Outlaw Heroes in Myth and History

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PREFACE

Outlaw Heroes in Myth and History continues and broadens the arguments presented in my earlier book, *The Outlaw Legend: A Cultural Tradition in Britain, America and Australia* (1996). That was based largely on primary sources from the relevant Anglophone traditions. This present work is much broader in scope and necessarily depends on the research of other scholars from many times, places and cultures. I have needed to revisit some of the material included in *The Outlaw Legend* to provide necessary continuity and context to the arguments presented here, and occasionally to refine those former arguments in the light of further information and/or my own better understanding. But generally it has been possible to keep references to those figures discussed earlier to a minimum in favour of newly researched material from many other parts of the world. Readers interested in the texts and sources of the English-language ballads and other items cited briefly here will find these in more detail in *The Outlaw Legend*.

What more is there to say about outlaw heroes? A great deal, it turns out. While many might consider the tradition of the outlawed hero to have died out, as this book argues, it has not only endured but has evolved into viable new forms. While the archetypal outlaw of Sherwood Forest continues to proliferate media representations of all kinds, the Robin Hood principle has also embraced aspects of Islamic fundamentalist terrorism, the rise of the celebrity criminal and various other Robin Hood-like activities in real and digital life. Many of these recent examples have an overblown parodic character, appropriate to the hypermodernism in which the developed world, at least, now appears to operate. As this book goes to press Julian Assange, the public face of the WikiLeaks website, has become the single most important individual in the world, at least as far as politicians, the media and his many supporters are concerned. Already Assange is being likened to Robin Hood, Ned Kelly and other Australian bushrangers. He is being represented in the traditional mould of the heroic villain, though one now marauding along virtual frontiers, wielding information as a weapon against those who hold global power. The legend of the recently deceased terrorist Osama bin Laden is set to continue the outlaw hero image that many made of his life.

In attempting to excavate and elucidate the origins, development and causes of the always-ambivalent figures and cultural processes discussed here, it has become apparent that we should take the factors that produce heroic villains and their sometimes devastating depredations much more seriously. The cultural processes that produce and sustain the outlaw hero as a viable mode of resistance are not only ancient, extensive and deep, but also socially perilous. I hope this book will make a small contribution towards a better understanding of this ongoing imperative of history and mythology.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION: THE OUTLAWED HERO

He passes by the rich with an air of contempt...
—Tamil ballad on the bandit Nadar Jambulingam

It is St Valentine's Day 1981. A slight young woman wearing red lipstick and cradling a Sten gun leads a gang of men into the village of Behmai in India's Uttar Pradesh state. She demands that the villagers bring out the brothers Sing, a couple of rival *dacoits*, or bandits. The young woman is implacably angry, and becomes more so when the terrified villagers will not or cannot comply. She orders her gang to line up all the young men, then walks along the line, spitting on the men, insulting them and jabbing the butt of her weapon into their testicles. Still no-one has seen the bandit brothers. The women cry and scream. An order is given – perhaps by the girl, a low-caste outlaw named Phoolan Devi – perhaps by another of her gang. The young men are made to walk single file towards the river where they are forced to kneel as they beg for mercy.[1]

Twenty-three years later, a white-masked French electrical worker fumbles through the fuse box of a rundown apartment block in the predawn darkness of St Denis, near Paris. Eventually he finds the right connections and electricity returns to the squalid suburban flat whose occupants have been unable to pay their bills. 'I give power back to the poor' the disguised man claims.[2]

That same year, 2004, along the lawless borders of Pakistan and Afghanistan, a Mujahadeen leader calls the press to his hideout and poses for photographs in the classic bandit hero manner – arms crossed, head raised proudly, low camera angle. His defiance of all authority rings out; 'And let me declare that I and my friends will not allow government to dictate its terms on [sic] us.' He is billed to the world as 'the Pathan Robin Hood'.[3]

What connects these very different incidents so widely separated by distance and time? How does the young woman responsible for the massacre of a large part of the village's male population later become a member of parliament? Why is she assassinated in 2001? Why did the French electricity union illegally

restore the current to a non-bill payer and – most amazingly in France – why was it done under the very English name of 'Operation Robin Hood'? Why does a Muslim tribal warlord adopt the manner and mode of the outlaw hero? How do the media immediately connect him with the centuries-old English myth of Robin Hood?

