

Limitations of Command: Robert Baden-Powell as Inspector-General of Cavalry, 1903 – 1907

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If one accepts the maxim that history makes heroes at least as much as heroes make history, then it is problematic in the extreme to name a greater “hero” of the British Empire than Robert Stephenson Smyth Baden-Powell, at least when restricting ones inquiry between the herculean pillars of Wellington and Churchill. The notoriety and publicity attending that hero status facilitated, and indeed made possible the creation of a volunteer youth organization that spread to every corner of the British Empire, and as a socio-cultural export product, to every corner of the world. Baden-Powell’s Boy Scout movement proved so prolific that its worldwide membership by 1977 totaled over a quarter of a billion members overall.¹

Robert Baden-Powell is well known as the founder of the Boy Scouts, the most prolific volunteer youth organization in history. He is also famous for his successful defense of Mafeking during a 218-day siege by Boer forces during the South African War. This defense provided Baden-Powell the celebrity that contributed to the success of the Boy Scouts.²

What is less well known, however, is that eight years passed between the relief of the Mafeking siege, and his creation of the Boy Scouts. During that time, Baden-Powell, or “B-P”³ had to deal with a number of issues that both reflected the inherent limitations on his career potential in the British army, and reflected on his creation of the Boy Scouts. . This period in B-P’s life, when his military career ended, and his leadership of the Boy Scouts began, is instructive in examining the personal and professional motives of one of the defining personalities of the Edwardian era.

The second South African War, or Boer War severely corroded the British Victorian self-image, to say nothing of the effect on the perceptions of potential imperial rivals in Europe. An in-depth account of the Boer War would be at best tangential to this analysis of B-P’s role as Inspector General of Cavalry in the decade prior to the Great War. Suffice it to say that the combined disasters of Colenso, Stormberg and Magersfontein during the second week of December, 1899 resulted in a total of over 12,000 dead and wounded British soldiers, with another 2,000 surrendering to Boer forces. When Sir Arthur Conan Doyle described this week as “The blackest one known during our generation...” he expressed a very widely held sentiment. With such grim reports from the war a daily refrain during this period, the British public desperately sought any good news to be found. General Baden-Powell would provide it.⁴

Happy to report Mafeking successfully relieved today. . . . Relieving forces marched into Mafeking this morning at nine. Relief and defense forces combined, attacked enemy laager, shelled them out, and took large amounts of weapons and stores. Townspeople and garrison . . . heartily grateful for their release.⁵

Baden-Powell succeeded, as Thomas Pakenham rightly concludes, in giving Britain its self-confidence again and dealing the Boers a “crushing psychological blow” by successfully defending the staging point for the Jameson Raid five years earlier.⁶ He became the hero in a decidedly unheroic war, and both the Crown and the British public responded in a predictable manner:

I and my whole Empire greatly rejoice at the relief of Mafeking after the splendid defence [sic] made by you through all these months. I heartily congratulate you and all under you, military and civil, British and native for the heroism and devotion you have shown.⁷

The “great rejoicing” mentioned by Queen Victoria can hardly be overstated. The Times for May 19, 1900 accurately portrays both the degree and scope of “hysterical rejoicing”:

A remarkable demonstration of popular enthusiasm was witnessed in the streets of London last night. . . . The source of the public's knowledge was a placard on the Mansion House posted by order of the Lord Mayor [Alfred Newton] . . . 'MAFEKING IS RELIEVED!' The announcement spread with astonishing rapidity . . . it was widely known before it could be published through the ordinary channels. Drivers of trolleys and vans shouted out the tidings as they drove down Ludgate Hill, Queen Victoria Street and other thoroughfares, and passers-by cheered in response. The cabmen on the ranks set up loud hurrahs . . . the whole space in front of the lordship's residence and the Royal exchange was packed with a cheering crowd. . . . Traffic was stopped throughout a large area . . . the whole space as far as the eye could reach . . . was quickly packed by a mass of people waving flags and shouting themselves hoarse. . . .⁸

