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Take Six Girls

The Lives of the Mitford Sisters

Written by Laura Thompson

Published by Head of Zeus

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TAKE SIX GIRLS

The Lives of the Mitford Sisters

LAURA THOMPSON



First published in 2015 by Head of Zeus Ltd

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN (HB) 9781784970871
(E) 9781784970888

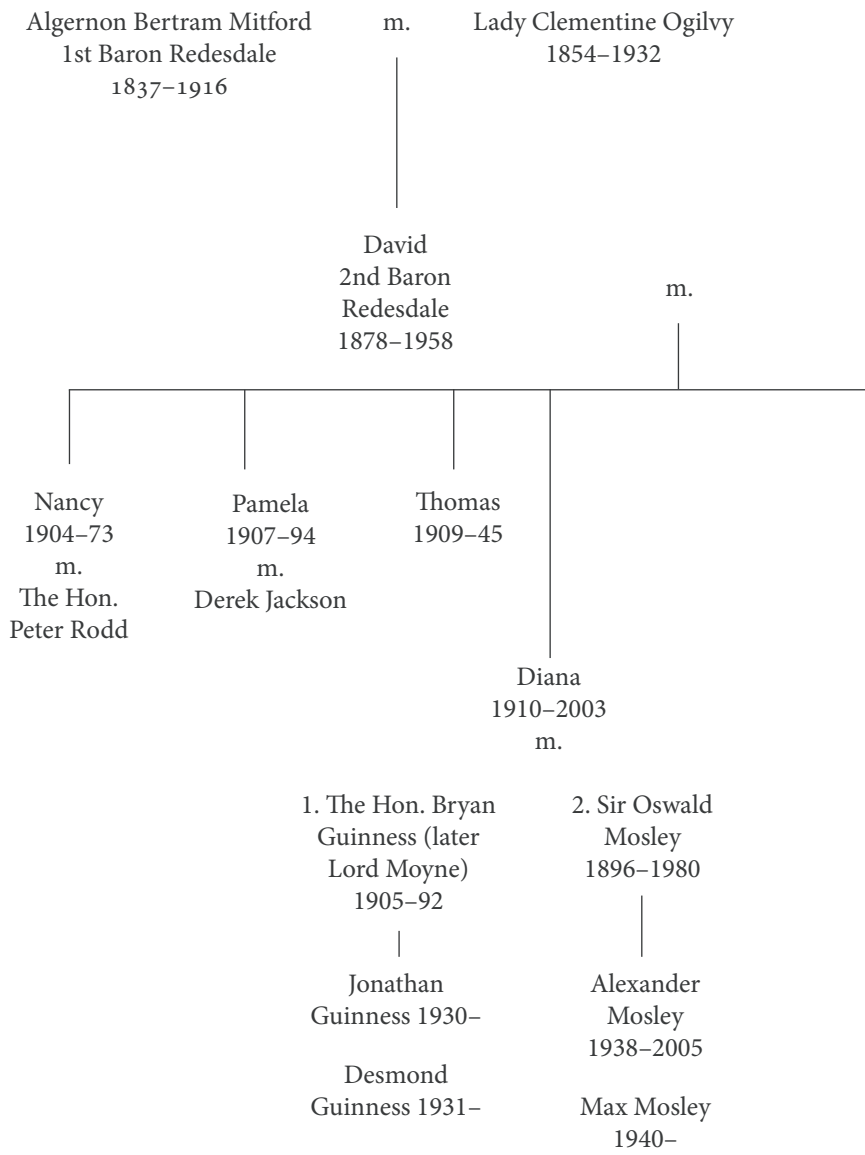
Typeset by Adrian McLaughlin

Printed and bound in Germany by
GGP Media GmbH, Pössneck

Head of Zeus Ltd
Clerkenwell Green
45–47 Clerkenwell Green
London EC1R 0HT

WWW.HEADOFZEUS.COM

THE MITFORD FAMILY TREE



Thomas
Bowles
1841?–1921

m.

Jessica Evans
Gordon
1852–87

Sydney
Bowles
1880–1963

Unity
Valkyrie
1914–48

Jessica Lucy
1917–96
m.

1. Esmond
Romilly
1918–41

|
Julia
Romilly
1937–38

Constancia
Romilly
1941–

2. Robert
Treuhaft
1912–2007

|
Nicholas
Treuhaft
1944–55

Benjamin
Treuhaft
1947–

Deborah
1920–2014
m.

Lord Andrew
Cavendish
(11th Duke of
Devonshire)
1920–2004

|
Lady Emma
Cavendish 1943–

Peregrine
Cavendish,
(12th Duke of
Devonshire 1944–)

Lady Sophia
Cavendish 1957–

THE MITFORD PHENOMENON

Take six girls, all of them rampant individualists, and let them loose upon one of the most politically explosive periods in history. That is the story of the Mitfords. It is like a social experiment, the results of which would have staggered even the most imaginative scientist, and no small part of its fascination lies in the fact that the experiment can never be repeated. Never again will there be six such girls, raised in such a way, at such a time.

The Mitford sisters were born in the heart of England, between 1904 and 1920, into a family of pre-Conquest antiquity. Daughters of the 2nd Lord and Lady Redesdale, they were expected to become wives, mothers, propagators of their class, the kind of women who appeared at state balls in slightly ill-fitting satin and tramped through Gloucestershire in good tweed. Something of this steadfast upbringing always remained with them: Nancy Mitford confessed on her deathbed that she would give anything for one more day's hunting. But a world beyond the Heythrop had long since claimed Nancy, and indeed all the girls except Pamela – the shadowy exception who threw the rest into even more powerful light.

One can chant the careers of the Mitford sisters in the manner of Henry VIII's wives, thus: Writer; Countrywoman; Fascist; Nazi; Communist; Duchess. One can recite the mini-biographies, pulling out extraordinary facts with the practised ease of a conjuror. Nancy,

an auto-didact who never learned to punctuate (Evelyn Waugh: 'it is not your subject'), became a star author whose 1940s novels *The Pursuit of Love* and *Love in a Cold Climate* are deeply loved popular classics. Pamela, the bucolic chicken-breeder whose blue eyes matched her Rayburn, was adored by the young John Betjeman ('Gentle Pamela, most rural of them all'). Diana, the greatest beauty of her generation, calmly put herself beyond the social pale when she left her perfect husband for the leader of the British Union of Fascists, Sir Oswald Mosley. Unity, conceived in a Canadian town called Swastika, became a fervent Nazi and the close companion of Adolf Hitler. Jessica eloped with her fellow Communist, Esmond Romilly, the nephew (and rumoured son) of Winston Churchill, and proudly set up home among the working classes of Rotherhithe. Deborah became chatelaine of Chatsworth House, the magnificent seventeenth-century seat of the Devonshire family, where she filled her office with Elvis Presley memorabilia.

