

CONISBROUGH & *IVANHOE*

There are few more beautiful or striking scenes in England, than are presented by the vicinity of this ancient Saxon fortress. The soft and gentle river Don sweeps through an amphitheatre, in which cultivation is richly blended with woodland, and on a mount, ascending from the river, well defended by walls and ditches, rises this ancient edifice, which, as its Saxon name implies, was, previous to the Conquest, a royal residence of the kings of England.

Sir Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe* (1819)

Ivanhoe! Ivanhoe!
To adventure, bold adventure, watch him go
There's no power on earth can stop what he's begun
With Bart and Gurth, he'll fight 'till he has won
Ivanhoe! Ivanhoe!

Ivanhoe TV series, 1958-9

Sometimes, a work of art can be so powerful that it displaces the history on which it is based. The classic example of this is Shakespeare's *Henry V*, first staged in 1599, and made into a memorable film by Laurence Olivier in 1944. Both take many liberties with the facts, but have entered the modern consciousness, so that it is virtually impossible for people of my generation to see the historical Henry (who reigned between 1413 and 1422) other than through the prisms which Shakespeare and Olivier - created. Sir Walter Scott's novel *Ivanhoe* (1819) was almost as influential. It played an important part in popularising the myths of 'the Norman Yoke' and of 'Merrie England', while it also set the scene for a new genre of history written by Bishop Stubbs, E.A. Freeman and J.R. Green over fifty years later.

Sir Walter Scott

There have been many film versions of Scott's *Ivanhoe* but the version I shall always remember is the TV series broadcast in the late 1950s. My younger sister and I used

to gather almost every day to watch children's TV after school, and (apart from the adverts on ITV) our favourite programmes were episodes of *William Tell*, *Robin Hood*, and *Ivanhoe*, all of which had memorable jingles. TV was a scarce commodity then, and we used to treasure it, not so much (I think) for the content, as for the opportunity to spend time together. Boys and girls did not go to the same schools then, after the age of ten.

The morality on display in these shows was simple. *Ivanhoe* was played by a young Roger Moore, before he became the Saint, let alone James Bond; but he was already engaged in righting wrongs. This was all right by us, but we did think - even then - that much of the action was comical. Above all, watching TV was a ritual, which including the singing of songs, though neither of us was especially musical:

There's freedom on his banner
Justice in his sword
He rides against the manor
Where tyranny is lord!

Rich and poor
Together we go
Forward with *Ivanhoe*!
With I-van-hoe!
[repeat last line, ad nauseam]

Despite my infantile familiarity with the story, I only read Scott's novel recently, following a visit to Conisborough, where some of the most important scenes in the book take place.

Scott sets his novel during the reign of Richard the Lionheart (1189-99), and in the West Riding, or what we now call South Yorkshire (the two being not at all coterminous). In particular, he describes 'Rotherwood', the home of *Ivanhoe*'s father Cedric, and 'Coningsbrough' the seat of Athelstane. Both these men are fierce Saxon patriots, who submit to the harsh Norman Yoke with great reluctance. The novel begins:

In that pleasant district of merry England which is watered by the river Don, there extended in ancient times a large forest, covering the greater part of the beautiful hills and valleys which lie between Sheffield and the pleasant town of Doncaster. The remains of this extensive wood are still to be seen at the noble seats of Wentworth, of Warncliffe Park, and around Rotherham. Here haunted of yore the fabulous Dragon of Wantley;¹ and here also flourished in

¹ See Chapter 5 below.

ancient times those bands of gallant outlaws, whose deeds have been rendered so popular in English song.

Much later, Scott continues his description of Conisbrough:

The outer walls have probably been added by the Normans, but the inner keep bears token of very great antiquity. The wall is of immense thickness, and is propped or defended by six huge external buttresses which project from the circle, and rise up against the sides of the tower as if to strengthen or to support it. The distant appearance of this huge building, with these singular accompaniments, is as interesting to the lovers of the picturesque, as the interior of the castle is to the eager antiquary, whose imagination it carries back to the days of the Heptarchy.

