Nobody today would deny that translation played a crucial role in Britain between the year of the first printed book in 1473, itself an English rendering by William Caxton of the French romance, *Recueil des histoires de Troyes*, and the mid-seventeenth century. It was central to the dissemination of knowledge in all branches of intellectual and practical endeavour, as indeed it still is, and it was instrumental in the development of a native literature and the evolution of religious thought. Nor would one deny that the printing press was the indispensable tool in the production and circulation of translations in all spheres. Printers brought to England ideas first articulated on the Continent, either in the Classical languages or in various vernaculars; they imported recent Continental scholarly editions of Classical texts informed by the humanists’ new philological and linguistic scholarship; and they invited older vernacular texts that had once crossed the Channel in manuscript form to make a second journey as newly printed editions begging to be newly translated. In fields as diverse as politics and poetry, physics and philosophy, numismatics and navigation, and myriad disciplines in between, books were imported and quickly turned into English prose and verse. F.O. Matthiesson opened his book on Elizabethan translations by claiming that “a study of [them] is a study of the means by which the Renaissance came to England”.

However, although he limited his scope to what he considered great works of literature and discussed only four translators, Hoby, North, Florio and Holland, his claim can in fact be extended to cover, not just the years of Elizabeth’s reign, but the whole period from early humanism to the eve of the First Civil War in 1640, and not just *belles-lettres* and major literary translators, but works in diverse fields by men and women of equally diverse backgrounds and talents.

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1 F.O. Matthiesson, *Translation, an Elizabethan Art* (Cambridge, 1931), MA, p. 3.
Scholars frequently write about how an increasingly literate public in early modern Britain avidly sought to buy books, both those written first in English and those translated from a variety of languages both ancient and modern. They also write about authors and literary movements and fashions. However, they rarely deal with the role of the whole translation movement in this effervescent and exciting period of British history, or about the manner in which translations were created and printed. While some translators have been studied and their works reassessed, we know little about so many of them. While some kinds of translation have been given much attention—English renderings of the Classics, for example, or of the Bible—others have been largely ignored. It is also true that translations into English have monopolised the field of research, whereas those into other languages, although printed in Britain, have inspired little scholarship.

Moreover, despite great strides in our knowledge of early printing, relatively little attention has been paid to the role of translation in the history of the book since the days of H.S. Bennett, who in each of his three volumes of *English Books and Readers* devoted one chapter to “Translation and translators.” We are still left asking many questions: How did translators and printers choose texts to translate? Which was more important in a printer’s decision making, a ready supply of texts, so that printers had to translate what they had at hand, or readers’ demands for specific works, which the printer procured and then had translated? What was the relationship between printer and translator? Can we see emerging in this period the profile of anything resembling a professional translator? Finally, what role does patronage play in translation? These questions need to be answered if we are to understand and appreciate how England’s cultural and intellectual development, as well as its material progress, was bound up indissolubly with translation.

One reason why so much about English Renaissance translation remains in the dark is that we have lacked the tool with which to investigate the subject thoroughly, namely a complete and reliable catalogue.

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