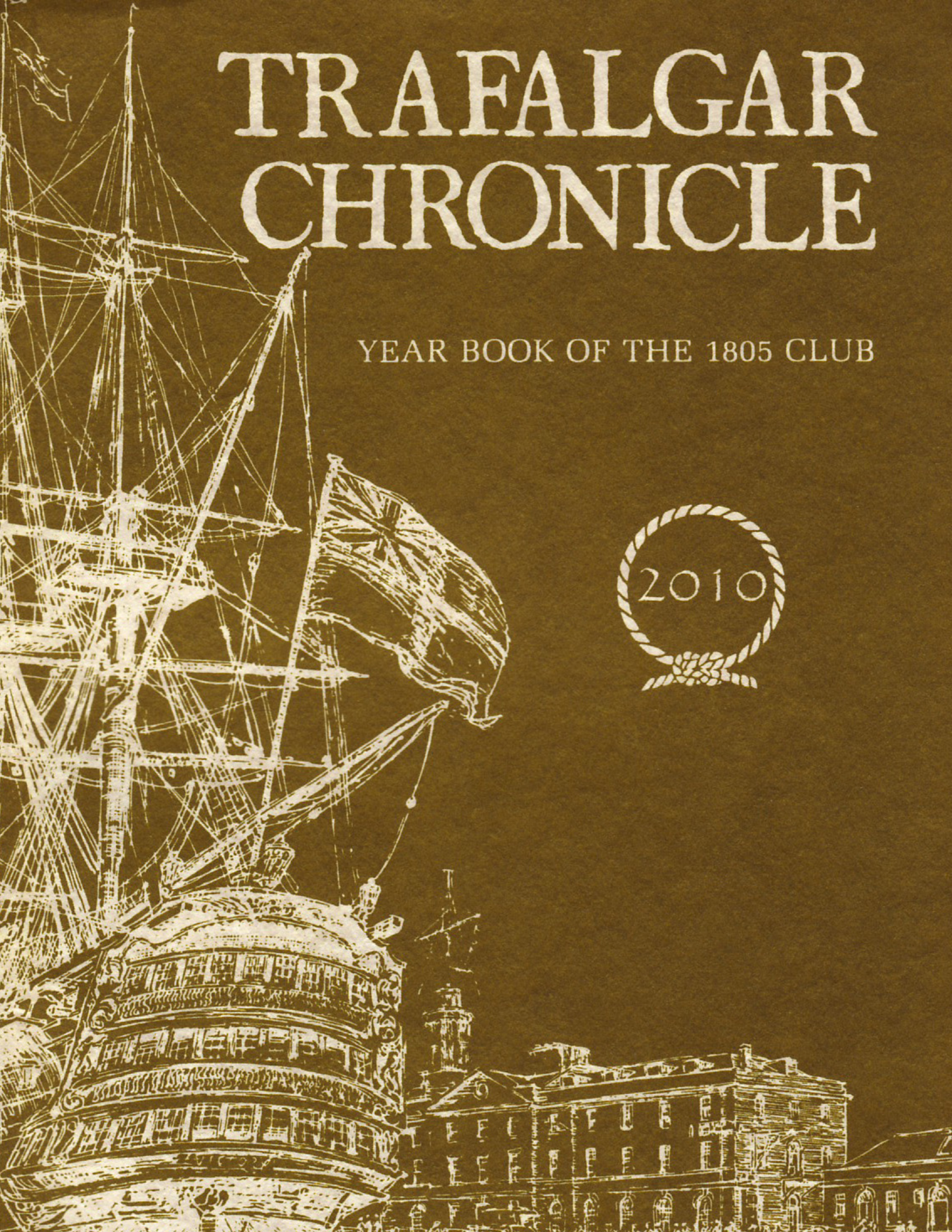
TRAFALGAR CHRONICLE

YEAR BOOK OF THE 1805 CLUB

2010



In Search of Nelson's 'Inner History': The View of A.T. Mahan

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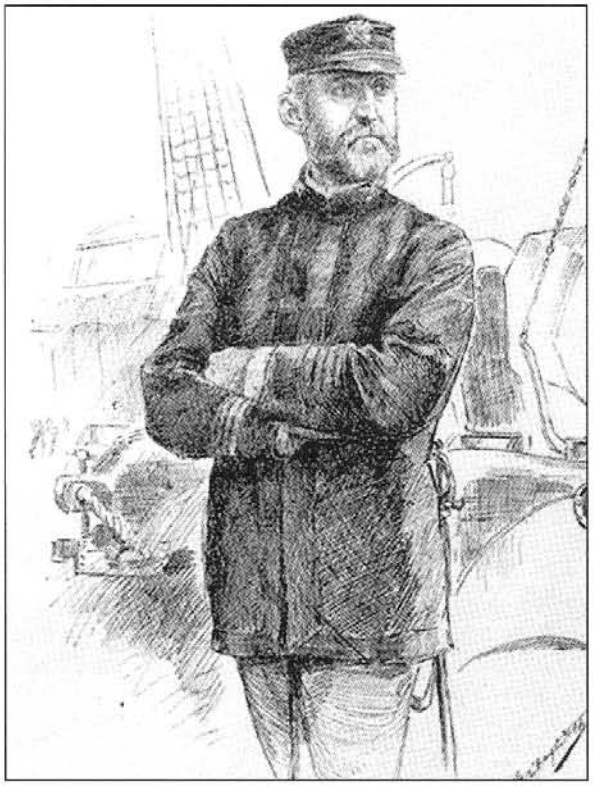


Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan, (1840-1914). Engraving after a sketch by Gribayeitoff, 1894, while he commanded USS Chicago. Mahan was United States Naval officer, geo-strategist and historian, who has been called 'the most important American strategist of the nineteenth century'. Courtesy Private Collection.

Despite the challenge of his elaborate writing style, Rear Admiral A.T. Mahan's *The Life of Nelson: The Embodiment of the Sea Power of Great Britain* has survived as a definitive assessment of the naval officer who changed the course of history from the quarterdecks of his ships.

