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Terres Australes: rewriting Australia's French history (with the help of Jules Verne)

Abstract:

The weaving of fiction through the framework of history can be a challenging occupation. My interest in writing maritime historical fiction or adventure stories inspired by the French voyages of discovery to the Indian and Pacific Oceans in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries has led me to seek models for this process of adaptation. Jules Verne was renowned for his intertextual use of nonfiction source material in his novels. As part of an exegetical process for writing my own novel I embarked upon a research project with my co-author to study the way in which Verne had incorporated passages from the voyages of the French Pacific explorer Dumont d'Urville (1826-29 and 1837-40) into *Twenty Thousand leagues under the Sea* (1867). Verne draws upon this factual account, not only for accurate content, but also for narrative structure and literary devices. More interesting though, is the way in which he adapts and re-arranges factual material to suit the demands of an adventure story, in particular simplifying characters and exaggerating events for dramatic effect. The influence of these changes on character and plot reveal much about the demands of adventure stories, as well as Verne's own socio-political framework.

Biographical notes:

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Australia's French history

Australia's history is largely an Anglophone one. Not only is it predominantly written in English, but it is also predominantly written with a focus on English exploration and colonisation. Ask a class of university students who the first European to discover Australia was and the majority will answer James Cook. Despite efforts to counter this English focus, the mainstream school history curriculum, and the books available to support that curriculum, tend to give less attention to the role of earlier European explorers, much less Asian explorers or indeed our extraordinarily long and rich indigenous history (Parkes 2007). My interest as a creative writer then, is in explicitly rewriting our narrowly English history into a broader view which, in this case, incorporates a French perspective.

The French were early rivals to the English exploration of Australia. Indeed, it has been argued that French exploration, and a fear of French territorial claims, often fuelled English activity in the region (e.g. Dunmore 1969). Cook was sent to the Pacific following reports of Bougainville's highly successful voyage. Flinders was sent in direct response to Baudin's voyage. Colonies were established in Perth, Melbourne and Hobart, at least partially in response to the presence of French exploration vessels, which gave rise to unfounded fears of French colonial intentions.

French Pacific exploration

From 1766 to 1840, the French government sent many well-equipped, state-funded scientific expeditions to the Pacific and Indian Ocean regions (Clode and Harrison 2013). Initially, these voyages were intended to locate, map or document the extent of the theoretical 'Great South Land' as well as to establish whether or not the lands later known as Australia and New Zealand were connected to any such larger land mass. In later years, the voyages focussed on completing accurate maps of the regions as well as documenting natural history and anthropological information. While territorial and financial opportunities were always an underlying interest, the primary overt goal of these voyages was scientific and exploratory (Clode and Harrison 2013).

I have previously written a narrative nonfiction book on a range of these French voyages (Clode 2007), starting with the missing Lapérouse voyage which famously left Botany Bay just after meeting with the First Fleet and was never seen again. I finished with the last voyage of Dumont d'Urville, arguably the greatest of the French explorers of this period, who not only located the Lapérouse shipwreck in the Santa Cruz islands but also was the first to establish Antarctica as a land mass.

In order to cover this long timeframe I used an episodic, single scene structure to write a chapter from each of the voyages (or sometimes from historical figures in France). Chapters were structured chronologically and provided overlapping references to previous voyages. In order to minimise the appearance of retrospective historical interpretation, I wrote *Voyages to the South Seas* in a narrative form, in third person, but with each chapter focalised through a major character (usually the commander). The book was commercially and critically successful. Both general and specialist reviewers were positive about the approach (e.g. Fornarsiero 2007),

although some non-specialist academic readers struggled with the reconstruction of historical events (Powell 2009) even though some of the events they felt to be overdramatised were, in fact, directly attributable to the documented historical record.

Each expedition in *Voyages to the South Seas* took some 2-4 years, involving 2-300 men (and some women) over thousands of miles of ocean and incorporated several continents. Compressing those voyages into a short chapter each naturally missed much of the drama and interest in each voyage. I had also not been able to deal with some of the earlier voyages, such as Kerguelen's remarkable voyage which led to a French claim to Western Australia in 1772.

Adapting to fiction

I decided to tackle these voyages again, this time in a fictional form. This approach offers much greater narrative freedom and avoids some of the constraints of strict historical interpretation which had hampered the narrative nonfiction approach. More importantly, historical fiction has the possibility of reaching a far greater, potentially international, audience.

