This is an ambitious edited collection about British sociability in the long eighteenth century. The aim of the book, as spelled out in the introduction and foreword, is to investigate British sociability from a wide range of perspectives to show how a distinctive "British model of sociability progressively took shape from the Restoration period and developed throughout the eighteenth century" (p. 4). Particular emphasis is placed on the national character of British sociability, and how it diverged from the French model of politeness, refinement, and conversation that has come to typify understandings of sociability and mixed-sex social interaction at this time. Each of the fourteen chapters, many of which are written by leading experts in British and French historical and literary studies, attempts to define the idiosyncrasies of British sociability. The book is structured thematically, but also employs a loose chronological structure, with the first chapters exploring Restoration sociability and the latter touching upon sociable culture in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Tracing the origins of British sociability forms the focus of the four chapters that make up part 1, beginning with an incisive and readable chapter by Brian Cowan about the place of the Restoration in the history of English sociability. Citing three key developments—the consumer revolution, the rise of the public sphere, and the emergence of a new culture of politeness—Cowan draws attention to the problem of periodization. The central claim of this chapter is that, with the exception of these developments being more pronounced, there was very little that was distinctive about this moment in British sociability compared to what had come before. Cowan makes an important case for connecting the political and social histories of this period and argues that the most novel development in post-Restoration culture was the emergence of the political party, which paved the way for a culture of partisan sociability. Marie-Madeleine Martinet's chapter attempts to show how present-day mapping and visualization techniques might be retrospectively applied to urban settings of the Restoration period to understand how social structures and physical space interacted. Club sociability forms the focus of chapter 3, by Valérie Capdeville, who sets out to explore the purposes that the club served and the extent to which it answered "new 'sociable' aspirations in post-Restoration Britain" (p. 5). This rich and nuanced discussion engages well with the paradoxical nature of the public sphere as it evolved, showing how clubs, as they became more established and started to proliferate became less public and more selective in their outlook. Following this is another useful discussion...
of British sociable culture by Markman Ellis, who focuses on the tea table, women, and gossip in early eighteenth-century Britain. The different iterations that the tea table held at this time—as a material object, a place for sociability, and a form of polite sociability—lies at the center of the discussion and provides a useful framework for delineating the different gendered meanings that came to be attached to it. Like many chapters in this section (and in the volume more widely), it makes a strong case for refuting the Habermasian ideal of post-Restoration sociability that centered only on the public sphere of the coffeehouse. Indeed, Ellis draws attention to the fact that tea-table gossip should not be regarded as frivolous or idle chat, since its destructive consequences and, by extension, its importance were widely recognized.

Concentrating on the connections between British and Continental patterns of social practice, the five chapters that make up Part 2 center on the question of how British sociability developed a distinctive model of urban sociability through a process of “imitation, hybridisation, rejection and redefinition” (p. 89). To that end, Elisabeth Martichou explores the nuances of French and English models of artistic sociability and the competing perceptions about the relationship between artists, amateurs, and connoisseurs. Anglo-French emulation and rivalry are also central issues in Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire’s chapter on Masonic culture. However, as he emphasizes, this is not a simple story of rejection or cultural appropriation. Instead, the picture is complicated, as lodges, such as the Brest Lodge, deliberately adopted procedures that remained loyal to both English and French models of masonic culture, suggesting a conscious decision “to make the most of opportunities afforded them by a plural Fraternity” (p. 122). Chapter 7, by Annic Cossic-Péricarpin, uses the eighteenth-century novelist Tobias Smollett’s little-explored medical treatise on water (first published 1752) and travel book Travels through France and Italy (1766) to challenge established models of British sociability, especially surrounding how Englishmen viewed Continental sociability and how health and social customs were perceived and represented in their writings. For Smollett, health was always prioritized over a search for sociability, which stood in tension to the Grand Tour’s aims to open up social and cultural opportunities for many young writers. Likewise, Jane Rendell also uses the writings of British authors to challenge established ideals of sociability in Enlightenment Scotland is uncovered. In particular, Rendell emphasizes the expansion of mixed sociability from the late eighteenth century and the rise of associational culture that enabled women to engage in public life in different ways. The final chapter of this section, by Alain Kerhervé, examines eighty-eight epistolary manuals published in Britain between 1700 and 1800 to provide an overview of the similarities and differences between Anglo and French models of epistolary sociability. Kerhervé suggests that British letter-writing practices were distinct from the French in a number of ways, but especially because of their broader social inclusiveness, involving both those from lower social groups and women. It is also noted that under the British model, letter-writing would address subjects beyond the limited world of court politics, as demonstrated from the wide range of advice relating to business or family matters.

