

Children, young people and the League of Nations in interwar Britain*

Tomás Irish¹ and Susannah Wright²

¹Swansea University, United Kingdom
t.d.irish@swansea.ac.uk

²Oxford Brookes University, United Kingdom
susannahwright@brookes.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This article asks how the League of Nations, and its supporters in Britain, sought to mobilize young people c.1918–39. How did children and young people associated with the League of Nations Union engage with the League of Nations? What meanings were ascribed to this engagement? Drawing on sources from the League of Nations and local junior branches, we explore spaces for internationalist engagement from the local community to overseas travel. We conclude that children and young people emerged as a distinct group of actors in international affairs and were part of the League's wider mission to create an informed international public opinion.

In December 1934 Joseph Avenol, secretary general of the League of Nations, received an unusual letter. Written by two teenagers based at the junior branch of the League of Nations Union (L.N.U.) in Ealing in England, the letter wished Avenol and all members of the League's secretariat 'every possible happiness' for Christmas. 'We recognize with gratitude the excellent work which you are all doing – year by year, and sometimes in spite of the greatest obstacles and difficulties – for WORLD PEACE and FRIENDSHIP'. The letter written 'on behalf of all our members, boys and girls of ages 11/16 years' was signed by Barbara Beard and L. J. Lawler.¹ In his response a couple of days later, Avenol thanked his 'young friends' for their message and commented that 'the fact that we have the support of young people is the best of all auguries for the future of the League of Nations'.² Why did two young people from England write to the secretary general of the world's first intergovernmental organization? While direct correspondence between junior branch members and senior officials was exceptional, this article will show how children and young people were cultivated as an important constituency by the League and its adult supporters, and that they engaged with the organization in a variety of creative ways.

Established in the aftermath of the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, the League of Nations sought to utilize international co-operation and arbitration in order to avoid future wars. As a new institution, it attracted much

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¹ League of Nations Archives online (hereafter L.N.A.), LNA/R5172/13/21835/1744, B. Beard and L. J. Lawler to J. Avenol, 14 Dec. 1934. L. J. Lawler finished grammar school in 1938 and later went on to teach biology and zoology before scripting and presenting educational programmes for the B.B.C. (*Phoenix: Drayton Manor Grammar School*, Jan. 1957, p. 40 <http://www.ajpinternet.com/dmgs1963/phoenix/library/Phoenix_5701.pdf> [accessed 14 March 2025]).

² L.N.A., LNA/R5172/13/21835/1744, J. Avenol to Ealing junior branch of the League of Nations Union, 19 Dec. 1934.

hope for what it might achieve as well as disappointment in what it did not. While research has focused on the activities of the League as an institution, relatively less is known about the ways in which the organization at Geneva interacted with communities around the world, such as the group of young people mentioned above. The primary means of doing this was through League of Nations Societies, such as the L.N.U. (established 1918) in Britain, which sought to promote support for the institution within individual nation states.³ The L.N.U. aspired to be a mass-participation movement and sought to position itself above party politics in order to do so; its membership peaked at over 400,000 in 1931, although this non-political position became more difficult to sustain by the late 1930s with the rising threat of war in Europe.⁴

This article explores the ways that the League of Nations, and its supporters in the L.N.U. in Britain, sought to mobilize children and young people, and conceived them as a distinct group of actors in international affairs. The League and its supporters crafted opportunities for them to engage intellectually, emotionally and materially as active participants in its work because they believed this would further the League's aim of cultivating international public opinion in support of its cause. Accordingly, they established junior branches and youth groups in order to create and encourage younger League supporters.⁵ Activities, sometimes localized, sometimes involving travel overseas, connected children and young people in Britain with a distant international organization and individuals in other countries. These activities were often curated, prescribed and sometimes even performed by adults, while a smaller number were co-ordinated and organized by children and young people themselves. In this article, we pose two key questions in order to critically interrogate the significance of these activities. How did British children and young people associated with the L.N.U. engage with the League of Nations? What meanings were ascribed to this engagement by adults from the League of Nations itself down to L.N.U.'s local branches, and children and young people themselves? We explore the spaces in which children and young people interacted with the League, from their local communities to sites overseas.

Existing literature on younger generations and the League of Nations has explored pedagogy in school classrooms and extra-curricular activity predominantly within the school setting.⁶ This article takes a different approach and moves beyond the classroom and school. Away from the formal environment of the school setting, children and young people were visible in source material encountering the League of Nations and its agendas, either through direct contact with the League or through imagined interactions. This approach highlights how the League of Nations and its national associations, exemplified here by the L.N.U., sought to mobilize children and young people to the cause of international peace in a variety of settings and in a range of creative ways. While the results of these efforts are difficult to measure, the energy that was expended on trying to engage and enthuse this constituency suggests that they had emerged as a significant group in the creation of interwar international public opinion, and one that international organizations were eager to influence.⁷ We focus on the ways in which a role was envisaged for children and young people as international actors at a number of levels, from the top of the organizational structure in Geneva, through the British national L.N.U., down to individual local junior branches and to young people themselves. We make use of the records and publications of the League of Nations in Geneva, the headquarters of the London L.N.U., and a number of junior branches across Britain. Relatively few junior branch records have been preserved in archives; one exception to this is the Ealing branch, located to the west of London, which we draw upon in this article.

³ H. McCarthy, *The British People and the League of Nations: Democracy, Citizenship and Internationalism, c.1918–45* (Manchester, 2011); and D. Birn, *The League of Nations Union, 1918–1945* (Oxford, 1981).

⁴ Birn, *League of Nations Union*, p. 130; and McCarthy, *British People*, pp. 213–14.

⁵ S. Wright, 'Creating liberal-internationalist world citizens: League of Nations Union junior branches in English secondary schools, 1919–1939', *Paedagogica Historica*, lvi (2020), 321–40.

⁶ K. Osborne, 'Creating the "international mind": the League of Nations' attempts to reform history teaching, 1920–1939', *History of Education Quarterly*, lvi (2016), 213–40; T. Irish, 'Peace through history? The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's inquiry into European schoolbooks, 1921–1924', *History of Education*, xlv (2016), 38–56; J. Goodman, 'Working for change across international borders: the Association of Headmistresses and education for international citizenship', *Paedagogica Historica*, xliii (2007), 165–80; and Wright, 'Creating liberal-internationalist world citizens'.

⁷ E. E. Seidenfaden, 'The League of Nations' collaboration with an "international public", 1919–1939', *Contemporary European History*, xxxi (2022), 368–80; and J. Stöckmann, 'The First World War and the democratic control of foreign policy', *Past & Present*, ccxlix (2020), 121–66.

Our primary source material is, as is often the case for those examining childhood and youth in the past, varied and fragmentary. It requires approaches of reading ‘along and against the archival grain’, seeking to understand and take seriously authors’ points of view, but also asking questions about what is said and left unsaid, and why.⁸ The material we consider records adult perspectives, and also those of a minority of the children and young people involved who commented and reported on their views and experiences. Even if youngsters of all ages are visible as participants in activities, those who appear as actively involved in decision-making, or those who left accounts of their involvement, were typically older, about fifteen to nineteen. In the source material, however, it is not always clear exactly which age ranges are applicable. We work with the ambiguous definitions of *childhood*, *children*, *young people* and *youth* in the sources, which could, depending on context, designate anything from those under five to above age twenty. The sources leave some things unsaid. We learn of what activities were arranged, but often less about exactly who organized or took part in them, and even when names are given, only occasionally do we learn exactly what these individuals did. This applies to both adults and young people. And while we can learn to some extent what happened, the sources we have accessed say much less about motivations for young people’s involvement on the part of adult organizers, parents and young people themselves.

The article will first explore how children and young people were conceptualized by international organizations in the interwar years. It will then analyse the range of ways, from domestic activities organized by junior branches to international correspondence and travel overseas, that children and young people engaged with the League of Nations. Their engagement was thought to be not only desirable, but vital. One adult organizer, Elizabeth Jay, a teacher in London, claimed that their involvement was as important as that of the L.N.U.’s leaders: ‘They feel as much a member of the League of Nations Union as Lord Cecil [president of the L.N.U.] himself’, she argued, adding that ‘any failure in anyone weakens the whole weight of opinion behind the League.’⁹ Children and young people could make similar claims. The discussion below highlights challenges and ambiguities in mobilizing children and young people to engage in international affairs, as well as in interpreting the resultant archival record. Still, we should take seriously the commitment and intent behind the ambitions voiced by adults and young people alike at the time, and the aspiration that the engagement of the young in League-connected activities would change the world.

