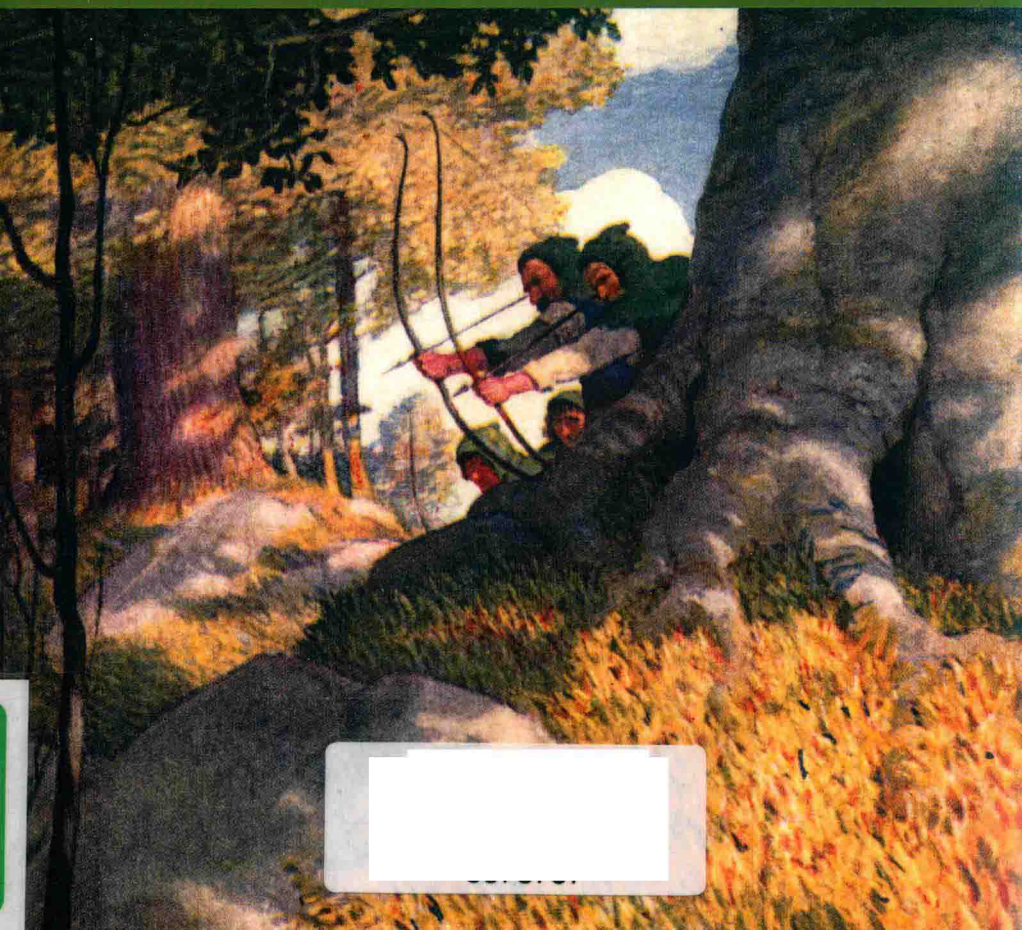


# Reading Robin Hood

Content, form and reception  
in the outlaw myth

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STEPHEN KNIGHT



# **Reading Robin Hood**

Content, form and reception in the outlaw myth

STEPHEN KNIGHT

**Manchester University Press**

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## Note on sources

Early Robin Hood texts pose problems of reference as the ballads often have varying titles, sometimes the same story will differ in detail across versions, and characters' names are often spelled differently. Some of the early texts are hard to date and may well have been lost, while early collections, both ballad garlands and prose lives, can overlap in contents, may be effectively reprints rather than new editions, and themselves can have quite uncertain dates. This study has for the most part used the titles given to ballads by F. J. Child in his *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, though some revisions have been made in the light of the edition *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales* by Stephen Knight and Thomas H. Ohlgren (see Bibliography for details). Ballads are quoted from Knight and Ohlgren and in some cases, when they are not present in that edition, from Child. The dating of the ballads has been based on the best available information, and caution has been used in arguments about dates and precedence. The names of characters have been normalised on the basis of their earliest appearance – for example Allen a Dale, Marian, Will Scarlett – though when names appear in quotations the original is preserved. To limit referencing, a recurrent source is given in an endnote when it first occurs in a chapter, and further references from it in that chapter are given in the text after quotations.

