Repairing a Movement: How a Feminist Drove Girls Out of Boy Scouts

By

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ABSTRACT

The Boy Scouts of America's 2019 decision to invite girls to join their flagship program was met with controversy from critics arguing that the decision strips boys of their rightful space of over a century. Interestingly, founder Lord Baden-Powell's (1857—1941) writing around the inception of the scouting movement indicates a more egalitarian perspective on gender roles, an unusually feminist viewpoint for a man of the post-Victorian British empire. However, as demonstrated by her own writings, Violet Markham (1872 –1959), an acclaimed British feminist, although she was a social reformer opposed to women's suffrage, may have led the movement to shun girls from the flagship Boy Scout program in Great Britain. This gender split persisted in the organization's descendant programs, including the Boy Scouts of America, for the next one-hundred-ten years. I use original historical writings to support my point of view that the Scouts BSA's 2019 decision to induct girls into their flagship program reflects scouter Baden-Powell's intention and vision that the scouting movement include both boys and girls.

Keywords: Scouting, Gender Roles, Feminism, Post-Victorian England

In February 2019, the Boy Scouts of America invited girls to join their flagship program: Boy Scouts, an internationally recognized program for youth leadership, skills, and character development. In the process, the Boy Scouts of America changed the name of the program to Scouts BSA to be more inclusive. This decision was met with controversy from those who were accustomed to the organization's gender-exclusive atmosphere of the prior 109 years. While critics admonished the BSA for stealing a space of identity for boys, proponents argued for the benefits that girls would receive through admission into this well-recognized and prestigious program. However, the point that neither side of the debate considers is how gender exclusivity came to be introduced into the scouting movement in the first place.

It might surprise readers of this essay to know that at its birth in England, the Boy Scouts had several thousand female members. Shockingly, it was Violet Markham, an acclaimed feminist, who ultimately forced them out of the program. Social customs in the time of post-Victorian England drastically changed founder Baden-Powell's mission to produce a non-exclusive scouting movement in ways that the current scouting movement is only just starting to overcome. Ultimately, the Boy Scouts of America's invitation for girls to join the organization welcomes them back to their rightful place as equally respected citizens of a transnational scouting movement in accordance with Baden-Powell's expansive vision.

I begin my argument in support of my thesis by providing background to contextualize Baden-Powell's and Markham's viewpoints within the post-Victorian era. Second, I analyze the writings of Baden-Powell, Markham and others in reference to the emerging scouting movement in Britain. Third, I review the history of the movement's crossover into the United States. Fourth, I point out the discrepancy between American values and actions related to Boy Scouts. Last, I use Troop 6 of Amherst, New Hampshire to demonstrate the success of girls in the Scouts BSA flagship program. In sum, I think that my analysis not only demonstrates the precedent that should have been set for girls in the Boy Scout movement but also
the strength of the scouting movement in providing leadership and citizenship training for all genders.

**Background on Baden-Powell and Markham**

Robert Stephenson Smyth Baden-Powell was the seventh son born to Henrietta Grace Powell and Baden Powell, who passed away soon after. After her husband's passing, Henrietta became the head of the household and resolved to give her sons a life as rich as the one they had when her husband was still alive, despite the family's new financial limitations. She wanted her children to go to the right schools and meet the right people so that her family remained well-respected. In fact, her husband's name was so well respected that Henrietta had the family surname legally changed from Powell to Baden-Powell to immortalize her husband (Hillcourt).

Known today typically by his hyphenated last name, Baden-Powell excelled artistically and athletically but struggled with schoolwork, despite his great intelligence. As a result, he joined a regiment of Her Majesty's Army in India where he gained much respect and approval for his alternative approach to discipline. For example, rather than flogging soldiers who did not wear their cholera belt, he made them wear two belts as punishment.

Many of his fellow officers played polo in their free time, and Baden-Powell needed a polo pony to play. To this end, he spoke with his older brother, George, who recommended writing a book to earn additional money for such a pony. Baden-Powell wrote *Reconnaissance and Scouting*, a manual of military scouting tactics which became quite popular in the British Army. Later in his military career, Baden-Powell then revised *Reconnaissance and Scouting* into a new publication, *Aids to Scouting for NCOs and Men*, shortly before coming under siege in the South African city of Mafeking during the Boer War. This new publication included new material since the publication of his original book, including his lectures and scouting techniques he learned from an American scout, Frederick Burnham.

