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Modern Manhood and the Boy Scouts of America: Citizenship, Race, and the Environment, 1910-1930

Benjamin René Jordan

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In this illuminating look at gender and Scouting in the United States, Benjamin Rene Jordan examines how in its founding and early rise, the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) integrated traditional Victorian manhood with modern, corporate-industrial values and skills. While showing how the BSA Americanized the original British Scouting program, Jordan finds that the organization's community-based activities signaled a shift in men's social norms, away from rugged agricultural individualism or martial primitivism and toward productive employment in offices and factories, stressing scientific cooperation and a pragmatic approach to the responsibilities of citizenship.

By examining the BSA's national reach and influence, Jordan demonstrates surprising ethnic diversity and religious inclusiveness in the organization's founding decades. For example, Scouting officials' preferred urban Catholic and Jewish working-class immigrants and "modernizable" African Americans and Native Americans over rural whites and other traditional farmers, who were seen as too "backward" to lead an increasingly urban-industrial society. In looking at the revered organization's past, Jordan finds that Scouting helped to broaden mainstream American manhood by modernizing traditional Victorian values to better suit a changing nation.

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