Nelson: ‘Forever in Love’

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Perhaps the time has come to make something more of Nelson’s love life. For one thing Nelson’s loves provide important ‘connective tissue’ for the mega-events of his career narrative, and as such they can help us reach a deeper understanding of the multifaceted naval officer who shaped the course of modern history from his quarterdecks.

Nelson gave us a hint of the significance of his romantic attachments in a letter written to his uncle Maurice Suckling in 1785. At the time he was raising the subject of a possible marriage, and as he began writing he suggested that his uncle’s reaction to the letter would be ‘This Horatio is forever in love’.

Nelson’s loves – Mary Simpson, Elizabeth Andrews, Mary Moutray, Frances Nisbet, and Emma Hamilton – were more than incidental items in the sweeping geopolitical drama of Nelson’s career as a naval warrior. They were in fact significant players in the last 28 years of a drama that swirled around the naval officer who biographer Tom Pocock labeled as ‘valiant yet vulnerable’.

Mary Simpson

In 1782 Nelson was in command of HMS Albemarle, anchored at Quebec on the St. Lawrence River. After five months of convoy and patrol duty, Albemarle needed reprovisioning and her crew needed medical attention. While at Quebec Nelson fell deeply in love with Mary Simpson, a pretty and vivacious young woman who was popular in the local British social circle. Given her attractiveness it was not surprising that Nelson fell in love with Mary. What was surprising, however, was his willingness to abandon his Royal Navy career in the pursuit of a young woman, even one as appealing as Mary.

There were two particular reasons why Nelson’s behavior was unexpected. First, his early career performance had been very promising. He had reached the rank of post captain at a fairly young age, and there was every indication for a bright future in the naval service of his king and country. Second, there could be no doubt that he felt he was following a calling, and in his
book Nelson the Admiral, Colin White characterized Nelson’s unusually strong emotional connection with his naval career: ‘For Nelson, service in the Royal Navy...was much more than a job. He viewed it as a vocation.’

As Nelson teetered on the brink of sacrificing his promising Royal Navy career, his new friend in Quebec, Alexander Davison intervened. Davison was surprised to come across Nelson ashore as Albemarle was in the last stages of getting underway for England. In his early biography The Life of Nelson, Robert Southey describes the exchange between the two men on the Quebec waterfront:

... (Nelson) told him he found it utterly impossible to leave Quebec without again seeing the woman whose society had contributed so much to his happiness there, and offering her his hand. – ‘If you do,’ said his friend, ‘your utter ruin must inevitably follow’. – ‘Then let it follow’, cried Nelson, ‘for I am resolved to do it’. – ‘And I’, replied Davison, ‘am resolved you shall not’. Nelson, however, upon this occasion was less resolute than his friend, and suffered himself to be led back to the boat.

The situation in Quebec was an early clue that love for a woman was an indispensable element of Nelson’s psychological makeup. That in turn raises two questions: why was that love so important to Nelson and how would that quality become a significant factor in Nelson’s astonishing life?

Elizabeth Andrews

After returning to Britain in Albemarle in June 1783, the ship was paid off, and Nelson decided to travel to France, ostensibly to learn French. He took rooms at a lodging house in Saint-Omer, and once again he fell in love. This time it was with the daughter of a British clergyman. Her name was
Elizabeth Andrews. In a letter to his brother William in November 1783, he made it clear that his feelings for her were serious. In the correspondence the question of money surfaced as a marriage issue for the first time. It was not the last. In fact money became an ongoing issue associated with his love interests and his career in general. At the time he wrote:

*My heart is quite secured against the French beauties: I almost wish I could say as much for an English young lady, the daughter of a clergyman, with whom I am just going to dine, and spend the day. She has such accomplishments, that had I a million of money, I am sure that I would at this moment make her an offer of them: my income at present is by far too small to think of marriage, and she has no fortune.*

As a gauge of Nelson’s love for Elizabeth, he went so far as to ask his uncle William Suckling if he would subsidize the marriage. In his correspondence with his uncle, he even raised the possibility of seeking a position outside the Royal Navy in order to improve his financial position. Again Nelson was considering the possibility of placing his love of a woman ahead of his naval career.

For reasons that are not apparent, there was no marriage to Elizabeth. Perhaps Nelson changed his mind and perhaps it was Elizabeth who felt that the brash young naval officer did not have sufficient financial substance for a suitable match. In any event in March of 1784 Nelson was placed in command of the 28-gun frigate *HMS Boreas*, and he departed for the West Indies, where he served as the senior office afloat on that station.

