

Nathalie Duval

Sorbonne University, Paris

e-mail: nathalie.duval@sorbonne-universite.fr

ORCID: 0000-0002-2463-6631

THE FRENCH FEDERATION OF ECLAIREUSES: A FEMALE MOVEMENT WHERE ANY LITTLE FRENCH GIRL WAS TO BE COMFORTABLE

Abstract

According to one of the famous foundresses of the French Federation of Eclaireuses (FFE), Marguerite Walther, it had to be a female movement where “any little French girl would be comfortable” – comfortable to learn about moral values and about freedom. The FFE was very successful during the 1930s, achieving a high number of enrolments which were maintained after World War II. But the 1960s resulted in some fatal consequences for the FFE due to several reasons. There were financial problems, personality clashes, changes of attitude, and, eventually, co-education. Nevertheless, undertaking the analysis of the impact of the Eclaireuses’ movement one may clearly see its contribution to women’s empowerment in France. The question is to determine the particularities of this kind of feminism and how the women participating in the movement became more engaged in civil society.

KEYWORDS

scouting, feminism, empowerment, French associations

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE

skauting, feminism, wzmocnienie, stowarzyszenia francuskie

1. INTRODUCTION

Scouting is a British youth movement created by Robert Baden-Powell in 1907. It was introduced to France¹ in 1911. Originally intended for boys, it was quickly adapted to girls² when female scout units were established in and around Paris and in other major towns in France. These units were created thanks to the determination of young women active in the Unions Chrétiennes de Jeunes Filles (UCJF) and the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), which were mainly Protestant organizations³. The impact of the movement was radical in that it enabled girls to “get out of the house”.

After World War I the existing units of *Eclaireuses* were split between two groups. One group was Protestant and was called Unionists. The other group was called *Neutres*, meaning ‘neutrals’, i.e. they were free to choose whether or not they wanted to practise a religion. In 1921 the *Cheftaines* or Chief Guides gathered for a national congress in the little town of Epinal, located in the east of France. During this congress, the female only participants founded the French Federation of *Eclaireuses* (FFE) which brought together the Unionist/Protestant units and the Neutral units. Several years later, in 1927, some Jewish units joined them to form the third part of the FFE-UNI: Unionist/Neutral/Jewish. This explains the meaning of the letters written inside the clover leaf, a symbol of the FFE.

From the start, the FFE demonstrated the uniqueness of a youth movement organised by women for women in an ecumenical spirit. It was unique, because in comparison with the boys' movement, it was divided between several associations of different religious denominations. In 1923, three years after the FFE was created, a Catholic girls association was founded, known as the *Guides de France*.

According to one of its famous foundresses, Marguerite Walther, the FFE was to be a female movement where “any young French girl would be comfortable”. This meant comfortable with learning many moral values such as freedom. The FFE was very successful during the 1930s, with numerous enrolments. This was maintained after World War II. But financial problems, personality clashes and a change of attitude in the 1960s were fatal to the movement. In 1964 the FFE fell apart. This was mainly caused by the refusal to integrate an essential educational principle: co-education. As a result of its original and historic refusal to accept co-education, a violent controversy on this principle ensued which finally brought

¹ N. Duval, *L'Ecole des Roches*, Belin, 2009, 2010. The troop of scouts formed in 1911 at the Ecole des Roches was the first one to be formed in a school in France. It was the initiative of Georges Bertier whose second wife, Renée Sainte-Claire Deville, was one of the founders of FFE. Cf. A. Baubérot, N. Duval (eds.), *Le scoutisme entre guerre et paix au XXème siècle*, Paris 2006.

² https://fr.scoutwiki.org/Histoire_du_scoutisme_en_France (accessed 31.08.2019).

³ <https://www.museeprotestant.org/notice/le-scoutisme-feminin/> (accessed 31.08.2019).

about the demise of the FFE. However, the movement had contributed to women's empowerment in France for almost half a century.

This paper will explore the particularities of the kind of feminism that emerged in the FFE and will explain how the young female participants benefited from the spirit of the movement in terms of their involvement in civil society.

