



The Death of Kings: A Medical History of the Kings and Queens of England

Clifford Brewer

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Many Kings and Queens of England suffered extraordinary deaths. Handsome and virile in his youth, a rare medical condition turned Henry VIII into a bloated and grotesque old man. The Dashing and glamorous Henry V probably died of cancer of the rectum, a fate that also befell Edward I. Charles I was beheaded. Henry VI was the victim of a grisly murder. Edward II, attacked with a red hot poker died in agony from traumatic perforation of the rectum. George II died in ignominy enthroned on the lavatory.

This book will enthrall and appal.

Distinguished surgeon Clifford Brewer T.D F.R.C.S. has made the death of kings the study of a life time, examining every act of violence and each unpleasant disease with a razor sharp eye for detail.

The Death of Kings: A Medical History of the Kings and Queens of England Details

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From Reader Review The Death of Kings: A Medical History of the Kings and Queens of England for online ebook

Midgetbee says

As a medical history of the Kings and Queens of England this is fascinating. However the history involved is problematic. Each monarch is given a few pages of backstory before a cause of death is given and there are quite a lot of mistakes: Henry VII is said to have been alive in 1523 when he'd actually been dead for over a decade, his daughter Mary is married off to *Thomas* Brandon rather than Charles and so on.

Such mistakes are slightly understandable considering the author is a doctor rather than a historian. However they really should have been picked up by the editor or whoever checks these things. It's unfortunate as these relatively minor mistakes do cast doubt on the rest of the rest of the information given. Overall it is an interesting read, but at the same time a slightly frustrating one due to the historical errors.

Kim says

An excellent, interesting subject - an attempt to determine the cause of death of the kings and queens of England from Edward the Confessor to Queen Victoria. I was drawn to the book like a moth to flame the moment I saw it in the bookstore, and snatched it up.

It's a fascinating subject, and fairly well-written. The problem in the book, however, lies with the errors that riddle it. The author isn't a historian, of course, but the editors should have caught these errors before the book was printed. Intimating that young Henry Fitzroy was younger than his half-sister Elizabeth, saying that the youngest daughter of Henry VII married *Thomas* Brandon rather than *Charles*, and so on draws on my skepticism and makes me wonder about the veracity of the rest of the book.

Emma says

The conceit of this book is so freaking delightful, I wish the finished product had lived up to it more. The Death of Kings touches briefly on the probable cause of death for every English monarch from Edward the Confessor to Victoria, and obviously the interest and length of each section kind of depends on how interestingly the person in particular died. So some of it worked more than the rest; I almost wish the book had just focused on the more controversial cases? It was very short and glancing as it was, and I wish Brewer had gone into further detail. For instance, with the more modern kings and queens, where we have really very detailed postmortem accounts of the condition of their bodies, I wish he'd explained what everything meant instead of just giving the quote verbatim and concluding they died of 'x'. If that makes sense. And I would have loved further exploration of the medical history of each individual rather than the focus on the ends of their lives, because when he did touch on that material, I was really intrigued. I know [trust me] there's a paucity of evidence especially for the medieval monarchs, but I wanted more science and forensics, dammit!

I say this especially because some of his history was... sloppy. I'll give a couple of instances that caught my eye.

- 1) He has Mary Tudor marrying 'Thomas' Brandon, and, like, sorry, Suffolk is one of my historical pets [blame Cavill], how DARE you.
- 2) He indulges in some tired old discredited theories in places. He simultaneously brings up the speculation that Elizabeth had an intersex condition or some kind of physical defect that made her too embarrassed to marry anyone or produce a child AND floats the idea that she had a secret love child with Dudley. I am having trouble reconciling your views here, Brewer. [Also: seriously?]
- 3) He touches on some generally really interesting character details with the early Plantagenets and their infamous tempers, a la Henry II's rolling on the floor gnawing at the rushes and the similar fits of anger that John inherited, but doesn't draw any conclusions--and then later he mentions offhandedly that Henry was probably manic-depressive, as were most of the Plantagenets. And I could probably agree with him, but he really does not walk through the evidence properly! I mean, I think you could write a whole book just on the characters and personalities of the Angevins alone, but his connection-drawing was incredibly superficial and I just wanted to stand behind him holding up a [CITATION NEEDED] placard.

