



The House of Mitford

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The classic story of one of the twentieth century's most extraordinary families.

Among the six daughters and one son born to David, second Lord Redesdale, and his wife Sydney were Nancy, the novelist and historian; Diana, who married fascist leader Sir Oswald Mosley; Unity, friend of Hitler; Jessica, who became a communist and then an investigative journalist; and Deborah, Duchess of Devonshire and mistress of Chatsworth.

'The Mitford Girls,' as John Betjeman called them, were one of the twentieth century's most controversial families; said to be always either in shrieks of laughter or floods of tears, they were glamorous, romantic and - especially in politics - extreme. Yet the teasing, often bordering on cruelty, the flamboyant contrasts and the violent disagreements, hid a powerful affection, subtle likenesses in character, and a powerful underlying unity.

The House of Mitford Details

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From Reader Review The House of Mitford for online ebook

Emily Ross says

I was drawn to the Mitfords through reading Madame de Pompadour by Nancy Mitford, and this book does give a lot of detail. It's just that it is rather difficult to read, a bit of a slog, and it isn't well organised.

Natasha says

I skimmed passages of this book which seems so outdated in light of other books I have read. The prose is unnecessarily thick and pedantic. Not a good casual read. I'm pulling out of this one and starting to read the Mitford Letters book.

C.S. Burrough says

After this sitting considerably far down my Mitford history reading list, I was taken by its erudition. My expectations were cynical, knowing it was penned by family insiders: author Jonathon Guinness, 3rd Baron Moyne, is the eldest son of Diana Mitford Mosley by her first husband Bryan Guinness; his co-author is his daughter the Hon. Catherine Guinness. My tainted expectations could not have been wider off the mark.

Not only is there a marked absence of family bias, but the wordsmithing outshines every Mitford biography I have read. He does his forebears proud, his craftsmanship a testament to this clever bloodline. His being schooled at Eton and Oxford, one might expect this standard, but others with similar academic foundations have produced less impressive works.

I did not find, as certain readers have implied, any pro-Conservative slant to the narrative (the author was a Conservative Party Parliamentary Candidate). Wary of rightwing undertones, I here found objectivity from start to finish. Graced with impartiality, the content may stop short of censuring history's political right, which is not tantamount to partisanship.

I did sense, in certain of Jonathon Guinness's references to his novelist aunt Nancy Mitford, subtle retributory tones on behalf of his mother Diana who spent most of WWII in prison partly thanks Nancy. That history, well documented by all Mitford biographers, goes like this:

After leaving her first husband for British Union of Fascists leader Sir Oswald Mosley, Diana spent time in Germany with Hitler and his inner-circle in the prelude to WWII, aiming for a Nazi-approved radio station for the BUF which never eventuated. When Mosely was imprisoned early in the war under 18B as a potentially dangerous person, Diana was initially left to do much of his bidding on the outside. Nancy was summoned by MI5 to comment on how 'dangerous' she thought her younger sister. Putting patriotic duty before blood, Nancy said she thought Diana 'highly dangerous', swaying the government's decision to lock up Diana too. Separated from her babies, Diana was accordingly detained without charge or trial for years, subject to the horrors of Holloway Jail. Diana never learned of this sisterly betrayal until late in life and Mosley never learned of it.

So, one could understand any tinge of injustice felt on his mother's behalf by this author, who as a youngster witnessed her long imprisonment. Yet this is barely evident, if only hinted at (how much of the text his co-author daughter Catherine contributed is unclear).

The telling of Mosley's career itself is presented minus the fascist-bashing righteousness of many, from a rational 'setting-the-record-straight' standpoint. That seems fair considering the author is Mosley's stepson. It carries no hint of the fascist apologist we might anticipate.

(Prior to this book, after Mosley's death his birth son from his first marriage to Lady Cynthia Mosley, Nicholas Mosley, had written harsh volumes against his fascist father, for which Mosley's widow Diana never forgave her stepson.)

I confess to being least taken by the convoluted earlier histories and lineages of the Mitford sisters' two grandfathers, Algernon Freeman-Mitford ('Barty') and Thomas Gibson-Bowles, as I always am. Even so these are more impeccably detailed than any other Mitford historian's efforts I've encountered.

To call this author's archival prowess masterly is a gross understatement. This book, Mitford descendants can keep in stately libraries and others can consult through the mists of time. I wish I had read this particular Mitford history sooner as it surpasses all others.

With Jonathon Guinness in his late eighties as I write this review of a book published thirty-four years ago, there still feels to be some carryover from these remarkable sisters, all now long dead.

A self-proclaimed Mitford aficionado, I now see this as the definitive biography of this canon.

Marcelle says

About 1/2 way through and starting to skip around a bit...it's a big book and I'm finding some of the sisters more interesting than others, but overall what a fascinating family.

