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**Lloyd-George: The Goat in the Wilderness**

John Campbell

London, Jonathan Cape, 1977, ISBN: 9780224012966; 456pp.; Price: £18.99

**F. E. Smith: The First Earl of Birkenhead**

John Campbell

London, Jonathan Cape, 1983, ISBN: 9780224015967; 918pp.; Price: £64.99

**Nye Bevan and the Mirage of British Socialism**

John Campbell

London, Weidenfield and Nicholson, 1987, ISBN: 9780297789987; 430pp.; Price: £19.99

**Edward Heath: A Biography**

John Campbell

London, Jonathan Cape, 1993, ISBN: 9780224024822; 876pp.; Price: £15.00

**Margaret Thatcher: Volume One – The Grocer's Daughter**

John Campbell

London, Jonathan Cape, 2000, ISBN: 9780224040976; 528pp.; Price: £25.00

**Margaret Thatcher: Volume Two – The Iron Lady**

John Campbell

London, Jonathan Cape, 2003, ISBN: 9780099516774; 928pp.; Price: £25.00

Biography has always been as something of the black sheep of historical writing; we cannot do without it, yet it always looked down upon, particularly by those in the profession that are committed to more high-flown subjects and methods of analysis. Yet there can be no doubt that John Campbell has made a serious contribution to British political history through his biographical studies. His subjects range over most of the 20th century; from Lloyd-George and F. E. Smith through to Ted Heath and Margaret Thatcher, via Nye Bevan and Roy Jenkins. The recent publication of his rewritten biography of Roy Jenkins provides an opportunity to look back over Campbell's previous work as a prelude to *Reviews in History's* examination of his latest effort.

**Lloyd George: The Goat in the Wilderness**

Campbell's first book covered the last ten years of Lloyd George's career following the downfall of the Coalition in 1922. Traditionally this has been seen as little more than a coda to his war-winning Premiership, with few examining it in much detail. But Campbell argued that the later years of Lloyd-George would repay close study; 'the justification lies in the fact that Lloyd-George was actually important in these years, and that a failure to appreciate his importance can lead to a serious misunderstanding of the character of inter-war politics' (LG, p. 2). One of things historians have generally forgotten or failed to appreciate about a period – 1922–31 – that is generally seen as the age of Baldwin and McDonald is that both men spent a lot of energy ensuring that Lloyd-George was never able to return to power. Because he 'never did return to office after 1922, it has been too easy for posterity to assume he could not have returned' (LG, p. 3). *Post hoc ergo propter hoc*.

When the coalition fell in 1922, almost 'no observer believed that he [Lloyd-George] was out forever. Many from the King downwards recorded their expectation of a quick return.' (LG, p. 30) But the problem was the Lloyd-George was effectively a man without a party, having alienated both the Conservatives and the Liberals. Eventually he made his peace with Asquith, and the future of the Liberal party seemed reassured. The Liberals gained 158 seats in the 1923 general election; but it was a pyrrhic victory. They had finished third behind Labour, and 'were now caught in the electoral trap from which they have never escaped' (LG, p. 77). Furthermore, it was in the 1923 Parliament that 'the identity of interest between the Conservatives and Labour in destroying the Liberals first became clear.' (LG, p. 87)

Campbell quotes a letter from Leo Amery to Stanley Baldwin; 'It is in the interest of both of us [Conservatives and Labour] to clear the ground of the Liberal Party ... We may each hope to get the larger share of the carcass but meanwhile the great thing is to get the beast killed and on that we can be agreed' (LG, p. 87). After Labour failed to secure an overall majority in the 1929 election, Baldwin resigned as PM, 'rating the fear of being humiliated by Lloyd-George higher than the possible advantage to be gained by letting the Liberals be seen to install socialism in office' (LG, p. 242).

As well the combined efforts of the Conservatives and Labour, there were other factors which contributed to the decline of the Liberals as an electoral force. Between 1916 and 1926, the feud between 'Asquith and Lloyd George destroyed the Liberal Party, and with it the chance of non-Socialist radicalism between the wars' (LG, p. 156). One of the bones of contention between the two men had been the Lloyd-George fund, and this continued to cause problems after Asquith's death. The fund had arisen from Lloyd-George's war-time premiership, which had seen him effectively become a one-man party. One cannot perhaps have expected Lloyd-George 'get rid of a resource which seemed to give him so much power'; but it was constantly used by opponents as a stick to beat him with, and in the end probably did him more harm than good (LG, p. 177).

