

Robin Hood

BY SCOTT FARRELL



*Lythe and listin, gentilmen,
That be of frebore blode;
I shall you tel of a gode yeman,
His name was Robyn Hode.*

—From "A Gest of Robyn Hode" c. 1450

Robin Hood, with his quarterstaff, longbow, and his quest to "rob from the rich and give to the poor," has become a cultural archetype: He is the only potentially fictional entry in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, and on a list of the 101 most influential legends of all times and cultures published in 2006, he ranked number twelve.

Robin Hood has always been a potent icon for social, economic and political commentary. (References to Robin Hood made headlines as recently as the 2008 Presidential campaign!) But behind the green tights and bombastic dialogue is a figure with a long and complex history stretching back to the Middle Ages. The figure of Robin Hood who was known and loved (and sometimes feared) in medieval and renaissance England is quite different from the persona we encounter in books and movies today.

The Outlaw Hood

Robin Hood leapt into history in the 1370s in William Langland's poem "Piers Plowman." But, like a true bandit, he arrived masked, revealing a mere hint of the legend behind the name.

"Piers Plowman" is a moral allegory in which the vice of Sloth is personified by a lazy priest. Confessing his sins, the priest says: "I ken (know) not perfectly my Paternoster as the priest it singeth, But I ken rhymes of Robin Hood..."

The simple use of this name indicates a figure so

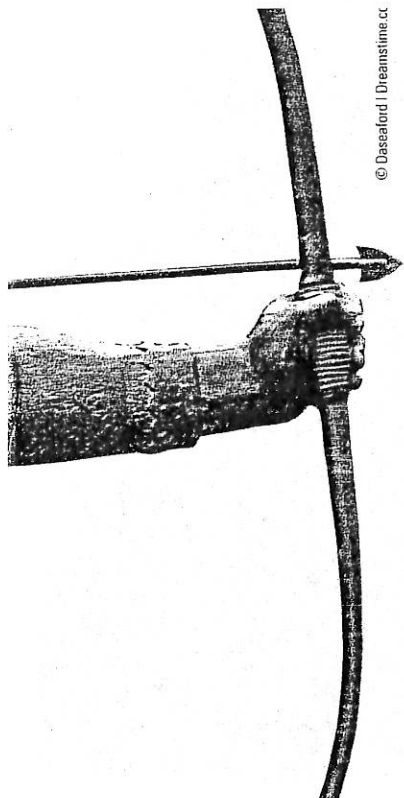
familiar to readers that he required no explanation. "Sloth" does not need to say why Robin Hood represents the opposite of a churchman's dreary, penitential prayers. Prof. Stephen Knight, author of the book *Robin Hood: A Mythic Biography*, explains, "Everyone (in this time) knows what Robin Hood means. He is an outlaw. He's in the forest. He's going to do something interesting and perhaps slightly illegal, but he is still a hero."

The name Robin Hood had recognized legal status during this period. Records of the Court of Common Pleas use the phrase, "Robin Hood in the greenwood stood" as a ubiquitous shorthand for certain types of criminal activity. Robin Hood was also a rallying cry for any sort of discontent: Near Norfolk, a group of laborers once staged a protest by blocking the highway and chanting, "We are Robinhodesmen! War, war, war!"

References to Robin Hood in the Late Middle Ages reflect both the social upheaval of the age and the desire to preserve the comforting familiarity of the vanishing feudal world. Professor Tim Jones, contributing editor to *Medieval Outlaws*, and who teaches a course on Robin Hood at Augsburg College in Minneapolis, explains that for people of the time Robin Hood bridged the gap between the stability of urban life and the dangers of the world beyond the town walls. Those dark forests and lonely highways seemed just a bit safer if the outlaws lurking there were decent English fellows, after all.

The Old Adventures of Robin

By the end of the fourteenth century and the early fifteenth, details of the character behind the name start to emerge. Ballads of Robin Hood, which had undoubtedly been told in taverns and village halls for generations, were printed in a rudimentary one-page format called "broadsheets."



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Center photo: Statue of the medieval outlaw, a tourist attraction at Nottingham. Left, King Richard I joins the hands of Robin Hood and Maid Marian. Illustration by Walter Crane (1915), from the book by Henry Gilbert.



Three of these broadsheet ballads still survive: "Robin Hood and the Monk," "Robin Hood and the Potter," and "Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne." These stories, little more than fragments, contain no explanation as to why Robin became a "waytheman" (a forest outlaw), how he met Little John or the rest of his gang, or any details of his life. Robin is described as a "godeman" who is a "curtseye" outlaw, and his presence in the forest is as natural as the trees, stones and animals.

