
Reviewed by Joyce Goggin (University of Amsterdam)

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Commissioned by Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth (Red Deer Polytechnic)

“Cards were the opium of the polite” (p. 1).

People who work in gambling studies are well aware that this fundamental human activity is under-researched, clouded as it is by associations of low-living and sleaze on the one hand, and non-seriousness or triviality on the other. To the generally unfavorable impression of gambling that has hindered its proper study, Bob Harris, author of *Gambling in Britain in the Long Eighteenth Century*, adds the difficulty of pinning down what precisely constitutes gambling: where its limits lie, and how threatening or recreative it is thought to be at any given time. In other words, what exactly is gambling? Working through a dense tangle of archival sources, *Gambling in Britain* is Harris’s impressive and very welcome attempt to clarify some of these issues, by studying a high point in the history of gambling, namely, the eighteenth century in Britain.

Also in this history, Harris undertakes to explain the social and economic depth and breadth of gambling in Enlightenment Britain, and he incorporates a broad spectrum of British life in his tale, with a particular focus on London. Harris offers readers a treasure trove of the kind of nuggets and entertaining stories with which the (popular) history of gambling is replete, along with a rich archive of thoroughgoing documentation ferreted out of the archives. And while we all love a good anecdote, the factual stuff from the archives is what people who write about gambling need to know most. Indeed, where knowledge of court trials, gambling laws, debt resolution, and legality is thin, the scholarship tends to support notions about various social groups and their engagement with gambling that may not be entirely accurate, or at least do not tell the whole story. Harris’s book fleshes out a more fulsome version of what gambling was and meant in the eighteenth century, debunking a number of received notions about class, gender, and gambling. To give just one example, while it may be (and is often) assumed that gambling was frowned upon among women, and particularly women of the elite classes, Harris shows that this is far from the case: women of all
classes enjoyed gambling in the eighteenth century—some voraciously—and lost sizable sums as well.

For people who work on gambling in the eighteenth century and its representation in various media—literature, theater, and painting, as well as film, television, and digital media—this book is a goldmine of detail and solid documentation. Indeed, to take women and gambling again as an example, Harris's book provides important details about where women were gambling. For those researching gambling in women's history as described in eighteenth-century literature—Susanna Centlivre and Frances Burney spring to mind—Gambling in Britain in the Long Eighteenth Century provides innumerable illuminating details. As Harris explains, London town houses became venues for exclusive gambling entertainment with notable hostesses, such as the Duchess of Cumberland, and a Lady's Club was founded in 1770. So, although “women were not admitted to the homo-social world” of men's clubs, they hosted their own “‘faro' tables or games of hazard in their homes” (p. 69). And those interested in scenes of gambling in seedier venues outside the private salons of the genteel and parvenus presented in Centlivre and Burney, such as the taverns, inns, and coffeehouses that come to life in novels by authors like Daniel Defoe and Henry Fielding, will find much of use here as well.

Also of particular interest is the final chapter on legality and gambling, including discussions of locations where it occurred, the legality of various kinds of gambling, the things that were wagered with and on (bowls, skittle, cards, dice, lotteries, ninepin, billiards, backgammon, and foot races), the people who were gambling (lowlifes and the elite), and the difference that class may have made as to how gambling was viewed. At the same time, gambling debts belong to a different order and are somewhat self-regulating, at least among the upper classes, given that honoring gambling debts involved a gentleman's reputation. In sum, what becomes clear in this chapter is that “most anti-gambling laws were ignored” and most of their clauses were never invoked (p. 255). The result was that Britain in general, and London in particular, was seized by a gambling mania and that gaming “reached unexampled heights in Britain in the 1770s and 1780s” (p. 33).

One more area in which this book is of particular interest is how it shines a light on those points at which gambling and the greater economy—the worlds of gaming and Exchange alley—met in the eighteenth century, thus drawing our attention to “the shifting boundary line between commerce, finance and gambling” (p. 235). The chapter on the lottery is particularly revealing here, and again where women were concerned because they often viewed investing in the lotteries as a source of steady and sound income. Indeed, some viewed purchasing lottery tickets as “an entirely rational, controlled and regular” way for people of the poorer classes to venture small amounts and make small gains, or some “women ... did not normally participate in the stock market” and were “drawn into the modest adventures offered by the lottery” (pp. 188, 293). More significant still, Harris shows that buying lottery tickets was part of the wider array of services that banks typically offered and explains that “most lottery office keepers appear to have been stockbrokers for whom sales of lottery tickets and lottery-related products became the main components of their business” (p. 146). On the other side of the coin, their customers also included those already active in the stock market who invested in the lotteries as part of their portfolio with the goal of securing a reasonable, steady income.

To suggest one point of critique—a tiny needle in the haystack of very useful arguments, facts, and figures contained in the book—is Harris's brief comment on the novel and its relation to the lottery in the eighteenth century. Here, the author rather forgivably—given that the rise of the novel in the eighteenth century is not the point of his
book—cites just one source on the topic, and not the best at that. Indeed, Harris does not mention the work of any of the really significant authors in the study of gambling (and finance) and literature in the eighteenth century—Thomas Kavanagh, Deidre Lynch, Sandra Sherman, Mary Poovey, Natalie Roxborough—from which his argument would have benefited. That said, Harris has most certainly provided raw material with which to continue work on the novel in the eighteenth century, as a genre that is intimately related to the market, chance, speculation, and gambling.

Where print culture, the promotion of gambling, and the dissemination of the practices that surrounded it are concerned, Harris also argues that gambling may have become a salient feature of British life in the eighteenth century for reasons beyond the green felt, lottery office, or racetrack. Gambling in eighteenth-century Britain may have become more visible than elsewhere in Europe because it was “made more visible by the existence of uniquely free, bold, ebullient and creative print media,” which encompassed multiplying newspapers, periodicals, and, again, “that significant export and agent of English cultural influence, the novel” (pp. 11, 268). Overall, the world of print in the eighteenth century advertised and radically invigorated the market for various forms of gambling, which was also greatly extended through new channels of communication and circulation, such as a growing network of postal services.

What you will not find in Gambling in Britain in the Long Eighteenth Century along with all the topics just enumerated, however, is a grand, overarching theory of how to think about gambling in Britain in the long eighteenth century. What you will find is a wonderful resource, correctives for some well-worn clichés about eighteenth-century gambling, and a number of new insights about circulation networks, the market and gambling, legality, and the lottery. Harris has obligingly scoured the archives for us to provide rich detail for any-one working in eighteenth-century studies in any number of disciplines from economic history, women’s studies, literature, and sociology, to urban, film, and media studies.
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