



## **Can the Girl Guide Speak? The Perils and Pleasures of Looking for Children's Voices in Archival Research**

—Kristine Alexander

The history of childhood is written by adults and is often written about adults as well—about their hopes, their fears, and the ways in which they have sought to affect the future by educating and regulating young people. In large part, this is because archives are reflections of existing power relationships: they privilege the written word over the visual, the oral, and the material, the masculine over the feminine, elite white perspectives from the metropole over non-white and working-class voices from the peripheries, and adult perspectives over youthful ones. The power to exclude, as Rodney G. S. Carter has written, “is a fundamental aspect of the archive” (216), and girls’ voices have been excluded especially often. This is even true of the archival collections of the Girl Guide movement, the world’s largest voluntary organization for girls.

Since its establishment in England in 1909, the Guide movement has sought to mould, protect, and encourage generations of girls and young women. While its twenty-first-century incarnation identifies itself as a global humanitarian organization, whose empowered girl members volunteer to end poverty and violence in their communities and around the world, in the early twentieth century the official global vision of Guiding was an imperial one: a contradictory mix of gender conservatism, empowered citizenship, global sisterhood, and the British “civilizing mission.”<sup>1</sup> By the 1930s, over 1.5 million girls within and beyond the British Empire had joined the movement and were wearing its uniforms, earning badges, and learning about camping and social service. Like the young readers discussed in Kristine Moruzi’s article, these early-twentieth-century girls were encouraged to


see themselves as part of a diverse and harmonious imperial and international sisterhood. The official program of Guiding was a product of adult anxieties and aspirations, but it also reflected ongoing and often unacknowledged negotiations among adults, adolescents, and children, as well as among local, national, imperial, and global contexts.

The Guide movement offered similar experiences and ideals to girls with vastly different identities and life experiences: during the 1920s and 1930s, the global Guide “sisterhood” included Jewish girls in Winnipeg and Toronto, Aboriginal girls at Canadian residential and day schools, middle-, upper-, and working-class girls in England, and students at mission schools in India. Whereas existing scholarship on the history of this organization is based mainly on adult-produced sources held in British and American archives, I have sought to expand our understanding of its history both geographically (by producing a multi-sited study of the movement’s practices and ideals in early-twentieth-century England, Canada, and India) and by asking how girls and young women in these three distant and different places responded to the often contradictory ideals and practices of Guiding.<sup>2</sup> Their voices, perhaps unsurprisingly, were among the hardest to find among the many documentary traces the movement has left behind.


I am a historian by training, and my doctoral work on the imperial and international history of Guiding

was based largely on archival research. And yet, as this article demonstrates, relying solely on the archive can obscure as much as it can reveal. My scholarly practice is therefore also informed by the close reading practices of literary criticism, the insights of art history and cultural studies, and the emphasis on understanding silences and power imbalances that characterizes postcolonial scholarship. Inspired by the methods of social and cultural history, I ask questions about discourse and practice, and about the often complicated relationships between the two. My work also engages with girls’ studies and the new children’s history, in that I aim to put girls at the centre of my research rather than focus simply on the prescriptions and descriptions of adults.

By studying the history of Guides in England, India, and Canada, I have sought to discover how ideas about girlhood travelled across borders and how these ideals were complicated and shaped by factors like race, class, and religion. Crucially, I also ask how girls themselves understood and responded to the adult-led activities and pedagogy of Guiding and how they used aspects of the movement in their own cultural practices. In some respects, my work (which includes analyses of Guide catalogues, consumer goods, radio programs, and films) examines Guiding as an early example of the globalized youth marketing practices discussed here by Natalie Coulter. Moreover, like Moruzi’s work on late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-



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century girls' magazines, my scholarship is also concerned with print culture, the transnational circulation of texts, and the construction of an idealized international girl figure.

