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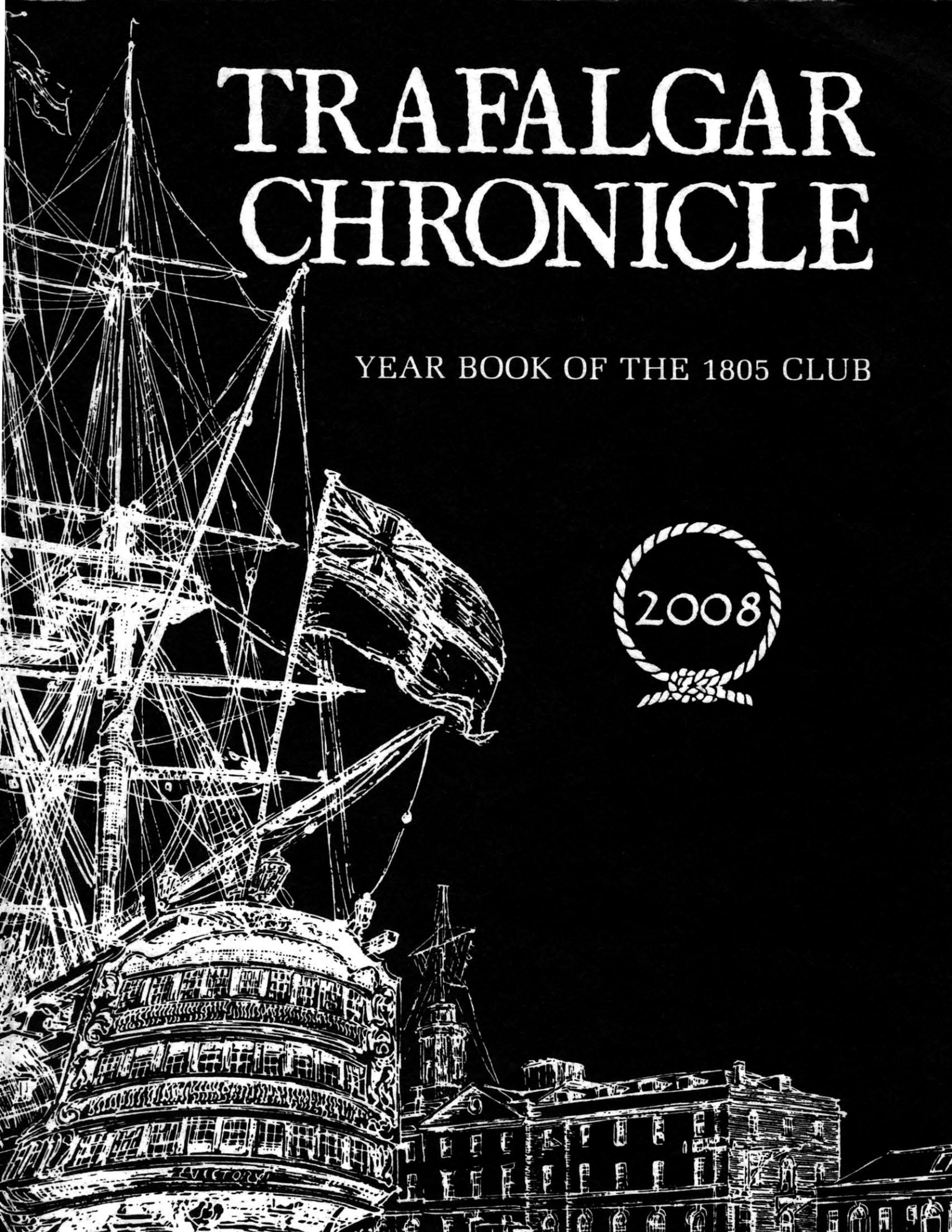

Nelson in HMS *Boreas*: Beyond Physical Courage

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HMS Boreas in the West Indies, March 1787, after the painting by Geoff Hunt, President RMSA. Courtesy Newcomers' Gallery.

The three years Nelson spent as captain of the 28-gun frigate HMS *Boreas* have never received much attention. It's not surprising, since there were no history-making sea battles for Nelson during that period. The epic Battles of Cape Saint Vincent, The Nile, Copenhagen, and Trafalgar were yet to come.

