

Did Robin Hood Exist?

By Garry Victor Hill



Robin Hood. This statue stands outside Nottingham Castle. The arrow has to be continually replaced as tourists love thieving a souvenir. Robin would have appreciated the irony.

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at the website Garry Victor Hill. Illustrations here are taken from the Public Domain or *Wikimedia* using requested permission steps.

Wherever people speak English Robin Hood is a known name and personality. Few others have such instant recognition. Jesus, King Arthur, Buddha, Cleopatra, Hitler, Napoleon, Shakespeare... who else? All a figure has to do is appear in a Lincoln green jacket tights and knee high leather boots, carrying a bow and everyone from the age of five upwards knows that there stands Robin Hood. As children know of Jesus and Robin Hood, but are unlikely to know of the others well into adolescence, it may well be that these are the two most famous names in the English speaking world. This leads to two questions, obviously why he has become such a celebrity comes first.

Robin Hood emerges as a cultural figure in so many ways and has so many imitators that the character has become almost a genre in himself. His appeal needs no great astuteness to find. This outlaw has been freed from the unvarying drudgery, servility and responsibility that characterises existence for so many. Even the dangers he faces have an excitement - and how often does he fail or finds that the dangers have brought catastrophe? Except at the end with his killer the Prioress of Kirklees, his few catastrophes turn out to be merely trials overcome. His death does not act as a focus in all that many Robin Hood narratives and he dies old and sick. Most stories have him winning against authority. Authority figures have to be obeyed in reality or negative consequences follow: Robin defies or destroys them. Similarly the depiction of living in the beautiful, verdant, spacious Sherwood Forest would appeal to medieval peasants in their hovels. The same appeal still applies to executives in their luxurious twenty-first century high rises and to those in the crowded shanty towns of developing nations. Those living in the western world's industrialised cities or urban sprawl also needs an escape. In all four types of locale the fresh air, quiet and spacious verdant world of the forest exists as a dream, to be enjoyed vicariously in Robin Hood stories.

Some of his audiences may in reality be worrying about mortgages, power bills, litigation or retrenchments: none of those things exist in Sherwood Forest. Others worry about where the next meal will come from: Robin merely has to shoot an arrow and his venison will be cooked soon. The appeal to starving Medieval peasants is obvious, but does not end there. Many recreate Robin Hood through the prism of their needs. In the 1938 film version Robin (Errol Flynn) tells Maid Marian (Olivia De Havilland) to look at the starving beggars and peasants laughing and enjoying the abundant food he has provided. For

audiences at the end of the Great Depression that scene would have a deeper, more personally relevant and appealing meaning. This provides one example of how Robin Hood becomes a vehicle for each era. In the 1976 film *Robin and Marion*, made after the turbulence of the 1960s and the aging of the disillusioned hippie generation, Robin appears as a troubled veteran soldier, alienated from his supposed celebrity hero king, who turns out to be selfish, tyrannical and self-indulgent, just like so many of the rock stars, movie people, gurus and political leaders of the 1960s. Aging, disillusioned and wiser, Robin now returns from war and only wants to settle down, unobtrusively. In the 1990s *Robin Hood Prince of Thieves*, was made against the background of the Iraqi War. In this version Robin is much concerned with the disastrous crusade and the effect it has on England. The twenty-first century versions all have Maid Marion as assertive women and both cinematic Robins from this time are alienated from a manipulating society, expressing a sullen cynicism.

This transformation of Robin Hood into current outlooks does not always happen. Many stay true to the adventure story. They do not so much reinterpret Robin Hood as represent him as he appears in early ballads or in the first complete narrative, the late fourteenth century *The Geste of Robin Hood*. They update the language and perhaps slightly bowdlerise the violence, but the essential narrative, outlook and focus on escapist adventure remains unchanged. This process was developed by such diverse figures such as the anonymous balladeers of the broadsheet era, Tudor playwrights and many antiquaries and historians. Joseph Ritson, who collected Robin Hood ballads and stories to publish them late in the eighteenth century, was also an extremely influential person in this process. In the twentieth century this focus on adventure and staying true to the original image was maintained by Rosemary Sutcliffe in *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1950) Roger Lancelyn Green in his 1956 book of the same name and the makers of the popular English ITC television series of 1955-1960. In cinema the 1938 version, the 1960 film *Sword of Sherwood Forest* and the 1991 John Irvin version *Robin Hood*, with Patrick Bergin as Robin kept the traditional image.

