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The Spirit of His Men: The Development of the Lord Nelson Legend, 1805-1905

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Alexa Price

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INTRODUCTION

On October 18, 1905, the British magazine *Punch* dedicated one of its distinctive engravings to the memory of Horatio, Lord Nelson, bearing the caption, “my ships have passed away, but the spirit of my men remains”¹ (fig. 1). A particularly heroic incarnation of the admiral, in his full officer’s regalia and honors, stands on a cliff surveying the array of iron-and-steam battleships that patrol the sea below him. The stirring portrait spoke to an audience that had watched the Royal Navy evolve rapidly in recent decades, but that still turned to a century-old hero for inspiration.

During the nineteenth century, Lord Nelson became a cultural phenomenon, appearing in place-names, monuments, celebrations, home merchandise, art, literature, and printed media. His memory permeated all corners of society, constantly modified to promote current ideals and interests, whether dealing with politics, empire, religion, patriotic duty or naval pride. As David Cannadine has written, by the end of the century Britain had created a version of “Nelson to suit almost every taste.”²

The legend of Lord Nelson had not grown irrelevant when the age of sail and constant war gave way to the age of steam, iron, and European peace. Authors, artists, naval enthusiasts and others portrayed Nelson as being continually relevant, embellishing popular anecdotes or focusing on certain elements of his life while cleverly disregarding others. Invoking pride in a national hero could spark nostalgia by highlighting the traditional value of the navy and of societal ideals, and providing a legendary figure who could be imagined to embody the principles of modern morality. The hero of Trafalgar evolved into a symbol of Britain’s empire

¹ "1805-1905," *Punch*, October 18, 1905, <http://collections.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/202360.html>.

² David Cannadine, ed. *Admiral Lord Nelson: Context and Legacy* (New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 1.

and supremacy, the embodiment of British masculinity, Christianity and paternalism, and a figure that could be molded to support a variety of political sentiments.

Lord Nelson's nineteenth-century legacy, however, finds little space in the existing historiography of his life and of the British Royal Navy. Biographers deal mostly with his service and his tactical genius, but fail to note the way his memory promoted Navalism well after his death. The scarcity of work on Nelson's long-term legacy fits within an absence of study concerning naval reverence and popular perceptions of the Victorian navy in general. Seemingly following Arthur J. Marder's assertion that Victorian Britons before the end of the century did not understand or even care about the fleet, scholars have traditionally been reluctant to acknowledge that a public opinion on the navy existed at all.³ Works by John F. Beeler, Jon Horsfield, Peter Padfield, Anthony Preston and John Major have provided insight to the navy's imperial role in the Victorian era, and reached conflicting verdicts on its effectiveness, but do not devote time to examining the navy's popular impact.⁴ A biography by Andrew Lambert sheds some light on the issue, admitting that naval reverence and love of Nelson experienced a resurgence at the end of the century, but glosses over most of the Victorian era with the generalization that the relatively peaceful mid-century rendered hero-worship unnecessary.⁵

However, there has been a resurgence of interest in the "cult of Nelson" in recent years, influenced by the 200th anniversary of Trafalgar in 2005. Compilations of articles edited by David Cannadine and Holger Hoock focus heavily on the themes of commemoration and celebration, using Nelson's funeral, the Trafalgar centenary of 1905 and the bicentenary

³ Arthur J. Marder, *The Anatomy of British Sea Power* (London: F. Cass, 1972), 45

⁴ John F. Beeler, *British Naval Policy in the Gladstone-Disraeli Era, 1866-1880* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997); Jon Horsfield, *The Art of Leadership in War: the Royal Navy from the Age of Nelson to the End of World War II* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980); Peter Padfield, *Rule Britannia: the Victorian and Edwardian Navy* (London: Pimlico, 2002); and Anthony Preston and John Major, *Send a Gunboat!: The Victorian Navy and Supremacy at Sea, 1854-1904* (London: Conway, 2007).

⁵ Andrew Lambert, *Nelson: Britannia's God of War* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), 345.

celebration of 2005 to examine eras in which a “Nelson culture” existed.⁶ Despite these works’ tendency to overlook the Victorian era and jump from 1806 to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, they suggest the ability to analyze Nelson as a cultural phenomenon, rather than only a heroic symbol.

Collaborative work between Laurence Brockliss, John Cardwell and Michael Moss gives attention to the question of why Nelson’s memory was useful enough to abide through an entire century, suggesting that Nelson-based patriotism was powerful enough cut across class and regional boundaries.⁷ Specifically in reference to the funeral, the article explains that Nelson’s memory served an immediate wartime purpose, bringing together soldiers and sailors from all regions of Britain, extending public mourning to rich and poor alike, and creating “patriotic solidarity at a time when the international situation could not have been worse”.⁸ Adding to the possibilities for cultural study, Colin White’s examination of post-Trafalgar mourning notes the early prevalence of Nelson in public culture, using theater pieces, commemorative merchandise, and newspapers as a way to examine the role of popular mediums of expression in perpetuating the Nelson legend.⁹ Although limited to the years immediately following Trafalgar, these recent articles demonstrate ways in which scholarship could expand to include popular culture from later periods.

This paper aims to fill the gap in Nelson’s nineteenth-century legacy, and to examine the way it functioned to inspire popular enthusiasm for empire, political reform, and the navy itself.

⁶ David Cannadine, ed. *Admiral Lord Nelson: Context and Legacy* (New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) and Holger Hoocke, ed., *History, Commemoration, and National Preoccupation: Trafalgar, 1805-2005* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁷ Laurence Brockliss, John Cardwell and Michael Moss, “Nelson’s Grand National Obsequies,” *English Historical Review* CXXI, no.490 (2006): 163, <http://her.oxfordjournals.org/>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Colin White, “Nelson Apotheosised: The Creation of the Nelson Legend,” in *History, Commemoration, and National Preoccupation: Trafalgar 1805-2005*, ed. Holger Hooch (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 23.

The malleability of Nelson's image, I argue, rendered his memory continually relevant throughout the century and created a "cult of Nelson" that was not limited only to specific commemorative moments. Drawing on Colin White's use of material culture, and Linda Colley's appeal to researchers to study visual and printed sources as well as art, theater, music, and literature,¹⁰ it will move out of the realm of military history and examine the legend of Lord Nelson in a more deeply cultural context. Chapter 1 will examine the legend's early development, when the end of the Napoleonic Wars and the supremacy of the British Navy invoked pride in Nelson and his sailors as the national saviors that sparked Britain's naval ascendancy. Chapter 2 will examine Nelson's evocation in political opinions, social commentaries, and appeals to Victorian morality, examining how the legend changed to fit contemporary concerns. Chapter 3 will use late-Victorian naval celebrations and the case of the HMS *Foudroyant* to examine on the legend's role in generating nostalgia, highlighting nationalism, naval pride, and history-based identity. Taken together, the chapters will follow the development of Lord Nelson's legacy, and demonstrate how Britain made one of its greatest heroes continually relevant in a changing society. This thesis will assess the shifting nature of heroism, as Lord Nelson became a figure that could generate public support for the Royal Navy, while also serving as a moral standard for a century of changing ideals.

¹⁰ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992), 8.

CHAPTER 1

The Immortal Nelson and the British Naval Worldview

When England received news of the battle of Trafalgar in November 1805, *The Times* announced to its readers that, “we do not know whether we should mourn or rejoice. The country has gained the most splendid and decisive Victory that has ever graced the naval annals of England; but it has been dearly purchased. The great and gallant NELSON is no more.”¹ Though Trafalgar secured Britain’s sense of naval supremacy over the rival fleets of France and Spain, and created a sense that the island was safe from a seaborne invasion, the battle cost the nation its most beloved naval hero. Vice Admiral Lord Horatio Nelson, who had been the center of British naval pride since his victory over Bonaparte at the Nile in 1798, died at Trafalgar from a bullet that shot through his spine. Though paralyzed from his wound and aware of his mortality, Nelson lived long enough to hear that the British fleet had been victorious and that his country would praise him as the hero of Trafalgar.

In the months following Trafalgar, the royal government declared a “general thanksgiving” for the services of Nelson and the navy, and organized a grand state funeral to commemorate the late hero. Letters to the King poured in from the mayors, aldermen, and town councils of all regions of Britain, in congratulations for the splendid victory but in mourning for the nation’s great personal loss. Later published in *The London Gazette*, the “Subjects, the Lord Provost, Magistrates, and Council of the City of Edinburgh” proudly announced that the victory and the spirit of Trafalgar was enough to “have defeated all the Attempts of our Enemies to enslave us... we behold the combined Navies of France and Spain reduced, by repeated Defeats,

¹ Colin White, “His dirge our groans – his monument our praise’: Official and Popular Commemoration of Nelson in 1805-6,” in *History, Commemoration, and National Preoccupation: Trafalgar, 1805-2005*, ed. Holger Hoock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 25.

to an inconsiderable Force, and their Ships and Sailors dragged in Triumph to our Shores.”² The “Royal Borough of Inverness” likewise marveled that the British Navy is irresistible, and [its achievements] proudly adorn, with fresh Laurels, the Crown of British Valour.”³ At the same time, every city wrote that it joined in a great national mourning, but agreed that Nelson had left a great legacy that would doubtlessly inspire Britons for generations. Bristol’s letter wrote that Nelson had “left behind him a Name which can never die. His bright Example remains to the latest Posterity; and that gallant and patriotic Spirit... has raised the Naval Power of these Kingdoms to the highest Pinnacle of Glory,”⁴ while Exeter hoped that the navy would continue to “prove to the whole World that an Hero and a British Seaman are synonymous Terms.”⁵ These letters continued to be printed well into the next year. Nelson’s death and legendary command engendered his apotheosis as what Lord Byron called “Britannia’s god of war,” and cast him as the savior of the British nation. Nelson became the near-mythical icon who freed Britain from the threat of invasion and rendered the sea safe for British trading power and empire, an immortal figure that could justify the nation’s supremacy for the next century. True to the early letters of *The London Gazette*, his name continued to appear as an example for British conduct, encouraging support for naval reform and maritime politics, bolstering popular naval reverence, and building the nationalistic image of Britain as the world’s foremost maritime power.

The Aftermath of Trafalgar

Lord Nelson’s funeral became a powerful outlet for the promotion of national unity and imperial aspirations. The funeral, lasting five days between the fifth and ninth of January 1806, was nearly unprecedented as a government-sponsored service held for a non-royal figure. The

² *The London Gazette*, November 23, 1805.

³ *The London Gazette*, December 10, 1805.

⁴ *The London Gazette*, December 3, 1805.

⁵ *The London Gazette*, November 19, 1805.

event drew thousands of spectators, who reportedly filled the streets and even crowded onto docked merchant ships along the Thames as a “Grand River Procession” carried the body of their hero from Greenwich to London.⁶ Bringing together such a number of people, and being reported in the newspapers for the reading public to see, the funeral was capable of building national unity through common mourning. Individuals of all class backgrounds came to view the proceedings, causing some initial uneasiness as to how “the mob” might behave itself, but demonstrating that just three months after his death, Nelson’s legend had the power to cut across class boundaries. One elite spectator, Lady Bressborough, reported in a private letter how “touching” it seemed to view “the silence of that immense Mob” of mingling classes that she observed from her window; she was likewise surprised at the unity of feeling when the entirety of the crowd of their own volition removed their hats out of respect for the approaching funeral car.⁷

Cutting across social boundaries, Nelson’s state funeral was capable of creating “patriotic solidarity at a time when the international situation could not have been worse.”⁸ As Brockliss, Cardwell, and Moss explain in their examination of Nelson’s public image, Trafalgar was a definite indication of Britain’s supremacy at sea, but Bonaparte’s armies continued to pose a considerable threat by land. Soon after receiving the report of Nelson’s death, Britain learned of Bonaparte’s victory at Austerlitz, and faced the potential of weakened morale. Poignantly, the *Morning Chronicle* expressed fear that Bonaparte would gain strength from Nelson’s death, knowing that “the only rival to [his] greatness is no more.”⁹ With the situation of war so tenuous, as Brockliss et. al. argue, the funeral provided a venue from which to enhance nationalistic pride,

⁶ White, 33.

⁷ White, 37.

⁸ Brockliss et. al., 163.

⁹ Terry Coleman, *The Nelson Touch* (New York: Oxford, 2002), 320.

and to solidify the image of Great Britain as a united island with the power to stand against the situation in Europe.

While mourning the loss of a great leader, the funeral created a universal significance that stressed the importance of the navy to all of Britain's three kingdoms. Trafalgar was a useful rallying point: it was the largest battle won by the "new United Kingdom" since Ireland had joined the union in 1800.¹⁰ The government capitalized on the use of different groups in the funeral procession to foster an image of a united island, bringing Scottish Highland regiments and Irish soldiers to take their places among the English ranks, thus representing Presbyterians and Catholics at an Anglican state funeral. Devotion to the "Immortal Nelson" united groups and faiths that traditionally had been at odds with each other, lending credence to the state's imposed symbolism of unity.¹¹ In an added gesture to reinforce patriotism, the government chose to include common sailors as participants in the funeral ceremonies, although like some members of "the Mob" they had typically been considered a separate and even vulgar breed. Enjoying a changed image for the occasion, sailors became accepted symbols of patriotism, representing the navy that had so well protected England from the ambitions of the enemy. In the river procession, sailors from the *Victory* rowed the royal barge that bore Nelson's coffin, and in the streets they carried the battle-torn colors of their ship, displaying the damage of war to awe-struck spectators. Lady Bessborough remarked how sailors from the *Victory* were "repeatedly and almost continually cheered" as they passed by.¹² Another observer, the wife of Admiral Edward Codrington (who had been captain of the *Orion* at Trafalgar), watched as Nelson was lowered into his tomb at St. Paul's Cathedral and his sailors prepared to fold the colors of their

¹⁰ Brockliss et., al181.

