

Margaret Thatcher, The Authorized Biography

By Norman Hill

In the late 1800s through the start of World War I, Turkey, the old Ottoman Empire was often called “The sick man of Europe.” This referred to its ongoing losses of geographical territories and states, its deteriorating military capacity and a perceived general collapse in its cultural and social stability.

In the 1970s, a less likely nation sometimes received this unfortunate description—the United Kingdom. This nation, often referred to as the mother country of the U.S., our staunchest European ally, was in very bad shape, economically and, to some extent, socially. Basic heavy industries, nationalized since shortly after World War II, were throwing off heavy financial losses. Labor unions, often in local areas only, were calling strikes that caused great inconvenience and losses for the country. In the early part of the decade, the Conservative Prime Minister, Edward Heath, was sometimes described as “symbolizing national decline, even while he futilely tried to ward it off.”

The author, Charles Moore, aptly describes in this first of a two volume biography, how Margaret Thatcher stepped into this daunting situation and served as the U.K. Prime Minister from 1979 to 1990. He admittedly had always been sympathetic to Thatcher’s political views, both before and after her tenure in office. But this does not prevent him from covering some of her faults, such as in dealing with people.

Moore stresses that Thatcher gave the utmost cooperation in allowing him access to her own voluminous papers and paving the way for him to have access to many still classified state papers. But she did not interfere or “look over his shoulder” while he was writing this text. One part of their agreement was that neither volume of this biography would be released until after her death.

Many in the U.S. were surprised when the Labor Party won the U.K. election of 1945 and ousted war hero Winston Churchill. Party leaders were passionately committed to socialist doctrine and proceeded to implement many of its platforms. A program of “cradle to the grave security” included nationalization of basic industries, very stiff personal income taxes and, above all, socialized or national health care.

By the 1970s, cracks in this system were evident. “Labour does not work” was a Conservative Party motto used at the end of the decade. The winter of 1979, plagued by strikes and a failing economy, was referred to as the “Winter of discontent.” General Conservative unrest and disagreement with

Heath’s leadership led to Margaret Thatcher’s ousting him as Conservative Party leader.

The general economic disarray in the U.K. led to Thatcher’s victory in 1979. She became the first female Prime Minister and, eventually, would serve the longest term of any in the 20th century.

Some in her party urged Thatcher to move slowly against longstanding features of the country’s semi-socialist structure. But she disregarded this advice. She sold off ailing nationalized industries and curbed the power of labor unions and many local governments long dominated by Labor leaders. She reduced the country’s punitive personal income tax rates. Later, in a 1983 U.S. conference, a former spokesman of hers said that she also wanted to take on the nationalized health system, but it was too entrenched.

Economic recovery from her programs was slow and led to no end of hysterical denunciations of her policies. “Margaret Thatcher, the milk snatcher” was a common epithet, to symbolize her actions as taking milk out of the mouths of babies.

Moore shows how the 1982 Falklands dispute with Argentina greatly increased Thatcher’s popularity and united the nation with the greatest pride since World War II. Although the Falklands were a small group of islands in the south Atlantic, Argentinean claims and occupation stirred British patriotism to a pitch. Thatcher’s firm military stand to retain Falkland control increased her approval ratings as never before.

Presumably, Moore’s second volume will devote more to Thatcher’s role in the Cold War with the Soviet Union and her close ties throughout the 1980s with Ronald Reagan. If Reagan often came across as laid back in dealing with Brezhnev, Thatcher was quite the opposite, purposeful and unflinching. The Soviets bestowed on her the nickname “The Iron Maiden”, hardly a term of endearment, but one of very grudging respect.

This second volume hopefully will shed more light on how the mutual efforts of Reagan and Thatcher led to Soviet overspending and collapse of their economy, whose well-touted strength had always been very questionable.

Thatcher remained a most

controversial figure, even after her role as Prime Minister was over. Her title was always “Mrs. Thatcher”, never relying on the “Ms.” Similarly, she never used her maiden name in her political career.

Mrs. Thatcher was ousted from Conservative Party leadership in 1990. Reasons always struck me as petty. But she did not engage in personal attacks against her younger opponents who had replaced her.

Eventually, the Labor Party, through Tony Blair, regained the Prime Minister position. But he never tried to restore the doctrinaire socialist policies of the 1940s. In fact, he supported President Bush in much of the early stages of the Gulf War. Arguably, this represents part of Margaret Thatcher’s legacy and evidence that her doctrines did work.

As indicated before, Margaret Thatcher had no end of ardent admirers and hateful critics. Some revisionist historians have asserted that she really didn’t do anything to aid the British economy. Upon her death, Glenda Jackson, award winning actress and doctrinaire Socialist, uttered in Parliament passionate denunciations of Thatcher and all her policies. To Jackson, she had turned “vices into virtues.” On the other hand, the actor Michael Caine, born in the London East End Labor Party stronghold, said that Mrs. Thatcher’s income tax rate reductions enabled him to move back to his beloved London from the U.S.

It has been reported that the bust of Margaret Thatcher was removed from the White House in 2009. To this, I say passionately, “Put her back, Barack.”

