Hunting a legend in Sherwood Forest

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Ann McGrath seeks the elusive benchmark for noble thieves, Robin Hood

Propped up with enormous crutches and fenced off, the expansive eight-century-old tree wore the signs of its imminent demise with nobility. About an hour's journey from Nottingham, England, in the grey winter leaflessness of Sherwood Forest, I was standing in front of a naked merry-go-round of a tree with a hippopotamus trunk and bulky branches. The Major Oak's hollow base was supposedly the hideout for the whole Robin Hood band and its embracing arches shaded their central camp. Today, its 23 tons are far outweighed by the massive legend associated with it.

It was January 2002 and as senior curator at the National Museum of Australia I was leading a two-year research project on the history of legendary outlaws for the Outlawed! exhibition now showing in Canberra. Museum exhibitions demand vivid storytelling imagery, especially through the use of three-dimensional "authentic" objects. The purpose of this trip, and several other adventures to countries including Mexico, the US, Italy, Japan and China, was to locate potential loan objects in order to tell the stories of some of the world's most famous outlaw heroes.

There before the Major Oak, I thought of an oil painting I had admired the previous day at Nottingham Castle, Robin Hood and His Merry Men Entertaining Richard the Lionheart in Sherwood Forest (c1840), by Daniel Maclise. In a bacchanalian scene with merry men ready to gulp more wine from their pewter goblets, a welcoming Sherwood Forest of wise oaks embraces them under its green canopy. Alongside the limp bodies of slaughtered deer is a stash of precious loot, while, in the far distance, men are poised for fight and archers brace their bows. In the foreground is Richard the Lionheart wearing sword and shield and full metal armour, overlaid by a white tunic emblazoned with a large gold cross. At first glance, Robin Hood, in green tights and red hood, seems to be paying homage to the king. Upon further viewing, you wonder whether the seated Richard, attended by black slaves wearing North African turbans, is instead paying his respects to Robin.

Residents of Yorkshire, Derbyshire, Scotland and elsewhere claim that Robin Hood hailed from their region asserting proof in scant archives or in the names of inlets, towns and stories from all over the Isles. It is the legend of Sherwood, however, that has dominated 19th- and 20th-century re-creations of Robin Hood. Every spring, Sherwood Forest witnesses the Robin Hood Festival, a great gathering of lute players, jousters, jesters and archers, peopled by men with long hair and beards and women wearing long wavy gowns and floral crowns.

Robin Hood is the archetypal noble robber, "the norm" against which newer outlaws are compared, tried and judged. Yet a closer look at the story uncovers layer upon layer of contestability. Although some experts have devoted their life's research to "proving" the story once and for all, it is difficult to find convincing records that any such man existed in historical fact. While some scholars conclude he did exist, probably as "Hobbehod"
or "Robehod", others suggest his legend conflates the stories of various notorious outlaws.

Long before the environmental movement, Robin Hood merged into Celtic mythology as one of the legendary "green men" of the forest magical characters sprouting out of and into vines, like the half- alien, half-beast characters of mediaeval Bibles. As "outlaw"/wolfman, Robin Hood entered the natural/animal realm and could be shot on sight. Long before "native title", Robin Hood and his merry men contested rights to land use especially the King's declaration that the game in the forest now belonged to him. Friend or foe of the King, of the monks, himself a peasant, nobleman or the Earl of Huntington, Robin's legend has done somersaults over time. He became the iconic lover of Maid Marion, then more recently slapstick star, porn-movie king and even cuckold to Maid Marion's lesbian band. Although the story of Robin Hood is infinitely flexible, no telling has successfully discredited him. Dramaturges, balladists, rock 'n' rollers, Hollywood idols from Errol Flynn to Kevin Costner, Walt Disney and now Xbox game designers have produced layer upon interactive layer of storytelling with rich motifs including green caps, bow and arrows, oak leaves, an apple. Robin Hood drops down dead under the "gren-e-wode" tree, treacherously tricked and betrayed by his cousin, the Pryoresse of Kyrkesly, an aristocratic nun.