All this poured out in a great torrent of newsprint when Deborah – 'the Last Mitford Girl' – died in 2014, although the facts were already familiar. Some people may have thought that Nancy was the Fascist and Unity the Communist, but they pretty much had the basic idea. Equally familiar was the collective aspect of the sisters: their irrepressible aristocratic levity, their variations-on-a-theme faces, their idiom. The Mitfords inhabited a linguistic microclimate, whose almost nursery way of speech ('oh do be sorry for me') is famous above all for the nicknames they gave to everybody, especially to each other, which began as a private joke and were later displayed for public consumption. Again, people may have sometimes got things confused and thought that Woman was the Nazi and Honks the Writer, or that Stubby was the Countrywoman and Bobo the Duchess;¹ nevertheless there was an awareness that this was how the Mitfords went on. They all met Hitler and they all called him Hitty or Herr Housepainter. Or something like that.

Some years before she died I interviewed the then Duchess of Devonshire, or Debo, as she was always known (although Nancy –

have you heard this one? – called her ‘Nine’, after her alleged mental age). She admitted to a brisk bafflement with the whole Mitford industry. ‘As for people being interested in all of us now – that’s just amazing. But they seem to be, for some reason best known to themselves.’ Her sister Diana Mosley (Honks, Bodley, Cord, Nardie), whom I also met, came more sharply to the point. ‘The Mitford family has become a frightful bore,’ she said, laughing her still-beautiful head off in a very Mitford way (almost silently, as if the mirth were too great for verbal expression). ‘It bores us to death!’

Of course one might now say much the same about Henry VIII’s wives. Oh God, no, not the one about Anne of Cleves’s painting by Holbein. Who doesn’t know that one?

Nonetheless, familiarity is undoubtedly an issue with the Mitford story. The life of Unity Mitford should be the subject of an opera, yet it has become more like the punchline to a sick joke – ‘And then war was declared and she shot herself!’ – than the astonishing, murky tragedy that it was. For familiarity does not merely induce boredom. It deadens significance. And the sisters *were* significant; still are, as a matter of fact. Those who long to rip apart the twee latticework of Mitfordiana – Farve, Muv, Hons’ Cupboards² – may think otherwise, and I can quite see why, but at the same time I would say: look afresh at the familiar and consider. These girls are prize exhibits in a Museum of Englishness. What they represent is complex, although their image has a divine simplicity. And whatever one’s opinion of what they represent, it is impossible, in truth, to find them boring.

As I say, the phenomenon of the Mitford sisters is unrepeatable. The nature of the girls, the nature of the world at that time: such a configuration can never happen again.

In the first place there is the simple fact that the Redesdales had so many children, seven in all (Tom, the only son, born in 1909, is generally overlooked, but his personality was at least as strong and intriguing as that of his sisters). Then there is their upbringing. Although Tom went to Eton, the girls were educated mostly at home, and the three large country houses that the family inhabited –

Batsford Park, Asthall Manor, Swinbrook House – became their imaginative playgrounds. The well-raised modern child has its every moment accounted for (oboe at 4, gluten allergy test at 4.30) and accompanies its parents into almost every adult arena, from saloon bar to Starbucks. The Mitford girls, conversely, lived in a world of their own. They had a freedom that today would seem almost feral. In a literal sense it was limited: they travelled nowhere beyond Scotland, nowhere without Nanny, and they talked to few people outside the family except grooms, governesses and gamekeepers. Their mother could be rigid in outlook, their father would create sudden violent storms about infringements of the behavioural code. Yet in a more profound sense the girls' freedom was near absolute, because nothing really prevented them from indulging their essential natures. How far this was a good thing is open to question, of course. But it made them the Mitfords.

They roamed around their homes, obsessing over books or love or animals (never a photograph without a wonderful dog in it), growing ever more beautiful and hungrier for life, experiencing the perverse stimulation of extreme boredom. They were not all together, all the time. They formed particular alliances: Diana and Tom, Jessica and Unity, Deborah and Jessica. Not least because of age differences, the sisters did not operate as a sextet (with Tom as semi-detached musical director). Nevertheless, and partly because there was nobody else freely available, they sparked off each other like tinder sticks. Competitive family hierarchies were set in place that would last all their lives. Right up to the end, when only Diana and Deborah were left, the Mitford girls remained intertwined in a network of rivalries and alliances.

And indeed, their startling – one might even say theatrical – individuality was all part of that complex, six-ply weave. It sounds facile in the extreme to say that Jessica became a rabid Communist because Unity, the sister to whom she was closest, became a rabid Nazi. It sounds equally glib to say that Unity became a Nazi because Diana – whom she admired and adored – became a Fascist. Yet to

some extent these statements are true. Had these girls not grown up in such proximity, competing with or retreating from each other in a constant battling rhythm, they would not have become quite so singular. And had they not lived in such singular times, their individuality would – in some cases at least – have been expressed quite differently.

The Mitford girls came of age in a period of profound and, perhaps more importantly, highly *dramatic* change. Nancy made her society debut on 28 November 1922. The occasion was a ball at Asthall, reported in *The Times's* court pages with the formal respect then given to the upper classes ('Among those who brought parties to the dance were Countess Bathurst...'), for all the world as if the Edwardian era had never come to an end. The dance for the youngest sister, Deborah, was held at the family's London home on 22 March 1938. Ten days previously, Adolf Hitler had instigated the *Anschluss*, the annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany.

In the sixteen years between the two coming-out balls, politics had become ever more openly polarized and extreme. Communism and Fascism stood at each end of the global chessboard like clumsy monoliths. Democracy seemed a feeble little beast by contrast, bleating of moderation in the face of the aftermath of war and the Russian Revolution, the Great Depression and mass unemployment. Of course Britain did not – as Italy, Spain and Germany did – turn to dictators, but there were many who craved those illusions and certainties, the politics of poster slogans. The British Communist Party was formed in 1920, followed three years later – almost inevitably – by the first, small Fascist Party.

