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Nelson: The Sword of Albion

John Sugden. New York: A John Macrae Book, Henry Holt and Company, 2013. Originally published in 2012 by The Bodley Head. 944 pp. Illus. Notes. Biblio. Index. \$45.

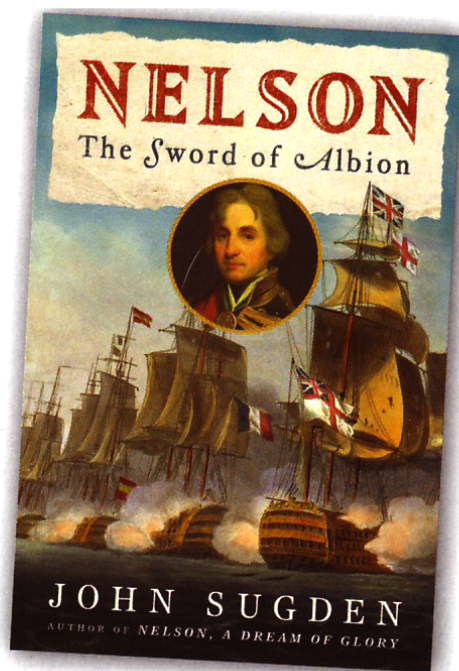
Reviewed by Rear Admiral Joseph Callo, U.S. Navy Reserve (Retired)

This new biography of Admiral Lord Nelson is a follow-on to John Sugden's earlier work, *A Dream of Glory, 1758–1797*, which covers Nelson's first 39 years of life. It picks up the narrative after Nelson's disastrous defeat at the Battle of Santa Cruz de Tenerife in 1797, and its 853 pages of informationally rich text provide insight into Nelson's persona not found elsewhere. Sugden's comprehensive approach coincidentally provides a special view of Great Britain's struggle against Napoleonic France during a pivotal time.

The final eight years of Nelson's life covered by this work include the strategically important battles of the Nile (August 1798) and Copenhagen (April 1801), and the especially consequential Battle of Trafalgar (October 1805), but this biography goes far beyond a tactical analysis of those events. We also learn, for example, how Nelson's duties during those years involved him in complex geopolitical issues in the Mediterranean and Baltic theaters and how that paramilitary involvement influenced his naval career.

The years covered in *Nelson: The Sword of Albion* were the most militarily significant of Nelson's career, and they sharply define many of the extraordinary leadership qualities of the man who shaped history from his quarterdecks. It's also a revealing window into the unusual loyalty among those Nelson led as well as the unparalleled public adoration he enjoyed. Military leadership and the influence of public opinions on wartime policies are two subjects that remain germane in our own times.

Sugden's exceptionally thorough treatment of his subject runs counter to today's high-volume, low-content media approach. Of greater significance, however, the unusual detail of his work adds important connective tissue to the Nelson narrative. That in turn facilitates a "next level" understanding of arguably the world's most famous admiral. The manner in which Sug-



den illuminates two important—and contrasting—personalities in Nelson's story, namely his hard-bitten mentor the Earl St. Vincent and his paramour Lady Emma Hamilton, is an example of how his detail-rich approach facilitates a deeper understanding of his subject.

St. Vincent was Nelson's anchor to windward during a career that was marked by what Nelson called "scrapes" with his naval and political leaders. The ways in which St. Vincent—at one point as first lord of the Admiralty—protected and advanced Nelson's career constitute a continuing strand woven throughout this work. Initially we see the earl saving Nelson's career after the Battle of Santa Cruz de Tenerife in 1797. Then, even as Nelson's final triumph and death at Trafalgar approach, we observe St. Vincent continuing to apply his influence by facilitating Nelson's assignment as commander-in-chief of the Royal Navy's strategically crucial Mediterranean fleet.

Emma Hamilton was a very different kind of influence on Nelson, and to his credit, Sugden does not dwell on the relationship's steamier aspects. Instead, he draws out the extent to which Emma Hamilton became an integral part of Nelson's diplomatic activities and a major element of his psychological support system. Placing the relationship in the context in which

it occurred, Sugden writes, for example, about how the diplomatic situation in the Mediterranean after the Battle of the Nile drew Nelson and Emma together. At the time, Nelson's duties included protecting Britain's main ally in the theater, the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. Sir William Hamilton was the British ambassador to that kingdom, and as his wife, Emma, became a diplomatically important confidante of the kingdom's queen. Sugden writes:

He [Nelson] had moved on in two and a half years, into a different world of monarchs and international diplomacy, a world understood and shared by the Hamiltons, in whom he now confided.

Nelson: The Sword of Albion is not a quick read. It challenges the reader to bring an appreciation for relevant context to each page. The reward for the reader's extra effort is a richly developed perspective of the man described in mythic terms by naval visionary Rear Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan:

[He was] the one man who in himself summed up and embodied the greatness of the possibilities which Sea Power comprehends,—the man for whom genius and opportunity worked together, to make him the personification of the Navy of Great Britain.

With the hundreds upon hundreds of books extant on Nelson, John Sugden has managed to find a significant niche for his latest work. In the process he has created a definitive biography that allows the serious reader to view Nelson from inside the events of his astonishing life and history-making times, rather than as an outside observer.

Rear Admiral Callo is a historian and writer. His books include *The Sea Was Always There* (Fireship Press, 2012), *John Paul Jones: America's First Sea Warrior* (Naval Institute Press, 2006), and *Nelson in the Caribbean: The Hero Emerges, 1784–1787* (Naval Institute Press, 2003). Admiral Callo is also the coauthor of *Who's Who in Naval History: From 1550 to the Present* (Routledge, 2004), and he contributed a chapter to *The Trafalgar Companion* (Osprey, 2005).