

SOUTHEY'S
LIFE OF NELSON

EDITED

WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

BY

ALBERT F. BLAISDELL

GINN AND COMPANY

BOSTON • NEW YORK • CHICAGO • LONDON
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615.10

The Athenæum Press
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INTRODUCTION.

SOUTHEY'S "Life of Nelson," one of the most popular and readable biographies ever written, is an enlargement of an article which appeared in the *Quarterly Review* of London eighty-five years ago.¹ This brief sketch was afterwards enlarged at the request of the eminent publisher, Mr. Murray, and was first published by him in the *Family Library* some three years after, in 1813.

Mr. Southey, in speaking of its publication, says :

"The 'Life of Nelson' was completed this morning (Feb. 1, 1813). This is a subject which I should never have dreamt of touching, if it had not been thrust upon me. I have walked among sea-terms as carefully as a cat does among crockery ; but if I have succeeded in making the narrative continuous and clear, — the very reverse of what it is in the lives before me, — the materials are in themselves so full of character, so picturesque, and so sublime, that it cannot fail of being a good book."

The following extract from the original preface briefly explains the motive which stimulated the author to write the life of Lord Nelson :

¹ "This, which was perhaps, upon the whole, the most popular of any of my father's works, originated in an article in the fifth number of the *Quarterly Review* (February, 1810), which was enlarged at Murray's request. My father received altogether £300 for it, — £100 for the *Review* ; £100 when the 'Life' was enlarged ; and £100 when it was published in the *Family Library*." — *Southey's Life and Correspondence*, chap. xviii.

"Many lives of Nelson have been written; one is yet wanting clear and concise enough to become a manual for the young sailor, which he may carry about with him till he has treasured up the example in his memory and in his heart. In attempting such a work I shall write the eulogy of our great naval hero; for the best eulogy of Nelson is the faithful history of his actions; the best history that which shall relate them most perspicuously."

Mr. Southey's little book rose at once into universal favor, and has ever since been regarded as one of our popular and standard biographies. What is the secret of its popularity? Why has this little book been read and reread for more than eighty years? Why has it been an old-time favorite all these years with young people? The explanation is not difficult. In the first place, Southey was a writer of exceptional ability, and an unwearied and skillful editor. He was master of a style which has always commanded admiration for its clearness and simplicity. His literary, and also personal, fortunes were intimately associated with those of Coleridge and Wordsworth. He was not equal to either of them in genius, but he had abilities of a high order. For many years he made himself a magnate in the world of letters, doing his duty, says Thackeray, "for fifty noble years of labor; day by day storing up learning; day by day working for scant wages; charitable out of his small means; bravely faithful to the calling he had chosen, refusing to turn from his path for popular praise or prince's power. I hope his life will not be forgotten for it is sublime in its simplicity, its energy, its honor, its affection."

Mr. Southey wrote many long and now forgotten poems, and scores of volumes, and articles for the quarterlies and other periodicals, which required great accuracy and vast research. Except the "Life of Wesley" and the "Life of Nelson," and a few short poems, the vast literary productions of this

unwearied author are rarely read. "Southey's 'Life of Nelson,'" says Macaulay, "is, beyond all doubt, the most perfect and delightful of his works. No writer, perhaps, ever lived whose talents so precisely qualified him to write the history of the great naval warrior. There were no fine riddles of the human heart to read; no theories to propound; no hidden causes to develop; no consequences to predict. The character of the hero lay on the surface; the exploits were brilliant and picturesque. It would not be easy to find in all literary history an incident of a more exact hit between wind and water."¹

It is to be remembered that Southey wrote his first sketch for the *Quarterly Review* only four years after the death of Nelson. The full biography, as it now stands, was written less than eight years after Trafalgar, and only two years before the downfall of Napoleon at Waterloo.

England's favorite admiral had almost annihilated the naval power of her great enemy, but on land Napoleon still threatened the liberty of Europe. Fresh in the memory of every Englishman were the daring exploits and matchless victories of the frail little man who, before he was forty years of age, had "actually been engaged against the enemy upwards of 120 times, in which service he had lost his right eye and his right arm, and had been severely wounded and bruised in his body."

Written during such momentous and stirring times in the history of his country, it is not strange that Southey was able, by his masterly pen, to give his narrative a dramatic vividness and depth of interest found in few works of fiction.

