Inside the Club by Mark Fisher

"He may be said to have formed my mind, and brushed off from it a great deal of rubbish," is how Joshua Reynolds described his debt to Dr Johnson. Reynolds was 40, at the height of his success, when he met Johnson in 1756, the year before Johnson published his Dictionary. Johnson loved to talk, Reynolds to listen. They formed The Club in 1764 as a literary dining club, at a dinner in the Turk's Head Tavern in Gerrard Street. Its nine founding members included Edmund Burke and Oliver Goldsmith.

They were soon joined by David Garrick and James Boswell, and later by Charles James Fox, Edward Gibbon and Richard Brinsley Sheridan.

The French Revolution exposed fault lines in The Club: Boswell was opposed, Fox in favour, and by the end of the 18th century this crucible of the Enlightenment (Adam Smith was also a member, though not a popular one) became gradually more political and more Establishment, electing aristocrats like the Irish Lord Charlemont, a member of the Society of Dilettanti and friend of Robert Adam and David Hume.

In New Annals of The Club (Modern Art Press, limited edition) Charles Saumarez Smith (1764–1814), David Cannadine (1814–1914) and Peter Hennessy (1914–1984) tell the story of The Club and its membership well. In the 19th century members included nine Prime Ministers, from Lord Liverpool to Asquith (five Conservatives, five Whigs/Liberals) and the membership became wider (Walter Scott, T.H. Huxley, Lord Kelvin) but it was never a Lunar Society, electing very few scientists, or physicians or manufacturers, and it never formed policies or acted executively. Meeting once a month, The Club was concerned solely with conversation (recorded in its early years by Boswell, and later by Carlisle and Grant-Duff) and conviviality.

If in the 18th century it embodied the Enlightenment, in the 19th century it became more Establishment: a bastion of Church, State, the Law and Parliament (more Lords than Commons).

When in 1911 it didn't elect Winston Churchill and F.E. Smith, the two of them formed The Other Club (with Bob Boothby, Max Beaverbrook and Gordon Selfridge). It was less staid: "a rival body of political bounders" in Anthony Sampson's words. Churchill maintained that election to it was "superior to any honour, short of the Garter" but it has never matched The Club's remarkable roll call of historians (Macaulay, Trevelyan, H.A.L. Fisher), Archbishops of Canterbury (everyone in the 20th century except Donald Coggan, who declined membership, as did Ramsay MacDonald and Jeremy Thorpe) or private secretaries to the monarch (nearly all of them). Both are very English institutions, maintaining continuity and change. Both draw almost exclusively from Oxford and Cambridge.

Prime Ministers like Baldwin came to The Club to escape the pressures of office. Journalists have rarely been elected (the late Charles Douglas-Home, Editor of The Times, was an exception), and records have not been kept, so the reader is left to imagine what Gladstone or Acton or Kenneth Clark might have said.

But we are given occasional glimpses of how members behaved. When in 1944 the Algerian red wine supplied by Brown's Hotel was considered unsatisfactory, Clark supplied bottles of claret from his own cellar.

The Left has seldom featured. Gaitskell failed by one vote to be elected, though Roy Jenkins, the ideal clubman, biographer as well as politician, was successful. The Club's literary taste has always been catholic: Tennyson, Matthew Arnold, Kipling, Buchan, Galsworthy, T.S. Eliot, Cecil Day-Lewis, John Betjeman.

These Annals bring The Club and its membership up to 1984—its own 30-year rule? In recent years it has admitted women but the authors are discreet as to their identities. Perhaps such discretion is the secret of its longevity—that and the belief that Montaigne was right to consider conversation "the most fruitful and most natural exercise of our minds."