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1 From the late seventeenth century to Victorian times, gentlemen’s clubs have always oscillated between norm and dissidence. The ambivalent identity of London clubs can be perceived through some of their main paradoxes and inherent tensions such as the dialectics of integration vs. exclusion or publicity vs. privacy. If some of the first political factions that started to meet in London taverns and coffee-houses during the Restoration period fostered a spirit of dissent, eighteenth-century London clubs were mainly considered as instruments of socialization. They provided young men with an ideal space for promoting their social integration into a selective network of male affiliation. Belonging to a club implied conforming to social norms of politeness and education. Therefore, club sociability proved the best way to acquire the cultural varnish and the social skills required to become a perfect gentleman.

2 However, even though the strict rules, rituals as well as the socially and sexually exclusive membership of these institutions were supposed to guarantee moderation and social cohesion, excess and provocation could easily lead to the disruption of the social and moral order. Dissident behaviour could embody various degrees of transgression, ranging from a disregard of social norms to more offending or even criminal attitudes. Yet, it proved often difficult to find appropriate responses to curb such unsociable behaviour, though denounced in pamphlets or periodicals and condemned by society at large.

3 The English club can be considered as a distinctive sociability space. After being influenced by imported fashions, it succeeded in distancing itself from the normative prescriptions of French sociability. Furthermore, its persistent elitist and gender-
exclusive tradition as well as its evolution in the Victorian period makes it a form of resistance to modernity. Constantly hesitating between norm and dissidence, to what extent did London clubs, which seemed to mirror the specificities of the national character, contribute to model English sociability along new norms? How far were eighteenth-century London clubs a prelude to Victorian clublife?

The Ambivalent Political and Social Function of Clubs

As the first clubs appeared in London during the Restoration period, they answered both a need for social intercourse and an aspiration towards political freedom or defiance. On the one hand, some early clubs were, indeed, political factions, whose members met to oppose the government or to dissent from dominant political trends. In 1674 for example, a political faction known as the Green Ribbon Club started to meet at the King’s Head Tavern in Chancery Lane and counted among its members some wealthy and influential aristocrats, all members of the opposition. During the Exclusion Crisis (1678–81), this hub of reflection and agitation played a decisive role in the whig propaganda campaign, organizing petitions and demonstrations in the streets of the capital. In 1682, the poet Dryden already deplored the fact that some factious clubs ‘vilified the government’. Moreover, the end of censorship in 1695 favoured a growing freedom of expression and political speech, through the press of course, but also thanks to the expansion of a new ‘associational world’, to use the phrase of the historian Peter Clark. As a matter of fact, the eighteenth-century club, heir to the coffee-house as the cradle of public opinion, rapidly developed as both an efficient tool to reinforce political unity and partisanship and a potential counter power, sometimes perceived as a threat to the established order. The October Club created in 1710, gathered an important group of Tory dissident MPs who denounced the moderation of Robert Harley’s government and wished to act as a ‘pressure group’. Jonathan Swift’s Journal to Stella is interspersed with ironical allusions to this political faction: ‘We are plagued here with an October Club, that is, a set of above a hundred parliament-men of the country, who drink October beer at home, and meet every evening at a tavern near the parliament, to consult affairs, and drive things on to extremes against the Whigs, to call the old ministry to account, and get off five or six heads’ (Journal to Stella, 194–5). The ‘October men’ became so powerful that Swift clearly considered their club as a sort of counter power: ‘the Club is now growing up to be a party by itself’ (The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift, 236). Therefore, the fact that politicians could meet freely outside the boundaries of State control fuelled the fears of the government who, in 1675, had already suspected the existence of a secret network, when they accused the coffee-houses of fomenting a mysterious plot.

On the other hand, it is the social nature of man that justifies his gregarious instinct and his desire to gather into clubs and societies. David Hume was convinced of man’s sociable drive: ‘The propensity to company and society is strong in all rational creatures’ (Hume 115). As an instrument of socialization, the club provides man with social interaction and convivial exchange. In 1711, Joseph Addison acknowledged this cohesive dimension of the club in his Spectator: ‘Men are thus knit together, by a Love of Society, . . . combined for their own improvement, or for the Good of others’. In the first half of the eighteenth century, the term ‘club’ referred to any association or society in which men gathered with a common aim and met on a regular basis in a precise location.
according to certain rules, in order to maintain social relationship and a spirit of cooperation.

