

Nelson

Nelson is a fascinating character and was far from a perfect person, as are most great men. He had decided early in his career to be a hero. As he was being repatriated to England after suffering tropical illness in India he recorded his thoughts: *"After a long and gloomy reverie, in which I almost wished myself overboard, a sudden glow of patriotism was kindled within me, and presented my king and country as my patron. My mind exulted in the idea, 'Well then,' I exclaimed. 'I will be a hero, and confiding in providence I will brave every danger'".*

Here follows a spoof written, I suspect, by an industrial relations lawyer. It can be enacted by any two people, if a party is getting boring. I challenge you to read it without laughing.

It is followed by a story about a mysterious snuff box probably belonging to Nelson.

Nelson at Trafalgar

Nelson: "Order the signal Hardy."

Hardy: "Aye, aye, sir."

Nelson: "Hold on this is not what I dictated to Flags. What's the meaning of this?"

Hardy: "Sorry sir."

Nelson: (Reading aloud); "England expects every person to do his or her duty regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, religious persuasion or disability. What gobbledey gook is this for god's sake?"

Hardy: "Admiralty policy, I'm afraid sir. We're an equal opportunities employer now. We had the devil's own job getting 'England' past the censors, lest it be considered racist."

Nelson: "Gadzooks Hardy. Hand me my pipe and tobacco."

Hardy: "Sorry sir. All naval vessels have now been designated smoke free working environments."

Nelson: "In that case, break open the rum ration. Let us splice the mainbrace to steel the men before battle."

Hardy: "The rum ration has been abolished Admiral. It's part of the government's policy on binge drinking."

Nelson: "Good heavens, Hardy. I suppose we'd better get on with it, full speed ahead."

Hardy: "I think you'll find there's a 4 knot speed limit in this stretch of water."

Nelson: "Dam it man! We are on the eve of the greatest sea battle in history. We must advance with all dispatch. Report from the crow's nest please."

Hardy: "That won't be possible, sir."

Nelson: "What?"

Hardy: "Health and Safety have closed the Crow's nest, sir. No harness; and they said the rope ladders don't meet regulations. They won't let anyone up until a proper scaffolding can be erected."

Nelson: "Then get me the ship's carpenter without delay, Hardy."

Hardy: "He's busy knocking up a wheelchair access to the foredeck, Admiral."

Nelson: "Wheelchair access? I've never heard anything so absurd."

Hardy: "Health and safety again, sir. We have to provide a barrier free environment for the differently abled."

Nelson: "Differently abled? I've only one arm and one eye and I refuse even to hear mention of the word. I didn't rise to the rank of Admiral by playing the disability card."

Hardy: "Actually, sir, you did. The Royal Navy is under represented in the areas of visual impairment and limb deficiency."

Nelson: "Whatever next? Give me full sail. The salt spray beckons."

Hardy: "A couple of problems there too, sir. Health and safety won't let the crew up the rigging without hard hats. An they don't want anyone breathing in too much salt- haven't you seen the adverts?"

Nelson: "I've never heard such infamy. Break out the cannon and tell the men to stand by to engage the enemy."

Hardy: "The men are a bit worried about shooting at anyone, Admiral."

Nelson: "What? This is mutiny."

Hardy: "It's not that, sir. It's just that they're afraid of being charged with murder if they actually kill anyone. There's a couple of legal-aid lawyers on board, watching everyone like hawks."

Nelson: "Then how are we to sink the Frenchies and the Spanish?"

Hardy: "Actually, sir, we're not."

Nelson: "We're not?"

Hardy: "No, sir. The French and the Spanish are our European partners now. According to the common fisheries policy, we shouldn't even be in this stretch of water. We could get hit by claim for compensation."

Nelson: "But you must hate the Frenchmen like you hate the devil."

Hardy: "I wouldn't let the ship's diversity co-ordinator hear you saying that sir. You'll be up on disciplinary report."

Nelson: "You must consider every man an enemy, who speaks ill of your king."

