

Margaret Thatcher: The Authorized Biography, Volume One: Not For Turning

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Not For Turning is the first of two projected volumes in the authorized biography of Margaret Thatcher. Covering the period from her childhood in Grantham to the Falklands War of 1982, it offers the most comprehensive account yet published of Thatcher's early life. Compellingly written, exhaustively researched and impressively fair-minded, it propels its author, Charles Moore, to the front rank of political biographers. *Not For Turning* is essential reading, not only for students of Thatcherism but for anyone with an interest in modern political history.

Despite her magnetic attraction for the genre, Thatcher is not a straightforward subject for the biographer. Unlike the great majority of political leaders, Moore notes, she 'did not think autobiographically'. She cheerfully threw away old letters and files, and only when she became leader in 1975 did the Conservative Party begin archiving her correspondence. She viewed her diary strictly as a list of engagements; not, as for Gladstone, as a private confessional or a hotline to posterity. Under pressure from journalists, she disinterred a handful of 'small-town stories and paternal precepts' from her childhood in Grantham, but 'she did so in order to advance her cause, not in any spirit of autobiographical inquiry'. Her memoirs were largely written by others, for even in retirement Thatcher 'hardly ever sat down to reflect upon the past'. This 'was a life with no space for self-examination' (pp. xi–xii).

If Thatcher had little taste for reminiscence, it was partly because her childhood was not an especially happy one.⁽¹⁾ She was born in Grantham in 1925, the second child of Alfred and Beatrice Roberts, and grew up over her father's grocery shop. It was a household dominated by hard work and duty; as Margaret later

recalled, 'I always got the books I wanted. But no pleasures'.⁽²⁾ Beatrice, according to her elder daughter, was 'a bigoted Methodist' who simply 'didn't exist in Margaret's mind' (p. 9), and even the sainted Alfred had a troubled relationship with his famous offspring. Margaret forgot his birthdays, grumbled at having him around the house, and there is some uncertainty over whether she attended his funeral.⁽³⁾ The later 'Grantham myth' was precisely that; when she took a peerage in 1992, as Baroness Thatcher of Kesteven, she took her title from the old administrative district in which her home town lay (which also gave its name to her old school), and not from the town itself.

Nonetheless, the lessons and precepts absorbed at Grantham would shape Thatcher's career. 'We were Methodist', she later recalled, 'and Methodist means method'. Her father's sermons, dutifully recorded in his daughter's exercise book, thrilled with proto-Thatcherite principles: 'There is no promise of ease for the faithful servant of the Cross'; 'God wants no faint hearts for His ambassadors'; 'We must avoid the principle of a Denominational Closed Shop' (p. 7).

All this undoubtedly left its mark on Thatcher, both in her tendency to sermonise and in her extraordinary appetite for work. Yet one of the real surprises of Moore's book is the discovery of a very different side to her character, which no previous biographer had really captured. The young Margaret who emerges from these pages is passionate, romantic and even hedonistic; someone who loved dancing, adored dressing up and was captivated by the glamorous world of Hollywood. When she went up to Oxford, in 1943, her letters home described a whirl of parties, dinners and sensational outfits. New costumes are described in minute detail, and their effect on her audience recorded with diva-ish glee. When Margaret's first boyfriend, Tony Bray, gave her a carnation, she carried it to a friend's house and watched anxiously as it was placed in a vase with water and aspirin. It was the first of many romantic conquests, giddily related in secret letters to her sister.

Thatcher was, nonetheless, often lonely: first at Oxford and then at Colchester, where she gained her first job as a research chemist. Salvation came from the Conservative Party, which at its high point in the 1950s claimed more than two million members. Moore captures superbly the social world of post-war Conservatism, which served its members as a dining club, social network and even dating agency. Like so many others, Thatcher met her husband through the Conservative Party, as well as undergoing a political training of a kind her successors could barely imagine. Thatcher's apprenticeship was served, not in the Conservative Research Department or as a special advisor at Westminster, but on a soap box in Colchester, where she warmed up the crowd each weekend for the Conservative candidate 'Cub' Alport. There she learned to speak off the cuff and to deal with hecklers, while conceiving a dislike for Alport so powerful that he would later resign from the party during her leadership. Above all, she formed an emotional attachment to her party – and to 'her people' in the Tory grass-roots – to which neither David Cameron nor Ted Heath could ever lay claim.

As a woman from the provincial 'shopocracy', Thatcher was always closer to the party membership than to the masculine elite that dominated the upper reaches of the party. She had not attended public school. She had not been captain of cricket or 'victor ludorum', and knew nothing of the homoerotic culture of the male boarding house. She did not, like Jack Straw, spend her first day at secondary school learning that 'rubbing up' had nothing to do with furniture polish.⁽⁴⁾ Nor would she have remembered Kesteven Grammar, as John Nott described his own alma mater, as a place of 'muscular Christianity', 'cold baths' and 'homosexual activity'.⁽⁵⁾ She had not fought in the Second World War or done National Service in the Empire. She held no military rank and knew nothing of the military codes and conventions that governed organisations like the whips' office. For Geoffrey Howe, who had served with the British Army in Kenya and Uganda, it was second nature 'that you don't rebuke officers in front of other ranks' (p. 353); yet this was a world to which Thatcher had simply never been exposed. Nor had she received the capacious sexual education on offer in the armed forces. When Nott first joined the British Army, soldiers were given a haircut, a uniform and 'a prophylactic kit of condoms'. 'Sex', he recalled wistfully, was 'virtually the only topic of conversation'; hardly surprising, when 'the most beautiful young German girls were available for a packet of five Woodbines'.⁽⁶⁾ It was no coincidence that the moral reform movements of the 1970s, such as Mary Whitehouse's campaign to clean up national television, were staffed chiefly by women, or that the men in

Thatcher's cabinet were less prone than she to talk of traditional moral values.

The roles and characteristics thought appropriate to women were, of course, changing markedly over the course of Thatcher's career. She was born three years before the coming of universal female suffrage, and came up to Oxford at a time when all but a handful of colleges were closed to women. As a female undergraduate, she was automatically barred from the Oxford Union debating society. Her first employer, BX Plastics, paid her £50 a year less than the men around her, and her search for a constituency in the 1950s ran up against a constant tide of bigotry and condescension – what she herself labelled the 'what a pity such a charming girl ... such an unnatural life, should have stayed at home' mentality (p. 79). Running for the Conservative nomination at Finchley, she predicted wearily that 'the usual prejudice against women will prevail and that I shall probably come the inevitable "close second"' (p. 134). (She may have been right – the chairman later claimed to have fiddled the votes to secure her the seat). Yet her rise to the party leadership in the 1970s coincided with the emergence of second wave feminism, and even *Spare Rib* cautiously welcomed Thatcher's election.

Thatcher herself disliked being pigeon-holed as a 'woman MP'. When invited to deliver the annual Conservative Political Centre lecture in 1968, she ignored her leader's suggestion that she speak on 'Women in politics' and delivered instead a wide-ranging address on the state of modern government. (Women, she noted dryly, had 'been around since Eve' (p. 192)). Visiting the United States in 1969, she insisted on being listed as 'Mrs Margaret Thatcher', not 'Mrs D. Thatcher' – 'although', as a baffled official reported, 'she is not a widow' (p. 201). In what it clearly imagined was a compliment, *The Finchley Press* likened her performance in a speech on foreign policy to 'a housewife measuring the ingredients in a familiar recipe' (p. 136), and her clothes, hair and views on parenting were all considered legitimate matters of interest.

The very existence of such a woman seems to have deprived some men of their faculties. One businessman asked that his notes be placed under her pillow, while Kingsley Amis wrote rapturously of her 'sexual beauty'. Alan Clark, whose appetites in this direction apparently knew no bounds, told Moore that 'I don't want actual penetration – just a massive snog' (p. 436). This must all have been rather tiresome; but Thatcher learned first to manage the problem and then to use it to her advantage. Her remarkable capacity for the double-entendre – she famously claimed to be 'always on the job', and once told a finance debate that she had 'got a really red-hot figure' (p. 161) – provided ample scope for a form of sexual badinage that had never really suited Ted Heath. Her capacity to switch between the flirtatious and the ferocious regularly disoriented opponents, both in Cabinet and in her dealings with the press.

Thatcher was openly contemptuous of feminism, deploring its critique of marriage and the traditional family. But she was equally dismissive of women whose horizons expanded no further than the home. After a dinner party with Willie Cullen (an early boyfriend, whom she subsequently married off to her sister), she dismissed the women present as 'typical wives – they know of domestic matters and nothing else'. 'I stayed with the men after supper' (p. 90). Indeed, one of Thatcher's great political assets was her ability to bridge the domestic and the political, using conventional images of womanhood to establish her own political authority. As early as 1949, she told an adoption meeting that 'The Government should do what any good housewife would do if money was short – look at their accounts and see what was wrong' (p. 81). Mocking 'the high language of economists and Cabinet ministers', she urged women to 'think of politics at our own household level' (p. 87), translating Conservative economics into the commonsense of good housekeeping. When a Labour minister attempted to interrupt her, during a debate on household taxes in 1966, he was firmly rebuked. 'The right honourable Gentleman', she growled, 'is not so good on clothes washing and dish washing machines as I am, so he had better sit down'. 'I am terrified', the minister stuttered. 'I was only about to make a simple point...' (p. 182).

Thatcher's political positions, in these years, were founded on gut instincts rather than philosophical preoccupations, though she would later find support for them in the writings of Friedman, Hayek and Popper. She was staunchly inegalitarian, convinced that 'Nations depend for their health ... upon the achievements of a comparatively small number of talented and determined people' (p. 465). The 'greatest advances of the ordinary person', she believed, were 'the products of the achievements of the extraordinary

person' (p. 334). Government, therefore, should always be on the side of the great individual: 'the person who is prepared to work hardest should get the greatest rewards and keep them after tax' (p. 294).

Thatcher was not, however, an individualist in an atomistic sense. She believed in the family as the bedrock of civil society, and in the peculiar destiny of the British nation across the world. She was an enthusiast for the empire – which she insisted in 1945 'must never be liquidated' (p. 53) – and her early speeches identified 'Imperial Preference', rather than free trade, as 'the cornerstone of Conservatism' (p. 80). Yet she seemed little troubled by the dissolution of the empire, seeing it as further evidence of the greatness of Britain's imperial conception. The British, she boasted, had been 'the first imperial country voluntarily to give up sovereignty ... There's been nothing like it in history'. The story of Empire had been a 'marvellous' thing, which had made Britain 'one of the greatest, most fervent advocates of democracy ... of any country in the world'. In Thatcher's view, what had made Britain strong was not its natural resources or its exploitation of colonial populations, but the peculiarly English values of 'fairness', 'equity', 'individuality' and 'initiative'. 'How else did this really rather small people, from the times of Elizabeth on, go out in the larger world and have such an influence on it?' (7)

It followed that, in order to restore British greatness, 'we must firstly *believe* in the Western way of life' (p. 112). That conviction was fundamental to Thatcher's career, explaining both her hatred of socialism, which she saw as morally corrosive as well as economically flawed, and her horror of inflation. It also made her suspicious of consensus. Thatcher understood the necessity of compromise, but she disapproved of those who made compromise an objective in its own right. Politics, for Thatcher, was a moral arena, and compromise smacked of appeasement. 'The Old Testament prophets didn't go out into the highways saying, "Brothers, I want consensus". They said, "This is my faith and my vision!"' (p. 408).