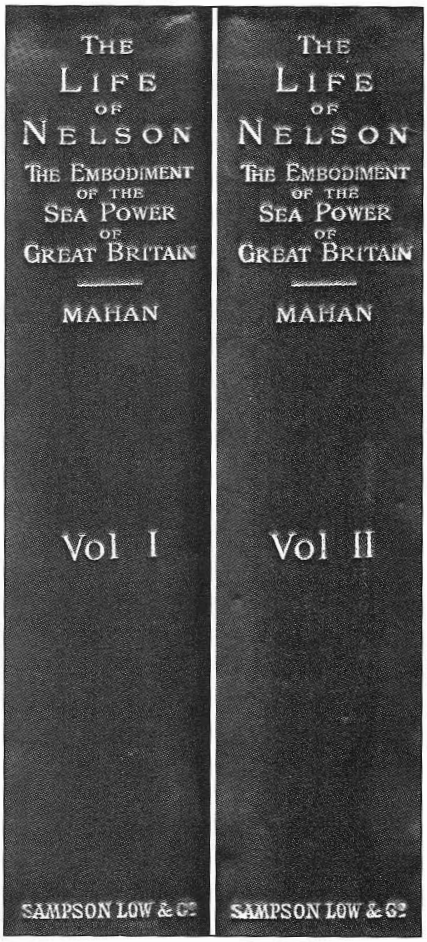
One of the foremost reasons for the continuing relevance of Mahan's work, which is now more than a century old, is his perspective as a professional naval officer and a sea power visionary. Mahan, a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, illuminates his subject, not as a celebrity hero, but as a professional naval officer who played a unique role in the shaping of the nineteenth-century geopolitical landscape. This emphasis on the professional and broadly historical aspects of Nelson's career is clearly established in the book's title, and it consistently guides Mahan's view of Vice Admiral Lord Viscount Nelson throughout his work.

