

From The Times

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



The Times review by Peter Ackroyd

RICHARD STEELE, the editor of *The Spectator* in the early years of the 18th century, once asked his readers to send to him an hour-by-hour account of their daily lives “to give a lively Image of the Chain and mutual Dependency of Human Society”. Such is the theme, and object, of Ophelia Field's account of the Kit-Cat club. It was named after the mutton pies, known as “Kit-Cats”, that were sold by Christopher Cat at the Cat and Fiddle in Gray's Inn Lane in London. In this establishment the first members met and engaged in “chit-chat”.

It was a highly influential conglomerate of males - writers, politicians, artists and musicians among them - who believed that the 18th century might herald a new age in English culture and English society. There were only 39 members at any one time, but that small gathering included William Congreve, John Vanburgh and Joseph Addison.

They wished to define, and to promote, a style that would do justice to the country's pre-eminence in mercantile affairs. They promoted the new fashion of opera, and sponsored concerts as well as plays. With the building of Blenheim Palace and Castle Howard by Vanbrugh, there was even an attempt to assert what might be called Kit-Cat architecture.

Some of the members had been born before the Plague and the Fire, and many of them had lived through the series of political revolutions that had led from Cromwell to Charles II, and from James II to William of Orange. By 1700 they were living in what was effectively a new or at least transformed nation, and they determined that it should be furnished with all the wit and wisdom at their disposal. It was from the start a Whig enterprise, part of what might be described as a conservative tendency leaning towards dissent, towards the aristocracy rather than the gentry.

The aristocrats were prominent in the club itself, the most eminent being the Duke of Somerset “who had once disowned his daughter when he awoke from a nap and caught her seated in his presence”. Among the Kit-Cats were the Lord of the Treasury and the Lord Chamberlain. It was a place of politics as well as culture, where the leaders of political society could gossip in an atmosphere that was heavily imbued with alcohol and the scent of chamber pots.

It was in any case an age of clubs and societies, when conversation was considered to be the medium in which important truths could be conveyed. This was the context in which dramatists such as Congreve and Vanbrugh could flourish and become the epitomes of the age. In that sense The Kit-Cat Club could serve as a perfectly good

theatrical history of the time. It is extraordinary, in fact, how success in one sphere could lead to promotion in another. When Steele's play *The Funeral* was pronounced a success he was given a commission as captain in the 34th Regiment of Foot.

It was inevitable that as the years passed the club would acquire a more solid and institutional identity; in the encroaching age of political party and party ideology, it became what Field describes as the "inner sanctum" of Whig leadership. Nine Kit-Cats, for example, were part of the commission to draw up plans for the union between England and Scotland in 1708. Two Kit-Cats, Addison and Thomas Wharton, ruled Ireland as Irish Secretary and Lord Lieutenant respectively. At a slightly later date Addison and another Kit-Cat, Richard Steele, established *The Spectator* that in Field's words was "usurping the pulpit in defining Britain's moral order".

In large part this book serves as a selection of biographies of the leading members of the club who came together in an alliance of taste and learning. In a city of half a million people it was still possible for a small group of people to influence and even change the culture of the time. The Kit-Cat club was an example of "networking" on a pre-eminent scale.

In a book such as this, with such broad general themes, the details matter. Here Field has succeeded admirably. She has a native gift for historical retrieval so that we see the past in close-up, as it were, as well as in wide view. The participants at a funeral wear "heavy wool mourning suits", and the female vendors sell "warm bags of walnuts". It is the tactility, and weight, of the narrative that bring the past to life.

Field is also adept at conveying the outright corruption that infected the political life of the period - with bribes, gifts and jobs going ineluctably to the selected boys. There have been few periods in English history when business has been done any differently, but this era must surely rank as a hothouse of nepotism and greed. The union between Scotland and England was only countenanced by the liberal use of "back-handers" to the Scottish commissioners, and the English rule of Ireland was simply an excuse for the wholesale stripping of the smaller country's assets.

The collective star of club, therefore, dimmed and brightened according to the political weather. Its fortunes improved on the accession of George I in 1714, for example, but by then the entire enterprise was winding down. There were divisions and disagreements - largely over the division of spoils after the German king had arrived. It was part of its age, and passed with its age.

But you may still see the club in its state of glory, with the portraits of its members by Godfrey Kneller preserved in the National Portrait Gallery. They are depicted in an equal spirit, aristocrats and authors dressed in similar style. Some sit in loose shirts while others wear turbans, fashionable at that time. They are relaxed and informal portraits, with expression of self-assurance that almost - but not quite - register self-satisfaction. Now Field has brought them to life in a different sense.

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

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