Robin Hood's profound existence in legend has never been in dispute. People from around the world want to believe in a core truth somewhere in this evolving, conflicting tale. Certainly there is a consistency in the paradox of the "good outlaw", the good criminal, the man who did bad to do good. Robin Hood's fame has been celebrated in publications since at least the 16th century and has now gone global. In my other travels, I discovered Robin Hood in translation with a Chinese, a Japanese and an Italian name. A Google tally of website listings has Ned Kelly gazumping Jesse James's measty 194,000 records with his respectable 326,000. However, outrunning everyone is Robin Hood's impressive 2,020,000.

But how to exhibit both the "historic" story and its legend? Consultant mediaevalist Tania Colwell, who had paved the way for my research trip, suggested depicting a camp scene diorama from Robin Hood's period and we agreed this was a good idea. Perhaps not surprisingly, we received rather bemused replies from British museums. We had asked for arrows, daggers, cooking equipment, "real objects" that might demonstrate the story of Robin Hood. By letter and email we had contacted the British Museum, the British Library, the Museum of London and the Royal Armouries Museum in Leeds. Understandably, professional curators baulked at the generality of our request, the impossibility of authenticity. Robin's stronger existence in fiction rather than fact and his irritating looseness in time between the 12th and 14th centuries put us on tenuous ground. Inquiring about objects to tell the Robin Hood story epitomised a museological folly, and was possibly even seen as lampooning the curatorial profession. After all, as one curator asked: "What were we hoping to find, Robin Hood's green hat?"

Less concerned with the facts, Nottingham tourist attractions eagerly promoted their associations with the popular legend. The Tales of Robin Hood was closest to theme-park grunge. A range of very large and very short men with beards and long hair, dressed as monks and green men, encouraged me to sit in a little cart to be shunted through fake scary forests housing corrupt monks in a 21st-century experience of the "real history" told in "olde englishe". Nonetheless, the exhibits were well-researched and the evolution of the Maid Marion story was memorable.

Brewhouse Yard Museum, within walking distance of the castle, is an archaeological research centre and repository, its floors stuffed with broken bits of mediaeval pottery, including tankards, crossbows and other artefacts. Jotting down far too many catalogue numbers, I quickly deteriorated into a state of awe, aesthetic rapture and curatorial greed. The hand and wheel-moulded shapes of mediaeval lanterns, the unique finish of the greenish Nottingham glazes, the humanity of the uneven twists and turns of handles and pots had defied the centuries.

At the Nottingham Castle gift shop, I bought up "props" museum lingo for non-precious objects or copies. A child damsel's hat and gown, a model of Robin Hood, a bow and arrow, mediaeval money, jewellery, a map of the castle, some build-your-own and made-up miniature castles and Robin Hood statuettes, tea towels, children's storybooks all part of the global industry of Robin bric a brac.

The next day, as I took video of the Major Oak from a nearby bench in Sherwood Forest, a white-haired,
round-faced lady smiled at me as she walked her white dog. By the time she went past a second time, I was wondering about the distance indicated by a wooden sign with an old-fashioned hand pointing "To Village". When I asked her how far it was, she replied that I was welcome to walk with her. Friendly and helpful, Agnes had lived in Edwinstowe and around Sherwood Forest all her life; it was her world.

Before Agnes took me on the Robin Hood tour of her town, she hesitatingly invited me to her house for lunch. It was a frilly curtained, unpretentious and very clean affair, with a frontage right on the street, the neighbours calling out to her as she arrived. The print on her colourful ensemble matched the wallpaper of her family room. Agnes introduced me to her 11-year-old son who was off school sick. Agnes wasn't working and nor was she keen to resume. She showed me the town's romantic rendition of a charming bronze Robin Hood proposing to a coy, beautiful, though possibly underage Maid Marion. Agnes took me to a gift shop where I bought a Robin Hood plate and ashtray, tea towels and other souvenirs, pleasing her friend who ran the shop.

