

Nelson's Column must not fall! In defence of Horatio

Don't cancel the victor of Trafalgar. Fired by a sense of his own destiny, the great naval hero became one of the most remarkable men in history



Horatio Nelson by Lemuel Francis Abbott

ALAMY

[Dominic Sandbrook](#)

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On the morning of October 21, 1805, one of the most extraordinary characters in Britain's history knelt alone in his great wooden cabin to write his final prayer. "May the great God, whom I worship," he began, "grant to my country, and for the benefit of Europe in general, a great and glorious victory ..."

The author of those words was the greatest naval commander of the age and perhaps of all time. He was a man of war, hardened to the horrors of conflict, who had lost an arm and the sight in one eye during battle.

One thing he had never lost, though, was his simple boyhood faith. And now, on the last morning of his life, the vicar's son from rural Norfolk asked for the blessing of the Almighty. "To Him I resign myself," he ended, "and the just cause which is entrusted to me to defend. Amen. Amen. Amen ..."

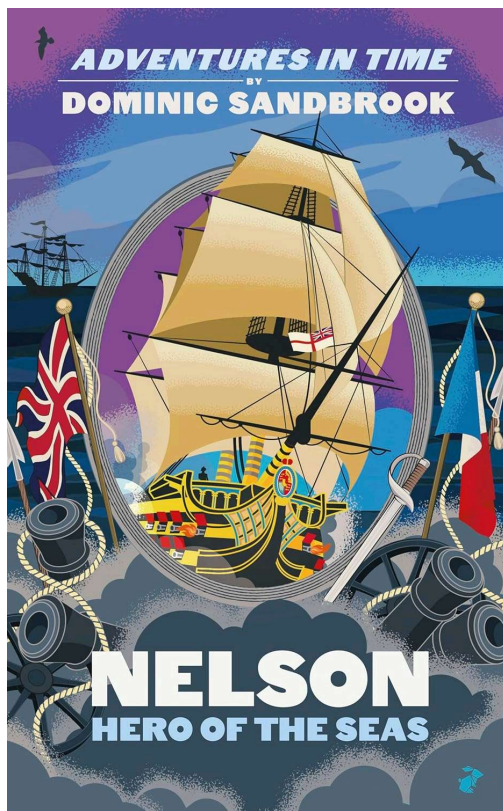
Such was the final prayer of Horatio Nelson, a few hours before his victory over the combined fleets of France and Spain at the Battle of Trafalgar. Had he not fallen in the hour of victory, cut down by a marksman's musket, those words would surely be forgotten today.

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But all his life Nelson had carried himself like the hero of an opera. And fate gave him an ending worthy of the most melodramatic blockbuster.

Even now, more than four decades after I first encountered Nelson's story in one of the Ladybird history books, I find it impossible to resist. A boy from a country village who went to sea at the age of just 12; a lover of Shakespeare who led his band of brothers to victory at the Nile; a patriotic martyr who saved Britain from invasion; a national hero who won mastery of the seas for generations — for adventure, for romance, for sheer mythic resonance, there's nothing in British history to match it.

But in a post-imperial age, does Nelson still matter? Should he be banished to the attic with James Wolfe, General Gordon and Lord Roberts, those other fading heroes of the 18th and 19th centuries? Or should he, as some activists insist, be tarred and feathered as a symbol of oppression, an instrument of colonialism who sailed in defence of an empire of slavery? Is it time, as the professional provocateur Afua Hirsch asked a few years ago, for Nelson's Column to fall?



You can guess my answer because I wouldn't have bothered writing a book about Nelson, the latest volume in my *Adventures in Time* children's history series, if I didn't think he was worth it. I've written about some titanic characters in my time, from Alexander the Great and Cleopatra to Larry Grayson and Jim Callaghan. But Nelson is special: not just the most talented leader of men Britain has produced but a figure of almost unfathomable charisma and magnetism. I don't believe there's a young reader alive who wouldn't enjoy his story.

