



The Strange Tale of the *Kibbo Kift Kindred*

The Boy Scout movement produced a little-known offshoot of ‘intellectual Barbarians’, whose charismatic leader had dreams of overcoming the existential crises of the 20th century, writes **Annebella Pollen**.

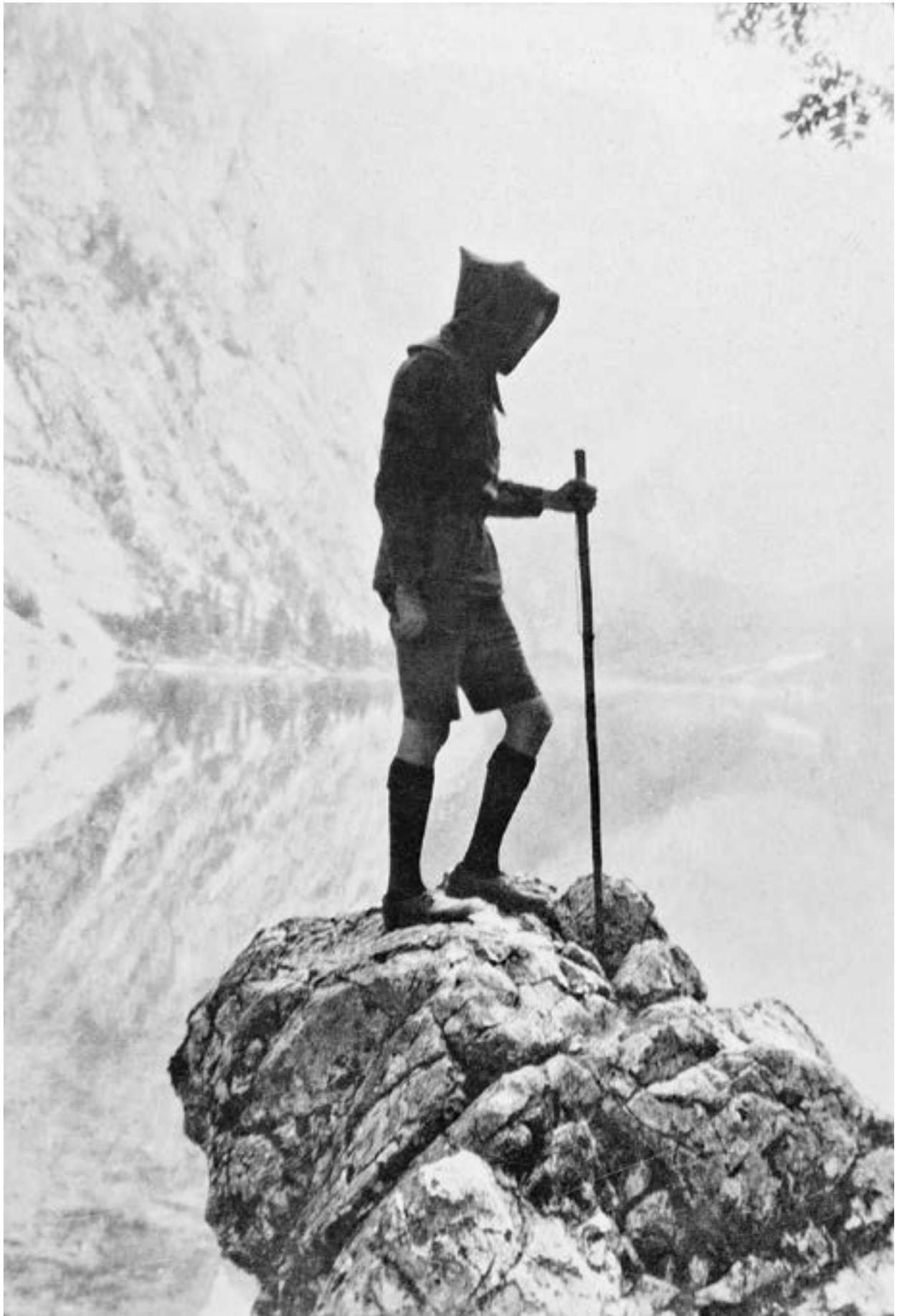
AS PART OF A TRANCHE of MI5 documents recently released by the National Archives to mark the centenary of the First World War, secret correspondence concerning investigations into ‘Red Boy Scouts’ came to light. Who were these scouts suspected of communist sympathies? One particular figure under scrutiny, John Hargrave, described in official papers as a ‘half-caste Hungarian’, stands out. Hargrave was born in 1894 to Gordon Hargrave, a Quaker and professional landscape painter, and Babette (née Bing) of Hungarian-Jewish descent. He enjoyed little in the way of formal education but showed great aptitude for drawing from an early age and, while still in his teens, began to sell cartoons to newspapers and illustrate books professionally, a career that would continue his whole life. Hargrave joined the Boy Scouts in 1910, a year after the movement was founded, discovering a second passion.

