

The “Public School” Robin Hood: The Outlaw in Nineteenth-Century Children’s Books

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Abstract. During the late-Victorian and Edwardian period many children’s books telling the story of Robin Hood were published, such as John B. Marsh’s *Robin Hood* (1865), Howard Pyle’s *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood* (1883), Henry Gilbert’s *Robin Hood and the Men of the Greenwood* (1912), and Paul Creswick’s *Robin Hood and his Adventures* (1917). Stephanie Barczewski argues that Robin Hood in late Victorian children’s books is an anti-imperialist figure, and she bases this assertion largely upon the fact that Robin Hood children’s books are critical of Richard I’s foreign adventures. Yet the situation was more nuanced than that: many of the late Victorian Robin Hood children’s works that were published in the period projected Robin Hood and his fellow outlaws as men who lived up to the Public School Ethos, cultivating the virtues of athleticism, fair play, chivalry, and devotion to duty. Indeed, Edward Gilliatt’s novel *In Lincoln Green* (1898) is even set in a very ‘Victorianised’ medieval public school. Thus these works represented the ideal qualities that young men would need if they were to serve the country, and thus, as the proposed paper argues, were subtly imperialist.

Introduction

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a horde of Robin Hood’s children’s books were published. Imperialism is not often associated with retellings of the Robin Hood legend in the nineteenth century, much less in any era. In fact, Stephanie Barczewski argues that Robin Hood in the nineteenth century, especially in children’s books, was an anti-imperial figure.² As

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² Stephanie Barczewski, *Myth and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain: The Legends of King Arthur and Robin Hood* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), p.224.

this paper will show, however, the relationship of Robin Hood to imperial ideology in the nineteenth century is more nuanced than that: these authors certainly do critique some of the domestic problems caused by the expansion of empire, but no author of Robin Hood children's books can be seen arguing that Britain *should not* participate in imperial adventures abroad. Furthermore, these works represented the qualities that young men would need if they were to serve the country. Robin Hood is seen to display the values of the Public School Ethos: athleticism, fair play, and devotion to duty. Given the fact that these books are so generic to the extent that to read one is to read them all, this paper takes a thematic approach to discussing these texts, discussing the texts according to the constituent values of the ethos referred to previously. Thus the argument of this paper is that, far from propagating an anti-imperial message, these books were subtly imperialist because they represented the qualities that young men would need if they were to serve the country.

Context: Why the Public School Ethos was Necessary in the Late-Victorian Era

It is necessary to give a *very brief* overview of why the Public School Ethos emerged during the late nineteenth century. Between 1884 and 1914, European powers took direct political control of virtually the whole of Africa – a process known as ‘the scramble for Africa’. Men with an imperial ethos were needed to run this empire, and the public school system began to develop ‘distinctly militaristic features’ in order to produce the people such men.³ While the Public School system trained healthy boys from the middle classes, working-class boys – the future manpower of the empire – at this period were generally unhealthy, living in cramped overcrowded conditions and malnourished. This became especially apparent at the beginning of the Boer War (1899-1902), for instance, which highlighted what seemed to the establishment to be a case of ‘national deficiency’ as one third of working-class volunteers were turned away

³ G. R. Searle, *A New England? England 1886-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp.36-37.

from enlisting for being too unhealthy.⁴ Additionally, the growing rivalry from other emerging great powers such as USA made the British establishment anxious that they would lose their preeminent international standing. The public school ethos, then, which stressed the values of sportsmanship, manliness and devotion to duty, sought to prepare boys for a life of imperial service.⁵ The end result of this ethos was intended to be ‘a Christian gentleman [...] who played by the rules, and whose highest aim was to serve others’.⁶

Muscular Christianity and Athleticism

If one of the aims of the public school ethos was to build ‘a Christian gentleman’, then it was easy for late-Victorian authors to transpose earlier ideas about Robin’s piety on to the new public school ethos. In Henry Gilbert’s *Robin Hood and the Men of the Greenwood* (1912) Robin is insistent that his men should hear mass daily:

‘And now, lads,’ went on Robin, ‘though we be outlaws, and beyond men’s laws, we are still within God’s mercy. Therefore I would have you go with me to hear mass. We will go to Campsall, and there the mass-priest shall hear our confessions, and preach from God’s book to us.’⁷

Hand-in-hand with the development of muscular Christianity in the late-Victorian period was an increasing emphasis upon physical fitness. As Nick Watson, Stuart Weir, and Stephen Friend argue: ‘the basic premise of Victorian muscular Christianity was that participation in sport could contribute to the development of Christian morality, physical fitness, and “manly” character’.⁸

The late-Victorian period was the era of the strong-man, when body builders such as Eugene Sandow went topless on stage, displaying what was considered to be the perfect male

⁴ Searle, *A New England*, p.302.

