

After Nelson...? Viva Collingwood!
Max Adams

Trafalgar and the death of Nelson spell the end of the naval wars against Napoleon - it's as convenient a historical book-end as the battle of Hastings. In fact nothing could be further from the truth, and a year after the bicentenary of the battle it is about time we paid tribute to the man who took over when Nelson died and devoted the rest of his life to securing naval supremacy against France. That man was Cuthbert Collingwood.

Despite the destruction of half of the combined Franco-Spanish fleet at Trafalgar in October 1805, Britain's strategic position was more perilous than ever a year later. Her great war prime minister William Pitt was dead and Napoleon's armies had won a crushing victory against the Austrian empire at Austerlitz in December. The British fleet, weakened as it had been by battle and constant blockade, now had to keep control of the Mediterranean at all costs. And its Commander-in-Chief, the newly ennobled Admiral Lord Collingwood, had perhaps as hard a task as any naval commander has ever faced. He must bottle up the French and Spanish squadrons in Cadiz, Cartagena and Toulon. He must prevent a French military invasion of Sicily across the straits of Messina, just three miles wide. He must reinforce delicate diplomatic relations with a bewildering array of deys, beys, pashas, sultans, emperors, kings and queens of the Mediterranean states - many of them unstable - and all the while keep a fleet of eighty ships at sea in all weathers, with little or no support from home. Ships and men alike were worn past the point of exhaustion.

It was not as if Collingwood had no private worries of his own. He had not seen his wife and two daughters since 1803 (and he would never see them again). He had lost his closest friend and comrade Nelson as well as most of his furniture, cutlery and livestock at Trafalgar. And as if these privations were not enough, his recent elevation to a Barony had turned the head of his long-suffering dog Bounce, as he complained in a letter to his wife in April 2006...

I am out of all patience with Bounce. The consequential airs he gives himself since he became a right honourable dog are insufferable. He considers it beneath his dignity to play with commoners' dogs, and truly thinks that he does them grace when he condescends to lift up his leg against them. This, I think, is carrying the insolence of rank to the extreme, but he is a dog that does it.

Although he retained his acid wit to the end Collingwood was rapidly becoming a grumpy old man. A hater of flogging, and unable to tempt the enemy's fleets out for a last, truly decisive battle, he vented his frustrations in letters home on the French: 'in their best days they were ever a set of fawning, dancing, impious hypocrites'; and on Bonaparte in particular, 'as much villainy as ever disgraced nature in the person of one man'.

A Geordie from a large but poor family, he had gone to sea at the age of thirteen in 1761. He had served as a midshipman and master's mate for fourteen years before gaining his lieutenancy, oddly enough after a land battle: Bunker's Hill in 1775. Here he ferried men and munitions across Boston harbour in support of the disastrous assault of British redcoats on Colonel William Prescott's Massachusetts militia. His coolness and bravery under fire were duly noted. Collingwood later survived shipwreck and two courts martial after one of which, though acquitted, he was admonished for 'want of cheerfulness'.

From the start of his naval career he spent a staggering forty-four years at sea. He fought in three of the great fleet actions of the age, including the battle of Cape St Vincent in 1797 where he saved his friend Nelson's life by taking on four Spanish battleships and destroying them with an awesome display of gunnery that was never bettered in the age of sail. He somehow found time to marry the daughter of the mayor of Newcastle and have two daughters, whose education he believed should include spherical trigonometry, history, swimming and rifle shooting. He liked to gossip, to warm his backside against a blazing Northumbrian fire and to tend his cabbage patch. He carried acorns in his pockets when ashore, to plant in hedgerows and patches of waste ground so that England should never run out of oak for her ships. And he wept openly when he paid off his ships' companies - it was like losing one's family, he told a friend.

Now, with the tremendous burden of responsibility for holding the Mediterranean against Napoleon's armies and navy, Collingwood was wearing himself out from constant worry and a work schedule that would have killed a man half his age. Throughout 1806 and 1807 he stayed at sea, never anchoring his flagship for fifteen months, never letting his guard down in case the enemy's fleets should manage to get to sea. His obituarist later drew an evocative portrait of Collingwood during this time when he often spent all night on deck scanning the horizon for enemy ships, 'his grey hair streaming to the wind, with eyes like an eagle's, on the watch'.

