

# ‘Most Secret and Confidential’: The Pressed Copy Nelson Letters at the British Library<sup>1</sup>

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In November 1804, Spain finally declared war on Britain after a period of uneasy neutrality. The British commander-in-chief in the Mediterranean, Vice Admiral Lord Nelson, had advance warning, thanks to his well-maintained network of contacts and intelligence-gatherers, and he reacted swiftly, ordering his ships to seize all Spanish vessels immediately. As he told his mistress, Emma Hamilton, ‘by management and a portion of good luck, I got the account from Madrid in a much shorter space of time than I could have hoped for and I have set the whole Mediterranean to work.’<sup>2</sup>

Among the captures was a transport ship with a detachment of the Spanish Regiment of Castile on board. Instead of sending all the prisoners to the nearest British base at Malta to await formal exchange, Nelson immediately made arrangements for landing the officers in Spain ‘upon their Parole of Honour not to serve until regularly exchanged’. He ordered them to be placed on board a neutral vessel and gave the ship’s Master 50 dollars to transport the Spaniards to Barcelona. With them, went one of his battleships, HMS *Spencer*, to make sure they got safely into port.

A few days later, the Spanish schooner *Ventura* was captured. The vessel itself was sent to Malta as a prize and its Master went with it to appear before the prize court. But Nelson invited the Conde de Clara, the Captain General of Catalonia, to send boats to receive the *Ventura*’s crew and he also sent orders to Malta to ensure that the Master’s imprisonment was not too onerous, directing he should be ‘allowed to walk about the Town.’<sup>3</sup>

This leniency was extended to the crews of other captured Spanish vessels and also to the ordinary fishermen of Barcelona and the surrounding coast. As Nelson wrote to the Governor of Barcelona, ‘I have given orders that neither fishing nor Market boats should be detained by the fleet under my Command.’ Earlier in the same letter, he explained his motives for his actions, ‘I feel it is the duty of Individuals,’ he wrote, ‘to soften the horrors of war as much as may lie in their power ... nothing in my Power will upon any occasion be omitted to alleviate the distress of the Unfortunate.’

That is a classic expression of the humanity for which Nelson has always been renowned – and yet it will be searched for in vain in any biography. Indeed, before 2005, the story of the Regiment of Castile and the crew of the *Ventura* had never been told before.<sup>4</sup> This is because the correspondence between Nelson and his Spanish counterparts was discovered only very recently among a large cache of hitherto unpublished letters among the Nelson Papers in the British Library.

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<sup>1</sup> I am most grateful to the editor of the *eBLJ* for inviting me to submit this article and for advice in its preparation. To avoid a proliferation of intrusive ‘sics’ it may be assumed that any idiosyncratic spelling, grammar, or capitalization used in direct quotations from the letters, is Nelson’s own.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Pettigrew, *Memoirs of the Life of Vice Admiral Lord Nelson*, 2 vols (London, 1849), vol. ii, 437.

<sup>3</sup> BL, Add. MS. 34958, f. 39.

<sup>4</sup> The correspondence was first published in Colin White (ed.), *Nelson: The New Letters* (London, 2005), pp. 119–26 (Hereafter, White, *Letters*).

This paper will first explain how this important new material came to be discovered, during the course of a major research initiative, *The Nelson Letters Project*; it will then offer an analysis of the contents of the new letters and finally will highlight some of the key new insights into a number of different aspects of Nelson’s life and career that have resulted (fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Nelson at his desk in HMS *Victory*, portrait in oils by Charles Lucy (Royal Naval Museum).

### *The Nelson Letters Project*

Until very recently, the consensus among naval historians was that most of Nelson’s correspondence was already in the public domain and very little of importance remained to be discovered. In 1999, the Royal Naval Museum decided to test this supposition and commissioned *The Nelson Letters Project*.<sup>5</sup> Its aim was to revisit all the Nelson archives in Britain and overseas, private as well as public, to identify any new material and, where appropriate, to publish it. When the Project’s initial findings were released in 2002, they came as a surprise to even the most experienced Nelson scholars: it was estimated that some 550 unpublished letters existed. By the time the final report was made, in August 2004, that figure had risen to just over 1,400 unpublished letters,<sup>6</sup> and it now stands at 1,500. This represents an increase in Nelsonian primary material of over 20% and so it is the most significant addition to the ‘canon’ since the publication in 1844–46 of Sir Nicholas Harris Nicolas’s great 7-volume collected edition of Nelson’s correspondence, *The Dispatches and Letters of Lord Nelson*.<sup>7</sup>

The new material was located in a total of thirty different archives.<sup>8</sup> A key reason why it was possible to spread the net so wide, in such a relatively short space of time, is that the Project was the first major work of Nelson scholarship to make extensive use of online catalogues – the National Register of Archives in the United Kingdom and the National Union Catalog in the USA. Using these excellent tools, unpublished material was pinpointed in advance of visits to individual archives, thus considerably reducing the time spent actually on site. Additionally, extensive use was made of the online catalogues of the British Library and the National Maritime Museum, which led to some interesting discoveries of material in unexpected places. For example, a number of single letters were located in the collected papers of people not previously known to have had dealings with Nelson, for example Warren Hastings, the former Governor General of India, and General Sir Robert Wilson.<sup>9</sup>

Even allowing for these advantages over previous scholars, the question still remains, why did they miss so many letters? To answer this question properly, a brief history of the publication of Nelson’s letters is required.

### **Publishing Nelson’s Correspondence**

The first major work to print collections of Nelson’s letters was the monumental two-volume biography by J. S. Clarke and J. M’Arthur, published in 1809.<sup>10</sup> The authors obtained many private letters from Nelson’s family and friends and were also allowed access to his personal papers by Nelson’s brother, William, Earl Nelson, who was one of the book’s main sponsors. However thanks to the work of the Project, we now know that most of the letters were heavily edited: large portions were cut out; grammar and punctuation ‘improved’; and the texts of different letters intermingled, so as to provide a continuous narrative.

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<sup>5</sup> From 2001, the project was co-sponsored by the National Maritime Museum.

<sup>6</sup> White, *Letters*, pp. 499–502.

<sup>7</sup> Sir Nicholas Harris Nicolas, *The Dispatches and Letters of Lord Viscount Nelson with notes*, 7 vols (London, 1844–46) (hereafter, ‘Nicolas’).

<sup>8</sup> For a full list see White, *Letters*, pp. 499–502.

<sup>9</sup> A pipe is the modern day equivalent to 105 gallons or 430 litres.

<sup>10</sup> J. S. Clarke and J. M’Arthur, *The Life of Admiral Lord Nelson*, 2 vols (London, 1809); 2nd edition, 3 vols (1839–40).

The first proper collection of letters was the anonymously published *Letters of Lord Nelson to Lady Hamilton* (London, 1814), a compilation of some 140 letters from Nelson to Emma. While generally accurate in their content, these letters, too, were edited – especially by the removal of particularly embarrassing passages.

