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BOOKS &amp; CRITICS

BOOKS

## YOUNG MEN IN SHORTS

*The 1908 Boy Scout manual was, our reviewer writes, "one of the very few books of the twentieth century that actually led to the formation of a worldwide movement"*

BY CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS

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In 1988, shortly before the expiration of communism in Eastern Europe, I was waiting on the platform of a Prague subway station. The idea was that a member of the civic opposition would recognize me by the book I was carrying and escort me to some illegal gathering. The precautions were hardly necessary, since the regime was by then in an advanced state of decay and inanition, but I am glad I went through the "drill," because I might otherwise have missed witnessing one of the symptoms of that decadence. Onto the platform was led a spiritless troop of pre-teenage boys, all wearing makeshift uniforms of shorts and blouses. Round their necks were faded red kerchiefs. In command was an adult Communist of scarcely believable bloat and scrofulousness, who looked as if it would be beyond his power to motivate his charges even to whistle, let alone to sing an uplifting anthem. They were trudging off on who knows what futile errand of party-building. I thought of Milan Kundera's caustic reference to "pointlessness" as one of the special arts of the system. Here was another prefiguration of the coming fate of "actually existing socialism": its listless Young Pioneers were clearly no match for the pack of keen-eyed, clean-living, Kipling-quoting lads whose organization had long outlived the empire it had been formed to uphold and defend.

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**Scouting for Boys:  
The Original 1908  
Edition**

by Robert Baden-Powell  
Oxford University Press

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Happy, perhaps, the country that needs no "youth movement." In common with its comparable rivals, Victorian Britain managed quite well without one. There were some church-inspired groups for the children of the deserving poor, and conscription and emigration took care of many of the rest. The South African, or Boer, War, however, altered the picture in two ways. Sudden reverses in the field meant that new drafts of manpower were required at short notice, and the establishment discovered to its shock and dismay that Britain's cities and slums were producing narrow-chested, knock-kneed, wheezing, rickety specimens. Sir Frederick Maurice wrote a treatise concluding that only two out of five recruits were physically fit for military service. (The authorities were to make very much the same "discovery" in 1914 and 1939, before deducing that a welfare state was cheaper in the long run.) The second catalyst was the siege and eventual relief of the town of Mafeking.

Some pseudo-events cease to be pseudo because of their sheer aptness for the moment. It is likely that Mafeking was never in much danger, and the Boer farmers were in any case always the military inferiors of

the vast British army. But the "siege," which went on from October of 1899 to May of 1900, was presented at home as something Homeric. Moreover, Mafeking's gallant defender, a British officer named Robert Baden-Powell, possessed all the qualities that the British public adored. Handsome and humorous, with a solidly researched and popular book (on wild-boar hunting, or "pig-sticking") under his belt, he excelled as a raconteur and a producer of impromptu dramatics. Picture Flashman without the seamy side. The perfect gentleman amateur cheering up what had been a distinctly sordid and depressing colonial war, he brought the public-school virtues of Kipling and Henry Newbolt to vivid life. One of the more inspired schemes during the siege was to organize the British boys of the town into a troop of "scouts," and to use them for running messages and doing the simpler sorts of reconnaissance.

A third catalytic element, in my opinion, was the death of Queen Victoria, in 1901. Take a society that has just endured a demoralizing war, lost its reassuring regal figurehead, and simultaneously been made aware that its "stock" is becoming unfit. Add a challenge from nearby European empires—most notably the German one, which had backed the Boers—and one is in grave peril of having to look for a national savior who can appeal to the spirit of youth. All things considered, then, it could have been a good deal worse than it was.

Baden-Powell was not a megalomaniac (though he did at one point say that the Scout motto, "Be Prepared," was inspired by his initials, which were also his scouting nickname). Nor was he a sadistic, repressed pederast. He was a racist and an imperialist and a monarchist, all right, but most of the time to a temperate degree. The British skill at "pig-sticking" was, he asserted (in another reference to a subject he could hardly bear to stay away from), proof of a natural superiority. He had charm and courage, and a knack with the young, and he could draw excellent freehand illustrations. All these qualities are evident in this best-selling manual of 1908, now cleverly reissued by Oxford University Press. It's one of the very few books of the twentieth century that actually led to the formation of a worldwide movement.

