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Robin the Hood and his merry men

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

FIVE hundred years ago, if you lived as I do in one of the Lowland or Border burghs, this wasn't just Beltane (the great Celtic quarterly festival, from Gaelic *Bealltainn*). It was also Robin Hood's time of year.

A Robin Hood and a Little John would be elected, and there would be Robin Hood 'games' (a play, with much fighting and drinking and collecting of money and firing of arrows by the young men) but also formal ceremonies in which Robin would bestow a burgess's ticket upon certain individuals in return for a fee.

Robin Hood is a quintessentially English figure and his games were well known in England, but without the 'civic' dimension. What's more, scholars have identified the condoning of violence as one of the most notable features of the whole Robin Hood tradition, yet nowhere in England did Robin Hood games ever lead to as much violence as they did in Edinburgh in 1561. So how exactly did all this come about?

Let me start at the beginning. I have the advantage of having some of the best and latest scholarship on the subject in front of me, notably J C Holt's 'Robin Hood' of 1982 and Jeffrey L Singman's 'Robin Hood: The Shaping of the Legend' of 1998, which devotes an appendix to the Edinburgh riots.

The first hints of the tradition begin to surface in the thirteenth century, the time of Thomas Rhymer to whom I devoted so much space on this page a couple of years ago. The main difference between the Hood and the Rhymer is that the Rhymer definitely existed. Says Singman: "As a name for a medieval highwayman, 'Robin Hood' has a suspiciously pseudonymic ring; it may well be that the only forests this outlaw ever prowled were those of the imagination."

There is also a parallel — almost too obvious, too neat — with Fionn of the Gael and King Arthur of the Welsh (British). By the end of the Middle Ages Fionn, Arthur and Robin had become the representative heroes of the three great competing races of these islands. Fionn had his *féinn*, Arthur his round table, Robin Hood his merry men. In different ways they all seemed to defend the structures of society without entirely belonging to it. Fionn and Robin Hood in particular were countryside figures, brigands on the edge of civilisation. Probably Arthur was like that too until the Norman-French imagination picked him up as a *jeu d'esprit* and turned him into a pillar of feudal society, a figure that somehow justified their conquest of England.

There are of course differences. Fionn belongs everywhere where Gaelic was spoken from Cape Wrath to Cape Clear, a universal hero of his people. His *féinn* are a tribe without a tribal homeland, a *sluagh* whose *dùthchas* is the entire Gaelic-speaking territory. And they are classless, as we would expect in a kin-based society. They are just warriors.

By contrast, in the earliest ballads Robin Hood belongs to Barnsdale in South Yorkshire, in the later ones he has only moved a few miles to Sherwood Forest on the borders of Nottinghamshire, and there in the popular imagination he is fixed for ever — a national hero who belongs to quite a small locality which, unlike Camelot, is resolutely identifiable.

What is more, Robin belongs to a class. Over and over he is called a 'yeoman'. "Robin's yeoman status," says Singman, "is a key organizing principle in the legend, for it defines the entire point of view and ethical outlook of the stories. The concept of yeomanry fulfils much the same function in Robin Hood's world as chivalry does in the world of the romances, serving as the yardstick by which all acts are measured."

A yeoman was a free man, higher than a serf, a villein or a husbandman, lower than a knight, a squire or a gentleman; he could be a tenant of land in his own right, but when he travelled he went on foot. His weapon was light and inexpensive — the bow. And in the middle ages, archery was the only sport that received legal sanction and encouragement.

One difference between Fionn, Arthur and Robin is more apparent than real. In the eighteenth century Fionn was believed to be a historical figure (Fingal) who lived in the third century AD. By the nineteenth this was disproved, or at least shown to be unprovable. Nobody wastes time any more trying to prove Fionn existed.

At the other extreme are Arthurian studies, a literary industry still devoted to proving the unprovable. The latest contribution is 'Arthur and the Lost Kingdoms', published last year by this newspaper's greatest fan, Alistair Moffat. I bought the book in Moffat's home town, Kelso. The blurb says: "After he had finished his history of Kelso, he began to look in earnest for Arthur. And he found him. Historians have failed to show convincingly that King Arthur existed, for a good reason: they have been looking in the wrong place." Camelot, apparently, is Roxburgh near Kelso. And my articles about Thomas Rhymer in 'The West Highland Free Press' are generously cited in support of the argument. Well well. Whatever next.

Of course there are great liminal heroes of this kind who certainly did exist. William Wallace. Ned Kelly. Billy the Kid. Jesse James. But the fact that a man existed doesn't mean that everything that has been said about him is true. It's the Braveheart Factor.

Robin Hood is a good example. After centuries of trying, this is a summary of what historical scholarship has come up with. I quote Holt. "A Robert Hode, tenant of the archbishop of York, fled the jurisdiction of the king's justices at York in 1225. Meanwhile at Wakefield and the villages immediately to the north and west a family carrying the surname Hood was established throughout the thirteenth century. The villages in which they held their modest estates yield comparatively early Robin Hood place names first recorded in the seventeenth century. Many of Robin's legendary activities are centred ten miles or so south-east of Wakefield, in Barnsdale, which was a particularly dangerous area for travellers by 1306."

Perhaps all we can say is that Robin Hood is a great name for a yeoman outlaw and that the good people of Wakefield provided it. In fact Hood is such a good name for a gangster that that is precisely what it has become. The 'Oxford English Dictionary' tells us that 'hood' in this sense was first recorded in the December 1930 issue of the 'American Mercury' (which mentioned 'St Louie hoods') and that it was an abbreviation of 'hoodlum'.

