

Vulpes Libris

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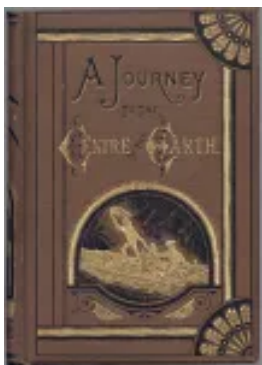
Electric light in the darkness



M. Verne

I love science writing, especially by the really good science communicators who don't dumb down too much, just enough to let us understand what they do for a living. Sometimes they can be a bit too intense, making a science degree to understand what they're on about more of a requirement than an optional extra, but the really good ones (for example, Richard Fortey of the UK's Natural History Museum, writing about trilobites and geology) bypass the complexities and let you concentrate on the wonder. Novels that just happen to be about science are a good way into science writing, especially if they are seriously enjoyable. Jules Verne's novel *Journey*

to the Centre of the Earth, from 1867, is one such cracking good read. He is usually regarded as one of the forefathers of science fiction, but this novel is not speculative: it doesn't imagine a future full of imaginary technology in space. It's about the world here and now (his 19th-century here and now), with a fat dose of imagination, and uses the most modern science then known to develop the plot



Journey to the Centre of the Earth was Verne's second novel, signifying the start of a torrent of over 80 works about the earth and its wonders, inside and out, including the slightly more famous *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* and *Around the World in Eighty Days*. I read Verne in an English translation since my French is not that great, and this post is really due to the excellent modern translations of Verne by William Butcher, in the Oxford World's Classics editions. Butcher makes the narrative live. The

story leaps off the page in modern and unaffected prose, and its excitement just drags you along in its wake. For the first time in many, many months, on a working day, I stayed in bed in the morning to finish this novel: it was THAT exciting.

So what's it about? Nineteen-year-old Axel lives with his uncle, the Hamburg scientist Professor Lidenbrock, and works as his assistant. When the professor brings home a 16th-century book by an Icelandic author, a strange parchment falls out of the book, and is discovered to be a coded message in runes giving details of how to descend from an Icelandic volcano to the centre of the earth. The challenge is irresistible to the professor, so Axel is dragged off on a terrifying adventure, rather against his will, since he would rather hang around at home to be with his girlfriend. They sail to Iceland via Copenhagen, collect Hans, a sturdy collector of eider duck feathers, to be their guide, and begin the ascent of Snaefells, the volcano that they must reach by the calends of July to find out which of the shafts into the crater is the right one. The descent by rope brings them to caverns and tunnels under the land masses and the sea, and they travel for weeks, ending at a vast underground sea. Here Hans builds a raft from fossilised tree trunks, and they sail for further weeks across the sea until a massive electrical storm drives them back. On exploring the shore they find not only vegetation, but evidence of life, animal bones and human remains, and then they see a forest in the distance, and then a herd of mastodons, and then, most unexpected of all, a 12 foot humanoid shepherd.



lithograph by Julie Dapras

They find the right tunnel to continue their journey downward, but decide to blast a blockage in the tunnel with explosive, but this has far more serious consequences than merely letting them pass. The sea rushes into the cavity caused by the resulting earthquake, and their raft is thrown about wildly as they rush into a new torrent, all their goods, food and gear are thrown overboard, and only one light is left. Strangely, the torrent takes them upwards, and the

professor realises that they are now being sucked up into a side-tunnel of a volcano, and they are, accordingly, after days of this travel, expelled by a series of gas eruptions, onto the dry land and the open air of the earth's surface again. They are on Stromboli, on the other side of the world from Iceland.

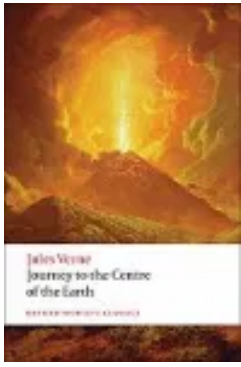
So how believable do you find all that? Not at all? Does it matter? What makes *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* so enjoyable is that it is larded with the most up to date science Verne knew. The novel is written for readers who kept in touch with the latest developments in physics, chemistry, anthropology and palaeontology, and who would be expected to understand the professor's motivation for scientific exploration completely. The arguments between Axel and his uncle are all about the importance of ascertaining facts, of measuring and deducing and thinking rationally. Science is the most important thing in their lives, and the result is a novel which is just a little bit teacherly, but so packed with enthusiasm and passion for the subject, that Verne's readers are expected to learn as well as enjoy.

