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TRANSLATION

Translators  
through  
History

*Revised edition*

Edited and directed by  
Jean Delisle and  
Judith Woodsworth

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# Translators through History

Revised edition

*Edited and directed by*

Jean Delisle

University of Ottawa

Judith Woodsworth

Concordia University

Revised and expanded by Judith Woodsworth



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*No higher service can be rendered to literature  
than to transport the masterpieces of the human mind  
from one language to another.*

Germaine de Staël (1766–1817)

French-speaking Swiss author and thinker

*The history of the different civilizations is the history  
of their translations. Each civilization, as each soul,  
is different, unique. Translation is our way to face  
this otherness of the universe and history.*

Octavio Paz (1914–98)

Mexican writer, poet, and diplomat,  
winner of the 1990 Nobel Prize for Literature

*Translation is not a matter of words only:  
it is a matter of making intelligible a whole culture.*

Anthony Burgess (1917–93)

English author, poet, playwright,  
linguist, critic and translator

Cover photo (paperback edition)

**Émilie du Châtelet (1706–49)**

The marquise du Châtelet, née Émilie de Breteuil, was fluent in English, Italian and Latin. She translated the *Aeneid* and other classical works into French, though no examples have survived. She showed great interest in the abstract sciences, devoting herself to the study of mathematics as shown in this portrait. She was the first to translate and comment on Isaac Newton's *The Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* (written in Latin). Completed shortly before her death, the translation was published posthumously by Voltaire, her lover of fifteen years.

Source: Portrait by Maurice Quentin de La Tour (1704–88), photographed by Philippe Sébert. The painting now hangs in the Château de Breteuil, near Paris, owned and managed by Madame du Châtelet's descendant, Henri-François le Tonnelier, Marquis de Breteuil. Used with permission.

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#### **Volume 101**

Translators through History. Revised edition

Edited and directed by Jean Delisle and Judith Woodsworth

## About the authors

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JEAN DELISLE holds a doctorate from the Sorbonne Nouvelle (Paris III). After a distinguished career of teaching at the University of Ottawa from 1974 to 2007, he now holds the title of professor emeritus. He is the author, editor or co-editor of about twenty books and many articles dealing with translation history and teaching translation. His work has been translated into at least seventeen languages. He is an honorary member of the Canadian Association for Translation Studies (CATS).

## Translators through History



## Foreword to the second edition

Great strides have been made in the field of translation studies in the past quarter century. The history of translation, in particular, has burgeoned, providing fertile ground for students and scholars around the world to tackle topics with breadth and depth through time and across geographical areas. The history of translation, and of translators, has a robust past, a vibrant present, and a promising future. In this context, *Translators through History* remains a useful tool for a variety of readers – students, scholars and professionals working within the discipline of translation – and continues to be of interest to scholars from other disciplines and the wider public. With the exception of a reprinted version in 1997 that contained a few straightforward adjustments, however, there has not been a thorough revision. In 2007, Jean Delisle issued a new French version of the book, *Les Traducteurs dans l'histoire* (University of Ottawa Press), in which he corrected errors that had been identified by readers and critics, made improvements in both form and substance, and provided updated bibliographical information. It was clearly time for a new English edition with current information, corrections and new theoretical perspectives, not the least of which recognizes new thinking in the discipline of history.

In the first edition, we referenced the nineteenth-century historian Leopold von Ranke who sought to “determine what actually happened” (Delisle and Woodsworth 1995: 245). Academic historians have long since moved beyond the Rankean paradigm, and approaches to history continue to evolve. In our time, the very notion of objectivity has been set aside in favour of multiple points of view. To begin with, the range of possible objects of inquiry is limitless; the rules and regulations of the discipline, as well as the methods and nature of historical interpretation, are all open to debate. A work of history can be compared to a musical composition, as in Paul Cohen’s account of the Boxer Rebellion, which he has called a history “in three keys”, building his narrative on history as event, experience and myth (Cohen 1997). A weaving together of different strands, drawing on diverse stores of evidence, history is a creative, interpretive act, to some extent an act of imagination. Not unlike translation, in other words.

