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The Man in the Forest

IF there are ghosts in what is left of Sherwood Forest they must have been convulsed with silent laughter when it was reported recently that inquiries had been made about the political soundness of Robin Hood. Mrs. Thomas White, described as adviser to the Indiana State Education Board, had said that she thought his story should be banned from schoolbooks "as it was Communistic." She had formed this extraordinary opinion because the outlaw robbed the rich and gave to the poor. American journalists thereupon roused the present Sheriff of Nottingham from his bed to ask him "whether Robin Hood was considered to be a Communist." He replied stoutly—and was cheered for it later—that "we are going to cling to the tradition of Robin Hood and his band as long as Nottingham is Nottingham."

If Robin Hood can survive the full *TIFH* treatment given him not long ago by Jimmy Edwards and friends, he is not likely to be harmed by a minor heresy hunt in Indiana. After all, he has been with us a very long time. He is reputed to have been born in 1160, and before he became the hero of stories for children he had been the subject of many ballads and chronicles. Some scholars say that his historical authenticity is "ill-supported," but Ritson declares that the man existed, that his real name was Robert Fitz-Ooth, and that he was commonly said to have been Earl of Huntingdon. It is by no means certain that he "gave to the poor." The antiquary Stow explains that Robin spared poor men's goods, and was content to rob the rich; but this could have been the result of policy rather than humane impulses. What self-respecting outlaw, making his way in the world, would take the miserable belongings of peasants when fat merchants and bishops were there to be despoiled? His most profitable source of income appears to have been a sort of blackmail levied on

people who needed safe passage through the forest for their goods and cattle.

The philanthropic side of Robin's nature, which has now brought him under suspicion, is largely the work of modern writers: there is little mention of it in the old chronicles. True, he could be generous to an enemy and gentle with women, and it has been said that he would receive no man into his company until he tested him in fair combat. But the attributes most admired in him were his courage, his skill with weapons, especially the long bow, and a shrewdness—even trickery—in bargain and stratagem. Again and again the stories are told of fierce encounters with staves, swords and bucklers. He would fight for two hours at a time, and if he had had enough—or feared he might be beaten—he would suggest an adjournment to the nearest alehouse—"for I love those men that will stand to it, and scorn to turn their backs for the proudest Tarmagant of them all."

The alleged practice of robbing the rich to give to the poor has coloured the legend in modern times, perhaps because it helps to make more respectable our interest in a man who, after all, was a rascal and a law-breaker. This part of him has been the source of many books, films and radio serials which have allowed writers to make crime interesting. It has fostered a pretence, quite immoral, that gangsters may be heroes if they do not steal for themselves, or if they mend their ways in the last chapter. Robin Hood might have seemed equally doubtful at a closer view, but time has softened the portrait. Every man is said to have a secret wish to set himself against society. The wish can be gratified safely in imagination when we identify ourselves with an outlaw who lived long ago in a forest of England—a forest enriched by the dreams of poets and storytellers, and so much a part of our childhood that no evil can touch it.

N.Z. LISTENER, DECEMBER 4, 1953.