A TEACHERS' GUIDE TO SHERWOOD FOREST

When Shakespeare wished to show the delightfulness of life in the forest of Arden, he recalled and mentioned the great folk hero of the English people, Robin Hood. In *As You Like It*, Oliver asks: "Where will the old Duke live?" Charles answers: "They say he is already in the forest of Arden, and a many merry men with him; and there they live like the old Robin Hood of England;... and fleet the time carelessly as they did in the golden world." To one who stops to thinks about it a moment, it is a singular circumstance. Here we have an outlawed individual of the twelfth or thirteenth century. Of his historic career we know nothing with certainty. And yet his name is a household word. In the sixteenth century he has become such a popular hero that no May Day is complete without him. At the end of the eighteenth century ballads are being everywhere chanted, of which he is the hero. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries he is still common literary property, appealing to poets as wide apart in time and spirit as Sir Walter Scott and Alfred Noyes. It is probably not too much to say that there is no English king, not even Arthur, and no other English hero who so appeals to the imagination, or who is so often mentioned in literature.

The historic Robin Hood is hidden behind a heavy veil of time. When he actually lived, or indeed whether or not he ever really existed, is a question that probably will remain forever unanswered. His biographers fall into two groups: those who insist that he really lived at some definite period, and those who deny altogether that he ever existed in the flesh. The difficulty with the believers is that they can not agree among themselves. Some place Robin Hood in the later half of the twelfth century; others, in the first part of the thirteenth; and still others point out the absurdities of the calculations, and insist that he had his being in the early fourteenth century. In any case, we have absolutely no contemporary historical references to our hero. He is first mentioned by a historian in John of Fordun's *Chronica Gentis Scotorum*, which appeared about 1384, fifty years after his death by the most generous estimate. Fordun was a Scottish chronicler who wrote a history of Scotland down to his own time. He places Robin Hood in the reign of Henry III, saying:

"About this time (1266) ... lived those famous robbers Robin Hood and Little John and their fellows, of whom the foolish vulgar in comedies and tragedies make lewd entertainments, and are delighted to hear the jesters and minstrels sing them above all other ballads."
Modern scholarship insists, however, that this reference was not the work of Fordun himself, but that it was inserted by his disciple and follower, Walter Bower, who revised and continued the work of his master up to the year 1450. In any case, it would not be wise to accept the work of Fordun as entirely truthful, for we can not forget that he is Holinshed's source for Banquo, Fleance, and others Scotch heroes, who have been frowned out of existence by history. But this reference did its work, and nearly all the historians of Robin Hood, until the beginning of the nineteenth century, state as an accepted fact that he lived in the first half of the thirteenth century.

One of the prominent and important scholars in our group of believers is Joseph Ritson, the English antiquarian. In the intervals between his fierce quarrels with Wharton, and Steevens, and Dr. Johnson, and Bishop Percy, (in which he was nearly always right in matter and wrong in manners) he managed to find time to gather and edit the first real collection of *Robin Hood Ballads*, to ferret out references to the famous outlaw from an unbelievable number of literary works, and to write an "authentic" Life of Robin Hood. His work appeared in 1795, and we must hope that it won immediate success, for the unfortunate author showed signs of mental collapse as early as 1796, and he became completely insane on the 10th of September, 1803. He barricaded himself in his chambers at Gray's Inn, made a bonfire of his manuscripts, and was finally forcibly removed to Hoxton, where he died two weeks later. Fortunately for us, he could not destroy his issued volumes on Robin Hood, and they live to keep alive the memory of poor, hard-working, acrimonious, half-mad Joseph Ritson.

