

**'SHERWOOD IN THE TWILIGHT':
RE-WORKING ROBIN HOOD ON THE EVE OF
THE GREAT WAR**



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In Memoriam

Lieut. Col. Henrique Augusto Perestrelo de Alarcão e Silva (1891-1954)

In 2012, ULICES/CEAUL organized a conference entitled "Changing Times: Performances and Identities on Screen". The paper I presented then --- "'Captain Hood' or 'The Forest Hawk': Robin Hood (dis)played by Errol Flynn (1938)" --- focused on Michael Curtiz's and William Keighley's film, produced on the eve of the Second World War, and, not meaning to mix up conflicts, I would like to recall a short scene from it (24:12-25:20).

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For reasons not entirely clear and certainly debatable, there seems to be no such passionately committed statements in Edwardian and early Georgian literature on Robin Hood, a hero --- and a myth --- being re-worked at the beginning of the 20th century. To start with, the emergence of the cinema and of the first productions dedicated to Robin from 1909 onwards² meant that the media through which he was being portrayed were changing, ballads, theatrical and musical performances being clearly on the wane, without disappearing altogether. Moreover, Robin Hood, a hero of a primarily adult public until the mid or high Victorian period (Knight, *Complete Study*, pp. 202-203), was beginning to be increasingly targeted at, adapted to and adopted by children and youngsters with a view to promoting or enhancing courage, comradeship, solidarity, independence, self-sufficiency, courtesy, patriotism and loyalty to crown and country,³ if not to the Empire as a whole. However, as Mark Girouard has put it "(...) the war both brought Victorian chivalry to its climax and helped to destroy it." (n. p.; see also pp. 275-293)

In order to illustrate the output of 1914 alone, Dobson and Taylor's chronology mentions Henry Gilbert's *Robin Hood and His Merry Men* as "(...) an English story-book edition of long popularity" (p. 318); E. F. Matheson's also entitled *Robin Hood and His Merry Men*, "(...) a play for children in two acts" (*Ibidem*), and John Drinkwater's *Robin Hood and the Pedlar*, "(...) a Georgian verse play" (*Ibidem*). I shall, however, focus on an almost forgotten author,⁴ although a prolific one in his day and age (Alfred Noyes, 1880-1958), who wrote both a poem ("Song of Sherwood" or simply "Sherwood", first published in 1904 and often reedited) and a play (*Sherwood, or Robin Hood and the Three Kings*, written in 1908, published in

² According to Stephen Knight (*Complete Study*, pp. 218-219), the first movie was *Robin Hood and His Merry Men* (1909), followed by four others before the outbreak of the First World War.

³ "(...) both novels and poems, whatever the period they cover, celebrate virtues especially associated with feudal, chivalric or old-fashioned societies. They are full of examples of bravery, loyalty, hospitality, consideration towards women and inferiors, truth to a given word, respect for rank combined with a warm relationship between different ranks, and refusal to take advantages of an enemy except in fair fight." (Girouard, p. 36) Speaking of youngsters, these were also the years that witnessed the birth of the Scout movement by Sir Robert Baden-Powell (1857-1941), whose *Scouting for Boys* came out in 1908.

⁴ In fact, Noyes is only mentioned in older histories of English literature like, for instance, Sampson, p. 1018 and Legouis and Cazamian, p. 1349, n. 1, p. 1355, n. 2 and p. 1374.

New York in 1911 and in Britain, with some alterations and the simpler title of *Robin Hood*, in 1926).⁵

Due to the fact that the play has been discussed in detail by Lois Potter, I will just focus upon the poem; but may I add that, as well as a poet and a playwright, Alfred Noyes was also a novelist and a writer of short tales, a literary critic, a university lecturer in the United States,⁶ an essayist, a lover of science (particularly astronomy), a biographer of scientists (e.g. Isaac Newton and Charles Darwin) and, from 1927 onwards, a Catholic convert. Noyes was also part of a generation preceding that of the "War Poets", angry young men spurred on, like Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, by a strange urge and a strong need to tell; men like Rupert Brooke (1887-1915),⁷ but especially the Isaac Rosenberg (1890-1918) of "Break of Day in the Trenches", the Wilfrid Owen (1893-1918) of "Strange Meeting" and "Anthem for Doomed Youth" or Charles Sorley (1895-1915), who, in "When You See Millions of the Mouthless Dead" and "All the Hills and Vales Along", has captured so well the absurdity and paradoxical nature of any enthusiastic response to clarion calls to war.⁸ In fact, unlike all these poets,⁹ Alfred Noyes never went to the war, nor did he

⁵ Unlike the play, the poem is not listed in Gable's bibliography, p. 83.