Hardy: "Not any more, sir. We must be inclusive in this multicultural age. Now put on your Kevlar vest; it's the rules. It could save your life."

Nelson: "Don't tell me - health and safety. Whatever happened to rum, sodomy and the lash?"

Hardy: "As I explained, sir, rum is off the menu and there's a ban on corporal punishment."

Nelson: "What about sodomy?"

Hardy: "I believe that is now legal, sir."

Nelson: "In that case.....kiss me, Hardy."

Nelson's Snuff Box.

Australia versus England.

There is an interesting love hate relationship between the English and Australians. On the one hand we have the rather class conscious English and the ex convict largely Irish Australians. To illustrate the clash of culture, I recall a conversation related to me by a Ken Knight when I was young fellow. He had taken Lord Colman, in Australia on business, to a Rugby Union club to give him a taste of the locals. He introduced Lord Colman to a member:

"Jim I would like you to meet Lord Colman."

"Claude, nice to meet you, how are you going?"

"Jim, it's not Claude, its Lord Colman."

"Ah, Lord or Claude, it's all the same to me, nice to meet you."

Ken related that after this little episode, he introduced him to another friend.

"Bob, I would like you to meet Lord Coleman."

"Ah! Jesus Ken, don't give me the bloody shits will you?"

Luckily the Lord did not take himself too seriously. Had he been merely middle class the evening may have become rather tense.

Many years later, Michael a life long friend, showed me a snuffbox. It was made of tortoise shell and alabaster. It had a secret compartment, and if you knew where to press, it opened to a miniature painting, on ivory and framed in gold, of Nelson's mistress Emma Hamilton. Adam Buck, a noted miniaturist had dated the portrait 1802.



Self portrait, Adam Buck and family.

Adam was an exquisite Irish artist, stationed in London, who worked miniatures with a bush containing just one bristle. Nelson happened to be in London then, and had planned this tribute to his mistress for some time. In 2003 Michael told me that he was going to London to show it to the Nelson society. Well, I thought, that sounds fun; I'll go with him and sell my newly invented Gaco Oarlocks in the old UK.

We both paid our dues to join the Nelson society and headed off for the grand tour.

So it was that we found ourselves in a hotel in Chatham. Michael tried to interest some of the members in his snuffbox but had been rebuffed. I spoke to one of the members:

"Why don't you show any interest in the snuffbox, it may be a genuine relic?"

"Oh well, I think you people are just trying to make money."

"But Michael is quite wealthy he doesn't need money. If you play your cards right you will have it on permanent loan to the Maritime Museum courtesy of the Read family."

This was no idle boast as there is a tradition of benevolence in the Read family. Michael's great great grandfather Dr. Richard Read was honoured for his contribution to the construction of the medical school at Sydney University. This contribution was made from his share of the spoils of the sale in 1906, of the Great Cobar Copper Mine to a British Consortium for 1,006,000 Pounds (about 100 million dollars in today's money). There was a Read Wing at the now demolished, Rachel Forster Hospital, Redfern, named in honour of his Grandmother. There is also "Read House" at Abbotsleigh School for Girls, named after his Grandfather Dr. William Henry Read. Michael himself is sponsoring a young Philipino through medical school in Manila.

"Sorry we are not interested." He replied.

Shortly after this we adjourned to a glassed in booth where some members were having a stilted conversation. I found this rather boring, so I left for the next booth. It was not much better there. Two new chums had just met as I walked in:

"Is that an Oxford or a Cambridge accent you have?" asked Arthur.

"Well, what do you think?" replied Eugene.

"It's a bit hard to say, there seems to be a bit of each."

"Yes, you could be right there."

"In that case," Arthur replied, "I would say that you had neither one nor the other, but rather you had an Oxbridge accent."

"Quite so, have you ever shopped at Fortnum and Masons?"

"No, as a matter of fact I find it a bit pretentious."

