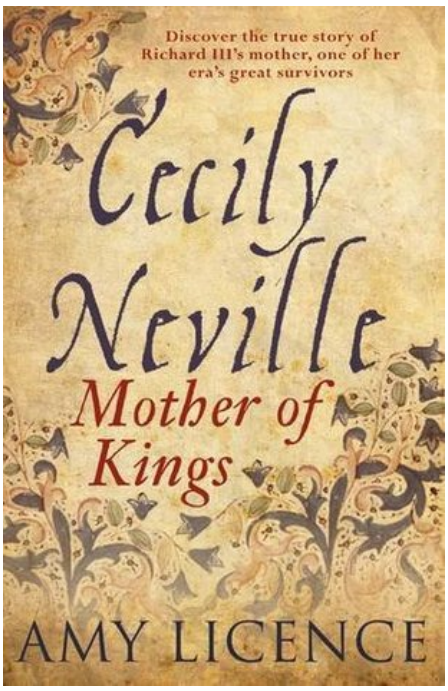

Cecily Neville: Mother of Kings

Amy Licence

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Known to be proud, regal and beautiful, Cecily Neville's life spanned most of the fifteenth century. Born in the year of the great English victory at Agincourt, she lived long enough to witness the arrival of the future Henry VIII. Her marriage to Richard, Duke of York, was successful, even happy, and she travelled with him wherever his career dictated, bearing his children in England, Ireland and France, including the future Edward IV and Richard III. What was the substance behind her claim to be 'queen by right'? Would she indeed have made a good queen during these turbulent times? One of a huge family herself, Cecily would see two of her sons become kings of England but the struggles that tore apart the Houses of Lancaster and York also turned brother against brother. Cecily's life cannot have been easy. Images of her dripping in jewels and holding her own alternative 'court' might belie the terrible heartache of seeing her descendants destroy each other. In attempting to be the family peacemaker, she frequently had to make heart-wrenching choices, yet these did not destroy her. She battled on, outliving her husband, friends, rivals and most of her children, to become one of the era's great survivors.

Cecily Neville: Mother of Kings Details

Date	:	Published April 28th 2014 by Amberley Publishing
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From Reader Review Cecily Neville: Mother of Kings for online ebook

Kara says

License is determined to drag Cecily Neville out of the historical shadows and into the light. She acknowledges going in there is not a lot to work with – evocatively describing trying to illuminate this woman's long and busy life as "lighting matches in the dark" as she very occasionally pins her down to a specific moment in time over the course of nine decades, but overall has to work largely with conjecture.

License, besides admitting to her handicap of lack of direct primary sources, also is pretty forward with her bias in the belief that Cecily could, nay SHOULD, have gone down in the history records as Queen Cecily, calling her the greatest queen England never had. So yeah, she's just a tiny bit biased in favor of "proud Cis," constantly defending and championing things like her financial, sexual, and spiritual reputation.

She starts at the moment of Cecily writing her will, covering all the worldly possessions she was giving up, then shuttles back to when she was born, focusing lot on how it was the same year as the Battle of Agincourt, then, showing how intertwined everyone was, traces back her and her husband's linages for 400 years before their births, showing how they were both so close to the throne (but more on that later).

With the motley backstories established, she dives into the childhood of Cecily and her husband-to-be, Richard, Duke of York, and shows how the seeds were already well sown and growing for the upcoming War of the Roses. There are several gatherings of the various noble families and royal branches and you just see the strained smiles on some of the noble faces and think: 'oh God they are going to be *literally* trying to kill each other in just a few years.'

With studied speculation, License does her best to give a conservative estimate as to how Cecily spent her childhood and young adulthood, and, more importantly, where she was, sometimes having hard evidence of Cecily traveling from A to B, sometimes guessing based on factors like other family members' movements, the season, the political climate, or where she was recorded a few years earlier or later.

