

## CHAPTER FIVE

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# GO GETTING GIRLS: 100 YEARS OF GIRL GUIDING

LIFE IS VASTLY DIFFERENT FOR WOMEN IN 2011 THAN IT WAS ONE hundred years ago. In 1911, many women did not have the right to work in the career of their choice, to vote, receive training, or hold political office. Universities such as Cambridge did not grant degrees to women until 1921. Accompanying this formal discrimination were widely-held views about women's physical and intellectual inferiority. Girls were raised to believe that their most important role was as a wife and mother and that, for the middle-classes, work should only be a temporary occupation before marriage.



Australia now has a female Prime Minister and a female Governor-General. The majority of undergraduate university students are female, and these women can aspire to any career. With such progress, many people assume that gender equality has been achieved. While it



Girl Scout illustration, 1950s  
United States membership card

is true that most formal barriers to equality have been removed, sexism is still ingrained where the law has no effect—in people’s minds—and substantive equality still eludes us.

Successive generations of women tore apart stereotypes of women’s inferiority and dismantled barriers to women studying and working. In 1908, 15,000 women marched through New York City demanding shorter working hours, better pay and voting rights, in a protest that helped to establish National Women’s Day in the United States. The culmination of previous generations of women’s lobbying led to the mobilisation of an international movement for women’s rights on the first International Women’s Day in 1911. In Austria, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland more than one million men and women attended rallies to lobby for women’s rights. Women in small towns and villages set down their domestic chores to attend political meetings and demonstrations. No one expected that the show of support for women’s freedoms would be so widespread and emphatic.

One hundred years later, some people find it easy to forget why

we have a women’s movement, or ever needed one. The centenary of International Women’s Day on 8 March is the perfect moment to remember what has changed for women in the past century and why we should not forget the lives of our great-grandmothers in striving to make today’s world a safe and enabling place for today’s girls.

It is also one hundred years since the largest movement for girls officially began in Australia. In 1911, Girl Guides were formally recognised in Victoria.<sup>1</sup> Millions of girls in more than a hundred countries have pitched tents, travelled the world and saved the lives of others—not to downplay the good turns, quests for badges and biscuit sales. Girl Guiding was born because, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the world was unsure of girls’ ability to move outside the home and into the realm of adventure and capability, and doubted their capacity to perform feats of bravery and physical endurance. Ironically, the movement that began because girls had to be segregated so that they would not be seen as transgressing into ‘manly’ territory has changed opinions and expectations about what girls can do.

Lord Robert Baden-Powell held the first Scout rally in 1909. That year he published *Scouting for Boys* and thousands of boys worked from its pages to form patrols and register with the fledgling movement.<sup>2</sup> Tens of thousands of uniformed boys milled around the Crystal Palace rally site, inhaling the excitement of their first contact with the man who inspired their outdoor activities and the sense that their isolated activities were part of a larger community. These feelings were surely part of the experience of one other patrol, but as ‘Girl Scouts’ among a mass of khaki-clad boys, they no doubt knew that the publication they had followed was called *Scouting for Boys* with good reason. The pioneering rally girls were not alone. Not only had English girls used Baden-Powell’s book to form their own Scout patrols, but girls in Australia, New Zealand and Scotland had also begun informal groups, some without any adult instruction.<sup>3</sup>

The rogue patrol of girls was dressed for the occasion in Scout hats and many wielded staves. Like any other Scout, the Girl Scouts knew that pride in the uniform was essential to the scheme—and would become a fixation in pedantic rules and regulations—and demanded to be inspected by Baden-Powell. His plan to improve the strength and character of British boys, and indirectly its military capacity, was