Between 1844 and 1846 Sir Nicholas Harris Nicolas published his magisterial *The Letters and Despatches of Lord Nelson*. Like Clarke and M’Arthur, Nicolas gathered Nelson documents from many sources, private as well as public but, unlike them, he did not tamper with the contents of the letters.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, he deplored the way in which his predecessors had treated their material, saying, in the Introduction to his own first volume,

The text is so changed that while the Reader imagines he is perusing what Nelson, or the party in question, actually wrote he is in fact indulged with an *improved* and very different version of these letters.<sup>12</sup>

It was therefore a particular matter of concern to him that he was not able to gain access to the originals of many of the letters that Clarke and M’Arthur had seen and was forced to use their edited transcripts instead.

Not content with merely printing the letters, Nicolas also supported them with extensive footnotes giving biographical details, where available, of those who appear in the text and also supporting the letters with other documents illustrating Nelson’s career. The resulting work has always been justly admired. Carola Oman, author of one of the finest Nelson biographies, described it as ‘the Bible’ of the Nelson student,<sup>13</sup> and it is still quoted, over 150 years later, as the ultimate source on Nelson’s correspondence.<sup>14</sup>

However, Nicolas has its limitations and these are becoming increasingly apparent in the light of the findings of the Nelson Letters Project. The most notable omissions from Nicolas’s collection were Nelson’s letters to Emma Hamilton, which are only thinly represented by a number taken from the 1814 edition. A much more complete run of these letters was published by Thomas Pettigrew in 1849 and some of the remaining gaps were filled by Alfred Morrison in 1893–94.<sup>15</sup> But both these publications are flawed: Morrison omitted all the greetings and envois and Pettigrew sometimes edited as heavy-handedly as Clark and M’Arthur, removing many of the more intimate passages.

Another limitation of Nicolas’s work was that he was not able to obtain the originals of Nelson’s letters to his wife and so had to rely on the very inaccurate and incomplete transcripts published by Clarke and M’Arthur. This omission was rectified by George Naish, with his volume for the Navy Records Society in 1958, which showed just how severely mangled those letters had been.<sup>16</sup> Other gaps were filled by H. Gutteridge’s collection of correspondence relating to the 1799 civil war in Naples, published in 1903, Warren Dawson’s catalogue of the Lloyds Nelson Collection (1931) and Geoffrey Rawson’s edition of letters relating to Nelson’s service in the West Indies in the mid 1780s (1957).<sup>17</sup> Other letters have been published singly, or in small batches, in some dozen other publications. In sum these further publications have added about another 1000 letters to the 3,500 published by Nicolas.

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<sup>11</sup> Although he did introduce a considerable amount of over-fussy punctuation, thus destroying the natural flow and energy of the letters.

<sup>12</sup> Nicolas, vol. i, p. x.

<sup>13</sup> Carola Oman, *Nelson* (London, 1947), p. 566.

<sup>14</sup> For example, see Joel Hayward, *For God and Glory: Lord Nelson and his Way of War* (Annapolis, 2003) and Edgar Vincent, *Nelson, Love and Fame* (New Haven and London, 2003), both of whom rely heavily on Nicolas.

<sup>15</sup> Alfred Morrison, *The Hamilton and Nelson Papers*, 2 vols (London, 1893–94).

<sup>16</sup> George Naish (ed.), *Nelson’s Letters to his Wife and Other Documents 1785–1831* (London, 1958).

<sup>17</sup> H. C. Gutteridge, *Nelson and the Neapolitan Jacobins* (London, 1903); Warren Dawson, *The Nelson Collection at Lloyd’s* (London, 1931); Geoffrey Rawson (ed.), *Letters from Lord Nelson* (London, 1949).

In the meantime, despite these omissions, Nicolas’s great work acquired a reputation for completeness that it did not deserve. To be fair to him, he never made such a claim himself. On the contrary, in the introduction to his fifth volume he made it clear that, confronted with the volume of Nelson’s official correspondence for the period 1803–05 he had been forced to make selections.<sup>18</sup> However the myth took root and an unfortunate side effect was that Nelson’s biographers stopped looking for new material, believing that the letters contained in Nicolas’s seven volumes represented a sufficiently representative cross-section of Nelson’s correspondence. The material assembled by the Nelson Letters Project showed how wrong such a judgment was (fig. 2).

### The British Library Pressed Copy Letters

One of the most striking demonstrations of the error was found in the British Library. There, amongst the voluminous Nelson archive known as the Bridport Papers, are nine volumes containing ‘pressed copy’ letters – direct copies of original letters obtained by using a special portable copying apparatus. At first, it was thought that these were simply duplicates of Nelson’s official letter books, most of which are now in public collections, and which had been seen and used by Nicolas. But when their contents came to be analysed more closely, it became apparent that they contained material that was not available in any other form. Moreover, as detailed transcription work proceeded it emerged that much of this hitherto unpublished material was of a ‘sensitive’ nature, either because it was private and personal, or because it related to secret activities such as diplomacy and intelligence.

Pressed copies were obtained using a process that was then comparatively new, and not in general use. Impressions of the original letter were created by using a special machine to press it onto moistened tissue paper, producing a mirror image of the text. This was then reversed, so that the writing could be read through the tissue, and stuck into a book containing blank pages of light grey paper against which the impression stood out more clearly. The pressing was done on a small portable copying desk, a process patented by the famous engineer, James Watt, in 1780.<sup>19</sup> Special ink was required in order to make good impressions and there is evidence that Nelson and his secretaries did not always have a supply to hand, for some of the impressions in the book are now so faded that they are illegible (fig. 3).

There are nine volumes of pressed copy letters in the British Library’s Nelson Papers. They consist of a series of loose pages, with pressed copies stuck onto them, which have been bound together in books. Each page is numbered in ink and most of the volumes have indices bound into the front, in the handwriting of John Scott, Nelson’s private secretary. These consist of the names of the recipients in rough alphabetical order, the date of the letter and a page number (fig. 4).<sup>20</sup> Two volumes have no index: Volume I, which dates from an earlier period and has only six letters in it and Volume IX, which was compiled in

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<sup>18</sup> Nicolas, vol. v, p. viii.

<sup>19</sup> There is an example in the Science Museum (Inventory No: 1921-0397). Machine for creating pressed copy letters, Science Museum Pic Ref 10327509 (Portable Copying Apparatus, c. 1800). See: <http://www.scienceandsociety.co.uk/results.asp?image=10327509>.

<sup>20</sup> The pages were renumbered, in pencil, when the volumes were acquired by the British Museum and these have become the official folio number for the individual documents in the BL catalogue. It should be noted that in almost every case the pencilled numbers differ from the inked ones, so the indices in the front of the volumes do not agree with the BL catalogue.



*Fig. 2. Nelson's writing slope (Royal Naval Museum).*



Fig. 3. The Great Cabin of HMS *Victory* – the day cabin, where Nelson worked with his secretaries, is in the background (Royal Naval Museum).

