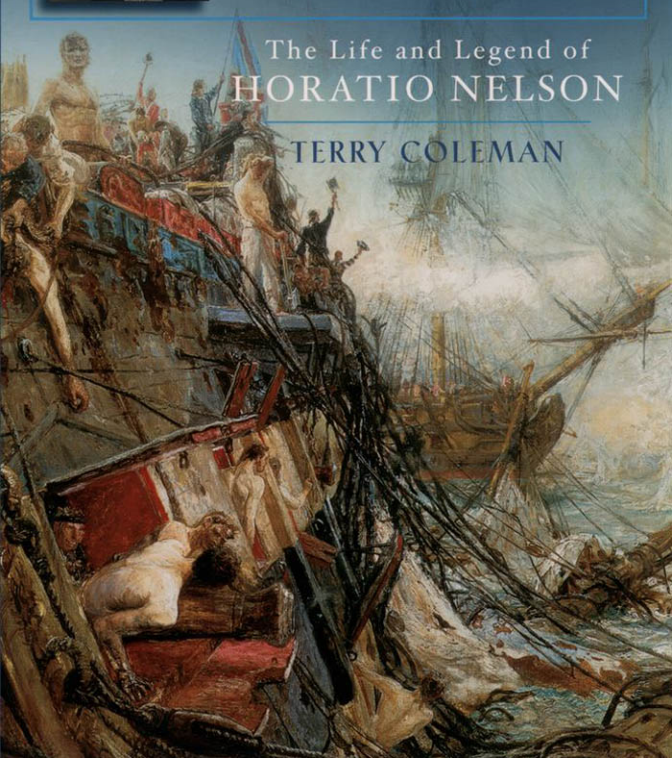


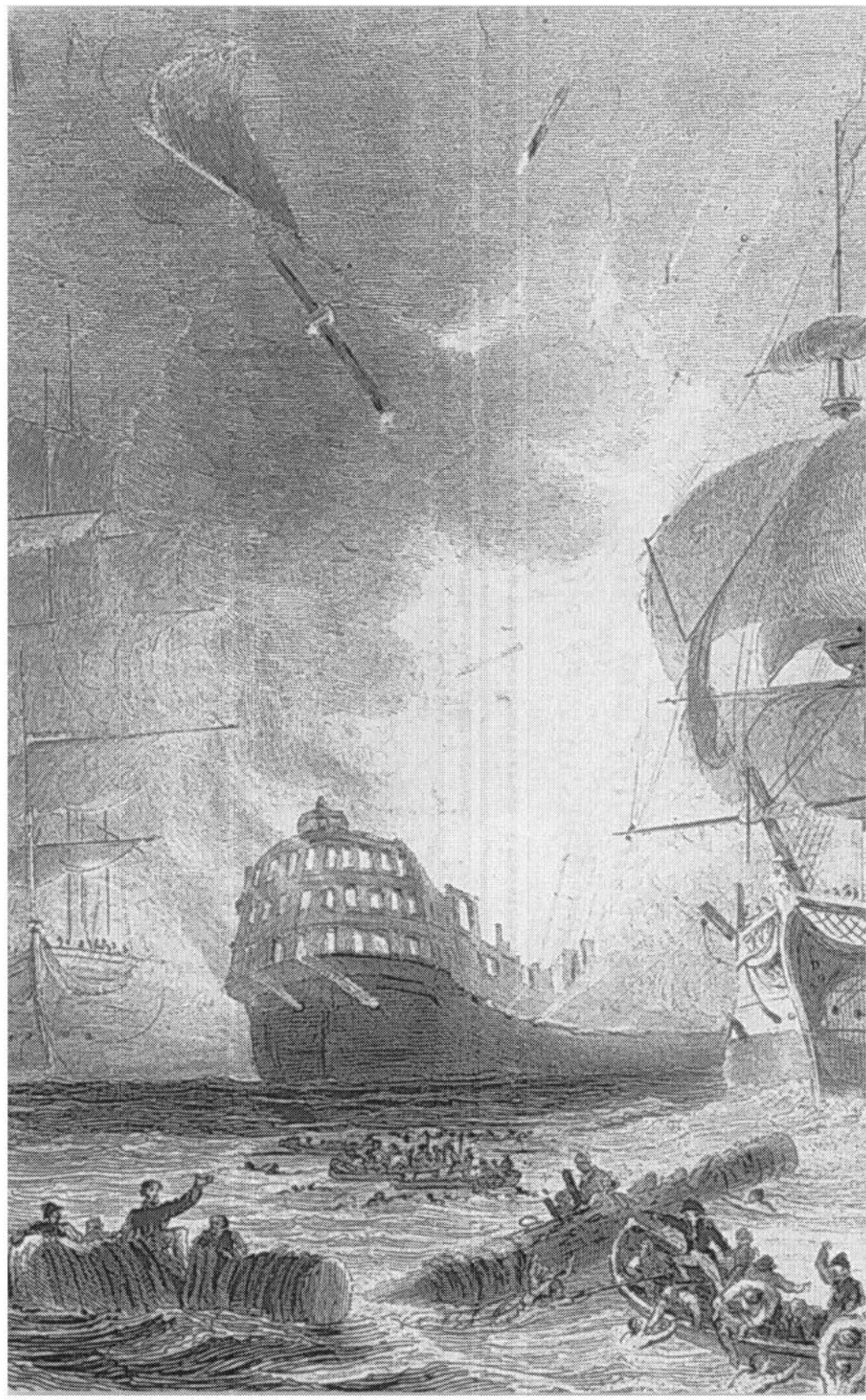


THE NELSON TOUCH

The Life and Legend of
HORATIO NELSON

TERRY COLEMAN





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The Nelson Touch

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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The Nelson Touch

The Life and Legend of Horatio Nelson



Terry Coleman

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For Lesley and for Vivien; both

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Author's Note and Acknowledgments

This book has been a long time in the gestation. My maternal grandfather served more than forty years in the Royal Navy. On the editorial staff of the *Guardian* I was a very junior colleague of the splendid and modest Mark Arnold-Forster, who was I believe the youngest commander RNVR of the 1939–45 war and who was reputed to have gone into action, with his squadron of MTBs, waving a sabre. We often talked ships. I once went as a reporter to meet Arthur Bugler, who had risen from apprentice shipwright to be dockyard constructor at Portsmouth, and he showed me over *Victory*, calling parts of her by their beautiful and lost names – topgallants and futtocks, seizings and mizens, thimbles and after-ends of horses, helves and hitches and hoggings, vang pendants and falls. After that, wherever I went – English Harbour on Antigua, the tiny island of Nevis, the bay of Cap Haitien, the mouth of the Nile, Naples, Copenhagen – I looked to see where Nelson had been. Then I began to read his manuscript letters, and it became gradually but irresistibly clear that there was more to Nelson than the legend. I did not set out to write a revisionist biography. I should suspect the good faith of anyone who did set out to do that. I started off knowing nothing, but then a pattern emerged. The Nelson of Hotham's action seemed to explain the Nelson of the battle of St Vincent, the hasty Nelson of the Caribbean in 1785–87 ('hasty' is his own description of himself) shed light on the hasty Nelson of Naples, and the Nelson of Naples was very much the man who seized

the day at Copenhagen with a *ruse de guerre*. That is how this book came about.

I should like to thank all those who have let me explore the vast archive of Nelson and other papers, or have helped in other ways: the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, and particularly Mr Alan Giddings of the manuscripts department; the British Library manuscripts room; the Public Record Office, Kew; the Nelson Museum at Monmouth and its curator, Mr Andrew Helme; Mr Anthony Cross of the Warwick Leadlay Gallery, Greenwich, for generous help with illustrations; the London Library; the BL newspaper library at Colindale; the College of Herald; Bristol University Library; the county record office, Trowbridge; Mr and Mrs Harry Spiro, New York; the New York Public Library; the Houghton Library of Harvard University; the Huntington Library, San Marino, California; and the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.

And since the way in which a book is produced is of great importance, I should like to thank Rosemary Davidson and Edward Faulkner, of Bloomsbury Publishing, for sympathy in the matter of illustrations, for indicating and demanding proper emendations, and for the most scrupulous copy-editing of an intricate book.

List of Illustrations

IN THE CASE OF portraits, the number in square brackets at the end of the description – e.g. [Walker 67] – is the number of the picture in *The Nelson Portraits*, by Richard Walker, 1998, the standard book of reference, which gives details of the date, medium, provenance, dimensions, copies and other versions made, of each of 238 paintings, prints, medals, and sculptures.

