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Do come to me funeral

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DECCA: THE LETTERS OF JESSICA MITFORD
edited by Peter Sussman.
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In 1934, one of the most disturbing aspects of the Red Menace and the creeping influence of Moscow – for the *Daily Mail* at least – was a public school magazine called *Out of Bounds*. Written and produced by a group of wealthy, disaffected teenagers, it was a mixture of political polemic, reviews of left-wing books and adolescent anxiety. There were articles on the arms race and on Fascism (a member of the Oundle School Fascist Youth Group, who wrote that the ultimate aim of Fascism was 'Liberty, Justice and Tranquillity', proved a sitting target for the magazine's editor, who mused on 'the Liberty of the Concentration Camp, the Justice of the Jewish Pogrom, the Tranquillity of Imperialist War'). But probably more popular with most readers were the complaints about corporal punishment, compulsory OTC and the restrictive rules of girls' schools, as well as the upbeat reassurances about masturbation. In the fourth and final issue, 'a doctor' wrote to dispel the myths propagated by teachers on this subject: 'some form of auto-eroticism is absolutely inevitable except in a person with complete sexual anaesthesia, a very rare psychological condition.' This 'doctor' was presumably one of the young editors.

The editorial team of *Out of Bounds* had a sharp eye for publicity, blazoning across the masthead 'Banned in Uppingham … Banned in Cheltenham'. But it was an expensive production at a shilling an issue, and short-lived. It would never have attracted such national attention (other papers also covered its launch, though with less of a sense of imminent danger than the *Mail*) if the leading spirit among the rebels had not been Esmond Romilly, the nephew by marriage – and, according to a powerful but probably unfounded rumour, the illegitimate son – of Winston Churchill. This was the work of Winston's 'Red Nephew'.

Many of Romilly's co-conspirators followed the usual path of privileged young dissidents: they came – or were forced – back into the fold, at least for long enough to launch their careers. H.W. Stubbs of Charterhouse went on to teach classics at the University of Exeter. Philip Toynbee was expelled from Rugby, but then handed over to the monks of Ampleforth to be crammed, successfully, for a history scholarship to Oxford. John Peet ended up as head of the Reuters bureau in Berlin, before defecting to the East in 1950. Gavin Ewart, whose poems now seem the high-spot of *Out of Bounds*, went to Cambridge with an exhibition to read classics; he left Wellington with some farewell verses in celebration of onanism, incurring a presumably superfluous three-year ban on crossing the school's threshold.

Romilly himself, however, had run away from Wellington by the time the first issue of the magazine was published, jumping before he was pushed. Unsurprisingly, *Out of Bounds* was not his only 'crime': he kept a bust of Lenin in his room, distributed the *Communist Manifesto* to his fellow pupils and had slipped anti-war leaflets into the hymn books at the Armistice Day service. There followed a disastrous term at progressive Bedales, his parents' last hope for reform; a spin-off book, also called *Out of Bounds* (the *TLS* reviewer thought its literary style a credit to the public school education which its authors decried); and a short spell in a remand home, after his desperate and uncomprehending mother called the police when he turned up at home riotously drunk. Then, aged only 16, Romilly was off to join the International Brigades in Spain. Some of that irksome OTC discipline might actually have come in useful, but he was hopelessly ill-prepared and soon invalided back to Britain with dysentery.

There he met Jessica Mitford, a year older than himself, who had just finished her coming-out 'season'. Mitford had not had the luxury of a school education, her parents – Lord and Lady Redesdale – not thinking it worth the trouble and expense for girls. But she shared most of Romilly's enthusiasms and hatreds. In particular, unlike her sisters Diana and Unity, who were busy falling in love with both Fascism and Fascists (Oswald Mosley and Adolf Hitler respectively), Decca, as she was always called, was a would-be Communist, who scratched the hammer and sickle onto the windowpanes of the parental home with a diamond ring. Together, Mitford and Romilly ran off (or back, in his case) to Spain. Within days, what had begun, formally at least, as a political journey, had become an elopement.

Some gunboat diplomacy followed. Anthony Eden, then foreign secretary, sent a cable to the consul in Bilbao asking him to 'FIND JESSICA MITFORD AND PERSUADE HER TO RETURN.' Mitford was made a ward of court and nearly lured onto a British destroyer (which would have whisked her back to England) by the handsome captain's offer of roast chicken and chocolate cake. Sister Nancy and her husband also turned up, courtesy of the British Navy, and tried to persuade her to come home. In the end, Romilly and Mitford left Spain – the British threatened to stop all refugee evacuation from the Basque country if they didn't – but were allowed to marry in the South of France, with both mothers in attendance.