Meanwhile a succession of governments, mostly very short-lived, grappled with the enduring economic crisis and the attendant fear of instability. The 'Zinoviev Letter' of 1924, purportedly an instruction from the president of the Communist International to unleash class war, was taken very seriously. Whatever the truth about the origins of the document, Bolshevik subsidies had indeed been paid to foment unrest; but there was cause enough anyway for

real grievance. Unemployment was appallingly high, close to 3 million in 1933. The first of six National Hunger Marches took place a couple of weeks before Nancy's society debut. In 1926 came the General Strike; ten years later, the Jarrow Crusade. In 1929 the first Labour prime minister, Ramsay MacDonald, had appointed the dynamic young MP Sir Oswald Mosley to deal with the unemployment problem, but Mosley went his own way when his radical (though not unpopular) ideas were rejected. He formed the New Party in 1931 then, a year later, the British Union of Fascists.

In Germany, where 7 million were unemployed in 1933, where poverty was dire and a sense of post-war grievance primed to explode, a stark choice presented itself between Communism and Nazism. When Hitler became Chancellor he declared war on Marxism, and for this reason if no other was admired in some British quarters, as Mussolini had been when he took power in 1922. Certain members of the aristocracy were quite open in their desire to make common cause with Hitler: in 1936 the Anglo-German Fellowship held a dinner for Ambassador von Ribbentrop attended by, among others, the Duke of Wellington, Lord Londonderry, and Lord and Lady Redesdale. That same year Lord Redesdale praised Hitler almost unreservedly in the House of Lords, and attacked the press for 'the greatest exaggeration in such matters as the Nazi treatment of the Jews'. Then he came to the heart of the matter: 'Whatever might be said against certain details of his administration, it is certain that Herr Hitler saved Germany from going red.' This was the aristocrat's view. Yet it was shared in some measure by a good many normal, anxious Britons, in whom the terror of Communism ran deeper than can possibly be grasped today. On the other side, within a sizeable part of the intelligentsia – the kind of people whom Stalin was methodically liquidating – Communism represented a vision of alluring idealistic clarity; but it was also a bulwark against Fascism. The fact that these two wildly opposing creeds were, when one came down to it, remarkably similar was perceived by many, including Nancy and Deborah Mitford. But

sanity of this sort was not altogether in tune with the 1930s. What was demanded were gesture politics, uncompromising affiliations, solutions based upon theory rather than the hesitant realities of human nature. Young people have always responded to the clarion call of extremism: Diana, Jessica and Unity did not resist.

Nevertheless what they did *was* extraordinary. Again, familiarity has dulled its significance; but again, consider. They were not the only bright young things who flirted with extremism at that time (a cousin, Clementine Mitford, got briefly carried away by the thrill of shiny jackboots), yet the point about the Mitford sisters is that they were *not* flirting, they carried their convictions through. As Deborah wrote of Jessica in 1952: 'Her blasted cause has become so much part of her that she can never forget it.' Can one imagine their equivalent today? A nineteen-year-old Jessica Mitford, absconding to a life with an Islamic fundamentalist? No: a girl of that class might dabble excitably in 'activism', in the sense of waving an anti-fracking banner in Sussex (where her parents have a house) or having a fling with a sexy anti-capitalist protester (who went to school with her brother). Jessica's fellow runaway Esmond Romilly *was* in fact a cousin of the family, an ex-Wellington boy; Jessica, as Nancy wrote in a fictionalized version of the situation, 'had been introduced to him and knew his surname'. Yet when she disappeared in 1937 – supposedly to meet friends in Dieppe, where she never arrived – the skies fell in for her parents. For a fortnight they did not know whether she was dead or alive, and simply sat beside the telephone, waiting for they did not know what. Lord Redesdale never saw Jessica again after seeing her off at Victoria Station. When news of her whereabouts finally arrived, her father is alleged to have said: 'Worse than I thought. Married to Esmond Romilly,' but if he did say this then he didn't mean it. The shock of what Jessica had done – the casual, callous finality with which she disowned her former life – was one from which her parents never recovered (although far worse was to come). 'I nearly went mad when it seemed you had quite disappeared,' Lady Redesdale wrote to her. And for Deborah: 'It was far the worst thing

that happened to me.' Forty years after the event, Jessica wrote to Deborah that she was 'v astonished' to have caused her such distress, but the tone of this letter was defensive and not altogether convincing. The point is that back in 1937 Jessica hadn't much cared whom she hurt. Such was the power of the extremist cause, embodied in a man. The man alone might have led her to elope. It was the extremism that led to the swift absolutism with which all else was abandoned.

Usually it is disaffected men who embrace a dramatic ideology, although girls do it too. But the Mitford sisters? Those posh, protected creatures, who rode side-saddle to hounds, who were presented at court, who danced in and out of the great houses of London? Society tends to say of its young rebels: they have nothing to lose. This is not always true, but for sure they would have less to lose than the Mitfords. They had everything to lose. They were the smooth-skinned daughters of privilege. Nor were they too stupid to know what they were doing: Jessica was as sharp as a tack and Diana's idea of light reading was Goethe (her wedding present from Dr Goebbels was a complete set of Goethe's works, bound in pink calfskin). Jessica was also pretty, vital, by all accounts enchanting, while Diana, beautiful as a goddess, had a worshipping husband and two young sons, a life of picture-book perfection in Belgravia. Unity, as Deborah later put it, was 'always the odd one out'; nevertheless she was bright, handsome and popular despite her occasionally unnerving eccentricity.

Of course the sheer idiocy of youth played its part. 'The Führer got into quite a rage twice...it was wonderful,' is a typical phrase from Unity's letters, which sometimes give the impression that Hitler is Mick Jagger and she a favoured groupie circa 1966. But there was more. Something in these young women responded to the dark power of the times. Beneath the sunlit Mitford effervescence ran a deadlier, steadily determined tide. There was a strong sex element in it, in this willingness to embrace the aggressive and unyielding, and it was obviously connected to individual men – but it was still more mysterious than that: extremism calls upon the entire pre-civilized self.

Exactly why, and how, the girls took the paths that they did will be analysed more fully later. The starting point was Diana's deep, complex passion for Sir Oswald Mosley; although she had already been influenced by the intellectual Teutonic sympathies of her forebears. In the context of the period, and of the family dynamic, their behaviour does become just about comprehensible. It also remains almost incredible. 'What lives we do lead,' as Nancy wrote to her mother in 1940, her tone dry and disbelieving.

She had not hurled herself headlong into extremism. The family friend Violet Hammersley once wrote to Nancy, saying 'You Mitfords like dictators,' but this was only half true. Pamela married a Fascist sympathizer and met Hitler ('like an old farmer in a brown suit'), yet she stood quite apart from the behaviour of Diana and Unity. So too did Deborah, who spent the month before the Second World War at a house party for York races. Nancy helped Republican refugees in the Spanish Civil War, then went home to perform frenetic amounts of patriotic war work.

