament used in the first incandescent light, the carbon arc-light, a bronchial inhaler for asthmatics, smokeless powder, vacuum cleaning, pneumatic tires, a fire-fighting sprinkler system, and the first airplane to rise from the ground under its own power system, a remarkable flying steam engine. In America and Britain he registered a total of 268 patents.

Aside from a biography written by his son, Percy, Hiram's autobiography provides almost everything we know about him. Hiram wrote his memoir for the British reading public and offered those colorful details from his youth that, ever since *Martin Chuzzlewit*, the British expected from an American frontier: bear hunts, religious fanaticism, tall stories, con-games, and plenty of Yankee brag, especially feats of strength. Maxim wrote up these scenes with great relish and became the hero of all of them. In Canada, where he spent two and a half years during the Civil War, his wrestling victories and cleverness with his hands made him, he confessed, "the talk of the town." He tamed bullies, played practical jokes, and was especially attentive to the pretty girls. No signs of genius yet. His true career began only after he moved to Massachusetts to work in an uncle's machine shop and foundry. "These were glorious days," he wrote. "All my waking hours were given to hard work and study. I left no stone unturned to become expert in everything I had to do." He



Over the course of his career as an inventor, Maxim registered a total of 268 patents. Among them was an apparatus for treating carbon filaments in electric lamps. *Maxim, MY LIFE (1915).*

learned draftsmanship, metallurgy, and chemistry, moved next to a Boston factory that made illuminating gas machinery, and finally to New York and a rivalry with Edison for inventing the first incandescent light bulb. Then upward and onward to Europe and the gun.

Hiram Maxim moved to England in 1881 as an electrical engineer for the United States Electrical Lighting Company. The first public awareness that another clever American mechanic had crossed the Atlantic came in Paris in 1881 at the Electrical Exhibition and Congress when the French government made him a Chevalier of the Legion of Honor for his demonstration of a method of maintain-

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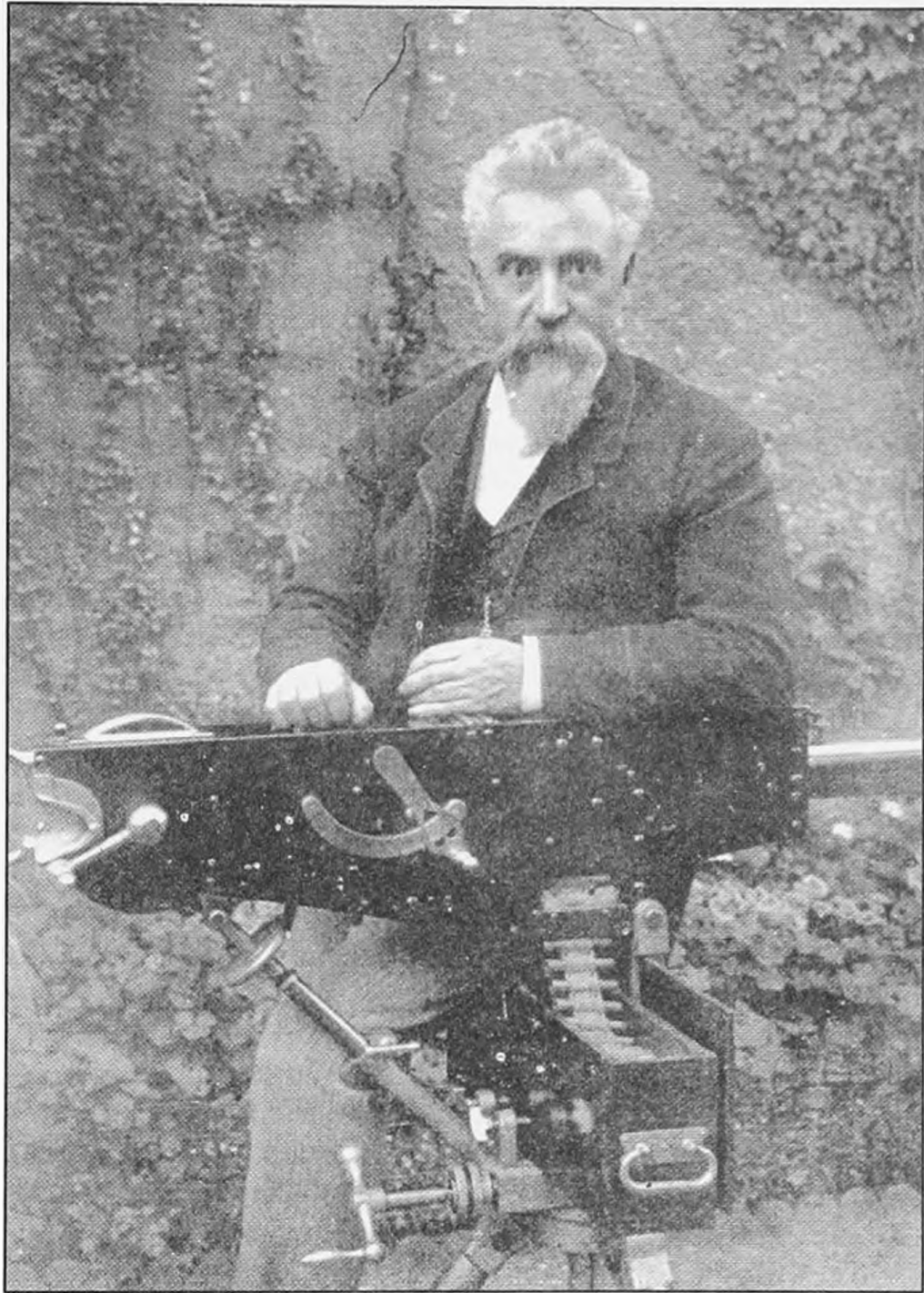
ing a constant current in a series of incandescent lights. At this point in relating his personal history Maxim remembers London newspapers announcing him on his arrival in that city as “the greatest electrician in the world.” He denied ever having pretended to that title. He preferred, he said, to call himself an ordinary Yankee from the state of Maine.

