# "Gone Home": Boy Scouting and the Writing/Re-Writing of the War in Britain, 1914-1920s

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Although some scholars have used soldiers' letters to family members to discover more about their experiences of war, their connections with home, and their attitudes toward life during the First World War, few have analyzed non-familial networks of letter writing.[1] British soldiers wrote not only to parents, spouses, children, and siblings, but often to business colleagues, friends, and acquaintances while serving in France and other theatres of war. Although these missives were examined by censors and sometimes other family members, most of this correspondence was essentially private. This short paper examines another correspondence that inhabits the space between public and private, and that functioned as an important imaginative connection between home and front both during the war and in its postwar remembrance: letters between Scoutmasters and their Scout colleagues and troops in Britain.

Often close friends and colleagues, these Scout-soldiers tailored their letters to fit the particular relationship and war experience of each of the recipients. For young boys, the former Scoutmasters tried to provide accounts of the excitement of war for the vicarious pleasure of the recipients, sometimes even including war trophies in the envelopes. The letters were addressed to patrol leaders or troops and were made to be read aloud at Scout meetings or pressed into logbooks as part of the troop's historical record. However, when writing privately to older Scout leaders, the accounts often reflect a different tone. Some of the Scout soldiers knew their words might appear in public Scouting periodicals and wrote consciously for posterity, but to close leader friends in the movement, the letters provide a bleaker account of the life of a soldier and its connection to Scout ideals. What this Scout correspondence demonstrates is the importance

[1] A recent examination of letter writing as a cultural practice and a source for historians is Rebecca Earle, ed., *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-writers, 1600-1945* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999).

of non-familial letter writing to the understanding of the war and its long-term commemoration in Britain. Just as these Scouts created their own news networks through letters, it is clear that schools, churches, villages, clubs, sporting teams, and other informal groups used soldiers' letters to piece together a vision of the war.

More than forty thousand former Scouts served as combat soldiers during the First World War, and many of those men maintained connections with their troops back home through letters, newsletter articles, diaries, and logbooks. On leaves, they visited with troops and gave lectures about Scouting and the war. At home, boys collected the letters and answered them, sometimes individually, but often as groups, and the boys created elaborate tributes to those who died from their ranks. This paper focuses on one particular group of soldier-Scoutmasters, all with ties to London's poverty-riddled boroughs in Stepney, Bethnal Green, and Southwark. The four men examined here were born to privilege, educated at the best schools in Britain, yet chose to devote themselves to social work among the poor boys of London. For all four, Scouting became a vehicle for the kind of youth training they considered necessary. All four died in France, thereby entering the Scout Roll of Honour of those who had, according to Scout lingo, "gone home" and been "called to higher service."

The four young men highlighted in this short paper shared elite upbringings, but they also shared a vision of community and service that made them leaders in the fledgling Scout movement. Space doesn't allow a complete examination of their various correspondences, but I will use isolated examples to suggest the richness of these archives. The four men at the center of this paper include Dr. T. S. Lukis, a trained physician, who had embraced London's East End in 1908 when he moved into Toynbee Hall and started its first Scout troop. Scouting itself was new, with its founding text only appearing as a book in May 1908, around the same time that

Lukis's 1st Stepney Toynbee Troop was created.[2] Joining Lukis as a Scout pioneer was Roland Philipps, second son of Lord St. Davids and a graduate of New College, Oxford. Philipps, easily one of the most recognizable figures in Scouting before the war, lived in Bethnal Green in a university settlement, wrote several important books for the movement, and served as Scout Commissioner for East and North-East London.[3] Another soldier-Scout leader was Anthony Slingsby, also an Oxford man and a Commissioner, but for the North of England. He had lived among the poor in Walworth (South London) and worked for a time as Scouting's Organising Secretary for London.[4] Finally, Maurice Partridge Gamon had founded the Wellington troop of Scouts in South-east London (Lambeth) in November 1909, and prior to the war had thrown his energies into social organizing in the area.[5]

All four of these men, then, shared a commitment to youth work, to Scouting, and to building a cross-class community in Britain. They had each been influenced by their university careers and by first-hand experience of the poverty in some of London's districts, and each had chosen to act for change. As Standish Meacham wrote of the Toynbee Hall reformers, "Much of the teaching, particularly in the boys' clubs, reflected the desire to instill social harmony by means of a respect for tradition, order and authority."[6] Like the university reformers, Robert Baden-Powell's Boy Scout movement, founded in 1907, also sought to create a cohesive social fabric by mixing together poor and elite boys in a character-building scheme.[7] Both the university settlements and the Scout movement depended upon the creation of close ties between

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[2] Asa Briggs and Anne Macartney, *Toynbee Hall: The First Hundred Years* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 78-79.

