

Research Article

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On Things from Sea and Shore: British Naval Heroism in Material Culture

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Abstract: This article examines social participation and the dissemination of cultural knowledge through artefacts, and analyses how unspectacular and mundane everyday objects manage to convey ideas of the exceptional and heroic, as, for example, in the case of Admiral Lord Nelson and the souvenir culture surrounding him and his victories. Over the course of the eighteenth century, the British Empire expanded and consolidated its global influence, relying heavily on the British Navy in the process. Public interest in the Navy—and in its prominent figures—increased and was also consciously promoted, and, as a consequence, elements of maritime culture were taken up and adapted in everyday culture. Nautically inspired artefacts became the fashion, and the new opportunities for mass production contributed to their proliferation. Thus, admiration for a naval hero found its expression in a multitude of artefacts which, taken by themselves, have nothing of the heroic about them but taken en masse demonstrate the significance of naval prowess in this period, and the forging of connections between the domestic to the foreign sphere.

Keywords: Admiral Nelson, Royal Navy, memory, souvenir, mass production

Souvenirs and Heroes

This article explores how artefacts, even when they are small and seemingly insignificant or downright mundane, can serve to disseminate cultural knowledge. Everyday objects, which are often used unthinkingly, and which take up functions and spaces in the residences and daily routines of people, are of particular interest here. They are integral parts of life without a great deal of reflection given to them once they have been acquired. In helping to define the lifestyle of an individual, a household or a community, they express taste and financial status. But artefacts like tableware, bookmarks and textiles convey more information than that. Potentially, they carry messages about politics, culture, and history with which their owners, either inadvertently or by conscious choices, surround themselves.

The role of small (i.e. mostly portable) artefacts is especially interesting when they implicitly evoke the great, the spectacular, even the heroic, and when they contribute to cultural participation and the popularisation of history. The "relation between materiality and meaning" (Stewart x) is a multifaceted and mediated one. The singling out of heroes and their deeds, from landmark events to people's everyday lives and homes yields insights into the cultural memory of a given community. The process of looking from the wars and battles deemed worthy for history books to inconspicuous objects helps to contextualise heroic figures, and to understand how they had an impact on the everyday life of the communities from which they originated.

Hence, the role of everyday artefacts should not be underestimated, even if they are at most times completely unobtrusive and may therefore be not immediately recognisable as conveyors of meaning. As

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Daniel Miller notes, "Stuff has a quite remarkable capacity for fading from view, and becoming naturalized, taken for granted, the background or frame to our behaviour. Indeed, stuff achieves its mastery of us precisely because we constantly fail to notice what it does" (155). It is their subliminal, unobtrusive part in culture that makes artefacts worth exploring. While Miller's definition is a broad one and includes basically anything material, this article concentrates on a specific category of artefact: the souvenir.

Souvenirs have traditionally been associated with travelling and—since the nineteenth century—with tourism. The Latin "subvenire" means "to come up" or "to come to the rescue" (Merriam-Webster). The French term "souvenir", which has been recorded in English since the mid-eighteenth century, refers to a keepsake, a small object which can be a gift, given with the intention to preserve the memory of something or someone. The OED entry specifies a souvenir as "[s]omething that is given or kept as a reminder of a place, person, event, etc.; a memento, a keepsake; spec. a (typically small and inexpensive) item designed for sale to tourists and having some association with the place visited. (Now the usual sense.)" (OED).