In the ballads, Robin uses disguises and con games to trick his rivals, bests them at wrestling and shooting contests (his bow is never used as a weapon), and fights them with his sword and buckler (although he doesn't always win). Taken together, an intriguing theme emerges among Robin's adversaries: The greedy monk wants Robin arrested for highway robbery; the stingy potter balks at paying Robin's self-imposed toll for passage through the woods; and Guy of Gisborne, a bounty hunter who works for the sheriff of Barnsdale (not Nottingham), simply seeks a reward for Robin's head. Obsession with money is their flaw. The moral is that a man's worth is better measured by his hospitality and courtesy (even if he's a thief) than by the amount of money in his purse.

These are only episodic images of Robin Hood. Not until the early decades of the sixteenth century does a larger and more vivid Robin appear in a book called *The Gest of Robin Hood*. While not a complete "origin story," *the Gest* (which was in its fourth edition by 1530), presents a more detailed account, one aimed at aristocratic readers familiar with tales of chivalry. In it, Robin is clearly the "lord of the wood." He holds feasts for travelers passing through the forest (they dine on venison, bread, and ale, as well as swan and pheasant) and insists on hearing mass three times daily. He enjoys rough-and-tumble games like "pluck-buffet" (an archery contest in which the winner gets to punch

the loser), but also abides in his hunting lodge while his men do the work of catching game. Robin retains his trickster-like wit, but carries himself with knightly grace rather than a yeoman's swagger.

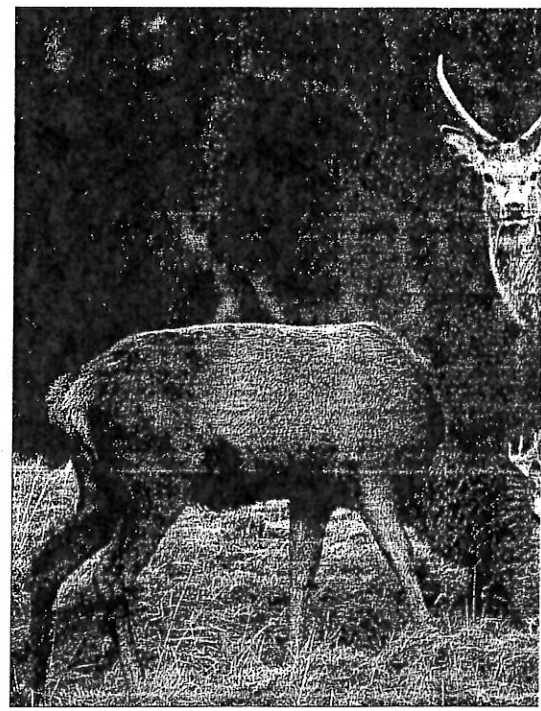
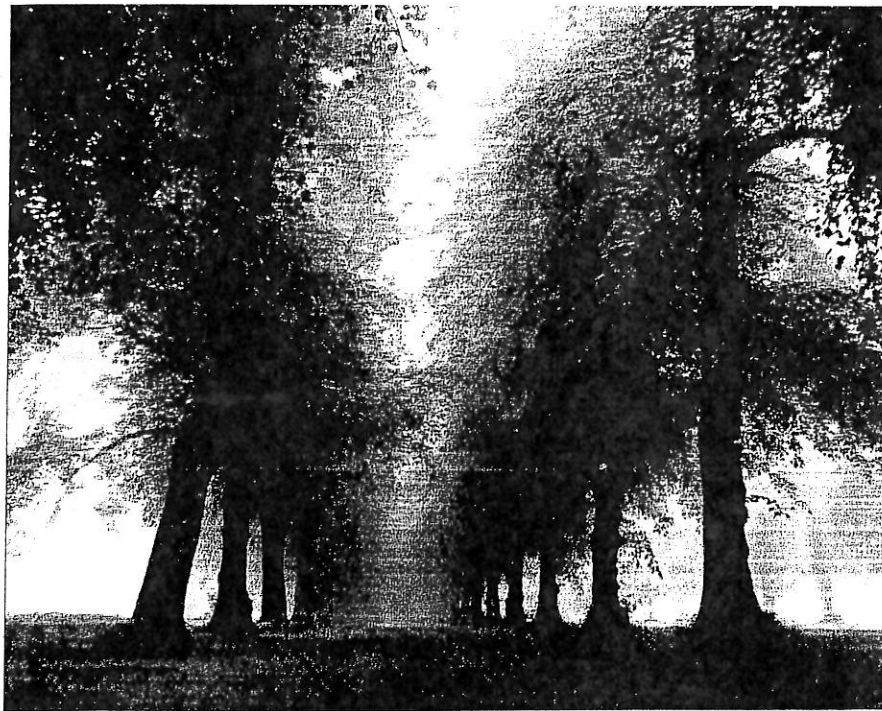
The Green Man

Lore of Robin Hood practically soaked into the landscape of medieval England. Landmarks like "Robin Hood's well," or "Robin Hood's bluff" can be seen dotting the English countryside on medieval maps anywhere a forest comes near a village or town.