The early sections of Peter Sussman's *Decca*, a vast collection of Mitford's letters, cover this period. For those who take pleasure in the ironies of epistolary communication (or non-communication), there are some gems here. One is the clever forgery, written by Mitford and Romilly, inviting Decca to stay with friends in France, so giving cover to the runaways. In others, the irony rebounds on the writer: by the time she received some of Decca's faux-enthusiastic accounts of her French travels, Lady Redesdale must already have discovered exactly what had gone on and have been busy organising the gunboats. (This temporal mismatch between dispatch and receipt was well recognised by Roman letter writers, who regularly used a past tense where you would expect a present when writing a letter – on the grounds, we suppose, that whatever the state was that was being described, it would be in the past by the time the recipient read of it.) But overall these letters provoke the same ambivalent reaction as *Out of Bounds*. It is hard not to admire these young people who managed to take a sometimes brave stand against their horribly conservative families; at the same time, it is hard not to feel put off by the blinkered upper-class vision of the world which somehow survived their radical rejection of parents and school. As Decca later wrote, in her memoir *Hons and Rebels*: 'The strong streak of delinquency which I found so attractive in Esmond' is 'not hard to trace to an English upper-class ancestry and upbringing'.

Lady Redesdale is reputed to have observed that if her daughter was committed to Communism, then she might at least try not to make so much extra work for those members of the working class closest at hand – namely, the servants. Mitford's letters, written in semi-exile after her elopement

had been discovered, and against the background of the Spanish Civil War, reveal a not hugely likeable young rebel, still apparently unaware of the class privilege that her favourite little luxuries signalled. Maybe the begging letter asking her nearly estranged mother to forward her dress allowance ('I cant help feeling it would come in awfully useful') was merely a cunning ploy to squeeze extra cash out of the parents, or 'the revered Ps', as she referred to them. But her enthusiastic response to some back numbers of *Vogue* she had received, the request to send her summer sandals (if the old nanny can find them) and her jolly reports of lunch with a local duchess strongly suggest a rather comfortable style of rebellion. Little wonder that Dylan Thomas, who came across the *Out of Bounds* group in the mid-1930s, thought they had 'no idea of what they priggishly call "the class struggle" … They are bogus from skull to navel.'

The sequel to the elopement and marriage was marked by tragedy. Romilly and Mitford returned to London, to a house in Docklands, where their first baby died in a measles epidemic. Soon after, in 1939, they moved to the United States, prompted in part, according to *Hons and Rebels*, by a vast utility bill. 'No one had ever explained to me that you had to pay for electricity'; so rather than pay up like most ordinary and less well-connected mortals, they 'scrammed'. In the States, Mitford became pregnant again. But soon after their daughter Constancia (named after a Spanish Republican heroine, but generally known as 'the Donk'), was born, Romilly, by then serving in the Canadian Air Force, was lost in action. Despite clear evidence of his fate, delivered to her by Churchill himself, among others, it took Mitford months to accept that he was dead.

Whatever the tragedies she faced, Mitford's letters from this period in the United States are not much more appealing than the earlier ones from France and Spain. The couple's lifestyle was, despite her protestations, more designer Bohemian than poor. It was extravagantly reported and photographed by the *Washington Post*, whose owner was a friend, and it was supported by other rich and powerful connections ('we have got to know quite a few millionaires which is nice,' as she wrote home to her mother). Mitford and Romilly spent much of their time dreaming up hopelessly unrealistic and self-aggrandising schemes. One bright idea, which predictably came to nothing, was to rope in other members of the *Out of Bounds* group and offer themselves as an English consortium on the lecture circuit. Philip Toynbee, as Mitford explains elsewhere, was down to do a family talk on 'Arnold Toynbee – Historian, but First and Foremost Dad'. Romilly, perhaps making the most of the rumours of his paternity, would offer 'The Truth about Winston Churchill'. There is no sign through all this that Mitford herself had learned much more about the labouring classes than when her mother urged her to follow through the implications of her rather theoretical Communism by being more considerate to the domestic staff. Very soon after the birth of the Donk, she hired a woman to care for the baby. Writing to Romilly, then based in Canada, she insists: 'Daniels now adores the Donk so much she can hardly bear to take her day off.' This is, of course, exactly the way the servant-employing classes have always convinced themselves of the loyalty of those they exploit. What Daniels herself really thought we don't know; but she wasn't in the job long.

