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## U of L history professor wins national book award

The Girl Guides, the world’s largest voluntary organization for girls, has its roots in the early 20th century, a time of rapid social change when more than a few adults were wringing their hands about the future. Girl Guide programs were designed to give girls a taste of the freedom they were clamouring for, but also maintain the idea that women were primarily wives and mothers.

This complicated picture emerged when Dr. Kristine Alexander, associate professor of history and Canada Research Chair in Child and Youth Studies at the University of Lethbridge, began the research for her book *Guiding Modern Girls: Girlhood, Empire, and Internationalism in the 1920s and 1930s* (University of British Columbia Press, 2017).

Alexander, who is also director of the U of L’s Institute for Child and Youth Studies, recently received the Wilson Book Prize for this work, which was one of more than 70 books nominated for the \$10,000 award. This academic honour, awarded by the Wilson Institute for Canadian History at McMaster University, recognizes the best book that makes Canadian historical scholarship accessible to a wide and transnational audience.

“I was thrilled and also honoured to be recognized by my peers in this way,” says Alexander. “In Canada and other parts of the world, historians have tended to focus primarily on national stories. These national histories are valuable, but as a scholar whose work investigates questions related to childhood, empire and globalization — and as a citizen of our interconnected 21st-century world — I have come to see that it is important to look beyond national boundaries as well.”

In *Guiding Modern Girls*, Alexander uses the early history of the Guide movement in Canada, Great Britain and India to ask big questions about girls, citizenship, and the global social order during the years between the two World Wars. The Girl Guides were founded by Robert Baden-Powell, who also established the Boy Scouts, in England in 1909 and the organization quickly spread to other countries.

“The Guide movement was established at a time when the social order, established gender roles and the future of the British empire appeared to be under threat,” says Alexander. “This

was also a moment characterized by the militant suffrage movement and falling birth rates across the developed world.”

Another related force at play after the First World War was the rise of the flapper. These young women pushed the boundaries of what was considered acceptable behaviour by wearing short skirts, bobbing their hair and listening to jazz. The older generation worried about the future of society and children in particular.

“These youth organizations were adult attempts to shape the future by providing a gender-specific type of character training that offered a combination of freedom and control,” she says.

Alexander looks at Girl Guides from the perspectives of the organization and the girls who were Guides. She examined official handbooks and periodicals but she also wanted to know what the girls themselves thought.

“I did find some log books, photo albums, scrapbooks and diaries and those were some of the richest and most rewarding sources to work with, partly because they give a sense of individual personalities and their responses — which were not always positive — to Guide programs,” she says.

Alexander found that the Girl Guide movement was complex and often contradictory in ways that had to do with gender.

“The Girl Guide program emphasized citizenship, training modern girls to be future voters, and teaching them bravery and lifesaving skills,” says Alexander. “But that co-existed with an older belief that girls needed, above all, to learn to be good mothers, wives and homemakers.”

Alexander became interested in girlhood and youth organizations when, as a graduate student, she conducted research into how adults have tried to shape children’s understanding of behaviour and what it means to be masculine or feminine. Another factor that motivated Alexander to write the book was her belief that girls’ history is just as important as boys’ history and the bigger questions about political, imperial or economic history can’t be understood if girls and young women are left out of the story. *Guiding Modern Girls* grew out of Alexander’s doctoral thesis and was almost a decade in the making.

“It’s my name on the cover, but the book only exists because of the support I’ve received from a number of individuals and institutions,” she says. “My research and writing were enriched in all kinds of ways by conversations with my mentors, colleagues and students.”

This news release can be found online at [Wilson Book Prize](#).

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