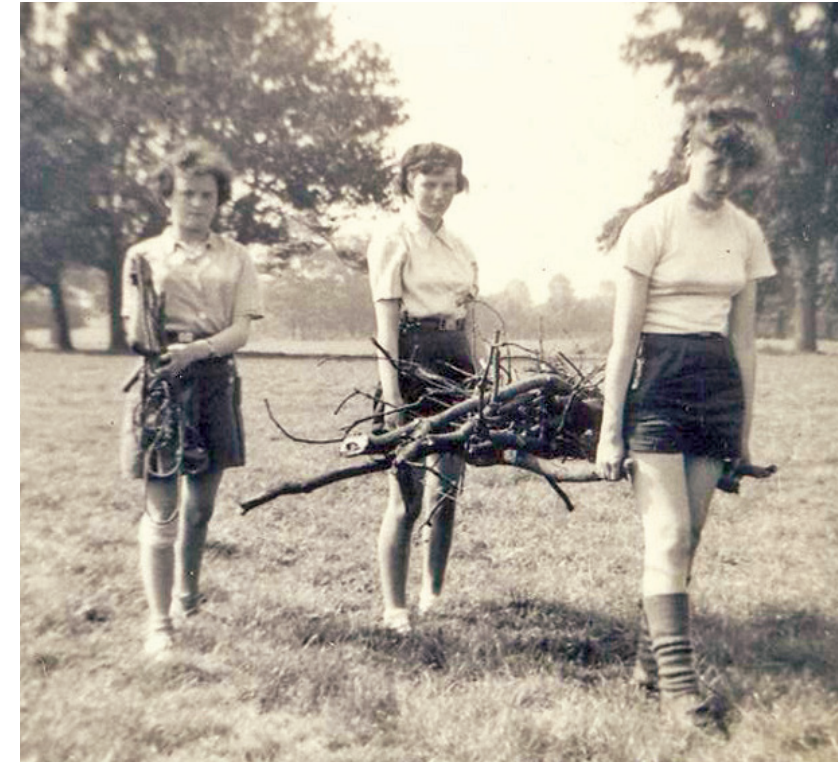
Striking tents photograph, vintage English Girl Guides scrapbook from 1960, published in London. Photo taken at Bristol on Tiennes camp facility



being subverted before Scouting's first official day was done.<sup>4</sup> A group of girls, however small, was not conducive to instilling 'manliness' in English boys.

Girls were quickly advised that a new organisation called Guides had been created specifically for the purpose of developing their 'womanliness'. Gladys Commander, who was one of the original Girl Scouts, recalled the transition as a mixture of reluctance and loyalty to Baden-Powell:

When it was decided that girls should be Guides and not Scouts we rather sadly exchanged our Scout uniform for blue cotton dresses and straw hats. It all sounded a little tame to us—flowers for our Patrol instead of animals, and rather a lot of emphasis on 'womanliness'. But we never thought of giving up; after all, the Founder was still our Chief, and if he wanted Guides, then Guides we would be! The change of name did me one good turn; our French mistress at school—had seen one of the earliest Guide rallies, and had spotted me there. The next day she said



Gathering firewood photograph, vintage English Girl Guides scrapbook, 1955

to me in very disapproving tones, 'I hope, Gladys, that you are not one of those unladylike Girl Scouts.' 'Oh, no, mademoiselle,' I answered. 'I am a Girl Guide.'"

The name change was the first symbolic step in transforming Scouting principles for girls. Animal patrol names were also no longer acceptable and most girls were resistant to the floral feminisation of their patrols. "When Guides first started, we refused to join them," one of the original 6,000 Girl Scouts recalled, "for having been Peewits and Kangaroos, we thought it was a great come down to become White Roses and Lilies-of-the-Valley!"<sup>6</sup> The association of proper femininity with the delicacy of beautiful, inoffensive flowers is a well-worn cliché and conflicts sharply with the way in which, over the next century, Guiding challenged what was acceptable for girls to do. Even the Brownies, the younger branch of Guides, which one in three British girls of membership age belongs to today, were initially lumbered with a floral moniker, Rosebuds.