In all these respects, Thatcher's sympathies were somewhat to the right of the Conservative leadership in the post-war years. She liked and admired Enoch Powell, and continued to associate with him even after his notorious 'Rivers of Blood' speech in 1968. Yet Thatcher was also a party loyalist, in a way that was never true of Powell. She only once defied the party whip in more than thirty years as an MP –her solitary act of rebellion coming not on an economic question or on the expansion of the state, but on a vote to restore corporal punishment for young offenders. She would defend her party's record on the most unpromising of subjects, insisting that Neville Chamberlain was owed 'a great debt of gratitude' (p. 19) for his handling of Nazi Germany and that Anthony Eden had been 'let down by others' during the Suez crisis (p. 130).

Nor did she accept the charge of betrayal later pinned upon the post-war governments of the 1950s. On the contrary, Moore observes, she seems to have emerged from the war years with 'a fairly strong belief in the capacity of Whitehall men and ideas to run the country' (p. 51). She claimed credit, on behalf of the Conservative Party, for both the founding of the National Health Service and the welfare state, and insisted that it 'was the Tories who introduced the finest food-rationing system during the war' (p. 87).⁽⁸⁾ As Education Secretary from 1970 to 1974, she largely followed the orthodoxy of her department, promoting higher pay for teachers and doing little to obstruct the trend to comprehensive education. In public she even applauded the spread of progressive educational methods, though privately she thought it 'all rag dolls and rolling on the floor' (p. 227).

'Until February 1974', Moore argues, Thatcher's 'career had been mentally conformist' (p. 253). How, then, did this rather unimaginative party loyalist become the radical leader who gave her name to an ideology? For Moore, the answer lies in the failure of the post-war settlement to deliver the things that Thatcher demanded of it. With inflation rising, public expenditure escalating and the authority of the state coming increasingly into question, Thatcher concluded that the old gods had failed. As she broadened her reading under the influence of Keith Joseph, she found in thinkers like Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek the intellectual tools with which to challenge the post-war settlement. Yet this, Moore argues, was a pragmatic accommodation to experience, rather than the implementation of an explicitly ideological programme. When Thatcher 'came to overturn the post-war economic consensus', he concludes, 'she did so because she believed it had failed, not because she had never believed in it in the first place' (p. 170).

There are two possible objections to this approach. The first is that it endorses a specifically Thatcherite reading of the 1970s, in which the failure of the post-war settlement produced Thatcherism as its natural – and inevitable – corrective. This is a view with which Moore is clearly sympathetic, and in these chapters alone, the strict impartiality of the text slips a little.⁽⁹⁾ The second objection is that it suggests a binary choice: between ‘Thatcherism’, on the one hand, and the continuation of ‘consensus politics’ on the other. Yet the ‘monetarist’ agenda of the New Right was only one of a dizzying array of new political strategies on offer, as governments grappled with problems that had been largely dormant in recent decades. Tony Benn, Michael Foot and Arthur Scargill were, in this respect, as much critics of ‘the post-war consensus’ as Mrs Thatcher; and their prescriptions arguably lay further outside the political mainstream. The question, then, is not simply why Thatcher lost faith in Keynesian social democracy, but why she was drawn to the policies of neo-liberalism rather than to the many other options under discussion on the Right.

The answer, as Moore shows, lies in the overlap between the technical prescriptions of monetarism and the moral values that drove Thatcher’s politics. Though she enjoyed debating the finer details of monetary control, her attachment to neo-liberalism was always instrumental. The attraction of monetarism was that it appeared to reward hard work, encourage thrift, and tame the redistributive consequences of inflation. This *moral* case for monetarism not only drew Thatcher to the policies of the New Right; it also gave her an extraordinary resilience in the face of adverse economic data. In a remarkable exchange in 1980, when the pressure to change course was most severe, Thatcher rebuked an interviewer for assessing her policies in purely economic terms. ‘If we had ever looked at Dunkirk as a kind of balance sheet, as sometimes I am asked to look economically at this country, well I don’t think we would have gone on at that time. If you looked at it as a matter of the spirit of the people then it is totally different’ (p. 529).