Even the Robin Hood ballads stand apart from the other ballads, due to their theme, setting and ethics - or rather the lack of them. Excitement, victory against tyranny, adventure, abundance, space, freedom, Robin offers them all - vicariously. No wonder he remains the most popular folk hero in the English speaking world. In Francis Child's collection of 305 ballads twenty are about

Robin Hood.¹ King Arthur does not come close to double figures. Frank Sidgwick's three volume collection has one volume dedicated to Robin and other outlaws. Arthurian stories get an occasional listing in Sidgwick's other two volumes.

Robin's appeal and reshaping once he became a cultural icon are obvious, more problematic are two more questions, did he exist and if so, who was he?



The illustration here of 'Robyn Hode' is typical of the style, spelling and presentation in broadsheets

¹ See The Contents page of Volume Five of Child's collection. *The English and Scottish Border Ballads (1882-1898)* Boston; Little and Brown, 1860. A facsimile of an expanded computer edition has been used Ann Arbor; University of Michigan, 2005.

In summary a more accurate way to phrase the question would be ‘How many actual once living men became part of the Robin Hood legend and how did they contribute to it?’

The idea that Robin Hood did not exist at all is an old one. As his fame ascended late medieval cynics coined a proverb “Many men speak of a Robin Hood who never drew his bow.”² As early as 1584 Reginald Scot noted the similarities between Robin Hood and Robin Goodfellow, an elfin creature.³ Both Robins are forest creatures drawn to mischief and merriment. Scot also noted how both Robins connect to the German goblin Hodekin or Hudgin through more than nomenclatural similarities. All three are anarchic, mischievous and forest creatures outside society. By wearing green and living in the forest outside society’s laws Robin connects to the pantheistic and pagan ‘green man’ god, a spirit of the forest. Francis Child, the folksong and folklore collector who found and published so many Robin Hood ballads, believed that he never existed.⁴ In his introduction to the fifth volume of his *The English and Scottish Border Ballads (1882-1898)* he not only implies this, but develops the ideas Scot expressed and others that are similar. The way Hood’s name was sometimes spelt Robin Wood supposedly derived from Woden. Therefore he was a pantheistic figure in paganistic or pagan derived May Day celebrations. This supposedly proves that he was only a myth, a fairy tale creature, not a person.

On a first reading this all looks likely, but this viewpoint falls apart rapidly on other evidence. Pixies, elves and goblins are not taken to court and have their hard cash seized. Their names do not appear on lists of fugitives and chroniclers writing about them do not write of such creatures as real people. All these references predate the appearance of Robin Goodfellow and the known pagan May Day celebrations which included Robin. The earliest such celebration including him dates to 1518.⁵ In that same introduction even Child stated that these May Day rituals were not known to exist before the early sixteenth century.

There are historic references to Robin Hood, but on differing dates alone they cannot be one man and as J.C. Holt remarks, nobody says that they met him, saw

² Stephen Thomas Knight & Thomas H. Ohlgren, eds, *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*. Portland, Oregon; Medieval Institute Publishers, 2000. pxiii.

³ ‘Robin Hood’ *Wikipedia*

⁴ Francis J. Child, Introduction to Volume Five of *The English and Scottish Border Ballads (1882-1898)*. Introduction pix. Child presents evidence and his arguments against verification of a real Robin Hood in the subsequent introductory pages. These are mentioned above.

⁵ ‘Robin Hood’ *Wikipedia*.

him or that they knew what he looked like.⁶ Most of these references are several decades later than the dates the chroniclers narrate for Robin's existence in their brief and unsubstantiated references to him. With the documents from the 1220s and the 1260s it is possible that the writers personally knew a man with the name or at least saw him in court, but they do not say so.

Despite their failings, these references to Robin Hood take him out of the world of myth and into legend, and that legend leads to the possibility of history, if not solid history.

In his 1995 essay 'Robin Hood: Reality or Myth?' Stephen Knight comments on the confusion between myth and history in dealing with Robin Hood.⁷ This has been caused by a combination of scant and conflicting historic material, local enthusiasts, Robin Hood's popularity and writers not aware of the difference between history and myth. He has a very relevant point. Since the 1980s the word myth has been used in an imprecise, loose or vague way to mean either not existing, fakery, impossible, or a lie. The true meaning of the adjective mythic is of something that does not literally exist but functions in a story that may be entertainment, but more often works to preserve wisdom in culture. This is what myths do. They contain wisdom, warnings, and lessons and embody natural forces and personality types. They do this in incarnations that are physically impossible or have never existed. To some extent Robin Hood in the ballads and stories does function this way and like many myths, does entertain.