6 The ambivalent character of London clubs can thus be identified through its paradoxical function as both an instrument of integration and exclusion. The desire to 'club together', to feel part of a group was particularly strong among young aristocrats. An ideal means to enter the closed circles of polite society, belonging to a club was also often a passport for a political career. By favouring male bonding and elective friendship, club life undoubtedly strengthened networks and opened doors.

7 Whatever its nature, a group has its norms, its own codes. Similarly, the good functioning of a club requires the definition of precise rules. The regulations that most clubs adopted from their creation in the 1730s, were both a constitutive and a structuring element, which defined the nature and the identity of each institution. This formalization had been progressive and originated in a desire to restrain the access to clubs, as a reaction to the open and public sociability of coffee-houses. Most clubs then became increasingly selective. White's Chocolate-House became a private club in 1736, The Club of Royal Philosophers (future Royal Society Club) appeared in 1731, the Society of Dilettanti was founded in 1734. The first rules always set all the details on where, when and how often the club meetings would take place. A significant part of the internal regulations was devoted to the criteria and procedures of admission, depending on the exclusive character of the club. It is interesting to note that, for the most exclusive ones, such as White's, Brooks's, or Boodle's, those precisions were crucial and came in first position. For example, the first sixteen of the twenty-three rules of Boodle's exclusively described the election procedures of its members, the modes of subscription, etc. Another significant part of club regulations dealt with the organization of club dinners, being more or less detailed according to the vocation of the club. Such administrative rules guaranteed institutional stability while rules of behaviour (about gambling, betting, drinking or smoking...) were intended to prevent from any excess; both were indispensable to the cohesion of a group.

8 However, as already suggested, the function of clubs was not only to help the integration of its members into the club itself and into the polite circles of London society. As conflicting as it may seem, exclusiveness was itself key to a better social integration. For instance, the three clubs of St James's Street, White's, Boodle's and Brooks's followed the 'blackballing' procedure, which meant that one single black ball was enough to exclude a candidate.6 This selective membership was not only a means to guarantee social recognition through the introduction to the best social circles and therefore the consolidation of friendships and networks, but also an instrument of social discrimination as the least fortunate candidates were excluded from a restrictive group of carefully chosen equals. The various lists of membership, analyzed in my own work L'Âge d'or des clubs londoniens, revealed that eighteenth-century club sociability was mainly aristocratic, a space for the English social and political elite. Nevertheless, the names of famous writers, scientists and artists also appeared among club members, as they represented the intellectual elite of the nation. For example, the members of Samuel Johnson's Club were meaningfully called 'an aristocracy of the mind'.7 Most clubs preserved their exclusiveness into the nineteenth century even though the democratization of power and prestige which characterized the Victorian period somehow heralded new economic and social values. Derived from the growth of
commerce and Empire, these values challenged club culture thus giving gentlemen’s clubs a new role as ‘the vital and enterprising core of commercial society’. If eighteenth-century London clubs were reserved for the higher ranks of society, they were above all homosocial spaces. Most of their activities were clearly considered unsuitable for ladies. Dining and drinking, gambling and conversation were the chief motivations for such gatherings and enabled clubmen to share their political, scientific or artistic interests in a convivial and ‘safe’ male-only environment. The election of a new member was frequently followed by an initiation ritual which, as a shared experience, both produced a sense of belonging to a selective community as well as strengthened clubmen’s ties. The practice of toasting, for example, cemented club members and was central to male club conviviality in the first half of the eighteenth century, though it progressively disappeared.

The Norms and Transgressions of the Gentleman Ideal

In the eighteenth century, the norms of polite behaviour were prescribed by conduct manuals, moral literature, and popular periodical essays. Born in the coffee-houses of Queen Anne’s reign, periodicals such as the Spectator and the Tatler progressively diffused ‘gentlemanly values’ to their readers (Solkin 60). Joseph Addison and Richard Steele’s goal was truly to uphold ‘the gentleman ideal’. The first step of the gentleman’s formation was education, more precisely learning. Then politeness and conversation were essential to the fashioning of the gentleman. Politeness was a vast notion which comprised the manners to adopt in public, the instruction as well as the moral virtues of an individual. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the French were still the best models of polite conversation. ‘L’art de plaire’, the ‘art of pleasing’, determined the norms of conduct to observe in conversation and in social interaction. Numerous French treatises were directly translated by English authors to spread those norms across the Channel. Also part of acquired polite experience was sociability: ‘being sociable to man’, as James Miller defined politeness in 1738 (Miller 4). In that respect, the club was a decisive step for the young gentleman eager to polish his manners and culture in order to gain recognition from his peers, thus reinforcing his social status. Shaping one’s behaviour according to the polite expectations of an elite social group was a way for the young aristocrat to acquire gentlemanly manners: the various activities provided by the club were an essential vector of those values and norms of behaviour, to which these exclusive circles were dearly attached.