As he proceeds, Mahan goes well beyond a chronicling of the details of Nelson's life by including his subject's less frequently discussed qualities and what he refers to as 'the inner history' of Nelson's career. And Mahan

warns us with an interesting compound analogy that achieving deeper understanding of Nelson is a complex challenge:

> *The man's self and the man's works, what he was and what he did, the nature which brought forth such fruits, the thoughts which issued in such acts, hopes, fears, desires, quick intuitions, painful struggles, lofty ambitions, happy opportunities have blended to form that luminous whole ... not to be understood except by a patient effort to resolve the great result into its several rays, to separate the strands whose twisting has made so strong a cord.*[1]

In considering *The Life of Nelson*, it's also important to note that Mahan was detached from the Hero of Trafalgar in two significant ways: time and nationality. Those two separations helped him to maintain a high degree of objectivity about his subject, not an easy achievement, given the emotional attachment to Nelson by the British public and many of his early biographers, some of whom went so far as to 'improve' some of Nelson's own writing.



The Life of Nelson: The Embodiment of the Sea Power of Great Britain. Alfred Thayer Mahan, published in two volumes by Sampson Low, Marston and Co 1897. The two volumes are reckoned perhaps to be the finest, most accurate, and detailed biography of Lord Admiral Nelson ever published. Courtesy Warwick Leadlay Gallery.

The two-volume first edition of Mahan's work was published in London in 1897, and the single-volume second edition was published in the United States in 1899. It was a time of change, when navies were shifting from sail power to steam propulsion and from wood to steel construction. Arguably most important it also was a time when naval thinking by men such as Mahan and Britain's Sir Julian Corbett was beginning to advance beyond tactics and engineering to a vision of sea power as a prime influencer of history. In the initial paragraph of his Preface to the first edition, Mahan firmly positions Nelson in that sweeping historical context by identifying him as 'the one man who in himself summed up and embodied the

greatness of the possibilities which Sea Power comprehends'.[2] That astonishingly wide view of Nelson immediately put his actions in both a global and a long-term context that extends far beyond the limits of his own country and his own era.

Early Predictors

Mahan's search for Nelson's 'inner history' is immediately apparent in two apocryphal stories about Nelson's childhood. The first relates how Nelson and his older brother were sent off to school by their father during a snowstorm. The story goes on to tell how the two boys returned home because they decided that the snow was too deep for them to continue on. When their father told them to try again, he put them on their honour to not to turn back, unless necessary. With their second effort, and with Nelson repeatedly telling his brother to 'Remember it was left to our honour', the boys pressed on and reached their school. In examining the story about the snowstorm, Mahan quickly bypasses the obvious characteristic of physical courage in order to emphasize a more intellectually provocative quality – Nelson's sense of duty and honour:

> *No material considerations, neither danger on the one hand, nor gain on the other, ever affected him as that idealized conception which presented itself, now as duty, now as honour.*[3]

The second story drawn from Nelson's childhood tells of how he undertook the theft of pears from his schoolmaster's pear tree, not because he wanted the fruit but because, as Mahan reports, Nelson was driven to succeed where others had failed. In Nelson's own words, he undertook the escapade because 'the others were afraid'. To expand on this personality trait, Mahan recounts the story of how Nelson, as a lieutenant in HMS *Lowestoffe*, managed to board a captured privateer in heavy seas, after others in his ship's crew had failed in the manoeuvre. In this case Mahan again allows his subject to provide the insight by quoting Nelson's own analysis of the event: 'I know it is my disposition, that difficulties and dangers do but increase my desire of attempting them'.[4]

As he moves on to the initial stages of Nelson's naval career, Mahan continues his emphasis on penetrating analysis. For example, he describes how Nelson showed his penchant for independent thinking and action. When

describing Nelson's assignment to HMS *Triumph* and particularly his performance when he was in charge of that ship's boats, Mahan writes:

> *It may be interesting, too, to note that this condition of more or less detached service, so early begun, in which, though not in chief command ... he was for only brief periods commander-in-chief, yet almost always acted apart from his superior.*[5]

Lady Nelson and Lady Hamilton

Following his examination of early clues to Nelson's persona, Mahan continues to explore the deeper currents that propelled him to his unique role in history. Two of the more intriguing examples of this are found in how he relates Nelson's wife and paramour to his subject. Both Lady Nelson and Lady Hamilton provide obvious opportunities for a biographer to add 'human interest', and in the case of Lady Hamilton, a full measure of notorious behavior. But Mahan generally bypasses those opportunities.

