Here Begynneth A Lytell Geste of Robin Hood…

Chronicling the Lives of Robbers, Rogues & Rebels

The Legend of Robin Hood

A talk at Pontefract Castle

Sunday 8 May 2016 1pm –2pm

Stephen Basdeo PhD student at Leeds Trinity University discusses the development of the legend over time.

Free but booking essential on 01924 302700 or email museumslearning@wakefield.gov.uk
Introduction

The Renaissance poet Michael Drayton authored a monumental work entitled *Poly-Olbion* which was published in 1612. It is often described as a 'topographical poem' and deals with the history of England and Wales. In one part of this poem he wrote the following lines:

In this our spacious isle I think there is not one,
But he of ROBIN HOOD hath heard, and Little John;
And to the end of time the tales shall ne'er be done
Of Scarlock, George-a-Green, and Much the Miller's son,
Of Tuck, the merry friar, which many a sermon made
In praise of ROBIN HOOD, his out-laws, and their trade.[1]

I would like to echo Drayton’s words and say that surely everybody here ‘in this our spacious isle’ no doubt has heard of Robin Hood. He is the quintessential noble robber who steals from the rich and gives to the poor. His true love is a woman named Marian. His fellow outlaws include Little John, Will Scarlet, Allen-a-Dale, and Friar Tuck. Their stories have been immortalised in books, films, and television series, and with three movies forthcoming, it seems that Drayton's prophecy that 'until the end of time the tales shall ne'er be done' will continue to ring true. I want to talk to you today about the legend of Robin Hood as a whole. I will briefly discuss some of the historical outlaws whom researchers have identified as being possible candidates for the 'real' Robin Hood. I then want to move on to discussing how the legend has been continually reshaped over time, and how Robin Hood has been appropriated by different authors for various purposes. My talk, therefore, will take you on a journey through social, cultural, and literary history from the middle ages until the twentieth century.

A Real Robin Hood?

When I have given public talks before on the legend of Robin Hood, the one question that continually arises is: was Robin Hood a real person, and if so, who was he? It is a question to which there will never be a definitive answer simply due to the paucity of evidence surrounding his life.[2] That being said, this has not stopped people attempting to identify an historic outlaw. I am going to pre-empt your questions by dwelling upon the most likely candidates we have who may be the real Robin Hood.

The late Professor James C. Holt in his work Robin Hood (1982), believed that a man listed in the Yorkshire Assize Rolls between 1225 and 1226 as ‘Robert Hod, fugitive’ was the most likely candidate for the real Robin Hood. And in the image above you can see the entry for this man in the court rolls. The same outlaw turns up years later under the sobriquet of ‘Hobbehod’. [3] Allen Wright, an independent Robin Hood scholar based in Canada, lists in one of his articles several of the other candidates that have at one time or another been identified as the real Robin Hood. Among them is one Robert of Wetherby who is listed in the Court Rolls as ‘outlaw and evildoer of our land’. [4] Other potential candidates include a Robert Hood...
Most pertinently for audiences here today, perhaps, there is also the case of the supposed Robin Hood of Wakefield. The Robin Hood of Wakefield was identified by a nineteenth-century antiquary named Joseph Hunter (1783-1861). Hunter was appointed as the Assistant Keeper of the Public Record Office, or National Archives as we know it today. In a tract entitled The Great Hero of the Ancient Minstrelsy of England, Robin Hood, published in 1852, he argued that Robin Hood was from Wakefield. Hunter aimed to fit known facts to the early tales of Robin Hood. Hunter first identified a Robert Hood who with his wife Matilda appears in the Court Rolls of the manor of Wakefield in 1316 and 1317. Without any evidence, he argued that this Robert Hood became an outlaw between this time and 1324, when Hunter discovered that there was a valet de chambre to Edward II named Robyn Hode.[7] For Hunter, this seemed to confirm that that this man was the same Robin who enters into the King's service at the end of the fifteenth-century poem A Gest of Robyn Hode, when the King travels into the forest and meets Robin, and asks him to join his service. The problem with this approach is:

1) There is no indication that this Robyn Hode from 1324 was ever an outlaw.
2) The idea of a monarch going into the woods, as the king does at the end of the Gest, was a common trope in medieval ballads, and it is highly unlikely that the King ever went incognito among the populace.[8]

Thus I hope I have shown you how difficult it is for anybody to identify an historical outlaw whose life and deeds match those of the legendary Robin Hood. We really are dealing with scraps of information: little notes in court rolls; men who used the name of Robin Hood as an alias. But I think it is the very paucity of evidence regarding a real Robin Hood which has allowed the legend to grow over time, and be adapted continually by different people in different ages. Thankfully academic scholarship has now moved beyond trying to identify a historic outlaw who could have been the 'real' Robin Hood. And I think this is a move in the right direction: the tale of Robin Hood has been appropriated and adapted many times, and we will never identify a historic outlaw simply due to the lack of evidence. In the words of Professor Alexander Kaufman, 'the origins of Robin Hood the person and his original context are perhaps best left to those individuals who wish to search for that which is forever to be a quest'.[13]

