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‘A Frank and Free Comradeship Between the Sexes’: The Woodcraft Folk and the Second Wave of Feminism

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This article explores the extent and nature of feminist influence on the educational theory and practice of the Woodcraft Folk in the twentieth century. It starts by examining Woodcraft’s ideas on “the relations between the sexes” as outlined by Leslie Paul (1938, p. 55). It then examines in detail his understanding of co-education, and his claim that the organisation had achieved a “frank and free comradeship between the sexes” (Paul, 1938, p. 55). It argues that the equating of sex equality with a formal equality of opportunity, coupled with the lived experience of its co-operative camping communities, led to the belief that equality of the sexes had been achieved within the Woodcraft Folk. This outlook, which remained largely unchanged until the second wave of feminism in the late 1960s and 1970s, came into conflict with attempts to adapt to that new type of feminism. Rather than making the Woodcraft Folk’s membership more receptive to ideas of the Women’s Liberation Movement, these earlier ideas proved to be a barrier to exploring its ideas on gender as a social construct, resulting in a missed opportunity to re-work Woodcraft’s educational practice at a time when the second wave of feminism was at its height.

Introduction

In 1979, the Woodcraft Folk, as part of a broader discussion updating its aims and principles, adopted the following clause as part of its constitution:

> **Equality for Men and Women:**
> As an educational organisation we will ensure that equal opportunities exist for the development of both boys and girls in the Woodcraft Folk in order to help lay a solid foundation for equality in their future adult lives. (Woodcraft Folk, 1979c, Clause 1.6, p. 2)

The inclusion of the principle of sex equality is here linked to the educational practice of the organisation, since equal opportunities for the development of both boys and girls within Woodcraft will lay the foundation for their equality when adults. Despite having been in existence for over 50 years, this was the first ever mention of sex equality in its constitution — the document which all adult members were required to accept and abide by when joining the organisation.

This addition to its stated aims was clearly a conscious response to the second wave of feminism which was then at its peak. According to the 1978 *Leaders' Manual*:

> The Women's Liberation Movement … is a very different movement from the caricature so often depicted in the press as something emanating from neurotic or attention-seeking women who hate all men and whose main hobby is bra-burning.
>
> It is a serious movement (not an organisation, incidentally), with many different strands of thought within it. It represents a new kind of feminism — much more far-reaching than the suffragette movement of 60 years ago. (Woodcraft Folk, 1978, Part II, Section 11, p. 6)

From this it would appear that the inclusion of sex equality in its aims and principles signalled an openness to the ideas of the Women's Liberation Movement. The first purpose of this article is therefore to identify exactly which ideas of the Women's Liberation Movement the Woodcraft saw itself as embracing, and how (and whether) this changed the educational practice of the organisation.

However, in order to identify the changes in the organisation's educational work that were the result of its response to the second wave of feminism, it is also necessary to explore its approach towards sex equality prior to this. The existing literature on the Woodcraft Folk, in so far as it mentions this issue at all, assumes that its "pioneering of co-education" (Davis, 2000, p. 114) in 1925 was a consequence of its commitment to sex equality. Indeed, this assumption has been so widely held amongst Woodcraft's membership that it could be said to be part of the folklore of the organisation. Yet just as there have been different strands of thought within feminism, so too what constitutes sex equality is open to different interpretations. Furthermore, what is understood by 'co-education' calls for greater clarification — after all, schools in England have often been labelled as co-educational because of their mixed intake, whilst segregating the sexes for subjects such as woodwork on the one hand and domestic science on the other.

This article will therefore firstly examine how the Woodcraft Folk understood sex equality and linked it to its educational practice prior to 1979, and then discuss how this, in turn, shaped its response to the second wave of feminism. It will argue that despite the 'progressive' elements of its approach prior to 1979, its early outlook and practice on this issue actually rendered it resistant to incorporating those strands of thought of the new feminism that had the most far-reaching implications for its educational work.

The Views of Leslie Paul in *The Republic of Children*

Woodcraft President Leslie Paul's (1938) *Handbook for Teachers of Working-Class Children* provides the best starting point for understanding Woodcraft's approach prior to 1979. This is because it contains the first full public explanation of, and justification for, its policy of co-education: "Early Woodcraft Folk literature never made much of this feature; it was just part of the organisation from the beginning and was neither publicised nor defended" (Leslie, 1984, p. 302).

Furthermore, Paul's book also marked the end of Woodcraft's flirtation with recapitulation theory and eugenics. The 1925 launch of the Woodcraft Folk as a mixed membership organisation had been a continuation of Kibbo Kift Kindred's previous practice, as much informed by John Hargrave's positive eugenics as it was by any commitment to sex equality on the part of its young founders (Palser, 2020). It was the approach to sex equality and co-education that emerged in the mid-1930s that became entrenched in the organisation's practice from then up until the second wave of feminism.