One of the great things about Nelson, as with so many of history's memorable characters, is that he was profoundly conscious of his own star quality. In the late 18th century the Royal Navy was the most modern organisation on Earth, with a vast bureaucracy and pioneering manufactories, supported by the world's foremost industrial economy and its most sophisticated financial system. And from admirals to able seamen, its men were unsurpassed, the finest sailors anywhere in the world.

Yet even by those standards, Nelson was different, and he knew it. When, as a young midshipman in India, he fell dangerously ill with malaria, he had a kind of vision — a “sudden glow of patriotism” that told him that he would survive and “be a hero”.

Later, after another brush with death in the jungles of Nicaragua, he wrote of his unshakeable conviction that his “dream of glory [would] be fulfilled”.

As a general rule, only teenagers or lunatics say things like this. But Winston Churchill said something similar, and he was proved right. And Nelson, too, was vindicated beyond doubt or question. If nothing else, his life is an object lesson in the importance of self-confidence. All his life he had dreamt of becoming “Britannia’s god of war”, as Lord Byron put it — and he was.

There’s more to Nelson’s life, though, than a burning sense of his own importance. Had he not been genuinely exceptional, he would merely have been the Royal Navy’s answer to Liz Truss, driven mad by his own self-belief. But even scholarly biographers such as John Sugden and Andrew Lambert have written of his “genius” — his mastery of naval strategy, his command of battle tactics, his diplomatic subtlety and skill, his unrivalled ability to inspire his men.



The fall of Nelson at the Battle of Trafalgar painted by Denis Dighton, c 1825

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Even at the time, hard-bitten sailors believed Nelson to be special. As they knew better than anyone, no other British commander had kindled such a spirit of comradeship, determination and sheer adventure. When, just before Trafalgar, he sent his most famous signal — “England expects that every man will do his duty” — the electric reaction around the fleet spoke volumes.

For in those words there was an extraordinary magic, as if Nelson were speaking personally to every man in the fleet, putting an arm round his shoulders and urging him to do his best. One sailor recalled that it filled them with “cool, deliberate courage”. Another said simply that it gave them a “determination to conquer” — as indeed they did.

Was Nelson perfect? Of course not. He was prickly, sickly, demanding and difficult, and his private life was a national scandal. Although complicated love lives are hardly uncommon, his treatment of his decent, dutiful wife, Fanny, whom he abandoned for the flagrantly narcissistic Emma Hamilton, is simply impossible to excuse.

But all of us have feet of clay and it would be mad to expect historical characters to meet impossible standards. And it would be absurd to cancel Nelson because he doesn't share the ideological assumptions of the 2020s. It's absolutely true that as a conservative officer in the Royal Navy, whose wife came from the Caribbean planter classes, he was no friend to abolitionism. A single letter survives in which he appears to express support for slavery, but since it was doctored after his death, it's impossible to be certain what he actually wrote.

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More significantly, he never owned slaves, never served on a slave ship, never invested his money in sugar plantations and never wrote anything remotely racist. His family did have a black servant called Price, but he was a free man, not a slave.

For what it's worth, Nelson thought that he was "as good a man who ever lived".

So when Nelson's successors in the Royal Navy meet for dinner on Monday — the anniversary of Trafalgar — they should raise their glasses without a moment's hesitation. He was the supreme embodiment of the most dramatic and exciting age in Britain's history — an era of thrilling technological change, political statesmanship, industrial supremacy and financial innovation.

But he was also, quite simply, one of the most remarkable individuals our island has produced, a slight, sickly man who showed tremendous physical courage and intellectual fortitude and gave his life to defend hearth and home.

Nothing better captures Nelson's spirit than his last agonised whisper as he lay dying on the Victory, blood draining into his chest and his officers choking back the tears: "God and my country." If you don't feel a lump in your throat as you read those words, then there's something wrong with you. Or you're French.

Dominic Sandbrook's *Adventures in Time: Nelson, Hero of the Seas* is available now (Particular £15.99 pp384). To order a copy go to timesbookshop.co.uk. Free UK standard P&P on orders over £25. Special discount available for Times+ members

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