Illustrations in the colour section

NELSON THE YOUNG SEA OFFICER: oil portrait by Francis Rigaud, 1777–81. [Walker 1]. Courtesy National Maritime Museum, Greenwich. The uniform is that of a post captain, but the features are those of the seventeen-year-old lieutenant Rigaud first began to paint. HMS *Boreas*: the sentencing of the seaman William Clark, 16 April 1787. This coloured print, by Louis Ryngal, also shows *Solebay*, *Maidstone*, *Rattler*, and *Pegasus* (Prince William's frigate), all at English Harbour, Antigua in 1787. Courtesy Royal Naval Museum, Portsmouth.

THE WEST INDIES AND AFTER: Nelson, watercolour by Cuthbert Collingwood, c1784, done for Mary Moutray, wife of the commissioner at English Harbour, Antigua. [Walker 2]. National Maritime Museum, Greenwich. *Frances Nelson*, pencil sketch by Daniel Orme, c1798. National Maritime Museum, Greenwich. *Chatham royal dockyard*, detail

of coloured print, n.d. The print evidently shows a royal visit (see the royal ensign flying by the dockyard steps). In the right foreground a first rate is fitting out. Courtesy Anthony Cross, Warwick Leadlay Gallery, Greenwich.

EARLY YEARS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN: The capture of the *Ça Ira* by the *Agamemnon* in Hotham's action, March 1795, by Nicholas Pocock. National Maritime Museum, Greenwich. *Nelson*, miniature in oils by unknown Leghorn artist, 1794. [Walker 3]. National Maritime Museum, Greenwich.

THE ROMANTIC HERO: Nelson after he lost his right arm at Santa Cruz. Mezzotint by W. S. Barnard, May 1798, after the oil by Lemuel Abbott. [Walker 14, 1]. Anthony Cross, Warwick Leadlay Gallery, Greenwich.

THE CARICATURE: The Hero of the Nile, by James Gillray, December 1798. Nelson is shown in full dress uniform, and weighed down by an exaggerated chelengk and by the scarlet pelisse also given to him by the Sultan of Turkey. [Walker 68]. Anthony Cross, Warwick Leadlay Gallery, Greenwich.

THE BATTLE OF THE NILE: Coloured engraving published by Edward Thompson, October 1798. Anthony Cross, Warwick Leadlay Gallery, Greenwich.

NAPLES, AND THE TWO WOMEN WHO CHANGED NELSON'S LIFE: Nelson by Leonardo Guzzardi, 1799. This is one of four copies made by the artist himself, probably for Nelson. [Walker 79]. The original was sent to the Sultan of Turkey, another is in the old admiralty boardroom, and this version is in the collection of the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich. *Maria Carolina*, Queen of Naples, unknown artist. National Maritime Museum, Greenwich. *Attitudes* by Emma Hamilton, engraved in 1794 by Tommaso Piroli after Friedrich Rehberg. The sitting attitude shows Emma in a pose entitled *Penseroso*. From *Nelson and his Companions in Arms*, by John Knox Laughton, 1896.

LIKE THE PRINCE OF AN OPERA: Nelson, pastel by Johann Heinrich Schmidt, Dresden 1801. [Walker 129]. This oval version, paper on copper, which the artist kept, is rather finer than the better known octagonal version, which is however dated 1800, when Nelson was in Dresden. National Maritime Museum, Greenwich. *Emma Hamilton*, pastel by Schmidt. This, although octagonal, is, from the background colouring and the form of signature, over the right shoulder, the pendant of the oval version of Nelson above. National Maritime Museum, Greenwich. *Smoking Attitudes*, coloured print by Isaac Cruikshank, published by Fores of Piccadilly on 18 November 1800. Anthony Cross, Warwick Leadlay Gallery, Greenwich.

THE FÜGER PORTRAIT: Nelson, oil by Heinrich Friedrich Füger, Vienna, 1800. [Warner 102]. This, the only known portrait of Nelson in civilian dress, was kept by the artist for himself and descended to his family. It was bought in 1859, as one of its first acquisitions, by the National Portrait Gallery, London, by whose courtesy it is reproduced. Another version, probably commissioned by Nelson himself, and showing him with decorations and in the full dress of a rear admiral, was presented by the American collector Mrs Lily Lambert McCarthy to the Royal Naval Museum, Portsmouth, in 1872. *The Nelson Touch*: engraving by W. M. Craig after a sketch by, perhaps, one of the officers of the fleet. [Walker 196]. National Maritime Museum, Greenwich.

THE APOTHEOSIS OF NELSON: Print by James Gillray, published 23 December 1805. [Walker 71]. Emma Hamilton is shown as Britannia, and she, with George III, supports the fallen Nelson. The kneeling seaman on the right has the features of the Duke of Clarence. Courtesy Anthony Cross, Warwick Leadlay Gallery, Greenwich. *Reputed death mask*; but this is more likely to have been made as a life mask by Thaller and Ranson, Vienna, 1800, often reproduced. [See Walker 105]. *Funeral in St Paul's*. Engraving after Augustus Pugin, 1806. Anthony Cross, Warwick Leadlay Gallery, Greenwich.

Illustrations in the first black-and-white section

THE FAMILY: Silhouette of the Revd Edmund Nelson, from *The Nelsons of Burnham Thorpe* [a family memoir] by M. Eyre Matcham, London, 1911. Portraits of the Revd William Nelson (later first Earl Nelson), Maurice Nelson, and Catherine Matcham (Nelson's younger sister), from *Nelson's Friendships*, by Hilda Gamlin, 1899.

NELSON'S EARLY PATRONS: Captain Maurice Suckling, stipple after Thomas Bardwell, from *The Life of Nelson*, by A. T. Mahan, 1897. Captain William Locker, engraving by H. T. Ryall after Gilbert Stuart, Clarke and M'Arthur, 1840 edition. Admiral Sir Peter Parker, from an engraving by Ridley, from *Nelson and his Times*, by Lord Charles Beresford, 1897.

TWO GREAT COMMANDERS: Viscount Hood, mezzotint by J. Jones after Reynolds; and Earl St Vincent, mezzotint by C. Turner after William Beechey. Both from *The Royal Navy*, by William Laird Clowse, vol IV, 1897.

THE PRESS GANG: engraving by Barlow after Collings; courtesy Anthony Cross, Warwick Leadlay Gallery, Greenwich.

PRINCE WILLIAM: engraving after a portrait by Richard Cosway; from *Nelson's Friendships*, by Hilda Gamlin, 1899.

THE BATTLE OF ST VINCENT: engraving by Edward Orme after Daniel Orme, 1800; courtesy Royal Naval Museum, Portsmouth.

ANNIHILATION AT ABOUKIR: engraving made for Clarke and M'Arthur's biography, 1840 edition, after the oil by George Arnald. This is one of those engravings which are somehow more vivid than the original work.

CAPTAIN FOLEY: engraving after William Grimaldi; courtesy Anthony Cross, Warwick Leadlay Gallery, Greenwich.

NELSON IN NAPLES, 1799: Sir William Hamilton, engraving by G. Morghen after Hugh Douglas Hamilton; Ferdinand IV, Francis Caracciolo, and Cardinal Ruffò, all by unknown artists. Queen Maria Carolina, detail of portrait by Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun.

LATER PATRON: Sir Gilbert Elliot, later first Earl Minto, by unknown artist. FIRST LORD: Lord Spencer, engraving by B. Holl after John Copley, from Clarke and M'Arthur's biography of Nelson, 1840 edition. FAVOURITE, THEN RIVAL: Thomas Troubridge, engraving by M-A. Bourlier after Beechey, courtesy Anthony Cross, Warwick Leadlay Gallery, Greenwich. MISTRUSTED COMMANDER: Lord Keith, mezzotint by Hoppner, from *The Keith Papers*, NRS, 1950.

Illustrations in the second black-and-white section

CONSTANT WIFE: Lady Nelson, from a miniature c1793, which in the 1890s was in the possession of Mrs F. H. B. Eccles, her granddaughter, at Plymouth. From Mahan, 1898.

LADY OF THE ADMIRALTY: Lavinia, Countess Spencer, mezzotint by Charles Howard Hodges after Reynolds, from *British Portrait Engravers . . .* ed. Edmund Gosse, 1906.

THREE ENGLISH PORTRAITS: Top right: mezzotint by Edward Bell, after full length portrait by Beechey, 1800 [Walker 137]. Left: detail of stipple by G. Keating after an oil by Henry Singleton, 1797 [Walker 10]. Bottom left: stipple by William Evans, after the drawing by Henry Edridge, 1797, showing Nelson with the stump of his right arm still unhealed after Tenerife; the ribbon-ties just visible on the right sleeve, which was slit, enabled the wound to be dressed without removing the coat every time. [Walker 5]; from *Nelson in England*, by E. Hallam Moorhouse, 1913.