⁵ Searle, *A New England*, p.65.

⁶ Lawrence James, *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire* (London: Abacus, 1994), p.207.

⁷ Henry Gilbert, *Robin Hood and the Men of the Greenwood* (London: T. C. & A. C. Jack, 1912), p.51.

⁸ Nick J. Watson, Stuart Weir & Stephen Friend, ‘The Development of Muscular Christianity in Victorian Britain and Beyond’ *Journal of Religion and Society* Vol. 7 (2005), 1-21 (p.1); for another discussion on athleticism and Christianity see J. A. Mangam & Colm Hickey, ‘Missing Middle-Class Dimensions: Elementary Schools, Athleticism, and Imperialism’ *European Sports History Review* Vol. 4 (2002), 73-90.

physique.⁹ In late-Victorian Robin Hood's books and children's books in general, then, there is an emphasis upon Robin's physique that is absent from earlier popular works such as Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1819) and Thomas Love Peacock's *Maid Marian* (1822). In J. Walker McSpadden's *Robin Hood*, in his youth Robin is 'a comely, well-knit stripling, and as soon as his right arm received thew and sinew he learned how to draw a bow'.¹⁰ Robin is not merely skilled in the use of the bow, however, but is also an excellent wrestler, and the outlaws, when not robbing people upon the highway, are said to regularly 'amuse themselves in athletic exercises'.¹¹ Gilliat in his novel *In Lincoln Green: A Story of Robin Hood* (1897), tells the reader how Robin has 'well-made arms and massive shoulders'¹² (Gilliat's novel is even set in a quasi-Victorian medieval public school). In McSpadden's novel, as Robin competes in the archery contest, 'he felt his muscles tightening into bands of steel, tense and true'.¹³ These prime physical attributes were not simply restricted to Robin Hood in these books, for of Will Scarlet is said that he was 'not a bad build for all his prettiness [...] those calves are well-rounded and straight. The arms hang stoutly from the shoulders.'¹⁴

Cultivating physical prowess would enable boys – the future servants of the empire – to survive and endure in the often inhospitable environments in the colonies. In *Henty's With Clive in India* (1888), for example, the hero of the novel, the young Charlie Maryatt, from an early age always participated in sports at home, and he is chosen for a dangerous mission requiring the

⁹ See David Waller, *The Perfect Man: The Muscular Life and Times of Eugene Sandow, Victorian Strongman* (London: Victorian Secrets, 2011).

¹⁰ J. W. McSpadden & Charles Wilson, *Robin Hood* (London: Associated Newspaper Books [n.d.]), p.12.

¹¹ Stephen Percy, *Tales of Robin Hood* ([n.p. n.d.]) p.8.

¹² Edward Gilliat, *In Lincoln Green: A Story of Robin Hood* (London: Seeley & Co. 1897), p.45.

¹³ McSpadden & Wilson, *Robin Hood*, p.23.

¹⁴ McSpadden & Wilson, *Robin Hood*, p.80.

surmounting of dangerous rivers, mountains and passes for its completion.¹⁵ While a lot of medieval Robin Hood texts celebrate the summer time and give no consideration to how a body of outlaws living in the forest might survive in a harsh winter, some of these children's books do recognise the fact that life for an outlaw might at times be difficult. H. E. Marshall in *Stories of Robin Hood Told to the Children* (c.1906) reveals a little about Robin's life in the cold winter months:

In winter the roads were so bad, and the weather so cold and wet, that most people stayed at home. So it was rather a quiet time for Robin and his men. They lived in caves during the winter, and spent their time making stores of bows and arrows, and mending their boots and clothes.¹⁶

Living outdoors makes the outlaws even tougher: McSpadden tells how 'the wind blew the ruddy colour into his cheeks'.¹⁷ The outlaws in Gilbert's Robin Hood, additionally, undergo very rigorous training drills on a daily basis to keep themselves sharp and ready for battle.¹⁸