"Robin Hood was born at Locksley," he tells us, "in the county of Nottingham, in the reign of King Henry the second, and about the year of Christ 1160. His extraction was noble, and his true name was Robert Fitzooth, which vulgar pronunciation easily corrupted into Robin Hood." The corruption of Robert Fitzooth into Robin Hood offered no difficulties whatever to the men who could insist seriously that his own name, Ritson, was a short pronunciation for Richardson! But to go on with his story: "He (Robin Hood) is frequently styled, and commonly reputed to have been Earl of Huntington; a title to which, in the latter part of his life, at least, he appears to have some sort of pretension. In his youth he is reported to have been of a wild and extravagant disposition." And so the story continues, telling of his flight to the forest, the gathering of his band, their free life in the woods, their deeds and their exploits, until "... the infirmities of old age increasing upon him, and desirous to be relieved, in a fit of sickness, by being let blood, he applied for that purpose to the prioress of Kirkleys-nunnery in Yorkshire, his relation, ... by whom he was treacherously bled to death. This event happened on the 18th of November, 1247, ... about the 87th of his age." Now, I am not one of those who insist on having every fact supported by an affidavit. I can swallow a fact with any man. But, there are, to say the least, some details of Ritson's story that seem open to doubt—"the 18th of November, 1247," for example—and I am afraid that we must conclude that it contains more fiction than fact. Nevertheless, Ritson's edition is exceedingly valuable, and it must not be neglected by one who is interested in the lore of Robin Hood.

There are many nineteenth century investigators who believe that Robin Hood lived at a late period. One of the most important of this group is John M. Gutch, who issued in 1847 a new edition of the Lytell Gests of Robin Hood, with Other Ancient and Modern Ballads and Songs Relating to This Celebrated Yeoman, to which is Prefixed his History and Character, Grounded upon other Documents than those made Use of by his Former Biographer, 'Mister Ritson.' Gutch reprints the invaluable notes of Ritson, and adds many new ones, so that this is the most complete and useful edition until that of Professor Child, in 1888. He scorns Ritson's "facts," however, and maintains that Robin Hood was a follower of Simon de Montfort; and that after the defeat of that nobleman at Evesham, in 1265, Robin Hood kept up the struggle for liberty by a sort of guerilla warfare from his stronghold in the forest. He suggests that Robin Hood was born in 1225 and lived until about 1294.

Another interesting theorist is the Rev. 1

1Published in London, by Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans.
Joseph Hunter, who claims that both Ritson and Gutch are wrong. Robin Hood was born, he insists, in the reign of Edward I, about 1285, and lived into the reign of Edward III. Mr. Hunter made some studies of the ancient exchequer accounts and the court rolls, and he found that for several months in 1323, in the reign of Edward III, appear payments to "Robyn Hod" as a "vadlet of the crown." This fact, he claims, coincides with the history of Robin Hood as told in the "Lytell Geste," and he associates the outlaw with the rebellion of the Earl of Lancaster. Lancaster was defeated and executed in 1322. In the following year the King, Edward III, actually made a trip into the region of Sherwood, according to the court records. This trip coincides with the ballad story. Here, says Mr. Hunter, the King met Robin Hood, forgave his misdeeds, attached him to his court, and brought him back to London. The payments stop after a year or so, and this fact again agrees with the ballad story, that Robin soon sickened for the old free life, and asked and received the King's permission to return to the north, where he lived during the remainder of his life in the region which he loved, and with which he will be forever associated. Although Professor Child dismisses the inferences of Mr. Hunter as "ludicrous", we must admit that he has pointed out a striking series of coincidences. But proof, in such a matter as this, is an impossibility, and the reader is free to accept the story that best pleases him.

He may, if he wishes, believe with the unbelievers, and insist that Robin Hood never lived at all. Mr. H. Bradly states that the jovial Friar Tuck with the "spirit of frost and snow," it must be admitted that there are elements in the story that suggest the exploits of Robin Goodfellow and the forest elves. However it may be, when we leave the shadowy kingdom of history and come into the broad free fields of tradition, we are on certain ground.

This is the one thing that we can state with certainty: by 1400 Robin Hood had been accepted by the English people, and he has never been dethroned in their affection, however he may have been treated by history. Langland, in The Vision of Piers Plowman, about 1360, puts these words into the mouth of Sloth, an idle, ignorant, drunken priest:

"I kan noght parftly my pater-noster as the preest it syngeth; But I kan rymes of Robyn Hood, and Randolf, erl of Chesstra."

One of the arguments against Hunter's theory is that if Robin had lived until 1350, as he maintains, there would hardly have been time before 1360 for many "rymes of Robin Hood" to spring up. However, the actual existence of Robin Hood seems to gain strength from his mention here with Randolphe, Earl of Chester, whose actual existence no one doubts.