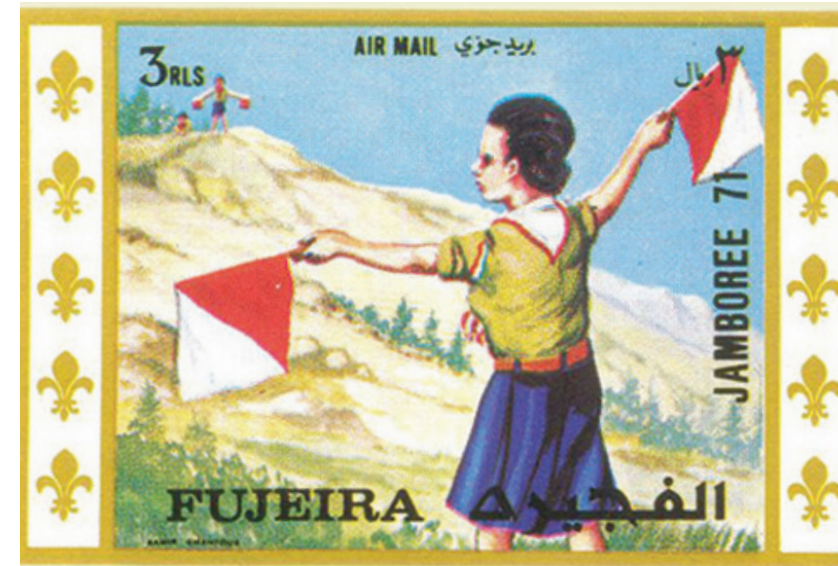
## ANYTHING BUT HOUSEWORK

Girls did not always comply enthusiastically with these attempts to alter the activities that were permissible for them. One Girl Guide wrote a letter to the founder to express doubt about the new components of Guiding. “We can ride and swim and climb a tree and track a man,” she wrote to Baden-Powell. “But when you write back please don’t say anything about sewing and lessons and housework, because these are the things Mother says we should do, and we hate them.”<sup>7</sup> Girls took to Scouting because they were craving opportunities for adventure, outdoor exercise and freedom from the home. Olave Baden-Powell, Robert’s wife, who became the Chief Girl Guide, suggested that Edwardian girls had nothing to do (apart from needlework, painting and music) “except wait to be married”.<sup>8</sup> After centuries of being second-class citizens, “women were beginning to dream of freedom and quality with men,”<sup>9</sup> she recalled in her autobiography.

### Sidestepping Public Disapproval

The first official years of Girl Guiding required delicate negotiation of the risk of public controversy—easily provoked on issues of girls’ proper station as they broke away from the home and into careers and higher education—while endeavouring to retain its useful aspects. In comparison with Scouting, there was greater difficulty in marketing the concept of training girls in drill, camping and tracking. Even in a magazine for girls, *The Girl’s Realm*, in 1909 there was concern about Guiding making for “rough-and-ready” girls, and it was suggested that some parents “were rather alarmed at the idea of their children running about the country and becoming somewhat gypsy-like in their habits and ideas.”<sup>10</sup>

*The Girl Guides Gazette* of 1914 confronted two issues that had the potential to compromise the movement’s “reputation for true womanliness as opposed to a ‘tomboy’ spirit or militarism”.<sup>11</sup> The first actively discouraged girls from wearing uniforms in public. Most concern is reserved for the potential public disapproval of marching, drumming and bugling girls: “In the words of the ‘Handbook,’ the less Girl Guides

