

By Jay Tolson

It was shortly before noon on Oct. 21, 1805, a light wind blowing easterly across the Atlantic just a few miles off southwestern Spain's Cape Trafalgar. Admiral Lord (Horatio) Nelson, with his 27 ships of the line now slowly closing on the 33 ships of Adm. Pierre-Charles Villeneuve's combined French and Spanish fleet, ordered his flagman to hoist the signal whose words would ring down through 200 years of naval history: "England expects that every man will do his duty."

As always, leading by personal example, the one-armed commander, looking weathered and worn beyond his 47 years, stood with his fellow officers on the quarterdeck of the 102-gun *Victory* as he strained with his one remaining eye to sight Villeneuve's flagship. The British admiral had split his fleet into two

divisions, and the 12 battleships and accompanying frigates in Nelson's windward column were holding to a northerly tack in order to block the Combined Fleet from sailing back into the protective waters of their harbor at Cadiz. Nelson had already chased the Frenchman through the Mediterranean and across the Atlantic and back, and now that he had caught Villeneuve heading toward the Strait of Gibraltar and into the Mediterranean, he didn't want to lose him. But Villeneuve was not retreating. Napoleon had ordered him to bring his fleet—and 4,000 troops of reinforcement—to Naples to support the campaign in Italy. Villeneuve had ordered his fleet to reverse course and prepare for battle.

About five minutes after Nelson issued his famous exhortation, the French commander, aboard the 80-gun *Bucentaure*, ordered his ships to hoist their colors. Spotting his foe's flagship, Nelson ordered the *Victory* hard to starboard, directly for the *Bucentaure*. Nelson's second in command and leader of the 15-ship leeward column, Rear Adm. Cuthbert Collingwood, had already plunged into the Franco-Spanish fleet at a point farther down the line, launching the furious melee for which Nelson and his "band of brothers" were so widely known and fearfully respected.

At 12:30, Nelson's *Victory* cut the enemy line just astern of the *Bucentaure*, though not before exchanging heavy broadsides with as many as eight of Villeneuve's ships, including Spain's formidable 136-gun four-decker, the *Santisima Trinidad*. One round-shot had taken out Nelson's secretary, who had been standing



For all his warts and weaknesses, Admiral Lord Nelson earned the exalted status history conferred.

not far from the admiral's side; another had bowled through eight Royal Marines stationed just below him on the poop deck; yet another destroyed the ship's wheel, greatly complicating steering. "This is too warm work, Hardy, to last long," Nelson said to the *Victory*'s captain, after one blast sent splinters flying across the quarterdeck. Yet Nelson refused to budge. "Engage the enemy more closely," read one of the last signals he sent up the main topgallant mast. The commander, who had lost his right arm and right eye and suffered countless other blows to his frail frame in previous actions, wasn't about to absent himself from the thick of this engagement.

"Killing machine." During the next several hours, the battle unfolded almost exactly as Nelson had planned. In some ways, it went even better. The 10 ships in the van of the Franco-Spanish fleet could have doubled back in timely fashion to help their comrades to the rear, whose ships were being raked, splintered, and subdued by superior British gunnery. (While it took, on average, five minutes for Combined Fleet gun crews to reload and refire, the Royal Navy crews averaged 90 seconds,

and some did even better.) But Rear Admiral Dumanoir kept his ships sailing on a northerly course for so long that by the time they turned around and returned to the battle, the melee had been all but decided in the Royal Navy's favor. By no later than 6 p.m., the Combined Fleet had lost 18 ships—one sunk, the rest captured—and its battered remnant was fleeing for safe harbor. While the British fleet took 1,666 casualties, Nelson's finely honed "killing machine" had left the Combined Fleet with 5,239

dead and wounded. Thanks to Nelson, Britain's command of the seas was firmly established, a fact that demolished Napoleon's fantasy of conquering Britain and helped shape the geopolitical realities of the world for at least the next 100 years.

