



# Gentlemen & Blackguards: Gambling Mania and the Plot to Steal the Derby of 1844

*Nicholas Foulkes*

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In the early 19th century, gambling was a grave social ill—largely uncontrolled and corrupt. The 1830s saw the institution of the Poor Law, the abolition of slavery, the regulation of child labor, the birth of the police force, and the widening of parliamentary representation. But, as far as gambling was concerned, the beginning of 1844 saw things much as they had been since the 18th century: games of faro, hazard, whist, and roulette could be played in houses around the West End; while racing was self regulated by the Jockey Club and a vaguely defined sense of honor. Almost exclusively aristocratic in tone, racing was, in the days before football, the chief national sporting obsession. However, the popularity of gambling and the turf was at odds with the increasingly regulated tempo of life in the 1840s. Vociferous moralists began to inveigh against the vice. The government was on a mission to clean up, if not eradicate, gambling in Britain and Britain's premier race, the Derby, was put on public trial. The Derby of 1844 was expected to be a two-horse race between Ugly Buck and Ratan, owned respectively by the intriguing characters, John Gully, a social-climbing former prize-fighter, and his great rival, William Crockford, the club owner. The race itself was full of drama, not least when it became apparent that Ratan and Ugly Buck had both been doped. Nick Foulkes brilliantly takes Frith's narrative canvas "Derby Day" as the inspiration for a gripping story. There are strong characters, the tension of class rivalries, the drama of the race and the trial, as well as the opportunity to use the gambling of the time as a lens through which to view the wider social change of the period.

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