Villagers throughout northeastern England might speak of a "Robin Hood mile" (reportedly three times as long as a standard mile) and call anything of great value a "Robin Hood's pennyworth." A long and tortuous journey was "going around Robin Hood's barn," and the greeting, "Good even, good Robin Hood," was a deferential way of showing wary respect to a stranger.

In the springtime, Robin Hood became a woodland spirit of fertility, particularly along England's southern shore. "Robinhood's day" was an informal folk festival celebrated near Whitsun. To mark the occasion, villagers staged processions through town led by





Robin Hood, Little John and (occasionally) a lady of the season called Marian, all dressed in green. Wrestling and shooting games were part of the festivities, as were town plays that dramatized the familiar stories.

One of the earliest references to these “play-games” comes from a series of documents called the Paston Letters, written in 1473. The letters include a fragmentary script (just 15 lines long) that provides scant description of a Robin Hood story: Robin meets a knight on the road and challenges him to contests of skill, including stone throwing and a form of caber tossing called “the axle tree.” There is also a scene where Robin is captured, then rescued by Friar Tuck and some other men when the sheriff brings Robin out of his cell to the gallows.

This minimal script, Prof. Jones says, implies that Robin Hood plays had “very little dialogue and lots of action, kind of like modern action movies. They were put on to entertain people of the village, not a learned audience.”

Robin Hood’s role wasn’t confined to the stage. During the festival, a villager disguised as Robin went around demanding money from the townsfolk; the funds were used for civic improvements such as roads and bridges. (A sort of financial interaction that brings back the image of Robin Hood as a robber who was good-hearted, but not to be denied.) The day also included morris dancing, and a feast called a “Robin Hood Ale.”

In this way, Robin Hood became a kind, if mischievous, spirit rather than a disruptive outlaw.

A Noble Robin

At the end of the sixteenth century, a pair of plays by Anthony Munday, titled *The Downfall ... and The Death of Robert, Earle of Huntington*, added a new element to the character of Robin Hood: the title of “earl.” In these plays, Robin became not only noble in character, but noble by birth as well.

Munday’s plays incorporate another important ele-

ment into the Robin Hood legend: a specific historical setting. Staged in 1598 and 1599, the plays set Robin Hood during the tumultuous time of Prince John and King Richard. This setting may have been borrowed from the real historical account of Fouke de Fitz Waryn (or Fulk Fitz Warren), a Marcher lord of the thirteenth century who opposed the rule of King John, lived for years as an outlaw on the Welsh border, was eventually restored, and became one of the signatories of the Magna Carta.

In a time of consolidation of royal authority, these plays presented the image of Robin Hood as an ideal vassal: loyal to the rightful king, antagonistic to the usurper, and preying on only merchants and abbots who supported the pretender.

In Munday’s plays, the fully realized character of Robin Hood finally emerges. Gone is Robin’s little gang of con men and petty thieves. Now Robin commands a hundred men or more, and at the insistence of Robin and Little John they all swear an oath of allegiance:

***“You shall never the poor man wrong ...
You shall defend with all your power
Maids, widows, orphants (sic) and distressed men.”***

