



Derring-do and Dirty Deeds

The term derring-do isn't used much these days. It refers to heroic acts of daring; and doubtless applies to many who are still living. What interested me, though, were the historical legends of yesteryear – the famous heroes of times gone by; along with a few infamous villains. I thought I knew their stories quite well, until I began my research; which led to the realisation that not all were the romantic good guys depicted in movies and books.

Robin Hood is arguably one of the most well-known. He was thought to be of noble birth, or was at least from the Yeoman class, placing him a cut above the grubby peasants. The majority of historians seem to agree that he was outlawed, and reputedly robbed from the rich to give to the poor. The tales of his exploits, the source of details being chiefly crooned in ballads, may or may not have related some semblance of truth; but when it is considered that the name "Robin Hood" is suggested by some as being used by other outlaws to hide their own identities, any good deeds he might have done could have been over-played by someone perpetrating dirty ones in Robin's name. Then again, he could actually have been a crook in his own right; and the poor he gave to were himself and his Merry Men. After all, the hoodies they wore are often associated with present-day crims. If you don't believe me, check out the CCTV footage on the 6 o'clock news - Robin's the bloke in Lincoln green.

Still in the UK, one miscreant born around the beginning of the eighteenth century, started his criminal career in the early 1730s as part of a gang thieving deer. An oft-repeated story about **Dick Turpin's** 200 mile overnight ride from London to York on his horse Black Bess, fictional nonetheless, cast him as something of a dashing romantic hero. Maybe this enhanced his standing in the public eye; and reported antics of his success as a daring highwayman clearly gained him popularity as a salt-of-the-earth type who, like Robin Hood, simply robbed from those who had money and could afford a coach ride. Anyway, wasn't Dick only occasionally just a wee bit naughty and no real harm to anyone who didn't deserve it? Actually, he was far from likeable. Assaults on people in their homes labeled him as a butcher, the trade he may have followed before he took to a life of crime. Dick certainly left none of his victims in doubt that he could be barbarous, brutal, and took great delight in torture. As for killing, it was obviously in the job description. For my money, the best thing he ever did in his life was getting caught so that he could be hanged in 1739.

A bit earlier than Turpin's era, but not much, one Englishman set sail for foreign climes to become the scourge of the West Indies and a regular pain along the east coast of the Americas. **Edward Teach**, better known as the pirate **Blackbeard**, was clearly a formidable character. Tall and broad shouldered, he sported a thick black beard and was said to have tied lit fuses (the bits of treated rope used to fire cannons) under his hat to strike fear into the hearts of his enemies. If that wasn't enough, he wore dark clothing, plus a sling over his shoulders holding three pistols – if one didn't get you, the other two surely would. Despite his contrived appearance, and his projected reputation as a blood-thirsty pirate, Ted Teach was documented as a smart leader who wasn't keen to use force, relying on psychology and strategy to outwit the opposition. As for murder on the high seas, there are no reports of his ever having harmed ordinary folk who fell foul of his professional attention.

The Wild West of the eighteen hundreds gave rise to heroes and villains alike. Hollywood probably wouldn't have survived if it weren't for tales of gunfighters, train robbers and the Indian conflicts. One of America's favourite sons earned a reputation as cavalry scout and marksman. **Buffalo Bill Cody** honed his riding skills as a mounted messenger, and became a well-known horse wrangler, hunter and Indian fighter. Between 1866 and 67, he worked as a civilian scout and dispatch rider for the U.S. Army; but it was the 67 to 68 period that secured his place in the annals of history. Employed to supply food for crews building the Union Pacific Railroad, in a mere eight months he shot 4,280 buffalo. This and other stories published in dime novels popularised his larger-than-life accomplishments; so when he produced his first Wild West exhibition in 1883, it was probably a sell-out. Buffalo Bill's extravaganzas even delighted audiences overseas, but due to mismanagement, he eventually lost his fortune. Bill Cody died in Denver Colorado at the age of 70.