[3] "Fallen Officers. Lord St. David's Heir," *Times* 17 July 1916, 6.

[4] Roland E. Philipps, "Anthony Slingsby: A Very Real Scout," *Headquarters Gazette* 9:8 (August 1915), 201.

[5] "Maurice Partridge Gamon, Killed in Action, July, 1916," *Headquarters Gazette*, 10:8 (August 1916), 206.

[6] Standish Meacham, *Toynbee Hall and Social Reform, 1880-1914: The Search for Community* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 55.

[7] Tammy Proctor, *On My Honour: Guiding and Scouting and Interwar Britain* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2002).

the elite leaders and the poor boys with whom they worked. These close ties, forged at campsites and in club rooms, re-emerged in recruitment stations in 1914 and in letters from the front.

The Scout correspondence network was multifaceted in that it consisted of private letters between individuals, semi-public letters from individuals to Scout troops, and public correspondence published in books, Scout periodicals and regional newsletters. Epistolary forms were common devices in Scout publications, and in fact, one of the most popular early Scout books was entitled *Letters to a Patrol Leader*. *The Headquarters Gazette* and *The Scout*, two national Scout journals, both published letters and when war broke out, they used letters and diary entries from former-Scout soldiers quite extensively in their columns. Baden-Powell himself was fond of quoting letters he received from Scouts, and he did so in all of his public venues: speeches, lectures, books, journals, news articles. Often, the name of the author would be removed before publication, but still letters meant for only one troop or individual sometimes appeared for the whole movement.

An example of these multiple uses for letters is Gamon's correspondence with his Wellington Troop. Gamon kept a diary for his Scouts, which he sent home regularly for them to read. He also corresponded with one of his former Wolf Cubs (younger Scouts) who became a Wellington Scout in 1916. A. W. Wyatt, whom Gamon called "Half-Mile Wyatt," wrote regularly to Gamon. In his answers, Gamon tried to reinforce Scout lessons, both feeding into the boy's vicarious thrill in corresponding with a soldier by including a German coin in his letter and warning him that he had a duty to serve at home. Just the day before his death, Gamon wrote to Wyatt: "You Scouts cannot help out here. But you can help at home. And I hope that you and the other Wellingtons will always buck up and do your best to become brave

Englishmen in the days ahead . . ."[8] In addition to these letters and diary entries for the Wellingtons, Gamon wrote a short book on *The Spirit of Scouting* and contributed letters and articles to the Scout publications.[9]

Although Gamon wrote most of his words for the boys themselves, other Scout leaders corresponded with boys and adult leaders in equal parts. Perhaps one of the best examples of Scout letter writers is Roland Philipps, author of the popular *Letters to a Patrol Leader* (1914). In this publication, Philipps used the epistolary form to teach boys about the Scout laws, with the letters all written to a mythical patrol leader named Jim. Already a famous Scout letter writer then by the beginning of the war and a well-known face at Scout trainings, rallies, and camps, Philipps spent much time answering letters about his ideas. He also wrote to Scout troops and individual Scouts, providing war yarns and Scout advice. For example, 13-year-old Antony (son of the Earl of Lytton), wrote to his parents about Philipps' visit to his school in February 1916:

> Captain Rowland Philipps has been here today giving us some lovely tips. He is a Commissioner for all school troops. He is telling us some lovely yarns about the front now. It is awfully exciting, he has been telling us some glorious indoor games. He is talking all about bombing, glorious! We have got a God in the Room, it is great fun. He is talking so well that he makes you think you are in the trenches. Good-bye.[10]