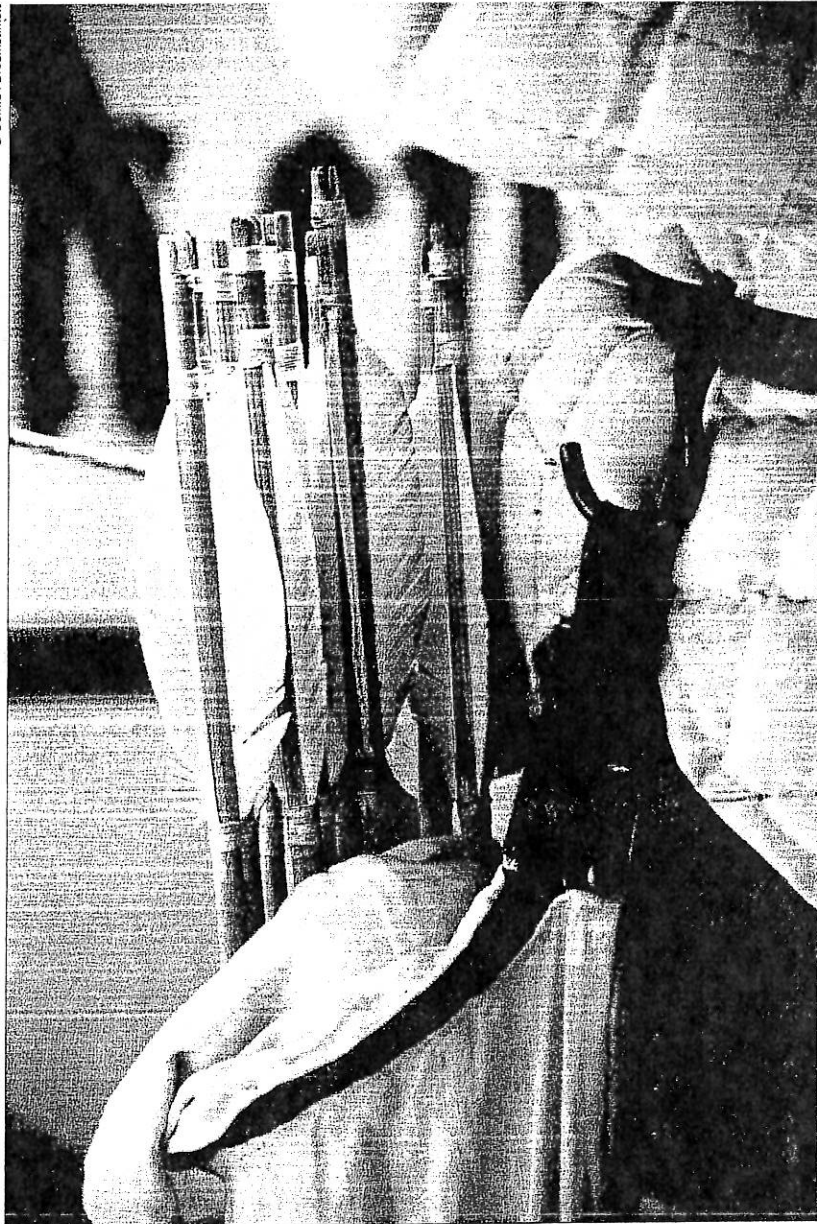
Still, Robin Hood retains an edge of menace. In the same oath, they swear to “(never) spare a priest, usurer or clarke.” Bankers and lawyers were particularly reviled by 16th century London playgoers, as were the priests and abbots who represented the excesses of the Catholic Church.

Robin’s Rebels

Historians in the Late Middle Ages began a new trend by trying to establish a “true” identity for Robin Hood, attempting to associate him with notorious rebels and celebrated reformers. Scottish historians such as John Major claimed (naturally) that Robin Hood was a follower of William Wallace. Holinshed (the historian whose work informed many of Shakespeare’s plays) placed Robin among the solders led by Simon de



Far left, near Sherwood Forest... old trees in dark green Clumber Park, Nottinghamshire, England. Center, poaching the King's deer was forbidden, a law enforced by the Sheriff.



Montfort. (The veracity of both those claims is severely weakened by the fact that Robin Hood was a commonly used alias, a medieval "John Doe.")

He was an outlaw, a lord, a rebel and a force of nature. Like a woodland sprite, Robin Hood is the essence of contradiction. Prof. Jones says, "The outlaw appeals to our desire for freedom... but also our desire for order and justice." Not quite an outright agent of chaos, nor an unquestioning authoritarian, Robin Hood is a mirror for our own ideals of responsible liberty and just government.

Was there ever a real Robin Hood? Prof. Knight explains, "Yes of course there's a real Robin Hood. He's real in the sense of ethics, chivalry, justice and natural law." ☺

Robin Hood On The Web

The stories, images and geography of the medieval lore of Robin Hood continues to fascinate people today. Here are some websites that will bring you a little closer to the tales and times of Robin Hood:

The Robin Hood Project

A collection of many of the original texts of medieval Robin Hood ballads and tales (including those mentioned in this article) with introduction and commentary by leading scholars:
<http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/rh/rhaumenu.htm>

Bold Outlaw Of Barnsdale and Sherwood

A resource for Robin Hood enthusiasts, with a variety of articles and interview pieces chronicling the legend through the ages:
<http://www.boldoutlaw.com/>

The Sherwood Forest National Treasure Reserve

A website maintained by the Nottinghamshire County Council listing the many Robin Hood-related things to do and see in and around Sherwood:
<http://www.nottinghamshire.gov.uk/home/leisure/countryparks/sherwoodforestcp.htm>