

Robert Baden-Powell (1857-1941) was a lieutenant-general in the British Army and a participant in the Siege of Mafeking in the Boer War. His 1908 book *Scouting for Boys* became the foundation of the Boy Scout movement.



Scouts'

Did Robert Baden-Powell really mastermind the Boy Scout movement? Or was it a Canadian? by Matthew R. Laird

It was only a photograph. But nearly thirty years later, the memory of it was still infuriating, encapsulating a lifetime's resentment. It was September 23, 1910, and Sir Robert Baden-Powell (known as B-P), the immensely popular British founder of the Boy Scouts, was in New York to acknowledge the publication of the first edition of the official handbook of the newly created Boy Scouts of America (BSA). A celebratory dinner was planned for that evening at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, where Baden-Powell would be joined by Daniel Carter Beard and Ernest Thompson Seton, two respected colleagues who had been instrumental in introducing Scouting to the United States. "Uncle Dan" Beard was the founder of the Society of the Sons of Daniel Boone, later renamed the Boy Pioneers, which by the early twentieth century had become the largest boys' club in America. A British-born Canadian, Seton was a celebrated naturalist, artist, and author who in recent years had devoted much time and energy to his Woodcraft Indians, another popular youth organization.



life that the "Father of Scouting" had brazenly stolen his ideas and the international acclaim that should have been his.

Ernest Thompson Seton's story began in a distant place and under a different name. Born Ernest Evan Thompson in South Shields, Durham, England, in 1860, he was six when his family immigrated to Canada. They settled in rural Lindsay, Ontario, where Seton developed his lifelong love of nature and wildlife. Unsuccessful at farming, the family then moved to Toronto. Here, Seton often took refuge from his stern Presbyterian household in the wilds of the Don Valley, where, inspired by James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, he spent many solitary hours "playing Indian." A gifted artist, Seton went on to study at prestigious academies in London and Paris. It was during this formative period that he assumed a new identity. He had been fascinated by the dubious family tale that his father was heir to Scottish nobleman Lord Seton, the Earl of Winton. To emphasize this alleged connection, he settled on the name Ernest

Ernest Thompson Seton (1860–1946), who homesteaded in Manitoba, founded the Woodcraft Indians, a precursor to and influence on Lord Baden-Powell's Boy Scout movement.

