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Lawrence Price (fl. 1624–67): The Forgotten Anti-Catholic Author of “Robin Hood’s Golden Prize” (1631)

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“Our hero, indeed, seems to have held bishops, abbots, priests, and monks, in a word, all the clergy, regular or secular, in decided aversion [...] and, in this part of his conduct, perhaps the pride, avarice, uncharitableness and hypocrisy of these clerical drones and pious locusts, (too many of whom are still permitted to prey upon the labours of the industrious, and are supported, in pampered luxury, at the expence of those whom their useless and pernicious craft tends to retain in superstitious ignorance and irrational servility,) will afford him ample justification.”

Joseph Ritson, *Robin Hood: A Collection of All the Ancient Poems, Songs, and Ballads* (1795)

SUMMARY: This article recovers Lawrence Price, a prolific seventeenth-century ballad writer, and argues that *Robin Hood’s Golden Prize* transforms older anti-clericalism into explicit anti-Catholic polemic. Situating Price within broadside culture and Protestant politics, it shows how popular literature absorbed religious hostility and recast Robin Hood for post-Reformation England and a readership.

INTRODUCTION

With the exception of Friar Tuck, members of the Catholic clergy rarely come off well in early tales of Robin Hood.

The poem of “Robin Hood and the Monk” (c.1468) tells of how a devious monk, on seeing Robin Hood praying in a Nottingham church, reports him to the authorities. As a result, Robin is then captured by the sheriff. The long narrative poem of *A Lytell Geste of Robyn Hode* (c.1495) sees Robin Hood relieving the debts of a poor knight named Sir Richard of the Lee who mortgaged his lands to the greedy Archbishop of York. So detested were the high clergy in early tales of Robin Hood that in

the *Lytell Geste* Robin issues the following direction to his band:

These bysshoppes and thyse archebysshoppes
Ye shall them bete and bynde
The hye sheryfe of notygnhame
Hym hole in your mynde.¹

The early tales’ unfriendly depiction of Catholic clergy was, by and large, more a critique of unjust authority and corruption in high places.² But after the Reformation and into the seventeenth century, in tandem with the increasing restrictions placed upon Catholics in public life, the portrayal of Catholics in

¹ “Wynken de Worde Edition of A Lytell Geste of Robyn Hode,” in *Early Rymes of Robyn Hood: An Edition of the Texts, ca.1425 to ca.1600*, ed. Thomas H. Ohlgren and Lister M.

Matheson (Arizona Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2013), 95.

² A.J. Pollard, *Imagining Robin Hood: The Late Medieval Stories in Historical Context* (Routledge, 2004), 114.

later Robin Hood songs and ballads becomes specifically anti-Catholic, rather than anti-authority.

One seventeenth-century writer's Robin Hood broadside ballad, in particular, epitomises the new

LAWRENCE PRICE

Lawrence (sometimes called Laurence) Price is unusual among seventeenth-century ballad writers in that he already has his own entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.⁴ He has also received some critical interest from sociologists as being an originator of what was an early form of popular rock music owing to the commercial success of his songs.^[4] Although we do not know the dates of his birth or death, we can determine the dates that he flourished because he always signed his ballads with the initials of "L.P."

We can speculate that perhaps he was born in Bristol or had connections with the area (Bristol being both a city and a county). I say this because, on looking at his output, he wrote several pieces featuring the city, two of them being "The Bristol Bridegroom; or the Ship-Carpenter's Love to the Merchant's Daughter" (c.1630) and "The Honour of

PRICE'S LOVE SONGS

Price wrote songs for the broadside market. Broadside were single sheets of paper (varying in size) upon which were printed the lyrics of a song along with an engraving, which was often reused from earlier prints. A search of Price's output on the Early English Broadside Ballads Archive reveals

anti-Catholicism. Just as I have tried to illuminate the lives of forgotten Robin Hood balladeers previously, so too I would like to introduce people now to Laurence Price (fl. 1624–67).³

Bristol. Shewing how the Angel Gabriel of Bristol, fought with three Ships" (c.1630).⁵

The only other city to receive such attention in Price's songs was London which, for obvious reasons (Price obviously living and working there and catering to the London market) would be over-represented in his output. Perhaps he was from a family of sailors—as we shall see below, he wrote several works praising sailors. Nevertheless, the Bristol connection, and that with the seaman, remains as speculation.

