# THE OUTLAWS OF MEDIEVAL LEGEND

MAURICE KEEN

## The Outlaws of Medieval Legend

The swashbuckling mythical heroes of the Middle Ages have been the object of fascination for centuries. *The Outlaws of Medieval Legend* explores not only the notorious Robin Hood and William Wallace, but also some now forgotton rogues such as Gamelyn and Fulke Fitzwarin.

Apart from William Wallace, the heroes of the outlaw legends did not play a leading role on the historical stage. Nevertheless, this book reveals how they were remembered in tradition for generations. This intriguing book explains the popularity of these figures and how the stories appealed to the people of the Middle Ages. Maurice Keen discusses the origins, spirit and background of the tales as well as the real people on whom they were based.

In this edition of *The Outlaws of Medieval Legend*, the author provides a new introduction to set the book in the context of recent work on these exciting characters.

**Maurice Keen** is a distinguished historian of the Middle Ages and Fellow and Tutor at Balliol College, Oxford. His many books include *England in the Later Middle Ages* (Routledge, 1975), *Heraldry* (Yale, 1986) and *Nobles, Knights and Men at Arms in the Middle Ages* (Hambledon Press, 1996).

# A mery gelle of

Robyn Hoode and of hys lyfe, wyth
a newe playe for to be played
in Maye games very ple-
saunte and full of pastyme.

# The Outlaws of Medieval Legend

Maurice Keen


London and New York

First published 1961
Revised edition published in 1977
Revised paperback edition published in 1987
Revised edition published in 2000
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
270 Madison Ave, New York NY 10016

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group*

Transferred to Digital Printing 2007



*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN 0-415-23650-9 (Hbk)
ISBN 0-415-23900-1 (Pbk)

**Publisher's Note**
The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this reprint but points out that some imperfections in the original may be apparent

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# Preface to the New Edition

Forty years ago, when this book was written, I was a very young would-be historian, just starting out in academic life. Since writing it, my historical interests have developed in quite other directions, but for a time its subject played a part in my life that may explain why it is the sort of book it is.

In the summer of 1954 I had just completed my national service, and was waiting to go up to Balliol College, Oxford, to read English Literature. A letter from the College had suggested that in preparation I should try to read, among other things, all Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. There was a copy of them on my parents' shelves in Bell's old nineteenth century edition, and when I came to the *Coke's Tale of Gamelyn* I did not notice the footnote which explained that it was not by Chaucer, and plunged in. I emerged tremendously stirred and excited, and, realising how close this *Tale* was to that of Robin Hood, turned aside to the *Oxford Book of Ballads* to read the first versions of his story. Soon after, newly arrived at university, I attended some lectures by Father Gervase Mathew on fourteenth century romance, and when he spoke of the *Tale* and some other interesting analogues to it (including the *Romance of Fulk Fitzwarin*), I became newly excited. I promised myself that when I had time I would try to pursue the matter of outlaw stories further.

The chance came eighteen months later, when I had changed course to History, and the second year historians were all encouraged to compete for a College prize for a 'long essay', on a subject of their own choosing. Robin Hood was the subject of my (very long) essay, in which I sought to trace, through the stories of Hereward, Fitzwarin and Gamelyn an origin for his myth in literature of protest, and to relate Robin's robbing of the rich with the Peasants' Revolt (which had grabbed my attention in a tutorial under Richard Southern). I shared the prize with two contemporaries (one of whom, if I remember

rightly, had written on the American Civil War and the other on coal miners), and came away the better for some £15 and a typescript of some 20,000 words.

Some three years later, when I was a junior research fellow of the Queen's College, I decided (at the instigation of Colin Franklin of Routledge) to try to expand that typescript into a book. I had besides been re-excited by a new article by R. H. Hilton in *Past and Present* (1958), in which he argued forcefully for the same sort of connection between the Robin Hood ballads and the Peasants' Revolt towards which I had been groping in my undergraduate essay. John Prestwich, my guide and mentor among the senior fellows of Queen's, encouraged me. I did not explain to him certain things that were in my mind; that I thought my doctoral research on the laws of war was not going well, that I was depressed about my prospects of getting a permanent academic job, and that Colin Franklin's suggestion seemed to offer a chance of leaving behind something between hard covers if I had to alter my career dreams. I embarked on some intensive further reading and then began to write, fast and excitedly.

I hope that some of that excitement shows in the book that is now being reprinted. As a broad treatment of the whole *genre* of outlaw stories and of literary relations between them, I hope also that it may still have some value. But I can now see plainly the marks of haste in writing, and of the fact that, when I wrote, I was a good deal less far into my apprenticeship in historical research than I supposed. My views on a number of issues raised in the book have altered radically, moreover, notably on the connection between medieval outlaw stories and class antagonisms, which coloured so much of what I wrote in youth. This is why the book is impossible to revise, and appears as it did in 1961, unaltered. To explain what I think now would mean writing a new book, and I have no urge to attempt that.