Much of his time was taken up with Sicilian affairs. The King and Queen of Sicily, at whose court in Palermo Nelson had been seduced by Emma Hamilton, were shiftless intriguers; at one and the same time begging Collingwood to secure them against the French and courting Napoleon to protect them from England. Though he succeeded in preventing invasion Collingwood kept the court firmly at arms length; his letters to them, if an admiral may be so to a king and queen, were patronising.

His great failing was that he was a poor deputer. When a sensitive mission to the court at Constantinople, known as the Sublime Porte, miscarried Collingwood made the two-thousand-mile journey there himself. He wrote home, 'the Ambassador to the Sublime Porte was tenacious of diplomatic forms. I overthrew them to maintain the country's honour and determined in a day what he would have prosed over for a year.' The British government could hardly believe their luck in finding a man so exactly fitted for what must have seemed such an impossible portfolio.

It is hard to know just where Collingwood acquired his skill in diplomacy. He became, despite a very short formal education, an accomplished historian. He spoke French and Spanish. He sang poor Bounce to sleep with Shakespearean sonnets that he had himself adapted; and his letters are among the most beautifully written of the Georgian age. His famous Trafalgar Dispatch, written in a cramped cabin during the appalling hurricane that blew up after Trafalgar, is an extraordinary

piece of writing. In the draft, which survives in his own elegant copperplate, there is not a single crossing-out. It contains this moving passage on Nelson, surely amongst the most beautiful ever written at sea...

...my heart is rent with the most poignant grief for the death of a friend, to whom, by many years' intimacy, and a perfect knowledge of the virtues of his mind, which inspired ideas superior to the common race of men, I was bound by the strongest ties of affection; - a grief to which even the glorious occasion in which he fell, does not bring the consolation which perhaps it ought.

Never were Collingwood's skills more perfectly brought to bear than in the months following the Spanish uprising of May 1808: the Dos de Mayo so evocatively captured in Goya's famous firing-squad painting. Long before the British Army's expeditions under Moore and Wellesley, Collingwood saw the uprising as a chance to split the Franco-Spanish alliance and gain a foothold in continental Europe for the first time in the war. He arrived in his flagship off Cadiz during June and immediately offered his services to the Junta there.

It might come as a surprise to find that Collingwood who, after all, had been the victorious enemy commander at Trafalgar, was well-received in Spain. When he set foot ashore forty thousand Spaniards came onto the streets shouting 'Viva Collingwood!' and he was given a standing ovation at the opera. Nelson would have loved the adulation; Collingwood was not so pleased, especially since he had given the Cadiz garrison all the gunpowder he could spare and they had fired it all off in honour of a local saint's day.

Collingwood's warm reception in Cadiz is partly explained by his conduct after Trafalgar in repatriating captured Spanish sailors and in conducting a magnanimous correspondence with the defeated admirals, who saw in him a worthy opponent and gentleman. What many will find more improbable is that this Geordie son of an indebted trader should then have revealed his intimate knowledge of the Koran. It happened that the Spanish insurgents had asked the Emperor of Morocco to sell them a large number of horses. The Emperor of Morocco had refused, saying that it was against his religion to deal with infidels. Collingwood's masterly letter to the Emperor pointed out that it was in all their interests to defeat Napoleon, and then quoted the prophet 'Mahomet' in support of his case:

I respect all those who are true to their faith. Mahomet was a wise and great law-giver; - he knew how fallible and weak mankind were; - he knew how much they required the assistance of each other: and one of his commands to his people was, (and it is a sacred tenet in all religions,) "To do good to all". What greater good can His Imperial Majesty do, than assist a loyal people in repelling an enemy, who regards not the laws of God, and maintaining their existence as a nation.

To his own government he wrote that he wished they might only appoint to consular roles men who understood the customs and cultures of the Islamic nations, a plea with a very modern ring to it.

It is not clear if the Emperor's horses ever arrived; nevertheless, Collingwood's role in supporting the Spanish uprising, in harrying French coastal garrisons and disrupting their convoys played a crucial

part in what would later become the Peninsular campaign, which itself led ultimately to Waterloo and Napoleon's downfall. It also led more directly to Collingwood's return to a haunt of his early days at sea, Port Mahon. This valuable all-weather deepwater harbour in south-east Menorca, a former British possession, was now open to the Royal Navy's ships once again and Collingwood used it to full effect as a base from which to control the western Mediterranean.

