

Bang!: A History of Britain in the 1980s

Review Number:

1491

Publish date:

Thursday, 10 October, 2013

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ISBN:

9781848871458

Price:

£25.00

Pages:

560pp.

Publisher:

Atlantic Books

Publisher url:

<http://atlantic-books.co.uk/book/Bang%21>

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

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A sure sign of the ageing process is when events that are part of your own memory start appearing in works of history. And so it is now the case with the 1980s; for one's students, 'Thatcher' is a person of whom they have no firsthand knowledge, just a figure whom many of their lecturers and supervisors are prone to paint as the devil incarnate. Similarly, many of those who attend football matches take the fact of all-seater stadia for granted; the events of Hillsborough that led to them is something to be watched on YouTube. How many of those that paid obscene amounts of money to see the Stone Roses reunion concerts in 2012 saw them originally? And so on. With the first decade of the 21st century having seen the comprehensive tilling of the ground of the 1970s in British history, it is perhaps no surprise that scholars have moved onto its sister decade.⁽¹⁾ As Graham Stewart – author of among other things an excellent volume of the official history of *The Times* – notes in his introduction, 'we are gaining distance and critical detachment from events and personalities that seemed remarkable even at the time' (p. 1).

In a strange quirk of fate, I was around a quarter of the way into this book when the news came over the wires of the death of Margaret Thatcher. Any book about Britain in the 1980s must inevitably revolve around the former Conservative Prime Minister, and Stewart on the whole agrees with Andrew Rawnsley's recent verdict that often there seems to be two Margaret Thatchers – a mythologized version that recourse to the historical record doesn't always support. The archetypal 'conviction politician' who nonetheless kept Saatchi & Saatchi – 'masters of style over substance' – as part of her intimate counsel: 'for an instinctive puritan, she enjoyed being feted by the colourful, even *louche* band of courtiers that constituted her image making team' (p. 30). She had 'considerable personal experience of patronising sexist attitudes', but never developed anything like an interest in feminism; correspondingly, her rise to becoming one of the most influential women in the world afforded little satisfaction to most feminists (p. 46). Furthermore, she did not

come to power aiming to sweep away all that had gone before; her 1979 election manifesto was 'remarkably similar to Edward Heath's statement of intent in 1970' – the difference perhaps being that Thatcher was determined to deliver on her promises (p. 48).

Stewart also concurs with Thatcher's first major biographer John Campbell that there was nothing inevitable about Thatcher's rise to the premiership; which, of course, for those who suffered under her reign, can give rise to plenty of what-might-have-beens: if Keith Joseph hadn't referred in public to 'human stock'; if Edward Du Cann could have been persuaded to stand; if Callaghan had called the election in the autumn of 1978. There was nothing inevitable about Thatcher's rise, and she also enjoyed much good fortune: her first years as party leader and Leader of the Opposition were fairly underwhelming, but as Stewart points out, 'the second half of the seventies ... was an excellent time to be in opposition' (p. 47). But it would be unfair to paint her rise to the Conservative leadership, and ultimately Number 10, as mere contingency: she was the only candidate unafraid to stand against Heath in 1975 while the supposed favourites either dithered or hung in the wings waiting for the second ballot.

The defining event of her premiership was the conflict over the Falkland Islands. In many respects the Falklands War was a bizarre conflict: as Ronald Reagan was moving towards promulgating a missile defence system that would involve space-based interceptor missiles, Britain found itself embroiled in a conflict 'whose origins owed more to the preoccupations of the nineteenth century ... in that it was about the ownership of territory' (p. 131). The weapons that both sides used were by and large still those of the Second World War; and newspapers were the most immediate means for the public to gain information about the conflict.⁽²⁾ Stewart calls it the 'last of the good-old fashioned wars'; a throwback to the days before humans became so good at killing each other that conflict now potentially involved the destruction of the entire planet. And ultimately, the conflict was a more close-run thing than popular memory allows. (Incidentally, it should also be noted that Stewart claims that reports of a ceasefire in the Falklands conflict began to emerge during the 1982 World Cup final (p. 166). This is highly unlikely, given that the ceasefire was signed on 14 June and the World Cup final took place on 11 July.⁽³⁾)