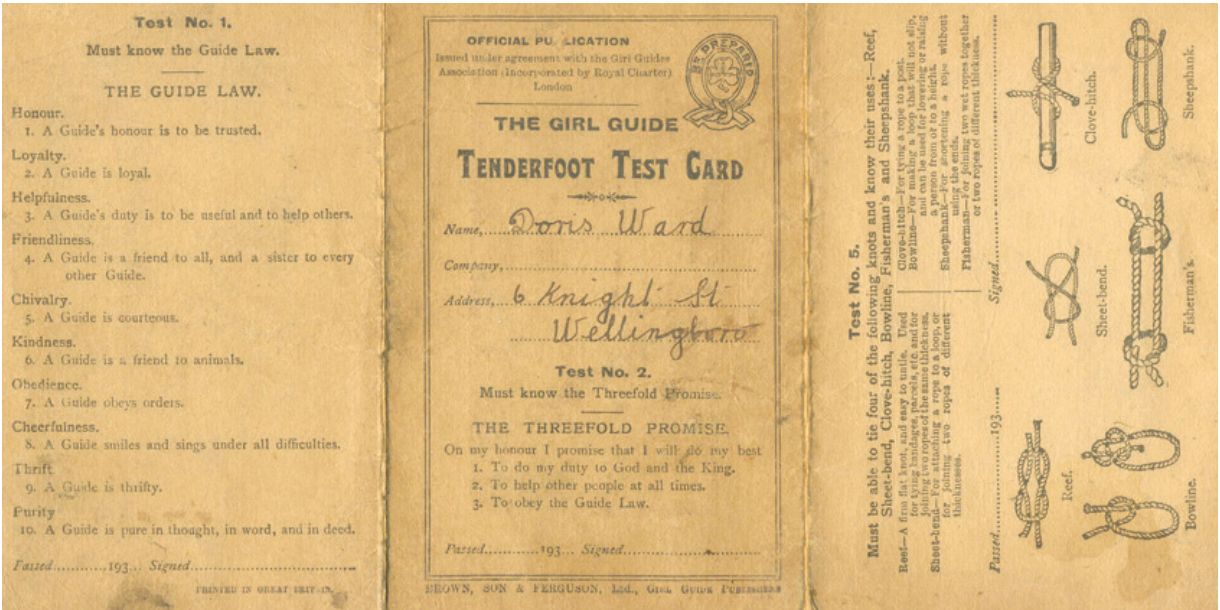
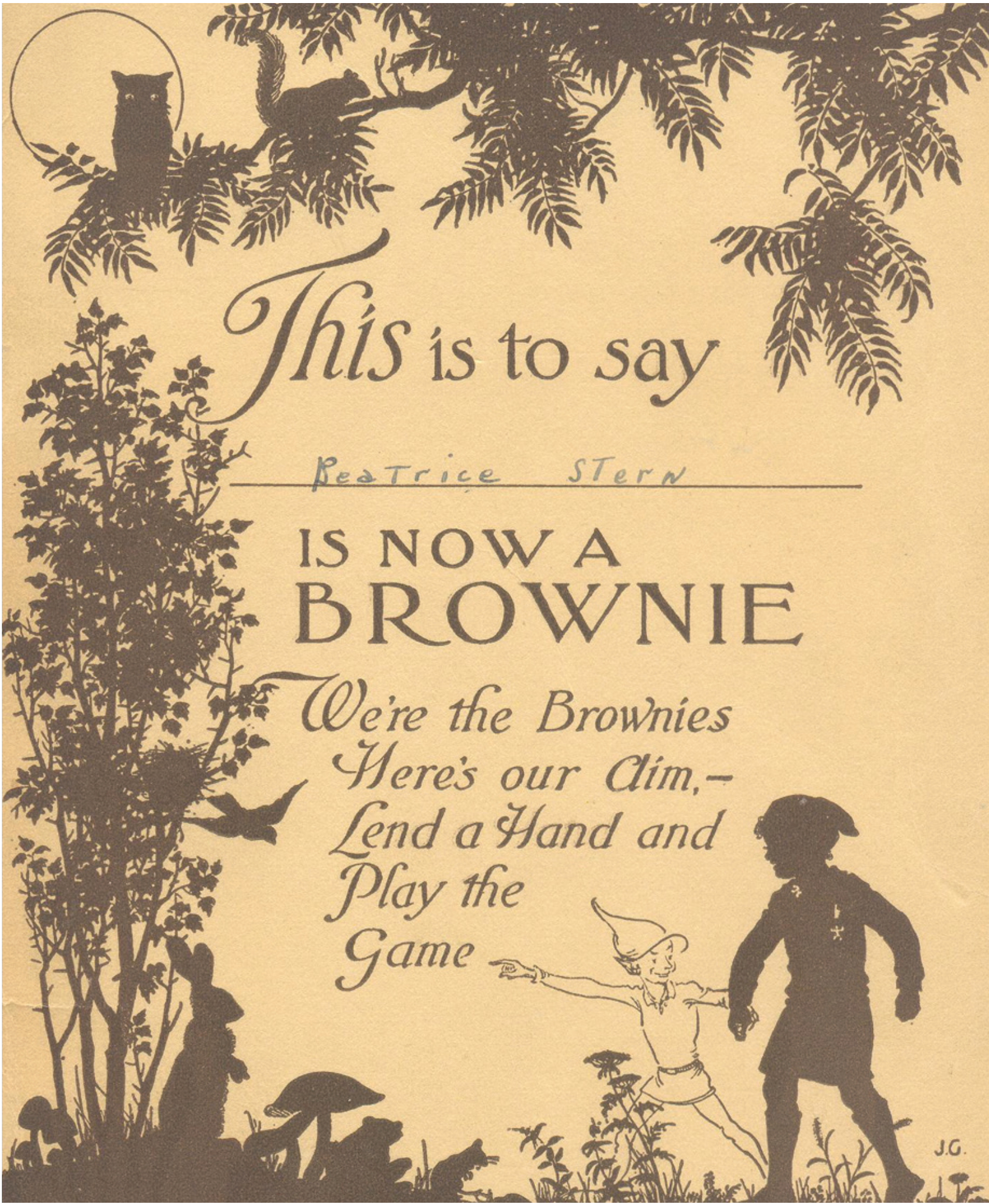