ENGLISH CARICATURE of October 1798, by James Gillray, shows Nelson extirpating revolutionary crocodiles at the mouth of the Nile. This was done as soon as news of the victory reached England, and

Nelson is shown with a hook to his right arm, which he never had. Courtesy Anthony Cross, Warwick Leadlay Gallery, Greenwich.

TWO ITALIAN PORTRAITS: Left: a fine engraving made by J. Skelton for Pettigrew's life of Nelson, 1849, after the full length portrait of 1799 by the Palermo artist Leonardo Guzzardi, which was in 1849 and is now in the admiralty boardroom. Guzzardi made at least three versions in oil, the first of which was sent to the Turkish sultan in thanks for the chelengk. This is still at Istanbul. Compare the portrait by Guzzardi in the colour section, which is the version Guzzardi made for Nelson himself and is now in the National Maritime Museum. [Walker 77, 79, 82]. Right: Drawing by an unknown Palermo artist, 1799, from *The Nelsons of Burnham Thorpe*, by M. Eyre Matcham, 1911. [Compare Walker 96–101, which are however slightly different].

BATTLE OF COPENHAGEN: A detail from a pen and ink drawing by the Danish artist J. Bang, 1803. An emblematic and composite picture of the engagement. Courtesy National Maritime Museum, Greenwich.

NELSON'S FAVOURITE PORTRAIT: Stipple vignette by James Stow after a pencil drawing by Simon de Koster, 1800. Courtesy Anthony Cross, Warwick Leadlay Gallery, Greenwich. Nelson wrote [see Walker 164] that this 'little outline of the head' was of all prints the most like him. Many versions exist. On the left is the version now used by the Nelson Society; courtesy Derek Hayes.

PARADISE MERTON: The house Nelson bought in 1801, where he lived with Emma Hamilton. Engraving c1804, from *Nelson and His Companions in Arms*, by J. K. Laughton, 1896.

LAST PORTRAIT, by William Arthur Devis, of which this engraving, by Edward Scriven, was made for the frontispiece of William Beatty's *Authentic Narrative of the Death of Lord Nelson*, 1807. Pettigrew does say that Devis saw Nelson just before he left for Trafalgar, but this is a portrait done for the most part not from the life but from the death. Devis went on board *Victory* when she returned to Spithead after the battle, was present at the post mortem, and was commissioned by the

surgeon, Beatty, to paint this portrait. It is the only known portrait of Nelson to show him wearing the shade attached to the front of his hat-brim, which protected his good eye from the glare of the sun. Many versions exist. [Walker 197–210]. Courtesy Anthony Cross, Warwick Leadlay Gallery, Greenwich.

STATE FUNERAL: This fabric shows scenes from the death and the funeral – Nelson falling on his quarterdeck, the shallop bringing his body from Greenwich, and the funeral car in front of St Paul's – which appeared in a series of aquatints published by Ackermann in January 1806. The fabric is 26½" wide and has a vertical repeat of 21". Courtesy Royal Naval Museum, Portsmouth.

INSIDE ST PAUL'S: This engraving by W. H. Worthington, after a pen and ink sketch by W. Bromley, is one of the illustrations of T. O. Churchill's biography of 1808. It shows the Bishop of Lincoln, who was also Dean of St Paul's, saying the last prayers over Nelson's coffin. In the centre foreground is the Prince of Wales, whom Nelson detested, suspecting him of wishing to seduce Emma, and to his left is the Duke of Clarence. Courtesy Anthony Cross, Warwick Leadlay Gallery, Greenwich. On the coffin were laid a laurel wreath and the cocked hat worn by Nelson. It is obviously a foul-weather hat, and is waterproofed. From *Nelson and His Times*, by Lord Charles Beresford, 1897.

THE ASCENSION OF NELSON: The Christ-like Nelson, wrapped in a white shroud, is raised up by Neptune and offered to Britannia. The artist was Benjamin West, president of the Royal Academy and historical painter to the king. His romantic work was engraved for the first edition of Clarke and M'Arthur's biography of 1809. Compare Gillray's satirical version in the colour section. Courtesy Anthony Cross, Warwick Leadlay Gallery, Greenwich.

Figures in the text

A: Map of the West Indies and central America, 1780, showing Jamaica, where Nelson served and from where he sailed to take part in the disastrous Nicaraguan adventure, and the islands of Nevis, Antigua, and Barbados which he later knew well. Map adapted from *Nelson and His Times*, by Rear-Admiral Lord Charles Beresford, 1897.

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B: 'Never a finer night was seen than last night and I am not the least tired.' Facsimile of Nelson's note to his wife as he left her to join the *Agamemnon* in 1793. Courtesy Nelson Museum, Monmouth.

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C: Facsimile of part of Nelson's first letter with his left hand, 27 July 1797, after he lost his right arm at Tenerife. In it he asks Sir John Jervis, soon to become Lord St Vincent, for a frigate to convey the remains of his carcass home. From *Nelson and His Companions in Arms*, by J. K. Laughton, 1896.

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D: Map of the Mediterranean in 1798, from Gibraltar to Naples and Aboukir, showing the routes taken by Nelson in his pursuit of Napoleon's French fleet. Adapted from *Nelson and His Times*, by Rear-Admiral Lord Charles Beresford, 1897.

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E: Map of the battle of the Nile, 1 August 1798, From Clowes's *Royal Navy: a History*, vol IV, 1899.

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F: Eighteenth-century Naples, showing the position in 1799 of the rebel castles, the French garrison, the royal palace, and the polaccas in the harbour. Engraving by Guiseppe Pietrasante, from *Nelson and the Neapolitan Jacobins*, by H.C. Gutteridge, Navy Records Society, 1903.

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G: Facsimile of part of a letter from Nelson to Emma Hamilton, January 1800, in which he recounts to her his erotic dream of her and two princesses. By kind permission of Mr and Mrs Harry Spiro, New York.

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H: Map of the battle of Copenhagen, 2 April 1801, from Clowes's *Royal Navy: a History*, vol IV, 1899. Page 254

J: Facsimile, c1802, of Nelson's list of his wounds received in the French war. From *Nelson and His Companions*, by J. K. Laughton, 1896. Page 303

K: The many versions of Nelson's right and left-handed signature, from 1777 to his last years. Page 353

L: A fifth rate, the 44-gun frigate *Cambrian*, built 1797; and a first rate ship of the line, the *Royal George*, 100 guns, built 1788. From *Liber Nauticus*, by Dominick and John Thomas Serres, London, 1805. Page 354

Endpapers

The battle of the Nile, an engraving, made for the 1840 edition of Clarke and M'Arthur's biography of Nelson, after the oil by George Arnald. It shows the moment the French flagship *L'Orient* blew up, which so stunned both fleets that there followed several minutes of silence before the battle was resumed.

. . . and 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 was simple and from admirals downwards it was repeated it must succeed if they will allow us to get at them, You are My Lord surrounded by friends who you inspire with confidence, some may be Judas's but the majority are certainly much pleased with my commanding them.

Thus Nelson, in one of his last letters to Emma Hamilton, told her how he explained the plan of attack at Trafalgar to his captains. And thus was born another part of the Nelson legend. Like so much of that legend, its origin lies with Nelson himself. "The Nelson touch" is his own phrase, as is the picture of the captains moved to tears. We do not have a word that any one of the thirty-one captains of his fleet wrote on the occasion.