These and other questions arise from the use of illegal force for what are considered by many to be moral ends. This ambivalent situation has existed for over two thousand years, and on every continent. It still exists today. The name of the good robber or outlaw hero differs from time to time and place to place, but the social, political and economic power conflicts that give rise to such characters remain substantially the same despite differences of culture, language and location. In the English language – yet also famous around the world[4] – the archetypal outlaw hero is the mythical Robin Hood. Wherever similar figures are found, the poor and weak see them as champions against those they consider to be oppressing them. In twelfth-century China the outlaw hero is named Song Jiang. In late nineteenth-century Australia, Ned Kelly. In twentieth-century India, Phoolan Devi. Robin Hood goes by many names. Always they are the name of a hero – at least to many.

Whatever they are called and wherever they are found, such characters represent a struggle against a power greater than themselves and those who support them. Almost always they die violently and always their legends celebrate them and their actions, despite the usual ambivalence of their lives. The legends allow their protagonists to live on in folklore, popular culture, art and literature. These expressions then continue to shape the attitudes and actions of later individuals who, for whatever reasons, wilfully defy the forces of authority and whose actions are represented and received as morally justified, if legally criminal.

Regardless of the economic, social and political structures and forces in operation, independent of time, space, culture and religion, the outlaw hero can be found swashbuckling through history, folklore, popular culture and high art. As one scholar of comparative myth and literature observed in a study of hero beliefs around the world: 'It is remarkable that among so many nations the life-history of a hero again and again reveals the same features. The result of this is that the heroes of virtually all parts of the world have features in common.'[5] What sort of social and cultural process can link and explain the beliefs and deeds of such far-flung, unconnected and disparate characters?

At its most fundamental, the outlaw hero tradition is invoked when a criminal robs the rich and powerful, sharing the proceeds with the poor and oppressed who, in return, provide sympathy and active support. A Robin Hood figure may arise whenever and wherever there is perceived inequity and oppression, leading to conflict over ownership of land or access to its

resources.[6] This can be in the context of a feudal society, a peasant economy, on lawless frontiers or within the resistance of colonised indigenous peoples. The tradition can still be found operating along the postmodern frontiers of the digital revolution and in the operations of global terrorism. It has a lengthy and involved pedigree that mixes myth and history in a crucible of injustice and violence, producing an ambivalent amalgam of hero and villain.

Good Villains and Bad Heroes

While many individuals have been cast out of their societies, either legally or by virtue of the dictate of a power group, only a very few have become heroes. The popular celebration of certain criminals was noted by commentators from at least the seventeenth century[7] and, in the case of English highwaymen, can be traced much further back.[8] Studies of the Italian mafia systems and of peasant insurrections have also noted the tendency for certain individuals to become great heroes, both in history and in myth. The first sustained attempt to understand this phenomenon on a broad scale was produced by the eminent historian Eric Hobsbawm in a book originally titled *Social Bandits* (1969).[9] Hobsbawm's interest in what he had earlier called 'primitive rebels' led him to develop an explanatory model for individuals like Pancho Villa, Lampião, Salvatore Giuliano and a host of lesser-known bandits who nevertheless seemed to share similarities in the processes through which they were turned into great and usually enduring heroes by those social groups who supported their defiance of the authorities.

Such 'social' bandits, Hobsbawm argued, could not be considered mere criminals but were engaged in legitimate forms of struggle against the oppressions and injustices perpetrated on their own people by those holding wealth and power. They were, in the classic Robin Hood phrase, 'the friends of the poor'. At least, they were certainly seen in this light by their sympathisers and celebrators. Often, as Hobsbawm and others have noted, such celebration was at odds with the reality of their actions. But regardless of the often unpleasant realities, these and similar figures have continued to be seen as heroes by many, even if they remain villains to some. Hobsbawm pointed to parallels in the lives and legends of outlaw heroes in the mainly peasant economies that he studied, widely scattered though these were in time and space. Generally these similarities revolved around the conception of certain outlaws being 'considered by their people as heroes, as champions, avengers, fighters for justice, perhaps leaders of liberation, and in any case as men to be admired, helped and supported'.[10] This interpretation has been widely criticised by many other students of banditry.[11] But Hobsbawm's basic contention that certain individuals transcend the merely criminal to be

accepted by their own social group, and so are to some extent justified in their violence and defiance of authority, has stood the test of time as a seminal and still valuable approach to a broad sociopolitical phenomenon.