During the siege in Mafeking, Baden-Powell used ruse and deception to fool the Boers into thinking that the city was surrounded by land mines and barbed wire, effectively defending the city from attack by the Boers despite having very few military resources at his disposal. Although many men and supplies were lost during the siege in Mafeking, the news in England described Baden-Powell as a courageous hero. His new text, *Aids to Scouting*, sold like wildfire. When Baden-Powell returned home from the Boer War, he discovered that young boys wanted to play soldier in accordance with his writings. Thus, he wrote *Scouting for Boys*, and with it came one of the most prominent youth movements in history (Hillcourt 1981).

In this same time period, first-wave feminists addressed the controversy surrounding women's suffrage and British imperialism. However, one acclaimed British feminist, Violet Rosa Markham, a self-described Radical Liberal, spoke passionately in favor of both liberal social reform and conservative imperial politics while simultaneously speaking against women's suffrage, an unusual set of positions to be held by a single person. Violet Markham was the youngest daughter of Rosa and Charles Markham, a successful industrialist from whom she took her Liberal political leaning. Despite receiving little formal education, she found herself surrounded by intellectual and political discourse (Reidi 2000).

Following her father's death when she was fifteen years old, Violet Markham grew closer to her mother and started to gain interest in natural law as applied to different genders and the anti-suffragist cause. She then spent her mid-twenties traveling to key areas of the Victorian Empire. In Egypt, she marveled at "the world of British administration shepherding a backward oriental land into paths of righteousness for which many of its people had little taste" (quoted in Reidi). She cites this experience as well as Alfred Milner's book, *England in Egypt*, as the deciding factor that shifted her thinking from Liberalism to Imperialism (Reidi 2000).

Violet Markham later visited South Africa where she suffered a nervous breakdown, likely due to the social expectations of living as a wealthy unmarried daughter, as implied in her diary. Violet Markham stayed in South Africa from June through October 1899 which both reinforced her beliefs about imperialism and gave her a foundation of authority to speak on her views. She wrote and spoke on many occasions through the mouthpiece of British propaganda. Although only a few hundred copies of her books on this experience were sold, she came to be well-respected by newspapers, such as The Spectator, as well as other media for her literary prowess in politics. Violet Markham went on to make many friends in the circle of imperialist thinkers, and upon receiving her inheritance, provided funds to them to further their imperialist causes (Reidi 2000).

**The Advancement of Scouting in the British Empire**

Keeping the momentum of the scouting movement had both challenges and moments for celebration. An
early challenge to the implied gender inclusivity in Boy Scouts came from an anonymous young girl writing, “Dear Sir, If a girl is not allowed to run, or even to hurry, to swim, ride a bike, or raise her arms above her head, can she become a Scout? Hoping that you will reply. Yours sincerely, A Would-Be Scout” (quoted in Hillcourt 1981). In this letter to Baden-Powell, this “Would-Be Scout” summarizes the central dilemma in producing a scouting organization that was accessible and inclusive to her and her gender group in the context of the post-Victorian era. Baden-Powell ([1908] 2011) initially answered this dilemma in his book, *Scouting for Boys*, when he wrote

“And there have been women scouts of the nation, too: such as Grace Darling, who risked her life to save a shipwrecked crew; Florence Nightingale, who nursed sick soldiers in the Crimean War; Miss Kingsley, the African explorer; Lady Lugard, in Africa and Alaska; and many devoted lady missionaries and nurses in all parts of our Empire. These have shown that girls as well as boys may well learn scouting while they are young, and so be able to do useful work in the world as they grow older.”

Baden-Powell’s answer clearly demonstrates that British imperialism could coexist with egalitarian gender roles. In performing their duties with the skill and patriotism expected of any good scout, these women actively strengthened the British empire. And so, even in the post-Victorian era, Baden-Powell asserts that girls and women advanced both the scouting movement and British society, and that they should continue to do so.

In July of 1908, sectors of the media began to endorse girls in scouting. In a piece titled “Is Scouting Good for Girls?” published in *The Scout* magazine (1908), the Boy Scouts organization answered the title question by asserting

“Certainly it can [be]. There are plenty of reasons why a healthy-minded girl should become a Scout, and I do not know of one sound reason against it. If any proof were needed of the way Scouting has caught on with girls it is furnished by the large number who have already become Scouts and are enthusiastic supporters of the movement.”