Fujeria (now United Arab Emirates) Girl Scout stamp, 1971

are seen marching in public the better. Girls playing bugles and drums will attract attention anywhere, and not always attention of a sympathetic kind. The use of bands of any sort when marching in public is therefore to be discouraged.”<sup>12</sup> Drumming and bugling carried military associations that were unpalatable when assumed by girls. Potential military links were downplayed from the outset. Baden-Powell’s sister Agnes, who was the initial head of the Guiding movement, wrote in *Home Notes* in August 1910 that there is “no militarism in it—no idea of making girls into poor imitations of Boy Scouts. Education will be on such lines only as will make the girls better housewives, more capable in all womanly arts, from cooking, washing and sick nursing to the training and management of children.”<sup>13</sup>

The initial set of proficiency badges that girls could strive for included many that were identical to the Boy Scouts’, such as first aid, cook, signaller, cyclist, musician, electrician, clerk, florist and pioneer.<sup>14</sup> To develop ‘womanliness’, the new badges for Guides encouraged competency in traditional domestic or nursing tasks such as laundress, matron, needlewoman, sick nurse, child nurse and dairymaid.<sup>15</sup> It is tempting to see these encouragements to embroidery and temperature-taking as redirecting girls from the excitement of the wide world, back into the home. Even in the recent history of Guiding there has been a coexistence of stereotypically feminine badges like the 1980s





‘Homemaker’ (for which girls were required to know how to care for a toaster, electric frypan, coffee percolator, blender and vacuum cleaner) with the likes of ‘Handywoman’ (girls must be able to sharpen a knife, fit a curtain rail, lay a floor covering, unblock a sink, replace a washer, paint a ceiling or walls).<sup>16</sup> Yet for the first Girl Guides, there were also physically-oriented badges for swimming, pathfinding, boating, flying and shooting rifles.<sup>17</sup>

Brownie enrolment card. “On my honour I will promise to do my best.”

