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- 1 In 1992, Linda Colley published *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837*, which explains how a sense of British national identity was created in the eighteenth century which overlaid, but did not supplant, older English, Welsh and Scottish identities. 'Great Britain' therefore emerged as 'an invented nation' that was 'superimposed onto older alignments and loyalties'.<sup>1</sup> To explain this development, Colley imported the anthropological concept of 'othering', in which 'men and women decide who they are by reference to who and what they are not':

The sense of a common identity here did not come into being...because of an integration and homogenization of disparate cultures. Instead, Britishness was superimposed over an array of internal differences in response to contact with the Other, and above all in response to conflict with the Other.<sup>2</sup>

- 2 In this case, the 'Other' was Britain's archenemy, France: 'Time and time again, war with France brought Britons, whether they hailed from Wales or Scotland or England, into confrontation with an obviously hostile Other and encouraged them to define themselves collectively against it.'<sup>3</sup> Britain was Protestant whereas France was Catholic, ruled by a Parliament rather than an absolute monarch, free instead of crushed under the boot of tyranny, prosperous instead of impoverished. These common factors brought its disparate nations together despite their differences from and with each other, as what came to matter most was unity versus the shared French enemy:

Once confronted with an obviously alien 'Them', an otherwise diverse community can become a reassuring or merely desperate 'Us'. This is how it was with the British after 1707. They came to define themselves as a single people not because of any political or cultural consensus at home, but rather in reaction to the Other beyond their shores.<sup>4</sup>

- 3 Colley's view proved to be massively influential, garnering praise from commentators on the left and right. Theodore Koditschek writes:

What makes for a seminal book? It must be excellent enough to excite admiration, original enough to introduce new perspectives, and problematic enough to elicit

constructive criticism. It should raise new questions, but provide the kind of provisional, provocative answers that will serve as a stimulus to future work. Linda Colley's *Britons* has been such a book...In this story of the creation of a polyglot Britain, Colley found the backbone of a new master narrative: a broad, overarching, heuristic framework, which might bring order and direction to a rudderless field.<sup>5</sup>

- 4 Writing in the *Guardian* in 2003, Nick Cohen referred to *Britons* as 'the most influential history book of the 1990s'.<sup>6</sup>
- 5 Inevitably, however, there were critical voices. Some commentators opined that Colley had largely ignored the problems that the presence of a majority-Catholic Ireland posed for her argument, and that she had over-emphasised British unity in the face of the continuing power of Welsh, Scottish and Irish identities. To be sure, Colley had been clear that the emergence of a British identity had not swept aside all others: 'I am not suggesting for one moment that the growing sense of Britishness in this period supplanted and obliterated other loyalties. It did not. Identities are not like hats. Human beings can and do put on several at a time.'<sup>7</sup> Even so, her argument risked minimizing the significance of additional 'Others' under the umbrella of an over-riding Britishness. For 'othering' as a key concept in defining British identities was not limited to Britain versus France. Most obviously, 'othering' had long existed, and continues to exist, as a means for Wales, Scotland and Ireland to define themselves against England (and, in Ireland's case, against Britain as a whole). This latter point was emphasized in particular by the practitioners of what was known as 'four-nations history', which had tried to move away from the traditional Anglocentrism of British history and towards a recognition of the significance of Wales, Scotland and Ireland within a British framework.<sup>8</sup>
- 6 What was in danger of being lost in both Colley's *Britons* and four-nations history, however, was *England* and English identity. England needs to be viewed, as Andrew Mackillop writes, 'as a nation in and of itself rather than as the automatic centre-point of the British Empire or the United Kingdom of Britain and Ireland'.<sup>9</sup> Or, as Patrick Collinson put it more bluntly in 2011, 'To write about English history on its own is now a piece of political incorrectness.'<sup>10</sup> Using the legend of Robin Hood, the remainder of this essay will take up the question of England and 'othering', not only as it is subsumed under the umbrella of Britishness or in its role as a foil for the other nations of the British Isles, but in its role as a means of the formulation of English national identity in its own right.
- 7 At the outset, I would point out that Robin Hood is a specifically *English* legend. To be sure, Lesley Coote has recently argued that we need to take into account continental European antecedents to and parallels of the legend, but after this multilingual and multinational origin, Robin Hood was quickly assimilated into English culture and began to take on English characteristics.<sup>11</sup> The legend is set in the English rural landscape in Sherwood Forest in Nottinghamshire, and all of the earliest references to it, including the very first, in William Langland's *Piers Plowman* of circa 1377, are by English authors or in English sources. More to the point, Robin Hood emerged from – and it might be argued was a product of – a late-medieval cultural context in which English national identity was coming to be more precisely defined. The reign of Henry III (1216-72) saw two influxes of foreign nobility, first the Savoyard relatives of his queen Eleanor of Provence and then the family of his step-father Hugh de Lusignan, who had joined the failed rebellion of the barons of Poitou against Louis IX and were therefore forced to leave France. The Savoyards managed to keep their heads

sufficiently down to avoid widespread resentment by the English elite, but the Lusignans, or 'Poitevins' as they came to be derisively called, soon came to be widely loathed, as the king appeared to favour them with land and patronage. This antipathy boiled over in 1263, when the Earl of Leicester Simon de Montfort, though himself French by birth, launched a rebellion that sought to capitalize on the surging anti-foreign sentiment. The impetus behind the rebellion quickly expanded from anti-Lusignan sentiment to a broader – and uglier – xenophobia that resulted in the massacre of hundreds of English Jews in the Second Barons' War in the 1260.<sup>12</sup> Later in the thirteenth century, Edward I's attempts to conquer Wales and Scotland heightened the sense of difference between the English and the other peoples of the British Isles.<sup>13</sup> This attempted imposition of English dominance led to a corresponding intensification of national identities in the non-English parts of the British Isles, as was manifested in such early declarations of nationhood on the part of the Irish in the Remonstrance of the Irish Princes (1317) and the Scots in the Declaration of Arbroath (1320).

