

# Against role models. Tracing the histories of manliness in youth work. The cultural capital of respectable masculinity

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## Abstract

*The article documents the powerful account that there is 'a lack of male role models' for boys, and gives examples of current youth work based responses to this. It seeks to situate this view historically as a strong rhetorical trope of youth work which divides the 'rough' from the 'respectable' through an emphasis on competitive sport, discipline and adventure. It discusses the history of boys' clubs in the UK and their significance in the development of approaches to masculinity. It considers the role of Evangelicalism and Muscular Christianity in youth work both historically and in the present; and explores how feminism and homophobia are negotiated in the reaffirmation of masculinity. The article investigates questions of secular accounts of fitness and the place of love in practice. It ends by naming some tensions in the re-emerging constructions of 'respectable' masculinity, with a view to opening up space for dialogue and conversation about the complex and contradictory orientations of both secular and Christian youth work in practice.*

**Key words:** Role models, masculinity, youth work practice.

THE ACCEPTANCE that youth workers can and should be role models seems to be a taken for granted aspect of current professional common sense. But it contains a number of assumptions that are open to question. This article pulls at a number of threads in the histories of youth work. It seeks to attend more closely to a 'structure of feeling' (Williams, 1977) concerning masculinity. In debates about the current state of youth work it is insufficient to attend only to the re-organisation of funding and governance. Even residual structures of feeling, such as that analysed here, can exercise new influence depending on the balance of power. Drawing on a number of sources – including some initial interviews with practitioners conducted between May and July 2012 (n=7) – I explore the part played by youth work historically and in the present in the channelling of forms of respectable masculinity. The revalidation of respectable masculinities and their potential cultural capital occurs at the cost of 'symbolic violence' to other masculinities. Thus national Youth organisations (co-ordinated by NYCVS) distanced themselves from young people who took part in riots in the summer of 2011 in the UK, proclaiming 'Not in My Name' on Facebook. It also occurs at the cost of marginalising, even abandoning any attempts at critical informal education

or any critique of existing social inequalities. It may make it easier to mourn the loss of symbolic (and actual) fathers but it makes it harder to mourn and be enraged at the loss of hope for social justice and social transformation.

The article first documents the powerful account that there is ‘a lack of male role models’ for boys, and gives examples of current youth work based responses to this. It does not engage directly in a critique of this view but rather discusses briefly the history of boys’ clubs in the UK and their significance in the development of approaches to masculinity. It considers the role of Evangelicalism and Muscular Christianity in youth work both historically and in the present; and finally returns to questions of the militarisation of masculinity and the question of the place of love in practice. It ends by naming some tensions in the re-emerging claims of ‘respectable’ masculinity, with a view to opening up space for dialogue and conversation about the complex and contradictory orientations of youth work in practice.

## Lack of male role models

It is widely suggested that one of the chief problems facing young men in the poorest communities, and particularly black young men, is the absence of role models, and, underlying this state of affairs, the absence of their fathers.

Press reports on mentoring projects, usually staffed by youth workers, abound. (Using the LexisLibrary search engine and the search terms ‘youth work’ and ‘male role models’ revealed 52 examples in the UK Broadsheet press between summer 2011 and summer 2012). The headline and caption of a report for a Brighton-based charity ‘A Band of Brothers’ in which mentors undergo a rigorous training in a ‘rites of passage’ approach (*Guardian*, 27th March 2012) was: ‘Boys don’t suddenly become men at 18 – a mentoring project that builds bonds between young men and older male role models is steadyding the rocky road to adulthood’. This report on ‘Band of Brothers’, with its reference to the war-time play/film *Henry V* (‘we happy few, we band of brothers’), captures in a few brief words some elements of the masculinity that it is feared are being lost. In the very name of the project, there is a sense of belonging, and, subliminally, of patriotic belonging.

The reference to ‘rites of passage’ echoes the primitivism and ‘woodcraft’ which informed earlier youth movements. Engaged with ideas of ‘recapitulation’ in development, whereby the development of the (human?) race was seen to be recapitulated in the stages of development of the child, ‘bushcraft’ of various kinds seemed accordingly to fit naturally with the interests of the growing boy (Springhall, 1977: 111). Such a ‘turn to the wild’ is a recurring theme in the formation of respectable manliness. It has to be acknowledged but then abandoned if a boy is to become a respectable man and not one of the roughs.

