



Irrepressible: The Life and Times of Jessica Mitford

Leslie Brody

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Admirers and detractors use the same words to describe Jessica Mitford: subversive, mischief-maker, muckraker. J.K. Rowling calls her her “most influential writer.” Those who knew her best simply called her Decca. Born into one of Britain’s most famous aristocratic families, she eloped with Winston Churchill’s nephew as a teenager. Their marriage severed ties with her privilege, a rupture exacerbated by the life she lead for seventy-eight years.

After arriving in the United States in 1939, Decca became one of the New Deal’s most notorious bureaucrats. For her the personal was political, especially as a civil rights activist and journalist. She coined the term *frenemies*, and as a member of the American Communist Party, she made several, though not among the Cold War witch hunters. When she left the Communist Party in 1958 after fifteen years, she promised to be subversive whenever the opportunity arose. True to her word, late in life she hit her stride as a writer, publishing nine books before her death in 1996.

Yoked to every important event for nearly all of the twentieth century, Decca not only was defined by the history she witnessed, but by bearing witness, helped to define that history.

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