This is the second biography of Elizabeth in the last few years and will inevitably be compared with David Baldwin’s 2002 book, not least because the covers are very similar, and because both are aimed at the general public rather than at an academic audience. The author is an American professor of English Literature and says that she first encountered Elizabeth in Shakespeare’s Richard III. When she discovered that this queen’s notoriety as a low-born, calculating, greedy and arrogant woman originated in slander spread by enemies, she became determined to expose the lies and restore the queen’s reputation beyond the narrow confines of academia. She cites a number of obscure novels as evidence that Elizabeth is still regarded in terms of the old propaganda, but novelists are permitted to make what use they like of historical figures, they are, after all, writing fiction. Any regular reader of the Ricardian will be aware of work which has gone some considerable way to restoring the queen’s reputation.

As befits her discipline, Professor Okerlund writes well and handles her narrative fluently and all the major set-pieces of Yorkist court life wherein the queen featured are skilfully recounted. She has researched widely and there can be few more facts about the queen’s life to be discovered. She also quotes from contemporary sources at length and has modernised the spellings. The Wydeville family features extensively, since she is concerned to rescue the reputation of the entire family and not just the queen; an entire chapter is devoted to her brother, Anthony, second Earl Rivers, ‘Courtier par excellence’, who is a fascinating character and deserves wider study. Thus far, the book can be recommended, but not much further. The author has no real understanding of fifteenth-century life and politics and it severely affects the quality of her judgements. She sees the struggles of the mid-fifteenth century in terms of ‘over-mighty subjects’ (unsurprisingly, she does not include John Watts in her bibliography), and regards the Yorkist struggle for the throne as existing throughout the fifteenth century, and merely ‘muted’ after the earl of Cambridge’s execution in 1415. She also finds the restoration of the Wydeville lands early in 1461 extraordinary, given their loyalty to the Lancastrians, without appreciating that the Wydevilles were not a threat to Edward IV because they had no territorial power base, and that, as a competent official, Lord Rivers was of equal value to the new regime if he was prepared to submit to it. There is no need to hint that this generosity may already have been due to Elizabeth’s influence. As an American, perhaps it is not surprising that Professor Okerlund has a shaky grasp of the English peerage, but with a subject like this it matters that Warwick is referred to throughout as Earl Warwick, that she seems not to have appreciated that Elizabeth’s first mother-in-law held the Ferrers barony in her own right and that her grandson, Thomas Grey, inherited it directly from her and not from his father (who never held the title because he predeceased his mother), and that as the widow of a knight, Elizabeth was Lady Grey and not Lady Elizabeth. The author also uses the terms dowry and dower interchangeably, though they mean completely different things. There are a number of occasions when she adds superfluous facts to her narrative which are just plain wrong; Queen Isabella of France’s dowry was not £13,000, a sum which would have bankrupted the crown, but her income in 1327 when she and her lover were ruling the country; like all thirteenth and fourteenth-century queens her dower was approximately £4,500, very similar, in fact to Elizabeth’s. Nor was Edward IV’s first daughter, named Elizabeth after her mother, ‘the first time the name was used for a female child born into English royalty’; both Edward I and John of Gaunt had daughters with that name. Much is made of Queen Elizabeth’s piety (which is undeniable), but to Elizabeth’s. Nor was Edward IV’s first daughter, named Elizabeth after her mother, ‘the first time the name was used for a female child born into English royalty’; both Edward I and John of Gaunt had daughters with that name. Much is made of Queen Elizabeth’s piety (which is undeniable), but the author cites as particularly strong evidence the fact that she chose to spend her honeymoon at Reading Abbey and when she came to bear her second son, Richard, she chose to do so at the priory of the Shrewsbury Blackfriars. In fact, once away from the royal palaces of the Thames valley, with very few exceptions, the only places suitable to accommodate royalty were ecclesiastical. The author also seems to be in a state of confusion about Bermondsey Abbey, at times referring to it as a convent, at others indicating that it was a monastery. These criticisms might be regarded as mere nit-picking, were it not for the book’s other faults.