Souvenirs connect a specific place, usually one which has a cultural and/or historical relevance ascribed to it, to their owner, who would have visited that place in the past. With the increase of domestic tourism in Britain in the first half of the nineteenth century, the demand for affordable souvenirs grew and was met by mass-produced, usually small objects. Travellers would return home with souvenirs, tangible presences acquired to facilitate holding on to their memories. Kristen K. Swanson and Dallen J. Timothy have described how souvenirs stand in a metonymic relationship to places, people, or events, and are hence loaded with meaning. In the case of a small, tangible object, I would suggest a kind of "meaning-to-go": in that the owners can carry a souvenir around with them, put it to daily use in some cases, or place it in a conspicuous position in their homes. Susan Stewart explores how souvenirs are positioned in a materially mediated relationship between something that is temporally or spatially removed, and the souvenir owner. "The possession of the metonymic object is a kind of dispossession in that the presence of the object all the more radically speaks to its status as a mere substitution and to its subsequent distance from the self" (Stewart 135). Possessing a souvenir thus points to the very absence of the actual place visited, or the event commemorated. The souvenir also, by its very existence, makes clear that there is a gap to bridge between the place, the self (the owner), and the object itself, which works as a material mnemonic aid. In this form, it would not be needed if there still were an actual connection, a continuing presence of experience. This is where the souvenir comes in, not merely as a material reminder but actually upholding, even updating experience by its persistent material, tangible presence in its owner's environment. According to Timothy and Swanson this is a process which conceivably moves in stages (492). They argue that first, a souvenir takes on the role of a prop. It then becomes evidence (of the places visited, for example), then a memory, and possibly, in a final step, it even may become a substitute—in the sense that the act of acquisition, of buying a certain souvenir item, conceptually replaces the original event or activity it commemorates.

Souvenirs as metonymic objects can connect their owners to far-away places and distant events, but also to temporally and/or spatially distant figures, for example to historically significant actors whose deeds would merit commemoration. Conceivably, souvenirs of heroes and their successes work in similar ways to those of travel destinations and sights visited. Notably, it is not the relic that is at stake here but the inconspicuous artefact which can, by its material presence, bridge the gap between a hero and his community of admirers. The question of what a hero 'really' is seems easy at first but essentialist answers should be eschewed here in favour of a more complex picture. Undoubtedly, heroes and heroines can be frequently but by no means exclusively recognised by certain family resemblances in the Wittgensteinian sense. To become heroic, an extraordinary, courageous deed may be necessary, usually for a greater good; death by a heroic act certainly helps too. However, ticking boxes when it comes to heroes does not yield a satisfactory explanation. In a more constructivist (and heuristic) view, heroes and heroines are crucial to the understanding and self-understanding of cultural communities. Heroic figures serve as focal points for a variety of agendas, and they tend to fulfil certain needs in a given community. They can be seen as points where needs, desires and the cultural imaginaries crystallise. It is therefore necessary to explain the social, historical and medial factors which shape what a community considers to be heroic at a certain moment. Of particular interest here is the attribution (or denial) of qualities considered heroic. Hence, heroes are figures "[...] who are named and/or presented as heroes, and who have heroic characteristics attributed to

them, in particular agonal, exceptional, often transgressive achievements of their own" (von den Hoff et al. 8, translation and emphasis UZ). At the same time, a certain tension can often be observed with regard to heroes: they have exceptional and extraordinary qualities, setting them apart from average people; they also need audiences, an admiring public re-telling their achievements and thus making them heroes, and they potentially can serve as role models. Therefore, they cannot be too far removed from the general public in order to make imitation or emulation a possibility. Indeed, they are often blank screens upon which the needs and ideas of their admirers can be projected. Souvenirs as memorabilia are positioned at intersections between the extraordinariness of a hero and the necessity to keep him within the realm of the everyday and the domestic. In the case of military leaders like Admiral Nelson, the role souvenirs play in memory culture is particularly striking and deserves a closer look.

Admiral Lord Nelson, British Naval Hero

Great Britain in the early twenty-first century may still conceive of itself as an island nation (an increasingly insular nation, as many would claim) but the greatest days of Britain as a seafaring nation have passed. Nonetheless, the country's long naval tradition is still present, as is the memory and the legacy of the British Empire. The Royal Navy, while without an official foundation date, traces its origins back to the early sixteenth century. It was a major factor in the establishment and the preservation of the Empire; from the mid-eighteenth century until World War II it was the world's most powerful naval force. Great men of the sea, naval heroes like Sir Walter Raleigh or Admiral Lord Nelson are household names and firmly located in the history books.