The Republic of Children had the following to say about relations between the sexes:

> The Woodcraft Folk is co-educational throughout. No discrimination is made between men and women, or boys and girls, and all the offices of the movement are open to both sexes. We wish to see a frank and free comradeship between the sexes springing naturally and unforced from our delight

> in each other and in our common tasks and pleasures. This we feel we have achieved and must safeguard, and the relations between the sexes can be kept cheerful and sensible by the exercise of a little common sense in group life. (Paul, 1938, p. 55)

Two different claims were being made here. The first suggested that there was more to co-education than Woodcraft's membership being open to both sexes. It is implied that Woodcraft was co-educational *throughout* since at no point did it discriminate between men and women, or between boys and girls. Co-education in Woodcraft meant equal opportunities in Woodcraft. The second claim concerned how the sexes actually related to each other in practice. Woodcraft Folk felt they had been successful in their aim of developing a "frank and free comradeship between the sexes" (Paul, 1938, p. 55), and that this was made possible by their equality of opportunity for girls and women. They argued that these relations developed spontaneously from their joint participation in all of Woodcraft's activities.

Paul does not make explicit his reasons for attaching such importance to achieving a frank and free comradeship between the sexes, but this becomes clearer when we take into account the overall purpose of its educational work — the training of working class children for future participation in the organisations of the working class movement. By the mid 1930s, the Woodcraft Folk had affiliated to the Socialist Educational International (SEI). In *The Republic of Children*, Paul (1938) says that the SEI sees the task of its affiliates being "to work out in *the present* the Socialist education of the future" (p. 55). Quoting the official programme of the SEI, Paul comments:

> The new education is that which bases itself, not upon the old ideas of individualism, but upon the ideas of co-operation and of collective ownership and control. 'To train vigorous personalities of a social character, whose aim is to realise a social ideal, ought to be the aim of all educators' who are conscious of the decay of the old competitive society and the struggle of the new collective society to give birth to itself. (Paul, 1938, pp. 55)

From 1935, the Woodcraft Folk published on behalf of the SEI a journal for helpers and leaders in the English speaking world. The first edition carried an unsigned article, probably written by Woodcraft leader and *Helper* editor Henry Fair, which explained that Woodcraft had faced a lot of opposition in the labour and co-operative movements over its stance on co-education. These critics often seemed to forget, he commented, that they had been fighting for the emancipation of women for a generation "yet they wished to deny the teaching of equality as between the sexes to children" (Woodcraft Folk, 1935, p. 7). The article went on to argue that ensuring that children understood the issue of equality would serve them well as adults when they joined the labour and co-operative movements:

> Our task as leaders and helpers must be to put before the youngsters of both sexes that they both have a part to play in the solving of the problems of the world and that by playing, working and learning together they will learn and appreciate each-others' point of view at a period in their lives when their basic impressions are being formed of each other. (Woodcraft Folk, 1935, p. 7)

The training of working class children, boys and girls alike, for an informed and active participation in the labour movement would also have appealed to many in the co-operative movement on which the Woodcraft Folk relied for support. In particular, there were considerable links between the Woodcraft Folk membership and that of the Women's Co-operative Guild (WCG), and they shared a common commitment to social change and a future co-operative commonwealth (Palser, 2020). The influence of both the SEI and the WCG would have ensured that by the mid-1930s, few Woodcrafters would have quarrelled with the 1926 *Model Branch Rules* of the WCG which stated that "the object of the Guild is to promote a new social order, in which co-operation shall replace capitalism and women have equal opportunities with men" (Black, 1989, p. 119).

Co-educational Throughout?

It is useful to consider what Woodcraft's 1930s co-education looked like in practice. There is no evidence of any barriers consciously being placed in the way of girls' participation in the core activities of the organisation — whether at group nights or during outdoor activities. The

inclusion of girls in all the activities of the organisation was a bold policy on the part of the Woodcraft Folk since the mixed camps in particular were frequently objected to by outsiders. Paul (1938) dismissed those raising objections to mixed camps as seeing sexual impropriety everywhere. He also argued that co-educational activity was made easier by sex education, though this should be tackled “in a scientific spirit” by talks on the biology of reproduction of different life-forms, including humans — and so avoiding both “moralising or pruriency” (Paul, 1936, p. 21). There is no doubt that by challenging the segregation of the sexes which was then practiced by other children’s organisations, like the Scouts and Guides, it was challenging the gender stereotypes then dominant in English society. However, the extent of that challenge is open to question.