The head teacher of the new Boxing Academy (set up for 40 pupils in Hackney and Haringey) was

reported by the *Independent* as saying:

*For some of the kids here this will be the first time they've ever had a positive male role model in their lives, a role model who will get them in on time and push them out of bed if they need to (Independent, 17th November 2011).*

The disciplining of the unruly and energetic body of the working-class boy, through sport (with its rule-bound ethic of fair play) and especially boxing, also has a long pedigree, with the first boxing clubs in inner city areas being established from the mid-nineteenth century onwards as part of boys' clubs, most often with links to public schools.

Emeka Egbuonu's book *Consequences: Breaking the Negative Cycle* is based on his own experience both as a gang member and as a graduate of the London Mayor's mentoring courses for black boys. He is a youth worker at The Crib in Hackney. In an article in the *Guardian* (20th September, 2011) he said:

*There is a slavish devotion to musicians and sports stars as role models, set against a lack of ambition in more achievable arenas. There is a risk of being groomed for gangs at an age at which every-one wants instant financial gratification.*

The anti-role models of criminal gangs, with the appeal of instant gratification, are set against a masculine discipline of work and sport and the deferred gratification or militarism and glory. In these terms, the work of The Prince's Trust, Outward Bound, Brathay and One-to-One programmes regularly figure strongly in reporting of the youth work offer which is constructed as the positive alternative to gang involvement. Following the riots of 2011, news reports focussed predictably on this theme. Clasford Stirling, a veteran youth worker who runs the football club on the Broadwater Farm estate was widely cited as saying 'There's been an erosion of authority for a long time.' (The *Guardian* August 11th, 2011). which chimed with the views of his local MP David Lammy who in 2009 set up the All-Party group on Fatherhood. Lammy was cited frequently in press reports during this period and in an article in the *Guardian* (August 11th 2011) he is reported as saying:

*In areas like mine, we know that 59% of black Caribbean children are looked after by a lone parent. There is none of the basic starting presumption of two adults who want to start a family, raise children together, love them, nourish them and lead them to full independence. The parents are not married and the children have come, frankly, out of casual sex; the father isn't present and isn't expected to be. There aren't networks of extended families to make up for it. We are seeing huge consequences of the lack of male role models in young men's lives. How do you find your masculinity in the absence of role models: through hip-hop, through gang culture, through peer groups. Teenagers are in school till 3.30 then MTV, the internet, Facebook kicks in with a set of values that comes with it.*

The idea of the role-model has become part of the widespread common-sense of professional youth and community work practice. It is a powerful vehicle for the ‘trading’ of cultural capital, appearing at once to confirm the cultural capital of the youth worker and infer a degree of legitimacy and power in practice where there may in fact be very little. At a time in which the employment status, pay, security and influence of youth workers are under attack, the claim to be ‘role models’ may offer some symbolic sense of being part of a wider game, a game in which respectable forms of both masculinity and femininity can be affirmed. The idea of role-modelling has been mobilised in relation to mentoring projects (Colley, 2003) where docility in relationship is sought as the vehicle for achieving employability and other social goals such as a reduction in anti-social behaviour. Attempts to alter the dispositions of both mentors and mentees as idealised role models of employability and social conformity lead in the end to anxiety and disillusionment and little tangible benefit. Rooted in social learning theory of a rather mechanistic kind, role-modelling as a basis for practice enables a further neglect of the role of structural disempowerment in young people’s lives, promoting an individualistic model of empowerment largely devoid of any wider critical consciousness.

## Boys’ Clubs and Muscular Christianity

The re-iteration of a new crisis of masculinity framed as a crisis of ‘youth’ draws on a repertoire which can be traced back to the nineteenth century Evangelical Christian roots of youth work and to the characteristic tropes of Muscular Christianity (Hall, 1994). From this source many long established organisations for boys drew their inspiration – the Boys Brigade, the Church Lads Brigade and the boys’ clubs especially – and the channels and flows of both ideas and affect from these sources are not yet dry. Historically, concern for the working boy was associated with fear of him and with concerns to build the unity of the nation and to serve the Empire.