A Popular Hero: The Medieval Period

While there is little evidence that enables us to definitively identify a single outlaw whose life and deeds gave rise to the legend of Robin Hood, stories about Robin Hood circulated at an early period of English history. In a thirteenth-century poem by William Langland entitled The Vision of Piers the Plowman (c.1370), we meet a lazy Priest named Sloth. Poor Sloth is not a very good cleric. He cannot read or write, and he does not even know his Paternoster by heart. However, the one thing he can recite from memory is 'rymes of Robyn Hode'. He tells us in the poem that:

I can noughte parfitly my Paternoster as the prest it syngeth,
But I can rymes of Robyn Hode, and Randalf Erle of Chestre.[14]

These words from c.1370 are the first literary reference to Robin Hood. They make clear that during this period ‘rymes of Robyn Hode’, or ballads were circulating orally. Transmission of these tales was often by word of mouth, for England was not a predominantly literate society in the fourteenth century. In fact, the skill of reading and writing was mainly confined to members of the Church and the upper classes.

In time, however, the ‘rymes of Robyn Hode’ were written down. We have five surviving examples of these early rhymes, or ballads, of Robin Hood, and these are: Robin Hood and the Monk which survives in manuscript form and is dated c.1450; [15] Robin Hood and the Potter, which survives in a single manuscript of popular and moral poems that can be dated to c.1500; [16] Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne which is dated to the mid-fifteenth century; [17] and A Gest of Robyn Hode, the content of which is dated to c.1450, but only survives in printed copies from the sixteenth century.[18]

The Robin Hood of these early ballads is very different to the outlaw that we would recognise today. While modern audiences are used to seeing Robin Hood portrayed as the dispossessed Earl of Huntingdon, Robin is not a nobleman in these early texts but is described as a 'yeoman'. Broadly speaking, a yeoman was a member of the medieval middle classes, for want of a better term, occupying a social position between the aristocracy...
and the peasantry. This is clear from the outset of the *Gest* which opens with the following lines:

```plaintext
Lythe and listin, gentilmen,  
That be of frebore blode;  
I shall you tel of a gode yeman,  
His name was Robyn Hode. [20]
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All of Robin's fellow outlaws such as Little John and Much the Miller's son hail from the same social class of yeomanry. And Robin and his men are quite violent characters. In *Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne* he cuts off Guy's head, mutilates his face with a knife, and sticks his head upon the end of his bow:

```plaintext
Robin thought on Our Ladye deere,  
And soone leapt up againe,  
And thus he came with an awkwarde stroke,  
Good Sir Guy hee has slayne.
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```plaintext
He tooke Sir Guy's head by the hayre,  
And stickt itt upon his bowes end:  
"Thou has beene a traytor all thy liffe,  
Which thing must have an ende."
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```plaintext
Robin pulled forth an Irish kniffe,  
And nicked Sir Guy in the face,  
That hee was never on a woman borne,  
Could tell who Sir Guye was.[21]
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In *Robin Hood and the Monk*, one of Robin's men, Much the Miller's son and Little John kill a travelling monk and his young page:

```plaintext
John smote of the munkis hed,  
No longer wolde he dwell;  
So did Moch the litull page,  
For ferd lest he wolde tell.[22]
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There are also characters whom we would count as staples of the Robin Hood legend today that actually appear nowhere in these early texts. Maid Marian is notable absent from these texts. In fact, Robin has no love interest at all. Marian entered the legend via a different route to the ballads. The first time that two people named Robin and Marian were associated together was in a French pastoral play entitled *Jeu de Robin et Marion*, dating from c.1282. It is unclear, however, whether the Robin and Marian of this play were understood to be outlaws. There is certainly no proven link between the play and the Robin Hood tradition. We do know, however, that Marian appears alongside the 'proper' Robin Hood in sixteenth-century Tudor May Day celebrations. It seems from thence she made her way into *Anthony Munday's two plays The Downfall of Robert, Earl of Huntington and The Death of Robert, Earl of Huntingdon* written between 1597 and 1598. Despite these two plays, however, Maid Marian would not get her "big break" until the nineteenth century with a short novella by Thomas Love Peacock entitled *Maid Marian* published in 1822, although of this novel I shall speak later.

The poem *A Gest of Robyn Hode* (c.1450) is the most significant of all the medieval texts. While Robin was an outlaw in *Robin Hood and the Monk* and *Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne*, he did not really have a social mission as such. It is with the *Gest* that this changes. It is a long poem, 1,824 lines in total, and appears to have been constructed from a variety of existing tales which somebody, at some point, endeavoured to give unity to. It is a type of the 'good outlaw' tale. Robin will help poor, honest people whom he meets: the first 'fytte' of the poem sees him lending money to an impoverished knight named Sir Richard of the Lee, whose lands have been mortgaged to pay a debt to the Abbot of St. Mary's in York. And in this poem many familiar scenes occur, such as the archery contest, or his meeting with the King and subsequent pardon. At the end of the poem, Robin falls ill and goes to Kirklees Priory to be bled. The prioress, in league with Sir Roger of Doncaster, bleeds him to death. The poem then ends with a benediction:

```plaintext
Cryst have mercy on his soule  
That dyed upon the rod.  
For was a good outlawe,
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And dyde pore men moch gode.

