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Portland illustrator Ed King imagines a party for knighted Mainers and assorted royals: 1) Prince Philip; 2) Queen Elizabeth; 3) Senator George Mitchell; 4) William Phips; 5) President George H.W. Bush, with parachute; 6) Lady Bettina Brown Gorton; 7) Harry Oakes; 8) Sir William and Lady Pepperrell; 9) Hiram Maxim; 10) General Dwight D. Eisenhower.

# Knight Moves

The royal treatment: A brief history of Maine's knights of the realm.

BY RON SOODALTER

**W**hat boy doesn't dream of becoming a knight? We have all watched the scenes in the Hollywood swashbucklers in which the king lays the flat of his broadsword blade on each of the young warrior's shoulders, granting him entry into that rarest of societies.

Although many might assume this tradition to have been long left in the historic past, it is alive and well, and practiced by governments in Europe and Great Britain to this day, to honor their own citizens as well as deserving foreigners. According to the British Monarchy website, "Foreign citizens occasionally receive

honorary knighthoods or damehoods...Such knighthoods are conferred by The Queen, on the advice of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, on those who have made an important contribution to relations between their country and Britain." Unlikely as it might seem, over the centuries—and for a variety of rea-

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sons—a number of Maine’s citizens have had knighthood bestowed upon them.

### MAINE’S FIRST KNIGHTS

The first two “Mainers” to be knighted were subjects of the British Crown. Born to a Woolwich family of reportedly modest means, **William Phips (1651-1695)** made his fortune as a treasure hunter, locating and salvaging the riches from sunken Spanish vessels. After turning over one-tenth of the booty to the crown, Phips was knighted by King James II and appointed royal governor of Massachusetts Colony. From then on, things turned somewhat dicey for Sir William. In 1692, he bowed to religious and political pressure by creating a special court to hear the many accusations of witchcraft emanating from Salem Village. Phips placed his lieutenant governor, William Stoughton, in charge of the court. Stoughton was utterly

## Maxim lived to see millions fall before the terrible efficiency of his invention.

devoid of legal training, but more than qualified as a religious zealot, and very few of the accused walked free from the trials. After a number of locals had been tortured and executed, Phips finally heeded the public outcry and granted a handful of pardons, but neither the community nor Phips’s reputation would ever be the same.

**William Pepperrell (1696-1759)** of Kittery epitomized the self-made man, achieving great riches and prominence, and becoming the most famous American of the early 18th century. But it was for his service as a soldier that he was knighted. In 1745, during King George’s War, Pepperrell helped organize, finance and lead a successful expedition against the French fortifications at Louisbourg. It was a stunning achievement, and the king made him a “baronet”—a member of an hereditary order. The phenomenally wealthy Pepperrell enjoyed the good life to the fullest, and, in the words of Nathaniel Hawthorne, “spent the remainder of his days in all the pomp of a colonial grandee.” According to prominent Maine historian Ernest Marriner, “Sir William, who had once enjoyed being rowed across the Piscataqua in Governor Winthrop’s barge, acquired a barge of his own,” rowed

by liveried black slaves. He owned a tract of over 100 miles that stretched from the Saco to the Piscataqua rivers, and his opulent mansion, with its extensive formal gardens, was maintained by a staff of a dozen slaves. (Slavery had not yet been abolished in Massachusetts, and ownership was an obvious sign of wealth and status.) In 1759, after attaining the highest level of military, political, and commercial success, William Pepperrell—writes Hawthorne—“laid down his aristocratic head among the humbler ashes of his fathers.”

### THE KNIGHTS FROM SANGERVILLE

Sangerville, Maine, boasts a population fewer than 1,400. And yet, the tiny town in Piscataquis County fostered two Knights of the Realm! They could not have been more different from one another. One contributed a fortune to the improvement of social conditions, while the other developed an instrument of war.

**B**orn in Sangerville, **Hiram Stevens Maxim (1840-1916)** was a world-class inventor. He first demonstrated his creative skills by inventing a better mousetrap—literally. By all reports, his “self-resetting” snare was highly successful in eliminating rodents from a local grist mill. In his lifetime, the prolific Hiram was awarded over 270 patents, for inventions ranging from the pocket inhaler and the curling iron, to smokeless gunpowder and aircraft artillery. He even dabbled, albeit unsuccessfully, in the realm of sustained flight. His crowning achievement, however, and the one for which he is remembered today, was the invention of the self-powered machine gun. After a myopic U.S. War Department refused to purchase his invention, Hiram set up a plant in Britain, from which he successfully marketed his doomsday device to virtually every other major army in the world. So impressed was Queen Victoria with Maxim’s gun that she had him knighted. Hiram Maxim lived until 1916—two years after the outbreak of World War I, and in time to see millions fall before the terrible efficiency of his invention.