Despite having been PM for six years, in the 1920s Lloyd-George was not a backwards-looking politician; and a Liberal policy document published in 1928 (known as the Yellow Book due to its cover) 'offered a prophetic vision of post-war society. Disregarded in its day, it was nevertheless the harbinger of a typically quiet British revolution' (LG, p. 201). Herein lies the true tragedy of the period covered by *The Goat in the Wilderness*; the waste of Lloyd-George's talents, which were still in evidence. Prevented from making a comeback by a combination of circumstances and events, 'he had no further chance to raise further monuments of real achievements to his name and to the countries benefit; he could only draw up policies on paper' (LG, p. 205).

In July 1931 Lloyd George stood 'closer to regaining office than at any other time between 1922 and 1940' (p. 293). There is extremely strong evidence to suggest that MacDonald was thinking of taking the Liberals into the coalition at this time (LG, p. 294). However, Lloyd-George played for time, having little confidence in MacDonald; at the end of July, he had to have his prostate removed. By the time he had recovered, a National Government headed by Baldwin, MacDonald and Samuel had been formed. Lloyd-George had no problem with Samuel joining the coalition government; but was strongly against the election which was then called. The Liberal Party split three ways; with Lloyd-George's independent Liberals gaining just four seats.

One of the great counterfactuals of 20th century British politics is: what if Lloyd-George had not have been taken ill in July 1931? His absence 'unbalanced the National Government, leaving it exposed to the Tory take-over which his deputy – a generally respected but second ranking figure – had not the political muscle to prevent' (LG, p. 308). Although there were sporadic calls for him to be added to the National Government throughout the 1930s, neither Baldwin nor Chamberlain would wear it: 'the Goat was condemned to the wilderness for the rest of his life' (LG, p. 311).

Although the jury is probably still out on Campbell's argument that Britain might have been better off if Lloyd-George had been allowed back into the fold after 1922, it does show that he was still an important presence in British politics in the 1920s. Baldwin in particular appears to have been obsessed by him: in 1935 Baldwin recalled that his reason for calling an election on the issue of protection in 1923 had primarily been as a move against Lloyd-George – 'I felt that it was the one issue which would pull the party together, including the Lloyd George malcontent. The Goat was in America ... I had information he was going Protectionist, and I had to get in quick ... [This] Dished the Goat, otherwise he would have got the party with Austen and F. E. and there would have been an end of the Tory party as we know it' (LG, p. 47).

## **F. E. Smith: First Earl of Birkenhead**

Campbell's next project was a massive biography of F. E. Smith; a giant of politics in his time, but a largely forgotten figure in recent years. Campbell was keen to stress that Smith was a substantial figure in the first 30 years of British politics in the 20th century: history has generally taken note of his 'verbal brilliance, his exuberant high spirits and his reckless love of life'; but he was also an extremely talented lawyer: 'His meteoric success [at the bar] was not achieved by glamour, cheek and self-advertisement – such qualities do not impress solicitors – but by a real mastery of law and of the art of advocacy equal to the very greatest of that golden age of legal giants' (FES, p. 114).

F. E. was elected to Parliament in the general election of 1906, which saw the Liberals dish out a famous drubbing to the Conservatives. But the result was advantageous for the new MP, as he had far more chance of establishing himself in a House of Commons which contained just 157 Unionists. His maiden speech was a barnstorming affair which lifted the demoralised Conservative spirits – according to Violet Asquith in the gallery, 'the Conservative rank and file shouted and roared in ecstasy, their leaders rolled about on the front bench in convulsions of amusement and delight' (FES, p. 152). This set the tone for Smith's contributions to that Parliament, over the next three years becoming the party's most effective speaker: 'Balfour was too sophistical, Austen Chamberlain too pedestrian, Lansdowne and Curzon too remote ... F.E. alone commanded the power of rhetoric, combining force of argument with vivid extravagance of phrase fired by sheer love of battle, to trade threats and insults successfully with the enemy on platforms up and down the country' (FES, p. 188).

After an incongruous start to the war, in 1915 Smith became solicitor-general, and then six months later Attorney-General: with the latter post carrying a seat in the cabinet. In 1918 Lloyd-George offered F. E. the Woolsack; to accept would mean a permanent exit from the Commons, as well as the end of his career as a practising lawyer. And yet he had announced at age eight he wanted to be Lord Chancellor: it was 'an office normally reserved for one of the most learned, senior and dignified elder statesmen in the Cabinet. This grand climax to a career he was being offered at age 46' (FES, p. 458). F. E. was always a man in a hurry, and the alternative was to take a second-ranking job with a seat outside the cabinet. When the news broke, *The Morning Post* (not *The Times*, as is sometimes stated) that his appointment was 'carrying a joke too far'.