The *locus classicus* for the expression of the values of Muscular Christianity is the novel Tom Brown’s Schooldays by Thomas Hughes. Based on the author’s experience of Rugby School it conveys the values of the new public school education, which emerged in the mid-Victorian period and which expanded from the traditional curriculum of Latin and Greek to embrace physical development, sport and comradeship for boys alongside concern for their spiritual and intellectual development as Christians. Thus physical fitness and sport were linked to spiritual challenge and bullying was challenged by the establishment of a proper sense of legitimate hierarchy, authority and discipline. By the early twentieth century, discipline had come to be almost co-terminous with military discipline and all of these elements were linked with both manliness and Christianity (Springhall, 1977).

According to Eagar (1953), the mid-twentieth century chronicler of the boys’ club movement, many saw in the scope and vigour of philanthropy sure evidence of the truth of evangelical religion. Other countries left social salvage to religious orders. Protestant England invoked not

only the charitable gifts of the laity but their active participation in good works. The people who set up the boys' clubs were laymen and women with a powerful personal faith which created a social movement in the cities responding to the condition of 'the working boy'. This movement occurred in the context of the widespread contestations concerning the purposes and directions of education. It drew on the belief that the purpose of education was to equip a man 'to serve God and glorify him for ever'. From this theme came the formula: 'fitness of Body, Mind and Spirit' as an expression of the purpose and aim of boys' clubs. 'Fitness' referred to a 'fitness' to the purpose of God's service and glorification. The idea of 'fitness of body mind and spirit' was directly transmitted to the boys' club movement by public school men. Within the boys' club movement, the ideal of 'fitness' came to contain also 'the soldierly impulse': promoting the virtues of loyalty, courage, endurance and discipline and supporting 'virile recreation.' Military drill was introduced into the boys' clubs after the Franco-Prussian War (with the more scientific Swedish drill of the kind still used as the basis for 'whole body workouts' being thought at first as only suitable for girls). Camping holidays (imitative of the military camp) and camping weekends were introduced from the late 1870s in Manchester. Finally, the movement was strongly associated with temperance and the campaign against alcohol. 'Their object', said Eagar, 'was never the negative one of taking boys off the streets but to find means whereby boys and girls could be attracted from the streets to be taught, influenced and encouraged to lead the good life' (Eagar, 1953: 360). Within Evangelical Christianity there has long been a tension between its personal individualist emphasis on 'the heart' and the social movements (such as the anti-slavery movement) which emerged from it. As a result of the strongly personal emphasis, the 'good life' was and is usually defined against 'personal vices' such as those associated with alcohol and crime, yet the movement always had an element in which questions of the 'common good' and attention to the conditions of life of 'the working-boy' came inescapably to the fore.

Over time some of the boys' clubs developed a strongly democratic ethos with an emphasis on the self-regulation necessary for democratic participation and with a strong resonance with the culture of the 'respectable' working-class. This movement from regulation: 'keeping them out of trouble' to self-regulation is also consonant with the emphasis on the 'inner life' of Evangelical Christianity. The following extracts from *Principles and Aims of the Boys' Club Movement* (1930) exemplify this move to an emphasis on self-regulation and the link with democracy and citizenship very clearly:

*The special quality of club discipline is, in fact, that it is the ordinary discipline of social life. It rests on sanction of common consent. It is not imposed by authority; it comes from within rather than from without. It is democratic in essence because only by discipline of a democratic kind can the club convince its members that the club is their club, existing for them and demanding a loyalty to itself and to all their fellow members ...*

*Something more however is required for the leader of a Boys' Club than natural sympathy*

*with boys. He must have a clear understanding of the aim of the movement, and must study how to make his own club not merely a group of boys attached to himself but a self-governing body with a character of its own able to foster the independent character of each of its members. The right kind of leader in a Boys' Club is a man who remembers that he himself as a boy gladly followed the lead of men he liked and admired and that the finest influences in his own life have been those which taught him to judge things for himself, to be critical of catch-words and to resist mass suggestion (NABC, 1930: 5).*

This 'democratic turn' in the boys' club movement has been well-documented by Melanie Tebbutt in her account of the work of James Butterworth and Basil Henriques, where she suggests that the movement was united by a belief in the spirit for adventure and the unharnessed power of masculinity (Tebbutt, 2011).

The emphases of the boys' club movement have re-emerged (albeit in secularised form) in the youth work of today which seeks to create 'positive male role models.' Calls for male role models habitually reference adventure and sport and discipline, elements of a residual structure of feeling which I am suggesting has powerfully re-emerged. The potential of militarism to transform 'rough' into 'respectable' masculinity is also re-emerging, whether in the support for Cadets or in proposals for military academies in 'riot-torn areas of our cities.'

