



Elizabeth Woodville: Mother of the Princes in the Tower

David Baldwin

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This is the first new account of Elizabeth's life for over fifty years and David Baldwin sets out to reveal the true story of this complex and intriguing woman. Hers was certainly a dramatic life with dizzying reversals of fortune; from poverty in 1461 to queenship in 1464, followed by deposition, restoration, and conflicts with Richard III and Henry VII before spending her final years in religious seclusion. There is also the issue of her two sons, the infamous 'Princes in the Tower', and the controversy surrounding their disappearance.

Elizabeth Woodville: Mother of the Princes in the Tower Details

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Finuala says

An enjoyable book by an author new to me. The highest praise I can give is that, having finished this, I went searching my shelves to see if I had another by David Baldwin; I don't, but this will soon be rectified.

Women's stories are hard to find, particularly those who lived from the 16th century backwards in time. However, David Baldwin has scoured the annals of the 15th century to collect and collate what could be found on Elizabeth's life, and to discover what can be inferred from the stories of her family. In this, I feel he has been successful. I feel I know her better than I did and if I'm left with more questions, that too is a success of sorts.

I do urge the reader to explore the appendices. One covers the fate of Elizabeth's sons by Edward IV and a better, less biased synopsis of the events surrounding their disappearance I have not read. Another uncovers a possible, indeed likely, author of the Croyland Chronicle.

A satisfying read.

James says

Elizabeth Woodville is someone who has received much attention throughout the last five hundred and more years since her death, a woman 'vilified and championed by her contemporaries' as the author puts it. Like certain other people in history, such as Anne Boleyn, Richard III, Henry VIII, Oliver Cromwell, Charles I- to name just a few- Elizabeth Woodville divides opinions from people. Often, she is seen as a proud and haughty woman, scheming to get ahead in the difficult power struggles during the period of the Wars of the Roses, in which the houses of Lancaster and York, fought on the various battlefields for the throne of England. A woman who manipulated her husband (Edward IV) to do her bidding, and advance her upstart family to high positions at court.

In this biography, David Baldwin seeks to uncover the real Elizabeth, was she a proud and haughty schemer? Or was she simply someone who fell in love with a man, she only could of dreamed of marrying. Baldwin divides his biography into the following sections; from her 'early life', to her first years as Queen, the disaster of her husband's brief overthrow, 'Elizabeth the Queen', 'Elizabeth and Richard III', 'Elizabeth and Henry VII' and 'Elizabeth's Reputation'. In the Appendix section, Baldwin looks at Elizabeth's descendants (seven of whom either became Queen Regnants or Consorts), the memorials throughout England to Elizabeth and the Woodville family, 'The Woodville's and Witchcraft', Elizabeth's 'diary', 'Elizabeth and Jocelyn of Hardwick', 'The Fate of the Princes in the Tower', among others.

Baldwin acknowledges that there are areas in which we have no records of- and to his credit he does not try to 'fill in the gaps'- and it is fair to say that he his sympathetic to Elizabeth Woodville, and takes into account the period in which she lived. He his right in that she would have been foolish not to advance her family's fortune, and he does dismiss the allegations that she was haughty and arrogant, with good evidence, and instead, presents good evidence of a charitable lady, with a good sense of humour. Elizabeth, as someone on my Facebook page so brilliantly put 'rose higher than all her peers, and fell greater than any of them'. She is a woman who will likely always divide people, yet in fact, she was not quite the seductive schemer she has often been wrongly credit as.

Marie Z. Johansen says

I just got David Baldwin's "Elizabeth Woodville" from the library through inter-library loan. I am thoroughly enjoying it! Lots of great genealogy information that helps to sort out some of the complicated inter-related family lines. Mr. Baldwin also introduces lots of direct quotes from relevant documents that are, generally speaking, easier to read than I had thought they would be. Interesting to see how the language has morphed since then. Excellent book for anyone interested in the realities of Elizabeth's life. What a woman she must have been!

Deborah says

After reading this book, I feel I know only slightly more about Elizabeth Woodville than I did when I started. The book is chock-full of facts about events and people around Elizabeth, but precious little information about her. It's not an easy read, either, thanks to the author's insistence upon using medieval spelling and grammar and not clearly identifying various dukes and earls. I am by no means an academic or an expert on this period of history so it could very well be that this book is simply over my head and if I were better educated, it would all be perfectly understandable. If, like me, you're not a hard-core historian, I would advise choosing another book or doing lots of background research before taking this one on.

Katherine says

Loved this book! Not only was Baldwin thorough, but I felt that he put a lot of effort into producing the most factual account of Woodville's life and circumstances. He was comfortable to plainly state when the information just wasn't available as well as pointing out the flaws and discrepancies of other accounts. It gives me confidence in the quality and legitimacy of his work. This was a very enjoyable book to read!

