

Shaping British Children's Perspectives of War, 1919-1939

Michael van der Kamp*

Abstract

Many things were changing in Britain after the First World War, yet militaristic ideals continued to hold sway. This paper examines the way that these ideals were ingrained in British youth. Organizations such as the Boy Scouts and Girl Guides engaged British youth in militaristic activities, while the children's literature of the day emphasized militaristic ideals by crafting glamorous depictions of Britons involved in the First World War. These same works commonly portrayed enemy combatants as monsters, creating the semblance of a clear-cut, good versus evil struggle. Furthermore, the desolate living conditions faced by many British youth made military life seem like an enviable escape, despite the horrors experienced by most British soldiers during the war.

Keywords: interwar Britain, militarism, children, Boy Scouts, Girl Guides, children's literature

In the aftermath of the First World War, British children found themselves at the centre of a society reeling from the shock of mechanized trench warfare. Changing social conditions and perceptions were beginning to chip away at the old Edwardian ideals; girls were allowed to participate in activities that had previously been restricted to boys, while youth organizations were eroding class distinctions. Yet, at the same time, certain notions held fast. Prevalent among these was a militaristic national pride that revealed itself both in the training and activities that were offered by youth movements and in the children's literature of the period. The British authors of the day seem to have been unwilling to give up the idea of their military as a righteous force for good in the world. The effect of this presentation on the impressionable young minds of children was significant, particularly among those seeking respite from their malnourished, poverty-ridden home life. These elements ultimately combined to shape a perspective of war for many inter-war British children as being a heroic and noble cause, a means of escape from poor living conditions, and an adventurous source of fun and

friendship, in spite of the actual lived experience of the Western Front.

Scouting Boys and Guiding Girls

Two prominent youth organizations in inter-war Britain were the Boy Scouts and the Girl Guides. Inspired by his concerns about "a perceived moral and physical degeneration of Britain," Lord Baden-Powell founded the Boy Scouts in 1908 as a means to improve the character and training of British boys.¹ Boy Scouts in 1908 as a means to

¹ Tammy M. Proctor, "On My Honour: Guides and Scouts in Interwar Britain," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, n. s., 92, no. 2 (2002): 13, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4144911>.

improve the character and training of British boys. Though Scouting was founded on Edwardian ideas of masculinity, it immediately gained widespread appeal to the girls of Britain as well. These girls craved the sense of “adventure and usefulness” that had been denied to them by Edwardian society, but was now offered with the Scouts.² However, Lord Baden-Powell balked at the notion of a coeducational organization, opting instead to establish the Girl Guides in 1910. These distinct yet similar organizations were designed to teach youth responsibility and character according to their gender, while improving physical prowess and instilling a strong sense of nationalism.

The success of the Scouts and Guides was based on their appeal to many facets of society. For parents, they offered respite by providing an out-of-home activity for youth that enforced discipline and opened up future prospects through their relatively classless structures, which welcomed children from all levels of society.³ For children, they provided an exciting and fun way to meet and bond with friends, and a sense of purpose greater than what was found at home and in school. For the country’s leaders, they assuaged fears about the degeneration of society by offering accessible instruction and physical training to youth. For the military, they provided exactly what recruiters had found themselves so desperately wanting during the Boer war: a generation of boys and girls “ready-made for army life when the need arose.”⁴

The distinctly militaristic nature of the Scouts and Guides was evident in the way they organized themselves and went about their activities. Baden-Powell came from a distinguished military background, and he used his experience in the army as the basis for his training programs. Marches and parades were common in both the Scouts and the Guides, and though typically less formal than some organizations, such as the cadets, the similarities are striking.^{5,6,7} While the cadets were overtly militaristic,

the Scouts and Guides were quite influential in the promotion of a militaristic ideology, as they reached a significantly larger number of youth. Perhaps most importantly, the establishment of the Girl Guides meant that girls could also participate, something that the cadets wouldn’t allow until 1982. One estimate goes so far as to suggest that 34% of British boys born between 1901 and 1920 had been members of the Boy Scouts.⁸

It should be noted that the Scouts did make a noticeable attempt to distance themselves from militarism. In fact, they frequently contested such accusations, going so far as to urge their members to be “nonpolitical, humanistic and peaceful.”⁹ This claim is easily refuted, though, as their training consisted primarily of skills that translated easily to military application. Examples such as marksmanship, wilderness survival, dispatch running, signalling, and tracking speak volumes about the kind of training that was on offer. The Girl Guides were also influenced in this manner, with their training frequently being geared toward nursing and first aid, the roles which women were expected to fulfill in times of war. When World War I broke out, there were instances in which a “whole troop would march to recruitment centers to enlist.”¹⁰ To this day, Scouts still participate in war memorials alongside cadets, reserves, and regular army units. Under this light, any claims of pacifism come across more as attempts to win the favour of a post-war public that was increasingly tired of war than as statements of the heartfelt ideals of the organizations.

