

'Our comrades beyond the seas' Colonial youth movements 1880–1920

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On 11 October 1906 William Alexander Smith (later Sir William), founder, and later Secretary, of The Boys' Brigade in Glasgow in 1883, wrote to A. B. Field at the Australasian headquarters of the movement in Melbourne:

It is a great stimulus to us in the old country to know that there are thousands of our comrades beyond the seas enrolling in the Boys' Brigade, and helping to keep the flag flying for all that is good and true in Boyhood and Manhood.

Bringing a message for New Year 1907, he further hoped that antipodean boys 'may grow up to be worthy sons of your great country, worthy citizens of our great empire . . .'.¹ Smith, as John Springhall in his researches into the history of youth movements in Britain has shown, was the first to found a mass voluntary youth movement fully in tune with the social-political-religious mood of his times: among the first to realize in late Victorian Britain ' . . . that the successful propagation of a "manly" religion required it to be articulated in cultural and organizational forms more in keeping with an age of nationalism and militarism . . .'.² and that youth movements could, indeed, be seen (and by some used) as important and sensitive social barometers of an era. Smith's 'Brigade idea' soon found imitators and emulators in such movements as the Jewish Lads' Brigade (1895); the Church (C. of E.) Lads' Brigade (1891); the Boys' Life Brigade (1899); the Girls' Guildry (1900); the Girls' Brigade and Girls' Life Brigade. Two other mass movements, the Boy Scouts (1908) and Girl Guides (1909) were formed a generation later than the brigades but they were, in the same way, responses to contemporary socio-political and intellectual currents of a different kind. They, too, spawned competitors and imitators.³

The writings of a new 'school' of social historians concerned with youth work and recreational or leisure-time pursuits in Britain and North America have, as yet, made little or no impact upon historical research in New Zealand. In recent years there has, it is true, been a spate of writing in this country on more contemporary sociological issues in the field of recreational, leisure-time and youth work activities but, so far as I can discern, to date very little of a really critical, penetrating or even useful nature *historically* has appeared.⁴