

Alexandre Dumas (1802-1870)

BLACK EUROPEANS: A British Library Online Gallery feature by guest curator Mike Phillips

Thomas-Alexandre Dumas was the son of Marquis Alexandre-Antoine Davy de la Pailleterie, and a slave, Louise-Céssette Dumas, from the Caribbean island colony of Saint Domingue (or Santo Domingo, known as Haiti after 1804). Returning to France in 1780, De La Pailleterie consented to his son joining the army on condition that he did not use his name.

Thomas-Alexandre Dumas' courage and strength became legendary and by 1793 he was a general at 31. Following a successful campaign with Napoleon in Egypt, Dumas seemed set for a brilliant future but, because of his involvement in a republican plot, he was despatched to France, captured during the journey and imprisoned. Freed after 20 months, he was lame, deaf in one ear, partly paralysed and penniless. At the age of 35 he was obliged to retire to Villers-Cotterêts, a quiet village near Paris where he had married Marie-Louise Elizabeth Labouret in 1792. Alexandre was born on 24 July 1802. Madame Dumas was in raptures because of his fair skin and blue eyes. A few days before she had seen a puppet show with a black devil called Berlick, and she had been terrified at the prospect of giving birth to a Berlick.

Alexandre adored his father, who died in 1806. Told that his father been taken away by God the four-year-old Dumas angrily declared his intention of going up to heaven and demanding satisfaction. In adult life he was to fictionalise many of his father's real life exploits in his famous novel *The Three Musketeers*.

Madame Dumas now lived with her parents in their *hôtel*, and the young Dumas spent his time wandering out of doors in the woods, catching birds, hunting, and exploring the neighbourhood. He learnt fencing from the local fencing-master, and at 10 years old harangued adults with complete assurance. Around this time his mother decided to send him to the local seminary to train for the priesthood, but Dumas settled the matter by running away and living in the woods until his mother gave up the idea.

In June 1813 Alexander saw a carriage careering through the main street of the town. Inside he glimpsed the profile of a man: Napoleon, on his way to take command of the army. Several days later he saw the same carriage speeding by in the other direction. Napoleon again, this time crushed and defeated. These two contrasting images fixed themselves in Dumas' memory forever. To Madame Dumas this was the eclipse of her husband's enemy, and she gave her teenage son the choice of what to call himself. As Davy de la Pailleterie he might be able to get a position with the royal family. As Dumas he had no prospects at all. Dumas didn't hesitate in choosing his father's name.

At the age of 15 Dumas' only useful skill was his beautiful handwriting, which allowed him to enter the office of the local notary as his third clerk.

He continued to prefer the outdoor life, but the notary was a liberal in his politics, and Dumas had the opportunity to begin reading liberal and revolutionary literature. His good looks fostered his vanity, he seduced a young woman in the town, and he was promoted to second clerk. He might have established himself as a local worthy, but temptation suddenly appeared in the form of young nobleman, Adolphe de Leuven, who visited Villers-Cotterêts, befriended Dumas, and took him on his first trip to the Paris theatre in November 1822. At the Théâtre-Français Adolphe introduced the famous actor Talma. "I'm a notary's clerk", Dumas stammered. "Bah", replied Talma, "Corneille was an attorney's clerk." Returning home Dumas began searching novels for suitable subjects to turn into plays, and plotted his escape. This turned out to be simple. One of his talents was at billiards, and one evening he won 90 francs, a small fortune, enough for a coach to Paris and to keep him there while he found his feet. Almost without delay Dumas said goodbye to his childhood and set out to conquer Paris.

The feelings of Dumas' great hero D'Artagnan as he entered Paris resembled those of his creator. In May 1823 Dumas had in his pocket several letters of introduction to old friends of his father, written by his mother. It had been all she could give him. At first he met with indifference, but when he approached General Foy, administrator of the Duc d'Orléans' office and an old friend of his father's, the general exclaimed over his beautiful handwriting and got him a post as a junior clerk with the Duc d'Orléans.

