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BOOKS & ARTS

The Kit-Cat Club

Nationhood and mutton pie

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THEY gathered to eat a "collation of oven trumpery" at the invitation of Jacob Tonson, a publisher and bookseller. The kitchen produced mutton pies, cheesecakes, golden custards, puff-pastry apple tarts and rosewater codling tarts. Between mouthfuls the conversation flickered between politics, poetry, architecture and the regrettable lack of culture among the English. It was all rounded off with a toast to a beautiful woman singled out by a member of the club. Cutlery was coming into use at the time, but using fingers and fingerbowls was fine too. Above all, they drank a lot.

The Kit-Cat Club, named after Christopher Cat, the owner of the inn where they met, flourished for a couple of decades, beginning in the 1690s. At one point it had some 50 members, ranging from politicians and diplomats to writers and architects, along with polymaths such as John Vanbrugh, who dabbled in all those professions. Ophelia Field concentrates on a handful of the best remembered, including the playwright William Congreve and Sir Richard Steele, who founded the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*. Even then, cramming this lot into a single story is tricky, especially since no record of what was said at the Kit-Cat meetings survives. The author turns this to her advantage, allowing the book to meander eruditely, rather like an 18th-century conversation.

Drunkenness and friendship gave the Kit-Cats a feeling of invincibility; so much so that they even tried to introduce the philistine English to opera. Other ventures were more successful. They campaigned for freedom of expression against Tories like Jeremy Collier, whose pamphlet, "A Short View of the Immorality and Prophaneness of the English Stage" was aimed at Vanbrugh and Congreve. The Kit-Cats responded with mockery. They took aim too at the societies for the reformation of manners, which worked to turn drunken philanderers into sober husbands.

As in other culture wars, marriage was a battlefield. In the Kit-Cats' era the nuclear family first emerged as the building-block of society, Ms Field claims, and some of them did not like the look of it at all. Their plays featured trapped, unhappy wives, though Vanbrugh's and Congreve's horror at the notion of sexual fidelity was probably as strong as their sympathy for women. The conflict would continue until the Victorians settled it in favour of godliness and propriety.

Though the Kit-Cats could display a high degree of intellectual snobbery, their club was open to talent. Moreover, through the six issues of the *Spectator* each week, Steele and his collaborator Joseph Addison tried to bring the reading public, which was still just about small enough to be spoken to as a whole, up

The Kit-Cat Club:
 Friends Who
 Imagined a Nation
 By Ophelia Field



Harper Press; 524 pages;
 £25

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to somewhere near their level. The anonymous Mr Spectator, Ms Field writes, declared that his aim was to take knowledge from where it was "bound up in books" to where it could "dwell in clubs and assemblies, at tea-tables and coffee houses". In addition to his essays on politics and society, Mr Spectator offered a crash-course on Milton. He eschewed small-mindedness and boorish patriotism, and admired the Jews, whom he described as "pegs in the building of European civilization".

Amid all this cultural output, the Kit-Cats also found time for politics, becoming a centre of the reformist Whig cause and ultimately government. When the British monarchy performed its second bloodless reverse takeover in as many generations, a group of Kit-Cats was sent to fetch the new king, George I, from Hanover. During his reign they feasted on sinecures.

For Ms Field, the club's members were progressives who helped to forge an identity for a new nation created by the Acts of Union that brought England and Scotland together in 1707. Yet they were also throwbacks to an earlier period of aristocratic patrons and politics pursued through poetry. When in power they liked to think of themselves as Roman senators, bound by duty and friendship. When out of it, the model was the Renaissance courts of Italy—only with more pie. Despite all the alcohol, the Kit-Cats were productive. What Tonson began as a subsidised supper for impecunious writers eventually resulted in some 800 publications.

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