Basically, I think he wasn't enough of a historian OR enough of a doctor in this book to really drive the concept home sufficiently. I adore this kind of interdisciplinary writing, in theory, and it's been done and done WELL before in books like *Purple Secret*. With a writing partner, Brewer could really have had something here. But it didn't quite work. Unfortunately.

Meaghan says

This is a collection of biographical sketches of the kings and queens of England, beginning with Edward the Confessor, with a focus on trying to figure out what caused their deaths. In many cases it's quite easy (Richard I was hacked to pieces on the battlefield. Pretty obvious cause of death there!) but in many cases there is a lot of mystery and speculation, as medicine was so primitive back in the days of Merrie Olde Englande and doctors didn't know what to look for or how to treat what they did see.

The author is himself a doctor, so with the medical side of the book I presume he knows what he's on about. He does carefully weigh the variables instead of immediately trying to pin on one illness or another. However, he is not a historian, and I saw some errors. Most of them were minor, but some were not. There were some parts that weren't inaccurate so much as incredibly dense -- like where the author makes note, with apparent wonder, of Elizabeth I's "distorted and very morbid approach to marriage and all that follows" but fails to even begin to connect this to her father Henry VIII's matrimonial history.

I would recommend this book, with reservations, to English history buffs.

Tweedledum says

A fascinating way to review our British history from Edward the Confessor to Victoria.

Brewer, a retired consultant steeped in diagnostic jargonese, does not confine himself to analysing symptomology of the last few weeks or days of the monarch's lives but casts a diagnostic eye over their whole life wherever he can. Consorts, mistresses and children are occasionally taken into account especially where their medical histories appeal, thus Queen Caroline markedly upstages her husband George II in this peculiar and sometimes stomach churning history.

However Brewer's rather clipped prose and occasional dogmatic pronouncements, which are unintentionally reminiscent in places of 1066 and All That: A Memorable History of England, make for an interesting reading experience. I read this book alternately pulling a "yeuch too much information" face while inwardly squirming or raising my eyebrows and lips in wry amusement at Brewer's unusual descriptive manner. His diagnoses often extend way beyond the symptomology.

Here is one of my favourites: (the author is reflecting on William IV's early life and is waxing unusually prosaic in style.)

"Sending him away to sea seemed to be a very good way of making sure that William avoided the dissolute ways of his brother and accordingly the young man was sent to sea as a midshipman. It is likely that the young man was not particularly intelligent; at any rate he took to the life with great gusto."

I am still chuckling over this one days after reading it.

In conclusion I echo The Guardian's review comment :

"We found this book irresistible."

Yes. I took to it with great gusto.

Not sure if that reflects on my own intelligence....

Rosie says

I'd seen this on display in the bookshop at Hampton Court and thought it sounded interesting, if a little grisly! Chapters tackle every monarch since Edward the Confessor although I did chuckle at the inclusion of chapters for Jane Grey and Charles I (beheading being fairly straightforward!).

The book was written in the 1980s so obviously some of the conclusions/assumptions are slightly out of date. He also seems to connect many of the symptoms to syphilis and I would be interested to know if it was really this widespread until recently or whether he just liked to connect it. Most significantly, the author's writing style is a little dry and I did struggle to finish it at times. He also uses medical terminology without a huge amount of concession for the lay person so I did have to look several things up. However it was an interesting and revealing (if obviously speculative) look at the illnesses or injuries; many of which are treated without a thought nowadays.

Jillianne Hamilton says

I picked up a copy of The Death of Kings: A Medical History of the Kings and Queens of England by Clifford Brewer last year while visiting Westminster Abbey in London. (Appropriate, I know.)

This book features 41 chapters, each one focusing on an English monarch, beginning with Edward the Confessor (1019-1066) and ending with Queen Victoria (1819-1901).