He lived cheaply in a room facing the Opéra-Comique. His fellow clerks laughed at his unfashionable frock-coat and mocked his kinky hair, which stood out all over his head like a mane. He couldn't afford another coat, but he had a haircut. He now worked harder at copying than he had in Villers-Cotterêts, but he had no *entrée* to the world of fashion and the arts. But Dumas was not a man to stand still and he soon improved his situation a little through friendship with Catherine Lebay, who lived on the same landing. She was separated from her husband, owned a linen shop, and had two rooms. Living together expanded their living space and now Dumas had an apartment, his first in Paris.

Working for the Duc d'Orléans taught Dumas one important thing: how little he knew. Courageously, he began educating himself, reading at the office, and at home. He took lessons in physics, chemistry and biology at a nearby hospital. In the middle of this effort Catherine gave birth to a boy on 27 July 1824 whom he named, inevitably, Alexandre. At the same time his mother arrived from Villers-Cotterêts. He rented her a nearby apartment, increasing his financial responsibilities to two households and four persons. The Duc didn't pay enough and Dumas determined to write his way out of trouble. He wrote a vaudeville sketch with two others, which was performed with mild success. With his share of the fee Alexandre printed his book *Nouvelles contemporaines*, which sold four copies. At this point he discovered the history of an assassination involving Queen Christina of Sweden. In a flash he decided that he would write the story as a melodrama, with terrible overpowering emotions and ignoring the rules of classic French drama. The classic unities were merely

organised suppression, he told himself, and his play would find its form from the emotions and actions of the characters. In this way, hardly knowing anything about the traditions he was confronting, Dumas found the formula for a new age of popular French drama.

Christine was painful to write. In the evening the baby cried, and once Dumas seized him by the arm and threw him at the bed. "I can still see myself in the air", the younger Dumas used to say years later. At the Duc's palace his superiors thought that if he wrote at all, he should be writing classical literature, but Dumas declared firmly that he would write his way or not at all. Finishing the play, he persevered in securing an introduction to Baron Taylor, Commissary Royal of the Théâtre-Français. Taylor received Dumas in his bath, listened to the play, liked it, and put it forward to his committee which approved its production. Dumas now began to frequent the salon of Monsieur Nodier, librarian of the Arsenal, who had introduced him to Taylor. He now met most of the writers and artists who would be his friends and enemies for the rest of his life. Nodier became a kindly mentor who began to fill the gaps in his education. Dumas also began cultivating the former newspaper editor Matthew-Guillaume Villenave, who had a huge library and collection of literary memorabilia. Villenave had a passionately jealous nature, and he mounted a strict guard over his elderly wife and his daughter, Melanie Waldor, who was married to an army captain usually absent in pursuit of his military career. Melanie was five years older than Dumas, but he set out to court her, winning over Villenave by showing him some correspondence between his father and Napoleon. Dumas had already separated from Catherine Lebay, and now he intended to enjoy himself.

Christine had seemed to be the stepping stone to Dumas' first big success, but during rehearsals the enterprise stalled because of clashes with Madame Mars, the leading actress, and eventually Dumas gave up. At the same time he found the subject for another historical drama, *Henri III et sa coeur*. Henri was accepted by the Théâtre-Français on 17 September 1828. But in the run-up to the production Dumas was summoned to the head of the Duc's office, who explained that literature and administration could not live together. "Choose." Predictably Dumas gave up the job, and went off to the banker Lafitte to borrow 3000 francs, leaving the manuscript of *Henri III* as a pledge. The first night was on 11 February 1829. The Duc d'Orléans, soon to be King Louis-Philippe, was in the audience with his family, honouring his former employee.

Dumas, getting dressed, couldn't find a collar to wear so he cut one out of cardboard. In the theatre all his dramatic devices worked. A scene where the Duc de Guise twists his wife's hand with a steel gauntlet had been argued over, but when Madame Mars cried out piteously the audience shuddered. Afterwards a tumult of applause broke out, the audience standing up "as if seized by madness". Dumas had arrived. Classical critics denounced the play, but the young romantics hailed him as their leader, and in the wake of his success, the Duc employed him again, as librarian: a sinecure with a larger salary.