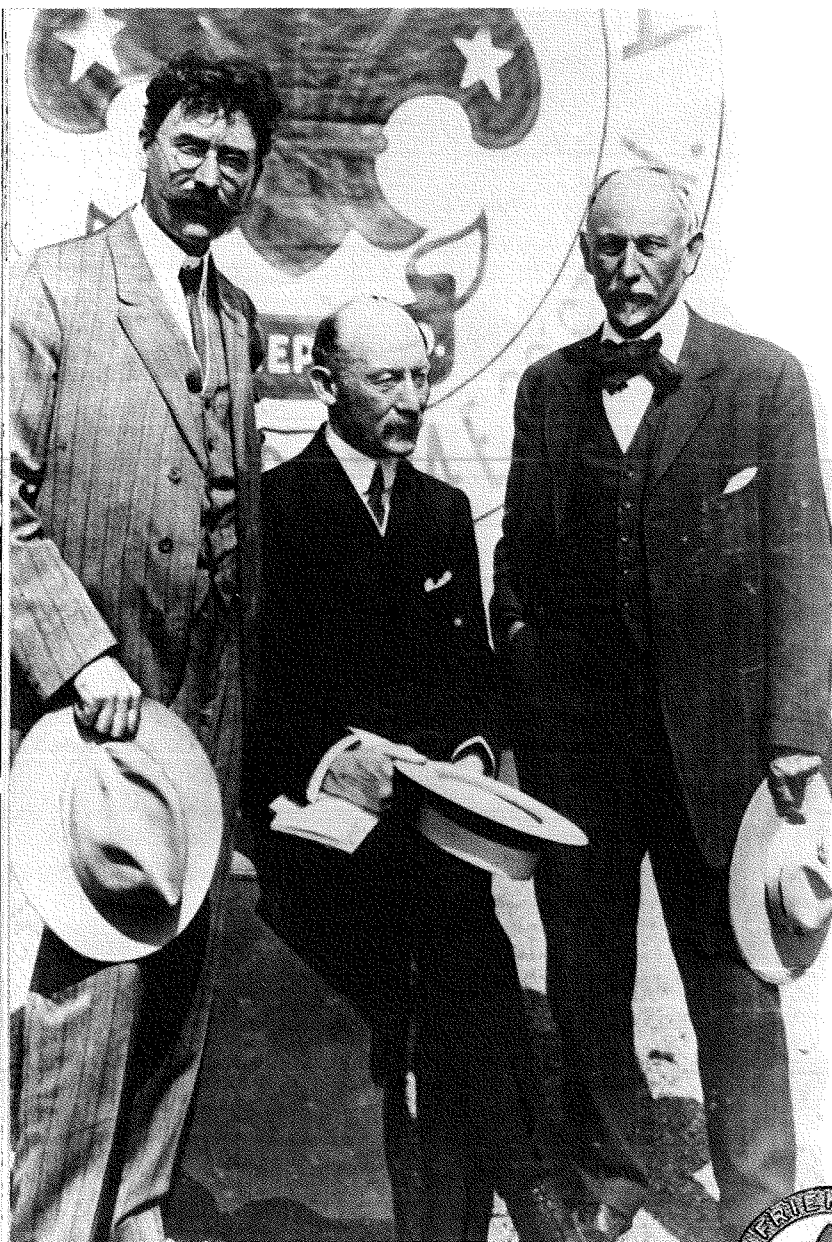
Baden-Powell, Beard, and Seton met earlier that day at the headquarters of the YWCA. The organization's director suggested a group photograph to commemorate the occasion, and the men retired to the roof of the building. (See page 30.) What happened next would become the subject of considerable controversy. In a 1938 letter to Beard, Seton recounted his version of events. "The assumption was that we were all equals," he wrote. "As we were about to pose, B-P said, 'I think I'll sit down,' and moved over to the ventilator. You and I had to stand, by which trick he made us his subordinates, although he was the latest to enter the field."

No doubt Beard had long forgotten this trivial episode. But Seton clearly had not. In fact, he had nursed a profound bitterness toward Baden-Powell for decades and remained convinced to the end of his

Thompson Seton.

With no aristocratic inheritance forthcoming, Seton lived a nomadic life into his thirties. He homesteaded in Manitoba, where he served as provincial naturalist; worked as an illustrator in New York; and travelled extensively in North America and Europe. For a time he considered a scientific career, and his beautifully illustrated *Birds of Manitoba* was published by the Smithsonian Institution in 1890. But it was as a popular writer that he would find the greatest success. His short stories, which appeared in a number of American magazines, portrayed animal characters in natural settings and situations. In 1898, he wrote the bestselling *Wild Animals I Have Known* and launched a brilliant North American lecture tour that made him a household name among readers of all ages. His popularity grew with a string of

Honour



Convinced that boys everywhere might benefit from his program of games, woodcraft, and nature study, Seton persuaded the popular *Ladies' Home Journal* to allow him a regular column in which to publicize his program. "Ernest Thompson Seton's Boys" appeared in May 1902, and soon fifty or more groups had sprung up across the United States and Canada. Although he never intended to create a highly structured organization, he codified the guiding principles in *The Birch-Bark Roll of the Woodcraft Indians*.

Seton continued writing popular stories about animals and native peoples and, on a 1904 promotional tour, introduced his Woodcraft Indians to Britain with modest success. During a return trip in the fall of 1906, he was first introduced to the redoubtable Baden-Powell. A career cavalry officer and popular hero of the Siege of Mafeking in the recent Anglo-Boer War, Baden-Powell shared Seton's interest in shaping the characters of young men. He had famously commanded the Mafeking Cadets, an impromptu corps of youths who had helped defend the beleaguered South African town. He was now determined to establish a civilian boys' organization at home. Although he rejected the military trappings of existing groups such as the Boys' Brigades and Church Lads' Brigades, he shared the fear – pervasive before World War I – that a young generation of pale and pigeon-chested loafers could not possibly defend the Empire. His goal was to produce healthy and dutiful patriots. Still, he struggled to imagine a practical program that would appeal as much to the adventurous impulses of middle-class boys as to their parents, who were generally skeptical of overt military training. A leader in search of a movement, Baden-Powell was intrigued when a copy of Seton's *Birch-Bark Roll* arrived on his doorstep.