Firstly, sport is seen as essential to respectable masculinity, enabling co-operation through team games, the harnessing of competitive instincts and the positive use of adolescent energies. C.E.B. Russell, one of the founders of the Working Lads' Clubs, developed a curriculum of wrestling (stating: 'the natural instinct of every healthy young male is to put his fellow on the floor') and boxing, fencing with foils, weightlifting, miniature shooting, and gymnastics. Such activities became staples of the clubs and their curriculum (Eagar, 1953). In the interviews I undertook in 2012, sport remained a staple of youth workers' engagement with young men:

*Sport's always popular. They want to do football; basketball; we've usually got a league running of some sort. Sometimes they want to do more extreme activities. Yeh, I think sports always good...zorbng,whatever (Interview 2, Youth Worker, 2012).*

*We set up a boxing club for the Roma kids. That boxing club's been in the area since my dad went there (Interview 3, Youth Worker, 2012).*

Secondly, discipline is strongly linked to employability, the work discipline created by Calvinism and capitalism. In a context of real struggles to find employment in a period when young people in the poorest communities are experiencing very high unemployment levels compared to other generations and also those of a higher socio-economic status (Allen and Ainsley, 2012), the disciplines offered through youth work appear as an attempt to salvage the work ethic as part of

respectable masculinity:

*some of the next generation that are coming through now they get a lot of handme's so it's a weird concept that you have to drill into them: they get a lot handed to them, so they don't come in till lunch time and they know nothing's going to happen, whatever behaviour they exhibit...I know he knows all the rules. He thinks it's a rite of passage going through all the projects: where are you going to be in five years 'on the hustle': I go 'what does that mean?' and I don't think he knows (Interview 4, Youth Worker, 2012).*

In this they are echoing a long-established trope:

*More than one long-established boys' club can claim that, by teaching law-abiding boys to defend themselves and law-breaking boys to accept the sportsmanship of the boxing-ring they tamed the gangs and made the neighbourhood less unpleasantly romantic. The Scuttlers are gone. The Yoboes call themselves by more sophisticated names (Eagar, 1953: 332).*

Thirdly, an emphasis on adventure and on links to nature, drawing on anthropological accounts of rites of passage seems to be a necessary aspect of respectable masculinity:

*Adventure-based learning activities are one of the most powerful and effective tools for engaging young people here at Salmon. We offer a wide range of adventure activities including climbing, abseiling, high ropes course, bungee trampoline, flying trapeze, mountain biking, kayaking, sailing, skiing and other seasonal events (Salmon Youth Centre 2012).*

*Something was said about 'chilling in the middle of nowhere' and Ray Mears was mentioned (Interview 6, Youth Worker).*

*Some enthusiasts for nature in the raw found BP's woodcraft not esoteric enough. They elaborated the primitive element and developed precious mysticisms, which went with jerkins and long-haired politics – jibbabs and gibberish would be the rude way of putting it. Kibboo Kift and other side shoots have withered away; the only survivor seems to be the Woodcraft Folk, which is bi-sexual, pacifist and co-operative socialist (Eagar, 1953: 331).*

The extent to which this relates to the sense of 'imperial adventure' or of 'boundary-crossing' which the boys' club pioneers experienced in their missions and ventures not 'into darkest Africa' but 'darkest London' is important to consider here. Respectable masculinity would certainly be brave in pursuing its mission to bring light to dark places, and is now perhaps more than ever entrepreneurial in a time when only businessmen will survive.

The boys' club movement was in eclipse by the time of the Albemarle Report (1960), whose

secularising tones focussed on the purpose of youth services as:

*to offer young people in their leisure time opportunities of various kinds, complementary to those of home, formal education and work, to discover and develop their personal resources of mind, body and spirit and thus the better equip themselves to live the life of mature, creative and responsible members of a free society.*

Nevertheless, 'fitness' was still required of young people: no longer 'a fitness to 'serve God and glorify him for ever' but as fitness (at first) to become 'mature creative and responsible members of a free society' and now, in the end, fitness for a labour market that can only offer them 'sole trader' status.

