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978-1-108-02437-2 - A Narrative of the Battle of St. Vincent

John Drinkwater

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A Narrative of the Battle of St. Vincent

Lieutenant-Colonel John Drinkwater (1762–1844), an army officer, was on board the *Minerva*, bearing Commodore Nelson's pennant, after the British evacuation from Corsica, when they found themselves in the middle of the Spanish fleet. Having been transferred to another ship, and Nelson to the *Captain*, Drinkwater thus became an eyewitness of the Battle of St Vincent, 14 February 1797. He made sketches of the positions of the fleet during the battle that were subsequently praised for their accuracy by naval officers. His *Narrative* was originally published the same year, but reissued in 1840 with the addition of anecdotes of Nelson, to raise funds for a Nelson testimonial. The original aim of the work was to give due credit to the officers, particularly Nelson, to whom it was felt that Admiral Sir John Jervis had not given sufficient recognition for their part in his most significant victory.

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A Narrative of the Battle of St. Vincent

*With Anecdotes of Nelson,
Before and After that Battle*

JOHN DRINKWATER



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Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo, Mexico City

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108024372

© in this compilation Cambridge University Press 2010

This edition first published 1840

This digitally printed version 2010

ISBN 978-1-108-02437-2 Paperback

This book reproduces the text of the original edition. The content and language reflect the beliefs, practices and terminology of their time, and have not been updated.

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Published by Saunders & Odey Conduit Street .

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A NARRATIVE
OF THE
BATTLE OF ST. VINCENT;
WITH
ANECDOTES
OF
NELSON,
BEFORE AND AFTER THAT BATTLE.

BY
COLONEL DRINKWATER BETHUNE, F.S.A.,

AUTHOR OF THE "HISTORY OF THE SIEGE OF GIBRALTAR," ETC.

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SECOND EDITION.

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Palmarum qui meruit ferat.

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LONDON:
SAUNDERS AND OTLEY, CONDUIT STREET.

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PRINTED BY WILLIAM WILCOCKSON, ROLLS BUILDINGS, FETTER LANE.

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TO

ADMIRAL THE RIGHT HONORABLE

SIR GEORGE COCKBURN, G. C. B.,

&c. &c. &c.

MY DEAR SIR GEORGE,

HAVING decided to publish a Second Edition of my “Narrative of the Proceedings of the British Fleet, commanded by Admiral Sir John Jervis, K.B., in the action with the Spanish Fleet off Cape St. Vincent, on the 14th of February, 1797,” with additional anecdotes of Nelson, I am induced to request that you will allow this publication to be inscribed with your name; not only as the associate and intimate friend of the gallant Nelson, whose transcendant conduct in that glorious battle, the publication of the original “Narrative” was intended to commemorate, but as one of the only three Commanders now surviving, who were present on that occasion. In addition to these reasons, I

gladly embrace this public opportunity of expressing my high estimation of your eminent professional talents, and of manifesting my sincere and grateful recollection of many acts of friendship and kindness received at your hands.

With sentiments of warm attachment and regard,

Believe me to be,

My dear Sir George,

Yours most sincerely,

J. DRINKWATER BETHUNE.

*Thorncroft,
Surrey,
14th February, 1840.*

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P R E F A C E.

THE first edition of the “Narrative of the Battle of St. Vincent” was published in the spring of 1797, but, being anonymous, did not obtain the full credit to which it was entitled; and one of the main objects of the present edition, is to establish the authenticity of that narrative, and to explain the circumstances which led to its publication.

It had been the good fortune of the Author to witness that celebrated battle. Being previously acquainted with many of the principal officers serving in the action, he felt more than a common interest in their personal welfare. Never were British seamanship and valour more eminently exemplified than on that occasion. Nothing was wanting to render the transactions of that splendid

b

day complete, but a satisfactory record of the various occurrences, such as would afford not only a description of the engagement, but due notice of the personal conduct of those individuals to whose extraordinary bravery and skill the discomfiture of a greatly superior force was to be attributed. The Admiral's public letter was, however, little calculated to gratify the legitimate anxiety of the nation on this subject. Instead of detailing the movements of the British fleet in an action that reflected the highest honor on Sir John Jervis himself, as well as on his gallant squadron, and properly noticing the distinguished conduct and bearing of the commanders of his Majesty's ships Culloden, Blenheim, and particularly of the Captain, (in which ship the chivalrous and daring Nelson carried his commodore's pendant,) the Admiral's public despatches were limited to an official report of his meeting with the Spanish fleet off Cape St. Vincent, a brief and meagre description of the manœuvres of the British squadron during the action, and of the enemy's defeat with the loss of four sail of the line. Not even the slightest mention was made of any of the gallant officers who had so ably seconded their

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Chief in obtaining that victory. The conduct of Commodore Nelson had been pre-eminently distinguished: two of the four captured ships were taken solely by him. The whole of the British squadron had not hesitated to bestow on him the chief merit of the enemy's defeat; therefore, not to have his name even mentioned in the official public despatch, (usually considered the proper channel for recording extraordinary exertions on such occasions, and too often, the only gratification afforded to the parties named,) produced no small degree of surprise among the Commodore's personal friends. Some of these had been witnesses of his undaunted conduct in the action, and of its results; and they were greatly at a loss to conceive any plausible reasons for concealing such acts of heroism from the public.