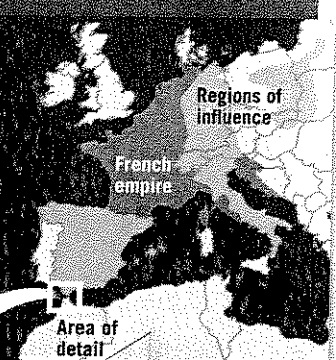
Decisive as Trafalgar was, however, it took just one of those British casualties to make Oct. 21, 1805, a day of tragedy as well as a day of triumph for Britain. For just as the battle unfolded as Nelson had planned, so did his death come as he had even more uncannily foreseen. "God bless you, Blackwood, I shall never speak to you again," he had told one of his frigate

captains as the fighting got underway, and that was not the only time he voiced his premonition that day. Almost exactly an hour after his parting words to Blackwood, at around 1:15, a shot fired by a French marksman from the mizzenmast of the Redoutable, then locked in gunwale-to-gunwale combat with the Victory, tore through Nelson's left shoulder, severing a branch of his pulmonary artery and lodging in his backbone. "They have done for me at last, Hardy," the admiral muttered. Probably paralyzed below the waist, Nelson managed to cover his face and medals with his large handkerchief, hoping that

BRITAIN'S SEA CHANGE

On Oct. 21, 1805, Great Britain's Royal Navy engaged the Combined French and Spanish Fleet west of Cape Trafalgar, off the southern coast of Spain. At the end of the five-hour battle, Adm. Horatio Nelson's British fleet had defeated the Combined Fleet under Adm. Pierre-Charles Villeneuve, crushing Napoleon's plans to invade England and establishing British dominance of the seas.

FRENCH EMPIRE AND REGIONS UNDER ITS INFLUENCE
Circa 1810

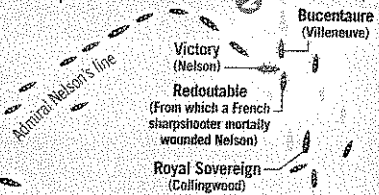


THE MELEE

At Trafalgar and other battles, Nelson abandoned traditional naval warfare tactics of orderly lines of attack under central command and encouraged his captains to break through the enemy lines and engage in close combat.

British	French and Spanish
27 ships	18 ships 15 ships
0 ships lost	18 ships lost
1,666 killed or wounded	5,239 killed or wounded 7,000 captured

1 In his initial approach, Nelson, aboard the Victory, led his line in a feigned attack on the lead enemy ships.

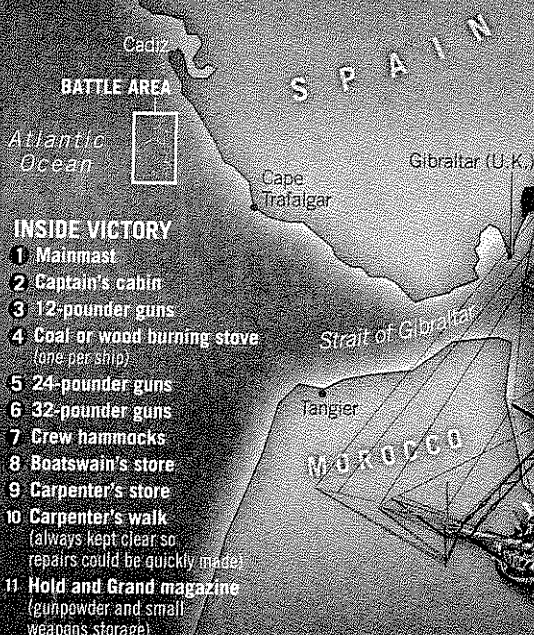


2 By the time French and Spanish commanders realized his real target, the middle of their line, it was too late and Nelson rammed through, raking the French ships Bucentaure and Redoutable.

BATTLE TACTICS

Broadside
Each ship turns maximum firepower on the other.

Raking
This leaves one ship powerless to return fire.



INSIDE VICTORY

- 1 Mainmast
- 2 Captain's cabin
- 3 12-pounder guns
- 4 Coal or wood burning stove (one per ship)
- 5 24-pounder guns
- 6 32-pounder guns
- 7 Crew hammocks
- 8 Boatswain's store
- 9 Carpenter's store
- 10 Carpenter's walk (always kept clear so repairs could be quickly made)
- 11 Hold and Grand magazine (gunpowder and small weapons storage)
- 12 Ballast
- 13 "Lumber Passage" (hides ship of seeping water)
- 14 Copper sheathing