Seton must have been somewhat star-struck when he received a note from Baden-Powell, one of Britain's most beloved and influential public figures. Seton was flattered by his enthusiastic response. "I am sincerely grateful to you for your kindness in forwarding me your interesting *Birch Bark*," wrote B-P. "It may interest you to know that I had been drawing up a scheme with a handbook to it, for the education of boys as scouts – which essentially runs much on the lines of yours. So I need scarcely say that your work has a very special interest to me."

At Baden-Powell's invitation, the two met on October 30, 1906. Over lunch at London's Savoy Hotel, they discussed their mutual interest in youth activities and parted on friendly terms. They continued their correspondence over the following months, exchanging ideas and offering encouragement. Baden-Powell's thoughts on how to organize his program coalesced, and in the summer of 1907, he led the first experimental Boy Scout camp at Brownsea Island off the Dorset coast. Next, with the expert guidance of publishing

Seton, Baden-Powell, and Daniel Carter Beard at the New York City YMCA, 1910. For Seton, the photo's composition symbolized Baden-Powell's usurpation of the scouting concept.

commercial successes, including *Trail of the Sandhill Stag* (1899), *Biography of a Grizzly* (1900), and *The Lives of the Hunted* (1901).

Wealthy and famous at forty-one years of age, Seton bought a large, undeveloped property in Connecticut, where he planned to build a luxurious new home. But local youths, upset by the loss of their forest haunt, began trespassing and painting obscenities on the gates. When threats failed to stop the vandalism, Seton asked permission to speak at the local school. He invited every boy over twelve for a week-end picnic and camp-out, and a large number accepted. They played on his estate all day, and in the evening he regaled them with stories. At Seton's encouragement, they decided to camp "Indian style." One of the boys was elected chief, while Seton, adopting the title Black Wolf, served as "medicine man." The gathering was such a success that Seton soon established a Senewauk Tribe of local boys, drafting basic rules of conduct and planning activities for their weekly meetings.



MUSEUM OF CANADIAN SCOUTING, SCOUTS CANADA, OTTAWA

magnate C. Arthur Pearson, he presented his own handbook, *Scouting for Boys*, in serial form beginning in early 1908.

When Seton first read *Scouting for Boys* he was astonished, and then irate. He fired off a scathing letter to Baden-Powell, effectively charging him with plagiarism. "*The Birch Bark Roll*, now in its eighth edition," he claimed,

differs in no essential from the Scouting for Boys, it was in your possession when you formed your plans and must have contributed to helping you. Yet you give no hint of this. Next you have taken my games ... made unimportant alterations in them, changing their names in most cases, and given them as though they were yours in spite of the fact that these were invented slowly, developed in the course of practice, and copyrighted solely by myself. This, you must admit, is not right ... But more important to me, is the fact that you do not anywhere come out frankly and make it clear that for nine years I have been carrying on in America precisely the same movement, founding camps and teaching woodcraft and scouting to the boys as a means of developing manliness and character.

No critic has ever accused Baden-Powell of literary greatness. In her recent analysis of the reissued first edition of *Scouting for Boys*, Elleke Boehmer describes it as a pastiche of "'true crime' anecdotes, stock adventure tales, campfire hints, potted history natural and imperial, first-aid tips, and recycled advice on the definitive scouting activities of observation and tracking," all mirroring the particular sensibilities – classist, racist, sexist, and imperialist – of Edwardian Britain. In creating the Boy Scouts and its pre-packaged founding text, Baden-Powell admitted to borrowing liberally from many sources. But did he truly steal Seton's movement?

Certainly Seton's influence is evident throughout *Scouting for Boys*. As charged, Baden-Powell was guilty of lifting a number of Woodcraft Indian games, often changing only their titles. "Spearing the Great Sturgeon" was transformed into "A Whale Hunt," and "Pole Star" became "Find the North." Baden-Powell did occasionally note Seton as a source, and he buried a cursory acknowledgment of the Woodcraft games in the final chapter. But the two boys' groups shared other fundamental similarities that Baden-Powell never credited. The Boy Scout patrol replicated the self-governing nature of the Woodcraft tribe, with peer leaders overseen by a responsible adult. As with Seton's Indians, each Scout group adopted its own animal or bird totem. And, most notably, the Boy Scouts incorporated a system of non-competitive honours or badges earned for performing physical feats or mastering certain skills, an original Woodcraft practice that had greatly impressed Baden-Powell.