Yet Smith's spell as Lord-Chancellor was undoubtedly a success. He discharged the major constitutional and judicial responsibilities of his role 'with a dignity beyond all criticism', while being determined to enjoy privileges that his office gave him (FES, p. 469). Moreover, he was now at the heart of the Government, 'in high office, with his best friends ... [who] seemed to have the world at their feet' (FES, p. 498). The Coalition would only last until 1922 however, and then it fell 'with a crash from which F. E.'s career never recovered' (FES, p. 499). In the run-up to the general election of 1922, there were many coalitionists who believed that the Tories should simply fall into line, as it couldn't do without them; 'but F. E. expressed it most candidly, most provocatively, and most frequently with his stinging tongue. It was F. E. who aroused the bitterest resentment in the Tory party, and it was F. E. therefore who bears most of the responsibility for goading the party to its inevitable revenge' (FES, p. 601).

When the Conservatives returned to power in 1924, F. E. was given the India Office. By this time drink had begun to get the better of him. He had always been a heavy drinker; but whereas before the war 'all the stories of F. E.'s drinking were admiring ... After the war, as a response to the pressures of office, he drank more heavily than ever; and he began to show the effects as he had not done before' (FES, p. 712). Before 'tired and emotional' became the accepted euphemism for politicians being drunk, it was said that individuals had 'dined well'; and the phrase now began to be connected with F. E. regularly. But even if F. E. had been at

the height of his powers, the 'truth is that the India Office in the 1920s was no place for a logical man... Only a woolly-minded man of vaguely benevolent Liberal sympathies – like Irwin or Baldwin or McDonald – could preside over the gradual withdrawal of British rule with the necessary bland indifference to the irrationality and inconsistency of each succeeding constitutional arrangement. F. E. was not such a man' (FES, p. 762). Despite devoting over 800 pages in trying to rehabilitate Smith as a key British political figure, ultimately I'm not sure Campbell succeeds. This is not to detract from the work as a biography: it is as readable as any of Campbell's other efforts, and the research that went into it is impressive – anyone who takes the trouble to ascertain whether it was foggy on the day of Michael Collins' funeral puts most of us to shame. And the book provides a great service in establishing and debunking the various myths that surround F. E.. Yet one is not quite persuaded that Smith made a huge contribution to the politics of the period. In a more recent work Boyd Hilton classed Smith as one of those 'maverick right-wing politicians ... who operated too far outside the consensus to be effective', which perhaps comes closer to summing Smith up than Campbell's entire volume.<sup>(1)</sup> The last word on Smith probably still belongs to Cynthia Asquith: 'he is a magnificent bounder, but I can't help liking him'.

## Nye Bevan

Campbell's Bevan biography was originally entitled *Nye Bevan: The Mirage of British Socialism*, although when the book was reprinted in 1994 the subtitle was dropped in favour of *Nye Bevan: A Biography*. The original title accurately captures the flavour of the book though; 'the sad, even tragic, fact which the biographer has to face is that Bevan's life – the immense achievement of the National Health Service notwithstanding – was essentially a failure ... because his great gifts were essentially in thrall to an erroneous dogma' (NB, p. xii). Bevan's career must ultimately be judged as a failure not because he was betrayed by unworthy colleagues, but because quite simply 'the party and the electorate, including his own class, could not be persuaded, even by his own superb oratory, to share his vision' (NB, p. xii).

Why did Campbell choose Bevan as his next subject? As he himself correctly points out, Michael Foot's two-volume biography of Bevan is both an idealised biography and a transferred autobiography. This is not to say that Foot's book is worthless; but there are certain aspects of Bevan's character that Foot plays down, most notably the pragmatic and realistic side of Bevan's nature. Campbell sets out to complement Foot's two-volume biography. Yet while *Nye Bevan* is a perfectly competent piece of work, one gets the feeling that Campbell's heart wasn't entirely in it; or more likely perhaps, the conclusions he reached were somewhat disheartening to him. The writing in the book certainly lacks some of the sparkle of his previous and later work.

One of the ironies of Bevan's political career is that during his relatively brief spell in power, he was a largely isolated figure: yet the moment he resigned he found himself at the head of a substantial movement within the party. Bevan's resignation 'opened a Pandora's box of grievances, mutual suspicions, and genuine differences of political philosophy which, once released ... multiplied to create a deep division in the party which has never healed ... It marked a fatal watershed from which Labour's once steady upward progress – admittedly already showing signs of faltering – went into steep and prolonged decline' (NB, p. 253). But Bevan was never really a leader in the way his acolytes wanted; for one thing, he was committed to the Labour Party, and had no difficulty closing ranks at elections and other such occasions. In 1952 Bevan published *In Place of Fear* – 'one of the most disillusioning books ever written by a prophet to whom so many ardent followers looked to for a way forward' (NB, p. 264).

