

The Kit-Cat Club: friends who imagined a nation

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Jonathan Keates reviews **The Kit-Cat Club: Friends Who Imagined a Nation** by Ophelia Field

Visitors to the National Portrait Gallery will sooner or later encounter Sir Godfrey Kneller's epic portrait sequence representing members of the Kit-Cat Club. Among more than 40 likenesses (all of them male) it is not easy to make much differentiation, since almost every sitter sports the fashionable early-18th-century outfit of full-bottomed periwig, lace cravat and velvet coat. Their faces, what is more, lack definition.

Here, as elsewhere in his voluminous oeuvre, Augustan portraiture's great panjandrum is content to give each one the same puffy jowls and bulbous eyes like glass paperweights, and the same air of boundless self-confidence. These are men who, it seems, have never known a moment's embarrassment, doubt or remorse. Why on earth should they interest us and do they really deserve so significant a niche in the pantheon on Charing Cross Road?

The Kit-Cats were members of a dining society which began meeting during the 1690s at a tavern in Gray's Inn Lane owned by Christopher Cat, a Norfolk pastry cook famous for his 'oven trumpery'.

The club's presiding genius was Jacob Tonson, London's most enterprising publisher. His original idea had been to treat promising authors to a fine dinner with as much wine as they could drink, on the understanding that 'they would do him the honour to let him have the refusal of all their juvenile productions'. Tonson's shrewd social networking meant



The Kit-Cats combined alcohol with networking

that in addition to a good table, the 'poetical young sprigs' could expect to meet potential patrons in the shape of well-heeled noblemen with a taste for literature and a voice in the government.

That these Gray's Inn Lane evenings involved rather more than expense-account booze and schmooze and permanently influenced the way Britons have lived ever since is the convincing central thesis of Ophelia Field's new book.

advertisement The Kit-Cat Club included most of the movers and shakers on that astonishingly vibrant cultural and political scene, which evolved through the triumph of the Glorious Revolution in 1688 and which offered new freedoms of initiative, opinion and belief.

Addison, Steele and Congreve were all members of the club, so too were the poet-diplomats Matthew Prior and George Stepney, together with John Vanbrugh, creator of those archetypal Augustan pleasure domes Castle Howard and Blenheim Palace. Beside them, enjoying Cat's ham pies, cheesecake and smuggled French wine, sat Addison's patron Lord Halifax and the influential lawyer John Somers, principal architects of that constitutional stability, limiting the monarch's arbitrary power with parliamentary government, which still just about protects us all.

Somers and Halifax, Whigs supporting the Protestant William III against Tory Jacobites intriguing to restore the exiled Catholic James II, set the Kit-Cat Club's political tone. An efficient party patronage network ensured government posts or sinecures for several distinguished writers.

Prior, as well as heading an embassy to Paris, became Commissioner of Trade and Plantations, the ever-impecunious Steele kept off the bailiffs with a handsome salary as Surveyor of Hampton Court Stables and Congreve made the best of his position as manager of the Malt Lottery and licensor of wine imports.

The club, however, had loftier aims than that of rescuing scribblers from starvation. As a convivial forum it was the birthplace, according to Ophelia Field, of much that we now take for granted in terms of national identity and sophisticated discourse.

Its conversations and friendships fostered an ideal Englishness compounded of courage, honesty, the sense of a shared history and culture and a passion for liberty. From its notion of a community of free opinions, centred in robust pragmatism and refusing to be silenced by religious dogma or deference to rank, sprang those sturdy journalistic and critical traditions which are among Britain's most enduring gifts to the world.

Field knows the Kit-Cat period so intimately that it is difficult to challenge her claims for the club's significance.

What particularly distinguishes this book is the humane perspective in which the writer places her protagonists. Mortal and fallible they undoubtedly were; plagued by pox and gout, binge-drinkers of everything from 'Barbadoes water' (citrus-flavoured spirits) to Vanbrugh's lethal punch concocted of beer, mead, port and rum, and chronically overweight, or 'chuffy' as Congreve called it.

Watching the spherical Kit-Cat member Dr Samuel Garth desperately trying to dance a minuet, Sarah Duchess of Marlborough made the classic understatement: 'I can't help thinking he may be sometimes in the wrong.'

Yet we warm to their cheerful sociability, to Steele's bibulous but never wavering devotion to his wife Prue, to 'party-coloured, maggot-headed' Halifax's loyalty towards fellow-clubbers through the dangerous lurches and zigzags of the period's politics, to Tonson's enduring love of a good table, where cider and perry washed down 'a Sweetbread God damn a foot square'.

Shifting historical and critical approaches over the intervening centuries since Tonson, outliving all other Kit-Cats, died in 1736, have meant that it is now those who were not invited to join the club - the great Tory satirists Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift, devastating in their gloomy visions of human baseness and imperfection - with whom most writers on the period feel comfortable.

Field demands we take a closer look at those such as Steele and Addison whom Swiftian 'saeva indignatio' has all too easily encouraged us to dismiss as mere frigid triflers, sincere in nothing but a desire for self-advancement. Swift himself, jockeying for office and influence and as ready as any of his contemporaries to please a potential patron, was scarcely a beacon of integrity in this respect.

'The Kit-Cats', Field justly concludes, 'not only made it easy to reform a nation constitutionally, but also to reform the fundamental attitudes and aspirations of that nation.' As an essay in group biography her book presents an authoritative portrait of a genuinely revolutionary era.

Whatever our political alignments or literary tastes, we owe rather more to those goggle-eyed periwig-wearers in Charing Cross Road than we care to imagine.

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