

THE  
LIFE OF NELSON.

---

---

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.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-08344-7 - The Life of Nelson: Volume 1

Robert Southey

Excerpt

[More information](#)

---

## CHAPTER I.

### CONTENTS.

Nelson's birth and boyhood.—He is entered on board the *Raisnable*.—Goes to the West Indies in a merchant-ship; then serves in the *Triumph*.—He sails in Capt. Phipps's voyage of discovery.—Goes to the East Indies in the *Seahorse*, and returns in ill health.—Serves as acting lieutenant in the *Worcester*, and is made lieutenant into the *Lowestoffe*, commander into the *Badger* brig, and post into the *Hinchinbrook*.—Expedition against the Spanish main.—Sent to the North Seas in the *Albemarle*.—Services during the American war.

**H**ORATIO, SON OF EDMUND and CATHERINE NELSON, was born Sept. 29, 1758, in the parsonage house of Burnham Thorpe, a village in the county of Norfolk, of which his father was rector. The maiden name of his mother was SUCKLING: her grandmother was an elder sister of Sir ROBERT

WALPOLE, and this child was named after his godfather, the first Lord WALPOLE. Mrs. NELSON died in 1767, leaving eight, out of eleven, children. Her brother, Capt. 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 holydays, he read in the county newspaper that his uncle was appointed to the *Raisonnable*, of 64 guns. “Do William,” said he to a brother who was a year and 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 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

LIFE OF NELSON. 5

might be placed, he would climb, if possible, to the very top of the tree. Accordingly Capt. 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 labour and of glory, so eminently distinguished him. When a mere child, he strayed birds-nesting from his mother'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 appre-

hended that he might have been carried off by the gipsies. 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 ? ” Once, after the winter holydays, when he and his brother William had set off on horseback to return to school, they came 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 honour. If the road is dangerous, you may return : but remember, boys, I leave it to your honour.” 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,”

## LIFE OF NELSON.

7

said he : “ remember, brother, it was left “ to our honour ! ”—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 bed-room window by some sheets, plundered the tree, was drawn up with the pears, and then distributed them among his school-fellows, 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 bed-fellow, 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 *Raisonné* 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, Capt. Suckling was not in the ship, nor had any person been apprized of the boy's coming. He paced the deck the whole remainder of the day, without being noticed by any one; and it was not till the second day that somebody, as he expressed it, "took compassion on him." The pain which is felt when we are first transplanted from our native soil,—when the living branch is cut from the parent tree,—is one of the most poignant which we have to endure through life. There are after-griefs which wound more deeply, which leave behind them scars never to be effaced, which bruise the spirit, and sometimes break the heart: but



1771                      LIFE OF NELSON.                      9

never never do we feel so keenly the want of love, the necessity of being loved, and the sense of utter desertion, as when we first leave the haven of home, and are, as it were, pushed off upon the stream of life. Added to these feelings, the sea-boy has to endure physical hardships, and the privation of every comfort, even of sleep. Nelson had a feeble body and an affectionate heart, and he remembered through life his first days of wretchedness in the service.

The *Raisonnable* having been commissioned on account of the dispute respecting the Falkland Islands, was paid off as soon as the difference with the Court of Spain was accommodated, and Capt. Suckling was removed to the *Triumph*, 74, then stationed as a guardship in the Thames. This was considered as too inactive a life for a boy, and Nelson was therefore sent a voyage to the West Indies in a merchantship, commanded by Mr. John Rathbone, an excellent seaman, who had served as master's-mate under Capt. Suckling in the *Dreadnought*. He returned a practical sea-

man, but with a hatred of the king's service, and a saying then common among the sailors —“ Aft the most honour ; forward, the better “ man.” Rathbone had probably been disappointed and disgusted in the navy ; and, with no unfriendly intentions, warned Nelson against a profession which he himself had found hopeless. His uncle received him on board the *Triumph* on his return, and discovering his dislike to the navy, took the best means of reconciling him to it. He held it out as a reward, that if he attended well to his navigation, he should go in the cutter and decked longboat, which was attached to the commanding officer's ship at Chatham. Thus he became a good pilot for vessels of that description from Chatham to the Tower, and down the Swin Channel to the North Foreland, and acquired a confidence among rocks and sands of which he often felt the value.

Nelson had not been many months on board the *Triumph*, when his love of enterprise was excited by hearing that two ships were fitting out for a voyage of discovery