2. SCIENTIFIC CONTEXT FOR STUDYING HOW THE FFE CONTRIBUTED TO WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AMONG ITS FORMER MEMBERS

In France, the term used for women's empowerment is *promotion féminine*. This expression conforms to Christian historiographical semantics, more Catholic than Protestant. It comes from a collection of proceedings of a seminar devoted to Scouting for Girls, edited by Marie-Thérèse Cheroutre and Gérard Cholvy⁴ in 1990. This seminar may be regarded as the starting point of university research into Scouting for girls. It told its history through the stories of the FFE's former members. Cheroutre edited a notable thesis on the Guides de France (Catholic Girl Scouts). Cholvy was an academic at the University of Montpellier, an expert on youth movements and Catholic education. During the 1990s, the influence of these youth movements on French society interested historians such as Nadine-Josette Chaline, Francis Démier, Gilles Le Beguec, Françoise Mayeur, an expert on education for girls and women⁵ and in the 2000s Rebecca Rogers⁶, professor at the University of Paris-Descartes. The definition of *promotion féminine* must be understood as the evolution of promoting the empowerment of women in civil society.

In fact, what can be observed about the Guides de France in particular can be generalized for the Eclaireuses as a whole. If you examine their stories and their answers to several questionnaires, it is clear that the majority of the FFE's former members were women engaged in various areas of teaching, education, social care, and health services.

If the empowerment (*émancipation* in French) of women through the Girl Scouts is a subject of debate between historians, it is also one debated between

⁴ M.-T. Chéroutre, G. Cholvy (eds.), *Scoutisme féminin et promotion féminine, 1920–1990*, Paris 1990.

⁵ J. Chaline, F. Démier, G. Le Béguec, *Jeunesse et mouvements de jeunesse en France aux XIX^e et XX^e siècles: Influence sur l'évolution de la société française*, (in:) D. Fauvel-Rouif (ed.), *La jeunesse et ses mouvements: Influence sur l'évolution des sociétés aux XIX^e et XX^e siècles*, Paris 1992, pp. 95–115.

⁶ R. Rogers, *L'éducation des filles: Un siècle et demi d'historiographie*, "Histoire de l'éducation" 2007, pp. 115–116.

the former Eclaireuses. One of them, an Eclaireuse from 1934 to 1943, explains⁷ that the word “emancipation” was not used amongst the Girl Scouts but rather the terms “responsibility” and “service”. This word “emancipation/empowerment” must be understood in the context of the ordered ethos of the Scout movement and not in the context of the violence of feminist political struggles.

Below is a short bibliography of sources and testimonies of the former Eclaireuses. Some of them, preserved in the Société Historique du Protestantisme Français, are particularly interesting:

- A book of more than 70 former Eclaireuses’ testimonies, edited in 1987 and re-edited in 1997. It contains the index of several topics under *émancipation des femmes*,

- A book of several original testimonies collected by a former Eclaireuse Violette Ginger, and collated into a typed document in 2012,

- A regional study about the FFE in Algeria from 1930 to 1962, published by a former Eclaireuse Simone Akli-Paumier,

- A regional study about the FFE in the Rhône-Alpes (Lyon) from 1938 to 1945, edited in 2001 by the former *Cheftaine* Denise Jousot who became national commissaire.

- A survey entitled “Image de ta vie FFE” (A snapshot of your life in the FFE) published in 2001. This is a statistical study based on 234 answers to a questionnaire intended to make the former Eclaireuses consider what the FFE had contributed to their adult life.

In addition to these FFE internal sources, academic studies from the 1990s laid the foundation for a history of this youth movement. There were several university studies:

- A master’s thesis of Sylvie Galtier, under the direction of Gérard Chlovy, about the section of Unionist Eclaireuses in the Languedoc⁸ (1917–1964),

- A master’s thesis of Anne-Sophie Faullimmel, under the direction of Françoise Mayeur at the Sorbonne, about the FFE’s origins (1912–1927). This study was summarized in an article published in the “Bulletin de la Société de l’Histoire du Protestantisme Français”⁹,

⁷ DT No. 129, Spring 2013, p. 35. DT is the title of a newspaper edited by the former Eclaireuses. It is also an acronym for the humorous expression “debrouillum tibi”, equivalent of the French *débrouille-toi* and the English “work it out for yourself”.

