

INTRODUCTION

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VERNE IN IRELAND

Jules Verne (1828–1905) invariably sets his works in far-flung, exotic parts, while endeavouring in each new book to avoid revisiting territory. The novelist himself travelled intensively and extensively outside France, reaching Scandinavia, North Africa and North America. By far his favourite destination, however, was the British Isles, with a score of trips. This represented in some sense a homecoming, for part of his family tree came from Brittany—and another from Scotland.¹

Verne's Celtic attraction takes on additional resonance in that America, Scotland and Ireland were the only settings for entire novels that he knew from his own travels. In the last case, it is true; his contacts were fleeting or debatable, with one contemporary account even reporting that Verne never went to Ireland.²

The first Hibernian visit was with his brother, Paul, en route for New York on the *Great Eastern*. From Liverpool, the huge ship skirted Holyhead before nearing Carnsore Point and following the coast down. On other crossings, the *Great Eastern* put in at Queenstown (Cobh), but perhaps not on this occasion:

Wednesday, 27 March [1867].

Emerald Coast, follow [*sic*] the whole day—creamy sea, squally, dirty green—stiff breeze / many ships—steamers overtaken / frequent meals / Queenstown—fishing fleet—ships of all sizes ... the beacons [of Cape Clear and Fastnet Lighthouses] / sail up to WNW.³



These telegraphic notes are the only direct record we have of Verne 'in' the Emerald Isle. However, the lightly fictionalised narrative which grew out of them, *A Floating City* (1870), expands them into a poetic, if still low-key slideshow, demonstrating the novelist's appreciation of Irish coastal activity:

... this long stretch of shore, with an elegant profile, whose permanent greenness has earned it the name of 'the Emerald Coast'. A few lonely houses, the twists and turns of a customs route, a plume of white steam marking a train passing between two hills, an isolated signal-post making grimacing gestures to the ships at large ...

Numerous vessels, brigs and schooners, endeavoured to claw off from the land; steamers passed, billowing their black smoke ...

Soon we hove in sight of Queenstown, a small port of call where a flotilla of fishing-boats manoeuvred ...

At half past four the land lay still visible, three miles to starboard ... Soon a beacon appeared. It was Fastnet Lighthouse, built on an isolated rock; night fell, during which we were due to round Cape Clear, the last projecting point of the Irish coast (vi).

But in addition to this, there exist tantalising claims, in two other contemporary sources and in the two family biographies,⁴ that the novelist subsequently revisited the Irish Sea and Ireland. The date might have been 1872, the route being simply the cryptic along 'the English coast and up the Ocean to Scotland'.⁵

INCEPTION AND PUBLICATION HISTORY

Little research has been done on Verne's sources, with the manuscripts not yet deciphered for the world-famous *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* or *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Seas*. It seems hardly surprising, then, that the inception of *P'tit bonhomme* (*Foundling Mick*) has hardly been explored.



The surviving manuscript is kept at Nantes, with the first and last sheets freely viewable on the Web.⁶ Verne's correspondence with his publisher, Jules Hetzel *fils*, shows that an earlier title, less sentimental, was '*Petit homme*' ('Little Man'), possibly derived from the expression 'Grand Little Man'. The two constituent volumes of the novel were written separately, the first undoubtedly in the second half of 1891, the second by 30 July 1892. On 5 December Verne returned the proofs of the first two chapters, revised following discussions with Hetzel.⁷

In reply to queries from the printer, Verne writes that the peat bogs of Ireland do indeed occupy '96 million cubic metres'; that 'holy potatoes' is the correct phrase, being a quotation; that the first line of the traditional poem 'John Playne's Complaint' should read 'John Playne, take my word for it ...'; and that it is the printer who has lost the colour map of Ireland to be published in the novel.⁸ Even after publication, in serial form in the *Magasin d'éducation et de récréation* (1 January–15 December 1893), Verne found new errors in the first volume, especially as regards the place names, resulting in further revisions for the book publication (small format, 2 October and 20 November 1893) and the illustrated edition (23 November 1893).

Sales of the French editions were reasonable: in addition to the *Magasin*, about 20,000 copies had probably been printed by 1904. Sampson Low and Marston brought out the book in London as *Foundling Mick* (1895), going through several editions.⁹ This translation comprised 27 chapters and 75,500 words, compared with the original 31 chapters and 120,000 words. A new edition was published for school use by the Educational Company of Ireland (Dublin) in about 1932 as *A Lad of Grit*, abridged by another 35,000 words.

