

The Six: the Lives of the Mitford Sisters



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Having grown up in a family of six sisters (and two brothers), I understand the influences, cooperation and competition that six sisters often have for each other. The similar interests, wildly divergent ones, pet names shared, and shifting alliances.

The Mitford sisters: Nancy, Pamela, Diana, Unity, Jessica, and Deborah were born between 1904 and 1920, so their youth encompassed the roaring and irreverent 1920s as well as the anxious, and violent pre-war period before WW II. The last of the Mitford sisters, Deborah, died only two years ago.

They had an idyllic childhood on a country estate, and were left mainly to themselves, a nanny and a tutor. They were almost totally home-schooled. They read deeply books from their parent's library and were fascinated by the world of ideas. All except Pamela, who loved farming and developed close connections with animals and the land. Just before dying she sighed and said she wished only for one more hunt.

The eldest, Nancy, became a novelist who wrote about English manners?some of her characters were based on her sisters' lovers, and many of the book's escapades she borrowed from her sisters' experiences. She penned *Love in a Cold Country* which is now considered a very witty classic.

Besides, Nancy, two others became writers: Jessica famous for her book about dying, *The American Way of Death*, and Deborah, who wrote mainly about Chatsworth House where she lived as a duchess.

But what really zings in this book is the politics. Three of the sisters became very active politically. Diana and Unity were both drawn to Fascism and Nazism. Both moved to Germany and became part of Hitler's inner circle. According to Thompson, Hitler was very attracted to Diana, but Unity became like a younger sister to him, someone to joke and relax with. Because of Diana and Unity's influence, even their parents were drawn into the pro-Nazi circle.

Unity met Hitler, whom she called Wolf (he called her Child) by visiting a café he favored and then making herself obvious by dropping her book or a glove. Soon she was invited to his table and they became friends.

Scholars speculate that Hitler used both sisters for their connections to Churchill and other British leaders. Being rich gave the young women, a good deal of freedom. Diana who had a kind, loving and rich husband soon left him for the philandering head of the British Union of Fascists. She eventually married Oswald Mosley at Goebbels' house. Hitler attended.

But before doing that, she scandalized the English by leaving her beautiful estate and moving to London where she had to share Mosley with his wife, and his wife's two sisters. This was during the age when divorce was frowned upon, and openly living in sin was considered an affront to society.

Eventually England declared war on Germany. That day, Unity shot herself in the head with a pistol probably given to her by Hitler. She did not die, but lived on, with the mind of a twelve year old, dependent on her mother.

Meanwhile, Decca (Jessica) married Churchill's nephew (who may have been his son) and became an ardent Communist. Yet, Unity and Decca still wrote to each other and were close.

If there is one thing this book teaches you is that the ties of sisterhood are very strong. Here's what Unity wrote to Decca during a period they ardently disagreed with each other on nearly everything, "Of course one can't separate one's politics & one's private life, as you know Nazism is my life & I very much despise that democratic-liberal-conservative-English idea of walking about arm-in-arm with one's opponent in private life and looking upon politics as a business or hobby; but I do think that family ties ought to make a difference. After all, violent differences of opinion didn't prevent you & me from remaining good friends did they?" A fascinating read that combines the personal and the political.

Posted by Dory L. on December 14, 2016

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