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Bare-knuckle Boxing in Joseph Ritson's *Robin Hood* (1795)

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SUMMARY: This article argues that Joseph Ritson's *Robin Hood* (1795), though usually treated as a landmark of antiquarian medievalism, also reveals the influence of contemporary Georgian popular culture, especially bare-knuckle boxing. Ritson's edition gathered key Robin Hood texts, prefaced them with a politically charged "Life of Robin Hood," and supplied extensive notes and illustrations. In one note on Little John's supposed surname, "Nailor," Ritson inserted the couplet "Ye boasted worthies of the knuckle, / To Maggs and to the Nailor truckle." The article identifies this as a misquotation from Hugh Dalrymple's *Redondo; or, The State Jugglers* (1763), a poem about London life and boxing culture. The reference matters because "Nailor" alludes to Bill Stevens, a famous eighteenth-century boxer and nail-maker. Ritson used the quotation to show how surnames might derive from trades, linking Little John's name to a real pugilist. Yet Dalrymple's original line described "meaner," not "boasted," worthies, because the fight involving Nailor was allegedly fixed. The article suggests Ritson deliberately softened the phrase to avoid associating Little John with dishonour, turning the boxer into a more heroic figure by association.

INTRODUCTION

Sometimes a text, rich in allusions and references to contemporary life, can have been studied for two centuries and it will still reveal interesting to new observers. In Joseph Ritson's *Robin Hood: A Collection of all the Ancient Poems, Songs, and Ballads* (1795), there is a reference to that noble sport of boxing, or, "the sweet science," as it would have been known in 1795. The bookish scholar, it seems, couldn't resist the draw of the ring.

JOSEPH RITSON'S ROBIN HOOD *(1795)*

Ritson's Robin Hood is one of the most (if not *the* most) important Robin Hood texts to have been published in the last 250 years. Spanning two volumes, as its title suggests, it was an anthology of primary sources including *A lytell geste of Robyn Hode* (1495), "Robin Hood and the Potter" (1465), as well as later ballads such as "Robin Hood's Birth, Breeding, Valour, and Marriage," "Robin Hood and the Tanner," and early dramatic pieces such as "The Playe of Robyn Hode." Prefixed to the collection of ballads was the first scholarly biography of Robin Hood, numbering 13 pages, which revealed something of Ritson's devotion to the principles of the French Revolution and his anti-clericalism. Robin Hood was a man who was "at perpetual war" with the King of England, and 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 all opposition to tyranny is the cause of the people), and, in spite of the malicious endeavours of pitiful monks, by whom history was consecrated to the crimes and follies of titled ruffians and sainted idiots, to suppress all record of his patriotic exertions and virtuous acts, will render his name immortal.[1]

After the "Life of Robin Hood" there appeared a vast 105-page section of "Notes and Illustrations." The latter section contained all of Ritson's references, quotations from obscure primary sources and chronicles, and many of these entries were essentially mini essays elaborating upon subjects found in the "Life of Robin Hood."
Ritson had pretty much collected all of the material for Robin Hood by the year 1791, for in one of his books, published that same year, titled *Pieces of Ancient Popular Poetry*, he made an "apology" to readers for not having included Robin Hood material:

> It might naturally enough excite the surprise of the intelligent reader, that in a professed republication of popular poetry, nothing should occur upon a subject indisputably the most popular of all—the history of our renowned English archer, ROBIN HOOD. Some apology is undoubtedly necessary on this head, as the omission is by no means owing to ignorance or neglect. In fact, the poems, ballads, and historical or miscellaneous matter, in existence, relative to this celebrated outlaw, are sufficient to furnish the contents of even a couple of volumes considerably bulkier than the present; and sufficiently deserve to appear in a separate publication.[2]

Those "couple of volumes," of course, would finally appear in 1795, complete with elegant woodcuts by John Bewick.

EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BOXING

Ritson lived in London when he was researching Robin Hood, and he could not help but be acquainted with the sport of boxing. A boxing ring had, by royal authority, first been erected in Hyde Park, London, in 1723, so that the "lower orders" might watch a boxing match and the participants be free from committing the offence of affray.[3] The atmosphere at these events was perfectly captured by the minor poet Paul Whitehead in "The Gymnasiad:"

> Assembled myriads croud the circling feats,
> High for the combat, every bosom beats,
> Each bosom partial for its hero old,
> Partial thro' friendship—or depending gold.
> But first, the infant progeny of Mars
> Join in the lists, and wage their pigmy wars;
> Train'd to the manual fight, and bruiseful toil,
> The stop defensive, and gymnastic foil,
> With nimble fists their early prowess show,

[1] Joseph Ritson, ed. *Robin Hood: A Collection of All the Ancient Poems, Songs, and Ballads, Now Extant, Relative to that Celebrated English Outlaw*, 2 vols (London: T. Egerton and J. Johnson, 1795), I: xi–xii.
[2] Joseph Ritson, *Pieces of Ancient Popular Poetry* (London: T. and J. Egerton, 1791), x.
[3] David Snowdon, *Writing the Prizefight: Pierce Egan's Boxiana World* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2013), 3.