Legend is probably the closest category to the reality and it is worth considering Rosemary Sutcliff's 1965 description of an archetypal legendary hero in her beginning of *Heroes and History*. Here she states that the legendary hero often has something a little larger than life about him that attracts people. He has the hero light and so his deeds become stories which are remembered and similar stories from other men are gathered round the story of his life and merge with it.

This is legend and we can see with a modern forest outlaw how legend unfolds. Nestor Makhno features as a villainous bandit in Soviet history. In reality he tried to establish an anarchist society in the Ukraine and for a time succeeded against the Kaiser's armies, then White guards, Ukrainian nationalists, and eventually the Soviets, who after four years, crushed the Makhnovite movement in late 1921. Until then he fought brilliant and victorious campaigns where he led from the front, had the support of the peasantry and frequently lived in the forest.

⁶ J.C. Holt, *Robin Hood*. 1982. London; Thames & Hudson, 1983. p40.

⁷⁷ This essay is reproduced in Ian Pindar's *The Folio Book of Historical Mysteries*. London; The Folio Society, 2008. pp69-83.

Incapacitated with six bullet wounds, he was evacuated to Eastern Europe where he was imprisoned twice and escaped twice. He eventually became a cobbler in Paris, dying in 1934 aged about forty-five. His wife and co-worker Galina returned to Russia and died there in 1978, aged eighty-six. In the lifetimes of many reading this, a real Robin Hood and a real maid Marion existed. Makhno was courage, generosity, determination and loyalty incarnate. He could also be merciful; being one of the few commanders to take or pardon prisoners in Russia's Civil War, but even those major eyewitnesses on his side, Voline and Pytor Arshinov, reveal the dark side to the forest outlaw.⁸

He was a lecherous bully when drunk, which was his frequent state. Women had to take part in his orgies. He once ordered a woman to be punched in the face for refusing sexual involvement with him. He may have been involved in anti-Semitic activities, including a possible massacre of Jews taken into the forest and shot on his orders.⁹ At times he tended to rule with a clique rather than democratically. Many in the Makhnovite movement were considering his replacement and this probably led to his self-rehabilitation. He became a legend amongst the oppressed Ukrainians and as late as the 1940s anyone known to have been part of the Makhnovite movement was quickly arrested and vanished. He also went into folk memory: songs were sung about him at weddings as late as the 1950s.

Was Robin Hood something like this? Are the medieval records as inaccurate and as biased as the Soviet accounts of their enemy Makhno? The Medieval accounts are the records of the law abiding written about an outlaw. With Robin Hood we have no accounts from him, and no equivalent to Voline or Arshinov emerges from Sherwood Forest to give us a complete picture. So what do the scant records on Robin Hood say? How do we interpret them?

Writings about both the legend and the supposed reality are scarce in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, but they suddenly come in clusters between about 1400 and 1460. Before that first date very little was written about Robin and they were in passing references or a sentence or two – which revealed little. After

⁸ Pytor Arshinov, *History of the Makhnovist Movement 1918-1921*. Detroit; Red & Black, 1974; Voline, *The Unknown Revolution*. Detroit; Red & Black, 1974 pp541-712. These overviews are both by an eyewitness. See also Paul Avrich, (editor) *the Anarchists in the Russian Revolution*. pp128-137 reproduced Makhnovite documents.

⁹ This was narrated to me by a Russian dissident in Melbourne in 1980. He stated that he had been told this some years before by an old woman who saw the Jews in her village rounded up under Makhno's personal orders, led into a nearby forest and shot.

around 1460 he was England's most popular cultural hero, and on the way to becoming a ubiquitous one.

The earliest, most common and popular representation of Robin Hood place him as active during the reigns of Richard the Lionheart (1189-1199) and then John I (1199-1216.) This accreditation rests on no verifiable evidence. John Major, a Scottish historian writing in 1521, was apparently the first to place Robin in these years, but he offered no proof. Frank Sidgwick reproduced some of Major's comments from his *Historia Maioris Britanniae* and they are worth examining. In reference to the reign of Richard the Lionheart Major states:

‘About this time it was, as I conceive, that there flourished those most famous robbers Robert Hood, an Englishman, and Little John, who lay in wait in the woods, but spoiled of their goods those only who were wealthy. They took the life of no man, unless either he attacked them or offered resistance in defence of his property. Robert supported by his plundering a hundred bowmen, ready fighters every one, with whom four hundred of the strongest would not dare to engage in combat. The feats of this Robert are told in song all over Britain. He would allow no woman to suffer injustice, nor would he spoil the poor, but rather enriched them from the plunder taken from abbots. The robberies of this man I condemn, but of all thieves he was the prince and the most gentle thief.’ Sidgwick, Introduction to *Ballads of Robin Hood and Other Outlaws*. p xv.