## GIRLS AT WAR

The first two world wars cemented the value of Guiding to Britain and dispelled public opposition to girls camping and tracking. With half a million members, the immensity of the movement at the outbreak of World War II inspired a fundraising strategy that would become a staple method. As girls had minimal power, being neither an adult nor male, each was likened to only the size of an ant in the scheme of the wider world. When mobilised, however, all Guides together could lift giant weights. Girls would not be rushed to the front line of war

LEFT: Tenderfoot test card, 1930s England. The first rule to learn was ‘Know the Guide Law, the Threefold Promise, the Signs and the Salute’.



equipped with their knot-tying skills, but they could contribute to helping the Empire in battle through self-sacrifice. In a letter sent to inspire donations in April 1940, the contribution of the Empire's Guides was seen as a tangible and exciting way to show devotion to their country: "There is something terrifically thrilling in the thought of giving to the country the First Air Ambulance Service ever inaugurated, plus, we hope, the latest type of motor Lifeboat".<sup>18</sup> The money was raised across the Empire, sourced from Rangers, Guides and Brownies who sacrificed sweets and luxuries and, in the case of adult members, half a day's wage. Guides also earned money performing household tasks such as furniture removal, weeding gardens, cutting lawns, and minding babies. Some overseas Guides took self-sacrifice to a new level, however, the publication *The Girl Guide Gift Scheme* remarking on the dedication of a leper company of Guides in India that went without meat and fish to donate money to the cause.<sup>19</sup> Most of the donations were generated from Great Britain but almost one fifth of the funds originated from the dominions and India, showing lingering assistance of the British Empire on the spread of Guiding.

With all of its atrocities, the War brought with it opportunities for girls to work in areas previously closed off to women, acceptably brought into being by the necessity of their contribution with so many men engaged in combat. Rangers (for older girls aged over 17) and Guide leaders joined the services as well as the Red Cross, St. John's Ambulance Service, the Home Guard, Women's Voluntary Service and Air Raid Patrols. Sea Rangers became members of the crews of the Thames Emergency Service working in boats that were readied as sea-going ambulances in the event of air raids. Younger girls were not only sitting darning soldiers' socks and knitting scarves for care packages, however. Honour rolls list dozens of Girl Guides who rescued injured people from their homes during the Blitz, picking up where the Girl Guides who were used as spies by MI5 during World War I left off in the bravery stakes.

The conclusion of the War brought volunteer women directly into devastated regions. The millions of refugees who fled their home countries or witnessed the destruction of their towns needed support to survive and draw together the threads that remained of a normal life. The Guide International Scheme (GIS) was planned from 1941 for

women aged from 21 to 50 to carry out relief work under the auspices of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. From June 1944 to March 1952, 192 women from Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand and Kenya served across the world, in the Middle East, Greece, Holland, Germany and Malaya. There was no payment for their physically and emotionally torturous work, other than 10/- pocket money per week.

In *From a Flicker to a Flame: The Story of the Girl Guides in Australia* (1990) one of the Australian GIS members Nancy Eastick recalls the difficulties of work in the war zone:

I had seen so much misery when I left Germany in 1951 after my GIS that I hoped there would never be the need for relief work on such an enormous scale as it was in Europe after World War II. There were some nine million distraught refugees in Germany in 1945. Many had witnessed unspeakable horrors, some were maimed or diseased for life. Many had watched families taken away or murdered.<sup>20</sup>

In Greece, the GIS cared for hundreds of villages that had been ravaged. In their first week, Guiders cared for one thousand female political prisoners, equipped with little food and no heating, additional clothing or sanitation in the midst of winter. In the German summer of 1945, thousands of displaced people, political prisoners released from concentration camps and gaols, slave-labourers and foreign workers who had been trapped, and refugees fleeing from the Russian army in the Baltic States were flooding into large camps. Each carried mental, and sometimes physical, scars as a result of the conflict. From the deathly chill of the European winter to the oppressive heat of the jungles of Malaya, the dedication and strength of those who served with the GIS was a living demonstration of Guiding's capacity to shape women who aspired for more than a life of domestic bliss.