An examination of the events of that period, spent in the West Indies between 1784 and 1787, is vitally important, however, in fully understanding Nelson's career. Those three years were profoundly formative in the career of the officer who U.S. sea power visionary Admiral A.T. Mahan called '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'.[1]

The Run-up to *Boreas*

By the time Nelson received his orders to the command of *Boreas*, he had been captain of the brig HMS *Badger*, the 28-gun frigate, HMS *Hinchinbrooke*, and the 28-gun frigate, HMS *Albemarle*. At the age of 20, when captain of *Hinchinbrooke*, he had made post captain, assuring his steady rise in Royal Navy seniority. Nelson's assignments during his early career had taken him to the Baltic and Caribbean Seas, as well as the Atlantic, Indian and Arctic Oceans. When there was no assignment for him in the Royal Navy, he had served in the British merchant marine, where he came to understand and appreciate those who served in the lower decks.

By the time Nelson was placed in command of *Boreas*, he clearly had demonstrated leadership and seamanship skills that identified him as a promising young captain in the Royal Navy. And at that point, he had caught the attention of some of his superiors. Fortunately for Great Britain, but less fortunately for Royal Navy officers of the time, however, their service was well stocked with exceptional young captains.

Nelson had established his potential, but he had not managed to separate himself from his many fellow captains who also showed exceptional promise. In addition, although he had attracted the attention of some of his seniors, he had not yet found a navy mentor who could guide his career through the often dangerous political cross-currents at the Admiralty. Nor had Nelson found the kind of influence in Parliament or at Court that could accelerate his career by influencing the Admiralty to favor him with choice assignments.

When Nelson was appointed captain of *Boreas*, his career was still in formation, and he was disappointed with his orders to the West Indies. He had lobbied for an assignment on the Jamaica station or in the East Indies, where he believed there were greater opportunities for a frigate captain to distinguish himself.

A Deceptive Calm

Nelson arrived at Carlisle Bay, Barbados in late June of 1784. It was a time when prospects for career-enhancing combat action were low. For one thing, Admiral Sir George Rodney had decisively defeated French Rear Admiral Count François de Grasse at the Battle of the Saintes, which was fought between the islands of Guadeloupe and Dominica in April 1782. Rodney's

victory established a significant degree of British naval dominance in the eastern Caribbean. In addition, less than six months before Nelson's arrival on station, Britain had signed a peace treaty with France and Spain at Versailles in September 1783. And the American Revolution had ended with the Treaty of Paris, also in September 1783.

On the face of things, Nelson's theatre of operations in the West Indies appeared calm, and his tour in *Boreas* could have been relatively uneventful. It was not. The global struggle between Britain and France continued by other means, and those means included fierce competition in sea-borne commerce and empire building. The West Indies, stretching from the Virgin Islands down through both the Leeward and Windward Islands and as far south as Grenada, remained one of the major arenas in this 'non-violent' struggle. The focal point for Nelson in this situation was quickly identified: the enforcement of Britain's Navigation Acts, a long-standing series of laws designed to protect British commerce and colonies.

There was, however, a particular problem as the Acts pertained to the West Indies. Once America became independent she was forbidden to trade directly with the British colonies in the West Indies. That was a serious problem, not just for the Americans, who wanted to reestablish their profitable trade in the West Indies, but also for Britain's West Indian colonists. The colonists relied heavily on the American trade for their very survival, and economic times were hard for Britain's West Indian colonies.

What developed after the American Revolution was a general understanding among the West Indian plantation owners and merchants, the local British authorities in the islands, and the American merchants and ship owners: the trade would go on under various subterfuges. For example, a fully laden ship from the United States would claim to have serious storm damage and would put into a port for 'repairs'. During the 'repairs', much or all of its cargo would be offloaded and sold.