I do however owe it to my readers to clarify where I believe that I went wrong forty years ago, and where and why I have changed my views. That is what the Introduction that follows this Preface must seek to do.

MK

# Preface

A great many people have helped me in the preparation of this book, and it is my first duty to acknowledge this. First of all my thanks are due to my colleague at Queen's College, Mr. J. O. Prestwich, who read the book in typescript and has given me invaluable advice and guidance, together with a great deal of valuable information—far too much, indeed, for me to acknowledge adequately in the text. I am also especially grateful to Mr. J. Wordsworth of Exeter College and to Mrs. Wordsworth for their advice and criticism, and to Father Gervase Mathew, whose lectures on fourteenth-century literature first interested me in the subject of this book. The Trustees of the British Museum I must thank for permission to reproduce three illustrations from printed books in their care. For their unfailing advice and kindness over the book's production I am grateful to Messrs. Routledge and Kegan Paul, and to the Editor of the Series of which this book is the first volume to appear.

The faults and mistakes in the book are of course my own. It is not, I fear, the product of extensive academic research, and for this reason I have tried not to write it as if it were. Because I have used no new sources and advanced no revolutionary theories, I have dispensed with the apparatus of learned footnotes, glossaries, and so on, and have tried to limit myself to telling the stories of the medieval outlaws in a form as near as possible to the original versions, and to fitting them into their correct historical context. This treatment leads inevitably to generalization, and to the omission from time to time of the cautious qualification. I can only hope that an effort to retain simplicity in discussion of a subject as endlessly debatable as the myth of Robin Hood has not resulted in a plethora of error and unwarranted assumption.

M.K.

# Introduction to the Second Edition

Between 1900 and the late 1950s, when I was writing this book, there had not been much scholarly interest in Robin Hood or in outlaw legends more generally. Since the book first appeared in 1961, there has been a great deal of interest in both these matters, and what has been written by others has led me to reconsider, in some respects drastically, many of the views that I then expressed. The principal purpose of this introduction must be to explain where my opinions have altered, where I now think I went astray. But before that I need to say a word about some of the more important discussions of the outlaws and their stories that have appeared since 1961 (a fuller list of recent studies is given in the Additional Bibliography). All the outlaws whose legends I discussed in my book have attracted further investigation, but attention has, very naturally, focussed above all on the most famous of them, Robin Hood, and it is what I have written about his story and its context that requires most revision. I will therefore mention briefly some of the researches that have thrown new light on the earlier heroes of whom I have written before focussing more closely on the issues raised by the revived and very active scholarly interest in Robin Hood.

The earliest of the outlaws discussed below is Hereward the Wake. Cyril Hart, in the essay on 'Hereward the Wake and his companions' in his collection *The Danelaw* (1992), has added considerably to what we know of this Old English resistance hero. He has identified the Domesday Book holdings of Hereward and a number of his associates, some of whom (notably one Thurkill of Harringworth) had been substantial landowners in East Anglia before the Norman Conquest, and stood to lose dramatically by the Conqueror's policy of settling Norman knights on the estates of local monasteries, in particular Peterborough and Ely. This probably contributed significantly to the sharpness of the resistance to the invader in this region. The next two outlaws of my book in chronological order are Fulk

Fitzwarin and Eustace the Monk (both born, probably, about 1170). Professor Glyn Burgess, in the introductions to his new translations of their two romances, *Two Medieval Outlaws* (1997), has brought together a much fuller and more informed account than I offer of the lives and landed interests of the historical figures on whom these stories are based. The collection edited by T. H. Ohlgren, *Medieval Outlaws: Ten Tales in Modern English* (1998), also includes modern translations of both these romances, along with a translation of the *Gesta Herewardi*. His introduction includes an invaluable discussion of tales of banditry and of the 'good outlaw' as literary themes, and of their sociological significance.

Ohlgren's *Ten Tales* includes modern English versions of the stories of three other outlaws whom I discuss, William Wallace, Gamelyn—and Robin Hood (a modernised version of the *Lytell Geste of Robyn Hode*). M. P. McDiarmid produced in 1968 a new edition of *Hary's Wallace*: the modifications to what I have written that are suggested by his masterly introduction are so major and so significant that I have set them aside for discussion at the end of this Introduction. The *Tale of Gamelyn* has also attracted attention, in two illuminating papers, the one by Richard Kaeuper ('An historian's reading of the *Tale of Gamelyn*', in *Medium Aevum*, vol. 52, 1983), and the other by John Scattergood ('*The Tale of Gamelyn*: the Noble Robber as Provincial Hero', in Carol M. Meale, ed., *Readings in Medieval Romance, 1994*). Both stress the provincial social background of the romance: 'we have moved from the world of emergent high medieval chivalry to the late medieval English countryside where the country gentry and the yeomen are the actors' (Kaeuper). Both stress as the dominant theme of the *Tale* 'justifiable law-breaking', the justification lying in the contemporarily perceived misdirections and corruptions of fourteenth century justice and local administration. Both find parallels to its mockery of the law and assaults on court sessions and justices from the historical record of actual events. We see in *The Tale*, Scattergood argues cogently, a reflection of the conservatism of the minor country landowners in a violent society: 'it is a voice not so much from the greenwood as from the backwoods, resistant to a centralisation (of justice and administration) that it mistrusts'.

