



B-P - Chief Scout of the World

Author: Marcus Ljungblad
Saved From : www.scout.org

The name of Baden-Powell is known and respected throughout the world as that of a man who in his 83 years led two separate and complete lives, one as a soldier fighting for his country, and the other as a worker for peace through the brotherhood of the Scout Movement.

Growing Up

Robert Stephenson Smyth Baden-Powell, known as B-P, was born at 6 Stanhope Street (now 11, Stanhope Terrace) Paddington, London on 22nd February 1857. He was the sixth son and the eighth of ten children of the Reverend Baden Powell, a Professor at Oxford University. The names Robert Stephenson were those of his Godfather, the son of George Stephenson the railway pioneer.

His father died when B-P was only three years old and the family were left none too well off. B-P was given his first lessons by his mother and later attended Rose Hill School, Tunbridge Wells, where he gained a scholarship for admittance to Charterhouse School. Charterhouse School was in London when B-P first attended but whilst he was there it moved to Godalming in Surrey, a factor which had great influence later in his life.

He was always eager to learn new skills. He played the piano and the violin. He acted - and acted the clown too at times. While at Charterhouse he began to exploit his interest in the arts of scouting and woodcraft.

In the woods around the school B-P would hide from his masters as well as catch and cook rabbits, being careful not to let tell-tale smoke give his position away. The holidays were not wasted either. With his brothers he was always in search of adventure. One holiday they made a yachting expedition round the south coast of England. On another they traced the Thames to its source by canoe. In all this Baden-Powell was learning the arts and crafts which were to prove so useful to him professionally.

B-P was certainly not known for his high marks at school, as his end-of-term reports revealed. One records "mathematics - has to all intents given up the study", and another "French - could do well but has become lazy, often sleeps in school".

Nevertheless he took an examination for the Army and placed second among several hundred applicants. He was commissioned straight into the 13th Hussars, bypassing the officer training establishments. Later he became their Honorary Colonel.

Military Life

In 1876 he went to India as a young army officer and specialized in scouting, map-making and reconnaissance. His success soon led to his training other soldiers for the work. B-P's methods were unorthodox for those days; small units or patrols working together under one leader, with special recognition for those who did well. For proficiency, B-P awarded his trainees badges resembling the traditional design of the north compass point. Today's universal Scout badge is very similar.

Later he was stationed in the Balkans, South Africa and Malta. He returned to Africa to help defend Mafeking during its 217-day siege at the start of the Boer war. It provided crucial tests for B-P's scouting skills. The courage and resourcefulness shown by the boys in the corps of messengers at Mafeking made a lasting impression on him. In turn, his deeds made a lasting impression in England.

Returning home in 1903 he found that he had become a national hero. He also found that the small handbook he had written for soldiers ("Aids to Scouting") was being used by youth leaders and teachers all over the country to teach observation and woodcraft.

He spoke at meetings and rallies and whilst at a Boys' Brigade gathering he was asked by its Founder, Sir William Smith, to work out a scheme for giving greater variety in the training of boys in good citizenship.

Beginnings of the Movement

B-P set to work rewriting "Aids to Scouting", this time for a younger readership. In 1907 he held an experimental camp on Brownsea Island, Poole, Dorset, to try out his ideas. He brought together 22 boys, some from private schools and some from working class homes, and put them into camp under his leadership. The whole world now knows the results of that camp.

"Scouting for Boys" was published in 1908 in six fortnightly parts. Sales of the book were tremendous. Boys formed themselves into Scout Patrols to try out ideas. What had been intended as a training aid for existing organizations became the handbook of a new and ultimately worldwide Movement. B-P's great understanding of boys obviously touched something fundamental in the youth of England and worldwide.

"Scouting for Boys" has since been translated into more than 35 languages.

Without fuss, without ceremony and completely spontaneously boys began to form Scout Troops all over the country. In September 1908 Baden-Powell had set up an office to deal with the large number of enquiries which were pouring in.

Scouting spread quickly throughout the British Empire and to other countries until it was established in practically all parts of the world. It was abolished later in countries which became totalitarian (Scouting is essentially democratic and voluntary).

He retired from the army in 1910, at the age of 53, on the advice of King Edward VII who suggested that he could now do more valuable service for his country within the Scout Movement.

So all his enthusiasm and energy were now directed to the development of Boy Scouting and Girl Guiding. (Girl Guiding had started in 1909 when girls attended the first Scout rally at Crystal Palace in London and asked B-P how they could become Scouts.) He travelled to all parts of the world, wherever he was most needed, to encourage growth and give the inspiration that he alone could give.

In 1912 he married Olave Soames who was his constant help and companion in all this work. They had three children (Peter, Heather and Betty). Olave Lady Baden-Powell was later known as World Chief Guide.

Chief Scout of the World

The first international Scout Jamboree took place at Olympia, London in 1920. At its closing scene B-P was unanimously acclaimed as Chief Scout of the World.

Successive International gatherings, whether of Scouts or of leaders proved that this was not an honorary title, but that he was truly regarded by them all as their Chief. The shouts that heralded his arrival, and the silence that fell when he raised his hand, proved beyond any doubt that he had captured the hearts and imaginations of his followers in whatever country they lived.

At the third World Jamboree, held in Arrowe Park, Birkenhead, England, the Prince of Wales announced that B-P would be given Peerage by H.M. the King. The news was received with great rejoicing. B-P took the title of Lord Baden-Powell of Gilwell. Gilwell Park was the international training Centre he had created for Scout leaders.

Scouting was not B-P's only interest. He enjoyed acting, fishing, playing polo and big game hunting. He was a very good artist, working in pencil and water-colours. He also had an interest in sculpting and making home movies.

B-P wrote no fewer than 32 books. He received honorary degrees from at least six Universities. In addition, 28 foreign orders and decorations and 19 foreign Scout awards were bestowed upon him.

In 1938, suffering from ill-health, B-P returned to Africa, which had meant so much in his life, to live in semi-retirement at Nyeri, Kenya. Even there he found it difficult to curb his energies, and he continued to produce books and sketches.

B-P's Last Message

B-P prepared a farewell message to his Scouts, for publication after his death.

The message is undated but probably was written before 1929 because it was signed "Robert Baden-Powell" instead of "Baden-Powell of Gilwell". Lady Baden-Powell said that this letter, in an envelope addressed "to the Boy Scouts," along with other papers was always carried with them on their travels in an envelope marked "In the event of my death".

[Read the full message here.](#)

Footnote

This fact sheet is adapted from one of the same name published by The Scout Association, United Kingdom.