

**Ian Martin**

**Ruth A. Roland. *Interpreters as Diplomats: A Diplomatic History of the Role of Interpreters in World Politics*, Ottawa, University of Ottawa Press, 1999, 209 p.**

<sup>1</sup>This is a reprint in the University of Ottawa's series *Perspectives on Translation* (ed. Jean Delisle) of a 1982 book (*Translating World Affairs*) written by Roland, a retired Georgia State University political scientist and historian of diplomacy. The University of Ottawa has done the academic community of translators and interpreters a great service, because this is an immensely informative and enjoyable book, and one which, although dealing with much more than interpreting, will inspire budding interpreters and trainers of interpreters for years to come.

<sup>2</sup>Roland surveys nothing less than the history of diplomatic interpreting from its origins in recorded history (c. 2600 B.C. in Mesopotamia and 165 B.C. in China) up to 1980, devoting a chapter to each of:

1. the Ancient Near East, Classical Greece and Rome, and Europe to the Renaissance
2. Post-Renaissance Europe, the decline of Latin and the rise of national languages as languages of inter-state communication (to 1919); Europe-Turkey communication, and language questions in European contact with native peoples of the New World.
3. diplomatic relations between the West and China, Japan and India in the nineteenth century
4. diplomatic interpreting from Versailles to the United Nations
5. outstanding interpreters of the 20th century

<sup>3</sup>Roland's method is to sketch a series of broad historical backgrounds within which she recounts specific anecdotes of inter-state diplomacy which illustrates various aspects of interpreters' skill. But a common thread running throughout the book is Roland's great respect and admiration for her gallery of outstanding interpreters. In particular, she is interested in "political linguists" (she uses the term *linguist* in the earlier sense of one proficient in languages), and in analysing the origins of their skill, as well as characterizing them as cultivated intercultural men (almost all of her examples are of male interpreters ? a noticeable exception is Malintzin/Malinche, the famous/notorious Mexican interpreter/mistress of Cortes, fluent in Spanish, Mayan and Aztec).

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<sup>4</sup>One cannot read this book without being convinced of the critical, but often unacknowledged, importance of interpreters throughout the history of interstate relations. Without exception, Roland presents them as “more than interpreter”: in many ways they were diplomats in their own right. Prior to the late nineteenth century, the distinction made today between interpreters and translators was not sharply drawn. The examples Roland cites were both literate and gifted speakers, true internationalists, often working in the course of their lives for a number of states. (Sometimes, as in the famous case of Friedrich von Gentz, who on one occasion had two jobs on his desk: diplomatic notes from two antagonistic powers.) Such a situation, in other times and places might have led to the interpreter being killed by one or the other of his clients, unhappy at a negative reply to a diplomatic note.

<sup>5</sup>Canada is mentioned but briefly, in the context of early French contact with aboriginal peoples. Mathieu da Costa (or d’Acosta) who knew French and Mikmaq in addition to his native Portuguese was, apart from the first Black on what was to become Canada, went into the service of Sieur des Monts and contributed to the good relations between the French explorers and the Mikmaq. But others had more complicated lives: Étienne Brulé, a young Frenchman who learned Huron, later went over to the enemy and worked for the English, and, according to some stories ended up being tortured and eaten by the Huron for his politics. Also, the ideology of the interpreter may get in the way of a “clean” interpretation, as was the case of early interpreters in New France who, as Huguenots, refused to interpret for the Catholic orders, dominant in the new colony. The problem was solved by their being replaced by Jesuit-trained interpreters.

<sup>6</sup>Roland is especially interesting on the topic of the history of the training of interpreters. In earliest times (except in China and Japan), their bilingual ability was a feature of their family or early life circumstances; they were not products of interpreter training programmes. But in Ancient Egypt, a special Egyptian-Greek interpreters’ caste was formed; in Ancient Greece, young Persians were instructed in Greek, and in Ancient Rome, bilingual instruction in Latin and Greek was the mark of a cultured citizen. Byzantium had an Office for Barbarians, who learned the customs and languages of the subject peoples in that vast empire. In fourteenth century Toledo, a quadrilingual translation centre flourished in Arabic, Hebrew, Spanish and Latin. The Ottoman Empire established a caste-like institution of *dragomen* of Turks and foreign nationals who conducted interpretation between the Turks and Europeans. In China, civil service examinations of translators and interpreters were set up in ten foreign languages; their positions eventually became hereditary, even though such positions were considered low-status, since the interpreters were required to have contact with despised “barbarians”.

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7The quality and quantity of the analysis falls off sharply after the Second World War. There is an interesting anecdote of the linguistic confusion which reigned at the onset of the United Nations, but little mention of the European Union or the contemporary situation of interpreters in diplomacy or interpreter training.

8Nevertheless, Roland's book is a highly readable survey of the development of the profession of diplomatic interpreter, while standing on substantial scholarly foundations (25 pages of bibliography, principally of works cited in English and French). As a teacher in a Canadian university faculty (Glendon College) founded by a Canadian diplomat (Escott Reid) to produce bilingual public servants with a broad liberal arts and internationalist outlook, I feel that my colleagues and I carry on a proud 4500-year-old tradition of linguistically-enlightened intercultural communication. This book invites all its readers to belong to the same noble tradition.

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