Queen Victoria probably did not grasp the full reality of her "whole Empire" rejoicing on Mafeking Day, but overseas accounts in the *Times* gives credence to her congratulatory assertions. ". . . throngs gathered outside the Sydney *Morning Herald* office, cheering and singing the National Anthem,"⁹ while "Europeans and Asiatics" displayed equal jubilation in Singapore.¹⁰ "Thousands on the parade ground heartily responded to the announcement," while in Cairo the military governor ". . . granted an amnesty for all minor military offences in the Army of Occupation."¹¹ Perhaps in the belief that great heroes should be great commanders, the War Office, at Victoria's request, promoted Baden-Powell to Major-General, making him, at forty-three, the youngest general officer in the British army.¹²

Baden-Powell's celebrity as the "Hero of Mafeking" did not immediately result in the creation of the Boy Scouts or any extraordinary changes in his life. On the contrary, the general's immediate future looked increasingly uncertain. B-P had benefited from the patronage of General Sir Garnet Wolseley. Wolseley had assigned him to the position at Mafeking, "To raise regiments of mounted infantry; to organize the defense of Rhodesia and Bechuanaland frontiers; so far as possible to keep forces of the enemy occupied in this direction away from their own main forces."¹³ Without that assignment, and B-P's subsequent success in withstanding the Boer siege, it is unlikely that he would have gained the celebrity that he ultimately enjoyed, a celebrity crucial to the success of his Boy Scouts.

By 1900, however, Wolseley's patronage had run its course; the magic of his "Garnet Ring" was now spent. In January 1900, Gen. Lord Frederick Roberts replaced Wolseley in Africa, and by 1901 as overall commander of the British Army. "Hindoo" Roberts employed a trusted ring of favored officers as extensive as Wolseley's and the "Battle of the Rings" bears as much responsibility for early British defeats in South Africa as did the Boers' tenacity.¹⁴

With Roberts' arrival, membership in the "Garnet Ring" quickly became a professional liability, and Baden-Powell's celebrity made him an obvious target. His subsequent assignment to increasingly irrelevant missions coincided with the fundamental change in tactics attending Roberts's command. "Little Bobs" believed that decisive open field battles held the key to victory. "They will see they have no chance against us . . . and we can then settle outlying districts."¹⁵ Baden-Powell's role in this effort involved "the necessity for pacifying the country around Mafeking,"

Baden-Powell had suggested the creation of a Constabulary Force to prevent the movement of Boers or their regrouping into commandos in "pacified territory." Roberts would never willingly accept such a plan from a member of the "Garnet Ring" and especially not from Baden-Powell, whom Roberts described as an officer ". . . who seems to have a strange fancy for being besieged."¹⁶ By late August 1900, however, Roberts had little choice in the matter. The Boers operated in small units for which the British army simply had no immediate remedy. Lord Roberts undoubtedly resisted courting Baden-Powell's advice, but the war "practically over" threatened to spiral out of control. Thus Roberts's telegram to Baden-Powell on August 29 proved to be succinct in the extreme: "I want you to see me without delay regarding formation of a Police Force for Transvaal, Orange River Colony and Swaziland."¹⁷

The impossibility of bringing the Boers to a decisive battle compelled Roberts to resort to tactics Baden-Powell suggested immediately after Mafeking, and Roberts, despite his personal feeling toward Baden-Powell or his erstwhile mentor, Wolseley, nevertheless congratulated him on the ". . . arrangements which you are making for the pacification of the country, and the collection of supplies. . . ."¹⁸

While impossible to prove from available documents, it is possible that Roberts sought to co-opt Baden-Powell into his own “ring,” or at least deflect criticism away from his inability to run the Boers to ground. By midsummer 1900, Lord Roberts’ official opinion of Baden-Powell had improved markedly. Speaking to the Cape Colony High Commissioner Sir Alfred Milner, Roberts recommended Baden-Powell to form the new force:

For head of the military police Baden-Powell is by far and away the best man I know. He possesses in quite an unusual degree the qualities you specify, viz: energy, organization, knowledge of the country, and a power of getting on with its people.¹⁹

Six weeks later, Roberts belatedly admitted that Baden-Powell’s approach to pacification, now shared by High Commissioner Milner, held more hope of success than his own. “So long as the Boers kept in fairly compact bodies we knew what to do with them, but now that they have broken up into small parties . . . the advantage is all on their side.”²⁰

