

Honest Aitken's Maggie opus

CHRIS MULLIN

POLITICS

Margaret Thatcher: Power And Personality

Jonathan Aitken

Bloomsbury £25 ☎ £20 ★★★★★

My first reaction, on learning of Jonathan Aitken's 700-page tome, was: do we need yet another biography of Margaret Thatcher in the wake of Charles Moore's nigh-on definitive account of her life and times? What could there be to say that is new?

I confess I was wrong. This is a magnificent work – highly readable, carefully researched and above all brutally honest. What brings it to life is that much of it is based on personal observation.

Aitken was a well-connected Tory MP who was closely acquainted with the Thatcher family because he'd walked out with Mrs Thatcher's daughter, Carol, for three years in the late 1970s. Although he never featured in her Government – probably because the

relationship with Carol ended badly – he had a ringside seat throughout her reign.

Aitken has great respect for his subject, but this is a warts-and-all biography. And

the warts are considerable.

She managed to fall out with just about every one of her senior Ministers and

many of her officials.

Although capable of personal kindness to those in her immediate entourage, she could be unbelievably rude and arrogant.

'I usually make up my mind about people within 30 seconds and 99 times out of 100 I am right,' she told the

Cabinet Secretary, Sir Robert Armstrong.

Cruel, capricious, volatile, hubristic, autocratic. These are just some of the adjectives Aitken uses to describe her behaviour, and there is no shortage of witnesses. 'Probably the most tactless woman I ever met in my life,' remarked Bernard Ingham, her loyal press secretary. She wasn't keen on most foreigners, either. 'I honestly came to think,' remarked Lord Carrington, the first of her Foreign Secretaries, 'that she was only able to relate to people whose mother tongue was the English language.'

For good measure he added: 'She seemed to believe that all blacks were communists.'

Cabinet government was not her strong point. 'She had a real problem seeing, let alone accommodating, a point of view other than her own,'

says Aitken. 'Nuances and consensus had no appeal to her. She had no empathy with those adversely affected by her policies.'

It was her repeated humiliation of her Foreign Secretary Geoffrey Howe that ultimately proved fatal. 'I

know what you are going to say, Geoffrey, and the answer is "no",' she began one meeting. 'Your paper is twaddle, complete and utter twaddle. I don't know how you have the nerve to submit it,' was her opening salvo on another occasion. All this in

front of embarrassed officials. Eventually the mild-mannered Sir Geoffrey had had enough. It was his devastating resignation speech that ultimately



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brought her down.

In retirement she continued to behave badly, launching into tirades against those she regarded as traitors, and never once pausing to reflect on the part she played in her own political demise. Before long she was denouncing John Major, her anointed successor, even going so far as to actively subvert his attempt to get the Maastricht Treaty through Parliament.

And yet, despite all, Aitken remains an admirer. He scrupulously documents her triumphs – the Falklands War, the defeat of the miners, the part she played in persuading the Americans to take Gorbachev seriously,

the courage and dignity she displayed after emerging from the rubble of the Grand Hotel in Brighton after the IRA bombing, the £5.2 billion Al Yamamah arms deal with the Saudis which, according to Aitken, saved British Aerospace and protected 50,000 jobs.

Even when recounting triumphs, however, his judgments are balanced. There is, he says, an ‘uncomfortable truth’ about the Falklands. The invasion and the subsequent war might never have happened had Thatcher not vetoed attempts by Nicholas Ridley to negotiate a leaseback arrangement with the Argentinians along the lines of the arrangement we had with the Chinese over Hong Kong.

Thatcher, says Aitken, was ‘easier to admire from afar than to work with at close quarters’. Amen to that.

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HUMILIATED:
Foreign Secretary
Geoffrey Howe
with Margaret
Thatcher in 1987