

The Hell-Fire Clubs: Sex, Satanism and Secret Societies

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Historians have needed a new book-length history of the so-called Hell-Fire Clubs of the 18th century for some time. Histories of these groups, notably those by Geoffrey Ashe, Edwin Beresford Chancellor, Louis Clark Jones, Daniel Mannix, and Donald McCormick which are those that historians most often cite, tend to fall into two categories.⁽¹⁾ On the one hand, there are those authors who claim that their work debunks popular myths about Hell-Fire Clubs. In practice however, they rarely do more than gloss well known printed sources. As a result, they tend to do little more than summarize the printed record, often failing to distinguish social fact from literary fiction – and more often than not fail to put either into a proper historical context. On the other hand are those who offer unsubstantiated accounts of Hell-Fire Club activities. Masquerading their work as competent research, these writers emphasize the fantastic and the controversial. Sex and Satanism are central to their narratives. In *The Hell-Fire Clubs: Sex, Satanism, and Secret Societies*, Evelyn Lord attempts to go beyond these two approaches. Ambitious in its aims, Lord traces the history of Hell-Fire Clubs from their origins in the 17th century to their decline at the end of the 18th century.

An historical synthesis of 18th-century libertine clubs is a difficult task, and it is admirable that the author presents the outlines of a number of prominent groups in such a readable and succinct manner. Unfortunately, however, the book does not add a significant stock of new knowledge to our understanding of the 'Hell-Fire Clubs'. Nor does it engage seriously with recent academic discussions of libertinism, sociability, the public sphere, or masculinity that should be central to an analysis of the groups she describes. As a work of popular history – a trade title – written for a non-specialist audience, this is not entirely surprising. But given the fact that it was published by a prominent university press, one would have expected a bit more historiographical engagement, at least in the citations. While this review critiques the book from the perspective of a professional historian, readers of this review should keep in mind that the target

audience for *The Hell-Fire Clubs* is the non-specialist reader.

Evelyn Lord outlines three preoccupations that guide her analysis. The first is ‘an approximation of the truth’ based on the available sources (p. xxviii). The second concerns the role of ‘place’ in the constitution of Hell-Fire Clubs. The third is the intersection of class, gender, and space as elements of socio-economic conditions. She divides her book into nine chapters which follow a rough chronology beginning with the 17th-century Damned Crew through the Mohocks and Hell-Fire Clubs to the Medmenham Friars, Demoniacs, and Beggar’s Benison. The author attempts to include examples that go beyond London, and while there is only one chapter that focuses on Scottish clubs, there are several examples of Irish and colonial American groups as well. Its attempt to look at Hell-Fire Clubs in the British context is one of the book’s virtues.

As part of the author’s emphasis of objectivity, she takes issue with earlier writers that sensationalize stories about 18th-century Hell-Fire Clubs. To do so however, Lord sometimes poses hyperbolic questions and overtly sensationalized stories as a tool for breaking through myths. For example, she writes:

Do the fires of hell fuelled by the figures of naked demons flicker through these pages? Or is this simply a story of wealthy men with too much time and licence on their hands, wanting to assert their masculinity (p. xxvi)?

Given the fact that it would be nearly impossible to discover evidence of Satanic worship in 18th-century Britain or Ireland, the answer that she offers is ‘boys will be boys’ (p. xxix). At times, *The Hell-Fire Clubs* does not do enough to shine light on some of the more questionable associations and myths that one finds on the blogosphere. For example, in a short passage on John Toland, Lord links him to Deism, atheism, Rosicrucianism, alchemy, Druidism, and the Knights of Jubilation, which she terms a ‘proto-Masonic organization’ (pp. 42–4). While there is much to be said on early 18th-century interest in these organizations and belief systems, it is unclear to the reader what exactly were their historical contexts. This is problematic in the case of non-specialist readers, because it is never quite clear how these topics relate to each other and what the significance is for the larger discussion of the Hell-Fire Clubs. By conflating these topics the text adds to popular confusion over the early modern histories of associational life, hermeticism, and natural philosophy.

Readers will have to search the book for a single definition of what constitutes a ‘Hell-Fire Club’, but Lord suggests what these groups’ primary characteristics might have been. They were elite organizations in which ‘hedonism ruled in a mix of sociability and rampant sexuality that led to excess’ (p. xxii). The ‘real hell-fire clubs were born’ in the 1720s, and the author suggests that this was because they were increasingly private (p. 44). While Lord suggests that these clubs mocked religion, this cannot be proven for any of the clubs that she describes. That said, some contemporary critics suggested that these groups were irreligious or anti-religious. There was a difference between club practices and the printed descriptions, gossip, and rumour surrounding them during the 18th century. With more emphasis on the relationship between club activities, popular perceptions, and print culture, Lord could have traced the ambiguity between privacy and publicity that was central to the function of the semi-private clubs and societies of the 18th century.

The first club that Lord describes as a Hell-Fire Club was not actually a club (p. 44). It was an invention of the press in response to a royal proclamation on 28 April 1721 stating:

His Majesty have received Information, which gives great Reason to suspect that there have lately been and still are, in and about the Cities of London and Westminster, certain scandalous Clubs or Societies of young Persons who meet together, and in the most impious and blasphemous Manner, insult the most sacred Principles of Holy Religion, affront Almighty God himself, and corrupt the Minds and Morals of one another (p. 45).