⁶ Although Noyes failed to complete his BA degree at Oxford, he was awarded an Honorary D. Litt by Yale and was made a Professor at Princeton.

⁷ An early poem by Brooke ("Grantchester") is evaluated by Vivien de Sola Pinto as "(...) poetry that deliberately turns away from the contemporary situation (the lies, the truths, and pain) and uses the day-dream of an unspoiled English countryside as an anodyne. It is the fantasy of an upper middle class which feared reality and refused to face the modern crisis at the very moment when it was assuming dimensions that threatened to disrupt the whole of the European social structure."(p. 133)

⁸ "(...) the European War (...) at first seemed an event to be spiritedly embraced. It could be greeted with youthful bravado and imperial confidence and celebrated with passionate pleas for the defense of the geographical entity of Britain in general and of a verdant England in particular. (...) The general patriotic enthusiasm of 1914 took time to waver; even longer to flounder. Feeling against the circumstances of the war, and a revulsion at its extraordinary waste, developed relatively late amongst a significant percentage of poets on active service. It was this singularly disillusioned verse which (...) ultimately had a profound impact on the attitudes of later generations."(Sanders, p. 506); "The war provided a disturbing context which forcibly transformed the often placid, elegiac, and unadorned poetry of the 1900s into a painfully observant record or a vehicle of protest."(*Ibidem*, 510) D. J. Enright's excellent chapter provides several powerful examples of alienation, despair and revolt running across what he calls "(...) the real poetry of War, or the poetry of the real War (...)"(p. 166); see also Pinto, pp. 140-142. Adapting slightly the title of a chapter by Vivien de Sola Pinto (p. 137), one might label it as trench(ant) poets(ry), exposing "the horror! The horror"voiced by Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Finally, as Cecil Day-Lewis (1904-1972) reminds us, "Post-war poetry was born among the ruins."(qtd. in Evans, p. 121)

⁹ Not to mention others who survived into seniority, like Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967); see, for instance, his poignant sonnet entitled "Glory of Women".

die young, leaving behind him a beautiful corpse; and the emergence, in the postwar world, of a new geopolitical framework, as well as the establishment of Modernism, would help cast his image, from the 1920s onwards, as that of an outdated and outmoded poet. Lois Potter, for instance, presents Noyes as "(...) the spokesman for an old order and old poetics, his productivity stigmatized as facility and his popularity taken as lack of original thought. (...) In this (...) situation, he soon became the man all young writers loved to hate." (p. 168)¹⁰

Notwithstanding this verdict, according to Dobson and Taylor, "Sherwood" was "far and away the most popular Robin Hood poem written during the last hundred years (...)" (p. 200), adding that "(...) no poet since Rudyard Kipling (...) has been more popular (...) on the eve of the First World War.'Sherwood' (...) still lingers on in the more old fashioned school anthologies; and no work in this [20th] century has done more to shape the popular attitudes to the English greenwood legend." (*Ibidem*)¹¹ And it is in this (twi)light that "Sherwood" - an example of pre-war heritage poetry - should be evaluated.

In terms of the poem's literary ancestry, one should mention not only the three sonnets written and sent by John Hamilton Reynolds (1796-1852) to John Keats (1795-1821) in 1818 and his response, entitled Robin Hood (see Alarcão, pp. 331-335), but also the weight and influence of the English alliterative tradition and an allusion to Shakespeare (1564-1616): see the reference to Oberon (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*), also mentioned, together with Titania and Puck, in Noyes's play.¹²

So far as "Song of Sherwood" is concerned, playing upon binary oppositions (dawn/dusk, sleepiness/wakefulness, absence/presence, imagination/reality, death/life, etc.), it presents Robin and a forest haunted by half-glimpsed elves, fairies and

¹⁰ "For Noyes, literary tradition was as organic as the natural world. As he insisted on one of his lectures [Some aspects of modern poetry], 'There is neither new or old poetry. There is only poetry.'" (Potter, p. 175)

¹¹ A similar view is held by Sir Henry Newbolt (1862-1938), to whom "In the last hundred years only one poet has succeeded in dreaming it [the Robin Hood legend] to life again: where Tennyson utterly failed Alfred Noyes has succeeded (...)" (p. 213). Tennyson's work is surely *The Foresters* or, *Robin Hood and Maid Marian*, a play produced in New York (1892) and London (1893).