In any case, tradition rolled up quickly. Within a century Robin Hood was an integral part of many Folk festivals. He becomes a supernumerary character of the Morris dances. May day celebrates his exploits. As the patron of archery, he is extolled as an example of manly virtue. The sports and games in his honor sometimes interfered with the more customary religious services, as is testified by Bishop Latimer in his sixth sermon before Edward VI, in 1549. The good Bishop is very indignant:

"I came once myselfe to a place, riding on a journey homeward from London, and I sent word over night into the town that I would preach there in the morning, because it was a holy day, and methought it was a holidays worke; the church stode in my way; and I thought I should have found a great companye in the churche, and when I came there the churche dore was faste locked. I tarried there half an houre and more, and at last the key was founde; and one of the parishe commes to me, and sayes, Syr, this ys a busye day with us, and we cannot heare you; it is Robyn Hoddes Daye. The parishe are gone

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3 Quoted in the Encyclopaedia Britannica. See article on Robin Hood.
4 Essays on England in the Middle Ages, Thomas Wright. 1850.
abroad to gather for Robyn Hoode, I pray you let them not. I was fayne there to give place to Robyn Hoode. I thought my rochet should have been regarded, though I were not; but it would not serve, it was fayne to give place to Robyn Hoddes men. It is no laughyling matter, my friends, it is a weepynge matter, a heavy matter, under the pretence for gathering for Robyn Hoode, a traytoure and a thefe, to put out a preacher, to have his office lesse esteemed, to prefer Robyn Hod before the mnistration of Gods word; and all thys hath come of unpreaohynge prelates. Thys realme hath been U provided, for that it hath had suche corrupte judgementes in It to prefer Robyn Hode to Goddes Worde."

Michael Drayton bears more cheerful testimony in Polyolbion, about 1613:

"In this spacious isle, I think there is not one. But he hath heard some talk of him and Little John: And to the end of time, the tales shall ne'er be done, Of Scarlock, George a Green, and Much the miller's son, Of Tuck the merry friar, which many sermons made In praise of Robin Hood, his outlaws, and their trade."

And Drayton goes on to describe in detail the merry life in the greenwood. There are hundreds of quotations and references that might be given to prove that by the Elizabethan age, Robin Hood had become a cult. He was the subject of ballads, the hero of many plays and festivals, and there are many places all over England that still bear his name. We find Robin Hood's Ook, Robin Hood's Shambles, Robin Hood's Well, Robin Hood's Bay, Robin Hood's Seat, and so on to infinity.

Mr. Spencer T. Hall, a native of Sherwood Forest, gives some interesting traditions in The Forester's Offering, and in his Rambles in the Country surrounding Sherwood Forest. He tells us of the prevalence even in his day (1850) in Sherwood Forest of Littles, Archers, Shaklochs, Hardstaffs, and Nailors. It will be remembered that the true name of Little John was John Nailor, according to many traditions, Mr. Hall reports that some years ago (probably about 1800) an old house was pulled down at Mansfield, and in its walls was discovered a sort of hiding-place, where the rotten remains of a bow, a green garment, and a cap, were found, which were supposed to have belonged to one of Robin Hood's band! He also visited Hathersage, the reputed burial-place of Little John, and saw the house in which Little John died! Mr. Hall speaks for himself:

"The house is a rustic old place, with exceedingly thick walls, built without lime; it is now mantled with ivy, shady with umbrageous trees. In it lives Jenny Shard, a repectable old widow—a very intellignet woman too, for one in her circumstances. I had a long conversation with Jenny Shard, who was full of faith not only in Little John having died in her cottage, and in his being buried in the churchyard, but that the very grave still pointed out, with the little stone at each end, in the precise spot."

