

Lord Lexden

Conservative peer and historian

Harriet Cullen has produced a candid portrait of a sharp-tongued socialite and newspaper proprietor's wife – her mother, Lady Pamela Berry

Lady Pamela Berry

Passion, Politics and Power

By **Harriet Cullen**
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From the early 1950s until the 1980s, leading politicians of all persuasions flocked to the parties given by Lady Pamela Berry, a staunch Tory born in 1914, at her homes in Barton Street and



1957 Pamela Berry with Mike Todd and Elizabeth Taylor

Cowley Street – little more than a stone's throw from the Houses of Parliament.

Yet few were loud in her praise. Her sharp tongue, which was rarely under control, and overbearing manner caused much offence. She suited those like the novelist Evelyn Waugh, who shared her taste for disparaging people in stylish language. She was good at that.

This haughty married

woman could not even win the applause of her long-term lover, the controversial journalist and broadcaster, Malcolm Muggeridge. He wrote in his diary: "She is not clever, not pretty, not nice." Oblivious to this unkindness, she told him: "You were my life and purpose."

Later she threw herself at another conceited journalist, Paul Johnson, who abandoned his left-wing views and became a rapt admirer of Margaret Thatcher, whom she disliked.

Her parties were well attended largely because she had influence in Fleet Street. In 1954 her husband, Michael Berry, later Lord

Hartwell, became editor-in-chief of the *Daily Telegraph*, which was part of his family's newspaper empire. At that time some 1.3m copies were sold every day to the paper's loyal Tory readers.

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In the early years of their marriage, the couple sometimes attacked each other physically. By the 1950s

the storms were over. She was plainly the predominant partner in their home life, forcing her husband and family to eat meals out of doors in all weathers.

Much to her satisfaction, she became the talk of the town when the *Telegraph* astonished its Tory readership by suddenly launching an attack on Anthony Eden and his government in January 1956, several months before the Suez crisis. An editorial which gained instant notoriety accused Eden of failing to provide "the smack of firm government".

The editor's wife was known to regard the prime minister with contempt, and so the paper's grave disloyalty to his government was naturally attributed to her. It made her reputation as a woman of power.

Did she deserve it? Clarissa Eden (whose biography I reviewed recently) made known her deep hatred for Pamela Berry as the author of the *Telegraph's* vendetta. But this book, written by the latter's candid, often critical daughter, makes

clear that she was far too ill-disciplined to organise any kind of campaign. She had "vehement opinions" with which she constantly pestered her husband, but

he remained "his own man" where the running of his paper was concerned. Her influence, though significant, was less formidable than many supposed.

Harriet Cullen writes with the endearing gusto that was so characteristic of her restless mother in all aspects of her life. Overall Pamela Berry probably did more good than harm, particularly in the arts world where her enthusiasm and social contacts made her a distinct asset as a trustee of the British Museum in the years before her death in 1982 at the age of 67.

It is hard, however, to forgive this Tory grande dame for her snobbish description of Margaret Thatcher, who would go on to become a great prime minister, as "a mere fishwife".