Although Hobsbawm considered the lore and legendry of many of the bandits he studied, his work is essentially one of historical sociology. Investigation of cultural traditions around the world and over a greater timescale reveals an even greater number of outlaw heroes, real and mythic. Nor do these figures persist only in their environing cultures. The dynamic processes of regional, sometimes national politics and economics that produce and sustain them are increasingly being translated to the global arena. The Islamic fundamentalist terrorism of the third millennium is producing figures bearing marked similarities with the history and legendry of outlaw heroes across the world and through time.

This book looks at the histories and the popular representations of outlaw heroes and identifies a set of recurring elements. These elements determine the way in which outlaw hero narratives are constructed and perpetuated over great distance and over long periods of time. They also constitute a moral code which those outlaws wishing to retain the assistance of their sympathisers must at least be seen to honour, following a cultural script in which all involved have their traditionally assigned roles to play. When outlaw heroes are understood in terms of these continuities, parallels and cultural imperatives, they emerge from the mists of myth and vested interest as continuingly important figures in the history and politics of humanity – past, present and, in all probability, future.

Outlawed

The outlaw is an individual who has been cast out of society, either for a crime or because he has become a threat to those in power – sometimes a combination of both these things. Being expelled from human company and so into the 'animal' domain of the wild is an ancient concept in world history and myth. It is a practice that eventually developed into penal systems in which wrongdoers are sequestered within society as punishment for their crimes and as a means of protecting the remainder of the community from potential further wrongdoing. As societies developed, outlawry was often codified into evolving legal systems. In the Roman Empire the bandit, or *latrone*, was deprived of all legal rights. Following the legal and social arrangements of their Norse origins, Icelanders developed outlawry as a means of dealing with major crimes, usually murder. The Icelandic sagas of the medieval era are full of people being outlawed for violent acts, often those with some relationship to power struggles within the ruling elite. Grettir, one of the most famous of

these saga characters, is only the most elaborated outlaw hero in a lengthy saga tradition.

In medieval England, outlawry was also a legal nonstate. The lands and goods of individuals outlawed were forfeit to the king and the individual's lord. The outlaw was presumed to bear the wolf's head, an ancient symbol of the outcast, and no longer considered a human being. He – and outlaws were always male at this time – could also be arrested by any man. If the outlaw resisted arrest it was lawful for him to be killed. This situation persisted until 1329 when the king's judges decided that only a properly appointed justice could put an outlaw to death, though it seems that outlaws were still being killed extrajudicially until at least the end of the fourteenth century.[12]

Although the severity of outlaw legislation declined from the fifteenth century, outlawry remained within the British,[13] colonial and even American legal codes. It was invoked in Australia against the bushrangers Hall, Dunn and Gilbert in New South Wales during the 1860s and against Ned Kelly and one of his gang in the colony of Victoria in 1879.[14] During the American Civil War the Federal authorities outlawed the members of Quantrill's raiders, originally an irregular Confederate band of combatants including a youthful Jesse James. In non-Anglophone cultures the concept also existed as a legal form[15] and was transported to the Spanish and Portuguese colonies of the New World to continue an already lengthy Hispanic history of outlawry. The concept was also used in colonial Cyprus and in Greece, where 40 brigands were legally outlawed in 1865, with large rewards placed on their heads. Five years later the number outlawed had risen to 200.[16]

