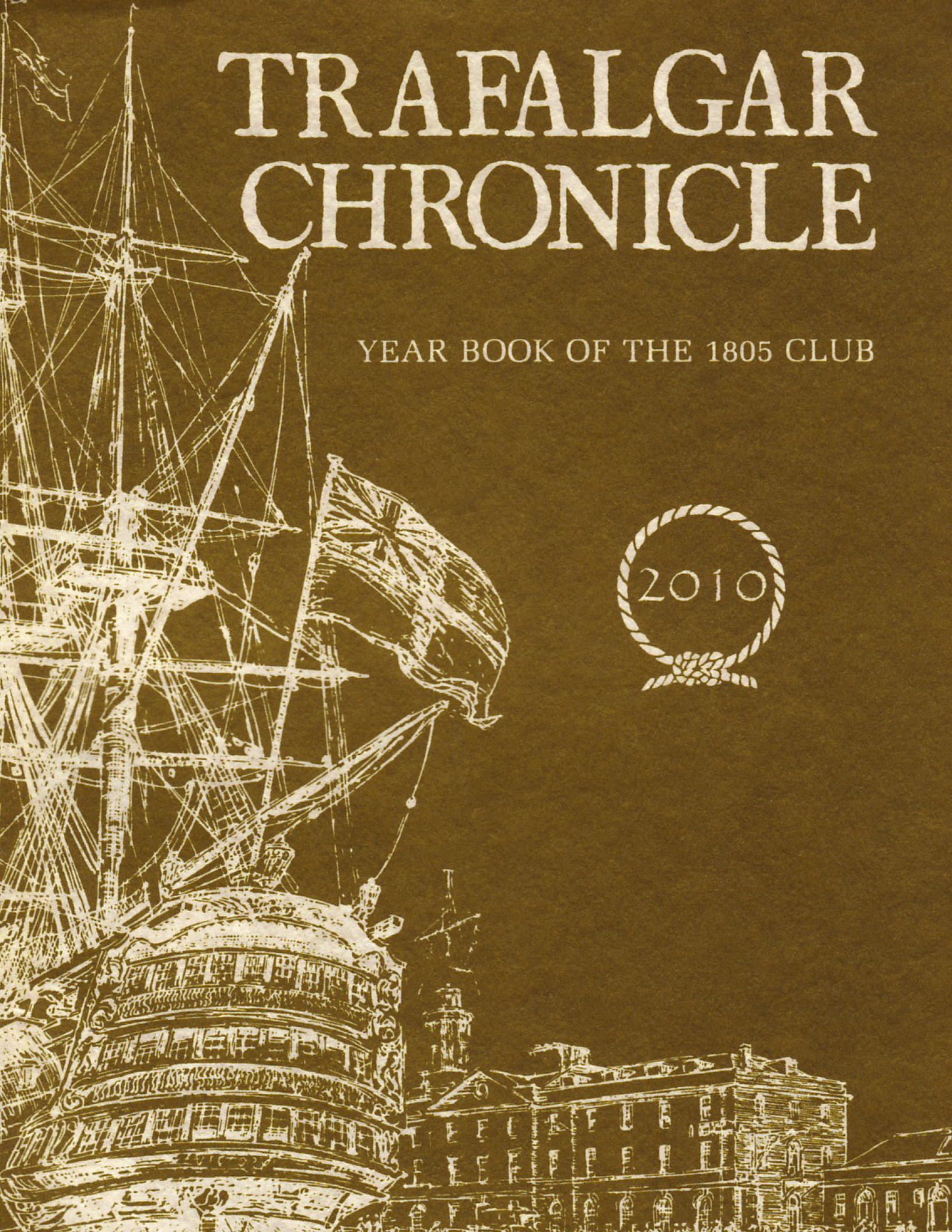
TRAFALGAR CHRONICLE

YEAR BOOK OF THE 1805 CLUB

2010



The Cecil Isaacson Lecture, 2010
Nelson in HMS *Boreas*:
Danger of a Different Kind

