O
tober 21 marked the bicen-
tenary 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 Vil-
leneuve.

Seventeen French and Spanish
ships captured and an eighteenth
blown up, for the loss of not a sin-
gle 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 cen-
tury about this famous battle. Like the
Second World War, it was preceded by
an unsatisfactory scrap of paper (Ami-
ens in 1801, Munich in 1938) and ru-
inous 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. Wil-
liam 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.

Part, then, of what distinguishes
the naval victory of Trafalgar from its
many contemporaries—the so-called
Glorious First of June (1794), St Vin-
cent (1797), Camperdown (1797),
even Nelson’s own earlier victories
at the Nile (1798) and Copenha-
gen (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 ex-
changing broadsides gave way to
riskier yet more rewarding tactics. De-
spite 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 Vil-
leneuve’s centre and rear where supe-
rior English gunnery would prove de-
cisive 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 break-
ing 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

There is more to Trafalgar than its epic quality.

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ory at Melbourne University and
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dtablishment of Israel: The Under-
cover Zionist (Routledge, London,
2004).
psychic 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 is a network of countries of British inheritance, established in the twentieth century to fashion a network of countries of British inheritance, established in the twentieth century to fashion a network of countries of British inheritance, established in the twentieth century to fashion a network of countries of British inheritance, established in the twentieth century to fashion a network of countries of British inheritance, established in the twentieth century to fashion a network of countries of British inheritance, established in the twentieth century to fashion a network of countries of British heritage—seems here to stay.

Even were Britain to go the way of Europe, the Anglosphere it created seems here to stay.

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 sultun (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 recognize 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.