Myth and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain: The Legends of King Arthur and Robin Hood

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Author:
Stephanie L. Barczewski
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Rosemary Mitchell

Nineteenth-century English nationalism has been a neglected area of research, as Gerald Newman pointed out in his seminal study,*The Rise of English Nationalism: A Cultural History, 1740-1830* (1987). The scholarly preoccupations of the last decade have been with *British* national identity and its interaction - or suppression - of divergent Celtic nationalisms. The publication of Linda Colley's *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (1992) perhaps rightly focused academic attention on the creation of a sense of Britishness which - in the eighteenth- and early-nineteenth- centuries at least - served to bind the disparate parts of the British Isles together. This book explores the relationship between British and English national identities in the nineteenth-century. David Cannadine has suggested that Colley's sense of Britishness had dwindled, by the end of Victoria's reign, to an interpretation of Britain as England alone, so that British history was essentially English history writ large.(1) Barczewksi's study of nineteenth-century perceptions and representations of the legends of King Arthur and Robin Hood offers a case study of the development of this Anglicization of the British identity. By the end of Victoria's reign, she argues, Britishness of the inclusive variety Colley pictured was under challenge: a more dominant and racialist form of English national identity was emerging. This was a definition of Britain as England which left no room for the inclusion of Celtic national identities. You could not longer be British *and* Scottish, Welsh, or Irish; you were British *and not* Scottish, Welsh or Irish.

However, Barczewki is careful to ensure that her conceptual model of this transition does not blind her to other aspects of British nationalism. She rightly recognises that national identities of every kind are under negotiation in nineteenth-century Britain. National identity is protean, she suggests, adapting itself to the demands of many different audiences. In addition to her argument concerning the gradual transformation of national identity in the course of the nineteenth-century, she uses the two *foci* of her research to illustrate the adaptability of Britishness. While King Arthur and his knights are the natural resource of conservatives, elites, and nostalgic romantics, Robin Hood and his Merry Men appeal to working-class audiences and socialists. She pursues this opposition between the chivalrous king and the people's outlaw through chapters on the development of English studies, ideas about women, and the growth of imperialism. The fact that two

such dissimilar heroes could be simultaneously national icons reflects the ways in which national identity serves and can be made to serve a range of different constituencies. As Barczewski puts it, 'British nationalism did not represent a single set of values and ideals, but rather a variety of competing points of view'.(2)

It is the contrasts presented between the two legendary heroes which gives this book its value for the academic reader - as well as much of its appeal. As Barczewski herself recognises, Victorian representations of the Arthurian legends are hardly an original subject for the historian, the art historian, or the literary scholar. However, most studies of Robin Hood's legend have had little to say about its nineteenth-century manifestations. She draws on a wide range of sources, including accounts of tours, guidebooks, historical novels, children's story books, poetry, antiquarian journals, and newspaper articles, mixing analysis of familiar and well-known texts - such as Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* and Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* - with the obscure and even the apparently tangential.

Excursions into this last area of the marginal make fascinating reading. The title of J. Lockhart Haigh's *Sir Galahad of the Slums* (1907), in which a young clergyman embarks on a career in the Liverpool slums, surely reveals the extent to which Arthur's knights had become household names by the close of the century. Barczewski shows how Robin Hood too had become part of the popular consciousness, a key figure in the rituals of the most prominent of all friendly societies, the Ancient Order of Foresters. Figures from both collections of legends were further immortalised, she reflects, in the names of racehorses. The only criticism which can be levelled at the breadth of Barczewski's coverage is her relative neglect of imagery. Although aware of the work of *inter alia*, Debra Mancoff and Christine Poulson on paintings of Arthurian subjects, she rarely considers in any depth representations of the Arthurian legends and still more rarely examines images of Robin Hood. Surely greater consideration should have been given to William Dyce's frescoes on subjects from *Morte d'Arthur* in the Houses of Parliament, representations of the legends in a new gothic building symbolising the national identity. The implicit promise of the dustcover illustration of Daniel Maclise's *Robin Hood* (1839) is not fulfilled.

Barczewski's chapter on the legends of Arthur and Robin Hood and the rise of English studies allows her to explore the development of an Anglicized sense of Britishness through the creation of a national literary canon. In this canon - unlike Shakespeare's plays - the ballads of Robin Hood and the Arthurian legends did not initially command a place. By eighteenth-century standards, the ballads were 'rude' and 'barbarous' - as too was their hero, whom it was considered wise to present as the disinherited earl of Huntingdon. It took the early-nineteenth-century development of a picturesque preoccupation with the English landscape and the invention of 'Merrie England' - which has been well analysed recently by Peter Mandler(3) - to convert them into the fabric of national literature. Placing Arthurian legend in a niche within the canon was more problematic - its French and Celtic origins had to be effaced first. But the generation of antiquaries who could reinvent decorated gothic as an English architectural style were not daunted. The promotion of Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* as the foundation text of Arthurian legend gave the myth an unquestionably English touchstone. Barczewski's account of the battle between English and Welsh scholars for ownership of the Arthurian legend at the end of the nineteenth century sheds light on the breakdown of the inclusive and reconciliatory sense of Britishness current in the early nineteenth century and the development of an increasingly racialist and Anglicized definition of the British national identity.