So how does it strike us, 150 years later? Naturally, science has developed in terms of how we understand the measurement of the Earth's mass, and what its constituent elements are. We have built evolution into our understanding of its geological processes, and have used mathematics and computing to be far more accurate in our dating of the age of the earth and its insides. In terms of the equipment that Axel and the professor take, the efficacy of their Ruhmkroff lamps, which use the then thrillingly new application of electricity, are probably only improved now by more reliable and longer-lasting power; we still light the dark with electricity. The measuring tools we'd use now for a surveying descent into the bowels of the earth would probably now be controlled by GPS, but we'd still need to measure air pressure and depth and temperature and direction, just as Axel and the professor did. The electrical storm that zapped their compass and turned north into south would probably have done the same to ours.

Where I do take issue with how the professor conducts his investigations is in the episode of finding the human remains. You do not just trip over a body and twang its ribs, nor do you hold it without gloves! Did these men never work in a laboratory? Obviously not. They've never seen *Time Team* either, since they have no forensic awareness, no respect for the dead, and no understanding of contamination by bacteria. The very fact that the bodies are still intact, with skin, and undecomposed, besides the shores of an underground sea where moisture circulates and cannot escape, is simply impossible. So *nul points pour Verne* on that. I don't mind at all about the giant mushroom forest (that makes perfect sense in an undisturbed damp environment). I can swallow, just, the herd of living mastodons. I would be happier with smaller creatures, but, again, in an uninterrupted environment without predators, lifeforms can grow really, really big, so why not mastodons? But I'm not happy about the 12 foot man, especially when the bodies in the boneyard are all around 6 foot high. That acts as a nightmare-like episode, a final touch of horror to round off the wonder and strangeness of these cumulative discoveries.

And what about the high-speed voyage by raft up a lava-filled rock pipe to be expelled by intermittent gaseous explosions onto the slopes of Stromboli, with no apparent harm. Really? I think not. Much is said in the novel about the dangers of running out of food and water, but this last journey has the travellers surviving beyond all possibilities of human endurance. They'd have suffocated in the gases before they got anywhere near the top, or the raft of wood would have combusted after a few moments exposure to the lava flow.

Not that any of this matters: the novel is a great read, thrilling, gripping, and genuinely unputdownable. [For the Tolkien-heads amongst you, *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* contains a surprising amount that you will recognise from Moria and Mordor in its descriptions, and this novel is not the only Verne that influenced the creation of Middle-Earth.] It's also a novel where the What of what happens is less



important than the How. The Journey is the story, not what they find en route. That's why I've given you more or less the whole plot, against my usual custom of avoiding spoilers. But get the Butcher translation if you want to read it in English.

Jules Verne, *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, trans W. Butcher, Oxford World's Classics, 1998. Plus loads of other Vernes, all translated by Butcher.

Kate podcasts weekly about books she really, really likes, on <http://www.reallylikethisbook.com>.

About Kate

Blogger, lecturer, podcaster, writer, critic, reviewer, researcher, and publisher (handheldpress.co.uk), in and on British literary history. Preferred occupation while listening to podcasts: cooking or knitting. Preferred soundtrack while reading: the sound of silence.

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3 comments on “Electric light in the darkness”

susan

November 14, 2012

Wow. As I read this review, I was bombarded with images from the Classics Illustrated edition I read in the early 1960s

annebrooke

November 14, 2012

Lovely article – Verne is a wonderful story teller and once you start reading him you can't put him down. Thanks, Kate! 😊

Jackie

November 14, 2012

It's been years since I read Verne, but I recall liking the scientific sense of adventure in his stories. I was surprised by how different this book is to the kitschy film with Pat Boone that I watched on TV when I was little.

I always applaud the appearance of prehistoric animals, even when it's not zoologically accurate.

Isn't a stromboli a little rolled pizza? But I digress.....

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