
Opening Extract from...

Glory and B*llocks

The Truth Behind Ten Defining Events in British History

Written by Colin Brown

Published by Oneworld

GLORY AND B*LLOCKS

The Truth behind Ten Defining Events in British History

COLIN BROWN

ONEWORLD

A Oneworld Book

Published by Oneworld Publications 2013

This book was first published as *Real Britannia* in 2012

A CIP record for this title is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-85168-992-7
Ebook ISBN 978-1-78074-443-8

Illustration credits on p. 315
Designed and typeset by Tetragon, London
Cover design by Stuart Polson
Printed and bound by CPI Mackays Ltd, Croydon, UK

Oneworld Publications
10 Bloomsbury Street,
London WC1B 3SR, England

CONTENTS

Introduction	*Ten years*	ix
One	1215 · *Magna Carta*	3
Two	1415 · *Azincourt*	33
Three	1588 · *Armada*	55
Four	1688 · *Glorious Revolution*	89
Five	1815 · *Waterloo*	115
Six	1833 · *Abolition*	145
Seven	1928 · *Suffrage*	169
Eight	1940 · *The Bunker*	199
Nine	1948 · *The Birth of the NHS*	231
Ten	1982 · *Falklands*	261
Postscript	*We are all Elizabethans now*	293
Appendix	*The Poll*	301
Notes		305
Acknowledgements		313
Illustration credits		315
Index		317

To my sister, Lilian (1931–2009),
who made all things possible

INTRODUCTION

Ten years

The idea for this book started with a blunder by David Cameron. In the midst of the events to mark the seventieth anniversary of the Battle of Britain, the Prime Minister said Britain was a 'junior partner' to the United States in 1940. In fact, Britain was alone when it faced the might of Hitler's Third Reich in 1940. It was not until the attack on Pearl Harbor by Japanese forces, on 7 December 1941, that America entered the Second World War.

When Cameron attempted to repair the damage, he stumbled into another controversy. Interviewed on the BBC Radio 4 *Today* programme, Cameron said: 'Nineteen-forty, to me, is the proudest year of British history bar none. We stood on our own against the Nazi tyranny. Let me absolutely put that on the record. It is the proudest year in all of British history.'[1]

Many would have agreed with him. Churchill himself, when asked by Dorothy, the wife of Lord Moran, his physician, which year of his life he would have chosen to relive, did not hesitate. He replied: 'Nineteen-forty every time, every time…'[2]

It therefore came as a surprise to me that Cameron's seemingly unexceptional remarks provoked an even greater controversy. Suddenly the nation was engaged in a debate: what was Britain's proudest year? Everyone seemed to have a different answer. A YouGov poll in 2010 showed the question sharply divided the nation, between men and women, Conservative and Labour voters. Women tended to opt for years of social or democratic advance – 1833, and the Abolition of Slavery; 1928, when the Suffragettes finally secured votes for women on the same terms as men; and 1948, the year when the National Health Service was born. Men opted for years of military victories: 1415, and the Battle of Azincourt; 1588, with the defeat of the Spanish Armada; 1815, when Wellington met Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo; and 1982, the victory over Argentina in the Falklands War. The popular favourite in the poll, with the support of twenty-nine per cent of the public was, indeed, 1940. It was the runaway winner among Conservatives (39%), men (38%) and middle-class electors (32%).

