

Review Article: Recent Biographical Works on Horatio Nelson

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Roger Morriss

2005, the bicentenary of the battle of Trafalgar, has seen a spate of publications relating to Nelson and Trafalgar. Some of us may be justified in thinking that there were already too many books on these subjects. By 1990 there were over 100 biographies of Nelson. Now there are more. Do these books take our knowledge any further forward, and where do Nelsonic studies go from here? This review examines five new books, all relating to Nelson. Most are veritable tomes: together they contain over three thousand pages. Most cover the same subject matter. But each is distinctive in approach and treatment, and amazingly some provide food for thought.

First out was John Sugden's *Nelson: a Dream of Glory*. At 960 pages it is also the most generous, especially as it examines Nelson's life only to 1797 when he suffered the loss of his right arm which could have terminated his career (a further volume is planned). Sugden, a former journalist and writer on Drake, has an eye for human detail; he uses crew lists, pay books, ships' logs, and a remarkable amount of biographical information to thoroughly recreate the social environments of the ships' companies and society in which Nelson operated. He is particularly good at recreating the social environments of, for example, Toulon and Naples, at setting out the conflict between the navy and the army during the sieges of Bastia and Calvi in Corsica in 1794, and at providing depth to the lives of key figures like the Hamiltons. The naval dimension is less effectively covered; significantly the few maps are not tied into the narrative. Furthermore, perhaps too thoroughly, it includes stories and recollections, some of doubtful authenticity, deriving from *The Life of Admiral Lord Nelson* of 1809 written by James Clark and John McArthur. Sugden nevertheless places Nelson in his social milieu. His accounts of the Marine Society boys who joined the *Agamemnon* in 1793, his examination of the proceedings of the first series of courts martial chaired by Nelson, and his discussion of a 'venereal complaint' for which a dentist claimed to have treated Nelson vindicate his claim that there is more to say about his life.

Andrew Lambert's *Nelson: Britannia's God of War*, contrasts with Sugden's first volume by treating Nelson's life before 1793 quite thinly, focusing more particularly on the naval dimensions than the social context, and by projecting Nelson's own point of view. The latter provides valuable focus, especially when considering the strategic situation in Europe from the Mediterranean in 1799 when Nelson himself remained with the Two Sicilies rather than succumbing to the entreaties of Lord Keith to reinforce the British fleet off Minorca.

Naval commanders like Lords Hood and St Vincent, who appreciated Nelson, are also well developed. But the analysis of these commanders takes Nelson's viewpoint rather too readily: Keith is demonised, St Vincent's flatteries are reiterated without qualification, and Sir John Orde, who felt threatened by Nelson's growing status, is condemned as a blockhead. Women appear little. Nelson's right to terminate his relationship with Fanny is championed, as her lack of understanding served to make his life difficult. Not that his relationship with Emma Hamilton is made any more important, for their passion is minimised, and their relationship largely ignored because, in the long-term, they spent relatively little time together. This Nelson always placed his duty before others, an attitude with which later naval officers may have identified and which helps to explain his relevance to later British society with which the last fifty pages of this book are preoccupied. But, with the Channel fleet of the Trafalgar campaign repeatedly referred to as the Grand Fleet, in places the age of Fisher seems to reach back into the life of Nelson.

In contrast to Nelsonic history on the grand scale is Colin White's *Nelson: the New Letters*. White has tracked down over 1,300 unpublished letters by Nelson and here presents over 500 of them. Some have been partly printed in earlier gatherings, but invariably edited, sometimes mutilated, and in these cases White distinguishes what was previously omitted. The printing includes official as well as private correspondence, the former in some cases from scruffy and neglected ships' order books, the latter often in runs among the papers of non-naval contemporaries. The operational orders are advanced as 'truly ground-breaking' and indeed they do show Nelson's forethought, preparations and attention to detail as a fleet commander. We learn of the division of his ships into squadrons and instruction for them to prepare to anchor by the stern preceding the battle of the Nile, and of the care with which he positioned his ships and boats at Copenhagen. The printing of Nelson's sea journal for the days surrounding this action connects us directly to his mind and preoccupations. Much is made of a series of 'pressed copies' in the British Library, not always easy to read, which, because they are pressed, are designated by White as 'secret'. However duplicating by pressing was becoming a common procedure in naval administration in 1800–5 and this looks like an over-dramatisation.