Nelson Roils the Waters

Shortly after his arrival on the station, where he was the 'senior officer afloat', Nelson began taking active steps to stop the illegal trade. In January 1785, he wrote a revealing letter to his friend and former commanding officer, Captain William Locker. Nelson's letter illuminated the contentious disagreement brewing between himself and his reporting senior in the West Indies, Rear-

Admiral Sir Richard Hughes, who was stationed ashore, where his focus was on local matters. Nelson clearly was challenging what had been going on. In the process, he was challenging his immediate military commander:

> *Our Commander has not the opinion of his own sense that he ought to have. He is led by the advice of the Islanders to admit the Yankees to a Trade; at least to wink at it. He does not give himself the weight that I think an English Admiral ought to do. I, for one, am determined not to suffer the Yankees to come where my ship is; for I am sure, if once the Americans are admitted ... they will first become the carrier, and next have possession of our Islands are we ever again embroiled in a French war. The residents of these Islands are Americans by connexion and by interest, and are inimical to Great Britain.*[2]

A few days earlier, in a long, argumentative letter, Nelson had thrown down the gauntlet in no uncertain terms with Admiral Hughes. The issue was whether Nelson and his subordinate Royal Navy captains or the local authorities were ultimately responsible for enforcing the Navigation Acts.[3] Nelson correctly assumed that if the local authorities were in control, the Acts would largely be circumvented, and he would have none of that. He ended his letter with a telling point: 'I know the Navigation Laws'.[4]

The application of the Navigation Acts on a strictly legal basis was, however, only half of Nelson's argument and not the most important half at that. Nelson also was motivated by his understanding of the broad strategic implications of the Acts. It was not enforcement of the law for its own sake that was driving Nelson's career threatening actions. In the same letter to Admiral Hughes, Nelson alluded to the strategic importance of the Navigation Acts when he referred to them as international instruments 'upon which the wealth and safety of Great Britain so much depends'.[5]

Admiral Hughes, for his part, wanted to get along with the local officials, planters and merchants and he felt Nelson was being unreasonable, perhaps even insubordinate. It was also clear as events developed that Admiral Hughes did not have a firm grip on the laws involved, and he did not appear to grasp the broad strategic implications of the Navigation Acts.

The dispute between the two went on for most of Nelson's tour, with both appealing to London to resolve the conflict. One of the most difficult aspects of the situation for Nelson was that he had virtually no local support. With only a few exceptions, the colonial officials, plantation owners, merchants,

and even customs officials were enraged by Nelson's insistence on strict enforcement of the Navigation Acts.

At one point, the local merchants and plantation owners actually attempted to have Nelson arrested and held responsible for their financial loses. If they had succeeded, Nelson's career would have been shattered and he would have been ruined financially. Further, as an immediate consequence of the legal action against him, Nelson was a virtual prisoner in his own ship during much of his West Indies tour.

Even many of the absentee owners of West Indian plantations in London were angered by Nelson's actions, and their displeasure with Nelson's zeal was made known at the Admiralty. The accumulated impact of those complaints would not become fully apparent until Nelson returned from his tour in *Boreas*.

Tempering Character

Because the dispute over if and how the Navigation Acts should be enforced was never really resolved by the Admiralty, it became arguably the most important single issue involved in Nelson's tour in the West Indies. Nelson's leadership was severely tested and several important qualities that would set him apart in his later career became fixed. Those qualities included Nelson's inclination to chart his own course in the pursuit of his duty and then stick to it with iron determination. In many instances Nelson's related inclination to 'interpret' his orders skirted the edges of official disobedience, and it made him unpopular with some of his fellow officers, who thought he was getting away with behavior that would not be tolerated among other officers.

This quality of defining his own duty was an important factor in Nelson's later career, and it surfaced in different ways. For example, he pursued French Admiral Villenueve out of the Mediterranean and into the Atlantic, through the Caribbean and back to Europe in the spring and early summer of 1805, although he had no orders to do so. Those actions eventually led to the Battle of Trafalgar in October 1805. In a more limited context, Nelson ignored a direct order from his Commander-in-Chief, Admiral Sir Hyde Parker to break off combat at the Battle of Copenhagen in April 1801, eventually fighting on to achieve victory in that action.

Related to Nelson's inclination to define his duty for himself was his willingness to risk his career politically, and his tour in *Boreas* was when that

willingness first emerged in boldly defined terms. Day after day, week after week Nelson defied Admiral Hughes, risking his career-and when local officials attempted to have him arrested and held accountable for their financial loses-even his personal safety and financial security. In March 1786, as part of a long letter to Captain Locker, Nelson shows that he was aware of his risks and the possible repercussions of his decisions.

