

“LES INDES NOIRES”: THE SCOTTISH CONTEXT¹

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Towards midnight on Friday 26 August 1859, the Caledonian Railway express from Liverpool pulled into Edinburgh's Lothian Road terminus. As the smoke and steam cleared, two men emerged. One of them was Jules Verne, then aged 31 and practically unknown but who was to become the fourth most translated author in the world. With him was a musician friend, Aristide Hignard, who was to be Verne's companion on their brief tour of Scotland. As he stepped onto the platform so Verne took a crucial step in his lifelong love affair with Scotland and the Scots. Few Scots today are aware of the famous author's special connection with their country. In fact, Verne claimed Scottish ancestry on his mother's side, from a fifteenth century archer, N. Allott, in the service of Louis XI of France. Having served the king with distinction, he was awarded the noble title of 'de la Fuÿe', signifying the right to own a dovecot, and the family name became 'Allotte de la Fuÿe'. Moreover, from his youth, Verne had revelled in the works of Sir Walter Scott, popularised in Europe by the Romantic movement, which Verne had read avidly in translation. He had delved widely into Scottish history and as a Breton, sympathised with the notion of Scotland, like Ireland, as being downtrodden and exploited by the English.

This absorption with all things Scottish is reflected in his fiction. Two novels are entirely set in Scotland, *Les Indes noires* and *Le Rayon vert*, and three others are located in part in Scotland. Moreover, Verne delighted in populating his novels with Scottish characters, invariably cast in a heroic mould as aristocrats, mariners, explorers or tycoons. At least 40 Scots feature in his adventure novels as major or minor characters. However, it is doubtful if Scotland would have featured so prominently in his work had Verne not had an opportunity to visit the country unexpectedly in 1859. At this time, having qualified as a lawyer in Paris and recently married, Verne was in fact more interested in writing for the theatre. In 1859, the brother of his friend Hignard offered the pair a sea passage to Liverpool and thus an opportunity to visit Scotland. Verne set off in great excitement. This was to be his first journey abroad and his first encounter with mountains and lakes. The visit to Scotland lasted only five days but he did not waste a moment; we must consider it in some detail since it coloured his future writing on Scotland and the plot of *Les Indes noires* in particular. Indeed some critics consider that his encounter with Scotland was to provide a template for the series of over 60 novels known as the *Voyages Extraordinaires*. These novels blend travel, adventure, exoticism, historical detail and scientific imagination in specific geographical regions. While in most cases, the creations were the produce of painstaking research, his Scottish novels were born of firsthand experience. In this sense we may claim that Verne is at his most authentic when writing about Scotland.

On the day after their arrival, the friends spent the morning exploring the Old Town and as they followed the Royal Mile, Verne regaled Hignard with scenes from Scott's *Heart of Midlothian*. After recounting historical events at Holyrood Palace, Verne ascended Arthur's Seat, his first 'mountain'. The view from the summit filled Verne with amazement and in his account of their journey³ he concludes an emotional description with the sentence 'No pen can do justice to this breathtaking scene'. The two friends descend to Portobello and a numbing swim before returning to the city centre. They make their way through the New Town to Inverleith Row where a distant relative of Hignard, a prominent businessman, resided close to the Botanic Gardens. Verne was charmed by the eldest daughter, Amelia, and she agreed to draft an itinerary for a visit to the Highlands, which Verne ardently wished to see. A dinner guest was a Catholic priest, the Reverend Smith, who insisted that they should visit him at his brother's castle in Fife on their journey. The following day, the two friends continued exploring the Old Town before returning to Inverleith Row where Amelia handed over her itinerary and the Reverend Smith repeated his invitation to lunch.

Thus, the following morning, Verne and his companion boarded the Stirling steamer at Granton

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³ Verne's account of his travels in England and Scotland was published posthumously in France in 1989 and in translation in English in 1992 as *Backwards to Britain*, Chambers, Edinburgh.