CHAPTER ONE

Natural Born Predator

NELSON WAS A PARAMOUNT naval genius and a natural born predator, and those who look to find a saint besides will miss the man. The strength of mind is everywhere obvious. He knew he was right, and in action was daring and direct. His originality asserts itself again and again, and so does his quixotic generosity. But in private life, as in war, he was ruthless whenever he had to be, and he could be pitiless. He was a fanatic for duty, at times beyond all sense, and a royalist so infatuated with the divine right of kings that he began to see himself, in revolutionary times, as the instrument of God. This made him a good hater. He hated the American rebels of the thirteen colonies, and the harmless liberal rebels against the Bourbon king of Naples, as unforgivingly as he hated the revolutionary French and then Napoleon.¹

He often spoke of his soul, as often as he spoke of himself, in the third person. 'Nelson comes, the invincible Nelson' – this to his wife after the Nile. 'Nelson, all that is left of him' – this to a fellow admiral, in a letter listing his wounds. 'Nelson is as far above doing a scandalous or mean action as the heavens are above the earth' – this to the commissioners of the navy victualling board, who suggested he had bought beef too dear. Write to Nelson about beef, and he invokes the heavens.²

No one expects so great a marshal as Napoleon, or so implacable a general as Sherman, razing Georgia from Atlanta to the sea, to be a saint as well, but Nelson has been encumbered with his own romantic legend. The real Nelson was a man whose mind was, in his own words,

fixed as fate, whose instinct was not just to defeat the enemy but to annihilate him – and he uses the word again and again – as he did at the Nile. That was a new kind of victory. Annihilation was not in the naval tradition of the late eighteenth century, but Nelson was never ‘one of us’. Do not look for a rounded man. As a young captain in the Leeward Islands he despised his commander-in-chief for playing the fiddle. But an instinct to annihilate, though not quite the done thing, was a capital quality in a war against Napoleon.³

Nelson the living man cannot be held to account for the Nelsonian legend which was so sedulously cultivated after his death, but he did set out to be a hero, and did all he could to advance his own fame. He was an instinctive self-publicist. He first made his name in 1797 at the battle of St Vincent, two accounts of which became classic. Both were his. One he wrote himself and sent to a friend with the suggestion that it should be sent to the newspapers, which it was; and the other, published as a pamphlet by a colonel in the army, relied on what Nelson told him the day after the battle. Thus was established the story of Nelson’s patent bridge for taking Spanish ships of the line, by boarding one over the other. The story was challenged, but Nelson’s two versions were in print by then, and his fame never looked back.⁴

After Nelson’s death his legend grew and thrived. Trafalgar, in 1805, was a great victory, though it was by no means the end of the Napoleonic wars, which lasted another ten years. But it was a victory which was badly needed and it came at the right time, when Napoleon was sweeping everything before him on the continent and had just won the battles of Ulm and Austerlitz. The dead Nelson was seen almost as a redeemer, and was portrayed by Benjamin West in his vast oil painting as a Christ-like figure draped in a shroud and supported in the arms of Neptune while Britannia hovered above. This became the frontispiece to the official biography by Clarke and M’Arthur, which was in part controlled by Nelson’s older brother William. It came out in two vast volumes weighing twenty-three pounds, and was a hagiography.⁵ It reflected the spirit of the times, and served as an admirable piece of propaganda. Then in 1813 the single most influential biography of Nelson ever to appear was written by Robert Southey, who became poet laureate that same year. The publisher John Murray believed that a short life by Southey would sell well as a midshipman’s manual, and it has sold ever since. Few biographers can ever have known less about

their subject. Southey probably saw no single paper of Nelson's, his principal informant was his brother Tom who had been a midshipman at Copenhagen, and he wrote what was for the most part an elegant epitome of the unreadable Clarke and M'Arthur. 'I walk,' said Southey, 'as a cat does in a china pantry, in bodily fear of doing mischief, and betraying myself, and yet there will come a good book of it ...'⁶ It was still wartime, and his book, as he said, was a eulogy of a great national hero. It portrayed an almost infallible yet humane Nelson, helped form the legend, and set the tone for many later biographers. It is at times the portrait of an impossible ideal, as when Southey asserts that Nelson never placed musketry in his tops, to pick off enemies at close range, because this was a 'murderous sort of warfare'. This quite misunderstands Nelson the fighting officer. At close range, in action, Nelson's business was killing, and he excelled at his business. At Trafalgar he raked the *Bucentaure* through her stern windows with a carronade loaded with five hundred grapeshot. It must have killed fifty. Warfare is meant to be murderous.

It is now all but two hundred years since Nelson's death. The only comparable British military hero of modern times is Wellington.⁷ He was as great a fighter as Nelson, and had, by the age of forty-seven, at which Nelson died, been created a duke and a knight of the garter. He too won a great, remembered battle – his Waterloo to Nelson's Trafalgar. He was in his day as celebrated as Nelson, his funeral was as splendid, and there are in greater London ninety-seven streets or other thoroughfares named after Wellington or Waterloo as against sixty-nine named after Nelson or Trafalgar. But he is now generally known for the wellington boot and for having replied, when threatened with the publication of an ex-mistress's memoirs, 'Publish and be damned' (which he probably did not say or write). Nelson, with his eye patch (which he never wore), and with Emma Hamilton on his one arm, is a more vivid figure.⁸ He did of course have the great advantage that he died in battle at the height of his fame, and did not have the misfortune to survive and become prime minister, as Wellington did.

It is an irony that the immortal memory is in part kept fresh by two circumstances which are commonly counted stains upon it. One is Nelson's liaison with Lady Hamilton, and the other his conduct at Naples in 1799 where he acted more like a Neapolitan viceroy than a British admiral, broke a treaty, and imprisoned the rebel leaders in

British ships of war before handing them over to the Bourbon king's executioners. This is something Southey deplored, as a stain on the memory of the Nelson he was helping to create. Early in 1999, three London newspapers gave half a page each to a conference in Naples where Italian academics called Nelson a butcher and a war criminal.⁹ A chapter in this book is devoted to the Naples affair. But quite apart from the truth or falsity of the accusations, the remarkable fact is that after two hundred years Nelson is still news.

From all the evidence, these qualities of the man emerge. Always strength of mind amounting to genius, often generosity, always a fascination with women, often uneasiness with his family and with his superior officers, often ruthlessness, always fearlessness.

Often he was generous, giving a boatswain on hard times £100, going out of his way to support the common law wife his brother Maurice left behind, and twice writing privately to the first lord of the admiralty on behalf of a young commander who had been court-martialled and ruined for running his sloop ashore, saying that if he himself had been censured every time he ran his ship into danger he would long ago have been out of the service.¹⁰

He delighted in women and always noticed them. The commissioner's wife in Antigua who made him feel like an April day; the most beautiful girl of seventeen killed during a bombardment on Corsica; the ladies walking the walls of Cadiz, seen by telescope from his quarterdeck; and the bride, not quite thirteen, of Sir John Acton, prime minister of Naples. This was a marriage which caused Nelson to write to a friend, 'So you see it is never too late to do well. He is only sixty-seven.' And women liked Nelson – his admirals' wives, Lavinia Spencer, wife of the first lord, and girls in England who became *brisk* at the thought of him. Nelson was accused of venery, but if that is a fault in a vigorous man then it is one that Wellington shared in abundance.

Nelson's family have been too little taken into account. At times they tormented him. His father, a clergyman, loved his son but Nelson, in his last years, could not bear the old man's troubled doubts. Nelson was affectionate towards his sisters Catherine and Susannah, but was wary of their husbands. His brother Maurice, at the navy office, was disappointed and not so amiable as he is generally painted. And Nelson's brother William, also a clergyman, was a boorish, grasping scoundrel. In his twenties he went as chaplain with Nelson to the

Caribbean but came home early and then procured a pay certificate from Nelson stating that he had served fifteen months longer than he had.¹¹ Later he constantly scrounged for deaneries and bishoprics and was a perpetual irritant. Nelson's gentle and constant wife could not stand William, whom even his father thought ambitious, proud, and selfish. This was the brother who after Trafalgar, to honour the victory and the family name, was given the earldom that Nelson in his lifetime was denied.¹²

That Nelson was often ruthless there is no doubt. It is all very well for one Victorian writer to say, in accordance with the legend, that Nelson's nerves were convulsed by seeing seamen punished, and for another to state emphatically that among the many jewels which composed the hero's character, that of humanity was among the most conspicuous, but the log of the *Boreas*, the frigate Nelson commanded at the time of his marriage, shows that in eighteen months he flogged fifty-four of his 122 seamen and twelve of his twenty marines, almost half his people, and that eight of the punishments were for mutinous language.¹³ This does not make him a great flogger, but his nerves were plainly not convulsed. And when a fellow admiral objected to the execution of mutineers on a Sunday, Nelson said he would have hanged them though it had been Christmas day. This is not the sensitive Nelson of the legend. It was ruthless, and so was his threat to set fire to the floating batteries he had taken at Copenhagen, 'without having the power of saving the brave Danes who have defended them', burning the men with the batteries. He thereby procured a truce, and stated that his motive in asking for it was humanity, but he needed the truce to save his squadron.¹⁴

Nelson's fearlessness was perfect. His wife, his father, and the London newspapers urged him in 1797 to leave boarding enemy ships to others, telling him he had glory enough. He took no notice. He lost both his right eye and his right arm not in fleet actions, not even at sea, but on land, the arm quite gratuitously while he was leading what would now be called a commando raid, in which no admiral should have taken part. He had a reckless courage which was best described by Vice-Admiral Philip Colomb, in a sketch of Nelson which appeared in 1899. 'It is impossible to doubt, on the one hand, that these tremendous acts arose out of a sense of duty which in religion would be called fanatical; and on the other, out of some sense of delight of the fox hunting kind, which