Price must also have undergone some basic schooling in history. I say this because he wrote short prose tales based upon medieval romances. An example of this is Price's *The famous history of Valentine and Orson*. The earliest extant copies of this history dates to 1673, but they are likely, as was usually the case with seventeenth-century popular literature, reprints of a much earlier edition produced from his time with Francis Grove.⁶

that Price could have been active as early as 1624 owing to his employment with the printer Francis Grove, who commenced operations in 1623.⁷ Grove tended to directly employ his ballad writers, meaning that Price, who made his living principally from his pen, could be considered as one of the first professional songwriters in England.

³ See Stephen Basdeo, 'Samuel Smithson (fl. 1655–90): The Forgotten Broadside Ballad Author of "Robin Hood and Maid Marian" (c.1660–96)', *Reynolds's News and Miscellany*, 30 December 2025 <https://reynolds-news.com/2025/12/30/samuel-smithson-robin-hood-and-maid-marian/> [accessed 15 April 2026] and Stephen Basdeo, 'Thomas Robins's Seventeenth-Century Robin Hood Ballads', *Reynolds's News and Miscellany*, 26 December 2025 <https://reynolds-news.com/2025/12/26/thomas-robinss-seventeenth-century-robin-hood-ballads-stephen-basdeo/> [accessed 15 April 2026].

⁴ McShane, Angela. "Price, Laurence (fl. 1624–1667?), balladeer and pamphlet writer." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. 23 Sep. 2004; Accessed 18 Jan. 2026.

⁵ See the following:

Lawrence Price, *The Bristol Bridegroom; or the Ship-Carpenter's Love to the Merchant's Daughter* (London: Bow Church Yard, n.d.), London, British Library, Roxburghe Ballads, C.20.f.9.859
Lawrence Price, *The Honour of Bristol. Shewing how the Angel Gabriel of Bristol, fought with three Ships* (London: [I] W[right, I Clark, W. Thackeray, and T. Passinger, c.1681), Houghton Library, EBB65.

⁶ Lawrence Price, *The famous history of Valentine and Orson Being the two only sons of the emperor of Greece. Deciphering their wonderful births, their valiant achievements, their heroic minds, and their noble enterprises. Drawn up in a short volume, on purpose to give the better satisfaction to them that desire to hear and know the truth in few words* (London: D. Newman, 1683). Oxford, Bodleian Library. EEBO Reel Position: 2054:01.

⁷ Henry L. Plomer, *A Dictionary of the Booksellers and Printers who Were at Work in England, Scotland and Ireland from 1641 to 1667* (London: Bibliographical Society, 1907), 81.

Price certainly knew what would be popular. A staple of his writing was love songs and one of his earliest productions was “Flora’s farewell: Or, the Shepherds Love-passion Song, wherein he greatly doth complain, because his love was spent in vain” (c.1623).⁸ There was also “Give me the Willow-Garland; Or, the Maidens Former Fear and Latter Comfort. At first she for a Husband made great moan, but at the last she found a loving one.”⁹

As a Christian, sometimes he took to warning youths about the dangers of sin, much as he did in a

THE COMMON MAN’S BALLAD WRITER

Alongside the *Merry Conceits* were ballads about London nightlife such as “Win at first, and lose at last: or, a new game at cards. To the tune of, Ye gallants that delight to play” (c.1630).¹² Indeed, Price’s productions were not simply popular in the print sense—that is, that they circulated widely—but also in the matter of who they represented. The romance ballads listed above did not feature lords and ladies but represented commoners. In Price’s love songs, as we have seen, we find simple shepherds and maids. So too do we meet with commoners in what I call Price’s “London life” songs, such as the one telling about card playing or in another of his “Good Ale for My Money” which sees various tradesmen coming together in a London tavern to enjoy a drink:

Heres Smug the smith, & Ned the Cook,
and Frank the fine felt-maker,
Heres Steven with his silver hooke,
and Wat the lustie baker:

⁸ Lawrence Price, *Flora’s farewell: Or, the Shepherds Love-passion Song, wherein he greatly doth complain, because his love was spent in vain* (London: F. Grove, c.1623), University of Glasgow Euing Ballads 121 ESTC R182064.

⁹ Lawrence Price, *Give me the Willow-Garland; Or, the Maidens Former Fear and Latter Comfort. At first she for a Husband made great moan, but at the last she found a loving one* (Printed for F. Coles, T. Vere, J. Wright, and J. Clarke, c.1674), Cambridge, Magdalene College, Pepys Ballads 3.94.