How sport, discipline and adventure came to be associated both with manliness as opposed to womanliness (no Dangerous Book for Girls!) and with forms of 'healthy' Christianity, providing the basis for patriotic service to nation and empire, has been the basis for scholarly studies of muscular Christianity. Disciplining and celebrating bodiliness, competition and also courage among boys, especially working-class boys came to seem to be Christian virtues. This structure of feeling has re-emerged at a time when organisations with their roots in the Evangelical Christian movement are once again strong. The new heterarchies (Ball, 2007) and networks through which youth work is being organised are the vehicles through which the trading up of respectable masculinities occurs and which entrench further the cultural capital emanating from the public schools.

## **Evangelicalism in Youth Work now**

In aiming to display the continuing power of Evangelical Christianity in youth work organisations, I do not want to suggest a simple unitary narrative. The 'masculinity' historically associated with Muscular Christianity has been secularised and appears without any apparent need for reference to the divine, as I have shown, in many youth work projects which address young men. At the same time Christian themes of love and mutuality have become muted in this secularised discourse (where fear of young men overrides love for them) whilst being present in complex ways in Christian youth work projects.

Youth work in the UK is currently in something of a crisis consequent on the reduction of Local Authority services and the turn to philanthropy and faith communities as a source of developments for 'the Big Society'. There are contradictory forces at play here, since Church-based youth work for example has been a key site for defending JNC Professional Qualifications. Major players in the development of UK youth work now include key Christian figures such as Steve Chalke of Oasis and Faith Works. In community work, Nat Wei, founder of The Shaftsbury Partnership, has been David Cameron's key advisor on The Big Society. The son of a Korean pastor, who,

like the hero of Tom Brown's Schooldays, encountered and resisted bullying at school (albeit a Luton comprehensive) he appears to have developed much of his thinking and practice out of a response to that experience. At the same time, other faith communities, particularly Muslim communities, continue to develop their own youth work programmes, in the face of hostility, negative assumptions about radicalisation and extremism, and exclusion from funding streams which are readily opened to Christian organisations (Khan, 2013).

Once the Youth Service was established within Education Departments of Local Authorities in the post-Albemarle period, Christian-based philanthropic practice was largely sidelined by assumptions about secular public service and a neutral professional expertise in social education. With the demise of this settlement and the accompanying 'privatisation, peripheralisation and philanthropy' (Ball, 2007; Davies, 2010), it is possible to analyse once more the forms of influence from Christian organisations. New forms of governance, patterns of commissioning which are open to 'any willing provider' and networks of influence see certain providers (volunteers; voluntary and Church networks; private companies; academy chains) as good and (in the context of commissioning and competition for a diminished resource) other historic providers as rubbish, most especially Local Authorities and professionally educated and trained youth and community workers.

The Challenge Network, established by a number of partners, including Steve Chalke, founder of Oasis, was appointed as the major provider of the National Citizenship Scheme in November 2010. The Challenge consists of a number of programmes which are offered to teams of sixteen year olds as they leave school and before they move to the college context: the Personal Challenge (a week of residential outdoor education experience); the Team Challenge: a further residential week of Community service) and the Real Challenge (four weeks of fundraising in September, back home, for a chosen charity) and these experiences also form the core of the experience of the National Citizen Service. The offices of The Challenge and Oasis in Westminster Bridge Road, just opposite Lambeth North station, are also shared with Faithworks, The Shaftsbury Partnership, Stop the Traffick. These offices are clearly a significant node in the heterarchies that are changing the governance of education in the network of 'philanthropy, privatisation and peripheralisation' ((Ball,2007) The Oasis Trust, for example, which began in Youth Work, is now a provider of 19 academies and one private school.

*It was only in 1939 that the Youth Service was called into existence to recognise national responsibility for the younger citizens of the State. But the necessity for economy has reduced to a modest figure the financial assistance that is given from State funds. The fears or hopes of many that the State would take over youth work, and by its great resources drive out of the field voluntary organisations have proved unfounded. Youth work in the future will continue to rely largely on voluntary helpers and contributions (Cyril, Feb 1953: Preface to Eagar, 1953).*