Although it undoubtedly played its part, victory in the Falklands War was not entirely responsible for Thatcher's re-election in 1983. Opinion polls suggest the tide had begun to turn at the start of 1982, with the unemployment rate still growing – but more slowly – and the economy beginning to turn around. That said, the Falklands transformed Thatcher from a unreliable quantity into the Tories' prime electoral asset. In contrast, opposition leader Michael Foot attracted large amounts of derision, with one *Times* columnist describing him as the sort of man 'unable to blow his nose in public without his trousers falling down' (p. 173). Meanwhile the novelty of the SDP had quickly worn off after its formation in the early 1980s – there was now no need for 'for the media to dispatch a camera team every time Shirley Williams stepped deftly from a railway carriage onto a station platform' (p. 174).

What of Thatcher's economic policies? Stewart is by no means a convert: 'whatever the promises of eventual salvation the early consequences of the new economic policy were appalling' (p. 59). Thatcher always maintained that unemployment would fall once inflation was halted. But even when the tide turned, 'the damage had already been done, particularly to the long term unemployed and the disfigured communities they inhabited' (p. 183). Fans of Thatcherism point to the fact that for several years the government was able to support a sizeable portion of the population on employment benefits and low incomes while actually cutting its budget deficit. Certainly the achievement is not to be sniffed at; as Stewart notes, she was able to draw on something that no prime minister was able to before or indeed since: the tax proceeds from North Sea oil.

Was it the case that Thatcher's claim to have turned the British economy around was 'really just a quick fix, achieved by squandering oil proceeds which would have better invested for the long term benefit of future generations' (p. 185)? The oil bubble did not last long, with production peaking in 1985 and the international price of oil collapsing in 1986, not to mention the Piper Alpha disaster of 1988. By 1992, 'the North Sea's income stood at half its 1985 level – £11.7 billion, yielding merely £2.2 billion in tax' (p. 192) It might be argued, however, that those who state Britain should have taken a long term view over North Sea oil with

regards to imposing an extraction cap *ala* Norway are endowed with the benefit of hindsight. Britain's finances in 1979 were precarious enough 'for the outgoing Labour and incoming Conservative governments to conclude that oil proceeds were a necessary lifeline for the present, rather than the future' (p. 195). And indeed, Stewart concludes that the UK could only have invested 'it wisely for the future by risking ruin in the meantime' (p. 196). Barring a Fogel-esque work of counterfactual history reconstructing Britain's economy in the 1980s without North Sea oil, the conclusion is a sensible one.

Stewart fails to mention anywhere what persuaded him to give his book the dreadful title *Bang!*, but one suspects it relates to the deregulation of the London Stock Exchange that came to be known as 'the Big Bang'. Prior to deregulation, the London Stock Exchange was primarily a place for British institutions to invest in British companies, which meant that it was seriously undercapitalised. The exchange operated upon an archaic system which shut out foreign competition, and of the \$200 million raised on the global securities market in 1985, only \$8 million was raised in London. An OFT case that the Labour government of the 1970s had raised finally came to the Restrictive Practises Court in 1984; and the exchange realised to its dismay that the Conservatives meant what they said about fighting restrictive practises. When Cecil Parkinson became Trade and Industry Secretary in 1983, he made a deal with the Stock Exchange chairman Nicholas Goodison that the OFT case would be dropped in return for the city getting a grace period of three years to implement what the OFT would have done in around nine months. The Big Bang thus occurred on 27 October 1986.

