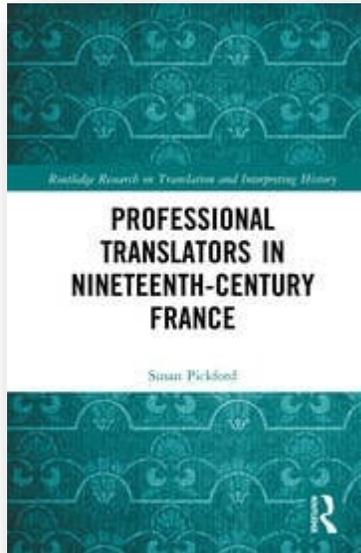


<https://www.ncis.org/the-independent-scholar/tis>



## *Professional Translators in Nineteenth-Century France*

**Susan Pickford**

(Routledge Research on Translation and Interpreting History series)

**New York & London: Routledge (2024)**

236 pages

ISBN: 9781032001791 (hardback)

ISBN: 9781032001821 (paperback)

ISBN: 9781003173090 (ebook)

[Professional Translators in Nineteenth-Century France | Susan Pickford](#)

**Review by Amanda J. Haste. First published online on 22 July 2025 and will appear in the next volume of *The Independent Scholar*.**

Susan Pickford's *Professional Translators in Nineteenth-Century France* explores the historical practices and professional identities of translators in France in the long nineteenth-century (1789-1914). The author brings these to life by contextualising translators' personal and professional lives within the political, sociocultural, legal, and economic developments in France – and by extension, in Europe – that led to the development of the professional translation industry in France.

The author's deep dive into publishers' records, archival and secondary sources reveals details of working conditions in the state-run translation bureaux:

"We know [translators] had fixed hours, since a

decree dated 14 brumaire an III [4 November 1794] stipulated '*les heures de sortie des employés du bureau des traducteurs*' [the time translation bureau staff were allowed to leave]; we know that they were held to certain professional standards, because a certain Pierre-Louis Beaufort was dismissed in May 1795 for '*inexactitudes dans son service*' [lack of punctuality] (Masson 1877: 343).<sup>1</sup> We know the *Convention nationale* translators ran their own printing press, anchoring them in the wider communication circuit (Schreiber 2015: 148; Darnton 1982) (pp. 4-5).<sup>2</sup>

Over the following six chapters, Pickford explores the hitherto unknowns such as the working practices of

<sup>1</sup> Masson, Frédéric (1877) *Le Département des affaires étrangères pendant la Révolution, 1787–1804*. Paris: Plon.

<sup>2</sup> Schreiber, Michael (2015) "Citoyens – Ciudadanos – Cittadini": Le travail des traducteurs de la Convention

nationale", in *La Ciencia como dialogo entre teorías, textos y lenguas*, Jenny Brumme and Carmen Lopez Ferrero (eds.) Berlin: Frank & Timme, 145-66; Darnton, Robert (1982) "What is the History of Books?". *Daedalus* 111(3): 65–83.

both freelance and translation service staff.

Chapter 1 outlines the growing demand for translation services that resulted from an expanding trans-European economy and the internationalisation of economic exchanges.

“Today, now that steam, electricity, and a newly civilised world have, as it were, suppressed distances, overthrown borders and made international communication instantaneous, what an advantage is it not for the merchant, for the scholar himself, to know immediately what has been written to him, and to be informed of what is happening and being published abroad? How many honourable traders and skilled industrialists have found themselves in difficulties for the want of an immediate, accurate translation of a telegram, business letter, or order in a foreign language? How troublesome, how worrisome, when one must call on a friend, or even entrust oneself to a stranger or competitor to discover the contents of a missive containing trade or family secrets that one would wish known only to oneself!” (Courrouve dit Pold 1861: 7–8) (p. 38).

Importantly, this led to the recognition of translation as a professional career. The author cites Masson’s (1877) demonstration of the impact of the French Revolution, in that “its need to disseminate information across France to speakers of all regional languages was a significant milestone in the bureaucratisation of translation practice” (p. 45). Although the original “Dugas entreprise” that undertook to translate revolutionary decrees into the local languages in 30 *départements* remained largely unpaid due to lack of bureaucratic infrastructure, it was

“characterised by a high degree of professionalisation: the translators were lawyers thrown out of work by recent events and keen to prove their revolutionary zeal (Pic 1989),<sup>3</sup> while the project as a whole gave rise to a new category of public employee, the *vérificateur*,

whose role was translation quality assessment (Simonin 2013)<sup>4</sup> (p. 14).

