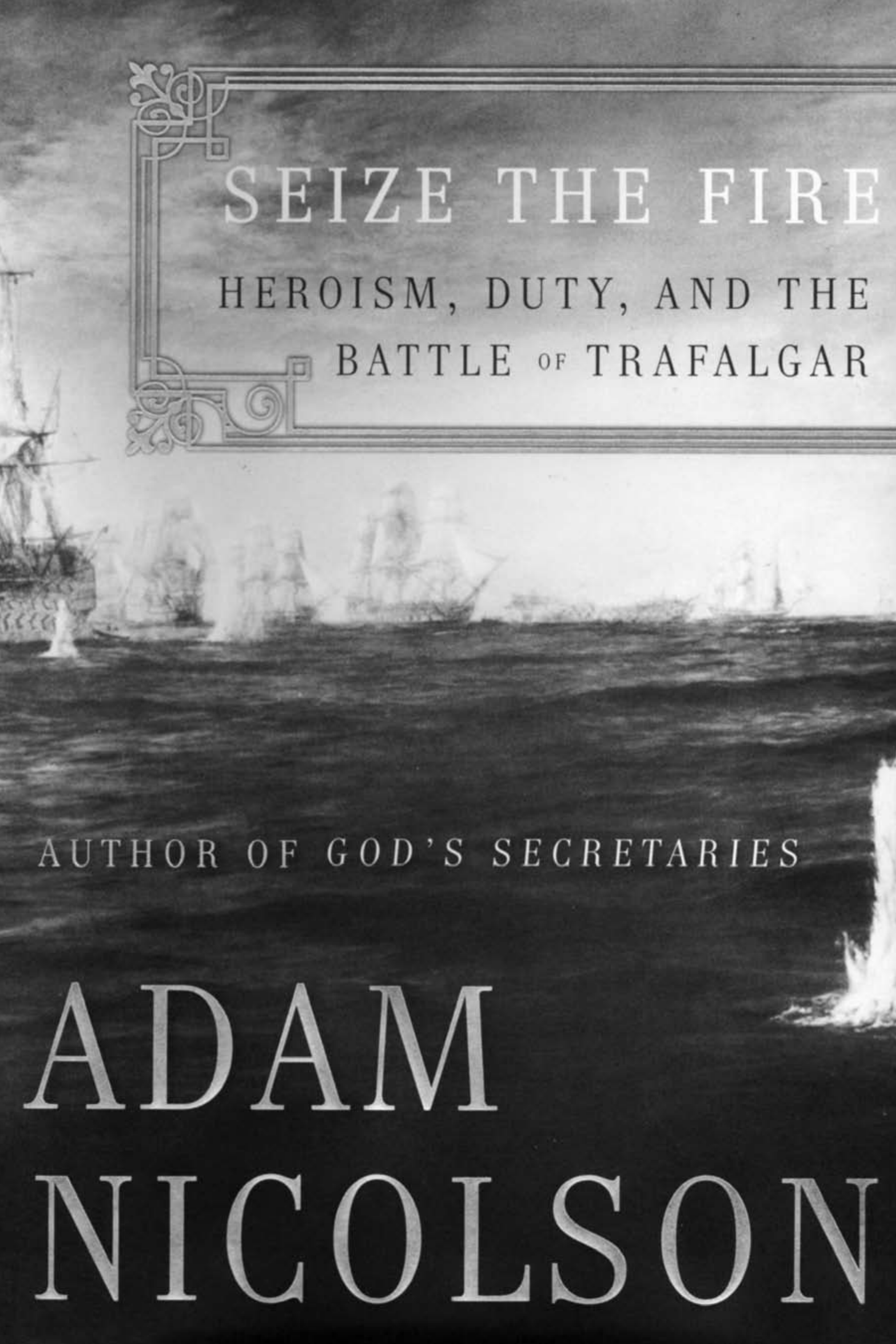

SEIZE THE FIRE

HEROISM, DUTY, AND THE BATTLE OF TRAFALGAR

AUTHOR OF *GOD'S SECRETARIES*

ADAM
NICOLSON

EDITOR'S CHOICE

Leadership at Trafalgar

by Lori A. Davis Perry

October 21, 2005 marks the 200th anniversary of Admiral Lord Nelson's victory over the French and Spanish at the Battle of Trafalgar. Adam Nicholson's latest historical inquiry of that battle, *Seize the Fire*, raises the bar considerably for historians of wars and the societies that fight them. In a brilliant and imaginative exploration of both Nelson and the Battle of Trafalgar, Nicholson offers an erudite perspective on the battle, the men who fought it, the political systems that financed it, and the social structures that propelled these men to fight, die, and win, no matter the cost.