As with many aspects of the 1980s, the deregulation of the SE is open to differing interpretations. It can be argued that opening up the London market to competition saved it from becoming a provincial backwater in the financial world; and the 'Wimbledon' analogy was widely trumpeted – London thrived because it attracted the top players from all over the globe. The analogy was misleading though – 'the international tennis championships were at least owned by the All England Club, whereas the investment institutions that came to dominate the city retained their headquarters in New York, Geneva and Frankfurt' (p. 406). The foreign takeovers that were a consequence of the Big Bang were certainly not anticipated beforehand. The hope was that British merchant banks would take on foreign competition; instead they were taken over by them. To use one of many of Gordon Gekko's lines from the ubiquitous 1980s film *Wall Street* – Stewart predictably rolls out 'Greed, for the lack of a better word, is good' early on – the British firms 'weren't used to pissing in the tall weeds with the big dogs.' But for all the problems and unintended consequences that the Big Bang wrought, had it not taken place it is hard to see how the London Stock Exchange could have avoided becoming an irrelevance – 'marginalisation as the price for retaining the old ways would hardly have been in the domestic economy's wider interests' (p. 408).

The 1980s were also the decade that saw the decline – or the breaking of, depending on your viewpoint – of trade unionism. Ted Heath had fought and lost an election on the question of 'who governs?' in the 1970s; Thatcher was determined history would not repeat itself. The two major union confrontations – between the miners and the government during 1984–5 and between the print workers' union and Rupert Murdoch over the move of the latter's newspaper titles to a plant in Wapping in 1986 – both saw the unions soundly defeated. By the end of the decade a country that 'was internationally notorious for being strike-torn became, within a short period of time, a model of industrial peace' (p. 375). What were the reasons for this? The privatisation of previously nationalised industries which had been a hotbed of militancy was clearly a factor; as was a series of legislative measures which changed the way strikes could be organised. Doing away with an incomes policy also meant that ministers no longer needed to negotiate pay norms – or indeed anything policy related – with union leaders. Such was the change in the state of affairs that when EC president Jacques Delors' visited the TUC conference of 1988, he was given a standing ovation for a speech that proposed standardizing employment law across the European Union: an ovation from a movement 'that had until that point regarded the European project as capitalist dogma' (p. 379). One could interpret all of the above measures as part of a concerted policy by the Conservatives to destroy the trade unions; but Stewart ultimately makes no comment on the matter.

If the reader feels that I have concentrated on the fortunes of Thatcher and the Conservatives to the detriment of the other political parties, this is largely because Stewart does the same. This is not so much a reflection

of political prejudice as a testament to the minuscule impact the opposition parties had in Britain for much of the 1980s. The birth of the SDP is covered in some detail; but for all the fanfare that accompanied the breakaway of the Gang of Four, ‘the most discernible long-term consequence of the SDP’s brief life was that it bought about the demise of the Liberal Party after 129 years of independent existence’ (p. 427). In 1980 Jim Callaghan stepped down as Labour leader, and to avoid having to choose between Denis Healey and Tony Benn (who later slugged it out in a tremendously bitter contest over the deputy leadership) the party voted for compromise candidate Michael Foot, who promptly led Labour to its worst election result since 1934. Neil Kinnock took over from the hapless Foot with Roy Hattersley as his deputy – the ‘dream ticket’ as it was put at the time – but the faction within the party known as the Militant Tendency continued to cause problems, and although Labour added 20 seats to their tally at the 1987 general election, the Conservatives still retained a three-figure majority.