Although the idea that Robin steals from the rich and gives to the poor is not fully articulated in the poem (it was not until John Stowe’s *Annales of England* in 1592 that this idea would become current),[24] it is in the Gest that we first get the idea that Robin is kind to the poor and ‘dyde pore men moch gode’.

The Seventeenth Century

Robin moved up in the world during the seventeenth century. In the afore-mentioned plays by Anthony Munday, *The Downfall of Robert, Earle of Huntington* and *The Death of Robert, Earle of Huntingdon*, Robin was cast for the first time as an Earl. There was no precedent in the ballad tradition for Robin being an Earl. Munday did this because he was catering to a primarily aristocratic audience. Although largely forgotten about today outside of academic circles, these plays established a new narrative in the Robin Hood legend: Robin is depicted as an aristocrat; he is outlawed because of a plot against him by rival courtiers; and instead of a bold yeoman outlaw/rebel, the reason that Robin is outlawed is because he has stayed loyal to King Richard. Hence any subversive political traits are extracted from his character. Thus instead of challenging the establishment, in these plays Robin becomes an upholder of the established order.
In fact, in the area of high culture, Robin becomes a very non-threatening and gentle figure. This is the case in a play written by Ben Jonson entitled *The Sad Shepherd, or, A Tale of Robin Hood* (1641). Firstly, it’s unclear whether Robin is actually an outlaw at all: he is described as ‘Chief Woodsman, and Master of the Feast’. His men refer to him as ‘gentle master’. Furthermore, in the play, Robin never actually steals from anybody. Instead the story is what we call a ‘pastoral’, which is defined as:

A literary work (as a poem or play) dealing with shepherds or rural life in a usually artificial manner, and typically drawing a contrast between the innocence and serenity of the simple life and the misery and corruption of city and especially court life.

In the play, Robin Hood has invited all the shepherds and shepherdesses of the Vale of Bevoir to a feast in the forest of Sherwood, and then he learns that the shepherd, Aeglamour, fears his true love has drowned in the river – hence *The Sad Shepherd*. In the meantime, Marian appears to have been possessed by an evil witch, named Maudlin, whom, it is speculated, is also responsible for the disappearance of the Shepherd’s beloved. Jonson never finished the play – that was a task left to subsequent writers. However, as among the cast is one ‘Reuben, the Reconciler’, one academic named Ann Barton suggests that Jonson would probably have had the witch and her children forgiven and present at the final delayed banquet of venison. However Jonson might have ended, as you can see, it’s a very different tale of Robin Hood than the one that we are used to seeing.
At the same time as Jonson was writing, more exciting tales of Robin Hood were appearing in broadside ballads. Broadsides were large folio size sheets of paper with the lyrics of a song printed on one side. They were sold usually for a penny by itinerant hawkers. The ballads which appear in the seventeenth century are not the long type of medieval narrative poem, but rather are shorter stories, supposed to be sung, and they depict Robin as something of a buffoon. Ballads such as *Robin Hood and the Tanner*, which dates from the seventeenth century, for instance, see Robin meeting a stranger in the forest. Robin bids him to stand, and the traveller takes offence. The traveller challenges Robin to a battle with quarterstaffs. The stranger wins the fight, and afterwards the two fellows make friends, and the stranger usually joins Robin's band. Now although this is not quite the 'heroic' Robin Hood we expect, you may already realise that even these relatively unimportant later texts have left their mark upon modern-day portrayals: anybody who has seen a Robin Hood film or television show will no doubt recall that, in most instance, when Robin meets Little John for the first time, the two men fight and then become friends.

The Eighteenth Century

The eighteenth century is a very interesting century for the Robin Hood legend. **On the one hand, he's depicted as a cold-blooded killer.** On the other hand he is celebrated. But let us begin at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Between 1714 and 1737, Robin Hood's reputation took a beating. In criminal biography, the most popular genre of literature, Robin was portrayed as a cold-hearted killer. It is best to briefly digress, however, to explain why criminal biography emerged when it did.
In the 18th century crime was the subject on everybody's lips, and people believed that they were in the midst of a crime wave. The situation apparently became so bad by mid-century that Henry Fielding gloomily prophesied 'I make no doubt, but that the streets of [London], and the roads leading to it, will shortly be impassable without the utmost hazard'.[30] The legal response to this crime wave was the introduction of a bloody law code, when 200 offences became capital felonies. This resulted in the proliferation of cheap criminal biographies. Major novelists of the period also capitalised on this market for criminal biographies, and Daniel Defoe's novel *Moll Flanders* (1722) is often seen as a more sophisticated example of the genre. The first appearance of Robin Hood in criminal biography comes in Captain Smith's *A History of the Lives and Robberies of the Most Noted Highwaymen* (1719), where he is listed as 'Robin Hood: A Highwayman and Murderer.' Robin also makes an appearance in Captain Johnson's *Lives and Actions of the Most Noted Highwaymen* (1734), as well as the anonymous *The Whole Life and Merry Exploits of Bold Robin Hood* (1737). The content of Smith's *Highwaymen* was heavily plagiarised for subsequent accounts of Robin's life, and it is Smith's text which is focused upon here.