Scott's choice of location reflected the importance of Conisbrough in Saxon, rather than Norman times; and, many years ago, the late David Hey pointed out that, before the Conquest, the town was owned by King Harold and was an important administrative and military centre, while St Peter's Conisbrough was the mother church for much of South Yorkshire. After 1066 it became the centre of an important feudal 'honour' created for the Warenne family, which was 'one of the great dynasties of medieval England', and held the fee until 1347.² However, Scott was quite wrong when he wrote that Conisbrough Castle was built in Saxon times. In fact, the keep dates from the 1180s and therefore from 'Norman' times - or, more accurately, from the time when England formed part of Henry II's 'Angevin Empire'. It was built by Henry's illegitimate relative Hamelin Plantagenet, while other parts of the castle were built later still. But, as the visitor can see for himself, Scott's description of the architecture was accurate.

The mode of entering the great tower of Coningsburgh Castle is very peculiar, and partakes of the rude simplicity of the early times in which it was erected. A flight of steps, so deep and narrow as to be almost precipitous, leads up to a low portal in the south side of the tower, by which the adventurous antiquary may still, or at least could a few years since, gain access to a small stair within the thickness of the main wall of the tower, which leads up to the third story of the building.

Ivanhoe was written after Walter Scott had published several novels in the *Waverley* series, all concerning Scotland and Scottish history; and it is thought that he wanted to make the point that England and Scotland were 'better together' as a result of the Act of Union of 1707, in the same way that (in his view) English and the Normans had been much better off, once they had forgotten the bitterness

² Hey, *The Making of South Yorkshire* (Moorland Publishing, 1979); *Conisbrough Castle*, Brindle & Sadraei (English Heritage Guidebooks, 2018).

engendered by the Conquest of 1066. The eponymous hero Sir Wilfred of Ivanhoe has been disinherited by his father (as we have noted, an Anglo-Saxon chauvinist), because he chose to go crusading in Palestine with the Norman, King Richard. Other characters include Robin Hood and his outlaws, Ivanhoe's two love interests (Rebecca, a Jewish woman, and the Lady Rowena) and various evil Knights Templar, of whom one - Brian de Bois-Guilbert - is Ivanhoe's rival. There is also Isaac the Jew (Rebecca's father), Gurth the Saxon swineherd and a Ken-Dodd figure, Wamba, who are there to demonstrate that the Saxons, united, can never be defeated, even when shackled to the Norman Yoke. The Normans include the wicked Prince John. The story features duels, tournaments, a siege, two kidnappings, dungeons, unspeakable tortures (or the threat of them) and no less than two masked knights.

There are numerous inaccuracies. Such was Scott's taste for all things 'Gothick' that he could not resist lumping all kinds of 'medieval' phenomena together, which did not belong to the same period so that (all too often) we cannot be sure what century we are in. Although the scene of the action is Yorkshire in 1194, we are presented with modes of dress and behaviour which belong to the early Saxon period. Templars from the 12th century mingle with friars from the 13th. There are chivalrous episodes which resemble the tales told by Jean Froissart (who died around 1405); and there is a trial for witchcraft which properly belongs in the 15th century. Most problematic is the fact that we are presented with a description of the relations between Saxon and Norman which might have been appropriate in the 1070s, but is out of place in the 1190s. This will not do, whatever Scott's admirers say in his defence. To be convincing, historical fiction has to be firmly grounded in the facts. If it is not, it rapidly becomes a comedy, even when it depicts tragic events.

Much nearer to the truth, perhaps, is Walter Scott's depiction of the anti-semitism present in medieval English society. For, in *Ivanhoe*, Normans and Saxons of all classes each behave abominably towards the Jews:

There was no race existing on the earth, in the air, or the waters, who were the object of such an unintermitting, general, and relentless persecution as the Jews of this period. Upon the slightest and most unreasonable pretences, as well as upon accusations the most absurd and groundless, their persons and property were exposed to every turn of popular fury; for Norman, Saxon, Dane, and Briton, however adverse these races were to each other, contended which should look with greatest detestation upon a people, whom it was accounted a point of religion to hate, to revile, to despise, to plunder, and to persecute. It is a well-known story of King John, that he confined a wealthy Jew in one of the royal castles, and daily caused one of his teeth to be torn out, until, when the jaw of the unhappy Israelite was half disfurnished, he consented to pay a large sum, which it was the tyrant's object to extort from him.

