

At home with the IRON LADY

Katie Jarvis meets Jonathan Aitken to talk about his fascinating new biography of Margaret Thatcher, prison reform and the much underrated experience of failure

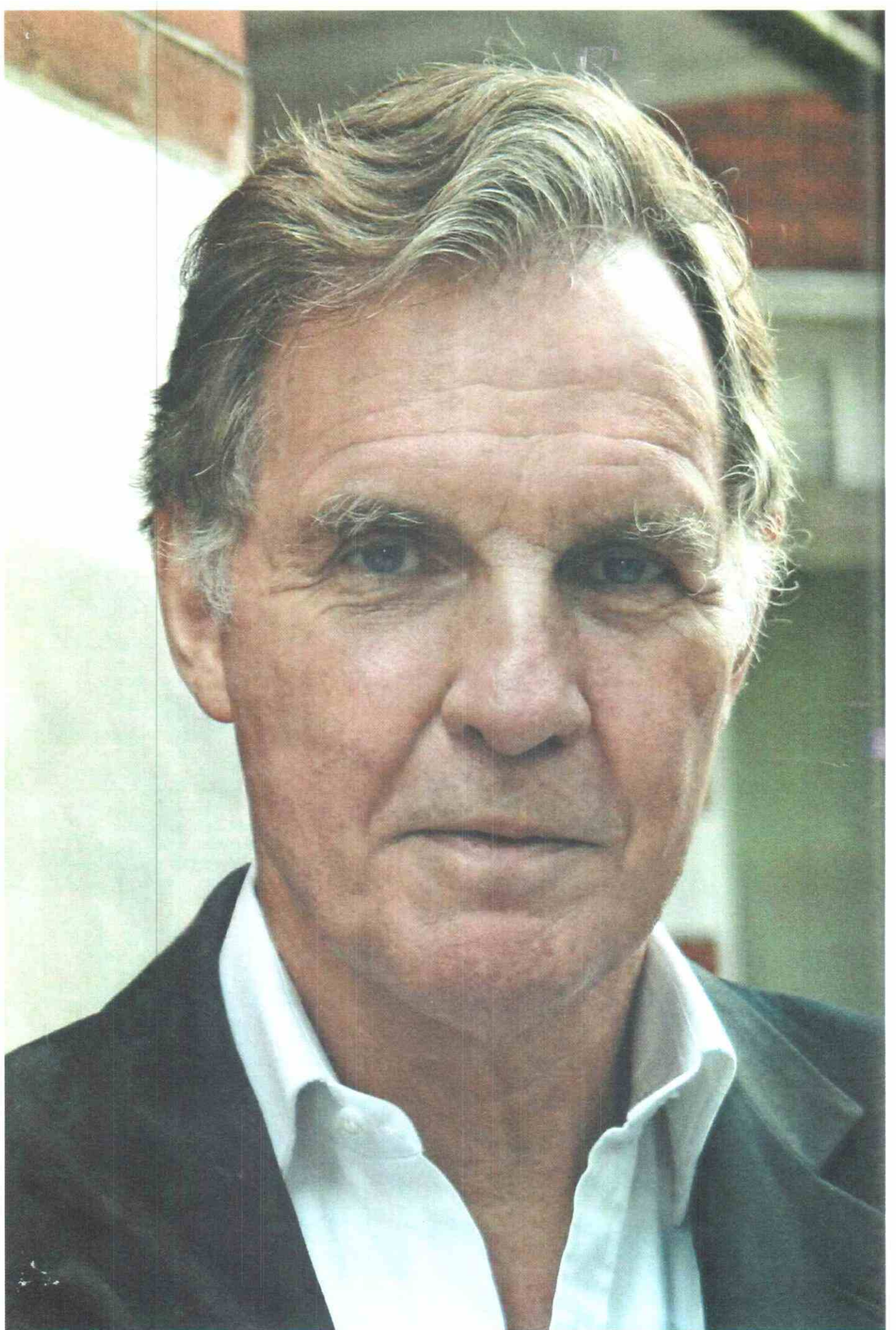


Outside Jonathan Aitken's elegant Earl's Court apartment, there's a whole other world. A world of crime, punctuated by the nee-naa of police cars whizzing past; a world of tawdry Burger Kings selling ketchup-laden butties; a world of Marks & Spencer shelves stacked with simply anodyne food.

