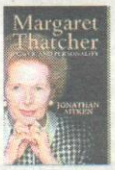
She spoke for me

An insider's view of the Thatcher years is partisan, personal and utterly gripping, says **Alwyn Turner**



Margaret Thatcher: Power and Personality
by Jonathan Aitken,

784PP, BLOOMSBURY, £23 (PLUS £1.35 P&P) 0844 871 1515 (RRP £25, EBOOK £14.62) ★★★★★

The year of Margaret Thatcher's death has been marked by the publication of a swathe of books, including those by Gillian Shephard, Robin Harris and Robin Renwick, as well as the first volume of Charles Moore's authorised biography. Is there room on the shelves for yet another one? There is when the new volume turns out to be Jonathan Aitken's *Margaret Thatcher: Power and Personality*.

Not so much a biography as a case study, this is the most readable, most entertaining book on Thatcher I've read, and probably the most illuminating. It's also one of the most personal and least political in tone, which might seem odd since its author is a former Conservative cabinet minister. But then Aitken was in a unique position for a Tory MP; his three-year relationship with Carol Thatcher meant he could contemplate the possibility of the Prime Minister one day becoming his mother-in-law. Drawing on his own diaries, as well as interviews with figures as diverse as Mikhail Gorbachev and Tim Bell, he manages to look at the big picture without losing sight of the individual.

The subtitle is aptly chosen. Aitken's fascination is with the exercise of power and with the psychology of leadership. His Thatcher is pure stateswoman, and he has little time for the mundane world of parochial politics. Episodes that loomed large during her premiership – the battles with the GLC, the Commonwealth and the Church of England, the industrial disputes at Warrington and Wapping – receive scant or no attention. He can't conceal his fury that she could have been brought down by something as trivial as the poll tax when there were issues of war in the Gulf, the future of Europe and the post-Cold War settlement to be resolved.

It's the foreign affairs that really matter in this version, and Aitken is acute on how much Thatcher relied on personal chemistry and flirtation. She clicks with Ronald Reagan, Gorbachev and François Mitterrand, but not with "the corpulent Kohl, the reptilian Giscard and the anaemic Carter."

The other key factor in her dealings with the world is her memory of the Second World War, most evident in the rhetoric of the Falklands War, but also shaping her approach to Europe. "She could not forget the shadows of Nazi Germany and Vichy France," says Aitken. "She had moved on, but not nearly as far as most British people who had been teenagers in the dark days of the Forties." Hence the "anti-German vitriol" she expressed in private.

Much of this, of course, is well-worn ground, though a central chapter on the Al Yamama Saudi arms deal is new and fascinating in its revelations about Denis Thatcher's role. But even when the tale is familiar, the storytelling makes it live again, particularly on the big set pieces: the no-confidence votes in 1979 and 1990 that bookended her premiership, the Brighton bomb and – particularly – Geoffrey Howe's resignation speech, the television pictures of which showed Aitken sitting behind Thatcher's assassin, mouth open in disbelief at what he was hearing.

Aitken is acute on Thatcher's reliance on flirtation and chemistry

Running through it all is the thread of Thatcher's personality as manifest in her dealings with her own colleagues. Here Aitken doesn't spare his criticism. Her famous invocation of the prayer attributed to St Francis of Assisi in 1979 was "an ill-judged lurch into uncharacteristic hypocrisy". She had no intention of bringing harmony instead of discord, nor was she capable of doing so. Her triumphs in the South Atlantic and at the 1983 election "brought hubris to her style of leadership"; she had "a cruel and capricious way of running a government"; her abrasive man-management was "her long-term Achilles' heel".

The consequence was that when she needed support in 1990, it was hard to find.

At this point, Aitken's impartiality disappears entirely. So too does some of his judgment. "The Tory Party spent over a decade in the political wilderness because the public could not forgive or forget the coup against Margaret Thatcher," he writes. Which is not entirely true.

It was the Conservative Party that failed to forgive or forget; the public had other concerns and were alienated by the infighting. Had she remained prime minister and lost the next general election, he adds, it "would have been a better departure for her". Well, possibly, but in political terms it would have left her work unfinished and put Neil Kinnock in Downing Street. From a Tory perspective, the victory of John Major in 1992 was her greatest legacy, ensuring the transformation of the Labour Party.

By that stage her bitterness was beginning to make Edward Heath look like a gracious loser. Perhaps the most damaging revelation in the book is the account of a 1991 dinner when she mocked Major as "the boy from Coldharbour Lane". As someone whose entire career had been a fight against the establishment, a sneer at the social background of her successor was unworthy of her, and almost unforgivable.

It was a long way from the wonderful vignette of a greengrocer from Ramsgate whom Aitken found dancing with joy after Thatcher's first conference speech as leader in 1975. "She spoke for me!" the man exulted. "She spoke for my customers!" What Alan Clark once called "a decade of motorcades" had damaged that link with her supporters.

"How well did anyone know her?" Aitken ruminates at one point. After reading this superb book, you'll feel you know her a little better.