With regards to the Bevan/Gaitskell feud which ultimately split the Labour Party, Campbell concludes there was fault on both sides. . An important factor in the affair was that the

Labour Party was essentially leaderless at the time; Attlee was in hospital, Bevan was dead, Dalton discredited, and Cripps had retired. The only one of the old 'big five' still active at the time was Morrison: 'a long standing critic of the Health Service and an old enemy of Bevan [who] was strongly predisposed towards Gaitskell' (NB, p. 250). Attlee later blamed Morrison for having 'lost' Bevan – but regardless of who's fault it was, the vacuum at the top of the Labour party that left the two rivals to confront each other without any restraining influence was a crucial factor in the disastrous outcome.

On the health charges themselves, both men had a certain amount of right on their side. Bevan was wrong to make charges a point of principle, as his case was weakened by his accepting prescription charges in 1949 – however his supporters try to explain that away. Indeed, Gaitskell was forced to drop prescription charges in 1951 due to cabinet pressure; whereas hardly anyone got worked up over teeth and spectacles. On Gaitskell's side, 'charges against teeth and spectacles were a trifling and essentially irrelevant response' to the problem of health service spending (NB, p. 247). Not only that, but a case can be made that in fact health service spending was under control by 1951 – in 1955 the Guilleband Committee acquitted the NHS of the extravagance in this period that it had been accused of by Tories and Gaitskillites respectively. Clearly then, Gaitskell was out to provoke Bevan; but the latter's behaviour in response was appalling; undoubtedly at the crucial point Jennie Lee and Michael Foot pushed him back towards the brink after he had moved away from it (there is much in Attlee's famous aside regarding Bevan and Lee that 'he [Bevan] needed a sedative. He got an irritant').

The epilogue that Campbell provides to the book is a bleak one. The cause that Bevan fought for had been lost: 'he was a socialist of an old-fashioned sort, at once moralistic and mechanistic, which was out-dated in the cynical and opportunistic climate of the 1950s' (AB, p. 372). In some respects Attlee was fortunate in that he was able to retire before the consumer boom got into its stride: Bevan on the other hand, was overtaken by forces he did not understand while still an active politician, and died 'with the bitter knowledge that all he struggled for and believed inevitable had not, and now almost certainly would not, come to pass' (AB, p. 373). Not only that, but those who subsequently claimed the Bevanite mantle were pale imitations of the original at best – Michael Foot, entrusted by Jennie Lee to write a two volume biography of Bevan, marked his only spell in government by 'finding out what the leaders of the biggest trade unions wanted and giving it to them. Anything further from Bevan's understanding of socialism would be hard to imagine' (AB, p. 375).

## **Edward Heath**

In a sense, Ted Heath falls into the same bracket as Nye Bevan for Campbell: in that Britain would probably have been better off had it chosen to stick with Heath's policies, instead of rejecting him in 1974. Of all the post-war Prime Ministers, Ted Heath is perhaps the most difficult to pin down. Nonetheless, in a voluminous biography Campbell gets as close as anyone has; in his review of the book for the TLS in 1992, Matthew Paris opined that it was hard to believe a better biography of Heath would ever be written.<sup>(2)</sup> Since the book came out an official life has appeared, authored by Phillip Ziegler; but it is a supplementary volume to Campbell's at best.

Heath was man full of contradictions. Unlike most Prime Ministers, he had interests outside politics. Harold Wilson and Margaret Thatcher, to name two, simply had nothing in their lives outside the political game. Heath on the other hand, was a successful yachtsman and an extremely good amateur musician. Yet as PM more often than not he came across as 'a one-dimensional political robot' (TH, p. xv). Moreover, Heath's love of music and sailing failed to resound with the electorate; both were seen as elitist pursuits. His sailing exploits were always greeted with the response that 'sailing was a rich man's sport, of no interest to ordinary people' (TH, p. 255). Similarly, his interest in classical music came at a time when

