

## **AGNES BADEN-POWELL, A LITTLE KNOWN PERSON**

Agnes Baden-Powell, Robert's youngest sister, is generally little known in the scout context. She is often put aside by her more famous sister-in-law, Olave. Many people think that Guiding is totally due to Olave, but this is not right. As a matter of fact, Olave appeared several years later, when the bases of Guiding had already been set by Agnes. In collaboration with her brother, she had started the association for Guides, she had settled the first Committee of Organization, she had written the first documents and the first booklet, she had conceived the uniform and drawn the badges for Guides, thus giving her personal influence to newly born Guiding. It is her too who founded officially the association of British Guides, which was historically the first association of Guides in the world.

### **Her education**

Agnes Smyth Baden-Powell was born on December 16th 1858, two years after Robert's birth and a bit more than one year before the birth of the youngest brother, Baden Fletcher Smyth, with whom Agnes was always closely linked and with whom she shared several hobbies. Agnes was the only girl of the numerous family of professor Baden Powell and Henriette Grace Smyth, as two young girls, born before her, died fairly young.

Professor Baden Powell died in 1860, aged 63, when Agnes was only 2 years old, leaving his wife Henriette, who was only 36 years old, with numerous children to educate (7 children from their union were still alive – 3 had died very young and there were also 4 children from a previous marriage of the professor). Henriette had a hard work to educate with dignity her numerous children, for whom she had very high perspectives. In order to raise her family to the peerage, Henriette changed her surname and added her late husband's surname, so that the family became Baden-Powell instead of Powell.

Agnes did not go to school ; she was educated with her brothers Robert and Baden Fletcher, which was quite common at that time. At home, Agnes learnt reading, writing, singing and many other things thanks to her mother and to Fraülein Groffel, the German housekeeper who lived with the family. On feast days, a tutor came home to teach the children mathematics, Greek and Latin.

To overcome the difficulties she had to face, Henriette managed to get some financial help and some study grants, but she used them for the studies of her sons. So, at the end of their studies, the elder brothers, Warrington and George enlisted in the navy then came back to London, one as a barrister, the other one as a politician. Robert and Baden Fletcher joined the army whereas Franck started an artistic career. The sixth brother, third in the family, Augustus, had died of tuberculosis in 1863, at the age of 13.

But Agnes remained at home with her mother. However, even if she did not have the opportunity of going to school, her education and her instruction were very well led, thanks to the high cultural level that reigned in the family. As a matter of fact, the living-room of the Baden-Powell house was frequented by intellectuals, writers and artists.

Considering the poor resources of the family and in spite of several proposals of marriage, Agnes did not have the possibility of getting married because the family was unable to offer an adequate dowry, which was an insuperable handicap for the uses and mentality of that time.

### **Agnes' hobbies**

Like all the young ladies of the Victorian era, Agnes studied music ; she was an excellent violin player. But she was also able to play six other instruments, among which piano and organ. She had an inclination for languages, old and modern, and she studied eleven languages, among which Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Persian, French and

Italian. She also belonged to the the Dante Alighieri Society, which spread out in the world the knowledge and the Italian language and culture, as it still does nowadays.

Agnes knew and frequented Guglielmo Marconi ; she followed carefully his experiences with radio. There is still a letter written by Agnes in March 1899 to Marconi to congratulate him for the success of his first experiments of transmission by radio through the Channel. Marconi, whose mother what British, spent long stays in England and, for a short period, he courted Agnes but it did not go further.

Agnes' great passion was natural history. She bred bees in a hive conceived by herself and put on a window sill of her house, with the opening towards outside so that she could observe the life of these little insects. Agnes also won several prizes for the honey produced by her bees.

At home, she had a colony of birds who flew freely in the rooms. For years, she had a sparrow particularly attached to her that came to stand on her shoulder. She also had a collection of butterflies; some of them flew freely in the house. Agnes was also very fond of botanics and she had a big collection of flowers that she had gathered and then dried. She was clever for handicraft, she drew and painted ; several of her watercolors still exist nowadays.