In the years following his great success more serious issues were waiting in the wings. In July 1830 Charles X was deposed and replaced by the Duc d'Orléans, now Louis-Philippe. Dumas called himself a republican - not out of any great conviction but because his father had been one - but in a preface to his next play, *Napoléon Bonaparte*, he declared his opposition to the regime, and his devotion to the republican cause. Louis-Philippe's comment on reading it was, "just a big schoolboy". The play was relatively unsuccessful, and Dumas turned to his next project, taking over the Théâtre-Français with Victor Hugo - but this too came to nothing. In despair he returned to the play *Antony*, the story of a love affair which he had written in the throes of a jealous quarrel with Melanie. The play came out on 3 May 1831 and was an even greater success than *Henri III*. It attacked conventional ideas of marriage, idealised romantic love, and ended in murder and suicide. "The most obscene play that has ever appeared in these days of obscenity!" the classic critics thundered. Dumas had struck the right note, and once again his play became an anthem of the young romantics.

Now Dumas was eating "with all the teeth of glory". He lived in a new house in the Square d'Orléans in the Rue Saint-Lazaire. He wore flamboyant waistcoats, green as the sea, purple cloaks, and massive golden chains. Once when Nodier saw Dumas arriving he sighed: "Ah, Dumas, my poor fellow, what a lot of baubles! Will you Negroes always be the same and forever be delighted by glass beads and corals?". Dumas didn't take offence. He chose this time to close his accounts with the past. He had already broken with Mélanie Waldor, but they met again and a quiet intimacy was established. Mélanie's daughter played with Dumas' little son who made her a declaration of love, and Alexander rubbed his hands, crying out, "Bravo! I recognise my own blood. You are really my son".

Since he now had some money, he decided to acknowledge Catherine Lebay's child, and also acknowledged Bell Krebsamer daughter (1831). Everything was now cleared up. He was ready to begin all over again, and he launched into the mixture of work, love, gastronomy, travel, festivals, financial speculations, dazzling successes and heavy failures, splendour and misery, which were to characterise his life to the end.

At the beginning of 1832, cholera was raging in Paris. From his window in the Rue Saint-Lazaire Alexander saw a daily convoy of 50 or 60 ammunition wagons loaded with coffins going towards Montmartre. In this state of mind he wrote the comedy, *Le Mari de la veuve*. Then on 15 April he fell ill with the disease. On his recovery he found Paris agitated and uneasy. The struggle of the republicans against Louis-Philippe continued and insurrection was imminent. General Lamarque, a Deputy of the opposition party, had just died, and his funeral offered an opportunity to overthrow the July Monarchy.

On 5 June 1832, accordingly, all the revolutionary forces, followed the convoy shouting "Honour to General Lamarque!", and Dumas, naturally, was in the crowd. An hour later half of Paris was in the hands of the insurgents. Dumas rejoiced, but he contented himself with distributing

weapons from the store rooms of the Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin. The insurrection failed and the repressive measures were harsh. On 9 June 1832 a newspaper announced that Dumas, taken with weapon in hand, had been shot. Nodier wrote: "I have just read that you were shot yesterday at three o'clock in the morning. Be good enough to let me know whether that will prevent your coming to the Arsenal tomorrow to dine with Taylor." Alexandre went, but he knew that he was marked by the police as "a republican in the full meaning of the term". One morning he was warned about his impending arrest. At the same time his doctor was advising a change of air. So politics and hygiene dictated his absence, and as he had never seen any high mountains, he started off for Switzerland on 21 July 1832.