Within days, papers supporting High Church positions expounded upon the context of the proclamation. Identifying participants in the groups that the proclamation mentions as ‘Hell-Fire Club men’, the authors explained that a number of London clubs were meeting in support of heterodoxy and atheism. The periodicals accused them of challenging fundamental beliefs, especially the Thirty-Nine Articles. Most importantly, these groups were nurseries for Arianism. In effect, the ‘birth’ of Hell-Fire Clubs was an invention of the press as a way to defame organizations that tended towards latitudinarianism. In the wake of the South Sea Bubble debacle, which Lord describes, the Hell-Fire scare of 1721 also became a way to challenge Whig politicians. Linking the Whigs with nonconformity and atheism was a way to show their threat to the state – a counter-narrative of sorts to a rhetoric linking Tories with Jacobitism.

Thus, the Hell-Fire clubs first described by the press in the 1720s were groups discussing the nature of religious practice and belief. They were the product of a long-term process that began in the 17th century, part of a more general debate over toleration, nonconformity, latitudinarianism, and Arianism. Existing at the nexus of religion and politics, they were a powerful symbol that could be used by High Church Anglicans and Tories alike. Therefore, the Hell-Fire Clubs of the 1720s fit the mold of Calves’-Head Clubs; they were fictional (or fictionalized) constructs meant to produce political or religious action against perceived threats to church and state. As Roger D. Lund has argued, in the late 17th and early 18th centuries:

there emerged a consensus on the part of the defenders of Anglican orthodoxy that infidels and deists were incapable of fomenting discord individually and were dependent upon the support of their associations.⁽²⁾

For critics, the club could be a potent signifier of threats to stability. Even the Kit-Cat Club came under attack as an organization committed to blasphemy and revolution.⁽³⁾

It is clear that the Hell-Fire Club ‘scare’ of the 1720s is the product of a High Church discourse linked to a distinct historical moment. The discourse itself was the result of religious and political debates that reached back to the 17th century. To call clubs that tended to excesses in drink, sexuality, or violence ‘Hell-Fire Clubs’ has less to do with the associations of the 1720s and more to do with a Victorian historical tradition that tended to classify all libertine clubs as ‘Hell-Fire Clubs’.

One of the themes that characterizes Lord’s analysis is its emphasis on dichotomies. We read that while ‘youths of the lower classes might make havoc in the streets ... they lacked the organization of the [elite] hell-fire clubs’ (p. xxii). The same opposition defines the relationship between the aristocracy and the middling sorts: with the outset of the Napoleonic wars:

‘[t]he bucolic roistering aristocracy began to transform into sober and responsible leaders of men, while the respectable God-fearing middle classes, professionals, mill-owners, businessmen and entrepreneurs helped to change the moral economy and social attitudes of the ruling classes’ (p. 211).

Historical research into the complexities of the Georgian social framework contradicts any such

categorization.⁽⁴⁾ Even Lord's own analysis reveals numerous middling families who wished to partake in the lifestyle of the Hellfire Clubs. Again, this simplification is probably the result of the needs of a popular audience. However, in a work that claims to engage with issues of class, one would expect a somewhat more nuanced approach. If nothing else, it would have been preferable to have the footnotes reflect some sense of recent historiographical trends. This lack of engagement with the historical literature is evident in the other topics that Lord investigates, notably space and gender. For example, in the author's discussion of 'Hell-Fire Clubs and Dirty Books,' she never mentions the standard work in the field, Karen Harvey's *Reading Sex in the Eighteenth Century*.⁽⁵⁾ Likewise, the chapters on the Grand Tour and the Monks of Medmenham Abbey do not engage with the significant amount of historical literature published over the last decade.

I want to remind the reader again that the criticisms above judge the work for its importance to specialists in the field of 18th-century British history. It will, no doubt, be a popular work with the broader public. *The Hell-Fire Clubs*, for its shortcomings, is in fact an enjoyable, approachable introduction to libertine associations in 18th-century Britain and Ireland. It outlines several major associations and individuals, and it is a fine introduction for researchers beginning their investigations on associated topics. However,

scholars should not treat it as a definitive work on the topic. In addition to the excellent work that has already been completed on the topic of libertinism and sociability (much of which is not in the book's endnotes or bibliography), there is much more research to be done and archives to be examined. We look forward to a number of pieces that are in production, notably Newton's Key's research on early 18th-century aristocrats and John Sainsbury's survey of 18th-century British libertinism.

The author is due to respond to this review in due course.

Notes

1. Geoffrey Ashe, *Do What You Will: A History of Anti-Morality* (London, 1974); Edwin Beresford Chancellor, *The Lives of the Rakes: Vol.4, The Hell Fire Club* (London, 1925); Louis C. Jones, *The Clubs of the Georgian Rakes* (New York, NY, 1942); Daniel Pratt Mannix, *The Hellfire Club* (New York, NY, 1959); Donald McCormick, *The Hell-Fire Club: The Story of the Amorous Knights of Wycombe* (London, 1958).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Roger D. Lund, 'Guilt by association: the atheist cabal and the rise of the public sphere in Augustan England', *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 34, 3 (2002), 411.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Lund, 'Guilt by Association', 407.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. See, for example, the work of Henry French, most notably *The Middle Sort of People in Provincial England 1600-1750* (Oxford, 2007).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Karen Harvey, *Reading Sex in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2004).[Back to \(5\)](#)

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