This led to a heated debate on BBC *Newsnight* between two historians, Antony Beevor and Kate Williams. Beevor supported Cameron. 'The reason for 1940 is not just a question of national survival,' he said. 'It was a moment of great moral and physical courage which had a tremendous effect on the whole of the course of the Second World War. If Churchill had agreed to negotiation as Halifax and one or two others wanted, Hitler would have achieved all of his objectives. That chance of fighting back, with America coming into the war, would have been lost.' Williams disagreed strongly. 'My top choice would be the abolition of slavery because in the Second World War, we were against the aggressor, we were fighting back. With the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and the abolition of slavery in 1833, we were leading the world. The Government was doing something that didn't help Britain – Britain made so much money from the slave trade but by responding to the popular swell, people who believed in the rights of their fellow men, we led the world. I really think that was their proudest moment.'[3]

Members of the public pitched in. Some suggested 1966 – the last time England won the World Cup. Another popular choice was 1953, the year when the Union Jack was raised for the first time on Everest by Edmund Hillary, a New Zealander, and Sherpa Tenzing almost on the same day that the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II took place. But 1953 was also the year in which the England football team were humbled by Ferenc Puskas and Hungary, 6–3, at the 'Empire Wembley Stadium', as it was proudly known then.

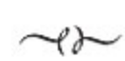
Like David Cameron, I had a sketchy understanding about some of the great landmark years in our history, and I therefore decided to find out more about them. I approached the question as I would any political investigation at Westminster or Downing Street, going back to the original sources where I could, challenging the accepted truths, trying to sift fact from fiction, myth from reality. The results were surprising.

I discovered that, contrary to popular belief, the longbow was not responsible for the English (and Welsh) victory at Azincourt; that Queen Elizabeth I's great Armada speech at Tilbury was probably an enormous exercise in spin; and that some who campaigned alongside Wilberforce for the abolition of the slave trade saw him as a hindrance rather than a hero of change. As I reflect in the Postscript, I was also reminded strongly how important that strip of sea between Dover and Calais really is. I was also surprised to find that, despite that natural

fortress, we have been successfully invaded at least twice since 1066 – in 1216 as well as in 1688.

My investigations took me to some unexpected places, including climbing out of a window to stand as close as I could to Churchill's secret balcony high up on the White Cliffs of Dover; a Thames-side fort dwarfed by a container port and a power station (an overlooked gem I would recommend anyone to visit); and the picturesque tourist port of Brixham, in Devon, where the Loyal Orange Lodges march every year around the harbour to mark Britain's forgotten Dutch invasion (though it must make the tourists wonder whether they have landed in Belfast). It also took me to unspoiled Azincourt, in Northern France, on St Crispin's Day – and to a charming museum dedicated to French humiliation; as well as to the wealthy Brussels commuter town of Waterloo, where I found a dilapidated farm that was once witness to heroism. If this account encourages more to cover similar ground, it will be worth it.

I also experienced a 'hairs-on-the-back-of-the-neck' moment when I felt I was touching history, such as the time at the Women's Library in London's East End when I held the return ticket to Epsom bought by suffragette Emily Davison before she fell under the King's horse at the 1913 Derby; reading a scrap of paper in the British Library that contained (I am convinced) a scribbled note of Queen Elizabeth I's famous Armada speech; and seeing the north gate at Hougoumont, where the 'bravest of the brave' turned the battle. I met many wonderful people (I apologize in advance if I have omitted many from the Acknowledgements) who help to keep our history alive in museums around the country, including at Brixham and Wilberforce's house in Hull.



But there were also times when I was dismayed by the way that we try to teach our island story today. None more so than the day I went to the National Maritime Museum (NMM) in Greenwich to find out how Elizabeth's piratical captains such as Drake defeated the Dons of the Spanish Armada. I was met at the shiny new entrance (with wave effects) by a notice telling visitors: 'The collection of two million objects have been arranged into groups to represent six different emotions – anticipation, love, sadness, pride, aggression and joy'.

History as six emotions? I found funeral mugs for Admiral Lord Nelson are arranged under 'sadness'. Other items of Nelsonia are displayed

under 'love' because they came from the house in Merton, south London, that he shared with his mistress, Emma Hamilton. This seems to me to be treating history as soap opera.

