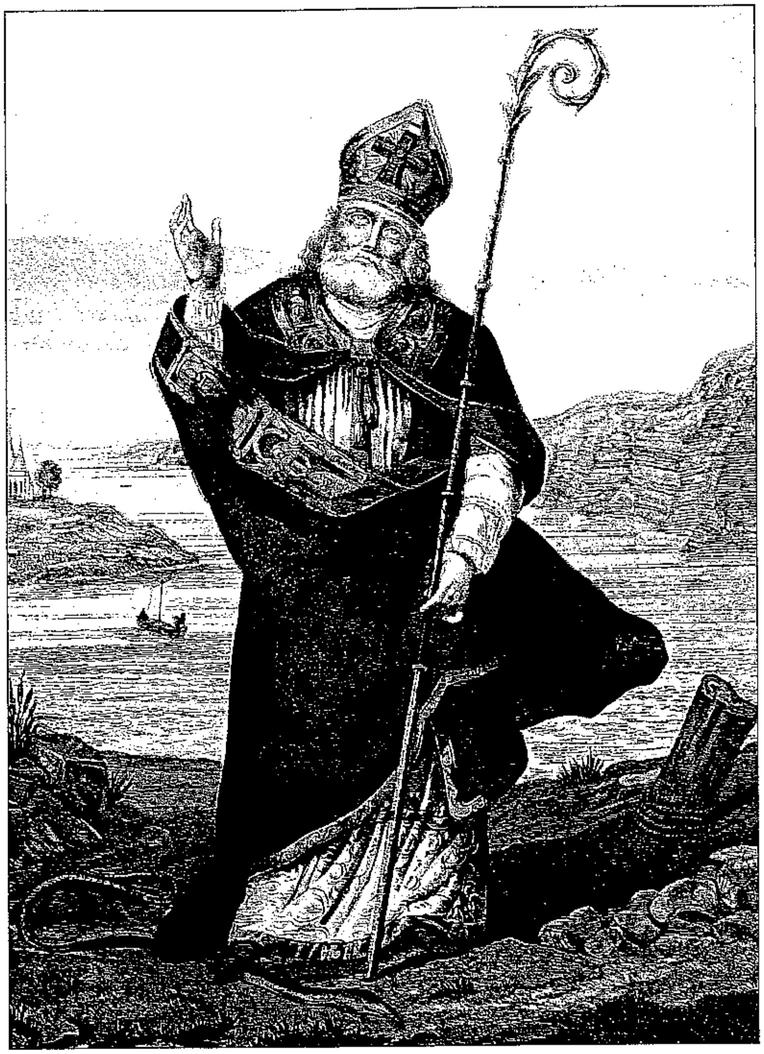
Did St. Patrick Drive the Snakes from Ireland?

Much of the popular legend about Ireland's patron saint is fanciful myth, but the real story of St. Patrick is the stuff of high drama.



ST. PATRICK IS OFTEN DEPICTED CRUSHING A SNAKE BENEATH HIS FOOT.

NO CULTURE TREASURES ITS MYTHS MORE THAN the Irish, but their most prominent legend is actually of foreign provenance. St. Patrick, Ireland's second bishop and the man largely responsible for Christianizing its pagan tribes, is also credited with banishing its snakes. The legend derives from a Norse mistranslation of Patrick's name. When the Norse invaders arrived in Ireland in the 9th century, they noticed that the island had no toads. The Norse word for toad is "paud," and when they heard of Paudrig, as Patrick was called, they understood his name to mean "toad expeller." Toads soon became snakes—undoubtedly because the snake has traditionally been a symbol of evil—and a legend was born.

