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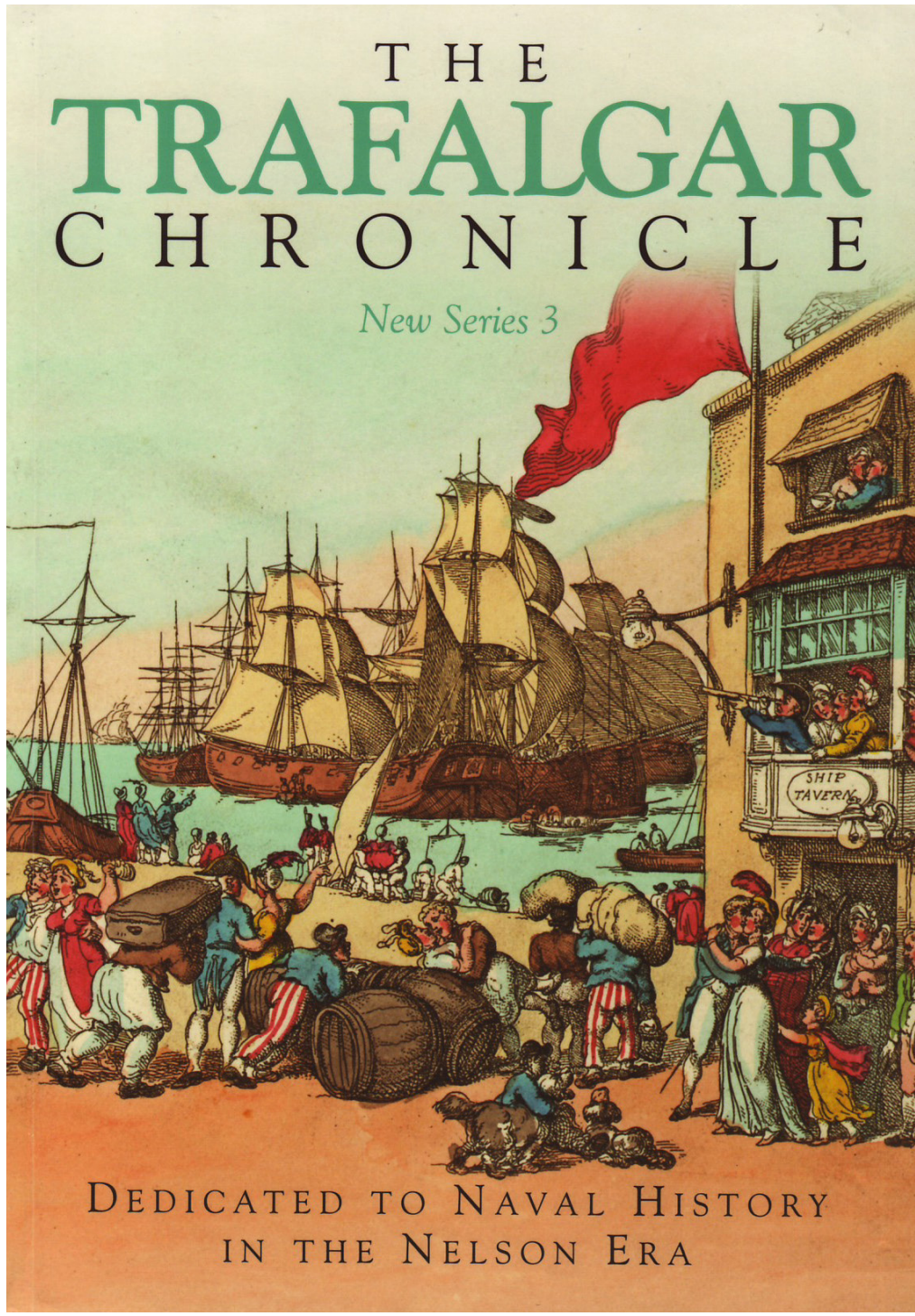

Television Interview with Emma, Lady Hamilton

Joe Callo

HOST: Good evening, and welcome to the third presentation of the *Speaking with History's Notables* television series.[1] As you will recall from the previous interviews with Lord Nelson and his wife Fanny, the conversation you are about to witness has been made possible by remarkable advances in paranormal communications. This stunning scientific breakthrough provides hitherto unthinkable communications, in person, with individuals who have passed on from this world. For this evening's programme we will be talking with Emma, Lady Hamilton, who is one of the most thought-provoking personalities in the Admiral Lord Nelson narrative. Good evening, Lady Hamilton.

EMMA: Good evening.

HOST: Lady Hamilton, being the mistress of one of Great Britain's greatest heroes established a unique place in British history for you, and we welcome this special opportunity to talk with you this evening.

EMMA: Sir, I question the label 'mistress'. Use of that word suggests that basic misperceptions concerning my relationship with Lord Nelson persist. Further, I believe the label 'mistress' establishes a trivial context for my story. It would, I believe, be more accurate to refer to me as Admiral Nelson's *paramour*.

HOST: Lady Hamilton, I don't mean to be argumentative, but I'm not sure I understand the distinction you are making.