The secret reason for transplanting himself to England was not at all ordinary. Edward R. Hewitt, Peter Cooper’s grandson and a leading member of a New York family whose lives were committed to the progress of American science and technology, told the story many years later. Hewitt explained that in the 1880s,

Hiram Maxim’s inventive genius worked with such rapidity...that American companies engaged in exploiting electrical devices were constantly upset in their plans by being obliged to change their products before any money had been made for commercial exploitation. In desperation they finally got together and made a joint deal with Maxim.....Maxim was to go to Europe for ten years, at a salary of twenty thousand dollars a year, remain in close touch with all new electrical inventions for the companies, but under no conditions was he to make any new electrical inventions himself during that time.¹

Maxim perfected and patented his automatic gun in 1884, three years after his arrival in England. Unlike any other gun before it, it fired at the rate of 600 shots a minute when the trigger was touched just once. A modern historian of his gun describes its epoch-making arrival. “Maxim was the first to make a single shot, locked firing mechanism move by the force of its own recoil and contact various other parts, thus enabling it to fire, unlock, extract, eject, cock, feed, chamber, and lock again into battery; altogether the most remarkably innovative engineering accomplishment in the history of firearms.”²

Maxim explained in a letter to *The Times* in July 1915, a year before died, how he had changed careers from electricity to



Maxim with his first automatic gun. Although this model fired at the rate of 666 shots per minute, Maxim quickly replaced it with another that was smaller, cheaper, and lighter. When World War I began, both the Germans and the British were using Maxim's gun. *Maxim, MY LIFE.*

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ordnance. "In 1882 I was in Vienna, where I met an American Jew whom I had known in States. He said, 'Hang your chemistry and electricity! If you want to make a pile of money, invent something that will enable these Europeans to cut each other's throats with greater facility.'"³ When Maxim wrote this he had been a naturalized British subject since 1900, and Sir Hiram after being knighted by Queen Victoria on January 1, 1901. To publish, at the opening of the First World War, such a casual gibe at the current bloodshed on the Western Front must have seemed to readers a heartless piece of mockery. As that war began both Britain and Germany were using machine guns based on Maxim's patents. Lloyd George, the Minister of Munitions, in a speech in the House of Commons on December 15, 1915, estimated that over eighty percent of British casualties to that date had been caused by machine guns. Maxim's gun was changing the military and social history of the twentieth-century world, but as the tone of his letter to the newspaper may suggest, the manners of the raw frontier world that formed his sensibility would be a continuing element in the story of the rise of Hiram Maxim of Maine.

In the 1890s Maxim's name became common currency in Britain, not because it was immediately realized what far-reaching consequences the gun had for the conduct of future wars – the British military mind was slow to accept the revolutionary importance of the Maxim. But the gun had arrived just in time to work its deadly powers over the native tribes of Africa in the hands of the independent military forces of British imperialism. The biographers of Cecil Rhodes tell of the time when Rhodes, Prime Minister the Cape Colony, learned that an African chief, Sigcau, had been insolent to the Cape's Royal Commissioner. Rhodes visited Sigcau and "with his escort and their Maxim gun...took the chief to a field of mealies [Indian corn]. The gun was fired and the mealies were mown down. 'That is what will happen to you and your tribe,' Rhodes told Sigcau, 'if you give us any further trouble.' The moral of the demonstration was doubtless taken...No trouble followed, and a few police were adequate to keep the peace."¹