- 8 The Hundred Years' War significantly intensified this nascent conception of national difference. The war boosted a sense of English national identity, which was manifested in the emergence of St George as England's patron saint and in insults, as English and French people began to hurl 'cultural slurs' at one another with 'increasing frequency and violence'.<sup>14</sup> Maps, too, began to delineate the difference between 'us' and 'them' more clearly, while an increasing use of the English vernacular rather than French as the language of the elite 'emphasised...a growing cultural divide'.<sup>15</sup> After the war ended, commemorative projects such as tombs and stained-glass windows helped to solidify the sense of the conflict as a source of collective national effort, sacrifice and unity.<sup>16</sup> We must, to be sure, be cautious about equating fourteenth-century national consciousness with modern nationalism. Malcolm Vale is sceptical about viewing the Hundred Years' War as a national rather than dynastic or feudal conflict, given the 'cosmopolitanism and internationalism of court society, dynastic politics and the world of the higher aristocracy'. Even he concedes, however, that national sentiment was growing among the lower orders, offering the opportunity for it to be 'exploited by governments for their own ends'.<sup>17</sup>
- 9 Robin Hood was a cultural product of this context. But what English traits did he specifically display? Here things get more complicated, and we must engage with Englishness and otherness as something different from Colley's view of Britishness and otherness. For Englishness, like Britishness, is an 'invented' identity which was also created by a process of juxtaposition against 'others'.<sup>18</sup> Certainly, in the nineteenth century, it was shaped by empire, as the 'othering' of the non-white peoples of the Empire contributed to a racialized sense of Englishness. Catherine Hall asserts that, in the early nineteenth century, many English people believed that non-white colonial subjects were capable of being transformed into people like themselves, but the Jamaican slave revolt known as the Baptist War in 1831 and the Morant Bay Rebellion in 1865 diminished faith in their capacity for improvement and brought into being more rigid racial attitudes that drew clear biological distinctions between the 'civilised' English and 'savage' Jamaicans.<sup>19</sup> Moving forward into the twentieth century, Wendy Webster asserts that, despite efforts during the Second World War to promote imperial unity, negative attitudes towards non-white peoples persisted. Webster asserts that a new formulation of Englishness emerged after 1945 in reaction to violent attempts to overturn British rule in Malaya and Kenya, and to the perceived threat posed by a growing influx of non-white immigrants from the Commonwealth. A new form of

Englishness was therefore constructed ‘against empire and particularly against immigrants’.<sup>20</sup>

- 10 Looking at the postwar era, Camilla Schofield reminds us of the significance of the ultra-conservative and extremely controversial Tory politician Enoch Powell in defining England’s postcolonial national identity as something timeless and immutable, despite his deserved reputation as a racist.<sup>21</sup> In a speech to the Royal Society of St George in 1961, Powell declared that the ‘nationhood’ of England had been ‘unaffected’ by empire, so that when the ‘looser connections which had linked her with distant continents and strange races fell away’, the ‘continuity of her existence was unbroken’:

For the unbroken life of the English nation over a thousand years and more is a phenomenon unique in history, the product of a specific set of circumstances like those which in biology are supposed to start by chance a new line of evolution. Institutions which elsewhere are recent and artificial creations appear in England almost as works of nature, spontaneous and unquestioned.<sup>22</sup>

- 11 This definition of Englishness could not withstand demographic diversification, however, and so Powell’s vision of English nationhood became increasingly racialized, as he infamously expressed in his ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech in 1968.
- 12 Robin Hood relates to this form of Englishness in that his legend often highlights the high cost of imperial adventures for the metropolis. The legend has always been oriented in an insular direction, as Robin Hood and his fellow outlaws retreat into the forest; they do not disperse outwards on a quasi-imperial trajectory like King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table on the quest for the Holy Grail. Treatments of the legend have long pointed to the absence of King Richard I during the Crusades as the source of England’s problems, implicitly arguing that political leaders should focus their attentions at home. This view acquired particular potency in the nineteenth century. In one of many examples, in Edward Gilliat’s *In Lincoln Green* (1897), a Nottingham porter complains to Robin Hood that ‘it seems to us poor, toiling sons of serfs, that all these fine red-cross knights go out yonder...just to show off their...bravery...and feats of horsemanship. Meanwhile, the land suffers at home, the castle goes to rack and ruin, the labourer gets no hire, and the monks grow fat and buy up all the great estates of the broken knights.’<sup>23</sup> In this period, numerous works of popular fiction focused on the dangers that empire could bring to the British metropolis. In his novel *Maid Marian, the Forest Queen* (1849), J. H. Stocqueller has Robin Hood join Richard I on the Crusades. When he returns to England, he brings with him a Saracen chieftain named Suleiman and his daughter. Suleiman attempts to poison Robin Hood and then, after he is banished from Sherwood Forest, joins Prince John’s attempt to usurp the throne from his brother.<sup>24</sup> These sorts of sentiments link the legend of Robin Hood to the ‘Little Englandism’ of the late nineteenth century, an attitude prevalent among some British Liberals which opposed further imperial expansion and wanted the existing colonies to be granted independence as quickly as was practically possible.

