

Book Review: *The Iron Lady*

A brilliant example of a biography, "The Iron Lady" (Macmillan London Limited, 1989) chronicles the enduring impact of one woman with an iron will, determined to champion the cause of her own people and the cause of liberty across the globe. Hugo Young, three time winner of the British Press Awards "Columnist of the Year," relates the lasting impression of Margaret Thatcher upon the social and political landscape of Britain, Europe and the world. As an avid reader of biographies, I have read the life stories of many important persons. I find Young's work a very well-balanced, unbiased and thought-provoking account of the footprint left behind by the former prime minister's march on the path of democratic leadership. This biography is packed with the memorable moments of a legacy penned with unique insight and first-hand information collected over the course of a political columnist's career. It is well worth the time spent to read Young's 546 pages to gain insight into the mind, methods and model of one of the greatest leaders of the 20th century. It is evident that the content of the book flowed from the pen of a journalist well versed in British and global politics. His writing style is such that he adeptly presents complex political issues in a way that is easily understood, by both the highly partisan and apolitical reader, yet is not over simplified or tedious. This reviewer became completely absorbed and spent almost an entire night enfolded in its pages. Hugo Young has triumphed in chronicling the humbling and majestic moments of one woman's struggle to achieve and maintain personal, national and global freedom. His great efforts to produce as unbiased a work as possible are evident. No hesitation is noted when her flaws are laid out for the reader, nor does he hold back from highlighting her moments of victory.

Young separates his chronicle into three parts, each a distinct and defining era in the transformation of a grocer's daughter into a determined and devoted national leader. Part one, "One of Them" (1925-1979), details her education as an industrial chemist and attorney and reveals her father's role (then a Conservative mayor) in the shaping of her political mindset. (The Conservative Party is comparable to the U.S. Republican Party.) Margaret Thatcher was president of the campus Conservative Association while a student at Oxford University. She later ran and lost the race for a parliamentary seat three times before finally being elected as the representative of the Finchley District in at 32 years of age. In the early years as "One of Them," she held to the conventional Conservative Party position and was really quite unremarkable in her political influence until the latter part of this period. In 1976, at the Conservative Party Conference, she delivered a memorable and career-making speech in which she vehemently exposed the evils of communism. It was this speech that, upon falling on the ears of Soviet leaders, earned her the title, "Iron Lady," and cemented her role as party leader, which in turn resulted in her election as the very first female prime minister of Great Britain three years later. She had once said that there would never be a woman P.M. in her lifetime, yet here she was. Young says, "Her victory made her unique not only in the history of Britain, but in that of the Western world" (p.135).

Part two, "Them and Us," records the first four years of the "Iron Lady's" leadership, in which she was beginning to determine a new course, while still within the confines of the standard party philosophy. This was a very difficult time to come to office. Government owned industries were nearly bankrupt; unemployment and social unrest were at extremely high levels. Workers' strikes, riots in the streets and terrorist attacks were commonplace. Margaret Thatcher faced the daunting task of undoing the devastation caused by almost 40 years of socialist oppression. The set backs and opposition she met along the way were faced with an iron determination to do right by her people. When socialists loudly demanded she turn back to the old system, her bold, unbending reply, "this lady's not for turning," provided more reason to call her the "Iron Lady." Young cites the failure of the Thatcher administration, preoccupied with domestic concerns, to respond to warning signs that there was trouble brewing over the Falklands' issue, but then praises her swift response to the Argentinean invasion, calling her "the best kind of soldier" (p.278). His reflection of those events provided more insight into the driving force behind the iron in the lady. "The struggle she said was between good and evil. It went far wider than the Falklands and their 1,800 British people. It was a challenge to the West" (p.273). Thatcher was determined to bring victory to her nation, proclaiming, "It must be ended. It will be ended" (p.273). Mr.

Young also recognized the significance of the war for Thatcher's future. "In the political history of Margaret Thatcher the war played the part of an unqualified triumph. Because it ended in great victory ... it made her position unassailable, both in the party and in the country" (p.258).

Part three, "One of Us" records the years 1983-1987, when Margaret Thatcher's new Conservatism became more defined and separated her from the more moderate-thinking facets of the party. When considering partnership with others in the business of democracy, Margaret Thatcher would consistently inquire, "Is he one of us?" According to Hugo Young, this question embodied Thatcher's determination to surround herself with like-minded people who would assist in fulfilling her vision for the nation. Young also declared, "Margaret Thatcher is the most famous British leader since Winston Churchill. As well as being the only prime minister this century whose name has become synonymous with a political philosophy - 'Thatcherism' has no antecedents - she is the object of a singular fascination all around the world" (preface ix).

Since this book was primarily a look into the political life of the Iron Lady, there were very few references made to her personal relationships, with the exception of the unity of spirit she found with President Reagan. Her husband, Denis Thatcher was only briefly introduced. Young said Mrs. Thatcher found her husband a wise source of support and encouragement for her political ambitions. He, however, had a slightly different outlook on the role of his wife, as contrasted with his own. Denis stated that he felt he was "always one step behind." When Margaret became prime minister, it appeared that her husband desired to distance himself from the realm of the political, but Hugo Young related a humorous, endearing and little-known element of the marriage (p.38). Shortly after the election, she remarked to a reporter, "When I'm in a state, I have no one to turn to except Denis. He puts his arms round me and says, 'Darling, you sound just like Harold Wilson.' And then I always laugh." (Wilson was the socialist P.M. 1964-70 & 1974-76.)

Careful examination and mental exercise in reviewing and contrasting this work with other biographical accounts has led me to conclude that "The Iron Lady" is a masterpiece of the art of the life chronicle. I highly recommend it to anyone with an interest in politics or interest in the Iron Lady herself. Hugo Young has brilliantly memorialized the magnificent contributions of one woman of iron with a singular purpose to proclaim, promote and preserve freedom for all.