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In the Hour of Victory: The Royal Navy at War in the Age of Nelson

Sam Willis. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014. 396 pp. Illus. Notes. Glossary. Index. \$35.

Reviewed by Joseph Callo

The story of how *In the Hour of Victory* was conceived begins with the chance discovery at the British Library in 2010 of a “varnished box the size of a coffin.” Inside the mysterious container was a book so large it took two people to lift it onto a table. Willis describes the centuries-old contents:

Here, immaculately preserved, were the admirals’ narratives describing their victories to the King and the naval lords and politicians in London. Here also were letters from captains describing their conduct in battle to their admirals; from boatswains describing the damage to their ships; and from surgeons describing injuries to their men. Here were maps detailing the changing locations of ships as the chaos of battle unfurled. . . . History came off them all like heat.

Willis skillfully weaves the newly discovered material, along with his own insightful commentary, into a narrative of a series of naval battles that shaped the geopolitics of the 19th century and sealed British dominance at sea for a hundred years. The cache spanned seven combat actions: the Glorious First of June (June 1794), Cape Saint Vincent (February 1797), Camperdown (October 1797), the Nile (August 1798), Copenhagen (April 1801), Trafalgar (October 1805), and San Domingo (February 1806).

The author captures the unusual personal quality of his discovery in his book’s introduction:

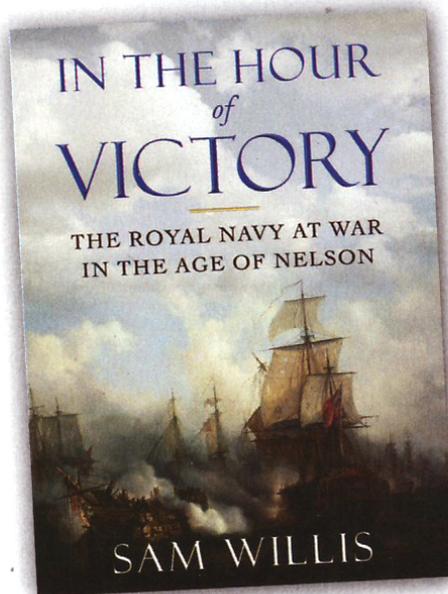
Listen! Do you hear it? It is the sound of a quill, like an urgent whisper. It is the sound of history being written at a heavy oak desk, in a low-beamed cabin; the sound of a naval officer describing one of those mighty clashes that ruptured history between 1794 and 1815, when Europe was at war and when much of the conflict was fought at sea.

Not surprisingly there is heavy emphasis in this book on the Battle of Trafalgar. Vice Admiral Horatio Nelson’s hunt for his adversary, the threat of an invasion of

Great Britain, the violence of the action, the matching violence of the storm that followed the combat action, and Nelson’s death all advance the drama of this special chronicle.

Among the most thought-provoking passages of the book are Willis’ observations of Nelson’s special leadership qualities. At one point, for example, he observes that, contrary to popular wisdom, the Royal Navy fleet that Nelson led at Trafalgar was not exactly a naval leader’s dream:

His fleet at Trafalgar was a motley collection of men and ships, hastily gathered from wherever they could be



found; this was no “Band of Brothers” like that which had fought at the Nile. Nelson had never even met some of his captains and 11 of the 27 had never served with him before. Indeed six of the British captains had never been in battle before, let alone in battle under Nelson’s command.

Further, it emerges from the facts of the narrative that Nelson’s primary strength as a leader was not the employment of brilliant tactics; it was his ability to establish an effective combat doctrine, which can be defined as the overarching attitude that becomes the most basic guide in the chaos of battle.

Nelson’s often referred-to tactic of breaking the enemy’s line of battle was important, but as Willis’ illumination of previous battles shows, it was not new. It was Nelson’s doctrine of forcing a pell-

mell action, in which the rate of fire and aggressiveness were paramount, that was most critical. In his report of the momentous victory at Trafalgar, Nelson’s second in command, Vice Admiral Cuthbert Collingwood, confirmed the reality of Nelson’s combat doctrine at Trafalgar: “As the mode of our attack had been previously determined on, and communicated to the Flag Officers and Captains, few Signals were necessary, and none were made, except to direct close order, as the Lines bore down.”

Willis puts the cap on his unusual book and the entire era with his closing lines: “It was an intense sliver of history, a period of unmatched ferocity at sea, a period that characterized and shaped the history of the world and a period populated by men whose achievements and sacrifices deserve the widest possible recognition.” *In the Hour of Victory* author Sam Willis takes chances with an unorthodox approach to a series of crucial naval battles of inordinate geostrategic importance, and his approach works.

Rear Admiral Callo is a historian and writer. His books include *The Sea Was Always There* (Fireship Press, 2012); *Legacy of Leadership: Lessons from Admiral Lord Nelson* (Hellgate Press, 1999); and from the Naval Institute Press *John Paul Jones: America’s First Sea Warrior* (2006); *Nelson in the Caribbean: The Hero Emerges, 1784–1787* (2003); and *Nelson Speaks: Admiral Lord Nelson in his own Words* (2001).