Mistress of all she surveyed

Margaret Thatcher’s triumphant second term sowed the seeds of her downfall, says Jesse Norman

Margaret Thatcher: The Authorized Biography, Volume Two: Everything She Wants by Charles Moore (Allen Lane, £30)

In 1982 Margaret Thatcher led a British delegation to Beijing to discuss the vexed question of Hong Kong. They were given second-rate accommodation, and most of the Chinese leadership deliberately stayed away from the British banquet at the Great Hall of the People. But matters really hit rock bottom back at the hotel when Denis Thatcher discovered that he could not obtain a gin and tonic, a point on which he was vociferously indignant to his wife in the privacy of their bedroom. The eavesdroppers took the hint; both gin and tonic were then supplied.

To read this book is to find oneself in something of the same position as the Chinese eavesdroppers. For as with the first volume of his superb biography, such is the depth of Charles Moore’s research—he interviewed 286 people for the book, some more than once—that he is able to move the reader effortlessly from front of house to behind the scenes and back again. The political and the personal are juxtaposed, and the result illuminates even the most familiar episodes of an already well-researched period.

The result is a book almost every one of whose 621 pages is absorbing. The style is clear and incisive, the viewpoint sympathetic, nuanced and dispassionate; all qualities which give additional weight even to Moore’s most trenchant judgements. And the footnotes, in which much of the most gossipy and revealing material has been placed, are worth studying in their own right.

Beginning with the Hong Kong negotiations, this second volume takes us from the aftermath of the Falklands War until the general election of 1987. It is a period packed with incident and drama, among which the miners’ strike and the IRA’s Brighton bomb of 1984 (which killed five people and nearly took Thatcher’s life) stand out.

Moore describes these events with great skill. But he does not neglect a host of other matters that challenged Thatcher and her government. Some, such as Star Wars, the proposed defence system designed to protect the United States from strategic nuclear weapons, and the European Exchange Rate Mechanism, were very big indeed, and obviously so at the time. Others, such as her wooing of Mikhail Gorbachev or the travails of the Westland helicopter company, would prove to be unexpectedly consequential. Still others—the Cecil Parkinson affair and “Attempts were made from time to time to soften her and her image, all of which she rejected as inauthentic”

Oxford University’s refusal of an honorary degree come to mind—affected her personally in different and sometimes long-term ways.

Nor does he neglect her failures. Thatcher was bamboozled over Europe, struggled with local government and—as is sometimes forgotten—failed to get headway on public spending. As Moore records, “little serious attempt was made to reform and reduce spending on social programmes. Public spending, as a whole, was never cut.”

But what also comes through vividly is the highly conflicted nature of the times themselves. To an extent hard to recognise now, Britain in the 1970s and 80s was beset by hatreds—of class, of income, of religion, of race—made worse by unemployment, economic malaise, loss of international standing and a wider sense of powerlessness. These hatreds were reflected in the media, and to some extent fomented by them, including by the BBC. (Indeed the BBC notoriously spiked The Falklands Play by Ian Curieus, which depicted Thatcher as a heroine; overall, Moore records, it ran seven dramas that were critical of the Falklands War, and none that were favourable to it. Little wonder she disliked it.) Thatcher is often criticised as a divisive figure, and various attempts were made at the time to soften her and her image, all of which she rejected as inauthentic. But from British Leyland to cruise missiles to South African sanctions, the times themselves were no less divisive. What the country desperately needed was leadership, and leadership—of a very particular kind—was what she gave them.

Given the amount and quality of his material, it is understandable that the author has reverted to his original plan of a three-volume work. But this also has the important effect of casting light forward to the final act. There is a sense of lurking tragedy as the narrative unfolds. The heroic central figure, the struggle, the great achievements, the fatal weakness, the iron logic of events are all here. The excitement builds inexorably and, though the final downfall is deferred, we know how it will end.

There can be no doubt over the pre-eminence of the central figure. During this period Thatcher was dominant in domestic politics. But by 1983, after the Falklands, she was also the senior figure among world leaders. Indeed she stood at—and sometimes, fought her way to—the centre of almost every major issue affecting the western alliance. The exception was the US invasion of Grenada, a former British colony, on which President Ronald Reagan deliberately blindsided her. “Susceptible to charming, well-dressed men who flattered her,” Moore notes, “[she] was as disappointed as an ex-girlfriend.”

Depending on your viewpoint, the Iron Lady of caricature was forceful or domineering, independent-minded or arrogant, personally professional or cold, crisp or obsessive on detail. There is no lack of evidence here for those wishing to feed these stereotypes. But the book adds to the vastly more substantial picture already assembled in Moore’s first volume. It reminds us that Thatcher was unwilling to take decisions on occasion, especially in the removal of colleagues—be it Cecil Parkinson, whom she greatly liked, or Michael Heseltine, whom she did not.