As the British Empire continued to expand in the long eighteenth century, the role of the British Navy grew in importance. However, it took time to impress upon the British public a positive image of the Navy as protector of trade and defender of the country. While land armies had always been subject to criticism, they still enjoyed a more favourable reputation at the time, and army officers a higher social standing. Recognition of the Navy as an institution was not easy to achieve as the service mostly operated far from the home country, and hence would not have been directly visible in the daily lives of many people. But the importance of the Royal Navy increased and particularly during periods of war became a feasible career option. By the mid-eighteenth century, as Margarette Lincoln notes, "English naval tradition was already strongly focused. It was identified with the defence of liberty, the protection of national religion and with the prosperity of the nation" (2). What was also crucial was not the establishment of military power alone but the ability to bind that power to the nation, to connect the institutions of empire conceptually as well as administratively. Some elements of the Royal Navy helped to create a sense of coherence in quite unexpected ways: seamen on one ship would have come together from all parts of the British Isles and would ideally create a professional identity despite their different origins. "The Navy abroad therefore constituted a projection of 'Britishness' which some contemporaries appreciated and were keen to cultivate" (Lincoln 5). While this process was naturally not easy and would warrant a more differentiated look, the projection, the political agenda and cultural desiderata connected to it are worth noting here. Furthermore, it may be important to state that the extraordinary as it presents itself in military heroism and warfare is not a spectacle with positive connotations, and Admiral Nelson himself a controversial figure.

Around the turn of the nineteenth century, Horatio Nelson was one of the most prominent figures within the British Navy. Even today, he is one of the most famous and well-known British historical figures. The continuing extent of his fame is shown by the fact that he appeared ninth in the BBC survey "100 Greatest Britons" in 2002.² Born in Norfolk in 1758, he first went to sea at the typical age of 12. His first decisive success took place when he was Commodore under Admiral John Jervis at Cape St. Vincent in 1797, where he managed to capture two Spanish ships by overrunning them one after the other, a practice which came to be known as "double-boarding." In the same year, however, Nelson also suffered his greatest failure, when the

 $^{{\}bf 1}\,$ On identity and the Royal navy, see for example Rüger 2005, or Davey 2013.

² See for more information on the programme, and the top ten "Churchill voted greatest Briton", 24 November 2001, news.bbc. co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/2509465.stm.

British did not manage to defeat the Spanish at Santa Cruz de Tenerife. In the attack on Santa Cruz, Nelson lost his right arm. His wound first plunged him into depression and a sense of uselessness, but in later years, the empty sleeve became his trademark and, because it denoted the willingness to physical sacrifice, an outward sign of his heroism. Only a year later, in 1798, Nelson defeated the French Navy in the Battle of the Nile in Aboukir Bay, a success with cemented his status as a naval hero, and in fact as a celebrity. The fact that he was a hero with flaws made him even more interesting.³

