BOOKS

More than a fop on horseback

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James, Duke of Monmouth was a rogue and a gambler but he toughened up on the battlefield, discovers *Tim Bouverie*

THE LAST ROYAL REBEL
by Anna Keay

480PP, BLOOMSBURY, £25, EBOOK £14.29

★★★★★

History has not been kind to James, Duke of Monmouth – the eldest and favourite of Charles II's illegitimate children, who led an ill-fated rebellion against his uncle, James II, in 1685. Macaulay dismissed him as "effeminate and irresolute", while the historian's great-nephew, G M Trevelyan, was scathing about this "foolish, handsome, bad young man". These judgments should now, however, be considered as discredited as the rest of Whig history. Monmouth had his flaws, but, as Anna Keay shows in this brilliant and revelatory biography, he was both a better and more substantial man than history has, thus far, allowed.

Conceived during Charles II's 14-year exile on the Continent, the future Duke of Monmouth came into the world in Rotterdam, three months after his grandfather, Charles I, exited it. His mother, Lucy Walter, was beautiful, vivacious and decidedly loose. But while her enemies would brand this daughter of respectable English gentry a whore, she is more to be pitied than condemned. In 1658, the nine-year-old James was abducted from her house – the third attempt by Charles II to kidnap his son – and nine months later the heartbroken Lucy was dead, aged just 28.

The loss of his mother would always remain with Monmouth, who later commissioned Kneller to paint a magnificent portrait of her. But if his abduction was traumatic, it also opened up a new world of possibilities to the young James. His father doted on him and after the Restoration there was nothing the king's eldest son, although illegitimate, was denied. In 1662, he was created Duke of Monmouth and the following year, aged 14, he married to Scotland's richest heiress, the 12-year-old Countess of Buccleuch.

The next six years were a giddy whirl of glamour and hedonism, expertly captured by Keay. After the privation of exile and the reign of puritan killjoys, pleasure was the watchword of the Restoration court, and Monmouth indulged heavily. In addition to the vast Buccleuch wealth, he was granted such largesse by the king that his means reached almost "limitless proportions". Hundreds of pounds were spent on hats, wigs and other fripperies, while still greater sums were lost on horses and at cards. Good-looking and charming, he had the pick of society beauties, and his many affairs, along with various acts of high-spirited roguery, gave him a deserved reputation for debauchery.

This is the impression passed down to posterity: the dashing, but feckless, youth, whose vanity deluded him into assuming the role of pretender to the throne when his uncle succeeded. What this portrait lacks, however, is the considerable maturity, discovered by Keay, that Monmouth attained in the 1670s. Awed by the martial glory of Louis XIV, Monmouth was determined to become a soldier and persuaded his father to allow him to test his mettle on the Continent. There, as part of England's alliance with the Sun King, he saw action against the Dutch. During the siege of Maastricht, he distinguished himself when, with almost foolhardy bravery, he led a dozen men, including the musketeer d'Artagnan, out of a mud-filled trench to recover a crucial bastion.

Back in England, although only in his mid-20s, Monmouth was given responsibility for administering the army. To help wounded soldiers, he persuaded his father to build the Royal Hospital at Chelsea, which still functions today. In the third decade of Charles II's reign, he was better known as the darling of the Whig opposition and, if popular acclaim could make it so, the next king of England. Having fallen out with his uncle, Monmouth supported the attempts of the House of Commons to exclude him from the line of succession, on the grounds that the Church of England could not be entrusted to a Catholic. The Whigs lost, but Monmouth's journeys around the country confirmed him as the most popular man in the kingdom, and it was here that the seeds of future tragedy were sown.

After Charles II died suddenly in February 1685, Monmouth, then in exile, allowed himself to be persuaded that it was his duty to his country and his faith to launch an invasion to depose the

He spent hundreds of pounds on hats and wigs, and lost even more on cards

newly crowned James II. He duly sailed with 80 men. Although his company eventually swelled to about 4,000, it was a ragbag army whose destruction was all but assured. On Sedgemoor, just below the Somerset Levels, the rebels were routed. Monmouth was captured, brought to London and beheaded.