This all has implications for the history of translation, and the various methods of constructing history all have relevance for what *Translators through History* seeks to accomplish. Whereas traditional history tended to look at momentous

events and the “great deeds of great men”, recent decades have seen an increasing number of scholars focus on ordinary people and attempt to tell “history from below”. Historians of translators are adopting this vantage point to good effect. For millennia, translators have accompanied the “great men” in their “great deeds”, but they have been defined by their subordinate status (as captives, slaves or ethnic hybrids, for example). Yet, their social, cultural and geographic identities have allowed them to cross borders, negotiate across cultures and contribute to intellectual and cultural exchange. Just as decolonization, feminism and identity politics have transformed historical writing, so, too, have they made their mark on the narratives of translation. The examination of the agents in translation history, along with the cultural, social and political structures that define them, can yield compelling and textured historical explanations. Once reliant on archives and historical records in a culture dominated by the written word, furthermore, newer historians now take oral accounts into consideration: for example, Evan Haefeli “reads” Hudson’s voyage up the river that flows through present-day New York State through the eyes of native peoples using both written and oral accounts (2007). This can be a productive technique for us as historians of translation in delving into non-textual cultures and in examining interpreting, in particular.

The new directions in researching and writing history, set in motion some time ago, are in fact becoming mainstreamed. For instance, since Ranajit Guha penned the classic text of subaltern studies, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983), we have moved to a point at which subalternity has become an accepted framework through which to view all kinds of history and “reading against the grain” has become widespread.

The field of translation studies, too, has evolved considerably, particularly since the “cultural turn” heralded by Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere (1990), who went on to link the “translation turn” to the field of cultural studies in general (1998). Translation scholars have become familiar with new theoretical perspectives through contact with other disciplines, and translation has become an area of interest, even a fruitful metaphor, in other realms of inquiry. This confluence is very rich in consequences for the history of translation. To name only a few of the titles that will be referred to in the following pages, the nineties saw the publication of feminist studies by such scholars as Sherry Simon (1996) and Luise Von Flotow (1997). In *Translation and Power* (2002), Maria Tymoczko and Edwin Gentzler extend the boundaries of the “cultural turn” and advance the notion of a “power turn”. Michael Cronin’s *Translation and Identity* (2006) draws on various forms of translation to show its role in shaping identity and promoting difference.

Postcolonialism, in particular, provides a corrective lens for the field of translation and has opened new avenues of reflection – in edited volumes by Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi (*Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*,

1999) and Sherry Simon and Paul St-Pierre (*Changing the Terms: Translating in the Postcolonial Era*, 2000), for example. The postcolonial perspective is applied in monographs examining translation in a non-European context: Paul Bandia's *Translation as Reparation: Writing and Translation in Postcolonial Africa* (2008); and Wang Hui's *Translating Chinese Classics in a Colonial Context: James Legge and his Two Versions of the 'Zhongyong'* (2008), which offers a fresh look at the work of missionary translators. There may be a danger of this becoming the "new orthodoxy", as Peter Burke warned of the earlier "history from below" movement (1992:38), with translation scholars attempting to explain or critique all past forms of translation in postcolonial terms. Yet, the approach remains useful in taking into account the transnational dimensions at play and in providing a framework for understanding "power relations and relations of alterity" (Simon and St-Pierre 2000: 13).

This new edition preserves a good part of the original publication. The preface and introduction to the 1995 edition of *Translators through History* have been left virtually intact since they tell the story of our history, documenting its genesis from an idea launched at a translators' congress over twenty years ago through the rather daunting task of drawing on the talents of a team of historians from around the world to compile a collective work – much like putting together the pieces of a puzzle.

In writing *Translators through History* in the first place, we focused on the translator – the agent rather than the product or the process. This was not an obvious choice in a discipline that had hitherto been so focused on the text: for example, on the extent to which the translation replicated the source text or, on the other hand, was made to fit the norms of the target culture. We identified certain themes, or spheres of activity in which translators have played an important role, and in telling the selected stories, dealt to different degrees with the social, political, economic or religious context in which the particular translators worked. The structure has not changed: readers will recognize the original chapters and many of the subheadings. This history of translators continues to be organized around the same nine key themes, and the narratives and voices of the original contributors have been preserved to a large degree. At the same time, an effort has been made to achieve a greater degree of scholarly rigour, cohesion and seamlessness while keeping the text clear and readable.

The content has been updated and expanded, and some completely new elements were introduced. Chapter 8 was completely rewritten for the 2007 French edition and appears here in English for the first time. Additional material has been added to the other chapters: for example, a brief history of machine translation in Chapter 4; an overview of the way recent theory has framed issues of

power in Chapter 5; and a look at English versions of sacred texts of the East made by such translators as James Legge. Revisions have extended beyond stylistic changes to the correction or updating of factual information – the number of translator associations in the world, the number of languages now spoken, and so on – made possible by increasingly available sources. More importantly, the revised edition alerts readers to new directions in translation scholarship, which provide a more nuanced view of past events. One “error” that has attracted particular attention in the field of translation history is the notion of a so-called school of Toledo: it has been clarified and perhaps put to rest, although the “myth” may well continue to circulate.

