

The Works (and Quirks) of Alexandre Dumas père

By Charlotte Ashley

It began when I was fourteen years old and read *The Three Musketeers* for the first time in my life. I thought it was the best book I had ever read. "I am going to read every word this man has ever written," I told myself, not sure at the time what it was that I was swearing to do. I imagined that Dumas must have written at least a few other books and I swore I would own them all. My copy of *The Three Musketeers* comprised of two small blue cloth volumes from J.H. Sears and company, ancient-looking books to my inexperienced eyes. I imagined a future in which I owned a whole shelf of similar romances, bound in leather or cloth with intricate gilt-tickled spines; my Dumas collection.

Today I have over seventy-five books bearing Alexandre Dumas père's name, covering thirty-seven of his over 250 works. That his oeuvre would be so big was an unexpected surprise, but a welcome one. From the point of view of a young person without much disposable income, but who nevertheless loves nothing more than to spend long hours scouring the shelves, boxes, basements and hiding-places of used book stores, collecting the works of a prolific but popular author like Alexandre Dumas is a perfect project. His works range from the staggeringly popular and ubiquitously available (*Three Musketeers*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*) to the completely obscure (*Charles the Bold*) and includes plays, short stories, travel diaries, histories, romances, a cookbook and more. Along his works one can find everything from the cheap and plentiful to the rare and expensive.

Once the scope of Dumas' oeuvre had become clear to me, I established some collecting rules. I did not simply want to buy books found and arranged by booksellers, sold to me at the fair price. To me, it is the bookseller who has done the "collecting" in such cases, and I am doing nothing but buying it. I take much greater pleasure in locating the books myself; putting together a hodge-podge little collection of books found one at a time in book stores all over the world.

The first aim of my Dumas collection was simply to *own one copy of everything Dumas ever wrote, regardless of edition or condition*. Because of this seemingly simple aim, my collection contains several books which might not be considered "collectable" to another book lover. Penguin Classics' new (2007) edition of *Nutcracker and Mouse King / The Tale of the Nutcracker* is a widely available paperback with no especially collectable features, but it is the only edition of this work that I have ever seen. Similarly, the Librairie Générale Française 1973 pulp edition of *Les Mohicans de Paris* looks better suited to an airport newsstand than a beloved collection, but it is the only copy I have ever encountered. Unremarkable or damaged books are place-holders in my collection. They will serve until I find a more pleasing edition to replace them.

To that end, the second aim of my collection is to own a *collectable* copy, one in French and one in English, of every work of Alexandre Dumas. What constitutes a collectable copy is really something which suits my fancy. First editions and first translations would be nice, or any other landmark in the history of the publication of the book. But in their

absence *nice* editions will do. Older cloth-bound editions, well put together and in clean condition will suffice. My goal when selecting "better" copies of books to replace placeholder copies is to secure a book which not only looks, aesthetically, pleasing, but which might have a story behind it. My copy of *The Eighth Crusade* published by Hurst & Co. is a good example of such an edition. *The Eighth Crusade* is, in content, the latter part of the romance more commonly published as *The Whites and the Blues* (*Les Blancs et les Bleus*). To the best of my knowledge this text was only published as *The Eighth Crusade* twice, and this Hurst edition is the last such publication, published in the first decade of the twentieth century. So it is not the *first* English edition, but it will most likely be the *last*, as these chapters are now routinely included in *The Whites and the Blues*.

The third aim of my collection is to own that *ideal* copy, in English and in French, of each of Dumas' works. This final step of the "upgrading" of my collection would involve collecting those elusive first editions and first translations. This will surely be a life-long effort. Some more obscure works have had few editions printed and translated over the years and can be generally found for reasonable prices in book shops. But the important editions of Dumas' "big" works, *The Three Musketeers*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *Queen Margot* and others are generally priced in such a way that I don't hold out a lot of hope of ever owning them. Still, I have collected editions which come close enough that I am proud to own them. My 1846 Bureau de L'écho des Feuilletons edition of *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo* represents the dream to me. This two-volume octavo is not the very first publication of *Monte-Cristo*, but is it the first edition of *this text*, corrected, revised and with a new epilogue written by Dumas. This edition appeared within a year of the first publication, and during Dumas' lifetime. My copy is horribly dilapidated - badly foxed, dirty, barely bound with loose leaves at both ends; the spine is torn and tattered and the endpaper is stamped by a bookseller. But ugly though it is, it represents the final stage of my collection. I am not likely to ever have the money or the luck to have a clean, well-kept copy of this book, but I do have *this* copy to remind me what I'm looking for.