pop music was in the ascendancy. Had the electorate 'been able to share his passion for music and admire his nautical achievements, had they understood that the goal of his political ambition was to open the same opportunities to more of his fellow countrymen, they might have been readier to respond to his warnings and lectures about inflation, investment and national unity' (TH, p. 501). Instead he was perceived as a 'one dimensional technocrat', unmercifully savaged by *Private Eye*'s Auberon Waugh as 'a waxwork' (TH, p. 501). Although in many ways Heath had a lot of bad luck after he'd gotten to the top, it should be noted that he enjoyed some good fortune on his way to the top, in that the events of 1963 – the replacement of McMillan with Home – led directly to Heath's election as leader in 1965. (TH, p. 139) After the debacle of 1963 leadership selection, from which Lord Home – 'a little-known Scottish aristocrat' – emerged, it was clear that his successor must be a man of a quite different stamp. Furthermore, the effect of Blackpool was to remove nearly all of his rivals – Butler and Hailsham were now too old; McLeod and Powell had refused to serve under Home, and Maudling had lost some of his lustre by failing to capture the leadership at the first attempt. But the downside was the 'divinity that had hitherto hedged a Tory leader was diminished even for Home: by the time Heath succeeded ... it had all but disappeared' (TH, pp. 140–1).

Heath was dogged by bad luck almost from the moment he took office. Tragically, Ian MacLeod died just a few months after being appointed as Chancellor; 'a blow from which, in the view of many of its members, Heath's Government never fully recovered' (TH, p. 302). Heath had pledged to avoid intervention in industry; but had to nationalise Rolls Royce in 1971 to save it from collapse. He had pledged to reform industrial relations at a time when the unions – having effectively seen off Wilson's government by rejecting *In Place of Strife* – were in no mood to co-operate with a Tory government. The increase in union militancy and the wage claims that went with it saw inflation rise. The early 1970s also saw a rise in violence in Northern Ireland – in 1969, there were 13 political murders; in 1972 the total had risen to 467. Heath's attempts to get the economy back on an even keel in 1973 were derailed by the Arab-Israeli war and the oil crash that followed, as well as the decision by the miners to defy his incomes policy.

Heath's one undoubted triumph as PM was negotiating Britain's entry into what was then known as the European Economic Community. General de Gaulle, who had vetoed Britain's two previous attempts to join, had stepped down by the time Heath became PM: but even so, it was by no means certain that Britain would now join the EEC. Heath had been part of the negotiating team in 1963, and took away the lesson – subsequently confirmed by Labour's failed attempt at entry in 1967 – was that it was no use trying to 'get around' the French by appealing to the other five: France held the key to Britain's fate. Pompidou was not unfriendly to Britain's entry, but was determined to drive a hard bargain. After months of torturous negotiations, a successful face-to-face meeting between him and Heath saw a lot of the French objections to things like West Indian sugar and the Community tariffs magically disappear. During the Thatcher years, much was made of the supposedly poor terms Heath accepted in order to join the EEC. The fact is however, the terms Heath got were probably as good as Britain was going to get, given the fact that she was seeking to join the EEC 16 years after it was found. If the price Britain was forced to pay was disadvantages, the blame should probably be placed on Attlee and Churchill. But regardless of the terms, what 'mattered in the long run was that Britain – at last, and still subject to the approval of Parliament – was in ... The outcome may have disappointed in the short run. But it was an historic achievement nonetheless' (TH, 363).

The battle then turned to getting Parliament to approve membership. In 1970 when Heath came to power, all three political parties were broadly in favour of European entry; in mid-1971 things had changed dramatically. The public reaction to the negotiations had been one of scepticism mixed with some hostility. The 'electorate had favoured the idea so long as there was no imminent likelihood of it happening, but shied off whenever it began to seem a

realistic possibility' (TH, p. 396). Heath would have preferred to lead a united country in Europe; but Labour's volte face over Europe (Wilson had applied to join in 1967) played into Conservative hands; the Labour opposition helped galvanise Tory support. Heath could probably have relied on Labour dissidents to get the Bill through – but as 'a former Chief Whip, it was a matter of principle that the Government should be able to get its policy through by the votes of its own supporters' (TH, p. 400). Grudgingly, Heath conceded a free vote on the issue: Labour imposed a three-line whip, which enabled pro-Europeans in the latter party to defy it on the basis the Government were not enforcing a whip on the issue.<sup>(3)</sup> The result was Ayes 356: Noes 244 – a majority of 112. 33 Tories voted against, while 69 Labour MPs voted for. It was Heath's finest hour.

Less than a year later, however, he was out of office. Campbell is even-handed about the reasons for his downfall. Heath did his best to try and work with the unions; but the brute fact was they knew they would get a better deal under a Labour government, and therefore showed little inclination to work with the Tories. Wilson could always promise more than Heath offered: 'This was the Catch-22 of British politics in the 1970s which Heath could not resolve' (TH, p. 541). Moreover, one can't really fault him for not trusting the unions in 1974, having spent countless hours talking to union leaders in 1972, 'patiently trying to draw them in to share responsibility for running the economy [on the basis that] ... they could be treated as social partners: when it had come to the crunch in November 1972, they had refused.' (TH, p. 583). Little wonder then that he didn't believe them when they said they were going to be on their best behaviour in early 1974.