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The period following the end of the First World War saw children and young people emerge as a distinct constituency in international relations.¹⁰ Perhaps the most famous manifestation of this was the ‘Geneva Declaration’, a statement of children’s rights drafted by the Save the Children Fund and adopted by the League of Nations Assembly in 1924.¹¹ The immediate context for this development can be found in a number of connected phenomena that identified children and young people as both transnational symbols and potential transnational actors. These developments can be seen through the lens of three historical and historiographical fields, namely, the history of humanitarianism and post-war reconstruction, the history of liberal internationalism, and the history of youth movements.

Recent historiography has explored the humanitarian response to the crises that confronted Europe in the aftermath of the First World War.¹² Historians such as Michael Barnett have argued

⁸ K. Alexander, S. Olsen and K. Vallgård, ‘Voices and sources: lessons from the history of childhood’, *Digital Handbook of the History of Experience*, 21 Sept. 2023 <<https://sites.tufts.edu/hexhandbook/methodology/voices-and-sources-lessons-from-the-history-of-childhood/>> [accessed 14 March 2025].

⁹ League of Nations Union (hereafter L.N.U.), *An Experiment in a Secondary School* (London, 1925), p. 5. Lord Cecil was president of the League of Nations Union from 1923 to 1945.

¹⁰ D. Marshall, ‘The construction of children as an object of international relations: the Declaration of Children’s Rights and the Child Welfare Committee of the League of Nations, 1900–1924’, *International Journal of Children’s Rights*, vii (1999), 103–47, at pp. 103–4.

¹¹ Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child 1924, *University of Minnesota Human Rights Library* <<http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/instrree/childrights.html>> [accessed 16 March 2025]; and B. Cabanes, *The Great War and the Origins of Humanitarianism, 1918–1924* (Cambridge, 2014), p. 279.

¹² Cabanes, *Great War*; K. D. Watenpugh, *Bread From Stones: the Middle East and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism* (Oakland, Calif., 2015); and M. Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: a History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca, 2011).

that humanitarianism was transformed around this time, with a growing emphasis placed upon suffering and need rather than the identity of those seeking aid.¹³ In this wider humanitarian context, children emerged as an especially resonant category of sufferer. Organizations such as Save the Children effectively mobilized the image of the suffering child in their campaigns, framing the child as an innocent victim of circumstances beyond their control, but also as a resource worthy of investment with an eye to the future.¹⁴ This image of the suffering child was inherently international as it transcended national boundaries and political and religious divisions and, in the words of Emily Baughan, presented the child as the '[object] of innate pathos ... universally worthy of humanitarian concern'.¹⁵ Child suffering was a powerful image, meaning that it could be utilized in a variety of ways. This motif could be leveraged by states for particular cultural diplomatic purposes in a process that Elisabeth Piller calls 'the diplomacy of pity'.¹⁶ They could also be used to reaffirm narratives of imperial benevolence, and to gloss over the political causes of wartime suffering.¹⁷ The post-war image of the suffering child was deeply resonant and inherently international, and linked together the destruction and dislocation of wartime with the hopes for a peaceful and stable future, framed by the imperative to resolve a set of material crises.

Beyond the immediate, reactive imperative of providing humanitarian aid to those in need, the task of post-conflict reconstruction placed faith in the creation of new institutions to create a stable international order, such as the League of Nations and its subsidiary bodies. There has been a resurgence of interest in the League over the past two decades, with a range of studies exploring its activities in fields such as diplomacy, empire, economics, education, philanthropy, labour and much beyond.¹⁸ Both the League and the L.N.U. were advocates of liberal internationalism, meaning that they valued international institutions and co-operation between states in order to supplement, rather than replace, existing national or imperial loyalties. They saw nations and internationalism as complementary rather than antithetical.¹⁹ Typical L.N.U. narratives emphasized a spirit of enlightened patriotism whereby love for country and empire fitted within wider obligations to an international community. This may have helped the L.N.U. attract a mass of members, but, as Helen McCarthy has noted, it embedded the movement within 'the established values – and prejudices – of British society'.²⁰ In this context, national associations sought to promote greater international awareness of the work of the League, of international politics and of the cultures of different countries, all as a means of contributing to a stable international order.

The League was built upon the key principle that its success required the creation and cultivation of an informed and supportive international public opinion.²¹ The desire to cultivate international public opinion stemmed from a belief that the First World War had been caused by secret diplomacy; accordingly, in the post-war world, open diplomacy would ensure that populations were informed about the actions of their governments and, in turn, better international relations. The League held its meetings in public view and made materials available to the press and national societies around the

¹³ Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, p. 82.

¹⁴ S. Roberts, 'Exhibiting children at risk: child art, international exhibitions, and the Save the Children Fund, 1919–23', *Paedagogica Historica*, xlv (2009), 171–90; and J. Droux, 'Children and youth: a central cause in the circulatory mechanisms of the League of Nations (1919–1939)', *Prospects*, xlv (2015), 63–76, at p. 65.

¹⁵ E. Baughan, '“Every citizen of empire implored to save the children!” Empire, internationalism and the Save the Children Fund in inter-war Britain', *Historical Research*, lxxxvi (2013), 116–37, at p. 124; see also Cabanes, *Great War*, p. 273; and Marshall, 'Construction of children', pp. 138–41.

¹⁶ E. Piller, 'German child distress, US humanitarian aid and revisionist politics, 1918–24', *Journal of Contemporary History*, li (2016), 453–86, at p. 454.

¹⁷ E. Baughan, 'International adoption and Anglo-American internationalism, c.1918–1925', *Past & Present*, ccxxxix (2018), 181–217, at pp. 185, 216; and M. Tusan, 'Genocide, famine and refugees on film: humanitarianism and the First World War', *Past & Present*, ccxxxvii (2017), 197–235, at p. 198.

¹⁸ M. Mazower, *Governing the World: the History of an Idea* (London, 2012); M. Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: the End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton, 2009); P. Clavin, *Securing the World Economy: the Reinvention of the League of Nations* (Oxford, 2013); S. Pedersen, *The Guardians: the League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford, 2015); C. Biltoft, *A Violent Peace: Media, Truth, and Power at the League of Nations* (Chicago, 2021); and L. Tournès, *Philanthropic Foundations at the League of Nations: an Americanized League?* (London, 2022).

¹⁹ G. Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism* (Philadelphia, 2013), p. 2; and Mazower, *Governing the World*, pp. 48–54.

²⁰ McCarthy, *British People*, p. 134.

²¹ Seidenfaden, 'League of Nations' collaboration', pp. 368–71; Stöckmann, 'First World War'; and S. Kaiga, *Britain and the Intellectual Origins of the League of Nations, 1914–1919* (Cambridge, 2021), pp. 59–62, 71.

world. By conducting its business in the open, the League hoped not only to embody an alternative to pre-war secret diplomacy, but to win ongoing support for the institution through the active dissemination of information about its activities. The cultivation of international public opinion was intended to generate support for the League in both the present and the future, and children and young people became a key constituency in this effort. In 1930 an official League publication stated bluntly that 'the League of Nations is the sum of Public Opinion' and added that 'the most fundamental necessity in the formation of habits of mind which are in keeping with the principles of the League is the provision of suitable instruction for the young'.²² However, for critics of the League's approach such as E. H. Carr, the emphasis placed on public opinion was emblematic of the wider failings of the organization. In his 1939 polemic *The Twenty Years' Crisis* he wrote disapprovingly that the League was 'from the first closely bound up with the twin belief that public opinion was bound to prevail and that public opinion was the voice of reason', which was in his opinion incorrect.²³

In the British context, the aims of open diplomacy coincided with the early years of universal suffrage, creating space for a civil society association like the L.N.U. to act as a vehicle for 'broad-based, cross-party organizing'.²⁴ The place of children and young people in such organizations was not wholly clear: were they envisaged as engaging in popular participation in the present, or included to ensure their mobilization in the future? Despite this ambiguity, children and young people were, in the words of Susan Pedersen, one of the 'mobilized publics' that the League in Geneva sought to reach through instruction, and for whom national associations such as the L.N.U. created a distinctive space in the form of junior branches.²⁵

Junior branches had some affinities with youth movements, and the historiography of youth movements affords a fruitful way of analysing how children and young people engaged with international themes in this period. The largest youth movements in interwar Britain, the Boy Scouts and Girl Guides, with a combined membership of over one million by 1930, developed a more internationalist outlook after 1918, which sat alongside older ideologies of cultural nationalism and imperialism.²⁶ Smaller groups such as the Woodcraft Folk had a strong internationalist, peace-oriented, dimension.²⁷ Children and young people in the L.N.U. were not an isolated example, therefore, but their movement was different in its consistent and explicit emphasis on (frequently complex) internationalist themes and practices and on the League of Nations itself. Many youth movements shared what Mischa Honeck has called a 'vocabulary of youth'. In the context of youth movements, children and young people 'were cast as emblematic of imagined national and global futures', a casting that could help exonerate adults from feeling culpable for past actions that had contributed to death and suffering during the First World War. This framing helps explain the enthusiasm with which adults responded to indications of youngsters' support for the League. At the same time children and young people adopted the vocabulary of youth themselves to frame their contribution to the cause of international friendships.²⁸

As historical subjects, much has been written about the experiences of children and young people faced with the traumatic rupture of wartime.²⁹ We know less about how they engaged with the more

²² Secretariat of the League of Nations, *Ten Years of World Co-operation* (Geneva, 1930), pp. 413–14.