In the novel, the Saxon thane, Cedric, behaves better than the Norman Templar, but not much:

Oswald, returning, whispered into the ear of his master, "It is a Jew, who calls himself Isaac of York; is it fit I should marshall him into the hall?" "Let Gurth do thine office, Oswald," said Wamba with his usual effrontery; "the swineherd will be a fit usher to the Jew." "St Mary," said the Abbot, crossing himself, "an unbelieving Jew, and admitted into this presence!" "A dog Jew," echoed the Templar, "to approach a defender of the Holy Sepulchre?" "Peace, my worthy guests," said Cedric; "my hospitality must not be bounded by your dislikes. If Heaven bore with the whole nation of stiff-necked unbelievers for more years than a layman can number, we may endure the presence of one Jew for a few hours. But I constrain no man to converse or to feed with him.

The worst example of persecution occurs when the Templar seizes Isaac the Jew and threatens him with torture unless he hands over money:

Seize him and strip him, slaves," said the knight, "and let the fathers of his race assist him if they can." The assistants, taking their directions more from the Baron's eye and his hand than his tongue, once more stepped forward, laid hands on the unfortunate Isaac, plucked him up from the ground, and, holding him between them, waited the hard-hearted Baron's farther signal. The Jew then looked at the glowing furnace, over which he was presently to be stretched, and seeing no chance of his tormentor's relenting, his resolution gave way. "I will pay," he said, "the thousand pounds of silver".

The Norman Yoke

Scott's view of English society in the mid 1190s was anachronistic. *Ivanhoe* portrayed the Anglo-Saxons as a people who had recently been conquered and were still regarded as an inferior race. Moreover, *Ivanhoe's* father Cedric secretly hoped for the return of a native English dynasty whereas in fact, the English had long ceased to engage in active revolt against their Norman masters by the time Richard I became King. However, in other ways, Scott's description of English society is no more than a precursor of the 'Germanist' view of Anglo-Saxon history, which was so important in late Victorian times.

However, it is important to realise that the Normans have also had their champions, and continue to do so. The 'E' version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for 1087 – the year of William the Conqueror's death - praises his wisdom and piety, and tells us that, as a result of the Conquest, 'any honest man could travel the kingdom without injury with his bosom full of gold' and that, 'if any man had intercourse with a woman against her will, he was forthwith castrated.' Poor men lamented and powerful men complained, when the Conqueror died. For Ordericus

Vitalis, who was English by birth though he became a monk in Normandy, William was a man who 'during his whole life had followed the advice of wise counsellors, feared God and been the unwearied protector of holy mother Church.'

There was even a view that the Anglo-Saxon nobility 'had it coming'. William of Malmesbury, whose father was Norman, wrote his *Deeds of the Kings of the English* in the 1120s. According to him, moral standards had declined steeply in England in the years before the Conquest, which had brought about a real religious revival. The Normans were praised for their 'economy in large houses', their taste in dress, their delicacy when it came to food, their hardiness and prowess in war, their politeness, and the protection they afforded to their subjects. By contrast, the Anglo-Saxon priests had been ignorant, their monks had consistently disregarded the Benedictine Rule, and they had given themselves up to 'luxury and wantonness.' Above all, 'drinking parties had been a universal English custom, in which they passed entire days and nights.' (So, was it 'binge-drinking' which condemned the Anglo-Saxons to ignominious defeat at Hastings?)

Yet there have long been historians who took the view that the Normans had nothing to teach the Anglo-Saxons. This view became popular in England in the 1640s and during the English Civil War; and it was also the view taken by the Victorians J.M.Kemble, Bishop Stubbs and E.A.Freeman. Likewise, in the late 20th century James Campbell and Patrick Wormald both wrote that late Anglo-Saxon England was a nation state, with 'an effective monarchy, uniform institutions, a national language, a national Church, clear frontiers and a strong sense of national identity.' Michael Wood has also described it in glowing terms, referring in particular to the monastic revival led by St Dunstan in the 10th century and centred on Glastonbury in Wessex.