"Hoodlum," it goes on, "originated in San Francisco about 1870–72, and began to excite attention elsewhere in the U.S. about 1877, by which time its origin was lost, and many fictitious stories, concocted to account for it, were

current in the newspapers." The earliest reference is to 'the bullying of the San Francisco "hoodlums"' in the 'Cincinnati Commercial' of 1871. It is helpfully defined as 'a youthful street rowdy; "a loafing youth of mischievous proclivities"; a dangerous rough'.

These definitions would have received the hearty endorsement of Edinburgh's city fathers in 1561. But first we have to explain the strangely urban nature of the Scottish connection. Here is Singman's view: "The theme of community is most overt in the Scottish towns where the citizenry are required to costume themselves and attend upon the outlaw, and where new citizens are admitted by the agency of Robin Hood, likening admission to the liberties of the town to joining the fellowship of the outlaw band, as happens in so many of the ballads.

"The analogy between an urban middling class and forest outlaws may at first seem incongruous. Perhaps some element of urban pastoralism was involved, but more important is an underlying similarity between the Robin Hood myth and that of the premodern town. The towns were analogous to the greenwood of the ballads in that they were semi-independent localities whose citizens enjoyed special freedoms and were subject to no overlord save the king himself; ironically, although the Robin Hood ballads consistently contrast the worlds of the forest and the town, Robin's world was a particularly effective icon for civic self-identity."

This is helpful, and to develop it I only need to look out of my window here in Peebles. In the sixteenth century Scotland had reached something like linguistic equilibrium: half Gaelic speaking, half Inglis speaking. Inglis was in the process of being renamed 'Scots' to consolidate its claim to be the national language. The burghs were tiny Inglis-speaking communes. Some, like Inverness and Dunkeld, were surrounded by a sea of Gaelic-speaking warrior tribes and Celtic customs. Even those which were not — like Peebles — were largely surrounded by a sea of robber barons, wooded hillsides, bogs and the echoes of Celtic traditions of one kind or another. As Professor Smout once memorably wrote, "Highland society was based on kinship modified by feudalism, Lowland society was based on feudalism tempered by kinship."

So in the sixteenth century, despite being one of Scotland's leading towns, Peebles was just a little street of merchants and artisans at the confluence of two rivers. A mile to the east the Horsburghs ruled the countryside from their castle at Horsburgh. A mile to the west the Hays ruled the countryside from their castle at Neidpath. And all around the hills closed in. Menacingly.

So here in Scotland it was the 'urban middling class' that was beleaguered. Inglis-speaking, egalitarian and surrounded by hostile territory, their lifeline — like that of Robin Hood — was loyalty to the crown. In the case of Peebles this came alive every year at Beltane when the King came on pilgrimage to the Cross Kirk to enjoy the fresh air, do some hunting and join in the revelry. But in a land that lacked governance, the yeoman with his bow had to believe that he, too, could be king.

So in the Scottish burghs by 1500 Robin Hood had become a craze. Says Ronald Hutton in 'The Stations of the Sun': "At Aberdeen in May 1508 the corporation excitedly ordered all able men to process behind Robin and Little John 'with their arrayment made in green and yellow, bows, arrows, and all other convenient things'. Ten years later the mighty Earl of Arran stiffly refused an invitation from Edinburgh to accept the office of 'Litiljohn' and 'make sports and jocosities in the town'."

But, as is also true of that other Celtic quarterday, Hallowe'en, chaos was never far away. Says Singman: "Some degree of unruliness must inevitably have arisen in an activity which involved young bachelors, weaponry, combat, and the consumption of alcohol."

In 1555 the very insecure Catholic administration of Mary of Guise became the first to ban Robin Hood games throughout Scotland. Then in April 1561, in the first spring after the Reformation, the provost and baillies of Edinburgh got wind of plans among the town's apprentices and servants to 'mak convocatioun and assemblie efter the auld wikit maner of Robene Hude'. Nervously, they issued a proclamation banning 'all sic conventionis' and all wearing of armour, bearing of weapons, striking of drums, sounding of trumpets or carrying of flags 'for sic vane besynes'.

The young men ignored the ban. They chose a certain George Durie to be Robin Hood and marched into the city armed to the teeth. The games and disturbances went on for weeks, with much brawling and molestation of citizens and visitors alike.

Determined to make an example, the city fathers arrested one James Gillon on charges of robbery and condemned him to hang. The leaders of the crafts pleaded for Gillon's life with them and also with John Knox, the newly-installed minister of St Giles, believing that if the hanging took place more disturbances would ensue.

They were right. On 21 July rioters tore down the gibbet, broke into the Tolbooth and released Gillon and his fellow prisoners. They brought them down the Canongate to try to leave the city. At that point the provost and baillies took over the Tolbooth. Finding the gate closed, the crowd turned back past the Tolbooth and were fired upon. One person was wounded. Furious, the mob turned on the Tolbooth and besieged it for several hours.

The provost and baillies asked the craft leaders to help them. According to Knox they refused, saying: "They will be magistrates alone; let them rule the multitude alone." After that the military authorities in the Castle intervened and extracted a promise from the provost and baillies that the rioters would not be punished. The crowd finally dispersed at 9 p.m.

The last Robin Hood games in Scotland were held at Linton near Kelso in 1610.

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