The good news, though, is that through the hundreds of letters that comprise the 700 pages of this book – and almost justifying its enormous length – we see Mitford gradually becoming nicer. As Sussman observes in the introduction, 'compilations of correspondence are necessarily biographies of a kind.' So, if *Decca* is testimony to anything, it is to the transforming power of growing older. After the death of Romilly, she moved to the West Coast, eventually settling in Oakland, where she was based for the rest of her life, now the partner of Bob Treuhaft, a left-wing lawyer. She had two more children, became an active member of the Communist Party and was involved in a range of civil rights campaigns, as well as finding more lasting fame than her 'Mitford girl' celebrity by writing a series of brilliant – and brilliantly funny – exposés of various hidden corruptions of American life.

Best known – and by far the most hard-hitting – was *The American Way of Death*, which made her journalistic name, as well as making her the enemy-in-chief of the funeral industry for her account of its self-serving, unnecessary and highly lucrative practices. The book's high-point was a cruelly dispassionate account of the process of embalming, which nearly prevented its British publication on the grounds of bad taste: Victor Gollancz thought it far too gruesome and revoked his contract for the manuscript. It is these passages, with all their nasty little details about the removal of the entrails and the neat stitching of the hole thereby made in 'Mr Jones' (as she called her typical corpse), that have since been repeatedly anthologised and are now taken as a model in high-school writing courses.

From the late 1940s to her death in 1996, to judge from her letters at least, the blinkered, if sometimes very witty, privilege of the British upper class gave way to a political and social engagement, which retained the wit, but had an added capacity for self-irony. It is true that right up to the end, after half a century in the US, she still uses – now rather quaintly, in the style of many expats – some of the argot of her upbringing. 'Scram' remains a favourite word even in the 1990s, and she never stops writing 'me' for 'my' ('me book'), while she worries about being 'off speakers' ('not on speaking terms') with various of her sisters. But the mannered, almost private language of the early correspondence, liberally sprinkled with 'awfully' (as in 'awfully pleased/ nice/useful') has gone. And with it has gone the dreadful impression of insulation from the rest of the world, left-wing protestations or not, that makes some of those letters so hard to take. When *The American Way of Death* launches her into a new kind of fame, and wealth, she seems surprised and touched, endearingly overwhelmed by all the publicity, interviews and promotional tours. It is in striking contrast to the way she had earlier taken her own celebrity for granted, exploiting the notoriety of her siblings and the 'Mitford industry' for all it was worth (while simultaneously deploring its silliness).

She also becomes an increasingly sharp commentator on her previous life and lifestyle in Britain. Fifty years in America may not entirely have changed the way she wrote and, presumably, spoke, but it certainly made her background seem increasingly distant. True, she never quite lost the knack of blending into British elite society; in fact, she had such a romantic attachment to the family's Hebridean island that she bought out her sisters' shares and obviously flirted with the idea of becoming its laird. But her letters to friends in the States from family visits to England cast her more as a puzzled observer of the strange tribal customs of the upper class. There are, for example, some hilarious accounts of staying at Chatsworth in the early 1960s, where her sister Deborah, who had married the Duke of Devonshire, was grandly installed among the Rembrandts and Van Dycks. For Mitford and Treuhaft, it was the closest you could get to time travel ('If we were invited to stay with Jack and Jackie at the White House … at least I'd know which century I was in,' Treuhaft wrote to their children.) On one particular occasion they had the bad luck to coincide with a visit from the scientist Julian Huxley and his wife; Huxley not only lectured the assembled company on the principles of pollination, but also treated them to an interminable, ill-focused slideshow of his trip to Ghana. 'People never seem to think,' Mitford wrote,

> that the world is so full of such wonderful things, like Life Mag etc where one could see many even better pix of same scenes if one subscribed, and wouldn't have to wait for Lady H to click the thing and then go through the agonising (to one's eyes) process of focusing … So you can see … life here is a bit thick … Sorry to blither on so, but it does help pass the post-slide part of the evening.