While Southey was master of a clear, vigorous English, he was none the less at times, in his controversial writings, prone to be influenced by strong prejudice and violent political partiality, and a somewhat haughty tone of arrogant self-confidence. Blemishes of this kind naturally would be expected, and do occur, in his "Life of Nelson." For instance, he hated

¹ Macaulay's *Miscellaneous Works*, Harper's edition, vol. i. p. 394.

the French, and hence some of his statements are based more on a bitter prejudice against the national enemy than a calm estimate of facts.

The search-light of history long ago revealed the fact that in the long and bitter European wars that followed the French Revolution, it was not the French alone who were "distinguished for boastfulness, perfidy, and unscrupulous audacity."

Again, Southey lived too near Nelson's time to form a calm and philosophical estimate of the character of his hero. He overlooks the weak points in Nelson's character, and condemns where it is not deserved. On the whole, however, it is generally conceded that Southey's pen-picture of the great admiral is lifelike, vigorous, and for the most part accurate. He depended, for the most of his facts, upon Clarke and M'Arthur's "Life of Nelson." With his usual literary skill he rearranged the material of these two bulky volumes, but did not take the pains to eliminate errors or to furnish much additional information.

Judged from a strictly historical point of view, Southey's little masterpiece has no great value. It is well to remember, however, that it was never intended by its author for an elaborate biography, but was written to furnish young sailors with a simple narrative of the exploits of England's favorite naval warrior. As such, perhaps, it has never been equaled for the charm and the perfection of its style. The student is referred to such passages as the description of the blowing up of the *Orient*, of the advance of the English fleet into Aboukir Bay, and the noble peroration of the book, as signal illustrations of what a skillful writer can do in writing clear, graphic, and beautiful English.

Southey was fortunate in the subject of his little biography. He was to write the life of a man whose remarkable exploits in the naval service of his country were unparalleled in their brilliancy and success. Information connected with the per-

sonal and professional career of this idol of the English navy has always been a subject of lively interest and proud exultation.

Nelson was a man of remarkable genius. He possessed exactly those strong and those weak points of character which made him a popular hero while living, and have endeared his memory to mankind for nearly a century.

Because his people were poor and the boy was sickly, his uncle, a captain in the navy, took compassion on the twelve-year-old stripling and took him to sea, "in the hope that a cannon-ball would knock off his head." A rifle bullet did put an untimely end to his life thirty-five years afterwards, but not until he had become England's greatest admiral, and had performed deeds in the service of his country with which all the world is familiar. With a fragile body, harassed by almost continual ill-health, or suffering most of his life from wounds, he showed what it is possible for a man of a fearless, intrepid, and ambitious spirit to accomplish. He early obtained by the most untiring energy and perseverance a mastery over the most minute details of his chosen profession. He always had the gift to inspire all under his command with an enthusiasm and determination to carry out his wishes. And as he was absolutely devoid of fear and a born fighter in those times when long and fierce combats both on land and on sea were the rule, and times of peace were rare, it may be well inferred that his men had their fill of hardship and glory. Nelson was an extraordinary man inspired to do great deeds from an unbounded ambition and an exalted idea of duty.

The personal life of a man who has played a commanding part in the history of his country is always of paramount interest to his fellow-men. We are never tired of noting and hearing of comparatively trivial deeds and sayings of such men. Hence, we like to read in Southey's "Life" that after the "great-little man," as Nelson was sometimes called, had become respected and feared in the West Indies by his enemies, that a certain official

of high rank, in seeking a personal interview, at last found the dreaded captain under a dining-table in a frolic with a pretty three-year-old boy, and that this same boy afterwards became a naval officer, and saved his benefactor's life the night Nelson had his right arm shot off.

Again, we like to learn, that the great admiral was cheerful and pleasant, and rarely appeared to have any weight on his mind; that he did not use salt, as he believed it to be the "sole cause of scurvy"; that he liked to eat his breakfast with several of his midshipmen. "He entered into their boyish jokes, and could be merry with the youngest." Not alone as a great naval warrior, able by his genius and fearlessness to carry out with wisdom and clear insight plans which led to victory, was Nelson preëminent, but equally wise and considerate was he in attending to those details of the daily life of his men which ensured their health and comfort. It does not disturb a people's admiration of their hero that Nelson "not infrequently displayed the unblushing and self-asserting vanity of a child, and with all a child's love of praise and a woman's love of flattery." He continues to be regarded as one of the great heroic figures of the world, in spite of the fact that his weaknesses were as remarkable as were his natural gifts and his sterling qualities.