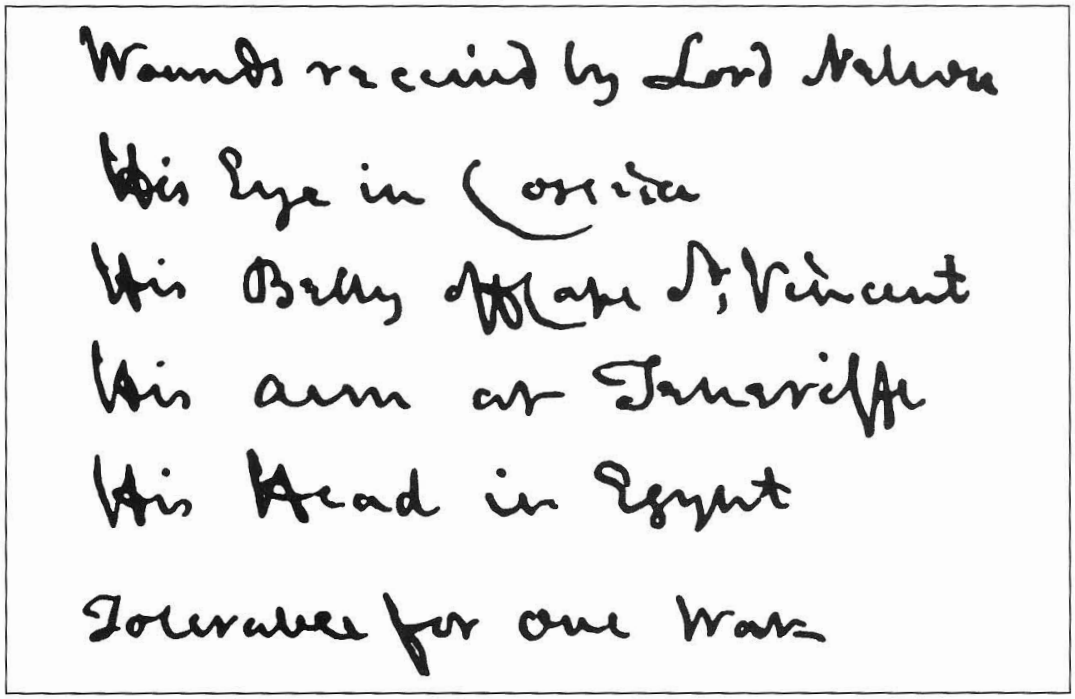
Joseph F. Callo

It's an honour and pleasure to be with you today as part of your Annual General Meeting. To set the stage, I'll begin by pointing out that there are three basic ideas that have shaped my approach to the subject:

- First, the importance of relevant history, rather than history for its own sake.
- Second, my hope to not necessarily get you to say 'I never knew that', but rather to trigger some 'I never thought of that' reactions.
- Third, the importance of illuminating Admiral Nelson, not as a celebrity or hero, but as a professional naval officer.

Admiral Lord Nelson faced a shocking amount of physical danger during his career. There was for example the difficult and perilous attack against Fort San Juan in Nicaragua early in his career. In that assault he led the grueling naval portion of a combined army-navy action up the San Juan River. Later he lost most of the sight of his right eye from an injury suffered during a bombardment at Calvi on Corsica.

Following his injury at Calvi, he faced mortal danger on three separate occasions during 1797. First there was the Battle of Cape Saint Vincent in February, when he boarded and captured not one but two Spanish ships, and suffered a severe stomach contusion in the action. Then in July he fought in hand-to-hand combat in a boat action off Cadiz. At several points during the boat action, he was within inches of being mortally wounded. The action off Cadiz was followed later that same month with the amphibious assault at Santa Cruz, where his right arm was shattered and subsequently amputated aboard his flagship, HMS *Theseus*. Roughly a year later, during the Battle of the Nile, Nelson suffered a head injury, and not quite three years later he was at the center of the bloody action at the Battle of Copenhagen. Finally, he was mortally wounded by a single musket shot during the ferocious action at the Battle of Trafalgar.



Wounds Received by Lord Nelson. Manuscript note written in Nelson's left hand, circa 1800-1. Courtesy Warwick Leadlay Gallery.

That foregoing list of events doesn't include the threats from exotic diseases in the East Indies, Central America, and West Indies. By any measure that's an incredible history of potential and actual bodily harm.And dramatic depictions of those scenes fill the pages of the uncounted number of books and articles about Admiral Nelson. So, it's not without good reason that his bravery in the face of injury and even death is recognized as an important part of his persona.

The Importance of Political Courage

There was, however, another very different kind of threat that Nelson routinely braved, and this other category of danger threatened, not his life, but his career.This danger of a different kind doesn't get anything near the level of attention devoted to his derring-do. Yet it played a very significant role in the career of the man who changed the course of history from the quarterdecks of his ships.

These non-physical but career-threatening circumstances often emanated from the Admiralty and from Whitehall and were described by Nelson as 'scrapes'. Some of those 'scrapes' were unavoidable and could be expected

during the career of an active Royal Navy officer of the Georgian era.But many – perhaps the most threatening – were actually precipitated by Nelson himself. Arguably the most significant thing about this second category of dangers was that Nelson met them with a level of what could be called political courage that matched his physical bravery. And of equal importance, his political courage was a very significant part of his persona.In addition it was as important to his role in history as his physical bravery, since just about any one of Nelson's 'scrapes' could have ended his career before his date with destiny at Cape Trafalgar in 1805.