¹¹ Ibid.,176.

¹² White, 36

ship. However, instead of performing their intended act, the sailors unexpectedly tore the colors into portions that they would keep as memorials to their commander. The crowd, overcome by the day's air of admiration for Nelson's men, cheered for this spontaneous act that appeared at the time to symbolize the charismatic spirit of their hero. As Mrs. Codrington remarked, while "the rest [of the funeral proceedings] had been so much the Herald's Office," the sailors' part alone "was *Nelson*."¹³

Nelson's funeral enhanced popular reverence for the Navy through performances, printed images, newspapers and written pieces that highlighted naval heroism and kept sentiments alive long after the hero was laid to rest. Colin White's illuminating study of Nelson's first year of commemoration demonstrates that much of the hero's legend was forged in the immediate aftermath of Trafalgar, and played a practical role in consolidating Britain's image as a seagoing nation. One funeral-based image drawn by Thomas Baxter in 1805 depicts Lady Hamilton dressed as *Britannia Crowning a Bust of the Hero with Laurel*¹⁴ (fig. 2). While clearly a funeral image, with a loving Britannia resting her hand on Nelson's laurel crown under a clouded sky, the print also depicts a rallying cry to the nation: the imposing figure of Britannia holds her spear high above everything in the scene, the British lion growls out of the darkness while a naval battle in the background clouds the enemy in smoke.

Presented in print, Baxter's image demonstrated a sentiment that permeated various forms of art in immediate response to Nelson's death. A national call for revenge was a common theme, inciting audiences to honor a hero as well as the entire navy, and to prove that Britain would continue, as the popular naval anthem decreed, to "rule the waves." On November 7, 1805, the day after news of Trafalgar reached England, Covent Garden Theater organized a

¹³ White, 36.

¹⁴ White, 29.

“hasty yet elegant compliment” to Nelson, with all the symbolism of Baxter’s later print portrayed in a live performance. After the evening’s performances, the theater presented a naval scene on stage, in which the British fleet was “riding triumphantly” to the admiration of officers who watched as a medallion descended from the heavens bearing Nelson’s image. While this tableau unfolded, a chorus sang “Rule Britannia” with an additional verse:

Again the loud ton’d tramp of fame
Proclaims Britannia rules the main,
Whilst sorrow whispers Nelson’s name,
And mourns the gallant Victor slain.
Rule, brave Britons, rule the main;
Revenge the God-like Hero slain.¹⁵

Received with popular admiration, Covent Garden re-organized its tribute into a more concrete piece entitled “Nelson’s Glory,” which *The Times* reported on November 9 would be repeated “every day until further notice.”¹⁶

Artistic and performance-based commemoration incited conflict at times regarding the forms memorials took or the motives for which they existed. As Colin White has explained, theaters competed for the best memorial following Nelson’s death, but not all met with success. On December 7, 1805, London’s King’s Theater announced that it would show a new tribute called “Naval Victory and the Triumph of Nelson.” Building on the popular imagery of naval battle scenes, which had previously gained such admiration in other venues and appeared to be a sure way to draw crowds, the opening of the performance met approval for its depiction of Trafalgar. The theater went wrong, however, in attempting to stage a death scene, which *The Times* reported was “too strong for the feelings of those who loved and admired [Nelson].”¹⁷ The performance was driven off the stage as the audience, particularly the more common people who

¹⁵ *Times*, November 7, 1805.

¹⁶ *Times*, November 9, 1805.

¹⁷ White, 23.

were watching from “the Pit,” voiced their objections. Clearly, physical death was not the legacy audiences wished for their hero, as they favored depictions of Nelson for his contribution as a war hero to the Royal Navy as a whole. Nelson’s immortal memory and heroic apotheosis was more appealing than depictions of a conventionally mortal man.

Nelson-based pride entered the daily lives of people in their homes as well, marketed through the newspapers with sales of commemorative merchandise. As Kate Williams argues, there had been a tradition during Nelson’s life of marketing his fame to female consumers through cameo jewelry, commemorative decorations, or fashion accessories decorated with gold anchors to honor the navy and its iconic hero.¹⁸ However, *The Times* produced an overwhelming number of advertisements for commemorative items in the years between 1805 and 1815, offering for sale memorabilia such as household wares, portraits, and literary tributes.

Having access to a profusion of books, pamphlets, and poetry, consumers could show their pride in Nelson for a variety of prices. At the most basic level, one had only to buy the newspaper to be met with moral anecdotes or commemorative poetry. The *Times* issue of November 12, 1805 included a poem by W.T. Fitzgerald, Esq., which spoke of “Naval Deeds achiev’d of high renown / And honors added to the British Crown,” but asking, “Is there a Briton’s breast that does not beat / At NELSON’S triumph, and the Foe’s defeat... Immortal NELSON! – here my throbbing heart, / Swelling with sorrow, acts no borrowed part.”¹⁹ Roy Adkins has commented on the wealth of lyrical tributes, stating that Trafalgar “had provoked a rash of (mainly bad) poetry among the middle and upper classes,” but suggesting also that “songs and ballads about the battle were sung by the working classes... with the better ones being

¹⁸ Kate Williams, “Nelson and Women: Marketing, Representations and the Female Consumer” *Admiral Lord Nelson: Context and Legacy*, ed. David Cannadine (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 70.

¹⁹ *Times*, November 12, 1805.

handed down from generation to generation.”²⁰ Full-length volumes on Nelson’s life appeared, the most famous being Robert Southey’s in 1813. *The Times*, also, advertised the biography by Clarke and M’Arthur (1807), Joshua White’s history of Nelson’s professional life (1805), numerous compilations of Nelson’s private and naval correspondence, and military histories with advertisements such as, “Just published, in one large 4to Volume, price £1. 2s. ORME’S GRAPHIC HISTORY of the exploits, and DEATH, of Admiral LORD NELSON; containing 15 Engravings, and intended as an accompaniment to the three celebrated whole sheet Prints of his Lordship’s splendid Victories.”²¹

Prints of famous paintings were also popular, often being used to illustrate biographies with images such as Richard Westall’s romanticized depictions of Nelson as a midshipman boarding a prize or fighting off a polar bear in the arctic²² (fig. 3). As Nicholas Tracy explains in *Britannia’s Palette*, art made Nelson and the reputation of the navy more accessible: while “the average Briton might never have seen the battle fleets of the Royal Navy ... images of the war at sea were exhibited in the Royal Academy and in private galleries, and prints based on them were displayed in printsellers’ windows and offered for sale to the general public.”²³ Images portrayed Nelson as the ideal courageous Briton, invoking reverence and mourning and prolonging Nelson’s usefulness as the immortal savior of the nation. *The Times* on December 25, 1805 announced that a Mr. Hopkins was taking two-guinea subscriptions for an image of “Britannia lamenting the loss of her brave Defender... with a view of the Combined Fleets,” invoking the

²⁰ Roy Adkins, “The World After Trafalgar,” *New England Review* 26, no.3 (2005): 165.

²¹ *Times*, August 14, 1806.

²² *Times*, February 10, 1806.

²³ Nicholas Tracy, *Britannia’s Palette* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007), 5.

“national exultation” and feelings of naval supremacy excited by Trafalgar²⁴ (fig. 4). Making famous paintings available to at least a middle-class audience, Benjamin West joined with the royal engraver James Heath to sell his *Death of Nelson* for three guineas.²⁵ Jewelry was still available, and one particularly patriotic advertisement of 1805 proclaimed under the heading, “Memory of Lord Nelson,” that a Mr. Brasbridge was selling rings and locketts bearing “a striking resemblance of the gallant and immortal hero Nelson, the pride of his country and the terror of his enemies... no less elegant than suitable to the present moment of reverential admiration”.²⁶

While some examples could be seen as instances of merchants hawking their wares to a mournful public, the prevalence of Nelson memorabilia demonstrates that shopkeepers were catering to a well-established patriotic market. The commercialization of Nelson did have its critics; Colin White cites a memorial caricature printed shortly after the funeral, criticizing the government’s decision that visitors would be charged a two pence admission fee to see Nelson’s tomb at St. Paul’s, thus unfairly making a profit from the crowds of devoted visitors who wished to honor the memory of a revered figure. The image stands in stark contrast to Thomas Baxter’s *Britannia-and-monument* engraving, showing a stout sailor standing by his personal memorial to his commander, which he has built from a sea chest, barrels, two swords and a bicorn hat ornamented as Nelson’s had been.²⁷

The commercialization of the tomb, as well as rival monuments, opportunities to visit the funeral car at Greenwich, and the wealth of memorial merchandise that appeared in the several years following Trafalgar, resulted from the emotional outpourings of a people that used

²⁴ *Times*, December 25, 1805.

²⁵ *Times*, January 9, 1807.

²⁶ *Times*, November 16, 1805.

²⁷ White, 39.

commercial outlets to spread their hero's image throughout daily life.²⁸ Merchandising did not simply serve a capitalistic purpose, but encouraged consumers to continue to remember Nelson and express support for the navy. Convention deemed it correct to honor the Royal navy, and satirical critiques did not parody excessive patriotism or those that wanted to revere Nelson honestly. The true criticism lay on those who sought a monetary profit from reverence, instead of sincerely catering to national identity. Nelson's apotheosis as a hero had made him akin to a naval saint, from whom the public eagerly wanted memorials or relics, and whose tomb attracted pilgrims wishing to honor the navy and view the resting place of the nation's savior. A poem published in 1806, entitled "Nelson's Ghost," demonstrated the contrast between gain and the qualities for which Nelson ought to have been remembered:

"... A mercenary crew
 Expose my lonely tomb to view,
 And by the thirst of gain misled,
 Invade the quiet of the dead;
 And he, who in his country's cause,
 Fought to protect its rights and laws...
 Serves, by a lucre-seeking throng,
 To make a show of when he's gone. "²⁹

Profound Peace

The merchandizing that satirists mocked in the years following Trafalgar continued into the later nineteenth century, although the trend gave way to more books and art, and printed items eventually replaced the household wares that newspapers advertised during the Napoleonic Wars. Numerous biographies had appeared, during Nelson's lifetime and especially while the wars continued after his death. Indeed, publications were so frequent that Jane Austen remarked

²⁸ Holger Hoock, "Nelson Entombed: The Military and Naval Pantheon in St Paul's Cathedral," in *Admiral Lord Nelson: Context and Legacy*, ed. David Cannadine (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 133.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

upon the publication of Robert Southey's famous *Life of Nelson* in 1813 that she was "tired of Lives of Nelson" although she had never read any.³⁰ Despite their possible over-abundance, biographies catered to a public desire to know as much as possible about Britain's hero's public and private life, and to understand the legacy that was, in Robert Southey's words, "at [that] hour inspiring thousands of the youth of England."³¹ The legend reached a broad audience, being published in newspaper anecdotes, pamphlets, and multi-volume texts. During the wars, these stories served to demonstrate the character that an ideal sailor or British citizen should have, creating sometimes erroneous stories about Nelson as a boy embodying honor, ambition, patriotic pride, and a sense of duty.

Publications advertised in peacetime placed Nelson among other figures of importance, aiming to show how England had ascended as a naval power. These books served a specific purpose; much as biographies such as Southey's did when aiming to inspire the youth and create an image of the ideal sailor that readers should admire, books of naval history aimed to demonstrate how the navy had risen to greatness, and why readers should still admire its sailors and veterans. *James's Naval History*, written by Captain Chamer of the Royal Navy and available in six volumes for five shillings each or two pounds fourteen for the set, claimed that it would be "a great national benefit. It promises to be the text book of our naval history."³² Accordingly, it advertised the inclusion of Nelson and dedicated a special section to drawing examples from "the late eventful War."

As the nineteenth century progressed, Nelson's legend found a new purpose through its appearance in printed expressions of naval opinions. Facing peace and a lack of European rivals

³⁰ Williams, 81.

³¹ Robert Southey, *The Life of Horatio Lord Nelson*, ed. Edwin L. Miller (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1896), 297.

³² *Times*, April 26, 1837.

for sea power, his image was not necessary to convince the public that the Royal Navy could win a war at sea. It could, however, be employed to build up the navy's image and emphasize Britain's need for supremacy even in peacetime, or to explain the need for improvement in naval policies. Nelson's ghost appeared in arguments for international policy, when a letter to the editor announced that the navy ought to be able to search neutral ships in the Pacific under reasonable circumstances, with the purpose of protecting interests along the Pacific coast of South America against Spanish vessels. Lord Nelson himself, the letter-writer explained, had given his opinion in 1803 that "it is the acknowledged right of *all lawful cruisers* to examine the papers of vessels hoisting neutral colours, in order to ascertain whether the property of enemies, not contraband articles, be carried on board them."³³ Noting that international policy was at the time conflicted, the author appealed to "acknowledged law" and the clearly revered opinion of Lord Nelson to explain how the navy should conduct its affairs to maintain its power.