This assertion lends the most compelling proof that the scouting movement both welcomed and held great promise for youth of all genders. Not only does this piece demonstrate that there was a good amount of public support for girls in scouting, but it also further indicates institutional support as well. Given the prominence of British imperialism, it would have been all too easy for Baden-Powell to voice his dissent to female involvement in any or all scouting activities. Instead, he remained silent.

In 1909, several months after the above article, the first Boy Scout rally occurred in the Crystal Palace in London. The media initially spoke of girls in scouting positively. On September 11, 1909, *The Spectator*, a London newspaper, wrote,

*At the Crystal Palace “rally” there were no fewer than eleven thousand Scouts, and among them was a troop of Girl Scouts. […] General Baden-Powell, addressing them before the march past, told them that all men are either workers or shirkers; Scouts had real work to do, because all their services were intended for others; they must carry out the special Scout duty of doing a good turn every day to someone.”*

Baden-Powell made no negative comments about the girls, and even declined to send them home. Doing a good turn has no gender, and Baden-Powell realized this when he saw the girls rallying under their own names instead of masquerading as boys.

However, the heavily ingrained social norms of the post-Victorian era soon began to overtake the momentum of the scouting movement. Powerful social influencers caused the media to subsequently rescind that opinion and thus affect change in the structure of the organization, forcing it away from the cohesive co-ed program that Baden–Powell envisioned. Violet Markham, an independently wealthy woman and acclaimed feminist of high social influence, initiated a series of letters to the editor in *The Spectator* that resulted in scoutmasters substantially altering the scouting program to conform to Victorian social norms.

In December of 1909, Violet Markham wrote

“SIR,

Some weeks since you allowed me to advocate the cause of Boy Scouts in your columns. May I draw your attention to an offshoot of this movement which seems to me thoroughly mischievous, namely, Girl Scouts. Again I can speak from personal experience. A corps of Girl Scouts has sprung up in a town with which I am acquainted; twenty girls or more, varying in age from twelve to sixteen, under the direction of a young Scoutmaster who has had considerable success with Boy Scouts. The Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts roam the countryside together on what I can only describe as glorified larking expeditions, expeditions from which they have been known to return home as late as ten p.m. The girls wear a red cross upon their arms, a symbol one is sorry to see in
I have described a local manifestation, but the wider issue remains to be considered. It may be argued that with proper control the evils I have sketched could be avoided. For the mixed scouting described above not one word of defense is possible; but, speaking as the head of a Settlement with some experience of girls' clubs, may I still urge the undesirability of any general development of this Girl Scouts scheme even on reorganised lines? In the first place, scouting for girls leads nowhere from the national point of view. It is not suggested that we should recruit our Army from women, and Morse signalling as a feminine accomplishment strikes me as singularly superfluous at a time when the decay of household arts is a word of reproach to women in every walk of life. The whole spirit of excitement and self-advertisement bred by the movement is highly objectionable, and from what I have seen myself I cannot too strongly depurate the tone and temper it creates among children at a difficult and impressionable age. Girls are not boys, and the training which develops manly qualities in the one may lead to the negation of womanliness in the other. To provide healthy and happy recreation for young people, to give them as much fresh air as possible, is an aim always before the head of a girls' club. But such recreation surely should be directed so as to encourage and not to destroy self-respect, dignity, and gentleness, qualities which are essential to the nation if the wives and mothers of to-morrow [sic] are to play their parts worthily. Ambulance work and Red Cross classes are most desirable for girls, but it is not necessary to associate these things with night attacks or ranging the country with a long pole.

I hear from the Boy Scouts' headquarters that six thousand girls have already enrolled themselves as Scouts, and that a scheme for Girl Scouts is being formulated. I trust that public opinion will assert itself strongly as regards this proposal. The friends of Boy Scouts can only feel that an admirable movement will be jeopardised seriously by the objections which must follow the spread of Girl Scouts, and this consideration alone, apart from any others, might well give the promoters pause.

I am, Sir, &c., VIOLET R. MARKHAM. Topton House, Chesterfield (Markham).

Despite her public reputation as a well-respected feminist in the post-Victorian era, Violet Markham argues for a notable anti-feminist change to the Boy Scouts, specifically the exclusion of girls. This stance is particularly striking when one considers the arguably more feminist mindset held by Baden-Powell and the media immediately prior to her letter to the editor. Violet Markham used her social influence to enforce the already-established gender roles of the Victorian era, and thus failed to stand in solidarity with female scouts wishing to further their own capabilities and leadership.

