

Muckraking Author Jessica Mitford Dies; Investigated Funeral Homes, U.S. Prisons

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Jessica Mitford, 78, the muckraking author who skewered the funeral industry in her 1963 exposé, "The American Way of Death," and indicted the American prison system 10 years later in "Kind and Unusual Punishment," died of cancer July 23 at her home in Oakland, Calif.

Her investigation into the business of death was a selection of the Book of the Month Club, stayed on the best-seller lists for a year and led to a CBS documentary and an investigation by the Federal Trade Commission. Time magazine dubbed her the "Queen of the Muckrakers." She was denounced by the funeral industry, which helped boost sales of her book, she said later.

Miss Mitford set the country talking with her charge that morticians were perpetuating a "huge, macabre and expensive practical joke on the American public" by exploiting grief. She said undertakers routinely gouged money from families of modest means for unnecessary services such as embalming and caskets that were hermetically sealed. To facilitate her research, she had posed as a bereaved widow.

Miss Mitford actively promoted low-cost cremations and cooperative funeral societies. She said she was proud that the gross income of one major casket manufacturer fell by 10 percent the year after her book was published. In an interview last month with the San Francisco Chronicle, she said that cremations had risen from 3.5 percent of American deaths in 1963 to 21 percent.

In the wake of her revelations, the FTC issued rules governing the funeral industry, among them a directive that mortuaries must give consumers

detailed price lists. But Miss Mitford, an avid reader of undertaker magazines, told the Chronicle that morticians continued to encourage elaborate funerals, even after cremations. She maintained that the FTC, under pressure from the industry, no longer was enforcing its directives.

The most important change since 1963, she said, was the emergence of funeral home monopolies, a subject she intended to address in a revision of her book that was underway.

Miss Mitford was the child of an aristocratic British family whose eccentricities were widely chronicled by herself and others. She wrote six books, including two autobiographies—"Daughters and Rebels" and "A Fine Old Conflict"—and several collections of articles, including "Poison Penmanship: The Gentle Art of Muckraking" in 1979.

In 1992, she took on the medical establishment, writing in "The American Way of Birth" about inequities, technological obsessions and unnecessary expenses in obstetrics. Her interest in the subject began with a California midwife who was being investigated for practicing medicine without a license.

Miss Mitford became a fierce advocate of midwife-assisted births, concluding that challenges to the profession of midwifery were an example of doctors' desires to keep control of a lucrative business.

"Kind and Unusual Punishment" described the American prison system as concentration camps for poor, young, mostly minority offenders. Prisons spent \$6 billion a year on buildings alone while failing to protect society, deter crime or rehabilitate offenders, she said. She spent a night in the D.C.

Women's Detention Center as part of her research.

"I've always gotten into these subjects by chance," Miss Mitford told The Washington Post in 1973. She became interested in prisons after the American Civil Liberties Union asked her to write a pamphlet on prisoner rights. She took on the funeral industry after her husband, a labor lawyer who wanted to help families of union members, founded a collective organization, the Bay Area Funeral Society.

Miss Mitford's articles, published by such magazines as Life, Esquire and the Nation, targeted Bennett Cerf and other members of the Famous Writers School, television executives, a spa catering to overweight wealthy women, and overpriced restaurants.

Described by a British writer last year as someone who easily could play an elderly lady detective in some long-running television serial, Miss Mitford retained the mannerisms and accent of a well-bred Englishwoman. While interviewing her subjects, her seeming naivete would encourage people to say things they'd later regret.

"You may not be able to change the world," she was fond of stating, "but at least you can embarrass the guilty."

Miss Mitford, known as "Decca," was born in Batsford, Gloucestershire, England, the next to youngest of six daughters of David, the second baron of Redesdale, and Sydney Bowles Mitford. The children were schooled at home. Their father had Fascist leanings, and two of the sisters became supporters of Hitler. As a young woman, Jessica declared herself a communist. The Mitfords were profiled in a number of books, including four that came about the same time in the 1970s. Miss Mitford rejected the life of the English nobility at an early age, when she began her own "running away fund." She wrote that, as a young girl sharing a room with her Fascist-adoring sister Unity, she used a diamond ring to scratch hammers and sickles on the windows of the family mansion.

At 19, after a season as a London debutante, she eloped with her second cousin Esmond Romilly, Winston Churchill's 18-year-old nephew. Rom-

illy also believed that communism was the road to utopia, and they embarked on a journey to join the International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War.

Lord Redesdale sent a British destroyer after the cousins, but they jumped ship in France, fled to Barcelona and were married in 1937.

Shortly after, they came to the United States, where she sold English tweeds at the New York World's Fair while he wrote advertising copy and tended bar in Greenwich Village. They tried selling silk stockings door to door in Washington, moved briefly to Miami, where they worked in a bar in Biscayne Bay, and then returned to Washington. Romilly joined the Royal Canadian Air Force in 1940, and Miss Mitford worked in a clothing store.

Their daughter, Constancia, named for the daughter of a Spanish grandee who cast her lot with the Republican army during the Spanish Civil War, was born in February 1941. Eleven months later, Romilly died when he was shot down by the Germans over the North Sea.

His widow scratched out a living in wartime Washington. She met lawyer Robert E. Treuhaft while they were both working in the Office of Price Administration.

They moved to Oakland, where they were dedicated members of the Communist Party for 15 years. Regularly called before the House Un-American Activities Committee, she called her Marxist training "a kind of adult Project Head Start" that enabled her to function in the outside world. They quit the party in 1958 but remained active in liberal causes.

Miss Mitford didn't begin writing until she was 38, after she was fired



FILE PHOTO

JESSICA MITFORD

from a job in the classified advertising department of the San Francisco Chronicle for being a subversive. She said that writing appeared to be the only job available at the time that didn't require skills or ability. Among the interests that had dogged her since childhood was music. She said she had always dreamed of being a torch singer. Last year, encouraged by her friend the poet Maya Angelou, she formed a rock band, Decca and the Dectones, and cut a rap-style CD on the Don't Quit Your Day Job label.

In addition to her husband, of Oakland, Miss Mitford is survived by a daughter from her first marriage, Constancia "Dinky" Romilly, a nurse who lives in New York, and a son from her second marriage, Benjamin Treuhaft, a Berkeley piano tuner who heads a group that sends pianos to Cuba and has been in the news lately; two sisters, Diana Mosley of Paris and Deborah Devonshire of Chatsford, England; and three grandchildren.

A daughter from her first marriage died in infancy, and a son from her second marriage, Nicholas Treuhaft, was killed in an accident in 1955.

Miss Mitford met with the owner of a cut-rate cremation society in San Francisco last month and arranged for her own, \$475 cremation. She specified that there would be no embalming and no frills.