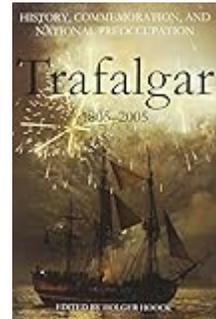




Holger Hoock, ed. *History, Commemoration and National Preoccupation: Trafalgar 1805-2005*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. x + 130 pp. \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-726406-5.



Reviewed by Antoine Capet (Université de Rouen)

Published on H-Albion (January, 2008)

Napoleon Ought Never to Be Confused with Nelson

The full quotation taken from *1066 And All That*, “Napoleon ought never to be confused with Nelson, in spite of their hats being so alike,” recurs at least twice in the book—and with good reason, if we refer to Linda Colley’s largely accepted thesis that the British primarily defined themselves as against the French in the period covered by the Battle of Trafalgar (October 21, 1805).[1] It is often difficult to find a unifying theme in a book derived from conference papers with additional chapters written later, but in this volume, it is clearly the significance of Horatio Nelson’s victory over Napoleon Bonaparte’s navy—then and now. This significance rests in its wider acceptance, including perception by its contemporaries and exploitation for national cohesion since then, as well as objective importance for Britain’s subsequent role in world affairs as far as it can be ascertained by the academic historian today. References to France are also always present in the background in that Pierre Nora’s seminal work on *lieux de m?moire* (*Realms of Memory* [1996-8]) underlies much of the thinking in the book, when it is not specifically quoted.

That the papers were first given at the British

Academy in January 2006 is an advantage, since they can take stock of the celebrations and commemorations of the bicentenary the year before. Indeed, this provides the theme of chapter 5, “Trafalgar: Back on the Map of British Popular Culture? Assessing the 2005 Bicentenary” by Mark Connelly. The important words in this title are, of course, “Back on the Map,” with the implication that it had disappeared from the map, where it once figured prominently. And, it is Colin White’s objective in chapter 2, “Official and Popular Commemoration of Nelson in 1805-6,” to explain how and to what extent Trafalgar was put on the map of British “realms of memory” at the time. But then again, the vocabulary is important: White uses the word “commemoration,” not “celebration.” Ludmilla Jordanova, in the introductory essay that forms chapter 1, attempts to tease out the complex relationship among memory, commemoration, memorization, and celebration. She, in fact, speaks of the “celebration of the 200th anniversary of Nelson’s death,” which is not the correct phrase as used by the official committee in charge of coordinating all the events and initiatives (p. 11). Margarette Lincoln and Martin Daunton tantalizingly tell us at the beginning of chapter

6 that this organization was launched in 1995 with the title Official Nelson Celebration Committee (ONCC) but that it “later” became the Official Nelson Commemoration Committee—the tantalizing element being, of course, that they do not tell us when and why, though the book indirectly gives us a number of elements (p. 103).

It naturally seems curious at first glance that White uses the “politically correct” word for the reactions in 1805-6, when, of course, the reader expects “celebration” on the part of the British populace of the time. One poor explanation would be that he is the director of the Royal Naval Museum, Portsmouth, and that he played a prominent role in mounting the exhibition at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, which is the object of the contribution by Lincoln and Daunton—thus having to use the “official” vocabulary. The real reason, however, is that he sets out to debunk the myth of a class consensus over the ceremonies and events that immediately followed the announcement of Nelson’s death on November 6, 1805. He, of course, does not deny the popular interest, but he points to the sailors’ unorthodox gesture during the funeral and to various letters and prints which show that some among the lower classes had their doubts. All the tensions that he mentions force us to recognize that there was none of that unanimous “celebration” which the later Whiggish idealization would have us believe.

With a gigantic leap, which is part of the collection’s format, the book then jumps to 1905. Once more, the title of chapter 3, “Remembering Victory—Commemorating Defeat? The Franco-British Trafalgar Centenary in 1905,” by Bertrand Taithe, will surprise many readers. Who expected the extremely nationalistic French of the Third Republic to participate in ceremonies at Portsmouth on Trafalgar Day in 1905? Who knew that the ceremony at the Royal Albert Hall ended not only with “God Save the King” but also “La Marseillaise”? Evidently, there was a subtext to all this, namely, the consolidation of the entente cordiale which was only one year old. The year 1905 was also when France passed legislation on the separation between church and state. Taithe excellently explains the complex internal and external politics of the Third Republic, and the men and mentalities behind them.

In contrast, it is not surprising (at least in the English-speaking provinces) that Nelson should be a hero in Canada, as explained by John M. Mackenzie in the next chapter, “Nelson the Hero and Horatio the Lover: Projections of the Myth in Canada, the Cinema, and Culture.” Providing three reasons for this (Nelson died in combat,

Nelson was sympathetic toward his sailors, and the navy is more important than the army for the British), Mackenzie argues that Nelson has always been a more popular hero than Arthur Wellesley Wellington. But then, whatever may be the value of the book as a measure of the “popularity” of historical characters, Connelly remarks that in *1066 And All That* “there is not one specific mention of Trafalgar, but there are three pages on Wellington, Waterloo, and the ‘gorilla war’ in Spain” (p. 85).