The collection’s last part situates itself around the tensions and paradoxes within British sociability, looking for signs of Kant’s ideal of the “unsocial sociability” as well as the different ways in which sociability might be resisted. Allan Ingram’s chapter on the public and private selves of Samuel Johnson and James Boswell offers an important discussion of these two pillars of eighteenth-century sociability, showing how public presentation does not always mirror the private thoughts, feelings, reflections, and behavior of the historical ac-
tors under discussion. Emrys Jones’s chapter on friendship and unsociable sociability in eighteenth-century literature pursues the status of the friendly enemy in works of eighteenth-century fiction, whilst Ian Newman offers an interesting case study of John Thelwall’s failure to toast the army at a meeting of the Royal Humane Society in 1799, showing the limits of conviviality. Through this instance of discord, the chapter skillfully shows the disparity between public reporting in the press and the private accounts of the meeting and emphasizes the need to look at how an individual decision to refuse toasting can undermine any sense of Habermasian collectivity or consensus. Norbert Col’s chapter has a similar political focus, exploring how Edmund Burke did not readily accept some of the new political developments in sociable culture, especially clubs and salons, despite his outward presentation as a highly sociable person. Indeed, his most rewarding sociability came from within the extended household rather than through political association. Finally, Rémy Duthille’s chapter explores the challenges faced by the London Corresponding Society to appeal to a broad membership, whilst also attempting to maintain an air of respectability. Using the autobiographies of Francis Place and Thomas Hardy in conjunction with a wide range of secondary literature on the Society and its activities during this period, the chapter suggests that alternative avenues of sociability, such as debating, letter-writing, collective pamphlet-reading, and the collection of dues were significant practices in educating and self-fashioning its members.

This volume is a great tribute to the exciting and vibrant research taking place in the history of eighteenth-century British sociability. It is wide-ranging in its scope and offers a varied analytical and methodological approach to its subject matter. More importantly, it embraces not just the benefits and importance of sociable culture and practice at this time, but also its tensions, paradoxes, and challenges. The Anglo-French connections and rivalries that lie at the heart of this volume are helpful for showing that British sociability was not simply a replica of what has traditionally been regarded as the “superiority of a French model of sociability” (p. 272), and instead was ideologically, politically, and culturally distinct. As hinted in the conclusion, one of the unusual components of British sociability was how far it was adapted across the British Empire, as the likes of David Shiels, Sarah Pearsall, and Julie Flavell have shown. The primary geographical focus of the chapters, however, tends to be England and Scotland, with sociable practices and experiences in Ireland, Britain’s North American colonies, and its other overseas territories never being addressed. Given the vibrant research in transatlantic studies and Atlantic culture in this period, it was a shame that this was not dealt with more fully. Similarly, the political and social focus of the majority of chapters in the collection means that religion and the various religious changes informing how patterns of sociability were changing in this period—for example, in the years preceding and following the 1689 Act of Toleration or the toleration of Catholics in the later eighteenth century—receive little recognition in the chapters. Such a focus may have added another distinctive layer to the discussions about the nature of eighteenth-century British social custom.

Although the majority of the chapters and case studies are highly readable and shed new light on British cultures of sociability, there are some where the central arguments and points get lost and throw the balance of the volume out of kilter. This is because some of the chapters occasionally lose sight of the volume’s readers, many of whom may not be specialists in the particular field under exploration. Despite these limitations, however, this broad approach to British cultures of sociability—embracing both the structural transformations taking place in the social and political arenas and more focused case studies—is able to offer something new and insightful to the nature of British sociable culture in the period after 1660. Wide-ranging and eclectic in its methodological and themat-
ic approach, it is clear that this volume will appeal to a wide range of scholars, whether approaching this from a historical, literary, philosophical, political, or social perspective.

Note


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