

**HINTS ON
TRANSLATION FROM
LATIN INTO ENGLISH**

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Hints on Translation from Latin Into English by Alexander Souter

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HELPS FOR STUDENTS OF HISTORY. No. 20

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BY

ALEXANDER SOUTER, D.LITT.

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HINTS ON TRANSLATION FROM LATIN INTO ENGLISH¹

By ALEXANDER SOUTER, D.LITT.

MANY helpful works have been written on the rendering of English into Latin. Some of them are of altogether exceptional merit, such as Professor J. P. Postgate's *Sermo Latinus* (Macmillan), Professor H. Nettleship's *Passages for Translation into Latin Prose, with an Introduction* (Bell), and Professor W. R. Hardie's *Latin Prose Composition* (Arnold). But on the reverse task, the rendering of Latin into English, much less has been written. Any such consummate treatment of the subject as has recently been provided for French by Dr. R. L. Graeme Ritchie and Mr. James M. Moore² does not appear to exist. Nor can the attempt to provide it be made in a few pages. All that can be expected here is some hints derived from personal struggles with the task and from considerable experience both as a teacher of Latin and as an examiner of school and university exercises.

An author of a book writes primarily for his own people, for those whose native language is the same as

¹ I am greatly indebted to Professor W. B. Anderson, the Victoria University, Manchester, for his careful revision of this paper.

² *Translation from French* (Cambridge: at the University Press, 1918).

his own. The words he uses have for them very much the same value as they have for him. Both he and they are inheritors of the same living speech, with a long history behind it. As is well known, the literary is never quite the same as the spoken language, and the farther away it departs from colloquial usage, the more artificial it becomes; and, while in so doing it may alienate many of the writer's compatriots, it becomes thereby more comprehensible by the educated of other peoples. The more "racy of the soil" an author's ideas and language are, the more difficult is the translator's task; indeed every literature contains works whose style and thought cannot be adequately reproduced in other languages. Such works must remain closed books to all who cannot read them in the original. But most works whose thought transcends mere national barriers can be so translated as to retain at least some of their best qualities. A scholarly and sympathetic translator who is an artist in his own language can do much to make such writings appeal to a wide circle of his countrymen.

It is self-evident that the translator must have a knowledge both of the language from which the translation is to be made, and also of that into which it is to be made. That he should possess an equally great knowledge of both is almost impossible. An English translator into English must of necessity know his mother-tongue better than any other, but he must be distinguished from the majority of his fellow-countrymen by a special knowledge of the language to be translated. It will be strange, however, if, in the process of obtaining his special knowledge, his sense of his own language is not blunted. One who spends the

greater part of his time in the study of foreign literatures, loses the finer appreciation of his own, just as a British traveller who has been continuously speaking French or German on the Continent for a month or two will on his return to his own country begin by speaking rather halting English. The translator from Latin, then, must know the Latin language and literature, but his English translation will always benefit by the criticism of one whose special acquirement is a fine sense for English. Professor G. G. Ramsay, in the preface to his translation of *The Annals of Tacitus* (John Murray), says: "My greatest debt of all is to the acute word-by-word criticism of one whose fine sense of what is pure and perspicuous in English recalls the well-known passage in which Cicero speaks of the beautiful simple Latin which he had heard spoken in his youth by the cultivated ladies of the time" (vol. i., p. ix); also: "I have again derived great benefit from the criticism of one whose sense of what is clear and idiomatic in English is not overborne by any knowledge of the language of the original" (vol. ii., p. x).

Our ideal in translation is to produce on the minds of our readers as nearly as possible the same effect as was produced by the original on its readers. This has been attempted in more than one way, but in my opinion every attempt which is not based upon a fine sense of the value of Latin words and on a careful attention to each word in every sentence, is built upon a rotten foundation and doomed to failure. The glamour of a fine English style has given many such productions a false repute, but even the best of them grossly mislead the reader in many crucial places. Every word should be represented somehow in the