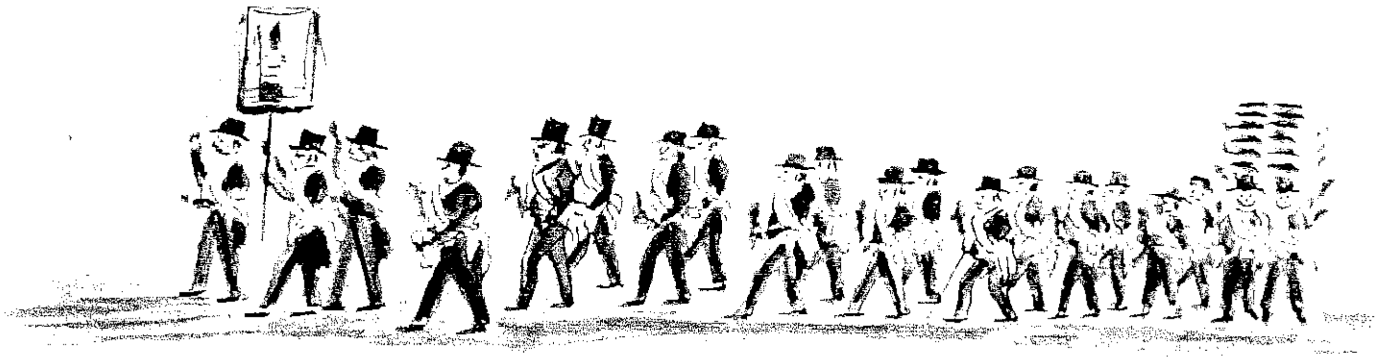
PATRICK'S LIFE AND LEGEND

The story that Patrick introduced the shamrock to the Irish as a visual explanation of the Trinity is also spurious. It seems the Christian Irish had valued the shamrock before Patrick's arrival as a natural representation of the Cross. But even after these colorful legends are dispensed with, there is still much that is fascinating about Patrick's life.

Scholars debate his exact date and place of birth. The general consensus was that Patrick was born in the early 5th century AD in western Britain. In ancient manuscripts, his birthplace appears as "Bannavem Taburniae," but scholars have been unable to locate the site, and many believe the name to be a copyist's error. Patrick was a Roman Briton, who came from a respected family; his grandfather was a priest and his father a deacon.

At the age of 16, before Patrick was able to complete his education, he was kidnapped by Irish raiders who took him back to their island homeland as a slave. It seems that he served a master in the country's north, but once again, historians dispute the exact location.

Six years into his captivity, Patrick began hearing voices telling of his imminent escape and seeing visions of a great ship that would be the instrument of his freedom. How Patrick escaped is not clear. But encouraged by his visions, he made his way some 200 miles to the port city now known as Wicklow. Sure enough, Patrick found a waiting ship and, according to legend, convinced the captain to let him join the crew. A few scholars suggest that he may have been taken on board as a captive.



Some legends claim that Patrick sailed to Gaul (France), then to Italy, where he disembarked on the French-Italian Mediterranean coast. It is said he spent a number of years in a monastic community near present-day Cannes.

After returning briefly to Britain, Patrick traveled again to Gaul, where he was ordained as a priest, dedicating himself to ministering to the Irish Christians. Patrick claimed that his decision was once again prompted by a striking dream, in which he was given a bundle of letters which were labeled "The Voice of the Irish." He also heard this solemn plea: "We ask you, holy boy, come back again and walk among us once more."

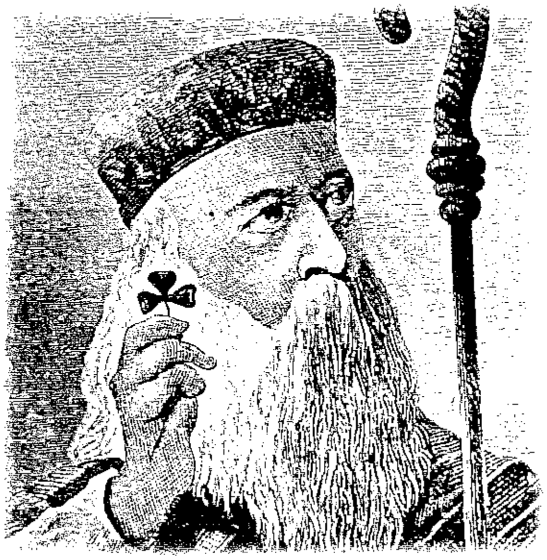
Patrick was motivated by a concern for his fellow Roman Britons: They had been taken as captives to Ireland, and their descendants had established small Christian communities that were struggling to survive in a pagan land. Also, in keeping with the Catholic Church, Patrick believed that bringing Christ to "the remotest parts of the land beyond which there is nothing and nobody" would quicken the coming of Christ's return.