However, this didn’t mean that perfection or conformity prevailed among clubmen, as the gentleman ideal often remained, by definition, difficult to reach. The acknowledged liberty, individualism and originality of the Englishman favoured his disregard of some norms of behaviour, set along French rules of politesse, which might seem too formal, and could easily lead to some deviance and transgression. Several degrees of dissidence from a normative polite behaviour, supposedly guaranteed by education and sociability, could be observed among clubmen.

Eccentricity allowed a divergence from the norm, but also provided a kind of safety valve for behaviours that might plausibly be tolerated. Paul Langford, in Englishness Identified thought that: ‘Eccentricity necessarily implied some recognizably desirable norm, some ‘centricity’ from which the eccentric had deviated’ (Langford 301). As we have just pointed out, being sociable and talented in conversation were obvious criteria of social
distinction. Lord Moira,\textsuperscript{11} for example, a member of \textit{White's Club}, chose not to conform to these norms. Though he loved society, had rather courteous manners and was, at times, able to be eloquent in public, this eccentric character often decided not to say the least word to anyone who shared his table, for hours, pushing taciturnity, this trait of the English character, to its paroxysm. Another eccentric clubman was the renowned scientist Henry Cavendish, both a member of the \textit{Royal Society Club} and of \textit{White's}. His misogyny was such that he went as far as to make architectural alterations to his house in Clapham, by creating a second staircase to prevent him from being face to face with any female character. Both examples of genteel eccentricity illustrated a singular, peculiar behaviour, though it did not represent a threat to society, and only expressed personal annoyances.

Besides, some deviation from norms of respectable behaviour could be ‘unsociable’ or even morally transgressive. As a matter of fact, the conviviality enhanced by club dinners frequently served as a pretext for immoderate drinking. In one of his letters to Horace Mann, Horace Walpole implied that the interest for Italy was not the true condition for being elected a member of the illustrious \textit{Society of Dilettanti}: ‘the Dilettanti, a club for which the nominal qualification is having been to Italy, and the real one \textit{being drunk}’.\textsuperscript{12} Excessive alcohol consumption was a common practice in clubs, as depicted by Hogarth in \textit{A Midnight Modern Conversation} (1733) and as reported by numerous contemporaries. In his memoirs, William Hickey remembered: ‘Up I went in the club-room (at Slaughter’s), down went the wine and punch, and away went all my plans of reformation (good resolutions)’ (Hickey 44). As for James Boswell, a very ‘clubable’ man according to his friend Samuel Johnson, he admitted his drunkenness in a letter to William Johnson Temple, ‘I got myself quite intoxicated, went to a Bawdy-house and past a whole night in the arms of a Whore’ (\textit{The Correspondence of James Boswell}, 192).

The figure of the Georgian rake corresponded to such debauched young aristocrats as illustrated in Hogarth’s \textit{A Rake’s Progress}. Plate 6 shows Tom Rakewell at a gambling table at \textit{White’s Club}. Whereas playing cards was acceptable for gentlemen, excessive gambling was deplored. The passion for gambling which raged at \textit{White’s} or at \textit{Brooks’s} was such that Swift considered those gambling dens as ‘the bane of half the English nobility’. It could also generate extreme behaviours, such as duelling and suicide, often called ‘the two children of gaming’.\textsuperscript{13} Erin Mackie, in her recent book \textit{Rakes, Highwaymen, and Pirates. The Making of the Modern Gentleman in the Eighteenth Century}, argued that ‘a small coterie of elite males aggressively flouted the new codes of civility and enjoyed a disproportionate \ldots share of cultural currency and social success’ (Mackie 40). Indeed, aristocratic extravagance and debauchery were accepted as part of a gentleman’s pursuits, as confirmed by \textit{The Connoisseur}: ‘The vices and follies of the fashionable world are so connected with each other, that they almost form a regular system; and the practice of them all is absolutely necessary to complete the character of a fine gentleman. \ldots A fine gentleman is one that whores, games, and wears a sword’.\textsuperscript{14} In the same way, any failure to follow the code of honour could prove fatal to the reputation of a gentleman: ‘While honour and dignity are the reward of virtue, any lapse of it that may tend to affect the character of gentleman, is punishable by formal expulsion from peculiar association, and ultimately, with loss of privileges, from society in general’ (\textit{The British Code of Duel}, 9).

