

The Society of Dilettanti, Archaeology and Identity in the British Enlightenment. Jason M. Kelly, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2009, 366pp. £40.00. hb. 978-0-300-15219-7.

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Jason M. Kelly's broad view of eighteenth-century Dilettanti 'culture' casts new light on the implicit understanding of that society's fraternal composition. Male companionship and sociability, often of a riotous nature, has dominated the historiography of this group and obscured the commitment to intellectual inquiry deeply-held by its original members. Kelly's book 'takes a more sophisticated look at the society and its members, recognising their social and cultural personae', and in doing so reveals how the Dilettanti Society helped pioneer a new approach to the study of antiquity and forged the way for archaeology to take its place among other subjects of scientific investigation and academic rigour. Therefore the 'Identity' in the book's title can be seen to refer to both the identity of the Dilettanti itself and the subject of archaeology within British society more generally.

The book is divided into three parts, covering 'The Social World of the Dilettanti', 'The *Anni Mirabiles* of British Classical Archaeology' and 'A Dilettantish Legacy', creating an overall impression of the ambitious nature of the Society's aims and closely aligning these to the particular circumstances of scientific empiricism in Britain during the period. This positions *The Society of Dilettanti* alongside recently published research that highlights the significance of the interconnected interests of a range of individuals whose sociability made an impact on their professional and leisure pursuits across the disciplines categorised roughly under the heading of natural philosophy; the forerunner of which being John Gascoigne's *Joseph Banks and the English Enlightenment: Useful Knowledge and Polite Culture* (1994) and the most recent, *The English Virtuoso: Art, Medicine and Antiquarianism in the Age of Empiricism* by Craig Ashley Hansen (2009).

In the introduction, Kelly describes the distinction he makes between the seemingly straightforward appropriation of classical imagery and modes of collecting that helped to shape an elite identity with the contingent, coincidental character of political allegiances that often determined this realisation. The author suggests that the prominence of classical archaeology in eighteenth-century British art and architecture was not the inevitable consequence of aristocratic interests in the classical world, education or even Grand Tour culture. Nevertheless, Philip Ayres' portrayal of the relationship between Robert Boyle, 3rd Earl of Burlington, and his antiquarian friend, William Stukeley (in which Burlington implored Stukeley to uncover evidence that would incontrovertibly connect contemporary Britons with their Roman ancestors) and Vicky Coltman's assertion that the dominance of classical literature in British public Schools helped to form a deep-seated longing for 'antiquity' within young elites, point to a determined way of thinking that may be construed as a form of 'constructed' identity. Of course, the Society of Dilettante does pose a useful illustration of the combinability of interests that constituted its membership and the author usefully examines just how Dilettantism collided with polite sociability as epitomised by the 'middling sort', particularly with reference to the

representation of elite encounters on the Grand Tour, as revealed in the Society's portraits by George Knapton. These portraits, emphasising the conviviality and libertinism of elite travellers are in sharp contrast to later recollections of the Grand Tour by artists and other professionals and, in the main, present a rather narrow view of the Grand Tour experience, while providing a fascinating insight into the self-parodying tendency among individual members. The author compares the paintings of Joseph Wright of Derby and Pompeo Batoni in an effort to explain how Dilettanti pursuits, such as Grand Tour collecting, could be presented to a wider audience that encompassed ideas of polite sociability. Wright's painting *Three Persons Viewing the Gladiator* (exh.1765) adopts a similar style to Batoni's portraits of elite travellers but the artist's intention was to construct a moralising public work of art, writes Kelly. However, the comparison with Batoni generalises that artist's *oeuvre* and overstates Wright's intentions. As private commissions, Batoni's patrons' wishes may have been given prominence in the composition and execution of the paintings, but they cannot be said to be for 'private' view only, given that they would have been hung in aristocratic homes for a very 'public' purpose. Despite the important role that the Grand Tour played in the initial formation of the Society of Dilettanti, the book's discussion of Grand Tour 'issues', such as religion and Jacobitism are touched on only briefly but this is, perhaps, to give more space to the overarching theme of archaeology which was, after all, to become the Dilettanti's legacy to British culture.