ORIGINS OF A PARADE

March 17—St. Patrick's Day—was designated a holy day, devoted to the worship of St. Patrick. In Ireland in the 19th century, pubs normally closed on that day, only serving travelers, but many got around this proscription by walking in groups to the next town.

It was the Americans who held the first official St. Patrick's Day parade in 1737 in Boston. The event spread to New York in 1762, when Irish military units were recruited to serve in the American colonies.

The parade itself began as a short walk from breakfast to church. But it did not make it to Ireland until the 19th century, and there it still exists more as a day for prayer, family gatherings, and sport—not green beer and mass-produced trinkets.



THE BISHOP'S LEGACY

Though Patrick came to Ireland to be its bishop in 457, he was passed over for the position—the church instead chose a senior prelate named Palladius. But after Palladius's death, Patrick, then in his mid-forties, was named bishop. Until his death in 492, he spent the rest of his life establishing churches and developing a native clergy. Tradition has it that Patrick impressed and then converted Ireland's pagan High King, Laoghaire.

Patrick was hampered both by feelings of inadequacy—in his *Confessions,* he describes himself as an ignorant country bumpkin—and by the fierceness of the pagan kings, who resented his ministering and often killed his converts. And yet one has only to consider the deep commitment to Catholicism of the Irish to appreciate how successful he was. Before Patrick, Ireland was considered by the Church a land *ubi nemo ultra erat*—"beyond which no man dwelt." Through his efforts, Ireland became part of Christian Europe.

ANOTHER TYPICAL PORTRAYAL HAS THE SAINT HOLDING A SHAMROCK IN HIS HAND (LEFT). A ST. PATRICK'S DAY PARADE HELD IN 1837 WAS SKETCHED BY AN AMERICAN ARTIST (TOP). THE EARLY PARADES WERE SOLEMN EVENTS, BECOMING BIG AND CELEBRATORY—AND OFTEN POLITICAL—ONLY IN THE 20TH CENTURY.