When for example he discusses Fanny, who was a widow when Nelson met her in the West Indies, it is generally with restraint and from the perspective of accepted nineteenth century cultural and social mores. In addition Mahan's initial descriptions of Nelson's wife are marked by condescension and resentment that she never grasped the far-reaching importance of her husband's career. As a result Mahan's approach to Fanny is more negative than the generally balanced and more recent assessments of her. At one point he damns her with faint praise:

> *To answer the demands of a nature (Nelson's) capable of such energetic manifestation ... was beyond the gentle, well-ordered, and somewhat prosaic charms with which ... Mrs. Nisbet was invested by Nelson.*[6]

Clearly Mahan does not see Fanny as a significant factor in Nelson's achievements. In fact he seems to go out of way to establish and then reinforce her non-relevance to Nelson's naval career. For Mahan Fanny is a distraction.

Mahan appears to be somewhat uncomfortable with Lady Hamilton. Unlike Mahan's characterization of Fanny, however, he establishes that Lady Hamilton was a significant, albeit negative, influence on Nelson's career. In this regard, Mahan differs from today's biographers, many of whom see

Lady Hamilton as a key factor in Nelson's career successes. Mahan's description of Emma's histrionics when the news of Nelson's victory at Aboukir Bay reached Naples is illustrative:

> *When they (two of Nelson's officers) left the palace they were met by Lady Hamilton, who made them get into her carriage, and with characteristic bad taste and love of notoriety paraded them until dark through the streets of this neutral capital wearing a bandana round her forehead with the words, 'Nelson and Victory'.*[7]

Later in his work, Mahan reinforces his disapproval of Lady Hamilton and his belief that she compromised Nelson's professionalism when describing her reaction to Nelson upon his return to Naples after the Battle of the Nile: 'This was the beginning of an intimacy destined, in the end, to affect profoundly and unhappily the future of Nelson'.[8]

Pivotal Point of a Career

Distinguished historian and author Colin White identified 1797 as 'Nelson's Year of Destiny'.[9] Nelson was 38 years old at the time, and his leadership had been honed and tempered to an exceptional edge. He was, however, still one among many highly capable Royal Navy captains. On 14 February 1797, in a bloody action off Cape St. Vincent, his life would change forever. On that day and in the 64-gun HMS *Captain*, Nelson performed feats in combat that catapulted him to the position of a national hero in Great Britain. The events of that day also bonded him with his mentor, then-Admiral Sir John Jervis and soon-to-be Earl St. Vincent, who would first save and then steadily advance Nelson's career over the years.

Mahan finds the Battle of Cape St. Vincent to be particularly helpful in pursuing the 'inner history' he seeks. For example he describes in substantial detail Nelson's pre-battle activities in the western Mediterranean and Atlantic Ocean west of Gibraltar:

> *The fact that the Spanish fleet had gone towards Jervis's rendezvous, and the continuance of easterly winds, which would tend to drive them still farther in the same direction, gave him uneasy premonitions of the coming battle which it 'would break his heart' to miss. It was, besides, part of his ingrained military philosophy, never absent from his careful mind, that a fair wind may fail or shift.*[10]

It is in Mahan's analysis of such circumstances as the run-up to the Battle of Cape St. Vincent that we see the author's naval experience surge to the fore. He knows and understands what is dominating Nelson's thinking and feelings. It isn't fatigue and it isn't fear of mortal combat or potential damage to his career that are motivating his subject. It's the possibility that he will *miss the battle*, and he knows it's the sailor's ancient friend/enemy, the wind, that will in the end determine his involvement or lack thereof.