In the end, we are likely to remain divided on this question; but there is little doubt as to what the Anglo-Saxons themselves thought about the Norman Conquest in 1066, or 1087, or 1100. For them, the Conquest was the equivalent of the Palestinian *Nakba* – the catastrophe which saw 700,000 Arabs driven from their homes in 1948, in what became Israel. The numbers of Englishmen who were killed, expropriated, or driven into exile during the reign of William the Conqueror was far smaller; but it was nonetheless substantial.

In the years after 1066, William 'the Bastard' spent much of his time putting down rebellions, which only diminished after the Saxon pretender Edgar the Aetheling surrendered in 1074. He soon became known as 'the Conqueror', displaying a ruthlessness which was remarked upon even by Norman chroniclers. The so-called Harrying (or Harrowing) of the North of England in 1069 was so brutal that its effects were still in evidence when the royal commissioners compiled Domesday Book 20 years later. The scale of English resistance was played down by the Norman chroniclers, and has been underestimated by historians ever since.

The Normans and their allies were few in number – around 8,000 compared to a native population of about 2,000,000. Moreover, they expected to be rewarded with land and titles in return for their service during the invasion, and in the putting

down of these numerous rebellions. A certain degree of ruthlessness was therefore to be expected, but the eventual outcome was the almost complete replacement of Anglo-Saxon lords with Normans. William expropriated the rebels; Anglo-Saxons were removed from governmental and ecclesiastical office. After 1075 all earldoms were held by Normans, and Englishmen were only occasionally appointed as sheriffs. Senior English office-holders were either expelled from their positions in the Church, or kept in place and replaced by foreigners when they died. By 1096 no bishopric was held by any Englishman, and English abbots had become uncommon, especially in the larger monasteries.

All this is well known. It is less widely known that many Anglo-Saxons, including groups of nobles, fled the country for Scotland, Ireland, or Scandinavia. The largest single exodus occurred in the 1070s, when a fleet of 235 ships sailed for Constantinople. As a result, Englishmen became an important element in the elite Varangian Guard, part of the Byzantine army which fought Robert Guiscard (the Norman conqueror of Southern Italy) at Durazzo in 1081. According to French and Icelandic sources, some of these English exiles were rewarded with a gift of land, possibly in the Crimea, where they named new settlements after London, York and other places which reminded them of home.

For those who remained in England, the French spoken by the conquerors became the official language; and, when their own language re-emerged, it was no longer Anglo-Saxon but Middle English. The law discriminated against the subject people both directly and indirectly. The *murdrum* fine provided that, if a Norman was killed and the killer was not apprehended within five days, the hundred within which the crime was committed should be collectively punished. An Anglo-Saxon enjoyed no such protection. At the same time, new forests established for the benefit of the Normans made the English who presumed to hunt outlaws in their own land. Men who lived in the forest were forbidden to bear hunting weapons, and dogs were also banned (though mastiffs were permitted as watchdogs if they had their front claws removed).

On the other hand, Anglo-Saxon society was by no means perfect. Slavery, which had been a normal feature of Anglo-Scandinavian England, died out after 1066; and there is a sermon of Bishop Wulfstan of Worcester (c.1008-1095) in which he lambasts the Englishmen who:

club together to buy a woman between them as a joint purchase, and practise foul sin with that one woman, one after another, just like dogs, who do not care about filth; and then sell God's creature for a price out of the country into the power of strangers.

Traditionally we have found consolation for the disaster of the Norman Conquest in the idea that the immigrants were soon assimilated. This comforting thought is largely based on a single statement made by Richard Fitzneal in his treatise *The Dialogue of the Exchequer*, written in the late 12th century:

With the English and Normans dwelling together and alternately marrying and giving in marriage, the races have become so fused that it can scarcely be discerned at the present day - I speak of freemen alone-who is English and who is Norman by race, I except, however, the bondmen, who are called villeins, and are not permitted, if their lords object, to change their status.