In this respect, ‘Thatcherism’ was never, at root, a policy programme. Rather, as Moore notes, it was ‘a disposition of mind and character embodied in a highly unusual woman’ (p. 536). The task of translating these dispositions into policy fell chiefly to others, and especially to Geoffrey Howe. Relations between Howe and Thatcher were always strained; he had stood against her in the leadership election in 1975, and his cautious, lawyerly style – reminiscent of a sheep engaged in philosophical contemplation – sorely tested Thatcher’s patience. Yet it was Howe, together with Nigel Lawson, who devised the economic policies of the first term and who carried them through against the instinctive caution of the prime minister. The abolition of exchange controls, the drastic cuts in income tax, the near-doubling of VAT and the Medium Term Financial Strategy were all pushed through against a backdrop of scepticism and anxiety from Number Ten.

As Moore cheerfully acknowledges, Thatcher was in some ways remarkably ill-prepared for the challenges of the premiership. As a minister, she had never risen higher than the Department of Education, and civil servants were surprised to discover that ‘she wasn’t terribly well briefed on the macroeconomic problems’ (p. 456). Her instincts on foreign affairs were simplistic and tinged with xenophobia. She distrusted the Germans, disliked the French and found European Commissioners ‘tiresomely foreign’ (p. 488). She was also suspicious of black nationalism, though more because she suspected it of Marxism than from any racial prejudice. Her first Foreign Secretary, Lord Carrington, joked that she ‘hardly knew where Calais was’, while Jonathan Aitken suggested that she thought ‘Sinai’ was ‘the plural of sinus’ (p. 365). Nor did she have much idea how to manage a Cabinet or run a private office. Even admirers complained of her reluctance to think strategically, and John Hoskyns told her openly that she lacked ‘management competence’ (p. 641).

How, then, did she survive in office for so long? Three particular strengths emerge from Moore’s account. In the first instance, she was persistently underestimated by those around her. Whether from sexism, class prejudice or sheer myopia, opponents routinely underestimated both her formidable abilities and her tenacity of purpose. Just as Heath had failed to take her seriously as a rival, the Tory ‘Wets’ seem to have regarded her as an accident of history, whose curious ideas would dissolve in the collision with reality. Thatcherism, it followed, was to be endured, rather than challenged. This was an analysis shared by the SDP leadership, which was more interested in displacing Labour as the government-in-waiting than in challenging the party that was actually in power. As David Owen later acknowledged, SDP strategists were already ‘looking ahead

to the next bit. They assumed that they would come through the middle when Thatcherism failed' (p. 549).

Secondly, Thatcher had a fixity of purpose that allowed her ministers to see through controversial policies. Towards the end of 1980, a particularly testing time for the government, Geoffrey Howe identified 'the Thatcher factor' as one of the few assets of the administration. 'People do have a sense that this Government – more particularly you ... is possessed of a tenacity, which might just work, if only it's sustained' (pp. 535–6). Once Thatcher was persuaded of a particular policy – a process that could take considerable time and energy – she could usually be relied upon to stick to it, whatever the deterioration in the polls or the short-term economic data. This not only won the loyalty of key ministers; it also made her the focus of attention within the government for those who wanted to achieve fundamental reforms.

Thirdly, Thatcher was more willing to take advice and even to change her mind than her public reputation would suggest. On Rhodesia, for example, she backed the multi-racial settlement favoured by the Foreign Office in spite of her distaste for Robert Mugabe. At least until the final years of her premiership, she rarely allowed her prejudices to overrule her caution. Here, as in other respects, the Thatcher that emerges from these pages is more cautious, more pragmatic and even more willing to give way than is commonly believed. She is also more human, someone who found the pressures of high office often hard to bear. There are tears and eruptions throughout these chapters, and even in the early years Thatcher seems to have been drinking more than was healthy.