William Tell & Lady Godiva

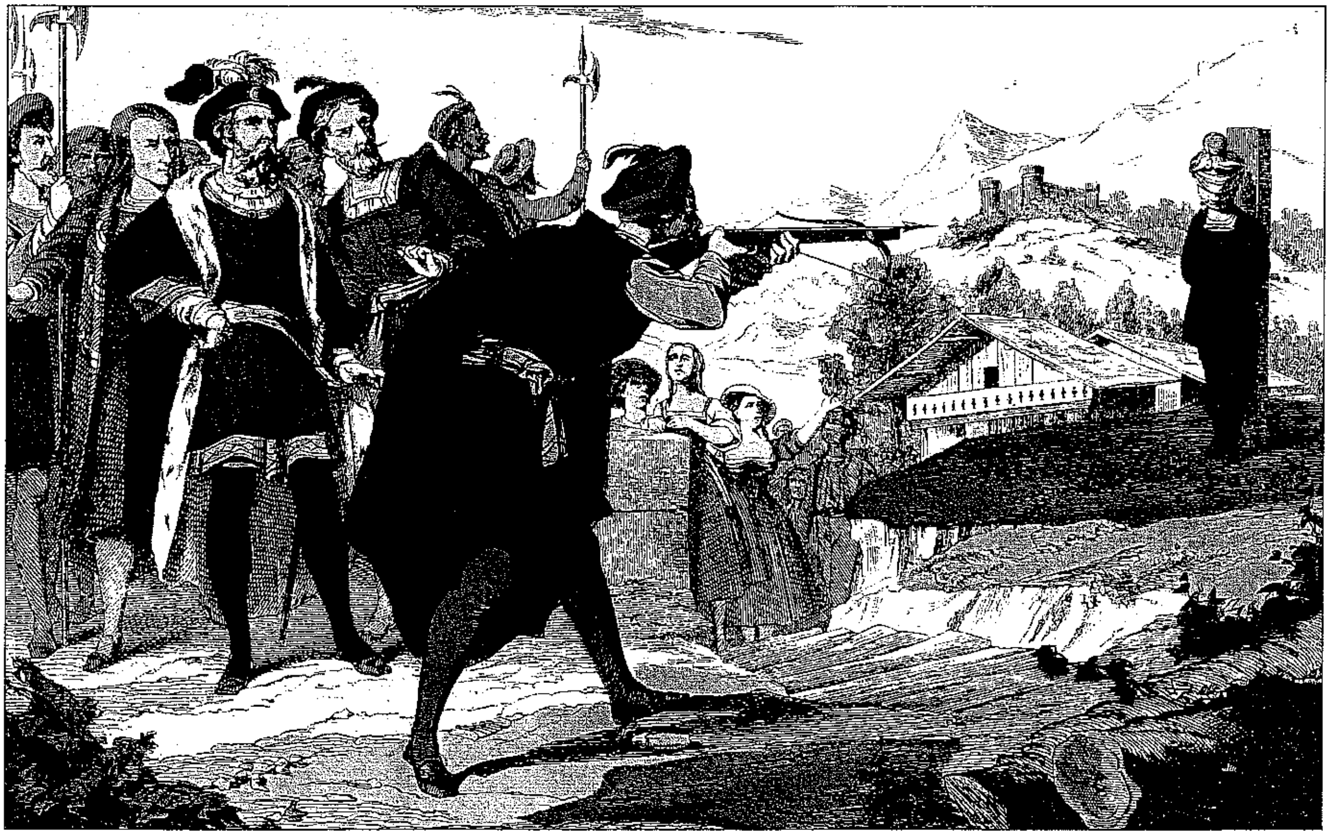
SOME LEGENDS ARE SO INTERTWINED WITH A NATION'S SENSE of pride that regardless of their veracity, they graft on to a place's identity like a tenacious vine. For example, in Switzerland a lime tree once marked the spot where legend says William Tell's son stood bravely as his father shot the apple from his head. Now the site is marked by a fountain, and camera-laden tourists flock to pose in front of this "birthplace of Swiss independence." To the north, citizens of Coventry, in central England, were for centuries treated to a solemn reenactment of Lady Godiva's ride through the town (her part played tastefully by a young boy). Today tourists visit these sites more out of respect for the myth than for historical accuracy, rarely asking whether these events happened at all.

In the case of Tell, the answer is probably no. The story now known around the world was popularized by the dramatist Friedrich von Schiller in his 1804 drama *Wilhelm Tell,* one of the classics of the German stage.

