

Australian translator brings Jules Verne to life

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Mikhail Strogoff

By Jules Verne

Translated by Stephanie Smee

Eagle Books, 337pp, \$55 (HB)

Here is a mystery to ponder: Jules Verne is the world's second most translated author, after Agatha Christie but before Shakespeare. Yet his most loved novel in his native France is unknown to many English-language readers.

One of the few non-natives who has read it is children's author Sophie Masson, and in the foreword to this new translation by Australian Stephanie Smee she is unstinting in her praise.

It turns out that French critics regard *Mikhail Strogoff* as Verne's greatest literary achievement, and avowed fans of the novel include everyone from Roland Barthes to Nicolas Sarkozy. It has never been out of print, was turned into a play almost immediately and with enormous success, and the first of a dozen or so screen adaptations was filmed in 1914.

One explanation for our relative ignorance

of *Mikhail Strogoff* is the variable quality of much early Verne translations. His works — even the famous titles we have heard of — have been treated with deliberate carelessness by many translators: bowdlerised, shoddily edited, rendered into tin-eared English. One translator replaced mere mention of the word “Jew” with anti-Semitic smears. Another left an entire chapter of the original out of their translation.

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Contemporary Verne fans who are bilingual speak in appalled tones of the damage done to Verne's Anglosphere reputation as a result. In a recent *Guardian* opinion piece, author Adam Roberts wrote that he couldn't think of a “major writer who had been so poorly served by translation”. Enter Smee, who has produced only the third English-language version of *Mikhail Strogoff* and the first new translation in more than a century. Her effort abandons the Victorian prolixity of the novel's contemporary “Englishers” and gives us instead a pared-back, nimble, flowing version. She retains the osten-

sible formality that governs much of the original, but is unafraid to reach for more up-to-date locutions when the story demands them.

For those of us whose French is not up to the task of making fine-grained discriminations about word choice and sentence structure Smee's prose is excellent to the degree it never obtrudes on our narrative pleasure. The result is like some heavy piece of 19th-century wooden furniture, stripped back to its original grain.

As Masson explains, *Mikhail Strogoff* is a chase novel. It begins at a canter and is at full gallop within pages. It describes the efforts of

one man, the eponymous hero, to courier a letter from the Tsar of Russia to his brother the Grand Duke during a time of rebellion in Russia's far east. The Tsar is in Moscow. His brother is in Irkutsk.

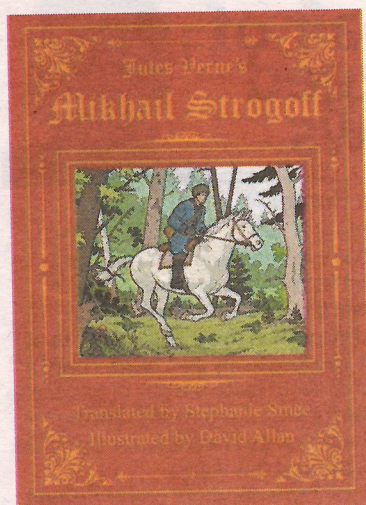
In between lies 5000km of wilderness, including the Volga River and Ural Mountains and, most pertinently, invading Tartar hordes, led by Feofar Khan, a princeling straight out of central casting who is in cahoots with renegade former Russian colonel Ivan Ogareff. The

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rebels have encircled the Grand Duke and he is set to make his final stand. Ogareff's perfidy must be communicated before he does.

Strogoff is a Siberian *ubermensch*, chosen for the task because of his deep childhood knowledge of the lands beyond the Urals, his strength and utter devotion to the Tsar and Russia. He is handsome, proud, physically strong and dutiful to a fault. He should, then, be a vapid cipher of 19th-century masculinity.

But Verne allows him to be an interestingly divided figure, torn between his soldier's duty, filial love, and basic human decency. He turns out to be an admirable and engaging character, one whose guile and valour are arrayed against superhuman demands.

Although the novel cheerfully traffics in some historical inaccuracies — the Tartars, for instance, were well and truly cowed by the time of the novel's 1860s setting — the descriptions of people and place are encyclopedic. Ivan Turgenev was even sent the novel to mine it for inaccuracies, so we can trust that the world through which Strogoff moves, with its wild bears and vast steppes alive with biting flies, its Jewish merchants and handsome gypsies, its Cossack warriors and holy monks, is a true picture of the region's teeming variety.

So exactly described are, say, the rough wagons Strogoff uses as his mode of travel in the mid-sections of the novel that you feel they might be used as a construction guide.

But this historical minutiae is deftly woven into a story that tears along at the speed of its hero. Indeed Strogoff's headlong rush is interrupted only long enough to admit a supporting cast who bring their own perspectives to bear: Harry Blount, the stolid British correspondent for the *Daily Telegraph*, plays straight man to the garrulous French spy Alcide Jolivet, while the beautiful young Nadia Fedor, on a lonely journey to join her father in Siberian exile, provides the romantic interest, though she, too, has her strengths. The characters' paths diverge and intersect with thrilling if implausible timing throughout.

An unfortunate tick in our manner of reading in recent decades is to proceed with one eye fixed on the failings of older authors to more equably and sensitively deal with issues of race, sexuality, gender, imperialism and so on. And *Mikhail Strogoff* contains its share of anachronistic attitudes.

But the good humour and light touch Smee draws from Verne's prose defeats this worthy, if killjoy, approach. It is the kind of novel (and here we should recall other great chase narratives: Geoffrey Household's *Rogue Male*, say, or John Buchan's *John McNab*) whose fealty to narrative progress is so total that all other considerations get pushed to the side.

All considerations except this: Smee's version shows us why as many French intellectuals have celebrated Verne as a "literary" author and true visionary, as common readers have adored his works as vivid genre pieces. *Mikhail Strogoff* is not only a genuine pleasure of a book: it is evidence that, in the hands of an intelligent and sympathetic translator (and an Australian one, to boot) a larger and richer Verne can be brought into view.

Geordie Williamson is a publisher, writer and critic.