

Myth and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain: The Legends of King Arthur and Robin Hood by Stephanie L. Barczewski. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000. viii, 274 pp. ISBN 0-19-820728-X. \$65.00.

The legends of King Arthur and Robin Hood were instrumental to the construction of a uniquely English national identity over the course of the nineteenth century, as these figures came to represent a mythic past purged of Irish, Scottish, and Welsh influences. Yet each figure represented very different notions of Englishness, Arthur embodying the gentle virtues of the ruling class and Robin Hood the robust, freedom-loving spirit of the People. As Stephanie L. Barczewski argues, "That two national figures so different as King Arthur and Robin Hood could simultaneously function as national heroes suggests that nineteenth-century British nationalism did not represent a single set of values and ideals, but rather a variety of competing points of view." In this, the first book-length comparative study of these figures' near-simultaneous rise to power in the British cultural imagination, Barczewski traces these "competing points of view" as they emerged, not only in the essential contrast between the two legends, but also among the often incompatible versions of each legend.

Despite their ostensibly ancient lineage, King Arthur and Robin Hood did not begin to achieve national hero status in Britain until the eighteenth century, when frequent military conflicts and political crises produced a desire among both radicals and conservatives for enduring national figures. This is the subject of the first chapter, in which Barczewski traces the trajectory of these myths into the nineteenth century, emphasizing the essential dichotomy between the figure of the noble king and that of the subversive forester. The legends achieved even greater prominence in Britain in the period following the Revolutionary War and French Revolution, as classical history and myths came to be associated with Republicanism, hence prompting a need for exclusively British myths to inspire national loyalty. Yet, as Barczewski maintains, "Not only conservatives ... looked to the medieval past in the years following the French Revolution. Radicals had long advocated the idea of an ancient constitution under which the British people had enjoyed the benefits of true democracy." While conservatives continued to invoke medieval legends of Arthur as a symbol of noble leadership and military prowess, radicals came to embrace Robin Hood as an early patriot fighting against tyranny.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, Robin Hood lost some of his more radical associations as the legend grew in popularity along with legends of Arthur. In her second chapter, Barczewski traces this rise in popularity, finding provocative parallels between the cultural phenomenon of nineteenth-