However, when Professor le Patourel examined the extent of intermarriage between Normans and English more closely, he could find very little evidence for it. Instead, he found that, by and large, the Norman aristocracy which came over with Duke William 'tended to marry within their own ranks', and intermarriage in English towns was also uncommon. Meanwhile, 'at the level of the men who tilled the soil and those who kept the flocks and herds', there was 'probably no intermingling of any consequence at all.' Finally, any mixing which did take place was likely to have been between 'the luckier survivors of the English landed families and the second or third ranks of the Norman baronage'. So there is little here for our comfort, after all.

Viewed in this light, Walter Scott's dismal description of the situation in England in 1194 may be more accurate than we may once have thought. In his reconstruction, Normans show their contempt for Saxons quite openly; but the Saxons hate the Normans with equal measure, and take the opportunity to attack them when the occasion arises. Moreover, the Saxons retain certain enduring characteristics - their fondness of dogs, their love of sport and their idea of fair play - but they are a subject race, with limited room for manoeuvre. Most of the time they have no choice but to comply with the wishes of their masters; and it is forest and feudal law which prevails. Scott describes very well how French became the official language of government and the law courts, and how French words displaced their English equivalents, in certain contexts:

"Why, how call you those grunting brutes running about on their four legs?" demanded Wamba. "Swine, fool, swine," said the herd, "every fool knows that." "And swine is good Saxon," said the Jester; "but how call you the sow when she is flayed, and drawn, and quartered, and hung up by the heels, like a traitor?" "Pork," answered the swine-herd. "I am very glad every fool knows that too," said Wamba, "and pork, I think, is good Norman-French; and so when the brute lives, and is in the charge of a Saxon slave, she goes by her Saxon name; but becomes a Norman, and is called pork, when she is carried to the Castle-hall to feast among the nobles; what dost thou think of this, friend Gurth, ha?" "By St Dunstan," answered Gurth, "thou speakest but sad truths; little is left to us but the air we breathe, and that appears to have been reserved with much hesitation, solely for the purpose of enabling us to endure the tasks they lay upon our shoulders. The finest and the fattest is for their board; the loveliest is for their couch; the best and bravest supply their foreign masters with soldiers.

Merrie England

Scott's novel focussed on the wholly new and fictional character of Ivanhoe; but it also involved Robin Hood, and broke new ground by placing him in the 1190s, at the centre of a clash between Anglo-Saxon and Norman culture. However, Robin was a well known character in English literature long before *Ivanhoe* was published in 1819. According to Wood, the legend was 'already taking shape' in the 13th century and can most convincingly be traced to Wakefield or Barnsdale;³ but it is generally considered that the first mention of Robin in a literary context is in William Langland's late 14th century poem *Piers the Plowman*, where Sloth, the lazy priest, confesses:

I know not perfectly my Paternoster, as the priest it singeth,
but I know rhymes of Robyn Hood, and Ranulf Earl of Chester.

Patrick Wormald took up the story at this point:

By the early 15th century, references have become relatively abundant. The earliest extant Robin Hood 'ryme', 'Robin Hood and the Monk', is found in a manuscript of 1450 or soon after. The central text forms the core of the legend as it was bequeathed by the Middle Ages. Robin already has his most familiar companions - Little John, Will Scarlett (or something similar), Much the Miller's son and Friar Tuck. He is at home in Sherwood Forest and the sworn enemy of the Sheriff of Nottingham. He is an archer of genius and a master of disguise. He is loyal to the king, and 'dyde pore men moch god', but he had no time for the wealthy and grasping religious orders: the *Gest* begins with the story of how Robin helped an impoverished knight pay his debt to the abbot of St Mary's York, and fleeced the abbey in the process.⁴

So here is the familiar Robin Hood of Sherwood Forest; but was there ever an identifiable individual of this name? As Wood once again pointed out:

Back in the 1850s, the Yorkshire scholar Joseph Hunter had noticed that the original location of the Robin Hood story was not in Sherwood in Nottinghamshire, but in Barnsdale. He was the first to reject the idea of a mythical Robin and to offer a real model in real historical setting. He suggested Robin was active in the time of Edward II (1307-27), and was perhaps one of the disgruntled supporters of the

³ Wood, *In Search of England*, 73, 81.

