

**“TRAFALGAR REFOUGHT”: THE PROFESSIONAL AND  
CULTURAL MEMORY OF HORATIO NELSON DURING  
BRITAIN’S NAVALIST ERA, 1880-1914**

A Thesis

by

BRADLEY M. CESARIO

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

December 2011

Major Subject: History

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## ABSTRACT

“Trafalgar Refought”: The Professional and Cultural Memory of Horatio Nelson During  
Britain’s Navalist Era, 1880-1914. (December 2011)

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Horatio Lord Nelson, Britain’s most famous naval figure, revolutionized what victory meant to the British Royal Navy and the British populace at the turn of the nineteenth century. But his legacy continued after his death in 1805, and a century after his untimely passing Nelson meant as much or more to Britain than he did during his lifetime. This thesis utilizes primary sources from the British Royal Navy and the general British public to explore what the cultural memory of Horatio Nelson’s life and achievements meant to Britain throughout the Edwardian era and to the dawn of the First World War.

An introductory literature review provides a thorough explanation of how Nelson’s legacy has been perceived by past historians and how this legacy will be examined throughout the thesis. The manner in which Nelson was viewed by both his naval contemporaries and the general British public during his lifetime is then surveyed, with a specific focus on the outpouring of national grief that followed Nelson’s death at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805. A major portion of the thesis explores how Nelson’s legacy developed throughout the century following his death. Separate studies of

Nelson's professional memory among his Royal Navy successors and his cultural memory in British society as it became ever more focused on naval concerns follow; these take the thesis chronologically up through the final decades of the nineteenth century and are then combined in a discussion of the degree to which Nelson's legacy permeated all Britons, regardless of profession, in the early years of the twentieth century. The thesis concludes with a brief discussion of the impact Nelson's legacy had on Britain during the early months of the First World War and a broader analysis of how the cultural and professional memory of Horatio Nelson's naval achievements in 1805 created an atmosphere in which a naval victory decisive enough to satisfy all aspects of British society was impossible in 1914.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION – THE FIFTH FACTOR

Horatio Lord Nelson redefined what constituted success in the British Royal Navy. At the height of the wars with revolutionary France Nelson reeled off a string of naval victories that dazzled the British imagination – as a captain at Cape St. Vincent in 1797 and as a fleet commander at the Nile in 1798, Copenhagen in 1801, and Trafalgar in 1805. His death at the moment of victory at Trafalgar ensured Nelson's legacy. A popular military or naval hero, particularly in monument-conscious Britain, could expect to receive the honor of a public statue or perhaps a burial in Westminster. It has been over two centuries since Trafalgar, and Nelson's name and image has been utilized ever since his death on everything from public statuary to advertisements for automobile insurance with no sign of abating.

To contemporary historians the study of Nelson can seem anachronistic, a return to the time when histories of great men dominated the literature. Nelson's very popularity makes another simple narrative retelling of the Trafalgar story an unnecessary effort. While it can never truly be said that no stone has been left unturned in a historical investigation, when it comes to the details of Nelson's career the historian has been reduced to the merest of pebbles. Nelson has always been a popular subject for biography, beginning with the poet Robert Southey's 1813 opus that has never been out of print.<sup>1</sup> More recently, the years from 1995 through the Trafalgar Bicentennial of 2005

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This thesis follows the style of *The Journal of Military History*.

<sup>1</sup> Robert Southey, *The Life of Nelson* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1962; originally published 1813).

were known as the ‘Nelson Decade’ by many in the British and international academic community. Multiple new works on Nelson and his times were called for and released in the period leading up to 2005 as part of a program run by Britain’s National Maritime Museum.<sup>2</sup>

The Nelson Decade led to an explosion of scholarly and popular works on Nelson and his Royal Navy. Many were updated biographies; major works in this vein appeared from Terry Coleman in 2002, Edgar Vincent in 2003, Andrew Lambert in 2004 and Roger Knight in 2005, among others.<sup>3</sup> Others were more specialized works. The traditional military history approach, in-depth studies of Nelson’s battles, remained widespread, with books by Nicholas Tracy in 1996, Tim Clayton and Phil Craig in 2004, and separate contributions by Roy Adkins, Nicholas Best, and Colin White in 2005.<sup>4</sup> Diverse collections also appeared on nearly every aspect of Nelson’s life, from his early naval career<sup>5</sup> to compilations of Nelson’s thoughts on war and discussions of Nelson’s

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<sup>2</sup> Roger Morriss, Brian Lavery and Stephen Deuchar, *Nelson: An Illustrated History*, Pieter van der Merwe, ed (London: Laurence King Publishing, 1995), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Terry Coleman, *The Nelson Touch: The Life and Legend of Horatio Nelson* (London: Oxford University Press, 2002); Edgar Vincent, *Nelson: Love & Fame* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003); Andrew Lambert, *Nelson: Britannia’s God of War* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2004); Roger Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory: The Life and Achievement of Horatio Nelson* (New York: Basic Books, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Tracy, *Nelson’s Battles: The Triumph of British Seapower* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2008; originally printed 1996); Tim Clayton and Phil Craig, *Trafalgar: The Men, the Battle, the Storm* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2004); Roy Adkins, *Nelson’s Trafalgar: The Battle that Changed the World* (New York: Viking, 2005); Nicholas Best, *Trafalgar: The Untold Story of the Greatest Sea Battle in History* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005); Colin White, *Nelson the Admiral* (Gloucestershire, UK: Sutton Publishing, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> John Sugden, *Nelson: A Dream of Glory, 1758-1797* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004).

‘way of war.’<sup>6</sup>

However, the Nelson Decade also brought an intriguing new development to British naval scholarship. This was the in-depth study of how Nelson was viewed *after* his death by the British public and his naval successors, the subfield this thesis places itself firmly into. The majority of works dealing with Nelson’s legacy – the so-called ‘Nelson Legend’ – are essay collections. Volumes appeared under the editorship of Pieter van der Merwe in 1995 and Colin White in 1997.<sup>7</sup> A second rush of titles appeared in time to capitalize on the Trafalgar bicentennial; works edited by David Cannadine, Marianne Czisnik, Holger Hock, and Alexander Stilwell were all released between 2005 and 2007.<sup>8</sup> One of the few single-author book-length treatments of Nelson’s legacy, Adam Nicolson’s *Men of Honour: Trafalgar and the Making of the English Hero* was also released in 2005.<sup>9</sup>

Nicolson’s work focused on the development of Nelson’s legacy while he still lived; the author states that he is searching for “that underlayer, the subtlest and

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<sup>6</sup> Joel Hayward, *For God and Glory: Lord Nelson and His Way of War* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2003); Joseph F. Callo, *Legacy of Leadership: Lessons from Admiral Lord Nelson* (Central Point, OR: Hellgate Press, 1999); Joseph F. Callo, *Nelson Speaks: Admiral Lord Nelson in His Own Words* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2001)

<sup>7</sup> Roger Morriss, Brian Lavery and Stephen Deuchar, *Nelson: An Illustrated History*, Pieter van der Merwe, ed (London: Laurence King Publishing, 1995); Colin White, ed., *The Nelson Companion* (Bridgend, UK: Bramley Books, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> David Cannadine, ed., *Admiral Lord Nelson: Context and Legacy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); David Cannadine, ed., *Trafalgar in History: A Battle and its Afterlife* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Marianne Czisnik, *Horatio Nelson: A Controversial Hero* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2005); Holger Hock, ed., *History, Commemoration, and National Preoccupation: Trafalgar 1805-2005* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007; British Academy Occasional Paper 8); Alexander Stilwell, ed., *The Trafalgar Companion* (New York: Osprey Publishing, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Adam Nicolson, *Men of Honour: Trafalgar and the Making of the English Hero* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005).



slipperiest of historical levels: pre-conceptions, and the way they shape present behavior. [Men of Honour] is an attempt to describe the mental landscape of the people who fought and commanded at one of the great battles in history and it asks, in particular, why and how the idea of the hero flowered here.”<sup>10</sup> This thesis instead aims to examine Horatio Nelson’s legacy throughout the century following his death, from Trafalgar all the way to the next great British naval conflict in 1914.

A longer chronological focus necessarily demands a broader historiographical base, and here the secondary literature appears less promising. Surprisingly, there has been more recent work on the Victorian Royal Navy than its later Edwardian counterpart. Andrew Lambert has established an industry unto himself, with books on the pre-Crimean War British steam navy, British strategy in the Crimea, the first British ironclads, and a broader survey of British warship development from 1815 to 1905.<sup>11</sup> John Beeler has also published two recent studies of British warship design in the mid-Victorian era, and Roger Parkinson has added a third on the late-Victorian Royal Navy.<sup>12</sup> But when the focus is shifted to the years from 1900 to 1914, the pickings become slim. Recent scholarly building blocks for the period are limited to Robert Massie’s 1991

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<sup>10</sup> Nicolson, *Men of Honour*, xx.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Lambert, *Battleships in Transition: The Creation of the Steam Battlefleet, 1815-1860* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1984); Andrew D. Lambert, *The Crimean War: British Grand Strategy, 1853-56* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990); Andrew Lambert, *HMS Warrior 1860: Victoria’s Ironclad Deterrent* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2011; originally published 1987); Andrew Lambert, cons. ed., *Steam, Steel & Shellfire: The Steam Warship 1815-1905* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1992; Conway’s History of the Ship).

<sup>12</sup> John Beeler, *Birth of the Battleship: British Capital Ship Design 1870-1881* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2001); John F. Beeler, *British Naval Policy in the Gladstone-Disraeli Era, 1866-1880* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997); Roger Parkinson, *The Late Victorian Navy: The Pre-Dreadnought Era and the Origins of the First World War* (Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, 2008).

*Dreadnought* and 2003 *Castles of Steel*, as well as Nicholas Lambert's 1999 *Sir John Fisher's Naval Revolution*, one of few works published in the last twenty years that focuses on a man arguably as important to the Royal Navy's technological development as Nelson was to its spirit.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps this is due to a reluctance to challenge Arthur Marder's seminal works on the growth of the Royal Navy in the years between 1880 and 1920, but as magisterial as Marder's volumes are the fact remains they are all now between fifty and seventy years old.<sup>14</sup>

However, there is one bright spot in this historiography – the specialized study of what became known as the 'new navalism.' There are a mere handful of works on the Royal Navy's impact on British popular culture – and vice versa – but they are all of superior quality and usefulness to a scholar of the period. Unfortunately, two of the most valuable are difficult to obtain. W. Mark Hamilton's *The Nation and the Navy*, an excellent survey of how British popular organizations used the Royal Navy for their own purposes in the Edwardian period, is only available as a reprinted doctoral thesis.<sup>15</sup> Marianne Czisnik's superb *Admiral Nelson: Image and Icon* was never published at all. This doctoral thesis formed the basis for her *Horatio Nelson: A Controversial Hero*, but

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<sup>13</sup> Robert K. Massie, *Dreadnought: Britain, Germany, and the Coming of the Great War* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991); Robert K. Massie, *Castles of Steel: Britain, Germany, and the Winning of the Great War at Sea* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003); Nicholas A. Lambert, *Sir John Fisher's Naval Revolution* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999).

<sup>14</sup> Arthur J. Marder, *The Anatomy of British Sea Power: A History of British Naval Policy in the Pre-Dreadnought Era, 1880-1905* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1940); Arthur Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow: The Royal Navy in the Fisher Era, 1904-1919*, vol. I, *The Road to War, 1904-14* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961).

<sup>15</sup> W. Mark Hamilton, *The Nation and the Navy: Methods and Organization of British Navalist Propaganda, 1889-1914* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1986; Outstanding Theses from the London School of Economics and Political Science).

the original *Image and Icon* thesis focuses more heavily on Nelson's legacy in the Victorian and Edwardian eras.<sup>16</sup>

Three more recent works also emphasize the development of both the Royal Navy and its public followers in the years prior to the First World War. Andrew Gordon's 1996 *The Rules of the Game* focuses specifically on the ossification of the British command hierarchy in the 1880s and 1890s.<sup>17</sup> Jan Rüger's *The Great Naval Game* deals instead with how the Royal Navy purposefully included the British public in its rituals as its structure changed in the 1890s and beyond; Mary Conley's *From Jack Tar to Union Jack* examines the same phenomenon in reverse, discussing how British sailors were shaped by their environment.<sup>18</sup> A sixth work, an edited collection on the public's response to the development of the dreadnought, was released too recently for inclusion in this thesis.<sup>19</sup>

It remains to be seen how the divergent historical threads of Horatio Nelson and the Edwardian Royal Navy will be connected. As previously stated, popular interest in Nelson and his times has remained strong in Britain for two centuries. Nelson was a national hero in 1805 when he was killed at the height of his greatest battle. Two hundred years later in 2005, the bicentennial of his death saw a new outpouring of

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<sup>16</sup> Marianne Czisnik, *Admiral Nelson: Image and Icon* (PhD Diss., University of Edinburgh, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> Andrew Gordon, *The Rules of the Game: Jutland and British Naval Command* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1996).

<sup>18</sup> Jan Rüger, *The Great Naval Game: Britain and Germany in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007; Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Modern Warfare); Mary Conley, *From Jack Tar to Union Jack: Representing Naval Manhood in the British Empire, 1870-1918* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2009; Studies in Imperialism).

<sup>19</sup> Robert J. Blyth, Andrew Lambert, and Jan Rüger, eds. *The Dreadnought and the Edwardian Age* (London: Ashgate, 2011).

scholarship of all stripes on Nelson's life and times as well as how Nelson was remembered in the twenty-first century. But what of the Trafalgar centennial? One hundred years after Nelson's death the Royal Navy was in the midst of new developments in naval technology that would revolutionize warfare at sea, but the service and its landlocked admirers remained firmly in the Nelsonian age when it came to tactics, strategies and theories of war. Jan Rüger has dated the 'cult of Nelson,' when Nelson's memory among both public and professional Britons was strongest, from between 1887 and 1914.<sup>20</sup> Yet histories of Nelson conclude in 1805 or 2005, and histories of the First World War begin in 1904 or 1914. Few works cover both wars; one that does is John Keegan's *The Price of Admiralty*, but it only deals with both conflicts in brief.<sup>21</sup>

In his history of Horatio Nelson's early career, John Sugden notes that "mythology, in fact, is the continual bane of the Nelson student. It steals insidiously into our sources at every turn, and is difficult to expunge because it was being created by contemporaries."<sup>22</sup> This thesis aims to transform the mythos surrounding Nelson's career from a historian's nuisance into a valuable source on the Royal Navy of a century later. Doing so will require the synthesis of many works; histories of Nelson, of British warship development during the nineteenth century, of the Admiralty, of the great technological changes of the early twentieth century and their associated naval reformer

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<sup>20</sup> Jan Rüger, "Nation, Empire and Navy: Identity Politics in the United Kingdom 1887-1914." *Past & Present* 185 (November 2004): 159-187, 164.

<sup>21</sup> John Keegan, *The Price of Admiralty: The Evolution of Naval Warfare* (New York: Viking, 1988).

<sup>22</sup> Sugden, *Nelson: A Dream of Glory*, 37-38.

Sir John Fisher, of the Edwardian navalist public, of the First World War. The threads of historical and cultural memory running through these topics, when connected, demonstrate how and why the world's most powerful navy went to war in 1914 with the confident belief that it would be refighting a battle from 1805.

The second chapter, 'Nelson's Glories, 1797-1805,' provides a brief overview of Horatio Nelson's naval career up to and including his death at the Battle of Trafalgar. As hundreds of books have demonstrated, Nelson was famous for a reason; his new tactical ideas of the nautical melee and the battle of annihilation at sea led to spectacular successes. The chapter also deals with Nelson's growing popularity among both his naval colleagues and the British public before his death and his near-instantaneous deification after Trafalgar as an explanatory foundation for the image of Nelson that would persist throughout the next century.

'The Navy's Nelson in the Nineteenth Century' traces the Royal Navy's conception of what Nelson's legacy meant to the Senior Service from Trafalgar through the early 1880s. As technology changed rapidly, leaving many of the Admiralty's leading lights at a loss for how to deal with the changing face of war at sea, they turned for ideological comfort to the memory of Nelson. However, as aging admirals clung to their view of a Nelsonian navy the innovations Nelson himself introduced began to slip away; by the 1880s the Royal Navy was a moribund institution dedicated more to the past and the school of 'spit and polish' than to any continued innovation.

'The Popular Nelson and the Navalist Era, 1880-1906' picks up the thread of the British public's interest in the Royal Navy, an interest that waned but was never fully

extinguished during the darkest days of the 1860s and 1870s. The chapter focuses on the period from the mid-1880s through 1905, when a series of naval scares thrust the Admiralty back into the public spotlight. This chapter examines the heart of the navalist era, when naval leagues, fleet reviews, and centenary celebrations made the man in the street believe that a second Trafalgar was just around the corner.

‘Nelson’s Britain Reborn, 1904-1914’ recombines the related aspects of the Admiralty’s views towards the public and the public’s views towards the Admiralty. Covering the years from 1904 to 1914, this chapter examines the effect that Sir John Fisher’s tenure as the professional head of the Admiralty had both on his subordinates and on his popular supporters. The Edwardian era saw the ultimate expression of the current navy’s faith in its own past, both in the historically and heroically minded Fisher and in his naval and press disciples that eagerly spread his word. By the end of the chapter the true price of placing one’s hopes firmly in the previous century will become apparent, as the Royal Navy enters the First World War with a modern navy handicapped by a tradition that relied more on its own self-created rules of warfare than anything Nelson had ever believed.

Historians by the dozen have claimed, and with good reason, that the Royal Navy was mentally and doctrinally unprepared to fight the First World War. This thesis will demonstrate just *why* that was the case, and how the Admiralty and the navalist British public supported each other’s grand delusions through a whirlwind thirty years up through the year 1914. The groundwork will also be laid for a future project that takes the Nelson legend through and past its inevitable disappointing conclusion at Jutland in

1916. Jan Rüger has written of the modern naval history field that “naval historians still study sea power in [a] limited sense. The vast majority of them focus on naval battles, strategy, administration and technology. [...] Should there not be a fifth factor, namely the cultural elements of sea power?”<sup>23</sup> This thesis aims to develop a shared military-cultural history that sheds new light on the uses and misuses of Britain’s naval might, both aboard ship and at home, in a century spent comfortably asleep beneath the shadow of a giant.

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<sup>23</sup> Rüger, *The Great Naval Game*, 209-210.

**CHAPTER II**

**“BEHOLD THE COUNTRY WHICH HE SAVED” – NELSON’S  
GLORIES, 1797-1805<sup>1</sup>**

Great Britain was no stranger to the value of naval power in the late eighteenth century. Horatio Nelson did not arise in a nautical vacuum; he was raised in a society that already celebrated the naval exploits of famous ancestors such as Drake, Blake, and Monck in popular prose and verse. When Nelson was born in 1758 at Burnham Thorpe rectory in Norfolk, Great Britain was embroiled in the Seven Years’ War; the year after his birth Admirals Hawke and Howe would add their names to the rolls of British maritime supremacy at Quiberon Bay. The young Nelson may have been the child of a clergyman, but his extended household bore the same familial and cultural connection to the sea that underlay many British subjects. A contemporary of Nelson and fellow sailor, William Cobbett, remembered that as a child in the 1770s he “had heard talk of all the glorious deeds of our admirals and sailors [which] good and true Englishmen never fail to relate to their children about a hundred times a year.”<sup>2</sup> Nelson likely heard many of these same tales, particularly as his uncle Maurice Suckling was a captain in the Royal Navy.

By 1771 Britain was again embroiled in an international dispute, this time with Spain, and twelve-year-old Nelson first went to sea as a midshipman aboard Maurice

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes throughout this work are transcribed as they appear in the original source. All British spelling is preserved. Biographical information found solely in footnotes is compiled from the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

<sup>2</sup> Adam Nicolson, *Men of Honour: Trafalgar and the Making of the English Hero* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005), 70-71.



Suckling's ship the *Raisonnable*. The war scare soon abated, but Nelson had found a calling, and the coming of the American and French Revolutions ensured that the Royal Navy would be in demand throughout the majority of his working life. Nelson's early naval career was notable more for his personal dedication than any standout performances. Like many young prospective officers in the sailing Royal Navy, Nelson traveled astonishing distances while moving up the ranks – to the Arctic, India, and Nicaragua in his first decade of service. Invalided home with malaria in 1776, Nelson reflected on his career to that point: as he recalled later, “a sudden glow of patriotism was kindled within me and presented my King and Country as my patron. ‘Well then,’ I exclaimed, ‘I will be a hero and, confiding in Providence, I will brave every danger.’”<sup>3</sup> This self-confidence and faith in his own heroism would serve the young Nelson throughout his professional service. Nelson soon returned to duty, this time in the Caribbean, where in 1787 he married the young widow Fanny Nisbet in Nevis.

The following few years of Nelson's career were quiet and spent mostly at home. His next chance for action came when Britain declared war on revolutionary France in 1793, and he was now deemed worthy of being sent to the more active Mediterranean theater. Nelson was sent to the Kingdom of Naples, where he was introduced to British ambassador William Hamilton. It was a prophetic meeting. Hamilton wrote of Nelson that “this man [...] will become the greatest man that ever England produced. I know it, from the few words of conversation I have already had with him. I pronounce, that he

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph F. Callo, *Legacy of Leadership: Lessons from Admiral Lord Nelson* (Central Point, OR: Hellgate Press, 1999), 23; Kathleen Wilson, “Nelson and the People: Manliness, Patriotism and Body Politics,” in David Cannadine, ed., *Admiral Lord Nelson: Context and Legacy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 52.

will one day astonish the world.”<sup>4</sup> Nelson certainly had an effect on Hamilton’s wife Emma, and their meeting in 1793 would eventually kindle a relationship that would play a major role in the young captain’s future. But the present remained full of frustrations, and Nelson sustained his first major injury in the line of duty; in July of the same year he lost the sight in his right eye after being wounded in a land engagement on Corsica.

This injury did not slow Nelson, and two years later he was finally able to participate in his first fleet action against the French off Genoa. Nelson made the most of his opportunity, taking on the French line-of-battle ship *Ça Ira* with his much smaller *Agamemnon* and fighting her and the French *Censeur* to surrender. These acts of seamanship put Nelson for the first time solidly into the British public eye. He wrote to his wife Fanny in August 1796 on the subject of his growing fame: “A person sent me a letter, and directed as follows. ‘Horatio Nelson, Genoa.’ On being asked how he could direct in such a manner, his answer, in a large party, was, ‘Sir, there is but one Horatio Nelson in the world.’” Nelson self-assuredly concluded that “I am known throughout Italy; not a Kingdom, or State, where my name will be forgotten. This is my Gazette.”<sup>5</sup> By this time Nelson was beginning to demonstrate two of the strongest elements present in his personal and official life. The first was his simple but strong-willed conception of tactics, devoted to smashing the enemy fleet rather than wider but less impressive strategic victories. Nelson itched for a fight – in 1796 he wrote to John Trevor, British minister at Turin, that “our Fleet, thank God, is perfect, and if the enemy will give us an

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<sup>4</sup> Roy Adkins, *Nelson’s Trafalgar: The Battle that Changed the World* (New York: Viking, 2005), 25-26.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph F. Callo, *Nelson Speaks: Admiral Lord Nelson in His Own Words* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2001), 152-153.

opportunity, the ancient glory of the British navy will be kept up.”<sup>6</sup> The second was his love of the recognition that annihilating victories at sea could bring. The same year he wrote that his defeat of a Spanish ship was the kind of success “I know the English like in a *Gazette*.”<sup>7</sup>

Nelson would soon find his personal fame raised to a new level. In February 1797 he took part in another major fleet action, this time against the Spanish. In the Battle of Cape St. Vincent Nelson purposely veered his ship the *Captain* out of the British battle line to engage three Spanish ships. He captured the *San Nicolas*, then stormed across her deck to capture the *San Josef* as well. For his part in the victory he was granted a knighthood; promotion according to seniority to Rear-Admiral soon followed.

Yet public adulation moved with a swifter current than the internal workings of the Admiralty. Genoa had brought Nelson to Britain’s attention; St. Vincent brought his name to the lips of the man in the street. Nelson encouraged popular sentiment by massaging his dispatches from the battle to point towards his own heroism; as he wrote to his commander at the battle, Sir John Jervis (now Earl St. Vincent), “we know, from experience, that more depends upon opinion than the facts themselves.”<sup>8</sup> His tactics worked, and his name rapidly permeated every stratum of British society. Nelson’s sailors already understood his appeal. G.S. Parsons, a naval sailor and contemporary of Nelson, wrote later of the battle that “had the daring and heroic soul of Nelson been

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>7</sup> John Sugden, *Nelson: A Dream of Glory, 1758-1797* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004), 784.

<sup>8</sup> Callo, *Legacy of Leadership*, 17.

infused into the breast of every British commander on that glorious day, every one of their gorgeous ensigns would have bowed to the Jack of England, and Sir John Jervis would have been created a duke instead of Earl St. Vincent.”<sup>9</sup> Now his fame had spread to the British aristocracy. Sir Gilbert Elliot, Earl Minto, wrote to his wife that the battle had made “Nelson a hero beyond Homer’s or any other possible inventions,” and it was “impossible to give you a notion of his exploits in a breath.”<sup>10</sup> Perhaps more importantly from his point of view, the general public also began championing Nelson’s name. His father wrote to tell him that “the name and services of Nelson have sounded throughout the City of Bath, from the common ballad singer to the public theatre;”<sup>11</sup> the same could be said of London. When word reached the mainland later in 1797 that the gallant Nelson had been seriously wounded in a land assault on Tenerife, losing his arm in the service of the crown, his fame only increased.

Although minus a limb, Nelson was now deemed worthy of more naval authority. After recuperating at home, he rejoined Earl St. Vincent in the Mediterranean the following spring; St. Vincent then sent him at the head of a detached command to search the area for a French invasion fleet headed by the revolutionary republic’s most prominent general, Napoleon Bonaparte. After a fruitless search to the east, news reached Nelson by the end of July that he had been correct in Napoleon’s object but had not managed to catch him; in fact, Napoleon’s army had already landed in Egypt and

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<sup>9</sup> G.S. Parsons, *Nelsonian Reminiscences: Leaves from Memory’s Log* (Maidstone, UK: George Mann Limited, 1973; first published 1843), 328.

<sup>10</sup> Terry Coleman, *The Nelson Touch: The Life and Legend of Horatio Nelson* (London: Oxford University Press, 2002), 128; Sugden, *A Dream of Glory*, 704.

<sup>11</sup> Edgar Vincent, *Nelson: Love & Fame* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 201.

won a battle against local Ottoman forces. Fortunately, the French fleet that had shepherded Napoleon's men across the Mediterranean was now lying at anchor in Aboukir Bay near Alexandria. Nelson's twin loves of simplicity in battle and glory at home were again suddenly at the forefront of his resulting plan. He had written that "all or none, is my motto,"<sup>12</sup> and to his wife that "glory is my object and that alone."<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, when Nelson saw the French fleet lying at anchor he immediately attacked their thirteen ships of the line with his equal number.

Nelson was willing to risk a night engagement – for the battle did not commence until 6:30 in the afternoon on August 1<sup>st</sup> – because he had again decided on an audacious plan. The French were at anchor, but farther out in the bay than they had intended due to a lack of correct charts. Nelson could thus double his fleet's attacking power by entering the bay on both sides of the stationary French ships, catching them in a deadly crossfire. Nelson took his ship the *Vanguard* to the outside of the French, but five British men of war braved the interior route; one British ship did run aground on the shoals off the Egyptian coast, giving the French a numeric advantage, but it mattered little. Nelson's daring plan put the French in an indefensible position – many of the ships being attacked on both sides could not even fire back, having put some of their men ashore on forage parties – and within the first hour of the battle the British had severely damaged the first eight ships in the French line.

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<sup>12</sup> Callo, *Legacy of Leadership*, 22.

<sup>13</sup> Joel Hayward, *For God and Glory: Lord Nelson and His Way of War* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2003), 51.

The British continued apace. Concern spread on Nelson's flagship when the vice-admiral was wounded above the eye by a splinter from a French shot, but even as Nelson was taken below to be attended to his fleet continued in independent command. The fiercest stage of the conflict that would become known as the Battle of the Nile came to an end around 10 p.m. with the destruction by fire of the French flagship *l'Orient*. When the next day dawned the true scope of the British victory became apparent. Of the thirteen French ships, the flagship had been destroyed, four had been beached and six had surrendered to the British; only two French ships of the line escaped. As Terry Coleman has written, the Nile was "an annihilation new to naval warfare." Nelson noted that "victory is not a strong enough name for such a scene as I have passed," but regretfully told Earl Howe that if he had "not been wounded and stone blind" he would have captured every French ship.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, Nelson had achieved his object. Napoleon would remain in Egypt for another year and his army for another three, but without naval support they were at the mercy of British forces; more importantly, they were no longer able to return to France.

In Britain, Nelson's already prodigious celebrity exploded overnight. The official governmental response was to create him Baron Nelson of the Nile, but this was a lesser award than Nelson had expected due to the fact that he had technically been under St. Vincent's command. However, public enthusiasm made up for what he considered a political snub. The victory of the Nile led to an outpouring of poetry commemorating the battle, first dominating newspapers and later being collected into

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<sup>14</sup> Coleman, *The Nelson Touch*, 160.

several printed volumes.<sup>15</sup> They often combined Nelson's name with Egyptian imagery, such as this ode from *Gentleman's Magazine*: "As long as Egypt's pyramids shall stand, / Long as the Nile shall fertilize her land, / So long the voice of never-dying Fame / Shall add to England's glory Nelson's name!"<sup>16</sup>

Nelson also received broader accolades. The *London Chronicle* labeled the Nile "one of the most glorious and comprehensive victories ever achieved even by British valour."<sup>17</sup> Busts of Nelson began appearing for purchase in London stores,<sup>18</sup> along with ribbons, fans, mugs, snuffboxes, and various accoutrements for fashionable Londoners.<sup>19</sup> Lavinia Spencer, wife of First Lord of the Admiralty Earl Spencer, wrote to Nelson that "every Briton feels his obligations to you weighing him down."<sup>20</sup> A buoyant Nelson wrote that his wife should expect his arrival home: "Nelson comes, the invincible Nelson."<sup>21</sup>

The Admiralty soon began to take greater notice of how Nelson fought his battles. British naval battles in the eighteenth century had been carefully-planned affairs, with opposing fleets attacking in converging lines until one was able to

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<sup>15</sup> Simon Bainbridge, *British Poetry and the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars: Visions of Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 50.

<sup>16</sup> Marianne Czisnik, *Admiral Nelson: Image and Icon* (PhD Diss., University of Edinburgh, 2003), 10.

<sup>17</sup> Kathleen Wilson, "Nelson and the People," 49.

<sup>18</sup> Czisnik, *Admiral Nelson: Image and Icon*, 6.

<sup>19</sup> Tim Clayton and Phil Craig, *Trafalgar: The Men, the Battle, the Storm* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2004), 19.

<sup>20</sup> Vincent, *Nelson: Love & Fame*, 268.

<sup>21</sup> Coleman, *The Nelson Touch*, 1.

overpower the other – more often than not this became a difficult proposition, and battles were frequently inconclusive. Nelson severely weakened the perceived effectiveness of this tactical conception with his turn out of line at Cape St. Vincent and destroyed it with his risky night melee at the Nile. Joseph Callo has written that when news of the Nile reached Britain it was the beginning of “a school of naval warfare that embraced the concept of total destruction of the enemy’s fleet; that school’s inspiration was Horatio Nelson.”<sup>22</sup>

Nelson was not shy about explaining both his tactics and his motivations. He wrote to First Lord Spencer that his guiding principle was “to assist in driving the French to the Devil, and in restoring peace and happiness to mankind.”<sup>23</sup> To further this end, he informed his captains to “always keep in mind how much the service requires active, not passive service,”<sup>24</sup> reminding them that “victories cannot be obtained without blood.”<sup>25</sup> This concept of decisive battle dovetailed easily with Nelson’s liberal attitude towards orders. Nelson was thankful that specific orders had not been followed at the Nile, realizing the value of independent action.<sup>26</sup> He wrote to Spencer explaining his policy in 1799: “Much as I approve of strict obedience to orders [...] to say that an Officer is

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<sup>22</sup> Callo, *Legacy of Leadership*, 88.

<sup>23</sup> Callo, *Nelson Speaks*, 7.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 53. From a March 1799 letter to Captain Darby of the *Bellerophon*.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 23. From a June 1799 letter to Captain Foote of the *Seahorse*.

<sup>26</sup> Nicholas Tracy, *Nelson’s Battles: The Triumph of British Seapower* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1996; revised edition, 2008), 135.



never, for any object, to alter his orders, is what I cannot comprehend.”<sup>27</sup> Nelson was more forthcoming in a series of letters written to the Duke of Clarence that same year. He conceded that “to obey orders is all perfection” – but to Nelson “to serve my king and destroy the French, I consider as the great order of all, from which little ones spring; and if one of these little ones militate against it [...] I go back to obey the great order and object, and down, down with the damned French villains.”<sup>28</sup> He acknowledged being “well aware of the consequences of disobeying my orders,” but believed that “although a Military tribunal may think me criminal, the world will approve my conduct.”<sup>29</sup>

This belief in a decisive battle combined with and following from a broad interpretation of orders would be demonstrated even more strongly in Nelson’s next major naval engagement. The Nile had stranded an army in Egypt, but the French were steadily assembling a continental coalition of defeated or cowed former enemies against Britain. In December of 1800, the Baltic nations of Russia, Prussia, Sweden and Denmark formed a League of Armed Neutrality against Britain. As these powers supplied many essential shipbuilding supplies, Britain’s first step was to send Nelson to the Baltic under Sir Hyde Parker to present an ultimatum to the Danes, the closest member of the League.

Nelson was as always eager for a fight, and was agitated when delays at home postponed the start of the expedition until March of 1801. He wrote to his friend Captain Edward Berry hoping to “be able as usual to get so close to our Enemies that our

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<sup>27</sup> Hayward, *For God and Glory*, 116-117.

<sup>28</sup> Callo, *Nelson Speaks*, 9. From November 1799.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 25. From July 1799.

shot cannot miss their object, and that we shall again give our Northern Enemies that hail-storm of bullets...which gives our dear Country the Dominion of the Seas. We have it, and all the Devils in hell cannot take it from us, if our Wooden walls have fair play.”<sup>30</sup> Nelson pushed his superior Admiral Parker for an attack similar to that of the Nile on the anchored Danish fleet outside Copenhagen; “the measure may be thought bold, but I am of opinion the boldest measures are the safest.”<sup>31</sup> Accordingly, Nelson’s detachment attacked the anchored Danish fleet and forts of Copenhagen on April 2, 1801.

The Battle of Copenhagen provided an unusual challenge for a naval conflict. Nelson had with him only 12 ships of the line, the smallest in the fleet so as to navigate the shallow harbor; the largest British ships stayed out of range with Parker. Facing him were a variety of Danish line-of-battle ships, anchored hulks, and forts. It was a hard-fought conflict. There could be no tactical victory or maneuver when fighting against anchored warships; the only solution was simply to batter the Danes into submission, a reality complicated further by the fact that many of the floating batteries were being supplied with replacement men from the city throughout the day. This was the sort of fight Nelson lived for, but the more cautious Parker grew alarmed; powder smoke obscured the scene, and all he could see from his flagship were three of Nelson’s ships that had run aground on the shoals and were flying distress signals. Accordingly, Parker signaled for Nelson to discontinue action and withdraw.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 193.

Of Nelson's ships, only one – the *Amazon* – heeded the order to withdraw, but not before her captain despairingly enquired “what will Nelson think of us?”<sup>32</sup> Nelson himself instead chose to undertake the most famous act of willful insubordination of his career. He acknowledged Parker's signal, but kept his own – ‘Engage the Enemy More Closely’ – flying from his flagship *Elephant*.<sup>33</sup> The battle, which had begun at 10:00 a.m., continued until mid-afternoon when Nelson, seeing that both sides had received severe punishment, again took an unprecedented step. On his own authority, he sent a flag of truce to the Danish crown, bluntly stating that “if the firing is continued on the part of Denmark Lord Nelson will be obliged to set on fire all the batteries he has taken.”<sup>34</sup> Nelson had not actually taken any batteries, but the threat combined with the explosion of the Danish flagship convinced Danish officials to agree to a cease-fire.

Nelson was aware that the battle had been a close-run ordeal, but still found time to be self-congratulatory. He went ashore in Copenhagen to discuss the terms of the cease-fire, and later wrote to his friend and agent Alexander Davidson: “I was received in the most flattering manner by all ranks, and the crowd was, as is usual, with me. No wonder I am spoilt.”<sup>35</sup> He also distributed prints of himself; a supply of these was always aboard Nelson's flagship for such occasions. Ten days after the battle Nelson sent Hans Sneedorff, the Commandant of the Danish Naval Academy, “a Short account

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<sup>32</sup> Tracy, *Nelson's Battles*, 176. Captain Riou was killed in the withdrawal, which involved taking the *Amazon* across the field of fire of the largest Danish shore battery – a contingency not foreseen by Parker.

<sup>33</sup> The story that Nelson put his telescope to his blind eye and claimed to not see the signal is now considered apocryphal but has been part of the Nelson legend almost since the day of the battle. It is generally accepted that Nelson did refer to his “right to be blind sometimes.”

<sup>34</sup> A.B.C. Whipple, *The Seafarers: Fighting Sail* (Alexandria, VA: Time-Life Books, 1978), 105.

<sup>35</sup> Coleman, *The Nelson Touch*, 255.

of my life it cannot do harm to youth & may do good, as it will show that Perseverance and good conduct will raise a person to the very highest honors and rewards.”<sup>36</sup> For his part, Admiral Parker sent to London for orders; when these arrived, they instructed him to return home and turn his command over to Nelson, who was also created a viscount.

