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Brian Lavery, *Horatio Lord Nelson* (New York: New York University Press, 2003). Maps. Illustrations. Chronology. Glossary. Further Reading. Index. Pp. 144. ISBN 0-8147-5190-3. \$21.95 (cloth).

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Well-done short biographies distill historical figures down to their quintessence, make them accessible to a wide audience, and spark further interest in the subject. Brian Lavery's *Horatio Lord Nelson* succeeds admirably on all counts.

Lavery is Curator of Naval History at Britain's National Maritime Museum at Greenwich, a trustee of the Royal Naval Museum, and a council member of the Navy Records Society and the Society for Nautical Research. He has written or edited more than a dozen books, mostly on Nelson and the Royal Navy of Nelson's time.

The Nelson that emerges in Lavery's well-written little book was a brilliant, charismatic figure whose command style—the "Nelson touch"—sometimes moved subordinates to tears. But he was no "marble man." He had his share of flaws and they exposed his human fallibility.

Born to a "genteel but impoverished family," (p. 14) Nelson entered the Royal Navy at age twelve, volunteered for whatever duty he could get to expand his seafaring knowledge, accumulated a vast amount of experience in a relatively short span, and rose rapidly through the ranks. His Nile campaign yielded "perhaps the greatest sea victory of all time." (p. 79). It was during the battle of Copenhagen that this one-eyed, one-armed

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popular hero made “his most famous, if misunderstood gesture,” putting his telescope to his blind eye while ignoring a signal to break off the action. (p. 97) At Trafalgar he paid the ultimate price to sow the strategic seeds of Napoleon’s ultimate defeat.

Nelson often followed success with setback. After his rapid advance in the American Revolution came a command in the West Indies that left him out of favor. After the victorious battle of Cape St. Vincent came the disastrous amphibious invasion of Tenerife, in which he lost his right arm. After the dealing a crushing blow to the French during the Nile campaign, he publicly flaunted his affair with Lady Emma Hamilton, endangering his career. And after defeating the Danish fleet at Copenhagen, he launched an ill-conceived amphibious operation at Boulogne.

Apart from hitting the highlights of Nelson’s life without getting bogged down in detail, Lavery is particularly good at setting Nelson within the context of the eighteenth-century Royal Navy officer corps, with all its factionalism, obsession with seniority, personal feuding, and excessive concern for bureaucracy. Lavery describes his subject’s legacy thusly: “Horatio Nelson was undoubtedly Britain’s greatest naval leader, perhaps the greatest sea commander of all time” and “can still be voted among the top ten Great Britons.” (p. 6)

Like its subject, however, the book is not perfect. Lavery discusses none of the historical debates surrounding Nelson, nor does he separate the wheat from the chaff with regard to secondary sources in his “further reading” section. Instead of writing a bibliographic essay telling readers which Nelson biographies are good and which are not,

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Lavery simply lists what readers must presume are the best. And there are no source citations. These are but minor quibbles that do not detract from the book's overall value.

*Horatio Lord Nelson* inaugurates the British Library's Historical Lives Series, published by New York University Press. The series aims at providing "concise, authoritative biographies of Britain's greatest historical figures." Books in this series are lavishly illustrated with images of diaries, paintings, photographs, charts, and other memorabilia, many in color.

If the future British Library Historical Lives turn out as well as *Horatio Lord Nelson*, the series will compare favorably with several biographical series now on the market. The Penguin Lives series includes military and wartime political leaders such as Napoleon, Winston Churchill, Crazy Horse, and Robert E. Lee, as well as people like Buddha, Rosa Parks, Andy Warhol, Charles Dickens, Leonardo Da Vinci, and St. Theresa of Lisieux. Penguin Lives contain neither source citations nor illustrations, number about 200 pages per volume, and retail for \$19.95 in cloth. Brassey's Military Profiles series includes such naval figures as Hyman Rickover, William Cushing, and Raphael Semmes, as well as a broad range of military figures like Alexander the Great, Ghengis Khan, and Dwight Eisenhower. Each Military Profile contains endnotes, includes black and white illustrations grouped in galleries, numbers about 100 pages, and retails for \$12.95 in paper and \$19.95 in cloth. Some volumes feature bibliographic essays; others simply list sources. The U.S. Naval Institute Library of Naval Biography series examines mostly nineteenth-century U.S. naval leaders. Each volume includes

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endnotes, a bibliography, and a bibliographic essay and numbers approximately 250 pages. While too long to be considered short and too short to be comprehensive, these books can be considered good “medium”-sized biographies. They retail for \$32.95-\$34.95. Each series features engaging narratives written by leading experts in their fields. They all suit a wide variety of purposes, from gracing buffs’ bookshelves to introducing students to significant historical figures.

The ideal short biography would incorporate each series’ best characteristics. It would number some 150 printed pages, cite sources for all quotations, and include a bibliographic essay that discusses primary sources, the best secondary works, and any historical debates surrounding the subject. Like Penguin Lives, the ideal series would be widely available in bookstores. Like Brassey’s Military Profiles, it would appear in both hard and soft cover. Like the British Library Historical Lives, it would feature beautiful color illustrations spread throughout the text. Like them all, it would feature sparkling narratives written by subject area experts.