In a family where her brothers practiced a lot of sports, it would have been strange that the only girl should not do the same ; so, Agnes learnt swimming, skating and cycling, horse riding, fishing, shooting with a gun, playing tennis, golf, sailing.

Her youngest brother, Baden Flechter, was fascinated by aeronautics and, during the Boer war, he had successfully experienced the use of aerostatic balloons. Agnes became very fond of this new means of conveyance and frequently went with her brother in her balloon ascensions. Then, with the development of aviation, with her brother, she added this means to their passions. Agnes adhered to the "*Women's Aerial League*", the feminine branch of the "*Aerial League of the British Empire*", and she was a member of its Leading Committee. When Baden Fletcher died in 1927, Agnes wanted to honor his memory by creating a prize linked to aeronautic knowledge, the "*Baden-Powell Memorial Prize*".

Agnes often travelled in Great Britain, visiting parents and friends. She made a cruising on the Mediterranean Sea in order to observe a total eclipse of sun and, in 1901, she travelled with her mother to South Africa, where they were invited (all costs paid) by her brother Robert, now famous thanks to the siege of Mafeking.

### **The "Girl Guides"**

On September 29th 1909, during the first big gathering of Scouts in « Crystal Palace » in London, a small group of young ladies asked Baden-Powell to organize something specific for them. From the beginning, Baden-Powell had planned that scouting would accept girls too, but this request was for him an incitation to study more carefully the possibilities that scouting could offer to girls. For scouts, the development was spontaneous and quick, but for girls this development did not happen in the same way. As a matter of fact, for about 110.000 Boy Scouts registered after one year at the British General Headquarters, the Girl Scouts registered were about 6.000. It was obvious that the way of proceeding had to be completely different : a specific realization had to be studied for girls.

Baden-Powell spoke with his mother and with his sister of the possibilities of scouting for girls. Then he started to settle the guiding lines, the first of which being to create a completely separated movement for girls, totally independent from the boys' one, also with a different name : "Girl Guides". Moreover, he saw that with girls it was impossible to implement the system used with boys, who had found by themselves grown-ups as leaders, the latter organizing Commissaryships for a better organization of the Movement at the local level. Baden-Powell thought that on the contrary girls needed to use the reverse method and so that it was preferable to train Commissaryships first, with some ladies interested in guiding. Then these ladies would find other ladies or younger girls, to become girl guide leaders.

But Baden-Powell was assailed by the question of the person to put at the head of this whole organization. He proposed to many ladies he knew to take the Guides in charge but it was in vain. Then he proposed it to his sister Agnes, who hesitated a lot before accepting. Indeed, she was already more than 50 years old, her life was full of commitments and hobbies and she had never had direct responsibilities of organization or management.

At that time, Agnes was the Vice-President of the "Westminster Red Cross" and she had founded a "Girls' Emergency Corps", based on the ideas of the book "Scouting for Boys". Besides, in 1908, Agnes had founded a scout troop by herself, in the hope of finding a man able to take it in charge. But all this was quite nothing compared to the idea of launching in the Great Britain of that time a feminine movement parallel to scouting. Finally, yielding to her brother's insistence, Agnes accepted and, with 52 years of age, she committed herself thoroughly into this new adventure.

### **The Victorian atmosphere**

At the beginning of the 1900ies, according to the current mentality, girls and women had to be obedient, submitted and care for domestic tasks. The popular opinion of those years had many prejudices and did not appreciate at all that girls should live experiences similar to the scouts' ones, because it feared that it should transform them into ill bred tomboys.

