Remarks by José Gregorio Cayuela Fernández, historian, in the Painted Hall, 5 November 2005.

Today Great Britain, France and Spain have more in common than the differences that separated them in the past. As allies and friends, the three nations form part of the European Union, NATO and a multitude of other cultural bodies and institutions, which serves to bring us closer to mutual understanding rather than to highlight our differences.

Democracy now prevails in these three countries, providing a clear path to the solution of any points of disagreement that may still exist between London, Paris and Madrid. This circumstance is a fact generally accepted by the British, French and Spanish people. Logic and the desire to live are now much more powerful than the brutality of war in victory and defeat.

The Battle of Trafalgar should serve to stop us from repeating our mistakes arising from personal and irrational ambitions. We must, furthermore, learn to overcome the past in order to save innocent lives in the present and to commemorate without causing offence.

Moreover, the Spanish and British people have recently experienced, once again, the pain of grief. The terrorist attacks of 2004 in Madrid and 2005 in London, claiming so many innocent lives, have brought our nations together in solidarity and affection and through their common democratic values and prayers. Grief for the loss of human life is yet another form of defeat that we have attempted to overcome with firmness, conviction in our beliefs and peace.

On 21st October 1805, following the terrible battle that took place off the Cape of Trafalgar, the Spanish population of Cadiz went to recover, regardless of their nationality, the living and the dead washed up on the beaches. Then, too, the local population was quick to understand the common cause of grief.

Many of those unfortunate souls, the actual combatants in the battle, were children of between 11 and 12 years old employed as cadets and ship’s boys in the three fleets. Today’s remarks are dedicated to them: the English, French and Spanish boys who lost their lives and their childhood between the canons of the ships Victory, Bucentaure and Santísima Trinidad. Thus it is my humble way of commemorating that battle, from a personal and an historical point of view.

To understand, fully, and professionally, the events that took place then, I am taking the story as an ordinary lesson, where the protagonist is neither power nor national mythology, but the human being. And I wish to do it today with my British friends, those who have helped us to
understand the complexities of present day society, those who in Great Britain and Spain share with us the sunlight of my country along the coast where once the terrible reality of the Battle of Trafalgar took place.

But what did Trafalgar represent at that time? How did it come about? Why did it happen? The Battle of Trafalgar changed the history of the Atlantic and therefore the history of the world. It is the time of the Third Coalition, a period of unrest between the 18th and 19th centuries. Its development and consequently the destiny of its men are basically the result of political decisions of the Emperor Napoleon I. Following the breakdown of the Peace of Amiens, in 1803, the governments of London and Paris once again went to war as a means of imposing their hegemony in Europe and on the seas. At that time the Spanish Crown was bound to France by the Second Treaty of San Ildefonso of 1800 and by the "Treaty of Subsidies" of 1803. However, Spain had not gone to war against England. It was at that time a neutral country with an urgent need for peace after several years of conflict.

However, both the British government of the time and Napoleon himself in France had an interest in the Spanish Monarchy entering the war. For Great Britain, it meant an end to the economic aid which Madrid gave Paris. As William Pitt said: "you can fire at ships but not at money". As far as Napoleon was concerned the entry of Spain into the war suited his extensive plans. His objective was to invade the British Isles. By combining the French Fleet with the Spanish Fleet he would be powerful enough to combat the British at sea and push them back from the English Channel. He would then be able to disembark his powerful Grande Armée and march on London. Thus, the Battle of Trafalgar would never have come about without the participation of the ships of King Carlos IV of Spain. Napoleon would never have attacked England with his fleet alone. He needed what was at the time the third naval power in the world, with the largest ship that had ever been built, the Santisíma Trinidad, in order to defeat the Royal Navy.

Following several attacks by the British fleet on Spanish ships in the Atlantic, a serious incident in October 1804 involving several frigates en route from America in which numerous men, women and children lost their lives, led to the Spanish Declaration of War against Great Britain on 14th December of the same year. It was a conflict seeking strategic power in the Atlantic and not a just war, if such exists.

At that time Spain was governed by a weak monarch and a prime minister, Manuel Godoy, who was astute and hardworking but overly egoistic when State interests were concerned. In his alliance with Napoleon he clearly put his own personal business interests before the interests of the Spanish people. The situation was far from being a democratic process. However, Godoy counted on the support of a group of well-known elite naval officers, admired and respected by their French and British counterparts. Among them were the geographer,
Admiral Federico Gravina, the naval engineer, Commander Cosme Churrucu, and the cartographer, Commander Dionisio Alcalá Galiano, all three of whom perished at Trafalgar. In a war charged with ambitions and rivalry, Manuel Godoy manipulated these gallant men for his own ends and destroyed both them and the Spanish fleet. Between 1804 and 1805 Napoleon had assembled almost two hundred thousand men near Boulogne ready to disembark in England. His highly-leared army corps similar to the ancient Roman legions but with greater operational capacity, trained everyday for the assault on the British coast. However, his huge “Terrestrial Plan” was supported by a weak “Maritime Plan”. His aim, to pursue relentlessly the Royal Navy and drive it out of the English Channel, was no easy task, least of all with the famous Admiral Nelson in command of the fleet.