Finally, a more serious dissidence from social and even moral norms can be epitomized by two different types of clubs. In the first half of the eighteenth century, the \textit{Mohocks} terrorized Londoners at night: ‘The great cement of their assembly, and the only
qualification required in the members was an outrageous ambition of doing all possible hurt to their fellow creatures' (Sydney 212–13). Those young men of rank formed into a club, imbibed themselves in alcohol before committing barbarous crimes, some of which are related in Swift’s correspondence: ‘Lord Winchelsea told me today at Court, that two of the Mohocks caught a maid of old Lady Winchelseas just at the door of their House in the Park where she was with a Candle, and had just lighted out somebody. They cutt all her Face, and beat her without any provocation’ (Journal to Stella, 515–16). As a second example, and contrary to the Mohocks, the Hell-Fire Clubs did not use physical violence but revelled in blasphemy and libertine excess. In the 1740s, Sir Francis Dashwood, nicknamed the ‘Hell-Fire Duke’, founded, with twelve other members, a fraternity called by different names: ‘The Order of the Knights of St. Francis of Wycombe’, or ‘The Friars of St. Francis’ or ‘The Monks of Medmenham’. This famous group was seen either as an informal gathering of young debauched aristocrats whose main motivations were drink and women, or as an occult society which performed satanic activities. Others also considered this Hell-Fire Club as a secret cabal, in which the elite of the opposition would plot against the government. Its members were politicians as well as literary men who shared the same taste for provocation, subversion and licentiousness, among whom were John Montagu (4th Earl of Sandwich), George Selwyn, the Earl of Bute (future Prime minister) and John Wilkes, to name but a few.

Violence, irreligion or sexual deviance became efficient tools of subversion of any social or moral code and, therefore, totally subverted the socializing function of some eighteenth–century clubs. Yet, if some of those characters were excluded from social or political circles and marginalized, others paradoxically remained prominent social figures, as most of them also belonged to the more respectable gentlemen’s clubs of St James’s Street, in the heart of London clubland.

The London Club as a ‘Dissident’ Model of Sociability

According to me, the dissident character of the club as a model of sociability lay in several paradoxes inherent in its identity: its ambiguous sociable character, as mainly shown in this paper through the coexistence of normative and dissident behaviours and its problematic position in the private/public sphere dialectics, both making it an original form of sociability.

As early as in 1711, Steele remarked in the Spectator: ‘There hath been a long Endeavour to transform us into Foreign Manners and Fashions, and to bring us to a servile Imitation of none of the best of their Neighbours, in some of the worst of their Qualities’. However, after following French norms of behaviour, the English started to reject foreign manners and especially imported norms of politeness. The double reason for that was that they threatened the masculinity and the national character of the Englishman, who, by the way, was often thought at the time ‘unsociable’. More generally, the criticism of French manners consisted in the questioning of the constant desire to please which was thought to degenerate into too great a formality, as reproached by Addison, a want of sincerity as deplored by Steele, or an excess of ceremony, as denounced by John Locke. Samuel Johnson, a reputed conversationalist and clubman, turned this art of conversation into both an ‘easy and natural’ exercise (Boswell 1246), and a ‘frictive’ interchange, a productive fight of ideas. Therefore, easiness as well as ‘intellectual vigour and skill’ (Boswell 1150) redefined new norms of conversation that valued the debating talents of
the English nation. Clubs therefore helped to establish new norms that mirrored the representative features of Englishness.

20 The adjective ‘clubable’ coined by Johnson in 1783— also spelt ‘clubbable’— might be the key to understanding the club as a supposedly dissident model of sociability. As sociability and politeness were the prevailing attributes of France and were based on feminine refinement, ‘clubbability’ appeared as the perfect term to embody England’s peculiar sociable identity. The homosocial model of the London club could be seen as a counter-model to the Parisian salon: it offered a dissident model from mixed-sexed sociability. Besides, being clubbable indeed reconciled the ambivalence of the gentleman ideal. As I have tried to show, a clubman could drink, gamble, and still remained a gentleman. A combination of virtue and excess as well as a tolerated dissidence from polite norms of behaviour were inherent in the Englishness of the eighteenth-century clubman.