Today Robin Hood is usually portrayed as the noble Earl of Huntingdon, which is a legacy of Munday's plays, but Smith was not convinced:

This bold robber, Robin Hood, was, some write, descended of the noble family of the earls of Huntingdon; but that is only fiction, for his birth was but very obscure, his pedigree ab origine being no higher than poor shepherds, who for some time lived in Nottinghamshire, in which county, at a little village adjacent to the Forest of Sherwood, he was born in the reign of King Henry the Second.[31]

Robin Hood's social status, however, is fairly immaterial to the reader of criminal biography in the 18th century: all men were capable of committing a crime because all men were sinners – there was no concept of a 'criminal class'.[32] You became a criminal if, like Robin, you allowed yourself to succumb to your own sinful inclinations.

Smith tells how Robin Hood was 'bred up a butcher, but being of a very licentious, wicked inclination, he followed not his trade, but in the reign of King Henry the Second, associated himself with several robbers and outlaws'. We are told that Robin Hood steals from the rich and gives to the poor, but in the 18th century people often rolled their eyes when they heard of thieves doing this. When one highwayman in 1763, Paul Lewis, told an official that he stole from the rich and gave to the poor, the sarcastic response was that this was 'a common excuse for all thieves and robbers'. Even Robin's meeting with the king is played out differently to how it is portrayed in movies today, for in Smith's work, instead of the meeting ending amicably, Robin simply robs him:

The King, seeing it was in vain to resist Robin Hood's power, he [sic] gave him a purse in which was about 100 pieces of gold; but swore when he was got out of his clutches that he would certainly hang him whenever he was taken.[33]
Evidently, the 18th-century Robin Hood is loyal to no man, not even the King. Finally, Smith portrays Robin Hood as a man who is wicked until the day he dies, for he records that:

Robin Hood had continued in his licentious course of life for 20 years, when being very sick, and then struck with some remorse of conscience, he privately withdrew himself to a monastery in Yorkshire, where being let blood by a nun, he bled to death, aged 43 years, and was buried in Kinslay.[34]

Criminal biographies were intended to serve as pieces of moralist literature. Readers were supposed to heed the warnings of the life of the criminal to avoid making the same sinful mistakes that had led felons to the gallows. Eighteenth-century authors had a more nuanced and, dare it be said, ‘realistic’ impression of the type of man that Robin may have been like, if he existed at all. If you lived in the eighteenth century, it was this version of Robin’s life which you were most likely familiar with: criminal biographies such as Smith’s Highwaymen and The Newgate Calendar were the third most common book to be found in the middle-class home, after the Bible and The Pilgrim’s Progress.

It was only in the latter part of the century when Robin became reimagined as a hero in the conventional sense of the word, with the publication of Joseph Ritson’s two-volume work Robin Hood: A Collection of All the Ancient Poems, Songs, and Ballads (1795).[35] Joseph Ritson was born in Stockton-on-Tees and was a conveyancer by trade. In his spare time, however, he was an antiquary. He was interested, not in the ‘high’ culture of people in times past, but in the culture of the common man. He published many collections of ancient ballads and songs such as A Select Collection of English Songs (1783) and Pieces of Ancient Popular Poetry (1791). Ritson quickly established himself as an authority on many historical subjects owing to his willingness to seek out obscure primary sources from archives and libraries across the country. He was also cantankerous, and fiercely critical of his rivals such as Thomas Percy who took it upon himself to edit and ‘refine’ Old and Middle English texts.


Ritson’s work is significant in the overall construction of the legend because, as his title suggests, he collected together and made accessible in printed form every Robin Hood text he could find ranging from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century. The Middle English ballad A Gest of Robyn Hode, for instance, was first printed for a mass market readership in Ritson’s publication. Some of the other ballads which he included in his collection had been printed before, of course, by antiquaries such as Percy in his Reliques of Ancient English Poetry (1765), and Thomas Evans’ Old Ballads, Historical & Narrative (1784), and in the often reprinted Robin Hood’s Garland chapbooks (‘garlands’ were cheaply printed collections of popular songs). But Ritson’s Robin Hood was the first book to include all of these ancient and modern Robin Hood texts in one place.

The most important part of Ritson’s work, however, was the section entitled ‘The Life of Robin Hood’ which he prefixed to the collection of ballads. In this Ritson laid down the “facts” of the legend, saying:

Robin Hood was born at Locksley, in the County of Nottingham, in the reign of king Henry the Second, and about the year of Christ 1160. His extraction was noble. […] he is frequently styled, and commonly reputed to have been Earl of Huntingdon.[36]

Ritson, furthermore, decides to lay down the ‘facts’ about his character:

With respect to [Robin Hood’s] personal character: it is sufficiently evident that he was active, brave, prudent;
possessed of uncommon bodily [sic] strength, and considerable military skill; just, generous, benevolent, faithful, and beloved or revered by his followers and adherents for his excellent and amiable qualities.[37]

Another thing about Ritson is that he is a bit of an armchair republican/revolutionary. His letters from the 1790s are full of praise for the French Revolution. And so Ritson fashions Robin Hood into an almost quasi-revolutionary leader:

In these forests, and with [his] company, he for many years reigned like an independent sovereign; at perpetual war, indeed, with the king of England, and all his subjects, with an exception, however, of the poor and needy, and such as were ‘desolate and oppressed,’ or stood in need of his protection.[38]

And finally, Ritson tells us that Robin steals from the rich and gives to the poor:

That our hero and his companions, while they lived in the woods, had recourse to robbery for their better support, is neither to be concealed nor to be denied. Testimonies to this purpose, indeed, would be equally endless and unnecessary [...] But it is to be remembered [...] that, in these exertions, he took away the goods of rich men only; never killing any person, unless he was attacked or resisted: that he would never suffer a woman to be maltreated; nor ever took anything from the poor, but charitably fed them with the wealth he drew from the abbots.[39]

As you can see, the story of Robin Hood, due in large part to Joseph Ritson, is beginning to look familiar to the story which we see depicted on film and television today. Ritson died shortly after the publication of *Robin Hood*, but we know from his letters that he was in contact with a young Scotsman, Walter Scott. It is Scott, as we shall see in a few moments, who carried Ritson's portrayal of Robin Hood even further in his novel *Ivanhoe* (1819).

The Nineteenth Century

It is indeed during the nineteenth century when the Robin Hood legend assumes the form that we are familiar with today. This was primarily due to three literary works: Scott's *Ivanhoe*, Thomas Love Peacock's *Maid Marian* (1822), and Pierce Egan the Younger's *Robin Hood and Little John* (1840).

Scott is perhaps the most famous of all Scottish novelists. Born in Edinburgh in 1771, after completing his studies he was articled to the legal profession through a friend of his father's. Throughout his life, however, in his leisure time he devoted himself to antiquarian pursuits, avidly reading scholarly works such as Percy's *Reliques*. Inspired by Percy, whose three volume work was a collection of Old and Middle English poetry, Scott went on to produce the three volume work, *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802-1803). Scott did not merely produce scholarly editions of old texts, however; he was also a poet, authoring several lengthy narrative poems: *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, *Marmion*, *The Lady of the Lake*, *Rokeby*, and *Lord of the Isles*, to name but a few. His poetry nowadays has been all but forgotten except by scholars, and it is his novels for which he is chiefly remembered. He authored over 25 novels, most of which are now known as the *Waverley* Novels. Among these novels, it is *Waverley* (1814) and *Ivanhoe* which are regarded by scholars as his two ‘key texts’.
Most of Scott's novels dealt with the fairly recent Scottish eighteenth-century history. *Waverley* – regarded as the first historical novel in Western fiction – dealt with the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745. His second novel *Guy Mannering* (1815) is a tale set in Scotland during the 1760s, while his third novel *The Antiquary* (1816) is set in Scotland during the 1790s. With *Ivanhoe*, Scott made a departure from Scottish history by writing a novel set in England during the medieval period, and it is with *Ivanhoe* that Scott is said to have, in the words of John Henry Newman, initiated the Medieval Revival of the early nineteenth century.[41]

Although we class Scott primarily as Romantic novelist today, he would have seen himself as one of the gentlemen antiquaries of the eighteenth century, such as Percy or Ritson. Reflecting his love of antiquarian pursuits, the preface purports to be a letter sent from one (fictional) antiquary, Laurence Templeton, to the (also fictional) Rev. Dr. Dryasdust. The story of *Ivanhoe*, we are told, is taken from an ancient manuscript in the possession of Sir Arthur Wardour. Readers of Scott novels will quickly realise that this is another fictional character, taken from *The Antiquary*. The purpose of the novel, Templeton writes, is to celebrate English national history, especially when no one until that date had attempted to:

> I cannot but think it strange that no attempt has been made to excite an interest for the traditions and manners of Old England, similar to that which has been obtained in behalf of those of our poorer and less celebrated neighbours [he is referring here to his own Scottish novels].[42]

England is in need of national heroes to celebrate, just as Scotland, through Scott's novels, had them. Scott says that:

> The name of Robin Hood, if duly conjured with, should raise a spirit as soon as that of Rob Roy; and the patriots of England deserve no less their renown in our modern circles, than the Bruces and Wallaces of Caledonia.[43]

The actual novel is set during the 1190s, and England is in a parlous state, divided between the Normans and the Anglo-Saxons:
A circumstance which tended greatly to enhance the tyranny of the nobility, and the sufferings of the inferior classes, arose from the consequences of the Conquest by William Duke of Normandy. Four generations had not sufficed to blend the hostile blood of the Normans and Anglo-Saxons, or to unite, by common language and mutual interests, two hostile races, one of which still felt the elation of triumph, while the other groaned under all the consequences of defeat.[44]

The divisions between the Anglo-Saxons and the Normans come to a head while Richard I is captured by Leopold of Austria, and his brother John rules as Regent. John taxes the people heavily to pay King Richard's ransom. In reality, John is hoarding the money for himself, hoping to raise an army to overthrow the few remaining barons who support Richard, while buying the others off.