Pier in the teeth of a gale and pouring rain. They disembarked with difficulty at Crombie Point in Fife where, as promised, the priest met them and they walked to Inzievar House near Oakley, the 'castle' belonging to his brother. Verne marvelled at the modernity of the newly built mansion and from its rooftop observed the estate, coal mine and ironworks that were at the origin of the Smith family's wealth. After a hearty lunch and having dried their clothes, Verne and Hignard caught the train to Glasgow via Stirling and lodged at a hotel on George Square. On the following morning, 30 August, the friends explored the cathedral and necropolis, the city centre and the harbour. As compared with Edinburgh, which Verne found magnificent, Glasgow impressed him less though he admired the energy of its industry and port trade and the bustle of the city centre. However, Verne was impatient to head for the Highlands. After lunch, the train was caught to Balloch at the southern tip of Loch Lomond and the pair boarded the *SS Prince Albert*. At once Verne waxed lyrical on the scenery and the stories of the struggles between the MacGregors and Colquhouns and agreed with Scott's opinion that 'Loch Lomond is the fairest of lochs and Ben Lomond the monarch of mountains'. At last, the steamer reached Inversnaid near the head of the loch and after a whisky at the inn, they mounted a coach which took them to Stronachlachar pier on Loch Katrine where the *Rob Roy* was waiting to sail its passengers to the Trossachs. Apart from marvelling at the majestic scenery, Verne now turned his commentary to the supernatural, the goblins and fairies which reportedly populated the shores of the loch. Finally, on disembarking, Verne turned round 'one last time to bid goodbye to those magnificent landscapes whose sublime beauty defies the imagination'.

The remainder of their journey was unremarkable. They spent the night in Stirling and proceeded to Edinburgh the following day where, after revisiting for a last time their favourite streets in the Old Town, they caught the overnight train to London. This précis of Verne's first visit to Scotland is essential in order to understand the action in *Les Indes noires* and as can be seen from the map, the itineraries taken in the plot correspond in detail to Verne's own travel in 1859.

The focus of the novel is an 'underground city', a vast coal mine abandoned as being exhausted then revived on the discovery of vast new seams. A new coalfield, 'New Aberfoyle' is opened and rapidly 'Coal City' is built in a huge cavern on the shores of an underground loch, Loch Malcolm. Verne writes with authority on mining activity but had never visited a Scottish mine. He declined such an opportunity at Oakley due to shortage of time and his material is gained from assiduous reading and a visit to the Anzin coal-mining district of northern France. If he writes convincingly on the technology and organisation of mining, he is less than accurate in his appreciation of geology of Central Scotland. In locating his coalfield close to Aberfoyle, Verne chose a geologically impossible location for mining. It is intriguing to pose the question as to why Verne, who had seen active coal mining in western Fife, should have chosen to situate the action at the foot of the Trossachs, knowing full well that this was geological nonsense. The reader will have no difficulty answering this poser for Verne required specific qualities of landscape and atmosphere for his tale. He needed a landscape of mystery and threat, where the existence of supernatural beings was credible. Moreover, he specifically needed a large loch, which after shattering earth movements would convulsively drain into the mine. As we have noted, the Trossachs and Loch Katrine had left an indelible impression on Verne and provided him with a perfect setting for the combination of mineral, water and the supernatural his story required. Without revealing the details of the plot, the novel can be described as an ingenious blend of the real, the imaginary and the fantastic, enacted above and below ground, in darkness and in daylight and on land and water. If the presence of the supernatural is never distant, the characters in the novel are never less than solid and conform to what Verne perceived as demonstrating the endearing and enduring qualities of the Scot. The former manager, James Starr, who retired to Edinburgh on the closure of the mine, is portrayed as being a highly esteemed but not arrogant gentleman, a pillar of Edinburgh's scientific community but at the same time most at ease when associating with his loyal miners. Simon Ford and his son Harry, former miners who continued to live underground after the closure, are depicted as being physically and morally strong, doers rather than dreamers and clinging to the idea that the mine still had riches to be revealed and that its past glory could be re-found. Simon's wife, Madge, is seen to be calm, practical, warm hearted and a fierce guardian of harmony in the Ford household. As compared with these dogged characters, Harry's friend, Jack Ryan, is fey, a poet, singer and musician. He is a free spirit who brings a touch of lightness to the most sombre circumstances. Nell, the 'child of the cavern', is a young girl discovered abandoned and close to death deep underground. She is by no means a pathetic child but an intelligent,