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## Introduction: drawing an academic bow

The literary and cultural tradition of Robin Hood differs substantially from other collections of material that might appear comparable. A myth which may have some basis in legend, like that of King Arthur or Tristan and Isolde, it is clearly much more popular than them in both its genres and its politics. The materials do not have the grand status or splendid illustrations of those medieval classics, they do not run on into modern high-status genres like epic poem or opera, and through the myth there is no clear structure of descent or authoritative transmission of the narrative. Modern Robin Hood stories, whether in print or in film, do not, like King Arthur versions, have evident sources which are carefully updated for a new context – rather, as is argued in Chapter 8 of this book, they tend to draw without apparent cultural hierarchy on a scattered range of unranked sources and so are remarkably open to new materials and ideas.

That rhizomatic tendency is itself recurrently regenerated through the way in which the myth itself is of uncertain, even anarchic, nature. Every Robin Hood scholar is familiar with the journalist who only wants to know whether Robin really existed, and some may have spoken on the myth in parts of England where members of the public will confidently identify where Robin Hood was born and brought up – usually close to their own personal locations. Historians and archivists, both professional and overtly amateur, have enthusiastically joined in this reduction of a heroic figure to a mere issue of personal identity – though very oddly (and again anarchistically) the earliest R. Hood of all to appear in the records, who was intriguingly accused of murdering a servant of the Abbot of Cirencester just before 1216, has proved of no interest at all to the ‘real Robin Hood’ people.

If the myth can be personally empiricised in this randomised mode, it has also avoided serious status through the varied,

small-scale, incoherent ways in which it has been recorded for posterity. It was at first apparently oral, in reports, songs and place-names, then was recorded in a couple of unostentatious manuscript anthologies, then became a reasonably popular early print, then withdrew into ephemeral printed broadsides, to emerge in the nineteenth century in a few little-valued poems and a range of unpretentious novels, often with garish illustrations, and in the twentieth century located itself primarily in children's fiction and the new popular disposability of film. This was not the treasured material of great libraries, nor was it enshrined in the genres which would attract moral or nationalistic excitement when, around 1900, literary criticism began to study fiction in languages other than Latin and Greek.

The two main scholarly functions which have proved central to both literary prestige and cultural capital, textual editing and critical commentary, were for long notably absent from the Robin Hood tradition – and when they partly appeared they were redirected in other, primarily historical directions. The sheer popularity of the Robin Hood ballads, including those in small anthologies called garlands, merged in the late eighteenth century with nascent medievalism, first in 1777 by the forgotten Welsh bookman Thomas Evans and then very influentially in 1795 by Joseph Ritson,<sup>1</sup> who basically copied Evans's edition but preceded it with a long introduction which did look like classic-forming respectful scholarship. It referred in its notes to many of the earlier texts, literary as well as popular, but the emphasis lay on the eleven-page 'Life of Robin Hood' (with sixty pages of quasi-empirical 'Notes and Illustrations'), including a genealogical chart tracing his lineage back to the Norman Conquest (when the name was allegedly Fitz Ooth).

In the new mood of biography (the major accounts of Johnson by Hawkins and Boswell came out in 1787 and 1791), this was a life and a legend, but such history itself involved hierarchy. Ritson fully accepted the sixteenth-century gentrification of Robin, turning him from an order-threatening yeoman into an earl true to all hierarchy but opposed to bad King John. Ritson was also for his time a startlingly radical figure – he addressed people as 'Citizen' and, probably even more alarmingly, was a vegetarian – but like many in England at the time, especially looking at events in France, could accept political and social reform only if it were led by a lord. By the 1840s that view had changed, and J. M. Gutch's new anthology,<sup>2</sup> which positioned itself independently by being

personally hostile to Ritson, probably because of his radicalism, also, and contradictorily, was more radical than him by conducting a long argument about Robin's having been not a lord but a yeoman, a figure of the people – almost a modern member of parliament, so maintaining Ritson's discursive position on identity and politics but updating it after fifty years.

In much of the nineteenth-century narrative that developed in the novel, historicity still ruled. Robin Hood remains a figure whose exciting deeds are retold only for a political, and so would-be historical purpose – for Scott he is Englishness embodied, and as is outlined in Chapter 6 for others he can be the spirit of Magna Carta rather weirdly combined with the modern English parliament; or among other desirabilities from high liberal politics to low pleasures, he could represent the spirit of English resistance to the French, the natural medieval forest against the alienating modern city, standing up to bullying lords and nasty legal officials, and while fond enough of his wife always keen to kiss a pretty girl. This under-focused para-historical figure oscillating between a trickster spirit and banal nationalism is also behind the finest piece of early outlaw scholarship, the collection and collation by Francis James Child in the early modern period of the early ballads, especially the printed riches, at one penny each. Volume 3 of the five-volume *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, which, as part V, originally appeared in 1888, gathers together thirty-eight Robin Hood texts, thirty-one of them broadside or garland ballads (see pp. 83–4),<sup>3</sup> but they are not identified as a theme-focused section. In fact Child links them to the Scottish outlaw of the border ballads by printing 'Johnie Cock' at the start of the volume, then obfuscates the date and coherence of the outlaw texts by offering next the unrelated 'Robin and Gandelyn' and then 'Adam Bell', at best a Robin Hood parallel and recorded later than the early Robin Hood texts which follow.