Copenhagen was an important victory for the British; their naval victory combined with the death of Tsar Paul of Russia broke up the League of Armed Neutrality. But it was not the public relations coup that Nelson was used to – there was no denying the fact that he and Admiral Parker had executed a preemptive strike on what was technically a neutral power. Accordingly, there was no great new outpouring of poems or personal items dedicated to Nelson’s name. The little Vice-Admiral remained extremely influential among the British populace; in the year of Copenhagen *Gentlemen’s Magazine* devoted a five-page spread to how Nelson had celebrated Christmas in England, assigning him “the brilliant qualities of a hero.”<sup>37</sup> But Copenhagen had provided no great new glories, and from Nelson’s perspective matters grew worse when in March of 1802 Great Britain entered into the Peace of Amiens with France; for the first time in a decade, there were no battles for Nelson.

The year-long Peace of Amiens brought out some of the more scandalous elements in Nelson’s character. His marriage to Fanny had been tottering throughout their years apart, and Nelson had become attracted to Emma Lady Hamilton, the wife of

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<sup>36</sup> Colin White, “Nelson Apotheosised: The Creation of the Nelson Legend,” in David Cannadine, ed., *Admiral Lord Nelson: Context and Legacy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 97; Colin White, *Nelson the Admiral* (Gloucestershire, UK: Sutton Publishing, 2005), 77. Nelson had shifted his flag from the *St George* to the smaller *Elephant* immediately before Copenhagen; if he did indeed bring a collection of personal prints with him it certainly speaks to his confidence before battle.

<sup>37</sup> Czisnik, *Admiral Nelson: Image and Icon*, 30; Kathleen Wilson, “Nelson and the People,” 49.

Sir William Hamilton, British Envoy to the Kingdom of Naples. By 1800 this relationship had blossomed into a not particularly well-hidden affair. Nelson cut off contact with Fanny that year, and when William Hamilton was recalled to England he, Emma, and Nelson chose to live together at Merton, near London; in 1801 Horatia, Nelson and Emma's daughter, was born. Now, with peace upon them, Nelson embarked in 1802 upon what was essentially a publicity tour of Britain, with the Hamiltons in tow.<sup>38</sup>

This unlikely grand tour demonstrated that despite Nelson's personal life, the majority of Britons still eagerly supported their fighting admiral. Nelson's niece Charlotte Nelson recalled watching him progress through London in a carriage, writing that "all the ladies had their handkerchiefs out of the windows when my uncle passed, they and the people calling Nelson for ever."<sup>39</sup> Charles Macready saw Nelson at the theater: "When with Lady Hamilton [...] he entered the box, the uproar of the house was deafening, and seemed as it would know no end...the crowded house was frantic in its applause."<sup>40</sup> Yet Nelson could not live out his life in a theater box. It must have come as a something of a relief when the Peace of Amiens collapsed in May 1803. Nelson was soon summoned back to sea amidst spreading fears that Napoleon planned to launch an amphibious assault on Britain.

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<sup>38</sup> Czisnik, *Admiral Nelson: Image and Icon*, 33-34.

<sup>39</sup> Roger Morriss, Brian Lavery and Stephen Deuchar, *Nelson: An Illustrated History*, Pieter van der Merwe, ed. (London: Laurence King Publishing, 1995), 129.

<sup>40</sup> Kathleen Wilson, "Nelson and the People," 61.

Although the Peace of Amiens ostensibly came to an end due to Anglo-French squabbling over the fate of Malta, Napoleon took the opportunity to re-launch his earlier strategy of a naval assault on England. Beginning in the summer of 1803, thousands of French troops began gathering at Channel ports in France and allied Holland. Although Britain mobilized the entire Regular Army of 139,000 men for home defense,<sup>41</sup> by the end of the year there were 200,000 French infantry at Boulogne alone. With it obvious that the British could not stand up to the French from a manpower standpoint, and with Napoleon claiming that he could conquer England if only he could control the Channel for six hours, Britain's lifeline was now more than ever her navy. Paradoxically, the two years when Britain was most directly threatened with amphibious assault – 1803 through 1805 – were the least eventful of Nelson's career, at least until the climactic engagement at Trafalgar. By the summer of 1803 he was installed in his new flagship *Victory* blockading the French at Toulon, a post he would not leave for nearly two years.

Interminable waiting outside of Toulon took its toll on the British fleet, and Nelson in particular spent these months hoping for any French movement that would lead to a fleet action. As Napoleon's armies ground their way across the Continent, Nelson remained convinced that "it is on the sea that we hope to realize the expectations of our country,"<sup>42</sup> and "in Sea affairs, nothing is impossible, and nothing improbable."<sup>43</sup> He spent his time explaining the finer points of naval campaigns to those around him,

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<sup>41</sup> Whipple, *The Seafarers: Fighting Sail*, 115.

<sup>42</sup> A.T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon the French Revolution and Empire, 1793-1812* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1892; 14<sup>th</sup> edition, 1912, Vol. I), 341. Originally from Nelson's Dispatches, volume v.

<sup>43</sup> Callo, *Nelson Speaks*, 58. From a letter to Count Mocenigo, August 1804.

imparting such lessons as “a wish to imitate successful battles is the sure road by exertion to surpass them”<sup>44</sup> and “we must all in our several stations exert ourselves to the utmost [...] if the King’s service clearly marks what ought to be done.”<sup>45</sup>

Still, the situation continued to deteriorate throughout the long blockade. By January 1805 the Spanish had joined the war on the side of the French, adding more enemy ships of the line and more enemy ports to watch over. Worse still, word had reached Britain that Napoleon had added 1500 small boats to his burgeoning Channel army, ready to transport hundreds of thousands of French soldiers to London and points west.<sup>46</sup> Now all the French had to do was control the Channel for the fabled six hours – but to do so, they needed to get the fleet sheltering in Toulon past Nelson. Even the excitable Vice-Admiral was beginning to show the strain; he wrote to Lord Melville, First Lord of the Admiralty, that “a half man as I am, cannot expect to be a Hercules.”<sup>47</sup> Yet Nelson still held out hope for a climactic battle, for his own benefit as well as Britain’s: “I hope I am duly thankful for the past; but one cannot help, being at sea, longing for a little more.”<sup>48</sup> As March of 1805 drew to a close, he had his first real chance – word reached the distant blockading British that the French Toulon fleet, under Admiral Charles Pierre Villeneuve, had left port.

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<sup>44</sup> White, *Nelson the Admiral*, 119. To Midshipman James Dalton of the *Renown*, 13 Dec. 1803.

<sup>45</sup> Callo, *Nelson Speaks*, 11. To Captain Schomberg of the *Madras*, Oct. 1803.

<sup>46</sup> Bernard D. Claxton, John H. Gurtcheff, and Jeffrey J. Polles, *Trafalgar and Jutland: A Study in the Principles of War*, Military History Monograph Series 85-2 (Montgomery, AL: Air Command and Staff College, 1985), 3.

<sup>47</sup> White, *Nelson the Admiral*, 129. 1 July 1804 – underlining present in original.

<sup>48</sup> Vincent, *Nelson: Love & Fame*, 516.

Nelson scrambled to follow the French fleet, but the ensuing three-month chase across the Atlantic ended disappointingly for both sides. Villeneuve bolstered his fleet with the addition of Spanish ships from Cadiz, but upon arrival in Martinique after an arduous Atlantic crossing he found that the object of his escape had been foiled; the second major French fleet was bottled up under British observation in Brest, and Villeneuve alone did not have the ships to sweep the Channel. Disappointed, and hearing that Nelson had arrived in the West Indies in pursuit, Villeneuve chose to return to Toulon rather than wait for the trapped Brest fleet. For Nelson's part, he discovered upon reaching Martinique that he had missed the French by a mere five days and immediately set off on his own return journey.

British nautical training told on the twin returns, and Nelson arrived back in Europe ahead of the French. Villeneuve almost did not return at all, and he never made it to Toulon. On July 22<sup>nd</sup> he encountered part of the British Channel Fleet under Admiral Sir Robert Calder off the western coast of Spain. The resulting Battle of Cape Finisterre was inconclusive; fifteen British ships met twenty of the French and Spanish Combined Fleet and captured two, but neither admiral was willing to press matters to any further conclusion.<sup>49</sup> It was the type of engagement that would have been greeted with joy in Britain two decades earlier – but Nelson's way of battle had already firmly infiltrated the Admiralty and the British public. Calder expected a hero's welcome and got a court-martial.<sup>50</sup> Calder never understood why the public had turned against him; at

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<sup>49</sup> The preceding two paragraphs owe much to Whipple, *The Seafarers: Fighting Sail*, 117-120.

<sup>50</sup> Ernie Bradford, *Nelson: The Essential Hero* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), 322-323.



his court-martial he pointed out the dangers he had foreseen “if I had madly and rashly done what John Bull seems to have wished me to have done.”<sup>51</sup> Nelson expressed surprise at Calder’s disappointment, writing – sincerely or not – “it most sincerely grieves me, that in any of the papers it should be insinuated, that Lord Nelson could have done better.”<sup>52</sup>

Through no great achievement of his own, Calder had actually changed the course of the war. The entry of Spain into the conflict on the side of France had drawn Austria and Russia back into open breach with Napoleon. Calder had then turned Villeneuve away from Brest and any rendezvous with the rest of the French fleet; Villeneuve instead sailed to Cadiz, where he was blockaded by yet another British fleet under Vice Admiral Cuthbert Collingwood. It was now clear to Napoleon that he would not see the fabled six hours necessary for an invasion of England, and in August 1805 his vast invading army marched off to the east. That same army would soon win Napoleon further glories at Ulm, but they would never march on London as Napoleon had for so long hoped.

Nelson and his ships and men were exhausted after their fruitless chase across the Atlantic. One of his captains wrote that the fleet was “all half-starved, and otherwise inconvenienced [...] but our full recompense is that we are with Nelson.”<sup>53</sup> But Nelson was frustrated at his failure to catch Villeneuve, and requested shore leave after nearly two years on blockade and patrol duties. In mid-August 1805 he returned home to

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<sup>51</sup> Nicolson, *Men of Honour*, 188.

<sup>52</sup> Bradford, *Nelson: The Essential Hero*, 323.

<sup>53</sup> Claxton, Gurtcheff and Polles, *Trafalgar and Jutland*, 9; Bradford, *Nelson: The Essential Hero*, 321.

London and then to Merton to be with Emma, as William Hamilton had died in 1803. It was Nelson's last trip home, and it was his triumph.

During Nelson's final weeks in Britain, the full effect that his victories had had on the general British populace and his resultant fame were readily apparent. By 1805 there were nearly one hundred popular songs and ballads involving the little vice admiral, and his praises were sung in taverns throughout the country.<sup>54</sup> An admirer informed Nelson that he had named his newborn grandson Horatio; Nelson congratulated the man, replying that he "trust[ed] that the name of Nelson will remain with credit to our country for many ages."<sup>55</sup>

Nelson's reputation also spread throughout Britain's upper classes. There was a separate push for official efforts to honor Nelson, although they met with more resistance; the statesman Warren Hastings asked Walter Scott to compose a poem with "our gallant Nelson the Subject of it," but Scott declined on the grounds that he was not qualified.<sup>56</sup> Lady Elizabeth Foster recalled the effect Nelson had when he appeared in public: "Whenever he appears, he electrifies the cold English character. Rapture and applause follow all his steps. Sometimes a poor woman asks to touch his coat. The very children learn to bless him as he passes, and doors and windows are crowded."<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Mark Philp, "Politics and Memory: Nelson and Trafalgar in Popular Song," in David Cannadine, ed., *Trafalgar in History: A Battle and its Afterlife* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 99.

<sup>55</sup> Coleman, *The Nelson Touch*, 269.

<sup>56</sup> Bainbridge, *British Poetry and the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars*, 126.

<sup>57</sup> Nicholas Best, *Trafalgar: The Untold Story of the Greatest Sea Battle in History*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), 153.

Sir Gilbert Elliot, Lord Minto, met Nelson “in a mob in Piccadilly, and got hold of his arm, so that I was mobbed too. It is really quite affecting to see the wonder and admiration and love and respect of the whole world; and the general expression of all these sentiments at once, from gentle and simple, the moment he is seen. It is beyond anything represented in a play or poem of fame.”<sup>58</sup> Minto himself was swept up by Nelson’s image, recording how “there was a sort of heroic cast about Nelson that I never saw in any other man, and which seems wanting to the achievement of *impossible things* which became easy to him.”<sup>59</sup> Hugh Elliot, Lord Minto’s brother, concurrently noted that Nelson’s fame was due to his achievements at sea, “an effort such as never was realised in former times, nor, I doubt, will ever again be repeated by any other admiral.”<sup>60</sup> Benjamin Silliman was a professor at Yale, in London on business; from this outside perspective he wrote how “Lord Nelson cannot appear in the streets without immediately collecting a retinue, which augments as he proceeds, and when he enters a shop the door is thronged till he comes out, when the air rings with huzzas and the dark cloud of the populace again moves on and hangs upon his skirts.” Like Lord Minto, Silliman was struck by Nelson’s ability to be “a great favourite with all descriptions of people.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Bradford, *Nelson: The Essential Hero*, 323-324; Roger Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory: The Life and Achievement of Horatio Nelson*, (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 497.

<sup>59</sup> N.A.M. Rodger, “Nelson and the British Navy: Seamanship, Leadership, Originality,” in David Cannadine, ed., *Admiral Lord Nelson: Context and Legacy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 27.

<sup>60</sup> Bradford, *Nelson: The Essential Hero*, 324.

<sup>61</sup> Callo, *Legacy of Leadership*, 52; Tom Pocock, ed., *Trafalgar: An Eyewitness History*, (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2005), 27.

However, Nelson was beginning to worry about the amount of adulation being heaped upon his shoulders. Lady Foster wrote that while at dinner with Emma, Nelson voiced his concerns: “popular applause is very acceptable and grateful to me, but no Man ought to be too much elated by it; it is too precarious to be depended upon, and it may be my turn to feel the tide set as strong against me as ever it did for me.”<sup>62</sup> He also confessed his burgeoning apprehensions to Captain Richard Keats of the *Superb*, a fellow naval man on leave, stating how “I am now set up for a Conjuror, and God knows they will very soon find out I am far from being one [...] for if I make one wrong guess the charm will be broken.”<sup>63</sup>

To guard against future wrong guesses, Nelson spent part of his time in Britain refining and strengthening his conception of what a decisive naval battle should entail. He had already made it certain that he believed “the business of an English Commander-in-Chief is first to bring the Enemy’s fleet to battle on the most advantageous terms to himself [...] and secondly to continue them there without separating until the business is decided,” goals which could be achieved by “laying his ships well on board the Enemy as expeditiously as possible.”<sup>64</sup> While at home, he solidified these concepts in a conversation with the previously-mentioned Captain Keats. Keats recorded Nelson’s new ideas at length:

One day, walking with Lord Nelson in the grounds at Merton, talking on naval matters, he said to me: ‘No day can be long enough to arrange a couple of fleets

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<sup>62</sup> Marianne Czisnik, *Horatio Nelson: A Controversial Hero* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2005), 90; Peter Warwick, *Voices from the Battle of Trafalgar* (Devon, UK: David & Charles, 2005), 61.

<sup>63</sup> Clayton & Craig, *Trafalgar: The Men, the Battle, the Storm*, 24.

<sup>64</sup> Claxton, Gurtcheff and Polles, *Trafalgar and Jutland*, 23.

and fight a decisive battle, according to the old system. When we meet them (I was to have been with him), for meet them we shall, I'll tell you how I shall fight them. I shall form the Fleet into three Divisions in three Lines. One Division shall be composed of twelve or fourteen of the fastest two-decked ships, which I shall always keep to windward, or in a situation of advantage; and I shall put them under an Officer who, I am sure, will employ them in the manner I wish, if possible. I consider it will always be in my power to throw them into Battle in any part I may choose; but if circumstances prevent their being carried against the Enemy where I desire, I shall feel certain he will employ them effectually, and perhaps in a more advantageous manner than if he could have followed my orders.

With the remaining part of the Fleet formed in two lines, I shall go at them at once, if I can, about one-third of their line from their leading Ship.' He then said, 'What do you think of it?' Such a question I felt required consideration. I paused. Seeing it, he said: 'But I'll tell you what I think of it. I think it will surprise and confound the Enemy. They won't know what I am about. It will bring forward a pell-mell Battle, and that is what I want.'<sup>65</sup>

This short garden speech was the beginning of what came to be known as the Nelson Touch – a rejection of the line of battle, drive for decisive victory with its associated risks, and trust in one's subordinates that characterized all of Nelson's major fleet actions. Having thus solidified his plans, Nelson once again became eager for a fight. He wrote to his friend Alexander Davison in September 1805 that "my health, or even my life must not come into consideration at this important crisis [...] it never shall be said that I have been neglectful of my duty, or spared myself;" he added that in any coming engagement "half a victory would but half content me."<sup>66</sup> Nelson's great opportunity arrived only a month after his leave began. On the 13<sup>th</sup> of September an Admiralty carriage arrived at Merton late at night with news that Nelson was to take

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<sup>65</sup> Oliver Warner, *Trafalgar* (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd, 1959), 50; White, *Nelson the Admiral*, 159.

<sup>66</sup> Callo, *Legacy of Leadership*, 45; Callo, *Nelson Speaks*, 13; Hayward, *For God and Glory*, 121.

over command of the fleet blockading Villeneuve at Cadiz; the vice admiral left for London immediately and was aboard the *Victory* by the morning of the 15<sup>th</sup>.

Nelson's final departure from London rapidly became a public spectacle. Benjamin Silliman, still in London, recorded his impressions: "some hundreds of people had collected in [Nelson's] train, pressing all around and pushing to get a little before him to obtain a sight of his face. [...] As the barge in which he embarked pushed away from the shore, the people gave him three cheers, which his lordship returned by waving his hat."<sup>67</sup> One near-contemporary account provides an excellent picture of what the atmosphere must have been on that final day. Robert Southey did not write his account of Nelson's life until 1813, but it became an instant best-seller and helped to keep Nelson's fame alive throughout the following century. Any of the multitudes who read Southey's biography would encounter a magisterial description of Nelson's departure, wherein "a crowd collected in his train, pressing forward to obtain a sight of his face; - many were in tears, and many knelt down before him, and blessed him as he passed." Southey noted that "England has had many heroes, but never one who so entirely possessed the love of his fellow-countrymen as Nelson. [...] they loved him as truly and as fervently as he loved England."<sup>68</sup> Nelson seems to have agreed; as his barge pulled away towards the *Victory*, he turned towards his friend Thomas Masterman Hardy and stated: "I had their huzzas before, I have their hearts now!"<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Best, *Trafalgar: The Untold Story*, 159.

<sup>68</sup> Robert Southey, *The Life of Nelson* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1962; originally printed 1813), 245-246.

<sup>69</sup> Whipple, *The Seafarers: Fighting Sail*, 136.

As Nelson was being celebrated in London, the British fleet off Cadiz was struggling with the tedium of a blockade. Vice Admiral Collingwood was an able and efficient commander, but in Nelson's navy quiet competence was no longer seen as enough. Various captains pled for Nelson's return. Thomas Louis of the *Canopus* "hope[d] Lord Nelson will come out as he is the life and Soul of the Squadron he serves with."<sup>70</sup> Captain Codrington of the *Orion* was blunter, writing to the Admiralty and inquiring "for Charity's sake send us Lord Nelson, ye men of power!"<sup>71</sup>

When Nelson arrived off Cadiz on the 28<sup>th</sup> of September, the change in morale was apparent. Captain Duff of the *Mars* found Nelson "so good and pleasant that we all wish to do what he likes, without any kind of orders."<sup>72</sup> The lower decks were also enthused. Able Seaman James Martin of the *Neptune* believed it "Imposible to Discribe the Heartfelt Satisfaction of the whole fleet upon this Occasion and the Confidance of Success with wich we ware Inspired."<sup>73</sup> On the *Bellerophon*, Henry Walker wrote to his mother how Nelson's appearance "could not but inspire every individual in the fleet with additional confidence. Everyone felt himself more than a match for any enemy."<sup>74</sup> As

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<sup>70</sup> Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, 503.

<sup>71</sup> Bradford, *Nelson: The Essential Hero*, 331.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 332.

<sup>73</sup> Clayton & Craig, *Trafalgar: The Men, the Battle, the Storm*, 81-82. All spelling original.

<sup>74</sup> Adkins, *Nelson's Trafalgar*, 60; N.A.M. Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain, 1649-1815* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004; reprinted 2006), 538.

Captain William Hotham noted, “[Nelson] was perhaps more generally beloved by all ranks of people under him than any Officer in the Service.”<sup>75</sup>

Nelson easily noticed the fleet’s attitude towards his arrival. He wrote to Emma: “I believe my arrival was most welcome not only to the commander of the fleet but also to every individual in it.”<sup>76</sup> He explained to Alexander Davison that his worries had gone, and he was now focusing all of his attention on a singular purpose: “my mind is calm, and I have only to think of destroying our inveterate foe...we all hope for a meeting with the Enemy.”<sup>77</sup> To further this goal, he released a memorandum to the entire British fleet on the 9<sup>th</sup> of October detailing plans for any future engagement. He had already discussed the matter with the fleet’s captains; the memorandum was simply a codification. Both the meeting of the captains and the memorandum were continuations of the conversation Nelson had had with Keats at Merton, with some additional details – namely, “in case Signals can neither be seen or perfectly understood, no Captain can do very wrong, if he places his Ship alongside that of an Enemy.”<sup>78</sup>

The majority of the Trafalgar captains had not previously served with Nelson, and the change from the Navy of Calder and Parker was more than welcome to a fleet tired of blockade. Nelson wrote to Emma how “when I came to explain to them the Nelson touch it was like an electric shock, some shed tears all approved, it was new, it

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<sup>75</sup> Rodger, “Nelson and the British Navy,” 26.

<sup>76</sup> Coleman, *The Nelson Touch*, 317.

<sup>77</sup> Callo, *Nelson Speaks*, 175.

<sup>78</sup> Vincent, *Nelson: Love & Fame*, 564-566.



was singular, it was simple and from admirals downwards it was repeated it must succeed if ever they will allow us to get at them.”<sup>79</sup>

Nelson was now prepared for anything the Franco-Spanish Combined Fleet could muster. He corresponded with George Rose, an acquaintance of Prime Minister William Pitt, on October 6<sup>th</sup>: “it is...annihilation that the Country wants, and not merely a splendid Victory [...] I have not the very smallest doubt but that a very few days, almost hours, will put us in Battle...and I want for the sake of our Country that it should be done so effectually as to have nothing to wish for.”<sup>80</sup> To his second-in-command Collingwood on the 9<sup>th</sup>, Nelson repeated that “we have only one great object in view, - that of annihilating our enemies, and getting a glorious peace for our Country.”<sup>81</sup> Everything now depended on the enemy; as an officer wrote, “if the enemy venture out, we are sure of a victory over them. If they continue in port, we may expect the continuance of [Nelson’s] victory over himself, the hardest victory of all! For a high heart like his, to endure a destiny where there is nothing to display but the melancholy miracles of passive valour!”<sup>82</sup>

Unfortunately for Nelson, Villeneuve was perfectly content to remain in Cadiz, much to the distaste of some of his fellow officers. General Lauriston, commander of the French troops aboard, complained how “the fear of Nelson has got the upper hand of

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<sup>79</sup> Coleman, *The Nelson Touch*, 317.

<sup>80</sup> Alan Schom, *Trafalgar: Countdown to Battle, 1803-1805* (New York: Athenum, 1990), 281; Callo, *Nelson Speaks*, 112.

<sup>81</sup> Tracy, *Nelson’s Battles*, 219.

<sup>82</sup> David Howarth and Stephen Howarth, *Lord Nelson: The Immortal Memory* (New York: Viking, 1989), 291.

[Villeneuve] [...] we sail like a fleet of merchantmen who fear the attack of 4 or 5 of the line and it is a single man who is the cause of all this.”<sup>83</sup> Still, Villeneuve had his pride, and when word reached him that Napoleon was sending Vice Admiral François Rosily to Cadiz as his replacement, Villeneuve decided that it was time to act to preserve his professional reputation. On October 19<sup>th</sup>, 1805, thirty-three French and Spanish warships cleared Cadiz and made for open water.

A mere twenty-seven British ships opposed the Combined Fleet, and 17,000 British seamen and troops stood against 30,000 French and Spanish. Yet few on the British side feared this imbalance of numbers. Captain Henry Blackwood of the frigate *Euryalus* did express concern in a letter to his wife, over whether Nelson could still maintain the advantage necessary for a crushing victory: “not that he has not enough to bring them to close action; but I want him to have so many as to make this the most decisive battle that was ever fought.”<sup>84</sup> Much of the lower deck simply enjoyed their respite from the years of blockade duty. Hercules Robinson, also of the *Euryalus*, recorded “the delight of us all at the idea of a wearisome blockade about to terminate with a fair stand up fight, of which we well knew the result.”<sup>85</sup> Able Seaman James Martin composed a brief poem for the occasion: “The British Hearts did Lift for Joy / the Sight for to Behold / We Sone prepaired to fight them / for Honnor and for Gold.”<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> John Keegan, *The Price of Admiralty: The Evolution of Naval Warfare* (New York: Viking, 1988), 31; Tracy, *Nelson's Battles*, 197-198.

<sup>84</sup> Best, *Trafalgar: The Untold Story*, 196.

<sup>85</sup> Adkins, *Nelson's Trafalgar*, 67.

<sup>86</sup> Clayton & Craig, *Trafalgar: The Men, the Battle, the Storm*, 131.

However, it was not quite time for battle to be joined. The Combined Fleet's seamanship had suffered during their long days in harbor, and Villeneuve's hand was forced by his fleet's clumsy sailing; he was attempting to avoid the British fleet until circumstances dictated a fight. Nelson had received word of Villeneuve's departure on the morning of the 20<sup>th</sup>, but the entire day was spent with both fleets jockeying for position in a near calm. As night fell, it was apparent to the men on either side that the great battle would take place the next day; the morning of the 21<sup>st</sup> dawned with the two fleets in visual contact and prepared to take the offensive.

Captains and commanders of British men of war spent the day exhorting their crews and each other to glorious deeds, although encouragement was not often needed; an officer aboard the *Bellerophon* noticed that his men had chalked 'Victory or Death' on their cannons,<sup>87</sup> while Surgeon William Beatty on the *Victory* recorded how among the sailors "the sentiment generally expressed to each other was that they would prove to their Country that day how well British Seamen could 'do their duty' when led to battle by their revered Admiral."<sup>88</sup>

There was scant time remaining for morale-boosting addresses, which were in no short supply. The captain of the *Minotaur* informed his men that "this day, or tomorrow, will prove the most glorious our country ever saw."<sup>89</sup> *Tonnant's* captain boasted of how

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 125, 129; the officer was Lieutenant George Saunders.

<sup>88</sup> Best, *Trafalgar: The Untold Story*, 221.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 211. The captain was Charles Mansfield.

“we shall have one apiece before night,”<sup>90</sup> while Captain Moorsum of the *Revenge* pledged to “act as Lord Nelson had always done, lay his ship alongside the largest he came near and would leave the rest to his men.”<sup>91</sup> Even the highest ranks displayed visible excitement. Vice-Admiral Collingwood spoke to his staff: “now, gentlemen, let us do something today which the world will talk of hereafter.”<sup>92</sup> Even Nelson made a brief speech, which Seaman John Brown of the *Victory* recorded: “My noble lads, this will be a glorious day for England who ever lives to see it. I shan’t be satisfied with 12 ships this day as I took at the Nile.”<sup>93</sup> Around 11:45 on the morning of the 21<sup>st</sup>, Nelson sent his last messages to the British fleet. One was the famous flag signal, ‘England Expects That Every Man Will Do His Duty’. The other was the same signal he had flown at the Nile and at Copenhagen: ‘Engage the Enemy More Closely.’<sup>94</sup> The two sides fired their first shots at noon, and by the end of the day both of Nelson’s signals would have achieved a fame that would last for a century.

The actual Battle of Trafalgar has been studied in immense detail, and there is no need to once again dissect its particulars. It will suffice to say that Nelson achieved his every object. The British went into battle with a six-ship disadvantage, yet at the conclusion of hostilities they had captured twenty-two enemy vessels while giving up none of their own. The years of tortuous blockade had honed British seamanship; they

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<sup>90</sup> Clayton & Craig, *Trafalgar: The Men, the Battle, the Storm*, 136. The captain was Captain Tyler; the story was relayed by Paul Nicolas on the *Belleisle*.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 201. This anecdote was relayed by John Greenly, the ship’s chaplain.

<sup>92</sup> Pocock, *Trafalgar: An Eyewitness History*, 62.

<sup>93</sup> Adkins, *Nelson’s Trafalgar*, 85.

<sup>94</sup> White, *Nelson the Admiral*, 69.

outmaneuvered their French and Spanish rivals at every turn, and fired their cannons at a faster rate. Exact numbers are difficult to come by, but when the final totals were calculated the British had lost 449 dead and 1241 wounded against approximately 4400 dead and 2500 wounded in the Combined Fleet.<sup>95</sup> Yet there was no great celebration in the British fleet. Their hero Nelson lay dead, killed by a chance shot from a French musketeer on the *Redoubtable* just after one o'clock in the afternoon.

The high drama of Nelson's final hours, the famous phrases and emotional outbursts, were confined to a handful of men on *Victory's* dark orlop deck. The first the vast majority of the British fleet knew of their leader's mortal wound was when night fell and Collingwood's *Royal Sovereign* flew the lantern of the fleet's commanding admiral. Captain Hargood of the *Belleisle* recorded the mood as his men heard the news: "The melancholy tidings spread through the ship in an instant, and its paralysing effect was wonderful. [...] 'Lord Nelson is no more!' was repeated with such despondency and heartfelt sorrow that every one seemed to mourn a parent."<sup>96</sup> Midshipman Joseph Woolnough, aboard *Agamemnon*, recalled how "a stranger might have supposed from the gloom that spread among us that we had been beaten instead of being the conquerors."<sup>97</sup> On Nelson's *Victory*, emotions ran even higher. A boatswain's mate "wouldn't have cared if it had been my old father, brother or sisters if there were fifty

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<sup>95</sup> Adkins, *Nelson's Trafalgar*, 290. Many of the French and Spanish dead were lost in the great storm that followed the battle, which also accounts for their much higher killed / wounded ratio.

<sup>96</sup> Best, *Trafalgar: The Untold Story*, 290-291.

<sup>97</sup> White, *Nelson the Admiral*, 189.

more of them – but I can't think of parting with Nelson.”<sup>98</sup> Gunner William Rivers composed a short epitaph: “Which of you all Would not have freely died, / To Save Brave Nelson There [sic] Dear Country's Pride.”<sup>99</sup>

Yet intermingled with expressions of grief were the first stirrings of an apotheosis. An officer aboard the *Britannia*, although distraught over “our greatest loss, the brave, the amiable Lord Nelson, the idol of the profession, the armament and defence of his country, the greatest warrior of his age,” took heart: “Nelson's merits are indelibly engraved on every British breast, his memory will be immortal.”<sup>100</sup> And Seaman James Martin, apparently a budding artist, penned another short poem: “What Better End can Best of Heros Claim / Children yet unborn will lisp the Heros Name / And Age to Age Record thy Matchless Fame.”<sup>101</sup>

This early hero-worship permeated two of Vice-Admiral Collingwood's official statements in his new capacity as leader of the British fleet. The first was a General Order of thanks to the fleet, sent the day after the battle, mourning “the ever to be lamented death of Vice Admiral Lord Viscount Nelson,” who fell “, covered with glory, whose memory will be ever dear to the British Navy and the British Nation [and] will ever be held up as a shining example for a British seaman.”<sup>102</sup> The second was Collingwood's official dispatch to his superiors at the Admiralty. It followed the same

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<sup>98</sup> Tom Pocock, *Horatio Nelson* (London: Pimlico, 1994), 333.

<sup>99</sup> Clayton & Craig, *Trafalgar: The Men, the Battle, the Storm*, 379.

<sup>100</sup> Pocock, *Trafalgar: An Eyewitness History*, 146.

<sup>101</sup> Clayton & Craig, *Trafalgar: The Men, the Battle, the Storm*, 360.

<sup>102</sup> Andrew Lambert, *Nelson: Britannia's God of War* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2004), 307-308.

basic format as the General Order; Collingwood had reason to “lament, in common with the British Navy, and the British Nation [...] the loss of a Hero whose name will be immortal, and his memory ever dear to his Country.”<sup>103</sup> Other captains’ letters went with the dispatch vessel, bringing the first news of the combined victory and loss to mainland Britain. Captain Henry Blackwood of the *Euryalus* sounded a note of discord that would continue to resonate in the Royal Navy for the next century, writing to his wife that “I hope it is not injustice to the Second in Command [Collingwood] [...] to say that the Fleet under any other, never would have performed what they did under Lord N.”<sup>104</sup> Other revelations were more personal in nature. Thirteen year old Norwich Duff, a midshipman on the *Mars*, wrote to his mother that his father, Captain George Duff, had been killed in the battle – but at least he and his shipmates “had fought like young Nelsons.”<sup>105</sup>

Collingwood’s report on the battle reached Britain on November 4<sup>th</sup>, and after a hurried journey from Portsmouth Collingwood’s dispatch was delivered to the Admiralty early on the morning of the 6<sup>th</sup>. The first to learn of Nelson’s death were his old compatriots in the Admiralty; St. Vincent remarked that he was “prepared for anything great from Nelson, but not for his loss.”<sup>106</sup> News of Trafalgar broke in special editions across Britain. *The Times* downplayed any celebratory aspects, writing that “the

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<sup>103</sup> Geoffrey Bennett, *Nelson the Commander* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1972), 276; Adkins, *Nelson’s Trafalgar*, 272.

<sup>104</sup> Lambert, *Nelson: Britannia’s God of War*, 307.

<sup>105</sup> Nicolson, *Men of Honour*, 294.

<sup>106</sup> White, *Nelson the Admiral*, 194.

triumph, great and glorious as it is, has been dearly bought;” instead, the newspaper followed the path chosen by the majority of Londoners, who “mourned with all the sincerity and poignancy of domestic grief their HERO slain...If ever there was a man who deserved to be ‘praised, wept and honoured’ by his Country, it is Lord Nelson.”<sup>107</sup> The *Morning Chronicle* rather obtusely portrayed Trafalgar as a victory for Napoleon, who could now rest secure in the knowledge that “the only rival of my greatness is no more!”<sup>108</sup>

Other newspapers immediately launched into the hagiographic style that would characterize much of the public’s reaction to Nelson’s death. The *Morning Post* reflected that although Nelson was gone, Britons now had “the consolation to reflect that he has closed his career of glory by a work which will place his name so high in the tablets of Immortality, that succeeding patriots can only gaze with enthusiasm, scarcely hoping to reach the envied elevation, which a Nation’s tears, to the latest period of time, will drop like so many bright gems upon the page of history, that records the fall of the Illustrious Hero.”<sup>109</sup> *Trewman’s Exeter Flying Post* stole a march on its larger competitors with an even more sensationalistic header, backdated to the 6<sup>th</sup> of November: Nelson will “live forever in the hearts of his countrymen,” and “altho’ we cannot suppress the tear which the loss of this hero has drawn from us, we feel confident

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<sup>107</sup> Bennett, *Nelson the Commander*, 284.

<sup>108</sup> Coleman, *The Nelson Touch*, 327. Napoleon was in fact involved with the Ulm campaign and did not learn of Trafalgar for several weeks; due to French efforts to mask the scale of their defeat, many Frenchmen learned little about the battle until the end of the Napoleonic Wars.

<sup>109</sup> Morriss et al, *Nelson: An Illustrated History*, 144.



that our navy will convince our enemies that tho' NELSON is dead, the same invincible courage he possessed still lives in the breast of every True British Tar."<sup>110</sup>

Aristocratic members of British society quickly busied themselves with releasing official statements on Trafalgar, with many also privately recorded their thoughts on the occasion. King George III publicly expressed his thanks for Nelson's "transcendent and heroic services...will prove a lasting source of strength, security and glory to my Kingdom," while the Prince of Wales recalled how "Nelson and Victory were one and the same to us, and it carried dismay and terror to the hearts of our enemies."<sup>111</sup> Many high-society chroniclers recorded their own reactions to Trafalgar. Lady Castlereagh saw it as the beginning of Nelson's "immortal career, having nothing to achieve on earth and bequeathing to the English fleet a legacy which they alone are able to improve;"<sup>112</sup> Lady Londonderry philosophically opined that "in such a death there is no sting, and in such a grave everlasting victory."<sup>113</sup> Others took a less optimistic approach. Lady Wenlock was a girl of seven in 1805, but recalled her thoughts of that November sixty years later: "Child as I was, I burst into tears; one had been taught to think that nothing could go on without [Nelson]!"<sup>114</sup> Lord Minto feared for the continued war effort: "We

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<sup>110</sup> Warwick, *Voices from the Battle of Trafalgar*, 19-20. Many of the newspaper accounts of Trafalgar appeared on the 7<sup>th</sup>.

<sup>111</sup> Lambert, *Nelson: Britannia's God of War*, 317.

<sup>112</sup> Pocock, *Trafalgar: An Eyewitness History*, 199-200.

<sup>113</sup> Lambert, *Nelson: Britannia's God of War*, 317.

<sup>114</sup> Edward Fraser, *The Sailors Whom Nelson Led* (London: Methuen & co. Ltd., 1913), 345-346.

shall want more victories yet, and to whom can we look for them?”<sup>115</sup> The essayist Charles Lamb felt similarly, writing that after Trafalgar “nobody is left of any name at all.”<sup>116</sup>

Many aristocratic accounts also display admiration and surprise at the reaction of Britain’s middle and working classes. Lady Elizabeth Herney noted the reaction of a gate guard who inquired if her companion had “heard the bad news? We have taken twenty ships from the enemy, but Lord Nelson is killed!”<sup>117</sup> Lord Malmesbury “never saw so little public joy,” with “every common person in the streets speaking *first* of their sorrow for *him* and *then* of the victory.”<sup>118</sup> Lady Elizabeth Foster believed “Nelson was the only person I ever saw who excited real enthusiasm in the English,”<sup>119</sup> while Lady Bessborough concernedly reported that “amongst quite the lowest class the discontent is so great that it was fear’d there would be a riot.”<sup>120</sup> Nelson was mourned internationally as well. Samuel Taylor Coleridge was in Naples, where “numbers stopped and shook hands with me, because they had seen the tears on my cheek, and conjectured that I was an Englishman; and some, as they held my hand, burst, themselves, into tears.”<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Tracy, *Nelson’s Battles*, 259.