In this short passage, which influenced so many coming after, much of the basis of the legend which would be developed gets a definite start: the ties to Richard the Lionheart, the robber band of archers hiding in the forest, robbing the rich to pay the poor – and the merciful, chivalrous prince amongst outlaws, a champion of justice. Much of what is in this passage reveals a mass of contradictions. If he is so gentle, why does he have a hundred feared archers, ‘ready fighters every one’? Killing people for trying to defend their property can only be gentle in comparison to merciless cutthroats. The murderous Robin of the early ballads and histories reads very differently to Major's description.

In the reign of Edward VI (1547-1553) the king's printer gave the same era for Robin as Major did, claiming it was based on exchequer records and ancient pamphlets, neither of which have ever been found.¹⁰ Others among their contemporaries followed these two sources. No evidence for this dating exists in the earliest songs, but two references in manuscripts allow for this early possibility.

¹⁰ Holt, p41.

Between 1189 and 1194 Prince John allowed his forester for Sherwood the hereditary right to the chattels of all robbers and poachers taken within the forest.¹¹ This is precisely the time of Major's Robin hiding within Sherwood during the absence of Richard the Lionheart. It also links the villainous Prince John of the popular version to the locale and the situation. Unfortunately it does not link Robin by name. For a regent to concern himself with robber's chattels suggests that they were much more than what starving forest peasants probably took, the occasional deer and firewood. Had they been plundering wealthy abbots perhaps?

Doctor Mike Ibej and J.C. Holt, working separately, are the major sources here for the facts in a similar story to that of Robin Hood.¹² Both outlaws have in common the same era, locale, villain and dramatic elements. One noble outlaw character concerns a onetime friend of Prince John, Fulk FitzWann. He was born in the 1170s and lived in the North.¹³ When the prince and Fulk were playing chess petulant John smashed the board on Fulk's head and got a kick for his pains. Complaining to his father King Henry, he got another blow for complaining. This incident gives an idea of Fulk's penchant for violence and John's villainous character. As an adult Fulk tracked down, captured and beheaded an outlaw gang one by one because the leader was using his name. Murderous violence was not the only point in common with Robin Hood. In 1197 Fulk's father died and after Fulk lost a disputed case in 1200 John gave the lands Fulk should have inherited to Mory, Fulk then killed Mory, was outlawed and fled to the forest. He rebelled against John's misrule for three years until he was pardoned in November 1203. He supported the Magna Carta rebels; a fighter for justice against misrule. He returned to his lands and died old in 1256 or 1257. By around 1325-1340 he became the hero of an epic poem named after him which exploited his forest exploits.¹⁴ Here much of the plot to the Robin Hood story appears and in the same sequence. A high energy hero is part of the aristocratic establishment, but fearlessly attacks its villains when they attack him. When finding himself unjustly excluded, he takes to outlawry in the greenwood, but he has a sense of justice and wins, being restored to his rightful position. He also became celebrated in song. The differences are in the names, some situations and the supporting cast.

Another aristocratic possibility with links and similarities to the Robin Hood of legend is Earl David of Huntingdon 1152-1219.

¹¹ Ibid, p97

¹² See the next source for Ibej. Holt, pp62-65.

¹³ Doctor Mike Ibej, 'Robin Hood and the Historical Context' www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/middle_ages/robin; Holt, p63.

¹⁴ Holt, p64.

As Allen W. Wright notes on his website *Search for a Real Robin Hood* he bases his work on K.J. Stringe's 1985 biography *Earl David of Huntington 1152-1219: A Study in Anglo Scottish History*. Almost all the facts used for assessment here are based on Wright's work, but unless otherwise stated the conjectures and opinions are mine. The first linking of an Earl of Huntington with Robin Hood came in 1599 when the playwright Anthony Munday gave Robin Hood the aristocratic title and background.¹⁵ This seems fiction, not evidence, but Munday must have found connections somewhere because links are there. Huntington's lifespan, placing and relations with King Richard I and John I make a perfect fit. He supported one of the rebellions against Henry II in 1174. He was present at the coronation of Richard I and was a loyalist to his cause. In 1194 he was actively engaged in siege warfare against John's supporters. During John's reign he was fined a massive 1,100 pounds for forest offences. In 1215-1216 he was a rebel against the king, which meant backing the Magna Carta, seen as a defence of the people's rights against royal tyranny. His son was named Robert. His brother in law was Ranulf Earl of Chester, who would gain mention as connected to Robin Hood in the earliest distinct reference to the cultural hero:

I kan nocht parfitylly my paternoster as the preest it syngeth

But I kan rymes of Robin hood (sic) and Randolf Earl of Chestre.