While not designed specifically for the crime of highway robbery, outlawry was typically the legal means used to deal with such lawbreaking. In medieval England highway robbery was endemic and usually carried out by large gangs of criminals. It was the focus of several fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century attempts – some being briefly successful – to declare it treasonous, an early indication of the continuing linkage between the actions of certain outlaws and political struggle. In 1283 the Statute of Westminster attempted to reorganise the legal system and address the corruption and chaos of medieval society. This was only partly successful and Wat Tyler's rebellion of 1381 was a peasant reaction to a long period of political, social and economic turmoil. Significantly, this is the social milieu in which a figure named 'Robin Hood' first fleetingly appears. The initial mention of Robin Hood does not refer to him as an outlaw, although the context suggests he has some relationship to social and political discontent, connections that become more pronounced in subsequent ballads and stories. He becomes the outlaw in Lincoln green and a displaced noble only some time later in the development of his extensive mythology. By the time of Jack Cade's rebellion of 1450 a recent scholar is

able to state 'that those who participated in Cade's Rebellion knew of the Robin Hood tradition and utilized many of the outlaw's philosophies'.[17]

Robin Hood has since become a worldwide term and a conceptual category to describe those individuals who stand out from the vast crowds of everyday criminals. Despite their illegal status, which may or may not involve them being actually outlawed through relevant legislative processes, these people are heroes to large social groups who see their actions reflecting – and often revenging – whatever sense of injustice they feel. Whether such perceptions are based on fact depends very much on your point of view. Between the opposing poles of such perceptions is a vast social, economic and political space in which myth and history swirl darkly around each other.

In Spite of History

What, if anything, is important about outlaw heroes? Aren't they just criminals? Unusually flamboyant, perhaps; in some cases the unfortunate victims of circumstance. But still just thugs, robbers and murderers who get what they deserve.

These valid questions are often raised. What makes the historical and mythical outlaws ranging through the pages of this book different is their identification by one or more social groups as something more than simple criminals. In these circumstances their crimes, for the most part undoubted, are usually ignored or glossed over. They are sanitised for the greater purpose or need of those who believe they are being badly treated and see the actions of *their* outlaws in some way redressing, even avenging those dissatisfactions. In these circumstances fact and fiction are intermingled and confused, creating the air of contradiction and ambivalence that characteristically surrounds outlaw heroes.

The always fraught nature of episodes of outlawry further contributes to this situation. Tensions and conflicts over land, resources, ethnicity, religion and political borders form the foundations for the lives and legends of all historical and most mythical outlaw heroes. One or more of these is usually the flashpoint for the explosion of defiance, often touched off by an apparently minor incident of violence or insult. Such moments may come only after lengthy periods of smouldering resentment among the communities that give birth to an outlaw hero. The Australian Ned Kelly and his comrades take to the bush after a drunken policemen harasses the women of the Kelly family in their home. In Mexico Pancho Villa attacks the local landowner he believes has raped his sister. The Brazilian *cangaçeiro*, Lampião, as did many before him, takes to outlawry as a result of vendettas related to the ownership of land and the intertwined complexities of family honour and male pride. Whenever and

wherever the hero rises up against those seen as oppressors there are histories of antagonism, suspicion and outrage to fuel the fires of defiance.

Violence is an inevitable feature of outlaw activity. Often the violence is serious, prolonged and savage, involving all sides and sometimes those on the same side. Informers, suspected or actual, are always given rapid and sometimes brutal despatch by outlaw heroes dependent upon the silence of their own 'resistant communities', as the cultural critic Stephen Knight has usefully called such collectivities.[18] One of the Kelly gang's closest confidantes was blasted to death by his best friend the night before the final showdown at Glenrowan station, suspected of informing to the police. The Gujerati Baba Deva murdered his sister and wife. Lampião gouged out a man's eyeballs in front of his wife and children before shooting him to death through the bloody empty sockets.

Violence is also employed by those who oppose the outlaw. The police, paramilitary or irregular enforcers variously attack, imprison, torture and kill suspected sympathisers in their pursuit of those they support. They often display savagery against the outlaws they capture. When police finally killed Lampião they cut off his head, and those of some others of his gang, and displayed the grisly relics throughout the region. European figures such as Sandor Rosza and Mandrin met agonising public ends. In those places where banditry has become an institution or otherwise normalised activity, such as parts of China and India, bandit gangs may attack each other, causing ongoing regional conflicts in which members of local communities can be caught in the withering crossfire.

