

# The highly collectable and rare ephemera of Junior Secret Societies

by Jack Tempest



*Finger Print and Autograph Album. Secret Photo album issued by the QO (Quaker Oats) Secret Society of the 1930s. 1930s film star Bebe Daniels didn't mind being recorded in the FP&A!*

'Sweet are the uses of advertisements' so it is often said. Manufacturers needed more than personal publicity when they emerged as industrialists. Their advertising had to grow too, to attract as many people as possible to devour their increased production ranges. This could be achieved in various ways, from simple statements of fact in the nation's most popular publications and by a variety of other ploys.

Amongst the many ideas discovered, of worthy consideration were free gift campaigns and, what the great factories of Cadbury's, Ovaltine and others discovered to be worthwhile promotions, the so-called junior secret societies. The idea was to simply persuade the children into accepting and appreciating the company's products on the assumption that they would become customers, and stay customers for at least most of the rest of their lives! To abbreviate a long story, Messrs Cadbury of Bourneville, Birmingham introduced their kiddies' club known as the *Cadbury Cococubs*; and Messrs Ovaltine of London founded their famous *Ovaltineys Club*.

There were other such clubs, of course, but these were probably the most popular up to the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. After the war some managed to reappear but only for a short period of time before they gradually faded out of popularity. They were classed as junior 'Secret Societies' because members were invariably issued with membership booklets containing rules and regulation that should be obeyed, a secret code for use in communicating with fellow members, and passwords and hand signs used to greet members wearing the equivalent club badge.

The secret codes were usually simple enough to be 'cracked' by non-members. The *Cococubs Club* was an idea designed to benefit the sales of Cadbury's chocolates and their popular Bourneville Cocoa. In the 1930s, when the *Cadbury Cococubs* made their appearance, cocoa at suppertime was a favourite tradition in many homes. Each tin of cocoa began to carry a delightful lead figure of a colourful animal character, which certainly made opening a tin of cocoa interesting for the family youngsters. Today these delightful Cococub figures have become quite highly-priced collectables, especially since it was realised that they were produced at the Britain's factory! Britain's soldiers and other figures are highly collected today.

Ovaltine was also very popular in the 1930s. It was a milk-based drink invented in the early 1900s in Switzerland and popular in Britain where it was advertised as a health-giving beverage. Ovaltine's popularity was helped by the popular *Ovaltineys* weekly programme transmitted by *Radio Luxembourg*. There was no advertising allowed on the BBC radio in those radio-only days! Harry Helmsley was the well-known performer who imitated the childhood voices of the Ovaltiney's happy family. The programme's rousing signature tune 'We are the Ovaltineys' is remembered to this day! Film star Dinah Sheridan, who starred in many 1950s movies, including the famous *Genevieve* film, started her show business career as a professional Ovaltiney appearing in many of their gang shows staged around the country. Members of the *League of Ovaltineys* received a bronze circular badge featuring a small letter 'O' nestling in a larger letter 'L' (the Cococub badge featured a colourful Cococub figure).

The *Cococub* badge had a perforation at its base where, if you were promoted to a Leader, you could hang a small metal bar bearing the word 'Leader', not blatantly so, but in the club's secret code! To earn this extra item it was necessary to enrol some fellow-members, four or so, I believe. In the *League of Ovaltineys* this brought you a silvery circular badge bearing the letters 'LO' in an embossed star shape, designed to be pinned above the normal badge. Neither of the awards meant anything in particular. They were designed primarily I guess, simply to impress! The *Ovaltineys* were also to find a secret code in their handbook, secret sign, password, and whatever.

The Quaker Oats attempt at a junior secret society was somewhat different. Whilst the *Ovaltiney* stood 'for the innocence, comfort, wholesomeness, and safety of English childhood', according to the company, the *Quaker Oats Secret Society* seems by today's standards rather 'sinister' although it was surely no more than children playing games! Members were given the secret *QO Secret Society* handbook, which held a secret code and instructions for the initiation of a new member before the Chief and henchmen, all wearing black Ku-Klux-Klan type hoods. The handbook contained a pattern for Mum to make one! The ceremony would take place in a darkened room illuminated only by four flashlight torches!

No wonder the *QO Secret Society* is hardly remembered today. *Quaker Oats* have no records of the club, they say! Collecting such items is popular. Martin Lawrence is a leading collector of breakfast cereal items, even empty packets with all their colourful decoration and special offers.

My thanks to ephemera specialist Jon Levine who allowed me to photograph his collection of *QO Secret Society* ephemera.



*The QO Secret Society secret password and salute, the secret code, the Initiation ceremony and how to make a special hood.*