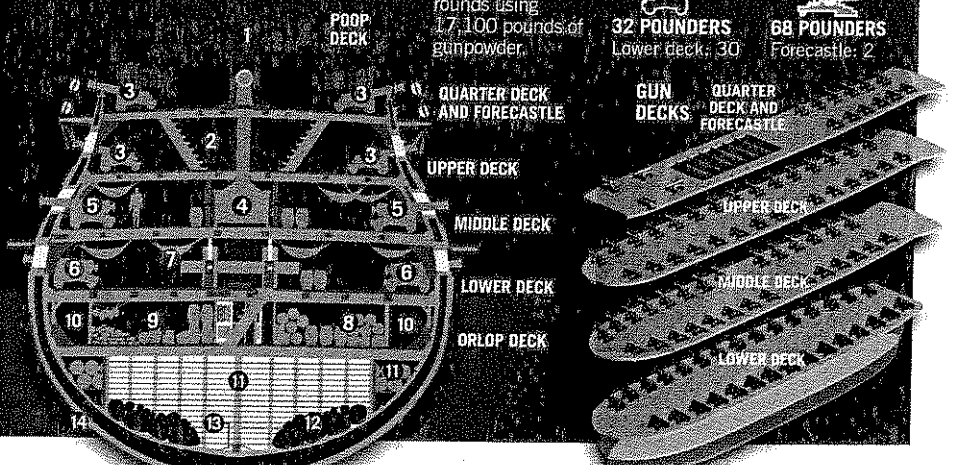
VICTORY

Total length: 227 ft. 6 in.
Widest point: 51 ft. 10 in.

VICTORY'S GUNS AT TRAFALGAR

104 guns fired an average of 25 shots for a total of 2,669 rounds using 17,100 pounds of gunpowder.

- 12 POUNDS: Upper deck: 30; Quarterdeck: 12; Forecastle: 2
- 24 POUNDS: Middle deck: 28
- 32 POUNDS: Lower deck: 30
- 68 POUNDS: Forecastle: 2



Sources: *The Trafalgar Companion* by Mark Adkin; BBC; HMS Victory.com; National Geographic; Popular Science; STEPHEN ROUNTREE—DSNGWR

his men would not be able to identify their fallen leader as he was borne below deck to the ship's surgery. Once there, he assured the surgeon that there was nothing he could do: "I have but a short time to live; my back is shot through." He was right. It would take a little over three hours for death to arrive, as Britain's most beloved hero verged increasingly on delirium, calling on Captain Hardy—and indeed on England itself—to look after his beloved mistress, Lady Emma Hamilton, and their daughter, Horatia. But around 4:30, not long after Captain Hardy assured him that the battle was effectively won, Nelson uttered his last words several times over: "Thank God, I have done my duty."

It is hardly surprising, given the importance of the man and his victory, that the bicentenary year of the Battle of Trafalgar has occasioned hundreds of public conferences and academic seminars, countless commemorations, at least one major re-enactment (though the Royal Navy, out of sensitivity for the feelings of the Spanish and French, dubbed the opposing sides of last summer's mock battle the Red and Blue fleets), and a raft of popular and scholarly books. Among the last are excellent treatments of the battle itself (*The Trafalgar Companion* by Mark Adkin), the contemporary cultural significance of Nelson's heroism and his many legacies (*Seize the Fire: Heroism, Duty, and the Battle of Trafalgar* by Adam Nicolson; *Admiral Lord Nelson: Context and Legacy*, edited by David Cannadine), the lasting influence of Nelson's style on naval command and control (*Command at Sea: Naval Command and Control Since the Sixteenth Century* by Michael Palmer), the great man's correspondence (*Nelson: The New Letters*, edited by Colin White), and Nelson's own most remarkable life (*Nelson: A Dream of Glory*, the first of two volumes by John Sugden; *The Pursuit of Victory: The Life and Achievements of Horatio Nelson* by Roger Knight).

The "Nelson touch." Not that there was a lack of interest in Nelson or his most famous battle in the years leading up to the bicentennial. Reviewing many of the new works in the *Times Literary Supplement*, N. A. M. Rodger observed, without irony, that "a man who has already received roughly one biography for every year which has elapsed since his death is obviously in need of some more." Rodger is not alone in recognizing the need to locate and rectify errors in the millions of words written about Nelson and Trafalgar. But if the new scholarship dutifully succeeds in doing so, even discrediting some of the more endearing myths (it now seems as though the adolescent Nelson did not, alas, go *mano a mano* with a polar bear on a North Pole

expedition), the brunt of this more scrupulous examination reveals a man no less heroic, and achievements no less significant, than what earlier history, biography, and legend purported. Nelson with warts and weaknesses—including vanity, occasional pettiness, and a sometimes reckless arrogance—is no less an awe-inspiring figure for all those flaws. Likewise, if Nelson's tactical and strategic innovations were not all strictly of his own making, the way he put them into practice through his remarkable style of leadership more than justifies his exalted standing in the annals of military history. Stressing discipline

and hard training, along with empathy with and concern for his men, he above all encouraged (and prepared) his subordinates to seize the initiative whenever necessary, particularly in the fog of war. "That," says Palmer, a naval historian at East Carolina University, "was what he called the 'Nelson touch,' and the men who served under him knew what he expected."