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A			D			Page	Date	1803	G.
Addington Right Honble Secy	20	24 August	Drummond William Mini.	19	13 August			Gibbs	
Addington Right Honble Secy	27	25 Sept	"	51	27 "				
Acton Sir John Bosc.	73	2 Septm.	"	58	"				
Addington Right Honble Secy	153	27 "	Duff James Esq. Consul	157	4 Oct.			Gasko	
Addington Right Honble Secy	184	6 Oct.	Durban - Captain	175	5 "			Griffe	
Acton Sir John Bosc.	211	8 "	Drummond William Mini.	196	7 "			Gibbs	
								Gibbs	
B			E.						
Ball Sir Alexander Bosc.	1	12 August	Ellist Hugh Esq. Minister	65	2 Septm.			H.	
"	3	"	"	91	8 "			Hunter	
"	9	"	"	95	"				
"	17	13 "	"	106	11 "			Hault	
"	41	27 "	"	215	8 Oct.				
"	49	"	"	219	"			J.	
"	62	"	"					Jackson	
Bickerton Sir Richd Bosc.	114	15 Sept.						M.	
Ball Sir Alexander Bosc.	124	16 "	Forstie Spurdian Esq.	15	13 August				
Brown, Master Prevoyant	188	18 "	Falcon John Esq.	32	26 "			Mou	
Ball Sir Alexander Bosc.	188	6 Oct.	Forstie Spurdian Esq.	54	27 "				
"	203	7 "	Fuse John H. Esq. Mini.	77	6 Septm.				
"	207	8 "	Falconet - Esq.	105	10 "			N.	
"	210	"	Fuse Sir H. Esq. Mini.	111	13 "			Nipf	
			Fyffe John Captain	115	15 "			North	
			Falcon John Esq.	161	4 Oct.				
C									
Consul Imperial	13	13 August							
Consul Vatica of	44	"							
Consul Barcelona	81	Septm.							
Crack Henry Junis	136	23 "							
Ditto	139	"							
Cutpath James - Gibraltar	169	4 Oct.							
Crocraft Captain - Anson	192	7 "							

Fig. 4. A typical index for the pressed copy volumes (BL, Add. MS. 34953).

September–October 1805 and left unfinished after Trafalgar. John Scott was, of course, killed on the quarterdeck of the *Victory* in the opening moments of the battle.

As will be seen from the breakdown of the contents in Table I, the first volume, containing only six letters, covers a short period in 1795. The other eight cover 9 August 1803 to 19 October 1805, with only one short break, between 16 August and 16 September, which coincides with a Nelson’s all too brief spell of leave in England in the early autumn of 1805. They therefore provide a detailed record of the most important period in Nelson’s career: his command in the Mediterranean in 1803–05, the famous chase of the French and Spanish fleets to the West Indies and back in the summer of 1805 and the build-up to Trafalgar.

**Table I – Contents of Press copy letter books**

BL Ref No. (all Add.Ms.)	Dates	No. Letters	No. Unpub
34952	18 July – 21 November 1796	6	4
34953	9 August – 8 October 1803	86	44
34954	8 August 1803 – 19 January 1804	102	50
34955	19 January – 26 May 1804	140	75
34956	25 May – 25 August 1804	164	107
34957	26 August – 13 November 1804	185	72
34958	15 November 1804 – 11 February 1805 18 June – 16 August 1805	154	103
34959	18 February– 18 June 1805	157	72
34960	16 September – 19 October 1805	105	66
	<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>1099</b>	<b>593</b>

Table I also shows that around 55% of the letters in the copy books have not previously been published in the existing printed collections of Nelson’s letters.<sup>21</sup> Some of the originals of the unpublished letters copied in these books have been located elsewhere during the course of the Nelson Letters Project. So, for example, Nelson’s letters for the 1803–05 period to his friend and former naval colleague, the Duke of Clarence, have been located in the British Library itself;<sup>22</sup> while a run of letters to Lord Melville, First Lord of the Admiralty, in 1804 is in the National Archive of Scotland.<sup>23</sup> Overseas, the main collections located have been letters relating to diplomatic relations with Naples in the US Naval Academy Museum at Annapolis<sup>24</sup> and an even more significant run concerning relations with Sardinia in the State Archive at Turin. Smaller groups, and individual letters, have been located in almost every other archive visited. Even so, these finds amount to no more than 150 letters. That leaves over 400 cases – 40%, that is, of the total – where these faint impressions in the BL volumes are the only record we currently have of these items of Nelsonian correspondence during a critical part of his career. Clearly, therefore, they represent a most significant find.

<sup>21</sup> The ‘unpublished’ figures given in this article are not exact. This is because some of the letters are so faded that their contents cannot be read. What can be said with some confidence however is that figures given here represent the *lowest* number.

<sup>22</sup> Add. MS. 46356.

<sup>23</sup> Edinburgh, National Archive of Scotland, GD51/2/1082.

<sup>24</sup> Annapolis, Naval Academy Museum, The Zabrieski Collection.

### Analysing the contents

So why did so many letters that were not recorded anywhere else find their way into these books? To try to understand the rationale behind the creation of this particular collection, the actual content of the unpublished letters was examined closely. Table II shows the analysis of the forty-four unpublished letters in the volume for August–October 1803.

TABLE II – Subject matter of unpublished letters (Add. MSS 34953)

Subject	Nos	Examples
<i>Personal</i>		
To Capts	3	To Capt Strachan re fleet movements (ff. 186-87)
Private Affairs	11	Letters re his estate at Bronte (e.g. ff. 120-21); Presents for Lady Hamilton (e.g. f. 109)
<i>Diplomatic</i>		
General	6	To Hookham Frere (British Minister in Madrid) re recovery of deserters from Spain (ff. 81-84)
Sardinia	2	To Mr Jackson (British Minister at Turin) re French invasion (ff. 88-91)
Naples	2	To Prime Minister Acton (ff. 77-80) re possible British intervention in Naples
Tunis/Algiers	3	To Consul Falcon at Tunis (ff. 165-66) re problems with Dey
<i>Operational</i>	7	To Admiral Bickerton re possible attack on Marseilles (f. 118)
<i>Intelligence</i>	7	To John Hunter (Consul at Cadiz) setting out types of intelligence required (ff. 145-46)
<i>Patronage</i>	3	To Admiral Pole re one of his protégés (ff. 176-78)

A similar pattern is found in all the other volumes. Some of the unpublished letters they contain are private or personal ones, but a significant proportion of them (for example, over 60% of the above sample) are concerned with secret matters such as diplomacy, intelligence and operations. This pattern is so consistent that it would appear to suggest that Nelson and his staff used these books to retain copies of letters that, for various reasons, they did not think appropriate for inclusion in the official letter books.

This supposition is supported by physical evidence within the letters themselves. Close examination reveals numerous signs of editing: all the volumes contain letters with pencilled annotations. Often these are simple clarifications: for example, the insertion of a name where the impression is faint or unclear. In some cases, however, passages are clearly marked for exclusion: most often this is done by the insertion of brackets but occasionally the words ‘Miss’ or ‘No’ are inserted.