Collingwood's adept management of foreign powers would not have come as a surprise to his officers. Although some of them found him cold and reserved from long years of isolating duty, his skill at handling junior officers and midshipmen was legendary. Many was the young boy whose parents sent him to Collingwood to be trained as an officer. Even in these last years of overbearing worry and exertion he took great pains with the 'young gentlemen'. One officer affectionately recalled that feeding Bounce and the Admiral's pet goat Nanny titbits from the mess had in all probability gained him his first promotion. But woe betide any young man who did not show aptitude for the sea. One boy in particular, the son of a Newcastle acquaintance, failed to respond to the Collingwood touch, as Cuthbert wrote to his sister-in-law in 1809:

Mrs Currel's son never can be a sailor: he has something very odd in his manner, or rather he has no manner at all, but saunters a melancholic for a week together, unnoticed and unnoticed, except when I give him a little rally to make his blood circulate, and this I do, not in the expectation that it will make him better in his profession, but merely for his health's sake. It is a pity she had not put him apprentice to Jno. Wilson, the apothecary; he might have gone on very wisely. His gravity would have established his reputation as a learned doctor, and if he did poison an old woman now and then, better do that than drown an entire ship's company at a dash by running on the rocks.

Young naval officers were not the only victims of Collingwood's barbs. Hercules Robinson would many years later write in his memoirs of the day Collingwood's patience with his incompetent flag-captain Edward Rotheram ran out...

Collingwood's dry, caustic mind lives before me in the recollection of his calling across the deck his fat, stupid captain - long since dead - when he had seen him commit some monstrous blunder, and after the usual bowing and formality - which the excellent old chief never omitted - he said: 'Captain, I have been thinking, whilst I looked at you, how strange it is that a man should grow so big and know so little. That's all, Sir; that's all.' Hats off; low bows.

By the end of 1809 the focus of the war in the Mediterranean was beginning to shift towards the Iberian Peninsular. It was just as well. Collingwood, after an unbroken seven-year tour of duty, knew he was dying. Repeated requests to the Admiralty to be replaced had been turned down because he was quite simply irreplaceable. In the early spring of 1810 having rented a house (now the Hotel del Almirante) in Port Mahon in a vain attempt to recuperate, he took matters into his own hands and resigned his commission. His secretary wrote home to the family preparing them for the worst. At the beginning of March the Admiral went on board his last flagship, the *Ville de Paris*, and she set sail for England on the 6th. The next day, at sea, he died. He was buried in state next to his friend and comrade Nelson in St Paul's cathedral. The Lord Chancellor, Lord Eldon, who was a pall-bearer at the funeral, recalled how a black seaman who had sailed with Collingwood for many years grasped his (Eldon's) arm, and wept throughout the service.

The historian Piers Mackesy, writing of this period, summed it up thus:

The splendour of the navy's work in the theatre after Trafalgar has been obscured by the absence of fleet actions; and the name of Lord Collingwood has equally been dimmed by his inability to bring an enemy fleet to battle. The fights were small, fierce encounters of sloops and gunboats, cutting-out expeditions, attacks on batteries. Only once did the enemy come out in force. Yet the scale was heroic; and over the vast canvas towers the figure of Collingwood.

Collingwood himself had regrets: he had been a virtual stranger to his family for his last years, and he pined for his roses and his neglected cabbage patch. But he, like Nelson, had died doing his duty to his country. And just as he had been passed the baton of supreme command by Nelson, so he now passed it on to Wellington. He did not doubt the final outcome. Among his great virtues of humanity, wit and an abiding sense of duty not the least was an understanding of historical perspective which allowed him to see beyond the near, beyond the immediate. In the years after Trafalgar he summed up his hopes and fears in words which one can almost hear Winston Churchill lisping in a crackling Home Service broadcast a hundred and thirty years later:

Wherever Buonaparte reigns, there is the domination of power, which is felt or dreaded by all. His rule is repugnant to the interests and welfare of the people; and whenever his tide of greatness be at the full, his ebb will be more rapid than his rise. I cannot help thinking that epoch is not distant. In that event, the world may hope for peace for a few years, until ease and wealth make them licentious and insolent, and then our grand-children may begin the battle again.