The authority of Lord Nelson's name in all sea-going lent moral authority to political rhetoric in Parliament just as it did in the public press. At the most extreme, the House of Lords had invoked his name in 1807 during the debate for the Slave Trade Act. The debate demonstrated the sometimes unfortunately flexible nature of a hero's memory, and how his example could be manipulated for both sides of an issue. Supporters of abolition argued that it was hypocritical for a great nation, which owed its supremacy to the heroic and patriotic deeds of Nelson's navy, to abandon its morality through the slave trade. In addition to being contrary to Christian religion, the Bishop of Durham argued that the trade conflicted with the superior "love of justice" that secured Britain's place among the nations of Europe. Conscience should turn Britain away from the monetary profits of slavery, for in the Bishop's words Britons "were a

³³ *Times*, November 7, 1821.

people more favoured by Heaven than any other nation had been from the commencement of time to the present hour; but we should beware how we forfeited the protection of Providence, by continual injustice; for if we did, we should look in vain hereafter for the glories of the Nile or of Trafalgar.³⁴ From the opposition General Tarleton, a great opponent of abolition, argued that Britain “ought to take care of the interests of our navy, and commerce would take care of itself... the coasting trade was the chief nursery for our marine, yet he maintained that sailors were good in proportion to the length of their voyages, and those of the sailors in the African trade were certainly long ones. There had been no considerable actions, such as that of Trafalgar, and others, in which sailors from this trade were not to be found in considerable numbers.”³⁵ If England’s supremacy depended on its navy and battles such as Nelson’s Trafalgar, Tarleton’s opinion was that the greatness of the navy depended on the existence of the slave trade.

In later years, parliament turned to “no less an authority than Lord Nelson” on the issue of naval impressment. As *The Times* had done in 1821 regarding the search of neutral vessels, Mr. George Frederick Young turned to a letter that Nelson had written in 1803 to Lord St. Vincent, stating that “although a complete register should be established, yet that it would be necessary to retain the power of impressment, and that that compulsion might, and ought to be kept up.”³⁶ Building on Nelson’s authority in 1831, Young hoped to “provide an efficient register” of men from which the navy would generally draw its power, but argued that legal impressment was still necessary in the case that the needs of war should demand it. Likewise, in an 1848 discussion of reform on the Navigation Laws, Benjamin Disraeli used the Nelson legend as the overarching symbol of British supremacy to support his argument. Suggesting the fervent

³⁴ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 1st ser., vol. 8 (1807), col. 670-1.

³⁵ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 1st ser., vol. 9 (1807), col. 918.

³⁶ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd ser., vol. 21 (1834), col. 1088

imperialism on which he would later build his Crystal Palace Speech of 1872, Disraeli named the navy “the arm of military power, which, in this country, has at the same time created empire and cherished liberty.” He pointed to English stability through the contemporary European revolutions, commenting that “amid the fall of thrones and the crash of empires around us... an Englishman must have remembered with pride... that our legions reposed upon the waters.” Thus using the patriotism of the navy and the spirit of Nelson that the fleet embodied, Disraeli vowed not to “incur the responsibility, by my vote, of endangering that empire, gained by so much valour, and guarded by so much vigilance—that empire broader than both the Americas, and richer than the farthest Ind—which was foreshadowed in its infancy by the genius of a Blake, and consecrated in its culminating glory by the blood of a Nelson—the empire of the seas.”³⁷

At the same time Nelson’s memory appeared to support international action, he appeared as a legendary spokesperson for the welfare of sailors and veterans, becoming an authority on how to properly honor the navy and promote its continued improvement. Naval supporters in the post-Napoleonic decades worried that the state did not do *enough* to honor the navy and its men. In February 1816, a letter-writer under the pseudonym of “Equal Protection” wrote to the editor of *The Times* expressing regret that officers who had been wounded in their days as midshipmen did not receive compensation for their injuries. Invoking Lord Nelson as a method to incite emotion from readers, the author explained why officers’ pensions should be augmented to account for damaged caused by earlier battles: “Suppose that the late Lord Nelson had lost his *eye* and his *arm* whilst serving as a midshipman... and that he had in consequence found himself compelled to apply to Parliament for redress; what sort of feeling, it may be asked, would the

³⁷ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd ser., vol. 99 (1848), col. 645-6.

appeal of the hero, in such a case, be likely to occasion? And if this practice continue, may not some *future* Nelson or Nelsons be placed in precisely this case?”³⁸

In addition to potential heroes, citizens were concerned for the ordinary sailors who faced unemployment after the war; equal to the “future Nelsons” and officer-heroes, the government ignored the plight of disbanded seamen. In a parliamentary assembly in January 1817, Lord Cochraine addressed petitions he had received on the subject of parliamentary reform; he acknowledged a public concern that among the masses agitating for tax reform, representation, and improved conditions for the poor, there were “starving sailors, who had fought the battles of their country under Lord Nelson, Lord St. Vincent, and others, who were now disbanded.”³⁹ The announcement caused a degree of commotion in the house, but the situation was viewed as simply the unfortunate effect of “profound peace.” While Parliament did not choose to support reform on the basis of starving sailors’ plight, the topic’s appearance in the assembly showed it to be a significant public issue: the navy had bravely defended its country, but received poor compensation in return.

While parliament originally ignored public opinion on veterans, the press demonstrated to the contrary that naval reverence had stirred public feeling towards its sailors, even in peacetime. In the early decades of Queen Victoria’s reign, although a French threat was safely out of mind, Lord Nelson and his surviving veterans continued to serve as a symbol of British prestige, supported by the press in glowing rhetoric as the saviors of the nation. Veterans were living relics, reminding those who saw or read about them how the navy transformed Britain from an island to a great seaborne nation. In April 1843, *The Illustrated London News* dedicated a number of pages to the naval pensioners living at Greenwich, explaining the excitement of

³⁸ *Times*, February 13, 1816.

³⁹ *Times*, January 30, 1817.

visitors who met veterans at the Greenwich Fair and heard the stories of their heroic pasts.⁴⁰ The navy continued to inspire the youth as it had in Nelson's day. Reportedly, young boys at the fair listened to the veterans' stories with fascination as they regarded the old men as "something far beyond Lord Nelson, who could have put Buonaparte into his pocket with the greatest ease." The following year the newspaper posted biographies of various Greenwich pensioners on the occasion of the fair, praising them as the human instruments through which "Nelson led the way" to Britain's growing imperial glory.⁴¹ The biographies showed Trafalgar as the moment that made empire possible, for it was "[Nelson's] conquests that first humbled, and then annihilated the naval power of France." Including many "hurrahs" and exclamations to the greatness of naval history, the newspaper called on readers to honor the navy, and in an accompanying poem, to "Sing for old England! The Land of the Free/ The Mistress of Nations, the Queen of the Sea!"

Concern for veterans remained poignant through the later part of the century, as those who had seen action at Trafalgar dwindled in numbers, and they became individual objects of interest in the press. As Roy Akins attests, "the deaths of these local heroes often merited a paragraph in the local newspaper," always emphasizing the deceased's connection with the immortal hero.⁴² In 1874, when the remaining Trafalgar veterans were considerably advanced in years, a poem entitled "Lord Nelson" appeared in print, written by a veteran sailor and published with a "biographical sketch" of the author's life. The Scottish poet John Johnston had served on the *Colossus* at Trafalgar, served through the wars, and after receiving his discharge in 1814 became a schoolteacher and agent to the temperance cause.⁴³ But despite his patriotic

⁴⁰ *Illustrated London News*, April 22, 1843.

⁴¹ *Illustrated London News*, April 13, 1844.

⁴² Roy Adkins, *Nelson's Trafalgar* (New York: Viking, 2004), 345.

⁴³ A. B. Todd. *Lord Nelson: A Poem by John Johnston, a Surviving Veteran of Trafalgar, With a Biographical Sketch of His Life* (London: Elliot Stock, 62, Paternoster Row, 1874), 7-9.

contributions and reportedly honorable actions in life, the biographical introduction to his poem revealed that after retirement his lack of a pension set him in financial distress. Using the old theme of Nelson's sailors as the defenders of the British island, newspapers moved to public action by printing letters written by A. B. Todd and asking for public subscription to help one of the "defenders of our much loved sea-girt isle!"⁴⁴ While the first round of letters in 1868 failed due to the intervention of Johnston's grandson, the second in 1871 pleaded "what a *disgrace* it is, that one who periled his life for his country in the most eventful crisis of her history, should, from no fault of his, be forced 'To join the poor, and eat the parish bread'" with a parish allowance of three shillings and six pence per week.⁴⁵ With its rhetoric of naval defense and connection to Nelson's heroism, the letter gave rise to "large and liberal donations" which came from "all parts of the three kingdoms," and succeeded in appealing to the admiralty to give Johnston a Greenwich pension of £27 7s per year.⁴⁶

In the decades following the Napoleonic Wars, the memory of the conflict shaped the way in which Britain viewed itself as a maritime nation. Through years of peace, Nelson's image shifted from that of a hero who had secured Britain's supremacy, to one whose memory needed to be maintained in order to maintain that supremacy. The navy and its sailors likewise, being no longer useful as merely the protectors of the island against invasion, became living relics of a heroic age, with Nelson as their patron saint. Although Britain was rarely called into outright war after 1815, Nelson's memory elevated the navy's popular image such that the nation felt that in any circumstance its sailors would always "do their duty." On the occasion of the Crimean War,

⁴⁴ Todd, 15.

⁴⁵ Todd, 14.

⁴⁶ Todd, 17.

Parliamentary debates expressed certainty that the navy was “manned by crews amongst whom the spirit of... Nelson yet survives.” England, in Earl Carnarvon’s words, was “rich enough to make a second race of heroes equal to the past,” and through the conflict in Crimea, British trade interests would be maintained.⁴⁷ Britain’s desire in the 1850s to connect its contemporary strength with the strength of the nation during the Napoleonic Wars was so strong that even in the army Lord Raglan occasionally misspoke and accidentally referred to the enemy as “the French,” a habit which N. Gash describes as “disconcerting rather than surprising.”⁴⁸ And when Britain engaged in an arms race with Russia in the 1880s, the *Penny Illustrated Paper and Illustrated Times* took the opportunity to publish a two-page image of sailors laying submarine mines, practicing gunnery, and launching torpedoes, while Nelson and his fleet appear in the sky to repeat the famous last signal Nelson gave at Trafalgar: “ENGLAND EXPECTS EVERY MAN TO DO HIS DUTY”⁴⁹ (fig. 5). Nelson became the voice of the navy, and the name called upon for naval reform, encouraging reverence for sailors and faith in maritime power. Through the century, the power of his name would expand into the realm of politics, symbolizing all ideals that Britain aimed to uphold in an era of change.

⁴⁷ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd ser., vol. 130 (1854), col. 7-17.

⁴⁸ N. Gash, “After Waterloo: British Society and the Legacy of the Napoleonic Wars.” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* vol. 28, no. 1 (1978): 146.

⁴⁹ *The Penny Illustrated Paper and Illustrated Times*, May 2, 1885.

CHAPTER 2

Nelson and the Victorian Mindset: A Voice From the Tomb

In 1853, a Fleet Street publisher produced an imagined dialogue between the ghosts of Lord Nelson and the Duke of Wellington, said to have been overheard by the publisher himself and offered for cheap sale to the London public. The dialogue, bearing the exciting title, *A Voice from the Tomb!*, appeared in forty-two eight-page parts. Unlike the full-length biographies and volumes of naval history offered for sale in Victorian newspapers, the dialogue was meant to appeal to a lower-income audience, selling for one penny per eight-page pamphlet. Using straightforward language, sarcasm, and a variety of (sometimes forced) naval puns, the dialogue aimed to amuse as well as inform. The topics discussed by the famous spirits could serve as a somewhat enlivened history lesson, addressing various points of popular interest. Readers discovered their national heroes exchanging stories about their careers, discussing the Napoleonic Wars and France's later revolutions, lamenting modern politics, and marveling at the technological advancements of the decades that separated their deaths.

A Voice From the Tomb! demonstrates the presence of Nelson literature in circles below the middle class of Britain. It also provides an example of the Nelson legend moving outside of a purely naval context. While the navy maintained its status as a national symbol in the nineteenth century, and Nelson's memory was never in danger of losing popularity, the international situation had changed by mid-century. In an era of "profound peace" the modern navy did not bring home glorious news as it had in Nelson's day, nor did it regularly produce new ideas of heroism. The navy was relatively static. With no hope of active service, sailors returned home in reduced circumstances to find ill-paying work, and officers grew old while retaining the ranks they had reached before 1815. Shortly before the Crimean War of 1853-6, the active list of

admirals contained one hundred elderly men, of whom only six had ranked below post-captain by Waterloo.¹ As Jon Horsfield has explained, “the qualities necessary for battle leadership – those associated with Nelson, Howe, Rodney, and St. Vincent - were not given opportunities to flourish among their successors, who never faced anything like an equal foreign naval challenge.”² In the modern context, the original Nelson was simply becoming outdated.

Nelson’s heroism, however, could be altered to fit the needs of a changing society. Through the British press and documents like *A Voice from the Tomb!* Nelson developed a legacy that was more complex than his role as a naval legend and the savior of the empire. He became a moral and ideological hero, or a standard by which to judge Victorian sentiments. New accounts presented him as the embodiment of traditional Britishness, representing patriotic zeal, masculinity, Christianity, paternalism, and the popular politics of the day. Being the symbol of a bygone era, Nelson’s legend also came to symbolize a “better” era, encouraging a return to values that Victorian society reportedly had lost.

The Political Legacy

During his lifetime, Nelson was not the most political of public figures. In his earlier days he supported William Pitt the Younger, and considered pursuing a parliamentary career as a follower of Pitt, but never saw politics as the best route to personal advancement. Even upon being raised to the peerage as a Lord and Viscount, his seat in the House of Lords never earned as much attention as his naval career.³ In a Victorian context, this fact did not matter, and the popular Nelson legend was flexible enough to be molded to a variety of political beliefs. The power of his name was more important than attention to the actual facts of his life. Employed as

¹ Gash, 148.