These editorial notes occur most frequently in the last volume of the series, 34960, which covers the busy weeks leading up to Trafalgar. The volume contains 105 copies of letters, sixty-six of which had not been published before the Nelson Letters Project started work. Of these unpublished letters, twenty-two have been clearly marked ‘No’ in pencil and only one of those so marked appears in Nicolas’s work – a letter to Vice Admiral Cuthbert Collingwood, dated 5 October 1805, which Nicolas transcribed from an original supplied to him by one of Collingwood’s descendants.<sup>26</sup> When the contents of the marked letters are analysed, we find that they coincide closely with the analysis above of the unpublished letters in Add. MS. 34953 – in other words, they are all either personal, or concerned with secret matters, such as diplomacy, ship movements, or intelligence. The fact that at some later date someone decided that these letters were too sensitive to be published supports the supposition that Nelson and his staff used these books to record letters that they did not wish to feature in the official letter books because of their personal or secret content.

Finally we have evidence that Nelson himself regarded these books as his own personal record of his activities. On 31 August 1805, while enjoying a brief spell of leave in England following his dramatic chase of the French and Spanish fleets to the West Indies and back, he wrote to his friend Lord Minto. He had been trying to enlist Minto’s support in his campaign to persuade the government to send troops to Sardinia to help the Sardis to defend themselves against a possible French-backed invasion from Corsica. He wrote

I send you the other Letter-books, and those I have marked may be worth your reading relative to Sardinia, as marking strongly my opinion ... As an index is placed in the first page you can refer to any letter in the Book.<sup>27</sup>

The letter was accompanied by a list of six letters that he particularly wanted Minto to read, identified by their addressee and number. If these are compared with the addressees and numbering of the letters in Add. MS. 34956 it can be shown that this was undoubtedly the book to which Nelson was referring. So he kept these pressed copy volumes with him, even when on leave, which suggests strongly that he regarded them as his personal property, and not an official record.

To sum up therefore, it seems fair to conclude that Nelson and his staff created these pressed copy volumes as a personal record of his transactions. A significant proportion of the letters – some 45% – were ‘public’ letters and duplicated material that was recorded elsewhere – notably in the official letter books kept by Nelson’s secretaries. But the rest are a fascinating mixture of personal letters, and of material that was clearly regarded as ‘sensitive’ – usually because it referred to diplomatic matters, intelligence or operations.

### Who made the cuts?

So, who made the decisions to make the cuts indicated by the pencilled annotations? It is impossible to be absolutely sure, but all the available evidence suggests Clarke and M’Arthur. Careful analysis of the letters marked ‘No’ or ‘Miss’ shows that in almost every case, they were not used in their massive *Life*. Even more telling, when passages in the copies are marked with pencilled brackets, these coincide almost exactly with cuts in letters that Clarke and M’Arthur did publish.

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<sup>26</sup> Nicolas, vol. vii, p. 77.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. vii, p. 25.

To illustrate this point, let us examine closely a sequence of seven letters from Add. MS. 34954, all written between 29 December 1803 and 4 January 1804.

In late December 1803, Nelson received intelligence from intercepted letters that the French were planning an invasion of Sardinia from Corsica. This coincided with intelligence from his frigates watching Toulon, about the movements of the French fleet that suggested they were preparing to put to sea. He responded by immediately moving with his battlefleet to cover La Maddalena. In fact, the attack came to nothing but the Sardis were now thoroughly alarmed and asked formally for assistance with the defence of La Maddalena and, when he sailed to take up again his patrol off Toulon Nelson left one of his protégés, Captain William Parker, in the frigate HMS *Amazon* at the anchorage. So, by early 1804, the officially neutral Kingdom of Sardinia was openly co-operating with the British to prevent a French invasion of the island. Clearly this was a significant aspect of the Mediterranean Campaign – and yet it will be sought for in vain in biographies published before 2004.

Close examination of seven letters in Add. MS. 34954 covering the height of the invasion scare reveals why. Five of them are annotated in pencil to indicate that passages are to be omitted. When these notations are compared with the transcripts of the letters published by Clarke and M’Arthur, it is apparent that the marked passages coincide exactly with material that does not appear in the printed version. As Table III shows, in each case, the omitted material is of a sensitive nature.<sup>28</sup> However, the information these passages contain is essential for a full understanding of what is going on. Scarcely surprising then, that the story has not featured before; the mangled fragments that survive do not give a clear enough picture of the event.

**TABLE III – Passages omitted from letters in Add. MS. 34954**

Folio Nos:	Date	Recipient	Published	Omissions
188-90	29/12/03	Thomas Jackson, British Minister Turin	C&M, vol. iii, pp. 10-11; Nicolas, vol. v, pp. 336-37	1. Hoping the King of Sardinia ‘will not be frightened into shunting us out of his ports it would be a very serious inconvenience’  2. Detailed intelligence of the French fleet
191-94	29/12/03	Hugh Elliott, Ambassador Naples	Not in C&M; in Nicolas, vol. v, pp. 335-36	None. In this case, Nicolas transcribed the letter from an original and so the entire letter is published

<sup>28</sup> NB: ff. 197-201 are too faint to read.

195-96	29/12/03	Sir John Acton, Prime Minister Naples	C&M, vol. iii, pp. 11-12; Nicolas, vol. v, pp. 337-38	<p>1. Passage relating to Nelson’s decision to leave a frigate to defend Sardinia</p> <p>2. Passage (marked in C&amp;M by dots) explaining Britain cannot send any more ships to the Mediterranean because of Napoleon’s invasion threat</p>
202-03	31/12/03	General Villettes, Malta	C& M, vol. iii, p. 12 (précis only)	Problems Nelson is having with linking up with supply and mail ships
204-06	31/12/03	Villettes	C&M, vol. iii, pp. 12-13; Nicolas, vol. v, p. 340	Private material relating to their friendship
207-10	1/1/04	Sir Richard Bickerton (2 i/c)	Not published either by C&M or Nicolas	<p>1. Briefing about proposed ship movements</p> <p>2. Plans for defending Sardinia</p>
211-12	4/1/04	Capt William Parker	C&M. vol. iii, p. 14; Nicolas, vol. v, p. 344	<p>1. Detailed instructions for communicating with Governor of Maddalena and Commandant of the local fort</p> <p>2. Passage making it clear that Nelson will come to the rescue if the French land. Parker is to report to him with ‘all the information you may be able to collect of the Enemy’s force and of the Posts they occupy.’</p>

It seems clear, therefore, that Clarke & M’Arthur saw the material in the pressed copy books and that it was they who were responsible not only for the decision to omit the material that was not published at all, but also for making the cuts in the material that was published. It is important to remember that their book was published in 1809, when the war against France was still at its height, and so it is scarcely surprising that they decided to omit material relating to delicate diplomatic matters, or intelligence, or operations.

