

The Controversial Foundations of Scouting: Imperialism, Militarization, and the Pivot to Peace

Hussin J. Hejase*

Basic and Applied Sciences Research Center, Al Maaref University, Beirut, Lebanon.

*Corresponding author: Hussin J. Hejase, E-mail: hussin.hejase@mu.edu.lb

Citation: Hejase HJ (2025) The Controversial Foundations of Scouting: Imperialism, Militarization, and the Pivot to Peace. *Int J Teach Learn Sci-IJTLS*: e141. <https://doi.org/10.71010/3066-0807/ijtls-e141>.

Received Date: 23 November, 2025; **Accepted Date:** 26 November, 2025; **Published Date:** 01 December, 2025

Abstract

The scouting movement is found in over 216 countries and territories. The World Organization of the Scout Movement (WOSM) acknowledged 176 National Scout Organizations as its official members. Countries not recognized by WOSM have young groups labeled as pioneers. They run similar activities, therefore, differing only in ideology. These universal souls are aged between 4 and 25 years old. However, when referring to the founder of scouting, Lieutenant-General Robert Stephenson Smyth Baden-Powell, the founder of the global Scouting movement, he is a person with a legacy deeply tied to the controversial events of the British Colonial Second Boer War, especially the Siege of Mafeking. This research explores the ethical foundations of Scouting, shaped by a conflict between its origins in British imperialism and its evolution into a global peace initiative with Christian principles. Three main controversies are explored: (1) The inclusion and exaltation of youngsters in the Mafeking Cadet Corps, (2) Baden-Powell's role in South African colonization and the ensuing "occupation guilt," and (3) the conversion of a military manual into the popular book 'Scouting for Boys.' Moreover, understanding Baden-Powell's legacy requires realizing that Scouting is an extension of the British Empire's moral and military aspirations rather than just a harmless character-building activity.

Keywords: Boy Scout Movement, Baden-Powell, Mafeking, Colonialism, Religion, Peace.

Introduction

The Dual Legacy of a Hero and an Imperialist

There is a special place in history for Robert Baden-Powell, also known as B-P. He is hailed as a national hero [1] and a defender of peace, yet he is also blamed for playing a significant role in British imperialism. His fame didn't come from education or social reform, but from the harsh realities of the British Empire's wars, especially the 217-day siege of Mafeking during the Second Boer War [2,3].

When Baden-Powell started the Boy Scouts in 1908, just eight years after his rise to fame, he turned military skills and loyalty to the Empire into a global program for "character development" [2,3]. This study argues that many of the ethical questions facing scouting today, like accountability, political neutrality, and inclusivity, can be traced back to these controversial beginnings. I suggest that the movement's origins were an attempt to mitigate the British Empire's "occupation guilt" by turning military readiness into moral and civic responsibility, all within a religious framework that promoted peace but also reinforced colonial values.

Research Methodology

A qualitative content analysis is the research approach, mixing historical and interpretive methods. Three sections embody the analysis. These are as follows:

Section One: Inspecting Documents and Archives: These include reading Baden-Powell's publications (like The Matabele Campaign, Aids to Scouting, and Scouting for Boys), along with what historians have written about him and researchers' critical reviews. The sources provide Baden-Powell's perspective, while the other shed light on the bigger picture. Online sources

and materials form a strong background, such as the Project Gutenberg (<https://www.gutenberg.org/>).

Section Two: Applying a Historical Context Comparative Analysis. This work examines how different authors describe the events of Mafeking and the Cadet Corps. In fact, some celebrate them, while others are more critical. Particular attention is paid to the points where these accounts diverge, particularly about whether Baden-Powell led the Cadet Corps or merely observed from a distance and whether the lads were truly in danger. In addition, the analysis highlights the continuously debated facts (<https://scoutwiki.scouts.org.za/wiki/>).

