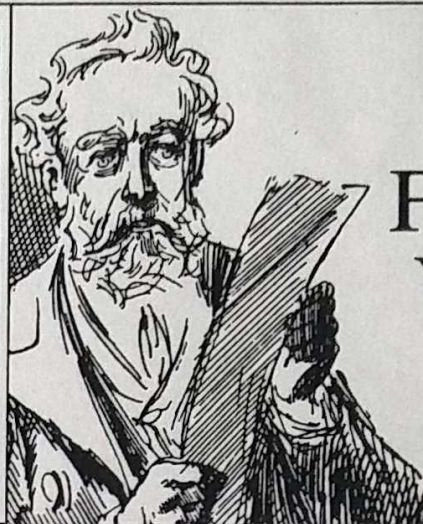


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VERNE'S FANTASTIC VOYAGES

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PERSPECTIVE/BOOKS 17

JOURNEY TO THE CENTRE OF INSPIRATION

BY WILLIAM BUTCHER

THE MASK OF THE PROPHET: THE
EXTRAORDINARY FICCTIONS OF JULES
VERNE

BY ANDREW MARTIN
Clarendon Press, Oxford
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VOYAGE À RECOLONS EN ANGLETERRE
ET EN ECOSSE
BY JULES VERNE
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Why does Verne remain such a pariah in Britain? The best-selling writer of all time, the most translated, the only Frenchman to have attained truly universal renown he still often goes unidentified on these shores without a "Jules" attached. Authentic, mainstream literary works in France are transformed, over a bare 22 miles, into Disney fantasy. The texts have been studied in 30 or so learned books, in the *agrégation* and in a good score of doctorates, including four at the *École Normale Supérieure*, probably the highest academic institution in Europe. In this right little, tight little island, they have encountered silence, condescension or hostility, not just from publishers but also from university departments of French.

It would require a Pierre Bourdieu or a Régis Debray to understand how a reputation can resist reality for 20 years. But given that the same phenomenon exists in the United States, a possible line of enquiry might involve the English versions of the *Voyages extraordinaires*. What is passed off as faithful translation often turns out to be brutal truncation and incomprehensible, full of phrases like "with a lentil [*lentille*], he lighted a fire" "the passage of the North Sea [*Nord-Ouest*]", "each square $\frac{1}{2}$ s of an inch [*centimètre*]".

Ironically, Verne himself was an ardent Anglophile and Scotophile. His mother's name, Allotte de la Fuÿe, came from an archer called Allott who joined Louis XI's Scottish Guard, eventually earning the right to keep a "fuÿe" (dovecote) and a "de" in his name. "Verne" means "alder" in Breton, and the writer's birth and upbringing in Brittany made him think of himself as a "Celt". His first novel started in London and was set in Empire territory, his second one appeared as *Les Anglais au Pôle nord*, and a score of others had British

heroes. The Scottish setting of *Les Indes noires* and *Le Rayon vert* was about the closest to home his exoticism-seeking ever got. One of the *Voyages* was even written in English.

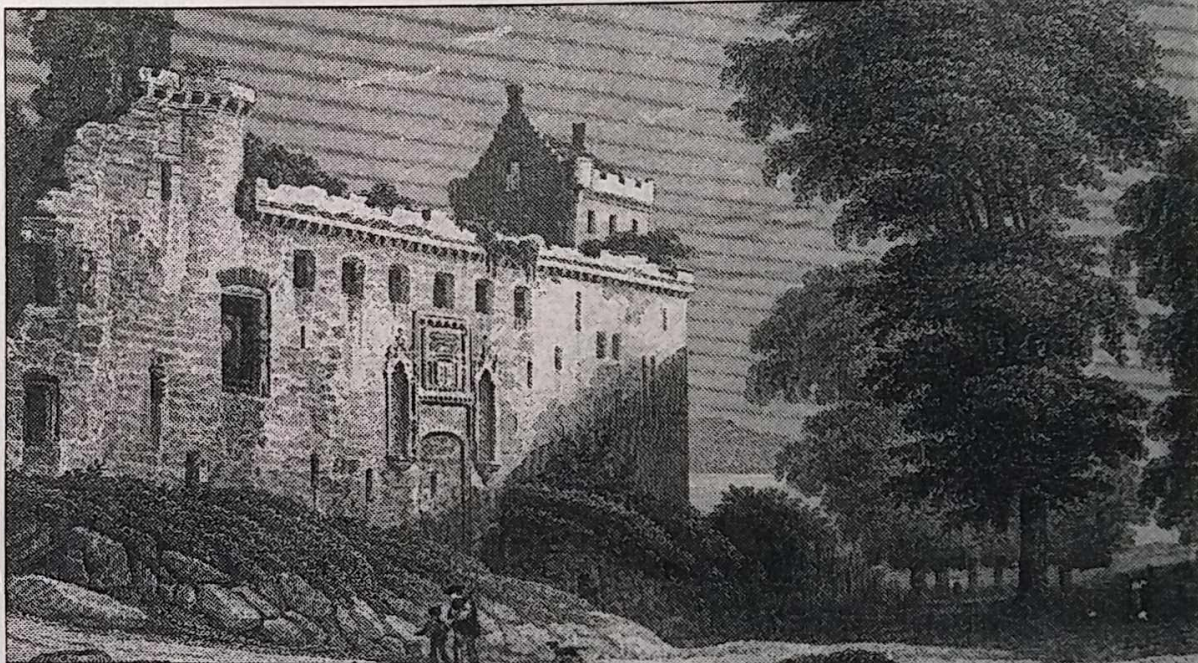
Now has come a bombshell: the appearance of Verne's only full-length manuscript to remain unpublished. The first book he ever wrote, it was rejected by Hetzel in favour of *Cinq semaines en ballon*, a genre which Verne never managed totally to escape. *Voyage en Angleterre et en Ecosse* is a brilliantly entertaining, lightly fictionalised, account of Verne's first trip outside France. It is a hymn to Walter Scott: each successive town, loch, hillside is coloured by *The Heart of Midlothian* or *Rob Roy*. But the book above all embodies the travel urge which is the heart of Verne's writing. It is an artistic manifesto, an inverted palimpsest of the *Voyages extraordinaires*.

"Jacques" and "Jonathan" (Verne and his musician friend Hignard) disembark in Liverpool to encounter degrading, shocking, social conditions including open prostitution. In the morning they wake to a view of Edinburgh Castle, 10-storey medieval houses and a "mountain". Verne had never seen a lake or a mountain before and is bowled over by "the terrible poetry of old Scotland". A litany of architecture, history, literature, food and ale flows from his amazed pen.

Comic relief is provided by an open omnibus outing to the "fine beach of Portobello", with its "Italianate name in the midst of the hard Gaelic syllables". Bathing-huts predate/anticipate mixed nude bathing. Our two heroes resolve to conform. But at the vital moment, having briefly plunged into the "bitter swell", they emerge shamefully from the sea backwards.

Verne falls for a local lass, who royally informs and entertains the joyous couple. On her advice, they set sail up the Forth towards Stirling, Glasgow, Loch Katrine, discovering a landscape that is history, with its "savage, melancholy and plaintive" nature, its "sublime beauties", its people full of "abnegation and devotion". They even see the Aurora Borealis and cross paths with the Queen and full Highland guard.

Many major themes of the next 60 years are visible: the haunting music, "as if played only on the black keys"; the science-literature link - Scott and Watt's statues are interchangeable; the exhilaration of being on the limits of empire; the "sinuosities" of Loch Lomond, hiding-place for untold mys-



Linlithgow Palace: Verne was bowled over by "the terrible poetry of old Scotland"

teries; mingled masts and trees, first sign of the mechanical-biological equivalence that haunts Verne; the dream of the North; the seed for Hatteras's septentrional suicide and for the lines-on-a-map generation of half-a-dozen different *Voyages*. Ben Lomond is the fateful volcano at the Pole; the waterfalls of Oversnoid are the Fingal's Cave of *Le Rayon vert*; and the Flemish and Italian canvases and comfortable Gothic toilets in a windswept wilderness are Nemo's *salon* with its perfect plumbing in the raging depths.

Verne's northern urge is abruptly curtailed. After Linlithgow Castle, the Pentland Hills and the Water of Leith, an infernal overnight journey besieged by lager-louts. Then London and home again. Paris, concludes Verne, is where "the real journey begins, for imagination will now be their guide, and they will travel only in their memories".

This time-bomb, this lost manuscript, this un-Hetzeli-censored book, this only true journey, this hymn to the land of the ancestors has already come out in the major cultural languages of the globe. English publishers, however, do not consider it publishable.

The early structuralists - Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Jean Ricardou - sought simplicity in Verne; *The Mask of the Prophet* uncovers great subtlety and richness. Andrew Martin's Verne is Frenchness, travel, science and writing combined: a "Man without Qualities" by his intertextuality and self-doubt. The subtext is: how can literature be taken seriously? Is anything reliable in the world of words?

Martin's first pre-text, Napoleon, works only as a very loose metaphor for Verne's attempt to subvert history and colonise the globe. But the other, Borges, with his intellectual humour and amazement at the hyperfictionality of the real, works perfectly.

So well are we led through the by-passes, knotted labyrinths, *n*-dimensional Klein bottles, totally

curved lines and infinitely fragmented black holes, that we are constantly convinced that the ideas pre-existed our reading; that some mystical necessity linked writer, critic and reader; that Verne is just a convenient fiction. But this is surely an Oxbridgian confidence-trick.

For a start, no one-to-one mapping is possible from Verne to a *critique*. *The Mask of the Prophet* . . . steers between monolithic monograph and synthesised *saupoudrage*. By analysing half a dozen plots, Martin discovers a number of universals: the permeation by internal writings, the play of *clair-obscur*, the known in the unknown, the new in the old, the intertwining of discovery and discourse. "Divisions and intermediate points multiply indefinitely while goals recede"; ends are ardently desired but viscerally feared. If the formalists' criterion for the literary was the process of defamiliarisation, Verne attempts to restore the extraordinary to the ordinary, to internalise the Other, to assimilate the foreign: a *refamiliarisation* which reinstates a unity, but now inside-out. His invariable tendency is the overload of nature, man, machine and narrative, the thinking of the unthinkable, the surreal, the transcendent.

Writing for Verne the over-achiever is provoked by the emptiness of the desert, by a narrow security between two dangers, by a rebellion which becomes its own law and order. Kin-Fo's *Tribulations* are the consequence of his over-realistic aesthetic, his penmanship, his addiction to the readability of the leaves in the cup, his fear of being adulterated by yellowness. Writing is simplicity and complexity, a line which loses its linear characteristics, a structure defined by its repeated self-similarity: the fractal. The Great Wall is totally porous; and the Mediterranean fractal enables subversion to survive in unexploded pockets. But just as the initial enigmas of the Vernian machines are subsequently elucidated, and intermissions of the most varied natures are eliminated, so

the coastlines are under threat of being smoothed out by modernity.

Writing is anxiety. It is a stressed urge to proceed and produce, to avoid Schultze's fate, frozen in the absolute rest of the undischarged writer. It is, *en amont*, the worry of originality and precedence, *en plein courant*, the unease engendered by the collaboration with André Laurie, *en aval*, the duplicity of Michel, reader and writer of his father, communing with a corpse, creating old ground, borrowing what is already his while yearning to return it.

Chiasmus is omnipresent. "Grim Teutonic realism collapses into oneiric excess, while Latin permissiveness and aestheticism become increasingly exclusive, regimented, imperialist." Sea and land - Nemo and Land - mobility and entrapment, tranquillity and storm, quiet life and anarchy invert indefinitely.

While unearthing the politics in the posthumously-written *Les Naufragés du "Jonathan"* and "L'Eternal Adam", Martin does not neglect the philosophical and literary. Rather, he fishes out the poet contained in the potentate, the Michelian child fathering the Julesian man, the self-government intrinsic to successful anarchy, the author within the Hetzeled texts. Filiality turns the imitation principle inside-out and repeats it indefinitely to produce a consoling degree of immortality.

He concludes that a bearded prophet haunts Verne, Napoleon and Borges, that a single "fantasy is the keystone to [Verne's] fiction: the return of Napoleon and the restoration of the age of Empire". I remain unconvinced.

But it doesn't really matter. Martin has produced a book that is informed, fluent, sardonic, original and rigorous. Verne can never be the same again.

Dr Butcher is lecturer in French, University of Buckingham, and author of Verne's Journey to the Centre of the Self: space and time in the "Voyages extraordinaires" (Macmillan, 1990).