² Horsfield, 93.

³ Edgar Vincent, *Nelson: Love and Fame* (New Haven: Yale, 2003), 469.

an authority alongside Wellington in *A Voice From the Tomb!* Nelson appeared to be a supporter of mid-Victorian conservatism, regardless of his (or Wellington's) actual political philosophy.

Despite Nelson's alliance with William Pitt, a member of the Whig party, the author of *A Voice From the Tomb!* depicts him often agreeing with Wellington's defamation of the modern Whigs and labeling them as the source of all political corruption. As a piece of political propaganda, the dialogue aligns Nelson with the traditional values of the contemporary Tory party and its former Prime Minister Wellington. From a literal standpoint the piece depicts Nelson's modernization. As Wellington explains to him how politics have changed since the days of Trafalgar, Nelson becomes an ideological hero for a new age and agrees with the fictionalized Wellington's attacks on the opposition. Some are far-fetched claims, meant to stir readers into anger, that there are no limits to the corruption of men who will do anything "to take up their quarters in Downing-street... to hold the purse-strings of the nation and fix their teeth in the carcase [sic] of John Bull. The Whigs would bid as high as revolution for office."⁴ But other political comments mark legitimate concerns surrounding the loss of tradition. Nelson's ghost laments that Parliament has "struck its colors" to Catholics and Jews, allowing men of both faiths to sit at Westminster. "Can it be possible, Wellington" he asks, that "Moses and Solomon can exercise influence over the Queen's Minister; is the Rabbi to supersede his Grace of Canterbury? Have you still Bishops in the House of Lords? Will they consent to bring men into Parliament, who disbelieve the Christian Religion?"⁵ Wellington can only reply mournfully that the traditional England that Nelson had known has "undergone a perfect revolution" since his death.

⁴ *A Voice From the Tomb! First Part* (London: M. Pattie, 1853), 6.

⁵ *A Voice From the Tomb! Third Part*, 2.

The greatness of Britain was at stake, the heroes claimed, for as the character of Nelson exclaimed, England had always been “so great, because she was so Protestant.”⁶

Despite the utility of Nelson as a figure of traditional conservative propaganda, his universal popularity also had the ability to place him on the side of the opposition. His versatility was demonstrated in an 1837 edition of *The Times*, when the newspaper remarked with mixed emotions in regards to the General Elections, politicians in Nelson’s home district of Norfolk especially were prone to use “the name of Lord Nelson... to grace the claims and pretensions of either party.”⁷ When Nelson’s legacy reached the houses of Parliament, he was not always a symbol of tradition; his name appeared in discussing the rights of patriotic veterans, and even came out in defense of Catholics who had served in the wars against France. Although in 1853 *A Voice From the Tomb!* portrayed Nelson as the spokesperson for an author who was still bitter about Catholic Emancipation, Nelson appeared as a figure of support when the issue was fresh in the 1820s. In 1821, one member of Parliament raised the supportive argument that while “a Roman Catholic officer [might] have commanded under Nelson at Trafalgar, or under Wellington at Waterloo: his Protestant leaders and companions are ennobled, and take their seats in the House of Peers, but the Catholic, even though that Catholic were the first in his rank in the kingdom—even though already in the rank of the peerage, must be turned back from the door of that House, into which, if a Protestant, his valour and his services would have opened the way.”⁸ This opinion, though voiced by the Tory George Canning who opposed other measures of reform, was far from traditional and drew on the idea that patriotism and service could outweigh religious difference. Britain might have valued traditional Protestantism, but the nation also

⁶ *A Voice From the Tomb! Third Part*, 7.

⁷ *Times*, August 5, 1837.

⁸ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 2nd ser., vol. 4 (1821), col. 1462.

valued Nelson and his officers; and in Canning's opinion, national value was of greater importance than personal religion.

Nelson's mid-Victorian image demonstrated the changing situation in Tory politics. In "The Fall of Wellington's Government," Carlos Flick describes the mid-Victorian Tory party as having split during Wellington's time in office: "the small liberal wing of the Tories, the Canningites, had left the party in 1828 after a series of disagreements with Wellington... [and] the opposite wing, the ultra-Tories, had broken with the prime minister and Sir Robert Peel over the granting of Catholic emancipation."⁹ Assuming a new status as a political symbol, however, Nelson was able to support all factions of the party. *A Voice From the Tomb!* demonstrates this flexibility most clearly: in the third and fourth parts of the dialogue, Nelson's ghost asks numerous questions about modern politics, playing the part of the reader who must be educated as to the modern political situation. He asks what the reform bills have done for England, what the Corn Laws were, and who the Peel Party are.¹⁰ Although having previously sympathized with Wellington for having to endure Catholic emancipation and the acceptance of Jewish members of Parliament, Nelson's character decides that other aspects of reform are beneficial on moral grounds, even if Wellington had been "forced" to accept them. Wellington explains that the "old Tory party" might never forgive him and Peel for having repealed the Corn Laws, but Nelson praises him for having made the right decision. "No wonder the people sing out for Reform," he tells Wellington; "whatever is taxed, for heaven's sake don't tax the bread of the poor; this Sir

⁹ Carlos Flick, "The Fall of Wellington's Government," *Journal of Modern History* 37, no. 1 (1965), 62.

¹⁰ *A Voice From the Tomb! Third Part*, 8.

Robert Peel must have had great courage to have proposed the Repeal against such powerful opponents.”¹¹

Lord Nelson in the dialogue had personal reasons to support poor relief, and made a convenient link to the more unconventional movements of the Tory government. Nelson’s daughter Horatia had fallen into financial difficulty, and though Nelson’s will had requested that the state provide for her as his “legacy,” the government ignored her because she was the illegitimate daughter of Lady Hamilton. While Horatia in reality never fell into deep poverty, and in fact had married a Norfolk curate, the dialogue used her as convenient propaganda, implying that she was at risk of sharing her mother’s fate as an imprisoned debtor. While in life Nelson stood for duty and served in battle where “every man proved himself a hero,” his character laments that his country failed to do its duty after his death, “turn[ing] round upon [him]” and failing to look out for his daughter in need.¹² Horatia’s case was not unknown to British readers; newspapers were equally vocal, printing opinions that “this last request of him who died for his country –one of her “greatest sons,” by side of whose remains, as the most fitting resting-place, have been deposited those of the great Duke [Wellington] – should be duly respected,”¹³ and that Horatia ought to live to see “the tardy recognition of her father’s services.”¹⁴ From discussing the stirring tale of Horatia, Nelson and Wellington turn to discussing the situation of Britain’s extremely poor; the subject appears repeatedly throughout the forty-three parts, as the subject often turns political. In the eleventh part, the heroes solidify their political standings as clearly as possible, condemning the Whigs as “scoundrels,” who are “hollow, selfish, and void of all pity for the poor; they made use of the people as a ladder to help them to power by fine speeches and

¹¹ *A Voice From the Tomb! Fourth Part*, 1.

¹² *A Voice From the Tomb! First Part*, 2.

¹³ *Times*, December 3, 1852

¹⁴ *Illustrated London News*, November 11, 1854.

promises... but when they found themselves seated in Downing street, they became the most heartless oppressors.”¹⁵ Being the voice of a supposedly traditional British sense of duty and morality, Nelson suggested that the government was not fulfilling its purpose if it did not provide for the daughter of a hero, and certainly if it did not provide for the poor among its subjects. In this, Tory politics fit the mold for the most patriotic and Nelson-backed stance; while Whigs and liberal ideas of self-help were simply not enough.

The usefulness of Nelson’s name in reform was not limited to the public press, and also appeared in parliamentary debates. In the issue of Parliamentary Reform, he symbolized the morality of justice and the rights of Englishmen. A *Times* advertisement from as early as 1809, four years after his death, proclaimed that “This day is published, price 2s. 6d. AN ADDRESS to the PEOPLE of ENGLAND, on the absolute necessity for REFORM in PARLIAMENT. To which is annexed complete Copies of the Magna Charta and Bill of Rights, with explanatory Notes. By a True Friend of the Constitution, and nothing but the Constitution.”¹⁶ To strengthen his point, the author of the advertisement added Nelson’s famous last signal at Trafalgar, “England expects every man to do his duty,” citing the hero’s name and suggesting that the consideration of reform was the duty of “every Englishman who loves his Constitution and his Country.” Although not immediately effective, pro-reform members of the House of Commons raised Nelson’s ghost in 1817, when reform riots drew attention to the fact that the nation’s poor included the hero’s disbanded sailors, who had fought bravely for their country but nonetheless found themselves living in desperate circumstances after the wars.¹⁷

¹⁵ *A Voice From the Tomb! Eleventh Part*, 8.

¹⁶ *Times*, May 8, 1809.

¹⁷ *Times*, January 30, 1817.

His name appeared again in 1843, in the debate surrounding the New Poor Law, when Commons member John Walter criticized “all that has been printed at the expense of this deluded country in support of this detested measure by its prime agents.”¹⁸ The Poor Law, which banned outdoor relief and mandated that the poor could not receive assistance except inside a workhouse, was intended to be a liberal measure of self-help; but Walter believed it to only have increased suffering. “You are erecting a Nelson monument of vast altitude. You may almost erect a Poor-law monument of equal height, though of more corruptible materials, of the reports of [the law’s] commissioners,” he told his peers, drawing attention to the irony of a government that supported such a display of patriotism as a monument to a national hero, but also spent incredible effort and expense on a law that was a detriment to so many of the nation’s people.¹⁹ In both instances, Lord Nelson was a figure of patriotism, contrasted against a government that was not seen as properly conducting its patriotic duty.

As the century progressed, Nelson’s memory continued to serve as a symbol of poor relief and social action. In 1905, on the centennial celebration of Trafalgar, a sermon entitled “Nelson a Flaming Fire” and given at Saint Paul’s Cathedral called its audience to support various social measures, and to back them with the same spirit that they believed Nelson to have possessed. In this early Edwardian context, Nelson’s legacy was a type of personal character, which was not specifically described but summarized as a patriotic zeal that Britain needed to recover. The sermon called for Nelson to be an inspiration for social politics: “as a people,” it imagined that all of Britain “should set our faces against lust, gambling, drink, dishonesty in trade, recklessness in finance, the growth of pauperism, declension in our birth-rate, the poverty and squalor of our towns and villages. We need to face all these things with something of the

¹⁸ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd ser., vol. 66 (1843), col. 1160.

¹⁹ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd ser., vol. 66 (1843), col. 1160.

spirit with which Nelson faced the fleet when it came before him.”²⁰ Still mentioning the nation’s duty to the poor but including other areas of social need, “Nelson a Flaming Fire” signaled a change in early twentieth-century politics and the movement towards the new Edwardian liberalism, which cast aside self-help, built on the older style of the opposing party and encouraged direct action in social progress. The sermon encouraged listeners (and later readers) to support that direct action, nothing that “it is not the opportunities of serving England in its poor that are wanting; it is the readiness to welcome and use them.”²¹ Britain, it concluded, had the resources to take on social reform, but only needed enthusiasm in the government and the public to move it forward. Providing inspiration, Nelson filled the rhetorical need as a symbol of old-style patriotism and a national sense of duty.

A Christian Hero

When “Nelson a Flaming Fire” called the early Edwardian nation to social action, it did so with a call to patriotism, but also with appeals to traditional English Protestantism. Although to be expected in a religious service given on the centennial of his death, Nelson’s Christian legacy was not limited to that day; over the hundred years following his death, he came to be remembered as not only a moral hero but a Christian one, the son of a Norfolk clergyman who penned a much-reprinted prayer before his death at Trafalgar, and included among his last words the phrase, “God and my country.” As a figure of tradition, Nelson’s memory promoted reverent Christianity as a British trait worthy of imitation. As C.I. Hamilton explains, the idea of a Christian hero was not unique to Nelson; in the middle of the nineteenth century, it was common among naval figures, and in biographies “the good officer was both a gentleman and an obvious

²⁰ *Nelson a Flaming Fire* (London: S. W. Partridge & Co, 1905), 12.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

Christian, although by then the single word ‘gentleman’ could serve to include both.”²² The moral characteristics of a Christian hero could make him accessible. As Hamilton explains, while naval technology and tactics changed, the characteristics that created a hero did not, and biographies throughout the nineteenth century focused on personal characteristics that made an officer worthy of commemoration. As the most well-known, Nelson was perhaps the most useful, and his memory could promote Christianity in a time when religion was threatened by society’s progress.

In one respect, Nelson’s legacy as a Christian had the ability to influence his role in politics, appearing in *A Voice From the Tomb!* as a traditional Protestant opposed to Catholic emancipation. However, his Christianity served more often to justify Britain’s international role in the nineteenth century. This outlook is reminiscent of the fictional Nelson’s line declaring, “I believe England was so great because she was so greatly Protestant.”²³ In “Nelson a Flaming Fire,” Nelson appears as his country’s servant who fought his battles with the knowledge that God wished Britain to prevail. In saying, “God and my country!” and, “Thank God, I have done my duty!” he set an example that later Britons might be expected to follow. In calling audiences to their national and international duty as patriotic citizens, the sermon asks listeners if England is truly yet in the state God intended it to be. There is still work to be done, it concludes, and “God and our country still want, still ask for, this service of zeal.”²⁴

The image of Nelson’s Christianity appeared as a tool of empire, in which English men should stand “for purity, temperance, self-control, honour of trade, the faith and fear of God.”²⁵

²² C.I Hamilton, “Naval Hagiography and the Victorian Hero,” *The Historical Journal* 23, no. 2 (1980), 386.

²³ *A Voice From the Tomb! Third Part*, 7.