21 Club sociability accepted dissident figures that led to a redefinition of norms of behaviour, which better reflected the English character. Clublife descriptions are abounding with examples of male characters, who somehow deviated from the required norms of behaviour expected by the society of the time, sometimes even blurring gender norms. Let’s just mention the figures of the beau, the ‘fop’, the macaroni, who all represented dissident social characters and potential threats to both English masculinity and national identity (See Carter 31–57). The beau was focused on his appearance, cultivating his self-esteem and the ‘fop’ was characterized by his extreme refinement and effeminacy, both being excessive representations of French fashion and frequently the object of ridicule in the press or in caricatures. As for the macaroni, he was a variation of those two first figures, but those young and wealthy aristocrats were mostly inspired by Italian fashion and adopted eccentric clothes and hair styles. They nonetheless played a decisive role in eighteenth-century clublife as the founders of Almack’s Club, future Brooks’s, still a preeminent club today. Even though those figures diverged from social norms, they belonged to the real or imaginary representations of the beau monde and, as such, were not so incompatible with the social attributes of the eighteenth-century gentleman and with clubs’ expectations. Last but not least, the Victorian dandy incarnated by Beau Brummell, proudly standing at White’s bow-window so as to see and be seen at the same time, will correspond to an evolution of those various eccentric figures and will appear, quite significantly, as an emblematic expression of nineteenth-century club culture.

22 Second paradox, the club occupies a specific position in the private/public sphere dialectics, as a space in-between. An institution of the public sphere as defined by Habermas, it became increasingly private in the course of the eighteenth century. It does not fit into the norms that defined either the public or the private sphere, by sometimes overlapping on the two, thus dissenting from this model. As a result, the club can be seen as a third space or an intermediary space: a ‘social space’ devoted to sociability. Michèle Cohen argued that ‘social spaces were neither fully public nor private but rather a space-between, created in part by the nature of the activities that took place there, and comprising all the spaces for “society” both inside or outside the home’ (Cohen & Hitchcock 47). Neither fully central nor marginal either, clubs may be an appropriate space to contain and, at the same time, to render socially acceptable potentially subversive or deviant behaviours. In addition, already considered in the eighteenth century as second homes for London gentlemen, this homosocial enclave became even
more like a surrogate ‘family’ for the nineteenth-century clubmen. They provided men with a variety of services, re-creating a quasi-domestic universe. As Amy Milne-Smith demonstrated in her 2006 article entitled ‘A Flight to Domesticity? : Making a Home in the Gentlemen’s Clubs of London, 1880–1914’, men did not want to flee from domesticity itself, but to avoid the rigid norms and codes that the interaction with women and their social events required. They were determined to create, through clubs, an exclusive masculine domestic space (See Milne-Smith 796–818).

What about women then? Would they oppose the clubs or denounce their excess or would they attempt to create dissident institutions in which they could play a part? In fact, feminine reactions or initiatives in that domain were rare until the second half of the nineteenth century. If some feminine voices, such as Mary Astell at the end of the seventeenth century and Catherine Macaulay or Elizabeth Montagu in the second half of the eighteenth century, deplored the status of women in English society and their exclusion from the public sphere, few dissident societies to counter male-only clubs existed. Apart from the famous Blue-Stocking Club, which was more a salon than a real club, mentioned for the first time in Elizabeth Montagu’s correspondence in 1757 (see Myers), an exception was the Female Coterie, a mixed club founded in 1770. Its meetings were first held in Almack’s Assembly Rooms, then, from 1775, in the splendid residence of George Colebrook in Arlington Street. It functioned like a men’s club (regular meetings, strict election procedures, dinners, gambling, balls, concerts…) but the equality of the sexes remained an illusion: if a married woman was elected, her husband automatically became a member, whereas the reverse was not the case. This dissident adventure was short-lived as the club ceased to exist in 1777.

Half a century later, with the emergence of a new social ethic and the promotion of family values centred around the home, Victorian women started to express their discontent towards those all-male enclaves, as exemplified by Thomas Hood’s ‘Comic Annual’ published in The Mirror in 1838, entitled CLUBS ‘turned up by a female hand’:

Of all the modern schemes of Man  
That time has brought to bear,  
A plague upon the wicked plan,  
That parts the wedded pair!  
My female friends they all agree  
They hardly know their hubs;  
And heart and voice unite with me  
‘We hate the name of Clubs!’