²³ E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis: an Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (London, 1939), p. 45.

²⁴ H. McCarthy, 'Parties, voluntary associations, and democratic politics in interwar Britain', *Historical Journal*, 1 (2007), 891–912, at pp. 897, 907.

²⁵ S. Pedersen, 'Back to the League of Nations', *American Historical Review*, cxii (2007), 1091–117, at p. 1093. Other relevant studies include Seidenfaden, 'League of Nations' collaboration; and A. Richard, 'Competition and complementarity: civil society networks and the question of decentralizing the League of Nations', *Journal of Global History*, vii (2012), 233–56.

²⁶ T. M. Proctor, 'Daughters of war: Girl Guides and service after the First World War', *Twentieth Century British History*, xxxiii (2022), 103–28, at pp. 122–5; and S. Johnston, 'Courting public favour: the Boy Scout movement and the accident of internationalism, 1907–29', *Historical Research*, lxxxviii (2015), 508–29. For membership figures, see T. M. Proctor, '(Uni)forming youth: Girl Guides and Boy Scouts in Britain, 1908–39', *History Workshop Journal*, xlv (1998), 103–45.

²⁷ S. Mills, 'Geographies of education, volunteering and the lifecourse: the Woodcraft Folk in Britain (1925–75)', *Cultural Geographies*, xxiii (2016), 103–19.

²⁸ M. Honeck, 'Rubble and rebirth: postwar rejuvenation and the erasure of history', *Journal of Social History*, liii (2020), 889–905, at pp. 890, 891.

²⁹ A. Carden-Coyne and K. Darian-Smith, 'Young people and the world wars: visibility, materiality, and cultural heritage', *Cultural and Social History*, xvii (2020), 589–95, at p. 590; M. Pignot, 'Children', in *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, iii: *Civil Society*, ed. J. Winter (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 29–45, at pp. 36–40; M. Pignot, *Allons enfants de la patrie. Génération Grande Guerre* (Paris, 2012); B. Mayall and V. Morrow, *You Can Help Your Country: English Children's Work During the Second World War* (2nd edn., London, 2020); and R. Clifford, *Survivors: Children's Lives After the Holocaust* (New Haven, Conn., 2020).

nebulous theme of peace in the interwar period. Existing studies focus upon the reform of school curricula rather than young people themselves.³⁰ This historiography tends to emphasize the ideas that children and young people were presented with in formal school settings, rather than seeking to analyse the nature of their interactions with internationalism and the League of Nations in particular. Annie McCarthy's work on the 1931 children's vote – where 155,392 pupils in New South Wales expressed their support for the League of Nations – is a notable exception to this, and one that takes seriously the contribution of young people to interwar cultures of peace.³¹ Children and young people interacted with the League of Nations in a variety of settings. More than being mere symbols of a peaceful future, the League hoped that the young would be actively engaged in the task of building an informed and supportive international public opinion. Far from being a top down story, however, the success of efforts to engage children and young people depended upon enthusiasm and energy being exerted at the grassroots level. Here, local organizers were frequently a decisive factor in stimulating the engagement of children and young people with activities that promoted liberal internationalist ideas.

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The aspiration of the League of Nations to cultivate an informed and supportive international public opinion means that any analysis of children and young people's participation needs to explore the structures and activities of the League and its affiliated organizations. From Assembly resolutions to the work of its International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation (I.C.I.C.) and the Child Welfare Committee (C.W.C.), the League demonstrated a clear concern with the position of a younger generation in a liberal internationalist order. The practical implementation of policies formulated at Geneva was far from straightforward and required the work of intermediaries – national associations, local branches and enthusiastic local activists – in order to bring the aspirations of the League to children and young people in Britain. As a result, the engagement of children and young people with the League was a complex process whereby somewhat rigid and formal ideas emanated from the top of the organization and trickled down to local communities where they were reshaped by these intermediaries; it was a process that linked international organizations, national associations and local communities. Throughout this process children and young people learned about or imagined Geneva, and, if they were fortunate, visited the Swiss city.

The League of Nations wished young people to play a part in building international peace and stability following its establishment in 1920. Beyond the adoption of the Declaration of Geneva in 1924, the Assembly passed resolutions relating to children and young people, peace and education each year between 1923 and 1933. These articulated an aspiration to make the institution and its covenant known to the young and, as in 1924's resolution, to encourage them to see 'international cooperation as the normal means of conducting world affairs'.³² Two League committees were primarily responsible for the development of policy relating to children and young people. The C.W.C., in conjunction with other voluntary organizations, discussed and sought to agree policy and expertise regarding issues specific to children across the world such as age of marriage, delinquency, guardianship and other matters.³³ At the same time, the I.C.I.C. considered the engagement of children and young people with the wider mission of the League primarily through the medium of education. All of this activity was part of what Ilaria Scaglia has called a process of 'social and emotional engineering' utilized by the League and its supporters.³⁴

³⁰ Osborne, 'Creating the "international mind"'; M. Siegel, 'Negotiated truth: the Franco-German historians' agreement and the long history of cultural demobilization after the First World War', in *The Academic World in the Era of the Great War*, ed. T. Irish and M. Chagnon (Basingstoke, 2017), pp. 233–50; McCarthy, *British People*, 103–31; B. J. Elliott, 'The League of Nations Union and history teaching in England: a study in benevolent bias', *History of Education*, vi (1977), 131–41; and E. Fuchs, 'The creation of new international networks in education: the League of Nations and educational organizations in the 1920s', *Paedagogica Historica*, xliii (2007), 199–209.

³¹ A. McCarthy, 'Votes for children: the 1931 NSW Children's Peace Vote for international cooperation, peace and security', *History Australia*, xx (2023), 497–520.

³² L.N.A., LNA/R4060/8165/5260, 'L'enseignement aux enfants et à la jeunesse de l'existence et des buts de la société des nations'.

³³ Droux, 'Children and youth'.

³⁴ I. Scaglia, *The Emotions of Internationalism: Feeling International Cooperation in the Alps in the Interwar Period* (Oxford, 2020), p. 59.

The I.C.I.C. concerned itself with a wide range of issues relating to international co-operation in education, science and other cultural matters.³⁵ It was supplemented, from 1926, by an International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation based in Paris. Both intellectual co-operation organizations saw formal education as a means through which children and young people might be informed about the League. Much energy was devoted to ensuring that hostile and belligerent narratives about both war and peace were eradicated from schoolbooks and national curricula. The League Assembly approved the Casares resolution in 1926 to (theoretically) provide oversight of – and a mechanism to change – problematic content in national history texts, but this was rarely used.³⁶ The I.C.I.C. formed an advisory committee on League of Nations Teaching, which was responsible for the publication of a range of handbooks for teachers, which suggested activities for children with the intention of familiarizing them with the institution and its procedures. The advisory committee mirrored the wider aspirations of the League to create an informed and enthusiastic international public opinion, reporting in 1935 that ‘the youth of today will constitute the public opinion of tomorrow’.³⁷ It oversaw the publication of a textbook outlining the work of the League of Nations, which was translated into twenty-nine languages.³⁸

There were many challenges in implementing the educational ideas developed at Geneva. On a basic level, the I.C.I.C. was careful to not be seen to overstretch and overly interfere with an area – education – which was the preserve of sovereign states.³⁹ At the same time, the League’s educational committees operated at a vast distance from children and young people themselves and were often tasked with popularizing quite technical subjects. A 1934 memorandum about teaching noted the fear that ‘questions of method are apt to be lifeless and lacking in interest’.⁴⁰ All of this meant that, while the League and the I.C.I.C. took a great interest in mobilizing the young in support of its cause – and doing so through the schools – the practical work of engaging directly and successfully with this group required the participation of agents much closer to the populations in question. For these national and local agents, activity through junior branches proved to be a more effective means of connecting with children and young people.