Heath might have been dealt a bad hand; but at times he was his own worst enemy. He had an incredible capacity to rub people up the wrong way; he never had much time for Parliament, and made no 'attempt to charm or flatter the House' when he became PM, 'he simply battered it with facts and dealt brusquely with interrupters, even from his own side' (TH, p. 502). He saw the House something that was there to support the elected government and pass whatever legislation that was put in front of it without demur, an attitude that alienated many in his own party as well as Labour. He managed to antagonise the majority of Fleet Street on a similar scale: regarding journalists as 'predatory vultures to be kept at a distance' (TH, p. 503). At times he was too high-minded: Palmerston said of Louis Philippe that 'one must admit in one's own mind that if he had been a very straightforward, scrupulous and high-minded man, he would not now have been sitting on the French throne'.<sup>(4)</sup> A similar explanation might account for why Harold Wilson won four elections and Ted Heath won one. He fought the first 1974 election 'honourably, responsibly, and with one hand tied behind his back', which was probably why he lost it (TH, p. 619).

In his biography of Bevan, Campbell clearly felt that the failure of Bevan's brand of socialism was clearly a loss for Britain; he comes to a similar conclusion with regards to Heath's premiership: it would probably have been better for Britain as a whole – particularly in light of the Thatcher years – if Heath's policies had succeeded. Heath genuinely strove for national unity and consensus: his successor 'despised consensus and gloried in trampling on her enemies' (TH, p. 763). In 1974 when the British voters were asked 'to declare themselves firmly for the elected Government against sectional intransigence, they had preferred the easy option and voted, too many of them, for a quiet life' (TH, p. 619). Yet despite all the bad luck Heath suffered, 'in the end he had no-one to blame but himself. He had gambled his job, and he had lost' (TH, p. 619).

### **Margaret Thatcher – Vol.1: The Grocer's Daughter;**

Campbell's next biography would become his most famous work. The recent death of Margaret Thatcher has seen a slew of biographies published in its' wake – including the fabulously dire first volume of the authorised biography written by Charles Moore. But nothing has come close to troubling Campbell's effort of its status as the definitive life of

Thatcher. In his recent study of her premiership, Richard Vinen opined that 'John Campbell's biography of Margaret Thatcher has probably taken us as close to understanding the woman as we are ever likely to get – perhaps closer than she (a person with little taste for introspection) ever got herself'.(5)

Campbell's principle task in *The Grocer's Daughter* was to unpick the mythical version of her rise to power that Thatcher herself had propagated. In his recent authorised biography of Thatcher, Charles Moore seems to have swallowed the idea that Thatcher was hugely influenced by her father whole. But Campbell argued their relationship was somewhat more complex. The iconography of 'the Grocer's Daughter' was the truth – but not the whole truth. It was 'in fact a supremely successful exercise in image management' (GD, p. 1). The picture Thatcher painted of her childhood and her relationship with her father was 'too idealised to be wholly true' – it is hard to reconcile the submissive and dutiful portrait of the young Thatcher that she painted in later life with the evidence that she was in fact a 'clever and strong willed' child (GD, p. 2). Thatcher seemed to have placed her father on a pedestal at the expense of her mother. A 1985 television interview provides the prime example of this. Thatcher wept as she recalled how her father had been deposed as an Alderman of Grantham Council, but avoided talking about her mother, portraying her as a mere second to her husband. Thatcher's inability 'to summon up a warm word about her mother, even when she is trying to do her justice, is fairly striking' (GD, p. 20).

Why then, did she idolise her father? Campbell puts it that she exaggerated her father's influence to divert attention from the ways in which she had abandoned it. Famously, she insisted that the most important lesson he taught her was to never go with the crowd; of course, the irony was that she prided herself on taking all her ideas from him. Her elevation of her father to mythical status was largely retrospective; once she had left home at 18 she saw very little of him for the rest of his life. Throughout her career she preferred the company of men older than herself – 'father figures to whom she would quite surprisingly defer, almost visibly suppressing her instinct to challenge and rebut ... Obviously Alfred Roberts was the archetype, the idealised father she had now outgrown, but psychologically needed to replace' (GD, p. 87).