Evidence of this willingness to take political risks in the pursuit of important goals is sprinkled throughout Nelson's written words.And those words are, I believe, the source of the most illuminating clues in the search for the meaning of Nelson's 'scrapes'. I have relied on them heavily in my remarks to try to give you tone and texture to this special aspect of Nelson's career.

In 1795 for example, while in the Mediterranean and in command of HMS *Agamemnon*, he was detached by his commander-in-chief, Vice Admiral William Hotham, with eight frigates for an independent assignment. The assignment involved cooperation with Austrian and Sardinian armies headed by Austrian General Baron de Vins. The objective was to drive the French from the Riviera coast. He wrote exuberantly to his wife Fanny:

> *Here I am, having commenced a cooperation with an old Austrian General, almost fancying myself charging at the head of a troop of horse. Nothing will be wanting on my part towards the success of the Common Cause ... I am acting not only without the orders of my Commander-in-Chief, but in some measure contrary to them. However, I have not only the support of His Majesty's Ministers, both at Turin and Genoa, but a consciousness that I am doing what is right and proper for the service of our King and Country. Political courage in an Officer abroad is as highly necessary as military courage.*[1]

That last sentence shows that Nelson clearly understood the need for career-risking courage, and his tone suggests that he actually reveled being in a position of independence and importance. It's also worth noting that Nelson pointed out that while he was acting contrary to his orders, he was nonetheless pursuing the 'common cause' of Great Britain and its allies, which he claimed was more important than the specifics of his orders. But there's also something troubling in Nelson's apparent pleasure in taking

actions that he understood to be contrary to orders from his superiors. The Royal Navy of his time, like any first-class military organization was based on strict obedience to orders.

Later in November 1799, in a letter to the Duke of Clarence, Nelson further illuminated the thought process leading to his willingness – at times it seems eagerness – to interpret his duty himself:

> *To serve my king, and to destroy the French, I consider as the great order of all, from which little ones spring; and if one of these little ones militate against it, (for, who can tell exactly at a distance?) I go back to obey the great order and object.*[2]

In this instance, the great order, which was strategic rather than tactical, was to defeat the French enemy. But let me take you back to an earlier point in his career when Nelson's willingness to face the political dangers inherent in defining his duty himself really emerged. It was in fact during the three year period between March 1784 and July 1787, when he commanded HMS *Boreas* in the West Indies, that we can see this aspect of Nelson's astonishing career come into very sharp focus. And interestingly there was no combat involved while he was serving in the West Indies in *Boreas*. Britain's ongoing war with France had been suspended and there was no overt combat with other forces in the theater. It is also worth noting that Nelson was only 26 years of age when he deployed in Boreas. Although he was a seasoned officer at the time, he was still maturing as a leader.

Nelson Stands his Ground

Clearly the most significant example of political danger that Nelson precipitated during his West Indies deployment revolved around his controversial enforcement of Britain's Navigation Acts, the series of laws that were designed to further Great Britain's mercantile rise and specifically the ocean trade that was the lifeblood of Britain's global empire. When Nelson had arrived in the West Indies, the Navigation Acts were for the most part being ignored by the local colonists, merchants, and even the local officials, including the Captain-General of the Leeward Islands, retired Major General Sir Thomas Shirley, and most important for Nelson, his reporting military senior in the West Indies, Rear Admiral Sir Richard Hughes.

British and American Rivalry in the West Indies. Woodcut by Geoffrey Wales in Nelson's Letters From the Leeward Islands, ed. Geoffrey Rawson, published Golden Cockerel Books, 1953. Courtesy Warwick Leadlay Gallery.

There was a coincidental dispute with the Commissioner of the Antigua Dockyard, Royal Navy Captain John Moutray over military precedence, but it was Rear Admiral Hughes and General Shirley who became the most dangerous threats to his career while he was in the West Indies. Both Admiral Hughes and General Shirley were more interested in maintaining cordial relations with the local populace and avoiding local friction than in enforcing the Navigation Acts. But in fairness it should be recognized that there was more to their approach than a desire to not 'rock the boat'. There was a legitimate argument that they were helping to sustain the economic viability of Britain's West Indies colony, which was an economically vital part of the British Empire at the time.