The L.N.U. sought to promote the League in Britain, both by lobbying government and through outreach to a wider public. While it aimed for a united and peaceful future, it looked back at the First World War as a catastrophe not to be repeated and as a reason to work for the League cause.⁴¹ For the L.N.U., as with the League itself, children and young people comprised a core constituency within its intended wider public. Much of the L.N.U.’s activity with this group was co-ordinated through its education committee, which looked to schools as a means of reaching the young. Its efforts resulted in League teaching in schools being undertaken by nearly all local education authorities in England and Wales by the early 1930s.⁴² The L.N.U. also organized events that were open to children and young people from all parts of the country such as the Geneva summer schools discussed below. In the L.N.U.’s many teaching aids and its reports upon its educational work, the active engagement of young people is difficult to determine. The L.N.U. typically reported numbers such as counts of junior branches and film viewings, circulation figures for teaching aids; these perhaps tell us more about reach than anything else.

The engagement of children and young people with the League is most visible in the historical record through junior branches. These were, like adult local L.N.U. branches, intended to stimulate

³⁵ J. Pemberton, ‘The changing shape of intellectual co-operation: from the League of Nations to UNESCO’, *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, lviii (2012), 34–50; J. Renoliet, *L’UNESCO oubliée. La Société des nations et la coopération intellectuelle, 1919–1946* (Paris, 1999); D. Laqua, ‘Transnational intellectual cooperation, the League of Nations, and the problem of order’, *Journal of Global History*, vi (2011), 223–47; and T. Irish, ‘The “moral basis” of reconstruction: humanitarianism, intellectual relief, and the League of Nations, 1918–1925’, *Modern Intellectual History*, xvii (2020), 769–800.

³⁶ Osborne, ‘Creating the “international mind”’, p. 227.

³⁷ Osborne, ‘Creating the “international mind”’, p. 213.

³⁸ Secretariat of the League of Nations, *The Aims, Methods and Activity of the League of Nations* (Geneva, 1935).

³⁹ K. Li, *Transnational Education Between the League of Nations and China* (Cham, 2021), p. 56.

⁴⁰ L.N.A., LNA/R4059/4871/12286, ‘Educational survey’, 3 July 1934.

⁴¹ S. Wright, ‘Children internationalism and armistice commemoration in Britain, 1919–1939’, in *Childhoods in Peace and Conflict*, ed. J. Marshall Beier and J. Tabak (New York, 2021), 85–102.

⁴² Board of Education, *Report on the Instruction of the Young in the Aims and Achievements of the League of Nations* (London, 1932). The *Children’s Newspaper*, edited by Arthur Mee, carried items on the League and from 1929 invited individual membership of the L.N.U. for readers.

grassroots involvement. While the majority of the 1,470 junior branches in Britain by 1936 were linked to schools, they operated outside of the formal curriculum and timetabled lessons. In addition, district junior branches (of which there were ninety-three in 1936) were typically linked to adult branches and valued for their potential to attract a wider range of young people than the minority who attended secondary school at this time.⁴³ Junior branches, it was hoped, would forge a sense of connection between children and young people and the League. Belonging to one ‘makes [young people] feel that the League belongs to them’, wrote the organizer of one junior branch in 1924.⁴⁴

Not all junior branches were equally active, and the activities of a branch typically depended upon the actions of a motivated and enthusiastic adult organizer (although their names do not always appear in the published or archival record). An example of an active junior branch is that of Ealing, which, with the encouragement of adult organizer F. E. Harris, engaged enthusiastically and with regularity with the types of activities that the League and the L.N.U. hoped that junior branches might undertake. Ealing’s junior branch was established in late 1928 and counted sixty-five members for 1929–30. A youth group for those aged between sixteen and thirty was established in 1929 with the aim of ‘[supporting] the cause of world peace and the League of Nations.’⁴⁵ Harris ensured that accounts of the activities of the Ealing branch were given regular and prominent attention in local newspapers, mirroring, in this way, the commitment of the League of Nations to publicize its activities in the international press.⁴⁶ Children and young people from the Ealing branch were often involved in national L.N.U. initiatives, as will be shown below.

The relationship between the League of Nations and children and young people can thus be seen at a number of levels, from the policy-driven activities that took place in the committees based at its headquarters by Lake Geneva, to national and, ultimately, local organizations, where children and young people themselves become visible. While they *are* present in the records of the I.C.I.C. and the L.N.U., they are generally talked about. It is in the documentary traces related to L.N.U. junior branches, and, exceptionally, in first person manuscript accounts, that evidence of children and young people doing, saying or writing things can be found, although these sources often provide the perspectives of older, particularly active teenagers. While the League in Geneva bore a deep-seated desire to build a supportive and informed international public opinion that included young people, this process was complex and unevenly experienced, and fundamentally depended upon grassroots organizations.

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L.N.U. junior branch organizers provided a wide range of activities for children and young people to encounter the League of Nations and internationalism without leaving their locality. Guest lectures, exhibitions, mock assemblies, plays and pageants sought to ‘bring the world’ to children and young people.⁴⁷ Events comprised those that utilized formal modes of delivery (the expert speaker educating a listening audience), and those that sought to engage youngsters’ senses of sight, sound and touch. ‘Fancy dress internationalism’ was the dismissive description offered by Alfred Zimmern regarding the latter. Zimmern was a leading British supporter of the League and deputy director of the International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation in Paris between 1926 and 1930. His comments implied that there was disagreement within the movement about the most effective way to educate children and young people to be international.⁴⁸

⁴³ Of these 1,470 junior branches, 758 were attached to secondary schools, 560 to elementary schools, and 59 to ‘other day and Sunday schools’ (L.N.U., *Junior Branches of the League of Nations* (London, 1936), pp. 4, 19–21).

⁴⁴ L.N.U., *Experiment in a Secondary School*, p. 5.

⁴⁵ Ealing Central Library, London, L.N.U. Records (hereafter ‘E.C.L., L.N.U. Records’), ECL/LNU/48/13, Report of Junior Section of Ealing Branch of League of Nations Union, March 1929–March 1930; ECL/LNU/48/15, Ealing Youth Group report of annual meeting, 10 March 1930. F. E. Harris was identified on such documents as ‘leader’ of the Junior Branch and ‘chairman’ of the Youth Group.

⁴⁶ Biltoft, *Violent Peace*, pp. 1–13.

⁴⁷ K. D. Good, *Bring the World to the Child: Technologies of Global Citizenship in American Education* (Cambridge, Mass., 2020).

⁴⁸ A. Zimmern, ‘Education in international relations: a critical survey’, *Educational Survey*, March 1932, pp. 9–29, at p. 17.

The public meeting with a visiting speaker was a core component of the regular activities of both adult and junior branches.⁴⁹ Visiting speakers included those who spoke as representatives of different countries, and those who were often British but spoke as experts on the function of the League of Nations or a specific international issue. Very active and well-organized junior branches featured speakers on an almost weekly basis. In 1936 Ealing junior branch welcomed lecturers from over thirty nations, including China, Czechoslovakia, Dutch East Indies, Hungary, India, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, South Africa, Sweden and Turkey.⁵⁰ Visiting speakers also discussed specific issues relating to the League or international relations in an effort to inform children and young people about particular topics. At a lecture given in 1932 to Chichester junior branch about the League's work to combat disease, listeners were told that 'germs did not respect frontiers and the League was trying to teach human beings not to respect frontiers, but to work for all the world.'⁵¹ Despite organizers' hopes that visiting speakers would be engaging and informative, it appears that many youngsters were more interested in entertainment and social events. In 1929 fifteen Ealing junior branch members attended a talk about 'What the League Stands For' in March by Miss MacIntosh while forty were present for a social event a few months later that featured dancing, refreshments and games 'relating to the League'.⁵² Given the often technical and complex subjects being discussed, this was hardly surprising.⁵³

Ealing's programme boasted a wide array of events that emphasized interaction, tactility and experiential approaches, but were at the same time intended to be informative and persuasive in their positive messaging about the aims and work of the League. In 1934 the junior branch, supervised by Miss Hogarth, produced a mock television broadcast of a 'Children's Hour' from Geneva at the Ealing L.N.U. branch's largest gathering, its annual fete.⁵⁴ Even at the socials held at least three times a year, attendees who went for the games, dancing and refreshments would have found themselves a captive audience for short talks with an international focus.⁵⁵ The involvement of children and young people in branch events was meaningful for adults as symbolizing hope for the future of the movement, and for the League itself. The Ealing branch annual report for 1930–1 commented, 'Those who have been working for the League since its inception, rejoiced to see Youth taking so prominent and successful a part in the Fete'.⁵⁶ These performances did not serve adult interests only. From the perspectives of the young organizers who wrote about these events at least, they were consciously educational and appreciated as such. Through music, dressing up and performance, children and young people could, at the same time, perform and take on a League-friendly, internationalist agenda, in practical, accessible, tangible and potentially emotionally powerful ways.

