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The Kit-Cat Club: Friends Who Imagined a Nation by Ophelia Field

An elegantly written and deeply researched study of The Kit-Cat Club, the key figures at the end of Stuart rule and the accession of the Hanoverian

The Sunday Times review by John Brewer

Ophelia Field's elegantly written and deeply researched study of The Kit-Cat Club is not, as you might imagine, the story of a group of chocolate lovers or of some sketchy dive in Soho, but the saga of an association of powerful men who were key figures in the political and cultural struggles that marked the end of Stuart rule and the accession of the Hanoverians. Whig in politics, a drinking and dining club that over the years included more than 50 members, the Kit-Cat Club was, as Field pithily puts it, a combination of "cultural institution, literary clique and political think-tank". The gatherings at Christopher Cat's hostelry, the Cat and Fiddle in London's Gray's Inn Lane, and later at a house in Barn Elms, west of Putney, included aristocrats and powerful politicians, among them several government ministers, and a glittering array of literary talent such as Joseph Addison, William Congreve, Richard Steele and the architect/playwright John Vanbrugh. Presiding over these meetings was the club's founder, the publisher Jacob Tonson, dubbed "Chief Merchant of the Muses", a man made rich by his editions of Milton, Congreve, Dryden and later Alexander Pope.



Field's history of The Kit-Cat club combines several interconnected stories: the Whig struggles for eventual assumption of power; the "culture wars" between those who wished to liberalise the stage and press and those in favour of censorship and suppression; and the literary triumphs of the Kit-Cats, most notably the huge success of Addison and Steele's publication *The Spectator*. All three narratives are shaped by stories of male friendship cemented by shared politics, prodigious amounts of eating and drinking, outings to the theatre and opera and a willingness among the rich and powerful Kit-Cats to patronise less fortunate members by paying their debts, subscribing to their books and plays and giving them a leg up the political ladder.

Field's account of "the snakes and ladders board game of 18th-century politics" follows the changing triumphs and vicissitudes of the Whig junta as it orchestrated demonstrations, fixed elections, dispensed patronage and bribed, cajoled and propagandised its way into power. In 1711, for instance, the Tory government seized effigies of the Devil, the Pope and the Stuart Pretender that the Kit-Cats had commissioned as props to an anti-administration rally. Altogether the club had raised more than £1,000 to celebrate November 17, the anniversary of Queen Elizabeth's succession and an important Protestant holiday. Such setbacks were temporary. Field's tale has a happy ending, the Whig triumph, after a bitter few years in the political wilderness, at the Hanoverian succession. When George I landed in England in 1714, the Kit-Cats, as she vividly describes them, "waiting to greet him in the first row of the crowd, their beaming faces lit like torches in the soupy twilight", knew they finally had the cream. It is a familiar if fiendishly complex story, delightfully labyrinthine for those who love political intrigue, but of an intricacy that taxes Field's considerable literary skills.

More accessible (and original) is her discussion of the Kit-Cats' place in what she calls the "culture wars". The club shaped the arts by creating an elaborate web of influence and patronage. It sponsored the plays of Congreve,

Addison and Steele, operas and subscription concerts, and its members trooped to the theatre en masse to cheer on colleagues and friends. As one Kit-Cat wrote to another in Paris of a typical Kit-Cat evening out: "Tomorrow night, Betterton acts Falstaff, and to encourage that poor house [the theatre in Lincoln's Inn Fields] the Kit-Catters have taken one side box"; there they listened to a special prologue "in favour of eating and drinking". Mindful to defend their pleasures, they wrote pamphlets defending the stage from its puritanical detractors, and helped raise the money for the new Queen's Theatre in the Haymarket, whose first managers were the Kit-Cats, Congreve and Vanburgh.

Addison and Steele were the key literary figures, their joint masterpiece *The Spectator* becoming the most influential literary periodical of the 18th century. Field does an outstanding job of describing this friendship. As Steele well knew, the two men were chalk and cheese: "One with Patience, Foresight, and temperate Address, always waited and stemmed to torrent; while the other often plunged himself into it, and was as often taken by the Temper of him who stood weeping on the Bank for his Safety." Steele led a turbulent life of drunkenness, debt and marital conflict; Addison was almost irritatingly ultra-reasonable, a man who lived and breathed moderation. The former brilliantly sketched the manners and moeurs of London, the latter preached a creed of modern politeness; together they created a model of English prose and a how-to conduct book for the modern urban dweller. *The Spectator* was endlessly reprinted and became the schoolbook from which the literate classes learnt style and manners.

Writing a history from the Kit-Cat point of view has its dangers. "The breadth of the Kit-Cat Club's ambition," Field writes, "is without analogy." Well, maybe. But the group never matched the intellectual distinction of Dr Johnson's club, whose members included Adam Smith, Edmund Burke and Edward Gibbon. Tonson the publisher (who Field rightly gives his proper due) and the Kit-Cat writers certainly helped shape an idea of English literature but, again, this was not properly developed until the age of Johnson. And the claim that somehow the Kit-Cats made Whiggery the default mode of British politics both under-estimates other political traditions, and the endurance of Tory (not to mention Jacobite) politics and values. Nevertheless, Field has written a fitting memorial to a remarkable body of men who contributed so much to British politics and culture.

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