Unfortunately for reasons that we cannot now reconstruct, when Sir Nicholas Harris Nicolas came to compile his great collection of Nelson’s correspondence, he did not look at

– or maybe he was not even shown – the pressed copy letter books. A note in the British Library catalogue says, ‘Sir H. Nicolas used none of these letter books with the exception of the latter part of Vol VII [Add. MS. 34958] 18 June – 16 August 1805 which was then separate from the rest of the volume and in the possession of John Wilson Croker, Secretary to the Admiralty’.<sup>29</sup> And in a footnote to Nelson’s letter to Lord Minto mentioning the letter books and quoted above, Nicolas says, ‘The Letter-books referred to have not fallen under the Editor’s observation’.<sup>30</sup>

As a result, in this case, as in a number of others,<sup>31</sup> Nicolas was forced to rely upon Clarke and M’Arthur’s mangled extracts, even though he knew that they were unsatisfactory. And so, unwittingly, the decisions about non-publication of the sensitive material, made for understandable reasons in 1809, were perpetuated in the mid 1840s, when the reasons for withholding the material no longer applied in most cases. Thereafter, because of the myth of Nicolas’s completeness referred to above, the pressed copy letter books were ignored by successive biographers. So it was only when the material in the books was properly examined, and compared with the printed sources, during the course of the Nelson Letters Project, that it became apparent just how much material had been omitted or edited.

### Examples of the Contents

Let us now look in more detail at the unpublished material that has been located as a result of this exercise. As we have seen, this falls into two main categories:

- (1) Private or personal letters to family, friends and naval colleagues
- (2) Official letters concerning secret or sensitive matters, such as intelligence, diplomacy or operations.

#### Private Letters (1): Letters to Captains

Many of the private letters in the books are concerned with fairly mundane matters, such as presents for Emma Hamilton, or the affairs of Nelson’s estates in Bronte in Sicily, or Merton in England. These are of interest to biographers of course but, in historical terms, perhaps the most important material is to be found in private letters in which Nelson explained his ideas to his captains, taking them into his confidence and sharing responsibility with them. They throw fascinating light on the way in which Nelson actually exercised his leadership.

A letter to Captain William Cracraft, dating from early in Nelson’s period in command in the Mediterranean, shows his methods admirably. Cracraft had just been appointed to command a squadron of frigates in the Adriatic to watch the French movements in that area and to protect British trade. It was an important and responsible task, as Nelson’s orders made clear. But he also resisted the temptation to tie Cracraft down with over-precise orders preferring, instead, to write what he called a ‘loose letter’ and assuring his subordinate, ‘I rely on your abilities and Zeal to do what is right.’ Here is the letter in full:

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<sup>29</sup> BL Index.

<sup>30</sup> Nicolas, vol. vii, p. 25.

<sup>31</sup> For example, Nelson’s letters to his wife and to his friend the Duke of Clarence.

Victory off Toulon Octr: 7<sup>th</sup>: 1803

Dear Sir

The Arrow & Bittern are ordered to put themselves under your Command, but it may not be necessary to keep them always with you. The services to which I desire most particularly to call to your attention exclusive of the great one of preventing the French army crossing the Water or putting foot upon Salt Water, are, the comfort of Malta & the army and all thereunto belonging, the expediting our Commerce to and from the Adriatic and the Levant, keeping the French Privateers from being insolent in the Morea & above [*illegible*] and Trieste, for which purpose you will communicate with Corfu with His Majestys Minister Mr: Foresti.

You will also visit the upper parts or send some of your Squadron of the Adriatic, and keep the Italian republic in better order. I wish you to try and have from Manfredonia which I believe the French have not settled, a communication with Naples, and write to Sir John Acton offering any services in your power to him and also to Mr Elliot. They will wish you probably to convey some letters for them to Trieste or Venice or Vienna & from thence to Manfredonia, it will be a most acceptable service. You will call at Malta and consult with Sir Alexr: Ball and General Villetes how you can be useful to them, call at Messina Syracuse &c: You will as soon as you can spare her send the Juno to Me.

The Service you are employ'd upon is a most important one but I do not mean unless perfectly agreeable to you to keep you always upon it. Only signify your wishes and I shall be happy to attend to them. You will see by this loose letter that it is almost impossible at this distance to give precise orders for such various Services but I rely on your abilities and Zeal to do what is right and I am Ever Dear Sir your most obedient Sevt:

Nelson & Bronte<sup>32</sup>

His trust was not misplaced and, in January 1804, he told Cracraft, ‘I beg you to be assured that I have approved and been most perfectly satisfied with every part of your conduct.’<sup>33</sup>

Nelson also understood the importance of keeping his captains happy and one way he did this was by giving them independent ‘cruises’, which were an opportunity for them to win some prize money. The following letter to Capel, one of his best frigate captains, shows him using this carrot. Capel had just completed a long, and very useful, reconnaissance off Toulon and Nelson reassures him that he will soon be relieved and sent on his way:

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<sup>32</sup> Add. MS. 34953, ff. 196-99.

<sup>33</sup> Add. MS. 34955, ff. 54-55.

Victory Decr: 9<sup>th</sup>: 1804

My Dear Capel

Although you are most probably fancying that the Ships outside the Medn: are making fortunes by the Capture of Spanish Vessels, yet by reports of neutral and Spanish vessels, Sir John Orde who is off Cadiz has not as far as the 24<sup>th</sup>: Novr molested any Spanish vessels. Therefore I suppose I am the only admiral at war with Spain, and either Sir John or myself must be doing wrong. However I feel that I am acting a consistent part and shall go on, and I have no fear but I shall have the approbation of Government. Either Seahorse or Active shall Relieve you immediately as they join or get to Rends: 97 where I have left orders for them. I shall hope to see you with a long list of Spanish Prizes.

You will be not only surpriz'd to find me still here but also to hear that Adl: Campbell is gone to England, very ill in the Ambuscade. It is now 80 days since I have heard from England. I beg my regards to Capt: Munday & Believe me Ever My Dear Capel Most faithfully Yours

Nelson & Bronte<sup>34</sup>

Even when matters did not go so smoothly, Nelson was prepared to be supportive, providing the subordinate in question could show he had acted as he did for good reasons. In March 1805, he had to write to Captain Frank Sotheron to explain to the inexperienced captain the knock-on effects of an apparently isolated decision. Sotheron, commanding the battleship HMS *Excellent* stationed at Naples, had agreed to a request of the British Ambassador, Hugh Elliot, that the frigate HMS *Seahorse* should be diverted from her planned course to take urgent dispatches to the Commander in Chief. But, as Nelson patiently explained, this decision had dislocated his finely-balanced chain of ships, so that, as result, a vital convoy was kept waiting at Malta for want of a proper escort. However this lesson in wider command was given lightly and with an assurance of continued trust,

I am truly sensible that you ever act in the most correct manner and that information was of the very greatest importance to Me, therefore although that is most desirable for Me, yet I have only mentioned my situation to you to prove to you the impossibility of any of the small ships being allowed to remain in Port longer than is absolutely necessary.<sup>35</sup>

All this makes him sound very sensitive and caring – and he certainly was. But he clearly was not a soft touch and, if he felt one of his subordinates had let him down he was quick to reprimand them. In October 1803, one of his protégés, Robert Pettit, wasted an opportunity for prize-taking that his patron had given him and received the following sharp letter

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<sup>34</sup> Add. MS. 34958, ff. 85–86.

