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Basdeo, S. (2016) Radical Medievalism: Pierce Egan's the Younger's Robin Hood, Wat Tyler, and Adam Bell. In: Basdeo, S. and Padgett, L. Eds. *Imagining the Victorians: Leeds Working Papers in Victorian Studies*. 15. pp. 48-64. Leeds Centre for Victorian Studies.

Radical Medievalism: Pierce Egan's the Younger's *Robin Hood, Wat Tyler, and Adam Bell*

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Introduction

In 1866 an anonymous correspondent in *MacMillan's Magazine* declared that:

There is a mighty potentate in England whose name is Pierce Egan [...] Many among us fancy that they have a good general idea of what is English literature. They think of Tennyson and Dickens as the most popular of our living authors. It is a fond delusion, from which they should be aroused. The works of Mr. Pierce Egan are sold by the half million. What living author can compare with him?²

The author whom the writer was referring to was Pierce James Egan (1814-1880), usually styled 'the younger' to distinguish him from his more famous father who bears the same name. Egan began his working life as an illustrator, and he provided the illustrations to some of his father's works such as *The Pilgrims of the Thames in Search of the National* (1838).³ After having collaborated with his father on *The Pilgrims of the Thames*, he turned his attention to writing, and in the following year his novel *Quintin Matsys* was published in sixty three penny parts.⁴ He became a prolific writer, authoring at least thirteen novels, in addition to numerous contributions to *The Illustrated London News*, *Reynolds' Miscellany*, as well as holding editorships of *Home Circle* and *The London Journal*.⁵

As of yet, there is no scholarly biography of Egan's life, and his works have been forgotten by all but a handful of scholars, with most of the historiographical and literary research into his career having been conducted by Stephen Knight⁶ and Chris R. V. Bossche.⁷ Scholarship upon his life and works seems to be scattered across three fields: Robin Hood Studies; Chartist studies; penny dreadful studies. One of the aims of the present article, then, is to bring the scholarship together by focusing upon three of Egan's early works: *Robin Hood and Little John* (serialised

between 1838 and 1840); *Wat Tyler, or the Rebellion of 1381* (serialised in 1840); and *Adam Bell; or the Archers of Englewood* (serialised in 1842). They are all tales of medieval outlaws and rebels. Robin Hood, who supposedly flourished during the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries and Wat Tyler (d. 1381), the leader of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, need no introduction. Adam Bell, however, is a green-clad medieval outlaw archer with whom readers may not be familiar. He allegedly flourished in Cumbria around the same period as Robin Hood, and his career was also, like that of Robin Hood, celebrated in ballads such as *Adam Bell, Clym of the Clough, and William of Cloudeslie*, which was first printed in 1565.⁸ Of Egan's *Robin Hood*, Stephen Knight, while acknowledging that the text is violent in parts, says that Egan presents a 'curiously bourgeois' view of life in medieval Sherwood.⁹ Paul Buhle argues that Egan's *Robin Hood* revealed 'no political leaning by the author toward either radicalism or conservatism'.¹⁰ In contrast, Bossche argues that *Wat Tyler* supports Chartism, and is therefore a radical text.¹¹

Is it possible that an author could be so apolitical in one text, yet so passionately support the plight of the working-class Chartist movement in another – the same author who made numerous contributions to his radical friend G. W. M. Reynolds' periodicals? It is doubtful. Firstly, although Egan usually wrote historical novels, it was recognised by the *MacMillan's Magazine* reviewer that his novels 'deal more directly with present times',¹² and consequently, as this essay will show, he intended them to have application to the political situation in his own day. Furthermore, the differing assessments of Egan's political sympathies probably stem from the fact that Egan's works are the type of text which scholars usually cite, rather than actually read.¹³ The methodology for this paper, then, was to read Egan's medievalist novels in full. In contrast to Knight and Buhle, this article will argue that Egan's early medievalist texts highlighted the plight of the poor and their need for political enfranchisement; Egan does this by presenting Robin Hood, Adam Bell, and Wat Tyler as working-class heroes who stood up for their political rights. In consequence of this, the essay also argues that Egan's name should be added to the list of other early Victorian radical writers such as that of his friend and fellow radical, G. W. M. Reynolds (1814-1879).

The Novels

Sir Walter Scott is Egan's main inspiration for all of his medievalist novels. He draws upon the idea popularised in *Ivanhoe* (1819) that, since the Norman Conquest in 1066, England was a divided nation: on the one hand there was the downtrodden Anglo-Saxons, and on the other hand there was the triumphant Normans. In the words of Scott himself:

A circumstance which greatly tended to enhance the tyranny of the nobility, and the sufferings of the inferior classes, arose from the consequences of the conquest by William Duke of Normandy. Four generations had not sufficed to blend the hostile blood of the Normans and Anglo-Saxons, or to unite, by common language and mutual interests, two hostile races.¹⁴

The notion that the Anglo-Saxons and the Normans were opposed to each other was effectively invented by Scott, who drew upon and enlarged the idea of the 'Norman Yoke'.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the idea that English society in the medieval period was divided between downtrodden Saxons and the triumphant Normans, and that Robin Hood was an Anglo-Saxon outlaw, soon gained currency in nineteenth-century Robin Hood scholarship. M. A. Thiers in *The History of the Conquest of England by the Normans* (1825), for instance, said that Robin Hood was 'the last chief of the Anglo-Saxon banditti'.¹⁶ Similarly, the Robin Hood scholar and antiquary J. M. Gutch wrote in 1847 that Robin Hood was 'the celebrated hero of English serfs, the poor and the obscure of the Anglo-Saxon race'.¹⁷ Thus by the time that Egan was writing, the idea of enmity between the Anglo-Saxons and the Normans in the 1190s had become a 'fact' in historical writing.