The new ‘heterarchies’ are not democratically accountable (in contrast to a Local Authority), and the ‘authority’ enshrined in them is more opaque. The withdrawal of the State from youth work appears to many Christian groups as a welcome free-ing from bureaucratic targets and controls and from the ignorance and suspicion which often greeted the work of practitioners who are sometimes the remaining providers of what they themselves define as open-access youth clubs in any given Local Authority area. Many Christian youth workers positively welcome the withdrawal of the State. However, the other side of the ‘freeing up’ from local bureaucratic control is the lack of accountability in the new heterarchies through which power and influence flow relatively free from subjection to democratic control and, as has happened with the provision of children’s homes, is entirely open to exploitation by private for-profit providers. This may very soon become evident in this sector too with the appointment of SERCO as a key provider of National Citizen Service. How these networks operate is illustrated clearly in the following extract from a youth worker interview, describing how he and a number of young people he was working with who were involved in The Big Clean Up were roped into the Conservative Party Conference in Manchester 2011:

*We got told, you can go but you’re not representing (name of organisation). The Conservative MP was liaising with the Conservative Man....we got picked up from ... College...We spoke to...funnily enough he’s a black MP and he’s on all of the youth led ones...He said ‘I used to be a youth worker...pointing at us lot...he likes kids who show respect...he had to interview kids on the stage...another Black lad funnily enough got picked...It was right before Cameron’s big speech...they gave us all the flyers about the National Citizens service and where we were going to sit...he shook hands with every single one of the young people... William Hague can’t communicate with young people...Cameron’s a really good public speaker.... and we watched him deliver his key speech to the nation...Every-one’s clapping ever so enthusiastically after every single word...no-one said to me that you can’t move...in Rugby you just follow the trainer...and there’s a photo of me on Cameron’s shoulder and I’ve tagged it to myself ‘Cameron’s bodyguard’: @Prime Ministers’ bodyguard ...’ (Interview 4, Youth Worker, 2012).*

However, as well as complex ‘structures of governance’ and fluid sets of accountabilities, the complex, divided and various ‘structures of feeling’ present in this stream of youth work practice deserve attention. Significant binaries which seem to structure contemporary Christian youth work include: the ‘urban’ as against the ‘white middle class’ in the Evangelical movement itself; the sense of the ‘ignorance’ of State-based and many secular projects concerning Christianity in contrast with a sense of the abiding presence of small community projects with deep roots in neighbourhoods; linked to this, a concern for process and relationship versus both the imposition of targets and external agendas (from the State) and the ‘poor practices’ of Christians who act coercively, requiring participation in ‘God-slots’. Within the current youth work agenda therefore –despite all its retroactive turning to models rooted strongly in Muscular Christianity – the concern for masculinity may be more present in secular discourses than in Christian ones. Paradoxically,

the ‘trading’ in respectable masculinity moves from the religious to the secular, even as the power of Christian organisations is re-emerging.

## Respectable Masculinity, Feminism and Emasculation

When the discourse of the need for ‘male role models’ is mobilised by Christians, there is a significant sense of threat, to which the assertion of both the lack and the consequent need for ‘male role models’ seems to offer a response. The nature of the threat is quite mobile, but from time to time it is represented as ‘feminism’ with all its (apparently) emasculating powers. Feminism is also sometimes seen as a threat in discussions of work with girls where it is associated with masculinisation or (by extension on the assumption that girls are devoid of sexuality) with ‘sexualisation’. Since Christianity has been seen – following Nietzsche for example – as promoting a ‘slave morality’, a religion of the weak and of women – and remains, doctrinally, a religion of love – the need to address how manliness (with its emphasis on courage, discipline, toughness, adventurousness) can or cannot be thought alongside weakness and love becomes a point of tension in Christian youth work:

*one of the things we reflect on a lot in the office ... or we’ve had conversations ... how a lot of young men quite often can be emasculated and it is increasingly hard for urban young men to find appropriate role models. It would be very interesting if you asked this question to male workers ... do they see themselves as role models? ... a lot of the ways society is set up is to run down young men ... they see it that, the feminist movement that has increased opportunity for young women has done so at the expense of young men ... (Interview 2, Youth Worker, 2012).*

*Most of my friends’ kids when I was at school, their mums were well mums (laughter) if that makes sense they were mums ... if they had a job they had a part time job they did something that meant their kids, they could drop them off at school picked them up at the end of the day, they worked for that time in between and maybe worked three to four days a week not full-time and now I’m seeing young people with mums who are high powered and – no disrespect please don’t get me wrong – there is nothing wrong with that – but the balance is changing with the whole ... well I think the whole feminist movement was an interesting thing cos it was about power not equality though the word equality was often exchanged for power and so what you’ve got now is a balance that is ... unfortunately a lot of lads feel very, very undermined, they feel very emasc ... yeh if that makes sense they feel very emasculated if that makes sense ... there is something about being, if yeh yeh, there is something about ... yeh blokes kinda end up the butt of jokes now...do you know what I mean and more often than not no not more often than not but more regularly now you’ll see a group of girls causing a lad hassle whereas it used to be, if there was a group of lads together ... and how are you dealing with that yourself ... And you know, they look for honesty ... so sometimes blokes can*

