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## The Kit-Cat Club, by Ophelia Field

The first age of clubbing

Reviewed by Sarah Burton

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Few bakers have been remembered by history, but such was the fate of Christopher ("Kit") Cat, on whose pies an eclectic band of men regularly feasted through the late 1690s and early decades of the 18th century. The club which bore his name was initiated by the publisher Jacob Tonson, as a way of patronising (and feeding) promising young writers; in return they gave Tonson first refusal on their literary offerings. However, the club came to have more wide-ranging interests and is today remembered primarily for its political aspect.

The Kit-Cat Club's appearance places it, Ophelia Field notes, "in the context of a significant relaxation in attitudes to the public exchange of opinion". The lapse of the Licensing Act in 1695 occasioned an outpouring of books, papers and pamphlets, which within a few years would see Britain publishing far more books than any other European country.

At the same time, "clubbing" was at its zenith, one contemporary observing that "Almost every parish hath its separate Club, where the Citizens, after the Fatigue of the Day is over in their Shops, and on the Exchange, unbend their Thoughts before they go to bed." As Field observes: "Freedom of commerce, association and expression went hand in hand."

The Kit-Cat pursued an ultra-Whig political agenda for over 20 years, leading a critic to describe it with some justification as a "Club that gave Direction to the State". The Kit-Cats saw their role – their duty – as shaping the political and cultural ideology of their period, counting among their number popular playwrights such as Vanburgh and Congreve and influential essayists Addison and Steele, as well as a bushel of powerful earls and dukes, some of whom came primarily to listen, "in hopes to be accounted wits", others to shape the discourse of the day.

The extent of power and wealth that lay in the hands of the Kit-Cats was such that in 1709 half its members were personally guaranteeing the National Debt. In the same year, every senior post in Ireland's colonial administration but one was filled by a Kit-Cat.

While the world at this time – whether of commerce, politics or culture – was almost exclusively a privileged man's world, this book gives a strong sense of both that maleness and that privilege. The lower classes and the female sex exist peripherally, and then only because they are inevitable.

One member, the Earl of Carbery, was infamous for having sold his Welsh servants into slavery in Jamaica, while another, the notoriously proud Duke of Somerset, "had once disowned his daughter when he awoke from a nap and caught her seated in his presence".

For some, the club's appeal lay in its extension of the congenial collegiality of school and university, again male preserves. In an age when women did not dine in public – a symptom of a culture which considered any kind of "appetite" vulgar in women – Field emphasises that the fact that the Kit-Cat was a dining club was "the corollary of

its exclusively masculine nature". It was "the first in a long line of clubs where men went to escape their uneducated wives and what they regarded as the intellectual wasteland of the domestic dinner table".

Many members had public offices in their gift and were able to help out their less affluent fellows – particularly writers – by parcelling out these often well-paid posts. As Field points out, other authors published by Tonson, such as Aphra Behn, Katherine Phillips and Susanna Centlivre, were by virtue of their sex excluded not only from the club itself, but from the fringe benefits of membership. These were very much "jobs for the boys".

If you ruefully agreed with John O'Farrell's claim in his Utterly Impartial History of Britain that the history of our islands "really is a fascinating and compelling story, unless you have the bad luck to be studying 'The Whig Oligarchy 1714-1763'", Field's book is your antidote.

Incidentally, as a further example of the influence of the club, in the period O'Farrell cites there were only nine years when the government was not in the hands of a Kit-Cat prime minister. And, for eight of those, it was in the hands of the younger brother of a Kit-Cat.

Field's clear and scholarly account of both the politics and the personalities shows how one man's idea that began in a pie shop became the "cultural institution, literary clique and political think-tank" that helped shape a nation.

*Sarah Burton's biography of Charles and Mary Lamb, 'A Double Life', is published by Penguin*

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