Hargrave’s enthusiasm for the outdoor aspect of scouting – the camping, primitivist play and campfire ceremony that went under the heading of ‘woodcraft’ – far outweighed his interest in the other concerns of Robert Baden-Powell’s new organisation: those of paramilitary drill and preparedness, empire-building and Christianity. Hargrave identified more with the ideas of the artist, novelist and naturalist Ernest Thompson Seton, whose system of so-called primitive training for boys, modelled on a mythical ideal of a heroic Native American and infused with fantasy and romance, predated the Boy Scouts but was adopted, if not plagiarised, by the organisation.



Top: John Hargrave, 1929. Above: Hargrave as White Fox Spirit Chief with children at Dexter Farm Tribal Training Camp II, 1928. Photo by Angus McBean. Right: a Kinsman on a rocky peak, Switzerland, 1930, also by McBean.

Scout patrol groups led by Hargrave were marked by his experimental, mystical, Seton-inspired methods and his first full-length publication, *Lonecraft*, prepared in 1913 while he was still a teenager, was rich in songs inspired by Native Americans, sign language and nature lore. Illustrated throughout with Hargrave’s distinctive line drawings, *Lonecraft* demonstrated to senior Scout leaders his communications skills and abilities and he was appointed as



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staff artist in 1914. While happily accepting this prestigious position, Hargrave would later reflect that he was inspired to write *Lonecraft* because he felt that scouting was already drifting away from the woodcraft trail and was becoming too concerned with bugle-blowing, military parades and indoor activities more suited to Sunday school.

HARGRAVE'S CONVICTION that the Scouts were following the wrong path was consolidated by his experience in the First World War. Much to his own surprise, given his Quaker roots, Hargrave signed up to serve in a non-combatant position as a stretcher-bearer in the Royal Army Medical Corps. The devastating loss of life he observed first-hand during the disastrous Gallipoli campaign in 1915 would have a deep and lasting effect on his understanding of the world. The consequences of Hargrave's war experiences would also affect his relationship with the Scouts. When Hargrave returned to scouting, invalided after his war service, he found it wholly in the hands of older ex-military men with far too little of the woodcraft aspect remaining. As he put it: 'The backwoodsmanship had gone. In its place one found the curate, the squire, and Major Toothbrush. The boy had been taken into the woods by his Wicked Uncles, folded in the Union Jack, and smothered.' Hargrave was welcomed back in 1917 with a senior position in the organisation, as Commissioner for Woodcraft and Camping. As he surmised, the promotion had been intended to achieve 'the effect of bridling a spirited horse'. The result was quite the opposite. Hargrave wrote many independently minded articles for scouting papers, promoting woodcraft training. His articles in the postwar years grew publicly critical of the direction of the Scout movement and even became daringly disloyal about the Chief Scout, Baden-Powell, himself.

Hargrave published his most ambitious book to date, *The Great War Brings it Home: The Natural Reconstruction of an Unnatural Existence* in 1919. It added practical detail and philosophical underpinning to much that was familiar from his previous books on primitive methods of camp life and ceremony. What distinguished this work, however, was its ferocious political critique of the mechanised modern city and the 'over-civilised' inhabitants of 20th-century urban cultures. 'Civilisation' was singled out as the cause of a cultural disease that had been brought to a climax by the Great War. Across nearly 400 sprawling and indigestible pages, Hargrave set about proposing solutions.