² Proctor, “On My Honour,” 20.

³ *Ibid.*, 33-44, 93.

⁴ Alan G.V. Simmonds, *Britain and World War One* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 44.

⁵ *Scouts At Windsor – March past the King*, British Pathé, first broadcast 29 April 1937, Adobe Flash video, 1:03. Film ID: 919.01. <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/scouts-at-windsor>.

⁶ *The Princess Royal at Torquay*, British Pathé, first broadcast 31 May 1937, Adobe Flash video, 5:32. Film ID:941.06. <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/the-princess-royal-at-torquay/>.

⁷ *London Cadets Inspected - on Horse Guards Parade*, British Pathé, first broadcast 24 June 1937, Adobe Flash video, 0:41. Film ID:923.21. <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/london-cadets-inspected-on-horse-guards-parade/>.

⁸ Paul Wilkinson, “English Youth Movements, 1908-1930,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 4, no. 2 (Apr., 1969): 3. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/259659>.

⁹ Proctor, “On My Honour,” 93.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 87.

British Heroes vs. Monsters

Following the end of the Great War, British authors of children's literature poured their efforts into depicting the war as a worthwhile and noble struggle. To achieve this, they avoided the gruesome details and trauma of the Western Front. Instead, they searched for war narratives that could be filled with action and adventure, while avoiding any disillusionment or overt criticism of the war.

A notable example is the use of T.E. Lawrence's campaigns as a basis for several novels. Unlike the static war of attrition that characterized the war experience of the majority of British soldiers, Lawrence's campaign in Arabia was one of movement. It was full of easily-romanticized tales of camel charges and daring, in which it seemed that the "prowess and resourcefulness of the individual British hero" was enough to win the day.¹¹ Furthermore, it took place in a landscape vastly different from those of Great Britain or Europe, and thus could easily be compared to previous colonial wars. In this way, stories of Lawrence's exploits allowed authors to characterize war as more or less unchanged from colonial depictions of war, with plenty of opportunity for individual "heroism and adventure."¹²

Writers for girls were presented with a different challenge: how to involve girls in the excitement of war while maintaining their perceived role in society. One writer, Bessie Marchant, found the answer in her depiction of a young English girl who, along with her younger siblings, is separated from her parents by the outbreak of war while travelling in Europe.¹³ The "temporarily orphan[ed]" protagonist, Molly Angel, must then assume the role of caregiver to her younger charges while overcoming the challenges of survival in a land suddenly gripped with war.¹⁴

This happens away from the front lines, in direct contrast to the equivalent novels with male protagonists. Social connections are of the utmost importance, as it is through use of these connections that Molly survives her adventure.

A common element throughout children's war literature from this period is the use of antithetical characterizations, in which the British heroes are seen as clearly good, while the non-British enemy combatants are portrayed as clearly evil. Krista Cowman analyzed several works from the period, including the novel described above, and uncovered clear examples of this propaganda tool at work. One of the more chilling examples comes from her analysis of D.H. Parry's *With Haig on the Somme*. In this work, a German spy is depicted as sly and underhanded, while a British spy displays "boyish pleasure" and heroism.¹⁵ Cowman further reveals the extent to which Germans were portrayed as monsters, through one German spy posing as a governess, who exclaims upon being fired that her only regret is not being able to "twist the neck" of a young boy in the household—the brother of the protagonist.¹⁶

This black and white, good versus evil writing technique was not limited only to fiction directly pertaining to the war. One of the most enduring works of a British author from the inter-war period is J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*.¹⁷ In this seminal work, published in 1937, Tolkien weaves an intricate fantasy tale about the wholesome and overwhelmingly British hobbit, Bilbo Baggins. Throughout his adventures, Bilbo, along with the company of thirteen dwarves and the wizard Gandalf, faces off against actual monsters: from trolls to orcs, and finally a dragon. While having the hero fight literal monsters is certainly more innocent than those narratives that display other humans as monsters, it can still reinforce in impressionable minds the notion that there are forces of absolute good which must literally fight against forces of absolute evil, be it through war or smaller-scale combat. Further, it comforts the readers by making them feel, by association with the protagonist, that they are absolutely on the side of good. The real world rarely works in this clear-cut way, which the reader must learn elsewhere. In a more enlightened society,

¹¹ Dorothea Flothow, "Popular Children's Literature and the Memory of the First World War, 1919-1939," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 31, no. 2 (April 2007): 152, doi:10.1353/uni.2007.0016.