This essay, based on my own research experiences, discusses the frustrations and rewards of looking for girls' voices in archives across Canada, England, and India. This discussion will also provide insights about broader methodological and epistemological issues related to historical research, postcolonial scholarship, and children's studies. The title of my paper is a play on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?"—a question that she ultimately answers in the negative. Whereas the subjects of Spivak's analysis were adult women who had been marginalized by race, gender, and the colonial context of British India, a number of scholars have argued that children are also subalterns—a colonized group, frequently seen as primitive or not fully realized, who are more often spoken for and about than they are allowed to speak.<sup>3</sup>

This is especially true of girls. Despite their practical and symbolic place at the heart of numerous debates about nation, empire, and modernity (through debates about the age of consent in India and fears about the "flapper vote" in 1920s Britain, for example), girls and young women have "by most usual criteria . . . acted from positions of relative powerlessness, marginality, and invisibility. And they have often been 'acted on'" (Maynes 116; see also Bannerji; Bingham; Driscoll). Studying girls, as Mary Jo Maynes has shown, reveals "the inadequacy of prevailing notions of historical agency" especially clearly (116). It also reveals the inadequacy of existing methods of archival collection and categorization, as girls' actions and choices are generally far less visible in conventional textual sources than are those of boys, women, and men. Some girls' voices are present in

archival scraps and fragments: in marginalia, diaries, and other texts that are often not seen as important enough to mention in collection descriptions, catalogues, and finding aids. Moreover, just as their experiences were fragmented along the lines of geography, class, race, and politics, so have these factors affected which sources and whose ideas have been seen as important and worth preserving.

Both perils and pleasures, then, await the scholar who attempts to combine girl-centred analysis with archival research. While marginalized, spoken for, and acted upon, girls from Canada, India, England, and beyond were also sophisticated consumers of the gender-based program of “character training” offered by Guiding, yet we know relatively little about them. This article will ask three questions about the attractions and limitations of looking for girls’ voices in colonial archives. First, how have issues of gender, race, language, and geography affected the production and preservation of documentary evidence? Second, what impact has the accidental and purposeful destruction of archival sources had on what we can know about young people’s responses to this particular youth organization? Finally, in such an uneven archival landscape, what strategies are available to historians who want to produce works of child-centred scholarship?

Like a number of other twentieth-century voluntary organizations, the Girl Guides have largely held on to

their own records in collections that often consist of both carefully selected documents and uncatalogued pieces that were acquired more haphazardly. Many sources related to the history of Guiding in Britain and across its former empire are kept at the Girl Guiding UK Archives, located on one of the upper floors of the central London headquarters of the movement, an imposing building on Buckingham Palace Road that testifies to the ability of the movement to acquire valuable property and align itself with elites. It was my experiences in various local and national Girl Guide archives that led me to consider how the collections on which my work is based have been—and continue to be—constructed, manipulated, and policed. The British Guide archives are looked after by a single employee whose duties include managing the archival collections, regulating access to documents, and working with volunteers (former Guides and Guide leaders, now mostly in their seventies and eighties) who run smaller local Guide archives, sometimes out of their own homes. This reliance on voluntary labour, a necessity for non-profit organizations with limited funds, means that vast quantities of Guide records face an uncertain future as the elderly, unpaid archive workers of the movement literally die off.<sup>4</sup>

Like some of the other records workers mentioned in Antoinette Burton’s edited collection *Archive Stories*, the employee who was in charge of the Girl Guiding UK Archives during most of my time there often acted

as a gatekeeper, “controlling and mediating my entry . . . by stressing what [she] thought was ‘important’ to” the archive and its contents (Ghosh 29). Concerned with race, gender, and young people’s responses to Guiding’s ideals and practices, I was less interested in photographs of the adult founders of the movement or members of the British royal family than I was in scrapbooks and photograph albums created by so-called “unimportant” girls and women. These albums were some of the richest sources I encountered, and I was saddened to learn that many similar texts, donated by former Guides from Britain and around the world, had been disposed of simply because the girls and women featured in the photographs could not be identified.

The Girl Guiding UK Archives, like the British suffrage archives that have been studied by Laura E. Nym Mayhall, had clearly been put together and catalogued with the goal of privileging one narrative and one “trajectory of experience while devaluing and obliterating any others” (236). This official narrative of Guide history is a story of female emancipation, interracial cooperation, and cheerful heterosexuality. Yet I also found myself unable to ignore the exclusions and silences that characterized this collection, having witnessed first-hand the destruction of documents whose contents were seen as unimportant or as threatening to the reputation of the organization.