- 13 Englishness has also been defined against continental European ‘others’, in a different way from Britishness. England has historically defined itself not against a particular country, but against ‘Europe’ as a whole.<sup>25</sup> Menno Spiering writes:

It is not just, say, the French, Germans or Italians that serve as the Other, but the Europeans *en masse*, as if they are one distinct nation...If the Inuit have many words for snow (at least, according to popular folklore) the English language has one word

for the people living across the Channel...‘The Europeans’ are...a popular mirror for the national self.<sup>26</sup>

- 14 In other words, other European nations tend to see the ‘other’ as an individual country whom they have deemed a rival or an enemy, but English commentators lump the entire continent together.<sup>27</sup> In 1990, the former Conservative party leader and cabinet minister Norman Tebbit declared:

As different as our continental neighbours are from each other, we are even more different from each of them...These fundamental differences have developed from, and in turn fostered, a sense of nationality and social cohesiveness that has saved us not only from foreign conquest but violent revolution and civil strife too. Our nationalism is of a different kind to much of that on the continent.<sup>28</sup>

- 15 In the process of transforming Robin Hood into an embodiment of this anti-European type of Englishness, a crucial role was played by Sir Walter Scott, who focused his extremely popular and influential novel *Ivanhoe* (1820) on the conflict between Saxons and Normans that was, in his view, still intense a century after the Battle of Hastings. Scott writes in the first chapter that ‘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.’<sup>29</sup> In *Ivanhoe*, Robin Hood serves as the embodiment of Saxon resistance to the Norman conquest. Scott’s view came to dominate nineteenth-century views of the Robin Hood legend, not only in England but in the rest of Europe. The liberal French journalist Augustin Thierry endorsed it in his *History of the Conquest of England by the Normans* (1825), in which he argued that the continuing struggle for freedom by the Saxons after 1066 was responsible for the greater freedoms enjoyed by English people eight centuries later.<sup>30</sup> Although Scott did not explicitly invoke biological concepts of race, he implicitly endorsed Thierry’s belief that the peoples of Europe could be distinguished from one another by their ‘blood’. By the mid-nineteenth century, this idea would expand into full-blown theories of the superiority of the ‘Saxon race’. Contemporary treatments of the Robin Hood legend reflected the intensification of these racial attitudes. In 1869, George Emmett’s *Robin Hood and the Outlaws of Sherwood Forest* refers to ‘the undying enmity between the Norman and the Saxon’, while J. Frederick Hodgetts describes Robin Hood as a ‘thorough Englishman’ with ‘no taint of Norman blood’ in *Edwin, the Boy Outlaw* (1887).<sup>31</sup> To support these views, antiquaries concocted elaborate – and extremely specious – pedigrees for the ‘Saxon Robin Hood’. It is important to note that these exercises not only emphasized Robin Hood’s purported racial superiority, but also his Englishness and therefore distinctness from other Europeans.

- 16 They also helped to distinguish Robin Hood from the rest of the United Kingdom, thereby linking him to a third ‘other’ for English identity.<sup>32</sup> For centuries, England so dominated its neighbours that ‘English’ and ‘British’ were all but synonymous, and there was little need to assert English identity in British context. Even so, however, there were sporadic appeals to English identity when it was useful for political purposes. In the 1760s, for example, John Wilkes used fears of a Scottish takeover of the British government to garner English support for his programme of political reform. In more recent decades, the resurgence of Scottish, Welsh and Irish identities and political aspirations has brought English nationalism more to the fore. The arrival at Westminster of MPs representing Plaid Cymru and the Scottish Nationalist Party in the 1970s was followed two decades later by the creation of legislative assemblies with considerable power in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. This meant that England



has no independent voice in its own or in British governance, while Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish MPs continue to vote on English matters.<sup>33</sup> Although calls for English independence or for a Scottish-style devolved parliament remain muted, this peculiar political situation is frustrating to many English voters.<sup>34</sup> Robin Hood also relates to this form of Englishness, as the legend, in contrast to other, more 'British' legends such as that of King Arthur, has no links to Celtic cultures, and Robin Hood is never depicted as being anywhere but in England.

- 17 Finally, there is a fourth 'other' of English identity, one that is distinctive because it is not shared by the other nations of the British Isles: itself. It is a peculiar quality of Englishness to combine two oppositional ideas at the same time. The legend of Robin Hood helps to illuminate this idea. In its classic 'Whig' formulation, English history is often seen as proceeding from past to present along a gradual, nonviolent and constitutional path. Timothy Garton Ash asserts that English history is above all a story of continuity, by contrast with the fickle mutability of the continent, with its constantly changing regimes and borders and monarchs and constitutions; a story of the slow, steady, organic growth of institutions, of Common Law, Parliament and a unique concept of sovereignty, vested in the Crown in Parliament.<sup>35</sup>

- 18 Or as Krishan Kumar puts it, English identity is premised on

The English can congratulate themselves on an orderly evolution, at least since the seventeenth century. Their revolution, and its attendant disorders, are far enough back in time to be decently buried. The 'Whig interpretation' of their history, which became the national myth, stresses progress through continuity and gradual change, rather than abrupt shifts and revolutionary convulsions. Despite the disruptions of the industrial revolution, despite the wholesale replacement of a rural by an urban way of life, despite the rise to global dominance and its subsequent demise, there was a sufficient approximation to reality in the Whig interpretation of English developments to make the English look complacently on themselves and their history.<sup>36</sup>

- 19 In this view of a 'seamless' transition from past to present, England first came into being as a separate and clearly defined political and territorial entity in the reign of Alfred the Great.<sup>37</sup> Parliament emerged in the Middle Ages as a unique political institution which distinguished England from continental monarchies, and one that proved capable of adapting to change, first the transition from absolutism and later to demands for increased democracy.<sup>38</sup> The sixteenth century saw a 'Tudor revolution in government', as G. R. Elton famously termed it, which saw the creation of a modern bureaucratic state.<sup>39</sup> The system of government that emerged from all this was sufficiently flexible and resilient to withstand the subsequent transition from monarchy to oligarchy to democracy without revolution. It adapted gradually to a changing political universe, in contrast to the violence and upheaval which occurred on the continent.

