

Dusseau, Joëlle. *Jules Verne*. Paris: Perrin, 2005. Pp. 564. 24 € ISBN 2-262-02279-8.

Valetoux, Philippe. *Jules Verne, en mer et contre tous*. Paris: Magellan, 2005. Pp. 176. 19.90 € ISBN 2-914330-88-X.

Maudhuy, Roger. *Jules Verne: La Face cachée*. Paris: France-Empire, 2005. Pp. 296. 19 € ISBN 2-7048-0990-9.

*William Butcher, Taipo, Hong Kong*

In a year when a hundred Verne books came out in France alone, biographical breakthroughs were expected. Previously the two family lives by M. Allotte de la Fuÿe (1928) and Jean Jules-Verne (1973) resourced virtually all biographies. The result was many middle-of-the-road accounts, albeit fairly readable and illuminating on particular aspects of the life. All those in English or French rehearsed such well-worn half-myths as the runaway child or the immediate success of *Five Weeks in a Balloon* (1863). But none were pure biography, falling into the trap of cramming the life and works into a single volume. All underplayed the books' evolution from conception to publication, referring to the "Hetzalized" books and not to those that Verne actually wrote. None told us who his friends were, whom he lusted after, how much he earned or where he lived.

Great hopes were raised then for the Verne centenary. But the biographies that emerged were insufficiently researched (except for the outstanding German-language Volker Dehs, *Jules Verne* (2005), beyond the scope of this review). I do not mean the primary research of investigating the archives of the land records, births and deaths, testaments or genealogies, the manuscripts of the century's bestsellers, the foreign countries that marked the young writer so decisively, even the schools attended or theatrical and financial institutions worked at. I mean simply the hundreds of biographical publications freely available. Half a dozen works are crucial: the correspondence, the interviews, the two family biographies mentioned above – and Raymond Ducrest de Villeneuve. Written in 1928 by Verne's first cousin, partly brought up in the same household, Ducrest's memoirs uniquely benefit from sustained first-hand knowledge of Verne's private life. Shockingly, no biographical work in French or English up to 2005 mentions the volume.

Amongst the French efforts, the best are those by Dusseau, Valetoux and perhaps Maudhuy. However, the neglect of pure biography, everyday reality and the manuscripts has continued. These biographies do provide valuable introductions, with their readable narratives. Each benefits from the French literary tradition, based in a shared and deep knowledge of the historical, political and cultural contexts. But none

presents the man, *per man*.

With a serious academic, but not dry, approach, Dusseau is the finest available in French. About 200,000 words long, but with more than a third devoted to analysis of the works, with footnoted references but no index, its strength is the pages where events are synthesized from often conflicting accounts: Verne's work as a stockbroker, meeting with Hetzel or collaboration on the play that gave rise to *Around the World in Eighty days*.

The second book, strangely subtitled "Texts assembled and presented by Philippe Valetoux," restricts itself to Verne and the sea. (The publisher Magellan was unable to provide review copies, despite repeated reminders.) Nicely illustrated in sepia, its style is largely factual, perhaps of less immediate interest to the non-specialist. Its strong point is its exclusive, but unreferenced, information about Verne's travels on three successive boats, most frequently to the British Isles. Much of it is surely drawn from Verne's unpublished logbooks, jealously guarded by the City of Amiens. But much is also drawn from the author's unearthing of primary documents in Departmental archives, the contemporary media and Verne's correspondence with boat builders.

Maudhuy, indexed and endnoted, is a lively, popular account, with little pretension of going beyond surveying some of the more accessible information. However, it brings to light the first eye-witness account of Verne, two important poems printed by his father in 1842, which record the boy's love of the Loire and ambition to be a savant.