⁴ Wormald, *London Review of Books*, 5 May 1983.

rebellion of Thomas, Earl of Lancaster in 1322. Hunter even connected the ballad's tale of the king's visit to Robin in the greenwood with the royal visit to the North in 1323. To cap it all, Hunter noticed that the king's wardrobe accounts recorded a payment to one Robert Hood.⁵

The truth is that, although Hunter was a first-rate scholar, he only looked at a tiny fraction of the records, military, legal and administrative, which are now available in for medieval England; and a wider study justifies the conclusion that there were several Robin Hoods, not one.

The earliest known reference was in 1226 and appears in the records of the York Assizes. These mentions a person named Robert Hod, whose goods worth 32 shillings and 6 pence were confiscated. Accordingly, Hod became an outlaw. In the following year, he is called "Hobbehod"; but there are many other references to men of that name in the 13th century. Indeed John Maddicott has suggested that "Robin Hood" was a stock alias used by thieves. Between 1261 and 1300, there are at least eight references to 'Rabunhod' in various regions across England, from Berkshire to Yorkshire; but, importantly, these men were criminals, not heroes. They may have robbed the rich, but there is no sign that they gave to the poor.

Another view has been put forward by Andrew Ayton,⁶ who found one excellent archer who was not even an outlaw:

On 21 November 1338, forty-three archers joined the company of troops entrusted with the security of the Isle of Wight. The garrison pay-roll, which forms the greater part of an excellent set of accounts now preserved at the Public Record Office, records the names of the newly arrived men. In their midst is a name as familiar as any from English literature or history: Robin Hood.

Ayton thought he had found his man, largely because this soldier was such a crack-shot that he may have been the object of lasting admiration for miles around; but so many tales have been told about Robin Hood that there must be dozens (if not hundreds) of rival candidates who left no record at all. The better view is that Robin probably represents a mythical past, when the outlaws roamed free, unrestricted by convention or law, in a green version of the Golden Age. It is even possible that he represents an amalgam of characters.

J.C.Holt (1922-2014), who wrote one of the best books on the subject, told us that Hood has 'the unique distinction of being the only entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography* which was devoted exclusively to proving that its subject never

⁵ *In Search of England*, 75.

⁶ Ayton, *Military Service and the Development of the Robin Hood Legend in the Fourteenth Century*, Nottingham Medieval Studies, 1992)

existed'; but by the 1950s, Robin had nonetheless become the subject of innumerable books, films and TV programmes. (My sister and I thrilled to Richard Greene's portrayal of him (and I to Patricia Driscoll's of Maid Marian) in *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, a series which ran between 1955 and 1959). In due course Robin acquired fierce partisans in many parts of the country, including Nottingham, Sherwood Forest, Wakefield, York, and Barnsdale. My daughter, who attended Nottingham University in the late 1990s, was outraged when the City of Doncaster had the audacity to call its airport after Robin. In fact, the inhabitants of Doncaster had long laid claim to an association with the outlaw, because of the existence of 'Robin Hood's Well' at Skellow, which is only eight miles north of the town.

There came a time when historians began to study the composition of the audiences of the early ballads, to probe their social significance. This led to a series of articles in *Past and Present*, a journal founded in 1952 by a group of historians which included members of the Communist Party Historians Group, amongst them Rodney Hilton of Balliol College, Oxford (1916-2002). In 1958, in article an entitled *The Origins of Robin Hood* (P&P No 14, November, 1958), Hilton argued that there was continuity between the Robin Hood ballads and the agenda of some of the rebels involved in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. This idea was attacked with some vigour by Holt, who was Professor at Nottingham at the time, in an article entitled *The Origins and Audience of the Ballads of Robin Hood* (P&P No. 18, November 1960). He pointed out that rural and peasant issues are nowhere found within the texts, and proposed that the supposedly dissident audience was in fact composed of the lower gentry, their hangers-on and higher servitors. Maurice Keen (1933-2012), also a Fellow of Balliol, weighed in to support Hilton,⁷ and was bluntly rebuked by Holt. He told me later that the Professor was probably right; but that he 'need not have been so rude about it.'

⁷ *Robin Hood, A Peasant Hero*, *History Today*, volume 8, issue 10, 1958.



Conisbrough Castle



The Keep, Conisbrough Castle