**Harry Oakes (1874-1943)** was born 34 years later, and achieved notoriety—and knighthood—by a totally different route. Despite what was considered a fine education for its time—a bachelor’s degree from Bowdoin College and graduate credits from Syracuse Medical School—Harry left home at 21



LEGENDS

## Good knight, Mr. President

**G**eorge H. W. Bush isn’t the only presidential knight. Three U.S. presidents—all Republicans—have been knighted, one before he ever ran for office. In the fall of 1945, **King George VI** conferred the Order of Merit on a decidedly underwhelmed General of the Army **Dwight D. Eisenhower**. It was one of many honors heaped by grateful governments on a no-nonsense professional soldier whose primary objective was the winning of World War II, and who had little patience for the trappings of state. In a letter to General **George Marshall**, Eisenhower bemoaned what he called “a fearful drain on available time. I do hope the whole business is doing a little good. Otherwise, I am certainly inconveniencing myself to no purpose.”

In 1989, the British government bestowed on President **Ronald Reagan**—described by one reporter as “Prime Minister **Margaret Thatcher’s** conservative soul mate”—his own GCB. Both Reagan and Bush were knighted after their terms of office had expired, since Article I, Section 9, of the U.S. Constitution prohibits members of the government from accepting “any present, emolument, office, or title, of any kind whatever, from any king, prince, or foreign state” without the approval of Congress.



## LEGENDS

to find his fortune by prospecting for gold. Just as Sir William Phips had sought his treasure in the sea, Harry was determined to take his from the earth. After years of failure in Alaska, California, Australia, New Zealand, Africa, and Central America, he struck pay dirt near a northern Ontario town with the unlikely name of Swastika. He dug some \$300 million from the ground—the equivalent of more than \$7 billion in today's money—making him the wealthiest man in Canada. Oakes became a naturalized Canadian citizen, moved to Nassau, Bahamas, with a newly acquired young bride, and proceeded to donate large sums to social, cultural, and environmental improvements, including a \$400,000 gift to St. George's Hospital of London. So impressed was King George VI with Oakes's largesse that he knighted him in 1939, bestowing upon him the title of baron. Unfortunately, his good fortune soon failed him. One rainy summer night in 1943, Sir Harry was brutally murdered in his Nassau home by party or par-

**"As you would expect,  
Buckingham Palace is a  
very nice place!"**

ties unknown. According to oral tradition, when still in college, Harry had confided to a classmate that he would gain a fortune and die a violent death, "with his boots on." Oakes's youthful prediction proved true on both counts.

### THE DISTAFF KNIGHTS

Titles of nobility have not fallen exclusively to the men. The title of Lady is the female equivalent of Knight, and some women of Maine have been so graced. When, for example, William Pepperrell—a subject of the Crown—was made a Baron, his wife automatically became Lady Pepperrell. Nor was she the only Maine woman to achieve nobility. After Bettina Edith Brown (1915-1983) of Great Barrington married Australian politician John Gorton, she became an Australian citizen and British subject as well as a down-easter. And when John was knighted in 1977 after having served as Prime Minister, Bettina automatically became Lady Gorton. An accomplished woman in her own right, she matriculated in Asian studies, learned to speak fluent Indonesian, and worked for years on a Malay/English dic-



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Bangor High School graduate Bettina Brown Gorton, wife of Australian Prime Minister John Gorton, converses with her Indonesian language instructor Yohanni Johns in Canberra in 1968.

tionary. Lady Gorton used her rank and position to strengthen and enhance Australia's relations with Indonesia.

### PRESIDENTIAL YANKEE IN QUEEN ELIZABETH'S COURT

In 1993, President George H.W. Bush, whose family has maintained a generations-long residence in Kennebunkport, was awarded the highest honorary rank bestowed by Britain on foreigners: the Knight Grand Cross of the Most Honorable Order of the Bath, or, GCB. The ceremony was, to say the least, understated, and was described by one chronicler as having "no pomp at all and very little visible circumstance." Comments the former president, "It was conferred during a private visit to Buckingham Palace, and given the friendship between our nations and my high esteem for Her Majesty, I recall being very moved. Because I was not a British subject, I do recall I did not have to kneel." Apparently, only British subjects get to kneel before Her Highness; Americans—even presidents—receive their knighthoods standing. Nor, it seems, are foreigners allowed to call themselves "Sir." After receiving his medal and crimson sash, President Bush was treated to a private lunch at the palace, at which, according to the Associated Press, the "table talk was top secret and the menu strictly confidential."

"When I returned home," recollected the President, "I asked Barbara how it felt to be married to a real live knight. Her reply? 'Make the coffee, Sir George.'"