I wish the book continued on to include the medical histories of Edward VII, George V, Edward VIII and George VI. Thankfully their causes of death aren't hard to find. (Also, I realize how creepy that sounds. Jeez.)

Each chapter gives a vague outline of the monarch's health history, the biology of their various illnesses, treatments they received, first person accounts and descriptions of their illnesses as recorded by royal physicians and final cause of death-what the physicians of the time ruled the death as and what the author, surgeon Clifford Brewer, believes it to be based on symptoms. Also includes intimate descriptions of final moments from the handful of monarchs not killed by natural causes.

If I learned anything from this book, it's that bloodletting was used for every illness imaginable. This method was used during the Middle Ages, all the way up to the later chapters in the 1800s. Seriously, did bloodletting ever work? What made physicians keep doing that? Someone, at some point, must have felt better after having been cut open by a physician and for hundreds of years, that continued to be their go-to treatment.

I don't get it. But anyway.

The book also includes a list of where each monarch is buried, a chapter on the pattern of diseases and an introductory chapter on the process of announcing a monarch's death and switching to their heir. Very interesting stuff.

This book was great. A bit dry, but I've always been a sucker for gory details. If you're interested in health, biology, history and don't mind a bit of bloodshed, I highly recommend picking up this.

Deborah Pickstone says

Aaaarrrrggghhhh!

This would have been a good idea if the writer actually knew anything about history. IT IS NOT ENOUGH TO BE A SURGEON, OK? And surgeons know diddly squat about medicine and CERTAINLY should keep their ill informed thoughts about psychiatry (which hadn't been invented yet for most of this history) to themselves. Period.

Purveyor of historical gossip, presented as 'fact' and diagnoses are made from this clutter of misinformation. So, basically the book is utterly pointless - I mean, if you tell me that Richard I died on the battlefield when a) it was a siege; battles were pretty rare in the Middle Ages and b) he died of gangrene after being hit by a crossbow bolt 2+ weeks earlier...it looks quite a bit different. So, the Plantagenets were 'well-known' as manic depressives (a term no longer used at the time of his writing the book; he was still using it though, the DOCTOR). Some bod at some point posited that they were suffering from same - can't see it myself but what would I know? - and suddenly everyone was saying it as if that made it a FACT!

TUT!

Margaret says

Fascinating look at the deaths of English monarchs from Edward the Confessor to Victoria.

Both deeply interesting and deeply disturbing in equal measure. I was a little surprised at some of the causes of death arrived at. A couple of English kings apparently died of "cancer of the rectum". Ouch!

Not for the squeamish.

Laura Hodo says

One of my favorite professor in college put this book on my desk and said he knew I enjoyed the weirdness of history.

Joanna says

It's an enjoyable and fascinating read about the (often grisly) deaths of England's rulers from Edward the Confessor to Queen Victoria, surprisingly written by a surgeon rather than a historian. I really have a problem, though, with the author's attempts to diagnose the various ailments that brought these rulers to their deathbeds. From a historian's perspective, it really doesn't make sense to apply modern diagnoses and labels to historical ailments, particularly when the types of sources he draws from - so far (I'm on Richard I), primarily chronicles - really aren't meant to be medical in nature. To say that the Plantagenets were manic-depressive, for instance, is really missing the point. This is a modern label that has no connection to medieval experience. If we are to really understand medieval life and death, we have to focus on how medieval people perceived and diagnosed their own medical conditions; manic depression would mean absolutely nothing to them. Still, I'll keep reading; it is rather interesting to see how each ruler met his or her end when presented in the words of their contemporaries - not a modern surgeon.

Helen Mears says

An interesting diversion - better for the medical rather than the historical side. The author uses what information is available to try and establish the cause of death for monarchs from Edward the Confessor to Queen Victoria.

David Hines says

This is a very readable, very interesting little book that tells about the death of every English king (and queen!) from Edward the Confessor in 1066 to Victoria in 1901. A succinct background is given on each monarch, followed by all the information that is available on the monarch's lifetime health and circumstances

of death. Obviously, the available information varies, and until the advent of modern medicine with the last few kings and queens, some of it is speculative or inferred. Information is also provided on the burial sites.