- 20 English history, however, has encompassed disruption as well as stability.<sup>40</sup> Although it did not reach the same heights of mutual atrocity as it did on the continent, the Reformation was extremely violent. Peter Marshall observes:

Thousands died in the convulsions of 1549, and blood was spilled in encounters between armies fighting for religious causes in every decade between the 1530s and 1570s: after the Pilgrimage of Grace (a rising in the north of England against Henry VIII's break with Rome in 1536–37); during Wyatt's Rebellion (against Mary I in 1554); and in the Rising of the Northern Earls (a Catholic attempt to overthrow



Elizabeth I in 1569–70). Over the same period and beyond, hundreds more were put to death for opposing the state's religious policies.<sup>41</sup>

- 21 An estimated 200,000 people, many of them civilians, died in the English Civil War. This represented around 3.7 per cent of the English population at the time, significantly larger than the percentage who died in World War I (1.7 per cent) or World War II (1 per cent). The Glorious Revolution was far from bloodless, not only in Scotland and Ireland, but in England as well. Steven Pincus reminds us that 'there was extensive mob violence throughout England in late 1688, violence that terrified local populations and resulted in extensive damage to property and individuals, violence that was on the same scale as the violence in France subsequent to July 1789'.<sup>42</sup> The Jacobite rebellions of the first half of the eighteenth century were responsible for around 3,000 deaths.
- 22 If England avoided violent revolution in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was more by luck than design. In the decades around 1800, Tory governments were sufficiently worried by radical activity that they imposed a series of heavy-booted acts of repression restricting the English people from assembling or speaking freely and allowed them to be imprisoned without trial. Around the same time, Luddites smashed machines as they expressed their discontentment with the shift to mechanised forms of industrial production and its impact on employment. Later in the nineteenth century, radicalism flared repeatedly as reformers sought extensions of the franchise, with the danger of revolutionary violence very real in 1832 in particular.<sup>43</sup> Some Chartists were committed to violent action to bring about political change, and after the potato famine increased demands for Irish independence, Irish nationalists carried out acts of violence in England. Between 1880 and 1900, Fenian bombers detonated explosives in London and other English cities; Whitehall, Scotland Yard, the London Underground and the House of Commons were all targeted.<sup>44</sup>
- 23 And here is where the Robin Hood legend comes in. Robin Hood has served as an English national hero for centuries. We can therefore assume that the values he embodies reflect something of the national character as it was imagined to be. But what is that character? The early Robin Hood poems contain, as Richard Firth Green writes, 'a marked streak of ruthless violence...that is the very antithesis of the mood of chivalrous fair play that we have come to associate with these romantic denizens of the greenwood'.<sup>45</sup> The medieval Robin Hood kills and maims with wanton and unsporting abandon, unfettered by moral scruple or pangs of conscience. I will cite two examples. In the ballad 'Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne' (c. 1475), he cuts off Guy's head, impales it on the end of his bow and mutilates his face beyond recognition:

He tooke Sir Guys head by the hayre,  
And sticked itt on his bowes end:  
'Thou hast beene traytor all thy liffe,  
Which thing must have an ende.'  
Robin pulled forth an Irish kniffe,  
And nicked Sir Guy in the fface,  
That hee was never on a woman borne  
Cold tell who Sir Guye was.<sup>46</sup>

- 24 Similarly, in the fifteenth-century ballad 'Robin Hood and the Sheriff of Nottingham', Robin Hood kills a knight who has volunteered his services to the Sheriff of Nottingham to capture the outlaw. He then steals the knight's clothes and tucks his severed head into his hood:

Now I have the maystry here,  
 Off I smyte this sory swyre.  
 This knyghtys clothis wolle I were,  
 And in my hode his hede woll bere.<sup>47</sup>

25 This violence is not casual or random, but rather directed specifically against the medieval English state, as Green makes clear: ‘Robin’s violence...is in no sense complicit with the power of the state. It is, indeed, openly resistant to it.’<sup>48</sup> His violence is not casual but political, and it therefore poses a direct challenge to the idea that English history proceeds along a legal and non-violent path.

26 It might be argued that after this violent origin, Robin Hood was tamed, thereby bringing him more into line with conventional conceptions of Englishness. Over subsequent centuries after his late-medieval birth, his more violent and subversive qualities were stripped out, and he became a displaced nobleman who only imposed his vigilante justice in justified circumstances and without unnecessary violence. J. C. Holt has written that Robin Hood was, by the end of the seventeenth century, ‘gentrified out of any real activity’.<sup>49</sup> And in the eighteenth century, there was growing distaste for Robin Hood’s violent criminality; this is when the idea of him ‘robbing the rich to give to the poor’ came to the fore, in order to transform him from brigand to crusader for social justice.<sup>50</sup>