¹⁰ Lawrence Price, *A map of merry conceites. Wherein is contained much mirth which may yeeld pleasure to the reader, delight to the bearer, content to the buyer, profit to the seller, and hindrance to no man* (London: F. Grove, 1656), London, British Library C.40.a.46.

¹¹ Lawrence Price, *Heres Jack in a box, that will coniure the fox. Or, A new list of the new fashions now used in London. Come who buyes Jaek [sic] in a box, that will cunjure the fox, and move them to delight; it*

16-page pamphlet titled *A map of merry conceites. Wherein is contained much mirth which may yeeld pleasure to the reader, delight to the bearer, content to the buyer, profit to the seller, and hindrance to no man* (1656) which directed young people to steer clear of strong drink.¹⁰ In a similar vein was *Heres Jack in a box, that will coniure the fox. Or, A new list of the new fashions now used in London* (1657) which “book of merriment” would allegedly help people to pass the dark nights in mirth but also impart moral truths.¹¹

Heres Harry & Dick, with Greg & Nicke,
heres Timothy the Tailor,
Heres honest [K]it, nere spoke of yet,
and George the joviall Saylor.
Weell sit and bouse and merily chat,
and freely we will joyne
For care neere paid a pound of debt,
nor shall pay none of mine:
Here is but eighteen pence to pay,
since every man is willing,
Bring drinke withall the speed you may,
weell make it up two shillings.¹³

Price was especially fond of seaman, and praised them specially in “The Seaman’s Compass: or, A dainty new Ditty composed and pend, the deeds of brave Seamen to praise and commend” (c.1640) for they contributed to the wealth of the nation:

Sea-men from beyond Seas bring Silver & Gold
With Pearls and rich jewels, most rare to behold
With Silks and rich Velvets their credits to save,
Or else you gay Ladies could not go so brave

may serve as I may say, for to passe the time away, in the long winter night, to sit by a good fire, when the season doth require, your body to keepe warme: this booke of merriment, will yield you sweet content, and doe you no harme. This new merry booke was newly jnvented, but never before this time jmprinted. written by Laurence Price, in the moneth of October. 1656. Entered according to order. (London: T. Vere, 1657), London, British Library, Thomas Tracts, EEBO Reel Position: 206:E.1640[3].

¹² Lawrence Price, *Win at first, and lose at last: or, a new game at cards. To the tune of, Ye gallants that delight to play, &c.* (London: Printed by and for C. Brown, and T. Norris, and sold by J. Walter, in Holborn High, [1695 – 1707]), Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Rawl. D 383(f. 113).

¹³ Lawrence Price, *Good Ale for my money. The Good-fellowes resolution of strong Ale, that cures his nose from looking pale* (London: [n. pub.], c.1645), London, British Library, C.20.f.7.138-139.

This makes my heart merry as merry may be
 The Sea-men bring Spices, and sugar so fine
 Which serve the brave gallants, to drink with their wine
 With Lemmons & Oranges all of the best,
 To relish their pallats when ehey make a Feast.¹⁴

Although Price lived and worked in London, he idealised provincial life in “The Countrey peoples Felicity. Or, A brief Description of Pleasure. Shewing

PRICE THE MONARCHIST

Price was a protestant—a fervent one at that. He believed that Charles I had a divine right to rule as he wished, and during the English Civil War took the side of the royalists. Somewhat prematurely, in 1641, he wrote a pamphlet celebrating the triumphal entry of King Charles into England who apparently had “established an united peace, between his loyall countrymen of Scotland, and us his loving Subjects

PRICE THE ANTI-PAPIST

By 1655, Price appears to have made peace with the fact that the Cromwellian Commonwealth was here to stay. While he lamented the Civil War, he respected Cromwell because he was a Protestant and, like himself, opposed to Roman Catholicism or “Popery.” Thus, in 1655, Price is found beseeching Cromwell to intervene militarily in Piedmont, Italy, where Papists are murdering Protestants:

In the famous and fruitful Countrey, which is called, The Vallies of Piedmont, and Lucern, under the command of the Duke of Savoy, there lately inhabited a people called

the ready way of sweet content, by them that ply their work with merriment. They eat, they drink, they work, and sport at pleasure, they pipe and dance, when time and place give leasur [sic]” (c.1624). In this ballad, the crime-free and honest way of rural country life is the antithesis of the urbanised London where crime people are shallow and follow the latest fashions in a bid to impress others.¹⁵

of England.”¹⁶ Obviously, events did not go Charles’s way and he was executed.