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Rhodes soon moved his Maxims north toward richer territory. The goal, for which he was competing against German and French rivals, was South Central Africa. Rhodes, the son of a vicar, could speak in Biblical cadences of his destined victory in this competition for empire: "And when I looked down, I said, This earth shall be English." His God was usually his willing partner. Would He be this time? Rhodes wrote back to an important public supporter in London, "I quite appreciate the enormous difficulties of opening up a new country, but still, if Providence will furnish a few paying gold reefs, I think it will be right. Please understand, it is no personal avarice which desires this, but as you know, gold hastens the development of a country more than anything....I wonder if the Supreme Power will help me in this object, for it is certainly a disinterested one, or whether out of pure mischief He dooms it to failure."⁵

The agent of God's mischief was King Lobengula of Matabeleland, soon to be called Rhodesia, and more recently Zimbabwe. It was in the Matabele War of 1893 that the Maxim made its first entry onto the world's stage and from there to the Oxford Dictionary. In 1891 Rhodes chartered in London an imperialistic instrument called the British African Company with shares for sale on the stock exchange. Investors in the company were betting on Rhodes to defeat Lobengula, and as the war news trickled up from the South African hinterland the company shares rose and fell. In the Cape Colony the company had recruited a mercenary army on speculative terms. When Matabeleland was occupied, the Company promised to reward every volunteer with six acres, twenty gold claims, and his share of the loot from native villages. In the Company's official account of the war the battle scenes against Lobengula's warriors are short and repetitious. They all tell the story of the native charge stopped by the Maxims. Lobengula's people had few rifles; their traditional arms were a shield and a short spear. This came back from one of Rhodes's officers to the Maxim Nordenfelt Company:

During the late Matabele campaign, I was artillery officer in charge of all the British South Africa

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Company's guns, including seven Maxims. It is a universally admitted fact that to the Maxim gun is due in very great measure the success, hitherto, of the Company's forces. Every Matabele...put our victory down to witchcraft, allowing that the Maxim was the pure work of an evil spirit. They have named it "S'cock-a-cock" owing to the peculiar noise it makes when in action.⁶

Back in London the steady progress of the Rhodes mercenaries filled the newspaper columns and the debates in Parliament. The anti-imperialists – Little Englanders as they were called – seized upon the Maxim as the symbol of the inhumanity of Britain's annihilation of defenseless natives. The satirists began to have their day. An anti-imperialist Member of Parliament rewrote the familiar hymn:

Onward Christian soldiers, on to heathen lands,
Prayer-books in your pockets, rifles in your hands.
Take the glorious tidings where trade can be
done;
Spread the peaceful gospel – with the Maxim
gun.⁷

A young man two years down from Balliol College was ready to begin his illustrious career as a poet, novelist, historian, and, with his collaborator G.K. Chesterton, a clever satirist of British society. His was Hilaire Belloc and this was his portrait of Cecil Rhodes in action. He called him Blood:

I never shall forget the way
That Blood upon this awful day
Preserved us all from Death.
He stood upon a little mound
Cast his lethargic eyes around
And said beneath his breath,
"Whatever happens we have got
The Maxim gun and they have not...."
We shot and hanged a few, and then
The rest became devoted men.⁸

After South Central Africa was secured, the theater of

British imperialism moved to Egypt. In 1898 Egypt was an occupied colony of the Empire, a vassal state with a nominal ruler, the Khedive, who took his orders from the British Agent. But the upper reaches of the Nile, Egypt's lifeline, were in the Sudan. Thirteen years earlier the Sudan had been under British control, but recently it had become a huge new Moslem nation where a holy man, or Khalifa, led tribesmen called dervishes in a religious war. In 1885 this army besieged a British commander, "Chinese" Gordon, in Khartoum, killed him, and flaunted his body. Now the great army of the Empire was being moved from India to Egypt and under General Sir Herbert Kitchener was preparing to retake the Sudan and avenge the martyred Gordon.

To the preparation for the re-conquest of the Sudan, Rudyard Kipling found an occasion for contributing a poem. A corps of British infantry sergeants was sent on loan to the native army to instruct their officers in drill and tactics. Kipling sent "Pharaoh and the Sergeant" to the *London Graphic* with a line in the first stanza mocking the anti-imperialist satirists. The Laureate of the Empire, as he was to be called, took the tone of his poem from those colloquial verses in *Barrack Room Ballads* that had made Kipling the most popular poet of the age.

Said England unto Pharaoh, "I must make a man
of you, That will stand upon his feet and play the
game;

That will Maxim his oppressor as a Christian
ought to do,"

And she sent old Pharaoh Sergeant Whatsisname.

