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## The admiral's reliquary

By MARK PROUDMAN  
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By Martyn Downer

Random House, 415 pages, \$45

Lord Nelson is the most famous admiral in history. As everyone knows, his greatest and final victory, in which he fell to a sharpshooter's musket ball while commanding his fleet from the quarterdeck of HMS Victory, was won off Cape Trafalgar, Spain, on Oct. 21, 1805. A larger French and Spanish fleet was roundly defeated, and Napoleon, already by that date focused on his Austerlitz campaign against the Austrians, never again attempted to build a fleet to equal the Royal Navy. William Pitt the Younger -- whom we Canadians should remember as the author of constitutional government in this country -- was prime minister at the time; he remarked that England had saved herself by her exertions and Europe by her example.

But these strategically important details have been overshadowed by the glamour and dash of Nelson himself. Something of a secular cult rapidly developed around the man and his legend. The Victory remains to this day on the books of the Royal Navy, preserved in dry dock at Portsmouth, a monument to greatness and audacity that mocks the present. The hero retains his votaries among

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naval persons, history buffs and English patriots: it is already impossible, even at this early date, to find accommodation anywhere in the vicinity of Portsmouth for the celebrations later this year of the 200th anniversary of Nelson's great victory of 1805.

Alexander Davison was a friend and associate of Nelson. He was also Nelson's "man of business," in the contemporary, slightly disreputable sense of that term, handling the stickier aspects of his personal affairs, wheedling his way into profitable war contracts and collecting prize money -- the proceeds from the sale of captured ships -- on commission for Nelson and the captains of his "band of brothers."

Nelson's blood-stained purse and various other personal items, papers and knick-knacks were delivered to Davison after Trafalgar, and were recently rediscovered in a European chateau by Martyn Downer, a specialist in antique jewellery with Sotheby's auction house. Downer tracked down the history of the various objects with laudable thoroughness, and *Nelson's Purse* includes high-quality photographs of each. As the dust jacket announces, these stories shed some interesting light on Nelson, his times and his shore-bound associates. Davison himself had an eventful career. He began as a poorly paid clerk in the office of a merchant trading with Quebec -- at that time just liberated from the French -- whence he was sent on company business. Davison obviously had both a talent for getting along and an eye for the main chance, and wangled profitable leases on trading posts from the governor at Quebec.

Back in England, he won contracts to supply the British army during the wars of the French Revolution. Davison was an efficient commissary, by the standards of the age, but did not neglect his bottom line, currying favour along the way with ministers, princes and admirals. But eventually, after Nelson's death, Davison came to grief in a corruption scandal concerning the provision of adulterated coal to the army, and spent two years in Newgate prison.

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Downer is not an academic historian. He writes with the style of a novelist, dropping vignettes and painting in details that his (admittedly well-informed) mind can only have imagined. He lists his sources -- and they are impressive -- only in supplementary notes. Downer's opening account of Nelson's death in the knowledge of his triumph, on the orlop deck of the *Victory*, repeating, "Thank God I have done my duty, thank God I have done my duty" -- no "kiss me, Hardy" -- is gripping and plausible, but only referenced in a general way to primary accounts. It is an artistic rendering, just like the famous paintings of Benjamin West and Arthur William Devis.

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Notwithstanding Davison's checkered career, Downer's book is profoundly reverential: Its chapters are named after the major ships of the line at Trafalgar -- *Victory*: 100 Guns, Captain Thomas Masterman Hardy; *Téméraire*: 98 Guns, Captain Eliab Harvey, and so on -- without any direct connection to the events described in the relevant chapter.

The names of ships and captains read like a litany of saints, and Downer is a merchant of their relics, even if his relics, unlike those of other ages, are scrupulously shown to have been carved from Nelson's mainmast or pilfered from his purse. The relics signify a connection with something -- with greatness, perhaps, or merely with the need for greatness. Enough people coughed up tens of thousands, to a grand total of over £2-million, to own a token of greatness at Sotheby's auction of the Davison relics, auspiciously held on the anniversary of Trafalgar, 2002.

Nelson became the symbol of a success that would have satisfied Conrad's Lord Jim. Nelson became the ultimate hero, romantic ("a peerage or Westminster Abbey"), undisciplined ("truly, I cannot see," putting his telescope to his blind eye on hearing of an unwanted order to retire), combative ("no captain can go far wrong who lays his ship alongside an enemy"), bellicose ("you should hate a Frenchman as you hate the devil") and demanding ("England expects . . ."). The cult of Nelson dominated the Royal Navy, and indeed the Royal Canadian Navy, for 150 years. Men raised on Nelson -- Lord Jim in fiction, many others in reality -- died emulating his extreme success.

But beyond antiquarian interest, what can these relics mean to us today, in a society that has trouble even admitting it has enemies? Who today thinks, like the dying admiral, on his duty? A relic should signify belief; these artifacts have, sadly, become expensive curiosities.

*Mark Proudman is a Canadian who has just completed a doctoral thesis on Victorian imperialism at Oxford University.*

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