

# U Turn

By CHRISTOPHER BENFEY

NOW REMIND ME, which one was Nancy? That's a question you're likely to be asked if you mention the eldest of England's famous Mitford sisters. Then come the guesses. Was she Hitler's girlfriend? (No, that would be Unity, who put a bullet in her brain when Britain declared war on Germany and swallowed her swastika badge when she didn't die.) O.K., was she the Communist who eloped with her radical boyfriend and ended up in California, stiffing Joe McCarthy and covering the civil rights movement? (Nope, that was Jessica.) The one who married the head of the

## LIFE IN A COLD CLIMATE

### Nancy Mitford: The Biography

By Laura Thompson

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British Fascist Party in Goebbels's drawing room? (Wrong again: Diana.) The Duchess of Devonshire? (Extra points for this guess, since Americans tend not to know the peerage from the porridge, but sorry, no, that was Deborah.) Give up?

Drawing on Nancy Mitford's own poignant childhood memories from her exuberant novel "The Pursuit of Love" (including, notoriously, a "child hunt," with "four great hounds in full cry after two little girls"), Laura Thompson (author of "The Six: The Lives of the Mitford Sisters") vividly evokes the swarm of brilliant and beautiful sisters, and their lone brother, growing up carefree in a succession of country houses in Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire.

"I feel sorry for people who have *family planning*," Mitford, who had no children of her own, wrote of the charms of multiple siblings, all the more alluring if you have the free run of a rambling mansion and miles of surrounding countryside. Thompson sniffs that Swinbrook House — dubbed Swinebrook by Nancy and built by her father, Lord Redesdale — resembles "some lesser Nazi's vision of a Cotswold manor house," but it looks pretty enticing in the photograph included in "Life in a Cold Climate."

Lord Redesdale wouldn't have been a lord at all except for one of those "Downton Abbey" dramas of succession, where the death of her uncle and the birth of a female cousin shifted the family lands and title, though insufficient cash, to Nancy's branch. A "schemer and a dreamer," he had returned from the Boer War with one lung, and then from World War I "a 39-year-old wreck." Nancy thanked him "for having me taught, much against his better judgment, to read and write." A "chill coming off her mother," however, contributed to the "cold climate" in which Nancy came of age.

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Nancy's formal education, according to her close friend Evelyn Waugh, was confined to learning French and horsemanship. She enrolled briefly at the Slade School of Art only to be informed that she "had no talent whatever." She had better luck with writing; although she had a modest success with her first four novels, "The Pursuit of Love," published in 1945, was hugely popular. "I sat under a shower of gold," she remarked.

During the politically charged 1930s, the siblings had taken sides, as though in a



Nancy Mitford in Paris, 1956.

childhood game. Diana, Unity and Tom embraced fascism while Jessica lurched to the left. Caught in the middle, Nancy, after a brief flirtation with fascism, adopted a vaguely "pinkish" socialism. The politics of the Mitford sisters followed their romantic attachments, in Thompson's patronizing view. Thus, it was primarily "sexual appeal" that inspired Diana to abandon her first husband for the "charismatic and attractive" Sir Oswald Mosley, leader of the British Blackshirts. In 1933, Nancy married the "extremely good-looking" and left-leaning Peter Rodd, dutifully following him to the south of France six years later to provide relief to refugees from Franco's fascist regime. The marriage to the hard-drinking and womanizing "Prod," as she called him, dragged on until late 1957, when he finally agreed to a divorce, after sponging off the earnings from Mitford's novels "The Pursuit of Love" and its sequel, "Love in a Cold Climate."

The firmness of Mitford's anti-fascist views was put to the test during World War II when she was approached by British intelligence to spy on General de Gaulle's

Free French officer corps in London. A mole was apparently passing information to the collaborationist Vichy regime. Thompson tells us frustratingly little about this episode straight out of le Carré. Instead, she trains her attention on Mitford's love affair with one of the officers, Charles de Gaulle's right-hand man and chief political adviser, Gaston Palewski, a heavyset man with a Hitler mustache and receding hair.

In 1946, flush with the success of "The Pursuit of Love," Mitford moved to Paris, only to discover that Palewski was as much a philanderer as Prod. She established an independent life as a sought-after journalist who described the battered but brave world of Paris after the Occupation. Her biggest journalistic success, however, was her 1955 essay in the magazine *Encounter* entitled "The English Aristocracy." Her affectionate poking at the pretensions of the upper class ("U") combined with her sprightly savaging of linguistic vulgarity ("Non-U") secured Mitford's reputation as an insufferable snob. Say "house" rather than "home," she snippily instructed her readers; if guests insist on braying "cheers" as they clink their glasses, "silence is the only possible U-response."

A stylish and well-informed writer, Thompson brings a snobbishness of her own to her sympathetic account of Mitford's life. One's heart sinks with every mention of "nowadays," a sure signal that a reactionary opinion is about to be aired. In a more sophisticated time, people had "servants and no television," she informs us, but "they did strive for wit and elegance." While Mitford tolerated Palewski's affairs, today "we have chosen to ignore the truth of relations between the sexes, which do not change all that much."

It's a relief to return to Mitford's less heavy-handed opinions. In addition to her novels, she wrote a series of deft biographies set in the 18th century. In the lives of Voltaire and Madame de Pompadour, she found a world of perfect "U" manners. The Voltaire scholar Theodore Besterman patronizingly entertained her queries. When sent the first chapter of his ponderous tome, she gently reminded him that a book should be a work of art. "I think you *must* prune," she said, invoking Voltaire's gift (and her own) for the essential.

In 1967, Mitford moved to a small house in Versailles, "impelled by a vision," as Thompson nicely puts it, "that had not in fact existed for 200 years." For the last three years of her life, before her death in 1973, she endured appalling pain from Hodgkin's disease that was "something close to torture." She informed Palewski of her cancer on the same day he told her, with excruciating timing, that he was finally getting married, though not to her. Facing the end, she wrote, "I've always felt the great importance of getting into the right set at once on arrival in heaven." □