As a logical consequence of these circumstances, outlaw heroes are usually betrayed – both in myth and reality – by one or more disenchanted or coerced members of their supporting communities or by their own comrades. Sometimes the motive is the collection of the usually large rewards offered by the authorities. Perhaps it is revenge for real or imagined slights. Sometimes rivalry is the trigger for treachery, or the fatal act may be committed because the outlaw has lost heroic status among one or more factions of his previously sympathetic peers. This usually occurs when the outlaw fails to live up to the moral code embedded in the tradition.

Whatever form of betrayal occurs, the moral code of the outlaw hero generally demands that he dies bravely, although a good death is not universal among outlaw heroes. The Calabrian Giuseppe Musolino (1875–1956), for example, spent most of his life in prison and died there, having attained the status of an outlaw martyr. But dying well is definitely the preferred mode of the tradition, and going down guns blazing in a last desperate shootout with the police or paramilitaries is the best way to ensure immortality. Failing this, a brave and defiant exit at the gallows or other machinery of death is required,

as demonstrated by outlaw heroes as diverse as England's Dick Turpin, Italy's Stefano Pelloni and Australia's Jack Donohoe, to name only some of those who have gone to their deaths with boldness, bravado and not a little style. When these necessities cannot be achieved in actuality, the mythologising processes usually take over and, in spite of history, provide an appropriately 'game' exit for the outlaw.

Such is the charisma of an outlaw hero in life that many people will be reluctant to accept the fact of his death. Even despite compelling evidence to the contrary it may be widely and powerfully rumoured that the body in the grave is not that of the hero. He secretly escaped – to America, the Boer War, to Mexico or elsewhere – and is living quietly in a remote location. This belief is sometimes attached to folk heroes who are not outlaws, such as King Arthur, Barbarossa, the Slovenian Kralj Matjaz (King Mathias), the Serbian Ivan Cronojevic and the Spanish Roderigo, among others, and even the singer Elvis Presley. When associated with outlaw heroes this belief is generally a reflection of their high status within the communities that supported them during their lifetimes and who continue to celebrate and mythologise them in their afterlives.

The outlaw hero tradition, then, is a bloody one. It is born from violence and dispossession and in reality, as opposed to its often sanitised mythology, it is often savage. Almost always it ends in treachery, recrimination and revenge. One function of the outlaw moral code is to control this violence, or at least keep it within the bounds of what the supporters of outlaw heroes consider appropriate or tolerable. The outlaw who follows this code is expected to refrain from attacking the poor, the weak and the witless. Violence is only to be directed against those who oppress, and even then it should ideally be only in self-defence or through extreme provocation, such as the killing or mistreatment of outlaw family members or sympathisers. Outlaws who are seen to kill only for pleasure or without good reason risk losing their vital support base, usually a local or regional community. If an outlaw is especially violent, this vehemence should be directed against the oppressors, in which case it can be accommodated as justified retribution and revenge for real or imagined injustices. The appeal of figures such as Gregorio Cortez and Pancho Villa, for instance, is that they are seen by the Hispanic communities that support them as avengers of their oppression by the *gringos*.

The power conflicts that underlie outlaw heroism ensure that the hero of the underdogs is generally provoked or forced into defying the law. Outlaw heroes do not simply take up arms one day and ride off to rob banks, trains or homesteads. They are instead seen and portrayed by those who support them as the victims of official persecution, police corruption, state coercion or some other form of oppressive activity. 'The Governor of Victoria was

the enemy of this man', runs one of the many ballads about Australian bushranger Ned Kelly. Almost all the Brazilian *cangaçeiros* of note took up the outlaw life as a result of what they felt to be oppression and injustice at the hands of usually more powerful landowners and their crony networks. The situation with Indian *dacoits* and Chinese bandits is similar, as it is wherever these figures are found. Because the outlaw is seen to be forced to take up arms – and is often at pains to present himself in this light – those of his own social group inevitably see him as at least a potential righter of the wrongs visited upon them by others.

