



**MADAME DE
POMPADOUR**

NANCY MITFORD

INTRODUCTION BY
AMANDA FOREMAN

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MADAME DE POMPADOUR

NANCY MITFORD (1904–1973) was born into the British aristocracy and, by her own account, brought up without an education, except in riding and French. She managed a London bookshop during the Second World War, then moved to Paris, where she began to write her celebrated and successful novels, among them *The Pursuit of Love* and *Love in a Cold Climate*, about the foibles of the English upper class. Nancy Mitford was also the author of four biographies: *Madame de Pompadour*, *Voltaire in Love*, *The Sun King*, and *Frederick the Great*.

AMANDA FOREMAN was born in London in 1968 and educated at Sarah Lawrence College, Columbia University, and Oxford University, where she received a Ph.D. in history. She is the author of *Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire*.

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

BORN IN 1904, Nancy Mitford was a British aristocrat *par excellence*: eccentric, proud, and clannish. Yet she delighted in poking fun at the upper classes. Her three best-known novels, *The Pursuit of Love* (1945), *Love in a Cold Climate* (1949), and *Don't Tell Alfred* (1960), are based on the antics of her friends and family. The misanthropic character Uncle Matthew in these novels was none other than her father, Lord Redesdale. In real life he was even more peculiar. He thought that teaching girls was a waste of time (he had six), and denied his daughters a formal education. Consequently, Nancy and her sisters taught themselves out of what they found in the old library at the family country seat, Swinbrook. Nancy was only half-joking when she claimed that the one novel she had read in her life was *White Fang*.

The Mitford sisters' individual forays into the world of learning may explain the extraordinary and wildly different lives they were to lead. One became an ardent Communist, another fell in love with Hitler; one married the leader of the British fascist party, another married a duke. Nancy broke

ranks by becoming a journalist and novelist. She achieved instant fame with her essay "The English Aristocracy," a witty analysis of class-based habits of speech, in which she coined the terms *U* and *non-U*, meaning "upper-class" and "the rest." Yet she always remained insecure about her lack of education. The façade of wit and flippant prejudice that she constructed over the years was not only a pose to attract attention but a barrier to stop questions.

Few people recognized her vulnerable side, or her genuine love of learning. Most were too busy dodging her cruel tongue. She spared no one, even her closest friends. All her life, Nancy made up her own rules, not caring for their consequences. Although a self-declared snob and racist, she mocked other snobs and racists. She had an aristocrat's horror of manual labor, yet she toiled in a refugee camp for the Republican side during the Spanish Civil War. During World War II, Nancy devoted herself to the cause of the defeated French, campaigning on behalf of Charles de Gaulle. There was nothing predictable about her, not even her contrariness.

After the war, Nancy moved to France and lived in a charming house in Versailles. There she could be near the object of her unrequited love, Colonel Gaston Palewski, a senior aide to de Gaulle. But the tragedy of Nancy Mitford was that while she could not bear to be alone, she shied away from intimacy. "To fall in love," she once wrote, "you have to be in the state of mind for it to take, like a disease." The bourgeois, conjugal variety of love all but offended her sensibilities. She felt more at ease with the upper-class scandals and affairs that she wrote about. To her they were the delicious fruits of high society, to be plucked, peeled, and relished.

Nancy decided to write a biography of Mme. de Pompadour in 1952, at the suggestion of her friend Lady Pamela Berry. At first she was daunted by the amount of research involved. "I do more or less grasp the functions of the parlements," she told the novelist Evelyn Waugh, "but not how

they are constituted." Nor was she sure whether to aim the book at the general public or the educated reader. But the idea appealed to her twin loves of insider gossip and eighteenth-century French culture. She also viewed the project as an opportunity for attacking the feminist lobby. Nancy loathed the idea of female politicians and originally regarded Mme. de Pompadour as a good and cautionary illustration of why women are unsuited to the role.

However, during the course of writing the book she became seduced by her subject's charms. "I have lost the poor Marquise," she wrote at its finish. "I miss her fearfully, my constant companion for nearly year." Her view of Mme. de Pompadour had changed from that of affable condescension to deep affection and respect. During the 1950s it was fashionable for historians to argue that the Marquise never had any influence on Louis XV's opinions. Nancy came to realize that her contribution to politics was far more substantial; and, although not always successful or right, Mme. de Pompadour had been no worse than the men around her.

In Mme. de Pompadour, Nancy discovered a heroine who was everything and nothing she admired. Although the leader of aristocratic society, the Marquise always remained true to her bourgeois origins. Unlike her aristocratic biographer, she despised the petty feuds and malicious gossiping which dictated court life. She truly loved Louis XV, much to Nancy's surprise, and her sole ambition throughout their relationship was to make the King happy.

Mme. de Pompadour was born Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson. Her father left the family in 1725, when she was four, to escape his creditors. Even though Jeanne-Antoinette grew up to be an accomplished beauty—well read, musical, artistic, intelligent, and exceptionally graceful—her moderate birth and family history repelled suitors. Finally, her stepfather bribed one of his own nephews to propose, using a generous marriage settlement as bait.