Moving from the personal to the political, the conclusion that Campbell reaches in *The Grocer's Daughter* is that there was nothing inevitable about the rise of Thatcher to the Premiership. After the event there is always a tendency to portray what happened as the only possible outcome. Yet Campbell always keeps in mind Trevor-Roper's famous dictum that history is what happened in the context of what might have happened. We might also recall here Sir Ronald Syme's remarks on the potential pitfalls of biography: 'undue insistence upon the character and exploits of a single person invests history with dramatic unity at the expense of truth' (6). But Campbell avoids this; he always keen to point out how events could have taken a different course. For instance, in March 1974 the odds on Thatcher becoming Conservative leader would almost have been impossible to calculate; one of the 'most extraordinary things about Mrs Thatcher's seizure of the Tory leadership is that scarcely anyone – colleague or commentator – saw her coming. Even after the event her victory was widely disparaged as a freak of fortune of which she was merely the lucky beneficiary' (GD, p. 260). If only Edward Du Cann could have been persuaded to stand; or if Willie Whitelaw had run in the first ballot; or if Heath had taken the campaign more seriously, the course of British political history might have been different. Enoch Powell summed up her accession to the top job as boiling down to the fact that 'she was opposite the spot on the roulette wheel at the right time, and she didn't funk it' (GD, p. 260). Similarly, if Callaghan had called an election in October 1978 he probably would have won, and Thatcher would have gone down in the history books alongside failed Conservative leaders such as Austen Chamberlain. To continue with Powell's roulette metaphor though, even if this was the case, one has to be in the casino in the first place – and Thatcher had worked tremendously hard to gain entry. As Campbell puts it, reaching the top rung of British politics is not something that just 'happens'

– ‘it takes extraordinary single-mindedness and stamina to reach to topmost rung of British politics, and obsessive dedication to the job to the exclusion of other concerns like money, family, friendship and the pursuit of pleasure’ (p. 260). One also needs a large help of luck to get to the top, and there is no doubt that at several key points in her career Thatcher was aided by the self-destruction of her adversaries – but she also made her own luck when she needed to, seizing ‘chances from which others shrank, and exploiting their hesitation with ruthless certainty’ (p. 261). For instance, in a bravura performance in the Commons in January 1975 she routed Denis Healy at the dispatch box; this demolition of Labour’s chief bruiser made her look like a leader-in-waiting, at the expense of her rivals on the front bench who looked inferior in contrast.

For the majority of her time shadowing Wilson and Callaghan, Thatcher was largely ineffective Leader of the Opposition. She woefully underperformed in the Commons, largely due to the fact that her speeches which went down well in the Home Counties died a death when repeated in the chamber. How then did she manage to triumph in 1979? It is a shade simplistic to simply point to the Winter of Discontent; but undoubtedly it played a huge part. The summer of 1978 marked the low point of her leadership; in May 1979 she entered Downing Street. In between, a series of pent-up pay demands exploded which destroyed James Callaghan’s Labour government. In hindsight many commentators thought Labour ran the better campaign in 1979, with Thatcher’s message being ‘muffled and in retrospect surprisingly timid’ (p. 443). There were also doubts over ‘whether the British electorate, when it came to the point of the privacy of the voting booth, would really bring itself to vote for a woman Prime Minister’ (IL, p. 1). But in the end, they did – as Callaghan famously opined, ‘I suspect there is now such a sea-change [in what the public wants] – and it is for Mrs Thatcher’ (GD, p. 443).

## **The Iron Lady**

As her recent death has shown, Thatcher is a divisive figure – perhaps someone who hated the idea of consensus would have smiled at the fact no consensus about her 11 years as PM has yet emerge. As the various reactions to Thatcher’s recent death have made clear, she is still an extremely controversial figure. To some, she was ‘the dauntless warrior who curbed the unions, routed the wets, re-conquered the Falklands [and] rolled back the state ...’ (IL, p. 800). To others, she was a ‘narrow ideologue whose hard-faced policies legitimised greed, deliberately increased inequality ... starved the public services, wrecked the universities, prostituted public broadcasting and destroyed the nation’s sense of solidarity and civic pride’ (IL, p. 800). Ultimately, it is not a questing of ‘proving’ one or the other – both are true. From a solely political point of view, perhaps the truth is that ‘she achieved much less than she and her admirers claim’ (IL, p. 800). Moreover, did she really inspire and drive the policies that have become branded as ‘Thatcherism’, or did she merely ride a global wave of technological revolution and anti-collectivism that would have impacted upon Britain whoever was in Number 10? The debates will go on.

