

Daddy, what was Margaret Thatcher?

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David Cannadine, *Margaret Thatcher - A Life and Legacy*, Oxford University Press, 2017. pp. 176. ISBN: 978-0198795001. £10.99

Before the Brexit vote, no other issue divided Britons as much as the policies, personality, and legacy of Margaret Thatcher (1925-2013). To her detractors she was the unfeeling, cruel, and vindictive destroyer of lives and communities. To her supporters she was a brave leader who made vital and lasting changes to a once great nation that had grown exhausted and complacent. Her state-funded, ceremonial funeral, like those given to Princess Diana and the Queen Mother, was a huge honour. Such funerals were rare: among non-royalty, only Horatio Nelson, the Duke of Wellington, and Winston Churchill had been paid a similar tribute. It showed that the controversy surrounding her life would continue well beyond her death. Britain remained post-Thatcher in only one sense. Maggie was well and truly out, but twenty-five years after she left office Britain still lives to some extent under her shadow.

Charles Moore has recently published two of the three volumes of her official biography to universal acclaim. Moore's Thatcher emerges as not just a political phenomenon but a very human figure. Since the 1980s large numbers of sociologists and political scientists, as well as newspaper columnists and political colleagues, have poured over her political utterances, policies, and beliefs - in and out of power. Thatcher Studies is now a virtual cottage industry. Is there anything left to say about her?

An historical perspective may encourage a more nuanced view of the life

and times of Margaret Thatcher and help move beyond the polarized debate. Sir David Cannadine's *Margaret Thatcher: A life and legacy* (2017) aims to do just that, covering her life in 126 pages, an ideal length for those unwilling to wade through Moore's three-volume official biography.

While focusing more on the life than the times (this book is the entry Cannadine wrote for the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*) some useful texture of time and place seeps in. She was the daughter of a grocery store owner in Lincolnshire, a flat, seldom visited county, known chiefly for its vegetable fields. Her father, Alfred Roberts, an occasional Methodist preacher, imbued his two daughters with the values of hard work, thrift, self-reliance, and self-improvement.

The young Margaret Roberts cut a somewhat lonely and anxious figure. She was an unexceptional but diligent student of chemistry at Oxford, having taken up an award at Somerville College in 1943 after another student had abruptly declined the offer. The young Margaret courted, dined, and danced, took an interest in her appearance, and an interest in men much older than herself. She also became president of the Oxford University Conservative Association in her final year – membership of the Oxford Union was a male preserve – and gradually distanced herself from her provincial roots.

Cannadine charts the post-Oxford years well: the move to the southeast for work as a chemist; the two defeats standing as Conservative candidate at Dartford; the marriage to Dennis Thatcher, an ex-soldier who had money, dash, and charm; the birth of twins; the successful bid to qualify for the Bar; and the election of Margaret Thatcher as MP for Finchley in 1959, one of only twelve female Conservative MPs elected.

Cannadine shows how Thatcher's political rise was a mix of luck and diligence. She was lucky enough to sponsor a private member's bill in 1960, her maiden speech not a mere statement of aspiration like most but a piece of legislation, to allow the press into local council meetings. In 1961 MacMillan gave her a lowly position at the Ministry of Pensions. Her brief time as a tax lawyer and her natural temperament meant she mastered her duties and

towed the government's line. The opposition years (1964-70) were spent in six different shadow posts. Once Edward Heath became PM in June 1970 she was made education secretary.

The book's coverage of how Thatcher became Conservative Party leader and then Prime Minister shows how she profited more from good fortune than political skill. The storm over abolishing free milk for schoolchildren aged 7-11 meant 'Mrs Thatcher, the milk snatcher' was lucky not to be sacked, and she spent the remaining years lying low and avoiding controversy. Partly because of this, she was not strongly associated with Heath or the nation's economic woes. Once the parliamentary party lost confidence in Heath, Thatcher was duly elected as party leader in 1975 largely because she was not Heath, and probably wouldn't last long. Though she benefited from Airey Neave's clever mentoring and campaign management, Cannadine's Thatcher chimes with Enoch Powell's assessment: 'She didn't rise to power: she was on the spot on the roulette wheel at the right time, and she didn't funk it.'

Cannadine truly excels in condensing and explaining the No.10 years. The reader is guided adroitly through the early crises, the Falklands campaign, the consequent reelection in 1983, the impervious middle years, and the hubris of the late eighties, displaying the concision worthy of the senior mandarin that Cannadine might well have become if he hadn't chosen history as a career.

As for the legacy, Cannadine stresses the accidental nature of her rise to power and the contradictions throughout Thatcher's eleven years in office. She benefited from an ineffective opposition, in parliament, cabinet, and wider party. Her election victories did not mean widespread popularity or acceptance. The 1980s was a good decade depending on who you were and where you were. Her achievements as prime minister, Cannadine points out, were partial and qualified. She was neither as humble in origin as other prime ministers, nor as unique if one recognizes the existence of female leaders in India, Pakistan, Israel, and Norway. And unlike her successor, she had the advantages of an Oxbridge education and a wealthy spouse. She gave

birth to an -ism, but Thatcherism was incoherent as an ideology, and her political rise and her tenure as PM owed more to events than philosophy.

Cannadine gives us a more nuanced Thatcher, contradictory but also endlessly fascinating because of it. Despite its size, the book adds significantly to a more balanced picture of Thatcher as a remarkable woman as well as a significant historical figure. To many she was and still is 'That Bloody Woman'. To others she remains (somewhat satirically) 'The Blessed Margaret' - part Boudicca, part matron to the rescue. However her legacy is judged, Thatcher surely ranks alongside David Lloyd George and Winston Churchill as prime ministers who, through the dogged pursuit of their beliefs and policies, defined twentieth century politics and the course of British history. She was far from an ordinary politician.