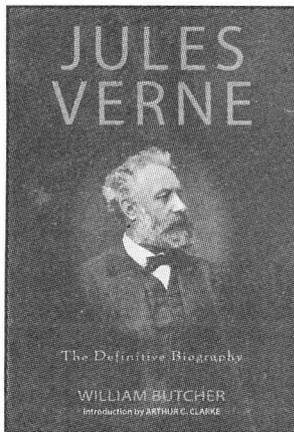


JULES VERNE
THE DEFINITIVE BIOGRAPHY
William Butcher
 Thunder's Mouth Press (\$28)



by Jim Feast

William Butcher's new biography of Jules Verne, which is absorbing, filled with insightful and informative passages, and lit by charming flashes of authorial naiveté, certainly needs no justification. Ironically, the only place this magnificent work weakens is when it provides implausible and unnecessary justifications for why Verne is to be taken seriously.

Born in 1828 into a family of lawyers in a Breton seaport, Verne grew up among relatives who were amateur poets or musicians; middle-class leisure in those days involved the robust exercise of creative energies in evenings of theater, poetry recitations, or music. So it's no surprise that when Verne came to Paris to prepare for the bar exams under pressure of his father, he lost no time in turning to literary endeavors. He spent the next 15 years trying to make it as a playwright, achieving a prodigious output and minimal success. Needled by his family who was supporting him—his father parsimoniously and his mother surreptitiously—he sought a rich wife as a way out, only to be rebuffed at every turn. "At the age of twenty-eight," as Butcher writes, "he felt depressed at the mess of his sexual and professional life."

Eventually, Verne found a wife—a widow with two daughters and, importantly, a good income. More significantly for his writing, he went abroad for the first time, north to England/Scotland one year, and to Norway/Denmark the next. These were the stimulants that turned him from drama to successful novels describing incredible journeys. As Butcher astutely notes, it was the fact that the still-poor Verne went in for "budget" travel that helped him see the lay of the new lands he visited. "Because he traveled by public transport [and] lacked money . . . the author participated fully in Scottish and Norwegian life."

Beginning with his first novel, *Five Weeks in A Balloon*, accepted by the famous publisher Jules Hetzel, Verne embarked on years of literary triumph. Unfortunately, while his works were becoming literary sensations, the author was being pillaged by his publisher. This is one aspect of Verne's life over which Butcher displays a naive lack of propriety; instead of reporting the bare facts, Butcher yelps with pain at the depravity of the publisher. When Hetzel offers Verne a contract in the publisher's favor, Butcher comments, "If I had been Verne, my reply would not have been printable." On the author's percentage of sales, Butcher tells us, "Hetzel would have given Verne a minimum of 10 percent had he had a drop of justice or friendship in his grasping heart."

Such biased comments are ultimately unobjectionable: the author's partisanship is less valuable when he complains about how Verne has been neglected. But hasn't Verne been praised as the cofounder, along with Wells, of the science fiction genre? Science fiction writer James Gunn, for instance, encapsulates this view when he says in an essay, "Jules Verne seems to me the first real science fiction writer . . . He understood the questing spirit of the new science, and his major interest was in reflecting it."

Butcher argues, to the contrary, "in no case could Verne be con-

sidered a science fiction writer. . . . The real thrust of Verne's works, their *raison d'être*, was to explore the globe." It seems to me, nonetheless, if a few of Verne's novels are widely taken to have laid the foundation for all later science fiction, it's a moot point whether he wrote 100 other works, now forgotten, that had no science fiction bent. He can still be held in esteem as pioneering the genre.

Butcher's second claim for Verne, that he was unmercifully censored and forced by his publisher to revise, and in doing so weaken, major works, is even more audacious. Butcher's most striking example, based on scrupulous research of the original manuscripts, is the character of Nemo in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. In the

book that has come down to us, the captain of the Nautilus is an enigmatic, Bryonic anarchist, at war with mankind, blowing up any surface vessel in his way. In the original draft, Nemo was a Polish nobleman whose family had been exterminated by the Russians as they overran his country, and the only ships he attacks in this version are those of the hated conquerors. Hetzel was afraid that such a presentation would antagonize Russia as well as diminish money from a Russian translation, which was done by his Russian mistress, so he demanded Nemo's nationality and background be removed.

This is a strong case, but the argument is extended too far. Take Butcher's recent (2005) translation of Verne's Arctic exploration tale, *The Adventures of Captain Hatteras*. Butcher complains about the falsity of the ending, which was forced on Verne, in which the intrepid commander, as obsessed with reaching the pole as Ahab is with harpooning the white whale, goes insane at this moment of victory. True, it's not very plausible, but is Verne's rejected ending (now supplied by Butcher), which has Hatteras swan dive into an active volcano that just so happens to rest exactly on the North Pole, any more realistic? Rather than prejudice the reader, however, let me add that as a whole, this novel (until the ending) is outstanding in its ability to capture life in the far north.

Butcher remarks that the constant zigzags, double backs, and cul-de-sacs that mark the explorers' trip, making it so redolent of actual attempts on the pole, seems to reproduce Verne's own torturous path to literary fame. Fortunately, this type of intelligent reflection characterizes the biography as a whole, which, in cogently revealing the shape of this writer's life, amply justified Butcher's time, persistence, and courage in writing it. ♦



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