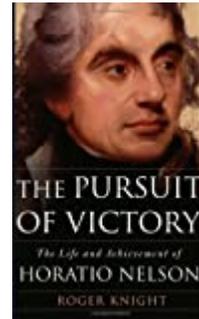




Roger Knight. *The Pursuit of Victory: The Life and Achievement of Horatio Nelson.* New York: Perseus Publishing, 2005. xxxv + 874 pp. \$38.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-465-03764-3.



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Biography of Horatio Nelson

The publication of Roger Knight's life of Horatio Nelson has been long eagerly awaited. Knight has previously published a number of articles on the dockyards of Nelson's time and written on Richard, Earl Howe.[1] Moreover, he was custodian of the naval manuscripts at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, where he went on to become Deputy Director.

Knight, in this book, has fulfilled all reasonable expectations. He sets its subject firmly within the framework of a great body of modern scholarship. Much of this work, such as Daniel Baugh's groundbreaking book, has been focused on relevant aspects of the British navy's rise to superiority over its French and Spanish rivals.[2] Other writers, such as John Brewer in *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688-1783* (1988), have traced the development of Britain's important financial advantages over its enemies. If British ships were, to the huge benefit of their fighting efficiency, kept at sea more than the warships of their adversaries, this cost money! Knight takes account of all these modern findings in his balanced reassessment of Nelson's achievement. Hagiography is entirely avoided. Knight's style is lucid and un-

affected. All the contents of the book (indicated in the heading above) are valuable for the reader progressing through the main narrative text of 558 pages. The index is helpfully arranged; indeed, Knight's organization is admirable.

Knight pauses twice, in separate chapters, to take stock of the nature and strength of the navy—a navy assembled, as it were, for Nelson's benefit. First, he describes the navy in 1771 that soon thereafter became involved in the American War. Then, he examines the enhanced navy of 1793 that undertook twenty years of struggle against revolutionary France and the subsequent menace of Napoleon. When Nelson joins the navy in 1771, we understand the nature of the service in which he develops as a young officer. The same can be said of the post-1793 period when he reaches the stage where he can demonstrate his hitherto latent powers in a major battle.

While always giving Nelson his due, Knight never glosses over the character flaws of his heroic subject. Nelson is seen essentially as a "driven" personality, craving distinction in an age increasingly colored by notions

of patriotic heroism, traceable back to the romantic (and entirely unrealistic) depiction of the youthful General James Wolfe dying picturesquely at the moment of victory in 1759. Nor does Knight take Nelson's side in dealing with that discreditable phase in 1798-99, when he is influenced, much for the worse, by his burgeoning involvement with Lady Hamilton at Naples and Palermo. Knight accepts that this interlude has left an indelible stain on Nelson's naval and personal record. But he traces the largely destructive course of Nelson's passion for Emma with appropriate sensitivity.

A feature of the book is the amount of attention paid to Nelson's earlier career. In 1787, when Nelson is captain in command of the Leeward Islands, he has to deal with problems caused by the "sailor prince" William Henry, later King William IV—then serving as a captain junior to Nelson. Nelson's sycophantic response to the presence of royalty, so baneful at Naples in 1799, is already clearly discernible.

But Nelson's flaws, including his earlier petulance in dealing with higher naval authority—only brought fully under control towards the end of his career—pale before his remarkable strengths. His outstanding physical and moral courage and his inspired handling of officers and men are repeatedly and effectively illustrated. Of Nelson's contemporaries, only Adam Duncan springs to mind as perhaps comparable in this area of leadership. It might have been said also that only Duncan showed equal ability in a battle to wrest conclusive victory from a problematical opportunity. But Camperdown, in 1797, amounts to but one victory against Nelson's four. Nelson was the key figure off Cape St. Vincent during the battle of John Jervis, Earl of St. Vincent. Nelson, at Jervis's instance, commanded at the Nile. He predominated (though officially but second in command) at Copenhagen and, subsequently, he displayed his potent diplomatic flair. Fourth, he finally commanded, with great material, moral, and political impact, at Trafalgar. These battles are all clearly and convincingly described. This also applies to Nelson's calamitous attack on Santa Cruz de Tenerife in 1797.

Knight's handling of a wide variety of related personalities, ranging from Nelson's own family to leading politicians and many officers in both armed services, is

a notable feature of the book. In dealing with Jervis, for instance, Knight demonstrates his expert knowledge and balanced judgement. Jervis's relationship with Nelson is clearly delineated in all its twists and turns.

Nelson's interceptive record was not noticeably brilliant, but Knight duly explains his problems, for instance in blockading Toulon, by paying proper attention to geographical and logistical detail. Knight's extensive yachting experience in Nelsonic waters, extending from Copenhagen down to relevant parts of the Mediterranean, gives him a good feel for Nelson's navigational problems under sail. At appropriate times, adverse winds, sudden gales, swirling currents, and tidal problems, are interwoven into the narrative. Knight also provides an expert account of the various kinds of ordnance so effectively used by Nelson's crews in all his major battles. While fully accepting that earlier British admirals like Edward Hawke had insisted on the merits (with inevitably inaccurate smooth bore guns) of fighting at very close range, Knight sees the British carronade as a conclusive influence on Nelson's tactics. For carronades to have their full effect, something near to touching distance was the ideal range. Nelson realized that fearful objective in all four of his major actions. The results, of course, were devastating for his less well armed and patchily trained opponents.

The final chapters provide a fascinating account of how the Nelsonic legend took root and went through its various historical stages. The "Summing Up" is masterly—a most satisfying ending to a great book.

Notes

[1]. In Peter Le Fevre and Richard Harding, eds., *Precursors of Nelson: British Admirals of the Eighteenth Century* (Mechanicsburg, Penn: Stackpole Books, 2000). See Edward M. Furgol, "Review of Peter le Fevre and Richard Harding, eds., *Precursors of Nelson: British Admirals of the Eighteenth Century*," H-Albion, H-Net Reviews, April, 2002 <[\\$>](http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=313331018450434)

[2]. Daniel A. Baugh, *British Naval Administration in the Age of Walpole* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965).

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