"Yes, I am inclined to agree. Just yesterday they wanted to charge me twenty pounds for a punnet of strawberries, so I told them what to do with it. Then the impertinent upstart replied.

'I'm sorry sir but the ten pound celery enjoys that Privilege'."

"Yes, it seems some people just don't know their place."

This conversation seemed to establish that we were in elite company. We sat around wondering how we might engage in conversation with these rarefied individuals.

Mark a Canadian, bravely decided to introduce himself around. When he came to an English lady named Mary Lou, he sought an entry to the general spirit of whimsical banter. He may have been better commenting on the weather:

“Mary Lou, it’s not Mary Louise then?”

“ No just Mary Lou.”

“ Really, why is that?”

“ Well, that is it, that is how I was christened.”

In this situation it seemed that it was best to speak in reverential or submissive tones. It was not that you would be listened to, but rather that you would be judged. Things quieted down as guests sought for a subject that would not expose them to silent ridicule. Mark seemed shaken by his faux pas and Arthur and Eugene were still trying to discern who was of adequate status to engage in conversation.

The catatonia was disturbed when we were alerted to a presentation to be delivered at the hotel auditorium. As we approached the auditorium I suggested to some members that they might like to have a look at the precious object. So four members adjourned with us to an ante-room for an inspection. Michael carefully unwrapped the snuffbox from several layers of newspapers and showed them how to open the secret compartment. A member gasped:

“My God! Have you declared this through customs?”

This, of course, was code for: This looks authentic, and we are going to trap it in England.

Michael who is no fool and was obviously prepared for such a ploy replied:

“No, but I have declared it out of customs from Australia.”

“Well, you need to take it to the Director of the Maritime Museum, Colin White, in Greenwich to have it authenticated.”

After this interlude we adjourned to the Auditorium. The chairman issued welcomes to people from all over the world including America, Canada and New Zealand. It seemed, though I hadn’t noticed this, that Australia was not represented. Michael mentioned this to John Boulton, an ex destroyer captain from the war. He promptly set off to correct the chairman of proceedings.

“I say, these fellows have come all the way from Australia and you didn’t acknowledge them.”

“Yes, bit of an oversight, I’m sorry.”

“But you met them.”

“Yes, well that is the point isn’t it?”

Our friend, who was one of those thoroughly decent Michael York types, was not impressed.

The “speeches” seemed to be selling opportunities for Nelson memorabilia, and, for one fellow an opportunity to sell a cruise to famous Nelson battle sites such as Copenhagen, ironic in light of our alleged aspirations.

After a day viewing the excellent dockyard at Chatham we went to the Maritime Museum at Greenwich:

“No, you can’t see Mr. White today he is busy”

“Tomorrow?”

“No.”

“This week?”

“No, let’s see, we can fit you in two weeks away, would you like to make an appointment?”

“Yes Please. Look I have some photos and the provenance on this snuff box I want him to evaluate for me, can we leave it with Colin to Peruse?” Said Michael.

So after some discussion Michael and I set off for a two-week sojourn around the British Isles in our two hundred and fifty pounds Ford Sierra, bought from a Romanian.



Setting off to tour the UK, Michael on the right.

After touring Scotland we found ourselves driving down from Belfast to Dublin. I was driving as we came to a petrol station fenced off because of roadworks. I drove round twice looking for the entrance and vented my frustration:

“Jesus Christ, how are we going to get in here?” My blasphemy was shortly to have ramifications.

Perhaps it was my preconceptions that made Ireland seem a magic place. The Irish had installed a gigantic stainless steel needle where a statue of Nelson had once stood. I spotted an elfin like member of the Garda (police) leaning on a lamppost:



A needle instead of a Nelson.

“Tell me, I believe that there used to be a statue of Nelson here but that the republicans blew it up.”

“It blew down.” was his only reply.

Later, I reported this conversation to a lady at the local pub:

“Aye, but it had a bit of help.” She replied.

Michael and I booked into a room for the night and set off for a pub that promised some Irish dancing. After we had settled down with some beers, Michael, out of the blue said to me:

“Hit me, John.”