I can only explain by supposing bodily fear and the mental power to banish it, the delight being in the moral victory.'¹⁵ His own fearlessness did of course expose others to danger. In the attack which cost him his arm, an attack which he knew to be hopeless and which he later said he made out of pride, he lost twice as many men as died in the whole battle of St Vincent.¹⁶

At sea, most of all in action at sea, he was all bold originality. On land he was less sure, and in the last five years of his life he was unhinged. He was a generous man who wished his wife dead, half out of his mind with Emma Hamilton but jealously unsure of her, at odds with his father whom he neglected and whose funeral he did not attend, at law with his old mentor Earl St Vincent over prize money, forever complaining that prime ministers never did anything for him, and damning the lords of the admiralty as a set of beasts. At the same time as he was doing the damning, he was writing to Emma: 'I am all soul and sensibility; a fine thread will lead me, but with my life I would resist a cable dragging me.'¹⁷ He would not, he was saying, be dragged even by the admiralty. Yet the man of soul and sensibility who wrote this was still the fearless predator who a few weeks later won the battle of Copenhagen. That too was in his soul.

The immortal memory survives everything, and will survive everything. In 1999 the Royal Naval Museum, in Portsmouth dockyard and in sight of the *Victory*, commissioned a life-size wax figure of Nelson to stand in its new Nelson gallery. It depicts Nelson as he was when he went aboard the *Victory* for the last time, at Portsmouth in 1805, to search out the French and Spanish fleets. Nelson's health and appearance is well documented in contemporary descriptions and paintings. When he set out on his last voyage he had spent only a month at home after two solid years at sea. He was thin, his hair had been white for five years, and he had lost his top teeth. He had lately described himself again and again as worn out, shaken, and old. Yet the Portsmouth museum, after taking careful measurements from the uniform Nelson wore at Trafalgar, and examining hair cut off after his death, produced the effigy of a man whose hair is reddish, who fills out his uniform, and is the image of robustness. No matter that a showcase just behind him shows seven miniatures of a white-haired Nelson. The effigy is of Nelson the legend, and that in its way is perfectly authentic, for the legend has long outlasted the man.¹⁸

This book is an attempt to tease out the man from the legend, which is not easy, because the two have become so intertwined. The poet Coleridge discovered from one of Nelson's captains that *L'Orient*, the French flagship at the Nile, which famously blew up, may have been fired by some phosphorus-like substance thrown aboard her. But in considering this, as with so much else, it is as well to bear Coleridge's own maxim in mind: 'Facts! Never be weary of discussing and exposing the hollowness of these – every man an accomplice on one side or the other ...'¹⁹ One of the most potent and most universally accepted facts – that of Nelson putting a telescope to his blind eye at the battle of Copenhagen – does not stand examination. In spite of all the evidence, or what appeared to be evidence, it didn't happen. It is a myth. But in general, to distinguish the man from his legend is the less easy with Nelson because the man was himself full of such contradictions and paradoxes. One of them is his relationship with his mentor St Vincent. Nelson and John Jervis, later Earl St Vincent, were the two greatest sea officers of their age. St Vincent, who was born in 1735, was the older of the two by a generation. Nelson as captain and commodore served under him in the Mediterranean. The two men got on marvellously, and few senior officers did get on well with the irascible St Vincent. It was he who in 1801 recommended Nelson to go as second in command to the Baltic and then, in 1803, as first lord, appointed him commander-in-chief in the Mediterranean. It was he who called Nelson a predator, and prized him for it. He believed that Nelson possessed the magic art of infusing his own spirit into others, and told him so.²⁰ But his belief in Nelson changed. In retirement, St Vincent corresponded frequently with his old friend Dr Andrew Baird, who had known Nelson well and had served with him as fleet physician. In 1814, when St Vincent was in his eightieth year, he wrote a discursive letter to Baird to which he scribbled a postscript: 'Animal courage was the sole merit of Lord Nelson, his private character most disgraceful in every sense of the word.'²¹

How St Vincent came to write that is one of the questions this book will try to answer.

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CHAPTER TWO

Well Then, I Will Be a Hero

HORATIO NELSON WAS BORN on 29 September 1758 – two years after Mozart’s birth and the year before Wolfe stormed the Heights of Abraham – in the parsonage house at Burnham Thorpe, a village three miles from the northern coast of Norfolk. A man standing on that bleak coast and looking north has nothing but sea and ice between him and the North Pole. Horatio’s father, the Revd Edmund Nelson, had been rector of the parish since he came down from Cambridge. His father before him had been a country clergyman, and his mother was the daughter of a baker. There was nothing distinguished, then, about the male line of the Nelsons, except for its tradition of longevity. Horatio’s paternal grandmother lived to be 91, and two aunts to 89 and 93. But the female line had some claim to distinction. Edmund Nelson’s wife Catherine was a Suckling, and her great great grandmother had been sister to Sir Robert Walpole, prime minister to both George I and George II, who had been created an earl. This connection to nobility was tenuous enough, but it did subsist. Horatio itself was a traditional Walpole family name, and Horatio, second baron Walpole, stood as Nelson’s godfather. In the 1760s another branch of the Walpoles, who were distant cousins and lived at Houghton Hall, ten miles or so from Burnham, sometimes remembered to send a brace of pheasants to the Nelsons, and sometimes forgot.

But Edmund Nelson was in no sense a poor parson. He had inherited his two livings from his father, and one was in the gift of Eton College. He kept four servants, and had the means to spend most winters in

the milder climate of Bath. Catherine Nelson bore eleven children, of whom eight survived at the time of her death in the winter of 1767. She was forty-two. Horatio was then nine years old. Three of his brothers had died in infancy. Two older brothers, Maurice and William, were fourteen and ten. An older sister, Susannah, was twelve. That left two more brothers and a sister who all later died young, and the youngest of all, Catherine, who was only ten months old at the time of her mother's death. She grew up to be Horatio's favourite. The widowed rector did not remarry. Susannah was apprenticed to a milliner in Bath. Maurice left for London at the age of fifteen to become a clerk in the excise. William and Horatio were educated at the Royal Grammar School in Norwich and at two other schools in Norfolk. William went on to Cambridge and became a parson like his father. Horatio picked up enough Latin to be able to quote the odd tag in his letters, read enough Shakespeare to enable him to misquote from *Henry V*, and was vilely taught French, in which language he could never speak or write a dozen words together. But he always had a natural gift for the written word. His letters can be as vivid, and as self-revealing, as Pepys's.

It is important to recognise that no more is known for sure about the young Nelson than about any other country clergyman's son. His father kept a 'family historical register' which says nothing at all about him until he went to sea at the age of thirteen.¹ All that Nelson ever said he remembered about his mother was that she hated the French. Of course many traditional anecdotes of the young Nelson have been handed down from biographer to biographer. They should be given as much credence as any anecdotes of a man's youth, recalled by others many years later when their subject has achieved greatness. It has also to be taken into account that almost all these stories come from Clarke and M'Arthur's approved biography published soon after Nelson's death. John M'Arthur was a naval journalist, who had been secretary to Admiral Lord Hood and had known Nelson. The Revd James Clarke, who was added for respectability, had been a naval chaplain and journalist, but was by then chaplain to the Prince of Wales. Their work, when it can be checked against the letters and documents it cites, is in a hundred instances inaccurate.² Furthermore, in selecting early anecdotes, the joint authors naturally chose tales which revealed in the young Nelson the heroic qualities he displayed as a man. This

does not matter with such a story as that of the boy Nelson, lost in a wood on the way to visit his grandmother and believed to have been carried off by gypsies, who when found and asked whether he had not been afraid, replied, 'Fear never came near me, grandmama!'³ It hardly rings true, but it is of little consequence. The accuracy of some other anecdotes does matter.

The source of such tales had to be the family, but by the time Clarke and M'Arthur were compiling their biography Nelson's father and his brother Maurice were dead, and of his surviving sisters Catherine would have been too young to remember her brother's youth. That left Susannah and William, and it was William, the sanctimonious and grasping elder brother, who insisted on controlling the biography and made himself most objectionable in the process.⁴ He was concerned that the work should reflect glory not only on Nelson's memory, which would have been natural, but also on 'the line of Nelsons', by which he meant himself. The bloodline was an obsession with him. William, having been created an earl solely to celebrate the merits of his dead brother, considered himself the proper and principal surviving representative of that bloodline; and he was also a self-seeker in whom no confidence whatever should be reposed. So where a story is at all unlikely, and where its probable source is William, it has to be taken with a large pinch of salt.⁵

Two important anecdotes fit this description. One concerns Nelson taking his lieutenant's examination. We shall come to that. The other is the classic story of how the boy Nelson came to enter the navy.