Even though the Victorian club was undeniably valued as an instrument of self and social construction of the British man, it was thus often seen as a potential threat to family life.

Moreover, the club had a dissident role either as a counter power or an antechamber of power. In his Journey through England published in 1714, the traveller John Macky reported that: ‘In the time of the sitting of the Parliament, there are also clubs composed of the different Members of the House of Commons, where most Affairs (were) digested before they are brought into the House’ (Macky 188–9). Thus we can consider, after the historian
Above all, the London club has been shown as a dissident model of sociability, which by rejecting foreign influences, aimed at reasserting English masculinity and defining its own norms of clubbability. Likewise, the Victorian club could also be considered as a dissident model from the original eighteenth-century club itself born from the seventeenth-century coffee-house. As already mentioned, it increasingly granted access to the 'new middle-class public man' (Davidoff & Hall 449), embracing new social as well as commercial values. However, the most exclusive institutions remained attached to their traditional selective criteria and resisted the democratizing turn enhanced by the extension of the franchise. If conviviality, conversation and pleasure were highly valued by eighteenth-century clubmen, as many contemporary accounts have revealed, they came to be understood by some Victorians as 'eighteenth-century degeneracy', far from the new norms of morality prescribed by Victorian society.

Yet, if gentlemen's clubs also flourished in the nineteenth century, it seems to me that the atmosphere of sociability and conviviality that contributed to their success in the eighteenth century had changed, to a certain extent. The institution might have both benefited and suffered from the growing cult of individualism and the exaltation of solitude that were often said to characterize the Victorians. However, dissidence remained a dominant feature of clublife in later periods. As a form of resistance to modernity, the exclusive London club has always been seen by most people as a peculiar institution. Even today, the clubs and their networks constitute a unique powerful social and political phenomenon and, in that respect, would deserve more scholarly attention.

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NOTES

1. ‘What right has any man among you […] to meet, as you daily do, in factious clubs, to vilify the government in your discourses?’ quoted in the Oxford English Dictionary.


3. Robert Harley, Earl of Oxford (1661-1724), moderate Tory British politician (who began his career as a Whig), Secretary of State (1704-08), Chancellor of the Exchequer (1710-11), First Lord of the Treasury (1711-14).

4. A Proclamation for the Suppression of Coffee-Houses, By the King, London, Printed by the Assigns of John Bill, and Christopher Barker, Printers to the Kings most Excellent Majesty, 1675.

5. Joseph Addison, The Spectator, n° 9 (March 10, 1711).

6. At Boodle’s, it was rule n° 3: ‘One black ball excludes’, extracted from the original rules of the club (Fulford 5-12).

7. With its ‘mixed complexion, its own standards of merit, and the freedom its members felt toward each other, The Club was in fact a true democracy’ (Curtis & Liebert, 5, 96).

8. In her recent study, Barbara Black considers Victorian clubs as ‘markers of modern society’ and highlights ‘their convergence of self-interest and solidarity’ (Black 113).

9. On toasting in clubs, see Capdeville, 139-145.

10. According to the OED, politeness is a synonym for ‘polish, refinement, elegance, good taste’.

11. Francis Rawdon, 1st Marquess of Hastings, 2nd Earl of Moira (1754-1826), Anglo-Irish peer, close to the Prince of Wales. Military officer who served in America during the War of Independence and took part in the French Revolutionary Wars until 1794. He was later appointed Governor-General of India (1813-23).


13. The expression ‘the two children of gaming’ was used in 1787 in the Gentleman’s Magazine and came from an allegory of the time invented to explain the origin of gaming. It was told that gaming was born from the union of the Goddess of Fortune and the God of War. That child was only preoccupied with cards and dice and fascinated his admirers of both sexes. Strongly attracted by swordsmen, gaming then united with one of them and this unnatural alliance gave birth to twins: duelling and suicide. Since then, their mother has always cherished them and all three have become inseparable. Therefore, the link between gaming, duelling and suicide was logically established in Charles Moore’s essay, entitled A Full Inquiry into the Subject of Suicide. To which are Added (As being closely connected with the subject) Two Treatises on Duelling and Gaming, 2 vols. London, 1790, 2: 352-353, 374.


