

# CASTLE:

'Stuff his bloody title' said Barbara Castle, when Black Rod told her she'd have to wear a hat to accept her peerage. Liz Thomson meets the feisty Baroness, who reveals all in her forthcoming memoirs

When Barbara Castle retired after 45 years as an MP and MEP, she accepted a much-deserved peerage. For some, that acceptance was a touch surprising and it has to be said that even she had her doubts. "Black Rod said to me, 'You've got to wear the full rig-out'. I told him that in that case he could stuff his bloody title! Anyway, we read through all these old books and in the end we compromised — I wore the robes but not that silly hat." Thus was Baroness Castle of Blackburn inducted into the House of Lords: with her familiar hairdo intact.

Castle tells the story with relish. It is, after all, one more victory for a woman who, from her earliest days, has argued for what she believes in. "Do you know what I think?" she asks rhetorically, over coffee in the Lords tea room. "I think there should be a sort of *noble Whipsnade* where tourists could pay to see their Lordships in all that get-up. It has no place in a modern parliament."

It's impossible to imagine Baroness Thatcher of Kesteven expressing such irreverent sentiments though both women, in their different ways, are a law unto themselves. Now 82, Barbara Castle was probably born a few years too early to have assumed the leadership of the Labour Party and, as she writes, it did not anyway occur to her to stand. Nevertheless, she was delighted at Margaret Thatcher's accession to the Tory leadership. Eighteen years later, she is still more willing to praise than bury Thatcher — even to express a womanly, sisterly sympathy at the circumstances of her demise. "I feel sorry for any human being in that situation. One could see her *writhing* in agony, and then she rallied herself with great dignity. And that is a very difficult thing to do. But the *drama* of it, oh the drama of it!" We have yet to discover whether the Blue Baroness can be so magnanimous.

Certainly, Castle's memoir, aptly titled *Fighting All The Way*, is a very human account of a very full life and it seems set to become that rare thing — a political autobiography that transcends political allegiance as it climbs the bestseller lists. "I wanted it to be a social history, and yet they kept saying: we don't want a history of the Labour Party — it's Barbara Castle we want to hear about. But I was determined to get the social history across for the simple reason that there's a whole lot of recent history that young people of today know nothing about. I want to get over to them that it was really a quite dramatic period. I was determined to write this book, though as long as I was in the European Parliament it was impossible. So I had to retire — I could have stayed on, mind you," she adds, heading off on one of many tangents that always, eventually, leads back to the point under discussion. "But I had to write this book. I kept saying to my doctors: if anything goes wrong with me, just keep me alive until I finish this book. Then I don't care. I felt I had a duty to put on record, hopefully in a readable form and a personalized form, things that to me are just facts of life but which are unknown territory to most people today."

And it is a remarkable story, both personally and politically. One of three children, young Barbara Betts grew up in Yorkshire amid an intensely political family, where what little money they had was spent on books for her father. "My parents were politically active and although my father was a civil servant and couldn't engage in any public politics, our alignments were clear as daylight. I remember in the miners' lock-out of 1920 my mother served meals to the miners' kids, my father couldn't address a public meeting but he would use this play, *The Strike*, which was about a strike, the workers versus the boss. Miners were *magic* to me," Castle recalls, a smile



spreading rapidly across her ever-mobile face. "There were no pithead baths at that time, so you'd see them on top of the tram, straight from the pits, coal black. They were men of great *mystery* and *power*, going down into the bowels of the earth. And, of course, they were playing a real part in the battle for working-class rights in those days."

But the seriousness of purpose was offset by lots of family fun. "I was a tomboy. I was always in trouble at school, always had a gang of more timid spirits who I suppose were attracted to the naughtier ones. I was always getting into scrapes. I wasn't a prodigy or anything of that kind."

Naughty she may have been, but Castle always had her career plans. "There were only two things I wanted to do — politics or writing." She went up to St Hugh's, Oxford, in 1929, studying French before swapping to PPE, but agrees that the experience shaped her less than it did many others. "Definitely, I can never understand where it got its great reputation from. I seemed to me a parochial little enclave," she continues, acknowledging that it is radically different today. Up against girls from Roedean and Cheltenham Ladies' College who mimicked her northern vowels, she broadened her accent still further. "I had many great advantages from my family and I had some great disadvantages. For one thing, we were always short of money and I never had pretty clothes and I never had a tennis racket and I'd have given my eye teeth for a bike. They're the things you remember. But at the same time I went up to Oxford with a deep sense of internal pride. I was unsure of myself socially in all sorts of ways. At the same time, I had this curious sense of superiority coming from high standards. There were people who didn't have the literary high standards, the social high standards... People who stood up and sang 'Land of Hope and Glory' were just *heathens, philistines!* There were so many philistines in the world — people who'd never read a decent book, never listened to a decent argument, never listened to their consciences, never made a sacrifice for anyone. (*Bangs the table*) I had no time for them!"

