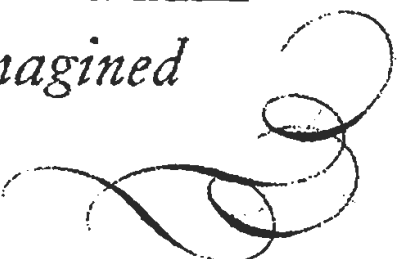





THE
KIT-CAT CLUB



*Friends Who Imagined
a Nation*



OPHELIA FIELD



Harper
Press



PROLOGUE DRYDEN'S FUNERAL, MAY 1700

Thy Wars brought nothing about;
Thy Lovers were all untrue.
'Tis well an Old Age is out,
And time to begin a New.

JOHN DRYDEN, *Secular Masque* (1700)

ON A WARM London afternoon, 13 May 1700, a crowd of mourners assembled beneath the turret and weathercock of the Royal College of Physicians, then a handsome brick building on the west side of Warwick Lane, near Newgate Prison. They were attending the funeral of former Poet Laureate, John Dryden. Among the writers, actors, musicians, patrons, politicians and publishers gathering to pay tribute to the man generally acknowledged as the greatest writer and critic of his generation were over a dozen members of a controversial dining society known as the Kit-Cat Club.

One of Dryden's patrons, Kit-Cat member Charles Sackville, 6th Earl of Dorset, had earlier arranged for Dryden's embalmed body to be exhumed from the local churchyard of St Anne's in Soho, so that it could be reburied, with due pomp and ceremony, in Westminster

Abbey. The Kit-Cat Club financed this second funeral at the suggestion of Dr Samuel Garth, another of the Club's members, who was both Dryden's personal physician and one of his literary disciples. Any of the aristocratic Kit-Cats with good credit could have single-handedly paid the funeral's bill, totalling only £45. 17s. (or around £5,500 today), but by transforming the occasion into a communal gesture the Club was demonstrating its generosity and good literary taste to Londoners. Though both Whigs and Tories attended the funeral, no public occasion could take place in the 1700s without one of these two political parties attempting to dominate it, and in this case the Tories resentfully acknowledged that the Kit-Cats were posthumously appropriating Dryden to their distinctively Whig narrative of English literature.

At four o'clock, Dr Garth and the other Fellows descended from the oak-panelled Censors' room on the Royal College's first floor to host a drinks reception, with music and 'funeral baked meats',¹ for the assembled mourners. Garth, who wore a distinctive red cloak, delivered a Latin oration that offended several attendees for being addressed to the 'great god Apollo'.² Such an unchristian oration cleverly avoided the issue that the man whom the Kit-Cats were about to bury in an Anglican abbey had died a Catholic. One of Garth's literary enemies claimed the physician delivered the oration standing on a rotten beer barrel that collapsed halfway through. This slapstick moment was probably a fabrication, however, since another anti-Kit-Cat observer, who said Garth 'threw away some words and a great deal of false Latin', fails to mention it.³

At five o'clock, the coffin – containing the body wrapped in a flannel shift, tied at the feet like a fishtail and packed in bundles of rosemary – was loaded into a horse-drawn hearse adorned with black feathers. Eight musicians in mourning scarves led the procession playing crape-covered oboes and trumpets. At the head of the cortège walked the College beadles, carrying staves. There were three other funeral coaches, one carrying Dryden's widow and son. Over fifty private coaches followed behind.

Departing the Royal College's forecourt, they processed down Warwick Lane and Ludgate Hill, passing the Fleet, a former tributary

of the Thames that had dried into a fetid ditch. The carriages following the hearse became entangled with several 'moveable Bawdy-houses' (prostitutes in hackney coaches) as they passed Chancery Lane,⁴ the passengers bracing themselves as horses reared and carriages lurched against one another on the cobbles. The jam then cleared as they slowly proceeded west along the Strand, where gaps between the buildings offered glimpses of the equally traffic-clogged Thames below. At the hour Dryden's cortège passed, the Thames would have been at low tide, revealing the large mud-brown beach onto which shoeless children and scrap collectors were able to wander unimpeded, no embankments yet having been built. The procession finally turned down Whitehall, past the higgledy-piggledy buildings of Old Westminster Palace, towards the Abbey. In the surrounding streets, crowds gathered to watch the strange spectacle of England's nobility, dressed in unseasonably heavy wool mourning suits, paying their humble respects to a near-bankrupt author.