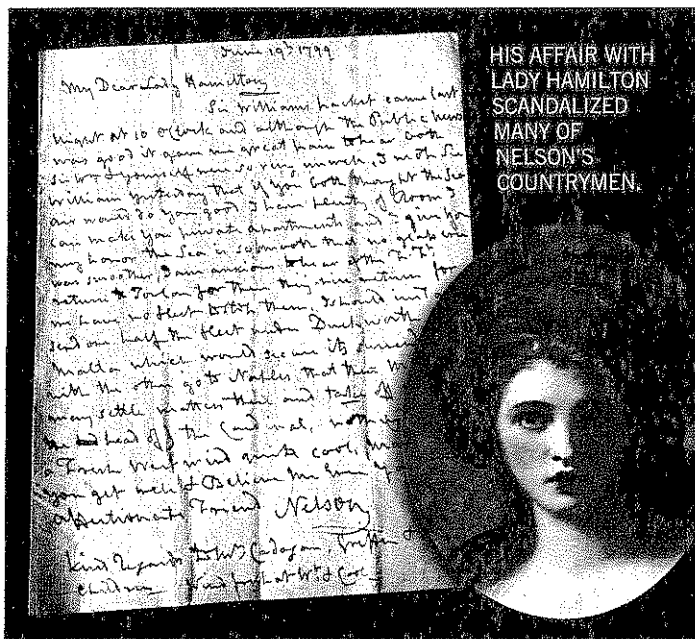
Among the questions that continue to circle the naval hero, some loom large: If Nelson hadn't existed, would the Britain of his day have been forced to invent him—or at least find someone very like him to push to the fore and idolize? Was he the embodiment of the qualities that his age

admired, or was he so exceptional, so distinctive, that his contemporaries could only partly define his greatness through the categories and ideals of his time? And perhaps most important, if Nelson had not existed and Trafalgar never happened, would Britain have acquired naval supremacy and so decisively influenced the course of modern history?

Born in 1758, the son of an Anglican rector, Nelson spent his first 12 years in the village of Burnham Thorpe, near the coast of eastern England. His mother died when he was 9, perhaps from the burden of bearing 11 children (eight survived infancy). He attended only a few years of grammar school before his maternal uncle, Capt. Maurice Suckling, gave him a midshipman's post on the Royal Navy's *Raisonnable*. A product of the lesser gentry who secured his first job through family connections, Nelson quickly became an indefatigable striver in an increasingly entrepreneurial and meritocratic nation that was being transformed by the "animal spirits" of capitalism.

If it was not directly through commerce that Nelson made his speedy ascent, it was through service in a navy that made Britain's galloping commercial expansion possible. (Britons

paid higher taxes than any other Europeans, but they considered themselves freer than the subjects of other nations—in large part because they knew that hefty naval outlays for building and manning warships ensured the



HIS AFFAIR WITH LADY HAMILTON SCANDALIZED MANY OF NELSON'S COUNTRYMEN.

After Nelson moved in with Emma Hamilton, many wished he weren't quite so indispensable.

prosperity that they believed was a keystone of freedom.) Some of Nelson's fastest friendships were formed with bold and successful merchants who recognized Nelson as exactly their kind of man—that is, a man of daring and enterprise. And if the officer ranks of the Royal Navy had their share of well-connected aristocrats (not as many as in the Army, though), those ranks were more open to untitled men of talent and ambition than were those of any continental European navy. In Britain, not even peerage ensured success on the examination for lieutenantancy. British officers had to master their craft if they hoped to command a ship.