With the Nile Campaign, Nelson had finally become a public character, admired nationwide by military personnel as well as civilians, advisor to politicians, and a welcome guest of the upper classes. As Arthur Herman remarks, "Without Nelson the man, the British navy's rise as the supreme instrument of global power would have been incomplete. Without Nelson the myth, its transformation into a universal symbol of heroic achievement may never have begun" (360). The hero worship of Nelson took on many different forms of expression. His victory on the Nile had quickly become public knowledge; it was celebrated with fireworks and concerts, and reports, caricatures and poems were published. Interestingly, this victory was not the very first celebration of this kind: Admiral Vernon's victory in Porto Bello, Spain, in 1739 was the first instance of memorabilia such as medals created especially for a successful admiral of the Royal Navy. "These objects allowed consumers to express their allegiance and solidarity to the British polity" (49), as Katherine Wilson succinctly notes on the case of Vernon, and this also is valid for Nelson. A mass production of objects began; they were dedicated to Nelson's heroic deeds and suited to establish and retain these deeds in public consciousness. A multitude of artefacts to celebrate, and above all commemorate, the victory was put on the market. Aboukir and Nelson memorabilia proliferated, and nautical as well as Egyptian styles on enamel products, fans, boxes, and maybe most importantly on pottery became fashionable. It is a coincidence of history that Nelson's most important victories met with increasingly efficient and elaborate possibilities of mass-production on an industrial scale in Britain. Marianne Czisnik's description of the wealth of mass-produced artefacts, ceramics in particular, is impressive. She notes that there was a huge repertoire of motifs that potters could employ as decor on their goods. Symbols, portraits and nautical motifs were the most frequent, and sometimes would be underscored by more or less fitting inscriptions, mottoes and verse (cf. Czisnik 190-191). There were countless ways to visually allude to Admiral Nelson's actions on all kinds of artefacts—a crocodile (for the Nile), a ship, or a trophy would all work equally well to evoke the victory and the sense of triumph. Thus, a lowly piece of crockery could, in its own way, contain a condensed narrative about a far-away naval battle. Mary A. Favret details in her monograph War at a Distance how the British, in the course of the eighteenth century, came to conceive of war as something happening only far away, and what kind of effects this view had: "the felt distance from crucial events, the limits of knowledge in a mediated culture, the temporal gaps in the transmission of information" (11). In her sense, souvenirs would have to be read as part of the mediation processes of war, and, potentially, as material reminders connecting warfare to the everyday.

Admiral Nelson was a successful and well-known naval officer, a hero of the nation when, in the War of the Third Coalition (1803-1806), he engaged the French and Spanish fleets off Cape Trafalgar on October 21, 1805. His flag signal "England expects every man will do his duty", which he sent from the "HMS Victory" at the beginning of battle, is firmly entrenched in British memory. The words became mainstay in the English vocabulary and have been permanently quoted (and misquoted) since. Hours after he had been hit by the musket ball of a French sniper, Nelson died aboard the "Victory", but lived long enough to hear about his success. The decisive success of the battle (which would establish British naval supremacy for the next century) was heavily tarnished by the sense of mourning for a national hero. Admiral Nelson's death was considered a grave loss for Britain, almost outweighing the triumph of having beaten the French. "The dead Nelson ... would become a crucial part of the fabric of national culture" (Herman 398). The Battle of Trafalgar came to be firmly entrenched in the national memory, and the subject of innumerable cultural products, many of them monumental, one of the most famous being J. M. W. Turner's painting "The Battle of Trafalgar, 21 October 1805", completed in 1822. Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square in London has been

³ Suggestions for further reading can only be tentative and would include Cannadine's essay collection and the biographies by Knight and Lambert. All three books were first published in 2005, marking the bicentenary of Trafalgar.

a landmark of commemoration since its erection in 1843, and is still one of the most characteristic sights in the British capital. Commemoration by large memorials is certainly the first thing that comes to mind to preserve the memory of heroes but the afterlife of heroes is not merely constituted by displays of grandeur. Commonplace artefacts are equally crucial to keep them in the collective memory.

Commemorating with Artefacts: Examples

As a site of naval cultural history, Portsmouth, the oldest naval base in Britain, is a good starting point for thinking about the heroic and the unheroic, the monumental and the small, in relation to each other. Portsmouth Historic Dockyard is a tourist attraction. The large site comprises docks as well as museums and galleries, next to the unavoidable recreation areas, shops, and restaurants. The dockyard is home to several significant ships of British history: the "Mary Rose" from Tudor times, which sank in 1545, was rediscovered in 1971 and raised in 1982, now has a museum of her own. Portsmouth has also become the permanent home of the "Warrior" of 1860, the first warship with an iron hull. Next to the public area of the museums is a working naval port, currently the largest of the Royal Navy. A visit to Portsmouth is apt to convey the impression of an unbroken line of British naval history; where commissioned, contemporary warships can be seen in close proximity to historical ones.