The idea is apparent in both *Robin Hood* and *Adam Bell* which are set during the 1190s. The Anglo-Saxons are good and honourable, whilst the Normans are cunning and treacherous.¹⁸ In other places, the Normans are portrayed as buffoonish; Egan describes them as 'monkeys',¹⁹ and there is a particularly comic scene in which the outlaws force the Bishop of Hereford and his Norman knights to drink copious amounts of alcohol, and the outlaws make them sing and dance for their entertainment.²⁰ Similarly, in *Adam Bell*, the eponymous outlaw minces no words when expressing his hatred of the Normans, calling them 'dogs', 'curs', and upon meeting a lone Norman in the forest, he declares how the Normans have 'our deepest contempt'.²¹ In a completely ahistorical move, Egan carries the Saxon versus Norman theme further than the 1190s and through to the 1380s in *Wat Tyler*. For example, Leowulf, one of Tyler's associates (a name that sounds suspiciously like Beowulf), exclaims that 'we'll teach the Norman ruffians that a Saxon's hatred of their villainies carries death with it'.²² In fact, Egan also utilises this theme in two of his other medieval tales: *Fair Rosamond* (1844), and *Edward, the Black Prince* (c.1850).

In the 1820s and 1830s, radical writers such as John Wade (1788-1875) racialised their contempt for the nineteenth-century aristocracy by

drawing direct comparisons between the medieval Norman nobility and the nineteenth-century aristocracy. John Wade in his *The Extraordinary Black Book* (1820), for instance, referred to the early nineteenth-century aristocracy as ‘our *Norman* lawgivers’ (emphasis added).²³ In each of Egan’s novels, the Normans effectively represent the nineteenth-century elites, while the Anglo-Saxons represent the downtrodden working classes. Hence the language of class comes through strongly in each of Egan’s tales. In *Robin Hood*, he writes that there are ‘two classes’ under whom the poor Anglo-Saxons suffer: wealthy Norman landowners and the Catholic Church.²⁴ In *Adam Bell*, it is ‘the poorest *class*’ (emphasis added) who suffer most as a result of the Norman Conquest:

The villeins or vassals, were transferred from the estates upon which they were born and bred, like flocks of cattle, to various parts of the country – exchanged or sold, as it suited their new owners, as so much common stock, and were, with much policy, divided and subdivided, that they might not unite and rise up en masse to destroy their oppressive conquerors.²⁵

Similarly, towards the close of *Wat Tyler*, Egan exhorts ‘the poorer class’, who are ‘the true source of all power’, to rise up and form a council between themselves ‘so that they may not be, as they have been, trampled upon’.²⁶

In *Robin Hood*, after Robin is outlawed he and his fellow Anglo-Saxon outlaws resist the Normans by taking to the woods and forming a just forest society with its own laws. Robin is not a dictator, however, for he must first be *elected* by his fellow Anglo-Saxons. In a rousing speech to his fellow outlaws and countrymen, depicted as a medieval version of an electoral hustings, he says:

Friends and brother Saxons – This is a proud and joyous moment for me, that you should so unanimously and cheerfully, at the instigation of Little John, elect me as the head of your community; warmly and earnestly I thank you for it [...] All I have to speak upon the fact of my being your leader, is of the duties which will be imposed on me by my post, and of the constant endeavours I will make to perform them to your satisfaction.²⁷

What could have been more radical to Victorian readers than seeing people of lowly birth voting for their leader? Robin’s election, furthermore, is based upon merit rather than his ‘noble’ birth, for he must

endeavour to perform his duties to the ‘satisfaction’ of his countrymen (the point about his noble birth shall be returned to below). Indeed, the forest society of Sherwood is egalitarian; when Robin’s love interest Matilda goes to live in the forest with Robin and the outlaws, she asks that people refer to her as ‘Maid Marian’. This is so that the others dwelling in the forest might not think her either above or below the other inhabitants.²⁸ In fact, the outlaws pay little regard to rank in general. Egan writes that Robin was raised ‘without that consideration of rank which should induce us all to bow quietly to any freak or whim that the great may possess’.²⁹ This sentence could be read as highly supportive of the status quo, were it not for the words ‘freak’ and ‘whim’. Readers may have found themselves questioning just why, exactly, they should be deferential to their supposed ‘betters’. Similarly, Little John, when he first meets Friar Tuck, also known as the Clerk of Copmanhurst (an obvious continuity with Scott’s *Ivanhoe*),³⁰ says this:

“Understand me, Sir Clerk of Copmanhurst, if that be thy title, which your boisterous bawling taught me to be it, that you are stopped by him who would stop anyone from whom he wanted an answer, and one who is beneath thee only so much as thy nag gives thee in height.”³¹

Their subsequent resolve is to despoil the Normans continually because they deprive the Anglo-Saxons of every little thing which might make them self-sufficient and happy in their own land.³²

In *Adam Bell*, the outlaws are already formed into a cohort at the outset of the story, and so the reader does not witness the formation of a just outlaw society through elections. Bell and his fellow outlaws live in the forest because they were ‘stripped of their estates and their political rights’.³³ Egan also inserts radical figures into his narrative; the third character whom the reader meets is a mysterious Lud of the Tarn, a relative of Adam Bell’s, who lives in the forest and is looked up to and known by all the outlaws of Englewood.³⁴ He is a relatively elusive figure in Egan’s novel, often spoken of but rarely, apart from the first chapter, actually depicted. Lud of the Tarn is a relatively obvious allusion to Ned Ludd, the ‘mythical’³⁵ machine breaker from whom the working-class Luddite movement took its name.

