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Citizenship and Soldiering: An Analysis of the Early Boy Scout Movement

Jason Hewer

A quick ferry ride across Poole Harbor took me to Brownsea Island on the southern coast of England. Brownsea Island is part of the British National Trust and is home to a variety of flora and fauna. It operates as a nature preserve now, but this was not always the case as back in 1907, it was private property. It was in this year that Robert Baden-Powell decided to make an experiment on the island by inviting twenty boys to come and camp for a week in what would become the first ever Boy Scout camp. It was easy for me to think back 100 years and picture myself at that first camp. Standing atop a cliff, looking down at the sandy beach as the waves broke upon it, I was imbued with the romanticism that must have inspired Baden-Powell to use “Scout-craft” as a means of character education. Yet for all the good Baden-Powell intended, Scouting has not been without its critics. In this paper I will explore the beginnings of the Scouting movement, the criticism it encountered in the period after the First World War, and the transformation the movement underwent in response to a changing society. I hope to prove that despite very clear retrospective military qualities, the Scouting movement was founded on views that were appropriate for the time; and as the years have progressed and society’s opinions have changed, Scouting has kept pace.

From its conception, the Scouting movement has been charged with indoctrinating our youth with military ideals; however, the Scouting movement has routinely rejected this accusation. Robert Baden-Powell, the
founder of the movement wrote an explanation of his movement in 1910:

So many people ask me, ‘What is Scouting? What do Scouts do?’

Well, Scouting is not, as some seem to think, in any way connected with Soldiering. It is really the work of Colonial frontiersmen, coupled, in our case, with a good deal of knight-errantry. That is to say, the boys learn backwoodsmanship, and have, as part of their duty, to do a good turn to a fellow-creature every day. It is a method of developing among boys the manliness and character which are so much needed among our future citizens. It consists, briefly, in giving them Scouting-craft in place of loafing or rowdiness, which are now becoming so prevalent. To drive out a bad habit it is necessary to inculcate a substitute, and Scout-craft is the substitute we suggest. By Scout-craft I mean an education in character outside the school walls, as distinct from mere book-learning learnt within the school.¹

So if Scouting is not about “Soldiering” but rather about the work of “Colonial frontiersmen”, where do these accusations come from? It is necessary to look closely at the methods and materials of the movement to find an answer.

When reading through Scouting for Boys, Baden-Powell’s highly successful handbook for the Scout movement, it becomes clear that the main goal of Scouting is to turn boys into better men. However, “better” is a highly subjective term. What constituted “better” for Baden-Powell? The Oath requisite for membership in the Boy Scout Association offers insight:

On my honour I promise that-
1. I will do my duty to God and the King,
2. I will do my best to help others, whatever it costs me,
3. I know the scout law, and will obey it.²

The Scout Oath is three-fold and listed in order of importance: duty to God and country, the highest calling; duty to others; and duty to self (the

¹ Robert Baden-Powell, Scouting for Boys: An Explanation (1910), 1.
Scout Law being a list of twelve attributes a Scout possesses). The Oath really is a promise to be a better citizen, and citizenship is really what the Scouting movement is about. But it has been over 100 years since the conception of the Scouting movement. What was citizenship in 1908?

Baden-Powell describes a good citizen in *Scouting for Boys*: “‘Country first, self second,’ should be your motto. Probably, if you ask yourself truly, you will find you have at present got them just the other way about.”3 To Baden-Powell, “better” citizenship meant placing the needs of the country before the needs of the individual.

