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Chateau Despair by Lisa Barnard; The Real Iron Lady by Gillian Shephard – review

Two depictions of the Tories' lost leader are in turn spooky and deadly dull



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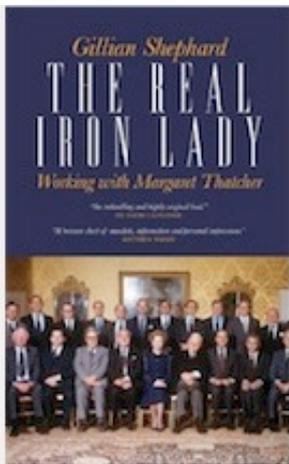


A corrupted portrait of Thatcher from Lisa Barnard's *Chateau Despair*. Photograph: Lisa Barnard

At a time when Tories are gripped with gloom that their party will never again win a parliamentary majority, many in their ranks look back wistfully to the woman who won them three elections in a row, two by a landslide, and changed Britain for ever. It is not terribly healthy, either for them or the country, this nostalgia for the lost leader, but it's a potent force. Here are two very different ways of remembering the Iron Lady.

**The Real Iron Lady:
Working With
Margaret Thatcher**
by Gillian Shephard

Thatcher fans should avoid **Chateau Despair**. They will not like it. In this strange but interesting limited edition, the photographer [Lisa Barnard](#) has collected some of her prints of



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the interior of 32 Smith Square, the building that was Conservative central office when Maggie was in her prime, and which was left unoccupied for a long time after the Tories deserted it nearly 10 years ago. It was here that her campaigns were plotted. It was from here that she would first appear on television on election night to celebrate her victories, waving from the balcony as adoring party workers chanted "four more years!". Treating the building and its forgotten contents as a sort of political mausoleum, Barnard shows us shabby and empty blue spaces, stained carpets and crumbling plasterboard, stopped clocks, empty chairs and abandoned shoes. The detritus of old political battles is represented by images of shrivelled campaign materials, faded rosettes and unblown balloons. The effect is quite spooky. These haunted images are punctuated by portraits, retrieved from a long forgotten cupboard, of the former chatelaine. There's the face that ruled Britain for more than a decade in the pose that became so embedded in the national consciousness: the purposeful lips, the regimented hair, the signature pearls clipped to her ears and hung around her neck, and the drilling blue eyes which François Mitterrand once likened to Caligula. The photos are in a corrupted state, aged and bleached, providing a visual metaphor for the passing of glory and the fading of pomp.

Gillian Shephard takes a different approach to reanimating the ghosts of the Thatcher years in **The Real Iron Lady**, her miscellany of recollections of what it was like to work with her. It's published by Biteback, the prolific political publishing house which I greatly admire. Iain Dale and his team put into print many lively, engaging and often important biographies, memoirs and current affairs titles written from across the spectrum. It's the political junkies' publisher and long may it flourish. So it is as a disappointed friend that I say Biteback shouldn't have wasted paper and ink on this thin piece of work. A cover puff calls it "an enthralling and highly original book". I'm afraid the reverse is the truth.

Shephard collects plenty of tributes to the former prime minister's obvious qualities: her conviction, her determination, her courage, her energy, her appetite for work and her attention to detail. Trouble is that we knew that already and certainly didn't need reminding of it again and again at such repetitive length. There is some acknowledgement of Thatcher's weaknesses: her obstinacy, her belligerence, her divisiveness, her reckless humiliation of colleagues and the other flaws that eventually led to her downfall. "She could be impossible to work with, given to tantrums, tears and shouting matches and lightning changes of mood," writes Shephard. On the whole,

though, this former Tory cabinet minister is a fan and often a gushing one. And she has mainly sought testimony from other worshippers at the shrine of Maggie, which makes this a very unbalanced portrait of her character and legacy.

That, though, is not the most fundamental problem with this book. The really infuriating thing about it is its sheer laziness. The pages groan, and the reader with them, under the weight of great slabs of extracts from the memoirs of Tory cabinet ministers that anyone interested will probably have read already. A boring remark by John Major – "she was a woman of contrasts" – strikes Shephard as so scintillating that she repeats it three times. Her own observations about Mrs T are trite. "The Falklands conflict certainly stretched her to the limit. She was acutely aware that the final decision to send Britain to war was hers, and she had to take responsibility for it." You don't say.

The only new material comes from some interviews. Lumpen, unedited extracts are cut and paste and thrown on to the page in italicised text whether or not they merit being given the space, which they rarely do. Almost none of the interviewees have anything revelatory, gripping or funny to say. Their anecdotes, often related at remorseless length, are for the most part bland. Their reflections and conclusions are entirely predictable.

I yearned for this book to tell me one thing that I didn't already know about Thatcher, or to present me with one surprising insight or fresh perspective or novel way of thinking about her. Love her or hate her, she was a remarkable woman, one of the most significant, dynamic and vivid personalities to inhabit No 10. The great dramas of her career included the conflict in the south Atlantic, the miners' strike, the Brighton bomb and the poll tax riots. I never thought it would be possible to produce a dull book about such a fascinating subject, but Shephard proves me wrong.

Chateau Despair is available at gostbooks.com

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