Egan’s democratic ideals are somewhat restrained in both *Adam Bell* and *Robin Hood*, and he seems to be railing more against ‘Old Corruption’,³⁶ rather than fully setting out a vision of a democratic society. It was an alliance of reform-minded men drawn from both the working and middle classes who, through that term, drew attention to the problems in Britain’s political system.³⁷ And it was not simply in *Robin*

Hood and *Adam Bell* that Egan draws attention to the corruption inherent in the medieval establishment. At the commencement of another of Egan's medievalist novels entitled *Edward, The Black Prince; or, A Tale of the Feudal Times* (c.1850), he places a particular emphasis on the time during the reign of King John when, supposedly, the medieval middle and working classes successfully allied together and won political rights from the aristocracy:

It would at this day be difficult to imagine the misery in which these serfs or slaves existed, and, as in the best of their times, bad was their condition [...] Coupled with these injuries were the King's demands from his immediate vassals – the barons, which in turn were extorted with relentless harshness from their vassals – the landholders, farmers, and freemen who were compelled to exact further forced contributions on the unhappy serfs [...] losers thus on all sides, the middle classes lifted up their voices against their lords' exactions.³⁸

Through the alliance of the medieval middle and working classes, Egan says, 'the Barons, moved by THE PEOPLE, struck a blow against despotism. MAGNA CHARTA was the result.'³⁹ Similarly, in *Fair Rosamond*, Egan tells readers how the Normans 'cruelly oppressed the wretched people of the land' and taxed them by laying 'tribute after tribute upon towns and cities'.⁴⁰ The oppressive monarchy and aristocracy, and their unjust taxes, are what Egan censures. Thus the discourse of 'Old Corruption' is obviously a theme that runs throughout Egan's medievalist stories.

Robin Hood had been appropriated to radical ends previously to Egan, most notably in Joseph Ritson's *Robin Hood: A Collection of All the Ancient Poems, Songs, and Ballads* (1795) where he is described as:

A man who, in a barbarous age, and under a complicated tyranny, displayed a spirit of freedom and independence, which has endeared him to the common people, whose cause he maintained, (for all opposition to tyranny is the cause of the people,) and, in spite of the malicious endeavours of pitiful monks, by whom history was consecrated to the crimes and follies of titled ruffians and sainted idiots, to suppress all record of his patriotic exertions and virtuous acts, will render his name immortal.⁴¹

Thomas Miller – a radical who continued writing the third series of Reynolds' *The Mysteries of London* – similarly portrays Robin as a radical figure in *Royston Gower; or, The Days of King John* (1838) who fights against 'the tyranny of the Norman forest laws'.⁴² Less bombastic than either Ritson or Miller, Egan's criticism of the establishment is more subtle, and often takes the form of witty sarcasms directed against the Church and the government in the medieval period:

They [the Normans] well knew what living on the fat of the land meant [...] and with their wealth they indulged in gluttony, debauchery, and every species of wickedness. They were ignorant to such an extent that, William of Malmesbury tells us, when the Normans first came over they could scarcely read a Church service [...] The Clergy were not to be put aside; by clamouring and cringing they got a place among the rest of the cormorants, and gorged as before, keeping out all they could, and taking up as much room as they could contrive to get possession of.⁴³

Indeed, the outlaws are not 'outlaws' as such; the real criminals in all three texts are the Normans, and in the serials which Reynolds and Egan produced for the *The London Journal*, one contemporary commentator remarked how all of the villains were usually 'high-born'.⁴⁴ In the case of Egan's novels, as it has already been illustrated, the 'high-born' villains are Normans. The outlaws in *Robin Hood* and *Adam Bell* resist the Normans most forcibly through violence. At one point, Robin shoots the Norman Caspar Steinkopf in the eye,⁴⁵ and in another place he shoots a soldier in the throat.⁴⁶ Additionally, when a Templar attempts to rape Marian, Robin kills him and hangs his dead body upon a tree as a warning to all Normans who might try the same.⁴⁷ A similarly grisly spectacle is observed when Allen-a-Dale cuts off a Norman soldier's arm.⁴⁸ These violent acts were vividly portrayed in the novels, many of them by Egan himself, which is indicative of the early Victorians' love for violent entertainment.⁴⁹

