

*The  
Connell Guide  
to*

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# Horatio Nelson

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*by Roger Knight*

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# Introduction

Horatio Nelson was complex, talented and flawed, possessing great physical courage coupled with enough ambition to last for all of his 47 years. He was driven by a continuous feeling of not being appreciated. Yet at the same time he had an extraordinary professional self-belief: if he thought his way was better he would have no hesitation in breaking rules or conventions; and he generally got away with it.

Long-established, over-simplified myths are the greatest problem faced by a Nelson biographer.\* Early books focused on Nelson alone, taking little account of those around him and making him a hero who could do no wrong. Victorian writers, often copied later, made out that signs of greatness were obvious from an early age, supporting their view with imagined stories, mostly far-fetched and ridiculous. In fact, there were few signs of exceptional talent in Nelson until the mid-1790s, when he was already in his mid-thirties. Yet this deep veneration continues and his mystique survives to the present day.

The other problem is Nelson's relationship with the remarkable Emma Hamilton. Some newer biographies and television documentaries concentrate on this subject at the expense of his life and achievement at sea. Yet Nelson's private life did not

\* Lambert, *Britannia's God of War*, xii

affect his performance or that of the fleets which he led so well. There is one exception, in the summer of 1799 at Naples, when Emma was present and undoubtedly had a damaging influence on his judgement.

Today we are left with icons, symbols and commemorations of Nelson. The name is permanently commemorated in towns: Nelson in the South Island of New Zealand, in Victoria in Australia, in British Columbia and in Lancashire. Perhaps the most famous modern bearer was the young Rolihlahla Mandela, who was called "Nelson" by his missionary teachers in the Transkei when they found his name too difficult to pronounce. Columns supporting a statue of Nelson stand in the middle of London, Edinburgh, Liverpool, Great Yarmouth, and there are statues and plaques in Montreal, Barbados and Simonstown, among other places. Nelson's Pillar also stood in the middle of Dublin, until it was blown up by the I.R.A. in 1966.\*

Each country and generation has used his memory for its own purpose. In Italy a group of liberal historians in 1889 began to champion the Neapolitan Revolution, claiming that the backwardness of the south of Italy was due to its suppression, and Nelson was cast as the villain.\*\* In France, after the fall of Napoleon, the historian Marianne Czisnik notes, Nelson's "genius" and the weakness of French admirals was used to explain

\* MacKenzie, 'Nelson goes Global', 147-161

\*\* Knight, *Pursuit of Victory*, 543-544

the defeat at Trafalgar. Later in the 19th century, Alphonse de Lamartine and Alexandre Dumas wrote novels stressing the admiral's passion and "blind and fanatical zeal". After surveying French, German and Spanish literature, Czisnik comments: "Foreign perceptions of Nelson have been shaped more by the needs of those societies than by the reality of what Nelson had in fact achieved."<sup>\*</sup>

In Britain in the years leading up to the First World War, the Navy League, lobbying for further rearmament against the new threat from Germany, invoked his name. Trafalgar centenary celebrations in 1905 took place all over the Anglophone world. In 1941, during the Second World War, Alexander Korda made the only film of Nelson's life of any distinction called *That Hamilton Woman*. It starred Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh and not only told the story of Nelson and Emma, but showed Nelson resisting tyranny in the form of Napoleon: audiences equated the emperor in the film with Hitler. Churchill was reputed to have said that the film was worth two divisions.

In 2005, the bicentenary of Trafalgar was marked by books, conferences and television programmes, while a review of over a hundred warships took place at Spithead: 27 foreign navies sent 52 ships; the French, with great style, sent six, including their largest aircraft carrier, which dominated the view of the warships down the

<sup>\*</sup> Czisnik, *Controversial Hero*, 147-148, 157

Solent.<sup>\*</sup> Predictably the review was criticised by the left-wing press, for being held at all, and by the right-wing press, for not doing enough. Controversy aside, the navies of the United States, Russia, China and Japan, all present at the commemoration, still study his leadership and tactics.<sup>\*\*</sup>

This short book seeks a dispassionate view of the man, which can be gained from the thousands of documents which Nelson and those around him left to us in dispatches, reports, letters and logs. It also considers the other parts of the equation: the navy, a formidable organisation of thousands of officers, seamen, administrators and shipbuilders on which Nelson's success depended; and the backdrop of the intense ideological struggle between Britain and France which developed from the French Revolutionary War through the rise of Napoleon into a contest for domination of Europe.

