



Book Review

Jules Verne, *Jules Verne's Mikhail Strogoff*, translated by Stephanie Smee, illustrations by David Allan, foreword by Sophie Masson, Melbourne, Eagle Books, 2016, 337 p., rrp AU\$ 25.00, ISBN 978-0-99423-400-1.

Available at eaglebooksadventure.com and selected Australian bookshops.

In 2013 Sophie Masson and two artist friends set up Christmas Press, a small specialised press devoted to traditional, beautifully illustrated books for children. Eagle Books is a new imprint within it, specialising this time in classic and contemporary tales of high adventure. What could be more appropriate for the launch title in 2016 than a novel by Jules Verne. It is a new translation, but not of one of the narratives that are so familiar to English-speaking readers such as *Round the World in Eighty Days*, *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* or *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*. Jules Verne's *Michel Strogoff*, first published in 1876, has nothing to do with science fiction; it is a novel of courage, adventure and suspense set in the vast expanses of Russia. This novel has never ceased to be a favourite in France, where it has been frequently adapted into film, animation and comic versions. Sophie Masson calls *Michel Strogoff* not only Verne's best novel but 'the best adventure novel ever written', and she is not alone: there are many who think it is Verne's masterpiece. Nevertheless, after a few reprints of the two early translations and a silent film, this novel did not go on to become part of the Jules Verne canon for English-language readers. This new translation, however, could well help to bring a new generation of readers to a great tale of adventure.

Mikhail Strogoff is a courier of the Tsar who is entrusted with the vital mission of warning the Tsar's brother that a traitor, Ivan Ogareff, intends to betray him to the rebellious Tartar armies now on the march to besiege Irkutsk, the capital of Western Siberia. All telegraphic communications have been cut. Assuming the identity of a Siberian merchant, Mikhail





Book Review

befriends a young girl desperate to join her father exiled in Siberia. They travel as brother and sister on a 5000 kilometre journey across Russia from Moscow to Irkutsk. However, progress is often agonisingly slow because of the terrain, the weather, the land laid waste by the advancing Tartar armies and the retreating population, the decreasing availability of transport, and numerous unexpected setbacks, which provide thrilling scenes of terror and suspense. As time begins to run out and Mikhail is captured by the Tartars, the urgency of his mission makes the novel a real page-turner. At the same time, this otherwise unrelenting series of ordeals is lightened by the affection between Ivan and Nadia and the marvellous comic presence of two rival journalists, an Englishman and a Frenchman, who are never far behind. Verne is also very clever in cutting from one scene to another with almost cinematic skill. There are colourful and dramatic scenes, like the celebration ceremonies for the victorious Tartar troops and the torture of Mikhail and Marfa, Mikhail's mother, which will long remain in the reader's mind.

Mikhail Strogoff is almost a modern superhero. He is handsome, tall, with a huge chest and almost superhuman strength; his brow reveals 'that calm courage of heroes'. At the same time his feet are firmly planted on the ground, on the beloved soil of Russia. He does not achieve his feats of heroism unscathed, but experiences all-too-human pain, both physical and mental. The two principal female characters, Nadia and Marfa, are not the only ones who have to suffer in silence as their love and loyalty are tested to the limit.

The historical anachronisms concerning the Tartar invasions are deliberate and serve Verne's narrative purpose. He had never been to Russia, but as usual he did a great deal of geographical research and used his powers of description to make this vast land come to life as a background to Mikhail's hazardous mission. The journey across Siberia is indeed one of Verne's 'voyages extraordinaires', but one that relies more on real and vivid detail than science fiction. Just as his *Enfants du capitaine Grant* (1868), and to a lesser extent *Mistress Branican* (1891), influenced the way the French readers imagined Australia, *Michel Strogoff* inspired a long-lasting fascination with Russia in France.

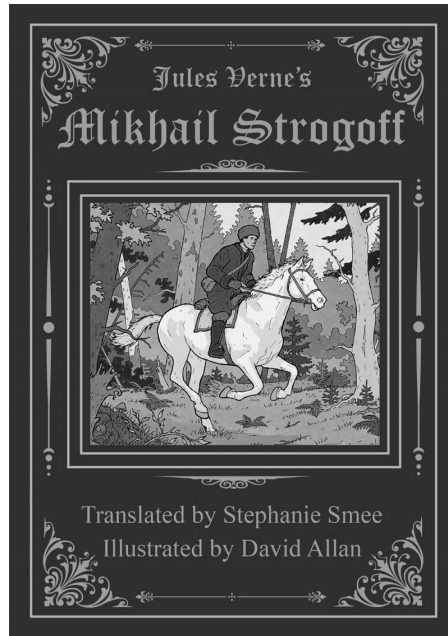
Stephanie Smee has given us the first new translation of this novel for a century. The first two were heavy, wordy and very nineteenth-century, which did not do justice to Verne's much more vivid and lively style. While retaining the generally more formal tone of a historical novel, Smee has





Patricia Clancy

smartened the pace by cleverly incorporating footnotes into the text and choosing a simpler, more evocative vocabulary. The book is well illustrated, although the drawings seem a little tame for the urgency and drama of the plot, especially when compared to the (melo) drama of contemporary illustrations.



The book itself is a delight to read and to look at. Its relatively small format is also very comfortable to hold. My review copy is one of a limited edition of 750, which has been released well before general commercial publication. It is a handsome hard-cover that looks like a nineteenth-century book with gold foil lettering and embellishments on the cover. Inside there are pages of quality cream paper, a coloured map of Mikhail's journey as endpapers and a satin ribbon bookmark—all in all, a fine gift for any lover of novels of high adventure.

Patricia Clancy

Melbourne