This is a British book so in some areas the wording may not be familiar to Americans-- the use of "stone" for example for weight. There is no information on the uncrowned and presumably murdered King Edward V. The information on the death and burial of Richard III predates the recent discovery of his grave and autopsy that proved much of the legend was true.

The writer seems a bit focused on speculation about the disease syphilis which he often speculates on in monarch after monarch; the other medical evidence presented is more straightforward.

Overall, this is an informative and interesting book that anyone who enjoys British royal history will find a great read. The only real shortfall is the book ends abruptly with the death of Queen Victoria and covers none of the monarch deaths in the 20th century.

Mary says

That's more like it! This is my second "Death of Kings"-themed book and, as the title states, it dealt with the medical histories and causes of death of Great Britain's kings and queens from the Norman Conquest (1066) to the death of Queen Victoria (1901). Obviously much of it is speculative, as medical science was in its infancy for much of the period covered and the doctors didn't have a clue what they were really dealing with, but the author was himself a surgeon and he made sound, educated guesses based on his knowledge and the historical records available. Each chapter dealt with a specific king or queen and gave a brief overview of the political and social climate of the reign under discussion, which was nice for brushing up on my history without going into exhaustive detail. In most cases he described the brutal and often fatal treatments prescribed by the physicians of the times, which basically can be summed up as bleeding and purging, with a few really bizarre twists such as the shaving of the sufferer's head (why??) and/or the burning of the soles of the feet with hot irons. King Charles II, especially, suffered at the hands of his doctors, with very good grace, I might add. Inadvertant poisoning with mercury or arsenic seems also to have been a favorite "cure" for the French pox (syphilis) in those long-ago days.

The editing could have been better but overall this was a fascinating, well-researched, and informative book with just enough gruesome detail to satisfy a gore crowd like myself.

Josephine (Jo) says

It has taken me ages to get round to reviewing this book. I do so more out of annoyance than anything else. For anyone who picks it up as an historical reference book would be making a big mistake!

Clifford Brewer was an eminent surgeon but he certainly did not research his historical content for this book very well. I am not a qualified historian but the constant errors just kept leaping out at me. If Brewer had even taken the time to read some of the works of our most talented writers of historical non fiction and even fiction he would have been far more accurate. Writers like Elizabeth Chadwick, Philippa Gregory, Alison Weir, to mention just a few. These authors must spend so many hours researching their characters before writing a book.

I knew the causes of death of most of these monarchs, as described by physicians of the time and Brewer really did not have much to add. It was all rather speculative, things like he was overweight and died with chest pains, heart attack. Sudden severe stomach pain with fever, appendicitis. Most of the Plantagenets were 'well known' manic depressives! Psychiatry was unheard of at the time. Admittedly the Plantagenets were known for their violent tempers and fickle behaviour but who is to say at this time that they were manic depressives. I found it annoying that so many of the diagnoses were then followed by the comment that it could also have been syphilis, so many in fact that it becomes a little tiresome, how did they have healthy children?

As for the historical errors, there are too numerous to list entirely. The author states that if Henry VI had been canonised, which proved too expensive, we would actually have had an English King who was a saint. What about Edward the Confessor canonised approximately 1161, or Edward the Martyr died 978.

The biggest error in my opinion was with the children of Henry VII! The author states that the king and his wife Elizabeth of York had three sons and two daughters, four of whom died, this includes Arthur who died at the age of 16. Henry and Elizabeth actually had eight children, Arthur, Henry, Margaret, Mary, Edmund, Katherine, Elizabeth, and Edward.

The most astonishing thing is that neither Margaret or Mary are given a mention! Margaret married James IV and was mother to the future king James V.

Mary Rose married Louis XII and became queen of France, after his death she married Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk best friend of Henry her brother. Henry VIII named his famous ship the Mary Rose after her.

The author then goes on in the chapter about Henry VIII to mention Charles Brandon, as Henry's brother in law!!!! Who did he think Brandon married?

I would not recommend this book to anyone for any reason.