In 1989 Margaret Thatcher took to the platform at the Conservative Party conference to be greeted by chants of ‘ten more years!’ Little over 12 months later, she was out of office, removed not by the electorate, but by her own party. Popular memory associates the downfall of Thatcher with the community charge, the official name for what was more commonly referred to as the Poll Tax. The genesis for the tax rested on two fronts. In the mid 1980s, several Labour-controlled councils reacted to the government cap on rate rises by announcing they would set no rates at all, resulting in a farcical situation in Liverpool where the city council hired 30 taxis to dispatch 31,000 90-day redundancy notices to its staff. Eventually the councils were bought into line, but it had been a close-run thing; if the councils had held out longer, several inner cities might have descended into chaos. Despite *The Sun* raging against ‘loony left’ councils, the Labour vote in most of them was holding up. The government this started to look at taking – among other powers – taxation away from local authorities in the hope of making said Labour councils unelectable. The other impetus for the Poll Tax lay in Scotland; a mandatory rate evaluation in 1985 had seen outrage among Scots with regards to the new tax demands, and the Scottish Tories concluded a flat rate would be preferable to one linked to property value. If ‘the new system was good enough for Scotland, it was presumably good enough for England ... On 9 January 1986, the Cabinet approved in principle the poll tax’ (p. 438). The unpopularity inequity of the Poll Tax can be illustrated by the fact that, whereas under the old system the Duke of Westminster paid £10,255, under the poll tax he ‘would now be asked for £417, the same as his housekeeper and chauffeur’ (p. 422).

To use Lawrence Stone’s model of causation, if the poll tax was the precipitant, the trigger was Europe. Thatcher had not always been what we now call a Eurosceptic; having campaigned for Britain to remain in the EEC in the run-up to the 1975 referendum. However, her relations with her European partners were never great during her tenure: after 1985 her relationship with Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev was better than with any of her EC counterparts.⁽⁴⁾ But it was EC President Jacques Delors’ aforementioned speech to the TUC conference of 1988 that set in motion the train of events that saw the resignation of her Chancellor, the Deputy Prime Minister, and ultimately Thatcher herself. Responding to Delors’ TUC speech, Thatcher infamously remarked that ‘we have not successfully rolled back the frontiers of the State in Britain only to see them reimposed at a European level’ (p. 447). Her disagreements with her cabinet over the issue of the European Exchange Rate Mechanism saw Geoffrey Howe moved from Foreign Secretary to Leader of the House and led Nigel Lawson to resign as Chancellor in 1989.

It appeared the tide was also beginning to turn against the Conservatives in the country; the constituents of Eastbourne reacted to the murder of Ian Gow by the IRA by overturning a 17,000 Tory majority into one of 4,500 for the Liberal Democrats. Geoffrey Howe had considered resigning in 1989, but hadn’t gone through with it; in 1990 he delivered a resignation speech (made all the more effective the fact it was televised, cameras having been allowed into the Commons the previous year – a fact Stewart fails to mention) that proved to be the *coup de grace* for Thatcher – one of her oldest lieutenants was now publicly saying that ‘the time has come for others to consider their own response to the tragic conflict of loyalties which I myself have wrestled with for perhaps too long’ (p. 457). Michael Heseltine – who for years had been positioning himself as the heir apparent – announced he would stand against Thatcher in the annual leadership selection, which was usually a formality. Thatcher kept to her official schedule instead of campaigning – justifiably

she argued that if she hadn't convinced people with her record in office, there probably wasn't much hope in any case – finding out in Paris that the contest would need to be decided by a second ballot. Initially she announced she would fight on, but on her return to Downing Street, she discovered the true extent of the party's disaffection – the consensus was that she was now 'so badly wounded that it would be better to finish her off than let her limp on' (p. 459). And so she resigned on November 22, 1990.

What does Stewart see as the legacy of the 1980s? A compare and contrast exercise between Britain in 1979 and 1990 reveals the changes wrought by the decade. The issues filling newspaper columns at the end of the 1970s were by and large the same ones present at the start of it: rapidly rising prices; strikes and their resolution, with pronouncements by trade union leaders being as least as important as those of the government; the two sides in the Cold War facing each other across a divided Germany (p. 460). Some elements of the 1970s were still prevalent at the start of the 1990s: unemployment was still a concern, and the IRA terror campaign showed little sign of slowing down. But there was much that had changed. The transformation of the 1980s, 'judged by this admittedly crude method, seems not only more profound than that which was wrought during the seventies, but also more primary in nature than the breaks in continuity ... between Britain in the respective summers of 1991 and 2001' (p. 461).