In Chapter 2 “Tracing an Emergent Discourse of Translatorial Labour” the author begins the story in late eighteenth-century Germany and Britain, and cites a discussion of the German publishing industry, and particularly the *Übersetzungsfabriken* [translation factories] in Nicolai’s *Das Leben und die Meinungen des Herrn Magister Sebaldus Nothanker* [*The Life and Opinions of Sebaldus Nothanker*] (1773–6), translated into English by Thomas Dutton in 1798. This “compared the manufacture of translations to weaving linen and knitting stockings to fulfil orders for the military” (p. 43), and described the emerging hierarchy of translation for the publishing trade:

“[A] translator from the English, for example, ranks higher than a translator from the French, as being scarcer. A translator from the Italian expects to be solicited before he begins to work, and will not always be content to be tied down to any particular day for the delivery of his work. As for a translator from the Spanish, there is scarce a single one to be had. And this is the very reason why people frequently undertake to translate from this language without understanding a syllable of it. On the other hand, translators from the Greek and Latin are so numerous, that they are never sought after, but come for the most part to offer their services. In addition to all these, there are translators, who do nothing their whole life but translate; – translators, who make their translations at their leisure hours by way of amusement, in the same manner as our young ladies employ themselves with ornamental needlework, knotting and filligree [sic]; fashionable translators who accompany their translations with a preface, in which they assure the public, that the original is excellent; – learned translators, who improve upon their work, accompany it with remarks, and assure us that the original is very bad, but that they have

---

<sup>3</sup> Pic, François (1989) “Essai d’inventaire des textes en occitan de la période révolutionnaire (1788–1800)”, in *Le Texte occitan de la période révolutionnaire*, Henri Boyer, Georges Fournier, Philippe Gardy, Philippe Martel, René Merle, and François Pic (eds). Montpellier: Section française de l’Association internationale d’études occitanes, 434.

<sup>4</sup> Simonin, Anne (2013) “La République en ses provinces: la traduction des lois, histoire d’un échec révolutionnaire (1790–1792 et au-delà)”, in *La République en voyage: 1770–1830* (eds). Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 197–218.

made it tolerable; translators, who translate themselves into originals; these worthy gentry get hold of a French or English book, leave out the beginning and end, alter and improve the remainder at leisure, put their name boldly in the title page, and publish the book as their own production. Lastly, there are translators who make their translations themselves, and some, who get them made by others (Nicolai, tr. Dutton 1798: 1.153–5)<sup>5</sup> (p. 43).

These fascinating contemporary insights lead to an exploration of the hierarchy of social and linguistic capital at play.

Chapter 4 explores the development of a legal framework for the nineteenth-century French literary translation market. Much of this centred on the translator's right to claim authorship of the translated version, and thus the *droit d'auteur* [intellectual property rights]. Legal opinion was divided, with Pardessus maintaining that "translations of French books published in France were by their very nature counterfeits" (Pardessus 1825: 35);<sup>6</sup> a lack of international law on the subject, however, led Pardessus to maintain that "French translations of foreign books [were] perfectly licit" (p. 89).

In Chapter 5, the author explores the economic lives of women translators, using Louise Swanton-Belloc (1796–1881) and Emma Allouard (1836–1918) as case studies. Swanton-Belloc was married to an artist, and both came from formerly wealthy families whose wealth was decimated by the Revolution. Louise cared for her three children, and other relatives, and her earnings from translation must have been a welcome addition to the family's finances. Likewise, Emma's family was experiencing financial difficulties when she began her translation career in about 1863. The records show that both Louise's and Emma's income dipped when their children were young, a pattern that will be familiar to anyone with caring responsibilities, and the author compares this to the difficulties encountered by female translators during the Covid pandemic.

---

<sup>5</sup> Nicolai, Friedrich (1773–76) *Das Leben und die Meinungen des Herrn Magister Sebaldus Nothanker*. Berlin/Stettin: In der Nicolaischen Buchhandlung. Trans. Thomas Dutton (1798) *The Life and Opinions of Sebaldus Nothanker*. London: Printed for C. Lowndes and sold by H. D. Symonds.

The final chapter provides a short biography of Auguste-Jean-Baptiste Defauconprêt: originally a legal professional, financial difficulties forced Defauconprêt to flee Paris for London in his forties, and he turned to translation, claiming a prodigious productivity. However, Pickford surmises that many of the translations for which he claimed authorship were outsourced to other translators whose names we shall probably never know.

This beautifully researched and extensively referenced book fleshes out the lives of translators in France in the long nineteenth century, and underlines the Paris-centric nature of the French publishing industry as well as the social and cultural capital needed to provide credibility in an unregulated industry. Whilst the focus is most certainly on literary translation, with other fields of translation (e.g. commercial, maritime and legal translation) remaining tangential, the fascinating accounts of the lives of individual translators, collectives, agencies, and the revelations about rates, working conditions and quality control will surely resonate with social and cultural historians as well as with today's professional translators. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose!* [The more things change, the more they stay the same].

**Amanda J. Haste** (*PhD Musicology, Diploma in Translation, Chartered Linguist*) is an Anglo-French musicologist and translator. She was adjunct faculty in both the Translation Studies and Music departments of Aix-Marseille University, France, and her research interests include identity construction through music and language. Her books include *Music and Identity in Twenty-First-Century Monasticism* (London & New York: Routledge, 2023), and co-authored (with James E. Block) *Constructing Identity in an Age of Globalization* (Paris: Ex Modio, 2015), and (with Linda Baines) the NCIS Guide for Independent Scholars (NCIS, 2024). She is currently working on two more books: *Becoming a Successful Independent Scholar* (with Linda Baines), and a monograph on the British in nineteenth-century Marseille.

<sup>6</sup> Pardessus, Jean-Marie (1825) *Cours de droit commercial*. Paris: Nève.