²⁴ *Nelson a Flaming Fire*, 8.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

“Nelson a Flaming Fire” uses the hero’s all-encompassing spirit as a promotion of Britain’s imperial right; by emulating his spirit, Britain would become “a race fitted for empire by character, a race with the fire of zeal within it, not chiefly to extend its dominions, but rather to sink deep its foundations in the truth and honour of God.” Reminding listeners and later readers of Nelson’s sentiment that “England expects that every man will do his duty,” the sermon emphasizes an imperial duty, and invites its audience to embrace British morals and promote them with the same zeal with which Nelson commanded Trafalgar. Trafalgar had given Britain command of the sea and made empire possible, but empire “is now a heavy, though inspiring load of privilege and responsibility.”²⁶ “We are proud of our Empire!” the sermon declares, but “do we really as a people set over it some clear light of a high and noble ideal? ... The Navy which we need for the defence of our Empire is a Navy of seafaring men who remember that into every port they bring the honour of their country, and an example which either hurts or helps the life of *other races*.”²⁷ In this appeal Nelson’s legacy becomes one of paternalism and service to “other races”, and since Trafalgar had made the ocean safe for Britain’s empire, honoring Nelson became connected with spreading British values and Christianity across the globe. This rhetoric was not new in 1905; in 1853 Joseph Allen’s *Life of Lord Nelson* spoke of the Christian spirit in nearly the same terms. He included a quote from Clarke and M’Arthur’s 1810 biography, seemingly still relevant enough to add without being dated 43 years later, which described Nelson’s character as “consummated by his uniform sense of the blessed tenets of

²⁶ *Nelson a Flaming Fire*, 10.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 10-11

Christianity...Let posterity consecrate his memory by emulating the perfection of his public character and the disinterested zeal of his conduct.”²⁸

Though not necessarily imperial, a poem written by a Trafalgar veteran also served to strengthen Britain’s international image through the Christian memory of Nelson. The short epic, “Lord Nelson,” was written by John Johnston shortly after the Napoleonic Wars but not published until 1873. In two cantos, the first describing the Battle of the Nile and the second recounting Trafalgar, Johnston uses Nelson to symbolize the British navy as a Protestant force afloat upon a sea surrounded by enemies of all other religions. Using the style and exotic imagery of a Greek epic, Johnston paints Nelson’s navy as a heroic group sailing among many “heathen” groups: first, the Ottoman empire where “wretched natives, never lift their eyes,/ To that great Being who their want supplies; ... Within thy realms are Christians held in chains,/ Whilst savage cruelty o’erspreads thy plains.”²⁹ Johnston does not specifically say that British imperialism will spread Christianity to that region, but after describing the Battle of the Nile bids “Adieu, till freedom basks upon thy shore,/ And furious tyrants rule thy realms no more!”³⁰ Britain, symbolized by Nelson’s navy, appears as a civilized nation that towers above others. Even in Europe Britain’s standing is best due to its Protestantism, compared with Spain where “Popish delusions and traditions mark/ Thy natives, sunk in superstitious dark,”³¹ and Naples where “their free-born spirit has been broke - / They bow beneath the Roman Pontiff’s yoke; / That man of sin, who held the world in chains, / Now sways the scepter o’er these dark

²⁸ Joseph Allen, *Life of Lord Viscount Nelson, K.B: Duke of Bronté &c* (London: George Routledge and Co., 1853), 246.

²⁹ A. B. Todd, *Lord Nelson: A Poem by John Johnston, a Surviving Veteran of Trafalgar, With a Biographical Sketch of his Life* (London: Elliot Stock, 1874), 26.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

domains.”³² Through these descriptions, Johnston gives the impression that Britain could be a civilizing and Christianizing power, with Lord Nelson symbolizing the high status Britain held over all nations within the reach of its navy.

The 1905 description of Nelson as a “soldier-saint” is perhaps the best description of his Victorian development as a moral hero.³³ True to C. I. Hamilton’s description of a Victorian hero’s hagiography, the biographical memory of Nelson, whether written or orally communicated, spoke to both his military virtues and his (sometimes exaggerated) virtues as the ideal Briton. Encompassing symbols of tradition, patriotism, and Christianity, Victorian hero-worship turned Nelson into something more than human, described in the centennial sermon as “the Nelson who lives... His Name, the essential spirit of the man, what he was at his best.”³⁴ Whether the beliefs attributed to Nelson in works of literature or propaganda were true, they served to demonstrate the versatility of a hero who grew beyond the status of a man to that of a legendary figure. In politics, religion, or character, Nelson’s Victorian incarnation depended less on what history said about him than on the issues that Victorian society needed a public hero to support.

The ideals Nelson’s Victorian image espoused expressed a nostalgia for an imagined better time that had existed in Nelson’s day: an era where men had been more devoutly Christian, when politics had been less corrupt, or when either conservatism or liberalism (depending on the politics of the one using Nelson as a voice of support) had done better for the nation’s poor. The usefulness of his naval legacy was somewhat overshadowed for a time when

³² Ibid., 28.

³³ *Nelson a Flaming Fire*, 2.

³⁴ Ibid., 3-4.

Europe was at peace, but it did not lose its power when the time came for it to be invoked once again. With the idea of nostalgia and an old-fashioned British spirit, the naval competition of the late nineteenth century called Nelson's spirit back to its place as a reminder of maritime supremacy, and helped draw attention to the modern fleet.

CHAPTER 3

“For Nelson’s Sake”: Nostalgia and Naval Reverence at the Close of the Victorian Age

On October 28, 1905 *The Illustrated London News* advertised “Interesting Nelson Relics” for sale at Warring and Gillow’s Oxford Street Galleries. For unspecified prices, patrons could consult the prestigious furniture company on a new collection of historical reproductions made from the timbers of the wrecked HMS *Foudroyant*, once the flagship of the famous Admiral Lord Nelson. The manufacture of *Foudroyant* relics afforded readers the singular opportunity to own a model of the ship itself, a table “in exact imitation” of one that Nelson kept in his cabin aboard the HMS *Victory*, or one of several other creations built from materials that a century earlier “had so often been brought into personal contact with the great Nelson himself”¹ (fig. 6). For those who could not afford costly new furniture, Warring and Gillow exhibited the pieces in their antique galleries on Oxford Street for public viewing, in time for Trafalgar Day and what the advertisement promoted as “Nelson’s week.”

By the time *The Illustrated London News* published the unusual advertisement, the British reading public was aware of the *Foudroyant*’s strange history. She had been sold by the Admiralty to a German shipbreaking firm in September 1892, hastily bought back at the call of an outraged British public, passed through the hands of several private companies to be refitted for public viewing, and ultimately destroyed in 1897, driven ashore in a storm. Britain loved her for her past: she was Lord Nelson’s flagship in 1799, soon after she was commissioned, taking the place of the *Vanguard* from which Nelson had commanded the battle of the Nile.² Under Nelson’s flag she helped to restore the Kingdom of Naples, a British ally, after a short-lived

¹ *The Illustrated London News*, October 28, 1905.

² Vincent, 321.

Jacobin revolution in 1799³, and later participated in the Blockade of Malta where she took as prizes both the *Généreux* and the *Guillaume Tell*, the last surviving French ships from the Nile⁴.

When the 1892 newspapers announced the initial sale of the *Foudroyant*, the public launched widespread relief efforts to save this relic of a glorious past that the Admiralty had betrayed. In order to raise money and clear away obsolete ships, the Admiralty had sold the *Foudroyant* and she had gone to Germany to be broken up for materials. The press exploded in outrage, printing articles, engravings, poetry, and numerous letters calling for the ship to be brought back to England before she was destroyed. Rarely had the fate of a ship caused such a commotion or prompted such a relief effort at the hands of the public; but the *Foudroyant* was a special case, touted as a national symbol for having been once connected with England's greatest naval hero. Apart from the *Victory* she was the only extant ship that Nelson had commanded, and despite her outdated frame was to British eyes a symbol of the greatness of their Royal Navy. Jon Horsfield's argument that the 19th century navy "lived off the reputation of battles long ago"⁵ echoes fittingly for this case. But while Horsfield argues that the Royal Navy was responsible for its own history-based reputation, and the public "appeared to take it at its own inflated self-assessment,"⁶ the case of the *Foudroyant* demonstrates that the public played its own part.

The *Foudroyant* affair took place in a time of changing technology, when naval exhibitions caused people to marvel at the power of steam and iron, but also to feel nostalgic for the more beautiful Age of Sail and the romanticized battles that occurred before the relative peace of the Victorian age. The press's emotional outcry indicates that the navy remained a popular public icon, but faith in the navy's greatness relied on memories of Lord Nelson and

³ Coleman, 195.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 227.

⁵ Horsfield, 96.

⁶ *Ibid.*

historical victories. Reverence for naval history made the *Foudroyant* a more emotional issue than the Admiralty had anticipated. By appealing to the memory of Nelson and the “wooden walls of England,” public defense of the *Foudroyant* shows how the British public at the end of the 19th century still viewed the navy through the lens of its celebrated past, even in the face of steam and change.

The *Foudroyant* and Public Naval Reverence

The *Foudroyant* affair of the 1890s occurred during a new era of public interest in the navy. Driven by the imperial competition of the late Victorian era, the Royal Navy sought to increase national feeling through grand celebrations. Encouraged by the Queen’s Jubilee Naval Reviews in 1887 and 1897, and by an 1891 Naval Exhibition, admiration for the navy’s history and modern prowess became an institutionalized affair. The admiralty was aware that naval appreciation could boost nationalism; as First Lord of the Admiralty at the turn of the century, John Fisher wrote that “the Empire floats on the Royal Navy”⁷. In 1891 First Lord George Hamilton felt the same way, expressing confidence that the exhibition would be a “great success and [increase] the popularity of the Navy, and largely [add] to the funds of the excellent charities associated with the service.”⁸ Visitors flocked to celebrate the Royal Navy; *The Times* from May to August 1891 recorded thousands of individuals visiting the Royal Naval Exhibition each week. Newspapers published histories of steam power, anecdotes from naval history, announcements for newly launched armored ships, and an array of illustrated descriptions of the vessels at both the 1887 Naval Review and the 1891 Exhibition.

⁷ Jan Rüger, “Nation, Empire, and Navy: Identity Politics in the United Kingdom 1887-1914,” *Past and Present*, no.185 (November, 2004):162, <http://jstor.org>.

⁸ *Times*, February 6, 1891.

The revolution in naval popularity occurred with such force, and permeated the press to such an extent that subsequent generations easily assumed that modern steamships and technology had always drawn a great degree of interest. Writing from 1940, Arthur J. Marder noted that such an assumption was a popular misconception, arguing that “the public began to take an intelligent interest in the fleet” only in the face of imperial naval competition in the 1880s.⁹ Marder cited the 1891 exhibition as a turning point, through which the Royal Navy helped spark enthusiasm and employed tactics to increase public appreciation for modern technology. Truly, the exhibition strove to invoke confidence in the modern navy and its matériel; visitors could detect the sentiment instantly from an inscription over the exhibition’s main entrance, which read, “IT IS ON THE NAVY, UNDER THE GOOD PROVIDENCE OF GOD, THAT OUR WEALTH, PROSPERITY, AND PEACE DEPEND.”¹⁰ However, technology and materiel were not the only attractions at the exhibition. The Royal Naval Exhibition catered to another topic that was certain to draw spectators: the memory of Lord Nelson.

The Lord Nelson legend had not lost luster during the 19th century. As David Cannadine has noted, Nelson’s life contained many facets – personal, professional, moral, and even mythical – and there was a version of “Nelson to suit every taste.” National fascination with his “immortal memory” was “perpetuated in countless biographies, in shrines and relics and statues and rituals, in the Trafalgar Day toast, in Trafalgar Square itself, and much more besides.”¹¹ Forms of remembrance abounded, but the exhibition’s method of displaying naval history and the Lord Nelson legend on a fantastic scale was a new type of commemoration. While the earlier Victorian press had produced no shortage of Nelson memorials and tributes to aging and

⁹ Marder, 45.

¹⁰ *Royal Naval Exhibition 1891: The Illustrated Handbook and Souvenir* (London: Pall Mall Gazette, 1891), 4, archive.org.

¹¹ Cannadine, 1.

deceased Trafalgar veterans¹², the British government and the Royal Navy itself had traditionally been detached from the propagation of nostalgic imagery. After planning Nelson's grand state funeral in 1806, the government had stepped back. Thus when the admiralty joined forces with the Prince of Wales and numerous members of Parliament to create the Royal Naval Exhibition – putting Nelson's life on display through artifacts, art, and re-created scenery, and using his memory to spark enthusiasm for the modern navy – Nelson-commemoration entered a realm of nationalized display that it had not occupied for nearly a century.

Through the first half of the 19th century popular enthusiasm for Lord Nelson far surpassed the level of interest the state had in him, and popular discontent surrounding the government's treatment of the Nelson's memory led to grassroots action. In 1854 subscribers of the Patriotic Fund petitioned the government on behalf of Nelson's daughter, Horatia, whose family received no inheritance and had always struggled financially. Although the world knew Horatia as Nelson's illegitimate daughter by an affair with Emma, Lady Hamilton, the petitioners believed that her ancestry was more important than the scandal, and that Horatia and her daughters ought to receive aid in "recognition of her father's services".¹³ Similarly, the Harrison Fund in 1860 begged subscribers to "open your purses and sympathies" to help complete the monument in Trafalgar Square¹⁴. Distress in the government's lack of initiative was so great that by Trafalgar Day 1859 *The Illustrated London News* lamented that "Those who visit Charing-cross may notice an incomplete monument to the hero of Trafalgar. Perhaps [t]he best way to keep a great man's fame in the memory of his countrymen is continuously to neglect doing justice to him, and thereby [sic] to cause a continuous protest from the pens of those who

¹² Adkins, *Nelson's Trafalgar*, 345.