Sportsmanship and Fair Play

Despite having to keep themselves ever-ready for battle, the outlaws are not presented as brutes. The ideals of sportsmanship and fair play were easily superimposed onto Robin-Hood-meets-his-match scenarios by late-Victorian writers (the Robin-Hood-meets-his-match scenarios are those tales of Robin losing a fight to somebody in the forest and then making friends with them afterwards). According to John Finnemore in *The Story of Robin Hood* (1909), these types of situations display 'the old English love of fair play and straight dealing'.¹⁹ In Marshall's *Stories of Robin Hood*, when Robin meets Little John and a fight with quarterstaffs ensues, in which Robin is beaten, he says to Little John 'it was a fair fight and you have won the

¹⁵ G. A. Henty, 'With Clive in India' in *British Empire Adventure Stories* (London: Carlton Books, 2005), 465-774 (p.570).

¹⁶ H. E. Marshall, *Stories of Robin Hood Told to the Children* (London: T. C. & E. C. Jack, [n.d.]), p.11.

¹⁷ McSpadden & Wilson, *Robin Hood*, p.33.

¹⁸ Gilbert, *Robin Hood and the Men of the Greenwood*, p.48.

¹⁹ John Finnemore, *The Story of Robin Hood* (1909 repr. London: A. & C. Black, 1935), p.x.

battle'.²⁰ And a similar scene is acted out in Charles Herbert's *Robin Hood* as, after having fought Little John, Robin exclaims: 'you've proved yourself the best man. I own I'm beaten, and the fight's at an end.'²¹ Similarly in McSpadden's work, when Little John and Will Scarlet first meet and have a fight with quarterstaves, they laugh about the fight afterwards and make friends.²² In Gilliat's *In Lincoln Green*, Robin's son Walter, at the public school he attends, is taught to play 'by all the fair rules of fighting'.²³

The fact that these mini-skirmishes in the greenwood had to be conducted according to the rules of fair play meant that real fighting was often portrayed as game in these texts. In Herbert's text, when Robin asks Little John to join his band, he says: 'there is plenty of fighting: a hard life, and fine sport. Wilt throw in thy lot with us, John Little?'²⁴ When the outlaws are faced with real danger – that is, when they face the forces of the Sheriff – this is described as nothing more than a 'sport'.²⁵ Gilliat similarly refers to 'the great sport of war'.²⁶ The portrayal of fighting as a sport reflects how warfare was often seen by prominent imperialists in the late-Victorian and Edwardian eras. Sir Henry Newbolt in his poem *Vitae Lampada* (1897), for example, authored the following lines which equated warfare with the games played on public school playing fields as his poem exhorts young men to "Play up! play up! and play the game!"²⁷ Expressing similar sentiments to Newbolt's poem is the memorial in the main cloister of

²⁰ Marshall, *Stories of Robin Hood*, p.16.

²¹ Charles Herbert, *Robin Hood* (London: John F. Shaw [n.d.]), p.18.

²² McSpadden & Wilson, *Robin Hood*, pp.37-41.

²³ Gilliat, *In Lincoln Green*, p.116.

²⁴ Herbert, *Robin Hood*, p.19.

²⁵ McSpadden & Wilson, *Robin Hood*, p.152.

²⁶ Gilliat, *In Lincoln Green*, p.362.

²⁷ Henry Newbolt, 'Vitae Lampada (1897-98)' *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Representing the Great War: Texts and Contexts* [Internet <https://www.norton.com/college/english/nael/20century/topic_1_05/hnewbolt.htm> Accessed 21 June 2016].

Charterhouse College which lists the alumni who have fallen in various campaigns. The deceased, according to the writing on the wall, 'played up, played up, and played the game'.²⁸ The sad truth is that war, in fact, was not a game in the Victorian era, no matter how 'brave', 'gallant', or 'sporting' war was made out to be by imperialist writers.