In 1934 and 1936 Ealing hosted 'Geneva at Ealing' exhibitions. The 1936 event, which was organized by the Ealing L.N.U. branch in conjunction with other London-based branches, featured displays that dealt with different aspects of the League's activity, including disarmament, minorities and refugees, economics and social issues, alongside a Children's Court.⁵⁷ The latter was billed in the official programme as opening children and young people up to 'new horizons beyond their national frontiers' and bringing home to them 'the difficulties of organizing the world' in order to 'prepare those who will create the peace of tomorrow'. Featuring a display of 'toys and books from other lands', which were later loaned out to local schools, the Children's Court was situated between an exhibit about the International Labour Organization and a literature stall. A special 'children's session' took place on the Friday, which featured a tour of the exhibits, a film showing and 'community singing'.⁵⁸ An

⁴⁹ Birn, *League of Nations Union*, p. 131.

⁵⁰ E.C.L., L.N.U. Records, ECL/LNU/48/14, F. E. Harris, Ealing junior branch, 'Selection from records of our work during the year 1936'.

⁵¹ 'War on disease: a League of Nations activity', *Observer and West Sussex Recorder*, 13 July 1932, p. 2.

⁵² E.C.L., L.N.U. Records, ECL/LNU/48/13, Report of Junior Section of Ealing Branch of League of Nations Union, March 1929–March 1930.

⁵³ Birn notes that the 'dullness' of public meetings was a feature of the activity of adult branches (Birn, *League of Nations Union*, p. 132).

⁵⁴ E.C.L., L.N.U. Records, ECL/LNU/48/6, Ealing general purposes committee minutes, 24 May 1934.

⁵⁵ For an overview of the social activities of the Ealing junior branch and youth groups, see the meeting and annual reports in E.C.L., L.N.U. Records, E.C.L., LNU/48/12–15.

⁵⁶ E.C.L., L.N.U. Records, ECL/LNU/48/1, Ealing Branch 12th Annual Report, Feb. 1930–Feb. 1931, p. 7.

⁵⁷ E.C.L., L.N.U. Records, ECL/LNU/48/23, 'Geneva at Ealing'.

⁵⁸ E.C.L., L.N.U. Records, ECL/LNU/48/14, Ealing Junior Section, "'What the headlines tell'": records of work 1936 & 1937'; ECL/LNU/48/23, 'Geneva at Ealing'.

Ealing newspaper called on local residents to attend the exhibition because the success of the League depended upon public opinion. 'And that opinion', the news report argued, 'depends very largely upon the information of the man in the street. This, in its turn, explains why the organizers want him – and his wife and family – at the exhibition.'⁵⁹ For those who could not literally travel to Geneva, an exhibition that purported to transplant important elements of the work of the headquarters of the League to a domestic setting might be the next best thing.

At the Geneva at Ealing exhibitions, the material side of learning – the tangibility of objects and experiences – was utilized by League enthusiasts to encourage visitors to feel international. As Stephanie Olsen has noted, the interactions of children and young people with material culture in wartime were central to processes of emotional formation and helped create a sense of belonging. This insight can be applied to objects and experiences that encouraged a sense of belonging to an international community, and a sense of connection to the institution of the League of Nations.⁶⁰ Many junior branches had a stamp book, in which postage stamps from around the world could be collected, touched and placed for safe keeping. It was common, too, for visiting international speakers to contribute to the branch stamp collection, as was the case when a Norwegian student visited Ealing in 1935 or when a member of the Yugoslav legation gave a talk in 1937.⁶¹ By that year, the Ealing junior branch stamp collection boasted almost 400 stamps from forty-five different countries as well as coins from twenty-five countries.⁶² The archival record does not, however, reveal *how* exactly youngsters interacted with these material objects.

Pen friend exchanges were a further means through which children and young people could experience the international world from their homes and actively participate in internationalism. Numerous correspondence schemes were set up at this time with the aim of promoting international, intercultural dialogue and conveying messages of international friendship.⁶³ Many junior branches sat within a network of schools and associations that was both transnational and rooted in local civil society and thus could organize exchanges of correspondence between children in different countries. The Ealing junior branch, being particularly well-connected, had an exchange with a school in Awka, Nigeria, through which children corresponded. The *Middlesex County Times* speculated in 1935 that 'one cannot imagine the pleasure of the African boys and girls on the arrival of the English mails with letters from their English friends.' The nature of the source material means that the historian must imagine how these interactions took place, the content of the letters, and what roles were played by adults as mediators.⁶⁴ By 1938 children in the Ealing junior branch had pen friends in France, Germany, Canada, Nigeria, Denmark and the U.S.A.⁶⁵

Children and young people could communicate across borders in other ways, taking an active role in international exchange without leaving their locality. The Welsh children's Peace and Goodwill Message was broadcast annually on 18 May (the anniversary of the 1899 Hague Peace Conference) from 1922. Written in the name of Welsh boys and girls, it was generally authored by the educationalist and peace activist, Gwilym Davies.⁶⁶ The Goodwill Message was one manifestation of 'wireless internationalism', the potential for radio broadcast to facilitate international co-operation by connecting individuals across borders through the power of direct and intimate contact with the spoken voice.⁶⁷ Each year's message took a different thematic focus. In 1934 this was the battle against disease, and the message concluded, 'Science has made us neighbours; let goodwill keep us friends.'⁶⁸ In 1934 responses

⁵⁹ 'Geneva at Ealing', *West Middlesex Gazette*, 17 Oct. 1936, p. 14.

⁶⁰ S. Olsen, 'Children's emotional formations in Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, around the First World War', *Cultural and Social History*, xvii (2020), 643–57, at pp. 643–5.

⁶¹ 'League of Nations Union: Ealing Youth Group', *Middlesex County Times*, 12 Oct. 1935, p. 2; and 'Yugoslav official at Ealing: talk to Junior Branch of L.N.U.', *West Middlesex Gazette*, 27 Feb. 1937, p. 11.

⁶² 'Summer school at Geneva', *West Middlesex Gazette*, 7 Aug. 1937, p. 9.

⁶³ K. D. Good, 'From pen pals to epals: mediated intercultural exchange in a historical perspective', in *Intercultural Communication, Identity, and Social Movements in the Digital Age*, ed. M. U. D'Silva and A. Atay (London, 2019), pp. 9–28, at pp. 9–10.

⁶⁴ 'L.N.U. junior branch', *Middlesex County Times*, 9 March 1935, p. 15.

⁶⁵ 'League should be decently buried', *West Middlesex Gazette*, 24 Dec. 1938, p. 6.

⁶⁶ Davies was a Baptist minister who played a leading role in the League of Nations movement in Wales and took a particular interest in matters relating to education and school curricula. He is credited with establishing the Goodwill Message. See T. Pallant, 'The man with a mission for a movement: the interwar peace campaigns of Rev Gwilym Davies', *Welsh Centre for International Affairs*, 2 Nov. 2019 <<https://www.wcia.org.uk/wcia-news/wcia-history/leagueofnations/>> [accessed 16 March 2025].

⁶⁷ S. Potter, *Wireless Internationalism and Distant Listening* (Oxford, 2020).

⁶⁸ L.N.U., *Wales and the League of Nations, 1934–1935* (Cardiff, 1935), pp. 50–1.

came from schools in Romania, Denmark, Canada, Belgium, U.S.A., France, Italy, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Japan, Australia, Russia, Peru, Egypt, China, Nigeria and Ireland.⁶⁹ Responses were often composed by adults, but they were also accompanied by colourful drawings by children and young people depicting themes of peace and international co-operation, and sometimes the signature of each pupil in the school.⁷⁰ While the words may not have been theirs, young people were able to shape their encounter with the international exchange by personally signing and illustrating the documents that were sent by way of response. The Goodwill Message reached prominent individuals; in 1935 a pamphlet claimed that one particular English child – Princess Elizabeth, the future queen – had begun to keep prints of the Goodwill Message among her ‘books and possessions.’⁷¹ But if the messages could be owned and archived by children and young people, they could also, once published, be adapted, reused and republished by adults within the movement.⁷² They were not one off ‘events’ but had a complex, ongoing, multigenerational life that extended beyond the message itself.