27 Beneath the surface, however, a radical Robin Hood continued to bubble up, specifically as a product of resistance to the increasingly aggressive imposition of agricultural ‘improvement’ in the form of enclosure and other methods which encroached upon the traditional rights of the common people. In the chapbook ‘The Whole Life and Merry Exploits of Bold Robin Hood’ (originally published in 1737 and then in many editions and versions in subsequent decades), he is described as an opponent of ‘the misers and engrossers of corn; and, accordingly, he took from them to relieve the necessitous’. He purchases the stock of a merchant who has purchased a quantity of corn for forty marks and sold it for a hundred, distributes it to the poor, and then robs the wholesaler of his ill-gotten gains. He declares indignantly to the merchant when he protests the robbery:

Can you have the impudence to talk of justice, when there is none in the world acts more injustice than an engrosser of corn? Sirrah, there’s no vermin in the land like you who slander both heaven and earth with pretended dearth when there’s no scarcity at all; so talk no more of your justice and honesty, but immediately deliver your money, or I shall crack your crown for you.<sup>51</sup>

28 In this context, Robin Hood became an exemplar of E. P. Thompson’s ‘free-born Englishman’ of the eighteenth century, when ‘local rights and customs were cherished against the encroachment of the State’ and ‘patriotism, nationalism, even bigotry and repression, were all clothed in the rhetoric of liberty’.<sup>52</sup> In the anonymous opera *Robin Hood*, performed at Bartholomew Fair in 1730, the outlaws proudly chant, ‘And Liberty...shall smile and crown our Arms.’ In the comic opera *Robin Hood; or, Sherwood Forest* (1782), Robin Hood and Maid Marian proudly proclaim in Leonard MacNally’s libretto:

Strains of liberty we sing  
 To our country, queen and king.<sup>53</sup>

29 At century’s end, as these ideals of freedom and liberty came to have more radical connotations, so did Robin Hood. In 1795, the radical antiquary and supporter of the French Revolution Joseph Ritson published a collection of Robin Hood ballads in which

he introduced the outlaw 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 opposition to tyranny is the cause of the people)’.<sup>54</sup> This radical interpretation of Robin Hood did not go un-noticed. The *British Critic* protested that ‘it is surely a just matter of most strong complaint, that a careless, or literary, reader cannot look for a Ballad of Robin Hood, or an account of his life, without meeting with what must either shock his feelings, or corrupt his principles.’<sup>55</sup>

- 30 In the nineteenth century, Robin Hood came to be invoked in the struggle of the Luddites to resist the socioeconomic changes brought by the Industrial Revolution. In Nottinghamshire, a public notice posted by the Luddites was signed by ‘General Lund’s [sic] Office, Sherwood Forest’. The nineteenth-century Robin Hood served as a model for those who wished to see the nation’s social and economic imbalances adjusted along more equitable lines, while his forest commonwealth of equal fellowship provided a political model through which this adjustment could be carried out. Instead of deference and obedience, life in the greenwood offered democratic choice and the opportunity for ordinary people to govern themselves. As I have written elsewhere:

The outlaw hero who functioned as a heroic embodiment of freedom and independence was a popular motif in early-nineteenth-century popular literature. The outlaw represented a way in which conventional social and political hierarchies could be inverted so that the low would be high and the high low, a theme which, judging from the frequency of its appearance, possessed a strong appeal.<sup>56</sup>

- 31 To be sure, there were attempts to reel Robin Hood back into traditional Whig history. Some authors took up the fifteenth-century Scottish chronicler Walter Bower’s line that Robin Hood had been a supporter of Simon de Montfort’s rebellion against Henry III in the 1260s.<sup>57</sup> Bower was a nationalist Scot using Robin Hood to resist English encroachment, but now he became an heroic defender of *English* liberties against royal tyranny. To cite an example from 1840, the historian J. O. Halliwell wrote:

His was not a contest for the equalization of property, made by one who had nothing to lose, in the hope of being bettered by a revolution; nor was it that senseless spirit of opposition to authority, merely because it is authority, which sometimes arises after a long continued peace; but it was a contest for freedom, for justice, and for natural and reasonable rights.<sup>58</sup>

- 32 Here, Halliwell makes the case that Robin Hood was trying to preserve English political institutions from tyrannous usurpers, not overturn them. Such a rebuttal of a more radical and revolutionary Robin Hood would not have been necessary, however, had such a Robin Hood not existed in the first place.
- 33 Robin Hood’s radicalism, expressed in varied but contextually relevant forms, therefore kept reappearing despite efforts to bring him into line with what we might think of as a more conventionally Whiggish view of English history in which that radicalism was tamped down and the benefits of more gradual change extolled. This reflected a tension which lies at the heart of English national identity, which takes the form of an ability to treat itself as simultaneously thing and ‘other’. What defines English national identity, in other words, and distinguishes it from the other nations of the British Isles, is its capacity to ‘other’ against itself, to contain two oppositional ideas at the same time. Robin Hood continued to embody violence, disorder and rebellion, and was in that sense opposed to conventional views of English history as nonviolent, orderly and undisturbed by revolution. Even so, he retained his stature as an English national hero.

34 This essay touches on the classic debate about Robin Hood's social and ideological origins. On the one side are those authors who support a more radical version of Robin Hood as an embodiment of what Beatrice Webb called the 'social discontent' of the late Middle Ages.<sup>59</sup> On the opposing side are those who see Robin Hood as 'a displaced gentleman indulging in a bit of sport', and therefore as a supporter rather than a challenger of legitimate authority.<sup>60</sup> Both versions of Robin Hood, however, have long appeared in manifestations of the legend; as I have written previously, 'Robin Hood's character has always been Janus-faced. The tension between the dangerous outlaw and the good-natured rogue has existed since the inception of the legend.'<sup>61</sup> This tension was not, as it has often been interpreted, a creation of elite authors who were worried about rebellious peasants and therefore sought to create a less socially disruptive version of Robin Hood. Instead, the two sides of Robin Hood represent the two sides of English political development, in which the relatively orderly evolution that has occurred in recent centuries conceals a more tumultuous undercurrent. The contradictions of the Robin Hood legend are in that sense a feature rather than a bug. For centuries an English national hero, Robin Hood therefore reflects the complexities of England's political evolution from the late Middle Ages to the present day.