What changed in Britain in the 1980s? As we noted earlier, the prominent position enjoyed by the unions in the 1970s had disappeared at the turn of the 1990s. Interventionist economic measures were largely jettisoned during the 1980s; the question of whether Britain should have a market or a socialist economy was permanently settled: by the end of the decade Labour had given up on the idea of renationalising British Telecom or British Airways. This naturally leads to the question of whether a more interventionist economic policy might have saved British manufacturing, which all but collapsed in the 1980s. Stewart argues 'it should not be presumed that British industrial decline would have been reversible if capital movement had continued to be restricted and government had remained interventionist', using the example of the similar decline of French manufacturing, which took place under a socialist government (p. 465). Furthermore, Stewart puts it that had the Thatcherite policies introduced by the mid 1980s been available earlier in the decade, they would have bought down inflation and therefore the tough interest rate squeeze of 1980–1 would not have been necessary.

Stewart also argues that it is a myth that the eighties saw the end of the 'post-war consensus.' Some of it was dismantled: nationalised industries, a commitment to full employment and a corporatist partnership with the trade unions all fell by the wayside. But Thatcher was more of a disciple of Attlee and Bevin's foreign policy than Michael Foot or Neil Kinnock were; despite constant criticism of her attitude towards the NHS, government spending on health increased by over one third above inflation, and no major reforms were introduced during her premiership. In a famous exchange with Hugo Young, Thatcher bridled at the suggestion she had moved away from 1950s conservatism, arguing that in her view Britain had started to go downhill in the late 1960s, a process which had continued throughout the 1970s.

Nonetheless, Stewart does not gloss over the fact the 1980s were not all coffee and roses. Some of the worst picket line violence in the country's history was witnessed at Orgreave and Wapping; football hooligans saw English clubs banned from European competition for the rest of the decade, while the increasing tendency to treat football fans like cattle lead inexorably to the Hillsborough disaster; inner-city riots in 1981 saw the government consider partially evacuating Liverpool (revealed in Cabinet papers post-dating Stewart's book); the troubles in Northern Ireland claimed 853 lives without bringing the conflict much closer to a conclusion; the decade saw the outbreak of AIDS, and heroin use rose dramatically (despite the best efforts of *Grange Hill*). The 1980s saw the death of the idea of 'a job for life' (with the exception of a few protected areas in the public sector), which 'made for anxious times and searing hardship, especially among those with few skills or with a specialism that was not easily transferable' (p. 470).

As Hugh Trevor-Roper once put it, history is what happened in the context of what might have happened. We talked earlier of some of the what-ifs – the point about counterfactuals is that they remind us nothing is inevitable, and certainly the turn that events took over the course of the 1980s were not pre-ordained in any way. The Falklands War was an extremely close-run thing; a British reverse in the conflict would have put

Thatcher under enormous pressure (though the case that the nation could ever have been persuaded to vote for Foot remains to be made). If the IRA bomb at the Grand Hotel in Brighton had been placed differently, who would the next occupant of Number Ten have been? If Arthur Scargill 'had chosen his timing better, alienated fewer potential allies (and other miners) and known when to make a small compromise in order to gain the substance of his demands, then the miners would have won their strike' and trade union power would have remained alive and well (p. 472). If Dennis Healey had won the 1980 Labour leadership election instead of Michael Foot, he certainly would have been a tougher first term opponent.

Inevitably Stewart's book will be compared to Dominic Sandbrook's tomes on the 1960s and 1970s. One area where Stewart's work isn't quite up to Sandbrook's is in the latter's ability to weave in a cultural exemplar to underline a point in a political chapter; or vice versa. One can't help feel that for instance, Sandbrook would have underlined the impact of acid house upon mainstream culture by citing the episode of *Brookside* where Jimmy Corkhill ended up dropping E at a rave; or mentioned the parody of the Protect and Survive manual in *The Young Ones*. Ultimately there isn't quite as much depth to Stewart's work as there is to Sandbrook's; and the former doesn't quite possess the verve in his writing style of the latter.