Whilst it is relatively easy to see the eponymous title characters of *Adam Bell* and *Wat Tyler* as working-class heroes,⁵⁰ the only thing which might complicate the case for radicalism in *Robin Hood* is the fact that the outlaw is portrayed as the Earl of Huntingdon. The idea that Robin was a nobleman was first articulated by Anthony Munday in two plays entitled *The Downfall of Robert, Earle of Huntington* and *The Death of Robert, Earle of Huntington* (1597-98). The fact the Robin is a lord in this text has led some scholars such as Stephen Knight to conclude that Egan's *Robin Hood*, the violence in his narrative notwithstanding, is a

relatively conservative and ‘gentrified’ portrayal of the outlaw legend.⁵¹ Egan skirts around this issue quite well, however, for once Robin learns of his birth-right, although he does attempt to reclaim it through legal means,⁵² in Book II he soon realises that the possibilities of reclaiming it are slim and thereafter ceases to try.⁵³ In fact, even at the end of the novel, Robin is still dispossessed. Although King Richard orders that restitution of his estates be made to Robin, the lying, scheming monks refuse to give up the Huntingdon estates:

“Possession is nine-tenths of the law,” says the adage, and the crafty Abbot of Romsey tried hard to make it ten; he did not attempt open opposition to the will of Richard, but he craved time to enable him to retire to his other estates; and during that time he employed every means to gain the Chancellor to his side, by making him presents of great value, and offering him assistance in any way, should it be required; and by these means the decree of Richard was evaded.⁵⁴

Moreover, Robin never lives among the upper classes; Egan explains that ‘he had mixed with no society above the class in which Gilbert Hood [his adoptive yeoman forester father] was placed’.⁵⁵ The casting of Robin as the Earl of Huntingdon seems to be a result of the fact that Egan wished to pay at least some lip service to the overall Robin Hood tradition. In his preface, for instance, Egan references Ritson’s *Robin Hood* (even then, Ritson, himself a radical, saw no problem with a Lord standing up for the people),⁵⁶ and throughout his novel there are numerous footnotes indicating which Robin Hood ballads different parts of his novel are based upon.⁵⁷ Thus Egan’s portrayal of Robin as a nobleman is him paying his debt to the tradition, but he finds ways to negate what to him seems to have been the rather inconvenient ‘truth’ that Robin was of noble birth.

If Robin Hood had been a somewhat awkward radical figure for Egan, by virtue of the fact that the tradition said that the outlaw was the Earl of Huntingdon, this was not the case with *Wat Tyler*. The leader of the Peasants’ Revolt had been appropriated by radicals before, such as Thomas Paine in *The Rights of Man* (1791),⁵⁸ and in Robert Southey’s *Wat Tyler* (1817). In Southey’s play, Tyler leads ‘the sovereign people’ to ‘demand justice’.⁵⁹ Egan’s *Wat Tyler* is an altogether more satisfactory novel than either *Robin Hood* or *Adam Bell*, for it is here that his egalitarian ideals really shine through. The setting is England in the 1300s, and the Normans rule the Anglo-Saxons by terror. The narrative is as violent in places as *Robin Hood* and *Adam Bell*. Men, women, and

even children are not spared from the Normans' murderous outrages. For instance, there is one scene in which a Norman stabs a maid in her house, and drags her along the floor.⁶⁰ In spite of all the depredations they suffer, however, Tyler and his fellow peasants are no law breakers; they first try to achieve a fairer society through democratic means. Tyler explains that the peasantry 'did send petition after petition, but in vain – fresh taxes were imposed and rigorously exacted, and all their appeals and prayers were unheeded'.⁶¹ Tyler and his associates Jack Straw and John Ball, therefore, seek the establishment of a 'code of laws', or a 'charter'.⁶² As Bossche points out, Egan's novel was published when the second wave of Chartism was beginning to emerge, and the 'charter' that Tyler and his associates seek is highly reminiscent of the Chartist struggle.⁶³ Included in this charter is 'the undoubted right to *elect* a sovereign' (emphasis added).⁶⁴ Issues come to a head when a 'monstrous poll tax'⁶⁵ is levied upon all people over the age of fifteen to pay for King Richard's foreign wars, and tax gatherers are sent out into the country to collect it. Still, however, the peasants think that if they only appeal to the King, who will grant them their charter, then all issues will be resolved. Tyler is moved to lead the revolt, however, after an incident with a Norman tax collector who visits Tyler's house. The tax collector finds his daughter at home alone and 'full of strong drink'⁶⁶ attempts to rape Tyler's daughter. At that instant, Tyler arrives home, seizes his hammer, and strikes the tax collector on the head, with the consequence that 'his brains were scattered about the place by one tremendous blow'.⁶⁷ This event, combined with the fact that the Saxons' political demands are not met, makes Tyler, Straw, Ball, and the peasants rise up and march on London.⁶⁸ It is in Egan's portrayal of the exchange between the King and Tyler in which the latter displays his open contempt for authority:

“Thinkest thou, if thou hadst performed the duty for which the people placed thee on the throne [...] would they have quitted their homes to assemble in a body and demand their rights? King, they placed thee on the throne.”

“I am the Lord's anointed” exclaimed Richard haughtily; “I received the Crown from God, not the people.”

“That is a juggle of priestcraft, which will only suit the weak minds of the superstitious,” said Wat.⁶⁹

This exchange is unambiguous – the King's power emanates from the people, not from divine right, a notion which Tyler trashes. To contemporary radicals such as Wade, referred to above, the idea of the divine right of Kings was simply one of the many 'fictions of regality'.⁷⁰ When *Wat Tyler* was published in the midst of the second wave of the

Chartist movement, Egan's talk of a 'Charter', and the right to *elect* a sovereign, cannot have failed to have resonance for many of his readers.