Rebecca Wilkins says

This book by Diana's son Jonathan is much less objective than Mary Lovell's *The Sisters*, *The Saga of the Mitford Family* that I read in the past. He obviously favors his mother. The other Mitford books I have are *Wait For Me* by Debo, the Duchess of Devonshire and *The Letters of Nancy Mitford*, this latter I abandoned after a few chapters. I am not quite sure how I got on this kick. I was probably wondering how these sisters could get so crazy over politics. Diana, the Fascist, Decca, the Communist and Unity, the Hitler lover. Is it just middle children needing attention? But the quote from this book about their mother Sydney may offer a hint, "Sydney relied too much on the evidence of her own senses and believed too little the perfectly valid experience of others." The sisters were all home-schooled or left to just read whatever they wanted without much supervision. Then Jonathan says that the men they were attracted to, Mosley for Diana, Edmond for Decca and Hitler for Unity just combined passion for a man with passion for a cause. What one does for love so to speak. Nancy, the oldest and the writer living in Paris, Pam the country girl and Debo, the Duchess (after her husband's older brother died in WW2---he was married to Kathleen Kennedy who also died in the 1940's) were the 3 non or lesser political sisters. Debo worked to make her husband's family home

Chatsworth a tourist attraction and paying concern. She has been seen on PBS showing off the house and was the last to die in 2014. I tried to read *The Coming of the Third Reich* by Richard J. Evan as recommended by my history professor son-in-law but I was getting enough of the Nazi's with *Unity* in this book. I am still trying to understand why people choose the politics they do. *The Righteous Mind* was more helpful in that regard.

Barbara Mader says

I willed myself on through this book, reading closely for bits I didn't know, but it was uphill work. The writing was terrible: horrible style, lack of organization, lousy paragraph structure, pathetic transitions, repeated cliches, clumsy phrasing, etc., etc. The heavy-handed attempts to put Diana in a good light also grated after a while. Lovell's book is much better. Despite my interest in the subject, I barely got through this.

Must add that the Guinnesses (those who wrote this) don't sound very bright.

Katherine says

Since reading Mary Lovell's book on the Mitford sisters, I have been intrigued by the family. This book gave an in-depth exploration but was tediously detailed. I ended up reading other books around this as I found it a slog to get through. As I suggest, it is informative just not particularly engaging or entertaining.

Lyn Elliott says

The early parts of the book on the Various Mitford ancestors interested me most but I bogged down as we neared the twentieth century and just didn't get beyond Sydney and David's wedding. May be I will come back to it, but there is so much on my 'want to read list' that I will turn my attention there rather than persist.

Margo says

Downton Abbey on Acid: Non-Fiction history of impoverished British aristocratic family well known for being super wacky, eccentrics. This book follows their lineage to see how the family turned out so wack.

The most famous/infamous generation of the Mitford family is that of WWII era. Of the Mitford daughters 2 were buddies w/Hitler and hard-core Nazis, 1 a Communist, 1 a popular writer, 1 a sheep farmer and 1 a Duchess.

Kay Robart says

The book successfully shows that despite all the family disagreements and bickering, underlying it all was strong family affection and unity. The book didn't do much, however, to answer my initial questions about how an admittedly eccentric but not very political upbringing could produce such extremes of personalities and beliefs in a single generation.

See my complete review here:

<http://whatmeread.wordpress.com/tag/t...>

Allison says

I'm a bit obsessed with the Mitfords but this book was boring. It suffers from the fact that the author is a nephew of the sisters but he is also not a very good writer.

Elaine says

Loved this book! It was a well-researched and thorough recounting of a most fascinating family. However, since Jonathan is Diana's son, I wish he 1) would have offered more personal insights and 2) wouldn't have referred to himself in the third person. These are minor complaints, though, and the book was well written and intriguing.

Annalisa says

As a shameless Mitford fan, naturally I enjoyed this book. Written by the son and granddaughter of Diana Mitford Mosely, it is naturally a defense of the House of Mitford, and for the most part comes across as a reasonable one. The portraits painted of the family are more intimate than those in other books. It gets beyond the caricatures and describes actual three-dimensional people, family dynamics and the historical context that explains much which might otherwise seem inexplicable I especially appreciated the portraits of the very interesting grandfathers Mitford and Bowles who led quite remarkable lives. I only wish that Jonathan had written a little more on a personal level about Diana and how she managed her role as mother and stepmother through a scandalous divorce and remarriage, and later from prison. Ultimately, the thing I love the best about the Mitfords and the reason I love them at all, is their sense of humour. It is their wit more than anything that is indelible.

Kathleen says

Written shortly after the death of Mosley, it is in part an exploration of (if not an apologia for) Diana's involvement in his movement, written very skilfully by her descendants. But it has many worthwhile aspects,

including the information on the Mitford grandfathers, Bertie Redesdale and Tommy (or Tap) Bowles. I would love it if Sadie's unpublished manuscript, referred to in the book, were available for readers.

Kaveri says

Since reading Nancy Mitford's "The Pursuit of Love" and Decca Mitford's "Hons and Rebels", I've been fascinated with Mitford sisters. Born into a family of old-fashioned, deeply traditional British landed gentry amidst the upheavals of the 20th century, the sisters developed along wildly different paths. Nancy became a pleasure-loving, bohemian "Bright Young Thing" and eventually an author; Decca became a Communist, running off to help the Spanish Republic and eventually working as leftist journalist in America; Diana joined the British Fascist party and married its leader; Unity became a Nazi and friend of Hitler. But Nancy and Decca's books treat all these developments as primarily piquant and amusing, skimmingly lightly across the surface of even the most extreme clashes of individuals and ideologies. I had hoped that Jonathan Guinness' group memoir of the sisters would serve up more insight into the dynamics of a family whose conflicts so dramatically echoed those that were taking place on the world stage.

To some extent, it does, since it offers a fuller picture of other members of the family--less-famous siblings, grandparents, and most interestingly, the parents. But Guinness is hopelessly biased--perhaps not surprisingly since he is the son of Diana Mitford. Much of the book gets bogged down in an attempt to salvage her reputation and to take down those of Nancy and Decca, her political opponents.
