

Cancel Culture Canceled in London: The Failed Smear Against Horatio Nelson

If you've ever visited London, you most likely noticed Nelson's Column, the majestic monument to Britain's greatest naval hero. It resides in Trafalgar Square, a short walk from Parliament. If you've *never* visited London, you probably know of it anyway, because both the man and the monument are famous the world over.

You might even have heard of a recent clamor about it all. Some people—none of whom ever accomplished half as much for Britain as Nelson did—want to tear it down. It's another sorry episode in cancel culture, but this one has what appears to be a happy ending. Let's look at the man, the accusation, and the truth—in that order.

The Man

[Horatio Nelson](#) was born on September 29, 1758, in Burnham Thorpe in the County of Norfolk, England. Whenever I'm asked what laudable celebrities share my birthdate, Nelson is at the top of my list (along with Ludwig von Mises).

At the tender age of 12, Nelson joined a Royal Navy expedition to the Arctic, where he was charged by an enormous polar bear. The young man stood his ground fearlessly. It proved to be a harbinger of the uncommon courage that would be a hallmark of his 47-year life.

During the war with Revolutionary France, Nelson put himself on the front lines of every naval battle in which he figured—one of many reasons he was adored by the men who served under him. At Corsica in 1794, he was blinded in one

eye for life. At Tenerife in 1797, a cannon ball nearly tore off his right arm, which necessitated amputation at the elbow. He was scarred in the face in 1798 at [the Battle of the Nile](#).

At Copenhagen in 1801, Nelson was urged to retreat. Sensing he could still win the battle, he raised his telescope to his blind eye and declared, "I do not see the signal." He continued to press the attack. That moment gave rise to a phrase we still use today, namely, to "turn a blind eye" to unwanted information.

By his men, Nelson was admired for more than courage. He treated them with uncommon respect and kindness. A true leader, he never asked them to do anything he wouldn't do himself. He had remarkable "emotional intelligence," an uncanny ability to "read" both his own sailors and the enemy's.

He is best known in history for the successful engagement that cost him his life, [the Battle of Trafalgar](#) in October 1805. Britain placed its confidence in Nelson as it faced down an imminent invasion by the combined naval forces of Spain and France under Napoleon Bonaparte.

Outnumbered 27 ships to 33, his last word to his men (by signal flag) before the firing started was the immortal expression, "England expects every man to do his duty." He then sailed perpendicular to the French and Spanish fleet to "break the line"—a daring maneuver for its day. Struck by a sniper from an enemy ship, he died shortly thereafter, but not before learning that the battle was won. Napoleon would never again threaten an invasion of Britain.

So, you can see why the British people gratefully erected Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square in 1843.

The Accusation

Tarnishing the Nelson legacy in recent years is the claim that he supported slavery. In an August 22, 2017, [article](#) in *The Guardian*, British writer and broadcaster Afua Hirsch called for the naval hero's monument to be pulled down. Why? Because Nelson, she wrote, was "what you would now call, without hesitation, a white supremacist." In righteous indignation, this confident cancel culture warrior declared:

While many around him were denouncing slavery, Nelson was vigorously defending it. Britain's best known naval hero—so idealized that after his death in 1805 he was compared to no less than "the God who made him"—used his seat in the House of Lords and his position of huge influence to perpetuate the tyranny, serial rape and exploitation organized by West Indian planters, some of whom he counted among his closest friends.

Left-wing activists and academics joined in Hirsch's condemnation of Nelson, hoping the Column's days would be numbered.

The Truth

Adolf Hitler intended to succeed where Napoleon failed a century and a half before. His plans to invade England included a stated intent to move Nelson's Column from London to Berlin. Thankfully, his designs were thwarted as thoroughly as truth is now decimating the anti-Nelson fanatics.

A genuine historian—one who examines the evidence and ignores bumper stickers—just blew a massive hole in Hirsch's boat. Christopher Brett in his October 2023 book, [Nelson and the Slave Trade](#), provided conclusive proof that the information on which Hirsch based her allegation was—drum roll, please—forged. That's right—false, cooked up, fabricated, all

in the hope that suckers who don't do their homework would fall for it.

Hirsch did—hook, line, and sinker.

Adding to earlier evidence from Nelson authority Martyn Downer, Brett reveals that pro-slavery letters the admiral allegedly wrote were forged and doctored by slave-owning Caribbean planters. They wanted to use the admiral's reputation to stop a bill outlawing the slave trade (which passed, incidentally, in 1807). Nelson, conveniently, had [gone to his reward](#) and couldn't respond.

In [an interview](#) with Ed Baker for *The Telegraph*, Brett says:

Nelson's sole motivation was duty to his country and everything must be understood with that in mind.

Other evidence shows that Nelson actually freed slaves, argued against the Barbary slave trade and supported proposals for slaves to be replaced with paid labour.

The accusation that he used his role in the Lords to support slavery does not stand up to scrutiny—he spoke only six times and never mentioned it.

And the charge of him being a “white supremacist” is based on zero evidence. He had black sailors in his navy as well as freed slaves who were paid the same as everyone else..

The last person's hand he shook on land before departing on his final voyage was that of a black sailor—a friend of his.

Brett's new book, *Nelson and the Slave Trade*, is a masterpiece of demolition. It leaves no doubt about the utterly erroneous claims against the great man. If anyone should be canceled, it's Afua Hirsch, at least until she can muster the integrity to issue an apology.

Slavery is a blot on the history of mankind, but it didn't begin with the British in the 17th and 18th centuries. Its origins date back thousands of years and involve countless countries and peoples (see recommended readings below). London abolished the slave trade in 1807 and slavery itself in 1833. Thereafter, the British Navy did more to stop the evil business than any other armed force in the world.

The Nelson Column must stand. Cancel culture and its twin evil of [presentism](#) must be torn down.

For Additional Information, See:

[*Letter Showing Nelson to be a Racist Supporter of Slavery is Forged, Says Historian*](#) by Ed Baker

[*Nelson and the Slave Trade*](#) by Chris Brett

[*Recognizing Hard Truths About America's History With Slavery*](#) by Lawrence W. Reed

[*The History of Slavery You Probably Weren't Taught in School*](#) by Lawrence W. Reed

[*Presentism Imperils Our Future by Distorting Our Past*](#) by Lawrence W. Reed

—

This [article](#) appeared first on *FEE.org* under a [Creative Commons \(CC BY 4.0\) license](#).

Image credit: [Public domain](#)