⁸ S. Galtier, *Contribution à l’étude de la FFE, Les Eclaireuses Unionistes, 1917–1964*, Master’s thesis in history, under supervision of G. Chlovy, Université de Montpellier III, Histoire contemporaine, 112 pages. The release date is not mentioned, maybe between 1988 and 1997. This study needs further work.

⁹ *Bulletin de la SPHF*, Vol. 143, July-August-September 1997, special edition with articles about youth organisations, collected by G. Cadier-Rey, mainly from the work of A.-S. Faullimmel, *Aux origines du scoutisme féminin en France: La naissance de la Fédération Française des Eclaireuses (1912–1927)*, pp. 439–501.

– A scientific round table in 1997 with researchers such as Françoise Mayeur (history of girls education), Gabrielle Cadier (history of protestantism), Françoise Tétard (history of popular education) and Christine Bard (history of women and feminism). This round table was concluded with the idea of “a history in search of female historians”¹⁰.

After 2005, monographs on specific periods of the female scout movement were written which were developed into master’s theses. One of them, written by Agnès Le Cossec and directed by Jean-Noël Luc, was about the FFE’s contribution to the empowerment of women in the period of 1927–1939. Another one, written by Farah Solaani at the University of Strasbourg, was about the FFE during and after World War II¹¹. Recently, Héloïse Duché, a former activist¹² within the Eclaireuses et Eclaireur Unionistes de France (EEUDF), began writing a thesis about the FFE’s executives in the period of 1921–1970, under the direction of Mathias Gardet of the Department of Educational Science at the University of St Denis.

The archive collections are to be found in several locations: the library of SHPF in Paris, the Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand (BMD) in Paris (specializing in feminism) and the National Library of the University of Strasbourg (BNUS). These three libraries hold the most important FFE archives. The less important archives are to be found in the National Archives, le Musée national de l’Education in Rouen and Mont-Saint-Aignan, the offices of the different associations of Eclaireurs and Eclaireuses, both Unionist and Jewish, the Museum Galliera which has preserved an Eclaireuse uniform and finally the Bibliothèque et Archives Scoutes de Buttes in Switzerland. These archives started to be collected in the 1980s under pressure from former Eclaireuses, aware of the necessity to preserve their memory. This intensified in the 1990s. The former Eclaireuses¹³ were determined to sort, classify, rate and deposit these various archival resources so that in 1997 they became available for researchers.

¹⁰ Ce que femme veut... De nouvelles archives pour une vieille histoire, la FFE des origines à 1964, An IRESCO Meeting of 5 December 1997, 57 pages. Typed document dated September 1998.

¹¹ F. Solaani, *La FFE au temps des épreuves: De la guerre à l’immédiat après-guerre (1935-1950)*, Master’s thesis II under supervision of F. Igersheim, Université de Strasbourg, 2008.

¹² H. Duché *Prêtes à marcher vers l’avenir. Trois générations de femmes, cadres de la FFE, 1921-1970*, Master’s thesis in preparation under supervision of M. Gardet, Université Paris 8.

¹³ For example, the President of the former Eclaireuses, Denise Zwilling, wrote 12 biographic papers about FFE’s founders in B. Didier, A. Fouque, M. Calle-Gruber (eds.), *Le Dictionnaire universel des créatrices*, Paris 2013, 1600 pages.

3. SCOUTING FOR GIRLS: SPACE TO BE FREE

Scouting allowed girls to get out of their homes and gave them the space and freedom to pursue other interests. Photographs and pictures show small girls and teenagers out in the open air playing and pursuing various activities in fields, on the beach and in their campsites as well as hiking in woods and mountains.

3.1. THE FFE'S HISTORY FROM 1921 TO 1949: GROWTH AND PROSPERITY

After its official foundation on 25 July 1921, the FFE's main purpose was to get girls out of the cities for their health and moral welfare. Parents were aware of the necessity of protecting their daughters from tuberculosis which was devastating urban districts, both rich and poor. The first FFE units came from big cities such as Paris, Lyon, Bordeaux, Marseille, Nîmes and Strasbourg.

