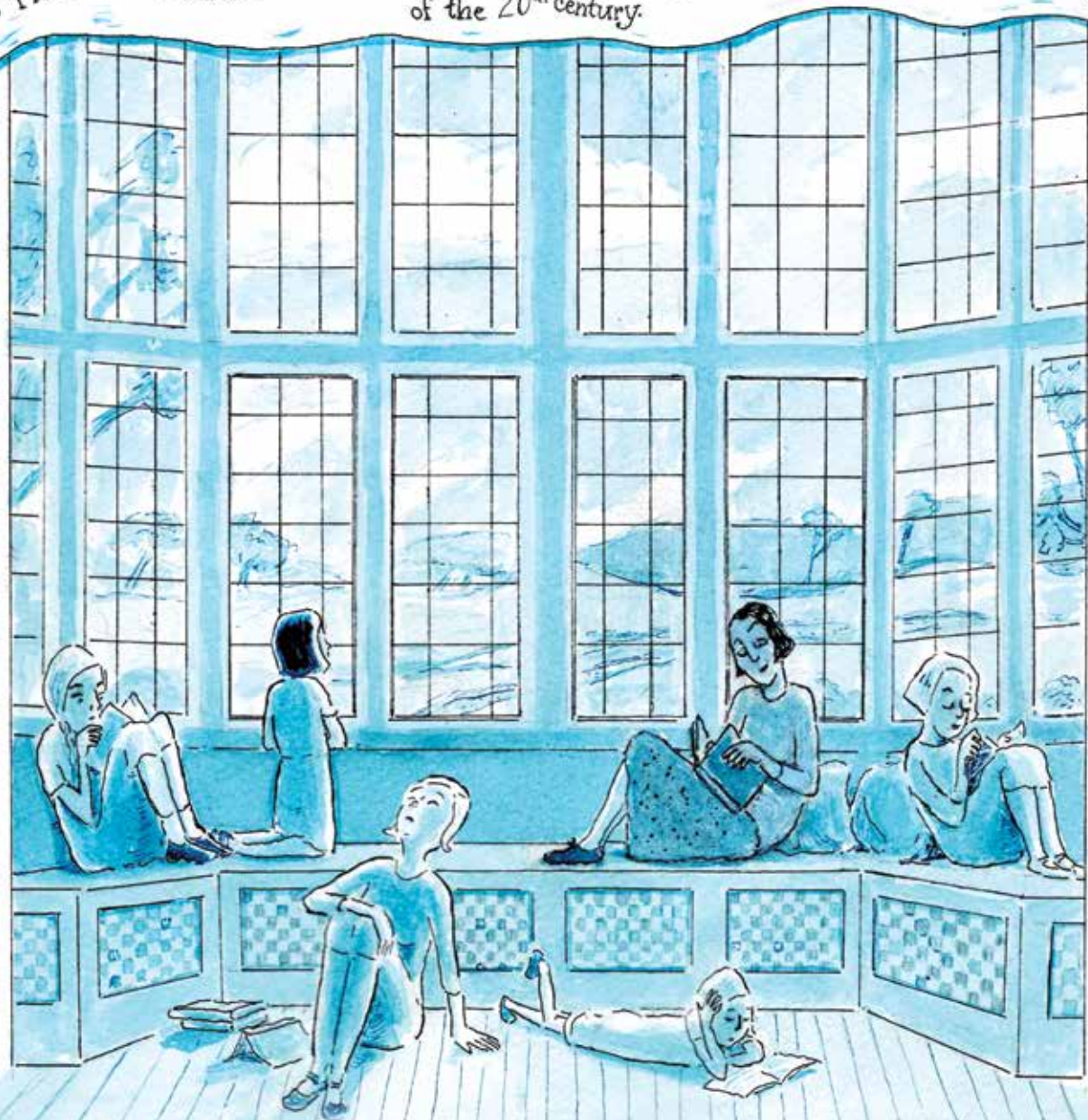




The Mitford sisters were raised in isolation in the English countryside in the early part of the 20th century.



Other Mitford biographers point out the contradictions between the sisters' accounts, taking sides in the same way the girls did with each other.

The Entrenching
Tool



NANCY

The Brute was
Bagless



PAMELA

Streicher is a
Kitten



DIANA

The Führer is too
Sweet for Words



UNITY

White Slavers



JESSICA

Chinless Horrors



DEBORAH

This is what fascinates me most. They each had an innate talent for shaping entertaining narratives and for making their lives seem epic - which they were. So I don't mind, really...

