

ROBIN HOOD IN THE LIGHT OF RESEARCH

THE QUEST FOR PROOF OF HIS EXISTENCE

By Professor L. V. D. Owen

The constant refrain of "no historical evidence" which is the mark of most articles and investigations dealing with the career and exploits of Robin Hood must by now have produced something akin to despair in the hearts of those in the Midlands and elsewhere who have treasured the famous outlaw as a historical person. It has always seemed hard to believe that, in spite of the hostility of modern investigators into tradition and ballad, there should never appear any sort of tangible historical record of his emergence, if only for a moment, into real life. Most of those who have written summaries of the ballad and other presentations of the outlaw either begin or end their accounts with the triumphant note that no contemporary historian as much as mentions Robin Hood the Outlaw.

The possibility of any reference by contemporary medieval chroniclers being discovered in the future is exceedingly remote, but it might perhaps have been surmised that the record sources for English history would some day yield some hint. For what it is worth such a mention of a real Robin Hood will be indicated in this article, but any appreciation of the value of this evidence depends upon a short survey of the fictions, traditions, and literature that have gathered round the celebrated robber and the previous endeavours that have been made to prove him a historical or, more frequently, an unhistorical figure.

Lack of Evidence

In the notes and illustrations to Ritson's *Life of Robin Hood* the lack of contemporary chronicle evidence is explained in a queer manner. It is caused "most probably by his (Robin Hood's) avowed enmity to churchmen, and history in former times was written by none but monks." This is ingenious but unconvincing. It is, however, undoubtedly a curious fact that no contemporary historian of the "period" of Robin Hood, that is, from 1189 to 1324, does allude to him.

Discussion of the exact period of Robin Hood's life and exploits has been active since the end of the eighteenth century, and the matter is still debated. The names of Ritson (1795) and Child (1858:1888) are familiar in this connexion, while J. R. Planché, Rouge Croix of the College of Arms, contributed a striking article to the *Reports and Papers of the Architectural Society of Lincoln Diocese* (1864), favouring for a change the historicity of Robin Hood. The various encyclopaedias and the *Dictionary of National Biography* have marshalled over and over again the evidence against the real existence of the forest hero. Sir Paul Harvey, in his *Companion to English Literature* (1932), plumps for Robin Hood, a legendary outlaw, whose historical authenticity is ill supported. Lastly, De Lange (1935), following Child, Fricke (1883), and Kiessman (1895) holds that Robin Hood is merely a creation of the ballads.

The periods favoured by tradition, fiction, or construction for the adventures of Robin Hood are those of the reigns of Richard I., of Henry III., of Edward I., and of Edward II. If there could be anything in the story that Robin Hood died in 1247 at the age of four score and seven, Scott, in *Ivanhoe*, would have a reasonable, albeit unintended, foundation for Locksley in point of date. Locksley (Robin Hood) and some of his reputed companions might have lived in the reign of Richard I. (as in Major's surmise) and have survived to take part in the events of the reign of Henry III.:

This Robin is made to do by some writers, but he becomes prominent rather late in the reign and takes the side of Simon de Montfort. This lateness is a mere invention of Bower. In fact, the attribution of the outlaw to the latter part of the reign of Henry III. and the time of Edward I. is a mere re-hash of ballad history by Wynthoun and Bower (fifteenth century). The bold date, 1283, in Wynthoun is a pure guess in all probability, while the mention of a "King Edward" in the *Lytell Geste* proves, as Child demonstrates, nothing. Sir H. Newbolt (1924) accepts

Wynthoun's date and fixes Robin Hood firmly in Edward I.'s reign.

Joseph Hunter (1852) made Robin an adherent of the Earl of Lancaster in 1322, one of the "porters of the chamber" of the King in 1323; while in 1324, he says, poor Robin was discharged from the service of King Edward II. with a present of five shillings. All these events are based merely upon the recurrence of the name Robert Hood in sundry records. This name appears to have been fairly common in various parts of England.

What is really wanted is the conjunction of the name Robin Hood with a description which might indicate the position of the holder to the law and at the same time help to place his activities in point of date. This, it would appear, is seen in the Pipe Roll of 14 Henry III. (1230). The date is significant. The entry reads: *Idem vicecomes debet xxxij. s. et vi. d. de catallis Roberti Hood fugitivi* ("The sheriff [of Yorkshire] owes 32s. and 6d. in the matter of the chattels of Robert (Robin) Hood, fugitive.") The position of the entry among others which imply the West Riding of Yorkshire is also interesting. Robin's adventures occur in Barnsdale as well as Sherwood. Here is therefore a malefactor with the famous name living during the early years of the reign of Henry III., and if *fugitivus* can bear the rendering of "on the run" it is possible to conceive the fugitive as active during a great part of the thirteenth century, or if 1230 represents the end of his life then he can be taken back to Richard I.'s reign for some of his exploits.

This Robin Hood is, further, an exact contemporary of the Randolph, Earl of Chester, who figures in the celebrated line of Langland's "Piers Plowman" which runs "Ich can rymes of Robin Hode, and Randolf, erl of Chestre." This has been held to be the first reference (*circa* 1377) to Robin Hood which hitherto has something of real historical quality. The Earl is Ranulf de Blundeville who succeeded to the earldom of Chester in 1180, besieged Nottingham for Richard I. in 1194 and after a career of tumult and adventure died in 1232. He also comes into the famous "ryme" of Fulk Fitzwarin.

The Pipe Roll of 1230 is an official document. The Exchequer clerk records without emotion the fate of this Robin Hood or rather that of his worldly goods. Other fugitives are entered - Vol. on the page (Pipe Roll Society, N.S., Vol. IV., 1927, p. 274). It is just possible that this lonely entry may be the only clue that we shall ever have as to the existence of the outlaw. It is, however, impossible not to be impressed with the name, the description, the date and the locality. Further, we have our interesting sheriff, not indeed of Nottinghamshire but of Yorkshire.

An Illuminating Essay

On the character and value of the "rymes," "gestes," and sagas which grew around the names of these historical and semi-historical figures the late J. H. Round has an illuminating essay in his "Peerage and Pedigree" (1910): Notable persons become the heroes of legendary tales many of which are deliberate fictions or romances. Robin Hood is a particularly prominent character of this sort and is given a ballad cycle which covers centuries. The lost "ryme" of Randolph, Earl of Chester, Round claims to have identified, in part, in a column in Dugdale's "Baronage" (1675), Vol. I., pages 42-3. Here history is completely perverted to the glory of the Earl. Something of a parallel to this is the popular endeavour to ennoble Robin Hood, but this effort is hardly strong enough to warrant the indignant rejection by the Complete Peerage of the tale that Robin Hood ever possessed the Earldom of Huntingdon or any other title of dignity.

There is no need to discuss the pedigree found for the outlaw, the grave, the gravestone, and the epitaph. Graves can be great deceptions. Even Gelert was provided with a grave. The soil under the gravestone of Robin Hood was found to be earth undisturbed. The various place-names are of no more value than the grave. It would seem that the only likely source of authentic information about Robin Hood, as about much else, is in the records of the State.