THE MONMOUTH OR WEST COUNTRY REBELLION

One of the key difficulties about writing any history article is to know precisely where to begin. I have chosen as my starting point the English Civil War fought between the forces of King Charles I and Parliament. The Civil War ended in victory for Parliament and ultimately led to the execution of Charles I. His son, the future Charles II, had fought at the Battle of Worcester. The Royalist forces had been defeated. He hid up an oak tree to avoid capture by parliamentary forces, hence, the preponderance of Royal Oaks in our culture and history. Charles had to make his escape and return to exile in France. In a country that was now dominated by parliamentary forces this would not be easy. The way that he was taken out of the country was very clever; to get him from Worcester to the coast he rode a horse with a lady. He was very tall; probably 6frt 1 or 2 ins which is tall today (the average height of men in the UK today is 5ft 10 ins, women 5ft 5ins; in Stuart London the average height of men is estimated to have been 5ft 7 ½ ins, women 5ft 2 ¼ ins) so he would have stood out very much at this time. I was talking to a friend about this, and she like me, felt that for a man to stand out today he would need to be about 6ft. 5ins tall.

It was not unusual in those days for a lady to ride a horse and be accompanied by a male servant, from the artistic representations I have seen the lady in question, Jane Lane, rode pillion with Charles having charge of the reins. In the final stages of their journey to the coast another lady, namely Juliana Coningsby, took over as pillion passenger. The horse they rode may have been an Irish Draught Horse. I contacted the British Horse Society and the lady to whom I spoke said that there was a portrait of Charles I dated 1635 on a Buckskin Iberian Charger. I was interested in relation to the type of horse that would have been strong enough two adults over long distances.

It seems that he finally left England for France from the Hove Basin near Shoreham. I am very grateful to the ladies at the British Horse Society and at Berriewood Farm and Riding Stables, Ryton, Dorrington, Shropshire for helping me with this aspect of my research. It was not safe at this time for ladies to travel around the country on their own. A lady and her servant travelling together would not probably have aroused suspicion. Efforts were made to make Charles seem as if he was from the lower classes. Sitting in a saddle his height would not have been so apparent and at night they would presumably demount, sleep and prepare for the next day!

Charles managed to escape into exile in France, in England the rule of Oliver Cromwell continued. When he died his son Richard took over. This only lasted for two years and he then relinquished the position. The throne was offered to Charles. He retuned to England to be crowned King Charles II. He was tall, as previously stated, and handsome. He was affable and had a friendly personality; he loved to go to the horse racing at Newmarket. He was very interested in Science and he used to do experiments with mercury. It is thought that this might have had a long term negative effect on his health. He was married to Catherine of Braganza; he seems to have held her in high regard. He had, however, no children with her. It seems that she had gynaecological problems that made it very difficult for her to conceive. He did, however, have a very great liking for women. He had, it is thought, a total of 13 children with different ladies, but as he was not married to them, any

children would be deemed illegitimate and could not, therefore, succeed to the throne. One of the most famous ladies of his acquaintance was Nell Gwynne the actress; she had two sons by Charles II, namely, Charles Beauclerk (1670-1726) and James Beauclerk (1671-1680). Charles Beauclerk was created Earl of Burford and later Duke of St. Albans. James, at this stage the Duke of York, had fathered seven children with his wife and a further three with Arabella Churchill. One is forced to consider that at this, the highest level of society with is vast retinue of servants and tutors, child care was not the issue that it would be, and still is, for ordinary families! The point here must surely be that, whether or not Charles was married to their mothers, these children were of royal lineage and would have to given an appropriate rank. When he died there were a number of children would have been able to succeed to the throne had he been married to their mothers! One of these children, the Duke of Monmouth would greatly resent the fact that when Charles died the throne passed to James II, Charles 11's younger brother. He would stage a rebellion that would have very serious results.

James II had proved himself to be a competent military leader. He was equally a competent administrator in terms of peacetime issues. It would, however, be his religious views that would be a huge cause of contention. He was in the early years of his reign Protestant in outlook. He had spent part of his formative years, like his brother Charles II, in exile in France, a largely catholic country and of course, his mother, Henrietta Maria was a Catholic. Initially the ruling elite were to give him their support; he had, after all, proved himself in the Dutch Wars. At this time most of Parliament consisted of men who were Protestants.