Stephanie Miller says

I read this book hoping to get a clearer picture of Elizabeth Woodville, but i still found myself lost as to who she was. I was more caught up in the political history of the late 15th century and drowning in a list of names and found myself very confused as to who was who. I understand reliable information is scant on this topic, but i was really hoping for better.

Kelly Dowling says

There is just not very muchb contemporary source material on poor Elizabeth, but David Baldwin makes some well researched guesses and it's a far more sympathetic treatment than she usually receives from biographers. Believe it or not, it seems like Shakespeare's version of the lady, plucky, intelligent, forced to make horrible decisions in a series of dangerous circumstances, may be fairly accurate. At least the populace

of England seemed to like her, which is more than you can say for poor Margaret of Anjou!

Heather says

I enjoyed this biography. It was a swift read, and covered most everything I already knew about Elizabeth. However, the rich finds (for me) came in the appendices. Baldwin includes some interesting material about Elizabeth Woodville (not all of it verified, he acknowledges), but excellent for historiographical purposes.

Baldwin takes a pretty hard line against Richard III (as biographers of Elizabeth Woodville tend to do, I've found) but I appreciate that he acknowledges that other players also wanted the princes in the Tower dead, notably the Duke of Buckingham.

Overall, an excellent introduction to anyone who wants to know more about Elizabeth Woodville.

Nikki says

Despite liking one of David Baldwin's other books, I actually found this one really really tedious. It's just a procession of facts with precious little interpretation, and nothing I hadn't gleaned from mere chapters in books like Queens Consort (Lisa Hilton). Not really recommended unless you need a painstakingly in depth study of Elizabeth Woodville.

Debra Cook says

I really didn't like this book all that much because I wanted to learn more about Elizabeth Woodville and what I got was info on the times and her husband's fight to keep the throne. No word on if she knew or thought what had happened to her sons or how she survived periods of time I already knew about from the Historical fiction book THE WHITE QUEEN. Why do authors say its on a subject but it really isn't.

Jodi says

Baldwin takes an angle not often concentrated with Elizabeth Woodville--the Princes in the Tower are usually their own subject matter of books and articles. Admittedly, the majority of the book covers Elizabeth's earlier life but enough is devoted to the decision to relinquish Richard, Duke of York to join his brother, Edward, the Prince of Wales into the care of Richard, Duke of Gloucester (later Richard III). What a difficult choice for a mother with several other children to protect let alone a Queen having to make political decisions for the good of the country as well.

Michael Cayley says

An attempt at a sympathetic biography of Edward IV's queen. It is inevitably hamstrung - as are biographies

of most medieval women - by limitations in the sources and information available, and the book is filled out with a certain amount of surmise and supposition. Parts of it are descriptions of key events of the time, with little or no mention of Elizabeth Woodville herself. David Baldwin seeks to defend Elizabeth from the usual charge that she favoured a clan of grasping relatives. As in his biography of Richard III, he seems to lean too readily to the view that Richard III had the Princes in the Tower put to death.

Fergie says

****3 1/2 stars**** A thoughtful, sympathetic biography of the unfairly maligned England's Queen Elizabeth, Consort to King Edward IV from 1464 until his death in 1483. This was the famed time in English history known as the War of the Roses. Elizabeth, the White Queen of York, was wife to the first king of the Yorkist supporters. Baldwin does his best to sort through the old evidence, attempting to paint one of the most accurate portraits of the Queen to date. For most of his endeavor, I think he succeeds.

This is certainly not a quick or easy read. Baldwin's research is meticulous, but the result, while compellingly intriguing, is somewhat weighed down by the burdensome Middle English language used during the mid-fifteenth century in which he writes. To a modern reader not versed in the English language of the Middle Ages, these passages, while understandable if read with care, are, nonetheless, at times, tedious. With that said, I understand the inclusion of these sections. Baldwin, perhaps more than any other modern historian, is valiant in his efforts to stay authentic to the time period of his subject and the period in which she lived.