These strengths and weaknesses came together in the Falklands War – the decisive test of her first term, and the moment, for Moore, when Thatcher 'reached her zenith' (p. xvi). Like many of Thatcher's ministers, he doubts whether the decision to retake the Islands would have been made by a male prime minister, or one who had experienced the horrors and uncertainties of war. This is not to say that she was callous – she wrote personally to the families of all those who were killed, and wept bitterly for the loss of 'my young men' (p. 735) – but that she was less conscious of the risks of failure. She was, however, acutely aware of her lack of military experience, which made her more willing than in other fields to defer to her generals on the conduct of the war. She also came closer to compromise than had previously been believed. As Moore demonstrates, Thatcher was willing to make concessions that would have appalled many of her supporters. Under pressure from the United States, she reluctantly accepted a Peruvian peace plan that would probably have ended British sovereignty and that certainly compromised the right of the Islanders to decide their own destiny. Not for the last time, it was the intransigence of an opponent that compelled Thatcher to play for total victory.

Success in the Falklands marked Thatcher's apotheosis. It settled the question of whether a woman could lead her country in time of war, and gave her government a triumph of the kind that had been singularly lacking in domestic policy. It entrenched Thatcher's reputation as a popular patriot, and gave her a global reputation to which few British premiers can aspire. Ominously, it also deepened her confidence in a certain model of leadership, establishing what Moore himself calls 'the dangerous idea that she acted best when she acted alone' (p. 753). From 1982, Thatcher was far more prone to trust her instincts against the judgement of her Cabinet. As so often, the seeds of defeat were sown in victory.

To celebrate the Argentine surrender, Thatcher gave a dinner at Downing Street for the Lord Mayor and 120 of those who had been involved in the Falklands campaign. Spouses were not invited, though there was to be a reception for them after the dinner; which meant that Mrs Thatcher was the only woman in the hundred strong gathering. After a speech hailing 'the spirit of the Falklands' – 'the spirit of Britain which throughout history has never failed us in difficult days' – Thatcher pushed back her chair and smiled. 'Gentlemen', she asked; 'shall we join the ladies?' In the words of one of her ministers, Thatcher was now very definitely 'one of the boys'. As Moore wryly concludes, 'It may well have been the happiest moment of her life' (p. 758).

Notes

1. Margaret married Denis Thatcher in December 1951, but I use her married name throughout this review. [Back to \(1\)](#)

2. Interview for *Sunday Telegraph*, 23 October 1969.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Moore concludes persuasively that she did, but that she left Grantham before the cremation (pp. 206–7).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. J. Straw, *Last Man Standing: Memoirs of a Political Survivor* (Basingstoke, 2012), p. 42.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. J. Nott, *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow: Recollections of an Errant Politician* (London, 2002), p. 32. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Nott, *Here Today*, pp. 33–7.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. *Newsweek*, 22 April 1992.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Strikingly, Thatcher seems to have regarded the wartime government as a Conservative one to which Labour lent its support, rather than as a coalition of the kind she would oppose in the 1970s.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. For example: ‘these humiliations proved the Conservatives right’ (p. 337); ‘it was a revulsion against selfishness ... which brought Mrs Thatcher into office’ (p. 399); ‘Events were proving [Howe] right that ... “There is no alternative”’ (p. 480).[Back to \(9\)](#)

Other reviews:

Guardian

<https://www.google.co.uk/url> [2]

Independent

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Telegraph

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Scotsman

<http://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/books/book-review-margaret-thatcher-the-authorized-biography-volume-one-not-for-turning-1-2925999> [5]

Spectator

<https://www.google.co.uk/url> [6]

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[4]

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[5] <http://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/books/book-review-margaret-thatcher-the-authorized-biography-volume-one-not-for-turning-1-2925999>

[6]

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[7] <http://www.cercles.com/review/r67/Moore.html>

[8] <http://www.sehepunkte.de/2014/01/23437.html>