

# Of sausages and steam engines

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**Richard Boston  
reflects on the  
meaning of  
upholstery as he  
assesses a late  
Jules Verne**

A FEW days before reading Jules Verne's *Backwards to Britain* (Chambers, £14.99) I travelled by rail and sea from Marseille to London. The train journey from one end of France to the other was rapid, smooth and comfortable, as was the trans-Channel Swedish ferry. Then came the train from Dover to Victoria. It shook, rattled and rolled to such an extent that it was scarcely possible to read. We stopped at Dover Priory, Snowdown, Aylesham, Adisham and Bekesbourne. Between Canterbury East and Selling we went at a speed which can't have been much faster than that of Chaucer's pilgrims.

At Faversham there was a chance to change to a fast (or faster) train, but this information was not widely disseminated, and by the time I had man-handled two large bags and a typewriter on to the platform it was too late and I had to man-handle them all back again. We stopped at Teynham, Sittingbourne, Newington and Rainham, Gillingham, Chatham, Rochester. We stopped at places I'd never heard of (Sole Street) or had no idea how to pronounce (Meopham). Then Longfield, Farningham Road, Swanley, St Mary Cray and finally, after more than 20 stops, Victoria, just under 2½ hours after leaving Dover.

The fact that the scenery was lovely, with its apple orchards and oast houses and the Medway, does not conceal the fact that the permanent way is permanent woe, and that the rolling-stock is a laughing-stock. With this as our response to France's TGV we prepare ourselves for the Channel tunnel and the 21st century.

How different it all was for Jules Verne when he visited Britain in 1859. Having set out from Paris he spent no fewer than 17 impatient days before setting sail from Bordeaux. A glance at the map confirms your hunch that Bordeaux was in the wrong direction (as, indeed, it still is). Verne's travelling companion suggested that they should keep going till they reached Spain, but Verne had set his heart on Britain, especially Scotland. Nothing would satisfy him short of clapping eyes on a man in a kilt.

The reasons for their going to Bordeaux instead of somewhere sensible like Dieppe are of little interest but are given at great length. Having spent nearly three weeks getting from Paris to Liverpool, there are only five days of their holiday left. In this short time they take in Glasgow, Edinburgh and London, Verne jotting down his impressions the while.

The first chapters in Britain are headed "Exploring Liverpool", "Strange English customs" and "A noisy nocturne". Then comes the surprise, a chapter on "The excellence of British railways". English trains are much faster than French ones, he says. They are much smoother than French ones too, both because of the superior suspension and the better track. He finds the rail system "poorly supervised, without guards or signalling every half mile. Trains pass and follow one another almost continually — hence the accidents people hardly worry about, not to mention those no-one worries about."

Having said which, he takes it back. He says there are fewer accidents than one might expect, considering the risks taken. "The apparent carelessness of railway officials and drivers conceals a special instinct for great industrial ventures. The British are, with the Americans, the world's leading

mechanics. They shrink from no hurdle and when a new idea occurs to them, think up the machine to carry it out. In short, where engineering is concerned, they can achieve anything." He is vastly impressed by the power of steam, and the ingenious uses to which it is put, not least in a device he notices in a pork butcher's: you insert a live pig at one end and sausages come out of the other.

It was Verne's first trip abroad. He spoke no English, but considered himself well prepared by avid reading of Sterne, Scott and Dickens. Certainly the route via Bordeaux was a Shandian digression that Sterne himself would have admired. Scotland lived up to Verne's expectations with its lochs and mountains (his previous idea of a mountain was Montmartre). He saw kilts and the Scott monument, heard bagpipes and ate haggis.

He even managed to fit in a brief flirtation before taking the admirable British train to London where he followed the tourist beat that survives to this day. The Tower and beefeaters, the City and a chop-house, Westminster, Trafalgar Square (where he places Nelson on a Doric column) and Madame Tussaud's, where inevitably he has a comic conversation with a waxwork.

The tone is one of heavy facetiousness that anticipates *Three Men in a Boat*. More agreeably, his comments on the misleading nature of English staircases describe the internal architecture of Fawlty Towers many years later. He is puzzled by sash windows, and can't understand why British beds are so big when the bedrooms are so small that you sometimes have to open a window to pull a sleeve on. But his observations are mostly as superficial as are to be expected from such a brief visit by someone who didn't speak the language. A railway station platform notice leads him to believe he is passing through a town called Ladies' Room, a joke that must have been old even in 1859. More original is his horror at the word "upholsterer". He refuses to be consoled by his friend's assurance that the word only means the same as *tapisserier*. It's not something I have ever thought about before, but now he comes to mention it there is something rather menacing about the word upholsterer, especially when pronounced as I imagine Verne would have done.

Verne's good-natured and good-humoured prattle is interrupted in only a few pages. These are where he leaves his pre-conceived world of Sterne and Scott and witnesses the reality of Dickens. The writing immediately becomes much sharper as he experiences "that dank, grimy blend of fog and coal dust so typical of England".

He sees for himself women in rags walking barefoot in slimy black mud. "In countless workshops, where police carry out fewer controls than in France, tasks are set beyond human strength. Labour is vilely cheap. In sordid rooms, women toil 15 hours a day, often with no dresses, petticoats or blouses to wear, wrapped only in rags."

*Backwards to Britain* was the first book Verne wrote, but the last to be published. It appeared in print in French only three years ago. It isn't hard to see why it has waited for more than a century. The book is agreeable but very lightweight, and Verne's writing is not of a quality to make bricks out of so little straw. What charm and interest it has comes from what has been added by the passage of time. In the steam-engine that turns pigs into sausages can be discerned the inventive imagination that Verne put to such good use in his more celebrated works. To read a Frenchman extolling British trains is a rich and rare opportunity to look through the wrong end of time's telescope. And my attitude to upholsterers will never be the same again.