Anna Keay has written a superb biography, which paints a vivid picture of the times and of her subject. She has an instinctive feel for character and place, and combines elegant prose with a novelistic gift for narrative. Above all, she has rescued this much-traduced and forgotten royal rebel from the backwaters and set him once more at the centre of one of Britain's great historical whirlpools.

Tim Bouverie is a political journalist for *Channel 4 News*

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Is this the year's most daring novel?

Duncan White welcomes an audacious fiction that breathes new life into the American canon

THE SPORT OF KINGS
by C E Morgan

560PP, FOURTH ESTATE, £16.99, EBOOK £9.99

★★★★★

No dead horse has been more thoroughly flogged than the Great American Novel, yet CE Morgan, undeterred, has coaxed the poor animal into unexpected resurrection, leading it up onto its shaking legs and into a full-blooded gallop. *The Sport of Kings* is a novel ostensibly about horse racing, but it is competing for much higher stakes. Morgan has dared to write the kind of book that was presumed long extinct: a high literary epic of America.

Maybe this should not have been all that unexpected. When Morgan was asked to write the foreword for a recent reissue of William Faulkner's *Light in August* she defended the very concept of a Great American Novel: "Rarely neat and carefully ordered, they are neither quickly read nor readily comprehended in their full complexity," she wrote. "They don't lend themselves to facile exegesis. Instead, they often manifest as overabundant, and just as an over-rich meal can overwhelm or even sicken the stomach, so can these novels overwhelm even the most generous reader."

Morgan was clearly meditating on the book she was about to unleash, a novel that compared to most literary fiction reads like a strange, majestic anachronism. *The Sport of Kings* is long. It is dense. It is violent. It is strident. It is pretentious. It is portentous. And yet, despite these flaws, or rather because of them, it is the first novel since Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985) to take its own ambition seriously. Morgan's prose taps into the deep vein of American rhetorical excess, drawing from the Pilgrim pulpit and the poop deck of the Pequod.

Any attempt to summarise this novel's scope and scale will fall short, but in the spirit of overreaching, here goes. In the postwar decades, John Henry Forge is a Kentucky farmer who can trace his family line to the white settlers who crossed through the Cumberland Gap in the aftermath of the Revolutionary War. He is a racist tyrant obsessed with the preservation of his family name. His son, Henry Forge, imperils that name. How? He has vulgar plans to convert the farm into a venue for breeding horses.

John Henry Forge dies in the Sixties but his son is indelibly marked by his patrimony. Henry pursues the idea of breeding the perfect racehorse with the monomaniacal intensity with which Ahab pursues the whale. He is trapped inside the Forge family mythology. He becomes obsessed with legacy. This is bad news for his daughter.

Alongside the narrative of the Forges runs the story of Allmon Shaughnessy, whose feckless white father leaves him and his ailing black mother to struggle with poverty in Nineties Cincinnati, just north of the Ohio River, a historic boundary between the free north and the slaveholding south. Allmon's life is a catalogue of misery until he finds a vocation as a groom, a vocation that takes him to Forge Run Farm and all manner of complications.

Strange and majestic: CE Morgan

Orbiting these main narratives are interludes that sweep back through centuries, from an unbearably tense story of an escaped slave fleeing the Forge Farm for Ohio, to an account of the geological formation of the Appalachian Mountains. These are not indulgent digressions. As you read deeper into the novel, you realise that it is not as loose and baggy as it initially seemed. Rather, it has been intricately assembled. Beneath the ostentatious prose, Morgan is a good old-fashioned storyteller, knowing what to withhold and what to reveal.

That is not to say that *The Sport of Kings* ever eases into the merely conventional. This novel does not canter along; it bucks and heaves. As the momentum builds, the force of its culminating revelations urges you towards what you might have least expected: the desire to get back in the saddle and do it all over again.