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Lively account of PM Thatcher



BIOGRAPHY
MARGARET
THATCHER:
POWER AND
PERSONALITY

★★★★★

Jonathan Aitken

Bloomsbury, £25
(Express Books,
£20)

ROMANCING the boss's daughter can be a high-risk strategy, like placing all your chips on one number at roulette. So it proved for Jonathan Aitken.

A golden boy, he had obvious prospects. Godson of Queen Juliana of the Netherlands, son of a Tory MP and great-nephew of the newspaper magnate and wartime Cabinet Minister Lord Beaverbrook. Educated at Eton and Oxford, blessed with looks, charm, intelligence, wealth and superlative connections, his political rise was assured.

An MP at 32 and an early Thatcherite, he should have been a shoo-in for swift promotion

when Margaret Thatcher became prime minister in 1979.

It didn't happen because he crossed her daughter, Carol, in love. When he ended his three-year dalliance with Carol, she was reportedly bereft and

Margaret called him "the man who made Carol cry".

Thereafter, she pointedly ignored his manifest claims to preferment. He had to wait for John Major to become prime minister to get his feet on the Ministerial ladder.

Despite that disappointment, he remained a loyal supporter throughout the Thatcher years, in a front-row seat at that political grand opera lasting 11 years.

After Sir Geoffrey Howe's resignation in 1990, which precipitated the avalanche which brought her down, Aitken told Newsnight: "If we throw out Britain's most successful peacetime prime minister in a backstage party bloodbath, we will come to regret it as our darkest hour."

So it was. Despite John Major's surprise win in 1992, things swiftly fell apart, consigning the Tories to the political wilderness for over a decade. She was

quickly proved right on Britain's membership of the Exchange Rate Mechanism, the precursor of the disastrous EU currency, the euro.

Britain's humiliating ejection in September 1992 demonstrated that Howe, Lawson, Heseltine and Major, together with the entire business and financial establishment, had been wrong. She had been thrown out of office in a coup d'état engineered by people who were catastrophically mistaken. Consequently, the wounds left by her political assassination went very deep.

Like her predecessor Edward Heath (who was dubbed "the

Incredible Sulk") she never forgave or forgot.

The difference was that history vindicated her and confounded him. Thus, the European shockwaves which removed her convulse the Conservative Party still.

Inevitably, much of Aitken's



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narrative is familiar but he skilfully weaves in many personal and private anecdotes to enliven the tale.

Particularly interesting and poignant is his account of her life after office and the snapshots of her kindness and consideration, especially towards staff and the young.

Aitken was himself the beneficiary of her compassion. Within two days of his being released from prison, she got husband Denis to take him to lunch publicly at his club.

Similarly, she invited John Profumo to her 70th birthday party dinner and seated him between her and The Queen. This was a side of Margaret Thatcher, well-known to her friends but unknown to the public.

Although humour was, notoriously, not her strong suit, there were occasional shafts of wit. I liked her explaining to a group of youngsters that: "If God had intended us to be a member of the EU, he wouldn't have put the Channel where it is."

Aitken is an accomplished biographer and wordsmith. This book is highly readable and highly recommended.

NEIL HAMILTON

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Picture: DAFYDD JONES



LOYAL TO THE LAST: Aitken, with Margaret and Denis Thatcher, was an early Thatcherite