Growing up in Southern California in the 1960s and '70s, my world was only about 60 years old.



The oldest bungalows in my neighborhood were maybe just pre-World War I...



and the newest were what came to be called "dingbat" apartment buildings...



which, during my childhood, popped up like mushrooms in what had been a community of single-family homes.



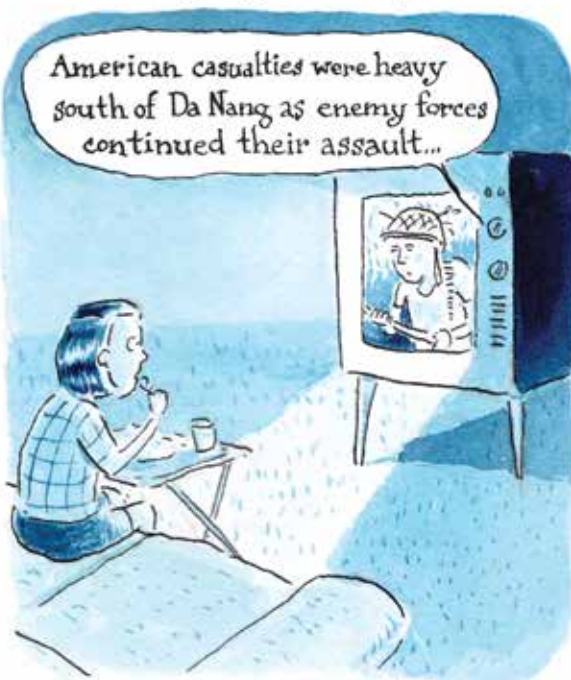
The construction sites, with their plumbing trenches, unfenced and unguarded, were perfect places for weekend combat...



which we watched on t.v. not only on ABC on Tuesday nights...



but also every night on every network.



I wouldn't have been dying in those dingbat trenches if I'd had sisters instead of brothers.



If I'd been aware of six sisters growing up isolated in the English countryside in the first three decades of the 20th century...



I would have known my bedroom closet would be the perfect portal through which to access them...

since Decca and Debo* used to hide in a linen closet for secret meetings of their Hons Society. They called it the Hons Cupboard,



not because, as the daughters of a baron, their honorific was "Honorable" or "Hon." It was named in homage to the family hens under their charge.

* nicknames for Jessica and Deborah

It would have helped to know someone besides me felt they belonged elsewhere.



San Diego, California 1968

Forty years earlier, twelve-year-old Jessica Mitford was making plans too.



Swinbrook, England 1928

Jessica's oldest sister, Nancy, already a failed debutante, dropped out of art school after a month and came home.

How could you? If I ever got away to a bedsitter, I'd never come back.

Oh, but darling.*

you should've seen it.



* I would've killed to have had an older sister who called me "darling."

After a week it was knee-deep in underclothes...

no one to put them away...

Well, I think you're very weak-minded. You wouldn't catch me knuckling under because of a little thing like underwear.



Jessica knew she'd need capital.

She wrote Drummonds Bank and opened up a "running-away" account.

"We respectfully acknowledge the receipt of six shillings as initial deposit..."

We remain, madam...

your obedient servants."



Fancy Drummonds being my obedient servants!

What bliss!



Amended with money made from looking after the family chickens with her sister Debo,



who spent long hours perfecting the exact expression of a hen about to lay an egg...

good fortune struck when Jessica's doctor saved for her her appendix he'd removed...

You are so lucky to have a dear little appendix in a bottle...



It was no trouble at all to relieve Debo of the pound she'd been saving. It was added to the running-away account.

Why would Jessica need money? If you assumed that because their father was a baron that they were wealthy, well...

it's complicated.

To describe Batsford Park, the home David Mitford had inherited, as simply, "a rambling Victorian pile..."



suggests to the American imagination something in the Charles Addams or Edward Gorey realm...

But in fact, their grandfather, Algernon Bertram Freeman-Mitford, aka "Berty", had been a diplomat in Asia and had written extensively on Japanese culture and horticulture.

He was rumored to have fathered two children...



with a Japanese geisha.

He was also rumored, through a dalliance with his wife's sister...



to be the actual father of Winston Churchill's future wife.

Berty consulted with Gilbert & Sullivan on "The Mikado"...



teaching them the Japanese song that became the entrance march for the famed comic opera,



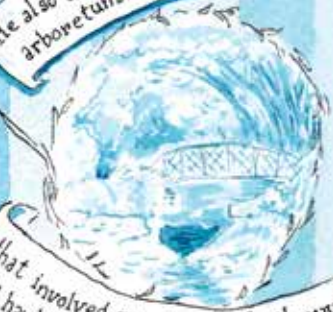
In 1886, Berty inherited an estate of over 10,000 acres, where he erected a palatial manor with five grand staircases...



Batsford Park

and one hundred rooms.

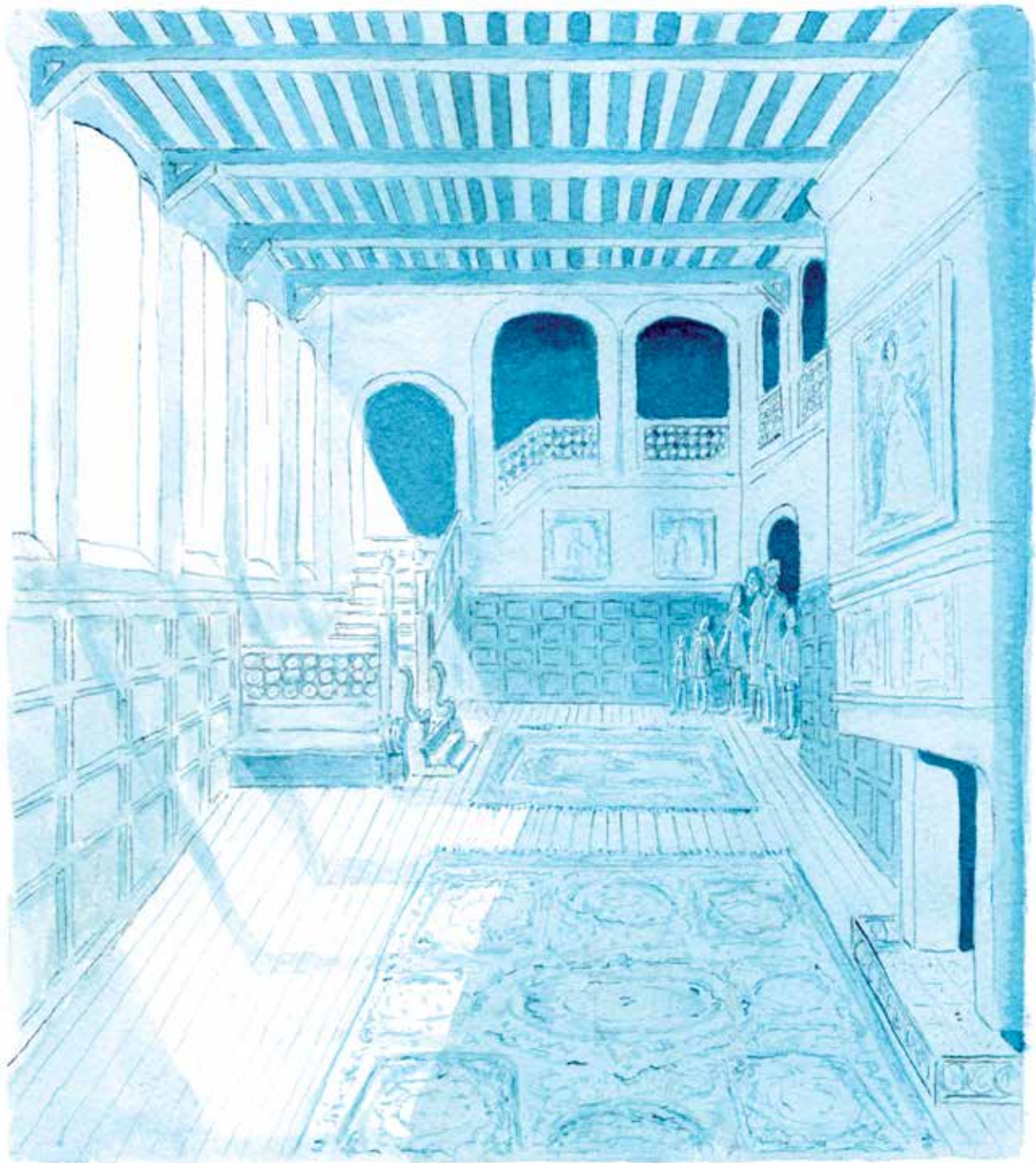
He also constructed a 55-acre arboretum...



