

Foreword

In a sense, *Highland Fling* is a taster of coming delights. It was Nancy Mitford's first novel, published in 1931 when she was still in her twenties, and among its pages the reader may find seeds of the characters that would so memorably people her later books, *In Pursuit of Love* and *Love in a Cold Climate*, for both of which she is justly celebrated. General Murgatroyd is certainly the ancestor of Uncle Matthew, both descending, as they do, from Mitford's own father, Lord Redesdale, who must surely rank as her principal source material throughout her career. I always enjoy his response when he was accused of discrimination. "I don't discriminate," he spluttered indignantly. "I hate everybody." But alongside the splenetic General, there are clear traces of Linda Radlett in Jane Dacre, Lady Prague lays the groundwork for of Lady Montdore, Albert Memorial Gates is a precursor of Cedric Hampton, and so on. But if it is fun to find the clues of what would come after, the book has its own merit in that this is the first time Mitford attempted to quantify and codify and explain the world of her beginnings, always seen with her wonderful, comic vision.

Admittedly, this world was not a hard place. Young couples live on nothing at all, highland castles are lent and borrowed, no one seems to have much in mind beyond some decent shooting and dinner at the club. Only Albert is engaged in anything remotely resembling a profession and that as a surrealist painter. Mitford's men did not push pens or languish behind desks, her women spent their time gossiping and changing their clothes. Nor did they question the rules of a society that enabled them to idle away their days, or ask why they should be waited on hand and foot even when they hadn't a penny to their name. But that is what makes this account of them a restful and hilarious read. It was a thoughtless age, perhaps, and even a selfish one, but without our moral

smuggery which prompts every soap opera celebrity to veil their own self-obsession with much vaunted, anguished care for the environment or the survival of the whale. There is an honesty in that.

As a young woman, Nancy Mitford was madly, if quite unsuccessfully, in love with a Scottish aristocrat, Hamish St Clair-Erskine, and it is hard not to feel that *Highland Fling* may, in some ways, be a form of revenge after those wasted, tearful years in fruitless pursuit. How much time must she have spent in just such houses as Dalloch Castle, waiting for Hamish to love her, and how frustrating it must have been. Lord Craigdalloch himself, to say nothing of horsy Lady Brenda Chadlington or the intolerably dull Admiral Wenceslaus, all have the quality of being drawn from life, while the snobbish and philistine Lady Prague comes in for particularly savage treatment. “Why let her learn oils?” said Lady Prague. “There are too many oil paintings in the world already. Let her do water colours. They take up much less room.” Guided by Mitford’s sly description, we grasp at once why Lady Prague would be quite unable to resist Mrs Fairfax, an amoral bolter of the first order, because, during her many marriages, Mrs Fairfax has given birth to an English marquess and an Italian duke. “Dear Louisa,” explains Lady Prague, “was always such a high-spirited girl, she can scarcely be blamed for her actions.” But when others without so many connections in the ranks of the Peerage break her ladyship’s rules, there can be no mercy for them. The point is that Mitford knows these men and women. She knows how they work. She grasps their self-interest and their hypocrisy and their double standards. I would not say she never loves them, or some of them, but she knows them for what they are.

In *Highland Fling*, as always with this author, there is the vividness of personal experience in her work and this pre-war group do seem to embody exactly what a clever, quick-witted

woman must have found hard to endure about that oh so predictable life on the hill. It is a culture of watching others kill all day, getting ever more cold and wet before returning to freezing baths and bad dinners with boring people. Indeed, she writes with such relish that I am convinced the fate she metes out to the scene of their pleasures is one she wished on too many of such house-parties in this unsatisfactory period of her own past. Because, for me, that is the key to Mitford's genius: her intimate knowledge of this world and these people. Indeed, no one knew it – or certainly could articulate it – better. But, in her own way, even by this stage of her life, she had grown out of its limited values and, free as she was, she could afford to turn the torch of her own acerbic wit on a tribe who thought themselves the very acme of high life and high principle but were instead living in a foolish and largely pointless bubble, a bubble, what is more, that was soon to burst.

Of course there is cruelty here beneath the comedy, a kind of sharpness that bears testimony to the force of her judgement even where it is wrapped in the cotton wool of humour. But most of all, there is truth. And truth, as all the world knows, is the basis of great comedy.

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