

Nelson – Britannia's God of War by Andrew Lambert.
Faber and Faber 2004.

Carrying the soubriquet 'the outstanding naval historian of his generation', it is unsurprising that the author's approach to his subject takes a different tack from that of many of Nelson's other biographers.

Andrew Lambert divides this superb book into four parts, The Making of a Hero, Towards Greatness, The Years of Command and Nelson after Trafalgar, tracing the career of Horatio Nelson through all its stages and many engagements to his death at Trafalgar. His aim is not to give a conventional portrait of this iconic Englishman but rather to detail his development as a supreme naval commander, and the courage and tenacity which enabled the Royal Navy, under his leadership, to change the course of history.

The previous, pre-eminent, biography of Nelson by Christopher Hibbert is complemented perfectly by Lambert's work, and even though a concentration on Nelson the sailor might appear to be too restrictive it amply demonstrates the all round character of the man.

By far my favourite part of the book is the final section, detailing in its first half the way in which Nelson was transfigured after his heroic death into a god-like figure that inspired artists, writers and poets; to the extent that no less a man than Byron could describe him as 'Britannia's god of war'; and in the second half the way in which Nelson was emblemised, not least by Churchill during the Second World War who portrayed Nelson as the epitome of British steadfastness, obdurate courage and honour.

Andrew Lambert's biography does great credit to the memory of Horatio Nelson and is a superb accompaniment to the bi-centenary of Nelson's most famous victory.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh