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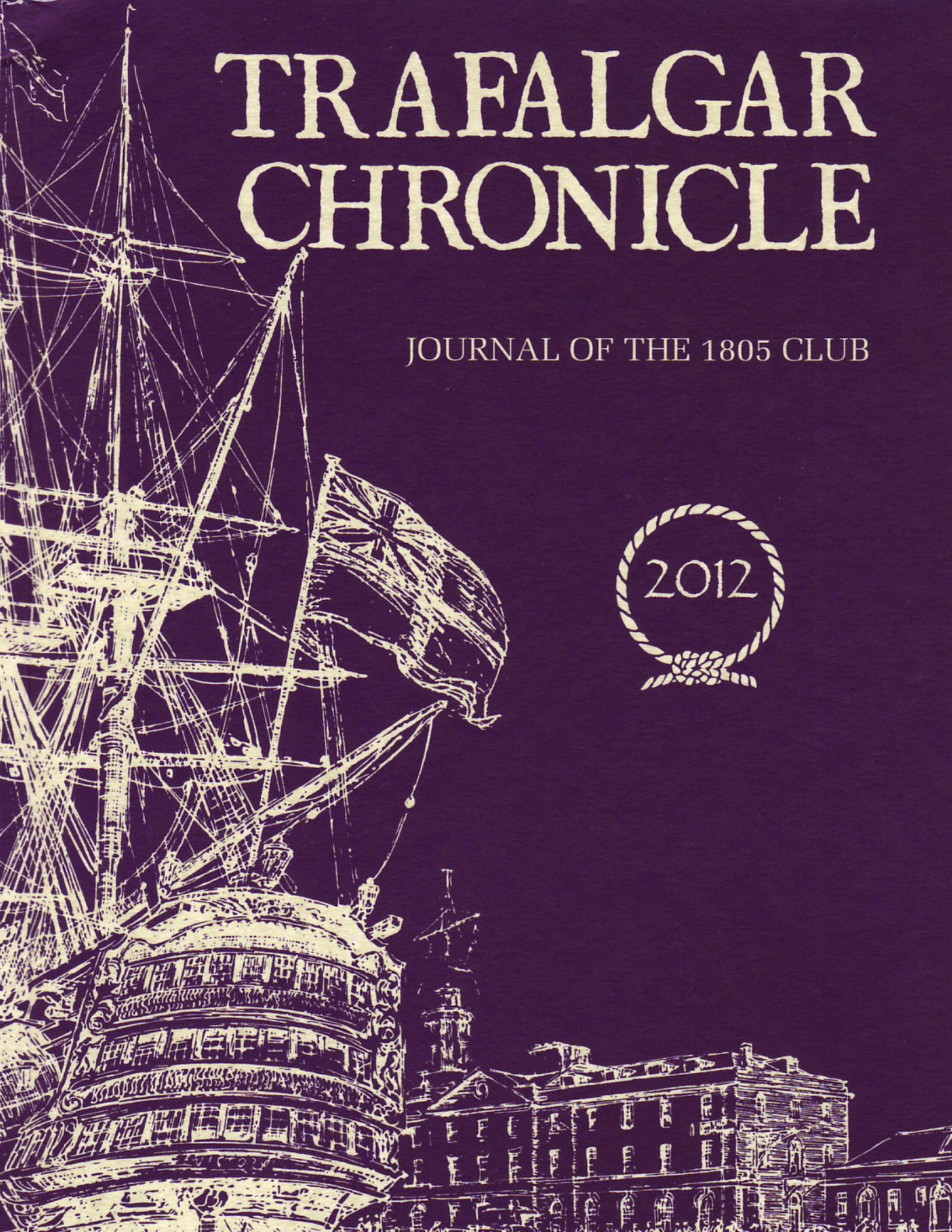