In analysing Nelson's actions at Cape St. Vincent, Mahan, as a militarily insightful observer, also grasps the critical confluence upon which Nelson's brilliant achievement depended:

> *[I]t is true of (the Battle of Cape) St. Vincent, as of most battles, that there was a particular moment on which success and failure hinged, and that upon the action then taken depended the chief outcome – a decisive moment, in short. That moment was when the enemy attempted, with good prospect, to effect the junction which Nelson foiled.*[11]

In his final analysis of the Battle of Cape St. Vincent, Mahan chooses an intriguing note to throw light on Nelson's psychological core. As with a number of his previous analyses, he lets Nelson himself provide the thought-provoking insight, when he quotes from a letter to Fanny: 'My late affair here will not, I believe, lower me in the opinion of the world. I have had flattery enough to make me vain, and success enough to make me confident'.[12]

Nelson's confidence – it could at this point also be seen as hubris – swept him on to the events of the latter part of 1797 and the Battle of Santa Cruz. There the results were dramatically different from Cape St. Vincent, and they included a crushing defeat by the Spanish general who led the defense of Santa Cruz, Don Antonio Gutiérrez and the loss of his right arm from a devastating wound. The aftermath of the event provides Mahan with an opportunity to focus with intensity on the Earl St. Vincent's crucial role in Nelson's career, and it also provides an opportunity to keep his subject in the framework of a professional military officer.

The significance of the relationship between Nelson and St. Vincent is seen clearly in passages from letters that passed between the two men. The first involves Nelson's despondency after Santa Cruz, when he wrote to the Earl on 27 July 1797: 'I am become a burthen to my friends and useless to my

Country. When I leave your command, I become dead to the world; I go hence and am no more seen'.[13] St. Vincent's quick response to his captain is that of seasoned warrior who has learned much from combat and life: 'Mortals cannot command success, You and your companions have certainly deserved it, by the greatest degree of heroism and perseverance that ever was exhibited'.[14]

At this point in his biography, Mahan launches into a fascinating example of the 'inner history' he constantly seeks. He describes the post-Battle-of-Santa-Cruz period as a separation point that begins a new career for Nelson. And he adds significant dimension to his account when he connects that sea change in Nelson's fortunes, not to Nelson himself, but to the circumstances of his time:

> *A change was now at hand. As the sails of the 'Vanguard' dip below the horizon of England, a brief interlude begins, and when the curtain rises again, the scene has shifted ... We see again the same man, but standing at the opening of a new career, whose greatness exceeds by far even the high anticipations that had been formed for him ... Before him was now about to open a field of possibilities hitherto unexampled in naval warfare.*[15]

The Nile and Copenhagen

In Aboukir Bay on 1 August 1798, Nelson reached a new height in his career, and Mahan uses the events associated with the Battle of the Nile to further illuminate Nelson in the context of his naval career and his role as a shaper of history. Once again he goes beyond relating the events for drama's sake and emphasizes the subtler aspects of the action. Mahan goes into considerable detail to describe the tactical situation, while also illuminating the personal qualities Nelson brought to the situation. There is ample discussion of planning, briefing of the captains, seamanship, discipline and good order, and tactical initiative. But it is Nelson's concern for post-Battle recognition for his officers that ultimately stands out in Mahan's analysis.

Mahan describes Nelson's immediate recognition of the men who fought through the horrors of combat and won an important victory by quoting and then commenting on the beginning of his general order of 2 August: 'The

Admiral desires they will accept his most sincere and cordial thanks for their very gallant behavior in this glorious battle'.[16] Mahan provides his own sense of Nelson's feelings behind those rather restrained words, and along the way he arrives at the core of the universal warfighter's code:

> *There is in them no appeal to egotism, to the gratified passion for glory, although to that he was far from insensible; it is the simple speech of man to man, between those who have stood by one another in the hour of danger, and done their duty.*[17]

The Battle of Copenhagen on 2 April 1801 was another opportunity for Mahan to focus on Nelson in a one-of-a-kind naval action, and again he chooses to put a great deal of emphasis on the aftermath of the combat that ended in a truce and especially on Nelson's skill at negotiating a British-Danish agreement that worked to the benefit of Great Britain. He refers to how Nelson viewed combat not as an end but a means:

> *[I]t next fell to him to make the most of what the British had so far gained; having regard not merely to Denmark and Copenhagen, but the whole question of British interests involved in the Coalition of the Baltic States. Parker had entrusted to him the direct management of the negotiations (after a truce was agreed upon), just as he had given him the immediate command of the fighting.*[18]

As he proceeds Mahan describes not only how Nelson guided the negotiations but how he saw the larger strategic picture in the Baltic at the time, as well as how frustrated he was with the British diplomats with whom he had to work. He includes Nelson's estimate of their performance:

> *Our diplomatic men are slow. Lord St. Helens [British minister assigned to St. Petersburg] told me that he hoped in a month he should be able to tell me something decisive ... but ministers must do something for their diamond boxes.*[19]

Trafalgar

It's not surprising that Mahan devotes a great deal of attention (something more than a hundred pages) to the approach to Trafalgar and the Battle itself on 21 October 1805. It was there and then that Nelson's actions had an extravagant impact on the geopolitical landscape of the coming century.