At that period, in Great Britain, the movement of « suffragets » was also very active : that movement claimed for women a bigger equality with men and vote right. The majority of the public opinion was rather hostile to the suffragets, especially because they often made demonstrations and noisy protests such as tying themselves to balconies, burning pillar-boxes, breaking windows, etc. For the public opinion, the risk was that the ideas behind the Guide movement should be assimilated to the suffragets' ideas. Indeed, some newspapers such as "The Spectator", at seeing some of the first "Girl Guides", had defined that initiative as "stupid and pernicious". "The Spectator" also published some violent articles against the existence of "Girl Scouts", signed by Violet Markham, an anti-suffraget activist, who wrote, among others : "Girls are not boys and the education that develops masculine qualities for the latter may lead to the negation of femininity for the former".

Agnes Baden-Powell's soft character was very useful to go against these opinions, also because Agnes created a program of activities which on the one hand tried to satisfy the demands of girls, who wanted to live the adventure of scouting, but on the other hand reassured and obtained their parents' approval. Preoccupied by the polemic that had appeared, Agnes wrote to the newspaper "The Spectator" and, after an exchange of letters, the newspaper changed its opinion completely and wrote : "on previous occasions, we have heavily condemned the organization of Girl Scouts, particularly when their leaders are men. Miss Baden-Powell's frame for Girl Guides contains, on the reverse, a completely different proposal and gives a complete answer to the objections that we had made previously".

### **Agnes' action**

Agnes started her new functions in April 1910 ; she founded the association of Guides, she became its president, organized a Committee to which she invited numerous ladies and women of the high society. With a loan of £100 from the scout association, she rent some offices where she settled the organization of Guides, with a paid secretary, miss Mac Donald.

Agnes imagined the uniform of Guides, draw a lot of badges herself, invented the class tests and all the initial organization of Guiding. Then she made an agreement with the editor Pearson, who published books and magazines for scouts, and she obtained 2 pages free of charge in the feminine magazine "Home Notes", as soon as August 1910. These pages were the first official newsletter of Guides, as long as the new organization was not able to print its own magazine.

At the end of 1910, the association of Guides had now settled its organization, analogue to the Scouts' parallel one, even if less developed. The Organization Committee asked for clearer guide-lines for Guides and Agnes

prepared an information sheet on Guiding, "Pamphlet A". Some time later, "Pamphlet B" was published : it explained to girls how to make their parents understand the interest and the importance of Guiding.

Agnes travelled everywhere throughout Great Britain, taking part in meetings and gatherings, appointing commissaries and secretaries throughout the country. Se was often camping with girl guides, she wrote articles for the Guides' magazine and she was always active to promote in the public opinion the importance of training in the Guide Movement. The fruit of her labor were not long to arrive. As a matter of fact, at the first census, in 1916, the Guide association had more than 40.000 members and in 1919 the number of members had tripled, reaching 120.000. The bases settled by Agnes were obviously very steady because, ten years later, in 1929, Guides were much more numerous than Scouts, with 518.826 members instead of 397.648 members of Scouts.

### **A booklet**

But the movement of Guides needed a basic booklet. To cope with this need and to answer to many requests too, Agnes published in May 1912 the booklet : "*How Girls can help to build up the Empire - The Handbook for Girl Guides*". This title seems rather strange to us nowadays but, at that time and according to the mentality, it was very useful to convince so many parents reluctant to the registration of their daughters to Guides. This book had 475 pages and was an adaptation of "*Scouting for boys*". In collaboration with her brother, Agnes had eliminated several chapters, had replaced some men by women and had introduced new chapters concerning puericulture, care to sick, domestic economy and other typically feminine occupations.

In her booklet, Agnes raised the question of woman's role in society; according to her, this role could not be exclusively confined to home, caring for children, as the right-thinking people of that time would have wanted, on the contrary ! Besides, thanks to her book, Agnes managed to avoid the suffragets' extremist positions as well as the too strict positions of right-thinking people, indicating for girls an active role not only in the family but also in society. In the first chapter, Agnes wrote : "*Girls are wrong when they imitate boys. It must not be a bad imitation. It is certainly more refined to be a true girl, as no boy can be. It is pleasant to see a soft and mild girl, able to encourage someone who suffers, with kindness. Some girls like scouting, but scouting for girls is not the same as for boys*".