Admiral Nelson's flagship of Trafalgar, the "HMS Victory" with her long history is certainly a highlight of the dockyards. The ship has been in dry dock as a museum ship since 1922 and has been the flagship of the First Sea Lord since 2012. It is accessible to the public. A plaque on the floor of the quarter deck marks the spot where Nelson fell in battle, hit by a sniper who was firing from aboard the French "Redoubtable". The spot is always surrounded by people, and visitors usually have to queue on the deck to take photographs. This physical location of military heroism has to all intents and purposes still considerable appeal, conveying a sense of the real, the actual, even if the commemorated event is more than 200 years in the past.

Apart from the *genius loci* to be experienced aboard a historic warship, the unavoidable gift shop provides insights into images of the Navy today. Unsurprisingly, the shop at Portsmouth Historic Dockyard is full of the usual fare: books, postcards, pencils, models of the exhibits, all with an emphasis on naval history. The merchandise in the children's section seems particularly striking. There is for example a "Nelson Activity Pack" which includes games, puzzles, and colouring pictures. This may be a laudable attempt to teach children about Admiral Nelson's life and achievements, although one could also think products like this are somewhat excessive didactic kitsch of early twenty-first century teaching. The activity pack certainly speaks to the fact that Nelson belongs firmly in the national curriculum. But first and foremost, the activity pack (as well as all the other souvenirs) tap into cultural and economic potential which is highly active and was already present in Nelson's lifetime. Heroes have monuments dedicated to them, but the huge array of artefacts produced in their memory, or simply in free association with them, tends to be overlooked.⁴

To my mind (as an academic visitor from continental Europe), Portsmouth does lean towards the heroic mode when it comes to the presentation and commemoration of Nelson, and its exhibitions expectably strive to put not only the heroic past, but also the contemporary Royal Navy, which apparently has difficulty recruiting, in the best possible light. The display of goods in a modern-day museum's gift shop, marketable and easily accessible for many, shed light on the workings of cultural memory, and therefore should not be ignored.

Admiral Nelson's state funeral on January 9, 1806, was an enormous public event, and a wave of mourning swept over the British people. The huge funeral procession moved from Greenwich to St. Paul's and drew masses of bystanders to the streets of London.⁵ And once again, manufacturers were ready with mourning products and ranges of souvenirs: jewellery, prints, tableware. Particularly, products supposed to commemorate the Battle of Trafalgar were in demand and were produced in subsequent years. All three artefacts shown in the following were made as commemorative objects.

⁴ For an analysis of a twenty-first century Nelson bookmark, see Zimmermann 2016.

⁵ On the funeral, see for example Czisnik, 195-203. Colin White (2007) provides a detailed analysis of the public mourning for Admiral Nelson.



Figure 1: Saucer (Object ID AAA4966) © National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London

This porcelain saucer, probably from 1806, is part of a Trafalgar-themed tea set, which is on display in the gallery "Nelson, Navy, Nation" in the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich. It is black-and-white tableware, with the battle order of Trafalgar, the ships as they were deployed at the outset of the battle, as a transfer-printed decoration. "A compass rose and the coast line are shown around the edge of the saucer with the place names 'Cadiz', 'C. Trafalger' (sic), 'C. Spartle'. There is a gilt line around the rim." 6 The design is clearly contemporary, with the two columns of British warships—Admiral Nelson's strategy to make the British force even more efficient and enable it to split the French and Spanish fleets—easily discernible. While the rather abstract, geometric look of the black-and-white ships may be aesthetically pleasing, it seems somewhat out of place on a tea set. In fact, here nautical content can be seen to leave its original context and travel into the everyday life of people who are not necessarily directly connected to the Navy but who, at any rate, consume tea. A tea set would have been part of—probably carefully prepared and structured—social encounters in a private, familial setting. Possibly, the décor may have invited comment or started a conversation including the Royal Navy, its main actors, and its successes. The tea set, as well as the other souvenirs, provides affordances in J. J. Gibson's sense, as part of an environment that enables or invites certain kinds of use and interaction (Gibson 1986).

