

## THE LEGEND OF ROBYN HODE: REVISITING A CULTURAL ENIGMA

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The popular image of Robin Hood is quite well known. He lived in Sherwood Forest with a band of Merry Men in the time of Richard the Lionheart. He was a dispossessed nobleman, bearing the name of Locksley and the title of Earl of Huntington. He lived by hunting the king's deer and robbing the rich to give to the poor. His closest friend was called Little John, whereas his sweetheart, or possibly wife, was the beautiful Maid Marian. The outlaws all wore Lincoln Green and spent much of their time outwitting the wicked Sheriff of Nottingham and fighting the nasty Norman conquerors. Eventually, after many adventures, Robin met his end at the hand of an evil nun, the Prioress of Kirklees, who bled him to death. This is the gist of the legend which has come down to us through various literary sources and historical records, even though interpreting many of these documents-most of them posing serious contradictions-has been a difficult task. Today Robin Hood exists mainly as a children's story book hero and as a more glamourised version in films, especially since the phenomenal success of the early 1990s' *Robin Hood-Prince of Thieves*.

This article intends to take a fresh look at the legend and question some of the myths that have developed, trying to find the solutions in literature, and particularly in the original texts which have come down to us: the early medieval ballads. Indeed, in the realms of fiction, it is of utmost importance to pay scant regard to the accurate historical and literary background of the legend in order to understand why such a legend has been able to go from strength to strength for so many centuries and is still able to capture the hearts of millions of readers, cinema goers and scholars in the XXIst century.

### 2. THE LITERARY ORIGIN OF THE LEGEND: THE MEDIEVAL BALLADS

Of recent years scholars have taken a more serious interest in Robin Hood as an historical character, although collections of ballads and references to the outlaw have been written since medieval times. Between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, they were collected in chapbooks and known as garlands. Then, in 1795, Joseph Ritson published a complete collection of the ballads, and in the nineteenth century an impressive volume of them was edited by F. J. Child (1957). Around that time the Revd Joseph Hunter published his theory that Robin Hood was a Yorkshire man, born in Wakefield. A hundred years later the Wakefield historian, J. W. Walker, enlarged on this theory. Other books followed by writers and historians such as P. Valentine Harris, Harold Speak and Jean Forrester, Professors Dobson and Taylor, Professor J. C. Holt, Professor John Bellamy, G. Phillips and M. Keatman, and of more recent years, scholarly studies by Professors S. Knight and medievalist J. L. Singman.

Whether all such scholars agree or not on the existence of the character and his historical background, there is no doubt that the early Robin Hood ballads are medieval: a sign of their popularity is that they are already mentioned in *Piers Plowman*, in the last