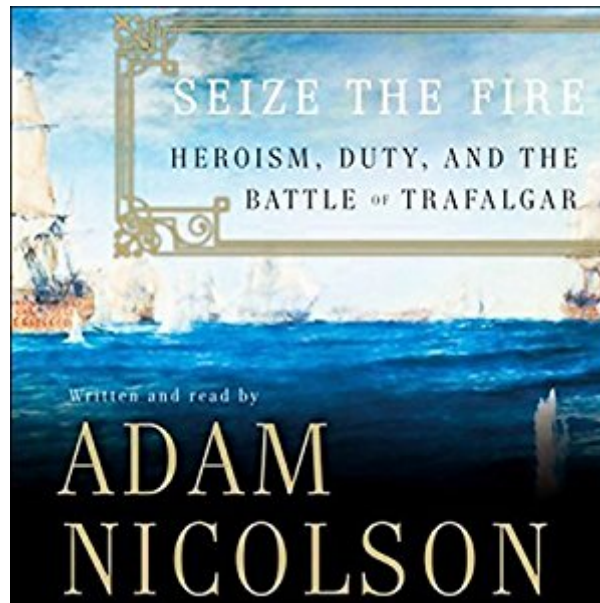




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# **Seize The Fire: Heroism, Duty, And The Battle Of Trafalgar**



## Synopsis

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. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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## Customer Reviews

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."

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.

interesting book.

A human, political and understanding of "class" distinctions and Royal or Privileged few changed the outcome of Imperial France. At times it became quite ponderous. CS Foster's Hornblower series is much easier reading and more fun.

The building of those magnificent ships is one of the aspects that is a part of this unbelievable story. Horatio Nelson is a fascinating figure in history.

This is a well-written book, an account of the sea battle off Trafalgar which destroyed the French-Spanish fleet and Napoleon's plans to invade England. However, the first 200 pages of the book leading up to the battle are really a comparison of the culture of the three countries and how it affected their navies and the outcome of the conflict. Interesting, but I kept asking, when does the battle start? The battle itself is fascinating but I expected more. Still, I'm glad I read it and I did learn a lot about that era.

This should not be considered a "stand alone" book for those who wish to know more of this momentous battle at sea. The title alone hints at the problem - The battle was OFF Trafalgar, not OF Trafalgar. Ron Adkins' "Nelson's Trafalgar" is far more incisive and readable. Further, the reader of the latter will learn sea lore that will allow dinner conversation to be as lively as standing on a poop deck in a storm. Adkins gives us the origin of "slush fund." Nicholson gives us dry wit. As a supplement, buy this along with "Nelson's Trafalgar" to fill the gaps, but don't buy it alone.

The author is best at describing the actual ships and crews as they engaged at Trafalgar, Lord Nelson's decisive sea battle of 1805. At this he is very good. Less successful is his attempt to coherently explain the social and political dynamics at work in the nations that sent the fleets to war. I think England won because its fleet was better led, better manned, better equipped, and had greater motivation for victory. The reason for these advantages, in turn, was the foundation of a society fairly open to personal advancement and based on new commercial realities. In his book, Mr. Nicholson too often transfers his own thinking on such airy concepts of the sublime, love, honor, etc. back to a specific naval engagement conducted long ago by real human beings.

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