Down from Oxford and disappointed with a third, Castle was lifted out of her gloom by an affair with William Mellor, a political activist and a married man. Her parents were "a bit taken aback" but accepted the situation because "William was such an honourable man, so frank and open with them." Did she feel guilty? "No, I didn't feel guilty, but I couldn't have forced him into a divorce. I couldn't face riding roughshod over the wife's rights." The affair ended only with Mellor's sudden death, and her parents' tolerance is perhaps understandable in light of her father's own extra-marital dalliance. "It nearly killed my mother when she found out but she fought back and they were closer than ever when Dad died." Was she shocked? "Well, surprised. I don't think we had conventional morals, you see. My father was a Rabelasian puritan. He loved *sensual* things. It was a bit out of character but I think his children could understand it."

In London in the mid-Thirties, she worked for the Socialist League, befriending the likes of Michael Foot, and eeked out a living in journalism. In 1937 she was elected to St Pancras Borough Council and, during the War, was a local air-raid warden. "I was *terrified* but I soon learned that there is one antidote to fear and that is to be busy, and particularly to have responsibility for someone else."

The 1942 Beveridge Report fired her enthusiasm. Addressing the 1944 Labour Party Conference on that very subject, she came to the attention of Ted Castle, night editor of the *Daily Mirror*, who put her on the front page. Months later, the couple married and, in 1945, Barbara Castle finally arrived, elected Member of Parliament for Blackburn East.

"This myth, this legend has grown up that Labour Governments always fail while Thatcherism was a roaring success. People don't know what was achieved by that 1945 Labour Government against a background of total ruin, of devastated houses and towns, and two-and-a-half ounces of cheese a week. I was desperately anxious to tell the story of Lend-Lease — what the Americans did to us was absolutely bloody criminal." Her fist once more thumps the table. "Oh, they introduced the Marshall Plan but it

was too late to repair the damage done to the Labour Government... You can't understand the present unless you understand the past."

The years in Opposition were spent travelling, reporting on the injustices of the world, from Cyprus to Africa, so that when in 1964 the Tories were burned in the white heat of Harold Wilson's promised technological revolution, Barbara Castle found herself well equipped to take up office as Minister of Overseas Development. Then, in 1965, Wilson told her he needed "a tiger in my tank" and sent her to the Department of Transport where her lasting monuments are the breathalyser and seat belts.

"It was a satisfying period," she recalls, her face once more aglow. "I loved the challenge: how do you come to terms with the motor car without allowing it to take over our small island and ruin it? That battle's gone; it ended when I left," she sighs, adding how proud she is of her Transport Act, which saved the canals and made sense of the railways, locally and nationally. "By God, I'm waiting to get my teeth into the Railways Bill when it comes here," she spits.

And then, of course, there was *In Place of Strife*, the White Paper on trades union reform that she drafted in 1969 during her period as Secretary of State for Employment and Productivity. "That was the nastiest job of all," she muses, adding that had the Labour Party and the unions accepted her proposals life would be very different today. In Labour's last period of Government, she was Secretary of State for Social Services and battled over reforms to health care. Then her decade in Brussels changed her views on the EC but did not allay her fears. "I believe there's an optimum size for effective democratic control," she reasons.

What, then, of her political friends and foes? "Macmillan was a cunning old buzzard. The actor-manager *par excellence*. He knew how to make a popular appeal. The one I most feared as a possible Tory leader was Iain Macleod. I had enormous respect for him. He was a subtle taunter, not a blunderbuss." Wilson, a Yorkshire kindred spirit, "drove me up the wall more than once, as my full Cabinet *Diaries* show. I was very fond of him. People used to say he was without principle but he was one of the most principled men I know. His principle was that he was going to keep the Party together at any cost to himself." Though she admits to grave doubts as to the conduct of the last Election campaign which put him into a straitjacket, Castle believes that Neil Kinnock would have made a good prime minister. She is venomous about what she calls "the systematic denigration" of a decent man — a task for which she holds "my pet hate" Chris Patten wholly responsible. "He'll make an absolute balls-up of Hong Kong," she adds with satisfaction. And John Major — what of him? There is a long pause. "I don't know. Thatcher without the Tabasco. He's just *mush*, that's all he is. I never despised Thatcher but I despise Major."

But Labour can and will fight back to win an overall majority. Tactical voting is only sensible but as for pacts and PR — *never!* "The Lib Dems are *too* anxious to be the balancing power... I object to giving power to Paddy Ashdown. PR should be defined as power to Paddy Ashdown," she rails, "and he is the man I would trust *least* with the future of this country."

And with that, Baroness Castle of Blackburn, resplendent in a natty purple suit with matching shoes and handbag, drains the last of her coffee and heads for the Chamber, ready to inflict lasting damage to some younger but infinitely less quick-witted noble fiend.

*Fighting All The Way* is published on June 11 by Macmillan at £20.