Nevertheless there *was* a characteristic aspect to the politicized girls. It wasn't simply what they did, it was the way they did it: with the smiles-over-steel quality that is definitively Mitford. They were naturally and comfortably shameless. Not necessarily flagrant, although Unity became so in her love of Nazism; more accurate to say that they were shame-free. Their confidence was blithe, adamant. Whatever the subject matter, the idiom remained that of the nursery. There was a bizarre disconnect between their mode of expression (sweet Hitler, blissful Lenin) and what they were actually doing. The story of Jessica and Unity dividing a room in half, decorating one side with hammers and sickles, the other with swastikas, pretty much sums up the Mitford relationship with politics. Completely sincere, but also attention-seeking: showing off to Nanny.

They did not necessarily court publicity, of which they naturally received a large and damaging amount, but they were not afraid of it. Partly this was in the blood – they had two very showy grandfathers – but it was also *them*, their natures, the spectrum of beauty that they

covered, the x6 aspect that magnified them into something overwhelming. Looking as they did, the Mitford girls were never going to be ignored. Being what they were, they did not want to be. They had a feel for the limelight, a desire to prance in its glow. ‘Whoever is going to look at you?’ was their nanny’s refrain, but that upper-class instinct towards self-effacement – the fear of being vulgar – was not really in them. Nancy was not just a writer, she was a ‘celebrity’ author (Evelyn Waugh: ‘I saw Debo last week. I feel it my duty to tell you that she is spreading a very damaging story about you: that you have allowed yourself to be photographed by the Television.’³) She offered up her persona quite willingly, writing a highly opinionated column for the *Sunday Times*, co-operating with a slightly naff musical version of *The Pursuit of Love*⁴ and, later, with a projected ITV comedy series based on the lives of the Mitford sisters.⁵ Deborah gave numerous interviews as Duchess of Devonshire, and was possibly amused by the ease with which journalists could be coaxed to eat from her hand (‘How could *anyone* resist her?’⁶). Diana, although she must have known it was asking for trouble, went on Radio 4’s *Desert Island Discs* in 1989. The public reaction to her appearance was predictable outrage; but alongside the Mitford instinct for populism was a total lack of concern about what people thought of them. If they had ever used Twitter, which is not entirely impossible (one can certainly imagine Jessica), they would have roared with laughter at the #poshbitch abuse. They were tough, as well as airy. When Diana and her husband were placed under house arrest in 1943, they were besieged by a pack of pressmen and forced to sit tight with the curtains drawn: ‘I would rather be *us* than them’, wrote Diana, ‘because it is the most frightful weather.’ When Nancy wrote her 1955 treatise on class, ‘The English Aristocracy’,⁷ with its famous division of vocabulary into ‘U’ (upper-class) and ‘Non-U’ – viz, writing paper versus notepaper – the enraged response left her essentially unshaken. ‘Who *are* you anyway?’ asked one reader. ‘So difficult to answer, really!’ was her reaction.

Snobbery, shallowness, stupidity, adultery, unpalatability – the

Mitfords were accused of all these things and rode out every criticism, smiling brightly, talking in that direct yet obtuse way that disarms attack. In Diana this ‘never apologize, never explain’ quality was intensified to an almost unparalleled degree. It is hard to think of anybody more truly indifferent to public opinion. ‘Being hated means absolutely nothing to me as you know,’ she wrote to Deborah in 2001. ‘I admired him very much,’ she said of Hitler on *Desert Island Discs*. ‘My husband was a *very* clever man,’ she remarked to me, in the same calm beatific way as she said almost everything. It has been suggested, surely rightly,⁸ that she was incapable of telling anything other than the truth as she saw it. This made things simple for her, but also very difficult. She refused to defend or exonerate herself. She could have put the blame on circumstances, said that she had got carried away and now saw events differently: but no. Whatever one thinks of her, it has to be said that only a woman in a million would have stood as firm as she did. Instead she wrote articles that argued, with cool cogency, against unquestioned ideas such as the absolute rightness of war against Germany, or the absolute evil of the Vichy regime; she described Hitler as ‘a terrible part’ of history but refused retrospectively to edit her friendship with him; and her loyalty to Sir Oswald Mosley was so stalwart as to be almost beyond comprehension, like something from a legend. But Diana *did* have a mythic aspect, with her dynamic serenity, her sphinx smile. Even her sisters were confounded by her. Her political allegiances did not affect the remarkable, open-minded kindness that she displayed in every other area of her life. Her constant rippling urge to laughter did not prevent adherence to a creed that took itself insanely seriously. Far more than Jessica and Unity – both strongly influenced by her – Diana was an enigma. In fact she was quite possibly one of the most enigmatic women who ever lived. When people talk about the ‘Mitford Girls’, it is she and Nancy whom they really mean, because without the separate components of Diana and Nancy the spell of the whole would never have been created.

Diana defined the mysterious, implacable side of the sisters.

Nancy defined their wayward enchantment, their sublime silliness, their use of jokes as an act of defiance ('there is,' as Nancy wrote in a letter when she was dying of cancer, 'always something to laugh at.') This distinction is simplistic, however, because the dual nature of the Mitfords cannot be pulled apart: in its contradictions lie the very heart of their fascination.

There is no such word as 'Mitfordian', but – like Proustian, Dickensian or Gilbertian – it has a meaning. It is understood by people who may know little of the sisters' actual lives, yet who have absorbed their image.

The reason for this is ultimately very simple. The elements that make up the phenomenon of the Mitford sisters are various, complex and contradictory; but what *really* counts is the fact that this phenomenon was parcelled and wrapped and sold with a beautiful great bow on it: by Nancy. She is the begetter of 'the Mitfords'. In 1945 she wrote her family into life in *The Pursuit of Love*. Thereafter she – followed by Jessica in the autobiographical *Hons and Rebels* – nurtured and primed the Mitfordian image until it became the essence of aristocratic charm, accessible yet untouchable, and as dangerously irresistible as a drug.

Without Nancy, the sisters would have had their own separate significance, with Unity the most noteworthy. But their significance en masse – culturally, societally – came from the first Mitford girl. Not necessarily the cleverest of them – that was Diana – but by some measure the most intelligent, Nancy took an overview of her upbringing, gathered it up between her pretty little hands and remoulded it as art. By so doing – by writing *The Pursuit of Love*, that outbreath of familial memory, with its pinpoint accuracy shading into timeless haze – Nancy made of that world something definitive. So *felt* is her novel, it contains within it far more than she could possibly have intended during the three months of its creation. It contains the genesis of the Mitford myth. And the Mitford myth contains, first and foremost, an image of England.