15. Wycombe was the name of the Dashwoods’ family house, West Wycombe House, whose caves welcomed the first gatherings of the fraternity; Medmenham Abbey was a Cistercian abbey founded in 1145 in Buckinghamshire. Dashwood bought this property from a friend Francis Duffield, a local painter and started its restoration in 1751. He built a ruined tower and a cloister so as to reinforce the gothic atmosphere of the place. He also created an erotic garden and caves in old chalk mines.

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16. Part of its members belonged to Prince Frederick’s Shadow Court. G. Bubb Dodington, for example, was the Shadow Prime Minister; the poet Paul Whitehead was also a member of this opposition government.

17. As Amy Milne-Smith justly put it in her recent analysis of Victorian clubs, the clubland was ‘not only a space on the map, but also a defined community of elite men’ (Milne-Smith 2011, 22).


20. ‘The club life of the last century was a faster, wilder life than clublife is now. Men played higher, and drank more deeply’, Charles Dickens Jr., *Dictionary of London: An Unconventional Handbook* [1879], quoted in Barbara Black 10, and accessible on <http://charlesdickenspage.com/dictionary1879m-z.html> (St James’s Street entry) last accessed 26 February 2015.

ABSTRACTS

From the late seventeenth century to Victorian times, gentlemen’s clubs have always oscillated between norm and dissidence. The ambivalent identity of London clubs can be highlighted through some of their main paradoxes and inherent tensions such as integration/exclusion or publicity/privacy. Some of the first political factions that started to meet in London taverns and coffee-houses during the restoration period fostered a spirit of dissent. However, the eighteenth-century club rapidly developed as both a potential counter power and an efficient tool to reinforce political partisanship. Besides, London clubs were considered as instruments of socialization, as they provided young men with an ideal space for promoting their social integration into a selective network of male affiliation. Belonging to a club implied conforming to social norms of politeness and education. Therefore, club sociability proved the best way to acquire the cultural varnish and the social skills required to become a perfect gentleman. If the strict rules, rituals as well as the socially and sexually exclusive membership of these institutions were supposed to guarantee moderation and social cohesion, excess and provocation could easily lead to the disruption of the moral and social order. Dissident behaviour could embody various degrees of social transgression, ranging from a disregard of social norms to more offending or even criminal attitudes. If some ‘clubmen behaving badly’ were excluded from social or political circles and marginalized, others paradoxically remained prominent social figures. The English club can be considered as a distinctive sociability space. Always hesitating between norm and dissidence, London clubs seem to mirror the specificities of the national character, contributing to model English sociability along new ‘norms’. Furthermore, its persistent elitist and gender-exclusive tradition as well as its evolution in the Victorian period makes it a form of resistance to modernity.
de socialisation, les clubs londoniens offraient aux jeunes hommes un espace propice à leur intégration sociale dans un réseau d'affiliation masculine très sélectif. Être membre d'un club exigait donc que l'on se conforme à des normes sociales (politesse, éducation, etc.). En effet, fréquenter un club était alors le meilleur moyen d'acquérir le vernis culturel et les talents sociaux nécessaires pour devenir un parfait gentleman. Cependant, alors que des règles strictes, des rituels savamment orchestrés, ainsi que le caractère exclusif (tant sur le plan social que sexuel) de ces institutions étaient supposés garantir la modération, l'ordre moral et la cohésion sociale, il semble pourtant que les manquements ou excès de certains de leurs membres n'étaient pas rares. Un comportement dissident se déclinait selon différents degrés de transgression, allant du simple mépris des normes sociales à une attitude plus provocatrice, voire criminelle. De manière surprenante, si certains hommes au comportement déviant se voyaient exclus de ces cercles exclusifs et ainsi marginalisés, d'autres demeuraient, paradoxalement, des figures sociales ou politiques de premier plan. Enfin, de par son ambivalence, le club anglais peut être considéré comme un espace de sociabilité distinct. Hésitant constamment entre norme et dissidence, cette institution unique en son genre semble refléter les spécificités du caractère national et, par conséquent, contribuer à redessiner les contours d'un modèle de sociabilité anglaise, selon de nouvelles normes. En outre, sa tradition elitiste et masculine persistante et son évolution pendant l'époque victorienne en font, indéniablement, une forme de résistance à la modernité.

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Mots-clés: clubs, dissidence, gentleman, Londres, sociabilité
Keywords: London, sociability

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Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens, 81 Printemps | 2015