She spends a lot of time documenting when and where Cecily had her children, clearly frustrated by the lack of records, but as Cecily and Richard's family grows, so does the political tension at court, building in the pressure cooker of an extremely small group of people who were all related somehow by blood and or marriage, all getting ready to tear each other's throats out – but at the same time still attending things like each other's families christenings and holiday celebrations.

Also, she speculates that while things broke down completely between the men of the various factions, the women of the War of the Roses all stayed fairly close, or at least they were better at keeping emotions in check and being able to negotiate and compromise as various fortunes rose and fell throughout the tumultuous period.

Henry VI goes into his mysterious catatonic sate and Cecily's husband takes the resigns of power, and here License sees this political period through the lens that Cecily was queen in all but name only, which strikes me as a bit of stretch.

Unfortunately, as the War of the Roses takes off, there is less information about Cecily, since sources at the

time were more interested in chronicling the battles where thousands of men were dying then recording where and when the women were hanging out. So we get a lot of rehashing about the battles and other people.

She is more prominent when things calm down, militarily, but there is still a lot of time spent on other people, mostly because the people around her have more recorded than her.

However, after recounting her living through almost becoming king and then watching her son become king, the speculation gets quite interesting when Richard III comes to power, and License points out a lot of previously overlooked evidence that she may have been in the thick of it. But when the Tudors come to power, the last decade of her life is either admirable or sad, or both, as we see her devote herself to a life of rigid piety, appearing to wash her hands of politics after seeing the political events of her lifetime destroy so many family members.

An excellent attempt to give us a look at the life of Cecily Neville, but, as the author admitted upfront, there just isn't enough available to fill in the whole picture, and while the speculation was well thought out, all the other information about other people of the era felt like padding things out to make up for the scarcity of sources about a woman who was, even with as little we know about her, undoubtedly remarkable.

Caroline says

Oddly disappointing. Maybe I was hoping for too much from it because I'm sort of a White Rose partisan and I wanted to know more about this woman; there isn't much known for sure about the details of Cecily's life. The current approach to this problem by the authors of biographies seems to be to throw everything else and the kitchen sink onto the page to make up for it. "We don't have any details about the festivities surrounding the coronation of Queen X, but at the feast for Queen Y..." followed by several pages listing every dish and entertainment at the feast for Queen Y who is not part of the story we're trying to follow. I have to confess I skimmed when I came to things like this.
I'd like to suggest to Amberley Press that they slow the roll of their cranking out of these books enough to have a good copyeditor read them (this is not the first one I've read, and I have had the same reaction each time). Someone born in 1415 was not 70 in 1475. "Angus Dei" is not a thing. If someone is Katherine in one sentence, she probably should not be Catherine in the very next sentence. Watch your antecedents. Someone who is a good historian ought not to mind having their presentation improved by catching these mistakes, and people who are ravenously snapping up books about 15th and 16th century English history will not mind waiting a couple of extra weeks.
I don't know if it's me, or if British syntax is different, but there were SO MANY sentences in this book and others I've read recently, like the following: "Cecily spent X years at X Castle. Having a high crenellated tower at each corner, she had her entire family with her for the first time in years." This is not one of the author's sentences and I wish I could invent a better example, but when you start a sentence with a clause like that, the subject of the other clause has to be whatever it is that has the high crenellated tower, i.e. the castle. Cecily did not have a tower at each corner of herself. Every time I read a sentence like that, it felt like driving over a syntactical speed bump. How hard would it have been to have written, "Having a high crenellated tower at each corner, X provided ample room for her to have her entire family..."?? COPYEDIT I say! Amberley Press, hire me! I'm experienced and really good at it!

Caroline says

Royal women led lives at the very epicentre of the events that make up the history of this country, but all too often their stories are neglected. Partly, it's true, due to a lack of the records and documentary evidence that form the backbone of history, but partly because their lives are deemed less interesting, less influential, and therefore not of relevance when telling the story of the great events that shaped the history of England. And yet a women like Cecily Neville, mother of kings, a potential Queen of England herself, a figure at the very heart of the Wars of the Roses, connected by marriage or blood to almost all the major players - what a fascinating insight she could give us!

Cecily's life spanned some of the most tumultuous and significant decades in England history - born during the reign of Henry V, mere months before Agincourt, she was a granddaughter of John of Gaunt, great-granddaughter of Edward III, wife of Richard Duke of York, mother of Edward IV and Richard III, grandmother of the Princes in the Tower and Elizabeth of York, great-grandmother of Henry VIII. Her husband claimed the throne himself, and Cecily was within inches of becoming Queen of England before the Wheel of Fortune turned and Richard lost his life (and his head) at Wakefield Bridge, only to see her eldest son Edward IV triumph and become King. It's hard to think of another figure so utterly interwoven through these events, who saw them all and survived to tell the tale.

So Cecily is a figure ripe for biography, and Amy Licence does a decent job - as well as anyone can with such a dearth of resources. We can never know what Cecily truly felt or thought, how she really reacted to events that tore her family apart, how much influence she had on her sons, how much of a hand she herself had in Edward IV's winning of the throne from Henry VI, Richard III's usurpation of the throne. What did she think about the death of Henry VI, or George Duke of Clarence, or the Princes in the Tower? How did she feel seeing her granddaughter Elizabeth of York wed to the man who had invaded the kingdom and killed her son Richard III? We can never know, and to her credit Amy Licence does not overly speculate, in these areas at least. But, as with all historical biography to a greater or lesser extent, there is a large amount of speculation and supposition in this book - particularly as it relates to Cecily's belief in her family's royal destiny and her role in Richard's usurpation.

Licence also spends the majority of this book detailing Cecily's early life as wife and mother during the Wars of the Roses - understandably so - but the later years, particularly those during the reigns of Richard III and Henry VII are somewhat skated over. Richard III's reign is dealt with in one chapter, Bosworth barely lasts a chapter. And there is scarcely anything regarding what to me may be the most interesting chapter of Cecily's life - how she lived under the reign of Henry VII, having outlived her husband and all of her sons, their plans of a Yorkist dynasty come to ruin, and a man with a far lesser claim to the throne as King of England in their place. But alas, we shall never know...

David Santiuste says

A readable, sympathetic portrayal of a medieval woman and her world. Amy Licence provides an engaging narrative of Cecily's life and times, incorporating a wealth of fascinating detail.

Carolina Casas says

Queen by right, Proud Cis, were just some of the many names she was known by. In history Cecily has often been overlooked in favor of her more popular descendants but she deserves a story of her own and Amy Licence retells that story sparing no punches. Putting forward the reasons for Cecily's decisions and her abscence from some of the royal ceremonies, and her flaws. This is a scholarly biography that explores the life of a high born woman through Cecily's eyes, presenting us her world through its customs, moral and religious attitudes towards women.