And mark the future Hero in each blow.[4]

It was one of the most popular sports nationally—for football remained a largely rustic and unprofessionalised sport relegated to provincial towns—and a whole print culture of books, broadsides, and periodicals grew up around boxing, in the process creating a national fan base for fighters.[5]

With good reason, therefore, is the eighteenth century considered as one of the golden eras of British boxing. It was a time before boxing gloves were adopted in "prizefights" and the fights could be brutal, sometimes with no rounds and just the continuous exchanging of blows. At other times, boxers would, wearing gloves, have friendly sparring matches in pubs to which the public were admitted for a small fee. Nevertheless, it was a period when greats such as Jack Broughton enjoyed an unparalleled run of 21 years as the Champion Pugilist of England (he is also alluded to in Henry Fielding's novel *Tom Jones*). It was Broughton who, in March 1743, gave the sport its first set of rules, the "Broughton Rules," which laid down how a match should be fought and how losses would be determined.[6]

After Broughton there was Jack Slack, a butcher by trade, who defeated the former and held the championship for several years. According to the boxing historian Pierce Egan (1772–1849), there was very little that was elegant about Slack's fighting method. He preferred to rush in furiously upon his opponent's face, attempting a knock down with every blow.[7] He was also a dirty fighter and the originator of the "rabbit punch." The move, illegal in boxing today because of its potentially fatal effects, targets the back of the neck.[8] He is also the first boxer to have had accusations of match-fixing levelled at him. Then, as now, the accusations were hard to prove and Slack held on to the championship for a full ten years with nobody seemingly able to beat the butcher. But his downfall came when a match was arranged with Bill Stevens. And it is with Stevens that the thread of our narrative weaves back to Robin Hood.

"YE BOASTED WORTHIES OF THE KNUCKLE"

At the close of his "Life of Robin Hood" Ritson wrote a few particulars about the life of Little John after Robin's death on November 18, 1247:

> After [Robin Hood's] death his company was dispersed. History is silent in particulars: all that we can, therefore, learn is, that the honour of Little John's death and burial is contended for by rival nations; that his grave continued long "celebrous for the yielding of excellent whetstones;" and that some of his descendants, of the name of Nailor, which he himself bore, and they from him, were in being so late as the last century.[9]

There is no need to pay serious attention these remarks; Ritson was merely quoting a few old antiquaries who themselves were relating some fabulous tales connected with Little John's grave. However, in Ritson's "Notes and Illustrations," which provided the primary evidence for these remarks, the following comments appeared:

> "some of his descendants of the name of Nailor," &c.] See the preface to the *History of George a Green*. As surnames were by no means in general use at the close of the twelfth century, Little John may have obtained that of Nailor from his original profession.

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[4] Paul Whiteheard, "The Gymnasiad, or Boxing Match," in *Poems and Miscellaneous Compositions of Paul Whitehead*, ed. Edward Thompson (Dublin: S. Price et al., 1777), 39–40.
[5] Christopher Johnson, "British Championism: Early Pugilism and the Works of Fielding," *The Review of English Studies*, 187 (1996), 337.
[6] Pierce Egan, *Boxiana; or, Sketches of Ancient and Modern Pugilism*, 3 vols (London: Sherwood, Jones, 1812), I, 51.
[7] Egan, *Boxiana*, 61.
[8] Griffiths, Andrew, "The Development of Boxing in 18th Century England," *The History of Fighting* (2012–25).
[9] Ritson, *Robin Hood*, I, xiii.

("Ye boasted worthies of the knuckle,
To Maggs and to the Nailor truckle.")[10]

But however this, or the fact itself may be, a bow, said to have belonged to Little John, with the name of Naylor upon it, is now, as the editor is informed, in the possession of a gentleman in the West Riding of Yorkshire. The quotation about whetstones is from the Sloane MS. Those, indeed, who recollect the equivocal meaning of the word may think that this production has not been altogether confined to the grave of Little John.[11]

Ritson was elaborating here upon the name of Little John. Subsequent adaptations of the legend have taken great liberties with Robin's sidekick's name, although a general consensus seems to have been, among antiquaries, historians, novelists, and filmmakers, that it was an ironical reference to the man's tall stature. Of the epithet of "Little" Ritson says very little but does state that Little John's actual name was John Nailor.

After the mention of Little John's descendants, by the name of Nailor, being alive even at the end of the seventeenth century, we then have a curious quotation from a poem:

Ye boasted worthies of the knuckle,
To Maggs and to the Nailor truckle.

The quotation is from a longer poem titled *Redondo; or, The State Jugglers* (1763) by Hugh Dalrymple.[12] It is a topographical poem recounting the sights and sounds of London life in the mid-Georgian period, and the stars of the contemporary boxing world, including Broughton and Slack, all appear in it. But why insert the reference?

