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So was Hood a murderous, blaspheming torturer?

By JOHN BRUNTON

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TV executives would have a fit if the Robin Hood of author Adam Thorpe's imagination were to enter their sanitised world of 21st Century viewing.

This isn't the homely, boy-next-door of the BBC1 version starring Jonas Armstrong, or the urbane Richard Greene of 1950s ITV.

No, this is a conscience-less killer, who tortures his captives. He nails one high in a tree with a crossbow bolt, convinces those around him – the Merrie Men of the popular myth – that he's above the laws of God and man and keeps women prisoner for his and his followers' lewd entertainment, throwing them out when they become pregnant or if he's had enough of them.

And as for stealing from the rich to give to the poor... none of that, though in truth the Robin Hood of French-based author Adam Thorpe's darkly entertaining new novel Hodd seemingly cares little for wealth.

He's a man possessed by inner demons, well-educated who has rejected society – or rather seen it reject him – has seen the love of his life, a French farmer's daughter, die of a brain tumour after just a year together, and has turned to a life of crime, living rough in Sherwood

Forest, with his group of similarly dispossessed outlaws.

Were we to meet Hodd, or rather were he to become the subject of a modern-day psychiatric investigation, he would probably be pronounced a psychopath, and megalomaniac, too.

Like Hitler, he was capable of beguiling those around him by this mix of undesirable personal traits.

Legends don't create themselves. By and large, it takes others to do that for them.

And so it is with Hodd.

This is an unusual and clever book, so even the way the story is told is unconventional, and is related second hand.

It starts during the First World War Battle of the Somme when a scholarly British officer finds in a French church an old manuscript in medieval Latin.

Fearing its destruction in the shelling, and curious about its contents anyway, he pockets it.

Later back in Britain, shell-shocked and reeling from the horrors he's witnessed in the trenches, he begins to get to grips with what it says.

It emerges it was originally written in the early 1300s by a monk, in his 90s, at Whitby Abbey.

The monk, who is never named, had been raised by a hermit on the coast nearby, but, having stolen a harp from another of the hermit's pupils, flees.

A child of eight or nine, he tries to make a living as a boy minstrel, but his

existence becomes ever more threatened until he is taken in by a rather dubious, unsavoury monk at Doncaster – Thorpe calls it Dancaster – Abbey.

Some years later, during a journey south, he, the monk and the rest of their party are waylaid near Barnsdale by a band of brigands.

The young monk and his harp becomes prisoners of the outlaws, led by Robert Hodd.

Other captives face a pretty awful fate, but when Hodd and his men hear the 14-year-old novice monk play and sing, they are captivated.

Hood calls him Much – the name that sticks through the book – and he joins them, though he knows full well that attempted escape would be suicidal because the outlaws' forest camp "beneath the great oak tree" is so well guarded by them and their expertly-wielded bows.

Much becomes a robber with them.

During one foray they take captive Isabel, the beautiful but, as it emerges, very worldly-wise, daughter of a wealthy Nottingham merchant.

Hodd is enchanted and announces to Much that he and she will marry.

But Little John – one of the few other figures of the traditional Robin Hood Tales, other than the Sheriff of Nottingham – to feature in the book, arranges for her father to pay a massive cash ransom for her safe return.

Hodd is mortified at losing her and, later, and under a thin disguise, goes to

St Mary's Church in the Lace Market to try to see her again.

There he is captured, and thrown by the Sheriff's men into the deepest dungeon in Nottingham Castle.

The hellish scenes author Thorpe creates of this dark, forbidding realm take some reading.

Much and Little John hatch a plot to free Robin, and succeed in getting into the jail and springing him loose.

But in a short space of time Hodd's health seems to have been broken by the terrible conditions of his confinement.

They take him back to the greenwood, where, by degrees, he begins to recover. Hodd's relationship with Little John is always uneasy. The paranoid Hodd fears the big, brutal John wishes to take over command, and persuades Much to murder the man of whom – despite helping him escape the castle – he is now jealously afraid.

Matters however come to a head sooner, and during a fight between the two men, Much makes a bolt for freedom.

He is now around 15, and has been an outlaw for a year.

A great deal later, and in his 90s, he writes the memoir that forms the book. The songs he has written about Robin – and performed in the camp – now long popular with minstrels all over England and beyond

Of Hood and Little John? Who can say?

Except that the legend continues.