No sooner was the Admiral's letter published, than Nelson's friends were not backward in expressing their disappointment at its silence with respect to the heroes of St. Valentine's day—a silence that appeared to them a real injustice to all parties. They called for a publication of particulars, and it was not long before an attempt was made to gratify their reasonable expectations.

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It was known that the Author had sketched a series of diagrams of the position of the fleets during the battle. These diagrams had been corrected on the spot, by communication with many of the principal actors, and being generally admitted to exhibit a tolerably correct view of the battle at different periods of the action, it had been intended to lay them before the public. The Author was now strongly urged to accompany their appearance with a description of the battle, which it was also well known he had likewise drawn up for the gratification of a private circle. Concurring with the friends of Nelson in the expediency of some such publication, the Author was persuaded to comply with their wishes, by annexing the private letter to the diagrams. Hence the original Narrative of the Battle. To answer the object in view by its publication, its early appearance became of moment, and it was given to the public without alteration. No name was affixed to the pamphlet, the author wishing thereby to mark his sense of the presumption of an officer of His Majesty's land forces, in attempting the description of a naval engagement. It was afterwards thought that this

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scruple needed not to have been so strongly felt, and indeed, it proved unfavorable to the Author's main object ; since the fact that the Narrative was published anonymously, threw a doubt on its authenticity, and the pamphlet consequently had but a very limited sale. Indeed, it did not attract any special public notice until its accuracy was promulgated by the officers of Sir John Jervis's fleet, and particularly through the testimony of Nelson himself,* too late, however, to repay even the expence of the publication ; for by the time the accuracy of the account became established, the greatest part of the impression had been consigned to the usual fate of unsaleable articles. The writer was, however, most amply rewarded by the increased friendship of the gallant Commodore, who, from that moment, never omitted any opportunity of acknowledging to him his personal obligation, particularly on a

* See Clarke and M'Arthur's Life of Nelson, page 51. Extract from Lord Nelson's Summary of his professional career, drawn up by himself:—

“ For an account of what passed from our sailing from Porto Ferrajo, on the 29th of January, 1797, to the finish of the action on the 14th of February, I refer to the Narrative published by Colonel Drinkwater. ’

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memorable occasion which the Author cannot deny himself the gratification of recording here. The first time that he met Lord Nelson after the Battle of the Nile, the Admiral approached, with the eagerness which always characterised him, and shaking the Author cordially by the hand, exclaimed, "Why were not you with us at Aboukir?"

It was afterwards understood that Sir John Jervis wrote two public letters descriptive of the battle of the 14th of February; in the first of which the Admiral, impressed with a due sense of the merits of his officers, gave appropriate credit to those of superior rank, and high praise to Nelson and others for their distinguished conduct on that occasion; but that the first letter was suppressed, and a second substituted in its place, on his being reminded of the inconveniences that had been found to result, on other occasions, from the practice of naming officers in public despatches.*

* Extract from Sir John Barrow's *Life of Admiral Lord Howe*, published in 1838-9 :—

"He (Lord Howe) would have acted, if left to his own judgment, as Sir John Jervis did, after the battle of St. Vincent, who omitted even the name of Nelson, though he was mainly instrumental in gaining the battle. It is known, however, that in Jervis's original letter, he had given to

Sir John Jervis, in addition to his public letter, likewise wrote a private one to the First Lord of the Admiralty ; but in that private communication, the Admiral entered into very few details ; nor did it speak of Nelson as his conduct, in the opinion of those who witnessed it, certainly merited. All that was said of his heroic achievements was, “that Commodore Nelson contributed much to the fortune of the day.”

The first edition of “the Narrative” is now rarely to be met with, and the Author has been frequently urged to republish it. Hitherto, he has resisted these representations ; but, as the public attention appears again to be awakened to the merits of the Hero of Trafalgar, by the recently declared intention to erect a suitable testimonial to

Nelson all due praise ; but was prevailed on by Sir Robert Calder, the Captain of the fleet, to substitute another, in which it was left out, on the ground that as Nelson had disobeyed the signal of recall, any eulogy on his conduct would encourage other officers to do the same, while the exclusive praise of one individual would act as a discouragement of the rest.”

The writer of Lord Howe’s Life adds, very pointedly and properly, “The surprise is, that a man of Lord St. Vincent’s sagacity should not have detected the lurking jealousy that gave rise to such a recommendation.”

perpetuate the memory of his invaluable public services, the present moment appeared favorable for that purpose. For these reasons, and with the view of adding any profits which may accrue from the sale to the sum already contributed to the fund for erecting a memorial to do honor to the immortal Nelson, the Author has decided to republish "The Narrative of the Battle of St. Vincent." Some interesting anecdotes, with other additional matter not deemed necessary to notice in the first hasty edition, are likewise introduced, affording, on the whole, new and corroborative proofs, if such were wanting, of the high professional feeling and zeal, uncommon sagacity, and prompt decision which were united in Nelson, even on minor occasions, with a degree of personal activity and energy that was almost without a parallel.