

CHAIRMAN'S DISPATCH: Farewell to Colin

The ever to be lamented death of Dr Colin White who died in the prime of his life and fullness of his career leaves me the duty to write this dispatch recognizing our loss but without lapsing into either melancholy or a formal obituary. The latter is more ably accomplished by professionals and in this issue we have used extracts from the best, together with pictures of Colin, to pay tribute to him.

However, this dispatch remains a daunting prospect. Where to begin?

At the time of his death, Colin, a Vice President and former Chairman of The 1805 Club, was writing about Nelson's state funeral, so let me start with his Requiem Eucharist on 12 January. Colin's coffin was draped with the union flag and his RNR officer's hat was placed on top, together with some flowers. He was so proud of the uniform which came with his recent and most singular distinction of Honorary Captain Royal Naval Reserve. The Royal Navy provided the pall bearers and the First Sea Lord ordered flags at Portsmouth Naval Base to be worn at half mast, the most poignant being HMS VICTORY's opposite Colin's office at the Royal Naval Museum.

His family paid many tributes, the centre-piece of which was his brother's to 'Captain Colin'. Fr Peter Wadsworth preached a superb sermon and concluded with the first and last sentences of Sir Isaac Heard's words at Nelson's funeral wishing that 'he is now raised to a bliss ineffable and a glorious immortality'.

Notwithstanding the large congregation of mourners, and the religious grandeur and simple elegance of the Cathedral Church of St Thomas of Canterbury – Colin's second home – this was truly a family funeral. It focused on the family's love and affection for him and on the man rather than his achievements – his generosity and caring nature; his integrity, approachability, sense of humour, love of Handel, Mozart and Haydn, love of life, and above all his infectious enthusiasm. It reminded us that there was a great deal more to Colin White than Nelson, museums and naval history.

I have to say that it was one of the 'finest' funerals I remember attending. It really felt Colin was there bidding his last farewell. His spiritual presence may have even been whispering, "I had their huzzas before. I have their hearts now!"

Like Nelson, who he championed in such an inimitable way, Colin's death has put a hole in the fabric, especially for those of us who are fascinated by naval history and the Nelson story. Also, like Nelson, he has died prematurely depriving the world of his undoubted talent.

I have perused the obituaries with close attention. They all recount the details of his career and his achievements, but it is hard for them to portray the enormous strength he derived from his family, close friends and colleagues; and no more so than during his final days when he was deluged with good wishes from every corner of the world and every aspect of his life. It was typical of Colin that, when he knew the end was near, he wrote to all those well wishers, reminding me that he was behaving just as Nelson did on the morning of 21st October 1805 - putting his affairs in order, attending to every little detail, caring for others.

He didn't make a great fuss of it, but we all knew that at the very heart of his being was an enviable religious faith. It was his rock and always his first priority.

Obituaries will also find it hard to capture something of his warmth, his energy, the twinkle in his eye, the wry smile and that sometimes slightly mischievous sense of humour inspired by his ability not to take life *too* seriously, but rather to enjoy it to the full.

Everyone will have their favourite anecdotes about Colin and as we each recall our own, I know how they will be cherished – such was the measure of the man. For myself, having been fortunate enough to enjoy his friendship for more than 15 years, and to 'work' closely with him for most of that time, I will happily say that he enabled me to fulfil my own destiny and in that respect had a greater influence on my life than most.

I remember our first meeting. I had introduced myself as a person interested in Nelson, who would love to have the opportunity of meeting him in the hope that we might share the passion. He readily agreed and we had an enjoyable and memorable ham sandwich lunch (with I recall too much mustard!), appropriately enough at the Emma Hamilton on the Hard at Portsmouth. We described how our interest in Nelson came about and found common denominators, such as the Ladybird Nelson and the great boys' comic Eagle. We were both sold on Nelson well before our respective ages entered double figures!

It was a simple beginning to a long and marvellous friendship that brought us closer and closer together as we pursued our dreams for the then distant Trafalgar bicentenary! I had already prepared a blueprint, which later became known as the Blue Book, and Colin was keen to see that it got a good hearing.

