

The Literary Club of 18th-Century London

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the renowned author and playwright, and Dr. Christopher Nugent, the successful physician. As they conversed sparks surely must have flown all around the table and Boswell must have been taking notes all the time of the pearls dropping from Dr. Johnson's lips!

It was Reynolds who had proposed the toast associated with the Club—*Esto perpetua*, Latin for "Let it be perpetual." Club membership was restricted—at first there were 9 members but soon some more were inducted. They included cultural luminaries such as the greatest actor of the time David Garrick; the great parliamentarian and minister of the British Government for a while, Charles James Fox, the luminous economist Adam Smith, and arguably one of the greatest of British historians, Edward Gibbon. According to the author and member of the Club, Bishop Thomas Percy, as far as Johnson was concerned, the thing that all members were to keep in mind was that the Club "was intended" to "consist of such men, as that if only two of them chanced to meet, they should be able to entertain each other without wanting the addition of more Company to pass the evening agreeably". Or, to use the word that was coined by the great Dr. Johnson himself, Club members had to be "clubbable!"

As one can imagine, with such amazing

minds and larger than life characters, the reputation of the Club spread far and wide—in London and beyond. For sure, there were other clubs in swelling and increasingly prosperous London (as is the case with Dhaka now!), and Johnson himself was associated with quite a few of them, but who could compete with the members of The Club? Initially, Tuesday was set aside as the meeting day, then Friday; eventually other days were considered good for clubbing as well. According to one member, the writer and lawyer John Hawkins, The Literary Club soon proved to be "the great delight of Johnson's life, a center of conversation and mental intercourse."

As the century progressed more and more people vied with each other to become a member of The Club strict rules were initiated to keep up its reputation. Eventually, elections and "blackballing" were procedures chosen to control the number of members as well as to ensure that only "quality" people became members. Hawkins, unfortunately, was deemed to be "unclubbable" by Johnson himself and therefore was soon expelled from the Club! But Club members could be of varying political beliefs—Burke, for example, was passionate about the rights of the American colonists but Johnson critical of them. Burning political issues such as the right of the American colonists came up for

discussion and debate but tempers were kept under control and wit-combats proved to be the rule and not scuffles. On most days conversation flowed freely. On April 3, 1778, Boswell records in his biography of Johnson, for example, "The conversation began with sculpture" and then "the subject is dropped for emigration; it then moved on to "population increase" and "density"; next to parliamentary oratory, then to philology; afterwards to travelling abroad and thence to "human nature generally!"

Johnson died in 1784 and The Club eventually disappeared from recorded history, but it had survived long enough to become a model of clubs where great minds could come together for a convivial atmosphere, free and witty exchange of ideas, and company worth seeking every evening. It became the inspiration of many such institutions all over the world. Dhaka Club thus can claim that any recorder of its primordial history would find The Club as one of its ancestors. For sure, for our club members, or literary minded people wanting to elevate their *addas* a lot, the London Club can be a source of inspiration and the conduct of its members well worth emulating during *addas* for fantastic clubbing!

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