Baden-Powell jealously guarded his command of the South African Constabulary, (SAC), which is not surprising, given his military history. From his arrival in India in early 1883, Baden-Powell had devoted an extraordinary amount of time and effort to his own training and subsequently passing that training on to his troops. Baden-Powell, in fact, viewed the army’s role as a training mechanism in larger terms than purely military functions:

Here they gain, in addition to their school knowledge, a development of physical health and stamina . . . an army officer has in his hands a valuable power as great as that of any schoolmaster or clergyman for developing his men in the attributes of good citizens.²¹

He shared these beliefs with his publisher less than a year after Mafeking, and his tone reveals an increasing concern about the training quality of military personnel and perhaps his larger concerns for Britain as a whole. “Now is the time, while enthusiasm is still warm and before we sink back into our English easy chair, for us to prepare a wise and practical organization of the splendid material lying ready to hand.”²²

Even before the relief of Mafeking, Baden-Powell began developing his ideas for the South African Constabulary, believing that a policing force in pacified areas provided a better chance for success against the Boers than Roberts’s and later Kitchener’s futile quest to destroy a Boer army *en masse*. Their belated enthusiasm for Baden-Powell’s Constabulary plan subsequently arose not from the merits of the plan itself but rather from the increasing pressure by the War Office to accelerate the rotation of troops back to England.

Beyond his romanticized self-image as a commander of “a regiment of gentlemen privates” trained in his own hard won experiences in Scouting, Baden-Powell clearly believed that organized training provided dividends above and beyond increased military proficiency. His belief that the improved “physical health and stamina” provided by army life validates a recent biographer’s depiction of Baden-Powell viewing the army as a “university for the working class.”²³

By the end of 1902 Baden-Powell’s career benefited from the actions of General Roberts. Despite having considered relieving Baden-Powell of command of the South African Constabulary, Roberts, as Commander-in-Chief of the army, did not “put off Baden-Powell,” due in large part to his experience in scouting applications for cavalry. Roberts, in fact, regarded *Aids to Scouting for Non Commissioned Officers and Men* as “quite the best book I have ever read on scouting.”²⁴ Roberts also realized that many of Britain’s difficulties in South Africa arose from poor reconnaissance and ignorance of Boer troop dispositions. If the role of cavalry could incorporate a broader reconnaissance function, Roberts felt that disasters like Colenso, Magersfontein, and Stormberg could be avoided. This helps to explain his recommendation of Baden-Powell for Inspector General of Cavalry. In doing so, Roberts assured the Secretary of War that Baden-Powell’s shortfalls arose from weak administrative talents, and that “. . . as an inspector . . . he is doing very well, very active and painstaking If his health is all right I believe we could not do better.”²⁵

Lord Roberts’s recommendation made perfect sense, given the particulars of Baden-Powell’s military career, the specifics of which are instructive in understanding Robert’s decision in spite of his personal misgivings. B-P’s bona fides for the post of Inspector General of Cavalry for the British Army included:

- 1) In 1876 he began his military career as a lieutenant in the 13th Hussars, then stationed in India. British Cavalry doctrine at this time focused primarily with maneuvers for attack against infantry formations. B-P begins developing and teaching his troops in reconnaissance and scouting methodology.
- 2) 13th Hussars deployed to Zululand, where B-P honed his military scouting skills amidst the Zulu in the early 1880s in the Natal province of South Africa.
- 3) The Army Council issues General Order #30 in 1884, requiring unit commanders to provide instruction on reconnaissance operations to their troops. Based on his experiences in India and Natal, B-P publishes Reconnaissance and Scouting through William Clowes & Sons in London. This brief manual will be adopted by the British Army as a standard text for reconnaissance operations for cavalry units.
- 4) 1885: he publishes Cavalry Instruction through Harrison & Sons, London. This manual will be used for cavalry instruction by the British Army in India.
- 5) 1887: While the 13th Hussars are in garrison in Manchester, B-P develops and patents the equipment and developed operational doctrine for machine gun use by cavalry units.
- 6) He returned to Africa in 1896 to aid the British South Africa Company colonials under siege in Bulawayo during the Second Matabele War. This was a formative experience for him, commanding reconnaissance missions into enemy territory in the Matopo Hills.
- 7) December 1895 – February 1896: B-P led a native contingent during the 4th Ashanti War in modern day Ghana.
- 8) 1897: B-P is given command of the 5th Dragoon Guards in India.
- 9) 1899: Publishes his third military manual, Aids to Scouting for NCOs and Men through Gale & Polden, London.