Nelson's mother had two brothers who had done well for themselves. One was William Suckling, deputy collector in the custom office, who had got Maurice Nelson his post with the excise. The other was Captain Maurice Suckling, a sea officer who had distinguished himself in a Caribbean action in the Seven Years' War. He had then been on half pay for seven years, but in December 1770, when war looked likely with Spain over an obscure dispute in the Falkland Islands, he was given the *Raisonnable*, 64 guns, which was fitting out at Chatham. The story goes that the twelve-year-old Nelson, reading of his uncle's appointment in a county newspaper, exclaimed: 'Do, brother William, write to my father at Bath and tell him I should like to go with uncle Maurice to sea.' At which William did write to Bath, where their father was spending the winter for his health, and he in turn wrote to Captain Suckling, who

exclaimed: 'What has the poor Horace done, who is so weak, that he above the rest should be sent to rough it out at sea? Do let him come; and the first time we go into action, a cannon ball may knock off his head and provide for him at once.'⁶

The tale has been told ever since, and doubtless it was agreeable to William that he should be seen to have played an indispensable part in sending his famous brother to sea. But is it likely that Horatio Nelson, who throughout his life was the first to hurl himself into any enterprise, and was always the dominant brother, would have asked William, who was after all only eighteen months his senior, to make the application for him?

At any rate Nelson had taken the first, indispensable step of any would-be sea officer. He had found a captain to take him to sea. Suckling took his nephew on board and rated him midshipman. But the greatest of naval careers nearly came to a rapid end. Spain climbed down and withdrew from the Falklands, the newly commissioned ships were taken out of service, and Nelson would have been on his way home again if Suckling had not asked for the command of a guardship in the Medway, and got one. She was the *Triumph*, 74 guns, and he rated his nephew as captain's servant. Whether a young gentleman was written down as midshipman or captain's servant did not matter. There was no one rank equivalent to officer-cadet in the modern sense. A midshipman was an aspiring officer, but not yet an officer. He was a rating and he could be rated or disrated as his captain pleased, turned ashore or turned before the mast with the common seamen, though this rarely happened. Nelson in his first years at sea served variously as midshipman, captain's servant, and able seaman. Many distinguished officers had once been nominally rated able seaman, but this did not mean they had risen from the lower deck. The crucial distinction was that, however a young gentleman was written down in the ship's books, he had the privilege of walking the quarterdeck with the captain and his officers. If all went well with him he would in time become one of those officers. But it was a hard life, and though he was in no real sense a common seaman he had to learn to do the duties of one: that was indeed one of the requirements of the lieutenant's examination he could take after six years at sea.

In a third rate ship of the line like the *Triumph*, if she were fully manned, six or seven hundred unwashed seamen lived and messed on

the gundeck, sleeping in hammocks slung fore and aft and with only fourteen inches of lateral space to swing in. A midshipman was slightly better off. He messed and slung his hammock either in the gunroom, in the sternmost part of the gundeck, or in the cockpit on the orlop deck, midships and on or below the water line, where there was no natural light and little air. On duty he learned navigation from the master or the lieutenants, hauled cables, and climbed into the rigging with the topmastmen. He thoroughly learned his trade and his profession.

So Nelson walked the *Triumph's* quarterdeck, and learned to pilot the ship's cutter from Chatham to Tower Bridge, or from Chatham to the North Foreland, becoming confident in the rocks and sands of the Thames. But service on a guardship which would never leave the Medway was no way for a young gentleman to learn his profession, so Suckling sent his nephew on a voyage with a merchantman, whose master had once served with him. We do not even know the name of this ship or where she went, but her owners traded out of Florida, Bermuda, and the Lesser Antilles. When after a year Nelson returned, having become as he said a 'practical seaman', he was taken back into the *Triumph*, on whose books his name had remained, so that he should lose none of the six years' service required before he could hope to gain a commission. This was a harmless fiction regularly practised.⁷

Then came his first adventure. In 1773 an expedition towards the North Pole was planned. The navy strengthened the two bomb-ketches which were to sail on it. The principal purpose was to make astronomical observations for the Royal Society, though there was speculation that the larger object might be to find a northwest passage to India. An act of George II still offered a reward of £20,000 to any British ship that should do so. It was an age of exploration. The Frenchman de Bougainville had circumnavigated the globe and given his name to the bougainvillea. Captain Cook had discovered the extent of the southern continent later to be called Australia. Among those who at one time sailed with him were George Vancouver, who later surveyed much of the western coast of America, and William Bligh of breadfruit and mutiny fame. Cook, on his second voyage, had crossed the Antarctic circle and was northward bound for Tahiti at the time the Arctic expedition was due to sail. It was an expedition in which Nelson had an ardent desire to take part. As he wrote years later in a memoir, nothing could prevent him using 'every interest' to go with

Captain Lutwidge in the *Carcass*. This meant that his uncle knew that captain. The strange thing is that, having got his way and sailed with the expedition, and traditionally attacked a bear on an ice floe with the butt of a musket (an adventure he never mentioned), Nelson wrote no more than that he was given the command of a cutter with twelve men and prided himself in fancying he could navigate her better than any other boat in the ship.⁸ It was left to another midshipman to describe, in his journal, the passage to the far north of Spitzbergen, snowflakes sometimes shaped like icicles and sometimes like stars, the vistas of ten miles of unbroken ice, up to twenty-four feet thick, which threatened to engulf and crush the ships, the walrus crashing against the boats with which the men tried to tow the ships to open water, and the eventual escape.

The expedition returned after five months, having found no north-west passage but having been within ten degrees of the Pole. Nelson at fifteen had been as far north as any man in the navy.

He returned to the *Triumph*, put in another one week and five days' service with Captain Suckling, and was then given a letter of introduction to the master of the *Seahorse*, a small frigate in a squadron which was fitting out for a far eastern voyage. The *Seahorse* took the classical route to the East Indies – to Madeira, south to the Cape of Good Hope, eastwards in the roaring forties, and then north to Madras. In the next two years she touched at Calcutta and Bombay, and sailed as far north and west as Basra in the Persian gulf. It was a thorough tour of the East. He thought Trincomalee in Ceylon the finest harbour in the world, but otherwise recorded nothing of his first, and only, experience of the East.⁹ A quarter of a century later he did tell the daughter of an admiral that at one port, which he did not name, he won £300 at cards and then, considering what he might have lost, never played again. The pay of a midshipman was £60 a year, which would hardly have paid his mess bills. Then he took fever, probably the malaria which returned intermittently all his life, and was sent home, a mere skeleton, in the *Dolphin* frigate. The passage took six months. He recovered, but during this first severe illness thought that he should never rise in his profession, and almost wished himself overboard. But then his mind exulted in the idea of patriotism, that the king and country should be his patron. 'Well then,' he told himself, 'I will be a hero, and confiding in Providence I will brave every danger.'¹⁰

Such was the vision, and such his state of mind on that long passage. But this again is what he is reported, perhaps with advantages, to have told a brother officer many years later. We do not have a single line he wrote at the time. He had sailed to the Caribbean and the Arctic. He had sailed the Atlantic as far south as the Cape of Good Hope, traversed the Indian Ocean, the Bay of Bengal, and the Arabian Sea. He had, indeed, seen more of the world than he ever would again, but his family, who afterwards preserved hundreds of his letters, extraordinarily kept not one from his first five years at sea, nor did he preserve one from them. He arrived back in England, a month or so before his eighteenth birthday, in a time of peace when employment would be scarce, and with little but his ideal of patriotism to sustain him. For a midshipman there was not even the half pay on which many a sea officer without a ship scraped by.

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CHAPTER THREE

The Whole Glory of the Service

BUT WHEN NELSON RETURNED to England on board the *Dolphin* in the summer of 1776 not only was his health restored but his prospects had changed beyond anything he could have hoped. For a start, there was war. The thirteen American colonies had rebelled the year before, the shots that rang around the world had been fired at Lexington and Concord, George Washington had forced the British to evacuate Boston and move their headquarters to New York, and the first naval action of the war was fought against an American squadron off Rhode Island. In time of war, there would be employment for an aspiring sea officer. Not only that, but Nelson's uncle, Captain Suckling, had been appointed comptroller of the navy. This was the greatest stroke of luck. The eighteenth century was a time when a sea officer, if he were to flourish, needed 'interest', or influence in the right places. Nelson as a young officer liked to say that he stood for himself and had no great connection, the implication being that he had risen unaided and on his own merit. Now his merits were great, but without the chance of his uncle's advancement he could never have risen as he did. Of Nelson in his mid-twenties it can safely be said that few sea officers had ever enjoyed better interest.