## How did Nelson achieve such rapid promotion?

Horace Nelson, as he was called as a child, was born on 29th September 1758 in Burnham Thorpe, a large village in Norfolk where his father, Edmund, was rector. His mother, Catherine (*née* Suckling), was the great-niece of Sir Robert Walpole, the first

<sup>\*</sup> Connelly, 'Trafalgar and Popular Culture', 87-97

<sup>\*\*</sup> Hattendorf, 'Nelson Afloat', 182-186

Prime Minister, and it was her side of the family which gave Nelson political and naval connections which enabled him to start in the navy. However, she died when Horace was nine, leaving a large family to be brought up by the unworldly Edmund Nelson. Horace had two older brothers, Maurice and William, who played a large part in his career. They were dull, quite unlike him. Indeed, no other member of the Nelson family, before or since, ever remotely matched Nelson's qualities.

Nelson's one unusually powerful attribute, his capacity to communicate and empathise with his officers and seamen, was perhaps due to his early

life in the country. Burnham Thorpe had a population of 300, with a market every week. The rector's son was in contact with all manner of men and women, from the gentry to the labouring poor. Later in life, only royalty was to prove immune to Nelson's charm. George III did not like him, his naval son Prince William Henry twisted him round his little finger in the West Indies in the 1780s, and the Queen of Naples duped him in 1798 and 1799.

Just before his 13th birthday, on 24th April 1771, Horatio Nelson joined his uncle's ship as a midshipman. The 64-gun *Raisonable* was anchored in the Thames Estuary, hurriedly assembling a crew,



### THE ROYAL NAVY IN THE FRENCH REVOLUTIONARY WAR?

The Royal Navy achieved some real advantages over the French navy by the time the French Revolutionary War started in 1793, and its superiority continued. In the ten years of peace after the American Revolutionary War had finished in 1783, William Pitt's government had raised extra money, reduced the naval

debt and invested heavily in the infrastructure of the navy. New warships came down the slipways. Procedures in the Navy Board and working practices in the dockyards were reformed. Docks at Portsmouth and Plymouth were enlarged and renewed, a huge rope laying building was constructed at Chatham, and many storehouses constructed.

By the mid 1780s, the biggest problem of all was also solved. At the beginning of the American War the fleet had been hastily sheathed with copper, which kept ships' bottoms clear of weed and enabled them to sail faster,

while it also protected the hull against shipworm. However, it was found that the great iron bolts which held the ships together were slowly destroyed by the process of electrolysis, caused by the proximity of copper in sea water. In the mid 1780s a copper alloy bolt was invented which neutralised this process. The huge task of rebolting the entire fleet had to be undertaken, but it was largely achieved by the time that war was declared.

The Ordnance Department tested the entire stock of British naval guns and over half were condemned. New ones were manufactured to a

better design. The mixing of gunpowder improved. The light, short-range carronades, perfected at the end of the American War, were produced in quantity and became a crucial feature of Nelson's battle tactics.

In contrast, the French navy was battered by disaster after disaster. In 1783 the battleships of the combined Bourbon powers of France and Spain had outnumbered those of the British, but the financial effort to retain this advantage was one of the chief reasons why the French treasury ran out of money in the late 1780s. A further failure was the huge

taking on stores, adjusting her rigging and bending on sails, making ready to go to sea. Britain was in dispute with Spain over the Falkland Islands and the fleet was mobilising to back up the British government's diplomatic pressure.

The captain of the ship, Maurice Suckling, Nelson's mother's brother, was the first in a succession of patrons who supported Nelson through his early career. At this time the captain could decide which officers he took to sea, though they received their commissions from the Board of the Admiralty. It was therefore essential for the family of an aspiring young naval officer to find a patron.

and costly project to build a harbour at Cherbourg, which would have transformed the strategic situation in the Channel. But the newly-constructed piers were swept away by winter gales. Money was so tight that French seamen and dockyard workers were unpaid, which in turn led to strikes, contributing to domestic strife which led to revolution. This in turn led to some of the best officers being dismissed from the service. In 1793 the French navy thus had unprepared ships and mutinous crews.

Throughout the French Revolutionary War, British

warships were therefore better maintained and more efficient. Their guns were more robust and accurate, because of better gunpowder, while many ships were equipped with gunlocks rather than slow matches, enabling the gunners to aim effectively. Superior copper sheathing made the ships faster. Ships continuously on blockade resulted in highly trained seamen, while French seamen and ships languished in harbour. Nelson's success in battle should be understood with this mind.\* ■

\*Knight, *Britain against Napoleon*, 29-45; *Pursuit of Victory*, 131-141



*Captain Horatio Nelson, 1781, by J.F. Rigaud*

In turn, it was useful for the captain to have a group of young men whom he could train and trust. It was in no one's interests to appoint and promote a young man who did not like life at sea, or who had no aptitude for it.

In 1775 Suckling would become an important administrator, Comptroller of the Navy Board, which enabled him always to be on hand in London to help Nelson's career. He had already used his influence to obtain a berth for Nelson in the *Carcass*, which went on a voyage of exploration to the Arctic during the summer of 1773. Following this, the young midshipman sailed to India and the Arabian Gulf for three years.

He came back very ill, probably suffering from

malaria, but his return was fortuitous. The first shots had been fired in what became the American Revolutionary War and many warships were being commissioned. He recovered quickly, and Suckling managed to get him a berth in the winter of 1775/6 on a short convoying voyage down to Gibraltar and back, to prepare him for the lieutenant's exam which would enable him to stand watch on his own. Nelson had already gained an extraordinary amount of experience, having sailed 45,000 miles, and he passed as lieutenant on 9th April 1777.

The next day Nelson received his commission as second lieutenant of the *Lowestoffe*, a fast frigate of 32 guns captained by William Locker, and set off to the West Indies. Of all those who interested themselves in Nelson's career, Locker was the most influential. He had had a brilliant early career in the Seven Years War. In the West Indies Nelson caught the eye of Admiral Peter Parker, commander in chief of the Jamaica station. After six months as third lieutenant in Parker's flagship Nelson was appointed on 1st January 1779 to his first independent command, a small brig called the *Badger*, in which he distinguished himself and took a prize.

It was not long before the next promotion. On 1st September 1779 Nelson reached the rank of post-captain (that is, appointed to command a 6th rate warship or above) when he was appointed to the *Hinchinbrook* in the West Indies by Parker, only eight years after he had joined the navy as a midshipman. He was just under 21. While he was

clearly keen, and had impressed his senior officers, he had not yet displayed any exceptional qualities. The underlying reason for Nelson's rapid rise in the service was that the war in the West Indies was taking its toll on the navy and plenty of vacancies arose for promotion for a young and active officer. Nelson was in the right place at the right time.

## When did Nelson first show he was an exceptional commander?

For more than a dozen years after his early promotion to post-captain, Nelson's upward path in the navy stalled. For a start, he became seriously ill, catching a tropical fever in April 1780 when ashore in an expedition against a Spanish fort in central America. He was taken back to England, but another nine months were needed before he was sufficiently recovered for active service. It was not until August 1781 that he commissioned the *Albemarle*, a 28-gun frigate, cruising to the St Lawrence in Canada, New York and the West Indies.

In New York he met two naval officers who would have an effect on his career, neither of them positively, though initially relations were warm. The first was Rear-Admiral Sir Samuel Hood, whom Nelson impressed; the other was a midshipman,

Prince William Henry, the third son of George III, who was equally taken with the 26-year-old naval officer. But in all, it was an undistinguished cruise and not a good time for the navy, with the loss of the American colonies following the American War of Independence and the consequent loss of morale and prestige.

With the peace, Nelson was put on half pay. He set himself the task of learning French, potentially useful for his career, but he signally failed to master the language during his six-month stay in northern France. In March 1784 he received a mark of favour by a peacetime appointment to the *Boreas*, another 28-gun frigate, which was to cruise in the Leeward Islands. This three-year cruise was something of a disaster, and nearly wrecked his career.

The first problem erupted because of a dispute with the West Indian planters, who had long traded with the American colonies in American vessels, but who were now prohibited from doing so by an order of 1783. This permitted trade only in British vessels, owned and built in Britain with British crews. This was an inconvenient piece of legislation, enacted before the signing of the peace treaty between Britain and the United States. It was habitually ignored by planters and merchants, but from Nelson's arrival in the West Indies in November 1784 he was determined to enforce it. He boarded American vessels and sent them to the vice-admiralty courts as prizes, but was challenged

repeatedly in the courts by the local planters. After many months, Nelson succeeded in shaming the British government into defending him in the courts. Nonetheless it was a stressful episode, perhaps ill-judged on Nelson's part. With hindsight it was the first sign of an independence of mind: but it also marked the start of his reputation as an intemperate captain who could not be trusted. Worse was to follow.

When the senior naval officer of the Leeward Island station went home, Nelson was left as the acting senior officer. He was then faced with a problem which he handled with astonishing naivety. The *Perseus*, a frigate of the same size as the *Boreas*, arrived on the station, commanded by the 20-year-old Prince William Henry, now grossly over-promoted through the influence of his father. He ran his ship in the only way he knew, with an iron and wilful discipline. He had also fallen out badly with an older first lieutenant, Isaac Schomberg, who had been appointed to assist the inexperienced Prince. Rather than attempting to diffuse this difficult situation, Nelson took the Prince's side and did not keep the Admiralty informed.

After months of poisonous relations aboard the *Perseus*, Schomberg finally requested a court martial and Nelson was persuaded by the Prince that the *Perseus* should sail for Jamaica so that the court martial could take place. The commander-in-chief of the Jamaica station wisely dissuaded Schomberg from proceeding with the court martial.