The series of letters from Markham and others concludes with the following letter from J. Archibald Lyle, Managing Secretary of the Boy Scouts, on December 25, 1909.

“SIR,

From recent correspondence in the Press on this subject there appears to be an impression that Girl Scouts form part of the organisation of Boy Scouts. I am directed to state that this is not so. Mixed troops of boys and girls are not countenanced in our organisation. There are some small irresponsible imitations of the Boy Scouts movement about the country, and it is known that in certain of these mixed troops have been started. We are much indebted to Miss Violet Markham for drawing attention to this, since unless it is under very good supervision the system is open to grave objections. Of course it is impossible for the public to discriminate between the different bodies alike in dress, and the blame has naturally fallen on the Boy Scouts. All we have done has been to register and take note of the large number of girls who have applied to us as anxious to take up scouting; and in view of their keenness and of the good that some such movement might obviously do, especially among a certain class of girls, a suggestion for Girl Nurses (called “Guides”) as an entirely separate organisation has been made by Sir Robert Baden-Powell to the Red Cross Society, which it is hoped may be taken up by ladies' Committees of that organisation where considered desirable. The aim of
the scheme is to teach the girls hospital and home nursing, cooking, housekeeping, &c., by practical means, appealing to the girls' own imagination and keenness.”

I am, Sir, &c., J. ARCHIBALD LYLE, Boy Scouts, Managing Secretary (Lyle)

In only a matter of months after males and females rallied in a unified Boy Scouts movement, one woman’s influence proved powerful enough to bend the will of the entire organization and the nation itself. This resulted in a gender-divided youth movement that has de facto encouraged gender roles internationally up until very recently.

Returning to Solidarity in the United States

In 1910, barely a year after the rally at Crystal Palace, the Boy Scout organization made its way into the United States. William D. Boyce, the original owner of the name “Boy Scouts of America”, initially struggled to get the organization off the ground until Edgar M. Robinson, a delegate of the YMCA, offered his funding and guidance to the BSA during its first year. The YMCA’s prior experience with running camps for boys led to recruitment of several thousand boys and many monetary donations to the Boy Scouts of America. By this time, numerous other organizations for youth and social work banded together to create a permanent sense of structure for the Boy Scouts (Peterson 1985).

While this progress continued to solidify the transnational legacy of the Boy Scouts, it had the consequence of defining the ideal scout in terms of their adherence to the white, male, heterosexual model. Although the Boy Scouts of America had since been proactive about welcoming boys of different races and religions into the Boy Scouts, it is only recently that the organization broke the gender barrier to allow girls into their flagship Boy Scouts program. This change has put girls on a track which allows them to earn the award of Eagle Scout, the most renowned youth character and leadership recognition award in the country.

CONCLUSION

Scouting has no gender. Camping has no gender. Helping others has no gender. Citizenship has no gender. The scouting movement should never have been an organization exclusive to the male gender. Although several alternative programs were developed for girls, including the Girl Scouts and the Campfire Girls, Americans believe that separate but equal is inherently unequal. Thus, it is completely antithetical to our most basic values that the Boy Scout organization in Great Britain allowed Violet Markham, a “well respected feminist”, to impact the gender composition of the Boy Scouts of America for over 100 years. Despite granting women the right to vote in 1920, we did not give girls equal access to programming and ranks, such as Eagle Scout, that would prepare them to be equally skilled and respected leaders in society. The Scouts BSA’s 2019 decision to induct girls into their flagship program represents a long overdue resolution of this gender injustice.

REFERENCES


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About the Author and New Hampshire Troop 6:

Kaileigh Row is a 2023 graduate of Keene State College where she earned a B.A. in Psychology and minored in Women's and Gender Studies. As an adult leader in one of the new Scouts BSA girl troops, she observed the girls of Troop 6 in New Hampshire demonstrate that they are equally capable in camping, first aid, and leadership roles as their male counterparts. Troop 6 has produced five Eagle Scouts in four years, each of whom presented a deeply impactful Eagle Scout project. In the words of Baden-Powell, they “have shown that girls as well as boys may well learn scouting while they are young, and so be able to do useful work in the world as they grow older” (Baden-Powell [1908]2011). The author may be reached at kaileigh.row@me.com.

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