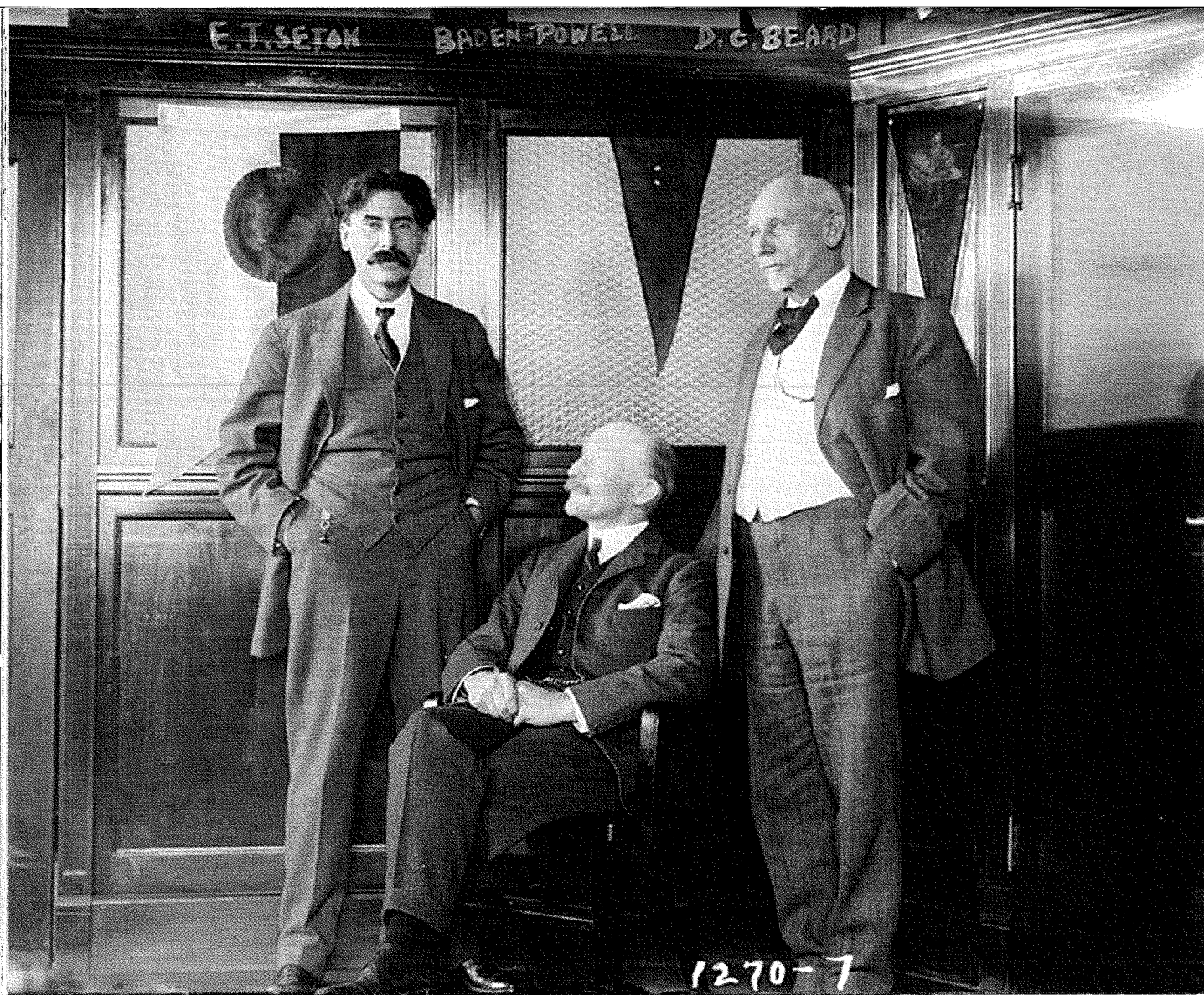
Most contemporary boys' organizations, especially those devoted to scouting and camp craft, inevitably shared some basic aims and activities. True, Baden-Powell did not simply dress the Woodcraft Indians in new khaki uniforms. But Seton's contributions to the Boy Scout program were far more important than its founder ever felt comfortable admitting. Early on, for example, Seton had related that "among the [Woodcraft] Indians generally the Grey Wolf is considered the ideal Scout, because he sees everything and no one sees him. The Wolf, then, is the badge of their scouting order." Later, Baden-Powell proposed in *Scouting for Boys* that the title "Wolf" should be awarded annually to the most distinguished Scout. "The Red Indians of North America," he explained, "call their best Scout 'Grey Wolf,' because the grey wolf is a beast that sees everything and yet is never seen."

