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*A Sixpence at Whist. Gaming and the English Middle Classes 1680-1830.* By Janet E. Mullin.

Woodbridge: The Boydell Press. 2015. 240 pp. £45.00. ISBN 9781783270477.

The ‘middling sort’ in the eighteenth century has been a flourishing area of research in recent decades.

Janet E. Mullin’s highly readable and well-researched account of card-play makes a valuable contribution to this literature by bringing to the foreground a remarkably understudied leisure activity—especially given how prevalent she finds it to be. Whether at home or out at the tavern, assembly room or pleasure garden, cards were an enduring source of pleasure and entertainment for middle class men and women of all ages throughout the long eighteenth century. In pursuit of these activities, Mullin draws together a variety of source material, from diaries, letters and personal papers to court documents and print literature in the form of conduct manuals, novels and periodicals.

Such a varied source base allows for a picture not just of contemporary perceptions of card-play and its uses, value or risks, but also of how these ideas related to the lives and everyday practices of ordinary middle class men and women. Card-play might be just one manifestation of the eighteenth-century penchant for a wager—as Mullin tells us, men and women could be found taking a punt on anything from the length of a footway to the date of a man’s marriage—but the goal of this book is to use cards to yield new understandings of gaming practices in the eighteenth century more generally, as well as the people who noted their wins and losses (p. 5). As a whole, the reader will learn much about the former, if a little less about the latter, since the picture of polite culture we are presented with is a more familiar story than the card-play Mullin uses to uncover it.

From the first line of the introduction the reader is plunged into a world of middle class respectability, as the Reverend John Woodforde and his niece scramble to cater for visiting house-guests at short notice. Afternoon tea followed a successful dinner, and the company dealt out the cards for Quadrille. Woodforde’s losses of ‘2d. per fish’ did not sour what he considered to be ‘a very agreeable day indeed’ (p. 1). Could it be, asks Mullin, that the fashionable, genteel and status conscious middle classes were ‘a vast pool of gamesters’ (p. 2)? And, if so, in what ways did their gambling differ from the elite culture of recklessness exercised at Brooks’s and White’s clubs with

which we are more familiar? In answer to these questions, the following chapters provide an intimate portrait of middle class 'pass-times'. Chapter 1 sets out the broader context of middling culture and the place of cards within it. Far from conflicting with polite values, moderate gambling, social play and honouring debts were a natural fit for a polite and commercial people well versed in cautious risk-taking, thorough accounting and the significance of personal repute. Chapter 2 takes the reader into the home with episodes of spur-of-the-moment sociability between husbands, wives, close acquaintances and children, for whom card-play was a useful educational tool. In chapter 3, invited guests are added to this domestic scene as card-play unfolded within a 'system of expected standards of polite hospitality' (p. 58): the 'home as a stage' used to project respectability and to further and maintain networks of business and social life. Chapter 4 ventures out into the familiar spaces of polite sociability, where card-play enlivened assembly rooms and pleasure gardens. How the ostensibly polite resolved the moral quandary of gaming is explored in chapter 5: while aware of the warnings that gambling threatened social order and personal ruin, in the middle class mind, 'restraint and common sense' exempted them from such criticism (p. 127). Chapter 6 goes beyond this moderate risk-taking to consider those who did succumb to the perils of addictive 'deep play' and illegal play, along with a discussion of the difficulties of enforcing gaming laws. Finally, chapter 7 tells the tale of miscreant sons and their fathers' 'tough love' response.

Card-play was a fundamentally sociable activity, but it was one enjoyed by different types of people in different places. If there is one criticism of this work, it is that it misses the opportunity to explore fully how the expectations and conduct of sociability might have been contingent on these different contexts. In Mullin's account, it seems as though all roads lead to politeness, but the details of food and drink (pp. 76-9), for example, and of the diarists' frequent references to making 'merry' leave the reader wondering just how polite some of these encounters were—as does the existence of illegal gaming practices among those who were supposed to aspire to respectability. The nature and importance of politeness has been contested since the earlier work of scholars such as Paul Langford and Lawrence Klein, but Mullin tends to confirm established tropes about the 'how' and 'where' of these social encounters, rather than using the rich material she has unearthed to move debates

forward. On a similar note, the variegated middle classes are flattened as ‘people whose families were supported by commerce or professions’ (p. 14); further detail about the lives and status of the individuals who animate the study would have added depth to the picture, as would some consideration of change over time. Nevertheless, this hitherto untold story of card-play enriches historical understandings of the eighteenth-century middling sort. It should appeal to those with diverse interests, including leisure, sociability, domesticity and morality, as well as gaming more specifically—and there is a handy guide to eighteenth-century card games thrown into the bargain.

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