It was not a Duke nor Earl, nor yet a Viscount –

It was not a big brass General that came; But

a man in khaki kit who could handle men a bit,

With his bedding labelled Sergeant Whatsisname.⁹

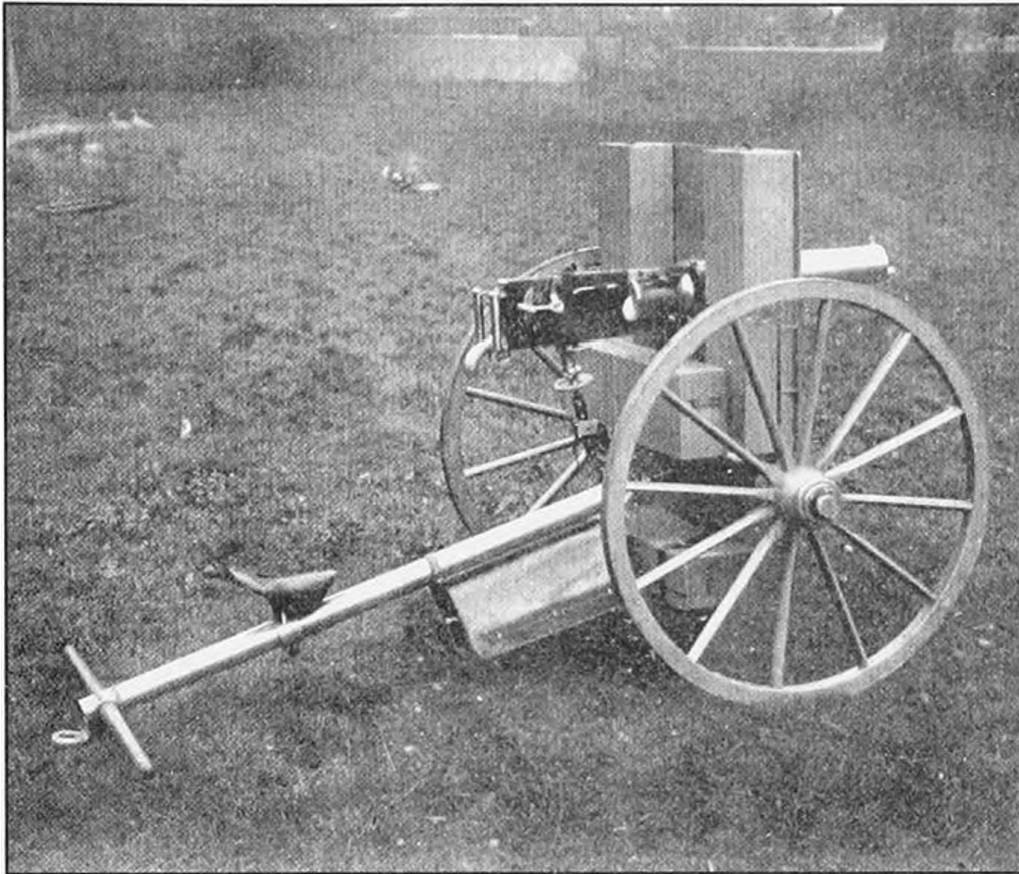
Another literary man now enters the story of the Maxim as the weapon of British imperialism. Winston Churchill, age twenty-three, cavalry officer, novelist, and war correspondent for a London newspaper, had seen his first military service in India and had written a book about it. Now he managed, despite the personal objections of

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General Kitchener, who disliked him and his book, to be assigned as a lieutenant to the Twenty-first Lancers on their way to retake the Sudan. Churchill devoted three chapters of the first volume of his autobiography, *My Early Life*, to his thrilling part in great battle of Omdurman. The record of his role in this decisive victory – it assured that the Sudan would remain under British control until it became an independent nation in 1956 – gives a romantic and very misleading impression of how the battle was fought and won.

Nothing like the Battle of Omdurman will ever be seen again. It was the last link in the long chain of those spectacular conflicts whose vivid and majestic splendour has done so much to invest war with glamour....Everything was visible to the naked eye. The armies marched and manoeuvred on the crisp surface of the desert plain through which the Nile wandered, now steel, now brass. Cavalry charged at full gallop in close order, and infantry and spearmen stood upright ranged in lines or masses to resist them.¹⁰

Churchill's part that day was to lead his twenty-five troopers against a dervish infantry armed with rifles in what has been called the last cavalry charge in British military history. His description of what it was like to be galloping toward "crouching blue figures...only half the length of a polo ground away" belongs to the great set pieces of Victorian literature. And his lucky escape from death in the close-range fighting is a modern movie camera close-up. But that day the cameras would not have been on the cavalry fighting in a minor skirmish on the flank of the battle. What was "visible to the naked eye" was the slaughter of massed rows of the Khalifa's army by the massed firepower of Maxim guns. The Dervish army, 60,000 strong, was not the victim of cavalry and infantry maneuvers. At the day's end 11,000 dead were counted on the battlefield, several hundred more in Omdurman. The cost of Kitchener's victory was 48 killed, including 25 British soldiers. A war correspondent sent back this description: "The Maxims were the most deadly com-



The improved and simplified Maxim gun was used to great effect by British armies in Africa. In the 1898 Battle of Omdurman – a grim preview of the loss of life to come on the Western Front in 1915 – the guns provided a decisive advantage. Maxim, by this time living in England, was knighted shortly after the battle. *Maxim, MY LIFE*.