This view is not surprising coming from a soldier such as Baden-Powell who was hailed as a hero for his actions at the Siege of Mafeking in South Africa during the Boer Wars. He knew what devotion to country meant; and to him, I’m sure, citizenship involved being prepared to defend his country. In *Scouting for Boys* he writes, “Every boy ought to learn to shoot and to obey orders, else he is no more good when war breaks out than an old woman, and merely gets killed like a squealing rabbit, being unable to defend himself.”4 He goes on to say

A scout obeys orders of his patrol leader or scout master without question.
Even if he gets an order he does not like he must do as soldiers and sailors do, he must carry it out all the same because it is his duty; and after he has done it he can come and state any reasons against it: but he must must [sic] carry out the order at once. That is discipline.5

So if Scouting is not soldiering, why does *Scouting for Boys* have such a militaristic tone to it? Truthfully, it does not. It is a sizeable work, and with enough effort can probably be quoted to support anything. These short passages do not offer a true feel for what the work was about. When

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4 Ibid., 16.
5 Baden-Powell, *Scouting for Boys: A handbook for instruction in good citizenship*, 50.
Baden-Powell states that Scouting is not soldiering, we would do well to believe that in his mind it is not. It is a system of educating boys in good citizenship in a way that appeals to their naturally adventurous spirits. In his own words, “With a view to making the subject appeal to boys, and to meet their spirit of adventure, I held up for their ideal the doings of backwoodsmen, knights, adventurers and explorers, as the heroes for them to follow. These I grouped generally under the title, ‘Scouts.’”

The movement is full of secret signs and codes of honor. It places emphasis on tracking ability and outdoor skills. It puts boys in a group with which they can feel camaraderie. If in retrospect, the movement appears to have military qualities, it is more an anachronism than anything else because as society’s perceptions of what “Soldiering” is have changed, so have the methods of the Scouting movement.

This is not to say that at the time of its conception Scouting was not charged by suspicious critics as being a militaristic organization. It was easy to lump the movement in with cadet corps that were springing up in various countries. The fact that Scouting was the idea of a soldier with an impressive military record did not help dispel these perceptions. The fact is, that at this time, and shortly after the Scouting movement began, a whole slew of youth movements began to spring up. Each of these movements professed its own ideology and put forth its own goals. There were communist movements such as the Russian Red Pioneers and the Young Communist League of Great Britain. There were authoritarian movements such as the Italian Balilla and the German Hitler Jugend. There were older, established movements such as the Young Men’s Christian Association. And then there was Scouting. Where on the

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spectrum of youth organizations did Scouting fit? If we can determine what organizations Scouting sought to associate itself with, or even what organizations sought to ally themselves with Scouting, then we gain better insight into the identity of the movement’s critics and why they offered criticism.

Arguably, the biggest criticism of Baden-Powell and his early Scouting movement is his determination to keep up relations with the Hitler Jugend and the Balilla. In both Germany and Italy, the Scouting movement had been absorbed by these respective institutions. However, Baden-Powell hoped that by fostering good relations with the fascist organizations, common goals could be achieved. Baden-Powell certainly did not approve of the methods used by either group. He cringed at the thought of compulsory participation and eventually viewed the groups as state-run cadet corps. These characteristics stood in stark opposition to the volunteer basis of the Scouts which sought to foster initiative from within the boy rather than clear-cut obedience from without. Historian Tim Jeal makes the interesting point that after the Hitler Jugend participated in the Kristallnacht attacks “neither Baden-Powell nor any of the Scout and Guide leaders... ever again wrote or spoke a word in favour of maintaining contact with the Hitler Jugend.”7 This had not, however, stopped him from trying to associate with them in their early years.

If Baden-Powell invited cooperation with the fascist organizations, it follows that the liberal youth movements would seek to disassociate themselves from Scouting and would become some of its most ardent critics. In 1927, the Young Communist League of Great Britain went so far as to send Baden-Powell a coffin, a message which clearly meant

“We hope you die!” It is safe to conclude that they did not approve of Scouting’s goals. The communist youth movements viewed the Scouts as a tool to indoctrinate boys with national pride in a system they saw as evil. Scouting was very much a movement that sought to build men into good British subjects, and Baden-Powell’s insistence on cooperation with authoritarian regimes served to alienate the leftist youth movements and cement them in opposition to him.