EMMA: I believe the term 'mistress' generally describes an arrangement of convenience among a husband, wife and another woman, and that certainly was not an unusual situation among the upper classes in the England of my time. In truth, Admiral Nelson wanted to gain a formal detachment from his wife, but she blocked those efforts. At the same time, the relationship between Lord Nelson and me was all-consuming. It was based on a powerful, mutual love. It's a matter of degree of intensity and a singular commitment between Lord Nelson and me. In addition, I would point out that there certainly was nothing convenient about our situation. All things considered, I believe that 'paramour' would be a more appropriate label for my attachment to Lord Nelson.

HOST: I see. What, then, was the cornerstone of the intensive relationship you describe?

EMMA: The Admiral understood me, and I understood him. He had no illusions about the path I travelled to become Lady Hamilton, and he still managed to love me intensely for the person I truly was. I might add that, in the process, he was also able to overlook the caricaturists' hurtful depictions of me as an overweight strumpet, worthy of derision. For my part, I was able to see beyond the public image of the single-mindedly ferocious warrior striking down England's enemies in bloody combat. I was able to understand – even embrace – Lord Nelson's overriding commitment to his career and to love him for the total person he was.

HOST: Notwithstanding the quality of your love, Lady Hamilton, you must admit that your relationship with Admiral Nelson was the most important factor in your place in history.

EMMA: Of course, that is true, but it is also true of most of the people who came in contact with Admiral Nelson during their lives. As the American historian Admiral A T Mahan wrote so concisely in his Nelson biography, 'there is but one Nelson'. In truth, countless people became known in history because of their association with Admiral Nelson, and I am not the least bit self-conscious about being one of those people – thank you very much.

HOST: Further to the quality of your relationship, there's no doubt that Nelson also loved his wife Fanny. Their marriage, and his many heartfelt letters to her, attest to that, and based on her correspondence, it is clear that she loved him. How did that love lack the intensity you attribute to your relationship with Lord Nelson?

EMMA: It goes back to the matter of mutual understanding. Lady Nelson, indeed, loved her husband, but it's quite evident that the key element of her love was the security the Admiral provided for her and her son Josiah by her first marriage. In addition, it's worth noting; she never bore a child by Lord Nelson. I believe that latter circumstance was more of a factor in the relationship than history reflects. Thus Nelson's boldness in combat and his aggressive commitment to his calling as a naval officer were a profound threat to the need for security that dominated her bond with Lord Nelson. She could never abide his risk-taking, and it remained an ever-present threat to the security she needed.

HOST: And for your part?

EMMA: I understood that the Admiral's seeming-recklessness in combat was an essential part of his true self. As much as it frightened me, I knew that

it was an absolutely essential part of the man's nature. I hated the danger he courted, but I also recognised that it was an inseparable part of the man I loved. I knew that when the Admiral wrote to me before the Battle of Copenhagen how 'the boldest measures are the safest', he was reflecting his own spirit, as much as a combat doctrine. In addition, I am compelled to point out that I did bear his child.

HOST: I would like to turn to the early stages of your romance with Lord Nelson. Please tell the audience something of that phase of your relationship.

EMMA: We met in Naples in September 1793, and it was in 1798, shortly after the Admiral's spectacular victory over a French fleet at the Battle of the Nile, that our relationship deepened. At that time, we not only were drawn to one another romantically, we both were, in a very real sense, striving to advance the position of Great Britain in a region of great strategic importance. That was an important common denominator that is sometimes underestimated. I had the confidence of the Queen of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, and Admiral Nelson was employing his courage and naval skills to check the naval power of Buonaparte and his allies. It was a politically stressful period, but, of greater importance, it was deeply gratifying to be working towards the same important national objectives with Admiral Nelson. Our common patriotism became a significant element of our powerful attraction to one another.

HOST: Yes, and …

EMMA: When word of the Admiral's astonishing victory at Aboukir Bay on 1 August 1798 first reached Naples, and in particular King Ferdinand's court, the relief – the indescribable joy – was remarkable. The resulting anticipation of the Admiral's arrival in Naples was almost unbearable, and when he arrived he was welcomed as the great hero – indeed, the saviour – he was. However, he was physically and emotionally drained, and, of course, there was his head wound. I devoted myself to his recovery. It seems strange, but I was playing a role similar to that of Lady Nelson when Lord Nelson returned to England following the Battle of Santa Cruz de Tenerife in 1797 – lacking his right arm. By the time he recovered to some degree in Naples, our love was firmly fixed, and, in a special way, it was a relationship between partners. Perhaps your modern term, near-peers, is not an exaggeration. In any event, there was a lot more than physical attraction that drew us together. Another current term I might use to describe our relationship is 'soulmates'.

HOST: Your description of events in Naples is thought-producing. It also leads

to a question. What was the impact on your relationship when King Ferdinand and Queen Carolina were driven out of Naples and into sanctuary in Palermo?

EMMA: Our relationship continued to strengthen under those very difficult circumstances, but the circumstances to which you refer were, indeed, a living hell.

HOST: In what way?