Conclusion

The Robin Hood historian, James C. Holt, said that Egan's *Robin Hood* 'was the first comprehensive story deliberately written for children'.⁷¹ Holt was writing as a medieval historian with a relatively uncomprehensive knowledge of the history of Victorian penny serials. Although this essay disagrees with Stephen Knight on some points regarding Egan's novel, his contrasting assessment of the audience composition for Egan's *Robin Hood* is sound. He says that it was not children who read his works but 'a mass adult audience'.⁷² The reasons that Knight goes on to give for this argument are that 'the novel is very closely printed, and is actually of three-decker length, running to nearly four hundred thousand words, beyond most children then and now'.⁷³ Similarly, *Wat Tyler*, due to its length, would have warranted the three volume novel format, and the collected edition of 1851 comprises, like *Robin Hood*, five hundred and ten pages of double-columned minute typeface.⁷⁴ On the other hand, *Adam Bell* is a lighter novel than both *Robin Hood* and *Wat Tyler*, with the first collected edition numbering only one hundred and ninety four pages. Moreover, the themes of democracy and egalitarianism which run throughout the novels, as well as their violent words and imagery, suggest that these stories were primarily produced for an adult audience. Certainly Egan's novels, printed during the late 1830s and 1840s, were published at a time when working-class adults were turning away from the literature of philanthropist organisations such as SPCK in favour of penny bloods.⁷⁵ Thus to use an anachronistic term, Egan's publications would fall under the 'mass market' description, and were certainly not the sole preserve of children.

Certainly his serials were successful, for after their initial release in penny parts they were bound together in book form. And they were reprinted frequently, with Egan remarking in his preface to *Paul Jones, the Privateer* (1842) that 'the public have been most generous – the sale of "Robin Hood" (especially), and "Wat Tyler" &c. having been most extensive and highly flattering'.⁷⁶ Whilst research was being undertaken for this article, it was found that *Robin Hood* went through six editions.⁷⁷ Egan's *Robin Hood* was also adapted for a French audience in two novels entitled *Le Prince des Voleurs* (1872) and *Robin le Proscrit* (1873) which have been attributed to the French author Alexandre Dumas. These two French novels were then translated back into English as *The Prince of Thieves* and *Robin Hood the Outlaw* respectively. *Wat Tyler* similarly fared well, with six bound volumes appearing after its initial print run in

penny serial format. A bound volume comprising all the penny parts was published immediately after the first print run by F. Hextall in 1841 and reprinted several times thereafter by different publishers.⁷⁸ Less successful was *Adam Bell* which appears to have gone through only three editions after its initial run in 1842.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, if popularity is measured in terms of reprints, or being sold ‘by the half million’,⁸⁰ then Egan can lay claim to having been one of the most popular authors of the nineteenth century. And this is part of the reason why Egan’s novels deserve attention, for in the words of the correspondent in *MacMillan’s Magazine*, ‘an author who can command a million readers ought not to be overlooked’.⁸¹

Whilst the correspondent in *MacMillan’s Magazine* cited at the beginning of this article was favourable to Egan’s work as a whole, other reviewers were not. One anonymous writer in *The Westminster Review*, in an article entitled ‘Modern Perversions’, said that “‘Robin Hood and Little John’ by Pierce Egan the Younger! Truly this is too bad’.⁸² The reviewer goes on to state that England’s national hero has become nothing more than ‘a thorough-bred cockney of the year of grace 1839 [...] in the region of undying glory occupied by Tom and Jerry, Black Sall, and Dusty Bob’.⁸³ In other words, the reviewer is dismayed that Robin is now a working-class hero in Egan’s text; ‘Tom and Jerry’ being a reference to Egan the Elder’s *Life in London* (1823), and Dusty Bob a colloquial term for a Parish Dustman.⁸⁴ The same reviewer, however, still gives Egan credit for making Robin Hood ‘far above Jack Sheppard’,⁸⁵ which, given the contemporary furore around W. H. Ainsworth’s eponymous novel published in 1839,⁸⁶ was at least a grudging compliment.

Egan’s political stance was not detected by any of the reviewers. Perhaps this was due to the fact that rebels such as Robin Hood, in spite of Ritson and Miller, had been reconfigured as non-radical figures in previous novels. Scott was a Tory, and instead of challenging the establishment, in *Ivanhoe* Robin of Locksley works with Richard I to build a better society. Similarly, at the close of the anonymously authored *Robin Hood: A Tale of the Olden Time* (1819),⁸⁷ the novel ends with a command to readers that is highly supportive of the status quo: ‘Fear God – Honour the King – Relieve the Poor – Forbear to envy the rich; and do as you would be done by all mankind!’⁸⁸ Additionally, another reason that these radical sentiments were missed may be due to the fact that Egan’s novels were usually set in the distant past, with their settings being too remote for reviewers to grow nervous about the democratic ideals contained in them. Although it is surprising that even in Egan’s *Paul Jones*, set during the American War of Independence of 1776 – 1783, the title character’s hatred of England’s monarchical government