The sympathy and active support of the outlaw's community is the basis of both his physical survival and his mythology. To elude the authorities, gather information about their whereabouts and to find safe haven in sheltering homes or farms the outlaw hero must have, and keep, the loyalty of his own people. This requires being seen to live up to the moral code, as well as the perceived redistribution of any booty of crime back amongst the supporters. Such a classic Robin Hood dimension may be achieved in fact, or it may simply be implied by the expressions and perhaps a few symbolic gestures of such generosity on the part of the outlaw hero. It may even be totally nonexistent and the fabrication of media fantasy, as in the case of all British highwaymen, according to historian Gillian Spraggs, who writes: 'Were there ever any robbers who made a point of distributing their booty to people in need? It is sad, but hardly surprising, that in England, at least, there are no authenticated instances of this.'[19] In an attempt to comprehend the mythology of Dick Turpin, historian James Sharpe demonstrates the undeserving nature of the real Turpin for his subsequent celebration as a friend of the poor.[20] But despite these awkward realities, the myth of the noble robber is widespread, long-lived and powerful throughout the world.

Not only do such figures continue to appear in all times and places, including our own era, they also continue to be the subject of artistic and literary glorification. Noble robbers turn up in Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (c. 1590), in the character of Macheath in John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), in the dramas of Goethe and Schiller, and in the figure of Roque Guinart in Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605). The novelist Peter Carey has fictionalised the life and legend of the bushranger Ned Kelly to considerable acclaim. In less exalted forms of street literature and balladry the outlaw hero is a constant favourite, as he is in oral tradition. A mid-nineteenth-century observer wrote of the delight with which the *lazzaroni*, or Neapolitan street urchins, heard the stories of wandering tale tellers which were frequently 'the adventures of renowned brigands, the valorous deeds of Titta Grieco, of the Spiciarelli, of Angelo del Duca, Bartolomeo Romano, or Pietro Mancini. The crowd listened with open ears, their eyes fixed upon him with almost painful interest,

uttering shouts of admiration as they heard of each new murder committed by one of the heroes I have named'.[21]

Dependent though they are on the expectations and machinations of others, outlaw heroes also have considerable mastery of their own destinies. This can be seen in the letter writing, speechifying and similar public relations skills of Jesse James, Ned Kelly, and Salvatore Guiliano and many others. All these men went to considerable lengths to compose and deliver their messages to newspapers, politicians and, in Guiliano's case, even to the President of the United States. During raids, they would also often have the benefit of a live audience, spellbound in fear and awe, as they were harangued on the injustices of the authorities and the righteousness of the outlaw's cause. Ned Kelly made something of a speciality of this sort of performance, but similar tirades are reported of other outlaw heroes. As he robs their trains, the Brazilian 'Captain Silvino' complains about the incursions of English capital on the railways of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Brazil. The western Macedonian brigand Vasileios Zourkas had a pamphlet published that presented him as 'a Greek version of the Robin hood type of popular hero, one that possessed all those qualities a Greek hero was expected to possess.'[22] In the modern era, the Indian *dacoit* Phoolan Devi had her life story and justification of her crimes written up by professional writers and published globally through a major publisher. Osama bin Laden extended this art form into the format of the audio and videotape, complaining of 'injustices against the people'.[23]

Other things that can significantly assist in the celebration of an outlaw's life and legend are the ability to be kind and courteous to victims and supporters alike. The 'gentleman highwayman' image is not a total fabrication of novelists and Hollywood scriptwriters, it is also a common element of outlaw hero traditions around the world and one that is often acknowledged in ballad, story and reality. Arthur Hayward's *Lives of the Most Remarkable Criminals*, first published in 1735, tells of the highwayman James Wright, executed in 1721, who 'valued himself not a little that he had never injured any poor man'.[24] Another highwayman, John Levee, gave back a poor man's horse and money, while John Turner, alias 'Civil John', was renowned for his courtesy to his victims, often giving back a portion of what he had robbed from them. Being seen to preserve family 'honour' by refraining from molesting women is an especially valued ingredient of the Hispanic version of the outlaw hero tradition, while the Chinese bandit code specifically forbade the mistreatment of female abductees.

Also important in outlaw hero lives and afterlives is the ability to outwit, elude and escape the authorities, usually with some panache, often in clever disguise and preferably in a way that makes the pursuers look like bumbling fools. Outlaw hero songs and stories around the world are filled with such real

or imagined incidents, from Robin Hood's ability to melt into the greenwood to the frequent video and Internet appearances of Osama bin Laden's troubling phantasm. Often this ability is believed to be the result of the outlaw's possession of supernatural attributes. Beliefs of this kind are found in China, England, Brazil, Java, Italy and most of the numerous other cultures that support outlaw heroes.