¹² For its indebtedness to other late Tudor plays, particularly Anthony Munday's and Henry Chettle's *The Downfall of Robert Earl of Huntington* and *The Death of Robert Earl of Huntington*, as well as to some traditional Robin Hood ballads, see Potter. On Munday's companion plays, see Alarcão, pp. 229-261 *passim*.

medieval outlaws as a "dream-world",¹³ synecdochally symbolizing a past and idealized green England.¹⁴ This sentimental and nostalgic recollection of the myth, with the occasional "Kiplingesque"¹⁵ overtone, coexists with some hazy hints of an English 'resurrection':

Sherwood in the twilight, is Robin Hood awake?
Grey and ghostly shadows are gliding through the brake,
Shadows of the dappled deer, dreaming of the morn,
Dreaming of a shadowy man that winds a shadowy horn.

Robin Hood is here again: all his merry thieves
Hear a ghostly bugle-note shivering through the leaves,
Calling as he used to call, faint and far away,
In Sherwood, in Sherwood, about the break of day.

Merry, merry England has kissed the lips of June:
All the wings of fairyland were here beneath the moon,
Like a flight of rose-leaves fluttering in a mist
Of opal and ruby and pearl and amethyst.

Merry, merry England is waking as of old,
With eyes of blither hazel and hair of brighter gold:
For Robin Hood is here again beneath the bursting spray
In Sherwood, in Sherwood, about the break of day.

Love is in the greenwood building him a house

¹³ An expression borrowed from F. R. Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry* qtd. in Ford, p. 68. The word "Dreamland" appears in Noyes's own play (N. d: Act I, Scene 1, p. 15), describing a kingdom jointly ruled by Oberon and Titania, a magic realm whose gates, through the good deeds of Robin and his band, open up at night to the poor, the needy and the oppressed.

¹⁴ "The writers of the Romantic period and after popularized Robin Hood only at the cost of converting him from a real outlaw into a literary symbol of a vanished and largely illusory medieval Arcadia." (Dobson and Taylor, p. 58).

¹⁵ An adjective borrowed from Sir Herbert Read (1893-1968) in a passage worth quoting in full: "It must be remembered that in 1914 our conception of the war was completely unreal. We had vague childish memories of the Boer War, and from these and from a general diffusion of Kiplingesque sentiments, we managed to infuse into war a decided element of adventurous romance. War still appealed to the imagination." (qtd. in Enright, p. 165); Kipling's only son (Lieutenant John Kipling, 1897-1915) was himself a casualty of the Great War, falling at the battle of Loos, aged 18. Likewise, John Masefield (1878-1967) admits: "I know what England was, before the war. She was a nation (...) which had forgotten her soul (...) And then, at a day's notice, at the blowing of a horn, at the cry from a little people in distress, all that was changed, and she re-made her soul, (...) the soul of St. George who fought the dragon." (qtd. in Goebel, p. 210)

Of wild rose and hawthorn and honeysuckle boughs:
Love is in the greenwood, dawn is in the skies,
And Marian is waiting with a glory in her eyes.

Hark! The dazzled laverock climbs the golden steep!
Marian is waiting: is Robin Hood asleep?
Round the fairy grass-rings frolic elf and fay,
In Sherwood, in Sherwood, about the break of day.

Oberon, Oberon, rake away the gold,
Rake away the red leaves, roll away the mould,
Rake away the gold leaves, roll away the red,
And wake Will Scarlett from his leafy forest bed.

Friar Tuck and Little John are riding down together
With quarter-staff and drinking-can and grey goose-feather.
The dead are coming back again, the years are rolled away
In Sherwood, in Sherwood, about the break of day.

Softly over Sherwood the south wind blows.
All the heart of England hid in every rose
Hears across the greenwood the sunny whisper leap,
Sherwood in the red dawn, is Robin Hood asleep?

Hark, the voice of England wakes him as of old
And, shattering the silence with a cry of brighter gold
Bugles in the greenwood echo from the steep,
Sherwood in the red dawn, is Robin Hood asleep?

Where the deer are gliding down the shadowy glen
All across the glades of fern he calls his merry men –
Doublets of Lincoln green glancing through the May
In Sherwood, in Sherwood, about the break of day –

Calls them and they answer: from aisles of oak and ash
Rings the Follow! Follow! and the boughs begin to crash,
The ferns begin to flutter and the flowers begin to fly,
And through the crimson dawning the robber band goes by.

Robin! Robin! Robin! All his merry thieves
Answer as the bugle-note shivers through the leaves,
Calling as he used to call, faint and far away,
In Sherwood, in Sherwood, about the break of day.