Roger Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory: the Life and Achievement of Horatio Nelson*, benefits from White's work and acknowledges the generous pre-publication sharing of his findings. Without doubt, the scholarship incorporated in this biography is exceptional. Knight's knowledge of the naval world in the late eighteenth century is exceeded by none; he has travelled the world to examine every relevant source; and he rejects with consistent discipline the anecdotes and doubtful stories incorporated in previous biographical works; documents printed by Clarke and McArthur in 1809 have been completely banned. Further, certain myths are corrected from study of the logs of the ships Nelson that served in, which also gives rise to a series of track charts that recreate the maritime-geographical dimension of his life. The result is a naval biography crisp with new thinking. Special features are cross-sectional surveys of the British navy in 1771 and in 1793; while the former recreates the social structure Nelson entered, the latter reviews the political events and technological innovations that increased the power of the navy when Nelson resumed his career. Regrettably a similar chapter is not entitled the navy in 1803, although much on the adverse administrative circumstances is included in the chapter on the Peace of Amiens. For an academic book, which constantly calls upon the reader to consider its sources, the endnotes are too far away. But the quality of the judgements that inform the text lead forcibly to the conviction that this book is the nearest we yet have to the definitive biography.

However Marianne Czisnik's *Horatio Nelson: a Controversial Hero* demonstrates that there is still much more to understand about this man. Czisnik, significantly not of the UK, demonstrates the necessity to suspend for a time the business of writing full but superficial and subjective biographies, and to take a more clinical and analytical approach to a character that even contemporaries acknowledged as complex. Czisnik explains with admirable clarity and detail key episodes in Nelson's career, tracing the historiographical inhibitions, prejudices, confusions and controversies that beset subsequent interpretations. The second half of her book examines the post-1805 uses of the Nelson legend. But the first half focuses on Nelson's apparent acts of disobedience at the battle of Cape St Vincent, against Lord Keith, and at Copenhagen; explanations for his success as a battle commander; his actual role at Naples in 1799; the appeal of Lady Hamilton; his needs at his death; and his qualities as a military leader. In the process she uses management

theory, gender analysis, Freudian analysis of Nelson's account of a particularly explicit dream, and a perceptive eye for what Nelson admired in his most famous female partner. The result is that we get to know Nelson more intimately than in even the fullest of the other biographies.

So, what new insights do we gain from these new publications? In some areas especially his early life, quite few. Nelson's career passed through three stages. In the first, we have always known of the patronage of Maurice Suckling, naval captain then Comptroller of the Navy Board, but the new biographies also stress the importance of his other uncle, William Suckling, Deputy Collector at the Customs House, who had the ear of Charles Jenkinson, Lord Hawkesbury, through whom there was a route to Lord Sandwich and later Lord Chatham.(1) Maurice Suckling ensured that Nelson became an accomplished seaman by placing him with captains who gave him time in sailing boats and small vessels. Knight calculates that he had sailed 45,000 miles before he took his exam for lieutenant.(2) Too young though he was, there was thus reason that he should pass. Even so, his early career was probably much like those of many others. After the American War, his sycophantic support of the boorish Prince William Henry and readiness to accost his superiors marked him out as an unpredictable, indeed difficult, officer.(3) Back in England, there were good reasons for his unemployment, an additional one probably being his failure to attend an election.(4) His criticism of stores management in the West Indies gained him some notice – an alleged three-hour conversation with George Rose – but this was insufficient to redeem a reputation already tainted, especially with the career of an otherwise innocent storekeeper certainly damaged.(5)

