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By Stuart Kelly

BOOK review

THE KIT-CAT CLUB

Ophelia Field

Harper Press, £25

THE idea that a cabal of powerful men are secretly in power – think of the fictional depictions of the Freemasons, Illuminati and Opus Dei, or even Robbie the Pict's campaign

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against the Speculative Society – is remarkably tenacious.

The Kit-Cat Club, the subject of Ophelia Field's splendid book, is the exception that proves the rule. The membership of this elite and exclusive dining club was an open secret, widely discussed in the popular press – and they really did run the country.

The club coalesced out of a group of friendships in the late 1690s and the pivotal figure was London's leading publisher, Jacob Tonson. Over the "oven trumpery" of Christopher Cat's bakery, he brought together two distinct groups: penniless authors in search of a patron, and rich aristocrats in need of prestige. Together they ate rose-water codling tarts and mutton pies, drank copious amounts of wine and punch, and toasted the most glamorous ladies of the day.

This disparate group had one unifying factor: they were all adherents of the Whig Party, defenders of constitutional monarchy, opponents of any Jacobite succession and broadly aligned with emerging commercial concerns (such as the New East India Company). Specifically, the Kit-Cat Club supported the pro-war "Junto Whigs", a "party within a party" comprising Baron Somers, the Earl of Halifax, the Marquess of Wharton and the Earl of Orford – of whom only Orford was not a member of the club.

The achievements of Kit-Cat members cover every aspect of public life. Congreve and Vanburgh were leading

playwrights, and Vanburgh became a successful architect, designing the follies at Stowe, the Queen's Theatre, Castle Howard and Blenheim Palace. Richard Steele and Joseph Addison combined high political office with founding modern journalism, specifically with their joint productions, *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*. Gardening, cuisine, censorship, literary criticism and opera were all affected by their efforts. Wharton became Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, and took Addison as his secretary. Of the 31 Commissioners who oversaw the Union with Scotland, nine were Kit-Cats. Britain's first Prime Minister, Robert Walpole, was a Kit-Cat, and between 1714 and 1762, there were only nine years when a Kit-Cat was not Prime Minister – and for eight of them, the Prime Minister was Henry Pelham, whose elder brother, the Duke of Newcastle, was one.

Field's subtitle – *Friends Who Imagined A Nation* – is wholly apposite, and many later historians echo the words of Walpole's son Horace, who claimed that "the KIT-CAT CLUB, generally mentioned as a set of Wits, were in reality the Patriots that saved Britain". Field is especially good, however, on the idea of "Britishness" that the Kit-Cats envisaged and promoted. Through the pages of *The Spectator*, Addison described a kind of national character and manners, usually by contrast to the boastful, arrogant, pretentious French. The English – and thanks to the Kit-Cat Club Englishness and Britishness began to conflate – were a weird mixture of the staid and the eccentric, the self-effacing and the blunt, the humble and the undaunted. It was a self-image that became engrained: Field quotes CS Lewis, writing: "Even to this day, when we meet foreigners (only think of some young Frenchmen) who have not been subjected to Addisonian 'reform', we have to 'make allowances' for them."

Why are the Kit-Cats no longer part of the pantheon of greats? In part, the rival Tory Scriblerus Club was, though less politically effective, far more imaginative and exciting. Pope and Swift are frenzied, ironic, gleefully vicious writers; while Addison, Steele and Congreve are excruciatingly proper. In part, because they won the debate so completely, they became part of the background.

It is testament to Field's skill that the members of the Club come to life in such vivid and dynamic ways. There is a great deal of panache and pungency alongside the unfussy explication of the finer points of Georgian political intrigue. One particularly fine anecdote concerns a guest of Steele's at a dinner party commenting on how many servants he had: in fact, they were bailiffs whom "he had thought it convenient to embellish with liveries, that they might do him credit whilst they stayed".

The Kit-Cat Club's greatest triumph is in the depiction of the forging, influence and cooling of these friendships. It is, above all, about humans. Regarding Sir Godfrey Kneller's portraits of the Club, Field writes that "it is as if the Kit-Cats chose to preserve themselves as a series of individual essays instead of a group biography". She has supplied, exactly, the group biography they forewent. v

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