At one point we could have ended up as rivals, but Colin was sensitive and quick to defuse any such possibility and even quoted to me Nelson's reassuring words to Collingwood, 'let there be no petty jealousies between us', and there were not.

We fashioned a wonderful partnership based on trust and mutual respect and I was elected to serve as vice to his chairmanship of the Official Nelson Commemorations Committee. It was 'warm work' but great fun. We never looked



back and I soon lost count of the number of times we dined out at the Pizza Express in Mayfair to discuss the Trafalgar Festival, sometimes bizarrely to the sound of modern jazz!

Admired and respected internationally, by royalty, the Royal Navy, historians and enthusiasts of Nelson and naval history, Colin was the right man in the right place at the right time. His apogee was the Trafalgar bicentenary, which he steered with considerable aplomb. In the wake of his extensive research, which identified new sources (which he was happy to share with others – a rarity) and ‘revealed new insights’ (a favourite phrase), he launched a fleet of Nelson books culminating in the landmark *Nelson-The New Letters*, fired a broadside of spellbinding lectures and justly earned the description of being the admiral's "representative on earth".

While Colin's patience could be tested when things did not work out as he would like, he always had time for people whatever their walk of life and was equally at home with royalty as he was with a young student. He encouraged and mentored, and would also remember and later enquire after some small but important personal detail. Moreover, he gave credit where credit was due.

Colin displayed a boyish charm whenever some ‘new’ Nelson artefact was shown to him. More than occasionally he made his own discoveries and the most famous was Nelson's hurried sketch of his fleet dispositions for Trafalgar. Colin was carefully going through papers at the National Maritime Museum, when he caught sight of an apparently unremarkable scrap of paper on which Nelson had jotted reminder notes about patronage. Then Colin did what all good researchers should do; he turned it over, and there as if it were a Eureka moment, he recognized that what looked like a scribble was in fact Nelson's strategy. I always loved the way in his lectures he would enthuse about the urgency of Nelson's hand and how the ink flowed freely from his pen where he cut the enemy line.

For me the essence of all that was good about Colin arose from his understanding of human nature, his generosity of spirit, warmth and charm, and his ability to make everyone know they mattered. He inspired a sort of loyalty and affection that made us believe in him – and that *was* the White Touch.

It helped that he was a marvellous communicator with a vivid historical imagination and a fantastic theatrical ability to bring history to life. We remember how he would often say, ‘Ladies and gentlemen, imagine that you are sitting with Nelson in the Great Cabin of Victory on the eve of Trafalgar...’ and then transport us there. At the Club Trafalgar Dinner at Newhouse in 2003 he had the guests in tears as he took us back, with the lights dimmed and candles burning, to St Paul's Cathedral and Nelson's funeral on that wintry afternoon of 9 January 1806.

The 1805 Club owes Colin an immense debt of gratitude for his vision and leadership and for his utter dedication to our cause. We treasured his support, enthusiasm and loyalty and we were always thrilled when he took part in our activities, which he did frequently. The most visible and lasting legacy of his work for the Club is The Trafalgar Captains' Memorial, which found and surveyed the graves and memorials of the British commanding officers at Trafalgar, conserved those at risk, and published their stories in the highly successful *The Trafalgar Captains: Their Monuments and Memorials*.

As I cast my eye over Colin's life, personality and achievements I realise how humble are my own words compared to those of others in similar situations and would therefore like to reinforce mine with a quotation from Robert Louis Stevenson:

‘The man is a success who has lived well, and laughed often, and loved much; who has gained the respect of intelligent men and the love of children; who has filled his niche and accomplished his task; who has left the world better than he found it, who has never lacked appreciation of earth's beauty, or failed to express it; who has always looked for the best in others and gave the best he had, whose life was an inspiration, whose memory is benediction.’

Our present sadness will be assuaged by the brightness of his legacy, leaving us with the cherished memories of a remarkable man. For certain we shall not see his like again.

With all good wishes,

Peter

Peter Warwick
Hon Chairman

Left: Peter Warwick and Dr Kevin Fewster, Director of the NMM with Colin outside Newhouse, 2008.

