

Robin Hood: A Mythic Biography. By Stephen Knight. (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003. Pp. xxi + 247, notes, works cited, index, ISBN 0-8014-3885-3, cloth.)

Jan Darby

Volume 25, Number 2, 2003

Language and Culture / Langue et culture

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/008056ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/008056ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Darby, J. (2003). Review of [*Robin Hood: A Mythic Biography*. By Stephen Knight. (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003. Pp. xxi + 247, notes, works cited, index, ISBN 0-8014-3885-3, cloth.)]. *Ethnologies*, 25(2), 235–238. <https://doi.org/10.7202/008056ar>

REVIEWS / COMPTES-RENDUS

Robin Hood: A Mythic Biography. By Stephen Knight. (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003. Pp. xxi + 247, notes, works cited, index, ISBN 0-8014-3885-3, cloth.)

Stephen Knight's *Robin Hood: A Mythic Biography* is a thorough overview of the Robin Hood tradition in literature, performance and popular culture, from the earliest medieval references to modern film versions.

Between the historical and mythic approaches to the study of the legend, Knight treads the middle ground of literary interpretation. In his analysis, Knight posits four roughly chronological (though sometimes overlapping) manifestations of the hero — “Bold Robin Hood”, the medieval social bandit; “Robert, Earl of Huntington”, the gentrified hero of the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries; “Robin Hood, Esquire”, the product of nineteenth century Romanticism; and “Robin Hood of Hollywood”. These four categories serve as chapter divisions within the book. At times, however, this organizational structure seems overly simplistic and awkward. For instance, the last chapter, “Robin Hood of Hollywood”, becomes a catch-all for twentieth century versions of the legend, including children's storybooks, feminist popular fiction, and scholarly analyses, many of which have very little to do with the filmic tradition.

Knight's overview of the legend is quite comprehensive. In his survey of the extant theatrical versions of the legend from the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many of them obscure, he traces the origins and development of plot and character motifs that have become canonical. By focusing on these obscure dramatic works, Knight elegantly elucidates the cultural continuity between the much-studied medieval beginnings of the tradition and its more familiar form in modern popular culture.

Strangely, this monograph is not Knight's first comprehensive study of the Robin Hood tradition. In 1994, he published *Robin Hood: A Complete Study of the English Outlaw*, which, by its title, would seem to need no sequel. In fact, despite differences in organization and focus, there is an enormous amount of overlap between the two volumes. New scholarship in the field has certainly arisen over the intervening decade, perhaps most notably Jeffrey Singman's startling new survey of the tradition, *Robin Hood: The Shaping of the Legend*, published in 1998. Using material from the Records of Early English Drama project [REED], which had previously been overlooked by Robin Hood scholars, Singman was able to demonstrate that the "May Games" were likely the dominant medium of transmission for the legend during the sixteenth century. However, although Knight endorses Singman's findings, Knight's discussion of this intriguing new material is quite brief. Indeed, since he personally views the Robin Hood of the play-games as more "benign," less "confrontational" and less "risky" than the "bold" hero of the ballads (12-13), Knight seems almost uninterested in decoding the social and symbolic meaning of these festivities, which he actually dealt with in greater detail in his earlier book.

While Knight acknowledges the "multifaceted potency" (xiii) of Robin Hood as an enduring cultural icon, and criticizes what he considers "mono-interpretation" (xiii) by some other scholars, his own analysis of the outlaw hero is ultimately a reductionist one as well. Knight concludes, in quite a definitive tone, that "Robin Hood always represents resistance to authority" (208), and that this resistance is the "key element" (210) of the myth. For Knight, the multiplicity and complexity of meaning encoded in the legend arises primarily from the variety of ways in which this central theme of resistance has been played out within the changing sociopolitical contexts of the past six centuries. Other potent symbolism within the myth, such as that evoked by the fertile forest setting and the consistent seasonal timing of both the ballads and the play-games, receives scant attention in Knight's interpretation.