Undaunted, the twenty-year-old Jeanne-Antoinette set about establishing herself in Parisian society. It was not always a dignified struggle, but the young woman was single-minded in her determination to gain admission to the court. Obsessed by a gypsy's prophecy, she was already convinced of her love for the King. Moreover, she was certain that the reserved father of ten would fall in love with her too. In 1744, the happy coincidence of a royal ball in Paris and Louis XV finding himself in between mistresses gave Jeanne-Antoinette her long-awaited opportunity. Within hours, the post of Royal Mistress had been filled.

Real power, meaning access to the King, lay not with the Queen but with the mistress du jour. "Royal Mistress" was less a term than a job description. The position entailed a code of behavior as well as a set of clearly defined duties. Every waking hour had a purpose. When she was not amusing the King, there were requests to fill, plans to execute, and scores to be settled. The whole of Versailles and its one thousand inhabitants buzzed around the Royal Mistress like bees in a hive. She was the focus of attention, constantly flattered, constantly importuned, and constantly in danger.

Versailles had remained unchanged since Louis XV's great-grandfather, the Sun King, had reduced the French aristocracy to the level of serfs in silk. Every noble family in France, unless in exile or desperately poor, lived there under the King's watchful eye. All paths of ambition led to him. Although it seemed to the outsider that life at court was lived solely for pleasure, the inhabitants knew better. They were prisoners as much as they were participants. Behind the mask of enjoyment was a desperate competition for financial spoils, political influence, and social power. The aristocracy had to stay and play the game if they did not want their families to be outcasts.

The rules governing Versailles were too arcane for Jeanne-Antoinette to master over night. Like all closed societies, it

thrived on nuances which are second nature to the initiated and hidden traps for the unwary. It was important for her to know how to behave in general, and also how to treat each inhabitant appropriately, and though she had conducted herself with aplomb the first time the King showed her off to the court, the risk of ridicule was great. Every member of the court was ready to pounce on some unintentional solecism. To remove the stain of her parentage, Louis XV created Jeanne-Antoinette the Marquise de Pompadour. To eradicate her bourgeois manners required more comprehensive measures. The King sent her to the country for several months to be trained by two of his closest friends. The Marquise was an enthusiastic pupil and very quickly learned the complex customs and language of her new world.

Once assigned her own apartments, with a secret staircase that led to those of the King, the Marquise never ceased to be vigilant against potential rivals. A physically cold woman, she had to find other ways of maintaining the King's interest. During her twenty-year tenure she transformed Versailles into a cultural paradise, a veritable showcase of France's greatest dramatists, composers, architects, craftsmen, and artists. Louis XV shared her passion for art and architecture. Together they supervised the building of some of France's finest palaces, including the Petit Trianon at Versailles and the Château de Bellevue.

The only area where the Marquise and the King differed was in their intellectual tastes. She had always admired the French *philosophes*. Long before she had met the King, her friendships had extended to Voltaire as well the authors of the great *Encyclopédie*. When Louis XV banned its publication she persuaded him to allow private subscribers to receive their copies. However, he refused to read it. The Marquise had to be content with furthering the interests of the *philosophes* on her own. Even Voltaire, who did nothing but complain, recognized her pure intentions. "She had righteousness

in her soul," he wrote, "and justice in her heart; all this is not to be met with every day."

Unfortunately, a good heart did not make the Marquise successful in foreign affairs. Historians still debate the extent of her influence on the King during the disastrous Seven Years' War (1756–1763). Nancy Mitford argues that it was considerable. This costly war resulted in the loss of most of France's overseas territories, including Canada. At the very least, the Marquise was a powerful voice among those who convinced the King to shift France's alliance from Prussia to Austria, which precipitated the conflict.

The Marquise felt each defeat very keenly, and the war no doubt hastened her death in 1764. "*Après nous le déluge,*" she is alleged to have remarked sadly to the King. She was unpopular with the people and her death went largely unlamented. However, compared to her successor, Mme. du Barry, who died under the guillotine, the Marquise enjoyed a quiet and dignified end, supported by the King and surrounded by her friends. Childless after the early death of her daughter, Mme. de Pompadour's legacy to France was the great flowering of art during her time.

The critical reaction to Nancy's biography was mixed. She had initially dreaded its publication. "For one thing I now believe it to be very bad and badly written," she wrote during one of her bouts of insecurity. Her novelistic style certainly outraged more orthodox historians. A. J. P. Taylor, in the *Manchester Guardian*, was vitriolic: "All those who admired *The Pursuit of Love* will be delighted to hear that its characters have appeared again, this time in fancy dress. They now claim to be leading figures in French history." The *Observer* declared it delightful, but not history. Yet the great French historian Alfred Cobban congratulated her on writing such an enjoyable book. The public agreed with Cobban and, encouraged by her success, Nancy wrote two more books about the Court of Versailles in a similar mode.

Madame de Pompadour has endured as a classic precisely because of its witty and anecdotal style. It captures the essence of eighteenth-century court life far more expertly than any monograph on the period. Nancy Mitford rescued a genre of history writing, first made popular by the seventeenth-century historian John Aubrey, that had all but disappeared under a pile of academic minutiae, ideology, and statistics. Almost in spite of herself, she championed the humanity of the past against the forces of vanity and cynicism.

—AMANDA FOREMAN