Difficulties obtruded themselves as soon as the Scout appeal caught fire and began to spread. In principle its ethos was supposed to be universal, just like the empire itself, yet also a matter of Britishness. The idea was to recruit boys from poor backgrounds, although Baden-Powell believed in a near caricature of middle-class ideals. And the plan for a eugenic redemption of the young from all forms of degeneracy was awkward by nature, since it involved teaching boys about subjects that were generally thought to be unmentionable. Thus B-P's famous account of the perils of self-abuse has been allowed to eclipse almost everything else he wrote.

Having with admirable matter-of-factness described what the temptation to solitary vice actually involves, the old boy went on to warn, "The result of 'self-abuse' is always—mind you, *always*—that the boy after a time becomes weak and nervous and shy, he gets headaches and probably palpitation of the heart, and if he still carries it on too far he very often goes out of his mind and becomes an idiot." This admonition was driven home, as it were, by the further warning that "several awful diseases come from indulgence—one especially that rots away the inside of men's mouths, their noses, and eyes, etc." What a terrifying "etc.!" (For a hilarious but sobering account of a boyhood blighted by this kind of advice, see Dalton Trumbo's epic letter to his son Christopher in *Additional Dialogue: Letters of Dalton Trumbo*.) B-P counseled his readers to lay off for another reason: namely, that misuse of the "parts" when young would render those parts useless when it came time to procreate.

The account, which appeared in a section called "Continence," concluded with some manly, useless, straight-from-the-shoulder advice ("Avoid listening to stories or reading or thinking about dirty subjects") and then veered wildly into a diatribe against unemployment and overpopulation: "It is at present a disgrace and a danger to England that from want of self-restraint among men and women thousands upon thousands of children are born every year for whom there is no work and no money." Michael Rosenthal pointed out an obvious inconsistency here in his brilliant 1986 study *The Character Factory: Baden-Powell's Boy Scouts and the Imperatives of Empire*—an indispensable companion volume to this one. If masturbation led to sterility,

surely it would be of some help in limiting the rise of a surplus population. Obscure though the connection may have been in B-P's mind, the contradiction still may not be quite as evident as Rosenthal supposed. It was intended that the scouting type should reproduce, whereas the base and ignoble should not. In any event, and because of its explicitness on the subject at hand, as it were, the "Continenence" chapter was eventually dropped.

**T**he more enthralling parts of the Scout manual were those that trained small boys to look for clues, read signs and spoor, and be on the watch for evildoers. Leaning heavily on Sherlock Holmes, and with a fund of tales from his own adventures in jungle and desert, B-P raised generations of amateur detectives. Until I realized that it was a no-smoking, no-drinking outfit, strongly pro-God and pro-Queen, I was vaguely drawn to the Scouts myself. But then there was all that stuff about lighting a campfire with nothing but dry twigs, and making beds out of bracken, and extracting stones from horses' hooves. To say nothing of what everyone had heard about scoutmasters ... It was easy to ridicule the strenuous high-mindedness of the thing, with its ever present element of farce and its somehow sinister stress on short trousers.

When B-P dropped his genial tone in the manual, and ceased discoursing about derring-do and the marvels of nature and wilderness, he could sometimes be sinister too. Here is his introduction to Chapter VII, "Chivalry":

One aim of the Boy Scouts scheme is to revive amongst us, if possible, some of the rules of the knights of old, which did so much for the moral tone of our race, just as the Bushido of the ancient Samurai Knights has done, and is still doing, for Japan. Unfortunately, chivalry with us has, to a large extent, been allowed to die out, whereas in Japan it is taught to the children, so that it becomes with them a practice of their life, and it is also taught to children in Germany and in Switzerland with the best results.

In another passage, dealing with the then recent Russo-Japanese War, B-P wrote admiringly of Japanese suicide soldiers at Port Arthur, whose "plucky self-sacrifice enabled their comrades to get in and win the place for the Emperor." I don't know why B-P was so pro-Japanese, since an exercise of the same sort on the Russian side would also have won Port Arthur for an emperor, and a Christian one at that; but Bushido may have made the difference here.