The real Sherwood Forest

¹⁵ Child, pxxxv

Years later the Earldoms of Huntington and Chester would be combined and named that way. A village in that area would be renamed Barnsdale, which is one of Robin Hood's legendary locales.

As with Fulk, all this is thin as evidence for being Robin Hood, but thick as a connection with missing pieces. Both men show that historians and investigators should not be too quick to insist that Robin was a fourteenth century yeoman and could not have been an aristocrat in the reigns of Richard and John.

Their names however, go against their evidence and there are others with the right name were in the medieval records. Robin, incidentally is a diminutive of Robert, so Robert Hood has to be considered to be Robin Hood.

Several men with the outlaw's name or recognisable variations of it are recorded as having lived around Sherwood from the thirteenth century onwards, but unlike those mentioned here, nothing seems to exist that reveals them as outlaws. The earliest plausible historical reference to the named character as an outlaw comes in reference to a servant, Robert Hood, who slew Ralph of Cirencester in the Abbott of Cirencester's garden, sometime between 1213 and 1216.¹⁶ While this suggests the violence and hostility the legendary Robin showed to the church, it provides no other links. Cirencester is located in South West England, hundreds of miles from Nottingham. Then a reference to the York assizes list of 1225, found by L.V.D. Owen in 1936, provides a more plausible candidate – if it is a namesake and not the same person as the man in Cirencester. This Robert Hod is listed as a fugitive and penalties for his chattels come to thirty-two shillings and sixpence in 1226.¹⁷ This amount must be too large for a peasant or someone of the lower classes, such as a servant, but not enough for an earl, such as an Earl of Huntington. The amount does suggest a yeoman, a knight, or a lord of the manor, a minor noble, all roles Robin had in assorted ballads. This man was a tenant of the Archbishopric of York. In the next year's record his name is given as the colloquial Hobbhed. When the case continues he has fled the jurisdiction of the court and he becomes a declared outlaw. He may be the same man who murdered another between 1213 and 1216. On the other hand perhaps two namesakes in the same era shared a penchant for trouble. No mention of Little John, Sherwood or other aspects of the tale emerge in this brief account. Cases in chancery can drag on. He may have been found to be the murderer years after much time passed or he may

¹⁶ The presented facts here are based on Holt's work with various Medieval sources. pp53-54. The linking of the two men is my opinion, not Holt's.

¹⁷ Holt, pp53-54.

have successfully defended himself against a murder charge and then got into more trouble years later.

In 1354 another forest robber called Robin Hood was known to be awaiting trial.¹⁸ However this is so late that his existence suggests both a non de plume in imitation, and a life also in imitation of the now legendary figure.

Scottish historian Andrew de Wyntoun located a more likely candidate, along with Little John, in Barnsdale and Inglewood. In his four line account written not long before 1420 he states that Robin and Little John, these “renowned” pair of “forest outlaws” in the years 1283-1285 were “plying their trade” of robbery.¹⁹ This was written about two decades before the time that the Abbot Arthur Bower referred to the outlaw’s cultural popularity amongst ‘rough commoners.’²⁰ More sourly, Bower gives his opinion of popular taste and the likely reality behind the Robin Hood legend:

Then arose at the famous murderer, Robert Hod as well as Little John, together with their accomplices from among the dispossessed, whom the foolish populace are so inordinately fond of celebrating both in tragedy and comedy. Walter Bower, *Scotichronicon*.

Bower wrote these lines around 1440 under a heading for events of the year 1266. Both Francis Child and Stephen Knight separately reproduce a longer passage from the same writer in the same document in which “certain praiseworthy things are told.”²¹ These praiseworthy things being Robin’s refusal to flee from a mass being conducted in a very secluded part of Barnsdale forest as his enemies approach, his trust in God and his singling out the servants of the church and masses to be held in greater respect. Presumably his subsequent overcoming of his enemies, his plundering of them and then ransoming them after mass are not among the praiseworthy deeds. This passage contradicts that written by Bower and reproduced above and the many documents in which he shows hostility to the church – or the church to him.