EMMA: First of all, there was the chaos when King Ferdinand, and his court, and his friends were driven from Naples by the Lazzaroni mobs. We were fortunate to escape with our lives – thanks to Lord Nelson and the Royal Navy. Then, we suffered through a most brutal storm before we were able to reach the safety of Palermo. During that horrible voyage, I devoted myself to ministering to the royal family. One of the King and Queen's sons actually died in my arms during that most dreadful storm. Once in Palermo in December, many of we refugees were forced to occupy summer homes that were most uncomfortable during the winter months. Thus our anxiety was matched by considerable physical discomfort.

HOST: During those months, did you and Nelson become closer?

EMMA: Yes, of course, we did, but as I say, not in happy surroundings. On top of everything else, most of Sir William's treasured collection of antiquities had been looted or destroyed by the revolutionaries. However, in due time the kingdom was restored, and we returned to Naples. Unfortunately, even the restoration of the King had a negative aspect, as it was accompanied by the most vicious retributions against the Neapolitan rebels and their families. It was impossible to not feel the utter despair of the women and children, swept up in the vengeful spasm.

HOST: Please go on.

EMMA: The unifying factor during that terrible time was the continuing need to guard the interests of England, and we were doing that together. I might add, that Sir William was in tune with events, and many authors have reported how he referred to the three of us as 'the Trio Juncta in Uno'. At the time, Sir William also wrote, 'I glory in the hospitality I have had in my power to show Lord Nelson and almost all of the Heroes of the Nile'.

HOST: As I recall, Admiral Nelson was eventually relieved in the Mediterranean by Admiral Lord Keith.

EMMA: That is so, and to our distress our time together in the Mediterranean became limited, but, finally, there was a decision by Sir William to

return to England overland. Lord Nelson joined us on that memorable journey, but I realise that it created a great deal of criticism at home.

HOST: Perhaps, madam, since our time is growing short, we can move ahead to Merton.

EMMA: After the horrors in the Mediterranean, Merton was like heaven on earth.

HOST: In what particular ways?

EMMA: When I discovered Merton, I immediately felt that it was a place created for the two of us. David and Stephen Howarth, in their biography *Nelson the Immortal Memory*, referred to Sir William's description of Merton, written to Nelson after Sir William and I had moved in, and were anticipating being joined there by Lord Nelson: 'You are in luck for in my conscience, I verily believe that a place so suitable to your views could not have been found'.

HOST: Please tell us more about what was special about Merton.

EMMA: In his book titled *Horatio Nelson*, your modern author Tom Pocock included Lord Minto's telling description of the scene that he observed upon a visit to us in that wonderful place. 'I had a hearty welcome. He looks remarkably well and full of spirits. His conversation is a cordial in these low times. Lady Hamilton has improved and added to the house and the place extremely well without his knowing she was about it. He found it ready done. She is a clever being after all: the passion is as hot as ever'. Sir, I think that illuminates quite well what Merton was all about.

HOST: I'm not sure I understand fully.

EMMA: We were two people in love, and our relationship was not – as some have suggested – primarily a matter of physical attraction. We had miraculously found one another, and at Merton we finally had a chance to be together in relative quiet. Up to that point, our relationship was generally pursued in consistently frantic and stressful circumstances. At Merton, Horatio and I had an opportunity to put our relationship to the ultimate test. We were required to deal with one another in serene surroundings. The threat of Merton's peacefulness was the ultimate test of both the depth and the permanence of our feelings.

HOST: And did your love pass that ultimate test?

EMMA: Yes, sublimely.

HOST: Lady Hamilton you have provided important insights to your relationship with Admiral Lord Nelson this evening. Is it possible to sum up that emotional journey?

EMMA: Not really, but perhaps an idea from John Milton's amazing poem

Paradise Lost can help somewhat. The notion I am thinking about is: 'The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n'. In the Mediterranean, we were, indeed, able to create a kind of heaven in the hell that surrounded us. However, in Merton, our minds were free of overbearing stress, and we were able to concentrate fully on our incredible feelings for one another. In good times and bad, our love was there. No matter the challenges, our love was there. Whatever the externals were at any given time, our love was firm, and even when we were separated our love was ever-present in our minds.

HOST: Lady Hamilton, given the depth of your love for Lord Nelson, one wonders how you were able to manage after his death, particularly in light of government's failure to abide by Lord Nelson's final wishes concerning your well-being.

EMMA: Clearly, I did not manage well. For all practical purposes, however, my life ended when the musket ball struck Horatio. What transpired in my life, during the ten years between the glorious events at Trafalgar and my death in France, was of little historical importance.

HOST: We are almost out of time, Lady Hamilton. Is there anything else you would like to add?

EMMA: I simply want to thank you, and your audience, for this opportunity to get beyond the frequently smirking, 'wink, wink' references to my role in Horatio's life. Perhaps the most thought-producing measure of my life that I can add is contained in Horatio's terse comment in a letter to Sir William Marsden: 'If there were more Emmas, there would be more Nelsons'. I'll leave it at that.

HOST: Thank you, Lady Emma Hamilton, and goodnight.

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1 An interview with Lord Nelson was published in the *Trafalgar Chronicle* 2012, and with Lady Nelson in 2015.