

Politics and Personality in the Mid-Century

Middlebrow:

The Fiction of Nancy Mitford

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Abstract

This thesis explores the fiction of Nancy Mitford, who, despite being one of the most popular writers of the twentieth century, has received very little critical attention. Through close analysis of Mitford's lesser-known novels, alongside an examination of her media portrayal and contemporary critical reception, I aim to establish the reasons for Mitford's general exclusion from academic debate, and for her frequent categorisation as a 'middlebrow' writer.

This thesis situates Mitford thoroughly within the historical context during which she produced her novels, and argues that the contemporary social and political situation influenced their content. The two main themes that recur throughout this thesis are politics and personality. I examine the role played by politics in Mitford's first three novels *Highland Fling* (1931), *Christmas Pudding* (1932) and *Wigs on the Green* (1935), the last of which contains an ambiguously satirical portrayal of British fascism. I look at the difference between Mitford's depiction of fascism in that novel and her later text, *The Pursuit of Love* (1945), which treats fascism much more seriously. Through a consideration of Mitford's fourth novel, *Pigeon Pie* (1940), I highlight the significance of personality in that text, whether it be related to notions of political propaganda or to adopted personas, such as that of the glamorous female spy.

Glamour is an important subtopic in this thesis, and is applied to its study of both *Pigeon Pie* and Mitford's early press appearances, the glamorous sophistication of

which, I argue, informed later critical views of her works. By engaging with academic studies of middlebrow and modernist literature, I demonstrate Mitford's conflicted position as a writer of fiction that has generally been characterised as light and insubstantial, but which, I claim, can be surprisingly subversive, and offers valuable observations about life in interwar and mid-century Britain. This thesis provides the first extended critical study of Mitford, who remains understudied and in need of critical reappraisal.

Introduction

Even after reading every one of [Nancy] Mitford's carefully chosen words some doubts remain. Is this a satire of the advanced state of decadence reached by the aristocracy of England in this century, a light-hearted and occasionally witty burlesque, or just a lot of high-spirited nonsense?

– Orville Prescott, *The New York Times*, 1949

Nancy Mitford, who died the other day, was a novelist and historical biographer, but she will probably be remembered for one short essay on the English aristocracy ... a gay, light-hearted slightly satirical piece, first published in *Encounter*. It wasn't very original but it took the world by storm, starting the snobbiest craze of the 1950s.

– Maurice Dunlevy, *The Canberra Times*, 1973

The whole, wonderful Mitford achievement depends not only on a perfect ear for the unacceptable note, but also for exhibiting a terrific childishness in all things. It is very U to be childish about the complications of life.

– Andrew O'Hagan, *London Review of Books*, 2007

When it comes to critical responses to the works of Nancy Mitford, bemusement is a rather common reaction. The startling aspects of Mitford's fiction – exaggerated characters, ludicrous settings, narrative ambiguity and subversive approaches, all

flavoured with a rich satirical sauce – do not always suit critical taste. As a result, bewilderment is frequently accompanied by disapproval, and a number of critics have dismissed Mitford simply because of their inability to look past the dazzling surface of her writing. If her fiction appears frivolous, that is because, at first glance, it is. To many contemporary critics, Mitford's writing comes across as farcical, light-hearted, fun, and little else. This thesis will argue that it is so much more than this.

The Misunderstood and Misrepresented Miss Mitford

Nancy Mitford's position in literary history is astonishing. Though her writing was marked by controversial commentary on extreme politics and wartime international relations, subversive portrayals of sexually transgressive characters, bizarre humour and eruptions of violence, she has recently fallen out of the critical account. Why has this happened? How has an author who was not only hugely popular, but also influential, well-connected and very famous, disappeared entirely from critical accounts of the mid-century period? What can we learn about the nature of literary celebrity, touched on by Maurice Dunlevy, who, days after Mitford's death had already relegated her, in an obituary, to the position of mere essayist, cause of a linguistic and social furore, but nothing more? In a much later assessment of Mitford, Andrew O'Hagan also refers to that infamous essay, "The English Aristocracy", which cemented the Mitford persona: sophisticated, self-conscious, frivolous aristocrat, prioritising breeding and deportment over all other concerns. While Dunlevy dismisses Mitford, O'Hagan identifies what makes her important: her 'perfect ear', her distinctive style, and her mastery of the social discourses of her day.

In many ways, Mitford was a trailblazer. As a member of the aristocracy, Mitford's young womanhood was bounded by parties, balls and other social occasions. Though Orville Prescott, Dunlevy and O'Hagan highlight that her preoccupation with the aristocracy increased as she grew older, Mitford nevertheless separated herself from other young women of her era. She was willing to work – writing being one of the few accepted professions for a young lady at this time – and produced novels which offer compelling commentaries on life among the upper classes in twentieth-century Britain. Her diligent work produced something which readers evidently craved, with seven of her books appearing on the *New York Times* Best Seller List for a combined total of seventy-five weeks.¹

Mitford's novels can reveal much about interwar, wartime and post-war politics, gender issues, sexuality and social class, while her frequent fictionalising of real events alongside aspects of her own experiences highlights her overlooked contribution to the fields of life writing and creative non-fiction. Her journalism regularly uses her own experiences as inspiration, while her letters are often even more exciting than her fictional output, peppered as they are with private nicknames, secret code words, and gossipy retellings of major and minor events. From the horrors of the Spanish Civil War to the mild anxiety about not having quite the right frock to wear, Mitford's letters run the gamut from seriousness to frivolity then back again, with the two moods sometimes irrevocably entwined.

Crucially, those novels that drew most heavily on her own eccentric family – in particular *The Pursuit of Love* (1945) and *Love in a Cold Climate* (1949) – proved to be her biggest successes with the public, suggesting that regardless of the

¹ For figures related to Mitford's appearances on this list, see Appendix Two.

aristocratic position of the families featured in these books, they contain insightful observations about family and relationships, to which many people can relate. Even more importantly perhaps, they are hilarious, as evidenced by the inclusion of Mitford's novels in lists compiled by both *Esquire* and *Woman & Home* magazines of the funniest books ever written.² Mitford's way with words is extraordinary – in his introduction to the 2010 Penguin edition of *Love in a Cold Climate*, Alan Cumming notes 'the brilliance of [her] observational wit' (viii) – and in her novels, she almost single-handedly developed a new language of shrieking, do-admitting and too, too much-ing.³

Mitford's essay "The English Aristocracy" continues to define her. If we are to transform her literary standing, it is vital to look beyond this limited view of Mitford as cultural arbiter only, and instead refocus our attention on her nuanced engagement with the complex world around her and how she presented this to her reader. Although contemporary critics such as Prescott frequently portray her as a writer of light-hearted fancies, an unexpected subversiveness can be detected in her depiction of blatant adultery in *The Pursuit of Love*, and of unashamed homosexuality in *Love in a Cold Climate*. These aspects of Mitford's works are continually ignored in the small amount of critical discussion that has been published, while she is almost completely excluded from considerations of interwar

² The *Esquire* list can be found at www.esquire.com/uk/culture/books/news/g5331/funniest-books-ever/, while the *Woman & Home* list can be accessed at www.womanandhome.com/life/books/10-best-novels-to-make-you-laugh-130007/.

³ Though the 'too, too' prefix can mostly be blamed on Evelyn Waugh, who originally coined it in his novel *Vile Bodies* (1930).

and wartime literature, comedic writing, and modern women's writing.⁴ A huge success with the public and with a number of critics of her day, her work has been mostly discarded by today's literary critics and academics. As such, Mitford is long overdue a reassessment as a writer ahead of her time in many ways, and whose writing should be taken into consideration when evaluating the time periods that her books present to us.

There has never been a better time to discuss Mitford and her literary influence, since it is very clear that she remains extremely popular. She has been cited as an influence by writers as diverse as Jilly Cooper, Sophie Dahl and Julian Fellowes, with Cooper and Fellowes especially borrowing themes and tropes from Mitford for their own writings about the aristocracy. In May 2018, the Hay Festival announced its list, as voted for by the public, of the 100 most popular books of the last 100 years written by women, and Mitford's *The Pursuit of Love* made the grade. A month later, the novel was reissued for the first time as a Penguin Essentials text. This follows the republication of Mitford's novels *Wigs on the Green* (1935), *The Pursuit of Love*, *Love in a Cold Climate*, *The Blessing* (1951) and *Don't Tell Alfred* (1960) by Penguin in 2010, which led to the reissue of Mitford's earlier, less remembered novels *Highland Fling* (1931), *Christmas Pudding* (1932) and *Pigeon Pie* (1940) by Capuchin Classics in 2011. Penguin also released Mitford's novels in a complete volume that same year, before reissuing that edition with a new cover in 2015, alongside similar reissues of *Wigs on the Green*, *The Pursuit of Love*, *Love in a*

⁴ Academics such as Nicola Humble have examined Mitford's works to a certain extent: in one particularly useful essay, Humble looks at the role of campness in *Love in a Cold Climate* (1949), but the novel is not the main focus of her argument. Aside from similarly short considerations of Mitford's writing by critics like Nicola Beauman, the amount of existent work on Mitford does not fully reflect her position as a writer of value. Equally, those studies that do mention Mitford – with the notable exception of Humble's consideration of campness – tend to characterise her as just another writer whose works have been rubbished because of their supposed lightness, and fail to address the more ground-breaking aspects of her texts.

Cold Climate, *The Blessing* and *Don't Tell Alfred*. In addition to the continued appeal of Mitford's own writing, in 2018 it was announced that India Knight is to write a modern-day 'reimagining' of *The Pursuit of Love*, which will be released through Fig Tree, an imprint of Penguin. The story, retitled *Darling*, aims to examine how the Radletts of Mitford's text would deal with life in today's world. With this resurgence of interest in Mitford, my thesis offers a timely reconsideration of this understudied and underappreciated writer, and though a 'reimagining' may prove interesting, it would appear that now is an appropriate time to return to the original.

'I live a great deal by my eyes': Mitford in Perspective⁵

Nancy Mitford was born into one of the most controversial British families of the twentieth century. Her upbringing had a profound effect on the writing she produced, while her notorious family, and apparently glamorous way of life, affected the way her works were received by critics. Growing up in the years following the First World War, Mitford was witness to some of the most tumultuous events in modern history, and her works offer valuable observations of life in Britain during the interwar period. Yet Mitford's body of work extends much further than the interwar period itself.

Mitford began her writing career as a journalist for high society magazines such as *Vogue* and *The Lady*, and her first novel, *Highland Fling*, was published in 1931. Initially intended as a way of supplementing the meagre allowance she received from her parents, writing soon became a constant in Mitford's life.

⁵ For a much more detailed biographical exploration of Mitford's life and career, see Appendix One.

Highland Fling, a light-hearted satire about a small group of young aristocrats – members of the Bright Young People – who visit Scotland and cause problems for the locals, was largely based on Mitford's own experiences. This text demonstrates one of the first instances of Mitford fictionalising her own life. However, upon publication, this first attempt at a novel was not a great success in terms of sales, despite critical praise from the upper-class magazines and periodicals – *The Tatler*, *The Bystander*, and *The Sketch* and so on – which regularly included Mitford in photographic features. Mitford's position as the daughter of a baron allowed her entry into the sophisticated world of high society covered by such publications, and she was regularly seen in their pages, often presented as the epitome of good breeding.

It is surprising that Mitford was able to be presented in such a way at all, given the unusual behaviour of her family. The eldest of seven siblings – six daughters and one son – born to Lord and Lady Redesdale, Nancy was one of the most conventional of all, particularly in relation to politics. In her biography of Mitford, Selina Hastings claims that 'there can have been few families in England more deeply divided between right and left, Fascist and Communist, appeasement and war, than the Mitfords' (119), and it is difficult to argue with this description. In 1932, Nancy's sister Diana caused a social scandal when she left her husband and became the mistress of Sir Oswald Mosley, whose political party, the British Union of Fascists, was founded that same year. Diana and another sister, Unity, were soon devoted members of Mosley's far-right organisation, and Unity eventually became a committed Nazi. Yet another sister, Jessica, was attracted to socialism and, in time, an active member of the Communist Party.

As well as supporting particular political parties, the family were also torn in relation to the inevitably approaching Second World War. By the mid-1930s, Unity was an intimate of Adolf Hitler and totally against war with her beloved Germany, a view that was shared by her parents, sister Diana, and brother Tom. Lord and Lady Redesdale were invited to attend the Nuremberg Rally in 1938, and were quickly taken in by Hitler's rhetoric, and by Nazi ideology. Soon, Nancy's parents were against any conflict with Germany, and Unity caused great controversy when she wrote an anti-Semitic letter to the German propaganda newspaper *Der Stürmer*, which was translated and republished widely in the British press.

It is intriguing, then, that Nancy managed to avoid similar public ire. Yet there is a simple reason for this: Nancy, unlike her more outrageous sisters, did not get involved with extreme politics in a personal capacity, though she did transmute it into the fiction she produced. Indeed, when her second novel *Christmas Pudding* – another satire of the wild lives of the Bright Young People – was released to sales as tepid as those of its predecessor, Nancy turned her attention to Unity and Diana's political machinations, beginning a trend for satirising those closest to her that would recur throughout the rest of her novels. Mitford's third novel, *Wigs on the Green*, caused a rift between Nancy and her fascist sisters, who, upon learning about the novel and its satirical portrait of Unity and the BUF, demanded that Mitford scrap it immediately. Although Nancy agreed to delete some of the most potentially damaging descriptions of Captain Jack, an obvious caricature of Mosley, her sisters remained displeased, and her fractured relationship with Unity was never fully healed. Even more frustratingly, in spite of all the trouble the novel had caused between Mitford and her sisters, upon release, *Wigs on the Green* was not a hit.

In 1938, Mitford edited a collection of letters written by her cousins,⁶ entitled *The Ladies of Alderley: Letters 1841-1850*, and followed this in 1939 with *The Stanleys of Alderley: Letters 1851-1865*. Alongside these edited works, Mitford continued to write fiction. In 1940, Mitford's first novel to be published by Hamish Hamilton was released: *Pigeon Pie*. A satire of the 'Phoney War' period then in progress, it was published a mere few days before the Phoney War period ended and the Second World War began in earnest, making it almost immediately a relic. As Alison Light suggests in her study *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars*, 'this is the Britain which expected and dreaded that the next war would be like the last, and which dutifully tried on its gas-masks in October 1938, only to put them away again a week later' (114), and this remained the case until May 1940, the same month Mitford's fourth novel was released. As a result of its public no longer wishing to make light of the approaching war, the book did not sell particularly well, and Mitford was again denied popular success as an author.

However, a few years later, while the Second World War raged around her, Nancy decided to turn her attention back to her family, though this time she avoided any broad satire about political beliefs. The novel that emerged as a result of Mitford's fictionalisation of her eccentric childhood was *The Pursuit of Love*, an immediate success with the public and most critics. Mitford's breakthrough, it is generally considered her best book – Nicola Beauman suggests that 'there are few novels which explore with such insight women's real natures' (279) – and it is

⁶ Through her grandparents, Mitford was related to a number of prominent families. Her maternal grandmother was the aunt of Clementine Hozier, who went on to marry Winston Churchill, and the great aunt of Angus Ogilvy, who later married Princess Alexandra of Kent, cousin of Queen Elizabeth II. Meanwhile, through the Stanleys of Alderley, Mitford was related to philosopher and mathematician Bertrand Russell.

almost certainly the one for which she is most remembered. Its sequel, *Love in a Cold Climate*, was even more successful in commercial terms. Chosen as Book of the Month by various book clubs, the novel sold over 70,000 copies in its first four months of release alone. Both novels revolve around upper-crust life. Themes of aristocracy were returned to in Mitford's final novels *The Blessing* and *Don't Tell Alfred*, the latter of which is a further sequel to *The Pursuit of Love* and *Love in a Cold Climate*. The main difference between these earlier portraits of British upper-class society and the worlds depicted in *The Blessing* and *Don't Tell Alfred* is the intensification of the later texts' distinctly French flavour: both novels take place almost entirely in France.

After *The Pursuit of Love* proved a roaring success, Mitford seized upon her long-held ambition to move to Paris. Since childhood, she had been fascinated by France, and a number of trips to the country over the years with friends and family had whetted her appetite, and only increased her desire to live there permanently. With the success of *The Pursuit of Love* came financial security at last, and Mitford moved to a flat on the rue Monsieur in 1946. Surrounded by the luxury of French food, the sophistication of Parisian couture and the romantic language she had learned in the schoolroom but never experienced perpetually around her, Mitford developed into more of a devoted Francophile than ever before. In 1950, she branched out into theatre, translating and adapting André Roussin's hit comedy *La petite hutte* for the West End stage. The success of Mitford's adaptation of the play, entitled *The Little Hut*, which ran for over three years, can be attributed to that 'perfect ear' for speech styles and idiomatic English described by O'Hagan. Mitford's success outside fiction was solidified by the popularity of her historical

biographies *Madame de Pompadour* (1954), *Voltaire in Love* (1957), *The Sun King* (1966) and *Frederick the Great* (1970), though these non-fiction texts have received even less critical attention than Mitford's novels.⁷ In 1972, Mitford was appointed a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) by Queen Elizabeth II, and awarded the Légion d'Honneur by the French government. After a long period of illness, she died in Versailles in 1973.

Why Mitford?

As a writer, Nancy Mitford has long been overlooked. During her lifetime, she was a bona fide celebrity. The novels she produced found a popular audience, brought her wealth and fame, and looked likely to ensure her a lasting reputation. However, the position Mitford held during her lifetime as a successful and admired writer has not translated into a distinguished posthumous standing, and indeed, in terms of literary criticism, academic discussion of Mitford's works has been surprisingly limited. As is the case with her sisters, Nancy has been the subject of numerous biographies, many of which do contain a focus on her writing career,⁸ though of course the primary interest tends to be her personal life and the contemporaneous lives of her sisters. Although she was a bestselling writer on both sides of the Atlantic, there have been very few extended discussions of her writing, and to date, no book-length study

⁷ I would, of course, have liked to discuss Mitford's historical biographies in detail, but limitations in terms of space prevented this. Further consideration of Mitford's non-fiction would however be beneficial for a fuller understanding of her literary output, and I intend to use Mitford's biographies in my future research.

⁸ Biographies of Nancy have been produced by Harold Acton, Selina Hastings, Lisa Hilton and Laura Thompson, and she has also been discussed in different biographies of the sisters as a collective written by Thompson, Mary S. Lovell, and Jonathan and Catherine Guinness respectively. In general, these biographies praise Mitford's writing, describing the critical success of her books and the huge sales figures which her later novels accrued, though much of the emphasis on her output is placed on the real-life people who inspired her works, rather than on literary merit.

of her literary output has been published. This thesis is the first extended study of her works, and seeks to address the reasons for her omission from the literary canon and for her conflicted relationship with the category of the ‘middlebrow’.

One of the foremost aristocrats of her time, Mitford intrigues me because of her contradictions. On the one hand, she supposedly abandoned Britain in favour of France, but it is difficult to ignore the patriotism that seeps into her novels, belying this position. As well as this, her mockery of the aristocracy is a constant focus in her fiction, though her tireless attention to the upper classes suggests a deep affection hidden beneath the barbs; a paradox that can also be seen in her deliberate opposition to seriousness. Often, the narrative viewpoint in her novels proves ambiguous, or the characters described veer into ludicrousness. Everything, even the most inhumane of subjects, such as fascism, is regularly cloaked in guile and frivolity.⁹ Everything with Mitford is a tease.

Clearly, choosing to write about an author who revelled in teasing her family and friends by fictionalising them in her novels – sometimes quite brutally¹⁰ – could prove challenging. However, it is the inherent difficulty of unravelling the threads of Mitford’s comedic tapestry that makes a study of her writing worthwhile. Although she was not a modernist who experimented with the narrative form of her novels, she was nevertheless quite ground-breaking in her approach to subjects that were either

⁹ So much so that ‘Nancy Mitford’ has become somewhat of a byword for light-hearted fun. One of my colleagues, who discovered Mitford’s writing later than myself and was similarly drawn in, suggested that her writing is ‘like comfort food, in a book.’

¹⁰ In her biography of Mitford, Selina Hastings suggests that *Love in a Cold Climate*’s Lady Montdore, ‘magnificent in her rudeness, magnificent in her grandeur ... is a composite of Helen Dashwood and of Nancy’s mother-in-law, Lady Rennell, two ladies well known for a lofty view of themselves and their belief in uncompromising candour’ (188), though Mitford herself described Lady Montdore as a caricature of Violet Trefusis. Meanwhile, less equivocally in *The Blessing* (1951), ‘Cyril Connolly puts in an appearance as the Captain, one of Grace’s suitors, owner of an avant-garde theatre run by long-haired girls with dirty feet, closely modelled on the *Horizon* [Connolly’s literary magazine] staff, a portrait which, unsurprisingly, gave a great deal of offence to its original’ (Hastings 199-200).

then taboo or little discussed. In *The Pursuit of Love*, for example, she chooses to depict Linda's extramarital affairs plainly. Hardly revolutionary in itself perhaps, her depiction nevertheless subverts the usual pattern followed in novels of this kind: rather than renounce her lover and sink into depression or suicide, Linda brazenly admits the affair to Fanny, the novel's narrator, and happily gives birth to her lover's child. Admittedly, she dies in childbirth, which could be seen as a means of punishment for her adulterous transgressions, but in a novel in which Linda is presented as the most lovable and fascinating character of all, it is difficult to justify the position that she transforms into a castigated sinner for whom we should feel pity. Even more so than Linda, the character of Cedric in *Love in a Cold Climate* should be presented as a sinner: flamboyantly homosexual, and continually provoking the straight men around him on purpose, in the hands of almost any other writer during this period, he would be a paper-thin stereotype. Yet Mitford makes him the hero of the novel. By working his magic, he effortlessly patches up damaged relationships and converts the stiff Lady Montdore into a thrill-seeking adventuress. It is these moments of transgression that make Mitford exciting as a writer, and though much of this thesis focuses on her lesser known works, naughtiness and mischievousness are themes which recur throughout her oeuvre, and which can be seen in almost all her books.

The main themes which will be discussed in my thesis are politics and personality. By engaging with concepts of politics and personality as a means of examining Mitford's novels, this study draws on various disciplines, including, among others, political theory, history, literary theory, literary criticism, periodical studies, and visual culture studies. It also invokes literary hierarchies such as the

middlebrow and modernism. Politics and personality are appropriate themes to apply to Mitford's writing, given her sophisticated and sustained engagement with the most debated political movements of her time, while theories of personality – particularly in relation to identity, persona and propaganda – recur throughout her texts. The concept of glamour is a worthwhile subtopic to explore, as the notion of glamorised politics persists in several Mitford novels: especially the aestheticising of extreme political movements such as fascism. Further to this, glamorous personas are frequently returned to through the stylish locations and characters which populate her texts, while Mitford's focus on the glamorising of cults of personality demonstrates a melding of both themes. However, my thesis also aims to explore politics and personality more generally, focusing on the different ways in which these concepts are used in Mitford's novels and how they relate to the wider historical context. Alongside this, my study will examine Mitford's own persona, both literary and celebrity, exploring reasons for the lack of attention she has received from academics, and for the conflation of the Mitford persona with Mitford herself. My purpose is to revive interest in Mitford's writing, and to both explore, and argue against, her exclusion from scholarship about mid-century literature.

Thesis Structure and Concerns

My thesis is divided into five chapters. The current chapter provides an introduction to the thesis and its main aims and concerns. Chapter One comprises an analysis of fascist politics in Mitford's novel *Wigs on the Green* and its relation to the later *The Pursuit of Love*, Chapter Two focuses on *Pigeon Pie* and notions of personality,

while Chapter Three investigates contemporary media coverage of Mitford, and her consequent literary reception. The Conclusion gathers together findings from the three main chapters for an overall discussion of Mitford and the ideas offered in the thesis. The thesis also contains three appendices. Appendix One offers an extended biographical study of Mitford's life and career as a means of situating her in the contemporary context. Appendix Two provides further details about the data compiled for Chapter Three, which was too extensive to be included in full in the chapter itself.¹¹ Appendix Three displays some examples of the vast array of book covers chosen for Mitford's novels over the years in order to support my discussion of the marketing of Mitford's books and public image throughout the decades. My thesis aims to answer four main questions, two of which contain numerous sub-questions:

- How does Mitford engage with politics? What do her texts suggest about attitudes toward extreme ideologies such as fascism and communism during the interwar period? Further to this, how is glamour used in relation to such movements, and what does Mitford's writing say about the transformative and potentially dangerous power of glamour when applied to politics?
- How does Mitford engage with notions of personality, particularly in regard to personal and national identity? As well as this, what do her texts suggest about the implications of adopted personas and propagandistic cults of

¹¹ The data collected for Chapter Three was vast; therefore, it was not possible to include details about every single contemporary critical review of Mitford's works. Indeed, multiple chapters could be written based on the reviews and other material gathered for Chapter Three alone. Chapter Three discusses a selection of these reviews, and Appendix Two is intended as a supplementary analysis of particular keywords which recur throughout the reviews, and other relevant data.

personality, which can rely on glamour as a means of aestheticising the undesirable?

- What role does nostalgia – particularly that of the upper classes for their disappearing lifestyle – play in Mitford’s evocations of notions of politics and personality, and in responses to her work, and its categorisation as middlebrow?
- How was Mitford herself depicted in contemporary print media, and how has this affected the reception of her work among readers and academics?

The first question is most explicitly addressed in Chapters One and Two, both of which deal with interwar and Second World War politics, though politics in general is a recurring theme throughout the thesis. The second question is almost exclusively the focus of Chapter Two, which engages with notions of personality in relation to political propaganda and wartime spy work. The third question is discussed throughout the thesis in relation to the historical context of Mitford’s novels, while the final question is thoroughly examined in Chapter Three, which details Mitford’s literary and celebrity image. It is worthwhile to outline each chapter in more detail in order to demonstrate how the thesis structure is appropriate to the themes and how all of the themes are closely interrelated.

Chapter One offers an analysis of Mitford’s third novel, *Wigs on the Green*, and its approach to the rise of fascism in Britain. Written in response to her sister Unity Mitford’s extreme political beliefs, the book is unusual to say the least. As this chapter demonstrates, the tone of the novel is difficult to pin down, since the omniscient narrator adopts an ambiguous attitude towards this new political

movement, and it is almost impossible to work out whether fascism is being presented as a viable choice for Britain, or as a malignance which must be stopped. On the one hand, the novel satirises fascism and the ardent beliefs of people like Eugenia – the character inspired by Unity – while at the same time, it often presents these beliefs without comment. Further to this, these beliefs are almost aestheticised through glamorous means which are intended to seduce, with the implied author highlighting the dangers of idealising such views. This technique makes the narrative position hard to determine and ultimately creates anxiety in today's reader. Certainly when the novel was written, fascist beliefs, as I will demonstrate, were much less controversial than they are today. Indeed, among some members of the aristocracy during the interwar period, fascist, or even simply far right-wing beliefs, were often the norm.

However, by the late 1930s, attitudes towards fascism had already altered considerably. In 1945, Mitford's fifth novel, *The Pursuit of Love*, was published, and as this chapter shows, that novel treats fascism very differently from the way it was treated in *Wigs on the Green*. In *The Pursuit of Love*, Mitford describes the treatment at Perpignan of refugees fleeing from the Spanish Civil War, and her depiction is one which emphatically condemns fascism, the root cause of this grim situation. This chapter situates *Wigs on the Green* in relation to its interwar historical context, and likewise in relation to the other two novels which Mitford published in the 1930s – *Highland Fling* and *Christmas Pudding* – both of which also explore political ideas. In the case of these earlier novels, however, the political spectre is communism, and this chapter looks at fears expressed by the upper classes about this potentially

destructive movement, which arguably contributed to the rise of fascist parties across Europe, and provided Mitford with fuel for her satirical comedy.

One of the most extended critical examinations of Mitford appears in Judy Suh's *Fascism and Anti-Fascism in Twentieth-Century British Fiction*. In her analysis of the role of fascism in fiction of this period, Suh compares Mitford's *Wigs on the Green* with Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* (1948) by focusing on the role played by the country house in both novels. The book as a whole considers how writers whose aesthetic located them outside the sphere of modernism engaged in anti-fascist approaches through the medium of middlebrow fiction. Suh identifies *Wigs on the Green* as an example of country house literature, characterising the novel as one 'that [blends] elegy and satire to transform the genre into an intense site of political theorization' (132). Although in my thesis I do not place much emphasis on *Wigs on the Green*'s position as a country house text, I do draw on Suh's analysis of the failings of Eugenia's grandparents and nanny, who are incapable of controlling her and inadvertently become 'domestic sources of fascism' (Suh 132). As Suh herself acknowledges, 'the lengthiest critical discussions of Nancy Mitford's *Wigs on the Green* appear in biographies of various members of the author's aristocratic family' (131), and Suh's account is the only literary critical discussion published to date. However, Suh's study is part of a larger analysis of the role of political extremism in twentieth-century British fiction, rather than entirely dedicated to Mitford's text, and my first chapter presents a much more extended exploration of this understudied text.

Much of my research for Chapter One, therefore, is derived from studies of political theory, in particular books about the rise of British fascism and Nazism. One

of the most useful texts of this kind is Julie V. Gottlieb's *Feminine Fascism: Women in Britain's Fascist Movement*, which provides a detailed study of the role of women in the British Fascist movement, exploring motivations for joining, and tasks undertaken by women within the organisation. An important contextual source, Gottlieb's text contains repeated mention of Unity and Diana, as well as discussion of the role – or lack thereof – of feminism within the organisation. My focus on Eugenia in this chapter adds to Gottlieb's discussion of the place of women in British fascism, but goes further in demonstrating how Mitford uses this political doctrine as a means of total empowerment for Eugenia, moving beyond Gottlieb's exploration of the rather limited freedom fascism granted to female fascists in the real-life context. Alongside Gottlieb's book, I engage with Richard Thurlow's *Fascism in Britain: A History, 1918-1985*, the early chapters of which explore the rise of fascism in Britain, with an emphasis on the many factors precipitating the popularity of this movement, while Thomas Linehan's *British Fascism 1918-1939: Parties, Ideology and Culture* provides detailed analysis of fascism within the British context, and about the inner workings of British Fascist movements in particular, especially Mosley's BUF, the group heavily satirised by Mitford in *Wigs on the Green*. Both of these texts, especially Linehan's, describe the interwar historical context which contributed to the popularity of the British Fascist movement, and Chapter One uses this historical context in order to discuss the situation for aristocratic women during the interwar period, and the allure which fascism held for certain members of the upper classes.

Chapter Two comprises an examination of Mitford's fourth novel, *Pigeon Pie*, and the different ways it engages with the theme of personality. The first half of

this chapter details Mitford's engagement with personality in relation to politics, specifically through cults of personality and their relationship to political propaganda. The topic of political propaganda in the novel is discussed chiefly through an investigation of the role played by radio broadcasting during the Phoney War period. Chapter Two explores how in *Pigeon Pie*, Mitford satirises the propaganda expressed through this medium on both sides of the conflict. In my analysis of Mitford's portrayal of the wartime BBC, I draw on Siân Nicholas' study of radio broadcasting during this period, which demonstrates the difficulties experienced by the broadcaster as it attempted to keep listeners interested in patriotic content. *Pigeon Pie* details such efforts by the BBC, and I use Nicholas' work, as well as that of Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, to investigate the important relationship between radio broadcasting and political propaganda. Jowett and O'Donnell highlight the growth of Nazi radio propaganda, and Chapter Two builds on their analysis by describing how Mitford uses fears about Nazi propaganda to comment on life in Phoney War-era Britain.

In the novel, Mitford presents the character of Sir Ivor King, a wildly popular British opera singer, who seemingly switches allegiance from Britain to Germany. Mitford therefore transposes German propaganda techniques into the British context. My chapter shows how the novel demonstrates the force of the celebrity persona, which can be used to persuade people into accepting particular beliefs or values. The power of propaganda, especially through music, is key to the narrative, and I also analyse Mitford's portrayal of Lord Haw-Haw, the Briton who became notorious for his pro-German broadcasts during the Second World War.

The second half of Chapter Two explores how Mitford engages with personality from a different angle, in this case in relation to spying. The protagonist of *Pigeon Pie*, Lady Sophia Garfield, bored with her tedious job at a first-aid post during this period known by some as the ‘Bore War’, becomes obsessed with spy work, and soon longs to become a glamorous female spy. This chapter demonstrates Mitford’s engagement with metafiction, as her characters frequently debate spy fiction conventions, with Mitford highlighting the influence of Hollywood films on conceptions of spies. Most explicitly, *Pigeon Pie* is metafictional in relation to the works of John Buchan, in particular *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915),¹² and the two novels are comparatively analysed in this chapter. This chapter also deals with the opposing depictions of spy work in Mitford and Buchan, and how these novels operate in different time periods and different realities. By engaging with Emma Grundy Haigh’s analysis of the role played by women in early twentieth-century spy fiction, I explain how Mitford uses similar tropes in *Pigeon Pie* to challenge expectations about Sophia and about the work which she, at first enthusiastically, then reluctantly, carries out as a female spy. I also build on historical studies of female spies such as Marthe Richard and Mata Hari to amplify my discussion of Mitford’s persistent allusions to Hari. *Pigeon Pie* is briefly touched on by Gill Plain in an article about women’s writing of the Second World War, and is the focus of an article by Donald McDonough entitled “Off with Their Heads: The British Novel and the Rise of Fascism”, though the difficulty of sourcing the latter – which was written

¹² This chapter looks specifically at Buchan’s *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915), but the intrepid hero of that novel, Richard Hannay, also went on to appear in six other texts by Buchan: *Greenmantle* (1916), *Mr Standfast* (1919), *The Three Hostages* (1924), *The Courts of the Morning* (1929), *The Island of Sheep* (1936) and *Sick Heart River* (1940).

for the *Tennessee Philological Bulletin* in 1996 – suggests that critical reappraisal of Mitford's text is long overdue.

Alongside Nazism, the second half of Chapter Two deals with spies in literature. The notion of the glamorous female spy persona is one of *Pigeon Pie*'s biggest concerns. Studies on espionage in literature by Allan Hepburn – who has also written about female sexuality and the associated role of the mistress in Mitford's *The Pursuit of Love* – exemplify the changeable nature of such roles in the literature Mitford parodies in *Pigeon Pie*. This chapter also engages with Chrisoph Ehland's examination of changing notions of modernity in John Buchan's *Mr Standfast* (1918). As well as this, I adopted a similar approach to Joseph A. Kestner in my study of femininity in Mitford's novel, while Kirsten Smith's study of the femme fatale in fiction informed my analysis of the glamorous female spy phenomenon. Generally, spy fiction tends to focus on dominant male characters, though in early spy literature, as Grundy Haigh demonstrates, female characters were also given agency. With the advent of cinema, masculinity and strength became the traits most associated with spies and spy work – epitomised by the films of Alfred Hitchcock, perhaps most notably *The 39 Steps* (1935) and *Secret Agent* (1936), both of which feature in John Sedgwick and Michael Pokorny's exploration of popular films of the 1930s – while female sexuality was often shown to be subversive and dangerous, as in the portrayal of female spies in the films of Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich. In *Pigeon Pie*, Mitford employs conventions from both spy books and spy films, creating an intriguing blend of female-centred espionage performed in a world fully dominated by an awareness of traditional spy tropes in popular culture.

Chapter Three moves away from close readings of the novels, and instead uses the theme of personality primarily in relation to Mitford herself, and to the critical reception of her works. The chapter encompasses a study of Mitford's early press appearances – from the 1920s to the 1930s – and the celebrity persona which emerged as a result of the way she was portrayed in periodicals of this period. Through a survey of high society magazines and periodicals of this era such as *The Tatler*, *The Bystander* and *The Sketch*, this chapter highlights the early identification of Mitford as a model of behaviour which readers would do well to emulate. Although a Mitford, which by the mid-1930s had already become somewhat of a notorious surname, Nancy was unlike her sisters in that she generally avoided controversy, while her stylish elegance and sophistication – captured in photographic features and magazine covers – made her a perfect representative for publications of this kind. Exemplary credentials aside, though, Mitford was not always considered separately from her infamous sisters, and as such, this chapter investigates the frequent conflation of Nancy with her sisters, and how her association with divisive figures like Diana, Unity and Jessica has affected later attitudes towards her and towards the works she produced.

This chapter also discusses Mitford's early journalistic endeavours, with a view to discovering how much Nancy's portrayal of herself, through satirical and light-hearted advice articles, colluded with existing media images of her. It can be argued that Nancy's magazine work affected – consciously or not – her later critical reception by reinforcing the association of her with frivolity and lightness. Frivolity and lightness are themes which persist throughout the second half of Chapter Three, which analyses Mitford's contemporary critical reception, and shows how her works

were often dismissed simply because of their comedic nature. By scrutinising reviews from as early as 1931 to as late as 1960, and from publications in Britain, the United States and Australia, the second half of this chapter examines how Mitford's novels were received. It demonstrates the myriad reasons for their conflicted reception, and explores how Mitford contributed further to audience perceptions about her by altering texts for republication – specifically the 1952 publication of *Pigeon Pie* for the American market – in keeping with her already well-established public persona. Overall, the chapter shows how these various elements – early press appearances, self-consciously light-hearted journalistic endeavours, contemporary critical reception, and continued associations with her notorious sisters – have affected the way Mitford was received. All of these factors have contributed to the notion that Mitford's novels are unworthy of serious consideration – despite their sometimes subversive nature, and quite ground-breaking approach to sexuality – and have consigned them to the often negatively connoted category of middlebrow. Indeed, Mitford has recently been referenced – when she has been mentioned at all – in studies of middlebrow literature by critics such as Erica Brown, Mary Grover and Nicola Humble.

The first consideration of Chapter Three is the early portrayal of Mitford in the periodical press, and as such, it deals with archival materials which fully illustrate the world in which Mitford lived. Due to the evocativeness of her writing, it is easy to imagine yourself in the fictional worlds she creates, but close scrutiny of Mitford's appearances in magazines of the period helps to solidify the reality of these moments in history. By looking at these magazines, I was able to see the changing nature of Mitford's press portrayal over time. At the beginning of her career, she was

portrayed in a similar manner to any other socialite, but as her stylishness came to the fore, she was frequently showcased as someone for readers – particularly the aspiring middle class – to look up to and imitate. After her marriage to Peter Rodd, her press image changed, and her unusualness was accentuated by her writing career, uncommon for a young woman of her privileged societal position. I approached this chapter by engaging with historical studies of the period during which Mitford lived and wrote, with examinations of the interwar period by D.J. Taylor, Alison Maloney and Pamela Horn proving particularly useful to the formulation of my argument. In my analysis of Mitford's image, I used as a model Faye Hammill's study *Women, Celebrity, and Literary Culture Between the Wars*, which analyses different female celebrity authors, the ways in which those authors used their own literary images, and the way that these writers were appropriated in order to fit particular cultural discourses. Alongside Hammill's work, that of Liz Stanley, who has investigated the power wielded by photography in the generation of autobiography, also informed my understanding of Mitford's media portrayal.

Alongside upper-class periodicals and the photographic features therein, my research for Chapter Three also involved newspaper, journal and magazine reviews of Mitford's novels. My methods were similar to those adopted by Arthur F. Kinney in his reappraisal of the life and work of Dorothy Parker, and I made use of various digitised archives of magazines and newspapers. In particular, the online British Newspaper Archive and the *New York Times* Machine were vital resources for my research, as both archives gave me digital access to a large number of articles and features about Mitford, as well as critical reviews of her works, all written during her lifetime. I also made use of the *New Yorker* archive, alongside the National Library

of Australia's online database, Trove. Through these resources, I found contemporary reviews of Mitford's novels from the earliest – the first reviews of a Mitford novel can be seen in a Thornton Butterworth advertisement for *Highland Fling*, published in the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* of 20th March 1931 – to the latest in the 1960s.

It is testament to Mitford's ongoing popularity throughout her writing career that all of her books after *The Pursuit of Love* were reviewed extensively in major British and American publications.¹³ Much of the material gathered came from American newspapers and magazines, in particular *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker*. A number of reviews from these sources are the most intriguing of all, since several of them are imbued with a sense of confusion about Mitford's intentions, and about the popularity of her books with the public. The scorn expressed about Mitford's writing by some American critics – for example Brendan Gill and Orville Prescott – informed present-day academic reactions to her books. Indeed, it is often as difficult for recent critics – among them Brooke Allen, John Atkins and David Pryce-Jones – to separate Mitford the writer from Mitford the celebrity as it was for these derisive earlier reviewers. As well as British and American newspapers, a number of Australian publications also contain contemporary reviews of Mitford's works, and these are equally interesting since they demonstrate her international appeal. Unlike in the years before *The Pursuit of Love*, when her novels were scarcely reviewed even by British publications, the years after *The Pursuit of Love* show a worldwide interest in her texts, underlined by their

¹³ Though *Wigs on the Green* (1935) was released in Australia, as evidenced by a review of the novel which appears in *The Sydney Morning Herald* of 20th September 1935, apparently none of Mitford's early novels was popular enough in Britain to be transported across the Atlantic. The success of *The Pursuit of Love* (1945) changed this, however, and *Pigeon Pie* (1940), which sank without a trace on its original publication in Britain, was published in the United States in 1952, to notable acclaim.

translation into a number of different languages. An analysis of contemporary reviews is essential if Mitford's current literary standing is to be considered fully, and in addition to these reviews, Chapter Three also engages with a number of books about middlebrow literature and culture by critics such as David M. Earle, Andreas Huyssen, Lise Jaillant, Alison Light, and Joan Shelley Rubin.

A Consideration of Three Key Terms

Before concluding, it is useful to consider three of the key terms which will be returned to throughout my thesis, namely 'middlebrow', 'lightness', and 'glamour'. Perhaps the most frequently used one is 'middlebrow'. Middlebrow is an extremely contested term. Although more recent scholarship has begun to re-evaluate some fiction previously described as 'middlebrow', it is also still the case that some academics see it as unworthy of study.¹⁴ As Nicola Humble points out in her study *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class Domesticity, and Bohemianism*, "'middlebrow'" has always been a dirty word. Since its coinage in the late 1920s, it has been applied disparagingly to the sort of cultural products thought to be too easy, too insular, too smug' (1). As a term, it has consistently been used to dismiss certain writers or certain literary genres, while describing a writer as 'middlebrow' has frequently proved an effective means of devaluing their work in the eyes of critics and readers. However, my reading of Mitford and some of the other so-called 'middlebrow' writers with whom she is frequently linked, has revealed that quite often, these authors are more radical than would initially appear.

¹⁴ Research in this field is still awarded much less prestige than work on modernist cultures, and a similar feeling can be detected more generally in arts-related journalism, which often categorises what it sees as less interesting works as 'middlebrow'.

Indeed, recent scholarship which reconsiders supposedly middlebrow fiction has revealed the multi-layered nature of the term ‘middlebrow’. In initial studies that alluded to ‘middlebrow’ fiction, such as Alison Light’s *Forever England*, middlebrow is often associated with the feminine, while Andreas Huyssen’s influential *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture and Postmodernism* notes the fears expressed by modernist artists about being labelled ‘middlebrow’. However, current scholarship by critics like Kristin Bluemel, Phyllis Lassner and Robert Scholes highlights the interdependency between movements like modernism and the middlebrow, and of course, it must be remembered that ‘middlebrow’ as a term is a strategic construct, intended to further discriminate among cultural objects in an already jam-packed field of literary and cultural terms. It was generally used in order to give a name to those books and other forms of culture that were seen as less important than, and supposedly beneath, modernism and other experimental literary and artistic endeavours.

However, as academics like David M. Earle, Faye Hammill and Lise Jaillant highlight, ‘middlebrow’ is also a category marked by variety, and unlike the somewhat more clearly defined idea of what makes a text modernist, a notable blurring of boundaries exists within middlebrow. In his study of book covers, *Re-Covering Modernism: Pulp, Paperbacks, and the Prejudice of Form*, Earle explains that those books categorised as non-modernist were not always merely inferior copies of more experimental texts, and that often the case was quite the opposite: ‘elite modernism often looked to the lowbrow for inspiration, the proletariat for realistic fodder, as in Joyce’s use of mundane ephemera and fondness for Edgar Wallace, Stein’s appreciation of Hammett, Faulkner’s love for aviation pulps, or, in

general, modernism's colonization of primitivism' (87). Similarly, in her book *Women, Celebrity, and Literary Culture Between the Wars*, Hammill notes that a number of female writers cut their teeth working on supposedly lower genres such as advertising or film scripts, and this work gave them a suitable grounding for their later literary endeavours. Therefore, the resultant texts actually benefited from these earlier, apparently less worthy, cultural products. Finally, as Jaillant points out in *Modernism, Middlebrow and the Literary Canon*, classic texts themselves were also frequently sold to consumers in the guise of the middlebrow, namely through book clubs, which exploded in popularity during the early twentieth century. If inclusion in a book club or literary series is what was sometimes needed to make a book sell, then surely this reveals that in order to be disseminated more widely, modernism was, as Earle and Hammill also demonstrate, often deeply reliant on apparently lesser categories, and in particular the so-called 'middlebrow'.

Alongside its meaning as a mode of circulation and reception of texts, in a number of accounts, 'middlebrow' also functions as a term relating to ideas about aspiration. As Jaillant suggests, "'middlebrow", in its earliest sense, described someone with high intellectual or aesthetic aspirations, but who lacked the cultural capital necessary to understand high art' (5), and given the potential this held for such people to perhaps bluff their way into highbrow circles, the 'middlebrow' is therefore sometimes seen as dangerous. In her important study *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*, Joan Shelley Rubin describes the jury formed for, and the decision-making processes behind, the Book-of-the-Month Club in the United States, and how it was frequently depicted as 'an agency for the destruction of independent judgement and literary quality' (97). Without a doubt, middlebrow was seen as a

threat to legitimate literature by high-minded intellectuals and critics, who discounted the fact that many books labelled as such were, in reality, much more complex and thought-provoking than they were ever given credit for.

It is undeniable that a number of contemporary critics of Mitford's work highlight qualities that are considered markers of the middlebrow – such as comedic style, satirical approach and general lightness – in order to denigrate their worth as texts. Most of the studies in which Mitford is briefly mentioned are larger investigations of 'middlebrow' literature, and her placement in these studies contributes to the notion that she is 'only' a middlebrow writer. My thesis is intended to demonstrate that through her engagement with interwar and wartime politics, and her examination of personality – as will be discussed in Chapters One and Two – Mitford emerges as a writer deeply concerned with the world around her. The approach she takes may make light of some grim realities, but her blitheness conceals a fundamental knowledge about human relationships, power, love, and sexuality that is rarely acknowledged. An engagement with studies of middlebrow theory allows for a thorough consideration of Mitford's place within such debates, and Chapter Three will show how ideas about celebrity persona can also determine a writer's categorisation as 'middlebrow'.

After 'middlebrow', the most frequently returned to term in my thesis is probably 'lightness', which is debated a number of times, though most prominently in Chapter Three. In contemporary critical appraisals, 'lightness' is a word that is often attributed to Mitford's novels, and it is frequently used in a negative manner. The *OED* defines 'lightness' as 'the quality or fact of having little weight' ("Lightness"), while a cross reference search in relation to food and drink describes

‘lightness’ in this context as ‘that [which] does not lie heavy on the stomach; easy of digestion’ (“Light”). The food-related meaning is especially relevant to this study, as in Chapter Three, I discuss the idea proposed by some contemporary critics that consumption of Mitford’s novels yields nothing of intellectual nourishment. Another meaning expands upon this idea of her texts as unnourishing: ‘levity in behaviour; fickleness, unsteadiness, frivolity, thoughtlessness, unconcern’ (“Lightness”). Frivolity is a recurring theme in my thesis, especially in relation to my discussion of *Wigs on the Green* and *Pigeon Pie*, both of which demonstrate Mitford at her most light-hearted. Here, I am indebted to Wendy Pollard, whose *Rosamond Lehmann and Her Critics: The Vagaries of Literary Reception* explores the strategic use of ‘lightness’ in critical reviews, usually in order to denigrate the quality of a book.

Yet the term undergoes changes in meaning as time goes on. Sometimes, lightness can be a positive. In several reviews of Mitford’s novels, their lightness is described as a quality that makes them enjoyable to read. While the subject matter of Mitford’s later novels – *The Pursuit of Love* and its engagement with the horrors of fascism, for example – makes them more serious than some of her earlier, more playful texts, time and time again reviewers return to their supposed light-heartedness. The word ‘light’ appears in reviews of Mitford’s works from the very beginning. It is applied to Mitford’s first novel, *Highland Fling*, in one of the earliest reviews I could find of the book: the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* of 8th April 1931 describes it as ‘enjoyable light reading’ (2). This reviewer does not necessarily equate lightness with low quality, yet the phrase still suggests that the novel has limited intellectual value. Almost a decade later, Mitford is still referred to in terms of lightness, though in the case of Richard King’s review of *Pigeon Pie* in *The Tatler*

of 19th June 1940, this ascription of lightness appears to be complimentary. King notes that ‘the writer’s touch is of the lightest and, thank goodness, it remains light all the way through without becoming facetious’ (454). The reference to lightness of touch sees the word’s meaning altered slightly once again, used in this instance to indicate the apparent ease and skill with which Mitford produces this novel that moves along effortlessly – never inanely – to a satisfying conclusion.

It is fascinating, therefore, that by the mid-1940s in American publications, ‘lightness’ has come to be an almost wholly negative term. In reviews for *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker*, light novels are painted as almost dangerous entities, which have the power to seduce unsuspecting readers. Their apparent lack of seriousness makes them easy to consume, but, these American critics suggest, their silliness is potentially damaging, as they do not improve the minds of their readers. Much of this critical reaction can be ascribed to intellectual snobbery: a number of American book critics in the 1940s began to rally against what they saw as the homogenisation of culture as a result of the popularity of cultural organisations like book clubs: more and more people were reading books that had been recommended to them, and were therefore apparently less likely to broaden their literary horizons with more intellectually demanding texts. It is clear from Pollard’s description of the use of ‘lightness’ by critics, and from its varied use in contemporary critical reviews of Mitford’s novels, that ‘lightness’ as a term is conflicted. This thesis examines ‘lightness’ at length, with the aim of discovering how the term shows Mitford’s critical standing during her lifetime and in the years afterward.

Another term which receives extended attention in my thesis is ‘glamour’. Much like ‘lightness’, it has undergone several changes in meaning over time.

Originally a Scots word, ‘glamour’ was revived in a literary sense by Sir Walter Scott in his 1805 narrative poem “The Lay of the Last Minstrel”.¹⁵ In the poem, ‘glamour’ appears in an early form as ‘gramarye’ – a corruption of ‘grammar’ – and is used to refer to ‘occult learning, magic, necromancy’ (“Gramarye”, *OED*). The idea of magic and enchantment in relation to ‘glamour’ can be dated further, specifically in the glossary to Allan Ramsay’s *Poems*, which suggests that ‘when devils, wizards or jugglers deceive the sight, they are said to cast *glamour* o’er the eyes of the spectator’ (qtd. in “Glamour”, *OED*). In my thesis, I use the term a number of times in different contexts, and certainly the idea of enchantment is the most relevant to the discussion of the aestheticising of extreme political views in *Wigs on the Green*, the primary text discussed in Chapter One. In the text, characters like Eugenia and her cohorts are bewitched by the propagandistic techniques employed by fascist leader Captain Jack, who manages to convert them to his political doctrine through an idealised emphasis on youth and the glorification of Empire. Conversely, glamour is also used by other characters in the novel, such as Mrs. Lace, who relies upon a feminine conception of glamour in order to seduce Eugenia’s friend Noel.

Indeed, in general, glamour as a concept is most frequently associated with femininity. In his extensive study *Glamour: A History*, Stephen Gundle underlines the indefiniteness of the meaning of ‘glamour’:

¹⁵ The poem, written in six cantos and dealing with themes of nationhood, was a huge success and brought Scott tremendous fame, as well as popularising the Scottish places which the poem discusses. In the years after publication of the poem, Scott expanded upon ideas about nationhood in his novels about Scotland, and effectively helped to create the Scottish tourist industry: Allan Massie referred to Scott as ‘the Father of Scottish tourism’ (41) in a *Spectator* article of the same name.

As a word, glamour carries talismanic qualities. It has a sparkle and glow about it that enhance the people, objects, and places to which it is attached. Yet, despite the ubiquity of the term, glamour is notoriously difficult to define. ... For some, glamour is an aesthetic cloak ready for every woman who is willing to dress up in a uniform of high heels, coiffed hair, bold red lipstick, strong make-up, and vibrant colours, regardless of her age or position. ... Glamour is a weapon and a protective coating, a screen on which an exterior personality can be built to deceive, delight and bewitch. (2-4)

The most useful of Gundle's definitions of glamour for this study is that of 'a weapon ... a protective coating, a screen on which an exterior personality can be built to deceive, delight and bewitch', particularly given the definition used in Chapter Two. In Chapter One, I suggest that glamour is a concept used to make extreme political views seem more appealing, and this is even further emphasised in Chapter Two. The primary text under discussion in that chapter, *Pigeon Pie*, revolves around its central character's fascination with the apparent glamour of spy work and the idealised persona of the glamorous female spy. In the text, Sophia tries to deceive those around her by assuming the persona of a glamorous female spy, capitalising on preconceived notions about what this persona requires. In terms of spy work, some critics place a distinct emphasis on the potential duplicitousness concealed beneath the glamorous façade of the female spy persona. This is examined by Smith in her article "Seduction and Sex: The Changing Allure of the Femme Fatale in Fact and Fiction", which details contemporary fears during this period about the dangerousness of female sexuality, which could be used as a tool of corruption. The

danger of glamorous women is most strongly exemplified in the films of actresses Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo, who frequently play women of dubious moral character attempting to seduce unsuspecting men into sin.

Ideas of danger in relation to glamour can also be seen in the reaction of American critics – discussed in Chapter Three – to Cedric, the unexpected homosexual heir to the Montdore fortune in *Love in a Cold Climate*, who upsets the delicate balance of rural life when he arrives at the family's stately home. His unconventional – and, to some, shocking – behaviour does not prevent him from being glamorous, however, as he manages to charm those around him into doing what he asks, whether they realise it or not. Interestingly, Cedric's flaunting of his homosexuality does not lead to any punishment or grim fate, as it does in some novels of this period and after, and it is this element of the novel that dissuaded a number of American reviewers from looking upon it favourably. Glamour is therefore, as Gundle points out, a slippery term to define, and its ability to 'deceive, delight and bewitch' can be seen in the manipulation by Sir Ivor King – another potentially dangerous homosexual character – of his glamorous celebrity persona to draw in listeners who are unaware of the propaganda concealed within his broadcasts. As with the unsuspecting men who give in to temptation at the hands of glamorous screen sirens Garbo and Dietrich, so Sir Ivor's equally unsuspecting audience are led into a web of misinformation.

The final conception of glamour that appears in my thesis is that which is applied to Mitford herself. This is particularly apparent in the upper-class periodicals which devote much space to photographs of her. Frequently, glamour is almost used against Mitford, as though her inherent charm and sophistication mean that she is

incapable of producing literature. In a number of reviews, her photograph is placed beside the review text itself, while specific attention is drawn to her beauty a number of times. In her study of Rosamond Lehmann, Pollard suggests that the inclusion of an author's photograph in a review of their work can be helpful, since it can provoke extra attention, especially if the author is attractive. However, this marketing approach can also negatively affect a writer, reducing them to a mere image instead of a fully rounded individual. Much of Chapter Three deals with the difficulty some critics have with separating Mitford from her literary output; a problem exacerbated by both the glamorousness of Mitford's public persona – due to the many profiles of her attendance at parties, her elegant houses, her penchant for Dior dresses and her own physical attractiveness – and the way that she used her own experiences in her fiction. Fictionalising one's personal experiences does not always affect the ability of critics and readers to separate the writer from what they are fictionalising, but in Mitford's case, it has apparently proved almost impossible for most people to do so. The public has so much knowledge of Mitford's real life – and the controversial lives of the sisters whom she also used as inspiration – that it is difficult for some people to see the novels as anything more than thinly-veiled autobiographies. In a commentary on Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Elizabeth Wilson highlights a reading of glamour as 'bondage' (100), and this notion is certainly applicable to Mitford herself. To an extent, she became trapped in the glamorous image that she presented to the public, who ultimately found it difficult to associate her with anything else.

Revitalising Mitford

Mitford's penchant for lampooning real people, along with the satirical bent of her novels, contributes to their gossipy atmosphere. I feel that this gossipy light-heartedness, combined with the humour with which she infuses her characters and her texts' apparently frivolous plots, is another of the main reasons that her novels have been generally dismissed by critics and academics. Although her books sold extremely well, in the years since their initial publication, Mitford has never been designated a great writer. However, in my view, from *Wigs on the Green* onwards, Mitford's novels are well-written, amusing, and offer unexpectedly profound examinations of upper-class life at a time of great change for the aristocracy of Great Britain. As well as this, Mitford *was* innovative; perhaps not in the same pioneering stylistic way as many modernists, but certainly in her surprising portrayal of themes mostly absent from literature of this period. *Love in a Cold Climate* and its frank portrayal of Cedric's homosexuality is a strong example of this focus on generally avoided subjects, while the fact that Cedric is one of the most charming characters in the text, who manages to enchant most people he meets and does not meet a stereotypically tragic end as punishment for his deviation from societal norms, shows Mitford taking a markedly different approach from some authors of this period.

On the surface, Mitford's novels display a lack of the seriousness which imbued modernist texts, and for some readers, her predilection for humour can make her novels seem almost throwaway, as though there is no point to them. Indeed, the idea of disposability is one returned to in various American reviews of Mitford's novels, as though her books are all the same and therefore easily replaceable. Despite

some negative critical reactions, though, Mitford was nonetheless a celebrated figure at the time of her death, since her writing – as well as the outrageous personal lives of her sisters – had made her an international star, and in 1973, newspapers worldwide mourned her death in lengthy obituaries. The girl who loved to tease her family and friends had used her life experience as the thread for a series of comedic tapestries of life among the aristocracy, to tremendous popular success. However, the literary position Mitford occupied during her life – well-reviewed, popular, influential – has not been accorded her in the years following her passing. Though most of her books have never been out of print, public adulation of Mitford has not been mirrored in academic considerations. A full-length appraisal of her fiction is long overdue, and the following thesis is exactly that: a fresh assessment of a writer long ignored, who produced novels which provide insight into fascinating, and long vanished worlds, whose ongoing historical and political relevance make them deeply worthy of further study.

Chapter One: Frivolous Fascism?: Politics in the Interwar Period and Beyond

Introduction

Politics is a recurring theme in Nancy Mitford's works, which frequently illuminate the political landscape of the 1930s and 1940s. This chapter will explore Mitford's depiction of the most provocative political movement of its time, fascism, as well as examining her depiction of the broader political landscape, with a particular focus on strategies of glamorisation. Mitford's fiction shows glamour being used to aestheticise extreme political movements, thereby making them more palatable to a wider audience and ultimately more persuasive. This chapter will analyse whether the novels are complicit in this glamorisation, or whether they critique it. This chapter concentrates primarily on Mitford's earlier texts. This tendency towards glamorising or aestheticising political views which are generally regarded as repellent can be seen most prominently in her third novel, *Wigs on the Green* (1935), a satirical portrait of the unlikely rise of fascism in the English countryside. The book is somewhat of a curiosity, given its conflicted tone, which mocks, but also, to a certain extent, romanticises fascist doctrine. On the other hand, Mitford's later novel, *The Pursuit of Love* (1945), published ten years after *Wigs on the Green* – and crucially after the end of the Second World War – makes several allusions to the consequences of fascism for the countries it had affected, and as a result, treats it more seriously than *Wigs on the Green*. An awareness of the devastating effects of

Nazism and fascism on Europe, which by the time Mitford was writing *The Pursuit of Love* had become common knowledge throughout the world, undoubtedly contributes to the less whimsical portrayal of these movements in the later text.

In contrast to this, a general lack of seriousness pervades the two novels Mitford wrote before *Wigs on the Green* was released. *Highland Fling* (1931) and *Christmas Pudding* (1932), while amusing depictions of a bygone period, are relatively insubstantial in terms of narrative. Neither text has a plot as such, but nevertheless, both allude to general fears of the time, particularly the rise of communism, which was perceived as a threat to the position of the upper classes in the years following the Russian Revolution. The fact that the majority of their characters are thinly veiled caricatures of real people – a repeated trope in Mitford’s works – suggests that the views expressed, though presumably exaggerated, may have some basis in reality in terms of sentiment among some aristocrats at the time.¹⁶

In this chapter, I will analyse *Wigs on the Green* and *The Pursuit of Love* in detail. Through close reading and an engagement with the wider political and historical contexts of the period, I will examine how dangerous political views and movements are depicted in each text, and explore differences between the novels in terms of Mitford’s approach to such extreme politics. The two texts use the concept of glamour in different ways to comment on political movements such as fascism and communism, though in the earlier novel, the narrative position in relation to such doctrine is ambiguous. Alongside this, the comedic approach to such repugnant beliefs in *Wigs on the Green* especially often prompts uncomfortable laughter in the

¹⁶ The views expressed by Kerrie Holloway about Aldous Huxley can also be applied here to Mitford, with her basing of ‘several characters on real figures ... adding to the novel’s value as a social commentary on the 1920s’ (328-29). Mitford deemed her fictional portraits of real people a wonderful method of teasing her friends and family, though it often resulted in disagreements or outright estrangements.

reader and undermines any notion that Mitford is making serious observations about the state of interwar politics. My analysis will also include discussion of Mitford's earliest novels, *Highland Fling* and *Christmas Pudding*, which engage with politics to a much lesser extent than *Wigs on the Green* and *The Pursuit of Love*, but nevertheless present a valuable contextual background, particularly in their depiction of upper-class hysteria about the rise of communism.

Ambiguous Authoritarianism: A Conflicted Political Approach

Fascism, Gender and Family

The protagonist of *Wigs on the Green*, Eugenia, is an odd character in terms of her outlandish political views, which are not in keeping with the norm for a girl of her age and position – she is still a teenager and the granddaughter of an earl – but she is also made strange by the way that she is presented to us by the narrator. While *The Pursuit of Love* uses a first person narrator, Fanny, who provides us with a fair assessment of events, in *Wigs on the Green*, the narrative position is less clear. Although we are occasionally provided with details about the inner workings of other characters' minds, Eugenia's motivations remain rather unclear, and this turns her into somewhat of an enigma. Politically, she is devoted to the 'Social Unionists', an obvious send-up of Sir Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists. The narrator tells us early on that 'until the Social Unionists had come to fill the void of boredom that was her life, she had always obeyed her grandparents in everything' (18), suggesting that Eugenia's dull country life has been invigorated by the glamour of a political

party based in the city, which seems a million miles from sleepy Chalford. The sleepiness of Chalford and the oppressiveness of life with a grandmother who prevents any socialising because she sees most of her neighbours as immoral – ‘take any name ... they are all alike, they all have some sort of cloud hanging over them’ (123) – can be seen as a reason for Eugenia’s commitment to this new political movement.

If we also take into consideration Julie V. Gottlieb’s suggestion that ‘the BUF’s heroines were all women who had broken through the bars of women’s confinement to the home’ (*Feminine Fascism* 97), then another possible reason for Eugenia’s attraction to this political party is the sense of escape it supposedly grants to the women who embrace it. In the novel, fascism is a vehicle used by Eugenia to transcend the limited options available to her as a young aristocratic woman, whose only expected life goal is the attainment of a suitable husband and children. By becoming politically active through passionate adoption of fascist doctrine, Eugenia is granted freedom from prescribed societal expectations. Her role as a political activist allows her to cast off any notion of conventional femininity, and indeed, as we can see from Gottlieb’s discussion of women who were active in British fascist politics of the 1930s, the masculine ethos traditionally associated with fascism was likewise applied to women:

The fascist woman was objectified and simultaneously desexualised in BUF [British Union of Fascist] portrayals. ... The British fascist masculine aesthetic of hard lines, classical angularity, and a virile rejection of softness or curvature, was also applied to women’s “body” politics. ... The

quintessential fascist woman provided an anti-thesis to overt Hollywood sex-appeal and democratic pliability. (*Feminine Fascism* 95)

In the novel, Eugenia is symbolic of those fascist women who rejected fashion in favour of practicality, and whose lack of glamour allowed them to separate themselves from the conventionally feminine women of their era. In addition to this, the attitude of the narrator towards Eugenia is ambiguous. At times, she is apparently mocked due to her earnest beliefs, which often border on the ridiculous, as expressed in her dialogue. Eugenia's sincerity is underlined by the greeting of 'Hail!', which is used by her throughout the text regardless of who she encounters, while at another point, the ominous influence of Nazism on the Social Unionists is explicitly highlighted: 'Eugenia looked at [Jasper] reprovably. "Under our regime," she said, "women will not have lovers. They will have husbands and great quantities of healthy Aryan children. I think you forget the teachings of our Captain, Union Jackshirt Aspect"' (36-37). It is intriguing that as a woman, Eugenia is seemingly willing to give up her own agency in order to marry and produce children, though the separation between 'our' regime and 'they will' suggests that perhaps she does not see herself as a conventional woman, and certainly the novel does not present her as one.

When we take into account the fact that Eugenia is based on Mitford's sister Unity,¹⁷ who became notorious in Britain after developing an infatuation with British

¹⁷ Nancy's satirical representation of Unity was not well-received by her sister, as evidenced by Nancy's pleading letter to Unity, written on 21st June 1935, a few days before the publication of *Wigs on the Green*:

Darling Head of Bone & Heart of Stone

fascism, and eventually Nazism, the reason for Eugenia's sinister nature and extreme dogmatism can be understood.¹⁸ Mitford intended the novel as both a satire on British fascism as propounded by her then future brother-in-law, Oswald Mosley – who married Nancy and Unity's sister, Diana, in 1936 – and as a critique of Unity and her extreme beliefs. The exaggerated severity of Eugenia, along with the satirical approach to the extreme political movement she follows suggests that in *Wigs on the Green*, fascism is being treated frivolously, though at times, this frivolous approach masks dark undertones, as this chapter will show.

In her study of fascism in relation to women, Gottlieb describes the book as a 'satirical *roman à clef*', which testifies 'to what degree the young fanatic [Unity] could not be taken seriously' (*Feminine Fascism* 220n). Mitford distils Unity's immaturity into a character that emerges as little more than a walking advertisement for fascism, her only function in the novel seeming to be the conversion of others to the fascist cause. The unflattering portrait of Unity caused a rift between the sisters which never fully healed; Mitford was also forced to cut back on some of her most

Oh dear oh dear the book comes out on Tuesday ... this is probably the last letter you'll ever get from me because it's no use writing to Stone-Hearts ... *Please* don't read the book if it's going to stone you up against me ... Oh dear *do* write me a kind & non-stony-heart letter to say you don't mind it *nearly* as much as you expected, in fact you *like* it, in fact, after *I Face the Stars* it is your favourite book even more favourite than mine comf [sic]. (*Love from Nancy: The Letters of Nancy Mitford* 101, hereafter referred to as 'Letters')

Nancy's repeated allusions to Unity's toughness highlight the aspect of her which most comes to the fore in the characterisation of Eugenia in the novel, while the mention of *I Face the Stars*, 'a novel set in 1923 in defeated Germany' (C. Mosley, qtd. in *Letters* 102), and Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* underline Unity's passionate interest in Germany.

¹⁸ Colin Cross describes Eugenia as a thinly disguised version of Unity, whom he characterises as 'a peer's daughter who tries to convert her village to the militant new creed of "Captain Jack" and the "Union Jackshirts"' (162).

biting satire, eventually removing ‘three chapters satirising Mosley for fear of a libel suit and enraging her sister Diana’ (Lezard 14).¹⁹

Perhaps the deletions Mitford was forced to inflict on the novel in order to placate her sisters affected her ability to present a consistent narrative attitude towards the subject of fascism. At times, the narrator seems to mock Eugenia for her earnest beliefs, which often border on the ridiculous, as expressed in her letter to Noel and Jasper:

Hail! The filthy old female Pacifist my grandmother has shut me up in my room. ... She misuses me and tramples upon me as for many years France has misused and trampled upon Germany. It does not signify. Germany has now arisen and I shall soon arise and my day shall dawn blood red. Terrible must be the fate of the enemies of Social Unionism, so let the poor old female beware. I will meet you both tomorrow outside the twopenny-bar shop at four o'clock exactly. (26)

This excerpt reveals Eugenia’s narrative function as a repudiator of fascist doctrine: almost all the dialogue given to her is some variation on a diatribe in support of fascist ideology. As David Pryce-Jones suggests in his biography of Unity, *Wigs on the Green* ‘perfectly crystallizes Unity in her first year as a fascist’ (79), and Eugenia’s immaturity is prominent in the letter’s amusingly jarring juxtaposition

¹⁹ In his biography of Unity, David Pryce-Jones explains how ‘[Nancy] was merciless in the writer’s pursuit of copy, and in 1934 she was at work on her third novel, *Wigs on the Green*, whose publication was held up, according to Jessica [Mitford], by threats from Diana and Unity that they would never speak to her again, if it appeared’ (79). Meanwhile, in their family biography *The House of Mitford*, Jonathan and Catherine Guinness suggest that Nancy’s satirising of Unity and the British Union of Fascists ‘was in part an attempt to reduce Unity’s activities, and by extension those of Diana, to manageable proportions’ (303), an attempt which was thwarted completely when Unity struck up a friendship with Hitler soon after the publication of *Wigs on the Green*.

between melodramatically vengeful political tirade and commonplace chat.

Eugenia's emphasis on the oldness of her grandmother in comparison to her own youthfulness – 'the filthy old female', 'the poor old female' (26) – reminds us that, in spite of her political acumen, Eugenia is still a typical teenager, though the threat contained in her warning to 'beware' suggests a darkness beneath the spoilt surface. The letter's conclusion expands upon this feeling of dread with its move from a grim threat against her grandmother to a firm injunction – almost an effort at military precision – about meeting the following day outside the sweet shop. The reference to a sweet shop is of course another means of highlighting Eugenia's immaturity, and this letter becomes representative of Eugenia as a character: half sweet and half acid, on the one hand she is childlike and almost quaint; on the other, she is a political barracuda. As well as this, the letter underlines the ambiguousness of the narrator's attitude towards Eugenia. Almost everything we know about her is revealed through direct speech – or in this case, writing, in the form of a letter – and her words are reported with little comment from the narrator. Therefore much of the humour comes from the reader's own reaction to Eugenia's sincerity about fascism.

