

Robin Hood

The legendary hero



Robin Hood, legendary outlaw hero of a series of English ballads, some of which date from at least as early as the 14th century. Robin Hood was a rebel, and many of the most striking episodes in the tales about him show him and his companions robbing and killing representatives

of authority and giving the gains to the poor. Their most frequent enemy was the Sheriff of Nottingham, a local agent of the central government (though internal evidence from the early ballads makes it clear that the action took place chiefly in south Yorkshire, not in Nottinghamshire). Other enemies included wealthy ecclesiastical landowners. Robin treated women, the poor, and people of humble status with courtesy. A good deal of the impetus for his revolt against authority stemmed from popular resentment over those laws of the forest that restricted hunting rights. The early ballads, especially, reveal the cruelty that was an inescapable part of medieval life.

Numerous attempts have been made to prove that there was a historical Robin Hood, though references to the legend by medieval writers make it clear that the ballads themselves were the only evidence for his existence available to them. A popular modern belief that he was of the time of Richard I probably stems from a “pedigree” fabricated by an 18th-century antiquary, William Stukeley. None of the various claims identifying Robin Hood with a particular historical figure has gained much support, and the outlaw’s existence may never have been anything but legendary.

The authentic Robin Hood ballads were the poetic expression of popular aspirations in the north of England during a turbulent era of baronial rebellions and agrarian discontent, which culminated in the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381. The theme of the free but persecuted outlaw enjoying the forbidden hunting of the forest and outwitting or killing the forces of law and order naturally appealed to the common people.

Although many of the best-known Robin Hood ballads are postmedieval, there is a core that can be confidently attributed to the medieval period. These are *Robin Hood and the Monk*, *Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne*, *Robin Hood and the Potter*, and the *Lytyll Geste of Robin Hode*. During the 16th century and later, the essential character of the legend was distorted by a suggestion that Robin was a fallen nobleman, and playwrights, eagerly adopting this new element, increased the romantic appeal of the stories but deprived them of their social bite. Postmedieval ballads (which gave Robin a companion, Maid Marian) also lost most of their vitality and poetic value, doubtless as a result of losing the original social impulse that brought them into existence.