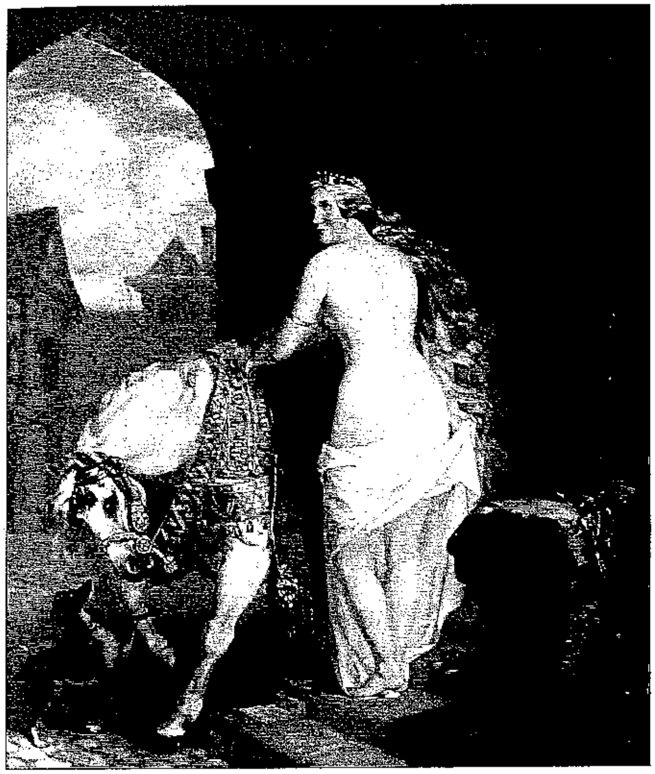
The time of the legend is the late 13th century, and its setting is the forest cantons of Uri, Schwyz, and Unterwalden. For centuries, the cantons had been ruled from Vienna by the monarchs of the Holy Roman Empire, whose representatives alienated the populace with autocratic, heavy-handed governance. The Uri governor, Hermann Gessler, was one such tyrant. He required that every last citizen salute a hat placed on a flagpole in the marketplace. This hat represented his authority whenever he was absent from the town.

THE SCORNFUL PEASANT TELL

William Tell, so the legend goes, was one of the peasants who toiled in the nearby valleys—and who scorned Gessler's rule. One day, while walking by the pole with his young son, he refused to give the mandatory salute and was quickly confronted by soldiers. The governor was alerted and brought to the marketplace, where a crowd had formed. Tell's young son, unaware of the danger, bragged to the crowd of his father's skill as an archer, and Gessler, seizing on an opportunity to humiliate



REAL LIFE OR FROM THE STAGE? THE SWISS PEASANT WILLIAM TELL AIMS AT AN APPLE ATOP THE HEAD OF HIS SON, AS GESSLER AND THE TOWNSFOLK OF URI, A FOREST CANTON, LOOK ON.



MARSHALL CLAXTON PAINTED A BARE AND VOLUPTUOUS LADY GODIVA IN 1850.

the insubordinate, asked Tell to demonstrate his prowess by shooting an apple off his son's head.

Tell pleaded for another task, to no avail. Grabbing his bow and loading it with two arrows, he warned Gessler, "If my first arrow had my dear child struck, the second arrow I had aimed at you. And be assured, I should not then have missed." Tell managed to hit the apple, but was promptly taken into custody. He soon after escaped, then ultimately ambushed and killed the governor. His act was said to be the first shot of Swiss independence.

Doubts began to arise over the story's truthfulness as early as the 16th century, when Swiss historians suggested it was probably invented in order to stir the hatred of neighboring Austrians. Even the dramatist Schiller admitted taking liberties in assigning Tell a central role in the fight for Swiss independence. But the legend suffered its most crushing blow in the middle of the 19th century, when the historian Joseph Kopp, after scouring the archives of the early forest cantons, concluded that Tell never existed.

Historians have now traced the story back to the late 15th century and say it was probably based on earlier oral traditions. The first print reference to Tell occurs in four stanzas of a 1477 ballad, *Song of the Origin of the Confederation*; mentions are made of archery, but not of Gessler, the hat, or the pole. Those elements do, however, appear in other works, such as *The White Book*. Published sometime between 1467 and 1474, it names Gessler as a bailiff and the skilled archer as Thall (not Tell) but fails to link them to Swiss independence.

So how did the story gain such stature? Historians can only point to the prevalence of tested marksmen in European legend, who appear in the oral traditions of Germany, Denmark, Norway, Iceland, and England. It is possible that whoever first told the Tell story in the context of Swiss independence was adapting one of these foreign tales to the cause.