Equality of opportunity could only go part of the way to challenging the then dominant stereotypes, because ideas as to what constituted masculine and feminine behaviour were, of course, carried into the organisation by children as much as adults. This is most clearly illustrated by the organisation’s approach to activities intended to build and demonstrate physical fitness and endurance. The Woodcraft Folk constantly emphasised that their aim was to develop children fit in mind and body, and its system of tests rewarded by badges placed considerable emphasis on physical endurance. For example, the hiker test involved a fifteen mile hike whilst carrying a backpack. Since these tests of physical stamina and endurance, like all the other tests, were intended to show individual achievement rather than a competitive comparison of abilities, there was no necessity to segregate them so as to take into account the physical differences between the sexes. However, boys and girls may well have approached these activities very differently. As one oral testimony commented:

> There was a fairly even distribution between boys and girls but when it came to outdoors activities boys were always in the majority. I spent seven years being the only girl who ever went on hikes with a group of eight or nine boys — you know, when we were young teenagers. I think because we were so active that a lot of girls physically couldn’t have walked the distances that we used to walk. (Salt & Wilson, 1985, p. 5)

It is possible that other girls could not have walked the same distances, or more likely could not yet do so because they had not built up to it, but it is equally likely that they did not feel the same need to prove themselves ‘hardy’ as many boys did. Paul and many of the other youngsters who had formed the organisation were of a generation of boys whose experience of the First World War led them to look upon Woodcraft as “a way of making and proving one’s manhood without becoming a soldier and dying” (Paul, 1980, p. 2). Where the Scouts offered boys “masculinity building” activities that were framed within a military discipline, the Woodcraft Folk offered masculinity framed within the self-discipline of the “Red Indian” ideal.

In his defence of co-education in *The Republic of Children*, Paul finds it necessary to answer Woodcraft’s critics:

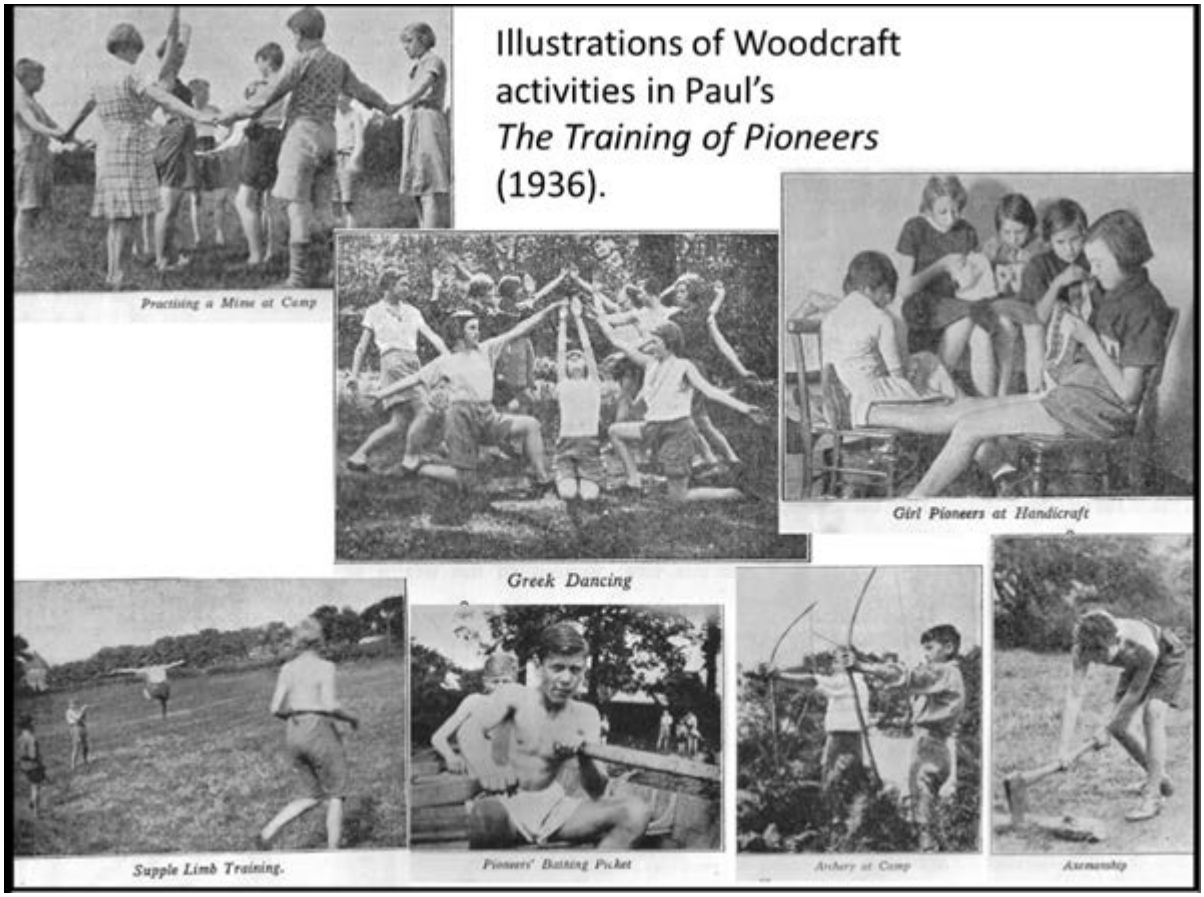
> Reactionary critics sometimes maintain that co-education “softens the fibres” of boys, and makes girls hoydenish. The critic is right to this extent — that if you want to make the boy a good soldier, you had best cut him off from contact with the other sex. (Paul, 1938, p. 56)

By implication, mixing with girls was likely to make a boy more pacifistic, more peace-loving, as these were widely held to be qualities found more commonly in women. These were, of course, precisely the qualities that Paul wanted to encourage amongst working class children, boys as well as girls, along with a co-operative outlook and a desire for social change.

