

## **BOOK REVIEW**

### **Cicely Saunders: A Life and Legacy**

*by David Clark*

Hardback, 352 pages  
Oxford University Press  
June 2018

This biography covers the life of Dame Cicely Saunders (1918-2005) and, by extension, the birth of the “Hospice Movement” and the new specialty of Palliative Medicine. The book is well worth reading for anyone interested in the history of 20<sup>th</sup>-century medicine or in the radical changes in the care of the dying. It is well researched with much original material and plenty of primary source material from Cicely and from those who knew her.

The author paints a picture of Dame Cicely’s unusual and privileged upbringing and her own determined and often difficult character that was so crucial to her achievements. It describes her unconventional career pathway, driven always by a profound motivation to care for the dying.

Dame Cicely was deeply dissatisfied with existing care for the dying, so she initially became a one-person research institution, driving change. The opening of St Christopher’s Hospice in London in 1967 and the subsequent Hospice Movement were very much the result of dogged determination. Her research and methods of care formed the systematic discipline first called “terminal care”, then “palliative care” and now recognised as the distinct sub-specialty of “palliative medicine”.

I have a personal interest: my wife worked as a Nursing Sister at St Christopher’s some 40 years ago, and, as a local GP with an interest in palliative medicine, I also saw Dame Cicely often. I observed Cicely Saunders as someone who rearranged the world around her by sheer force of will.

The first biography of Dame Cicely was published in 1984, but Clark’s book takes us further. It paints a vivid picture of St Christopher’s, both front and back of stage. In its early years, St Christopher’s was a revolutionary institution completely devoted to changing the experience of the dying within a model of total care. Yet backstage, as anyone personally involved was well aware, the staff worked under huge pressures and interpersonal strains, not least from the demanding and ever watchful Dame Cicely herself.

This book is no hagiography, especially when it comes to its account of the immense difficulty that Dame Cicely had in letting go of the reins, even after her “retirement” as medical director in 1985. Clark’s *Cicely Saunders* is a mature and successful biography that rings true and is likely to become the definitive account of a remarkable doctor.

**David Misselbrook**  
**April 2018**

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