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## NOTES

1. Linda COLLEY, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (London: Pimlico, 1992), p. 5. Colley acknowledged the indebtedness of her concept of nationhood to Benedict Anderson's definition of the nation as an 'imagined political community': see Benedict ANDERSON, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, Verso, 1983.
2. Linda COLLEY, *Britons...*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
3. Linda COLLEY, *Britons...*, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
4. Linda COLLEY, *Britons...*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
5. Theodore KODITSCHKEK, 'The Making of British National Identity', *Victorian Studies* 44 (2002), p. 389.
6. Nick COHEN, 'What Is a Briton?', *Guardian*, 7 September 2003, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2003/sep/07/britishidentity.race>
7. Linda COLLEY, *Britons...*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
8. See Raphael SAMUEL, 'British Dimensions: "Four Nations History"', *History Workshop Journal* 40 (1995), p. iii-xxii.
9. Andrew MACKILLOP, 'What Has the Four Nations and Empire Model Achieved?', in Stephanie Barczewski and Martin Farr (eds.), *The MacKenzie Moment and Imperial History: Essays in Honour of John M. MacKenzie*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, p. 279.
10. Patrick COLLINSON, *This England: Essays on the English Nation and Commonwealth in the Sixteenth Century*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2011, p. 2.
11. See Lesley COOTE, *Storyworlds of Robin Hood: The Origins of a Medieval Outlaw* (London: Reaktion, 2020).
12. See Robin R. MUNDILL, *England's Jewish Solution: Experiment and Expulsion, 1262-1290*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

13. See R. A. GRIFFITHS, 'The English Realm and Dominions and the King's Subjects in the Later Middle Ages', in J. G. Rowe (ed.), *Aspects of Late Medieval Government and Society: Essays Presented to J. A. Lander*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1986, p. 83-105.
14. Ellen C. CALDWELL, 'The Hundred Years War and National Identity', in Denise N. Baker (ed.), *Inscribing the Hundred Years' War in French and English Cultures*, Albany (NY), SUNY Press, 2000, p. 237; and David GREEN, *The Hundred Years' War: A People's History*, New Haven (CT) and London, Yale University Press, 2014, p. 234. For the emergence of St George, see John BENGSTON, 'Saint George and the Formation of English Nationalism', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 27 (1997), p. 317-40; Jonathan GOOD, *The Cult of St George in Medieval England*, Woodbridge, Suffolk, Boydell, 2009; and Samantha RICHES, *St George: Hero, Martyr and Myth*, Stroud, Gloucestershire, Sutton, 2005.
15. David GREEN, *Hundred Years' War*, *op. cit.*, p. 236. See also Jeremy CATTO, 'Written English: The Making of the Language 1370-1400', *Past and Present* 179 (2003), p. 24-59; W. M. ORMROD, 'The Use of English: Language, Law and Political Culture in Fourteenth-Century England', *Speculum* 78 (2003), p. 750-87; Camille SERCHUK, 'Cest figure contient tout le royaume de France: Cartography and National Identity at the End of the Hundred Years War', *Journal of Medieval History* 33 (2007), p. 320-38; and M. G. A. Vale, 'Language, Politics and Society: The Uses of the Vernacular in the Later Middle Ages', *English Historical Review* 120 (2005), p. 15-34.
16. T. G. ASHPLANT, Graham DAWSON and Michael ROPER, 'Introduction', in T. G. Ashplant, Graham Dawson and Michael Roper (eds.), *The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration*, London, Routledge, 2007, p. 7. See also Anne CURRY, 'War, Peace and National Identity in the Hundred Years' War', in Anja V. Hartmann and Beatrice Heuser (eds.), *War, Peace and World Orders in European History*, London, Routledge, 2011, p. 141-53; and Norman HOUSELEY, 'Pro deo et patria mori: Sanctified Patriotism in Europe 1400-1600', in Philippe Contamine (ed.), *War and Competition between States*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 221-48.
17. Malcolm VALE, *The Origins of the Hundred Years' War: The Angevin Legacy 1250-1340*, revised edn, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1996, p. ix.
18. Aleks Sierz writes, 'Englishness or Britishness is a state of mind, an imaginary place, a fictional way of being, a set of stories we tell ourselves'. Aleks SIERZ, *Rewriting the Nation: British Theatre Today*, London, Methuen Drama, 2011, p. 9.
19. Catherine HALL, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination 1830-1867*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2002. Peter Mandler has taken issue with Hall's argument and asserted that, while the English clearly saw themselves as superior, the basis for this claim rested upon their institutions, values and Protestant religious beliefs, rather than any sense of racial difference: Peter MANDLER, "'Race" and "Nation" in Mid-Victorian Thought', in Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore and Brian Young (eds.), *History, Religion and Culture: British Intellectual History, 1750-1950*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 224-44. In further work on the development of English national identity, Mandler locates its emergence in the early nineteenth century, when 'a new generation of post-Napoleonic, more democratic English thinkers...were the first to think of the "nation" as a psychologically homogeneous unit.': Peter MANDLER, *The English National Character: The History of an Idea from Edmund Burke to Tony Blair*, New Haven (CT) and London, Yale University Press, 2006, p. 27.
20. Wendy WEBSTER, *Englishness and Empire: 1939-1965*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 8. A simultaneously complementary and contradictory work to Webster's is Kathleen PAUL, *Whitewashing Britain: Race and Citizenship in the Postwar Era*, Ithaca (NY), Cornell University Press, 1997, which argues that British government policy ran ahead of public opinion in shaping conceptions of citizenship along racial lines in the decades after the Second World War. Both these works link to the debate on the impact of decolonization on postwar Britain; see Jordanna BAILKIN, *The Afterlife of Empire*, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 2012; Andrew