That same mistrust, and the same acceptance of violence in the course of justifiable law-breaking, colour likewise the stories of Robin Hood. As I have said, it is his legend above all among those concerning outlaws which has excited the widespread interest of scholars. The principal issues that their research has raised are well surveyed in two important books. One is the *Rymes of Robin Hood* (1978), a collection of the principal Robin Hood ballads brought together by R. B. Dobson and J. Taylor and introduced by a substantial discussion of their origins, audience and significance. The other is the magisterial study by Sir James Holt, *Robin Hood* (1982), which offers the most thorough, wide-ranging and coherent investigation of the subject to date. Besides these two books there has also been extensive discussion in learned journals. The most important articles that have appeared over the last two decades have been usefully included in the collection edited by Stephen Knight, *Robin Hood: An Anthology of Scholarship and Criticism* (1999). The most significant papers reproduced there, from the present point of view, seem to me to be those by John Maddicott, Douglas Gray, Peter Coss and Colin Richmond (for titles and bibliographical details, see the Additional Bibliography). This collection also reprints David Crook's important note, which first appeared in the *English Historical Review*, vol. 99 (1984), which takes back the first clear allusion to Robin's reputation as an outlaw to a note on the Memoranda Roll of the King's Remembrancer in the Exchequer, of April 1262. There is thus a very considerable literature in the light of which my opinions of 1961 need to be reviewed. In what remains of this Introduction I will do my best to explain where I now stand in the light of it, and how and where it has altered my opinions.

* * *

In 1961 I argued, emphatically, that the Robin Hood story rose to popularity in the later middle ages because it gave expression to the social grievances of the 'common people', and I equated the 'common people'—over-exclusively, I think—with the rural peasantry. The arguments with which I supported this view, in particular in Chapters XI and XIV, do not now seem to be satisfactory. In the first place I assumed too

readily that the ballad form in which the Robin Hood story first found literary expression was a sure indication of its popular origin (pp. 96–7). In fact, there are good arguments for supposing that the origins of narrative 'ballads' such as those of Robin Hood are not to be sought, as I then thought they should be, in the communal story telling of country people—the accompaniment of their song and dance at rustic festivals—but were composed for recitation. Those who composed them in the form in which they now survive drew on diverse materials, which included full-scale literary romances. The Robin Hood ballads seem therefore in their origins to be closer to the medieval metrical romance than to the true sung ballad. Fulk Fitzwarin, whose story has affinities with Robin's (see Chapter IV) is known to have been the hero of a lost alliterative romance in English, and the *Tale of Gamelyn*, which is in so many ways so very close to the story of Robin Hood (see Chapter VII) is in form a metrical romance. These poems were certainly intended for a genteel rather than an exclusively popular audience, and so also must have been the lost romances about Ranulf of Chester, who is coupled with Robin Hood in Sloth's remark in *Piers Plowman*:

> I can not my pater noster as the prest hit saith
> But I can rymes of Robyn Hode and Randle Erle of Chester.

In 1961 I exaggerated the distance separating the Robin Hood ballads from stories such as these with an appeal to an aristocratic audience, from which in fact they seem to be at least in part derivative. I am therefore no longer inclined to argue for an exclusively popular appeal for the Robin Hood ballads, and am much more attracted by Sir James Holt's suggestion that the original focal centre for the dissemination of Robin's legend was the gentleman's household, 'not in the chamber but in the hall, where the entertainment was aimed not only at the master but also at the members (of the household) and the staff'.

In 1961, however, I assumed that ballads were a sure guide to the attitudes of the common people, and went on to argue that a significant relation was discernible between their attitudes, as expressed in the Robin Hood ballads, and the aspirations of the peasantry, as expressed in the demands that they

put forward at the time of the Peasants' Revolt. Here my arguments, as set out in Chapter XI, appear on reflection somewhat specious. I relied chiefly on the fact that the kinds of people towards whom the peasants in 1381 revealed a special animus—officers of the law and ecclesiastical landlords—were also the favourite victims of the outlaws. But hostility towards grasping ecclesiastics and corrupt officials was not in any degree exclusive to the peasant class: for high and low alike they were two stock targets for complaint throughout the whole medieval period. Given this, it was rather special pleading on my part to suggest that, in order to relate the stories of the outlaws to peasant discontent, one does not need to look in them for references to the specific matters about which peasants were complaining in 1381, such as the exaction of labour services and of incidents of servile tenure like merchet and heriot, or the oppressive wage regulations of the Statute of Labourers. As a number of scholars have pointed out, agitation against unfree status is a theme conspicuous by its absence in the outlaw stories, and there is nowhere in them any sign of any sort of mental association between the outlaws' freedom in the 'fair forest' and emancipation from manorial serfdom. As I now believe, the appeal of Robin Hood's story owes much more than I once thought to the glamour that so easily attaches, in any age, to the activities of the 'gentleman bandit' whose misdoings are redeemed by the courage and generosity of his nature and of the manner of his robbing, and have nothing much to do with specifically class tensions, such as those which surfaced in the course of the Peasants' Revolt.