These units of Unionists, Neutrals and, in 1927 Jews, shared this basic aim. The period 1927–1939 was really the golden age of the French Girl Scouts. From 1931 to 1938 the number of Eclaireuses increased from about 2600 to more than 6100, an increase of 150% in less than 10 years. The FFE was made up of 382 sections in total. During this period the FFE created another branch, the EMT. The initials stood for “Eclaireuses malgré tout”, which translates as Eclaireuses despite everything. These units included girls who were isolated by such things as illness or living in remote places. Several units were created outside mainland France in Sub-Saharan Africa; Togo and Gabon, in North Africa; Morocco and Algeria and also in Indochina where some sections of the FFE survived until decolonization. A book, written by a former neutral Eclaireuse, Simone Akli-Paumier and entitled *Algerie, Memoire Oubliee*, recounts how sections were created in the regions of Algerois, Oranie and Constantinois. There was even a unit for girls of the nomadic Kabyle people in the form of itinerant camps. Sections were also created in the overseas territories of Guyana, Tahiti, and New Caledonia.

During World War II, scouting was forbidden in the occupied zone but there were a few clandestine units. In the non-occupied zone the Vichy government created the French Scoutism, a federation that gathered together all the Girl Scout associations. The public authorities and in particular the local municipalities, asked the Girl Scouts to welcome refugees and to organize summer camps and train scoutmasters.

After the war, the FFE resumed its activities in 1949. Its membership rose to 19,800 and there were more than 1,260 units. This success was due to the quality of its organization which was directed only by women.

3.2. AN EXCLUSIVELY FEMALE ORGANIZATION: FROM MEMBERS TO EXECUTIVES

Every Unionist, Neutral and Jewish section of the FFE welcomed into their units girls of all ages who were divided into different groups according to their age.

For the younger ones, a cadet group, *Envolées des Petites Ailes*, included girls aged 7 to 11. Girls aged 12 to 16 were known as *Eclaireuses*. The FFE was an hierarchical organization with units directed by *Cheftaines*. *Commissaires* controlled different levels of the hierarchy from districts to provinces (16 throughout France), the regions and, finally, the national level. At the top a *Commissaire générale* managed the movement through the CDC, the *Conseil des Chefs*. The *Eclaireuses* were trained to exercise their responsibilities in a real and practical way. They learnt the use of democracy as the *Cheftaines* had to elect the *Commissaires provinciales* who in turn elected the national leadership consisting of the *Commissaire générale*, the *Commissaires nationales* and their assistants. They were all responsible for functioning of the institution as they were for education of the girls whose parents had entrusted them to their care.

3.3. AN EXPERIENCE OF FEMALE SOCIETY

All members of the FFE were involved in a specifically female organization. It was recognisable first by the uniform which was based on that of the Boy Scouts. It consisted of a beige or brown skirt, two shirts – a white one for town and a light brown one for outdoor activities, a leather belt with a knife worn on the right and a whistle worn on the left, a scarf with colours specific to a section, a hat and after the war a beret, stockings and socks, a brown woollen pullover for winter and a grey flannel dress for summer.

The FFE's insignia and symbols had to be used depending on whether one was a *Petite Aile*, an *Eclaireuse* or an *Eclaireuse Aînée*. They were worn on the shoulder of the shirt, on the tie and on the hat. Among these symbols, the most recognizable is the clover leaf chosen from the start, it was at first green, then became golden yellow on a blue background. Its use has several meanings. The three segments of the clover leaf correspond to the three duties that each *Eclaireuse* promised to take on: to help, to serve, and to obey. On the two outer segments of the leaf, two stars are visible which signify the Law and the Promise shared by all *Eclaireuses*. The central stem is a compass needle pointing to the direction to be taken. At the base of the stem there is an heraldic fire which symbolises the fire of love between the *Eclaireuses*. Finally, the golden clover is like the sun shining in the blue sky for the *Eclaireuses* all over the world.