These recurring elements are integral to a tradition that perpetually negotiates the uncertain borders between history and myth and within which certain individuals are singled out as friends of the poor, avengers of the oppressed and righters of wrong. Fact and folklore weave around and through each other in the events of individual outlaw lives, deaths and afterlives. Regardless of how often historians reveal the frequently unheroic facts of what occurred, tradition around the world prefers to shape certain outlaws in the mould of Robin Hood. This process, inevitably it seems, is reiterated time and time again and in place after place through myth as well as in history.

Ambivalent Outlaws

Because outlaw heroes operate on the boundaries between the legal and the extralegal and/or within zones of political, economic or cultural conflict, they are often ambivalent figures – heroic and admirable to some social groups yet villainous and repulsive to others. Ambivalence and uncertainty about the righteousness or otherwise of those associated with banditry is an ancient aspect of the outlaw hero tradition. The bandit of Greek mythology, Sciron, is said to have blocked the road, levying tribute from passing travellers. Those who could not or would not pay were thrown into a pit inhabited by a giant tortoise, which tore them limb from limb. That is one version of the story. Another version has it that Sciron was in fact a kindly old gent and a good father.[25]

Where do the facts end and the fiction begin? It is not that simple. The fraught nature of outlawry and the many conflicts involved are complex issues in themselves. They are further complicated by the existence of such a powerful cultural tradition, with its ability to influence the perceptions of friend and foe alike. The strong emotions aroused by outlaws, alive or dead, are usually encapsulated in the straightforward notion that they are either heroes or villains, depending on which side of the argument we stand. Usually this choice is not available to the participants, as those with the most to win or lose in the debate are already committed to their particular socioeconomic network and the belief systems it supports. The power relations between such groups, almost always the occasion of outlawry episodes, ensure that each will see the outlaw as either a hero or a villain.

The extent to which such figures are 'good' or 'bad' depends on the eye of the beholder and because there are usually a variety of vested interests in seeing and portraying outlaws as heroes or villains, ambivalence and contradiction are an inherent feature of their traditions. Consequently, the image of outlaw heroes contains both positive and negative elements, these oppositions being held within an overall cultural discourse in which folklore presents the outlaw as a hero, the media represents him as a flawed but romantic figure and the forces of power and the law categorise him as a criminal.

Outlaw heroes ride between the borders of history and mythology. As well as dissolving the always-shaky boundaries between history and folklore, the outlaw hero tradition has a considerable capacity to avoid facts that contradict it, to elaborate those that confirm it and to invent those that never existed. The ability of cultural traditions in general to construct and reconstruct reality is well attested.[26] These processes are neither random nor unlimited. They take place within a well-defined narrative framework that controls the mythologisation of the outlaw hero and also conditions what he must, and must not, do, or at least what he must be seen to be doing. These complex interminglings of fact and fiction, of history and folklore can be witnessed in action over and over again in the lives and legends of noble robbers. In history they inhabit a specific period and place in which certain political situations, economic circumstances and social relationships condition the lives of all involved. Things are done to them; they do things to others. These deeds are variously corroborated, disputed, defended or vilified. At the same time, and for long after, the cultural processes of mythmaking envelop these figures and their activities. Outlaw heroes are therefore at once both rooted in time and place and also timeless insofar as their stories conform to an international stereotype, genre or category that has little respect for 'facts' but which is believed, or at least not denied, often by large numbers of people. The anomalous, ambivalent and contradictory chasm between these outposts of history and myth is the continual context in which we need to understand the generation and perpetuation of the outlaw hero.

If the tales of the world's many Robin Hoods were merely entertainment and diversion they would be mainly of antiquarian interest. But the serious consequences of these traditions and their intersections with politics, economics and culture require a deeper understanding of the processes and imperatives involved. Outlaw heroes have been with us for probably as long as there have been laws to be flouted. They continue to appear today and to be involved in profound matters of sovereignty, independence, ethnic difference, class struggle and global terrorism.