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Overseas travel for young people was promoted in the interwar years by governments, educational institutions and voluntary organizations. Benefits noted for individuals included opportunities to tackle insular prejudices, broaden horizons and learn languages.⁷³ Wider benefits envisaged by governments and organizations ranged from the promotion of international friendship and international understanding, to cultural diplomacy on behalf of nation states.⁷⁴ The L.N.U. was thus far from alone in valuing opportunities for international travel for young people – and it was mainly teenagers who international travel opportunities were offered to. With the notable exception of Geneva (dealt with in the section below), much of the international travel within its remit did not explicitly deal with the League of Nations. Instead, the international co-operation of young people from different countries meeting each other, an aspiration of the League, was the key objective.

The L.N.U. and individual junior branches organized tours, international camps and exchange visits, mainly within Europe, deeming such activities ‘an excellent way of cementing international friendships.’⁷⁵ These views were mirrored by young participants, with a pupil who attended a summer camp in Germany claiming that ‘it is in the friendly relations between young people of all nations that the greatest hope of world peace lies.’ This pupil’s description of her travels overseas and the friendships she formed matched closely with adult L.N.U. messages of children as the hope for a peaceful future.⁷⁶ International travel enabled young people to experience other cultures in the name of international peace and understanding and, where archival source material exists, these trips elucidate a range of experiences and emotions, from deep engagement to boredom and matter-of-fact reflections upon the activities that had been organized.

In April 1937 the L.N.U. organized a two-week trip for L.N.U. ‘Pioneers’ that took thirty-six British teenagers to Denmark. In the official itinerary the L.N.U. set out the aims of the visit as being: ‘1) to explore another country and learn something of its culture and industries. 2) to meet the young people of Denmark. 3) To show how to travel abroad inexpensively’, for an estimated cost of £6.⁷⁷ Planned as a reciprocal visit in which the Danish teenagers would later visit Britain, participants were paired with young people in Denmark with whom they corresponded ahead of the trip. The

⁶⁹ L.N.U., *Wales and the League of Nations*, pp. 50–1.

⁷⁰ Examples of these can be found at *People’s Collection Wales* <<https://peoplescollection.wales>> [accessed 16 March 2025].

⁷¹ L.N.A., LNA/R4054/SC/2659/699, ‘The growth of a world idea’, p. 1.

⁷² For example, see examples from New South Wales, Australia, noted in McCarthy, ‘Votes for children’, p. 504.

⁷³ W. E. Marsden, ‘The school journey movement to 1940’, *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, xxx (1998), 75–95.

⁷⁴ D. Laqua, ‘Activism in the “Students’ League of Nations”: international student politics and the Confédération Internationale des Étudiants, 1919–1939’, *English Historical Review*, cxxxii (2017), 624–31; T. Pietsch, ‘Commercial travel and college culture: the 1920s transatlantic student market and the foundations of mass tourism’, *Diplomatic History*, xliii (2019), 83–106; P. Polak-Springer, ‘Gain weight, have fun, discover the motherland: the German–Polish children’s summer camp exchange and interwar era revisionism’, *Contemporary European History*, xxx (2021), 214–30; and T. Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls: National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900–1948* (Ithaca, 2008).

⁷⁵ *League News*, June 1936, p. 7.

⁷⁶ *Magazine of Manchester High School for Girls*, Dec. 1932, pp. 3–4.

⁷⁷ Anthony Gomme papers (private collection), League of Nations Union, Exchange visit with Denmark, 4 March 1937; and ‘Forthcoming events’, *League News*, Feb. 1937, p. 8.

British students stayed with the families of their Danish correspondents for a number of days and otherwise availed of local youth hostels. The group visited sites such as Hans Christian Andersen's home in Odense, Hamlet's Castle in Helsingør, the Tuborg brewery in Copenhagen and the offices of a local newspaper, and also went on a brief trip to Sweden. They also gave an address on Danish radio. The lone activity relating to the League was a reception given for the British youngsters by the Danish League of Nations Society.⁷⁸ The itinerary for the trip noted the expectations for this visit: 'Our party will be expected to sing songs and to discuss with Danish children school life in our respective countries.'⁷⁹ This was broadly how the event was reported in the press where, in the spirit of international exchange, the young people discussed differences between Britain and Denmark, which included weak tea, strong coffee and a dislike of Danish feather beds.⁸⁰ While the trip was arranged by the L.N.U., the vast majority of documentation – newspaper accounts, official itineraries, letters and diaries produced by participants – said next to nothing about the League of Nations itself.

One of the participants was sixteen-year-old Anthony Gomme from London. His correspondence and diary from the trip provide a rare example of unpublished sources penned by a young person who participated in L.N.U. travel. In advance of the trip to Denmark he exchanged letters with the Danish student with whom he was paired. His correspondent wrote with geographical and political facts about Denmark alongside a note that reflected on current political events: 'I am sorry that you should lose your king, Edward VIII but it was perhaps the best thing for himself to leave his country.'⁸¹ In a postcard written from Sweden to his parents, Anthony Gomme wrote that 'the trip has been going far too fast. It is nearly over. I am very sorry. The Danish and Swedish are such nice people.'⁸² His emphasis on the friendliness of his hosts was echoed by other participants. Mary Joan Stock, a seventeen-year-old participant from Warwick, wrote a long report of her experiences for her local newspaper, concluding that 'no matter how much an Englishman exerted himself, he could never equal the warmth and friendliness shown us by the Danes. It is easily summed up in these few words, "Denmark is the little country with the great heart"'⁸³ Barbara Stephens from Croydon High School for Girls drew a similar conclusion in her account of the event, lauding the 'friendliness and hospitality' of the 'people of Denmark'.⁸⁴

Gomme also kept a diary of his trip where he recorded some more prosaic aspects of international travel, including a stop at the customs office to 'give up playing cards instead of paying duty' on his arrival in Denmark.⁸⁵ These included the group trip to an abattoir to learn about Danish agricultural practices: 'Walk to the pig slaughterhouse [ugh!!!]. It was ghastly.'⁸⁶ He also wrote of his experiences in the town of Assens, 'It has a school for delicate children + they were our hosts. We played them at football + beat them 3-0.'⁸⁷ This private diary enabled him to express personal reactions to some of the activities that were not evident elsewhere in the published accounts of the trip, which reported an entirely positive experience.

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The ultimate manifestation of attempts to encourage young people to connect with the League and its aims was travel to Geneva, home of the League of Nations itself. The League intended that young people could 'feel' internationalism and trips to Geneva were deemed the best means of achieving this.⁸⁸ There, young people could see the League at work at first hand. Geneva was a travel destination for numerous League of Nations-supporting associations and individuals, representing adults, university

⁷⁸ B. Stephens, 'Pioneer expedition to Denmark', *League News*, June 1937, p. 8.

⁷⁹ Anthony Gomme papers, League of Nations Union, Exchange visit with Denmark, 4 March 1937.

⁸⁰ 'English children's impression of Denmark', *Yorkshire Post*, 21 Apr. 1937, p. 3; and 'Visit to Denmark', *Croydon Times and Surrey County Mail*, 5 May 1937, p. 5.

⁸¹ Anthony Gomme papers, K. Larsen to A. Gomme, 26 March 1937.

⁸² Anthony Gomme papers, A. Gomme to parents, 20 Apr. 1937.

⁸³ 'Stratford girl in Denmark', *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 7 May 1937, p. 2.

⁸⁴ Stephens, 'Pioneer expedition to Denmark'.

⁸⁵ Anthony Gomme papers, A. Gomme, L.N.U. trip to Denmark, 8–22 Apr. 1937, entry 9 Apr. 1937, p. 2.

⁸⁶ Anthony Gomme papers, A. Gomme, L.N.U. trip to Denmark, 8–22 Apr. 1937, entry 13 Apr. 1937, p. 6.

⁸⁷ Anthony Gomme papers, A. Gomme, L.N.U. trip to Denmark, 8–22 Apr. 1937, entry 15 Apr. 1937, p. 9.