Dumas enjoyed his journey exceedingly. In the Rhone valley he went trout-fishing with a pruning-bill and lantern; he ate a bear which had killed and eaten a hunter; he climbed the crags of Mont Blanc. At the inn he cooked omelettes for ladies thrilled to be served by the author of *Antony*. He visited the famous author and guru of Romanticism, Châteaubriand, and finally, to crown his journey, he paid his respects to Queen Hortense, daughter of the Empress Josephine. Dumas was never bored. He acted his own comedy on his own moving stage, and he enjoyed himself hugely. Then, when he began to note down his impressions in his scrapbook, he began to discover "a natural liveliness in narration".

But on his return to Paris he heard that one of his plays had been hissed and he decided to change course. He went to Buloz, manager of *La Revue des Deux Mondes*. The journey to Switzerland had been expensive and times were hard. Dumas now ate in a little cabaret in the Rue de Tournon - it was a good time to get to work. Pen in hand, he set himself to reading works of history, cutting out incidents which he could adapt, but he soon realised that there was no coherence to his thoughts. Something was missing. He found what he was looking for in Abbé Gauthier's *L'Histoire de France en vers*. Now he travelled in ancient France as he had just travelled through Switzerland, talking with the people, and entering their minds and customs. After he had conscientiously filleted the *Études historiques* of Châteaubriand and the books of Augustin Thierry, he wrote *Gaule et France*, in which he argued that the republic would be established when the monarchy was one day or another forced to grant universal suffrage.

At the Café de Paris, on the boulevard, the celebrities of journalism, literature and dandyism met, drunk with lyric poetry and art. Dumas was in the centre of the fashionable crowd, and his costume ball made the carnival of 1833 in Paris a great event. The painter Delacroix decorated the walls of the empty building next door, and Dumas hosted the party, dressed as a 16th-century Italian, with the actress Ida Ferrier as the wife of Rubens. At daybreak they danced down to the boulevard - Delacroix dressed as Dante, the poet Musset as Paillasse, the composer Rossini as Figaro, and the sculptor Barye as a Bengal tiger. Afterwards Dumas set out on a new round of travels to the South. He discovered the wine of Saint-Péray in going down the Rhone Valley; slept at Avignon in the very

room of the Hôtel du Palais Royal where his father's friend Marshal Brune, a republican hero and one of Napoleon's generals, had been assassinated by Royalists; and made a bargain with the municipality of Cavaillon to supply him with melons in exchange for his works. Next came Marseilles, Toulon and Genoa, where he was asked to leave. He travelled to Rome under a pseudonym. The Pope received him kindly, before he was denounced as a revolutionary, arrested in Tuscany and thrown out. Back in Paris he put on a new drama, *Caligula*, featuring a trained horse which he hoped would be a star, but the play failed and the horse was hissed. On the boulevards it became the fashion to say "you caligulate me" instead of "you make me tired".

Romanticism was falling into a decline, and Dumas was acquiring new enemies. One day the novelist Balzac, in Dumas' hearing, said, "When I'm used up, I shall write plays". "Better begin at once, then", retorted Alexandre. Such gibes fed his insecurity, though, and he started to be obsessed with official recognition. He was made a Chevalier of the Legion of Honour on 2 July 1837 after the intervention of the novelist Victor Hugo. This was followed by the Belgian Cross, the Order of Isabella the Catholic, of Gustavus Vasa, and of Saint John of Jerusalem, the Great Cross of Saint-Louis of Lucques which cost him 200 francs, and a few others - all of them successively spread across his chest on special occasions. On 1 August 1838 his mother died, and Dumas decided on a great project: a statue in Haiti in honour of his father. He wrote a letter to the Haitians, proposing a subscription of one franc each from coloured men only, wherever they lived. To this subscription no one else would be allowed to contribute except the King of France, the French princes and the government of Haiti. There was no response.

After his next trip abroad, to Germany, he thought about settling down and marrying his current mistress, Ida Ferrier. He had an important reason to make up his mind. Ida's guardian, a dung-farmer, bought up 200,000 francs worth of Dumas' debts for 40,000 francs and, accompanied by the sheriff's officers, ordered the great man to marry or go to debtors' prison. The marriage took place on 5 February 1840, witnessed by the romantic poet Roger de Beauvoir and Châteaubriand.