In short, General Baden-Powell had over two decades of theoretical and practical experience in operational doctrine for cavalry units, spanning two continents, from the Khyber Pass to Khartoum in the Sudan, and from the Ashanti coast of West Africa to the Transvaal. This evidence suggests his ability to bring great insight into the operation of British cavalry units.

Almost five months to the day after Roberts's recommendation, Inspector General of Cavalry Baden-Powell arrived at his desk in the War Office on May 7, 1903, a position of responsibility for which he felt entirely unqualified:

Physically because I had long had a 'loose leg' as a result of a shooting accident . . . and I could not supply an example of hard-riding horsemanship. . . . Intellectually I was deficient because I had not gone through the Staff College.²⁶

Baden-Powell's remarkably candid recollection decades after the fact demonstrates his realization that during his term as Inspector General of Cavalry he had contributed virtually nothing to the theory of mounted warfare.

This lackluster performance can readily be explained given the forces arrayed against his intrusion into the bureaucratic monopoly of the Army Council. When Baden-Powell approached the Inspector General of the British Army with his ideas on scouting functions for cavalry,²⁷ the Army Council responded unequivocally:

Inform General Baden-Powell that it is not within his province to criticize the action of the Army Council. The duties of Inspector of Cavalry are limited to inspection of technical training and efficiency of cavalry for war.²⁸

The truculent conservatism of the Army Council extended well beyond its limitation of Baden-Powell's authority. Arguably the strongest advocate of cavalry application since before the Boer War, Maj. Gen. Douglas Haig, the Director of Military Training, held a similarly obsolescent view. Despite the rapid advances in military technology, Haig subscribed to a philosophy of war that proved hopelessly outdated, contending that

“. . . the increased range and effectiveness of modern weapons and the greater length of battles would lead to moral exhaustion, which in turn would render cavalry attacks more likely to succeed.”²⁹ Baden-Powell realized the implausibility of a cavalry charge against modern weaponry, but even the senior British cavalry commander, Sir John French, concluded that, “It must never be forgotten that it is only by the employment of shock tactics . . . of the highly trained horsemen, wielding sword and lance, that success can be attained.”³⁰

Given his military history, it is perplexing that Baden-Powell as Inspector-General failed to assert a more positive influence over the cavalry debate.

Certainly he faced a daunting task in opposing the senior army leadership over the issue, but Baden-Powell had consistently asserted aggressive positions on training in his previous billets. Moreover, as a musketry instructor, and with his machine-gun demonstrations for Wolseley, he had sufficient practical experience for a reasoned argument against the traditional role of cavalry, to “overthrow the enemy’s cavalry by shock and then to push on against other arms with the rifle or shock.”³¹ By March 1904, Baden-Powell effectively abdicated any part in the debate, and in deferring to the traditionalists told the War Office: “I fully agree with Sir John French’s remarks as regards the role of the cavalry.”³² Subsequent recollections demonstrate the degree to which Baden-Powell’s influence in the matter diminished:

The Adjutant-General asked my opinion about the lance for cavalry It certainly ought to be used for its moral effect on the user and on the enemy . . . cavalry training was designed with a view to shock tactics being the end and aim of the whole of it.³³

Baden-Powell arguably had more theoretical and field experience in reconnaissance training and operation than any other officer in the British army at that time and dramatically more so than any other general officer. For a significant period of his career, Baden-Powell had literally “written the book” on cavalry operations. As Inspector-General for Cavalry his position should have allowed him substantial influence regarding the application of his techniques to the cavalry. General Roberts’ recommendation of Baden-Powell for the cavalry position resulted largely from his scouting and reconnaissance experience; but even on these subjects, Baden-Powell had little success implementing scouting instruction for cavalry officers on an official basis. In nearly every case, General Haig overrode Baden-Powell’s suggestions.³⁴

Baden-Powell’s singular professional success during his tenure as Inspector General of Cavalry consisted of establishing a new Cavalry School at Netheravon in 1904 and the attendant publication of a new Cavalry Journal.³⁵ Despite Haig’s prohibition, Baden-Powell tried to impart some fundamental scouting instruction to the students at the Netheravon school. The Inspector-General clearly believed that, despite his official capitulation to Generals Haig and French on the issue, scouting and reconnaissance presented an issue of vital importance on the modern battlefield: “Either the winners have won through knowing all about the numbers and position of their adversaries . . . or the loser, through ignorance of these points, has been unable to save himself.”³⁶

The facts of this case seem at this point to be counter-intuitive. Arguably the most experienced cavalry officer in the British Army, with a tremendous media profile as a hero during a war replete with tactical and operational failures by the British Army, Baden-Powell’s promotion to Inspector General for Cavalry, resulted in virtually no influence on operational doctrine for British cavalry units in the decade prior to World War I, where the obsolescent paradigm of the Army Council ran headlong into the reality of the Maxim Gun and the “box” barrage of long range artillery. Baden-Powell was well acquainted with the impact of modern weaponry – he had developed the operational doctrine for machine gun use by cavalry units. Some other factor has to have influenced Baden-Powell in his failure to exert a more decisive role in this situation.

The available evidence suggests that his reluctance to challenge the Army Council on the issue of cavalry tactics arose in all likelihood from the dire financial situation imposed on him by his family, and particularly his mother, Henrietta Grace Baden-Powell. As Tim Jeal eloquently described her in his excellent 1989 biography of B-P, Henrietta Grace was “driven to undertake . . . the transmutation of a disaster-prone family into a success-generating cooperative, in which she would be treasurer, director of planning and supreme arbiter.”³⁷ Baden-Powell’s entire professional life served, as did his brothers, to provide a kind of late Victorian “venture capital” for his mother’s familial self-promotion.

His promotion to Lieutenant General made Baden-Powell the best breadwinner in his family, but his subsequent appointment as Inspector-General of Cavalry coincided with several factors that threatened the family finances. B-P's second eldest brother George, MP for Manchester and a career diplomat in the British Colonial Office had died prematurely in November 1898. George's correspondences with his family prior to his death reveals the familial attitude regarding finances: "There are numerous girls about with at least two or three thousand [annual income]...if we could each pick up one, the family would be able to spend £15,000 a year, or more, instead of £2,000, which would mean greatly improved comfort all around."³⁸ With this loss of family revenue attending George's demise, Mother Baden-Powell increasingly depended on her surviving children, particularly the future Inspector-General. The financial burdens on the new Inspector-General continued to multiply.

His younger sister Agnes still lived at home, essentially a spinster. His eldest brother Warrington, an attorney who rose to the rank of Queen's Counsel, (the equivalent of an attorney general in the U.S.) contracted tuberculosis, and could no longer serve as the principal financial supporter of the Baden-Powell "success-generating cooperative". The Inspector-General had an annual salary of approximately £3,000 per year, virtually every shilling of which went to the long-term maintenance of nearly his entire family. Upon arriving back in England to assume his post at the War Office in 1903, General Baden-Powell suffered two more serious attacks on his financial status. His mother leased a sumptuous new home in Prince's Gate, South Kensington, while his younger brother, Baden, announced his intention to resign his commission in the Horse Guards to purchase and publish a scientific journal. The new general quickly objected:

Cui Bono? . . . it will be the final straw against your soldiering . . . piles of work, no money return and no thanks . . . Your only way is to stick to the soldiering . . . if you get your promotion you will be in some position to get a wife with something of her own.³⁹

The Inspector-General had good reason for his concern; Baden's "scientific Journal" **Knowledge** went bankrupt in less than six months, due in large measure to the youngest Baden-Powell sibling being dismissed by the academic community as the "Baloonatic".⁴⁰

Faced with providing for his mother, Sister Agnes, and brothers Baden and Warrington, it is reasonable to conclude that Inspector General Baden-Powell deferred to the traditionalists in the Cavalry and the Army Council as a matter of financial survival. A premature retirement from the Army would cut his income to a pension of approximately £800 per year, which would fail to cover the household expenses of the Baden-Powell residence in Prince's Gate. It seems clear that Baden-Powell feared any excessive criticism of senior army commanders might well have resulted in that premature retirement, with an attendant loss of income that Baden-Powell simply could not afford.

