

Off the bookshelf

Aletta Stevens enjoys the first English translation of a groundbreaking Dutch work, while Kim Sanderson assesses a guide to translation studies



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***My Little War* by Louis Paul Boon, translated from the Dutch by Paul Vincent (Dalkey Archive Press Belgian Literature Series, £9.99). www.dalkeyarchive.com**

When *Mijn kleine oorlog* by the Flemish writer Louis Paul Boon (1912-79) was published in 1947, reactions in Belgium were deeply divided. The Catholic press rejected it with vehement indignation on moral and aesthetic grounds, whilst the socialist and liberal press praised it highly. The criticisms concerned both content and form.

First published after liberation as chronicles in a weekly magazine, and based on the author's wartime diaries, the book was given an angry reception by collaborators who thought they recognised themselves. In addition, *Mijn kleine oorlog* was accused of being unliterary and 'ugly' writing. In fact, it was groundbreaking and modernist. Although the book was much talked about, it did not sell well. A second edition did not appear until 1960, with two new chapters and the text adapted to Dutch readers in the Netherlands, as well as offensive words and expressions taken out.

It is this last edition corrected by the author which is the basis for Paul Vincent's translation. The novel is a series of short chapters, each no more than four pages and a kind of vignette, featuring a local character and a brief account of how they fared during the war, followed by anecdotes and comments. Some characters are petty-minded and pathetic, their stories bizarre and shocking. These



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sketches give us an insight into how Flemish people lived through the Nazi Occupation, how the little man was up against the big war: the soldier, the baker, the collaborator. Beyond this, however, they also have relevance today. 'The impact of war and occupation on ordinary lives in this book remains topical, indeed universal', as Paul Vincent states (*ITI Bulletin*, March-April 2012).

What makes the book so distinctive, and a true *cri de coeur*, is the style in which it is written. The stories read as a breathless stream of thoughts without punctuation, a furious and incredulous emptying of

the mind. In his foreword to the original edition, the renowned Flemish writer Willem Elsschot warns: 'Dear reader, do not read this book with the eyes of a literary critic, do not search for superfluous or missing or poor punctuation... but read it with your heart, with a sparkle of the humane sensibility with which Boon wrote it. Your most profound human dignity will be awakened.'

Born into a working-class family, Boon worked in manual jobs from the age of 16. He attended art college in his spare time, where he embraced Marxism and later co-founded the local youth section of the Communist Party. Called up for military service, he ended up a prisoner of war in Germany in 1940. After four months he was released and started to write. To support his wife and young son, he worked as a journalist. In 1947 he co-founded the literary magazine *Tijd en mens*. The publication of his novels *De Kapellekensbaan* and *Zomer te Ter-Muren* (1953 and 1956; both available in English translation), in which he charts the rise of socialism in Flanders, was a breakthrough and Boon was now considered a major writer, put forward as a candidate for the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1972.

Through his rough-and-ready style, with its rude, crude insolence, Boon railed against the cowardice and suppression around him. He was a sensitive idealist, deeply disturbed by the treachery and small-mindedness so prevalent during the war. He felt compelled to bear witness to this injustice, believing that the fate of the common man had remained unchanged throughout the centuries. He died a depressive alcoholic, dreaming of a Utopia that he doubted could ever be achieved.

Boon's bitter rage was expressed through the everyday language of common folk, with all its vulgarities and peculiarities, creating an unliterary form with the noblest of literary intentions. While the original, which he chose to write in regional Belgian Dutch, is not always clear to readers used to the literary Dutch of the Netherlands, this first-ever English translation by the eminently capable Paul Vincent excels in fluency and lucidity. Thanks to Dalkey Archive Press, this literary gem is finally accessible to all readers of English.



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Introducing Translation Studies by Jeremy Munday (Routledge, £22.99). www.routledge.com/linguistics

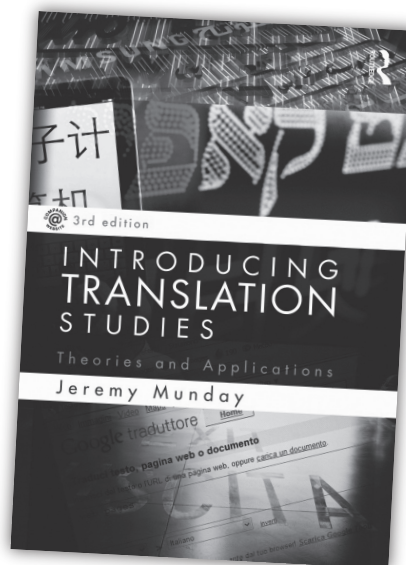
I approached this third edition without having read the previous ones, but I had heard that this book was recommended reading for several Masters courses in translation. My review will therefore consider translation students as one group of potential readers.