<http://genius.com/Alfred-noyes-song-of-sherwood-annotated>>¹⁶

¹⁶ Also printed in Dobson and Taylor, pp. 200-202 and read aloud in <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JpK-iDIegtI>

As Stephen Knight points out, without providing examples:

"There are from the period many relatively feeble and clumsy 'poetic' reworkings of the myth, with some sense of woolly patriotism, some idea of greenwood value (...) and varying amounts of liberal democracy enshrined in the hero, usually amounting to little more than distaste for town life (...) Local or international, Georgianism caused a definite Robin Hood renaissance, however little contact it had with the early rebelliousness of the outlaw hero." (*Complete Study*, p. 214)

In his monumental comparative study on the medievalist appropriations and re-workings of the Great War in Britain and Germany (1914-1940), Stefan Goebel also argues that whereas:

"German war remembrance cultivated a number of archetypal freedom fighters (...) in Britain, commemorations of the (...) conflict offered no match for them, in spite of the fact that figures such as Robin Hood or Owen Glendower (...) were ingrained cultural memory. To be sure, a small number of Scottish war memorials resurrected 'defenders of Scottish freedom', notably (...) Robert the Bruce and William Wallace." (pp. 113-114)

To conclude, Sir Edward Grey, 1st. Viscount Grey of Fallodon (1862-1933) and Foreign Secretary (1905-1916), is credited with having remarked "The lights [Or lamps] are going out all over Europe. We shall not see them lit again in our [life]time"; a sentence allegedly uttered in his Whitehall office, while the street lamps were going up in the evening of August 3rd. 1914, the eve of the British declaration of war to Germany.¹⁷ But, contrary to Lord Grey's expectations or

¹⁷ The tension between both countries had been growing for some time, as H. C. G. Matthew illustrates: "Imperial rivalry had meant that in the 1870s-1890s France had usually seemed Britain's most likely enemy and Germany her most likely friend. Germany's navy plan of 1898, and her bid for 'a place in the sun' (...) now made Germany seem a potent threat (...) (in Morgan, p. 509) and "(...) by 1910 it was clear that Germany would be Britain's adversary,

prediction, the lights would be "lit again", in the halls of Versailles (1919), only to "go out" once more twenty years later. Noyes's poetic recall of the medieval outlaw in the post-Victorian twilight (including its Edwardian and early Georgian afterglows) reminds us that summers seldom last forever... and not all wars will be over by Christmas.

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Alarcão, Miguel. "'Captain Hood' or 'The Forest Hawk': Robin Hood (dis)played by Errol Flynn (1938)". *Anglo-Saxónica. Revista do Centro de Estudos*

if she were to have one. In a series of incidents in North Africa, the Balkans, and Turkey, and in the continuing escalation of the navy building program (despite British attempts, especially in 1911-12, to negotiate a limitation agreement) Anglo-German hostility became confirmed. It began to take on a cultural as well as a diplomatic and military aspect. The respect mixed with concern characteristic of British views of German achievements in the 1890s began to change to alarm and fear."(*ibidem*, p. 521). Muriel Chamberlain also recalls that "In 1907, for the first time, Britain's summer manoeuvres were conducted on the assumption that Germany, not France, was the enemy."(p. 169; see also *ibidem*, pp. 124-125 and p. 156).

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ABSTRACT

In 2012, ULICES/CEAUL organized a conference entitled "Changing Times: Performances and Identities on Screen". The paper I presented then --- "'Captain Hood' or 'The Forest Hawk': Robin Hood (dis)played by Errol Flynn (1938)" --- focused on Michael Curtiz's and William Keighley's film, produced on the eve of the Second World War. I shall ramble now around "Sherwood", a poem originally published in 1904 and reissued in 1914 by Alfred Noyes (1880-1958), an almost forgotten author, though a prolific writer in his own day and age.

Keywords: Alfred Noyes; Robin Hood; Georgian poetry; "Sherwood".

RESUMO

Em 2012, o ULICES/CEAUL organizou um congresso intitulado "Changing Times: Performances and Identities on Screen". A comunicação então apresentada ---

"'Captain Hood' or 'The Forest Hawk': Robin Hood (dis)played by Errol Flynn (1938)" - -- centrava-se no filme realizado por Michael Curtiz e William Keighley, produzido nas vésperas da Segunda Guerra Mundial. Ocupar-me-ei agora de "Sherwood", poema originalmente publicado em 1904 e reeditado em 1914 por Alfred Noyes (1880-1958), autor praticamente esquecido, embora bastante prolífico na sua época.

Palavras-chave: Alfred Noyes; Robin Hood; Poesia Georgiana; "Sherwood".