

✚ Film

## Dementia and Mrs Thatcher



**The Iron Lady**

Directed by Phyllida Lloyd.  
Produced by Damian Jones,  
Anita Overland. Pathé Films,  
2012. On general release in the UK  
<http://www.theironladymovie.co.uk/blog>

See Online for webvideo

We tend to form our political views and prejudices in early adulthood. Margaret Thatcher became leader of the UK's Conservative Party soon after I left school, and Prime Minister half way through my clinical training. By the time I had started to train in psychiatry she was the dominant political figure of the day, so much so that myself and two colleagues decided to see if she really was as memorable as we thought. The Maudsley Hospital had used the same rating scale for people with dementia for 30 years, so we looked at the replies to the question "Can you name the Prime Minister?" and compared the results for Thatcher, Harold Wilson, and Harold Macmillan, matching for length of premiership. Maggie was not only recalled at cognitive levels that precluded remembering her long-serving predecessors, but she was the only one who was easier to recall than the Queen. Our work was published in the Christmas issue of the *BMJ* in 1985, and it was my first ever paper. We called it "Dementia and Mrs Thatcher".

Now the focus has shifted from the impact of Mrs Thatcher on dementia, to the impact of the disease on her. In *The Iron Lady*, Phyllida Lloyd has cast Meryl Streep as Thatcher, an inspired

choice. The film opens with the now frail and elderly Mrs Thatcher evading her minders to buy a carton of milk in a local shop—a neat allusion that will however be lost on anyone neither British nor of a certain age. Before she became Prime Minister she was often called "Thatcher the Milk Snatcher", a reference to her stopping free school milk as Education Secretary in 1971.

**"There have been better dramatic tellings of Mrs Thatcher's early years, and better portrayals of the ravages of dementia."**

The narrative is broken up into a series of short vignettes that bear only a passing resemblance to the historical facts, something that Mrs Thatcher's contemporaries have been quick to point out, perhaps irked by the fact that they are portrayed as sexist oafs or supine lackeys, mere foils to the Iron Lady's will. Seminal events speed past, devoid of any political context. Perhaps the intention is to convey the coarsening of memory in Alzheimer's disease, but more likely it is aimed at the US market, where Thatcher continues to be remembered largely for her part in

the closing stages of the Cold War. One hopes that the transatlantic audience will not notice the strange propensity of the inhabitants of Grantham, Mrs Thatcher's Lincolnshire birthplace, to speak in Yorkshire accents.

Of course, Streep is magnificent. But the film fails to convince. It is not intended to be a film about the life and times of Mrs Thatcher. But the events that shaped her, and that she in turn shaped, are so powerful that they distract from the sad and moving account of what we are led to believe is her present. There have been better dramatic tellings of Mrs Thatcher's early years, and better portrayals of the ravages of dementia. Indeed, Jim Broadbent—well cast as Dennis to Streep's Margaret—delivered two of them, once as a victim in the 2011 BBC drama *The Exile*, and also as a carer in *Iris*, the film of John Bayley's memoir of his wife, Iris Murdoch. One would learn more about the tragedy of dementia from either of those sources, or novels such as Samantha Harvey's *The Wilderness*, than from *The Iron Lady*.

For my generation Mrs Thatcher remains the archetypal figure, impossible to ignore, impossible to forget. Like most people, I can remember exactly how I heard the news that she was resigning—a driver's announcement on the Northern Line, greeted by cheers and applause. To this day we talk about what made her tick. That she was a force of nature was never in doubt, but whether this was for good or ill still divides. But you would learn none of that from *The Iron Lady*. The film tells us little about dementia that we did not know, reminds us why Streep is at the top of the acting profession, but has nothing to say about how Margaret Thatcher achieved the same dominance in politics.

Simon Wessely  
[simon.wessely@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:simon.wessely@kcl.ac.uk)