In this connection, Sir James Holt has also rightly stressed the origin of the Robin Hood ballads in the north, a region significantly untouched by the peasant movement of 1381. In the early ballads the centre of Robin Hood's activities is always Barnesdale, north of Doncaster in the West Riding of Yorkshire, rather than Sherwood, and it is here too that the Scottish chroniclers Bower and Wyntoun, whose references to Robin are earlier than any of the extant ballads, locate him. Barnesdale is close to the site of Robin Hood's Well which, as we learn from the Monkbretton cartulary, was already known as Robin Hood's Stone in the early fifteenth century, and is not far from Kirklees, the traditional site of his death and

burial. Local references to the area in the *Litel Geste of Robyn Hode* are moreover specific to a point otherwise unparalleled in the early ballads: the 'Saylis' for instance, mentioned in stanza 18, can be identified firmly with a small landholding in the parish of Kirk Smeaton on the northern edge of Barnesdale. Robin's original connections with Yorkshire rather than Nottinghamshire are indeed so clear that it has been convincingly suggested that his story as we know it originated in two once separate cycles, one celebrating a Yorkshire outlaw and the other lampooning the Sheriff of Nottingham, and that these have been interwoven sometime in the course of its dissemination. This attractive theory is not demonstrable, but the originally more northern connection of Robin Hood is established firmly enough. The quest for the origin of his legend, in taking us into the north, takes us into an area where the community of the hall, where lord and followers and servants gathered together, remained a social reality longer than in the south. The north was too the great home of narrative balladry, that 'border minstrelsy' celebrating the deeds of Percies and Douglases and their ilk which has obvious literary affinities with the Robin Hood ballads, and which is clearly not to be associated with an exclusively peasant audience. Sir James Holt is I am sure on the mark in focussing attention firmly on a specifically northern context for the origin of Robin's story.

Virtually all scholars would now concur with Sir James, not only on this point but also in tracing back the origins of the story to the thirteenth century. By the fifteenth century, however, when references to Robin Hood become common and from which the earliest ballads about him date, it is clear that his legend was very widely disseminated, universally familiar in southern as well as in northern England. To what sort of audience did it now most strongly appeal, in a form that had been recast and re-interpreted over generations by nameless authors and minstrels? This issue has raised much controversy. As Sir James stresses, the Robin of legend displays many of the characteristics associated with fictional knightly heroes—courage, courtesy, generosity, a free and open bearing. This 'chivalrous' element is undoubtedly there in the ballads; but it is equally undeniable that in them Robin Hood's status is differentiated, explicitly and emphatically, from that of knight-

hood and gentility. Their Robin is always a yeoman: his 'good yeomanry' is indeed a recurrent theme. The object seems to be to present him as an independent commoner, no peasant indeed, but of humbler standing than a knight or squire.

Yeoman is a word that in the social vocabulary of the times can carry a variety of implications, but they are regularly—and more and more clearly as time goes by—sub-genteel. Sir James, in line with his preceding argument that the original focal centre for the dissemination of the legend was the gentleman's hall, stresses the use of the word to describe officers in both royal and aristocratic households, who 'were fed and liveried and were often drawn from gentle families'. Chaucer's description, in his *Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales*, of his Knight's yeoman, his attendant servant clad in a coat and hood of green and with a mighty bow in his hand, might almost be a portrait of Robin Hood, he points out. Robin's legend, he concludes, reflects in its finished form 'the circumstances of the feudal household of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries'. But 'yeoman' could equally be used to describe members of the rising class of lesser landholders, very often of peasant origin and regarded as of humbler rank than the genteel, who in the decades either side of 1400 were achieving a new measure of prosperity and independence, usually as tenant farmers. Robin's 'good yeomanry' can thus alternatively be interpreted as reflecting 'social aspirations based on the real economic progress' (Dobson and Taylor) achieved by persons of this status. Both Coss and Richmond incline toward this view, with individual modifications. In the increasingly literate society of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Coss further and cogently argues, the 'downward dissemination' through local society of themes and matter drawn originally from romance owed as much (and perhaps more) to 'small group reading' as to oral diffusion. He thus leads the emphasis away from the hall and household setting that Holt has argued for. This opens the way, usefully as it seems to me, toward a view of the Robin Hood story's appeal to late medieval audiences that were characterised by their social breadth and variety, ranging from modest gentlemen through yeomen (of all descriptions) to 'apprentices, day labourers and journeymen, small proprietors and liveried merchants' (Ohlgren).

