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RESPONDING TO MARGARET THATCHER'S DEATH

Louisa Hadley





Responding to Margaret Thatcher's Death

Also by Louisa Hadley

THE FICTION OF A. S. BYATT (2008)

NEO-VICTORIAN FICTION AND HISTORICAL NARRATIVE: The Victorians and Us
(2010)

THATCHER & AFTER: Margaret Thatcher and Her Afterlife in Contemporary Culture
(Edited with Elizabeth Ho, 2010)

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Louisa Hadley
Dawson College, Canada

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Acknowledgements

On 8 April 2013, I woke up to find my inbox and *Facebook* feed filled with the news that Margaret Thatcher had died. In the evening, I appeared on a CTV News Special on Thatcher's life and legacy. My invitation to appear was a direct result of the volume that I co-edited with Elizabeth Ho, *Thatcher & After: Margaret Thatcher and her afterlife in contemporary culture* (2010). I remain grateful to Elizabeth Ho for her collaboration on that project and the further possibilities it has opened up. In particular, the arguments that we forwarded in the introduction to that volume have informed my thinking on Thatcher since.

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Introduction



Abstract: *The introduction traces the key moments of Margaret Thatcher's political career, connecting her policies to the various personae that she adopted or was given. It then examines the shift to a more personal and sympathetic approach to Thatcher after her resignation. The introduction establishes the theoretical framework for the volume; it considers the relationship between private and public in relation to Carole Pateman's theory of the sexual contract and connects this to issues of gender through Heather Nunn's reading of Thatcher's performance of femininity.*

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On 8 April 2013, news agencies around the world reported that Margaret Thatcher, Britain's former Prime Minister, had died from a stroke. In the days between Thatcher's death and her funeral, many column inches and much screen time was devoted to debating her legacy. Much was made of her "historic" position as Britain's first and, to date, only female Prime Minister and as the longest-serving Prime Minister the country had seen for 150 years. However, while there were attempts to position Thatcher in terms of history, some of the reactions belied the fact that she had been out of office for almost a quarter of a century. For some, it was as if Thatcher's death reopened the as-yet unhealed wounds caused by her policies and their after-effects in Britain. As Elizabeth Ho and I argued in the Introduction to *Thatcher & After* (2010), Thatcher and Thatcherism are experienced as a trauma; they "function as a symbolic 'wound' in the contemporary imagination, a palpable point where things can be said to have irrevocably changed" (2). David Cameron's widely reported remark that "We are all Thatcherites now" captures the extent to which Thatcher changed British political and cultural life (Stewart). This assessment positions Thatcher as the "originary" moment of contemporary culture, a view which is reinforced by Cameron's later comments that "she shifted the consensus of British politics" (Stewart). Cameron's remarks echo the recent reinterpretation of Thatcher's policies in documentaries such as Dominic Sandbrook's *The 70s* (2012) and Andrew Marr's *A History of Modern Britain* (2007), which have tended to present them as a necessary and inevitable step in the formation of modern Britain. However, while Britons live in a post-Thatcher world, a situation made more evident in the current policies being followed by the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government, there remains a distinct sense of opposition to the political legacy of Thatcher and Thatcherism, particularly in the areas of the country most affected by her policies. Although it came almost a quarter of a century after she was removed from power, the physical death of Thatcher serves as a symbolic moment which was variously mourned as the passing into history of a "Great Briton" or celebrated as offering the possibility of renewal.

In response to her death, Tony Blair described Margaret Thatcher as a "towering politician". As Prime Minister of the United Kingdom between 1979 and 1990, Margaret Thatcher and the ethos of Thatcherism dominated the 1980s. As Hugo Young remarked on the occasion of Thatcher's resignation, "For better or for worse, this will truly and for ever be called the Thatcher Era" (5). Indeed, as several commentators noted in the wake

of her death, Thatcher is the only British politician to have coined an “-ism” to describe the political ideology that her governments promoted. This term indicates the extent to which the personal and the political are imbricated in considerations of Thatcher. The force of Thatcher’s personality and her preference for a more presidential rather than cabinet style of government means that the person became synonymous with the policies. During her time in office, both supporters and detractors mediated their responses to Thatcher’s policies through the person of Thatcher. While in power, Thatcher was either loved or reviled, yet this polarisation in responses to Thatcher became more muted in the years following her resignation. As an old lady who was increasingly removed from public life, Thatcher’s image in the mainstream media became much more sympathetic.

Within this context, the hateful and abusive comments that appeared from some quarters in response to her death seem baffling. In the days following her death, the official public discourse repeatedly emphasised Thatcher’s position as the longest-serving British Prime Minister of the twentieth-century, her almost unequalled success in three consecutive general elections, and the fact that she was never defeated at the polls. These facts are constructed into an overarching narrative which seems to suggest a resounding public endorsement of her; however, it glosses over the fluctuations in her position and popularity during her time in office. It is important to place in contrast to the facts about her longevity, statistics regarding her popularity: despite winning three successive elections, Thatcher never achieved more than 60% of the popular vote and indeed at one point had the lowest approval rating of any previous Prime Minister. Similarly, the public discourse surrounding Thatcher and Thatcherism suggests an inevitability to her impact on British politics that in some senses closes down any opposition to her policies and legacy by preventing consideration of an alternative. In contrast, then, it is necessary to consider the emergence of Thatcherism within the wider historical context and to trace the role of contingency and chance in Thatcher’s rise to power. Thatcher’s death reignited long-standing debates about Thatcher and Thatcherism and repositioned her as the polarising figure she had been during her time in office. In order to make sense of the extremes of opinion that appeared after her death, it is necessary to first consider her political career and the impact of the policies her government implemented. Given the intimate connection between the person and the policies, this will be done through a consideration of

the shifting personae of Thatcher, some of which she adopted, others of which she had foisted upon her.

Rise to power: 1948–1979

In Thatcher's rise to power, it is possible to trace the shifting attitudes towards women in politics. In 1948, the young Margaret Roberts was selected to be the Conservative candidate for Dartford. She was defeated in the 1950 General Election and her political career took a back-seat as she married and gave birth to twins, Mark and Carol. Although she was keen to return to politics a few years later, she was passed over several times – in part because of the resistance among the male-dominated selection committees to putting her name forward (Gover 16). However, Thatcher's initial lack of progress within the Conservative Party could be equally attributed to her self-identification as “a grocer's daughter”, which jarred with the upper-class sensibilities of many in the party. It was not until 1959 that Thatcher's opportunity came when she stood as the Conservative candidate for Finchley in the General Election, winning the seat with a majority of 16,260 votes (Gover 17). Once in Parliament, Thatcher began to be noticed and she advanced to the front bench as the Parliamentary Under-secretary at the Ministry of Pensions and National Insurance (1961–1964), followed by positions as Conservative Spokesman on Housing and Land (1964–1966) and Shadow Transport Secretary and Shadow Education Minister while the Conservatives were in Opposition.

When the Conservatives were elected in 1970, Thatcher became the Secretary of State for Education and Science in Ted Heath's government. As Gover notes, this decision was at least partly determined by Thatcher's gender since “convention dictated that the Ministry of Education was the domain of the female far more than many other ministerial posts” (19). This position brought Thatcher to national attention when she introduced a policy to abolish free school milk for pupils aged seven to eleven. Although Thatcher was implementing cuts imposed by Heath, the policy was inextricably associated with the person of Thatcher and she acquired various derogatory nicknames, the most lasting of which was “Margaret Thatcher, Milk Snatcher”. Gender played a key role in the hatred aimed at Thatcher since there seemed to be not only resistance to the policy itself, but also incredulity at the fact that it was implemented