Initially Hughes and Shirley tried to reason with Nelson.Nelson, however, insisted on stopping American ships suspected of carrying such cargos as lumber, foodstuffs, and tobacco for trade in the West Indies, and he did so because he was – rightly or wrongly – thinking strategically by putting the laws that protected the trade that was the life-blood of the British Empire before the economic interests of the region's British colonists. What developed was a series of angry exchanges between the young frigate captain, with his own very firm sense of his duty and his seniors. In November 1784, Nelson had personalized the dispute in a letter to his former commanding officer and mentor Captain William Locker:

> *This station is far from a pleasant one. The Admiral and all about him are great ninnies.*[3]

The degree of Nelson's commitment to his position and his aggressive approach was evident in a letter to Admiral Hughes a few months later in January 1785. The letter read in part:

> *While I have the honour to command an English Man of War, I never shall allow myself to be subservient to any Governor, nor co-operate with him in doing illegal acts. Presidents of Council I feel myself superior to.*[4]

Nelson's actions and words amounted to direct disobedience to his military commander and an inability to cooperate – at the very least – with his government's senior administrator in a major colony of the Empire. It was evident from that letter and Nelson's other words and actions at the time that he was applying the combat doctrine he espoused before the Battle of Copenhagen to his 'scrape' with Admiral Hughes and General Shirley. That doctrine was, 'the boldest measures are the safest'. In this instance, however, the phrase 'out on a limb and sawing energetically' also comes to mind.

As the dispute continued, Nelson again defended his position in another letter to Captain Locker. This one was written while at sea in March 1786. In this letter he saw fit to use the term 'disobey my orders' but he was also clearly detailing his defense:

> *General Shirley and others began by sending letters [to local officials] not far different from orders...but they thought it right to let me know it.Mr. Shirley I soon trimmed up and silenced.Sir Richard Hughes was a more delicate business; 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 believed that my Country would not allow me to be ruined, by protecting her Commerce.*[5]

In 1897 United States sea power visionary, then-Captain A.T. Mahan, provided a presumably objective perspective on Nelson's actions in the West Indies in his biography *The Life of Nelson*. Mahan reflected the view of a navy captain on the question of Nelson's defiance of his senior.Here is what he wrote:

> *It is difficult for the non-military mind to realize how great is the moral effort of disobeying a superior, whose order on the one hand covers all responsibility, and on the other entails the most serious personal and professional injury, if violated without due cause; the burden of proving which rests upon the junior.For the latter it is justly*

and necessarily, not enough that his own intentions or convictions were honest: he has to show, not that he meant to do right, but that he actually did right in disobeying in the particular instance.[6]

Mahan's distinction between intending to do right and actually doing the right thing is an insight into the professional relationship between military senior and junior that reaches far beyond Nelson's disputes in the West Indies. And Mahan's point is clear: good intentions will not be a justification for failing to strictly carry out one's orders. There is a stark contrast between Nelson's enthusiastic description of how he was actually disobeying the orders of his senior and Mahan's description of the profound consequences of disobeying a military order. That contrast alerts us to the unspoken but real inner conflict that Nelson was dealing with.

And it took an inordinate amount of self assurance for Nelson to take the actions that he did in the West Indies, and there is no doubt that he was running a high risk by aggressively defying his military commander and the senior local colonial administrator. In the immediate term, for example, he was sued for £40,000 by the local merchants and American captains for the losses they suffered from his strict enforcement of the Navigation Acts. During the suit Nelson was subject to arrest at any time or place he stepped ashore from *Boreas*. Until that particular legal action was resolved in his favor, he was a virtual prisoner in his own ship, and if the court had decided against him, he would have been financially ruined and his naval career ended.

Repercussions at Home

In the end Nelson was supported by the local court, but he had to know that there would be a negative aftereffect at the Admiralty and elsewhere from his tour in the West Indies. Nevertheless when Nelson was relieved of command of Boreas and he returned to his home in Burnham Thorpe in 1787 he assumed that he would soon have a new assignment. He wrote to his father in September of that year:

A war seems at present inevitable ... It looks like a general War ... and [I] should not like to be an idle spectator.

But based on his enforcement of the Navigation Acts, and a number of additional controversial actions he took while in the West Indies, he had developed a reputation at the Admiralty as a troublemaker. That reputation,

and particularly the bruised feelings among those Nelson opposed during his deployment in *Boreas*, resulted in five years 'on the beach' on half- pay.It was the price he paid for not only what he did, but more importantly, *how* he did what he did.

Frances Nelson, nee Nisbet, who married then-captain Nelson in 1797; she remained faithful to her husband until the bitter end of their relationship. Courtesy the Author.