* * *

Any attempt to gauge the appeal of the Robin Hood stories in the late medieval period must clearly take account of the evidence that we have about real forest outlaws, the genuine analogue to which contemporary listeners and readers would have related the idealised fictional hero of the ballads. I have discussed below in Chapter XIII the activities of some of the outlaw bands of whose activities an historical record survives. Thanks to the researches of Sir James Holt and especially Professor J. G. Bellamy we now know a good deal more about men of this type than I did when I originally wrote. On the whole, the evidence they have uncovered seems to me to confirm the view that the essential historical context of the later fictional outlaw stories is the world of the lesser country gentry and yeomen, rather than the aristocratic world of hall and household in which Holt (rightly I think) locates their first, earliest popularisation. In terms of social status, the leaders of whom we learn from record sources are a diverse bunch. Roger Godberd, the Sherwood outlaw of the late 1260s (see below, pp. 195–7) and Eustace de Folville, north midland bandit of the 1330s (below, pp. 197–202), both came of knightly stock. James Coterel, the early fourteenth century robber of the Peak district whose career Bellamy has reconstructed might (but perhaps might not quite) have ranked as a minor gentleman. William Beckwith, who at one point in Richard II's reign was allegedly leading a band of several hundred men in the 'deep forest' of Knaresborough, would probably have been classed as a yeoman. Robert Stafford, *alias* Friar Tuck (below, p. 203), was a chaplain. What for present purposes seems probably more significant than the status of these men is the context in which they operated, which is that of local quarrels and of the regional enforcement of justice. Thus we find gangs being hired by local people of standing in order to protect their interests: the Coterels, for instance, were employed by the canons of Lichfield to put out the vicar of Bakewell from his church and to defend their jurisdictions in certain parishes of the Peak district where these had been challenged by Lenton Priory. Chief Justice Willoughby, who was put to ransom by the Folvilles, had judged a number of cases in which they or their associates were involved. William Beckwith seems to have taken

to the woods and to violence because he had been passed over for an office in the forest of Knaresborough, to which he believed he had a right. Given that the activities of real outlaws seem thus so enmeshed in local matters, it seems reasonable to argue that romanticised versions of them probably had a particular appeal to people for whom local matters and their repercussions had likewise a direct significance—as they did for the yeomen and minor gentlemen of county society in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

The activities of men like the Coterels and the Folvilles were not very savoury. Dobson and Taylor wisely caution us against making too much of a comparison between Robin Hood and gangsters such as they, whose disorderly violence does not seem to offer very promising matter for romanticisation. Nevertheless, as Bellamy points out, it is clear that mere profit was not always the object of their excesses: 'sometimes money was sought as a measure of revenge rather than material gain, to recompense the band for some wrong or imagined wrong once suffered'. William Beckwith's long running feud with Sir Robert de Rokely, steward of Knaresborough, is said to have disturbed the district to the point where the 'whole countryside' was divided by it: clearly he had achieved a measure of sympathy and Bellamy speculates that his and his family's cause may in the area have appeared as the 'popular' side, standing out against the associates of the powerful. In the disordered local conditions of late medieval England, as we are here reminded, it was not in the least uncommon for men to take to violence to defy the decisions of courts or to pursue imagined rights outside them, and it was not difficult for those who did so to appear, to some at least and from a local perspective, as the champions of justice. A certain analogy between the activities of real bandit gangs and those of legendary outlaw bands was undoubtedly perceived—witness the famous Parliamentary petition of 1439 complaining of the misdoings of Piers Venables of Derbyshire who, being outlawed, drew to himself other miscreants and took to the woods 'like as it had been Robin Hood and his meiny'. In the circumstances of the time, it was not a long or difficult step from the perceived analogy between men like Venables or the Folvilles and Robin Hood as disturbers of the peace, to the idealisation

of the latter as a disturber of the peace in the cause of justice in local disputes and grievances.

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There is much more that I would like to say here, in the way of modification of my earlier views about Robin Hood and comment on new issues connected with his legend that other scholars have raised. Space demands that what I have said so far, on the topics that seem to me most crucial, must suffice. There is one matter, however, that I must turn to briefly before concluding, the revisions that need to be made to what I have said about the legends concerning William Wallace's outlaw exploits in the course of his struggle against Edward I and the English in the early days of the Anglo-Scottish struggle, in the light of what M. P. McDiarmid has written in his introduction to his edition of *Hary's Wallace*. Significantly, they are in a number of respects closely analogous to some of those revisions which I have suggested need to be made to my earlier views about the Robin Hood story and its original literary origins, notwithstanding the fact that national confrontation, the underlying theme of *Hary's Wallace*, makes it the least locally focussed of all the outlaws stories that I have considered.