Antony, who had been a Scout since 1914, included Philipps' "yarn" in his letter, which is a story about a courageous soldier doing foolhardy things in the taking of a German trench. This visit inspired some sort of correspondence because Antony saved a letter from Philipps written in June 1916 reminding the boys, "Don't forget that if I live through the war, you and other West Downs boys are coming down in a few years time to help me with my Scouts in East London."[11]

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[8] Maurice Gamon to A. W. Wyatt (30 June 1916); Imperial War Museum, 87/83/1, A. W. Wyatt letters.
[9] "Maurice Partridge Gamon, Killed in Action, July, 1916," *Headquarters Gazette*, 10:8 (August 1916), 206.
[10] The Earl of Lytton, *Antony: A Record of Youth* (London: Peter Davies, 1935), 20.
[11] Ibid, 21.

According to Antony's father, the boy was much affected by Philipps' death later that summer and kept his promise to do youth work with poor boys when he was an adult.

Perhaps the most striking thing about Philipps' correspondence with Antony and the report of his yarns to schoolboys is the way in which it both reflects and contradicts his correspondence with other Scouts. In the semi-public and public venues, Philipps plays up the war and soldiering as a "Scouty" endeavor, but in his private correspondence with close Scout friends, he tells a different tale. When writing to Baden-Powell, Philipps maintains a cheerful and public tone, knowing that B-P is likely to either publish his letters or to quote from them at length. In October 1915, he assures Baden-Powell (the former career soldier) that "We are all cheery and confident and absolutely happy. For my own part I would not be in any other place." By March 1916, he is speaking more candidly about the possibility of death, but still reassuring the Chief Scout, writing, " . . . the loving Creator who went with me when I bought my first Scout hat and pair of short trousers will never take me to another world unless there is Scouting to be done there also."[12] Yet when Philipps wrote to his closest Scout friends, he is not so clear that what he is doing is right. To Arthur Gaddum, an intimate Scout friend in Manchester, he recorded a bit of despair:

> Last week the Chief sent me a copy of a scheme, which would, if carried through, have the effect of changing the whole basis of the Scout movement. He asked for my outspoken criticisms, and, although I was at the time in a dug-out under intermittent shellfire, yet I felt the matter so deeply . . . I do ask you to bring every force to bear to preserve the simplicity and purity of scouting, while we are out here carrying out another year of this cruel and wasteful warfare.[13]

Earlier, Philipps had comforted Gaddum, who was not serving at the front, saying both that "I loathed joining the Army, but, having done so, made up my mind to give my best to the work,"

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[12] Roland Philipps to Robert Baden-Powell, 6 October 1915 and 28 March 1916, Scout Association – London, TC/38.

[13] Roland Philipps to Arthur Gaddum, 8 August 1915, Scout Association – London, TC/248.

and "it needs a braver man to stay out of the army than to go into it . . ."[14] Likewise, to his friend and fellow Scout-soldier, Stanley Ince, Philipps confided in a letter his feeling that "Scouting is more noble in its aims and more permanent in its results than soldiering."[15]

Philipps, then, expressed his ambivalence about soldiering in his private correspondence while feeding the patriotic enthusiasm and Scout/war connection in his public utterances and writings. By tailoring his message for different audiences, he unwittingly created an image for himself as a war martyr that helped shape Scout post-war commemoration. Along with other Scout soldiers such as Maurice Gamon, Anthony Slingsby (one of Philipps' best friends), and many more like them, the boys of the war period shaped a heroic vision of the war as one big Scout camp. Through the letters and accounts, boys at home could imagine themselves at the front performing heroic deeds and "being prepared." As one young Bristol Scout wrote to his aunt, "I think the war is getting worse every day, do you? The Zeps, two days ago, were 23 miles from Bristol so "look out" or "Be Prepared" is our Scout Motto."[16] Other Scouts wrote to Baden-Powell himself to offer their services as couriers, coast guards and harvesters.