### **Olave's arrival**

In 1912, Robert Baden-Powell married Olave St Clair Soames. After an unsuccessful attempt, in 1916 Robert asked the Guide Committee to give a function to his wife and he obtained for her the appointment as Commissary for the County of Sussex. Olave assumed this function very efficiently and after two years she was appointed as "*Chief Commissioner*". From that moment on, her ascension in the Guide movement started. Between the two sisters-in-law, there was not much friendship and, gradually, Olave took more and more responsibilities in scouting. Olave's ascension corresponded to Agnes' slow exit.

Unfortunately, some disagreements and degrading episodes took place between Agnes, her brother and her sister-in-law, for instance when Robert and Olave forbade Agnes to intervene during the first World Camp for Guides and Leaders, in 1924 in Foxlease (Hampshire). As Olave feared that Agnes should participate even in spite of this prohibition, she asked Grace Browning, member of the Committee, to black Agnes and to avoid her meeting with the leaders of the foreign delegations. But Agnes ignored the prohibitions and Grace Browning's vigilancy and she managed all the same to take part in the camp and to meet some foreign leaders. A few days later, when Robert met his sister, he told her that if such an episode happened again, she would be dismissed from her function of Vice-President of the association of Guides. But Agnes did not observe his threats and went on meeting Guides, Leaders and Commissioners.

Tim Jeal, an historian of scouting, affirms that, apart from the absence of mutual attraction, Olave saw in Agnes an obstacle to her ambition of becoming for the Movement of Guides what her husband represented for the Movement of Scouts. So Olave not only tried to get rid of Agnes but, gradually, she also put apart all the Commissioners and Leaders who had collaborated with Agnes during the first years, starting with Miss Mac

Donald, the first secretary for Guides, and Mrs Agatha Blyth, who had founded the first training-camp for leaders (*The Girl Guide Officers' Training School*).

In February 1918, a new booklet, "*Girl Guiding*", written by Robert Baden-Powell, replaced the book written by Agnes. Many years later, in her autobiography, Olave defined Agnes' book as "*the little blue mess*", after the color of the cover of Agnes' book, ignoring the fact that the book was also due to her husband Robert!

Agnes resigned from her function of President to allow princess Mary, daughter of King George V and enthusiast supporter of Guides, to become the President of the association and, in 1920, the Committee appointed her as Vice-President, an honorary function that Agnes kept till she died. Agnes still remained a few years in the Committee but, in January 1924, Robert managed to replace her. Agnes would have liked to receive the title of "General Commandant" but Robert and the Committee ignored her request.

### **The decline**

In spite of the fact that she was deeply hurt by the way she was put apart and treated by some members of the Committee, Agnes went on following silently the developments of the Movement of Guides; she intervened during meetings and gatherings. She defined herself as "*the Guides grand-mother*". Several photographs represent her in uniform, among the Guides, in camps or on other occasions, almost till she died. Till the age of 80 years, she spent long periods sleeping under canvas, camping with units and troops of a commissaryship.

Apart from her commitment towards Guides, Agnes was extremely active in social life: she took part in meetings, dancing feasts; she even remained active physically. She died on June 2<sup>nd</sup> 1945, at the age of 86, and was buried in the London cemetery of Kensal Green, in the family tomb, although no inscription mentions her name.

Agnes Smyth Baden-Powell is rarely mentioned when we speak of the Guide Movement. Yet, the birth of Guides and all the implementation of Guiding is due to her commitment and to her disinterested sacrifices. After her death, Rose Kerr, one of the first leaders of the Guide Movement, wrote: "*Without her courage, her originality and her unwearying work during the first years, the feminine branch of Boy Scouts would never have found its way and would never have become the great strength that it represents now*".

Attilio Grieco