To understand the sisters properly one must go to the Cotswolds, where they grew up, and to the adjacent villages of Asthall and Swinbrook, which was once their father's land. Four of them – Nancy, Unity, Diana and Pamela – are buried in the churchyard of St Mary's, Swinbrook. What strikes one most is how unassuming is this ending place, how embedded in the landscape, how secure in its acceptance of time and death, how unlike the bright frenetic span in which the sisters put their mark upon the world. 'Say not the struggle naught availeth' is the inscription on Unity's gravestone: a very moving thing to read, especially in this calm little square of green, where the silence is absolute except for the tentative bravura of birdsong and a hymn being sung inside an English church. Here, the struggle of Unity's short, misguided life drops away into irrelevance.

From the church – which houses a memorial to Tom Mitford and a set of oak pews paid for by Lord Redesdale's winning bet in the 1924 Grand National – one can walk a mile or so to Asthall Manor, where the greater part of the Mitford childhood was spent. This is where the imaginative lives of the girls were formed: in country the colour of hen pheasants, in a shallow flattened valley scooped from apparently limitless fields, amid drystone walls, fat healthy sheep and the constant rustle of the River Windrush. Asthall itself, dark brown and gabled, stands as rooted as a great tree, with beside it the church, whose graveyard was overlooked by the nursery windows.

Everything about Britain has changed since the Mitford girls lived in this small part of Oxfordshire, yet Asthall and Swinbrook seem not to have changed, and Asthall Manor is a peculiarly beautiful example of that unchanging ideal: the English country house. This magical constancy is the backdrop to *The Pursuit of Love*. Nancy reimagined Asthall as 'Alconleigh', peopled it with her family and described it, not with idealism, but with a ravishing lightness and clarity, like the sun spilling onto the fields at dawn.

It is a construct, of course. The Mitfords were not quite like Nancy's fictional 'Radletts'. Her father's rampaging eccentricity was rendered faithfully, as were his habits – such as writing down the

names of people he disliked and putting the paper into a drawer, stuck with pins – but ‘Uncle Matthew’ was a simpler, more assured man than the real-life Lord Redesdale, and ‘Aunt Sadie’ a more benign woman than his real-life wife. Although the book covers the same timescale as the one that sent assorted Mitfords dashing towards political extremes, there is no reference to the fact that Lady Redesdale herself was an admirer of Hitler. The grimly naive remarks made by Lord Redesdale about pre-war Germany are also expunged. ‘Good God, I never expected to harbour a full-blooded Hun in this house,’ says Uncle Matthew, when the son of the Governor of the Bank of England (surname Kroesig) turns up at his daughter’s coming-out ball. Nor does *The Pursuit of Love* allude to the dark passions of Unity and Diana, while Jessica’s elopement is made light of: the fictional ‘Jassy’ absconds with a Hollywood film star, and the heroine Linda, who falls for a Communist, does so mainly because he is incredibly good-looking.

Then there is the emphasis that Nancy places upon continuum. The seasons come and go, as does the hunting and the lambing, the rhythms of country life; the Radlett children roam and flit like butterflies, searching for brightness; and Alconleigh itself stands immutable at the heart of it all, rooted in the land with which Uncle Matthew has an ineffable bond.

In fact the Mitfords had three main childhood homes, whose surrounding acres were disposed of in job lots. Lord Redesdale inherited considerable assets when he succeeded to the title in 1916, but he was unable to hold on to them. Batsford Park in Gloucestershire, a fairytale castle of old gold built by his father, was first to go in 1919, together with almost 10,000 acres. In 1926 Asthall Manor and more land was sold. The home that the family had grown to love was replaced with the self-built Swinbrook House, a chilly, over-symmetrical structure perched just outside the village. Nancy gave Alconleigh something of the appearance of Swinbrook – ‘It was all as grim and as bare as a barracks, stuck upon the high hillside’ – but little of its atmosphere. Only Deborah liked it there. Jessica, aged

nine when the family moved to Swinbrook (or 'Swinebrook', as Nancy called it), longed to leave. She collected 'running-away money', and asked repeatedly to be sent to school, a request fulfilled only briefly. When she did escape, Lord Redesdale may have blamed himself for not giving her a happier home, but Jessica's teenage rebelliousness – which lasted well into middle age – was more complex than that. Nevertheless the move to Swinbrook was significant; it was the beginning of the end for the family as an entity. 'We never again had real family life after we left Asthall,'⁹ Diana later wrote. Nancy devised a brittle tease about how their fortunes had descended from Batsford PARK to Asthall MANOR to Swinbrook HOUSE, but after Swinbrook was sold in 1938 there were no more country houses at all. That life was over.

The supreme irony about *The Pursuit of Love* is that, by the time it was published, pretty much everything that it represented was vanishing. Not just the world of feudal certainties and communion with the land; but that of the Mitfords themselves. Tragedy and dislocation comes to the fictional Radletts, yet the family remains essentially secure in itself, eternal despite the passage of time. In real life, the thunderous ideologies of the 1930s – so impersonal, so destructive of personal happiness – left the Mitfords bereft and broken.

For Nancy, there was creative glee in writing *The Pursuit of Love*, but it was also an act of poignant salvation. She was celebrating what had been lost: her own past, as well as that of her kind. And in doing so she triggered a public response that has never really faded.

After the war, and despite the election of the 1945 Labour government (for which Nancy herself voted), it seemed that people still craved what the 'Radletts' had: an ease, an unhurried confidence, a charm that made life a less exigent, more reassuring business, above all a rooted sense of Englishness. Certainly people liked reading about these things. As with *Brideshead Revisited*, also published in 1945, *The Pursuit of Love* was an instant, stunning success. It sold 200,000 copies within a year, 1 million

copies by the time of Nancy's death in 1973, and even now – when the upper classes are about the only minority that can be attacked with impunity – it is as popular as it has ever been. So too is its 1949 successor, *Love in a Cold Climate*, in which the Radletts prance on the sidelines but the central drama exerts the same fundamental enchantment.

Nancy Mitford was an artist. Not major league, but nobody else could do quite what she did. She told her stories in such a way as to encapsulate – to *become* – the essence of what she was writing. As time went on she became the smiling gatekeeper to a particular image of England (rather than Britain), irresistible not just for its content but for the way in which this was presented. Nancy did not write about the upper classes as her friend Evelyn Waugh did, with an awed seriousness beneath the jokes: she treated them as if they were the most normal thing in the world – which, to her, they were. Nor did she satirize her characters, even the fabulously comedic ones. Her tone was innately good-natured and accepting. Yet her humour, which ran as deep and essential as the marrow in her bones, enabled her to see what she was, and to laugh at it; even though she believed in it.