As for Price, he detested the parliamentarians and, in those tumultuous years of the Civil War, took to writing a book titled *Englands [sic] Unhappy Changes* (1648) in which he lamented “the manifest troubles and calamities of this our bleeding Kingdome” and “the death of many thousand late valiant-hearted English-men [...] of this broken-hearted kingdome.”¹⁷

Waldenses, famous for their constant profession of the Protestant Religion in all ages for about 500 yeares together; to whom the blood-thirsty Papists have always born a most venomous spight, and have often consulted amongst themselves how to get these Protestants quite rooted out and so to make themselves masters of all that they enjoyed. In the pursuance whereof about the later end of January last, the Duke of Savoy by the perswasion of the Romish Priests and Iesuits, put forth a Proclamation that in case all of the reformed Religion, both inhabitants and strangers, should not in thrée dayes turn Papists they must for ever bid farewell to their native countrey, houses, lands and possessions, and that it should be death without mercy for any to disobey the same.¹⁸

¹⁴ Lawrence Price, *The Seaman’s Compass: or, A dainty new Ditty composed and pend, the deeds of brave Seamen to praise and commend* (London: Printed for F. Coles, T. Vere, J. Wright, and J. Clark, c.1674), Houghton Library EBB65.

¹⁵ Lawrence Price, *The Countrey peoples Felicity. Or, A brief Description of Pleasure. Shewing the ready way of sweet content, by them that ply their work with merriment. They eat, they drink, they work, and sport at pleasure, they pipe and dance, when time and place give leasur [sic]* (London: Printed for Francis Grove, c.1624), University of Glasgow, Euing Ballads 49.

¹⁶ Lawrence Price, *Great Britaines time of triumph. Or, The solid subjects observation, shewing in what a magnificent manner, the citizens of London entertained the Kings most excellent majestie, and how the honourable Lord Mayor of London, with the warlike artillery men in their glittering armour, gave His Majestie a martial-like welcome* (London: R. Burton, 1641), 1. London, British Library, Thomason Tracts, EEBO Reel Position: 31:E.177[17].

¹⁷ Lawrence Price, *Englands unhappy changes, or Suddaine alteration. Wherein is contained two treatises, and one petition. The first concerns the sweet blessing of peace, which we lately injoyed. The second concerns the troubles and distractions which this whole kingdom is now in, by reason of the perilous times. The third is Englands petition to heaven for peace* (London: F. Grove, 1648), 3. London, British Library, EEBO Reel Position 2983:03.

¹⁸ Lawrence Price, *The Christians calamities: or, The Protestants complaint, collected out of many severall letters that were sent from beyond the seas into England, and presented to His Highness the Lord Protector, of England, Scotland and Ireland* (London: Thomas Vere, 1655), 5–6. William Andrews Clarke Memorial Library, Early English Books, 1641-1700 Wing (2nd ed.) / P3355B, EEBO Reel Position: 2792:03.

“Blood thirsty” and “venomous” are hardly diplomatic terms with which to describe the Papists! Price was evidently a man who could not tolerate them at all. No wonder, then, that when Price turned his hand to the Robin Hood legend—and perhaps knowing about the outlaw’s avowed enmity to churchmen of all description—he decided to tell a tale in which two Catholic priests get robbed or, shall we say, relieved of the greater part of their money.

The subtitle of Price’s Robin Hood ballad, titled “Robin Hood’s Golden Prize,” reads thus:

He met two priests upon the way,
And forced them with him to pray;
For gold they prayed, and gold they had,
Enough to make bold Robin glad;
His share came to four hundred pound,
That then was told upon the ground.
Now mark, and you shall hear the jest,
You never heard the like exprest.
Tune is, Robin Hood was a tall young man, &c.¹⁹

There are several extant copies of Price’s Robin Hood ballad to be found in UK archives.²⁰

However, this ballad, and Price’s authorship of it, received only scant commentary in Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren’s previous edition of the ballads. They state that the tale is meant as a “jest” of Robin Hood because the outlaw tricks the priests into handing over their money.²¹ Robin, disguised as a friar, stops the priests and asks for money. They claim they have none. So, Robin makes them dismount from their horses and pray with him for more money:

The priests did pray with a mournful chear,
Sometimes their hands did wring;

Sometimes they wept, and cried aloud,
Whilst Robin did merrily sing.
When they had been praying an hours space,
The priests did still lament;
Then quoth bold Robin, Now let’s see
What mony heaven hath us sent.