In England, where Guiding and Scouting had been

taken up by young people from all social classes by the 1920s and 1930s, the voices of middle-class, urban, and suburban white Protestant girls are the ones that are the easiest to locate, especially in logbooks or diaries describing what took place at the weekly meetings of the various Guide groups. These sources provided information about individual responses and specific local contexts, which makes them a valuable counterweight to the mountains of prescriptive literature produced by Guide headquarters. They were also often a joy to read, as, for example, was a handwritten logbook kept between 1928 and 1930 by Eileen Knapman, a Girl Guide from Battersea in South London. In the ruled pages of a small notebook, Knapman described the weekly activities of her Guide group while also using her writing to mock several aspects of the movement and to create a sense of ironic distance from some of its more stringent requirements and ideals. In particular, her description of being tested for the mandatory Child Nurse badge (one of the many attempts of the movement to teach girls about scientific motherhood) may be read as proof that she—like many of her contemporaries—was more ambivalent than enthusiastic about maternal training. On 23 January 1928, she wrote:

two [of us] trotted down to Tennyson Street, in the pouring rain, with drooping hat brims, and hearts in [our] boots, to enter for the “Child Nurse” Badge.

There were heated arguments on the way, as to whether one puts a baby into a bath head or feet first, and whether a boy of one year, five months should be allowed to use a carving knife or a garden fork to eat his dinner.

Several months later, she made a similar comment about the seriousness with which the adult leaders of her group approached First Aid training. A few members of her company, she wrote, were tested for

[the] Ambulance Badge, including two Swallows. We spent the evening first aiding imaginary broken limbs, cuts, bruises, and grit in the eye; we surpassed ourselves in artificial respiration [and] we answered questions on every emergency possible (and impossible!), from an ice accident, to the baby swallowing the new Austin 7!

Not all English girls, of course, wrote such detailed and entertaining accounts of their Guide experiences, and certainly only a fraction of their logbooks and diaries have ended up in archival collections. Thankfully, I was also able to find bits of information about other English girls' responses to Guiding in the everyday record books that were kept by the adult leaders of each individual company (even fewer of these appear to have been thought of as worth preserving, however). The mostly working-class

membership of the 1<sup>st</sup> Foots Cray Guide Company from Southeast London, for instance, included several shop assistants and a dressmaking apprentice, the latter of whom quit in 1927 at the age of sixteen because of a "loss of interest."<sup>5</sup> This defection from Guiding, along with the numerous other examples I encountered of adolescent girls leaving the movement, supports Claire Langhamer's argument that young wage-earning women in interwar England saw the years between leaving school and marrying "as a time of freedom and independence" (50), a period without responsibilities when many teenage girls believed that they were entitled to spend their leisure time however they liked.


A similar age-based pattern of attrition also characterized Guiding in interwar Canada, a rapidly urbanizing, white settler society whose federal government was committed (through a variety of initiatives, including the Scouts and the Guides) to the assimilation of non-British immigrants and Aboriginal peoples. Once again, the logbooks kept in provincial Guide archives (in Canada, these are also run by aging volunteers) are generally by native-born, Anglo-Celtic girls from cities, such as Winifred Thompson, head of the Nightingale Patrol from the 21<sup>st</sup> Winnipeg Company, which met at St. Albans Anglican Church. Thompson was a more serious and matter-of-fact diarist than Eileen Knapman: of a Guide meeting on 22 October 1928, for instance, she noted that some members of her company played volleyball while

others practised their “ambulance” skills, marching, and singing for upcoming public displays, and she wrote that St. Albans Guides had recently earned badges in flag signalling, bed making, fire making, and “health rules.” Her logbook is also proof of the importance of local conditions in Guide practice; on 14 January 1929, she noted that her company began one January meeting by running laps around the church hall—not to keep fit but to keep warm.