Adapting historical sea journeys into a fictional form is an inherently challenging process. Among sailors, sea voyages are commonly characterised as long periods of boredom punctuated by intense periods of life-threatening terror. Nonetheless, there are many models, most notably maritime historical fiction, such as C. S. Foster's classic *Hornblower* series, Alexander Kent's *Bolitho* series and Patrick O'Brien's *Master and Commander* series. This genre typically follows the career of an English commander from midshipmen to Admiral through various battles during the Napoleonic period. Thus these books are almost exclusively English, have French enemies, follow a particular individual career path and are focused around major maritime battles.

Exploration narratives, on the other hand, are characterised by a lack of military conflict. These expeditions were explicitly excluded from the many wars between the English and the French by a system of mutually agreed international passports – granting them free passage and immunity from military engagement (de Beer 1960). I would have to look elsewhere for my models of maritime story structure.

The adventure story model

Another popular genre which somewhat resembles these voyages, are the adventure stories, many of which have a particular Pacific focus. These stories originate from Daniel Defoe's classic *Robinson Crusoe* which was based on the true story of Alexander Selkirk. Such stories became particularly popular in the late 19th century through the work of Robert Louis Stevenson (*Treasure Island, Ebb Tide*), R. M. Ballantyne (*The Coral Island*), J. D. Wyss (*Swiss Family Robinson*) and, of course, the work of Jules Verne (*Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea, The Mysterious Island*).

Jules Verne is of particular interest because he is a French author. While robinsonades were popular with other French writers (such as *Les deux Robinsons ou aventures merveilleuses de deux enfants qui cherchent leur mère* by Eugénie Foa and *Le Robinson de douze ans* by Mme Malles de Beaulieu), few were translated and became as influential as Verne in English literature. Additionally, Verne is well known for his intertextual use of material from both fictional and nonfictional sources (Evans 1996). Verne's stories often feature elements from French fairytales and the works of Baudelaire, Scott and Poe. His intertextuality culminated in 'completing' Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* with *An Antarctic Mystery* (also known as *The Sphinx in the Icefields*) as well as writing a sequel to Johann Wyss's *Swiss Family Robinson* with *The Castaways of the Flag*.

Some work has traced the origins of Verne's technological innovations in 19th century science (de Vries-Uitterweerd 2011; Butcher 2009) or identified the geographic locations of his stories (e.g. Margot 2012). Much less study has been devoted to the way in which Verne incorporates nonfiction source material into his stories and which Compere (2005) argues are less well-integrated than fictional references, retaining an '*aspect étranger*' (171) within Verne's writing.

Comparing Dumont d'Urville and Verne

An obvious source of material in *Twenty Thousand Leagues* are the voyages of one of France's great Pacific explorers, Dumont d'Urville. In both narratives, the ships visit the wreck site of Lapérouse in Vanikoro. Both ships are trapped in Antarctic Ice. Both ships are grounded attempting to pass through Torres Strait (between Australia and New Guinea) and both ships meet with aggression from Indigenous inhabitants. Dumont d'Urville's voyages were famous in France at the time Verne was writing. Verne had at least some of Dumont d'Urville's books in his library (Dehs 2011) and had already written authoritative accounts of Dumont d'Urville's voyages in his nonfiction books of great navigational voyages. The explorer is explicitly referenced in the text of *Twenty Thousand Leagues* so there is little doubt that Dumont d'Urville's work was the direct source of inspiration for sections of Verne's novel.

Despite specific scene similarities, these narratives take very different forms. Verne's novel, of just over 100,000 words, is considerably smaller than the accounts of Dumont d'Urville's voyages which, for his final voyage, included a ten-volume *histoire* and *atlas pittoresque*, in addition to twelve specialist scientific volumes and five technical atlases (1841-54). Verne's narrative is a fast-paced action story. Dumont d'Urville's account is anything but pacy. How did Verne make use of this material? How did he adapt and abridge the material for Dumont d'Urville's voyage into his own fictional voyage of the Nautilus?

Both accounts are translated into English, although often in a significantly abridged form and, in the case of Verne, with many errors (Derbyshire 2006). In order to complete this research, I collaborated with native French speaker and children's literature scholar, Christele Maizonniaux. Christele compared the original French first edition text of Verne with that published account of Dumont d'Urville. In a longer, more detailed account of that research (Clode and Maizonniaux, in prep), we report on

the original French language analysis but, for convenience, here we will use English translations to summarise that analysis.