The Duke of Monmouth had been involved in the Rye House Plot; however, he had given evidence against other men who had been involved in this Plot. Monmouth sailed to Holland very soon after the failure of this Plot. In Holland he joined up with the Duke of Argyll a Scottish Presbyterian leader who had also been exiled. With the accession of James to the throne, Monmouth began with Argyll to plot against his Uncle James II

In June 1685 Monmouth landed at Lyme Regis in Dorset. He did not get the enthusiastic response that he seemed to have expected. The local gentry were not interested in following a man that they believed to be unreliable. Monmouth's next set of actions were extremely reckless. He was proclaimed King at Taunton. It was at this stage that he proved himself to be even more reckless. He declared that this Uncle King James II had been responsible for starting the Great Fire of London and of being a conspirator in the Popish Plot. He even accused James of murdering his elder brother King Charles II. There could surely be no way back for him should things go wrong! Nonetheless, he advanced to meet the Army of his Uncle King James II at Sedgemoor; this is just three miles form Bridgwater in Somerset.

Monmouth's position was utterly hopeless. The men who had joined him were untrained and lacking in essential equipment needed to fight a major battle. Monmouth watched the opposing Army and when he saw the flags of the regiment that he had once commanded he remarked that he knew that they were good soldiers facing his own largely peasant Army. This Battle taking place in July 1685 was the last Battle to be fought on English soil.

King James II had 3,000 troops, the Duke of Monmouth 4,000 troops. The leaders on the King's side were Louis de Duras, John Churchill and

Henry Fitzroy. Monmouth's Army had himself as its head with Lord Grey of Warke and Benjamin Hewling as the other leaders. Hewling was later sentenced to be hung, drawn and quartered but this was commuted to death by hanging after his sister paid £1,000 for this to happen! The King's Army suffered 200 casualties. Monmouth on the other hand had 1,300 of his sooldiers killed. John Churchill was second in command to Lord Faversham. Churchill would go on to win a memorable victory at the Battle of Blenheim on 13th. August 1704 in the reign of Queen Anne who was the last Stuart Monarch and interestingly the first Queen of a United Kingdom of Great Britain! Churchill was later given Blenheim Palace in recognition of this memorable victory. He was, of course, the ancestor of Winston Churchill.

Monmouth was taken to London to meet his Uncle. Lady Antonia Fraser notes in her brilliant biography of Charles 11 that Catherine of Braganza, the now widow of Charles II and the sister-in–law of the King, James II, pleaded for Monmouth's life to be spared. Despite Monmouth's desperate pleas for mercy, none was forthcoming and he was to be beheaded.

A tragic end for Monmouth but also very tragic for the people who had followed him The man who was chosen to try the rebels was Lord Chief Justice Jeffreys. There is a local connection here because Judge Jeffreys was originally from Oswestry. He was portrayed by his critics, mainly Whigs, as being very ugly whereas in reality he was handsome. He had come to prominence trying the Rye House Plotters. Jeffreys was, in fact, a brilliant lawyer. He was also a very strong supporter of the Tories. There were two main Parties in Parliament at this time the Tories and the Whigs. He was a very keen supporter of both King James and the Church of England. Jeffreys and other Judges toured the West Country, they were a special Commission and they would punish the followers of the Duke of Monmouth. Jeffreys is often blamed for the harshness of what happened in these trials which later Whig writers called "the Bloody Assize", however, it was James who was the real power in this situation. He might have settled for a few of the ringleaders being punished, however, he stipulated that .large numbers of rebels were to be punished.

The numbers punished were vast. About 1,300 men and women were found guilty.200 of these were hung, drawn and quartered, the punishment for treason. Around 800 people were given to the Queen and her courtiers to be told as slaves to work in the West Indies. The islands of the West Indies were a valuable part of the ever expanding British Empire and grew a very valuable commodity namely sugar cane. To grow commercially sugar cane needs a hot climate and many hours of direct sunshine, the people of Britain and the wider world were developing a huge taste for sugar and companies involved made large profits. A visit to the Maritime Museum in Liverpool in very educative in this context.