Section three: Legal and Ethical Analysis: Here, international laws about war and occupation are consulted (i.e., the Hague Regulations and Geneva Conventions) to judge how occupying powers should treat civilians and children. Moreover, how these rules could shape policies and educational programs for modern Scouting is examined, especially those focused on peace. For this, legal summaries and guidance from organizations like the International Committee of the Red Cross [4] are inspected.

Historical Foundations and Discussion

The Empire's Shadow: Baden-Powell, Mafeking, and "Occupation Guilt"

The Reality of Colonial Conflict

To fully comprehend the arguments around Baden-Powell, one must confront the realities of the Second Boer War (1899–1902). In this conflict, the British Empire sought to subjugate the Boers, i.e., Dutch-descended settlers, in South Africa to control resources and territory [5,6]. Although Baden-Powell was hailed as a hero in Britain for his defense of Mafeking, it

was only one aspect of a far bloodier and more extensive battle. During the war, activities like burning down fields and placing civilians in concentration camps caused many British people to doubt their own empire [5]. These incidents contributed to what is now known as "occupation guilt."

Baden-Powell's fame grew in this environment [7]. He was skilled at using the media and public opinion, and he became the symbol of the tough, clever British officer [6] (Potter, 2023). The celebrations when Mafeking was relieved were a way for Britain to feel good again about itself, and B-P became the poster child for what it meant to be a "real" British man, someone whose reputation was built on military success [1].

Imperial Values at the Core

'Aids to Scouting for N.C.O.s and Men' [2], Baden-Powell's debut publication, was a military guide to teach light reconnaissance skills to the British Army. To help the British Empire maintain control over its colonies, it taught skills like tracking and observation. The emphasis changed to character development when he modified these concepts for boys in 'Scouting for Boys' [3], but the fundamental notion remained the same: The ideal Scout was obedient to the King and Empire, prepared to serve, and morally upright according to Christian ethics. According to B-P, Scouting even transformed ill, feeble youngsters into strong, moral, and diligent young men [3].

This is the first big controversy: The values at the heart of Scouting were originally meant to train boys to serve the empire. The same skills that helped soldiers in war were rebranded as tools for good citizenship. In this way, the guilt of being an occupying power was softened by turning the skills of conquest into virtues like self-reliance and service. Baden-Powell wrote: "So, too, with a boy who has been accustomed to obey orders at once, whether there is risk about it or not; the moment you order him to do a thing on active service, no matter how great the danger is to him he does it, while another chap who has never cared to obey would object, and would then be despised as a coward even by his former friends. But you need not wait for war to be useful as a scout. As a peace scout, there is a lot for you to do any day, wherever you may be" [3].

Children in War: The Mafeking Cadet Corps

One of the most troubling incidents in Baden-Powell's story is the way children were used during the Siege of Mafeking, especially in the Mafeking Cadet Corps [6,8].

What Did the Cadet Corps Do?

Sergeant-Major Edward Cecil gathered about twenty young people, between the ages of twelve and fifteen, into a group during the siege. When Baden-Powell took over in February 1900, he immediately recognized their potential use and assured their operations were publicized [8,9]. These boys played important roles in the town's defense, even though they didn't fight directly [8]:

- a) They delivered messages across the town, sometimes under fire.
- b) They helped in hospitals and military offices.
- c) They ran errands and managed the town's basic telephone system.

Even though they weren't soldiers, their endeavors exposed them to real danger, which goes against today's rules about

protecting children in war [4]. Baden-Powell praised their bravery, turning them into symbols of British courage [9].

The Problem with Glorifying Their Role

The Boy Scouts movement was a direct inspiration, based on the Mafeking Cadets story. The uniforms, the focus on service, and the idea of discipline all came from these boys' experiences.

But this raises two big ethical issues:

- 1) The boys were put in harm's way, blurring the line between civilians and soldiers. In fact, "A boy named Brown, who arrived in the town as a refugee just before the siege began and was part of the messenger corps, was ultimately killed near the end of the siege. This was the sole injury among the boys, apart from small accidents and scrapes" [10].
- 2) Their bravery was celebrated in a way that made it seem normal, even admirable, for children to take on military-like roles. "The boys had to carry out their endeavors frequently under heavy shell fire, but bravely carried on, although it meant risks to their lives every time" [10].

