Review: Nelson: The Man And The Legend By Terry Coleman Essay, Research Paper

The man on the burning deck Nelson: The Man and the Legend Terry Coleman424pp, Bloomsbury There never was such a hero as Admiral Lord Nelson, the flawed national treasure who could, as Terry Coleman points out, be “feted and feasted…ridiculed and caricatured” at one and the same time. Also vilified, even now, by Italians for his shameful behaviour at Naples in 1799, when he repudiated a treaty that had just been made with rebels against their Bourbon king allowing them safe conduct to France. Such was Nelson’s detestation of all republicans that the moment they left their refuge he selected a large number of ringleaders and had them all hanged. That same antipathy, of course, fuelled his appetite for war against Napoleon’s navy, which propelled him to his glorious death at Trafalgar in 1805 and the capture there of 17 French and Spanish ships, over half their combined fleets. This was indeed a famous victory, as well as an individual tragedy, which the Royal Navy remembers still as the most momentous day in its calendar. It is made the more fascinating because it seems conceivable that Nelson had a death wish that afternoon. He was worn out, not only by long active service, but by perpetual ill-health that had nothing to do with war, a body racked with many long-standing wounds and, as much as anything, the disapproval and ostracism he suffered as a result of his infatuation with Emma Hamilton, and his consequent dismissal of his wife, Fanny. Only a heedless idiot, or a man who had had enough, would have stood so conspicuously on Victory’s quarterdeck. As Nelson’s latest biographer says: “It did not need marksmanship to hit an admiral covered in stars at 50 feet…” Coleman made his own reputation with a splendid piece of original research into the 19th-century railway navvies in 1965. The same characteristics that made it the classic text on its subject are apparent in this book. It is not simply the elegant style delivered with magisterial authority, or the sharp understanding of what’s significant and what isn’t, or even the fine storyteller’s gift; it is, above all, the sheer diligence with which the author has done his research. A book on Nelson by C S Forester, writer of the Hornblower novels, refers to “the large mass of his letters and dispatches… with a large remainder to be found and read by those who can make the opportunity for themselves” – which is a lazy man’s cop-out if ever I read one. Coleman, on the other hand, has seized that opportunity, and the result is vastly illuminating. He is wonderfully sceptical of legends that have merely been handed on unexamined, and thus we learn that Nelson never put a telescope to his blind eye at Copenhagen – he simply ignored Signal 39 from Rear Admiral Parker, which told him to break off the engagement. For he was a wilful man who invariably went his own way, irrespective of instructions from above, from the moment he disobeyed Sir John Jervis as an unusually young post-captain at Cape St Vincent and captured two Spanish vessels as a result. He got away with this sort of thing, of course, because he was almost always successful, but it was one of the reasons why he became so disliked by many contemporaries, especially after he took up with the Hamiltons and began to steal Sir William’s wife, which made him distinctly unrespectable in high society as well as insubordinate. He was also a pushy fellow, very keen on honours, good at self-promotion, extremely obliging if he thought it was going to help his career along (he was not, however, in the same class as his odious brother William, a clergyman who endeavoured to ascend the ecclesiastical hierarchy by hanging onto Horatio’s coat-tails). On the other hand, Nelson – who was always known as Horace by their father, another parson – had a number of qualities, quite apart from exceptional bravery. He was uncommonly cheerful about whichever ship he happened to be commanding at the time, even if she was a leaky old tub and cranky to sail. He made light of the wounds he sustained at regular intervals, four of which would each have permanently flattened a lesser man. He could be very generous, and not only with self-advancement in view, never stinting Fanny after their separation and providing well for her in his will. She retained an affection for him that outlasted the pain she had borne, coming to a secret arrangement with the official who organised Nelson’s funeral that her carriage, with their crests entwined, should take part in the procession to St Paul’s. And though 19 admirals refused to attend, 48 of Nelson’s old shipmates from the lower deck were conspicuously there, and afterwards divided between them Victory’s biggest ensign as precious souvenirs. This is a superb biography and, although I haven’t read all the books about Nelson written since Harrison’s life of 1806, I should be surprised if Coleman’s were not the best of them.