



## Baden-Powell, Lord Robert (1857-1941)

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British military hero and founder of the Boy Scouts and the Girl Guides, Lord Robert Baden-Powell was probably a homosexual. Certainly, most of his life was spent in same-sex environments and his deepest emotional commitment was with another man.

### Family Background and Education

Baden-Powell was born on February 22, 1857 in London to Henrietta Grace Powell and the Reverend Baden Powell, a professor of Geometry at Oxford. He was christened Robert Stephenson Smyth Powell. He was the eighth of the couple's children.

Baden-Powell's father died only three years after his birth, leaving his mother to raise nine children on her own. On September 21, 1869, his mother added Baden to the Powell family name in honor of her late husband. Thus, all the children's last names became Baden-Powell.

Throughout his life, Baden-Powell lavished praise on the powerful role his mother played in the family and celebrated motherhood as the most cherished of institutions.

His writing not only conveys a deep respect for his mother, but it also defines his vision of moral masculinity in terms of its relation to and respect for motherhood. After the death of his mother, he wrote, "A really good manly fellow is seldom to be found who is not also a good son to his mother. There is only one pain greater than that of losing your mother, and that is the pain your mother would suffer if she lost you. I do not mean by death, but by your own misdeeds."

In spite of difficulties in their relationship, Baden-Powell remained extraordinarily loyal to his mother throughout his life. As Tim Jeal observes in his monumental biography, her commanding presence shaped in large part the "anxieties and ambitions that drove Baden-Powell throughout his long life."

In 1870, Baden-Powell entered Charterhouse, an esteemed public school, and began his formal education. Even though he did poorly in his academic courses, he enjoyed and excelled at the more physical aspects of school life. As a student, he acted in numerous student productions and developed an intense appreciation for the outdoors, both of which he would draw on in his future roles as a military officer and leader of the Boy Scouts.

### Military Career

Given his lack of academic success, Baden-Powell failed to gain admission to Oxford. But his exceptionally high placement on exams for an officer's commission in the British army prompted him to consider a career in the military. In 1876, he joined the British cavalry and departed for India, where he began his service with the 13th Hussars.



Lord Robert Baden-Powell (right) with Scout Leader Dan Beard.  
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In India, Baden-Powell began his quick rise through the ranks, and by the time he was forty, he had attained the rank of full colonel. In 1888, he was appointed to serve in South Africa under his uncle. In the mid-1890s, he was dispatched to the Gold Coast in West Africa to fight against the Ashanti, an indigenous African people, who were disrupting British colonial expansion.

After serving in a few other minor campaigns in Africa, Baden-Powell returned to India to take charge of the 5th Dragoons. By 1899, tensions between the British and Boers in South Africa had increased, making war inevitable, and Baden-Powell was sent back to Africa to defend British outposts against the Dutch settlers.

In October 1899, for reasons historians still debate, Baden-Powell was in Mafeking, a small British trading settlement 650 miles north of Cape Town. Boers laid siege to him and his troops, and for 217 days, Baden-Powell withstood their attack and dramatically played up his role as heroic British commander outnumbered by a grim enemy.

Baden-Powell's acting talents came in handy as he staged an elaborate and determined resistance. His actions earned him great fame as the "hero of Mafeking." As Michael Rosenthal observes, "In a war steeped in British blunder and embarrassment, he helped shape an image of heroism in which nearly everyone could take refuge."

### **The Scouting Movement**

After the Boer War, Baden-Powell returned home to Britain and was celebrated as a national hero. He continued to serve in the British army in Africa until 1907, when he retired to devote himself full time to the Boy Scouts. Since 1899, he had been writing pamphlets in the army to train soldiers, but it was not until his last few years in the military that he began to consider adapting such material for boys.

In 1907, Baden-Powell organized a camp on Brownsea Island for a group of boys of different social backgrounds. This experiment unofficially inaugurated the Boy Scouts movement. A year later, he published *Scouting for Boys*. In 1909, with his sister Agnes, he founded the Girl Guides.

By 1910, the scouting movement had spread all over Britain and throughout much of the British empire. Baden-Powell led the movement until his death in 1941.

### **Baden-Powell's Sexuality**

In recent years, Baden-Powell's sexuality has come under increasing scrutiny. Even though he married Olave Soames in 1912, at the age of 55, many biographers have speculated that his lifelong friendship with Kenneth McLaren may have been sexual. At the very least, it is clear that Baden-Powell's relationship with McLaren was one of the most important emotional connections of his life.

Interestingly, Baden-Powell's relationship with his wife, who was considerably younger than he, may not have been sexual. Indeed, it tended to duplicate his relationships with male comrades and boys. She altered her appearance to suit him, flattening her breasts and shearing her hair. As Jeal remarks, "With every hint of sex removed from a relationship he could get on reasonably well with women."

It is difficult to know for certain the intricacies of Baden-Powell's sexual orientation. But after considering all available evidence on the matter, Jeal concludes that even if he never acted on any homosexual impulses, "Baden-Powell was a repressed homosexual."

Jeal's conclusion may or may not withstand scrutiny, but his discussion emphasizes an important undercurrent to Baden-Powell's life. He intensely identified with and enjoyed all-male culture and the activities that accompanied it. Whether this interest was simply an extension of a Victorian sensibility

toward male friendship or a latent indication of homosexuality, we may never know.

Yet considering Baden-Powell's central role in creating the Boy Scouts and the current debate on gays in the Boy Scouts of America, our inability to confirm his orientation certainly challenges the American organization's belief that gay men have no place in the scouting movement. (Tellingly, the British, Canadian, Australian, and European chapters of the Boy Scouts do not ban homosexual participation.)

For his services to the nation and to international scouting, Baden-Powell was knighted in 1909 and created a baron in 1929. In 1938, he returned to Africa, where he died on January 8, 1941.

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### **About the Author**

**Geoffrey W. Bateman** is the Assistant Director for the Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military, a research center based at the University of California, Santa Barbara, that promotes the study of gays and lesbians in the military. He is co-editor of *Don't Ask, Don't Tell: Debating the Gay Ban in the Military*, as well as author of a study on gay personnel and multinational units. He earned his M.A. in English literature at the University of California, Santa Barbara, in eighteenth-century British literature and theories of genders and sexuality, but now lives in Denver, Colorado, where he is co-parenting two sons with his partner and a lesbian couple.