Child saw the early Robin Hood materials as part of early English national folk culture, and missed their special characteristics, as discussed in Chapter 4. This blurring of boundaries and contents between outlaw texts and folk ballads meshed with his mission – one that was accomplished with remarkable energy and learning, and relied on what would still be impressive world-wide consultation – which was to make widely available in full scholarly mode the early, primarily oral, folk materials of English culture, which were in many instances also part of American culture, and he was implicitly arguing for the richness of these materials that

the usual high-culture emphasis on literature and its European antiquities was overlooking. But as well as showing a laudable popularism and an understandable interest in the American cultural past, Child also blurred a crucial generic boundary. The almost comparable scholarship of Bertrand Bronson when he gathered *The Traditional Tunes of the Child Ballads*<sup>4</sup> showed that musically the Robin Hood materials are, as in so many other areas, very different from the norm: their tunes are not ancient and folkloric, they are not medieval, and they are primarily urban and commercial and mostly borrowed – they are new early modern phenomena, and are not of antique folkloric value, neither in the content that Child privileged nor in the form on which Bronson focused.

But no-one at the time in the scholarly or critical professions would notice these malformations of the context of the Robin Hood materials, as almost nobody took any notice of them. The burgeoning number of folklore and folk-ballad people soon realised that the outlaw texts were different, and passed them by for the border ballads and the many early songs of love and loss (the largest category of the Child ballads). The literary people focused on authors who could be felt to rank with the Latin and Greek classics of their earlier education, and in the first half of the twentieth century literary criticism (much to the surprise of people when it is pointed out) was just about Shakespeare and the major poets. The important part of Leavis's intervention was not the shaky moralistic basis and the thematic redirection of authors, but his decision to concentrate on the novel as the major literary art form – *The Great Tradition* is a deliberately challenging title: poetry is superseded. But the outlaw novels were never contenders, being quite without the alienated wit of Austen, the moralising intensity of Eliot or the sensual narcissism of Lawrence.

There were rare instances of scholarly engagement with the outlaw tradition – in 1909 a young American scholar, W. H. Clawson, produced a careful formal study of the major early Robin Hood text, *The Gest of Robin Hood*, and the diligent Oxfordian E. K. Chambers described the early ballads in several studies as part of his literary-historical approach<sup>5</sup> – but no-one followed them up. The first quivers of coherent Robin Hood scholarship appeared after the Second World War in Britain as a debate developed in the journal *Past and Present* about the social and political meaning of the figure and some at least of the texts. Rodney Hilton linked Robin to the so-called 'Peasants' Revolt' of 1381 and others agreed, but then James Holt argued that Robin represented the dissent of small

landowners, who were both free yeomen and also minor gentry. Though his interest was clearly political, the conservative Holt could read texts well, and was in fact the first to see ambiguity, even a multiple audience, at the core of the myth,<sup>6</sup> but there were also other nuances. Tom Hahn has shown how this debate was also about how to re-read the English tradition in the light of the post-war leftward move of British politics.<sup>7</sup>

Similar variations in the structures and attitudes of university education led to the actual development of something like Robin Hood studies in the late twentieth century. The move away from core courses, themselves re-creators of a stable hierarchical canon replete with cultural capital, permitted restless-minded people to set up optional courses to study never-discussed issues – like the concerns of women, workers, the colonised and, in this instance, the popular audience. I and others, notably in North America, came across the figure of Robin Hood in courses on ballads, as well as on popular culture and film, and it was immediately obvious that there was no informative secondary material on the tradition, beyond the ‘real Robin Hood’ obsessionals and the recent extension of that concern into social and political history. One move towards the texts from the historians was the anthology by Dobson and Taylor,<sup>8</sup> but its major value was a lengthy introduction which was the first survey of the textual tradition beyond a few pages in the earlier histories. An indication that a more literary approach would be productive appeared in an essay by Douglas Gray, a classic literary medievalist with wide-ranging and often radical interests, who here thought about the themes and structures of the earliest texts.<sup>9</sup>

It was clear to us Robin Hood ballad teachers that there was more to do to make this tradition, so varied in time and genre, available for coherent analysis. I set out to provide a basically descriptive account, which appeared in 1994 – the subtitle ‘A Complete Study’ was meant to suggest the old-fashioned descriptive nature of the project: I was tempted to spell it ‘Compleat’.<sup>10</sup> Others were thinking along similar lines: Jeffrey Singman published in 1998 a survey with emphasis on the drama, building on David Wiles’s earlier useful though slender book.<sup>11</sup> Kevin Carpenter at Oldenburg University in Germany arranged in 1995 a conference and an essay collection to complement his own fine collection of Robin Hood materials, including visual realisations.<sup>12</sup> Tom Hahn at the University of Rochester joined in with several perceptive analyses as well as organisationally as mastermind of

the International Association for Robin Hood Studies, which first met in 1997 and has kept doing so in alternate years, miming the forest spirit by having no subscriptions and no bureaucracy, just a flexible and ad hoc organising group.