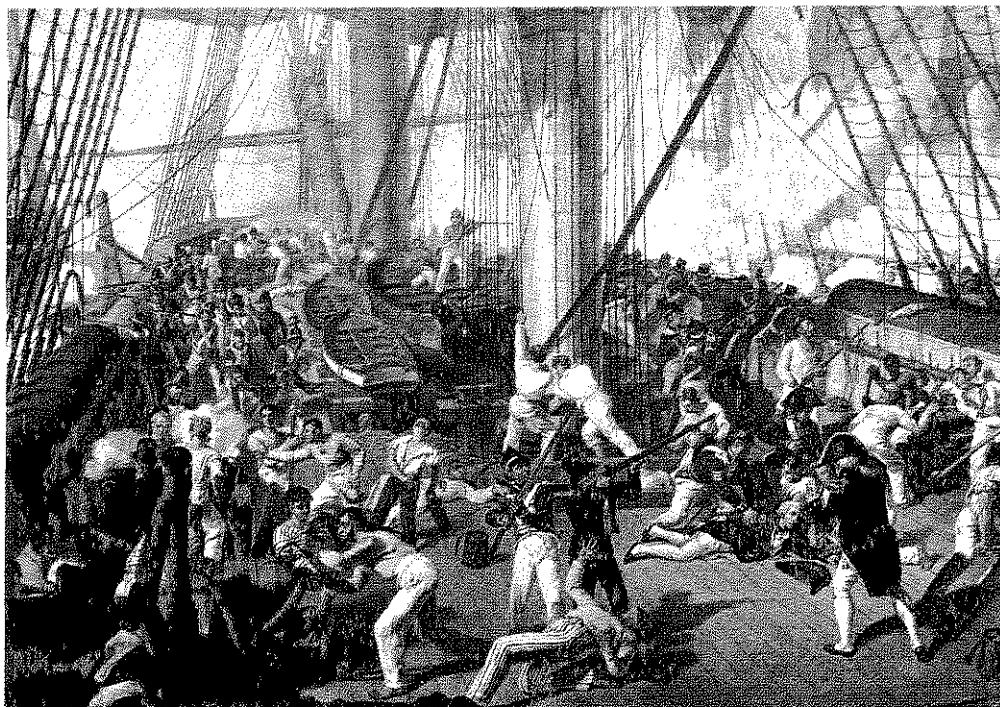
In his early years in the Royal Navy, on voyages to the East and West Indies and elsewhere, Nelson endured tedium, near-fatal diseases, and needlessly harsh discipline, even while learning the ropes of seamanship with a thoroughness that would allow him to pass the lieutenant's qualifying exam at the unusually young age of 18. Three years earlier, brief service on a merchantman—which, in typical fashion, was far more humanely and intelligently run than a Navy ship—left him with an invaluable lesson: Men treated well serve well.

Path to glory. He put the lesson to the test when he became post captain and received his first command, the 28-gun frigate *Hinchinbrooke*, at age 20. For the next 18 years, Nelson would serve with high competence but without obvious heroic distinction. In 1787, he married Frances ("Fanny") Herbert Nisbet, a widow with a son then living on the island of Nevis. Within months, Nelson had lost his command and was barely subsisting on half pay in England with his new family. Only the onset of the French Revolutionary War in 1793 brought him back to sea, beginning with service in the Mediterranean, and set him back on the path to glory.

That path was marked, along with many lesser naval actions, by four major sea battles: St. Vincent (1797), the Nile (1798), Copenhagen (1801), and Trafalgar. His successive performances in each would win Nelson the respect of his fellow officers and superiors, the love of his subordinates, the envy of his foes (Napoleon kept a bust of Nelson in his study), and the growing adulation of his fellow citizens. Even before his death, that adulation translated into a booming commercial cult, with medals, books, and assorted memorabilia.

Tarnishing his fame—or possibly adding to it in the eyes of some—Nelson began an affair in 1799 with the wife of Lord Hamilton, the British ambassador in Naples, that soon became

the buzz of Europe. Nelson, it must be said, made some of his worst decisions under the influence of Emma Hamilton, not least those associated with his inept meddling in Italian politics. After Lord Hamilton's death, Nelson abandoned his wife and moved in with Emma, causing many in the Admiralty to wish that he were not such an indispensable leader. The love between the two outsize figures was as dramatically attention grabbing as it was ardent, befitting a completely fearless naval hero and a beautiful woman who liked to perform "Attitudes" (staged moments from myth or literature) at parties. Both were targets of scandal sheets and the subject of ribald cartoons, and Hamilton



ON THE VICTORY, NELSON IS FELLED BY SHARPSHOOTERS IN THE RIGGING OF THE REDOUBTABLE.

would become the obvious model of major characters in the novels of Jane Austen and William Makepeace Thackeray.