Those who were old enough joined up in earnest. When Lukis called a meeting of former members of the Toynbee troop in September 1914, it resulted in the formation of a Scout "Pals" Battalion from the East End, with Lukis himself joining alongside his former Scouts. When Lukis and his friend and assistant Scoutmaster, Archie Hogarth, were killed at Neuve Chapelle at March 1915, it was another assistant Scoutmaster, E. Barsted, who carried the wounded Lukis from the field.[17] Even boys sometimes joined as with Jack Cornwell, who won the Victoria Cross

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[14] Roland Philipps to Arthur Gaddum, 13 February 1915, Scout Association – London, TC/248.

[15] TS of Stanley Ince's Wireless Talk (BBC Boy Scout Programme), 7 July 1927; Roland House File, Scout Association – London, TC/168.

[16] Hubert to Auntie Bee 3 February 1916; Imperial War Museum MISC 131, 2009.

[17] Public Record Office, WO 374/43231, T. S. Lukis; Competitions folder, Scout Association – London, TC/225; Melvyn R. Brooks, "Dr. Theodore Stewart Lukis M.D., M.R.C.P. and the Lukis Trophy 1885-1915," FirstWorldWar.com, 2 August 2003.

for bravery after his death at the naval battle of Jutland when he was just sixteen years old. The Scout organization promptly created a Cornwell badge that was awarded to boys who saved lives.[18]

For Lukis, Philipps, Gamon, Slingsby, and many others, Scouting became their memorial. Huge services at Toynbee Hall (for Lukis), at the People's Palace at Mile End (for Philipps), and at churches and cathedrals around the country marked these Scout deaths. Locally, troops created roll of honour books, shrines, wall plaques and gardens. The Lukis Trophy, which is still awarded for scouting work to East London Scouts, was created in 1915 to honor this Scout-Soldier martyr.[19] Philipps' memorial was of his own making. He left money in his will to create an East London Scout home, which became a hostel and training center called Roland House in Stepney. At Roland House, a small shrine with his sword, medals, and his wooden cross marking his grave was erected.[20] Following Baden-Powell's suggestion, Scouts themselves became a "living" war memorial in the 1920s, taking on duties at Armistice Day services and participating in national commemorations.

One of the central problems Scouting has always faced is its relationship to militarism, and that was never more of a problem than during World War I and its immediate aftermath. This small section of correspondence shows quite clearly that the tie between Scouting and war was muddled and messy, and that private feelings and public utterances did not always agree. Even Baden-Powell himself, who had made his career as a soldier, often vacillated in his support for war. While on the one hand he tried to connect Scouting with the War Office in an official capacity and he promoted soldiering in Scout publications, privately he expressed more ambivalence. In writing to a friend about Roland Philipps, Baden-Powell confessed that "The

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[18] History of the Cornwell Badge, Scout Association – London, TC/331.
[19] Competitions folder, Scout Association – London, TC/225.
[20] Roland House files, Scout Association – London, TC/168.

loss of Roland Philipps will be a very heavy one to us. It is a great blow to me personally and though I nominally expected it, I always hoped that he would get badly wounded and sent home!" To that same friend, Scouter Percy Everett, B-P suggested that Everett avoid military service, writing that "I sincerely hope . . . you will ask for exemption for the sake of the Boy Scouts and Girl Guides."[21]

What I have tried to suggest in this short presentation is that the examination of non-familial correspondence from the First World War can be fruitful in understanding the mixed messages that people on the home front received from soldiers. The private sentiments of some soldiers often directly contradicted their public writing, yet it was the public writing that most shaped the post-war commemoration and historical memory of the conflict. In recent years, historians have suggested that the "mythic" idea of the Great War as an exceptional break with the past might be overblown.[22] Usually these scholars point to the British war literature of the 1920s and 1930s as the culprit, but this Scout correspondence suggests a more complex creation of memory from contemporary correspondence and publications as well as post-war commemoration and memoirs.

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[21] Robert Baden-Powell to Percy W. Everett, 16 July 1916 and 12 April 1918, Scout Association – London, TC/Percy Everett.

[22] See, for example, Tim Travers, "The Relativity of the War: British Military Memoirs from the Campaigns of Marlborough to the First World War," in *Political Memoir: Essays on the Politics of Memory*, George Egerton, ed. (Portland: Frank Cass, 1994), and John Mosier, *The Myth of the Great War: A New Military History of World War* I (New York: HarperCollins Perennial, 2002).