Texts for classroom use were another issue, and having separately approached the TEAMS (Teaching of the Middle Ages) series on this matter, Tom Ohlgren of Purdue University and I teamed up and in 1998 produced our *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, which has been widely used.<sup>13</sup> A different textual move transpired when, having heard about the discovery in 1993 of the seventeenth-century 'Forresters' manuscript of Robin Hood ballads, I learnt at the British Library, to my surprise, that there were no plans to publish it. I turned to this task – there were no new ballads as such in the manuscript, but a few better versions of broadsides and some new editorially corrected texts. The volume was produced by that fine scholar-turned-publisher Derek Brewer, who proved friendly to Robin Hood – his very wide interests already reached into folklore.<sup>14</sup> Through all this process I realised how hard it was to track down such scholarly and critical materials as had been randomly appearing: Gray's essay, in a Tokyo journal, was one of the easiest to find. Again with the help of Brewer, I produced a plump book of reprinted pieces that have helped many a student write interesting essays on the disparate, challenging but highly rewarding primary material.<sup>15</sup>

Once we had as it were introduced Robin Hood to the groves of academic teaching, it was natural, from genuine interest, as well as meeting (and even ironising) the requirements of the modern university's managerial sheriffs, to develop research output on the English outlaw. The International Association for Robin Hood Studies has produced four essay collections from its meetings; there are other independent ones in process, and a number of scholars have produced essays and books. Much of this work has been a sophisticated form of extending our knowledge of Robin Hood across the genres: Scott Nollen has charted the Robin Hood films, while Kevin Harty has recurrently written on little-known outlaw films, including ones outside the Anglophone world;<sup>16</sup> Linda Troost has analysed eighteenth-century musical theatre, and Lorraine Stock has explored the later work of de Koven;<sup>17</sup> Lois Potter has matched that with a study of the English Georgian Alfred Noyes, as well as reporting on the Sherwood-area poets of the early nineteenth century;<sup>18</sup> Tom Hahn's work on the 'Lives of Robin Hood' will be an important addition to this Robin Hood



fieldwork;<sup>19</sup> a major contribution has been Tom Ohlgren's research into the early texts and his re-editing of them, with the sadly late Lister Matheson, in a classic comparative edition.<sup>20</sup>

Another form of critical scholarship has produced striking results as the contexts of Robin Hood materials have been looked at both more closely and more widely. Rob Gossedge has shown that Peacock's *Maid Marian* is not a mere witty frolic, as most have thought, but responds to the royal family's attempt to enclose major parts of Windsor Forest in 1814;<sup>21</sup> Helen Phillips has not only seen a Robin Hood theme deep in the most political Brontë novel *Shirley*, but has also set out in compelling detail the varied and determined ways in which early modern religious controversialists, from St Thomas More on, used the Robin Hood tradition as an instrument in their arguments;<sup>22</sup> John Marshall has examined the events and implications in several of the better recorded early play-games;<sup>23</sup> and I have argued for a fuller understanding of the way in which the play-games link to the French *pastourelle* tradition of 'Robin et Marion'.<sup>24</sup> Laura Blunk, Allen W. Wright and John Chandler have all looked further into the outlaw tradition continuing in modern popular culture.<sup>25</sup>

If moves of those kinds took Robin Hood deeper into the academic libraries, there has also been some sign of transition towards a concept-based treatment of the materials of the myth. This was the Raymond Williams-linked idea behind my book *Robin Hood: A Mythic Biography*, tracing how a changing myth operates politically in terms of its multiple receptive – and in terms of this tradition at least, productive – contexts.<sup>26</sup> Other theory-oriented approaches have appeared: the essay collection that I edited for Brepols in 2011, devoted to serious academic treatments of the outlaw myth, included Valerie Johnson's account of it in terms of Giorgio Agamben's theories, and Alex Kaufman's development of Nietzsche's theories of the horde in terms of greenwood society.<sup>27</sup> There will surely be more of what have been in a tricksterish spirit called 'Robin Hood with brains' ventures, exploring through scholarship and theory how the outlaw materials are not merely a domain of irritating complications, as they were long seen by tidy-minded and effectively conservative scholars, but are in fact a rich field of social, political and intellectual complexity.

The present book is seen as work towards this goal – its premise is to treat the Robin Hood material with the scholarship and the measured, even plodding, tread of analysis that has long been natural to more prestigious literature. These chapters each develop