

A force of nature

The description “une des forces de la nature” was applied by Jules Michelet, the French historian, to his compatriot Alexandre Dumas, often titled *Dumas père* to distinguish him from his son *Dumas fils*. Alexandre was born just two centuries ago, on 24 July 1802, in the village of Villers-Cotterets, at 5.30 in the morning, as he tells us in ‘Mes mémoires’, a massive work of 10 volumes, which he wrote between 1852 and 1855.

Like his close acquaintance Victor Hugo, born in the same year, Dumas was the son of a general, and owed many of his opportunities, as well as some of his disappointments, to that fact. His family on his father’s side belonged to the lesser nobility, the family name being Davy de la Pailleterie, but his grandmother was a Creole from Haiti. This mixed ancestry was responsible for some of the strange quirks from which Alexandre suffered, and sometimes brought him ridicule from critics.

In Villers-Cotterets, in the centre of an enormous royal forest, the young Dumas, living after 1806 with his widowed mother, was allowed to run wild, hunting and shooting, aided and abetted by the forest superintendent, a close relative of the family. He spent some time at the village school, under the Abbé Grégoire, and tells us that his favourite reading was Buffon’s natural history, Robinson Crusoe, the Arabian Nights and the Bible.

An attempt to apprentice him to Maître Mennesson, the local solicitor, and later to another lawyer, Monsieur Lefèvre, failed, and with one of his fellow clerks Dumas made a surreptitious trip to Paris. There he came under the influence of an exiled Swede, Adolphe de Leuven, a young man whose influence was crucial to Alexandre’s future development. That was the beginning of his unbridled literary ambition.

However, the need for pocket money led Dumas to make contact with his father’s former military associates. One of them was so impressed with his handwriting that he used his influence to get the lad a clerking post for the Duc d’Orléans. Although those at the Palais Royal, including the Duke, treated him with sympathy, Alexandre’s leisure compositions gradually took over his entire life. He mixed with other *litterateurs* in Paris, and at first wrote several successful plays. Then, in collaboration with August Maquet, an indefatigable searcher-out of

historical minutiae, his attention turned to novels based on historical situations.

The great turning point came with ‘Les trois mousquetaires’ in 1844, followed by ‘Le Conte de Monte-Cristo’ the following year. On these and their sequels, ‘Cinq ans après’ and ‘Le Viconte de Bragelonne’, Dumas’s popularity with the reading public was assured, but he also left a vast legacy of other quasi-historical works, and he laboured incessantly and at all hours of the day and night.

He took great interest in the use of poisons in history and studied the records of the Borgias and other poison adepts. This interest stemmed from his early years in Paris, when he accompanied his



young doctor friend Thibaut to the Charité Hospital’s dissecting rooms, and with him studied physics and chemistry in the evenings.

Dumas contrasted himself with his namesake J. B. Dumas the chemist, remarking that the chemist was known as “Dumas the savant”, whereas he was “Dumas the ignorant”.

Dumas records a strange incident during an 1832 cholera epidemic, when he contracted the infection and collapsed. By sheer accident he came across half a bottle of ether on a table, consumed it, and was restored overnight after massage with a warming pan by his servants.

Alexandre was a great adventurer, whose contacts with politicians brought him trouble. He travelled all over Europe and had to seek refuge for two years in Brussels. He gave active assistance to Garibaldi in Italy.

He was a great bon-viveur, wrapped up in the social scandals of the Paris theatre world. He was a celebrated cook, and was preyed upon all his life by parasites who flocked about his establishments.

His lavish spending kept him constantly in debt, despite his large revenue, and when he died on 28 November 1870, taking refuge from the Prussian invaders in the house of his son in Puy near Dieppe, he was penniless. But he will always enjoy his reputation as “une des forces de la nature”.

Matter of degree

The patting of a cheek and the slapping of a face will have contrary results, although they are exactly the same thing only varying in degree. — E. S. Ellis: ‘Ancient anodynes’ (1946).

Insidious factor

One of the defining features of what we call a drug — in its special sense of a narcotic, hallucinogen or stimulant, as opposed to the general sense of constituent of a medicine — is that it has the power to alter its consumer’s state of consciousness.

From his earliest days on earth, *Homo sapiens* has been aware of means made available by Mother Nature to remove him for a time from the humdrum or stressful incidents of life and offer him the illusion that heaven lies within his reach. Natural products, particularly those of the plant kingdom, have been exploited in their thousands, but none more widely within civilised times than alcohol and tobacco, ethanol and nicotine. Yet still we persist in classifying these not as drugs but as types of food, and our laws make the careful distinction even more clear cut.

In the *British Medical Journal* for 15 June, Alex Paton, a retired physician and an adviser to Alcohol Concern, condemns our national strategy against alcohol misuse, asserting that no political party intends to do anything to reduce it. True, in 1991 a government report entitled “Health of the nation” proposed a reduction of one third by 2005 of the number of people consuming alcohol over the sensible limit (whatever that may be). Nevertheless, the number of heavy drinkers has increased since then. Other European countries have done no better. Despite its pious suggestion, Britain has remained reliant on alcohol taxes, committed to making alcohol more widely available, and under the domination of a powerful drinks industry. Consumption has risen, despite arguments on the need to tighten advertising and to discourage youngsters from drinking. A recommendation to lower the blood alcohol limit for car drivers to 50mg/100ml has been rejected, and deaths resulting from drink driving are increasing.

Any proposal for a national alcohol strategy is weakened by a lack of public anxiety, except over violence and crime. Decreasing the availability of cheap alcoholic beverages and increasing their cost is thought to be a recipe for political disaster. Yet seven million people in Britain drink more than is good for them, and doctors in general avoid dealing with alcoholics whenever possible.

Health professionals, including pharmacists, who come into contact with alcohol misusers are aware that alcohol increases the chances of serious reactions from legitimate medicines, and the alcoholic is unlikely to discriminate when other more hazardous materials affecting central nervous system function come his way.

The cost of alcohol to society is enormous, but few suggestions are offered concerning methods of dealing with it. Unfortunately like all substances we can classify as drugs, it is essentially addictive and the habit incredibly difficult to overcome.