Now he wrote comedies to pay his debts. In Marseilles he collected stories; in the brush of the Midi he hobnobbed with bandits; in Paris he lobbied for entrance to the Academy. For a time, after the death of his patron the Duc d'Orléans, he worried about his future, but he was too much of an optimist to worry for long.

A noted gourmet as he grew older, he frequented the Café de Paris, where he enjoyed the veal *à la casserole*, a speciality of the house. In the middle of a meal he would hurry off to get the recipe. At home he kept open table. Luncheon began at half past 11 and ended only at half past four, for new guests were constantly coming in. Dumas often didn't know the names of his guests. He was never formal, he received poor and rich, fellow countrymen and foreigners, with the same cordiality, making it a duty to be especially hospitable to the British, in order to repay his debt to Shakespeare and Sir Walter Scott.

Actually Dumas was plagued by debt, because he spent his money as fast as he could earn it, and he repeatedly paid out six or seven times the amount that owed. One day someone came to ask for a contribution to burying some poor wretch who had died penniless. He gave 15 francs, then when told that the dead man had been a bailiff he reached into his pocket again. "Diable!" he exclaimed, "a bailiff. Here's another 15 francs. Bury two."

Marriage didn't change him. The couple lived in an apartment on the first floor while Alexander had only a simple office on the fourth floor at the rear of the court. One evening returning home, instead of going up to his own room he stopped at Ida's, knowing that he would find a fire there. Ida, already in bed, seemed unwelcoming, but Dumas warmed his feet, went to the table and began working. Suddenly the door opened and Roger de Beauvoir appeared in his shirt. It was freezing in the dressing-room, he said. Dumas thought things over. Outside the rain was beating against the window. Reasoning that he couldn't throw a friend out in such weather, he invited Beauvoir to spend the night in an armchair, while he went to bed next to Ida. In a few minutes he looked round at De Beauvoir and told him he could get into bed too. In the morning Alexandre woke up first, looked at the two traitors, and then addressed de Beauvoir. "Shall two old friends quarrel about a woman, even when she's a lawful wife? That would be stupid", and seizing his friend's hand across Ida's sleeping form, he added: "let us become reconciled like the ancient Romans - on this public square".

This was his nature. He was too easy-going and good-natured to hate. Balzac himself, his inveterate enemy, confessed that Dumas had no pettiness of soul, no base jealousy, and that he was only capable of generous actions.

Dumas one day was visited by Auguste Maquet, a tall, well turned-out man. He had been a professor, and now practised writing historical romances. He brought Dumas one of them with an interesting plot and a dull narrative. Alexander took the manuscript, speeded it up and made it lighter, and the tale appeared in the journal *Le Siècle*. Maquet's name did not appear, but he got 1200 francs as his share.

This was the start of something big. Maquet knew history and had ideas, but he wasn't a writer in Dumas' class. A collaboration seemed inevitable and its first product was *The Three Musketeers*. Many of D'Artagnan's exploits were based on his father's experiences. *La Reine Margot* and *Le Chevalier de Maison-Rouge* followed in rapid succession, sweeping Dumas into the 16th century, the 17th century, the Revolution - with an energy and enthusiasm which amazed even him. His rule was that what entertained him was good, what bored him was bad. Novels were like dinners. First the appetiser, then the main course, decorated with incidents and catastrophes. Once his plot had been invented, he decided where "to hang his picture" - by preference times which were troubled and violent - but Dumas is always himself, and in every tale there is the echo and the detail of his own experience and emotions.