ponent of the massed fire power. The gunners did not get the range at once, but as soon as they found it the enemy went down heaps, and it was evident that the six Maxim guns were doing a large share of the work in repelling the Dervish rush.”¹¹

Churchill's cavalry had no impact on the outcome, but the Lancers had suffered 22 percent casualties. Omdurman was a grim preview of the loss of life to come on the Western Front in 1915. Sir Edwin Arnold, a leading London editor, put this pronouncement on the battle into his memoirs: “In most of our wars it has been the dash, the skill, and the bravery of our officers

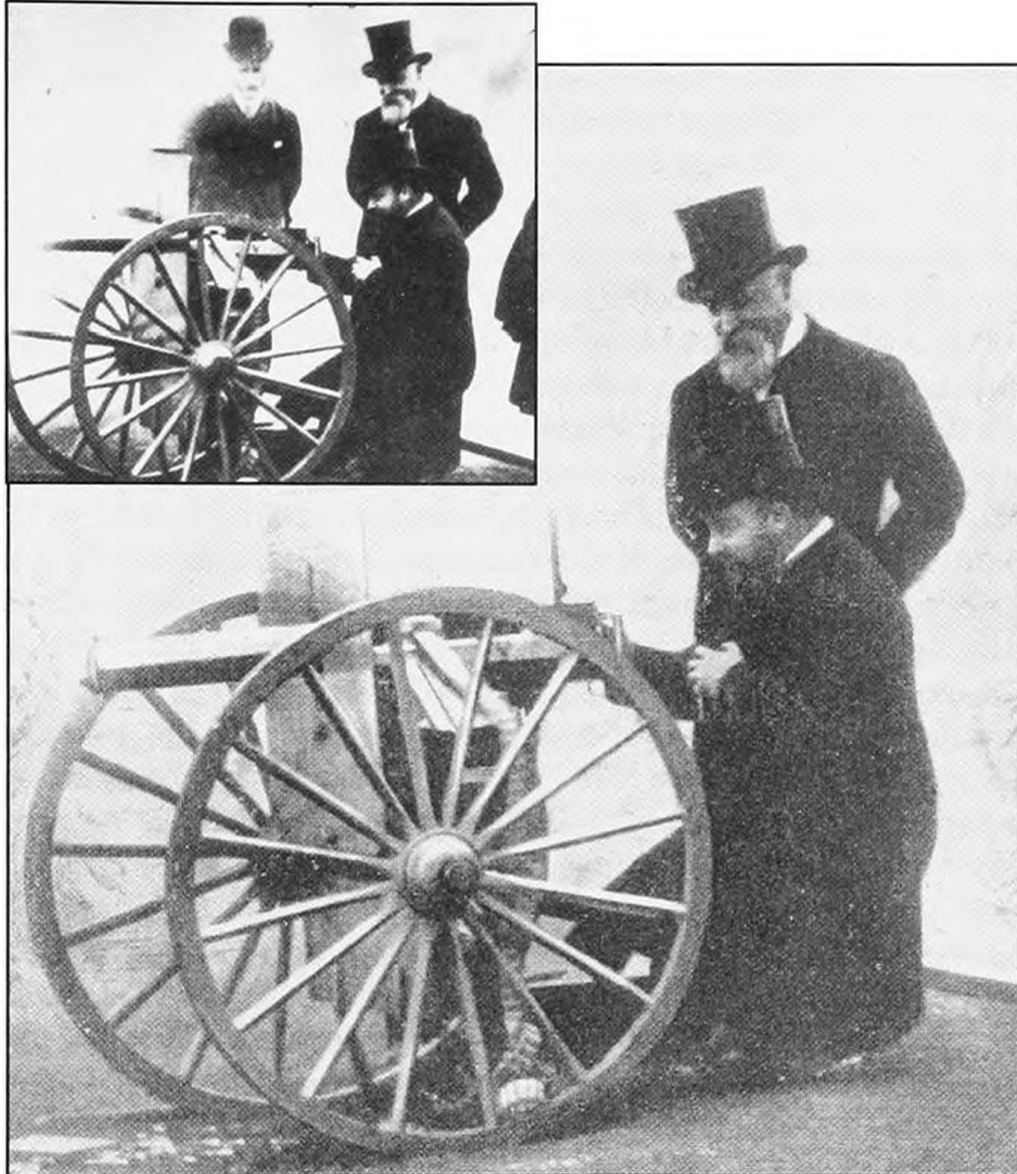
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and men that have won the day, but in this case the battle was won by a quiet scientific gentleman living down in Kent.”¹² The Battle of Omdurman was won in 1898; Hiram Maxim’s change of nationality and his knighthood followed shortly afterwards.