### A KNIGHTHOOD FROM FRANCE

Britain is not the only nation to have awarded knighthoods to denizens of the Pine Tree State. In late 2013, 89-year-old Donald Tuttle of Augusta was appointed a knight in the French Legion of Honor, in recognition of his service-

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## LEGENDS

es in the liberation of France during World War II. He recalls the event with both reverence and humor. “The French consul in Boston called to say I was going to be knighted with France’s highest award. They asked me where I would like the ceremony to be held, and I said, in my garage; I don’t travel much anymore. Instead, I had them mail it to me.”

**T**uttle, at 19, flew 50 missions over France as tail gunner in a B-24 Liberator bomber. He was wounded on his second mission, and shot down over enemy territory on his fortieth. Bailing out over enemy territory, he watched as his best friend’s chute fatally snagged in the plunging bomber’s tail section. Hidden by Italian farmers, Tuttle eventually made his way back to his own lines—and another 10 deadly bombing missions. Plagued by memories to this day, Tuttle was asked if he might be suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder—what the GIs of his era used to call “combat fatigue.”

“I can’t think of any other reason for me to still feel the way I do. I still have nightmares, and I’m jumpy as a son-of-a-gun. You tell your readers that. I want people to know what these boys went through. It wasn’t some field trip. These days, I read about our boys getting killed in wars that make no sense, and it just makes me sick.”

The French government mailed Tuttle a handsome medal, which he displays with the many others he won in the war. The certificate that accompanied the citation reads, “France will never forget the sacrifices made by the American soldiers for the cause of freedom.”

### THE PEACEMAKER

In 1998, Senator George Mitchell of Waterville was invested as an Honorary Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the British Empire (GBE) for his splendid efforts in negotiating the Good Friday Agreement, which brought about a cessation of hostilities in Northern Ireland. Senator Mitchell, a modest man who built an unsurpassed reputation for international diplomacy, recalls, “I was completely surprised to be invited to Buckingham Palace to meet with the Queen. I was accompanied by my wife, her mother, and my sister. I had been chairman of a three-man team in Northern Ireland, and the other two were with me as well, to receive similar honors.

“It was a nice ceremony,” Mitchell remem-

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bers. “We were met by uniformed British officials as we entered the Palace, and taken to a separate room and briefed about the upcoming event. As you would expect, Buckingham Palace is a very nice place! The Queen entered, a brief statement of citation was read, and she placed medals on the three of us. An informal reception followed.”

Mitchell was informed that as a foreigner, he would not be referred to as “Sir George.” “As it was explained to me, if I chose to give up my American citizenship and become a British subject, I could use the term, ‘Sir.’ I declined the offer...”

“Actually,” he reminisced, “I already knew the Queen. In 1992, when she came to address a joint session of Congress, as Senate Majority Leader I hosted a luncheon in the Capitol. I sat with her at lunch, and we had a long conversation. So when I got to Buckingham Palace, we enjoyed quite a nice talk. Not surprisingly, after a lifetime of doing such things, she’s good at personal conversation.

“It was my sister’s birthday, and the Queen was very nice about acknowledging that. To this day, my sister—who has stopped recognizing her birthdays due to advancing age—refers to that last one, which she celebrated with the Queen of England!”

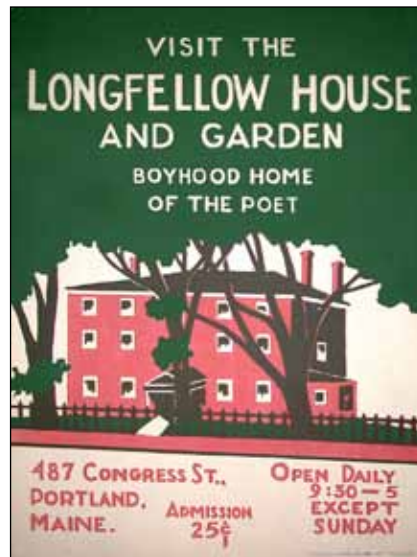
**O**n a more somber note, Mitchell remembers, “It was a nice gesture by the British government, but it turned politically awkward. By sheer coincidence, on the very day, indeed at the very time, we were in Buckingham Palace receiving these awards, the Northern Ireland Assembly, which had been formed as a result of the peace agreement, collapsed. We were scheduled for a celebratory dinner but I couldn’t go, because I received calls from the Prime Ministers of Ireland and the United Kingdom asking me to return to Northern Ireland, to try to put the process back on track.” I spent the whole day and evening on the phone with British and Northern Irish officials. I ended up returning [to Northern Ireland] for several more months, and eventually succeeded in putting it back together. It was a very difficult period, with horrific incidents of violence. In the end, the agreement was worked out, and continues today.”

The year following Senator Mitchell’s investiture by the Queen, President Clinton awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom, America’s highest civilian honor. ■

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