The ‘secret’ history of the Anglosphere

Daniel Mandel

October 21 marked the bicentenary of the battle fought off Cape Trafalgar near the Spanish port of Cadiz between the Royal Navy’s 27 ships-of-the-line (today we would call them battleships, or combat vessels) commanded by Vice-Admiral Horatio, Viscount Nelson and the combined Franco-Spanish fleet of 33 ships-of-the-line commanded by Admiral Pierre Villeneuve.

Seventeen French and Spanish ships captured and an eighteenth blown up, for the loss of not a single English ship, marking the greatest naval victory in the annals, was itself the product of high drama. It came at the end of a two-year invasion threat to England posed by a Napoleonic France busy subduing the European continent, with England soon to be facing the peril bereft of allies.

That scenario, familiar to those who lived through or read about the Second World War, marks Prime Minister William Pitt as Winston Churchill’s great predecessor. Indeed, there is something very twentieth century about this famous battle. Like the Second World War, it was preceded by an unsatisfactory scrap of paper (Amiens in 1801, Munich in 1938) and ruinous military economies that solved nothing and weakened England before its supreme test. Similarly, the events leading up to it involved the massing of a French flotilla along the English Channel for an invasion, called off by Napoleon only once it became clear that he would be unable to command the Channel and land his soldiers. In 1940, Hitler was to call off his own invasion, Operation Sea Lion, when the Luftwaffe failed to the same end to obtain mastery over the skies. William Pitt, like Winston Churchill 135 years later, had the Herculean labour of keeping England secure, playing for time and working assiduously to open new fronts against the Continental dictator, even as allies succumbed to his onslaught.

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Part, then, of what distinguishes the naval victory of Trafalgar from its many contemporaries—the so-called Glorious First of June (1794), St Vincent (1797), Camperdown (1797), even Nelson’s own earlier victories at the Nile (1798) and Copenhagen (1801)—is the high stakes that the Napoleonic war had assumed by 1805. Truth to tell, the invasion threat to England had passed by the time the two fleets caught sight of each other on the morning of 21 October 1805, but Nelson’s victory put paid to any future threat of invasion. The battle had a devastating finality—as Nelson intended.

With Nelson, the age of fleets massing in parallel columns and exchanging broadsides gave way to riskier yet more rewarding tactics. Despite an almost dead calm, he ordered a frontal attack of his sailing ships in two columns to break the Franco-Spanish line. The aim was to bring overwhelming strength to bear on Villeneuve’s centre and rear where superior English gunnery would prove decisive before his vanguard could come to his aid. A bold plan that worked handsomely, but it involved heavy losses to Nelson’s leading ships, not least his flagship, the *Victory*, which was unable to return fire until breaking the line and coming up alongside an opponent.

Fate brought the *Victory* alongside the *Redoutable*, the best trained vessel in the French fleet, commanded by a fearless captain, Jean Etienne Lucas, who nearly succeeded at one point in boarding the *Victory*. The Gallic reputation for foul play in the British

psyche may well owe something to the French practice of placing musketeers in the masts, firing down on the British decks below—hardly a tactic that could win a battle, but one which resulted in Nelson being struck down at the moment of his greatest triumph, though he lived long enough to hear confirmation of it from the mouth of his flag captain, Thomas Hardy.

A humble sailor wrote home after the battle that the news of his death caused 'chaps that fought like the devil [to] sit down and cry like a wench'.

In short, high historical moment, tactical brilliance, overwhelming victory and deep human interest imbue Nelson and Trafalgar with unmatched pathos. But there is also more to Trafalgar than its epic quality. The battle holds historical significance beyond the curious twentieth-century parallels already mentioned.

If there has been a constant theme to Britain's place in Europe, it has been to stand apart as its keeper. Alone amongst its major powers, it has never sought to conquer or subdue it. Resolving that no-one else should do so led it over the centuries to ally itself with any and all European powers willing to frustrate such designs. In the main, it worked, even when—as in two world wars—its success came at tragic cost. The contemporary British debate over joining Europe in political-economic union or standing apart takes place in its shadow.

Yet even were Britain to go the way of Europe, the Anglosphere it created over centuries—made possible by the naval supremacy bequeathed by Nelson—seems here to stay. Neither economically, ethnically nor geographically unified, the Anglosphere is a network of countries of British norms and traditions sufficiently established in the twentieth century to have already been the subject of a serious book (James C. Bennett's *The Anglosphere Challenge*) speculating on its future prospects.

In a world of politically centralising, bureaucratic tendencies, a vigorously sovereign, free market, democratic Anglosphere might yet prove a corrective. If so, it will be owed in large measure to British maritime supremacy established for a century at Trafalgar, which permitted the expansion of British influence and institutions via trade and empire. And if not, the fact will remain that British naval power has been on the whole a powerful, benign force that helped shape the better contours of our world.

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The fleet of Lord Exmouth, one of Nelson's 'band of brothers', bombarded Algiers in 1816, putting an end to the centuries-long traffic in Christian slaves by Barbary pirates. Within a generation of Trafalgar, in 1829, Britain had abolished the *sutee* (ritual immolation of widows on husbands' funeral pyres) in India by a firm act of what today would be called—and perhaps therefore damned as—imperialism. The African slave trade and the wider problem of piracy were also epidemics that the Royal Navy helped to eradicate. Britain's mastery of the seas also stood the United States in good stead during the American Civil War, when it thereby prevented the intervention and meddling of other powers that might well have detrimentally affected the Union's fortunes.

And so the heritage of Nelson and Trafalgar looms large, but perhaps dimly, over our culture, to be glimpsed today in a profusion of publications. New Nelson biographies have poured from the presses, including the first volume of a projected two by John Sugden, while other new works on Trafalgar have jockeyed for attention with reissues of classics by Sir Julian Corbett and Dudley Pope. Films and television serials are churned out of C.S. Forrester's Hornblower books and Patrick O'Brian's more recent Aubrey–Maturin volumes—both set in the age of Nelson.

'England expects that every man will do his duty'—Nelson's penultimate signal to the fleet before the battle—was once known to every Englishman and still draws a responsive nod in educated quarters of modern Australia. Even Australian geography bears the record—the Sydney suburb of Bronte is not named for the sister authors of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, but for Nelson, whom the King of Naples made Duke of Bronte in Sicily after the battle of the Nile. And the Melbourne suburb of Collingwood is named for his second-in-command at Trafalgar.

In Nelson's England, the year-long celebrations have been many and varied but also at times curiously anaemic.

While France has attempted refurbishing by law its history in textbooks so that its 'school programs recognise in particular the positive character of the French overseas presence, notably in North Africa', Britain seems preoccupied with an opposite vice. With the Trafalgar celebrations, the Franco-Spanish defeat, which was its only object, has been assiduously played down in deference to the sensitivities of these sturdy allies whose troops are to be found nowhere at Britain's side in Iraq. Instead, a re-enactment in May was produced of 'an early 19th century sea battle' between a 'blue fleet' and a 'red fleet', leaving one to wonder what historical distinction inspired the effort—and in that can be detected today's ambivalence over what Trafalgar signified—and should signify—for Britain and the world.

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