The First World War saw both the rise of communism and marked a turning point in the Scouting movement. More than that, it marked a turning point in society in general. The carnage resulting from the conflict inspired a massive push away from anything thought to lead to another such disaster. Old standards such as nationalism and military prowess were placed under the microscope of public opinion and scrutinized for their role in starting the Great War. Where did the Boy Scouts fit into society’s new model? Scouting set itself up as a flexible organization, but how would it handle its new outspoken critics? For critics it did have. Even before the war, it was accused of being a military organization. In 1910, *The Advocate of Peace*, a pacifist publication, accused the Scouts of meaning “to catch the boys and fill their minds with the love of military performances before they are old enough to discriminate, and thus to foster the war spirit in the nation and promote the further growth of the navy and the army.” After the war, these accusations became far more common; but as society demobilized, Scouting would follow suit.

Earlier in this paper, I identified several passages from the 1908 edition of *Scouting for Boys* which had a decidedly militaristic tone to them. Let us re-examine these passages. The first passage stated, “Every
boy ought to learn to shoot and to obey orders, else he is no more good when war breaks out than an old woman, and merely gets killed like a squealing rabbit, being unable to defend himself.”10 It is significant that this passage was not included in later editions of the book.11 In like manner, the excerpt that described obedience was re-written thus:

A SCOUT OBEYS ORDERS OF HIS PARENTS, PATROL LEADER, OR SCOUTMASTER WITHOUT QUESTION.

Even if he gets an order he does not like he must do as soldiers and sailors do, and as he would do for his Captain in a football team, he must carry it out all the same because it is his duty; and after he has done it he can come and state any reason against it: but he must carry out the order at once. That is discipline.12 (Italics added to denote change.)

Although the allusions to military discipline were not omitted in this case, “Parents” were added to the list of people the scout is required to obey; and following orders of a football captain was added to the list of examples of situations where discipline is necessary. This clearly dilutes the original effect. Giving examples of respecting a football captain or a boy’s parents by obeying their orders lends credibility to the assertion that obedience is a desirable quality without associating it with the military.

The shifting language of Scouting for Boys demonstrates how the aims of the program were changing with the times. However, the old adage “Actions speak louder than words” bears significant truth. If Scouting was, as Baden-Powell asserted, a peaceful movement, how would it show it? The answer came in the form of the first International Jamboree. Even before the war had ended, Scouting’s leaders hoped to have a celebration to mark the ten-year anniversary of the Scouting

12 Ibid., 46.
movement. Plans were made to hold the celebration in 1918 provided that the war had come to a close. Of course, the war had not concluded by the beginning of 1918. Moreover, it became apparent that something more than a celebration of Scouting was required. After careful consideration, it was determined to hold an assembly in 1920 that would foster unity among the various scouting organizations of the world. Reflecting on the event shortly after its conclusion, Baden-Powell wrote:

> To bring impressions into their proper perspective after the shock of such revelation requires time and reflection, but there cannot have been one among us under that great dome who did not feel that here in these times of anxiety and doubt was unfolded a prospect full of promise and hope, where men and future men of all nations were gathered as brothers in mutual happy comradeship under a common ideal for the weal of the world.13

In addition to Scouts from across the British Empire, Scouts from 21 other nations arrived to represent their respective countries.14 The number of nations represented in subsequent jamborees would continue to grow. In 2011, 146 countries came to the 22nd world jamboree in Sweden.15 This in itself is a testament to the ultimate popularity of the movement in the post-war era.