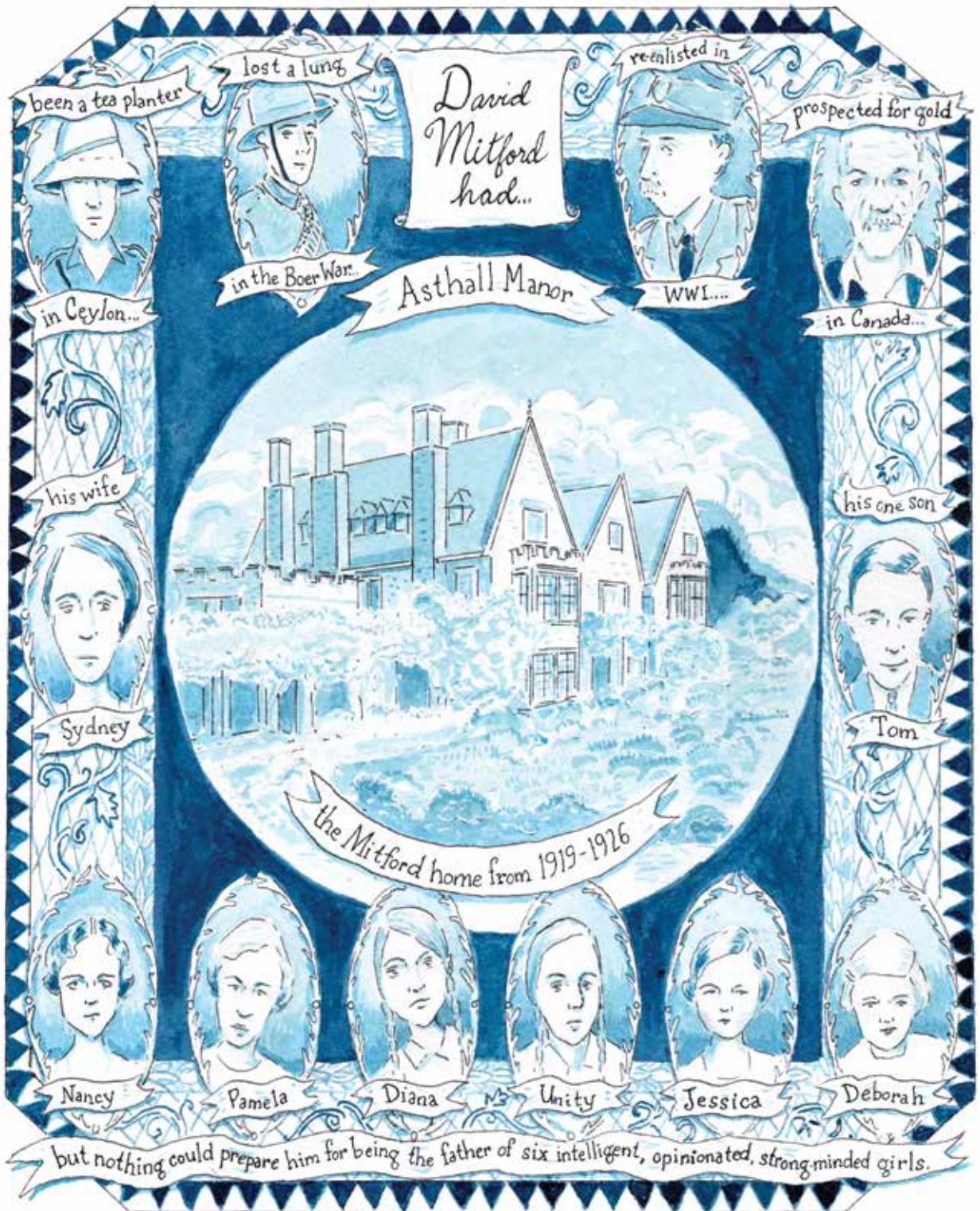
that involved gouging a half-mile ravine and hauling thousands of tons of limestone to form a rocky gorge with a stream...



merrily blowing through the rest of his money before his death in 1916.



Moving into the immense Batsford Park was only a temporary measure. Even though David Mitford had inherited the modern equivalent of over two million dollars, it was insufficient to maintain this immense property.



been a tea planter

lost a lung

David Mitford had...

reenlisted in

prospected for gold

in Ceylon...

in the Boer War...

Asthall Manor

WWI...

in Canada...

his wife

his one son

Sydney

Tom

the Mitford home from 1919-1926

Nancy

Pamela

Diana

Unity

Jessica

Deborah

but nothing could prepare him for being the father of six intelligent, opinionated, strong minded girls.