However, Woodcraft’s challenging of the then dominant gender stereotypes had its limits. Paul clearly felt that some activities were more masculine, and by implication some more feminine, than others. For example, when he discusses dance, he discusses the two types that were popular in the Folk at this time — country dancing and (noting that he used the language of the time) what they used to call ‘savage’ dancing (Paul, 1938). The former dances were mixed, and there is evidence that boys often had to be cajoled initially into taking part. ‘Savage’ dancing on the other hand was “a type of dancing suitable for camp-fire demonstrations and stunts, and of

a more masculine character than country dancing. It is a good way of letting off steam …" (Paul, 1938, p. 147).

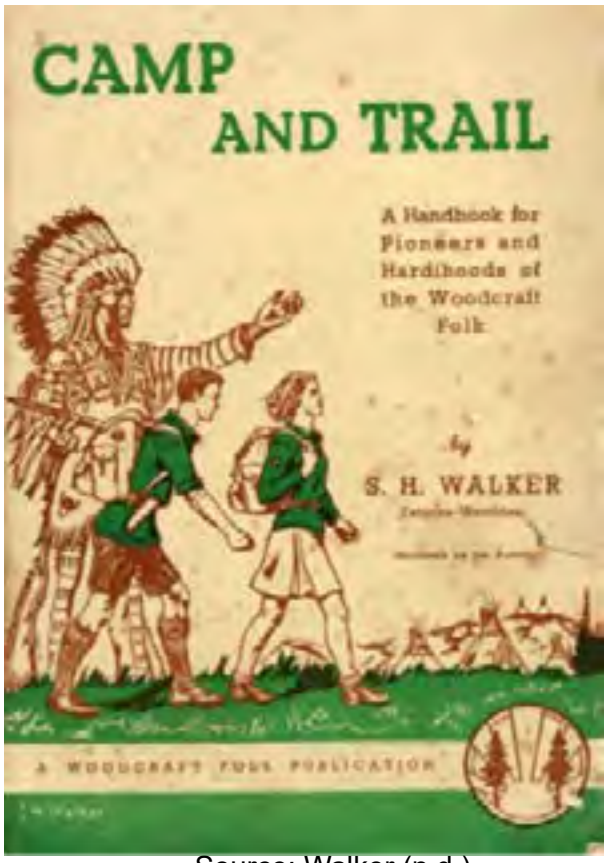
The gendering of activities in this manner was at times quite unconscious, as in *The Training of Pioneers* (Paul, 1936) where there are a number of photographs used to illustrate Woodcraft activities. Boys and girls are shown practicing a mime together, but Greek dancing and handicrafts are illustrated with pictures of girls only, whilst other outdoor activities are all illustrated with pictures of boys only.



Source: Paul (1936, pp. 8, 9, 15, 28, 32, 35, 37).

Yet it was because he saw some activities as more masculine in character that Paul (1938) also saw it as important to get the right balance of activities. He pointed out that the co-operative Junior Guilds were open to both sexes, but in practice they were a girl's movement because that is who it actually catered for. The Woodcraft Folk, he argued, had managed to achieve a roughly equal membership of the sexes, and in his view this was because a balanced group of boys and girls was always aimed at — and any separated activities were not allowed to undermine this (Paul, 1938).

This view of activities being more masculine or more feminine, and yet of finding the right balance between them so as to attract boys and girls to the organisation in similar numbers, was at one and the same time an acceptance of the idea that there are inherent differences between the sexes, and yet a desire to challenge and modify to a degree the gender stereotypes then dominant in British society. This two-sided approach can be illustrated by the rules governing male and female 'costumes'. They specified that males should wear shorts, and females should wear skirts, and this is how children were shown in most Woodcraft publications.



Source: Walker (n.d.).