He bemoaned the fact that the youngest, fittest and finest men had been slaughtered on the battlefield. He concluded that there were but two possible methods of future redemption: to train the children of the slain and to cultivate new physically, mentally and spiritually fit and trained clusters of men and women to evolve a new kind of human race. Hargrave defended his approach by recourse to history: 'Every effete civilisation must crumble away. The only hope is that a new and virile offshoot may arise to strike out a line of its own.' He continued: 'Nowadays, owing to the fact that modern civilisation has penetrated throughout the world, there are no "Barbarians" to sweep us away. Therefore the cure must be applied internally – and we must produce the "Barbarian" stock ourselves.'

Hargrave claimed in his 1919 book that he had no interest in establishing his own organisation but, in that same year, he covertly strengthened his plans to do just that.

Ernest Thompson Seton, early 20th century.



For conservatives such as Baden-Powell, the spectre of Hargrave's political leanings hung over him like an ominous red cloud

Together with a group of close friends he began to plan ways to redefine the woodcraft element of the scout movement. By 1920 Hargrave had begun to categorise 'the woodcraft kindred' within the Scouts as a 'movement within a movement'. Twinned with his increasingly uncompromising and subversive articles in scouting magazines, however, it became clear that this aim was untenable: public spats ensued with senior officials, on and off the page, all the way up to Baden-Powell. Hargrave later reflected: 'I was slanged up hill and down dale as a "dangerous man", as a "pantheist", as an "atheist", as a "fool" and a "knave". It was splendid.' The scale of support from left-wing groups, who opposed imperialism and militarism in the Scouts,

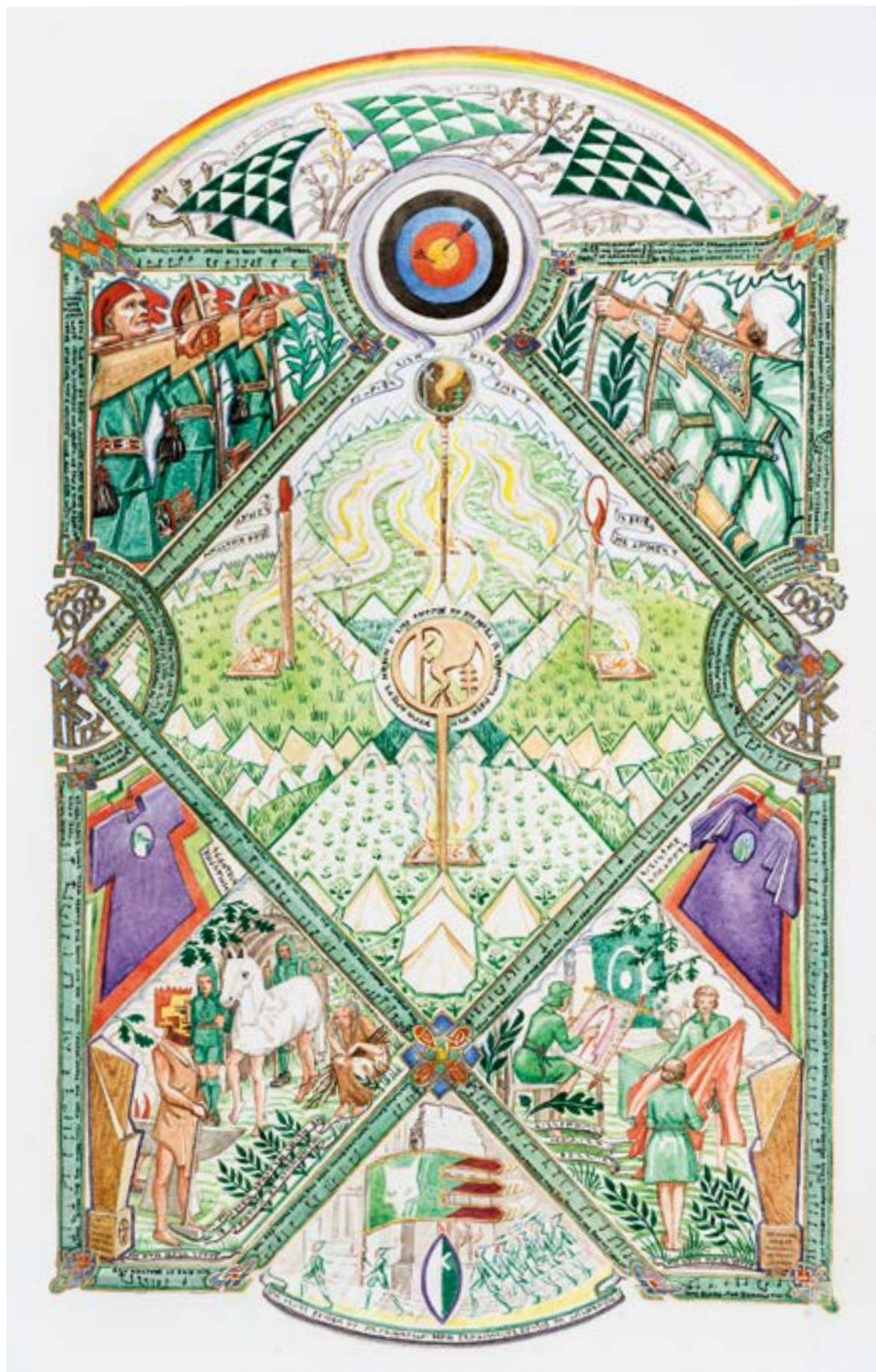
also troubled the organisation's senior members. Hargrave was reported to MI5 as non-patriotic by Hubert S. Martin, the International Commissioner of the Boy Scout Association and regular informant of Major W.A. Phillips, a senior intelligence officer. In Martin's view, the woodcraft movement was 'communist in its aims', noting that Scout officers 'believe them to be in relation with the young communist movement emanating from Moscow'.