Their language and gestures were codified. Some words were invented by the *Eclaireuses* to express their female identity, such as the word *sestralité*, the female equivalent of *fraternité*, which means "sisterhood". Their salute

was also important: the three raised fingers (index, middle and ring) signified the three-part promise (to help, to serve and to obey), two fingers outstretched with the thumb over the little finger meant the strong would protect the weak. Those who were not in the scouting movement were called “pale faces”. Furthermore, each Girl Scout was designated a totem, inspired by nature – animals, flowers or fruit – and symbolizing a character trait. There was “merry mongoose”, “happy hummingbird” or “chatty chinchilla”. This identity for each Eclaireuse was a means of asserting one’s personality and cultivating a healthy self-esteem.

Each Eclaireuse was committed to respecting the FFE’s Law (summarized in ten statements) and to delivering their promise to do a good deed daily. Their life in the camps or during their outdoor activities gave them many opportunities to develop personal qualities and useful skills. Eclaireuses were able to pitch a tent, build a shelter, make an oven or an entire kitchen. Their great celebration each year was the World Thinking Day which took place on the 22nd February, the birthday of the two founders of the Scouting movement, Robert Baden-Powell (born in 1857) and Olave St Clair Soames (born in 1889) whom he married in 1912. In France, the FFE’s foundresses were five women, all with strong personalities. They were Marguerite Walther, Georgette Siegrist, Violette Mouchon, Renée Sainte-Claire Deville, and Madeleine Beley.

These women exemplified the values that they wanted to pass on to young girls. They wished to ensure the movement a long and stable future. Other important women in the FFE were Antoinette Butte who wrote the first handbook for the Eclaireuses, Andrée Demetre, Jacqueline Bricka and, from 1949, the *General Commissaire* Geneviève Lamon. She wrote in an article published in the newsletter for the former Eclaireuses that she wanted the girls to receive a modern education so that they could become strong people, dependable, focused on the essentials of life and able both physically and professionally.

4. FFE SERVING FEMALE EMANCIPATION/WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT

The FFE was created at a time when women were becoming more involved in civil society outside the home. During the war they had to assume new responsibilities while the men were away fighting. The 1920s were the years of *la garçonne*, a famous literary character, a scandalous woman who reacted against the traditional expectations of the female’s role in society¹⁴. How did the FFE contribute to female emancipation/women’s empowerment?

¹⁴ M. Victor, *La Garçonne*, Paris 1922.

4.1. THE TRAINING OF GIRL SCOUT LEADERS

The FFE's leaders were recruited from the Senior Eclaireuses. The theory was taught at evening classes leading to a diploma. The practical was taught at camp-schools, places which became important in the FFE's history. There was Château d'Argonne in the department of the Eure in the 1920s, Les Cornettes located near Grasse in the Alpes-Maritimes in 1937, La Repara in the department of the Drôme between 1952 and 1962, and Les Prés – a land bought in the Briançonnais in 1953.

Service to others was the most important precept taught to the *Cheftaines*. They made a commitment to serve the FFE and civil society and to become involved in charitable work in schools, parishes, and places like the Foyer de Berck founded in 1952 in the Nord-Pas-de Calais. Here, with the Guides de France, the senior Eclaireuses supported young girls handicapped by illness who therefore needed an opportunity to access the outside world.

4.2. SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF THE GIRLS JOINING THE ECLAIREUSES

The Eclaireuses were recruited from both the working and middle class. Did the FFE help in the social and professional advancement of their girls? This has yet to be ascertained. In the FFE's newspaper we read that the FFE "was a crucible of female achievement for girls coming from different social classes enabling them to manage their lives with all their abilities and aspirations".

4.3. PROFESSIONAL INTEGRATION: COMMITTEES, ASSOCIATIONS, CIMADE, NEW EDUCATIONAL METHODS

Personal testimonies and other publications reveal that Scouting promoted women's careers in the areas of social welfare, medicine, associations, education and formal schooling, both public and private. Many former Eclaireuses opened new schools which used the latest teaching methods such as those of Montessori, Freinet, and Decroly. It would be useful to have statistical studies that evaluate the impact of Scouting on the professional choices of many former Eclaireuses.

There is only one partial survey made in 1991 by the former FFE Association entitled *Snapshots of your life in the FFE*. This survey was based on the answers to a questionnaire sent to one thousand of former Eclaireuses. Of these 87% said that they were engaged in a remunerated work: 50% in the educational sector, 18% in the medical or paramedical sector and 31% were doing a variety of jobs, this acknowledging that some people have several different types of employment during their working life. Only 13 of those who answered the questionnaire said they had not been in work, a small minority of 5%.