As Holger Hoock indicates in his general introduction, “Connelly heroically discharged the daunting commission to attend a wide range of academic and public bicentenary events, monitored many more in the media, and interviewed several groups of (primarily young) people over the course of 2005, with the aim of exploring the current stage of knowledge about, and national identification with, Nelson, Trafalgar, and Britain’s maritime past” (p. 3). The result is an overview of considerable interest, even though Connelly is the first to admit that his samples and figures do not meet the professional pollster’s “scientific” criteria. He starts from the premise that the objective of the ONCC was to “help to flick a Nelson switch deep in the souls of the British people,” and he saw it as his remit to ascertain how far that objective was met (p. 87). So, he went to see the Fleet Review in the Solent—one up on the ceremonies of 1905 in that no less than the president of the French Republic graced them aboard France’s largest aircraft carrier, the appropriately named *Charles de Gaulle*. His study of the reports in the *Sun* (“Yesterday’s Trafalgar celebration ... reminded us of what made this country great” [p. 90]) and in the *Guardian* (“Celebrating the carnage of Trafalgar is obscene” [p. 92])—poles apart as one might have expected—and his impressions of the reactions that he perceived among the public make fascinating reading. Even more striking are the findings of his visit to a grammar school in Canterbury, where he interviewed fourteen boys about thirteen years old: the authors of *1066 And All That* were right, “Nelson was confused with Napoleon”; and even after the considerable media coverage, “none knew the name of Nelson’s flagship” and “only seven had heard of the Battle of Trafalgar” (p. 100). And the members of the public who did take an interest often did so from a point of view which diverged from that of historians. “The section of the public that became involved with the commemorations did so on an emotional level and demanded that historians give them an unambiguous celebration of British achievement, but the academy was not quite happy with that role” (p. 101).

The ambiguity in the perception of the commemora-

tions as opposed to their clearly stated objectives is also in the forefront of the revealing discussion by Lincoln and Daunton, "The National Maritime Museum's 2005 Exhibition, 'Nelson & Napoleon': Intention and Reception." Interestingly, the comprehensive press review which they offer makes it clear that even well-intentioned journalists did not always see the points that the curators of the exhibition were trying to make. They had feared criticism "on the ground that a great British hero was devalued by comparison with a continental tyrant" (p. 105). But then the *Independent* (admittedly not a member of the rabidly nationalistic Murdoch stable) "noted that the suggestion of equivalence flattered Nelson" and "French television interviewers" of the curators "insinuated that perhaps the exhibition originated in a desire to crow over French defeat" (pp. 109, 114). The exhibition suffered from an extreme stroke of bad luck, since the official opening was due to take place on the night of the bomb outrages and had to be canceled. Moreover, massive press coverage naturally went to the terrorist attacks for the following weeks. The museum's target had to be redirected toward people who did not have to cross central London to go to Greenwich. Even with all these handicaps, the exhibition attracted ninety-one thousand visitors, "predominantly elderly and male," though "from a wider socio-economic base than is currently usual for museums" (pp. 112, 116). One somehow senses an undertone of disappointment through the chapter—but then the ambitious educational objectives of museum authorities are seldom fully met. The authors' thoughtful general reflection with the benefit of hindsight is applicable to all forms of what is usually termed "public history": "What should be commemorated, and in what manner, raises highly contentious and significant questions not only about definitions of leadership, but also of national identity and citizenship" (p. 117).

Peter Hicks concludes his superbly researched chapter, "The Battle of Austerlitz, Collective Amnesia, and the Non-Commemoration of Napoleon in France," on much the same note: "Remembering need not be jingoistic tub-thumping.... If war is the continuation of politics by other means, then commemoration is the continuation of history by other means" (p. 125). Curiously, however, none of the authors point out that the only festering sore in

Anglo-French relations when naval encounters are discussed is the tragedy of Mers el-Kébir (Oran) on July 3, 1940, not Trafalgar. The participation of the British ambassador, with a delegation of men who served on the battleship *Hood* (the flagship at Oran, sunk by the *Bismarck* on May 24, 1941) at the annual ceremonies of homage to the dead organized at Brest in 2006 was widely perceived as a landmark in the process of reconciliation between the two navies.

Unusually, the book has no bibliography—perhaps because a comprehensive bibliography on Nelson and Trafalgar (let alone Napoleon) would have had to be far bigger than the contributions proper. The eleven illustrations provided to support the text are superbly informative. Probably for reasons of cost, however, the only painting—Benjamin West's *The Immortality of Nelson* (1807)—is in black and white. Fortunately, the National Maritime Museum's website has a magnificent full-color reproduction.[2] This is no ordinary book on Trafalgar or Nelson. It, in fact, presupposes a fair knowledge of the events and context of the battle. What makes its worth is its wealth of insights into and concrete examples "at the coal face" of the complexity of the subject underlined by Jordanova from the theoretical point of view, a rich exploration of undeniable interest to both the historian (or historiographer) and museologist.

Notes

[1]. Walter Carruthers Sellar and Robert Julian Yeatman, *1066 And All That: A Memorable History of England, Comprising All the Parts You Can remember, Including 103 Good Things, 5 Bad Kings and 2 Genuine Dates* (London: Methuen, 1930), 97; and Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992).

[2]. Visible on: <http://www.nmm.ac.uk/collections/nelson/viewRepro.cfm?reproID=BHC2905&picture=1#content>. The painting itself is exhibited in a special room of the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, devoted to Nelson, with other prints also reproduced in the book. With its showcases full of Nelson memorabilia (paraphernalia for the unconvinced), the room wonderfully illustrates the cult of the hero as discussed in several chapters.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

Citation: Antoine Capet. Review of Hoock, Holger, ed., *History, Commemoration and National Preoccupation: Trafalgar 1805-2005*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. January, 2008.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14022>

Copyright © 2008 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.