



History, Archives and Scouting A little-known Continent?

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Scouting is celebrating its centenary, which is an opportunity to take a look back at its history. However, there is no history without a historiography, and there is no historiography without archives. Where are we on these issues?

Having only worked on French Catholic Scouting, I can hardly offer an overview of everything on this issue on the scale of the World Scientific Congress. However, thoughts on a particular case may offer a useful contribution (albeit an inevitably modest one). This will involve me crossreferencing personal experience and issues.

Initially, I was not aiming to focus my research on Scouting. When I started my university work in preparation for my professorship at the Ecole Normale Supérieure of Saint-Cloud, I was interested in the issue of mentalities: my multidisciplinary studies in the preparatory courses had made me aware of the relationships between representations (especially those concerning popular literary publications) and society. I asked myself if, as a historian, there was something to say about this, and whether studying such a body of publications could palliate the absence of archives or add to the results of more classic studies. At the beginning of the 1970s, this interest was part of the air du temps.

René Rémond, who was then professor of modern history at Paris X Nanterre University, accepted to be my research director. He guided me towards Catholic literature for young people from the 1920s to the 1960s. After an initial examination, the area turned out to be too vast. The research area needed to be narrowed down. I ended up opting to study a particular collection of novels for young people, "Le Signe du Piste", produced by a publisher in Alsace, called "Alsatia". It corresponded well to the chosen period and comprised over a hundred works, which was a significant sampling. Then, I had to expand beyond this framework to

find comparative elements from the “Spes” publishing house (the “Jamboree” collection), Desclée de Bouver, etc., as well as periodicals such as *Coeur Vaillant* (which, amongst other things, published comics and serial stories) and *Le Scout de France/Scout*, a newspaper in which authors wrote and for which Pierre Joubert provided illustrations (he also worked for “*Le Signe du Piste*”). This led me to become interested in the Scouts de France.

I finished the systematic analysis of my core material at the beginning of the 1980s and I had already made contact with the Scouts de France, whose headquarters were in Rue Lignier, if I am not mistaken. I was given a warm welcome, in particular by Philippe Missotte (one of the people who had worked on the “Pionniers-Rangers” reform at the beginning of the 1960s), who was in charge of publications and who was subsequently to be of great “technical” help to me.

The correlation between the “*Signe du Piste*” collection and the Scouts de France had been easy to establish. The collection was not strictly speaking institutionally dependent on the Scouts de France: it was a commercial collection. But, as I just mentioned, its founders and main authors and illustrators had or had had responsibilities at local and even national level as Scout leaders, commissioners and even chaplains in the middle age section of the association (the “*Eclaireur*”) and the Alsatia publishing house aimed their publications primarily at a Catholic audience. From the end of the 1930s to the 1950s (the time of the public split between the collection and the Scouts de France), “*Signe du Piste*” and Scouts de France had, with a few small exceptions, worked together closely.

The closeness of the “interpersonal” relations between the Scouts de France and the collection led me to wonder about the representativity of the themes, which, from novel to novel, I could see organised as a real “system of representations”. Wishing to know more about the pedagogical options of the “*Eclaireur*” age section than I could obtain from magazines, manuals and other works, I asked about the association’s archives. First, I was told that there were not any. Then, they were willing to admit that a few boxes had to be lying around in the cellar of the national headquarters, but that everything was in a total mess, that there were only bits and pieces, no doubt of no interest, and that it was not possible to consult them. As my work progressed, I asked the same question several times, but to no avail.

It was only in the 1990s, after having defended my thesis, that I finally gained access to these famous archives, which were starting to resurface. I was then able to note that the conclusions I had come to on the study of the imaginary developed by the leaders of the “*Eclaireur*” age section, crosschecked with the “*Signe du Piste*” novels, were on the whole confirmed up until the split carried out by the General Commissioner, Michel Rigal, at the end of the 1950s (from what one could gather about the effective intentions found in the “papers”, or at least from what remained of them).

I would like to express here my very great appreciation to Christian Hurrise, a professional documentalist, who, despite being on long-term sick leave due to his extremely precarious health, had nonetheless offered his services as a volunteer with undeniable passion, obstinacy and rigour.

With no means and little support, except from the then general commissioner on the odd occasion, Hurrise managed to create an embryonic Scouts de France archive centre worthy of the name.

One must hope that his work has not been in vain, and that the association, at the highest

level, has finally realised the importance of what is at stake in conserving, filing and protecting archives, and making them accessible to researchers.

The approach taken by leaders of other French Scout Associations, as seen through various colloquiums and my personal experience of associations more generally involved in “social” or general youth work tends to prove that the Scouts de France case was not an isolated one in France. Is the rest of this diverse world of associations, as a whole, more attentive to its archives?

This is not certain. Everything seems to focus on immediate action and the rest has little importance. Of course, associations are happy to cultivate remembrance of their past, but it is usually of a “celebratory” and selective nature, out of nostalgia, a short-term “tactical” calculation or sometimes for less admissible reasons. Building up history would seem to be a vain, if not dangerous, luxury that detracts from the demands of the present, that would reignite old debates, or, horror of horrors, bring painful moments back to the surface. With the hindsight created by crosschecking time with work on archives, do people fear seeing the appearance of less pure motivations behind the venerated “Action” than those that the selfless commitment to noble causes might suggest? In more prosaic terms, on an everyday basis, do people see an interest in putting one’s work into perspective?

Concerning Scouting in France at least, while it is not without a “memory”, it still has little history: because it does not want problems? The debate is still open. In any event, one can but note Scouting’s fairly poor historiography, and the condescension with which, fairly bizarrely, this area is considered, particularly in university circles: is writing about the history of Scouting not “boyscoutish”?

A vague smile of superiority, a few sneers and, too often, that is the end of the story.

But is such a situation not largely due to the voluntary ignorance that Scout Associations maintain about their past? Has the World Organization itself ever examined this matter? Has it ever tried to make national associations more aware of the issue? Has it ever encouraged conserving and opening its archives to its members? How can the world of research, with the exception of a few curious or atypical minds, take things seriously if Scouting itself does not do so?

And yet, what an area for investigation! Since its creation, tens of millions of girls and boys have been in Scouting whether it be for a few months or for years. In France alone, there have been hundreds of thousands. This being so, to claim that Scouting’s pedagogy is a form of education without any content and is without any significant personal or collective stakes is less candid activism than plain stupidity. But managing to collect a whole that is so vast and so complex requires a scientific process that goes well beyond gathering the testimonies of a few nostalgic people, or of compiling “troops’ lives” or those of teams, or of even a limited research study such as the one I carried out. It requires a process that goes beyond local micro-histories or research that is restricted to narrow sectors or self-celebration. Above all, it could not exist without archives to consult. To not consider it as a priority amounts *de facto* to working to maintain the ignorance I mentioned earlier, which ends up being the culprit.

For, while the World Organization of the Scout Movement is not at all occupying the field of its own past (i.e., basically, the shaping and evolution of its identity), others are actively doing so by making use of the remaining traces. This is the case in France at least; does the phenomenon affect other countries? It would be interesting to know: it would be a first step in establishing an “inventory”. In any case, committed individuals, private, ideological or religious bodies have been scouring Scouting’s past for decades. Such “collectors” do not just take ownership of “objects” (old badges, flags, uniforms, decorations, as well as camping gear, etc): they also collect Scout manuals and novels, records of events, magazines, private “papers” of leaders, even the very statutes of associations.

Some of these steps aim to maintain a cult (that is touching but somewhat sterile) of how Scouting was experienced in its long-gone early years: this is the least serious situation. Others aim, when it is not a matter of “freezing”, or even purely and simply destroying items judged (in a totally partial way) to be inopportune, to make use of gathered documents in this way. Such is the case when some little office or another, without any connection to the World Organization, opens a little research centre to promote its own brand and to work towards recognition that it cannot otherwise achieve, or when someone opens a little “Scout museum”, whose money-making purpose does not always hide the ideological thinking behind it. Through such practices, there is a whole heritage that is put up for auction: these are the sources of Scouting’s history that are being diverted, or even denatured. At Scouts de France, Christian Hurrise clearly understood this.

Other archivists or documentalists in other associations and countries need to have been lucid, even much more so, much earlier (one may always hope). Scout leaders need to understand (one may hope) the importance of what is at stake and to make young people aware of it. A long time ago, the Scouts de France Cub Scout section had an “archivist” badge: this needs to continue (one may hope) and be hugely successful, in this form or in another one. Finally, one must hope that in the area of its history, with the conservation, organisation and the opening up of its archives, the World Organization takes the initiative that it has just launched through holding this World Scientific Congress.

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