**Mary Moutray**

While in the West Indies, Nelson added two chapters in his love life. The first involved Mary Moutray. Nelson’s relationship with Mary was intense, but significantly different from those with Mary Simpson and Elizabeth Andrews. Mary was not only married, she was married to a retired Royal Navy captain who was commissioner of the Royal Navy dockyard at English Harbour, Antigua, and she was several years older than Nelson. The evidence suggests that the relationship was probably more of an extremely strong friendship than a romance. Based on how Nelson described the connection, however, it could be said that the friendship had an intensity that came very close to romantic love, and of importance, he considered Mary to be a confidant. The degree of Nelson’s emotional involvement was clear as he wrote to his mentor Captain William Locker in September 1784: ‘Was it not for Mrs. Moutray, who is very, very good to me, I should almost hang myself in this infernal hole’.
In March 1785, as Mary prepared to return to England, Nelson again exposed the intensity of his feelings in a two-part letter to his brother William:

My dear, sweet friend is going home ... My sweet amiable friend sails (on) the 20th for England. I took my leave of her with a heavy heart, three days ago. What a treasure of a woman.

In May Nelson wrote again to his brother and described a melancholy visit to Windsor, Mary’s former home in Antigua:

This Country appears now intolerable, my dear friend being absent. I went once up the Hill to look at the spot where I spent more happy days than in any one spot in the world. E’en the trees drooped their heads, and the tamarind tree died: all was melancholy: the road is covered with thistles; let them grow. I shall never pull one of them up. By this time I hope she is safe in Old England. Heaven’s choicest blessing go with her.

These were not the words of someone who simply missed a casual friend. They came very close to the agony of one separated from a lover or spouse, and of importance someone whose support was sorely missed. At the time Nelson was under great strain. He was in a career-threatening conflict over his insistence on enforcing the British Navigation Acts in the West Indies. His local military commander Admiral Richard Hughes, as well as the local civilian leaders, opted to ignore the Navigation Acts, since they hindered the trade with America that was essential to the local plantation economy.

While Nelson fought his political battle, Mary had taken on the important role of a confidant and a source of psychological support. When she left, Nelson sorely missed the love that, in that instance, supported his political courage. As his willingness to mark his own course in the Royal Navy became a hallmark of Nelson’s career, there was a concomitant need for a love that supported that kind of risk. The situation with Mary Moutray was a strong signal that, for Nelson, there was a link between his valor and his need for a loving woman. The stage was set for a pretty widow who was the ward of one of the West Indies’ leading plantation owners.

Frances Nisbet

Fanny was born on the West Indian island of Nevis in 1758, a few months before Nelson’s birth in Norfolk in September of that year. The contrasts of their initial environments were predictive of future differences. Her parents died when she
was two years old, and her widower uncle John Herbert raised her. Herbert was president of the Nevis Council and one of the very few supporters Nelson had among the civilian leaders of the West Indies. In fact Herbert not only supported Nelson’s enforcement of the Navigation Acts, it’s clear that he liked him as well.

Montpelier, Herbert’s home was the finest of the more than seventy plantation houses on Nevis. In her biography of Nelson, Carola Oman painted an evocative picture of the backdrop for what was Nelson’s most serious love, up to that point:

*Nevis, viewed from the sea, resembled a highly coloured illustration of a treasure-island in a child’s picture-book. It was almost circular, and its lower slopes displayed the sharp green of the sugar cane, fringed by groves of coconut. Its conical summit, of a much darker blue than the surrounding waters, was continually capped by the snow-white clouds which had reminded Columbus of the Mountains of Nieves, in Spain.*

It that exotic setting, Fanny was the hostess of the plantation and manager of the household for her uncle. At 20 years of age, she had married the local doctor, Josiah Nisbet, who became seriously ill and died shortly after their marriage.

In what her publisher titled *The First Biography of Frances Herbert, Viscountess Nelson*, E.M. Keate, referred to Fanny as ‘a very fascinating young widow’. Later in the same biography, she wrote: ‘she was always treated as a young princess’. Although she had developed significant strength of character and maturity during her young years and was very much at home with her young son and uncle at Montpelier, Fanny lacked an important element in her life: she lacked the security and social affirmation
that went with a stable marriage. As a result, the prospect of a secure social position, combined with a reasonable expectation for financial stability for herself and her son were likely to have been important – perhaps the most important – factors in her attraction to the young captain of Boreas.