It was, of course, Nelson's unmatched prowess at sea that kept the two lovers from being destroyed by the scandal. Though Nelson was not the fleet commander at the 1797 Battle of St. Vincent, also off the Spanish coast, the commander, Adm. John Jervis, would have found his ships in a bad fix against his Spanish foes had Nelson not seized the initiative, broken out of line, and launched a flanking attack against the Spanish fleet that eventually decided the battle. Nelson's ship, the *Captain*, was badly damaged, but he still managed to ram it into one of two entangled Spanish ships, personally led a charge onto the first and forced it to surrender, and then, using that ship as his "bridge," compelled the captain of the second to surrender. It was a brilliant and brave series of actions, as Jervis's report to the Admiralty acknowledged. Insufficiently, thought Nelson, who made sure that a more ample account found its way back to England.

In full command at the Battle of the Nile, in 1798, Nelson, who had only the year before lost his right

If they hoped to command a ship, British officers had to prove they could master their craft.

arm in a raid in the Canary Islands, tactically overwhelmed the French fleet that had anchored in Egypt's Aboukir Bay. The British fleet managed to capture or destroy all but four of the 17 French ships of the line and frigates. The only rub: If Nelson had caught up with the French fleet earlier, he might have taken it when Napoleon and his Army were still aboard, thus sparing all of Europe the Napoleonic Wars, which would be launched five years later, in 1803, by France's self-proclaimed emperor.

This again raises the question about the importance of Nelson and Trafalgar: Did either truly shape the course of history? Can great people, or great events, ever matter as much

Years' War (1756–63), when it received territories in the West Indies and America from France and Spain, Britain had lowered its guard a bit and suffered some surprising naval setbacks in the American Revolutionary War. After that, the Admiralty devoted itself to making the Royal Navy the strongest, largest, and most ably manned navy in the world.

Napoleon's rise to power and near domination of continental Europe were built on ground force, but the emperor considered Britain—and particularly its sea power—his true nemesis, and he dreamed of one day invading it. The alliance he formed with Spain was part of that plan. But

based on what he had learned from the Battle of the Nile, he knew that his dream was not without risk. He had no naval commander equal to Nelson. Unlike most other naval commanders, including British ones, Nelson never fought just to make a better showing than his foes, backing off when things got too bloody. Nelson fought to overwhelm and annihilate them, shedding his own blood if necessary. He fought at sea the way Napoleon fought on land—a sobering thought to the emperor. If he could keep Nelson occupied, however, Napoleon believed, he might be able to score a few successes against British ships. Then he could swallow up Europe and take care of Russia. And then, finally, he could return to Britain.



BELOW DECK ABOARD THE VICTORY, NELSON EXPIRES: "THANK GOD, I HAVE DONE MY DUTY."

as economic and demographic factors, climate and natural resources, structures of social and political organization—those big, impersonal forces that Karl Marx and others argued were the real engines of historical change?

Great timing. Roger Knight, author of one of the excellent new Nelson biographies, emphasizes an important fact: "Nelson was fortunate to reach senior rank at just the right time, on the crest of a wave of British naval superiority." Even more, though, Nelson's career peaked at a time when Britain's long-developing geopolitical ascendancy—territorial, economic, and military—faced one of its greatest challenges. For most of the 18th century, Britain had committed itself to strength at sea, not only to protect trade with its growing colonial possessions but also to control access to the western and eastern entrances to the channel that separated it from the Continent. The latter, crucial to national self-protection, also allowed Britain to interfere with other nations' trading ships that used the channel as passage to and from northern European ports, including those in the Baltic. After the Seven

Trafalgar dashed that dream by establishing Britain's unquestioned naval supremacy. That supremacy not only made invasion of Britain unthinkable; it allowed Britain to control the channel trade and use the profits from it to pay the continental coalition against Napoleon. "Sea power works like radium," says Palmer. "It takes time. It worked a slow death on France. And Trafalgar was part of that."

Was Britain's mastery of the seas, and the eventual demise of Napoleon, good for the world? That depends, of course, on whether one thinks the growing interconnectedness of the world—one certain consequence of the British Empire and the trade that moved throughout it—was a good thing. When Britain abandoned its restrictive Navigation Acts in the mid-19th century, it gave a strong boost to free trade among all nations across sea routes made somewhat

more secure by the presence of British naval power—a further boost to globalization.

Did Nelson really matter in all this? That's the question the anniversary of his most famous battle invites us to ponder. ●

Thanks to Nelson and Trafalgar,
Napoleon's dream of conquering
Britain was finally quashed.