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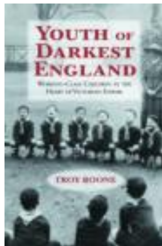

Hooligan Knights

Youth of Darkest England: Working-Class Children at the Heart of Victorian Empire. Troy Boone. New York and London: Routledge, 2005. 235 pp.

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<1> In a striking line in *Scouting for Boys* (1908), Robert Baden-Powell attributes British poverty and unemployment to "boys being allowed to run riot outside the school walls as loafers" (116). Troy Boone pauses during his analysis of the text in *Youth of Darkest England* to ask coyly, "How exactly does one 'run riot' while 'loafing'?" (116). This passage, for all its comic effect, reveals the complexity of those fears that impelled writer-reformers to reclaim the lives of working-class children. Yet this book is not a conventional social history of slum philanthropy; nor is it, despite its marketing in Routledge's series, solely a study of "Children's Literature and Culture." It covers such ground, but also surpasses it, particularly by exploring the infantilization of working-class adults at the heart of the middle-class imperial vision. To this end, Boone examines sociological journalism, lowbrow and high-modernist fictions, popular guides, and visual resources.

<2> The imperial project seemed to offer bourgeois reformers a means of defusing class antagonisms and producing a unified national identity. By their lights, working people would subjectively identify as middle-class and as agents of empire; they would also profit by being systematically transferred from slums to imperial domains. But they would nevertheless be expected to abide by familiar economic and social constraints. Middle-class writers advocated for workers' education and incorporation into the nation while still insisting on the need for paternalistic guidance. These writers expressed this ambivalence by alternating claims about the poor's temporary environmental damage and permanent racial degeneration, the latter signified by their essential embodiment and lack of empowering vision. Popular writings urged acculturation of the poor into middle-class values and praised their imminent responsibilities overseas; yet, as Boone notes, they also betrayed doubts about workers' capacity for self-government. Did such texts ultimately inspire widespread patriotism among the poor? Refuting an assumption commonly held among historians, Boone claims no, that laborers did not accept propaganda passively or uncritically; their responses, far from uniform, included cases of resistance.

<3> The subject of the first chapter, Henry Mayhew, worried that the peripatetic nature of the poor's street work aligned them with the wandering natives of countries in need of colonial regulation. While he anticipated their cultural recuperation by the state, his journalism expresses reservations about their intrinsic acumen. First, he observes a native juvenility and simplicity in adult peddlers, implying that they can never truly learn self-regulation and will continue to need paternalistic supervision. Second, he depicts vendors in terms of their limited vision. While the middle classes sustain visual power over the city, the poor can only focus on alleviating hunger and base wants (the sewerman "peer[s]… ratlike" at Mayhew, a telling allusion to his life underground [29]). That Mayhew would like working people to imitate his own rootedness is clear from his advocacy of street-orderlies, cleaners assigned particular public areas who would police them by shooing off more transient scavengers.

<4> The next two chapters judge mid-Victorian penny bloods (popular among working-class adolescents) and late-Victorian adventure fictions within a discourse of working-class agency and self-education. Chapter 2 uncovers the bloods' implicit promotion of moderate Chartist political processes over violence. As Boone demonstrates, even though James Malcolm Rymer's *Varney the Vampire* teems with brutal events, it deliberately undermines the reader's fixation on any one event in order to sustain its excitement as a suspenseful serialized narrative. Boone argues that by setting up this readerly state of mental agitation, the novel moves readers not towards a mimetic identification with violence, but towards reflective debates about it. *Varney* dramatizes repeated

instances of the villagers' mob-mentality; their inflamed passions derail them from any effective action against the vampire. The working-class author of *Varney* thus dissuades readers from identifying with the villagers and instead prompts them to esteem moderate, mindful agitation on the road to self-empowerment. If the middle classes (wrongly) feared that penny bloods incited bloodshed, then Rymer's construction of a proud, self-determining working-class readership would have been just as jarring to bourgeois assumptions.

<5> By the 1870s, middle-class commentators worried that young readers of penny dreadfuls would mature into a literate but uncultured working-class electorate, vulnerable to radical, "anti-capitalist" rhetoric. In answer, penny magazines proffered "elevating" adventure narratives, typified by *Treasure Island*. Long John Silver initially resuscitates *Varney*'s endorsement of quiet working-class agitation when he advocates thrift and restraint. But, by positioning violent action as the work's central climax, R. L. Stevenson sends a more conservative message about the pirates who stand in for the working classes. They sabotage their own quest through uncontrolled appetites, setting into high relief the more disinterested motives, calmer outlook, and only-accidental violence of Stevenson's middle-class heroes. Such stories complexly encourage the working-class boy to identify with youthful middle-class protagonists while endorsing his traditional place on the social ladder and situating him in the service of empire.

<6> Gender-studies scholars will likely gravitate more to the second half of Boone's volume. In early chapters, the "youth of Darkest England" register asexually as "children" and "the poor." Chapter 4, however, performs a strong class and feminist analysis of Salvation Army slum lassies. Born into a working-class culture that General William Booth deemed inherently degraded, they never achieved the authority of middle-class women in the organization or escaped their surveillance. The next two chapters, on the training of working-class youth as Boy Scouts and soldiers, survey Robert Baden-Powell's hegemonic ordering of male bodily practice, including his proscriptions against masturbation and "hysterical," effeminizing sports spectatorship.