The fount of interest in the navy was the first lord of the admiralty. He could make an officer's career, and received constant requests to do so. The man enjoying the best interest with a first lord was likely to be someone close to him, say a nephew, or a person whose services he needed to keep. Family interest was best. A nephew had a stronger

claim than a man of high rank who was personally unknown to the first lord. St Vincent, as first lord in 1801, replied to a petitioner that he had lately refused to promote at the request of four princes of the blood. He liked to prefer those he called 'young men of friendless merit', but kept a sense of proportion and readily procured the promotion of an old friend's grandson.¹

How Captain Suckling, as the captain of a guardship, had caught the eye of the first lord is not known, but in 1775 he was made comptroller, and Nelson's future was assured. The comptroller was traditionally appointed from among the senior captains, and he became head of the navy board. If the admiralty was the right hand of the navy, its left hand was the navy board. Ultimate power lay with the admiralty which disposed of the navy's ships and its commissioned officers, but the navy board, which was an infinitely larger organisation, ran the navy's dockyards, built, repaired, and supplied its ships, and mustered their crews. It was the civil and administrative branch of the navy. Another comptroller of the period described his powers in these words: 'He is the mainspring belonging to anything that is naval; he must be in every part of it and know everything that is going on, in and out of it ... It is the office of next consequence to the first lord of the admiralty.'² Just so. All sea officers of whatever rank would wish to cultivate the comptroller, who by virtue of his office, and because he was a creature of the first lord, was a man of great power. Suckling was also a man whose services the first lord needed. What he asked for his nephew, the first lord was likely to grant. Unless Nelson had been the son of the first lord himself, he could not have had a more powerful patron than Suckling.

The first lord of the time was Lord Sandwich, statesman, sponsor of Captain Cook's voyages, rake, and so keen a gambler that rather than leave the table he had meat brought to him between two slices of bread, thus giving his name to the sandwich. His enemies said of him that he liked to thumb through the pages of Lemprière's *Classical Dictionary* picking out attractive names for new frigates while allowing those frigates he had to decay from neglect.³ He had first become first lord as far back as 1748, had held the post again in the 1760s, and in 1771 was appointed for a third time to that office. He knew the navy.

Sandwich kept patronage books, leather bound and bearing the gold-tooled title 'Appointment of Officers', in which the names of those

recommended for or seeking promotion were set down, in columns which recorded by whom and for what they were recommended, and what the case was.⁴ Lieutenant William Williams, recommended by Lord North, who happened to be prime minister, was unsurprisingly promoted master and commander. Lieutenant Young, recommended by the admiral his father, was found employment in the Mediterranean. Lieutenant Samuel Thompson, on half pay, recommended himself 'to be put somehow on full pay'; no outcome is recorded. Those putting forward candidates included the Lord Chancellor, Lord Plymouth (recommending his son), the Bishop of Oxford, and the dukes of Leeds and Kingston. The case stated varied from 'driven from his estates by [Irish] rebels', to 'was round the world with Capt. Wallis', to 'very indigent and unfortunate', to 'slow, but a good man.'⁵

In these books the name of Horatio Nelson appears nine times, first when he was a midshipman on board the frigate *Seahorse* in 1775, in the East. In the column which asks by whom the man is recommended this entry candidly appears: 'Capt. Suckling, his uncle.'⁶ When Nelson returned in 1776, the lords of the admiralty wrote to the port admiral at Portsmouth directing him to appoint a well-qualified midshipman to act as fourth lieutenant of the *Worcester*, a ship of the line of 64 guns, under Captain Mark Robinson.⁷ The admiral, who of course knew Suckling, duly appointed a young man whom Captain Robinson wrote down in his ship's books as Horace Nelson,⁸ who presented himself with letters from Captain Suckling. Robinson took good care of his new young gentleman, introducing him to the port admiral and taking him to dinner with the mayor of Portsmouth. And when they reached Cadiz, it was Nelson rather than one of the more senior officers of the *Worcester*, who was sent ashore with mail for the British consul. During a winter of dreadful weather in the Channel and the Atlantic, Robinson was well pleased with Nelson, who later recalled that the captain felt as easy when Nelson was in charge of a watch, as any other officer in the ship.⁹

But the rank of acting lieutenant was purely temporary. Nelson was paid as a lieutenant and did a lieutenant's duties, but as soon as he left the *Worcester* he would revert to his former rating of midshipman. He still, however, figured in Sandwich's patronage book, and on 9 April 1777 he appeared before three captains to take his lieutenant's examination, without which no man could go further.¹⁰

The commissioning of officers was the admiralty's business, but by an historical anomaly the examination of young gentlemen to determine whether they were fit to hold a lieutenant's commission was conducted by the navy board. The examinations were by tradition conducted by three captains. During his time as comptroller, Suckling had consistently sat as chairman of the examining board, and he did that day. The other two captains were very different men. Captain Abraham North was ordinary. He had been made lieutenant as far back as 1739 and had been a post captain for twenty-two years, but had seen little sea service. His principal business was as regulating captain of the impress service, the press gang, which in seaports rounded up unwilling men to serve in his majesty's ships. The other captain, John Campbell, was a remarkable man. He had himself been impressed into the navy from a Scottish coaster, went round the world with Anson as master's mate and was afterwards made lieutenant, and became a post captain in 1747. He served in the *Victory* when she was a new ship, commanded a first rate and then a royal yacht, was reputed to have declined a knighthood, and was almost unrivalled as an astronomer and navigator.¹¹ These three captains stated that Nelson appeared to be twenty years of age – he was not quite nineteen – that he produced certificates from five captains under whom he had served, that he had been at sea for more than six years, and that he could splice, knot, reef a sail, and perform his duty as an able seaman and midshipman.¹² There is a tradition that when Nelson was shown into the room Suckling showed no sign of recognition, and that only when it was clear that there could be no doubt the candidate had passed did he rise from his seat and beg to introduce his nephew.¹³ At which the captains are reputed to have expressed surprise at not being informed before, and Suckling to have replied that he had not wished the youngster to be favoured. This is a good story but wildly improbable. Captains Campbell and North had been examining for eight years, and with Suckling for the two years since his appointment as comptroller. They knew him and they knew how the system worked. Nor was there anything unusual in an uncle's patronage of his nephew. Such nepotism was expected and openly avowed, as it was in Lord Sandwich's books. Nelson was the only candidate examined that day, which was unusual. At its previous sitting, the week before, the same board had examined five. Furthermore, one of the captain's certificates produced by Nelson was

from Suckling, with whom he first went to sea, so it would have been obvious he knew Nelson. The tradition makes a good story, but that is all. Clarke and M'Arthur say the source is William. Nelson did not hint that anything of the sort had happened when he wrote five days later to William, telling him he had passed his 'degree as Master of Arts'.¹⁴

Not that he did quite have his degree. Passing the lieutenant's examination did not give a man a commission. There was no such thing as a commission in the abstract. It had to be a commission to serve as lieutenant in a certain named vessel. Men who had passed their certificate could wait years for a ship. One unfortunate, given acting rank by Howe of all people, had to wait ten years. A few were never called. Of the ten who passed immediately before and after Nelson, only four received a commission that same year, five waited anything from one year to four, and one was never made.¹⁵ Nelson on the other hand received his commission the very next day, as second lieutenant of the frigate *Lowestoffe*, 32 guns.¹⁶ 'So,' as he continued in his letter to William, 'I am now left in [the] world to shift for myself, which I hope I shall do, so as to bring credit to myself and friends.' He would not quite have to fend for himself. His uncle the comptroller even franked the letter, which saved Nelson the postage.

It was a very good time to begin a sea officer's career. Not only was there war against the rebel American colonies, but in February 1778 Britain declared war on France when she signed an alliance with the Americans. So there was a general war and general employment. If we consider again the ten men who were Nelson's immediate contemporaries, of the nine who were commissioned two progressed no further than lieutenant and one no further than commander, but no fewer than six became post captains. Of these six, one (Philip Gidley King) became governor of New South Wales, and four achieved flag rank. Of these last four, two were knighted.¹⁷

The captain of the *Lowestoffe* was William Locker, a man of some parts. He had served in the West Indies, North America, India, and China, and sailed with Hawke and Jervis. He had been wounded in the boarding and taking of a more powerful French privateer, and Nelson frequently quoted his advice: 'Lay a Frenchman close and you will beat him.' He and Nelson became close friends. Two-thirds of the existing letters written by Nelson in his first four years as a commissioned officer were to Locker.¹⁸ And to Locker is owed the first portrait of Nelson,

who liked to have portraits of his young officers. Before Nelson sailed he gave sittings to John Francis Rigaud, a French émigré who had also painted Joshua Reynolds, William Chambers, and the ceiling of Trinity House. It was unfinished when Nelson sailed with the *Lowestoffe*, and was put away for three years. It is the only portrait of Nelson made before he was changed by recurrent illness and wounds.