> *I must either disobey my orders, or disobey Acts of Parliament, which the Admiral was disobeying. I determined upon the former, trusting to the uprightness of my intention, and believing that my Country would not allow me to be ruined, by protecting her Commerce.*[6]

Interestingly, Nelson's conflict with Admiral Hughes was not his only ongoing problem over his authority. There were others, including one with Captain John Moutray, resident dockyard commissioner in Antigua and a naval officer in an inactive status. Although dockyard commissioner in Antigua was a civilian position, at one point the governor-general of the Leeward Islands, General Sir Thomas Shirley, a retired senior army officer, tried to establish Moutray as the senior military officer in the Antigua area. Nelson refused to recognize Moutray's military authority and precipitated a rancorous dispute with Moutray and Shirley that was eventually resolved by the Admiralty in Nelson's favor.

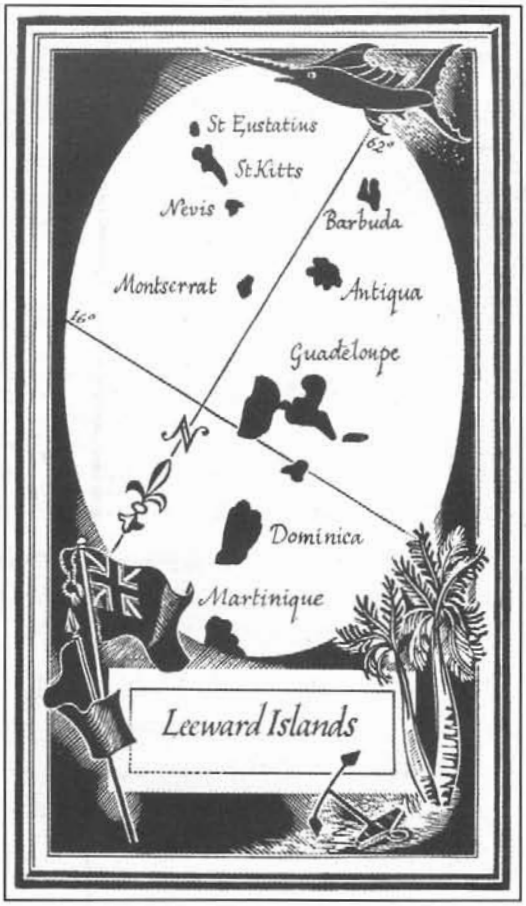


Chart of the Leeward Islands. Engraving by Geoffrey Wales from Nelson's Letters, 1953. Courtesy The Golden Cockerel Press.

Refuge at Montpelier

Montpielier House on Nevis became a unique retreat from contention for Nelson during his West Indies Tour. It was the home of John Herbert, plantation owner and president of the Nevis council. Herbert was one of the few influential colonists on the station who supported Nelson. Indeed, Herbert befriended him.

On several occasions in early 1785, Nelson was entertained at Montpelier, and on those visits, there is little doubt that he heard about Herbert's attractive niece, Fanny Nisbet. Fanny had been married to a local doctor and after the doctor's untimely death she had taken over the management of the Montpelier household for her widowed uncle. In March of 1785, Nelson returned to Nevis. At the time, he was escorting another of Herbert's nieces, Miss Parry Herbert, whom he had transported to Nevis in *Boreas*.

When Nelson and Miss Herbert arrived at Montpelier, it was still quite early in the morning and the household was not yet about. While Nelson was waiting in the dining room, he encountered Fanny's five year son, Josiah. They hit it off, and when Herbert finally appeared, he found Nelson and Josiah playing together. It was an unexpected view of the hard-edged Royal Navy captain who had managed to make so many enemies among the islands, and Herbert was astonished. He later wrote of the event: 'Good God! If I did not find that great little man of whom everybody is so afraid, playing in the next room, under the dining room table, with Mrs. Nisbet's child'.[7]

There is no doubt that Fanny was struck by the attention of the tough-minded naval officer, whom so many feared, to her son. It was a scenario to which few young mothers could have been indifferent, and a romance quickly developed between Nelson and Fanny. By September 1785, Nelson was courting Fanny with such protestations as: 'My greatest wish is to be united to you; and the foundation of all conjugal happiness real love and esteem, is, I trust, what you believe I possess in the strongest degree towards you'.[8]

