



*The Woodvilles: The Wars of the
Roses and England's Most Infamous
Family,*

Susan Higginbotham

(Gloucestershire: The History Press,
2015).

Review by: Lynda Pidgeon

The Woodvilles: The Wars of the Roses and England's Most Infamous Family. By Susan Higginbotham. Gloucestershire: The History Press, 2015. ISBN 978-0-7509-6078-6. 224 pp. £9.99.

In the introduction to the book, the author notes that a number of non-fiction books have been written on individual Woodvilles, but that none have been written on the family except “a self-published book that is largely hostile toward the Woodvilles” (7), although no reference is given. This statement clearly sets the tone of the book, as it is a partial history of the Woodvilles, where any criticisms made of the family are discounted.

Although entitled *The Woodvilles*, the book is inevitably about Elizabeth and her family in the period 1464-1495. As Higginbotham points out, researching this family is problematic, which is why she admits to having concentrated on the best documented members. Even so they are still minor figures in her history which places Elizabeth, and her relationship with Edward IV and later Richard III at its centre. Why the family is considered to be the “most infamous” in England, as suggested by the book’s title, is not fully explained, although the various charges laid against Elizabeth which gave rise to her poor reputation are examined in a chapter entitled ‘The Black Legend of the Woodvilles’. This covers three events: “a churching, an execution, and a trial” (40). The churching recounts a splendid banquet given after the birth of Elizabeth of York and how the etiquette displayed has been used by “modern detractors” to demonstrate her “vanity and the social climber’s insecurity” (42). This solemn occasion is contrasted with a later event, when Louis of Gruuthuse was a guest of the king, and he records the “pleasant sight” of the queen relaxing with her ladies. The execution is that of Thomas Fitzgerald, earl of Desmond, which led to allegations of murder being made against Elizabeth. Higginbotham points out this was not a contemporary allegation, but one which originated in a sixteenth century memorandum, which she examines in detail, and then sets against the events which actually took place in the fifteenth century. The execution takes up the bulk of the chapter, and is analysed thoroughly. The final event, the trial, is that of Sir Thomas Cook. This case also involved Elizabeth’s parents, and has been regularly cited as an example of the Woodville family’s greed, starting with the *Great Chronicle of London* by Robert Fabyan (1516) and more recently by Michael Hicks in “The Case of Sir Thomas Cook, 1468,” *English Historical Review* (1978). Unfortunately the opportunity to fully discuss the reputation of the Woodvilles rather than just Elizabeth’s has not been taken. The trial is covered in a few pages before moving on to the accusation of greed, made when Elizabeth attempted to claim Queen’s Gold from Cook. The Cook Affair has been fully explored in an excellent article by Anne Sutton, while the

use of Queen's Gold as a source of income for medieval queens has been covered by A. R. Myers in his article on Elizabeth's household, both of which are cited by Higginbotham. However, Myers' analysis has not been used as fully as it could have been to clear Elizabeth of the charge of greed, which makes the coverage of the three events a little unbalanced.

Inevitably witchcraft is a prominent feature requiring its own chapter 'Witchcraft and Sorcery'. In the introduction Higginbotham points out this has featured in historical fiction, to the extent that readers "know" that the Woodvilles are guilty of these charges, Higginbotham therefore has to "set the record straight" (7). The chapter concentrates on Jacquetta, Duchess of Bedford, and the accusation of witchcraft made against her in 1469 during Edward's captivity by the Earl of Warwick. The accusation was that she used witchcraft to procure the marriage between her daughter Elizabeth and Edward IV, and much energy is devoted to discrediting interpretations of this event, from W. E. Hampton's claim that the date of the marriage was significant because a Grand Sabbath was held on 30 April, Walpurgisnacht, followed by the marriage on 1 May, to Annette Carson's theory that love potions and aphrodisiacs had been administered to Edward IV. The type of witchcraft to which Hampton refers is a view influenced by sixteenth-century stereotypes, which is the most obvious flaw in his argument, although not mentioned by Higginbotham. A book which she might have found useful to counter Hampton's "sheer creativity" is *Magic and Religion in Medieval England* (2012) by Catherine Rider, although its recent publication may have been too soon for her to use here.

More discussion on the contemporary sources would have been useful, as would a reference to Joanna Laynesmith's book *The Last Medieval Queens* (2004), which gives a sensible reason for why chroniclers chose the 1 May as the supposed date for Edward's marriage; that is, they were influenced by the popularity of medieval romances, in which May was the month for love. There is little doubt that Edward fell in love with Elizabeth. *Gregory's Chronicle*, which is the first to give the 1 May for their marriage, makes it quite clear this was the case in his warning "Nowe take hede what love may doo...", (*Historical Collections of a Citizen of London*, ed. James Gairdner (1876), 226) when reporting Edward's marriage.

There have been a number of books written on Elizabeth, most recently by David Baldwin, *Elizabeth Woodville: Mother of the Princes in the Tower* (2002) and Arlene Okerlund, *Elizabeth: England's Slandered Queen* (2006). Okerlund reviews the reputation of the Woodvilles, and notably Elizabeth, as the title suggests. There is also a biography of Edward Woodville by Christopher Wilkins, *The Last Knight Errant: Sir Edward Woodville and the Age of Chivalry* (2010). Although Higginbotham's book adds little to the sum knowledge of the wider Woodville family, her conclusion – in line with Okerlund and Bald-

win – proposes a re-appraisal to the generally received view taken of the Woodvilles, and suggests that their story is more complex than might be assumed by the general reader, especially those who only know the Woodvilles from fiction and for whom the “impression of the Woodville family remains largely negative” (7).

Higginbotham has read widely in primary and secondary sources, including those quoted above, and her bibliography should assist the reader wishing to further pursue any of the points raised. A helpful appendix has also been included, drawing together the known surviving wills of the Woodvilles. Some of these have already been transcribed and appeared elsewhere, for example the wills of Elizabeth and Anthony, however they appear here newly transcribed, except for the will of Thomas Woodville which no longer exists and is therefore taken from the *History and Antiquities of Northampton* by George Baker (1822).

The largest audience for this book is most likely to be found amongst Ricardians, however this is a work which champions the Woodvilles and is therefore not always kind to Richard III: Ricardians may therefore find they have much more to disagree with in this history than the general reader at whom this book is aimed.

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