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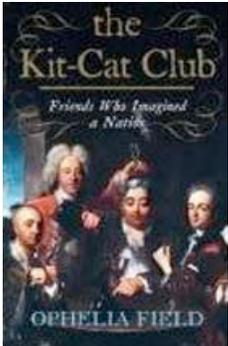
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## Patrons and pies at the Cat and Fiddle

The Guardian, Saturday July 26 2008

At some point in the late 1690s (the precise date is not known) a shrewd and literary-minded publisher called Jacob Tonson struck up a meal-deal with a group of aspiring authors who included his own Fleet Street housemate, William Congreve. The writers gained access to all the pies they could devour at Mr Christopher (or "Kit") Catling's Cat and Fiddle Inn; Tonson, footing the bill and enjoying the conversation of his guests, asked in exchange to be given the publishing rights to their forthcoming work. Satisfaction was mutual and wholehearted: some 20 years later, following Tonson's retirement to Herefordshire, the playwright and architect John Vanbrugh lamented the ending of the Kit-Cat, "the best club that ever met".

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



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Ask people today about the Kit-Cat Club and they tend to confuse it with the naughtily blasphemous frolics held - much later - in West Wycombe's caves and grottoes by Sir Francis Dashwood and his chums. The better-informed - familiar with the astonishing series of 44 portraits painted for Jacob Tonson's private gallery by Godfrey (Gottfried, in real life) Kneller - may still incline to dismiss members of the Kit-Cat Club as a gang of paunchily urbane peers, puffed up with pride and drink.

There is in that image a little truth (the Kit-Cats drank both well, and often), but not much. Bringing together patrons and protégés in a way that turned social and economic divisions to advantage, Tonson's club pushed forward its Whig objectives - strong Parliament, Protestant monarch, independence from France - by looking after its own. Patrons, once identified, were shared; taken for granted, always, was loyalty to fellow-members and to the Whig cause.

To take one of Ophelia Field's most suggestive examples: when George Stepney, Mathew Prior and Charles Montagu met at Westminster School in the 1680s, all three were keen to become poets. When Prior, from modest stock, acquired a rich patron in the Earl of Dorset, the new heir to Knole, he drew his friends to the attention of the generous peer. Montagu, in fact, soon left off writing poems to join Dorset as a patron and powerful politician. As chancellor of the exchequer, Montagu helped to further Stepney's career as a diplomat and offered him sinecures; Dorset arranged for Prior a posting to The Hague; Tonson, meanwhile, acted as their publisher. All were Kit-Cats; each worked to the benefit of the others. Until, that is, Prior, upon defecting to the Tories, attempted to impeach his old friends. Political disloyalty was the one crime a club member might never commit. Prior was excluded from the Kit-Cat ranks for life - and lived to regret his expulsion.

Field's magnificent book sustains its narrative drive by focusing on the most influential members of a remarkable club. Tonson, who lived on into the 1730s, binds all together. A shrewd and scholarly man, he was the first publisher to strike up friendships of equality with his authors, to unite them and to influence them in much the same way that, a century later, John Murray would do at Albemarle Street. As the Kit-Cat Club became more closely knit, drawn together by political

adversity (and by a constant berating from Tory clerics for the lewdness of its playwrights and poets), Tonson offered the beleaguered members a more permanent home than the taverns of Holborn and the Strand in which early meetings were held. Long before Pope and Lord Burlington (a juvenile Kit-Catter) discovered that Eden lay somewhere west of Shepherd's Bush, Tonson purchased a modest property at Barn Elms, not far from Putney. Young John Vanbrugh, asked down to do it up, was given a hearty kitchen supper, promised a bedroom of his own, and granted a free hand in the house's interior design.

Barn Elms, later burned down and then bulldozed into extinction, was the place where, over 20 years, Vanbrugh remembered hearing the best conversations, in the best of company. Among the company was Lord Carlisle, another Kit-Catter, who wanted his new home, Castle Howard, built on a bare Yorkshire hillside, to symbolise Whig ideals; Vanbrugh, inevitably, was the architect to whom he turned. Field (some of whose best writing here elucidates the political ideology of Vanbrugh's architecture) makes use of both Castle Howard and Blenheim to show the passing of power from the monarchy to the (admittedly rather privileged) "people".

Writing on Vanbrugh and Congreve as playwrights, and describing the constant threat of censorship under which they wrote, Field makes sense of their early retirement from the life of the theatre. Congreve was ordered to revise and clean up plays that had already been staged and well received; Vanbrugh, struggling to turn a stage in the Haymarket into a Kit-Cat-funded project, a proscenium for Kit-Cat authors, was mocked by the staunchly Tory Daniel Defoe for getting above himself. ("Apollo spoke the word / And straight arose a Playhouse from a Turd.") Not even a bit of diplomatic homage to a Whig-phobic monarch - the obsequious naming of it as "The Queen's Theatre" - could save this doom-laden venture from the rocks.

Field's previous book, *The Favourite*, described the volatile relationship of the first Duchess of Marlborough with Queen Anne; here, the author's skill in dealing with such paired lives shows to advantage again in her absorbing account of the birth of modern journalism, in the persons of Addison and Steele. Particularly exemplary are her chapters on the *Spectator*, a single-essay pamphlet of a magazine, published over a period lasting less than two years and yet exerting more influence in the newly unified Britain than any book other than the Bible.

Always even-handed in her account of two personalities so different that we can hardly imagine rowdy, careless Steele and quiet, scholarly Addison as fellow-members of the Kit-Cat, Field brings their friendship - and their joint literary creation - into glowing life. Lucidly, she shows how that wonderful production was influenced by the spirit and ethos of the Kit-Cat Club. A wise, entertaining and generous magazine, the *Spectator* (unrelated to its modern namesake) was directed to all, and read by all. It fostered the spread of knowledge throughout the country. Addison offered (to cite one of Field's most memorable examples) a weekly analysis, over three months, of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. New cultural standards were offered to the emerging nation.

After reading this stimulating book, it is shocking to realise that the Kit-Cat Club has had to wait so long for its influence to be recognised. Field offers rich compensation, in a book that is both instructive and engrossingly readable.

Miranda Seymour's *In My Father's House: Elegy for an Obsessive Love* is published by Pocket Books.