

Preface

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Translators through History: Revised edition

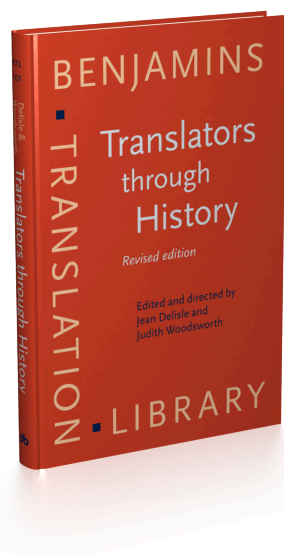
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Preface

“Turning translations into instruments of humanism, peace and progress – such is our noble task”. These are the words of Pierre-François Caillé (1907–79), founding President of the International Federation of Translators / *Fédération internationale des traducteurs* (FIT). They reflect his personal philosophy, which he passed along to the Federation when it was established in 1953 (Lilova 1979). In Article 6 of its bylaws, FIT invites translators to “assist in the spreading of culture throughout the world”. The tens of thousands who belong to the seventy-three [now 100] member organizations of our Federation spare no effort to fulfil this mission. The work they perform on a day-to-day basis attests to the fact that translation permeates all facets of human activity and is an inexhaustible source of progress.

People have translated since time immemorial. Long before FIT, translators served as vital links in the vast chain through which knowledge was transmitted among groups of people separated by language barriers. Ever since humans first devised writing systems, translators have been building bridges between nations, races, cultures and continents. Bridges between past and present, too. Translators have the ability to span time and space. They have enabled certain central texts – works of science, philosophy or literature – to acquire universal stature. Translators breach the walls created by language differences, thereby opening up new horizons and broadening our vision of reality to encompass the entire world. “Translators live off the differences between languages, all the while working toward eliminating them” (Edmond Cary 1956: 181).

Yet translators have been widely scorned at times and their work severely criticized. These educated men and women of letters have been distrusted, even called turncoats and traitors. But if we think about it, what people actually fear is not the translators themselves, but rather the new, foreign and sometimes strange values that they introduce into their own cultures. We are always somewhat unsettled by novelty, difference and otherness, which challenge our own values and hold up a mirror that forces us to examine ourselves. Translation, in the final analysis, is about discovery – a journey of exploration through the fabulous realm of knowledge.

If we stand back and assess the work of translators over the centuries, as the authors of this volume have done, we can see that receiving cultures have generally considered themselves enriched by their work. Just think of Livius Andronicus,

a Greek slave in the third century BCE, who introduced the stern Romans to the treasures of Greek literature; Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ, the eighth-century Persian translator who enriched the Arab culture with the famous Indian *Fables of Bidpai*, which later inspired the fables of Jean de La Fontaine; Geoffrey Chaucer, a translator before becoming an author, who brought the ballad, the romance, the fabliau and animal fables into his culture; Jagannatha, the eighteenth-century Indian astronomer who translated Ptolemy's *Almagest* and Euclid's *Elements* from Arabic into Sanskrit; Voltaire, who acquainted his eighteenth-century compatriots with Shakespeare and shook their aesthetic values; Émilie du Châtelet (pictured on the cover), who was the first to translate the seminal work of Newton into French; Yan Fu (Figure 15), who introduced the work of the prominent British thinkers Thomas Huxley, Adam Smith, Herbert Spencer and John Stuart Mill to China; and finally, closer to home, Constance Garnett (Figure 23), the eminent English translator, who made the Anglo-Saxon world familiar with great Russian writers such as Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Chekhov and Turgenev. There are thousands upon thousands of examples. "Please, never despise the translator", Alexander Pushkin advised. "He's the post-horse of human civilization". These words will be all the more compelling as readers become better acquainted with the function of translators as unassuming artisans of communication.