Duty and Patriotism

Above everything, in these novels Robin is portrayed as being unwaveringly loyal to the King and his country. In Newbolt's *The Book of the Happy Warrior* (1917) which tells various stories of heroic figures from English history, including Robin Hood, the reader is told how they might best benefit from reading these tales of heroic deeds:

You will not get the best out of these stories of great men unless you keep in mind, while you read, the rules and feelings that were in their minds while they fought [... the] main ideas that were in the minds of all these great fighters of the past were these: First, service, in peace and war.²⁹

Gilliatt's *In Lincoln Green* sees Robin's son Walter participating in an archery contest 'for the honour of your house and country',³⁰ and at another point in the novel Robin emphasises his own commitment to 'duty' by exclaiming 'I am never tired when honour and duty call me'.³¹ Similarly, in Marshall's story, when the outlaws are made to recite their chivalrous oaths, they are loyal to the King first, and vow to protect the weak and needy second.³² Towards the end of Marshall's tale, Robin proudly exclaims 'God Bless the King [...] God bless all those who love him. Cursed be all those who hate him and rebel against him.'³³

²⁸ Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (London: Penguin, 2004), p.262.

²⁹ Henry Newbolt, *The Book of the Happy Warrior* (London: Longman, 1917), p.vi.

³⁰ Gilliat, *In Lincoln Green*, p.45.

³¹ Gilliat, *In Lincoln Green*, p.180.

³² Marshall, *Stories of Robin Hood*, p.8.

³³ Marshall, *Stories of Robin Hood*, p.101.

Serving the King and the nation is presented in late-Victorian and Edwardian texts as a means by which a boy might advance in the world. In Paul Creswick's *Robin Hood and his Adventures* (1917) young Robin is taken to his uncle Gamwell's estate. Upon surveying his uncle's vast land holdings, he enquires how his uncle Gamwell became so rich, and he is informed that he was given lands as a reward for serving in the King's army. This is a message that is seen repeated in the works of Henty as well, as in *With Clive in India* where a young parochial boy rises through the ranks of the British army and returns home rich. Service to one's country could be the making of a man: morally, physically, and financially.

The emphasis upon Robin's loyalty to the King, and his duty to the nation is to be found in every late Victorian text, and so the point need not be laboured with more quotes illustrative of this. From a twenty-first century standpoint, it seems odd that authors might adapt Robin Hood – a figure who had been very radical and anti-establishment in some previous incarnations – to serve the middle-class ethos of duty to the nation and, indirectly, the empire. But the appropriation (or misappropriation depending upon one's point of view), of medieval heroes to this end was not only applied to Robin Hood. In Henty's laughable *A March on London: Being a Story of Wat Tyler's Insurrection* (1898), for instance, Tyler and the peasants revolted, not simply because of the Poll Tax, but 'above all, they felt that they were not free men, and were not even deemed worthy to fight in the wars of their country'.³⁴ For the record, the historic Wat Tyler and his fellow men were not fighting for the right to be able to fight in Richard II's wars.

There was a class dimension to these ideas of loyalty and duty. Robin is *always* the Earl of Huntingdon in these books. They lack the democratic political sentiments that are present in Egan's earlier and superior work. Robin does not have to be elected as he is in Egan's *Robin Hood and Little John*, and there is a clear sense that he is the leader of his 'lower class' counterparts who knows what is best. In McSpadden's tale, Robin is the leader of the outlaw

³⁴ G. A. Henty, 'A March on London: Being a Story of Wat Tyler's Insurrection (London, 1898)' *The Literature Network* [Internet <<http://www.online-literature.com/ga-henty/march-on-london/1/>> Accessed 21 June 2016].

band because he possesses 'birth, breeding, and skill'.³⁵ It is almost as though Robin is the head boy of a public school house.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the story of Robin Hood was adapted by conservative (with a small 'c') authors who sought to adapt the outlaw's story to project the ideals of the Public School Ethos. It would have been hard for authors to set Robin Hood in an actual overseas imperial setting, given that his story has historically always been associated with the forests of Barnsdale in Yorkshire and Sherwood in Nottinghamshire. These books should be viewed, then, as though the greenwood is the training ground for the imperial adventures that will come *after* Robin and his men have been pardoned. Such a view is borne out by the fact that in Gilliat's book, for example, where having been pardoned by the King, most of the outlaws join Richard I on his Crusade in the Holy Land.³⁶ Thus far from being anti-imperial, these books promoted an imperial message and stressed the qualities that would prepare young boys for a life of imperial service.

³⁵ McSpadden & Wilson, *Robin Hood*, p.30.

³⁶ Gilliat, *In Lincoln Green*, p.365.