During her son's reign she began using the moniker "Queen by rights" to emphasize her position above that of his wife, whom she disapproved of, Elizabeth Wydeville. While Cecily never got to be Queen, for the first three years of her son's reign she was the highest ranking woman in England and almost no ambassador would see Edward without seeing her first. In Coppini's words, the papal legate, he would not get to see Edward until he wrote to the Duchess of York first congratulating her for her son's accession. These years saw the rise of the York dynasty, a united front that represented a glorious alternative to the defeated Lancastrians. However Edward's licentious behavior would lead them to a right which they never recovered. It is unclear what were Cecily's exact feelings regarding her son's union. Licence using Mancini as a source, writes that she likely regretted and this could have made her side with George and then Richard when he took the crown from her grandson in 1483. The truth though as Licence writes, is that we cannot know for sure. When she met George at Sandwich port in Kent before he left off with his betrothed Isabel to marry in Calais, she could not have been encouraging a rebellion but instead warned him to be careful not to take things too far. Something that if this was she did, he clearly did not do. With Richard's accession, things become less clear. Mancini was writing from Richard III's period so some of what he said is based on heresay, but actions reveal more than words. The fact that Richard received the news at Baynard's castle which was her mother's property, that they wished to make him king and when he finally accepted, does make you think. Did she encourage both her sons to take the crown, first from Edward, then from his son (in Richard III's case) because she believed it was better to keep the power in their trusted family members? If this was the case, Cecily would have to make a great sacrifice and allow for both her sons to impugn her honor by circulating the old rumor that their brother was illegitimate and the son of a Welsh archer.
Some pop historians and fiction authors have lend credence to this rumor based on the theory that Cecily turned against Edward when he married Elizabeth and encouraged her family's rise to power. However the truth of the matter is that this rumor wasn't employed until 1460, eighteen years after Edward's birth, and as Licence points out, the arguments that validate this rumor are ridiculous. Such as Edward was fair when his father and brother (Richard) were dark. She points out that he could've gotten his looks from Cecily or from his parents' common ancestors -Edward III- who was also reputedly fair and tall. Another thing that nobody factors in is that childbirth was not an exact science. Today we have doctors and machines that can predicate more accurately when a baby is going to be born, back then all women had to rely on were midwives and folk tales. That was the science of the day, now imagine a medieval woman, even a high-born woman like Cecily having nothing but these tools to know when the baby is coming? It was impossible. Babies often came early or late. Women were shut down in their chambers into what was known confinement -which Amy Licence greatly explains to what went on here-, after this they had to wait another month until they could finally be free to wander about. It was a rigorous life-style but one all women had to follow. The other tools that apologists of this theory use to prove Edward was not Richard's son is that he was baptized early or unlikely to have been conceived when Richard, Duke of York was campaigning at Pontoise on August. Both of these prove nothing. As the author cleverly explains, Richard was fight yes at Pontoise but Pontoise was not extremely far from Roue where Cecily was staying. It was fifty miles away. He could have made a brief visit and conceived Edward then, or he was conceived days before he left, or he was conceived right after he came thus making Edward premature which would make then a lot of sense why he was christened so early.

If he was born weak or he was born ahead of time, his parents would have been concerned for his immortal soul, they probably didn't believe he would make it and in the belief that infants who weren't baptized would be condemned to eternal stagnation in limbo, they needed to act right away. Another factor was that the previous year in 1441, Cecily and Richard had lost their first son Henry. It was a terrible blow for the both of them. They had known each other since he became a war of her mother's when he was fifteen and she eleven, they married young and were probably shy on the first years of their marriage (1429), but as the years passed they came to love and respect each other. The death of their firstborn son was a harsh blow. But they were also practical, if they wanted to continue the family line, they had to have a son. This was how medieval society worked and it is something that we often don't understand because we are not provided with enough background into the society the subject lived in. Amy Licence starts the book by providing you with background regarding Cecily's family, when the Nevilles first came to England with William the Conqueror, from where they got their name. And also providing background on Cecily's mother, Joan Beaufort, only daughter of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster and Katherine Swynford. And why religion was so important for her. Her mother had to bare the stigma of illegitimacy being John of Gaunt's mistress' daughter. (Although parliament legitimized her and her brothers after her parents' marriage, it couldn't have been easy, knowing she had to bare with her mother's previous reputation). She spent countless times teaching her youngest child (Cecily) the value of fidelity and other virtues expected of young girls. So with all this taken into account, it makes even less sense that a woman of high religious moral values and of proud lineage, and well aware of it, would go behind her husband's back.