The author condemns Baldwin for unsubstantiated speculations about Elizabeth’s opposition to Henry VII, but her own book is riddled with such speculations which she presents as facts. It would surprise most Ricardians, I think, to learn that Warwick was so proud of his royal blood and so pleased with his apparently successful negotiations with Louis XI in 1467 and the gifts he received from him that ‘Such magnificent honours from a King encouraged Warwick to think that he himself should be one’. Warwick may have wished to rule, but as far as any evidence goes, he had no pretensions to reign. Much
is made of the Wydevilles’ advancement ‘through merit and service, rather than through birthright and inheritance’ as in some way being the precursors of the Tudors’ custom of regarding ‘merit rather than heritage, as the prime consideration for its ministers’. This is to ignore the many men raised to the peerage for their service to the crown throughout the fifteenth century and who did not owe their initial advancement to marriage to the widow of the king’s brother. Nor, presumably, would Elizabeth’s father have received an earldom except for his daughter’s marriage, still less Thomas Grey a marquessate. Not much obvious merit there. In the context of the king’s marriage, the author thinks the king may have been seduced as much by the life he witnessed at Grafton as by Elizabeth: ‘The Wydevilles were a happy, loving family who cared deeply for each other, a sharp contrast to the malevolent rivalries within the family of York . . . The Wydeville sons would never have slandered their mother as an adulteress as both Clarence and Gloucester subsequently pronounced their mother – in their quests after power’. Quite apart from the total lack of evidence about the Wydeville family life, or the slightest knowledge of how any Wydeville would have acted if the throne was in his sights, this is to ignore the Paston comment that in 1460 the young Edward, Earl of March, visited his younger brothers and sister every day in London, which at least suggests care and affection among the York family.

The account of the widow’s meeting with the king under an oak tree two years later reads like a historical novel. The author can see nothing wrong with Edward’s decision to marry Elizabeth for love regardless of the likely politically consequences and in a very twenty-first-century judgement regards it as ‘helping to revolutionise the concept of marriage, by placing emotional wellbeing above financial gain, political expediency and social rank’. The book continues like a hagiography. Much is made of the Wydeville family’s ‘culture and moralistic principles’ as somehow setting them apart from the common run of English aristocracy. The author regards Jacquetta’s birth in Luxemburg (part of Burgundy) as ensuring that she was far more cultured than her peers in her adopted country, citing as evidence one of her surviving books, without considering the possibility that it might have been a gift from her first husband, John, Duke of Bedford, a noted bibliophile. There is certainly evidence for the culture of the queen and in particular for the scholarship of her brother, Anthony, though none at all for her father or any of the younger Wydevilles, and it completely ignores evidence of similar tastes among other Englishmen and women. It seems to be going a little too far to regard the family as helping ‘to usher in the intellectual, cultural and sociological changes that define the modern era’. So anxious is the author to right the propaganda wrongs done to the queen and her family that she overplays their modern reputation as unprincipled, conniving schemers devoted to personal aggrandisement. Most readers with any knowledge at all of the fifteenth century would dismiss this judgement as unbalanced, but she is unable to accept that any criticism of the family might be justifiable, particularly of her two main protagonists, the queen and Anthony. No mention, for instance, is made of the perversion of the law of inheritance that Edward IV permitted Anthony to ensure that he hung on to the Scales inheritance after the death of his wife without children. Even on his death, the Scales co-heirs’ rights were ignored when he willed the estates to his brother. This is not to absolve Edward of blame in the first instance, but it seems unlikely that the original idea was his and not Scales’s or that the queen did not attempt to influence her husband in her brother’s favour. As to the principles of any member of the family, moralistic or otherwise, there is virtually no evidence available to indicate either the principles or motives of individuals in the fifteenth century. It may also surprise readers to learn that Henry VIII and Elizabeth I owed much of their ‘vigour, intelligence, flamboyance and feistiness’ to Elizabeth Wydeville. Plantagenet genes, anyone?

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