¹³ *Illustrated London News*, November 11, 1854.

¹⁴ *Illustrated London News*, February 04, 1860.

command the attention of the people.”¹⁵ Government and administration may have been slow to respond, but by the end of the century the Royal Navy seemed to be aware that Nelson-worship was a public fact, and that the navy could use nostalgia to its advantage. Displays of historic ships and models, along with extensive exhibitions of Nelson relics, became an integral part of public understanding of the navy. Thus, when the Admiralty announced in 1892 that they had made the decision to sell the *Foudroyant*, the Admiralty appeared to have committed an act of shocking regression. In disregarding the importance of a ship that Nelson had commanded, the Admiralty’s decision mirrored previous decades when powerful officials failed to do sufficient justice to the people’s hero.

Through the Royal Naval Exhibition, which opened at Chelsea in May 1891 and lasted through August, British audiences became accustomed to seeing history preserved and Nelson relics being put on display. The entrance fee was one shilling, with extra costs for special exhibits, and trams and omnibuses scheduled routes specifically to make the exhibition easily accessible.¹⁶ Interested parties, whether having visited the exhibition or not, could easily follow the goings-on through newspapers, or through official exhibition catalogues. The exhibition included all naval topics about which a visitor might have been curious, from naval art and artifacts, to galleries of modern weaponry and shipbuilding techniques. Sailors performed gunnery demonstrations, and divers showcased their skills and equipment in a viewable diving tank. Model ships displayed the history of naval architecture from the 17th century through the 19th, while mechanized models performed small-scale naval actions for the onlookers. However, the exhibition gave a disproportionate amount of attention to Lord Nelson as well. Visitors could explore a life-size and historically faithful reproduction of the *Victory*, peruse an enormous

¹⁵ *Illustrated London News*, October 22, 1859

¹⁶ *Illustrated Handbook and Souvenir*, 64.

collection of relics supposedly (and sometimes dubiously) connected with Nelson, or, for six pence extra, view a panorama of Trafalgar.¹⁷ Such a tribute to one of Britain's most famous heroes may have been expected from an event that aimed to appeal to popular opinion, and indeed an account preceding the exhibition's opening credited the Prince of Wales as saying, "though our Navy is popular... anything to make it still more popular is our bounden duty."¹⁸ However, the Nelson exhibits may have stolen attention from the modern navy.

Despite achieving the goal of appealing to popularity, the admiralty unintentionally encouraged a love of the past. In planning the exhibition the Prince of Wales was aware of how much Nelson contributed to the people's admiration for the navy, saying that the "attractions of the exhibition would be very largely increased" by the life-size Victory model and Trafalgar panorama.¹⁹ But instead of being simply added attractions, the Nelson exhibits became some of the most popular. In due course, *The Times* announced that "among the relics there are none to which the visitor more eagerly turns than those which are alleged to be connected with the career of Lord Nelson,"²⁰ from furniture and personal effects to the bullet that ended his career, and that "there is probably no part of the Exhibition more generally attractive than the life-size Victory."²¹

The inclusion of Nelson-era ships alongside modern technology created a sense of nostalgia for the age of sail at the exhibition. Although the newspapers admitted that the exhibition's models of armored ships were "striking" and called attention to Britain's "armed strength", it appeared that the contrast between past and present caused a sort of aesthetic shock.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ *Times*, February 6, 1891.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ *Times* May 22, 1891.

²¹ *Times* June 20, 1891.

Visitors felt a sense of regret that the navy had lost the beauty that sail had possessed in Nelson's day. "The two large and handsome models of the Queen and Vanguard, the latter under full sail," *The Times* lamented, "indicate clearly enough how the pride of the seaman in his skill in handling a ship has been abased."²² The nostalgia for sail engendered an enthusiasm for protecting old ships, and preserving what was left of Lord Nelson's career. A rather prophetic article about the history of shipbuilding in *The London Illustrated News* spoke of preservation, mentioning the "wooden walls era" and the *Victory*, "Lord Nelson's flag-ship at Trafalgar, built in 1765, and still afloat; may she long remain so! – he should be a bold man who dares propose to break her up."²³ The article's sentiment could well have been transferred onto the *Foudroyant* a year later, for the Admiralty's decision to sell her was a bold one in the face of what administration clearly knew well in planning the exhibition – the fact that Lord Nelson played a significant role in the public's naval pride.

The *Foudroyant* in the Press

When the Admiralty unintentionally thrust the *Foudroyant* into public limelight, it was as though Britain had found yet another Nelson relic, such as the ones they had seen at the 1891 Royal Naval Exhibition. The *Foudroyant* did not factor into the newspapers before 1892, as the navy had used her as a training ship²⁴ and she was not publicly visible or as conventionally famous as the *Victory*. But when she appeared on the scene, the press became the main outlet for her defense, as papers jumped on her story with all of the enthusiasm due a newly recovered artifact. *The Times* overflowed with letters to the editor concerning the scandal of the sale, and commenting on the history of the ship. September was wrought with emotion to the point that

²² Ibid.

²³ *Illustrated London News*, June 13, 1891.

²⁴ W. P. Gosset, *The Lost Ships of the Royal Navy 1793-1900* (London: Mansell Publishing, 1986), 125.

several letters appeared every week, often being published in groups in each issue. Other papers chimed in by publishing letters, historical anecdotes, poetry, and stirring illustrations, as well as historical documents related specifically to the *Foudroyant* and Nelson. One reader succinctly described the situation when he addressed *The Times* with enthusiasm about how “national concern anent [sic] the Foudroyant is still kept alive in your columns.”²⁵ The press was instrumental in saving the ship, being able to receive public sentiment and broadcast it back out in mass print.

In petitioning to bring back the *Foudroyant*, hopeful saviors turned to the old tactic of the public subscription. Although the urgency of the situation prevented the formation of a formal association, letters in *The Times* began immediately asking if there would be “no one enterprising (not to say patriotic) enough to buy the old ship.”²⁶ George Wheatly Cobb wrote the first letter on September 2, detailing a powerful correspondence he had conducted with the Admiralty. Employing arguments about the ship’s connection with Nelson and trying personally to reverse her sale, Cobb found only that the Admiralty countered his arguments with appeals to progress and the cold response that “In view... of the exigencies of our largely increased modern fleet... my Lords regret that they are compelled to dispose of this and other old ships which from historical associations it would have been interesting to preserve.”²⁷ The sale of the *Foudroyant* did not occur in a vacuum: in April 1893 the Civic Lord of the Admiralty reported that the navy had twenty “obsolete vessels” in 1892 and to the current date.²⁸ Removing obsolete vessels was part of a pressing desire for technological advancement; parliament’s discussion of the Navy Estimates for 1891-1892 reveals a great concern for men being trained on antiquated vessels with

²⁵ *Times*, September 26, 1892.

²⁶ *Times*, September 2, 1892 .

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 4th ser., vol. 11 (1893), col. 437.

obsolete gunnery, and for the necessity of building more modern vessels for imperial defense.²⁹ But Cobb took the initiative to stir the readers of *The Times* to support him and to raise funds for the *Foudroyant*, in spite of contemporary needs for modernism. He lamented that the ship, at the time sitting at Swinemünde on the Baltic, was “to be broken up and used, I presume to light German fires,”³⁰ thus creating a shocking image writers quickly seized.

Following Cobb’s letter, other correspondents believed that public funds would be the source of recovery, and Britain could waste no time in saving the *Foudroyant*. Inspired gentlemen immediately wrote replies, and on September 5 G. R. Dannel stated that it was “useless to expect anything can be done by State aid. Before the money could be secured the last of the *Foudroyant* would have smouldered out on a German hearth.”³¹ The public, however, could be counted on if time would allow, and if a person with enough public influence appeared on the scene to be the collector of subscriptions. Another very optimistic correspondent wrote on the subject of public subscriptions:

“I think that every Englishman owes a debt of gratitude to Mr. G. W. Cobb in drawing attention to the sale of Nelson’s old ship, the *Foudroyant*.

Surely it would not take many days to collect one shilling from 150,000 Englishman to save one of the grand old wooden walls from destruction.

I have sent one shilling per head of my family and servants to Mr. Cobb. May I ask through your columns all yachtsmen, all lovers of the sea, and all British schoolboys to send their shilling? The old ship might well be granted a “snug harbour” off Somerset-house.” Your obedient servant,

R. NORTHALL-LAURIE (R.H.Y.C.)

Mr. Northhall-Laurie was clearly a man of some income, but his faith in public feeling for Nelson and the historical navy was such that he was sure that anyone with a spare shilling

²⁹ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd ser., vol. 354 (1891), cols. 661-709.

³⁰ *Times*, September 2, 1892.

³¹ *Times*, September 5, 1892.

would be willing to part with it for the *Foudroyant*. Other authors cited the public turnout to the 1891 Naval Exhibition, and how “money poured in” to prove that “interest in naval history is a living thing.”³² Calls for donations from the public continued through the month of September, until the Lord Mayor of London stepped up to collect the subscriptions, and generous payments from a few private individuals brought the *Foudroyant* back to England. In the end, the lack of time prompted J. R. Cobb (George Wheatly Cobb’s father) and an associate to pay £6,000 for the ship’s return on their own, but the immediacy with which people placed faith in public subscriptions gives a sense that the love of naval history was an effective rallying point. While the Admiralty may have refused to acknowledge that naval pride depended on history, the press made history’s importance clear.

The *Foudroyant*’s defenders did, of course, encounter certain matters of controversy when arguing against the Admiralty. Writers faced the difficult fact that the period during which Lord Nelson commanded the *Foudroyant* in the Mediterranean was the same period in which he began his famous affair with Emma, Lady Hamilton. Although Nelson’s Mediterranean career was not among his famous actions, Lady Hamilton was a name that all could recognize. Her influence over the royal court at Naples was crucial in securing supplies for Nelson’s men after the Nile, but her role as Nelson’s mistress made her memory abhorrent to Victorian ideals. The Victorian press often dismissed her, calling her a stain on Nelson’s career and painting her as a seductress. The Admiralty attempted to use morality as an attempt to make the *Foudroyant* forgettable: Admiral Erasmus Ommaney lamented that Lady Hamilton had “infatuated our hero,” and her “influence over the weak features of Nelson unfortunately prevailed.”³³ In September 1892 William Laird Clowes, a journalist specializing in the Royal Navy, commented on her

³² Ibid.

³³ *Times*, September 29, 1892.

history as “that period of Nelson’s life which his country wishes to forget,” and urged readers to not take their attention away from other Napoleonic ships such as the *Implacable*, which had been a French prize.³⁴ September 29 brought a few more discouraging letters to light, mostly from current Admirals of the navy, including Ommaney’s letter begging the public to see that it was “far better to let the *Foudroyant* be broken up” than let her “record the only dark spot on the renown of the greatest of our naval heroes.”³⁵

However, while Admirals and others connected with the navy wished to move on, the majority of the *Foudroyant*’s defenders accepted the reality of Lady Hamilton. Poet and naval admirer Henry Newbolt countered Laird Clowes and Ommaney, with the declaration that “there is no period of Nelson’s public life which his country should desire to forget: it is time that we should know, hold fast, and spread the truth,” and that slander should “cease to come before us endorsed with the signatures of Naval historians and British Admirals.”³⁶ Even the most grudging writers admitted that the connection to Nelson could overcome any stain related to Lady Hamilton, and the *Saturday Review* concluded that “one would rather – if the chance were given us – preserve the *Agamemnon*, or the *Captain*, or the *Vanguard* for the Nile, or the *Elephant* for Copenhagen. But, after all, NELSON did walk this *Foudroyant*’s deck, and it is a scandal that a ship which has formed part and parcel of the history of England should go to make fires for Germans.”³⁷ Even if the *Foudroyant* invoked memories of Lady Hamilton, and did not participate in a fantastic battle such as the Nile or Copenhagen, she at least played a part in recapturing Malta for the British and expelling the French from Naples.³⁸ It was Nelson himself,

³⁴ *Times*, September 26, 1892.

³⁵ *Times*, September 29, 1892.

³⁶ *Times*, October 6, 1892.

³⁷ *The Saturday Review*, September 17, 1892.

³⁸ *The Times*, October 6, 1892.

after all, that made the *Foudroyant* worth preserving. His fame was ingrained in national history and instrumental to faith in British naval power, to the rather ironic extent that nothing a modern Admiral said against the *Foudroyant* held sway over public opinion. The Prince of Wales may have been correct that the navy was popular, but its popularity came through the lens of history, and when the modern navy impugned Nelson, the public simply discounted it.

In addition to the Lady Hamilton argument, defenders of the *Foudroyant* found themselves countered by the Admiralty's call for modernity. Echoing the letter that had previously told George Wheatly Cobb that the navy must sell historic ships to make room and money for a new modern fleet, the Admiralty and its supporters claimed that the ship was simply taking up space. Despite admitting that the ship had a "glorious history" in the blockade of Malta, *The Marine Engineer and Naval Architect* called the popular call-to-arms "much ado about nothing," proclaimed that Britain still possessed the *Victory* and quite enough other Nelson relics, and explained that "we cannot afford to live on the glorious deeds achieved by "hearts of oak;" we live in an iron age... the removal of a little obsolete harbour furniture can do no harm."³⁹ However, just as enthusiasm for Lord Nelson made Lady Hamilton a non-issue for the public, defenders had ways of dealing with modernism. As the *Marine Engineer* clearly knew, but only grudgingly acknowledged, Britons preferred that their image of the navy "live on the glorious deeds" of the past. *The Illustrated London News* tried to argue that saving the *Foudroyant* was not anti-modern, by explaining that "no one asks that we should keep a whole skeleton fleet simply as a memorial of the past. But the *Foudroyant* belongs to a special history,

³⁹ *Marine Engineer and Naval Architect*, October 1, 1892.

which should make her a national relic.”⁴⁰ In the *Times* letters, modernism was an accepted fact, but was accepted with the belief that Britain could remember the past at the same time.