However, it was increasingly common practice for girls to wear shorts at camp and hikes. One member recalls:

> The other thing we used to do was quite a lot of cycling in our area and we all wore shorts, even the girls. To local people then in 1932 — that was a bit unique. And certainly it was unique to sunbathe in a pair of abbreviated shorts and a top. But we grew up taking no notice of it. We used to do a hell of a lot of sun-bathing. There was no nude sun-bathing, it is true, we didn't go as far as that but it was quite revolutionary for the girls to wear sun tops, which were not a bikini exactly, for those days it was very daring. (Salt & Wilson, 1985, p. 5)

This concession to choice and practicality at camps and on hikes was sanctioned in the constitution (Woodcraft, 1964, p. 3), but skirts for females remained obligatory for all formal occasions until the 1970s (Woodcraft Folk, 1976a, p. 7).

Equal Opportunities for Men and Women within Woodcraft?

Of course, children also learn their future roles by observing the behaviour of adults. Given that there were no formal barriers to women playing the same roles within the organisation as men, the oral evidence is mixed as to whether there was any distinction in practice between them. One member's recollection is that "there always has been equality. In the jobs at camp you got female Camp Chiefs, men in the kitchen, you got females looking after the loos, and the majority of Group Leaders are women" (Salt & Wilson, 1985, p. 5).

This author has a different memory of the 1960s, when my father was regularly Camp Chief and my mother responsible for food ordering and preparation. Emptying the chemical toilets and waste disposal were always dealt with by men, as was lighting the paraffin stoves and lamps, whilst first aid was usually the responsibility of a woman.

One member's testimony suggests that where a couple were both involved in Woodcraft, this led to a change in gender roles within the family home:

> A Folk family is one where traditional roles are dropped. You are much more likely to find shared roles within a Folk family where parents are looking after children, so that one or the other can help in the group or go to a meeting or go to a camp or whatever. (Salt & Wilson, 1985, p. 5)

Again, my memory is that whilst my mother and father jointly ran a Woodcraft group, when my father went away to National Folk Council for the weekend or went abroad to represent the organisation at a conference, it was my mother who was left to look after us children. This chimes with another member's recollection that this de-gendering of roles was true at local level but:

> … as you rose up the scale — the same as everything else, the number of women became fewer and fewer. And for a long time I was the only woman on the National Council … I suppose there must have been many occasions when I was the only female in the meetings, but I was never conscious of that fact, because we were all Woodcrafters. (Salt & Wilson, 1985, p. 5)

This under-representation of women on the National Council was raised at the 1934 Althing (Conference). According to the minutes, "Beech Tree urged the need for better representation of women on the National Council. Gowan, seconding, emphasised the point. Kestrel pointed out that sex equality in the Folk was already existent" (Woodcraft Folk, 1934, p. 5). Mayflower considered the motion unnecessary, presumably for the same reason, and Trailmaker wished for elections "irrespective of sex". The absence of any formal barriers to women and girls' participation in the life of the organisation was seen as sufficient to ensure equality of opportunity, and equality of opportunity meant sex equality was already existent in the organisation. This raises the question of how the unequal participation of women in the leadership was to be explained. White Raven "explained the poor representation of women was due to the fact that women were not prepared to equip themselves to lead the Folk" and Calumet pointed to the unions where there were "equal chances to take office" (Woodcraft Folk, 1934, p. 5) but women did not participate. Kwoneshe informed the conference that "all men vote according to what the women tell them to vote" (Woodcraft Folk, 1934, p. 5) — presumably meaning that equal representation was not needed as women were the 'power behind the throne' anyway.

The proposal was defeated with only 8 votes for and 69 votes against (Woodcraft Folk, 1934, p. 5). Even allowing for a majority of delegates being men, the vote suggests that most of the female delegates agreed that equality of the sexes already existed within the organisation, and that the unequal representation of the sexes on the national leadership was because women themselves shied away from taking on that role.

A Comradeship Springing Naturally from our Common Tasks and Pleasures

Clearly this insistence that sex equality already existed in the organisation was in part ideological — the equating of a formal equality of opportunity with equality in practice. However, this was further reinforced by the lived experience of a shared life in Woodcraft. Despite the different roles played by men and women within the organisation, there is a terrain upon which relations between them would have felt different to those in their work and everyday domestic lives. Involvement in Woodcraft may or may not have changed the dynamic within the family home, but at group night and at camp, the relationships between children, between children and adults, and between adults, were no longer framed by the family. Whole families might be present, but their roles as parents and children were fundamentally different to those experienced in the family home.

This was especially true in the camping community where: all adults shared the responsibility for the care of all the children regardless of their familial relationship; all adults and children were expected to take an equal part in the cooking and other tasks required to maintain the camp as part of a rota system; and finally, all adults and children were expected to take part in and contribute to the programme of activities of the camp. The relationship between adults and

children was one where both male and female adults participated jointly in activities with the children, not simply standing on the side-lines observing or supervising by issuing instructions. This was symbolised by men and women, boys and girls, all sitting on the grass in a circle for the daily 'council' meetings — foreshadowing the insistence of second wave of feminism upon finding non-hierarchical ways of holding discussions. It was this that engendered a sense of comradeship between men and women, and even if there remained areas in which a lack of equality was transparent, it still felt radically different to their day to day lives. It was a terrain on which men took responsibility alongside women, a terrain where women felt they had gained genuine respect, a terrain in which there were indeed opportunities for women to play a leading role. Furthermore, the resulting skills and self-confidence gained by women could be carried over into other spheres, making a difference to both their domestic and public lives.