<sup>116</sup> Sugden, *A Dream of Glory*, 1.

<sup>117</sup> Best, *Trafalgar: The Untold Story*, 320.

<sup>118</sup> Adkins, *Nelson’s Trafalgar*, 283.

<sup>119</sup> Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, 529.

<sup>120</sup> Adkins, *Nelson’s Trafalgar*, 310.

<sup>121</sup> Bradford, *Nelson: The Essential Hero*, 350.

Nelson's death did not escape the attention of the clergy. A Bristol clergyman attempted to soothe his flock by assuring them that Nelson's death did not mean the Royal Navy was now incapable of victory.<sup>122</sup> Reverend H. Draper placed Nelson's death in the context of eternity, preaching that "though removed from us, he still lives: yea, and he will live while Britain exists, and her sons are grateful!"<sup>123</sup> Reverend Thomas Brown Simpson was more rhetorical, asking: "was not Nelson more to us than the God who made him?"<sup>124</sup>

The aristocracy and the clergy memorialized and sympathized, but it was among the adoring general public that Nelson's death had the most immediate impact. Towns erected public memorials almost overnight. In Portsmouth, where naval and public grief mingled, "the town was wonderfully illuminated," with affluent households displaying pictures of Nelson and Britannia on their walls.<sup>125</sup> The atmosphere in London was quite literally electric. Thousands of people milled about the streets wearing mourning armbands and cockades decorated with Nelson's name, while shop windows were draped in black. The Admiralty, Treasury, Bank of England and other public buildings were lit in celebration of the victory and in honor of Nelson. The Drury Lane theater placed an illuminated anchor with the letters 'LN' underneath on its roof, while the German theater erected a large transparency of Britannia and a lion holding Nelson's

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<sup>122</sup> Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, 533.

<sup>123</sup> Czisnik, *Admiral Nelson: Image and Icon*, 228.

<sup>124</sup> Timothy Jenks, "Contesting the Hero: The Funeral of Admiral Lord Nelson," *The Journal of British Studies* 39, no. 4 (October 2000): 422-453; 447.

<sup>125</sup> Pocock, *Trafalgar: An Eyewitness History*, 198.

portrait with the legend ‘Victorious Nelson, I will avenge thy death.’ Not to be outdone, Covent Garden Theatre decorated its roof with a large ‘N’ and anchor, and ended their daily show with an impromptu rendition of *Rule Britannia* featuring edited lyrics that promised to ‘avenge the God-like hero slain.’<sup>126</sup>

Just days after carrying the news of Trafalgar to the people, British newspapers began to fill with adulatory poems and stories submitted by readers. Often these spoke of Nelson’s continuing presence, or his effect on future generations. Poems reassured Britons that there would be more Nelsons to continue the fight: ‘you still have more Nelsons in store,’ ‘may there rise from his ashes a Nelson again,’ even a declarative ‘EVERY BRITON WILL A NELSON RISE.’<sup>127</sup> Prose accounts followed the same theme in greater detail. Trafalgar was “a victory which will probably be more valued, in its effects, by future ages, than by the present,” and in these “future ages, when the Stranger who may visit our Island, shall enquire for the Monument of Nelson, the answer will be ‘Behold the Country which he saved.’”<sup>128</sup> An anonymous account is worth quoting at length, as it demonstrates the hold that the memory of Nelson already had among the British public:

His fame survives! bounded only by the limits of the earth, and by the extent of the human mind. He survives in our hearts, in the growing knowledge of our children, in the affection of the good throughout the world; and when our monuments shall be done away; when nations now existing shall be no more; when our far

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<sup>126</sup> Schom, *Trafalgar: Countdown to Battle, 1803-1805*, 360-361; Best, *Trafalgar: The Untold Story*, 320-321; Bennett, *Nelson the Commander*, 285; Adkins, *Nelson’s Trafalgar*, 284.

<sup>127</sup> Czisnik, *Admiral Nelson: Image and Icon*, 309. The poems are anonymous, authored by W.H. Green, and authored by William Carey respectively.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 102. This account is anonymous.

spreading empire shall have perished: still will our Nelson's glory unfaded shine, and die not, until love of virtue cease on earth, or earth itself sinks into chaos.<sup>129</sup>

The sailors of the *Victory* insisted on bringing Nelson's remains home themselves, and the ship arrived in England -- with Nelson's body preserved aboard in a cask of brandy -- on December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1805. Nelson's body lay in state in Greenwich from January 5<sup>th</sup> through 7<sup>th</sup> in preparation for a great funeral. Admittance to the funeral procession would be strictly controlled, so the three days in which the body lay in state were the last chance many ordinary Londoners would have to pay their respects. Nicholas Best provides one account of the chaos that ensued: "A written notice was posted up, that the public would be admitted at 11 a.m. by which time many thousands were assembled [...] and though express orders had been given that only a limited number should be admitted at once, yet the mob was so great as to bear down everything in its way. Nothing could be heard but shrieks and groans, as several persons were trodden under foot and greatly hurt."<sup>130</sup> 30,000 mourners gained entrance to Greenwich Hospital, but from the 20,000 additional Londoners turned away due to overcrowding the business-minded vergers of St. Paul's made over £300 by charging visitors a shilling to view Nelson's catafalque.<sup>131</sup>

More upper-class members of society could hold out hope for a glimpse of the actual funeral procession, which was held on the 9<sup>th</sup> of January. London newspapers ran advertisements leading up to the funeral to make "families of distinction" aware they

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 162-163.

<sup>130</sup> Best, *Trafalgar: The Untold Story*, 325.

<sup>131</sup> Coleman, *The Nelson Touch*, 334. A catafalque is a raised platform used to support a coffin in a memorial service.

could rent rooms along the procession's route.<sup>132</sup> On the day of the event, all traffic was stopped on the Thames as Nelson's funeral car proceeded, first by water and then via land, to St. Paul's. Accompanying Nelson's ornate casket – carved from the wood of *l'Orient* – were all seven of the King's sons, thirty-six admirals, 20,000 volunteer infantry and cavalymen, and 8,000 regular soldiers.<sup>133</sup> However, most of interest to the crowd were the forty-eight members of the *Victory*'s crew chosen for the occasion.<sup>134</sup>

Nelson's casket eventually arrived at St. Paul's, where it became the centerpiece of the last full heraldic funeral ever held in Great Britain.<sup>135</sup> This ornate ceremony lasted three hours, ending only when Sir Isaac Heard, the Garter King of Arms, broke Nelson's staves of office and threw them into his tomb; Heard then added a personal touch to the prescribed dialogue, inserting a final reference to Nelson as “the Hero who in the moment of Victory fell covered with Immortal glory.”<sup>136</sup> The tattered ensign of the *Victory* was to have followed, but Nelson's sailors chose instead to spontaneously tear the ensign to pieces for use as personal mementoes.

It took three hours to clear the crowds from St. Paul's, and by the time the last dignitary departed into the winter evening Nelson had passed firmly into the realm of a venerated icon. The very next day curious crowds in Temple Bar could see a re-

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<sup>132</sup> Jenks, “Contesting the Hero,” 440-441.

<sup>133</sup> Coleman, *The Nelson Touch*, 332; Czisnik, *Admiral Nelson: Image and Icon*, 234.

<sup>134</sup> Laurence Brockliss, John Cardwell, and Michael Moss, “Nelson's Grand National Obsequies,” *English Historical Review* 121 (February 2006): 162-182; 174.

<sup>135</sup> Warwick, *Voices from the Battle of Trafalgar*, 285.

<sup>136</sup> Bennett, *Nelson the Commander*, 286; Clayton & Craig, *Trafalgar: The Men, the Battle, the Storm*, 366.

enactment of Nelson's body lying in state for just a shilling.<sup>137</sup> Nelson's unrivalled career had come to a close, leaving the remains of three nations' navies in its wake. The next decade would see an alarming list of French victories on the Continent; news of Ulm and Austerlitz had already broken in London since Trafalgar had been fought. But none of these major victories would be at sea. When the White Ensign next undertook a major naval campaign, nearly half a century had passed. Britain would on the side of France then, and her wooden walls would be powered by steam. But the Royal Navy would still be guided by the principles laid down by Nelson and the confidence engendered through his victories. And, for better or for worse, the British public would still demand annihilating victories as their inalienable right. There could be no more Robert Calders after 1805; for a nation grown accustomed to triumph, there could be only Nelsons to come.

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<sup>137</sup> Brockliss, Cardwell and Moss, "Nelson's Grand National Obsequies," 177.

## CHAPTER III

### “PARSIMONY IN COAL AND EXTRAVAGANCE IN GOLD LEAF” – THE NAVY’S NELSON IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Nelson’s grand funeral did not mark the end of public commemorations of Trafalgar and the Vice-Admiral’s storied career. The London public that had flocked to Nelson’s funeral procession could now spend their free time attending a naval show, as there were at least three London theaters – the Surrey, Astley’s, and Sadler’s Wells - that specialized in naval productions such as recreations of the Nile and Trafalgar.<sup>1</sup> Those of a more spiritual mindset could view a wax figure of Nelson erected in Westminster Abbey, although the more secular motive behind the wax rendition was to compete with Nelson’s actual tomb in St. Paul’s for visitors’ currency.<sup>2</sup> The market for Nelson souvenirs and collectables remained strong; even French prisoners of Trafalgar made extra money by selling carved domino boxes with Nelson’s portrait while waiting for repatriation.<sup>3</sup>

Yet the Nelson mythos had already begun to evolve. In life, Nelson had been a beacon of strength for contemporary Englishmen; in death, he would become a mighty

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<sup>1</sup> John M. MacKenzie, “Nelson Goes Global: The Nelson Myth in Britain and Beyond,” in David Cannadine, ed., *Admiral Lord Nelson: Context and Legacy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 46-47; Michael Paris, *Warrior Nation: Images of War in British Popular Culture, 1850-2000* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 19. Sadler’s Wells in particular specially constructed a 90 by 20 foot water tank for recreations of naval battles.

<sup>2</sup> Marianne Czisnik, “Commemorating Trafalgar: Public Celebration and National Identity,” in David Cannadine, ed., *Trafalgar in History: A Battle and its Afterlife* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 140.

<sup>3</sup> Roger Morriss, Brian Lavery and Stephen Deuchar, *Nelson: An Illustrated History*, Pieter van der Merwe, ed. (London: Laurence King Publishing, 1995), 136.



exemplar for their children. The London printsellers Boydell and Company advertised a 500 guinea reward soon after Trafalgar for the best painting commemorating the death of Nelson.<sup>4</sup> One of the most popular Trafalgar paintings was Benjamin West's 1806 *The Death of Nelson*, an idealized version of the battle featuring Nelson dying on the *Victory's* quarterdeck surrounded by admirers. West was asked why he had romanticized the battle, and replied that "there was no other way of representing the death of a Hero but by an *Epic* representation of it. It must exhibit the event in a way to excite awe & veneration." To West, Nelson could never be "be represented dying in the gloomy hold of a ship, like a sick man in a Prison Hole;" instead, popular depictions of the vice admiral's death "should be a spectacle presented to raise & warm the mind, & all shd. [sic] be proportioned to the highest idea conceived of the Hero." Strikingly, West also connected his idealistic portrayal to the education of future naval generations. "No Boy," said West, "would be animated by a representation of Nelson dying like an ordinary man, His feelings must be roused & His mind enflamed by a scene great & extraordinary. A mere matter of fact will never produce this effect."<sup>5</sup>

Memorial items intended for public consumption often bore the same theme of Nelson's enduring legacy. Besides portraits there were monuments, like the one installed in the London Guildhall around 1810 that bore the legend 'The period to

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<sup>4</sup> Tim Clayton and Phil Craig, *Trafalgar: The Men, the Battle, the Storm* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2004), 366.

<sup>5</sup>Marianne Czisnik, *Horatio Nelson: A Controversial Hero* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2005), 100-101; Marianne Czisnik, *Admiral Nelson: Image and Icon* (Unpublished PhD Dissertation: University of Edinburgh, 2003), 279; Clayton & Craig, *Trafalgar: The Men, the Battle, the Storm*, 212. West's comments are recorded in the 1807 diary of Joseph Farington.

Nelson's fame can only be the end of time.'<sup>6</sup> There were also celebratory poems, published in newspapers and as standalone pieces; Jonathan Odell's 1806 *Song To The Memory of Lord Nelson*, to take one example, included the line 'Each tar shall inherit / A share of his spirit, / And all prove invincible Lords of the Main!'<sup>7</sup> However, the rush of commemorative biographies and hagiographies of Nelson that flooded the market following Trafalgar had the most lasting effect. Chief among these was Robert Southey's previously-mentioned 1813 work *The Life of Nelson*. Southey, the poet laureate of Great Britain, put his rhetorical skills to the test with his biography, with his conclusion again demonstrating how Nelson's contemporaries believed the vice admiral would be remembered: "He has left us, not indeed his mantle of inspiration, but a name and an example, which are at this hour inspiring hundreds of the youth of England: a name which is our pride, and an example which will continue to be our shield and our strength. Thus it is that the spirits of the great and the wise continue to live and to act after them."<sup>8</sup>

But Nelson's influence remained even stronger in his professional home, the Royal Navy. There was still a war on, and although Nelson had smashed the French and Spanish fleets and word had reached London that Napoleon's grand invasion plan had been scuttled there were naval battles ahead to be fought and presumably won. Even before Nelson's funeral brought thousands of mourners to St. Paul's, there were naval

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<sup>6</sup> Geoffrey Bennett, *Nelson the Commander* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), 298. Richard Brinsley Sheridan composed the inscription.

<sup>7</sup> Czisnik, *Admiral Nelson: Image and Icon*, 309.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Southey, *The Life of Nelson* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1962; originally printed 1813), 268.

plans for permanent monuments to the departed hero. As early as November 10<sup>th</sup>, 1805 – just days after news of Trafalgar had reached London – 1200 members of the Sea Fencibles spontaneously raised a 20-foot triumphal arch to Nelson in Ireland.<sup>9</sup> Before Nelson’s battered fleet had even reached home, crews were preparing memorials. The men of the *Conqueror* received permission to replace their ship’s damaged figurehead with a bust of Nelson,<sup>10</sup> while the crew of the *Orion* voted that £2,000 out of any prize money they received upon their return would go towards a Nelson monument in Portsmouth.<sup>11</sup> Other early memorials under discussion by December of 1805 included a sailors’ asylum and a column where local youths would be encouraged to learn of Nelson’s heroism;<sup>12</sup> Lord Castlereagh, the Secretary of State for War, simply wanted to ensure that any future monuments would ensure Nelson’s use to the Navy as a “model for his profession to study.”<sup>13</sup>

Although there were no naval battles of Trafalgar’s scale between 1805 and the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, there were a variety of small-scale clashes at sea. Many of these proved valuable as morale boosters to a navy still spending most of its time on blockade and patrol duty, and captains and crews often made reference to

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<sup>9</sup> John Sugden, *Nelson: A Dream of Glory, 1758-1797* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004), 2. The Sea Fencibles were a volunteer naval militia for home defense purposes.

<sup>10</sup> Edward Fraser, *The Sailors Whom Nelson Led* (London: Methuen & co. Ltd., 1913), 308-309; Clayton & Craig, *Trafalgar: The Men, the Battle, the Storm*, 374.

<sup>11</sup> Nicholas Tracy, *Nelson’s Battles: The Triumph of British Seapower* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1996; revised edition, 2008), 257; Sugden, *Nelson: A Dream of Glory*, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Alison Yarrington, *The Commemoration of the Hero 1800-1864: Monuments to the British Victors of the Napoleonic Wars* (New York: Garland, 1988), 109.

<sup>13</sup> Holger Hooek, “Nelson Entombed: The Military and Naval Pantheon in St Paul’s Cathedral,” in David Cannadine, ed., *Admiral Lord Nelson: Context and Legacy*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 118.

Nelson in these engagements. In a clash with the French in 1806 Captain Richard Keats, to whom Nelson had explained his ‘Nelson Touch’ at Merton less than a year earlier, hung a portrait of Nelson on his mainmast and entered battle with his ship’s band playing the commemorative song ‘Nelson of the Nile.’<sup>14</sup> After a naval victory by Richard Strachan, his sailors composed a song for the occasion: ‘Though with tears we lament our great Nelson’s demise, / Let the nation rejoice that more Nelsons arise.’<sup>15</sup>

Half a decade after Nelson’s death, his naval supporters were no less enthusiastic. Admiral William Hoste flew a ‘remember Nelson’ signal from his flagship before engaging French frigates at the 1811 Battle of Lissa.<sup>16</sup> That same year, Private William Wheeler took passage on the ship of the line *Revenge* to Lisbon, destined for service in the Peninsular War. A naval outsider, he recorded how the ship’s crew spent their free time: “again is to be found a select party immortalizing the heroes of gone by days by singing songs to the memory of Duncan, Howe, Vincent, and the immortal Nelson.”<sup>17</sup>

Even Southey’s *Life of Nelson*, intended to stir heroic deeds in all young Englishmen, was becoming a staple of the Royal Navy. Although Southey’s conclusion

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<sup>14</sup> Roger Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory: The Life and Achievement of Horatio Nelson*, (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 539. This was the Battle of San Domingo in February 1806.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Napier Robinson, *The British Tar in Fact and Fiction: The Poetry, Pathos, and Humour of the Sailor’s Life* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1909), 297. This may have been the Battle of Cape Ortegal, 4 November 1805, in which case it would demonstrate naval memorials to Nelson before news of his death had even reached Britain.

<sup>16</sup> Edgar Vincent, “Nelson the Man,” in Alexander Stilwell, ed., *The Trafalgar Companion* (New York: Osprey Publishing, 2005), 94; Edgar Vincent, *Nelson: Love & Fame* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 261.

<sup>17</sup> N.A.M. Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain, 1649-1815* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004; reprinted 2006), 490, 504.

called for an appreciation of Nelson among all ages and classes, his introduction was directed more specifically towards his goal of penning a “manual for the young sailor, which he may carry about with him, till he has treasured up the example in his memory and in his heart.”<sup>18</sup> Southey also informed a friend that he hoped to create “such a life of Nelson as shall be put into the hands of every youth destined for the navy;” Southey’s acquaintance later believed that the completed work “ought to be in the chest of every seaman, from the admiral to the cabin boy.”<sup>19</sup>

Yet as Nelson’s influence continued apace in naval circles, it began to fluctuate among the general British public, a situation intensified by the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815. Monuments and memorials to the great hero were now interspersed with public bewailing of his lack of influence. Although 1830 rumors that the *Victory* was to be broken up led to a public outcry, Nelson’s ornate funeral carriage was dismantled around the same time.<sup>20</sup> Nelson theoretically remained a shining exemplar of Britain’s naval prowess. J.M.W. Turner composed an 1830 painting, ‘Yarmouth Sands,’ that featured women and boys looking on as sailors arranged ship models in battle formation underneath the Yarmouth Nelson monument.<sup>21</sup> But by that same year, the Nelson monument in Edinburgh had proven so unprofitable that its base had been rented out as a

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<sup>18</sup> Czisnik, *Admiral Nelson: Image and Icon*, 44.

<sup>19</sup> David Eastwood, “Patriotism Personified: Robert Southey’s *Life of Nelson* Reconsidered,” *Mariner’s Mirror* 77 (1991): 143-149; 145, 149. Grosvenor Charles Bedford was the acquaintance.

<sup>20</sup> Colin White, *Victoria’s Navy: The End of the Sailing Navy* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1981), 10; Morriss et al, *Nelson: An Illustrated History*, 150; Czisnik, *Admiral Nelson: Image and Icon*, 363. Morriss (1840) and Czisnik (1826) provide different dates for the dismantling of the funeral carriage.

<sup>21</sup> Czisnik, *Horatio Nelson: A Controversial Hero*, 121.

soup stall.<sup>22</sup> Trafalgar's cultural imprint had been overshadowed first by ten years of land war – with the Duke of Wellington ascending to nearly as lofty a peak of public admiration as Nelson – and then by a long-awaited peace. As Lord Byron wrote in his epic *Don Juan* in the years following Waterloo: “Nelson was Britannia’s god of war, / And still should be so, but the tide is turn’d; / There’s no more to be said of Trafalgar, / ‘Tis with our hero quietly inurn’d; / Because the army’s grown more popular, / At which the naval people are concern’d.”<sup>23</sup>

The Congress of Vienna may have been a welcome relief to an exhausted Britain, but it severely hampered the Royal Navy. The service had added thousands of necessary personnel to see it through more than twenty years of continuous patrols and battles; now, in a period that came to be known as the Slump, the navy quickly and forcefully reverted to its peacetime personnel requirements. Every aspect of the professional sea service saw severe contractions in the years following the war. In 1813 the Royal Navy used 4,873 commissioned officers to man its 685 ships. By the beginning of the next decade, naval personnel had risen to 5,664 active officers – but due to the peace, there were now only 134 ships for them to serve upon. In 1818 a staggering ninety-one percent of flag officers, ninety-four percent of commanders, and eighty-nine percent of lieutenants were shore-bound on half pay.<sup>24</sup> And those that remained employed were being drawn from a smaller segment of British society. By the 1830s nearly half of the

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<sup>22</sup> Czisnik, *Admiral Nelson: Image and Icon*, 271.

<sup>23</sup> Andrew Lambert, *Nelson: Britannia’s God of War* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2004), 326.

<sup>24</sup> These figures are drawn from Michael Lewis, *The Navy in Transition, 1814-1864: A Social History* (London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd, 1965), 66, 69, 72-73, 117, 120.

Navy's commissioned officers were from the peerage or the landed gentry. By contrast, a survey of officers' parentage conducted in the 1840s found that since 1815 men whose families were involved in business fell from 3.9 percent to 0.4 percent of the officers' ranks, while those with 'working class' parentage fell from nearly seven percent to a flat zero – not a single middle-class officer could now be found.<sup>25</sup>

There was one refuge for the middle-class sailor who dreamed of career advancement, tucked away in a specialty originally deemed so unimportant by the Admiralty that it did not appear on the officers' lists. This was the new branch of engineering, and by thirty years after Trafalgar it would be well on its way towards revolutionizing the Navy. The possibilities that technological advancement held for naval warfare was evident to the Admiralty even during Nelson's lifetime. Steam-powered cranes appeared in the Portsmouth dockyard as early as the 1790s,<sup>26</sup> and in 1805 the Admiralty deigned to test a primitive torpedo and submarine by the inventor Robert Fulton. However, the powers that be were not impressed – St. Vincent believed the adoption of the submarine as a weapon of war would “lay [...] the foundation for doing away with the Navy, on which depended the strength and prestige of Great Britain” – and Fulton was told to look for business elsewhere.<sup>27</sup> In the year Nelson died steamships were of use only in protected waters, as mail steamers and similar vessels, but before the Napoleonic Wars came to a close steam-powered vessels were capable of

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<sup>25</sup> Basil Greenhill and Ann Giffard, *Steam, Politics, and Patronage: The Transformation of the Royal Navy 1815-54* (London: Conway Maritime Press, 1994), 60; Lewis, *The Navy in Transition*, 22.

<sup>26</sup> Morriss et al, *Nelson: An Illustrated History*, 19.

<sup>27</sup> Alan Schom, *Trafalgar: Countdown to Battle, 1803-1805* (New York: Athenum, 1990), 261. In this period 'torpedoes' were essentially mines.

open-ocean voyages.<sup>28</sup> For naval constructors and strategists, the uses of steam power began to rapidly develop.

In what was to be a common theme throughout the century, the Admiralty was initially against experiments in steam propulsion, even to the point of self-contradiction. In 1827 the Lord High Admiral the Duke of Clarence included steam ships on the Navy List of official Admiralty vessels for the first time;<sup>29</sup> however, the very next year the Admiralty, now under the direction of Lord Melville, stated that “Their Lordships... feel it their bounden duty to discourage to the utmost of their ability the employment of steam vessels, as they consider that the introduction of steam is calculated to strike a fatal blow at the Naval Supremacy of the Empire.”<sup>30</sup> But the advantages of steamships were readily apparent. By 1830 the Royal Navy possessed both a small armada of steam tow vessels for maneuvering and dockyard purposes and the first steam-powered warship to mount heavy guns, the *Caledonia*.<sup>31</sup>

These early steamers were innovative, but their use as line of battle ships was severely limited. Until the 1840s the vast majority of steam warships were paddle-driven, with motive power coming from side paddlewheels rather than the later centerline screw propeller. The very name assigned to most of these vessels, paddle frigates, reveals their vulnerabilities. Their side paddlewheels and clunky machinery

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<sup>28</sup> David Howarth, *Trafalgar: The Nelson Touch* (New York: Galahad Books, 1975), 48.

<sup>29</sup> Andrew Lambert, consulting editor, *Steam, Steel & Shellfire: The Steam Warship 1815-1905*, Conway's History of the Ship (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1992), 17.

<sup>30</sup> White, *Victoria's Navy: The End of the Sailing Navy*, 16.

<sup>31</sup> Greenhill & Giffard, *Steam, Politics, and Patronage*, 36-37; Lambert, *Steam, Steel & Shellfire*, 22.



were extraordinarily vulnerable, and the ships would have been of little use in a Trafalgar-style melee; furthermore, the amount of space both interior and exterior devoted to propulsion meant that paddle frigates could carry only a handful of the guns mounted by first rates.<sup>32</sup> The Royal Navy of the 1830s and 1840s was excellent at its chosen role as the world's policeman. Small steam vessels and paddle frigates explored the Arctic, chased slave ships in the Atlantic, and made exploratory forays into Chinese and African rivers.<sup>33</sup> What it did not do was fight major naval battles.

The 1830s and 1840s saw the beginning of this disconnect that would characterize the Royal Navy for the next sixty years. The midshipmen and junior officers were gaining sea service around the Empire, learning to deal with the emerging technologies of modern warfare. Their aristocratic commanders, nearly all of whom had served with Nelson or his contemporaries, were growing elderly in command of vessels designed to fight a type of war that no longer existed. High-ranking British officers tended to look down upon subordinates who rose through the service's engineering branch, who were "not of the status of a gentleman;"<sup>34</sup> Admiral of the Fleet Sir George Cockburn complained that "since the introduction of steam vessel[s] I have never seen a clean deck, or a Captain who, when he calls upon me, did not look like a sweep."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Andrew Lambert, *Battleships in Transition: The Creation of the Steam Battlefleet, 1815-1860* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1984), 18-19; Greenhill & Giffard, *Steam, Politics, and Patronage*, 27-28.

<sup>33</sup> Richard Humble, *Before the Dreadnought: The Royal Navy from Nelson to Fisher* (London: MacDonald and Jane's, 1976), 30-31.

<sup>34</sup> Greenhill & Giffard, *Steam, Politics, and Patronage*, 87.

<sup>35</sup> Lewis, *The Navy in Transition*, 203.

Engineering officers were not even allowed into the wardroom until 1847, and when they arrived they were still forbidden to wear swords or live in their own cabins.<sup>36</sup>

So the Admiralty did not put much stock in technological advances or the innovations of junior officers. Instead, the brain trust of the Royal Navy put their faith in the spirit of Nelson while phasing out his methods. The Admiralty's revised fighting instructions, released only a year after the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1816, prescribed a return to the line-ahead battle tactics Nelson abhorred.<sup>37</sup> This tactical regression would theoretically be overcome by the energies of British sailors and captains steeped in the Nelson mythos. Indeed, by the 1830s any deficiencies in the Navy could be overlooked as proud remembrances of Nelson's day.

Some examples of this phenomenon can be found in the works of Frederick Chamier, a naval writer and memoirist in the 1820s and 1830s. In his 1832 autobiography *Life of a Sailor* Chamier detailed the daily routine of elderly low-level officers trapped in their positions by the Slump, writing of "how often have I seen a midshipman of forty-five years of age and a lieutenant of sixty" wiling away their time by "fight[ing] the battles of the Nile and Trafalgar on the oak table."<sup>38</sup> Chamier saw this surplus of aging midshipmen with no hope of promotion as preferable to any environment that could be created via the introduction of new, better-trained technical officers: "let them be educated, say some. I say no, you'll make them worse. Instead of

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 164-164.

<sup>37</sup> Geoffrey Bennett, *The Battle of Jutland* (Philadelphia: Dufour Editions, 1964), 170.

<sup>38</sup> Robinson, *The British Tar in Fact and Fiction*, 331-332. Robinson cites *Life of a Sailor* as being printed in 1832; the work was originally released in 1827 as a magazine serial and went through multiple printings through the 1870s.

talking of the good old times, spinning a yarn about the Nile, rubbing up one's memory about Nelson, and such like, they would all be squatting about the decks like a set of Turks."<sup>39</sup>

This tacit acceptance of the idea that training and innovation could only be negative developments also appeared in omnipresent naval biographies on Nelson. Southey's *Life* remained the principal sailors' account of Nelson, distributed aboard ship alongside bibles.<sup>40</sup> But there were always new works on Nelson for naval markets, even after the general public's appetite for Nelsonian products began to wane in the 1820s. A *Life of Nelson* published in 1836 under the pseudonym 'The Old Sailor' abandoned all pretense at a mass market, claiming to be oriented towards providing "a splendid example" for young officers, who would read of Nelson's deeds "unmatched in the history of any nation [which] have rendered him a model for his profession in all future ages."<sup>41</sup> A similar 1843 biography by a G. Thompson went one further. Nelson should still remain a model for all naval men, but to Thompson it was clear that "no one has equalled Nelson, and no one can ever go beyond him."<sup>42</sup> The shift of Nelson from an encouragement towards tactical innovation to a barrier to the same was in full swing by midcentury. In the 1850s a naval officer by the name of George Charles Smith wrote in *Soldiers' and Sailors' Magazine* how Nelson was received in the Royal Navy fifty years

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 332-333. This quotation is from Chamier's 1836 *Ben Brace*.

<sup>40</sup> Gerald Jordan, "Horatio Nelson: A Man to Be Loved," in Jack Sweetman, gen. ed., *The Great Admirals: Command at Sea, 1587-1945* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1997), 199, 213. Southey's *Life* and bibles were both distributed aboard ship by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

<sup>41</sup> Czisnik, *Admiral Nelson: Image and Icon*, 46.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 47.

after his great battles: “Nelson was considered our Saviour and our God.... We gloried... that we followed in the wake of Nelson, as the only Jesus Christ or Saviour we acknowledge in the fleet.”<sup>43</sup>

If the Royal Navy’s progress had continued unchecked, the 1850s would have been a decade of great uncertainty. The value of steam power had finally become indisputable with the development of screw propellers during the previous decade, as the greatest of line-of-battle ships now resembled larger versions of Nelson’s flagships and mounted dozens of guns as opposed to the precious few weapons of paddle frigates; the Admiralty built its last solely sail-powered warship in 1848.<sup>44</sup> Yet there was no corresponding increase in tactical thought. Admiral William Parker wrote in the 1830s that the inactivity of the main British fleet led only to “gallivanting and picnics, instead of sea-practice;” the next decade, the elderly admiral complained how many captains seemed to be “avoiding [...] things that will disturb *paintwork*, or dirty their white decks.”<sup>45</sup> The main units of the British fleet badly needed an opportunity to prove their worth. They would receive their long-awaited chance in 1853 with the outbreak of the Crimean War.

From a naval perspective, the war against Russia in the Crimea quickly became an opportunity to return to the glorious Nelsonian tradition. First Lord of the Admiralty James Graham believed the utilization of commanders who had served in the Napoleonic

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<sup>43</sup> Jordan, “Horatio Nelson: A Man to Be Loved,” 200, 213. These quotes are compiled from the December 1852 and April 1859 issues of *Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Magazine*.

<sup>44</sup> Lambert, *Steam, Steel & Shellfire*, 40.

<sup>45</sup> Andrew Lambert, *Admirals: The Naval Commanders who Made Britain Great* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), 234-235. Italics present in original.

Wars would be preparation enough against the Russian fleet. Accordingly, command of the two largest British fleets went to senior fleet commanders with decades of service to the crown – sixty-seven year old Admiral Charles Napier commanded the Baltic Fleet, while sixty-three year old Admiral Edmund Lyons commanded the Black Sea Fleet.<sup>46</sup>

Napier had an easy time crewing his fleet, as British sailors and the general public expected great battles from the Baltic Fleet.<sup>47</sup> And he took his duties to heart, encouraging his sailors to “sharpen your cutlasses, and the day is your own.”<sup>48</sup> First Lord Graham encouraged Napier in the press, offering the Russian fleet a grim warning: “I hope, even still, that the ‘Nelson Touch’, will not be necessary: but if unhappily it should be so, Charley Napier is the boy to administer it.”<sup>49</sup> The British press happily took up Napier’s cause. *The Times* ran a column detailing how British involvement in the Baltic was sure to turn out: “Sir C. Napier is sent out to do all the harm he can to the Russians, and a dozen or two ships of the line and a few fortresses battered to pieces, and several thousands killed or wounded will be the probable, and indeed the wished for result.”<sup>50</sup> Lyons found it more difficult to recruit sailors, as action in the Black Sea was presumed to be less intense and thus less suitable for Nelsonian glories. Nevertheless, Lyons also became popular with *The Times* and the British public, and consciously patterned himself after Nelson to the point of keeping a biography of Nelson with him at

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<sup>46</sup> Greenhill & Giffard, *Steam, Politics and Patronage*, 211.

<sup>47</sup> Robinson, *The British Tar in Fact and Fiction*, 355.

<sup>48</sup> Humble, *Before the Dreadnought*, 49.

<sup>49</sup> Andrew D. Lambert, *The Crimean War: British Grand Strategy, 1853-56* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), 35.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, *The Crimean War*, 76.

all times and believing that he personally resembled the bygone vice admiral; an impressed *Times* article called him “just another Nelson, full of energy and activity.”<sup>51</sup>

However, the public’s expectations for the Royal Navy – and the Navy’s expectations for itself – proved difficult to fulfill in the Crimean conflict. The Russian fleet chose not to fight a traditional fleet battle, and many of their largest vessels were sunk as breakwaters during the siege of Sevastopol. Realistically, this proved a British victory. Many of the British ships were old and underpowered, needing to be towed into place by vulnerable steam tugs, and in the Black Sea in particular there was also the difficulty of effective cooperation with the allied French fleet. Exactly how a second Trafalgar commanded by the dusty remains of Nelson’s midshipmen would have played out can only be left to speculation, but the results could not have been particularly admirable. Nevertheless public disappointment in the Navy began with the first campaign season of 1854, after which Napier was replaced by Richard Dundas, a veritable youth at fifty-two. Although First Naval Lord Maurice Berkeley had attempted to shield Napier from “a public who expect impossibilities [and] who would hang us if we fail in anything we undertake,”<sup>52</sup> Napier spent the last two years of the war in retirement. Lyons accomplished little of a glorious nature in the Black Sea, and the appointment of Dundas did not manufacture a great clash in the Baltic. The Crimean War ended in 1856 with a British victory, although not one that could easily be placed in

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<sup>51</sup> Andrew Lambert, “The Magic of Trafalgar: The Nineteenth-Century Legacy,” in David Cannadine, ed., *Trafalgar in History: A Battle and its Afterlife* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 164-165.

<sup>52</sup> Lambert, *The Crimean War*, 172. Maurice Berkeley served as First Naval Lord, the professional head of the Admiralty, concurrently with the previously mentioned James Graham’s term as the civilian head of the Admiralty, First Lord of the Admiralty.

the annals along Trafalgar and Waterloo. The land campaign was noteworthy more for the deficiencies it revealed in British war planning than for any great clashes. The naval campaign revealed almost nothing at all. The Crimea had briefly rekindled the general public's enthusiasm for the Navy, dormant since the early 1820s. But naval disappointment again drove the British populace away from anything more than a general appreciation of the Navy, a state that would continue for nearly three more decades. However, the Admiralty found itself rapidly involved in more pressing matters, for only two years after the Royal Navy returned home it found itself rendered nearly obsolete by a new warship from France.

The Crimean War had been a naval disappointment for the British; they had achieved their strategic objectives, but there had been no great decisive victory. But where Britain saw an unsettling new type of sea warfare that did not conform to any expectations, their allied French counterparts saw opportunity. Both the British and the French had utilized armor-plated floating batteries during the conflict. After the war the French, always on the lookout for a stolen march in their naval arms race with the British, transferred armor plate to a seaworthy battleship frame. *La Gloire*, laid down in 1858 and launched the following year, took a standard battleship hull and covered it with 4.7-inch iron plates. In one way *La Gloire* was a return to a problem inherent with paddle frigates – the ship mounted only 36 guns at a time when wooden screw battleships carried 120. Yet this was no weakly-armored steam prototype. With its armor, *La Gloire* was essentially invulnerable against any ship afloat. France followed

*La Gloire* with orders for six more armor-plated battleships, touching off renewed naval anxiety in Britain.<sup>53</sup>

New British naval developments soon quelled public anxiety. Where *La Gloire* had been evolutionary, a battleship with iron armor, Britain's response would be truly revolutionary. HMS *Warrior*, laid down in 1859 and launched in 1860, was constructed entirely of iron. The British answer to France's challenge was larger, faster and heavier than *La Gloire* – and while the French ironclad was intended to stand in the line of battle, *Warrior* had been designed as a large frigate with an eye towards independent operations.<sup>54</sup> Britain had responded admirably to the challenge of the French ironclad in the best Victorian tradition; the Crown struck second, but it struck a knockout blow.

However, the *Warrior* led to more uncomfortable realizations in the Admiralty offices at Whitehall. The Royal Navy may not have performed up to expectations in the Crimea, but the wave of naval volunteers and increased naval activity had at long last brought an end to the Slump; although eighty percent of flag officers were still unemployed ten years after the war – many of them quite elderly – lieutenant unemployment had dropped to eighteen percent.<sup>55</sup> Now the ironclad warship threatened to undermine everything Nelson's navy stood for. Common professional sentiment held that there could be no heroics in a war of iron; Charles Cooper Penrose Fitzgerald, who

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<sup>53</sup> Andrew Lambert, *HMS Warrior 1860: Victoria's Ironclad Deterrent* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2011; originally printed 1987), 14.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-27. Specifications for *La Gloire* were a length of 255 feet, a speed of 12.5 knots, and a displacement of approximately 5600 tons. *Warrior* was 420 feet long, could steam at 14 knots, and displaced approximately 9100 tons.

<sup>55</sup> Lewis, *The Navy in Transition*, 117, 120.



joined the Royal Navy in 1854 and eventually became a vice-admiral, recalled when his service began that “there was a very strong and universal feeling that it was unseamanlike to use steam, except perhaps in a flat calm, and that a Captain who could not take his ship in or out of harbour under sail with a commanding breeze was ‘no seaman’.”<sup>56</sup>

Fitzgerald’s view was no outlier. Lord Charles Beresford joined the Navy in 1859 and recalled his sailing youth in his memoirs: “the order to raise steam cast a gloom over the entire ship. The chief engineer laboured under considerable difficulties. He was constantly summoned on deck to be forcibly condemned for ‘making too much smoke.’”<sup>57</sup> Steam warships were seen as dirty and undisciplined, iron warships as ungainly and unattractive; the thought of a fleet of *Warriors* was too much to bear for some young sailors. An 1859 seamanship manual purposely excluded steam power, claiming it was not beneficial for a sailor’s education.<sup>58</sup> Charles Beresford was transferred from a screw line-of-battle ship to the *Defence*, a sister ship of the *Warrior*. He bemoaned in his memoirs that he had been “condemned to a slovenly, unhandy, tin kettle which could not sail without steam,” and “wrote to my father asking him to remove me from the Navy.”<sup>59</sup> In the early 1860s the Admiralty wrote of iron warships

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<sup>56</sup> Peter Padfield, *Rule Britannia: The Victorian and Edwardian Navy* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 134.

<sup>57</sup> Charles Beresford, universally known as “Charlie B,” will reappear in later chapters. The second son of Lord Waterford, Beresford became an extremely influential and popular admiral and Conservative Member of Parliament. Lord Charles Beresford, *The Memoirs of Admiral Lord Charles Beresford*, vol. I (Boston: Little, Brown, & Company, 1914), 120.

<sup>58</sup> Humble, *Before the Dreadnought*, 107-108.

<sup>59</sup> Beresford, *Memoirs* Vol. I, 41.

that “no prudent man would at present consider it safe to risk upon ships of this novel character the naval superiority of Great Britain.”<sup>60</sup>

Admiralty hand-wringing aside, the British fleet had been transformed a decade after the Crimean War. New British warships were universally steam-powered and constructed of iron, mounting broadside shell-firing guns for armament.<sup>61</sup> Britain had dealt with the French naval challenge in the best Victorian manner, rapidly developing and launching ships that outclassed the French threat. Now the Royal Navy faced a more insidious issue, one that would resonate through the next decades. Instead of a fleet of elderly ships crewed by elderly men, the ironclad navy was composed of new, untested ships commanded by the same aging flag officers. And to call the Navy’s guiding hands aging is perhaps too generous, as some were nearing decrepitude. British policy was still career advancement in a straight line once a certain rank had been reached. If an officer reached the rank of post-captain he would eventually, as those ahead of him retired or – more likely – passed away, reach the very top of the service. These were men who had survived the Slump, men who had survived most everything by the 1860s and 1870s. Edward Ratsey had become a frigate captain in 1806; despite holding no command after 1807, he rose by seniority to Admiral in the 1860s. Provo Wallis, promoted to commander in 1813, waited until 1877 to become Admiral of the Fleet, the most senior post in the navy.<sup>62</sup> These high officers who had served under

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<sup>60</sup> Padfield, *Rule Britannia*, 151.

<sup>61</sup> Lewis, *The Navy in Transition*, 14.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

Nelson and his contemporaries were asked to command a Royal Navy unlike anything Nelson could have dreamt of.

British ships were also undergoing a period of great uncertainty. The early steam-power debate of paddle frigates versus screw frigates had been rather easily solved in favor of screw frigates. In the 1860s and 1870s, however, every new technology had to be separately tested before use. Broadside battleships – similar to *Warrior* in construction – were pitted against the new technology of turret battleships, muzzle-loading guns against new breech-loading weapon technologies. Again the innate conservatism of the Admiralty, while understandable in a nation as dependent on sea power as Great Britain, often put British ships at a disadvantage; a training accident with breech-loading guns in the early 1860s convinced the Admiralty to stick with obsolete muzzle-loading guns for nearly two more decades, long after the French had upgraded to the new weapons.<sup>63</sup> The ship design controversy damaged more than reputations, as the poorly-designed early turret ship HMS *Captain* sank in 1870 with the loss of nearly 500 lives. Another issue the Admiralty struggled to grapple with was building time. Large ironclad battleships took an average of seven years to build, resulting in many ships being outclassed before their launch. Extended building times also spelled a temporary end to large classes of warships; early experimental ironclads were constructed in ones and twos as a hedge against becoming obsolete, destroying and possibility of a main fleet that could undertake successful combined operations.<sup>64</sup> One contemporary naval

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<sup>63</sup> Colin White, *Victoria's Navy: The Heyday of Steam* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1983), 14, 20, 22.

<sup>64</sup> Lambert, *Steam, Steel & Shellfire*, 95.

historian has called these tumultuous decades the result of “a state of anarchy in the ideas of naval architecture.”<sup>65</sup>

The confused state of naval construction throughout the mid-Victorian decades led to a backlash within naval circles. The professional journal *Naval and Military Gazette* was particularly hard on the Admiralty, dedicating most of February 1868 to criticisms of naval policy. The *Gazette* considered it “almost hopeless to expect that we shall ever be able to get our money’s worth out of the Admiralty,” and called for “an administrator at the Admiralty with strength of mind sufficient to kick this old humbugging spirit out of doors, and to install there in its place the fertile genius of the present day.” Until this ‘humbugging spirit’ was removed, the Admiralty could only be compared to “a benighted traveler wandering along ill-defined and intricate bye-paths [...] not knowing which would take him to his journey’s end.”<sup>66</sup> Even *The Times*, so supportive of the Navy during the Crimean conflict, was concerned that “we do not know what to build because we do not know how we shall fight our future naval battles.”<sup>67</sup>

The Admiralty was unprepared to deal with outside criticism and internal design questions at the same time, and many highly-placed naval officers responded by circling the wagons and placing the blame for confused shipbuilding choices on an insufficient

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<sup>65</sup> John Beeler, *Birth of the Battleship: British Capital Ship Design 1870-1881* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2001), 10.

<sup>66</sup> John F. Beeler, *British Naval Policy in the Gladstone-Disraeli Era, 1866-1880* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 45-46, 111. Quotes from the February 8, 29, and 22 issues of the *Naval and Military Gazette* respectively.

<sup>67</sup> Beeler, *Birth of the Battleship*, 87. The quote is from *The Times* of January 2, 1873.

appreciation of naval heritage. Reginald Bacon, who joined the Royal Navy in 1877, wrote in his memoirs that the “clinging to old ideas and doctrines” of top officers was not to be wondered at “considering that the senior officers, on whom rested the ordering and governing of the Navy, had from their earliest days been steeped in sailing-ship lore, and such lore in many cases constituted the bulk, if not the entirety, of their professional knowledge.”<sup>68</sup>

This pervasive nautical lore affected how the Admiralty responded to its critics. Admiral H.J. Rous blamed the previously-mentioned *Captain* disaster on steam power, writing how “the boiler has emasculated seamanship. No man can serve two masters; he will hold to the tea kettle and despise the canvas.”<sup>69</sup> At a major crossroads in naval design, the men responsible for the navy’s future believed “constant steaming and useless expenditure of coal produces ignorance in the rising young officers of all ranks,” that the removal of sails from future battleships would prove “fatal to our maritime greatness,” and that all future naval battles would be fought at close range like the great naval conflicts of the past.<sup>70</sup> The newest tactical conceptions of naval war were couched in the language of the past: Captain L.G. Heath wrote to the Admiralty’s Committee on Designs in 1871 that “Nelson’s maxim, slightly modified, should be instilled into the minds of all officers in command – ‘no captain can do very wrong who succeeds in

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<sup>68</sup> Admiral Sir Reginald Bacon, *A Naval Scrapbook: First Part, 1877-1900* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1925), 9.

<sup>69</sup> Humble, *Before the Dreadnought*, 117.

<sup>70</sup> Beeler, *Birth of the Battleship*, 47, 48, 163. The points on naval development are from Third Sea Lord Rear-Admiral Lord Gilford [mid-1870s], Controller of the Navy Robert Spencer Robinson [1871], and Second Naval Lord Arthur Hood [1879] respectively.

ramming an enemy's ship.”<sup>71</sup> The transition from appreciation to near-fanatical devotion extended to the lower decks as well – Charles Beresford recalled in his memoirs that after suggesting a change in his ship's rigging to improve efficiency he was soundly beaten by a ship's mate appalled at “this youngster laying down the law as if he knew better than Nelson!”<sup>72</sup> With Admiralty policymakers dragging their feet and wishing for a return to the ship of the line while presiding over a steadily-expanding fleet of one-off untested battleships, it comes as no surprise to find admirals concerned by the mid-1870s that any possible “outbreak of [war] will go far to ruin our naval reputation.”<sup>73</sup>

The 1870s and early 1880s were uninspiring years for the Royal Navy. Many later Edwardian naval figures who looked back at this period noted in retrospect the doldrums pervading the service. Lewis Bayly joined the navy in 1870 and rose to serve on one of the Admiralty's newest warships, 1882's *Colossus*. But innovation no longer equaled respect, and when Bayly visited the Mediterranean squadron in the 1880s he was “received coldly on arrival on the station; the older and senior officers had little use for a ship that had no yards or sails.”<sup>74</sup> Charles Beresford wrote in his memoirs that in the Royal Navy of the 1880s “organisation for war was taken for granted. We were

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 106. Ramming as a naval tactic was briefly fashionable after the successful use of ironclad rams in the 1866 Italian-Austrian Battle of Lissa.

<sup>72</sup> Beresford, *Memoirs* Vol. I, 32.

<sup>73</sup> Beeler, *British Naval Policy*, 173. Admiral Geoffrey Phipps Hornby to Sir Astley Cooper Key, 1876.

<sup>74</sup> Admiral Sir Lewis Bayly, “*Pull Together!*” *The Memoirs of Admiral Sir Lewis Bayly* (London: George C. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1939), 63.

living on the Nelson tradition.”<sup>75</sup> Tactical skill was no longer an asset; instead, ‘promotion by paint’ was rampant, with Beresford complaining that the most favored officers captained ships that resembled “a lady’s boudoir.”<sup>76</sup> C.C. Penrose Fitzgerald agreed, noting how “we were resting on our laurels, or rather on the laurels of our forefathers – a condition of affairs which is apt to make people sleepy and indifferent and over-confident.”<sup>77</sup>

However, the contemporaries of Beresford, Bayly and Fitzgerald were perfectly comfortable with the directions the Admiralty was taking. Naval thinkers were by now fully invested in the idea that the past could save the future; naval historian John Knox Laughton claimed in 1880 that which technology the British fleet chose was irrelevant: “in this very materialistic age we are too apt to overlook the force of sentiment and to measure the strength of a fleet by its iron or coal, or big guns. It was none of these that brought past honour to our flag, and for myself, I believe they will play but a secondary part in upholding it.”<sup>78</sup> Many naval men believed, as historian Richard Humble has written, that “once they built men of iron and ships of wood. Now they build ships of iron and men of wood.”<sup>79</sup> As long as Admiralty policy remained a strictly Admiralty

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<sup>75</sup> Lord Charles Beresford, *The Memoirs of Admiral Lord Charles Beresford*, vol. II (Boston: Little, Brown, & Company, 1914), 344.

<sup>76</sup> Beresford, *Memoirs* Vol. I, 120-121.

<sup>77</sup> Admiral C.C. Penrose Fitzgerald, *From Sail to Steam: Naval Recollections 1878-1905* (London: Edward Arnold, 1916), 2.

<sup>78</sup> Andrew Lambert, *The Foundations of Naval History: Sir John Laughton, The Royal Navy and the Historical Profession* (London: Chatham Publishing, 1998), 72.

<sup>79</sup> Humble, *Before the Dreadnought*, introduction.

issue, innovation would be in short supply. And here again it would be public and political intervention that would finally galvanize the navy into more directed action.

Again it was the French, or rather fear of the French, that spurred Britain into action. Renewed French ship-building initiatives in the early 1880s had begun to concern the establishment; the budding politician Hugh Oakley Arnold-Forster wrote in 1883 that “the country was in danger of losing ‘not prestige merely’, but the very life-blood of its national existence.”<sup>80</sup> The issue burst into public focus on September 15, 1884 with the appearance of an article in the *Pall Mall Gazette* entitled ‘The Truth about the Navy.’ The first in a series written by ‘One Who Knows the Facts’ under the direction of the *Gazette*’s editor, W.T. Stead, the article and its follow-ups alleged that Britain was spending less on her Navy than in the 1860s, that her docks and harbors were poorly defended, and that she was being rapidly outbuilt by the French.<sup>81</sup> There was suddenly great public pressure for the Royal Navy to create a homogenous battle fleet, one that would be able to deal with any future continental aggressors.

Luckily for naval public relations the Admiralty had in fact already started moving towards another new generation of warships, which the increased funds poured into construction budgets by an anxious government did nothing to hurt. Fully-rigged warships had been done away with in 1881, and 1882’s *Colossus*-class ships were the first built entirely of steel and lit with electric power. The Royal Navy could also point

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<sup>80</sup> W. Mark Hamilton, *The Nation and the Navy: Methods and Organization of British Navalist Propaganda, 1889-1914*; Outstanding Theses from the London School of Economics and Political Science (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1986), 46.

<sup>81</sup> Richard Hough, *Admiral of the Fleet: The Life of John Fisher* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1970; originally published 1969), 81.



proudly to the new *Admiral*-class battleships, with their steel construction, advanced armor, and breech-loading guns; the first of the class, HMS *Collingwood*, was laid down in 1880 and completed in 1887 at an excellent time to take advantage of pro-naval public sentiment.<sup>82</sup> For the first time, front-line warships were listed in the Navy Lists as ‘battleships;’<sup>83</sup> the age of the ship of the line had irrevocably passed.

Yet the same issue faced by the Admiralty since the rise of steam power, the conflict of new designs and old tactical ideas, soon arose again. Modern battleships could shoot further and steam faster than men of Nelson’s day could have imagined, but those in charge of British tactics often chose to disregard these facts. For the Victorian Admiralty, the next great sea battle would always be another Trafalgar. Admiral Geoffrey Phipps Hornby offered his thoughts on British tactics in 1885: “None has been prescribed: it is to be hoped that none will be prescribed. To prescribe any would be exceedingly foolish and in a high degree presumptuous. Foolish; for all our past history shows us the evil of having a prescribed formation for fighting in; it needed the genius of Nelson to disentangle us from the mess.”<sup>84</sup> The only certainly was that a naval engagement would be a full-out offensive struggle; according to Captain William Henry

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<sup>82</sup> Lambert, *Steam, Steel & Shellfire*, 101-103; Robert K. Massie, *Dreadnought: Britain, Germany, and the Coming of the Great War*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), 390-391. All of the *Admiral*-class battleships were named after British naval leaders – Collingwood being named after Nelson’s second in command – but for once there was no Nelson present, as the armored cruiser HMS *Nelson* had just been launched in 1876.

<sup>83</sup> Eric Grove, *The Royal Navy Since 1815: A New Short History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 73. This change occurred in October 1877.

<sup>84</sup> Lambert, *Admirals*, 279.

Hall in 1884, a defensive posture was “utterly at variance with the traditions of the British Navy, whose role has always been that of attack.”<sup>85</sup>

To this end, the Royal Navy of the 1880s and 1890s devoted much of its time to preparing, not for the last war, but for the wars of a century prior; copies of Nelson’s Trafalgar Memorandum were distributed to British warships in the 1890s to encourage officers to prepare for the next war.<sup>86</sup> These were the ‘spit and polish’ years of the Navy, where a gleaming ship counted for more than the efficiency of its crew. New breech-loading guns were mounted in ships, but crews were not drilled in their use; Percy Scott, who entered the Navy in 1866, wrote that the guns were not even fired except for required practices, as the blast damaged the ship’s paintwork.<sup>87</sup> As soon as a new ship was launched, its crew often removed the watertight doors and polished them to such a sheen that they were useless for their intended purpose.<sup>88</sup> British ships had always re-used names, but now the quarterdecks of modern ships were decorated with the names of battles in which their forebears had participated.<sup>89</sup>

This attitude towards display over substance proved popular among the naval-supporting British public. In 1893 the *St. James’s Gazette* praised the Royal Navy for its

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<sup>85</sup> Roger Parkinson, *The Late Victorian Navy: The Pre-Dreadnought Era and the Origins of the First World War* (Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, 2008), 85.

<sup>86</sup> Andrew Lambert, “Nelson and Trafalgar: The Legacy,” in Alexander Stilwell, ed., *The Trafalgar Companion* (New York: Osprey Publishing, 2005), 201.

<sup>87</sup> Peter Kemp, “From Tryon to Fisher: The Regeneration of a Navy,” in Gerald Jordan, ed., *Naval Warfare in the Twentieth Century, 1900-1945: Essays in Honour of Arthur Marder* (London: Croom Helm, 1977), 17; William Jameson, *The Fleet that Jack Built: Nine Men who Made a Modern Navy* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1962), 149.

<sup>88</sup> Kemp, “From Tryon to Fisher,” 19.

<sup>89</sup> Lambert, *The Foundations of Naval History*, 73.

“spirit of swagger; and its signs are a love of ostentation and of theatrical showing off, a mania for doing everything at a great pace in order to break the record and get one’s name mentioned as a smart officer, a passion for doing all work with a margin for safety cut to the quick.”<sup>90</sup> Young officers and cadets who actually bore the brunt of these policies often thought differently. K.G.B. Dewar joined the navy in 1893, and recalled that even at this late date cadets were often beaten to “suppress independence and initiative in our future naval officers.”<sup>91</sup>

Early-career officers also expressed frustration with their superiors’ antiquated attitudes. Sydney Fremantle, who joined the navy in 1881, sympathetically wrote as a junior lieutenant in 1888 that “it was difficult to please the Commodore, who was probably very weary of the effort to make a continuous succession of young officers and men, most of whose service had been in modern ships, into sailors of the old type.”<sup>92</sup> Others were less accepting of naval ossification. Reginald Bacon remembered years later: “I always look on the year 1889 as marking the lowest level of efficiency of material that the British Navy had known since the middle of the eighteenth century. The officers and men were just as zealous, their love of the profession was just as great as it ever had been, or is now, but they were imbued with ideas that had not altered with

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<sup>90</sup> Andrew Gordon, *The Rules of the Game: Jutland and British Naval Command* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1996), 174.

<sup>91</sup> Massie, *Dreadnought*, 383-384.

<sup>92</sup> Admiral Sir Sydney Robert Fremantle, *My Naval Career, 1880-1928* (Hutchinson & Co. (Publishers) Ltd, 1949), 42.

the times.”<sup>93</sup> Ernle Chatfield became a cadet in 1886 and felt much the same, writing that “the ‘80s and early ‘90s were years in which the older officers were still embedded in sails and all the thought that pertained to them. They hated engines and modern guns.”<sup>94</sup> Reginald Tyrwhitt, naval cadet since 1885, quickly realized that “polo and pony racing were much more important than gun drill.”<sup>95</sup>

A handful of forward-thinking officers did attempt to keep abreast of tactical developments. Percy Scott had risen to second-in-command of the HMS *Duke of Edinburgh* by the mid-1880s, and chose to focus specifically on gunnery training. The ship’s crew soon demonstrated exceptional gunnery skills, but for Scott it came at a price:

The innovation was not liked – we were twenty years ahead of the times, and in the end we had to do as others were doing. So we gave up instruction in gunnery, spent money on enamel paint, burnished up every bit of steel on board, and soon got the reputation of being a very smart ship. She was certainly very nice in appearance. The nuts of all the bolts on the aft deck were gilded, the magazine keys were electroplated, and statues of Mercury surmounted the revolver racks.<sup>96</sup>

Another even more senior figure with the willingness to go against tradition was Vice Admiral George Tryon. Despite his tactical heresies – he had declared in the 1880s that “an Admiral must make his general plans clear to all his Captains and must trust

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<sup>93</sup> Bacon, *A Naval Scrapbook*, 155.

<sup>94</sup> Padfield, *Rule Britannia*, 176.

<sup>95</sup> Massie, *Dreadnought*, 397.

<sup>96</sup> Admiral Sir Percy Scott, *Fifty Years in the Royal Navy* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1919), 72-73. Scott includes a picture of the *Duke of Edinburgh* in his memoirs – there were indeed statues of Mercury aboard.

chiefly to their loyalty and initiative”<sup>97</sup> – Tryon had become commander of the navy’s Mediterranean Fleet, traditionally an extremely prestigious appointment, by 1891. He devoted much of his energies to creating a new simplified version of the Admiralty signal book which would enable quicker command decisions. Unfortunately, Tryon’s own command decisions led to his untimely death. In June 1893, while on maneuvers in the Mediterranean, Tryon called for a turn that would put his flagship HMS *Victoria* on a collision course with another British battleship. His calculations were obviously in error, but none of his subordinates were willing to question their admiral. The two ships collided; *Victoria* quickly sank, taking with her over 350 people including Tryon.<sup>98</sup>

Public outcry over the *Victoria* disaster led to an official Admiralty inquiry into the sinking. Tryon had obviously erred, although the committee was loath to lay official culpability on an officer who had perished in the line of duty. The Admiralty instead took the opportunity to clamp down on any further Tryon-esque innovations, essentially ruling the incident merely a blameless demonstration of the importance to be found in following orders; privately, many officers must have breathed a sigh of relief that Tryon’s uncomfortable meddling into the Senior Service’s traditions had come to an end.<sup>99</sup> Tryon’s replacement, Admiral Sir Michael Culme-Seymour, recorded his thoughts on the sinking and its lessons: “If the doctrine that officers were supposed to think for themselves when a manoeuvre was ordered to be performed, instead of obeying it, were once laid down, it would strike a terrible blow at the efficiency of the

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<sup>97</sup> Gordon, *The Rules of the Game*, 195.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>99</sup> Kemp, “From Tryon to Fisher,” 22.

Service.”<sup>100</sup> Admiral Geoffrey Phipps Hornby and now-Captain Charles Beresford released a statement that summed up the official verdict on the collision: “unconditional obedience, no matter at what cost, is, in brief, the only principle on which those in the Service must act.”<sup>101</sup>

The Tryon inquiry marked yet another victory for the principles which had come to dominate the Royal Navy, obedience to the past and to one’s superiors. Some press objections were raised; *The New Review* wrote that the contemporary naval officer “almost fails to realize, save in a dull and general way, that some day the storm of battle will again rage around him, and that he will be expected, by an unreasonable country, to repeat the triumphs of his ancestors.”<sup>102</sup> But for the navy as a whole the entire dismal cycle was again repeated. Innovation had been quashed. There were more British battleships in 1900 than there had been two decades earlier, but they were still being designed on reactionary principles; not only France but the United States, Germany, Russia, Austria-Hungary and Italy had all introduced new shipbuilding improvements during the previous decade.<sup>103</sup> Britain meanwhile was pursuing a quantitative strategy, launching forty-eight capital ships between 1891 and 1905.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Gordon, *The Rules of the Game*, 276.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 180-181. Geoffrey Phipps Hornby would later revealingly tell Alfred Thayer Mahan that he found Nelson too erratic. Andrew D. Lambert, ed., *Letters and Papers of Professor Sir John Knox Laughton, 1830-1915* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002), 112.

<sup>102</sup> Nauticus, “The Children of Nelson,” *The New Review* 57 (February 1894): 129-149, 143.

<sup>103</sup> Charles H. Fairbanks, “The Origins of the Dreadnought Revolution: A Historiographical Essay,” *The International History Review* 13:2 (May 1991): 246-272, 268-269. France had developed water-tube boilers, steel armor, nickel-steel armor, smokeless powder, long guns, chromium-steel projectiles, high explosive shells, triple screws, high-freeboard battleships, and a practicable submarine. Germany had

Britain's tactical ideas at the turn of the century were also still steeped in Nelsonian ideals, and any change was heavily frowned upon. Percy Scott had already learned that it was unwise to try and improve naval gunnery; when Arthur Hungerford Pollen, a civilian inventor, submitted a proposal for an improved fire control system to the Admiralty in 1900 he was politely informed that the Royal Navy did not consider it possible to fire at ranges greater than 1500 yards.<sup>105</sup> Reginald Bacon recorded the Admiralty's thoughts on the range matter: "The case-hardened older generations immediately asked: 'Why should ranges be increased? We can hammer at the enemy at short range much the same as Nelson did, why not continue to do so?'"<sup>106</sup> Cecil Usborne, later to become a vice admiral, took the same dim view of the Admiralty. "The tactics of 1900, in so far as they existed, were Nelsonian. The majority of our admirals intended to lay their ships within a mile of the enemy, and smother him with superior fire."<sup>107</sup>

The Admiralty did little to hide the fact that it was operating within a tactical framework very much out of date. Any naval engagement would be fought with the direct aim of bringing about a direct, close-range battle of annihilation. At the 1902 Colonial Conference, the Admiralty let it be known that "the primary object of the

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slow-burning powder and marine diesels, the U.S. Harvey armor, Austria-Hungary torpedo gyros, and Russia and Italy were experimenting with oil-burning warships.

<sup>104</sup> White, *Heyday of Steam*, 33, 36.

<sup>105</sup> Jon Tetsuro Sumida, "British Capital Ship Design and Fire Control in the Dreadnought Era: Sir John Fisher, Arthur Hungerford Pollen, and the Battle Cruiser," *The Journal of Modern History* 51, no. 2 (June 1979): 206-230, 212.

<sup>106</sup> Bacon, *A Naval Scrapbook*, 262-263.

<sup>107</sup> Arthur J. Marder, *The Anatomy of British Sea Power: A History of British Naval Policy in the Pre-Dreadnought Era, 1880-1905* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1940), 519.

British Navy is not to defend anything, but to attack the fleets of the enemy.”<sup>108</sup> That same year, an official ‘Memorandum on Sea-Power and the Principles Involved’ utilized the same phrasing before concluding with: “In the foregoing remarks the word defence does not appear. It is omitted advisedly.”<sup>109</sup>

And there were other naval policies more visibly obsolete than these. Percy Scott returned from a six-year absence to the Mediterranean Fleet in 1896 only to discover to his dismay that “everything was just as it had been; no advance had been made in any way, except the housemaiding of the ships. The state of the paintwork was the one and only idea. To be the cleanest ship in the fleet was still the objective for every one; nothing else mattered.”<sup>110</sup> Frederick Richards, First Naval Lord from 1893 to 1899, objected to the discontinuation of cadets training on rigged warships, complaining that “you have got an established system and a time-honoured one, so why alter it?”<sup>111</sup> Sydney Fremantle’s ship was examined by Admiral Arthur Wilson in 1902; Wilson’s report of his tour concluded that “the ship takes first place in General Exercises oftener

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<sup>108</sup> Paul M. Kennedy, “The Relevance of the Pre-war British and American Maritime Strategies to the First World War and its Aftermath, 1898-1920,” in John B. Hattendorf and Robert S. Jordan, eds., *Maritime Strategy and the Balance of Power: Britain and America in the Twentieth Century* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989), 168.

<sup>109</sup> Nicholas Tracy, *Nelson’s Battles: The Triumph of British Seapower* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2008; originally published 1996), 31.

<sup>110</sup> John Winton, *Jellicoe* (London: Michael Joseph, 1981), 55.

<sup>111</sup> Arthur Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow: The Royal Navy in the Fisher Era, 1904-1919*, vol. I, *The Road to War, 1904-14* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 11.



than any other ship in the Squadron [but] [m]ore time should be devoted to the instruction of midshipmen in rifle and cutlass.”<sup>112</sup>

Obviously the power players in the naval hierarchy were content with this state of affairs. But as the twentieth century began, there was growing unsettlement among lower-ranking officers and, importantly for public pressure, naval journalists. The Earl of Carnarvon spoke to the Committee for Imperial Defence early in the century: “We lavish on what is obsolete, save on what is essential, and always think our past good luck is a guarantee of future success.”<sup>113</sup> The naval journalist Arnold White blasted Admiralty policies in his 1901 book *Efficiency and Empire*, writing that “Parsimony in coal and extravagance in gold-leaf, insufficient sea training of officers, [...] the retention of muzzle-loading guns, neglected gunnery, and failure to attract the highest engineering skill at the Admiralty, are all counts in the indictment against our rulers. If drift is their maritime policy, wreck is our inevitable fate.” White accused the Admiralty of spending more time dictating how officers were to wear their socks than focusing on the issues essential to the Royal Navy’s future.<sup>114</sup> Admiral Cyprian Bridge, a first-hand witness to the navy’s resistance to change, waxed poetic on the Admiralty in a later reminiscence: “as the formalism becomes more pronounced, so the unreality increases.”<sup>115</sup> Earl

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<sup>112</sup> Fremantle, *My Naval Career*, 97.

<sup>113</sup> Hamilton, *The Nation and the Navy*, 42. There is a discrepancy in the source here: Hamilton attributes the quote to the fourth Earl Carnarvon, but Henry Herbert died in 1890; the Committee for Imperial Defence was set up by Arthur Balfour in 1902. The source could be George Herbert, the fifth Earl Carnarvon, but unlike his father he never held any official governmental post.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 201, 204.

<sup>115</sup> Admiral Sir Cyprian Bridge, *Sea-Power and Other Studies* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1910), 102.

Rosebery, the former Liberal prime minister, was blunter in 1900: “unhappy is the nation that relies for its security on its past history.”<sup>116</sup>

The Royal Navy in the first years of the twentieth century was again at a crossroads, as it had been for much of the previous century. Technology had proceeded ever onward, from the *Victory* through monstrous 120-gun wooden battleships, paddle frigates, screw line-of-battle ships, ironclads, the unfortunate misshapen experiments of the 1860s and 1870s, ever-larger and more numerous battleships after the resurgence of popular interest in the Navy from the 1880s on, all the way to the contemporary *Royal Sovereign* class: 380 feet long, over 14,000 tons, and capable of steaming at 17 knots.<sup>117</sup> The Admiralty as an institution had persevered as well, having weathered all the storms of midcentury. Some had been genuine crises, or had seemed like ones at the time – the Slump endured, the Crimean War won, *La Gloire* outclassed.

But many of the Admiralty’s storms were self-inflicted. The uppermost admirals and administrators always seemed behind the times, always looking to return to the days when wooden battleships offered a safe future. The Admiralty would have gladly taken a dozen Trafalgars over another Sevastopol; a battle of annihilation could bring death or glory, while a siege or blockade could bring neither. Mentally this was understandable in the 1830s and 1840s, when Nelson’s companions still commanded British fleets across the globe. Technologically, it was understandable during the 1860s and 1870s, when there was no clear consensus on what the future of naval warfare would even be.

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<sup>116</sup> Marder, *Anatomy of British Sea Power*, 378.

<sup>117</sup> Charles Rathbone Low, *Her Majesty’s Navy, Including its Deeds and Battles*, vol. III (London: J.S. Virtue & Co., 1892), 333.

Yet the Admiralty never evolved. Nelson's commanders grew old and passed away, and their successors became even more entrenched in the mythos of the line of battle. Men who joined the service in the 1850s and found themselves disgusted by the lack of innovation rose to become those who scoffed at gunnery reforms in the 1890s.

Historians have devoted many a turn of phrase to the state of the late-Victorian navy. Richard Humble penned one of the best: "The glorious traditions begun in the days of the old sail Navy did not act as an encouragement to better things; rather, they came to have an inhibiting, numbing effect. The golden calf of 'The System' was raised on dusty altars."<sup>118</sup> But the Senior Service was never decrepit through and through, as is often assumed. Throughout the nineteenth century frigates, sloops and later gunboats put the world under the white ensign under the command of thousands of eager young commanders and midshipmen. It was the topmost ranks that became clogged with a steady procession of elderly admirals, each apparently living further in the past than the one before. Precocious gunboat commanders would eventually make their way up the chain of command and realize once they arrived at the pinnacle that they had been taught nothing. As Donald MacIntyre has written, "an officer up to Captain's rank was not expected to meddle with tactics. On reaching the Flag List, the spirit of Nelson mysteriously descended upon him and he at once became an expert."<sup>119</sup>

The Royal Navy of 1805 idolized Nelson; so did the Royal Navy of 1905, but time and apathy had condensed Nelson's tactical ideas into a series of maxims of

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<sup>118</sup> Humble, *Before the Dreadnought*, 189.

<sup>119</sup> Donald G.F.W. MacIntyre, *Jutland* (Norwalk, CT: The Easton Press, 1990), 257-258.

questionable utility. Nelson's famous dictum, that all in war was chance, had been replaced with the supposed unerring exactitude of modern technological warfare. His principle that delegation must be on as wide a scale as possible and orders should be interpreted as broadly as possible to ensure a successful engagement sank in the Mediterranean with George Tryon. What remained from Trafalgar morning was an almost fanatical devotion to order and the offensive battle of annihilation. This concept had not been tested for over a century; if it had been called upon in the 1860s or 1870s the result would have been almost certain disaster. The Royal Navy from the youngest cadet to the most veteran admiral still considered Nelson 'our Saviour and our God,' but Nelson was now a mere talisman rather than an exemplar to be followed, rendered impotent by his very ubiquity; "tradition is a fine servant, but a poor master."<sup>120</sup>

The Admiralty had also experienced a tumultuous century when it came to public opinion. The general British populace had supported the navy with open arms throughout the Napoleonic Wars and then fallen away in the decades of peace that followed. The Crimean War brought the Royal Navy back into the public spotlight and just as rapidly out of it as the hoped-for devastating British naval victories failed to materialize. The British public was spared the most excessive naval hand-wringing during the 1860s and 1870s, only to be thrust back into the Admiralty's field of view with the naval scares of the 1880s.

This was how the Admiralty had arrived at 1905. Renewed public and governmental interest had increased naval coffers and led to dozens of new battleships,

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<sup>120</sup> Jameson, *The Fleet that Jack Built*, 51.

but the apparent continued lack of progress within Whitehall itself was leading to ever more unpleasant questions. Britain was in danger of losing faith in its navy, which seemed to sink deeper into the past with every passing generation. The Royal Navy needed a revolutionary, one who could reform the *service* to the same degree as the ships. It found one in the person of John Arbuthnot Fisher. A paradoxical soul if ever one existed, Fisher took the love of the navy's past – and Nelson in particular – to a degree never seen before. Yet he was committed to reform, first to bringing Admiralty bureaucracy to the same level of modernization as its technology and then with a second effort putting British warship design again at the forefront of the world. Fisher also tied the popular press irrevocably to naval policy. For good or ill there would be no more discussions on the future of naval warfare held in darkened rooms; minutes were leaked, proclamations were made, and the Senior Service was paraded around London on sandwich boards. The Royal Navy of 1905 had been back in the public eye for twenty years; with Sir John Fisher at its helm, it would begin to feel the full weight of an anxious nation's fears of war.

## CHAPTER IV

### **“A GREAT ERA CONCRETE IN A SINGLE MAN” – THE POPULAR NELSON AND THE NAVALIST ERA, 1880-1906**

The naval disappointments of the Crimean War faded into the past throughout the 1860s and 1870s. For most of Britain, they took any first-hand conception of Nelson and British naval history with them. There had been no great Trafalgar below the walls of Sevastopol. Worse yet for the Royal Navy's public image, it soon became apparent that the Crimea had marked the end of the famous 'wooden walls' which dominated popular imagination. A decade after the conflict, the great timber steamers and ships of the line were being steadily replaced by iron behemoths that bore little relation to the fleet that had made Great Britain a force at sea.

As these ships disappeared, their famous captains also began to disappear from the public eye; it seemed that Drake and St. Vincent and Collingwood and their heroic brethren could be of no further use except as examples of past glories, Caesars of the sea who should be emulated in word but not deed. The historian J. C. Wylie wrote that “during the century of peace of the Pax Britannica [...] their memories were bright and the pub signs were beyond counting, but their lore had been lost.”<sup>1</sup> Nelson himself remained popular, but the general public view of him slowly began to blur around the edges into an ideal rather than an individual. While the Royal Navy bombarded

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<sup>1</sup> J.C. Wylie, “Mahan: Then and Now,” in John B. Hattendorf, ed., *The Influence of History on Mahan: The Proceedings of a Conference Marking the Centenary of Alfred Thayer Mahan's The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1883* (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 1991), 40.

Alexandria in 1882, the members of the British public who idly thumbed past news of the latest colonial dust-up in the local press had no idea of the force with which Nelson and *his* Navy would return to the popular consciousness – in everything from novels to mass advertisements - over the next quarter century.

The major scholarly naval history resource of the post-Crimea decades was still Sir Nicholas Harris Nicolas's *The Dispatches and Letters of Lord Nelson*, published in the 1840s. Nicolas aimed to ensure that Nelson's fame would endure, writing that Britain owed to the great admiral "a Name synonymous with Victory, which, with almost talismanic power inspires her Sons in the day of battle with a confidence that ensures success; and She is indebted to him for an Example to ages yet unborn, of the most ardent loyalty, the most genuine patriotism, the most conscientious sense of duty to his Sovereign and his Country."<sup>2</sup> However, his letters also made indisputably public Nelson's illegitimate child and adulterous relationship with Emma, Lady Hamilton. This was an unpardonable sin to the Victorian social mores of Nicolas' readers, and commentators explained away Nelson's 'shameful' private life by claiming that he had sought death at Trafalgar to expunge his sins;<sup>3</sup> even so, Nelson's public reputation was badly shaken and his value as an ethical example called into question. A nephew of Nelson wrote to *The Times* in 1861 calling for a new conception of the Admiral's life that would focus merely on his deeds at sea: "The glory of Great Britain depends as much on the heroes she has produced, as on her wealth, her influence, and her

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew Lambert, *Nelson: Britannia's God of War* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2004), 331. Nicolas was an antiquarian who had served in the Royal Navy during the closing years of the Napoleonic Wars.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.

possessions; and the true patriot and honourable man, if he cannot add to their lustre, will at least refrain from any premeditated act which may dim their fame.”<sup>4</sup> Nelson could best serve his country by being remembered as a symbol, not as an individual – his affair and illegitimate child proved all too human for his dutifully moral admirers.