If we would have faithful likenesses of those about us we must have them painted, as Cromwell wanted to be painted, "warts and all." In biography, as in portraiture, we must have light and shade. A common artist, whether he works with brush or pen, sees merely the outward form, and copies it. A man of genius looks deeper, and portrays the soul of the man as revealed by his features or actions. In the one we have a piece of neat waxwork; in the other, the living man. Hence, our library shelves are crowded with the lives of the world's great and little men, but biographies truly great may be counted on the fingers.

Southey's "Nelson" is an entertaining and stimulating biography for young people to read. It cannot, of course, be compared with the more stately biographies, written for more mature minds, like Boswell's "Life of Dr. Johnson," or Lockhart's "Life of Sir Walter Scott."

It belongs rather to the class of biographies represented by Wirt's "Life of Patrick Henry." Such biographies serve a most useful purpose in shaping the lives of young men.

It is a most wholesome thing for young students to learn that throughout Nelson's career a high sense of duty was always uppermost in his mind and directed all the public acts of his life. This dominant idea culminated and was exemplified in the famous signal to the fleet before going into action at Trafalgar, — "England expects every man will do his duty"; as well as in the last words of the dying hero, — "I have done my duty and I praise God for it." The old Saxon idea of a resolute devotion to duty, whether in the great or little acts of life, never had a more striking exemplar than in the story of Nelson's life. To this abiding sense of duty, which was the very crown of Nelson's character, were added other sterling traits admirably set forth by Mr. Southey, — such as inflexibility of purpose, courage of convictions and fearlessness of personal danger, which enabled him to dare and to do great things in the face of apparently insurmountable obstacles.

Some one has said that the great lesson of biography is to teach what man can be and can do at his best. This lesson has been most emphatically impressed upon the minds of hundreds of young readers by the simple and charming style of Southey's brief biography of Lord Nelson.

The chief authorities for Nelson's professional life are Nicolas's "Dispatches and Letters," above 3500 in all (7 vols., 1846), and James's "Naval History" from 1793 (6 vols.), the standard authority for all the naval actions of that time. For his private life the best authority is the "Hamilton-

Nelson Papers" (2 vols., 1894), privately printed from Mr. Alfred Morrison's collection of original manuscripts. Mr. J. C. Jeaffreson had access to these manuscripts in his "Lady Hamilton and Lord Nelson" (2 vols., 1888), and "The Queen of Naples and Lord Nelson" (2 vols., 1889). Clarke and M'Arthur's "Life of Nelson" (2 vols., 1808) was long the basis of later lives of the great admiral, but it is to be read with great caution in the light of quite recent researches. Harrison's "Life" (2 vols., 1806) was written to the order of Lady Hamilton, in order to sustain her claims for help from the British government. "It is not too much to say," says Mr. Laughton in his recent "Life," "that Harrison's book is 'a pack of lies,' and that no one statement in it can be accepted unless it is independently confirmed from other sources." Dr. Pettigrew's "Memoirs of the Life" (2 vols., 1849) is considered a strong and well-written book on Nelson's career. There are several other biographies of Nelson which are not worthy of mention even by name.

For a most readable biography of Nelson the young student is advised to read "Horatio Nelson and the Naval Supremacy of England," by W. Clark Russell, the well-known writer of sea stories, and published in 1890 in the "Heroes of Nations Series"; and "Nelson," a brief but charming biography by J. K. Laughton, published in 1895 in the "English Men of Action Series."

In this edition of Southey's "Nelson," which is more especially intended for school and home use, certain sections here and there have been omitted. These consist of passages giving full details of events which have lost their interest for the readers of to-day, or of those which do not concern Nelson's public life. No alterations have been made in the wording, and the succeeding text stands as originally written with the exceptions just mentioned.

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SOUTHEY'S LIFE OF NELSON.

CHAPTER I.

FIRST YEARS AT SEA.