Part two of *The Society of Dilettanti* is devoted to its most famous endeavours, the sponsorship of expeditions and the publication of drawings of ancient architecture. Covering three chapters, the author explains the apparent progress of these projects from the earliest journey to Palmyra undertaken by Robert Wood and James Dawkins in 1749 to the Ionian expedition in 1764. The results of these expeditions became *The Ruins of Palmyra* (1753), *The Ruins of Balbec* (1757) *The Antiquities of Athens* (1762) (By James Stuart and Nicholas Revett) and *Ionian Antiquities* (1769). Kelly describes the historical and social background to these publications, discussing how Society members were articulating these projects alongside plans to erect their own buildings in London, based on the idea of creating a 'Gallery of Ancient Merit' and a 'Gallery of Modern Genius'. This, argues the author, is evidence of contemporary debates among the Dilettanti surrounding the notion of a 'classical ideal' versus 'modern' interpretations. Thus, 'The Dilettanti were breaking their reputational moorings from the language of elite libertinism, and combining the language of *virtù* and polite science to redefine its public image'. Similarly, in their publishing projects, Kelly makes a distinction between Robert Wood's earlier works that included a characteristic element of travel narrative compared to *Ionian Antiquities* where the author acclaims matter of 'Fact' rather than 'Opinion'. This is an example of the Society of Dilettanti's 'adaptation of antiquarianism to conform to the expectations of natural philosophy'. *The Society of Dilettanti* presents a valuable reassessment of the contribution made by Robert Wood, in particular, to dialogues that emerged within the art world concerned with a growing mood of empiricism. As a friend of Joseph Spence, Wood may have been sympathetic to the expression *ut pictura poesis* (a natural connection between all the polite arts) but, according to Kelly, the constraints of empiricism prevented him from

exploring his views on poetical geography any further. However, constructing such a polarised perspective of these dialogues seems slightly contradictory to the premise of the book, which is, that Dilettanti 'culture' was constantly shifting and altering to keep pace with changing social circumstances. Nor does this 'crisis of enlightenment *scientia* and the aesthetic of *empeiria*' really explain both William Chambers' and Horace Walpole's objections to *Ionian Antiquities* that seem to be based on localised prejudices closer to home rather than any loyalty to a universal ideal.

In chapter six, the author examines William Pars' illustrations for *Ionian Antiquities* suggesting that they serve as ethno-history, giving the viewer a 'panoramic' of foreign places, people and time and serving as a book for the researcher, rather than the connoisseur. This aspect of Pars' images is apparent both from the original watercolours and from the book's engravings where the central viewpoint focuses on a careful delineation of the ancient ruins themselves, while in the foreground, the local inhabitants are portrayed carrying out everyday routines such as prayers, tending to animals, talking and smoking. They are not exoticised to degree which might be expected in a generalised 'picturesque' scene. However, neither do the illustrations represent accuracy over imagination or give a sense of empirical fact. This is evident in the rather insignificant positioning of the antiquarians within the frame, particularly in Plate II, *The Ruins of the Temple of Apollo Didymaeus from the Northeast*, 1764-5, which shows Nicholas Revett sketching in the middle of a pile of the ruins, but he is difficult to see and the picture needs careful observation in order to recognise him at all. This might indicate that Pars thought it important to include some kind of reference to antiquarian practice but that it would not harm his overall depiction of a topographical scene, tempered by his imagination.

The Society of Dilettanti, ends with a critical evaluation of the Society in the last decade of the Enlightenment period and describes the various tussles among its members over issues such as the Parthenon marbles, the Graeco-Roman debate and the controversy over the publication of *An Account of the Remains of the Worship of Priapus* (1786) by Richard Payne-Knight and William Hamilton. The Priapus antiquities, Kelly argues, forced the Society to reconsider its views on naturalism, regarded as primitive and less than ideal in this extreme example. The meanings of the ownership and knowledge of the *Worship of Priapus*, and its significance for Dilettanti members is considered from the theoretical perspective of Arjun Appadurai's *The Social Life of Things*. However, the powerful significance of objects described by Appadurai in his analysis of commodities in cultural exchange appears somewhat misplaced in this assessment of the circulation of what was, effectively, a private project that produced an almost singularised object in the form of the publication itself. More successfully interpreted throughout the book is the incorporation of Arnaldo Momigliano's ideas of the role played by antiquarians in the understanding and dissemination of ancient material culture.

The Society of Dilettanti is a timely and comprehensive overview of an often neglected and, at times, misrepresented organisation. The author has surveyed a wide range of archival sources in order to present the crucial contribution made by the Society to the fields of archaeology, architecture and the fine arts. The

book creates an opportunity to reconsider the purpose of this seemingly elitist band of aristocratic gentlemen within the eighteenth-century world of polite culture and speculate on their influences beyond the boundaries of their perceived social worlds.