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So that's who ate all the pies

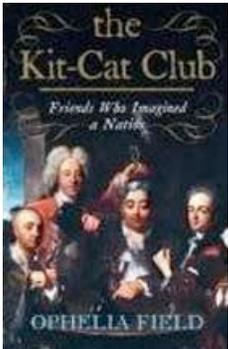
An absorbing book focuses on the 18th-century Whigs whose passion for food led to a transformation of politics and the arts

Jane Stevenson

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Whatever the health police think of them, pies are a great leveller. In the late 1690s, a pastry cook called Christopher (Kit) Cat hung up his sign, a cat playing a small fiddle (or 'kit'), in Gray's Inn Lane. His signature dish was a mutton pie, dubbed a kit-cat in his honour, though he also sold cheesecakes, rosewater codling tarts (made with a kind of cooking apple, not fish) and many another inexpensive treat. It was a place where hungry authors could afford to chitchat while eating Kit Cat's kit-cats at the Cat and Kit. The coterie who met there became an institution, under the inevitable name of the Kit-Cat Club, and were a formidable force for social change, not least because theirs was a meritocratic club within a rigidly stratified society: 'A Kit-Cat,' observed poor playwright William Burnaby, 'is a supper for a Lord.'

**The Kit-Kat Club:
Friends Who
Imagined a Nation**
by Ophelia Field
522, Harper Press, £25



Buy this book

The members of the Kit-Cat Club were writers of various kinds, politicians and aristocrats. Their names include a litany of famous authors - William Congreve, John Vanbrugh, Matthew Prior, Joseph Addison and Richard Steele - but they also included Jacob Tonson, the most important publisher in London, Robert Walpole and a shoal of peers. The unifying factor was Whiggery. In 1700, Whigs, as opposed to Tories, stood for constitutional government against royal absolutism; they were pro-parliament, progressive and hungry for cultural change. But beyond that, the Kit-Cats were friends. The group at the club's core had known each other since their schooldays. Field's highly intelligent book is about politics and culture, but it is also about male bonding and networking and how it works.

The house rules of the Kit-Cat Club, such as there were, focused on the ceremonial consumption of pies, camaraderie, drinking and excluding women, who could only appear as the subject of sentimental toasts. The club's egalitarian principles could not extend to including women, because in 1700 the two sexes occupied separate social spaces. To the Kit-Cats,

who were mostly bachelors, men were admirable as 'wits', women as 'beauties', with no possible overlap. Thus, talented Whig women such as Susanna Centlivre stood outside the group's nexus of patronage.

The club's combination of misogyny with nearness to the centre of government might seem unproblematic, since women had no role in politics, but in 1702 William III was succeeded by Queen Anne. It is a measure of the Kit-Cat Club's importance that Steele perceived Anne's rule to have been handicapped precisely by her inability to dine informally with her ministers and learn 'the Subdivisions of Affection and Interest among Great Men... in their unguarded leisure', a problem not unknown to women politicians more recently.

Another aspect of the club that Field brings out strongly is its passionate concern with Englishness. Even the iconic kit-cat pies were good old English fare, not fancy French cuisine. The club's members evolved a 'to do' list of national reform in the arts, an agenda for producing a new English

classicism. Part of the spur to this was that William III was Dutch and English culture interested him not at all. The role of the monarch in supporting the arts therefore lapsed. If 18th-century England was going to have a cultural identity, the impetus would have to come from elsewhere. The great Whig aristocrats saw art as a way of creating a sympathetic climate of opinion for their principles and used the club to draw talent towards themselves, setting the pattern of the century.

One of the most important productions the club generated was the literary magazine: first Steele's *Tatler*, then Addison and Steele's *Spectator*. We owe our sense of the centrality of Shakespeare, Milton and Spenser to English culture to the *Spectator*, an eloquent champion of all three. Addison and Steele evolved an easy, conversational style of writing and, perhaps more significantly, invented a distinctive mode of manners - unostentatious, less-is-more well-bredness - which they marketed as peculiarly English. In fact, as Field demonstrates, this was less English style than Kit-Cat style, evolved to allow dukes and playwrights to converse with ease.

The Kit-Cat formula for revitalising the arts was not invariably successful. 'English opera' was one major failure. Enraged by the popularity of Italian opera, the Kit-Cats tried to get this off the ground in 1707 with Addison's *Rosamund*, and made several subsequent attempts. Unfortunately, operas stand or fall on their music, not their libretti. Thomas Arne reset *Rosamund* successfully in 1733, suggesting that there was nothing wrong with the idea, but Thomas Clayton's 1707 score was 'a jargon of sounds'. Clayton and John Eccles, the best composers the Kit-Cats could muster, were no match for Vivaldi and Scarlatti.

Opera aside, Field argues persuasively that the club transformed both politics and English cultural identity, and smoothed the way for George I and the Hanoverian succession. Robert Walpole's son Horace defined the Kit-Cats as 'the patriots that saved Britain'. That is a matter of opinion (Tories would have argued that they betrayed their country), but what this extremely readable book demonstrates is that they certainly made it a different sort of place.

And the 'have a break...' KitKat? The name was invented by novelist Nigel Balchin while working for Rowntree's in the Thirties, and it sent the 'chocolate crisp' rocketing towards snack stardom. There was a Twenties Kit-Cat Club, which Balchin may have had in mind, but just as much, surely, it was the vowel quality that sold it: it sounds crisp; it sounds nice. These days, 47 KitKats are eaten every second in Britain alone.

• To order *The Kit-Cat Club* for £23 with free UK p&p, go to observer.co.uk/bookshop or call 0870 836 0885

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