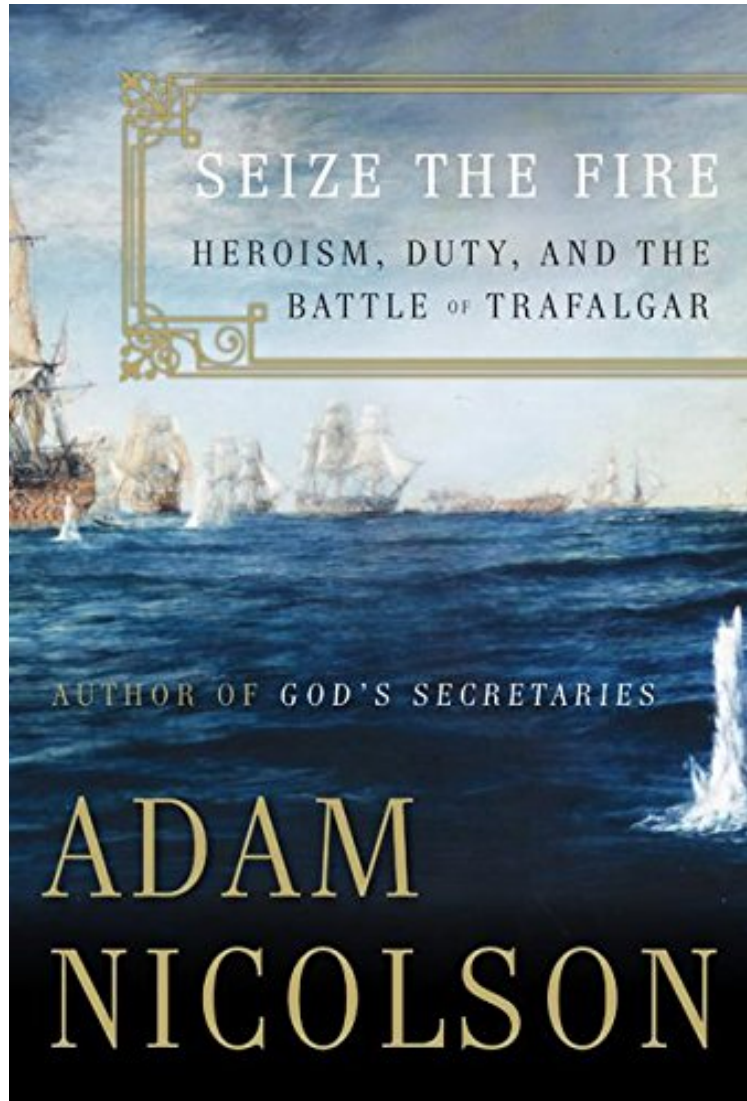


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Seize the Fire: Heroism, Duty, and the Battle of Trafalgar

Adam Nicolson

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Adam Nicolson : Seize the Fire: Heroism, Duty, and the Battle of Trafalgar before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Seize the Fire: Heroism, Duty, and the Battle of Trafalgar:

9 of 10 people found the following review helpful. Honour and heroism in the service of victory By Mr. Joe Several years ago, I had the good fortune to take the guided inspection - available to any tourist with the requisite admission fee - of Admiral Lord Nelson's flagship, HMS Victory, now permanently moored at the Portsmouth (UK) Naval Yard. The experience left a lasting impression, perhaps partly due to the excellence of the guide, a salty, retired Royal Marine. (A subsequent tour of the USS Constitution, moored near Boston and conducted by a young, female petty