Guiding in Canada also included non-British immigrants as well as Aboriginal children, yet these girls are discussed most often in official texts as abstract representations of the “Canadianizing” value of Guide work. While in Canada to receive an honorary doctorate from the University of Toronto, Scout and Guide founder Robert Baden-Powell spoke at the 1923 Imperial Education Conference, where he claimed that Guides and Scouts had been “found particularly useful in the schools for Red Indian children, just as [they] had also proved useful in a like manner on the West Coast of Africa and in Baghdad” (“Scouts and Guides,” 232). Guiding was also often explained as a “useful” way to assimilate non-British immigrants: on 14 May 1928, for example, the Captain of a company from the Manitoba town of Morden was commended at the provincial level for “trying to turn fourteen little German girls into good Canadians” (Minute book). Unlike Eileen Knapman and Winifred Thompson, these “Red Indian children” and “little German girls” (among

numerous other examples) exist in Guide texts as abstract concepts or social problems to be solved. My research in Canadian Guide archives failed to uncover any sources created by these young people, and I have not even been able to learn a single one of their names.

I have, however, found bits of evidence of how a few Aboriginal, mixed-race, and immigrant children responded to Guiding in the diary kept by Monica Storrs, a British missionary who started Guide and Scout groups in northern British Columbia in the late 1920s. Like many of her contemporaries, Storrs was fascinated by the “racial” and “national” composition of her Guides and Scouts (and it is worth noting that she often used those terms interchangeably), counting them off in her diary as including Danish, “Italian (Roman Catholic),” American, French-Canadian, “halfbreed,” English, German-Italian, “three-quarters Indian,” and “real Scotch” (61–62).<sup>6</sup> One evening in March 1930, Storrs wrote that her Guides “practiced bed-making. . . . We had a few serious differences of opinion [including]: How often you should strip [the bed]. The general opinion was, that to do it every day, (as sometimes in England), is morbid if not hysterical. Here we arrived at a compromise of *at least* twice a week!” (73). Storrs’s emphasis on teaching “proper” bed-making skills, when considered alongside her attempts to categorize the ethnically heterogeneous group of children who joined Scouting and Guiding,



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may be read as an attempt to use domestic and cleaning rituals to promote supposedly “superior” British lifeways in a settler society inhabited by Indigenous, mixed-race, and non-British peoples. Her Guides’ insistence that such time-consuming labour was “morbid if not hysterical,” meanwhile, provides evidence that these metropolitan ideals were contested and sometimes, in fact, rejected.

The formal connection between Guiding and Scouting and the Canadian Department of Indian Affairs, which got stronger as the twentieth century progressed, was especially evident in the formation of mandatory companies and troops at many Aboriginal residential and industrial schools (see, for instance, McCallum; Miller 277–80). I have looked for these girls’ responses to Guiding in sources produced by adults, primarily in reports on Guide activities by residential school principals (submitted to the Department of Indian Affairs) and in Guide magazine articles that alternately stressed the exotic nature and exemplary accomplishments of Aboriginal Guide groups (all while extolling the benefits of so-called Indian play for implicitly white young people). Aboriginal Guides won prizes especially often for first-aid work and needlecraft, an indication that Native girls could and often did use Guiding as “a means to practice ‘culturally related behaviours’ and . . . to continue distinct Aboriginal traditions” (McCallum 156; see also Haig-Brown).

In an essay that discusses Guiding and Scouting at Australian Aboriginal schools, Fiona Paisley notes that, while these organizations supported racial hierarchies and naturalized colonialism, “indigenous accounts of being in Scout and Guide troops focus on the escape from uniformity they afforded.



Where the impact of being institutionalized has been remembered by the ‘stolen generations’ as predominantly traumatic, Scouting and Guiding appears as fun” (255). A number of oral history interviews conducted with the survivors of Canadian residential schools similarly focus on the pleasures and pride that involvement in Guiding could bring. Marguerite Beaver, who was a student in the 1940s at the Mohawk Institute residential school in Brantford, Ontario, recalled the following:

Another thing we really liked—they had the Brownies and the Girl Guides. . . . And Lady Baden Powell come down there and we all went to the Tutela Park and the ones from the Mohawk Institute—I’ll never forget, oh we were so proud—we won everything—the inspections for the Brownies and the Girl Guides, out of all the troops in Brantford. They used to take the ones that stayed there in the summer, they used to take them camping. I went with them one time when they went to Chiefswood [the childhood home of Mohawk poet E. Pauline Johnson] and we had a fabulous time. (qtd. in Graham 386)<sup>7</sup>

Beaver’s words, I think, may be read as proof that some Canadian Aboriginal girls, like many of their “Guide sisters” across the British empire and the world, enjoyed and took what they wanted from the movement without

necessarily agreeing or engaging with some of its broader ideological goals.

