

Reviews of Holger Hoock (ed.), *History, Commemoration, and National Preoccupation: Trafalgar 1805-2005* (Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 2007

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HOLGER HOOCK, ed. *History, Commemoration, and National Preoccupation: Trafalgar, 1805-2005*. British Academy Occasional Paper 8. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. Pp. x+130. \$26.95 (paper).

Following the myriad 2005 British commemorations of the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Trafalgar and the death of Admiral Lord Nelson, the British Academy sponsored a symposium to discuss not only Trafalgar and Nelson themselves but the various ways in which they have been remembered, commemorated, and memorialized. This volume, edited by Holger Hoock, collects revised papers from that symposium and three commissioned essays on related topics. Contributions all probe questions of how, by whom, and to what ends a “national memory” is created at different points in time (2). Taken together, the essays usefully add to the growing literature on history and memory and on the function of public history in creating national identity. They also encourage professional historians to assess commemorations critically and consider their own roles or duties in public observances of historical events.

Ludmilla Jordanova’s introductory essay comments on the manufacture of anniversaries as points at which public history assesses today’s connections with historical figures and events. Jordanova perceptively “unpacks” the many terms used at these occasions and notes distinctions among “commemorating,” “celebrating,” “honoring,” and “remembering,” each of which implies a different perspective on the past. Taking the construction of Nelson’s identity as a key example, she also notes that the commercialization of anniversaries, together with public history’s aim at “identification” of the present with the past, can combine to create a single image of a person or event being commemorated instead of recognizing complexity. Calling on professional historians to take a critical stance toward the “commemoration industry,” Jordanova advises them to be “fearless both in looking the past in the face and re-presenting it to wide audiences” (19).

Following this capable introduction, the book groups its first essays around 1805–1905. Colin White, chair of the bicentenary’s Official Nelson Commemoration Committee, addresses public reactions in 1805–6 to Nelson’s death. White points out that reports of unified national grief at the time are simplistic. Instead, working classes and social elites often had divergent views of what kind of memorialization was appropriate and what kind of “hero” Nelson was. Popular cartoons and ballads (key examples are included in the essay) often caricatured official representations of Nelson’s death and even Nelson’s own funeral. But White notes that this nuance was soon lost, as the “heroification” of Nelson in newspaper accounts, artwork, biographies, and heavily edited letter collections constructed a uniform, legendary image.

Moving ahead to the centenary, Bertrand Taithe observes a shift in 1905 from “memory to commemoration” (49) and then helpfully puts the centenary into the context of the recently concluded Entente Cordiale of 1904. Taithe’s essay makes clear the impact of public memorialization on foreign relations and vice versa: the character of Trafalgar commemorations became important to the Anglo-French alliance. In the interests of Entente, both Britain and France participated in ceremonies that “commemorated” the battle, rather than “celebrating” the British victory, and embraced Nelson as a heroic model for all men. Ranging further afield, John Mackenzie takes on Nelson’s treatment in Canada and then in twentieth-century film. The grouping of these topics within one essay seems artificial, but the coverage of twentieth-century film treatments of Nelson shows how movies spread the Nelson myth throughout the English-speaking world.

Part 2’s essays focus on the 2005 bicentenary. Mark Connelly’s wide-ranging study and extensive firsthand observations of events ground his assessment of the current place of Trafalgar and Nelson in British popular culture. Connelly acknowledges the inherent problem of determining public perceptions, but his analysis points to a gap between the ways academic historians treated the bicentenary and the expectations and “lessons” drawn in popular public history of the same. Politicians and journalists, particularly on the right, framed the centenary as a celebration of patriotism “in order to restore British national identity,” especially among youth (83). They often denigrated efforts by event planners to put Nelson and Trafalgar into an international context, ignoring the kind of joint “commemoration” held with France in 1905 in favor of a more nationalistic “celebration.” Connelly contrasts commercial and official public observations of the bicentenary with concurrent academic conferences and comments that while the professionals stressed the complexity of their subjects, the public preferred simpler histories stressing action and heroism. In any case, all of these efforts at promoting British history seem to have had little transformative power: Connelly concludes that average Britons remained either uninformed about Trafalgar and Nelson or confirmed in their original focus on a positive, heroic interpretation that rejected any nuance as a negative comment on British identity.

Margarette Lincoln and Martin Daunton also see a disconnect between the intentions and receptions of bicentenary events in their essay on the National Maritime Museum’s 2005 Nelson and Napoleon exhibition, for which Lincoln edited the catalog. The exhibition linked Nelson with Napoleon and put Nelson’s victory into a European context, de-emphasizing British nationalism. Like Connelly, Lincoln and Daunton find assessing audience reaction to the exhibition problematic. But they express hope that because the exhibition attracted so many visitors, its contextualized and multifaceted portrayal of Nelson may have influenced the public’s “construction of the past” (116).

The volume ends with Peter Hicks’s “meditation” on the lack of official French commemorations of bicentenaries for Napoleon. While this essay’s connections to its Trafalgar-focused companions seem tenuous, Hicks does echo other authors’ comments about public history, suggesting, “It *is* possible to ‘remember’ without ‘enthusiasm’” (125).

The essay collection points up the continuing tension between the historical academy and increasingly popular public history in all its forms. As professional historians tend to explore complexity and ambiguity in historical events and figures, public history regularly commodifies and oversimplifies the past, treating history, in Connelly’s words, as “a repository of national triumphs and tragedies” (102). The essays are often optimistic, however, that these two camps can be balanced and encourage professional historians to get involved to promote what Hoock calls the “responsible practice of public history” (4).

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