Nancy offered up the aristocracy with a light touch, without self-consciousness. She exemplified the almost childlike lack of fear in the upper classes, their refusal to throw veils of half-embarrassed discretion over what they are or say. Take, for instance, the reaction of Linda Radlett to her new-born baby. 'It's really kinder not to look,' she says to her friend Fanny, who is equally appalled by the 'howling orange' in its swaddling. Now this is a reaction shared by many obliged to coo over cots, but few would dare to express it, and anybody who did would draw attention to their own daring. Nancy felt no such need. She said outrageous things with exactly the same polite, feminine precision as she said anything else. Linda, embarking on a train journey to Spain, tells Fanny that she dreads the journey alone. You may not be alone, says Fanny: 'Foreigners are greatly given, I believe, to rape.' 'Yes, that would be nice...' In *Love*

in a Cold Climate another baby is born, this time to beautiful Polly and her creepy husband; it 'took one look, according to the Radletts, at its father, and quickly died again'. One's laughter at this is partly shock, but Nancy was never shocked, nor shockable. Her manners were impeccable, but she was delicately careless of the proprieties. And her refusal to be serious is the most subversive thing of all. When she arrived at Perpignan to work with Spanish Civil War refugees – a hard, distressing job that she performed with caring competence – she was nevertheless unable to resist saying that Unity was also on her way to help. Nothing quite that off-colour ever made it into her novels. They were not, as has been said, the whole truth: they turned the truth into a commodity.

What defines Nancy's writing – its Mitfordian quality – is the sincerity of her levity. All the sisters had this trait, as to an extent did their father. They brought it out in each other, and sometimes played to the gallery with it: as in Jessica's *Hons and Rebels*. But it *was* their natural idiom. A supreme example came from Diana, when she and Mosley were jailed in 1940 as suspected enemy sympathizers, and for three years in Holloway she endured unspeakable conditions and mental anguish. Nevertheless, as she put it to her husband, 'it was still lovely to wake up in the morning and feel that one was lovely *One*.' This remark, with its almost painful funniness born of pain, its lightness born of indomitability, above all its complete naturalness (Diana wasn't trying to be funny, she was simply saying what she meant) is wholly Mitfordian. So too is the private system of jokes, now so familiar that all those nicknames, all that Tuddemy (Tom¹⁰), Cake (the Queen Mother¹¹), Boots (Cyril Connolly¹²), Joan Glover (von Ribbentrop¹³) and Bosomy (President Kennedy¹⁴), can become a bit of a crasher (bore) – although that is not the fault of the jokers themselves. In her novels Nancy modified it slightly. But the dominant voice of her characters¹⁵ is her own, the Mitford voice, and thus that distinct, direct, wide-eyed, fantastical idiom has become a familiar mode of speech, unbearable to some, adorable to others, oddly impossible to imitate. It is part-childish, part-posh,

part-1920s exaggeration – ‘do admit’, ‘oh you are kind, the kindness of you’, ‘she ees *wondair*’ – yet what makes it durable is the edge of perceptiveness, the nail on the head quality. ‘You know, being a Conservative is much more restful,’ says Linda Radlett, apropos the Communist Party, ‘though one must remember that it is bad, not good. But it does take place within certain hours, and then finish...’

To be on the receiving end of the Mitford speech mode is an undoubtedly delightful experience. ‘Oh now *aren’t you clever*,’ said Deborah to me, when I had done nothing more than recall the name of one of her husband’s racehorses. ‘Miss Thompson: *so clever*, and *so nice*,’ said Diana, to an aged gentleman who joined us for tea in her Paris flat. I fell for it, but then so did pretty much everybody who met them (Diana could have had Karl Marx grovelling at her feet). The point, of course, was that the way the sisters spoke was an outward expression of charm. And here one comes down to it: after all the analysis, the identification of the elements that comprise the Mitford phenomenon – the x 6 power, the upbringing, the times in which they lived, the showmanship, the toughness, the humour – one is left with that single, fused element. Charm. A quality that can enrage, but whose mystery is brightly indestructible.

In itself there was nothing particularly remarkable about the fact of the Mitford sisters’ charm. Many of their circle were charming, people like Lady Diana Cooper, Lord Berners, Sir Harold Acton and, in her lugubrious way, Violet Hammersley. It is a characteristic associated with the upper classes, who had the leisure to weave that ethereal web, and the confidence to override resistance. The ‘creamy English charm’ that Evelyn Waugh famously described in *Brideshead Revisited* poured its streams through society, soothing and poisoning as it went.

But the Mitford charm – which, for all its high-altitude chill, did the essential thing of making life seem better – was charm writ large. It had the quality of self-awareness, increasingly so after Nancy mythologized it. The Mitfords deployed their charm as a kind of tease, as part of a game in which the charmed were also invited to

take part; and this knowingness, this self-ironizing, is the preservative that prevents decay.

The charm of the Mitfords en masse was very much Nancy's creation. But then there are the six individual girls, who in real life were charming all right, but were a lot of other things as well. When one thinks about Unity, in particular, the very notion of charm seems rather absurd. Indeed perhaps the most extraordinary aspect of the Mitfordian image is that it entrances and delights and at the same time contains so much that is not entrancing at all. Perhaps that is simply charm at work again, compelling people to overlook the lethal sympathies?

Without Nancy's mythologizing skills, the separate lives of the Mitford girls (except Pam) would be of interest, but because of her – because she marketed herself, her family and her class – interest still flourishes in the full six-pack. As current usage would have it, the sisters are 'iconic'. They are part Audrey Hepburn as Holly Golightly, part Patti Hearst in the Symbionese Liberation Army, part *Country Life* girls in pearls, part Malory Towers midnight feasters, part marble frieze of smiling young goddesses. Their significance has become detached from the realities of their own times, and is now a significance of image; as most things are today.

They are the stuff of themed fashion shoots (tweed, little hats, elegant brogues, shooting sticks) and mesmerized blogs ('The Divine Debo' is a fairly representative post title). A book was published recently entitled *The Mitford Girls' Guide to Life*. Who knows, there may be a guided tour to their widely varied habitat (Swinbrook, Chatsworth and Holloway jail). They are constantly referenced in popular culture. Caitlin Moran's fabled upbringing, with the eight auto-didact children running loose around a Wolverhampton council house, could be seen as a working-class take on the Mitfords. Meanwhile the sisters themselves have been satirized by razor-witted modern comedians: in BBC2's *Bellamy's People*,¹⁶ two actresses dressed up as aged facsimiles of Jessica and Diana and sat

in their drawing room beneath images of Stalin and Hitler. The Mitford idiom was magnificently conjured: 'Stalin – oh he was terribly *attractive*! With that wonderful peasant moustache – very *sixy*!!!' 'Fuffy – oh that's what I called the Führer – darling Fuffy, well, he was terribly misunderstood...' The joke was not exactly affectionate, but affection is not really what the Mitford girls inspire; one is always aware that they are not as cosy as they appear to be. The joke was also on us, incidentally, for turning these adherents to murderous ideologies into figures of fascination.