Another reference, almost certainly to the same man, dates from 1262 in the King’s Rembrancers Memoranda roll. Here the King pardons the Prior of Sandleford for seizing without warrant the chattels of William Robehod. As he is

¹⁸ Holt, p54.

¹⁹ Holt, p40. He reproduces Wyntoun’s quote.

²⁰ A.L. Lloyd, p136. Quoting from *Scotichronicon*; David Laing identifies Bower as a Scottish abbot.

²¹ Knight, p76. The whole passage is reproduced. Child also reproduces this passage in his Introduction to Volume Five.

listed as William Son of Robert of Lefevere in 1261, ‘Robehod’ must be a non-deplume, again.²² The continuing use of non de plumes, the hostility to the church, the sense of being cast out of society and then finding refuge in the forest almost always emerge in these brief references to Robin Hood figures. This reference does show an aristocratic link: the surname Lefevere almost certainly derives from Norman French, the language of the ruling aristocracy and also almost certainly, therefore would not be used by peasants or yeomen. Kings do not concern themselves with the chattels of the lower orders and priors would not bother with a peasant’s paltry possessions. These years were the time of political upheaval when nobles were in a losing rebellion against royalty. This led to aristocrats and minor nobility frequently becoming fugitives or leaders of dwindling forces. The meagre evidence here, like the connections Fulk and the Earl of Huntington had, suggests that the later descriptions of Robin as a displaced noble may have a historic basis – or have been added to one of lesser rank to give his deeds and persona lustre.

Even so his popularity was not among the well off for many many years. He was the people’s hero and this seems to have developed against the background, and then the aftermath of the Wat Tyler Rebellion of 1381. Here the ordinary people marched on London and came close to overthrowing aristocracy’s grip on England. One of their chants “When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?” was not only a defiant and sarcastic affront to the hierarchical feudal order, it was an expression of the mentality that Robin Hood stories appealed to.

Around the middle third of the fifteenth century cultural works, fragmentary mentions in court transcripts, references in chronicles and manuscript versions of ballads start to appear more frequently, but they referred to someone who even then was in the long ago past. A 1432 acrostic mentions his name and that of the best known in his gang and a 1439 complaint against robbers in Derbyshire compares them to Robin Hood and his company.²³ The leader, Peter Venables certainly deserved the comparison. After rescuing prisoners he fled to the woods.²⁴ In 1441 a disgruntled mob blocked a road with threats of murder, chanting “We are Robynhod’s men, war war war.”²⁵ In 1498 Roger Marshal led a rebellion of around a hundred people and in court admitted to using Robyn Hood as an alias. He gave his defence as being that he acted with typical Robyn Hood practices.²⁶ In 1500 a Scottish writer compared the national hero William Wallace to Robyn Hood.²⁷ He

²² Ibej,

²³ Holt, p58 p69; Child reproduces the original statement in his introduction Volume Five.

²⁴ Wright

²⁵ Wright

²⁶ Wright

²⁷ Wright

had a point: both had been popular outlaws fighting for freedom against royal authority. In 2009 Doctor Julian Luxford discovered a similar comment, which for the first time from a medieval source definitely links the shadowy historical figure and his band to Sherwood Forest. This document implicitly gives support to the idea that he indeed robbed the rich, even if there no mention of giving to the poor. This comment was written around 1460, on a manuscript from about forty years earlier. This was itself a later copy of the Medieval history, the *Polychronicon*, which dated from the late 1340s.²⁸ Doctor Luxford's translation of the Latin reads:

Around this time, according to popular opinion, a certain Robin Hood, with his accomplices infested Sherwood and other law-abiding areas of England with continuous robberies.

Writer and scholar Paul Booth claims this is a mistranslation. The Latin "regio" does not mean regions or areas here, but royalty.²⁹ He translates Doctor Luxford's find as:

Around this time, according to popular opinion, a certain Robin Hood, with his accomplices attacked and stole constantly from the faithful (servants) of the King of England at Sherwood and elsewhere.

While both translations show that many of the early stories and popular images of Robin Hood now have a stronger basis in fact, the second translation lifts him above the idea of a rapacious cut throat.

He may have even given to the poor, albeit as rural guerrillas often do, not from altruism but from self-preservation. They know that local informers can be of immense benefit to them - or to their enemies. Robin is an enemy of the king and his servants and followers, but of which King?