At times, fascism is implicitly mocked through descriptions of the over-the-top sincerity of Eugenia and her allies,²⁰ yet, due to the process of political glamorising which fascism undergoes in the text, it often seems a most attractive prospect. The lack of any explicit judgement about these views on the part of the

²⁰ As Eugenia's words frequently demonstrate, the teachings of the Captain are seen as paramount by his followers, as is adherence to the party's envisioned gender roles for women, which mirror Italian Fascist and Nazi ideals of woman as idealised mother and child bearer.

narrator makes one question the novel's position in regard to fascism.²¹ As a result of this, it could also be suggested that the text could be dangerous if read by a less sophisticated reader. In the hands of someone unable to pick up on the implicit mockery directed towards fascist principles, Mitford's novel could potentially read as a tribute to fascism, and this is underlined by the climax of the novel which ends on a celebratory note with the rapturous rendition of the Social Unionist anthem.

Indeed, most intriguingly, Mitford herself tried to convince Diana and Unity that the novel was a celebration of fascism. In a letter to Diana of 18th June 1935, Mitford writes:

A book of this kind *can't* do your movement any harm. ...

The 2 or 3 thousand people who read my books are, to begin with, just the kind of people the Leader admittedly doesn't want in his movement. Furthermore it would be absurd to suppose that anyone who was intellectually or emotionally convinced of the truths of Fascism could be influenced against the movement by such a book.

I still maintain that it is far more in favour of Fascism than otherwise. Far the nicest character in the book is a Fascist, the others all become much nicer as soon as they have joined up.

But I also know your point of view, that Fascism is something too serious to be dealt with in a funny book at all. Surely that is a little unreasonable? Fascism is now such a notable feature of modern life all over

²¹ In her study of the novel in relation to fascism, Judy Suh suggests that 'while the political ambivalence of the novel might read as the result of personal contingencies (Mitford's attempt to save her family's feelings), it is also a record of the ambiguities that attended the perception of fascism in England in the late 1930s' (147).

the world that it must be possible to consider it in any context, when attempting to give a picture of life as it is lived today. (*Letters* 100)

It is significant that Mitford acknowledges the apparent danger of choosing such a contentious subject as the main focus for a comedic text, but her subsequent claim that fascism has a universally positive effect on the characters depicted therein is unconvincing. It is doubtful that she really believed this, and much more likely that she was attempting to soothe Diana's discomfort about the novel's forthcoming publication by claiming that it could have real political benefits. In an obvious act of deference, she refers to Mosley as 'the Leader', further aligning him with the fictional Captain Jack of *Wigs on the Green*, though her seemingly respectful attitude towards Mosley is undermined by her quickness to disassociate his target audience from her own. She suggests that Mosley would not wish to count her readers among his followers, while also claiming that anyone already committed to fascism would be little affected by her novel, as though such political adherents are not the people for whom she writes. Regardless of audience consideration, however, much of Mitford's appeal is undermined by an allusion to her own considerations, namely her financial position. At the beginning of the letter, she tells Diana, 'as you know our finances are such that I really couldn't afford to scrap the book' (*Letters* 100), and when this remark is considered, the rest of the letter's content becomes dubious. Clearly Mitford wanted to make up with her sisters, but at the same time, it must be remembered that she was a writer with a deadline, and in dire need of the money that she would earn from this potentially family-feud inducing novel.

'Arise British Lion!': Sir Oswald Mosley and the Idealisation of Youth

Before examining later sections of *Wigs on the Green*, it is best to start at the beginning of the novel, where the first example of explicit political glamorising can be found in the form of Eugenia's speech, which introduces us to both her and to 'Social Unionism'. Beginning her speech with a demand for her fellow Britons to 'arise', Eugenia adopts the figure of a lion – specifically, a 'British lion' (7) – as an idealised symbol of nationhood. The lion, often a symbol of ferocity and authority, seems appropriate for a country which, at its peak, maintained control of 'more than 13 million square miles, approximately 23 percent of the world's land surface' (N. Ferguson 15). However, Eugenia is convinced that this lion has been entrapped as a result of an unfit government, and commands that it 'shake off the nets that bind you', insisting that Social Unionism holds the only key to salvation. One part of her speech in particular paints a glorified picture of British power:

we are tired of the old. We see things through their eyes no longer. We see nothing admirable in that debating society of aged and corrupt men called Parliament which muddles our great Empire into wars or treaties, dropping one by one the jewels from its crown, casting away its glorious Colonies, its hitherto undenied supremacy at sea, its prestige abroad, its prosperity at home, and all according to each vacillating whim of some octogenarian statesman's mistress. (7-8)

Eugenia's rallying cry ties in with Eugen Weber's suggestion that 'all Fascist-type movements [involve] a rising of younger generations against the old who keep them from the manger' (140). Youthful Eugenia and her cohorts, then, come to represent such fledgling self-styled revolutionaries, echoing Colin Cross' description of the BUF as 'a movement of youth ... [who] saw themselves as the post-war generation come to sweep away the corruption of the past' (67). These sweeping changes to the status quo are ultimately ironic, however, since Eugenia's celebration of youth forms part of a wider idealisation of a lost era of British imperial power – 'its glorious Colonies' – and contains a call for a renewal of Empire. Although they claim to want to change the government through innovative means, their aims appear remarkably old-fashioned.

In his book *The Greater Britain* (1932), Mosley promotes a spirit of political idealism which is shared by Eugenia in Mitford's text. This similarity in rhetoric on Empire can be seen in Mosley's claim that 'the Colonies owe everything to Britain and it is only right that they should make in return the contribution of trade concessions in a comprehensive Imperial plan' (145).²² According to Mosley: 'British Colonial practice ... seeks by every means to raise native populations to a higher standard of life ... we will not pursue the illusion that great and productive areas of the world should be kept as a close preserve for races who are unable or

²² Mosley evidently ignores the fact that none of these colonies ever asked Britain to commandeer them: it was only years after Mughal Emperor Jahangir's original agreement to a trade deal between Britain and India that Britain gradually increased its dominance there, battling with the indigenous population before eventually gaining supremacy in the region. For a transcript of the 1617 letter sent from Mughal Emperor Jahangir to King James I of England granting Britain permission to trade in India, see sourcebooks.fordham.edu/halsall/india/1617englandindies.asp. Further discussion of the rise of British dominance in India can be found in C.A. Bayly's *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), P.J. Marshall's edited collection *Trade and Conquest: Studies on the Rise of British Dominance in India* (Variorum, 1993), Jon Wilson's *India Conquered: Britain's Raj and the Chaos of Empire* (Simon & Schuster, 2017) and Shashi Tharoor's *Inglorious Empire: What the British Did to India* (Penguin, 2018).

unwilling to develop them' (146). In this instance, Mosley's idealised rhetoric about fascism's position as a beacon of hope for the world is undermined by its implicit racism. Clearly his movement is only for white people, a characteristic shared by *Wigs on the Green's* Social Unionism, which promotes Aryanism and the persecution of Jews. The name chosen for Eugenia by Mitford is significant in itself, as it undoubtedly reminds one of the concept of eugenics, and connects with Eugenia's interest in Aryanism. Eugenics, of course, was used by the Nazis in order to preserve so-called racial purity, and the word 'eugenic', which is derived from the Greek for 'well-born', also accurately describes Eugenia, who has been born into a rich family. It seems cruelly ironic that her name serves as a reminder of Nazi racial policy, and it could be argued that Mitford chose this name as a way of further mocking her sister Unity, who became obsessed with Nazism and gradually developed a perplexing hatred of Jews.²³ Eugenia, in some ways, becomes the embodiment of the racial policy she is fighting for. Her name echoes the concept itself, whereas her looks are undoubtedly Aryan – 'Malmains women were all large blonde goddesses (39) – and no doubt make her as popular with Captain Jack's Social Unionists as Unity was with the National Socialists in Germany.

Glamour is also used in Eugenia's idealisation of youth and concomitant caricaturing of the 'octogenarian' statesmen who make up the current House of Lords:

²³ Mark McGinness discusses how in June 1935, Unity sent a letter to Nazi propaganda newspaper, *Der Stürmer*, in which she claimed that 'the English have no notion of the Jewish dangers... England for the English! Out with the Jews!' Nancy's frivolousness is clear from the letter she wrote to Unity shortly afterwards, quoted by McGinness: 'Darling Stony-heart, we were all very interested to see that you were the Queen of the May this year at Hesselberg. Call me early, Goering dear/ For I am to be the Queen of the May.' The acerbic nature of the sisters' relationship is summed up by McGinness' description of how Nancy 'followed up with news that she had discovered a great-grandmother Fish, who made them one-16th Jewish', simply to annoy her deeply earnest sister.

How can those ancient dipsomaniacs reach any goal at all? Their fingers are paralysed with gout – they cannot aim; their eyesight is impeded with the film of age – they see no goal. The best that they can hope is that from day to day they may continue to creep about the halls of Westminster like withered tortoises seeking to warm themselves in the synthetic sunlight of each other’s approbation. (9)

Their ineffectiveness is emphasised by the paralysis in their bones and their loss of vision, while the tortoise imagery suggests the sluggishness of their movement, both physically and politically.²⁴ The deglamourising of the peers by associating them with revolting corruption is an important part of the process of glamorising youth. Eugenia underlines that the ‘Union Jackshirt Movement’ – the more informal and patriotic name given to Social Unionism – is ‘a youth movement’ (7), entirely different from the ‘ignoble dotards’ who populate parliament. As Richard Thurlow suggests in his study of British fascism, ‘Mosley portrayed the BUF as a movement against the “old gangs” of British politics and appealed to youth, the politically uncommitted and displaced idealists as well as those who were dissatisfied under the

²⁴ In *Highland Fling* (1931), the narrator amusingly details the newspaper coverage of the death of Lord Prague, a House of Lords peer, with a description of the testimony of the night watchman who discovered the body: ‘I noticed the figure of a man half-lying on one of the benches. This did not really surprise me, as the peers often sleep on late into the night after a debate. ... I was going to let him stay there till morning when something in his attitude made me pause and look at him more closely. I then realized that he was stone dead’ (191-92). This description emphasises the advanced age of these peers, further underlined by the revelation that the night watchman ‘has often known the peers to die in the corridors and refreshment rooms of the House’ (192), stressing that the vast majority of them are at the end of their lives. Meanwhile, the suggestion that Lord Prague ‘must have passed away in the middle of the debate on Subsidized Potatoes’ (192) is ironic, as it alludes to the dubious status shared by Lord Prague and his fellows: much like the ‘subsidized potatoes’, they too are financially supported vegetables, while their longwinded debates can generate enough boredom to bring death to listeners.

leadership of the political parties' (125). Though the focus on youth also went deeper than this, and can be connected with the fallout from the First World War, as evidenced by Cross' study. Cross explains that the BUF 'saw themselves as the post-war generation come to sweep away the corruption of the past and often referred to themselves as "a movement of ex-servicemen"' (67), highlighting their unwillingness to repeat the mistakes of the older generation. Their elders, in particular those within parliament, were held to have caused the First World War as a result of poor decisions in the years leading up to 1914. If this were to be avoided, those responsible would need to be removed from their positions of power.

The House of Lords: A Satirical Portrayal

Despite the fact that Eugenia's rhetoric is often subjected to mockery in the text, her critique of parliament is upheld by the commentary on the House of Lords in other sections of *Wigs on the Green*. Indeed, perhaps the most effective means of mocking the parliament of the day occurs in the description of the mental institution inhabited by Jasper's grandfather, which has been 'built on the exact plans of the House of Lords, so that the boys should feel at home' (94). Mitford's description of the building itself is whimsical, suggesting that the place has a wonderland quality to it: 'there suddenly appeared the towers and spires of the Houses of Parliament, looking strangely uncomfortable in their rustic setting' (101). The uncomfortableness of the personified building generates a similar discomfort in the reader, as this place is completely incongruous with its countryside surroundings. Far away from the hustle and bustle of London as this place is though, it is still populated by the same useless

lords, the same people Eugenia maligns in her speech, and the transplanting of the building underlines its irrelevance and detachment from the actual concerns of real Londoners.

Although glamorous for a hospital, then, it is as politically inefficient as the real House of Lords. The problem here goes beyond mere political incompetence, however, as the residents of this hospital are also psychologically incompetent, a trait which Mitford uses to great comic effect by making the hospital's patients entirely unaware of their real situation. Through the dialogue between Jasper and his grandfather, the Duke of Driburgh, Mitford makes use of irony, with much of the dialogue infused with double meaning. As J.A. Cuddon observes, 'irony is the most precious and efficient weapon of the satirist' (431). Speaking about the hospital-cum-House of Lords, the duke tells Jasper and Poppy that 'this is the only legislative assembly that's worth two pins these days, I assure you' (105), entirely unaware that the real place of power is hundreds of miles away. He asserts that during a debate in the chamber, 'we Tories won the day – we always do, of course, there's some sense talked in this place let me tell you' (106). It is certainly ironic that the duke does not realise the place he claims is full of good sense is in fact a psychiatric hospital, but this piece of dialogue could also be seen as a mocking tongue-in-cheek comment about the real House of Lords, where good sense and order are, as has been shown, apparently rarely evident. A double meaning can also clearly be seen in the duke's assertion that because another man – apparently a communist – has different political views from him, he must be mad: 'anybody would think the poor chap wasn't quite right in the head, the way he goes on' (106). The duke's words could be equally applied to himself, although he is amusingly unaware of this.

Any semblance of normality – though it is debatable that any such thing exists in this hospital – is lost at the end of this episode, however, when Jasper and Poppy leave. We have previously heard mention of Lord Rousham, who ‘has just nipped up to the top of a big elm tree and is building himself a nest there’ – the doctor’s suggestion that this is ‘nothing at all serious’ (101) satirises the inefficiency of the hospital authorities – and as they take leave of Jasper’s grandfather, the trio encounter Lord Rousham, ‘who, peeping over the edge of his nest as they passed, began to pelt them with orange-peel, chattering wildly to himself’ (106). At this point, Mitford could have addressed the strangeness of this behaviour, but instead, she has the duke accept it as perfectly normal:

‘Wonderful fellow, Rousham,’ said the duke, hardly bothering even to look up, ‘he can turn his hand to anything, you know. That’s a first-class nest he has made. They tell me it is entirely lined with pieces of the India Report. Of course we miss him in the House just now, but I bet you he is doing good work up there all the same.’ (106-07).

The image created of the peer in his self-built nest sees the humour of the passage verging into the absurd, with the duke’s blind acceptance of Rousham’s behaviour underlining this absurdity. Indeed, the Rousham section, in its mockery of parliamentary integrity, seems almost Swiftian,²⁵ drawing on a tradition of political

²⁵ Jonathan Swift (1667-1745), whose works – especially his prose satire *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) – were very successful in the eighteenth century and, indeed, remain popular through to the present day, specialised in social and political satire which aimed to expose and critique contemporary Britain and Ireland. Much of his satirical writing relies on exaggeration and irony in order to bring attention to power structures that he felt needed to be altered for the greater good of society, with much of his literary output in this regard dealing with the poor treatment of Ireland by Britain during this period.

satire dating back to the eighteenth century. Certainly the image Mitford creates of the peer in his nest is somewhat akin to political cartooning, especially those cartoons found in satirical magazines such as *Punch*. One example from *Punch*, entitled “Our Play Box”, which appeared in the magazine in 1865, is similar to the scene described by Mitford, and depicts Mr. Punch lifting the lid of a toy box shaped like the Houses of Parliament and reaching inside for his ‘dear old puppets’ where he left them in July. The ‘dear old puppets’ are, of course, the various MPs at Westminster, and the cartoon thereby questions the competency of these people to lead the country.

The image created by Mitford, however, is more subtle than “Our Play Box” and contains a complexity missing from the *Punch* cartoon, the aim of which is to amuse the reader with a silly drawing and a quickly digestible jeer. Mitford’s description goes further than this, with its jibes mocking these politicians but also referencing current events. The narrator explains how Rousham’s nest ‘is entirely lined with pieces of the India Report’ (107), almost certainly a reference to the Report of the Joint Committee on Indian Constitutional Reform, a document ‘founded on the Reform proposals of the National Government presented to Parliament in March, 1933, usually referred to as “The White Paper,” and on the Report of the Indian Statutory Commission of 1930’ (Bridgeman).

During this period, Britain’s control over India was gradually weakening, and the country was just one of the ‘jewels’ of the Empire crown discussed earlier. Its potential loss threatened to significantly reduce British influence in world affairs. As Reginald Bridgeman explains in his article published shortly after the release of the

Report, any notion of increased independence for the native population of India was a fiction. The report, Bridgeman suggests, had several objectives:

to safeguard the vast investments of British capital in India ... to stabilise the position of India so that India, and all that it represents to the British Empire from a financial, economic and strategical standpoint, may be a fixed rather than a fluctuating factor in the prosecution of imperialist policy ... to preserve India absolutely as a strategical bulwark of the Empire. (Bridgeman)

This list underlines the fact that although ostensibly a document regarding proposed changes in India, the Report was effectively biased against Indian citizens, particularly given that ‘in the sphere of finance and trade the Governor-General will be the sheet anchor of the State ... [and] as far as the holdings of the British investor are concerned the Indians will have no say whatever. India is not to be financially independent’ (Bridgeman). Bridgeman’s analysis is useful, as it makes Mitford’s point in regard to the Report much clearer. The idea that Rousham has lined his nest with parts of such an important document certainly emphasises the lack of sense prevailing in this skewed vision of government, but it is also part of Mitford’s satirical approach to the corruption perceived to be inherent in the real Westminster.

When we consider that the ‘India Report’ as identified by Bridgeman was used by Britain as a means of maintaining control over Indian, as well as British finance in the country, the lining of Rousham’s nest with its pages can be seen as a clever pun using the clichéd metaphor of feathering one’s own nest. Often used in relation to politicians, this metaphor – defined by the *OED* as ‘[availing] oneself of

opportunities for laying up wealth, to enrich oneself’ (“Feather”) – is particularly apt in this case, as the government had much to gain from the Report, given that it would preserve British dominance in the region for the foreseeable future; or, at least until 1947, when India finally began the formal process of separating from the Empire.

Alongside Mitford’s point about the integrity of these politicians, the duke’s comment about Rousham’s ability to ‘turn his hand to anything’ (107) suggests she is also drawing attention to amateurism, questioning how capable these men are of doing their jobs well. As Matthew Holehouse points out, ‘MPs were first paid in 1911, set at £400 a year – compared to an average industrial worker’s wage of around £250 a year – so that the growing number of working class MPs would be able to afford to take their seats’ (Holehouse). Most members of the House of Lords, on the other hand, do not receive salaries,²⁶ and Mitford’s wondering about their competency is justified given that when she was writing – and until the House of Lords Act 1999 – ascendancy to the Lords was not regulated, therefore those inheriting a peerage automatically became members regardless of their suitability for such a prestigious role within parliament.²⁷ In light of these facts, Mitford’s vision of parliament as a psychiatric hospital populated by mentally incompetent peers is even more effective in satirising the real peerage, which is apparently equally unqualified for this task, given its prioritising of financial gain – as with the situation in India – over humanitarian considerations.

²⁶ This is true to this day, though they are eligible to receive allowances and have their expenses reimbursed. Further information about House of Lords expenses, including records of claims made by its members, can be found on the Parliament website at: www.parliament.uk/about/mps-and-lords/about-lords/lords-allowances/.

²⁷ It is important to remember that before the Parliament Acts 1911 and 1949, the House of Lords had the power to veto any bill proposed by the House of Commons, and therefore it was much more powerful than it is today. Although Mitford was writing after the enactment of the 1911 Act, the House of Lords was generally perceived by the public as a powerful group of unelected aristocrats. For an extended discussion of the House of Lords, see Shell.

The tone of *Wigs on the Green* is, as has been discussed in relation to Eugenia, rather uncertain, especially in relation to attitudes towards fascism, and in general the novel is a combination of social comedy and satirical excess. It does offer glimpses of Mitford tropes recognisable to readers of her more well-known novels: the country house, inefficient parental guardians, bourgeois characters – like Mrs. Lace, Eugenia’s Chalford neighbour – who wish to climb the social ladder, forbidden romance, and so on, but also occasionally veers off in outlandish directions. As always with Mitford, teasing – especially teasing the people her characters are based on – takes precedence over any notion of serious political or moral protest, and indeed, it is not until *The Pursuit of Love* that she deals with fascism more seriously. At one point in that novel, Christian Talbot talks politics with Linda, touching on ‘Right-wing blight in England’ (98), while Linda later expresses a desire to fight against fascism, principally in the form of Nazi Germany. While *The Pursuit of Love* deals with the fascist threat in a much more straightforward – and critical – manner, *Wigs on the Green* is different, and the fluctuation between absurd scenes of excessive satire and moments of conventional humour contribute to its intricate richness. In its farcical nature, the novel is, as has been noted by others,²⁸ similar to

²⁸ Both Suh, in her study of fascism, and Nicholas Lezard, in his review of *Wigs on the Green* in *The Guardian*, have noted similarities to Wodehouse, with Lezard commenting that when reading the text, one ‘could be forgiven for thinking that you had stumbled into the plot of a Wodehouse novel of exactly the same period’ (14). Wodehouse would surely take issue with this comparison, if his correspondence is to be believed. In a letter written to William Townend on 5th November 1949 from his Park Avenue apartment in New York City, Wodehouse expresses his amazement at the success of Mitford’s latest novel:

I join you in gasping over the 75,000 sale of Nancy Mitford’s *Love in a Cold Climate*. It is selling enormously here as well, and I can’t understand why. It’s dirty, of course, and the modern public, especially in America, loves dirt, but I thought it was dull. Wasn’t that house party ghastly! Of course, Nancy Mitford probably knows everybody, and I should imagine that a lot of her characters are real people, and that always boosts sales. But, my gosh, what a book! (*A Life* 429)

the satires of P.G. Wodehouse, in particular *The Code of the Woosters* (1938), which concerns Roderick Spode, a similarly megalomaniacal British Fascist leader – also based on Mosley – and his band of loyal followers.

While Wodehouse's narrator directly mocks the fascist leader character – it is revealed that Spode lives a secret life as a designer of women's underwear, 'has indulged it secretly for some years ... [and] is the founder and proprietor of an emporium in Bond Street known as Eulalie Sæurs' (284) – Mitford's narrator, through Eugenia, has nothing but praise for Captain Jack. Certainly, when choosing between the two main categories of satire, Horatian and Juvenalian, *Wigs on the Green* undoubtedly falls into the former. Juvenalian satire, in its disdainful abrasiveness, uses mockery to criticise its subject and try to bring about change, whereas Horatian gently pokes fun, without engaging in specific attacks. In this novel, Mitford is certainly mocking her future brother-in-law, but the overall equivocality of the text in relation to fascism complicates any suggestion that with it, she is explicitly protesting against this movement or attempting to encourage people to rally against it. As well as this, Mitford's crackpot parliament is an exaggerated depiction of how out of touch these rich men are with the outside world.²⁹ The peers

Wodehouse makes an astute observation in his allusion to Mitford's practice of basing her characters on real people, but his letter seems unduly bitter and may have been influenced by professional jealousy: at the time, Wodehouse's own writing career was in decline, and his financial situation was grim at best. For her part, Mitford seems to have been unaware of any ill feeling towards her on Wodehouse's behalf. Indeed, as Sophie Ratcliffe points out, Mitford was a great fan of Wodehouse, and 'in 1960, tributes flooded in for Wodehouse's eightieth year – with a notice of birthday greetings placed in *The New York Times* from writers that included W.H. Auden, Nancy Mitford, James Thurber, Lionel Trilling and John Updike' (qtd. in Wodehouse, *A Life* 472).

²⁹ In Oscar Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), the Lords is more subtly satirised when Mr. Kelvil asks Lord Illingworth if he feels the House of Commons is a better institution than the House of Lords, to which Illingworth responds: 'A much better institution, of course. We in the House of Lords are never in touch with public opinion. That makes us a civilized body' (106). As well as commenting on the arrogance of these peers, who boast about their ability to rise above the ignorant opinions of the masses, Wilde also seems to point out how easily public opinion can be swayed and subject to dangerous influences. One such dangerous influence is the Union Jackshirts themselves, who surely pose the biggest threat to these peers.

in Mitford's narrative are so out of touch that they have lost their grip on reality, underlining her suggestion that the real House of Lords is likewise unfit for purpose. If the real peers – whose claim to efficacy is based on the very idea that they are not professional politicians in need of public approval and are therefore in control of their own judgement – suffer from impaired judgement, then Mitford's hyperbolic depiction exposes their inability to function as effective components of parliament.

The ineffective nature of such peers is also briefly explored in Mitford's first novel, *Highland Fling*, when Sally and her husband, Walter, visit her uncle at the House of Lords and 'notice that his audience consisted solely of themselves, Aunt Madge, an old bearded man seated on one of the benches with a pair of crutches just out of his reach and another stretched at full length on a red divan' (35). Meanwhile, in *The Pursuit of Love*, Linda and Fanny accompany Uncle Matthew to the House of Lords, a visit which merely allows them to watch as he '[takes] his own forty winks on a back bench opposite' and to see him bother the other members 'when he was awake ... which was not often' (67). Mitford consistently critiques this form of government, in which lords are automatically given a seat – and, crucially, a voice – in the House of Lords, whether they will ultimately make an effort to attend or not. This, in combination with the amusing scenes of slothfulness at the House of Lords described in *Highland Fling*, highlights an apparent contempt for this body of parliament, and consequently underlines the ambiguousness of the narrator of *Wigs on the Green*; given the Union Jackshirts' hatred for the present government, the narrator's similarly disdainful attitude towards it complicates the narrative viewpoint: is the narrator implicitly suggesting that the Union Jackshirts are the best remedy for the 'debating society of aged and corrupt men called Parliament' (8), and does the

apparent glamorising of fascism, mentioned earlier, make this extreme movement seem more palatable?

In *Wigs on the Green*, most residents of the hospital-cum-House are Conservatives: as the doctor remarks, ‘the majority here are moderate Baldwinites’³⁰ (102). The duke leads their objection to a proposed bill which would ‘try and substitute dandelions for strawberry leaves on our coronets and rabbit skins for ermine on our robes’ (106). This suggests that the members have become accustomed to the prestige of the articles of clothing which make up their regalia – ermine traditionally being associated with royalty – and also that they are clearly misjudging their priorities. The world they inhabit is one in which an important piece of legislation like the India Report is torn up and used as nest lining, whereas a bill about potentially deglamourising the robes worn by these men produces widespread – and outraged – reaction. This is another way in which Mitford highlights how out of touch the real peers in the House of Lords are.

It must be remembered that Mitford’s novel was written when Britain was suffering through the crippling economic depression brought about by the Wall Street Crash of 1929; therefore, the focus of politicians ought to have been on the reduction of unemployment, which increased dramatically during this period, as well as on international security in the wake of increased German aggression in

³⁰ Stanley Baldwin, who was Prime Minister three times, from 1923 to 1924, 1924 to 1929 and 1935 to 1937, had to deal with various crises during his political career, including the General Strike of 1926 and the abdication of Edward VIII. Baldwin was generally popular during his leadership and his speeches about England have become famous as odes to patriotism. Interestingly, when Baldwin was selected as Prime Minister in 1923, he was chosen over Lord Curzon, the father of Sir Oswald Mosley’s first wife, Cynthia. Baldwin’s Home Secretary from 1924 to 1929, William Joynson-Hicks, became a figure of fun among the Bright Young People, with whom Mitford is often grouped, due to his stance against nightclubs and his fight to prevent publication of Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), notably satirised in Waugh’s *Vile Bodies*, as well as Mitford’s own *Highland Fling*: ‘When the train stopped at Victoria [Albert] was only half-awake until suddenly thrown into a most refreshing rage by the confiscation, from his registered luggage, of a copy of *Ulysses*’ (18).

continental Europe. This criticism of these out of touch peers links to Mosley's real-life campaign against them. As Stuart J. Rawnsley points out, 'the B.U.F. arose because of the frustrations and despair over the old style political leadership (the "old gang" according to Mosley) and a set of state institutions and institutionalised ideas' (42). Mosley argued that the only way to save Britain from irreversible decline entailed a radical reshuffle of parliament, in particular the House of Lords, which he viewed as an antiquated mob based on aristocratic privilege which had no place in a modern country. In fact, Mosley went as far as calling for a new parliamentary structure altogether, with the House of Lords replaced by a group selected on the basis of merit instead of inherited power; in Gottlieb's words, 'an elite of merit, rather than one of heredity' (*Feminine Fascism* 196).³¹

Country, City and Class

Division between city and countryside is a theme Mitford returns to throughout her works, and in the instance of *Wigs on the Green*, Eugenia is shown to use it in her suggestion that trivial pursuits among aristocrats such as those in the House of Lords are easier to indulge in the city, and have seduced some of these formerly countrified peers away from their duties and from their traditional place in the societal framework. In her speech, Eugenia proclaims:

Respect for parents, love of the home, veneration of the marriage tie, are all at a discount in England today, society is rotten with vice, selfishness, and

³¹ However, as will be discussed shortly, this principle was ironic given Mosley's own privileged position within the parliamentary hierarchy.

indolence. The rich have betrayed their trust, preferring the fetid atmosphere of cocktail-bars and night-clubs to the sanity of a useful country life. The great houses of England, one of her most envied attributes, stand empty – why? Because the great families of England herd together in luxury flats and spend their patrimony in the divorce courts. (9)

Eugenia's rhetoric is effective, as even the most blasé of characters, Jasper, is intrigued by her claims, though with reservations about her overall sanity: 'the girl's a lunatic, but she's not stupid' (9). Indeed, there is some sense in Eugenia's argument, particularly her suggestions about the position of the country house in society, which at the time Mitford was writing had become increasingly precarious. Death duties and taxes imposed by the government on such homes made it almost impossible for the majority of them to survive, while the large town houses of the aristocracy were equally at risk.³² The trivial indulgences of bars and nightclubs, it is suggested, have contributed to the 'vice, selfishness, and indolence' present in wider society, and the aristocrats who are allured by them are implicitly compared to cattle, blindly herding together far from the 'sanity' of the countryside; an effective metaphor, given the alien image conjured up of cattle escaped from the country and into the city. In her study of fascism in *Wigs on the Green*, Judy Suh suggests that in the text, 'the loss of hospitality once endemic to aristocratic forms of cultural

³² Evelyn Waugh's 1934 novel *A Handful of Dust*, published a year before the release of *Wigs on the Green*, details the new practice of demolishing grand old houses – perpetrated in that novel by the crafty Mrs. Beaver – and replacing them with the 'luxury flats' which Eugenia disdains. This process is also referenced in Stella Gibbons' *Nightingale Wood* (1938), when we are told that the Spring family is 'established at the Dorchester, which was ... conveniently near to Buckingham Square, where Phyllis and Victor intended to bespeak one of the most expensive flats in the block that was now shooting up on the site of Buckingham House' (244). Buckingham House, a relic of the past, has been torn down, a victim of the craze for modernity, with both Gibbons and Mitford explicitly mentioning the 'luxury' of these new residences.

hegemony has in part enabled the success of fascist spectacle' and that Mitford indicts 'the withdrawal of aristocrats from the communal scene of English culture as a condition of fascism's pull within the nation. The aristocracy as a class has abandoned cultural patronage and cosmopolitanism, and in turn has left the countryside susceptible to fascism' (142). If we accept Suh's interpretation, it becomes apparent that through the efforts of young idealists like Eugenia, fascism has flourished, and this can be partly blamed on the older generation, namely Eugenia's grandparents, who have little knowledge of this new movement and make no real efforts to understand it or its implications for the future.

Yet despite apparently being tired of the old, this allegedly new movement still relies on claims about the importance of Empire, disregarding the simple fact that during the first half of the twentieth century, Britain's imperial supremacy was under threat. By the time Mitford's novel was published in 1935, the after-effects of the First World War had greatly affected the British Empire, the United States had emerged as a dominant world power – 'since the First World War when Wall Street had replaced London as the world's leading financial centre' (Thurlow 153) – and growing tensions between Britain and Germany signalled the potential for another war in Europe. Irrespective of the loss of power, though, this does not mean the Union Jackshirts would not want to reconsolidate British control abroad. Much of this fictional movement's doctrine is drawn from that of Mosley's BUF – or 'Blackshirts' – which entertained visions of eventual British world domination. Mosley regularly mocked the government of his day, consistently referring to them as the 'old gang' or 'old women' (Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism* 76) in an attempt to convince voters that these figures were outdated relics of the past, whereas his party

embodied the future. It is therefore significant that when Eugenia says ‘we see things through their eyes no longer’, she forges a clear ‘us’ and ‘them’ division in regard to the old and the young, with ‘their eyes’ described in stark contrast to the ‘we’, who claim to be the only political party capable of ensuring Britain’s survival.

‘A man and not a tortoise’: Fascism, Masculinity and Failure

The allusion to ‘those other countries, [which] like ourselves, still languish ’neath the deadening sway of a putrescent democracy’ (9) shows an alignment between the Union Jackshirts and Nazi Germany. Indeed, the formal name of the Union Jackshirts, ‘Social Unionism’, is pointedly similar to that of the Nazi Party, officially known as the National Socialist German Workers’ Party. Both names are ironic given the lack of any real socialist aspects in Nazi doctrine, while Captain Jack, the leader of Eugenia’s party, bears some similarity to Adolf Hitler, particularly in his followers’ unswerving loyalty towards him. When Jasper and Noel agree to join the party, Eugenia does not take kindly to Noel’s questioning of her leader’s authority: ‘Eugenia looked at him with lowering brow, fingering her dagger. “You had better be careful,” she said gloomily. “That is no way to speak of the Captain”’ (11); ‘the Captain’ also brings to mind Hitler’s specific title, ‘the Führer’.

The Captain himself is glamorised, or rather, Eugenia attempts to glamorise him, in her speeches. She tries to imbue the Captain with a sense of the strong male sexuality which characterised Mosley in real life, that ‘image of potent, virile sexuality that was so essential to his political as well as his private persona’ (De Courcy 166). Virility was a quality much celebrated within fascist doctrine. Mosley’s

party, taking its cue from Mussolini's movement, encouraged competitiveness among its male members, while demanding that women conform to conventional gender roles, focusing their attentions on domesticity and motherhood. However, Eugenia's efforts to present the Captain as the ideal man are repeatedly subverted by her own mixed images and lapses of logic. She extols:

How then, if a sun shall arise, arise with a heat which will shrivel to cinders all who are not true at heart? How if a real Captain, a man, and not a tortoise, shall appear suddenly at their bedsides, a cup of castor oil in the one hand, a goblet of hemlock in the other, and offer them the choice between ignominy and a Roman death? (9)

Though she attempts to portray the Captain as a symbol of idealised manhood, performing, as the mention of 'a Roman death' suggests, like a gladiator or a Julius Caesar, her message is muddled. The image of the Captain appearing 'at their bedsides, a cup of castor oil' in hand, is oddly domestic, indeed even has nurturing connotations, as though the Captain is performing the role of nurse to these old men, while the allusion to tortoises makes him seem even more ridiculous.

Actually, in terms of masculinity, it is Eugenia herself who embodies the masculine traits expected of Union Jackshirts – and which characterised the BUF – more so than the Captain does. Indeed, at one point, she is even described as 'godlike' (7). Gottlieb points out that 'while the visibility of women speaking on public platforms may have attested to the BUF's inclusion of women in public life, it was still the case that women preserved their femininity by "staying close to home"

in both the form and content of their speeches' (*Feminine Fascism* 96). Eugenia's public addresses are much closer to those expected of male party members, both in terms of the contents of her speeches and the way she delivers them. She frequently attacks the government, she commands her listeners – 'Britons, awake! Arise!' (7) – and her rhetoric does not reflect the speeches traditionally demanded of British female fascists. In an organisation that, according to Gottlieb, '[raised] the occupations of mother and housewife to the status of professions [as part of] the BUF's politicization of domesticity' (*Feminine Fascism* 120), fascist women were generally encouraged to limit the topics of their speeches to domestic considerations. Eugenia subverts this expectation, and engages with stereotypically unfeminine topics – war, imperialism, Empire – in a masculine manner that challenges our assumptions about young upper-class women.

Yet this conception of Eugenia as breaking some kind of mould is equally complicated and undermined by the presence of her long-suffering nanny. Even in the middle of her charge's harangue, Nanny attempts to persuade her to stop and is met with anger: 'Get out you filthy pacifist, get out I say, and take your yellow razor gang with you' (8). As with Jasper's grandfather, the humour derived from Eugenia's response is at her expense. Her paranoia about political enemies, which manifests itself throughout the text, extends even to her own nanny. Meanwhile, the fact that she even still has a nanny surely problematises the alleged youthful independence she seeks to portray throughout her speech.

Certainly, Eugenia, much like Mosley in real life, occupies an unusual position in general. When we take into consideration her political affiliation, given that she lectures against the societal group of which she is undeniably a member,

Eugenia emerges as an aristocrat who in some ways is biting the hand that feeds her. In actuality, Eugenia's situation is even more conflicted than that of Mosley. As a baronet, Mosley was not heir to a peerage, in contrast to Eugenia, who, as the only grandchild of Lord Chalford, is his sole heir: 'Eugenia must marry, Chalford House and the barony of Malmain which she would in due course inherit from her grandfather must have an heir' (39).³³ Her interest in extreme politics contravenes her duty as an heiress: instead of dressing to impress, she sports 'an ill-fitting grey woollen skirt, no stockings, a pair of threadbare plimsolls, and a jumper made apparently out of a Union Jack. Round her waist was a leather belt to which there was attached a large dagger' (7). Physically, Eugenia – 'England's largest heiress' (5) – resembles her real-life inspiration, Unity Mitford, but in dress she is similar to Rotha Lintorn-Orman, the leader of the British Fascists, an organisation which preceded Mosley's own. As Colin Cross explains, Lintorn-Orman was 'a Field Marshal's grand-daughter ... a forthright spinster of thirty-seven with a taste for mannish clothes. At private Fascist rallies, it was rumoured, she wore a sword' (57). The dagger worn by Eugenia is similar, suggesting an inner potential for violence out with the politically dangerous views she espouses.

Betrayal of aristocratic duty is a charge Eugenia could be deemed guilty of, and the criticism she levels against her own class ties in with Mosley's fascist politics, which were as conflicted as they were radical. Mosley's BUF demanded

³³ In Britain, the title of baronet is a rank which is not a peerage. Therefore, although Mosley, as sixth baronet, inherited a title, he did not inherit a peerage alongside it and therefore was not entitled to a seat in the House of Lords. In contrast to this, as the reference to a 'barony' suggests, Eugenia will inherit the title of 'baroness' and be addressed as 'Lady Chalford'. A baron or baroness is the lowest rank in the peerage – in descending order, the ranking is duke or duchess, marquess or marchioness, earl or countess, viscount or viscountess and finally, baron or baroness – and at this time, such a title would have entitled its holder to a seat in the House of Lords, though women were not admitted until 1963.

changes be made to the House of Lords system, while also attempting to appeal to the upper classes, with the early incarnations of his party giving the impression that it was only slightly more extreme than the Conservatives. In general, however, Mosley failed to attract significant interest from those within his own social circle: only a discussion group formed by Mosley, named the January Club, drew any aristocratic interest, and even this was meagre. Indeed, his party did not win any seats at UK elections.³⁴

Several reasons have been put forward for the failure of fascism to succeed in interwar Britain. These include the lack of enthusiasm for the movement in working class areas, fears about the often violent methods used by the party to gain support, and the difficulty in translating ideas perceived as foreign into the British consciousness. As Sir Charles Petrie, a contemporary of Mosley, observes:

[Mosley's] continued flirtation with Hitler and Mussolini caused his movement to be regarded as something not far removed from a foreign conspiracy: had he put his followers into blue pullovers instead of black shirts much would have been forgiven him. ... Finally, when war came Fascism was felt to be unpatriotic, and that sealed its fate. (qtd. in Cross 101)

This quotation from Petrie is intriguing, as he suggests that a movement with less austere uniforms – ‘blue pullovers instead of black shirts’ – would have had a better

³⁴ After breaking from the Conservative Party, Mosley and his first wife, Lady Cynthia, each won a seat for the Labour Party at the 1929 General Election. On the other hand, the New Party, the first party formed by Mosley after he left Labour, failed to win any seats in the by-elections in which it took part. The BUF, meanwhile, did not contest any seats in a General Election, with Mosley opting for the slogan ‘Fascism Next Time’; this ultimately backfired, as the beginning of the Second World War destroyed any hope of fascism seriously taking hold in Britain.

chance of succeeding. The image of the blue pullovers is closer to the uniforms worn by Eugenia and the other Union Jackshirts in Mitford's novel.

In terms of policies, though, it is clear that the Union Jackshirts are in a similarly conflicted position to the BUF, as Eugenia's speech both calls for peers in the House of Lords to be replaced, and for the upper classes, presumably including such peers, to join them in their political fight. This contradictory appeal draws attention to the illogical nature of Mosley's party, which first alienated members of his own class and then tried to win them back. As well as this, Mosley attempted to win over the lower classes, ignoring the simple fact that he could never truly identify with them, given his own life of privilege. According to Gottlieb, in Mosley's view, 'his aristocratic identity was not at odds with his leadership of a populist movement. He strongly felt that a natural affinity existed between the lowest and highest classes' (*Feminine Fascism* 196). This, of course, proved not to be the case, and is suggested by Mitford in her depiction of the villagers' dubious reaction to Eugenia's speech and her subsequent appeal for funds:

The yokels immediately began to fade away. Already they paid two shillings a year to Lady Chalford towards the Conservative funds, and twopence a week for the Nursing Association; they failed, therefore, to see why any more of their hard-earned money should be swallowed up by the Malmains family.

(10)

The use of the word 'yokels' of course simplifies this group, and suggests a scornful attitude towards them on the part of the narrator, but it also highlights their unwillingness to part with any more money at the behest of their supposed betters.

Eugenia, therefore, attempts to appeal to the working-class people of Chalford, and fails, underlining the great gulf which existed between the richest and the poorest in society during this period. The only working-class support which Mosley himself ever managed to gain came as a result of the anti-Semitic campaign staged by the BUF in London's East End. Targeting the area's migrant Jewish population, the BUF elicited significant support, but was – quite rightly – vilified in the press as a result. Gottlieb goes on to suggest that Mosley 'identified a common enemy [of the upper and lower classes] in bourgeois culture and its attendant stifling Puritanism' (*Feminine Fascism* 196); however, it is clear that most of his party's limited success came as a result of his targeting a fear of the unknown, some unseen menace which threatened to destabilise society completely.

Communist Paranoia in *Highland Fling* and *Christmas Pudding*

In Mitford's first two novels, *Highland Fling* and *Christmas Pudding*, the unseen threat is communism. The narrator of *Highland Fling*, who pokes fun at the characters more explicitly than the narrator does in *Wigs on the Green*, describes how pleased Lady Craigdalloch is that one of Sally's apparently unsuitable friends is living in France rather than Britain:

Lady Craigdalloch inwardly supposed that this must be one of Walter's Bright Young but Undesirable friends that she was always hearing so much about from Sally's mother. The creature probably has a villa in the South of France – so much the better, those sort of people are not wanted in England, where they merely annoy their elders and breed Socialism. (37)

The fact that Sally's 'friend' is actually the Elizabeth Arden salon – in response to her aunt's enquiry about how she has become 'so wonderfully sunburnt', she replies, 'At Elizabeth Arden's, Aunt Madge' – produces laughter from the reader, as Sally's aunt is shown to unwittingly assume that Elizabeth Arden is, firstly, a real friend of Sally's, and secondly, a rank communist. Her ignorance unintentionally links glamour with danger. Since the name of this glamorous beauty salon/Sally's friend is unknown to Lady Craigdalloch, it is therefore mistrusted, while her obliviousness also draws attention to the lack of sense present in this fear of communism, which casts suspicion on anything remotely unfamiliar.

The danger of such baseless assumptions is demonstrated further in *Christmas Pudding*. When Paul asks Lady Bobbin about the foot and mouth situation which is gripping her part of the countryside, she reveals her conviction that the Bolsheviks are somehow to blame for the disease:

Florence Prague was saying only yesterday, and I am perfectly certain that she is right, that the Bolsheviks are out to do anything they can which will stop hunting. They know quite well, the devils, that every kind of sport, and especially hunting, does more to put down socialism than all the speeches in

the world, so, as they can't do very much with that R.S.V.P. nonsense, they go about spreading foot and mouth germs all over the countryside. I can't imagine why the Government doesn't take active steps; it's enough to make one believe that they are in the pay of these brutes themselves. (66)

Lady Bobbin's fears go even further than those of Lady Craigdalloch, and their similar hierarchical positions suggest this is a common trend among the upper classes. Lady Bobbin's paranoia even leads her to question the integrity of the government, while her allusion to the relationship between sport and politics – 'every kind of sport, and especially hunting, does more to put down socialism than all the speeches in the world' – evokes some serious debates that were expressed during this period about their interconnectedness. Michael Krüger's article about the German workers' sport movement and its relationship with socialism and class division undermines Lady Bobbin's claims by providing several examples of groups which openly used sport as part of a wider socialist objective during the interwar years. According to Krüger:

[the Deutscher Arbeiter-Turnerbund (ATB, in English the German Workers' Gymnastics association)] and the majority of their members displayed a close affinity to and sympathy with the SPD [Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, in English the Social Democratic Party of Germany], with some socialist and/or communist ideologies, and with policies aiming to improve the living conditions of common people, and also to campaigns for

more political strength and influence of the working class in the
Wilhelminische Gesellschaft (1870/1871–1918) of Germany. (1100)

It is clear then that in mainland Europe during the interwar years, a significant relationship existed between sport and socialism. With the 1890 abolition of laws against socialist organisations and clubs in Germany, ‘clubs of worker gymnasts [became] progressively more defined by their common political and ideological objectives and alignment with the socialist and communist parties’ (Krüger 1,108), while sport itself ‘was regarded as a means of agitation and propaganda, and even for the physical battle in a forthcoming communist revolution’ (1,111). No wonder then that aristocrats like Lady Bobbin express such concern about the rise of socialism, given the threat it could pose to those in her position. While socialism had taken over Russia completely around 1917, by the interwar years it had evidently spread closer to Britain, much to the discomfort of the British upper classes.

In his article about sport and socialism in Britain specifically, John Hargreaves, while acknowledging that ‘the British working-class movement was simply not equipped in terms of understanding strategy and organization to challenge dominant groups that were so well established in this cultural domain’ (148-49), also points to *The Fabian News*, which at this time had noted that ‘capturing the social life of the workers is one of the most potent weapons of the servile state ... the fellowship of the cricket and football field will bear precious fruit in sterner fields of industrial warfare’ (qtd. in Hargreaves 148). Clearly in some quarters of interwar Britain, socialism was on the rise, and regarded as a potential means of bringing about societal and political change; therefore, socialism and fascism had something

in common: both were promoted as hypothetically revolutionary movements capable of disrupting the status quo. Yet as Hargreaves suggests, ‘the working class [in Britain] had been fragmented economically, politically, and culturally in ways which ensured that sport never took on the significance for class struggle that it did on the Continent’ (149), and, not under any credible threat, the British government ‘was more interested in using international soccer as a tool of diplomacy’ (143).

When the English football team travelled to Germany in 1938, for example, the Foreign Office persuaded the team’s players to adopt the Nazi salute during the opening ceremony, an effective endorsement of the Nazi Party, which had in 1933 re-banned the existence of socialist or workers’ groups of any kind. Another example of appeasement on full display, this approach was mirrored the following year during ‘the England team’s reception in Mussolini’s Italy [which] was carefully monitored and regarded as a diplomatic triumph ... [while] visits to the USSR were quietly discouraged’ (Hargreaves 143). It would appear from the government’s attempts to quell communism that Lady Bobbin’s belief that the government may be ‘in the pay of these brutes themselves’ (66) is entirely inaccurate. In fact, during the interwar period in which Mitford’s *Christmas Pudding* takes place, and as will be shown in this chapter and those that follow, the British government aimed to maintain a good relationship with Germany, while diplomatic relations with Russia were often difficult. From Krüger and Hargreaves’ observations, it can be ascertained that aristocrats like Lady Bobbin could be relatively assured of their position at this time, though this did not prevent them from expressing outright paranoia about the apparent threat socialism posed to British upper-class hegemony.

The wider political situation is further touched upon in the humorous scene in which Captain Chadlington, an MP visiting Lady Bobbin, is tricked by Bobby and Héloïse into believing a bomb has been planted underneath his chair at the dining table. With no indication whatsoever as to who could be responsible, Chadlington immediately points the finger of blame at the Bolsheviks, owing to a speech he made against the movement previously: ‘Hullo, Woodford police? It is Captain Chadlington, M.P., speaking from Compton Bobbin. Look here, officer, there has just been an attempt to assassinate me. The Bolsheviks, I suppose’ (125). The scene is a rare instance in Mitford’s early novels of a political figure being mocked by other characters within the text, rather than by the narrator. Bobby and Héloïse glory in their prank, while Chadlington’s phone call displays the pompousness he has acquired because of his position in parliament. This is emphasised by the unnecessary mention of his job – he proclaims himself ‘Captain Chadlington, M.P.’ rather than simply stating his name – while his instantaneous assumption that he is the target of an assassination attempt draws further attention to his sense of self-importance. His overly inflated ego will not allow him to see anyone else as a potential target, as nobody else at the table has as important a job as he does. Yet, his alleged enemy does not exist: at least not in the way he imagines. No-one has targeted him for assassination, and the only incident which has occurred is his authority being undermined by a pair of mischievous children.

Parents and Children

Childishness is a theme which recurs throughout Mitford's novels, which regularly feature unruly children, childish adults and adults seemingly incapable of raising their children well. It is generally the case that Mitford's characters are always well-born, but not necessarily well-raised or well-educated by their parents. One critic who has discussed children in Mitford's work is Niamh Baker, and her focus is on *The Pursuit of Love*. This novel, which traces the story of free-spirited Linda Radlett from countryside childhood, to unhappy marriage(s), to glamorous Paris and true love, comments on children's education several times. Generally, the emphasis is placed on girls' education, and Baker suggests that in the text, '[Mitford] makes explicit her belief that the education of girls is a liberating and empowering influence, and ... the poor choices made by the Radlett girls, especially Linda, are blamed on their lack of a formal education' (135). This lack of education is a result of Uncle Matthew's aversion to educated women, and indeed, he himself admits that he has only ever read one book, highlighting that the childishness of the parents is sometimes equal to that of their children: 'I have only ever read one book in my life, and that is *White Fang*. It's so frightfully good I've never bothered to read another' (74).

It is significant that the narrator of *The Pursuit of Love* is Linda's cousin, Fanny, who has received a formal education and is therefore able to look at the lives of her cousins as an outsider. Fanny can see her uncle's failings because she does not regularly inhabit his home, which emerges as a place as unruly as the countryside

surrounding it. Instead of sending his daughters to school along with his sons, Uncle Matthew mostly allows them to run wild, with occasional lessons from a governess:

The Radlett daughters did practically no lessons. They were taught by Lucille, the French governess, to read and write, they were obliged, though utterly unmusical, to ‘practise’ in the freezing ballroom for one hour a day each, their eyes glued to the clock, they would thump out the ‘Merry Peasant’ and a few scales, they were made to go for a French walk with Lucille on all except hunting days, and that was the extent of their education. Uncle Matthew loathed clever females, but he considered that gentlewomen ought, as well as being able to ride, to know French and play the piano. (10-11)

The ‘education’ prescribed by Uncle Matthew reveals a lot about his ambitions in regard to his daughters. Much like Eugenia, they are expected to conform to societal norms – being able to carry themselves well, speak French and entertain musically when required – and consequently attract potential husbands. In Uncle Matthew’s view, no girl should need to know more in order to make a successful life for herself: a life, of course, predicated on the procurement of a good marriage.³⁵ The use of verbs in this section is important to note, however, as it highlights the lack of interest in these activities on the part of Uncle Matthew’s daughters themselves, with ‘obliged’ and ‘made’ emphasising that Uncle Matthew has chosen the activities and that his daughters are reluctantly adhering to his demands.

³⁵ As Baker attests, ‘the Radlett girls grow up in a home where, though they are allowed the freedom to run wild, their futures are never considered, as it is assumed they will marry and live the same sort of life as their mother [Aunt Sadie]’ (136). Mitford and her sisters endured a similar upbringing, in which education for females was not valued by their father, whereas education for males was: the only Mitford son, Tom, was sent to Eton.

In *Wigs on the Green*, Eugenia seems to have had even less of an education than Linda and her sisters – ‘I can never forget that she [Lady Chalford] has treated me really very badly. She wouldn’t let me go to school, you see’ (44) – and despite being seventeen years old, she, as mentioned earlier, is still followed around by a nanny. Nanny, however, is completely ineffectual, and unable to control her charge. Undoubtedly, the lack of any practical work in Eugenia’s life contributes to her move toward the Union Jackshirts. Suh blames ‘a combination of sheer boredom and social retardation’ (135), and this is exacerbated by her grandmother’s failure to enforce any discipline, leaving her granddaughter susceptible to outside influence.

A lack of attention on Lady Chalford’s part is her greatest failing as a guardian, as she is clueless about the Social Unionist party. This is made clear during her interview with Jasper and Poppy when she refers to the party as ‘[Eugenia’s] Scouts or Guides or Comrades or whatever she calls them’ (124-25). The word choice in this sentence is effective in underlining Lady Chalford’s naivety, as we see her mistakenly assuming this political party is as benign an organisation as the Boy Scouts or the Girl Guides. Admittedly, they were not entirely benign, given that the Hitler Youth appropriated many of the activities practised by the Boy Scouts following Hitler’s banning of the organisation in 1935. Regardless, Lady Chalford’s complete unawareness of Eugenia’s activities is underlined during the pageant preparations when Eugenia explains that her grandmother supports the Social Unionist movement because ‘she thinks it’s the Women’s Institute and she’s all for it. Keeps on saying how pleased she is that I do something for the village at last’ (127). As well as showing Eugenia’s deviousness in manipulating her grandmother’s naivety, her words also suggest a feeling on her grandmother’s part that the

Malmains family should be interacting more with the people of Chalford. Her attentions may, however, be too late, reminding us of Suh's suggestion that the withdrawal of aristocratic hospitality in the countryside has encouraged the development of extreme movements such as the one praised by Eugenia. Suh underlines this further by pointing out that 'this ungrounded condition and ennui potentially lead to fascism, which is borne [sic] of cynicism toward mass politics and the abandonment of the past and its cultural practices' (150).

Lady Chalford's old-fashioned nature is made clear by her assertion that she no longer visits other people – 'I stopped going out' (122) – and by her out-of-date thoughts about divorce: 'Here we have the Hon. Adrian and Mrs Duke; Mrs Duke, it appears, is the divorced wife of a colonel, so these two people are in fact living together adulterously' (123). Lady Chalford's views on this matter tie in with Eugenia's earlier criticism of those who 'spend their patrimony in the divorce courts' (9) and shows that despite her motivations being based on a rally against the oppressiveness of home life and her struggles against her grandmother, Eugenia unconsciously echoes many of her grandmother's opinions. Lady Chalford believes in traditional morals, and it could be argued that in her mind, saving face socially is more important than finding out exactly what her granddaughter is involving herself in; indeed, it is made clear that if Lady Chalford were only to pay more attention, she would probably be able to put a stop to her granddaughter's actions. This is obvious from Eugenia's fear of being discovered, expressed when she tells of her nanny's hatred of the Social Unionists, and how she is 'always afraid she's going to tell on me' (127). The idea of a seventeen-year-old being worried that someone will 'tell on' them once again draws attention to Eugenia's essential childishness.

Pageant, Spectacle, Performance: Glamorous Means of Persuasion

Pageant as Propaganda

Perhaps the most blatant example of glamorising in *Wigs on the Green* is the pageant Eugenia and the others organise. It serves as an elaborate piece of political propaganda, aestheticising the Social Unionist movement. Eugenia claims the purpose is to ‘earn a lot of money for the [Union Jackshirt] funds’ (44); but it is also a clear effort to try and convert as many unsuspecting villagers as possible to the cause. A surreptitiousness surrounds the pageant from the beginning, as we see Eugenia manipulating her grandmother again. When Poppy suggests Lady Chalford would not wish the pageant to be used in such a way, Eugenia explains that ‘there’s no reason why [she] should ever find out, she’s very easy to deceive in such ways’ (45).

Initially, Eugenia wishes to make the pageant explicitly about Social Unionism, expressing her desire for it to feature ‘the March on Rome, the Death of Horst Wessel, the Burning of the Reichstag, the Presidential Election of Roosevelt’ (46). These explicit references to events in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, though, are seen by the others as inappropriate, and it is decided that a historical pageant would be more suitable. In terms of arrangement, the pageant is built around the recreation of a historical visit paid to Chalford House in the eighteenth century by King George III and Queen Charlotte; however, as Suh rightly points out, ‘there the reference to actual events ends’, with the script ‘full of outrageous anachronisms’

(139). The pageant can be seen as an example of a political party picking and choosing historical moments and deliberately aestheticising and mythologising them in order to further its own political ends, a noted characteristic of fascist propaganda, which, according to Philip V. Cannistraro and Gianfausto Rosoli, is ‘ingenious in its conversion of reality into myth and [derives] its inspiration from nationalist rhetoric’ (675). During the planning stages, Noel and Mrs. Lace explain that a pageant must be historical, but this does not stop Eugenia from taking historical characters and imbuing them with fascist tendencies. The speech she prepares for George III to give to the pageant audience is notable for its similarity to her own speech at the beginning of the novel.

The address begins with details of ‘a very curious prophetic dream which we had last night’ (88) and this idea of prophecy is used retroactively to suggest George III has envisioned the current political climate, and that there is still time to prevent his prediction of doom, if the audience at the pageant acts swiftly. The rest of the speech begins to mimic Eugenia’s earlier diatribe against the government, but goes further in its viciousness, referring to the ‘pack of disastrous old ladies who ought to have been dead for years’, and intensifying the threat of Social Unionist revolution against this old institution: ‘the streets will ring with the cry of youths who will march, each carrying his little banner, towards the fulfilment of a Glorious Britain’ (88). As these threats are projected under the guise of a statement made by a historical character, it would be possible for the party to deny any incitement, but the argument is nevertheless evident. As well as this, words such as the ‘Hail!’ which precedes the speech, and the reference to its listeners as ‘loyal Aryan subjects’ (88) further highlights the underlying propaganda of its content, which borrows Eugenia’s

own Nazi-influenced words and phrases.³⁶ The power of Social Unionism is underlined by the suggestion that under its influence, the country will be reborn – ‘vitality will flow back into her withered veins’ – while ‘hateful democracy’ (88) will be eradicated.

The final part of the speech mentions ‘the Social Unionist Hymn, “Land of Union Jackshirts, Mother of the Flag”’ (88), a rewritten version of the patriotic song “Land of Hope and Glory”. The reference to this song as a hymn shows the melding of religion and politics, and ties in with Weber’s suggestion that ‘nationalism ... has many things in common with other great religions of its time’ (18). By manipulating conventions used by religious groups, such as hymns and mass assemblies, fascist parties worked to create an aura of godliness around their leaders, encouraging the notion that the leader was preordained to lead them and become the solution to all their problems. This notion of predestination is used by the Social Unionists in the speech by George III, with the king of course standing in as a royal substitute for Captain Jack; as Linehan stresses, under fascist rule, the ‘single charismatic Leader [is] perceived as an almost God-like figure part human and part divine’ (75).

Religion is emphasised once again during the pageant itself, which ends with the Social Unionists singing another song of theirs entitled ‘Onward, Union Jackshirts’ and sang to ‘the tune of “Onward, Christian Soldiers”’ (156). The use of this title and the rewritten lyrics related by the narrator display an even more explicit alignment with religion on the part of the Union Jackshirts. While “Land of Hope

³⁶ The propaganda of the Union Jackshirts also stretches to the posters designed for the pageant, as well as the huge ‘life-size photographs of Hitler, Mussolini, Roosevelt and the Captain’ (Mitford, *Wigs* 65) which hang in the Jackshirt headquarters. These photos recall glamour portraits of Hollywood film stars, and create a link between the glamour of Hollywood and extreme politics. As Gottlieb attests, Mosley himself was idolised as ‘the “Rudolph Valentino of Fascism”’ (“Women” 111), while Cross adds that ‘party meetings had a semi-religious air, with salutes for the pictures of Mosley which hung in every headquarters’ (70), emphasising the interlinking of politics, religion, and cinema by the portrayal of these leaders as political equivalents to cinematic idols.

and Glory” is not a hymn, “Onward, Christian Soldiers” is one. The use of this hymn sees the party equating its followers with religious fighters. Faith in Christianity is thus calculatingly associated with the faith required of Social Unionism’s followers. Further to this, fascism is aestheticised by the casting of ‘famous military and royal figures as proto-fascists’ (Suh 140), with George III and Nelson depicted as fighters against ‘French Pacifists’ (Mitford 152), in order to imply to the pageant audience that even these revered figures from the past held such political views, and would therefore endorse Captain Jack and his movement.

The final tableau, entitled ‘The Exile of Napoleon’, is an effective means of showing the placement of fascist beliefs at the forefront of the audience’s psyche, as Napoleon and the notions of democracy associated with him are expelled from society and from the spectators’ thoughts. The eventual deletion of Napoleon’s appearance by Eugenia – because although ‘a dirty foreigner, he was nevertheless somebody’s Leader’ (155) – may weaken the pageant’s climax, but at the same time, it further stresses the importance of the fascist leader to movements of this ilk. Perhaps inevitably for a novel such as this, the pageant – which has been rehearsed only once, disastrously – is, at first, a complete farce, drawing further attention to the way in which Mitford uses fascism frivolously for comedic purposes.

Disaster strikes at the very beginning of the pageant, with the narrator vividly describing the carnage as ‘a noise like thunder was heard ... punctuated by horrible thin shrieks ... the next moment the coach came crashing into sight with horses at full gallop and evidently quite out of control’ before adding that ‘Mrs Lacey, screaming loudly, was attempting to throw herself out of a window, and was being forcibly restrained from doing so by Mr Wilkins’ (154). It is surely a bad omen that

the pageant should start this ineptly, and the lack of control described at this point is perhaps a way of showing both the thin veneer of respectability attached to the Union Jackshirts, which can quickly be stripped away, and the lack of control Eugenia has over her followers. This lack of control is emphasised when the pageant descends into a literal battle, and Eugenia must rally her fellow Union Jackshirts in order to defeat ‘quantities of horrible-looking men dressed as the *sansculottes* of Revolutionary France and wearing yellow caps on their heads’ (157). What follows is a burlesque of a battlefield clash between fascist forces and those dubbed ‘the Pacifists’ (158), in this case the Rackenbridge men, former devotees of Mrs. Lace. The weapons used by the pacifists are similar to those used by communists in their real-life fights against Mosley’s Blackshirts, with the ‘life preservers, knuckledusters, potatoes stuffed with razor blades’ (157) employed by the pacifists echoing the ‘razor-studded potatoes, knuckle-dusters and bicycle chains’ (Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism* 67) of the real-life communists.

As well as this, it is significant that the man placed at the forefront of the Rackenbridge men is named Mr. Leader, casting him in ironic opposition to the other leader in the novel, Captain Jack. The battle between the Jackshirts and the Pacifists, then, can be seen as a symbol of the ideological conflict between fascism and communism. The humour of this passage can be found in the buffoonish quality of the fighting, with the unprepared Jackshirts ‘sadly hampered by their full-bottomed coats, ill-fitting breeches and the wigs, which in many cases fell right over their eyes’ (157) and the overstated bombast of Eugenia’s enthusiasm at its conclusion: ‘She pointed to her tattered flag, saying that in time it would surely be one of the most

honoured relics of the Movement ... Their names would go down to history, she said, and become famous' (159).

Yet the Jackshirt victory leads to behaviour which subtly changes the humour of the passage. Instead of laughing at Eugenia's pompousness, the laughter produced in the reader becomes rather uncomfortable, as 'the Olde Englyshe Fayre from now on became more like an Olde Englyshe Orgy' leading to effigies being burned and chants against 'Pacifists ... Communists ... non-Aryans ...the Junket fronted National Government' (160). Perhaps at the time of writing, this would have been amusing; however, as readers nowadays, we are aware of the real danger of such oppressive policies, and the substantial impact these policies can have when taken to extremes, as in the case of Nazi Germany. As Mitford herself wrote to Evelyn Waugh after it was suggested *Wigs on the Green* be republished after the Second World War, 'Too much has happened for jokes about Nazis to be regarded as funny or as anything but the worst of taste' (*Letters* 101), and this perceived distastefulness affects the way these scenes of debauched fascists glorying in hateful doctrine are received by readers today. The victory of the Jackshirts also again calls into question the attitude of the narrator, who does not voice an opinion about these festivities, but instead merely describes them, adding to the ambiguous nature of the narrative. Does the fascist victory endorse the movement, thereby glamorising it? Or does the description of the resulting orgy of hatred serve as a warning against such doctrine? This is left unclear by Mitford.

Nazi Spectacle

The pageant orchestrated by the Union Jackshirts can also be connected to the great demonstrations utilised for propaganda purposes by the Nazi Party in Germany, immediately after it seized power, and up to the beginning of the Second World War. In his study of supporters of Nazi Germany who lived in Britain during the interwar years – a number of Mitford’s characters fit the bill – Richard Griffiths points out the ‘many methods used by the Germans in the years 1933-5 to impress the British public with the new régime in Germany’ (126), and the spectacle of the rallies were one such method. As well as this, the year 1936 saw the staging of another great show of Nazi propaganda: the Olympic Games,³⁷ which were held in Berlin during the summer of that year. The Games were used by Hitler as a means of showcasing his party and the alleged supremacy of the Aryan race. In order to achieve this aim, German Jewish athletes were surreptitiously banned from competing for their country, though foreign spectators arriving in Berlin for the Games were unaware of this. As Griffiths suggests, the 1936 Olympic Games were characteristic of a wider political decision made by the Nazis:

Many historians have referred to the ‘Olympic pause’, by which the Nazis played down their political activity, particularly in relation to the Jews, in the

³⁷ Interestingly, *Wigs on the Green* anticipates the use of the Olympic torch at the Olympic Games. The Berlin Games were the first to create a Torch relay from Greece to the host city: in the novel, while showing off the posters she has created to advertise the pageant, Eugenia explains that they depict ‘a Union Jackshirt comrade handing on the torch of Social Unionism to the youth of Britain’ (137). This can be seen as an example of the Social Unionists attempting to connect their cause to an ancient tradition – similar to their use of historical figures as proto-fascists in the propagandistic pageant – and thereby granting their movement legitimacy, as though it is as old, and consequently as valid, as the Olympic Games.

months leading up to the Olympic Games in Berlin in August. That the propaganda value of the Olympic Games was important to them is clear from the care with which they used that event; but the 'pause' was more than Olympic; as far as internal policies were concerned, it spanned the whole year. (213)

The 'propaganda value' of the Games was huge, given the opportunity which the event afforded the Nazi government to impress other nations who were otherwise suspicious of their policies. As Griffiths adds, 'the whole of the year 1936 saw a definite attempt, on the part of Germany, to become "respectable" in the eyes of other nations ... and the Olympic Games were merely part of a vast propaganda exercise aimed at the Western World ... particularly, at Great Britain' (214).

Perhaps the most memorable aspect of the 1936 Olympic Games – the performative qualities of which are echoed in the *Wigs on the Green* pageant – is the documentary which depicts the Games, entitled *Olympia*. The film, directed by Leni Riefenstahl, stands as a supreme example of Nazi propaganda, designed to make the German nation appear greater than any other. Years before American and British studios began creating wartime propaganda films, Riefenstahl's documentary pioneered new film techniques to emphasise the efficiency of Germany, propagating the notion that Germans formed a race of their own which was unbeatable. Unlike many documentaries, which tend to focus on facts, Riefenstahl used many of the elements, described above, which fascism employed, with a particular focus on the visual. Many scenes in the documentary deliberately exploit the physique of the German athletes, glamorising them in terms of physical beauty, while at the same

time showing their athletic prowess. As Griffiths suggests, ‘from an early date, the European dictatorships had an aura of glamour for certain members of London’s high society’ (168), and the glamorous spectacle of the Olympic Games alongside the aestheticised displays at the Nuremberg Rallies helped to intensify this aura, with the result that after being exposed to such great shows of strength and wealth put on by Nazi Germany, ‘so much of British society was won over by Nazi propaganda’ (Griffiths 169).³⁸

As with the Chalford pageant in *Wigs on the Green*, Nazi spectacle relied on pomp and display, employing strong rhetoric alongside a show of power in the form of committed, vocal followers. The Nuremberg Rally, held annually from 1923 to 1938, was perhaps the most effective means of winning over visiting foreigners, and its power can be seen in the fact that even those unable to understand German were nevertheless intoxicated by its seductiveness. In her biography of Diana Mosley, Anne de Courcy describes how, at the Nuremberg Rally of 1933, ‘Diana, unable to understand a word, recorded that an “electric shock” ran through the multitude at his [Hitler’s] appearance’, which created ‘a dizzying atmosphere: the thunderous, rolling cheers, the waves of crashing, reverberating Sieg Heils, took on the incantatory quality of obeisance to a godhead’ (121). De Courcy’s description highlights the glamour, if we use Walter Scott’s meaning of the word, inherent in Nazi propaganda, with the ‘incantatory quality’ emphasising the sense of enchantment which prevails

³⁸ Interestingly, the Nazi Party’s ideals of Aryanism were called into question when American track and field athlete Jesse Owens raced to victory at the Berlin Olympics, winning the 100 metre, 200 metre and 4 x 100 metre relay races, and claiming three gold medals in the process, along with another gold for the long jump competition. Owens’ great success suggested that the supposedly perfect German athletes glorified in Riefenstahl’s documentary were not the best after all. This was only exacerbated by the fact that Owens was African-American, with his victories highlighting the questionable nature of Nazi claims of Aryan superiority. Nazi Germany did, however, top the medals table at the Berlin Games, winning eighty-nine medals in total, considerably more than the United States, which won fifty-six in total, though both countries were miles ahead of the other major political power, Britain, which managed to win a total of only fourteen medals.

at such events, where entire crowds of people are somehow magically converted to a cause. This notion of mass conversion is emphasised by the mention of ‘obedience to a godhead’, allying politics with religion, and thereby casting Hitler as a God. De Courcy’s account of the rally also suggests that it is possible to be affected by its pull even with little knowledge of what is being said: rather, the rally is more dependent upon the way in which words are delivered, and especially upon imagery, with visuals at the forefront of its propagandistic arsenal.