In the *Lowestoffe* Nelson sailed for Jamaica, which was the principal British naval base in the Caribbean. He was an outstanding and fearless lieutenant. He liked to tell the story of his boarding a captured French merchantman in a gale of wind and a heavy sea, saying it was an event which presaged his character, and remarking that it was his disposition that difficulties and dangers only increased his desire of attempting them.¹⁹ He was not modest. From Jamaica, with his eye on the American rebellion to the north, he wrote home to Captain Suckling about the Yankees who had come down the Mississippi, plundered the plantations, carried off the negroes, and sold them at New Orleans. Providence (now Annapolis) had also been taken by the Americans, and here Nelson added an approving note which gives some idea of his lifelong contempt for rebels. 'It was retaken by a Kingston privateer who flogg'd the whole council for giving it up without firing a shot.'²⁰

After Britain declared war on the French, Rear-Admiral Sir Peter Parker came out as commander-in-chief of the Jamaica station. Here was a character, an admiral in a line of admirals. His father had been an admiral, and his own son and grandson became admirals too. As commodore on the New York station he had already taken Long Island and Rhode Island.²¹ He had served his country well, and believed that a grateful country should reward its sea officers. He was one of those officers who also became a member of parliament. In one debate on the promotion of officers, having spoken on the peril and fatigue of a naval life, he told the Commons that if neither honours nor emoluments were to be given to officers who had behaved meritoriously, and gallantly distinguished themselves, he feared that the mere thanks of the House (which were frequently voted) would be considered only as an empty compliment.²² Sir Peter practised what he preached. He had made a nephew lieutenant at the age of thirteen, and his son Christopher post captain at seventeen, with the result that this son later became rear-admiral at the age of thirty-four; no younger man is known to

have attained that rank.²³ When he arrived in Jamaica, Parker knew Nelson was the comptroller's nephew, and was happy to take an active young man into his flagship, the *Bristol*, which was the classic way of bringing a young man on. In July 1778 Nelson joined Parker as third lieutenant. By September he had, by succession, become first lieutenant of the flagship.²⁴ He was not quite twenty. By then he had just heard that his uncle the comptroller had died. But as Nelson wrote to his father: 'Even in his last illness he did not forget me but recommend'd me in the strongest manner to Sir Peter Parker who has promised he will make me the first captain.'²⁵

So Suckling was succeeded as patron by Parker, and again Nelson could not have had a better sponsor. At home an officer had to rely on the admiralty for employment and promotion. But an admiral who was commander-in-chief of a foreign station had almost equal powers. He could promote whom he wished, and though his promotions would be subject to confirmation by the admiralty, by long tradition such an admiral's appointments to fill death vacancies were always confirmed. And there were deaths enough on the busy Jamaica station, deaths and prizes.

Prizes were a great consolation. In one year Parker's own flagship took three ships, two schooners, and a sloop, carrying cargoes of lumber, staves, rum, sugar, pimento, negroes, and dry goods. The other ships under his command took forty-six more. Typical among them were the *Pirha*, ship, of Rochelle, bound from West Africa to Cap François with 570 slaves; the *Fredericksburg*, an American sloop, with rum, sugar, and salt; and the *Comte de Vergennes*, ship, of Havre, bound from Port au Prince to Bordeaux with sugar, coffee, indigo, and cotton.²⁶ Most were out of or bound for the ports of St Domingue, now Haiti, then the richest of all French colonies. Prizes formally belonged to the Crown, but by an act of parliament of 1708, to encourage seamen and sea officers, the whole net value of a prize went to those who took her. Parker, as commander-in-chief, took one-eighth of the entire value of any prize taken by a vessel of his squadron, whether he was there or not. The captain of that vessel took a quarter. The lieutenants, of whom in a frigate there might be four, divided another eighth between them. The warrant officers and petty officers – the master, boatswain, chaplain, surgeon, clerks, sailmakers, and incidentally midshipmen – shared another quarter. Then the last quarter was split between all

the rest, captain's servants, seamen, and boys. A modest prize of £10,000 taken by a small frigate would yield the captain £2,500, each lieutenant £312, and each seaman £25. This was ten years' pay for the captain and a full year's for each seaman. It was a lottery and an inducement.

Deaths from disease and war continued. The French frigates were typically larger and faster than the British. In late August the *Concorde* took the *Minerva*. Captain John Stott was wounded in the head. A piece of his ear was shot off, his eyesight and hearing taken away by a great swelling, and a ball remained in his face. A few days later the *Active* (Captain William Williams) was taken and towed into Cap François, where she was moored alongside the *Minerva*. Nelson knew both these captains. He wrote to his friend Locker that three hundred British seamen lay in the jails of St Domingue, and that poor Captain Williams had died of a broken heart.²⁷ By 8 December 1778, losses had been so great that Parker had to make fourteen new appointments in one day. One of them was Nelson, who was made master and commander of the *Badger* brig.²⁸

This was a between rank given to officers who commanded vessels smaller than frigates, in effect sloops or brigs. A frigate was a three masted square rigged ship, carrying anything from twenty to forty-four guns, mostly used for commerce raiding or reconnaissance. A sloop carried twenty guns or fewer, and could be either a three masted ship or a two masted brig. Officers in command of sloops were called master and commander because such vessels did not also carry a master – that is to say an uncommissioned navigating officer – as all larger ships did. A commander was called Captain This or That, but that was out of courtesy. He was not a post captain. Commander was the first step in a sea officer's promotion.

Nelson spent only six months in the *Badger*, in a filthy climate and constant rains protecting the settlers in the bay of Honduras from American privateers. But he did everything well and gained the affection of the settlers who, as he did not hesitate to say, voted him their unanimous thanks.²⁹ On her return to Jamaica, the *Badger* was lying in Montego Bay when the *Glasgow* sloop came in, anchored, and was soon in flames. A steward with a candle had tried to steal rum and a cask caught fire. Nelson was affected by this as he was not afterwards affected in battle, and told Locker he thought the burning

ship a most shocking sight. He saved all her crew.³⁰ Then in June 1779 he was given the most essential promotion in the career of a sea officer. A commander could remain a commander for the rest of his days, without promotion or even employment. Many did. As St Vincent put it with typical blunt emphasis: 'Seniority upon *that vile list* is no boast, or ever can be of service to any man.'³¹ Many a commander, after his sloop was paid off, found himself less able to find employment than if he had remained a lieutenant, and had to live on half pay for years. In 1790 about 300 lieutenants were employed, as against sixty-eight commanders. But once an officer was given command of a post ship, a frigate or larger, he became a post captain. The list of post captains was inviolable and unalterable, and the order of seniority on it was determined by the date of a captain's commission. An officer on *this* list had only to survive, and not be disgraced and dismissed the service, in order to rise. Employed or unemployed, on full pay or half pay, he rose as those above him were killed, or died off, or in the fullness of time became admirals. And when an officer rose to the top of the list of post captains, he himself was raised, in one of the periodic promotions, to rear-admiral. Once a man was a post captain, and lived, he would die an admiral.

In the autumn of 1778 Admiral Parker had bought a captured French ship into the service, armed her with 28 guns, rated her a frigate, and renamed her the *Hinchinbrook*.³² She was a post ship, and her commander would be a post captain. In June of 1779, when her first British captain was killed by a random shot from a French ship, Parker gave Nelson command of her. Since it was a death vacancy it would be confirmed. As Nelson wrote to his brother William, 'We all rise by *deaths*. I got my rank by a shot killing a post captain and I most sincerely hope I shall, when I go, go out of the world the same way ...'³³ He was made.

The rise in Nelson's fortune in the previous six months is best put in his own words, written many years later and speaking of another young lieutenant, but the essence was the same for any sea officer: 'Get him the next two steps, commander and post, for until that is done, nothing substantial is effected; then the whole glory of our service is opened to him.'³⁴

Nelson was post, and in command of a frigate bearing the name *Hinchinbrook*, which was the name of the estate of Lord Sandwich, who