We found striking similarities in the precise wording used by Verne in his descriptions of scenes inspired by Dumont d'Urville's voyage. Dumont d'Urville describes the remains of Laperouse's shipwreck: 'Scattered here and there and embedded in corals, were anchors, cannons, cannon balls and other objects, especially many lead plates' (Dumont d'Urville 1830-5 v5: 161). Similarly, Verne writes there 'lay anchors, cannons, blocks of iron and lead, embedded in the calcereous concretions' (Verne, ch19). In detailing the reluctance of the native Vanikorans to reveal the fate of the survivors of Laperouse's ships, Dumont d'Urville writes 'It was obvious that these islanders ... had adopted in concert a system of absolute denial' (Dumont d'Urville, 1830-5 v5: 147, see also 159 and 185). Verne writes that: 'The natives, adopting a system of denial and evasion, refused to lead them to the scene of the accident' (Verne, ch19). Such similarities in language can also be found in descriptions of Indigenous people, of ice and of food.

The pedagogical imperative

Both Dumont d'Urville and Verne had explicit pedagogical instructions, but differed significantly in their intended audience. On his final voyage Dumont d'Urville was tasked by the Naval Minister 'to complete the great collection of information gathered by you and other navigators in regions as yet poorly described, but which are nevertheless of great interest to explore to further hydrography, trade and science' (Rosamel 1837, quoted in Rosenman 1989 v2: 317). As a result, his narrative is an informational text and its educational function is overt. Much scientific documentation, for example, appears in the large well-illustrated atlases which document (and often identify for the first time) all the species collected on the voyage. Dumont d'Urville's primary audience, it must be remembered, were highly educated scientists and government officials who had access to the expensive expedition narratives and specialist background knowledge.

Verne had a similar pedagogical imperative but his audience was vastly broader. His books were affordable and aimed at 'bourgeois families', children and lower-class adults (Heywood 2013: 59). According to his publisher, the series *Voyages Extraordinaires* was designed for Verne 'to outline all the geographical, geological, physical, and astronomical knowledge amassed by modern science and to recount, in an entertaining and picturesque format that is his own, the history of the universe' (Hetzl 1866). The requirement for knowledge must be balanced in this case with an imperative to tell an engaging and exciting story. Verne's pedagogy cannot take the same form as Dumont d'Urville's.

Occasionally Verne includes an additional explanatory clause in his writing, but he also utilises a scientific metadiscourse that runs behind the main narrative. Thus different characters may use dialogue to explain things to each other, or the narrator will fill the reader in on factual background, or descriptive text is used to mimic the natural history atlases of the exploration narratives. These techniques allow Verne to address both young and non-specialist audiences.

The artistic and poetic

Interestingly, both Dumont d'Urville and Verne use different aesthetic arts to achieve similar effects. While Verne was an early pioneer of the use of black and white woodcut illustration, his innovations pale to insignificance beside the triumph of artistic works in Dumont d'Urville's atlases. These atlases represent the pinnacle of 19th century natural history illustration and even today retain their exquisite detail, colour and accuracy. In both cases, the use of images carries specific informational (rather than decorative) value. In Dumont d'Urville scientific descriptions must be accompanied by adequate technical illustration to compare specimens and identify new species. In Verne's case, the passages he chooses to have illustrated tend to be pedagogical rather than dramatic turning points in the plot (Evans 1998). Verne also supplements his vision with poetic language.

For two whole hours an aquatic army escorted the Nautilus. As they leapt and frolicked, vying with each other in beauty, brightness, and speed, I distinguished the green wrasse; some bewhiskered mullet, marked with a double line of black; the round-tailed gobies from the genus *Eleotris*, white with violet spots on the back; some Japanese specimens of the genus *Scomber*, a beautiful mackerel of these seas, with a blue body and silvery head; the brilliant azure goldfish, whose name alone describes them; varieties of porgy or gilthead, with variegated fins of blue and yellow; others with horizontal heraldic bars, with a black strip around the caudal area; Others boasting color zones and elegantly corseted with six waistbands, some trumpetfish with fluty beaks, genuine seafaring woodcocks of the seas, specimens of which attain a metre in length; Japanese salamanders; moray eels from the genus *Echidna*, serpents six feet long, with small but keen eyes and a big mouth bristling with teeth; and many other species (ch 14).