This association between Scouting and the military, some detractors contend that the movement is less about education and peace and more about obedience and nationalism [9].

From Military Training to Peace Movement: Religion and Redemption

Changing the Message

After Scouting for Boys became a hit around the world, Baden-Powell realized that a youth movement focused on military skills only wouldn't last. The early 1900s saw a growing desire for peace and a fear of more wars. To keep Scouting relevant and expand it globally, B-P had to move away from its jingoistic (militaristic and nationalistic) roots. According to White [7], "Jingoism is the political perspective that advocates the use of threats or military force in foreign relations as opposed to finding a diplomatic solution. It is often marked by arrogance about the superiority of one's country and the inferiority of others."

His solution was clever: Keep the excitement and structure of military training, but change the goal. Instead of preparing boys to fight for the Empire, Scouts would now be ready to help others and promote peace and friendship between nations. A similar approach was adopted by veterans of the Spanish-American War of 1898, in the United States of America, who formed scout troops in the Northeast Illinois Council [11].

Although it was sublimated [12] on moral discipline and good citizenship, the military spirit persisted. Beginning in 1920, the World Jamborees served as a platform for showcasing this new, non-competitive character by uniting Scouts from many nations to celebrate harmony rather than competition.

The Role of Religion

This shift was built on a foundation of Christian values, though B-P tried to make them universal. The Scout Law required a "Duty to God," and the core values: Honor, loyalty, and helpfulness, were all presented as practical ways to live out Christian beliefs, often summarized by the principle of Christian manliness popular in Victorian and Edwardian Britain [13,14,15]. But this religious base brought its own controversies:

Although Scouting was open to boys of all religions, its Protestant Christian foundations occasionally made it difficult for boys of other faiths to feel completely accepted [14,15].

The emphasis on morals and God also helped defend Scouting against those who claimed it was merely a means of preparing future soldiers. B-P claimed that the movement was a force for good, able to transform the legacy of empire and war into something constructive; by presenting it as moral and religious [14,15,16].

Limitations

Since digital and secondary sources account for the majority of this research, certain original documents may be absent or lack ing. Historians and researchers continue to debate certain elements, such as what orders were delivered or how food was rationed.

Conclusion

The legacy of Robert Baden-Powell blends moral quandaries, true social innovation, and imperial aspirations. The ongoing debate about Scouting comes from this mix: B-P was both the hero of Mafeking, famous for defending a colonial outpost and using children in dangerous roles [1,9], and the founder of a global movement for peace and character-building [17,18,19,20].

The guilt over Britain's actions in South Africa helped create the psychological space for scouting to emerge. The discipline and organization of the Scouts came straight from the military, and the idea of children serving in war became the romantic model for the Scout uniform and spirit. Even as it attempted to disassociate itself from its colonial past, Scouting was able to endure and flourish globally due to its subsequent transition to a peace movement founded on religious principles.

The unsettling reality that Scouting's advantages: Discipline, organization, and global reach, are linked to its contentious origins must be acknowledged if we are to comprehend the organization fully. Today's Scouts have the task of honoring their past while attempting to disentangle their present values from the complex, perhaps unsettling, underlying principles upon which the movement was founded [9,21].