One thing Thatcher always had on her side for the majority of her Premiership was luck; particularly as far as her opponents were concerned. Throughout her career, her adversaries played into her hands. She was fortunate to have faced two unelectable Labour leaders in Foot and Kinnock; ‘at the nadir of her popularity in her first term, General Galtieri saved her by invading the Falklands, while in her second term, the miners’ leader Arthur Scargill led the critical domestic challenge to her Premiership with crass ineptitude’ (IL, pp. 352–3). She was also fortunate that the SDP took votes away from Labour while at the same time never becoming a legitimate threat themselves. Indeed, one could go back to before she became PM and add Callaghan’s failure to call an election in the autumn of 1978.

The manner of her departure however, opened up divisions in the Conservative party which have still not healed; particularly with regards to Europe. Thatcher did not become anti-

European until her third term; she had battled with Brussels in her first over the rebate, but always took British membership and participation in the EU as a given. Thatcher liked to model herself after Churchill: but the latter 'voiced an emotional identity with Europe which was quite alien to Mrs Thatcher's overwhelming deference to the United States' (IL, p. 598). She never held any seminars or strategic discussions over Europe like she did over other aspects of foreign policy: she simply assumed she knew what was right for Europe, and if the EC knew what was good for them they'd listen to her. Consequently she 'was always two steps behind events, unable to lead or even to participate fully, but only to react angrily to what others propose' (IL, p. 599).

The combination of circumstances that led to Thatcher's departure is surely one of the more extraordinary sequences of events in British political history. First came the community charge: nothing 'did more than the poll tax to precipitate Thatcher's downfall' (IL, p. 562). It combined her obstinacy with a 'hard-faced inegalitarianism', but most surprisingly, her political antennae failed her. Attacking Harold Wilson's Land Tax in 1965, Thatcher stated that any tax 'should be certain in its incidence, cheap and simple to collect.' (IL, p. 563) The poll tax was none of these. Then came her reshuffle of 1989, which she had decided on in order to break up what she saw as the Howe-Lawson axis. The way in which she did it was reminiscent of Macmillan's night of the long knives: it took moving 13 out of the 21 cabinet in order to do it. All in all, 'the 1989 reshuffle was a political shambles which antagonised practically all her colleagues and delighted only the opposition.' (IL, p. 617).

Thatcher continued to antagonise many in the party with her anti-European pronouncements, culminating in a House of Commons speech in which she famously stated 'no, no, no' to the idea of further integration of the European Community. It was this that led Geoffrey Howe to resign. But Lawson went before him: he told Thatcher that it was either him or Waters. After a series of meetings, the PM refused to sack Waters, so Lawson resigned. When he heard of the Chancellor's resignation, Waters realised his own position was now impossible, and resigned too – 'Thus, by sacrificing Lawson to try to keep Waters, Mrs Thatcher had ended up losing them both' (IL, p. 691).

It is not simply hindsight to state that Thatcher should have voluntarily stepped down before she was pushed. Denis Thatcher had always thought that after the 1987 general election she wouldn't fight another one. Several people, including Lord Carrington and Kenneth Baker, tried to persuade her to step down in 1989 when she reached the tenth year of her Premiership. But she quite simply lived to work, and dreaded the thought of retirement. She had no real friends or interests outside of politics. The problem she – as indeed any leader who has been in power for a length of time faced – is that there were a sizable group of MPs in her own party who either knew their chance at being the Cabinet had gone and were aggrieved their talents had not been recognised; or realised their chance would never come while she was the helm.

Campbell prophesied that the BBC would have a hard time striking the right note dealing with Thatcher's death, and so it proved, with the corporation tripping over itself in its Top 40 show to explain why 'Ding Dong The Witch is Dead' had suddenly rocketed into the charts. Thatcher was not simply another PM; or even just the first female PM; but one of the 'most admired, most hated, most idolised, most vilified public figure of the second half of the twentieth century' (IL, pp. 800–1). Doubtless she and her policies will be debated or decades to come; perhaps the most we can say about her at this point is that 'she was a brilliantly combative, opportunist politician who, by a mixture of hard work, stamina, self-belief and uncanny instinct, bullied an awestruck country into doing things her way for more than a decade' (IL, pp. 800–1).

## Notes

1. Boyd Hilton, *A Mad, Bad and Dangerous People* (Oxford, 2006), p. 82.
2. Matthew Parris, 'Honourable member', *Times Literary Supplement*, 4710 (1993), 36.
3. It was Chief Whip Francis Pym who persuaded Heath to give a free vote on the issue; typically, Heath never thanked him.
4. Quoted in E. L. Woodward, *The Age of Reform 1815–70* (Oxford, 1962), p. 238.
5. Richard Vinen, *Thatcher's Britain: The Politics and Social Upheaval of the Thatcher Era* (London, 2009), p. 4.
6. Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (Oxford, 1956), p. 7.