In the years before his knighthood, Hiram Maxim had not lacked for recognition outside of England. Soon after he crossed the Atlantic in 1881 he had written to his twelve-year-old son: “You know of course that am Sir Knight now. Having been made so by the French president. I have the decoration of the Cross of the Legion of Honor. I may be able to get another decoration in Spain.”¹³ He did, and many more honors when he shifted from electricity to automatic weapons. After the large-scale production of his gun by the Maxim Gun Company began in 1887, he spent the next years as his own best salesman. Hiram Maxim from Sangerville, Maine, entered machine gun trials before the crowned heads of governments and their ministers. Lucrative contracts and new decorations followed from the King of Portugal, the Czar of Russia, and the Sultan of Turkey.

His first success was in Switzerland, where he was accompanied by Albert Vickers, soon to be his partner and later Britain’s prime munitions maker. From there he moved to Italy and then on to Vienna, where Basil Zaharoff, later known as the Merchant of Death, who represented the rival maker of a hand-cranked machine gun, nearly succeeded in sabotaging Maxim’s demonstration model. In Germany Maxim was in the party of his friend the Prince of Wales when the Kaiser, enormously impressed at the end of a three-gun contest “walked back, examined the gun, and, putting his finger on it, said: ‘That is the gun – there is no other.’”¹⁴ In Constantinople he met with one of the Sultan’s ministers, whose comments may have made him realize how far he had traveled from Sangerville. “Hang your guns,” he was told. “We don’t want guns. Invent a new vice for us and we will welcome you with open arms.”¹⁵

Maxim’s guns sold themselves so readily that by the end of the century they had become standard equipment everywhere in the civilized world. His patents did not run out until 1908. The



A retouched photo of Albert Edward, Prince of Wales, firing the Maxim gun. The inventor looks on approvingly. In Germany, the Kaiser examined Maxim's gun during competitive trials, put his finger on it, and said: "That is the gun — there is no other." *Maxim, MY LIFE*; original photo from *Maine Historical Society collections*.

most popular piece was the machine gun of rifle caliber, light enough to be carried and set up by a couple of men. Also in widespread use was the pom-pom, a Maxim automatic artillery piece that shot a one-pound explosive projectile. The Maxim machine gun was used by both sides in the Boer War, which

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began 1898, but the pom-pom – given its name by African natives – was used only by the Boers, the British military's ordnance experts having found it inferior to their own non-automatic gun. (Maxim called the British officer who rejected the pom-pom "Captain Calamity.")

The Boer War lasted two and a half years – enough time to offer arms merchants ample field tests for new weapons. The war began in battles between massed forces, but after six months, to the confusion of the British generals, the Afrikaner farmers turned it into a guerrilla war. The Boer War attracted international attention and debate because of the moral weight of its issues and the contrasting contestants involved. To unsympathetic observers it seemed obvious that the war was a continuation of Britain's South African imperial aggression, but with a difference: instead of decimating native black tribes with automatic firepower, the British armies were now killing fellow Europeans, who first came to South Africa in the seventeenth century and were ready to die for the two independent republics they had brought into their version of a modern South African world.

Pro-Boer sympathy became widespread. The war divided British families, including Rudyard Kipling's own. During its first six months British troops lost every big battle. Rhodes was besieged in a Rhodesian city. The British press charged incompetence in the high command, and (now) Lord Kitchener was sent for again. Australia, New Zealand, and Canada responded with forty thousand colonials. At the finish, the war cost the Empire forces 22,000 men, the Boers, 6,000. Ironically the Boers proved to be the eventual winners. The war had given birth to a new Afrikaner national consciousness, and in 1908 their political ambitions to be the dominant nationality in what would be the Union of South Africa were rewarded when the Cape Colony, a British stronghold, came under their political control. Kipling, who wintered with his family in South Africa, left for England and never returned.

The literary trail now turns to Kipling's use of the Maxim in his fiction. In the Cape Colony during the war, Kipling wrote a

short story, "The Captive," about an American inventor and his artillery and how they fought with the Boers against the Empire. His hero is Hiram Maxim in deep disguise as Laughton O. Zigler from Akron, Ohio. The parallels between Maxim, now a British celebrity, and Zigler were enough for an alert reader to make the connection. Zigler was fighting with the Boers because theirs was the only army that would let this single-minded inventor test his pom-pom in the field. The story on one level is full of the shop talk of "gun sharps": "I presume you never heard tell of the Laughton-Zigler two-inch field-gun, with self-feeding hopper, single oil-cylinder recoil, and ball-bearing gear throughout? Or Laughtite, the new explosive? Absolutely uniform in effect, and one-ninth the bulk of any present effete charge – flake, cannonite, cordite, troisdorf, cellulose, cocoa, cord or prism – I don't care what it is. Laughtite's immense; so's the Zigler automatic. It's me. It's fifteen years of me."¹⁶ This is Kipling showing off one of his many talents. He had worked up his new subject, ordnance, in order to present Maxim as the obsessed Yankee mechanic, which he was.