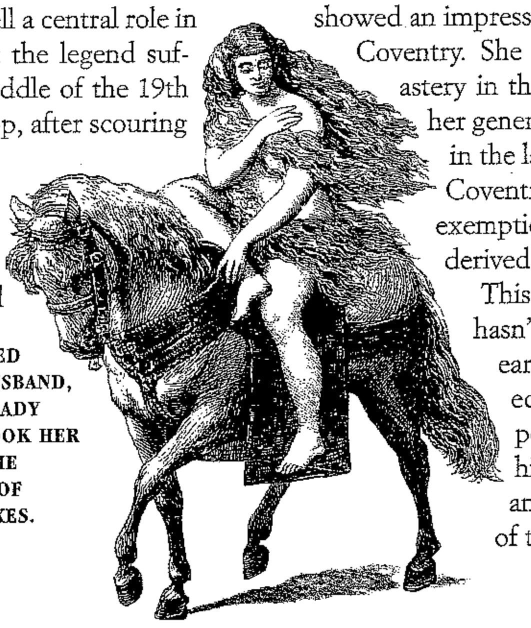
LADY GODIVA'S RIDE

And what of Lady Godiva? According to the story, she was the matriarch of Coventry who rode naked through the town to save it from paying taxes. There are indeed records of a Godiva who married Leofric, the 11th-century earl of Mercia. Leofric was required by King Edward the Confessor to raise a large tax from his populace in Coventry, and the distraught citizenry turned to the earl's wife for help. Godiva begged her husband to lower the levies, and he responded by saying that he would do so after she rode through the town naked on a horse—probably a medieval version of "fat chance."

Yet so dedicated was Godiva to the townspeople that she took up her husband's challenge, mounting a horse and riding through town unclothed, her body cloaked by her flowing hair and the townsfolk staying respectfully indoors. Leofric had little choice but to keep his word.

It is a moving legend, combining civic virtue with the slightest hint of prurient fascination. And it may very well be true. The story is first referred to in the chronicles of a 13th-century historian, Roger of Wendover, who relied on documentation since vanished. But there are plenty of historical records of a Godiva, who throughout her life showed an impressive dedication to the people of Coventry. She founded a Benedictine monastery in the city in 1043, which through her generosity became one of the richest in the land. Up until the 17th century, Coventry also boasted a number of tax exemptions, which some claim to have derived from Leofric's concession.

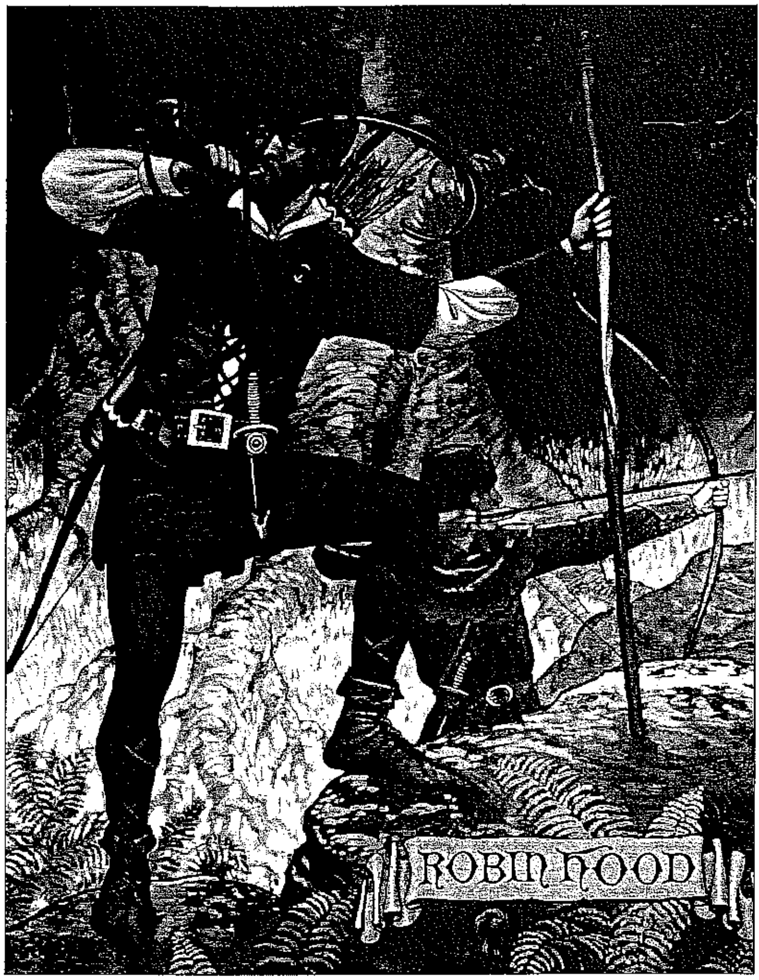
This is not to say that the legend hasn't evolved through time. In the early 18th century, the tale included a tailor named Tom, who peeked through the shutters of his home at the naked Godiva and was struck blind—the origin of the phrase "peeping Tom."



