

Foreword to *Jules Verne: The Definitive Biography*, Thunder's Mouth, 2006,
by William Butcher

Unveiling Jules Verne, a century after his death

Jules Verne had already been dead for a dozen years when I was born. Yet I feel strongly connected to him, and his works of science fiction had a major influence on my own career. He is among the top five people I wish I could have met in person.

Indeed, he and H G Wells are the two greatest names in science fiction – between them, they established it as a distinctive literary *genre*. Although Verne (1828 – 1905) and Wells (1866 – 1946) now seem to belong to different ages, their careers actually overlapped; Verne was still alive when Wells published his finest tales.

Verne lived through a period of such rapid invention and discovery. Major technological breakthroughs – including the telegraph, railway, electricity and the telephone – happened during his lifetime. Many other possibilities, such as heavier-than-air craft and submarines, were being discussed speculatively. Large parts of the world, hitherto uncharted and unknown to the West, were explored and documented.

But instead of merely chronicling such developments, which would have engaged an ordinary writer for a lifetime, Verne wove them into works of fiction – creating vivid scenarios and stories that have enthralled

generations of readers. A century after his death, he remains the most widely translated author in the world, a distinction unlikely to be surpassed in the near future.

At the same time, as this painstakingly researched new biography shows, Verne must rank as one of the most widely distorted, censored and mistranslated authors of all time. Dr William Butcher, a scholar whose mastery of French gave him rare insights, draws from hundreds of original manuscripts, archival material and other evidence to reconstruct an authentic story of the life and work of Jules Verne.

It contrasts with the familiar image of Verne we have grown accustomed to. For example, Butcher reveals how Verne's own publisher, Pierre Jules Hetzel, excised large chunks of the author's original writing to suit some political and social interests. Equally disturbing is the fact that most books of Jules Verne available in English have been poor translations – and to make matters worse, generations of critics have debated and judged the merits and demerits of the author without ever accessing the originals (either published French versions or the original manuscripts).

This book also reminds us how prolific and versatile Verne was: he wrote some 200 books, of which only a few can be categorized as science fiction. Many were adventure stories, traveller's tales or social commentary, even though we have to acknowledge that Verne is best known for what we now consider science fiction.

In an avid reader's mind, however, these *genres* blur easily. The only real question is whether it's a good story. I have always believed that the primary

function of any story is to entertain -- not to instruct or to preach. (Every writer should remember Sam Goldwyn's words: 'If you've gotta message, use Western Union'.) Promoting a particular scientific concept or technology or a utopian worldview should be the secondary aim of a science fiction story. This offers us a test to discern good fiction. The acid test of any story comes when you re-read it, preferably after a lapse of some years. If it's good, the second reading is as enjoyable as the first. If it's great, the second reading is more enjoyable. And if it's a masterpiece, *it will improve with every reading*. Needless to say, there are very few masterpieces -- in or out of science fiction.

From the Earth to the Moon (1865) is one Verne story that I have found to have enduring entertainment value -- even if some of its scientific premises were slightly dubious, especially the idea of shooting people to space from a mammoth cannon. It is difficult to say how seriously Verne took this idea, because so much of the story is facetiously written. Probably he believed that if such a large gun could be built, it might be capable of sending a projectile to the Moon, but it seems unlikely that he seriously imagined that any of the occupants would have survived the shock of takeoff.

However, in several other respects Verne demonstrated remarkable abilities of prescience. His chosen location for the cannon gun was not far from Cape Canaveral, Florida. He was the first to conceive the free return trajectory -- the idea that it would be possible for a projectile to go around the Moon and then return to Earth. Upon such return, Verne was again the first to suggest the use of water (oceans) as a medium for landing one's space ship in -- the idea of splashdown. As I covered the Apollo Moon landings for CBS television in the late 1960s and early 1970s, I couldn't

help thinking over and over again how Verne had anticipated a good part of the overall scenario a century ahead of any one else.¹

Verne was a master in taking us on intriguing journeys to far corners of our planet – and beyond. In *Jules Verne: The Definitive Biography*, William Butcher takes us on an equally interesting journey through the life of the author which has been hidden beneath layers of ‘fiction’ and misconception. I am confident that this book will help set the record straight, while enhancing our understanding and appreciation of one of the greatest storytellers of all time.

Arthur C Clarke

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885 words

¹ For interesting discussions on many other ideas and inventions first imagined by science fiction writers, see the website Technovelgy, <http://www.technovelgy.com/index.htm>