INTERVIEW WITH JONATHAN AITKEN

By John Hinton

“Whatever one thinks about Margaret Thatcher, she is a major historical figure who marked out footprints on the sands of time of her generation.” Jonathan Aitken was speaking to me in the beautifully appointed drawing room of his large flat in west London. The sins of the past including a short spell in prison may have cast shadows but undaunted he has long since emerged from them by some writing some acclaimed books, and bringing his own experience to his work on prison and probation reform. His latest book, Margaret Thatcher: Power and Personality, is selling well on both sides of the Atlantic and he has been giving talks about the book arranged by his publishers.

He knew the Iron Lady well during almost the whole of her remarkable career. “I personally think her greatest achievements were turning Britain around from being the sick man of Europe politically and economically to being a strong country again.

“Then in the middle of that came the Falklands and I am quite critical of the prelude to the Falklands War. Through inexperience and some amount of prejudice, she threw away the chances to get what would have been a Hong Kong solution. She was pressed by her colleagues including Lord Carrington to look for a peaceful solution – and the Argentines even talked of granting a 99 year lease. To get one more century for the Falkland Islands would have been doing pretty well. But she was very new and there’s a description of a so-called thermo-nuclear lunch where she accused Carrington of cowardice.

“But then you move on to the Falkands War itself. Once hostilities broke out, her courage and determination could not have been better. She was a lioness, the risks were considerable but she closed her eyes to them.”

He agrees the Falklands earned Mrs Thatcher a great reputation for strength and courage. But she was deeply affected by the war, the loss of life of the servicemen and the possibility of defeat.

“The night HMS Sheffield was sunk, she couldn’t sleep, wept and was terribly upset. In a sense, it was a lonely time for her since colleagues were still trying to make a deal – however botched up – with the Argentines and the Americans were never really convinced the Falklands were worth fighting for. She gave President Ronald absolute hell about this in long telephone conversations – and I have seen the transcripts. But she did earn his respect – and of course Casper Weinberger eventually gave us an enormous amount of materiel help.”

Her next big battle was the miners’ strike. “And my take on it is that it was a great pity she didn’t keep in mind the Churchillian dictum ‘In victory magnanimity’ If she had said the right things afterwards about the contribution the miners communities could make to the economy that would have been better. But I do think Arthur Scargill had to be beaten – he was militant to the point of Marxist madness.”

What about greed of the eighties? “Well, she was quite a material girl and maybe all this coincided with the crumbling of institutions like the Church. But she didn’t do anything gently; the nation’s attitudes were changing and she wanted to keep in step.”

He knows from personal experience, having often been to church with Margaret Thatcher’s family, she was certainly brought up admiring the church as an institution.

“She was very well grounded in faith, the Methodist faith. Her own father wrote sermons and she was very interested in sermons and always commented on them. At the end of her life, she used to attend the Royal Hospital Chapel in Chelsea. And there was a chaplain there called Dick Whittington. One day he preached the story of Mary and Martha. And he came down on the side rather on the side of Mary, the quiet contemplative one, against Martha who was always very busy with her pots and pans.

“After the sermon and the service was over, Margaret approach Dick Whittington and said: ‘I think you rather underestimate the value of the Martha’s of this world who roll up their sleeves and get the job done.’”

Did he know Mrs Thatcher when she became difficult and eventually unwell with dementia? “She used to come around here for dinner and it was rather like having a lighthouse round for dinner. She had certain conversational defence mechanisms. She was asked by one guest beside her whether she wanted some gravy to which she replied: “I always say the most important thing in life is to have the courage of your convictions and to stick to them through thick and thin.” She was in many ways a more attractive person when she was vulnerable than when she was very powerful.

“After she fell in that dreadful coup in 1990, her health was okay for a bit – for four or five years – but she was very frustrated and I don’t think she had a happy day after she left power. There was trajectory from Grantham to grandeur and the dictum ‘all power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely’ seemed to apply. I don’t mean corrupt in the usual sense, but the decaying of some of her better qualities; the trajectory was an unhappy one. I hate to use the words, but she was her own worst enemy.

“I think after ten years in office she didn’t listen; she thought she knew it all, she could walk on water; she didn’t take into account the views of her Parliamentary colleagues. She had become presidential and she had also become a bully to colleagues, particularly Geoffrey Howe

Did she have a sense of humour? “No, not at all. She was strangely one-dimensional. Politics was really her only interest. She couldn’t sense, feel or understand a joke at all.

“But even in her declining years, there were still some attractive qualities. Three days after I left prison, the phone rang. And it was Denis Thatcher inviting me to join him for dinner. And both he and Margaret and Carole and Mark were extraordinarily kind to me. She hated the genocide in Bosnia and gave substantial sums to assist charities working there.”

And what the hangover in the popular press, that he remains the “disgraced politician” convicted of perjury who served prison time in 1999– even though it was only seven months?

It doesn’t bother him now at all, although it is a legacy he regrets. As he points out, most newspaper clippings bulge with the worst stories about the past. Yet he has climbed back up the mountain of public esteem and redeemed himself as a significant figure in the Christian community, an expert on prison reform and an author. He recently compiled a well-received report for the government on how the prison and probation could be better organised.

His Christian faith as an Anglo-Catholic brought up in Dublin has always been with him, although he admits it was sleeping for a time. ‘I was partly brought up by Catholic Nuns in Ireland because I had TB as a child and I was the British Ambassador’s grandson. One of the Sisters of Mercy taught me to read.

“I am hugely sympathetic to the Catholic faith. And we Anglo Catholics think of ourselves as very close to Catholicism. But the longer I live, I am less troubled by denominations. I love Catholic worship, the Catholic liturgy and could possibly say the Catholic Mass in Latin. But if was really to start arguing about transubstantiation and purgatory, I would disagree - but not fierce disagreement. I don’t see the point of leaving the faith I feel comfortable with and I think these denominational boundaries matter much less than one’s relationship with God.

Jonathan married again to Elizabeth, previously married to the famous actors Rex Harrison and Richard Harris who this July suffered an aneurism in her brain but who has survived high-risk surgery and against all predictions has survived.”

He smiles with relief. “She is still a little frail but her memory has not suffered at all and we were recently able to go to church together. I believe the power of prayer had a lot to do with her recovery.”

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