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Features

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Trafalgar then & now

by [Andrew Roberts](#)

Britain Today: Part VIII

How the English-speaking world is-”and isn’t-”celebrating Admiral Nelson’s famous victory.

The many celebrations of the bicentenary of Admiral Lord Nelson’s death at the battle of Trafalgar on October 21, 1805 tell us much about how Britons view themselves in the early twenty-first century. No one has waited until the autumn itself for the festivities to start; they are already in full swing. Yet there is also a tangible sense of atavism, yearning, and perhaps even sorrow about the anniversary, for the way it italicizes the contrast between Britain’s former naval greatness and national heroism and her present unprecedented maritime weakness.

Nothing highlighted this so forcibly as the International Naval Review on June 28, when the Queen reviewed 167 ships anchored off Portsmouth. When her grandfather, King George v, reviewed the fleet there for his Silver Jubilee in 1935, there were 160 warships present, every single one of them from the Royal Navy. This June, ships from thirty-five fore ...

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