But here? Here, we're protected from the hurly-burly behind heavy apartment-block doors. Inside, there's a tesserae hallway where you startlingly meet yourself approaching in a full-wall mirror; spacious rooms lead off, tantalisingly reminiscent of a stately home way out in the country. There are endless shelves of books; oils, sketches; Bloomsbury-looking women; military-looking men.

Jonathan Aitken points to a rather jaunty red-and-white-covered chair behind me. "One night, Margaret Thatcher was sitting on that chair - there - at dinner. She wasn't well - she was in her declining period - and someone asked her a question about Keith Joseph. And she absolutely lit up with an anthem of very thoughtful praise for him."

It's not a non sequitur. (We are, in fact, discussing her admiration for great intellects.) But it's an anecdote I wanted to include for obvious reasons: not everyone can claim easy familiarity with one of the world's most famous women. A woman who spawned a new vocabulary - such as Wets (coined after Thatcher's habit of scrawling 'wet' in the margins of memoranda from Tory dissenter Jim Prior). The Iron Lady. The woman who gainsaid the concept of society (supposedly). Who chided America like a headmistress and charmed Russia like a hoyden. The woman who totally 'got' the mood of the nation but who rarely got a joke. (When her shrewd advisor Whitelaw stood down for health reasons, she innocently told her ▶



speech-writing team. "Every Prime Minister should have a Willie.")

Indeed, I've come to talk to Jonathan Aitken about his brilliant biography - *Margaret Thatcher, Power and Personality*: charming, detailed, insightful, anecdotal, explicative. It combines hilarious stories (another gloriously unintended double-entendre was when Thatcher's PPS, Fergus Montgomery, came back from the hairdresser looking particularly well-groomed. "I expect you've had a blow job," she commented) with the necessary who-said-what-to-whom-about-which-policy nitty-gritty. But you need neither a degree in politics nor the intellect of Sir Keith Joseph to appreciate and enjoy it.

What I most like is its balance and honesty. It reminds me of that old joke. "X was bullying, deceitful and humorous: I liked her enormously"; And I did like Thatcher a lot more after reading the book; it made her seem human. Almost human, at times; very, at others.

"I got a bit tired of what I call the one-dimensional portraits," Jonathan Aitken agrees. "Either they're all for her, and you think she's absolutely wonderful because she's so determined, so courageous, so dedicated, knows what she wants. Or there's the anti-Thatcher portrait of someone who was overbearing, was not caring about great blocks of society, and heartless and so on. The wicked witch angle. And I've always known that both points of view, although they have glimmerings of truth in them, are simply not right."

Nor could he be better placed to paint a more convincing portrait. For three years, from 76-79, Jonathan dated Carol Thatcher, giving him glimpses into a family life few ever witnessed. Dinners *en famille* show Mark being sulky, Denis being humorously tolerant, and Margaret herself insisting on doing all the wine-pouring, cooking and washing up - if somewhat bossily. "With the same acceleration, she cooked breakfast every morning for Denis, who could get pernickety if his bacon was not grilled in a certain way." (Well, there's a daisy one for militant feminism.) It was, Aitken admits, a dysfunctional family at times; while Thatcher's heart was in the right place, it was not often physically in the centre of her home. She spent vast swathes of time in the House of Commons, eschewing the concepts of hobbies, friends and even holidays. But she was, at the same time, fiercely loyal to her husband and children. He recalls apologising to her many years later for his

rather heartless break-up with Carol. "Margaret Thatcher looked totally stunned," he writes. "There was an awkward silence in which she seemed to be choking up." Thinking he'd made a mistake in bringing the subject up, Jonathan quickly took his leave. A couple of weeks later, however, Denis approached him at a cocktail party, to thank him for what he'd said. "[Margaret] appreciated it a lot and so did I."