By 1916, in the eighth edition of *Scouting for Boys*, the commendation of German methods in the drilling of youth had been dropped. However, B-P's admiration for the militarism of other countries, with its implied rebuke to British "softness," never ceased to be a problem for the Scout movement. B-P did not live long enough (he died in January of 1941) to be forced to revisit his admiration for Bushido and kamikaze, but the defeat of Germany in 1918, and that country's subsequent re-emergence as a regimented and expansionist power, if anything rekindled his enthusiasm. So did the precedent of Fascist Italy: in 1933 B-P visited Mussolini and hymned the Balilla, or Blackshirt youth organization. In a published interview he reported with gusto,

The Duce realises that if his Fascist revolution is to live its permanence will largely depend on the moulding of the men of tomorrow.

As he remarked to me, "Our future is in the hands of the boys." He is himself a "boy-man," with sons of his own and fond of boys ... The B.S.M. [Boy Scout Movement] had been widely established in Italy many years before Mussolini's advent, and when his scheme came to be adopted for all boys the Scouts were naturally absorbed into it. But to them the change was not a great one, since the new organisation was formed on the lines of the Scout movement.

The visits by Bernard Shaw and other fellow travelers to the USSR simply pale, in point of credulity, beside B-P's question to Il Duce about the "volunteer" character of the Balilla.

I asked Signor Mussolini how this was brought about, and with a very appropriate gesture he said, "Simply by moral force." The fact that moral force is already exercising so strong an effect on this young experiment augurs well for the future of Italy.

One wonders what that "appropriate gesture" was.

When it came to Germany, B-P was equally boneheaded. He actually upbraided one official of the Scout movement who did not want to be associated with the Hitler Youth. The head of his International Bureau, Hubert Martin, reported that a German scouting leader named Riecke had been dispatched to a camp for the offense of proposing an independent, non-Nazi movement. B-P responded testily that Riecke had been sent there "not for international tendencies, but for homosexual tendencies!" This is the only reference to that dread subject that I know of in his writings; an accusation repudiated with indignation when made—often unfairly—against British scoutmasters was taken at face value when made by Hitlerites. It's pleasant to record, however, that B-P was outvoted on this question, and that the BSM never recognized the Hitler Youth as a model or as a partner.

Its emphasis on the outdoors and on personal courage and initiative notwithstanding, the scouting ethos had always had something modern and totalitarian about it. B-P could not even keep his nature notes under control: he told his trusting readers that industrious bees were to be admired: "They are quite a model community, for they respect their queen and kill their unemployed." He repeatedly referred to the movement he had inaugurated as "a factory," for bodies and minds as well as "characters." The expression "to be a brick," still in use if somewhat archaic, originates with this fearsome injunction:

You should remember that being one fellow among many others, you are like one brick among many others in the wall of a house. If you are discontented with your place or your neighbors or if you are a rotten brick, you are no good to the wall. You are rather a danger. If the bricks get quarrelling among themselves the wall is liable to split and the whole house to fall.

Some bricks may be high up and others low down in the wall; but all must make the best of it and play in their place for the good of the whole. So it is among people; each of us has his place in the world, it is no use being discontented.

When, as a youth, I dumped the Scouts and turned away to the left, I found that there was an old labor-movement outfit called the Woodcraft Folk, which hoped to be a "progressive" surrogate for scouting. For all I know, I might have learned from it how to cure snakebite and ford streams and pitch tents without being instructed in racial and political Darwinism at the same time. Michael Rosenthal's book contains a remarkable passage about Ernest Thompson Seton, the founder of the Woodcraft movement in America. In the closing decades of the nineteenth century Seton popularized the idea of nature-based recreation for the young, inspired by the Shawnee hero Chief Tecumseh—beau ideal for rising manhood. By 1902 he was involved in the forming of "bands" of "Seton Indians," with distinct rituals and codes of honor. In 1906, having heard of Baden-Powell, he wrote to him, enclosing a copy of his own "manual," *The Birch-bark Roll of the Woodcraft Indians*. On this and other evidence—including the fury of Seton himself when he found out—there seems scant room for doubt that B-P annexed Seton's inspiration, and took the forest culture of a lesser breed for his template of imperial inculcation. And now British youths would regard as almost too moderate the Pink Floyd anthem that mockingly repudiates the entire idea of education as fitting them to be only "another brick in the wall."

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