

# Alexandre Dumas

## The author and his work



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Alexandre Dumas was one of the most famous French writers of the nineteenth century. He is the most widely read French writer in the world and his stories have been translated into more than a hundred languages. He is best known for his historical stories of adventure, courage and romance. He once said that the two most important things in life were 'love and adventure'. His stories are often set against a background of real historical events and contain real people from history. His two most famous novels are *The Three Musketeers* and *The Count of Monte Cristo*.

Dumas's life was as colourful and exciting as his stories. He had a very unusual family background. His grandfather was a general in the French army, he was stationed in the French colony of Saint-Domingue (now called Haiti). He married a black woman, an Afro-Caribbean slave. She died shortly after giving birth to Dumas's father, Thomas-Alexandre, in 1762. After his wife's death, her husband returned to France with their son. When Thomas-Alexandre grew up, he joined Napoleon's army. He was a very brave soldier and became a general by the age of thirty-one. He married Marie-Louise Elisabeth Labouret, and on July 24th, 1802, Alexandre Dumas was born in Villers-Cotterêts, near Paris.

Dumas's father died when the boy was only four years old. His mother was very poor and could not afford a good education for her son. But she often told him stories about his father's brave deeds in Napoleon's army. This was the beginning of Dumas's love of heroes and adventures. In 1823 he went to Paris and got a job at the Palais Royal in the office of the Duc d'Orléans, a very powerful nobleman. While working there, Dumas began to write articles for magazines as well as plays for the theatre. In 1829 his first play, *Henry III and his Court*, was produced and became very successful. His second play, *Christine*, was equally popular. After this, he became a full-time writer.

France was going through times of great political change. Some of these changes were very lucky for Dumas. In 1830 there was a revolution and the Duc d'Orléans, Dumas's former employer, became King Louis-Philippe. Then another change took place that was very good for Dumas. For many years the government controlled everything that was published in the French newspapers. But in the 1830s, this control, or censorship, came to an end. So the newspapers could publish what they liked. They started to publish stories in serial form. People of all classes read the stories and bought the newspaper to find out what happened next. This was an excellent opportunity for Dumas. In 1838 he rewrote one of his plays, *Captain Paul*, as a serial novel, which became very successful.

After that, the newspapers wanted many stories from Dumas. Dumas did not have time to write all these stories himself, but he was a clever businessman. He set up a production studio and employed assistants to write stories for him. The business was very successful, and Dumas and his assistants produced many stories for the newspapers. Dumas produced about 250 books with the help of seventy-three assistants. The best-known assistant was a history teacher called August Macquet. Macquet often suggested ideas for stories and wrote the first outline. Dumas then added more details and the final chapters. His most famous novels, *The Three Musketeers* and *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1844–5) were first written in this way by Macquet.

Dumas earned a huge amount of money from his writing, but he spent more than he earned. His way of life cost him a lot of money. He built a huge castle called the Château de Monte Cristo, and many of his friends came to stay there. Dumas enjoyed good food and drink, and was also an excellent cook. He even wrote a book about cookery. He spent a lot of money on entertaining his friends, and also on women, so he always had many debts. In 1840 he married an actress, Ida Ferrier, but he had relationships with other women too. He had at least three children who were born outside his marriage. One was named after him and also became a successful writer. Both men have the same name, so the older man is known as Alexandre Dumas *père* (father) and the younger one is called *fils* (son).

In 1851 Dumas's life changed. After King Louis-Philippe lost power, Napoleon was elected as president of France. Napoleon did not like Dumas because Dumas had supported King Louis-Philippe. So things became difficult for Dumas. His creditors – the people he owed money to – also started demanding money from him. So he left France and went to Belgium. From there he went to Russia where his stories were very popular, and then to Italy. Italy was going through times of great political change. For the next few years, Dumas supported Garibaldi in the

fight for a united Italy. But later he returned to France, where he quickly started getting into debt again.

Dumas died of a stroke on December 5th, 1870, near Dieppe in northern France. He was buried near his birthplace, in the cemetery at Villiers-Cotterêts. But on November 30th, 2002, his body was dug up and put into a coffin by order of the French president, Jacques Chirac. Chirac thought that Dumas had suffered in his life from racism because his grandmother had been a black woman. Dumas had been treated unfairly because of this. Chirac wanted Dumas to be recognised as a great French writer. Dumas's coffin was carried by four members of the French Republican Guard dressed as characters from Dumas's stories, the Musketeers. It was taken to the Panthéon of Paris, and buried near other great French writers like Victor Hugo and Voltaire.

Dumas's books continue to sell well, over one hundred years after his death. He wrote not only stories but also articles on politics and culture, and books on French history. But he is best remembered as a wonderful storyteller. His stories have very strong plots and characters, so they make very good subjects for films. Dumas's stories have given filmmakers ideas for nearly 200 films.

### A selection of works by Alexandre Dumas

#### Novels

- 1840 *The Fencing Master*  
 1844 *The Three Musketeers*  
 1845 *Twenty Years After*  
 1844–5 *The Count of Monte Cristo*  
 1847 *The Vicomte de Bragelonne* (usually divided into three parts when published in English. The last part is *The Man in the Iron Mask*).  
 1850 *The Black Tulip*  
 1857 *The Knight of Saint-Hermine*

#### Plays

- 1829 *Henry III and his Court*  
 1830 *Christine*  
 1831 *Napoléon Bonaparte*  
 1831 *Antony*  
 1836 *Kean*  
 1838 *Captain Paul*

#### Travel books

- 1834 *Travel Impressions: In Switzerland*  
 1841 *A Year in Florence*

- 1847 *From Paris to Cadiz*  
 1859 *The Caucasus*  
 1860 *Travel Impressions: In Russia*

#### Cookery

- 1873 *Great Dictionary of Cuisine*  
 1882 *Small Dictionary of Cuisine*

#### Films

- 1994 *The Three Musketeers*  
 Directed by Stephen Herek  
 Starring Charlie Sheen, Keifer Sutherland and Chris O'Donnell  
 1998 *The Man in the Iron Mask*  
 Directed by Randall Wallace  
 Starring Leonardo di Caprio, Jeremy Irons and John Malkovich  
 2002 *The Count of Monte Cristo*  
 Directed by Kevin Reynolds  
 Starring James Caviezel and Guy Pearce

(For a list of Alexandre Dumas's stories that have been simplified for the Macmillan Readers Series, see a copy of the current Readers catalogue.)