This unlicensed "borrowing" also had financial ramifications. Seton had allowed Baden-Powell to manufacture a small number of his patented "tracking irons" – special footwear that simulated deer tracks – with the understanding that subsequent copies would be subject to a new agreement. No such arrangement was ever negotiated, and, years later, Seton was disgusted to see his own design for sale in a London shop as "B-P Tracking Irons."

No wonder Seton felt cheated. Despite his repeated complaints, Baden-Powell remained, according to Boehmer, "affably nonplussed," never adequately

Scouting, Canadian style

Scouting first arrived in Canada early in 1908, only a few months after the initial publication of Baden-Powell's *Scouting for Boys*. The earliest Canadian Scout groups emerged spontaneously, without official support or encouragement. In fact, several communities, including St. Catharines and Merrickville, Ontario, and Port Morien, Nova Scotia, have claimed the distinction of hosting the nation's first Scout patrol. The movement soon spread throughout the country, and Baden-Powell persuaded Governor General Earl Grey to become the first Chief Scout of Canada in 1910. A council was established that summer, and the first annual meeting was held in Ottawa the following year. On June 12, 1914, the Canadian General Council of the Boy Scout Association was incorporated by an Act of Parliament. The Council remained a branch of the Boy Scout Association until October 30, 1946, when it became an independent member of the Boy Scout World Conference. In March 1961, the name was officially changed to Boy Scouts of Canada/Scouts du Canada. With the introduction of the current logo in 1976, the organization became commonly known as Scouts Canada. Since 1910, the Governor General has served as Chief Scout, with the title currently held by Her Excellency Michaëlle Jean.



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To Seton, the Scout motto “Be Prepared” betrayed a preoccupation with war. Even the prescription that Scouts do a daily “good turn” struck him as encouraging an “artificial” or “priggish” character.

This second, undated photograph suggests the relationship between Seton and Baden-Powell was more complex than either would admit.

acknowledging Seton’s role in the creation of the Boy Scouts. Yet, more than the appropriation of games, totems, and badges, Seton resented the militaristic stamp he felt Baden-Powell had put on the movement. While Seton cherished the purity of the Woodcraft ideal, which sought to nurture imagination, self-reliance, and ultimately, spirituality, he saw the Boy Scouts as a scheme of “narrowly self-serving” military training that emphasized duty and obedience over individualism. To Seton, the Scout motto “Be Prepared” betrayed a preoccupation with war. Even the prescription that Scouts do a daily “good turn” struck him as encouraging an “artificial” or “priggish” character.

While Seton remained committed enough to serve as the first “Chief Scout” of the BSA, he eventually fell out with the organization’s leadership, which decried his alleged “pacifism” during World War I and his reluctance to take American citizenship. He

resigned his position in 1915, opting to concentrate his efforts on his own Woodcraft League.