In theory the Maritime Plan was a simple one: the French and Spanish fleets would meet in Cadiz, draw the attention of Nelson, cross the Atlantic to the Caribbean, leave Nelson and the Royal Navy there and head under full sail towards Europe and go into the English Channel. However, the sea is not the land and it has its own dynamic and strategic rules. After all, Napoleon was no sailor, but an artilleryman.

On 30th March 1805, Admiral Pierre Charles de Villeneuve, Commander-in-Chief of the operation, weighs anchor in the port of Toulon. On 9th April, he joins with Admiral Federico Gravina, second-in-command of the expedition, in the port of Cadiz. Both squadrons then set sail for the Caribbean. Admiral Nelson also begins his pursuit across the Atlantic. At the end of March the combined Franco-Spanish fleet arrives in Martinique. Some days later, they discover that Nelson has arrived in Barbados with the Royal Navy. Without arousing suspicion, Admirals Villeneuve and Gravina then set course for Europe following the Napoleon Plan. But the return crossing of the Atlantic turns out to be very difficult: shortage of food and water, with overcrowded ships diseases such as scurvey begin to spread among the sailors. Then, on 22nd July, they come upon Admiral Calder's fleet at Cape Finisterre. After an inconclusive battle which ends with Calder withdrawing, but with the capture in the mist of two Spanish ships, Villeneuve and Gravina decide to anchor in the Galician ports of Northern Spain. It is necessary to repair the ships. In the port of El Ferrol, the Franco-Spanish fleet is reinforced with more ships, but not all of them are in good repair.

On 13th August, the squadron of Villeneuve and Gravina weigh anchor in the Ria de Ares with the intention of setting course for the English channel. But between the 14th and 15th, they see a large number of sails on the horizon, which makes Villeneuve think that a great concentration of English ships is waiting for them a few miles away.
Without checking their colours and with his ships in a bad state, the French admiral then decides to turn for Cadiz to obtain more reinforcements, among them the Santa Ana and the huge Santissima Trinidad. He had made a big mistake. The ships that were on the horizon were mainly French and were the reinforcements that Napoleon was sending from the port of Rochefort. The Franco-Spanish fleet arrived in Cadiz on 20th August, after attacking an English convoy off the Portugese coast.

When Napoleon, at his headquarters at Boulogne, found out about this mistake, he was furious with Villeneuve, starting the legend of the "useless admiral" and sending to Cadiz letters full of insults and severe criticisms. Then the Emperor of France changed his strategy. He was a master of the "Alternative Plan". Now it would not be possible to invade Great Britain, so he chose to attack London's allies in the east, the armies of Russia and Austria, who were threatening the eastern frontiers of France. According to his words: "If London did not fall, Vienna would". the units of the army corps left Boulogne on 25th August, destined for central Europe. With this change of plans, the Franco-Spanish fleet remained idle in the port of Cadiz as the war took another direction. Already, for Napoleon, the Franco-Spanish navy was of secondary importance, but not for the British government, who very quickly realised the opportunity being offered by events, to finally put an end to the menace of an attack on British shores. Since the beginning of September the Royal Navy had been blockading Cadiz and, at the end of the month, Admiral Nelson himself arrived as commander of the squadron. The intention was to force the combined fleet to leave port for a final "battle of annihilation".

Since 14th September, the combined fleet had new orders from Napoleon: it was to sail to form part of the support units in the Mediterranean for the great advance of the Grande Armée on eastern Europe. The presence of the Royal Navy was of no importance. The Emperor Napoleon was committing another grave strategic error. On 8th October, the French and Spanish commanders met on board the Bucentaure to work out a solution. Admiral Gravina, a good strategist, persuaded the French officers of the advantage of remaining in Cadiz and causing the British to mount a costly winter blockade.

But Napoleon resumes the pressure: he secretly decides to replace Admiral Villeneuve with Admiral Rosily. As a result of a "leak", Admiral Villeneuve becomes aware of his dismissal on 17th October and, before Rosily arrives, decides to make the whole combined fleet leave port. He prefers to face up to Nelson rather than Napoleon, because he knows the cruel nature of his master. In Madrid, Manuel Godoy, subordinating his own interests to those of the Emperor of France, does not oppose the manoeuvre and leaves Admiral Federico Gravina alone. The head of the government, Godoy, thus betrays his sailors and the
Spanish people. He does not even initiate peace talks with Great Britain. Admiral Gravina, as a military man, although absolutely against the fleet leaving port, obeys the orders of his superior Villeneuve: "A Spanish admiral does not mutiny against his ally".