These lists, often regarded as deliberately poetic in their original French form (Stolfus 2011: 71), were often abridged in later, particularly English language, editions (Heywood 2013: 61).

Despite this apparent scientific accuracy, Verne is prone to exaggeration. Everything is bigger in Verne. Dumont d'Urville, for whom accuracy is paramount, rarely exaggerates. In Verne, the birds with the largest wingspan in the world, sooty albatrosses, measure four metres across. The reality is 2.2 metres. Verne describes seals ten metres long. The largest seal in the world, male southern elephant seals, are enormous but are actually only 4-6 metres long.

Naturally, Verne's adventure story utilises drama much more frequently than occurs in Dumont d'Urville. Verne does not feel obliged to conform precisely to the historical journey, but alters the path, route and action. His account is third person dramatic, while Dumont d'Urville's account is a first person journal, which follows a daily routine and a strictly chronological path, whether or not anything interesting happens.

The flawed hero

One of the most interesting changes Verne introduces to his narrative relates to the main protagonist. In maritime historical fiction, the main protagonist is generally the commander himself. Although these stories are usually told in third person, the focalisation and point of view generally remains that of the commander (or occasionally a second main character such as Maturin in *The Master and Commander* series). The main protagonist in *Twenty Thousand Leagues* is undoubtedly the commander Captain Nemo. But the first person narrator is Arronax, from whose limited point of view the story is told.

This device allows Verne to provide an externalised view of the commander's behaviour and increase the tension around leadership. There is a lack of narratorial control over events, which increases the narrative drive of the adventure story. Arronax is at the mercy of the erratic and unpredictable Nemo.

By contrast, Dumont d'Urville's actions are all explicable and rational (at least according to him). He is explicitly writing an account of his actions and there is an obvious level of self-justification in his writing. Tensions therefore, are internalised and the opinions offered are all one-sided. Dumont d'Urville's accounts are, however, more personal and more emotional than Arronax's view of Nemo.

There are some similarities in nature between Dumont d'Urville and Nemo. Dumont d'Urville was a polymath and by all accounts a child prodigy, gifted in languages and sciences (Rosenman 1987, v1 xliii-xliv; Duyker 2014). He was less gifted socially, often annoying his superiors with his dogmatic and arrogant requests for recognition of his achievements. Despite an impressive aristocratic heritage he refused to conform to social expectations – rarely wearing shoes or a dress uniform, much to the confusion of visiting English commanders. He was physically indomitable and expected the same of his men and, even though this generated great loyalty and respect from his sailors, it did not always earn him the approbation of weaker souls.

Man against nature

In terms of overall plot, one of the most striking differences between Dumont d'Urville and Verne is the general plot type used. Dumont d'Urville's voyage is very much a story of 'man against nature'. The main threat is always the weather, illness, lack of food, water or shelter. Other people are rarely regarded as a significant threat. French explorers learnt very rapidly the unexpected dangers that Indigenous people might pose to their expeditions, from the tragedies of Lapérouse and Marion du Fresne, and they were careful to establish early their military superiority and ensure that encounters were managed without violence.

By contrast, Verne's main plot is explicitly man against man. Nature, in Verne, follows the tradition of the robinsonnade. Nature is generous and forgiving and, in particular, provides an abundance of food. Food in Dumont d'Urville is always scarce and poor quality, while in Verne it is in excess. Unlike the old wooden sailing ships, which were always at risk of falling apart on the voyage, the sophisticated modern

Nautilus is invulnerable to Nature's storms and dangers. Neither waves, nor rocks, nor ice concern Nemo. His ship has mastered Nature.

The only remaining risk is posed by humans. Dumont d'Urville's analysis of local communities is ethnographically nuanced and complex for the times. Indeed, Dumont d'Urville's work on Pacific cultures formed foundational anthropological work. He noticed, described and mapped the different Polynesian, Melanesian and Micronesian communities across the Pacific (Douglas 2006). Even when his descriptions are unflattering and, by modern standards, racist, they are more commonly specific and individual rather than a general stereotypes. By contrast Verne's natives are not individuals, they are always stereotyped and presented as an amorphous untrustworthy mass.