In an interview of spring 1893, Verne talks about the inspiration of the book:

In the novel *P'tit bonhomme*, I describe the adventures of a lad in Ireland. I take him from the age of two and give his life up to the age of fifteen, when he makes his fortune and that of all his friends, which is a novel denouement, is it not? He travels all round Ireland ... my descriptions of the scenery and localities have been taken from books ...



I have read the whole of Dickens at least ten times over ... I love him immensely, and in my forthcoming novel ... the proof of this is given and acknowledgement of my debt is made.¹⁰

The orphan's ascent clearly shows the influence of *Oliver Twist* (1838) and *David Copperfield* (1850), as do the overriding sentimentality and melodrama and even many of the characters.

Three other novels depicting a boy's struggles and travels undoubtedly influenced Verne: *Sans Famille* (1878—*Nobody's Boy*) by Hector Malot (1830–1907); *L'Enfant* (1879—*The Child*) by Jules Vallès (1832–85), a schoolmate of Verne's at the Collège Royal in Nantes; and *Le Petit Gosse* (1889—*The Little Chap*) by William Busnach (1832–1907). Within the novel itself, Verne cites one source three times, a certain Marie-Anne de Bovet. Marie-Anne de Bovet (b. 1855) was a well-known feminist writer, who from 1889 wrote three books on Ireland, sympathetic to the nationalist cause.

Foundling Mick has been disliked by many of the critics: 'one of Verne's least good', 'a descent into pathos', the hero 'of only middling interest, the action long and drawn out', its plotting 'contrived and facile', the novel, it is claimed, 'presents little of interest', 'is not a very good book'.¹¹

However, others have argued that 'many passages ... are superb' and that, as 'one of the best written of Verne's novels, through certain moods it creates, it is comparable to the best of Dickens'.¹²

P L O T ¹³

In 1875 poverty reigns across Ireland. The book opens with three-year-old Mick working the hidden mechanisms of a puppet show depicting Queen Victoria and her entourage, forced by a cynical showman who hits and starves him. The boy is intelligent, industrious and persistent, honest, generous and brave: 'It was as if he were born aged 20' (II x).

Mick had been found by the showman on a street-corner in Donegal. His earliest memories are of a bad-tempered drunkard who starves the



orphans she is meant to be looking after; however, an older girl, Cissy, protects him.

He is saved from the showman's clutches by the good people of Westport, Co. Mayo, and eventually placed in the poor school in Galway.¹⁴ This institution is full of bullies who make his life a misery. However, Grip, sixteen, naturally good-humoured and thin as a rake, befriends him. When the school is destroyed in a fire, Mick is back on the street. In Limerick, Anna Watson, a flighty, ageing actress, takes him in and pampers him, but soon tires of the boy.

Finally, at the age of four, a family of Kerry farmers take pity on Mick: he spends four happy years with the hard-working, warm MacCarthys. But in 1880 famine strikes and they are evicted for rent arrears, while the farm is demolished above their heads.

Mick is on the road once more, alone except for Ranger, the farmer's dog.¹⁵ He prospers by hawking matches. He finds a wallet containing £100 and returns it to the arrogant Marquis of Trelingar. With the Marquis, he visits Cahersiveen, Co. Kerry, birthplace of O'Connell, and Valentia Island, the starting point of the transatlantic cable (1857–66). After working briefly as a groom for the Marquis's loutish son in Limerick, Mick leaves in order to save his dog's life.

Ranger rescues from suicide another young orphan, Dick, who has not eaten for 48 hours. The two boys walk together to Cork, set up another hawking business and soon make £30, invested in turn in wool.

Moving to Bedford Street, Dublin, Mick and Dick open a children's toy shop. Mick also makes money by acquiring exclusive rights on an ingenious new toy. Dick captures birds, puts them in cages and sells their freedom to rich children.

In one dramatic episode, Mick single-handedly saves his cargo from sinking on the Irish Sea. In another, he visits Belfast, witnessing Land Leaguers fighting pitched battles; however, the boy's only interest is in business. While there, he rescues Cissy, trampled unconscious in the struggle, and takes her back to Dublin.

In 1887, at the end of the novel, Mick has made his fortune, given the MacCarthys their farm back, taken his earliest friend Grip on as associate and married him off to Cissy.