As McDiarmid shows, Blind Harry's long narrative poem is a much more sophisticated and interesting literary achievement than I appreciated in 1961. The author was a learned man, well read in the chronicles and French romances: his literary debts are very extensive and his skill as a narrator is considerable. He came from the Linlithgow area, and almost certainly had personal military experience, probably in the French service as well as in border warfare. He had aristocratic patrons and acquaintances, in particular Sir William Wallace of Craigie (who came of the same family as the great Wallace) and Sir James Liddale, both of whom took an interest in his poem. The poem itself is full of direct contemporary references to Harry's own time; part of its inspiration was the hostility that the patriotic author and his patrons felt towards the policies of James III in the 1470s, which they regarded as too anglophile. In the 1470s Scotland had been wholly independent of any measure of dependence under the English crown for well over a hundred years, and Harry's sentiments

have therefore less to do with the experience of English oppression in the time of Edward I than I suggested in 1961, and much more to do with the tradition of national rivalry that had become deeply established by the fifteenth century, when Harry was writing. I went still further astray in treating Harry as a collector of popular traditions concerning Wallace. In fact, as McDiarmid shows, his sources were largely literary and he did not owe much to tradition (though there are occasional borrowings from that store). Harry's poem, therefore, does not really illustrate the relationship between popular stories told of heroes whose part was played in history and the 'later stories of men who belong to a greenwood of pure fancy' (as I suggested p. 77). Rather, since it can be demonstrated that some ballads concerning Wallace derive their matter from Harry, it illustrates the way in which narrative ballad is so often indebted to romance, whose audience was expected to be aristocratic—the point that Professor Holt has rightly stressed in connection with the search for the early literary origins of the Robin Hood ballads.

I ended the preface to the first edition of this book with a hope that my efforts to retain simplicity in discussion had not resulted in a plethora of error and unwarranted assumption. There seem to have been plenty of both. This time I will conclude merely by hoping that its reprinting may help to stimulate further interest in stories whose appeal will prove, I believe, to be perennial.

# Introduction: some recantations

Since this book first appeared in 1961, there has been a good deal of interest displayed by English historians in the subject of medieval outlaws and the Robin Hood legend. My book, and the views that I have expressed in it, have been the subject of criticism, some of it harsh and much of it, as I now recognise, fully justified. This criticism has forced me to do more than modify some of my opinions: on certain quite central matters I have had to change my view completely. For this reason it is not really feasible to revise the book: I could not revise it without rewriting the whole *ab initio*, and since my historical interests are no longer centrally concerned with its subject, I am unwilling to attempt this. I do however owe it to the reader that I should make it clear where I think I went wrong in 1961, and where I stand now on the issues that I raised then. To this end the publishers have kindly allowed me to write a new introduction.

In 1961 I argued, emphatically, that the Robin Hood story rose to popularity in the later middle ages because it gave expression to the social grievances of the 'common people', and I equated the 'common people'—over-exclusively, I think—with the rural peasantry. The arguments with which I supported this view, in particular in Chapters XI and XIV, do not now seem to be satisfactory. In the first place I assumed too readily that the ballad form in which the Robin Hood story first found literary expression was a sure indication of its popular origin (pp. 96–7). In fact, there are good arguments for supposing that the origins of narrative 'ballads' such as those of Robin Hood are not to be sought, as I then thought they should be, in the communal story telling of country people—the accompaniment of their song and dance at rustic festivals—but were composed for recitation by professional minstrels. The materials on which such minstrels drew was diverse, but it certainly

included full-scale literary romances. The Robin Hood ballads may therefore in their origins be closer to the medieval metrical romance than to the true sung ballad, and indeed there are some facts which point strongly in this direction. Fulk Fitzwarin, whose story has affinities with Robin's (see Chapter IV) is known to have been the hero of a lost alliterative romance in English, and the *Tale of Gamelyn*, which is in so many ways so very close to the story of Robin Hood (see chapter VII) is in form a metrical romance. These poems were certainly intended for a knightly rather than an exclusively popular audience, and so also must have been the lost romances about Ranulf of Chester, who is coupled with Robin Hood in Sloth's remark in *Piers Plowman* (which is the earliest known reference to the outlaw hero):

> I can not my pater noster as the prest hit saith
> But I can rymes of Robyn Hode and Randle Erle of Chester.

In 1961 I greatly exaggerated the distance separating the Robin Hood ballads from these stories with an appeal to an aristocratic audience, from which in fact they seem to be at least in part derivative. Reconsidering the position, I am therefore no longer inclined to claim an exclusively popular appeal for the Robin Hood ballads, and am much attracted by Professor Holt's suggestion that one of the focal centres for the dissemination of Robin's legend was the gentleman's household, 'not in the chamber but in the hall, where the entertainment was aimed not only at the master but also at the members (of the household) and the staff'. In 1961 I argued against this view: it now seems to me to have the ring of conviction.