The purpose of *Translators through History*, published by the FIT Committee for the History of Translation with the assistance of UNESCO, is twofold: first, to bring translators from the ancient and recent past out of oblivion and, second, to illustrate the roles they have played in the evolution of human thought.

"Historians of translation are needed more than ever before", said José Lambert (1993: 22). There are two main reasons for this. The history of translation helps translators, those discreet labourers, to emerge from the shadows and enables us to better appreciate their contribution to intellectual life. The pages that follow are teeming with figures who have left their mark on the profession in various ways. Inventing alphabets, enriching languages, encouraging the emergence of national literatures, disseminating technical and scientific knowledge, propagating religions, writing dictionaries – their contributions have been prodigious. Translation cannot be dissociated from the notion of progress; some even maintain that a society can be measured by the translations it accepts. This points to the importance of the work done by translators.

"The construction of a history of translation is the first task of a *modern* theory of translation" (Berman 1992: 1). The study of our profession's antecedents will help to legitimize translation as an independent discipline, capable of defining itself, of sustaining a discourse *sui generis*. It has already been given a name: "translation studies" or "*traductologie*" in French. This young discipline cannot claim a

future if it is unable to build upon earlier experience and seek fresh ideas based on models from the past. Constructing a history of translation means bringing to light the complex network of cultural exchanges between people, cultures and civilizations through the ages. It means drawing a portrait of these import-export workers and attempting to unravel their deep-rooted reasons for translating one particular work instead of another. It means finding out why their sponsors (kings, aristocrats, patrons, high-ranking clergy, etc.) asked them to translate a given work. It means taking into account what the translators themselves have written about their work, its difficulties and constraints. In short, as Lieven D'hulst has observed, history "is virtually the only means by which the discipline of translation studies can achieve some measure of coherence – by showing how divergent traditions of thought and activity are in fact similar or interconnected, by linking the past to the present" (1994: 13).

I hope that today's translators will recognize themselves in this book devoted to their predecessors. And I include the many administrative and technical translators of the latter half of the twentieth century who, while they may not participate in cultural advances to the same extent as the individuals from the past presented here, nonetheless fulfil an essential function in modern society.

Readers will appreciate the immense task involved in mapping the vast but uncharted territory of the universal history of translation. This work, itself only a beginning, could never have been carried out without an international team reflecting the make-up of FIT itself. We would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to all those who had a hand in the project, as contributing authors, editors, translators or proofreaders, helping to produce this original work from a wealth of documents. Some fifty individuals from twenty different countries helped to mount this impressive portrait gallery of translators. All the authors are to be thanked for their rigorous and highly professional efforts. Above all, our appreciation is due to the initiators and driving forces behind the project, Jean Delisle and Judith Woodsworth, Chair and Vice-Chair of the Committee for the History of Translation, respectively. Through their determination, enthusiasm and talent, they were able to achieve the objectives set out by Jean Delisle at the Twelfth World Congress of FIT, held in Belgrade in 1990. We would like to offer them our deepest appreciation.

Monuments have been erected to various translators: Mesrop Mashtots (Figure 2) in Yerevan, Jacques Amyot (Figure 4) in Melun, Joost van den Vondel (Figure 6) in Amsterdam, William Tyndale (Figure 13) in London, and St. Jerome (Figure 20) in Washington, to name but a few. This volume, which celebrates the achievements of many other translators, should also be seen as a monument to their memory.

History would be a fascinating curiosity, but merely a sterile exercise, if we did not draw lessons from it for the present and future. I am convinced that *Translators through History* will be interesting, even inspirational, to a broad range of readers, who will learn a great deal from this work. Translators themselves will undoubtedly be the first to gain from it. Embarking on this fascinating voyage through the annals of their profession, they will encounter many pioneers who crossed borders and influenced the course of the history of ideas. These portraits will remind them that theirs is one of the most useful and noble professions, one in which they have every reason to take great pride.

Jean-François Joly
President
International Federation of Translators
Montreal, June 1995