I looked at him quizzically and noticed that he had a strange demonic expression.

“Go on, slap me across the face.”

While I was still wondering what was going on, he affirmed:

“Go on slap me across the face, because that is what you do every time you blaspheme.”

“Whoa.” Thought I, a spot of religious fanaticism here, I am going to have to tread carefully from here on. Fortunately, he appeared to get over his pique. In hindsight I am able to recognise his reaction as part of his bi-polar disorder. This condition was to eventually put a finish to the relic.

After a marvelous trip around Ireland, we found ourselves on the day of the appointment at Windsor Castle.

“Well Michael what do you think, do we tour Windsor Castle or go see Colin White?”

“Bugger it, Colin White will probably be a waste of time let’s do Windsor Castle instead, it’ll be much more interesting.”

Not long after this we parted ways. Michael went on to visit our friend John Boulton and thence he did a trip to Japan before coming home.

Although Michael never saw Colin White he did receive a letter from him. Colin’s letter denied the authenticity of the artifact on the grounds that:

1. Nelson did not take snuff.
2. Since Nelson had a painting of Emma Hamilton in his cabin, he would have no need for a miniature secreted in a snuffbox.

Had I known what I know now, I would have loved to challenge him as follows:

“Alright Colin there is a very good chance that Adam Buck has engraved the name of the subject of the painting on the back. I will put up \$1000 to have a jeweler to disassemble and reassemble it. If it is identified as Emma you will reimburse me.”

Colin White was a historian and director of the Royal Naval Museum. He wrote a book on Nelson called “The Battle of Cape St. Vincent” and died of cancer in 2008.

In December 2011 George Unwin, at Bonhams, offered a Lord Nelson snuffbox for auction. The advertisement for the auction refers to the Unwin, Nelson’s secretary, who was given the snuffbox by Nelson. It was the son of Nelson’s secretary that provided the provenance quoted below:

According to Unwin’s son, the gift was made in strange circumstances. In a note which used to be folded in the box and is now framed separately, he wrote, “My father had either lost his own snuff box on going ashore or in some shop in Palermo and upon mentioning the circumstances at Lady Hamilton’s table where Lord Nelson was one of the party, his Lordship handed over to him this identical box and desired him to keep it until he could get a better one.”



Snuffbox gifted to Unwin by Nelson

This almost certainly dates the incident to December 1798 or very early 1799 when Nelson was in Sicily with the King of Naples and Sir William and Lady Hamilton whom he had rescued from an attack on Naples by the French. Although Nelson and Emma Hamilton already knew each other, it was on the island that they began their notorious affair and it is tempting to see Nelson’s act of generosity as a way of impressing his new mistress. (Google, “Lord Nelson Snuff Box for Auction at Bonham’s”)

So not only did Nelson have a snuffbox, but, he was going to, “get a better one”. The portrait in the cabin hardly warrants discussion. A man passionately in love with a woman may desire to have such a precious memento in his possession at all times. We did take it to the Dublin Museum where the Adam Buck painting was authenticated, but, it could not be confirmed that it was a painting of Emma Hamilton. Nevertheless comparison with other paintings of Emma showed many similarities.

Another snuff box allegedly stolen from his cabin as he lay dying was offered for sale in 2010.



A silver snuffbox allegedly stolen by a sailor from Lord Admiral Nelson's cabin as he lay dying.

The 8cm horn-shaped snuff 'mull' was taken from Horatio's private quarters by a coxswain called 'Sims'. The snuffbox ended up in the hands of a Dr. Griffith, Principal of Brighton college. He wrote in a letter, May 5, 1891:

“Sims who was coxswain aboard the Victory on 21st of October 1805 obtained for himself from Nelson's cabin, as was then the habit some of the admiral's things & among them this horn silver mounted snuff box.”

However Brian Goodison Banks, a maritime specialist at Beames, takes a different view:

“It seems Sims stole into Nelson's chamber on the day he died, probably as attention was turned to him as he lay dying, and helped himself to something.”