*be really macho, or they can try and be really sensitive but what they want is some-one who's kinda real that can talk to them on a really personal level and is happy playing football ... there's a balance ... that shows you don't have to be one extreme or another ... and although we're deemed to be a very open country but if you're deemed to have a more feminine side 'you're gay' and the other end if you're quite a bit laddish and you're happy to get drunk at a weekend and do whatever and there seems to be this urge to be pushed one way or the other and to be able to say young men there is a place in the middle that you can be, you can have a good time with your mates you can do all the things, you know, you can go to the football, you can go out you can go camping you can do all those masculine very stereotypical kind of activities but you know you don't have to be trying to be dominant in a relationship where your girlfriend's some sort of token and you can be kind, you can be sensitive, you can be nice and that doesn't make you gay ... (Interview 3, Youth Worker, 2012).*

These long extracts from interviews with youth workers working in a Christian context show both the struggle to make sense of feminist claims to equality and the ways in which female empowerment seems to be directly undermining of men. It suggests how important a space of distance from the feminine or from gay masculinities remains in this context.

In the nineteenth century and early twentieth century the attributes of manliness were seen to adhere above all to the 'working boy' and there was in some ways a hope that contact with the working boy would revive the virility of middle-class men, enervated by too much book learning.

There was little fear of expression of mutuality and love between boys and men, often expressed as 'brotherly love':

*It is absolutely natural for a young man to be mixed up with boys. It is natural for him to take up their cause, to lay himself alongside their interests, to play the part of an older brother to them. He altogether understands them, he knows their ways and dodges, and has been in all their scrapes. A mother does not know a boy in the least. She has never been a boy (Drummond, in Eagar, 1953: 326).*

Nevertheless, by 1953, Eagar was obliged in the passage accompanying this to make explicit reference to the fear of homosexuality in boys' clubs and the need to be 'alert to the danger of attracting perverts' (Eagar, 1953: 324).

Evangelical Christianity (outside of its own self perception perhaps) is currently widely associated with fundamentalism and a virulent agenda of opposition to and persecution of homosexuality. The male leaders of the past boys' club movement exhibited little fear of being seen to love the boys and to experience transformation by their relationship with them. The memorial to Lord Shaftesbury which is the Gilbert statue of Eros in Picadilly Circus somehow represented from the

beginning the contradictory ambivalence towards the body and sex. It was campaigned against from the start by some who felt it was a too ‘bodily’ monument to Shaftsbury’s achievements and became famous as the ‘meat rack’ where rent boys were readily available from the 1950s. According to Potts (2004) the new fountain came to serve as a conduit for anxieties about the uncontrollability of public space and of sexuality within it.

This discourse of love all but disappeared in secularised accounts of the need for ‘positive role models’ with the boys almost always and entirely described in terms of a ‘lack.’ The sense of deficit (in training and discipline) can quite simply derive from a discourse of ‘underclass’, but it sometimes also emerges in left discourses emphasising the contrast between domestication (a disturbingly feminine state) and liberation from oppression. Domestication and deficit can be uncomfortably close as analytic terms. The term ‘humanising’ (based in Freire) is sometimes also used with an accompanying sense of an encounter with the primitive and feral. First homophobia and then fears of allegations of paedophilia and finally representations of young working class men as ‘animals’ have all but vanquished the language of homosocial bonds of affection which characterised earlier accounts of the relationship between men and boys in the boys’ club movement. It is this ambivalence which explains why, for all his undoubted disciplined, aggressive, adventurous and sporty masculinity, the Welsh Rugby Coach Gareth Thomas is unlikely to be among the male role models advocated by those who sense their lack. He was shortlisted (and named as a role model) for *The Pink List* published by *The Independent* in 2011.

A disciplined and potentially militarised masculinity – associated with boxing, competitive sport, fitness, nation, rule, security – has re-emerged as a solution to crisis and the lack of community cohesion. Christianity, associated by rulers with its power to create community cohesion since it was adopted by the Emperor Constantine as the religion of the empire, can once more be pressed into service. The call for ‘fitness’ to purpose – that is fitness to the call to serve God and glorify him – readily becomes a call to ‘fitness’ for other purposes.

