

Macleod, David I. *Building Character in the American Boy. The Boy Scouts, YMCA, and Their Forerunners, 1870-1920*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press. 1983. Pp. xx, 404. \$27.50.

Robert Baden-Powell and George Williams were probably turning over in their graves. Baden-Powell and Williams, founders of the Boy Scouts and the Young Men's Christian Association respectively, had dreamed of transforming the youth of the world, providing them with adult companionship, tests of skill and endurance, and middle-class Protestant values emphasizing hard work, thrift, honesty, reliability, and leadership. By the 1980s both organizations were still working to build character in young men, but at times their purposes seemed perverted. The Village People, an overtly homosexual disco-rock group, had a 1980 number one hit with "YMCA," a musical celebration of masculine culture and gay love. In 1983 newspapers throughout the country described a Boy Scout survival camp in East Texas where the boys learned, along with cooking and knot-tying, guerrilla warfare tactics, including how to disembowel and decapitate "the enemy." Network news shows the next year talked for days of a Boy Scout jamboree in Fort Hill, Virginia, where several hundred campers had pitched their tents next to a chemical dump site. Although such stories were certainly exceptions rather than the rule, the 1970s had been a difficult time for both Boy Scouting and the YMCA, with membership averages declining dramatically before stabilizing in 1980.

In *Building Character in the American Boy*, historian David Macleod looks at the formative years of the Boy Scouts and the Young Men's Christian Association. He sees both organizations as middle-class, male responses to industrialization, the declining economic significance of family life, and the social discovery of childhood and adolescence. In the late 1800s, urban middle-class children were losing their economic significance, and in the process family life assumed new emotional dimensions: "character-building" and affectionate nurturing became the major parental objectives. Since increased leisure was creating new opportunities for recreation, parents turned to external institutions for assistance in making sure that young people were not frivolously wasting their time. Urban middle-class men left the welfare of farm boys to vocationally-oriented crop clubs and had little concern for the welfare of young women. The Boy Scouts and Young Men's Christian Association, both organized first in England in the nineteenth century, seemed perfect, ideal institutions for meeting the expectations of middle-class men. Like so many other reform movements of the Progressive era, scouting and the YMCA were part of the "search for order," an attempt to preserve traditional values while coping with confusing economic and social change. At the same time, Boy Scouting and the YMCA became convenient ways of attaining middle-class respectability, especially for immigrant groups and such religious outcasts as the Mormons.

As for the success of the Boy Scouts and YMCA in building character, Macleod sees only dubious results for boys, if not for their adult sponsors. Boys

found fun, friendship, and personal achievement in scouting and the YMCA, but drop-out rates were just as high for them in 1910 as in 1978, long before the so-called youth rebellions of the post-World War II era. Far more important, Boy Scouts and the YMCA gave generations of middle-class men outlets for paternalistic energy, a way of expressing patriotism, individualism, and voluntarism in a secular, bureaucratic society. *Building Character in the American Boy* is an important book, one which historians will cite for years in their work on Progressivism, industrialization, family life, and childhood.

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