Firstly, we might surmise that Ritson enjoyed watching boxing. There would be no need otherwise to go looking for a boxing quotation; indeed, the only combat sport which appears in any medieval Robin Hood tale is wrestling, which occurs in *A lytell geste of Robyn Hode*. So if he were to have sought out anything combat-related, it should have been wrestling. Yet it was boxing he honed in on. Beyond being a fan of the sweet science, however, might there be another reason why these lines of verse were included?

One of the things about eighteenth-century antiquaries is that they assumed their readers would simply "get" the references they inserted. Unless one is well-read in eighteenth-century boxing history, and poetry about boxing, this reference to Nailor might pass you by. It was also the fashion to insert lines of poetry into one's prose to show your education and refinement, and to embellish the text. Hence several quotations from Shakespeare's plays appear throughout Ritson's "Life of Robin Hood," such as a quote from Romeo and Juliet:

The world was not his friend, nor the world's law… (*Romeo and Juliet*, 5.1)

is inserted by Ritson into his Robin Hood biography after he writes about how Robin Hood was outlawed and went to live in the woods. Of course, Shakespeare's original quote had nothing to do with Robin Hood; it is from the scene when Romeo is speaking to the hesitant apothecary, desiring him to sell him poison:

Art thou so bare and full of wretchedness,
And fearest to die? Famine is in thy cheeks,
Need and oppression starveth in thy eyes,
Contempt and beggary hangs upon thy back.
The world is not thy friend, nor the world's law.
The world affords no law to make thee rich.

[10] Dalyrymple, *Rodondo; or, The State Jugglers*, 18. The "Maggs and Nailor" reference refers to two eighteenth-century boxers.
[11] Ritson, *Robin Hood*, I, cxviii.
[12] Hugh Dalrymple, *Redondo; or, The State Jugglers* (London: W. Niccol, 1763), 9.

Then be not poor, but break it, and take this.

The apothecary of course does sell Romeo the poison for "[his] poverty, but not [his] will, consents." The Shakespeare reference in *Robin Hood* was uncredited—for a great many of Ritson's Georgian-era readers no citation was necessary as they would have been familiar with the play.

Dalrymple's poem, like the Shakespeare references, remained uncredited (and I had a job in finding it!) but presumably Ritson thought that he did not need to reference it properly because the poem was likely well known among the reading public. Be that as it may, the quotation's appearance seems very random. To decipher why the boxing reference was inserted, however, we need to look at the preceding sentence: Little John may have obtained that of Nailor from his original profession. Bill Stevens, "a most tremendous boxer," was indeed a nailer, or nail maker, before finding most of his fame as one of the "boasted worthies of the knuckle."[13] Ritson is using Nailer's case to illustrate how a person might acquire a name based on their profession. However, Ritson misquoted Dalrymple's poem. The original reads:

Ye *meaner* worthies of the knuckle,
To Maggs and to the Nailor truckle.

Dalrymple's description here alludes to a prizefight between Nailor and George Meggs in the 1760s, in which Nailor lost the championship. However, according to Dalrymple, the pair were "meaner" (less honourable) than the other "boasted worthies of the knuckle" because the match was fixed. Meggs essentially "bought" the title of champion from Nailer, who retired from boxing in disgrace but also as a relatively wealthy man. Meggs, "of no particular note as a pugilist," meanwhile, held the championship for a couple of years before losing it to a better fighter.[14]

Why, then, the misquotation? Ritson could have simply read Dalrymple's poem one time and misremembered the quotation. A more likely explanation is this, however: Robin Hood, Little John, and the rest of the outlaws, in Ritson's eyes, represented the best of the English nation. He certainly wanted to illustrate how a person's name might be acquired from their profession, and a reference to Nailor the boxer (Little John's namesake) seemed a perfect fit. But there was no way he could allow Little John, even if by association, be connected with anything dishonourable like the actions of Nailor the Boxer. Thus, Stevens, who had probably been dead for some years by 1795, received a new commendation in Ritson's *Robin Hood*. Stevens, by his tenuous association with Little John, was now one of the BOASTED worthies of the knuckle.

CONCLUSION

We do have an image of Nailor surviving in a print titled *The Proclamation of Proclamations or the most glorious and memorable Peace that ever was proclaimed in this or any other Metropolis throughout the World*, published to celebrate the peace treaty which ended the Seven Years' War (1756–63).

Ultimately, Ritson's brief but fascinating nod to the "boasted worthies of the knuckle" reveals just how deeply his *Robin Hood* text was embedded in the popular culture of his own time. Far from being a purely medievalist antiquary, Ritson wove into his scholarship echoes of eighteenth-century London life—its coffee-houses, politics, and even its boxing rings. The passing allusion to the Nailor reminds us that Ritson's *Robin Hood* is not only a monument of medieval scholarship but a reflection of Georgian England, where learning, liberty, and "the sweet science" coexisted.

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[13] Egan, *Boxiana*, I, 69.
[14] Egan, *Boxiana*, I, 73.