In his study of various types of fascism, Stanley G. Payne points out these elements of fascist doctrine, noting ‘the great emphasis on meetings, marches, visual symbols, and ceremonial or liturgical rituals’ (11). These different elements work towards ‘[enveloping] the participant in a mystique and community of ritual that appealed to the religious as well as the merely political’ (11). There is, of course, clearly a danger inherent in such a combination. Deities are, by their nature, assumed to be all-seeing and all-knowing, therefore ascribing these qualities to a political leader, a mere man, is a means of figuring that leader as superhuman, making any act committed by him – regardless of whether or not the act harms others – justifiable due to his apparently indisputable, deistic authority.

Although ‘the villains of [Mitford’s] most famous novel’ (136-37) – as Suh refers to the Kroesig family into which Linda marries in *The Pursuit of Love* – are never described as Hitler fanatics, it is nonetheless suggested that, like Mitford’s own family, they have been enchanted by the Nazi leader and his party. In the novel, Fanny explains that ‘both Sir Leicester and his son were great admirers of Herr Hitler: Sir Leicester had been to see him during a visit to Germany, and had been taken for a drive in a Mercedes-Benz with Dr Schacht’ (93). Mitford almost certainly

based Sir Leicester's fictional experience on visits paid to Germany by her family and friends, and the reference to a real Nazi figure of the time in Hjalmar Schacht contributes a genuineness to the description. As well as this, the use of such a prominent figure underlines the importance placed by the Nazis on charming rich influential Britons like Sir Leicester during this period of appeasement.

The Pursuit of Love and the Spanish Civil War

If glamour was attached to some European governments during the interwar period, in particular Germany, a distinct lack of glamour characterised the situation in Spain. Although a republic rather than a dictatorship – until the eventual victory of Francisco Franco in 1939 – Spain was nevertheless a significant European power. However, the Spanish Civil War disrupted any potentially glamorised visions of life in Spain, and indeed, the creation of the Second Spanish Republic, which preceded the Civil War, fed into contemporary fears about the potential encouragement of

retaliation against the upper classes closer to home and the possible spread of communism.³⁹

Mitford explores the Spanish Civil War in *The Pursuit of Love*, using it as a means of self-discovery for her characters – it is while helping displaced Spanish refugees in Perpignan⁴⁰ that Linda realises her second marriage is beyond recovery – but also to highlight the grimness of the conflict. This grimness is a product of the fight between republicanism and fascism, and the awful effect which the fighting has upon the Spanish people, witnessed first-hand by Linda. Indeed, if Mitford uses fascism frivolously in *Wigs on the Green*, her presentation of it in *The Pursuit of Love* is much darker, describing the after-effects of such doctrine on those who embrace it and those who have it thrust upon them. This suggests that in the ten years between the writing and publication of these novels, Mitford's frivolous attitude toward fascism has sobered in tandem with that of the rest of the world, as the full extent of Nazi violence began to emerge.

³⁹ As David Pryce-Jones points out, 'Nazi sympathies were far wider spread in Britain on the eve of war than they appeared. This was a logical extension of the policy of appeasement – and there were many who further believed that Britain was in danger of fighting the wrong war and should ally with Hitler against Communism' (ix). Further to this, Richard Griffiths draws attention to the spread of non-democratic governments in general during this period, suggesting that 'as well as Mussolini (1922) and Mustafa Kemal (1923), [Miklós] Horthy's regency in Hungary, which had started in 1920, was also *de facto* a dictatorship', while 'in the late twenties [Józef] Pilsudski (1926) in Poland had started the trend in the eastern European states – Yugoslavia, in 1929, and Rumania, in 1931, took on forms of dictatorial government' (26), whereas in Spain, 'Primo de Rivera ruled from 1923 to 1930, and appeared far more successful than the republic that succeeded him' and 'in 1931, the Japanese military succeeded in installing a non-democratic form of government. In 1932 [António de Oliveira] Salazar became dictator of Portugal. Hitler's success in 1933 appeared to be one more step in the new political process' (26-27). Griffiths concludes that 'if one takes into account the Communist dictatorship in Russia, it appeared by 1933 that few major European countries retained democratic institutions', with 'Spain in chaos, Greece [returning] a royalist majority to parliament ([before becoming] a dictatorship in 1936), and Bulgaria ... on the verge of becoming a dictatorship, which it did in the following year' (27). When taking into consideration the state of European and international politics as a whole, the further spread of fascism and authoritarian governments seemed almost inevitable.

⁴⁰ The Perpignan scenes in *The Pursuit of Love* are based on Mitford's own experiences in France as a volunteer aid worker during the Spanish Civil War. She travelled to Perpignan in May 1939 with her husband, Peter Rodd, and 'had to help get some refugees on board a ship for Mexico. It was no picnic; an adverse gale kept the vessel out of Port Vendres where it had been supposed to dock, and the refugees had to be redirected to Sète' (Guinness and Guinness 309).

The Spanish Civil War, much like the later Second World War, can be seen as a demystification of the idealistic claims made by political parties, including those such as the Union Jackshirts in *Wigs on the Green*. In the case of Nazi Germany, Hitler's rise to power in 1933 was seen as unifying – though in reality, it masked growing human rights abuses against Jews and other minorities – while in Spain, the victory of the republican cause in 1931 led to idealistic notions of togetherness and nationhood. Instead, unlike in Germany during the same period, political unrest in Spain became rife. Left- and right-wing parties were constantly at battle both figuratively and literally, creating an atmosphere of unrest in which uprisings and assassinations became the norm. These dire conditions were distinctly unglamorous, and a world away from the life enjoyed by Linda before she ends up aiding those affected by the brutal war which eventually gripped Spain.

In her first marriage to Tony Kroesig, Linda, however reluctantly, embraces the bourgeois lifestyle of the Kroesig family, while her second nuptials lead her to the opposite end of the spectrum; indeed, the austere and distinctly unglamorous life she accepts in order to please Christian Talbot is a reflection of his communist beliefs, but also of the terrible conditions she finds in Perpignan. Unlike Nazi Germany with its aesthetically appealing displays of wealth intended to bewitch the uninitiated, the political turmoil in Spain has led to an entirely unglamorous state of affairs. Mitford underlines this with her description of Perpignan:

Early in 1939, the population of Catalonia streamed over the Pyrenees into the Roussillon, a poor and little-known province of France, which now, in a few days, found itself inhabited by more Spaniards than Frenchmen. Just as

the lemmings suddenly pour themselves in a mass suicide off the coast of Norway, knowing neither whence they come nor whither bound, so great is the compulsion that hurls them into the Atlantic, thus half a million men, women, and children suddenly took flight into the bitter mountain weather, without pausing for thought. (118)

The tone of this passage is intriguing because of its seriousness, and being a factually-based account, it contains none of the caricaturing that we see elsewhere in Mitford's fiction. In contrast to *Wigs on the Green*'s ambiguous narrator, who often leaves us unsure of how to consider the descriptions given, Fanny's words come across as serious pleas for compassion. The violence and suddenness of the imagery meanwhile – 'streamed', 'suddenly pour', 'mass suicide', 'hurls', 'suddenly took flight', 'bitter mountain weather', 'without pausing' – underscores the piteous situation of this displaced group and the genuine need for action from the international community.

This plea for compassion is emphasised further in the pathetic description which follows:

It was the greatest movement of population, in the time it took, that had ever hitherto been seen. Over the mountains they found no promised land; the French government, vacillating in its policy, neither turned them back with machine-guns at the frontier, nor welcomed them as brothers-in-arms against Fascism. It drove them like a herd of beasts down to the cruel salty marshes

of that coast, enclosed them, like a herd of beasts, behind barbed-wire fences, and forgot all about them. (118)

When we consider that Fanny's knowledge of events is based on Linda's recollections, the depiction of the refugees' plight is also indicative of Linda's maturation. These scenes clearly demonstrate an alteration in her previously childish outlook as she comes into contact with real suffering, as opposed to the imagined suffering of her fantasy life or the self-imposed suffering of her first marriage. Upon arrival in Perpignan, the refugees receive little to no help at all. This face of fascism, ugly without its mask of propaganda, is suited to a fascist regime which would become notorious for murdering its own citizens.

The French hesitancy to intervene on behalf of the Spanish refugees, meanwhile, shows that although perhaps morally on the side of the refugees – and the republicans, with whom the French Prime Minister Léon Blum sympathised – France was unwilling to risk becoming involved in a larger conflict. This period was characterised by increased tensions, particularly between France and Germany, due to the latter's disregard for the Treaty of Versailles.⁴¹ Consequently, France did not wish to anger Franco's nationalist movement, which already seemed likely to form

⁴¹ The Treaty of Versailles was signed on 28th June 1919, exactly five years after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria triggered the beginning of the First World War. Peace talks lasted for six months after the conflict ended, with the final Treaty demanding that, among other sanctions, Germany drastically decrease its armed forces, return land it had seized during the War, and pay substantial reparations to its former enemies. The amount Germany was required to pay was £6.6 billion (£284 billion in 2018). One section of the Treaty caused particular outrage in Germany. Article 231, under the first section of the Reparation part of the Treaty, made it clear that 'the Allied and Associated Governments affirm and Germany accepts the responsibility of Germany and her allies for causing all the loss and damage to which the Allied and Associated Governments and their nationals have been subjected as a consequence of the war imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany and her allies' (Treaty 137-38). The wording of this request did little to encourage good feeling from the German people toward their already resented conquerors, and the harshness of the Treaty itself would later be used by Hitler as justification for taking back what he saw as being rightfully German.

an alliance with the Axis powers of Germany and Italy in the event of a second world war.

The Glamorous Linda Radlett

Alongside the deglamourised politics, Linda goes through a process of deglamourising during her relationship with Christian. This process begins shortly after she leaves Tony, and can be seen both as a means of contrasting political beliefs, and of simultaneously contrasting the lifestyles associated with such views. In general, any sympathy towards Nazi Germany within Britain was felt by the upper classes, or by the ever more prominent bourgeoisie, among whom the Kroesig family can be categorised. The great fear prevalent among this group was the risk of war with Germany, which Tony, who feels the ‘man in the street’ should be duped with never enacted promises of social reform, dreads: ‘War brings people together and opens their eyes, it must be avoided at all costs, and especially war with Germany, where the Kroesigs had financial interests and many relations’ (93).

Clearly the inference to be drawn from this fear is that the increasing strength of the working classes in Britain – solidified by the Labour Party’s gradual ascendance in parliament – posed a threat to the unchecked dominance of the upper and middle classes. As discussed earlier, the emergence of republicanism in Spain bred uncertainties about the potential rise of communism, which had taken hold of Russia following the 1917 Revolution, and the idea of a loss of power made wealthy Britons unwilling to encourage another war, the consequences of which could further diminish their influence in the country. Financial interests such as those fretted over

by the Kroesigs were another reason war should be avoided,⁴² as Germany was performing better than Britain economically, with trips to the country by wealthy Britons providing ‘a welcome visual contrast to the bleak age of Depression in Britain’ (Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism* 199). As Richard Thurlow explains, ‘in the economic sphere, Britain’s position as the leading industrial nation had clearly been superseded by the United States and Germany by 1914’, and this was reflected in each country’s share of world manufacturing production: ‘in 1870 Britain had 31.8 per cent ... compared with the United States’ 23.3 per cent and Germany’s 13.2 per cent, but by 1913 the USA had 35.8 per cent, Germany 15 per cent and the United Kingdom 14 per cent’ (8). Consequently, families such as the Kroesigs see obvious benefits – immediate financial gain with the prospect of continued economic growth – in Britain remaining on friendly terms with Germany.

In the episode of the story focusing on Linda’s relationship with Tony, exteriors and aesthetics dominate. On the day their families meet for the first time, Linda wears ‘a white chintz dress with an enormous skirt, and a black lace scarf. She looked entirely ravishing, and it was obvious that Sir Leicester was much taken with her appearance’ (74). Tony’s father, Sir Leicester, focuses solely on the exterior – ‘her appearance’, rather than Linda personally – and the person beneath the clothes is immaterial to him. As she takes on her new role as the wife of a banker, Linda fails to live up to the Kroesigs’ expectations. Sir Leicester, fooled by the glamour of her appearance, has assumed that the person beneath will measure up to the political and economic ideals he instils in his son. Alongside this, Linda discovers she has been

⁴² At one point in Gibbons’ *Nightingale Wood*, the narrator informs us that Victor Spring, a rich man with designs on Viola, one of the novel’s heroines, ‘felt irritation against General Franco and the Spanish Government because their civil war was hitting some interests that he had in a new line of small ships built for luxury cruising’ (100), underlining the importance of peace to those with financial interests abroad.

duped by Tony, whose own glamorous and fun appearance has seduced her before ‘his true self [emerges], and he [is] revealed as a pompous, money-grubbing ass, more like his father every day’ (79). Fanny describes Linda’s realisation as a ‘waking from her Titania-trance’ (84), a reminder of the frequent association between glamour and magic, particularly the phrase ‘to cast the glamour over one’ (“Glamour”, *OED*), which suggests that an observer can be tricked into believing that which is not true if presented with an idealised picture.

Glamour is personified in the form of Lord Merlin, who brings amusement into Linda’s life once more when he renews his friendship with her after her marriage. Mitford emphasises the beacon of glamour that Linda becomes under Lord Merlin’s guidance, comparing her to honey – ‘photographers and gossip writers dogged her footsteps ... her house was full of people from morning till night, chatting’ (89) – while her besotted followers are bees: ‘Young men ... clustered round Linda like bees round honey, buzz, buzz, buzz, chat, chat, chat’ (89). As well as stressing Linda’s allure – and drawing attention to the photographers and gossip writers whose work will be discussed in Chapter Three in relation to Mitford’s own early press appearances – the repeated use of such simple onomatopes in this description suggests that the conversation Linda has with these chaps is unlikely to be very intellectual. As Fanny explains, their presence makes it inevitable that ‘Linda was soon well on the way to having her head turned’ (89), and, in keeping with the Radlett family pattern, she of course moves from one extreme to the other. Smothered by the conservative, borderline fascist outlook of her in-laws, she abandons everything in favour of communism, presented in the form of self-righteous activist Christian.

When Linda runs off with Christian, she self-consciously adapts her outward appearance to suit his politics, thereby making herself identifiable as a stereotypical member of that particular political group. She abandons the expensive dresses worn while entertaining politicians and those from the City. The parties Linda attends with Christian are ‘awfully funny and touching, but not very gay, and they’re always in such gloomy places’ (103), requiring her to associate with a group of people – always referred to as ‘the comrades’ by Linda – who would not approve of her usual attire. The political beliefs of this group necessitate economic strictness in regard to expenditure, meaning that Linda must, for the first time, make do with the little money she and Christian have. When Fanny asks about Linda’s clothing at communist parties – ‘I ... [thought] that Linda, in her expensive-looking clothes, must seem very much out of place at these baths and halls’ (103) – Linda explains the rules regarding which clothes are acceptable: ‘I’ve discovered that, so long as one wears wool or cotton, everything is all right. Silk and satin would be the blunder. But I only ever do wear wool and cotton, so I’m on a good wicket. No jewels, of course’ (103-104).

As a result of her fresh interest in communism, Linda can be seen to adopt Eugenia’s political methods, ‘[becoming] an out-and-out Communist, bored and embarrassed everybody to death by preaching her new-found doctrine, not only at the dinner-table, but also from a soap-box in Hyde Park, and other equally squalid rostra’ (99). Unlike the narrator in *Wigs on the Green*, though, who only implies a lack of interest in Eugenia’s speech on the part of her listeners, *The Pursuit of Love*’s first-person narrator makes it clear that Linda and her political preaching are dull. Dullness pervades the communist lifestyle in general, and life with Christian is

simply a variation of life with Tony. The communist meetings at the house on Cheyne Walk – given to Linda by Lord Merlin – take over Linda’s home, suggesting that politics has invaded domestic life. This is made clear by the mention of the house, ‘always full of comrades, not chatting to Linda, but making speeches to each other, restlessly rushing about, telephoning, typewriting, drinking, quite often sleeping in their clothes, but without their boots, on Linda’s drawing-room sofa’ (114). The domestic chatter of her glamorous friends, enjoyed by Linda during her marriage to Tony, ceases completely, with Linda finding herself ignored and even her own furniture sullied by the presence of such dogmatic crusaders.

However, Linda does manage to exact revenge on them, to an extent, through her job as bookseller in ‘a Red bookshop’ (115) run by one of the comrades: ‘Boris liked to get drunk from Thursday afternoon, which was closing day in that district, to Monday morning, so Linda said she would take it over on Friday and Saturday’ (115). Her presence at the shop increases sales, not only due to her natural charm, but also as a result of her introduction of more pleasurable books to the store catalogue. These books are deliberately chosen as the antithesis of those stocked for the comrades: ‘for *Whither British Airways?* was substituted *Round the World in Forty Days*, *Karl Marx, the Formative Years* was replaced by *The Making of a Marchioness*, and *The Giant of the Kremlin* by *Diary of a Nobody*, while *A Challenge to Coal-Owners* made way for *King Solomon’s Mines*’ (115). Such choices are significant. The latter three replacements are, as well as being amusing in their total opposition to those favoured by the comrades, also indicative of literary hierarchies. The texts which the communists prefer are, based on their titles, unquestionably highbrow in terms of subject matter and approach, while their

replacements are bestsellers which would generally be classed as middlebrow. It would appear that at this juncture, Mitford is suggesting that these more palatable texts maintain a popularity such dismal volumes could never achieve, which is underlined by the huge sales achieved under Linda's rule: 'Instead of showing, week by week, an enormous loss ... it now became the only Red bookshop in England to make a profit. Boris was greatly praised by his employers, the shop received a medal ... and the comrades all said that Linda was a good girl and a credit to the Party' (116). It could be argued that with this description, Mitford provides us with a self-reflexive commentary on the type of fiction she herself is writing: easily accessible, fun, and therefore popular with the public.

Mrs. Lace and the Masquerade

In *Wigs on the Green*, Mrs. Lace, like Linda, also engages with extreme politics, though her motivation is entirely cynical, as she attempts to ingratiate herself with Eugenia solely in order to get closer to Noel, who she thinks will help her move up the social ladder. In *Chalford*, Mrs. Lace expresses disdain for the village and her ridiculous getups symbolise the contempt she feels towards her middle-class origins and her subsequent aspiration toward a higher plane. In the text, she functions as a representation of the 'grasping parvenu who aspires to aristocratic style and power' (Suh 136), and this is made clear by the schemes the narrator describes. The narrative tone during these moments is knowing. The omniscient narrator is aware of the inner workings of Mrs. Lace's mind, and shares this knowledge with the reader. When she first hears about the presence of Jasper and the others in the village, she plans to go

home and change her clothes: 'Mr Aspect, a well-known figure in society circles, was probably tired of sophistication and would be more likely to take an interest in simplicity and rural charm. Her Austrian-Tyrolean peasant's dress would meet the case exactly. Delighted with the subtlety of this reasoning she hurried away' (23).

This example demonstrates Mrs. Lace's deviousness, and her awareness of the importance of performance. Afraid that her clothes 'which were at present of the Paris-Plage variety' (23) are unsuitable for her task, she realises the need to alter her outward appearance to create a more favourable impression. The sarcastic comment about the 'subtlety' of Mrs. Lace's plan shows the narrator scoffing at her, as 'this reasoning' and her ridiculous-sounding 'Austrian-Tyrolean peasant's dress' are surely anything but subtle. Her plan is subverted by the sudden appearance of Noel. We are told that, after mentioning her children to him, she 'flapped her eyelids at Noel' prompting him to reply, 'as indeed he was meant to, that she did not look old enough to have a family' (23). The knowingness of the narrator is made clear again, as are Mrs. Lace's innermost thoughts – conspiratorial, 'he was meant to' – and the effectiveness of her appearance on Noel.

Indeed, Mrs. Lace's entire appearance is a façade, with the narrator providing us with more information about her past, of which, crucially, Noel is not made aware:

Noel assumed from the fact that her name, as she told him, was Anne-Marie, from the slightly foreign accent and curious idiom in which she spoke, and from her general appearance, that she was not altogether English. He was wrong, however. For the first twenty years of her life she had lived in a

country vicarage and been called Bella Drage. Being an imaginative and enterprising girl she had persuaded her father to send her to Paris for a course of singing lessons ... she came back Anne-Marie by name and Anne-Marie by nature. Shortly after this metamorphosis ... she met Hubert Lace, who was enslaved at the Hunt Ball by her flowing dress, Edwardian coiffure and sudden, if inaccurate, excursions into the French language. (24-25)

The first line, referring to 'fact' is ironic, as it is almost impossible to determine fact from fiction in regard to Mrs. Lace. Everything about her outer appearance suggests foreignness, as well as her name, but it is all a deliberately misleading gambit: she is English, and the name an affectation. As Stephen Gundle suggests in his study of the concept of glamour, it can be used as 'a screen on which an exterior personality can be built to deceive, delight and bewitch' (4), and this is Mrs. Lace's approach exactly. Her commitment to this fiction is serious, emphasised by the idea that she is 'Anne-Marie by name and Anne-Marie by nature', with the underlying suggestion that her snobbishness and imaginative nature has effected a change in personality as well as appearance.

Yet appearance can still be undermined by lack of knowledge, as in the reference to her forays 'into the French language', which are often 'inaccurate', and undermine the notion of any genuine foreignness. The husband she has chosen, however, is not sophisticated enough to be aware of her linguistic failings and has submitted to the glamorousness of the image she projects. Her choice, though, has been a poor one, as it restricts her to the countryside surroundings of Chalford, which she has come to despise. We are told that 'one of her favourite day-dreams was to

envisage the death of Hubert. ... After the funeral and a decent period of mourning, an interesting young widow would then take London by storm' (25). This draws further attention to the depths of her scheming, as she does not bat an eyelid at the notion of widowhood – though balks at the idea of divorce, 'early up-bringing in the parsonage had not been without its influence upon her' (25) – and also highlights her hopes of attaining upper-class respectability. The narrator is explicit in pointing out that Mrs. Lace's main ambition in life is that 'of entertaining smart Bohemians in London' (25), but this is thwarted by the societal position into which she has married. Noel tells Jasper of Mrs. Lace: 'You don't seem to understand, Jasper. That child never has any fun, never goes to Venice or the South of France like other girls of her age ... in order to make her life seem more interesting she has to make believe all the time, poor darling' (53).

The danger of becoming too involved in imagined worlds is made clear by the deception carried out by Jasper on an unsuspecting Mrs. Lace, which sees her upper-class aspirations used against her for the purposes of amusement: Jasper's and our own. Mrs. Lace is led to believe that Noel is an important person, living under an assumed name, and the plausibility of this concept is supported by the farcical nature of the narrative, in which many characters are not who they appear to be. While Mrs. Lace absorbs the vague information Jasper supplies her with in regard to Noel, the narrator describes her thoughts: 'after all, she thought with wild exhilaration, Miss Smith was not Miss Smith, neither was Miss Jones Miss Jones; on the contrary, they were both well-known figures in London Society. Why then should not the name of "Noel Foster" also conceal some thrilling identity?' (62). Immediately convinced by Jasper's claims, she deludes herself into believing that Noel is the heir to some

foreign throne, and becomes fixated on the idea of becoming associated with him and achieving great fame as a result. She explains to Mr. Leader that she is ‘probably one of the world’s great lovers, and her love for Noel would be accounted in days to come as one of history’s greatest loves’ (110). Such dreamy imaginings about life with Noel lead her to betray Mr. Leader, and the other artists who have supported her in the past, in favour of the Union Jackshirts. Her ability to discern the dangers present in Union Jackshirt doctrine has evidently been affected by the potential prestige of monarchical connections and aestheticised visions of life as a great lover. This emphasises how glamour can have an adverse effect on someone’s basic principles. Evidently the idea of a glamorous life with Noel prevents Mrs. Lace from questioning exactly what she is getting involved in and obscures the truth about the party she is helping.

Aspiration to the exalted societal position granted by an upper-class life makes her willing to throw old connections aside, while even being invited into the lives of her new friends at all gives her satisfaction: ‘Anne-Marie was pleased with her invitation ... and privately she thought it was high time’ (114). In fact, she is so determined to support Noel and his friends that she agrees to lure Mr. Leader into a trap – another example of glamorous allure masking hidden danger – which sees him questioned about the fire that has destroyed the Jackshirt headquarters. When Mr. Leader leaves, Mrs. Lace, ‘if she felt inclined to follow her friend, who after all had stood by her with some courage, made no move to do so. She must, whatever the cost, keep on good terms with Eugenia. ... Not for any loyalty was she going to sacrifice her chance of riding in that coach’ (118). The idea of riding alongside Noel in a coach at the pageant, playing at the royalty she believes him to be in reality –

‘through cheering crowds, bowing to right and to left of them, a cynosure for all eyes’ (79) – overtakes Mrs. Lace’s senses and her notion of morality, the glamorous idea of fame encouraging her already aspirational nature.

After Mr. Leader is attacked by the Social Unionists in retaliation for the alleged arson, Mrs. Lace is symbolised as a dangerous woman: ‘the seed was sown of an active resentment against Social Unionism and his treacherous enchantress, Mrs Lace’ (121). In giving up her friend to aid this cause, Mrs. Lace is depicted as belonging to Social Unionism as though she is its mistress, and the personification of the movement – ‘his’ – reminds us of the masculinity, discussed earlier, that was often associated with fascist doctrine. Mrs. Lace, meanwhile, is an ‘enchantress’, using her glamour for malicious ends. Even her home symbolises her vain attempts to move up the social ladder. The narrator describes the Lace home as having a drive which ‘twisted and turned among rhododendron bushes like a snake in its death agony (a late Victorian arrangement calculated to make the grounds seem more spacious)’ (60). The reference to calculation underlines the deviousness of Mrs. Lace’s class aspirations, while the comparison between the drive and a dying snake suggests that this ambition is ultimately doomed. Much like Mrs. Lace with her fancy dress, the house fails to live up to the quality associated with the genuine article, and her crude efforts at emulating the upper classes through imitation of their hallmarks miss the mark entirely.

This remark raises a question about loyalty that relates back to Mrs. Lace’s abandonment of Mr. Leader in the pursuit of a glamorous, though admittedly, fictional future. Is the loss of one’s integrity the price to be paid for a glamorous life? Amusingly enough, in *Wigs on the Green*, it is the characters who wish to improve

their social standing – Noel and Mrs. Lace – who in the end get nothing, and are rewarded with a return to the status quo; Noel returns to the job he hates at the beginning of the text, while Mrs. Lace remains trapped with a husband she cannot stand. On the other hand, Jasper, perhaps the least principled character in any Mitford novel, is awarded a glamorous wife, wealth, and the possibility of a political career. The effect of glamour on the psyche leads to several of Mitford's characters making mistakes, highlighting the danger of being seduced by an idealised vision of reality. Yet *The Pursuit of Love*'s Linda, unlike the characters in *Wigs on the Green*, sees the brutality imposed in the name of extreme politics and, through her work with refugees, makes an effort to combat it. The narrative perception of fascism in these texts can be seen to change in tandem with Mitford's own understanding. The benefit of hindsight about the effects of this extreme doctrine influenced her portrayal of fascism in *The Pursuit of Love*, as well as her decision not to republish *Wigs on the Green* in her own lifetime: she was well aware that the latter text no longer reflected an appropriate response to one of the most devastating political movements in history, and wished to distance herself from such a frivolous account of the proponents of tyranny and persecution.

Conclusion

Fascism is a major theme in the novels of Nancy Mitford, and one which is returned to throughout her works. By focusing on her early novels *Highland Fling*, *Christmas Pudding* and *Wigs on the Green*, as well as her post-war novel, *The Pursuit of Love*, this chapter has sought to examine the varied ways in which Mitford engages with

the complex and unstable politics of the interwar period. This period witnessed the rise of two related political movements, namely fascism and Nazism, which ultimately had a devastating effect on the countries where these extreme doctrines flourished. Although Britain did not fall under the control of fascists, Mitford's text suggests that if the British Union of Fascists had been as convincing as the proponents of Social Unionism in *Wigs on the Green* are, the ruling government of the day could have faced a genuine challenge. Mosley's movement focused on the alleged need to oust the current administration – apparently infested with the frequently derided 'old gang' – in favour of new blood, but it never gained the support it so badly needed to achieve this aim.

In *Wigs on the Green*, Eugenia glamorises several aspects of the Social Unionist movement, emphasising its focus on the revitalisation of Empire and the alleged empowerment it will grant to the youth of Britain. Alongside this, the propagandistic pageant, with its aestheticised claims about a historical basis for fascism in the purported views of the historical figures depicted, is used in order to persuade the citizens of Chalford that the Union Jackshirts hold the key to Britain's salvation. As well as this, Mitford's satirical portrayal of the psychiatric hospital inhabited by lunatic peers calls into question the ability of the real House of Lords to make decisions, and consequently, the Union Jackshirt movement seems sane in comparison. The inclusion of the hospital and the lack of any direct comment about fascism on the part of the narrator make the book's position on this subject ambiguous, and it is never entirely clear whether the novel is an endorsement of fascism or a critique. In contrast to this, in *The Pursuit of Love*, the political situation in Spain is represented by a deglamourised vision of fascism. The real face of

fascism, exposed without the glamorised mask still maintained in a country like Nazi Germany, can be seen in the grim descriptions of living conditions at Perpignan for Spanish refugees fleeing the Civil War.

The period in which these books were written is significant. In the years 1931 to 1932, when *Highland Fling* and *Christmas Pudding* were published, Adolf Hitler had not yet come to power in Germany, while Mosley's party was still being formed. By the time *Wigs on the Green* was published in 1935, however, world politics was much more fraught, and due to the continued aggression of Nazi Germany, there were already fears that another world war was inevitable. *The Pursuit of Love* was published in 1945 at a time when the true extent of atrocities carried out in the name of fascism and Nazism was becoming apparent. In these texts, Mitford points out the dangers inherent in glamorising such repugnant beliefs, and though the tone of *Wigs on the Green* is often difficult to determine, that of *The Pursuit of Love* is much clearer. Mitford, due to her family connections, had personal knowledge of the power of fascism – two of her sisters were consumed by it, Unity attempting suicide at the outbreak of the Second World War and Diana interned during the conflict due to her association with Mosley – and had come to believe it should be stopped at all costs. The frivolousness which exists in her presentation of fascism in *Wigs on the Green* is perhaps due to her ignorance of the power this doctrine wielded, and of the grip it would maintain on mainland Europe throughout this period. On the other hand, *The Pursuit of Love* is written with full knowledge about the danger of being taken in by the glamorous lure of fascism: the Nuremberg Rallies and the Berlin Olympic Games are real-life versions of the Chalford pageant, enticing to people like the materialistic Kroesigs. The destructive behaviour after the Chalford pageant suggests a dark side

to fascism, and by the time Mitford tackled the issue in *The Pursuit of Love*, the serious danger posed by fascism was clear to her readers, some of whom may previously have been taken in by its allure. In *Wigs on the Green*, this movement is still nascent, and the ambiguous tone of the novel suggests it is difficult to be certain about fascism's elaborate promises of revitalised nationhood. However, in *The Pursuit of Love*, the doctrine has matured and revealed the true extent of its horror. No amount of glamorising can distract from the appalling nature of fascism in the eyes of today's readers, but in 1935, when its proponents presented it as the key to political redemption, some people found it impossible to resist.

If Mitford's early novels and the post-war *The Pursuit of Love* tell us anything about the period in which they were written, it is that it was a time of social upheaval and political turmoil. Some of the confusion about fascism's real objectives can be read in *Wigs on the Green*'s unclear tone, while *Highland Fling* and *Christmas Pudding* highlight hysterical upper-class fears about the lower classes potentially seizing political power from the gradually declining aristocracy. In reality, the threat was fascism, and because of the often glamorous way in which it was presented by its most committed supporters, it did manage to thrive in some parts of the world. Later, in *The Pursuit of Love*, Mitford removes fascism's glamorous sheen and reveals its true nature, reminding us that politics should not need to rely on elaborate methods of glamorising in order to appear palatable, and that a glamorous façade can mask any number of hidden evils.

Chapter Two: Personality, Identity, Persona: From Propaganda to Political Intrigue

Introduction

Ideas about personality and the ways personality can be used by different people for political and private purposes are among the main themes of Nancy Mitford's 1940 novel, *Pigeon Pie*. In the text, Mitford engages with personality in relation both to politics and to notions of adopted personas. The novel explores how personality can be used in the service of propaganda, through cults of personality, as well as through endorsement of political ideology by public figures. Meanwhile, different personas can be adopted dependent upon political need, with emphasis placed by Mitford on the persona of the glamorous female spy, and what this role entails for its holder.

Pigeon Pie is one of the very few novels that present life in Britain at the very beginning of the Second World War. A period known as the 'Phoney War' due to the lack of any direct military action on either side of the conflict, the uncertainty of this era was ripe for satire, and Mitford took full advantage of the opportunity, producing a novel which mocks this unusual historical moment and its intriguing social and political context. *Pigeon Pie* explicitly reflects on the myriad ways that the whole concept of personality can be exploited by governments and citizens alike.

This chapter comprises two different analyses of the concept of personality: the first half of the chapter examines *Pigeon Pie*'s engagement with the cults of personality which surrounded real-life political leaders such as Adolf Hitler and

Benito Mussolini. Several of Mitford's texts deal directly with these leaders. Indeed, a number of her characters have even met Hitler, and by describing their varied reactions to such dictators, Mitford explores the political and social outlook of the upper classes during the interwar and early wartime years. This chapter offers an extended account of the historical and political contexts for *Pigeon Pie*, which is necessary for an understanding of the 'Phoney War' period as a historical moment, and of Mitford's literary engagement with this short era. The first half of the chapter also focuses on the use of personality in relation to political propaganda, specifically through the medium of radio broadcasting. One of the main characters in *Pigeon Pie*, Sir Ivor King, a celebrity, is employed by the Nazi Party to promote their cause to the British people through radio. This part of the chapter studies the implications of such a propagandistic approach, which involves Sir Ivor using his public persona in ways that could potentially mislead the public and generate support for repugnant ideologies. The second half of the chapter considers Mitford's use of persona in *Pigeon Pie* in regard to espionage, and centres on notions of the persona of the glamorous female spy, and the reasons for the adoption of such personas by characters like the novel's protagonist, Lady Sophia Garfield, and her rival, Olga Gogothsky. Through a comparative study of John Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915) and *Pigeon Pie*, the second half of this chapter highlights the intertextual nature of Mitford's text, which frequently parodies tropes from Buchan's text for the purposes of satire. Chapter One demonstrated that Mitford's earlier novel *Wigs on the Green* (1935) is a much more sophisticated text than it appears to be at first glance; this chapter shows that this is also the case with *Pigeon Pie*.

Although *Pigeon Pie* is deeply satirical, bordering on farcical in terms of plot, characterisation and narrative approach, it nevertheless contains astute observations about life in Britain at the beginning of the Second World War. The ‘Phoney War’ period, characterised by dictatorial cults of personality, extensive political propaganda on both sides of the conflict, and widespread rumours about enemy spies – alongside glamorised visions of such spies, the result of countless literary and cinematic representations of spying and spy work – is brought to life by Mitford through her distinctive evocation of the time. Much of *Pigeon Pie* is played for laughs, but this chapter will highlight how it nevertheless often functions as a satiric commentary on many different aspects of the ‘Phoney War’ era.

Personality: Cults of Personality and the Power of Radio Propaganda

Pigeon Pie: A Casualty of the Phoney War

In the short period – the space of a mere four years – between the publication of *Wigs on the Green* and the beginning of the Second World War, Mitford wrote only one novel: *Pigeon Pie*. The failure of her first two books, *Highland Fling* (1931) and *Christmas Pudding* (1932), did not dissuade her from writing,⁴³ though *Pigeon Pie* equally brought little success.⁴⁴ *Pigeon Pie* is summed up by Mitford, in her dedication at the start of the 1952 edition of the novel, as ‘an early and unimportant

⁴³ In 1938 and 1939, Mitford also published *The Ladies of Alderley: Letters 1841-1850* and *The Stanleys of Alderley: Letters 1851-1865*, two edited collections of letters written by the aristocratic Stanleys of Alderley, to whom she was related through her maternal great-grandmother.

⁴⁴ In his biography of Mitford, Harold Acton remarks that ‘the novel ... had fallen flat on its original publication’ (91), which disappointed the young writer. In a letter written to her publisher several months after the novel was released, Mitford expresses her regret at the book’s failure: ‘I’m awfully sorry that *Pigeon Pie* was such a flop’ (qtd. in Hastings 128).

casualty of the real war which was then beginning' (5).⁴⁵ As Siân Nicholas points out in her study of Second World War propaganda and the BBC, during this time, 'the British people became accustomed to a war in which little seemed to be happening' (40). Nicholas goes on to acknowledge that 'the term "Phoney War" was an Americanism that was only later used to describe these months; at the time it was known more bluntly as the "Bore War"' (41), and indeed, Mitford evokes this sense of tedium through the novel's humour, as Sophia tries desperately to stave off boredom. The 'Phoney War' or 'Bore War', which began in September 1939, ended when sustained offensive action between Germany and the Allies took place on 10th May 1940.⁴⁶ Significantly, Mitford's novel was published on 6th May 1940, just four days before the German invasion of France, which in effect turned her text into a time capsule of a bygone era, shattered by this new war in Europe. Understandably, the British public was not terribly interested in a novel which made light of such a serious situation, especially when the real war began in earnest shortly after the book's release. Mitford therefore seems justified in describing *Pigeon Pie* as a 'casualty'.⁴⁷

Nonetheless, the novel is worthy of further analysis for these very reasons.

Literary criticism in relation to the Second World War tends to focus on texts written at the height of the conflict, whereas studies of the 'Phoney War' are far less

⁴⁵ Note: all quotations from *Pigeon Pie* in this thesis are taken from the 2011 Capuchin Classics edition, unless specified otherwise.

⁴⁶ Historians generally agree that the 'Phoney War' began on 3rd September 1939, with the British declaration of war on Germany, and ended with the commencement of the Battle of France on 10th May 1940.

⁴⁷ As Laura Thompson highlights in her biography of Mitford: 'That clever little creature [*Pigeon Pie*] was stillborn ... the phoney war had got too real, all of a sudden, for readers to laugh at the kidnapping of the King of Song. "It should be just what people are in the mood for, if we are quick," said her publisher, Hamish Hamilton; but they were not quick enough. Holland and Belgium fell as Nancy's novel emerged with its pretty hands over its eyes' (159). In a November 1951 letter to Lady Pamela Berry, an older and wiser Mitford reflects: 'It came out 6 May 1940 so you can imagine if it sank like a stone' (*Letters* 341).

numerous. *Pigeon Pie* evokes a short, unique time period, during which it was still possible, regardless of the fact that Britain was at war, to be comedic and satirical about the enemy. At this time, fears and anxieties about Nazi Germany were thought by some to be exaggerated,⁴⁸ and the implications of another war were not fully considered by everyone. Equally, a wave of hysteria about underlying Nazi threats at home gripped others; both of these attitudes are reflected in *Pigeon Pie*. It is this contradictoriness which marks out the type of novel Mitford produced: entirely of its moment, indicative of the frenetic and conflicted atmosphere of the time, and representative of contemporary social anxieties and paranoia.

Paranoia and Anti-German Propaganda

As Mitford wrote *Pigeon Pie*, and in the immediate months following its publication, debates raged over fears about potential enemies – mainly German spies – who were allegedly hiding in plain sight. The House of Lords Hansard for 23rd May 1940 provides a useful representation of this contemporary hysteria, with Viscount Elibank,⁴⁹ in a House debate about the so-called ‘fifth column’, making reference to ‘the Fifth Column Army which is already growing up in this country’ (qtd. in “Fifth”

⁴⁸ In his study of British support for Nazi Germany between 1933 and 1939, Richard Griffiths suggests that some found it difficult to believe the stories emerging from Germany, particularly in relation to treatment of Jews: ‘The events of November 1938 [the infamous Kristallnacht or “Night of Broken Glass” pogrom] had soon waned from people’s minds. To some, the reports had been exaggerated. For others, there had been some justification for the German actions’ (346).

⁴⁹ Gideon Oliphant-Murray, who served as Unionist MP for Glasgow St. Rollox between 1918 and 1922, before eventually entering the House of Lords in 1927 as 2nd Viscount Elibank, a title he held until his death in 1951.

cc418).⁵⁰ The exaggeration evident in the use of the word ‘army’ underlines the anxiety felt by some people about Nazi spies, and *Pigeon Pie* engages fully with the fears expressed during this debate. Viscount Elibank alludes to the ways in which suspected German spies in Britain ‘have added to this form of warfare the parachutists who are helped by [them]’ (qtd. in “Fifth” cc412) and Mitford references this paranoia about parachutists several times. At one point, Sophia expresses her fear of parachutists – ‘Give me bombs, gas, anything you like. It’s the idea of those sinister grey-clad figures, with no backs to their heads, slowly floating past one’s bedroom window like snowflakes that gives me the creeps’ (87) – while when one character is apparently murdered, ‘it is ... supposed that [he] had been liquidated by German spies who had fallen into Kew Gardens in parachutes’ (62). Further to this, the novel’s final set piece involves an elaborate spy plot to blow up the London sewage system, before ‘fleet upon fleet of aeroplanes ... would now pour over it, dropping armed parachutists’ (149). The novel’s descriptions of anxieties about an invasion of Britain by Nazi paratroopers echo the misgivings expressed in the House of Lords, and these descriptions are tinged with a rare seriousness in tone that is otherwise missing from *Pigeon Pie*. Perhaps even light-hearted Mitford felt an invasion of Britain by the enemy was no laughing matter. As well as this, fears

⁵⁰ In his discussion of the production of ‘black propaganda’ during the Second World War, Stanley Newcourt-Nowodworski explains that the term ‘fifth column’ was first used during the Spanish Civil War by General Emilio Mola, the leader of the four columns of General Francisco Franco’s army as they marched towards Republican-held Madrid: ‘[Mola] said that he had in fact under his command five columns, the fifth being the clandestine followers of Franco in Madrid, who would attack the red defenders of the capital at an appropriate moment. Ever since this term has meant subversion, sabotage and hit-and-run attacks by foreign agents, supposedly capable of causing immense damage, but nevertheless remaining invisible’ (31). It is the final part of this notion, the idea of an enemy existing and quietly destroying, while remaining undetectable, which amplified the fears of people such as Viscount Elibank.

expressed by Lord Marchwood⁵¹ in the House debate about how ‘women acting as spies against the interests of our country can be far more dangerous even than men’ (qtd. in “Fifth” cc421) are illustrated in Mitford’s depiction of the secret spy network in the novel, which, much like the ‘fifth column’, quietly invades Sophia’s home. Mitford’s description of this spy network will be discussed more fully later in this chapter.

Worries about secret networks out to disrupt British life recall Mitford’s *Highland Fling* and *Christmas Pudding*, in which the unseen threat to national security is the spectre of communism. The choice of a new menace suggests that regardless of the circumstances, the public, particularly the upper classes, will inevitably seek out a blameworthy external cause for their own failings, while the discussion in the House of Lords also demonstrates British anti-German feeling present in the years immediately after the First World War. Indeed, until Adolf Hitler came to power and revitalised Germany – both economically and in terms of national pride – by casting himself as its saviour, the British public maintained a profoundly negative view of Germany. Anti-German propaganda had been circulated extensively in Britain during the conflict. ‘Atrocity propaganda’ in particular had done irrevocable damage to the average Briton’s view of Germany, and as Nicholas John Cull shows in his book about British Second World War propaganda, during the earlier First World War, the British government had ‘shamelessly manipulated war news, had peddled pictures of bloated Prussian beasts, had invented tales of “Hun”

⁵¹ Frederick George Penny, Unionist MP for Kingston-upon-Thames from 1922 to 1937, who was knighted in 1929, created a Baronet in 1933, and entered the House of Lords as Baron Marchwood in 1937. Following Winston Churchill’s defeat to Clement Atlee in the 1945 General Election, Penny was made 1st Viscount Marchwood in Churchill’s 1945 Resignation Honours list.

atrocities, and had faked the evidence to fit' (9).⁵² The legacy of this propaganda is evident in the venomous attitude adopted by Uncle Matthew in *The Pursuit of Love* (1945) towards anyone categorised as even vaguely German:

‘Now Matthew, dear, don’t get excited. The Kroesigs aren’t Huns, they’ve been over here for generations, they are a very highly respected family of English bankers.’

‘Once a Hun always a Hun,’ said Uncle Matthew. (56)

The association of the word ‘Hun’ with Germany first spread during the Boxer Rebellion in China, during which the last German Emperor, Kaiser Wilhelm II, compared the might of his forces to the Huns of Attila.

Mitford’s use of ‘Hun’ echoes wartime attitudes within Britain, epitomising one of the ways her work participates in, and helps shape, historical and political discourse, and emphasising the value of her texts as a literary response to early to mid-twentieth-century social and political mores. The continued popular use of the word ‘Hun’ in British culture can be seen in its appearance in then-Prime Minister Winston Churchill’s “A Difficult Time: ‘Westward, Look, the Land Is Bright’” broadcast of 27th April 1941. In his broadcast, Churchill speaks of ‘the ruthless and highly mechanized Hun’, before denouncing the ‘less than seventy million malignant Huns – some of whom are curable and others killable – many of whom are already engaged in holding down Austrians, Czechs, Poles, French, and the many other

⁵² The influence of such propaganda on the average Briton’s attitude toward Germany during this period is reflected in Gibbons’ *Nightingale Wood*, in which the protagonist, Viola, speaks of ‘all those Atrocities ... and boiling down dead bodies for soup. Why, it’s well known. There are books about it. If they didn’t, why are they called Huns?’ (80). For a detailed investigation of atrocity propaganda, see Gullace.

ancient races they now bully and pillage' (Churchill). The rhetoric employed by Churchill in his speech is powerful. With just a few words, he effectively dehumanises the enemy. His allusion to ruthless mechanisation encourages the conflation of Germans with impersonal technology: almost with robotics. As well as this, the mention of some Huns being 'curable' creates an image of ordinary Germans seized by a sort of disease – perhaps Nazism itself – which must be cured at all costs, even if some Germans will need to be killed in the process. Finally, the listing of different nations suffering under the Nazi regime emphasises the sheer number of people affected, while specifically naming them reiterates their status as British allies in need of help. The reference to 'many other ancient races' draws further attention to the numbers of those in need, with the reference also contrasting the legitimacy of these enduring old nations with the new, destructive, and inevitably fleeting, presence of Nazi doctrine.

Masks of Fascism

Yet in the interwar years, before Germany once again became the enemy of most European nations, it was a beacon of progressiveness under the Weimar Republic. In *Don't Tell Alfred* (1960), Fanny speaks about her uncle, Davey Warbeck, and how 'before the Nazis had taken over, during the decadent days of the Weimar Republic, he had greatly preferred the Germans [to the French]' (35), echoing a sentiment shared by some members of the British upper classes during this period. The Treaty of Versailles, imposed on the Germans following Allied victory in the First World War, was particularly supported by France, which was still recovering from the

traumatic wounds inflicted upon it by Germany during the conflict. France demanded enormous financial reparations, and was determined to prevent any German military expansion. However, in some quarters, the Treaty was regarded as unfairly restrictive, especially when countries like Britain began to express reservations about the growing might of the Soviet Union. It was felt that if the Soviet Union was ever to wage war on Europe, Germany would be needed; therefore, its military power should perhaps be subject to scrutiny, but not greatly diminished as the Treaty demanded.⁵³

Hitler, having risen to power as Chancellor in 1933, did much to propagate a vision of a united Germany in which every citizen felt valued and equal. As David Welch underlines in his study of Third Reich political propaganda, ‘the community of the nation was to replace the “divisive” party system and the class barriers of the Weimar Republic and in effect offer the prospect of national unity’ (18). Of course, the reality was quite the opposite. The vision was a fabrication, and, as discussed in Chapter One, new anti-Semitic legislation was put into effect shortly after the Nazi Party took over. Yet Hitler managed to maintain huge popularity within Germany, and many historians claim that he exploited tendencies and prejudices which prevailed in Germany during this period. For instance, anti-Semitism certainly existed in Germany before Nazi rule; however, it was only through constant production and dissemination of propaganda that Jews became reviled in Germany. Welch notes that hatred of an enemy is an effective means of uniting people. It is ‘the

⁵³ The Treaty was labelled a ‘Carthaginian Peace’ by economist John Maynard Keynes. This term, defined as ‘a peace settlement that is very severe to the defeated side’ (“Carthaginian”) illustrates the perceived harshness of the Treaty, which forced Germany to remain in a permanent state of subordination. As a result of the Treaty’s enforcement, most Germans felt great resentment toward the Allies, and the success of Hitler and the Nazi Party can be partly attributed to their election pledge to completely disregard the Treaty and its sanctions.

most spontaneous of all reactions ... need only be addressed to the most simple and violent of emotions and through the most elementary means [of] attributing one's own misfortunes to an "outsider" ... because hatred when shared with others is the most potent of all unifying emotions' (91). As we know, Jews became the target of such hatred.

In a similar vein to Mitford, the work of Stevie Smith was also characterised by a fictionalising of her contemporaries, and Smith's *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936) depicts the rise of Nazism through its narrator's growing horror about the anti-Semitism generated due to national adoption of this new doctrine. By 1945, when *The Pursuit of Love* was published, Mitford, like Smith before her, evidently took the threat of fascism entirely seriously.⁵⁴ Towards the end of that novel, Linda, in response to Davey's complaints about his health, points out that 'You always said nobody understood as much about your inside as Dr Meyerstein', to which he angrily responds: 'Use your common sense, Linda. Are they likely to drop Dr Meyerstein over Alconleigh? You know perfectly well he's been in a camp for years' (203). The doctor's surname is recognisably Jewish, and the unequivocal allusion to his grim fate demonstrates that Mitford is no longer making light of this horrific situation, even though the full extent of the Holocaust had not yet become clear. Ten years earlier, though, it was still a subject suitable for frivolous mockery. In *Wigs on the Green*, discussed extensively in Chapter One, Mitford took inspiration for the

⁵⁴ In Smith's book, the narrator, Pompey, begins to adopt a similar attitude. Speaking of her Jewish friends, she notes how 'I got to loving these people set there in this train and thinking what the Nazis might and certainly would do to them' (109). This realisation is significant, as Pompey has previously been anti-Semitic and flippant about such issues. Therefore, it is suggested that, if even Pompey feels discomfort about the situation in Germany, then readers ought to seriously consider for themselves what is happening there, and put aside any frivolous ideas they may entertain in relation to Nazi policy. As Smith's book was published before *Pigeon Pie*, it could be suggested that Mitford was slow to realise the great threat posed by fascism, perhaps due to her class status. Mitford was part of the aristocracy which the Nazis attempted to seduce, whereas Smith was a middle-class writer without access to the privileges of the elite.

doctrine of 'Social Unionism' from her brother-in-law Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists. The BUF enforced a strict anti-Semitic policy, which Mosley based on the Nazi programme. According to Anne de Courcy in her biography of Diana Mosley, much like Hitler, Diana's husband 'realised that a political creed which preached constant action needed an easily targeted enemy if it were to keep up its momentum' (165). However, as Richard Thurlow highlights in his history of British fascism, 'Mosley's draconian solution of establishing an authoritarian state with drastically reduced individual liberties, expelling minorities, anti-Semitism and the abolition of political opposition, was of little appeal to the bulk of the British people' (162).

Unlike Hitler, Mosley did not manage to successfully create a beguiling cult of personality within which to envelop himself, and it is productive to analyse the reasons for Hitler's massive success, and how this relates to ideas of personality touched on by Mitford in *Pigeon Pie*. It is intriguing that the very same policies which failed in Britain were adopted successfully in Germany, and apparently supported by the population from 1933 until the collapse of Nazi power at the end of the Second World War. However, the Nazi Party's success seems, in fact, to have been due less to its policies than to Hitler's charismatic appeal, which Charles Madge and Tom Harrison, in their contemporary study *Britain by Mass-Observation* (1939), termed 'the personality-magic of Hitler' (57). The cult of personality surrounding Hitler was based on an explicitly masculine conception of charismatic personality, and indeed, Welch argues that one of the most vital positive themes in Nazi propaganda revolved around 'the projection of the "Führer-myth", which depicted Hitler as both charismatic superman and man of the people' (13), a concept

which struck a chord with mass audiences. As Gustave Le Bon explains in his theoretical study of the crowd, ‘the multitude is always ready to listen to the strong-willed man, who knows how to impose himself upon it. Men gathered in a crowd lose all force of will, and turn instinctively to the person who possesses the quality they lack’ (135). The Führer was imaginatively depicted as a saviour, who would restore the equally mythical glory of imperial-era Germany, which had ostensibly been destroyed by the cruel and heartless Allies, in particular the French, who wanted to keep the German people at heel.⁵⁵

The key method used to create associations between Hitler and the glory of the German past in the minds of the German populace was, as discussed in Chapter One, the spectacle. The Nazi spectacle, which Mitford alludes to in both *Pigeon Pie* and *The Pursuit of Love* – several of her upper-class characters attend such events – consisted of political rallies and celebrations, during which thousands of troops marched in formation, sang anthems, and displayed flags and symbols, while aggressive speeches rang out. In his analysis of Hitler in relation to personality and politics, William Carr highlights that ‘Hitler’s aim in the early years was quite simply to arouse and mobilize the emotions of his audience’ (4). The Nuremberg Rallies in particular are major examples of such propaganda, ultimately preserved for posterity by Leni Riefenstahl, who used the 1934 Rally as the basis for her Nazi propaganda film *Triumph of the Will* (1935).

⁵⁵ As Welch notes, ‘the other element which appears to have been genuinely effective and unique was the projection of Hitler as a “charismatic” leader’, as a result of which ‘the “Führer cult” had become synonymous with the NSDAP, and it is significant that the Party referred to itself even on the ballot papers as the “Hitler movement”’ (18). Taking this into consideration, the Nazi election campaign, relying as it did on the personality of Hitler, had much in common with modern American Presidential campaigns, which are generally seen as being as much – sometimes much more – about the candidate as they are about the parties themselves.

Much like *Olympia*, examined in Chapter One, *Triumph of the Will* was intended to emphasise the might of German power and underscore Hitler's place at the centre of Nazi ideology. De Courcy describes how in 'its opening shots of the Leader's aeroplane, descending through the clouds like the silver chariot of some Teutonic hero-god to the strains of Wagner, there was but one theme: the invincibility of Germany' (135), while 'the marching columns, their goosestepping suggestive of a robotic implacability trampling all beneath it – all declared an unconquerable race' (136). The reference to robotic relentlessness is significant, as it recalls Churchill's description of the inhumane nature of the 'Hun', suggesting that what the British see as brutality passes for strength in Germany. The film's prologue describes its premise. The subtitles read: 'On 5th September 1934, 20 years after the outbreak of the World War, 16 years after the beginning of German suffering, 19 months after the beginning of German rebirth, Adolf Hitler flew again to Nuremberg to review the columns of his faithful followers' (Riefenstahl). The wording of this passage reiterates stages of time in order to emphasise the great pain the German people have suffered; in spite of which, in the long years between 'suffering' and 'rebirth', and against all odds, they have endured. The reference to 'the columns of [Hitler's] faithful followers' also reminds us of the dreaded 'fifth column', an extension of these faithful followers, who apparently secretly work for German interests while hidden among unsuspecting Britons.

The documentary is an expert piece of propaganda, implying throughout that the Germans, victims of their First World War vanquishers, have, under Nazism, managed to rebuild their nation and reunite. Much like the anti-British propaganda depicted in *Pigeon Pie*, it is intended to establish the unitedness of Germany.

Repeated shots of besotted crowds, enthusiastically saluting Hitler as he travels to his hotel in Nuremberg, stress the universality of support enjoyed by the Führer, with people from all walks of life shown, elated. The great breadth of national unity is demonstrated again in a sequence which depicts an ordered group of men holding spades, several of whom are asked the question: ‘Comrade, where are you from?’ Each man answers with a different place in Germany. It is made clear from this group that Nazi support exists throughout the country, and the formation of the men, holding their spades like rifles, implies that ordinary citizens, united in their loyalty – the word ‘we’ recurs constantly – intend to work just as hard as the fighting soldiers of the Third Reich.⁵⁶

Radio, Religion and Totalitarianism

As Welch determines though, the notion of German ‘rebirth’ had been established before the 1934 Nuremberg Rally. On 21st March 1933, shortly after the Nazi Party assumed power, a ceremony was held to celebrate the opening of the new Reichstag, at which ‘President Hindenburg⁵⁷ resplendent in the full military regalia of Prussian field-marshal raised his baton to the empty throne of the exiled Kaiser. Hitler, in top hat and morning coat, bowed deferentially before him. The propaganda message was clear’, with the Nazis ‘restoring the old imperial glories lost in 1918 by forging a link

⁵⁶ For a detailed study of Riefenstahl’s work and her Nazi connections, see Zox-Weaver.

⁵⁷ Paul von Hindenburg, who served as President of Germany from 1925 until his death in 1934, was, however reluctantly, instrumental in bringing Hitler to power. It was von Hindenburg who arranged for the appointment of Hitler as Chancellor in January 1933, despite the Nazi Party forming only a minority within the government. Under pressure from the newly appointed and self-styled Führer, von Hindenburg signed into law the Reichstag Fire Decree, removing a number of civil liberties from the German people, as well as granting the Enabling Act of 1933, which granted the Nazi Party power to enact laws without consulting parliament. Upon von Hindenburg’s death in 1934, Hitler no longer had any obstacles in his path and seized total power, merging the offices of President and Chancellor into one, and essentially becoming Germany’s sole leader.

between the past and the present – between the conservatism of the Prussian tradition and the razzmatazz of National Socialist ritual propaganda’ (21). The marrying of pre-War majesty to modern Nazi ideology was successful, and Welch’s words echo Serge Chakotin’s suggestion that ‘in order to carry on this type of [emotive] propaganda, an essential condition is the creation of a myth’ (276).

In his analysis of the psychology of totalitarian political propaganda, Chakotin brings up the power which radio wielded in connection with such displays of Nazi spectacle, a phenomenon illustrated in *Pigeon Pie*. The importance of radio in the dissemination of information to countries like Britain during this period cannot be underestimated. As Jowett and O’Donnell point out, ‘the invention of the radio in the late 19th century altered for all time the practice of propaganda, making it possible for messages to be sent across borders and over long distances without the need for a physical presence’ (124). The Nazis, therefore, did not need to display their might physically to Britons: they could project it via the airwaves. Chakotin emphasises the power of such sounds and the effect they would have on the people exposed to them, detailing how the provocative broadcast, featuring ‘a daunting rumbling, slow and emphatic, of drums, and heavy footfalls pounding the earth, together with an indescribable rattle and swish and pant of armed masses on the march ... must have clutched at the hearts of the millions of listeners’, calculatedly ‘filling them with apprehension of disaster – a feeling of fascination and fear’ (84). The stress Chakotin places on sounds is effective, conflating the rumble of drums and the rattle of soldiers’ footsteps with the dreaded sound of approaching tanks and troops, an association which would have filled listeners – especially those old enough

to remember the First World War and its carnage – with dread. Aside from uniting Germany, then, these spectacles were also used to intimidate its wartime opponents.

Before the outbreak of the Second World War, however, Nazi Germany was intent on gaining support from, and establishing strong relationships with, the other leading nations of Europe. As discussed in Chapter One, the Nazi Party managed to successfully persuade some members of the British aristocracy – including members of Mitford’s own family – to visit Germany, and the resultant support for Nazi policy generated within this small minority was strong. In his study of high society within Nazi Germany, Fabrice d’Almeida echoes descriptions given in Chapter One of such visits, emphasising that ‘evidence of the expanding influence of the [Nuremberg] congresses is shown by the exemplary presence of great British families at the 1935 session’, and stressing how ‘for instance, Lord Mitford ... was given a place of honour, along with his wife and children; they were prominent guests at following congresses as well’ (184). Aside from the Mitford family, ‘other prominent Britons went to the Nuremberg congress; among them were Lord Rothermere, a newspaper baron who admired Hitler’s courtly manners and exchanged greetings with him every year, and Lord Londonderry’ (184).⁵⁸

In Chapter One, a focus was placed on the relation of religion to politics, and how techniques borrowed from the former can be used to manipulate responses to the latter, especially in terms of creating a god-like image of a political leader. Mitford

⁵⁸ Harold Harmsworth – 1st Viscount Rothermere (1868-1940) – was a powerful potential ally for Hitler. Proprietor of Associated Newspapers Ltd., he controlled a publishing empire which included the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Mirror*, and regularly used his newspapers to promote the appeasement of Nazi Germany. During the summer of 1939, Rothermere was in regular communication with Hitler and his subordinates, and in June, wrote to the dictator: ‘My Dear Führer, I have watched with understanding and interest the progress of your great and superhuman work in regenerating your country’ (qtd. in Norton-Taylor). Rothermere’s appeals further demonstrate that some support for Nazi Germany, however small, did exist among the aristocracy, and that those concerned very much hoped that war could be prevented.

continues this theme in *Pigeon Pie* by conflating politics with religion in the association she creates between Sophia's husband Luke's admiration for 'Our Premier'⁵⁹ – when Luke speaks of him, 'his voice ... [takes] on a reverent note' (18) – and his religious belief in Brother Bones, the founder and leader of the Boston Brotherhood, 'one of those new religions which are wafted to us every six months or so across the Atlantic' (14). The narrator notes that, during the Munich crisis, 'in [Luke's] eyes, Our Premier had moved upon the same exalted sphere as Brother Bones, founder of the Boston Brotherhood, and almost you might say, God' (18-19). The later revelation that the Brotherhood has served as a cover for a group of Nazi spies makes this association doubly ironic, with one pseudo-religious network being used to mask another, while the suggestion that the Brotherhood is merely one of many temporary fads 'wafted to us every six months or so' implies that Nazism could meet with a similar fate.⁶⁰ To Luke, however, completely taken in by the Brotherhood, its leader, and the Prime Minister, are both great men and above reproach. Approaching politics with such complete blind faith is, at best, naïve – 'Luke's information was that ... Parliament and the Press might have to be got rid of for a time whilst Our Premier and Herr Hitler rearranged the world' (27) – and at worst, reckless, and the narrator therefore places particular emphasis on Luke's gullibility: 'His information then had been that the Czechs were in a very bad way, rotten with Communism, and would be lucky to have Herr Hitler to put things right. It also led him to believe that universal disarmament would follow the Munich

⁵⁹ Neville Chamberlain, who replaced Stanley Baldwin in 1937, and would continue as Prime Minister until ill health caused him to resign in 1940, after which Winston Churchill took over.

⁶⁰ Later in the novel, the temporary nature of the Brotherhood is emphasised again in Sophia's comparison between it and Catholicism: 'Sophia ... reflected that whatever you might say about Popery it is, at least, a professional religion, and shows up to great advantage when compared with such mushroom growths as the Boston Brotherhood' (63).

agreement, and that the Sudetenland was positively Hitler's last territorial demand in Europe' (19). The fact that none of these predictions – in relation to appeasement, which will be returned to later in this chapter – came to pass demonstrates to today's reader the misguidedness of Luke's loyalty.

It would also have resonated with readers in 1940. Living in a country which, by then, was well and truly at war with Germany, discerning readers of *Pigeon Pie* would be able to see Luke's foolishness as a representation of that small minority, mainly aristocrats, who had expressed sympathy for the Nazis and been convinced that Hitler would not start a conflict if his ever-increasing demands were met. In some ways, *Pigeon Pie's* depiction of upper-class faith in Hitler – focalised through the gullible Luke – alongside the government's failure to see through the dictator's schemes, emphasised by the text's references to the blundering Chamberlain, shows a continuation of the mockery of authority Mitford began in *Wigs on the Green* in relation to the farcical House of Lords. The message seems to be quite clear: some of those appointed to positions of authority, or born into wealth and status, are not worthy of their titles, and should be scrutinised mercilessly. Otherwise, who knows what could happen, with the country vulnerable to attacks from a – by all accounts barbarous – nation with whom some wealthy members of society would rather make peace?

Nazi attempts to persuade other nations of their legitimacy through continuous broadcasting of pro-German radio propaganda form a major focal point of *Pigeon Pie*. In Germany, long before the beginning of the war, new technological innovations had been utilised effectively to generate support for the Nazi Party. In his analysis of personality in politics, David Thomson discusses how increasingly

sophisticated forms of modern technology such as cinema and the wireless made ‘the spoken word ... audible to millions at once ... by electrical amplification ... these scientific inventions, together with the invention of the machine-gun and the aeroplane, have made it possible for a government to secure both mental and physical conformity to its own desires’ (134-35). The comparison Thomson makes between broadcasting technologies and machine guns and aeroplanes highlights that radio can be just as effective a weapon as firearms or bombers.⁶¹ Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell suggest that ‘radio was ... the perfect medium for communicating the almost religious fervour of Nazi spectacles, with the rhythmic chants of “Sieg Heil,” the enthusiastic applause, and the power of Hitler’s or [Joseph] Goebbels’s speaking style’ (234). Their description reminds us of the religious aspect of Nazism, while ‘rhythmic chants’ draws attention to one of the necessary components of propaganda, as outlined by Hitler himself: repetition. In *Mein Kampf*,⁶² Hitler claims that ‘[propaganda’s] chief function is to convince the masses, whose slowness of understanding needs to be given time in order that they may absorb information; and only constant repetition will finally succeed in imprinting an

⁶¹ In their study *Propaganda and Persuasion*, Jowett and O’Donnell describe the distinctions which exist between the three different categories of propaganda, namely ‘white’, ‘black’ and ‘grey’ propaganda. White propaganda comes ‘from a source that is identified correctly, and the information in the message tends to be accurate’ (16), black is ‘when the source is concealed or credited to a false authority and spreads lies, fabrications, and deceptions’ (17) while grey rests ‘somewhere between white and black ... the source may or may not be correctly identified, and the accuracy of the information is uncertain’ (20). Much like a weapon, all of these types of propaganda are intended to inflict serious damage.

⁶² Hitler wrote this book, literally translated as *My Struggle*, in 1924, while imprisoned in Landsberg prison after organising a political coup known as the ‘Beer Hall Putsch’, during which he and around two thousand Nazi followers marched into Munich, with the intention of overthrowing the government. The coup was unsuccessful, but newspaper coverage of it, and of Hitler’s subsequent trial on charges of treason, brought both Hitler and the Nazi cause public attention, which he attempted to capitalise on by writing *Mein Kampf*. In it, he expounds on, and attempts to justify, his anti-Semitic views, while also discussing his plans for Germany’s future. Though sales in Germany were initially slow, the book gained popularity, especially after Hitler’s rise to power. It remains controversial in Europe to this day, and following a re-release in 1945, it was not published again in Germany until 2016, while in the Netherlands, it is illegal to sell the book.

idea on the memory of the crowd' (87). Rampant anti-Semitism spread throughout Germany mainly as a result of continual repetition within Nazi propaganda of the alleged dangers posed by Jews.⁶³

Such appeals to the lowest common denominator in order to provoke distrust towards certain groups of people were unlikely to meet with the same measure of success in Britain. For one thing, Britain was more financially stable, not having endured as devastating a post-World War I situation as Germany, where hyperinflation struck from 1921 to 1924, hugely destabilising the German economy.⁶⁴ As well as this, Britain's Jewish population was small, and though some attempts had been made – mainly, as mentioned in Chapter One, by Mosley and the BUF – to incite hatred against this minority, largely contained within the East End of London, anti-Semitism did not have the same appeal as it did in Germany. If Nazi Germany was to fully succeed, both in the war and more generally, it would need to

⁶³ The power of such repetition is underlined by Newcourt-Nowodworski, who reiterates Hitler's argument: '[propaganda] should address itself not to the elites but to the masses. It must appeal to their emotions, rather than their reason. Its intellectual level must correspond to the lowest mental common denominator of the target public. Propaganda must be confined to a few bare essentials, which should be persistently repeated' (16). Appealing to people's baser instincts clearly worked in Germany, where emotions were manipulated – through the propagandistic documentaries of Leni Riefenstahl, as well as non-documentary feature films and endless radio broadcasts – in order to build up feelings of patriotism and create the idea of a cohesive and prosperous Germany. Various feature films containing blatant propaganda, particularly against Jews, were released while the Nazi Party was in power, many personally overseen by Hitler's propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels. Perhaps the most notorious example of such propaganda occurs in *Jud Süß* (1940) – literally translated as *Süss the Jew* – in which a conniving Jewish banker lends money to the Duke of Württemberg in exchange for status, gradually corrupting the noble and Württemberg itself in the process. Although the anti-Semitic themes of the film are glaring, its lavish budget and well-known cast – shrewd means of somewhat masking the grim subject matter – attracted the public, and it became a huge financial success, grossing over six million Reichsmarks and attracting over twenty million cinemagoers. Contemporary popularity aside, it nevertheless stands as testament to what Saul Friedländer describes as Goebbels' hideous goal, which was 'to elicit fear, disgust, and hatred. At this straightforward level [*Jud Süß*] can be considered [one] facet of an endlessly renewed stream of anti-Jewish horror stories, images, and arguments' (102).