<sup>35</sup> Add. MS. 34959, ff. 111–12.

Victory off Toulon Octr: 6<sup>th</sup>: 1803

Sir

I wished to have given you a chance to pick up something in the Termagant and most particularly told you not to heave her down. You will now receive an order to join Me that Captain Hylliar may go into the ship which I told you he would probably accept. If you have not put yourself in fortunes way it is your own fault and [not] of him who wish'd to be your sincere friend

Nelson & Bronte (fig. 5)<sup>36</sup>

### Private Letters (2): Patronage

A significant proportion of the newly-located letters – perhaps as much as 15% – relates to Nelson’s exercise of patronage.<sup>37</sup> Nicolas prints comparatively little of this material and, as a result, this aspect of Nelson’s leadership has not been properly examined in the past. Yet an understanding of Nelson’s use of patronage is vital to a full appreciation of his leadership methods: it often informed his decisions about promotions and even had an effect on his operational decisions. For example, he was more likely to give a ‘plum’, such as a potentially lucrative cruise, to an officer who was one of his own protégés, or the protégé of one of his friends or close colleagues.

He was of course not alone in this: patronage was the oil that kept the wheels of Georgian Britain moving smoothly. It affected most areas of public life, not least the Royal Navy. In his early career, Nelson benefited from the patronage of his uncle Captain Maurice Suckling, and of his uncle’s friends and professional allies. When he became influential himself, he passed on the benefits to others – often the sons, or relatives, of those who had helped him earlier.

As the most cursory glance through the pressed copy books shows, Nelson was constantly beset by friends and naval colleagues asking him to look after, or give special attention to, their friends and relatives and, in a letter to an old friend Admiral Roddam, in November 1804, he explained how his power of promotion was severely curtailed by a rule requiring him to fill any vacancies with names from a list supplied by the Admiralty,

I will explain to you exactly my power of promotion and you will then see the very distant prospect I can have of obliging any of my friends ... Nothing is left to a Commander in Chief of the Present day but Deaths & dismissals by Court Martials and not one of them thank God has happened since I took Command in May 1803.<sup>38</sup>

All the same, he had a strong sense of the importance of continuity in naval service and clearly saw it as his duty to do as much as he could to make sure that the careers of the sons

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<sup>36</sup> Add. MS. 34953, f. 185.

<sup>37</sup> This is an estimated figure only.

<sup>38</sup> Monmouth, The Nelson Museum, E156.

185  
Victory off Toulon Oct<sup>r</sup> 6<sup>th</sup> 1803

Sir

I wished to have given you a chance to pick up something in the Termagant and most particularly told you not to break her down. You will now receive an order to join her that Captain Agullear may go into the ship which I told you he would probably accept, if you have not put yourself in fortune's way it is your own fault and of him who would be your sincere friend Nelson to B. B.

Of Mr. Dalson chuses to put up with such accommodations as the Termagant can afford you will cry him to me

Capt. Pettit. (Pettit.) N B

Fig. 5. Private letter: Nelson scolds Capt Pettit, 6 October 1803 – note the signs of editing. (BL, Add. MS. 34953, f. 185).

of his fellow officers were looked after. Perhaps this feeling was particularly strong in him since he did not have any sons of his own. This can be seen in a letter in the pressed copies to his friend Rear Admiral Thomas Louis, who had been one of his captains at the battle of the Nile,

Victory Oct: 12th: 1804

My Dear Louis

Your Son is placed upon the Admiralty list and the first Adlty: Vacancy that happens I shall put him into it but keep this to yourself for I am order'd to promote as they stand upon the list but I shall certainly take a liberty for the Son of my worthy Second & friend

I am Ever My Dear Louis Most faithfully Yours

Nelson & Bronte (fig. 6)<sup>39</sup>

He also had a following of bright young protégés of his own and worked hard to further their careers whenever the opportunity offered. On the same day that he wrote to Louis, he wrote a letter to the First Lord of the Admiralty, Lord Melville, about one of his own particular favourites, William Hoste, who had first gone to sea with him as a teenaged midshipman in 1793:

Victory Octr: 12th: 1804

My Dear Lord

I interest myself very much that Captain Hoste should have a frigate. I beg you will give him one and pledge myself that he will do honor to the Command of her to Your Lordship me and to our Country and your kind compliance will most truly oblige your Most faithful Servt:

Nelson & Bronte<sup>40</sup>

Melville duly obliged and Hoste fulfilled his patron's pledge by becoming one of the leading British frigate captains of the war. In 1811, he commanded a squadron of British frigates that won a decisive victory over a superior Franco-Venetian force at the Battle of Lissa. And he never forgot his debts. Just before battle was joined, he electrified his men by sending a simple signal: 'Remember Nelson!'

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<sup>39</sup> Add. MS. 34957, f. 226.

<sup>40</sup> Add. MS. 34957, f. 229.

226

Victory Oct. 12<sup>th</sup> 1804

My Dear Louis,

Your Son is placed upon  
the admiralty list and the first ad<sup>y</sup>  
vacancy that happens I shall put him  
into it but leave him to yourself for  
an order to promote as they stand on  
the list but I shall certainly take a  
liberty for the Son of my worthy  
Friend. I am ever My Dear Louis  
most faithfully Yours  
Nelson & Boscawen

You must excuse my short letter.  
Dear Admiral Louis,  
The late ad<sup>y</sup> never recommended your  
Son.

Fig. 6. Patronage: Nelson writes to Admiral Louis about the promotion of his son, 12 October 1804 (BL, Add. MS. 34597, f. 226).

## Official Letters (1): Intelligence

As we have seen, official letters amongst the new material tend to deal with sensitive matters – and few subjects could be more sensitive than intelligence. Naval intelligence of the Nelsonian period is still a little-known area of naval history and to date there has been little in the way of detailed academic study of this fascinating, but necessarily rather shadowy, subject.<sup>41</sup> One of the problems confronting historians hitherto has been the paucity of primary source material and this has applied to Nelson as much as to any of his contemporaries. As a result, this important aspect of his work, especially during his time as the Mediterranean commander-in-chief, has hardly featured at all in the various biographies, until very recently.

Once again, however, the pressed copy material has enabled us to shine new light into a hitherto dark area. So, for example, we now have a much better idea than hitherto of Nelson’s extensive network of contacts, on whom he relied for so much of his information. In a letter dated 24 September, right at the start of his time as commander-in-chief, Nelson told one of those contacts, John Hunter the British Consul at Cadiz, the sort of information he required:

Victory Septr: 24th: 1803

Sir I earnestly entreat that you direct from the Consuls at the different Spanish Ports (weekly if possible) returns to be made to you and forwarded by you to Me of the names of the Ships of War fitting out.