Robin then claims that a miracle has happened. He searches their bags and finds £500. The priests of course cannot admit to having had the money the whole time, and therefore confess to lying, so they must meekly accept Robin’s “offer” of keeping £400 for himself and giving the two priests £50 each. Of course, Robin knew the priests were lying. He makes them swear an oath never to lie again:

You shall be sworn, said bold Robin Hood,
Upon this holy grass,
That you will never tell lies again,
Which way soever you pass.

Perhaps trying to paint all Catholic priests as immoral, Price’s Robin also makes the priests swear to never defile young maidens again, nor to lead married women into adultery:

The second oath that you here must take,
That all the days of your lives,
You shall never tempt maids to sin,
Nor lie with other mens wives.

Knight and Ohlgren may have interpreted “Robin Hood’s Golden Prize” as no more than the “jest” that it purported to be on the broadside, yet there was a real ideological, anti-Papist thrust behind Price’s portrayal of the Catholic priests. They were grasping, greedy lechers.

¹⁹ *Robin Hood’s Golden Prize: Shewing how he Robbed two Priests of five Hundred pound. Tune is, Robin Hood was a tall young man* (London: W. Thackeray, c.1641), Cambridge, Magdalene College, Pepys Ballads 2.114.

²⁰ *Robin Hood’s golden prize. He met two, priests upon the way, and forced them with him to pray. For gold they pray’d, and gold they had, enough to make bold Robin glad: his share came to four hundred pound that then was told upon the ground: now mark and you shall here the jest, you never heard the like exprest. Tune is, Robin Hood was a tall young man* (London: Printed for F. Coles, T. Vere, J. Wright, and J. Clarke, c.1679), British Library, C.20.f.9.(12-13); *Robin Hood’s golden prize: shewing how he robbed two priests of five hundred pound.*

Tune is, Robin Hood was a tall young man (London: Printed for William Thackeray, c.1688–89), Cambridge, Magdalene College, Pepys Ballads II.114; *Robin Hood’s golden prize: shewing how he robed [sic] two priests of five hundred pounds. Tune—Robin Hood was a tall young man, &c.* (London: L. How, c.1750), British Library, C.20.f.9.(486-487); *Robin Hood’s golden prize: shewing how he robed [sic] two priests of five hundred pounds. Tune—Robin Hood was a tall young man, &c.* (London: L. How, c.1750), Oxford, Bodleian Library Douce Ballads 3(121a)

²¹ “Robin Hood’s Golden Prize,” in *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, ed. Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren (Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), 556.

CONCLUSION

Price was no insignificant itinerant ballad seller but a famous man who involved himself in contemporary politics and whose works were respected alongside the aforementioned Samuel Smithson and another writer named Humphrey Croucher. These men were the “glorious three” mentioned by the author of *Death in a New Dress* (1656):

Higher then Phoebus self; Ye glorious three
Who grasp the Poles of Star-crown'd Poesie.²²

Price's “Robin Hood's Golden Prize” illustrates how in the Robin Hood tradition, earlier hostility toward corrupt churchmen, rooted in critiques of power and hypocrisy, is here sharpened into a recognisably anti-Catholic polemic shaped by the politics of Protestant identity, civil war, and international religious conflict.

Price's Robin Hood no longer merely corrects unjust clerical authority; he exposes, humiliates, and morally indicts Catholic priests as liars, hypocrites, and sexual transgressors. That this is framed as a “jest” does not neutralise its hostility but rather renders it more accessible to a broad audience.

Far from being a marginal figure, Price was a prolific and respected writer whose works circulated widely and engaged directly with the ideological currents of his day. His Robin Hood ballad therefore deserves recognition not as a curiosity but as evidence of how popular literature absorbed and disseminated post-Reformation religious antagonisms within England's most enduring legendary framework.

FURTHER READING

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Coote, Lesley, *Storyworlds of Robin Hood* (London: Reaktion, 2021)

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Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales, ed. Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren (Medieval Institute Publications, 1997)

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²² S.F., *Death in a new dress: or Sportive funeral elegies. Commemorating the renowned lives and lamented deaths of these eminent personages, Robbin the annyseed-water seller. Martin Parker the famous poet. Archee the late kings jester. The gentlewoman that so often travail'd up Holborn-Hill upon her bum, &c. With the celebration of some*

(harmless but plesant healtbs) hitherto not in fashion: and other drollerical crotchets, very delightful. (London: Isaac Pridmore, 1656), 16. London, British Library, Thomason Tracts, EEBO Reel Position: 133:E.885[11].