

Introduction

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Translators through History: Revised edition

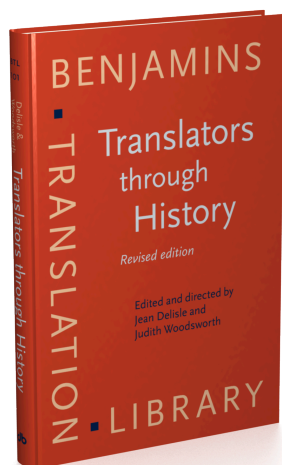
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Introduction

This book comes at the end of a long gestation period; it is the culmination of an idea that took root in the early 1960s when the International Federation of Translators (FIT) was only ten years old. At the Fourth World Congress of FIT held in Dubrovnik in 1963, it was unanimously agreed that a comprehensive history of translation should be written. One of the principal initiators of this project, Dr. György Radó (1912–94) (Hungary), called upon historians of translation to carry out preliminary studies and write monographs on this subject, which had previously received little attention. “We have to show the way and lay the foundations; in other words, we must create a framework and a method that will enable us to carry out the research and ultimately write the proposed history of translation” (Radó 1964: 15).

At the FIT Congress held three years later in Lahti, Finland, Dr. Radó raised the matter once more and outlined to the delegates his concept of how a comprehensive history of translation should be written. The reaction was enthusiastic, and the FIT Council decided to establish a Committee for the History of Translation. The scope of the project was enormous: the proposed study was to cover no less than twenty-five centuries, encompass every continent and deal with hundreds of languages. Studying the history of translation in this way would be tantamount to rewriting the history of the world, the history of civilization – but from the perspective of translation (Van Hoof 1991: 7).

Given the amount of work involved, the state of research in history of translation and the limited financial and human resources of FIT, some people were sceptical about whether so ambitious a project would ever be completed. In an article that appeared in *Babel*, Radó nevertheless presented a detailed outline of the book as he saw it (Radó 1967: 4–8).

Years went by. Despite a steady increase in the number of publications on the subject, the vast compendium of translation history envisioned by the early members of FIT had not yet been written. Would it be possible to produce this “worldwide encyclopedia of translation”, full of dates and facts, containing all the milestones along the “glorious road which the art of translation has travelled” (Radó 1964: 15)? Even the most enthusiastic and daring of historians would feel daunted by such an undertaking, and justifiably so.

A new Committee for the History of Translation was struck at the Twelfth World Congress of FIT in Belgrade in 1990. Moved by the same spirit as those who initiated the original history project, the Committee developed plans for a publication that would be more limited in scope. The goal remained the same: to enhance the translation profession throughout the world by revealing the immeasurable contribution of translators to the intellectual and cultural history of humanity. To borrow the words of Pierre-François Caillé, founding president of FIT, translators are those “lonely soldiers” who plunge into the fray of ideas and cultures to bear messages from one to the other, often becoming agents of profound ideological and social change (Caillé 1955: 3). It was felt that their work, their dignity and their place in the “Republic of Letters” had yet to be highlighted (Larbaud 1946: 9).

Interest in the history of translation has grown in recent years. Since the 1980s, in particular, translation scholars have been aware of the importance of historical research and have begun to define appropriate methods and theoretical models for the new subdiscipline. In their conference papers, scholarly articles and books, they have addressed the subject of the history of translation from a variety of perspectives, each drawing the boundaries of history in a different way and looking at the past through different lenses.

The Committee for the History of Translation set out to make a contribution to this area. One of its first tasks was to compile as complete a list as possible of historians of translation around the world and to gather information about their research. This groundwork led to the publication of the *International Directory of Historians of Translation* in 1991, with further editions released subsequently (Delisle 2011). This valuable tool enabled us to set up research teams, create an international network of historians and get the preparation of *Translators through History* under way.

While broad-ranging and ambitious, *Translators through History* does not claim to be an exhaustive study of the history of translation. Instead, it is a *selective* and *thematic* overview of the principal roles played by translators through the ages. Nine broad themes were chosen to reflect the various areas in which the work of translators has been most apparent. Translators have been viewed not so much from a psychological point of view, but rather in terms of their position in a cultural and temporal space. The result is rather like a canvas drawn with a broad brush, and readers will undoubtedly discover significant omissions in the pages that follow. We are well aware of the lacunae, which inevitably derive from the approach we decided to adopt.

Each of the nine themes was assigned to an international team of historians, headed by a principal author. The participating scholars had the freedom to illustrate their remarks by means of examples drawn from any period of time and

any cultural or linguistic community. Through teamwork, we have drawn on the expertise of scholars living in various parts of the world and have sought to move beyond a Eurocentric view of translation, thereby respecting the vocation of FIT. It is undeniable that the West in general, and Europe in particular, have been given preferential treatment, as it were, owing to the sheer number of historians in that part of the world, and to the important strides they have made in historical research in the past twenty years. And yet we have been fortunate enough to include history specialists from the major regions of the world: from Europe, the Americas, the Middle East and – to a lesser extent – from Africa and Asia.

Underlying our task as editors were two concerns: one was for our readership, which was intended to be an international one, and the other was for stylistic and methodological consistency. Without compromising our standards of scholarship, we have sought to make the book readable and accessible to as wide an audience as possible. For this reason, we have been careful to avoid using some of the highly specialized terminology particular to the field of translation studies or related disciplines. In addition, explanations have been added, either in the text or in endnotes, to clarify allusions to specific historical events or cultural features that might not be familiar to every reader.

Translators through History can be regarded as a guide to the field of translation history. References are intended to help readers find more information on specific topics of interest to them. All the works mentioned in parenthetical references in the body of the text are listed in the “Works Cited” section. An index of proper names is also provided to make the book easier to use.

Illustrations have been inserted between the chapters. These illustrations, in our opinion, are not simply decorative. They are another means of portraying the role and status of translators through history. The iconography of a field is an essential element in any meaningful history of it. A description of all illustrations is included in Appendix I.

It is our sincere hope that you, the reader, will take pleasure in reading this collective work, and that the wide range of material presented will arouse your curiosity about the history of translation.

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Ottawa and Montreal, 1995