Tableware to commemorate Admiral Nelson was widespread after Trafalgar. Also, creamware, a kind of earthenware produced by Staffordshire potters, which takes its name from its colour, and "which was introduced in the early 1760s and went on to become the dominant ceramic ware for the rest of the century" (G. Miller) was still a huge market in the early eighteen hundreds. Miller notes that creamware would have been the cheapest ware available at the end of the century. There are countless jugs, mugs and plates

⁶ Quoted from the object description on the National Maritime Museum collections website, collections, rmg, co.uk/collections/ objects/4690.html. For descriptions of all three artefacts in this article, refer to the relevant object ID in the collections of the National Maritime Museum.

⁷ See George L. Millers article for a detailed assessment of the various kinds of earthenware and porcelain, economic background, and value.

from post-Trafalgar years, often with portraits of Nelson in transfer-print, flanked with symbols of victory, battle plans, and surrounded by inscriptions. Sometimes there is the man himself and his most important victories, Aboukir and Trafalgar, all on a single piece of crockery. Simon Morgan has suggested that the presence of commemorative pottery in households can be traced back to the seventeenth century (132). While the material for his case studies largely stems from the mid-nineteenth century, his exploration of the connection between mass-produced ceramics with memory culture and political participation are pertinent in the present context.

Other frequent artefacts designed for regular use would be patch boxes. Below is an example, an oval patch box in pale blue with an enamelled surface. It measures 43x38x25 millimetres and is also on display in the gallery "Nelson, Navy, Nation" of the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich. On the lid, an untinted transfer shows a rather generic ship in central position. Around the ship, a verse is inscribed: "Off Trafalgar the Battle was Fought / Lord Nelson's Life the Victory bought". The box was produced in the English Midlands; its maker is unknown. While quite pretty to our tastes because it is relatively simple (there are many exuberant, overloaded designs prefiguring the Victorian taste for decoration), the patch box seems rather commonplace. With the ship and the verse, its associations are however very specific. Artefacts like this box would have been easy to carry and were, similar to tableware, designed for everyday use. They are private objects which are made to become part of a specific personal environment. The patch box would belong into rather personal, even intimate setting, and be handled frequently. Its inscription is somewhat sentimental as well as catchy; the word play the double meaning of "Victory"—Nelson's flagship as well as the outcome of Trafalgar-ensures that the two lines would have been easy to remember. For people unfamiliar with the sea, the ship itself seems rather nondescript; however, since the middle of the eighteenth century, popular publications had appeared with included engravings of ships with explanations of the sails, masts, and rigging. Whilst missing nautical specificities, also due to the diminutive size of the object, the image is still realistic.



Figure 2: Oval patch box (Object ID OBJ0042) © National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London

Arguably, a girl's sampler as the last example falls somewhat out of line here, as it is not a mass-produced commodity, and hence may not be quite fitting for the category of manufactured goods. "Samplers derive their English name from the French *essamplaire*, meaning any kind of work to be copied or imitated" ("A History of Samplers"). Originally, they were made by professionals, serving as a documentation of their skills and collection of stitches and patterns. In the sixteenth and seventeenth century, while retaining the possibility of showing handcrafting skills, samplers moved into the provenience of women. Moral verses and figural motifs would be included, and the samplers developed into picture-formats that could be displayed, rather than long pieces that could be rolled up. In the nineteenth century, the stitching of samplers had become a fundamental needlework exercise for schoolgirls. But many preserved examples

show that they could still be personalised and made interesting, depending on the preoccupations of their maker and her teacher.