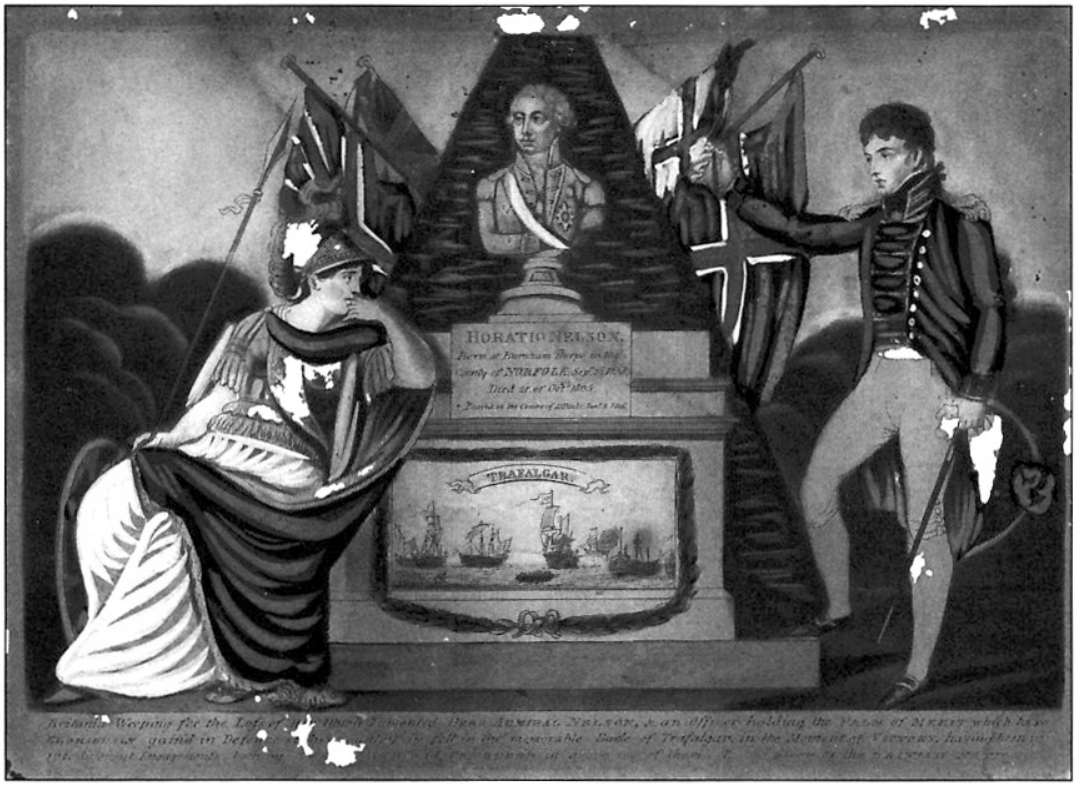
# Nelson Now: A Question of Relevance

*Joseph F. Callo*

In 1810 early Nelson biographers The Reverend James Stanier Clarke and John M'Arthur wrote with patriotic fervor: 'The Fame of Nelson ... will endure as long as the name of his Country shall be pronounced ... and it will be esteemed honourable by posterity to have lived during that Era which he has ennobled'.[1] Almost a century later in 1897 U.S. Navy admiral and sea power visionary A.T. Mahan referred to Admiral Lord Nelson in terms that transcend both time and national borders: '(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...a great force or a great era concrete in a single man'.[2]

In 1974 a more recent biographer and journalist Tom Pocock described Nelson in terms that any contemporary celebrity could envy. Of particular interest, he also referred to his modernity: 'He was Superman with Everyman's weaknesses. That his hold on the imagination is maintained is due to the flash and sparkle of the many sides of his character, and the fact that he seems a modern man'.[3] Then in 2004 Alastair Wilson, historian and co-author of *Who's Who in Naval History*, took a sweeping geostrategic view in his work, which spanned naval history from 1550 to the beginning of the twenty-first century: 'He was, unquestionably, Britain's greatest sea officer ... His two smashing victories over the French fleet, at the Nile and Trafalgar, confirmed beyond doubt a British mastery of the world's oceans that lasted for 100 years'.[4]

So we see that on long-standing testimony, as well as recent testimony, there can be little doubt that Nelson is an enduring historical figure whose eminence has survived unabated for more than two centuries. But fame is not *relevance*. Thus we must probe beyond such things as physical courage, professional skill, and even implausibly dramatic victories at sea, to determine if a hero, even one such as Nelson, is relevant to our own lives. Does he connect to our issues and become, as Tom Pocock said, 'a modern man'.




*'Britannia Weeping for the Loss of her Much Lamented Hero Admiral Nelson', a hand-coloured droll mezzotint and etching published by Patriarcha on 11 March 1806. © Trustees of the British Museum.*

## Command and Control

The commitment to firm government control of the military, an idea that is rooted in representative governance, is one of the most prevalent concerns of our time. As we move through declared wars and increasingly frequent 'kinetic military actions', it is an ongoing and challenging subject for our attention. On the one hand, for example, we expect our military leaders to win when the geostrategic 'chips are down', but we also expect them – and this cannot be overemphasized today – to do what they do in the right way. Thus we require that, in the field and at sea, the military must be trained for more than the ability to manufacture death on demand.

Whether the national leadership is right or wrong in detail, our belief in the principle of a military that is subordinate to government leadership and policy is important, and thus Nelson's relationships with his government is a subject that is worthy of our thoughtful attention. And it must be noted that it was for Nelson an extremely complex challenge. There was the First Sea Lord, the First Lord of the Admiralty, Parliament, the King, the Royal Court, and various commissioners and diplomats in the government equation.

