



Olave, Lady Baden-Powell

1889-1977



by Jim Mackie

Olave, Lady Baden-Powell, Chief Guide of the World and widow of the Founder, passed away peacefully in her sleep at 11.45 p.m., Saturday, June 25, 1977, at the nursing home near Guildford, England, where she has lived for the last three years.

In 1930, when she accepted the title of Chief Guide, she said, "I will do my best to help everybody everywhere." In her more than 60 years of leadership in the two Movements founded by her husband, she kept that promise. When she was asked to help, she did, whether it meant a trip of thousands of miles by air or a few miles by car; sometimes to the detriment of her health and, in most cases, at her own expense. She served the youth of the world as she knew B.-P. would have wanted her to and was never happier than when she was surrounded by Scouting and Guiding people.

In company with literally tens of thousands of men and women, boys and girls around the world, I have very pleasant memories of my few meetings with this remarkable woman, but one in particular stands out because it was in her home, surrounded by the personal possessions of Lord Baden-Powell, that were especially dear to her.

I had gone to England to spend two weeks with The Scout Association in London and when I was asked if I had any particular wishes during my stay, I requested an interview with Lady B.-P.

Initially, it seemed that this would be impossible because she had been quite ill and was still under doctor's care. Then, just two days before I was to leave for home, I was asked to call her at her Grace and Favour apartment at Hampton Court Palace. In typical fashion, this gracious lady apologized for not being able to see me earlier and asked if I could come down the following morning.

At exactly 11:00 a.m., the next day, I presented myself at her door, after a walk down the drafty and damp outer corridors of the palace where Henry VIII had lived with five of his six wives. As I climbed the flight of steps to her door, I heard a school teacher telling her wide-eyed stu-



At home in Hampton Court Palace.

dents that the plaque that they were looking at on the wall which read "Lady Baden-Powell" was there *in memory* of the widow of the Founder of the Scout and Guide Movements. As I later wrote in my story: "A minute or so later, I could have told the group that nothing was farther from the truth. The person who came forward to meet me, with her left hand extended was, despite a recent illness, the same exuberant, vibrant and charming lady that millions of members of the Movement have seen, met and loved, since her marriage to B.-P."

After seeing that I was comfortably seated and fortified with a cup of tea, she began to bombard me with questions concerning home, family and Canadian Scouting. I suddenly realized that it was I who was being interviewed, where it was supposed to be the other way around.

Later, however, I had my turn and when she spied my tape recorder (which my colleagues in London said she would not allow me to use), she surprised me by asking if it would not be easier for me if our conversation were recorded, as she was "really very good on a recorder."

And she was! When I returned to London with my prize tape, the same colleagues were astounded.

I found out a number of years later from her daughter Betty, that she did, at one time, fear the recording machine but after one of her grandsons secretly recorded her voice and then played it back to her, she was so delighted with the results that she no longer objected to using one. The tape, incidentally, is now a treasured possession.



With son Peter at Jubilee Jamboree, 1957.

Who Was She?

She was born Olave St. Clair Soames (her father expected a boy, who was to have been called Olaf, thus the first name), on February 22, 1889, the youngest of the three children of Harold and Kathleen Soames. From her earliest days she was a lover of the outdoors and spent many of her childhood hours riding, rowing and walking and in later years, when the family moved to London, she became an accomplished skater. She had no formal education and was taught at home by a series of governesses and tutors.

As a young man, her father inherited a large brewery and while no lover of the business world, tended it carefully so that he could retire early and be free to devote his time to his real interests — painting, architecture,



Metal sculptures of the Baden-Powells; Gilwell Park.

gardening and travel. In fact, it was Harold Soames' love of travel that eventually brought Olave and Robert Baden-Powell together.

Whether you believe in fate or not, it is hard to disregard the circumstances leading to the union of these two remarkable people, who could not have been better

matched, despite the 32 years difference in their ages.