For five long years he was what he feared most: a spectator, and he gradually realized that he was no longer perceived at the Admiralty to be a rising young captain. He claimed at one point that he was in ill favor even with the King. It was a difficult time for him. He had married Frances Nisbet on Nevis in 1787 and life at Burnham Thorpe in Norwich had not agreed with her, either physically or temperamentally. He persevered in his efforts for a new command, however, and on 17 January 1793 he wrote with palpable satisfaction to Fanny:

> *Post nubila Phoebus:- After clouds comes sunshine. The Admiralty so smile upon me, that really I am as much surprised as when they frowned. Lord Chatham yesterday made many apologies for not having given me a Ship before this time, and said, that if I chose to take a Sixty-four to begin with, I should be appointed to one as soon as she was ready; and whenever it was in his power, I should be removed into a Seventy-four.*[8]

As it turned out, his assignment to the 64-gun HMS *Agamemnon* occurred during the same month. In retrospect, Nelson's tour in the West Indies in Boreas was without a doubt a serious threat to his career. He had aggressively defined his duty for himself, and in the process he had escalated his local dispute to the Admiralty in London, which violated another general military precept: solve problems at your own level.

The Heart of the Matter

At this point it's fair to ask: what was the basis of this quality of Nelson, this willingness to risk dangerous political 'scrapes' to pursue his duty as he defined it – even if it meant disobeying direct orders from his superior? I suggest that at the heart of this high degree of political courage was, in a word his *individuality*. It was the very same element that former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher described in her autobiography *Statecraft*. In the postscript of that book she wrote:

> *[T]he nation has bred and nurtured more than its share of these rugged, angular individualists. We all know who they are. They are the people referred to as 'one of a kind', or 'a character', or sometimes and less favorably 'a difficult customer' or even on occasion 'a damned nuisance'. They are not to be consigned to social categories, not planned into programmes, not fitted into schemes ... We need such individualists in every walk of life. We need them as oysters need grit.No grit, no pearl.*[9]

Are there any of you here this afternoon who can't visualize more than a few occasions in the Board Room of the Old Admiralty when Nelson was referred to as 'one of a kind', 'a character', a 'difficult customer', or as tempers strained, even 'a damned nuisance'? As an aside and related to Nelson's personal life, I would further suggest that it was Nelson's individualism that allowed him to not only have a mistress – that was certainly not shocking at the time – but to expect everyone, including those at Court, to treat his paramour as if she were his wife! That was dangerous to his career.

Now I come to an observation about Nelson's political courage.It was his ability to couple 'doing the right thing' with his willingness to define his duty in his own terms that enabled him to survive so many 'scrapes'. That ability to know and do the right thing was the necessary companion to his political courage, when, for example, he defied Admiral Parker's signal at the Battle of Copenhagen, or later, when he left the Mediterranean without orders in pursuit of Admiral Villeneuve in 1805. Each instance was an example of how Nelson was willing to repeatedly risk his career to do what he thought was the right thing – and how often what he did turned out to actually be the right thing.

Finally I return to Mahan, excerpting from both the beginning and the end of his biography of Nelson:

> *(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.*[10]
>
> *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 greatest achievement ... he needed and he left no successor.*[11]

It is that 'genius' to which Mahan refers that we continue to explore and illuminate, and it isn't simply what Nelson *did* that compels us. It's what he was as a man, rather than as a hero – the strengths and weaknesses and the strengths that were also weaknesses – from which we probably learn the most.

Colin White in his work *Nelson the Admiral* wrote of Nelson as a senior officer who 'matured by degrees into a finely rounded leader'. Tom Pocock, in *Nelson and his World* called him 'Superman with Everyman's weaknesses'. Between those two very different characterizations there is a complex personality, part of which was the ability to survive something I have called 'danger of a different kind'. The search for the essential Nelson continues.

---

1 *The Dispatches and Letters of Vice Admiral Lord Viscount Nelson*, edited by Sir Nicholas Harris Nicolas (London, Henry Colburn, 1845), ii, p. 59.

2 Ibid., iv, p. 95.

3 Ibid.,i, p. 112.

4 Ibid., i, p. 116.

5 Ibid., i, pp. 157-58.

6 A.T. Mahan, *The Life of Nelson* (New York: Little Brown, 1899), p. 45.

7 *The Dispatches and Letters of Vice Admiral Lord Viscount Nelson*, edited by Sir Nicholas Harris Nicolas (London, Henry Colburn, 1845), i, p. 258.

8 Ibid., i, p. 297.

9 Margaret Thatcher, *Statecraft* (London: Harper Collins, 2002), pp. 468-69.

10 A.T. Mahan, *The Life of Nelson* (New York: Little Brown, 1899), p. xv.

11 Ibid., p. 743.