

**Jules Verne**

**The Biography**

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Foreword by Arthur C. Clarke

## Introduction

“Joolsvurn” is an invisible man. Probably the most translated writer in the world (*JVEST* 43), he remains the opposite of a classic: a household name from Teesside to Tibet, but shunned by the school curricula and histories of literature. Although his intelligence and technique have created hypnotic page-turners, some bookshops seem unaware he actually wrote novels.<sup>1</sup>

But why study the life of Jules Verne (1828–1905)? Quite simply, to understand his influence on the modern world, arguably as great as anyone’s. Verne is one of the most read of all writers—nine times as much as the next Frenchman. He invented a new genre, although not the one associated with his name. His books dominate the box office. But still their creator is ignored, the life a black box.

The crux of the matter lies in his reputation. There has been a misunderstanding of Verne’s work in Britain and America. He did not write for children; he cannot be said to have published science fiction; and he was not pro-technology.

Of his many scores of works, three are world famous. In *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1864), Dr Lidenbrock and Axel enter the crater of Snæfells in Iceland and head down through the strata of geological time. They discover a lost world containing the body of a white man, live sea-monsters, and a gigantic figure herding mastodons, before riding a volcanic eruption back up to the surface.

*Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Seas* (1869)—to give the right title—presents Captain Nemo and his beloved *Nautilus* through the eyes of his obtuse prisoner, Dr Aronnax. The two commune with the ruins of Atlantis, dive below the ice-cap to conquer the South Pole, fight off hordes of Papuans and giant squid, and finally plunge into the Maelstrom. But much of the interest comes from the anguish gripping the sombre captain, and at the end a shocked Aronnax concludes that he is going round sinking ships. (The published versions are summarised here; the manuscripts are very different.)

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<sup>1</sup> The present edition is updated and revised from *Jules Verne: The Definitive Biography* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth, 2006). It incorporates extensive new material about the radical changes forced on Verne’s novels.

In *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1872), Fogg—stiff, repressed, British—bets the Reform Club that he can circle the globe in a stipulated time. With an irrepressible Frenchman and an Indian beauty, he traverses dense jungle, explores Hong Kong, shoots a few Sioux, and chops up his boat for fuel—only to get back five minutes late. But he has gained a day by travelling eastwards, and makes a triumphant entrance to his club.

Five other works written in the same decade are of similar interest. *Paris in the Twentieth Century* (1860–3) is set in 1960, complete with cars, faxes, pollution, Americanisation, and degradation of the language and lifestyle; the poet hero fails in love and work and succumbs to cold, hunger, and isolation. This anti-science fiction novel was unequivocally rejected by Verne's publisher, Hetzel.

*The Adventures of Captain Hatteras* (1864), with its poetic settings and riveting authenticity, features a Briton's quest for the North Pole. Setting off via Baffin Bay, Hatteras's expedition undergoes hunger, frostbite, and disease. After various tragedies, the survivors discover an open Polar Sea and sail on. At 90 degrees north surges an island in full eruption. As the captain dives into the volcano to reach the absolute Pole, his American rival drags him back. Hatteras's failure drives him mad.

The good-humoured *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865) describes preparations for a manned launch from Florida, monitored by a giant telescope in the Rockies. However, the target is missed and the volume ends with the astronauts lost in orbit round the moon.

The dazzling story "Edom" features Atlantis and a haughty twenty-first-century Sinitic humanity, which slowly realises it is trapped in a recurrent cycle of destruction and rebirth: almost the only real science fiction under Verne's name.

In *The Mysterious Island* (1874), five Northern balloonists escape the American Civil War to land on a Pacific landmass. They proceed to colonise it while marvelling at a series of providential events. Eventually they find a stranded *Nautilus* and a dying Nemo, renouncing his anarchistic activism for good deeds, piety, and jingoism, before the island blows up.

Our understanding of Verne passes through generations of interpretations and by-products. Unfortunately, the majority of works in English are doubly fakes, betrayals of censored works. Not

a single word of chapter 1 in the most popular English *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, for instance, corresponds to the French original; and a majority of editions of *Twenty Thousand Leagues* abridge the novel by a quarter. In the English Verne the heroes visit the “disagreeable territories of Nebraska” or “jump over” part of an island; reference is made to “prunes” or “Galilee”; and Napoleon dies broken-hearted in “St Helen’s”. Verne himself wrote “the Badlands”, “blowing up”, “plums”, “Galileo”, and “St Helena”! It is these bowdlerised hack jobs that films and commentary have often been based on.

In France Verne is the author generating the largest number of literary analyses, but his life still remains largely virgin territory. My reservation about even the best scholarship is methodological. It has invariably addressed the intellectual history of Verne’s writings, but neglected his everyday life. Let us consider the following list, almost Vernian in its scope.

No biography has traced Verne’s family tree back to the fifteenth century. None has analysed his early environment. None has identified his best friends or traced his path to nursery school, to his grandmother’s, or to church. No one has presented his family’s links with the slave trade, his visits to Britain, or the attic rooms he lived in.

No English or French biography has mentioned a full-length treasure trove about the writer’s early life. No biography has benefited from a unique, Borgesian collection of every article ever written on Verne, lovingly collected and catalogued by Swiss–American and Anglo–Dutch researchers. No biographer has examined every work published by Verne.

But this is still only part of the story. Although *Jules Verne* will concentrate on the man himself, the writing cannot be ignored. Verne’s passing off and borrowing started as private matters, but ended up in court.

Other discoveries include the writer’s correspondence with his family, including ejaculatory and scatological imagery and banned worldwide; 1,400 letters to the two Hetzels, published in 2006; and many interviews with British journalists. (None of these volumes, I’m afraid, is available in English.)

Nevertheless, I would claim that these advances pale in significance beside one fact. The texts lacerated by the English

“translators” already betrayed the novelist, for the works devoured by hundreds of millions were altered by the French publisher.

Scholars have pored over every draft of quite minor literary pieces, but not those of the only universal Frenchman. For most of their existence, Verne’s manuscripts remained about as accessible as the Chinese Politburo minutes.

I was fortunate enough to obtain under-the-counter copies (becoming the first person to see the set since Verne).