To put this into some type of context, Judge Jeffreys arrived in Dorchester in early September 1685, by this time a number of people had already died due to the appalling conditions in which they had been kept. The trials would be known, as stated, as the "Bloody Assizes". These events are covered by Dr. Anna Keay in her book, "The Last Royal Rebel- The Life and Death of James, Duke of Monmouth"; like Lady Antonia Fraser, she is a brilliant historian and writer. On a single day in September 1685, 540

prisoners were tried and sentenced. Over the next few months 250 people were hanged, drawn and quartered. As stated, a large number of people were transported to the West Indies for ten years. Over 90% were executed or transported, in fact, less than 10% of the rebels were pardoned.

In the West Country the scenes were truly horrific; the hangings were distributed to 37 different locations in Dorset, Devon and Somerset. The idea was to maximise the impact of these punishments. People in small market towns had to observe the people they knew being killed horrifically, for instance, being disembowelled. Hand and limbs were boiled in brine, tarred and put on public display. Judge Jeffreys seemed to have had little sympathy for these people. There were acts of considerable bravery, for instance, John Langford of Dorchester who cut down the quarter of a friend and was prepared to take the risk of severe punishment.

Lady Alice Lisle aged 70, she was deaf and not in good health. She was hanged for allowing rebels to sleep in her barns. Elizabeth Gaunt was found guilty of helping the rebels and was burned to death; she would be the last woman to be executed for treason in England.

The people punished and sent to work on the sugar plantations were extremely unfortunate. They were forced to work very long hours in very hot conditions, that are, as stated earlier, essential for growing sugar cane. The islands that the rebels were sent to were Jamaica, Barbados and the Leeward Islands; this was a very severe punishment. These people were from England and they were sent to a very different place. England is essentially a temperate maritime climate the temperature rarely falls below 0 Centigrade in Winter and rarely higher than 32 C in Summer. Jamaica by contrast is a tropical monsoon climate. It is in the Hurricane Belt; from December to May the average temperate is 21-31 C (70-88F), from June to November it is 28-31C (73-88F).

Returning to the fate of the Duke of Monmouth; following his defeat at Sedgmoor he wrote to James 11 citing William of Orange as a witness to how he had not really wanted to rebel! He also wrote to Catherine of Braganza to elicit her support and, as stated earlier, she did plead on his behalf. However, James would not allow him to live even though they had once been close. Monmouth clung to the hope that his Uncle might be sympathetic. James did commute the sentence of hanging, drawing and quartering to beheading. This was the normal punishment for capital offences for members of the aristocracy. His head was to be given to his family to bury, rather than being placed on London Bridge. His sentence was carried out in public on Tower Hill and not within the Tower of London itself. Elizabeth 1 had allowed the Earl of Essex and Mary 1 had allowed Lady Jane Grey to be executed within the Tower of London.

Monmouth's execution scaffold was draped in black as a mark of respect and James had agreed to this. He was allowed to have servants in attendance and for his wife and children to visit him. He was very calm when they saw him. On the scaffold he proclaimed "I die as a Protestant of the Church of England".

His execution was truly horrific. A number of attempts were made to remove his head and the executioner, Jack Ketch, had to take a knife to cut through the sinews. His body was placed in a velvet lined coffin and he was buried in the Church of St. Peter ad Vincula in the Tower of London. This

Church is also the burial place of Anne Boleyn and Catherine Howard. These ladies had both been Queens of England married to Henry V111; both had fallen foul of him

The Monmouth Rebellion is referred to in the novel Lorna Doone written in the nineteenth century by R.D.Blackmore. The Doones were in the novel, high class robbers. They sided with the Duke of Monmouth during the Rebellion in the hope of advancement should he win. Later in the novel Judge Jeffreys is made Lorna Doone's guardian.

Undoubtedly a very interesting period of History and the suppression of the Monmouth Rebellion would not be the end of the matter. The question of who should rule would continue for many years to come and the controversies lingered. I hope to be able to discuss these in later articles.

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