However, a sampler is a prefect souvenir not merely for needlework skills but also for the historical context in which it was created. This example shows the impact of Trafalgar and the memory of Admiral Nelson all in one. On a piece of cloth, a young girl, Mary Gill, practiced her stitches and worked her sampler to commemorate Admiral Nelson's death. The motifs are mostly flowers in green and yellow, surrounded by a border of acorns. In the lower half, there is an urn on a plinth and the words "Sacred to the memory of Nelson Slain 21st October 1805". Above these, Mary Gill put her name and date of birth (August 7, 1794) in black cross-stitch. At the base of the work, there is a place and the date of its creation: "Dudley 1808". This particular sampler is a favourite of James Davey, former curator of naval history at the National Maritime Museum: "[Mary Gill] lived in Dudley, which is about as far from the sea as you can get, and yet his [Nelson's] death made such an impression that she chose to give so much of her time to making this memorial" (quoted in Kennedy). It can be deduced that at that point in time, the knowledge about Admiral Nelson and his accomplishments was widespread and part of general education on contemporary history-to a degree that an eleven-year old girl included him in her needlework. Mary Gill made use of contemporary aesthetic trends, with her depiction of elements of mourning like the urn and the acorn. The acorn carries contradictory symbolic meaning but would frequently be found on military tombs, and also be associated with longevity and immortality. The sampler is a quintessential part of the domestic sphere. It puts the talents of its maker and her feminine skills on show and highlights her passage into adulthood through the acquisition of (historical and artisanal) knowledge. Commemorating Nelson by actually making an object in his memory makes this example the most personal of the three. Mary Gill may have made her sampler according to a teacher's instructions but this would not necessarily make the process of creating it less important, as far as the inclusion of the historical event is concerned. The absence of the event of Trafalgar, the temporal and geographical distance between Mary Gill, the Admiral and the battle, is filled with an individual effort which brings the foreign place into the domestic interior.



Figure 3: Mary Gill's sampler (Object ID TXT0031) © National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London

Concluding Remarks

By choosing from an offer of an ever-widening range of artefacts, consumers could, for example, participate in the national mourning process after Trafalgar, but also in the successes of the British Navy, even if they had no personal connection to it. After all, whoever bought Trafalgar souvenirs in the early nineteenth century had not necessarily served in the Navy. But with the acquisition of a relevant artefact, it became possible to establish a connection, to express a personal interest, to share common societal concerns. The metonymic relationship between the artefact and an event or a person is of course a highly individual one, and it can be stretched almost to breaking point (Timothy/ Swanson) but the overarching principle of participation generally remains. Souvenirs are usually cultural props and sellable commodities, mostly inexpensive and unspectacular, but they can carry a huge associative load. They cannot be underestimated as conveyors of meaning which are within easy reach for many people.

Artefacts make a considerable contribution to the dissemination of cultural knowledge, sometimes by their very presence. As the Navy was needed in building an imperial nation, it was crucial to project a positive or at least solid image, and it was vital to anchor (pun intended) the Navy quite literally in the everyday life of the people. When contextualising heroes and public figures, which is a necessity as they depend on the communities which heroise them, it is also commendable to include the little things in the picture, or the display.

Essentially, this article has been on artefacts on shore informed by what was going on at sea: it is artefacts which can forge the connection between the battles and the people outside the Royal Navy. As Susan Stewart explains this process of connecting, "The souvenir seeks distance (the exotic in time and space), but it does so in order to transform and collapse distance into proximity to [...] the self" (xii). In addition to the exotic, in the case of Admiral Nelson the extraordinary and spectacular should be mentioned. Generally, heroic figures are brought into private spaces and retained in individual consciousness via objects. These objects, bound up in contexts and able to point to events and whole narratives on a small scale, do not merely reflect the state of contemporary politics, they have a part in it by their production and presence. Public interest in the Royal Navy increased over the course of the history of the British Empire and its wars, but it also was increased by the proliferation of mass-produced artefacts, making the image of warships, for example, an unobtrusive part of daily life, firmly binding an imprint of the Navy up into everyday life. In the case of Britain, as part of the building of an imperial nation it is inextricably linked to warfare. Within the conceptual field of naval heroes and war, the presence of small, mass-produced artefacts is particularly striking as a saucer or a sampler seem to be so far removed from the scenes of battle. Their existence brings information about the battle into the private sphere, and easily alludes to world politics on a small piece of material.

