



NATURE TRANSLATED: ALEXANDER VON HUMBOLDT'S WORKS IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITAIN

Alison E. Martin. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP. 2018. 268 pp.

Reviewed by Scott G. Williams

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NOTES

1. Jacobs, "I listen and proceed accordingly".
2. Venuti, "Towards a translation culture," 231–48.

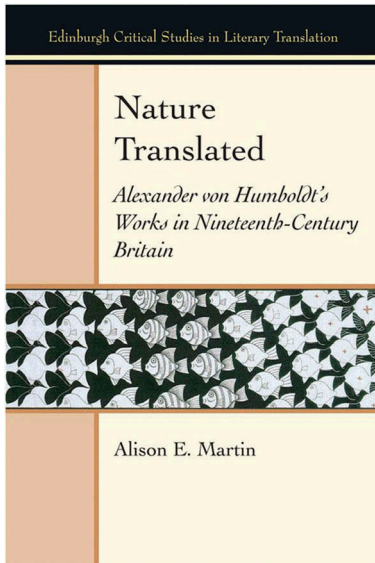
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The Introduction presents Alison Martin's goals for the study. For instance: "This book sets out to demonstrate that translators did not just ensure that scientific knowledge generated on the Continent circulated in Britain and the Anglophone world. They were crucial in evaluating and explaining, criticizing and censoring this knowledge in ways that influenced how both the material itself and its author were received by British readers" (2). Indeed, though Martin is particularly interested in the literary and stylistic dimension of Humboldt's scientific writing, this book also addresses the lack of attention most translation studies scholars have paid "to non-fiction writing in general and scientific writing in particular" (4). Importantly the book also highlights the vital role that women translators played in furthering the scientific

discourse during the first part of the nineteenth century. In the introduction and then throughout the book, Martin frames her study within the overall discussions in the

field of translation studies. Martin not only considers the translators but also their environment and the power dynamic of the role of publishers and critics. She references Lefevere's concept of rewriting early in the introduction (4).

In Chapter One, "Styling Science," Martin justifies her overall approach: "Style and rhetoric are central to this study of Humboldt's writing in English translation, which investigates how language was used to communicate scientific knowledge in the nineteenth-century ... " (23). She then addresses Humboldt's own style (be it in French or German) at length before tackling the roles and tasks of his translators. In Chapter Two, "Dispute and Dissociation: John Black's *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain* (1811)," Martin deals with Black's translation of the *Essai politique sur le royaume de las Nouvelle Espagne*, a text Humboldt had adapted in French from a report he had written in Spanish for the king of Spain. It focuses mainly on Black's use of footnotes to subvert the power relationship between translator and author by querying, correcting, and criticizing Humboldt's text (42–43). In this context, Martin mentions what Hermans called "ironic" translation, or "resistance by the translators to the very text they translate" (56). Humboldt was irritated by Black's "confrontational and self-promoting style" (73). The criticism of the translation at the time was not always kind, calling it "derivative and second-rate" (41). According to Martin, this may have stemmed from the fact that he did not sufficiently domesticate the source text to the taste of his audience. For instance, his text was often a grammatically literal translation from the French, and he routinely used English cognates of the French terms (57). The next two chapters deal with two different translation of a different text (Humboldt's *Personal Narrative of Travels*) done some thirty years apart. The first was a longer, fuller, more literary-minded translation, whereas the second was a pared down version designed for the mass market.

Chapter Three, "'A Colossal Literary and Scientific Task': Helen Maria Williams and the *Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent* (1814–1829)," deals with the first translation. In contrast to the translation in the previous chapter, there was close collaboration between the translator, Williams, and Humboldt. She lived just a half hour's walk from him in Paris (82). Williams, already a noted author and translator, held weekly salons that included experts in many fields, on whom she could draw for help with the more scientific aspects of Humboldt's text (80). It was, however, her skill as an accomplished writer that Humboldt admired, referring to her in letters to his publisher as "die berühmte Dichterin" (86). Martin attributes the success of the translation in part to her "lyrical vocabulary of the literature of sensibility which enhanced the sensual appeal" of the text (114). Martin has access to twenty-nine pages of corrections and notes by Humboldt on the first draft of the translation (92). He wrote to Williams: "Everything is felt and embellished by you ... " (91). This chapter also highlights the role that women played in translation and the dissemination of literature and knowledge in the nineteenth century, which is also an aspect of the next chapter.