“If he had been caught he would have been in deep trouble and probably executed for treason.”

I cannot see how anyone can be indifferent to the behaviour of Sims, stealing from a hero who was in the process of dying for his country. I cannot imagine more odious behaviour. However we only have Sims's word and its provenance seems unreliable. Unwin's snuff box sold for 45,000 pounds but I can find no record for the sale of the Sims snuff box.

There is nothing particularly precious about either of these snuff boxes. Their existence seems to have been unknown till they were offered for auction. It is not surprising then, that Michaels snuff box has an air of mystery about it. However it does distinguish itself by having a particularly personal, endearing and romantic aspect.

There is a rather sad ending to this story. Michael has type one bipolar disorder. It is a characteristic of this disorder that sufferers in the manic stage are inclined to give valuables away and later, to regret it terribly. I remember reading of a woman who gave away an inheritance and committed suicide when she realised what she had done. It is time the law recognised the receivers of these valuables as thieves. I digress; Michael has given away, over the years, more than half a million dollars. He has also in the process, given away the snuffbox, and during the same episode gave away many family heirlooms to his cleaner, and his car (which he subsequently recovered). The snuffbox including all the documentation went to his second cousin. He subsequently told Michael:

“You didn't believe it was real, so I sold it.”

Michael claims he never made this statement and the great irony was that Michael had given it to him to keep the precious object in the family.



This poor photo of the snuffbox is all Michael has left. The secret compartment has been opened to show the miniature of Emma. The snuff box can be opened without revealing Emma's portrait.

Michael has since married a marvellous Phillipina Chemical Engineer and, because of her ministrations, no longer suffers from bipolar episodes, but does suffer from Parkinson's disease. The snuffbox and issues associated with it are now literally out of his hands.

It is gone now and will no doubt appear some time in the future. However the new owner is unlikely to want to donate it to the Maritime museum if it is authentic. From what I have seen I would give it a better than 90% chance of being authentic. Michael has evidence of provenance beginning with the Duke of Leinster of Ireland, whose youngest surviving daughter was married to Nelson's favourite Captain, Sir Thomas Foley. It was captain Foley that Nelson turned to when he put the telescope to his blind eye at Copenhagen and it was captain Foley that had a big hand in winning the battle of the Nile. Some of Nelson's relatives and the state had treated Emma very poorly after the admiral's death. Her life had drifted into drink and debt and, she died in France, a penniless refugee from her creditors in 1815. It is more than likely that she pawned any relic of worth, and by this process, the Duke may have come into possession of the snuffbox. Leinster house is now the seat of government in Ireland. He gifted the snuffbox to his solicitor William Read of Read and McNabb in Dublin in thankfulness for work done in regard to the Leinster estate. This was passed on to William's son Richard who graduated from Adelaide Hospital in Dublin as a surgeon in 1869 and then came to Australia. His initials are discretely engraved in the gold frame. He set up practice in Singleton and went on to become a major partner in a copper mine in Cobar. The provenance has a good chance of being proven by removing the miniature to see if it is identified on the back. If so, it will be worth up to a million dollars.

It is considered poor form and somewhat akin to racism to criticise a nation of people. The English can be very intelligent and witty, but they do have a downside. The main character played by John Cleese in a very funny and witty film, A Fish Called Wanda, complains about the problem of being English:

"Do you know what it is like to be English? Being so correct all the time. Being so stifled by the dread of doing the wrong thing. We are so terrified of embarrassment that's why we are all so dead. Most of my friends are dead, we have all these piles of corpses to dinner."

Perhaps it was just a matter of putting these presumptuous Australians, descendants of Irish convicts, in their place. But as my father used to say, as he was about to belt me: "This hurts me more than it hurts you." For the want of a bit of generosity the Nelson society has lost the possibility of owning a most precious Nelson relic.

End.

Good yarn Commander.