Narratives are considered vital to convey information, but indeed the ways in which diminutive artefacts can subtly allude to narratives, and call them up in an unobtrusive manner, often without verbalisation, needs to be emphasised. Günter Oesterle suggests that a souvenir holds a promise: a promise to retell, revive, re-stage a narrative which is actually only present in fragments (cf. Oesterle 20). Any distinction between the big and important events in history on the one hand, and the diminutive and unspectacular artefact is a tenuous one at best anyway. Hence, a tea set is part of the context of Admiral Nelson quite as much as the "HMS Victory". Hierarchies of information, or a highly differentiated view on events, may get lost in the process but the presentification (here used in Gumbrecht's sense of "presence effects") of past events may be all the more effective because of that. Swanson and Timothy have remarked that souvenirs are doubleedged in yet another way: scholarly descriptions and evaluations of them tend to be positive when they are reminders of events deemed historically important, and negative when the emphasis is laid on a souvenir as a sellable commodity (cf. footnote 23, 491). However, one aspect can hardly be thought without the other, as history is also remembered and re-imagined in the economies of commodities, not merely by memorials and dignified, large-scale commemorations. In the case of Nelson memorabilia, the souvenirs do not refer back to individual travel but are connected to participation: the memory of events which were deemed politically important, and potentially the experience of their reverberations. Here, these kinds of souvenirs help their owners to express "[...] a statement of membership, not in the event, but in the prestige generated by the event" (Stewart 137).8 Participation by proxy is possible via objects which can be integrated into one's daily life: acquiring and holding an object means becoming part of a specific part of history: events, places, even the deeds of a hero. "We do not need or desire souvenirs of events that are repeatable. Rather we need and desire souvenirs of events that are reportable, events whose materiality has escaped us, events that thereby exist only through the invention of narrative" (Stewart 135). Souvenirs of heroic exploits, it could be added, are not just commemorating the reportable, but also the remarkable, the extraordinary and enviable, in which people may want to take part by an act of consumption. The still-expanding British Empire, and its dominance of the seas which was firmly established at Trafalgar, possesses attraction and is mediated in manifold ways, by way of narratives to which many Britons would desire to subscribe and thus express national pride and allegiance. This becomes possible through souvenirs in the domestic sphere, a sphere which was thus linked to international politics and to the foreign sites of battle on which men like Admiral Nelson moved and contributed to decisions pertaining to the fate of the nation as a whole.

Moreover, it is important to note, as the case of Admiral Nelson shows, that the much-criticised commodification is no invention of the twentieth century. Material commodification of knowledge in the widest sense needs to be studied for a better understanding of the movement of political agendas and/or the general accessibility and dissemination of historical knowledge. Like the heroic figures they commemorate, the artefacts have a socio-cultural specificity. Processes of ascription and, potentially, emotional investment⁹ are by no means universal but need to be firmly located within cultural communities. Still, next to the monumental reminders of heroes' lives and deeds, there are small objects doing the same on a very different scale, in the metaphorical as well as literal sense. Small artefacts play as equally an important role as squares and columns do in memory culture. With everyday objects, the reverberations of great deeds seep into the everyday lives of people, and it is presumably objects in which the exceptional and the everyday can most easily be conflated. Tapping into the cultural imaginary may not be evoking detailed academic knowledge but ensures presence and provides owners and users of the objects with a sense of cultural participation, of taking part in narratives of a nation. With heroic figures as focal points in these processes, the study of souvenirs illuminates how the extraordinary is mediated through the material, through inconspicuous artefacts bringing theatres of war into the domestic sphere.

Images:

Saucer, Object ID AAA4966 Patch box, Object ID OBJ0042 Sampler, Object ID TXT0031

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⁸ Stewart's argument here is about a specific family souvenir but the sense of prestige, of a connection to a great man, is the

⁹ For the emotional impact of objects, see for example Downes 2018.

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