Alex Gross

THE HISTORY OF TRANSLATION HISTORY

Translators through History, edited by Jean Delisle and Judith Woodsworth, Amsterdam / Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 346 p.

By my count, nine useful books about translation history, specialized works aside, have been published over the last thirty years. It must say something about where this field is going that six of them have come out during the last seven years (and four since 1992). The latest such work, *Translators through History*, edited and directed by Jean Delisle and Judith Woodsworth, appears under the very highest auspices, being co-published by John Benjamins and Unesco. The combined effort of fifty scholars from twenty different nations, this volume has been five years in the making and is now published simultaneously in French and English with assistance from several Canadian sponsors and the F.I.T.

The editors have set out to create "a selective and thematic overview" rather than "an exhaustive study of the history of translation,...without compromising ...standards of scholarship...they have sought to make the book readable and accessible to as wide an audience as possible." The volume is divided into nine chapters, each covering one of the roles played by translators over the ages: inventors of alphabets, developers of national languages, creators of national literatures, disseminators of knowledge, accessories to power, religious proselytizers, transmitters of cultural values, authors of dictionaries, and interpreters as the middlemen of history.

To their outstanding credit, the editors and their collaborators make a truly impressive showing in each of these fields, no small achievement within the limitations of a few hundred pages. The work is supplemented by 24 illustrations, two appendices, a bibliography, and an index. Perhaps most important, this is the first general work on translation history to abandon a purely Eurocentric perspective (though a pending ATA exhibit proposal also favors this approach).

This work is almost overwhelming in the sheer number and richness of strands, episodes, and anecdotes it embraces, moving with seeming effortlessness from the Seventh Century Chinese monk Xuanzang to modern Cameroon to the creation of the Cree syllabary in the early Nineteenth Century. As we visit Baghdad, we learn that the master translator Hunayn ibn Ishaq was paid in gold for his work according to its weight (and hence tended to use thick paper!), that Gerard of Cremona wandered from Italy to Toledo in 1157 simply because he

wanted to find a copy of Ptolemy's *Almagest* for himself, that Doña Marina's ghost still lurks along the edge of Mexico City's zócalo, that French Canadian translators protested in vain against politicians, who insisted "*Dominion of Canada*" must be translated "Puissance du Canada."

This book is certainly an indispensable tool for anyone interested in translation history. But it should perhaps also be admitted at the same time that no single book in this field can be considered a model of clarity or accessibility. Of these works (*see bibliography at end*), perhaps Rener's and Kelly's should receive the lowest grades for their overall meaning-to-verbiage ratio, though both certainly have useful insights to offer. Even for someone familiar with the material, the current work also leaves something to be desired. Parts of it read even more drably than most history texts, and sentences like the following are all too common:

"In the twentieth century, as in the nineteenth, the United States was divided by conflicting ideological tendencies, some of them conservative and others more liberal."

"In fact, religion was only one of several motives for the many expeditions from the Old World to the New; missions were also carried out for the purposes of commerce, power and territorial expansion."

Wooden language abounds, and the chapter on dictionaries reads remarkably like a laundry list of such works through the ages, though such a list will surely be valuable to specialists. And many other passages, both in the chapter on evolving world literatures and elsewhere, resemble what Jiri Levy called mere "literary chitchat" and/or the all too predictable harumphings of Gregory Rabassa's "Professor Horrendo."

Perhaps most unfortunately, given the book's theme, parts of it actually read "like a translation." From internal evidence it would appear that at some point during the bilingual publishing process, the entire text of the book was converted into French for a "final" proofreading and then reconverted into English with little further checking, leaving behind such French spellings as Marchak (Marshak), Guatemoc (Cuauhtémoc), and La Coruna (La Coruña). Equally distracting are countless text-embedded footnotes stuffed with sources, dates, or titles, greatly reducing the work's readability—these could have been assigned lettered footnotes (to distinguish them from endnotes) and placed at the bottom of the page.

Despite the number of scholars involved, there are still some glaring errors, among them the Western invention of printing in the fourteenth century (p.102), the assertion that Greek and Roman medicine were "of Indian origin" (p. 108—over time their cross-fertilization was far more complex), the strange use in

English of the French term "Americanist" (p. 149), and a misleading explanation of the differences between Mahayana and Hinayana Buddhism (p. 125). Two major oversights: the book almost totally ignores Japan and Korea and also fails to mention that the great Baghdad renaissance actually began in the Persian town of Jundishapur.