Agnes then drove me to St Mary's, the church where Robin Hood and Maid Marion had married. Knowing I was "really" there, at this place where this fanciful wedding never happened, filled me with inexplicable excitement. Was it the ambient charm of the church or the mossy-stoned graveyard? Was it the peculiarity of a supposedly "real place" associated with a French romantic overlay of an English legendary tale? Or simply that I wanted to believe they were wed there?

At Pollock's Toy Museum in the middle of London, highly animated curator Barry Clarke explained that wealthy little children owned toy theatres of expensive coloured card, playing out the scenes with the tiny Maid Marions, the Sheriff of Nottingham, Friar Tuck and Little John. Barry showed me a couple of these ornately painted toys, then started pulling out other cutouts from boxes, talking excitedly and in minute detail about London's theatrical history. In the mid- to late 19th-century London theatre, both real chorus line and cardboard figure "Maid Marions" saucily showed off their striped bloomers in renditions of another Parisian import, the can-can.

At the Museum of London, I noticed a long-gowned, plump-bosomed young woman studiously taking down notes of shoes and details from a museum mannequin. John Clark, senior curator and expert in mediaeval material culture, explained how the Goths and mediaevalists helpfully corrected matters of detail, for they had a working knowledge of making and wearing historic dress. John had asked us to select a range of arrowheads, daggers, camping kit, boots and other such mediaeval things from the museum's well-organised database. Most of the good stuff from the mediaeval period has been exhumed from the bogs of the Thames during City of London public works, so the Museum of London was the place to go.

On my visit, in the orderly chaos of John's office, a beautiful, perfectly intact mediaeval leather boot with a pointy toe was perched on a spare chair. In the museum's collections, John showed me a range of daggers and arrowheads and some huge ceramic containers. Concerned about maintaining scholarly standards, John was eager to ensure we would not make inaccurate claims about loan objects. After all, they were not from Robin Hood's locality whatever that was or from his period ditto. They were, however, mediaeval; they were rare, and we could certainly ask to borrow them.

In contrast, the prestigious British Library gave me the proverbial cold shoulder. They would not consider lending us the Merry Geste of Robyn Hode (c 1560), although in a concession, they agreed to show me a copy. I tried to do the hard sell about how significant it would be for us to have the original, informing them of the National Museum of Australia's high standards of conservation, insurance indemnity and couriers, but to no avail. All the while they were intensely focused on the precious little books as though Robin's merry men might at any moment snatch them away. They pointed out that Merry Geste would be swamped by all the other stuff and not worth it for them or me. Perhaps they were right. This old Geste wasn't colourful and it wasn't spectacular. But it was exciting to me, and as one of the earliest ever publications about Robin Hood, I thought other Australians would agree.

Results of my efforts at the British Museum were equally mixed. Its curators demonstrated a combination of excellent knowledge and ostentatious helpfulness, while being institutionally retentive. When I tried to confirm my appointment, I found that the obliging junior staffer who had been assisting us was away. Instead, I was
met by a senior curator who, for our purposes here, I will call Robert. He was handsome in a pale, well-bred, dishevelled fashion now indelibly associated with the foppish Hugh Grant in Four Weddings and a Funeral. Robert apologised for over half an hour first for keeping me waiting, then for the spelling and typographical errors of his staff's emails: "This has let the whole museum down, it is my fault, very bad form, I was not been around to check the mailings first; they should never have gone out from the British Museum." Then, without any sense of this having greater import than the spelling, he stated: "Due to budget cuts, the British Museum will not be able to provide any loans."

Defying stretched resources, the passionate Robert nonetheless grabbed a huge set of keys to open up an exciting collections adventure. Inside the massive bowels of the British Museum, following Robert around from morning past lunch towards hungry afternoon, I saw the wondrous and the rare. Atop dusty old metal filing cabinets stood mediaeval cooking equipment, enormous iron pots and ceramic vessels for water and wine that might have come off the set of Jack the Giantkiller. Nineteenth-century specimen drawers squashed into corridors were opened with fine gold keys to reveal pieces of mediaeval leather, old spurs and remnant pieces of chain-mail. Walking under huge airconditioning and drainage pipes, I tramped behind Robert into dungeon-like rooms entered with monster 18th-century keys. Inside, the industrial size drawers revealed slivers of tissue paper protecting ancient mediaeval arrow heads, rusty and shiny. All were retrieved via a cataloguing system that required Robert to find evidence of tiny slips of paper typed in what appeared to be old Remington font. Usually the objects were in their place, but when they were not, Robert became visibly flummoxed.