In this connection Professor Holt has also rightly stressed the northern origin of the Robin Hood legends, which I very seriously under-emphasized. In the early ballads the centre of Robin Hood's activities is always Barnesdale, north of Doncaster in the West Riding of Yorkshire, rather than Sherwood, and it is here too that the Scottish chroniclers Bower and Wyntoun, whose references to Robin are earlier than any of the extant ballads, locate him. Barnesdale is close to the site of Robin Hood's Well which, as we learn from the Monkbretton cartu-

lary, was already known as Robin Hood's stone in the early fifteenth century, and is not far from Kirklees, the traditional site of his death and burial. Local references to the area in the *Litel Geste of Robyn Hode* are moreover specific to a point otherwise unparalleled in the early ballads: the 'Saylis' for instance, mentioned in stanza 18, can be identified firmly with a small landholding in the parish of Kirk Smeaton on the northern edge of Barnesdale. Robin's original connections with Yorkshire rather than Nottinghamshire are indeed so clear that the plausible suggestion has been made that his story as we know it originated in two once separate cycles, one celebrating a Yorkshire outlaw and the other lampooning the Sheriff of Nottingham, and that these have been skilfully interwoven by some anonymous minstrel. This attractive theory is not demonstrable, but the originally more northern connection of Robin Hood is established firmly enough. The quest for the origin of his legend, in taking us into the north, takes us into an area where the community of the hall, where lord and followers and servants gathered together, remained a social reality longer than in the south. The north was too the great home of narrative balladry, that 'border minstrelsy' celebrating the deeds of Percies and Douglases and their ilk which has obvious literary affinities with the Robin Hood ballads, and which is clearly not to be associated with an exclusively peasant audience. In the light of these considerations my claim that the Robin Hood stories can be accepted as a sure guide to the 'thoughts and attitudes of a vanished common people', in England as a whole, will not stand up. Professor Holt is I am sure much nearer the mark in focussing attention rather on a specifically northern context 'of maintenance and misgovernment at its worst, of border and baronial warfare: later of medieval survivals, of the Pilgrimage of Grace, of the white coated tenantry of the Duke of Newcastle, of the expensive largesse and nostalgic reconstructions of Lady Anne Clifford'.

In 1961, however, I assumed that the ballads were a sure guide to the attitudes of the common people, and went on to argue that a significant relation was discernible between their attitudes as expressed in the Robin Hood ballads and the aspirations of the peasantry, as expressed in the demands

that they put forward at the time of the Peasants' Revolt. Here I fear that my arguments, as set out in Chapter XI, appear on reflection somewhat specious. I relied chiefly on the fact that the kinds of people towards whom the peasants in 1381 revealed a special animus—officers of the law and ecclesiastical landlords—were also the favourite victims of the outlaws. But hostility towards grasping ecclesiastics and corrupt royal officials was not in any degree exclusive to the peasant class: for high and low alike they were two stock targets for complaint throughout the whole medieval period. Given this, it was very special pleading on my part to suggest that, in order to relate the stories of the outlaws to peasant discontent, one does not need to look in them for references to the specific matters about which peasants were complaining in 1381, such as the exaction of labour services and of incidents of servile tenure like merchet and heriot, or the oppressive wage regulations of the Statute of Labourers. As a number of my critics have pointed out, agitation against villein status is a theme conspicuous by its absence in the outlaw stories, and there is nowhere in them any sign of any sort of mental association between the outlaws' freedom in the 'fair forest' and emancipation from manorial serfdom. Once again, my arguments fail to stand up, and so, I suspect, will any other attempt to interpret the Robin Hood ballads in terms of attitudes exclusive to any one particular class. As I now believe, the appeal of his story owes much more than I once thought to the glamour that so easily attaches, in any age, to the activities of the 'gentleman bandit' whose misdoings are redeemed by the courage and generosity of his nature and of the manner of his robbing, and have nothing much at all to do with specifically class conflicts of the medieval period.

Questions concerning Robin Hood's status and about the historical context in which one should view his legend do remain, however, and some of them are intriguing ones. Professor Holt, developing his argument that we should look for the origins of the Robin Hood story in a tale with a conscious appeal to a genteel audience, has stressed that the Robin Hood of legend displays many of the characteristics traditionally associated with fictional knightly heroes—courage, courtesy, loyalty, generosity, a free and open bearing. This 'chivalrous' element is undeniably there in the ballads, but it is equally

undeniable that the ballad minstrels separated Robin Hood as the hero of their story—and emphatically—from the gentility. True, they bid gentlemen who are of 'frebore blood' to listen to his story, but their Robin is always a yeoman, one who therefore, as the *Geste* explains, should not expect to pay for a knight's dinner:

> It was never the maner, by dere worthi God,
> A Yomen to pay for a knight.