THE formal expulsion from the Scouts that Hargrave had surely engineered took place in 1921. He was, in his own words, 'excommunicated'. Baden-Powell would later characterise Hargrave in private correspondence as 'a clever young fellow in a way, good at writing and sketching, but eccentric, swollen-headed, communistic'. For conservatives such as Baden-Powell and his correspondent, the colonial administrator Lord Sydenham, the spectre of Hargrave's political leanings hung over him like an ominous red cloud. This association, however, did him no harm among his socialist colleagues. The accelerating clash and final expulsion had done much to raise Hargrave's profile and many left the Scouts to follow him, often bringing their troop of children along, too. In the months and years spent

establishing the 'woodcraft kindred' before the split was made final, Hargrave had established his reputation as, and strengthened his connections with, progressive thinkers and social reformers. These were variously regrouped into active members and advisers in the formation of his new organisation, the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift.

What was the Kibbo Kift? Hargrave asserted in typically flamboyant style that such a question was ultimately unanswerable, yet it was one that needed to be asked again and again by group members as well as strangers. Beginning with the challenge of their unfamiliar name – taken from an antiquarian dictionary of colloquial Cheshire terminology and meaning 'proof of strength' – and continuing ▶

Kathleen Milnes
(Blue Falcon), a
Kinlog illustration,
1928-9.



KIBBO KIFT

Chickadee totem,
c.1928.



into their outlandish visual style and remarkably diverse and ever-shifting purposes and practices, the Kibbo Kift's sometimes bewildering aims and methods ranged across health and handicraft, pacifism and propaganda, myth and magic, education and economics. Kibbo Kift was always much more than an all-ages, co-educational alternative to the Scouts. The wide range of the group's interests and the large scale of its ambition was necessitated, they believed, by the peculiar conditions of their time: dynamic new dreams were needed to overcome the nightmares of 20th-century existence.

From the earliest days of the Kibbo Kift, its ambitions were far reaching. There were pledges 'to counteract the ill effects of industrialisation and overcrowding' by establishing open-air camping and woodcraft opportunities to inculcate physical, mental and spiritual development in children; to foster craft training and to reorganise industry along non-competitive lines; to establish family groups trained in woodcraft principles in order to create 'a heritage of health'; to aim for international disarmament, an international educational policy, international freedom of trade, an international currency system, the abolition of secret treaties and the establishment of a World Council, including 'every civilised and primitive nation or race'.