It seems odd that Verne would deliberately chose to ignore the material in Dumont d'Urville that would provide the opportunity for a more rounded and complex description of his antagonists. Dumont d'Urville was writing in the aftermath of the French revolution, in the golden age of scientific rationalism. Several of his predecessors had written fierce condemnation of the impact of Spanish (Lapérouse) and British (Baudin) colonisation on native populations. Dumont d'Urville himself wrote his own fictionalised account of the impact of colonisation from a Maori perspective (not published until 1992).

By contrast, Verne was writing fifty years later in the period of pre-colonial French imperialism. Some writers have argued that Verne's narratives explicitly wrote into a pre-imperialist agenda that allowed the French to engage in colonial activities.

And yet, despite Verne's exaggeration, dramatization and simplification, his story remains, in the end, less dangerous than that of Dumont d'Urville's. For all Arronax's fears, there is no real risk of death for Verne's protagonist – the technological superiority of the *Nautilus* protects them from all dangers of the sea. Nemo literally laughs in the face of danger. But Dumont d'Urville's reality was filled with death. His men regularly died from illness and injury, particularly during his Antarctic campaigns. Voyages of exploration were regarded as so dangerous that some proposed a 'martyrology of savants' for scientists who went on them (Burkhardt 1977: 12). The prevalence and acceptance of early death in historical accounts may well be problematic for modern writers, even in Verne's time and even more so today.

Lessons for fiction

In conclusion, Verne provides models for the adaptation and incorporation of nonfiction material into dramatic narrative. Rather than attempting to follow historical voyages precisely, he cherry-picks key scenes and incorporates them into his own unique storyline and plot. This resembles, in part, the technique used by script writers to adapt books for film by selecting 10 key scenes and rewriting the story around those plot points. My unwillingness to deviate from the daily itinerary of the historical voyage has undoubtedly posed problems for the narrative drive of my own novel.

Verne's poetic use of information is particularly helpful, reminding us that all language can be lyrical no matter what other functions it plays, nor what source it comes from. 'Information dumping' is perhaps more acceptable when it is beautiful.

Despite writing futuristic novels, Verne provides an excellent illustration of the difficulties writers face in 'rewriting history'. Fiction writers always write into their own times and reflect the social concerns and mores of their own period. 'We write out of who and where and when we are, whether we like it or not, and disguise it how we may' (Atwood 1998: 1504) And yet this tendency conflicts with the need for historical veracity. Verne illustrates this in his over-simplification of 'natives' (which suited his own period of pre-colonial rhetoric), in contrast to the more nuanced writings of the earlier Dumont d'Urville. To what extent should the modern writer reflect modern cultural values or historical realities? Historical fiction may appear to be historically accurate, but it is always a mirror against which we judge our own times. As Furbank puts it:

The historical novelist can hardly hope to illuminate the past. What he or she can do, on the other hand, is use the past to cast light on the present – to highlight those parts of our way of thinking that were not known to a past period – and this is the secret of historical novels that succeed (112).

Verne also writes into a very particular social milieu, in that he explicitly wrote stories for boys, declaring that he 'scrupulously avoided any scene which, say, a boy would not like to think his sister would read' (Belloc 1895). His nonfiction source material also has a strong gender bias. Naval vessels were almost entirely populated by young men and they more commonly interact with men than women when on land (with a few notable exceptions). Although these French voyages are known to have had a surprising number of illicit female participants (Jeanne Baret – Bougainville; Louise Seguin – Kerguelen; Marie Louise Girardin – D'Entrecasteaux; Mary Beckwith – Baudin; Rose de Freycinet – Freycinet), women remain rare on board and only one (Rose de Freycinet) left a written account. The question remains for the modern writer as to whether fiction must replicate and perpetuate the restrictions of the past by excluding women from adventure narratives for the sake of accuracy, or 're-vision' women's engagement in history and adventure through the creative exploration of historical events. As Rich (1979) noted, such 're-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new perspective – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival'.

Verne may well have been puzzled by this feminist imperative to engage with activities and texts from which they have been historically excluded. We probably need to look elsewhere for solutions to that particular problem. But, as a writer who re-visioned his own contemporary world into a future few others were even willing to imagine, Verne would surely have no qualms about appropriating, repurposing, and reconstructing historical events for his own literary purposes. The value of Verne's writing, then, extends far beyond its broad popular legacy. His remarkable literary technique continues to provide a valuable model across many genres for modern creative writers to consider.

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