NOTES:

¹ This estimate is an extrapolation from membership numbers compiled between 1908 and 1977, by which time the Boy Scouts had enrolled 250 million members. See Lazlo Nagy, 250 Million Scouts (Chicago: Dartnell Press, 1985), 177.

² Numerous secondary works examine the role of Baden-Powell, or "B-P" in the South African War. For a specific study of the Mafeking siege, see Brian Gardner, Mafeking: the Making of a Victorian Legend, London: Cassells, 1966.

³ Virtually all secondary works dealing with Baden-Powell and the Boy Scouts refer to the founder as "B-P," a nickname that had followed him from his time at the Charterhouse school. See Tim Jeal, Baden-Powell (London: Hutchinson, 1989), 30.

⁴ Arthur Conan Doyle. The Great Boer War. London: Smith Elder, 1900: 197.

⁵ Baden-Powell to Queen Victoria, May 17, 1900, National Museum, Boy Scouts of America, (NMBSA).

⁶ Packenham, The Boer War, 441.

⁷ Queen Victoria to Baden-Powell, as quoted in Russell Freedman, Scouting with Baden-Powell, New York: Holiday House, 1967, 139.

- ⁸ Times, May 19, 1900, 12.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Frederick Maurice, ed., History of the War in South Africa vol. 1 (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1906), 140.
- ¹⁴ Pakenham, The Boer War, 71, 73, 95, 253, 261.
- ¹⁵ Lord Roberts to Baden-Powell, July 29, 1900, NMBSA.
- ¹⁶ Frederick Roberts to the Secretary of War, Lord Landsdowne, August 2, 1900, in Jeal, Baden-Powell, 323.
- ¹⁷ Baden-Powell, Lessons From the Varsity of Life (London: C. Arthur Pearson, 1933), 215.
- ¹⁸ Lord Roberts to Baden-Powell, June 14, 1900, NMBSA.
- ¹⁹ Cecil Headlam, The Milner Papers, vol. II, South Africa 1899-1905 (London: Cassells, 1933), Roberts to Milner, 4 July 1900.
- ²⁰ Lord Roberts to Queen Victoria, August 21, 1900, as quoted in Jeal, Baden-Powell, 329.
- ²¹ Baden-Powell, Lessons From the Varsity of Life, typed manuscript, microfilm reel #8, NMBSA, 618-619.
- ²² Baden-Powell to Mr. Methuen, January 20, 1901, NMBSA.
- ²³ Jeal, Baden-Powell, 339-340.
- ²⁴ Roberts to Secretary of War Brodrick, undated (December, 1902), Middleton Papers, Public Records Office.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Baden-Powell, Lessons From the Varsity of Life, typed manuscript, microfilm Reel #9, NMBSA, 313.
- ²⁷ Hillcourt, Baden-Powell: The Two Lives of a Hero, 232.
- ²⁸ Baden-Powell, Inspector General's Diary, July 29, 1905, NMBSA.
- ²⁹ George Charles Henry Victor Paget, Marquess of Anglesey, A History of the Cavalry (1816-1919) (London: Cassells, 1986) vol. 4, 389-390.
- ³⁰ Ibid., 388.
- ³¹ Sir John French, as quoted in Baden-Powell, Inspector General's Diary, November 08, 1903, NMBSA.
- ³² Baden-Powell to the War Office, March 10, 1904, NMBSA.
- ³³ Baden-Powell, Territorial Diary, vol. 2, July 10, 1908, NMBSA.
- ³⁴ Baden-Powell, Inspector General's Diary, August 31, 1906, NMBSA.
- ³⁵ Freedman, Scouting with Baden-Powell, 144-145; see also Cavalry Journal 1, (1906): 49-51.
- ³⁶ Baden-Powell, Aids to Scouting, 1-2.
- ³⁷ Jeal, Baden-Powell, p.6.
- ³⁸ George Baden-Powell to Henrietta Grace, 03 September 1892, The Frances Baden-Powell Collection, Fulham, London.
- ³⁹ Baden-Powell to Baden Baden-Powell, February 15, 1902, NMBSA.
- ⁴⁰ Baden-Powell, letter to his family, 04 February 1883, NMBSA.