My remarkable day was topped off by a tour of the display cabinets in the exhibitions proper. Ornately decorated, bejewelled swords, daggers and armour gleamed to elicit intense curatorial desire. Robert quickly reminded me, "Too rare; too precious, too valuable" to go to Australia. Quite impossible.

Ever the professional, however, Robert wanted to give me some catalogue references and some relevant academic articles. When he finished, he remembered: "Oh by the way, there is one object we found that you might be able to borrow the Seal of the Earl of Huntington." The real Earl. There it was, on the curatorial desk. "Perhaps we could lend you that."

When I arrived in Leeds for my appointment at the Royal Armouries Museum, I knew something was amiss. It was like walking into the wrong dressing-room. Wondering why I felt so very out of place, especially given my polite reception, I became aware that all the curators were male and that the females were either bringing in documents or making the tea. It also struck me that the curators were obsessively interested in everything mediaeval, especially the weapons. One of the managers gave me a lengthy specialist talk about the aerodynamics of the bow and arrow. Except for the information that serious archers imported their wood from France, the rest whistled over my head. This senior executive then divulged that a lot of his staff liked to dress up in mediaeval fashion in their spare time; he himself advised on authentic props, costumes and action for movies, and staff were encouraged to serve as extras in mediaeval films.

Reassuringly, in contrast to the neo-Nazi-styled youth admiring the weaponry that day, my assigned curatorial guide seemed a gentle soul. Nevertheless, being escorted into the Royal Armouries' vast storage room overflowing with mediaeval swords, daggers, arrows and armour filled me with cold horror. And a flash of Agatha Christie. How many deaths had these weapons caused? Was there still human blood on their sharp edges? The ever-present threats to safety and security of mediaeval times and the merry men's complicity in all this struck me with a thud. The woodblock images featured throughout the museum's exhibits depicted heads being lopped off, strung on sticks or carted around in buckets, and myriad other scenes of gruesome tortures and killings.

A somewhat grumpy curator purposefully rummaging through the mediaeval and 18th-century armour collection pulled out a heavy, primitive-looking helmet or head-piece. This contrasted dramatically with all the ornate metalwork of the fancy tournament gear that various kings had ordered to size. With great satisfaction, he boasted: "This proves Ned Kelly was not original."

Not until the end of this tour of the arsenal of mediaeval death was I informed by my curatorial guide that he and his bride had dressed up in mediaeval gear for their own wedding, and that they too were part of a
regular group of mediaeval re-enactors. Indeed, I was even shown the wedding photos. Hell, hadn't I just said something about costume freaks being slightly weird? I realised that I harboured an innate bigotry against those who adopt the past as an identity and lifestyle choice. I resolved to hold my tongue and not make false assumptions that dressing up in the clothing of other eras is in any way stranger than being a historian or a curator. After all, it was a long English tradition. The May games that celebrated spring and fertility often featured the crowning of a beautiful maid and man of the local villages as the "Robin Hood" and "Maid Marion" of the games. One year a fun-seeking Henry VIII secretly attended these festivities, himself and courtiers adopting the Robin Hood theme.

My other research travels took me to the remote provinces of China, to the Song Jiang Wushu martial arts school in remote Shandong; to the Palace Museum in Beijing; in Kyoto, Japan, I visited kimono factories, theatres and Zen monasteries. In Mexico, I went to Chihuahua to hunt down objects relating to Pancho Villa, then to Mexico City, and to various towns in New Mexico, including Mesilla, which was associated with Billy the Kid. At the repository of the Museum of the Native American, in Sutland, Maryland, I viewed objects associated with Sitting Bull. In Greenwich Village, in Manhattan, I spoke with Peter Carey about Ned Kelly. In Sicily, I traced the story of Salvatore Giuliani, King of the Mountain, for whom an opera has been written and a castle built. With Salvatore's nephew Giuseppe as guide, I saw the landscape of his life: his hideouts, his childhood village, the religious decor of his childhood home and the dusty treasures of his attic.