⁶⁴ Hyperinflation came as a result of Germany's continued attempts to repay the debts owed to its victors through the Treaty of Versailles, which proved practically impossible. At one point during the period of hyperinflation that occurred between 1921 and 1924, German banknotes became so worthless that people used them as wallpaper and as kindling for fires, as documented in photographs from the era.

persuade the British public – millions more Britons than that small number of aristocrats who had already endorsed it – about the merits of Nazi doctrine and the reasons its ideology warranted support. One of the most potent means, and really the only almost universal way of reaching out to the general public during the war years was through broadcasting,⁶⁵ and radio therefore became a vital tool for projecting the image of a united Germany to the rest of the world. As Jowett and O'Donnell make clear, 'with the coming of power of the National Socialist government in Germany in 1933, the role of international broadcasting was dramatically elevated to major prominence', with 'the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin [providing] the impetus to construct the world's largest shortwave radio transmitter facilities, and by the end of 1938, the Germans were broadcasting more than 5,000 hours a week in more than 25 languages' (126).⁶⁶

Mutability of Persona

In *Pigeon Pie*, Sophia's godfather Sir Ivor King, an enormously popular opera singer famous for his outlandish wigs, is apparently murdered. A badly mutilated body is discovered alongside a bedraggled wig – with the newspaper headline 'WIGLESS

⁶⁵ The glory of the Nazi spectacle, discussed in both Chapter One and above, may have been useful for persuading British aristocrats to take up the Nazi cause, but during this period, the majority of the British public would never have been able to afford a visit to Germany. As a result, more generalised propaganda was required, and radio seemed the obvious means of widely disseminating such persuasion; as George Orwell writes tellingly in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, 'twenty million people are underfed but literally everyone in England has access to a radio' (82-83).

⁶⁶ This assessment is echoed by Welch, who points out that 'from the moment he assumed power, Goebbels recognised [radio's] propaganda potential and he was determined to make the most of this relatively new medium' (38). As Newcourt-Nowodworski notes, 'at first, the German propaganda machine's primary targets were their own people, but it was soon expanded to include other countries. In 1933 the German radio foreign service had just a few rooms at the offices of the German Broadcasting Company'. However, 'by 1941, it occupied two large buildings and employed over a thousand people' (16).

HEAD ON KEW PAGODA, HEADLESS WIG ON GREEN' (57) comically referencing Mitford's previous novel. The body is quickly buried, yet only a few days later, Sir Ivor re-emerges, 'wig and all' (76), seemingly in Germany, where he pledges allegiance to the enemy. At this point in the text, a definite shift occurs in the narrative presentation of Sir Ivor. When Sir Ivor is first introduced, we are told that he 'was knighted at an early age ... made a large fortune, gained an unassailable position and the nickname by which he was always known, "The King of Song"' (25). His popularity is stressed by the description of how 'the evening papers had entirely abandoned "U-Boat Believed Sunk", "Nazi Planes Believed Down", "Hitler's Demands", "Stalin's Demands", and the reactions of the U.S.A., and were devoting themselves to what soon became known as the Wig Outrage' (57-58). All other headlines are forgotten in the wake of the beloved man's apparent death, and Sophia plans to leave his home 'to the Nation' (63) as a memorial to 'the dear old creature [who] was a sort of figurehead' (66), underlining his status as a British icon. The use of an icon like Sir Ivor to help propagate the Nazi cause represents an attempt by the Nazis to capitalise on his fame, the implication being that if Nazism has won Sir Ivor's approval, then it should also be adopted by his fans, who include, according to the newspaper coverage described by the narrator, most of the English-speaking world. If Sir Ivor feels Nazism is worthy of consideration, then perhaps his fans will follow suit and emulate their cherished star.

The agenda of the British newspapers changes accordingly: initially horrified by Sir Ivor's alleged murder, which prevents a planned propaganda scheme cooked up by the BBC, the Ministry of Information and the Foreign Office, calls are made in the *Daily Runner's* 'BRITAIN EXPECTS' column for the investigation of 'one of

our Cabinet Ministers [who] may be guilty of negligence' (61). Immediately after his reappearance though, the newspapers condemn Sir Ivor's betrayal, and we are told that 'the next morning, of course, every single window of the newly constituted Shrine of Song had been broken' (79). However, in his seeming betrayal of his country, Sir Ivor also provides it with entertainment: and not just singing. The narrator describes how Sir Ivor becomes 'a kind of serial story', which 'appeared day by day on the front pages of the newspapers, quite elbowing out the suave U-boat commanders, the joy of French poilus at seeing once more the kilt, and the alternate rumours that there would, or would not, be bacon rationing, which had so far provided such a feast of boredom at the beginning of each day' (82). Such trivial matters are forgotten in the wake of Sir Ivor's treachery, and although the newspapers continue to vilify his actions, a conflicted notoriety attaches itself to his image, making him a traitor, but an entertaining traitor, and therefore an oddly appealing anomaly.

In *Pigeon Pie*, though Sir Ivor's image has been tainted by his association with the enemy, he maintains an unusual appeal, no doubt partly influenced by nostalgia for the pre-war years during which he was irreproachable. It is these lingering feelings of respect and adulation for Sir Ivor which the Nazis rely on in order to generate support for their ideology. By using Sir Ivor for their propaganda, the Nazis intend to manipulate the public into the adoption of, or at least the consideration of, Nazism, simply because a celebrity whom they greatly admire and who still commands a massive audience, has suggested it. In this sense, Sir Ivor is comparable to real-life Nazi propagandist Lord Haw-Haw. Nicholas emphasises 'the extent of British listening to German radio, and in particular to the notorious Lord

Haw-Haw' (45). *Pigeon Pie* contains several references to Lord Haw-Haw, a nickname commonly applied to the Irish-born William Joyce, who defected to Germany and became infamous during this period for his pro-German broadcasts, beamed to Britain from enemy territory. The name 'Lord Haw-Haw' was used by a number of radio broadcasters during the Second World War, but is most commonly associated with Joyce,⁶⁷ who began using the nickname in 1939, when he took over as the main presenter of English-speaking Nazi radio propaganda to Britain.

The moniker 'Lord Haw-Haw' is intriguing, as the word 'lord' foregrounds the Englishness of its possessor, while the *OED* describes 'haw-haw' as both a verb meaning 'to laugh loudly or boisterously' ("Haw-haw, v.") and as an adjective 'characterized by the utterance of *haw haw* as an affected expression of hesitation' which is 'frequently applied to what is taken to resemble upper-class speech' ("Haw-haw, adj."). The persona created is therefore one which mocks the upper classes – in particular the clipped speech of Joyce's BBC broadcast rivals – but which also implicitly laughs at those ordinary people foolish enough to listen to the sneering broadcasts. It is important to note that when Mitford wrote *Pigeon Pie*, the true identity of Lord Haw-Haw was not yet known, and in the novel, one of the German spies, Winthrop, is apparently revealed to be Lord Haw-Haw. Nevertheless, this is another example of Mitford's engagement with the real-life situation. Placing Lord Haw-Haw in the novel as a minor character who is actually revealed to be a German shows Mitford highlighting the mutability of persona, and how the adoption of a

⁶⁷ William Joyce, who was born in Ireland in 1906, and grew up there before moving to Britain in the early 1920s, developed an intense interest in fascism, eventually – another Mitford family connection – joining Mosley's BUF in 1932, before becoming the organisation's Head of Propaganda in 1934. Joyce continued to broadcast on German radio until the close of the war, with his last broadcast recorded on 30th April 1945, as the Battle of Berlin raged. On 28th May 1945, he was captured in Flensburg, then extradited to Britain, where he was executed on 3rd January 1946.

persona – certainly in the case of the man behind Lord Haw-Haw – has the potential to be a political act. Although widely viewed as a traitor to Britain, Lord Haw-Haw attracted millions of listeners, and ‘by January 1940, 30 per cent of the population of Britain was reported to tune in regularly, and of the 16 million who listened to the main BBC news bulletin at nine o’clock, 7 million turned over to Radio Hamburg straight afterwards’ (Gardiner 115-16).⁶⁸ As well as referencing real-life events, Mitford also quotes the regular opening and closing lines of Lord Haw-Haw’s broadcasts almost verbatim, with the familiar ‘Germany calling, Germany calling’ (115), ‘Here are the stations Hamburg, Bremen and D x B, operating on the thirty-one metre band’ (77) and ‘Here are the Reichsender Bremen, stations Hamburg and D x B operating on the thirty-one metre band’ (83). Anyone reading the book in 1940 would immediately recognise these call signs.⁶⁹ If a real-life traitor like Lord Haw-Haw could generate such popularity, partly as a result of his manipulation of a particular persona, then surely in Mitford’s narrative, a famous personality with as much established influence as Sir Ivor could be even more persuasively powerful.

⁶⁸ Interestingly, the popularity of non-British radio stations such as Radio Luxembourg and Radio Normandy led Oswald Mosley to begin plans for his own radio station. Foreign stations could broadcast to Britain without commercial restrictions, and therefore their broadcasts included product advertisements. As Anne de Courcy points out, ‘by 1935, British advertisers were spending about £400,000 a year on commercials, a figure which would go up to £1,700,000 in 1938’ (179), and Mosley saw the commercial opportunities involved in such a venture, which could generate funding for the BUF and as a result, ‘its influence would increase and the prospect of power become more likely’ (199). Diana worked clandestinely in order to mask her husband’s involvement in the scheme, and ‘spent large parts of the later 1930s in Germany as her husband’s emissary’ (D.J. Taylor 245), making extensive efforts to set up radio transmitters in various locations. As de Courcy highlights, the possibility of a radio station based in Germany eventually became the most feasible endeavour, and following months of ‘making contact with Hitler whenever she arrived in Berlin and bringing up the subject of the radio station whenever there was an opening’ (183), Diana’s efforts paid off. A contract drawn up between Mosley, his associates and the German government, was finalised on 18th July 1938. However, Special Branch soon learned of Mosley’s plans, and due to increased tensions between Britain and Germany, followed by the eventual outbreak of the Second World War, the plans stalled, and were halted altogether after the internment of the Mosleys in 1940.

⁶⁹ A number of recorded broadcasts by Lord Haw-Haw can be found on the BBC Archive website at www.bbc.co.uk/archive/hawhaw/.

Advertising, Entertainment and Propaganda

Through production of repeated propaganda, it is anticipated that Britons will come to adopt Nazi sentiments, with such persuasive techniques aimed at producing an effect similar to the advertising practices described by Le Bon in his study of crowd psychology: ‘When we have read a hundred, a thousand, times that X’s chocolate is the best, we imagine we have heard it said in many quarters, and we end by acquiring the certitude that such is the fact’ (142), while equally, ‘if we always read in the same papers that A is an arrant scamp and B a most honest man, we finish by being convinced that this is the truth’ (142-43). Le Bon’s focus on repetition reminds us of Hitler’s own words on the subject, and the importance of repetition as a tool of conversion. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in 1944 forge a more explicit connection between political propaganda and advertising through their suggestion that in Germany, the Nazi Party’s ‘general repetition of names for measures to be taken by the authorities [made] them, so to speak, familiar, just as the brand name on everybody’s lips increased sales in the era of the free market’ (165). In order to increase public familiarity with political policy fully, however, a human representative was required. Within Germany, Hitler acted as this figure. In *Pigeon Pie*, the Nazis select a home-grown celebrity to draw in the British public. Such a decision seems wise. In his discussion of the cultural foundations of celebrity endorsement, Grant McCracken points out that celebrities are ‘powerful media ... [and] speak with meanings of long acquaintance’ (315) to their audience. This is echoed by Sejung Marina Choi and Nora J. Rifon, who highlight that ‘celebrities’

accomplishments and fame translate to credibility and power in the eye of the public’ (306).

As a British icon, Sir Ivor is an inspired choice to act as the voice of Nazi propagandistic persuasion, as he appeals to a number of different demographics, being ‘not only one of the best known but also one of the best loved men of several successive generations’ (25), having ‘received recognition of every kind, both public and private, from all parts of the British Empire, of his great gifts’ (103). Sir Ivor’s exalted status is emphasised by the title accorded him by the German press, ‘Lieder König’ (76), a literal translation of his English nickname ‘King of Song’, but also a homophone of the English word ‘leader’, aligning him with dictators like Hitler and Mussolini, whose authoritative status as leaders is marked by grand titles: Führer and Il Duce, respectively. As Jowett and O’Donnell highlight, ‘from stirring patriotic anthems to protest songs, music and lyrics are important propaganda techniques. Whether the exhilarating melodies and words of “La Marseillaise” or a commercial jingle advertising Tums, music is effective because it combines sound and language and is repeated until it becomes familiar’ and ‘because it touches the emotions easily, suggests associations and past experiences, invites us to sing along, and embraces ideology in the lyrics’ (284). In this case, Sir Ivor and his music are being used by the Nazis through ‘a world-wide anti-British campaign of Propaganda allied to Song ... [which] it was considered, would have a profound effect on neutral opinion, and might well bring America into the war, on one side or another’ (Mitford, *Pie* 76). In such an early stage of the war, there is everything to play for, and the mention of those countries of ‘neutral opinion’ creates an unsettling notion that Germany could soon have more allies if its campaign proves successful.

Indeed, the methods of political persuasion – music, anthems and so on – used by the Nazis in *Pigeon Pie* share an affinity with those pursued by Eugenia in *Wigs on the Green*, though the Nazis are much more devious in their approach, with their campaign of persuasion much more palatable than Eugenia’s haranguing calls to arms. Since they use a first-rate musical performer for their broadcasts, the Nazis are able to create a programme of light entertainment – ‘a continual treat, especially for collectors of musical curiosities ... even the *Times* music critic was obliged to admit that the Lieder König had never, within living memory, been in better voice’ (82-83) – which brings pleasure to its growing audience of devoted listeners. In fact, Mitford’s depiction of early wartime radio broadcasting, while satirical, contains more than a grain of truth, and is another example of her engagement with the real-life situation. During the ‘Bore War’ period, the BBC came under fire for its programming schedule, which, it was argued, was not entertaining enough to entice listeners. In her analysis of wartime Britain, Juliet Gardiner details the criticism directed at the BBC during this period, first by quoting an article from the *New Statesman and Nation* of 9th September 1939, which reported that ‘the BBC monotonously repeated news which was in the morning papers and which it had itself repeated an hour earlier. While each edition of the papers repeated what had already been heard on the wireless’ (115); Gardiner goes on to describe the consequences of broadcasting such tedious programming, explaining how ‘the Corporation was much criticised for its contribution to putting the bore into the Bore War ... [and] by the beginning of October ... 35 per cent of the public were fed up with the BBC and 10 per cent had stopped listening at all’, while ‘the press used

words like “puerile”, “funereal”, “travesty”, “amateurish” and “a paucity of ideas” to describe the wireless output’ (115).

If the intention of the BBC – working, it is important to remember, in association with the government – was to boost morale by broadcasting such tedium, it failed on all counts. Its failure was debated among government officials, who feared the country’s patriotic spirit might dim. As George Orwell points out in *The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius* (1941), ‘one cannot see the modern world as it is unless one recognizes the overwhelming strength of patriotism [and] national loyalty ... as a *positive* force there is nothing to set beside it’ (9). By failing to create a schedule of programming capable of effectively building up British patriotic feeling, the BBC risked alienating its listeners. The appealing presence of German radio, ‘which sought to woo British listeners away from the BBC, with a mixture of light music and pro-German propaganda’ (Nicholas 47), did little to allay fears about national despondency, and Mitford taps into these misgivings in *Pigeon Pie*. As Gardiner explains, ‘people needed entertaining, and they also needed to know what was going on, and if the BBC was not prepared to tell them then it seemed that there were others who would’ (115). The fact that these ‘others’ were German radio stations dedicated to undermining British morale provoked concern.

In *Pigeon Pie*, Mitford references British government attempts to rectify the situation, and in the process, once again pokes fun at the ineffectiveness of the authorities. Before Sir Ivor King’s disappearance, Sophia’s politician friends, the comically named ‘Fred and Ned’ (30) – their names used to underline the interchangeability of such incompetent, faceless members of parliament – tell her about the British government’s plan to ‘invite Sir Ivor King, the King of Song, to

conduct a worldwide campaign of songful propaganda', with an emphasis placed on the need to 'harness [Sir Ivor's] personality' (31). Fred alludes to techniques of advertising in his confident assertion that 'people will switch on to hear [Sir Ivor] sing ... and then they won't be able to help getting an earful of propaganda' (31), highlighting once more that Sir Ivor, like a celebrity employed to endorse a particular product, will act as the lure to hook people and draw them in, thereby increasing British morale at a crucial time for the war effort. The situation recalls Thomson's suggestion that radio can be used as a weapon – Sophia tells Fred that 'the old gentleman is your answer to Hitler's secret weapon' (32) – and with the sheer force of his personality, Sir Ivor is one of the most vital weapons in Britain's arsenal.

The British propaganda scheme, of course, does not come off as planned, with Sir Ivor's apparent death prompting several days of national mourning. Newspapers debate the failure of the BBC, Ministry of Information and Foreign Office to produce 'the most formidable campaign of Propaganda through the medium of Song that the world has ever seen' (61), while the wording of the passage in relation to the campaign's scope recalls the moment – mentioned earlier – when it emerges that Sir Ivor is alive and will perform this role after all, only not for the British. Both sections of the text have identical wording, describing how the campaign 'would have a profound effect upon neutral opinion, and indeed might well bring America in the war, on one side or another' (61, 76). The mirroring of these words emphasises the shared interests of Britain and Germany, both of whom hope to elicit support from the powerful United States. In parallelising these sentences, Mitford also draws further attention to the general uncertainty of the period, a time in which victory could easily swing either way.

What is certain, though, is that, as usual in Mitford's novels, the government is shown to be unfit for purpose. Fred's earlier admission about the need to 'remember to tell the police they had better keep an eye on [Sir Ivor] ... what a coup for the Huns if he got bumped off or anything' (32) is undermined when his premonition comes true, highlighting the lack of organisation within the authorities – questioned in the 'BRITAIN EXPECTS' column – who do not see to it that their most prized asset is protected. Meanwhile, the cunning and efficient Germans, with no great effort, apparently spirit him away to the other side. The authorities are lampooned yet again during Sir Ivor's first German radio broadcast, when Lord Haw-Haw reveals that 'your English police, it seems, never realized that the body found on the Pagoda at Kew Gardens was, in fact, the body of a wigless pig' (77). The farcical nature of this image effectively puts the final nail in the coffin when it comes to the reader's view of the government and authorities portrayed in *Pigeon Pie*: if the police are unable to tell the difference between the corpse of a man and that of a pig, how does the country stand any chance of winning the war?

Such fears are preyed on by the Nazis in the novel, and their continual mockery of the government reflects the real-life ridicule conducted by Lord Haw-Haw in his position as Nazi propagandist. Indeed, as noted above, Mitford even has Lord Haw-Haw appear as a character in the text, where he broadcasts alongside Sir Ivor. Mitford's introduction of a real person into her fiction lends *Pigeon Pie* authenticity, while asking the reader – particularly the contemporary reader of 1940 – to reconsider their attitude towards a figure as dubious yet oddly popular as Lord Haw-Haw. In his broadcasts in the novel, Lord Haw-Haw makes repeated, derisive

references to the HMS *Ark Royal*,⁷⁰ which Mitford uses to draw attention to the contemptuous tone of his real-life broadcasts, and to the general uncertainty of the ‘Phoney War’ period. On 26th September 1939, less than a month into the war, a group of German aircraft attacked a squadron of British ships in the North Sea, and although uncertain about the status of the *Ark Royal*, German radio nevertheless broadcast reports claiming that the ship had been sunk. As Michael Balfour explains in his study of wartime propaganda, when the British authorities refused to comment on the matter, ‘Goebbels scented a case of deliberate concealment which lent itself to exploitation. The story was particularly played up in German programmes to Britain, in which the question “Where is the *Ark Royal*?” recurred nightly’ (158). These very broadcasts are parodied in *Pigeon Pie*. During the broadcast in which he reveals that Sir Ivor is actually alive, Lord Haw-Haw asks the British audience, ‘Again, I ask, where is the *Ark Royal*?’ (77), a question which recurs in a more pointed manner later: ‘Ask Mr Churchill, where is the *Ark Royal*?’ (116). The inclusion of Churchill – at this time, First Lord of the Admiralty – shows the Nazis deliberately attempting to provoke Britain into responding to their allegations, while at the same time trying to undermine public confidence in the transparency of the British government.

As made clear in the earlier discussion about the effectiveness of repetition as a propaganda technique, continual questioning about the fate of the *Ark Royal* would likely breed concern, perhaps even contempt among the public, especially if they felt that they were not being told the whole truth. Mitford goes one step further in her depiction of this episode, however, by juxtaposing the seriousness of Nazi claims

⁷⁰ HMS *Ark Royal*, an aircraft carrier designed in 1934 and launched in 1937, took part in several important battles during the Second World War. She survived a number of different campaigns before eventually being torpedoed by a German U-boat on 13th November 1941 – eighteen months after the publication of *Pigeon Pie* – and sank the following day. All but one of her crew survived.

with the campness of Sir Ivor. Unlike Lord Haw-Haw, whose words could potentially strike fear in the hearts of the British audience, Sir Ivor is difficult to take seriously: ““Good night, dears,” said the old König, “keep your hairs on. By the way, where *is* the *Ark Royal*?”” (117). The emphasis placed on ‘is’ makes his question a mere echo of Lord Haw-Haw’s, thereby removing any real sense of threat. Meanwhile, Sir Ivor addressing his audience as ‘dears’ suggests that he feels a sense of warmth towards his listeners and hopes to build a rapport with them, which jars with the condescending tone Mitford injects into Lord Haw-Haw’s scornful broadcasts.

Interestingly, the Nazi propaganda campaign in *Pigeon Pie* is varied in terms of success. It is at its most powerful when presenting listeners with content which is appetising, unlike the endless regurgitations of news bulletins and political speeches produced by the BBC. Although allusions made in the novel by Lord Haw-Haw and Sir Ivor to the movements of government officials are perhaps helpful in creating a sense of dread among Britons about potential spies⁷¹ – ‘Eden was seen entering the Home Office at 5.46 Greenwich mean time this afternoon’ (78), ‘[Sir Ivor] suddenly gave an account of the Prime Minister walking in St. James’s Park that very morning’ (82) – they are not entertaining. The crucial need for propaganda to be appealing to its listener is demonstrated by the failure of Sir Ivor’s rewritten songs to capture his audience’s attention. In *Pigeon Pie*, the song “Land of Hope and Glory” – also modified in Mitford’s previous novel *Wigs on the Green* – is revised to ‘Land of

⁷¹ Rumours about potential spies secretly transmitting information which ended up in the hands of Lord Haw-Haw abounded. Posters designed by Fougasse – the pen name of illustrator Cyril Kenneth Bird – expounding that ‘Careless Talk Costs Lives’ were distributed throughout Britain as a warning to the public, and Siân Nicholas highlights how ‘the “clock story”, in which Haw-Haw allegedly asked “Why do you in [a town] keep your town clock [x] minutes fast/slow?”’ (thus implying that German spies were everywhere, was reported all across the country), while “Haw-Haw rumours”, a generic name given to all German statements showing a remarkable local knowledge, began to obsess the MOI’ (53).

Dope, You're Gory', and the failure of its lyrics to conceal the true nature of Nazism results in an unpersuasive attempt at conversion. Britons are unwilling to hear blatant political diatribes – they have suffered enough of that from the BBC – in place of entertaining musical interludes, and the narrator sums up the conventional reaction to these songs in the description of Sir Ivor 'bellowing out a good deal more of this kind of drivel' (78).

Admittedly, the most successful of Sir Ivor's broadcasts, his 'Pets' Programmes', are also drivel, but crucially, they are popular drivel. These programmes, unlike the misguided attempts at rewriting classic English songs, are extremely effective, proving to be 'a terrible thorn in the side of the authorities ... a definite menace, playing upon the well-known English love of animals' (91). The Nazi broadcasts are seen to be at their most persuasive when they make use of British language and culture to ingratiate themselves with their listeners. In his study of political propaganda, F.C. Bartlett suggests that 'to be effective, [propaganda] must use the idiom of the group to which it is directed. ... It is knowledge of the daily use of the language that is required, and of the many other shades of difference in practical culture that go with this daily use' (126). In other words, in order to fully appeal to its British audience – thereby creating an opportunity to impress them with the merits of Nazism – German radio must absorb and adopt the English language, and, to go further with Bartlett's explanation, in a sense, it must use the language and culture of its British listeners against them. This is underlined by Jowett and O'Donnell, who explain that 'identification must take place between the persuader and the persuadee in persuasive communication. Common sensations, concepts,

images, and ideas that make them feel as one are shared ... the persuader is a voice from without, speaking the language of the audience members' voices within' (37).

It is precisely this approach which the Germans take with Sir Ivor's Pets' Programmes and music recitals. We are told that '[Sir Ivor] soon became the only topic of conversation whenever two or more Englishmen met together, while the sale of wireless sets in London were reported to have gone up 50 per cent' (82), echoing Gardiner's analysis of the popularity of broadcasters like Lord Haw-Haw, whose transmissions 'were listed in *The Times*' (Gardiner 115). The popularity of Sir Ivor – and therefore the shrewdness of the novel's Nazis for employing him to work his magic on the British public – is emphasised again when Sophia writes to Rudolph after her godfather has been unmasked as a traitor: 'I must say there is one comfort to be got out of the whole business and that is the broadcasts. Aren't they heaven? I can't keep away from them, and Sister Wordsworth has had to alter all the shifts here so that nobody shall be on the road during them' (80). The fact that Sophia's first-aid post has had its entire shift schedule adjusted in order that no-one risk causing an accident while captivated by Sir Ivor's broadcasts – 'though most civilians were on some form of war duty much of the time ... a radio was usually nearby' (Nicholas 272) – shows the extent to which they have been bewitched by his presence. The glamorous aura he projects, along with his famous voice, proves irresistible. Although Mitford makes comic capital out of Nazism throughout *Pigeon Pie*, her description of this calculated process of persuasion may also serve as a warning about the perils of being hypnotised by dangerous powers.

The Pets' Programmes, on the other hand, are an exercise in parody. The narrator tells us that 'the wily Hun provided this enormous treat for the pets of the

United Kingdom' (91), and it soon becomes clear that rather than being named in honour of pets, the programme is actually addressed to them. Although the theme of celebrity endorsement within the novel rings true, the depiction of this programme demonstrates that similarly to *Wigs on the Green*, *Pigeon Pie* operates in a farcical world of silliness. However, as with *Wigs*, Mitford uses this world in order to highlight the absurdity of the real situation. In one broadcast, Sir Ivor informs his listeners about the differences between the treatment of pets in Britain and Germany before performing a number of songs entirely for animals, delivering:

a series of shrieks and groans which certainly did have an uncanny effect upon any animals who happened to listen in. Dogs and cats joined in the choruses, horses danced upon their hind legs, and dickie birds went nearly mad with joy. Mice crept out of their holes to listen. ... The authorities at the Zoo had gramophone records made to cheer up their charges during the black-out, and Ming, the panda, would soon eat no food until one of them was played to her. (92)

The anthropomorphism present in this passage adds to the overall absurdity of a programme created purely for animals, and helps create the image of an audience of faithful animal fans. Contributing even further to the preposterous tone of the text, unbelievably, Sir Ivor's appeal to the allegedly mistreated pets of Britain actually works. A comparison can be made here between the joyful animals, that happily absorb the Pets' Programmes, and the actual audience of Lord Haw-Haw and other broadcasts, which is likewise uncritically enthusiastic about this questionable

programming. The narrator details how ‘on the day after one of these concerts Members of Parliament would be inundated by a perfect flood of letters from sentimental constituents demanding instant cessation of hostilities against our fellow animal-lovers, the Germans’ (92), underlining the force of Sir Ivor’s personality. If he can convince the public that the war should be ended simply on account of the condition of their pets, then surely he can achieve anything.

This section connects to a familiar trope in Mitford’s writing: the irrational love felt by Britons – and especially the British upper classes – for their animals, which are sometimes considered to be more important than people. As well as this, the overt sentimentality of the Pets’ Programmes reproduces the strategies of Nazi propaganda, which aimed to imbue a nationalistic pride through emotional rather than rational appeal. In their summary of Hitler’s ‘cardinal rules’ for successful propaganda, Jowett and O’Donnell list the need to ‘avoid abstract ideas and appeal instead to the emotions’ (230). The broadcasts therefore skilfully bring the nation together through its sentimental love for animals, at the same time suggesting that Nazi Germany shares this affinity and cannot be a true enemy after all. Indeed, we are told that ‘the Pets’ Programme did more for the enemy cause over here than all the broadcasts by Lord Haw-Haw, all the ravings of the Slavery Party’s organ, *The New Bondsman*, and all the mutterings of the Bloomsbury’s yellow front put together’ (92). Sir Ivor may seem ludicrous – as does the text – but there is hidden logic in both the text and in his approach, and as a result, he succeeds.

The popularity Sir Ivor enjoyed before his apparent defection is the main reason he is chosen by the Germans, but in the end, it is revealed that he has been playing another role all along: that of counter-spy. Rather than supporting the

Germans, he has simply played along with them in order to discover more about their plans and hopefully foil them; when Sophia discovers him underneath the first-aid post, he tells her: ‘They are putting it into execution next Friday, in three day’s [sic] time. It is something devilish; I have half guessed what, but I must know for certain’ (130). The unpredictability of Sir Ivor – one moment a beacon of hope, the next moment a traitor⁷² – demonstrates the artificiality of celebrity endorsement, reminding us that such endorsements are generally taken up by a star solely for monetary gain. In *Pigeon Pie*, however, Sir Ivor’s predicament is undoubtedly nobler, as he dangerously risks an elaborate pretence in order to thwart an enemy plot. Regardless, though, this situation illustrates to the reader that it is impossible to trust or take anything completely seriously in the world of constant absurdity which Mitford creates in the novel. Yet equally, as with her earlier texts, Mitford also offers some rather astute reflections on the ways in which power works in the ‘real’ world of her time. Personality can be used as a weapon, while different personas can be adopted in order to evade capture, and the artificiality of manufactured personas will be discussed in the rest of this chapter.

⁷² The fickleness of celebrity is brought to the fore once more at the end of the novel, when the narrator describes how, after the truth about his clandestine exploits fighting against Germany emerges, ‘the King of Song had now soared to such an exalted position in the hearts of his fellow-countrymen that there would hardly have been room for anybody else. Wherever he showed his face in public ... he was snatched up and carried shoulder high ... through dense, hysterical crowds’ (152). Fame, like *Pigeon Pie* itself, proves unpredictable.

Persona: The Spy Genre and Notions of the Glamorous Female Spy

Intertextuality and the Spy Persona

Aside from dealing with personality directly in relation to politics, Mitford also engages with politics in regard to the espionage carried out by those working for different governments. *Pigeon Pie* deals with spies and spy work throughout. There is an implicit – and sometimes explicit – engagement with the ‘Richard Hannay’ spy novels of John Buchan,⁷³ mainly *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, and it is productive to compare the opposing approaches taken by the authors. While Buchan’s novels are often fanciful in regard to the ingenuity of the long suffering Hannay, frequently requiring massive suspension of disbelief on the part of the reader, his texts nevertheless treat spying and espionage with seriousness. Through continued emphasis on the fiendish tactics of the enemy which Hannay must defeat, Buchan constantly reminds his reader that Hannay’s failure to foil the spy plots described will result in doom for Britain.

The protagonist of *Pigeon Pie*, Sophia, finds herself in similar situations to Hannay, but she is less able than Buchan’s plucky hero to escape them successfully. As well as this, the spying in *Pigeon Pie* itself is often described with such humour, and Sophia herself shown to be so oblivious to what the reader can deduce easily without help, that it is difficult to feel that any sense of real danger exists, or to imagine that the novel will end any way other than comically. While Buchan’s

⁷³ In Mitford’s second novel, *Christmas Pudding* (1932), she suggests that Buchan’s novels are not the kind likely to gain attention from highbrows when Amabelle tells Paul: ‘I never thought an old highbrow like you would admit to such a thing. I read them in trains myself when there’s nobody looking’ (28).

Hannay novels, as Christoph Ehland notes, ‘search for reassurance in times of turmoil’ (123), Mitford frequently undercuts any notion of seriousness in relation to spying, and indeed, her novel directly lampoons Buchan’s *The Thirty-Nine Steps* several times.

The book is mentioned a number of times by various characters, and this metafictional approach adds a dimension of self-awareness to the text, with characters conscious of the conventions of spy novels, and therefore able to comment on their own situation: Sophia ‘thought he [Heatherley Egg, claiming to be an ally] looked like Uriah Heap [sic], and wished she had a more attractive counterspy to work with, somebody say, like, the ruthless young German in *Thirty-Nine Steps*; it was impossible to take much pleasure in the company of Heth’ (109). A clear contrast can be seen in the very different fictional worlds which Mitford and Buchan create. In *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, there is no time to register the desirability of the characters Hannay encounters, particularly given that he never meets any female spies, though they have become a staple of film adaptations of *The Thirty-Nine Steps*.⁷⁴ With Hannay, everything is strictly business, while Sophia is only proactive when it suits her, with the reference to ‘pleasure’ drawing attention to her prioritising of her own comfort over the needs of others.

In *Pigeon Pie*, Mitford uses the persona of the female spy to highlight Sophia’s great desire to emulate such a persona, her general unsuitableness for it due

⁷⁴ The first film adaptation of *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock and released in 1935, dispenses with the character of Scudder, the man killed at the beginning of Buchan’s novel who pulls Hannay into the spy plot. Instead, in the film, Scudder is replaced by Annabella Smith (Lucie Mannheim), a glamorous female spy, and on his travels, Hannay is joined by another woman, Pamela (Madeleine Carroll), who helps him defeat the spies. This formula has been replicated in nearly every subsequent adaptation of the text, and the film, extremely popular upon initial release, may have influenced Mitford’s interest in the female spy angle. As John Sedgwick and Michael Pokorny point out, Hitchcock’s *The 39 Steps* was the sixth most popular British-made film at the British box office in 1935 (97).

to her lack of commitment to real work, and also her ultimate redemption, as she eventually manages to apply her own talents to the task at hand and help save the day. As Pierre Lethier and Clara Laurent explain in their study of famous real-life female spies Marthe Richard and Mata Hari, ‘women spies had become all the rage during the inter-war years, and frequently lit up cinema screens in performances by the biggest stars of the day’ (65). Many films released during the 1930s deal with spies in a romantic fashion, especially those with glamorous female stars such as Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich. One of Garbo’s most famous roles was as the title temptress in *Mata Hari* (1932), who is alluded to several times in Mitford’s text, while Marlene Dietrich starred in a similar role in the romantic WWI-set spy film, *Dishonored* (1931). Alfred Hitchcock contributed much to the genre with *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934), *The 39 Steps* (1935) and *Secret Agent* (1936), and the latter two films feature Madeleine Carroll in glamorous roles which see her romanced by her dashing leading men. All of these films were very successful at the British box office, highlighting the appeal of such stories to women, who were by and large the biggest consumers of cinema during this period.

The films *The 39 Steps* and *Secret Agent* reflect a tendency, as time progressed, for female characters in spy films to be placed in secondary roles, either as love interests for the male spy in the narrative, as victims, or both. In her study of early twentieth-century women’s spy fiction, Emma Grundy Haigh focuses on literature from the years directly preceding the 1930s, and explains how ‘in women’s spy fiction, the female spy-hero is used to challenge expectations of women’s roles as well as to explore how women can be active in society and still retain their femininity’ (141). *Pigeon Pie* seems to adhere to these narrative conventions, as

Sophia does challenge such expectations of women's roles – since she is generally seen as frivolous and silly by those around her – while still retaining her femininity. Equally, the films *Mata Hari* and *Dishonored*, made in the early 1930s before women were relegated to more subservient roles in society, depict industrious females who rely on their sexuality to deceive the men around them and perform their roles capably. Mitford's novel, therefore, is a strange hybrid of that earlier spy literature, discussed by Grundy Haigh, and the cinematic representations of women in films like *Mata Hari* and *Dishonored*, as it depicts a woman who manages to defy the expectations of those around her, while also maintaining her femininity.

The idea of performance is crucial to the creation of the female spy persona in *Pigeon Pie*, as Sophia attempts to project an image of herself which is much more exciting than her actual role as glorified secretary at a first-aid post. By having Sophia and her rival Olga continually attempt to outdo one another, Mitford appears to comment on the boredom generated as a result of the standstill nature of the 'Phoney War' period. The war itself has perhaps ignited in these women a wish to contribute in some way to the war effort, but the spy narratives with which they are familiar prevent them from admitting that their work is, in reality, dull and uninteresting. As a result, they consciously recast themselves as glamorous female spies and idealised visions of femininity to the people around them. However, the text complicates the conventional tropes of spy fiction through its overall mockery of the genre, and its characters' self-conscious allusions to it.

Mitford's satirical presentation of these tropes allows her to defy narrative expectations, especially in relation to notions of the female spy, which are often tied up with the concept of the femme fatale. The femme fatale, as Kirsten Smith

suggests, has existed in literature since its earliest beginnings – Biblical characters such as Salome and Delilah demonstrate early associations between notions of female sexuality, deception and betrayal – but ‘it was the 20th century figure Mata Hari who helped to create a clear connection between the femme fatale and espionage’ (39). The press depiction of Hari emphasised her apparently exotic nature,⁷⁵ while her previous occupations as courtesan and dancer meant that in the public perception, the image of the female spy became implicitly linked with sexuality. This was exacerbated by later cinematic representations of spies like Hari. Smith explains that in the Hari biopic which stars Greta Garbo, ‘once again, we have a woman who is extremely sexual, amoral ... dresses provocatively and occupies a very dominant and masculine role [in her relationship with her male love interest, Rosanoff] at a time when it was not acceptable’ (40). Ironically, the position Hari achieves as a result of using her femininity makes her more dominant than her male lover, which reflects ‘the fears of the late 1920s and early 1930s around women and their sexuality’ (40) and Smith demonstrates how notions of the femme fatale and the

⁷⁵ Mata Hari was born Margaretha Geertruida Zelle in the Netherlands in 1876. During her career and particularly following her arrest, much emphasis was placed on her apparent exoticism. Hari herself was partly responsible for these assumptions about an unusual background, claiming to have been born in India, when in reality, both of her parents were Dutch. She therefore can be seen as a woman who actively took part in the creation of her own exotic persona, consciously adopting the name and persona of ‘Mata Hari’ which would make her infamous. After her parents’ divorce, mother’s death and father’s unsuccessful remarriage, Hari moved to Paris, where she lived a bohemian life and gradually became involved in clandestine spy work for her adopted country of France. However, her beauty and extravagance drew attention to the large amount of travelling she did between the Netherlands and France, and she was ultimately arrested by the French government on charges of counter spying for Germany. In the years since her trial and execution in 1917, some historians have claimed that Hari was not as dangerous a spy as the French government wanted her to appear, and was instead used by the government of a country that needed a scapegoat to blame for its military losses, which could apparently be partly attributed to information shared by Hari with the enemy. Regardless of her guilt or innocence, though, Hari can be seen as an example of the dangers facing any early twentieth-century woman who dared to overtly express her sexuality and use it to manipulate men.

glamorous female spy became intertwined.⁷⁶ In *Pigeon Pie*, Mitford echoes this cinematic depiction of Hari, and in the process, creates implicit links between ideas of glamour and female spies before ultimately subverting these notions with the revelation that the real female spy in the novel is Sophia's gloomy lodger, Florence, the least conventionally glamorous woman of all. Unlike John Buchan's relatively straightforward works, Mitford's novel is often difficult to pin down, due to the duplicitousness of its characters and the vacillating nature of its protagonist.

Spies in Mitford and Buchan

Buchan and his industrious spy Hannay are the main focus of the parody in *Pigeon Pie*, though not all its references to *The Thirty-Nine Steps* are explicit. The influence of Buchan's text is often felt more subtly, and many of Mitford's allusions to it mock the usual conventions of spy novels, as well as Sophia's unsuitableness for spy work. At one point, still influenced by *The Thirty-Nine Steps* and the spy Scudder's propensity for secretiveness, 'Sophia began on her egg ... when she saw that something was written on it in pencil ... the writing was extremely faint, but she could make out the word AGONY followed by 22. Sophia was now in agony, for this must be, of course, a code', as 'she knew that spies ... had the most peculiar ways of communicating with each other' (100). Sophia's certainty – 'must be, of course', 'she knew' – highlights the influence of spy fiction on the reader, as Sophia immediately sets to work on cracking the code, in somewhat of a burlesque of Hannay's attempts to crack the codes jotted down in Scudder's notebook in *The*

⁷⁶ In the Greta Garbo film, however, Hari is slightly ennobled due to her decision not to implicate Rosanoff at her trial and to instead accept sole responsibility, and ultimately the death penalty, for her crimes.

Thirty-Nine Steps. As Hannay explains to the reader, who is presumed to be ignorant of such matters:

I was pretty sure that there was a cypher in all this. That is a subject which has always interested me, and I did a bit at it myself once as intelligence officer at Delagoa Bay during the Boer War. I have a head for things like chess and puzzles, and I used to reckon myself pretty good at finding out cyphers. This one looked like the numerical kind where sets of figures correspond to the letters of the alphabet, but any fairly shrewd man can find the clue to that sort after an hour or two's work, and I didn't think Scudder would have been content with anything so easy. So I fastened on the printed words, for you can make a pretty good numerical cypher if you have a key word which gives you the sequence of the letters.

I tried for hours, but none of the words answered. (Buchan 22)

As is made clear in this description, Hannay already has experience of working with codes, having served in the Boer War. His qualifications as a spy are therefore evident, while his suggestion that 'any fairly shrewd man can find the clue to that sort after an hour or two's work', creates a correspondence between masculinity and spying, emphasised by the lack of major female characters, and the total absence of any female spies at all, in Buchan's novel. Equally, Hannay's great resilience is emphasised by the mention of the difficulty of the task, and further stressed by his allusion to the many 'hours' he spends attempting to crack the code.

Mitford's text, on the other hand, emphasises femininity during Sophia's protracted attempts to work out the apparent code. Firstly, the setting of Sophia's efforts is domestic, even luxurious, in contrast to the third-class train carriage where Buchan's protagonist puzzles over Scudder's notes:

[Sophia] rolled her eyes round the pink ceiling with blue clouds of her bedroom while she tried the word AGONY backwards and forwards and upside down. She made anagrams of the letters. She looked at the egg in her looking-glass bed-post, but all in vain. ...

Then she saw light.

'He, Egg, is in agony, because he is unable 2 see me before 2 night.' Sophia turned to her breakfast with a happy appreciation both of its quality and of her own brilliance. (101)

Sophia's bedroom is excessively feminine, and particular emphasis is placed on its opulence. The pink ceiling, and the clouds painted there suggest a quality of dreamy imagination not present in Buchan's text. The mention of 'her looking-glass' marks another – albeit, stereotypical – allusion to femininity and concern with personal appearance, a charge which, as has been shown above, Sophia is certainly guilty of throughout much of the novel. As well as this, she does not pore over the code as Hannay does. Instead, she soon comes to a conclusion of her own based on little more than guesswork, and is instantly self-satisfied with 'her own brilliance', despite the reader being left unsure about whether she is correct or not. The sumptuous femininity of Sophia's room makes it almost theatrical in form, setting it up as a

counterpoint to both the masculine ethos of Buchan's novels and to the explicitly theatrical notion of masculinity used by dictators such as Hitler and Mussolini in their cults of personality.

Of course, Mitford goes even further with the use of a code than Buchan does. While Hannay cracks the code – as, surely, only a *male* spy could do – and discovers it is the key to stopping the main spy plot, Sophia finds that her 'code' is actually meaningless. When she confronts Heatherley about it, he is baffled, and explains that if he wanted to get in touch with Sophia, he could simply do so in person. Even her second supposition, that Sir Ivor King may have written on her egg, alongside a corresponding message sent to the agony column of the newspaper – 'Poor old gentleman suffering from malignant disease would like to correspond with pretty young lady. Box 22 *The Times*' (102) – is proved wrong when she asks him about it:

Sophia asked Sir Ivor about Agony 22, but he was quite as much in the dark about the great egg mystery as Heatherley had been.

'Come now, pretty young lady,' he said. 'How could I get at your egg?'

'I know, but in spy stories people seem to manage these things.'

Ned here chimed in with the news that many eggs nowadays have things written on them.

'I expect there is a farm called Agony, and that egg was laid in 1922,' he said.

(157)

The sarcastic tone of the phrase ‘the great egg mystery’ draws attention to the silliness of Sophia for believing that spies would send messages to each other via egg. Yet Sophia’s protestation that ‘in spy stories people seem to manage these things’ seems valid, especially when we consider the outlandishness of some of Hannay’s exploits. If anything, though, Sophia’s belief in the egg code highlights the danger of an over active imagination, particularly for a spy, who, like Hannay, must stick to reality at all times and be able to rely on their wits and common sense.

However, unlike Hannay, who according to Joseph A. Kestner ‘is marked by pluck, physical resourcefulness and cleverness’ (86), Sophia is not practically minded, and indeed it is her own naivety which leaves her at the mercy of the German spies who have infiltrated her home. If she were shrewder, she would naturally question her husband’s lover Florence’s ownership of a pigeon at a time when the public was encouraged to report any suspicious behaviour to the authorities. Indeed, a brief analysis of the word ‘pigeon’ itself is useful here, as the word can be used figuratively to describe ‘a naive or gullible person; a fool or simpleton; a person who is easily swindled’ (“Pigeon”, *OED*), a meaning certainly applicable to Sophia in this instance. Florence and Heatherley, in actuality ‘Otto von Eiweiss [and] Truda von Eiweiss’ (133), manage to deceive Sophia – and her husband, Luke – with their disguise as members of the religious group patronised by Luke, even managing to set up part of their operation in Sophia’s home.

The narrator places knowing emphasis on Sophia’s gullibility again when she fails to enquire about her maid Greta’s whereabouts after seeing the young woman – who had, the previous night, alluded to having information about the supposedly

deceased Sir Ivor – carried off, gagged and bound, during a practice air raid at the first-aid post:

‘Casualties already!’ she said, and as she was going on she noticed that the ‘casualty’ under the rugs on the stretcher was her own maid, Greta. For a moment she felt surprised, and then she thought that Florence must have asked Greta to do it; probably they were short of casualties. Greta was far too superior to be bribed by three pence and a cup of tea. She had a sort of bandage over her mouth, and had evidently been treated for ‘crushed tongue’, a very favourite accident at St. Anne’s. She seemed to have something in her eye, or at any rate it was winking and rolling in a very horrible way. ...

‘Typical of them,’ she thought, ‘to treat the wretched woman for crushed tongue when she is half blinded by grit in the eye. Let’s hope they’ll take it out and give her a cup of tea soon.’ As the practice got into full swing Sophia became very busy and forgot the incident. She never saw Greta again. (75)

It becomes clear that Greta attempted to make an eye signal to Sophia, but Sophia’s empty-headed selfishness, combined with a total distaste for foreigners no doubt occasioned by the international situation, prevents her from intervening and saving Greta’s life; Sophia’s absolute faith in someone who is actually the enemy – ‘Florence must have asked Greta to do it’ – is ironic, and indicates a misplaced trust in someone who has fiendishly adopted the persona of an ally. It is surely the influence of the current conflict which dissuades Sophia from attempting to find out anything more about Greta. Although we are told that ‘she never saw Greta again’,

she makes no issue of the maid's disappearance, only telling Rudolph that 'Greta has left ... she came round here to lend a hand with a practice and hasn't been back since and apparently her luggage has all gone so I suppose she just walked out on me' (81). Sophia goes on to add that she 'really hated having a German in the house especially as [Greta] used to be so keen on all the Nazi leaders, she gave me the creeps you know' (81). The irony of this statement lies in the fact that Sophia unwittingly has *more* than one German living under her roof. Her lack of interest in Greta's whereabouts continues until she finally asks Heatherley: 'She was such a bore, anyway, I never could stick her. So what happened to her?' (98). It is only when Heatherley tells Sophia about Greta's fate – drowned in the main drain underneath Sophia's first-aid post – that Sophia must take in what has happened. Her ineptitude as a spy is highlighted again when Heatherley explains that '[Greta] was winking out a message to you in Morse Code' (97). Since the narrative is often focalised through Sophia, the reader is privy to her thoughts, and it is significant that Sophia herself realises that a lack of such practical skills is a handicap for a spy: 'Sophia saw that she might just as well have admitted to an Ambassador of the old school that she knew no French' (97).

Heatherley is convinced that Sophia knows more than she is letting on, and the humour of this passage derives from the reader's perfect awareness that Sophia is often absolutely as dim as she appears:

'Yes, knowing how stupid you are, Sophia, I might have believed that everything had passed over your head, but you can't laugh off that pigeon. So

come clean now; you've known the whole works since Greta disappeared, haven't you?

'What works? Darling Heth, do tell me; it does sound such heaven.' (96)

The fact that Sophia's first reaction to this revelation is that it sounds like 'heaven' suggests her disconnectedness from the real world. This is no doubt because of the fantasies which Sophia has absorbed through reading conventional spy fiction and from an interaction with cinema.

Indeed, the world inhabited by Sophia is very different in general from that of Hannay in *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. Unlike Buchan, whose descriptions of war contain more urgency, Mitford approaches the beginning of the Second World War with frivolousness akin to her treatment of fascism in *Wigs on the Green*. Although at the beginning of Mitford's text, Sophia expresses fear about the war just begun and 'that loud bang, those ruins, corpses and absence of loved ones' (16), her fears soon prove unfounded: 'There had been no loud bang, the house was not in ruins' (17). Life continues as before. However, an important distinction must be made between the respective settings of *Pigeon Pie* and *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. As Mitford explains in her dedication to the second edition of the novel,⁷⁷ 'it was written before Christmas 1939' (5), and at this time, no significant Allied or German military operations had occurred on the Western Front of the European Theatre of the Second World War. Therefore, Mitford's novel was not written during a time of actual warfare. This is in

⁷⁷ Most of Mitford's early novels were republished during her lifetime, with the notable exception, as mentioned in Chapter One, of *Wigs on the Green*. *Pigeon Pie* first reappeared in 1952. In a letter written to her mother, Lady Redesdale, on 6th September 1952, Mitford expresses surprise at the fact that '*Pigeon Pie* has had better notices in America than any of my books isn't it unaccountable. It's selling madly' (*Letters* 358). Perhaps by 1952, readers felt that enough time had passed in order for the novel to be palatable, while an element of nostalgia for interwar life may also have played a part in *Pigeon Pie*'s delayed success.

contrast to Buchan's novel, which was first serialised in *Blackwood's Magazine* from August to September 1915, a year into the First World War, before publication in book form a month later. Although Buchan's text is set in the months directly preceding the start of this conflict, he, and his readers, were already living through it, and were very aware of its implications for Britain. Mitford, on the other hand, although conscious of the fact that what would become the Second World War was serious, nothing, in terms of soldiers on distant battlefields or innocent civilians, had yet been lost. Conversely, Buchan was writing at a time when the Gallipoli Campaign was already in full devastating swing, and the sinking of the *Lusitania* remained fresh in the public mind.⁷⁸

War Games

This lack of seriousness in relation to war is emphasised by Mitford's method of describing the machinations leading up to the conflict. The tone of her description creates a sense of playfulness, with the countries involved in the prospective war metaphorically described as children playing 'in a round game' (29):

England picked up France, Germany picked up Italy. England beckoned to Poland, Germany answered with Russia. Then Italy's Nanny said she had fallen down and grazed her knee running, and mustn't play. England picked up Turkey, Germany picked up Spain, but Spain's Nanny said she had

⁷⁸ The Gallipoli Campaign lasted from April 1915 to January 1916 and resulted in over 550,000 casualties. The RMS *Lusitania*, meanwhile, was sunk by a German submarine in May 1915, causing a huge public outcry, as the ship was a non-military vessel carrying civilian passengers, and 1,198 passengers and crew were killed in the sinking.

internal troubles, and must sit this one out. England looked towards the Oslo group, but they had never played before, except little Belgium, who had hated it, and the others felt shy. America, of course, was too much of a baby for such a grown-up game, but she was just longing to see it played. (29)

Aside from acting as a humorous diversion within the narrative, this description is also cleverer than it seems at first glance, and is highlighted by Mitford biographer Laura Thompson as an example of ‘the kind of apparently simplistic, really rather sensible thing that Nancy wrote. ... In this context, her silly spy story becomes light but legitimate satire’ (153). The wartime alliances reimagined as childish friendships are factually accurate, with England and France teaming up for the ‘game’, while Germany unites with Italy. The creation of a nanny figure, however, scornfully suggests that these countries are barely capable of looking after themselves, let alone forming alliances with each other. As in *Wigs on the Green*, where Eugenia’s nanny is brought into the narrative in order to undermine the notion that Eugenia is adept at making her own decisions, so here is the nanny figure invoked as a satirical means of questioning the leadership of each of these countries.

The allusion to Italy’s nanny disqualifying her from play because she ‘grazed her knee running’ is probably an ironic comment on the country’s withdrawal from the League of Nations in 1937,⁷⁹ with nanny in this case a representation of that organisation. The introduction of a nanny figure is perhaps Mitford’s way of suggesting that these endless war games, generally caused by men, could be

⁷⁹ As Qizhi He points out, the League of Nations was founded in 1920 as ‘the first universal organization entrusted with the lofty task to maintain peace and security throughout the world’ (77). While the League initially coped well with its task, by the 1930s, conflicts such as the Second Italo-Abyssinian War, the Spanish Civil War, and the Second Sino-Japanese War had exposed its powerlessness to prevent such clashes. It was dissolved in 1946 and replaced by the United Nations.

prevented if women were able to intervene or, indeed, if women were in charge in the first place. The mention of Spain's 'internal troubles' is a clear allusion to the Spanish Civil War and the havoc it wreaked in Spain, while America's status as a 'baby' underlines its relative youth as a country, particularly in comparison to these old countries from which the majority of America's citizens had emigrated. As well as this, the very definition of a 'round game' – 'a card game in which each player plays as an individual rather than with a partner; (more generally) any game which is played by a large number of individuals, rather than by teams' ("Round", *OED*) – suggests that this game's participants have no real interest in forming concrete alliances just yet. As with most card games, each player is in it to win for themselves alone. In the novel, the depiction of the 'round game' and the nanny who attempts to police it, shows Mitford using frivolous and feminised discourses as a form of resistance against the traditional high seriousness of male notions of warfare.

In spite of the political knowledge it betrays, though, this description is nevertheless used for comic effect. The notion that war is mere child's play shows that Mitford's text frequently subverts the traditional serious approach to international conflict exemplified in a novel like *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, and instead employs frivolous metaphors which trivialise war. A similar description in Buchan's *Steps* makes this distinction between frivolousness and seriousness even more pronounced:

This war was going to come as a mighty surprise to Britain. Karolides' death would set the Balkans by the ears, and then Vienna would chip in with an ultimatum. Russia wouldn't like that, and there would be high words. But

Berlin would play the peacemaker, and pour oil on the waters, till suddenly she would find a good cause for a quarrel, pick it up, and in five hours let fly at us. That was the idea, and a pretty good one too. Honey and fair speeches, and then a stroke in the dark. While we were talking about the goodwill and good intentions of Germany our coast would be silently ringed with mines, and submarines would be waiting for every battleship. (34)

A degree of playfulness can be traced in Buchan's imagery, especially its softening of the idea of potential warfare with the light-hearted suggestion that 'Russia wouldn't like that, and there would be high words', reducing severe declarations of war to mere words of light reproach. Yet his description of the consequences of this game contains a sinister undertone absent from the scene depicted by Mitford.

Buchan's text engages with the real world context more explicitly than *Pigeon Pie*, going against that novel's extended whimsical allusions to the contemporary political situation. Buchan's description has a visceral quality, emphasised by the last lines of the above quotation. The stress on the fact that this is 'our coast' would prompt a strong emotional reaction, tied up in the mind with wartime notions of patriotism, from a reader consuming Buchan's novel at the time of initial publication in 1915. The mention of mines and submarines draws attention to real methods of warfare, and the allusion to vulnerable battleships engages with the real threat such underwater methods posed to British ships.⁸⁰ Clearly there will be more than just grazed knees in the grim world of Buchan's text.

⁸⁰ By the time of the initial publication of *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, four major British ships had already been sunk by German submarines: HMS *Formidable*, HMS *Triumph*, HMS *Majestic* and SS *Merion*. For detailed analysis of such data, see Burt.

Indeed, Mitford's delineation of the game does not inform us of consequences at all, since, as noted above, there have not yet been any, as the progress of the war has stalled: 'still it would not begin ... people made jokes about how there was the Boer War, and then the Great War, and then the Great Bore War' (Mitford, *Pie* 29). As well as this, the game described by Buchan is much more physical and militarised. The comparison Mitford makes between war talk and a 'round game' makes the situation seem tame, and indeed, domesticated, through its discussion of children and nannies. Buchan, on the other hand, speaks of 'honey and fair speeches, and then a stroke in the dark' – an odd combination of near-feminine and sexualised imagery – suggesting that a dark undercurrent lies beneath any apparently well-intentioned political negotiations, emphasised by the deadly silence with which the country will be surrounded by enemy troops.

The playfulness of Mitford's writing in general, self-conscious in its depiction of upper-class life and populated by often ludicrous characters who choose hunting over work, and animals over people, suggests that at this point in the novel, and in her writings as a whole, she is applying a different value system. Unlike Buchan, she does not opt for seriousness and realism. Early in *Pigeon Pie*, the narrator explains how Sophia's friend, Mary Pencill, 'thought [Sophia] incredibly frivolous' (36) while Florence tells Sophia that 'perhaps flippancy is the worst sin of all' (21). It can be argued that Mitford would not agree with Florence's statement, and can instead see the value of mocking the situation – the insecurity of the 'Phoney War' period – in order to exaggerate its absurdity, and to provoke questions about the reasons for the present state of affairs.

Despite the grimness attached to descriptions of war and wartime spy work in Buchan's text, for example when the beleaguered Hannay must spend 'the night on a shelf of the hillside, in the lee of a boulder where the heather grew long and soft ... a cold business, for I had neither coat nor waistcoat' (52), Sophia finds the idea of it all terribly glamorous. No doubt she is more influenced by the glamorised portrayals of female spies in cinema, discussed earlier, than with the protagonists of early twentieth-century spy novels, who are almost exclusively male. Yet it is important to be clear, at this point, about what Sophia likes, and crucially, it is this: merely the *idea* of being a spy. Indeed, it is the glamour which Sophia and her rival, Olga Gogothsky, rightly or wrongly attribute to these texts which makes them wish to become like the characters depicted.

Effort, Performance and Gender

An element of revolt against the tediousness of commonplace work is apparent in Sophia's response to the suggestion that Olga could be an undercover spy, since Sophia herself is trapped in a job involving drudgery: 'It was really too much if old Baby Bagg was going to assume the rôle of beautiful female spy, while she herself had drearily admitted to working in a First Aid Post, all boredom and no glamour' (34). The word 'rôle' reinforces notions of theatricality, stressing that the job of a female spy is mainly to do with a certain appearance, an affectation of a certain persona. Another equal element inherent within this desire to be a spy is the possibility of recognition, or great fame, especially that enjoyed by famous female spies. Indeed, Mitford makes it clear in the delineation of Sophia and Olga's

relationship that an interest in fame is one of Olga's biggest preoccupations. In the narrative, she functions as a foil to Sophia, who cannot stand her pretension and faux intellectualism: 'Olga's writing was an interesting phenomenon, rather like the Emperor's new clothes. She let it be known that she was a poetess, and whenever, which was often, her photograph appeared in the illustrated press, the caption underneath would announce that very soon a slender volume might be expected from her pen' (33). The allusion to the 'Emperor's new clothes' foregrounds the artificiality of Olga's projected persona as 'poetess', suggesting that this is merely an illusion. The 'slender volume' – emphasis on the 'slender', which implies something highbrow and avant-garde, in contrast to the more conventional form of the novel – is merely imagined, though it is mentioned every time she is depicted in the press. Olga constantly seeks opportunities to garner more attention, and recasting herself as a glamorous spy is the perfect way of holding the interest of a public newly preoccupied with war.

The performative aspects of the glamorous female spy role are emphasised by Olga's public appearances. In a letter to her lover, Rudolph, Sophia notes that:

Olga is really putting on a most peculiar act. She lunched alone at the Ritz yesterday in a black wig, a battle bowler and her sables, and pretended not to know any of her friends. Half-way through lunch a page-boy (she had bribed him no doubt) brought her a note, and she gave a sort of shriek, put a veil over the whole thing, battle bowler and all, and scrambled. So now of course everyone knows for certain she is a beautiful female spy. (52)

The enigmatic nature of Olga's persona is characterised by the mention of her 'in that week's *Tatler* wearing a black velvet crinoline with a pearl cross, toying with a guitar, beneath which was written the words, "This society beauty does not require a uniform for her important war work"' (104). Although the *Tatler* caption does not explicitly reveal the 'work' Olga is performing, by even vaguely entertaining her doubtful claims about spy work, it ascribes a certain amount of legitimacy to them, and highlights the role of the press in the creation and nurture of public personas.

The idea of a press persona is also referenced when, following the apparent death of Sir Ivor, Sophia is 'designated by the newspapers as "Wig Heiress"' (68). However, this soon backfires when Sir Ivor is seemingly revealed to be a Nazi traitor, and the newspapers turn on Sophia, highlighting the fickle nature of the press. It is obvious that Sophia, who 'liked to see photographs of herself in the papers' (69), is jealous of the attention Olga receives due to her glamorous spy persona, and consequently, she tries to outdo her. The rivalry between these two women leads to a competitiveness, particularly for the attention of those around them.

If we analyse this competitiveness more closely, it becomes clear that the role of glamorous female spy is played in order that the player appears more attractive, particularly in the eyes of the men around them. It is unimportant whether or not the war work⁸¹ being undertaken is actually related to spying in any way. Instead, it is enough for the player to make the men around them think that they are a spy by adhering to the conventional, eroticised image of the female spy, who uses her femininity to charm the men around her and plays with them as pawns in a political game. The importance of a female spy's appeal to masculinity is emphasised by

⁸¹ Significantly, in *The Pursuit of Love*, Linda's lovemaking with Fabrice is allusively described as 'war work', highlighting the connection between sexuality and intelligence work.

Rudolph's suggestion that Sophia's perfect role would be lurching with German spies and throwing them off track with her melodramatic stories, to which she responds: 'Oh, Rudolph, what a glamorous idea!' (20). The idea of being a female spy is implicitly connected with the glamour of real spies like Mata Hari, whom Olga subconsciously emulates in her exotic garb. Fact has no bearing on appearance, and the female spy role is one which must be played to maximum effect – underlined by Olga's penchant for sensational costumes and dramatic exits – if one is to impress. Indeed, the extraordinary outfits Olga wears are supposed to be eye-catching, and are intended to seize the male gaze.

Mitford plays up Sophia and Olga's competitiveness within the text until it becomes a main focal point of the narrative, with Sophia repeatedly attempting to expose Olga as a fraud and emerge as the most glamorous female spy. After Sophia is recruited by Heatherley, the reader is informed of her decision to learn Morse code, 'partly because she wished to be a well equipped counter-spy and partly (and this spurred her to enormous industry) so that she could wink at Olga in it the next time they met' (104). It is clear from the latter part of this description that Sophia's main preoccupation is with topping Olga, though once again the spectre of real hard work appears before her:

[Sophia] found it far from easy, even more difficult than counting overalls, though the reward of course was greater. She sat, winking madly into her hand looking-glass, until she was off duty, by which time she knew the letters A, B and C perfectly, and E and F when she thought very hard. The

opportunity for showing off her new accomplishment came that evening.

(104)

The great industry Sophia devotes to this task is spurred on by the possibility of upstaging her rival, with ‘the reward’ mentioned the satisfaction of showing Olga up: as we are told a little later, ‘she loved her work for its own sake (and that of Olga)’ (109). Ironically, Sophia devotes almost as much time to learning Morse code in order to best Olga as Hannay does to decoding Scudder’s message. However, unlike Hannay, Sophia is not the ‘well equipped counter-spy’ she wishes to be, given that she already finds it difficult enough to count the correct number of overalls at the first-aid post: ‘she supposed that she must have a brain rather like that of a mother bird who, so the naturalists tell us, cannot count beyond three ... it generally took her about half an hour before she could make the numbers tally twice, and even then it was far from certain that they were correct’ (103). As a result, the reader has little faith in Sophia’s abilities. When she finally confronts a confused Olga with this newfound, yet rather rudimentary skill, she explains: ‘I was just telling you, in Morse Code, to proceed to the ladies’ cloakroom, and are you proceeding? No. Have you made any excuse for not doing so? No. Therefore, as you evidently don’t know Morse Code which is a sine qua non for any secret agent, you can’t be that beautiful female spy we all hoped you were’ (105). This accusation is ironic, since we know that Sophia does not know Morse code either, and has only learned a small part of it to annoy Olga. She, therefore, also fails to meet the ‘sine qua non’ requirements of a female spy, despite, ironically, being one.

The accusation is swiftly followed by the narrator pointing out that ‘actually, of course, Sophia had only been winking out, and with great trouble at that, A, B and C’ (105), further demonstrating Sophia’s failings as a spy. No doubt Buchan’s ingenious Richard Hannay would have picked up Morse in a day with no ‘great trouble’ and used it effectively. Sophia, on the other hand, only desires enough knowledge of the code to *appear* more like a spy than her opponent, again emphasising the importance of performance to the manufacture of the female spy persona. Sophia’s plan, though, backfires, as Olga manages to convince the others that Morse code is no longer used in war, before telling Sophia: ‘Darling, you have been reading Valentine Williams, I suppose. Let me tell you that in real life the secret service is very different from what the outside public, like you, imagine it to be. ... No, really, I must tell the Chief that’ (105). The reference to Valentine Williams⁸² marks another instance of intertextuality in Mitford’s novel, with the allusion to his thrillers suggesting that Sophia has been devouring so many that she has lost her grip on reality. This is underlined by the distinction Olga draws between those texts and ‘real life’, while a clear ‘them’ and ‘us’ division is also created, separating ‘the outside public, like you [Sophia]’ from the ‘I’ insider, Olga, a real spy in the eyes of those around her, with a ‘Chief’ to whom she reports.

Yet as the narrative shows, Sophia’s attempts to tease Olga are occasionally somewhat successful. In a letter to Rudolph, she explains how she ‘sent [Olga] a telegram saying “Proceed John o’ Groats, and await further instructions. F.69.” Hope she proceeds, that’s all’ (66), before following this up in a further letter: ‘I hear she

⁸² Valentine Williams (1883-1946) worked as a journalist and war correspondent before writing a series of popular novels. Most of his books were thrillers focusing on spies, and their titles – which include *The Secret Hand* (1918), *The Crouching Beast* (1928), *The Knife Behind the Curtain* (1930) and *Dead Man Manor* (1936) – attest to the sensationally melodramatic subject matter which Olga mocks Sophia for crediting as probable.

was just about to proceed to John o' Groats when she guessed it was me and now she's furious so I must think up some more things to do to her. Perhaps you could think as you're in love with her – do' (81). This description conjures up images of a deluded Olga, convinced she has finally become involved in a spy plot, venturing off to a rendezvous with an unknown, and make-believe, contact. It is doubly ironic given that, unexpectedly, it is Sophia who ends up involved in such a plot. Mitford underlines this irony towards the end of the novel with the description of a boastful Olga 'telling quite a little crowd of people that she was hot-foot on the track of a gang of dangerous spies, and soon hoped to be able, singlehanded, to deliver them over to justice' (148-49) at the very moment that Sophia is trying to thwart Florence and Heatherley.

However, the great irony when it comes to appearances in the novel is that the real female spy among these varied characters is the least alluring of them all. Florence is the least glamorous woman Sophia could imagine. Yet it is she who is a spy, subverting expectations about the glamour necessary for one to be a female spy. When Sophia sees the bedroom Florence has been staying in, the narrative clearly contrasts the glamour of this room, a representation of Sophia, with the plainness of Florence:

[Sophia] was quite shocked to see how much it had been subdued. Pretty and frilly as it was, like any room done up by Sophia, Florence had done something intangible to it by her mere presence, and it was looking frightful. The dressing-table, exquisite with muslin, lace, roses, and blue bows, like a ball dress in a dream, and which was designed to carry an array of gold-

backed brushes, bottles, pots of cream and flagons of scent, was bare except for one small black brush and a comb which must have originally been meant for a horse's mane. (93)

The stress placed by the narrator on how Florence's 'mere presence' has altered the atmosphere is surely a signal to the reader in regard to Florence as a character.

Clearly, something about this woman who has 'subdued' Sophia's bright room into 'looking frightful' is ominous. However, Sophia, ever ineffective as a spy, does not pick up on this.

Sophia continues to examine the state of the room out of sheer morbid curiosity:

The Aubusson carpet had its pattern of lutes and arrows, with more roses and blue bows, completely obscured by two cheap-looking suitcases. A pair of stays and a gas-mask case had been thrown across the alluring bed-cover, puckered with pink velvet and blue chiffon. Sophia, who herself wore a ribbon suspender-belt, looked in horrified fascination at the stays. 'No wonder Florence is such a queer shape,' she thought, picking them up, 'she will never be a glamour girl in stays like that, and how does she get into them?' She held them against her own body but could not make out which bit went where; they were like medieval armour. (93-94)

By wearing an old-fashioned bodice, Florence should seem more feminine, but the 'queer shape' that the bodice produces cancels out this notion of femininity, and

consequently prevents her from appearing sexually desirable. Sophia, on the other hand, wears undergarments which make her much more accessible, no doubt a positive in the eyes of a modern male admirer with little patience for the old, complex contraption worn by Florence. Equally, the bed Florence sleeps in has had its seductiveness removed. Instead of the 'alluring bed-cover, puckered with pink velvet and blue chiffon', it is the gas-mask case, bleak reminder of the war now in progress, which takes precedence. Later, Sophia, in direct repetition of her earlier thought, admits to herself that 'Florence might not be a glamour girl, but she seemed to be a most efficient spy' (120).