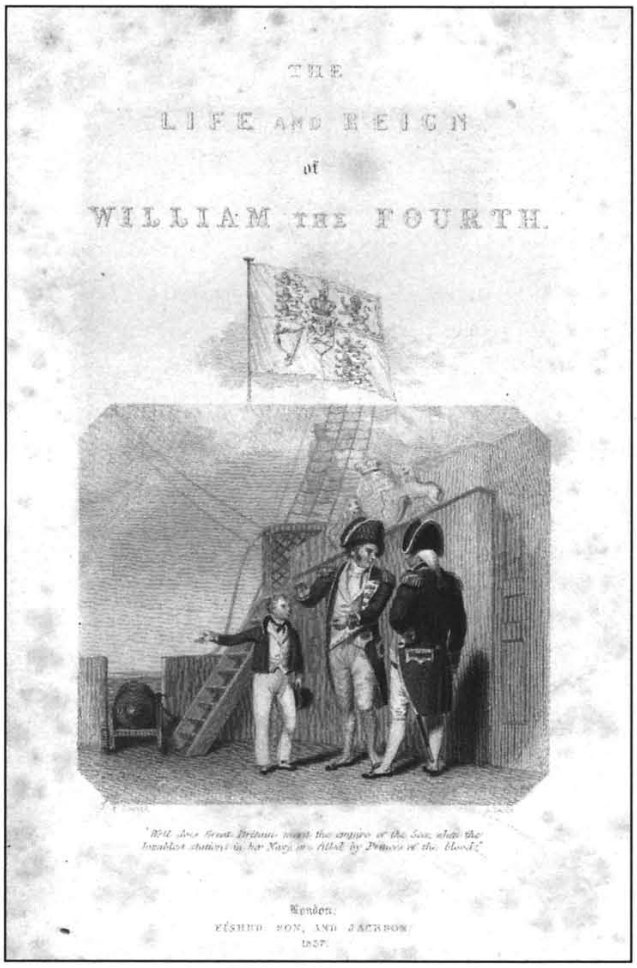
Among the aspects of Nelson's tour in the West Indies that has received little attention is that he and Fanny were very much in love. On the face of it they were a good match. Fanny needed the security of a solid marriage for herself and Josiah. As a rising Royal Navy captain, Nelson filled that bill. For his part, Nelson needed the emotional support of a loyal wife, and he surely hoped for children of his own. As an attractive and strong woman, Fanny filled that bill. The courtship ran its course and the two lovers were married in the garden at Montpelier in March 1787. Prince William, Britain's future King, gave the bride away. The tree under which the ceremony was held still stands on Nevis, as do the stone gateposts that marked the entrance to Montpelier.

The involvement of Prince William in the wedding added tremendous lustre to the event, and Fanny would have liked that. On the other hand, because Prince William kept Fanny waiting for a date when he would be available for

the event, Fanny would have had a frustrating time trying to make the arrangements for such an important event in her life. It was the first instance of how Nelson's navy career would dominate the marriage.

Still More Difficulties

Prince William was commanding officer of the frigate HMS *Pegasus* and when he and his ship were in the West Indies Nelson was his military commander. But Nelson also was a military aide to the Prince as William Duke of Clarence. It was a sticky relationship, and at one point it became a serious problem for Nelson, when Prince William and his first lieutenant, Isaac Schomberg, had a public falling out. Schomberg was a very competent seaman and was probably placed in his position because Prince William was somewhat lacking in seamanship and leadership qualities.



William Duke of Clarence as a midshipman on board HMS Prince George. Steel engraving published 1837. Courtesy Warwick Leadlay Gallery.

Unfortunately, Prince William chose to act more like a prince and less like a captain, and in the course of the disputes, Schomberg was cited for neglect of duty in *Pegasus*' general order book. In response, Prince William's first lieutenant demanded a court martial. It was a situation loaded with both threat and opportunity for Nelson. If he could resolve it to the satisfaction of William, it would establish the kind of long-term influence at Court that could make a career. On the other hand, if he failed to resolve the matter, his career could be at a dead end. There also was the very important issue of what was fair for Lieutenant Schomberg.

