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# CURRENT BOOKS

REVIEWS OF NEW AND NOTEWORTHY NONFICTION

## When Britain Was Great

Reviewed by Martin Walker

TWENTY YEARS AFTER AMERICA'S SUCCESSFUL struggle for independence toppled the initial British Empire, its successor was established through three brilliant naval victories won by Admiral Horatio Nelson (1758–1805). The first came in 1797, at the Battle of Cape St. Vincent, off the coast of Portugal, when Nelson departed from traditionally rigid battle tactics to break the Spanish line and allow his commander, Admiral John Jervis, to crush Spain's fleet. The second came the following year, when Nelson's well-trained squadron of 14 ships caught the French fleet at anchor in Aboukir Bay, off the Egyptian coast, and captured or destroyed 11 of the French ships of the line. As a result of these two battles and the subsequent defeat of the French army left marooned in Egypt, Britain assumed control of the Mediterranean Sea, and thus of the route to India, and held it for another 150 years.

By 1800, the Royal Navy was larger than the combined fleets of France, Spain, and the Netherlands, the next three largest naval powers. In 1805, after his famous affair with Lady Emma Hamilton and a sea battle that asserted British control of the Baltic, Nelson was killed while annihilating what remained of the French and Spanish fleets in his third

great victory over the old naval enemies, the Battle of Trafalgar. He thus assured his small, aggressive, and rapidly industrializing island an unprecedented command of the world's oceans, one that was to endure well into the 20th century, until Britain's impoverishment through Pyrrhic victories in two world wars.

The 200th anniversary of Trafalgar, in October, was accordingly the occasion for prolonged nostalgic celebration in Britain, as well as special exhibitions and a host of books. The most scholarly and important of the books is *The Pursuit of Victory*, by Roger Knight, the veteran curator of Britain's National Maritime Museum.

Knight manages to knock down many of the Nelson legends concocted by patriotic 19th-century hagiographers. To begin with, Nelson was as prepared to flog his seamen as most other captains of the day (though not as much as his devoted flag captain, to whom he supposedly uttered the celebrated words,

**The Pursuit of Victory:**  
The Life and Achievement of Horatio Nelson.

By Roger Knight.  
Basic Books.  
874 pp. \$35

**After the Victorians:**  
The Decline of Britain in the World.

By A. N. Wilson.  
Farrar, Straus & Giroux.  
609 pp. \$32.50



Admiral Horatio Nelson was struck down at the moment of his greatest triumph, at the Battle of Trafalgar, on October 21, 1805. His almost mythical status in the pantheon of British heroes has, until now, stymied attempts to produce a scholarly, unbiased appraisal of his life.

as he lay dying, “Kiss me, Hardy”). He owed his astronomical early rise in rank to the patronage of his highly influential uncle, who was comptroller of the Navy Board. Nelson almost ruined his career, and earned the lasting displeasure of King George III, by his sycophantic deference to the king’s unruly and undisciplined son, Prince William, deservedly known as “Silly Billy,” who served under Nelson in the West Indies. Nelson was capable of harebrained military ventures, such as the disastrous 1797 assault on one of the Canary Islands, Tenerife, during which he lost an arm. He was also insubordinate, quick-tempered, and a strong supporter of slavery. Knight even presents evidence suggesting that Captain Thomas Foley of the *Goliath*, and not Nelson, was the one who spotted the opportunity to sail inshore of the anchored French fleet at the Battle of the Nile and hammer the unmanned sides of the French ships with the crucial first broadsides.

Nelson could afford to take risks because British ships, with their superior crews and gun

technology, could almost invariably outmatch the equivalent ships of other navies—at least until the advent of the equally well-trained and -armed and much heavier American frigates of the War of 1812. Not all British sailors, however, lived up to expectations, and Knight breaks the long code of silence that has protected those who hung back at Trafalgar, or fired wildly or not at all. Nelson’s famous Trafalgar proclamation, “England expects every man will do his duty,” appears to have been more pointed reminder to the faint-hearted than rallying cry to a band of brothers.

Such was Nelson’s place in the pantheon of British heroes throughout the era of naval dominance that Knight’s scholarly new biography, the first to be rooted solidly in contemporary documents and letters, might not have been possible until the sun finally set on the old Royal Navy and the empire it secured. Erudite and judicious, with no time for vainglorious legends or Victorian bowdlerization, Knight has written a

post-patriotic, and certainly a post-imperial, book on the central naval figure in the imperial saga.

By contrast, the novelist A. N. Wilson's history of Britain in the first half of the 20th century—or, more precisely, from the death of Queen Victoria, in 1901, to the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, in 1953—is so steeped in imperial nostalgia that it is almost pickled. This is not a lethal criticism; indeed, it might not be possible for a writer to get under the skin of post-Victorian Britain without some instinctive sympathy for the era's class-consciousness and its myths of racial and political superiority. But when Wilson writes of “the obviously sensible option” of neutrality in 1914, or suggests that Hitler might have allowed the British Empire to continue as part of a negotiated peace in 1941 before turning to attack the Soviet Union, a rather odd agenda seems to emerge, which then blends into the old High Tory theme that what “stood in the way of American hegemony was British imperialism.” Accordingly, in Wilson's account, World War II usefully unfolds as a way that “America could kill two birds, not one. They could hope to rid Europe of a dangerous German dictatorship, but in doing so they could also reduce British power to negligible levels.”