Unexpectedly, it turns out that some of the apparently dull items Florence has are actually more useful than meets the eye. As Heatherley tells Sophia, 'those bags have false bottoms ... the gas-mask contains a camera ... there are code signals sewn into the stuffing of those stays' (95). Even then, Sophia fails to understand: 'she saw that the gas-mask carrier contained a Leica camera instead of a gas-mask, and she thought it was simply horrible of Florence never to have taken a photograph of Milly with it' (94). Rather than question Florence's need to have, let alone hide, an expensive camera made by a German company, Sophia reorients the matter around trivial questions of appearance. She continually demonstrates her ignorance in regard to spying, despite professing such an interest in novels about the practice.

Sophia, Class and Patriotism

In the text, Sophia functions in a number of different ways. On the surface, she appears to be a warning against too much frivolousness, the cultivation of an over

active imagination, and the bending of the truth for greater entertainment value.

Early in the novel, we are told that ‘[Rudolph] enjoyed Sophia’s talent for embroidering on her own experiences, and the way she rushed from hyperbole to hyperbole, ending upon a wild climax of improbability with the words “It’s absolutely true”’ (19). As a result of her tendency to embellish the truth, Sophia ironically makes it very difficult for herself to sound convincing when she finally does encounter a real-life thriller with the revelation that Florence and Heatherley have been spies all along. It is deeply ironic when Rudolph claims that ‘if you [Sophia] were a beautiful female spy, my own precious poppet, we should all know all about it in two days. For one thing of course, you would never be able to resist telling funny stories about your Chief’ (107).

This part of the novel can be seen, to some degree, as a turning point for Sophia, as she does not adhere to Rudolph’s expectations of her. The narrator, focalising through Sophia, asks the reader, tongue firmly in cheek:

Had she told a single funny story about her Chief? Had she not been a counter-spy for a whole day without hinting a word of it to anybody? Of course, she had been about to take Rudolph into her confidence; now nothing would induce her to do so. She would pay him out for being so horrid to her. Because he must be broken of this new predilection for Olga; it was becoming a bore. (107)

The sarcastic tone of the two questions highlights the irony inherent in Sophia’s satisfaction at having not blabbed about her new role the moment she took it on,

apparently forgetting that secrecy is a necessity for spy work. Sophia's silence is, of course, quite a feat really, given her inclination to gossip and her wish to top Olga. The reader is reminded of her childishness again, as she decides to 'pay [Rudolph] out', suggesting a juvenile act of revenge. The ultimate goal, clearly, is to remove Olga from his attentions, to break his 'predilection' and reclaim her position in his affections. In an odd way, at this juncture, Sophia emerges as a kind of underdog, looked down upon by men like Rudolph and Luke, who doubt her ability to do anything other than what is conventionally expected of a woman in her position, which, undeniably, is very little. As Mary at one point admonishes her, 'Really, your life is bounded by Harrods' (37).

From the beginning of the text, Sophia is positioned as a perfect representative of the upper classes. We are told that, in Luke's eyes, 'Sophia might not be ideally tactful with [prospective clients'] wives, but she did radiate an atmosphere of security and of the inevitability of upper-class status quo' (15). As the 'only child of a widowed peer' (11), she belongs to the aristocracy, which, in the years leading up to the Second World War, had already declined significantly. Stephen Gundle points out that this was a time during which 'the bourgeoisie was contesting many of the hereditary privileges of the aristocracy and in which society was becoming more open than before' (19), an occurrence which the upper classes desperately hoped to avoid. Partly as a consequence of this, some members of the aristocracy favoured a peace treaty with Germany, since, as shown in Chapter One,

they feared another war could sound the death knell for them and their way of life.⁸³

In his analysis of this period, Richard Griffiths notes that the Mitford family ‘in their flamboyant way ... reflected many of the obscure psychological, political and social motives which were to affect certain sections of the British aristocracy, particularly amid the wave of pro-Germanism which occurred from 1936 onwards’ (175).

Indeed, Mitford’s engagement with this aspect of late 1930s society highlights that popular support for the Nazis among the British upper classes – briefly touched on earlier – was greater than many of its aristocratic supporters would later care to admit. Initially, Britain wished to avoid war with Germany, and Hitler used the British aristocracy’s fear of the possible effects of another war on their already declining power to his advantage, aware that the upper echelons of British society were susceptible to the Nazi Party’s beguilingly pandering displays of pomp and circumstance.⁸⁴ In his discussion of the British novel and the rise of fascism, Donald McDonough describes *Pigeon Pie* as ‘an attack on the culpable ignorance of the British ruling class before the Second World War’ (34), and indeed, Luke’s support of Hitler demonstrates his role as the personification of those members of the upper classes – touched on in Chapter One in relation to the propagandistic Berlin Olympic Games, and earlier in this chapter in regard to the

⁸³ This fear is somewhat understandable. After the First World War, many aristocratic families had found themselves subject to massive death duties on country houses as a result of losing heirs in the conflict. Many of these houses had to be sold off or even demolished in order for the family to stay afloat financially, while most London town houses met a similar fate. In this way, Sophia and Luke are the last of a dying breed, as they still occupy an opulent London town house and employ a significant number of servants, at a time when this was becoming less and less common.

⁸⁴ As Griffiths acknowledges, echoing d’Almeida’s earlier description, a number of members of the upper classes ‘were impressed by the Nazi régime. They found some excitement in visiting Germany, and then enthralled their listeners’ (171). In his published diary, Henry Channon mentions how these people were ‘received by Ribbentrop, Hitler, and escorted everywhere by Storm Troopers’ (69), emphasising the intention to excite these visitors by giving them preferential and lavish treatment.

Nuremberg spectacles – who travelled to Nazi Germany, seduced by the fine treatment conferred on them by the Nazi government. As Rudolph tells Sophia:

[Luke] never cut any ice over here, but as soon as he set foot in Germany he was treated as a minor royalty or something. ... Berlin has been full of people like that for years. The Germans were told to make a fuss of English people, so of course masses of English people stampeded over there to be made a fuss of. But it never occurred to them that they were doing definite harm to their own country; they just got a kick out of saying “mein Führer” and being taken round in Mercedes-Benzes. (24)

The suggestion that Berlin is ‘full’ of members of the British upper classes underlines the extent to which these people have been drawn to Nazi Germany, while the allusion to a stampede stresses their great willingness to feel important again, especially since their own country is increasingly less likely to endorse their lavish lifestyle.

Alongside her function as a representation of the upper classes, Sophia also acts as an illustration of Englishness, and Mitford uses Sophia to affirm a version of Englishness that is resistant to Nazism and confident in its own values. Luke, personifying the Nazi supporters, is the antithesis of Sophia. Unlike the vast majority of the public, ‘who entered the war with little more than vague stereotypes about their enemies or their allies’ (Nicholas 179), Luke has been won over by the Nazis as a result of his travels to Germany, explaining to Sophia and Rudolph that ‘Our Premier (his voice here took on a reverent note) is going to be able to save the peace

again. At a cost, naturally. ... We have no quarrel with Germany that Our Premier and Herr Hitler together cannot settle peacefully' (18), a claim to which Sophia reacts angrily: 'Well, if they do, and there isn't a revolution here as the result, I shall leave this country for ever and live somewhere else, that's all. But I won't believe it' (18). Sophia is evidently somewhat misguided, as she does not consider how a revolution would affect members of the aristocracy such as herself,⁸⁵ but her intentions are nevertheless honourable. Unlike Luke, who says that perhaps Britain will have to 'give [Hitler] some colony or other, and of course a big loan' (18), in order to placate him, Sophia does not agree that yet more appeasement is the answer to settling the country's differences with Hitler.⁸⁶ Her disgusted reaction to the mention of 'Our Premier' and 'Herr Hitler' settling their quarrel 'peacefully' alludes to Neville Chamberlain's infamous promise to the British people that giving Hitler the Sudetenland would mean 'peace for our time';⁸⁷ a promise which obviously went unfulfilled.

The inability of Luke and other members of the upper classes to realise that Hitler will never be appeased highlights their true ignorance of the political situation, which, as a result of their exposure to Nazi propaganda while in Germany, has

⁸⁵ The first historical case of revolt against a country's aristocracy which usually comes to mind is the French Revolution. However, only twenty-two years before the beginning of the Second World War, the Russian Revolution occurred, resulting in the displacement – and, in the case of the Russian royal family, murder – of many members of the upper classes. The rise of the Labour Party in Britain during the 1920s bred fears of a similar revolution on home soil, leaving aristocrats worried about what might happen if the working classes continued to gain power.

⁸⁶ By 1939, Britain had already agreed to the rearmament of Nazi Germany in defiance of the Treaty of Versailles, and to the Anglo-German Naval Agreement, allowing Germany to increase the size of its navy, once more in defiance of the Treaty. It had done nothing about Germany's invasion of the Rhineland, had approved the union of Germany and Austria, and had taken no action against Germany for its annexation of the Sudetenland, eventually even signing the Munich Agreement, granting Germany permission to take the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia. Understandably, the British public – reflected in Sophia's attitude towards Luke's suggestion of awarding Hitler yet more baubles – felt it ridiculous to pander to Hitler any further, as it had become clear that nothing would be enough to satisfy his ever increasing demands.

⁸⁷ A transcript of Chamberlain's speech can be found here: eudocs.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Neville_Chamberlain's_%22Peace_For_Our_Time%22_speech.

created a dangerous naivety when it comes to reflections on Hitler's goals. Their country is actively at war with Germany, and yet they remain certain that nothing drastic will happen: "There won't be any war," said Luke comfortably' (22). Since there had not, as noted above, been any battles or loss of life at this point, their faith in the war petering out with no huge consequences seems somewhat justified, but anyone with genuine understanding of the situation would surely predict otherwise. By showing that Sophia, who is not very perceptive, is able to see the truth of the matter, Mitford suggests that only those who are wilfully blind, or wholly seduced by Nazism, are unable to grasp this rather obvious fact. Readers of the text at the time of its original publication in 1940 would have seen how wrong Luke turned out to be, as the war had certainly begun by then, validating Sophia's fears that it could not be stopped. Today's reader, with the benefit of hindsight, sees that Sophia is being deployed in the narrative as a critic of prevailing tendencies within the aristocracy at this time, even though few of her cohorts pay her any attention.

When it is learned that Russia, in alliance with Germany, has invaded Poland in spite of Hitler's assertion – made, Luke claims, by the dictator to himself – that 'his life's work was to lead a crusade against Bolshevism' (41), Sophia tells her bewildered husband: 'Of course I don't want to say I told you so, darling, but there's never been a pin to put between the Communists and the Nazis. The Communists torture you to death if you're not a worker, and the Nazis torture you to death if you're not a German', adding that 'if you are they look at your nose first. Aristocrats are inclined to prefer Nazis while Jews prefer Bolshies. An old bourgeois like yourself, Luke, should keep your fingers out of both their pies' (41-42). Sophia's remarks suggest an awareness that both the communist and fascist systems are based

on a hierarchical categorisation of people and on a violent enforcement of the privileges of the higher category, and her analysis of the situation is more or less accurate. She correctly identifies the British aristocracy's tendency to support the Nazis, and reprimands Luke for becoming involved with extreme politics in any form. Her disdain for Hitler and defiance in the face of Luke's pro-German feelings marks her out as a patriot in a similar vein to Linda in *The Pursuit of Love*. As she explains to Mary, 'personally I think the British Empire is worth fighting for' (35), and this fierce loyalty to her homeland justifies the anger she feels towards people like her foolish husband: 'I shall have such an awful grudge against Luke, don't you see? I do so fearfully think the war is the result of people like him, always rushing off abroad and pretending to those wretched foreigners that England will stand for anything' (24).

Sophia's commitment to patriotic action is, however, tested when she finds herself up against a gang of German spies quite unlike anything she ever imagined in a spy novel. When Heatherley instructs her to go to the first-aid post on a cold night, she balks at the idea, with the narrator meaningfully explaining that 'although Sophia supposed herself to be such a keen and enthusiastic spy, she had not really the temperament best suited to the work' and that 'it was not in her nature, for instance, to relish being sent out on a cold and foggy evening, after she had had her bath and changed her clothes, in order to do an apparently pointless job' (112). In contrast to Buchan's virile protagonist, Sophia is pampered and feminine, and the idea of doing anything which could produce discomfort is immediately dismissed. In his study of intrigue in espionage and culture, Allan Hepburn suggests that 'novels of intrigue involving spies provide speculations on the duties of citizenship' (5), and Sophia

certainly does not conform to the narrative trope of dutiful citizen. She ignores Heatherley's instructions in favour of remaining warm at home.

However, irony comes to the fore again when Sophia's laziness is rewarded, as her decision to pretend to leave the house and then 'let herself in at the back door' (114) actually leads her to discover the full extent of the spy plot, as well as the location of Sir Ivor, who was never whisked off to Germany to work for the enemy at all. Once again, much in Mitford's fictional world is determined by luck, a reminder of the metaphorical 'round game' of war discussed earlier. Sophia then discovers that her beloved pet, Milly, has been dognapped by Heatherley. In conventional spy literature, it is usually the spies themselves or their – human – loved ones who are placed in danger or threatened. Mitford satirises this trope through placing the spy's pet in peril. By having her protagonist choose a dog over saving the lives of millions of Britons, Mitford undermines Sophia's professed loyalty to her country, and stresses Mavis Cheek's claim that 'this is a world where life is gay and feelings seem flippant – except, perhaps, for the loss of a dog' (8). Ironically, a dog, generally perceived as the most loyal of animals, is chosen by Sophia over her loyalty to Britain, and at the expense of the greater good.

Eventually, though, as with her earlier challenging of Rudolph's expectations of her abilities, Sophia subverts the reader's expectations as well. At the first-aid post, Rudolph, performing a prank by disguising himself as a woman supposedly interested in volunteering, becomes unexpectedly essential to Sophia's salvation. The reference to this prank as 'an elaborate joke' because Rudolph is 'bored' (141) underlines the notion of childish gameplay in the text. However, Sophia's passing of a handkerchief to Rudolph's 'Mrs Twitchett' (141) alter ego shows her no longer

relying on luck, and instead proving her mettle at last. The narrator explains that ‘although it could not be said that Sophia had hitherto proved herself to be a very clever or successful counter-spy, she now made up for all her former mistakes by perfectly sensible behaviour’ (141-42). By casting aside frivolous thoughts, Sophia uses the same good judgment in her role as a spy that she previously applied to her understanding of contemporary politics, and saves the day. Since the text is so deeply farcical and satirical, it should not necessarily be taken as a rallying cry to the war effort, yet Sophia’s transformation, from silly spy wannabe to rather resourceful female spy, suggests that it is possible for even the most frivolous person to make a contribution to the greater good, in this case, the safety and security of one’s compatriots.

Unlike Olga, who continues to pretend to be something she is not with her blatantly false adventures served up for public consumption, Sophia emerges as an amiable protagonist due to her ability to make mistakes, acknowledge them, and improve herself. While she may sometimes appear impossible because of her comical unwillingness to perform the hard work spying involves, she never pretends to be anything other than herself. Her compulsion to annoy Olga is justified by the latter’s tiresome efforts at grabbing attention through artificial means, and as a result, we are on Sophia’s side. Hepburn suggests that ‘often the conclusion of spy narratives is punitive insofar as the rebellious or independent individual dies or suffers physical torment’ (18), but the inherent comedic satire of Mitford’s text does not allow for such a grim climax. We want Sophia to succeed. Through her metamorphosis into national saviour, she validates her existence, and the hero of a

Mitford spy novel is shown to be a dizzy female aristocrat rather than a manly, never-incorrect ex-intelligence officer.

Conclusion

The concept of personality occupies a prominent place in Nancy Mitford's novel *Pigeon Pie*. The text engages with the 'Phoney War' period in a number of different ways. Through its focus on the power wielded by dictators, on the pervasive political propaganda produced by both Britain and Germany at this time, and on wartime fears about spies and concepts of spy work, *Pigeon Pie* demonstrates Mitford's continued engagement with notions of personality and persona, and this chapter has shown how she uses such concepts in order to comment on this troubled era in British history. My analysis of this period has highlighted the strategic ways in which dictators like Hitler forged cults of personality in order to seduce the public and therefore gain, and retain, power. The focus on Nazi propaganda, which used Hitler as an icon – almost a god – in order that people would inherently associate him with its ideology, can be linked to the use of Sir Ivor King's image by the Nazis in *Pigeon Pie*. Sir Ivor's fame, and consequent notoriety, is manipulated to gain attention from the British public, which is half disdainful of, half fascinated by, him. Documentary films such as Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* propagated what David Welch refers to as the 'Führer-myth', and in *Pigeon Pie*, Mitford illustrates the effect that this propaganda – supplemented by the offer of visits to Germany to see the might of German supremacy up close – had on the British aristocracy. The influence of Nazi propaganda on upper-class Britons is exemplified in the character of Sophia's

husband, Luke, who has been completely bewitched by the cult of personality surrounding Hitler, and is convinced, even after war has been declared, that Hitler has only good intentions. Through Luke's certainty on this matter, Mitford shows the power personality can wield in politics if used cannily, while through Sophia, Mitford simultaneously critiques the naivety of such members of the aristocracy. In the narrative, Sophia functions as a symbol of Englishness, frequently expressing disdain for foreigners, a shrewd – and unusual for an aristocrat – distrust of Hitler and the Nazis, and love for her homeland.

Yet at the same time, she is not an ideal model of patriotism. In fact, ludicrousness aside, nothing in the novel is altogether straightforward. The plot of *Pigeon Pie* centres on life in Britain in the months following the country's declaration of war against Germany, and the insecurity of this time can be seen in the ambiguity of the characters who inhabit the text. The most obvious example of this ambiguity is Sir Ivor, a character who begins the novel as an idol of the British public before apparently swapping sides, in the process becoming a political pariah, then surprises both Sophia and the reader with the revelation that he never changed allegiance at all. As with Sophia and Olga's attempts at projecting the persona of the glamorous female spy, Sir Ivor has similarly adopted a false persona – in this case, a political one – in order to fool his German captors and ensure they are arrested by the British authorities. In the text, Mitford makes it clear that this uncertain world has perhaps inevitably bred inhabitants who are equally untrustworthy. Much of the novel is concerned with Sophia trying to work out whether or not Olga is in fact a spy, before finally discovering that the real spies have been under her nose all along; indeed, in her own home. Ironically, Sophia, who chased notions of spying

throughout the text, becomes a spy herself, and in the process, her identity as patriot is tested. While she initially fails this test, incapable of the ingenuity of a character like Buchan's ever resourceful Hannay, and hampered by her overt femininity, she eventually makes good, though her foolish initial conduct means she is 'not acclaimed as a national heroine' (152). She does, though, nevertheless risk her life for her country, and emerges as somewhat of a hero, at least in the eyes of the reader.

The satirical world of *Pigeon Pie* is very different from the seriousness of that depicted in Buchan's spy-filled adventures, and is one in which the corpse of a pig can be mistaken for that of a man. Consequently, it is not difficult to imagine the triumph of a seemingly silly socialite, who proves everyone around her wrong by managing to perform competently in order to preserve national security. As mentioned above, Sophia is likeable because of her position as the underdog, constantly trying to best Olga, who manages to convince everyone around her that it is *she* who is the spy and not Sophia. While most of the characters practice deception in some way – Sir Ivor pretends to be an enemy, the von Eiweisses allies, Olga's entire backstory is an invention, and even Rudolph dresses as 'Mrs Twitchett' – Sophia is genuine. To the reader, she is completely – and endearingly – transparent; she expresses her feelings directly, and is unable to hide secrets. In his lack of genuineness, Sir Ivor, on the other hand, is unpredictable. At first the perfect candidate to conduct a campaign of pro-British propaganda, he ultimately performs the same operation for the other side. This volte-face further highlights the artificiality of celebrity endorsement, since Sir Ivor only agrees to work with the Nazis in order to defeat them, and also underlines that the world depicted in *Pigeon Pie* should never be taken completely seriously.

Sir Ivor and his radio broadcasts parody Nazi propaganda, with its reliance on songs and deliberately provocative speeches intended to strike fear in the hearts of the enemy, and these depictions are at their most satirical when Sir Ivor's 'Pets' Programmes' are described. The programmes, which prompt strong reactions from any animal within hearing distance, are one of the most absurd elements in the novel. Superficially, the broadcasts perhaps show that the force of Sir Ivor's personality stretches even to members of the animal kingdom, but there is more to the description. The gullibility of the human Britons who also listen to these broadcasts and are deeply affected by blatant attempts to persuade them about the goodness of German citizens does – as intended – provoke laughter from the reader. However, it is also Mitford's way of addressing a real-life issue: the dangerous foolishness of those people who almost religiously listen to Lord Haw-Haw, a self-confessed traitor to Britain, who is apparently nevertheless impossible to resist.

Much like Lord Haw-Haw and Sir Ivor, the novel itself is difficult to pin down. Nothing within the novel operates at face value, and the apparently ludicrous action actually enables astute observations of life in early wartime Britain and the way that power operates in the real world of Mitford's time. Studies of personality were less numerous during Mitford's era than in the present, yet *Pigeon Pie* demonstrates that she is clearly conscious of, and indeed, fascinated by ideas about personality, and how it can be used by both authorities and individuals. Through its demonstration of the myriad ways in which notions of personality can be exploited, the novel asks vital questions about the contemporary social and political situation. A silly novel on the surface, *Pigeon Pie*, as with most of Mitford's novels, is much

richer in content than it would first appear, and exists as an important literary representation of a unique moment in British history.

Chapter Three: ‘Isn’t it lovely to be lovely *me*’: The Mitford Persona and Its Consumption

Introduction

In terms of critical attention, Nancy Mitford’s popular success as an author has not translated into any great amount of debate about her within academia. This lack of attention doubtless derives from the established image of Mitford in the public mind. This image, Mitford’s public persona, is inevitably associated with her notorious sisters, whose controversial behaviour placed them in the spotlight under which they remain to the present day. Early press portrayal of Mitford always connected her to her sisters, while also identifying her as a well-bred, well-dressed socialite, who should be looked to as an example of appropriate behaviour.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Mitford was regularly seen in photographic features in periodicals such as *The Tatler*, *The Bystander* and *The Sketch*. Their emphasis on physical appearance and correct behaviour also came to the fore in Mitford’s own journalism from this period, and it is clear that her focus on such matters affected the way she was seen in these magazines, and, as a result, contributed to later perceptions about her. After Mitford gained fame as an author, critics’ views of her works were often influenced by early press coverage of her. Critical emphasis on the lightness and frivolity of Mitford’s novels can be traced back to the frivolous and light-hearted image of her prevalent in interwar print

media. In the first half of this chapter, I will analyse this early press coverage of Mitford, and demonstrate how it fed into later interpretations of Mitford and her works. Alongside the emphasis on Mitford's familial connections, she is praised in magazine features in particular for her physical attractiveness and social accomplishments, whereas her writing is often seen as a secondary accomplishment rather than a genuine career.

Even when Mitford's works finally achieved popular success and her writing did become perceived as a legitimate career, early press coverage of her continued to influence critical reaction to her texts, and the second half of this chapter analyses this contemporary critical discourse. Here, I will take as a model Wendy Pollard's study *Rosamond Lehmann and Her Critics: The Vagaries of Literary Reception*, since, through analysis of contemporary reviews, Pollard builds a convincing argument about Lehmann's critical standing that my own study aims to replicate in regard to Mitford. Mitford's place in relation to the literary canon was ultimately affected by critical response to her books, and her literary status will be analysed through engagement with theories about interwar and post-war women's writing and middlebrow fiction. The study of Mitford's early media depiction as a light-hearted and playful member of the British upper classes and the subsequent conflation of her writing with lightness and insubstantiality combines with an analysis of current views of her works in an effort to discover the reasons for the persona commonly associated with Mitford, and for the general exclusion of her works from present-day academic debate.

Sisters, Stylishness and Early Self-Fashioning: Periodical Press Coverage

Debutantes and Bright Young People: Early Press Appearances

In early press coverage of Mitford, she is portrayed in much the same way as other socialites of the period. Although the presence of Nancy's five equally charming and attractive sisters increased popular interest in her and the family in general – *Tatler's* "Letters of Eve" column of 6th November 1929 describes them as 'the six lovely Redesdale girls' (256) – Nancy herself was not initially singled out as particularly different from the great number of famous faces around her. Profiles, gossip paragraphs and picture captions in *The Tatler*, *Britannia and Eve*, and *The Bystander* focus, predictably, on Mitford's looks and style, an emphasis that was typical of the depiction of leisure-class women, especially, in periodicals of this era. It is perhaps useful to provide a typical example of the lexicon used.

One of the most popular columns in *The Tatler* was "The Letters of Eve", written by Olivia Maitland-Davidson from 1914 onwards, and illustrated for much of its run by Anne Harriet Fish. Each column is presented as a missive from the titular 'Eve', identified as 'the Hon. Evelyn Fitzhenry', who discusses the latest social high jinks in London with her ostensible correspondent, 'her friend the Lady Betty

Berkshire’, in reality the *Tatler* reader.⁸⁸ In a “Letters of Eve” column which appears in *Tatler* of 28th December 1932, Unity Mitford’s attendance at a party given by Syrie Maugham⁸⁹ is mentioned, alongside an extended description of Lady Lindsay Hogg, ‘who has taken to lengthening her eyes and eyebrows with a curiously Oriental effect’, while Maugham herself is described as ‘a tireless hostess’ whose ‘powdered hair suited her remarkably well’ (528). Little attention is ever devoted to what these women do, besides hosting parties. In the “Letters of Eve” column of 6th November 1929, mentioned above, for example, it is noted that ‘Mrs. Robin D’Erlanger, with commendable energy, is hard at work organising yet another charity ball’ (256). The description of the ball as ‘yet another’ emphasises the repetitiveness of the seemingly never ending social calendar, while the fact that Mrs. Robin D’Erlanger’s energy is ‘commendable’ stresses the toll such a great number of events could take on an ordinary person. As an upper-class woman, however, such duties are expected of her. This column ends by pointing out that ‘two others who are working hard for a good cause are Lady Riddell, who is organising the Christmas

⁸⁸ “The Letters of Eve” was tremendously successful, particularly during the early years of its run. Between 1916 and 1919, the column spawned three books, which intriguingly – due to the First World War then being in progress – were targeted at men as well as women. *The Letters of Eve* (1918), for example, features a post-script advertisement that alerts the reader to the ongoing weekly presence of “Eve” in *The Tatler*, described as ‘the brightest and most interesting weekly newspaper in the world, and easily the first favourite with the lads on the North Sea or in the trenches’ (Maitland-Davidson 243). It is clear from this description that during the First World War, the magazine aimed to diversify and chose to focus on the reality of life in a country at war. Apart from this, ‘Eve’ became one of *Tatler*’s most popular exports: in 1916, an exhibition of Fish’s drawings was staged at the Fine Art Society, while the character was literally brought to life in 1918 by actress Eileen Molyneux, in a series of silent two-reel comedies produced by Gaumont. For an analysis of another famous ‘Eve’ of the period, namely the magazine of the same name, which later became *Britannia and Eve*, see Plock.

⁸⁹ Syrie Maugham, daughter of Thomas John Barnardo, founder of British children’s charity Barnardo’s, was married to acclaimed novelist W. Somerset Maugham from 1917 until their divorce in 1929. A celebrated socialite, she gained fame as an interior decorator during the 1920s and 1930s, attracting clients such as Wallis Simpson and Elsa Schiaparelli, and popularising the ‘all-white room’ as a style of decoration in the homes of the rich. For a detailed overview of Syrie Maugham’s work, see Metcalf.

Rose Ball, and Lady Worthington-Evans, who hopes to make a great success of the Gateway of the Empire Ball' (256).

The charitable focus of these events highlights a curious tension between the notion of altruistic endeavour, which requires productive work, and the apparently leisured-filled lives of these women. The idea that these women 'are working hard for a good cause' challenges the narrative created by many magazine features of this period, which often depict aristocratic women as primarily pleasure loving and frivolous. Those features highlighting the charitable efforts of such women show that frivolousness – in this case represented by party giving – can actually be used in service of a good cause, in order to make a constructive contribution to society. A reading of this kind demonstrates that some of these women's lives are bounded by more than mere frivolity, and indeed, hark back to a paternalistic model of society wherein the rich and powerful have an obligation to improve the lives of the lower classes.

More broadly, those features which emphasise the ongoing nature of the parties and balls that inform the content of these weekly periodicals highlight the question of periodical time and the repeating seasonal rhythms of weekly or monthly publications. The repetitiveness of these social engagements, and the apparent monotony of the lives of the women who dominate the pages of these magazines, pose a problem for the editors and writers, who must continually produce fresh content alongside a renewed sense of novelty with each new edition of the magazine. The emphasis on Lady Riddell and Lady Worthington-Evans' upcoming balls is perhaps intended to generate a sense of anticipation in the *Tatler* audience, and to ensure that readers buy the next issue in order to read about whether or not these

events were successful. Generally, these magazines portray the role of the women whose lives they cover as one which involves looking good and representing their families – or husbands, if they are married – appropriately, while any greater ambitions engender little editorial interest.

Of course it is undeniable that there existed a group of rich young people in the 1920s who did not conform to prescribed standards, and who instead brazenly flouted convention, the so-called ‘Bright Young People’, of whom Mitford was a member: a group who ‘blasted into the Roaring Twenties in a cacophony of motorcars, loud parties and shocking antics ... made headlines and filled endless gossip columns with their scandalous costume parties, bathing parties and midnight scavenger hunts’ (Maloney 8). The target of Evelyn Waugh’s satirical novel *Vile Bodies* (1930) – which was dedicated to Diana Mitford and her then-husband Bryan Guinness⁹⁰ – the Bright Young People were a phenomenon, endlessly discussed in the press, and immortalised in a song of the same name written by Noël Coward for Cochran’s 1931 Revue, performed at the London Pavilion in March 1931.⁹¹

However, as D.J. Taylor points out, the Bright Young People’s ‘great days were over

⁹⁰ In typical Redesdale fashion, Nancy’s parents were horrified by the novel, and fearful of the influence Waugh could have on their children, apparently unaware of how close Nancy and Diana already were to him. In fact, as D.J. Taylor explains in his study of 1920s Britain and the phenomenon of the Bright Young People, Waugh had even met twelve-year-old Jessica Mitford ‘whose pet lamb he had promised to include somewhere in [*Vile Bodies*]’ (115), a promise he fulfilled in his description of the character Edward Throbbing’s ‘perfectly sheepish house’ (Waugh 24). In a letter to Mark Ogilvie-Grant of 26th March 1930, Nancy writes ironically: ‘The family have read *Vile Bodies* & I’m not allowed to know him, so right I think’ (*Letters* 67).

⁹¹ The song is an ironic commentary on the lives of the Bright Young People, whose activities ‘were triumphantly on display, a compound of cocktails, jazz, licence, abandon and flagrantly improper behaviour’ (D.J. Taylor 4). Its refrain, ‘What could be duller than that?’ (Coward 108-109) seems to symbolise the questioning of the older generation, who cannot understand this madcap group of young hedonists, while the rest of its lyrics are remarkably self-aware and suggest the group is perfectly aware of its own ridiculousness:

They speak in the Press
Of our social success
But quite the reverse is the truth.
Psychology experts we often perplex
And doctors have warned us we’ll end up as wrecks. (109)

by 1929' (283), and by the mid-1930s, they 'had become almost wholly mythologised by the press: legendary, fantastic, not quite real' (D.J. Taylor 238). This shift from notoriety to distant memory is reflected in Charles Graves' "The Height of the Season" column in *The Bystander* of 15th July 1931, in which he notes that recently 'there have been no wild parties. Nobody has used the phrase, "The Bright Young People"', before going on to detail the post-partying activities of certain members of this group, including 'the Hon. Nancy Mitford [who] wrote "Highland Fling"' (119).

An arguable contradiction exists between the later presentation of Mitford as a model of conduct and her early association with the licentious Bright Young People. While Nancy was indeed one of the Bright Young People, with her parents' country seat providing a retreat for members of the group – Jessica Mitford recalled how 'at weekends they would swoop down from Oxford or London in merry hordes ... to be greeted with solid disapproval by my mother and furious glares from my father' (qtd. in D.J. Taylor 67) – she does not appear to have been as dedicated to debauchery as some of her cohorts.⁹² Despite this, however, even today, biographical and historical accounts of the period sometimes link Mitford with the Bright Young People, and the group exerted a considerable influence on her fiction. Indeed, the Bright Young People became fodder for Mitford's early writing, with each of her first three novels – *Highland Fling* (1931), *Christmas Pudding* (1932) and *Wigs on the Green* (1935) – focusing on groups of rich, young city folk who travel to unsophisticated countryside settings and cause mischief. Even *The Pursuit of Love*,

⁹² On the whole, Nancy managed to transition successfully from Bright Young Person to popular novelist, avoiding a fate similar to that of fellow Bright Young People like Brian Howard or Elizabeth Ponsonby, both of whom were consumed by their hard lifestyles and died young and penniless: Ponsonby as a result of alcoholism, Howard by suicide.

and its sequels *Love in a Cold Climate* (1949) and *Don't Tell Alfred* (1960), feature throwbacks to the Bright Young People, in particular Fanny's mother, the Bolter, who 'was curiously dated in her manner, and seemed still to be living in the 1920s ... as though, at the age of thirty-five, having refused to grow any older, she had pickled herself, both mentally and physically, ignoring the fact that the world was changing and that she was withering fast' (*Pursuit* 181). The Mitford sisters are reflective of this moment of generational change that Mitford returned to with the character of the Bolter: heirs of an old and respectable family and also members of the wild contemporary social scene of the 1920s. They are Bright Young People, but equally, persons in their own right.

Despite the gradual disbandment of the 'Bright Young People', however, public interest in the Mitfords in particular continued in the years to come. Indeed it was the Mitford sisters' collective lack of adherence to societal convention,⁹³ and involvement with extreme politics, which made them stand out from other young women of their era: Unity and Diana with the politics of the hard right, Jessica with communism. Nancy herself avoided either extreme, yet it is frequently clear that Nancy the individual is forgotten about in the recurrent media conflation of her and her sisters. The extended focus in these early years on the sisters as a collective

⁹³ Following her divorce from Bryan Guinness in 1932, Diana Mitford lived openly as British Fascist leader Sir Oswald Mosley's mistress, at a time when such conduct among the upper classes was unthinkable. They eventually married in 1936. The family was scandalised again that year when Jessica Mitford chose to elope to Spain with ardent communist Esmond Romilly. The worst publicity of all, however, occurred in 1939, when Unity attempted suicide in Munich on 3rd September, having just discovered that Britain had declared war on Germany. Newspapers debated her disappearance for months, with wild allegations of spying and counter-spying appearing alongside questions about her involvement with Adolf Hitler, who, it was even suggested, had given orders for her to be assassinated.

helped contribute to the later cult surrounding the six Mitford girls.⁹⁴ In her study of the 1920s to 1950s feminine middlebrow novel, Nicola Humble points out that many such novels depict families who are ‘other than the society outside their front doors ... eccentric, self-conscious units, establishing a familial identity through private games and invented languages. They are also ex-centric, with the focus of narrative attention invariably being the children’s generation, rather than the ostensibly powerful adults’ (*Feminine* 149). The Mitford family corresponds with this description: as children, the sisters spoke in ‘Boudledidge’, an invented language which they retained into adulthood, frequently using private words and nicknames in written correspondence, while the family as a unit was persistently rocked by disagreements and outright feuds between the Redesdales and their rebellious daughters. The Mitford sisters therefore contributed to their own characterisation as an eccentric family and this has been exacerbated by the recent publication of their letters to one another, though Nancy herself contributed to the creation of the Mitford sisters cult much earlier. Humble notes that Mitford’s persistent satirising of her family, especially in *The Pursuit of Love* (1945), helped to solidify an image of them in the public mind, with ‘our detailed knowledge of their lives [deriving] ... from a literary production of their family as mythos’ (*Feminine* 166). As Humble underlines, though, in the beginning, and well before Nancy immortalised her entire

⁹⁴ An interest which endures today. Jessica Mitford referred to the ‘Mitford industry’ that has grown around the sisters, which Hadley Freeman has pointed out includes ‘biographies ... collected letters ... [and] the books by the women themselves’ (41). To date, each sister except Deborah has been the subject of at least one individual biography – though Deborah wrote two of her own – while collectively, the sisters are the subject of, or the inspiration for, several books, films, television programmes, and even a musical. Indeed, the 2016 auction at Sotheby’s of some of Deborah’s possessions, held two years after her death in 2014, was named “Deborah, Duchess of Devonshire: The Last of the Mitford Sisters”, and its description on the Sotheby’s website underlines their enduring appeal: ‘A remarkable woman of our time ... [Deborah] led a life as extraordinary as that of her siblings, the legendary Mitford sisters’ (“Deborah, Duchess of Devonshire”). The auction was incredibly successful. In total, it generated £1,777,838, three times its pre-sale estimate, a strong indicator of the seemingly unrelenting public interest in the Mitford sisters.

family within the pages of her novels, ‘much of this [mythologising] was performed by the press’ (*Feminine* 166).

Two years before the publication of *Highland Fling* in 1931, *The Tatler*’s “New Letters of Eve”⁹⁵ column of 13th March 1929 notes Mitford’s involvement in a society wedding, with the author describing her as ‘the prettiest of the bridesmaids’, and ‘the eldest of Lady Redesdale’s big family of daughters and the only one without the characteristic golden fair hair and grey-blue eyes’ (472). As well as marking Nancy out as somewhat of an outsider due to her divergence from the family likeness, this remark also demonstrates the beginnings of the Mitford myth to which Humble alludes. Already the family is portrayed as female-centred – the only son, Tom, is continually absent from descriptions which emphasise his siblings only⁹⁶ – and already these siblings have a ‘characteristic’ look with which the public

⁹⁵ The first incarnation of “The Letters of Eve” column made its final appearance in *The Tatler* of 31st December 1919. Interestingly, its illustrator Anne Harriet Fish is no longer credited for her drawings, and in fact, an analysis of the column in *Tatler* issues leading up to this date shows that for a considerable period, the only illustration used for the column is the same: a depiction of ‘Eve’, tucked up in bed with letter in hand, displayed under the title page. Meanwhile, the rest of Fish’s illustrations, which used to adorn the column throughout, are curiously absent. The most obvious reason for the gradual disappearance of Fish’s drawings is that photography – both studio and outdoor – had, by this time, become much more sophisticated, and *Tatler* editors no doubt felt that readers might feel more connected to images of real people than to zany drawings. By *Tatler* of 29th January 1919, photographic images had become the predominant visual stimuli in the “Letters of Eve” column, though when the column was rechristened “The Letters of Evelyn” for the *Tatler* of 7th January 1920, Fish’s illustration was retained as the column’s masthead until 1st December of that year. The reasons for the rebranding of the column, meanwhile, are unclear – perhaps the editors felt that a new name would help keep the magazine fresh – and made more baffling by the re-naming of the column, from 6th February 1929 onwards, as “The New Letters of Eve”. The “New” part of the title was dropped by 10th July, when the column once again became simply “The Letters of Eve”, the only differences between the original “Eve” and this new incarnation being Eve’s fictional address and the general layout of the column: the original column’s ‘200, Curzon Street, Mayfair’ becomes ‘Grosvenor Square, W1’, carrying over the fictional address also used in “The Letters of Evelyn”, while the presentation of the column itself is much slicker.

⁹⁶ One notable exception can be found in *The Tatler* of 9th January 1935. This issue contains a feature by the pseudonymous Sabretache entitled “Pictures in the Fire”, which includes a group photograph taken at Burford by Eric Guy of all seven Mitford children, who are described as ‘Lord and Lady Redesdale’s family’ (77) alongside a list of their names.

associates them.⁹⁷ This visual emphasis is underlined by the *Bystander* cover of 12th April 1933 (see image 1), which features Pamela Mitford, and the caption: ‘Lord and Lady Redesdale’s second daughter – a very good-looking member of a good-looking family (“The Hon. Pamela Mitford” 45). The caption also refers to Nancy, ‘now well-known as a novelist’, while ‘the Hon. Mrs. Bryan Guinness [Diana] is another’ (45). The apparent indistinguishability of the sisters is also emphasised in a “Letters of Evelyn” column from the *Tatler* of 2nd January 1929, which remarks on the forthcoming weddings of Diana and Pamela, ‘two of Lady Redesdale’s family of lovely daughters, who are all so like each other’ (3).

⁹⁷ Indeed, this blonde, blue-eyed look played a major role in Unity, and later Diana’s, popularity within the upper echelons of the Nazi Party, with both sisters described by Hitler as ‘perfect specimens of Aryan womanhood’ (qtd. in Levy B06).

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Image 1: Cover of *The Bystander*, featuring Pamela Mitford, 12th April 1933

Family Likenesses

The consistent representation of the sisters as an identifiable set in these early print appearances contributes to the continuing notion that Nancy is just one part of a larger group, an impression which can inevitably diminish the significance of her literary output. By focusing on the sisters' characteristically scandalous lives only, critics frequently fail to see them as separate individuals, discounting their role in history, and the valuable observations they made – whether fictional, autobiographical or journalistic – regarding the complex contemporary social and political context through which they lived. One final example underlines this early melding together of the sisters into one representative unit: namely the *Sketch* cover of 6th January 1932 (see image 2), which features a group photograph of Nancy, Diana, Unity and Jessica. Immaculately dressed with perfectly coiffed hair, the sisters face the camera through an open window and all four stare into the lens defiantly, each with an amused expression. The words beneath the photograph describe them as 'a sisterly quartet', while the photograph, taken by Eric Guy and H. J. Milligan, is deemed a 'charming study of four of Lord and Lady Redesdale's six daughters' ("A Sisterly Quartet" 1). In its stress on the fact that the photograph of the sisters was taken 'at the family seat' of Swinbrook in Oxfordshire, the cover caption emphasises familial life and the close-knit connection between the Mitford girls pictured, who stand close to one another in an intimate pose. Though photographs, particularly posed ones such as those featured in the periodicals discussed in this chapter, are inherently performative.

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Image 2: Cover of *The Sketch*, featuring four of the Mitford sisters in a group portrait, 6th January 1932

The subjects of most photographs engage in an attempt to create an idealised moment that will be looked upon fondly in the coming weeks, months, and years, regardless of whether or not the photograph is a true representation of real life. As Liz Stanley suggests in her discussion of photography in *The Auto/Biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/Biography*, ‘the power and danger of photographic convention is that while everyone knows that neither family life nor children nor women are “really” as they are represented, these representations act as an “ought”’, and as ‘a standard that everyone thinks is or should be attractive and desirable and which they should aspire to or at least give the appearance (sometimes literally) of doing so’ (29). In photographs of the Mitford family or of the sisters grouped together separately, the viewer is presented with this ‘ought’ identified by Stanley, an implicit suggestion that readers of these magazines ‘ought’ to emulate this apparently close-knit group, regardless of the fact that their close-knitness is merely a pose for the camera. Press coverage soon made the public aware of the sisters’ many fractured interrelationships, but these early group photographs create an image of togetherness that is emphasised by their accompanying captions.

Stanley rightly points out that ‘photographs do not speak for themselves: they require interpretation and this interpretation may be mediated by words which surround, literally, particular photographs or from “texts” which readers of photographs import from their general knowledge’ (25). Captions can therefore be crucial to a reader’s interpretation of a particular photograph, as their wording can affect how we react to what is pictured, while general knowledge about a particular photographic subject may elicit a positive or negative response, dependent on subjective opinion. The reception of these photographs of Mitford and her sisters

would undoubtedly have been affected by the captions used and by readers' general knowledge of them at the time. As knowledge about the Mitford sisters gradually increased, criticism of their behaviour spiked simultaneously, and the enduring nature of these photographs – and photographs generally – is highlighted by our continued consideration of them today. Today, we can look at these photographs using the 'texts', to borrow Stanley's term, that we have at our disposal – innumerable biographies of the sisters, their own writings, fictional and otherwise, and the plethora of articles written about them as a collective – and discover ironies that would have been missed when the photographs originally appeared.

The role played by the sisters in history is illustrated in two features, one from a magazine and one from a newspaper. The first feature, published in *The Tatler* of 18th March 1936 (see image 3), is about Diana and Unity specifically, and appears damning in retrospect. It links the pair explicitly to both their family and to Adolf Hitler. Entitled "Friends of the Führer", it is composed of a photograph of the sisters, who are captured in profile. The picture is indisputably glamorous, with the pair beautifully shot in soft focus, perfectly made-up and styled, posing alongside elegant feather-like accoutrements. The caption beneath the photograph immediately identifies Diana and Unity as 'two of the charming daughters of Lord and Lady Redesdale', before going on to explain that 'the two sisters are frequent visitors to Germany and great admirers and friends of Herr Hitler' (511). The particular selection of Diana and Unity demonstrates that the larger group has been divided, with the right-wing sisters dealt with separately. The deep-rooted nature of their relationship with Nazism is clear from the last line of the caption, which lauds the

sisters as ‘both so blonde⁹⁸ as to set their “Nordic” qualifications far above question’ (511), an allusion which implicates not only the sisters, but certainly also the writer of the article, all being clearly aware of Hitler’s precise specifications for inclusion within the ‘Aryan’ race. The glamorousness of the portrait creates an alluring image of Nazi Germany as a land populated by Nordic beauties, willing to welcome the British aristocracy into close friendship. This association with Nazism and fascism permanently tainted the image of the Mitford family⁹⁹ during the Second World War and in the years thereafter.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Interestingly, in these magazines, Nancy is presented as different from Diana and Unity in physical as well as ideological terms: the “Letters of Evelyn” column from *Tatler* of 2nd January, quoted above, alludes to how she differs from her sisters in physical appearance, as she ‘is the only one unlike the others, for she is dark, and the rest are all fair’ (3).

⁹⁹ Intriguingly, the image of *The Tatler* itself does not appear to have been tainted as a result of its association with extreme politics. Instead, the magazine at this time seems to have provided an outlet for what Antony Taylor has termed ‘a gentlemanly fascism’ (143). As discussed in Chapters One and Two, connections between the aristocracy of this period and extreme politics are undeniable, and Taylor supports this in his assertion that ‘British Fascism provided a vector for declining aristocratic sentiments’ (143). He goes on to suggest that ‘the elite social status of a number of leading Blackshirts and their leader’s links with high society rekindled suspicions that the law courts looked favourably on Blackshirt offenders [while] ... the police more often than not protected Blackshirt demonstrations’ (143). It is difficult to prove whether the courts or the police favoured the Blackshirts, but it is clear that in some publications, namely upper-class periodicals like *The Tatler*, fascism was, if not explicitly favoured, at least, to an extent, normalised. This process of normalising can be seen in the *Tatler* feature discussed above, which blatantly showcased Diana and Unity Mitford’s links with Adolf Hitler and Nazism, and is also detectable in a feature from *The Tatler* of 17th May 1933, entitled “The Social Situation”, in which Sir Oswald Mosley is flippantly described as ‘the fencing fascist’ (273). The photograph of Mosley and its accompanying paragraph is placed alongside photographs of, and commonplace news about, various other aristocrats. The lack of editorial judgement in regard to Mosley’s extreme political views suggests that the magazine does not consider these views strange enough to warrant comment – perhaps because a significant number of readers align with those aristocrats described by Taylor, and share Mosley’s sentiments – and indeed, around this time, Mosley’s views were actually being normalised by more widely read publications, with the *Daily Mirror* and the *Daily Mail* both announcing their support for the British Union of Fascists.

¹⁰⁰ However, this is not to say that all of the sisters were ashamed of this association. In fact, Diana remained largely unrepentant about her involvement with the Nazi Party, and ‘stuck to her repulsive views’ (Roberts 21) until her death in 2003.

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Image 3: Photographic feature, which describes Unity and Diana Mitford's affiliation with the Nazi Party, published in *The Tatler*, 18th March 1936

The second feature that demonstrates the sisters' relationship with history also attests to the international interest that the Mitford sisters generated, even in the years before Nancy's satirical depictions of them became well known. Indeed, in this article published on 10th January 1940 in the Women's Supplement of *The Examiner* of Tasmania, Australia, and provocatively titled "Hitler Screamed Abuse at Her", Nancy – like Pamela – is little more than a footnote at the end. The article instead focuses on Unity's Nazism, attempted suicide, and repatriation to Britain – though Diana and Jessica also receive attention – and it categorically presents the sisters as notorious, even dangerous. The description beneath the headline instantly draws attention to how different these three young women are from their contemporaries, and how their recent activities have guaranteed them a dubious fame: 'from an old English family, noted for nothing but an occasional Conservative politician and an occasional soldier, have come three beautiful girls whose politics have carried their names to world headlines during the last three years' (3). Family is at the forefront once again, while two of the characteristics most generally associated with the Mitfords in the public mind – their physical beauty and their controversial politics – are introduced. Unity's activities in Germany and at home are recalled in a subtly critical manner, with the article never explicitly condemning her, but instead allowing the reader to make up their own mind from the information presented to them. It points out to the reader that 'this is the girl who worshipped Hitler ... this is the girl who claims with pride that she wrote to "Der Stuermer," the Jew-baiting paper, delightedly praising it for its war of extermination against the Jews' before claiming that several people have indicated that 'if Hitler ever married it would be

her' (3). This allegation is especially damning,¹⁰¹ though the article is peppered with a number of unprovable claims, including that Unity 'took an overdose of veronal' after a fight with Hitler, and that he gifted her 'a dagger engraved "Eternally True"' (3). Whether or not these claims are accurate, the article nonetheless casts the Mitford girls in an unfortunate light, clearly demonstrating the shift in opinion about them as a result of the war: 'Unity Mitford, 25, intimate of Hitler; Diana, 29, who was married to English blackshirt leader Mosley, in Hitler's private office with the Führer as best man; and Jessica, 22, whose Communist principles are so startling that she refused to have a doctor at the birth of her baby' (3). Its final lines, meanwhile, describe them as the 'wild cat daughters of unimportant Lord Redesdale' (3).

Unlike her more notorious sisters, Nancy's early fame mainly derived from her appearances in the magazines mentioned previously. In terms of politics, Nancy was one of the more conventional Mitford sisters, and because of this, and her fashionable stylishness, she was an ideal subject for these magazines. In *The Bystander's* "Grosvenor – Mayfair" column of 8th July 1931, for example, much attention is given to high society's 'younger beauties' who, it is claimed, are unsure about 'how to make the best of their beauty' (62). Mitford is suggested as a model: 'she is always carefully dressed, holds herself well, and chooses the right colours' (62). Mitford's role as an author – *Highland Fling* was published a few months before this column appeared – is not mentioned. Admittedly, this exclusive focus on

¹⁰¹ The idea that Unity and Hitler had a romantic, or even a sexual relationship, endures to the present day. On 17th December 2007, an article by Martin Bright, "The Lost Months of Unity Mitford", appeared in the *New Statesman*. It purported to contain new evidence about Unity's relationship with the Führer, evidence which suggested that after her return to Britain in 1940, Unity had secretly given birth to Hitler's child, a boy, who was immediately put up for adoption. A few days after the publication of Bright's article, a documentary in which he participated aired on Channel 4. The programme, *Hitler's British Girl*, focuses on the alleged romantic relationship between Unity and Hitler, and examines the reliability of claims about a secret lovechild. Deborah, the only surviving Mitford at the time, denounced both Bright's article and the documentary, proclaiming, as Bright summarised, that 'any suggestion of a child is fanciful' (37).

appearances is in keeping with the tone of the “Grosvenor – Mayfair” column, which is framed as a weekly telephone conversation between two gossiping women.¹⁰²

Other magazine features played on Mitford's unusual combination of style and intelligence. For example, *The Sketch* of 23rd March 1932 features photographs (see image 4) of Mitford wearing ‘one of the popular “Glengarry” hats, and also ... a new pair of suède and velvet gauntlet gloves’, alongside a note explaining that ‘she is a clever novelist’, but more importantly, that she is ‘as chic as she is clever’ (“Gauntleted and ‘Glengarry’-ed” 505). Here, Nancy is presented as a counter-example to the stereotype of the educated or intellectual female as drab and unattractive.

A pictorial published in *The Tatler* of 17th August 1932 (see image 5), featuring Unity and Nancy, is entitled “A Family Likeness”, and has the subtitle ‘Lord Redesdale’s pretty daughters’ (275). The accompanying photographs are striking, and once again, the beginning of the description beneath the pictures – ‘good looks distinguish all the members of Lord and Lady Redesdale’s family’ (275) – highlights both the attractiveness of the Mitford family, and the media’s depiction of them as a cohesive unit. However, much of the caption actually centres on Nancy as an individual: ‘the Hon. Nancy Mitford, seen on the right of this double portrait, is the eldest, and completely refutes the theory that brains and beauty are bad companions. Her first attempt at novel-writing produced “Highland Fling,” the success of which should certainly encourage her to further literary efforts’ (275). The description of Unity as one ‘too busy enjoying life to bother about staking out a

¹⁰² The “Grosvenor – Mayfair” column, as is the case with many society columns found in upper-class periodicals of this period, are characteristic of typical magazine fashion reports, ‘which seek to replicate the model of private feminine correspondence’ according to Faye Hammill and Michelle Smith in their study of Canadian periodicals (115).

claim to fame' (275) highlights how Nancy, by contrast, has already made a concerted effort to carve out a path different from that followed by the young women around her. This notion of Nancy having eclipsed other girls of her era, including even her own sisters, is echoed in a 20th July 1932 "Letters of Eve" column in *Tatler*, which lauds Nancy as 'the eldest, the loveliest, and perhaps the most talented of the Redesdale daughters' (92).

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Image 4: Feature showcasing Mitford's style, published in *The Sketch*, 23rd March 1932

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Image 5: Feature comparing Mitford and her younger sister Unity, published in *The Tatler*, 17th August 1932

Though this reference to her position as one of ‘the Redesdale daughters’ highlights another aspect of the sisters’ lives that is insistently emphasised in these magazines: their class status, since much of the interest in them can be attributed to their position within the aristocracy. It is interesting to compare the difference between the presentation of society beauties and the presentation, in the same magazines, of beautiful women who have achieved fame in the entertainment industry. The fundamental difference appears to be the acknowledgement, in relation to this latter group of women, that their fame is the result of a peculiar talent, which has allowed them to distinguish themselves in a particular field. While features about society beauties in these magazines persistently underline their aristocratic credentials by listing the names of their parents and other relatives, women from the entertainment industry – more often than not from distinctly unremarkable families, especially in the case of actresses – garner attention based on their own merit. A particularly useful example of this pattern can be seen in an uncredited *Tatler and Bystander* article of 14th April 1948 about Hollywood actress Mae West. Unlike a society beauty, West is not referred to in regard to her familial connections: the only consideration given to her background is that ‘her parents were theatrical people’ (38). Instead, the writer makes clear that ‘this unique stage figure’ is renowned because her ‘personality and technique are world-famous’, and crucially it is through her writing and acting talent ‘that she became the sensation and legend that she still remains’ (38). West’s stardom is emphasised in the photograph accompanying the article (see image 6), which sees her pose alongside a small-scale replica of her famous figure, a curvaceous puppet designed by Angus McBean, a noted photographer associated with surrealism.

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Image 6: Photograph accompanying an article about film star Mae West, published in *The Tatler and Bystander*, 14th April 1948

Magazine Fantasies

At this early stage in her career, Mitford, in contrast to West, is mostly known because of the Mitford name, and in spite of her increasingly acknowledged talent as a novelist, these magazines continued to focus primarily on her appearance and aristocratic credentials. This is consistent with the priorities of the magazines in which she appeared. Magazines such as *The Tatler*, *The Bystander* and *The Sketch* explicitly addressed – and, in the case of *Tatler*, continue to address – a minority readership. As Pamela Horn suggests, these magazines are squarely aimed at the upper classes, ‘the fashion-conscious and affluent’ (193), and as such depict the lives of the aristocracy. In her description of the history of *The Tatler* in her study *Tatler’s Irony: Conspicuous Consumption, Inconspicuous Power and Social Change*, Sallie McNamara explains how ‘in 1901, [the magazine] was bought by journalist and literary critic Clement King Shorter, who, aided by technological developments such as processes of newspaper printing and photography, launched it as a pictorial society magazine’ within which ‘the contents were not dissimilar to those of [*Tatler*] today as it commented on social trends, the social calendar, popular country sporting activities, and, using Shorter’s phrase, “global celebrities”’ (3).¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Tina Brown, editor of *Tatler* from 1978 to 1983, helped the magazine recover from a slump that had begun in the 1960s by returning to an approach that had worked in Mitford’s heyday, namely combining ‘the traditional aspects of the magazine, The Season, racing at Ascot, [while] also including people of social note, or who were fun, commenting: “I think glamour is terribly important: it is definitely what we need to capture the market”’ (McNamara 3).

The price of a standard edition of *Tatler* between 1920 and 1940 was one shilling.¹⁰⁴ When the price of a standard issue of *Tatler* for these years is adjusted for inflation¹⁰⁵ and the mean cost calculated for the twenty-year period between 1920 and 1940, the price of a standard issue of the magazine averages at £3.15. If we take into consideration that the weekly wage for the average worker in the 1930s specifically was £3.85 per week (“Pre-War Britons ‘Were Happier’”),¹⁰⁶ then purchasing a copy of a standard issue of *Tatler* would require 82% of the average worker’s weekly salary. This data underlines the exclusivity of magazines such as *Tatler*, *Bystander* and *Sketch* – also both generally priced at one shilling per issue – which, as Faye Hammill points out in her study of sophistication, were characterised by a strong sense of ‘visual appeal and elite atmosphere’ (160). It would be virtually

¹⁰⁴ At two shillings, the price of some special Christmas issues of *Tatler* was double the regular cost. The price of the regular edition of *Tatler* remained one shilling even after the magazine merged with *The Bystander* to become *The Tatler and Bystander* in November 1940, but eventually rose to one shilling and threepence from April 1941, and to one shilling and sixpence two months later in June 1941. The magazine’s proprietors attributed these rises in cost to paper shortages which had occurred as a result of the war effort. In *The Tatler and Bystander* of 26th March 1941, it is noted that ‘the rise in production costs has compelled [us] reluctantly to increase the price of this journal, starting with next week’s issue ... the paper shortage forbids waste and to make sure of your copy it is essential to place a definite order at once’ (“Increase in Price” 447), while less than three months later in the issue of 4th June 1941, an additional price increase is discussed: ‘[we] regret to announce that the rising costs of production necessitate a further corresponding increase in the price of this paper ... owing to the severe paper restrictions supplies must be rationed and readers are, therefore, asked to lend or share their copies among their friends’ (“Our New Price 1/6” 343). It is intriguing to consider the difference in tone between these announcements as it appears to highlight changing attitudes toward the war itself. The first announcement uses the paper shortage to the magazine’s advantage, suggesting to readers that this shortage means they ought to prioritise their obtainment of a copy in order to avoid disappointment. However, a high-quality magazine with a circulation like *Tatler and Bystander* could not afford to keep costs running at pre-war rates, especially ‘after the German invasion of Norway, the principal supplier of wood and pulp, [meant that paper] allocations were steadily reduced [further]’ (McAleer 60). The second announcement implies that the magazine’s proprietors are making a fresh effort to curtail any financial excesses, while at the same time maintaining pre-war levels of readership by encouraging readers to make the most of the limited number of copies available. Only a short time after the first announcement framed the magazine’s scarcity as an incentive to snap up a newly exclusive item, the second instead directly asks readers to adhere to wartime rationing requirements and embrace sharing in place of self-centred opportunism, or, in patriotic wartime parlance, to ‘make do’.

¹⁰⁵ All adjusted figures calculated using the Historical UK Inflation Rates and Calculator, found at inflation.iamkate.com/.

¹⁰⁶ As the BBC News article points out, the average worker’s yearly salary was £200, which, when divided by weeks of the year, is £3.85 per week.

impossible for the average Briton to justify this kind of extravagance. Those who would have been able to afford it, however, included newly affluent members of the growing middle and upper-middle classes, and as well as projecting the notion that ‘sophistication is the property of a distinguished elite’ these magazines also ‘covertly [offered] an education in sophistication’ (Hammill 3) to interested and ambitious readers. Mitford, like many other socialites of the interwar and wartime years, was presented in the magazines as a model of sophistication, an ideal to which to aspire.

Nancy first appeared in *The Tatler* on 28th January 1925, in a pictorial feature (see image 7) entitled “Some V.W.H. and Quorn Snapshots”, where she is photographed in a large group ‘at Cirencester House [for] a house-party’ (160). Twenty years old, she looks decidedly unglamorous, though her practical outfit was no doubt necessitated by the freezing temperatures of a Gloucestershire winter. In her subsequent appearances in *The Tatler* and *The Bystander* in particular, Nancy is a much more fashionable figure. A feature entitled “In London for the Season: A Quartette of Pretty Girls”, published in *The Tatler* of 21st May 1930 (see image 8), attests to this, with Nancy one of four beautifully photographed young women: the others being ‘the Hon. Vanda Vivian ... Miss Baba Beaton [and] Miss Rosemary Hope-Vere’ (351). Her inclusion alongside Baba Beaton especially highlights Mitford’s status as an aspirational figure. Baba, sister of Nancy and Cecil Beaton, was a popular socialite, and, through her association with her brother Cecil, a prominent photographic model of the era. She was featured in Cecil’s *The Book of Beauty* (1930), a collection of sketches and photographs depicting numerous celebrities, including actresses Tallulah Bankhead, Lillie Langtry, Anna May Wong,

and literary figures Edith Sitwell and Virginia Woolf.¹⁰⁷ The title of the feature itself emphasises the chicness of the ‘pretty’ young women pictured, who all embody the fashionableness of London during ‘the season’ (351). Similarly, another photographic feature, this time in *The Bystander* of 3rd February 1932 and entitled “The Art of Conversation” (see image 9), again places Mitford alongside three other socialites – ‘the Hon. Mrs. Roland Cubitt ... the Hon. Mrs. Evan Morgan ... Lady Sibell Lygon’ (206) – who the article identifies as ‘four examples of very witty conversationalists who add to the gaiety of any party’ (206). This allusion to parties, and the importance of such events running smoothly, recalls the hosting activities which were expected of women like those described in the feature.

¹⁰⁷ The combination of figures chosen for *The Book of Beauty* is striking in its diversity: modernist figures Edith Sitwell and Virginia Woolf are featured alongside popular film stars Marion Davies, Greta Garbo and Norma Shearer. In fact the book demonstrates a notable blurring of the modernist and popular boundaries maintained by so many modernist writers during this period. Modernists Sitwell and Woolf are placed alongside a popular writer like Anita Loos, showing that the former are actively engaging with their celebrity, in contradistinction to their professed high-minded ideals about the crassness of seeking fame through publicity; indeed, Beaton capitalises on this notion of exclusivity in his description of Sitwell as ‘a rare treasure ... as rare as the Unicorn’ (36), while similarly, Woolf is a ‘most rare and interesting being’ in whom ‘we do not find the conventional pink cheeks and liquid eyes and childish lips’ (37). However, any notion of exclusivity in regard to Woolf is undercut by Beaton’s conflation of Woolf with her characters: a process generally more likely to be endured by Mitford than by Woolf. Beaton depicts Woolf as ‘that charming and so easily recognisable creature that appears under different names in each of her books’ (37). He continues with a series of extended quotations from *The Voyage Out* (1915), *Jacob’s Room* (1922) and *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), which he uses to compare Woolf with her characters, as though the latter are little more than autobiographical sketches. Woolf’s gift for imaginative characterisation is therefore diminished, and this process would perhaps dissuade her from ever again agreeing to be featured in a publication centred entirely on superficiality and appearance rather than elite intellectualism.

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Image 7: Photographic feature, which marks Mitford's first appearance in a society magazine, published in *The Tatler*, 28th January 1925

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Image 8: Photographic feature, which aligns Mitford with other socialites of the era, published in *The Tatler*, 21st May 1930

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Image 9: *Bystander* feature emphasising social accomplishments, 3rd February 1932

The caption beside the photograph of Mitford in the “Art of Conversation” feature mentions her ‘amusing novel, “Highland Fling”’ but also draws further attention to her social accomplishments in its suggestion that the novel ‘is as bright as her conversation’ (206), thereby presenting the text as an extension of her social persona, while also perhaps downplaying the effort involved in writing it, as though Mitford simply transcribed actual conversations going on around her rather than inventing situations or dialogue of her own. A “Letters of Eve” column published in *The Tatler* of 30th December 1931 also mentions the publication of *Highland Fling* – and Mitford’s work on her next novel, *Christmas Pudding* – but again, her appearance and accomplishments are implied to be as important, if not more important, than her writing: ‘this young authoress is tall and attractive, with the great additional virtue of never seeming bored. Consequently, she is much in demand for every sort of party’ (528). Parties are at the forefront of consideration once more, and prettiness is considered a vital resource.

The alluring nature of these magazines with their glamorous subjects is directly alluded to by Mitford in *Love in a Cold Climate*, in which Fanny tells the reader, ‘I seldom saw the *Tatler* and *Sketch*, as my aunts would have thought it a perfectly unwarranted extravagance to subscribe to such papers ... I greedily [gulped] down back numbers’ (47). Clearly these magazines are seen as an indulgence by some of the older generation, and, raised by a middle-class woman as Fanny has been, she may have been banned from reading such apparently unintellectual material. Fanny’s guardian, Aunt Emily, tends to encourage a sort of intellectual aspiration, unlike that encouraged by most well-off parents during this period. Regardless, an appearance in any one of these magazines is the height of

success among young folk, as Fanny's friend Polly makes clear later in the novel: "“Heavenly *Tatler* day,” she said ... “I’m in and Linda’s in, but not you this week”” (85). The fact that Fanny is not in ‘this week’ suggests that she *is* in many other weeks, again referencing the repetitive cycle of periodical time, as well as the self-reflexive process by which a social elite reads contemporary print publications simply to see their own lives reflected back at them, rather than learning about the wider world outside their insular set.¹⁰⁸

The seemingly glamorous nature of Mitford's life as seen through the eyes of such magazine readers is exemplified by a photographic feature, entitled “At the Famous Beauties Ball” (see image 10), published in *Vogue* on 15th August 1931. Since the idealised photographs printed in these magazines depict an impossible world of endless revelry among the upper classes, the “Famous Beauties Ball” appeals to that group of readers described by Merja Mahrt in her article on the values of women's magazines and their readers that ‘use magazines to picture themselves in a variety of scenarios and roles’ (857) and as a form of imaginative escape from their real lives. It features one of the most glamorous portraits ever captured of Mitford. The photograph depicts a regal scene in which ‘Miss Baba Beaton as the Empress

¹⁰⁸ The notion of these publications existing as a form of self-gratification for the aristocracy is emphasised in *Love in a Cold Climate* when Polly chastises Fanny for not attending the long-planned, extravagant ball given by her mother and Cedric: Polly complains, ‘So what about the ball – have you heard anything? You really ought to have gone, Fanny’, before adding, ‘Never mind, there’ll be the *Tatler*’, to which Fanny responds, ‘Yes, they said it was flash flash all night. Cedric is sure to have the photographs to show us’ (231).

Eugénie¹⁰⁹ ... is surrounded by Miss Jess Chattock, the Hon. Nancy Mitford, and Miss Carol Prickard, as Ladies-in-Waiting' (33). The young women are dressed in extravagant ball gowns with low necklines, flounced bouffant skirts and decorative flowers, evocative of those dresses worn during Empress Eugénie's reign. The feature is particularly distinctive in the way that it harks back to an era during which the upper classes enjoyed more power and influence than they did when the photograph was captured, while an ominous similarity exists between the 1930s world inhabited by Mitford and that of Empress Eugénie during her reign, which was beset by numerous wars and crises. The nostalgic nature of the photograph is enhanced by the dramatic costumes chosen for the young women, the luxurious material of their voluminous skirts filling almost half the photograph, a reminder of Elizabeth Wilson's words about how 'fashion acts as a vehicle for fantasy' (246).

The painted background of trees, flowers and a column enhance this notion of fantasy, suggesting the gardens of the Tuileries Palace, Empress Eugénie's residence, while each of the young women wears elaborate jewellery, even a tiara in Nancy's

¹⁰⁹ Eugénie de Montijo, wife of Napoleon III, and as such, the last Empress Consort of France. Incredibly influential in fashion, she popularised the 'Eugénie hat', a style of woman's hat 'worn tilted sideways and to the front, and often trimmed with one long ostrich plume in the side roll' (Mankey Calasibetta and Tortora 249-250). The continued impact of the Empress' sartorial choices, even on the period under discussion, is highlighted by the prevalence of this style of hat during this era, which Mankey Calasibetta and Tortora claim was 'worn by Greta Garbo in a film about the Empress Eugenie and popular in the 1930s' (249). While Mankey Calasibetta and Tortora are certainly correct about the craze for this type of hat, the film Garbo starred in, *Romance* (1930), is not about Empress Eugénie. It is in fact based on the 1913 play of the same name by Edward Sheldon, and focuses on the romance between a famous opera singer and a clergyman. However, the film is set during the reign of Napoleon III, hence the depiction of the Eugénie's famous hat, already popular during that era, and subsequently reclaimed by a new audience shortly after the film's release.

case.¹¹⁰ The caption describes the ball as ‘one of the innumerable pageants that are a colourful part of any London Season’ (33), with ‘innumerable’ emphasising the frequency of these events and drawing further attention to the notion of periodical time. The word ‘pageant’ is even more significant, as it reminds us that during this period of economic depression, a retreat into historical fantasy – a glance at Franz Xavier Winterhalter’s painting “The Empress Eugénie Surrounded by Her Ladies in Waiting” demonstrates that Beaton closely copies Winterhalter’s scene – held particular appeal, especially for the upper classes, whose influence in society dwindled even further in the 1930s. “At the Famous Beauties Ball” effectively co-opts Mitford and the other young women pictured into a narrative of nostalgic celebration of lost imperial glory.

¹¹⁰ The photograph is similar to those Beaton took of genuine royalty. The image he captured of the young Princess Elizabeth in March 1945, seven years before she became queen, is alike in style. In “Princess Elizabeth”, Beaton’s subject is centred in a pastoral scene surrounded by a plethora of flowers, trees and leaves, and dressed in an opulent gown of beaded lace in floral pattern. For more detailed information about Beaton’s photographic association with Queen Elizabeth II and the royal family, see the Victoria & Albert Museum’s article about their 2012 exhibition on this subject, “Queen Elizabeth II by Cecil Beaton: A Diamond Jubilee Celebration”, which can be found at www.vam.ac.uk/content/exhibitions/cecilbeaton/about-the-exhibition.



CECIL BEATON

Miss Baba Beaton as the Empress Eugénie (next to left) is surrounded by Miss Jess Chattock, the Hon. Nancy Mitford, and Miss Carol Prickard, as Ladies-in-Waiting. They are dressed for the Famous Beauties Ball—one of the innumerable pageants that are a colourful part of any London Season

At the Famous Beauties Ball

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Image 10: Photographic feature which stresses glamour, nostalgia for past imperial glory and escape through fantasy, published in *Vogue*, 15th August 1931

Cover Girl

As a result of this co-opting, Mitford's status as a member of the aristocracy is solidified, and the appearance of a feature like this in the American edition of *Vogue* would affect the later reception of her work in the United States. The aristocratic focus of this feature, combined with the frequent mention of Mitford's upper-class credentials in other magazine appearances and her own tendency to document upper-class life, contributes to Mitford's celebrity persona. In his study of literary celebrity in the United States, Loren Glass suggests that authorial celebrity became 'loosely integrated into the larger market in "personalities," and famous authors [became] part of the public "society" about which gossip and information circulated in popular newspapers and magazines' (2). Mitford's frequent presence in periodicals of this kind marks her out as one of these 'personalities' about whom much is written, though not always in relation to their literary output. In Mitford's case, the force of her personality – underlined by her self-conscious public appraisal of aristocratic and middle-class language use, which will be discussed later – can tend to overpower her literary output, with the focus of interest placed on gossip about her background and private life.

Mitford's status as an inspirational figure is illustrated by her solo appearance on the covers of two of the other magazines focused on in this chapter. Unlike the *Sketch* cover of 6th January 1932, which comprises a group portrait wherein Nancy poses alongside three of her sisters (see image 2), the other covers feature Nancy only, and an analysis of them shows the development of her image over time. Nancy appeared solo on the cover of the *The Bystander* twice (see images 11 and 12), and

her second appearance occurs on 20th April 1932 (see image 12).¹¹¹ Immediately it is clear that Nancy is being presented in a slightly different way than she was in her first *Bystander* solo cover appearance of 2nd September 1931 (see image 11). In terms of the photograph used for this second cover, unlike the rather soft-focus image used for the first, which displayed Nancy in profile, this second image captures her straight-on, eyes turned to the left, gazing into the far distance. The focus of the photograph is undoubtedly Nancy's clothing. A slightly different image of her in the same outfit can be found a month before this cover appearance, in *The Sketch*'s "Gauntleted and 'Glengarry'-ed" fashion feature of 23rd March 1932, mentioned above (see image 4). The most significant element of this cover, however, is the caption beneath the photograph. In her first solo cover appearance (see image 11), Nancy is described as 'the Hon. Nancy Freeman-Mitford' (473), a name she is regularly given in magazine appearances from the late 1920s onwards. As a writer, however, Nancy dropped the 'Freeman' part of her surname (see image 12) and was known simply as 'Nancy Mitford'. The caption reflects this newfound identity as author. From this second appearance on the cover of *The Bystander* onwards, Nancy is almost never again referred to as 'Nancy Freeman-Mitford', except in announcements of her engagement, which required the full names of the engaged couple.

¹¹¹ Although Mitford appeared on the cover of *The Bystander* twice, as well as in several of its photographic features, she had a somewhat tumultuous relationship with the magazine. Aside from complaining in her private correspondence about the superficial focus of some of *The Bystander*'s articles, in 1935 Mitford and her then-husband Peter Rodd actually sued the magazine for libel. Their case was filed after the magazine's "Listen..." column of 11th December 1934 hinted at infidelity between Mitford and her former flame Hamish Erskine: 'A lady dining with her ex-husband's cousin; an ex-husband in earnest confab with his lately divorced wife; Mr. Hamish Erskine whirling round the room with Mrs. Peter Rodd – ye gods, what an evening! We, too, are all in favour of reviving the good old days' (492). In a letter of 13th May 1935 to Diana, Mitford writes that 'our libel suit is now 70 down the list ... meanwhile 3 other people are suing the *Bystander* for libel, & that particular page has stopped' (*Letters* 99).

The caption accompanying Mitford's second *Bystander* cover ends with a reference to the popularity of her first novel, which it claims has 'enjoyed a big and well-merited success' (101). This idea of success¹¹² is carried over to Nancy's final appearance on the cover of one of these magazines. In her only appearance on the cover of *The Tatler* – published on 2nd August 1933 (see image 13) – Nancy is photographed in an even more glamorous fashion than she was for her previous cover appearance. The primary reason for her appearance is her engagement to Peter Rodd, but the photograph and its caption reveal much more about the development of Nancy's image and how this image subtly changes throughout her early media appearances. The image used for the *Tatler* cover shows Nancy in profile, wearing a houndstooth and polka-dot dress and a fashionable beribboned hat. On this occasion, much more attention has been paid to Nancy's make-up and hair, with the make-up especially more noticeable than it was in the photographs used for her previous covers. Peter Lawrence, editor of *Woman* from 1974 to 1976, notes the importance of 'trying to find an image for a cover which truly represents an idealistic form of what the readers themselves would like to be, someone they can identify with' (qtd. in M.

¹¹² Nancy wrote to Mark Ogilvie-Grant on 28th March 1931 that '*Highland Fling* ... went into a second impression last week & sells a steady 30 a day' (*Letters* 74), and to Hamish Erksine on 29th November 1932 that '[*Christmas Pudding*] is selling 75 a day regularly' (*Letters* 84). Using these statistics – though it seems unlikely that such little-reviewed and under-publicised novels would be able to sustain these sales figures for more than a few months at most – it could be hoped that *Highland Fling* would sell just under eleven thousand copies in a year, while *Christmas Pudding* would achieve first-year sales of just over twenty-seven thousand copies. When we take into consideration that Nancy's later novel, *The Pursuit of Love*, 'would sell 200,000 copies', and that within three weeks of its publication, it 'had made Nancy more money than the rest of her books put together' (Thompson 243), the meagre success of her first two literary efforts is underscored. However, the *Tatler* cover under discussion implies that these novels were much more successful than the sales figures show, demonstrating that the magazine felt obliged to flatter Mitford as an author due to her status as a popular figure in the world of high society that forms the magazine's narrative focus; the editors perhaps consider it shrewd to remain in Mitford's good graces. As well as this, though, it could be argued that the tone used to describe these apparent literary successes is slightly patronising, as though the fact that the books have been published at all is achievement enough. This is supported by the general editorial suggestion, discussed below, that any accomplishment other than a successful marriage is a minor one.

Ferguson 100), and this cover photograph adheres to these conventions. The photograph is striking, and its construction is intended to emphasise Nancy's physical beauty. However, unlike the caption used for her first individual cover, which mainly focuses on attractiveness and social abilities, the *Tatler* cover also pays particular attention to Nancy's intellect. Indeed, its caption can be seen as a consolidation of every previous allusion made by these magazines in relation to the expectations of young women generally, both in terms of marriage and appropriate behaviour, and to those allusions made about Nancy in particular:

The latest bride-to-be is Lord and Lady Redesdale's eldest daughter, whose engagement to the Hon. Peter Rennell Rodd was officially announced last week. The Hon. Nancy Mitford is not only charming to look at but also extremely intelligent and an entertaining conversationalist. She has written two novels, "Highland Fling" and "Christmas Pudding," both of which have had a distinct success. Her fiancé is the second son of Lord and Lady Rennell. Lord Rennell, formerly Sir Rennell Rodd, is an ex-Ambassador, and was Member for Marylebone from 1928 to 1932. His Barony appeared in the last New Year Honours List. ("Engaged: The Hon. Nancy Mitford" 189)

The caption centres on her prettiness and her ability to enliven a party, yet as well as the continued interest in these supposedly vital qualities, there is also a decided engagement with Nancy's growing literary output, which reflects the media's gradual

acceptance of her identity as author.¹¹³ Overall, the caption incorporates several elements of the early media narrative surrounding Nancy, namely her position as a Mitford, her physical attractiveness and social polish, her gradual identification as a successful writer, and adds another new persona, that of young wife to an apparently highly eligible husband.

¹¹³ One photographic feature published in *The Sketch* of 21st September 1932 and entitled “Beauty British and Norwegian: A Novelist; An Author’s Wife; and A Debutante”, identifies Nancy as ‘Lord and Lady Redesdale’s novelist daughter’ (510), while another, published in the same magazine a year later on 2nd August 1933, and entitled “Seven Brides-Elect”, describes her as ‘the novelist daughter of Lord Redesdale and author of “Highland Fling” and “Christmas Pudding”’ (195).

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Image 11: Nancy's first cover appearance in *The Bystander*, 2nd September 1931

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Image 12: Nancy's second cover appearance in *The Bystander*, 20th April 1932

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Image 13: Nancy's only appearance on the cover of *The Tatler*, 2nd August 1935

Domestic Bliss?

After her marriage to Peter Rodd, Nancy undergoes another name change. An article about a wedding Nancy attended, published in *The Bystander* of 20th February 1934, notes that ‘Mrs. Peter Rodd and Miss Milnes Gaskell were two more guests. Mrs. Rodd was the Hon. Nancy Mitford before her wedding a few months ago’ (“Miss Penelope Portman Marries Captain Archer Clive” 329). While magazines continue to describe Nancy’s fashion choices after her marriage – ‘the Hon. Mrs. Peter Rodd was one we saw, wearing a most attractive blue and scarlet ensemble’ (“Goings Out to Goings-On” 508) – much of the attention at this time is aimed precisely at this new role of wife. In *The Tatler*’s “Letters of Eve” column of 13th December 1933, Nancy and Peter’s wedding is described in detail, and the account ends with an allusion to the home that the newlywed couple intend to keep, a ‘little cottage they have found on the banks of the Thames [with which] they mean to do all the distempering and decorating themselves, which is a most praiseworthy and economical intention’ (478-479). Due to its reference to the general trend for economising that prevailed during the 1930s, the tone of this feature seems slightly mocking, as though the writer does not quite believe that Mitford and her husband, both seemingly used to luxury, will be able to economise, let alone decorate the house themselves.

This new home generated enough interest to be featured in an article of its own, entitled “By the River: The Hon. Mrs. Peter Rodd At Her New Home” and published five months later in *The Bystander* of 22nd May 1934 (see image 14). The article features three photographs. One shows Nancy posing outside her new home at

Rose Cottage, Strand-on-Green,¹¹⁴ another sees her standing before the fireplace in one of its rooms, while the last photograph included is a headshot of Mitford. The article exhibits a trend in society journalism of this era, which Stephen Gundle suggests ‘emerged at just the moment that competition for high status was growing [and] by the early years of the twentieth century, the interiors of ... millionaires’ homes had become the subject of photographic features in illustrated magazines’ (117).¹¹⁵ Mitford and her husband could certainly not be described as millionaires, but this invitation into their new home – literally sent to thousands of people by extension – highlights a willingness to publicise their private lives, an act which Nancy specifically would be accused of performing for the rest of her life and beyond. The article itself, meanwhile, stresses a new distinction which these magazines have begun to make between Nancy the wife and Nancy the author: ‘Mrs. Rodd is Lord and Lady Redesdale’s eldest daughter, and as Nancy Mitford is well known as the authoress of two amusing society-ish novels, “Highland Fling” and “Christmas Pudding”’ (332). The idea that Mitford does not perform her writing as ‘Mrs. Peter Rodd’ suggests the two roles are totally separate, while the fact that Nancy’s married name takes precedence over her authorial identity makes it clear which role readers of these magazines are being told is the most important one.

A *Tatler* feature entitled “A Gallery of Well-Known and Charming People”, published on 17th April 1935, places further emphasis on Nancy’s new identity as wife. It explains how ‘the Hon. Mrs. Peter Rodd is the former Hon. Nancy Mitford’

¹¹⁴ This photograph rather undercuts the image of the ‘little cottage’ discussed above, as the home pictured is in reality a spacious villa with at least two bedrooms, as well as its own wine cellar. *The Tatler*’s “Letters of Eve” columnist could therefore be accused of emulating Robert Ferrars from Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) in their estimation of what comprises a cottage.

¹¹⁵ This process is still frequently used today, as seen in the photographic spreads regularly featured in glossy magazines like *OK!* and *Hello!*, both of which are willing to pay celebrities hundreds of thousands, if not millions of pounds, in order to secure exclusive rights to photographs of weddings and other social events. For a detailed study of magazines of this kind, see McDonnell.

(126-27), with the word 'former' underlining the notion that an incontestable change has occurred and implying that Nancy, by exchanging singledom for married life, is now a different person entirely. Although the article notes that Nancy 'has won fame in the fields of fair renown as a novelist' (126-27), it is almost entirely devoted to a lengthy description of her father-in-law's professional achievements. This extended focus on the family into which Nancy has married, rather than on her own admirable accomplishments as a writer, again implies that Nancy's biggest accomplishment has actually been the attainment of a successful husband from a well-connected and suitable family.

The importance attached to domesticity can be seen in another feature which showcases Nancy's home, entitled "Return of the Feminine Bedroom" and written by Audrey Wrangham for *Britannia and Eve* of 1st January 1937. As its title suggests, the article focuses on the renewed trend for overtly feminine decoration in the bedrooms of the aristocracy. Most of the bedrooms profiled belong to ladies – among them Viscountess Curzon, Lady Anne Rhys and Lady Weymouth – and the opulence of these rooms highlights the wealth of their occupants. The most prominent element of the article, though, is the exaggerated femininity associated with the décor chosen by these women. The photograph of Nancy's bedroom (see image 15) shows a space dominated by frippery. The windows, as well as the dressing table, are covered with frilled material, recalling Sophia's bedroom in *Pigeon Pie* (1940). The article points out that Nancy 'has combined blinds with curtains and had them made of pale pink cotton. They draw up and are hidden in the daytime beneath a frilled valance. They are especially suitable for an old bow window or anywhere where it is essential to let in as much sunlight as possible' (85). The final part of this description, with its tone

of recommendation, is another example of Mitford being used as an illustration of good taste which readers should aspire to imitate. In addition to this, however, it also recalls Mitford's own early journalism, which frequently contains recommendations and advice for women of her class.

This image has been removed from the digital version of the thesis for copyright reasons.

Image 14: Photographic feature, which displays Mitford's new marital home, published in *The Bystander*, 22nd May 1934

This image has been removed from the digital version of the thesis for copyright reasons.

Image 15: Photograph of Mitford's bedroom in feature entitled "Return of the Feminine Bedroom", published in *Britannia and Eve*, 1st January 1937

Mitford’s journalistic endeavours began in the late 1920s, when she was asked to produce short pieces of anonymous gossip and articles for the society magazines in which she herself appeared.¹¹⁶ Her ability to write such puff pieces resulted in more work being offered, and she was soon commissioned to write articles for magazines such as *Vogue* and *The Lady*, the latter of which, in 1930, gave her the opportunity to write a new piece each week. Indeed, the earliest example of Mitford’s fiction writing can be found in a magazine: a short story entitled, “The Refuge”, which first appeared in *Harper’s Bazaar* in August 1931.¹¹⁷ Nancy’s own feelings about the continued prioritisation of physical appearance over all other qualities can be inferred from a letter written by her to Hamish Erskine on 15th September 1932, in which she criticises this practice: ‘Would you like to write & say that my nose is interesting by the way? I really do loathe that awful *Bystander*’ (*Letters* 79). Her question to Erskine was occasioned by a comment published the day before in *The Bystander*’s “Hors d’Oeuvres” column – written by the pseudonymous “Caviare” – which suggests that ‘Miss Nancy Mitford’s nose is uninteresting, but Miss Sheila Berry’s has great character’ (489). This comment is found in a paragraph devoted entirely to

¹¹⁶ Mitford’s decision to write such articles was not merely based on a whim. In fact, Mitford’s early forays into journalism were necessitated by financial concerns. Before her marriage, Nancy was supported solely by an allowance from her father. Feeling it inadequate, she embarked on making her own money. In a letter of 23rd January 1930 to Mark Ogilvie-Grant, she writes, in reference to her work at *The Lady*, the magazine founded by her grandfather in 1885: ‘I’ve got a job offered me to write a weekly article for £3 a week’ (*Letters* 62). In a further letter to Ogilvie-Grant, sent a month later on 19th February, Nancy notes that ‘it is rather fun to do but a bit of a strain every week to think of subjects’ (*Letters* 64), showing her own engagement with periodical time.

¹¹⁷ “The Refuge” was republished in the UK edition of *Harper’s Bazaar* in August 2015, the first time it had been seen in print for almost eighty-five years; indeed, Sasha Slater’s introduction to the short story reveals that even Mitford’s family had forgotten about the story’s existence. In the magazine, “The Refuge” is printed alongside photographs of Nancy herself, including one of those aristocratic-themed portraits taken by Cecil Beaton and a photograph of Nancy on her wedding day, which further emphasise that, even today, Nancy’s personal life is seemingly forever intertwined with her literary efforts.

descriptions of young women's noses, the reductive nature of which makes Nancy's ire perfectly understandable.

However, it is undeniable that her own writing at this time centres on a light, fashionable persona predicated on femininity. Nancy's first published article, "The Secret History of a London Wedding", appeared in *Vogue* on 6th March 1929. As with most of the articles produced at the beginning of her career, "Secret History", offers a mixture of observation and advice. Certainly, much of Mitford's output at this time adheres to Laurel Forster's description of commercial magazine content, which, she suggests, '[offers] oppositional kinds of interest and entertainment, simultaneously providing practical advice and a fantasy world, giving authoritative instruction as well as passing on gossip' (4). Throughout her early journalism, Mitford frequently offers her readers advice about the best clothing to wear at certain events and about expected behaviour and etiquette. At the same time, she offers readers exclusive entry into a sophisticated world which many of them have not encountered first hand.

"Secret History" centres on a fictionalised account of a London wedding, largely focalised through the bride's confidante, who has been enlisted to help with the arrangements, and who must deal with the bride's growing nervousness as the big day approaches. Much emphasis is placed on the luxury of the bride's preparations for her honeymoon, for which she absolutely must have 'three evening dresses, a black, a white, and a pink ... an evening coat (silver, I thought, with white fox), a really good black coat and skirt, three or four jumper suits, two printed velvet dresses and one or two satin ones' (Mitford, *Annoy* 13), among many other items. The average middle-class reader of *Vogue*, though probably comfortable financially,

might be allured by the extravagance depicted in this article, which allows them to see how the other half live. The article goes one step further than merely showing a world from which the majority of its readers are excluded, however, and instead contains an explicit suggestion that some elements of this fantasy world are actually within the reader's reach. Towards the end of the article, Mitford notes that 'the [bridesmaids] dresses, when finally chosen, are copied from a photograph in *Vogue* of a dress worn by Greta Garbo' (*Annoy* 13), pointing out to readers that they, too, could do the same, thereby recreating some of the extravagance of a high-society wedding: though perhaps they will have to make do without the 'hundreds of yards of pearl-coloured tulle' (*Annoy* 13). The allusion to *Vogue*, the very magazine in which this article appears, gives the article an aura of self-consciousness and sees Mitford engaging with the metafictional approaches that recur in some of her later fiction.

The implication of most of these articles is that an emulation of Mitford's behaviour would benefit her readers. This instructive element can clearly be seen in "How to Be Photographed", published in *The Lady* of 10th April 1930. Mitford immediately addresses her reader with a question: 'May I then, dear Lady, venture to throw out a few suggestions as to how you should prepare yourself for this not important [sic] event so that the result may be even more dazzlingly satisfactory than might otherwise have been the case?' ("How to Be Photographed"). This question, with its distinct separation between 'I' and 'dear Lady/you', shows that from the beginning of the article, Mitford makes her credentials as an expert explicit, while also imbuing the article with a friendly tone. It is therefore constructed as a chat between friends, rather than as a critique of women who do not meet Mitford's

standards. The continued emphasis on glamour can be seen in Mitford's discussion of make-up – 'the chief thing to remember is not to powder too much ... your cheekbones and eyelids must be definitely very shiny indeed ... use a greasy rouge for the former and some blue and silver paste for the latter' – while the stereotypical notions of femininity that these articles are predicated on is highlighted in Mitford's claim about the vanity of women: 'If you have ever studied your face carefully and critically in the looking-glass – and it goes without saying, dear Lady, that you have done so' ("How to Be Photographed"). Once again, Mitford presents herself as an all-seeing eye, capable of knowing more about her readers than they do themselves.

The most advice-driven example of Mitford's early journalism is her piece entitled "The Shooting Party", published in *Vogue* of 11th December 1929. It takes the form of a detailed description of a typical shooting weekend in the countryside, with Mitford providing point-by-point advice about every aspect of this imagined event. As with "Secret History", the article invites even the most middle-class reader into an aristocratic world, allowing them to take the place of 'a woman who stays much in country houses' (Mitford, *Annoy* 16). The article is subtitled "Some Hints For The Woman Guest", and this allusion once again places Mitford at the top of the social pile, in a similar way to "How to Be Photographed", as she charitably takes the time to dispense vital information to women who are less au fait than her. The article is divided into a day-by-day format and filled with extensive information, giving the reader the impression that Nancy is alongside them, holding their hand as she helpfully guides them through an event about which many readers would be clueless. International readers in particular would require education in relation to such a traditionally English event, and an early international interest in Mitford's writing is

highlighted by the reproduction of this article in American *Vogue*, published as “The English Shooting Party” on 29th March 1930. The American version of the article is almost identical to its predecessor, with only one or two very minor details, untranslatable to an American audience, changed. The article, in both forms, is predicated on the importance of looking good and behaving appropriately in a prolonged, and potentially trying, social situation. Mitford stresses the need to ‘be very careful when choosing subjects for conversation’, while also suggesting that if the country house in question is particularly cold, ‘it is advisable to wear a little coat over your dinner dress; chattering teeth and goose flesh do not add very materially to the feeling of good cheer which is supposed to pervade the dinner table’ (*Annoy* 16). The way that Mitford frames her advice in this article, which has a light-hearted and bantering tone, suggests that even at this point, she is already sending up the culture around ‘proper’ behaviour and language, as she would go on to do more explicitly years later in her essay on ‘U and non-U’ language.

As well as this early mockery of societal convention, Mitford’s engagement with notions of femininity, physical attractiveness, and social deportment in her early journalism shows that early on, she was, to a certain extent, and perhaps unintentionally, complicit in the formation of later perceptions about her, and about her literary output. The light-hearted tone she adopts in her early journalism became a trademark of her later writing, as did her mockery of upper-class life. Indeed, a close analysis of Mitford’s first two novels, *Highland Fling* and *Christmas Pudding*, demonstrates that at the very beginning of her fiction writing career, Mitford was guilty of recycling her own early journalism. In *Highland Fling*, for example, the narrator explains how, after being told by General Murgatroyd to ““Get in, will you,

and lie down”’, Jane, ‘though rather taken aback, was about to comply when a kick from its master sent poor Mons [General Murgatroyd’s dog] flying into the butt, and she realized that the words had been addressed to that unfortunate and not to herself’ (67). This portion of the text is partly recycled from “The Shooting Party”, in which Mitford tells her reader, ‘when the man with whom you are standing breaks a heavy silence by saying angrily, “Shut up and lie down,” remember that he is most probably addressing not you, but his dog’ (*Annoy* 18). Similarly, Mitford’s article “At a Point-to-Point”, published in *The Lady* of 6th March 1930, notes that ‘a great help towards arriving warm is to take several hot-water bottles in the car. These can be applied to the small of the back, and are very comforting’ (*Annoy* 20), while ‘cherry-brandy [is] absolutely indispensable’ (*Annoy* 21), sentiments echoed in the depiction of a point-to-point in *Christmas Pudding*, where ‘Amabelle and Sally huddled up together for warmth in the Rolls-Royce, clasping innumerable hot-water bottles’, while Walter asks before the event: ““Have we got lots of cherry brandy in the car?”” (152).

These early examples of Mitford fictionalising real-life situations, engaging with what was familiar to her, and satirising upper-class life, illustrate specific tropes that are familiar to anyone reading the novels she produced. These associations are often used by those critics who accuse Mitford either of being too light, frivolous, snobbish, self-obsessed, or, most damning of all, altogether limited in her ability as a writer. Such assessments recur throughout contemporary critical reviews of Mitford’s works. The rest of this chapter will analyse a selection of these reviews – featured in British, American, and even Australian publications – which, to a large extent, demonstrate the reception of Mitford’s works at the time. Alongside this

analysis of contemporary reviews, the rest of this chapter will also discuss the differing ways in which Mitford's works were presented – either by herself directly or by her publishers – to the public over the years, especially through advertising and ever-changing book covers, and will examine how more recent critical reviews and reappraisals have precipitated a reassessment of Mitford's writing, her recent categorisation as 'middlebrow', and her exclusion from the literary canon.

Critical Consensus: An Analysis of Initial Interpretation and Changing Reception

Highland Fling, Christmas Pudding and Wigs on the Green

From the beginning of her writing career, Nancy Mitford was characterised as someone capable of effortlessly¹¹⁸ producing light and amusing fiction. As her career progressed, however, Mitford showed that she was more than capable of writing outside her comfort zone. In the 1950s, she diversified her output. In 1950, her translation of Madame de Lafayette's *La Princesse de Clèves* was published in the United States, while in the same year, she translated André Roussin's play *La petite hutte* for the English stage. The production, which starred Robert Morley and David Tomlinson, became so successful that it ran in the West End for three years and a

¹¹⁸ In regard to work, it is perhaps inevitable that Mitford, given the indolence of some of the characters so often conflated with herself, and the frivolous nature of some of her texts, would come to be seen by some as a writer who did not strive diligently to produce the best writing possible. This is simply not the case. In a letter to Evelyn Waugh about her novel *The Blessing*, Mitford complains about some people's perception of her approach to writing: 'Please don't think I've taken no trouble over revising – there are corrections on every page of the typescript & I had done the original MS over & over again – I re-wrote the whole thing twice. People always think I dash off my books with no real work, but it is not so, I very honestly do my *best*' (*Letters* 330). The emphasis placed on 'best' suggests a frustration on Mitford's part about the dismissive attitude of some critics towards her writing, who remain unaware of the great, and seemingly unnoticed, efforts made on her part to improve her output before its final submission for public consumption.

total of 1,261 performances. In 1954, Mitford's first non-fiction book, a biography of Madame de Pompadour, was released, and a year later, she became known worldwide – even by people who had never read her novels – because of her essay “The English Aristocracy”, which caused widespread debate about aristocratic identity and markers of social class. Regardless of the diverseness of the works Mitford produced, however, a familiar undercurrent can be identified in contemporary reviews of her writing. It is regularly categorised as light, frothy, and intellectually unchallenging. Although many reviewers do critique Mitford's works positively, it is undeniable that a significant number of these reviews, which span four decades, frequently feature disparaging insinuations about the content, quality and value – or lack thereof – of Mitford's writing. The vastness of the number of reviews gathered for analysis in this chapter makes it impossible to focus on every single one. An entire chapter – and more – could be devoted to these reviews alone. Therefore, a selection of these reviews has been chosen, which illustrate this continued focus on the supposed lightness and frivolousness of Mitford's works. Although accusations of lightness and frivolity in these reviews are not always meant negatively – a number of reviewers do praise this aspect of Mitford's writing as a virtue – they nevertheless contributed to the contemporary literary reception of Mitford's works and ultimately to her present day categorisation as middlebrow.

The earliest reaction to Mitford's novels can be seen in the magazines discussed earlier. Following her debut with *Highland Fling*, brief allusions are frequently made to her works when she appears in magazine profiles. Indeed, magazines such as *The Tatler* and *The Bystander* were very generous in their praise of this first novel. The author of *The Bystander*'s “Passing Hour” column of 11th

March 1931 suggests that ‘everyone will be reading [*Highland Fling*] in the next few days’ (429). Mitford was initially optimistic about her first novel, and her positive thinking was partly encouraged by her publisher, Thornton Butterworth. In a 28th March 1931 letter to Mark Ogilvie-Grant, who illustrated the original covers for *Highland Fling* and *Christmas Pudding*, Nancy describes how the novel has gone into a second impression and ‘sells a steady 30 a day which I’m told is definitely good for a first novel’ (*Letters* 74). However, a few days later, in a letter to James Lees-Milne, she notes that ‘the book is going fairly well, it went into a second impression 3 days after it came out’, before conceding that it ‘won’t I fear be a best seller or anything like that’ (*Letters* 75).

Regardless of its actual success, though, these magazines are shown to treat *Highland Fling* as though it were a bestseller with millions of copies flying off the shelves. L.P. Hartley’s “Literary Lounger” column in *The Sketch* of 25th March 1931 claims that the novel ‘is rousing a good deal of interest’ (540), while a “Letters of Eve” column published in *The Tatler* of 5th August 1931 describes the novel as ‘deservedly successful’ (218). *Christmas Pudding*¹¹⁹ was similarly lauded in these society journals as though it had been a bestseller, in spite of its failure to attract substantial notice from critics or readers. In a letter sent to Diana on 29th November 1932, a panicked Nancy writes, ‘I am glad you like the book ... it is a great comfort. But so far there’s not been *one* single review – is this rather sinister? I think I had quite a lot in the first week of *H. Fling*’ (*Letters* 82).

¹¹⁹ Interestingly, *Christmas Pudding*’s plot, which involves Paul Fotheringay’s attempts to edit and compile the letters of the aristocrat Lady Maria Bobbin would later be mirrored in Mitford’s own compilation of the letters of her relative, Maria Josepha, Lady Stanley, released as *The Ladies of Alderley: Letters 1841-1850* (1938) and followed a year later by *The Stanleys of Alderley: Letters 1851-1865* (1939).

Contemporary reviews of Mitford's first two novels are, as her letter to Diana suggests, rather scarce. The reviews which do exist, though, are positive. In fact, an advertisement released by Mitford's first publisher Thornton Butterworth for *Highland Fling*, which appears in the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* of 20th March 1931, quotes a review by "The Dragoman" in the *Daily Express*: 'The most entertaining first novel since "Decline and Fall"' (2). This review immediately places Mitford in relation to Evelyn Waugh, a comparison which would recur throughout Mitford's career.¹²⁰ The focus on Mitford's similarity to Waugh is an early example of cross-promotion, with Mitford marketed by her publisher as a specific type in order to tap into an already existent market. A review in the *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* of 2nd April 1931 also describes the novel as being 'somewhat in the style of Mr. Evelyn Waugh' and suggests that 'every character is burlesqued and satire is rampant' (5). This emphasis on humour is echoed in the review in the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* of 8th April 1931, which points out the 'amusing passages in this story', and suggests that overall, the novel 'will provide enjoyable light reading' (2).

Lightness is a key theme in reviews of Mitford's first three novels. In some of these reviews, Mitford's gender comes to the fore, and is to a certain extent invoked as a reason for the lightweight nature of these texts. The review published in *The Scotsman* of 1st December 1932 is the first of these reviews to refer explicitly to Nancy's gender, and notes that 'women writers as amusing as Miss Mitford must be fairly rare' (2). This statement instantly consigns Mitford and other women writers to

¹²⁰ Mitford's awareness of this early similarity is evident in a letter she wrote to Mark Ogilvie-Grant on 30th December 1929, shortly after the release of Waugh's *Vile Bodies*: 'Have had to alter the book quite a lot as it is so like Evelyn's in little ways, *such* a bore' (*Letters* 61). She even had to alter the intended name of her novel, since, as Charlotte Mosley notes, 'Lady Redesdale had suggested the title *Our Vile Age*, a pun on Mary Russell Mitford's *Our Village* (1824), but this was made impossible when *Vile Bodies* appeared' (qtd. in Mitford, *Letters* 62n).

the lower rungs of literary respectability, and suggests that in general, talented female writers are harder to find than their male counterparts. In her study *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars*, Alison Light points out the general negativity which later critics and academics have ascribed to books written by women during this period, highlighting ‘how much the literary history of “the inter-war years” ... has been rendered almost exclusively in male terms’ (6), despite the fact that ‘[Britain] was ... the place where women were, after 1919, in the majority and where women writers were coming into their own’ (7).

A further instance of this unequivocally gendered comparison between Mitford and her male contemporaries can be found in one of the more negative reviews of *Christmas Pudding* in *The Bystander* of 7th December 1932. The columnist, signing themselves “Ericus”, writes: ‘I did not read Miss Nancy Mitford’s first novel, *Highland Fling*, but presume from the manner of her second, *Christmas Pudding*, that she has modelled her style on that of Mr. Evelyn Waugh or, perhaps, of Mr. Richard Oke’ (460). This time, the comparison with male authors is not used to promote the book, but to suggest that Mitford’s work is derivative of theirs. As “Ericus” adds, Mitford’s apparent copying is ‘a dangerous process, for disagreeable persons, unless handled with the witty understanding of Mr. Oke or the riotous burlesque of Mr. Waugh, are so apt to become merely irritating’ (460). The ability of Oke and Waugh is underlined by the allusion to handling, as though these men possess something more than Mitford – whether it be technique, ‘understanding’ or sheer natural ability – which makes them better equipped to deal with the perils of writing and the production of well-rounded characters; Mitford, by contrast, ‘lacks the sting necessary to render [her characters’] malignity a matter for mirth’ (460).

The irony of this evaluation, of course, is that Mitford – like Waugh – remains popular today, whereas Richard Oke is now largely forgotten.

Aside from an emphasis on the lightweight nature of Mitford's first three novels, reviews from this period also stress their comedic elements. A feature entitled "Seasonable Humour", this time in *The Bystander* of 4th January 1933, notes that Mitford's 'latest novel, "Christmas Pudding," was seasonably published a month or so ago, and was even more witty and amusing than her first book' (28). With the publication in 1935 of her third novel, *Wigs on the Green*, discussed in Chapter One, Mitford's 'witty and amusing' comedy turns to farce, as reviewers were quick to point out. A review in the *Birmingham Gazette* of 3rd July 1935 repeats the usual phrases, describing the novel as a 'light-hearted story', and also remarking that 'Miss Nancy Mitford has brought together an amusing farcical little crowd' (8). This review is rather naïve in its suggestion that 'there is, one supposes, no political intention in the novel' (8): as demonstrated in Chapter One, the text offers a provocative depiction of fascism. Again, there is a suggestion of incapacity and lack of seriousness on Mitford's part. Although this novel shows Mitford astutely aware of fascism and its threat to Britain, the *Birmingham Gazette* review merely describes *Wigs on the Green* as 'a story which provokes many a chuckle at its genial absurdities' (8). Similarly, a review in *The Scotsman* of 11th July 1935, notes that 'Miss Mitford's novel is the wildest farce, culminating in a scene of riot which recalls descriptions of the conclusion of the harlequinade in an old-fashioned pantomime' (13). Pantomime is an intriguing analogy for *Wigs on the Green*, implying that, with its combination of stock characters, silly jokes and slapstick humour, it makes for an entertaining read, but lacks real substance. Similar charges

are laid against *Pigeon Pie*, which *The Times* of 11th May 1940 claims is ‘at times too facetious’ (4), L.P. Hartley in *The Sketch* of 5th June 1940 suggests is ‘sometimes on the callous side’ (312), while Vernon Fane in *The Sphere* of 5th June 1940 describes the novel as ‘a very good joke ... a gay little book’ (316). As these reviews imply, Mitford’s early books are seen as mere fripperies.

A focus on the insubstantial pervades reviews of Mitford’s novels, and it is important to note that this can be traced back to the early press coverage of her, discussed in the first half of this chapter. As Ohlsson et al. suggest, ‘the way in which a writer is portrayed in the media will affect the evaluation of his or her texts’ (42), and this is certainly the case with Mitford. Many of the critical reviews of Mitford’s early fiction are found in magazines in which she features prominently, such as *The Tatler*, *The Bystander* and *The Sketch*. Evidently, the editors of these magazines, and consequently their readers, already had a pre-conceived notion of Mitford and her life, which, as this early press coverage suggests, seemed to be characterised by balls, parties, fashion, and frivolity. A typical example of this conflation of Mitford’s writing with fashion and femininity in particular is illustrated on 1st March 1933 in Pamela Murray’s regular *Sketch* feature, “Paris Asides”, in which the reader is shown ‘Miss Nancy Mitford, whose spring hat is a black “Christmas Pudding” (374-75). The title of her last novel is used here to describe both a sartorial choice and the novel itself, and ultimately likens the text to an article of clothing, as though both are one and the same: Nancy’s writing is therefore implied to be fashion and female-oriented, just like a hat. This focus on the superficial sees Mitford’s early press portrayal bleeding into critical appraisal of her works, and in a sense, her early presentation – both by the editors of magazines and by herself – is used against her to

render her works totally frivolous, akin to the latest trends in fashion. At the same time, the reference to the hat as a “Christmas Pudding” functions as a sort of advertisement for the novel, reminding readers of its title and demonstrating that the novel, and Mitford’s fashionable image, are being deliberately associated with each other in the mass media in order to foster a celebrity persona characterised by style and sophistication.

The early, and enduring, portrayal of Mitford as a sparkling socialite can be detected in the review of *Wigs on the Green* in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 20th September 1935, which explains that the novel provides ‘readers who reach pages 119 and 120 ... [with] a couple of anecdotes which should go well at their next cocktail party’ (5). As well as linking back to Mitford’s early press portrayal, this review, printed in an Australian newspaper, demonstrates her growing presence internationally, with *Wigs on the Green* her first novel to be published outside Britain. The success of international publication, though, is undermined by the suggestion that the novel is only good for a couple of laughs, and not worthy of being read through to its conclusion. Insubstantiality is a charge equally levelled at *Highland Fling* in the “London Letter” column of the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* of 10th March 1931, which essentially rubbishes the novel, suggesting that ‘apart from the piquancy of its theme, [*Highland Fling*] is little more than an amiable diversion’ (6). This column, published in a Scottish newspaper, displays an underlying antipathy towards Mitford and the ‘young Mayfair’ set that she supposedly represents, with the writer apparently offended by this group, believing that Mitford has taken to ‘yawning and lamenting [over country life in Scotland] ... bored to distraction’ (6). The column’s concern with Mitford’s aristocratic connections –

‘Lord Redesdale’s daughter ... related to the Earl of Airlie ... the cover for her book has been designed by Mr Mark Ogilvy [sic] Grant, who is a cousin of Lady Seafield’ – suggests that the writer, a representative of what the column describes as those ‘die-hard devotees of the autumnal Scotland’ (6), feels that Scotland has been trivialised in Mitford’s account of life north of the border. The seemingly unimpressed attitude of Mitford’s characters towards Scotland seems to have been interpreted by this columnist as metropolitan snobbishness on Mitford’s part, and they have decided to underline her condescension by drawing explicit attention to her aristocratic connections, the implied root of her arrogance.

The Pursuit of Love

Prejudice in relation to class and gender can be seen in reviews written about Mitford’s first bestseller, *The Pursuit of Love*, and the texts which followed it, and such reviews show how Mitford’s enduring persona was solidified in these years. As stated above, it would be misleading to claim that the association between Mitford and lightness and frivolity in reviews of this period is always expressed in negative terms, since many of these reviews praise her ability to amuse and enchant her reader. In terms of contemporary reviews, *The Pursuit of Love* is one of Mitford’s most positively received novels. In his review published in *The Sketch* of 6th March 1946, L.P. Hartley again compares Mitford to other, more established male writers, noting how ‘Miss Mitford can command the inspired silliness of Ronald Firbank and the fantastic cruel humour of Mr. Evelyn Waugh’ (134). However, in contrast to the earlier comparison made between Mitford and her contemporaries Oke and Waugh in

The Bystander, Mitford is no longer deemed to be ‘modelling’ her style on anyone else or lacking in ‘understanding’ (“Ericus” 460). Instead, she is in ‘command’ of her own writing style, and capable of writing to an equally commendable standard, rather than relying on an imitation of others. Hartley praises Mitford’s construction of a novel ‘by turns tough, brilliant, audacious and diverting’ (134). The lexicon of this review is significantly at odds with the *Sydney Morning Herald* review of *Wigs on the Green*, which implied that that novel was unengrossing, highlighting that with *The Pursuit of Love*, Mitford at last found her groove and solidified her own style. Similar to writers like Waugh, perhaps, but also categorically Mitfordian.

In his review of *The Pursuit of Love*, published in the *Daily Herald* of 9th January 1946, John Betjeman builds on the notion that Mitford has applied herself and been successful in achieving her own style, particularly in regard to language and dialogue: ‘Nancy Mitford is a really good writer. She has *worked* at this book. It is good to read aloud and full of memorable phrases’ (2). Another writer who saw value in Mitford’s lightness was Elizabeth Bowen, who, in her review of *The Pursuit of Love*, published in *The Tatler and Bystander* of 30th January 1946, emphatically defends Mitford and novels like hers:

It has been an indisputable fact that intellectual novelists are, in the main, unsmiling, and from thence, I suppose, has come the increasing idea that the reading of clever novels is one of the “oughts” of life, but cannot be reckoned among its pleasures. Something is wrong with this outlook, I feel sure. ...

The intellectual attitude that precludes a smile seems to me a, humanly,

incomplete one – in fact, I go so far as to say that a smile is not only compatible with intelligence, it is inseparable from intelligence. (152)

Bowen's remarks are important, as they highlight a rallying against traditional views of humorous novels as unintellectual. In her study *Comedy and the Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, Erica Brown points out that for light literature to be fully appreciated, 'a very particular, highly attuned reader is required to perceive the jokes, irony and serious subject matter, and to perform the interpretive work necessary to find these novels funny, ironic, and simultaneously serious' (3). Rather than seeing these books as intellectually unchallenging, then, Bowen advocates a reading practice which appreciates that 'jokes require very specific knowledge and shared attitudes ... in order to be shared' (Brown 3), and acknowledges the multi-layered nature of texts like Mitford's, which demand astuteness as well as a sense of humour.

Romance and comedy, despite their respectable origins in medieval and Renaissance poetry and drama, were not seen as serious genres in the context of mid-twentieth-century fiction. As Lise Jaillant suggests in her study *Modernism, Middlebrow and the Literary Canon: The Modern Library Series, 1917-1955*, 'in the 1940s and 1950s, at a time when the responsibility of the writer was violently debated, intellectuals who defined themselves as "serious" could no longer endorse supposedly harmful popular genres' (79). By pointing out the importance of reading pleasure, and critiquing the idea that if a text is unenjoyable, it must be of greater intellectual value, Elizabeth Bowen seems to suggest that an intelligent attitude to life must always include a sense of humour. It could be argued that, as Bowen was herself a female writer, the observation expressed in her review of *The Pursuit of*

Love is reflective of her own experience of denigration as a result of her gender and the female-centred plots and partially domestic content of her novels.¹²¹ In general, Bowen's reviews of Mitford's works are very positive.

Orville Prescott's review of *The Pursuit of Love* in *The New York Times* of 11th June 1946 concedes that it is 'an engaging and diverting novel', but suggests that it is 'certain to leave many of its readers perplexed and curious' (21). Prescott feels unsure of Mitford's intentions: 'just how seriously does Miss Mitford wish to be taken and where her social satire leaves off and outrageous burlesque begins are questions her story raises and does not answer' (21). His musings imply that the novel ought to take one route or the other – either the serious or the light-hearted – in order to enable critics to 'place' it. He adds, though: 'perhaps it is futile to brood about such matters since 'maybe that is all [Mitford] intended: to amuse. If so, "The Pursuit of Love" is a complete success' (21). As twenty-first century critics, we may argue that much of the value of the novel lies in its disrupting blending of genres, but most contemporary reviewers were keen to assign it to a single category.

Orville Prescott's fellow *New York Times* critic Isabelle Mallet – whose review of *The Pursuit of Love* in the *New York Times Book Review* of 9th June 1946 was the first review of a Mitford novel to appear in a major American publication –

¹²¹ However, Bowen is unlikely to have received exactly the same contemporary treatment as Mitford, since Bowen's novels in general are characterised by a reliance on tropes traditionally associated with literary modernism, such as filmmaking techniques and an emphasis on the psychological make-up of her characters. Wendy Pollard suggests that Bowen suffered a similar fate to Rosamond Lehmann, with both writers frequently described by contemporary reviewers as 'feminine' and reliant upon 'sensibility', with the overall implication being that these qualities limited their ability to transition into a post-war world. Yet regardless of contemporary opinions of Bowen's work, she has, unlike Mitford, been discussed in a number of books and articles, arguably because of her now acknowledged association with modernism, and her recent categorisation as a modernist. Academic studies of Bowen include Phyllis Lassner's *Elizabeth Bowen* (Barnes & Noble, 1989), Maud Ellman's *Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadow Across the Page* (Edinburgh University Press, 2003), Neil Corcoran's *Elizabeth Bowen: The Enforced Return* (Oxford University Press, 2004) and Eibhear Walshe's edited collection, *Elizabeth Bowen* (Irish Academic Press, 2008).

also expresses surprise in relation to the book. Mallet, however, unlike Prescott, is pleasantly surprised by the novel. Rather than attempting to assign it to a particular category, Mallet instead suggests that *The Pursuit of Love* offers its reader ‘a fleeting hope of happiness, delicate, fresh and wistful; not at all the sort of thing you expect to find smiling up at you from the pages of sophisticated wit’ (4). Yet, as Mallet adds, ‘that is what you find’, and this is because ‘Miss Mitford has ... [allowed] tenderness to overwhelm the impulse to pure caricature or parody’ (4). In Mallet’s view, the novel appears to transcend category, and, in contrast to Prescott, she clearly did not expect to find such beauty in the work of a smart, sophisticated writer like Mitford, who may be expected to skewer everything with her wit, rather than explore sincere feeling. Mallet therefore appreciates the text’s emotional impact, and acknowledges that it makes a greater impression on the jaded critic than one would ordinarily expect from an apparently light novel. The impact of the text on Mallet is underlined in the final paragraph of her review, where she admits that ‘it all [lingers] in the memory like a smiling ghost’ (4).

Despite Mallet’s admiration of *The Pursuit of Love*, though, other critics voice similar concerns to those she and Prescott express. The opening line of Edmund Wilson’s generally dismissive review of *The Pursuit of Love* in *The New Yorker* of 15th June 1946 immediately discounts any notion of intelligence or nuance in Mitford’s text. Wilson suggests that ‘the let-your-mind-rest season is with us again’ (94). Although Wilson’s brief review is positive overall – he grants that *The Pursuit of Love* is ‘mocking, good-tempered, and very funny’ – it has a sneering tone which implies that the reader should not expect much intellectual nourishment from the text, exemplified by his summing up of the text as an ‘entertaining light novel’

(94). The novel is, of course, much deeper than his terribly short review would suggest, particularly in its multi-layered assessment of marriage and its subtle depictions of the effects of fascism on interwar Europe. However, although Wilson can acknowledge that *The Pursuit of Love* is entertaining, he cannot accept the notion that lightness can be anything more than entertaining. Surely a novel which, on the surface, focuses primarily on women, romance and female sexuality – Nicola Beauman describes it as ‘the apotheosis of the woman’s novel about love’ (279) – cannot possibly be complex or profound. Instead, Wilson contends, *The Pursuit of Love* offers the reader a chance to disengage their brain, to ‘let-your-mind-rest’ (94), and is symptomatic of ‘the middlebrow novel ... [that offers] intellectual stimulation without undue effort’ (Humble, *Feminine* 11).

However, it can be argued that Mitford’s writing can be placed in the category of ‘durable fluff’ suggested by Robert Scholes in his study *Paradoxy of Modernism*. Scholes identifies ‘durable fluff’ as those “‘light and funny” [texts] – totally lacking in what Matthew Arnold called “high seriousness” – [which] manage to survive and find audiences at least as well as others that are intended to be masterpieces of profundity’ (144). Mitford’s novels are certainly characteristic of what Scholes calls a ‘crucial element in durable fluff’, namely ‘the perception that social structures and roles are performative rather than innate ... that life consists not so much of destinies as of roles’ (153). Role-playing is a key part of several of Mitford’s novels, which frequently feature characters attempting to escape everyday confines through the adoption of different personas, while another element of ‘durable fluff’ can be applied to *The Pursuit of Love* specifically: ‘[the] representation of people readily changing social positions or genders or emotional

commitments – or transcending the limits normally taken to be those of a social position or gender or a strong emotion like love’ (153). Linda alone, with her fluctuating emotions and transcendence of social expectations, fits this description perfectly, while Cedric in *Love in a Cold Climate* adheres to Scholes’ notion of the flouting of conventional gender roles in texts of this type.

Mitford’s ironic approach in her writing demonstrates a reversal of accepted value systems that no doubt contributed to contemporary critical, and later academic, dismissal of her works, which are frequently seen as witty, yet lacking in substance. This perceived lack of substance prevented Mitford’s texts from being seen as in any way modernist, but made them very popular with the public. Scholes selects Oscar Wilde as the key producer of ‘durable fluff’, and his description of Wilde can equally be applied to Mitford: ‘his witty dialogue functions to make the characters more attractive to the audience. It’s hard not to like people who are so amusing. Their ironic speeches function to generate an emotional flow toward them’, while ‘the ironies of the plot put them in situations that use this emotional flow to make the audience invest in the happy ending [Wilde] intends to provide’ (159). Mitford – though the happiness of some of her endings may be questionable – uses humour in a similar way to Wilde, creating characters who are almost impossible to dislike, and in this way, encouraging her reader to become invested in their lives, however ridiculous these lives may seem. Mitford may not adopt modernist techniques like stream-of-consciousness, or subvert narrative convention by using an experimental style, but the positive reaction of readers to her novels suggests that her texts appealed to a large proportion of the reading public, who hungrily consumed these

detached and ironic depictions of upper-class life, even if some critics could not comprehend the attraction.

Love in a Cold Climate

Moving on to reviews of *Love in a Cold Climate*, Mitford's sixth novel and the sequel to *The Pursuit of Love*, in his 8th July 1949 *New York Times* review of *Climate*, Orville Prescott is once again perplexed: 'Is this a satire of the advanced state of decadence reached by the aristocracy of England in this century, a light-hearted and occasionally witty burlesque, or just a lot of high-spirited nonsense?' (17). Prescott's question is an amalgamation of the varied critical reaction Mitford's works have generated over the years, as her novels in particular can be so idiosyncratic that the reader – as demonstrated in Chapter One – is not entirely sure what to make of them. Prescott's review is peculiar, however, because it sees him moving away from a prejudice against the general lightness of Mitford's novels to a prejudice against Mitford herself. Prescott unnecessarily brings Mitford's political beliefs into the equation, describing her, confusingly, as 'a Right-Wing Socialist who votes Labour without conviction' (17). Prescott's review is, in general, imbued with intolerance, as evidenced by his description of Mitford's rather innovative gay character – Cedric, unexpected heir to Lord Montdore, who unlike most gay characters in fiction of this era does not die, lose his mind or otherwise suffer punishment for his homosexuality – as 'a lavender young esthete ... a clever, witty and loathsome hothouse flower' (17). Humble points out that 'the novel is completely on Cedric's side, his transformation of the stuffy Montdore offering the

same sort of narrative gratification as does Flora's re-making of the inhabitants of Cold Comfort Farm' in Stella Gibbons' novel ("Queer" 228). Prescott's negative response to Cedric's subversion of the usual fate of gay characters in novels like *Love in a Cold Climate* is as typical of the time in which it was written as his allusion to Mitford's apparent political leanings. Prescott's treatment of Cedric is unfortunate, but nonetheless significant, because it demonstrates the general view taken toward homosexuality at this time.¹²² Cedric is an entirely new creation, totally unashamed of his sexuality – '[his] gayness is completely apparent from the moment he sashays into the novel' (Humble, "Queer" 227-28) – during a time in which homosexuality, particularly among men, was vilified, and even criminalised. In her usual teasing fashion, Mitford pulls her reader – including uncomfortable, homophobic male critics like Prescott – into a world where she 'absolutely expects the reader to understand what she is saying about Cedric's sexuality' (Humble, "Queer" 228). Mitford's willingness to include, and indeed even portray sympathetically, characters who deviate from prevailing social norms is an element of her writing that receives little attention, and which is actually rather ground-breaking.

Any notion of innovativeness in Mitford's writing, however, is discounted completely by Brendan Gill's review of *Love in a Cold Climate* in *The New Yorker* of 23rd July 1949. Despite Mitford's status at this point as a well-established author with acknowledged talent – even Prescott admits that 'Miss Mitford, of course, is herself and no imitator of anyone' (17) – Gill repeats the same assertion; namely that

¹²² Indeed, Prescott was somewhat notorious for his views on homosexuality and for the overtly moralistic tone of his reviews in general. The writer Gore Vidal, himself gay, and whose work frequently focuses on LGBT characters and their experiences, despised Prescott. In a July 1961 article for *Esquire*, Vidal decries Prescott's 'identification with what he thinks to be his audience: the middle-aged, middle-class, moderately Affluent American woman' and criticises his reviews, which show that despite the passing of the years 'the Good Grey Goose of the *Times* is unchanged [and] still gives marks to novels not for style nor insight nor wisdom nor art, but for "morality"' ("Comment").

Love in a Cold Climate is insubstantial: ‘This is the time of year when, according to one of the oldest and most sacred superstitions of publishing, the reading public is to be found slouched on its back in a string hammock, victim of a sudden and unappeasable appetite for light novels’ (70). The choice of words in this example from Gill’s review is intriguing. In her article about physical differences in reading style – i.e. whether a text is read at a desk, on a sofa, is studied carefully or enjoyed comfortably – Humble alludes to the highbrow notion that highbrow texts, studied rather than enjoyed, should be taken in by a reader who is ‘upright, rigid, physically unable to relax’ because ‘the scholar engages with his reading from a bodily position of alertness, hostility, separateness from the text’ (“Sitting” 48). In contrast, ‘the leisured reader lolls, relaxing into his book and chair, spine curled, virtually foetal, fleeing into the body with the comfort of sleep or womb rather than in monastic disavowal of its needs (48). Gill’s conception of the average reader of a book like *Love in a Cold Climate* betrays a bias against reading for pleasure akin to that of the highbrow scholars discussed by Humble, while his image of this lazy, unintellectual reader ‘slouched on its back in a string hammock’ (70) recalls Janice A. Radway’s description of how publishers in this period began to categorise books by genre and subsection, using labels ‘such as hammock literature, serious fiction, popular history’ (168) and so on. The clear distinction such publishers – and Gill – make between hammock literature and serious fiction again sees Mitford’s novel relegated to the category of unchallenging leisure reading. Meanwhile, Gill’s reference to an appetite for novels, and his suggestion that this is an unfortunate occurrence, recalls Beaman’s assertion that ‘ever since the character in Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (1818) confessed to reading “only a novel”, and the French censors of the late

1850s declared that Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* was corrupting because it showed a married woman led astray by an over-rich diet of light fiction, this argument has refused to go away' (247). As Gill goes on to claim, '[*Love in a Cold Climate*] is ... one of those mysteriously able and amusing and unimportant books' in which 'on no account is the reader's mind to be tampered with ... for it is part of the unwritten contract between author and reader that the light novel is primarily a means of killing time' (70). These novels apparently have almost no intellectual content and are therefore mere trifles; trifles which should be consumed sparingly and, Beaman's description suggests, in which one must not overindulge.

Food and Delight

The repeated allusions to food in Gill's review highlight a trope that recurs throughout reviews of Mitford's works by contemporary critics, and it is worthwhile exploring some of these instances in more detail, as they function as signals that draw attention to the overall perception of Mitford's novels and middlebrow literature more generally. In his review of *Love in a Cold Climate*, Gill suggests that 'these works are to the robust fare of midwinter what a raspberry ice is to roast beef and Yorkshire pudding; they are expected to cool the prostrate reader, not nourish him' (70), stressing the recumbent position of Humble's laidback reader once more. It is significant that Gill compares novels like Mitford's to sweet food, suggesting that these texts should be enjoyed as a treat rather than every day. Radway notes that an opposition developed during this period between books seen as 'real literature' and their opposite, with the latter 'usually compared ... to nonnourishing food'

(210). These novels, then, offer little more than enjoyment, and are as ephemeral as insubstantial food, unlike ‘real literature’ which will nourish its reader both intellectually and spiritually. The notion of books as food suggests a model of consumption whereby the book is used up almost instantly and fails to generate anything, implying that it will not be re-read and will have no lasting effect on its reader, which can be connected to ideas of cultural consumption and the categorisation of the book as commodity. Direct comparisons made between Mitford’s novels and meals can be found in the early years of her career, too, and this carries through to Rosemary Carr Benet’s summary of *The Blessing* (1951) in *The Saturday Review* of 6th October 1951, in which she describes the novel as ‘quite a dish’ (33). In general though, Mitford’s works are generally compared to starters or sweets: in *The Tatler and Bystander* of 6th September 1950, Gordon Beckles describes Mitford’s play *The Little Hut* as ‘a delightful piece of confectionery’ (419) while in *The Tatler and Bystander* of 27th September 1950, it is compared to ‘a charming theatrical *vol-au-vent*’ (“At the Theatre” 569). Always light and insubstantial fare, Mitford’s fiction is never the main course.

A correlation can be made between these repeated suggestions that Mitford’s novels are similar to light, insubstantial foods and Pierre Bourdieu’s conception of food in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Bourdieu focuses particularly on foods that are stereotypically associated with men – ‘meat, the nourishing food par excellence, strong and strong-making, giving vigour, blood, and health, is the dish for the men’ (192) – and his suggestion that the diet of men is characterised by heavy foods eaten passionately is placed in contrast to the female approach, which involves lighter foods, and which, in his view, is associated with

‘nibbling and picking, as befits a woman’ (190-91). The idea that light food is inherently feminine connects to the disparaging opinions held by literary critics of the period in relation to light novels, whose readers were generally assumed to be women. The image of the stereotypical female reader, lolling and relaxing – to use Humble’s terminology – while consuming a novel quite beneath serious study is an example of what Andreas Huyssen has referred to as ‘the universalizing ascription of femininity to mass culture [which] always depended on the very real exclusion of women from high culture and its institutions’ (62). Until relatively recently, it was accepted that because of its apparently feminine connections, light literature of the interwar and post-war years, either that written by women or by others ultimately categorised as middlebrow, was less important than other novels – generally written by men – which supposedly offered vital observations and interpretations of life. Huyssen refers to the presumed fear of the serious – i.e. male and probably modernist – writer, of being mistaken for a non-intellectual, that is, ‘the nightmare of being devoured by mass culture through co-option, commodification, and the “wrong” kind of success’ (53).

Paul Fotheringay, the male protagonist in Mitford’s *Christmas Pudding*, is forced to endure such a living nightmare. Horrified when his debut novel – a categorically modernist text over which ‘he had expended over a year of labour, pouring forth into it all the bitterness of a bitter nature; describing earnestly, as he thought, and with passion, the subtle shades of a young man’s psychology, and rising to what seemed to him an almost unbearably tragic climax with the suicide pact of his hero and heroine’ (12) – is received by critics as a comedy, Paul finds himself ‘held up as a clown and buffoon to jeers and senseless laughter from the mob’ (12).

The mob can be seen to represent the stereotyped vision of the supposedly unintellectual masses described by Huyssen, while self-important Paul sees himself as the opposite, as a producer of ‘genuine art’ (Huyssen 53), despite the fact ‘nobody else had even remotely apprehended his meaning, not one person’ (*Pudding* 14). Such potential mix-ups must be counteracted ‘by fortifying the boundaries between genuine art and inauthentic mass culture’ (Huyssen 53). The use of light-food-related words by reviewers, then, show that Mitford’s works are being portrayed as unnourishing, while the association made between light foods and femininity by Bourdieu draws further attention to the similar ascription of femininity to light literature of this kind by contemporary critics.

This examination of keywords in relation to food also draws attention to another recurring word seen throughout reviews of Mitford’s works: ‘delightful’. The word, and its variants, can be found in almost twenty instances.¹²³ Its relation to food keywords examined is underlined by Erica Brown’s description of the connotations the word ‘delightful’ has in literary discourse:

In the critical lexicon of the early to mid-twentieth century, “delightful” became one of the defining signifiers of the middlebrow. According to the *OED*, to be delightful is to be “a cause or source of great pleasure”; the origins of the word are from the Latin *delectare*, meaning “to charm”. Delight, pleasure and charm: all connoted a certain kind of a novel in this period, one that was enjoyable, fundamentally unchallenging in style and reassuring in content. Delight has therefore connoted a “light read”. (1)

¹²³ For analysis of other recurring words in contemporary reviews of Mitford’s novels, see Appendix Two.

The ‘fundamentally unchallenging’ nature of such literature once again underlines the distinction made between the intellectual and the trivial, the latter ‘a smug “easy” read, lacking significant intellectual challenges’ (Humble, *Feminine* 13) and unlikely to satiate the reader. In her examination of reviews of the works of Rosamond Lehmann, Wendy Pollard points out that ‘the adjectives “charming” and “delightful” abound’ (78), and in this regard, a connection can be made between Lehmann and Mitford.¹²⁴ The literary value of their work is effectively diminished by these words, which Brown identifies as ‘defining signifiers of the middlebrow’ (1). Pollard describes how the adjectives ‘little’, ‘light’ and ‘slight’ ‘constantly appear as an integral part of the praise, but ... effectively undermine it’ (78), demonstrating that even an outwardly positive lexicon can mask negative attitudes towards such novels.

Class, Appearance and Celebrity

This preoccupation with the supposed lightness of Mitford’s novels is related to the evolution of her celebrity persona. Brendan Gill’s *New Yorker* review of *Love in a Cold Climate* demonstrates this preoccupation with Mitford’s upper-classness, which

¹²⁴ Rosamond Lehmann (1901-1990) was a contemporary of Mitford’s, and their books attracted a similar size of audience. Many of Lehmann’s novels were bestsellers, and her sixth, *The Ballad and the Source* (1944), was particularly acclaimed by critics. However, as with Bowen, Lehmann has received much more critical attention than Mitford. In addition to Pollard’s examination of Lehmann’s literary reception, other academic studies include Diana E. LeSturgeon’s *Rosamond Lehmann* (Twayne, 1965), Ruth Siegel’s *Rosamond Lehmann: A Thirties Writer* (Peter Lang, 1989) and Judy Simons’ *Rosamond Lehmann* (Palgrave, 1992). Mitford’s own feelings about Lehmann, whom she evidently knew rather well, seem conflicted, and can be gleaned from her letters. On 6th July 1948, Mitford wrote to Violet Hammersley to say ‘I saw Rosamond L[ehmann] on a station in England, running, but hadn’t the energy to run after. Oh the dowdiness of English women’ (*Letters* 265), while in a letter to Evelyn Waugh of 22nd August 1953, after explaining that Lehmann had been turned out by her hosts in France, the Duff Coopers, and forced to find someone else to stay with, Mitford describes Lehmann as ‘poor Rosamond, whom, for the first time, in her adversity, I rather liked’ (*Letters* 368).

he suggests limits her ability to write about her peers truthfully: ‘it is the first duty of the comic novelist to be detached, and Miss Mitford’s difficulty is that, as a member of the family, she cannot be detached’ (70). I would disagree, since, as has been argued in Chapters One and Two, Mitford thrives on teasing, and indeed, her most cutting satire is often reserved for those closest to her. In her biography of Mitford, Laura Thompson argues that ‘although Nancy would later be judged with the tough respect accorded to a “real” writer ... never were her books tossed casually to the wolves in the way that happens with so many writers. She was always, to an extent, protected by who she was’ (88-89). Thompson is correct in regard to the early reviews of Mitford’s works in the society magazines, and also in her suggestion that ‘it was really [Mitford’s] position in society that got her writing career kicked off’ (89). However, in terms of later reviews, especially in American publications, Mitford’s position as a privileged member of the aristocracy is, to a certain extent, actually used against her. In a sense, ‘who she was’ (Thompson 89) traps her, and limits the scope of her ability in the eyes of some critics.

Several reviewers claim that Nancy, due to her aristocratic upbringing, is only capable of writing about her own world, and as such, should stick to using that world for her subject matter. This can be seen in Phyllis McGinley’s review of *Love in a Cold Climate* in *The New York Times Book Review* of 10th July 1949, in which she states that ‘in the process of demolishing a class, [Mitford] is enchanted and dazzled – she cannot escape from the confines of her own background’ (4). This sentiment is echoed in Pamela Taylor’s review of *Climate* in *The Saturday Review* of 13th August 1949, which notes that ‘[its inhabitants] are Miss Mitford’s own kind; these are the circles into which she was born, in which she moves’ (15), while the *Sydney*

Morning Herald review of 19th November 1949 suggests that ‘if novelists should always write about things they know, then Nancy Mitford is no exception to a commendable rule’ (8). The association between Mitford and the aristocracy is a disadvantage in the eyes of critics concerned about the amount of material she has left to work with: McGinley even presciently suggests that ‘talented as she is, I do not see where Miss Mitford can move from here except to royal circles’ (4). Five years later, Mitford would do just this with her biography of Madame de Pompadour. However, Mitford’s intimate knowledge of the aristocracy can also be seen as an advantage, because it allows her to construct a novel that seems completely genuine.

As well as the link between Mitford and the aristocracy, the recurrence of previous media conceptions of Mitford can also be seen in the emphasis placed on her physical attractiveness, which, as the first half of this chapter demonstrated, was returned to again and again in early press coverage. Even as late as 1951, when she had already produced two extraordinarily popular and bestselling novels in *The Pursuit of Love* and *Love in a Cold Climate* – and just released a third, *The Blessing* – Mitford is still frequently described in terms of her beauty, while her hard work and the well-earned success she had achieved by this point is somewhat disregarded. The conflation of Mitford’s writing with her physical appearance can be seen prominently in *The Tatler and Bystander*’s “Priscilla in Paris” column of 24th May 1950, which places particular focus on Mitford, ‘whose books are so greatly appreciated. I almost wrote “looks” instead of “books,” a *lapsus calami* that would not have been misplaced, since Miss Mitford possesses all that one hopes for, and so rarely finds, in a celebrated novelist – charm, wit and good looks’ (399). While this article does not suggest that Mitford’s ‘looks’ are more important than her books,

and is in fact complimentary about her literary output, it nevertheless ignores the fact that Mitford's physical appearance is not pertinent to her ability to write. Although this article is obviously reflective of a bygone era, and should be viewed in the social context within which it appears, it nevertheless spotlights a judgmental focus on gender. If Mitford were deemed physically unattractive, this fact would surely not be made the focus of an article about her writing, as it is obviously irrelevant in relation to the quality of her texts. Further to this, and even more so than if she were unattractive, she would absolutely not be evaluated in terms of her looks if she were male, since male writers generally escape such assessments, owing to the supposed intelligence of novels produced by male writers of the same stature as Mitford during this period.

Mitford's attractiveness comes to the fore in a number of these reviews, and is an unfortunate distraction from the intrinsic worth of her works. Gill's review of *Love in a Cold Climate*, for example, describes the book's dust jacket, which displays 'a likeness of the beautiful author'¹²⁵ (70), while a similar focus on the visual can be found in Orville Prescott's review of *The Blessing* in *The New York Times* of 5th October 1951, which tells the reader: 'Nancy Mitford is a beauty (see picture)' (39). Prescott's comments in particular reduce Mitford to her physical appearance alone, with the reader's attention instantly snatched from a critical evaluation of Mitford's latest novel to an appraisal of her looks. In her review of *Love in a Cold Climate*, a female critic, Pamela Taylor, draws equal attention to Mitford's physical appearance, describing her rather tellingly as 'distractingly pretty'

¹²⁵ Gill's comment about the book's dust jacket also takes in its blurb, which, he notes, explains that "Nancy Mitford has good reason to be familiar with the workings of the English nobility; her father, David Bertram Ogilvy Freeman-Mitford, second Baron Redesdale, stems from the Stanleys of Alderley" (70), again underscoring the reliance on Mitford's aristocratic credentials even in the marketing of her books.

(15). These stresses on Mitford's physical attractiveness show that even though she had, by this point in her career, long since distinguished herself from other socialites of her period, critics are still just as 'distracted' by her appearance as they were during her youth.

Though Pollard suggests that the inclusion of an attractive photograph of an author in a review could actually help with a book's popularity, pointing out that 'sales [of Rosamond Lehmann's *Dusty Answer* (1927)] were likely to have benefited from the fact that [Arnold Bennett's] article was headed by an exceedingly glamorous photograph of the author, common practice in the USA' (39). The sort of image used in a review – glamorous, restrained, severe, and so on – could affect public reaction to a text even before the review itself was read, and influence book purchasing choices. An association can therefore be made between authorial celebrity that is controlled through the consumption of a writer's projected image and the popular success of that celebrity author's texts. In her study *Baroque Between the Wars: Alternative Style in the Arts, 1918-1939*, Jane Stevenson points out that 'most of the well-known faces of the twenties and thirties were highly conscious of their image, and regularly photographed. Even W.H. Auden ... trotted along to Cecil Beaton to be glamorized in 1930. ... It was part of the business of being a public figure, even for poets' (243). Given Mitford's willingness to appear in photographic features in magazines, and her long friendship with Cecil Beaton, it can be argued that she, like Auden and other literary figures of this period, was willing to engage with fame through the dissemination of her image, which helped to maintain her presence in the public eye and contributed to the popular success of her novels, for which she was therefore partly responsible.

