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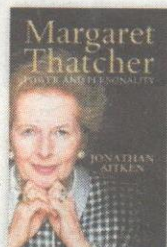
Hard-working, naive, brave and rude: the Mrs Thatcher he knew

Jesse Norman enjoys Jonathan Aitken's gossipy appraisal

In January 2000, 48 hours after his release from prison, having spent seven months inside for perjury, Jonathan Aitken got a cheery telephone call from Denis Thatcher. An epic lunch ensued. After Mark and Carol Thatcher also offered their generous support, Aitken began to suspect the guiding hand of their mother at work. In the Thatcher household, at least, his rehabilitation had begun.

Mind you, as this absorbing work reminds us, Aitken's relationship with Margaret Thatcher got off to a very rocky start in the mid-1970s. He was young, raffish, glamorous and the author of *The Young Meteors*, which profiled some of the jeunesse dorée of the 1960s. She was serious, the daughter of a shopkeeper from Grantham, a Methodist, and utterly determined to leave her mark on the country. He had been an admirer of Ted Heath; she had just deposed Heath in a brilliant and unexpected coup d'état. A greater contrast between the Conservative backbencher and the new leader of his party could hardly be imagined.

Having started badly, relations between them quickly deteriorated. Aitken almost literally got up Mrs Thatcher's nose by commenting acidly on her lack of foreign



Margaret Thatcher:
Power and
Personality
by Jonathan Aitken

Bloomsbury, 784pp
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GRANTHAM TO GREATNESS
Margaret Thatcher in
1974, the year before she
became Tory leader

TERRY O'NEILL / GETTY IMAGES



policy experience: "She probably thinks that Sinai is the plural of sinus." Worst of all, he began an ultimately ill-starred relationship with Carol Thatcher, then 22 to his 33 years of age. "It was not," he notes dryly, "greeted with unqualified enthusiasm by the Leader of the Opposition." The mind boggles at the dinner-table pleasantries between the potential son and mother-in-law.

One might reasonably ask whether the world needs a further biography of Mrs Thatcher, not least given the magnificent first instalment of Charles Moore's authorised biography. Yet Aitken brings three new perspectives to bear: that of the junior backbencher whose scepticism turns in time to admiration; that of the family intimate, as he became during the three years of his relationship with Carol; and that of the diarist, over the 23 years that he and Mrs Thatcher spent in Parliament together.

Margaret Thatcher: Power and Person-

He does not downplay the snobbery and misogyny she faced on her way to the top

ality is described as a "biographical portrait", and aptly so. Aitken's underlying goal is to examine Mrs Thatcher's life through the prism of her extraordinary personality. By exalting personality he risks downplaying the importance of ideas, the contributions of other actors, and the constraints of the institutions through which politics is conducted. Perhaps with Mrs Thatcher more than any other recent political leader, however, this approach pays off.

Virtually every page of Aitken's narrative is alive with her personality: courageous, single-minded, relentlessly hard-working, oddly naive, often brutally

rude to colleagues, kind to staff, all but devoid of a sense of humour, never apologising, seeking out opposition and drawing energy from overcoming it.

There are deft miniatures of those around her: her "laughing boys" Gordon Reece, Tim Bell and Ronnie Millar, her core team, her Cabinet colleagues. Some great set-pieces, such as the no-confidence debate of 1979 — with the Rev Ian Paisley's considerable bulk bouncing his neighbour Aitken up and down like a tennis ball — add colour, as the narrative wends its way through triumph and disaster towards its final tragic denouement.

There are some excellent stories. Ted Heath gives his own wondrously ironic judgment on the lady: "She can't separate the political from the personal... she bears grudges." This from the man known as the Incredible Sulk. A visit to Islay goes disastrously wrong when one night a policeman spots a shadowy figure and sets his alsatian on it, only to discover the dog pinning down the Prime Minister, out on a late constitutional. "The incident passed into legend among her inner circle, with the punch line 'How on earth did the dog dare?'"

As with any portrait, the personality of the painter is far from absent. Aitken breaks up the story into short sections, each chapter capped by his own reflections. He does not downplay the snobbery and misogyny with which Mrs Thatcher had to contend on her way to the top. However he is also highly critical of his subject, so much so that her admirers may be somewhat offended. Aitken recounts her carpetings high and low, from Lord Carrington and Jim Prior to the taciturn civil servant whom the Prime Minister asked at a briefing "Do you speak, Mr Jones?" And later, "Do you eat, Mr Jones?" It's a wonder the poor man could breathe.

Aitken's Thatcher is occasionally vindictive, even cruel, sometimes bigoted and happy to undermine her colleagues: "She had no friends... and no interests outside politics." He blames her fall not just on Michael Heseltine and Geoffrey Howe, but ultimately on the lady herself.

Readers may disagree about the analysis. They will enjoy the insider's peek at political intrigue, the gossip, the stories. **Jesse Norman is a Conservative MP and author of *Edmund Burke: Philosopher, Politician, Prophet***