Another American legend followed a similar occupational path as frontiersman, army scout and marksman; however, he was also a gambler and something of a drifter. He did join Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show for a while; although his fame seems to have stemmed mainly from his ability as a gun-fighter. Actually a good guy at heart - in his youth he was part of an anti-slavery mob - **Wild Bill Hickok** truly deserved the name, particularly during his time in Hays City and Abilene, reputed to be the most lawless towns on the frontier. Ruling with an iron hand, plus a gun or two with plenty of notches, he tamed them both and no doubt made himself a few more enemies. That and gambling saw for him in the end. Wild Bill only made it to 39. Playing poker at Deadwood's Number Ten saloon, he was shot and killed by a drunken stranger, Jack McCall, on August 2nd 1876.

I accepted that these men had been actual people and weren't products of a fiction-writer's pen; **Calamity Jane**, though, to me anyway, was just a bouncy, loveable character played by Doris Day as the title role in a movie musical. I learned she was much more. Born Martha Jane Canary around 1852, the legend of Calamity Jane seems to have been a product of her own bragging about happenings that might well have been exaggerated, bolstered by other fanciful stories passed on over the years. After skipping around the West from one job to another – cook, camp-follower, loose lady and dance-hall girl to name a few – she found herself in Deadwood, where she furthered her tom-boy reputation, hauling goods and machinery to the gold-mining camps. She probably first met Wild Bill Hickok here and, following her death in 1903, Calamity Jane was buried next to him in the Deadwood bone-yard.

Annie Oakley starred in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, and was often called "Little Sure Shot". At an early age while working as a game hunter, the proceeds of her expertise enabled her to pay off the family mortgage. She probably took her "stage" name from a suburb in Cincinnati where she won a shooting match at the age of 15. Here she met Frank E. Butler. They married and went on the road, playing vaudeville circuits and circuses. In 1885, with her husband as manager, she joined Cody's Wild West Show and was billed as "Miss Annie Oakley, the Peerless Lady Wing-Shot"; earning the accolade without doubt. She could split the edge of a playing card at 30 paces, hit dimes tossed in the air; and, while performing in Berlin, was requested by Crown Prince Wilhelm (later Kaiser Bill of WW I fame) to shoot a cigarette from his lips – he survived, unfortunately. Annie's amazing talent delighted audiences for years, and it is refreshing to learn of someone who was quick with a gun, yet didn't actually kill people.

The show's almost ready to wind up, and the fat lady's waiting in the wings. The venue is Tyburn in England's eighteenth century. A huge crowd is gathered to witness the final performance of a young man who has captured the hearts of the common people. Known by some as "Gentleman Jack" and by others as "Jack the Lad", this guy's incredible feats of escapology might even have been Harry Houdini's inspiration.

Jack Sheppard wasn't a born criminal, rather taking the wrong road with little more than a year to go as an apprentice carpenter. In 1723, Jack decided theft and burglary were better options, and for almost two years he was in and out of jail, the "out" part being his speciality. Within three hours of being banged up on the top floor of the St. Giles's Roundhouse, Jack broke through the ceiling and lowered himself to the ground outside the building using a rope made from bedclothes. Still wearing irons, he slipped into the crowd that had gathered after hearing the sound of his break-out, and distracted them by pointing at the roof where he said he could see the escapee. That gave him the opportunity to make himself scarce.

Jack continued committing crimes and getting caught, then escaping; again using bed sheets, files and "other tools". Needless to say, stringent measures were taken to ensure he remained in custody; but his arrogance and pride were such that he just had to prove that leg irons securely chained to the floor in the strong room of Newgate prison were no match for Jack the Lad. Producing a small nail, he proudly showed his gaolers how easy it was to open the padlock and slip out of their shackles. That bit of unwise cockney exhibitionism saw him more tightly bound and brought his entertaining show to its close.

Now, picture this scene – our Jack is on centre stage; the fat lady is finally wailing her song; and a huge audience is sobbing as it bids farewell to a beloved, colourful working class hero, Gentleman Jack Sheppard. England may never be the same again; and if it has any compassion at all, the World should truly mourn; while the halls of justice which have just displayed a total lack of it, though unrepentant, must surely be forever sullied in the eyes of anyone with a sense of fair play.

Whatever. Thinking about it from my own point of view, despite the fact that Gentleman Jack Sheppard's departure was entirely of his own making; maybe, as he dangles from Tyburn Tree, he is regarding this, his final hour, as his greatest and most daring escape of all.

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