⁸⁸ Scaglia, *Emotions of Internationalism*, p. 63.

students and young people from many different countries. It was estimated that in 1926 alone over 30,000 individuals from around the world attended the range of summer schools available there.⁸⁹ Alfred Zimmern promoted summer schools (including his own) as enabling participants to gain 'first-hand experience of foreign countries acquired under conditions which promote true international understanding.'⁹⁰ The L.N.U. offered 'junior summer schools' in Geneva from 1929, claiming that the setting of Geneva itself was conducive to this agenda: 'From Geneva one can see the whole world with the mind's eye.'⁹¹ A report in *Headway* suggested that the presence of young people from Britain attending the summer school was beneficial for the League's workers who resided in the city: 'Even the most jaded members of the Secretariat, bored and blasé with years of diplomatic dealings ... feel that there is hope for the peace of the world yet when there is so much interest among the members of the rising generation.'⁹²

The group of seventy-five British teenagers at the first L.N.U. junior summer school in 1929 expanded to parties of up to 200 in later years, mainly from Britain but with a few attendees from other countries. Even as numbers increased, these attendees were only a subset of the total junior membership of the L.N.U. Participation was restricted to those who could afford the fee or those who gained a funded place. Adults connected with junior branches reported that costs were too high for them to send as many as they would have liked.⁹³ Funded places were generally awarded through competitions.⁹⁴

The L.N.U. envisaged the summer school as a training ground for 'future leaders' of the movement. The selection process for funded places reinforced the sense that attendance at the summer school was primarily for knowledgeable, committed and high-achieving young people. The small number of prizes available ensured that only a minority of those who applied could go; there were 116 applicants for the four places offered in 1931 by the L.N.U. Welsh National Council.⁹⁵ Fred Passey from Wantage in Oxfordshire attended the L.N.U. junior summer school in 1933, aged sixteen, having won his place through a competition organized by a local newspaper. The shortlisting process pitted Passey against another boy, so the newspaper's editor visited both at their homes to establish who took the greatest interest. Passey talked of being a member of his local L.N.U. branch and speaking at its meetings, and showed his collection of L.N.U. pamphlets. He won the place.⁹⁶ As these examples show, competition for these places was often stiff. The Welsh critic and novelist Raymond Williams won a scholarship to attend a summer school in Geneva aged sixteen in 1937 for his essay, which was placed second in a national competition.⁹⁷ First place that year went to the seventeen-year-old Iris Murdoch, who later won much acclaim as a novelist and philosopher, her second time winning this competition.⁹⁸ That year's competition asked young people between fifteen and eighteen to write an essay on the topic 'If I Were Foreign Secretary'. Murdoch proposed toughening up the League's sanctions policy and close co-operation with the United States, while Williams argued for the re-establishment of the League as 'the most potent international factor'.⁹⁹ Overall, selection processes seemingly favoured those with the greatest knowledge, enthusiasm and essay writing or public speaking skills.

Competitions for scholarships were generally framed in a way that would encourage enthusiastic and pro-League responses from the participants. When the Welsh National Council of the L.N.U. instituted its own Geneva Scholarship scheme in 1928, the examination paper featured a series of questions that were phrased so as to prepare young people to respond to criticism of the League that they might encounter in public. Students were invited to reply to statements such as 'the League

⁸⁹ Laqua, 'Activism in the "Students' League of Nations"', pp. 628–30; and F. B. Boeckel, *Between War and Peace: a Handbook for Peace Workers* (New York, 1928), p. 38.

⁹⁰ A. Zimmern, *Learning and Leadership* (Oxford, 1928), p. 49.

⁹¹ 'Seeing life', *Headway Supplement*, Sept. 1930, p. ii; and *League News*, Feb. 1933, p. 7.

⁹² 'Seeing life', p. ii.

⁹³ British Library of Political and Economic Science, Records of the League of Nations Union, LNU/S/41, L.N.U. Junior Branch committee minutes, Questionnaire for junior branch leaders, 1936.

⁹⁴ 'Ealing at Geneva summer school', *West Middlesex Gazette*, 4 March 1939, p. 15.

⁹⁵ *Western Mail & South Wales News*, 9 July 1931, p. 11.

⁹⁶ 'Mission of peace in the shadow of war', *Oxford Mail*, 11 Aug. 1983, p. 6.

⁹⁷ D. Smith, *Raymond Williams: a Warrior's Tale* (Cardigan, 2008), p. 72.

⁹⁸ S. Eilenberg, 'With A, then B, then C', *London Review of Books*, xxiv (Sept. 2002) <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v24/n17/susan-eilenberg/with-a-then-b-then-c>> [accessed 16 March 2025].

⁹⁹ 'Prize essays in "Headway's" holiday lecture competition', *Headway*, xx (1938), 28.

of Nations and the British Empire are incompatible' and 'the fighting instinct in man will never be overcome'. They were also to consider how the situation in 1914 might have been affected if 'the League of Nations had then been in existence' and why a League was 'so much more necessary to-day than it was a hundred years ago'.¹⁰⁰ We can assume that scholarship applicants would have realized that anti-League, or perhaps even neutral or ambivalent, responses might have damaged their chances in a competitive situation.

Funded places catered for relatively few, but those that received them gained a chance to travel internationally. Participants wrote of sight-seeing in Geneva and evening social events. For the L.N.U. even these extras were an important part of facilitating international understanding as participants would 'talk things over among themselves'.¹⁰¹ An attendee described the summer school as 'a good holiday besides an excellent course of lectures', their words closely reflecting the advertising of these events by the L.N.U.¹⁰² Lectures delivered by experts, typically League employees and journalists, were the cornerstone of the summer school. Participants were also involved in workshop sessions in which they formed commissions to solve problems and were asked to complete written answers to questions. The weightiness of the topics covered through the summer school curriculum was stressed in accounts from 1929 onwards, yet commentaries suggest an increasing sense of gravity as international tensions grew in the late 1930s. A participant from Ealing wrote in 1937 that rising international tensions validated the continued work of the League project: 'Hitler has reminded us that there are no islands in Europe to-day, so what affects Europe cannot fail to interest intelligent people in Britain'.¹⁰³ The reference to intelligent people suggests that participation conferred a status of being an important, elite, minority.

Attendees' commentaries are often relatively brief and predominantly factual descriptions. Some, however, delineate what the author felt they learned and what they valued most, with particular lectures or lecturers identified as their favourites. One young woman selected a talk on refugees while a young man noted the input of representatives of 'small countries' whose perspectives were not completely aligned with the mainstream opinion of the most powerful interests in the League.¹⁰⁴ In these examples, unusual perspectives and matters of immediate humanitarian import stood out as highlights above the mechanics of how the League worked. In the midst of generally positive evaluations, there were occasional comments about the lack of opportunity for informal conversation with expert speakers, with dialogue limited to a few minutes for questions at the end of lectures. References to 'ten crowded days' suggest that the programme of events was very full and that opportunities for exploratory discussion were limited.¹⁰⁵

Being at the home of the League of Nations was thought by attendees to create the much-vaunted 'spirit of Geneva' or 'Geneva atmosphere'.¹⁰⁶ The Geneva atmosphere was described by journalist C. Howard-Ellis in 1928 as 'the absence of a national atmosphere and the growth in its place of a sense of world issues and international perspective'.¹⁰⁷ One pupil noted the importance of the Geneva atmosphere as follows: 'By holding this school at Geneva, the centre of the League's activities, and thus enabling the boys and girls who attend to see the League buildings and hear lectures by League officials, a more lasting impression will be made upon their minds'.¹⁰⁸ Witnessing the conduct of important League business was not possible every year, but when summer school timings allowed attendees enjoyed being part of the action: 'The League Council was in session: the atmosphere was electrical. Geneva was the focal point of world politics, and we were there listening'.¹⁰⁹ The inclusion of participants from outside Britain provided an additional dimension to international encounters that attendees at junior summer schools valued. One student in 1936 wrote that through conversation with

¹⁰⁰ U.N.E.S.C.O. Archives, Paris, A.XI.3, League of Nations Union, Welsh National Council, Geneva scholarships examination, 1928.

¹⁰¹ *League News*, June 1932, p. 7.

¹⁰² *Leightonian*, Dec. 1933, pp. 377–8; and *League News*, June 1936, p. 8.

¹⁰³ 'Summer school at Geneva', *West Middlesex Gazette*, 7 Aug. 1937, p. 9.

¹⁰⁴ 'My visit to Geneva', *Bicestrian*, Dec. 1938, pp. 25–7; and Perriam, Christmas term 1936, pp. 6–9.

¹⁰⁵ 'Boys and girls at Geneva', *Worthing Herald*, 5 Sept. 1931, p. 9; and *League News*, Nov. 1936, p. 8.

¹⁰⁶ Sluga, *Internationalism*, pp. 56–8; and S. Ghervas, *Conquering Peace: From the Enlightenment to the European Union* (Cambridge, Mass., 2021), pp. 151, 188.