Part One

MYTHS AND HISTORIES

Chapter 2

BEFORE ROBIN HOOD

When the rivers flood the old die and the young become bandits.

—Chinese saying

In the legendry, literature, art and popular cultures of the English-speaking peoples, Robin Hood has become the iconic outlaw hero. But the tradition of the robber who fights on the side of the poor against injustice and oppression is powerful around the world, in many cases long predating the earliest mention of the forest archer. Some of these traditions were in existence before any known contact between the countries that sustain them. Whether they developed in one place and were spread through the networks of oral storytelling along trade and migration routes, or whether they arose independently as broadly similar human responses to similar social, economic and political circumstances is not known. Perhaps we never will know. But it is possible to trace the earliest known expressions of the outlaw hero and the tradition that sustains such figures in the Roman Empire, in China's Northern Song Dynasty and throughout Europe since the Dark Ages.

Outlaws of Empire

In ancient Greece, banditry was originally considered to be just another way of earning a living. By the time of the Roman Empire however, it had become an especially heinous crime and those who followed the calling were nonpersons, denied all legal rights and liable to be crucified or thrown to the beasts in the gladiatorial arena for the grisly pleasure of the spectators. The Empire itself was plagued by bandits, or *latrones*, a few of whom are known to have wielded considerable alternative power and to have enjoyed sympathy and support.

One was Viriatus, leader of a Lusitanian and Celtiberian insurrection between 147 and 139 BC. Viriatus was a herdsman, the classic occupation of the bandit, and his impressive skills of war were much admired by Roman writers, who portrayed him as having the admired characteristics of the Roman citizen at a time when the Late Republic was felt by many to be in a state of

decadence.[1] His motivation for defiance was a treacherous massacre of his people by the commander Servius Surpicius Galba in 151 BC. According to Roman literary depictions, Viriatus was brave, physically impressive, generous and fair. His virtues imbued him with a magical invincibility that was only broken by betrayal. Viriatus also had a briefly illustrious successor in another leader of Iberian disaffection, Sertorius. According to his legend, Sertorius had a form of animal familiar in the shape of a white hind that afforded him divine protection and knowledge of his enemy's plans. However, this useful ally seems to have been of little help when Sertorius was eventually betrayed and murdered by a group of his own comrades.[2]

Spartacus was the ex-gladiator leader of a briefly triumphant slave revolt in 73–71 BC. This achievement and the application of his organisational and military skills to what was basically a rabble of escaped slaves, led to him being seen as a fighter against oppression and injustice, with one story that he intended to march on Rome itself. While he had no magical powers himself, his wife was a prophet who predicted his success, and he was credited with insisting on the equitable distribution of booty among his followers. Spartacus looked to the Roman state as a model for organising his own rag-tag band, though there is no suggestion of political ideology in his story. Finally, against his advice, Spartacus's followers decide to fight a pitched battle with the legions of Crassus. Knowing they are doomed, Spartacus nevertheless positions himself in the front line, dying in violent glory[3] and assuring himself of a good press into posterity. The 1960 Hollywood fabulation of his life and death, and subsequent television and film treatments are but the most recent manifestation of his afterlife.

Crucifixion was chosen as the appropriate mode for the execution of Jesus of Nazareth because he was classified as a bandit. His attacks upon the Jewish establishment were an implied threat to those interests and their convenient alliance with the Roman overlords.[4] Jesus was not a bandit, though his teachings on such matters as the moral obligations of the rich toward the poor were perceived as a menace to the powerful elites of Galilee.[5] His defiance of the Mosaic rules relating to purity led him into direct conflict with the Pharisees who prevailed upon a reluctant Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, to rid them of the problem.[6] Some scholars have argued that Jesus was a peasant revolutionary of the type identified by Hobsbawm. In this view, his teachings represented a direct threat to the established order and could be seen as an attempt to establish a more equitable socioeconomic regime,[7] the classic dream of the outlaw hero.

Needless to say, theologians and biblical historians hotly contest such interpretations[8] but while banditry in Galilee was reportedly rare immediately before, during and after the life of Jesus, the province was not a happy one.