T H E M E

The novel is unusual among Verne's series of *Extraordinary Journeys* in having little journey and no extraordinary aspect. It possesses instead a strong social and political dimension, being indeed the only book to represent the proletariat and the class struggle. Verne concentrates on the poorest people, the starving children, the cruelty of the overseers, the violence, the excessive taxes, the exploitation of the tenant farmers by the great absentee landowners, the evictions by the stewards. The national cause is hammered home: the most energetic and intelligent farmers, with a traditional poetic culture, are set against the aristocrats, without any positive qualities, being liberal in England and Scotland, but tyrannical in Ireland. The Marquis of Trelingar, who looks down on anyone of lower rank, is a ridiculous anachronism.

But the account may be exaggerated, and the ideology is certainly laid on too thick. In any case, having worked in his research on the tyrannical English, Verne lets the matter drop: no political solution is seriously proposed. Instead of the travails of the Irish people, the novel comes to emphasise instead the success story of the hero.



NOTES

- ¹ William Butcher, *Jules Verne: the definitive biography*, with a Foreword by Arthur C. Clarke (New York, 2006), 5; 7–9.
- ² Daniel Compère and Jean-Michel Margot (eds.), *Entretiens avec Jules Verne* (Geneva, 1998), 95.
- ³ Verne's unpublished 'Notebook of Voyage to America' (kept in Amiens Municipal Library), cited without reference by Philippe Scheinhardt, 'Jules Verne: génétique et poïétique (1867–1877)', PhD thesis, University of Paris III, 2005, 293.
- ⁴ Jean-Michel Margot (ed.), *Jules Verne en son temps vu par ses contemporains francophones 1863–1905* (Amiens, 2004), 44; Compère and Margot, *Entretiens avec Jules Verne*, 216; Raymond Ducrest de Villeneuve, unpublished, untitled illustrated biography of Verne in typescript form (1930—kept at Nantes Municipal Library), 109; M[arguerite] Allotte de la Fuÿe, *Jules Verne* (Paris, 1928), 162 (trans. Erik de Mauny, Staples Press, London, 1954).
- ⁵ Margot, *Jules Verne vu par ses contemporains*, 43.
- ⁶ Municipal Library, www.arkhenum.fr/bm_nantes/jules_verne (last accessed 31 January 2008).
- ⁷ The manuscript version confirms that the opening chapters did undergo a considerable number of changes, for example, the identity of the town where Mick is first seen, Westport being finally chosen (I i—letter of 4 January 1893). (References to Verne's works are to the French edition and consist of the chapter number—in lower case roman—and volume number if any.)
- ⁸ I xii; I xiii; II xiii; letter of 20 April 1893.
- ⁹ A facsimile of the 1895 translation was published on www.lulu.com in 2007.
- ¹⁰ Compère and Margot, *Entretiens avec Jules Verne*, 93.
- ¹¹ Ghislain de Diesbach, *Le tour de Jules Verne en quatre-vingts livres* (Paris, 1969), 72; Herbert R. Lottman, *Jules Verne. An exploratory biography* (New York, 1996), 285; Marie-Hélène Huet, *L'histoire des voyages extraordinaires: essai sur l'oeuvre de Jules Verne* (Paris, 1973), 103; Jean Jules-Verne, *Jules Verne: a biography*, trans. and adapted by Roger Greaves (New York, 1976), 179; Daniel Compère, *Jules Verne: parcours d'une oeuvre* (Amiens, 1996), 106; Brian E. Rainey, 'Jules Verne and Ireland', *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Western Society for French History* (Canada) 10 (1984), 154.
- ¹² Francis Lacassin, 'Jules Verne et le roman des larmes', in Jules Verne, *P'tit Bonhomme* (Paris, 1978), 11; Laurence Sudret, 'P'tit-Bonhomme, l'hommage de Verne à Dickens', *Bulletin de la Société Jules Verne* 161 (2007), 30.
- ¹³ This plot summary follows the original version—some of the episodes mentioned are absent from the English translation.
- ¹⁴ In Verne's French text, it is a 'Ragged School', an institution linked with Dickens, following his visit to one in 1843.
- ¹⁵ In the original French, the dog is called Birk, perhaps after Colonel Ricard O'Sullivan Burke (1838–1922), featured in Verne's *The Kip Brothers* (1903—II x).