While the Admiralty held little love for the *Foudroyant*, other influential figures lent their voices to the cause of its retrieval. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle published a poem entitled “For Nelson’s Sake,” dedicated “H.M.S. Foudroyant (Sold to the Germans for a thousand pounds.)”⁴¹ The poem speaks of a government hungry for profit, willing to sell anything for financial gain, for “If coal and cotton fail at last, / We’ve something left to barter yet - / Our glorious past.” Conan Doyle goes on to suggest that the government might just as well sell King Alfred’s tomb, or Shakespeare’s home, or even Windsor, before addressing the Admiralty directly for its mistake:

You hucksters, have you still to learn
The things that money will not buy?
Can you not read that, cold and stern
As we may be, there still does lie
Deep in our hearts a hungry love
For what concerns our island story?
We sell our work – perchance our lives –
But not our glory.

Conan Doyle suggested that British identity and pride was based largely on the past. Like any historical monument, the *Foudroyant* was a relic of a bygone age but invoked feelings of Britain’s continuing glory. Knowing how instrumental Nelson was to naval pride, Conan Doyle urged the government to properly honor the people’s hero: “when you touch the Nation’s store, / Be broad your mind and tight your grip. / Take heed! And bring us back once more / Our Nelson’s ship!”⁴²

⁴⁰ *Illustrated London News*, September 17, 1892.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

The press seized upon Conan Doyle's description of a government that had made a greedy shopkeeper's bargain, and brought historical ghosts back to speak on the matter. Along with printing the poem itself, *The Times* of September 17 asked readers what Nelson's sailors would say "if they could come back to earth to find the flag-ship of their hero sold to foreigners for firewood!"⁴³ A poetic response in *Punch* magazine asked even more poignantly what Nelson himself would think of his country. *Punch* suggested that if Britain neglected its past to the point of selling the *Foudroyant*, all past glory would have come to naught. Historic wars might have been for nothing, if "The Frenchman, the Don, / The Dutchman, all foes we have licked, - may wax bold / When they hear that the brave old *Foudroyant* is – Sold!!!"⁴⁴ The publication suggested that if the past were neglected, other nations would cease to take the British navy seriously; but equally pertinent was the fact that without history, the glory of the navy could not prevail. Along with the poem, *Punch* presented a stirring engraving of the *Foudroyant's* demise: Britannia had laid down her shield and sat upon it mournfully addressing the viewer, while behind her a tug-boat named "The Huckster" drew the *Foudroyant* to shore for her destruction, reminiscent of Turner's "Fighting Téméraire." Patriotism was setting with the sun, and Britannia's trident served as a sign-post for the words, "VICTORY. HERO. GLORY. FOR SALE" (fig. 7). Regardless of the technological progress the Admiralty had thought of in selling the old ship, the fact remained that to British sentiments the glory of the navy was built on the achievements of the past, and naval supremacy could not stand without historical memory.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ *Punch*, September 24, 1892.

“The Wooden Walls of Old England” on Display

When the *Foudroyant* finally came back to England, there was little doubt about her intended future.⁴⁵ In September 1892 when the newspapers were only entertaining hopes of bringing her back, the question of how to pay for upkeep was quickly answered by the idea of turning her into a floating museum and charging admission. Making her easily accessible from the shore near a “populous centre”, her maintenance “would be secured year by year from a short-memored public” who might come back again and again to see Nelson’s ship.⁴⁶ From the first letter Cobb had imagined the *Foudroyant* to be the “most paying of exhibitions and the most eloquent of all monuments of our greatest naval hero.”⁴⁷ By the end of the month an idea circulated to not simply exhibit her as she was, but to re-fit her and make her into a naval museum.⁴⁸ Confidence that the public would be interested in viewing the re-fitted *Foudroyant* stemmed from the pronounced interest in the Naval Exhibition of 1891 (which *The Times* reported drew an impressive 2,351,683 visitors⁴⁹), but also came from a general knowledge that the people held a special appreciation for what the papers called “the wooden walls of old England.” Popular interest in the navy during the late nineteenth century was an acknowledged fact, but underlying that knowledge was the truth that the public had mixed feelings about the navy’s transition from sail to steam. While modern technology possessed an undeniable degree of magnificence, it could not always compete with the beauty of the age of sail. In preserving the *Foudroyant*, the private companies who aimed to refit her were preserving the remnants of the old navy that the public loved, and the navy in which Britain still took pride.

⁴⁵ *Times*, August 23, 1895.

⁴⁶ *Times*, September 5, 1892.

⁴⁷ *Times*, September 2, 1892.

⁴⁸ *Times*, September 24, 1892.

⁴⁹ *Times*, October 26, 1891.

“The Wooden Walls of Old England” was a nostalgic term for sailing ships that newspapers used almost since the advent of steam power. The term appeared in *The Illustrated London News* during the 1891 exhibition, in *The Times* throughout the *Foudroyant* letters, and in numerous other articles in the late 19th century, but its use harkened back to at least the 1830s. When the *Téméraire*, one of Nelson’s ships at Trafalgar made famous in William Turner’s painting, was towed up the Thames to be destroyed in 1838, *The Times* lamented that while she was being towed by two steam tugs, she “was a noble specimen of the wooden walls of old England” and “every vessel she passed appeared like a pigmy.”⁵⁰ Later, in 1859, an imagined dialogue between the ghosts of Nelson and the Duke of Wellington has Wellington saying, “We have now a steam navy, Nelson. The engineer has superseded the Admiral; the engine and boiler take the place of the wooden walls...”⁵¹ The dialogue was meant to include humor - Nelson’s ghost punned that England must often be in “hot water” with a steam navy instead of sail - and the dialogue was also optimistic enough to admit that Nelson’s name still had charm and to predict that “Britannia will still rule the waves.” But despite optimism, the nostalgia in the writing was evident. When defenders of the *Foudroyant* employed the term “wooden walls,” they were drawing on nearly a century of nostalgic tradition that had entered British vernacular.

There was also enough evidence of the aesthetic contrast between sail and steam to make it clear to the *Foudroyant*’s purchasers that she must be saved so that her historical beauty might counteract a highly mechanized modern navy that the people did not always admire. As the navy increasingly made its way into printed media, commentaries were confused as to what to think of modern technology. Technology changed so quickly for a time that it was difficult to keep up

⁵⁰ Richard L. Stein, “Remember the *Téméraire*: Turner’s Memorial of 1839,” *Representations*, no.11 (Summer, 1985):168, <http://jstor.com>.

⁵¹ Pattie, D., *A Voice from the Tomb, First Part*. (London: M. A. Pattie, 1853), 8.

with what the navy really looked like: historian John F. Beeler pessimistically calls the 19th-century navy a “fleet of samples.”⁵² Pessimism aside, Beeler’s claim is not unfounded, as an 1897 account of the Diamond Jubilee Naval Review recalled that “in 1887 there were scarcely two ships alike in the assembled fleet” whereas in 1897 the fleet was “a practically homogenous squadron.”⁵³ In the ten years between two Jubilee reviews, and in the same span of time during which the Royal Naval Exhibition and the *Foudroyant* affair occurred, the navy had changed beyond recognition. Furthermore, viewers of the modern navy had mixed feelings as to whether the steam navy had aesthetic merit, even during the 1891 exhibition that was meant to invoke naval pride. *The Illustrated London News* of March 7 spoke with pride of the *Royal Sovereign*, which would be the heaviest ship in the world and completed in time for the exhibition, but seemed at a loss for how to describe it: the author declared that the ship was “handsome” but added the disclaimer, “if that adjective may be applied to a steam ship at all.”⁵⁴

Comparisons of the modern and historical navy were also intertwined with ideas of masculinity. An article about “Old English Ships of War,” published in *The Illustrated London News* during 1887 Jubilee Naval Review, asserted that naval warfare was more brutal before modern machinery, but admired the “our brave ancestors, whose manhood was abundantly proved in those fierce encounters, the history of which we have read, and some of us have heard told by men who bore part in them.”⁵⁵ Through literature and memory, glorified stories of historic battles remained popular, perpetuating ideas of the manliness that a sailor should possess. Manliness, however, seemed less easy to come by in the Age of Steam than it had been

⁵² Beeler, 259.

⁵³ *Journal of the Royal United Service Institution, Volume 41 Part 2* (London: J. J. Keliher & Co., 1897), 886.

⁵⁴ *Illustrated London News*, March 7, 1891.

⁵⁵ *Illustrated London News*, July 30, 1887.

in the war-torn Age of Sail. In 1891 *The Times* expressed this sentiment, ironically ending a lengthy article describing the impressiveness of “ships and engines at the Royal Naval Exhibition” by declaring, “What can the pleasure of holding a certificate in gunnery or torpedoes be, sailors of the old school may be pardoned for exclaiming, compared with that of yoking and controlling the winds on the stormy seas, where manly qualities and not the recollection of formulae brought distinction!”⁵⁶ Even the attribution of the sentiment to an old sailor could not mask the general feeling of aesthetic nostalgia. The Age of Sail had been more glorious and more masculine, echoing ideals that Victorian writers wanted to see in their own time. This was the sentiment of the late 19th century, and the atmosphere into which the saviors of the *Foudroyant* marketed her wooden walls.

The *Foudroyant* was not available for exhibition until 1896, after passing through years of difficulty in finding a committee competent enough to refit her. In 1894 *The Times* published an article announcing that work would soon commence on restoring the *Foudroyant* to her 1789 form, marketing her specifically as “Nelson’s Battleship Foudroyant,”⁵⁷ but newspaper coverage of a court case in 1895 revealed that she had passed through several hands before being refitted. J. R. Cobb and his associate had dealt with several fruitless proposals after repurchasing the *Foudroyant* in 1892, but in 1894 sold her to Mr. W. G. F. Hunt for the company “Nelson’s Battleship Foudroyant, Ltd.” The company, however, failed when one of its directors, Mr. Shorrock, was unable to pay the restoration contractors his promised sum.⁵⁸ Mr. Hunt was left to pay for the ship and for Shorrock’s debts himself, but in the months following the court case he

⁵⁶ *Times*, June 20, 1891.

⁵⁷ *Times*, May 21, 1894.

⁵⁸ *Times*, August 23, 1895.

was able to pay for the restoration.⁵⁹ As George Wheatly Cobb wrote to *The Times* in April 1896, Hunt had acted out of determination, “for, after having weathered so many storms, it was impossible to allow the old ship to be sold and broken up.”⁶⁰

The *Foudroyant* underwent a great deal of hardship, but the determination of several private companies to find someone to refit her demonstrates incredible dedication to restoring Nelson’s ship and presenting her to the public. Even the *Marine Engineer* grudgingly gave in and admitted that some good might come of her restoration: “a great deal of unnecessary fuss has been made over the old two-decker. We are not sorry, however, that she is re-claimed, and think she will look better and more picturesque in her new war-paint on the Thames than she did while lying in the Hamooze at Devonport, performing the ignominious duties of a hulk.”⁶¹ The paper that had been so bent on progress admitted a degree of admiration for the ship, and even admitted that a wooden ship could be useful as a historical symbol in “war-paint.”

Unveiled in the summer of 1896, the *Foudroyant* was meant to be a traveling exhibit, moving from one port to another so that as many visitors as possible could view her history. Beginning on the Thames in London, she was scheduled to travel to Yarmouth, Liverpool, and other ports where she could be granted moorings.⁶² Her exhibition lasted only a year, but in her short time on display she helped satisfy a public desire for naval history. A visitor who had seen the *Foudroyant* docked at Woolrich wrote to *The Times* commending her accuracy and her ability to inspire visitors to an old style of patriotism, calling her “a grand “object lesson” for the present generation to show this class of ship (and one of the actual ones, too) in which our naval battles were won and our gallant sailors, under such illustrious commanders as Nelson, fought

⁵⁹ *Times*, April 14, 1896

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Marine Engineer*, November 1, 1892.

⁶² *Times*, July 6, 1896.

and died for the honour of their country.”⁶³ The ship embodied the glory, masculinity, and romantic idealization that visitors expected from the Age of Sail. She was fully rigged and fitted with cannons, and had her decks refitted to resemble the decks of Nelson’s day. Nelson’s cabin, down to the furniture, was outfitted to resemble the days of 1798, and a plan arose to dress the crew in contemporary uniforms.⁶⁴ George Wheatly Cobb proclaimed that while the *Victory* at the time did not remotely resemble her Trafalgar days, “there can be no question that [Nelson] would at once recognize his “dear Foudroyant”.”⁶⁵ During her brief reincarnation she was an example of the old wooden-walled navy that Britain still took pride in, and instilled images of what a proper sailor should be like.