THOMPSON, *The Empire Strikes Back? The Impact of Imperialism on Britain from the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, Abingdon, Oxfordshire, and New York, Routledge, 2005; Andrew THOMPSON (ed.), *Britain's Experience of Empire in the Twentieth Century*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012; and Stuart WARD (ed.), *British Culture and the End of Empire*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2001.

21. Camilla SCHOFIELD, *Enoch Powell and the Making of Postcolonial Britain*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013.

22. <https://whatenglandmeanstome.co.uk/enoch-powell/>

23. Edward GILLIAT, *In Lincoln Green: A Merrie Tale of Robin Hood*, London, 1897, p. 288.

24. J. H. STOCQUELLER, *Maid Marian, the Forest Queen*, London, [1849], p. 118 and 144.

25. See Arno VAN DER ZWET, Murray Stewart LEITH, Duncan SIM and Elizabeth BOYKE, 'Brexit, Europe and Othering', *Contemporary Social Science* 15 (2020), p. 517-32.

26. Menno SPIERING, *A Cultural History of British Euroscepticism*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 23.

27. See Arno VAN DER ZWET, Murray Stewart LEITH, Duncan SIM and Elizabeth BOYKE, 'Brexit, Europe and Othering', *op. cit.*.

28. Quoted in David LOWENTHAL, 'Identity, Heritage and History', in John R. Gillis (ed.), *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 49.

29. Sir Walter SCOTT, *Ivanhoe*, edited by A. N. Wilson, London and New York, Penguin, 1984, p. 8. It should be pointed out that recent historical scholarship no longer supports this view.

30. Stephanie BARCZEWSKI, *Myth and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain: The Legends of King Arthur and Robin Hood*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 130.

31. George EMMET, *Robin Hood and the Outlaws of Sherwood Forest*, London, 1869, p. 126; and J. Frederick HODGETTS, *Edwin the Bow Outlaw; or, The Dawn of Freedom in England*, London, 1887, p. 8-9.

32. Jeremy Black writes: 'Nationalism, or at least a distinctive nationalism, has been precipitated, and, in part, forced upon England, by the development in the British Isles of strident nationalisms that have contested Britishness, and with much success. Irish nationalism was the first, but it was followed by those of Wales and, more prominently, Scotland.' Jeremy BLACK, *English Nationalism: A Short History*, London, Hurst, 2018, p. 2.

33. Michael Kenny disputes the idea that 'the reassertion of English identity' was 'the result of a backlash against the asymmetrical character of the model of devolution introduced by the first Blair government after 1997'. He argues instead that 'the language and sentiments associated with resurgent ideas of Englishness have a more complex set of causes than devolution itself': Michael KENNY, *The Politics of English Nationhood*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 2. Richard Weight argues that devolution was a response to Margaret Thatcher's attempts to create a more unitary British state, which led to a resurgence of nationalism in the non-English parts of the United Kingdom, to which the Blair government was forced to grant political expression in the form of increased autonomy: Richard WEIGHT, *Patriots: National Identity in Britain, 1940-2000*, London: Macmillan, 2002. See also Christopher G. A. BRYANT, 'Devolution, Equity and the English Question', *Nations and Nationalism* 14 (2008), p. 664-83; and Susan CONDOR, 'Devolution and National Identity: The Rules of English (Dis)engagement', *Nations and Nationalism* 16 (2010), p. 525-43.

34. English voters who felt unfairly disadvantaged by devolution were more likely to support Brexit. See, for example, [https://www.centreonconstitutionalchange.ac.uk/news\\_opinion/press-release-mays-precious-union-has-little-support-brexit-britain](https://www.centreonconstitutionalchange.ac.uk/news_opinion/press-release-mays-precious-union-has-little-support-brexit-britain). Menno Spiering writes that devolution 'has led to a heightened preoccupation with national identity in England which, in turn, has stoked an English disposition to distinguish the national self from "Europe"': Menno SPIERING, *A Cultural History of British Euroscepticism*, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

