

The Great and the Bad

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Writing history is rearranging the furniture, bringing a disregarded item into the light, polishing it up, finding surprises in the drawers. That is what Ophelia Field has done in *The Kit-Cat Club*, a bold and hugely entertaining book. We know what the members looked like from their portraits in the National Portrait Gallery, painted by Sir Godfrey Kneller for the publisher Jacob Tonson. At Barn Elms, west of Putney, where Tonson's house became the club's summer quarters, the portraits lined the walls of the room where the living originals talked and drank. Men only, of course. Women were ornamental. Chosen beauties — the Kit-Cat “toasts” — became celebrities. Marital domesticity came nowhere.

The origins of the club are apocryphal, but it appears to have been founded as a convivial literary dining club at the Cat and Fiddle in Gray's Inn Lane in the last couple of years of the 17th century. It was hosted by Tonson, and the innkeeper was Kit Cat, a pastry cook famous for his pies. The membership comprised aspiring writers — notably Congreve, Prior, Stepney, Vanbrugh, Addison and Steele — and rich and influential Whigs, such as the Lords Somers and Montagu, the Earl of Dorset, and assorted grandees. Patronage was the key and point of the club. The aristos and politicians found glamour in befriending the young authors, who gained enormously in status — a marketable asset in itself, even if the cash flow did not always match their new social positions. Patrons found it easier to get jobs for the boys than to put their hands in their own pockets. As a result, some literary Kit-Cats scraped by with portfolios of ludicrous sinecures. Others made serious parallel or subsequent careers as MPs and in diplomacy and public service. The Kit-Cat members were outward looking and international in their interests; the culture they promoted was the best of Englishness combined with European breadth. This was reflected in their achievements in poetry, theatre, opera, architecture and gardening, as well as in governance. (They were not really interested in science.) Party politics, high culture and the betterment of civil society were treated as indivisible. Kit-Cat authors produced propaganda for Whig policies, which included social reform, strong opposition to the return of the absolutist and Catholic Stuarts, and support of the Hanoverian succession and the Duke of Marlborough's militarism. The club flourished for two decades, and at its peak had about 40 members.

The first young Kit-Cats had humble origins, or were parentless, and friendship was ranked above family. As Field sharply comments, kindred spirits are “far more important than kin if you have fewer kin to begin with”; and for the patrons, the confidence to flout class barriers emerged as the true sign of class. The patrons were meritocrats in that they selected their gifted young friends for preferment “rather than favouring half-wit relations”. Kit-Cats' writings were designed to be accessible, in the interest of popularising ideas and ideals to an increasingly literate middle-class and non-metropolitan readership. Field gives high significance to Addison's and

Steele's *Spectator*, almost the house journal of the club, written in the characteristic Kit-Cat allusive and conversational style, to which she also credits the developing rhetorical conventions of the House of Lords — and which she adopts herself, writing with wit and verve, unafraid of sweeping generalisations and opinions. She also sees the *Spectator* in its early incarnation not only as providing cultural education, promoting the Elizabethan period as our golden age, but as constructing, like a conduct book, our image of the British character — an amalgam of common sense, taste, reserve, understated courage; and a pride that would “lead Britain into the chauvinism and atrocities of Empire”.

Given the alleged spread of the Kit-Cats' influence — when the Whigs were out of favour, the Kit-Cat Club constituted a virtual shadow cabinet — the book must necessarily fill in with a broad brush the whole economic, political, social and military history of the period, and necessarily there are small mistakes, from the sublime to the ridiculous: papal infallibility was not pronounced until 1870; a codling pie is not a pie filled with baby cods but with a variety of apple. Field's identification with the Whigs gives rise to some startling and maybe salutary rearrangements of the cultural furniture. Swift and Pope were the real literary geniuses of the age. Pope, as a Catholic, was ineligible for the club, a Tory, and irrelevant. Swift is portrayed as a sneering hanger-on, “reeking of envy”, boastfully exaggerating his friendship with Congreve, Addison and Steele, rejected by the Whig moguls on account of his “unctuousness, social insecurity, sarcastic pride and quirky genius”, his mixing of “obsequiousness with veiled insult”. No wonder he turned to the Tories. It is possible too that the Kit-Cat Club was not quite so pre-eminent a Whig think-tank as Field argues — the official Whig club, after all, was the Rose Club. She herself describes the club as “only a particularly large bump on the generally nepotistic playing-field of 18th century power”, but she also makes massive claims, which future historians will have to consider.

The Kit-Cats, Field writes, helped shape the nation's “taste, character and international image”. They “contributed to the building of a more prosperous, polite and self-confident society” and “established a model for the elite management of British culture that essentially remains intact to this day”. Late-onset uxoriousness, age, sickness, deaths and dispersal brought this golden age of wit, culture, comradeship and corruption to an end.

And what, today, equates even loosely to the Kit-Cat Club? It was less Pall Mall than Soho House and the Groucho, thinks Field, which may be elevating those agreeable places rather far. The mix of generations, and the intellectual clout, make it seem a bit like the Cambridge Apostles, and elements of the structure were Masonic. There are still private clubs, and loose clumpings of the Great and the Good, and the Great and the Bad.

But the Kit-Cats believed that literary endeavour, whether as author or patron, was “an essential qualification for being a great statesman”. What seems unique about the club is its ambitious agenda — the ardent literary and cultural activity, indivisible from the shameless snakes-and-ladders scramble for titles, money and power. Today there is no such thing as Society. Nevertheless, Congreve's lines of 1729 still resonate in 2008:

For virtue now is neither more nor less,
And vice is only varied in the dress:
Believe it, men have ever been the same,
And Ovid's Golden Age is but a dream.

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