Unbeknownst to John and his Templar henchmen, Richard has also returned to England in disguise. Richard finds his his land in chaos: outlaws roam in the forest; the Normans oppress the good Saxons; and Ivanhoe's father, Cedric, plans on using his brother Athelstane as a rallying point through whom the oppressed Saxons can rise up and overthrow their Norman conquerors. Recognising the parlous state of the country, the outlaw known as Robin of Locksley teams up with both Ivanhoe and King Richard and so that Richard can regain control of his kingdom and thereby unite the nation. Added into this plot are vividly exciting scenes; jousting tournaments, archery tournaments, damsels in distress, and epic sieges and battles. It is a piece of pure medieval spectacle.

Scott completely invented the idea that the Anglo-Saxons and the Normans were at odds with each other in the 1190s. He did this because he had a message for nineteenth-century readers: society does not have to be divided the way that it was in the 1190s. Scott argues that if all classes of society work together, they can overcome their differences. This is symbolised in the alliance between the yeoman Robin of Locksley (the working classes), Ivanhoe (the middle class), and Richard (royalty/aristocracy). Each class has responsibilities towards and should show loyalty to one another: ‘the serf [should be] willing to die for his master, the master willing to die for the man he considered his sovereign’. Medieval feudalism, where each class owed loyalty to the other, could, Scott argued, be adapted for the nineteenth century. England in 1819 was in fact a very divided society. The end of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars brought in its wake a trade and financial depression along with mass unemployment. In addition, the working classes and the middle classes were agitating for political reform. Issues came to a head in 1819, while Scott was working on Ivanhoe, in Manchester. Peaceful protesters had gathered in Peter's Fields calling for political enfranchisement. However, the local magistrate ordered the militia to charge at the protesters. Fifteen people died and over 700 people were injured. Scott himself was horrified by this event, and the general state of the nation. Hence the reason that he wrote Ivanhoe was to create a shared sense of history around which all people could rally. This is why we see all classes of people working together. Through Robin Hood, for example, Scott intended to show that:

From the beginning of national history, ordinary men had an important role to play in the shaping of the nation [...] his novel dramatizes the idea of history in which the lowest in the social order are as important as the highest.[46]

Robin Hood is the saviour of the nation in Ivanhoe – the upper classes need the working classes as much as the working classes rely on their ‘betters’.

Walter Simeone, an early twentieth-century academic, argued that the modern idea of Robin Hood was practically ‘invented’ by Scott.[47] Robin of Locksley in Ivanhoe is a freedom fighter first, and an outlaw second. And when you think of it, almost every modern portrayal sees Robin as a political fighter first, and a thief second. In fact, as in Ivanhoe, in film and television portrayals we rarely see Robin Hood robbing anybody. Indeed, Robin is only an outlaw in Scott’s novel because he and his fellow Anglo-Saxon outlaws have been deprived of their rights. Out of all the heroes in Scott’s novel, it is only Robin Hood who people remember.

Thomas Love Peacock
(1785-1866)

The early nineteenth century was a good time for Robin Hood literature. The year 1818 saw John Keats and John Hamilton Reynolds write two
Robin Hood poems each. In 1819 two novels featuring the outlaw hero came out: the anonymously authored *Robin Hood: A Tale of the Olden Time* (1819) and *Ivanhoe*. Neither of those novels, however, featured Robin's love interest, Maid Marian. Marian's 'big break' came in 1822 with the publication of Thomas Love Peacock's novella *Maid Marian*. Peacock was a friend of Romantic writers such as Lord Byron and Mary Shelley. Indeed, it has been theorised by Stephen Knight that Robin and Marian in this novel are based upon Byron and Shelley.[48] Although the publication date of the novella is 1822, all first editions carry a note to the effect that the majority of the work was written in 1818. This is perhaps Peacock trying to distance himself and his work from Scott's *Ivanhoe*, and to claim originality for it. As the Robin Hood critic Stephen Knight notes, however, the siege of Arlingford in Peacock's novel seems to be a little too similar to Scott's siege of Torquilstone in *Ivanhoe*, and thus it is unlikely that Peacock was not at least partially influenced by Scott.[49]

The novel was originally intended as a satire on continental conservatism and its enthusiasm for all things feudal and medieval.[50] After the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1793-1815), many of the pre-Napoleonic governments were restored to power on the continent. But these governments' power rested on flimsy bases, and some governments, such as that of Spain, attempted to re-impose a new type of feudalism. While the press in some continental countries was hailing the return of established monarchies and 'the old order', Peacock was more critical. In particular, he targeted what he called the 'mystique' of monarchy and the cult of legitimacy that had grown up around monarchies in the aftermath of Napoleon's conquests. Through his novella he showed how man's feudal overlords have always been the same: greedy, violent, cynical, and self-interested,[53] which is the reason why the aristocracy have such a bad reputation in his novel.