35. Timothy Garton ASH, 'Is Britain European?', *International Affairs* 77 (2001), p. 6.

36. Krishan Kumar, 'English and French National Identity: Comparisons and Contrasts', *Nations and Nationalisms* 12 (2006), p. 414.
37. G. E. Aylmer, 'The Peculiarities of the English State', *Journal of Historical Sociology* 3 (1990), p. 92.
38. J. R. MADDICOTT, *The Origins of the English Parliament, 924-1327*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010, Chapter 7.
39. G. R. ELTON, *The Tudor Revolution in Government*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1953.
40. Jeremy Black states that the British have 'a genius for the appearance of continuity', but notes that 'the manufacture of traditions often masks shifts in the character of power' and that 'change is readily apparent both in the landscape and in the experience of the people': Jeremy BLACK, *A History of the British Isles*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 1997, p. 325.
41. Peter MARSHALL, 'Henry VIII's Savage Reformation', *History Extra*, 19 May 2017, <https://www.historyextra.com/period/tudor/henry-viiis-savage-reformation/>
42. Steven PINCUS, *1688: The First Modern Revolution*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2011, p. 223.
43. See Edward ROYLE, *Revolutionary Britannia? Reflections on the Threat of Revolution in Britain, 1789-1848*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2001.
44. See Niall WHELEHAN, *The Dynamiters: Irish Nationalism and Political Violence in the Wider World, 1867-1900*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012.
45. Richard Firth GREEN, 'Violence in the Early Robin Hood Poems', in Mark D. Meyerson, Daniel Thierry and Oren Fulk (eds.), *'A Great Effusion of Blood': Interpreting Medieval Violence*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2004, p. 268.
46. [Unknown], 'Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne', in Steven Knight and Thomas H. Olgren (eds.), *Robin Hood and other Outlaw Tales*, TEAMS Middle English Text Series, University of Rochester, Robbins Library Digital Projects, <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/robin-hood-and-guy-of-gisborne>
47. John MARSHALL (ed.), 'Robin Hood and the Sheriff of Nottingham', The Robin Hood Project, University of Rochester, Robbins Library Digital Project, <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/robin-hood/text/robin-hood-and-the-sheriff-of-nottingham>
48. Richard Firth GREEN, 'Violence in the Early Robin Hood Poems', *op. cit.*, p. 276.
49. J. C. HOLT, *Robin Hood*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., London, Thames and Hudson, 1989, p. 159.
50. See Stephen BASDEO, 'Robin Hood the Brute: Representations of the Outlaw in Eighteenth-Century Criminal Biography', *Law, Crime and History* 6 (2016), p. 54-70.
51. This language is taken from *The Exploits of the Renowned Robin Hood the Terror of Fore-Stallers and Engrossers and Protector of the Poor and Helpless*, London, 1769.
52. 'The stance of the common Englishman', Thompson writes, 'was not so much democratic, in any positive sense, as anti-absolutist. He felt himself to be an individualist, with few affirmative rights, but protected by laws against the intrusion of arbitrary power.' E. P. THOMPSON, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon, 1964), p. 78, 80 and 82.
53. Both quoted in Stephen KNIGHT, *Robin Hood: A Complete Study of the English Outlaw*, Cambridge, MA, and Oxford, Blackwell, 1994, p. 148 and 151.
54. Joseph RITSON, *Robin Hood: A Collection of Poems, Songs and Ballads Relative to that Celebrated English Outlaw*, vol. I, London, 1795, p. 1.
55. *British Critic* 9 (1797), p. 17.
56. Stephanie BARCZEWSKI, *Myth and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, *op. cit.*, p. 75.
57. Stephanie BARCZEWSKI, *Myth and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, *op. cit.*, p. 73.
58. J. O. HALIWELL (ed.), *The Chronicle of William de Rishanger, of the Barons' Wars: The Miracle of Simon de Montfort*, London, 1840, p. xl.



59. Beatrice WEBB, 'Poet and Peasant', in Caroline Barron and F. R. H. du Boulay (eds.), *The Reign of Richard II: Essays in Honour of Mary McKisack*, London, Athlone, 1971, p. 58. See also Maurice KEEN, 'Robin Hood: Peasant or Gentleman?', *Past and Present* 19 (1961), p. 7-15; ID., *The Outlaws of Medieval Legend*, London, Routledge, 1961; and R. H. HILTON, 'The Origins of Robin Hood', in R. H. Hilton (ed.), *Peasants, Knights and Heretics: Studies in Medieval English Social History*, Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 1976, p. 221-35.
60. Stephanie BARCZEWSKI, *Myth and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, *op. cit.*, p. 19. See J. C. HOLT, 'The Origins and Audience of the Ballads of Robin Hood', *Past and Present* 18 (1962), p. 89-110; and ID., *Robin Hood*, *op. cit.*
61. Stephanie BARCZEWSKI, *Myth and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

## ABSTRACTS

This essay addresses and attempts to offer a new interpretation of the classic debate over Robin Hood's social and ideological origins. On the one side are those authors who support a radical version of Robin Hood who challenges social hierarchies; on the other are those who see Robin Hood as a gentleman playing at being an outlaw and therefore as a supporter rather than a challenger of legitimate authority. Here, I argue that the two sides of Robin Hood, who is a specifically English (as opposed to British) national hero, represent the two sides of English political development, in which the superficially orderly evolution that has occurred in recent centuries conceals a more tumultuous undercurrent. The contradictions of the Robin Hood legend are thus no accident. Instead, they reflect the complexities of England's political evolution from the late Middle Ages to the present day.

Cet essai aborde et tente de proposer une nouvelle interprétation du débat classique sur les origines sociales et idéologiques de Robin des Bois. D'un côté, certains auteurs soutiennent une version radicale de Robin des Bois qui remet en question les hiérarchies sociales ; de l'autre, on trouve ceux qui considèrent Robin des Bois comme un gentleman jouant au hors-la-loi et donc comme un partisan plutôt qu'un contestataire de l'autorité légitime. Je soutiens ici que les deux facettes du personnage, qui est un héros national spécifiquement anglais (par opposition à britannique), représentent les deux facettes du développement politique anglais, dans lequel l'évolution superficiellement ordonnée qui s'est produite au cours des derniers siècles dissimule un courant sous-jacent plus tumultueux. Les contradictions de la légende de Robin des Bois ne sont donc pas le fruit du hasard. Elles reflètent au contraire la complexité de l'évolution politique de l'Angleterre depuis la fin du Moyen Âge jusqu'à nos jours.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** Héros nationaux, Identité nationale, Robin des Bois, Anglité, Altérisation

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