Nevertheless, Knight expresses a fascination with, and an admiration for, interpretive approaches that explore the potential mythic meaning of the legend, such as Joseph. F. Nagy's structuralist analysis of the ballads and Lorraine K. Stock's semiotic analysis of the cultural overlap between Robin Hood, the Green Man and the Wild Man in medieval representations and literature. Although Knight holds out the hope that such mythic approaches can offer "a deep explanation of the power

of the tradition," he shies away from attempting such an analysis himself, perhaps considering these theoretical frameworks to be too far outside his area of expertise.

Nonetheless, Knight is far more accepting of mythic interpretations of the legend than he is of the search for a "real" Robin Hood, an approach he derisively calls "historicist empiricism" and even a "fetishization of fact" (198). Knight admits that "Reductive as this approach might seem to literary scholars... this intoxicatingly 'real' Robin Hood remains a potent part of the hero's biography" (193); yet, rather than exploring more fully how this "historicist" perspective has influenced popular perceptions of Robin Hood and the development of the legend as a whole, Knight seems content to simply dismiss this approach as fruitless and misguided. In fact, he goes so far as to imply that those historians who undertake such research are lacking a strong sense of self, claiming that "the individual who is in fact constructed in historicist empiricism appears to be not Robin Hood but the wished-for identity of the historian himself" (197). Oddly, Knight lumps the work of J.C. Holt in with the "hard-core" historical empiricists, even though Holt himself clearly rejects the concept of a single historical figure as the basis of the legend and is far more interested in analyzing the social context in which the ballad tradition arose.

In his analysis of film versions of the legend, Knight employs the "pop" psychology motif of the "dysfunctional family" to explain some of the emotional dynamics. This reading is an unconvincing one, with the exception perhaps of the sibling rivalry between Robin Hood and Will Scarlet in the 1991 movie *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*. Unfortunately, Knight makes a glaring error in his description of that relationship, stating that Will and Robin "are half brothers but Robin's father abandoned their mother" (155). In fact, in the movie, Will and Robin share the same father, but have different mothers. The error is minor, but brings into question Knight's accuracy and attention to detail in recounting some of the lesser known theatrical and literary versions of the legend.

In all, although *Robin Hood: A Mythic Biography* is a competent and scholarly survey of the development of the legend, it provides little in the way of new source material or compelling reinterpretations to recommend it above either Knight's own 1994 work or Singman's more radical reexamination of the tradition.

References

- Holt, J.C. 1989. *Robin Hood* (revised and enlarged edition). London: Thames and Hudson.
- Knight, Stephen. 1994. *Robin Hood: A Complete Study of the English Outlaw*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Nagy, Joseph Falaky. 1980. "The Paradoxes of Robin Hood." *Folklore*, 91(2): 198-210.
- Singman, Jeffrey L. 1998. *Robin Hood: The Shaping of the Legend*. Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press.
- Stock, Lorraine Kochanske. 2000. "Lords of the Wildwood: The Wild Man, The Green Man, and Robin Hood." In Thomas Hahn, ed., *Robin Hood and Popular Culture: Violence, Transgression, and Justice*. Thomas Cambridge, Boydell Brewer: 239-50.

Jan Darby
Toronto

Have Not Been The Same: The CanRock Renaissance, 1985-1995. By Michael Barclay, Ian A. D. Jack and Jason Schneider. (Toronto: ECW Press, 2001. Pp. vii + 757, annotated table of contents, black/white and colour photographs, selected critical discography, interview schedule, bibliography, cast of characters, index, ISBN 1-55022-475-1, pbk.)

When the University of British Columbia's radio station, CITR, amplified its FM broadcast to 1800 watts in February of 1989, a 1986 song release by Vancouver's Slow, "Have Not Been The Same," was the first one played over the broadened airwaves. Barclay, Jack and Schneider have picked this song's title to introduce their account of the Canadian music scene during the decade 1985-1995 and its effects on contemporary Canadian singers, musicians and songwriters. The chapters read eastward through the decade from Vancouver to Halifax and document, by interviews with highlighted artists and insightful comments from Barclay, Jack and Schneider, *The CanRock Renaissance*. This rebirth represents "a ten-year window during which a new canon of CanRock was created" (2); a temporal period described as "a golden age, a defining moment, and indeed, since then, we have not been the same" (2). The book also discusses developments in fields related to