Apologists for Baden-Powell have pointed to Seton’s insecurity, even his troubled relationship with his father, to explain his obsession with B-P’s alleged duplicity. They have argued that Seton’s Woodcraft movement, with its romanticized “Indian” values and practices, was inherently less popular. Conversely, Baden-Powell’s true genius was not necessarily his creativity, but rather his grasp of what sort of movement would have the broadest possible appeal to children, their parents, and society at large. While the Boy Scouts grew rapidly into an international phenomenon – for years *Scouting for Boys* outsold every book except the Bible in the English-speaking world – the Woodcraft movement became an “irrelevant curiosity,” according to Scouts historian Tim Jeal. After all, B-P’s supporters contend, Seton was jealous of Baden-Powell’s

Scouts stuff

Canada's largest museum devoted to the Scouting movement began in 1976 when Fran Moon, wife of the late Ron Moon, decided she wanted her basement back. Ron, a distillery manager and resident of Belleville, Ontario, began collecting Scouting memorabilia after Fran was made the first female district president for Scouting in the Belleville area. But, after a decade, his collection had outgrown the bounds of an average house. An early home was found in Belleville's St. Thomas Parish Hall before moving in 1987 to the upper floor of the Sir James Whitney School for the Deaf.

Today the Belleville Scout-Guide Museum holds 30,000 artifacts, from early Scouting handbooks to complete sets of provincial, Canadian, and world jamboree badges. Most of the latter, which number around 5,000, are displayed along "Badge Alley," a 3.3-metre-long hallway with floor cases and wall displays that opens into a hundred-square-metre history and uniform display, complete with Scout and Guide uniforms from the early 1900s to 2000. The museum's most significant artifact rests on a desk in the museum's re-creation of Robert Baden-Powell's study at Pax Hill, his home in Hampshire, England - it's an inkwell, used by Baden-Powell himself, bought at auction in the early 1940s after the Scout founder's 1941 death, and later given to Canadian World War I flying ace Wilfrid "Wop" May, whose family donated it to the museum.

For more information about the Belleville Scout-Guide Museum visit <www3.sympatico.ca/pandj>.

—Robert White

success and could never admit that he had been bested at his own game.

Psychoanalysis aside, perhaps Seton did let his frustration with Baden-Powell colour his recollection of events to some degree. A case in point: another lesser-known photograph of Seton, Baden-Powell, and Beard together. It was likely taken during Baden-Powell's 1910 visit, around the same time as the infamous shot on the YMCA roof. In this portrait the group is identically arranged, with Baden-Powell ensconced in a chair, and Seton and Beard standing by his side. The existence of this second, obviously posed photo calls into question Seton's memory that it was B-P's one-time trickery that put him in a subordinate position.

Seton remained a respected figure in the scouting world despite his departure from the BSA, and for years his longstanding feud with Baden-Powell was carefully concealed. Although he devoted a chapter of his memoirs to the controversy, his publisher convinced him to drop it for propriety's sake when Baden-Powell died in 1941. Even after Seton's own death in 1946, his tale remained untold. His second wife, Julie, released his private journals in 1967, but deliberately excluded any criticism of Baden-Powell,

as the book was timed to coincide with the dedication of the new Ernest Thompson Seton Memorial Library and Museum at the BSA's Philmont Scout Ranch near Cimarron, New Mexico. Not until the 1980s, when scholars began to look more critically at Baden-Powell and the origins of the Boy Scout movement, was the extent of Seton's influence reconsidered.

Seton may never have achieved the exalted status that Baden-Powell still enjoys, but he has hardly been forgotten. A variety of Woodcraft groups inspired by his ideas are active around the world, while his legacy as an "artist, naturalist, story-teller, author, philosopher, and leader par excellence" is preserved by the non-profit Ernest Thompson Seton Institute, Inc. (ETSI), in Sante Fe, New Mexico, and by ETSI Canada in Winnipeg. Seton may well have felt thwarted in life. But, more than a century after he created the Woodcraft movement, his unique vision of outdoor education for youth and his fundamental belief in the interdependence of humanity and nature clearly continue to resonate. 🐾

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Centennial of scouting

The year 2007 marks the centennial of the Boy Scout movement, commemorating Sir Robert Baden-Powell's first Scout camp at Brownsea Island. Canadian Scouts are expected to join 40,000 young people from around the world to mark the occasion in July and August at the twenty-first World Scout Jamboree in Hylands Park, Essex, England. In Canada, Scouts are scheduled to gather on the shores of Lake Tamaracouta, Quebec, on August 1 for a sunrise ceremony celebrating scouting at CJ'07, Canada's eleventh National Jamboree.

Et Cetera

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Scouts Canada national website: www.scouts.ca