In the second stage of his career, with the beginning of the French Revolutionary War, Nelson began consciously to re-establish a more favourable reputation. White prints the actual letter he sent containing an account of his first action – which he 'would have inserted in the newspaper' – to his brother Maurice at the Navy Office to ensure the details were known in that important department.(6) At this stage, he clearly courted his senior officers, Hood and later Jervis; he also ensured his activities were well known to Lord Spencer, First Lord of the Admiralty, by sending him regular reports of the Austrian campaign in northern Italy.(7) After the battle of Cape St Vincent, he briefed the writer Colonel Drinkwater and wrote his own 'Remarks Relative to Myself' (verified by two captains) which, under Nelson's instruction, went to William Windham, MP for Norwich and Secretary for War, who gave it to George III. Knight reveals that Windham was also a friend of Lord Spencer, First Lord of the Admiralty, under whose supervision a copy of Nelson's partial account, was edited and published, putting a glorious gloss on the battle. Sugden adds the newspapers in which versions of 'Remarks' appeared, largely through the efforts of Locker, Nelson's first captain and loyal friend.(8)

There can be little wonder that there were jealousies attending Nelson's promotion to rear-admiral. As a squadron commander, after the desperate attack on St Cruz of Tenerife, there were also grounds for criticism. Knight maintains the loss of Nelson's arm was a cushion against hostility. Yet Czisnik insists that outside the navy Nelson was not really known until after the battle of the Nile when the official report in the *London Gazette* was spontaneously celebrated by the newspapers. Nelson's flag captain Edward Berry anonymously published an account, but was outdone in popularity of sales by an unauthentic pot-boiler, later embroidered by others. In Czisnik's view. Nelson thus became a media personality without engineering his fame.(9) In view of his efforts to achieve acclaim, it is an irony difficult to credit. However it came about, once taken to the public heart, Nelson was able to build his reputation, and was assisted in the process by a government which wished to use his prowess at fighting with ships.

This was no common talent. What made him such an effective leader? The new books all agree: once in command he developed a consensual leadership style. For those whom he knew, Nelson generated a genuine warmth and care which, Sugden suggests, invoked loyalty, based upon something elemental – 'something that went beyond empathy, duty and symbiosis'. White refers to a sense of intimacy, personal trust and open sharing of information which did not exclude the occasional sharpness. Knight cites George Duff: 'He is so good and pleasant man that we all wish to do what he likes without any kind of orders.' His style was perhaps most evident in his relationship with seamen. They too were drawn into his ambit: one 21 year old had dinner with him. After the La Minerve/Blanche action of December 1796, he went round the deck of the *Blanche* shaking the hands of seamen: a gesture memorable and liked by the seamen. Officers as well as

seamen saw him as kind. After the battle of the Nile, he had his captains forgive all seamen on 'charges'.⁽¹⁰⁾ Yet he used the stick as well as the carrot. His standards must have been exacting. In the Boreas between May 1784 and July 1787 he flogged 86 of 334 men, 25.7 per cent of his ship's company, when the average contemporary percentage of men punished on board British warships on the same station was 9 per cent. Knight also notes the severity of the punishments on board the Victory in 1803–5 and refuses to regard Hardy, the flag-captain, as wholly responsible; he has no doubt that Victory was a 'flogging' ship.⁽¹¹⁾ The ground for Nelson's ruthlessness in battle was prepared in his management of his crews.