CHALLENGED BY HER HUSBAND, AN EARL, LADY GODIVA TOOK HER RIDE IN THE INTEREST OF LOWER TAXES.

Was there a Robin Hood?

"Robyn was a proud outlaw," sang balladeers of the intrepid woodsman. But did Robin Hood even exist? And why has his legend persisted?



THE LEGEND OF ROBIN HOOD HAS CAPTURED THE WORLD'S IMAGINATION FOR THE PAST FOUR CENTURIES. SHOWN HERE IS A LATE 19TH-CENTURY ILLUSTRATION OF ROBIN AND A BOWMAN.

IT SEEMS ALMOST AN INJUSTICE TO QUESTION THE Robin Hood legend, such is our innate appreciation for the celebrated champion of the underdog and the common man. Scholars who seek to debunk parts of the legend are practically accomplices to the evil Sheriff of Nottingham; and yet it is the historian's duty to examine the past, however entertaining the legend handed down to us. In the 19th century, scholars who had grown up with the beloved chivalric tales of Sir Walter Scott reexamined the Robin Hood stories and found them wanting in historical foundations. In his 1882 *English and Scottish Popular Ballads,* scholar Francis James Child declared Robin Hood a fiction, "absolutely a creation of the ballad genre." But in later years, more research has suggested there may be some truth to the legend.

The first known, extended version of the Robin Hood story is the 15th-century ballad collection *Lyttle Geste of Robyn Hode.* It contains the familiar cast of characters: the sheriff of Nottingham, Robin, Little John, and the rest of his "merrie men" who steal from the rich and give to the poor in their forest lair. In many of the early versions of the tale, the sylvan locale is Barnesdale forest, in Yorkshire. But references to Robin Hood appear in stories and ballads from as early as the mid-14th century, so historians speculate that if there was a historical "prince of thieves," he lived sometime before then. In the manorial rolls and similar local records from 1228 and 1230, the name Robert Hood appears, and he is described as a fugitive from justice, who stole "for the benefit of the many." But the name Robert Hood was actually a quite common one at the time, making the census evidence inconclusive.

CLAIMS AND CONTRADICTIONS

One of the greatest difficulties in dating the hero is the contradictory historical references within the legends; various suggestions within the ballads place him in the reign of four separate English kings, from Richard the Lionheart (r. 1189–1199) to Edward II (r. 1307–1327). The monarch with the strongest link to Robin Hood is Richard, who ruled in the late 12th century and was opposed by his brother and eventual successor King John. But Robin has also been linked to a 1265 revolt against King Henry III, led by his brother-in-law Simon de Montfort. According to the early historian Walter Bower, after the rebellion against Henry, "the famous robber Robin Hood. . . rose to

prominence among those who had been disinherited and banished on account of the revolt." However, modern historians have pointed out that the longbow, which features so prominently in many of the Robin Hood legends, was not in general use at the time of King Henry III, casting doubt on Bower's claim.