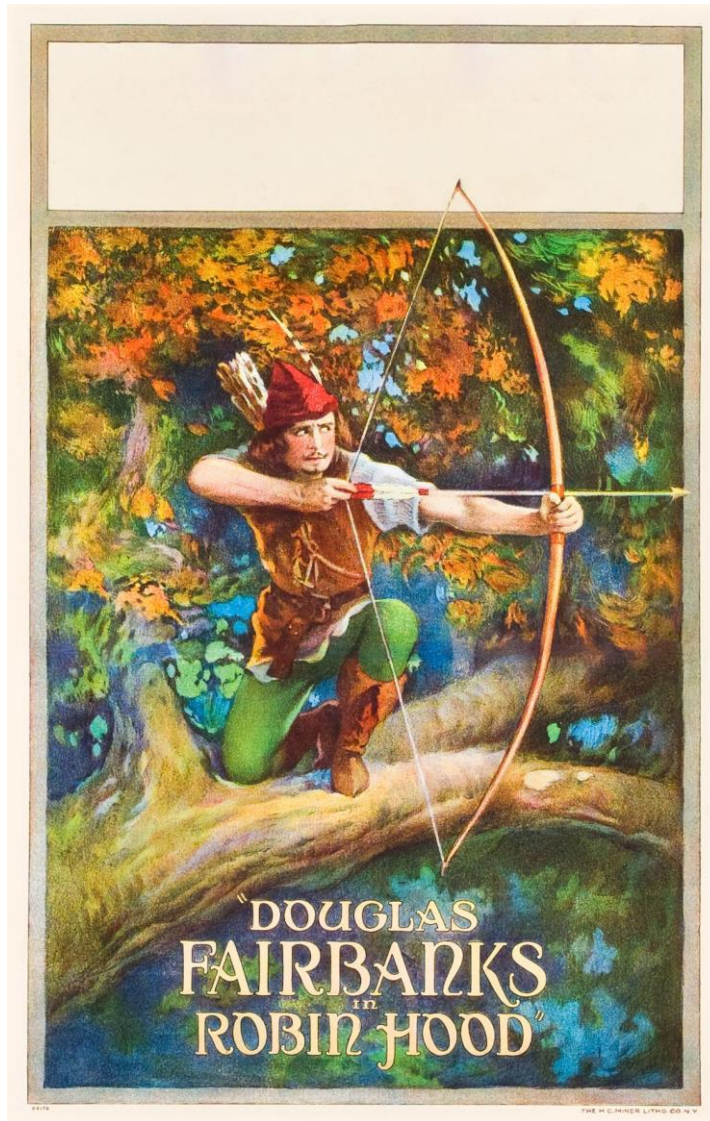
Arthur Bower makes him a rebel during the rebellion of Simon De Montfort, in the 1260s. After that baron's defeat, did some among those of De Montfort's surviving followers hide in the forests of Sherwood or Barnsdale and continue an intermittent guerrilla warfare that gradually deteriorated into selective robberies? There was a continuing rebellion in the north after Montfort's defeat in 1265.³⁰

²⁸ Paul Sims, *Daily Mail. Australia*. 14th March 2004. Online Front Page. This is credited to Medieval News.Net. *Medieval News*. Posted 16th March 2009. Doctor Luxford is interviewed here.

²⁹ Paul Booth, 'A comment on Julian Luxford's Discovery of an Unpopular Robin Hood.' Posted March 25th 2009.

³⁰ Holt p40.

Doctor Luxford believes that the note he found places Robin Hood in the reign of Edward I (1272-1307).



Hollywood perpetuates the legend

The one reference to a named king in the ballads and stories is to Edward, but which one? Three kings of that name ruled between 1272 and 1377. One person who can be traced is the real Friar Tuck. A former chaplain, his real name, was Robert Stafford. In 1417 he had begun a career in arson, illegal hunting in the forests and robbery in southern England and was still active in 1429.³¹ Maid Marion does not appear in the early ballads and only starts to make appearances in the sixteenth century. Although there are thirteenth-century French stories of a

³¹ Holt pp58-59.