Despite the lack of extensive details about Fanny and Nelson’s courtship, it appears that their prelude to marriage was an intriguing blend of physical attraction, practicality, and idealism, qualities that were linked by genuine affection. There was the additional positive factor of financial assistance from both families. The first known letter to Fanny, dated 19 August 1785, was written from English Harbour, Antigua. In that letter there was much that defined the person Nelson was at the time. Self assurance, forthrightness, a sense of honor, and the ever-present concern for money were discernible:

*Fanny did [I] possess a million my greatest pride and pleasure would be to share it with you; and, as I am, to live in a cottage with you I should esteem superior to living in a palace with any other I have yet to meet with ...The more I weigh you in my mind the more reason I find to admire both your head and heart ... My temper you know as well as myself, for by longer acquaintance you will find I possess not the art of concealing it. My situation and family I have not endeavoured to conceal. Don’t think me rude by thus entering into a correspondence with you, consider that separation from the objects we esteem lose some of its pangs by a mutual unreserved correspondence. Therefore if you think it right let me now and then be favoured with a few lines. The pleasure I shall receive with them, you will give me credit for.*

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The letter was written with a sense of confidence in the new relationship, and Nelson’s words, despite their apparent reserve by modern standards, reflected a propriety that was appropriate to the time and circumstances. The tone also indicated that Nelson had probably become more mature, since his romances with Mary Simpson and Elizabeth Andrews.

In a subsequent letter in May 1786, Nelson wrote to Fanny from Barbados, and he addressed a much more substantive issue:

*Duty is the great business of a Sea-officer. All private considerations must give way to it, however painful it is.*

That message was blunt: it was critically important for Fanny to support Nelson in his naval career: In the light of events to come, those particular words of Nelson’s emerge as an indicator of an ongoing need that sadly would not be met by Fanny. Despite their affection, the quality of love that Nelson needed to support his self-esteem and fuel his courage was apparently never forthcoming.

Time and events corroded the relationship that was formalized with marriage on 11 March 1787 at Montpelier. The process of decay began as soon as the couple returned to England in July and undoubtedly built during the five years Nelson spent at Norfolk lobbying for a new command. In fact when Nelson wrote a brief *Sketch of My Life* for John M’Arthur, the editor of the *Naval Chronicle*, he devoted only one sentence to his marriage, but that single sentence revealed a lot: ‘And in March (1786), I married Frances Herbert Nisbet, widow of Dr. Nisbet, of the Island of Nevis; by whom I have no children’.

The *Sketch of My Life* was dated 15 October, 1799, a date after the Battle of the Nile and after the point at which Lady Emma Hamilton entered Nelson’s life. A bitterness leaks through those lines. By that time Nelson’s heroics seemed more of a threat to Fanny’s security than achievements to be lauded by her. The constant, encompassing, ever-supportive love that Nelson needed to sustain his career simply wasn’t there. Soon an intriguing personality would enter the stage of Nelson’s drama, someone who would fill the fatal gaps in Nelson’s marriage.

Emma Hamilton

From her earliest years, Emma’s ability to please and psychologically support her lovers was what raised her from poverty. As a young woman, she was a striking subject for contemporary portrait artists, and with her ‘Attitudes’ she also demonstrated acting ability. She was in basic terms an exemplary courtesan, one who had even reached the unattainable for the traditional ‘other women’ by marrying the last of her patrons, the elderly Sir William Hamilton.

There were also important external factors that bore heavily on the initial circumstances of the relationship that developed between Emma and Nelson. First there was the public impact of Nelson’s brilliant Battle of the Nile victory at Aboukir Bay in August 1798. That impact was felt not just in the Mediterranean and Great Britain, it also echoed throughout Europe, and it would have made Nelson virtually irresistible for Emma.

Second Nelson had been wounded at the Battle of the Nile in August 1798, and Emma took it upon herself to lead the physical rehabilitation of the naval officer who had now become a mega-hero of international proportions. That would have increased Nelson’s attraction to her beyond her more evident charms.

A third circumstance that was significant when Emma and Nelson were thrown together was Emma’s status as the wife of British ambassador to the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies Sir William Hamilton. In that situation she became a close confidant to Maria Carolina, Queen of the kingdom, who was a major – if not the primary – influence on the kingdom’s policies and actions.

This third external circumstance – often overlooked – was probably as important in Nelson’s relationship with Emma as any other factor. At the time The Kingdom of the Two Sicilies was Britain’s most important ally in the Mediterranean, and Emma became an on-site partner in Nelson’s challenging diplomatic dealings with that kingdom. In his recent biography, Nelson: The Sword of Albion, John Sugden provides an observation about what that aspect of the relationship meant for Nelson:

_He had moved ... into a different world of monarchs and international diplomacy, a world understood and shared by the Hamiltons, in whom he now confided. He returned (from the Mediterranean) hopelessly in love with Emma._15