Woodcraft and the Second Wave of Feminism

Four decades on from the Althing discussion of female representation in the leadership, the 1976 Annual Delegate Conference saw "considerable discussion over the role of women in the W.F., and the desirability of more women on the N.C." (Woodcraft Folk, 1976b, minute 6b). As if discovering this male dominance for the first time, a delegate had drawn the Conference's attention to the "startling fact that following the retirement of Peggy Aprahamian there would be no elected woman member on National Folk Council" (Posner, 1976, p. 1). As Posner argued in the Woodcraft journal *New Day*:

> It would seem that we are electing a leadership that is in no way compatible with the avowed ideology of the Folk — of the equality of all people irrespective of race, religion or sex … Many of us, even some of the best and most respected comrades in our movement, find it difficult to difficult to appreciate the meaning and practice of real equality, and that does not exclude the writer of this article. For after all, the ideology and habits of centuries of the dominance of man are not easy to break. (Posner, 1976, pp. 1-2)

To illustrate this Posner (1976) gives some examples of comments made by Woodcraft leaders. They are remarkably similar to those voiced at the 1934 Althing: that there is no problem of equality as behind every good man is a good woman; that they do not vote on a person's sex, but on the role they play in the movement; that women being involved at a national level could lead to "more problem families" (Posner, 1976, p. 2) as they might then neglect their families. He goes on to propose that a syllabus on equal rights be drawn up to encourage discussion on what this means at every age level within the organisation, and that steps be taken to positively encourage women to stand for election at district and national level.

The October issue of *New Day* saw two more contributions, both from women, and both focusing on the obstacles to women standing for election. Linda Osborn (1976) points to the problems that women, especially mothers, may have in speaking out in public. Having a family disrupts this developing ability as women may find themselves outside of situations which require public speech, and so they have to start from scratch in building up their confidence again — especially since "there are those among us who are inclined to ridicule at large meetings" (p. 8). She also suggests that whilst women and men may share jobs in the home, the woman tends to take on the major responsibility for younger children and this makes going away for a weekend more difficult (Osborn, 1976). In her contribution, Josie Burnett says that whilst there is equal opportunity in Woodcraft, time and family commitments prevent women playing a greater role at District and National level. Whilst the mental and physical stimulation encountered in Woodcraft is rewarding, it leaves leaders emotionally drained, and this in turn leaves their partner at home feeling rejected (Burnett, 1976). Despite offering some practical suggestions, both appear to reluctantly accept that women with young children would not be able to contribute until their children are older.

However, now Woodcraft Folk members were not simply responding to feminist ideas which highlighted the difference between formal equality of opportunity and actual equality of

opportunity. The 1978 version of the Woodcraft Folk *Leaders' Manual* devoted eight pages to the "new thinking about women" (Woodcraft Folk, 1978). It challenges the argument that the status of women is determined by their biology, arguing that what men and women see as male and female roles are stereotypes acquired during childhood and re-inforced by the mass media, and goes on to demonstrate how women's roles are also the product of discrimination. Though not using the term, it is here echoing the sociological distinction between gender and sex whereby masculinity and femininity are seen as socially and culturally constructed, whereas male and female are biological categories. Making this distinction would have been anachronistic in the 1930s Woodcraft Folk, for as Barbara Blaszak has pointed out, "the discovery that gender roles are socially constructed is recent, a product of second wave feminism" (Blaszak, 2003, p. 491).

The *Leader's Manual* (Woodcraft Folk, 1978) consequently suggests some questions that the organisation needed to ask itself, questions which would highlight the limits to equality of opportunity then existing within the organisation. In group discussions do girls play as active a role as boys? Have we encouraged both adults and children to discuss any of the issues relating to sex inequality and gendering? When husband and wife are in the organisation, do we ensure they can both attend training courses and conferences? Why, in an organisation that aims to include the whole family, are there so few women on the National Council? It then has a page of suggestions for activities with older children, activities that are intended to encourage a questioning of gender as a social construct. The first activity is to carry out a survey of a week's television and the roles and images of women it projects. Second is a discussion on a sample of advertising text and the assumptions it makes about what women want. Third are discussions about family life, such as "what are the advantages and disadvantages of single-parent families?" (Woodcraft Folk, 1978, p. 8). Lastly, it suggests general questions for discussion, such as "should Ms be used in place of Mrs or Miss, and does it matter?" (Woodcraft Folk, 1978, p. 8).