That the jamboree movement was designed to promote peace in the world, there can be little doubt. The common theme in the speeches made to the scouts during this event was peace. The Archbishop of York, Cosmo Gordon Lang, charged the assembled body thus:

> I am almost awed by the huge power of the boys assembled here. How is such a solemn trust as is implied in this Movement to be used? There is only one answer- to

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14 Ibid., 13.
make a new and better world. You are out not to claim rights, but to do your duty; not to care for yourselves, but for others; not to work for the class, but for the commonwealth; not to suspect and fight other nations, but to make comrades and brothers.\textsuperscript{16}

Baden-Powell, as the newly nominated Chief Scout of the World, gave the closing address. The address, being the last words spoken, in many ways set the tone of the entire event:

The war has taught us that if one nation tries to impose its particular will upon others, cruel reaction is bound to follow... If it be your will, let us go forth from here fully determined that we will develop among ourselves and our boys that comradeship, through the world-wide spirit of the Scout Brotherhood, so that we may help to develop peace and happiness in the world and good will among men. Brother Scouts, answer me. Will you join in this endeavour?\textsuperscript{17}

Of course, the response was a hearty “Yes!” accompanied by boisterous applause. It can be seen as a sharp bit of strategy on Baden-Powell’s part to end with the asking of this poignant question.

Word choice was one of Baden-Powell’s exceptional strengths. Even the term “Jamboree” was not determined lightly. Baden-Powell wanted a term that would not be associated with anything else but Scouting. For this reason he passed up terms such as “rally” or “parade”.\textsuperscript{18}

A rally, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is a “rapid reassembling of forces for renewed effort or fighting” or a “meeting of the supporters of a cause, esp. in order to demonstrate the strength of public feeling, or to inspire or foster enthusiasm; spec. a political mass meeting” whereas to parade is defined as to “assemble (troops, etc.) for inspection or review”.\textsuperscript{19} These words had connotations that the leaders of the

\textsuperscript{16} Boy Scouts International Bureau, 12.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 15.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 9.
Scouting movement wished to distance themselves from. Jamboree was a relatively new term and was appropriately malleable. The Oxford English Dictionary defines jamboree as a “noisy revel; a carousal or spree.”

Baden-Powell wrote of his word choice:

> Different people assign different derivations to the word, but whatever its derivation, it will have quite a distinct meaning for most people after this year (1920). It will be associated with the greatest gathering of boys that has ever been held. ‘Jamboree’ to them implies a joyful, cheery gathering of boys with broad-brimmed hats and broad grins- complete in their workmanlike kit of shirt, shorts, staff, and scarf. They are the important part of the Jamboree.

Even with the careful consideration placed into planning the Jamborees, they would also fall under scrutinizing eyes.

One controversial point related to the Jamboree movement was the eventual semi-inclusion of the German Hitler Jugend and the Italian Balilla as observers at the 4th jamboree in Gödöllő, Hungary. These organizations were not part of the Boy Scout movement. In fact, in both cases they had superseded and suppressed the Boy Scouts in their respective countries. However, Baden-Powell saw an opportunity to foster goodwill between the organizations and hoped for cooperation not competition. It is for this reason, not for any shared doctrinal views, that the Scouts associated with these two fascist organizations. The vast majority of evidence shows the Scouts pushing away from any perception of military organization during this time. The jamborees even went so far as to discontinue the March Past of the Nations after the outbreak of WWII.

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21 Boy Scouts International Bureau, 9.
22 Ibid., 40.
for fear that having boys march in rank under their various nations’ flags would foster a military spirit. These actions represent clear proof that the Scouting movement had no hidden military agenda.

After examining the evidence, it becomes clear that by today’s standards the original Scout movement had military qualities. Moreover, after the First World War, it continued to have military qualities. It is even possible to trace militarism in Scouting up to the present day if one were so inclined. But if one were so inclined, that search would show the evidence of militarism ever decreasing. Scouting is a living organization. As the values of society change, so do the methods of the Scouting movement. Scouting will always have its critics. The period following the First World War was a time of particularly harsh criticism. However, Scouting has also proved itself as an organization dedicated to promoting world peace and cooperation. Baden-Powell’s idea of a program that would foster good citizenship assist in character development has not come to the present day unchanged, but the essence of the idea lives on.

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23 Ibid., 13.