There are several omissions, particularly with regards to culture; no mention of *The Young Ones*, undoubtedly one of the defining comedies of the 1980s; and no mention of the fact the first series of *The Blackadder* was fantastically dire, and it was the addition of Ben Elton to the writing team that transformed it into a classic. I also find it odd that *Auf Wiedersehen Pet* – a quintessential program of the Thatcher era based around unemployed builders from England being forced to look for work in Germany – is ignored. There is also no mention of one of the decade's most iconic television storylines, Zammo's descent into heroin addiction in *Grange Hill*; or the Davis vs. Taylor snooker final from 1985 that drew a record post-midnight audience of 18.5 million viewers. With regards to music: no mention of C86; the section on The Smiths fails to mention that in the high court royalties case the judge called Morrissey 'devious, truculent and unreliable'. I can also testify that no-one ever said 'Welcome to the Acid House'; I suspect the phrase Stewart wanted was 'Welcome to the Jackin' Zone', which *was* prevalent at the time.⁽⁵⁾ If one is going to talk about the emergence of acid house, one should surely make a mention of a style of music known as 'bleep', which was the first real British twist on acid house.⁽⁶⁾

The above might be regarded as ephemeral; more serious perhaps is the lack of space Stewart devotes to the topic of football hooliganism. Also missing is at least a cursory discussion of the Westland affair. One can understand why Stewart chose to address it only with a paragraph, as it doesn't easily fit into his taxonomic schema for the book. Nonetheless – as bizarre as it might seem in hindsight – the closest Thatcher came to having to resign during her premiership was due to a dispute over the ownership of a West Country helicopter company. And the undergraduate student reading this book will be left clueless as to why many of his/her lecturers regard Thatcher as the devil incarnate: nothing about her reforms of higher education is mentioned in *Bang!*, perhaps the book's biggest oversight.

Ultimately your view of Stewart's book will depend on which side of the political spectrum you stand on. Thatcher was an incredibly divisive Prime Minister, something which the divergent reactions to her death illustrated. Those on the right will regard her as a heroic figure that dragged Britain kicking and screaming into the modern age; those on the left will not have much time for Stewart's arguments that British manufacturing would probably have declined anyway.⁽⁷⁾ Stewart has made a solid attempt at providing a balanced appraisal of the 1980s; but it will be a long time before passions have cooled enough to start examining the period with anything like scholarly detachment.

Notes

1. See for instance, Dominic Sandbrook, *State of Emergency: Britain 1970–74* (London, 2011)/ *Seasons in the Sun: The Battle for Britain 1974–79* (London, 2012). Andy Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out: Britain in the Seventies* (London, 2010) Alwyn W. Turner, *Crisis? What Crisis? Britain in the Seventies* (London, 2009). [Back to \(1\)](#)

2. Although ironically, as one military historian later wrote on the conflict, while the Royal Navy was, after a fashion, 'prepared to fight World War 3, it simply was not equipped for the WW2-style, low level bombing attacks' that it faced around San Carlos Bay (p. 189).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Indeed, Simon Kuper has claimed one of the reasons the ceasefire was signed was that otherwise Argentina would have had to miss the tournament. See Simon Kuper, *Football Against the Enemy*, (London, 1994), p. 180.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. As she infamously reminded the French at the bicentennial of the French revolution in 1989, Britain had gained many of the same rights over a 100 years earlier in a revolution that didn't involve the guillotine.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Perhaps explained by the absence of either Wayne Anthony's *Class of 88: The True Acid House Experience* (London, 1998) or Matthew Collin's *Altered State: The Story of Ecstasy Culture and Acid House* (London, 2009).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. See <<http://energyflashbysimonreynolds.blogspot.co.uk/2008/04/bleep-20-fact-februarymarch-2008-by.html> [2]> [accessed 8 May 2013].[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Take for instance, Owen Jones, who writes that during the 1980s the working class were stripped of their power, belittled and scapegoated. See Owen Jones, *Chavs* (London, 2011), p. 10.[Back to \(7\)](#)

Other reviews:

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