During these dim naval days of the 1860s and 1870s, the British view of Nelson took on a new character. He had remained a ‘living’ legend while those who served under and with him were still on active duty admirals, fleet commanders, and the public’s link to the Admiralty. As the elderly naval leaders of the 1850s retired, even their inconsistently applied Nelsonian tactical and strategic ideas faded away. They were replaced in the public eye with what the naval historian Andrew Lambert has called the ‘Mythic Trafalgar:’ “Trafalgar was not a fit subject for careful investigation – it was best left as the sublime example of naval power.”<sup>5</sup> Nelson slowly became an exemplar rather than a historical individual, and in his new much broader guise could be useful both to the Royal Navy in his original role as professional model and to the general British public as a heroic exemplar of duty and patriotism.<sup>6</sup> With the underlying strategic conception of Nelson’s victories stripped away in all but the most technical of publications, Trafalgar in particular became both more and less relevant. When mid-Victorian writers spoke of Trafalgar the battle appeared as a parody of itself -- all fire

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<sup>4</sup> A.T. Mahan, *The Life of Nelson: The Embodiment of the Sea Power of Great Britain*, vol. II (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1907; originally published in 1897), 154, 157.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Lambert, “The Magic of Trafalgar: The Nineteenth-Century Legacy,” in David Cannadine, ed., *Trafalgar in History: A Battle and its Afterlife* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 158-159.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Lambert, “Nelson and Trafalgar: The Legacy,” in Alexander Stilwell, ed., *The Trafalgar Companion*, (New York: Osprey Publishing, 2005), 194-195, 198.



and heroics without any broader look at the underlying strategic or tactical concerns, viewed as one of the most significant events in English history without any further detail necessary.<sup>7</sup> Yet Nelson's memory as an example of past and present glories was alive and well among Britain's youth. Winston Churchill wrote of the high Victorian era: "Children were taught of the Great War against Napoleon as the culminating effort in the history of the British peoples, and they looked on Waterloo and Trafalgar as the supreme achievements of British arms by land and sea. These prodigious victories, eclipsing all that had gone before, seemed the fit and predestined ending to the long drama of our island race."<sup>8</sup>

This mid-Victorian recasting of Trafalgar as a semi-mystical exemplar of British naval superiority was connected with and partially subsumed under the broader and older concept of Britain's special relationship with the sea, an idea stretching back to the Tudor period. In 1878, Robert Louis Stevenson pushed for the sea as Great Britain's national symbol, as opposed to the lion: "The sea is our approach and bulwark; it has been the scene of our greatest triumphs and dangers, and we are accustomed in lyrical strains to claim it as our own."<sup>9</sup> The general public accepted this view; for example, a Victorian children's history claimed that "the love of the restless ocean implanted in the hearts of our fierce piratical ancestors has never quite left the British boy."<sup>10</sup> And there

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<sup>7</sup> Cynthia Fansler Behrman, *Victorian Myths of the Sea* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1977), 104.

<sup>8</sup> Winston S. Churchill, *The World Crisis*, vol. I (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951; originally published 1923), 11.

<sup>9</sup> Behrman, *Victorian Myths*, 25-26.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

could be no doubt as to the Navy's patron saint, who rose atop the ancient seafaring tradition to become the symbol of Britain's wooden walls: as historian W. Mark Hamilton has stated, "the triumph of Admiral Lord Nelson at the Battle of Trafalgar sustained Great Britain's naval pride for a century as her naval tradition, smartness, and 'Spirit of Nelson' struck fear into the hearts of her potential enemies."<sup>11</sup>

So Nelson's popularity remained, and although it waned from time to time, it was never in danger of being extinguished. His example was particularly used to encourage future generations; the author Esther Meynell recalled how she first became interested in the topic of naval history while growing up with a portrait of Nelson on her nursery wall.<sup>12</sup> However, the average adult's conception of the Admiralty beyond famous names and battles was weaker. For many, the fact that Britain's navy remained paramount went without saying – it was merely assumed that the Royal Navy was an ever-dominant service.<sup>13</sup> Naval historian Arthur Marder penned an in-depth explanation for this state of affairs during these peaceful decades: "Everything in regard to the navy was regarded as recondite, uninteresting, and a matter for experts. The silence of the press reflected the apathy of the man in the street." Yet apathy did not imply any belief that the Royal Navy was useless - rather "the command of the sea, so far as this concept was understood, was regarded by Englishmen as their birthright and something which it was

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<sup>11</sup> W. Mark Hamilton, *The Nation and the Navy: Methods and Organization of British Navalist Propaganda, 1889-1914* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1986; Outstanding Theses from the London School of Economics and Political Science), 10.

<sup>12</sup> Esther Meynell, *A Woman Talking* (London: Chapman & Hall Ltd., 1940), 57-58. Around the turn of the twentieth century, Esther Meynell became one of the first female journalists to focus on naval issues.

<sup>13</sup> John Winton, *Jellicoe* (London: Michael Joseph, 1981), 13.

impossible to lose.”<sup>14</sup> For contemporary writers in the 1870s and 1880s, the reasoning was simpler. Robert Louis Stevenson wrote in 1878 that “to suppose yourself endowed with natural parts for the sea because you are the countryman of Blake and mighty Nelson, is perhaps just as unwarrantable as to imagine Scotch extraction a sufficient guarantee that you will look well in a kilt. But the feeling is there, and seated beyond the reach of argument.”<sup>15</sup> This feeling of naval superiority had always existed below the surface among Britons, especially those of the middle and upper classes. But an explosive series of popular journal articles would soon thrust the Admiralty out of its doldrums back into the public eye and spread a fascination with naval development and a fear of naval usurpation throughout the nation as a whole.

On September 15, 1884, an article appeared in the *Pall Mall Gazette* entitled ‘The Truth about the Navy.’<sup>16</sup> As previously discussed in the third chapter, this article and those that followed provided an impetus for the Royal Navy to devote more funds to modern warships. However, the series of fearmongering articles also triggered a naval panic among the general populace. Newspapers and magazines from *The Times* downward debated the effectiveness of the Royal Navy; in addition to regaining the lead over France, it soon became accepted wisdom that the Royal Navy must also establish naval supremacy over Russia – currently the world’s third-largest navy – or any other

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<sup>14</sup> Arthur J. Marder, *The Anatomy of British Sea Power: A History of British Naval Policy in the Pre-Dreadnought Era, 1880-1905* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1940), 44-45.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, “The English Admirals,” In Charles Curtis Bigelow and Temple Scott, eds., *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson, Volume VI* (New York: The Davos Press, 1906), 238.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Hough, *Admiral of the Fleet: The Life of John Fisher* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1970; originally published 1969), 81.

nation that would take the Tsar's place.<sup>17</sup> Naval issues rapidly became so relevant to the British public that even Lord Tennyson, the honored poet laureate, became involved: in April 1885 he published a poem titled 'The Fleet' in *The Times* that warned the Admiralty: "You, you, if you shall fail to understand / What England is, and what her all-in-all, / On you will come the curse of all the land / Should this old England fall / Which Nelson left so great."<sup>18</sup> The journalistic and political uproar over the navy's supposed obsolescence eventually became so great that Prime Minister William Gladstone agreed to allocate an extra £3.5 million to the naval budget, a significant increase to the usual funds of around £11 million.<sup>19</sup>

Yet naval scares continued, and even the replacement of Gladstone with Lord Salisbury, who as a Conservative would ostensibly be a more vocal supporter of the navy, as Prime Minister in 1886 failed to quiet the crowds. Eventually more drastic measures became necessary, in the form of the 1889 Naval Defence Act. It set aside a mammoth £21.5 million for eight first-class battleships (what would become the *Royal Sovereign* class), two second-class battleships, nine large cruisers, 29 additional cruisers, and various smaller ships.<sup>20</sup> It also made official for the first time the long-followed *de facto* two-power standard: from 1889 onward, it was Admiralty policy to possess more

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<sup>17</sup> Mary Conley, *From Jack Tar to Union Jack: Representing Naval Manhood in the British Empire, 1870-1918* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2009; Studies in Imperialism), 24-25.

<sup>18</sup> Hough, *Admiral of the Fleet*, 83. The poem was published on 23 April 1885.

<sup>19</sup> John F. Beeler, *British Naval Policy in the Gladstone-Disraeli Era, 1866-1880* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 60-61.

<sup>20</sup> Marder, *Anatomy*, 143; Hamilton, *Nation and the Navy*, 22-23.

warships than the next two most powerful rival navies combined.<sup>21</sup> This vast growth in naval budgets marked the onset of what historians have generally termed the ‘navalist age.’<sup>22</sup> By the early 1890s, as W. Mark Hamilton has noted, “the British Navy [was] almost as sacred as the Crown, and just as popular.”<sup>23</sup> And although this surge in popularity focused heavily on the importance of remembering Nelson and Trafalgar, as could be expected, it also brought the Admiralty itself back into the public good graces for the first time since the Napoleonic War. The ships had changed, but the British public increasingly wanted reassurance that the men behind them still maintained a connection to the glory days of old.

The rapid increase in naval prestige during the last decade of the nineteenth century led to a concurrent rapid increase in literature concerned with the Royal Navy and Nelson in particular. Until the 1890s, the most popular work on Nelson was still Robert Southey’s 1813 biography;<sup>24</sup> between 1885 and 1905, however, there were at least ten major new biographies published on his life and works intended for various audiences.<sup>25</sup> They could take the form of reissued stories from Nelson’s day such as G.S. Parsons’ *Nelsonian Reminiscences*, originally compiled as a contemporary

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<sup>21</sup> Peter Padfield, *Rule Britannia: The Victorian and Edwardian Navy* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 193. In 1889 this would have been the French and Russian fleets.

<sup>22</sup> Conley, *From Jack Tar*, 31.

<sup>23</sup> Hamilton, *Nation and the Navy*, 18-19.

<sup>24</sup> Andrew D. Lambert, ed., *Letters and Papers of Professor Sir John Knox Laughton, 1830-1915* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002), 203. Southey was Poet Laureate from 1813 to 1843 and his biography of Nelson has been one of the very few Nelson-related works to remain consistently popular since its original publication.

<sup>25</sup> Behrman, *Victorian Myths*, 96.

remembrance of Nelson's navy but republished as a series of magazine articles in 1905.<sup>26</sup> More often they were new works, mainly consisting of the same general life story but peppered with details revealing exactly how their authors viewed Nelson's relevance to middle and working-class audiences nearly a century after his death.

One of these works is W. Clark Russell's *Horatio Nelson and the Naval Supremacy of England*. Released in 1890 as part of a 'Heroes of the Nations' series, Russell claimed to have written the first new life of Nelson since Nicolas's dispatches nearly half a century earlier.<sup>27</sup> Much of the book's material is typical hagiography intended for a mass-market audience; Nelson is referred to as 'The Hero' throughout. In Russell's words Nelson's career continues apace until the day of Trafalgar, where "the greatest sea victory that the world had ever known was won," which "fixed the destinies of Britain" with the help of sailors who were "the children of a nation whose offspring were the finest breed of sailors the world had ever produced."<sup>28</sup> Yet the end of Russell's account offered a new wrinkle. He connected Nelson's legacy with the performance of the contemporary Royal Navy, stating that "so long as the English sailor preserves [Nelson's] qualities, the name of Nelson must prove a note of magic. It will be these

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<sup>26</sup> Lambert, *Laughton Papers*, 126. G.S. Parsons was a sailor during the Napoleonic Wars who originally compiled his memoirs in the 1840s.

<sup>27</sup> William Clark Russell, *Horatio Nelson and the Naval Supremacy of England* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1890), v. Clark was an American naval novelist and sailor who moved to Britain to write for the *Daily Chronicle*.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 277, 288, 300, 305.

qualities which will, in turn, preserve the place of Britain.”<sup>29</sup> Nelson’s fighting qualities could, Russell argued, also be applied to the warship of the 1890s and its crew, as contemporary “scientific inventions and intricate mechanical instruments call for as much coolness and vigilance and nerve, if our commanders are ever to approach the records of the mastersailor [sic.] whose history we have striven to narrate.”<sup>30</sup>

Most intriguingly, Russell also set out exactly *how* Nelson would remain relevant to the contemporary steam navy. Although “it is eighty-five years since he died; yet still is his name the one of all earthly names to work most magically in the thoughts of Englishmen.” Russell admitted that Nelson’s “example as a strategist is of no use now,” but he believed that if Nelson’s views on warfare were obsolete, his genius was not: “his example as an English sailor must, whilst there remains a British keel afloat, be as potent in all seafaring aspirations and resolutions as ever it was at any moment in his devoted and glorious life.”<sup>31</sup> Russell closed his account with an engraving of one of the Royal Navy’s latest warships, HMS *Trafalgar* (1887) -- a fitting bridge between the two eras of Admiralty glory he described in the text.

Russell’s account may have been the first in the navalist era, but it was certainly not the most hagiographic. Authors raced to grab a share of the new market for naval literature by painting the Royal Navy’s past heroes in the most glowing terms as they could muster. Charles Rathbone Low’s *Her Majesty’s Navy* (1892) explained to its

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<sup>29</sup> Behrman, *Victorian Myths*, 106. According to Behrman, this quote is from *Nelson’s Words and Deeds*, also published in 1890; it is likely that this was an alternate title to or alternate edition of *Horatio Nelson and the Naval Supremacy of England*.

<sup>30</sup> Russell, *Horatio Nelson*, 317.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 315-316.

eager readers that “Nelson was one of those great spirits to whom the world concedes an undisputed preeminence. As Shakespeare stands at the head of poets and Napoleon at the head of soldiers, so the immortal Nelson remains peerless among sailors [...] and no voice has yet been raised to deny him the pride of place in his profession.”<sup>32</sup> By the end of the decade, the new flow of naval interest was beginning to become a two-way street. Naval scares and public agitation for larger fleets had made the Royal Navy more relevant to the man in the street than it had been in decades; some members of the Navy now attempted to make the fervor permanent by reminding the average Briton just what he owed to the fleet. Admiral Lord Charles Beresford was by this period an influential figure in the Royal Navy; he was the epitome of the post-Crimean War naval hero, having won fame ashore in Egypt and Khartoum in the 1880s. Yet his 1898 *Nelson and His Times*, written with H.W. Wilson, was intended for a different audience who favored earlier role models:

This Work is, in fact, addressed to the millions of the great British democracy, for whose prosperity and freedom, as for that of generations yet unborn, Nelson fought and died. [...] To-day the descendants of the people, to whom Nelson was the popular hero, are a gigantic force in the land. [...] It is important, therefore, that the masses who now hold the power, should realise what Nelson’s victories really meant for our country.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Charles Rathbone Low, *Her Majesty’s Navy, Including its Deeds and Battles*, vol. III (London: J.S. Virtue & Co., 1892), 22. Low was a naval novelist.

<sup>33</sup> Lord Charles Beresford and H.W. Wilson, *Nelson and His Times* (London: Harmsworth Brothers, Limited, 1898), iii. Wilson was a naval author and a founding member of the Navy League.



An essential component of Beresford's writing was ensuring the general public knew that Nelson was and remained "the pattern and patron saint of our seamen."<sup>34</sup> Exactly why this should be so was of no interest – but it was essential that "the millions of the great British democracy" knew "as the years recede and the permanency of his work more and more appears, that he was great with a colossal greatness."<sup>35</sup> By the 1890s Beresford was a rear-admiral in the RN, a member of Parliament and a firm believer in the value of a broader public conception of Nelson's legacy; he wrote that Nelson's "memory lives ever fresh in the heart of a free nation, whose children of to-day have learnt from the lips of their fathers and their fathers' fathers his deeds of splendid and unselfish heroism. It will be handed down radiantly bright from generation to generation – the greatest, perhaps, of all Britain's glories."

And if an increased interest in Trafalgar Day led to more agitation for naval bills that Beresford could harness in the professional and political arenas, that was acceptable as well: "The objects of the book will have been fully realised if it helps the great mass of our fellow-countrymen to truly appreciate the vital issues which depend on the maintenance of our naval superiority – the preservation intact of the heritage of Nelson."<sup>36</sup> Beresford concluded his work with an ominous warning of the dangers that would follow if Britons once again lapsed in their devotion: "The years pass, and danger

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., vi.

again threatens England. [...] But now, as of old, if we are true to ourselves, we need have no fears. Nelson's example remains to all time to inspire us with lofty devotion."<sup>37</sup>

Influential as these new works on Nelson were, they were generally single-volume biographical lives or simply parts of larger series on the Royal Navy. The 1890s also saw the rise of navalist authors who devoted large portions of their careers to demonstrating the importance of Nelson and the Royal Navy in an increasingly technological world. Two of the most influential were J.K. Laughton and Alfred Thayer Mahan. Laughton, a naval historian and lecturer at the Royal Naval College, had for years been calling for an increased appreciation of Nelson; as early as 1874 he delivered a lecture on how "the name of Nelson is almost a synonym for England's greatness."<sup>38</sup> Laughton's first major published work on Nelson was a new edition of the *Letters and Despatches of Horatio, Viscount Nelson* in 1886. After this scholarly tome he wrote two shorter works intended for popular audiences, *Nelson* (1889) for the 'English Men of Action' series and the illustrated *The Nelson Memorial: Nelson and His Companions* (1896). These smaller editions were intended for a mass audience and written to order for publishers who saw which Nelson's increased popularity as a path to profit -- both were cheaply reprinted and became Laughton's most popular, if not best remembered, publications.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 232.

<sup>38</sup> John B. Hattendorf, "Nelson Afloat: A Hero Among the World's Navies," in David Cannadine, ed., *Admiral Lord Nelson: Context and Legacy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 174.

<sup>39</sup> Andrew Lambert, *The Foundations of Naval History: Sir John Laughton, The Royal Navy and the Historical Profession* (London: Chatham Publishing, 1998), 100.

Laughton owed these successes to the increased public interest in naval affairs. His naval supporters encouraged him to write these further works on Nelson; after reading Laughton's *Despatches*, Rear Admiral Sir Francis Leopold McClintock wrote to the author in 1887 relating a conversation with a friend about "his great regret that no-one had written a vindication of Lord Nelson [...] If England has for nearly a century so deeply wronged the memory of Nelson, it is only just, to make what reparation we can even now."<sup>40</sup> The high Victorian dismissal of Nelson as a flawed hero was being papered over to cash in on the Navy's newfound popularity, and Laughton in particular was teaching his version of the heroic Nelson to his professional naval students and the general public at the same time.

Laughton's vindications included much of the language already familiar from Russell and Low. He was of the opinion that "sailors differ from their countrymen mainly in being finer specimens of the race,"<sup>41</sup> but cautioned his countrymen that "these qualities do not grow spontaneously: they require cultivation and development; they are the product of obedience, labor, and forethought, of unceasing energy, zeal, and devotion." He was quick to point out that "the encouragement to all these lies in the glorious and ever-living memory of TRAFALGAR."<sup>42</sup> However, Laughton would have a more lasting impact on navalism than these easily-affordable popular lives. In

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<sup>40</sup> Lambert, *Laughton Papers*, 52-53.

<sup>41</sup> Behrman, *Victorian Myths*, 58.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

1893, taking an opportunity to further the cause of naval history,<sup>43</sup> he became a driving force behind the organization of the Navy Records Society (NRS). The NRS's goal was the education of naval officers in the history of their craft<sup>44</sup> by the collection and printing of naval primary documents. The series began with volumes on the Spanish Armada of 1588, but by 1901 the Society and Laughton were hard at work on volumes intended "to put Nelson's fame beyond future challenge."<sup>45</sup> Yet their intended audience was shifting. A fellow naval historian wrote to Laughton in 1893: "I am disappointed at seeing from the list sent to me [...] that less than half of them are naval men. Although it is perhaps really better that they should be readier to make history than read it."<sup>46</sup> Instead, the Society began to generate interest among an upper-class popular market of antiquarians and history enthusiasts. Even as the NRS's market changed, its goal remained the same. Laughton declared to an audience in 1896 that "those of you who are here fifty years hence may say to your grandson or great-grandson that what they know of the art of naval war, and of the glories of our country, they owe to the Navy Records Society."<sup>47</sup>

J.K. Laughton was a respected and popular name in the field of navalist writing. Alfred Thayer Mahan was something more, perhaps the first worldwide naval sensation. A captain in the United States Navy, he had wondered as early as 1886 that with "*all the*

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<sup>43</sup> Lambert, *Laughton Papers*, 71.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>45</sup> Mahan to Laughton, 1901. Lambert, *Foundations of Naval History*, 179.

<sup>46</sup> The naval historian was Michael Oppenheim. Lambert, *Laughton Papers*, 90.

<sup>47</sup> Donald M. Schurman, *The Education of a Navy: The Development of British Naval Strategic Thought, 1867-1914* (Malabar, FL: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Company, 1984; originally published 1965), 94.

*changed conditions of naval warfare of what use is the knowledge of these bygone days?*”<sup>48</sup> Setting out to demonstrate that the naval past still held value, he published the first volume of his *The Influences of Sea Power Upon History* in 1890; a second followed in 1892. Mahan wrote to increase knowledge of naval matters among his U.S. contemporaries, and “the success of the book in Britain was incidental to its purpose.”<sup>49</sup> Be that as it may, the book used the Royal Navy as a case study of naval power and prestige, and this was enough to earn it a wave of publicity in Britain. Professional naval writers in particular proved enthusiastic -- Lord Beresford wrote to Mahan in 1891 to assert “if I had the power I would order your book to be placed on the table of every House in Britain and Her Colonies and teach our people how our magnificent Empire first obtained its basis, by its Sea Power resolutely fought for.”<sup>50</sup> Another naval author, Philip Colomb, wrote to Mahan the same year that “I think all our Naval men regarded it as the naval book of the age, and it has had a great effect in getting people to understand what they never understood before.”<sup>51</sup> Even J.K. Laughton was fulsome in his praise, telling an audience in 1893 he would “only say to any of you who may not yet have read

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<sup>48</sup> Barry M. Gough, “The Influence of History on Mahan,” in John B. Hattendorf, ed., *The Influence of History on Mahan: The Proceedings of a Conference Marking the Centenary of Alfred Thayer Mahan’s The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1883* (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 1991), 18. Emphasis in original.

<sup>49</sup> Lambert, *Foundations of Naval History*, 133.

<sup>50</sup> Hamilton, *Nation and the Navy*, 181-182.

<sup>51</sup> Schurman, *Education of a Navy*, 52. Colomb succeeded Laughton at the Royal Naval College and, unlike Laughton, was a member of the Royal Navy.

Captain Mahan's books, read them: to those who have read them, read them again; read them a third time."<sup>52</sup>

As popular as Mahan's early works were, it was still mainly a professional naval audience who read them for a second and third time, albeit a much broader readership than had been previously reached. When Mahan visited Britain in the early 1890s, the British navalists who entertained him had an idea of how he could reach even more people to teach them the value of naval power. Many encouraged him to write a work specifically about Nelson, and they provided him with documentary assistance through Laughton – who, thanks to his involvement with the NRS, had access to many of Nelson's papers -- and other British scholars.<sup>53</sup> Mahan's two-volume *The Life of Nelson* was published in 1897.

In terms of 'scholarly' work on Nelson, this work represents the culmination of the new navalist perception that had been coalescing for the previous fifteen years. Mahan's stated goal was to "present a study, from his own point of view, of the one man [...] for who [sic.] genius and opportunity worked together, to make him the personification of the Navy of Great Britain."<sup>54</sup> Nelson appears again as "this first of British seamen, whom the gifts of Nature and the course of History have united to make, in his victories and in their results, the representative figure of the greatest sea-power

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<sup>52</sup> Lambert, *Foundations of Naval History*, 132.

<sup>53</sup> Schurman, *Education of a Navy*, 66.

<sup>54</sup> A.T. Mahan, *The Life of Nelson: The Embodiment of the Sea Power of Great Britain*, vol. I (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1907; originally published 1897), v.

that the world has known.”<sup>55</sup> He became to Mahan and his readers “not merely a personality or a career, but a great force or a great era concrete in a single man, who is its standard-bearer before the nations.”<sup>56</sup> Nelson’s true value to turn-of-the-century Britain is best summed up in Mahan’s magisterial conclusion:

Wars may cease, but the need for heroism shall not depart from the earth, while man remains man and evil exists to be redressed. Wherever danger has to be faced or duty to be done, at cost to self, men will draw inspiration from the name and deeds of Nelson [...] The coincidence of his death with the moment of completed success has impressed upon that superb battle a stamp of finality, an immortality of fame, which even its own grandeur scarcely could have insured. He needed, and he left, no successor.<sup>57</sup>

*The Life of Nelson* became a best-seller and led to a great deal of further public interest in the Navy. It was released in Britain during another of the decade’s many press furors over the condition of the navy, and its glowing accounts of Nelson’s life and achievements added a popular dimension to contemporary calls for a further appreciation of British sea power.<sup>58</sup> Nelson’s resurgence as the arbiter of all British power had made the leap from bridges and mess-decks to drawing rooms and clubs across Britain thanks to upper-class organizations like the NRS and popular authors like Laughton and Mahan. But there remained a wider gap yet to bridge. As *The Times* noted in 1897, “Captain Mahan has made Nelson live again for the student, but ‘the man in the street’ needs a

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 3-4.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., v-vi.

<sup>57</sup> Mahan, *Life of Nelson* Vol. II, 397-398.

<sup>58</sup> Hamilton, *Nation and the Navy*, 191.

shorter and sharper reminder.”<sup>59</sup> Britain’s popular press had fallen under a disapproving eye from many upper-class citizens during its shift towards jingoism in the 1860s and 1870s. Now, inspired by Laughton and Mahan and their naval admirers, the burgeoning popular press of the late Victorian era began to swing into action to disseminate the navalist Nelson back downwards towards the working classes who had most loved him so long ago.

The rise of the popular press had long annoyed many of Britain’s moral crusaders, but their influence steadily expanded throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. By the early 1880s publications specifically for the youngest Britons made up nearly twenty percent of the books published in a given year. Many of these works were the cheap adventure stories known as ‘penny dreadfuls;’ an 1881 article in the *Contemporary Review* worried that “never before was there so little prospect of those given to such reading being driven to more wholesome mental food by a limited supply of garbage.”<sup>60</sup> It was easy to find the source of these works; an 1887 *Edinburgh Review* noted how “the fountain head of the poisonous stream is in great towns and cities, especially in London itself; and it is with that we now have to deal. Here the readers are to be numbered by hundreds of thousands, and the supply exceeds the wildest demand.”<sup>61</sup> But the mid-1880s brought a new understanding of the power these little

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<sup>59</sup> Marianne Czisnik, “Commemorating Trafalgar: Public Celebration and National Identity,” in David Cannadine, ed., *Trafalgar in History: A Battle and its Afterlife* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 145.

<sup>60</sup> Joseph Bristow, *Empire Boys: Adventures in a Man’s World* (London: Harper Collins Academic, 1991), 15, 10. The author of the article was Thomas Wright.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 12. The author of the article was B.G. Johns.



books and magazines held. An 1886 article in the *Nineteenth Century* wrote of their young audience: “These are the future electors who will exercise so much influence on the world’s destiny. The constituents of an imperial race, they ought to be educated with a view to the power they will wield.”<sup>62</sup> From this point on some would try to work with children’s literature instead of against it, making sure the stories told were proper moral tales – and many of these ethical lessons included the Navy.

Sales of children’s literature continuously increased during the navalist age; the *Boys’ Own Paper* eventually sold one million copies per issue.<sup>63</sup> They printed historic fiction where children met Nelson,<sup>64</sup> and spread pithy maxims from his life to Britain’s youth; *Boys of England* reported that doing one’s duty, as Nelson urged, was “the cause of England’s moral as well as physical supremacy over the other nations of the earth.”<sup>65</sup> The versions of Nelson created by some authors specifically encouraged their child readers to join the navy; F.H. Winder described his protagonist’s “initiation into the terrors and the grandeur of naval warfare” as the young boy’s “accession of manhood.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 19. The author of the article was Freeman Wills.

<sup>63</sup> Cecil Degrotte Eby, *The Road to Armageddon: The Martial Spirit in English Popular Literature, 1870-1914* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987), 6.

<sup>64</sup> Conley, *From Jack Tar*, 109-113 provides some examples of this type of story.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>66</sup> Marianne Czisnik, *Horatio Nelson: A Controversial Hero* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2005), 137-138.

This naval spirit soon spread to the schoolroom, where boys recited ‘The Death of Nelson’ as soon as they could comprehend the words.<sup>67</sup>

Even the very young, aided by their families, became involved. In 1887 *The Lady’s World* magazine noted: “a boy before he rises to the dignity of trousers and jackets is never so happy as in a Middy suit or a Jack Tar; and these suits are now selling in thousands.”<sup>68</sup> Eventually the Amalgamated Press reporting service was able to report that boys’ magazines had “done more to provide recruits for our Navy and Army and to keep up the esteem of the sister services than anything else.”<sup>69</sup> One example of the role these boys’ magazines played in the lives of middle-class children can be found in the memoir of James Cox, who joined the Royal Navy in 1900. He recorded his reasoning for making such a commitment: “And of course I used to read the *Boys’ Friend*, *Boy’s Own Paper*, *Union Jack* and *Chums* and all those very romantic boys’ books which were sold in those days for a halfpenny or a penny...I wanted to lead a life of adventure.”<sup>70</sup> He was not alone.

However, the spread of popular Victorian literature entailed more than just children’s books. Nelson and the navy made a dramatic reappearance the lives of middle-class Britons of all ages during this period. The Royal Navy and its sailors were

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<sup>67</sup> Andrew Gordon, *The Rules of the Game: Jutland and British Naval Command* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1996), 179. Gordon states that this point is from William Manchester’s *The Last Lion*. ‘The Death of Nelson’ is a poem originally composed in 1805.

<sup>68</sup> Hamilton, *Nation and the Navy*, 102-103.

<sup>69</sup> Eby, *Road to Armageddon*, 6.

<sup>70</sup> Conley, *From Jack Tar*, 9. Italics added.

used in advertisements for everything from Cadbury's cocoa to polishing cloths.<sup>71</sup>

Nelson himself was an even more valuable marketing tool -- broadsheets trumpeted that 'Nelson the Hero of Trafalgar and Pears Soap Have Become the Most Familiar Names in the English Language' and 'England expects that every man this day will do his duty and take Beecham's Pills.'<sup>72</sup> There were revivals of older works focusing on the Navy, some dating back to the era of Nelson's original surge in popularity. *Black Ey'd Susan*, a play involving Nelson originally written in the late 1820s, returned to the stage in the 1890s; the poster rather bizarrely featured a dying Nelson surrounded by chorus girls.<sup>73</sup> The historian Peter Padfield has written: "The strain was taken up by the press and the public, interested as never before in their Navy; Admirals were subject to the popularity and public scrutiny reserved today for stars of sport and entertainment. Music Halls echoed to popular pride of Navy and Empire; versifiers exhorted the people to reckon up their battleships [...] naval memoirs and naval history enjoyed a wider readership than ever before."<sup>74</sup>

The Navy had originally reappeared on the public scene in large-circulation newspapers such as *The Times* and the *Pall Mall Gazette* with the 'Truth About the Navy' series. Although the *Westminster Review* claimed that "The newspapers...are the

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<sup>71</sup> Colin White, *Victoria's Navy: The Heyday of Steam* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1983), 82-83.

<sup>72</sup> Czisnik, "Commemorating Trafalgar," 148.

<sup>73</sup> White, *Heyday of Steam*, 84.

<sup>74</sup> Padfield, *Rule Britannia*, 196.

best and surest civilisers of a country,”<sup>75</sup> they initially seemed better suited to sowing panic. Besides the naval scare in 1884 associated with the original ‘Truth About the Navy’ articles, there were further newspaper-driven popular panics in 1885 (war with Russia), 1888, 1893 (more Russian antagonism in the Mediterranean), 1894 (fears of Spain retaking Gibraltar), 1898 (the German Navy Bill and the Fashoda crisis), and 1900 (the Boer War combined with a French invasion scare).<sup>76</sup>

But every scare, however brief, seemed to increase the general public’s desire to become more involved with the Navy. In 1897, the *Morning Post* editorialized that “when, at some future period, the history of this country during the nineteenth century comes to be written, one of the features that will present itself most prominently to the mind of the historian will be the manner in which, in the last twenty years of this period, the nation awakened once again to the dominating influence of sea-power as the real source of British security and greatness.”<sup>77</sup> By the time of the Fashoda incident with the French over colonial possessions in September 1898, any sense of naval panic had been replaced by a vague but omnipresent feeling that future wars or naval actions would only lead to the second Trafalgar Britain had been denied in the 1850s.<sup>78</sup> Although the new battleships of the Naval Defence Act were in no way comparable to Nelson’s 74-gun

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<sup>75</sup> Paul Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism 1860-1914* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980), 87-88.

<sup>76</sup> Marder, *Anatomy*, 45, 59, 218, 380, Chapter 4 *passim*, Chapter 18 *passim*; Schurman, *Education of a Navy*, 44.

<sup>77</sup> Hamilton, *Nation and the Navy*, 254.

<sup>78</sup> Marder, *Anatomy*, 320.

ships of the line, most Britons seemed to believe with an often boisterous confidence that the result of any combat on the high seas would be the same.

Besides the daily press, cheaply-priced paperbacks for adults also became a middle-class staple during this period. The navalist era was the golden age of ‘invasion literature,’ popular tales of Britain heroically defending herself against foreign aggressors ranging from the French to Martians. The genre first appeared in 1871 with General Sir George Tomkyns Chesney’s *The Battle of Dorking*, in which a surprise invasion of mysterious but German-speaking troops defeated Britain. The British fleet in Chesney’s work pompously declared that “the issue of a contest between British ships and those of any other country, under anything like equal odds, can never be doubtful. England awaits with calm confidence the issue of the impending action.”<sup>79</sup> Hubris gets the better of them, and the entire fleet is sunk in a crushing defeat.<sup>80</sup>

Later naval works of literature were more jingoistic in character. They varied in subject – some, such as Horace Gordon Hutchinson’s 1902 *A Friend of Nelson*, were historical novels set during the Napoleonic wars. This was a tale designed solely to entertain, as Hutchinson’s narrator would not have endeared himself to the Royal Navy of 1805 or 1900; he purposely grounds a naval vessel to bring news to Nelson faster, scoffs at court-martial because he believes Nelson will protect him, and receives an

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<sup>79</sup> General Sir George Tomkyns Chesney, “The Battle of Dorking: Reminiscences of a Volunteer,” in I.F. Clarke, ed., *The Tale of the Next Great War, 1871-1914* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995; originally published 1871), 33.

<sup>80</sup> *The Battle of Dorking* inspired the publication of an anonymous rebuttal, *The Wreck of German Unity*, in which the British fleet defeats the Germans in a series of boarding actions. The publication date of 1871 for both is no coincidence. *The Wreck of German Unity* can also be found in Clarke’s *The Tale of the Next Great War*.

invitation to dinner from Nelson “like a boy that has just received his first letter from his mistress.”<sup>81</sup> The narrator eventually discovers a plot to assassinate Nelson but declines to inform him, knowing that the great admiral would not reschedule dinner for anything as simple as attempted murder. Instead, the narrator dresses as Nelson and tackles the criminals himself; as his romantic interest concludes, “that is what it is to be an Englishman!”<sup>82</sup> By 1900, a cheap costume Nelson was just as effective in selling books as the original.

More popular were writings that brought Nelsonian personas and heroism into the contemporary Royal Navy. Many of these also dealt with foreign invasions, usually the French in the 1880s and after the turn of the century generally the Germans. In 1891’s *The Last Great Naval War*, the British admiral reminds his men before a climactic battle how “remembering the noble traditions of the British Navy, we shall so acquit ourselves that this day will rank in history with that of Trafalgar.”<sup>83</sup> Rudyard Kipling urged his readers in 1899’s *A Fleet in Being* to remember that “under the shell of the new Navy beats the heart of the old. All Marryat’s immortals are there, better fed,

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<sup>81</sup> Horace Gordon Hutchinson, *A Friend of Nelson* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1902), 108, 112, 235. Hutchinson was a professional sportsman whose previous works included *Hints on the Game of Golf*, and the fact that he chose to write on Nelson speaks to the Admiral’s burgeoning popularity.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 256-257.

<sup>83</sup> A. Nelson Seaforth, *The Last Great Naval War: An Historical Retrospect* (London: Cassell & Company, Limited, 1891), 75. ‘Nelson Seaforth’ is a pseudonym. This work also contains in its end papers an advertisement for a new edition of Southey’s *Life of Nelson*, advertised as “the very book for a boy’s prize at the end of the midsummer terms.”

better tended, better educated, but at heart unchanged.”<sup>84</sup> Henry Newbolt’s collection of naval poetry *Admirals All* was published in October 1897; by September 1898 it was in its twenty-first printing.<sup>85</sup>

These navalist works eventually seemed to compete with themselves, outdoing each other in their tales of Nelsonic glories at sea. In 1901’s *The Raid of Le Vengeur*, the narrator has to sink a French submarine in order to win his love’s hand.<sup>86</sup> W. Laird Clowes declared in his 1892 *The Captain of the ‘Mary Rose’* that “the naval policy of Great Britain has simply been to seek the enemy’s Fleet and to endeavour to sink, burn, or take it,” and his hero conveniently loses an eye and an arm against the French doing just that.<sup>87</sup> Fred T. Jane did Clowes one better in his 1895 *Blake of the ‘Rattlesnake.’* His eponymous protagonist attacks a French cruiser in a tiny destroyer; “it appeared little less than suicidal for us to attack her; but the traditions of the British Navy demanded that we should do so.”<sup>88</sup> Blake is of course killed, but manages to hoist one last signal in the Nelsonic tradition: “*England expects that every man will die like a true Briton. No*

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<sup>84</sup> Rudyard Kipling, *A Fleet in Being: Notes of Two Trips with the Channel Squadron* (Leipzig, Germany: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1900; originally published 1899), 15-16. Frederick Marryat was a naval novelist popular in the 1830s and 1840s.