Robin and a Marion meeting in the greenwood, this Robin is a knight, not an outlaw and none of the usual characters emerge.³² The first mention of her specifically tied to Robin Hood dates from 1513/1514.³³ Maid Marion was originally a figure in May Day celebrations – and the two became partnered.³⁴

It may well be that the Robin Hood of legend is a composite figure, made of men with the same name, with the later figures taking the famous name to avoid punishment for their family and friends who did not escape to the forest with them. It may well be that the original figure of 1226 did very little except flee by himself to the forest and get his name on a fugitive's list, but that the deeds of near contemporaries such as Fulk and the Earl of Huntington accumulated around a name that several took in subsequent decades. Other deeds are probably pure invention by bards, minstrels and then broadsheet balladeers. As J.C. Holt remarks, the legends and ballads do have a composite character, with Robin sharing adventures and situations similar to other forest outlaws, real, legendary and unreal.³⁵

It is a rare writer on the origins of Sherwood's outlaw who does not quote the lines from *Piers Plowman*:

I kan noght parfitylly my paternoster as the preest it syngeth
But I kan rymes of Robin hood (sic) and Randolf Earl of Chestre.

These lines are dated to around 1362 by Child and to around 1377 by more recent scholars. This makes them amongst the first known references to Robin Hood being a definite cultural figure. From 1294 onwards one Robynhod even had a London inn named after himself.³⁶ Or was this the first known money spinner in the industry devoted to the outlaw of Sherwood? The earliest known datable ballad mentioning him 'Robin Hood and the Monk' gets an attributive rough date for being around fifty to seventy years before the lines in *Piers Plowman*.³⁷ 'Robyn and Gamelyn,' being from the Sloane Manuscript, dates from around 1450.³⁸ In 'The Nut Brown Maid' first published in 1503 but older

³² Robert Fortunaso, 'The Later Legend.' *Robin Hood: The Facts and the Legend*.
www.robinhoodlegend.com/

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ 'Maid Marion' *Wikipedia*; Fortunaso.

³⁵ Ibid, pp62-75.

³⁶ Holt, p52

³⁷ See the introductory notes for the song 'Robin Hood and the Monk' in Child's collection.

³⁸ Thomas H. Ohlgren and Stephen Knight, (editors) 'Robin and Gandelyn: An introduction.' From *Robin Hood and Other Outlaws*. 1997. As these writers make clear here scholars dispute to

than this, the troubled lover talks of becoming ‘an outlaw’ in ‘the greenwood’ where he will live by his archery to get venison. She wants to come with him. It turns out to be a test as his true love is nobly born and he merely poses as a poor squire. She retains her loyalty to him and he turns out to be an earl in disguise. He has lands in Westmoreland. The similarities to Robin Hood and Maid Marian are clear, but their names are not used, but then none are. Is this an early case of the richer classes moving in on the successful culture of the poorer? An early example of rich kids slumming? Or were Robin Hood types common and the popularity of the legend overshadowed similar characters?

The stories that became *The Geste of Robin Hood* were a collection of early pieces put together in book form and printed in Edinburgh around 1508 and then in Europe in 1510 and again in 1534. Those later editions came with some changes, but an earlier version may date from around 1489 or 1492.³⁹ How much earlier the stories that made up the compiled geste date from remains uncertain. One source dates them from around 1400.⁴⁰ The Percy Folio contains fragmentary versions of ‘Robin Hood’s Death’ as well as an incomplete ‘Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne’ A fragment of that same ballad was found on the back of a receipt book dated 1475/76.⁴¹ ‘Robin Hood and the Potter’ dates from around 1500 or very soon after, perhaps 1503.⁴²

With the publication of *The Geste the Robin Hood* the story had what would become the story’s essential form. From then on minstrels, broadsheet balladeers, romancers and performers would add tales, characters, enactments, ballads and songs – and even eventually novelists, directors of films and television shows and computer gamers would follow, adding to the process. Two songs, the theme from the British television series of the 1950s and the love song from *Robin Hood Prince of Thieves* have gone from screens to oral communication. The balladry tradition lives on.

And what would the original Robin Hood, who was perhaps an aristocrat, but was more likely to have been an obscure Nottinghamshire man, only different from thousands like him by escaping from the law for a trivial crime, have made of this and of becoming more famous than any English king?

what extent this ballad should be considered to be about Robin Hood.
d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/tex/trobinandgandelyn.

³⁹ Child, Volume Five. p43; Robert Fortunaso; Ibej.

⁴⁰ Ibej,

⁴¹ Holt, p33.

⁴² Child gives the date 1500. See his notes to the song his Volume Five. Holt states 1503 or a little later. p15.



Robin Shooting with Guy of Gisborne a 1912 illustration by Louis Reade.