Of the progress of their equipment. How many men they have and when likely to be completed.

And when the ships will probably be ready for Sea – and to what destination reports send them.

the last is of little consequence as it will be my business to guess at this.

Such information will be of the very greatest consequence to our Country and I know I need say no more to stimulate your exertions in getting it for me

I have the honour to be Sir with the greatest Respect

Your Most Obedient Servant

Nelson & Bronte (fig. 7)<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> The best treatment of this subject is by Roger Knight (who had access to the material in the pressed copy books), *Nelson: The Pursuit of Victory* (London, 2005). See also Michael Duffy, ‘British Naval Intelligence and Bonaparte’s Egyptian Expedition of 1798’, *The Mariner’s Mirror*, lxxxiv (1998), pp. 278–88.

<sup>42</sup> Add. MS. 34953, ff. 145–46.

Victory Sept<sup>r</sup> 24<sup>th</sup> 1803 145

Sir,

I earnestly entreat that you direct from the Consuls at the different Spanish Ports (whenever it is possible) returns to be made to you and forwarded by you to me. Of the names of the Ships of War fitting out - of the number of their equipment How many men they have and when likely to be completed - and when the Ships will probably be ready for sea - and what distinction reports send them - the last is of little consequence as it will be my business to inquire at this - such information will be of the very greatest consequence to

Fig. 7. Intelligence: Nelson writes to Mr Hunter, British Consul at Cadiz, asking for information. 24 September 1803 (BL, Add. MS. 34953, ff. 145-46).

Hunter responded ‘Nothing shall be wanting on my part to procure and transmit every possible information.’<sup>43</sup> This marked the beginning of an important stream of information from both Cadiz and Madrid – at one point, for example, Hunter even sent, at Nelson’s request, full details and a sketch of the road from Barcelona to Madrid.

A second, and very useful, source of intelligence was intercepted mail. Thanks to the regular patrols of his small ships, Nelson virtually controlled the western basin of the Mediterranean and it was extremely difficult for his opponents to transport their mail by sea. So, for example, on 21 November 1804 the British detained a Spanish packet boat sailing to Barcelona from Majorca, having first called at Minorca. Writing to his friend the Governor of Malta, Alexander Ball, and the First Lord of the Admiralty, Nelson made it clear that the information she was carrying was very useful. ‘[W]e know the very defenceless state of Minorca and their fear of attack every day,’ he wrote; while Melville was told, ‘Minorca at this moment would fall to 2000 troops’. Another letter, to General Villette, commanding the British troops in Malta, demonstrates just how detailed the information found in the packet boat actually was:

I have the Governors demand for stores, sandbags, shovels, balls, flints, handspikes, sponges &c, &c in short everything. His Troops are stationed from Tower Blanca across the Island believing I suppose that We should land near Mahon. They expect the attack by 5000 troops from Malta which their spy the same they had last war tells them is preparing.<sup>44</sup>

However Nelson also appreciated the need to lull the Spanish into thinking that nothing of importance had been discovered. So when, two days later, the Governor of Barcelona wrote enquiring about the fate of the mail, he was told ‘In the Packet from Majorca were taken a number of letters but by far the greatest number were lost overboard, the patron having cut the Mail open and thrown as many as possible into the Sea.’<sup>45</sup>

## Secret Official Letters (2): Operations

Finally, the pressed copy books contain much material relating to the operations of the fleet. Perhaps the most important is a remarkable sequence of letters and hastily scribbled notes in Add. MSS. 34958 and 34959 relating to the so-called ‘Trafalgar campaign’ of 1805 – the complex series of fleet manoeuvres throughout the spring and summer of that year linked to the Emperor Napoleon’s attempts to unite his fleet to cover his planned invasion of Britain, and the British responses to these moves. Nelson, and the Mediterranean Fleet, played a key role in this campaign and the BL letter books contain much hitherto unpublished material that that enables us, as it were, to watch over his shoulder as he deploys his ships and makes his decisions.

As an example, let us look at the first few days of the campaign. It started on 19 January 1805, in Agincourt Sound at La Maddalena, Sardinia. Nelson was there with his fleet, replenishing his stores and water, when the frigates *Seahorse* and *Active* appeared from the

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<sup>43</sup> Greenwich, National Maritime Museum, CRK/14.

<sup>44</sup> Add. MS. 34958, f. 28–29.

<sup>45</sup> Add. MS. 34958, f. 17.

north west, flying the signal, ‘Enemy at Sea’. From their captains Nelson learned that the French fleet had put to sea from Toulon the previous day, heading south.

A note to Captain Courtenay Boyle of the *Seahorse*, clearly written in great haste, shows Nelson’s instant reaction to the news. *Seahorse* is immediately sent out again, to the south west of Sardinia, to see whether the French fleet has been seen there.

Victory 8 PM Janry: 19<sup>th</sup>: 1805

Sir

Proceed without one moments loss of Time round the South end of Sarda: as far as St: Peters and enquire if the French fleet has been seen, and return and Join me. I shall make the best of my way with the fleet the same rout. Should you see the Enemys fleet upon your passage you will return & join me with all possible expedition making the signal with guns for seeing them

I am Sir your Most Obt: Servant

Nelson & Bronte (fig. 8)<sup>46</sup>

The following day, he wrote a personal note to his second in command, Sir Richard Bickerton, bringing him up to date,

Victory Janry: 20<sup>th</sup>: 1805

My Dear Sir Richard

On Rends: 102 our frigates at day light on Friday the 18th: were nearly surrounded by four ships. At 9 the french hauled their Wind, in the Evening they were still in Sight. At 10 at Night the french fleet were close to our ships steering South or S by W under a press of Sail, then nearly in the latitude of Adjaccio, therefore they must from this account be bound round Toro, but whether to Naples Sicily Morea or Egypt I cannot tell. I have sent Seahorse to make the best of her way off St. Peters. She will either probably hear of or see them. I am a little anxious naturally but no Man has more real cause to be happy, I hope to morrow we shall get hold of them, and the result I ought not to doubt. You will be a Peer as sure as my name is Nelson. I shall most probably bring them to battle in the Night if opportunity offers. Leviathan & Spencer I have made a detached Squad: as they sail fast to make a push at some of them. God send us a happy sight of them prays My Dear Sir Richard

Your Most faithful friend

Nelson & Bronte <sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Add. MS. 34958, f. 288.

<sup>47</sup> Off the Hyères Islands, to the east of Toulon.

<sup>48</sup> Add. MS. 34958, ff. 304-05.

303.