was not picked up on. In that novel, for instance, Paul says that he fights for ‘the weak against the strong – the oppressed against the oppressors – for liberty against tyranny’.⁸⁹ Jones, an Englishman, joins the American rebels because ‘the mother country was a hotbed of injustice’ and ‘unjustly oppressed the colonies’.⁹⁰ Furthermore, Egan’s radicalism was most likely not detected because the first thing that reviewers picked up on was the overt violence and lust in his tales. One correspondent in *The Times* remarked that ‘Lust was the Alpha and Murder the Omega’ of his tales.⁹¹ There is also the possibility that reviewers did not actually read Egan’s works, and just assumed that they were violent and immoral as they deemed many other penny serials were. Indeed, in the review of Egan’s Robin Hood in *The Westminster Review*, there are no quotations from Egan’s novel from beyond chapter one. As John Springhall points out, penny serials in the later Victorian period were rarely examined ‘without prejudice’, and were often simply assumed to be violent and immoral without having actually being read.⁹² Whilst Egan was quick to refute the suggestion that his stories were filled with violence and immorality,⁹³ contemporary commentators were not wide off the mark; *Robin Hood*, *Adam Bell*, and *Wat Tyler* do contain healthy doses of violence, as the earlier discussion of violence in Egan’s outlaw narratives indicate.

That Egan held radical sympathies should not be surprising given the foregoing evidence. His contributions to Reynolds’ radical newspapers such as *Reynolds’ Miscellany* and *The London Journal*, furthermore, should also be telling. Reynolds, after all, was a confirmed radical who appears to have detested the aristocracy.⁹⁴ Later novels that were written by Egan, such as his *Clifton Grey* (1854), in which he abandoned historical fiction to author a tale of the Crimean War, displays similar ‘democratic political sentiments’.⁹⁵ Egan’s medievalist novels deserve attention because they highlight the plight of the poor and argue for the need for them to be politically enfranchised. More than this, however, Egan shows that when the state breaks its social contract, like Robin Hood, Adam Bell, and Wat Tyler the use of force is justified. Egan inverts Scott’s Saxon versus Norman theme; Scott used it to show how, if all sections of the populace could find a way to work together, society will become harmonious.⁹⁶ Although Scott was obviously a more talented writer than Egan was, Egan was a realist. His vision of medieval society was not the same as Scott’s; feudalism could not be used as a model with which to build a better world. In keeping with the ballad tradition, it is only in *Adam Bell* that the rebels obtain a pardon from the King, although Bell’s fellow outlaw, Clim of the Cleugh, prefers to remain an outlaw living in the woods.⁹⁷ Otherwise his novels offer no resolution to the plight of either the outlaws or the poor in general. In keeping with the

ballad tradition,⁹⁸ Robin dies in a monastery as a result of the treachery of the Prioress of Kirklees, having all his life ‘endeavoured to lift the wretched serfs out of the galling clutches of dire oppression’.⁹⁹ In a departure from history, Tyler survives being wounded by the King’s guards and is borne swiftly away, there to die peacefully in his bed. Egan ends his novel by musing upon what might have happened had Tyler not been struck down:

They might have tumbled the monarchy into dust, and from the grossest state of slavery and despotism, have sprung into an enlightened and popular form of government, which, if virtuously conducted, is as rightful and trustful in its relations as it is just in its principles.¹⁰⁰

What is needed instead for the poor of both medieval (and Victorian) England is to once again rise up and take power to themselves. According to Egan, monarchical government is equal to slavery, whereas republican government is enlightened. Egan’s medievalist novels are therefore a call to arms to the working classes, and his name deserves equal prominence among radical writers as that of his friend and contemporary G. W. M. Reynolds.

Endnotes

¹ Stephen Basdeo is a PhD candidate at Leeds Trinity University and is currently completing his thesis entitled ‘The Changing Faces of Robin Hood, c.1700-c.1900’. He has forthcoming publications in *The Bulletin of the International Association for Robin Hood Studies* and *The Cambridge Guide to the Eighteenth-Century Novel*. Stephen’s other research interests include the history of crime, and the popular literature of crime such as eighteenth-century criminal biography, ‘Last Dying Speeches’, and nineteenth-century penny dreadfuls.

² Anon. ‘Penny Novels’ *MacMillan’s Magazine* June 1866, 96-105 (p.96).

³ Pierce Egan, *The Pilgrims of the Thames in Search of the National. With Illustrations by Pierce Egan the Younger* (London: W. Strange, 1838).

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⁶ Stephen Knight, *Reading Robin Hood: Content, Form and Reception in the Outlaw Myth* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), *Robin Hood: A Mythic Biography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003) & *Robin Hood: A Complete Study of the English Outlaw* (Cambridge: Boydell, 1994).

⁷ Chris R. V. Bossche, *Reform Acts: Chartism, Social Agency, and the Victorian Novel, 1832-1867* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2014).

⁸ See Anon '116: Adam Bell, Clim of the Clough, and William of Cloudesly' in *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* Ed. Francis James Child 5 Vols. (New York: Dover Reprints, 2005), 3: 14-39. For a commentary upon Bell's tale and a translation into modern English see Thomas Hahn's essay 'Adam Bell, Clim of the Clough and William of Cloudesley' in *Medieval Outlaws: Ten Tales in Modern English* Ed. Thomas Ohlgren (Stroud: Sutton, 1998) pp.239-252.

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¹² Anon. 'Penny Novels', p.104.

¹³ Knight, *Robin Hood: A Complete Study of the English Outlaw*, p.186.

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¹⁵ For a discussion of the Norman Yoke see Marjorie Chibnall, *The Debate on the Norman Conquest* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999).

¹⁶ M. A. Thiers, *The History of the Conquest of England by the Normans* Trans. Charles C. Hamilton (London: Whitaker & Co. 1841), p.239.

¹⁷ J. M. Gutch (ed.) *A Lytell Geste of Robin Hode* 2 Vols. (London: Longman, 1847), 1: iii.

¹⁸ Pierce Egan, *Robin Hood and Little John, or The Merry Men of Sherwood Forest* (London: W. S. Johnson, 1840), p.114.

¹⁹ Egan, *Robin Hood*, p.167.

²⁰ Egan, *Robin Hood*, pp.206-213.

²¹ Pierce Egan, *Adam Bell: or, The Archers of Englewood Forest* (London: G. Vickers, c.1847?), p.7.

²² Pierce Egan, *Wat Tyler, or the Rebellion of 1381* (London: G. Pierce, 1847), p.127.

²³ John Wade, *The Extraordinary Black Book: an exposition of the United Church of England and Ireland; civil list and crown revenues; incomes, privileges, and power, of the aristocracy, privy council, diplomatic, and consular establishments; law and judicial administration; representation and prospects of reform under the new ministry; profits, influence, and monopoly of the Bank of England and East-India Company; with strictures on the renewal of these charters; debt and funding system; salaries, fees and emoluments in courts of justice, public offices, and colonies; lists of pluralists, placemen, pensioners and sinecurists; the whole corrected from the latest official returns, and presenting a complete view of the expenditure, patronage, influence and abuses of the government in church, state, law and representation* (London: Effingham Wilson, 1831), p.209.

²⁴ Egan, *Robin Hood*, p.191.

²⁵ Egan, *Adam Bell*, p.1.

²⁶ Egan, *Wat Tyler*, p.839.

²⁷ Egan, *Robin Hood*, p.146.

²⁸ Egan, *Robin Hood*, p.101.

²⁹ Egan, *Robin Hood*, p.29.

³⁰ In *Ivanhoe*, when Richard I (disguised as the Black Knight) first meets Friar Tuck, he refers to himself as the Clerk of Copmanhurst. See Scott, *Ivanhoe*, pp.209-225.

³¹ Egan, *Robin Hood*, p.107.

³² Egan, *Robin Hood*, p.142.

³³ Egan, *Adam Bell*, p.2.

- ³⁴ Egan, *Adam Bell*, p.13.
- ³⁵ Miles Taylor, 'Ludd, Ned (fl. 1811–1816)' in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) [Internet <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/40127>> Accessed 6 March 2016]
- ³⁶ The term 'Old Corruption' was 'used by radicals, to mean not one, but a rather wide variety of practices they held to be at the heart of much of what was wrong with Britain's unreformed government'. See W. D. Rubinstein, 'The End of "Old Corruption" in Britain 1780-1860' *Past and Present* No. 101 (1983), 55-86 (p.57).
- ³⁷ Margot C. Finn, *After Chartism: Class and Nation in English Radical Politics 1848-1874* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p.5.
- ³⁸ Pierce Egan, *Edward, the Black Prince; or, A Tale of the Feudal Times* (London: W. S. Johnson, n.d. c.1850?), .7.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁰ Pierce Egan, *Fair Rosamond: An Historical Romance* (London: W. Barth, 1844), p.15.
- ⁴¹ Joseph Ritson (ed.) *Robin Hood: A Collection of all the Ancient Poems, Songs, and Ballads* 2 Vols. (London: T. Egerton, 1795), 1: xi-xiii.
- ⁴² Thomas Miller, *Royston Gower; or, The Days of King John* (London: W. Nicholson, n.d. c.1890?), p.7. For a critical commentary on Miller's novel see Stephen Knight, *Reading Robin Hood*, pp.143-186.
- ⁴³ Egan, *Adam Bell*, p.4.
- ⁴⁴ Patricia Anderson, *The Printed Image and the Transformation of Popular Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p.101.
- ⁴⁵ Egan, *Robin Hood*, p.70.
- ⁴⁶ Egan, *Robin Hood*, p.87.
- ⁴⁷ Egan, *Robin Hood*, p.155.
- ⁴⁸ Egan, *Robin Hood*, p.94.
- ⁴⁹ See Rosalind Crone, *Violent Victorians: Popular Entertainment in Nineteenth-Century London* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012).
- ⁵⁰ For example, a 'Wat Tyler Brigade' of Chartists was established during the 1840s to draw upon Tyler's anti-authoritarian heritage. See Marc Brodie, 'Free Trade and Cheap Theatre: Sources of Politics for the Nineteenth-Century London Poor' *Social History* 28: 3 (2003), 346-360 (p.348).
- ⁵¹ Knight, *Robin Hood: A Mythic Biography*, *op cit.*
- ⁵² Egan, *Robin Hood*, p.98.
- ⁵³ Egan, *Robin Hood*, p.298.
- ⁵⁴ Egan, *Robin Hood*, p.268.
- ⁵⁵ Egan, *Robin Hood*, p.8.
- ⁵⁶ Egan, *Robin Hood*, p.viii.
- ⁵⁷ Egan, *Robin Hood*, pp.38, 39, 47, 98, 190,
- ⁵⁸ Peter Linebaugh, *Stop, Thief! The Commons, Enclosures, and Resistance* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2014), p.162.
- ⁵⁹ Robert Southey, *Wat Tyler: A Dramatic Poem* (London: T. Sherwin, 1817), 10. For critical commentaries see Jean Raimond, 'Southey's Early Writings and the Revolution' *Yearbook of English Studies* Vol. 19 (1989), 181-196 and also David M. Craig, *Robert Southey and Romantic Apostasy: Political Argument in Britain, 1780-1840* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2007).
- ⁶⁰ Egan, *Wat Tyler*, p.539.
- ⁶¹ Egan, *Wat Tyler*, p.795.