References

1. Jeal, T. (1989). *Baden-Powell*. Yale University Press.
2. Baden-Powell, R. S. S. (1900). *Aids to scouting for N.C.O.'s and men*. Gale & Polden.
3. Baden-Powell, R. S. S. (1908). *Scouting for boys: A handbook for instruction in good citizenship*. Pearson. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/65993/65993-h/65993-h.htm>
4. ICRC. (2003, February). Legal Protection of Children in Armed Conflict. Advisory Service on International Humanitarian Law. Retrieved October 28, 2025, from https://www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/document/file_list/children-legal-protection-factsheet.pdf
5. Pakenham, T. (1979). *The Boer War*. Random House.
6. Potter, C. W., Jr. (2023). Siege of Mafeking. *EBSCO Information Services*. Retrieved October 30, 2025, from <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/siege-mafeking>
7. White, D. (2023, November 21). What is Jingoism? Study.com. Retrieved November 5, 2025, from <https://study.com/academy/lesson/jingoism-definition-lesson.html#:~:text=Where%20did%20the%20term%20%22jingoism,extremely%20pa,riotic%20during%20the%20war.>
8. Scout-Wiki. (2025a). *Mafeking cadets - the first Boy Scouts*. Retrieved October 30, 2025, from https://scoutwiki.scouts.org.za/wiki/Mafeking_cadets_-_the_first_Boy_Scouts
9. MacDonald, R. H. (1993). *Sons of the Empire: The frontier and the Boy Scout movement, 1890-1918*. University of Toronto Press.
10. Scout-Wiki. (2025b). Warner Goodyear - the first Scout. Retrieved October 30, 2025, from https://scoutwiki.scouts.org.za/wiki/Warner_Goodyear_-_the_first_Scout
11. Martin, D. (2019). Introduction to the Northeast Illinois History Project. Scouting America: Northeast Illinois Council. Retrieved November 12, 2025, from <https://neic.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Don-Martin-Written-History-092316.pdf>
12. Hejase, H.J., Hamdar, B., Farha, G., Boudiab, R., & Beyruti, N. (2013). Subliminal Marketing: An Exploratory Research in Lebanon. *Journal of Business & Management (COES&RJ-JBM)* 1(3), 112-135. Retrieved November 5, 2025, from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/248381021_SUBLIMINAL_MARKETING_AN_EXPLORATORY_RESEARCH_IN_LEBANON
13. Bruce, R.D. (2015, October). *The Influence of Lord Robert Baden Powell on the Development of the Boy Scout Movement with Observations on its Operation in Queensland 1907-1937*. (Master's Thesis). Faculty of Education, Queensland University of Technology, Australia. Retrieved November 4, 2025, from https://eprints.qut.edu.au/88478/1/Robert_Bruce_Thesis.pdf
14. McKay, B.H., & McKay, K. (2025, September). *Manly Honor: Part III: The Victorian Era and the Development of the Stoic-Christian Code of Honor*. Retrieved November 5, 2025, from <https://www.artofmanliness.com/featured/honor-during-victorian-era/>
15. McKay, B.H. (2016). *What Is Honor? And How to Revive It. The Art of Manliness*. Semper Virilis Publishing. Kindle Edition
16. Rosenthal, M. (1986). *The character factory: Baden-Powell and the origins of the Boy Scout movement*. Pantheon Books.
17. Parsons, T.H. (2004). *Race, Resistance, and the Boy Scout Movement in British Colonial Africa*. Athens: Ohio University Press, Social History/African Studies Series. ISBN 978-0-8214-1595-5.
18. Mason, K. (2006). [Review of the book Race, Resistance, and the Boy Scout Movement in British Colonial Africa]. *African Studies Review* 49(1), 160-161. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/arw.2006.0082>
19. Nyeko, B. (2006). Review of Parsons, Timothy H. Race, Resistance, and the Boy Scout Movement in British Colonial Africa. *H-Africa, H-Net Reviews*. January, 2006. Retrieved November 6, 2025, from <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11315>
20. Reddit Scouting (2020). Do you really know the true story of Baden Powell? *Reddit Scouting*. Retrieved November 5, 2025, from https://www.reddit.com/r/scouting/comments/ilq3ak/do_you_really_know_the_true_story_of_baden_powell/
21. Springhall, J. (1977). *Youth, empire and society: British youth movements, 1883-1940*. Croom Helm.