"She's much more complicated and really much more interesting than the stereotypes," Jonathan points out. "And I also realised that pretty much nobody really knew Margaret Thatcher. That's not uncommon with very prominent people: they have a sort of carapace around them, which protects them. But for various reasons, at times I did get to know her; got glimpses of her quite close up. And so I wanted to have a shot at doing a portrait of her personality because that drove so much of what she did."

And so he has. One night, after dropping Carol home, Jonathan discovers Margaret

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in tears because a colleague has been 'unbelievably unpleasant' to her in the division lobby. During the Falklands, he relates how distraught she was when Britain began to suffer losses. "In the midst of these traumas, Denis woke up to find his wife sitting on the end of the bed in floods of tears. 'Oh no, oh no! Another ship! All my young men!' she sobbed."

Yet counterbalancing the various kindnesses and thoughtfulness - personal notes to people in times of difficulty; her concern for her staff - there are more difficult truths. She undoubtedly loved her children, but cuddles and kisses were not on the agenda. (Her own childhood seemed curiously devoid of fun or warmth). And then there was the intransigence, bullying and outright cruelty she could display towards colleagues. Way before her savage revengefulness on Geoffrey Howe, she sniped and snarled at ministers in unrecorded attacks. The biography recalls a shaken Norman St John-Stevas leaving the cabinet room after one particular rumpus, saying, "No one will ever believe it is like this!"

On the plus side was the hilarity - and success - of her strong-arm tactics on Reagan. When the President phoned to persuade Thatcher that a diplomatic solution might be the way forward over the Falklands, you can picture him holding the receiver a foot from his ear. "He came off sounding even more of a wimp than Jimmy Carter", was the comment of NSC aide, Jim Rentschler, who had been listening to the call."

"She could be a bit like the girl in the nursery rhyme," Jonathan tells me: "When she was good, she was very, very good and when she was bad, she was horrid. And I certainly saw her being horrid as well. But it does make a very complex personality."

One of the most fascinating aspects, if you think about it, is the way she managed to be a woman in a man's world while still very much being a woman. Her name conjures up images of handbags and gladrags, seductive legs, winning hairdos.

"I never underestimated her femininity, which led her in some fairly capricious judgements. She had a very soft spot for people she thought were nice-looking. I don't mean that in any improper sense, but she liked to have and promote nice-looking, attractive men, and she went off unattractive men very fast. She got on very well with Reagan. Of Mitterrand, she said, 'He likes women, you know'. She couldn't stand the reptilian Giscard or the corpulent Kohl."

Quite. Despite the seriousness of the situation, some of the biography's funniest moments are played out when Thatcher and Gorbachev meet - a scene that Hollywood would surely cast with Meg Ryan and Billy Crystal. Like the best romantic movies, the story goes from tiff - Thatcher's opening gambit being, "I must tell you that I hate Communism," - to ultimate love-in.

"I interviewed Gorbachev [for the biography]. I think it's the only time he's ever been interviewed about her." He laughs. "As we spoke, he did imitations of her; him turning his back on her."

Were there any surprises for Jonathan himself - a backbencher during Thatcher's premiership - during his research?

"I was surprised to learn quite how hands-on she had been during the miners' strike. Remember, this was portrayed by her as a battle from which the Government was seriously aloof: the National Union of Mineworkers versus the National Coal Board. In actual fact, well over half her time was dedicated to the intense detail of beating Scargill - and it was a close-run thing.