In fact, Jenny well remembered Little John's grave being opened by the order of Captain Shuttleworth, a local nobleman, and a great thigh-bone was brought directly into her cottage and measured. It was found to be thirty-two inches in length! Little John must have been a giant, indeed, for the thigh-bone of a six-foot man is only about eighteen inches long. Two shovels were broken in digging the grave, and the bone had been broken in the middle, but the ends fitted together perfectly, and the accuracy of the measure is guaranteed by Jenny. Captain Shuttleworth had the bone taken to the Hall, but he met with so many severe accidents, two of them in the churchyard, that he had it re-interred in the old place. The result was, no more accidents!

Robin Hood's own gravestone was pointed out to travellers until the middle of the eighteenth century. It was in Kirkless Park near the nunnery in which our hero was treacherously slain. It read:

"Here undemead this lytel stone Lies Robert earl of Huntintua Nere archers were as he so gude And people called him Robyn Hudo Such outlaws as he and his men Will England never bee agen. Obiit 24 kal dekembirs 1247."

To be sure, Dr. Percy questions the "genuineness of this epitaph." Master Thomas Gent, of York, informs us

5 Two rare pamphlets, published in London about 1845, and quoted at length by Mr. Gutch.

"That his (Robin Hood's) tombstone, having his effigy thereon, was ordered not many years ago, by a certain knight, to be placed as a hearth-stone in his great hall. When it was laid over-night, the next morning it was surprisingly removed to one side; and so three times it was laid, and so successively turned aside. The knight, thinking he had done wrong to have brought it thither, ordered it should be drawn back again; which was performed by a pair of oxen and four horses, when twice the number could scarcely do it before. But as this is a story only, it is left to the reader to judge at pleasure."

The significant fact about all these traditions of Robin Hood and his followers is that they prove the vitality of the story and show how widely it was spread. The explanation is pointed out by Mr. Hunter; these stories are traditional recollections, not of the veritable heroes themselves, but of persons who "obtained a celebrity for the ability with which they performed their parts" in the wide spread dramatic representations. Such a person was Robert Locksley, a famous historic outlaw, who contributed his name to the story. So tradition grew. Whether Robin Hood represented the down-trodden Saxons against the Normans, the rich against the poor, or the forces of spring against those of winter, he did appeal to the English imagination, and by 1500, the date of the first printed ballad, there had grown up a great mass of tradition in which he was the hero.

The first printed story of which we know is "The Lytell Gest of Robyn Hode." There are seven early editions of this work which are extant, only four of which are complete. The most valuable and the best known of these is the one "Enprented at London in fletestrete at the sygne of the sone By Wynken de Worde." Unfortunately this little book contains no date, so we can not be certain when it was issued. However, a person was known that although Wyken de Worde succeeded Caxton in 1492, he did not move into Fleete Street until 1500; and as he died in 1534, we can place the edition between 1500 and 1534. This early source of the Robin Hood material is exceedingly interesting. What is probably the best discussion of it appears in Dr. Clawson's pamphlet, The Gest of Robin Hood. A gest is a romance or tale of adventure. This particular one is in eight "fyttes", Fytte (or fitt or fit) is the Anglo-Saxon word for song, whence it came to mean a canto, or division of a poem. Thus it may be seen that this Romance of Robin Hood, in eight cantos, is almost a little epic. It contains 456 stanzas, or more than 1800 lines, which is one-fifth again as many as there are in Evangeline. The regular ballad form is used, stanzas consisting of four lines each, of which the second and fourth rime.

The important thing to note is that this poem is apparently nothing more than a collection of earlier ballads, compiled and strung together by some unknown poet. Dr. Clawson in his study picks out and lists those parts which were originally individual ballads, and those parts which are the work of the compiler. He finds twelve distinct ballads. It is impossible to say when the work was done. It may have been as early as the fourteenth century; or it may have been only a few years before the first printing, or about 1500. In any case, it seems almost certain that the original ballads go back to the middle of the fourteenth century, for they contain a large number of unmistakably Middle English grammatical forms, such as the final -e and -es as regular inflectional endings. The "Littel Gest" contains other evidence, too, of earlier ballads, for we read in The Seconde Fytte, 11. 176 and 177:

"He wente hyn forthe full mery syngynge,  
As men have told in tale."

It is unfortunate that of these earlier ballads, with the possible exception of that fragment known as Robin Hood and the Monk, none are known.