Given their backgrounds and the circumstances of their association, one could conclude that love between Nelson and Emma was inevitable.
By the time Nelson had set up housekeeping with his paramour and Sir William (who was a willing partner in the ménage-a-trois) at Merton in 1801, he had gone through a deployment to the Baltic and the Battle of Copenhagen, and was again deployed to the Mediterranean. By that time the quality of the relationship between Nelson and Emma was in many ways that of a married couple, at least in their own minds. There was even a child of the relationship. In August 1803 he wrote from HMS Victory off Toulon about receiving one of Emma’s letters:

You will readily conceive my dear Emma, the sensations which the sight and reading even a few lines occasioned. They cannot be understood, but by those of such mutual and truly sincere attachment as your’s and mine. Although you said little, I understood a great deal, and most heartily approve of your plan and society for next winter; and, next spring, I hope to be rich enough to begin the alterations at dear Merton.¹⁶

Emma became firmly established as an essential element in Nelson’s life as he approached the culmination of his career and his final, greatest test at Trafalgar. By that time he was war-weary and physically depleted. An important part of his remaining strength was derived from his love for Emma and their child. The final words of Nelson’s last letter before the events at Trafalgar reflected that love:

May the God of Battles crown my endeavours with success; at all events, I will take care that my name will ever be most dear to you and Horatia, both of whom I love as much as my own life. And as my last writing before the Battle will be to you, so I hope in God that I shall live to finish my letter after the Battle. May Heaven bless you prays your Nelson and Bronte.¹⁷

But it was a somewhat earlier letter from Nelson that seemed to go most directly to the connection between Nelson’s valor and Emma’s love. In a letter written to her from HMS San Josef, when he was en route to the Baltic and the Battle of Copenhagen in February 1801, he clearly connected the concepts of courage in combat and love:

It is your sex that make us go forth; and seem to tell us – ‘None but the brave deserve the fair!’ and, if we fall, we still live in the hearts of those females, who are dear to us. It is your sex that rewards us; it is your sex that cherishes our memories; and you, my dear, honored friend, are, believe me, the first, the best of your sex … you know how to reward virtue, honour, and courage.¹⁸
Engraving of Nelson by Thomas Hodgetts from a portrait by William Beechey, 1840. Author’s Collection.
Nelson’s love of Emma may elicit a smile and a wink by some observers, and some may even point to it as a weakness. In his biography *The Life of Nelson*, for example, U.S. sea power visionary Rear Admiral A.T. Mahan is cutting as he opines on Emma’s motivation for her attachment to Nelson after his heroic achievement at Aboukir Bay:

[I]t is in entire keeping with the career and the self-revelations of the woman that she should, instinctively, if not with deliberation, have resolved to parade herself in the glare of his renown, and appear in the foreground upon the stage of his triumph. The chief dispenser of his praises, the patroness and proprietor of the hero. The great occasion should shed a glamour round her, together with him.¹⁹

It’s important to note, however, that Emma’s motivation is not an issue when considering how the relationship bore on Nelson’s character. To him Emma was not only a partner and confidant, she was an inspiration, as Nelson put it: ‘If there were more Emmas, there would be more Nelsons’.²⁰

Emma was the last in the sequence of loves that significantly influenced the persona of the unique naval warrior who established British dominance at sea during the nineteenth century. Mary Simpson, Elizabeth Andrews, Mary Moutray and Fanny Nisbet had set the stage for Nelson’s love for Emma. She became the confidant, ego support, political partner, and most important the fuel for the courage that carried Nelson to the summit described by Admiral Mahan at the end of his Nelson biography:

The words, ‘I have done my duty’, sealed the closed book of Nelson’s story with a truth broader and deeper that he himself could suspect … Other men have died in the hour of victory, but for no other has victory so singular and so signal graced the fulfillment and ending of a great life’s work … 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 left no successor … ‘There is but one Nelson’.²¹

But when the biographers’ sweeping accolades fade, our minds are drawn inexorably away to Nelson’s own evocative words: ‘This Horatio is forever in love’. Those few words – probably delivered to lighten the tone of the letter – may seem at first to be meaningless in the Nelson narrative, but with thought they open a special window on the essence of the unique naval warrior for whom ‘there is no successor’. It is also worth remembering that
Nelson described his written words as 'the inward monitor of my heart'. That statement alone challenges us to scrutinize his loves for Mary Simpson, Elizabeth Andrews, Mary Moutray, Fanny Nisbet and Emma Hamilton more diligently in the never-ending search for 'the essential Nelson'.

6 Ibid., p. 110.
7 Ibid., p. 124 and p. 126.
8 Ibid., p. 131.
11 Ibid., p. 4.
13 Sir Nicholas Harris Nicolas, *The Dispatches*, p. 167
14 Ibid., pp. 11-12.
18 Ibid., iv, p. 284.