Giuliano has been dubbed the Mediterranean Robin Hood; Ned Kelly is crowned Australia's. In his Jerilderie letter, Kelly virtually alluded to the legend when he concluded: "I am a widow's son outlawed." As in the 16th-century Lytell Geste, he wanted to be remembered as the "good outlaw", the revolutionary hero who "did pore men moch god".

The closest to a Robin Hood the US Wild West has is Jesse James. In the small town of St Joseph, Missouri, I saw the bullet-hole in James's house, where Bob and Charlie Ford shot him dead in 1882. When Jesse was shot dead, he was standing on a chair doing the dusting. Why wasn't a song ever written about this? A revolving model of Jesse's skull showed where the bullet entered and left. From his exhumed coffin were the ornate handles, shards of glass, his tie-pin and even the bullet. The famous feather duster was held, however, by the Jesse James Farm Museum, Clay County, and I needed to get there the same day.

Just off the highway, as I was heading for Liberty's main street, I was pulled over by a siren-wailing, gun-toting policeman. In Clay County, where the James-Younger gang held up the Liberty Bank in broad daylight in 1876, it therefore became all too clear to me that I would never make a decent outlaw. Hearing the sheriff's car's wail, I panicked about where to pull over my loungeroom-sized Dodge sedan. Then, frantic about where I'd put my driver's licence and passport, I was soon sweating onto the upholstery. Would sitting inside the car make me look suspicious? I had done something bad, and would maybe end up in a county jail one like I'd seen in Wild West movies? As nothing happened, I assumed this sheriff must be waiting for me to get out of the car. But when I opened the door and started to walk towards him, he reached for his gun holster and gestured for me to get right back in. I was now as guilty as hell for whatever left-hand turn or other rule I'd breached. The sheriff was checking something on his two-way radio, maybe whether I had a gun licence and might shoot him.

Finally, hips swinging above his sharp boots, the policeman approached the now red-faced, palpitating driver to ask in a sprawling drawl: "What is your destination and what is your purpose?" It was like I was some bad person, some criminal. I spluttered: "Ah, I'm, I'm from Australia." This floored him like he'd never met anyone from that part of the planet before. Staring with amazement and incomprehension, he was totally thrown off his tough act. Then, as if I had accidentally strayed into the wrong hemisphere, he asked: "And what are you doing so far from home?" "Going to Jesse James Farm Museum." While being Australian earms me a pardon, my interest in Jesse James put me within the central orbit of the outlaw's reality. He laughed, satisfied, like this had just become a most interesting day. Newsworthily. Piloting me to near the turn-off, he waved me off, smiling. I drove on, no outlaw, but with the freedom of the roads, never to taste a Clay County jail.

By the time I arrived, the James farm was shut, its gates bedecked by warning signs: "Closed. No Visitors Allowed. Do not to enter. Violators Prosecuted." "Damn it," I thought. "I've come from afar and I need to see Jesse James's duster!" So I drove right on, feeling game. As game as Ned Kelly or Maid Marion. Peering in
through the windows of the locked farmhouse, there was no duster in sight. Only a good view of two empty police cars, the drivers' whereabouts unknown.

Agnes of Edwinstowe hadn't liked school much and when she wagged, which I took to be often, she used to hide in the Major Oak. Rebellious acts big and small, her story somehow localised a global human tale about humble origins and connections with the grand. About hope and the choices we all face. About the stories of swashbuckling adventure we gather around ourselves, in myriad genres, on a national and international canvas.

Those famous, long-lived and infinitely malleable outlaw heroes emerge from ordinariness to style themselves into something transcendent. The legends remind us that although the world is often poor in handing out justice, the individual can arise to become richly extraordinary. In popular imagination, these violent morality tales reassure us about an essential human desire for true justice. Against great odds, the outlaw legends inspire us about the possibility of courageous if not always revolutionary protest.

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