Sales and Circulation

In terms of sales, Mitford's books were extremely successful. Advertisements for Mitford's novels from *The Pursuit of Love* onwards emphasise their popularity during this period. In *The Times* of 27th July 1949, *Love in a Cold Climate* is lauded by its publisher Hamish Hamilton as 'the first novel to be the triple choice of the Book Society, *Daily Mail* and *Evening Standard*' (7), and this great success is underlined by another advertisement from the publisher in *The Tatler and Bystander* of 7th December 1949, which declares the book to be 'the novel of the year' (513), alongside a note of its sales thus far: 70,000 copies. Similarly, shortly after the publication of *The Blessing*, a Hamish Hamilton advertisement in *The Times* of 1st August 1951 describes the novel as 'the choice of the Book of the Month Club in America, and of the *Daily Mail* here', while an overall air of triumph dominates, owing to the admission that it 'is selling faster than any novel we have published in 20 years' (8). These claims are supported by data. An analysis of the *New York Times* Best Seller List¹²⁶ from this period shows that of the nine Mitford books then-published in the United States, seven of them made an appearance on the list: *The Pursuit of Love* debuted on the list of 7th July 1946 and remained there for eight non-consecutive weeks, whereas *Love in a Cold Climate* entered the list on 31st July 1949 and remained for five consecutive weeks. *The Blessing* debuted on 28th October 1951 and remained on the list for fourteen non-consecutive weeks, while *Don't Tell Alfred* met with similar success, landing on the list of 16th April 1961 and remaining there for thirteen non-consecutive weeks. Interestingly, Mitford's most successful book in

¹²⁶ For a more detailed analysis of Mitford's appearances on the *New York Times* Best Seller List, see Appendix Two.

terms of the *New York Times* Best Seller List was not one of her novels. Instead, the Mitford book which stayed on the list for the longest period was her historical biography *Madame de Pompadour*, which from its debut on 27th June 1954, remained on the list for an impressive seventeen consecutive weeks. Of her biographies, *Voltaire in Love* (1957) also made the list, debuting on 16th March 1958 and maintaining its position there for nine consecutive weeks, while another success was *Noblesse Oblige* (1956) – containing her infamous essay on ‘U and non-U’ language – which debuted on 19th August 1956 and stayed on the list for nine non-consecutive weeks.

Mitford’s sales figures were greatly helped by the selection of some of her novels by highly popular book clubs, but being a book club choice could actually damage an author’s reputation among critics. In the early to mid-twentieth century, the expansion of institutions such as book clubs, lending libraries and paperback publishers ‘constituted a threat to the book as the cultural artifact of the elite’ (Earle 90). Such reactions against book clubs are voiced in John Betjeman’s review of *Love in a Cold Climate* in the *Daily Herald* of 27th July 1949, in which he admits that: ‘I am always rather put off by “books of the month,” because I don’t think one good book *can* be guaranteed to appear once a month, nor even once a year. When I saw that three “book of the month” spotters had picked on this novel for this month’s choice, I started to read it with a treble prejudice’ (4). Although Betjeman praises the novel, happily discovering that his prejudice against it is unfounded, his thoughts about book clubs are indicative of the wider opposition towards such institutions that characterises this period.

In her study of middlebrow culture, Joan Shelley Rubin draws attention to how the Book-of-the-Month Club in particular was depicted ‘as an agency for the destruction of independent judgement and literary quality’ (97)¹²⁷, an argument echoed by Jaillant, whose study of the Modern Library Series indicates that that series, and others like it, were seen as ‘vulgarly commercial [enterprises] that failed to cordon off “good” literature from thrillers and other debased genres’ (78). In a sense, the light novels discussed earlier were seen to be championed by these book clubs, as demonstrated by Joseph McAleer’s assertion that ““Book of the Month” selections, introduced in daily newspapers in the 1930s ... directed readers’ attention to the “best” in light reading’ (83-84). Unfortunately for highbrow intellectual readers like those discussed above, it was almost impossible to escape from the light middlebrow fiction endorsed by book clubs – selection by a book club being ‘sufficient to demote [a novel] beneath serious attention’ (Humble, *Feminine* 13) – because of its seeming omnipresence in popular culture, a result of the massive publicity machines behind such institutions.

Publicity was also used by Mitford herself during this period, as evidenced by her public endorsement of Basildon Bond, an advertisement for which appears in the *Daily Herald* of 26th April 1955. The advertisement features a glamorous photograph of Mitford (see image 16), along with a description of how she uses Basildon Bond paper for letter writing. The testimonial relates how Mitford was inspired to write her biography of Madame de Pompadour, an endeavour supposedly brought about as a

¹²⁷ In D.E. Stevenson’s comic novel *Miss Bunclie’s Book* (1934), the publisher Mr Abbott is aware of the public’s apparent reliance on him and his company in relation to literature, as they are clueless about what to buy otherwise: ‘Should “new mown hay” go into the blurb or should it be left to the reader to discover? What fools the public were! They were exactly like sheep ... thought Mr Abbott sleepily ... following each other’s lead, neglecting one book and buying another just because other people were buying it, although, for the life of you, you couldn’t see what the one lacked and the other possessed’ (9). Mr Abbott can be seen as the personification of those book clubs discussed by Rubin, which seemingly posed a serious threat to serious literature.

result of her use of Basildon Bond: ‘a friend had written asking me to tell her all I knew about Madame de Pompadour. I started to answer – but found the letter expanded so much that I had written a whole book!’ (8). This testimonial, which emphasises the power this brand of paper can exert on those with creative minds, also acts as a promotional plug for Mitford’s recently published biography. Most importantly though, it promotes a sense of elite taste, as evidenced by the flattering picture of Mitford and the assurance that this brand is ‘chosen by distinguished people’ (8). The advertisement’s particular emphasis on ‘writing-paper’, meanwhile, reminds us of the disagreement between Uncle Matthew and Aunt Emily in *The Pursuit of Love* over proper terminology – ‘all the same, Fanny darling, it is called writing-paper you know – don’t let’s hear any more about the note, please’ (29-30) – and also acts as a precursor to Mitford’s own delineation of the system of words supposedly used by the distinguished. ‘Distinguished’ in Mitford’s case is implied to mean aristocratic, and her essay “The English Aristocracy”, published in *Encounter* five months after the appearance of this advertisement, gave readers the opportunity to at last definitively differentiate between the aristocracy and the lesser classes.

LETTERS OF CONSEQUENCE



So here is the long-promised letter, which seems to have expanded into a book!

Long from Nancy

NANCY MITFORD

says

"This letter turned into a book"

"I THINK the most important letter I ever wrote was written very recently," says novelist Nancy Mitford.

"A friend had written asking me to tell her all I knew about Madame de Pompadour. I started to answer—but found the letter expanded so much that I had written a whole book! Finally I sent it off to her, with a letter explaining what had happened."

That letter certainly would be one to treasure! You never know

how important letters you write are going to be. That's why it's so important to use a good writing-paper like Basildon Bond.

"I always use Basildon Bond," says Nancy Mitford, "because it's good to look at and gives a pleasant writing-surface."

Basildon Bond suits every kind of pen and you can rely on it to make your letters look distinguished. It's excellent value, too. Like Nancy Mitford, you should always use Basildon Bond.

Basildon Bond

CHOSEN BY DISTINGUISHED PEOPLE

A John Dickinson Product

Image 16: Advertisement for Basildon Bond, *Daily Herald*, 26th April 1955

U or Non-U?: Mitford's Conflicted Image

For better or worse, the publication of “The English Aristocracy” perhaps solidified Mitford’s ‘posh’ image. However, as with her early complicity in the production of a frivolous image of her in interwar magazines, Mitford likewise actively contributed to the later image of her which emerged following the publication of this essay.

Writing to Lady Pamela Berry on 19th November 1951, Mitford notes that she has ‘been correcting *Pigeon Pie*, a book I wrote during the phoney war. ... Jamie [Hamilton, founder of Hamish Hamilton] wanted to republish all my early books but this is the only one I can allow, & it is very badly written I fear’ (*Letters* 341).

Although this may suggest that Mitford is altering the book extensively, a comparative analysis of the first edition of the novel alongside the most recently published edition shows that the novel remains largely the same. The small changes that were made, though, are crucial to our understanding of Mitford’s own role in generating the persona that ultimately became attached to her.

The major change to the text is Mitford’s deletion of an extended description of Italian politics containing an emphasis on fascism, ‘that cancer in Italian national life’ (7 [1940]). This was perhaps removed to avoid another disagreement with her sister Diana, or simply to distance herself from political controversy. The minor changes are more interesting for the purposes of this discussion. She once altered ‘hand-mirror’ (161 [1940]) to ‘hand looking-glass’ (104 [2011]), and twice changed ‘mantelpiece’ (33; 236 [1940]) to ‘chimneypiece’ (27; 150 [2011]). These changes may seem trivial and insignificant, but they directly correspond to the ‘U and non-U’

terminology put forward in Mitford's "English Aristocracy" essay. In the essay, Mitford quotes, and endorses, Professor Alan Ross' system, which, she explains, adheres to a useful formula: 'U (for upper class) -speaker versus non-U-speaker' (6). The list compiled in Ross' original essay includes 'mirror' as a non-U term, while 'mantelpiece' is one of many supposedly middle-class expressions used by Fanny in *The Pursuit of Love* which provoke Uncle Matthew's ire: 'Fanny talks about mirrors and mantelpieces, handbags and perfume ... the irritation!' (29). By deliberately altering these words for the republication of *Pigeon Pie*, Mitford shows us that she is aware of the image of her which exists in the public consciousness as an arbiter of language and conduct, and is determined to maintain that image. This careful re-manufacturing of a previous book in order to meet expectations built up about her following the success of her later works is her way of taking control of the dissemination of her own image, and her decision to do so doubtless ultimately affected the way she is seen today.

Today, Mitford has a somewhat conflicted image.¹²⁸ The echoes of her family's infamy continue to affect the way her work is received. Ohlsson et al. suggest that 'as in other cultural fields, the commodities to be sold – books – are marketed using the "personalities" directly connected to them' (32-33), and Mitford's established personality, or persona, is, as we have seen, multi-faceted. "The English Aristocracy", described by Humble as 'humorous but devastatingly influential' (*Feminine*, 86), confirmed Mitford's position as a social arbiter, policing the boundaries of her aristocratic world. Yet the 'humorous' aspect of the text meant

¹²⁸ In her study of the Irish playwright Oscar Wilde, Sandra Mayer finds that 'from its very beginning, Wilde's career was based on mask-switching, performance and the collapsing boundaries between reality and fiction, sincerity and artificiality' (125). A similar notion of the uneasy merging of fact and fiction, theatricality and outright performance, can equally be applied to Mitford, whose image has arguably suffered as a result.

that her image never hardened into conservatism. Throughout her career, and partly as a result of her own actions and the subject matter she chose, it became impossible for critics and readers to separate Mitford's life from her fiction. This is compounded by the easily decipherable real-life counterparts of her characters, unequivocally confirmed by flagrant admissions in her published letters about which characters are based on which friends or family members.¹²⁹

Ina Habermann's description of Daphne du Maurier, one of Mitford's contemporaries, as 'an author of middlebrow fiction for women, [who] is not taken seriously ... because of the strong focus in most discussions of du Maurier – or "Daphne" as her fans are wont to speak of her – on the author's biography' (149) could equally be applied to Mitford. To a certain extent, many readers feel that they know Mitford. As a result, she has a large number of fans. Those unaware of Mitford's writing, though, especially male readers, could perhaps be put off by the recent way in which her books have been presented to the public.¹³⁰ In 2010, Penguin republished Mitford's most famous novels, *The Pursuit of Love*, *Love in a Cold Climate*, *The Blessing* and *Don't Tell Alfred* along with *Wigs on the Green*. The republication of *Wigs on the Green* marked the first time in seventy-five years that the novel had been issued in a single volume in Britain. However, the covers of the 2010 reissues are rather garish and overtly feminine. The cover of each novel features a cartoonish drawing of one of the female characters: *Wigs on the Green*

¹²⁹ In a letter sent to Jessica on 1st March 1940, Mitford notes the forthcoming publication of *Pigeon Pie*: 'You are in it, called Mary Pencill, & Eddie Winterton & Co are called Ned & Fred' (*Letters* 131). Ten years later, on 21st November 1950, Nancy wrote to Violet Hammersley to explain that the characters in *The Blessing* related to real life as follows: 'Grace = me-&-my-sisters, Charles-Edouard = Col [Gaston Palewski], Mme de Valhubert = Dolly Radziwill, M. de la Bourlie (her lover) = any old duc' (*Letters* 324), while John Betjeman wrote to her shortly after *The Pursuit of Love* was released in 1945 to express his fondness for the novel, described above, and to proclaim that: 'You have produced something that really is a monument to our friends' (qtd. in *Letters* 191n).

¹³⁰ For a selection of images of different Mitford book covers through the years, see Appendix Three.

depicts Eugenia in a fitted Union Jack shirt not in keeping with its distinctly unglamorous description within the novel, Linda appears on the cover of *The Pursuit of Love* replete with furs, while glamorised portraits of Cedric, Grace, Sigi and Fanny adorn the covers of *Love in a Cold Climate*, *The Blessing* and *Don't Tell Alfred* respectively. These covers, coupled with the blurbs that focus on 'love [and] sex' (*Pursuit*) and 'the dresses ... the Season, with its endless run of glittering balls' (*Climate*) present a rather reductive, and excessively feminised, view of the content of the novels. In his study of book covers, David M. Earle points out that 'no work of literature can exist in a vacuum; the physicality of a book – the dustwrapper, illustrations, typeface, quality of paper ... all play a part in the initial interpretation of a book, all are integrally linked to the author and publisher's intended, even constructed audience' (158). Based on the covers of the 2010 editions, then, the intended demographic for Mitford's novels would appear to be women seeking escapist entertainment.

In a review of the Vintage re-releases of Mitford's novels from *Wigs on the Green* onwards, David Propson notes that Mitford's 'marriage-oriented plots seem to promise something sentimental' (W9) and it is perhaps this assumption, motivated by the unusual cover choices of recent editions of Mitford's novels, which dissuades some readers from picking up one of her texts. However, as Propson points out, to these seemingly sentimental plots, Mitford 'always adds a cynical twist' (W9). Indeed, cynicism is a recurring trope in Mitford's novels, whether it is directed at a failing government as in *Wigs on the Green* or at the failing marriages depicted in *The Pursuit of Love*, *Love in a Cold Climate*, and *The Blessing*. In terms of cynicism towards romance, this is perhaps most obvious in the character of Fanny's mother,

the much married – and much divorced – Bolter’s pessimistic view of love in *The Pursuit of Love*, which crucially forms the novel’s famous dénouement:

‘But I think she would have been happy with Fabrice,’ I said. ‘He was the great love of her life, you know.’

‘Oh, dulling,’ said my mother, sadly. ‘One always thinks that. Every, every time.’ (205)

Indeed, Bauman suggests that ‘there is no novel in English which ends on such a memorable note. It is *the* great ending, comparable in emotional effect to the opening of *Rebecca* (1938)’ (282). Unlike Mitford, though, du Maurier has received a considerable amount of critical attention.

Populated by eccentric characters whose emotions swing from bliss to crippling depression in the space of a few lines, on the surface, *The Pursuit of Love* could be seen as trivial, though we might argue that this trivialising of the apparently weighty subjects of marriage, money-making, politics and so on is in itself subversive, a challenge to the value systems of the age. At the same time, the comedy of Mitford’s novels is often the quality most remembered by readers: so funny and so cutting that it may lead to a view of her writing as pure entertainment.¹³¹ However, this supposition ignores Mitford’s sustained engagement with, and nostalgic lament for, a disappearing way of life among the gradually declining aristocracy of interwar Britain.

¹³¹ Mitford’s contemporary, Brian Howard, noted Mitford’s astuteness when he described Nancy, to her biographer Harold Acton, as ‘a delicious creature ... quite pyrotechnical ... and sometimes even profound and would you believe it, she’s hidden among the Cotswolds’ (qtd. in D.J. Taylor 67).

Indeed, this nostalgic quality led some of her contemporaries to see her novels as outdated. A sense of contemporary outdatedness can admittedly be seen if we look at the placement of Siriol Hugh-Jones' review of *Don't Tell Alfred* in *The Tatler and Bystander* of 9th November 1960. Mitford's novel is reviewed directly across the page from an assessment of Karel Reisz's film *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960). This film, adapted for the screen by Alan Sillitoe from his own novel, embraced the new permissiveness of literature – including cinema – with its emphasis on the working-class, so-called 'angry young man', who railed against convention and was dissatisfied with life in modern Britain. The 'angry young man' became a phenomenon depicted in several other British films of the period, the most famous examples aside from Reisz's film being *Look Back in Anger* (1959) and *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962). The New Wave nature of these kitchen-sink dramas does expose the somewhat old-fashioned nature of Mitford's final novel, revolving as it does around wealth, upper-class power and Christian Dior gowns. Similarly, a review of another film, *Beat Girl* (1960), one of a large number of new, X-rated films, which had begun to gain popularity around this time of fresh permissiveness, and were totally opposing in nature to Mitford's old-fashioned comedy of manners approach, is placed just above the review of *Don't Tell Alfred*. As Hugh-Jones points out in his review though, Mitford does address modern life in this novel, but a hint of nostalgia tinges proceedings: 'Linda and the Gallic dreamboat Sauveterre are no more, and the landscape has grown bleak and full of phenomena Miss Mitford views icily - Teds, Zen-boys, rock and roll idols, the get-rich-quick young ... coach-parties of English abroad, Nuclear Disarmament and all' (360). Without the reassuring presence of the past, then, Mitford is in completely

new territory, and Hugh-Jones suggests that she disapproves of what she has found there.

Yet surely by engaging with a world so outside her own comfort zone, Mitford is attempting to try something different. If we accept Hugh-Jones' view that she is confronting new developments and norms head on, it can be argued that *Don't Tell Alfred* marks the first real instance of Mitford dealing with new social trends and movements which are missing in her previous novels. The emergence of Fanny's son, David, as a prototypical hippie, the depiction of rock 'n' roll sensation Yanky Fonzy – obviously modelled on Elvis Presley – as well as the depiction of Teddy Boy culture through Fanny's younger son, Basil, alongside the description of the burgeoning package-holiday industry, are examples of Mitford's attempt to include contemporary references to a youth culture which was out with her own generation. It is unfortunate that *Don't Tell Alfred* was Mitford's final novel, as it is possible that her engagement with modern society would have increased and become more nuanced had she produced another.¹³² It would certainly have been interesting to see Mitford's always astute social commentary pointed squarely at new phenomena and to read her biting opinions about the ever-changing social and political landscape of the 1960s.¹³³

¹³² Mitford's literary output after the publication of *Don't Tell Alfred* (1960) was limited to articles in various periodicals, as well as three other books, all biographies: *Voltaire in Love*, a study of the Enlightenment figure's relationship with Émilie du Châtelet, *The Sun King* (1966), which focuses on King Louis XIV of France, and her final book, *Frederick the Great* (1970). All of these books enjoyed a positive critical response, and Mitford was commended for the detailed research she conducted for each text, a rare instance of her literary output being taken seriously and appreciated by critics who were often keen on trivialising her works.

¹³³ The reader is offered a preview of such commentary in Mitford's essay "The Tourist", published in *Encounter* in October 1959, in which she decries the tourism industry. She argues that the continual stream of tourists into places of historical and cultural interest, such as Venice, will eventually ruin these areas, as the local population cannot sustain itself financially since the areas themselves were never designed to accommodate such large numbers of people. As recent efforts by the Venetian authorities to solve a number of prevailing problems caused by the huge number of tourists who visit the city annually show, Mitford was correct.

Conclusion

In his analysis of post-war British women novelists and their relation to the literary canon, Nick Turner suggests that ‘in terms of the academic canon, a novelist must increasingly engage with current trends and political concerns, to become “teachable” ... if [they] do not appear to be *saying* something, academic interest in them may not be great’ (136). Many critics have taken the view that Mitford’s writing is not serious and does not involve her making specific points about anything in particular. Interestingly though, it is arguable that in recent years, which have seen a rise in the popularity of right-wing politics across Europe, along with the renewed presence of long-dormant political movements like fascism, Mitford’s novels – particularly *Wigs on the Green* for example – have actually gained fresh relevance. As well as this, period drama has never been more popular, as evidenced by the success of television programmes like *Downton Abbey* (2010-2015), and, more recently, *The Crown* (2016-). There has surely never been a better opportunity for Mitford to gain new fans.

In a 1907 letter to a friend, Selma Lagerlöf, the first female recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature, expressed fears about how she, and consequently her work, was being presented to the public: ‘I have got this feeling of being transformed into some sort of lifeless institution, some sort of brand name that people use for making business’ (qtd. in Ohlsson et al. 39). Lagerlöf’s concerns about the institutionalisation and branding of an author are directly relevant to the present-day presentation of Mitford in the media. The multitude of Mitfordania available –

memoirs of the sisters, group and individual biographies of members of the Mitford family, published collections of Nancy's letters, of Jessica's letters, of letters between the sisters as a collective, of letters between Nancy and Evelyn Waugh, and so on – and the inevitable images of aristocratic eccentricity conjured up as a result, have contributed to both the public's understanding of the family as a unit, and its supposed knowledge of Nancy herself. The image of Nancy as merely a peculiar toff with an equally odd family is of course misguided: she was, as this and the two preceding chapters have shown, so much more than this. Unfortunately, though, this impression of Nancy can be detected in the earliest reviews of her novels. As a result of critical reviews and the way she was marketed to the public, this impression gradually developed into the established image of Mitford that prevails today, thereby affecting her later literary reputation and reception.

The early categorisation of Mitford as an attractive socialite, interested in only frivolity, has come to characterise the way people see both her and her novels. This sense of frivolity is carried through to the present day. One of the most recent additions to the plethora of Mitfordania available for purchase is Gucci's 'Never Marry a Mitford' sweater, which retails at an eye-watering £765. The description on the Gucci website reads:

The most controversial aristocratic family of the time, the six Mitford sisters, took 1950s England by storm with their scandalous, fascinating lives.

Inspired by the rumors around them, Andrew Cavendish, the 11th Duke of Devonshire and the husband of the youngest sister Deborah, gifted the other girls' husbands with sweaters decorated with the slogan "Never Marry a Mitford." This sweater was repurposed by Alessandro Michele for Spring Summer 2018, and the Chatsworth family crest is inlaid on the back. ("Never Marry a Mitford")

Minor inaccuracies aside – the Mitfords came to prominence in the 1930s rather than the 1950s, while much of the furore around them was inspired by plain fact rather than rumour – Gucci's description nevertheless demonstrates the ongoing appeal of the family. The identification of the Mitfords with the high life is emphasised by the association between the Mitford myth and a luxury brand, but this association goes much deeper. Indeed, Gucci has actually co-opted the family image in order to make money for their brand, and when we take into consideration the fact that Gucci was a sponsor for the Chatsworth exhibit 'House Style: Five Centuries of Fashion', which ran between March and October 2017, and spawned a book entitled *House Style: Five Centuries of Fashion at Chatsworth, Home to the Devonshires* (2017), a partnership between Gucci and the Mitford family itself becomes apparent, underlined by the authorised use of the Chatsworth family crest alongside the warning 'Never Marry a Mitford' on the Gucci sweater in question. The Mitford family is therefore shown to be complicit in the continued conflation of the family with scandal, which can be related to the way Nancy encouraged public perception of

herself as superficial, and to the general lack of earnestness that characterised the image she presented. The great challenge posed to myself in this re-evaluation of Mitford's works – especially in convincing other academics about the importance of her writing – is that it is difficult to take seriously someone who often refuses to take herself or, indeed, anyone or anything else, seriously. However, an apparent lack of seriousness does not equal lack of worth, and, as this and the preceding chapters have shown, Mitford is worthy of, and in need of, further study, both in relation to her subject matter, and to her place among other writers and within the wider literary context.

Conclusion

Nancy Mitford: A Re-evaluation

Nancy Mitford was one of the most popular writers of her time, and though a number of her books continue to sell thousands of copies each year, my research shows that she remains critically undervalued. As this thesis has established, very little has been written about Mitford from a literary critical standpoint at all. Although she has been the subject of a number of biographies, her works themselves remain understudied, and the aim of my project has been to articulate the aspects of Mitford's work which make her so worthy of extended critical attention. Among the most important are her complex engagement with politics, her provocative accounts of the British class system, and her subversive portrayals of desire and sexuality.

While Mitford's best known books *The Pursuit of Love* (1945) and *Love in a Cold Climate* (1949) have generated a small number of critical discussions, her remaining novels have produced virtually none at all. Our view of Mitford's work is transformed when we consider the whole body of her fiction. I have therefore oriented my thesis primarily around the novels which have received the least attention to date, aiming to offer the first thorough critical account of Mitford as a novelist. Unlike *The Pursuit of Love* and *Love in a Cold Climate*, which are regarded as Mitford's best works of fiction and have been discussed by a few critics, *Highland Fling* (1931), *Christmas Pudding* (1932), *Wigs on the Green* (1935) and *Pigeon Pie* (1940) have rarely received much academic notice. These four novels therefore comprise the main focus of Chapters One and Two of my thesis.

In the context of the recovery and re-evaluation of so many early and mid-twentieth-century women writers by publishers and critics in recent decades, the neglect of Mitford is remarkable when we consider the size of her readership. In terms of her sales from *The Pursuit of Love* onwards, Mitford was one of the most successful writers of the mid-twentieth century and beyond. However, this popularity is not mirrored in the reaction of academics, who have generally overlooked Mitford's writings in the decades since her death, or discounted their subversive qualities. As discussed in Chapter Three, Mitford was prepared to tackle controversial subject matter. *The Pursuit of Love* and *Love in a Cold Climate* boldly describe an adulterous affair conducted without shame, and the actions of an openly gay hero respectively, and these innovative aspects of Mitford's writing show her willingness to challenge her reader with fresh perspectives on taboo issues.

By analysing Mitford's books in detail, the intention of my thesis is to highlight her underestimated impact on twentieth-century and women's literature, and to open a dialogue about similar female writers and the reasons for their exclusion from academic consideration. Undoubtedly in Mitford's case, this exclusion is the result of the sheer force of her celebrity persona, which often overwhelmed her literary achievements. Chapter Three engages with this persona in detail, and does so by expanding beyond analysis of Mitford's fiction to engage with her journalism, and with portrayals of her in the media. By self-consciously contributing to her celebrity persona and its association with frivolity, Mitford was complicit in the devaluation of her work. My thesis therefore demonstrates that detailed analysis of an author's celebrity persona can reveal the reasons for critical and readerly judgements of their literary merit. Lightness and frivolity may appear to

dominate when it comes to Mitford's writing, but this is because these elements of her persona can overpower everything else. It is time for academics to reconsider Mitford, and to look beneath the surface, where, my thesis argues, they will find much more than just froth.

Summary of Findings

The findings of my thesis are manifold, and in order to summarise them concisely, I will return to the research questions identified in the Introduction. By addressing these questions, I have been able to look at Mitford critically, and have illuminated many aspects of her writing that have been unconsidered by the few critics who have discussed her works. As a reminder, the questions are:

- How does Mitford engage with politics? What do her texts suggest about attitudes toward extreme ideologies such as fascism and communism during the interwar period? Further to this, how is glamour used in relation to such movements, and what does Mitford's writing say about the transformative and potentially dangerous power of glamour when applied to politics?
- How does Mitford engage with notions of personality, particularly in regard to personal and national identity? As well as this, what do her texts suggest about the implications of adopted personas and propagandistic cults of personality, which can rely on glamour as a means of aestheticising the undesirable?

- What role does nostalgia – particularly that of the upper classes for their disappearing lifestyle – play in Mitford’s evocations of notions of politics and personality, and in responses to her work, and its categorisation as middlebrow?
- How was Mitford herself depicted in contemporary print media, and how has this affected the reception of her work among readers and academics?

Rather than summarise individual findings in relation to each question, the following comprises a consolidation of all my findings. Since the questions are closely interlinked, an amalgamation of my various responses brings them together in a more easily digestible manner.

Mitford’s engagement with politics is multi-layered. Although she addresses politics throughout her fiction, the way that she deals with different political movements and power shifts is complex, and a notable change in her approach to politics can be detected when we compare her early novels with her later efforts. The earliest of her works discussed in my thesis, *Highland Fling* and *Christmas Pudding*, suggest that among the aristocracy during the interwar period, communism was seen as a grave threat to upper-class hegemony, and therefore every effort must be taken to avoid a socialist revolution. As Chapter One demonstrates, paranoia about communism had grown since the Russian Revolution of 1917, and Mitford reflects this in the hysteria of *Lady Bobbin*. Michael Krüger and John Hargreaves both demonstrate the real-life context behind Mitford’s portrayal of the contemporary situation. Although Krüger and Hargreaves suggest that socialism never posed any genuine threat to the British upper classes, Mitford, as a member of the aristocracy,

had first-hand knowledge of the misgivings expressed by those of her ilk. Much of the fear about communism can be traced to nostalgia felt by the upper classes for their disappearing lifestyle. By the mid-1930s, as has been shown in Chapters One and Two, the position of the aristocracy in society had become increasingly precarious. The gradual erosion of the British Empire, coupled with the rise of the working classes – a Labour government came into power in 1929 under Ramsay MacDonald – had led to alarm among the upper classes about their societal place. Many aristocratic families under the burden of death duties had to sell off large amounts of property in order to remain solvent.

For the aristocracy, therefore, the context in which Mitford wrote and set her novels appeared rather grim. Yet regardless of their hazardous situation, Mitford frequently returns to depictions of life among the upper classes. Indeed, as is the case with most writers, Mitford wrote about what she knew, and her writing was informed by her immediate surroundings, which happened to be a world of nobility. Her aristocratic status should not be viewed as a negative; though in the context of a critical praxis that, in our era, and in contemporary work on 1930s British writing in particular, tends to prioritise the perspectives of the working class or of rebellious disaffected youth,¹³⁴ it could be seen as such. I would argue, rather, that Mitford's class status is an element which gave her works genuineness, and brought their upper-crust characters to life vividly.

Contrary to assumptions about her love affair with the upper classes, however, Mitford does not always paint a rosy picture of aristocratic life. Indeed, her work is akin to that of Evelyn Waugh – comparisons between them being frequent –

¹³⁴ As in Samuel Hynes and Bernard Bergonzi's respective works on the Auden generation and other 1930s writers, as well as Chris Hopkins' recent study of Walter Greenwood.

in its willingness to mock the upper classes while also lamenting their situation. Longing for the glory of the past plays an important role in Mitford's evocation of the gradually crumbling aristocracy, and as her biographer Selina Hastings suggests, by the time she was 'in her fifties [Mitford] was beginning to feel out of tune with the times as her nostalgia for the past grew stronger' (230). Indeed, as Chapter Three of my thesis shows, it was Mitford's continued preoccupation with the lives of this apparently diminishing aristocratic group that alienated many reviewers. The response of American critics to Mitford's later novels was mixed, and a significant number of them felt that Mitford never wrote about anything else other than nobility. Admittedly, Mitford does return continually to life among the set she knew best. The point on which the reviewers are less convincing is their suggestion that Mitford wrote about the aristocracy as much as she did because she did not know about anything else.

When we take into consideration the contents of even a few of her novels, this theory appears flawed. In *The Pursuit of Love*, for one, Mitford deals with the Spanish Civil War up close, painstakingly detailing the plight of refugees desperately fleeing the country. In *Love in a Cold Climate* for another, Cedric's clandestine homosexual life receives particular attention, while in *Don't Tell Alfred*, the ever-present Fanny is forced to adjust to a new life of diplomacy at the British Embassy in Paris. Though all of her novels deal with the aristocracy in some way, each individual text studied in depth in my thesis focuses on a different aspect of life in interwar and post-war Britain: *Highland Fling* looks at the hijinks of the Bright Young People, *Christmas Pudding* highlights aristocratic fears about communism, *Wigs on the Green* demonstrates the rise of fascism in Britain, *Pigeon Pie* brings to

life the Phoney War period, while *The Pursuit of Love* covers the 1910s to 1945, and reflects upon the innumerable political and socioeconomic changes which defined that era. By situating Mitford in the political and historical context during which she wrote, my thesis illuminates both contemporary political beliefs among the aristocracy, and Mitford's own sophisticated engagement with such beliefs through the fiction she produced. It is undeniable, therefore, that Mitford consistently returns to the aristocracy for inspiration in her novels, but misleading to suggest that this is her only concern.

Mitford's fiction demonstrates that she is just as concerned with the two main themes of this study: politics and personality. In terms of attitudes towards extreme ideologies, communism, as mentioned above, is treated with suspicion by most of the characters who populate her novels. Fascism, on the other hand, is often embraced. Chapter One shows that some members of society saw fascism as a potentially revolutionary movement that could revitalise Britain's status on the world stage. While *Wigs on the Green* focuses on support for British fascism in particular, *Pigeon Pie* and *The Pursuit of Love* show that fascism in the wider European context was also alluring to some members of the British aristocracy during the interwar period. In *Pigeon Pie*, Mitford's heroine Sophia is one of the few members of her social circle who openly criticises Nazism, an attitude that she shares with Linda from *The Pursuit of Love*. Unlike Sophia's husband Luke, or the family of Linda's first husband Tony Kroesig, all of whom express sympathy for Hitler, the female protagonists of *Pigeon Pie* and *The Pursuit of Love* are explicitly portrayed as patriots unwilling to approve of appeasement. National identity comes to the fore as these characters make it clear that fascism cannot triumph in Britain. In Linda's case,

her beliefs are informed by personal experience – her visit to Perpignan – and indeed, *The Pursuit of Love* provides a snapshot of the experience of those ruled by other fascist governments, namely Spain; though as my analysis in Chapter Three of the first edition of *Pigeon Pie*, later edited by Mitford for republication in 1952 shows, this novel originally contained criticism of Mussolini's Italy, no doubt excised to avoid once again upsetting Mitford's sisters Diana and Unity.

It is clear that Mitford presented fascism ambiguously in *Wigs on the Green*, the focus of Chapter One, and this ambiguousness was no doubt partly the result of the removal of content which particularly offended Diana and Unity. Perhaps the narrative standpoint of the novel would appear more definite if Mitford had been allowed free rein in her satirising of British fascism. Yet this ambiguity in relation to fascism eventually faded and was replaced by disdain, as *Pigeon Pie* and *The Pursuit of Love* exemplify. *Wigs on the Green* and *Pigeon Pie* both feature examples of the propagandistic techniques adopted by fascist organisations, with *Pigeon Pie* especially looking at the role of personality in such persuasive approaches to information dissemination. Personality as a concept is used in *Pigeon Pie* in its evocation of Phoney War-era radio broadcasting, with Mitford pointing out the power of celebrity persona in propaganda. In the novel, Sir Ivor King, Sophia's eccentric godfather, seemingly uses his position as a symbol of British pride in order to try and persuade his many millions of fans to support the Nazi cause. However, his actions are subverted at the climax of the text, when it is discovered that he has been secretly working against the Germans, his captors, all along. Alongside this, personality is also touched on in the form of the glamorous spy personas used by characters like Sophia and her rival, Olga, who use such guises to beguile those

around them. With this novel, then, it can be argued that Mitford, through her depiction of the different ways personality can be manipulated by governments and citizens alike, is conscious of personality as a concept, and that *Pigeon Pie*, in a way, creates notions of personality and presents these for consideration to the reader.

Glamour plays an important role in the ideas about personality which Mitford develops in the fiction discussed in my thesis. In the case of *Wigs on the Green*, glamour is used to aestheticise Union Jackshirt doctrine, while Mrs. Lace relies on a glamorous façade to seduce the men of Chalford. When she is duped into believing that Noel belongs to a distant royal family, she uses all the glamorous tools in her arsenal to charm him, unaware of the truth: he is simply a clerk, newly possessed of a small inheritance, and in search of a well-off wife. Mitford demonstrates in *Wigs on the Green* and *Pigeon Pie* that glamour has the power to beguile and ultimately confuse, with both Mrs. Lace and Sophia seduced by daydreams of more glamorous lives. Mrs. Lace hopes to escape the suffocating atmosphere of Chalford, whereas Sophia is desperate to leave behind the boredom of her first-aid post. Glamour poses a danger to both of them. Mrs. Lace is so determined to embrace a more glamorous life that she is willing to back Eugenia's fascist activities if they will aid her attainment of her goal, while Sophia's tendency to daydream and exaggerate – to the extent that no-one believes her tales – is the handicap she must overcome if she is to stand any chance of averting national disaster. These texts show the danger of an overactive imagination, and Mitford continues this theme in *The Pursuit of Love*, in which Linda, always convinced by her own idealised fantasies of the future, consistently finds herself disappointed by the reality of married life. Indeed, it is only

when Linda faces reality – her marriage to Christian, despite her self-conscious attempts to deglamourise, is doomed – that she finds happiness in Paris with Fabrice.

Of course, as Chapter Three of my thesis proves, Mitford herself was surrounded by an aura of glamour throughout her life and career. From the earliest depictions of her in the periodical press, much emphasis was placed on her physical attractiveness and social accomplishments. These early depictions were in keeping with the conventions of upper-class periodicals of this era like *The Tatler* and *The Bystander*, but we can also detect this focus on superficial concerns in critical considerations of Mitford's writing. My examination of contemporary critical reviews shows that Mitford was often categorised as a frivolous writer of insubstantial fiction. It is arguably this contemporary focus on the apparent inconsequentiality of her writing that has led to her present-day categorisation as 'middlebrow'. As academics like Nicola Humble and Lise Jaillant suggest, writers assigned to this category often produce much more complex and remarkable fiction than they are given credit for. In her influential study *Forever England*, Alison Light draws attention to:

[the] curious kind of cultural squint which makes Noel Coward or P.G. Wodehouse of less interest than Stephen Spender or Christopher Isherwood, or which will, at a pinch, allow Noel Coward or P.G. Wodehouse a representative place in the literary past where an Agatha Christie or a Daphne du Maurier merits not even a footnote. (x)

Mitford is definitely a casualty of this ‘cultural squint’, which rules that ‘it may be respectable to write about Conan Doyle or even Raymond Chandler but [Agatha] Christie remains beyond the pale, the producer of harmless drivel, an unsuitable case for a critic’ (Light 64). Though in this second quotation Light is discussing detective fiction in particular, Mitford is nevertheless similar to Christie in her labelling by critics as a producer of apparently light and unintellectual fiction.

Yet as my thesis argues, Mitford frequently engages with the complex historical and political changes that dominated the period in which she wrote, and her subject matter spans decades, ranging from life among the wild Bright Young People of the 1920s to the grim realities of post-war austerity, and the political machinations that characterised the Cold War. By highlighting the way Mitford tackles such challenging and controversial subject matter, my thesis therefore demonstrates how the term ‘middlebrow’ can be damaging to a writer’s status – especially in the sense in which it was used in contemporary reviews – while these days it can provide us with a productive way of reassessing an author’s work. In her presentation of sexuality in particular, Mitford was ahead of her time, and it is essential to resist previous critical temptation to group her together with any other writer who presents a problem in terms of categorisation. Despite her fiction’s comedic nature, Mitford has much to say about life in mid-century Britain, and this belies past attempts to group her alongside other comedic, or female writers, simply because of her literary approach or gender. While Mitford has been excluded from the literary canon and instead generally assigned to the category of middlebrow, it is vital that we look beyond such categories, and evaluate Mitford’s writing in terms of its sustained

engagement with the fluctuating socio-political make-up of interwar, and mid-century, Britain.

Putting her fiction to one side, it is important to note that, though Mitford was continually associated with her more controversial sisters, especially in contemporary print media, she did manage to distance herself from them by carving out a sophisticated and distinctive persona of her own. Regrettably, her famous persona, to which she contributed herself – either by aligning herself with frivolity in her early journalism, or by offering herself as an arbiter of aristocratic knowledge and deportment – is one of the reasons for the lack of academic enthusiasm about her works. Mitford perhaps appears to be all lightness and ridiculousness, purely style over substance, and unworthy of further consideration. If we avoid these basic assumptions though, and make a concerted effort, as I have done in my thesis, to better appreciate Mitford and the writing she produced, and what it says about the historical moments in which she wrote, we can begin to think about her contribution to twentieth-century literature. We can re-examine her works, and the works of similarly understudied writers, and make new connections between literary image and reception, and the effect the former can have on the latter.

Changing Perceptions

It would appear that today, the Mitford family do not attempt to refute inherited notions about the Mitford sisters and their apparent lack of individual identities. In general, the family does not shy away from ideas of scandal in connection with the Mitford name. While during the sisters' lifetimes, and certainly during those of their

parents, a concerted effort was often made to quell press gossip about the family, this is no longer the case. Indeed, it can be argued that today, the family positively encourage it. As can be seen from the business relationship recently established – and discussed at the end of Chapter Three – between the Mitford family and Gucci, the former is largely complicit in the ongoing projection of ideas of scandal and notoriety in association with the family name. Their reasons for the perpetuation of such associations would appear to be mainly financial, since a veritable Mitford sisters ‘brand’ has become established in recent years. The lives of the sisters have been covered in numerous biographies, their letters published in various collections, while Nancy’s books continue to sell consistently well. The previously discussed ‘Never Marry a Mitford’ sweater itself is a powerful image for their brand because it distils in one short sentence the essence of the family’s notoriety for those already familiar with the name, while remaining enigmatic enough to prompt those unfamiliar with it to find out more.

When she passed away at the age of 68, Mitford was a household name, though her immediate legacy seemed somewhat limited. An analysis of some of the obituaries written about Mitford in the days following her death reveals the persistent connection their writers made between Mitford and the aristocracy, which reflected prevailing contemporary views about her. The obituary written by Steven R. Weisman for *The New York Times* of 2nd July 1973 immediately situates Mitford within the world of the aristocracy. He writes that Mitford’s writing ‘was enlivened by satire and a firm British aristocratic perspective’ (30) before continuing:

Unabashedly snobbish and devastatingly witty, Miss Mitford achieved enormous success and popularity as one of Britain's most piercing observers of social manners.

Beginning with fiction that V.S. Pritchett once hailed as helping to begin "an aristocratic revival in English literatures". ...

Through all her writing, she never let her readers lapse into unawareness of her own aristocratic, sheltered upbringing – the object of much of Miss Mitford's scalding satire but a background, nonetheless, which she took very seriously and continued to defend. (30)

Weisman's description highlights the accepted image of Mitford at the time of her death: that of titled lady, preoccupied, nay, obsessed, with upper-class supremacy, and determined to preserve it for as long as possible. Significantly, there is not much warmth attached to Mitford. Warmth was not something associated with her until after the publication of biographies by Harold Acton and Selina Hastings, both of whom revealed the unhappiness of Mitford's own romantic life, which inspired fiction that in a way functioned as wish fulfilment: in *The Pursuit of Love*, Linda hooks Fabrice, while in reality, Mitford was in love with a man who remained out of reach.

A sense of coldness dominates Maurice Dunlevy's obituary of Mitford in *The Canberra Times* of 7th July 1973, while its place of publication, Australia, again reveals the international reach of Mitford's celebrity. As Weisman did in his obituary, Dunlevy frequently refers to Mitford's aristocratic status, but his tone is oddly critical, with the article in parts questioning Mitford's reasons for writing in

the first place. The article is entitled “A Rather Non-U Way to Make a Reputation”, and its opening immediately discounts Mitford’s impact on twentieth-century literature: ‘Nancy Mitford, who died the other day, was a novelist and historical biographer, but she will probably be remembered for one short essay on the English aristocracy’ (10). The many books Mitford produced are instantly disregarded, with a firm emphasis placed instead on a minor work, namely her essay “The English Aristocracy”, first published in *Encounter* in September 1955. This work, if Dunlevy is to be believed, is the defining aspect of Mitford’s career. The rest of the article briefly summarises Mitford’s other novels alongside factual information about their success, but the obituary itself is dominated by Dunlevy’s interest in the ‘U and non-U’ debate. Indeed, almost the entire first half of his article concerns Mitford’s famous essay, and Dunlevy describes Mitford as someone who ‘was born into [the aristocracy] and lived to celebrate it’ (10). This echoes Weisman’s suggestion about Mitford’s apparent need to preserve upper-class life through her fiction.

However, Dunlevy goes further, by commenting on Mitford’s very reasons for writing: “‘I write in the hope of amusing the public and making money for myself’, she said, and this is what she succeeded in doing’ (10). He goes on to suggest, in the final lines of the obituary, that ‘the [stereotypical] aristocrat had one purpose and that was most emphatically not to work for money. Here Nancy Mitford betrayed her class. Money was most emphatically what she worked for’ (10), as though Mitford’s aristocratic status meant that she should neither need money, nor seek to earn more through work. It is an unusual note to end on, and makes Dunlevy’s article difficult to digest, since he almost seems to be critiquing the person he is supposed to be memorialising. Perhaps the most unkind part of the article,

however, is Dunlevy's further discounting of her impact on literature: 'when she died she had entertained two generations of readers with lightly written fact and fiction, but what everyone remembered was the lady who deplored mantelpiece for fireplace and serviette for napkin' (10). The fact that Dunlevy himself mistakes 'fireplace' for the actual word Mitford preferred in its place, 'chimneypiece', adds a layer of irony to his sneering depiction of her, while the depiction itself shows him repeat his earlier rubbishing of a career which impacted upon two generations in favour of a focus on Mitford's position as a member of the British aristocracy.

Yet not all obituaries took this line. The unsigned obituary in *The Times* of 2nd July 1973 refutes this idea, describing Mitford as a writer whose wit 'may well ensure the survival of her fiction (like E.F. Benson's "Lucia" books) when the society it portrays has vanished' (16). The writer of this article is correct in their assumption about the enduring popularity of most of Mitford's books with the public, as well as accurate in their remarks about Mitford's voluminous correspondence: 'she wrote longer and more frequent letters than most of her contemporaries. When these are published, they may place her among the liveliest epistolaries of her time' (16). And published they were. Although Mitford did not write an autobiography – it is believed that she intended to, but never got round to completing it – her letters have been published in several collections. *Love from Nancy: The Letters of Nancy Mitford* (1993) is the only one dedicated entirely to Nancy's own correspondence, and has been quoted from throughout this thesis, as the letters reveal aspects of Mitford's construction of her own persona through a particular prose style and mode of address. However, her letters have also appeared in *The Letters of Nancy Mitford and Evelyn Waugh* (1996) and *The Mitfords: Letters Between Six Sisters* (2004), both

edited by Charlotte Mosley, as well as *The Bookshop at 10 Curzon Street: Letters Between Nancy Mitford and Heywood Hill 1952-1973* (2004), edited by John Saumarez Smith. In terms of future study of Mitford, her letters are an important avenue which could be pursued further, especially in relation to her persona, which was evidently self-fashioned through an overt reliance on performance and theatricality. The *Times*' obituary ends with a lament for Mitford on behalf of the many people who made up her correspondents: 'today they find their world colder and less merry: like Beatrice in *Much Ado*, she was born under a star that danced' (10). Unlike Dunlevy's scornful depiction of her as one merely doling out U and non-U terms ad infinitum, the *Times* writer is much more respectful, envisioning her as a one-of-a-kind whose literary inventions will be missed.

In the years since her death, Mitford has remained popular, but in some ways, she has not always been a household name. Certainly, those who read widely will have come across her, but it is less likely that casual readers or non-readers will have heard of her before. It is possible that Mitford could have become more well-known had more of her works been adapted into films.¹³⁵ The only Mitford novel which has made it on to the silver screen to date is *The Blessing*. Alexander Korda originally adapted the book for the screen, but eventually abandoned the project for unknown

¹³⁵ Indeed a career in screenwriting was eminently possible, with Nancy courted several times by Hollywood producers, who thought that with her gift for witty dialogue, she might make an ideal contributor to screenplays. However, Nancy was unwilling to leave her beloved Paris, and only reluctantly agreed to take part in the pre-West End UK tour of *The Little Hut*. She did, however, revise the screenplay for the classic Ealing comedy *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949), though her work went uncredited. As well as this, *The Blessing* actually started out as a screenplay. In 1948, Mitford was approached by producer Alexander Korda with an idea for a movie treatment that he wanted Nancy to write. However, when she handed in her draft, Korda felt it was too sophisticated for film, and she consequently turned it into a novel. Ironically, several years later, the novel that had begun life as a movie treatment was adapted into a film, and to secure the film rights, Korda was forced to pay Nancy thirty times the amount he had paid her to write the treatment in the first place; or, as Nancy put it in a letter to Gaston Palewski: 'seven million 500 000 francs so dear dear Colonel I can give you a nice present ("No")' (qtd. in Thompson 306).

reasons. In 1956, the film rights were bought by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, and after two years in pre-production and over a dozen script rewrites, producer Karl Tunberg turned Mitford's *Blessing* into a lavish motion picture entitled *Count Your Blessings* (1959) starring Deborah Kerr, Rossano Brazzi and Maurice Chevalier. Despite the presence of the hugely popular Kerr, and Brazzi and Chevalier's recent star turns in *South Pacific* (1958) and *Gigi* (1958) respectively,¹³⁶ the film became a box office failure. Critics were impressed with the performances, but felt that the screenplay, decidedly lacking in Nancy's wit and sparkle, was dull and plodding. Perhaps if justice had been done to Nancy's original novel, the film would have been a more successful adaptation, but unfortunately, due to censorship rules in force at the time, it was difficult to fully portray the often adulterous relationships depicted in the original novel. Perhaps as a result of the failure of this film, Mitford's other novels did not make it to the big screen. There have been other adaptations of her fiction, though, most notably the 1980 television adaptation *Love in a Cold Climate*, which combines *The Pursuit of Love* and *Love in a Cold Climate* and stars Judi Dench, Michael Aldridge and Vivian Pickles. This amalgamation of the two novels was repeated two decades later in a new 2001 adaptation, also entitled *Love in a Cold Climate*, and starring Rosamund Pike, Alan Bates and Celia Imrie.

While Mitford's works may not have received much attention in terms of screen adaptations, the 2001 version of *Love in a Cold Climate* is one example of the continuing presence of Nancy, and her sisters, in popular culture. It is a presence

¹³⁶ Kerr was the star of *From Here to Eternity* (1953), the second-highest grossing film at the American box office in 1953 and *The King and I* (1956), the fourth-highest grossing film of 1956. Kerr was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Actress six times throughout her career, with five of these nominations accrued before the release of *Count Your Blessings* in 1959. She never won an Oscar for acting, but did receive a lifetime achievement award in 1994. Brazzi, meanwhile, had starred in a number of films, most notably *South Pacific*, which became the highest-grossing film at the American box office in 1958, closely followed by Chevalier-starrer *Gigi*, which won a then-record-breaking nine Academy Awards – including Best Picture – at the 1959 ceremony.

which has not abated in recent years, whether it be their 2014 appearance – featuring Sharon Horgan, Samantha Spiro and Sophie Ellis-Bextor as Unity, Jessica and Nancy, respectively – in the satirical television sketch series *Psychobitches* (2012-2014), or their role in Jessica Fellowes’ series of crime novels *The Mitford Murders*, the first volume of which was published in 2017, with further books to follow, possibly one for each Mitford sister. The back cover of the first book describes the collection as ‘a new series of mysteries set amid the lives of the glamorous Mitford sisters’ and clearly these glamorous lives still hold appeal: the first novel in the series was an international number-one bestseller. Further to this, it has recently been announced that author India Knight is writing a modern-day reimagining of *The Pursuit of Love* – entitled *Darling* – which will be published by Fig Tree, an imprint of Penguin, in 2019, with the full endorsement of the Mitford estate. As with the Mitford family’s collaboration with Gucci, the partnership with Knight demonstrates their willingness to bring Nancy in particular into the twenty-first century, and ensure that interest in the family as a whole never dies. This fresh interest in the Mitfords from a literary standpoint highlights the changing perception of the sisters in the public mind. At one point in history, and though still alluring to an extent, the sisters were anathema to the public. Today, they are unexpectedly popular, distanced enough from the political controversies that clouded their lives for it to be acceptable to like them once more. Nancy did not align herself with extreme politics, but she and her writing have suffered because of the general grouping together of her with her more notorious sisters. If Nancy is to be studied effectively at all, we must avoid this tendency to group her with her sisters, and instead focus on the literary approaches adopted by her in her writing. A fascinating writer of wit, bite, and

punch, Nancy Mitford made an important contribution to twentieth-century literature that should be examined further, in order that the prevailing perception of her as a frivolous writer of limited talent be reassessed. My thesis is the first extended study of Mitford's works, but I hope not the last, and it is intended to bring attention to a writer whose fiction is much more multi-faceted than her literary reputation would suggest, and who developed a distinctive voice which deserves to be heard.

Appendices

Appendix One

Nancy Mitford: An Extended Biography

Early Years

Nancy Mitford was born on 28th November 1904, the eldest child of David Bertram Ogilvy Freeman-Mitford and Sydney Bowles, known from 1916 onwards as Lord and Lady Redesdale.¹³⁷ Mitford's father did not believe in schooling for girls, and as a result, none of his female children received a formal education, much to Nancy and her sisters' disappointment.¹³⁸ Yet family life was never dull. Though an aristocrat, Nancy's father David was certainly not wealthy, and was continually seeking a fortune from a variety of imaginative business ventures. Among other endeavours,

¹³⁷ David and Sydney became engaged in 1903, and were married on 16th February 1904. Nancy was born nine months later. David was the second son of Algernon Bertram Freeman-Mitford, 1st Baron Redesdale, and therefore not first in line to inherit his father's title. Instead, David's older brother, Clement Freeman-Mitford was heir to the barony. The inheritance process was disrupted, however, when Clement was killed in 1915 at the Battle of Loos, fought as part of the Third Battle of Artois during the First World War. Clement's widow, Helen, was pregnant at the time of his death, and, as Laura Thompson points out, had their child been male, 'David would not have become heir, and Nancy's life would have been rather different' (37). However, Helen gave birth to a girl, and following his father's death in 1916, David became the 2nd Baron Redesdale.

¹³⁸ In her biography of Mitford, Selina Hastings highlights that 'Nancy's great complaint throughout her life, becoming louder as she grew older, was that she had never been allowed to go away to school. The Redesdales strongly disapproved of formal education for girls' (35). It was not until she reached the age of twenty-two that Nancy finally managed to convince her parents to send her for formal schooling at the Slade School of Fine Art. However, unused to the conventions of the schoolroom, she did not last long, dropping out after a few months. In a letter to Diana from early 1927, she writes mournfully:

I ought to be drawing but the professor has been so beastly to me in a piercing voice, everyone heard & I rushed away to hide my shame in the writing room. ... They are so awful to you, they come up & say What a very depressing drawing, I wonder how you manage to draw so foully, have you never had a pencil in your hand before. ... I now burst into loud sobs the moment one comes into the room, hoping to soften them. (Letters 48).

David and Sydney had investments in a gold mine in Canada, which ultimately failed to produce any gold, while David's decision to sell the country seat and move to a smaller home – and later to a yet smaller home – created a sense of instability in the family. As Laura Thompson points out, Nancy would later teasingly emphasise 'the descent from Batsford PARK to Asthall MANOR to Swinbrook HOUSE', and this exchange of grand surroundings for less illustrious places highlights that 'the Mitfords were never quite so rooted and secure as one somehow imagines them to have been' (38). Such a belief is no doubt influenced by the way Mitford portrays aristocratic families in her novels: not all of the families she describes are the wealthiest of their ilk, but all of them nevertheless inhabit one home that has been theirs for generations, generating a notion of upper-class perpetuation and unchallenged continuation of the societal status quo.¹³⁹

Although David managed to secure a well-paid and relatively easy job working at *The Lady*,¹⁴⁰ he was not suited to his role. A dedicated military man, David had fought in the Second Boer War in South Africa, where he suffered wounds severe enough to lead to the loss of a lung, and was eventually made a lieutenant. When the First World War broke out in 1914, he re-joined the army and was again commissioned a lieutenant, serving in Flanders, where he received special mention for his courageousness at the Second Battle of Ypres. Unsurprisingly, David was not particularly suited to a job behind a desk at a women's magazine. However,

¹³⁹ In *Highland Fling*, the Craigdallochs live at Dalloch Castle, while in *Christmas Pudding*, Lady Bobbin inhabits Compton Bobbin. Much of the action in *Wigs on the Green* takes place at opulent Chalford Park, whereas *The Pursuit of Love* focuses on the Radlett home at Alconleigh and *Love in a Cold Climate* is concerned with Hampton Park. Mitford even extended this focus on aristocratic permanence to France in her novel *The Blessing*, in which Grace, after marrying Charles-Edouard, lives for a time at the family seat Bellandargues in Provence.

¹⁴⁰ *The Lady* was founded, along with *Vanity Fair*, by Sydney's father, Thomas Gibson Bowles, who arranged for David to work at the magazine. As is discussed in Chapter Three, Nancy went on to write articles for the magazine herself, and this work kept her afloat during the early years of her writing career.

aside from occasional prospecting trips to the unfruitful gold mine in Canada with Sydney, his job at *The Lady* and his work in the House of Lords were David's main pursuits. Indeed, her father's role in the House of Lords no doubt allowed Nancy to become familiar with that parliamentary institution, which she regularly satirises in her fiction. Three years passed before Sydney gave birth to the second Mitford child: another girl, Pamela, in 1907. David had hoped for a son, and in 1909, Tom was born, but any hope of another boy was dashed by the arrival of the four girls who followed him: Diana a year after Tom in 1910, Unity in 1914, Jessica in 1917, and finally, Deborah in 1920.

The nearness in years of the later siblings made them especially close, whereas Nancy often found herself distant from her younger sisters, especially Jessica and Deborah, thirteen and sixteen years younger than her respectively. Even Nancy and Pamela, with just three years between them, were not particularly close as children, their relationship affected by Nancy's jealousy – she was extremely spoiled in her early years – about no longer being the centre of her parents' attention.¹⁴¹ As is clear from her writing, Nancy, bored and in need of stimulation, developed a great love for teasing, and her cutting remarks were generally directed at her family and her most intimate friends. Nancy became notorious for her mockery of others, and this often bordered on outright cruelty. She enjoyed terrorising her sisters, and once, during an early morning shift at the makeshift café the sisters set up during the 1926 General Strike, Nancy disguised herself as a disfigured tramp to terrify Pamela, who was apparently so petrified that she ran off screaming, breaking an ankle in the

¹⁴¹ Selina Hastings suggests that in Nancy's eyes, she 'had been abandoned [by her parents] in favour of Pam, and it was many years before she forgave her. From the day of Pam's birth, Nancy set out to punish her sister and make her life miserable. When Nancy was around, Pam could usually be found in tears; if something could be spoiled, Nancy spoiled it for her' (10).

process. Nancy's capacity for mockery only increased as the number of sisters she had to tease grew. For one extended period, Pamela and Diana were forced to join a Girl Guides troop established by Nancy, who served as its Captain – membership was conveniently extended to Mitford girls only – and took great relish in ordering her younger sisters around. She would often prey on her sisters' particular weaknesses: Deborah's sensitivity proved irresistible to Nancy, who was always 'unbearably moved by a story Nancy invented about a little houseless match' (Hastings 35), a tale that later resurfaced in *The Pursuit of Love* (1945) as one of the Radlett children's primary means of tormenting Linda. As is clear from the appearance of such real-life incidents in her fiction, much of Nancy's subject matter was informed by her own experiences, which were unique.

Growing Up

As she grew up, Nancy, the eldest of a large group of siblings, yearned to escape the family home. Her father's reluctance to welcome guests for the weekend, or even simply to dinner, alongside his generally bad temper when guests did brave a visit, frustrated Nancy, naturally sociable and at her best when surrounded by fellow chatterers. It did not help that Nancy tended to befriend people whom her father disapproved of, or in some cases, despised. One hilarious aspect of *Love in a Cold Climate* (1949) involves Uncle Matthew – based on Nancy's father – and the practice he reserves for those he hates most: 'it was a favourite superstition of Uncle Matthew's that if you wrote somebody's name on a piece of paper and put it in a drawer, that person would die within the year. The drawers at Alconleigh were full of

little slips bearing the names of those whom my Uncle wanted out of the way' (140). As with much of Nancy's writing, this characteristic of the real-life Lord Redesdale is no doubt grossly exaggerated, but Nancy's father was nevertheless quite intolerant of a number of her friends, 'sewers' and 'swine' among his favourite epithets for them, and used quite openly in their presence. In a letter to Tom of 25th February 1928, Nancy describes the grim scene at Swinbrook House when her father became involved in a heated argument with Nancy's friend, James Lees-Milne. Somewhat predictably, the argument related to David's favourite subject: war. Nancy wrote,

I am sorry to say that our respected male parent lost his temper rather badly with poor Jim which made us all feel very akward [sic]. ... In fact that nobleman has been so rude & unkind to the unhappy youth ever since he first arrived that the feeling in this house is one of terrible strain whenever they are in the same room together.

I sometimes think that parties here are more *misery* than *pleasure*. ... Apart from the argument it makes one so giddy with rage when people are so disgusting to their guests. Really parties here are *impossible*. The truth is that the poor old man having no building left to do is in a *very bad* temper.
(*Letters* 50-51)

The sarcastic tone adopted by Nancy in relation to her father's aristocratic position foreshadows her later satirical approach towards members of the upper classes, while the vigour of her language with its use of emphases – '*misery*', '*impossible*' – and intensifiers – '*very bad*' – underlines the oppressiveness of life at home with an

intolerant and often intolerable father. The reference to David ‘having no building left to do’ is an allusion to the family’s eventual settlement at Swinbrook House – Nancy nicknamed it ‘Swinebrook’ – which David had built over the course of several years while the family lived at Asthall Manor, the latter home serving as the main inspiration for Alconleigh in *The Pursuit of Love*.

Nancy’s memory of her father’s unpleasant treatment of her friends did not fade with time. In a letter to Cecil Beaton of 14th May 1969, she notes with sadness the death of her close friend Mark Ogilvie-Grant – who provided illustrations for her first two novels *Highland Fling* (1931) and *Christmas Pudding* (1932) – and points out that he was one of the few friends to earn David’s approval: ‘[Mark] was the only young man my father liked & therefore one could invite him without the risk of his being shaken like a rat. I remember my father shaking Mervyn Clive¹⁴² & saying: I’d sooner take a housemaid out shooting than you, *Lord Clive*’ (*Letters* 566). Contrary to the general assumption that most people mellow as they grow older, David’s apoplectic temperament only worsened, and Nancy was increasingly desperate to spend time away from home. In 1921, she finally convinced her parents to send her away to be educated, though Hatherop Castle turned out to be little more than a finishing school for young ladies. Nancy learned French, took music lessons, art and

¹⁴² Mervyn Herbert, 17th Baron Darcy de Knayth, stylised as Viscount Clive, was born around six months after Nancy on 7th May 1904. Ironically, Clive was similar to Nancy’s father in that he was also a second son, in this case the child of George Herbert, 4th Earl of Powis, and his wife Violet Herbert, 16th Baroness Darcy de Knayth. After the death of his elder brother Percy at the Battle of the Somme in 1916, Mervyn became heir to both the earldom and the barony, eventually succeeding his mother upon her death in 1929, though he retained the title Viscount Clive, given to him as heir apparent to the Powis earldom. Clive enlisted in the Royal Air Force at the outbreak of the Second World War. He was killed in active service on 23rd March 1943, and the earldom passed to a distant cousin, Clive’s father having no other sons or close male relatives. The barony, however, was inherited by Clive’s only daughter, Davina, who became 18th Baroness Darcy de Knayth. After a horrific car accident in 1964, Davina was left paralysed from the neck down. She went on to compete at the 1968 Summer Paralympic Games in Tel Aviv, where she won a gold medal in the 25m backstroke, while at the 1972 Games in Heidelberg she won bronze in table tennis. In the House of Lords, she was a passionate advocate for laws to protect people with disabilities, and in 1996 was made a Dame for her services to disabled people.

dance classes, and although Hatherop was less than luxurious – ‘the underfloor heating rarely worked and never penetrated the upper floors, the girls often having to break the ice in their ewers before they could wash’ (Hastings 37-38) – it was an exciting experience away from the tedious familiarity of home. A cultural trip to Paris,¹⁴³ Florence and Venice a year later with four other girls encouraged Nancy’s desire to fly the coop. However, as was customary for well-to-do girls of this era, before she could gain more freedom, Nancy had to make her *début*.

The Debutante

In 1922, when Nancy turned eighteen, her parents arranged a dance for her at Asthall. Due to her father’s general unwillingness to invite young men to stay and the consequent lack of many male acquaintances on Nancy’s part, the evening could have been disastrous – much like Linda and Fanny’s calamitous first ball in *The Pursuit of Love* – but it turned out to be relatively successful, and if not terribly sophisticated, it marked the beginning of Nancy’s adulthood. She made her *début* the following June, when she was presented at Court, and was now free to enjoy the delights of the London Season. The Season was a perpetual whirl of parties and balls, and Nancy was now allowed to entertain male and female guests at Asthall. Grasping her newfound freedom with both hands, she frequently stayed with friends, spent less

¹⁴³ On this trip, Nancy’s interest in France was piqued, and a letter written to Tom from Paris four years later while holidaying in the city with her mother and sisters demonstrates her growing knowledge of French history and culture: ‘I’m now soaking myself in French history, art & literature of the 17th-18th centuries which is passionnant. At the moment I’m reading Mme Campan’s memories & I’ve just finished *Marie-Antoinette et l’affaire du Collier* by Brentano & *Marie-Antoinette: Dauphine* by de Nolhac who is the greatest living authority on M.A. & the keeper of Versailles’ (*Letters* 45). Nancy would go on to become somewhat of an authority on France herself, producing very successful biographies of Madame de Pompadour, Voltaire and Louis XIV, as well as Frederick the Great.

time living at home, and was soon gallivanting with other members of the young set. It was perhaps inevitable that Nancy quickly became enamoured of London life after the stuffiness of life at home. She has often been identified as a member of the group whom D.J. Taylor describes as those ‘twenty-something men and women – fast, rackets and pleasure-seeking – sometimes known to the newspapers who wrote up their goings-on as “the younger set” but more often filed under the name by which history now remembers them: the Bright Young People’ (2). The group became infamous for its outrageous behaviour, which Alison Maloney suggests was dominated by ‘outrageous antics, all-night parties and high-speed treasure hunts’ with ‘London in the 1920s [becoming a] playground of hedonism and thrill-seeking (20). Nancy’s sister, Diana, newly married to brewery heir Bryan Guinness, was a prominent member of the group, and alongside Guinness, hosted many outrageous parties that quickly became the talk of the town. Indeed, even Mitford’s brother Tom became involved with the set. One of the most notorious Bright Young escapades was the staging of an art exhibit heralding the arrival of a brilliant new modernist artist, Bruno Hat. However, the exhibit was a fake, and as Mary S. Lovell points out, Bruno Hat ‘was in reality Tom Mitford in bohemian clothes and false whiskers’ (111),¹⁴⁴ while the artworks themselves¹⁴⁵ were created by either Brian Howard, John

¹⁴⁴ The Bruno Hat exhibit opened on 23rd July 1929 at a cocktail party hosted by Diana and Bryan Guinness at their London home. The press were alerted beforehand in order that the prank generate maximum publicity, and the artworks, mostly abstract paintings framed within rope, were displayed around the room, with Tom positioned nearby in full Bruno Hat garb, answering questions in an exaggerated German accent. The artworks have long been attributed solely to Brian Howard, though more recently it has been suggested that Howard’s close friend, the artist John Banting, also contributed to the paintings exhibited, as evidenced by the sale of one painting, entitled “Still Life with Pears” and attributed to John Banting, at a Leicester Galleries auction, more information about which can be found here: www.leicestergalleries.com/19th-20th-century-paintings/d/still-life-with-pears/10464.

Banting, or both. Such capers were much more exciting for Nancy than the stuffiness of life at home.

In the late 1920s, the activities of the Bright Young People began to wind down, and its members started to branch out into different fields. As Taylor stresses, ‘the London Society world of the mid to late 1920s was a crucible in which were forged the careers of several of England’s greatest novelists, one of its best-loved contemporary poets and half a dozen leading figures in ballet, photography and surrealist painting’ (D.J. Taylor 9). Although some critics have disagreed about the quality of her writing, Nancy nevertheless belongs to this first category. Yet before she went on to become a bestselling writer, Nancy had to earn a living like everyone else. While many people no doubt assumed that Nancy would want for nothing given her position in society, it has already been made clear that though her family had an impeccably aristocratic background, her father’s precarious finances meant that the Mitfords did not always have money. Nancy herself wrote:

¹⁴⁵ For one painting shown at the Bruno Hat show, “The Bath Mat”, a cork bath mat was used as the canvas, while Evelyn Waugh contributed to the apparent genuineness of the event by writing an introduction for the exhibit catalogue entitled “Approach to Hat”. Mitford engages with such absurd art, and the enthusiasm of both its creators and appreciators, in her first novel *Highland Fling*, at the end of which Albert Gates stages an art exhibit to show off his new work. Unlike the Bright Young People, though, Albert is entirely serious in his artistic endeavours, though the rather mocking tone of the text suggests the narrator does not share his enthusiasm:

The pictures were indeed, at first sight, most peculiar and Albert appeared to have employed any medium but the usual ... the first picture – *Child with Doll* – had a real doll stuck across it ... the next on the catalogue, ‘*No 2. Fire irons, formal design,*’ represented a poker and tongs and was executed in small pearl buttons, varying in shade from dead white to smoke-grey. This was framed in empty cotton-reels.

The most important picture in the exhibition was ‘*No. 15. The Absinthe Drinker*’. This was tremendously built out, the central figure – that of a woman – being in a very high relief. On her head was perched half a straw hat with black ostrich feathers. In one hand was a glass filled with *real* absinthe. This was felt by Albert himself to be his masterpiece. (182-83)

It would hardly be possible to exaggerate the eccentricity and restlessness of our upbringing. ... My father had two manias, for selling and for building. He would build a new house every time there was a boom, when labour was scarce and expensive. He would then live in it for a while, but as soon as there was a slump, as soon as labour became easy and cheap and values dropped, he would sell what he had built at a vast loss and we would all move on to the next house whose foundation stone would be laid on the first day of a new boom. (qtd. in Acton 21)

This passage demonstrates Nancy's insightfulness, and it is little wonder that she sought escape from such instability. As Harold Acton underlines, 'Lord Redesdale had little flair for finance and his father had been extravagant, like so many denizens of the horse world. Gradually he felt obliged to part with valuable possessions, usually at a loss' while 'his houses were often let, especially the London residence, whereupon his family were squeezed into the Mews behind it, or into Lady Redesdale's cosy cottage at High Wycombe' (25). The instability, therefore, was not only financial, but also domestic: Nancy felt suffocated, surrounded by many siblings in very close quarters.

