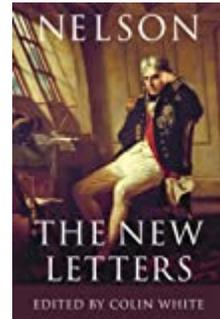




Colin White, ed. *Nelson: The New Letters*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005. xxix + 525 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84383-130-3.



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Published on H-Albion (June, 2006)

Horatio Nelson's Newly Found Letters

Colin White, an expert on Horatio Nelson and Deputy Director of the Royal Naval Museum at Portsmouth, selected these hitherto-unpublished letters from a large number assembled during the ongoing Nelson Letters Project, co-sponsored since 2001 by the National Maritime Museum. The large collection already published by Sir Nicholas Harris Nicholas remains the main published collection of letters written by the admiral.[1] But these *New Letters* include many which further illustrate Nelson's complex character and warlike abilities. Now that Roger Knight's well-balanced and comprehensive biography has also been published, White's book can most readily be seen as a useful and, in some particular instances, an indispensable addition to it.[2]

Knight gives an excellent account of Nelson's celebrated style of leadership. In that area, White's collection of complete letters is very welcome. In his book, he arranges the selected letters according to subject. While the reader might sometimes have preferred a straightforward chronological sequence that avoided any need to search ahead or duck back, his decision to arrange by subject pays off well in his important chapter entitled

"Leadership Style." White is an excellent writer. In his introduction to each chapter, he deftly indicates what is most notable in the selected letters. All the letters are conveniently numbered in a single series. This provision considerably eases the process of ducking about to find other letters of similar date tucked away in another chapter.

When dealing with Nelson's "Leadership Style," White twice uses, as a key term, the word "instinctual." One can see what he means, but would not "intuitive" have been better word? He goes on to list other outstanding features of Nelson's style, duly illustrated in the printed letters. In sum, Nelson was a wonderfully gifted encourager. He knew just how to convey "personal warmth" to an officer and to cement mutual "trust." This chapter adds usefully to Knight's admirable treatment of this key aspect of Nelson's performance as a naval officer.

Then, of course, there is the inevitable matter of Nelson's great passion for Emma, Lady Hamilton. In his chapter on "Lovers," White deals with the subject effectively. While he is fair to Frances Nelson, he is, like Knight, sensitively understanding of Nelson's need of

a more overtly emotional woman. In the final chapter, White remarks on the absence of the “jealous anguish” pervading Nelson’s earlier letters to Emma. White noticeably produces no such new letters for his chapter on the “Italian Campaign, September 1798-July 1799.” Emma is thus neatly excised from that fraught (Neapolitan) year in Nelson’s life which, as Knight notes, has left an indelible stain on Nelson’s character.

But it is in Nelson’s naval achievements that the main interest of the book resides. As it further illustrates, the flavor of Nelson’s intuitive flair for leadership is unrivaled. Nelson is a superb example for any naval officer serving in any age. He was at his best, as White shows, in handling admirals and captains placed under his command. But, as Knight pointedly reminds us, he dealt less happily, especially in his younger period, with some of those who happened to be his seniors.

When it comes to tactical method, however, White comes up, in a chapter on “The Nile Campaign, April-August 1798,” with something entirely new. He confirms the view that Nelson summoned only the more senior captains on board his flagship for tactical confabulations. The new item resides in his method of communicating his decisions to all of the captains in the fleet. In June 1798, after the consultation, Nelson issued a series of succinct tactical and cruising orders for the captains to place in their Public Order Books. He thereby catered for action on the open sea, as well as for the possibility of finally discovering the elusive French at anchor in a bay such as Aboukir. He even remarked on the likely strength and direction of the wind in such a location and (as Knight emphasizes but without reference to the Order Books) ordered every ship to prepare to anchor by the stern. This proved a critical provision when Nelson attacked the *Compte de Brueys*’s rather carelessly anchored fleet, as

evening befell, some six weeks later. Order Books again figure in Nelson’s system of tactical communication during his Baltic Command in January to June 1801. During and after the Battle of Copenhagen, another of White’s new items, “Nelson’s Sea Journal,” is of special interest. It gives Nelson’s own brief day-to-day account, including his personal impressions of the battle. It likewise includes his terse comments on the twists and turns of the diplomatic sequel, where Nelson, the diplomat, made all the running from a position of questionable strength.

Nelson’s extraordinary flair for winning the unre-served adherence of subordinate admirals and captains is again effectively displayed in White’s final chapter, “Build-Up to Battle, September-October 1805.” So is his solicitous touch in writing to the unfortunate Admiral Robert Calder.

In sum, this book is not a substitute for Knight’s balanced and comprehensive biography, but it serves as a very welcome adjunct to it. All of White’s introductions are well written, the illustrations are excellent, and the maps (all with north at the top) are admirably well presented.

Notes

[1]. H. N. Nicholas, ed., *The Dispatches and Letters of Vice-Admiral Lord Viscount Nelson*, 7 vols. (London: H. Colburn, 1844-1845).

[2]. Roger Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory: The Life and Achievement of Horatio Nelson* (London: Perseus, 2005). See review of this book on H-Albion, <[\\$](http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=h-albion&month=0604&week=b&msg=b/srgfl6rDBqXufnW7jS%2bg&user=&pw=$)>.

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Citation: Ruddock Mackay. Review of White, Colin, ed., *Nelson: The New Letters*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. June, 2006.

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