



The Last Royal Rebel

Anna Keay

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The Last Royal Rebel. By Anna Keay. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016. ISBN: 978-1-62040-934-3. xv + 462 pp. £ 21.99.

The Duke of Monmouth is not a particularly well-known historical figure—most students of seventeenth-century English history know him best for his death in 1685 at the hands of his uncle, the newly-crowned James II. Monmouth typically appears as a paragraph in the story of the dramatically controversial accession to the throne of the Catholic James II in the face of fierce confessional opposition: England in 1685 was not prepared to accept a Catholic monarch. An illegitimate son of Charles II, Monmouth championed militant Protestantism by challenging his uncle's succession in an uprising that was swiftly and decisively crushed. His subsequent execution and the vicious reprisals that followed (the “Bloody Assizes”) form the bulk of his appearance in most histories of the period. This episode commonly serves to illustrate James II's inflexible tendency towards autocracy, and to foreshadow and justify his deposition and displacement by William of Orange a mere three years later. Students of Restoration history could easily come away from such a cursory treatment with the impression that Monmouth was naïve, misguided, and insignificant. In her viscerally compelling biography *The Last Royal Rebel*, however, Anna Keay demonstrates that Monmouth was in fact a figure of crucial importance to the political balance at the Restoration court during the late 1670s, and a key player in the struggle that ultimately culminated in the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Monmouth may arguably have been naïve and misguided, but readers of Keay's work will see that he was anything but insignificant.

The Last Royal Rebel opens with a gripping vignette: the eight-year-old James, future Duke of Monmouth, is violently torn from his terrified mother's arms by kidnapers on the streets of Brussels. The attempted abduction is thwarted by the heroic intervention of bystanders, but we learn that the deed was carried out on the orders of the boy's father—Charles II, claimant to the English throne. The young James, it is revealed, was conceived during a very brief entanglement between Charles and the disreputable Lucy Walters, who had been raising the boy in conditions of poverty, ignorance, and scandalous moral turpitude. Determined to separate his offspring from these detrimental circumstances, Charles was eventually successful in having James spirited away from his mother's keeping. At the age of nine, James abruptly found himself in the care of the English royal family in exile, and embarked on a rapid course of training and education. Within a few short years, his father was recalled to England to reclaim the throne and James was summoned to

London soon thereafter and promptly given the title Duke of Monmouth. It was a stunning change of fortune indeed.

In exploring Monmouth's career as a member of the English royal family, Keay emphasises the extraordinary affection that Charles quickly developed for his son. Charles had been devastated by the loss of two beloved siblings to smallpox shortly before James joined him in London, and Keay suggests that his grief "left him bereft of something which only the arrival of his son would supply" (54). The relationship between Charles and James, and in particular the indulgent love of the father for his illegitimate son, forms the central strand of the remaining narrative: James moves from strength to strength as his father bestows on him high offices and military positions. He distinguishes himself with bravery on continental battlefields on both sides of the conflict between the Dutch and the French, and is soon among the most experienced of English military commanders. Handsome and dashing, he becomes the idol of the court and the fascination of young ladies. Keay argues that if his relationship with his young wife Anne was somewhat cool, that too is attributable to his father's love: "Monmouth's appetite for affection was already satisfied, not by his wife, nor even by his mistresses, but by his father. The family he felt part of was not that born of his marriage, but that which his relationship with the king placed him among. If there was one thing every observer of the age agreed upon it was the strength of the king's love for Monmouth" (148).

It seems all the more shocking then in 1678 when Monmouth aligned himself with his father's political opponents, namely Lord Shaftesbury's parliamentary faction (that had only recently acquired the name Whigs). Monmouth was repeatedly slighted by his uncle, James, Duke of York, whose Catholicism he despised, and he witnessed the brutal injustice visited by government policy on the population of the Scottish Lowlands. By 1679, Monmouth became a political activist for the cause of the legislative exclusion of his Catholic uncle from the line of succession, and thereby a staunch opponent of his own father. During the next few years he repeatedly defied his father's orders, and in 1683 engaged in a conspiracy for a violent uprising against the government that resulted in the execution of several of his co-conspirators. Even before his famed rising against his uncle, Monmouth established himself as a rebel against the crown of his own father.

Anna Keay tells Monmouth's story with energy and a vividness that is truly captivating. She sets out to rehabilitate his historical position and objects to those who have described him as "unprincipled" or "so weak as to let himself be 'made the cat's foot'" (386). She contends that "his devotion to honour and loyalty overwhelmed everything, causing him to make poor political judgments and to stay faithful to those who deserved it least" (385).

Whether or not she succeeds in vindicating a man whose actions betrayed his father's trust and cost the lives of so many Englishmen and women is for the reader to judge. In any case, *The Last Royal Rebel* is the very best sort of historical work. It is based on the meticulous use of an eclectic array of primary sources, and represents substantial painstaking and well-documented research. The action, intrigue, romance, and suspense drive the reader relentlessly toward the stirring conclusion. Through this work the Duke of Monmouth and Restoration England come alive once more—tales of such passion and moment are all too rarely told.

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