

*Correspondance inédite de Jules Verne et de Pierre-Jules Hetzel (1863-1886)*, Vol. 1 (1863-1874), ed. Olivier Dumas, Piero Gondolo della Riva and Volker Dehs, Slatkine, Geneva, 1999

Reviewed by William Butcher

This volume is an essential contribution to understanding the novels of Jules Verne. Although important revelations have been made recently concerning the manuscripts of Verne's novels, only by studying the details of the suggestions of Verne's publisher, mentor and friend, can we fully understand the extent of the changes introduced at manuscript and proof stage, often for the worse.

This volume covers the period of the masterpieces, including *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, *Captain Hatteras*, *From the Earth to the Moon*, *Twenty Thousand Leagues, Around the World*, and *The Mysterious Island*. While many of Verne's letters have been published previously, Hetzel's have not; meaning that for the first time we are able to follow the debates as they rage back and forth. The novel to suffer the most was *The Mysterious Island*, whose total inception period was at least ten years. But *Twenty Thousand Leagues* also undergoes quite a mauling at the hands of the publisher.

Unsuspected sources for the works are mentioned in these pages. What is equally fascinating is the tone: Verne invariably respectful, but Hetzel oscillating from the abruptly affectionate to the downright rude. Whether it is missing proofs or the nationality of Nemo, the Franco-Prussian War or the financial arrangements between the two, Verne invariably argues his side logically, patient point by patient point; only to have Hetzel ignore much of what his author says.

Brief extracts concerning *The Mysterious Island*. will give the flavour:

[18 September 1865] I'm dreaming of a magnificent Robinson. It is absolutely necessary for me to do one, it's stronger than me. Some wonderful ideas are coming to me, and if ... it succeeds in bringing in just three times as much as *The Swiss Family Robinson*, you'll be happy, and I will as well. If it isn't for us, let it be for our children, and still we won't complain ... I'm thinking enormously of this new machine and I'm taking notes.

[1 July 1870] It's a sketch, but the clay is too soft and too grey ... [the characters] are not at present interesting ... suppose Hugo doing this scene ... your people get out of situations worse than the most innocent robinsons [*sic*] of the past.

[15 February 1871] It's not the Robinson that I've continued with. I need to discuss it with you again. You know that I stick to my ideas like a Breton. Yes, Paris did a Robinson on a grand scale. But that is the *business* of my second and third volumes and not *the first*. When you have three volumes to do ... if you do not husband your effects and your climax you are lost.

In sum, this volume is a must for understanding Verne's novels. Let us hope

that it will soon be published in English translation.