What really bothered several contemporary observers about this Whig-dominated event was the promiscuous mingling of England's social classes. As government ministers, dukes, earls and knights abandoned their carriages and liveried footmen in the Abbey's yard, they found themselves literally on an equal footing with tradesmen, actresses and lowly born 'Playhouse Sparks'. Tom Browne, a satirist, mocked the impropriety of the motley congregation as 'A Crowd so nauseous, so profusely lewd, / With all the Vices of the Times ended . . .'⁵

The procession was led through the Abbey by a figure whose runtish stature was undisguised by his high-crowned periwig and high-heeled shoes. This was Charles Montagu, King William III's former First Lord of the Treasury and another key Kit-Cat member. Tom Browne considered Montagu the epitome of what was loathsome about the new, affluent class of Whig politicians: 'grown sleek and fat', proud, corrupt and pretentious, flattering himself as the 'Chief of Wits'.⁶ That Browne was able to publish such insults with impunity indicated, however, the reality of Montagu's situation in May 1700: he had fallen far enough from the King's favour that he would be openly attacked in the next parliamentary session.

Montagu's Kit-Cat colleagues, who knew his virtues of generosity, loyalty and intelligence, probably granted him pride of place in the procession to demonstrate their support for him during this difficult time.

Hobbling behind Montagu, leading a 'Troop of Stationers', came Dryden's half-crippled publisher and the Kit-Cat Club's founding father, Jacob Tonson. Tonson was grieving for the loss of his most lucrative and prestigious author, whose poem *Absalom and Achitophel* had launched Tonson's publishing career two decades earlier. Dryden had recognized Tonson as a cut above the Grub Street printers who seemed to 'live by selling titles, not books',⁷ telling Tonson: 'I find all of your trade are Sharpers & you not more than others; therefore I have not wholly left you,' and signing a letter 'not your Enemy & maybe your friend, John Dryden'.⁸ The longevity of the two men's collaboration, on numerous publications and as co-editors on a series of best-selling poetic *Miscellanies*, suggested an intellectual empathy greater than they had ever openly acknowledged to one another.

Next came Dryden's fellow authors, not yet recognized as a professional category and considered by many onlookers as even lower than the tradesmen: 'such as under Mercury are born, / As Poets, Fiddlers, Cut-purses and Whores'.⁹ Pre-eminent among these was Kit-Cat playwright and poet, William Congreve. Congreve was an insouciant, cynical young Irishman, armoured by quiet confidence in his own talent. He had known Dryden since at least 1692, by which date Congreve had assisted the older poet with various Latin and Greek translations. Dryden quickly felt that in Congreve he had found a worthy literary heir, and, in begging Congreve to be 'kind to my Remains',¹⁰ Dryden had effectively designated the young man his literary executor.

After Congreve, Dr Garth was considered next in line to inherit Dryden's poetic mantle, having published *The Dispensary* the previous year: a much-applauded mock-epic poem about Garth's battle to persuade the Royal College to dispense free medicine to paupers. Congreve and Garth had been among Dryden's circle at Will's Coffee House, the social centre of London's literati before the Kit-Cat Club.

The death of Dryden, 'To whom the tribe of circling Wits, / As to an oracle submits',¹¹ was a blow from which Will's Coffee House's 'Witty Club' would never recover, clearing the way for the rise of the Kit-Cat Club.

Rather than Dryden's favourites, Congreve or Garth, however, another Kit-Cat author, John Vanbrugh – 36 years old and with four plays under his belt – had been the one to offer practical assistance when Dryden lay dying. Vanbrugh organized a benefit performance, knowing Dryden would otherwise have little to leave his wife and children. Dryden's last dramatic work, his *Secular Masque* (1700), took new beginnings as its theme and was intended to be performed at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, on 25 March 1700: that is, on New Year's Day according to the Old English calendar – the first day of the new century. The production was not ready for this historic opening night, however, and the masque was probably not performed until after Dryden's death, when the third-night profits, which traditionally went to a play's author, would have been donated directly to Dryden's widow.

A number of other Kit-Cat members – including Members of Parliament, army officers and diplomats – accompanied Dorset, Montagu, Tonson, Garth, Vanbrugh and Congreve as they paced through the dimly lit Abbey to the solemn knelling of bells. When the mourners were all assembled under the Abbey's vast transept, a prebend began to read the service, and the choir sang an epicedium.

Several Tory eyewitnesses started the story, later repeated by Dr Johnson, that the funeral descended from a Christian solemnity into a kind of raucous party,¹² the playwright George Farquhar concluding with a sigh: 'And so much for Mr Dryden; whose burial was the same as his life: variety and not of a piece – the quality and mob, farce and heroics, the sublime and ridicule mixed in a piece – great Cleopatra in a hackney coach.'¹³ Whether touching or absurd, sublime or ridiculous, Dryden's funeral served several purposes for the Kit-Cat Club: it raised the Club's profile with the man in the street; it claimed a Whig share in Dryden's reputation; and it expressed gratitude to a man who had mentored many of those present. The event

further demonstrated that the Club was not cowed by the religious censors who had recently attacked the morality of Dryden's plays in the same breath as Congreve's and Vanbrugh's.

One of the mourners, frail old Samuel Pepys, would surely have thought back to another Westminster Abbey funeral he had attended in the company of the 27-year-old Dryden in 1658: that of Oliver Cromwell. Since then, England had seen a royal restoration and a revolution, but the turmoil and bloodshed of the Civil War still felt like recent history. Families and communities torn apart by the previous century's conflicts were still healing these divisions. With the new century only a couple of months old by the terms of their calendar, a sense of excitement hung in the air that spring, but the nation still lacked confidence, and feared the possibility of slipping back into barbarity.

Dryden's death proved a turning point for the Kit-Cat Club, after which it self-consciously set about trying to direct the course of English civilization in the new century, particularly the course of the two arts most beloved of Dryden: literature and music. None of Dryden's admirers, or 'Apollo's sons',¹⁴ not even Congreve, felt up to carrying this torch alone, but together – through subscriptions and collaborations – the Kit-Cats assumed what they considered their patriotic duty: to guide and nurture native talent. No grouping before or since has worked towards such an ambitious vision of national reform, encompassing every high art form and seeking to dominate every aspect of Britain's social and intellectual life.

By compensating for the especially sizeable gaps in royal patronage of English poetry, theatre and music, the Club would contribute to a shift in authority from the Court to private citizens. More than their monarchs, they would fulfil the country's need for new role models, in fashions, manners and morals. This helped turn the Court into 'the highly symbolic, sober, secluded, and slightly strange institution it has since become',¹⁵ while at the same time laying the foundations for the exponential growth of cultural consumption that would occur in the later eighteenth century. The Kit-Cat founders were born into an age of plague, fire and civil strife; the younger members would live to see the self-consciously

'civilized' age of Samuel Johnson, Joshua Reynolds and Robert Adam.

Similarly, when the Kit-Cat founders were born, most Britons would have said their monarch ruled them, but by the time the youngest members died, the majority would have said they were governed by an elected House of Commons. The Club was to be both a cause and a symptom of this shift in the political culture, from individual to collective accountability, and its leading members would also be closely involved in turning Britain from a 'ramshackle federal state'¹⁶ to something significantly closer to a modern 'nation state'. The political stability of Britain after 1720 owed much to a sense of common purpose and values among those who wielded power, and the Kit-Cat Club was the prime example of a political grouping formed and sustained around shared ideological and cultural values, 'Alike in Morals, and alike in Mind',¹⁷ rather than around bonds of kinship. Its members would pursue an ultra-Whig political agenda for over twenty years, such that an opponent could plausibly describe the Kit-Cat in 1704 as a 'Club that gave Direction to the State',¹⁸ and such that its final generation of members, most notably Robert Walpole, came to dominate the first half-century of Georgian politics.

The Enlightenment philosopher John Locke wrote in 1690 that, alongside Divine Law and Civil Law, the third type of law was 'the law of opinion . . . praise or blame, which, by secret and tacit consent, establishes itself in the several societies, tribes and clubs of men in the world'.¹⁹ The Kit-Cat Club continued this seventeenth-century tradition of 'clubs of men' carving out negative freedoms from the state, not least of which was the right to hold meetings and discuss their opinions freely. Kit-Cat members would help shape the nation's taste, character and international image in the coming decades, planting a particular idea of 'Englishness' in the popular imagination and contributing to the building of a more prosperous, polite and self-confident society.

On this evening in 1700, however, the Kit-Cats were first and foremost a remarkable group of friends, several of whom had known each other since childhood. Self-identification by their Kit-Cat name,

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and demonstrations of unity such as the funding of this ceremony, were now public vows confirming the men's personal and professional commitment to each other – nuptials of Whig fraternity. Dryden's death, several years after the Kit-Cat Club's foundation, marked the Club's coming of age.