In May 1795 Nelson wrote on the subject to his mentor Captain William Locker from HMS *Agamemnon* in Leghorn. He was commenting on what he perceived to be neglect by his leaders in London:

> *We have been here a whole week, expecting every hour to hear something from England, but nothing comes to us, neither messenger, nor post; surely the people at home have forgot us. The Admiral has not the scratch of a pen for a month past; no reinforcement arrived, nor have we heard of their having sailed, and yet the six ships of the Enemy left Brest last December with the Grand Fleet and have been arrived six weeks in Toulon harbor.*[5]

The same day he made virtually the same complaint in a letter to his uncle William Suckling. Nelson was expressing a frustration that is still experienced by senior military commanders when faced with an apparent lack appreciation for a military situation on the ground or at sea by the members of government 'at home'.

In November 1799 a letter written by Nelson from Palermo to the Duke of Clarence again dealt with the subject of his leadership in London, this time from a different viewpoint. In this instance he was talking about his willingness to interpret – some of his fellow officers called his actions disobedience and one officer claimed that Nelson 'did as he pleased' – orders from his leaders in government. Nelson wrote:

> *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 militates against it, (for, who can tell exactly at a distance?) I go back to obey the great order.*[6]

In his letter Nelson was rationalizing his willingness – some might say eagerness – to be a proactive commander by making decisions and taking important actions on his own initiative. And in certain instances, those initiatives took him beyond orders from London. His departure from the Mediterranean to chase French Admiral Villeneuve through the West Indies was an example of this willingness to take career-risking initiatives that went beyond specific orders.

Nelson's willingness to risk his career in this manner is, however, a quality that often makes the difference between a military commander who can win in the field when it's really important and one who is limited in those tipping-point situations by an overly conservative combat doctrine. But it is also a quality that makes members of government very uneasy. In any event many

would argue that the question of control of senior military commanders at the points of action by those at the seat of government, particularly civilian leaders of government, is among the most important and perplexing questions of our own times.

## Public Opinion

American author Mark Twain famously wrote: 'Its name is Public Opinion. It is held in reverence. It settles everything. Some think it is the voice of God'.[7] And the accelerating variations of the modern means of virtually instantaneous mass communication have arguably made the matter of public opinion even more relevant today than in Nelson's day. Perhaps the first period in his career when public opinion became a serious factor was the aftermath of the Battle of Cape St. Vincent in February 1797. During that action he commanded HMS *Captain* under then-Admiral Sir John Jervis. Following the battle Nelson made significant efforts to assure that the newspapers of the time were provided with the details of the combat and particularly his own extraordinary actions in the proceedings. For example he wrote a lengthy account of his behavior, which he captioned 'A Few Remarks Relative to Myself in the Captain in which my pendant was Flying on the Most Glorious Valentine's Day, 1797'.[8] Nelson's description of his actions included the note:

> *There is a saying in the Fleet too flattering for me to omit telling – viz, 'Nelson's Patent Bridge for boarding First Rates', alluding to my passing over and Enemy's 80-gun Ship; and another of a Sailor's taking me by the hand on board the San Josef, saying he might not soon have such another place to do it in, and assuring me he was heartedly glad to see me.*[9]

Shortly after his 'Few Remarks' were prepared, we see how aggressively they were disseminated by him to the public through, for example, his mentor Captain William Locker: 'I send you a short Detail of the transactions of the Captain; and if you approve of it, are at perfect liberty to insert in the newspapers'.[10]

As a result Nelson was catapulted to public fame within Great Britain. And although it would be consistent with Nelson's personality to believe that his attention to public opinion was ego driven, it is also worth considering the probability that he saw his popularity with the general public as a useful buffer between himself and government. In that role public opinion was an enabler for Nelson in his dealings with the Admiralty, Whitehall, and the

Court, and worthy of note, there were more than a few among those groups who did not approve aspects of his personal life or his tendency to interpret his orders from London.

Later in his career, as he departed from Portsmouth for the Mediterranean and his career approached its brilliant ending, Nelson demonstrated that he had come to a nuanced understanding of public opinion. The account is recorded as a footnote in Sir Nicholas Harris Nicolas's *The Dispatches and Letters of Vice Admiral Lord Viscount Nelson*. The description describes a comment made by Nelson as he observed the high level of emotion of the crowd that cheered him while his boat pulled away from shore and headed for HMS *Victory* at anchor.

