

## Scouting: an educational method for adolescent boys and girls

[Arnaud BAUBĂRROT](#)

### ABSTRACT

Scouting is a youth movement aiming to cultivate character and shape future citizens through the use of active educational methods. Founded in England in 1907, scouting quickly developed across the globe. In most European countries, its introduction led to the creation of a number of associations based either on a religious foundation or a principle of religious neutrality. For instance, there are Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and secular associations, and more recently Muslim ones as well. Although it was initially intended exclusively for young boys, scouting quickly opened up to young girls, leading to the creation of separate women's associations. During the second half of the twentieth century, the development of coeducation prompted most masculine and feminine organizations to merge, and to add gender equality to their pedagogical objectives.



Boy scouts scrubbing potatoes for dinner at a camp near Cambridge, 1943. Photo: Wildman Shaw.

Scouting was invented by Lieutenant General Robert Baden-Powell (1857-1941) in England in 1907. He adapted for the young boys of England the techniques that he had already presented in his manual *Aid to Scouting* (1899), which sought to reform the training of recruits for the British colonial army. Upon his return to England, Baden-Powell endeavoured to promote his method among existing youth organizations. Scouting was presented as a means of regenerating the vital force of the nation, and less explicitly as a means of mitigating the absence of

military service; it enjoyed official support, and spread throughout the country, quickly becoming established as an independent organization. It simultaneously enjoyed similar success outside the United Kingdom.

Scouting drew on a number of sources on the pedagogical level. The most obvious was that of new forms of pedagogy, from which it reproduced both the principle of education through action and the organization of units consisting of small teams, which enabled youths to become independent and assume responsibility. It also fell within the tradition of "muscular Christianity." This product of Victorian culture which saw sport as a means of jointly increasing the physical strength, moral uprightness, and spiritual depth of young men, in an effort to promote the rise of a virile and conquering Christianity inspired the reform of English public schools, and was subsequently disseminated throughout the Anglo-Saxon world by the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA, founded in 1844). Baden-Powell nevertheless left a more civic and patriotic mark on this model rather than a religious one, which allowed it to expand beyond countries with a Protestant culture. Finally, scouting also bore the stamp of social hygiene theories from the early twentieth century. Outdoor activities seeking to keep adolescents away from the unhealthy atmosphere of cities along with the obligation to maintain bodily cleanliness, celibacy, and abstinence from tobacco and alcohol demonstrate an ambition to promote the ideal of a wholesome life, a source of strength and health.

Yet the true originality of scouting resided less in this programme of physical, civic, and moral education, than in the way Baden-Powell intended to implement it. To a structuring partially borrowed from the military model he added an imaginary dimension drawn from colonial conquest and adventure novels. In order to appeal to the romantic soul of adolescents, he encouraged them to dress in an outfit reminiscent of that of the Boers or cowboys, to see in their games the adventurous life of pioneers or wilderness explorers, and to show their belonging by adopting a series of rites, signs, and symbols. These factors gave scouting a strong identity, which largely explains its dynamism.

Conceived as a method to educate young boys, scouting quickly sparked the interest of young girls. In 1910, feminine units that had formed spontaneously united under the Girl Guides Association, whose management Baden-Powell entrusted to his sister Agnes. Guiding developed on a global scale in similar fashion to the masculine movement; it reproduced the pedagogical foundation of scouting, and added elements more in conformity with the dominant models of femininity for the time, notably by including a programme in domestic education. This assurance offered by girl scouting to overcome the distrust it caused did not prevent female adolescents from experiencing it as a way of engaging in outdoor activities and experiencing a certain degree of autonomy. In addition, management of girl guides and girl scouts associations provided young women with an opportunity to gain experience in commitment and responsibility. This fact is often interpreted as a factor that enabled the blossoming of a generation of feminist, union, and political militants during the second half of the twentieth century.

In the aftermath of The Great War, the scout method was extended to new age groups: Wolf Cubs for children, and Rover Scouts for young adults. At the same time, scouting structured itself on a global scale. The first international scouting conference, held in London in 1920, gave rise to the Boy Scouts International Bureau, which would become the World Organization of the Scout Movement (WOSM) in 1961. The World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGS) was also created in 1928. Marked by the trauma of the war, Baden-Powell endeavoured to make global scouting into a tool for promoting peace. Large international gatherings, called jamborees, were organized every four years with the explicit aim of creating genuine fraternity between peoples.

The rise of outdoor leisure activities and the growing commitment of governments and national churches to extracurricular activities promoted the development of scouting during the interwar period. Its dynamism and mobilizing strength gave rise to reproductions and imitations on the part of other youth organizations, especially political ones, such as the communist Pioneers or socialist Red Falcons, which borrowed scouting's uniform and activities, along with aspects of its pedagogy. Under fascist regimes, which dissolved scouting associations, state youth organizations also took partial inspiration from scouting, while setting their own educational and political objectives.

Scouting was forbidden in people's democracies in the Eastern block, but continued its rise in the Western block during the aftermath of World War Two. However, the development of a consumer society, in addition to major transformations in youth culture, prompted scouting associations to question the pertinence and topicality of their

methods. From the mid-1960s, they initiated reforms for an *aggiornamento* of scouting, in both its forms and pedagogical practices. Far from garnering unanimous support, these changes sparked opposition among the managers of these organizations, who saw them as a distortion of Baden-Powell's project. The resulting conflicts sometimes ended in divisions, as in the case of the organization Scouts de France, which quickly found itself competing against two other Catholic movements, the Scouts d'Europe (1964) and the Scouts unitaires de France (1971).

Among these reforms, mixed-sex participation developed concurrently with coeducation in schools. Masculine associations experimented with this practice beginning in the 1950s, which led in the mid-1960s to an increased number of mixed units, as well as the coming together of masculine and feminine movements of the same denomination, in accordance with different methods and chronologies (in Italy: the merger of the primary Catholic and secular associations in 1974 and 1976; in France, the grouping together of secular (1964), Jewish (1964), and Protestant (1970) movements, along with the merger in 2004 of the Catholic organizations Scouts de France and Guides de France; in the United Kingdom, the two associations remained separate, although the masculine movement has opened up to girls and coeducation since 1976.)

Despite these developments and efforts toward renewing its forms of education for citizenship, scouting has retained a somewhat outdated image in Western Europe, where it has faced competition from new forms of youth leisure, although it remains the largest youth movement in Europe and indeed the world.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

CHEROUTRE, Marie-Thérèse, *Le scoutisme au féminin. Les Guides de France, 1923-1998*, Paris, Cerf, 2002.

CHOLVY, Gérard (ed.), *Le scoutisme: un mouvement d'éducation au xx<sup>e</sup> siècle. Dimensions internationales*, Montpellier, Université Paul Valéry, 2002.

JEAL, Tim, *Baden-Powell*, Londres, Hutchinson, 1989.

---

### **Source URL:**

<https://ehne.fr/encyclopedia/themes/education-teaching-and-professional-training/educating-europeans/scouting-educational-method-adolescent-boys-and-girls>