officer, paled woefully in comparison.) If, in Adam Nicolson's *SEIZE THE FIRE: HEROISM, DUTY, AND THE BATTLE OF TRAFALGAR*, you expect a rousing narrative that'll leave you - assuming you're an Anglophile - singing "Rule Britannia", you'll be disappointed. Rather, what the author gives us is an erudite, scholarly, well-researched, and relatively dispassionate narrative account of the great naval battle off the coast of Spain on October 21, 1805 in which the British Fleet virtually annihilated the Combined Fleet of France and Spain. As everyone knows, Nelson was mortally wounded as he strode his quarterdeck; his death nearly three hours later vaulted him to the head of the queue of England's all-time heroes. In great part, and as the subtitle of the book implies, *SEIZE THE FIRE* is an examination of what it was about the contemporary English psyche and its perceptions of "duty" and "heroism" that ensured the victory. Indeed, as Nicolson has it, the outcome of the contest was preordained even before the two sides collided because of the Spanish fleet's medieval command structure and the demoralization within the French fleet brought about by the officer purges of the French Revolution (much as the Soviet Army suffered from Stalin's purges of the 1930s). Love (of its commander), honour, a ferocious and zealous aggression, and skill won the day for the Royal Navy, not tactics. Nicolson's first five chapters (entitled: "Zeal", "Order and Anxiety", "Honour", "Love", "Boldness"), which deal with the England's national character and that of its naval officers, are cleverly headed with the time of day on that October 21st and the distance between the two fleets as they closed with each other at a walking pace. Thus, it's: 5:50 - 8:30 AM, 10 - 6.5 miles; 8:30 - 9:30 AM, 6.5 - 5.9 miles; 9:30 - 11:30 AM, 5.9 - 2 miles; 11:30 AM - 12 noon, 2 - 1 miles; 12 noon - 12:30 PM, 1 mile - contact. This effectively builds suspense. The last three chapters ("Violence", "Humanity", "Nobility") describe the battle itself, Nelson's death, and the shortly subsequent great storm at sea that beset both victor and vanquished. There's a commendable color section of paintings and portraits of the battle and the top commanders, as well as several diagrams showing the various ships' positions at progressive stages of the cataclysm. During the battle sequence itself, the focus is initially on the first English vessel to make contact with the enemy's line of ships, the HMS Royal Sovereign commanded by Admiral Lord Collingwood, Nelson's number two, and then switches to the HMS Victory. The point of reference throughout is, understandably, pretty much the latter, though the actions of many of the English ships are touched upon. The relatively subdued tone of the narrative is given considerable power by the descriptions - perhaps some of the best I've ever read about naval warfare of that period - of the awful carnage. After the French flagship Bucentaure capitulated, boarding British officers found: "Within the remains of (the) ship, the dead were no longer recognizable but lay along the middle of each deck in rough piles of blood and guts through which the roundshot and the splinters had ploughed again and again." It was Nelson, who understood and personified the English concepts of honour and heroism as perceived by his island nation at this point in its history, that engineered the Trafalgar triumph by harnessing the combative potential of his captains and funneling it into the violence and independent action which they, more than their French and Spanish counterparts, were capable of at this time and place. Yet, after Nelson's death, we hear nothing more of him from Nicolson other than that his corpse was conveyed back to England in a massive water cask filled with drinking spirits. There should have been some sort of epilogue - closure to the story - encompassing the Admiral's funeral (from which the love of his life, Lady Hamilton, was apparently excluded). But there wasn't, and I'm knocking off a star. In conclusion, the author writes: "... the uncompromising violence; the dedicated grip on the need for 'annihilation'; the seeking of victory through exsanguination; combined with a hunger for honour; a belief in the reality of noble ideas; self-possession as a mark of nobility; and behind all that a tender and active humanity ... these are the ambivalent ingredients of sublime and noble war, of a kind which Homer and Virgil would have recognized, and all of which were undeniably there on 21 October 1805." 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Great insight. Recommended additional reading. By Ray F. Longaker Jr. Naval History must read as the author thoroughly researched the events leading up to and the actual battle. Great insight. Recommended additional reading, from an "enlisted" "pressed" sailor of the time is "Jack Nasty Face," where "Jack" describes the subject battle which to me adds significantly to "Seize the Fire." Of particular importance to me this seller's book was advertised as a First Edition with no marks and shipped immediately. Book arrived as advertised and is a prized addition to my library. Will use seller again. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Four Stars By Dennis F. Miller interesting book.