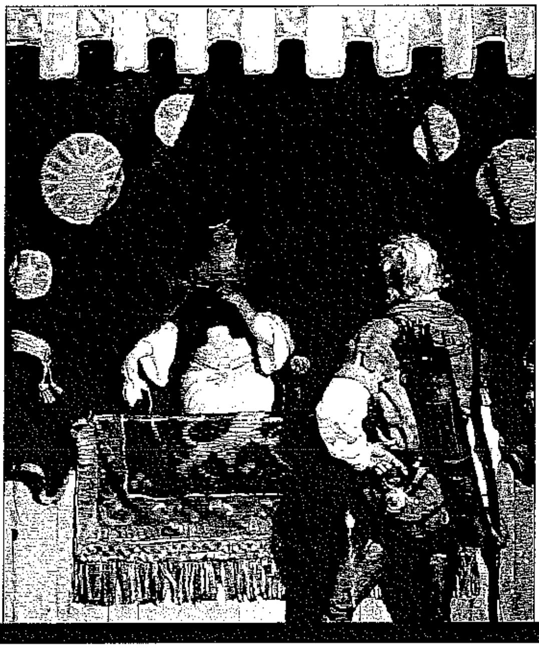
The candidate with the most plausible claim to Robin's identity is a tenant of Wakefield, Yorkshire, in the early 14th century, who was probably involved in an uprising against the Earl of Lancaster in 1322. The 1320 Manor Rolls of the town list a Robert Hood who had been charged with breaking "forest laws," resisting the lord of the manor, and negligence in fighting against the Scots. There is also some indication that Hood's home was confiscated because of this dereliction of duty, which might account for his move to the forest. The Wakefield Robin would place the story in the reign of King Edward II, and indeed, there is a record of the king taking into his service one "Robert Hood" as a court valet.

A LITERARY STEW

Despite the effort historians have spent searching for the first historical Robin Hood, most agree that the legend has evolved so dramatically over the centuries that its original inspiration might very well be unrecognizable, even if discovered. Maid Marian, the story's love interest, did not appear until the 16th century, nor did the earliest versions of the tale feature the portly Friar Tuck. In other versions of the story, Robin is actually motivated less by righting injustices than by national pride, fighting for the Saxon people against the conquering Normans. Some scholars have even contended, with much controversy, that Robin Hood and his "merrie men" were actually members of a gay community forced to live outside the city, beyond the reach of the law and the Church.

What is not disputed is that the story of Robin Hood, the archetypal outlaw-hero, took on the characteristics and details of many outlaw ballads, becoming a sort of literary stew of local lore and contemporary events. In fact, the story was so susceptible to adaptation and interpolation that in 1773, the lexicographer Samuel Johnson claimed that he could fabricate a Robin Hood legend that readers would swear they had known their entire life.

Those who enjoyed the Robin Hood legend, with its colorful cast of characters in pursuit of justice for the common man, didn't mind if it had evolved through the centuries; they expected no less, for so powerful is the love of justice that heroes who champion it necessarily become larger, greater, and more entertaining than anything history could produce.



ON THE SCREEN, ERROL FLYNN PLAYED ROBIN IN 1938 (ABOVE). THE AMERICAN PAINTER N.C. WYETH'S COLOR ILLUSTRATION FOR A 1917 COLLECTION OF TALES (BOTTOM LEFT) SHOWS THE QUILL-TOTING BANDIT MEETING MAID MARIAN FOR THE FIRST TIME, AT A ROYAL TOURNAMENT.

A HOST OF HOODS

Many other rebels, outlaws, and miscellaneous outcasts have been suggested as the historical Robin Hood. Among them are Sir Robert Thwing, who led a movement where he and his devotees raided monasteries, stealing grain and distributing it to the poor; and Robert Fitzhooth, claimant to earl of Huntington, who was born about 1160 and died in 1247. Fitzhooth is a more likely candidate, as some historical documents actually cite these particular dates for Robin Hood's birth and death. But critics point out that more recent records do not mention a defiant nobleman bearing the Fitzhooth name.