As for other potential readers, this review will also look at the text's suitability for the interested outsider to translation. I sometimes meet people from other disciplines (particularly academics) whose work brings them into contact with translation. Might this be a suitable introduction for them to translation studies?

Would this book also be suitable for me as a practising translator? I am generally keen to learn more about translation theory myself, and in particular how it relates to my non-literary freelance work. Perhaps an awareness of different theories could help with the difficult business of justifying translation choices convincingly?

Each chapter in the third edition has been updated, with the book's structure remaining broadly similar to previous editions. The language has been altered to make the text more accessible, and the examples used now cover a wider range of languages, with, in particular, greater coverage of Chinese and Arabic. So for example Chapter 2 on translation before the 20th century discusses 'literal' and 'free' translation in the western tradition, but also Chinese translation of Buddhist sutras from Sanskrit, and uses as an example the translation from Greek to Arabic of scientific and philosophical texts.

The information on the companion website has been expanded considerably for this latest edition.¹ I like the introductory videos summarising each chapter; there are also multiple-choice questions and 'research project questions' for afters. The 'interactive timeline' sounds handy too, but was unavailable at the time of writing. I must say that I did not find the site intuitive to navigate; the fact that material is advertised for either 'students' or 'instructors' might



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also put off interested parties who fall into neither category.


Turning to the book as a whole, I certainly found it user-friendly, written in a straightforward style and not overly complex. For instance, where 'use of nominalization instead of verb' is mentioned in Chapter 6, this is explained with an example.² There are reminders of key distinctions such as 'strategy is an overall orientation of the translator'/'procedure is a specific technique or method'.³ Most of the diagrams did aid my comprehension of the concepts, for example a table comparing Newmark's ideas of semantic and communicative translation in Chapter 3.

Case studies, discussion/research points and extensive suggestions for further reading are provided in each chapter. Links between theory and practice are explored, and non-literary translation features frequently. For example, in Chapter 2 the first case study looks at both UNESCO's Guidelines for Translators and the assessment criteria used by the IoL in the Diploma in Translation in 1990, showing among other things how historical ways of describing translation persist. One suggestion

for further research is to analyse the latest handbook to the CioL's DipTrans along these lines (it is available online).⁴

The scope of the book provides plenty of approaches to choose from, although to gain more than a brief acquaintance with a particular theory readers would need to pursue the suggestions for further reading. Information is often supplied on how theories have been received, helping to situate them in the wider context of translation studies. By way of example, the term 'transcreation' is introduced in Chapter 10 (as discussed by Brazilian poet Haroldo de Campos), and discussed further in Chapter 11 on 'New directions from the new media'.

Practising translators might find some of the basic distinctions useful in discussions with clients, perhaps when explaining the translation process. For instance, Chapter 1 lists Jakobson's types of translation: intralingual; interlingual; intersemiotic (from verbal to non-verbal such as a film adaptation of a book). Some of the detail in the theories presented could also prove relevant: in Chapter 5.2 Justa Holz-Mänttari is shown to place professional non-literary translation within its sociocultural context, describing the 'roles and players' in the translation process. Chapter 9.3 is entitled 'The power network of the publishing industry'.

Overall, I do think *Introducing Translation Studies* fulfils its aim to be a 'critical but balanced survey' of the field,⁵ and I am sure it is eminently suitable for use as a textbook on translation courses. I would also recommend the text to other interested parties who are new to translation. The book also contains much material linking theory and practice, and I was pleasantly surprised by the number of references to material available online. It is therefore relatively easy for practising translators such as myself to identify points of interest and pursue them further. 

¹ www.routledge.com/cw/munday

² p139

³ With reference to Vinay and Darbelnet, p86

⁴ pp49-51

⁵ p2