¹² Flothow, "Popular Children's Literature," 152.

¹³ Krista Cowman, "There are kind Germans as well as brutal ones': The Foreigner in Children's Literature of the First World War," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 31, no. 2 (April 2007): 108, doi:10.1353/uni.2007.0013.

¹⁴ Cowman, "The Foreigner in Children's Literature," 108.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁷ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (n. p.: George Allen & Unwin, 1937).

the result of this good versus evil narration would be negligible. The fantasy could be recognized as just that—a fantasy—and the more subtle and morally ambiguous elements of the text could come out. In a society where real human enemies are frequently described as monsters, the effect of such descriptions would likely compound with the impressions given by other forms of literature, guiding readers to perceive war as a just and moral cause against the forces of evil.

An Impoverished Home Life

During the inter-war years, the average health of British citizens was slowly improving, even during the height of the Depression. Yet averages mask the suffering and extreme poverty that dotted the landscape, particularly in industrial areas: Wales, the North of England, and Scotland. Clear evidence is found in the infant mortality rates. In some areas, children were dying at twice the rate that children in the wealthier Southeast of England were. Furthermore, these problems were frequently masked by the stoicism of those who were suffering, as they struggled to get by, yet maintained an image of well-being. Research into these matters has shown that a “large section of the child population in Britain during the interwar period was exposed to hardship, preventable disease and premature death.”¹⁸

Evidence of this is shown by footage from the era. In a documentary shot by British Pathé, upon revealing the conditions endured by just one of many thousands of similar families throughout Britain at the time, the narrator remarks that “not even cattle would be stored in such conditions.”¹⁹ These conditions are seen as depressing and hopeless, as unemployed men mill about hoping for work, mothers struggle to maintain a veneer of cleanliness, and children habituate themselves to the bedside company of rats.

This lies in stark contrast with the ways in which military life was presented, particularly to young boys. The

cover of the July 1925 edition of *The Boy's Own Paper*, a popular magazine whose primary market was young British boys, shows young men who are happy, healthy, and clean-cut.²⁰ It depicts military life as formal, yet fun and adventurous, with a strong theme of friendship and camaraderie. This kind of jovial yet masculine imagery would be highly enticing to young boys, especially if they've endured difficulties such as hunger or loneliness, or are searching for a place to belong. This kind of propaganda being commonplace, war might have seemed an enviable state of affairs for the thousands of British children living in slum conditions. For it was at times of war that their country finally had enough need for soldiers and nurses that they could all find work and escape their sordid home lives.

The social upheaval that marked the inter-war years wrought many changes for British children, but a departure from old militaristic ideals was not one. British inter-war society was one in which thousands upon thousands of children enduring destitute slum conditions were shown military life as a clean and enviable escape, while the Boy Scouts and Girl Guides gave them a community in which to grow and train for when war-time came. Meanwhile, their literature goaded them on, reminding them of the apparent greatness of their nation and the nobility of fighting against the perceived evil of nations that would oppose Britain's might. Anti-war sentiments and painful recollections of the trauma of the First World War were frequently lost on them, or never reached them. For many children, the military thus became the best, if not the only option available. As the 1930s ended and the shadow of war returned, Britain became more than happy to once again enlist such willing recruits.

¹⁸ Charles Webster, “Saving Children During the Depression: Britain's Silent Emergency, 1919 – 1939,” *Disasters* 18, no. 3 (1994): 215, doi: 10.1111/j.1467-7717.1994.tb00308.x.

¹⁹ *The Great Crusade – The Story of a Million Homes*, British Pathé, first broadcast 1937, Adobe Flash video, 16:28. Film ID: 3467.04. <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/the-great-crusade/>.

²⁰ *The Boy's Own Paper: The World's Best Magazine for Boys*, July 1925, accessed 8 February 2015, http://www.philsp.com/data/images/b/boys_own_paper_192507.jpg.

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