With *The Three Musketeers* he regained the great popularity that had marked the appearance of *Henri III*, the first romantic historical drama, and of *Antony*, the first romantic modern drama. Rehearsing it for the stage he noticed that the fireman on duty had disappeared. He had him called back, found out why he had stopped listening and immediately set to work changing the scene. After the success of *The Three Musketeers* Dumas recalled an island he had glimpsed in the Mediterranean a few years before. It was called Monte Cristo. The two collaborators set to work again, and in 1843 *The Count of Monte Cristo* started to be serialised in *Le Journal des Débats*. Dumas was now no longer re-inventing history, he was creating it. Dumas' activity was industrial. He described himself as a blacksmith "who threw himself into literature as his father had thrown himself upon the enemy", who did not always test the metal which he used, but let the feeble warm themselves at his fire. His vast silhouette stood out black against the red forge, and the crowd cheered him because it loved "fruitfulness in creation, grace in strength, and simplicity in genius".

At the moment of his triumph the issue of his origins returned with a vengeance. A journalist named Jacquot had written to Dumas and failed to get a reply. The result was a bitter attack on the "fiction factory". The terms are frankly racist – "Scratch M. Dumas' hide and you will find the savage. He lunches on potatoes taken burning hot from the ashes of the hearth and devours them without removing the skins - a Negro! He runs after honours - a marquis! He devotes himself with magnificent *sangfroid* to the trade of pirate on the ocean of letters and boldly lands his prizes in all the bazaars of journalism and the bookshops... To arrive at the top he turned royalist in La Vendée, Bonapartist in 1830, and republican in 1832. His works are only foundlings whose father he has never been. But since he needs 200,000 francs a year... he hires intellectual deserters and translators at wages that degrade them to the condition of Negroes working under the lash of a mulatto! None of his dramas or his romances is really his own."

Subsequently Jacquot was sentenced to six months in prison for libel. Dumas made a new deal with his collaborators and showed no rancour. In the boulevard someone hissed at him "mulatto". "My father was a mulatto, my grandfather was a Negro, and his father was a monkey", he replied, "My ancestry begins where yours ends". He showed no anger - he still took his walk on the boulevard, teased his enemies, and then, remembering an unfinished chapter would depart, saying: "Good! Have I amused you with wit of good quality? Tomorrow they'll be saying that I had collaborators!"

In 1846 Dumas travelled to North Africa as a representative of the French government. Apart from the other pleasures of the trip, he found a vulture which he named Jugurtha (after the ancient African king), tamed and brought back to France with him. But the Chamber of Deputies was upset by the expense of the junket and an indignant debate took place. Everyone was talking about Dumas, and to support his new eminence he

built an extravagant chateau near Saint-Germain which the locals immediately dubbed "Monte Cristo".

In the same year Dumas was granted a licence to build a new theatre and in the following year the Théâtre Historique opened to great acclaim. Even all this was not enough for the energetic Dumas, and after the Revolution of 1848 he determined to enter the National Assembly. He founded a magazine *Le Mois*, but his political views were contradictory or confused, and in spite of his popularity he found it impossible to persuade any district to adopt him. At one meeting he was greeted by cries of "O ho! the marquis! the aristocrat! the Negro! Orléans' secretary!"

"If I had had enough money", he once remarked to a friend "I should have gone to Martinique to be elected from there"; and pointing to his hair he added: "This would be a representative's brevet... but perhaps I shall send them a lock of my hair by mail."

Dramatic art was not in favour with the new revolution, and in the following year the Théâtre Historique failed. Dumas' creditors began to circle like a pack of wolves. Next was the turn of Monte Cristo. The bailiffs stripped it of its glories and soon nothing was left - not even Jugurtha, who went to an innkeeper owed 3000 francs. At the end of 1851 imperial order was resumed in France. The republican Victor Hugo was exiled, and Dumas absented himself in Brussels. After three years he returned to Paris and, irrepressible as always, started a new journal called *Le Mousquetaire*. As usual with Dumas' ventures the journal was a great success at first, but it made little money. In the following years attacks, in the journals and the courts increased in frequency. "Old Negro" became a habitual term of abuse. He quarrelled with Maquet, and *Le Mousquetaire* failed in 1857. He set out again on his travels, and when he returned to Paris his plays were once more in favour. His purse full, he set out to join Garibaldi, leader of the movement to unify Italy (*risorgimento*), who was about to invade Naples and Sicily in order to make them part of the new Italian union. In Marseilles he spent his fortune on weapons, and he entered Naples in triumph among Garibaldi's red-shirted soldiers. In recognition of his services Garibaldi appointed him director of Fine Arts, and Dumas threw himself into the science of excavation and preservation. His status didn't last long. The Neapolitans, resentful of the foreigner in their midst, organised a demonstration against him, and he was soon on his way back to France.