On another level the story is a means for propagating Kipling's views of the war, his devotion to the Empire, and the shortsightedness of Little Englanders. Some of his opinions were made clear in 1901 in a letter, which lies still unpublished in the Library of Congress, which he wrote to Dr. James Conland in Brattleboro, Vermont – the "best friend I made in New England." Kipling wanted at least one American to see what a mixed-up war it was.

The Boers are doing it very well. They keep in small parties, looting and riding away. They can't take prisoners. They haven't any bases and they are very like Apaches in their movements. And they are having the time of their lives....

I have got out [from England] a machine gun and handed it over to a corps of Mounted Rifles. The ten men who took charge of it were a lovely crowd. Eight of 'em had been wounded before, and two were old U.S. privates. One of 'em, the

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Sergeant, said to me: "I come from Portland, Maine – about 120 miles from where you used to live, Mr. Kipling." You can imagine how I almost fell on his neck and embraced him. He'd been at San Juan, and was a Democrat – a grey, grizzled tough old bird as ever walked.¹⁷

The story itself is a long monologue by Zigler designed to show off Kipling's knowledge of the Americans, their language, and their national character. Five years after he left Vermont, where Kipling and his American wife had built a house and where their two daughters were born, Kipling sounds nostalgic and pro-American. Zigler, like Maxim, is an enthusiast, full of energy, practical knowledge, and a sharp intelligence. In the story's terms these are the qualities Kipling believes the contemporary English character sadly lacks. But, unlike Hiram Maxim, Zigler is at home in the large world, full of curiosity and quick sympathy. The American's pom-pom outshoots the British artillery piece, except for a lucky shot at the end – Kipling couldn't let the Boer side win. In his prison camp, Zigler offers Kipling's England a solution for the whole South African muddle: "If you want to realize your assets, you should lease the whole proposition to America for ninety-nine years."

"The Captive" does not rank with Kipling's best stories. It is fiction written for its own times, and Kipling's art is in the service of his political views, many of which we no longer find attractive. One bitter perception of the usefulness of what was a useless war Kipling puts into the mouth of a British general: "it's a first-class dress-parade for Armageddon....With luck, we should run half a million men through the mill." Kipling's prediction in 1902 had twelve years to run.

Just before Armageddon, in 1913, Kipling returned to Hiram Maxim, alias Laughton O. Zigler, in a new story suggestively called "The Edge of the Evening." Zigler had become a member of the British "establishment." He enters the story as the very model of an American millionaire, with a sable coat and a limousine with "deep dove-colored pneumatic cushions." Did the Zigler automatic gun do all of this?" asks an English friend

from the earlier story. But like Hiram Maxim, Zigler had moved beyond the pom-pom.

I represent the business end of the American invasion. Not the blame cars themselves...but the tools that make 'em. I am the Zigler Higher-Speed Tool and Lathe Trust. The Trust, sir, is entirely my own – in my own inventions. I am the Renzalaer ten-cylinder aerial – the lightest aeroplane engine on the market – one price, one power, one guarantee. I am the Orlebar Paper-welt, Pulp-panel Company for aeroplane bodies; and I am the Rush Silencer for military aeroplanes – absolutely silent – which the Continent leases under royalty.¹⁸

Kipling here is fantasizing on and beyond Hiram Maxim's change of careers from guns to airplanes. Maxim had got his primitive first powered plane off the ground for a short straight flight in 1894. The element in his list of Zigler's inventions that is most surprising is the Maxim silencer, for both guns and engine exhausts, invented and then under manufacture in Hartford, Connecticut, not by Hiram Maxim but by his gifted son, Hiram Percy Maxim.

Out of these up-to-date technical materials Kipling wrote a short pre-war thriller. The American and three important guests at his estate in Sussex come off a golf course at dusk and find an unidentified, but surely German airplane forced down on a lawn. We learn that it has been flying silently over England taking photographs in preparation for an invasion. To escape capture, the pilot and camera man attempt to kill the golfers, but the golfers, in self-defense, kill them. What to do next? The prominence of Zigler's guests will make this an international incident, which would so embarrass the German government and outrage Britain that it might well begin the war that Kipling knew was coming. Zigler has the solution. It is, of course, one of his planes quieted by his son's silencer. He repairs the plane's faulty cylinder. The golfers place the dead Germans in their cockpit, start the engine, and aim the plane out over the English

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Channel. The day is saved and the war is averted for the time being.

The news of Sir Hiram's death in the middle of the First World War brought forth obituary comments that went beyond a simple accounting of his life and his astonishing list of inventions. In America, a long essay in *The Nation*, called "The Maxim Mind," began with a premise that probably overstated the way it was for Hiram Maxim on his death bed. The author presumed that he had died "with the knowledge that no human being since civilization began had so powerfully affected the lives of so many of his fellows....The harvest of his neat little gun in killed alone may run into millions....It is a theme which might allure the poets."¹⁹ And he suggested a literary comparison: The misanthropic Timon of Athens.