This has become a rather more common theme in British political and intellectual circles of late, since the Bush administration and the Iraq war kicked awake a dormant anti-Americanism. And Wilson's narrative skills, eye for an anecdote, and entertaining style should ensure a considerable audience for this lively, provocative, and thoroughly idiosyncratic history. His account is peppered with splendid brief portraits of such figures as Kaiser Wilhelm, suffering an oedipal complex for his English mother; the progressive novelist D. H. Lawrence, urging mass euthanasia for the sick, the halt, and the maimed; and Queen Elizabeth (the wife of King George VI), using her umbrella to rap the impertinent fingers of black children who reached out to touch her limousine on a South African tour.

It is hard to dislike a book that combines such wide reading in the literature and letters of the period

with a salacious taste for upper-class gossip. Wilson ranges from the fashion for circumcision among upper-class Englishmen to the possibility that Lord Mountbatten slept with Noel Coward and Pandit Nehru—and that Nehru also slept with Mountbatten's wife while he and Mountbatten were negotiating the independence of India. Yet running through Wilson's narrative as a constant theme—indeed, as something close to an obsession—is America as the looming heir of empire. For instance, he construes Henry James's *The Golden Bowl* (1904), “arguably the greatest novel in the English language,” as an allegory of change, in that its American heroine stays in Old Europe “not as a pathetic exile—as so many previous Jamesian heroines had done—so much as an occupying power.”

“One of the sure signs that Britain was finished as a civilization, long before two world wars had bankrupted the British economy and dismantled the British Empire, was the cultural emptiness of the years 1900-1950,” Wilson

asserts. He dismisses E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) as a poor book given undeserved fame by its political correctness, slights D. H. Lawrence and H. G. Wells, dismisses James Joyce as an Irish exile, and sneers at Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon as “good-bad poets” (a concept he borrows from T. S. Eliot). In Wilson's judgment, this cultural hollowness symbolized the way “Britain was poised to die” while “America was poised, half-desperately, half-unwillingly, to take over the world.”

Yet there are hints elsewhere in the book that Wilson understands very well the grander context: Far more than by British decline, the first half of the 20th century was characterized by a general suicide of traditional European civilization that began in 1914 and became pathological by 1939. To pursue his theme of the American looting of the British tradition, Wilson explains at length how the Allied war effort depended on British scientific breakthroughs

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in radar, nuclear science, computing, and cryptography that were freely shared with the Americans. Unless matters scientific are to be excluded from any catalog of cultural achievement, Wilson thus confounds his own argument.

What Wilson is trying to say is entirely sensible: Britain freely chose to sacrifice its empire in order to defeat the attempts of the Kaiser, Hitler, and Stalin to achieve dominance over Europe. In one of his excellent subessays, he explores the origins of the song that accompanied the music Edward Elgar wrote for the funeral of King Edward VII in 1910. “Land of hope and glory, mother of the free,” it begins, and Wilson

acknowledges that most British people, and those of not a few other nationalities, would recognize the validity in those words—not an evocation of heroics in the Nelson mold, perhaps, but a determination to fight for what is seen as right and never to surrender. That double determination is the common bond that joins Nelson at Trafalgar, Lloyd George in 1918, Churchill in 1940, and possibly even Margaret Thatcher holding on to the Falklands in 1982, all in defense of their sceptered isle. ■

■ Martin Walker is the editor of United Press International. His most recent books are *America Reborn: A Twentieth-Century Narrative in Twenty-Six Lives* (2000) and the novel *The Caves of Périgord* (2002).

## Unmasking the Terrorists

Reviewed by Terry McDermott

THE EARLIEST ATTEMPTS TO discern the root causes of 9/11 began errantly, with what seemed a simple question: Why do they hate us? The us-them taxonomy was further reinforced by widespread talk of a clash of civilizations, as if such a clash were not only well under way but unstoppable. They're *evil*, the president told us repeatedly. They hate modernity, freedom, democracy, even skyscrapers.

With this as the operative explanation, little wonder that the dominant 9/11 narrative, which emerged almost before the dust settled in lower Manhattan and persists today, depicts the attackers as crazed fanatics. A great deal has been written about the 19 hijackers based on minuscule information, and one consequence has been the proliferation of rumor and its solidification into fact. You'll find conclusions strung on the thinnest of threads, almost all supporting the “fanatics who hate us” angle.

In late September 2001, when *The Los Angeles*

### THE MAKING OF A TERRORIST:

Recruitment, Training, and Root Causes.

Edited by James J. F. Forest. Praeger. 3 vols., 1,214 pp. \$300

*Times* assigned me to examine the roots of the attacks, this angle shaped my initial reporting. We knew by then that Mohamed Atta, the presumed lead pilot, had grown up in an ordinary household in Cairo, attended university, and gone to Germany for graduate school. I set out to learn what had transformed this mild-mannered architect into the crazed killer of 9/11, and, by extension, *who* had effected that transformation, who had recruited and turned him.

It took three years to find the answer. In the end, I was forced to admit that Atta and his cohorts were not recruits but volunteers. They delivered themselves. And they did so for a variety of reasons: broad historical trends, including the long, slow decline of the Arab world; specific political objections, including American support of Israel; devout if wholly misguided religious belief; psychological alienation; and self-aggrandizement. The very ordinariness of the motivations implies that these were not exceptional men. Rather, they were so common that there are likely to be a great many more just like them. I argued in my writing that unless we understand what drives these people,