Barczewski turns next to the unavoidable issue of Teutonism, the development of a commitment to the idea of the English as Anglo-Saxons, part of a wider Germanic racial community destined for supremacy. The later-nineteenth-century reinvention of Robin Hood as a Saxon hero, a second Hereward the Wake valiantly resisting the Norman oppressors is effectively contrasted with *Ivanhoe* (1820), in which Robin also featured: in Scott's novel, the initial antagonism of Norman and Saxon is diffused by the marriage of the Normanophil Ivanhoe with the doggedly Saxon Rowena. (Only the Jewish Rebecca remains excluded from this new multi-racial and multi-cultural community and even she is treated with overt sympathy; as Barczewki points out, this tolerance was replaced by encroaching anti-Semitism by the end of the century). Once again, Arthur proves more problematic for the purveyors of national myth. A figure who, if he existed, was a fifth-century Romano-Briton who fought the invading Saxon hordes, and whose legend was associated with the tenth-

century Celtic revival in Wales, was difficult to adopt as a national hero for the descendants of the Anglo-Saxons. Initially reinvented in the early nineteenth century as a symbol of Anglo-Welsh co-operation, by the end of the century Arthur had been successfully re-interpreted as a Saxon. Such a transformation had been at a cost: any pretensions to historical accuracy had been jettisoned and Arthurian interpreters such as Tennyson had made it clear that they were dealing with the legendary, not the historical, Arthur. Within the context of later-nineteenth-century culture, such a strategy was not unusual: the development of history as an academic discipline placed an increasing strain on the creators of popular representations of the past.

Barczewski's chapter on women in the Arthurian and Robin Hood legends makes an intriguing addendum to her portrayal of the class opposition symbolised by Arthur and Robin Hood. She suggests that the contrasting treatment of Guinevere, Elaine, and Vivien with that of Maid Marian indicates differing reactions to Victorian women and their role within the nation. The adulterous Guinevere and the power-seeking Vivien, she suggests, were habitually seen as women who endanger and challenge the nation's existing social and political order, often through the emasculation of its leaders. She perceptively identifies Victorian portrayals of Vivien with contemporary anxieties concerning prostitution, and in particular concern over the spread of STDs. Even the relatively innocuous Elaine - the Lady of Shalott - is seen to embody fears about women's interventions in the public sphere. By contrast, Barczewki argues, representations of Maid Marian suggest far more relaxed attitudes to the political, social, and physical emancipation of women. Marian was presented approvingly as a vigorous defender of the nation, alongside Robin and the Merry Men. Her independence of mind was seen as the not inappropriate female equivalent of Robin Hood's sturdy defiance of unjust laws. Her physical vigour was linked to the acceptable female sport of archery and, Barczewski argues, even the identification of Marian with the end-of-century 'New Woman' did not really imply criticism of this medieval role model for the active and interventionist woman. Here a comparison between portrayals of Marian and the late-Victorian reputation of that other celebrated medieval maid - Joan of Arc - would have strengthened Barczewski's argument. While Joan of Arc became far more exclusively an icon for the suffrage movement - she heads up the list in Millicent Garrett Fawcett's *Five Famous French Women* (1905) and featured in suffrage pageants - Marian's broader popularity may suggest attitudes changing in favour (limited) emancipation for women among the wider community.

Barczewski finishes her study with a consideration of the relationship between British imperialism and representations of Arthur and Robin Hood. In view of the already substantial research undertaken on the uses of Arthurian legend to educate and motivate the servants of empire, she chooses to concentrate on one theme, the pursuit of the Holy Grail. This allows her to suggest that tales of the Round Table did not simply reinforce the rampant popular imperialism which is so often the subject of studies of the culture of imperialism. Treatments of Galahad, Perceval and the ultimate quest by J.H. Shorthouse and S.K. Levett-Yeats reveal, she suggests, 'a pervasive cynicism which reveals the anxieties which plagued British imperial endeavour in the final decades of the nineteenth century' (p. 223). While versions of the quest for the Holy Grail reveal dis-ease with the imperial project, Barczewski argues, portrayals of the legend of Robin Hood were often the vehicles for more direct criticism. Linking Arthurian legends to the sea and British naval power, she argues that the association of Robin Hood with Sherwood Forest makes the legend a platform for an anti-imperialist, 'Little Englander' agenda. After all - and Victorian audiences did not miss this point - the parlous condition of Robin's England resulted from Richard I's commitment to the Crusades and Continental wars. Moreover, Robin's resistance to tyranny at home often seemed very similar to the activities of colonial independence activists (both fictional and actual) who had fallen foul of the British imperial authorities. By the close of the century, Robin's function as *vox populi* made him a standing argument for late-nineteenth-century opponents of imperialism in the socialist and radical camps.

The contribution which Myth *and National Identity* makes to debates about British and English national identities in the nineteenth-century is a substantial one: Barczewski rightly draws attention to the importance of a wide range of cultural productions in the formation of Victorian national identities - and also to the internal tensions between varying interpretations of both national identity and the mythical figures seen to embody it. Well-presented, well-argued, and very readable, this is an important book for scholars of both nineteenth-century culture and nationalism.

Notes

1. Cannadine, 'British History as a 'new subject': Politics, perspectives and prospects', in A. Grant and K.J. Stringer, eds., Uniting the Kingdom? The Making of British History (London, 1995), p. 16.Back to (1)
2. S. Barczewki, *Myth and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain: the Legends of King Arthur and Robin Hood* (Oxford, 2000), p. 9.Back to (2)
3. P. Mandler, 'In the Olden Time': Romantic History and the English National Identity', in L. Brockliss and D. Eastwood, eds., *A Union of Multiple Identities: The British Isles, c. 1750-c. 1850* (New York and Manchester, 1996), pp. 78-92.Back to (3)

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