Nicholson possesses the increasingly rare ability to write for both a popular and academic readership. The structure of the book balances the demands of traditional military history with the wide-ranging and often illusive tentacles of social and cultural history, thereby creating a more profound understanding of events and personalities. In order to do so, Nicholson begins each chapter with the events of a single hour leading up to and concluding the battle then immediately veers away in the same chapter into the psychological and political world of the actors, particularly the cultural assumptions that would have resonated with Nelson and his officers relative to a multitude of abstract concepts such heroism, honour and virtue. His side-by-side exploration of both the macro and the micro—the larger society and the individual, the linguistic history of words and the individual actions in battle that embodied them—illuminates an entire century of social history that precedes Trafalgar. Nicholson's chapters focus primarily on Zeal, Order and Anxiety, Honour, Love, Boldness, Violence, Humanity, and Nobility, and their myriad cultural associations in 1805. In the hands of a less skillful author, the structure might have created a confusing criss-crossing of timelines and topics, and perhaps have become annoying. Nicholson, however, uses the structure to build toward a crescendo of quivering tension as the battle begins, and instead of presenting a dry historical analysis, develops a narrative as evocative and purgative as a Greek tragedy. The social and cultural history juxtaposed over the battle itself brings a thrilling new sense of life to Trafalgar and raises serious questions about—and insights into—contemporary military and cultural events of the 21st century. The cultural examinations, in particular, rank among the finest essays on these topics in any historical period.

Fine shades of meaning easily disappear from the public consciousness as intellectual movements ebb and flow. "Nature" as a philosophical concept or metaphor meant something quite different to a Dissenting minister in 1700 versus a Romantic poet in 1800. Additionally, words that carry subconscious, visceral meanings for contemporaries of a particular time and place do not require extensive analysis or definitions during their own period, for most people understand them intuitively. It is this contemporary intuitive awareness—the emotive and intellectual presuppositions that Nelson and his officers assumed to represent the reality of their lives and careers—that Nicholson examines so skillfully.

Nicholson's thesis—that the culture which produced Nelson played an enormous role in the outcome of the battle—becomes increasingly compelling as Nicholson marshals an impressive array of historical evidence and astute cultural analysis. He argues that the technological differences between the fleets were not sufficient to explain the battle's outcome. Instead, a wide variety of forces were at play, both before and during the battle, to ensure its outcome before it ever began, beginning with the ideological conflict between England and France:

> Far more than any war of the 18th century, this was a triangular, ideological conflict. A post-revolutionary, authoritarian regime in France, profoundly subversive of all the accepted nostrums of pre-modern European society, was allied in Spain with the most conservative and backward of all the European powers, the training partner in the alliance, against a Britain which already embodied a distinctly modern Atlanticist set of values—commercial, libertarian, amoral and aggressive—but which remain, nevertheless, dressed in some very old-fashioned 'King and Country', monarchist 18th century establishment clothes.

The ideological basis for the conflict manifested itself throughout the entire naval system, including midshipmen training programs, supply systems, shipbuilding programs, taxes available to support naval shipyards, sources of timber, the relative respect the officers held toward basic seamanship, the speed with which English crews could fire ships' cannons due to extensive training, modern innovations such as citrus juice to combat scurvy (which the Spanish navy never adopted), hiring and promoting practices within the navies, and even the demography that supplied the types of officers and men. As Nicholson points out, a systematic problem existed in the French and Spanish navies that resulted in consistently high casualty rates compared to their British counterparts:

> It has been calculated that in the six major battles between British fleets and their French, Spanish, Dutch and Danish enemies (First of June 1794, Cape St Vincent 1797, Camperdown 1797, The Nile 1798, Copenhagen 1801 and Trafalgar 1805) the British lost a total of 5,749 men killed and wounded, of whom 1,483 were killed in battle. In the same engagements, their enemies lost 18,970 killed, wounded and taken prisoner, of whom 9,068 were killed in battle itself, a figure over six times greater than the number of British dead.

In the Battle of Trafalgar, that number would increase to roughly 10 to 1, an unsustainable attrition rate. As Nicholson makes clear, "[o]ver more than twelve years, in a wide variety of conditions and theatres of war, the British had savagely outkilled their opponents."

Nicholson's comparative analysis of the impact that political and ideological imperatives created among the respective fleets is highly instructive and well researched. Among the French, the political exigencies of ideological "virtue," and the terror with which it was enforced—guillotines among the fleets, political officers on board ship, instant dismissals of officers at sea—destroyed naval discipline, the ability of a fleet to work independently in the midst of battle, and the personal trust necessary to establish vigorous leadership among both sailors and officers. The Spanish, on the other hand, suffered from their unwillingness to alter naval traditions, including an aristocratic ideal of intrinsic honour that contrasted sharply with the views held by British officers:

> In this was the core difference between the middle-class British and upper-class Spanish officer corps. For an aristocrat, failure in battle does not erode his standing or his honour. He remains, as long as he has behaved with courage, the man he was born to be. For the younger son of the English gentry, or of a lawyer or merchant, as most British naval officers were, there is no such destined luxury. If he fails at sea, his standing is diminished; he has not won the prize money which will set him up at home; his

> name is not gilded with honour; he has failed in the same way that a failing entrepreneur has failed. To preserve his honour and his name, he needs to win. Victory is neither a luxury nor an ornament. It is a compulsion and a necessity.

