There might seem something rather quixotic about a biography of Edward V, a king who reigned for two months and died at age twelve, but from the start Professor Hicks makes a compelling case for such a work. As Colin Richmond once wrote about Henry VI, so Edward V too makes a thin thread on to which to hang, yet Hicks sees the possibilities inherent in such a study and makes us see them as well. He understands that this cannot be a biography like those of most kings, but he knows that the very existence of Edward, as prince of Wales and as king, even if in name only, made him a figure of some importance in his own time. The challenge Professor Hicks faces is how to bring out this importance in someone who never reached his majority or acted on his own initiative.

Records of the life and death of Edward V do exist and Professor Hicks presents them with an admirable clarity. As much as we might yearn for more information on the prince, we have much more information about this royal child than on most others, covering a number of different fields. The ceremonial role of the heir to the throne is shown alongside the educational upbringing expected of the same. The prince might have been a child but he was also a major landholder, which Hicks neatly exhibits, and as such had a council, a somewhat confusing body, which Hicks also helps to clarify. There can be little doubt after reading all that Professor Hicks has compiled that Edward V was an important figure in the second reign of his father.

This same clarity is even more noticeable in Hicks’ discussion of the death of Edward V and its larger significance. He examines this subject, long debated and highly contentious, in a straightforward manner, working through the various questions required in any investigation. This careful examination of who might have killed the king and when leads to a well-thought-out discussion of the legacy of usurpation and regicide and to an insightful look at the immediate legacy of Edward V: a further example of the influence which he exerted over the later fifteenth century, even if just by being the son and heir of Edward IV. The information, which Professor Hicks has marshalled and organized in these respects, makes a convincing case that Edward V is worthy of being the focus of study.

All of this, however, only begins to flesh out the importance of Edward V. It shows that he had the position, the prestige and the power to make him an important figure in the Yorkist polity, even if he was too young to exert any of this himself. To gauge the full impact of this importance requires an examination of the rest of the Yorkist polity and how Edward V as Prince of Wales and then as king affected its other members. Naturally, this is less immediately obvious and certainly less accessible than is the information which Professor Hicks has presented the reader about the prince himself. Hicks does pursue some new investigation to this end, but its relevancy seems rather doubtful. Most of the second chapter is spent discussing the putative mistresses of Edward IV and the details of his wedding to Elizabeth Woodville. Hicks suggests that both of these factors helped shape the end for Edward V, yet that seems unlikely. For this to be true, one would have to say that had Edward IV not fooled around and had he not slipped off for a secret wedding then his son would not have lost his crown. In his discussion of the usurpation later in the book even Professor Hicks does not seem willing to say this. While he has some very interesting things to say about the dating of the wedding of Edward IV and Elizabeth Woodville, it is hard to feel that this section belongs in a biography of Edward V.

Unfortunately, there is little else in this book in the way of new research or analysis with regard to the Yorkist polity’s relations with and reaction to Edward V as prince or king. There has been a lot of work done on the reign of Edward IV and on the political world of fifteenth-century England in general in recent years, but Professor Hicks does not seem to have incorporated it in his book. He presents the fundamental importance of Edward V in his role as font of patronage, first as prince of Wales, and then the even greater potential which he had in this regard as king. As such, the real import of Edward V in the politics of Yorkist England is his use as a pawn by his mother’s family to increase their wealth and power. This is the sort of view which ignores most of the work of the past twenty years. The politics of late medieval England were more than matters of mere patronage, as any number of studies has shown. To disagree and present a counter-argument against this new research would be fine, but simply to ignore it undermines the work as a whole. As a result the book leaves the reader with little insight into Edward V’s impact on the polity of Yorkist England.

At the end of the day, despite a few minor factual errors, Professor Hicks has provided us with a book which firmly convinces the reader that a proper study of the influence of Edward V on the politics
of his lifetime would be a worthwhile endeavour. If this book is not that study, it does, nevertheless, provide a good introduction to a neglected figure in late medieval English politics.

THERON WESTERVELT