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# In the Hour of Victory: The Royal Navy at War in the Age of Nelson

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However, prospective readers might be warned that this book would probably not make good introductory reading to the Cold War. Wilson takes it as his task to relate the critical junctures and the respective leaders' reasoning at the cost of communicating the overall history of the conflict—a reasonable approach, given the troves of work available on the period. His portrait of Mikhail Gorbachev is particularly interesting. He casts a light on Gorbachev not merely as a new thinker who offers a different strategic perspective but as a responder to American initiatives. Gorbachev and Reagan shared an abhorrence of nuclear weapons, sometimes letting this revulsion outstrip the policies with which their advisers were comfortable.

Wilson's portrait of the time is an engaging one, capturing to an unusual extent how leaders then were trying to understand each other's motives. "In the last years of the conflict, improvisation mattered more than any master plan." We do well to be reminded of this, since there is often a temptation to look through the lens of history and see outcomes as certain and predictable, which is often a mistake and the product of psychological bias rather than cold analysis. Wilson's book is a useful corrective in this regard, examining how the role of improvisation and accident can play critical parts at crucial junctures of history.

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Willis, Sam. *In the Hour of Victory: The Royal Navy at War in the Age of Nelson*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2013. 416pp. \$24

British author Sam Willis's latest book, in what is a fast-growing and impressive collection of naval historical works, reveals new details of battles previously immortalized, shining new light on how these battles were conducted. Willis titles his book aptly and in a manner appreciative of the primary source material he has thrust forward from obscurity. Vice Admiral Collingwood's first dispatch to the Admiralty after the battle of Trafalgar begins, "The ever to be lamented death of Vice Admiral Lord Viscount Nelson, who in the late conflict with the enemy fell *in the hour of victory*." The victorious Collingwood goes on to describe for his superiors and for the British public the circumstances that allowed twenty-seven Royal Navy ships of the line to dominate a larger combined French and Spanish fleet. This book analyzes not only the original dispatches from Trafalgar but also those from several other great fleet battles from 1794 to 1806. Specifically, the author lays out original dispatches, historical context, and skillful interpretations for the battles of the Glorious First of June (1794), St. Vincent (1797), Camperdown (1797), the Nile (1798), Copenhagen (1801), Trafalgar (1805), and San Domingo (1806). These giant fleet engagements were remarkable in several respects, most notably in that they marked the last large-scale battles of the sailing warfare era, and all represent overwhelming British victories.

This work weaves into its narrative fascinating insights already known to naval historians. How did Britain come to dominate all these battles? Numerical superiority, though normally paramount in sailing warfare, was not enough to help the French, Danes, Spanish, or Dutch during this era whenever a British

fleet seized the initiative with bold maneuver. British officers had more experience with sailing tactics. British seaman were better trained, and their gunnery was better. The hulls of British ships could withstand cannon balls better, and their rigging was more amenable to repair. Estimates from these battles have British seamen firing multiple broadsides to each one fired by their enemies. However, Willis warns against presuming that the outcomes of these engagements were inevitable. He argues, with merit, that these dispatches “remind us of the occasions when random events tipped the battle one way or another.” These commanders all had choices, which set in motion tumbling aftereffects. A change in the wind could have a huge impact and turned well-laid plans into chaos. Sailing warfare took a great deal of skill but also luck, and both factors aided the British enormously during this war-laden period of naval history. In addition to detailing an interesting history of these fleet showdowns, Willis analyzes how the commanders themselves shaped history after the smoke from the cannons had cleared. This is

the book’s biggest contribution. Willis examines not only their states of mind at the time of drafting the dispatches but also their personalities. Nelson was a wordsmith and a self-promoter. Admiral Duncan possessed a deep desire to maintain the public’s respect for the Royal Navy and thus minimized confusion of battle and negligence of subordinates. No two commanders would describe a battle in the same way, especially not when they are all still damp from sweat and sea spray, their ears still ringing from the cannon shot, and the screams of the injured still audible from below decks. Moreover, writing with a quill pen while a battered ship pitches and rolls is not easy, particularly when one is sleep deprived. Regardless, these scribbled dispatches made months-long journeys to the Admiralty and then appeared in newspapers, where they became the first draft of history. Willis places these dispatches into historical context and crafts a very enjoyable narrative in the process.

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