<sup>85</sup> Marder, *Anatomy*, 56. Newbolt was the consummate navalist – he was a naval poet [he also wrote ‘Drake’s Drum’], edited the *Monthly Review*, and worked for the Admiralty during the First World War.

<sup>86</sup> George Griffith, “The Raid of Le Vengeur,” in I.F. Clarke, ed., *The Tale of the Next Great War, 1871-1914* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995; originally published 1901), 201.

<sup>87</sup> W. Laird Clowes, *The Captain of the “Mary Rose:” A Tale of To-morrow* (London: W. Thacker & Co., 1898; originally published 1892, 7<sup>th</sup> edition), 135, 300. Clowes wrote on naval issues for the *Daily News*, *The Standard*, *The Times*, and the *Daily Graphic*.

<sup>88</sup> Fred T. Jane, *Blake of the ‘Rattlesnake’* (London: Tower Publishing Company Limited, 1895), 73. Jane became a well-known novelist after the publication of *Blake*; he later began *Jane’s Fighting Ships*.

*surrender.*”<sup>89</sup> Jane stated in his introduction that he dared “venture to hope that this attempt to depict modern warfare from the Service point of view will convince the present and the rising generation that scientific advance has not yet eliminated the romance that, let peace-faddists say what they will, clings, and ever has clung around war.”<sup>90</sup> *Blake of the ‘Rattlesnake’* represents the view, held by many upper-class navy-supporting individuals, that the best way to retain the pro-Royal Navy popular sentiments of the 1890s permanently among the general population was to locate the heart of the Navy in the golden age best represented by Nelson rather than swiftly-moving contemporary technological warfare.

Other authors were also at pains to successfully blend the new scientific navy with the traditions of Nelson’s day. Hugh Oakley Arnold-Forster’s 1898 *In a Conning Tower* believed that “every Englishman who is worth his salt knows something of the glorious naval annals of his country. The names of Rodney, Howe and Nelson are happily and rightly household words among us; we honour and revere those splendid masters of their art. [...] All that their country demanded of them they did.” Yet he begged the reader to “compare for a moment the position of any one of those great officers in the action, and that which the fearful ingenuity of modern science has imposed on their successors.” Arnold-Forster waxed rhapsodic on the deadly responsibilities all modern Nelsons faced: “Such power was never till the world began concentrated under the direction of man, and all that power, the judgement to direct it,

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 150. Emphasis in original.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 8.



the will to apply it, the knowledge to utilize it, is placed in the hands of one man, and one only. What is this power? Talk of Jove with his thunderbolts, of Nasmyth with his hammer! The fables of mythology and the facts of latter-day science! Where has there ever been anything to compare to it?”<sup>91</sup> He offered a warning to his navalist readers to guard their heritage well -- “the door must needs be strong, for the treasure it has to keep behind it is the honour of the flag.”<sup>92</sup>

One of the most intriguing period accounts is again by W. Laird Clowes, 1905’s *Trafalgar Refought*. This is a work that cuts to the heart of the navalist position. There are no explanations of how the Nelsonian spirit is present in the Edwardian Navy; rather, Clowes removed the middleman and Nelson himself returns to fight a second Trafalgar a century after the first. The story is not unique, being a nearly blow-by-blow retelling of Trafalgar fought with modern ships. This leads to some inconsistencies, such as Nelson being dramatically felled by a splinter rather than a sniper’s bullet. Yet in the end the British prevail, being “full of the prestige gained in ancient times against the same enemies.”<sup>93</sup> And Nelson passes away a second time at the moment of victory, revealing once again how his “glorious death shines high above the turmoil, as some inextinguishable beacon crowning the summit of the world’s battles.”<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Hugh Oakley Arnold-Forster, “In a Conning Tower: How I Took HMS Majestic into Action,” in I.F. Clarke, ed., *The Tale of the Next Great War, 1871-1914* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995; originally published 1888), 141-142. Arnold-Forster was a navalist and a Liberal Unionist MP – he later became War Secretary in the Balfour cabinet.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>93</sup> W. Laird Clowes and Alan H. Burgoyne, *Trafalgar Refought* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1905), 51. Clowes and Burgoyne’s work provides the title for this thesis.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

The end result of this literary flood was a British middle class that was becoming ever more involved with the Admiralty's daily business as an increased knowledge of naval matters among all Britons became commonplace during the 1890s.<sup>95</sup> Invasion scares created navalist agitation among middle and working-class advocates, leading to persistent demands for a larger Royal Navy. The Admiralty was more than willing to reciprocate and demonstrate support for its newest fans – after all, public pressure had led to the Naval Defence Act a decade previously. One way the Navy gave back was through fleet reviews, where the general public could observe modern warships close up. This was not a new phenomenon – fleet reviews dated back a century, and since the 1870s there had been open 'visitor's days' on certain ships.<sup>96</sup> There had been eight reviews between 1815 and 1870, eight more from 1870 to 1901, and a further five before 1910.<sup>97</sup> In addition, the Royal Navy in the 1880s and 1890s began participating in 'hurrah trips:' goodwill voyages in which naval ships traveled up and down the coast in attempts to mobilize popular support for the Navy and recruit new sailors from local populations.<sup>98</sup>

A major fleet review took place in 1897 as part of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. The public was deeply involved; visitors to British warships could purchase

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<sup>95</sup> Marder, *Anatomy*, 59.

<sup>96</sup> Colin White, *Victoria's Navy: The End of the Sailing Navy* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1981), 87.

<sup>97</sup> White, *Heyday of Steam*, 118.

<sup>98</sup> Conley, *From Jack Tar*, 27.

drinks, snacks, and souvenir programs onboard.<sup>99</sup> Popular newspapers appreciated the effort. *Vanity Fair* claimed that “the pride of the seas is ours now as it has been for centuries, and regarding Saturday’s evidence of the fact few Englishmen can have felt unready to attack by sea any combination that could possibly be formed for the lowering of the Union Jack.”<sup>100</sup> The *Illustrated London News* reported how the review “represents, firstly, the results of the nation’s complete awakening to the real value of sea power and of all that it entails to an Empire such as ours.”<sup>101</sup> These fleet appearances eventually developed into something resembling a holiday weekend. By 1902, the *Daily Express* wrote of a review at Portsmouth: “The town is as gay as a Hindoo [sic] bazaar with bunting and devices, and you are haunted by a sense of holiday-making from the appearance of the crowds in the streets, go where you will [...] from a very early hour of the day an immense procession of excursion trains” flooded into the city.<sup>102</sup> By 1904 a naval officer was in charge of preparing the *Victory* for the influx of tourists she received each summer, even when there was no official review scheduled.<sup>103</sup> The Admiralty had become a source of entertainment for the common man. The majority of the speeches and programs distributed at these events, including

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<sup>99</sup> Jan Rüger, *The Great Naval Game: Britain and Germany in the Age of Empire*, Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Modern Warfare (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 130.

<sup>100</sup> Marder, *Anatomy*, 281.

<sup>101</sup> Hamilton, *Nation and the Navy*, 82-83.

<sup>102</sup> Rüger, *Great Naval Game*, 56.

<sup>103</sup> Hough, *Admiral of the Fleet*, 175.

some developed specifically for children, referenced Nelson and Trafalgar as arbiters of Britain's glorious naval past.<sup>104</sup>

Britain's government sometimes coordinated even larger events. One such festival was the 1891 Royal Naval Exhibition, a gala event dedicated to the Navy in all its forms. When the project was under consideration it was taken up enthusiastically by the Prince of Wales, who noted how "in his opinion, it was the duty of every Englishman to do his utmost to increase the popularity of the Navy, an object which he considered the proposed exhibition was well calculated to fulfill."<sup>105</sup> It was expected that the Exhibition would intrigue its middle-class visitors: "when they visited the Galleries in which so many of our great sea fights were so graphically illustrated, and viewed the relics and trophies of former wars, they would be reminded in what stormy times, and through what stirring scenes of strife and daring, the liberty and security they now quietly enjoy were won for them; and each one would feel a personal interest in maintaining the supremacy of the country on the seas."<sup>106</sup>

The exhibition proved a massive success. Over the 151 days it was open, 2,300,000 people attended the Chelsea spectacular. Inscribed over the entrance to every exhibit hall was the Exhibition's motto, 'IT IS ON THE NAVY UNDER THE GOOD PROVIDENCE OF GOD, THAT OUR WEALTH, PROSPERITY, AND PEACE DEPEND.' Visitors could examine the largest collection of Nelson memorabilia ever

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<sup>104</sup> Rüger, *Great Naval Game*, 13, 255.

<sup>105</sup> Hamilton, *Nation and the Navy*, 90. One of the attendees at the meeting where the Prince made this statement was Kaiser Wilhelm II.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 94. The quote is from the official report of the planning committee.

assembled and tour a full-size replica of the *Victory*'s deck where Nelson fell; they took home with them 300,000 programs, 4,000 copies of F.H. Miller's *History of the 'Victory,'* and 70,000 official memorabilia catalogues authored by Nelson scholar J.K. Laughton.<sup>107</sup> A contemporary author, Charles Napier Robinson, recalled in 1909 how "the story of the Navy [...] has never been shown to better advantage than at the great Naval Exhibition at Chelsea in 1891."<sup>108</sup>

Great exhibitions drew crowds, but they were sporadic affairs. The most active navalists believed more needed to be done to keep the Royal Navy in the public eye at *all* times, and they accomplished this through the formation and expansion of patriotic leagues. The first public association that specifically used Trafalgar as part of its message was the Primrose League, founded as a Conservative organization in 1883. However, the Primrose League went about spreading their message in a rather stuffy Victorian fashion; their events included evening entertainments featuring songs on Nelson, magic lantern shows with images of Nelson and the *Victory*, and 'Question Paper set[s] for Juveniles' that required frustrated youths to discourse on the value of Trafalgar.<sup>109</sup> Still, the Primrose League considered Trafalgar-related imagery as only a portion of its overall message.

A much more powerful navalist organization was the Navy League, begun at the end of 1894. It was spearheaded by Harry Cust, Unionist M.P. and editor of the *Pall*

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<sup>107</sup> Lambert, "The Magic of Trafalgar," 168; White, *Heyday of Steam*, 85; Hamilton, *Nation and the Navy*, 91-95.

<sup>108</sup> Charles Napier Robinson, *The British Tar in Fact and Fiction: The Poetry, Pathos, and Humour of the Sailor's Life* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1909), 456.

<sup>109</sup> Czisnik, "Commemorating Trafalgar," 142-143.

*Mall Gazette*, and started life with two essential legs up: royal patronage (Victoria, Edward VII, and George V were all supporters) and a picture of Nelson in its crest.<sup>110</sup> The League operated on the principle that it would be *the* organization to deliver naval news personally to every British man, woman, and child. League members, often politicians, newspapermen and upper-middle or upper-class naval enthusiasts, understood the power of public interest. Naval journalist William White wrote in 1895: “The force of public opinion, to which, as I have shown, we are entirely indebted for such sufficiency of naval defence as we have so far attained, has so far been only periodically and intermittently applied. This is surely wasteful, precarious, uncertain, and unscientific method of applying the force required [sic].” He then presented a solution which would increase public interest in naval matters, writing “the only way to secure continuity and sufficiency in our naval policy [...] is to apply the force required steadily, persistently, and uniformly.”<sup>111</sup>

The League would apply this pressure by any means necessary because, as the journalist and editor of the *Navy League Journal*, H.W. Wilson, stated: “our end is to strengthen that England which has made us what we are: to retain the inheritance of greatness which our fathers bequeathed to us: to confirm that proud national position without which many of us feel that life in this smoky island would be intolerable; and to

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<sup>110</sup> Conley, *From Jack Tar*, 132-133; Czisnik, *Horatio Nelson*, 125; Hamilton, *Nation and the Navy*, 101, 145.

<sup>111</sup> Hamilton, *Nation and the Navy*, 115-116. The use of ‘William White’ in Hamilton’s original may be a typo for Arnold White. William White was a naval constructor, while Arnold White was a naval journalist; the two were contemporaries.

do this by making the Navy strong. For by the Navy we stand or fall.”<sup>112</sup> Admiral Lord Charles Beresford believed that the League could “surely ventilate the necessities for undoubted command of the sea and interest people who otherwise never hear of the fleet.”<sup>113</sup>

But the League intended to go beyond simple interest – its goal remained the creation of a permanent British popular calling for new ships and increased naval budgets. Its navalist members possessed myriad ways of spreading issues related to the navy’s strength. They wrote to colonial officials and commercial heads in 1895, pointing out that “the purpose of the League is to fix public attention in all lands under the British flag [...] to the inexpressible and fundamental importance to them all of increasing the strength of the British navy.”<sup>114</sup> They promoted extreme jingoism; Arnold White mounted a press campaign against Sir Arthur Conan Doyle after Doyle suggested changing ‘Trafalgar Day’ to ‘Nelson Day’ to avoid antagonizing the French.<sup>115</sup> Like previous penny dreadful authors, League members found eager fans among Britain’s middle-class youth in schools. League associate P.J. Hannon noted: “Nelson’s life and death, it was foreseen, might be utilised to personify British Sea Power to the children, if

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<sup>112</sup> Conley, *From Jack Tar*, 124.

<sup>113</sup> Hamilton, *Nation and the Navy*, 122-123.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>115</sup> Czisnik, “Commemorating Trafalgar,” 145. White was a naval journalist and ardent Germanophobe in addition to being anti-French.

not the veterans, of British democracy throughout the world.”<sup>116</sup> Members lectured on Trafalgar in schools and led children in singing ‘The Death of Nelson.’<sup>117</sup>

Most importantly, the League felt bound to spread their views to the world at large. The first issue of the *Navy League Journal* in 1895 laid out the organization’s mission statement: “(the working man) is only half convinced of the value of our Empire, and but a lukewarm supporter of large Naval Budgets. We must be at him and teach him. It is the duty of the better-educated amongst us to go down into the market place and refute the sophistries of the blind leaders of the blind. The lower classes can be led, but they want leaders...men with devotion to the great ideals at which this nation should aim.”<sup>118</sup> These leading men would be expected to hound those who would not otherwise listen. In 1896 the *Navy League Journal* recommended “where our members can, let them hold small meetings and put the facts before their audience. Where they cannot hold meetings, let them attack the workingman in the train or on the omnibus.”<sup>119</sup> The renewed prestige and power of the Royal Navy would, if the League had its way, become literally inescapable.

Perhaps the League’s greatest achievement was the popularization of Trafalgar Day. Less antagonistic than many of their other schemes, the League began pushing in

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<sup>116</sup> Hamilton, *Nation and the Navy*, 144.

<sup>117</sup> Marder, *Anatomy*, 53.

<sup>118</sup> Peter Padfield, *The Great Naval Race: The Anglo-German Naval Rivalry, 1900-1914* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1974), 69.

<sup>119</sup> Marder, *Anatomy*, 52-53.



1895 for larger celebrations on the day of Nelson's death in,<sup>120</sup> realizing that the nearly century-old tradition had lost a great deal of its public impact by the 1850s. By the next year, their ceremonies were gaining empire-wide recognition; the *Toronto Mail* reported that "among the organizations of recent date in Great Britain, there are perhaps none which are likely more favourably to commend themselves to public notice than the Navy League."<sup>121</sup> The *Navy League Journal* crowed triumphantly:

It was as if the people had arisen to answer those who say: 'They do not care...' The hundreds of thousands who for six days from morning till night defiled before the column have shown the unsuspected strength of feeling latent in British hearts. They have shown that Britons do care, that they have not forgotten, that they are still capable of devotion and self-sacrifice. Trafalgar – the very name, with its stirring associations, is a trumpet-call to the nation to do its duty.

The *Journal* had high hopes for the future of the new Trafalgar Day, noting how of the spectators "some, of course, came only to look. But the great mass of the people in the eponymous square were pilgrims, rather than mere spectators. And those who were mere spectators must have learned much from their gazings. They would realize that the British Navy still regards Nelson as its chosen hero."<sup>122</sup> The populace could be thus reassured that the naval establishment shared their views on the importance of Britain's naval past.

By 1898, *The Standard* noted that "the anniversary of Lord Nelson's greatest victory was commemorated yesterday with unabated enthusiasm. The celebration is due to the Navy League, and it is to that association that the honour belongs of reviving the

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<sup>120</sup> Czisnik, "Commemorating Trafalgar," 143.

<sup>121</sup> Hamilton, *Nation and the Navy*, 127-128.

<sup>122</sup> Czisnik, "Commemorating Trafalgar," 144.

national interest in the greatest seaman of the century.”<sup>123</sup> According to *The Referee*, “there cannot be a greater incentive to young Englishmen to join the navy than the celebration of Nelson’s Day at Trafalgar Square.”<sup>124</sup> The yearly wreaths in Trafalgar Square were developing a deep-set connection with the Admiralty’s yearly budget – in the hands of the League, Trafalgar Day was moving from a solemn remembrance of Nelson’s life to a public celebration of Nelson’s afterlife.

Nelson’s navy still retained its powerful pull as the Trafalgar centenary approached, to the point where parliamentary campaigns could be run on the program of an ‘invincible Navy.’<sup>125</sup> *The Times* remained convinced that “the memory of Trafalgar can never fade so long as England remains a nation, nor even so long as the English tongue is spoken or the history of England is remembered in any part of the world,”<sup>126</sup> and the British museum published a catalogue of its Nelson engravings for the occasion.<sup>127</sup>

However, by 1905 the League had less of a hold over Nelson’s public memory and had squandered much of its working-class goodwill – badgering workers on streetcars had its drawbacks. The *Manchester Guardian* agreed that “a little more ancestor worship would do us as a nation no harm,” but “regretted that the public Nelson celebrations should have depended so much on an organization identified in the public

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<sup>123</sup> Hamilton, *Nation and the Navy*, 145.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>125</sup> Kennedy, *Anglo-German Antagonism*, 307.

<sup>126</sup> Roy Adkins, *Nelson’s Trafalgar: The Battle that Changed the World* (New York: Viking, 2005), 326.

<sup>127</sup> Robinson, *British Tar in Fact and Fiction*, 458.

mind with indiscreet and often unintelligent advocacy of increased naval expenditure [the League].”<sup>128</sup> At the other end of the political spectrum, naval writer F.T. Jane penned an appeal for ships instead of celebratory wreaths: “Too much Nelson cannot aid us against our future enemies; our own arms alone can do that. Therefore to that future we should give our thoughts, not to hysterical sentiment over the past – ever the hallmark of a declining race.”<sup>129</sup> But Jane’s view of a Nelsonless Navy was an isolated one. Across the Empire in Melbourne, “Fears were expressed of the war to come, and of the desperate need for another Nelson.”<sup>130</sup> In 1905, Elliot Mills published a futurist pamphlet entitled *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire*; supposedly authored in 2005, it cited a “growing tendency of the English throughout the Twentieth Century to forsake the sea” as one of the reasons behind Britain’s future decline.<sup>131</sup> As the Empire celebrated one hundred years of its premiere naval hero, one could be forgiven for some uncertainty as to the question hidden behind the curtain: “Will the Empire which is celebrating one centenary of Trafalgar survive for the next?”<sup>132</sup>

Even with concerns about the Navy’s future, the general public’s view and appreciation of the Royal Navy’s past and present was radically improved from those of a quarter-century earlier. As far as many navalists were concerned, panics were better

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<sup>128</sup> Czisnik, *Horatio Nelson*, 127.

<sup>129</sup> Colin White, “The Immortal Memory,” in Colin White, ed., *The Nelson Companion* (Bridgend, UK: Bramley Books, 1997), 24. Jane ran for Parliament in 1906 on a ‘navy before party’ platform.

<sup>130</sup> John M. MacKenzie, “Nelson Goes Global: The Nelson Myth in Britain and Beyond,” in *Admiral Lord Nelson: Context and Legacy*, David Cannadine, ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 158.

<sup>131</sup> Samuel Hynes, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind* (London: Pimlico, 1991 [1968]), 24.

<sup>132</sup> Kennedy, *Anglo-German Antagonism*, 308. The quote is from J.L. Garvin.

than the general apathy which prevailed during the dimmest days of the 1860s and 1870s. After all, naval scares had led to the vastly increased Admiralty budgets that had put the Royal Navy back in the public eye. Britain's naval heritage was now cheaply and easily accessible to those in all walks of life. Socially-minded businessmen, gentlemen and peers could now involve themselves in the Navy Records Society, contributing to the further spread of previously inaccessible naval documents while discussing the latest scholarly works of Mahan or Laughton. The vast middle-class was even more saturated with the Navy's fighting spirit. They could read a pro-Navy diatribe in their morning paper, attend a League rally in the evening, and stock up on cheap Nelson fiction and biographies specially designed for 'the common man;' their impressionable children would learn enough naval history in school to satisfy them for the day. Britain's working-class citizens could take a holiday to a fleet review or exhibition – or find themselves badgered on their way to work by an overzealous League supporter.

Many of these groups, however, conceptualized Nelson in their own ways. Upper-class navalists, the driving force behind the League, favored a conservative Nelson. Nelson could serve as the link between the glorious Navy that had defeated Napoleon and the new technological Navy created by the Naval Defence Act and beyond. The middle class, saturated with popular fiction and cheaply-printed histories of Nelson's days, preferred the political Nelson. Similar to the upper-class view but broader in scope, the political Nelson was oftentimes merely justification for all and any increases in naval budgets. A powerful Navy would enable the fighting men of the fleet

to take on France, Russia, or Germany just as Nelson tackled Napoleon a century prior. It was working-class Britons who had kept Nelson's memory alive in pubs and local memorials when it had faded in the 1860s and 1870s; and they retained the much older concept of the purely heroic Nelson – a role model for *all* Englishmen, from deckhand to admiral. They approached the new uses of Nelson in the 1880s and 1890s from the opposite direction. Rather than beginning with a modern Navy and adding Nelson to bolster its appeal, the working class began with a totemic Nelson and simply expanded his popular support into that of the Navy, helped along by fleet reviews and jubilees.

Britain was by the turn of the century saturated in a century's worth of Nelson's reflected glory, although the average Englishman's conception of what this actually entailed slowly became shaped more by banner headlines than by any in-depth knowledge of the issues. It seemed as if the Admiralty had been overshadowed by its own creation, this mass of popular supporters that demanded bigger and better ships and threatened to vote out or agitate against any politician or naval official who did not agree. But the elderly naval establishment was slowly churning away at its own reforms during these heady decades. The Royal Navy had lagged behind its own supporters; for nearly all of the 1880s and 1890s they had been more concerned with spit and polish than any true improvements. This changed rapidly in October 1904 with the ascension of Admiral Sir John Fisher to the post of First Sea Lord. Fisher brought with him naval improvements that would save money and improve naval efficiency. He brought with him a conception of how the Navy could work with the press, parliamentarians and popular naval leagues to create a fluid and easily-manipulated current of pro-Admiralty

public opinion. He brought a view of Nelson as the conquering hero that had rarely been surpassed. By 1906 he brought dreadnoughts. The Royal Navy and the British public's conception of its purpose, methods and history would be forever changed as a result.

## CHAPTER V

### “WE MUST WIN AT SEA OR PERISH AS A NATION” –

#### NELSON’S BRITAIN REBORN, 1904-1914

As the Trafalgar centenary approached in the early years of the twentieth century the Royal Navy found itself more popular among the general British population than it had been in fifty years, likely more popular than it had been at any time since Trafalgar. Internally the Navy was still suffering from tactical paralysis and a dearth of innovative leadership. Externally, however, it seemed as if the Navy was growing more powerful by the day. By 1905 the Royal Navy included scouting cruisers, and torpedo boats; specific night fighting practice and the inclusion of wireless telegraphy on Admiralty vessels were on the horizon.<sup>1</sup> Scattered naval vessels were beginning to steadily improve their gunnery; those captains influenced by Percy Scott in particular were practicing at ranges of up to 7000 yards by 1903.<sup>2</sup> And although official Gunnery Manuals still included instructions for boarding parties, with sections for both cutlass and pistol actions, cadet training in the use of sails came to an end in 1903.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Colin White, *Victoria's Navy: The Heyday of Steam* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1983), 162; Arthur Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow: The Royal Navy in the Fisher Era, 1904-1919*, vol. I, *The Road to War, 1904-14* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 398.

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Bassett, *Battle Cruisers: A History, 1908-1948* (London: Macmillan, 1981), 32-33; John Keegan, *The Price of Admiralty: The Evolution of Naval Warfare* (New York: Viking, 1988), 104.

<sup>3</sup> Archer Jones and Andrew J. Keogh, “The Dreadnought Revolution: Another Look,” *Military Affairs* 49, no. 3 (July 1985): 124-131, 124; Mary Conley, *From Jack Tar to Union Jack: Representing Naval Manhood in the British Empire, 1870-1918* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2009; *Studies in Imperialism*), 132.

However, the navy's celebration of a century of dominance was yet again besieged by internal policy criticisms. Percy Scott's personal gunnery crusade had borne some fruit, but when he suggested to his superiors that sailors on guard duty could be put to good use searching for enemy submarines – they were currently employed making sure their sister ships' laundry was hung in the Admiralty-prescribed manner – he was informed “such an idea was considered very ridiculous; no departure could be made from the old and obsolete notions which obtained throughout the Service. Our brains and energy were not used in training for war; housemaiding the ships was to remain as it had been the paramount consideration.”<sup>4</sup>

Lord Hankey, covering naval issues for the Committee of Imperial Defence, felt the same; he did not disparage the navy's enthusiasm, but felt “this keenness was often wasted on comparatively unworthy objects,” and “the topics and arguments of the officers' messes...were mainly confined to such matters as the cleaning of paint and brasswork, the getting out of torpedo nets and anchors, and similar trivialities.”<sup>5</sup> A young captain by the name of David Beatty, frustrated by a poor showing in official maneuvers, wrote to his wife that “I suppose it will all be the same a hundred years hence and so there is no use wearing myself out about it.”<sup>6</sup> Another agitated officer grouched that “we shall never get good firing and good gun crews for defending our

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<sup>4</sup> Admiral Sir Percy Scott, *Fifty Years in the Royal Navy* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1919), 198.

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas A. Lambert, *Sir John Fisher's Naval Revolution* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 75.

<sup>6</sup> David Beatty to Ethel Beatty, 2 October 1902. In B. McL. Ranft, ed., *The Beatty Papers: Selections from the Private and Official Correspondence of Admiral of the Fleet Earl Beatty*, vol. I, 1902-1918 (Hants, UK: Scholar Press, 1989), 14.



country until we have got rid of our out-of-date officers and ideas.”<sup>7</sup> Even *The Times* agreed: “The Navy is a very conservative service, tenacious of tradition, deeply and rightly imbued with the sentiment of its glorious past, and very suspicious of any innovations which seem to ignore that tradition.”<sup>8</sup>

These were the same arguments that had been raised against the Admiralty for years. But the Admiralty was now firmly in the public eye, and with increased public interest came increased governmental attention. The wave of new construction that had taken place over the previous two decades had produced technological marvels, but costs were beginning to spiral out of control. Since 1889 the price of a battleship had doubled. By 1905 a new battleship cost £1.6 million, and the naval construction budget had increased thirty percent since 1900.<sup>9</sup> With pressure to cut costs increasing, the Admiralty was forced to search for an economizer. When First Naval Lord Walter Kerr announced his impending retirement in early 1904, they took the opportunity to look outside the usual parade of steady, imperturbable admirals. The man they found would shake the Royal Navy to its very foundations.

John Arbuthnot Fisher, known to his friends and the press as Jacky, was born in Ceylon in 1841. Sent to England to live with relatives, he joined the Royal Navy in 1854 due to the fortuitous circumstance that his godmother lived next to Admiral of the Fleet Sir William Parker. Like nearly all British children, Fisher had already read

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<sup>7</sup> John Costello and Terry Hughes, *Jutland 1916* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977), 20.

<sup>8</sup> *The Times*, April 1906. In Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, Vol. I, 11.

<sup>9</sup> Lambert, *Sir John Fisher's Naval Revolution*, 3, 91.

Southey's *Life of Nelson*.<sup>10</sup> But Parker was a tangible link to the past, the last of Nelson's captains still on active duty.<sup>11</sup> And as the elderly admiral's personal cadet - for in the 1850s high-ranking officers could still enroll their own family or acquaintances directly into service - Fisher spent his first night in the navy at Parker's home, being regaled by tales of Parker's service with Nelson half a century prior.<sup>12</sup> His first days in the Royal Navy were spent in the company of Nelsonian memories, and Fisher would carry a deep devotion to Nelson with him for the rest of his life. As a young midshipman in 1880, Fisher wrote to his family that "all my spare moments for weeks past I have been reading Nicolas's letters and despatches of Lord Nelson, and I hardly do anything else."<sup>13</sup>

But Jacky Fisher's appreciation of Nelson was different. While the Victorian Royal Navy willfully relived 1805 again and again, Fisher personally had entirely divorced his love of Nelson from any love of the current Navy. He was a reformer through and through. After reading another biography of Nelson during his early years in the navy, Fisher came to a personal conclusion: "we all seem such puny, insignificant people after reading of the Nelson times. I quite despise myself."<sup>14</sup> He devoted his

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<sup>10</sup> Arthur J. Marder, *Fear God and Dread Nought: The Correspondence of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fisher of Kilverstone*, vol. III, *Restoration, Abdication, and Last Years, 1914-1920* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1959), 466.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Lambert, "The Magic of Trafalgar: The Nineteenth-Century Legacy," in David Cannadine, ed., *Trafalgar in History: A Battle and its Afterlife* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 170.

<sup>12</sup> Arthur J. Marder, *Fear God and Dread Nought: The Correspondence of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fisher of Kilverstone*, vol. I, *The Making of an Admiral, 1854-1904* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1953), 19.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

naval career to becoming as significant as Nelson, and succeeded admirably. Like many of his contemporaries, Fisher was unimpressed with certain aspects of the service that he had joined. He later recalled that “the chief object in those days seemed to be not to keep your vessel efficient for fighting, but to keep the deck as white as snow and all the ropes taut.”<sup>15</sup> In the early 1870s he wrote to another reformer, George Tryon, “I am getting horribly tired of being a sort of upper housemaid, devoting severe thought to the cleaning of paintwork.”<sup>16</sup>

This was a common sentiment in the Victorian navy, and many eventually grew to accept naval torpor as a matter of course. Fisher never accepted tranquility, and suffered for his dissent. As early as 1871 he called for the abandonment of masts and sails on warships and lost a promotion as a result for being, as he recorded, a “d—d fellow who wanted to do away with masts and sails! A d—d youngster.”<sup>17</sup> Undeterred, Fisher decided to bring about a revolution by other means. In the early 1880s, he slipped confidential naval technical reports to the journalist W.T. Stead; these would be used in the ‘Truth About the Navy’ campaign that rocked the navy and led to the Naval Defence

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew Lambert, *Admirals: The Naval Commanders who Made Britain Great* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), 294.

<sup>17</sup> John Beeler, *Birth of the Battleship: British Capital Ship Design 1870-1881* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2001), 49; Arthur J. Marder, *Fear God and Dread Nought: The Correspondence of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fisher of Kilverstone*, vol. II, *Years of Power, 1904-1914* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1956), 345-346.

Act.<sup>18</sup> Fisher had grasped the revolutionary concept that if one's superiors were not willing, press support could easily sway their thinking.

While the Admiralty underwent a wave of new technological reforms in the 1880s and 1890s, Fisher stayed ashore in a variety of administrative posts. He next appeared on the world stage as the Crown's naval representative to the 1899 Hague peace conference. At an event designed to demonstrate the Great Powers' quest for peace, Fisher preached blood and thunder. His speech to the assembled dignitaries on how the Royal Navy created a peaceful international atmosphere left many aghast: "If you rub it in, at home and abroad, that you are ready for instant war with every unit of your strength in the front line, and intend to be the first in, and hit your enemy in the belly, and kick him when he is down, and boil your prisoners in oil [...] and torture his women and children, then people will keep clear of you."<sup>19</sup> W.T. Stead apologetically reported that this was nothing out of character for Fisher, as his "ideas as to war, and especially as to naval war, were all based upon those current in Nelson's time."<sup>20</sup> Fisher himself saw nothing wrong with these comments, noting that "when I leave The Hague I

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<sup>18</sup> W. Mark Hamilton, *The Nation and the Navy: Methods and Organization of British Navalist Propaganda, 1889-1914* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1986; Outstanding Theses from the London School of Economics and Political Science), 46-47.

<sup>19</sup> William Jameson, *The Fleet that Jack Built: Nine Men who Made a Modern Navy* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1962), 104.

<sup>20</sup> Arthur J. Marder, *Anatomy of British Sea Power: A History of British Naval Policy in the Pre-Dreadnought Era, 1880-1905* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1940), 347.

go to take command of the Mediterranean Fleet. Suppose that war breaks out, and I am expecting to fight a new Trafalgar on the morrow.”<sup>21</sup>

Sir John had indeed been recently appointed to the Mediterranean Fleet, a job he approached with his usual flair: he had Nelson’s Trafalgar signal ‘England Expects that Every Man Shall Do His Duty’ painted over the guns of his flagship HMS *Renown*.<sup>22</sup> He set about furthering the cause of reform via the particularly British method of advocating a return to the past. Fisher sent Joseph Chamberlain a quote from a French admiral praising “the spirit which animates all English sailors;”<sup>23</sup> to this end he believed that “more than ever Nelson must be the model for our Admirals.”<sup>24</sup> Fisher expanded upon this view in a series of lectures to the Mediterranean Fleet between 1899 and 1902. To those who asked what the “vital principle of war” entailed, Fisher replied that it could be found in “Nelson at Cape St. Vincent, the Nile, and Trafalgar.” Unlike many of his contemporaries Fisher believed that the key to naval victory was quick action, without waiting for orders: “far exceeding anything known to history does our future Trafalgar depend on promptitude and rapid decision, and on every eventuality having been foreseen by those in command.” “The Admiral who hesitates is lost,” said Fisher to his

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<sup>21</sup> Richard Hough, *Admiral of the Fleet: The Life of John Fisher* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1970; originally published 1969), 117.

<sup>22</sup> Jan Morris, *Fisher’s Face: Or, Getting to Know the Admiral* (New York: Random House, 1995), 219; Ruddock F. Mackay, *Fisher of Kilverstone* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1973), features a picture of Fisher posing in front of Nelson’s motto opposite page 224.

<sup>23</sup> Admiral Sir Reginald Bacon, *The Life of Lord Fisher of Kilverstone*, vol. I (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1929), 189.

<sup>24</sup> Andrew Gordon, *The Rules of the Game: Jutland and British Naval Command* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1996), 345.

men, and as a counterexample noted “when Nelson went into battle the victory was half-won before a shot was fired” due to his self-confidence in his command decisions.<sup>25</sup>

This was an innovative tactical conception for the turn of the century Navy; it had not yet been a decade since the Tryon inquiry had set in stone the principle of order. But Fisher had even more far-reaching ideas for naval reform. Many of his fellow officers complained about their superiors, and Fisher did the same; he wrote to Lord Rosebery in 1901 that “*what we want is a more rigorous administration at the Admiralty. That is the root of the whole matter. They are lost to a sense of proportion: they can see a pin but they can’t see a mountain!*”<sup>26</sup> Yet instead of remaining content with complaints, Fisher decided to change the Royal Navy singlehandedly to the best of his ability. By 1902 he had been again promoted, on this occasion to the post of Second Naval Lord. He used his new authority to implement a series of reforms that modernized the training of naval cadets and broadened the pool from which future officers were chosen; “we are drawing our Nelsons from too narrow a class,” as Fisher put it.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps it was this reforming spirit that inspired Fisher’s selection as First Naval Lord in 1904; perhaps, like so many admirals before him, he had simply reaped the benefits of being next in line. Whatever the reason behind his appointment, the Admiralty would soon bear the full brunt of Fisher’s reforms.

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<sup>25</sup> The preceding material is taken from Bacon, *The Life of Lord Fisher*, Vol. I, 166, 176-177.

<sup>26</sup> Hough, *Admiral of the Fleet*, 131. Italics present in original.

<sup>27</sup> Conley, *From Jack Tar to Union Jack*, 44; Robert K. Massie, *Dreadnought: Britain, Germany, and the Coming of the Great War* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), 449.

Fisher was delighted at his selection as First Naval Lord. Although the appointment was made in May of 1904 Fisher chose to officially take office on October 21<sup>st</sup>, ninety-nine years to the day after Trafalgar; “nothing like a good omen,” he wrote to his friend Viscount Esher.<sup>28</sup> He spent the intervening months preparing to “use a hundred brooms to sweep away the naval cobwebs of a century;”<sup>29</sup> besides planning new reforms, he had three brief lives of Nelson made ready for immediate distribution among the British fleet.<sup>30</sup> As October drew closer, Fisher apparently became anxious to take up his new position; Viscount Esher consoled him in August with the thought “till Trafalgar eve.”<sup>31</sup> But Fisher could no longer stand the suspense, entering Whitehall a day early.<sup>32</sup> He could not wait past Trafalgar eve to become First Sea Lord.<sup>33</sup>

The new First Sea Lord was known service-wide as a commanding officer who did not suffer fools lightly, and his personal list of fools was longer than most. When commanding in the Mediterranean Fisher let it be known that if any captain under his watch demonstrated “the slightest deficiency in any one fighting requisite, however trivial [...] he would know quite well that I would shoot him like a dog.”<sup>34</sup> Now, as the

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<sup>28</sup> Hough, *Admiral of the Fleet*, 181; Marder, *Fear God and Dread Nought*, Vol. I, 316.

<sup>29</sup> Marder, *Fear God and Dread Nought*, Vol. I, 283.

<sup>30</sup> Mackay, *Fisher of Kilverstone*, 307.

<sup>31</sup> Viscount Reginald Esher, *Journals and Letters of Reginald Viscount Esher*, Maurice V. Brett, ed, vol. 2, 1903-1910 (London: Ivor Nicholson & Watson, 1934), 60-61.

<sup>32</sup> Stephen Wentworth Roskill, *Earl Beatty: The Last Naval Hero* (New York: Athenum, 1981), 41.

<sup>33</sup> A note on terminology: Fisher changed the title of the office of First Naval Lord to its original eighteenth-century version, First Sea Lord.

<sup>34</sup> Marder, *Fear God and Dread Nought*, Vol. I, 195.

professional head of the service he so loved, Fisher vowed to “ruin anyone else who tries to stop me. [...] I’d ruin my best friend if necessary for the Service.”<sup>35</sup> He had a biblical sense of justice, believing “all those who get in my way come to a nasty end. They all die of worms in the stomach or some other horrible complaint.”<sup>36</sup> There was service-wide alarm when Fisher distributed one of his first official memoranda:

I propose a lecture to all the C-in-Cs and Admiral Superintendents whom I am going to have at the Admiralty for an amiable and conciliatory setting-forth of their damned stupidity, pessimism and effeteness, of which I have full and authenticated particulars, and which I shall read out to them and rub their noses in it.<sup>37</sup>

Reginald Custance wrote to his fellow admiral Cyprian Bridge with apprehension:

“Heaven only knows what Fisher may not attempt to run.”<sup>38</sup>

It became evident early in Fisher’s tenure that those who feared change were facing turbulent days ahead. His first cost-cutting measure was the removal of the supply department responsible for providing training cutlasses, a blow to the Admiralty’s old guard.<sup>39</sup> Fisher also continued to take an interest in the manning of the Navy. By 1906 the naval college at Osborne, opened up to a wider class by Fisher’s 1902 reforms, was operating at peak efficiency; naval cadets heard lectures in Nelson Hall, and the college’s gym was crowned with a portrait of Nelson bearing the legend

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<sup>35</sup> Hough, *Admiral of the Fleet*, 175-176.

<sup>36</sup> Morris, *Fisher’s Face*, 170.

<sup>37</sup> Gordon, *The Rules of the Game*, 342.

<sup>38</sup> A.J.A. Morris, *The Scaremongers: The Advocacy of War and Rearmament, 1896-1914* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 165.

<sup>39</sup> Richard Hough, *The Great War at Sea 1914-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 20. The cutlasses were replaced on the outbreak of the First World War.



‘There is nothing the Navy cannot do.’<sup>40</sup> Fisher also streamlined official pay scales in a cost-saving maneuver.<sup>41</sup>

However, these incremental reforms were nothing compared to the list of new programs that Fisher proudly called the Scheme. This platform of revolutionary ideas most famously included the *Dreadnought*, which will be discussed in greater detail later. But before Fisher could build any new warships, he had to perform the serious budget cuts the government was searching for. Fisher accomplished this in two ways. First he centralized and simplified the British fleet’s overall divisions, particularly far-flung flag-showing squadrons; this also led to the reorganization of the home-defense Channel Fleet into the Atlantic Fleet, an early bellwether that Fisher’s eye was shifting from France to Germany. More shockingly, with a sweep of his pen Fisher called for the wholesale scrapping of over one hundred and fifty warships he classified as obsolete. Many of these ships were inevitably saved in official bargaining sessions, but ninety vessels were destined for the breakers before Fisher’s first year was out, with a resulting ten percent savings in the naval estimates.<sup>42</sup>

Fisher was well aware that many if not most of his contemporaries were uncomfortable with the scope of his reforms. He chose to deal with the issue by sidestepping as many of his fellow admirals as he could with the help of his oldest ally,

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<sup>40</sup> Julian Thompson, *The Imperial War Museum Book of the War at Sea, 1914-1918* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 2005), 8, 10; Esher, *Journals and Letters*, Vol. 2, 142. The naval motto was Fisher’s personal idea; Morris, *Fisher’s Face*, 220.

<sup>41</sup> Conley, *From Jack Tar to Union Jack*, 49.

<sup>42</sup> The details of the Scheme are compiled from David Howarth, *The Seafarers: The Dreadnoughts* (Alexandria, VA: Time-Life Books, 1979), 22; Marder, *Fear God and Dread Nought*, Vol. II, 22; P.K. Kemp, ed., *The Papers of Admiral Sir John Fisher*, vol. II (London: Navy Records Society, 1964), xi.

the British press. As previously mentioned, Fisher had been an official source behind the 1884 ‘Truth About the Navy’ scare; besides W.T. Stead, he had been acquainted with J.R. Thursfield, naval correspondent for *The Times*, and Arnold White of the *Daily Mail* since the early 1890s.<sup>43</sup> Fisher believed the Admiralty was not working closely enough with its civilian supporters, and as early as 1900 he wrote that “we have dealt most unwisely with the Navy League (in my humble opinion), for instead of utilizing it and controlling it, the Admiralty have always considered the Navy League its natural enemy!”<sup>44</sup>

He set out to change this, and made a habit of sending approved journalists internal memoranda and other private correspondence intended to strengthen the case for reform among the general population.<sup>45</sup> An early Fisher biographer diplomatically recorded Fisher as being “the first of our Admirals to make an intelligent use of the Press for the benefit of the Navy.”<sup>46</sup> But Fisher and his acquaintances could be heavy-handed with the papers. In 1908 Viscount Esher wrote to *The Times* that their staff “should take the right line about naval affairs. Why should any patriot wish to upset Jackie?”<sup>47</sup> Still, those members of the press with whom Fisher developed working relationships supported him enthusiastically. When he became First Naval Lord the *Daily Mirror* ran a cartoon that featured Nelson climbing down from his column in Trafalgar Square,

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<sup>43</sup> Massie, *Dreadnought*, 444.

<sup>44</sup> Marder, *Fear God and Dread Nought*, Vol. I, 163.

<sup>45</sup> Marder, *Fear God and Dread Nought*, Vol. II, 37.

<sup>46</sup> Marder, *Fear God and Dread Nought*, Vol. I, 154.

<sup>47</sup> Esher, *Journals and Letters*, Vol. 2, 276.

stating that “I was on my way down to lend them a hand myself, but if Jacky Fisher’s taking on the job there’s no need for me to be nervous. I’ll get back on my pedestal.”<sup>48</sup>

Sir John’s popularity with the press should come as no surprise. He was a breath of fresh air to a journalistic establishment that enjoyed comparing Whitehall to a dusty catacomb. Better yet, he preached reform while still remaining completely in thrall to Nelson’s legacy. When Fisher defended his personnel reforms, he claimed that the loosening of naval entry requirements was necessary to find candidates with the ‘four attributes of Nelson,’ which Fisher described as self-reliance, fearlessness of responsibility, fertility of resource, and the power of initiative.<sup>49</sup> He once wrote to Arnold White that every man’s life needed a great inspiration, a great cause, a great battle and a great victory, and suggested that these maxims would make a good manual for midshipmen.<sup>50</sup>

Fisher consistently used his press and political connections to his advantage. At various points in his career he asked former First Lord of the Admiralty George Hamilton, former prime minister Lord Rosebery, and his journalist friend Arnold White to write biographies of Nelson for the popular market; as he complained, “it is cruel how Nelson is forgotten!”<sup>51</sup> Fisher’s outsized personality fit especially well with the Edwardian press. He was jingoistic, believing that “ever since Cromwell it has always

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<sup>48</sup> Lord Fisher, *Memories* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1919), insert between pages 208-209. Fisher enjoyed the cartoon so much he had it reprinted in his memoirs.

<sup>49</sup> Richard Ollard, *Fisher & Cunningham: A Study in the Personalities of the Churchill Era* (London: Constable, 1991), 23; Fisher, *Memories*, 123-124.

<sup>50</sup> Fisher to White, 13 Feb 1910. Marder, *Fear God and Dread Nought*, Vol. II, 307.

<sup>51</sup> Marder, *Fear God and Dread Nought*, Vol. I, 318; *Ibid.*, Vol. II, 50, 428.

been ‘*the People’s Navy*’ and ‘*the Court Army*’<sup>52</sup> and that when British sailors were “heroic on their own element, the sea, we all thank God, as we should do, that Nelson, looking down on us in Trafalgar Square, feels his spirit is still with us.”<sup>53</sup> He was hagiographic in his treatment of Nelson in particular, claiming to be “a humble, and I endeavoured to be an unostentatious, follower of our Immortal Hero;” he wrote of Moses, Elijah and Nelson as “that great and splendid Trio of Translation to Heaven at the very zenith of their powers.”<sup>54</sup> To those both within and without the Admiralty who had been searching for decades for a way to combine the Royal Navy’s heroic past with a real desire for reform in the present Jacky Fisher was, in the words of the journalist L.J. Maxse, “the *deus ex machina* of the Admiralty.”<sup>55</sup>

Yet despite being a committed reformer, Sir John Fisher’s absolute dedication to the past created worrisome issues when it came to pinning down a defined tactical or strategic plan for the Royal Navy. A commander who painted in broad strokes, Fisher viewed the Navy’s sole purpose simply: “our great object is to destroy [the enemy’s] ships. The quickest and most certain way of doing so is by a second Trafalgar, a great fleet action, in which our superior strength in ships will assure us victory.”<sup>56</sup> Speed was of the essence to Fisher; he wrote that “*suddenness* is the secret of success at sea [...]

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<sup>52</sup> Ollard, *Fisher & Cunningham*, 40.

<sup>53</sup> Fisher, *Memories*, 51.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 25, 282.

<sup>55</sup> Harold Frazer Wyatt and L. Graham H. Horton-Smith, eds., *The Passing of the Great Fleet* (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co., Ltd., 1909), 116.

<sup>56</sup> Kemp, ed., *The Papers of Admiral Sir John Fisher*, Vol. II, 90.

rashness may be the height of prudence.”<sup>57</sup> He valued quick action over any in-depth tactical discussions, stating “the most damnable person for you to have any dealings with is a Naval Expert! Sea fighting is pure common sense.”<sup>58</sup> As early as 1902, when it had become apparent that Fisher was destined for high office, he had created a set of war plans – but they were uncomfortably brief, summed up by Fisher’s declaration “let us follow Nelson.”<sup>59</sup>

Fisher took the same historical approach to appointing those who would serve under him. He consistently promoted innovators into technical positions,<sup>60</sup> but when it came to the promotion of fleet commanders and admirals Fisher’s goal was to find “his own trusted and personally selected Nelson who commands the British Fleet.”<sup>61</sup>

Confident that “the advent of Nelson in a fleet (this is a fact) made every common sailor in that fleet as sure of victory as he was breathing,”<sup>62</sup> Fisher remained on the lookout for the next Nelson. There had been a handful of false starts; he called Admiral Sir Geoffrey Phipps Hornby “our greatest Admiral since Nelson” in 1893 and Admiral Sir Arthur Knyvet Wilson Nelson “if there’s a chance” in 1902.<sup>63</sup> He finally settled on an

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<sup>57</sup> Lord Fisher, *Memories and Records*, vol. Two: *Records* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1920; Volume Two: *Records*), 100. Italics present in original.

<sup>58</sup> Winston S. Churchill, *The World Crisis*, vol. I (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1951; originally published 1923), 146.

<sup>59</sup> Marder, *Fear God and Dread Nought*, Vol. I, 223-225.

<sup>60</sup> Admiral Sir Reginald Bacon, *A Naval Scrapbook, First Part, 1877-1900* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1925), 255.

<sup>61</sup> Fisher, *Memories*, 108.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>63</sup> Marder, *Fear God and Dread Nought*, Vol. I, 119, 241.

up-and-coming young captain named John Rushworth Jellicoe, extolling his virtues as the next Nelson to the journalists Gerard Fiennes and J.A. Spender, his friend Viscount Esher, and the wife of First Lord of the Admiralty Reginald McKenna, among others.<sup>64</sup>

The search for a new Nelson was nothing new in the Royal Navy, although Fisher pursued this goal with a particular intensity. What was new was Fisher's greatest shipbuilding project. He had been appointed to save money, which he had done; but Fisher was merely freeing up funds for his greatest project, a new battleship which would "stagger humanity."<sup>65</sup> Late-Victorian battleships generally possessed as many large-caliber guns as could be safely fit upon their superstructures, the idea being to blanket the enemy with fire. But there was a new idea on the horizon. The all-big-gun battleship, first proposed by the Italian Vittorio Cuniberti in a 1903 *Jane's Fighting Ships* article, would do away with the concentration of fire in order to fit a much smaller number of the largest possible weapons.<sup>66</sup> A big-gun battleship dealt in speed and long-range fighting, both anathema to the Admiralty but not to Fisher. And ships of similar construction were already on drawing boards in the United States, Japan, Germany and Russia by 1905.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Fisher, *Memories*, 208-210; Hough, *Admiral of the Fleet*, 314; Corelli Barnett, *The Swordbearers: Supreme Command in the First World War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), 101-102; Violet Bonham-Carter, *Winston Churchill: An Intimate Portrait* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1965), 194; John Winton, *Jellicoe* (London: Michael Joseph, 1981), 123. Fisher referred to Jellicoe as the future Nelson as early as 1889, although the majority of these quotes are from 1911-1912.

<sup>65</sup> Marder, *Fear God and Dread Nought*, Vol. I, 305.

<sup>66</sup> P.K. Kemp, ed., *The Papers of Admiral Sir John Fisher*, vol. I (London: Navy Records Society, 1960), 198.

<sup>67</sup> Holger H. Herwig, "The German Reaction to the Dreadnought Revolution," *International History Review* 13 (1991): 273-283, 276.

Traditionally, Admiralty policy had been to wait until a new warship design had been proven effective in other navies before adopting it at home. The professional journal *The Engineer* had reviewed Cuniberti's proposal in 1904 and come to the following conclusion: "Some such vessel is bound to come in the end, but we hardly think that the day has yet arrived. She would render obsolete too many other fine vessels for any nation to build her without very long and serious thought."<sup>68</sup> Fisher, however, was in no mood to wait. If speed and firepower would lead to a second Trafalgar, the new all-big-gun battleship had to be built immediately. Less than a year after he took office as First Sea Lord, on October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1905, the battleship that would become HMS *Dreadnought* was laid down at Portsmouth.<sup>69</sup>

When *Dreadnought* was launched in early 1906, parted from the ways with a mallet made from the *Victory*'s timbers,<sup>70</sup> the world landscape of naval power was changed overnight – every battleship built in the next ten years would be called a dreadnought. The ship mounted ten 12-inch guns at a time when no other warship possessed more than four; perhaps more importantly, *Dreadnought* could steam at 21 knots due to new turbine engines.<sup>71</sup> Not content with one breakthrough, Fisher pressed onward. Before *Dreadnought* was even launched the world's first battlecruiser, HMS

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<sup>68</sup> Marder, *Anatomy of British Sea Power*, 527.

<sup>69</sup> Peter Padfield, *The Great Naval Race: The Anglo-German Naval Rivalry, 1900-1914* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1974), 135. There is an unaccountable discrepancy about the date of this launch in some accounts, with authors believing that the *Dreadnought* was either laid down or launched on Trafalgar Day. It certainly sounds like a scheme worthy of Fisher, but is not the case.

<sup>70</sup> Massie, *Dreadnought*, 480.

<sup>71</sup> Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, Vol. I, 43.

*Invincible*, had been laid down.<sup>72</sup> More revolutionary than the *Dreadnought*, *Invincible* and her battlecruiser sisters were longer and heavier than battleships and could steam at an astonishing 25 knots while retaining a dreadnought's multiple heavy-gun emplacements.<sup>73</sup> Battlecruisers managed these feats by having nearly no armor as compared to dreadnoughts. This would haunt the Admiralty in future wars, but in the first years of Fisher's reign only the ship's positive aspects were emphasized.

Some at the Admiralty were concerned even at the time about the usefulness of Fisher's new ships, battlecruisers in particular. However, the majority of the British public enthusiastically supported Fisher's furthest-reaching reform. Appearing the year after the Trafalgar centenary, Fisher's mighty war machines seemed to signify a return to naval greatness. The centenary had already greatly raised awareness of Britain's navy past and present. In 1905 cigarette cards were popular, and the avid British consumer could choose from any one of First Lord, Flagship, Admiral, HMS, Royal Navy or Victory brands, or complete their set of fifty Nelson-themed cards.<sup>74</sup> Those interested in the latest technical innovations could also view films on Nelson; after dreadnoughts began to be launched they too became the feature of newsreels.<sup>75</sup>

Propagandistic works on the Royal Navy in general and on Nelson in particular remained popular. Joseph Conrad's 1906 *The Mirror of the Sea* left no doubt that "the

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<sup>72</sup> V.E. Tarrant, *Battlecruiser Invincible: The History of the First Battlecruiser, 1909-16* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1986), 16.

<sup>73</sup> Bassett, *Battle Cruisers: A History*, 14; Jameson, *The Fleet that Jack Built*, 114.

<sup>74</sup> John M. MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion, 1880-1960* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1984), 24-26, Marianne Czisnik, *Admiral Nelson: Image and Icon* (PhD Diss., University of Edinburgh, 2003), 304.

<sup>75</sup> Czisnik, *Admiral Nelson: Image and Icon*, 339; MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire*, 70-71.



man and the ships he knew how to lead have passed away, but Nelson's uplifting touch remains." And Nelson's touch would forever remain: "Like a subtle and mysterious elixir poured into the perishable clay of successive generations, it grows in truth, splendour, and potency with the march of ages." Conrad's work continued with a lyrical interpretation of the value tradition held for British supremacy: "We must turn to the national spirit which, in its continuity to good and evil fortune, can alone give us the feeling of an enduring existence and of an invincible power against the fates. In its incorruptible flow it preserves the greatness of our great men, amongst them the passionate and gentle greatness of Nelson."<sup>76</sup>

Percy Silburn took much the same approach in his 1912 *The Evolution of Sea-Power*, writing of the role Britain's naval past would play in the country's future: "the modern British sailor will go into action confident of success, for he has the prestige of centuries behind him. He cannot understand defeat, nor should he; he is only too anxious to emulate the fighting spirit his forefathers displayed at the repulse of the Armada, at the Nile, and at Trafalgar."<sup>77</sup> Silburn also made an appeal that would have made Jacky Fisher proud, writing "The British empire of the seas cannot stand unless the sea-sense of the nation is kept alive and is rekindled [...] this, then, calls for a vigorous

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<sup>76</sup> Geoffrey Bennett, *Nelson the Commander* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), 297; John B. Hattendorf, "Nelson Afloat: A Hero Among the World's Navies," in David Cannadine, ed., *Admiral Lord Nelson: Context and Legacy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 179-180.

<sup>77</sup> Percy Silburn, *The Evolution of Sea-Power* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1912), 270.

programme of education on the subject of sea-power by the State authorities and by the Press of the empire.”<sup>78</sup>

Author Frank T. Bullen felt similarly in his 1906 *Our Heritage the Sea*. Bullen stated in his introduction that *Our Heritage the Sea* was written because “it is a wonderfully inspiring theme for Britons, this growth of sea-power, and one that should hold a predominant place in the curricula of our schools of all classes.” He helpfully pointed out that naval history “should not be a hard task to teach it to our boys, for the story is so interesting, so full of thrilling romantic interest, that even in the hands of the dullest teacher it could hardly be made dry.”<sup>79</sup> Pro-naval accounts also appeared in handier versions. Bartimeus, the pen name of author Lewis Anselm da Costa Ritchie, penned a number of naval short stories that were eventually compiled into book form. Due to their format, Bartimeus’ stories were brief and pithy. One, 1914’s “The Legion on the Wall,” features a group of Royal Navy officers comparing their lot to the last Roman soldiers in Britain: “they had been brought up in all the brave traditions of their Empire....When you think of it, there wasn’t much left to fight for, except their proud traditions. And yet they fought to the last.”<sup>80</sup> Another, “A Tithe of Admiralty,” features a fifteen-year old naval cadet; as the narrator says, “if his imagination was coloured by the periodicals and literature of boyhood, who is to blame him?”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>79</sup> Frank T. Bullen, *Our Heritage the Sea* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1906), ix-x.

<sup>80</sup> “Bartimeus” [Lewis Anselm da Costa Ritchie], *Naval Occasions and Some Traits of the Sailor-Man* (Freeport, NY: Books For Libraries Press, 1970; originally published 1914), 58.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 60.

Bartimeus had the right idea. Although full-length naval works were still popular, periodicals and newspapers were still how the majority of Britain's middle class received their naval news; a 1906 survey of one area's working class found "the kind of reading in which the average working-class men and women of Manchester and Salford delight consists of sporting and ultrasensational newspapers [...] the most jingo shade of insular 'patriotism' [is] served up in regular instalments [sic] to the rising generation."<sup>82</sup> This was the market the Navy League had broken into in the mid-1890s, and their work continued after the dreadnought era began.

The Navy League remained a major pro-naval player, and its popularity only increased during Fisher's tenure. The League had 14,000 members in 1901; by 1914 they could boast 100,000.<sup>83</sup> As it grew the League still devoted a great deal of energy to youth education programs. A 1913 article in the *Navy League Quarterly* codified the League's position that "the Defence of the British Empire" was "the Duty of Every British Boy."<sup>84</sup> To further this goal the League distributed textbooks on naval history and classroom posters of dreadnoughts, and gave school lantern-slide lectures on the Navy; more advanced students were dealt with by the League's Universities Sub-Committee.<sup>85</sup> E.L. Churchill described in 1907 the importance the League felt naval history held for Britain's youth: "surely nowhere can more types be found of what a boy

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<sup>82</sup> Johan A. Höglund, *Mobilising the Novel: The Literature of Imperialism and The First World War* (Uppsala, Sweden: Reklam & Katalogtryck AB, 1997), 20.

<sup>83</sup> Conley, *From Jack Tar to Union Jack*, 134.

<sup>84</sup> Cynthia Fansler Behrman, *Victorian Myths of the Sea* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1977), 63.

<sup>85</sup> Hamilton, *The Nation and the Navy*, 148; MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire*, 183; Wyatt & Horton-Smith, eds., *The Passing of the Great Fleet*, 53.

should aim at being and a man should be than in the British Navy. The two leading characteristics of that service are modesty and devotion to duty.”<sup>86</sup>

Of course, the League also continued its work with Britain’s general population. Their members were predominantly middle-class, and this market was securely catered to: in 1912 alone the League held 400 public meetings and distributed 1.5 million pro-naval leaflets.<sup>87</sup> The League also ran special larger events such as the 1909 play *A Plea for the Navy*.<sup>88</sup> One Navy League project, the Trafalgar Fund, proved so popular the League eventually had to borrow from the Fund to cover other expenses.<sup>89</sup>

The Admiralty proved willing and able to assist the League in matters of national naval support. Fleet reviews were one way to increase the public’s interest in the navy. Originally reserved for coronations or other public commemorations, fleet reviews became increasingly common in the Edwardian period. There were three reviews in June and July of 1909 alone; more importantly from a naval publicity standpoint, one of them was held specifically for the benefit of the press.<sup>90</sup> Naval journalist Filson Young explained the process: “It was the custom of the Admiralty, when the Fleet was mobilized for manoeuvres, to invite certain newspapers to send representatives as guests [...] and to give these guests a week of voyaging and entertainment before the actual

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<sup>86</sup> Conley, *From Jack Tar to Union Jack*, 145.

<sup>87</sup> Hamilton, *The Nation and the Navy*, 351, 359.

<sup>88</sup> MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire*, 50.

<sup>89</sup> Czisnik, *Admiral Nelson: Image and Icon*, 383.

<sup>90</sup> Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, Vol. I, 171.

manoeuvres began.”<sup>91</sup> After the journalists spent their week aboard, the review would move to a major city and give the general public its own opportunity to see Britain’s naval power up close.

One 1909 London fleet review provides an example of the spectacle associated with these naval visits. Londoners could buy dreadnought-themed food, clothing and children’s toys near where the fleet lay in the Thames and then take trams shaped like miniature dreadnoughts down to the water’s edge to view “the fleet that stirs our blood and dazzles us with the splendour of its strength,” as the *Daily Mirror* described the event; the youngest naval enthusiasts were given children’s programs specially prepared by the navy.<sup>92</sup> Four million individuals visited the 1909 London review; fleet gatherings became such an economic force that Glasgow specially requested, and received from the Admiralty, its own review in 1912.<sup>93</sup> As Admiral Fisher’s colleague Viscount Esher wrote in 1911, “[Henry] Haldane and Henry Wilson and all the Generals in the Empire cannot deflect the mind and hearts of the people from their elemental love for the British navy.”<sup>94</sup>

This elemental love had increased greatly by 1910. In this jingoistic age, naval enthusiasm sometimes swelled dangerously close to something Fisher and his

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<sup>91</sup> Filson Young, *With the Battle Cruisers* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1986; originally published 1921), 23.

<sup>92</sup> Jan R ger, *The Great Naval Game: Britain and Germany in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007; Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Modern Warfare), 13-14, 214.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 50; Jan R ger, “Nation, Empire and Navy: Identity Politics in the United Kingdom 1887-1914,” *Past & Present* 185 (November 2004): 159-187, 166.

<sup>94</sup> Esher to Fisher 27 April 1911. Viscount Reginald Esher, *Journals and Letters of Reginald Viscount Esher*, vol. 3, 1910-1915 (Oliver, Viscount Esher, ed. London: Ivor Nicholson & Watson, 1938), 51-52.

compatriots could not control. The Admiralty had certainly done its share of blustering, particularly in the Fisher years; one 1907 press release declared “the British Empire floats in the British Navy. It is our all in all. Victory at sea, desirable to foreign States is a *sine qua non* to our continued existence. We must win at sea or perish as a nation.”<sup>95</sup> And Fisher had encouraged many a journalist to print pro-naval articles. Arnold White was one of Fisher’s closest allies in the press, and he continued to champion the Admiralty, as in his 1911 book *The Navy* which claimed that “in the next great sea war the fate of the Empire will be settled in one great moment – when the two fleets meet.” But White began sounding notes of concern about the Royal Navy’s strength; that same year he wrote “defeat of a British fleet is defeat forever. British defeat at sea is eternal, irreparable, irredeemable. Our Fleet is our all-in-all.”<sup>96</sup>

Arnold White was not alone. Fisher had silenced Admiralty critics of his dreadnought program by turning to the press to demonstrate widespread public support for increased naval building. But war scares resurfaced nearly every year, and many British newspapers were now calling for yet more ships and great battles. Some of this took the form of the same desire for a battle of annihilation that animated the Admiralty. The *Spectator* editorialized in 1910 that Trafalgar had been won “because our Fleet, inspired by a great tradition and a great man recognized that to win you must attack – go for, fall upon, fly at the throat of, hammer, pulverise, destroy, annihilate – your

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<sup>95</sup> Padfield, *The Great Naval Race*, 184.

<sup>96</sup> Hamilton, *The Nation and the Navy*, 206- 208.

enemy.”<sup>97</sup> Military historian Spencer Wilkinson stated in a 1909 lecture at Oxford that “the historian sees in Trafalgar and in Tsushima [sic] nothing but the inevitable consequence of the previous lives of the navies concerned.”<sup>98</sup> However, more press outlets were also beginning to demand increased naval activity. In 1909 the *Evening Standard and St. James’s Gazette* claimed Britain’s “very existence as a nation worthy in any sense of a great past and noble traditions [...] is dependent on the maintenance of the Navy in quantity as in quality.”<sup>99</sup> The *Daily Telegraph* ran an appeal for more battleships, declaring “we are not yet prepared to turn the face of every portrait of Nelson to the wall.”<sup>100</sup>

Popular navalist organizations such as the Navy League had risen to prominence on an apolitical platform. The League was more interested in the schoolyard than the halls of Parliament. A young George Orwell recalled his first foray into politics: “At seven years old I was a member of the Navy League and wore a sailor suit with H.M.S. *Invincible* on my cap.”<sup>101</sup> League press releases claimed “the question of the Navy lies above and beyond all considerations of party politics,” and in the 1910 general election the League urged voters to “Drop Party for once and Vote for a Supreme Fleet.”<sup>102</sup> This

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<sup>97</sup> Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, Vol. I, 367.

<sup>98</sup> Hamilton, *The Nation and the Navy*, 226.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 344.

<sup>100</sup> Arthur Herman, *To Rule the Waves: How the British Navy Shaped the Modern World* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004), 484.

<sup>101</sup> MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire*, 255.

<sup>102</sup> Matthew Johnson, “The Liberal Party and the Navy League in Britain before the Great War,” *Twentieth Century British History*, Twentieth Century British History Advance Access (Accessed 9 May 2011), 7.

strategy did prove viable; there were over one hundred Members of Parliament in the League by 1908, and while the majority were Tories there was a scattering of Liberal League members, including a young Winston Churchill.<sup>103</sup>

But as public interest in the Navy grew, navalist organizations inevitably became involved in political matters. No matter how many dreadnoughts the Royal Navy added, there were always calls for more. In a 1909 *Daily Mail* article journalist Robert Blatchford called for the Navy to institute a building policy of twenty-six dreadnoughts a year – at a time when four was the norm – along with an immediate grant of fifty million pounds to the navy and national conscription from the age of ten; this article was later reprinted and sold as a popular pamphlet.<sup>104</sup> Not to be outdone, the author James Blyth spoke on the state of the British Navy in his 1909 *The Swoop of the Vulture*: “Be strong, my countrymen. Ward off war by overwhelming power. Give up all, education (a useless incubus to 50% of the children) poor rates, old age pensions, what you will, give up all to the preservation of a navy which can terrorise the world.”<sup>105</sup>

This new generation of extreme navalists had its own prophet within the Admiralty. Lord Charles Beresford had risen to become a high-ranking admiral and essentially Jacky Fisher’s polar opposite; a captain serving under Beresford recalled that

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<sup>103</sup> Conley, *From Jack Tar to Union Jack*, 133; Johnson, “The Liberal Party and the Navy League,” 26. Conley has identified 112 League-related MPs of all political parties; Johnson states that there were at least 48 navalist Liberal MPs, although not all were in the League.

<sup>104</sup> Caroline E. Playne, *The Pre-War Mind in Britain: An Historical Review* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1928), 145.

<sup>105</sup> Höglund, *Mobilising the Novel*, 148.



“ceremonial had become almost an obsession with him.”<sup>106</sup> Technological innovations held no joy for Beresford. When the Admiralty began investigating the feasibility of submarines, another project spearheaded by Fisher, Beresford’s believed “Nelson would turn over in his grave” at this breach of naval tradition.<sup>107</sup> The launching of the *Dreadnought* so antagonized Beresford that he penned a short book, entitled *The Betrayal*, about how Fisher had caused the Admiralty to abandon its past: “in 1906 the tradition of dignity and courtesy hitherto prevailing in the Service was rudely violated, and Great Britain proclaimed herself the Bully of the Seas.”<sup>108</sup>

Beresford had long maintained an unfriendly relationship with Fisher. Barely younger than Fisher, Beresford had seen his opportunity to serve as First Sea Lord disappear with Fisher’s appointment. Fisher tried to placate an angry Beresford by offering him command of the prestigious Channel Fleet, but later severely slashed the same fleet under the Scheme.<sup>109</sup> Now Beresford saw an opportunity to discredit Fisher in return. He threw his considerable public support behind a new pro-naval rival to the Navy League.

Founded in 1908 by naval journalists Harold Frazer Wyatt and L. Graham H. Horton-Smith, the Imperial Maritime League devoted itself to maintaining a more hard-line navalist stance than the older Navy League. Their stated goals included ‘the command of the sea as national policy’ and ‘the spreading of information about the

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<sup>106</sup> Captain Lionel Dawson. Marder, *From the Dreadnaught to Scapa Flow*, Vol. I, 89.

<sup>107</sup> Lambert, *Sir John Fisher’s Naval Revolution*, 165.

<sup>108</sup> Lord Charles Beresford, *The Betrayal* (London: P.S. King & Son, 1912), 62-63.

<sup>109</sup> Padfield, *The Great Naval Race*, 149.

Empire and naval supremacy;’ backroom Imperial Maritime League dealings apparently also included a pledge to work with Beresford towards Fisher’s removal.<sup>110</sup> Wyatt and Horton-Smith were both former Navy League members who had begun to push for more pro-naval demonstrations around the time of the *Dreadnought*’s launch. Upset at what they perceived as a lack of political action within the Navy League, the two men began to agitate for action. They gave an interview to the *Standard* in 1907 on the faults extreme navalists found with the Navy League: “never was it intended, never was it contemplated, that the League should be restricted to the humble role now imposed upon it by the committee, the role of an agency for supplying lectures in boys’ and girls’ schools, while not merely acquiescing in, but actually supporting, the reduction of expenditure upon the Fleet.”<sup>111</sup> That same year Wyatt and Horton-Smith published an open letter to all Navy League members: “though it is of high importance to train the children of Britain in patriotism and in the principles of sea-power, that work is entirely subsidiary to the chief purpose of the League, which is [...] to influence National Policy. [...] That purpose is *not* fulfilled by lantern lectures to schoolchildren.”<sup>112</sup>

Other Navy League members began to publish their own articles in support of Wyatt and Horton-Smith’s position. Journalist L.J. Maxse told the *National Review* that the two men “realise that the British Navy as we know it to-day is the child of agitation

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<sup>110</sup> Behrman, *Victorian Myths of the Sea*, 150; Morris, *The Scaremongers*, 188.

<sup>111</sup> The *Standard*, 22 May 1907. Wyatt & Horton-Smith, eds., *The Passing of the Great Fleet*, 96.

<sup>112</sup> 22 June 1907. *Ibid.*, 133-134. Italics present in original.

and can only be preserved by agitation.”<sup>113</sup> Finally, at a contentious Navy League meeting in July 1907, it became obvious that the ultra-navalists would soon form their own organization. Many spent the meeting berating the Navy League for its perceived failures. F.T. Jane summed up the thoughts of those preparing to strike out on their own:

You have got on your NAVY LEAGUE JOURNAL, and on the form of membership, the portrait of Nelson. You claim to have founded the LEAGUE to keep up the spirit of Nelson. Do you mean to tell me that the spirit of Nelson is in any way whatever to be associated with cutting down the Navy because 125 Radical M.P.'s sent in a petition to the Prime Minister? Is that the spirit of Nelson? Is this LEAGUE founded for Nelson, or is it not? Is it founded to keep up the spirit of Nelson? Because Nelson died for his country, the least we can do is to preserve the spirit he died for.<sup>114</sup>

The Imperial Maritime League did follow its original charter. Although by 1910 the Maritime League had formed its own youth organization and was delivering lectures in British schools, by and large its members focused on political activism.<sup>115</sup> As Wyatt and Horton-Smith stated, “we did not propose merely to vent platitudes about the necessity of naval strength to the British people, and then (like the committee of the old Navy League) at once shirk every issue upon which the preservation of that strength depended.”<sup>116</sup> They made good use of their connection to Charles Beresford. The back matter of Beresford’s anti-Fisher book contained recruiting advertisements for the Maritime League, assuring readers “Vital and Undefeated; Alone and Undismayed; the Imperial Maritime League combats: To Sustain our Naval Supremacy; To Redeem our

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<sup>113</sup> 20 July 1907. *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>114</sup> 19 July 1907. *Ibid.*, 197. This quote is transcribed from the notes of the July 19<sup>th</sup> meeting and the notation of crowd cheers and applause has been removed.

<sup>115</sup> Hamilton, *The Nation and the Navy*, 160.

<sup>116</sup> Wyatt & Horton-Smith, eds., *The Passing of the Great Fleet*, xvi.

Naval Rights' and to Revive that 'Soul of Greatness' which inspired all men of British blood in the days that are gone."<sup>117</sup> And when members of the Imperial Maritime League spoke of British naval superiority, it was always against the same implied foe across the North Sea. When the Navy League had begun, France played the part of antagonist to Great Britain. But in the age of Fisher, it was obvious that any preparations for a naval war were being taken against Germany.

Politically, imperial Germany had long had an unsteady relationship with Britain. But they had no navy to concern the Admiralty, and many naval-minded Germans looked to the Royal Navy as an example of what their future could hold. Germany's most powerful figures respected the Royal Navy. Alfred von Tirpitz, the German naval secretary, wrote in his memoirs that his service "grew up on the British Navy like a creeping plant."<sup>118</sup> The German naval writer Alfred Stenzel believed "one must nurture the Nelsonian Spirit, and cultivate his ideas in order to achieve that [naval] greatness;"<sup>119</sup> to further this spirit, a copy of Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History* in translation was placed on every German warship.<sup>120</sup> Kaiser Wilhelm II was the grandson of Queen Victoria and had visited the *Victory* as a youth. When Victoria made him an honorary British admiral, Wilhelm reported to the British ambassador in Berlin

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<sup>117</sup> Beresford, *The Betrayal*, end matter.

<sup>118</sup> Daniel Allen Butler, *Distant Victory: The Battle of Jutland and the Allied Triumph in the First World War* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006), 58.

<sup>119</sup> Hattendorf, "Nelson Afloat," 175.

<sup>120</sup> Holger H. Herwig, *"Luxury" Fleet: The Imperial German Navy 1888-1918* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980), 40.

that “wearing the same uniform as St. Vincent and Nelson” was “enough to make one giddy.”<sup>121</sup>

But an appreciation of navies past led Germany, and Wilhelm in particular, to begin planning for a navy of the future. Britain had begun pumping money into her naval forces with the Naval Defence Act of 1885. Germany came late to navalism; the First Navy Bill, devoting funds to a modern battleship fleet, was passed in 1898.<sup>122</sup> But Germany learned quickly, and with the Kaiser’s backing additional naval laws came into being in 1900, 1906, 1908, and 1912.<sup>123</sup> Publically, German naval buildups and the often-resultant British naval scares were dismissed by the Admiralty and the press. Esher wrote to Fisher that “an invasion scare is the mill of God which grinds you out a Navy of Dreadnoughts, and keeps the British people warlike in spirit,”<sup>124</sup> and *The Times* wearily complained “the public always goes like this in March [when the year’s naval estimates were published].”<sup>125</sup>

Privately, tensions were rising. Germany had begun planning for a war against Britain in 1896; a decade later the Admiralty informed the C-in-C of the Channel Fleet that in the event war broke out “the principal object is to bring the main German fleet to

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<sup>121</sup> Massie, *Dreadnought*, 108, 150-151.