Given its UNESCO auspices, *Translators through History* certainly does its best to avoid any statement that could ruffle international feathers—in the Nuremberg trial section it even contains an endnote for the young detailing the nationalities of the "Allies" and the "war criminals." And yet the editors' well-meant attempt at even-handedness finally ends in failure. In the material they have chosen, they have been unable to resist the persistent quirk of extreme francophilia, a failing that finally leads almost to comedy. Not only do they insist that the entire twelfth century "Toledo School" of translation was under "French" direction, via monks from the Cluny monastery at in central France (and this at a time when Cathar, Bogomil, and diehard Arabist influences ran rampant throughout the South, when neither France nor the French language was in an advanced state of formation), not only is an attempt made to exonerate French church fathers for burning translator-martyr Étienne Dolet at the stake, but an even more amazing claim is made for French Calvinist missionaries in the jungles of Brazil.

While both the English and Spanish had a very poor record of training interpreters during their early explorations, according to our co-editors the French were far more fortunate:

"It is believed that Norman navigators anchored at the mouth of the Amazon even before Columbus reached the shores of the New World. Some Frenchmen, referred to in the French accounts as *truchements de Normandie* or 'Norman interpreters'...had moved into the villages, learned the language, cohabited with the women, had children by them and allegedly adopted all their practices, even cannibalism. While these *truchements* were an embarrassment to the French missionaries, they were immensely valuable to them as liaison agents."

This episode allegedly took place in 1555, which means that these truchements—or their grandchildren—would have needed to retain their French for at least 65 years, assuming they had arrived no earlier than two years before Columbus. But this story, which adds up to nothing less than the claim that the French discovered America, was inspired by a typical Sixteenth Century "traveler's tale" and deserves no logical analysis at all. Even histories of translation must still obey historiographical rules, and today's historians are united in dismissing most claims of successful new world colonization prior to Columbus—whether by Normans, Welsh, Irish, Vikings, Phoenicians, Egyptians, or

Israelites—as poppycock, and this tale does not belong in a serious history. Another recognizably French feature—as Mary McCarthy pointed out long ago—is an inadequate index, containing a mere fraction of the text's many names of persons and places. So French does the book become that it even quotes from that great Frenchman and former ATA President Henri Fischbach. [he is of course better known to ATA members as "Henry"] Greater clarity would also have been served by listing the authors of each chapter at its beginning rather than grouping them in italics at the end.

Despite these objections, books like *Translators through History* are still of enormous value: they offer a rich harvest for those prepared to cut their way through their burgeoning undergrowth. But some of the greatest figures and movements throughout this history upheld a different vision for translation, even for communication itself, than the one presented by our scholars. Martin Luther demanded language for "the common man in the marketplace," King Alfred the Great insisted on "language that we all can understand," Alfonso X of Castile called out for texts that were llanos de entender ("easy to understand"), while Hunayn ibn Ishaq wanted his medical texts to be understood by someone "who was not a medical specialist, or who was unacquainted with philosophy." During both the French Revolution and nineteenth-century political unrest in India, voices cried out insistently for precisely these goals. All of these examples can be found in the current volume. Against this background, it seems supremely ironic—and may well explain many of the problems facing our profession—that we have still not evolved a style for explaining the history and principles of translation to our fellow citizens in a clear and simple way. As advanced as this book undoubtedly is, the field of translation history may still be in its infancy.

Bibliographical Supplement

MAJOR WORKS ABOUT TRANSLATION HISTORY

Ballard, Michel. *De Cicéron à Benjamin: Traducteurs, Traductions, Réflexions*. Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1992.

Delisle, Jean & Woodsworth, Judith. *Translators through History*. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1995. (Co-published by UNESCO).

Kelly, Louis G. *The True Interpreter: A History of Translation Theory and Practice in the West*. Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1979.

Lefevere, André, (editor). *Translation--History, Culture: A Sourcebook*. London: Routledge, 1992.

Mounin, Georges. *Teoria e storia della traduzione*. S. Morganti, translator. Turin: Einaudi, 1965. (no French version has been found).

Rener, Frederick M. *Interpretatio: Language and Translation from Cicero to Tytler*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1989.

Steiner, George. *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Trans*lation. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975.

Van Hoof, Henri. *Histoire de la traduction en Occident*. Paris /Louvain-la-Neuve: Éditions Ducolot, 1991.

Vermeer, Hans J. *Skizzen zu einer Geschichte der Translation*. (2 vols., from Mesopotamia to Old English and early German) Frankfurt/M: Verlag für interkulturelle Kommunikation, 1992.

Source : *ATA Chronicle*, September, 1996.
http://language.home.sprynet.com/trandex/histrhis.htm

Alex Gross is the Chair of the ATA Special Projects Committee. He wishes to thank John Bukacek, Loië Feuerle, Maria Galetta, Harald Hille, Alex Schwartz, and Marilyn Stone for suggesting corrections and proofreading the text.