The compulsion not simply to fight, but to win, together with the social realities that created that compulsion, makes up the largest portion of the book. Nicholson exposes British society of 1805 for the violent, explosive, ambitious and swaggering period that it was, as opposed to the sentimental Victorian version many readers might have encountered. "The 18th-century English," he writes, "were acknowledged throughout Europe for their violence, shooting highwaymen and seducing 17-year-olds, swearing and farting in public, congratulating themselves on their lack of the effeminate refinements which the French affected." Nicholson is particularly adept at examining the tensions between what the English were in the process of *becoming*: caught momentarily between the worlds of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, traditional aristocratic class structures and social mobility, the "gentleman of leisure"and an empire built on trade, impulsive violence and high literacy, shocking brutality and generous humanity.

All of these social and cultural forces were at work on the decks of Nelson's fleet on the 21st of October, 1805. Nicholson personalizes the ideological conflicts between the three powers through the figures of the Captains themselves—the distrust between the French and Spanish officers, the various responses to imminent battle, and the concepts of personal honour for the officers of each navy. He also examines, however, the personal relationships that existed between these officers and the men they commanded, particularly among the British. Nicholson spends a considerable amount of time unravelling the delicate balance maintained between Enlightenment tradition and Romantic impulses, a balance maintained by British officers who were expected to represent the qualities of both Rome *and* Greece, Virgil *and* Achilles, with all the contradictions implicit in these expectations. The very concept of military order reflects one of these paradoxes:

> Buried deep within the 1805 conception of the naval officer was a Roman and stoical image of distilled order, of an applied and balanced rationality which both constituted and oiled the fleet system itself. A fleet was an act of English civility. Its orderliness was its virtue, rationality its fuel, clarity its purpose, and in those qualities, the English had long congratulated themselves that they were different from foreigners… Needless

> to say, though, this straining for order, for the idea of the beautiful machine, was founded on an overriding sense of anxiety. Naval order was little more than a thin and tense veneer laid over something that was on the boundaries of the chaotic. Rationality was merely a dreamed of haven in all the oceans of contingency. Order, it turns out, was in many ways little more than a rationalisation of chaos, anxiety and corruption.

Nicholson's highly nuanced and finely tuned understanding of the tensions between the ideal and the real, and the complex interactions between them, informs his analysis of the psychological assumptions held by Nelson's officers as well. Order and heroism, inspiration and reason, make for strange companions if one expects psychological or ethical consistency. Heroism requires an acceptance, even a *pursuit*, of chaos and the intuition to maneuver within it. Intuition vies uneasily with reasoned contemplation. For Nelson, as for his officers, the psychology of warfare required not a consistent psychological position—Virgil ***or*** Achilles—but the judgment to discern the correct moment at which to abandon civilized behavior ***and*** the corresponding judgment and willpower to reassert personal restraint over those violent impulses when the battle had ended. Nelson's brilliance as a commander lay not in controlling his most brutal instincts, but in unleashing them in surprising and unexpected directions, knowing that the enemy could not withstand his hunger for battle and victory. It is "the introduction of chaos as a tool of battle" at Trafalgar that Nicholson understands. Nelson's method of command, as Nicholson astutely argues, "can be seen to run across all the strings: intemperate, charming, theatrical, anxious, impetuous, educative, curt, considerate, indifferent to death and danger, inspirational to those around him and above all fixed on attack and victory."

In addition to violence, however, Nicholson carefully unpacks the psychological realities of an officer's life—their loyalties, hopes, desires, assumptions, and needs. The interdependence of concepts such as honour, heroism, glory, duty, love, loyalty, zeal, boldness, brutality and compassion are brilliantly illuminated in Nicholson's prose, which includes a supple exposition of linguistic, literary and cultural history. In the shift from eighteenth-century Enlightenment to nineteenth-century Romanticism, the concept of heroism itself had undergone subtle but important changes. Nicholson astutely points out Nelson's ability to offer a new model for the military hero: "Nelson had an instinct for devastation and the people of England detected it in him. He knew in his bones that the public demand was for convincing and destructive violence, not a harmless strategic victory."

England's embrace of the sublime in art and literature coincided with Nelson spectacular ability to destroy ships, fleets, and people. For instance, Nicholson exposes the psychological and intellectual connections between Nelson and the world back home through his analysis of Wordsworth's new style of poetry:

> Direct, fierce, daringly bereft of ornament or complexity, focusing on the central task, impatient with frippery, allowing the plain and open approach its vigour and clarity, Wordsworth, at precisely the same historical and cultural moment, had become to poetry what Nelson was to battle. Both were driven by a desire for the primitive and the passionate, that dreamed-of unequivocally manly moment in the history of the world when daring coloured the acts of men…

In an age of "How-To" books on leadership and organizational management, it is refreshing to encounter such a nuanced and subtle exposition of warfare and the human psychology within it. Nicholson offers his readers a lucid and compelling narrative that invites us to see in the Battle of Trafalgar not simply the thoughts and feelings of men long dead, but the cultural and social impulses behind our own experiences in the Middle East today. Battles, he insists, are won and lost by complex human beings, who reflect and respond to the cultural forces at work around them. *Seize the Fire* is a must read for anyone contemplating the meaning of Trafalgar in 1805 or the War on Terror in the 21st century.

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