‘Spiritual fitness’ was discussed during the Second World War in the context of the work of boys’ clubs (*Spiritual Well-being through Boys’ Clubs. A Survey of facts, their causes and a suggested remedy*, NABC, 1944) and has reappeared in papers currently under discussion in Christian youth work. The ability of a spirit of courage, resilience and indomitability to propel combatants towards victory in battles has been recognised by a variety of armies historically, including the US Military Academy at West Point which has ‘recently adopted the domain of the human spirit as one of the six developmental domains in its Cadet Leader development system.’ The US Army seeks to articulate ‘a spiritual dimension to assist in its premier task of instilling an indomitable spirit’ (Pargament, and Sweeney, 2011 : 58 ).

Lest this seems an alien import, consider the place of prestige given by the Coalition Government to the development of Cadets as an out of school opportunity. There is also the emphasis, from

the other side of the political spectrum in Compass Youth, on the possible offer of a 'new form of national public service' to all sixteen year olds in return for the minimum wage. This is accompanied by support for 'military academies' from all sides of British politics. As in the period of the formation of youth work, the honouring of those who serve in the armed forces in global wars easily comes to speak of and represent the virtues it is felt are needed and lacking among young people in the poorest urban areas.

However, the claims concerning the need to rescue masculinity no longer need explicitly grounding in religion, and at least some Christian youth work projects – especially in urban areas – draw on a discourse of love which emphasises a democratic openness and potentially invoke a historic Christian antimilitarism and even pacifism. Such projects have longevity, a preparedness to 'stand with' and witness pain and suffering and a discourse of love at ease with movements for social justice. They would characteristically draw on mystical theologies, such as those of Julian of Norwich or Thomas Merton (Youth Worker, Interview 4) which might be thought in contemporary terms to:

*propose a sacred anarchy ... which places the crown of divine preference upon the brow of the nomadic and the immigrant ... of the outsider, the marginalised, the disempowered, of the least among us ...*

and to ask:

*What would a nation look like that renounced sovereignty, that flexed the muscles not of military strength but of forgiveness, that organised a foreign policy around hospitality to the dispossessed and impoverished, that opened its borders to the widow, the orphan, the stranger, that took food out of its own mouth and shared its wealth, that placed the crown of privilege upon what Paul called ta me onta, 'the nothings and nobodies of the world?'(Caputo, 2012: 62)*

In this they are neither seeking role models or to be role models but desiring, above all, relationship.

## Conclusion

Youth work is playing and has played a significant part in a trade in the cultural capital of respectable masculinity, and the consequent disavowing of other masculinities whether they are seen as criminal or effeminate or both. This disavowal renders more difficult the practice of critical informal learning in youth work, which is dismissed and made redundant.

In youth work in England currently the emphasis on male role models is a significant vehicle for the trading in respectable masculinities and this is accompanied by a re-emergence, in a variety of

settings, of a 'structure of feeling' which values competitive sport, bodily and spiritual discipline, and adventure as key elements of manliness, closely deriving from the traditions of Muscular Christianity which informed the boys' club movement.

Such a version of masculinity is readily assimilable to militarism (in a period of warfare such as this one) and to the othering, especially, of Muslim communities. It also evokes a strongly hierarchical and anti-egalitarian form of relationship, which proposes feminism and commitment to gender equality as emasculating and fears homosocial and homoerotic bonds.

It is arguable that there is a coincidence of the valorisation of this respectable masculinity and the re-emergence of Evangelical organisations as key players in the youth work sector. The large-scale losses of professional youth work posts based in Local Authority Youth Services and Education Departments has meant a loss of focus on critical informal social education. However, whilst evangelical Christian organisations may have been hospitable to developments of markets in youth work, they have more readily embraced a critique of targets and state-imposed agendas than services based in Local Authorities, and it is unclear that they are more likely to pathologise working-class lads than are youth clubs or any other projects or secular ideologies. In fact it can be argued that, particularly in urban contexts, they have a range of resources which enable a counter-discourse based on mutuality and an ethics of presence with marginalised communities, from which a much needed critique of assumptions about masculinity which have been closely intertwined with youth work throughout its history can be questioned and challenged.

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