If the authors were suggesting that the organisation had to make changes in its practice, the response of many existing adult members was one of, at best, complacency. When in the following year, 1979, the Woodcraft Folk conference debated updating its constitution to specify "Equality for Men and Women" (Woodcraft Folk, 1979c), many Woodcraft members, women as well as men, felt that this was not saying anything new. They simply took it as read that the Woodcraft Folk had always practiced equality between the sexes. Thus, looking back on this in 1982, Woodcraft leader Peggy Aprahamian commented "It is interesting to recall that this addition [to the constitution] had previously been opposed by members who claimed that a truely *[sic]* integrated movement did not need to define the obvious" (Aprahamian, 1982, p. 3).

For many members it was obvious that the Woodcraft Folk stood for the equality of men and women because the sexes were truly integrated in the organisation. Whilst, perhaps reluctantly, supporting this new clause in the constitution pledging equality of opportunities for the development of both boys and girls *within* Woodcraft, members rejected an addendum which committed the organisation to striving "to break down the barriers to sexual equality facing people, particularly women, in our society" (Woodcraft Folk, 1979a, Item 1.6; Woodcraft Folk, 1979b, p. 7). This was moved by Julie Thorpe, one of the young women now joining the organisation who had not grown up with it from childhood. The motivation of those opposing the amendment is not immediately clear since the minutes do not record the content of the speeches for and against it. It is conceivable that members felt that, as an educational organisation, the Woodcraft Folk's official aim should be to ensure equality of opportunity for its child members rather than seeking to break down barriers to sexual equality in society more generally. Yet the same conference determined that since the Woodcraft motto was "Span the World with Friendship" it should "take a firm and determined stand against all forms of racism and prejudice within our society" (Woodcraft Folk, 1979a, p. 1).

Aprahamian's comment on the reluctance to adopt any constitutional change on sex equality was made in a major article in the second edition of the new national journal which she edited, *Woodcraft Focus*. Its title was "Moving beyond Gender" (Aprahamian, 1982), but here the use of the term gender was simply used in its grammatical sense rather than the broader sociological

meaning. She notes: “Gender is the means by which we indicate in language the sex of a human being — or other living creatures. Hence man/he, woman/she etc” (Aprahamian, 1982, p. 3). The article discussed whether to ’degenderise’ the organisation’s songs and ceremonies, as terms such as ‘brotherhood of man’ could be seen as undermining the educational message of equality between the sexes. Just two months later the following motion was proposed at the 1982 Annual Delegate Conference (ADC).

> This ADC recognises the power of language to strengthen the foundations of equality and determines to work to that end by ensuring that the language we use is direct, clear and does not discriminate against any group of people. (Woodcraft Folk, 1982a, Resolution 6)

The mover, Peter Wood from South Barnet, pointed to song lyrics like “The Family of Man” (Woodcraft Folk, 1982c, p. 8) and according to the minutes twelve people spoke on the resolution “and at times the discussion was quite heated” (Woodcraft Folk, 1982b, p. 5). A vote was taken to refer the motion to National Council, so avoiding a divisive vote on its contents, and Ruth Moulton is recorded as asking that “everybody’s comments be respected whether they had been in the Folk for a very long time or for a very short period” (Woodcraft Folk, 1982b, p. 5).

Amongst the ensuing letters to *Woodcraft Focus*, which Aprahamian edited, was one from Rosamund Cran, a new leader in Stockport who was “very much involved in the Women’s Movement” (Cran, 1982, p. 10). She welcomed Aprahamian’s carefully worded article and suggested that changes to the words of some Woodcraft songs could serve an educational purpose when discussed with children in group meetings. In contrast, a letter from another leading member Wad Klos (1982, p. 10) argued that everyone knew what expressions like ‘All men are brothers’ actually meant because of the context in which they were used — and attempts to ‘degenderise’ all songs and ceremonies would be never ending. He went on:

> Now, despite my comments so far, I am aware of the sexist attitudes that prevail throughout society and I would unequivocally urge all our members to speak out against these attitudes wherever and whenever encountered. What I cannot accept however, is that these attitudes prevail in our organisation. (Klos, 1982, p. 10)

Here, then, is the reasoning behind a reluctance to make any changes in the organisation’s practice. Sexist attitudes may prevail in society, but in the Woodcraft Folk they did not. Klos was not just speaking for himself when making this claim — he spoke for a section of the membership which, like him, had grown up in the Woodcraft Folk and for whom sex equality in Woodcraft was a given. Furthermore, changes in its existing practice, particularly its songs and ceremonies, threatened to undermine the “frank and free comradeship between the sexes” (Paul, 1938, p. 55) that long-term members felt had been achieved and must be safeguarded. For some long-standing members, the Women’s Liberation Movement represented a middle-class outlook which placed challenging women’s oppression above working class unity. They felt that the young feminists who were increasingly joining the organisation threatened to undermine the organisation’s past working class composition and roots (Palser, 2004).