Michael

Postscript:

That's right the Gaco rowlock. Yes I got a good intitial response, but then head office at Plastimo put the kibosh on. I notice they boast over 50% of their product is made in France; perhaps being foreign made, was a negative. We have some French knives not merely "Made in France" but "100% made in France". Perhaps they are more nationalistic than other nations. A similar response was received all over the UK. By contrast two outlets in the US have carried my product, the rest have been sold

online to Canada, UK, Sweden, Norway, Philipines, France, South Korea and New Zealand. There is also a retail outlet in Australia (Whitworth's)

So Michael and I can both proudly boast we were a complete failure in our objectives in the UK.

* Poms and Pommy bastards are epithets reserved for a certain kind of Englishman. Generally middle class (as in the TV series, "Keeping up Appearances") they tend to be class conscious, somewhat bitter, pessimistic, and quick with the putdown. I remember some time ago a teacher at an "elite" private school (Shore) making the strange boast that: "Nobody can cut you dead like an Englishman."

It is generally agreed that the "lower classes" such as Cockneys, and "upper classes" don't deserve the epithet. The Cockneys because of their egalitarianism, lack of adherence to rules and sense of humour, and the upper classes because of their good manners. The latter do not need to indulge in putdowns because of their secure social standing.

The origin of the word, Pom, is a mystery to Australians. As convicts they were allegedly labeled, POHM (prisoner of her majesty). Another that they were burnt red like a pomegranate. However in Portsmouth, I met an Englishman who told me that the port of origin for the convict was on their papers. Many departed from Portsmouth and it was allegedly abbreviated to POM. This last seems the most likely explanation.

Don't fret I am totally aware that Australians are not without fault. Watch a movie "Wake in Fright" that showed Australians in such a bad light that they tried to destroy every copy. However one copy survived, and is now generally available. Martin Scorsese reckons it is one of his favourite films.

Addendum: Mystery surrounds another incident. On the night of December 8, 1900, the painted hall at Greenwich was entered, the glass case containing the Nelson relics was smashed and the relics were removed. However a list of items stolen makes no mention of a snuffbox.

On September 13, 1904 a William Alfred Carter was charged with the theft. He appeared to be trying to give "information" about objects he may have stolen, but was denying the theft. There is an intriguing passage from the defendant in a statement by Seargent Burch. He claims the defendant said; "I have also seen a snuff box, a gold one. It is in the possession of a man in Melbourne (Australia) who has befriended me, and I won't give him away. I could get it if I went out there for it. He is a receiver out there but keeps a tobacconist shop as a blind. I refuse to say what his name is." A little later he says: "I have seen nothing else except the watch and seal which I have, and the snuff box and medal which I believe are in Melbourne." He may, of course, have sold a snuffbox and medal to the receiver in the tobacconist shop.

Fair dinkum: the Irish discovered in the early days on the goldfields, that they were consistently beaten at gambling because they were drinking heavily. To join a gambling table you were required to drink for drink. The Chinese mispronounced "fair drinking" as "fair dinkum". It means honest.

You've got Buckley's or You've got two chances mate, or You've got two chances mate; Buckley's and none: This means a very slim chance and, no chance. Buckley was an escaped convict who happened to be sleeping under a tree where the aboriginals had buried their chief. He was assumed to be the resurrected chief and lived with the tribe for 19 years.

Don't come the raw prawn with me: This means don't bullshit me. The origin of this expression is one of Australia's great mysteries.

War incident

Michael Read did not meet his father Peter till he was five. Peter was working to supply bases in New Guinea during the war against Japan. Michael has allowed me to read Peter's diaries and one incident stuck in my mind. Peter was repairing a sloop being used for supply when he saw a Japanese bomber coming for him. It began dropping a stick of bombs and Peter thought 'Oh well if one hits I am done for, nothing I can do about it.' Well, a bomb hit the water either side of the sloop, and, as the bomber flew off the natives on board immediately dived over the side to collect all the dead fish killed by the bombs.