Chapter Four, "'A Plain and Unassuming Style': Thomasina Ross and Humboldt's *Travels* (1852–1853)," discusses the translation of the same text from Chapter Three. According to Martin, the literary style of Williams's translation also contributed to it

being dated rather quickly, opening the door to a new translation some thirty years later. Ross was also an accomplished translator but instead of a literary background, hers was more that of a journalist (119). The publisher, Bohn, targeted a mass market and relied heavily on translations of new material and retranslations and revisions of older texts (120). Martin labels Ross's version a rereading and revision. Ross had the translation by Williams in hand during her own work, and she herself did not refer to it as a "translation" but rather a new "edition" (129). When addressing the concept of retranslation as applied to Ross's version of the *Travels*, Martin discusses the theories of Antoine Berman, Siobhan Brownlie, and Sharon Dean-Cox (129–130). Ross reduced the seven volumes and some 4,000 pages in Williams's version to just three 500-page volumes (117). Even in German, there was a separate abridged edition (146). The title of the chapter reflects the change in style as well, from literary to more straight-forward language. Changes also included a reduction in the number of maps and illustrations, and she updated the scientific language (e.g., "oxyd" to "oxides," "naturalist" to "scientist") (130). She rearranged some of the material to improve narration and added a much-praised index. All of this evidently made the translation more appealing to a larger audience.

Whereas the previous chapters address translation from Humboldt's own French into English, the next chapter discusses two competing English translations of the same German text (Chapter Five, "The Poetry of Geography: The *Ansichten der Natur* in English Translation"). As with the last two translations, these were done by women. Elizabeth Sabine translated it under the title *Aspects of Nature, the Different Lands and Different Climates* and Elise C. Otté as *Views of Nature: or Contemplations on the Sublime Phenomena of Creation* (151). Already in the respective English subtitles, one can see a difference in the approaches. Martin characterizes Otté's translation as emphasizing the "picturesque element" of Humboldt's descriptions of nature and her "stirring evocations of landscape nature." In contrast, Martin writes that Sabine was "more concerned to convey the detail of Humboldt's prose" (184). Sabine's translation appeared in the autumn of 1849 and Otté's in early 1850. As in the last chapter, the publisher Bohn, originally from Germany himself, played a role in one of the translations. Otté grew ill during the translation, contributing to the delay in publication, and Bohn stepped in to see that it was finished (170). The publishers also dealt with the paratextual material differently, whereas Longman and Murray maintained the copious notes as endnotes, Bohn tended to integrate them more into the text's page as footnotes (including the additional footnotes marked as 'By the Editor') (174).

Both these publisher/translator pairs play significant roles in the Chapter Five, "Cosmos: The Universe Translated." Indeed, though, instead of just two translations, there were three competing for the market. This competition is the most fascinating part of the chapter and is illustrated in the first picture, namely that of a page in the *Literary Gazette* from 1849 in which a reviewer took a passage from Humboldt's text in German and printed it side by side with the corresponding passages from the three different English translations (188). By 1852, the publisher of the first translation, Hippolyte Baillièrre, decided to drop out of the race (189). That translation had been done by a man, Augustin

Prichard (187), but it was the two remaining translations, by women, that became the focus of an ongoing, heated public debate. Otté worked with Bohn again, and, though overshadowed by her husband, Sabine again translated for Longman. In view of the heavy editing by Otté and Bohn mentioned in the last chapter, it is somewhat ironic that they openly accused Sabine of omissions, which she subsequently defended in print as still leaving the “sense and reasoning” of the text intact (188–189). Martin discusses all three translations in great detail. Some of that discussion includes the way the translators dealt with nationhood and identity as well as the delicate relationship of Humboldt’s writings and religion. Sabine’s translation often reminded the reader that Humboldt was German. Otté, however, downplayed his nationality in subtle ways. For instance, “fatherland” would be replaced by simply “Germany” or she would delete the reference to another person as “my own countryman” (211). An example of a translator dealing with the “ticklish” topic of religion would be Sabine simply omitting Humboldt’s humorous aside that observatories in England were not allowed to make observations on Sundays (221).

In the conclusion, Martin draws the many threads together. The study emphasizes the function of style and marketing in the translations. The important role of women in effectively communicating scientific contributions is very clear in this book. Martin notes though that as science became more professionalized and specialized, it also became an increasingly male domain (234–235). Throughout the book, Martin contextualizes her discussions within the field of translation studies. This book will appeal to anyone who studies the history of science, the role of women in the intellectual life of the nineteenth century, and those interested in situating the investigation of non-literary translations within the overall framework of translation studies.
