

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

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

Kristine Alexander

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Can the Girl Guide Speak?

The Perils and Pleasures of Looking for Children's Voices in Archival Research

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."¹ 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 **[End Page 132]** 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.² 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...



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2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218

[+1 \(410\) 516-6989](tel:+14105166989)

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