In *Seize the Fire*, Adam Nicolson, author of the widely acclaimed *God's Secretaries*, takes the great naval battle of Trafalgar, fought between the British and Franco-Spanish fleets in October 1805, and uses it to examine our idea of heroism and the heroic. Is violence a necessary aspect of the hero? And daring? Why did the cult of the hero flower in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in a way it hadn't for two hundred years? Was the figure of Nelson—intemperate, charming, theatrical, anxious, impetuous, considerate, indifferent to death and danger, inspirational to those around him, and, above all, fixed on attack and victory—an aberration in Enlightenment England? Or was the greatest of all English military heroes simply the product of his time, "the conjurer of violence" that England, at some level, deeply needed? It is a story rich with modern resonance. This was a battle fought for the control of a global commercial empire. It was won by the emerging British world power, which was widely condemned on the continent of Europe as "the arrogant usurper of the freedom of the seas." *Seize the Fire* not only vividly describes the brutal realities of battle but enters the hearts and minds of the men who were there; it is a portrait

of a moment, a close and passionately engaged depiction of a frame of mind at a turning point in world history.

.com On October 21, 1805, the British navy crushed the combined fleets of Spain and France near Spain's Cape Trafalgar, thwarting Napoleon Bonaparte's planned invasion of England and leading to a century of British maritime dominance. There are many books on the Battle of Trafalgar, but this one is different in that Adam Nicolson focuses more on "the mental landscape" of those who fought than on the battle itself. In analyzing why the British scored such an impressive victory, Nicolson looks beyond tactics to study the collective psychology of the three navies, along with the social and cultural forces at work. Part of the study revolves around the concept of the hero at the dawn of the 19th century. The men who fought at Trafalgar "looked on battle not as a necessary evil but as a moment of revelation and truth" that played into their conception of purpose, honor, and duty to king and country--with violence seen as an integral part of duty. No one fit the classic model of the hero more than Admiral Lord Nelson, the "most feared naval commander in the world"; a man who saw himself as a "prophetic agent of apocalypse and millennium" destined to lead England to global dominance. Nelson became the model of the British hero for the rest of the century and beyond. In addition to an in-depth study of Nelson's background and psychology, Nicolson discusses the cultural differences between the three countries. For instance, in England, a non-aristocrat like Nelson was allowed to rise to the top--an occurrence that would have been impossible in both France and Spain given their strict societal codes. Each nation's motivation was different as well. Spain's social system was based on aristocratic chivalry, while France was acting according to the authoritative whim of Napoleon. Britain, however, was motivated by trade, and Nicolson discusses how England was able to finance its powerful navy by taxing the growing middle class and their seemingly limitless desire for material goods, making Trafalgar "the first great bourgeois victory of European history." *Seize the Fire* provides an intriguing perspective on one of the great naval battles in history. --Shawn Carkonen
From Publishers Weekly
Not widely known as a naval historian, Nicholson (*God's Secretaries*) is a highly proficient and readable one. This intelligent and intriguing study of Nelson's naval leadership, though, is definitely for the advanced student of that era, requiring some knowledge of not only the larger culture of Great Britain (as leadership opened to nonaristocrats like Nelson) but also the peculiar culture of the British navy. The latter, the author argues, arose partly from the continuity of leadership, partly from the community of seafarers and partly from the figure of Nelson (1758–1805) himself. Nicholson ranks Nelson very highly among military leaders, with a combination of technical skill, charisma and warmth in his treatment of subordinates that gave him an exceptional hold over his fleet—and made him the British image of the hero for more than a century after Trafalgar. This book ranks higher as a study of cultural concepts than it does as one of events, with the personalities lying somewhere in the middle. Students of maritime history, however, will enjoy all aspects of it as Trafalgar's October 21 bicentennial approaches. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.
From Booklist
Nicolson is intrigued by why Trafalgar was such an annihilating British triumph. Nicolson writes: "The battle was won and lost before a moment of it was fought." Although the statement is simple, it masks the profound depth of Nicolson's exploration of Trafalgar, which embraces the psychology and values of the British naval officers and the corresponding mind-sets of the French and Spanish officers. The British expected to win; the French and Spanish knew they would lose. Enlisting a creative range of sources, including Romantic poets, Nicolson seeks out the sensibility that lies behind a Nelson, finding in him and others an emotional authenticity that was both ambitious and socially anxious about status--which could be secured but by brutal victory. An incisively original analysis. Gilbert Taylor
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