Girls in late colonial India also used Guiding for their own ends, although Indian Guides from the 1920s and 1930s are more difficult to trace than their Canadian and British counterparts because of the political and organizational changes that affected South Asia and its voluntary organizations in the decades after independence. In Delhi, I was received warmly at the headquarters of the Bharat Scouts and Guides (a coeducational organization since 1951), but soon learned that they had very few documents dating from before the 1980s. I had better luck at the Margaret Cousins Memorial Library in Sarojini Naidu House, the headquarters of the All-India Women’s Conference, a voluntary organization established in 1927 to promote female education and social reform. The leaders of this organization described Guiding as a way to modernize Indian girlhood through physical culture and character training, and their annual reports and conference programs include references to Guides as honour guards and volunteer workers at AIWC events and conferences.

In interwar India, a British colony with an enormous and varied population, most Guide companies were attached to schools, such as the Brahmo Girls School in Calcutta (which was attended by middle-class Indian girls sponsored by a Hindu social reform group called the Brahmo Somaj) and the Lawrence Royal Military School (an institution for the mostly working-class

children of British soldiers).<sup>8</sup> The public and private archives I visited in London and Delhi did not contain any texts created by the girls (Hindu, Muslim, Parsi, British, or Anglo-Indian) who had been Guides in late colonial India. While female literacy was far lower there than in Canada and England, the fact that most Guide companies were based in schools means that this lack of sources is not a result of the women and girls who belonged to the movement being unable to read or write. Instead, I suspect, written records of the activities of the individual groups were simply not preserved for a variety of practical and political reasons, including the changes wrought by Independence and Partition and the amalgamation of the Indian Scouts and Guides into a single coeducational body in 1951—an organization that, I suspect, was not especially interested in locating and preserving documents produced mainly by white women during the early twentieth-century period that Indian Guide leader Lakshmi Mazumdar, writing in the 1960s, called “a bitter struggle” for “national liberation” (38).

I have found a few traces of how that “struggle” played out among some girls and young women in South Asia during the late 1920s and early 1930s. The 1930 annual report for the British Guide Association, for example, included references to “a certain amount of trouble over Guides [in Kashmir] resigning for political reasons,” “trouble in one company [in Bihar and Orissa] on the question of loyalty,” and the regional reports from

Bengal and the Central Provinces noted that “political unrest” had led to the suspension or disbandment of several companies (*Girl Guides*, 141–44). These were not the first instances of South Asian Guides and Guide leaders acting in support of the popular movement to free India from its colonial ties to Britain. In 1928, for instance, senior students at Brahma Girls’ School in Calcutta refused to make the Guide promise of loyalty to the King-Emperor (Mazumdar 85). Perhaps unsurprisingly, this incident was not mentioned in the “India” section of the 1928–1930 biennial report of the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts, which focused instead on uniforms, training camps, and the publication of Guide handbooks in vernacular languages. But I think the fact that the actions of the Brahma Girls’ School students are discussed in the official history of South Asian Guiding (written in the 1960s and reprinted several times in the late-twentieth century) reveals the importance of these acts of resistance.

Some Girl Guides, then, do speak (though in ways that are always mediated) from the archives kept by their organizations in various national contexts. The production and preservation of evidence about girls’ responses to the prescriptions and practices of Guiding reflects a number of past and present power imbalances: between English and other languages, white and non-white racial categories, the printed word and non-print forms of knowledge, and the imperial and

organizational centre and peripheries. Age and gender are important here, too, as ideas about what counts as evidence and what is worth preserving continue to reflect gendered power relationships between children, adolescents, and adults. Our understanding of how girls made their own meanings and cultural practices out of Guiding is also shaped by the many photographs, letters, and other sources that have not survived, whether because of decolonization, organizational priorities, or the desire to suppress past aspects of the organization that may be seen as embarrassing or unsavoury.