At that moment he turned to his flag captain Thomas Hardy and observed: 'I had their huzzas before – I have their hearts now!'[11] In that statement Nelson demonstrated that he understood the significant difference between being celebrated merely for what he did and a deeper public affection that went beyond celebrity. It was a subtle but revealing distinction that revealed considerable understanding of the phenomenon of public opinion. In addition Nelson's awareness of the importance of public opinion went well beyond its effect on his own career. In a letter to his friend and then-Vice President of the Board of Trade, George Rose in early October 1805, we see his choice of words reflecting this awareness in a broad context. Focusing on the forthcoming action with the French-Spanish Combined Fleet, he wrote:

> *[I]t 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.*[12]

Whether it's in the context of what his fellow citizens thought of him or what 'the country wants', Nelson's words and actions provide food for thought on the issue of public opinion that can – and should – inform our current thinking.

## Honour

In an age characterized as 'the me generation', it might seem at first that the subject of honour would not be relevant. On the other hand, the argument could be made that the current state of society makes anything on the subject of honour especially worthy of intense study. In a recent book, award-winning author Adam Nicolson writes thoughtfully and from the perspective of Nelson's era about honour:

> *[R]ank is dissolved in the community of honour. The radically entrepreneurial world of which this honour class is part, cares nothing for rank and everything for duty, which meant the radical and uncompromising imposition of violent will on the enemy … the naval officer is a gentleman and acts with honour because he does his duty in bringing about the annihilation of the enemy...with more of an instinctive grasp of the anatomy of honour than anyone else in the world in 1805, Nelson could and did.*[13]

But honour is an elusive concept. For example, a dictionary provides numerous meanings for the word. Among professional military personnel, however, the word is generally used to describe a special kind of honesty – a willingness to do the right thing under all circumstances. And it is a term often used in connection with the requirement to carry out one's duty.

Nelson related to the concept of honour in both word and deed. He referred to its importance early in his career in a letter to a friend Hercules Ross: 'True honour, I hope, predominates in my mind far above riches'.14 Later in his career he writes with visible passion from HMS *Victory* to J.B. Gilbert the British consul in Barcelona. In his letter Nelson was questioning the requirement of Royal Navy captains to provide a 'Bill of Health' in the ports of Barcelona and Rosas before the Royal Navy could procure supplies there. The emotional content of his statement reveals much about Nelson's sense of honour:

> *You will therefore, have the goodness to explain to the Captain-General, that the word of honour of the captain of a British Man-of-War is as sacred as a Monarch's, and equal to any Bill of Health from me.*[15]

Perhaps the most dramatic and enduring evidence of Nelson's sense of honour appears in his famous signal at Trafalgar: 'England expects that every man will do his duty'. His focus at the moment was on the honour of his brothers in arms, not on tactics. Nelson's original version of the signal, with 'Nelson confides' in place of 'England expects', was an even more personal and thus more powerful reference to honour, both his and that of the officers and seamen of his fleet.

Based on Nelson's statements and behavior there can be little doubt that honour was a significant factor in his career. And at a time when there is neither conscription nor great financial motivation for those in military service, honour and its 'cousin' patriotism are important elements of motivation in today's armed forces.

## A Man of our Time

The subjects of subordination of senior military commanders to government control, public opinion, and honour are only three of many topics that establish Nelson's current relevance. On other subjects – as serious as death and duty or as frothy as love and humor – the same connections between Nelson and those of us marching through the early years of the twenty-first century can be found. On the evidence then, Nelson is clearly a man of our own time. He is in that respect one of us.

The corollary to Nelson's relevance is that there remains much of value to be learned about Admiral Lord Viscount Nelson, Baron of the Nile, Duke of Bronte, Hero of the Nile and Trafalgar – and brother to us all.

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[1] James Stanier Clarke and John M'Arthur, *The Life of Admiral Lord Nelson* (London: Cadell and Davies, 1810), p. 688.

[2] Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Life of Nelson* (London: Sampson Low, 1897), i, p. v and p. vi.

[3] Tom Pocock, *Nelson and his World* (London: Book Club Associates, 1974), p. 126.

[4] Alastair Wilson and Joseph Callo, *Who's Who in Naval History* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 225.

[5] *The Dispatches and Letters of Vice Admiral Lord Viscount Nelson*, edited by Sir Nicholas Harris Nicolas (London: Henry Colburn, 1845), ii, pp. 34-35.

[6] Ibid., iv, p. 95.

[7] 'Corn Pone Opinions', an essay by Mark Twain, 1900.

[8] *The Dispatches and Letters of Vice Admiral Lord Viscount Nelson*, ii, p. 344-47.

[9] Ibid., ii, p. 346-47.

[10] Ibid., ii, p. 354.

[11] Ibid., vii, p. 35.

[12] Ibid., vii, p. 80.

[13] Adam Nicolson, *Men of Honour: Trafalgar and the Making of the English Hero* (London: HarperCollins, 2005), p. 118.

[14] *The Dispatches and Letters of Vice Admiral Lord Viscount Nelson*, i, p. 80.

[15] Ibid., v, p. 490.