Like fellow historian Arlene Okerlund's biography of Elizabeth Woodville, David Baldwin's Queen Elizabeth fares well. She's shown in a sympathetic light, but unlike Okerlund, I believe Baldwin makes somewhat grasping suppositions towards the end of his biography in his attempt to connect circumstances with assumptions. I believe the conclusions he makes about Elizabeth after Richard III's defeat at Bosworth could be deemed as conjecture at best. Even before that time, Baldwin shows his willingness to base conclusions on arguments which stand on possibilities and circumstantial evidence more than any other reliable factors. This, in and of itself, would be no different than what other historians of that time period (including Okerlund) have supposed considering the limited surviving evidence, but after having read both Okerlund's and Baldwin's biographies, it seems Baldwin's is more reaching in his conclusions, and, therefore, I find those conclusions not as probable and his arguments certainly less compelling. One major case in point -- Baldwin expostulates the possibility (and indeed his conclusion) that Elizabeth plotted to depose her son-in-law, Henry VII so as to re-establish herself to be in a position, once again, of power. His "proof" for this is stated as -- Elizabeth's retirement and subsequent removal of lands came at the same time of the first major rebellion against Henry. Baldwin suggests that it would make sense that the historically anonymous, politically connected supporter must have been Elizabeth and that Henry, discovering this plot on the part of his mother-in-law, must have stripped her of her lands and forced her to a retirement from court to a nearby Abbey as punishment. Baldwin offers no documented evidence to support his theory. This supposition is even more questionable when the reader considers that Baldwin had used much of the book up to that point to propose that Elizabeth was not the power-hungry, ambitious, politically savvy Queen that history (thanks in part to propaganda postulated by Richard III) has been deemed as fact -- when it has been shown by Okerlund and Baldwin himself to be pure slander. In fact, Baldwin supposes that one of the reasons Elizabeth lost her sons, her reputation, and her rights as Dowager Queen at the hands of Richard III during the political maneuvering that followed her husband's death was because she lacked the ruthless understanding needed to succeed in the harsh world of royal politics. As Baldwin himself states, Elizabeth was sinned against much more than she sinned, in large part, because of the naive, but well-meaning assumptions she held.

Historical fiction writer of this period, Philippa Gregory has been known to use some of the suppositions put forth by Baldwin in this biography of Elizabeth Woodville. Indeed, it's been documented that Gregory used part of the historical research results of Baldwin's in her own writings of *The White Queen & The White Princess* -- novels about Elizabeth and her daughter Elizabeth of York. This point notwithstanding, Gregory takes divergent views, arriving at different conclusions. While she agrees with Baldwin's assertion that Elizabeth plotted to dethrone Henry, she suggests the only viable reason that would justify Elizabeth supporting removing her daughter from the throne she herself once occupied was because the Dowager Queen must have believed that one of her sons survived and was not killed as publicly thought at the time. Gregory proposes that the only basis for Elizabeth's support of any plot against her son-in-law must have been to place her son, the rightful heir, on the English throne. This is where she and Baldwin part views. Baldwin believes the Princes in the Tower were indeed killed, but his reasoning for Elizabeth's motive to support a rebellion against her son-in-law must have been steeped in her own ambition for power as well as due to a singular dislike for Henry's mother, Margaret Beaufort; a point that seems even less credible when many other historians have stated their belief that Elizabeth's supposed animosity for the King's mother is pure conjecture -- the two had a long history of friendship. Baldwin's belief in Elizabeth's supposed plot against her son-in-law, King Henry VII, while not as far-fetched as Gregory's, nonetheless, tends to fall just as short.

All in all, in spite of what I see as flaws in his conclusions, I do believe Baldwin has done a fine job giving what is most probably an overall accurate description of this most slandered queen. He can be forgiven for arriving at certain explanations, because the reader can never truly arrive with any degree of certainty at a definitive answer to certain questions that still abound. Unless new evidence is found to shed light on these questions, students of history will need to rely on historians like Baldwin & Okerlund -- those more verse and knowledgeable of the time than many who arrived at competing conclusions before them. At the very least, Baldwin has made a more than informed, honest effort to seek the truth in as an objective way as possible. As the facts seem to point out, Elizabeth Woodville, the mother of the tragic Princes in the Tower, was a captivating, cultured, intelligent woman -- one who served her realm with dignity and grace befitting her role. When she found herself out of her depth within the political intrigues of the court after her husband's death, she used her instincts, courage, and determination to survive in a world that was out of her control using the same dignity and grace in which she lived as queen.

Oliver says

I respect and admire this lady so much, and this book really helped me to know her better. Elizabeth lived an extraordinary (and tragic) life. I just wish history had remembered her more kindly.

Reggie says

Not for the casual historian.

This book is chocked full of information which was well researched. It's perfect for any serious history student. I'd give the informational content five stars. But it's not at all easy to read.

The writing style is very "professional", meaning it reads like a university professor would sound. There are many quotes from 15th century manuscripts and letters (which is great), but the original phonetic spelling was kept, making deciphering the text tedious (unless you like that sort of thing, in which case this is the book for you).

The other problem I have is the physical layout of the book. There is little "white space" in the hardback and even less in the paperback. If you have a problem with letters blurring together when you're reading (you know who you are), make sure and get the hardback edition.

If Alison Weir is your favorite Tudor Historian, you probably will have a hard time with this book. If you're looking for serious study material, this is perfect.