### Girl Guides Underground

Guiding in Britain and the allied nations grew in popularity in the face of war-time difficulties but, despite its innocuous purpose, the movement was restricted and even banned in some countries. Guide



'First day cover' of Afghan Girl Guides stamp set.

units operated secretly in these places, distracting some of the girls caught up in the war from their depressing surrounds. Changi Prison in Singapore, which imprisoned 50, 000 allies, including 3,000 civilians, was home to a covert Guide Company. In occupied France, both Guiding and Scouting were forbidden, as they had been in Finland and Poland prior to World War I. When Olave Baden-Powell visited Paris in April 1945 (just before Victory in Europe Day on 8 May), the suppressed ranks of Guides and Scouts emerged from the underground. On St George’s Day, Guides and Scouts rustled together uniforms and flags as best they could and 40,000 boys and girls marched down the Champs Elysees to salute her. The sight of Guides and Scouts turning out in large numbers at the close of the war, in front of Olave Baden-Powell, standing as leader without her husband (who had died in 1941), was a strong symbol of not only a new era for those who had lived through the war, particularly children who barely knew life without its impact, but of the ability of Guiding to emerge from a turbulent period with greater strength and promise for growth.

Many original aspects of Girl Guiding became outmoded as the twentieth-century unfolded: the British Empire dissolved through decolonisation and the education of girls broadened in its emphasis from starching shirts and larder management. The movement adapted to remain relevant, though the central laws remained largely unchanged. From the girls who gate-crashed the first large Boy Scout rally in London, the bravery of Guides who risked their lives during bombings and rebuilt shattered lives in refugee camps in both World Wars, to its adoption in almost 150 countries from the United States to Qatar throughout the twentieth century, Girl Guiding has played a part in advancing the status of women across the past century. Unlike the first rebel Girl Scouts, twenty-first century girls can try their hand at almost anything. Perhaps they owe a little of their freedom to these pioneering girls who wouldn’t accept that some aspects of the world were reserved for boys.

NOTES

- 1 'Girl Guiding in Australia,' *Girl Guides Gazette* (London: The Girl Guides Association, 1911), 12.
- 2 Robert Baden-Powell (1908) *Scouting for Boys: A Handbook for Instruction in Good Citizenship*. Ed. Elleke Boehmer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
- 3 Norah Johnston, *Blue and Gold, The Story Told* (Glebe, NSW: Rosehill Press, 1982), 68.
- 4 See Scouting for Boys, 3.
- 5 Gladys Commander, "The First Girl Guides," *Girl Guides Annual* (London: Thames Publishing, 1959), 80.
- 6 Qtd. in Rose Kerr, *The Story of the Girl Guides* (London: The Girl Guides Association, 1932), 35.
- 7 Alix Liddell, *The True Book About The Girl Guides* (London: Frederick Muller Ltd. 1956), 25.
- 8 Olave Baden-Powell, *Window on My Heart: The Autobiography of Lady Baden-Powell* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973), 45.
- 9 Baden-Powell, *Window on My Heart*, 46.
- 10 W. T. Roberts, "Girls as Scouts," *The Girl's Realm*, 12 (1909): 340.
- 11 "Uniform and Bands," *The Girl Guides' Gazette*, July 1914, 3.
- 12 "Uniform and Bands," 3.
- 13 Qtd. in Carol Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (London: Routledge, 1981), 11.
- 14 Robert Baden-Powell and Agnes Baden-Powell, *The Handbook for Girl Guides, or How Girls Can Help Build Up the Empire* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1912), 57-9.
- 15 Baden-Powell and Baden-Powell, 57-9.
- 16 Badges, Emblems and Pennants, Guide Section (Sydney: Girl Guides Association of Australia, 1990), 46.
- 17 Baden-Powell and Bade-Powell, 57-9.
- 18 "Girl Guide Gift Scheme," letter (Girl Guides Association of Australia, April 1940).
- 19 The Girl Guides Gift Scheme, brochure (London, Girl Guides Association, 1941).
- 20 Qtd. in Margaret Coleman and Honor Darling, *From a Flicker to a Flame: The Story of the Girl Guides in Australia* (Sydney: Girl Guides Association of Australia, 1990), 7