

### REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS: Jules Verne's Civil War

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## Feature Essay

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**Madden, David** *REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS: Jules Verne's Civil War.*

Jules Verne's Civil War

*The Blockade Runners* (1871) by Jules Verne

*The Mysterious Island* (1875) by Jules Verne

*North Against South* (1887) by Jules Verne

Do you know where and when Nemo, inventor and captain of the famed *Nautilus* submarine, died?

I suppose I should first answer your own question: What has that question to do with the American Civil War? You probably didn't know, as I didn't know until a few days ago, that Jules Verne wrote two Civil War novels within ten years of the end of the war: *The Blockade Runners* (1871) and *The Mysterious Island* (1875), a sequel to *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870). Twelve years later, this French admirer of President Lincoln and General Grant published a third Civil War novel, *North Against South*.

Answer: It was on *Mysterious Island* that Captain Nemo died.

Although it was later published, illustrated, and is even now in print, *The Blockade Runners* is often not even listed as one of Verne's nearly 100 books, probably because it is really a 76-page novella first published in a book as an add-on to *A Floating City* (1871).

In books about Civil War literature, Verne's three novels are not listed. So these novels are for most readers more discoveries than rediscoveries, for which the adjective purely delightful would be well chosen.

The title alone, *The Blockade Runners*, conjures up images of one of the major aspects of the war. A ship out of Glasgow, the *Scotland* runs the blockade into Charleston Harbor to take on a cargo of cotton. The captain's position on the war is ambivalent, but more inclined to the south. A hostile passenger on board is the daughter of an imprisoned abolitionist. Set on a typical ship of its era, this is a simple, vigorous, realistic adventure story, not a science fiction extravaganza.

*Five Weeks in a Balloon* (1863), published during the war, when balloons were in use, anticipates Verne's novel, *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1873) and *The Mysterious Island* (1865), in which five men escape from a Richmond Confederate prison in a balloon. Verne may have seen the famous photograph of Thaddeus Lowe observing a battle from his balloon *Intrepid* and may have known about the Confederate submarine *H. L. Hunley*; he may have known Brutus de Villeroi who created the U. S. Navy's first submarine, the USS *Alligator*. And then again he may not have. What we know he certainly did have was a fertile imagination whose creations in later manifestations now fill the sky and the sea. The novel opens with one wartime invention—a hot air balloon—and closes with another—a submarine—in two of Verne's favorite and famous locales: sky high and deep sea.

Ironically, the escape occurs a month before the war ended, and the time-span of the novel is four years into Reconstruction. For American readers this narrative could well serve as a fable of the Civil War. The escapees are a captain, who served as an engineer in Grant's army; his Negro servant; a reporter; a sailor; the fifteen-year-old orphan son of a sea captain; and the Captain's dog. A storm carries their balloon across America and over the Pacific to a mysterious island where it crashes.

Declaring themselves not castaways, but colonists, they name their New Eden after President Lincoln. The elements are symbolic of American history: the New World Wilderness, the ordeal of adaptation to a hostile environment, the Puritan work ethic, American style ingenuity, and eventual prosperity. They optimistically build a boat. Pirates invade the island and burn the plantation; they are killed by Captain Nemo who has befriended the noble colonists. Nemo is an Indian prince who fought for the independence of his country from the British Empire. When he dies, the *Nautilus* becomes his tomb, which the colonists sink, as he had requested. A volcano on the island erupts but they are rescued by a passing ship. In Iowa, they replicate the idyllic life they had created for

themselves on Lincoln Island.

Movie versions appeared in 1961, the best, and 2005.

Twenty-two years after it ended, the American Civil War still stirred Verne's capacious imagination. In 1887, *North Against South: A Novel of the American Civil War* appeared. His choice of locale was again the sea, with frigates and gunboats in conflict, and ashore in exotic, tropical Florida, mainly the Everglades, as the novel's numerous fine illustrations dotingly show. Antagonism between a northerner and southerner result in a revenge kidnapping. Slavery is a pervasive element, and Indians play a role. The Civil War is rendered at greater length in this novel than in the other two.

Verne has long been one of the world's five most often translated novelists. The complete texts of these novels, with original illustrations, are available free on line. Simply Google each title and you will soon see references to complete texts.

Walt Whitman, who doubted the real war would ever get into the books, would not likely have been satisfied with the creations of Verne or any other foreign writer. Even so, given an interest that produced three novels over almost two decades, we may with some reason expect to discover that the Civil War (perhaps even Civil Wars in general) is a vibrant thread that runs through all Verne's work, published over a half century of creative leaps and bounds. Had I but world enough and time, I would peruse that corpus myself.

Beyond that, knowing the interest that the English, the French, the Germans, and the Italians, among others, showed in our Civil War, we would do well to round up and corral all the suspects into a book of readings and commentaries, inclusive of the often dynamic illustrations, with all their interesting and understandable inaccuracies.

Is there no end to these discoveries and rediscoveries?

No.-----

*David Madden is the author of nine novels, including Sharpshooter: A Novel of the Civil War (1996), nominated for the Pulitzer Prize, and is the author or editor of five other Civil War books: Classics of Civil War Fiction,*

Loss of the Sultana and Reminiscences of Survivors, Beyond the Battlefield, Touching the Web of Southern Writers, and Thomas Wolfe's Civil War; O. Henry's Civil War Surprises *is under consideration*. Civil War Throughout History *is in the planning stage*. *In preparation is a collection of his many essays on and reviews of Civil War histories and literature, Civil War Discoveries and Rediscoveries. He has finished two novels in a trilogy called London Bridge Is Falling Down, and is finishing a third. A member of the Advisory Committee of the Abraham Lincoln Bi-Centennial Commission, he plans to become intensely active in the planning and facilitating of the Sesquicentennial of the Civil War, 2011-2015.*