It *is* perverse. Society today seeks a nirvana of non-judgmentalism about everything, except the things that the Mitfords represented. Yet their image still seduces. Why?

Well: one might call it a variant strain of *Downton Abbey* Syndrome, in which people seek comfort by retreating to an age of hierarchies, prejudices and certainties. The posh past, in other words. Being upper class today can bring the wrath of God down upon one's head; attending public school can be, as Linda Radlett whispered of Oscar Wilde's unknown crimes, 'worse than murder'; possessing an RP accent, or a Labrador, can lead to fiery accusations of elitism: yet poshness retains its mystique, and this is a quality that the Mitfords embodied. In *The Pursuit of Love*, Nancy conjures her world with a cosy, companionable ease that still puts up invisible barriers. And her readers remain besotted: not just by her humour, charm and so on, but because we *like* what she is describing. We want the freedom to hate it yet we don't – most of us – want it to cease to exist (what would we do without class? We would be lost). As long as an upper-class person handles their social status in the right way – preferably with a larky wink to their own eccentricity – egalitarian Britain will forgive them for it.

And the Mitfords, with their populist streak and eye upon the gallery, were remarkably good at classless displays of class. Deborah would mock her own accent – 'Ridiculous. It's just silly, and up here [in Derbyshire] it sounds even sillier.'¹⁷ 'Class is just too dull for words,' she would say, from the citadel of Chatsworth. Such broad-

mind self-mockery is typical Mitford, although how deep it went is another story. In her letters Deborah expressed contempt for the left-wing politics of Jessica and family ('I'm afraid they'll find Chatsworth not very progressive'). A middle-class person would have suffered grievously for this kind of remark, but the 'thrillingly posh'¹⁸ Deborah got away with it. Her autobiography *Wait for Me!* is full of brisk loathing for New Labour, and sends a lethal countrywoman's shot at Ivor Novello, a visitor to one of the Devonshires' homes, who called her coursing whippet 'an enchanting bit of beige' (a very Nancy phrase, but not to Deborah's taste). Meanwhile Diana, in person, seemed entirely devoid of snobbery, and was similarly amused by what she perceived as her outlandish voice when she saw herself on television.¹⁹ But in her writings she could pull sudden, knowing rank: 'There is no such person as Lady Sybil Colefax,'²⁰ was a droll correction in a book review. In a published diary she quoted the peer Lord Strathmore saying that 'if he had a gun' he would shoot a fellow peer who had criticized the Queen. 'What are we coming to, when a Scotch landowner, in August, has not got a gun?'²¹

Note that 'Scotch', by the way. This is 'U' usage. The U and Non-U debate went a bit near the knuckle on the issue of class. In fact all the writing paper v. notepaper stuff is in *The Pursuit of Love*, but there, crucially, the reader is in on the joke: a subtle form of flattery is going on, as in *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, which offers viewers the comforting illusion that their own lives (including entrées to castles) are up on the screen. Conversely, the measured direct speech of 'The English Aristocracy' essay made it very plain that this was Nancy's joke. Not her invention – U and Non-U was the concept of the linguist Professor Alan Ross – but it was she who made it incendiary, because of who she was. Thousands of people were enthralled by her strictures, and never again in their lives said the word 'mantelpiece'. But she had annoyed them, all the same. ('We could do with something more interesting than listening to a snobbish woman airing her views on class distinction,' was the

reaction of a viewer after Nancy appeared on the BBC.) Her followers were not *enchanted*, as they had been when, say, Aunt Sadie decreed Surrey a not-quite-appropriate location for a country house. So it was lucky that they did not see a letter written by Nancy in 1957, reassuring Jessica about her daughter, who was in Mexico at the time of an earthquake: 'People like us are *never killed in earthquakes* & furthermore only 29 people were, all non-U...' This was the brutish side of Nancy's 'teasing': the one that she softened for her public, but not for her friends, and especially not for her family. Today a remark of that kind would be almost as *mal vu* as a friendship with Hitler. But Nancy, were she alive to receive the criticism, would smile through it: just as she did the storm over 'U', in which accusations of snobbery and shallowness whirled around her elegant head like hailstones; just as Diana had sat, without a tremor, and faced down vilification that would have shaken most people into pieces.

This confidence of theirs – relaxed, diamond-hard – is fascinating. It particularly fascinates women. It is the confidence of the upper classes, embellished by femaleness: a kind of confidence that, for all their greater freedom, today's women do not find it easy to possess.

Women today ought to be high on self-assurance, given that men are obliged to behave around us with tiptoeing deference, the culture says that any way of life we choose should be ours for the taking, books tell us that we must celebrate our every last flaw, while at the same time urging us to be our best possible selves... but actually none of this is reassuring, quite the opposite. Women are in a metaphorical pressure cabin, on a state of high alert, chiefly about what other women are doing and whether it is better than what *One* is doing. Should one make cupcakes or become CEO of a multinational; should one strive to resemble an Oscar nominee or celebrate one's freedom from that particular tyranny; should one shave every inch of one's body or tweet pictures of one's statement armpits; should one be a domestic goddess, a yummy mummy, an alpha female, a pre-feminist, a post-feminist, a feminist, a feminist who nevertheless has a facelift... It is a shambolic state of affairs.

There is only one answer to all of this, which is to be oneself, but it seems extraordinarily hard to be sure of what that is. Hence the fascination of the Mitfords, who always had the confidence of their own choices, however mad these frequently were.

There is something essentially *unworried* about them. Again, today, this is almost impossible to achieve. It is not really to do with money – the Mitford girls grew up in a household that was lucky enough to have things to sell, but was nevertheless always selling them – although it is, of course, connected to privilege. Yet in truth this offered only a veil of protection against peculiarly cruel events. The trauma of Jessica's disappearance, the violent public excoriation of Unity and Diana, the disintegration of the family unit, the miscarriages and illnesses and shocking bereavements – the Mitford story was not unlike a soap opera in its constant assaulting dramas, and the sisters had all the resilience of soap opera matriarchs in the way that they weathered tragedy. Nevertheless, and in some mysterious way, their brows remained clear. As Nancy had it, there was always something to laugh at. This did not, as Diana once wrote,²² mean that one was necessarily happy – only that something was funny – but it was a true philosophy, that yearning towards lightness, and it was as good a creed as any by which to live. It had the priceless quality of allowing one to rise above events and see them as transient, not quite as important as they thought they were, merely steps on the way to the churchyard at Swinbrook; therefore not worth worrying about.