Nelson reacted by placing Schomberg under arrest. It was a temporary solution that solved nothing. Eventually, Nelson ordered Prince William and *Pegasus* to the Jamaica Station, which was under the command of a more senior officer, Commodore Alan Gardiner, who could legally convene a court martial.

As it turned out, Gardiner refused to convene a court martial, and he forced Schomberg to apologize to Prince William. Schomberg quickly moved on and was appointed to a career enhancing assignment as first lieutenant in Admiral Lord Hood's flagship, HMS *Barfleur*. Prince William was enraged because he felt Nelson and Hood had not supported him as a commanding officer. Shomberg was enraged because he had been humiliated by William and Commodore Gardiner. Gardiner, Hood and many at the Admiralty were annoyed because Nelson had not been able to resolve the situation at his level. It was not Nelson's finest hour, and the repercussions would be evident after his tour in *Boreas*.

An End and a Beginning

Nelson arrived back in England on 4 July 1787. *Boreas* was paid off and Nelson took up residence with Fanny at his father's parsonage at Burnham Thorpe in Norfolk. It should have been a positive period for Nelson, but it was not. Nelson's reputation had deteriorated at the Admiralty, where he was seen as an officer who created trouble. As his situation at the Admiralty became clear, Nelson was bitter. He felt that he had done his duty and should not have been penalized for that.

To make matters worse, Nelson's and Fanny's marriage did not prosper. The climate at Norfolk contrasted sharply with the tropical environment of Montpelier. Fanny suffered from the penetrating cold and took to her bed for extended periods. Similarly, at Montpelier, Fanny had been the center of a vibrant social life that contrasted sharply with the relative isolation of Burnham Thorpe.

In addition, Nelson's focus on his career and consuming drive to secure another command would have left Fanny wondering at what price had she had purchased security for herself and Josiah. For his part, Nelson came to realize that Fanny was not capable of providing the unconditional support for his career that he craved. And there were no children.

When Nelson returned from the West Indies in 1787, neither the tactical nor the strategic situation in the theatre had changed. But Nelson had; his three years as captain of *Boreas* had been an important transition.

The difficulties that he experienced could not be overcome with raw courage. They were more subtle, and in some ways more challenging. He did manage to overcome them, however, and in the process three qualities that would be important in the future emerged: a willingness to define one's duty depending on circumstances, political courage, and iron determination in the face of continuing adversity. Those three different elements of his character, when combined with his raw physical courage, 'completed' the formidable leader, the man who changed the course of history from the decks of his ship.

It took Nelson five years to secure his next command, HMS *Agamemnon*, and by the time he did, he realized how seriously his navy career had been compromised in the West Indies. Sadly, it also had become clear that Fanny was not to be the soul mate he desperately needed.

On the positive side, however, it was a more powerful persona that again took to sea in *Agamemnon* in 1793. Nelson had dealt with special stresses that added important dimensions to his unique leadership qualities, and those qualities would help him overcome Britain's enemies at sea during a period that shaped the world in which we live today.

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[1] Admiral A.T. Mahan, *The Life of Nelson* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, and Company, 1897), i, p. v.

[2] *The Dispatches and Letters of Vice Admiral Lord Viscount Nelson*, edited by Sir Nicolas Harris Nicolas (London: Henry Colburn, 1844), i, pp. 113-14.

[3] Among Nelson's subordinate captains during his tour in the West Indies was his life-long friend then-captain Cuthbert Collingwood.

[4] *The Dispatches and Letters of Vice Admiral Lord Viscount Nelson*, edited by Sir Nicolas Harris Nicolas (London: Henry Colburn, 1844), i, p. 116.

[5] Ibid., p. 114.

[6] Ibid., pp. 157-58.

[7] Clarke and M'Arthur, *The Life of Admiral Lord Nelson – From His Lordship's Manuscripts* (London: T. Cadwell and W. Davis, 1809), i, p. 78.

[8] *The Dispatches and Letters of Vice Admiral Lord Viscount Nelson*, edited by Sir Nicolas Harris Nicolas (London: Henry Colburn, 1844), i, p. 140.