As much as possible, newer references were used and information from them incorporated into the text. A wide range of sources are quoted and referenced in cases where the authors have provided a particular point of view or interpretation of facts, or have shed light on particular events that are less widely known. References are sometimes not provided when information originates from publicly available sources such as online encyclopedias or where it forms part of common knowledge. To annotate all sources would have yielded a cluttered and less readable text. All works mentioned in parenthetical references in the text are listed in the “Works Cited” section, which now reflects the 100 additional titles consulted during the editing process. The “Further Reading” sections that were included in the original edition, now somewhat outdated, have been removed. Translation history has flourished to such a degree in recent years that an exhaustive bibliography would be out of the question in a single volume such as this. However, there are enough references to point interested readers in the right direction should they wish to pursue a particular topic, especially given the relative ease of accessing bibliographic information using today’s electronic resources.

Dates of birth and death have been eliminated for historical figures, and are now reserved primarily for translators and interpreters. In the case of variations – and there are many – several sources have been consulted, including catalogues of major libraries; the generally accepted dates are accompanied by the notations “c.” (*circa*, around) or “fl.” (*floruit*, flourished), and in some cases only a date of birth or death is given. Inevitably, there continues to be some repetition from one chapter to another. Some important figures, such as St. Jerome, Chaucer, Luther and Tyndale, appear in more than one place, but the endnotes and index will guide the reader to the multiple references.

The illustrations, finally, have been refreshed in keeping with the importance attached to the iconography of translation we set out to establish in the first edition. Descriptions of all illustrations, with revised versions of the ones that remain from the previous edition, can be found in Appendix I.

There are, and will continue to be, gaps. “If we think of the history of translation as a *mosaic*, there can be little doubt that there are still many small pieces or tesserae missing, as well as large empty spaces yet to be filled” (Santoyo 2006: 13). This is where the “future” of translation history lies. This is a project that sets out a framework for further research, whether it be by filling in the blanks geographically or temporally, whether by focusing on the agency of the translator or on the nature and impact of the texts or discourse translated.

Once again, I would like to express my gratitude, in my own name and on behalf of Jean Delisle, to all the contributors to the original edition of this book, published simultaneously in English and French in 1995, and to those who have participated in various ways in the production of this new edition. The names of writers, translators and proofreaders are all listed in Appendix II. We are also indebted to translators of this work, and their respective teams, for disseminating it to Portuguese, Spanish, Arabic and Romanian readers, as well as others, potentially, as new translations are completed. Readers and reviewers, whom we have met personally, or whose comments we have read through individual correspondence or published texts, have been both generous and helpful. In drawing our attention to errors and omissions, large and small, they have enabled us to make necessary changes and improvements, first to the 2007 French edition and now to this one.

A few individuals deserve special mention. I am grateful, first of all, to Isja Conen, Acquisition Editor at John Benjamins, who commissioned this updated English edition. She has been both encouraging and patient. Jean Delisle contributed immensely with unfailing support, encouraging words, and immediate attention to my every request for information. He led the way by undertaking his revision of the French edition, and kindly provided me with his edits to set the stage. Long-time friend and colleague Sherry Simon has been a motivating influence and source of affection throughout the years. Philippe Caignon, my department chair and colleague at Concordia University, brought Ray Kurzweil to my attention in the course of a conversation during which he so warmly welcomed me back to my department. Philip Noss expertly and promptly revised the section on Gbaya in Chapter 2, offering positive, supportive comments. Jean-Claude Boulanger, author of Chapter 8, offered a thorough commentary on the English translation of his chapter. I extend my appreciation to Hilary Parker for her meticulous work constructing a new index for this edition, and to Douglas Parker for drawing on his acute sense of language, along with his vast knowledge of literature and culture, to proofread the manuscript.

I owe so much to a devoted family: to Michael, by now a historian in his own right, who has provided guidance in new thinking on history, and who, along

with Amy, has been my beacon; to Vince, the history buff, Patrice, the linguist and world traveller, and their partners; to my grandchildren Julien, Mia, Mathieu, Will and Eleanor, who each in his or her own way has provided inspiration. To Lindsay, who has lived and breathed this project since the beginning, I offer my thanks; once again, he has read every word – many of them several times – with immeasurable patience, while sharing my adventures through this vast history. This piece of work, finally, is offered in memory of my parents, Zsuzsanna and Zoltán Weisz. Displaced and dislocated, they inhabited the fertile spaces between cultures, instilling in me a passion for languages and cultural exchange. My journey began with theirs.

Judith Woodsworth  
Montreal, 2012

## 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.