Of the ballads which we have today few can date back of the reign of Elizabeth, and many bear the mark of the eighteenth century. The reason for the loss of the earlier ballads is obvious, and is well pointed out by Professor Bates, who says: "It was written literature, the work of clerks, fixed upon the parchment that survived, while the songs of the people, passing from lip to lip down the generations, continually reshaped themselves to the changing times." Space is lacking to discuss this fascinating subject of balladry, but there is probably no ballad anthology in existence that does not contain its
quota about Robin Hood. Professor Child's scholarly edition, *English and Scotch Popular Ballads*, which appeared in 1888, is probably the last word on the subject. A great advance has been made, however, since that time in one direction. The work of such collectors as Mr. Cecil Sharp has added to our knowledge of the ballads themselves a great store of the *tunes* to which they were sung. And it must be remembered that the Robin Hood ballads and indeed all ballads, were composed not to be recited or read, but to be sung. Whoever would gain a true idea of balladry must devote some of his time to the music element.

As a subject for festival or pageant Robin Hood and his merry men have few equals. Almost any two or three of the ballads may be woven together by an individual or by a class of students to make a festival play for May Day, or for any spring holiday. Such a play will furnish an opportunity for presentation by a large group or by a small one; the costumes may be as elaborate or as simple as one desires; the stage may be a gymnasium floor or a two acre lot. There is just one thing that the subject demands: a plentiful use of folk songs and folk dances. A few of the commoner ballads that have been so used are “Robin Hood and Maid Marion,” “The Rescue of Will Scarlet,” and “Robin Hood and Alan-a-Dale.”

The Sherwood Forest of today is a disappointment. A few years ago I tramped that historic region from Nottingham to Lincoln, stopping at several of the smaller towns for a day or two, especially at Edwinstowe, a secluded and tourist-less town, in the very center of what used to be the great forest. Robin Hood’s name is still connected with the region. One sees Robin Hood’s Shambles, Robin Hood’s Oak, and Robin Hood’s Cave. But of “the good green wood” there are few traces. There is an occasional grove of large oaks, here and there a thicket of white birch, and mile after mile of rolling farm land, sprinkled with interesting old cottages, and laced by winding muddy, brown roads. But the Great Forest, in which Robin Hood and his archers could roam at will, exists no more. No longer could the gentle outlaws gather under a great oak around a roaring fire and “troll the brown bowl” with mighty laughter and broad humor. The blasts of their hunting horns would be out of place. They would find no “good, red deer” to be turned into juicy venison or luscious meat-pies. The villainous Sheriff of Nottingham and his craven crew could soon chase them from the thinned thickets; and there are no longer any dark groves from which they could spring out to terrify fat and wicked abbots. Sherwood Forest is gone forever.

Gone forever? I wonder, after all, if it does not still exist in the only place where it has ever really been, in the minds and imaginations of those few who love the old ballads and songs that were once the delight of the English people. Sherwood Forest exists in those fortunate people for whom Robin Hood and Little John still fight at the plank over the brook; who follow softly the Sheriff of Nottingham in his tinker’s disguise; who trail after Alan-a-Dale as he goes down to court a “finikin lass, who shines like glistering gold”; or who see through the startled eyes of Robin Hood, the harmless-appearing Will Scarlet step ominously from the road, and with a gentle and melancholy whistle on his lips pluck up by its roots a sturdy young oak and turn it into a mighty quarter-staff. And perhaps we may be forgiven (by our students, at any rate!) though they still occasionally make the “comma blunder,” or misspell one of the “one hundred spelling demons,” or write in composition no higher than 6.9 on the scale when the median for the group to which they belong is 7.3, if only we can guide them, even a few of them, into the pleasant land of Sherwood Forest.

MILTON M. SMITH

“The solution of the ‘teacher problem’ is not merely more money. Salary increases are right and necessary, but inadequate as the sole solution of the question. Reform of the plan of organization, with intelligent boards of education acting in collaborations with teachers free to present their honest convictions and free to develop their own individuality, is essential. Recognition of the teacher as a human being will keep her human, and keep her from seeking other fields of employment for inspiration and a fuller life.”—Isabel Rockwell, in *The Survey*. 