But the writer's search for Maxim as a tragic figure could find only the exact opposite. Maximum was "one of the naivest characters who ever sprang from the stock of the American pioneers." His autobiography was "the most simple-minded...that has ever come my way." Maxim traveled with kings and had a most remarkable mind, but what he was really proud of was his physical strength. The writer cites an incident from *My Life*: "When he comes to describe how he showed his deadly machine to kings, the only detail on which he lays personal stress is that, as a heavy middle-aged man, he could on the hottest day amaze the spectators by sprinting back and forward over the range to see how the target was marked." And for the fullest summing up, "He was in body and mind the climax of a race of backwoods pioneers who owed their survival to physical prowess and mental adaptability....The oddest thing about him was that he evidently thought of his gun exactly as he thought of the sundry improved tools which he had made for other uses."²⁰

The Nation's obituary was a severe but fair judgment made by a thoughtful contemporary and based on the public record. Maxim, we now know, had an unattractive hidden life, full of deceptions and mistreatments of his family. Although in his memoirs he mentions nothing of his personal situation, he left behind in Brooklyn a wife and two young daughters whom he



Maxim, in his autobiography, titled this photograph "Showing the Gun to My Grandson," *Maxim, MY LIFE*.

was never to see again and a young son whom he may have seen again years later when he was on his honeymoon. On a trip to the United States he was sued for bigamy, although the charge against him was not sustained in court. Once separated from his Brooklyn family, Maxim tried to trap his young son into deserting his mother and two sisters and joining him in England to go into his factory. When the fifteen-year-old Percy said no, his father wrote him this letter:

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My Dear Son Percy,

Your curt letter to me is at hand.

So you choose to disobey the commands of your father do you?

Well it is not such a soft snap as you might suppose to drop into a first class position; however you will find this out for yourself later.²¹

One hears in this letter the cocky provincial of Sangerville, Maine.

It is the historians of the First World War who will keep Hiram Maxim's name alive. Liddell Hart, a widely read military historian, fashioned him into a giant metaphor to explain the character of those long, terrible four years. "After a few weeks in 1914 the armies were held fast in the grip of Hiram Maxim. The history of the years that follow is one of ceaseless renewed frontal onslaughts on entrenched lines held in reality by machine guns, if nominally by infantry."²²

A British historian of the war's last year was Brigadier General Hubert Essame. On November 11, 1918, he was on the front line, the adjutant of a battalion. He records how an anonymous German soldier improvised a dramatic action to precede the lowering of the curtain. On the Fourth Army front, at two minutes to eleven, a machine gun, about 200 yards from the leading British troops, fired off a complete belt without a pause. A single machine gunner was then seen to stand up beside his weapon, take off his helmet, bow, turn about and walk slowly to the rear.²³

NOTES

¹Edward R. Hewett, *Those Were the Days: Tales of a Long Life* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1943), p. 18.

²Dolph L. Goldsmith, *The Devil's Paintbrush: Sir Hiram Maxim's Gun* (Toronto, 1989), p. 333.

³John Ellis, *The Social History of the Machine Gun* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975), p. 33.

⁴J.G. Lockhart and Hon. C.M. Woodhouse, *Cecil Rhodes: The Colossus of Southern Africa* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), p. 192.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 227.

⁶Goldsmith, *Devil's Paintbrush*, p. 103.

⁷Ellis, *Social History of the Machine Gun*, p. 100.

⁸Hilaire Belloc, *the Modern Traveller* (London, 1898).

⁹*The London Graphic*, July 1887.

¹⁰Winston S. Churchill, *My Early Life: A Roving Commission* (London: Odham's Press, 1930), p. 268.

¹¹C.B.H. Pridham, *Superiority of Fire* (London, 1945), pp. 54, 59.

¹²Sir Hiram Maxim, *My Life* (London: Methuen & Company, 1915), p. 258.

¹³Percy Maxim Lee and John Gessner Lee, *Family Reunion: An Incomplete Account of the Maxim/Lee Family History* (Hartford, Connecticut: Privately printed, 1971), p. 181.

¹⁴Hiram Maxim, *My Life*, p. 210.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 229-30.

¹⁶Rudyard Kipling, "The Captive," in Kipling, *Traffics and Discoveries* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1904), p. 6.

¹⁷Kipling to James Conland, 1901, Chandler Kipling Collection, Library of Congress.

¹⁸Rudyard Kipling, "The Edge of the Evening," in Kipling, *A Diversity of Creatures* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1917), p. 321.

¹⁹*The Living Age*, 8th ser., vol. 5 (January-March 1917), p. 120 ff.

²⁰*Hartford Courant*, November 1, 1898, p. 2, in the Tunis Collection of clippings on Maxim in the Connecticut State Library, Hartford.

²¹G.S. Hutchinson, *Machine Guns: Their History and Tactical Employment* (London, 1938), p. 311.

²²Hubert Essame, *The Battle for Europe, 1918* (New York: Scribners, 1972), p. 206.