So how did Nelson win his battles: three excluding that off Cape St Vincent? Czisnik suggests these victories were once put down to dash and daring. But, having transcribed his public order books, White reveals Nelson's methodical attention to detail and mental energy. In the Mediterranean, even when the enemy was not on the horizon, he had his ships at readiness, sailing from rendezvous to rendezvous. Before the Nile, after consulting key officers, he divided his squadron into divisions for control, prepared all ships to anchor by the stern, and emphasised the sole object of completely destroying the French armament – by which he also implied their land force. Before Copenhagen he directed ships and boats precisely where to anchor. Before Trafalgar, after disseminating his battle plan and obtaining the cooperation of his captains, he still insisted upon the maintenance of a watering and replenishment regime.⁽¹²⁾ For the battle of St Vincent, Sugden emphasises Nelson's tactical insight, decision, speed and confidence in the morale and training of his seamen; Knight cites Collingwood's recollection of Nelson's enthusiasm and talents: 'everything seemed, as if by enchantment, to prosper under his direction. But it was the effect of system, and nice combination, not of chance.'⁽¹³⁾ His systematic mode of fighting battles culminated in the tactics at Trafalgar – to concentrate his principal force, headed by three-deckers, to conceal the precise point of entry into the enemy ranks – which gave rise to an effective feint by Nelson's line, and to render the enemy van impotent until it could wear and return against the wind. But there was more: his faith in the 68 pounder carronades, carried on poops and forecastles, which wrought havoc on the decks of enemy ships; and the fifty copies of Home Popham's new signal code which he carried to sea with him in September 1805.⁽¹⁴⁾ Nelson clearly performed with the cutting edge of naval technology.

Method, tactics and technology help to explain Nelson's success in battle. Was he more than just a leader of men and winner of battles? Lambert argues that Nelson also influenced the strategy with which the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars were fought. He supports Nelson's belief in the strategic value of the Two Sicilies in 1799 and of Sardinia in 1803–5, maintaining that Nelson's view encompassed the whole Mediterranean theatre. On this account he justifies Nelson's defiance of Lord Keith when the French Brest fleet arrived in the Mediterranean in 1799. He even suggests that Nelson's views actually influenced the Cabinet, though without producing any evidence that this was the case.⁽¹⁵⁾ A more common argument is that Nelson undertook the long chase to the West Indies on his own strategic judgement. Knight readily admits precedents in instructions to Rooke in 1704 and Byng in 1756 to follow the French fleet wherever it went, while Lambert observes that Lord Barham at the Admiralty 'covered every eventuality'. But both rely on Corbett's 1910 work, *The Campaign of Trafalgar*, and resist shifting some of the credit traditionally accorded to Nelson back to the Admiralty.⁽¹⁶⁾ This is regrettable as the Admiralty certainly provided for a chase to the West Indies in 1800 and more research in the Admiralty's instructions to fleet commanders in 1805 still seems necessary.

More work also seems necessary on Nelson's character. Sugden stresses his early craving for attention, recognition and praise. He also emphasises those apparent weaknesses so evident in his printed correspondence: his need to discharge his worries on to others; his dislike of loneliness; his willing subordination, indeed sycophancy, to Prince William Henry. Lambert, on the other hand, argues Nelson was affected by the loss of his mother and was a late developer but, once rising, always placed his duty before the emotional demands of his wife and mistress.⁽¹⁷⁾ Knight notices his assertiveness against weaker senior officers, his courage under fire, and his cool calculation of the odds, for example at Copenhagen when his ultimatum to the 'brave Danes' saved Britain's wafer thin advantage. Yet, at the same time, he also notes Nelson's apparently hasty and inconsistent (by British standards) management of the confusion in Naples.⁽¹⁸⁾ Nelson was but human.

Of course, these observations take us little further forward. Of more interest is Knight's gathering of telling contemporary comments – of Alexander Ball on Nelson's 'constitutional irritable and uneven temper'; of William Layman on his 'petulance at trifles'; and of George Cockburn on his 'curious compound of weakness, with powers of high exertions of intrepidity and talent whenever great occasions called for the exertion of the nobler qualities and subjection of the former'. As the American A. T. Mahan observed, Nelson was 'a synthesis of personality opposites'.⁽¹⁹⁾ Americans now describe him as 'bipolar'. In view of these comments, should we now place him somewhere on that spectrum which leads at one extreme to the manic depressive? It is tempting, but before doing so, attention needs to be paid to the work of Marianne Czisnik.

