

# Review

**Richard Vinen, *Thatcher's Britain The Politics and Social Upheaval of the 1980s*, Pocket Books, London, 2010, 403pp + x. £8.99.**

Richard Vinen's *Thatcher's Britain* looks to usher in a new era in the historiography of Margaret Thatcher's Prime Ministership and late twentieth century British history. While attracting a number of scholarly works on the topic of 'Thatcherism' at the time, the long reign of Thatcher as leader of the Conservative Party, in Opposition (1975 – 1979) and then as Prime Minister (1979 -1990), has received little attention since. As Vinen notes, the major pieces on Thatcherism were all published in the final years of her rule and only a few have been published since. (p. 2-3) In this regard, Vinen's book is to be welcomed as an interesting addition to the literature and its scope makes it far superior to the works by E.H.H. Green or Brendan Evans, both published earlier in the decade. However the book was published in late 2009, just before the first major release of papers by the National Archives after thirty years from the first year of Thatcher's electoral victory in 1979, so as we read Vinen's book, we should be aware that new information is now available that is absent in his work.

What Vinen does well is provide the reader with a 'long' history of Thatcher and Thatcherism, showing both the origins of Margaret Thatcher, famously known as the grocer's daughter from Grantham, and of the political ideas that formulated what is described as 'Thatcherism'. Vinen is able to demonstrate that the ideas that informed Thatcher's agenda as Opposition leader and Prime Minister can be traced back to the turbulent period of the late 1960s and early 1970s and did not appear as an entirely new

phenomenon when Thatcher entered 10 Downing St in May 1979, but also demonstrates that Thatcher's politics were not fully formed and crystallised at this time either, with 'Thatcherism' being a nebulous mixture of ideas that developed over her eleven years in office. Vinen is able to show that while Thatcher declared in 1980 that she 'was not for turning', her leadership was very pragmatic, especially during her first term, when many of her colleagues doubted her ability to steer the Tories through the British Steel strike, rising unemployment and the Medium Term Financial Strategy. It was not until the tripartite of victories – the Falklands in 1982, the General Election in 1983 and the defeat of the Miners' Strike in 1985 – that Thatcherism developed a more coherent set of ideas and political agenda, with Vinen showing that her image as the Hayekian inspired neo-liberal warrior was manufactured over a very long period. But at the same time, Vinen examines how Thatcher was able to harness previous Conservative and right-wing ideas within her framework and his chapter on Powellism (asking the question whether Enoch Powell espoused 'Thatcherism before Thatcher') is possibly one of the most valuable in the book, and read alongside Richard Seymour's *The Meaning of David Cameron* to understand the genesis of post-1970s Conservative Party.

Other valuable chapters are 'Some Thoughts on Sources' and the discussion of the term 'Thatcherism' in the Introduction and Conclusion. Vinen's analysis of the scholarship on Thatcherism is in-depth and quite nuanced, with a refreshing look at the origins of the phrase 'Thatcherism', including a nice evaluation of the contribution that Stuart Hall (and the rest of the people at *Marxism Today*) had on the discourse. However there are some events in the history of Thatcherite Britain that may be construed as overlooked or sidelined in Vinen's account, such as the 1981 inner-city riots or

the 'Poll Tax' demonstrations. While Vinen is able to depict the vulnerability of Thatcher's government in the early 1980s as the 'wets' questioned her monetarist strategy, one of the fallouts of this strategy, the riots that swept across Britain in 1981 is barely mentioned. Towards the end of Thatcher's reign, Vinen does discuss the community charge introduced in Scotland in 1987 and Britain in 1989 (better known as the 'Poll Tax'), but has little discussion of the fallout from this policy and the widespread protest against it. Many would argue that the mobilisation against the Poll Tax was a tipping point for the end to Thatcher's term as Prime Minister, but for Vinen, much more emphasis is placed upon the emergence of an anti-European agenda inside the Conservative Party that destabilised Thatcher's leadership. Nonetheless these 'gaps' in Vinen's history are not to detract from the overall quality of his account.

Vinen states in the final pages of his book that his account has a 'provisional quality' (p. 319), while historians start to uncover the archival material that will be released over the next decade. Many of his suppositions may be challenged or overturned by the archival material, but that is not to say that his work will become obsolete. Most likely Vinen's account will become an agenda-setter for historians, using his history, pieced together by a commendable analysis of the already publicly available sources, as the base for their archival enquiries. Vinen's book is necessary reading for historians interested in contemporary British political history, not just for its easy readability, but also for those interested in contesting many of the preconceptions of the historiography of Thatcherism, possibly even contesting Vinen himself.

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