The three aims outlined above are a sort of roadmap for gathering a collection that would, if I could ever realize it in the end, look like Frank Wild Reed's Reed-Dumas Collection at the Auckland Public Library or the I. H. Slater Collection of Alexandre Dumas at the University of Texas. But my love of the writing of Alexandre Dumas is rooted in how unmatched he is as a writer of joy, hope, camaraderie, fun and adventure. This timeless *joi de vivre* is something which comes out the works' publishing history, through the continual reprinting, reinvention and adaptation of his work. Publishers all over the world since the minute Dumas set pen to paper have seen how universal the appeal of his work is.

Because his stories are so universally appealing, the publishing history of many of Dumas' works is colourful indeed. Publishers, artists, editors, translators and adaptors have taken all manner of liberties with his work in order to repackage it to countless different audiences. These liberties, these quirky and unexpected takes on the works of Dumas, are welcome in my collection. I am in particular interested in the repackaging and reinterpretation of *Dumas'* work, and have decided specifically to *exclude* works "inspired by" Dumas. The Marvel Illustrated comic book adaptation of *The Three*

Musketeers does, therefore, qualify for my collection; while *The Son of Porthos*, a mid-nineteenth century "sequel" to the *Musketeers* saga attributed to Dumas but in fact written by Paul Mahalin does not interest me. Dumas was a great adaptor of his own works in his time and I think he would have been amused by the reinventions of his stories, but works such as *Son of Porthos* simply smack of fakery.

My collection contains many books which demonstrate this versatility of interpretation. I have collected foreign language editions, such as my Polish edition of *Trzej muszkietierowie* and the Spanish *El Conde De Montecristo* because each bear the "flavour" of their adoptive countries - the Polish edition is a brightly coloured book with four rosy-cheeked men on the cover saluting the reader; while the Spanish *Montecristo* is a serious, brooding volume that cites Dumas' Spanish influences in the introduction. Meanwhile, Penguin Classics' 60th Anniversary Edition of *The Count of Monte Cristo* earned its way into the collection because of the publishers' baffling decision to package it in an entirely inappropriate fluorescent yellow cover, rather than the standard Penguin black.

Perhaps my favourite acquisition is the tackiest book in the collection, Easton Press's edition of the *Three Musketeers* printed as part of their "100 Greatest Books Ever Written" book club. This leather-bound edition is a reprint of the illustrated 1953 "Limited Editions Club" edition, intended, I suspect, for people looking to furnish a library without ever having to read a page. Easton Press's only contribution to the content of the book was a painting of the author and a brief history publication history. To my great delight, Easton Press had got their one task wrong - the painting of "the author" they'd commissioned from artist Richard Sparks was most certainly not Alexandre Dumas *père*, the author of the book, but rather his son, Alexandre Dumas *filis*, the author of *La Dame aux Camelias*. I bought the book on that ground alone. Perhaps the most rewarding part of this revelation was discovering that this mistake was not acknowledged anywhere that I could find by any bookseller or publisher. It feels like my discovery alone, a point I consider collectable that nobody else in the world had even noticed.

These sorts of discoveries drive my love of book collecting. The hunt is almost more enjoyable than owning the books. To maintain that thrill, I have one final rule to collecting: I will not buy books on the internet. I have used websites like amazon.com, abebooks.com and vialibri.net as bibliographical tools, to check stock at a local bookstore, and for quick reference; but I am staunchly opposed to buying collectable books online. That it makes collecting *too easy* is only the first of my complaints with the practice. Book collecting is a material pleasure and can not translate into the virtual world. How am I to make discoveries such as the incorrect portrait of the author in the Easton Press *Three Musketeers* if I am entirely reliant on a bookseller's description of the book? What else might they have missed or misrepresented? And further, what joy can be found in "finding" a book when all one has done is entered a few parameters into a search engine? Lastly, if the practice of book collecting is ever to gain purchase with new generations, it is vitally necessary that used and rare bookstores remain open to the public in the real world, where budding collectors can browse and form mental wishlists, learning about books as they discover their own tastes and interests. I will do everything

in my power to keep those booksellers in business.

This is a collection gathered not just because of my great love of Alexandre Dumas, but out of a love of the form of the book. In pursuit of interesting additions to this collection I have visited book stores in remote corners of three continents and in order to learn more about my subject - the book - I have visited libraries, private book collections, book fairs and exhibits all over the world. What began as an act of fandom has evolved into a serious interest in all aspects of the art and practice of book collecting. I end this essay with the hope that my interest and involvement is part of a greater community, and that my generation can sustain the pursuit in the years to come. Too often recently I have seen favourite booksellers close up shop or move their businesses online, a move which takes them out of view of budding enthusiasts. I hope the future of book collecting will maintain its past and continue to bring satisfaction and delight to those of us who participate.