Czisnik reminds us that Nelson has always been interpreted according to current preoccupations and prejudices. She argues that any assessment of Nelson's character needs to be based on his behaviour in all the circumstances which beset him. These circumstances were, in her view, far more complex than historians have been prepared to admit and research. Her thorough work permits her to remove some blemishes: Nelson's apparent vanity, for example, is mitigated. It also permits her to explain the unusual quality of Nelson's abilities with convincing clarity. In her view, his leadership was based on a drive to high achievement united with his sociability; his ability to make appropriate judgements under pressure derived from a lack of physical and moral fear; while his ability to delegate derived from an absence of any desire to dominate others as individuals. He was thus compliant, preferred relationships on equal terms, and enjoyed hearing the views of others which involved them in his schemes. These qualities along with his pleasant nature, bravery, loyalty, modesty and generosity made him a man most liked to serve.⁽²⁰⁾ But what of the irritability, temper, highs and lows, and occasional bouts of remarkable exertion? For all her research and rationality, even Czisnik's work seems only a beginning.

These new publications thus suggest two necessities for the future: a re-examination of the Admiralty's strategy in which Nelson played his part, and an examination of his personality perhaps in collaboration with a specialist in the psychology of military men. The new books, at least those examined here, provide a platform, if not a resting place, for this particular corner of naval history. If Czisnik is right, there will always be interest in reinterpretations of Britain's greatest military hero. Perhaps it would reflect adversely on Britain and its historians if there were not.

Notes

1. Roger Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory: the Life and Achievement of Horatio Nelson* (2005), p. 127; Andrew Lambert, *Nelson: Britannia's God of War* (2004), p. 20; John Sugden, *Nelson: a Dream of Glory* (2004), p. 185.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, p. 42.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, p. 548.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, p. 127; Sugden, *Nelson*, pp. 368, 371; Colin White, *Nelson: the New Letters*, p. 151.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, p. 124 usefully corrects Sugden, *Nelson*, pp. 394–5, on the fate of

- storekeeper Munton.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, p. 162.[Back to \(6\)](#)
 7. Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, p. 189; Lambert, Nelson, p. 62.[Back to \(7\)](#)
 8. Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, pp. 228–9; Sugden, *Nelson*, pp. 709–13.[Back to \(8\)](#)
 9. Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, p. 253; Marianne Czisnik, *Horatio Nelson: a Controversial Hero*, 26–32.[Back to \(9\)](#)
 10. Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, pp. 210, 218, 286, 455, 505; Sugden, *Nelson*, pp. 23–4, 426, 626, 631; White, *Nelson*, pp. 53–5, 216.[Back to \(10\)](#)
 11. Sugden, *Nelson*, p. 356; Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, p. 475.[Back to \(11\)](#)
 12. White, *Nelson*, pp. 205, 245, 320, 445–7; Lambert, *Nelson*, p. 200.[Back to \(12\)](#)
 13. Sugden, *Nelson*, pp. 695, 705, 707; Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, p. 556.[Back to \(13\)](#)
 14. Czisnik, *Horatio Nelson*, pp. 33–9; Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, pp. 504–22, 555; Lambert, *Nelson*, p. 282.[Back to \(14\)](#)
 15. Lambert, *Nelson*, pp.108, 140, 145, 147, 160, 253.[Back to \(15\)](#)
 16. Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, p. 489; Lambert, *Nelson*, p. 266.[Back to \(16\)](#)
 17. Sugden, *Nelson*, pp. 271, 303, 366, 355; Lambert, *Nelson*, pp. 4, 182.[Back to \(17\)](#)
 18. Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, pp. 104, 323–7, 383.[Back to \(18\)](#)
 19. Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, pp. 548–9.[Back to \(19\)](#)
 20. Czisnik, *Horatio Nelson*, 84–93.[Back to \(20\)](#)

Roger Knight and Andrew Lambert are happy to accept this review and do not wish to comment further.