To what extent did the FFE influence these women's professional choices? Only 29% admitted it had influenced their choice of work while 51% said it had not. However, 76% reported that the FFE had been a great support to them in their working life. All these statistics are taken from speeches and articles by the FFE's leaders.

The following are well known former Eclaireuses:

- Thérèse Klipffel, Head of the Reformed Church in Alsace Lorraine.
- Violette Mouchon, a Protestant who, during World War II, contributed to the creation of CIMADE, Comité Inter-Mouvements Auprès des Evacués. She was the first and only female director until 1944.
- Simone Veil, deported to Auschwitz during the war, who went on to become one of the first female Government Ministers in the 1970s, the first President of the European Parliament and a Member of the French Academy.
- Finally, the many anonymous women who during the dark period of World War II worked undercover in the different French Resistance groups.

It is noticeable that Scouting also had an influence on the choices made in the private lives of the Eclaireuses. Out of the five FFE foundresses, only two ever married. One was soon divorced and the other, Renée Sainte-Claire Deville, was married at the age of 57 to Georges Bertier, a former director of the Ecole des Roches and a recent widower. The questionnaire *Snapshots of your life in the FFE* also looks at the topic of single women. 32% of the former Eclaireuses who answered the questionnaire were not married. That was above the national average. Only 20% of these women thought that their single status was due to their involvement in the FFE. However, 30% of women responding to the questionnaire thought that it was thanks to the FFE that they had got married, often to a man who had been a Scout himself. The authors of this study concluded that the FFE could not be considered as a group of old maids. In reality a lot of young people, both girls and boys, met at the religious services in their churches. Notwithstanding, their marital commitment seems to have limited their social commitment.

5. CONCLUSION: LIMITS OF FEMALE EMPOWERMENT

The feminism of the Eclaireuses has to be measured against the limits put on them by their moral values and education¹⁵. Their values are enshrined in the FFE's Law, promulgated by the Senior Eclaireuses.

¹⁵ G. Poujol, *Un féminisme sous tutelle. Les protestantes françaises (1810-1960)*, Paris 2003. The sociologist Geneviève Poujol demonstrates that the Protestant feminism remained controlled by its religious ethics although less so than its Catholic counterpart. However, there were only a few Protestants that supported the French feminist movement.

“Aware of her dignity as a woman, a Senior Eclaireuse is open-minded, courageous and respects work. She is demanding of herself and she is able to take on responsibilities. She fights for a better world for humankind”. We can recognise in this statement the values of friendship, ecumenicalism, helping others, doing a good job, and openness towards others. How is the term “women’s dignity” to be explained? It seems to conform to the Christian ideal – a strong and happy woman, pure in thought, word, and deed. The notion of purity implies the idea of self-control. The subject of sexuality is taboo. In the publications of the time, the term is never mentioned. If there was sex education, it was limited to the anatomy of the genital organs and to procreation inside marriage. The Christian ethos prevails for the future mother of a family or for a young single woman who must remain celibate and chaste. It is here that female emancipation/empowerment reaches its limit. The idea that in their intimate life each one is free to act according to their own conscience and convictions, is in no way understood or accepted.

The FFE was finally destroyed over the question of co-education. In March 1964, the Neutral sections of girls joined with those of the boys creating the Association of Eclaireuses and Eclaireurs de France (EEdF). But the spirit of the FFE still survives thanks to the former Eclaireuses who, opposed to co-education, got together to pass on their experiences through historical and sociological academic studies. We don’t have precise figures of the number of Eclaireuses between 1921 and 1964: 100,000 or 150,000 girls? Even if it is a minority of the French female population¹⁶, it is interesting to evaluate this youth movement which promoted an awareness by women of their feminine identity which transcended social class, culture, religion, and political opinions.

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¹⁶ Cf. the FAAS – Fédération des Associations d’Anciens et d’Adultes du Scoutisme Français, <http://www.faas.fr> (accessed 31.08.2019).

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