THE ambitious policies of the Kibbo Kift represented a vast global project more suited to agreements between governments than a few hundred part-time reformers, or what one former member would snootily dismiss as 'clerks, minor civil servants, garage hands and teachers living in the Home Counties'. The establishment of a League of Nations Union, as well as H.G. Wells' more far-reaching call for a World State, were key touchstones for Kibbo Kift policies that left behind the imperialism of the Scouts and aimed for a new worldview, indeed, for nothing less than 'a World Culture which will digest the narrow nationalisms and make a common ligature between the races'.

How could this be achieved? The Kibbo Kift was ambitious but lacked all means to implement its ideas. Membership numbers were small and resources few. Kinsfolk were earnest but ultimately amateur. Hargrave had previously developed detailed and refined methods in his writings for woodcraft training and camp life and so the practices of the Kibbo Kift emerged as something of a hybrid, where serious political ambitions for world peace and world leadership mingled awkwardly with totem poles, archery and hiking. The social and political purpose of the Kibbo Kift's outdoor methods, archaic language and picturesque ceremony was not at all clear to those who encountered the organisation for the first time. While it undoubtedly engendered a mystique that prompted curiosity, Hargrave and other members were also regularly required to explain



Above: the remodeled Kibbo Kift uniform, marking a shift in the organisation's identity, 1931. Right: Green shirts graffiti, 1937.

and defend its purpose and ultimate aims. Hargrave argued that 'woodcraft lore and handicraft is not merely a pastime or a sport with The Kindred. It is a way of life and a method of self-training'. He continued:

It is a necessary break-away, a ritualistic exodus, from Metropolitan standards of civilisation, from pavements, sky-signs, shops, noise, glitter, smoke ... More than that, it is a preparation for active service in the World; a drawing apart for a time to allow body, mind and spirit to regain equipoise.'

Members wondered if their camp, hike and craft activities could bring the effects promised, but Hargrave reassured them, claiming 'one of the greatest movements in human affairs came into active operation towards the close of 1920'.

The Kibbo Kift attracted an impressive range of campaigners, writers, politicians and visionaries, who lent their endorsement to the group. Its advisory council boasted Nobel laureates (Rabindranath Tagore and Maurice Maeterlinck), Liberal and Labour Members of Parliament (Norman Angell and Herbert Dunnico), former suffragettes (Mary Neal and Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence), eminent scientists (J. Arthur Thompson and Julian Huxley) and progressive thinkers in general (Havelock Ellis and Patrick Geddes). The most impressive of all the names was H.G. Wells, who at the time was Britain's most famous novelist. Together, the council's assembled authority displayed the Kibbo Kift's intellectual and political allegiances and legitimised the organisation's ambitions.



THE FUNDAMENTAL ISSUE of how radical social reform could be brought about by outdoor pursuits and arts and crafts was partly resolved by Hargrave's introduction in 1924 to the new economic theory of social credit. Developed by a British engineer, Major C.H. Douglas, the theory was based on the principle that society's production and consumption were out of balance and that the total cost of wages was always lower than the collective cost of goods produced. Social credit aimed to create a better balance between production and consumption by bridging the difference. It aimed to give consumers more purchasing power through the adoption of a National Dividend, payable to each and every citizen. It also demanded the readjustment in the price of goods to reflect more fairly their production values and it argued that control of finance should be wrested from bankers, who profited unfairly from the current arrangements.

Hargrave's exposure to economics was to transform the Kibbo Kift. At first the recommendation that 'it will be well if Kinsfolk keep abreast of the evolution of economic ideas' was merely one of many activities encouraged, from the study of prehistoric remains and the writing ▶

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of mummers' plays to the making of 'Indian teepees'. Economic theory came to form an increasingly dominant role in the Kibbo Kift during the latter half of the 1920s, leading to serious rifts among the membership. For many Kinsfolk, who had joined because they were attracted to the outdoor life, the shift to a more political focus was unwelcome. To some members, however, its addition helped resolve one of the Kibbo Kift's key shortcomings: how exactly were they to solve the manifold social problems of the world? The addition of an economic theory – itself sufficiently new and unorthodox to fit with Kinsfolk's largely oppositional interests – provided one answer. As Hargrave put it during this period: 'The Kin came to see itself not as a mere camping and rambling club, but as an instrument having internal incubational and external operative function.'