Robin's 'good yeomanry' is indeed a recurrent theme in the ballads. The precise implications of the word 'yeoman' are not easy to pin down, but in the later fourteenth century and the fifteenth it could be used equally to describe minor landholders, not gentry but a cut above the ordinary peasant husbandmen, and officials or servants of comparable status in the hierarchy of lordly households, feed to act as ushers or messengers or to keep the lord's bow or his dogs. Many of the former were prospering, even becoming socially ambitious (as references to the yeoman 'who araieth him as a squyer' attest); the latter performed tasks by no means servile, reminiscent of those performed for a knight by his squires in earlier times. For either kind of yeoman the path forward to gentility lay open, through thrifty farming on the one hand or through good and loyal service on the other. Whether in the household of a lord or in the local courts or at the local market the prosperous yeomen rubbed shoulders with the gentry; what more natural than that they should adopt some at least of the values of those who were their neighbours and, in economic terms, no longer always their superiors? So perhaps one should see the 'good yeomanry' of Robin Hood as a reflection of the eagerness of such independent spirits to make a kind of knightliness or chivalry their own. This would account for the popularity of the Robin Hood story among the 'common people', which is amply attested in early references to the vogue of his story, and will do so without loading his legend with implications which would make it unpalatable to gentry, some of whom (like Sir John Paston, who kept a man to play 'St Jorge and Robyn Hod and the shryff of Nottingham' before his household) certainly took an interest in it.

When we turn to look at the leaders of outlaw bands of

whom history has left a record (and whom I discuss in chapter XIII), we find a situation which is much what this re-examination of the ballads and their literary origins might lead us to expect, a preponderance of gentry, but some men of lesser status. Roger Godberd and Eustace de Folville were of knightly stock: James Coterel, the early fourteenth-century robber of the Peak district, might have ranked as a minor gentleman; William Beckwith, who at one point in Richard II's reign was allegedly leading a band of several hundred in the 'deep forest' of Knaresborough, would probably have ranked as a yeoman. Thanks principally to the researches of Professor Bellamy, we know a good deal more about men of this type than we did when I wrote in 1961. Some of the information which he has brought to light is of very great interest to the student of the outlaw stories. The activities of men like the Folvilles and the Coterels were not very savoury; nevertheless, as he points out, it is clear that mere gain was not always the object of their excesses: 'sometimes money was sought as a means of revenge rather than for material gain, to recompense the band and its members for some wrong or imagined wrong once suffered.' Chief Justice Willoughby, who was put to ransom by the Folvilles and the Coterels acting together (see p. 204), had, for instance, judged a number of cases in which they or their associates were involved. Again, we find that on occasion gangs were hired by local people of standing in order to protect their interests: the Coterels, for instance, were employed by the canons of Lichfield to put out the vicar of Bakewell from his church and later to defend their jurisdictions in certain parishes of the Peak district where these had been challenged by Lenton priory. William Beckwith seems to have taken to the woods and to violence because he had been passed over for an office in the forest of Knaresborough which his family had held in the past and to which he believed he had a right. Although his band included no men of substance, he made himself very formidable: his feud with Sir Robert de Rokeley, the steward of Knaresborough, and with Robert Doufbyggyng who acted as Rokeley's master forester, disturbed the district for five years, from 1387 to 1392, to the point where the whole countryside was said to be divided by it. Clearly Beckwith had achieved a measure of sympathy, and Bellamy speculates that his and his family's

cause may in the area have appeared as the 'popular' side against the associates of the powerful and well born. Dobson and Taylor, in the excellent introduction to their collection of the *Rymes of Robyn Hood*, wisely caution us against making too much of a comparison between Robin Hood and gangsters like the Folvilles, whose disorderly violence does not seem to offer very promising matter for romanticization, but contemporaries could see some analogy—witness the famous parliamentary petition of 1439 complaining of the misdoing of Piers Venables of Derbyshire, who, being outlawed, drew to himself other misdoers and took to the wood 'like as it had been Robin Hood and his meiny'. In the disordered local conditions of late medieval England it was not in the least uncommon for men to take to violence to defy the decision of courts where the jury had been empanelled by a sheriff with hostile and powerful connections, and it was not very difficult for those who did so to appear, to some at least, as the true champions of justice. Just how great is the distance, we may ask, between the Coterels' protection of the rights of the Canons of Lichfield or William Beckwith's grievance at the loss of a hereditary office on the one hand, and Robin Hood's protection of Sir Richard atte Lee or the dispute over inheritance which is at the centre of the *Tale of Gamelyn* on the other? The outlaw of legend is an idealized figure, of course, but one can find some sort of historical analogue for him in the history of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England, and the fact that one can do so helps us to understand why endemic disorder was such a problem in that age. To sum up. I believe that the social historian who is interested in the matter of the Robin Hood ballads will be best advised to view them in the context of an age plagued by lack of 'governance', when methods of enforcing law and order were still rudimentary and justice nearly always partial, and not in terms of class tensions.

There is much more that I would like to say here, in the way of modification of my earlier views about Robin Hood, but space demands that what I have said so far, on the topics that seem to me most crucial among those where I have been misled, must suffice. There is one other subject, though, that I ought to touch on before closing. My book includes a chapter on 'William Wallace and the Scottish Outlaws' (Chapter VI). Since I wrote,