<7> Its mission heightened by anxious post-Boer War fantasies of a German invasion of Britain, Baden-Powell's *Scouting for Boys* advanced military drill as an antidote to physical weakness and a means of teaching the "rough lad" self-regulation, so that he did not slide into hooliganism. Baden-Powell touted scouting troops as appealing alternatives to street gangs, and even celebrated boys' "savagery" – properly controlled – with a view to invigorating the nation. But like Mayhew's and William Booth's texts, *Scouting for Boys* undermines its own claims that a working person can ever truly achieve middle-class subjectivity. The laboring boy's body, perpetually exposed to urban contagions, is also victim to its own internal corruption, never truly purged by perspiration or defecation and liable to infect others through respiration. (Social-imperialists like Booth had associated the working-class body with urban sewage in order to justify "deodoriz[ing]" and "flushing" the poor out to the colonies [90]: despite schemes of re-education and emigration, they too doubted ever completely cleansing workers of their essential foulness.) As Boone notes, scouting remained relatively unpopular among slum children, whose parents likely detected and resisted its middle-class ideologies.

<8> In the final chapter, Boone draws on a wide span of materials to illustrate the discourse of a visionary middle class and embodied working class. Military fictions and images directed at boys promoted a public-school-derived "games ethic" which claimed to obscure class differences, yet, in fact, reaffirmed them. War was represented as a game: however, whereas schoolboys on a football field follow a captain from among their own sphere, working-class soldiers obey a general of higher-class origins. Recruitment propaganda and boys' fictions praised the obedient physicality of the subaltern while venerating the disembodied omniscience of the exemplary commander/strategist, Lord Kitchener. As Boone shows, such literature repeatedly characterized the soldier as mere equipment serving his general's greater intelligence. Following the war, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* revealed the human costs of such bodily mechanization, holding athleticist/militarist discourses at home accountable for mutilations in the trenches. Yet Woolf, promoting a modernist aesthetic, never adopted an oppositional working-class outlook, but privileged the elite artist and thus re-inscribed middle-class visionary power. As Boone illustrates, journalists did convey soldiers' points of view, especially their rejection of social imperialism, disgust at myths of national unity, and revolutionary claims to have a sharper vision than the "engineers of death" (149, 157).

<9> Overall, Boone is attentive to Victorian middle-class writers' generalization of the working

<9> Overall, Boone is attentive to Victorian middle-class writers' generalization of the working boy, and he offsets these constructions, when possible, with voices from working-class autobiographies (such as Robert Roberts' *The Classic Slum*). Most writer-reformers here define working-class boyhood without regard for specific neighborhood affiliations or social codes fostered in individual trades. They also ignore the complex presence of immigrant Others at home, who likely were targets of East End rational-recreation programs. To counter this apparent elision of ethnicity, Boone might look to the illustrations of undesirable character types that he reproduces from *Scouting for Boys*, which eerily evoke Cesare Lombroso's taxonomies of criminality and Francis Galton's composite photographs of criminal and ethnic types. Future complementary studies might explore those urban boys in fiction and history whose orientations hindered their easy assimilation – or even desirability – in hegemonic-imperial schemes: effeminate boys, for instance, or Jewish boys (by 1895, the latter could join the autonomous Jewish Lads Brigade). Boone does expose the multiple valences occupied by a working-class/Irish-fathered/dark-skinned/spy-of-empire like Kipling's Kim, whose success depends on his identifying as elite and white (107).

<10> One of the pleasures of the book is Boone's nuanced interpretation of visual images with literary texts. For a reading of blindness among the poor in Mayhew, he dissects an etching of a photographer's studio alongside interviews with an exploitative photographer and eyeglass salesman. His class analysis of the placement of male bodies, verbal text, and battle imagery in war recruitment posters is equally astute. Boone keenly associates the "millions of [connecting] fibres" envisioned by Woolf's shell-shocked Septimus Smith with an aerial photo of communication trenches (160). The photographic cover-image, discussed in Chapter 5, of a ring of boys practicing their wolf howls under the direction of a scout leader is delightful.

<11> While the book's title and cover-image are suggestive and lively, perhaps they undersell the complexity of its content. Besides those working adults cast as children by Victorian authorities, Boone does discuss actual boys – but their age-definition is slippery and shades off into adolescence. He blurs "children" and "young people" within and across chapters (and interchanges "young readers" and "working-class readers" in Chapter 2). This ambiguity culminates in the soldier, who seems suspended between two narratives: he is the literal adolescent in history and the adult metaphorically infantilized/dehumanized by his class-superiors. While the Boy Scouts delineated subgroups by age (199, n. 52), Boone echoes theorists like Reginald Bray who employed the term "boy" vaguely. The "empire" in Boone's title is similarly elusive, though this is not his doing. Regarding India and Africa as outposts in need of civilization, Victorian writers set them on the textual periphery, as yet untouched by their boy-subjects, whose lives are circumscribed by the London streets.

<12> Generally, Boone's writing is original and clear and his chapters meticulously outlined. His introduction disentangles the discourses of English national identity and British imperial identity and demonstrates where they converge. He differentiates terms – hegemonic imperialism, hegemonic colonialism, social imperialism, and capitalist imperialism – central to arguments throughout the volume. He employs artful, effective double entendres, such as the use of "agitation" to describe both political and readerly processes and "intellectual mobility" to associate workers' autodidacticism with their deliberate physical itinerancy (46, 57). Theoretically informed and meticulously researched, *Youth of Darkest England* will draw scholars interested in the continuities between the *fin de siècle* and modernism, imperial and class hierarchies, sociology and degeneration theory, and print- and visual culture.