Peacock's novel begins with the nuptials of Robert, Earl of Huntingdon and his lady Matilda. The wedding is interrupted by the Sheriff's men who seek to arrest him for 'forest treason'. Robin fights of the Sheriff's men and then takes to the woods, despoiling the Sheriff and his men of all their goods whenever they can. After resisting the advances of Prince John, Matilda joins Robin in Sherwood Forest and assumes the name of Maid Marian. Together, Robin and Marian effectively rule as King and Queen in the forest:

Administering natural justice according to Robin's ideas of rectifying the inequalities of the human condition: raising genial dews from the bags of the rich and idle, and returning them in fertilising showers on the poor and industrious; an operation which more enlightened statesmen have happily reversed. [54]

As Peacock's title suggests, Robin is the secondary character in the novel, with Marian being the main protagonist. However, she is no delicate little lady. Instead she takes an active role in defending Sherwood – Robin's forest kingdom – from the depredations of the Sheriff. She takes an active role in defending her home from Prince John's soldiers, and even fights Richard I in disguise. Marian is unsuited to the domestic sphere of life, and longs to be out in the world, as she says herself:

Thick walls, dreary galleries, and tapestried chambers, were indifferent to me while I could leave them at pleasure, but have ever been hateful to me since they held me by force'.[55]

In effect, Peacock, in crafting an image of Marian that was active, strong, and brave, he was rejecting nineteenth-century gender conventions, in which the woman of a relationship was supposed to confine herself to the domestic sphere. Marian in Peacock's novel is essentially a proto-feminist.[56]

The novel is also significant because it is the first time that the legend of Robin Hood is coherently articulated in the novel form.[57] Early ballads such as the Gest were compiled from a number of different tales, and are not classed as 'sophisticated' Middle English literature such as that of Chaucer's poetry or Langland's *Piers Plowman*. Other prose accounts of Robin Hood marginalise the hero to an extent: in Scott's *Ivanhoe*, for instance, Robin only appears in ten out of forty-four chapters, and he is just one among many medieval heroes to appear in the novel. And neither does Robin have a backstory before Peacock's novel.

Peacock set the tone for future interpretations of Maid Marian as an active, brave, and charming heroine. In Joaquim Stocqueler's *Maid Marian, the Forest Queen; A Companion to Robin Hood* (1849), Marian is presented again as a fighting woman. The paradox is that, despite this 'muscular' portrayal of active femininity, Marian as a character has never been adapted by female writers. Nevertheless, the representation of Marian as an action woman is an interpretation that has lasted until the age of Hollywood; *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (1991), the BBC *Robin Hood* series (2006), and the Russell Crowe *Robin Hood* (2010) all show Marian as an active and independent woman.

The man who really brings together the ideas of both Scott and Peacock is an author who is relatively unknown today: Pierce Egan the Younger (1814-1880). Egan was a prolific author who penned a number of mediaval novels, most of which were sold in weekly penny instalments. His quite radical work *Robin Hood and Little John* (1840) told the story of the hero from birth to death. Robin is portrayed as a freedom fighter, but also at the same time a chivalric, almost “Victorian” gentleman. And neither did Egan flinch from making his novels violent. Illustrating many of the scenes in his novel himself, the pages are full of arrows in people's eyes, and in the text limbs are cut off and there's a high body count. It is the perfect novel for a young male readership, even if Egan himself intended his novel to be read by adults as well. Egan's novel was highly successful, went through six editions, and was even translated into French by the famous author Alexandre Dumas as *Le Prince des Voleurs* and *Robin le Proscrit* (1863) which was then retranslated back into English as two novels entitled *Robin Hood the Outlaw* and *The Prince of Thieves* (1904).[58]
After Egan, the quality of Robin Hood novels declines somewhat. And there are some terrible, highly moralistic novels. Some of them were written by Churchmen, and they are all overtly patriotic, stressing the duties of loyalty and service to the crown. Whereas the Robin Hood of earlier novels had always represented something of a challenge to the establishment, in this any subversive traits Robin has are totally neutered. He is now a thoroughly Victorian “drawing room hero” – a gentleman, a worthy subject, and in some novels it is unclear whether he is an outlaw or not. The one exception to these late nineteenth-century novels is perhaps Howard Pyle’s *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood* (1883). Until Pyle, most Robin Hood novels had followed Scott in portraying him as an Anglo-Saxon freedom fighter. But Pyle returned to the earlier ballads, and from them constructed quite a lengthy narrative, telling the story of Robin’s life from birth to death. This was one of the more successful novels, and if you pick up a Penguin Classics edition of the story of Robin Hood today, it will most likely be Pyle’s novel.
At the turn of the twentieth century, however, it is clear that the medium for telling tales of Robin Hood was shifting from the book to the screen. And no twentieth-century Robin Hood novel has ever really had the power to truly have a lasting impact upon the tradition as Scott, Peacock, and Egan did. Robin Hood movies were released in 1912 and 1913,[59] but the first major Robin Hood movie was released in 1922 and starred Douglas Fairbanks in the title role. The idea of Robin wearing tights was something which Victorian actresses adopted so that they could, with propriety, show their legs on stage, but in the 1922 movie the semi-acrobatic costume allowed Fairbanks to make darting leaps from castle edges, and Robin becomes a true swashbuckling hero.[60]

The next major Robin Hood movie was Errol Flynn's The Adventures of Robin Hood (1938). Flynn's portrayal of Robin Hood is very much influenced by Fairbanks' movie and Walter Scott's novel. Robin Hood is an Anglo-Saxon freedom fighter, but he is more of an American hero than an English hero in this movie. And the movie endorses Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal, which can be seen in the oath that Robin makes the outlaws swear to:

> You the freemen of this forest swear to despoil the rich only to give to the poor, to shelter the old and the helpless, to protect all women rich and poor, Norman or Saxon, and swear to fight for a free England, to protect her loyally until the return of our king and sovereign Richard the Lionheart, and swear to fight to the death against all oppression.[61]

It is this American, populist vision of Robin Hood that has persisted in cinematic portrayals. Hollywood has always far outstripped the British Film industry in terms of quantity of output, if not in terms of quality. Robin Hood is perhaps the perfect hero to be “Americanised”: he is the man who stands up for the common man against the strong and powerful, much like an American superhero. There is the idea that Robin is a Lord, but on the whole cinematic portrayals of the outlaw myth are relatively classless, just as American society is supposed to be. Perhaps the most memorable American portrayal of the outlaw legend, for many here today at least, is the Kevin Costner movie Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves (1991). So Americanised it was, that the filmmakers seemingly never even made the effort to have key members of the cast speak with an English accent. Costner’s Robin Hood is a relatively two-dimensional character, and the movie is full of big Hollywood action sequences – Robin catapulting into Nottingham castle to rescue Marian, for instance, is definitely an “American” addition to the legend.
A more “realist” Robin Hood? The 2010 movie starring Russell Crowe.

The Costner movie was a piece of pure Hollywood fancy, a product of a time when cinema audiences evidently required little historical realism when watching a period film. The most recent movie Robin Hood (2010) starring Russell Crowe, although criticised by some reviewers, was an attempt at least to ground the story of Robin Hood in historical “fact”, with the signing of Magna Carta in 1215. It is essentially what, if it was a superhero movie, might be termed an ‘origins’ story. It is not a tale of merry men in Lincoln-Green costumes r big Hollywood set pieces, but a thoughtful and well-executed portrayal of a man who leads his people in an attempt to secure political rights from the monarch.

This is not to say that the British have not produced some good adaptations of the legend, but the most successful British portrayals have tended to be television affairs. There was the weekly TV series The Adventures of Robin Hood, starring the gentlemanly, and quite bland, Richard Green, which was broadcast between 1955 and 1959. In this series, following Scott, Robin is a Saxon nobleman who has returned from the Crusades and becomes an outlaw. But although the TV series may appear to be a thoroughly English affair, the hidden hand of the Americans was not far away: many of the series’ writers were Americans who held communist sympathies and who had fled the States after being accused of ‘Un-American Activities’ by the McCarthy government.[62] So in effect we have America giving us a quintessentially English Robin Hood. The television series Robin of Sherwood which aired in the 1980s is certainly my personal favourite. For me this series represents a return to the bold outlaw of A Gest of Robyn Hode. Robin is no lord in this series, and he does not declare his loyalty to the King at the end of the series. To me, he appears to be closest to how the medieval ballad writers imagined Robin Hood: an outlaw who owed allegiance to nobody.

Conclusion

I just want to finish off by saying that hopefully what you’ve learned today is this: that the legend of Robin Hood has always been varied and adaptable. There may or may not have been a man whose life and deeds gave rise to the legend that was to become Robin Hood. We shall never know, mainly due to the lack of evidence surrounding his life. From early poems and rhymes, the legend rolled on, and acquired new features: in the fifteenth century Robin Hood was a bold yeoman forester; in the sixteenth century he became a member of the aristocracy; in the eighteenth century he was portrayed as both a wicked criminal and simultaneously praised as ‘the celebrated English outlaw’; in the nineteenth century in
Ivanhoe, he became an Anglo-Saxon freedom fighter; and in the twentieth century he is now more or less an American hero. It is difficult to know what further turns the legend of the outlaw of Sherwood will take. One thing is certain, however, and that is that, as Drayton prophesied in 1612 that ‘to the end of time the tales shall ne’er be done’.[63]

References

[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.
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[9] Ibid.
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[33] Smith, Highwaymen, 411.
[34] Smith, Highwaymen, 412.
[37] Ritson, Robin Hood, 1: xii.
[38] Ritson, Robin Hood, 1: v
[43] Ibid.
[48] Stephen Knight, Reading Robin Hood: Content, Form and Reception in Outlaw Myth (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 127.
[49] Stephen Knight, Reading Robin Hood, 125.
[51] Knight, Reading Robin Hood, 127.
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Robin Hood was considered an unsurpassed archer, the authorities could not catch him. Ballads about this hero were built up in the XIV century. Virgo Marian became an important part of the legend of Robin Hood. However, very few people know that initially she was the heroine of a separate series of ballads. Robin and other robbers from the very first legends had no wives or family. The image of a woman appears only in the devotion of Robin Hood to the Virgin Mary. Probably, the narrators considered such worship irrelevant in the years after the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century. It is likely that Marian therefore appeared in the legends of Robin Hood around this time to provide an alternative female focus. These are Robin Hood and the Monk, Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne, Robin Hood and the Potter, and the Lytyll Geste of Robin Hode. During the 16th century and later, the essential character of the legend was distorted by a suggestion that Robin was a fallen nobleman, and playwrights, eagerly adopting this new element,