The main gallery at the NMM is dedicated to the Atlantic: slavery, trade, empire. Visitors are told: 'This gallery is about the movement of people, goods and ideas across and around the Atlantic Ocean from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth century. The connections created by these movements changed the lives of people on three continents, profoundly affecting their cultures and societies and shaping the world we live in today.' Yes, I thought, but what about the 'movement of people' up the English Channel in August 1588?

There was a brilliant exhibition at the NMM in 1988 to coincide with the fourth centenary of the defeat of the Spanish Armada, and the research department is excellent. But I drew a blank expression when I asked an attendant: 'Where is the Armada gallery?' That is because there isn't one. There is no coherent display to show how England defeated the Spanish Armada. Nor could I find much about Nelson's campaigns at sea, which literally allowed Britannia to rule the waves in the nineteenth century, but then they were mostly around the Mediterranean. It could be argued that one glaring omission in this book is 1805, the year of Trafalgar, which finally ended the threat of an invasion of England by Napoleon. It seemed to me (and obviously, the pollsters) that 1815 was the more decisive year, for it ended the Napoleonic wars, and largely set the scene for modern Europe.

I asked the NMM whether they were under the spell of *pc world*, the world of political correctness. I was sent the museum's mission statement, patiently explaining that maritime history now is presented in its 'social, political and cultural contexts'. 'This process,' continued the NMM, 'has brought a renewed intellectual energy and excitement to maritime history, which the Museum has both welcomed and actively supported.' I felt like screaming: yes, but what about the battles?

The museum is currently in the middle of a major renewal of all its maritime galleries. By 2020, there will be six permanent galleries covering the Royal Navy (two galleries); maritime trade; exploration; migration; and one combining London, Greenwich and the Thames, which will span the period from Tudor London to today. At the time of writing, Nelson and his precious uniform holed by the bullet that killed him is consigned to a corner of its Maritime London gallery, presumably on the grounds that he lived at Merton and visited the Admiralty in Whitehall or perhaps because his tomb is at St Paul's.

When I first came to London over thirty years ago, there was an entire gallery devoted to Nelson and his battles (although a neon screen raised the question: 'Nelson – a hero?'). There were also mock gun ports where kids could play at firing broadsides. Not any more. There is a great deal of space at the NMM devoted to teaching visitors about climate change and its effects on the oceans of the world, and the Atlantic gallery focuses on the 'social, political and cultural context' of mass migration brought about by trade. This is all very laudable but it seems to me we are in danger of treating Britain's military victories against the Dutch, the Spanish and the French like a punch-up on a drunken night out which we would prefer to forget. There is little to show how a fighting Man o' War was operated. For that, you may be better off reading the Aubrey-Maturin sagas by Patrick O'Brian or travelling to the NMM collection in Portsmouth to see Nelson's flagship, the *Victory*.

Nigel Rigby, head of research, assured me that this will be put right: 'Two new naval galleries, *Navy, Nation, Nelson*, will indeed open in June 2013, and you will not be surprised to hear from the title that Nelson's Trafalgar uniform jacket will be among the superb collection of objects that have been selected for display,' he reported. 'The gallery runs from the Glorious Revolution to the end of the Napoleonic wars and is structured around two interwoven stories: the first concerns the perils, customs and skills that made the Royal Navy, in many ways, a world apart; the second relates to the dazzling richness that nonetheless marked the relationship of navy and nation.' Whether that includes the great sea engagements, we will have to wait and see.

As I researched the Battle of Waterloo, there were reports that the bicentenary celebrations in 2015 are being kept relatively low-key in London to avoid upsetting the French. It would not be the first time diplomacy has intervened in a national anniversary. Even when that modern-day Boadicea, Margaret Thatcher, was in power, the tercentenary celebrations for the overthrow of the Catholic King James II were played down because the Government was seeking to avoid exacerbating the Troubles. It turned out its fears were well founded. An IRA hit team was rumbled as it scouted out an assassination attempt on an innocent businessman whose only crime was to chair the committee for the celebrations. But that is exceptional.

Research into Britain's 'proudest' year inevitably raised the question: what is Britishness?

Gordon Brown, the former Labour Prime Minister, struggled with the issue when he was in power. He even introduced a US-style citizenship test, though we have not embraced pride in our nationhood like the Americans, and probably never will. More recently, the outspoken historian David Starkey expressed exasperation with our reluctance to celebrate our national heritage for fear of upsetting others. 'A nation cannot exist without a common core of values,' he said on BBC *Question Time* in March 2012. 'We are trying this extraordinary experiment of being a nation without nationalism.'

Churchill, a member of a great political and military dynasty and the author of several great histories, understood the power of our past. When he delivered his famous speech to the House of Commons on 18 June 1940, he would have been acutely conscious that he was speaking on 'Waterloo Day', the anniversary of Wellington's great victory over Napoleon in 1815. 'If we fail, then the whole world, including the United States, including all that we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new dark age made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science. Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves, that if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, this was their finest hour,' he said.

Our natural diffidence can lead us to play down our role in world history. I was reminded of this when talking to a Norwegian while I was researching this book. He told me: 'The history of Britain is the history of the world. Had it not been for the British I would be speaking German today.'

Taking pride in our past is not jingoistic. This book examines our role in the slave trade, as well as our part in ending it. It also questions whether it is right, in the twenty-first century, still to have legislation on the statute book that discriminates against Catholics. As a nation, we are changing. We should not romanticize our past, but nor should we forget it. This is an attempt to show us as we really are.

Colin Brown

Glory and B*llocks

ONE

1215

'All the things which the king
valued too highly in the world'

Langham Pond, Runnymede:
How King John and the barons may have seen the old Thames.

King John was ill. He was riding at the head of his small mobile force of armed horsemen with his guts in torment and his bowels turning to water. Behind him, his baggage train struggled to keep up, but John needed to get to his first stop on his route, Swineshead Abbey. And to do that, he had to cross to the north bank of the Wash, the great bite out of the Norfolk coast where the sea rushes in across the marshes at high tide.

The route was difficult at the best of times, as the King picked his way across the mudflats where the dunlin pecked at molluscs in the sucking mud, and oystercatchers gave their shrill, wild cries. But this was the worst of times for King John. It was October, the weather was turning foul and he was in a hurry.

He was engaged in a debilitating civil war with his barons, and was in hostile country. He had ridden from a loyalist stronghold at Newark down to Lynn, where he had ordered supplies from the Continent to keep up the war, but he had contracted a terrible bout of dysentery while he had been there, probably from something he had eaten. Now it was consuming him.

Dysentery – known then by its painfully explicit medieval name of the 'bloody flux' – was all too common in Europe in the thirteenth century. John's eldest brother Henry (who would have inherited the Crown before his older brother Richard I) died of the disease in 1183 after campaigning against Richard in a family feud in France. Today, in developed countries, dysentery is generally a mild illness and not fatal. The symptoms normally begin to arise within three days, disappearing after a week, but amoebic strains of the disease, once in the bloodstream, can attack the liver, triggering fever, delirium and death. The only treatment before the development of antibiotics was to stop dehydration by drinking water mixed with alcohol (to kill the bugs in the water). King John desperately needed rest, and medical help.

Barring his way was the Wellstream, the tidal river that covered the mudflats at high tide. He could have gone by a longer route, down to Wisbech and a crossing where the river narrowed, and sent his baggage train on the more direct route across the Wash. This is the theory that was firmly held by academics until the mid-1960s, when it was challenged persuasively by the medieval historian Sir James Clarke Holt. Professor Holt argued that in the hostile Fenlands of East Anglia John was highly unlikely to have separated from his baggage train and its precious cargo. 'The King, especially, was unlikely to let such of his regalia, money and precious movables as he had with him, far from his sight'.[1]

I found evidence to support Holt's theory in a nineteenth-century Ordnance Survey map. It shows that a route across the Wash was still in use as a tidal highway as late as 1824. The date is significant – this was just a few years before the land here was finally drained, and the waters were then held back behind protective banks. With the draining, all signs of the medieval tracks across the Wellstream were wiped out. The track on the OS map is clearly marked across the salt marshes, a dotted line stretching from Cross Keys (still the name of a local village) to the Sutton bank, where a modern bridge on the A17 crosses the River Welland. The label reads 'Wash Way', the name that John would have known for the medieval route across the mudflats.

ORDNANCE SURVEY MAP, 1824:
The old path across the Wash, before the land was drained.

He had been told that low tide was at around 11.15 a.m., and he should have waited for a guide. But John was notoriously impatient and, given the fact that he was suffering from dysentery, it is fair to assume he could not wait. The way was probably staked out with poles or branches, but the sea began to run in rivulets across the mud, covering the quicksand.

What happened next has caused controversy for eight centuries, largely because we have to depend on the accounts of monks – the only chroniclers of the time – who had a vested interest in depicting King John, still seen by many clerics in England as an enemy of the Church, being crushed by the forces of God. The monks report that, as King John and his bodyguards kicked their horses on across the salt marsh, the wheels of the baggage train, following behind them, became stuck in quicksand. There were frantic efforts to rescue the laden carts, but they were sinking fast, and nothing could stop them from going down. All that was left was for the horses and men to struggle to break themselves free, so that they would not be swallowed up by the sucking sands.

Ralph, a monk at Coggeshall Abbey, in Essex, wrote that the King lost 'his Chapel with his relics and some of his pack-horses with divers household goods at the Wellstream and many of his familia [household] were drowned in the waters of the sea and sucked into the quicksand there, because they had set out incautiously and hastily before the tide had receded'. Ralph may have seen the religious relics as being of greater value than more earthly riches. Roger of Wendover, from St Albans Abbey,

wrote that King John had lost his 'treasures and precious vessels and all the other things which he cherished with special care; for the ground was opened in the midst of the waves, and bottomless whirlpools engulfed everything, together with men and horses so that not a single foot soldier got away to bear tidings of the disaster to the king'.

Roger today would be a tabloid journalist. Yet, he was not exaggerating the deadly speed with which the sea can come in. The mudflats remain dangerous, even with modern technology to guide us, as was seen in 2004 when thirty cockle-pickers, mostly immigrants from China, were caught by a rising tide in Morecambe Bay, on the Lancashire and Cumbrian coast, and eighteen were drowned.

A generation after King John lost his treasure, the tale was embroidered by yet another chronicler, the monk Matthew Paris, who recorded that the quicksand swallowed up 'the packhorses bearing his booty and loot, and all his treasure and household effects. For the ground opened in the midst of the waves and the sand which is called quick sucked in everything – horses and men, weapons, tents, victuals and all the things which the King valued too highly in the world – apart from his life.'

Whatever the extent of John's losses, it is almost certain they included his grandmother Matilda's regalia – the great crown, the gold wand with a dove and the sword of Tristram – which she had worn as Empress of Germany. He is known to have been in possession of her Crown Jewels, and they were never heard of again. His own Crown Jewels may have gone down into the sands of the Wash as well. John was a collector of jewellery, and his treasures were minutely recorded by his clerks in 'patent rolls' of parchment which survive. They list gold and silver goblets, flagons, basins, candelabra, phylacteries – amulets or charms – pendants and jewel-encrusted belts. His regalia, precious silver plate and jewelled cups were missing from the inventories when his son was crowned as his successor a few months later. Whatever their value, the scribes were clear that the impact of the loss on John was fatal. Ralph, the Coggeshall monk, recorded that it had hastened John's death. Shakespeare underlines the political impact in his telling of the life of King John:

> I'll tell thee, Hubert, half my power this night
> Passing these flats, are taken by the tide,
> These Lincoln washes have devoured them