"I think I was also surprised to discover ▶

- although this is not completely proved - that it was her insecurity that drove her to a lot of this super-preparation. She loved to be able to say to Francis Pym [a leading member of the Wets], 'Have you seen the footnote subsection B2 on page 24?' He hadn't. And so she dominated her cabinet rather unfairly in that way: on the whole, it's not the job of the cabinet minister to be on top of every point of detail."

He also writes movingly - though relatively briefly - of her decline into memory loss and confusion. A 'lighthouse' period, he terms it; a dazzling beam that shines inconstantly. It's amazing how many stunning brains have tragically and unfairly crumbled. Clearly, the glance of the natural world falls lightly on the cumbersome concept of justice.

What Jonathan Aitken is more keen to tell his readers is how kind Margaret and Denis were to him in his own difficulties. In 1999, he was charged with perjury and perverting the course of justice after he allowed an Arab businessman to pay for his stay in the Paris Ritz, violating ministerial rules. Jailed for 18 months - of which he served seven - he was invited to lunch by the Thatchers 48 hours after his release.

Since then, he's not only carved a new career for himself as a writer; he's also been a prime mover in the field of prison reform.

"Perhaps I should preface this on a note of humility by saying that most of the time I was a backbench Tory MP, I don't think I ever said 'Lock 'em up and throw away the key', but I was certainly a sort of law-and-order hardish liner. But I do think that an historian of the 21st century, writing at the beginning of the 22nd, might well look back and say: Were they really so unimaginative that they couldn't devise penalties which would punish without the often-wrecking effects of incarceration? I feel that particularly strongly about women prisoners."

We talk about other things: How prisoners should receive mentoring ("Don't get me started on this"); Snowden and GCHQ ("I am not wholly but somewhat on the side of the *Guardian* because I don't think the intelligence services have much to fear from good scrutiny"); Cameron and the power of the corporates, particularly the 24-hour-news brigade ("I'm a David Cameron admirer... but I think he and his team are too responsive to the winds of media fashion"); the poverty of experience in today's House of Commons ("In 74, you'd still got a great swathe of people who, for a start, had fought in the war. And lots of them had run businesses or practices"); and his love of the Cotswolds, where he has many friends. "I stay near



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Chipping Norton. I'm a great admirer, in good times and in bad, of the Brooks family. Caroline Brooks is the great matnarch - Charlie Brooks's mother."

So who is next, biography-wise, I ask Jonathan Aitken. But he's unsure. "Soon, I shall get very neurotic and stop taxi drivers to say, 'Excuse me! If you were a biographer, who would you choose?' They'd doubtless say some football manager I've never heard of but, occasionally, it produces a very good result."

Instead, he says, he's thinking of writing a book on failure - a much-underrated experience. He was asked to lecture on it, recently, by the prestigious Royal College of Defence Studies: a slightly backhand compliment, but one he relished. "I sometimes say I went through defeat, disgrace, divorce, bankruptcy and jail. It's a pretty good royal flush of failures. So I could speak from some modest expertise in the subject."

You can see how experience has forged a better man. A man of understanding and

principle. A man who can write first-class biographies, not just because he's intelligent and diligent, but because he has seen so much of human life. (*Porridge and Passion* is a mesmerising account of his time behind bars.)

When I leave this beguiling world of privilege, back onto the fast-food streets of crime-chasing police cars, I find the tubes have gone on strike. And later, when I get to Paddington, all journeys are delayed because some poor soul has been hit by a train. "Bloody body on the line," a suited giant of a man bellows angrily into his mobile.

Yes, there are two worlds out there. And it's a force for good when they meet. ■

Jonathan Aitken will be speaking about Margaret Thatcher: Power and the Personality on Saturday, April 26, at The Theatre, Chipping Norton, as part of Chipping Norton Literary Festival. For more details of the festival, which runs from April 24-27, visit www.chiplitfest.com or call 07775 120271



Read more about the Literary Festival on page 143 and learn about The Theatre on page 154