strong-minded girl, who under Madge's guidance rapidly becomes a young woman and a suitable wife for Harry. Finally, Silfax, Nell's great-grandfather, who has kept her underground all her life, emerges late in the plot as the perpetrator of the supposed supernatural events that punctuate the story. An aged, demented man, he regards the mine as his own and has done his best to drive out the population from Coal City and above all, to prevent the wedding of Nell and Harry. We should not forget a further 'personality', a giant Snowy Owl which plays a crucial role in the climax of the novel. Even as the story finishes with a happy ending, the Snowy Owl is to be observed flitting menacingly above the waters of Loch Malcolm.

The Underground City is thus a dichotomous novel in which half of the action takes place underground, often in darkness, and half above ground, where Verne exploits to the full his experiences from his 1859 visit. Thus the underground sequences give full range to his imaginative powers, whereas above ground he recycles his own journey down to the detail of names of steamers, railway lines and hotels. The description of the view from Arthur's Seat is repeated word for word from his travelogue, as is the experience of the steamer journey up Loch Lomond.

The success of *The Underground City* may be attributed to its multifaceted character. The book can be interpreted, more or less validly, in so many different ways. At a superficial level it might be regarded as a thriller in which as the plot unfolds, the atmosphere of menace and fear builds up to a dramatic crescendo. At a rather less superficial level it can be regarded as a romance in which many manifestations of love are portrayed – the love of Madge for her family, the affection between James Starr and the Fords, the fond nostalgia for the olden days of a strong mining community, the love of music and song on the part of Jack Ryan, the love expressed in the descriptions of mountains and lochs, the romantic love between Nell and Harry, and underlying all this, the love felt by Verne for 'his' Scotland. At the level of literary criticism, the novel may be regarded as being allegorical and particularly an interplay of opposites. Within the vast 'womb' of the cavern, people live their lives in semi-darkness, in a constant temperature, protected from the outside world and nourished with coal by their geological mother. The story is a triumph of opposites, of dark and light, day and night, good and evil, love and hate and rational and supernatural. Yet another dimension is that of social and political commentary. Verne poses the possibility of an alternative lifestyle, a subterranean utopian existence lived in by people living and working for a common cause, in a relatively classless society and lacking the strife and tension of life on the earth's surface. In this sense, the novel lacks reference to the existence in nineteenth century Scottish mines of child and female labour, a horrific accident rate and incidence of chronic ill health and illiteracy. Verne was aware that at this time mineworkers suffered a virtual slave system but the story makes no mention of this and even the owners of New Aberfoyle are not referred to. Just as Verne calmly overlooked the fact that in the creation of the 'English' empire that he so disdained, many of the explorers, entrepreneurs, missionaries, military leaders and shipping magnates that underpinned the imperial endeavour were Scottish, so in *The Underground City* the cruel exploitation, the back-breaking and dangerous work, the poverty-stricken existence, are suppressed in favour of an image of contented family life, a high work ethic and a coherent non-radical society.

Verne paints for us a picture that combines the real world based on his own experience and research, and an imaginary world unconstrained by banal facts. If, for reasons of the plot, New Aberfoyle should be located irrationally, then so be it. Would the story have succeeded so vividly in a more mundane but geologically correct setting, for example between Stirling and Alloa? One must doubt it. Verne needed to exploit the part of Scotland that had most stirred his imagination in 1859.

Jules Verne was born in 1828 in Nantes, and died in March 1905. The year of publication of this translation thus marks the centenary of his death, which will be celebrated world wide including a plethora of new books. It is fitting that one of these commemorative works should be a book set in Scotland and published in Edinburgh, his favourite Scottish city – a fitting dedication to an extraordinary author who deserves to be better known in Scotland.

I. Thompson, 2005

