



BIOGRAPHY

Jessica Mitford (1917–1996), known to family and friends as “Decca,” was the fifth of the celebrated Mitford sisters, who captured the attention of the English press and public with their literary talents and political waywardness. Mitford’s first work was a memoir, *Hons and Rebels*, which was published in 1960. In 1963 she turned to investigative journalism and published *The American Way of Death*, a harsh critique of the funeral industry which went on to become a best-seller and instigated congressional hearings on the industry. Mitford was married twice, first to Esmond Romilly, a nephew of Winston Churchill, and then to Richard Treuhaft, an American civil rights lawyer. Mitford was active in civil rights causes throughout her life, and once spent a night barricaded in an Alabama church after the rally she was part of was attacked by the Ku Klux Klan.

HONS AND REBELS

by Jessica Mitford

Introduction by
Christopher Hitchens

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“More than an extremely amusing autobiography... she has evoked a whole generation. Her book is full of the music of time.” —
Sunday Times

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Hons and Rebels is Jessica Mitford’s hilarious and moving memoir about her childhood in her eccentric English family and her dramatic elopement and marriage to a dashing, charismatic young journalist.

Jessica Mitford, or “Decca,” was one of the legendary Mitford sisters: Nancy, who was a celebrated novelist and biographer; Unity, who became a close friend and passionate admirer of Hitler before the war; Diana who married Sir Oswald Mosley, leader of the British fascists; and Deborah, who became the Duchess of Devonshire. Along with another sister and brother, they grew up in an unconventional, aristocratic English family whose many quirks Mitford describes with glee.

When at nineteen Decca elopes to Spain to take part in the Spanish Civil War with her second cousin—Winston Churchill’s nephew—the rebellious and captivating Esmond Romilly, a British destroyer is deployed to bring the truants home. But the pair refuses, leaving behind their privileged upbringings for good. They later travel to America where they do everything from selling silk stockings door to door in Washington D.C. to tending bar in Miami, going to all sorts of dazzling parties in between, up until the war begins and brings with it devastating consequences.

Mitford is a rare companion—spirited, entertaining, relentlessly funny, yet deeply serious—and her unparalleled memoir is both a touching love story and an absorbing social history of an England that was swiftly changing.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. “We were as though caught in a time-proofed corner of the world...The very landscape, cluttered with history, was disconcertingly filled with evidence of the changelessness of things” [p. 21]. Why is life at Swinbrook so insular? How did the politics and prejudices of Decca’s parents contribute to her claustrophobia?
2. Nancy and Decca come of ages at different moments in history, the 1920s and the 1930s. How does *Hons and Rebels* describe the difference between the two sisters’ experiences growing up? What does Decca think of the world of the 1920s? What were the sisters’ different concerns? What influence did Nancy and her set of friends have on Decca?
3. “Class was a delicate matter, a subject for intuition rather than conversation, one of those ‘borderline’ subjects, deeply felt but never discussed” [p. 59]. What were Decca’s earliest experiences of class? What were her parents’ assumptions about class? What feelings did the experience with Viola Smythe leave Decca with? Does Decca’s British experience of class have any resonance for Americans?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Mary S. Lovell, *The Sisters: The Saga of the Mitford Family*

Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death*

Jessica Mitford, *Decca: The Letters of Jessica Mitford*, ed. Peter Y. Sussman

Nancy Mitford, *The Pursuit of Love*

Nancy Mitford, *Love in a Cold Climate*

OTHER NYRB CLASSICS OF INTEREST

Great Granny Webster

Caroline Blackwood
(introduction by Honor Moore)

The Go-Between

L. P. Hartley
(introduction by Colm Tóibín)

A Way of Life Like Any Other

Darcy O'Brien
(introduction by Seamus Heaney)

My Father and Myself

J. R. Ackerley
(introduction by W. H. Auden)

4. In a letter to the Times Literary Supplement in response to a review of Jessica's book, Diana writes: "Doubtless the author realizes how 'supremely unpleasant' she makes her family appear. Perhaps the object of the exercise was to demonstrate her good fortune in escaping from them and their way of life. The portraits of my parents are grotesque..." Do you agree with Diana? How sympathetic or unsympathetic do you think Decca's portraits of their parents are?

5. Describe how the divide between Decca and Boud begins and develops. How do you think that two sisters, close in age, with the same upbringing, ended up on such starkly opposed sides of the political spectrum? How does Decca reconcile her affection for her sister with Boud's political beliefs? How is she able to create as sympathetic a portrait of Boud as she does?

6. From a young age Decca plots to escape the stifling confines of upper-class English life. She opens a Running Away Account, fantasizes about faking her death by the Loch Ness monster, and briefly considers slipping away into the crowd while in a Spanish port. Ultimately she does escape—by eloping with Esmond to take part in the Spanish Civil War. How much of her decision to go to Spain was based on committed political beliefs and how much was it motivated by a spirit of youthful adventure and rebellion that was continuous with her earliest desires for escape?

7. "He was my whole world, my rescuer, the translator of all my dreams into reality, the fascinating companion of my whole adult life—three years, already—and the center of all happiness" [p. 279]. Describe Esmond. Why was he such a compelling figure to Decca? How does he strike you?

8. "Yet our style of behavior during much of our life together, the strong streak of delinquency which I found so attractive in Esmond and which struck such a responsive chord in me, his carefree intransigence, even his supreme self-confidence—a feeling of being able to walk unscathed through any flame—are not hard to trace to an English upper-class ancestry and upbringing" [pp. 279–280]. What are examples of this behavior? How, even while they rebelled against their upbringing, did Decca and Esmond embody it?

9. "What would Muv say?" is a thought that Decca has frequently after she runs away with Esmond [p. 268]. She writes that "too much security as children, coupled with too much discipline imposed on us from above by force or threat of force, had developed in us a high degree of wickedness, a sort of extension of childhood naughtiness" [p. 281].

How does Decca remain like a child even after she elopes? Do you find it surprising that she is able to break so completely with her family and former life?

10. "This was the shape—if shape it can be called—our life had taken long ago; to swoop down on a situation, a circle of people, become part of them for a brief time, glean what there was of interest and be off again" [p. 260]. How would you characterize Decca and Esmond's lives during this time? Why did they adopt the lifestyle they did?

11. What differences in national character between England and America do Decca and Esmond discover? After Esmond's death, Decca ends up settling in America for many years. What are some of the reasons she finds America appealing?

12. The two great deaths in Mitford's memoir are her first child's and her husband's, yet the death of the child is described in a single page and Esmond's passing is mentioned only in a footnote. Why does she choose to treat these incidents so briefly?

13. How would you characterize Mitford's attitude to her youth? Has the passage of time altered her perspective on people and events? Does she have any regrets? Is this a happy or unhappy book, or are those not the right words to describe it?