

TITLE: BOOK REVIEW: The Iron Lady

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Book Reviews

The Iron Lady: A Biography of Margaret Thatcher.
By Hugo Young. The Noonday Press, Farrar,
Straus and Giroux, New York; 1990; 580 pp.

This model political biography is the best book on Margaret Thatcher to appear to date. It was published just before her defeat as prime minister, and it will therefore not be the last. For Anglophiles, students of political intelligence, current historians, or just plain biography buffs, this is a superb, detailed study of arguably the most famous British leader since Churchill. It is beautifully written, with great style and considerable humor.

The author, a veteran London political columnist, has had a wide range of contacts among leaders of the Conservative Party throughout the Thatcher years. Readers of current intelligence and followers of political developments affecting the US-UK "special relationship" will learn fascinating details of the Reagan-Thatcher *entente*, from their initial meeting in California in the 1960s through her visit to Washington for the first Reagan inaugural (she was the new President's first official guest) and beyond—well into her almost 12-year rule.

Lord Carrington, who accompanied Thatcher on her first visit to Washington and who later resigned as her foreign minister when the Falklands War erupted, told a friend that Thatcher had loved the trip and that it had "gone off very well indeed. She liked the Reagan people very much. They're so vulgar." The remark was described by Young as "not a serious evaluation but merely a demonstration of Carrington's incorrigible upper-class frivolity."

Students of intelligence on the Falklands War, described by Young as "a seminal event in the life of the Thatcher Administration," will be interested to learn that between January 1981 and April 1982 there was no meeting of the Defence Committee of the Cabinet to discuss the Falklands and that the Latin America Current Intelligence Group met 18 times between July 1981 and March 1982, when the Argentine invasion began, and did not once discuss the Falklands.

The Reagan administration's assistance contributed substantially to Thatcher's successful pursuit of

the war. Sir Nicholas Henderson, British ambassador to Washington at the time, later wrote: "It is difficult to exaggerate the difference that America's support made to the military outcome." The support included everything from the extensive use of transport aircraft to providing Sidewinder missiles and, according to Young, "most crucially, a measure of very close collaboration on signals and intelligence that was quite indispensable." No wonder, then, that Reagan was royally saluted on his subsequent visits to London and Windsor.

And yet, not long after the Falklands episode and all it meant to London-Washington relations, the Reagan White House had not told Whitehall about US plans to invade the British Commonwealth island of Grenada. Actually, Reagan later admitted to Young that the information was withheld on security grounds out of fear of a leak. Former Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill recounts in his autobiography that he raised the question of Thatcher's views of invasion plans when he was briefed by Reagan on the eve of the landings. He quoted Reagan as saying: "She doesn't know about it." From what O'Neill heard of Reagan's quick phone call to Thatcher, "it was obvious that she was enraged on being told after the fact." As she ripped through piles of telegrams on the invasion next day at 10 Downing Street, she told a cabinet secretary that she "simply could not understand" why she had not been taken into Reagan's trust; "Anglo-American relations will never be the same again." Her anger was described as "incandescent."

Young amply documents the degree to which Thatcher held the Foreign Office in great contempt, although there were a few ambassadors in whom she had confidence and from whom she occasionally sought advice or guidance. Nonetheless, the "despised" Foreign Office discovered Gorbachev in 1984 before anyone else in the Western world did. His first visit to a Western capital was to London, and Thatcher made her famous comment subsequently on the BBC: "I like Mr. Gorbachev. We can do business together."

Young makes the point repeatedly that Thatcher made a strong effort to know the government's

security and intelligence chiefs over her long tenure. For example, she formed a close and mutually admiring relationship with Sir Maurice Oldfield, head of MI6, from 1973 to 1979. She later acknowledged in response to a parliamentary question that Sir Maurice had been identified in an official investigation as a homosexual. Young notes that she maintained her interest in security and intelligence affairs throughout the years far more than many, if not most, of her predecessors.

In November 1979, shortly after becoming prime minister, she made the longest and most revealing statement any prime minister had ever offered to Parliament on a security matter when she confirmed that Anthony Blunt, the former Keeper of the Queen's Pictures, had admitted in 1964 to being a Soviet agent. Yet from 1985 to 1988, the *Spycatcher* affair epitomized the worst aspects of Thatcher's approach to government management in general and security matters in particular. She made an enormous effort to suppress Peter Wright's book of vengeful revelations on British security activities but failed in the courts to stop publication in Australia and the US. The *London Sunday Times* thus was able to publish long extracts without fear of prosecution. In 1983, she became involved in a serious labor flap when she banned labor unions from service in a government security agency, GCHQ, NSA's counterpart.

Young's handling of what he refers to as "the gender factor" in Thatcher's political career makes

for fascinating reading. He points out that there were highly contradictory aspects of her womanhood as it related to her rise to the top and how she handled herself when she got there. Young describes politics as a male world, and he emphasizes that Thatcher always prided herself in peace and war on her toughness. But she was not ashamed to weep on TV when talking about her father's loss of his town council job, or when commenting on British casualties in the Falklands.

The author suggests that gender was "incontestably a conscious part of Thatcher's personality as a political leader." In 1965, she told a political forum: "If you want something said, ask a man; if you want something done, ask a woman." At a 1969 party conference, quoting Sophocles, she said: "Once a woman is made equal to a man, she becomes his superior." Nonetheless, as Young observes, Thatcher frequently cited her role as a housewife when discussing the national economic problems she faced.

After her removal from party leadership in November 1990 following Michael Heseltine's unsuccessful challenge, Thatcher vacated 10 Downing Street for a rented flat in London. Her replacement, John Major, immediately reversed some of her pet policies. She will be missed by many, including her most astute biographer, Hugo Young.

John T. Kirby