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There was a time when historians (mostly male, seasoned, and white) chuckled at the idea that the history of girlhood could shed light on key aspects in the history of global modernity. Such mockery is now widely read as a sign of ignorance. Ever since the publication of the pathbreaking volume „The Modern Girl Around the World“ in 2009, it has become clear that girls and young women coming of age in the early twentieth century were at the center of transnational conversations over the promises and perils of emerging modern cultures of consumption, leisure, beauty, and self-realization.¹ Most studies in the field, though presently still small in numbers, have focused on modern girlhood’s ambivalent status as a symbol of liberation and projection of mostly male anxieties over the blurring of national, moral and gender boundaries.² Less attention has been paid to recovering the everyday experiences and voices of young females growing up in that period. The results are sometimes unfortunate analytical gaps between representation and lived realities.

Kristine Alexander’s award-winning book sets out to correct this imbalance. To Alexander, the Girl Guides are at once a story begging to be told and a method begging to be applied. „Guiding Modern Girls“, which garnered the prestigious Wilson Book Prize in Canada, is a diligently researched and carefully argued transnational history of the Girl Guide movement that weaves together three locales in the British Empire during the interwar years: England, Canada, and colonial India. But it is also – and maybe even more importantly – a smart and remarkably honest reflection on the methodological challenges of reconstructing marginalized subjectivities that lie outside the purview of traditional archival practices of collecting and preserving. Drawing inspiration from subaltern stud-

ices, Alexander states that writing about the history of girls requires scholars to distance themselves from a narrow understanding of what passes as empirical evidence. Rather, they need to make the „exclusions“ and „silences“ (p. 12) in written and visual records – from published sources such as manuals and periodicals to private photo albums, diaries, and scrapbooks – an integral part of their analyses.

The first chapter recounts the imperial origins and transimperial spread of the British-led scouting movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The discussion of how elite concerns over racial fitness, imperial fortitude and proper childrearing blended in turn-of-the-century youth work covers familiar ground. Furthermore, the chapter dissects the relationships of the Boy Scouts’ founding father, Robert Baden-Powell, with his sister Agnes and his future wife Olave, who were instrumental in establishing the Girl Guides as a related yet separate all-girl organization. In addition, Alexander shows that Guiding’s dual identity as „[p]art regulatory project and part liberating adventure“ (p. 29) resulted in no small measure from girls who sought opportunities to loosen the straitjacket of Victorian domesticity. The second chapter looks at how adult organizers and their charges grappled with changing notions of girlhood and motherhood in different national and colonial settings throughout the fast-paced 1920s and 1930s. Location mattered in attempts to train girls to be good mothers and wives who would perform their household duties in accordance with contemporary concepts of scientific efficiency and maternal affection. In India, Eurocentric norms of domestic propriety clashed with the culturally entrenched practice of child marriage, a widespread cross-


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ethnic and cross-religious tradition that the British read as proof of Indian backwardness. At the same time, Guiding’s openness to tolerating same-sex partnerships within its ranks seemed strongest in North American and European segments of the movement.

Chapter 3 shifts the focus from the private to the public sphere, mapping the book’s contributions to debates over female citizenship spurred by the international advance of voting rights for women. Once again, Alexander demonstrates a keen eye for detail as she highlights significant differences between metropole and periphery, young and old, white and non-white. Guide leaders promoted the movement’s official ideal to mold an imperial body of cooperative citizens across racial and national lines, yet they also found this vision betrayed by Guide groups in India and French Canada whom they accused of sullying their civics lessons with anticolonial or separatist propaganda. The place of nature in training girls to be good citizens is examined in the next chapter. Joining a broader trend in western societies to increase children’s physical and spiritual health through camping and woodcraft, Guide organizers also offered outdoor recreation to satisfy their young members’ “longing for adventure” (p. 112), even as factors such as age, race, religion, class and region often determined how individual girls experienced these offerings.

The hierarchies of race and nation are further explored in chapter 5, which hones in on a series of public performances staged by the Girl Guides during the interwar years. Alexander is not the first historian to identify a causal relation between the rise of organized youth movements and the growing transideological fascination with mass spectacles. Her specific contribution is that she reveals how the Guides employed a variety of performative scripts – from historical pageantry to semi-military drill – to heighten female visibility in public spaces that had been traditionally considered masculine territory. Then again, this progressive impulse was checked by the leadership’s (partly strategic) desire to present their young ones as healthy and self-confident but also obedient and deferential daughters of the empire. The final chapter investigates the extent to which the sisterhoods, both real and imagined, forged within the transnational Guide family helped to recast the British Empire as a peace-loving and benevolent interracial community. Although women organizers, as Alexander explains, held that their brand of “imperial internationalism” (p. 166) was unburdened by the militarist baggage of male-dominated youth schemes, their assertion that all members of the international Guide movement should know and love one another was not a recipe for practical egalitarianism. Instead, disparities of wealth, literacy, and racial privilege continued to divide girls, leaving mostly affluent white females to profit from what were essentially Anglocentric efforts to give birth to a cross-border sisterhood.

Guiding Modern Girls deserves a wide readership. Historians of internationalism and globalization will find much of interest in the book’s treatment of girls and female educators as bottom-up internationalists. Scholars of youth, childhood, and gender will appreciate Alexander’s attentiveness to young voices and her cautious balancing of adult and girl perspectives, in spite of an archival landscape that can make the task of recovering children’s experiences extremely arduous, and often frustrating. Occasionally, Alexander could have extended the scope of her analysis. The relationship of the British-imperial Guides with their relatives in the United States, the Girl Scouts, might have warranted greater coverage. There are moments of enlightening side-glances to fascist girl organizations, such as the German Bund Deutscher Mädel, which, according to the author, shared a “common grammar” of discipline and fitness with Guiding. However, the book contains no such references to rival com-

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munist initiatives, many proponents of which were as enthusiastic about mobilizing young females on behalf of revolutionary concepts of class and gender as Guide leaders were about their liberal-imperial designs. To be sure, this is a minor quibble with a work of scholarship brimming with big and small insights. Guiding Modern Girls unveils how the early Girl Guide movement carved out spaces of intergenerational female homosociality that were neither fully empowering nor exclusively oppressive. On a larger scale, it gestures at the untapped potential buried in the history of youth organizations for charting the stony and serpentine trails that led to the emergence of a global modernity.