The bohemian life began again on a smaller scale, with less luxury and fewer servants; it was Monte Cristo over again. Dumas was surrounded by sycophants who fleeced him for all they could get. He acquired an Italian mistress, a singer, who dominated the apartment and vetted his visitors. She received company lying down, or seated on her commode, explaining that she was ill. Eventually her rages got too much for Dumas and in the course of a violent quarrel he smashed her over the head and shoulders with a piece of crystal and threw her out. Now he let himself go, receiving his visitors surrounded by half-dressed women. He tried to hide his way of life from his son Alexandre, who was on his way to becoming a writer almost as famous as his father, but eventually the young Dumas gave up

and refused to go near the apartment. Now Dumas was truly a forgotten man reduced to applauding at performances of his son's plays. His next novel, about the sacking of Frankfurt in 1866 by the Prussians, failed.

Suddenly Dumas found himself a new career as a cook. His extensive travels and his sampling of the food in various countries stood him in good stead. He could cook anything. His banquets became legendary again, and at one of them he entertained, at the Reservoirs at Versailles, the renowned black actor Ira Aldridge, who had just enjoyed enormous success in the rôle of Othello. His reputation spread, but his debts were increasing and he was losing control of all the rights to exploit his books and plays. At the Paris Exposition in 1867 he met his last love, the American circus rider Adah Menken. Within a few months, however, she suffered a fall and died. Dumas was now truly alone.

Dumas was exhausted at last. Instead of writing he sat reading through his works, and repeating the words "tout passe, tout lasse, tout casse!" (everything passes, everything bores, everything breaks). Now he lived from day to day, borrowing from editors and his dramatic agent, pawning valuable objects at the Mont-de-Piété, and when he could no longer pay the tradesmen, sending for his son.

By 1869 he was chronically confused. Sometimes he tried to work, but he lacked the strength. Then, like a child, he cried about himself. He spent the winter in Paris, then he was sent to the South. He remained gentle and smiling, and grew weaker without active suffering. In July 1870 he returned to Paris, and his son decided to take him to his villa at Puys, near Dieppe.

Now Dumas, who had never counted anything, was obsessed with the fear of being without money, and the family took care to fill his drawer with cash. His other preoccupation was with his literary legacy. One day he asked Alexandre whether he thought his work would live. The younger Dumas explained his conviction that the work would last forever and the old man's face lit up.

The next day Dumas died. That evening the Germans occupied Dieppe. He was buried temporarily in the little cemetery of Neuville; then, when the enemy had evacuated Villers-Cotterêts, his body was taken there.

Dumas was what he was, in a completely un-selfconscious way. He emerged new and innovative into a society just recovering from the slaughters of previous decades. Innocent of almost everything but ready for everything, he pushed himself to the top, which was where he wanted to be, and in that sense his life is the most ambitious and interesting of his melodramas. He talked of himself as a populariser, but he was an entertainer who studied history with passion and desire, and few storytellers have had such lasting power. It is certainly not true to say that he did not experience or respond to the racism of the age. He understood it very well.

In his novel *Georges* he sketches aspects of his father's experience with an insight which shows how deeply he considered the matter, and he records with an unblinking truthfulness the insults which must have come out of his childhood experience. In many ways, many of his other books can be read as allegories in which he expresses crucial insights about what it meant to share different and conflicting origins. All the more impressive, then, was his ability to reflect and represent key aspects of the French culture, and to become a much-loved icon of French letters and world culture.

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