The debate in the pages of *Focus* was brought to a close by an article entitled “Redressing the balance” by Peter Woods of Central Barnet District. “What I believe we need to do on the issue of discrimination against women is to understand it in its myriad forms”, (Woods, 1982, p. 4) he argued, and suggested ways in which leaders could address these myriad forms in their educational work with children. One was to organise a debate in your group, and allocate two people to record the length and frequency of contributions made by boys and girls, and the number of interruptions of other speakers. He also suggests observing leaders’ responses to boys and girls — how much they favour boys in the time they devote to each. Exercises designed to expose gender stereotypes of a similar nature to those in the 1978 leaders’ manual are also included.

These and similar proposals that would take the Woodcraft Folk’s educational practice beyond a formal equality of opportunity towards one which challenged gender roles were never embraced by the organisation as a whole. This is despite the fact that feminist ideas and endeavours to

develop an anti-sexist practice were now evident in both the state and voluntary youth services (Davies, 1999; Spence, 2010). Whilst the 1980s saw the influx of many younger parents who had been influenced by the women's movement, and who were eager to take up challenges to gender stereotyping and find ways to empower girls, in many groups and districts the educational practice remained largely unchanged.

That there was resistance to change on this issue is best illustrated if we compare the response to the second wave of feminism with the organisation's response to the challenge of tackling racism. In 1982 the ADC debated a resolution moved by the Wimbledon District. It stated:

> This ADC acknowledges that the Woodcraft Folk has always enjoyed a considerable number of children from Britain's ethnic minorities, but has difficulty in attracting leaders from the parents of Britain's ethnic minorities. This ADC calls on National Council and its committees to investigate this problem. (Woodcraft Folk, 1982a, Resolution 4)

Not content to admit the organisation's failure to attract *leaders* who were from ethnic minorities, an amendment was put forward saying that the organisation had always "had difficulties in attracting leaders and *children* from Britain's ethnic minorities" (Woodcraft Folk, 1982a, Resolution 4). The amendment was overwhelmingly carried. Far from there being a reluctance to discuss this issue, delegates mandated the national leadership to investigate "this problem". Rather than maintaining that the organisation had always been opposed to racial discrimination, in the ensuing discussions the organisation re-examined critically is previous "multi-cultural" approach — and in its place adopted an "anti-racist work policy". As part of this, it went on to publish educational resources to assist group leaders in integrating anti-racism into group activities (Bourn, 2025). No such measures were taken in relation to women's equality.

It is not hard to see the reason for these different responses. Where the absence of non-white faces amongst both child members and leaders exposed the gap between the membership's ambitions and the organisation's actual achievements, the balance of the sexes in the membership and the lived experience of their collaboration within the organisation encouraged complacency.

Conclusion: An Opportunity Lost

It is ironic that it was actually the Woodcraft Folk's responsiveness to the feminist ideas that continued to circulate in British society after the first wave of feminism which later turned out to be an obstacle to its embracing of the ideas of the second wave. The impetus for further experimentation in ways to empower girls, to challenge sexism amongst boys, and to bring the talents of more women into the organisation's leadership was lost as a consequence. The Woodcraft Folk's equality of opportunity coupled with the comradeship developed out of its co-operative camping community, rather than providing an alibi for complacency, would have laid the foundations for the absorption of new methods if approached in the spirit of a critical re-evaluation of its existing practice.

An example is perhaps sufficient to illustrate the point being made here. One practice that was carried over from Kibbo Kift into Woodcraft and is contained in *The Republic of Children* was the division of the Fellowships (groups) into male and female "Clans" (Paul, 1938). Though this was not the stated intention, rather than this segregation undermining the mixed activities of the fellowship it benefited the girls in one important respect. The 'tribal democracy' of Woodcraft involved a fellowship council which discussed and prepared proposals on the activities and running of the fellowship, and the Clans elected children to participate in it from their ranks. The existence of a girls' Clan ensured that they were equally represented, and must surely have ensured that girls' voices were not drowned out by the boys as could easily happen in mixed discussions. The girls' Clans were also intended as a means of assisting members in their preparation for tests, and for preparing mimes, songs, or other contributions to fellowship entertainment. After the war, many groups went over to mixed Clans, and in most districts the use of Clans was slowly abandoned altogether. Looked at in the light of the 'Work with Girls'

(Davies, 1999) developed in the youth service in the 1980s, where ‘girls only’ activities were used to give them space to develop their confidence and skills, Leslie Paul’s Clan system could be said to be well ahead of its time.

A Note on Sources

Primary sources that are available in the online Woodcraft Folk Heritage Archive (https://heritage.woodcraft.org.uk/home/) are listed with the reference number (FH) and URL.

Primary sources that are available in the Woodcraft Folk archives at the Institute of Education, University College London, are included in the references with their catalogue number starting YMA/WF/.

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