HORATIO, son of Edmund and Catherine Nelson, was born September 29, 1758, in the parsonage house of Burnham Thorpe, a village in the county of Norfolk, in which his father was rector. The maiden name of his mother was Suckling: her grandmother was an elder sister of Sir Robert Walpole,¹ and this child was named after his godfather, the first Lord Walpole.² Mrs. Nelson died in 1767, leaving eight out of eleven children. Her brother, Captain Maurice Suckling, of the navy, visited the widower upon this event, and promised to take care of one of the boys. Three years afterwards, when Horatio was only twelve years of age, being at home during the Christmas holidays, he read in the county newspaper that his uncle was appointed to the *Raisonnable* of sixty-four guns. "Do, William," said he to a brother who was a year and a half older than himself, "write to my father, and tell him that I should like to go to sea with 'uncle Maurice.'" Mr. Nelson was then at Bath, whither he had gone for the

¹ Sir Robert Walpole (1676-1745). — The celebrated Whig statesman who flourished in the reigns of George I. and George II. He was the subject of one of Macaulay's essays.

² The First Lord Walpole. — Died in 1757. Probably Southey refers to Horatio, the second Lord Walpole.

recovery of his health ; his circumstances were straitened, and he had no prospect of ever seeing them bettered ; he knew that it was the wish of providing for himself by which Horatio was chiefly actuated ; and did not oppose his resolution ; he understood also the boy's character, and had always said, that in whatever station he might be placed, he would climb, if possible, to the very top of the tree. Accordingly, Captain Suckling was written to. "What," said he in his answer, "has poor Horatio done, who is so weak, that he above all the rest should be sent to rough it out at sea? But let him come, and the first time we go into action, a cannon-ball may knock off his head, and provide for him at once."

It is manifest from these words that Horatio was not the boy whom his uncle would have chosen to bring up in his own profession. He was never of a strong body, and the ague, which at that time was one of the most common diseases in England, had greatly reduced his strength ; yet he had already given proofs of that resolute heart and nobleness of mind, which, during his whole career of labor and of glory, so eminently distinguished him. When a mere child he strayed a-bird's-nesting from his grandmother's house in company with a cow-boy : the dinner hour elapsed ; he was absent, and could not be found ; and the alarm of the family became very great, for they apprehended that he might have been carried off by gypsies. At length, after search had been made for him in various directions, he was discovered, alone, sitting composedly by the side of a brook which he could not get over. "I wonder, child," said the old lady when she saw him, "that hunger and fear did not drive you home." "Fear ! grandmamma," replied the future hero, "I never saw fear : what is it?"¹ Once, after the winter holidays, when he and his brother William had set off on horseback to return to school, they came

¹ According to Clarke and M'Arthur's *Life*, Nelson's reply was, "Fear never came near me, grandmamma."

back because there had been a fall of snow; and William, who did not much like the journey, said it was too deep for them to venture on. "If that be the case," said the father, "you certainly shall not go; but make another attempt, and I will leave it to your honor. If the road is dangerous, you may return; but remember, boys, I leave it to your honor." The snow was deep enough to have afforded them a reasonable excuse; but Horatio was not to be prevailed upon to turn back. "We must go on," said he: "remember, brother, it was left to our honor!" There were some fine pears growing in the schoolmaster's garden, which the boys regarded as lawful booty, and in the highest degree tempting; but the boldest among them were afraid to venture for the prize. Horatio volunteered upon this service: he was lowered down at night from the bedroom window by some sheets, plundered the tree, was drawn up with the pears, and then distributed them among his schoolfellows without reserving any for himself. He only took them, he said, "because every other boy was afraid."

Early on a cold and dark spring morning Mr. Nelson's servant arrived at this school, at North Walsham, with the expected summons for Horatio to join his ship. The parting from his brother William, who had been for so many years his playmate and bedfellow, was a painful effort, and was the beginning of those privations which are the sailor's lot through life. He accompanied his father to London. The *Raisonnable* was lying in the Medway. He was put into the Chatham stage, and on its arrival was set down with the rest of the passengers, and left to find his way on board as he could. After wandering about in the cold without being able to reach the ship, an officer observed the forlorn appearance of the boy, questioned him, and happening to be acquainted with his uncle, took him home and gave him some refreshments. When he got on board, Captain Suckling was not in the ship, nor