¹⁰⁷ C. Howard-Ellis, *The Origin, Structure and Working of the League of Nations* (London, 1928), pp. 451–2.

¹⁰⁸ Perriam, Christmas term 1936, p. 6.

¹⁰⁹ *League News*, Nov. 1935, p. 8.

the international group, 'it was possible to obtain an accurate insight into their character, convictions, and points of view, to a degree that would be impossible under other circumstances'.¹¹⁰

Young people who contributed accounts of the summer school to local papers, L.N.U. publications or their school magazines were a self-selecting group. Those in receipt of a funded place may have felt encouraged to offer a positive write-up through a sense of obligation to their sponsors. Most described an engaging and memorable event from which they gained new knowledge, but which had equally significant experiential and affective dimensions. 'It had been a completely new experience for me and had opened my eyes to the reality and interest of the problems of the day', is a typical summation.¹¹¹ Pupils who wrote about summer schools reported leaving better informed and also inspired and energized to continue supporting and working for the League. One put it this way: 'We left enriched by happy memories, and having gained much practical knowledge and realization of our responsibilities as citizens of the modern world'.¹¹² Attributing enthusiasm to other attendees was common in accounts, and it is impossible to know how far the 'we' referred to agreed with such assessments.

Occasional dissenting voices can be found in the archives. Aubrey J. Hinds, a Welsh student who visited Geneva in 1930, wrote that his trip was a wonderful holiday but did not 'fulfil my expectations as an opportunity for studying the League'. He was especially disappointed in the failings of the League's much-vaunted 'open diplomacy' and commented that, at a session of the League's Council, the diplomats 'took no particular pains to make themselves heard to the general public'.¹¹³ Some were more critical still. William B. Hopkin, who visited the following year, wrote, 'We felt nothing of the far-famed "Geneva atmosphere"'. To the student of the League there is some knowledge that only Geneva can give. That knowledge did not become ours'. Hopkin also complained that he and his fellow scholarship winners, who had demonstrated their understanding of the League through the scholarship process, were placed in an elementary summer school where they learned little that was new (and where many of their fellow students had little prior knowledge of the League).¹¹⁴ Examples of young people's dissatisfaction are rare in the archival record but suggest that they were not passive recipients of the League's idealized image.

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In November 1939, two months after the German invasion of Poland, two boys from Ealing presented an account to their local L.N.U. branch of their visit to a Geneva summer school that August. It was noted that 'representatives of nations now unhappily distinguished as "enemies" and "neutrals" were participants in the talks', where issues such as the reasons for the breakdown in the League's authority and potential replacement institutions were discussed. The newspaper account of the presentation stated cryptically that of the two attendees, 'one at least had formed a highly favourable impression' of their time in Geneva.¹¹⁵ While membership of the L.N.U. had been in decline throughout the 1930s, the outbreak of war in Europe meant that much branch and junior branch activity came to an outright halt.¹¹⁶

There is no evidence that the Ealing junior branch met after the summer of 1939 and the same was true for many others. A second global conflict within twenty-five years meant that the League of Nations had failed in its primary aim, its aspiration to rein in state aggression via the cultivation of enlightened public opinion rendered obsolete. However, that was not the end of the type of activities envisaged by the League of Nations or the L.N.U. The United Nations (U.N.) was founded in San Francisco in 1945 as the successor organization to the League of Nations, while U.N.E.S.C.O. (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) continued and expanded some of the work pioneered by the I.C.I.C. in the interwar years, including the emphasis on inculcating

¹¹⁰ Perriam, Christmas term 1936, p. 8.

¹¹¹ 'My visit to Geneva', *Bicestrian*, Dec. 1938, p. 27.

¹¹² *League News*, Nov. 1935, p. 8.

¹¹³ Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales (hereafter N.L.W.), League of Nations and United Nations Association papers (GB 0210 LEANAT), B1/46 scholarship (Geneva), 1928–38, Account of A. J. Hinds, 1930.

¹¹⁴ N.L.W., B1/46 scholarship (Geneva), 1928–38, Account of W. B. Hopkin, 1931.

¹¹⁵ 'Ealing boys' visit to Geneva', *Middlesex County Times*, 25 Nov. 1939, p. 2.

¹¹⁶ Birn, *League of Nations Union*, pp. 124–5; and McCarthy, *British People*, pp. 212–14.

international-mindedness in children and young people.¹¹⁷ At a national and local level, the United Nations Association (U.N.A.) took on the role formerly performed by the L.N.U. and formed local branches to stimulate grassroots support for the organization, including a strong emphasis on educating children and young people about the U.N. and cultures around the world.¹¹⁸ Many former supporters of the League involved themselves with the work of the U.N. following its establishment.

What became of the young internationalists discussed in this article? It is difficult to determine their subsequent trajectories; based on the information available in the archival record, names often reappear only where the person in question achieved some unusual distinction later in life. Moreover, given the many experiences that shaped the formation of children and young people, their interaction with the L.N.U. cannot be seen as determining their future trajectories. Despite these caveats, some students who participated in international activities as children and young people through the L.N.U. had distinguished, international careers. Iris Murdoch, winner of the 1937 essay competition, worked for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (U.N.R.R.A.) between 1944 and 1946 before beginning a career as a distinguished novelist.¹¹⁹ Raymond Williams, the runner-up on that occasion, also became an acclaimed writer.¹²⁰ Another Geneva Scholarship winner was Gwnyfor Evans, later the first Plaid Cymru member of parliament. Evans noted the importance of the L.N.U. to his world view in his memoir, stating that he 'was an internationalist before ever I became a Nationalist'.¹²¹ Michael Errock was one of the teenagers who travelled to Denmark in 1937 with the L.N.U.; he returned to Copenhagen as a diplomat in 1953 before he was transferred to the British delegation to the U.N. in 1959.¹²² While these examples are suggestive, they reflect the experiences of a small minority, from which wider generalizations cannot be drawn without further research.

Over the course of its peacetime existence the League in Geneva, as well as its national and local supporters, demonstrated a persistent concern to engage children and young people in order to guarantee support for the new organization and, ultimately, a peaceful future. This activity built upon the wider belief in the importance of creating an international public opinion in the aftermath of the First World War, within which children and young people would play a crucial role as the next generation who themselves had few memories of the hostilities of that conflict. Young people's interactions with the League were experienced in an uneven way; they generally depended upon active and engaged local actors, like school teachers and local branch officers, to provide a range of international activities in which to participate. While the League in Geneva undoubtedly set the tone for engaging children and young people, enthusiastic local organizers were crucial in bringing this aspiration to fruition.

The evidence presented here shows that, because most of these activities were circumscribed by adults, children and young people could rarely exercise much by way of agency. More often than not, children and young people were on message and took on the roles and views ascribed to them by adults, from the League of Nations itself to those they encountered locally. At the same time, we know less about what they took away from many of the activities that were provided for them. Encounters with the international and the League of Nations for British children and young people in the interwar years were carefully framed, but dynamic and sometimes unpredictable. Aspects of their impact remain elusive. Despite these caveats, all of these interactions and encounters, so carefully planned by adult supporters of the League, demonstrate how children were envisaged as an important constituency of international actors in the 1920s and 1930s, a potential that drew from them being the next generation. While the aspirations of the League were undermined in 1939, they left a lasting legacy through the work of the U.N., U.N.A. and U.N.E.S.C.O., where children and young people remained an important constituency in building future peace.

¹¹⁷ P. Betts, 'Humanity's new heritage: UNESCO and the rewriting of world history', *Past & Present*, ccxxviii (2015), 249–85; and S. Lebovic, *A Righteous Smokescreen: Postwar America and the Politics of Cultural Globalization* (Chicago, 2022), pp. 8–38.

¹¹⁸ G. J. Jones and E. T. Davis, *United Nations for the Classroom: a Text-Book for Secondary Schools, Technical Colleges and Colleges of Further Education* (London, 1956); and T. Allbeson, 'Photographic diplomacy in the postwar world: UNESCO and the conception of photography as a universal language, 1946–1956', *Modern Intellectual History*, xxii (2015), 383–415.

¹¹⁹ Iris Murdoch: *a Writer at War: Letters & Diaries, 1938–46*, ed. P. J. Conradi (London, 2010), pp. 208–99.

¹²⁰ Smith, *Raymond Williams*.

¹²¹ G. Evans, *For the Sake of Wales: the Memoirs of Gwnyfor Evans* (Cardiff, 2001), p. 22.

¹²² Foreign Office, *The Foreign Office List and Diplomatic and Consular Year Book for 1964* (London, 1964), p. 198.