[The following study by Robert Morton has been included in this volume as it draws on letters which add to the picture of Mitford’s life in Japan, as recounted in Hugh Cortazzi’s edition of Mitford’s Japan: Memories and Recollections 1866–1906, Japan Library, 2002.]

When Adolf Hitler was showing the grave of Richard Wagner to Diana Mosley (née Mitford) and her sister Unity, he told them that it was an honour to be visiting it with the granddaughters of the great Lord Redesdale.¹ Today, Redesdale, who started life as Algernon Bertram Mitford, might be overlooked by anyone not interested in the history of Britain’s relations with Japan in the first years after the re-opening of Japan to the outside world following the conclusion of the ‘unequal’ treaties of 1858, had he not been the grandfather of Diana, Unity and the other Mitford sisters, five of whom became best-selling writers and all of whom lived colourful and sometimes scandalous lives. Consequently, he is accorded a few pages in many of the large number of books about them and in Hons and Rebels, Jessica Mitford mentions
her grandfather’s ‘depressingly huge autobiography’. *Memories* (along with *Further Memories*) is undeniably huge, comprising three volumes and more than 1,000 pages, but hardly depressingly so, reflecting as it does, the diverse and interesting life Mitford led. In its review of *Memories*, the *Times* gave this overview of him:

He had means, good looks, charm, ability. He has been everywhere and seen everything. He has... seen Louis-Philippe walking in the Tuileries; ...played a cornet obligato for Grisi; ... taken omnibus-rides with Thomas Carlyle; reformed the Office of Works; sat in the House of Commons; bred horses; lured King Edward up a steep hill in his famous gardens at Batsford. He has known ‘everybody’. He was the schoolfellow and friend at Eton of his little cousin, Swinburne; he has spent a night with Garibaldi at Caprora; he was on more than nodding terms with Dickens, Adelaide Kemble, Burton, Whistler, Joachim, Browning, Delane.³

This description does not even mention Japan, which by the end of Mitford’s life seemed a relatively minor part of it – he served just over three years at the British Legation there, arriving at the age of twenty-nine. But his time in Japan coloured the way he lived the rest of his life. He was there during probably the most interesting years in the nation’s history (1866 to 1870), witnessing the demise of the Bakufu, the Meiji ‘restoration’ and the opening of Japan to the West.⁴ Although he went on to have a very successful career back in England, and his life was certainly safer and more comfortable there, nothing that he did afterwards could equal the excitement of his time in Japan.

Mitford’s start in life was the quintessential British route to an elite career: Eton, then Christ Church College Oxford.⁵ To his father, he bemoaned the fact that he had had a ‘gentleman’s’ education because as he had been the first European to visit many places, he might have made ‘some interesting discoveries’ had he known more about science.⁶ After Oxford, Mitford joined the Foreign Office and moved to London where his good looks, intelligence and charm secured him invitations to the best parties – he was a particular favourite of Lady Palmerston, wife of the Prime Minister. In 1863, he took a six-month temporary position in Russia – where in just three months he had learnt enough Russian to have a conversation with the Tsar in the language. This was followed by a far more challenging posting in China and then in October 1866, Japan.

Mitford did not have the best start there. He had endured a typhoon on the voyage from Shanghai and on his arrival decided the country was a ‘gloomy disappointment’.⁷ On his first evening, the cheerless dinner conversation with his new colleagues revolved around the attacks on foreigners (the British diplomats were in Yokohama because rōnin had destroyed the Legation in Edo).⁸ To top it off, there