John Sugden's response:

In noticing my book in his review, Roger Morriss has appreciated some of what I tried to achieve, but as a lifelong historian I should point out that, while once an academic editor for *American National Biography*, I have never been a 'journalist'. Moreover, since my volume was the first ever to check systematically what I call the 'canonical' Nelson stories in Clarke and McArthur's official biography against every conceivable primary source, it is disappointing to be criticised for my occasional references to this book. In most cases my purpose in doing so was to demolish legends, demonstrate bowdlerisation, embellishment and outright invention, and to illustrate the ways in which a myth was being forged, an exercise that some scholars have acclaimed as long overdue. That aside, I must also unequivocally state that no thorough biographer of Nelson's early years, when sources are scant, can afford to dispense with Clarke and McArthur entirely, and none has. Whatever their deficiencies, Nelson's official 'biographers' (perhaps more properly 'editors') did approach some highly qualified eye-witnesses and receive valuable statements in good faith. Such witnesses as Surridge, Bromwich, Davison and Wallis do not all deserve to be confused with the medium, nor should their important details of Nelson's health, relationships and early service be lost through simple prejudice. Regrettably, few of their statements now survive independently; most come to us only through the suspect biographers, although several witnesses saw and presumably approved the final proofs. Faced with such potentially valuable but inadequately rendered sources as these witness statements, the job of the serious historian is to investigate them carefully in order to recover, as far as possible, any worth they contain, not to dismiss them unheard. The latter is to abort the necessary process of evaluation by an inflexible dogma. To put it another way, dismissal should, if deserved, follow – not precede – a proper examination. These examinations may be laborious, as evidenced in my detailed look at a Clarke and McArthur story in the current *Trafalgar Chronicle*, but having troubled to make them, I am bemused to see the effort attacked by those who have not. Thoroughness, I realise, has never been fashionable, but so good a historian as Roger Morriss cannot really believe it a sustainable charge against serious work.

Roger Morriss writes: The responses of John Sugden and Colin White are fair, well considered and valuable in setting out their judgements. They add significantly to my understanding of their thinking. I am grateful to John Sugden for correcting my mis-description of him which was certainly inappropriate.

Other reviews:

The Guardian

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/jul/16/featuresreviews.guardianreview16> [6]

The Oxonian Review of Books

<http://www.oxonianreview.org/issues/5-1/5-1nicholls.html> [7]

The Independent

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/book-review--britannias-swaggering-popinjay-nelson-a-personal-history--christopher-hibbert-viking-20-pounds--nelson-is-the-most-operatic-and-romantic-of-our-national-heroes-but-he-could-also-be-a-perfect-ass-jan-morris-is-charmed-1444335.html> [8]

The Guardian

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/sep/29/books.top.10s.nelson> [9]

The Observer

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2004/oct/10/historybooks.highereducation1> [10]

Times Higher Education

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2004/oct/10/historybooks.highereducation1> [10]

The Telegraph

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3642506/One-eye-one-arm-one-pen.html> [11]

The Observer

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/may/01/biography.historybooks> [12]

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[6] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/jul/16/featuresreviews.guardianreview16>

[7] <http://www.oxonianreview.org/issues/5-1/5-1nicholls.html>

[8] <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/book-review--britannias-swaggering-popinjay-nelson-a-personal-history--christopher-hibbert-viking-20-pounds--nelson-is-the-most-operatic-and-romantic-of-our-national-heroes-but-he-could-also-be-a-perfect-ass-jan-morris-is-charmed-1444335.html>

[9] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/sep/29/books.top.10s.nelson>

[10] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2004/oct/10/historybooks.highereducation1>

[11] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3642506/One-eye-one-arm-one-pen.html>

[12] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/may/01/biography.historybooks>