The Lady Writer

One form of escape materialised in the form of writing. David would never have allowed his daughter to find a job – the idea of an upper-class girl working unthinkable within the aristocracy – and indeed, Nancy was not exactly cut out for a

life without privilege. Hastings alludes to Nancy's brief sojourn living alone following her father's surprise agreement that she could attend the Slade School of Fine Art and inhabit a bedsit on her own during the week. Though the arrangement ended 'after only four weeks, [Nancy] explaining to her sisters (who had been beside themselves with envy and correspondingly shocked by her failure) that it was no good: too squalid, the room knee-deep in underclothes, because, you see, no one to put them away' (Hastings 52). At a loose end, Nancy found that writing paid well enough to top up her meagre dress allowance, and was a respectable enough career that it prompted no objections from her parents. Nancy's first foray into writing came when she was given the opportunity to write anonymous newspaper articles focused on gossip about the upper classes. Given her social connections, this job was not exactly difficult. As her experience grew, she contributed articles – crucially, with by-lines – to *Vogue* before eventually writing a column for *The Lady*, that magazine founded by her maternal grandfather, and which had employed her father for such a long time, albeit often against his will. These early journalistic activities helped Nancy gain attention, and together with her many photographic appearances in magazines like *The Tatler*, *The Bystander* and *The Sketch*, she became a well-known figure in high society. By late 1930, she was at work on *Highland Fling*. In her memoir *Hons and Rebels* (1960), Jessica Mitford recalls how:

For months Nancy had sat giggling helplessly by the drawing-room fire, her curiously triangular green eyes flashing with amusement, while her thin pen flew across the lines of a child's exercise book. Sometimes she read bits aloud to us. 'You *can't* publish that under your own name,' my mother

insisted, scandalized, for not only did thinly disguised aunts, uncles and family friends people the page of *Highland Fling*, but there, larger than life-size, felicitously named ‘General Murgatroyd’, was Farve. (35)

Jessica’s memory of this first novel’s origins draws attention to the most discussed trait of Mitford’s writing: its apparently autobiographical nature. It is correct that General Murgatroyd in *Highland Fling* is based on David, and it is also true that Nancy’s father would emerge in various guises throughout her books, most famously as Uncle Matthew in *The Pursuit of Love* and its sequels. As mentioned earlier, Nancy adored teasing her family and friends, and committing their idiosyncrasies and peculiarities to print – exaggerated or otherwise – took teasing to another level that Nancy was unable to resist. *Highland Fling* and *Christmas Pudding* both contain caricatures of Nancy’s friends and relatives, while their subject matter – Bright Young People wreak havoc on the countryside – was, in Bright Young People parlance, too, too familiar.

Marriage and Family Feuds

In December 1933, at the age of 29, Nancy briefly put her writing career on hold, and escaped the family home forever, when she married Peter Rodd, second son of Sir Rennell Rodd, a politician who had served as British Ambassador to Italy during the First World War. Although outwardly enthusiastic about her marriage – while still engaged to Peter, Nancy wrote to Mark Ogilvie-Grant of ‘the happiness. Oh goodness gracious I am happy. You *must* get married darling, everybody should this

minute if they want a receipt for absolute bliss' (*Letters* 90) – Peter was not Nancy's first choice. For several years, Nancy had been hopelessly in love with Hamish St. Clair-Erskine, second son of James St. Clair-Erskine, 5th Earl of Rosslyn.

Unfortunately for Nancy, Hamish was flamboyantly gay, a fact about which she was apparently oblivious. In spite of her family and friends advising against it, Nancy and Hamish carried on a relationship for a number of years – at one point, they were even unofficially engaged to be married – which endured until Hamish abruptly revealed plans to marry another woman. In her last letter to him, Nancy wrote, 'You see, I knew you weren't *in love* with me, but you are in love so often & for such tiny spaces of time. I thought that in your soul you loved me & that in the end we should have children & look back on life together when we are old' (*Letters* 85). Hamish's plans, as it turned out, were fictional, and simply a means of ending his romance with Nancy for good. If Nancy had taken time to recover from this blow, she may have found another ideal partner; yet, approaching her thirtieth birthday and still living at home while her younger sister Diana had already been married for four years, Nancy instead quickly became engaged to Peter – a mere month after Hamish's betrayal – and was married to him just six months later.

At first, Nancy's marriage was a happy one. Peter was good looking, intelligent and could be charming to a fault. However, it soon became clear that the couple were ill-suited, and tensions arose due to Peter's general inability to find and maintain employment. Before he married Nancy, he had been sacked from a long succession of jobs, and as a result, had limited prospects. Thompson highlights that after being expelled from Balliol College, Oxford, 'Peter was packed off to work in a bank in Brazil [where] he was eventually arrested for being destitute. He was sacked

from a job in the City, then from working on *The Times* in Germany' (106). All of these difficulties were exacerbated by his heavy drinking. As married life continued, the couple had only their combined allowances to live on, and thriftiness was therefore essential. Regrettably, Peter was anything but frugal. Nancy frequently had to reign in his overspending, and when this proved ineffective, she had to take care of their dire economic situation herself. In 1935, her third novel, *Wigs on the Green*, was published by Thornton Butterworth, the same publisher which had handled her first two books. Although not a bestseller, *Wigs on the Green* severely damaged Nancy's relationship with Unity and Diana. Unlike the earlier *Highland Fling* and *Christmas Pudding* which focus on the Bright Young People, *Wigs* is a satire on British fascism. The novel's protagonist, Eugenia Malmains, is a thinly-veiled caricature of Unity, while the leader of the fascist party Eugenia follows is based on Sir Oswald Mosley.

In the 1930s, Mosley became infamous when he founded his own political party, the British Union of Fascists. The party relied on methods and symbols inspired by Benito Mussolini's Italian brand of fascism, and accordingly, party members were nicknamed 'Blackshirts'. Shortly before Nancy's marriage to Peter Rodd, Diana scandalised society by leaving her husband Bryan Guinness for Mosley, who was also married. She lived as his mistress for a number of years, even after his first wife's death, before eventually marrying him in 1936. Despite causing plenty of scandal on her own, Diana was deeply offended by Nancy's satirical portrayal of Mosley and feared it could damage his image. As Anne de Courcy notes in her biography of Diana, 'for the next few years, relations [between Diana and] Nancy were strained to non-existent' (155). Although Nancy and Diana eventually became

close again, Unity's reaction to the novel – which depicted her as little more than a vociferous propagator of fascist doctrine – was more pronounced and required a grovelling letter of apology:

So now don't get together with Nardie [Diana] & ban me forever or I shall die. Could you forgive me quite soon? Otherwise Xmas & other feasts at home will be *so* uncomf. ... write quite soon and say you forgive me. I did take out some absolutely wonderful jokes you know & all the bits about the Captain.¹⁴⁶ (*Letters* 102)

Nancy and Unity did see each other at family occasions such as those mentioned in this letter, but their relationship remained fractured. By this point, though, Unity's mind had long been preoccupied with other concerns.

Scandal: The Mitfords and Politics

During the interwar period, Unity Mitford's name became familiar in Britain due to her vocal support for Nazi Germany. An enthusiastic follower of Mosley and the British Union of Fascists, she had regularly taken part in BUF activities, but her life changed forever when, in 1933, she and Diana travelled to Germany as part of a larger BUF contingent to witness the 1933 Nuremberg Rally. As she watched Adolf

¹⁴⁶ Originally, *Wigs on the Green* contained a number of scenes featuring 'Captain Jack', the leader of the Social Unionist Party – or Union Jackshirts – as well as more satire about fascism. After reading the manuscript, Diana and Unity requested numerous changes, with Diana particularly insulted by the portrait of Mosley that Nancy had created in the text. In order to placate her sisters, Nancy removed the majority of the offending material, though the appearance of the novel at all was enough to cause a rift between them.

Hitler deliver his stirring speech at the Rally, Unity was enchanted, and became determined to meet him in person. From that point on, she was regularly photographed at pro-German rallies in Britain, and proudly sported a swastika badge wherever she went. In 1934, after Lord and Lady Redesdale finally gave in to her requests to spend time in Germany, Unity moved to Munich, where she began learning German in earnest. As the school she attended was close to the Nazi Party headquarters, the situation could not be more ideal for her, and she began to frequent Adolf Hitler's favourite restaurant, Osteria Bavaria, in an attempt to secure an introduction. Incredibly, her gambit paid off. Within less than a year of her arrival in Munich, she was invited to sit at Hitler's table as his guest. As the months went by, the pair became friendly, and soon enough Unity had close access to Hitler and his inner circle. In 1935, she caused controversy when a letter she had written to *Der Stürmer*, a virulently anti-Semitic German newspaper, was published in full. Unity opens the letter by describing herself boldly as 'a British woman fascist' before mourning the fact that Britain does not have a similar publication:

The English have no notion of the Jewish danger. English Jews are always described as 'decent'. Perhaps the Jews in England are more clever with their propaganda than in other countries. ... We hope, however, that you will see that we will soon win against the world enemy, in spite of all his cunning. We think with joy of the day when we shall be able to say with might and authority: England for the English! Out with the Jews! With German greeting, Heil Hitler! (qtd. in Lovell 187-88)

It is intriguing that Unity continually refers to an unspecified 'we', creating in the process a clear 'them' and 'us' divide throughout, but her use of 'we' also suggests that she truly believes everyone else in the country feels this way, whether they care to admit it or not. The letter would have been damning enough with these lines only, and indeed, when a translated version of the letter was published in British newspapers, it caused widespread outrage.

However, Unity went one step further, and as a result, her family was once again scandalised, though unlike with Diana's unfaithfulness, Unity's behaviour became known to the wider public. For the first time, the Mitfords were thrust into the unfavourable glare of the spotlight. In a post-script, Unity added: 'PS: If you find room in your newspaper for this letter, please publish my name in full ... I want everyone to know that I am a Jew hater' (qtd. in Lovell 188). With no way to issue a denial or to claim the letter had been misinterpreted, the family had to accept the criticism. Unity, meanwhile, was actually rewarded for her unpleasantness: Hitler presented her with a gold swastika badge and invited her and Diana to attend the 1936 Berlin Olympics and the Bayreuth Festival. In 1938, a further invitation, this time to the Nuremberg Rally, was issued to Unity's parents. Amazingly, they accepted.

The Mitfords' decision to attend such an event, at a time when British relations with Germany had already deteriorated significantly, seems reckless in hindsight, but was in keeping with the sentiments of some other aristocrats during the interwar period. After meeting Hitler, Lord Redesdale quickly warmed to him, and later even applauded his conduct in the 1938 Anschluss. The House of Lords

Hansard for 29th March 1938 demonstrates his feelings about Hitler's annexation of Austria:

I am, personally, absolutely convinced that such a change was the sincere desire of the large majority of the Austrian people. The demonstrations in Austria on the arrival of Herr Hitler seemed to me to prove this beyond all reasonable doubt. ... It was not a welcome of the nature that would be given to an unwanted tyrant. It was a welcome that came straight from the hearts of a people for the man they looked upon as their saviour. (qtd. in "British" cc451)

Although Lord Redesdale acknowledges that some Austrian citizens will not be in favour of Nazi rule, his description of this group as 'all those people who had taken part in the long continued persecution and maltreatment of those Austrians with Nazi tendencies' (qtd. in "British" cc451) shows his misguidedness. Rather than being aware of the Nazi Party's cruel treatment of Jews and other minorities – or worse, he is fully aware of this and simply chooses to ignore it – Lord Redesdale instead sees the Nazis as those who are persecuted. He identifies their persecutors as 'Monarchists, Communists, and Jews ... these people [who] were in power' (qtd. in "British" cc451), totally misinterpreting – wilfully or not – the real power structures in place. He goes on to express the belief that because no conflict erupted in Austria, Hitler should be commended as a hero, adding that 'the gratitude of Europe and the gratitude of the whole world are due at this time, in my opinion, to Herr Hitler for averting a catastrophe of such staggering magnitude without spilling one drop of

blood' (qtd. in "British" cc452). Although certainly not universal, it is undeniable that during the interwar period, a significant number of aristocrats shared Lord Redesdale's views and were sympathetic towards Germany, entertaining hopes of avoiding another conflict with the country.

Nancy was not one of them. In his published diary, British diplomat Robert Bruce Lockhart describes meeting Unity at a lunch given by General Sir Ian Hamilton: '[she] is madly pro-Nazi and will not speak to her sister Nancy because she is anti-Nazi' (349). The conflict between Nancy and Unity had started with the publication of *Wigs on the Green*, but Unity's extreme behaviour only worsened it. Up until the end of the 1930s, Nancy's own political views were often vague. Hastings notes that when Mosley founded the BUF, Peter quickly joined up, and Nancy came along with him, though it is doubtful that she fully understood the movement and its aims.¹⁴⁷ In 1939, during the Spanish Civil War, Peter travelled to Perpignan in France to help with the refugee situation there. Thousands of Spanish citizens had gravitated towards Perpignan in an attempt to escape the horrors of the Civil War, and when Nancy joined Peter there a few weeks later, she came face to face with the terrible consequences of fascism. Her disgusted reaction was immediate and forceful, as evidenced by the letter she wrote to her mother while toiling to help the many displaced people she and Peter met in Perpignan:

If you could have a look, as I have, at some of the less agreeable results of fascism in a country I think you would be less anxious for the swastika to

¹⁴⁷ Hastings goes on to point out Nancy's July 1934 contribution to *Vanguard* of an article about Mosley's new political movement. Although the article lauds Mosley and the BUF, Hastings suggests that it is 'couched in that curious quasi-oratorical style that was always a sure indication that she hadn't the faintest idea what she was talking about' (97).

become a flag on which the sun never sets. And, whatever may be the *good* produced by that régime, that the first result is always a horde of unhappy refugees cannot be denied. Personally I would join hands with the devil himself to stop any further extension of the disease. (*Letters* 113-14)

Nancy's grim experiences at the refugee camps were fictionalised in *The Pursuit of Love*, in which the novel's heroine, Linda, travels to Perpignan with her communist husband, Christian, and sees the devastation brought about by fascism.

Nancy and Linda were also similar in another way. While in Perpignan, Linda attempts to salvage her crumbling marriage, and it seems very likely that Nancy was trying to do the same. Though on the surface, Nancy's marriage seemed perfect bliss; much like Linda, with family and friends – and especially in her letters – Nancy 'maintained, for as long as possible, a perfect shop-front' (Mitford, *Pursuit* 79). As well as never holding down a job for any significant length of time, Peter was also frequently unfaithful, and Nancy grew tired of his actions. The role of breadwinner was consequently played by Nancy, who produced three more books after *Wigs on the Green*: two edited collections, *The Ladies of Alderley: Letters 1841-1850* and *The Stanleys of Alderley: Letters 1851-1865* – compiled from letters written by cousins – and another novel, *Pigeon Pie* (1940). The latter, a satirical portrait of the Phoney War period still then in progress, was the first of her works released by Hamish Hamilton, which would become her long-time publisher. Unfortunately, P.P. Howe's instruction that the novel ought to be released 'at the earliest possible moment' since it 'should be just what people are in the mood for, if we are quick' (qtd. in Hastings 128) was not followed quickly enough. By the time of

its publication at the beginning of May 1940, military action had begun across Europe, and the Phoney War period was all but over. As with *Wigs on the Green*, *Pigeon Pie* did not sell particularly well, but by the time it was released, Nancy and her family had recently been preoccupied with yet another dramatic event in their lives.

On the morning of 3rd September 1939, the day that Britain officially declared war on Germany, Unity, devastated at the thought of her homeland and her adopted homeland fighting, walked calmly to the Englischer Garten in Munich, put a pistol to her head, and fired. She did not die. Instead, the bullet became lodged in the back of her skull, and she was hospitalised for several months. At first the Mitford family had no idea that anything untoward had occurred, but were merely concerned because they had not heard from Unity. As Hastings highlights, ‘the truth finally came out when the story broke in the *Daily Express*’ (123). Yet again, the Mitfords became headline news, and only shortly after, the second-youngest sister, Jessica, drew international attention by eloping to Spain with Esmond Romilly, a nephew of Winston Churchill.¹⁴⁸ When the narrator of *The Pursuit of Love*, Fanny, speaks of ‘the year when the parents of our contemporaries would console themselves, if things did not go quite as they hoped for their own children, by saying: “Never mind, just think of the poor Alconleighs!”’ (99), Mitford is being more than a little self-aware. Surrounded as she was by relatives who were becoming increasingly notorious –

Diana and her husband were eventually interned during the Second World War while

¹⁴⁸ The press interest in this story was so severe that Nancy and Peter, tasked with visiting Jessica and Esmond in order to persuade them to give up their engagement and come home, were beset by journalists and photographers for the entire journey. As with Jassy in *The Pursuit of Love*, who similarly disappears intent on marrying a Hollywood film star, ‘the whole thing appeared in the newspapers, which devoted pages of space to it, and (it was a silly season with nothing else to occupy their readers) turned it into a sort of serial story’ (Mitford, *Pursuit* 110). Much like the expedition in *The Pursuit of Love*, Nancy and Peter’s attempts proved fruitless: finally relenting, both families reluctantly gave their blessing, and Jessica married Esmond in 1937.

Jessica became an avowed communist – Nancy had more than enough fodder for her fiction. Her next novel, *The Pursuit of Love*, which she promised Jessica was ‘a book about us when we were little ... not a farce this time but serious’, before ominously adding ‘don’t be nervous!’ (*Letters* 177) proved to be the turning point in her career. Unlike her first four novels, which contain elements of her life as a grownup, with *The Pursuit of Love*, she returned to her childhood for inspiration, skilfully crafting her most well-known and perhaps best admired work.¹⁴⁹

Fictionalising, Love and Popular Success

It is indisputable that Nancy based many of the characters in her later novels on close family and friends.¹⁵⁰ In *The Pursuit of Love*, Nancy’s ill-tempered father David becomes Fanny’s cantankerous xenophobic Uncle Matthew, her distant mother Sydney is transformed into the vague Aunt Sadie, Peter serves as the model for Linda’s hopeless husbands Tony and Christian, while various friends and acquaintances, such as Eddy Sackville-West and Lord Berners, appear thinly disguised as Uncle Davey and Lord Merlin, respectively. Thompson highlights that Nancy took ‘what was intensely private among the family and laid it all out for public consumption’ (246), but it can surely be argued that given the fondness and genuine emotion which tinges Mitford’s descriptions of the madcap Radlett family,

¹⁴⁹ After the commercial failure of her previous two novels, Nancy initially lost some of her interest in writing. However, in 1944, with the encouragement of Evelyn Waugh, she began *The Pursuit of Love*. In March 1945 she took leave from her job as a bookseller at Heywood Hill in order to work on it, and by the end of the year, it was ready for publication. As Thompson points out, the novel was ‘an instant sensation’ (242), and one of the biggest selling books of the year. Finally, a little belatedly perhaps, Nancy had achieved popular success as a writer.

¹⁵⁰ The autobiographical basis can be gleaned from David’s reaction to his daughter’s third novel. In his copy of *Wigs on the Green*, beside the disclaimer ‘This is a work of fiction, and all characters in the book are drawn from the author’s imagination’, David had scribbled in pencil: ‘Beastly lie’ (qtd. in Hastings 100n).

Nancy meant the novel as somewhat of a tribute to her family, and it perhaps acted as a balm for them given recent events: Unity's weakened condition often made Sydney's life a daily struggle,¹⁵¹ while the family as a whole were devastated when Tom was killed in action while fighting in Burma. Perhaps the biggest inspiration for the novel, however, was the man behind Fabrice de Sauveterre, the character with whom Linda begins a year-long affair in Paris after meeting at the Gare du Nord. This man was Gaston Palewski, to whom the novel is dedicated. Nancy first met Palewski in London in September 1942 and soon became infatuated with him.

Although the pair conducted a secret affair for almost two decades, Palewski did not return Nancy's romantic sentiments. Unfortunately for her, the relationship was, in some ways, similar to her unrequited love affair with Hamish St. Clair-Erskine, though admittedly the affair with Palewski was much more than platonic. By the 1940s, Nancy's union with Peter was long past repair, and they remained married in name only.¹⁵² Free of any concrete ties to Britain – aside from her parents and sisters – in 1946, Nancy fulfilled a lifelong ambition and moved to Paris. She set up home in a flat on rue Monsieur, a strategic decision, given its close proximity to where Palewski lived at the time. For the rest of her life, Nancy pursued her romance with Palewski. At first, he was an active participant, but as the years went on, he became gradually more distant, the situation not helped by his varied diplomatic career: a favourite of Charles de Gaulle, in 1957, after a number of different political appointments, he was made French Ambassador to Italy. By the late 1950s, the relationship was principally conducted by letter. Nancy was an inveterate written correspondent, and adored sending missives to her family and friends – as evidenced

¹⁵¹ After years of poor health, Unity died from meningitis – a result of the cerebral swelling caused by the bullet in her skull – on 28th May 1948, aged 33.

¹⁵² The marriage lasted until their eventual divorce in 1957. Neither remarried, and Peter died in 1968.

by the huge collection of letters she left behind, some of which have been published – but it would be foolish to assume this lack of closeness enriched her affair with Palewski.

Yet in the years following the publication of *The Pursuit of Love*, Nancy had many other activities to occupy her time. *Pursuit* was the first of her novels to be published in the United States, where it sold extremely well. For a while, there was talk of a big-screen adaptation. The *Bronxville Review-Press*' "Movie Memoranda" column of 1st May 1947 states that 'the screen rights to "Pursuit of Love" by English novelist Nancy Mitford have been purchased by Enterprise with Vivien Leigh sought to play the lead role' (7) while a Random House advertisement for the novel in *The New Yorker* of 22nd June 1946 boasts that 'the film version will be made in London' (88). The film version never came to pass – *The Pursuit of Love* and *Love in a Cold Climate* were adapted for television in both 1980 and 2001 – but Nancy remained busy, producing *Climate* four years later. A sequel to *Pursuit*, the narrator is once again Fanny, and the novel features a number of its characters in supporting roles, most notably the Radlett family, though Linda is replaced by Polly Hampton, a rich heiress with an impossible mother. Another runaway success – the first novel ever to be simultaneously selected as Book of the Month by the Book Society, the *Daily Mail* and the *Evening Standard* – *Love in a Cold Climate* was Nancy's second bestseller on both sides of the Atlantic.

A Novelist and More

Into the 1950s, Nancy's career went from strength to strength. Shortly after the publication of *Love in a Cold Climate*, she translated André Roussin's farcical comedy *La petite hutte* into English, and returned to Britain for its pre-London tour, which visited Edinburgh, Glasgow, Newcastle and Leeds. As *The Little Hut*, the play debuted on the West End on 23rd August 1950 to instant success. Although the risqué nature of the play prompted minor controversy, it ran in the West End for 1,261 performances, and did not finally close until September 1953: in a letter to Mark Ogilvie-Grant of 19th September 1950, Nancy coos, 'the play is a success luckily so all the slight attendant horrors have been worth while & I am rich. The returns, which I get every week, go up by hundreds & make lovely reading as you suppose' (*Letters* 318).¹⁵³ A year after the debut of *The Little Hut*, Nancy produced another bestseller, *The Blessing* (1951). Selected as book of the month by the *Daily Mail* in Britain and by the Book-of-the-Month Club in the United States, this novel features a change of setting, with the action moved from Britain to France, reflective of Nancy's increasingly Francophile nature. *The Blessing* was followed by another French-oriented book, Nancy's first non-fiction text, a biography of Madame de Pompadour, which appeared in 1954. With *Madame de Pompadour*, for the first time in her career, Nancy received reviews that not only complimented the humour and style of her writing, but which also acknowledged the great effort she had dedicated to its

¹⁵³ After only two months of the play's run in the West End, Nancy had already made £1,029 in royalties. The cast on opening night was made up of Robert Morley as Philip, David Tomlinson as Henry and Joan Tetzel as Susan. Interestingly, when the play transferred to Broadway a month after its West End run had ended, for whatever reason, American theatregoers did not take to it as their British counterparts had done, while critical reviews were rather tepid, with one *New York Times* reviewer claiming that the cast, which featured none of the original actors, were to blame for the play's lack of energy. It ran for only twenty-nine performances, opening on 7th October 1953 and closing at the end of that month.

completion. A result of meticulous research, often involving extensive translations from French into English – which she would perform again for her later biographies *Voltaire in Love* (1957), *The Sun King* (1966) and *Frederick the Great* (1970) – Nancy demonstrated her great intellect, a characteristic sometimes forgotten about in critical considerations of her works.

However, Francophilia aside, Nancy's next piece of work would transport her back to Britain and to the familiar world of the English aristocracy. In 1955, while lunching with an American friend, Nancy met Professor Alan Ross, an expert in linguistics at the University of Birmingham. The eminent professor had no idea of the extent to which his work would be circulated as a result of this chance encounter with Mitford. While in conversation, Nancy learned that Ross was working on an article about upper- and non-upper-class language usage in English, and was surprised when he told her that he had cited *The Pursuit of Love* as an example of upper-class speech patterns. Time had not dulled Nancy's capacity for mockery, and as unable to resist a tease as ever, she immediately seized upon this idea and incorporated it into an essay she had been assigned to write for *Encounter* magazine. The essay, published in September 1955, was about the English aristocracy, and, so titled, it was an international sensation and provoked extensive debate. The 'U and non-U' discussion carried on in numerous newspaper and magazine articles for months, with many commentators treating it with total seriousness. Nancy, whose tongue had been very firmly in her cheek throughout the composition of this essay, surely could not believe the success of this particular tease. In 1956, her essay was republished, alongside Professor Ross' original and a number of other pieces, in a book entitled *Noblesse Oblige*, which Hastings observes sold 'nearly 14,000 copies

... in Britain [by the end of its first year]; in America 10,000 had gone in the first week' (225). Once again, though indeed in rather unusual circumstances, Nancy had worked her magic and produced another bestseller.

More bestsellers were to come. In 1957, Nancy once again turned her attention to a French figure, this time Voltaire. Her biography of Voltaire, entitled *Voltaire in Love* (1957), focuses on the poet's love affair with Émilie du Châtelet. It was very popular upon release, particularly in the United States, where it remained on the *New York Times* Best Seller List for nine consecutive weeks. Nancy's next book, *Don't Tell Alfred* (1960) turned out to be her final novel, and like *The Blessing*, it is set primarily in France. A further sequel to *The Pursuit of Love* and *Love in a Cold Climate*, it presents the re-emergence of Fanny, narrator of the previous novels, who this time becomes the central character. In the novel, when Fanny's cautious husband – the titular Alfred – is appointed British Ambassador to France, she suddenly finds herself transported to Paris, where she must adapt to an entirely new way of life, bounded by political intrigue, cocktails and Christian Dior. Although the novel was another success, Mitford did receive some criticism for her re-treading of familiar ground – several characters from past texts reappear once more – and for the perceived outdatedness of her literary focus. Some critics felt that the sun had already completely set on the twilight world of the aristocracy which Mitford continued to present to her readers, and such reviews were enough to dissuade Mitford from writing any more fiction. Undeterred in general however, she continued to write, and in 1962, Hamish Hamilton published a collection of her journalism, *The Water Beetle*, while four years later, she produced another book, *The Sun King* (1966). In the text, a biography of King Louis XIV of France, Nancy yet

again displays her ability to perform painstaking research and then present this research in a lively, readable fashion, which richly depicts the time period under discussion without boring the reader; or, as Cyril Connolly puts it, she had ‘evolved a technique for regurgitating packages of old letters in palatable form which any historian might envy’ (qtd. in Acton 167).

‘I don’t greatly fear death’: Nancy’s Final Years

The Sun King proved to be Mitford’s penultimate literary effort. In January 1967, she moved to a new home at rue d’Artois in Versailles. She had longed to live in Versailles for a number of years, and, in a very comfortable financial position as a result of her great success as an author, she should have been at her happiest. Unfortunately, this was not the case. In 1968, Nancy began researching what would be her final book, a biography of Frederick the Great, and while in the initial stages of writing, her health began to deteriorate. Worse still, while recovering from a bout of illness in March 1969, she learned that Gaston Palewski, who by now had become a largely absent figure in her life, had married another. Since Palewski had always dissuaded Nancy’s talk of their marrying with claims that he did not wish to marry anyone, this revelation was quite a blow. As usual, though, Nancy resorted to humour in order to mask her true feelings, and soldiered on with her latest project. As the year went on, she started to suffer long bouts of almost unendurable pain. Shortly after learning of Palewski’s marriage, she was hospitalised for the removal of a tumour, though this did little to alleviate her suffering. A vast number of specialists were consulted, but no definite cause of her discomfort could be identified.

In late 1969, although in excruciating discomfort, Nancy travelled to East Germany in order to carry out research for her book. This dedication to her craft would have no doubt surprised those critics who claimed her books were largely autobiographical and therefore fairly simple to produce. By the beginning of 1970, she had finished the book, but any celebration of this achievement was clouded by her need to enter hospital for more tests, which again yielded no information about the reason for her illness. *Frederick the Great* (1970) was published to relatively modest success, which surely disappointed Mitford, though by the early 1970s, the near-constant pain caused by her unknown illness overrode most of her other concerns. Life for Nancy was brightened a little in April 1972, when she received word that France had decided to award her the Légion d'Honneur, while a short time later, she was appointed a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) by Queen Elizabeth II. It seems ironic that a writer who consistently mocked the British government throughout her fiction was, with this award, heralded by the establishment, and it would not be surprising if Nancy thought of this achievement as the ultimate tease.¹⁵⁴ Little amusement could be found only a few months later. At the end of the year, Nancy was admitted to the Nuffield Clinic in London and finally received her much-awaited diagnosis: Hodgkin's lymphoma. By now in perpetual agony, she spent her days unable to perform basic tasks, and ironically, the sister with whom she often disagreed the most, Diana, also then living in France, became

¹⁵⁴ Initially, Nancy feigned indifference about the British award, claiming that she was only interested in the French honour. However, she soon changed her mind after reconsidering the privilege, which placed her higher in the rankings than a knight's widow. Nancy's amusement at the honour is emphasised by her letter of 31st May 1972 to Viscountess Mersey, in which she writes: 'Oh yes, I sit at dinner above a knight's widow, I shall simply have to find one but all the knights I know are unmarried for a certain reason. *Wanted* knight's widow – £100 offered to any who will come to dinner & sit below Mrs Rodd' (*Letters* 598).

her primary carer. Along with the youngest Mitford sister Deborah, now Duchess of Devonshire,¹⁵⁵ Diana looked after Nancy as her condition gradually deteriorated.

Nancy lived only another six months. She passed away on 30th June 1973 at her beloved home in Versailles. The eldest Mitford child, she was nevertheless predeceased by Tom and Unity, while her mother and father had died several years earlier.¹⁵⁶ A celebrated figure at the time of her death, Nancy's writing – as well as the outrageous personal lives of her sisters – had made her an international star, and newspapers worldwide mourned her death in lengthy obituaries. The girl who loved to tease her family and friends had used her life experience as the thread for a series of comedic tapestries about life among the aristocracy, to tremendous success. However, her works have never received much academic attention, while the literary position Mitford occupied during her life – well-reviewed, popular, influential – has not been accorded her in the years following her passing. Though most of her books have never been out of print, public adulation of Mitford has never been mirrored in academic considerations. A lengthy appraisal of her fiction is long overdue, and my thesis is intended to address this omission, and the reasons for Mitford's exclusion from current academic discourse.

¹⁵⁵ In 1941, Deborah married Andrew Cavendish, son of Edward Cavendish, 10th Duke of Devonshire. As with Deborah's father, Andrew was a second son, and his elder brother, William, was set to inherit the dukedom. However, also similarly to Deborah's father Lord Redesdale, William was killed during military action, in this case near the end of the Second World War. As a result, Andrew ascended to the position of heir apparent, and upon Edward's death in 1950, Andrew became 11th Duke of Devonshire, and Deborah chatelaine of Chatsworth House.

¹⁵⁶ David, Lord Redesdale, died on 17th March 1958 at the age of 80, while Sydney, Lady Redesdale, died on 25th May 1963, aged 83. At the time of David's death, the couple had been separated for years, with Sydney devoted to caring for Unity. After Unity's death, Sydney spent most of the year on the then-family-owned island of Inch Kenneth, in northwest Scotland.

Appendix Two

Selected Data Analysis

Table 1

Origin of Contemporary Reviews of Nancy Mitford's Works Analysed in Chapter Three

Country of Publication	Number of Reviews	Percentage of Total (%)
United Kingdom	62	63
United States	25	26
Australia	11	11

Table 2

Recurring Words in Contemporary Reviews of Nancy Mitford's Works Analysed in Chapter Three

Keyword	Reviews Containing Keyword	Percentage of Total (%)
Light	21	21
Amusing	20	20
Delightful	18	18
Farcical	18	18
Fun	17	17
Funny	13	13
Frivolous	11	11

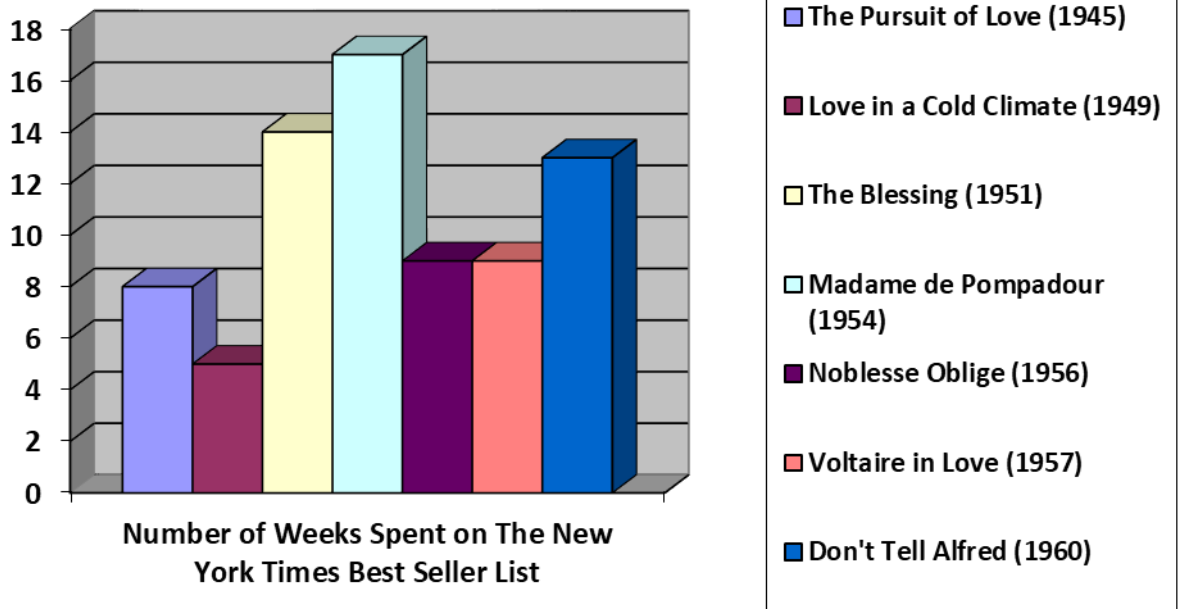
Table 3

Number of Weeks Spent on *The New York Times* Best Seller List and Chronology of Weeks

Book Title	Number of Weeks Spent on List	Chronology of Weeks
<i>The Pursuit of Love</i> (1945)	8	Non-Consecutive
<i>Love in a Cold Climate</i> (1949)	5	Consecutive
<i>The Blessing</i> (1951)	14	Non-Consecutive
<i>Madame de Pompadour</i> (1954)	17	Consecutive
<i>Noblesse Oblige</i> (1956)	9	Non-Consecutive
<i>Voltaire in Love</i> (1957)	9	Consecutive
<i>Don't Tell Alfred</i> (1960)	13	Non-Consecutive

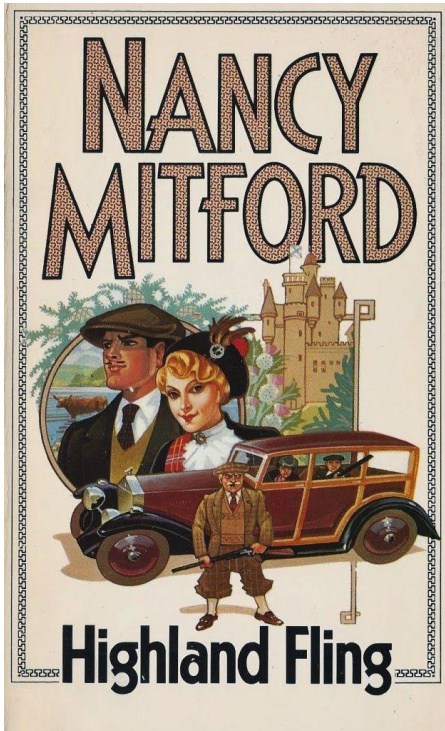
Graph 1

Number of Weeks Spent on *The New York Times* Best Seller List

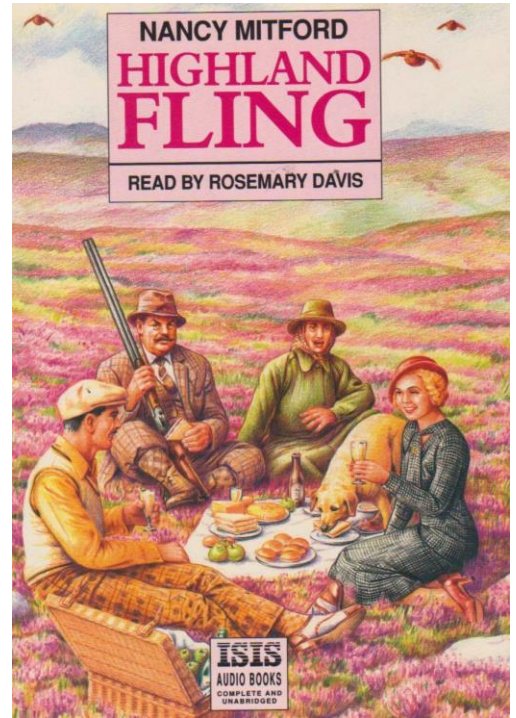


Appendix Three

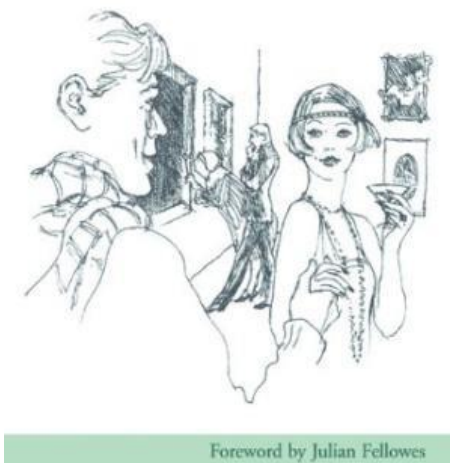
Mitford Through the Years: A Selection of Book Covers



Highland Fling (Hamlyn, 1982)



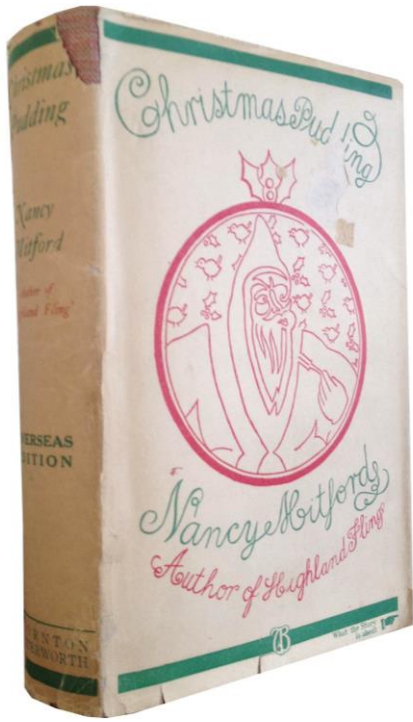
Highland Fling (Isis, 1992)



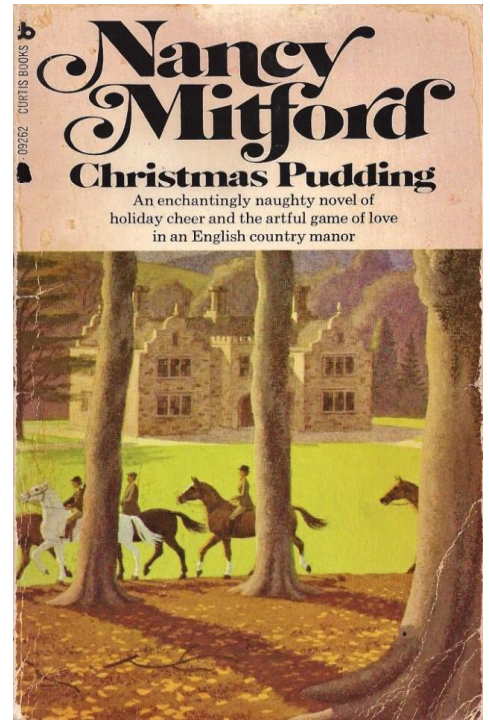
Highland Fling (Capuchin, 2010)



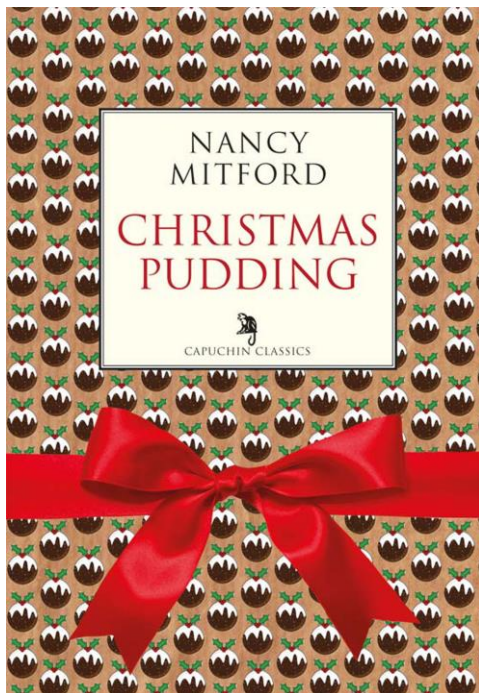
Highland Fling (Vintage 2013)



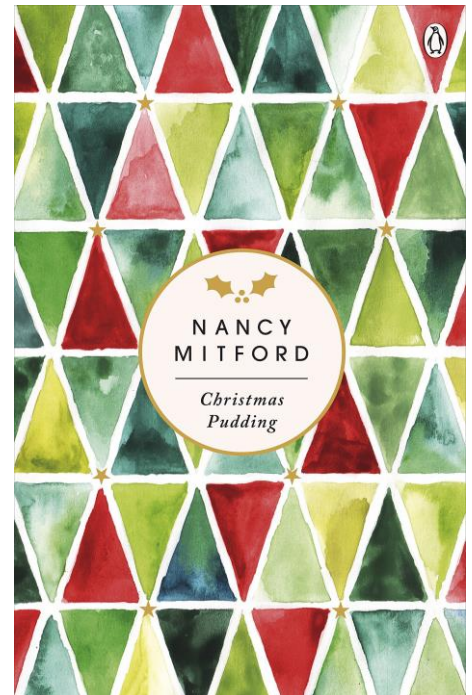
Christmas Pudding (Thornton Butterworth, 1932)



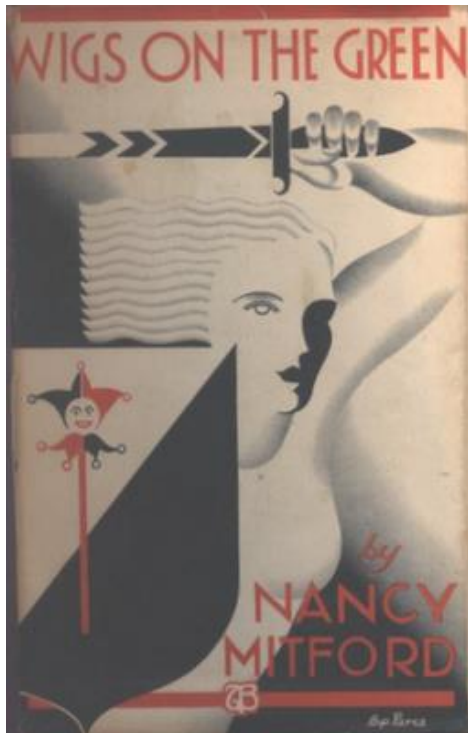
Christmas Pudding (Da Capo, 1993)



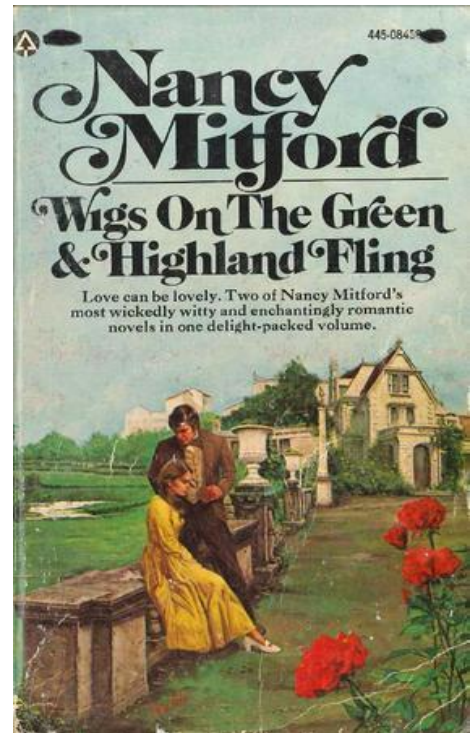
Christmas Pudding (Capuchin, 2012)



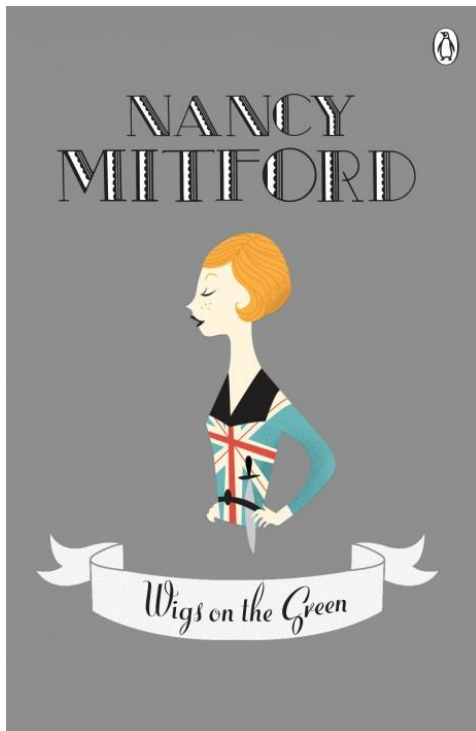
Christmas Pudding (Penguin, 2018)



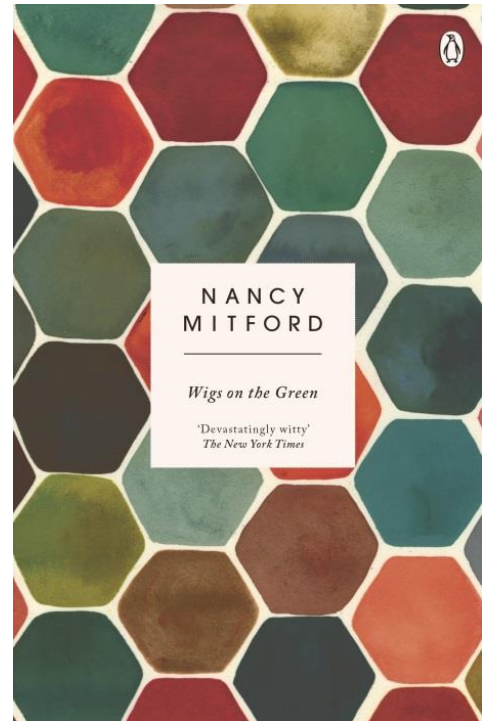
Wigs on the Green (Thornton Butterworth, 1935)



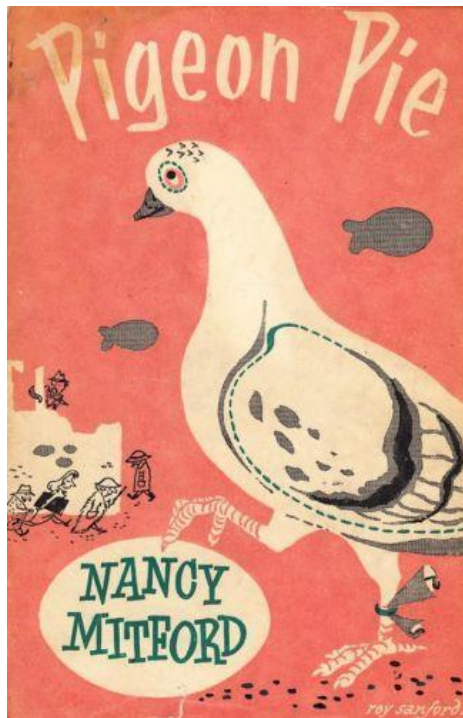
Wigs and Fling (Popular Library, 1976)



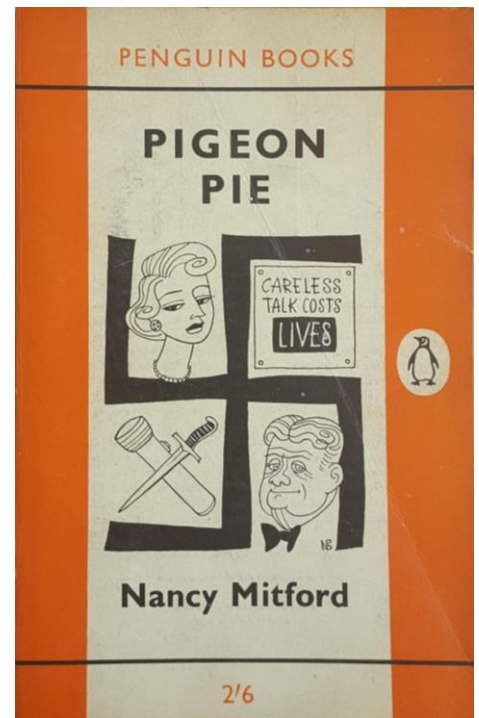
Wigs on the Green (Penguin, 2010)



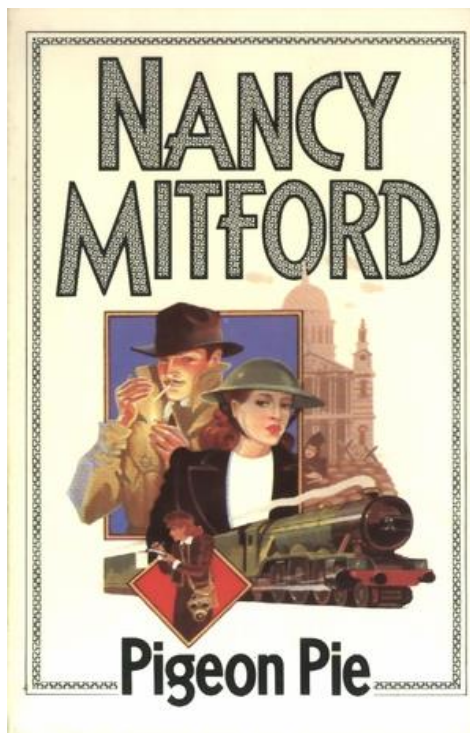
Wigs on the Green (Penguin, 2016)



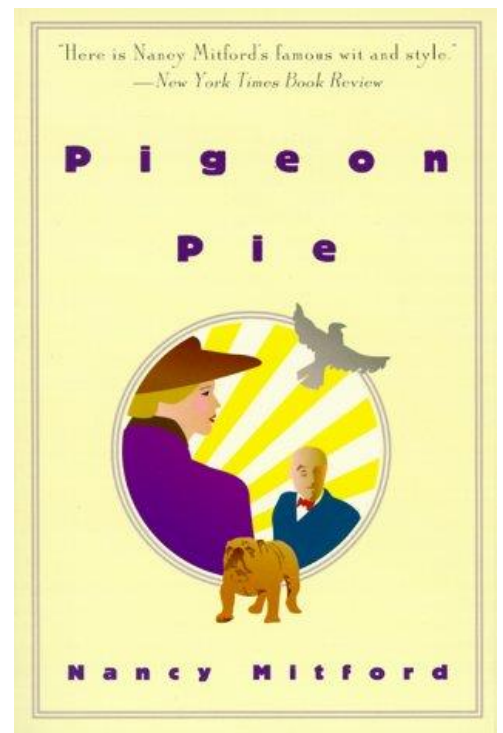
Pigeon Pie (Hamish Hamilton, 1952)



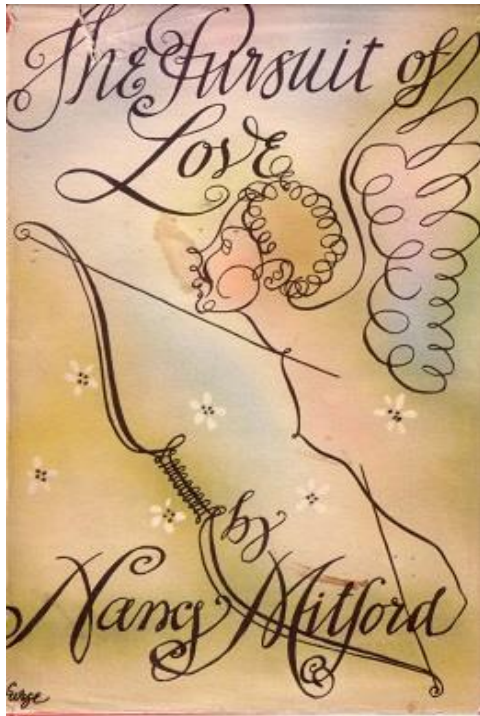
Pigeon Pie (Penguin, 1961)



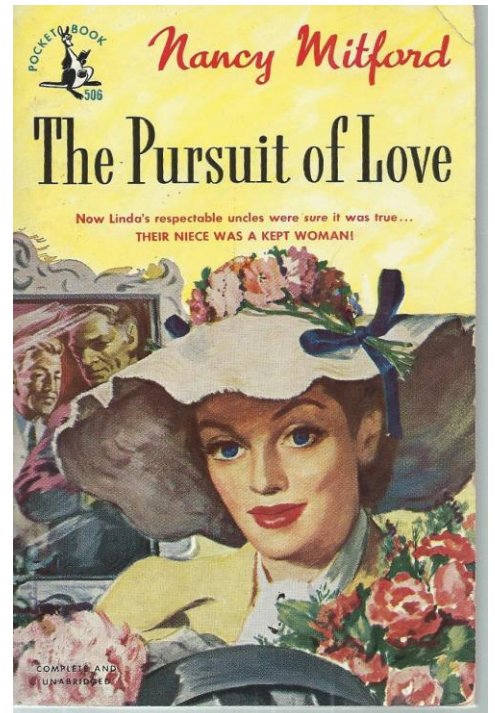
Pigeon Pie (Hamlyn, 1982)



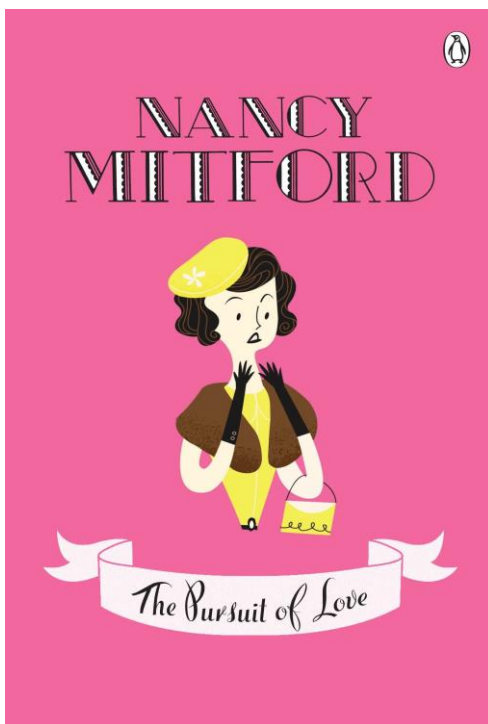
Pigeon Pie (Da Capo, 1999)



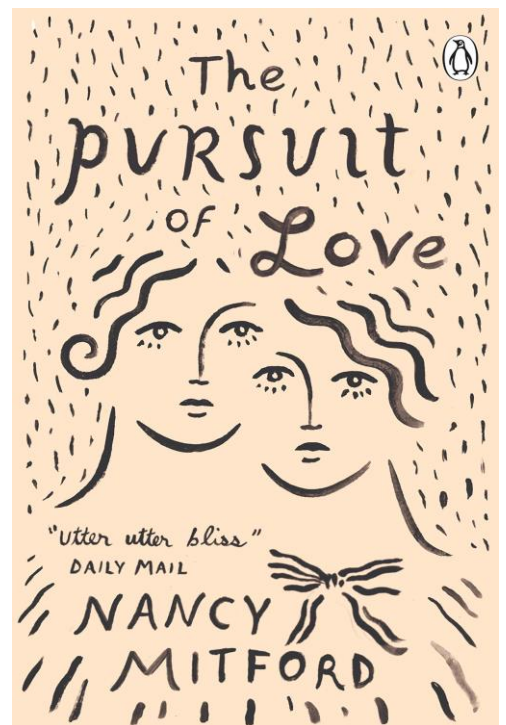
The Pursuit of Love (Hamish Hamilton, 1945)



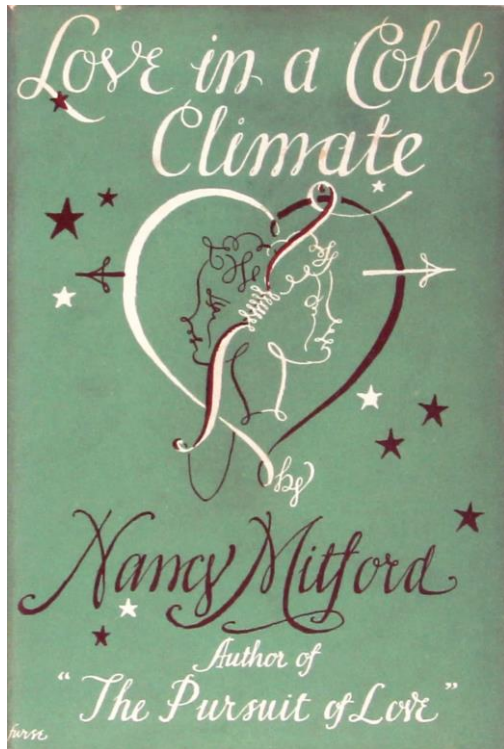
The Pursuit of Love (Pocket, 1946)



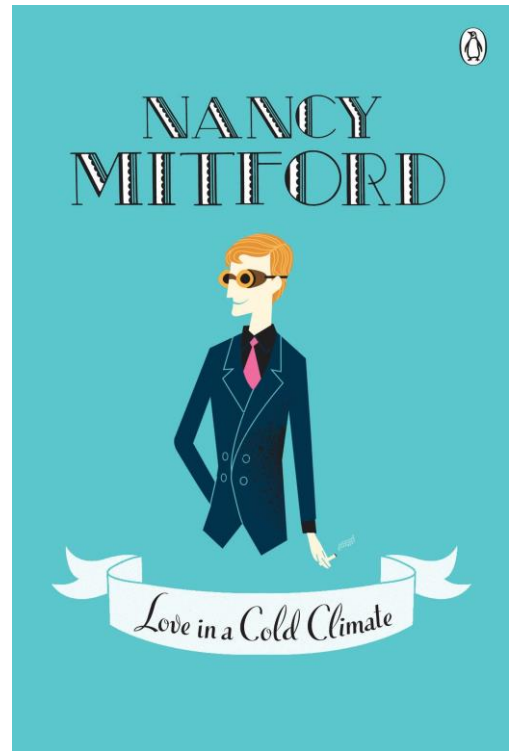
The Pursuit of Love (Penguin, 2010)



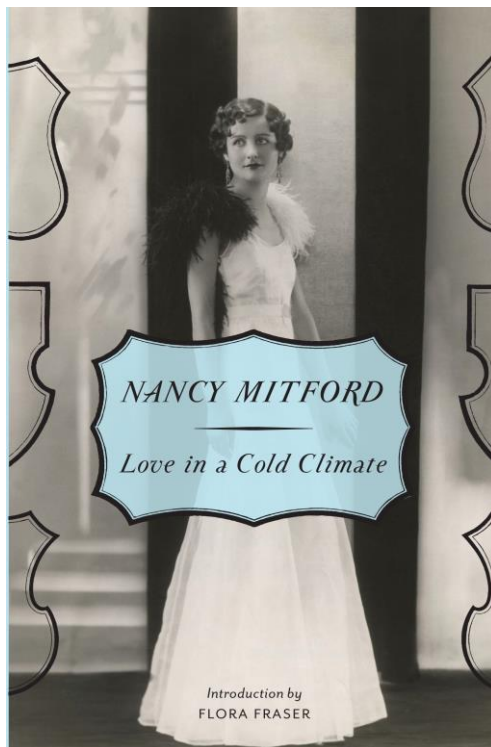
The Pursuit of Love (Penguin, 2018)



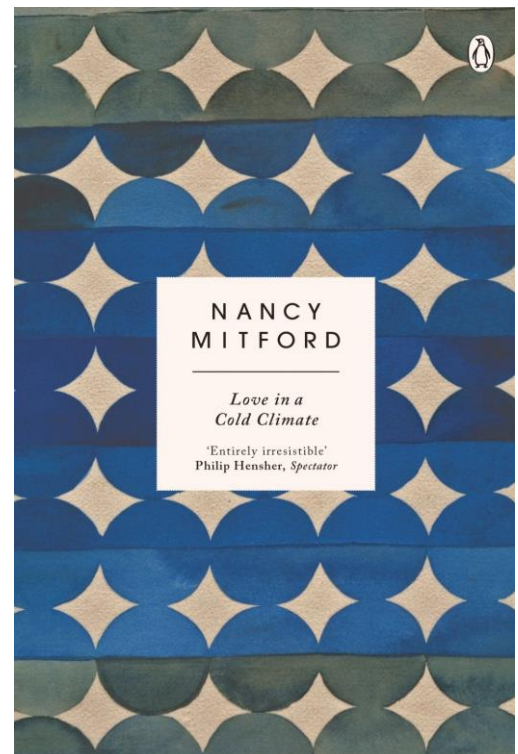
Love in a Cold Climate (Hamish Hamilton, 1949)



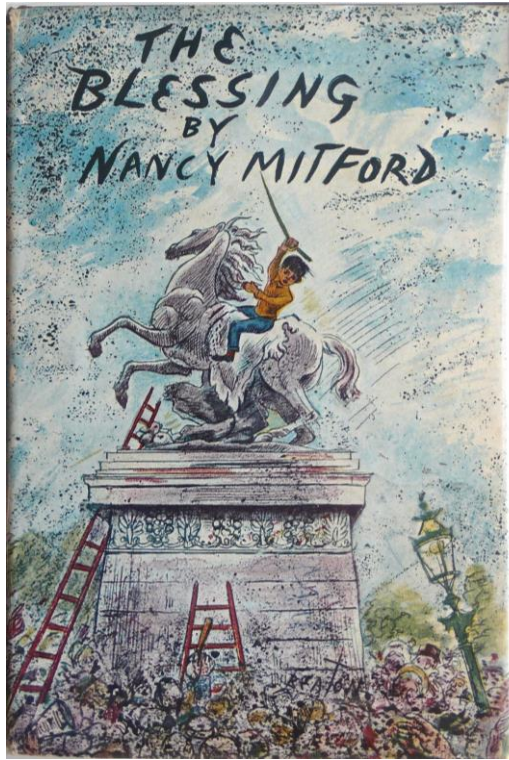
Love in a Cold Climate (Penguin, 2010)



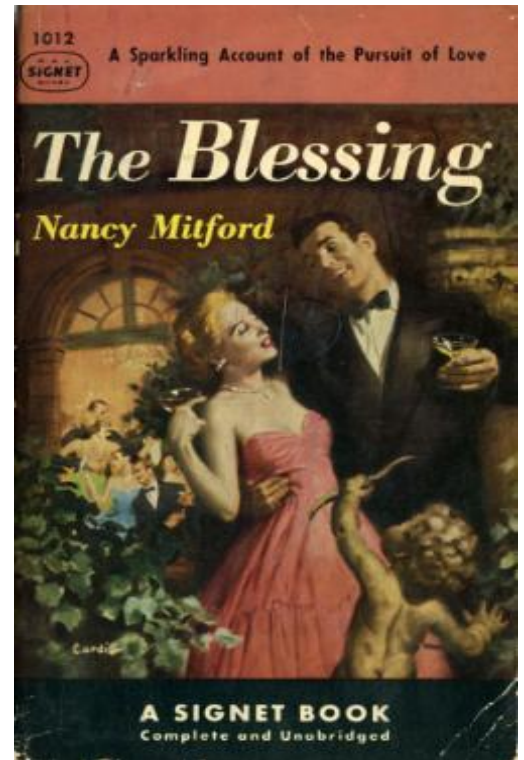
Love in a Cold Climate (Vintage, 2013)



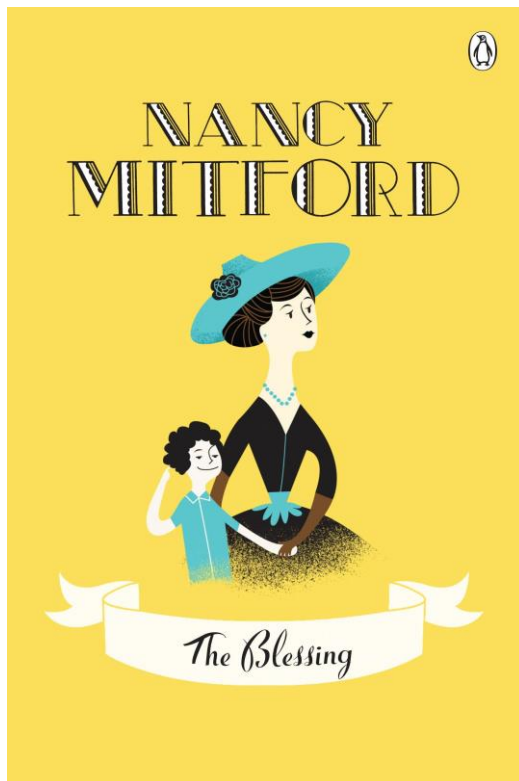
Love in a Cold Climate (Penguin, 2015)



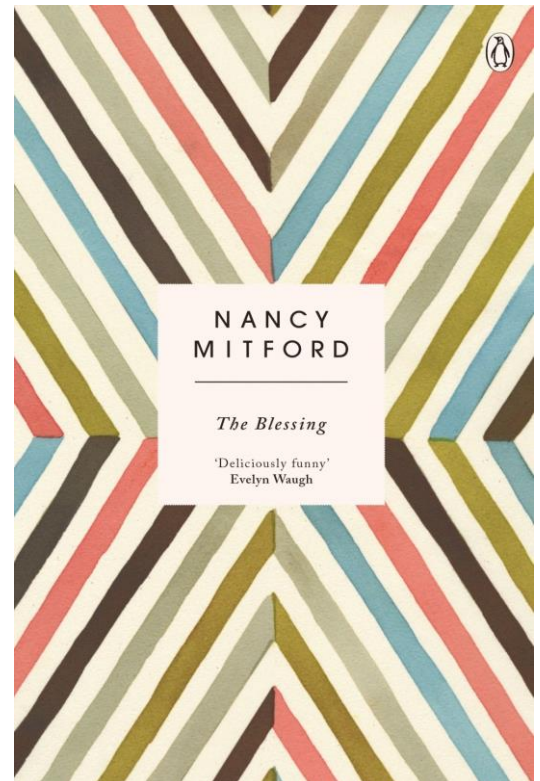
The Blessing (Hamish Hamilton, 1951)



The Blessing (Signet, 1953)



The Blessing (Penguin, 2010)



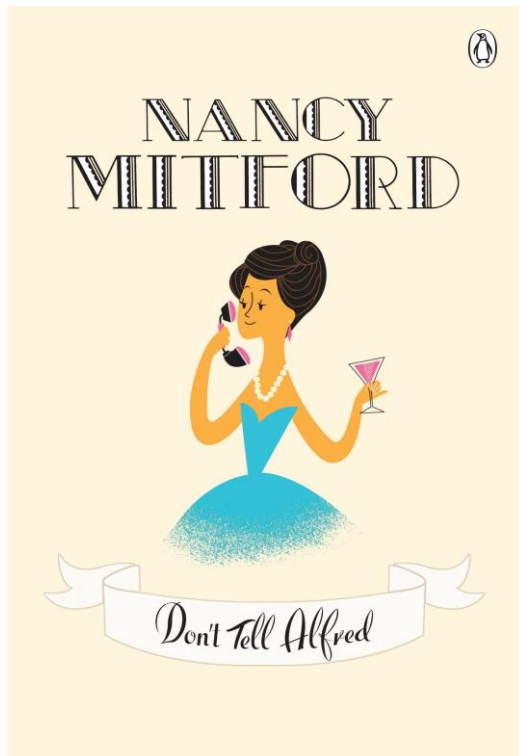
The Blessing (Penguin, 2015)



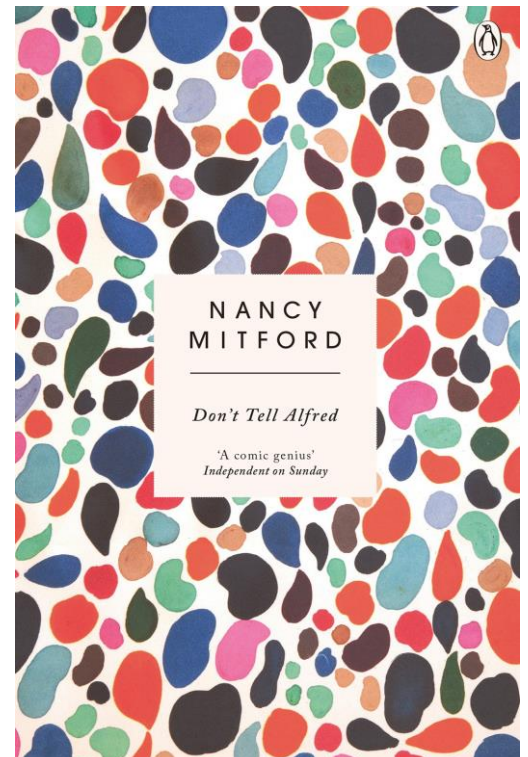
Don't Tell Alfred (Hamish Hamilton, 1960)



Don't Tell Alfred (Vintage, 2013)



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