Nevertheless, slander was a common tool used by political enemies against someone through the women in their family. Women were the ones that carried the family line through this logic, shaming them was a way of tarnishing their families' reputation. It was rumor nonetheless that resurfaced every time someone was in discontent with Edward, nicknamed the "Rose of Rouen" and if Cecily had indeed use the weapon her enemies had once used against her to shame her husband, she might have done so if she believed her son and her nephew were a threat to their family name. We can think this is something cruel of a mother and grandmother to do, however this was a far complex society than the one we live in now. Dynasties had the important responsibility to look after the family name. The family name was what mattered the most. And Cecily also had her fair share of misfortune. By a cruel stroke of fate she never got to be Queen. Her husband was recognized by parliament in the autumn of 1460 after he and Cecily were together to rejoice his triumphant entrance in London, as King Henry VI's heir and was given the titles of Prince of Wales, Duke of Cornwall, and Earl of Chester in the addition to the ones he already had. By this logic, Cecily was Princess of Wales and married to the King-to-be. He and their second son, Edmund, the Earl of Rutland were killed during an ambush outside of Sandal Castle that very same year. While the Wydeville family had replaced the Nevilles and other family members in Edward IV's inner circle, Cecily was still one of the highest ranking women in England and she began to use the moniker "Queen by rights" to emphasize this position.

After her son's defeat in August 22, 1485, Cecily chose to retire from the public sphere and lead an ascetic life. She was by no means finished. At her old age she was still as active she had been many years before ruling over her states and Henry VII continued to renew her licence over the exports of wool where she gained a lot of her income. The year that her daughter in law, Elizabeth, died, she began making her will and three years later she died. She was laid to rest in Fotheringhay Castle where her husband and son lay. She is the ancestress of every monarch to date. As a Duchess she worked alongside her husband, perhaps plotted with him, shared her joys and together they also shared their loss and misfortunes, as a mother she had to mourn the loss of so many children and grandchildren products of miscarriages, war, or illnesses. She safe-guarded Richard and George, her two youngest sons by sending them to Burgundy, she saw to her youngest daughter's religious and formal education as her mother had overseen hers. As a pragmatic woman however, she understood the importance of dynastic ties. And she was not above using questionable means to promote her own ambitions. In Amy Licence's words, Cecily Neville was a complex figure whose story often gets neglected in favor of her descendants. As a Duchess, she lived up to the expectations of the day, she proved an excellent administrator and tradeswoman, as a woman however she is harder to decipher. She waded

through blood and loss to see two of her sons become kings and afterwards bire witness to the destruction of her dynasty. It is impossible to know what Cecily thought in each of these events and what role she played in any, if she did at all. It would be irresponsible to put thoughts and words in her mouth when we have yet to know more of her story. Her story has just begun and it is far from over and Amy Licence brings the facts to the table without making any big suppositions that are not based on evidence, and tells us once more through her work that it is the job of a good historian to present the evidence without making arrogant assumptions he or she will solve a puzzle that is unlikely to be solved now or ten years time, and let the reader decide for him or herself.

Christopher Fox says

The author is scrupulously honest in her introduction and admits that there are precious few sources for a fully-fledged biography of someone who must have been a fascinating and powerful person during pivotal times in British history - if not a major player herself, certainly at the centre of the action as it were. Licence's research into and knowledge of the political and social fabric of the time is extraordinary and she uses same to pad out this biography. For me, however, the plethora of words and phrases such as "perhaps", "probably", "possibly", "may have", "presumably", "must have" etc., while well-founded I'm sure, give the whole feeling of the text devoted to Cecily a less than certain tone. Much attention is given to her husband, Richard and two sons, Richard III and Edward IV about whom much more is definitely known. Might have been better as a historical novel because it's well written. Pity.

Gina Basham says

I liked it, not loved it. I realize there would be holes and suppositions because of the lack of historical data, but, I felt like it was a lot of the same old, same old. It often felt like bits of other books and too much info about all of the other characters. I enjoyed it, but there is not a lot of new info on Cecily. If you are a history fanatic you may want to try it to see if you can glean any new info. gbash

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Dorothy says

Bogged down by every conceivable piece of research unearthed that doesn't add materially to story and adds innumerable names of questionable value or interest. Lengthy passages describing people and places that Cecily MIGHT have gone to or known and things she MAY have done feel like filler to lengthen the book. While I respect the clear notations that these were surmises and interpretations, it felt like a clumsy device to provide historical context. I ultimately felt that I knew enough of Cecily's story and the Wars of the Roses from other readings that this was just not adding substantially to my knowledge or interest so I put it aside at about 45% completion.

