

Not the premier league

Jules Verne's publisher censored his novel to sell more copies

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VINGT MILLE LIEUES SOUS LES MERS

Texte restauré

JULES VERNE

Édition établie, annotée et présentée
par William Butcher

634pp. Presses Universitaires Blaise-Pascal,
Clermont-Ferrand. PRICE?

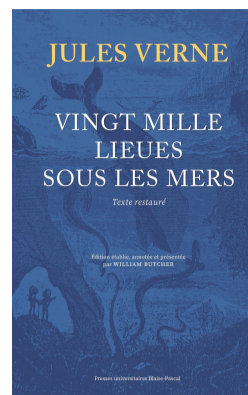
TWENTY THOUSAND LEAGUES UNDER THE SEA has not been out of print since it first appeared as a serial in 1869, and in 1871 as a book. There have been more than a thousand editions, re-issues and reprints. Why, then, do we need another?

Because, argues William Butcher, what generations of admirers have read is not the novel Jules Verne planned, but a text altered to suit his publisher. Suspicions have been voiced before, though not as loudly. What has long been the prime duty

of editors of classic works - to establish an authentic text - has not happened in the case of Nemo and the Nautilus. Two manuscripts dating from 1868-9 can be consulted on-line and the relevant correspondence has long been made available. Yet editors have shown little interest in the differences between Verne's intentions and the version published in 1871. Even Butcher's own edition and translation in the Oxford World's Classics series (2007, revised 2019) fell short of his ambition to fill the gap.

Of the several thousand variants which Butcher identifies in his "restored text", most are minor and stylistic but others are fundamental. In his first drafts, Verne sketches scenes which are later deleted. He also reproduces verbatim information from technical publications that act as a springboard for his dramatic instincts. Verne was more than the promoter of his age's scientific positivism; he was a romantic with dreams of a better future for the human race.

This new edition includes original illustrations by Riou and Nieuville and reproduces a number of manuscript pages that bear witness to Butcher's interpretative patience. The handwriting varies from scrawl to copperplate. It also shows the close attention Jules Hetzel had been giving Verne's drafts for some years. Hetzel, publisher of Balzac, Baudelaire, Hugo and others, was committed to promoting "improving" literature, and in particular the "family, illustrated library" which in 1864 became the *Magasin d'éducation et de récréation*, a periodical aimed at younger readers. It was to supply that market that he recruited Verne, and it was Hetzel who came up with *Voyages extraordinaires* as the running title for Verne's novels of adventure. In the process he cut a dozen chapters. To protect young minds, Hetzel also modified the language and behaviour of certain characters, eliminated love interest and softened or removed all criticism of religion, politics and the French establishment.



Verne occasionally rebelled, and (for example) rejected his publisher's suggestion that he add a third volume to *Vingt mille lieues*. But for the most part he submitted. He agreed to change the female portrait in Nemo's study (judged provocative) to a *pietà* and stripped his library shelves of the subject category *Politique*. References to "Nature" were replaced by references to "the Creator". The character of Ned Land became less violent and dramatic. Moreover, as the Second Empire slid towards the War of 1870, Hetzel cancelled all comment that was favourable to England and critical of France, and rooted out references to the revolutionary spirit of 1789.

Most damaging was Hetzel's refusal to accept Nemo as a rebel by refusing to have him identified with any libertarian ideology or single nation. An unspeakable injustice done to his family has led Nemo to his life of subterranean solitude, but details are withheld. At various times, he is associated with Greece, Ceylon, Turkey, France, Russia and Italy, though he may have been Polish and therefore a victim of Russian brutality. But Russia was a lucrative market for Hetzel and not to be alienated. (When Nemo resurfaces in *L'île mystérieuse*, 1874-5, he does so as an Indian whose wife and children have been murdered by the Raj, an anti-British solution Hetzel could accept.) Nemo's character is also tamed. Verne's original was combustible, cruel and violent.

If the changes imposed on Verne were so substantial, why did he not object? Hetzel did to Nemo what 1930s Hollywood did to Captain Bligh of the *Bounty*, and for the same reasons, but the novelist and the publisher were friends. Hetzel guided Verne's career. He guaranteed him a readership and paid him well enough to enable him to devote his energies to writing without having to worry about his family. It was an arrangement that suited them both. ■

David Coward is writing a biography of Marcel Pagnol