<sup>122</sup> Hough, *Admiral of the Fleet*, 93.

<sup>123</sup> Massie, *Dreadnought*, 180, 183.

<sup>124</sup> 1 October 1907. Hamilton, *The Nation and the Navy*, 173.

<sup>125</sup> Morris, *The Scaremongers*, 168.

decisive action and all other operations are subsidiary to this end.”<sup>126</sup> Both politicians and the press began to display open hostility in the Fisher era. As early as 1902 Arnold White, already a steady Fisher collaborator, inquired that if “the German Fleet is a menace to the British Empire, does not sound human reason demand that it should be destroyed before the youth becomes a man, or a giant, as will be the case by 1915?”<sup>127</sup> The Kaiser defended Germany’s interests: “Only when we can hold out our mailed fist against his face, will the British lion draw back.”<sup>128</sup>

Eventually newspapermen of all types became involved in this war of words. As both countries’ naval forces increased in the dreadnought era, printed attacks became more vehement. J.A. Cramb’s 1914 *Germany and England* waxed poetic: “if the dire event of a war with Germany – if it is a dire event – should ever occur, there shall be seen upon this earth of ours a conflict which, beyond all others, will recall that description of the great Greek wars: ‘Heroes in battle with heroes, / And above them the wrathful gods.’”<sup>129</sup> The German poet Gorch Fock, on assignment with the German navy, responded with his own Teutonic verses: “Beware, John Bull, beware! German wrath,

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<sup>126</sup> Paul Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism 1860-1914* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980), 221; Robert K. Massie, *Castles of Steel: Britain, Germany, and the Winning of the Great War at Sea* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003), 72.

<sup>127</sup> Playne, *The Pre-War Mind in Britain*, 140.

<sup>128</sup> Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism*, 224.

<sup>129</sup> Höglund, *Mobilising the Novel*, 49.

the fierce, smiling anger of a Siegfried at Saxon perfidy, is about to break over you. [...] All the old gods have come back to fight with us. Valhalla in the Gotterdämmerung.”<sup>130</sup>

Jacky Fisher’s creation of the naval press was now playing its own part in the war mania that began to overtake the Admiralty as well as the British public, and there were cracks developing in Fisher’s hold on the reins of naval power as well. 1909 saw a Parliamentary inquiry into the amount of money First Lord of the Admiralty Reginald McKenna had spent on fleet reviews.<sup>131</sup> Charles Beresford also continued to press Fisher, eventually mounting a press campaign against the First Sea Lord and charging Fisher with dereliction of duty for not possessing any written Admiralty war plans. Although Beresford’s bombshell was itself a breach of policy, as any war planning information had to remain confidential, the charge stuck in the naval scare-prone public climate.<sup>132</sup> In an attempt to fend off Beresford’s internal criticisms, an Admiralty committee headed by Fisher produced an official set of war plans in 1907.

The Admiralty War Plans, intended more as a personal defense than an actual strategic document, appeared hastily cobbled together. Despite all his reforming tendencies, Fisher’s conception of naval strategy remained firmly rooted in 1805; the plans stated that “the first active duty of our main fleet must be to endeavour to destroy that of the enemy. To this rule there can be no exception.”<sup>133</sup> Much of the plans were

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<sup>130</sup> Stuart Legg, ed., *Jutland: An Eye-Witness Account of a Great Battle* (New York: The John Day Company, 1967; originally published 1966), 31.

<sup>131</sup> Rüger, “Nation, Empire and Navy,” 164.

<sup>132</sup> Padfield, *The Great Naval Race*, 150-151.

<sup>133</sup> Kemp, ed., *The Papers of Admiral Sir John Fisher*, Vol. II, 337.

dedicated merely to the championing of Fisher's battlecruisers, which Fisher was at pains to describe in Nelsonian terms: "to regard them as an indication of decadence in our service – as a sign that brute force is taking the place of the art of war – is to miss their whole significance. In reality they are the expression of the most cherished and distinctive aspiration of our greatest masters of the art [...] the very type that all the old men from Hawke to Nelson sighed for, but never obtained."<sup>134</sup>

Fisher's hasty war plans did little to silence his critics. It must have been obvious even to Fisher's most steadfast supporters that they were a stopgap measure from a man who believed "like poets, Fleet Admirals are born, not made;"<sup>135</sup> at any rate the 1907 plans were never implemented. Fisher's lukewarm response to such tactical critiques infuriated Beresford, and the situation was not improved with Beresford's 1909 dismissal from the navy; the Imperial Maritime League passed out memorial cards with Nelson's last words in response.<sup>136</sup> Eventually, the verbal conflict between the two men and their supporters in the public arena – Beresford had simply continued his political career as a Member of Parliament - became so obstructionist towards everyday naval business that the Admiralty held an official inquiry into the feud. The inquiry was hastily conducted to avoid professional embarrassment for either admiral, and both men were cleared of any wrongdoing. But escaping censure was a victory for Beresford, who took his exoneration as an opportunity to launch a nationwide speaking tour on Fisher's incompetence. Fisher had weathered many storms of publicity during his tenure as First

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 326-327.

<sup>135</sup> Fisher, *Memories*, 37.

<sup>136</sup> Marder, *Fear God and Dread Nought*, Vol. II, 225.



Sea Lord, but governmental pressure to cut naval spending concurrent with public pressure to increase naval spending eventually got the better of the aging reformer. Fisher announced late in 1909 that he would step down as First Sea Lord the following year.<sup>137</sup>

The Fisher-Beresford controversy had shaken the Royal Navy at a time when it badly needed a united front against external political and journalistic pressures; by 1910, “officers were all partisans either of Sir John, or of Lord Charles, and would not speak to each other.”<sup>138</sup> For his part, Fisher believed he would soon be invited back to his rightful place at the Admiralty: “*I’ll be back all right in 1912!* My PROPER date is October 21, 1912, but I’ve compromised with [First Lord] McKenna and made it Lady Day [March 25th] and hope the Blessed Virgin will be as propitious as Saint Horatio; but I doubt it.”<sup>139</sup> The Navy certainly would have been more efficient had Fisher never left. His replacement as First Sea Lord was the elderly Sir Arthur Wilson, called out of retirement to head the Admiralty.<sup>140</sup>

Once some of the controversy had died down and Admiralty business could be examined in the light of day, it quickly became apparent that the Senior Service’s tactical confusion had not improved since the dreadnought revolution. For all his technological innovations, Fisher’s last days were plagued by the same complaints among junior officers that had been present since the Crimean War. David Beatty’s

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<sup>137</sup> Padfield, *The Great Naval Race*, 228-229.

<sup>138</sup> Sir Edmund Poë to Sir George King-Hall. Gordon, *The Rules of the Game*, 368.

<sup>139</sup> Marder, *Fear God and Dread Nought*, Vol. II, 367. Italics present in original.

<sup>140</sup> Gordon, *The Rules of the Game*, 369.

1909 complaint could have been written half a century earlier: “The men are excellent, but some of the officers, although very nice, are infernally stupid and had very little knowledge.”<sup>141</sup> Captain Charles Ottley took his naval worries all the way to Secretary of State for War Richard Haldane, writing “not one naval officer out of fifty has any knowledge of what the British fleet will do in war, or how it will do it.”<sup>142</sup> Fisher had been jealous of naval independence, but after his departure those from other branches of the British government were not impressed with what he had left behind. Douglas Haig wrote to Winston Churchill in 1913 that “the navy stands condemned [...] we should, presumably, be careful to steer clear of any wars.”<sup>143</sup>

Matters did not improve under the administration of Arthur Wilson. Fisher had equipped the Royal Navy with the most modern warships, but five years of his administration could not erase a century of ingrained conceptions of what war should be – particularly when Fisher spent much of his time arguing for Nelsonian battles of annihilation. As public calls for an ever-greater navy increased and German saber-rattling continued, the Admiralty’s mindset shifted more and more to the offensive. The attitude of victory at any cost that would be so exposed in 1914 was extremely popular in 1912 when Admiral Sir Reginald Custance wrote that “the idea that safety is of paramount importance, and that the defeat of the enemy is only secondary, is not only

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<sup>141</sup> David Beatty to Ethel Beatty, 20 Feb 1909. Ranft, ed., *The Beatty Papers*, Vol. I, 19.

<sup>142</sup> Lambert, *Sir John Fisher’s Naval Revolution*, 167.

<sup>143</sup> Barnett, *The Swordbearers*, 112-113.

directly opposed to military principles, but is calculated to undermine and destroy the military spirit.”<sup>144</sup>

As war clouds gathered on the horizon, it appeared that twenty-five years of uninterrupted navalism had produced consequences in the British fleet. In the Victorian era it had been the younger generations within the service that had pointed out the follies of their commanders. Of course, griping at the expense of one’s superiors remained a popular pastime. But the vast majority of serving naval personnel *wanted* war in 1914. Lieutenant Commander J.M Kenworthy recalled the Navy’s mindset in the immediate pre-war years: “We prepared for war in professional hours, talked war, thought war, and hoped for war. For war would be our opportunity.” Admiral B.M. Chambers noted the same mindset in the Mediterranean, noting the “universal prayer of the squadron, young and old [was] ‘Give us War.’”<sup>145</sup>

When war came in August 1914, many in Britain were unconcerned with the details. The power politics of mainland Europe had provided a conflict, and the navy could recapture its past glories while defending the homeland and ensuring a quick end to the war. Newsreel footage from August showed both men and boys sailing homemade dreadnoughts in the fountains of Trafalgar Square, while newspaper boys spread stories of great naval battles on the first day of the war to drive up sales.<sup>146</sup> A

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<sup>144</sup> Jan S. Breemer, “The Burden of Trafalgar: Decisive Battle and Naval Strategic Expectations on the Eve of World War One,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 17, no. 1 (March 1994): 33-62, 42.

<sup>145</sup> Marder, *Anatomy of British Sea Power*, 20.

<sup>146</sup> Morris, *The Scaremongers*, 1-2; Rüger, *The Great Naval Game*, 254.

young soldier fresh off to Europe wrote his mother and told her not to worry, as “our navy will play the chief part in our share of the war.”<sup>147</sup>

The mood in the Royal Navy was something akin to elation among all ranks and classes. Reginald Tyrwhitt and David Beatty were both captains commanding a large number of surface units. Tyrwhitt admitted just before the outbreak of the war that “now I am only longing for this desperate waiting to be over and to begin business. I can’t see how we can fail to defeat Germany afloat.”<sup>148</sup> Beatty displayed even more enthusiasm. He carried books on Nelson and portraits of Trafalgar and the Nile with him on all his warships, and kept multiple copies of Nelson’s pre-Trafalgar prayer in his cabins. As early as 1909 he stated to an audience at London’s Guildhall “we are praying that should the time ever come, we shall be found to conform to the words of the immortal Nelson that we have done our duty.”<sup>149</sup> Just days before Britain opened hostilities, Beatty’s flag captain Ernle Chatfield recorded Beatty’s thoughts: “He longed for it. We had not fought for a century: it was time we repeated the deeds of our forefathers.”<sup>150</sup> On August 5<sup>th</sup>, just one day after Britain had entered the conflict, Beatty wrote to his wife that “the enthusiasm was immense. I have never seen such a magnificent and cheerful spirit. War was a certainty at the time and we all knew it [...] we are making history

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<sup>147</sup> Richard Holmes, *Tommy: The British Soldier on the Western Front, 1914-1918* (London: HarperCollinsPublishers, 2004), 141.

<sup>148</sup> Jameson, *The Fleet that Jack Built*, 255.

<sup>149</sup> Rear-Admiral W.S. Chalmers, *The Life and Letters of David, Earl Beatty* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1951), 100-101, 422-423.

<sup>150</sup> Colin White, ed., *The Nelson Companion* (Bridgend, UK: Bramley Books, 1997), 24.

now, and it shall be a page that will not be behind those of the glorious past, so courage.”<sup>151</sup>

Even the navy’s younger members saw the war as a joyous occasion. Stephen King-Hall, only twenty-one in 1914, recalled the scene created when his ship mobilized for war: “the ladies ashore appeared to be convinced that we were sailing for Trafalgar II next morning.” Before war had even been declared King-Hall met a naval friend who “hadn’t the faintest idea where his uniform was, but he thanked his Maker that he hadn’t missed the Fleet action!”<sup>152</sup> Douglas King-Harmon, manning a reserve battleship in August 1914, wrote to his father with news of the war: “the news was received with great enthusiasm by all hands. The whole fleet was cheering continuously. We are all ready for immediate action, and only hope that our First Fleet may leave a few of the enemy’s ships for us to have a flap at [...] the relief is immense.”<sup>153</sup>

This, then, was the ultimate result of the navalist age. The cadets and midshipmen who manned the Grand Fleet in the First World War had grown up in a Britain that idolized Nelson and the Royal Navy in every way. The mid-Victorian service of elderly admirals and untested ships was gone. The surge of popular naval support beginning in the mid-1880s had brought the Royal Navy back to the people’s attention; ten years of Jacky Fisher’s tutelage had changed a reactive Admiralty into an organization that produced the most innovative warships on the sea.

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<sup>151</sup> David Beatty to Ethel Beatty, 5 August 1914. Chalmers, *The Life and Letters of David, Earl Beatty*, 136-137.

<sup>152</sup> Stephen King-Hall, *A North Sea Diary, 1914-1918* (London: Newnes, 1936), 27, 40. Early editions of this work were published under the pseudonym ‘Etienne.’

<sup>153</sup> Thompson, *The Imperial War Museum Book of the War at Sea*, 61.

But as so often occurs, the Royal Navy had suffered from too much of a good thing. Public and political interest led to new ships and more men, but Parliament and *The Times* eventually clashed, leaving the Admiralty caught in the middle. Fisher the economizer had created ships more expensive than anything in the Navy's history, resulting in Parliamentary grumbling about cost-cutting even as the jingoistic press called for more and more warships of all types.

Sir John Fisher had modernized the fleet to an astonishing degree, but when it came to tactical ideas he remained a devoted student of the past. Fisher's almost religious devotion to the Royal Navy's of a century prior and Nelson in particular played well with his greatest allies of the press and the public. He rose to public prominence at the time of the Trafalgar centennial and was a man uniquely suited to his moment, bridging the gap between Nelson's naval glories – easily understood by a general public that had been raised on the faint but persistent cultural memory of Trafalgar and the Nile – and the unsettling new world of battleships that could sail further and hit harder than anything that had come before. However, Fisher's modernizations seemed to peter out soon after the Scheme. He pushed many of the innovations that would be a staple of the First World War at sea, particularly submarine warfare, but never devoted the resources to such programs that were funneled to Fisher's personal, supposedly Trafalgar-recreating idea of the battlecruiser.

By 1914 the Royal Navy appeared as if it would easily recapture the glory of Trafalgar. A nation and a navy raised on the stories of Nelson and the value of naval warfare expected a quick battle of annihilation. Yet underneath the glittering exterior of

a fleet of dreadnoughts lay a simplistic conception of what modern warfare entailed. At its core the navy of 1914 suffered from the same malaise that had stunted the navy of 1854 and so worried the Admiralty of 1885. The cultural and professional edifice of Nelson had overshadowed his actual lessons – that wars could not be won in a day, that a battle of annihilation required a sacrifice to match, that decentralized command was the way to victory.

Through a century of technological change the Royal Navy's *spirit* had remained the same. It had kept the service viable through decades of uncertainty, but in a war of submarines and zeppelins the mere spirit of 1805 could no longer suffice. Professional competence and pride in one's fleet were important parts of the First World War Navy, and they would serve the navy well in the long days of waiting that lay ahead. But the British public demanded more, the British press demanded more, and most dangerously the Royal Navy itself demanded more. In August 1914 nearly the entirety of Britain from sea lords to newspaper boys expected and demanded a second Trafalgar within the year. The Admiralty had the comforting weight of a century of tradition behind it and only hope ahead. It remained to be seen if both would be enough.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION – WARRIORS AND STATESMEN<sup>1</sup>

The inevitable twin of the Royal Navy's high expectations was a resultant quick disappointment when a new Trafalgar failed to materialize. In the first months of the Great War, the British public remained extremely enthusiastic for any expected naval engagements. The boys' magazine *Chums* printed an account of British battlecruisers valiantly fighting against all odds before the war was two weeks old.<sup>2</sup> By October naval news had permeated London, with revivals of plays about Nelson's life; a patriotic London art gallery exhibition titled 'Some Modern War Pictures' displayed renderings of historic British naval battles.<sup>3</sup> Souvenir handkerchiefs could be purchased printed with images of Nelson's flagship and Britain's latest battleship, the *Queen Elizabeth*, labeled 'For the ships may change / But the spirit remains.'<sup>4</sup> In a short story written later during the war, the author Bartimeus recalled the general feeling when "with the red dawn of August 4th, 1914 [...] came war at last." In Bartimeus' version, local yachtsmen "pulled a deep breath of something like relief" at "a war of the sea."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Viscount Esher to Lt. Col. M.P. Hankey, 15 March 1915. "Obviously history is written for schoolmasters and arm-chair strategists. Statesmen and warriors pick their way through the dusk." *Viscount Reginald Esher, Journals and Letters of Reginald Viscount Esher*, vol. 3, 1910-1915 (Oliver, Viscount Esher, ed. London: Ivor Nicholson & Watson, 1938), 220-221.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (New York: Atheneum, 1991), 46-47.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 33; George Robb, *British Culture and the First World War* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2002; Social History in Perspective), 134.

<sup>4</sup> Colin White, "The Immortal Memory," in Colin White, ed., *The Nelson Companion* (Bridgend, UK: Bramley Books, 1997), 25.

<sup>5</sup> "Bartimeus," *The Navy Eternal* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1918), 166.



Yet as days turned to weeks without expected naval results, public confidence in the Royal Navy began to waver. By the end of August, naval writer Fred T. Jane noted that “people are disappointed that we have not had a Trafalgar or a Tsushima.”<sup>6</sup> In a later work, Admiral Sir Reginald Bacon captured the uneasy feeling of the public after the first months of war: “People asked: ‘What is wrong, where is our Nelson?’ The Public [...] confidently believed our day at last would have come – Trafalgar would be repeated, and ship after ship of the German Navy would be sent to the bottom. Such were the uneducated hopes of the British nation.”<sup>7</sup>

In August, the disappointment was that victory had not yet come. Public intellectual Gilbert Murray’s pamphlet ‘Thoughts on the War’ displays dissatisfaction that German losses had not been great enough: “For my part I find that I do desperately desire to hear of German dreadnoughts sunk in the North Sea....When I see that 20,000 Germans have been killed in such-and-such engagement, and next day that it was only 2,000, I am sorry.”<sup>8</sup> By the end of 1914 the first concerns that there would not be a new Trafalgar had begun to surface. Naval correspondent J.R. Thursfield released his own pamphlet, ‘The Navy and the War,’ that aimed to bolster public spirits. Thursfield spoke against the “most unworthy note of vexation and disappointment [that] is beginning to make itself heard in too many quarters concerning the Navy and its doings. ‘What is the Navy doing,’ people are asking, ‘and why is it doing so little? There has been no big

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<sup>6</sup> Jan Rüger, *The Great Naval Game: Britain and Germany in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007; Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Modern Warfare), 256.

<sup>7</sup> Admiral Sir Reginald Bacon, *The Jutland Scandal* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1925), 2-3.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Buitenhuis, *The Great War of Words: British, American, and Canadian Propaganda and Fiction, 1914-1933* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987), 46.

battle as yet, and there seems to be no prospect of one.”<sup>9</sup> Although Thursfield acknowledged that “wherever we look abroad on the seas we see nothing but disappointment, disaster, and destruction,” he sounded a hopeful note for the future: “there is no reason to think that the children of Nelson will prove less stout in endurance than their sires. The strain is undoubtedly far more intense in these days, but it is certain to be far less prolonged.”<sup>10</sup>

The children of Nelson, however, were already chafing at their own forced endurance. Like their land-bound public supporters, most of the Royal Navy had been eager for a fight at the war’s onset. Some sailors did disapprove of the public’s enthusiasm. Sydney Fremantle informed his family that war was certain a day before the official declaration on August 4<sup>th</sup>, and was unsettled how “one and all, they took the news (which so far had not been made public) so light-heartedly that I could stand it no longer.”<sup>11</sup> But the vast majority followed the lead of Admiral C.C. Penrose Fitzgerald, who pioneered the handing out of white feathers to civilian men who had not yet volunteered to fight.<sup>12</sup> Stephen King-Hall recalled “how certain 60 per cent of the mess was, that if war did break out, we should find ourselves ‘doing and dying’ in the first forty-eight hours.”<sup>13</sup> Young cadet G.C. Harper explained how he came to accept the

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<sup>9</sup> James R. Thursfield, *The Navy and the War* (London: Oxford, 1914), 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 3, 27.

<sup>11</sup> Admiral Sir Sydney Robert Fremantle, *My Naval Career, 1880-1928* (Hutchinson & Co. (Publishers) Ltd, 1949), 171.

<sup>12</sup> Arthur Marwick, *The Deluge: British Society and the First World War* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1970; originally printed 1965), 50.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen King-Hall, *A North Sea Diary, 1914-1918* (London: Newnes, 1936), 43.

idea of a naval war, writing “A week ago the very last thing I wanted was a war [...] but having got this far I saw it was the chance of a lifetime – besides being an excellent thing for the country.”<sup>14</sup> This attitude went straight to the top; the future King George VI, an 18-year old midshipman aboard HMS *Collingwood*, recalled in his diary: “In the Grand Fleet everyone was pleased [war] had come at last. We had been trained in the belief that war between Germany and this country had to come one day, and when it did come we thought we were prepared for it.”<sup>15</sup>

What is so astonishing in retrospect is just how quickly the navy’s patient waiting for battle turned to despondency. After less than a month of war, young G.C. Harper realized “there seems an awful chance that we may go through the war without an action.”<sup>16</sup> In the highest echelons of command, these sentiments were reprised. Vice Admiral David Beatty reassured his wife on the 5<sup>th</sup> of August: “thank heavens it’s summer months and before the dark nights of winter are on us it ought to be all over.”<sup>17</sup> Less than three weeks later Beatty again wrote to his wife, this time with less cheerful news: “This waiting is the deuce, and as far as we can see has no limit [...] For thirty

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<sup>14</sup> Trevor Wilson, *The Myriad Faces of War: Britain and the Great War, 1914-1918* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1986), 686.

<sup>15</sup> Geoffrey Bennett, *The Battle of Jutland* (Philadelphia: Dufour Editions, 1964), 29.

<sup>16</sup> Wilson, *Myriad Faces of War*, 687.

<sup>17</sup> B. McL. Ranft, ed., *The Beatty Papers: Selections from the Private and Official Correspondence of Admiral of the Fleet Earl Beatty*, vol. I, 1902-1918 (Hants, UK: Scolar Press, 1989), 113.

years I have been waiting for this day, and have as fine a command as one could wish for and can do nothing. Three weeks of war and haven't seen the enemy.”<sup>18</sup>

David Beatty was an especially vociferous believer in the value of the quick knockout naval engagement; again before August was out he had complained that it “looks as if we should go through the war without ever coming to grips with them. Such a thought is more than I can bear.”<sup>19</sup> And late in October, as a momentous naval anniversary approached: “Tomorrow is Trafalgar Day, the powers that be have forgotten it. Ye shades of Nelson that we should be in the hands of such is past enduring but one is powerless to do anything but wait wait day after day.”<sup>20</sup>

However, Beatty was not alone in his pessimism. Commodore Roger Keyes demanded to know “when are we going to make war?”<sup>21</sup> G.C. Harper felt for the crews of three British cruisers torpedoed in September, noting that his fellow naval cadets “are longing – now – even to get blown up by a mine – anything rather than spend the whole war doing nothing.”<sup>22</sup> By December, the waiting had become interminable for naval personnel. Sub-Lieutenant Bowyer-Smith aboard HMS *Superb* detailed his thoughts on another North Sea patrol: “Are we to be disappointed again? Heaven forbid – if the raiding squadrons get back untouched we will be dirt in the eyes of the public. We are

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<sup>18</sup> David Beatty to Ethel Beatty, 24 August 1914. Rear-Admiral W.S. Chalmers, *The Life and Letters of David, Earl Beatty* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1951), 140; Robert Massie, *Castles of Steel: Britain, Germany, and the Winning of the Great War at Sea* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003), 97.

<sup>19</sup> David Beatty to Ethel Beatty, 30 August 1914. Chalmers, *The Life and Letters of David, Earl Beatty*, 153-154.

<sup>20</sup> David Beatty to Ethel Beatty, 20 October 1914. Ranft, *The Beatty Papers*, Vol. I, 145-146.

<sup>21</sup> Massie, *Castles of Steel*, 97-98.

<sup>22</sup> Wilson, *Myriad Faces of War*, 687.

already unpopular I believe & the man in the street can not or will not realise the size of the North Sea.” Bowyer-Smith, like thousands of others, was coming to grips with the reality that the naval war promised only “cold, coal, and the disapproval of the people of England [...] to keep us going.”<sup>23</sup>

The same disapproval permeated the highest levels of the Senior Service. Jacky Fisher had been recalled to his historic post of First Sea Lord soon after the war began. From this lofty perch he offered traditional Fisher-esque motivations, counseling ranking officer of the British Grand Fleet John Jellicoe to “let everyone be optimistic, and shoot the pessimists!”<sup>24</sup> Privately, however, Fisher was writing to Winston Churchill that “we have done nothing else this whole war but lose opportunities!”<sup>25</sup> Public and official pressure continued to build on the Royal Navy. By the end of 1914 the naval war had spread. In August the Royal Navy’s pursuit of German naval units ended ingloriously, not for the last time, at the Dardanelles; in December two minor surface actions were fought in the South Atlantic near Argentina. But to a navy conditioned to expect success these were sideshows, and patience was wearing thin. Winston Churchill declared in December that “if the Navy and the Admiralty can’t beat the Germany in 1915 [...] the

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<sup>23</sup> Julian Thompson, *The Imperial War Museum Book of the War at Sea, 1914-1918* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 2005), 86-87.

<sup>24</sup> A. Temple Patterson, ed., *The Jellicoe Papers: Selections from the Private and Official Correspondence of Admiral of the Fleet Earl Jellicoe of Scapa*, vol. I, 1893-1916 (London: Spottiswoode, Ballantyne and Co. Ltd., 1966), 95.

<sup>25</sup> Arthur J. Marder, *Fear God and Dread Nought: The Correspondence of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fisher of Kilverstone*, vol. III, *Restoration, Abdication, and Last Years, 1914-1920* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1959), 44.

former should be shot and the latter sacked.”<sup>26</sup> For over a century the Royal Navy had maintained its reputation of consummate professionalism, Britain’s strength in times of war and her guardian in times of peace. Now, as the conditions of the First World War spiraled ever further away from what the Admiralty had expected and hoped for in a naval conflict, Captain Herbert Richmond could only conclude that “we are the most appalling amateurs who ever tried to conduct a war.”<sup>27</sup>

Despite its best efforts, the Royal Navy of 1914 would never fight the new Trafalgar so many of its members both old and young had dreamed of. The first two years of the First World War brought nothing but disappointment to those involved with the navy, to the point that cadet Harper would rather be sunk in action than spend another day on patrol. In 1916 the main British fleet would finally come to grips with its German counterpart at the Battle of Jutland, but the result was a disappointing stalemate that left two thousand Britons dead. Two years of waiting for Trafalgar followed by the disillusionment of Jutland did nothing to improve the morale of either British seamen or their private-sector critics, both of whom accused the Royal Navy of cooling its heels while the army defended British honor at the Somme. What the British public and many naval officers never quite came to grips with was the fact that the navy was doing everything asked of it. In the first days of the war, the entire British Expeditionary Force was transported to France without a casualty; the Channel that so thoroughly blocked Napoleon a century prior was little more than a speed bump to the modern fleet. Patrols

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>27</sup> Andrew Gordon, *The Rules of the Game: Jutland and British Naval Command* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1996), 399.

and sweeps were unexciting, but they kept Britain in the war by ensuring the safe delivery of thousands of tons of materiel.

What so damaged the navy's conception of the war was its institutional conception of its own past. Nelson had blockaded the French fleet for years, and British ships would continue to do so for another decade after Trafalgar. Yet all anyone remembered by 1914 was the glorious moment of battle. This fetishization of an apocalyptic naval conflict that would define entire wars in a day was endemic throughout the Royal Navy, from cadets to the Admiralty. It is extremely significant that of all the heated policy debates throughout the century, particularly during the navalist age from 1885 onward, there was never a push to define naval warfare as anything more than a battle of annihilation. Sir John Fisher, perhaps the greatest reformer the modern Royal Navy has seen, brought myriad new technologies to the fleet but couched them all in the language and tactics of Nelson's day, a man he considered his personal hero. Fisher's greatest naval critic, Admiral Lord Charles Beresford, remained committed to the conservative Royal Navy of the 1890s – but he too appreciated Nelson's legacy enough to pen a book about the vice-admiral's life. Between the 1880s and the First World War the global naval landscape shifted appreciably. France followed the *jeune école* school of many small warships, the United States constructed large cruisers, Germany developed dangerous submarines. But Britain's overarching goal never faltered – the most powerful warships, and more of them. Even Fisher's most audacious technical project, the battlecruiser, was designed as 'the very type that all the old men from Hawke to Nelson sighed for.'

But perhaps this desire for ultimate victory at sea can be understood more with a broader view of the navy's history. The byword of the nineteenth-century Royal Navy was change, and more often not this change was forced upon Britain rather than begun by the Admiralty. From the earliest paddle frigates to the most advanced dreadnoughts, the rapid pace of technological advancement over the course of the century seemed specifically designed to throw Admiralty planning into chaos. It is a testament to British naval might that Great Britain found itself in the unenviable position of having to convert a numerically dominant fleet over to new designs no less than three times in one hundred years – the introduction of steam line-of-battle ships in the 1840s, the ironclad revolution of the 1860s, and the dreadnought era.

Yet these rapid technological changes created a backlash among naval authorities. It is important to remember that men who came of age in Nelson's navy led its improved successor for another half a century. Combined with the Slump of the 1820s and 1830s, this meant that by midcentury the Admiralty was controlled by a smaller and smaller group of elderly officials. It has become almost trite to point towards Admiralty pronouncements of the danger of steam power to British supremacy as an example of backwards naval thinking in this era, but these attitudes existed and were dangerously real. Try as they might, Nelson's erstwhile successors could not delay the introduction of steam forever – so they sought solace in the only place they could, the memory of Nelson. In an age where the Royal Navy was shaken to its core by technologies that threatened to redefine war at sea, high-ranking officers turned to the Nelsonian legend to provide a visible and concrete link to the navy's glorious past.



This attitude was only reinforced in the mid-Victorian era. The Crimean conflict was a successful war, and the Royal Navy certainly performed better than the army. But without a decisive battle at sea, the Crimea soon faded into naval obscurity. The bombardment of Kronstadt was the last engagement for the men who came through the ranks with Nelson, but the ensuing ironclad era brought no changes in the navy's ideal of battle. Instead it was the Crimean War that was ignored, and the Admiralty hoped that the next war would bring a return to Trafalgar's form.

This use of Nelson remained excusable when used to bolster morale and establish a connection between grand British fleets and patrolling cruisers throughout the world of the Pax Britannica. However, the navalist age took Nelson's legend in a more perilous direction. From the mid-1880s onward, in the darkest days of spit and polish, the actual Nelson began to be forgotten. In the late-Victorian Royal Navy the man who endeared himself to generations of Britons with his willful disregard of the rules became the greatest example for following them. Commanders frowned at independent action, preferring that subordinates live by the letter of Nelson's example rather than its spirit. This trend reached its lowest point with the death of George Tryon and the Admiralty's resultant absolute devotion to order at all costs. Nelson wrote that 'nothing is sure in a sea fight;' a century after his death the navy that claimed to represent Nelson's legacy produced battle orders that stretched for hundreds of pages. Nelson blockaded his enemies for years; by the dreadnought era naval theorists and admirals alike believed that wars could and should be won in a matter of hours.

The navalist era also marked the point at which the British public reenters the Nelson mythos. Unlike their naval cousins, the majority of Britons had gradually let go of Nelson after the Napoleonic Wars; he was still a hero, still an inspiration to poets and sculptors, but Nelson's story was kept alive with the same fervor as it was in Whitehall. The naval scares that began in the mid-1880s changed all this. As the Victorian era became the Edwardian and global politics grew ever more complex, splendid isolation was replaced by a growing awareness that conflict could very well be on the horizon. Here Nelson served the same function for the general public that he had for the Admiralty thirty years prior – as either a backbone or a crutch, depending on one's point of view. Reassured that the Royal Navy remained modeled on Nelson's example, members of groups such as the Navy League held the Admiralty up as the model of British preparedness and defense.

During the Crimean conflict, the British newspaper industry had pressured the Admiralty for a decisive battle that never came. In the navalist period, it was the opposite; many high Admiralty figures, not the least of which was Jacky Fisher, purposely fed naval information to the press, which in turn promoted naval interests among their burgeoning middle-class readerships. By the first decade of the twentieth century this had become an entirely self-reinforcing system. The Admiralty would release documents, whether publicly or to one of their chosen naval journalists such as Arnold White, claiming that France or Germany was embarking on a new wave of naval construction; the British public, led on by various naval leagues and jingoistic journalists, clamored for increases to naval funding. And it was all predicated on

Horatio Nelson, the one common figure that by the Trafalgar centennial in 1905 every Briton could recognize as a symbol of British naval greatness.

This, then, was British naval culture on the eve of the First World War. In 1914 the man in the street would have lived through nearly three decades of constant naval scares, fear mongering newspapermen and invasion literature; if he was a member of the Navy League or the Imperial Maritime League he would also have received news about the challenges facing the navy first-hand at public lectures and meetings. Counteracting this would have been the image of Nelson, now omnipresent in a way it had not been in a century; cigarette cards, clothing, movies, advertisements, all establishing a connection between the modern British navy and the heroes of Trafalgar. If he lived in a major city there would have been fleet reviews, with their attendant naval supporters also adamant that this connection to the past was alive and well.

This connection to the past would have been accepted fact in the Admiralty of 1914 as well. For half a century young naval officers had criticized their superiors through backroom channels as too old-fashioned, too reactionary, too concerned with style over substance – and had then moved up the promotional ladder and fallen into the same trap (it is helpful to remember that Admiral Lord Charles Beresford had castigated the Royal Navy long before he became its staunchest defender). Just as the public had their Nelson, the navy had its own – and he was a vengeful god of battles, willing to accept a thousand casualties for one enemy ship sunk. Here tactics were forgotten in

favor of the rush to a decision; even a reformer such as Admiral Fisher pushed for surprise attacks and vast naval engagements over any form of raid or blockade.<sup>28</sup>

These two legends of Nelson, similar in substance but used for different purposes, combined to form the young men that went to sea in August 1914. A British naval cadet, in his late teens or early twenties, would have been couched in Nelsonian lore his entire life. As a child in the 1890s there would have been Navy League lectures at school, dreadnought toys and games, textbooks extolling the virtues of Nelson and his captains, and special youth exhibits aboard ship at fleet reviews. The centenary of Trafalgar would likely have brought him to a museum or traveling exhibit on Nelson and the navy; the years of naval scares leading up to the First World War inculcated him with a belief that devastating war lurked always just beyond the horizon. When war came he would have been glad for it, and for the opportunity to participate in the new Trafalgar that was sure to come.

Navalism was a tool used by Parliament, social organizations, the press, and the Admiralty to drum up support in various ways. Each of these groups had their own Nelson. Jacky Fisher's Nelson was something akin to a demigod, a violent avenger who would crush Germany or anyone else in Britain's way with a preemptive strike or a crushing battle. The Admiralty's Nelson was proof positive that their new ships of war could make do with old tactics; following Nelson's strategy of a 'pell mell' battle would be enough to bring Britain home victorious in any fleet action, although how this was to

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<sup>28</sup> One of the few (perhaps the only) high-ranking naval officials to barely mention Nelson in either official or private correspondence is John Jellicoe. He alone seems to have realized the dangers of conflating the past with the present, a lesson that would go unheeded at Jutland.

be achieved with initiative legislated out of captains and admirals remained to be seen. Politicians saw Nelson as a tool, and both Liberals and Tories rode navalist support to Parliamentary victories on the strength of laying a few wreaths on Trafalgar Day. For the press Nelson was a shining example of what Britain could be at its greatest, a call to duty and service and a weapon to be wielded whenever there were rumblings of naval budget cuts. The public Nelson was a comfort, a reassurance that if war came the Royal Navy could pick up where it left off a century prior and immediately return to its prior successes.

Every group that took part in the navalist age had its own Nelson, but they all had one. It was impossible to be a naval supporter in 1914 and not have an opinion on the man acclaimed by near-unanimous consent to be the greatest naval leader Britain had ever produced, at least until the new Nelson defeated the Germans. Horatio Nelson was a link to the navy's past for all Britons, an unbreakable thread connecting bygone heroes to their modern compatriots when nothing else remained to compare the navies of 1805 and 1914 on a direct technological level. The Nelson of the public and the press remained a simple hero, to be admired and emulated for generations to come.

The navy's Nelson was more dangerous. Based on a misinterpretation of Nelson's tactics and strategic conceptions, the Nelson that held sway with Sir John Fisher and the Admiralty was the culmination of a century spent trying to live up to a legend of annihilating battles that had no basis in reality. It is an oft-repeated canard that the British army in the First World War can be likened to lions led by donkeys. In the Royal Navy, however, the entire service from John Jellicoe to the lowliest cadet was

animated by the same spirit. The Royal Navy could be better termed as an elephant. It was at times painfully slow, both to adapt and to stop once it had chosen a new course. It was powerful, both technologically and in its own self-induced moral and spiritual ascendancy. And, like an elephant, the Royal Navy never forgot a thing; nor did it try.

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