THROUGHOUT the 1920s the Kibbo Kift continued to camp and hike in typically flamboyant and ceremonial style, but the economic crisis at the end of the decade – as well as dwindling membership – prompted a radical rethink. A scheme for a fundamental re-organisation was announced in 1931. As part of this, all archaic terminology was dropped. Kin roles that had been mythically styled as Scribe and Tallykeeper were renamed more prosaically as General Secretary and General Treasurer. Personal totem poles and the Native American-inspired cry of 'How!' were abandoned. No ceremonial outfits were permitted and the hooded camp costume was redesigned along sharper, more military lines. Hargrave called this process the beginning of 'normalisation'. He declared that the new scheme:

Sweeps aside all hindrances – all those 'strange', 'queer' and 'fantastic' aspects ... that confused and bemused the ordinary citizen, slowed down recruiting, and eventually tended to produce nothing but a clique, a little coterie of Kin-companions, without significance, and a sheer waste of time and energy.

The organisation was transformed. Within a year the Kibbo Kift was almost unrecognisable; a year after that, following further standardisation of policy and presentation, it had effectively ceased to exist. Nothing but the colour of the costume remained in the beret, military shirt and grey trousers of the street-marching organisation, now known as the Green Shirts, who paraded with drums and flags through city centres nationwide, demanding the National Dividend.

In 1920, while still in formation and a thorn in the side of the Scout movement, Kibbo Kift had set out a manifesto of everything they did not want to be, inspired by the organisation they wished to break apart. Hargrave summarised it thus:

We – the Kibbo Kift – are determined that we will not organise a new movement, we will not have a great Headquarters in London ... we will not set down and define in writing our 'aims and methods'. We will not have factory-made medals and badges, protected, registered and patented, we will not have bands and bugles and parades, we will not march about the streets ...

Spirit Mask, c.1928.



BY 1932, every one of these promises had been broken and yet, to Hargrave, continuity remained, even with the transformation to full political status as the Social Credit Party, which is what the remains of the Kibbo Kift would eventually become in the late 1930s. Although the Green Shirts and Social Credit Party groups still camped at annual National Assemblies throughout the 1930s, their methods moved towards more explicitly political forms of expression, including graffiti, throwing bricks and firing arrows through the windows of 10 and 11 Downing Street and burning effigies of Montagu Norman, the Governor of the Bank of England. This shift was not just a product of Hargrave's particular personality traits; many peace movements constructed in the utopian moment after the Great War shifted to a more hard-line position by the 1930s, following the dramatic economic turbulence of the 1920s and the rise internationally of political extremism.

Hargrave's dizzying policy shifts, outlandish belief systems and regular rebranding meant his post-Kibbo Kift enterprises were always on a precarious footing. When the Public Order Act of 1937 banned political uniforms, this precipitated the terminal decline of what few elements remained from the covenant of 1920. Hargrave's last stand in politics, as a parliamentary candidate for Stoke Newington in the 1950 General Election, resulted in a lost deposit. He closed down what remained of his movement the following year stating that it 'must vanish'.

Hargrave had written in 1927 that:

The Kindred changes ... illogically, inconsistently, as it may seem, with the non-logical forces of Life and Death. What it was yesterday it is not to-day; and what it is to-day it cannot be tomorrow. Its continuity and stability are here, in the cradle-bed of the emotions.

For Hargrave, a kernel remained in place across each of his diverse, if ultimately unsuccessful projects: a powerful belief in the supremacy of his singular vision, whatever the shape of the organisation built around it.

Annebella Pollen's book *The Kindred of the Kibbo Kift: Intellectual Barbarians* is published by Donlon Books. Her co-curated exhibition of the same name is at Whitechapel Gallery, London until March 13th, 2016.

FURTHER READING

Mary Davis, *Fashioning a New World: A History of the Woodcraft Folk* (Holyoake Books, 2000).

John Hargrave, *The Great War Brings It Home: The Natural Reconstruction of an Unnatural Existence* (Constable, 1919).

Richard Overy, *The Morbid Age: Britain and the Crisis of Civilisation, 1919-1939* (Penguin, 2009).

John Springhall, *Youth, Empire and Society: British Youth Movements 1883-1940* (Croom Helm, 1977).