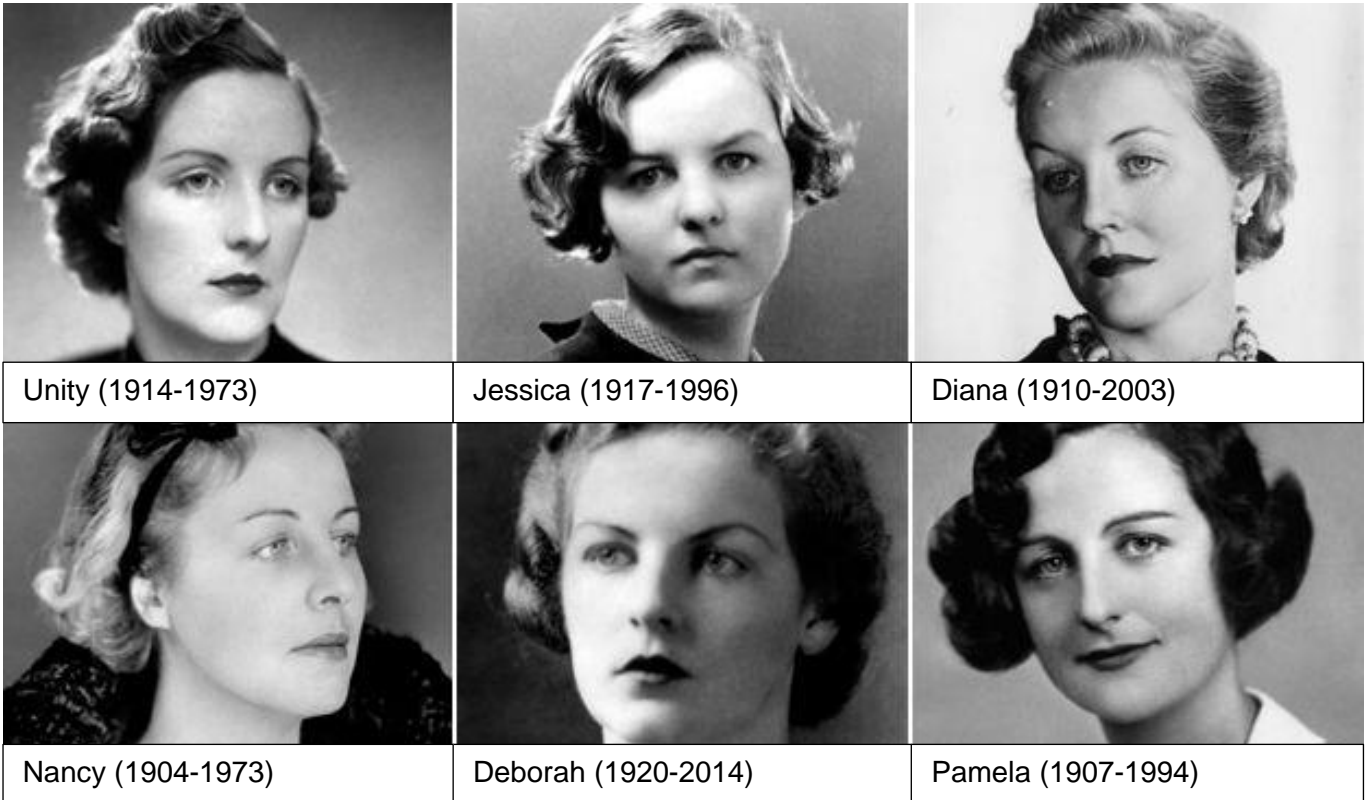


The Mitford Sisters



Following account courtesy of the BBC

Born to Lord and Lady Redesdale, known as Farve and Muv, the six Mitford girls - Nancy, Pamela, Diana, Unity, Jessica and Deborah - experienced an upbringing steeped in eccentricity. Living in genteel poverty in stately homes, the girls variously believed in poltergeists, pre-destination and barmy superstitions.

Their philistine father's loathing of foreigners, Catholics and anywhere "abroad" ended up instilling in his daughters an individualist mind-set and the confidence to pursue their own strong-minded opinions. Their vague and domesticated mother - odd in an age where servants exclusively ran aristocratic homes - gave the girls a healthy dose of common sense.

Hens were purchased with the intent of selling eggs to smart London restaurants, linen napkins were abandoned because of the cost of laundering them, and the children were forced to follow a kosher diet. Shellfish, sausages and "the dirty pig" were forbidden. The reason was an odd belief that cancer was less prevalent among Jews.

But medicine was withheld and operations were to be performed only as a last resort. School was frowned upon, in case the girls should develop thick calves from playing hockey. As such, a succession of dotty governesses attempted to educate the girls. And, aside from their beloved nanny, known as Blor, serving as a firm but fair disciplinarian, the girls were left to their own devices.

With brains, beauty and a scathing sense of humour, the press heralded the girls as celebrities before they did anything to merit such praise. On the fringes of the Bright Young Things and writing farcical novels on the upper classes at play, Nancy's earliest literary work was overshadowed by her sisters' political views.

Diana made a splash on British society when she married the brewing heir Bryan Guinness, but it was her affair with the leader of the British Union of Fascists, Sir Oswald Mosley, that brought her lifelong infamy. Caring little for social mores, Diana lived openly as Mosley's mistress, followed by a spell in Holloway prison. She became the catalyst for the progression of the Mitford sisters, and how the sisters reacted to the turbulent 1930s.

Unity, the restless middle child, followed Diana's lead and took up with the fascist cause, donning a Black Shirt and parading through Hyde Park, accosting the communists. Moving to Germany at the age of 19, she fulfilled her ambition of meeting Adolf Hitler, worming her way into his inner-circle and plunging head on into Nazi politics. Following a clumsy suicide attempt in 1939, she died a few years later when the bullet-wound became infected. A sad, wasted life - she ignited more fury than pity.

Jessica, known to friends and family as Decca, counteracted Unity's Nazism and became a communist. Eloping with her fellow communist cousin, Esmond Romilly, she ran off to fight the fascists during the Spanish Civil War. Shunning her aristocratic upbringing, she moved to the US, where she fought for civil rights and wrote bestselling books, including *Hons & Rebels* and *The American Way of Death*. She went on to become a late-blooming pop star, singing with her group Decca & the Dectones.

Nancy was a socialist. At the end of the war, she escaped a dull marriage by moving to Paris, where she wrote her novels. She dressed in Dior and carried on a hopeless affair with Charles de Gaulle's right-hand man, Gaston Palewski.

Deborah led a contented country life. Riding and hunting were her favourite pursuits, and she described herself as apolitical. She was a popular debutante, and during her "season" she met Kathleen Kennedy, and her brother John - the future US president. Deborah married Lord Andrew Cavendish in 1941, and the Cavendish family became intertwined through marriage (Kathleen and Billy Cavendish wed in 1939) with the Kennedys. Thus Deborah was linked with the most famous of presidents, and to Adele Astaire, sister of Fred, who was an aunt by marriage.

Pamela, although she shunned the limelight, married the millionaire scientist Derek Jackson. She motored around Europe alone and became one of the first women to be on a transatlantic passenger flight. Her sense of adventure was balanced with a quiet domesticity, and she was happy at home in her kitchen garden and tending to her animals.