

Men of Honour: Trafalgar and the Making of the
English Hero by Adam Nicolson.
Harper Collins 2005.

Amid a clutch of books about Nelson himself, carefully timed to coincide with the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Trafalgar, comes Men of Honour, a gem of a book, superbly written - as always - by Adam Nicolson.

Men of Honour is a description, in quite extraordinary detail, of the battle itself, but it is much more than this: Nicolson details the social history of England, particularly with regard to the development of the concepts of honour and heroism, and in parallel with this the way in which the English martial spirit grew into the ruthless and ferocious fighting machine epitomised by the Royal Navy.

Added richness is to be found in the personal vignettes of Nelson's naval colleagues, his rivals and his enemies, and the sailors who served under him and to whom he showed both love and loyalty.

Perhaps what stays in the mind the longest is the blow by blow account of the battle, replete with spine-chilling detail of the immensely bloody process of ship to ship fighting, from broadsides to close range sniper fire. The sheer brutality of Trafalgar is laid bare and it is a disturbing counterpoint to the tale of almost bloodless heroism that we learned at school.

Nicolson also finds time to consider the state of the post-Revolution French navy, its ships and crew, and the relationship between it and its Spanish allies.

Adam Nicolson has produced a great work in Men of Honour, an all-round analysis of one of the pivotal moments in pre-20th century European history, and a must read work for anyone interested in the reality of the 19th century Royal Navy.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh