

Captain Grant: One of Verne's Finest Novels

[Postface to *Captain Grant's Children*, translated into Chinese by Wang Ren-cai,
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Captain Grant's Children: Journey round the World is one of the most successful books by Jules Verne (1828-1905). The longest work, with *The Mysterious Island*, in his 50-year series, the Extraordinary Journeys, it has constantly been popular worldwide, although never attaining the great fame or fortune of *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Seas* or *Around the World in Eighty Days*.

The book opens with the capture of a hammerhead shark by Lord Glenarvan, sailing his brand-new yacht the *Duncan* off the west coast of Scotland. In its stomach is found a bottle and in the bottle is discovered an incomplete message in three languages, written by Captain Grant while heading for the South Seas to found a Scottish colony, but who has ended up shipwrecked. Glenarvan, together with his wife, his cousin Major MacNabbs and Robert and Mary, Grant's children, decides to rescue him. In a comic episode the distinguished French geographer Paganel agrees to join the expedition: he has embarked on the wrong ship, his original aim being to explore the Yalu-Zangbo-Chu River in Tibet. Although Grant's message precisely indicates the latitude, 37 degrees 11 minutes, the rest of the message is ambiguous. Following a first interpretation, the team heads across South America from west to east, undergoing many dramatic adventures on the way, a landslide, a major flood, and packs of wolves and crocodiles being only some of the problems they encounter. However, guided by the Patagonian Thalcave they reach the Atlantic coast – having found no sign whatsoever of Captain Grant.

They decide that the captain must be in Australia instead, and volume 2 crosses that island-continent, whose interior had only very recently been partly explored. While crossing the desert they fall prey to a band of escaped criminals, led by Ayrton, Grant's former quartermaster. In the end the team disembark unwillingly in New Zealand after a shipwreck involving their hired vessel. The Maoris, in full rebellion against the British Empire, capture the travellers and condemn them to death. Only by setting off a volcanic eruption can the travellers escape and rejoin the *Duncan* which had in fact escaped the convicts' tricks. Normally Ayrton would be hanged by British justice, but Glenarvan agrees instead to abandon him on a desert island. By an amazing coincidence the island he chooses, Tabor, is the very one on which the shipwrecked Grant is living. After a joyful reunion between Grant and his children at the end of volume 3, the captain receives a hero's welcome back in Scotland, while his son Robert resumes his project of colonisation.

The book was first published in French from 1865 to 1867 in serial form in the *Magasin d'éducation et de récréation*, appearing in book form in 1867, with the 172 illustrations by Riou added later. It has been filmed at least five times, the best-known one being the 1962 Disney production starring Maurice Chevalier. However, this latter film, like all of Hollywood's attempts to adapt Verne, must be considered little better than a betrayal of the book, which its scriptwriter does not seem to have read.

As yet unpublished research is highly revealing about the role in the writing of Verne's novels by his lifelong publisher, Jules Hetzel. First of all, the composition was

highly fragmented, with publication of the novel starting well before Verne had finished writing it. While the publisher demanded near-instantaneous responses from the poor writer, he himself seems to have retained the manuscript for long periods. Hetzel tried to “correct” the novelist’s style, although his own literary abilities and stylistic sensitivity were leagues below Verne’s. No doubt reflecting previous criticism, Verne wrote a sincere and heartfelt letter to the publisher saying how difficult he found to write the love-scenes and emotional language that Hetzel wanted. The reason was perhaps that, in his heart of hearts, he considered love-scenes unnecessary in an adventure story. Also, his preferred style was a simple, robust, frank one, at the opposite end of the spectrum from the sentimental, high-blown mush that the publisher wrote, both in his own name as a novelist and in the episodes he wrote for Verne. Probably the other reason for the writer’s anxiety is that in his last novel, *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1864), he had written many pages detailing the passionate love between the hero Axel and the delicious Graüben, not neglecting any detail, only for them to be censored by the publisher. Jules Verne disliked the title, *Captain Grant’s Children*, which, as he said, “means nothing” – this adventure novel is not really about children. Verne himself preferred *Journey round the World in Search of Captain Grant*, but as always the publisher overruled him. As a final problem, Hetzel seemed unwilling to send the author the proofs. In the end, Verne simply gave up, saying he had too many other things to worry about: he abandoned responsibility for the ending to Hetzel, surely an unwise move. We also know that the publisher intervened actively throughout the novel, in particular adding all the feminine touches, all the sentimental language, most of the religious language, while simultaneously cutting many of Verne’s social comments. Much of the closing chapters of the manuscript in particular are in Hetzel’s hand, only lightly corrected by Verne. The reader then who feels that a particular passage or chapter does not ring quite true may well be right: large sections of the book were not written by the author. One incidental effect of all the interference is that before the revelation at the end, built up over the whole three volumes, the game is given away, since the “correct” name of the island is used. It is my view in sum that the manuscript is probably a better book than the published version.

Another interesting aspect of the book is its coverage of Scotland and its depiction of Scottish characters. Verne himself had distant Caledonian ancestry on his mother’s side, and Scotland was the first foreign country he wished to visit in 1859, a trip that would indelibly mark him and set the scene for his writing career. Scotland is indeed about the only country worldwide that he hardly ever criticises. While later writing two novels set entirely in that country, *Captain Grant* benefits a great deal from Verne’s trip to Edinburgh, Glasgow and the Highlands. However it might be a mistake to consider Verne, as many have, a Scottish nationalist: even the rather unrealistic idea of founding a Scottish colony owes a great deal, if not everything, to the publisher.

Verne’s reputation in all countries outside his homeland, France, is that of a writer of science fiction. I personally believe such a reputation to be false, a betrayal of his books, often put forward by people who have only seen the Hollywood films. This is perhaps not the place to demonstrate the lie of this reputation in general, but it is abundantly obvious that *Captain Grant* itself contains not the slightest shred of science fiction. It is simply an adventure book, a novel of geographical exploration.

This novel deserves its popular reputation. It is classic Verne, full of excitement, but also full of insight into the human condition, the whole leavened by a sly sense of humour. Written before being worn down by the constant battles with his publisher and the huge pressure to write many millions of words, it is eminently readable, constantly varied, and demonstrates the depth of geographical research the author carried out. His great love of sailing, his obsession with cannibalism, his belief in the noble savage, his admiration for Scottish and British culture – it all adds up to one of the great books of the nineteenth century.

Surprisingly, this book has hardly ever been studied by the academics, with almost no serious articles written about it. No English translation has appeared since the nineteenth century, and no one to date has attempted to produce an annotated or commented edition of it in any language. In this newly translated version by the expert Wang Rencai, who scrupulously ensures that, unlike most of Verne's translators, the whole text is available to Chinese readers, *Captain Grant* is surely due for a major revival.

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