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- ⁶² Egan, *Wat Tyler*, p.835.
- ⁶³ Bossche, *Reform Acts*, p.23.
- ⁶⁴ Egan, *Wat Tyler*, p.799.
- ⁶⁵ Egan, *Wat Tyler*, p.862.
- ⁶⁶ Egan, *Wat Tyler*, p.797.
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁸ Almost all accounts of the Peasants' Revolt from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century attribute the immediate cause of the rising to this anecdote, although later historians such as G. M. Trevelyan have discredited it. See Lister M. Matheson, 'The Peasants' Revolt through Five Centuries of Rumor and Reporting: Richard Fox, John Stow, and Their Successors' *Studies in Philology* 95: 2 (1998), 121-151.
- ⁶⁹ Egan, *Wat Tyler*, p.861.
- ⁷⁰ Wade, *The Extraordinary Black Book*, p.196.
- ⁷¹ James C. Holt, *Robin Hood* 2nd Edn. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), p.183.
- ⁷² Knight, *Robin Hood: A Complete Study of the English Outlaw*, p.186.
- ⁷³ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁴ Pierce Egan, *Wat Tyler* (London: W. S. Johnson, 1851).
- ⁷⁵ Louis James, *Fiction for the Working Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), p.22.
- ⁷⁶ Pierce Egan, *Paul Jones, the Privateer* (London: F. Hextall, 1842), p.iii.
- ⁷⁷ *Robin Hood and Little John* was reprinted several times: London: W. S. Johnson, 1850; London, n.p. 1852; New York: McGloughlin Bros, n.d. c.1870; London: J. Dicks, 1896; London: E. Harrison, n.d. c.1870.
- ⁷⁸ *Wat Tyler* was reprinted several times: London: F. Hextall, 1841; F. Hextall, 1842; London, n.p. 1845; G. Pierce, 1846; London: G. Pierce, 1850; W. S. Johnson, 1851.
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- ⁸⁰ Anon. 'Penny Novels', *op cit.*
- ⁸¹ Anon. 'Penny Novels', p.104.
- ⁸² Anon. 'Modern Perversions' *The Westminster Review Vol. XXXIII* (London: Henry Hooper, 1840), p.425.
- ⁸³ *Ibid.*
- ⁸⁴ See Brian Maidment, *Dusty Bob: A Cultural History of Dustmen, 1780-1870* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).
- ⁸⁵ Anon, 'Modern Perversions', p.425.
- ⁸⁶ See Lauren Gillingham, 'Ainsworth's "Jack Sheppard" and the Crimes of History' *SEL Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 49: 4 (2009), 879-906.
- ⁸⁷ See Stephen Basdeo, 'Robin Hood: A Tale of the Olden Time (1819)' in *The Cambridge Guide to the Eighteenth-Century Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016) **[FORTHCOMING]**.
- ⁸⁸ Anon. *Robin Hood: A Tale of the Olden Time*, 2 Vols. (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1819), 2: 221.
- ⁸⁹ Egan, *Paul Jones*, p.214.
- ⁹⁰ Egan, *Paul Jones*, pp.540-541.
- ⁹¹ Pierce Egan, 'To the Editor of The Times' *The Times* 23 October 1861, p.4.
- ⁹² John Springhall, 'Pernicious Reading? The Penny Dreadful as Scapegoat for Late Victorian Juvenile Crime' *Victorian Periodicals Review* 27: 4 (1994), 326-349 (p.346).
- ⁹³ Egan, 'To the Editor of The Times', p.4.

⁹⁴ As an example of Reynolds' outspoken disgust of the aristocracy, we have the following quotation from his novel *The Mysteries of the Court of London* (1852-1864): 'Show us a class of persons, on the face of Almighty God's earth, more thoroughly heartless than the English aristocracy. No – You cannot! ...Talk of the donations which they make to charitable institutions – it is a despicable farce...and even if they really were charitable and truly bounteous – even if they gave largely to the deserving poor, and dispensed handfuls in secret benevolence – they would only be rendering back to the people a portion of that inordinate wealth which they derive from the thews, sinews, fibres, vitals, and heart's blood of the toiling – wretched – starving millions'. Cited in Michael Diamond, *Victorian Sensation: or, The Spectacular, the Shocking and the Scandalous in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Anthem, 2003), p.191.

⁹⁵ John R. Reed, 'Fighting Words: Two Proletarian Military Novels of the Crimean Period' *Victorian Literature and Culture* 32: 8 (2008), 331-342 (p.332).

⁹⁶ Alice Chandler, 'Sir Walter Scott and the Medieval Revival' *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 19: 4 (1965), 315-332 (p.324).

⁹⁷ Egan, *Adam Bell*, p.194.

⁹⁸ Anon. 'The Death of Robin Hood' in *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales* Ed. Thomas Ohlgren and Stephen Knight (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000), pp.592-601.

⁹⁹ Egan, *Robin Hood*, p.279.

¹⁰⁰ Egan, *Wat Tyler*, p.868.