This essay has also highlighted a few of the strategies available to scholars who want to bring girls from the margins to the centre of historical analysis. These include looking for sources produced by girls (while still reading them critically) and reading archival finding

aids and adult-produced sources against the grain. Girl-centred historical research is also made richer by what Mona Gleason has called empathic inference—the ability to imagine what events and experiences might have meant and been like from the perspective of a young person. Photographs are other especially valuable sources of information, as they depict a far broader range of girls than do the textual records of the Guide movement. Yet while presenting a broad and relatively unstudied body of evidence, photographs of Girl Guides from across the British Empire and the world are also reminders of just how many girls' subjectivities and ideas we will never be able to know. In addition to looking for voices, then, historians of girls and the institutions that socialized them should also remember, as Spivak suggests, to measure silences (48).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS) has developed a “Global Action Theme” badge that focuses on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of the UN. These goals, determined in 2000–2001, are to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; to achieve universal primary education; to promote gender equality and empower women; to reduce child mortality; to improve maternal health; to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases; to ensure environmental sustainability; and to develop a global partnership for development. To mark the hundredth anniversary of the start of Guiding, WAGGGS is hosting a series of “Young Women’s World Forums,” held in 2010, 2011, and 2012, at which Guides from around the world meet to discuss the MDGs and how to achieve them. For more on the Girl Guides and British imperialism, see Alexander, “Imperial Internationalism”; Proctor.

<sup>2</sup> See my dissertation, “The Girl Guide Movement, Imperialism and Internationalism in Interwar England, Canada and India,” which I defended at York University in 2010.

<sup>3</sup> See McGillis and Khorana; Nodelman; Wallace. A similar point is also made by Ann Laura Stoler, who writes that “racialized Others invariably have been compared and equated with children, a representation that conveniently provided a moral justification for imperial policies of tutelage, discipline and specific paternalistic and maternalistic strategies of custodial control” (150).

<sup>4</sup> This problem has attracted some attention in the United Kingdom, most notably through the Database of Archives of Non-Governmental Organizations (DANGO), an Arts and Humanities

Research Council-funded project based at the University of Birmingham. DANGO’s main focus is on the “new social movements” of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, however, so it is not especially concerned with Guide sources from the early twentieth century.

<sup>5</sup> As opposed to Brownies, which were for younger girls, and Rangers, which were for girls over sixteen, Guides were between the ages of ten and sixteen; many British girls during this period started full-time work at age fourteen.

<sup>6</sup> While Storrs’s unselfconscious list of racial and ethnic categories jars with twenty-first-century sensibilities, it is worth remembering, as Daniel Coleman does, that for early-twentieth-century Canadians

the sorting of people into racial groups was carried out without the looming consciousness of atrocity. They thought of the processes of racialized categorization (for immigration, for social intervention, for national definition) as civil acts—very often as recognition, respect, orderly government, and even as potential welcome. That these acts were based upon the assumption of British superiority was not immediately attached, in their minds to the images of genocide as it is in ours—this despite the fact that a greater devastation had been, and was being, carried out in the Americas under European colonialism than that perpetuated under Naziism. (41–42)

<sup>7</sup> Graham’s book also includes excerpts from reports written by the principal of the Mohawk Institute during the 1920s and 1930s that discuss the positive impact of Guiding on female students;

most of the interviews cover a slightly later time period.

<sup>8</sup> Sanjay Seth also highlights what a small percentage of Indian girls attended these schools, writing that “the quinquennial survey of education for 1927–37 found that only 14 percent of girls who

enrolled in school proceeded to even reach the fourth grade, completion of which was conventionally defined as the minimal requirement for attaining literacy, and on the eve of Independence there were only 232,000 girls in high schools, compared to almost two million boys” (157).

## Acknowledgements

The research and writing of this article were funded by SSHRC doctoral and postdoctoral fellowships. I am grateful for this financial support, and for the comments of Tarah Brookfield and of the reviewers of this journal.

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