It is frankly therapeutic to think of Diana, shaking helplessly with ill-suppressed laughter at the hey-nonny-nos of the folk singer 'who had so kindly come to Holloway to amuse the prisoners but had not meant to amuse them quite as much as that'. It is quite marvellous to read Nancy on her French lover, Gaston Palewski, who turned fifty '& *minds*. I've never minded being any of the terrible ages that have overtaken me and so don't quite understand.' Or indeed Nancy, sorting out her inheritance with Deborah while lying on her deathbed: 'We had screams over the Will.' Or Deborah,

after losing her third baby, writing that the village nurse had called her Your Ladyship ‘through the most undignified parts’. Or Diana, saying that sex, about which people made such a fuss, was no more difficult than eating a Mars bar.²³ All the things we take so seriously – suffering, ageing, dying, babies, love... The Mitfords took them seriously too, deep down. But what liberation there is, all the same, in pretending otherwise.

Fearless though they were, the Mitford girls nevertheless always operated within certain boundaries. They were a blend of formality and anarchy that is impossible now to achieve: revolutionaries who had been to the hairdresser, iconoclasts who put the milk in second, transgressors in tweeds. And this, too, fascinates women, this indestructibly feminine way of breaking the rules.

For sure they fascinate me. I remember Diana, moving gracefully about her airy apartment in the *septième*: a tall wraith, like a long exquisite wisp of grey-white smoke, entirely beautiful at the age of ninety. Her cheekbones retained the purity of a Canova, curving constantly as she dissolved into that almost silent Mitford laughter. I can still hear her saying, *en passant*: ‘I’ve had a fantastic life.’ Then Deborah, a vigorous and easeful figure with her dog at her side, sitting with her feet up on a stool in a casually grand anteroom at Chatsworth, instructing me firmly that a woman needs a ‘proper husband, proper children’ – advice totally contrary to my own ideas, but somehow I have never forgotten it. And then Nancy, beloved Nancy, architect of the Mitford myth, with her neat sharp brain, her romanticism, her cynicism, her felicitous heart-lifting turns of phrase; when I first read her, aged about thirteen, I could scarcely believe (so weighted down was I with Eliot and Hardy) that one was actually allowed this kind of pleasure, that literature could be soufflé-light as well as monolithic, and still tell memorable truths. Few are the women who do not relish Nancy (her sisters were among the exceptions, but that’s another story). Her Dior silhouette, her French bulldogs, her spry energy, her sharp silliness, her love of Parisian smartness and seventeenth-century prettiness, her description of an

ideal party as ‘hours and hours of smiling politeness’: all this satisfies female cravings for elegance in an inelegant world. But there is also a sense of real substance, of the daily courage in frivolity. As for her novels – like Jane Austen’s they can be misunderstood in a way that flatters feminine fantasies. Linda Radlett meets a sexy French duke with a spare flat in the *seizième*; Lizzie Bennet meets a brooding Englishman with a magnificent estate; both women are loved for their Real Selves... Of course such interpretations turn a blind eye to the flickering shadows in these books. *The Pursuit of Love* is permeated with images of death – like the graveyard outside the nursery at Asthall – and, as does *Pride and Prejudice*, it reminds the reader constantly that love, the happy ending, is a matter of chance: that life is brief, and goes awry very easily. Yet what endures – not just in this book, but in everything that Nancy subsequently wrote – is the bright affirmativeness of her voice. It contains the sound of happiness, of sane good humour; it taught me that levity and seriousness are not incompatible, which was an important thing to learn.

So I am immensely grateful to the Mitfords, to the Mitfordian image that makes life quite simply more enjoyable, although naturally it is far from being the whole truth. To take just one example of what lay beneath: the appalling migraines that Diana suffered, which began after the war, affected neither her looks nor her calm demeanour, and can be seen as a metaphor for a mass of hidden tumult. There was a large price to pay for being one of six such girls. In 1972 Nancy told an interviewer that sisters were a protection against ‘life’s cruel circumstances’, to which Jessica – who in 1944 praised her daughter by saying ‘There’s not a trace of Mitford in her’ – replied that sisters *were* life’s cruel circumstances (‘particularly Nancy’). The family dynamic was a veritable morass of female rivalries, shifting and reconfiguring throughout their lives. Nancy was jealous of Pam then of Diana; Jessica was jealous of Deborah; Unity was in thrall to Diana; Jessica was in competition with Unity; Nancy and Jessica were wary allies; Diana was critical of Nancy; and so on, and on, until the end. Yet in the main, with one notable

exception, the knotty ties remained in place. The sisters met quite frequently and corresponded for most of their lives; although when, from the 1980s onwards, what had previously been unseen was gradually revealed – for example what Nancy had written about one sister to another, thinking that the subject of the letter would never read it – the entire family structure rocked again.

And what of this? In a letter to Deborah, written in 1989 after she had been interviewed by a researcher for *Desert Island Discs*, Diana expressed the view that – contrary to the eager young Radio 4 girl's assumptions – there was nothing especially remarkable about any of the sisters, except Unity. 'Of course Birdie really *was* original to the last degree but the rest of us weren't a bit.' The whole phenomenon, she suggested, was invented by the newspapers.

A revisionist take on the Mitfords could indeed seek, thus, to rationalize their mystery. It could see them as nothing more than a typical upper-class family who happened to have a lot of daughters, half of whom happened to take an interest in extreme but fashionable ideologies. End of story? Yes, to the Mitford myth refuseniks. Although where that leaves Nancy's imperishable sliver of genius, Deborah's ability to secure the future of a national treasure like Chatsworth House while charming men like John F. Kennedy into rapt submission, the ruthless political fervour of Jessica, Diana and poor 'original' Unity, I am not sure. Even if one allows nothing more than the brimming variety of the Mitford sisters' contacts book – Winston Churchill, John F. Kennedy, Joseph Goebbels, Evelyn Waugh, Adolf Hitler, Lucian Freud, Lytton Strachey, Maya Angelou, Field Marshal Montgomery, one could go on – there is a level of engagement with their times that carries its own, powerful, unrepeatable significance.

Do admit.