In 1911, Olave's father was persuaded by a friend to apply for space on the maiden voyage of the S.S. Arcadian, a former mail steamer, that had been converted into a deluxe yacht for the tourist trade to the West Indies and New York. This seemed an ideal suggestion to Mr. Soames who, each winter, left England for sunnier climes. However, when he wrote for tickets for himself and Olave, he was informed that the ship was booked to capacity, so he began to make other plans. Then at the last moment a letter arrived to say that two passengers had cancelled and space was available.

On the morning of January 3, 1912, father and daughter arrived at Southampton to find that the dock workers were on strike. As the passengers stood around waiting for a tug to take them out to the Arcadian, which was anchored in the harbour, they noticed a Guard of Honour of Boy Scouts being inspected by their Founder, the legendary hero of Mafeking, Lieutenant-General Robert Baden-Powell, who was also sailing on the Arcadian for a world inspection tour of Scouting.

Olave had, of course, heard of B.-P. and like millions of others had worn his portrait on a buttonhole badge after the relief of Mafeking, but had never expected to meet him. But meet him she did on the first day at sea and it was love at first sight. By the time the ship reached Jamaica, they were secretly engaged but the official announcement had to wait until B.-P. returned to England in September.



Engagement photos, *The Sphere* magazine, September 28, 1912.

They were married on October 30, 1912 in St. Peter's Church, Parkstone, Poole, England and were to share 28 happy and worthwhile years.

After B.-P.'s death in Kenya in 1941, she was lost and for a time described herself as anchorless. Then, calling upon inner strength, she decided to return to England and do her part for the war effort.

From that time she never looked back and in post war years became a familiar figure in all parts of the world. She recorded more than 654 air flights to every continent, travelling over 500,000 air miles, and only in the last few years when her doctors would not allow her to travel, did she miss world jamborees and conferences.

Lady B.-P. was once asked by a reporter what her job in Guiding actually was and she replied: "My job is to bring the Movement extra zeal and oomph. Really I should be called the *Chief Oompher!*"



Visit to new U.K. headquarters, July 1976, with U.K. Chief Scout, Sir William Gladstone.

World youth became her life and Janet Graham wrote of Olave Baden-Powell in a Reader's Digest article: "She is never happier than when, always in her uniform, with a modest hold-all and battered portable typewriter, she is dashing from continent to continent, pinning badges on Eskimo Guides from the Yukon, accepting a canoe load of coconuts from Guides in Papua, or addressing a conference in Finland in the glorious — but understandable — mixture of languages she calls 'Desperanto'."

In 1974, a combination of age and diabetes forced her to leave her apartment at Hampton Court and go into a nursing home. But even here she kept up with her correspondence on her own typewriter and had to be watched to ensure that she did not stay up well after midnight, answering the large quantity of mail that she received daily.

The world has lost a great woman but her influence will live on, as has her husband's, through Scouting and Guiding.

We who were privileged to know her, are richer for it.

A private family service was held in England following her death and then her ashes were flown to Kenya to be buried with her beloved husband in the little cemetery at Nyeri, at the foot of Mount Kenya, in the Africa they both loved so much.



Her final official function — 50th Anniversary, Gilwell, September 1976.

Olave, Lady Baden-Powell's Last Message

Dear Guides, Scouts, Cubs and Brownies and all their Leaders and Friends,

I shall have left this world when you receive this message, which I leave to express my thanks for all the kindnesses and the affection shown to me, and to say how greatly I have rejoiced over the way in which you have all carried out your share in the work of the Movement that my beloved husband invented, for the advancement of boys and girls of all countries, years ago.

I have a firm belief in Almighty God and in the life in the world to come, when he and I will be reunited, and together we shall watch over you who have been enrolled as members of this world family, and go on caring for your progress and your well being.

I trust that you will continue fully to use the system of work and play that our Movement provides, keeping up the fun and the friendships made at your meetings and in camps, abiding by the Promise and upholding the Laws that you undertook to live by when you joined up.

In that way you will not only advance yourself in body, mind and spirit, but you will affect those around you, in doing what is honourable and right and wise, and in giving out kindness of thought and action, thus striving against all ills and helping to make the world a happier and a better place in which to live.

I trust that you will be successful in all your tasks, and may God be with you all in the coming years.

Olave Baden-Powell