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MONMOUTH'S PAINFUL END

Probably the most heinous crime for a soldier to commit – until it was abolished in 1998 – was High Treason, which was the ultimate betrayal of allegiance to the Crown.

Until it was replaced in 1870 by the axe, the penalty for this crime – when committed by a man – was public strangulation at the end of a rope, followed by emasculation, evisceration, dismemberment and, finally, decapitation. A proficient executioner could keep his subject alive until the final blow of the axe.

Despite the abolition of Capital Punishment for murder in 1965, it is a little-known fact that beheading for High Treason remained on the Statute books until 1973 when it was replaced with life-imprisonment.

To date, only one Life Guard has been executed for High Treason. This is possibly because, as John Harrington wrote at the end of the seventeenth-century:

Treason doth never prosper, what's the reason? For if it prosper, none dare call it Treason.

Had he been luckier commander of troops in the field, this might have been the case with Captain General James Scott, 1st Duke of Monmouth & Buccleuch who was the eldest and best-loved of King Charles II's illegitimate children.

Monmouth was born to the exiled King's mistress-of-the-moment, Lucy Walter, in Rotterdam in 1649. Ennobled in 1663, prior to which he was styled plain James Fitzroy and later Crofts, Monmouth grew up into a handsome, charming but not overly intelligent man. A close friend of the King's mistress, Nell Gwynne, who always made the frequently unwashed Duke take a bath before she would receive him, Monmouth's principal achievements, outside the bedroom (not Nell's), were that he was a reasonably competent military commander - and a Protestant.



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In 1668, at the age of nineteen, Monmouth was appointed to command The King's Troop of Horse Guards, the predecessors in title of the 1st Life Guards. This command carried with it the appointment of Gold Stick, which the King had to buy-back from the incumbent Gold Stick, **Lord Gerard of Brandon**, for £8,000 (2018: £1.6 million).

By 1674, Monmouth was married, Chancellor of Cambridge University, a Lord Lieutenant, Master of the Horse, the *de facto* but un-appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Army, and extraordinarily popular with the masses. He was also harbouring the ambition that his father would name him as his successor to the throne.

However, despite the unsuitability of the Heir Apparent, the fervently Catholic James, Duke of York, this was never a serious option given the King's obsession with the legitimacy of the royal succession. But the facts did not deter Monmouth from hoping and plotting. This ultimately resulted in his father sending him into exile in 1679.

Following King Charles II's death in 1685, Monmouth launched his bid for the throne with an armed landing at Lyme Regis. His troops were routed a month later at the Battle of Sedgemoor, following which Monmouth was captured, indicted for High Treason, put on trial and – despite a personal plea to King James II for clemency and the offer to convert to Catholicism – was executed in public on 15th July.

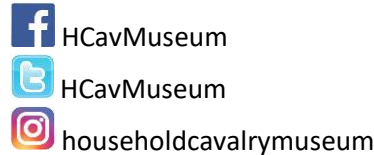
Given his semi-royal status, Monmouth was spared the pain and humiliation of hanging, drawing and quartering and was, instead, executed with the axe. However, his uncle was not *that* merciful, for the appointed executioner was the notorious bungler, Jack Ketch.

Despite Monmouth tipping him to make a cleaner job of his dispatch than Ketch had done with Lord Russell and others, the decapitation was gruesomely botched: it took between five and eight blows (accounts differ) of a rather blunt axe to sever Monmouth's head, which Ketch – who had thrown down his axe after the third stroke and had to be threatened with death before he would take it up again – finally had to detach with a knife.



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Two *post mortem* legends attach to Monmouth. The first is that, after his death, his head was re-attached, his body was re-dressed and then ‘sat’ for a portrait which may or may not be the one hanging in the National Portrait Gallery.

The second is that, unwilling to execute a son of his brother, King James II had a substitute sent to the scaffold and had Monmouth imprisoned in France, where he languished in an ‘iron mask’. Both stories are almost certainly apocryphal. What is not, is that Monmouth is – at least to date – the only Gold Stick to have been executed.

This and other Household cavalry stories can be found in my books, *The Drum Horse in the Fountain* and *Spoils of war*, both of which are available on Amazon.

Next week, I’m going to recount the extraordinary story of Colonel Alfred Wintle of the Royals, who also spent some time imprisoned in the Tower of London....

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**‘NOT A LOT OF PEOPLE KNOW THIS...’**

**A weekly series of podcasts about the Regiments of the Household Cavalry  
written and recorded by  
Regimental Historian, Christopher Joll, formerly of The Life Guards**

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