Kathleen says

3.5 Stars rounded up.
A very scholarly book with a great deal of detail on Cecily Neville and her family. It was, of course a heavy

read but a worthwhile one. The author had indicated that not much was known definitely and she provided what was available and made very good surmises.
Enjoyable.

Lyns says

I became interested in the War of the Roses when I read The Sunne in Splendour, by Penman. I then followed up with the Sister Frevisse mystery series by Margaret Fraser. Turning to straight biography, I found this book in Glasgow. I always was curious as to how Cecily Neville was related to John of Gaunt. She is his granddaughter. This book includes fantastic family trees. The writing is very clean yet wonderful to read with a flowing style. When Licence is not quite sure of a conclusion she presents both sets of primary sources to let you decide on your own. Her use of quotes from the few existing letters of Cecily Neville are very effective.
I did get stuck before starting the chapter headed 1459-1460 as I knew of Wakefield. What I did not know was that Wakefield was not a set battle, but an ambush undertaken during the Christmas truce.
I thoroughly enjoyed this book and highly recommend it to others.

Jodi says

Overall this was a well-written history of Cecily Neville. An influential woman at a time of influential women—Margaret Beaufort, Elizabeth Woodville, Anne Neville, Margaret of Anjou to name a few—Licence has pieced together the life story of Cecily with few constant document sources.

By including several alternatives or shall we say, interpretations, of events, Licence provided the reader with the opportunity to weigh issues his/herself before making judgment. One thing I did not care for was as the text progressed, Licence included much more supposition in her narrative. This is a troubling tendency with historical biography in the last decade or so. Examples would be the idea that Margaret of Anjou asked Cecily for prenatal advice (Licence implied it was due to Cecily's experience—not perhaps considering the number of unsuccessful pregnancies the Duchess of York endured); the repeated assurances that Cecily played hard politics (pitting one family member against another) then went and prayed for the outcome of each rebellion;

It was interesting as usual to read a writer's interpretation of Cecily's complicity with Richard about her own fidelity (or lack thereof). It does cause the student of history to question why a mother would denounce the legitimacy of her own child yet cause a hullabaloo when that son married 'beneath him.' One must conclude that Cecily was a pragmatist in a turbulent and violent era and could take the suspected deaths of her grandsons at the hands of her son in stride and continue to pray about it all.

Kelly Obernuefemann says

Lots of detail. This is the best you will get for a biography of Cecily. The author admits that there is so much we can never know, but she does a great job explaining various theories. I like how she discusses where some novelists stray from the truth. I also never realized how much Cecily had to do with son Richard's

takeover from her grandsons -- the princes in the tower.

Amanda says

Wow, oh wow. Another stunner from Amy Licence.

Cecily Neville certainly led a life which had more ups and downs than a rollercoaster, however she kept her dignity and regal bearing, which was necessary bearing in mind the turmoil which was to come!

I was very lucky to receive an ARC, and I will treasure this. For a woman who is a direct ancestor of our current Queen, this book brings the world of the Cousins War to a level that even I can understand, and leaves the reader wanting to know more.

Painstakingly researched, written eloquently immersing the reader into an uncertain world where their very life depended on which royal house they fought for.

Brilliant, simply brilliant.

Donie Nelson says

Excellent history of this important historical figure, whose sons, Edward IV & Richard III, held pivotal roles in England's history...and she is the ancestor of Great Britain's current monarch.

Kirsten Tancred says

This was a really good read, and supplied amazing knowledge on Cecile Neville. Quite how she’s never had her own biography before is beyond me. There is speculation in the book but that is the nature of history. I did feel the Edward IV and Richard III chapters felt a little rushed...