She could be cunning, and indeed underhand, notably over the ailing Westland public company. Her courage gave a paradoxical quality to some of her actions; she vigorously opposed sanctions on South Africa, yet was
the first British Prime Minister to request the release of Nelson Mandela. She was "passionately interested in ideas," loved poetry and was by no means uninterested in the arts, though her tastes were conventional. And she remained gloriously unruly. When *Private Eye* alleged (quite falsely) that Sarah Keays had "recently returned from exploring the jungles of Uganda"—a long-running euphemism for having sex—with Marcus Fox MP, Thatcher roundly informed ministers that it couldn't be true: "Marcus tells me he's never visited Africa."

Yet despite her dominance, despite her personal conviction, Thatcher retained a sense of wariness, even insecurity. This was not, in general, the result of public criticism. One of the most gripping chapters in the book surveys the response of many British intellectuals to her. Their language was not that of party-political hostility, but of utter hatred and even horror of defilement, in which it is hard not to see a degree of misogyny. She was "loathsomely, repulsive in almost every way" in the words of Jonathan Miller.

John Vincent, a rare academic supporter, summed the reaction up brilliantly: "Mrs Thatcher is the point at which all these snobberies meet: intellectual snobbery, social snobbery, the snobbery of Brooks's, the snobbery about scientists among those educated in the arts, the snobbery of the metropolis about the provincial, the snobbery of the south about the north, and the snobbery of men about career women." As Moore notes, these views were not shared by many intellectuals who had direct experience of tyranny. Men like Andrei Sakharov and Vladimir Bukovsky greatly admired her strength and her love of liberty.

No, Thatcher's wariness derived from a sense of political fragility. She had been patronised and underestimated by Tory gran-

dees all the way up the political ladder, and she had been instrumental in the assassination of a party leader herself with Ted Heath's defection in 1975. So she knew how quickly it could happen. Her views of her colleagues were astringent, indeed often hostile at the best of times and any sign of challenge made her bristle, as Norman Tebbit, Geoffrey Howe, Douglas Hurd and Michael Heseltine all discovered. Combined with her sheer longevity, and her extraordinarily punishing workload, the effect over time was to make her more suspicious, more insular, more reliant on a kitchen cabinet, cutting her off from independent advice and information that might have saved her at the end.

All these factors played a role in the episode that is the unexpected climax of this book: the Westland affair. As Moore notes, it remains something of a mystery how a dispute over a small helicopter company could have brought a government with a majority of 140 almost to its knees. On the surface, that dispute concerned the ownership of a defence contractor, the merits of an American or European "solution" and the wider issue of the proper scope of industrial policy. But in fact the underlying cause was simple: a titanic clash of wills between Heseltine and Thatcher.

As that clash became more public, so did the determination on each side to give no quarter. Heseltine's desire to move to the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) had been ignored in the 1983 Cabinet reshuffle, and he felt marooned at the Ministry of Defence. He threw enormous energy into shaping a European contractors' bid for the ailing Westland, a public company about to announce huge losses. The Prime Minister opposed this on the grounds that it would reduce competition but not the requirement for state subsidy; instead she preferred a bid by Sikorsky of the US. The need for speed, given that a formal City takeover bid table was in operation, raised the pressure.

Originally No 10 had wanted the DTI under Leon Brittan to lead on the issue, but as Heseltine raised the stakes No 10 soon took control, with Thatcher's adviser Charles Powell in the lead. Two ministerial meetings showed the Prime Minister in a majority but were ultimately inconclusive, as was a Cabinet meeting in which Heseltine's attempt to raise the issue appears to have been ruled out of order. Thatcher contemplated sacking Heseltine and other means to enforce her will via the invocation of collective discipline, but backed off. However, she was incensed by a letter from Patrick Mayhew, the Solicitor General, warning that the government could not withhold relevant information, including information which would almost certainly help the European bid.

It was in this context that a further confidential letter from Mayhew was leaked. Based in part on new evidence from Colette Bowe, then the press officer involved, Moore describes how No 10 and indeed Thatcher herself were complicit in the leak. She demanded that the letter should be written, No 10 gave clearance to Bowe, and it pronounced its satisfaction afterwards. As Powell put it, "Heseltine tried to deploy the Law Officers and got it right back between the eyes." Heseltine then resigned at a stormy Cabinet meeting, the civil service leak inquiry was unable to pin down the truth, a Parliamentary Committee was prevented from questioning the key official witnesses, Neil Kinnock failed to score an open goal in the Commons and Leon Brittan resigned, in part to protect the Prime Minister.

It is a deeply revealing and inglorious episode in modern government. Moore's verdict is damming: "[Thatcher] described Westland as a crisis created from a small issue by a giant ego", but she never examined what she—also the possessor of a giant ego—had done or failed to do... If the committee had known and published what really happened... it is hard to see how Mrs Thatcher would have been able to remain in office." After Westland, there was a further restriction in the trust and openness around the Prime Minister—a "hardening of the arteries." The stage was being set for the final act.

Jesse Norman MP's Everyman Anthology of Edmund Burke has just been published.