The unfortunate ship faced very little time as an exhibition vessel before being driven ashore and wrecked in 1897 (fig. 8). On June 17, *The Times* reported a “Destructive Gale” that had caused extensive damage in the north and west of England, and resulted in several shipwrecks. Although the report covered many topics, the subheading signaled the main point of interest: “Wreck of Nelson’s “Foudroyant”.” At the harbor of Blackpool, where she had been stationed for exhibition, the storm had driven the *Foudroyant* ashore “before any help could be given.”⁶⁶ Although the crew was rescued, the storm left the ship “high and dry, though deeply embedded in the sand... an object of curiosity to thousands of visitors.”⁶⁷ But as a wreck, the *Foudroyant* still maintained its status as a symbol of patriotism and nostalgia. When her materials were locked in a yard at Blackpool, the newspaper *Christian Work* was proud to admit that Britain at least still possessed the “famous timbers” from “a vessel commanded by a man

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ *Times*, April 10, 1896.

⁶⁵ *Times*, April 14, 1896.

⁶⁶ *Times*, June 17, 1897.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

who again and again maintained England's supremacy on the seas, and lowered the flag of every foe."⁶⁸ Despite her short time as a floating museum, she exemplified her country's love of naval history and inspired commentary that reflected that how the British people still viewed their naval supremacy through the lens of the past.

The story of the *Foudroyant*'s repurchase is remarkable in that it accomplished next to nothing, other than giving the ship one year of exhibition, having her wrecked on British shores instead of German, and turning her into British furniture instead of the feared German firewood. The *Foudroyant*'s history appears a tragedy when one considers that after the public effort to reclaim her, she spent the majority of her remaining life sitting in a harbor waiting to be restored, and was destroyed only five years after British enthusiasm saved her. But what was truly important about the *Foudroyant* was the pride she inspired in the British public, by being a Nelson relic that Britain could boast as its own. The preoccupation with bringing her back to England created a stir that permeated public attention, and formed a part of a larger understanding of the importance of the historical navy. Despite five years of difficulty and an unexpected demise, newspapers did not publish anything expressing regret that Britain had reclaimed her, or suggesting that she may as well have been left to Germany. The press likewise expressed no regret that the ship the *Marine Engineer* had once called "obsolete harbour furniture" was destined to become household furniture instead of displaying her glory for thousands of visitors to see. To a Victorian audience, it was enough to say that the "precious flotsam was recovered. The old oak timbers with their glorious story – those timbers which had

⁶⁸ *Christian Work*, September 14, 1899.

so often been brought into personal contact with the great Nelson himself – were carefully collected”, and craftsman turned the materials into “souvenirs of a splendid past.”⁶⁹

In its final incarnation, as souvenirs and relics, the *Foudroyant* worked its way into Victorian culture through the medium of collection (figs. 9 and 10). Deborah Cohen has argued that Britons of the late Victorian and Edwardian eras developed a passion for antique-collecting, both as an outlet for nostalgia and a means for self-expression. “Collecting old objects,” Cohen explains, “served as a critique of a fast-living age.”⁷⁰ Antique furniture in particular, and especially pieces from the 18th century, became indicative of an owner’s love for a more elegant past.⁷¹ Relics of the *Foudroyant* served all of the purposes Cohen describes. *Foudroyant* furniture was doubly antique, made from century-old materials to resemble artifacts from the same era. The furniture, as well as model ships, copper medals, dishes, jewelry, and commemorative plaques made from *Foudroyant* materials (extant in Greenwich’s National Maritime Museum), turned Nelson’s famous ship into a public possession and made it possible for households throughout Britain to contain a part of the country’s beloved naval history.

Britain made the best of the situation the *Foudroyant* presented to them. Instead of letting the ship be lost entirely, the people did what they could so the “wooden walls” still remained in English possession - a demonstration of remarkable reluctance to let go of the past. The *Foudroyant* affair lasted only a few years, but drew attention to a larger theme of naval reverence that existed at the end of the 19th century. The events surrounding the ship revealed that Britons loved the Royal Navy, but the navy that the people loved was not always the Royal Navy of the present day. Although no one could deny that the navy was popular, it was the navy of Nelson’s

⁶⁹ *Times*, October 28, 1905.

⁷⁰ Deborah Cohen, *Household Gods: The British and Their Possessions* (New Haven: Yale, 2006), 146.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 147.

day that drew people to comment on modern technology, or visit the Royal Naval Exhibition, or petition to save an old ship. When the Victorians viewed their modern fleet, they did so while thinking about Lord Nelson and the history that created their country's naval supremacy. In this way, the modern navy was inseparable from its past, and if the people loved the institution, their love was for the past glory that had made it a renowned symbol of British supremacy at sea.

CONCLUSION

When Britain celebrated the Trafalgar centenary in 1905, the fact that Nelson had been remembered for the past century came as no surprise. The remarkable aspect of Nelson's first century of commemoration, however, was the extent to which his influence had continued over those hundred years, outside of the routine commemoration that would be expected for a famous military hero. When David Cannadine wrote that "there was a Nelson to suit every taste," he referred to the various aspects of Nelson's character that biographers and artists drew on: the tactical genius or the brave commander, the flawed hero caught in a romantic crisis between his marriage and his love for Lady Hamilton, or the self-made man and the clergyman's son. But the Victorian memory of Lord Nelson had rendered him continually relevant, even in fields outside the original truth of his life. Although not a political man, citizens and parliament alike used his imagined voice as an authority for parliamentary reform, and though he lived long before the high imperial competition of the late nineteenth century, his spirit was the example that authors upheld as the standard that made Britons "a race fit for empire."

Instead of remaining within his original role as a figure remembered for his past deeds, Lord Nelson became a malleable figure who could be shaped to fit the needs of contemporary issues. Depicted as the embodiment of tradition, virtue, masculinity, patriotism or the nebulous quality of "zeal," his true person became less important than the ideal that popular memory had shaped around his name. While the memory of what Nelson as a man had done lived on through the glorification of Trafalgar, authors began to ask, in addition to what he *had done*, what a man such as Nelson would do in their time. They questioned how Nelson would expect his country to act toward sailors, how he would expect citizens to do their duty to honor the navy, and how he would wish that Britain might remember the glories of its past.

In political, social, or naval venues, Nelson's memory symbolized the Victorian tendency to nostalgia, bringing old-fashioned tradition into modern settings. While his name was invoked to call attention to the navy's needs, or to promote attention to sailors and veterans, he became the image that upheld faith in the modern navy, even when the sailing ships of his day had become antiquated curiosities. Printed media portrayed sailors as the heirs to a tradition that Nelson and Trafalgar had created, embodying the characteristics of duty and the strong spirit that had contributed to the formation of Britain's maritime supremacy. Even when a common British citizen did not understand the logistical workings of the modern fleet, they understood the legend of Lord Nelson and the past and present fame the navy symbolized.

When *Punch* published its 1905 image of Lord Nelson's looking out on the steam navy, declaring that "[His] ships have passed away, but the spirit of [his] men remains," the image symbolized more than a simple centenary commemoration. More than communicating the basic idea that Britain was still as great as it had been a century before, the image spoke to one hundred years worth of interpretations surrounding the spirit of the nation's hero. Nelson's spirit, and that of the men who served in the navy of his day, was a constantly changing idea, representing whichever ideals contemporary society needed a voice to support. Whether symbolizing patriotism, moral and political uprightness, or reverence for Britain's navy, popular memory always maintained a contemporary image of that spirit. In this way, a Greenwich visitor meeting a naval veteran in the 1840s, a mid-century reader reviewing parliamentary proceedings in *The Times*, and a late Victorian naval enthusiast following the *Foudroyant* affair would all find the spirit of Nelson to be as much alive as they believed it to have been in the year of Trafalgar.



1. Cartoon from *Punch*, October 18, 1905. The caption reads, "My ships have passed away, but the spirit of my men remains."

2. Thomas Baxter's engraving, *Britannia Crowning a Bust of the Hero with Laurel*, 1805.





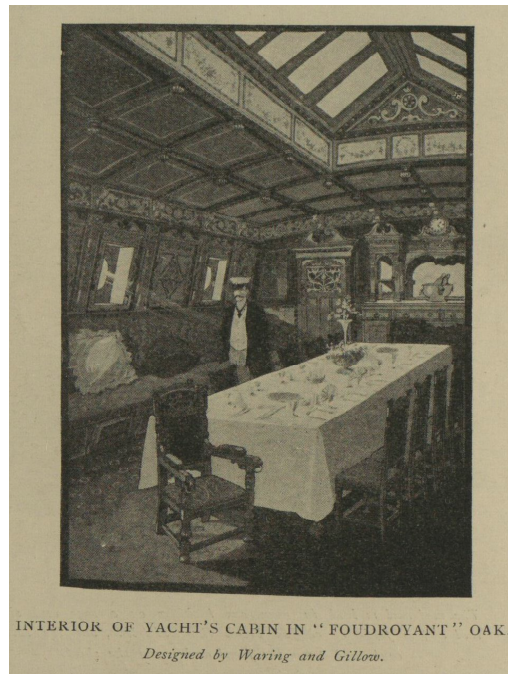
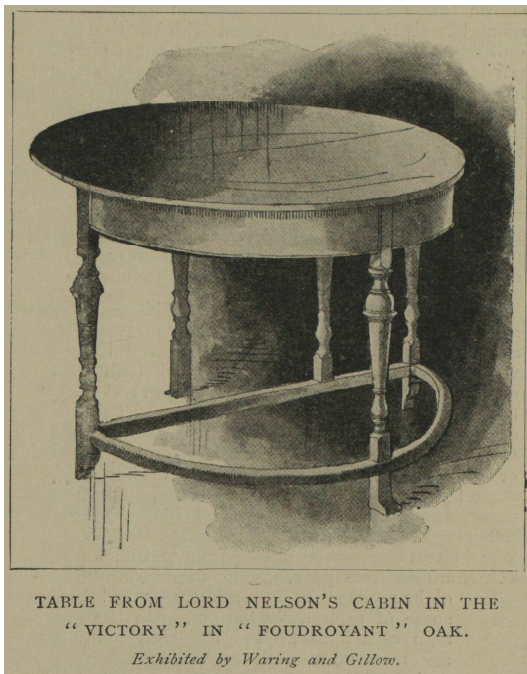
3. Engraving after Richard Westall, “Nelson and the Bear.” The image is an exaggerated depiction of Nelson’s time as a midshipman on an arctic expedition during his youth.



4. Engraving by John Hopkins after a drawing by John Young, “A Tribute to Vice Admiral Lord Nelson,” 1805.



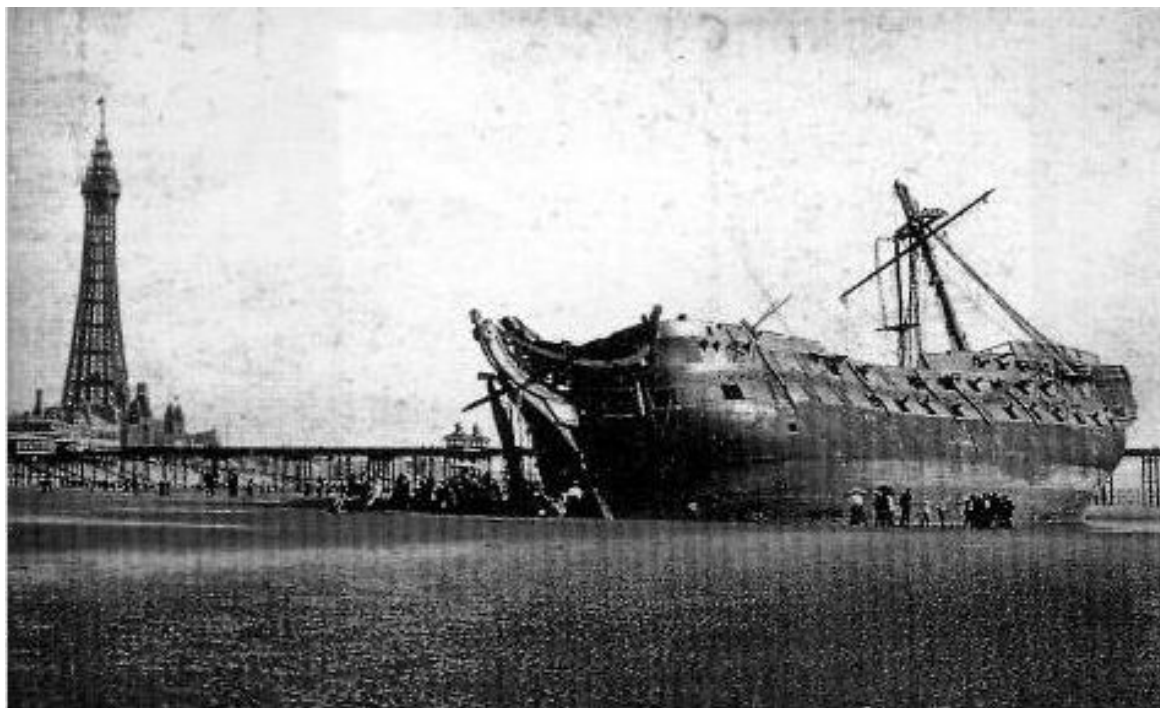
5. Image published in *The Penny Illustrated Paper and Illustrated Times*, May 2, 1885. The caption reads, "BRITAIN'S PREPARATION FOR WAR WITH RUSSIA, THE SPIRIT OF NELSON ANIMATES OUR JACK TARS."



6. *Foudroyant* materials repurposed as furniture and yacht interior paneling, advertised in *The Illustrated London News*, October 28, 1905.



7. "The Fighting Foudroyant," Published in *Punch* magazine, September 24, 1892.



8. The *Foudroyant* wrecked at Blackpool, 1897.



9. A bookcase constructed from *Foudroyant* oak and copper, sold by Christie's, 2006.



10. A medallion commemorating the *Foudroyant*, owned by the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich.

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