Velocity & Power Jan<sup>19</sup> 1805

Sir Proceed without one moment  
to ~~the~~ Sine round the South end of Sant  
Jago. At Petero and enquire of the French  
what has been seen, and return and join  
me, I shall make the best of my way  
in the first the same route, should  
you see the Enemy's feet upon your  
shore you will return & join me  
in all horrible expedition making  
a signal with guns for seeing them  
I am Sir your most Obedt Servant  
Nelson & Brouth  
Boyle (Capt. Boyle)

Fig. 8. Operations: Nelson's orders to Captain Boyle, 19 January 1805 (BL, Add. MS. 34958, f. 303)  
(Example of operational orders – Trafalgar campaign).

The same mood of tense anticipation can be detected in a note to one of his captains, Robert Stopford of HMS Spencer, explaining the tactics he is intending to use when the enemy fleet is found:

My Dear Sir

As I think that you and Leviathan are our fastest sailing Ships I have separated You from the Order of Sailing in case opportunity should offer of making a push at any Separated Ship of the Enemy, or for bringing their Rear to action should they be inclined to run. Therefore you will not be far from us that no mistakes of Signal may take place or of the Telegraph.

I shall bring them most probably to action in the night as well as the day therefore You may expect the Signal if we see them. The distinguishing Lights must be carefully attended to.

I am ever My Dear Sir Yours faithfully

Nelson & Bronte<sup>49</sup>

In fact, the French were not heading eastwards round the south of Sardinia at all, but westward out of the Mediterranean in accordance with Napoleon’s plan for the invasion of Britain. But this point was academic for Villeneuve had encountered a severe storm and, by 21 January, even as Nelson arrived in position off the south of Sardinia, he was already putting back into Toulon for repairs. Four days later, the first note of real anxiety begins to creep into Nelson’s notes as he begins to suspect that the French fleet may have eluded him. Sending Captain Richard Moubray in the frigate HMS Active to Cagliari for information he writes:

Victory Janry: 25th: 1805

Sir

Proceed with all possible dispatch into the Gulph of Cagliari and send my letters on Shore at the Town by an Officer, and charge him to return to you without one moments loss of time, for consider how anxious I must be for information of the Enemy and that one moments delay may enable them to accomplish their object. If your officer finds all is safe let him send the boat off to You to say so, or have a second boat that the Officer may not be delayed on Shore. All that is wanted is to know whether the Vice Roy or Consul knows anything of the french fleet, let him Enquire if the french fleet has been seen from the Island of St: Peters, or if they are at Palma, or if any Vessels have arrived which may have seen them. And the moment you come in sight of the fleet make the Signals indicative that you have or have not heard of the Enemy.

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<sup>49</sup> Add. MS. 34958, f. 306.

<sup>50</sup> Add. MS. 34958, f. 313.

I am Sir fully confident of Your Zeal & activity, which has never been more required than at this moment. The Active is not to anchor but to stand near inshore in order the quicker to get hold of her boat.

I am Sir Your Most Obedient Servant

Nelson & Bronte <sup>50</sup>

No printed transcription can do justice to the sense of urgency conveyed by these hurriedly scribbled notes in Nelson’s own hand. Reading them – even in the faint, almost ghostly, form of the pressed copies – the campaign suddenly comes alive.

### The effect of the new material

So, what effect has this sudden acquisition of new material had on Nelson studies and the way in which historians have judged him? To answer this question, let us take four recent influential biographies – two published before the new material was found, two afterwards – and compare the way in which they deal with the Mediterranean campaign of 1803-05.

Tom Pocock, a leading Nelson authority, published his much-acclaimed *Horatio Nelson* in 1987. This deals with the Mediterranean campaign in just ten pages, most of them dealing with Nelson’s personal routine on board the *Victory*.<sup>51</sup> In 2001, Terry Coleman published a thought-provoking and often contentious biography based on extensive research in the archives, in the course of which he unearthed some significant new material. But he did not see the pressed copy books and so his treatment of the campaign is even more cursory than Pocock’s – just seven pages – and the campaign itself is written off as ‘one long monotony’.<sup>52</sup> Worse, the chapter contains some serious errors. For example, it is claimed that Nelson’s ‘infatuation with the Neapolitan royal family deepened, if that were possible.’<sup>53</sup> In fact the new material shows that, whatever he may have said in his public letters, privately Nelson was no longer infatuated and even went so far as to give the Queen of Naples and Prime Minister Sir John Acton stern lectures on the need to abandon their outdated feudal system of government.<sup>54</sup>

In 2004, Professor Andrew Lambert published the first of the ‘bicentenary’ biographies. The first results of the Nelson Letters Project were published when he was in the closing stages of his research and he saw some of the early transcripts of the BL pressed copies. As a result, he devoted twenty-one pages to the campaign and noted that it ‘is striking for Nelson’s painstaking and professional management of his ships and fleets and his mastery of the routine administration that kept ships and men ready for a long cruise, a sudden battle or another year at sea.’<sup>55</sup> A year later, by which time the new BL material was becoming more widely known in naval history circles, Professor Roger Knight made the campaign one of the centrepieces of his much-admired biography, devoting to it a packed chapter of twenty-

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<sup>51</sup> Tom Pocock, *Horatio Nelson* (London, 1987), pp. 292-301.

<sup>52</sup> Terry Coleman, *Nelson* (London, 2001), p. 301.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 302.

<sup>54</sup> White, *Letters*, pp. 352-53.

<sup>55</sup> Andrew Lambert, *Nelson: Britannia’s God of War* (London, 2004), p. 253.

<sup>56</sup> Roger Knight, *Nelson: The Pursuit of Victory* (London, 2005), p. 451.

<sup>57</sup> Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Life of Nelson, the Embodiment of the Sea Power of Great Britain* (London, 1897).

seven pages, with almost 25% of its references drawn from the BL volumes. The chapter opened with a striking judgment that completely overturned earlier views of the campaign: ‘Nelson’s achievement over the next two years, during which hardly a gun was fired, was as remarkable as any of his battles.’<sup>56</sup>

The only biographer before Lambert and Knight who fully appreciated the importance of the Mediterranean campaign was the American naval historian Alfred Mahan, whose two-volume *Life of Nelson*, published in 1897, contained a magisterial chapter of nearly ninety pages.<sup>57</sup> In 1896, when he was close to finishing his great work, he learned that a large collection of Nelson’s papers had been sold to the British Museum by a descendant, Lord Bridport. In a letter to the British naval historian, J. K. Laughton, he explained why he had decided not to delay publication any longer,

I am reasonably sure that no letters of Nelson’s own will throw new light on his character, though they might possibly throw new light on incidents ...  
The truth is I shrink from further delay, partly because I have already been so long, partly because I want to finish.<sup>58</sup>

Had he known what the Bridport Papers actually contained, he would surely have been less dismissive, for, among them, were the nine volumes of pressed copy letters that have been reviewed in this article. If Mahan had examined these volumes, they would have helped him to explain more fully some of the incidents in the campaign, and some of Nelson’s command decisions.

As it was, the opportunity was lost and the letter books were destined to keep their secrets for another hundred years.

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<sup>58</sup> Andrew Lambert (ed.), *Letters and Papers of Professor Sir John Knox Laughton* (Aldershot, 2002), p. 125.