On 19th October the combined fleet sails from Cadiz, with the majority of ships in poor repair and with crews recruited at the last moment without any experience of battle. On 20th October, they form into "line of battle" near Cape Trafalgar facing the British fleet. It is a classic defensive formation. But Nelson has a much superior plan of attack as a result of his capacity as a leader. In his Memorandum, explained to the officers of the Royal Navy on 10th October aboard HMS Victory, he has the intention of attacking the enemy in two columns at right angles to their battle line, cutting the Franco-Spanish battle line, in order to begin the battle with the rearguard and then, after the slow tacking of the rest of the rival ships, against the vanguard of the combined fleet. But, besides that plan, Nelson himself, with strategic logic, had to cope with the grave mistakes that had been made by the British Admiralty of Lord Barham in London. Nelson would have few senior officers for confronting the huge combined fleet. The Admiralty had left him with only Vice-Admiral Collingwood and Rear-Admiral Northesk. Calder, Bickerton, Strachan and Keith were not there. On the other hand, Nelson had 27 ships of the line and the combined fleet had 33. Therefore, Nelson took a risk that in other circumstances would have been unnecessary: he placed himself at the head of the battle line in the heaviest ship with the largest number of cannons, HMS Victory.

This was the importance of Nelson and his plan. The Royal Navy was a good fleet, but after many days of blockading at sea, its ships also had serious problems. That is to say that the victory was due to the brilliant plan of Admiral Horatio Nelson, rather than to the power of the British fleet or the Admiralty in London. The strategy was even more important than fire-power. Before the chaos of the battle, Nelson knew that his plan would work even though he himself might be wounded.

The battle began at eight minutes past twelve when the line of Vice-Admiral Collingwood opened fire on the Spanish ship Santa Ana (112 cannons) in the rearguard. Nelson's line entered the battle at twenty minutes past twelve, in the centre against the French ship Bucentaure and the Spanish ship Santissima Trinidad. The battle was very fierce, but Nelson's plan worked to perfection. Nevertheless, as the English admiral stood on the deck, he was mortally wounded at half past one in the afternoon by a French sharpshooter on the Redoutable.

One by one the ships of the combined Franco-Spanish fleet were destroyed. Between half past two and half past four in the afternoon,
the ships Algeciras, Bucentaure, Santissima Trinidad, Bahama and San Juan Nepomuceno, amongst others, surrendered. Many of their captains had already died before the surrender of their vessels. Captains Churruca, Alcalá Galiano, Magon, Infernet or Alcedo. At half past four, Admiral Nelson died aboard HMS Victory and the British captains George Duff, John Cooke and James Morris also fell. The smell of death and burnt flesh was everywhere. About half past five in the afternoon, the French ship Achille exploded, which brought the battle to an end. The flagship of Admiral Federico Gravina, the Príncipe de Asturias, after fighting against five English ships, managed to disengage from them, regrouped with the rest of the fleet and returned to Cadiz. Gravina himself was mortally wounded aboard his ship. Only eleven of the thirty-three ships of the combined fleet returned to port. The English ships, although mostly badly damaged, were still seaworthy. The Royal Navy was victorious, but at a terrible cost in men and ships of the three navies.

But the worst was still to come: from 22nd October to 2nd November a terrible storm raged with waves more than five metres high, the effects of which were worse than those of the battle. From then on, the "human factor" began to overcome the "ferocity of men". The British captains lost most of the captured ships, which sometimes sank with the prisoners in them. As we have said, the people of Cadiz began to rescue the shipwrecked, even welcoming them into their homes. This action resulted in Vice Admiral Collingwood speeding up the hand-over of prisoners to the Spanish authorities and vice-versa, behaving very correctly. In fact, in none of the documents studied, did British officers ill-treat the prisoners and, similarly, the ship-wrecked British sailors in Spanish hands experienced the best possible conditions.

This situation did credit to both sides, over and above the terrible events that they had lived through in battle, only hours before. The officers of the three navies showed no hatred and were as magnanimous in victory as they were in defeat.

Here, today, we overcome previous events because we know them and take them for granted. Here, today, we assure the present, as it will be the future of our children.

To John, René, José, Richard, Maurice, Paco, William, Jean, Gabriel... and all those other children who lost the best part of their lives at Trafalgar as cadets and cabin-boys.

To the British, French and Spanish peoples, because we have learnt from the past.

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