Book Review


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The rather prosaically-named Room 9 of the National Portrait Gallery in London is devoted to a series of portraits by Sir Godfrey Kneller of Kit-Cat Club members, which were commissioned by Jacob Tonson, the Publisher and Secretary of the club, in the first two decades of the eighteenth century. Whilst the decision to devote an entire room to the series is partly based on Kneller’s mastery of portraiture, their presence in the gallery also reflects the important role the Kit-Cat Club played in English (and British) cultural and political life between the close of the seventeenth century and 1718, when the club went into decline.

Remarkably, Ophelia Field’s excellent (and highly readable) study of the Kit-Cat Club is the first such work to be published. Whilst many books have been written on prominent individual members of the club, such as Joseph Addison, Richard Steele, Jacob Tonson, Robert Walpole and William Congreve and John Vanbrugh, no group biography has been undertaken by historians. Hence, Field’s study is a welcome attempt to bring the club to the fore, as opposed to focusing on separate accounts of its leading luminaries. This is not to say, however, that the author does not flesh out the principal characters of the club with some aplomb.

The Kit-Cat Club’s name supposedly derived from the fact that they initially met on Thursday evenings at the Cat and Fiddle Tavern in London, which was owned by Christopher (or Kit) Catling. Here the early members of the club, founded by Tonson, would indulge in the owner’s hearty pies, which were washed down with generous quantities of wine. They would also raise toasts to beautiful ladies related to Whig party grandees, who were elected at each meeting by ballot. As with many societies of the time, the enjoyment of food and elements of Bacchanalian revelry were to remain hallmarks of the Kit-Cat Club throughout its existence. However, whilst Field does not gloss over this Dionysian dynamic, she also expertly reveals the more serious (and longer-lasting) aspects of the Club’s raison d’être.

The Club was an exclusively Whig society that saw itself as the cultural vanguard of the pro-Williamite and Hanoverian party after the Revolution of 1688. During the first decade of the eighteenth century, Field shows how the Club became increasingly political and how its members became embroiled in the party machinations of the day. Without adopting a partisan stance, the author places the Kit-Cat Club – and the political agenda of its members – amidst a backdrop of the Union of England and Scotland in 1707, the ongoing threat posed by Jacobites and Tory disquiet. A pertinent study of the proliferation of vying political clubs is also made, which reveals the extent to which Tories sought to emulate the Kit-Cat model. Furthermore, Field notes that it was no coincidence that several young Kit-Cats joined Masonic
lodges after 1717, when the Club was on the wane and the Hanoverian successor seemed relatively secure on the throne.

A stress is rightly placed by Field, for example, on how the Club constituted an unprecedented mix of aristocrats, such as Charles Sackville, sixth Earl of Dorset and Charles Montagu, first Earl of Halifax, and professional writers, who included Congreve, Addison and Steele, under the stewardship of Tonson the publisher and bookseller. Here was an associational form of culture that enabled patrons and clients to socialize and converse in a designated space in a conscious attempt to promote literature, theatre and architecture. Indeed, as Field emphasizes, the Club compensated for the sizeable gaps in royal patronage of the arts in England, which thereby contributed to a significant shift in authority from the Court to private citizens. What is more, Field demonstrates that the Kit-Cat Club acted as a crucible for the likes of Addison and Steele, in which they sought to mould the very nature of Englishness along Whig lines. Drawing on classical models and indigenous habits, they sought to create a harmonious hybrid of manners and customs that befitted the temperament of their countrymen (and women). In this regard, members of the Kit-Cat Club endeavoured to live up to Sir Richard Blackmore’s characterization of them as ‘Knights of Wit’, who through conversation, judgement and learning could bring about wider reform of society and manners outside.

For anyone interested in the history of fraternalism, Ophelia Field’s *The Kit-Cat Club* offers up a veritable feast of information regarding this formative English society. In broad terms, readers are able to comprehend the vital role played by such fraternities in early eighteenth-century England. It is also possible to appreciate the extent to which other societies reacted to the distinctive nature of the Kit-Cat Club. Consequently, although the Club had a relatively brief life-span, its legacy has been far more enduring.