**Life in a Cold Climate’ Review: A Life of Great Compensations**

Nancy Mitford was an incomparably witty commentator on the vanishing world of the English landed gentry, which she knew intimately.

*By*

*Elizabeth Lowry*

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Nancy Mitford was the eldest of six sisters, the daughters of Lord Redesdale, an impecunious Oxfordshire-based aristocrat known as “Farve” to his children. The girls’ unorthodox childhood was enlivened by jokes, or “teases” in the Mitford idiom; batty household economies (when their mother decided to do away with napkins at meals to save money, the headline in the local press was “Peeress Saves Ha’Pence”) and idiosyncratic variations on country sports (such as the family “child hunt,” during which Farve chased his children across the countryside with bloodhounds). All this became raw material for Nancy’s riotous comic (and, to a certain degree, autobiographical) novels.

There are excellent biographies of Nancy Mitford (1904-73)— Selina Hastings’s and Lisa Hilton’s among them—but Laura Thompson’s sparkling study is the gold standard. First published in Britain in 2003, the book has never been published previously by an American publisher. The success of Ms. Thompson’s recent “Agatha Christie : A Mysterious Life,” seems to have provided a welcome opening.

Nancy Mitford in the 1950s. PHOTO: CECIL BEATON STUDIO ARCHIVE, SOTHEBY'S LONDON

LIFE IN A COLD CLIMATE

By Laura Thompson   
*Pegasus, 415 pages, $29.95*

In the 1920s the cash-strapped, charismatic Mitford girls—part of the set of Bright Young Things—were a byword for rackety glamour. Nancy Mitford’s novels are frank about the fact that the real business of upper-class women lacking any other employment is marriage, though she herself didn’t marry until the comparatively late age of 29, and then unhappily. This turned out to be the making of her. Unlike her sisters Nancy worked, writing for magazines from 1929, and publishing her first novel, “Highland Fling,” in 1931. It launched her career as an incomparably witty commentator on the manners and mores of a vanishing world: that of the English landed gentry, which she knew intimately and was fearless in spoofing.

Together the Mitford sisters formed an “impregnable unit of rampant individualism” (a typically neat précis by Ms. Thompson). Yet sisterly rivalries didn’t lie too far from the surface, and in the politically fraught 1930s these took dangerous forms. Unity was a passionate admirer of Nazism; Diana, an equally avid fascist; Jessica, a communist. It was left to Nancy, incorrigibly skeptical of ideologies and what Ms. Thompson sums up as “all that drama and flag-waving and what nanny would call showing off,” to lampoon the “demagogic pyrotechnics” of Diana’s second husband, the British Union of Fascists leader Oswald Mosley, and Unity’s Hitler-worship. But Nancy was above all a social and emotional vivisectionist. Even the acute political satire of her third novel, “Wigs on the Green” (1935), in which she skewers Mosley as Captain Jack, leader of the Union Jackshirts, takes second place to the novel’s interest in what would always prove to be her key concern: the silliness of our delusions and machinations in the arena of love.

How to live a happy and sensible life while accepting the irrationalities of love; whether love itself is an eternal value, or simply an exquisite hoax—these are the questions Mitford’s novels try to answer, whatever their ostensible subject might be. In 1933 she married the Honourable Peter Rodd, an alcoholic wastrel with an encyclopedic knowledge of the medieval Norman kingdom of Sicily, of whom Ms. Thompson remarks caustically that “it is unusual for a black sheep to manage the simultaneous feat of being a bore, but Peter was both.” Within a year of marriage Nancy had already seen through Rodd’s charming facade; he features in “Wigs on the Green” as the upmarket sponger Jasper Aspect. Rodd was not just broke and incapable of holding down a job but compulsively unfaithful to her. By 1942 Mitford was conducting her own passionate affair, with Gaston Palewski, a leading officer in de Gaulle’s Free French Forces during World War II.

This liaison, which would matter more to Mitford than to Palewski—he’s taken to task by Ms. Thompson for his habit of blowing hot and cold toward Nancy for the next 25 years and for having a “face like an unpeeled King Edward” potato—led to her relocation in 1946 to Paris. She had just published what would turn out to be her breakthrough book, “The Pursuit of Love,” a recasting of her own eccentric childhood, in which the Mitfords appear as the capricious Radletts. Palewski proved humiliatingly elusive, but a glittering new existence was about to begin for Mitford: the publication of this novel made her instantly famous and fabulously rich (“I sat under a shower of gold,” she later recalled).

After the war people were desperate for books that would help them to forget the privations they’d recently endured. “The Pursuit of Love” had it all: “jokes and romance . . . a perfectly mixed cocktail of otherness and accessibility,” in the words of Ms. Thompson, as well as a fable-like aspect that “entranced a world that had changed forever.” In her novel Palewski is transformed (wishful thinking!) into the suave French duke Fabrice de Sauveterre, who steps up to the plate and makes an unequivocal declaration of love to the heroine, Linda. Yet though Nancy drew heavily on her own experiences in this, her greatest success, an enduring partnership eluded her.

The Radletts have walk-on parts in “Love in a Cold Climate” (1949), Mitford’s equally accomplished follow-up to “The Pursuit of Love,” written from a fresh Parisian perspective that freed her to tackle new worlds: London high society, Oxford’s university clique, Paris’s gay demimonde. It’s a comedy of manners, featuring, in Ms. Thompson’s words, “a man who has an adulterous affair with an older woman, marries her daughter, then falls for her male cousin.” Mitford presented its strong sexual realism, she argues, “with a light and knowing acceptance” and an absence of judgment that places it far from “the usual value systems” of Mitford’s time (and may have helped to remove homosexuality’s social stigma in England, at least).

Privilege was indisputably Mitford’s authorial milieu, and she’s been both praised and vilified for sticking to what she knew. Her most willful tease, an article in Encounter magazine in 1955 called “The English Aristocracy,” contained the inflammatory guide to “U and non-U” or upper class and non-upper class language for which she was perhaps best known in her lifetime. Even so, she had the courage to reinvent herself, in middle age, as a historian.

Having made mincemeat of the interwar English elite, she turned her attention to the ancien régime just as English readers were growing inimical to her kind. While her friend Evelyn Waugh was increasingly embittered and frightened by England’s postwar class shifts, Nancy, working from Paris and later in Versailles, wrote about Madame de Pompadour and Louis XIV and Voltaire with the same ruthless candor she had brought to her fiction and journalism. Ms. Thompson suggests plausibly that Mitford’s affair with France, rather than with the recalcitrant Palewski, was the most significant of her life, not just because it brought her contentment, financial stability and autonomy—all the things she failed to find in her connections with men—but because it allowed her to become the author she had it in her to be.

Nancy Mitford may not have had the things—an enduring marriage, children—that were considered essential by her class and epoch to a woman’s happiness, but she enjoyed, as her sister Diana once said, “great compensations.” This elegant and incisive life does full justice to her astringent humor, her undeluded authorial voice and her championing of “the pursuit of small-scale human happiness” over some of the 20th century’s worst abstractions.

*—Ms. Lowry’s latest novel is “Dark Water.”*