It's not only the unfortunate Huxleys who come in for this kind of treatment. Mitford is equally capable of turning her attention to her own frailties. In a couple of memorable letters written to Deborah in the mid-1990s, Decca, then in her late seventies, explained that she had concluded that she had become an alcoholic (hardly a misdiagnosis, to judge by the references to early morning

consumption of 'delicious vodka'). She was alarmed not so much by the damage to her liver, but by the trouble she was causing her family, who were forced to look after her when, on more than one occasion, 'more than tiddly', she had fallen down and broken her elderly bones. She had decided to go on the wagon. Without any outside help (none of 'that appalling Frank Talk etc' at Alcoholics Anonymous), and with what must have been heroic strength of will, she quit. A few weeks into the process, she confessed to Deborah that it was now really only at 9.30 a.m. 'when I do rather crave a drink'.

There is, however, a stronger strand of poignancy running through these letters than this senior tussle with the bottle might suggest. In one of his helpful introductions to each chronological section of the letters, Sussman notes that one of Mitford's closest friends suspected that there was more to her preoccupation with the funeral industry than merely the zeal of campaigning journalism. The letters collected in *Decca*, their preoccupation with death and dying, and their sometimes significant silences on that topic, bear out the suspicion very forcefully. They chart a life story that is articulated by the often premature death of those closest to her: the first baby, Romilly, her mother and most of her siblings (brother Tom, killed at the end of World War Two; Unity, who died, incontinent and mentally damaged, several years after she had shot herself in the head at the outbreak of war; Nancy, whom Decca helped nurse in Paris as she was dying of cancer; and Pamela, who passed quietly away, in very un-Mitford-like fashion, after a fall aged 86). Many of the most moving parts of the correspondence reflect on these deaths. There is a particularly unsettling series of letters describing the last weeks of Nancy's life, interspersing unvarnished details of her physical decline ('there's something so totally depressing abt. seeing someone turn into a corpse before one's very eyes – and a jolly *cross* corpse at that') with accounts of Decca's amateur attempts at palliative care, largely consisting of doubling the morphine dose and adding whisky ('she only takes a thimbleful but it seems to turn the trick').

Even more moving are those deaths which the letters do not, or cannot, recognise. There is an almost two-year gap in the surviving correspondence around the time of the birth, then death of her first baby. Almost unmentioned at the time, apart from a single telegram and a brief note to her mother, is the death of her first son with Treuhaft, Nicholas, aged ten, who was killed by a bus while riding his bicycle for a paper round in 1955. It was alleged in Oakland gossip that Mitford's neglect of the children was a contributory factor in the boy's death. Fair hit or not, she retained a powerfully defensive stance against what she saw as over-protective parents. Thirty years later, she writes of taking to task Marina Warner, a guest in Oakland, for keeping what seems to me an entirely sensible watchful eye on her son: 'oh – the pitfalls of adoring mumhood', she writes, when Warner tries to make sure she knows exactly where her 11-year-old is. It is hard not to suspect the sting of those allegations somewhere in the background here.

Only in the letters of the last decade of her life does she break these silences. In 1993, she and Treuhaft wrote to the Donk and their surviving son about Nicholas. And in 1990 she managed to admit to a friend that his death had 'absolutely wrecked all happiness for a v. v. long time', but that in her writing she had coped by 'simply airbrushing' him out. The same was true of the death of Romilly, which she had, she explains, been unable to mention in *Hons and Rebels*, beyond a bald footnote. By this period, terminal illness, death, funerals and obituaries had come to loom even larger in her day-to-day life, as friend after friend grew ill and died – not to mention the fact that she was now planning a second edition of *The American Way of Death*, which involved many more interviews with people from the funeral business. In fact, almost all the letters of her final years touch on the subject in some way, whether with sorrow, humour or bare-faced irritation. 'That stupid Grim Reaper has no concept of suitable times to be reaping. What a drag.' One gets the sense that by the time her own end came, she was very well practised for it. She writes, with extraordinary composure, to Treuhaft about how 'ODD' it is to be dying, and makes tentative plans

with Deborah for visits, bearing the projected ‘deadline (mot juste)’ in mind. ‘DO come to me funeral, about nine months or a year off accdg to the Dr.’ In fact, she lasted only a month after she first noticed she was coughing up blood.

The last letter in the collection? This is often a tricky decision for editors. But Sussman has done well. He ends with a letter written in the final days of her life, to Mitford’s specification, by her assistant, and posted the day after she died. It is to the head of Service Corporation International, one of the giants of the American funeral industry, asking if SCI would pay for her cremation. As it was put: ‘Ms Mitford feels that you should pay the bill. In her own words: “after all, look at all the fame I’ve brought them!”’