It is important to note, however, that Mahan, as he did with the Battles of Cape St. Vincent, the Nile, and Copenhagen, by no means neglects a discussion of tactics at Trafalgar, and in fact, his perspective as a naval officer is in full motion when he describes Nelson's preliminary plan: '[I]t is not the least of its merits as a military conception that it could thus, with a few signals and without confusion, adapt itself at a moment's notice to diverse circumstances'.[20] And Mahan cites how Nelson underscored the importance of flexibility of his planning in his well-known memo to his commanding officers, written twelve days before the Battle:

> *Something must be left to chance; nothing is sure in a Sea Fight beyond all others. Shot will carry away the masts and yards of friends as well as foes ... But in case signals can neither be seen nor perfectly understood, no Captain can do very wrong if he places his Ship alongside that of an Enemy.*[21]

But again it is in the broader aspects of global strategy that Mahan shows the most keenness. And as part of his analysis of the weeks preceding the action off Cape Trafalgar, Mahan covers a variety of issues that rise to the level of strategy and that coincidentally go to the 'inner history' for which he constantly probes. For example, in uncharacteristically concise terms, Mahan points out that Nelson was a senior officer who understood 'the sterile glory of fighting battles merely to win them'. With that declaration, Mahan adds context to the words Nelson wrote to his friend the Right Honourable Secretary of the Treasury George Rose on 6 October 1805, shortly before the Battle:

> *It is, as Mr. Pitt knows, annihilation that the Country wants, and not merely a splendid Victory of twenty-three to thirty-six, honourable to the parties concerned, but absolutely useless in the extended scale to bring Buonaparte to his marrow bones.*[22]

Mahan recognizes that Nelson was not just a combat technician, and that he was in fact an officer with a unique ability to see and think beyond his own quarterdeck. Mahan recognized that Nelson understood the far-reaching strategic implications of his combat actions, events that, because of their inherent drama, many simply see in their own light.

In final analysis if there are any lingering doubts as to the importance Mahan placed on Nelson's geopolitical context, one need only to go to the final paragraphs of his work, where he writes:

There were, indeed, consequences momentous and stupendous yet to flow from the decisive supremacy of Great Britain's sea-power, the establishment of which, beyond all question or competition, was Nelson's great achievement ... He needed, and he left, no successor.[23]

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1 Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Life of Nelson*: The Embodiment of Sea Power of Great Britain (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2001), facsimile edition of the second edition, p. 2.

2 Ibid., p. xv.

3 Ibid., p. 7.

4 Ibid., p. 17.

5 Ibid., p. 9.

6 Ibid., p. 59.

7 Ibid., p. 317.

8 Ibid., p. 318.

9 Colin White, *1797: Nelson's Year of Destiny* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1998), title.

10 Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Life of Nelson: The Embodiment of Sea Power of Great Britain* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2001), facsimile edition of the second edition, p. 225.

11 Ibid., p. 232.

12 Ibid., p. 252.

13 Ibid., p. 261.

14 Ibid., pp. 261-62.

15 Ibid., p. 266.

16 Ibid., p. 307.

17 Ibid., p. 307.

18 Ibid., p. 490.

19 Ibid., p. 502.

20 Ibid., p. 694.

21 Ibid., p. 697.

22 *The Dispatches and Letters of Vice Admiral Lord Viscount Nelson*, edited by Sir Nicholas Harris Nicolas (London: Henry Colburn, 1846), vii, p. 80.

23 Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Life of Nelson: The Embodiment of Sea Power of Great Britain* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2001), facsimile edition of the second edition, p. 742.