

ANNA LANFRANCHI

Italian Translation Rights, the British Council and the Central Office of Information (1943-47)

Abstract: The archival records of the British Council and the Ministry of Information-Central Office of Information (The National Archives, Kew, UK), together with the correspondence of Italian publishing houses and literary agents, document the complex relationship between British propaganda and the Italian translation industry in the years going from the Armistice to the Treaty of Peace (1943-1947). These sources demonstrate that Britain recognised the cultural influence that foreign reading products had in interwar Italy, as well as the function that they could perform in the postwar cultural field. In fact, British authorities encouraged the restoration of translation activities in Italy by launching a dedicated scheme for purchasing translation rights. Arguably, Britain associated an increasing propaganda value with having books translated and published by indigenous and independent publishing firms in newly liberated areas. While the British Council and the Ministry of Information helped to create new transnational contacts between Italian and British publishing, the article shall evaluate to what extent their efforts were successful in “obtain[ing] publicity for British ideas as expressed in British books.”

Key Words: Cultural diplomacy; British Council; Ministry of Information; Central Office of Information; Italy; Great Britain; Second World War; Translation rights.

Introduction

In 2001 Roger Ellis’s and Liz Oakley-Brown’s *Translation and Nation: Towards A Cultural Politics of Englishness* focused on translation practices in order to investigate their influence on the idea of “Englishness” from late medieval times to 20th century Britain. However, the context and scope of those practices were not confined within the geographical borders of the British Isles; on the contrary, the editors pointed out how “England has shown itself, from earliest times, as vigorous a coloniser as ever it was colonised: English self-definition, that is, cannot be understood without reference to the imposition of English culture, first throughout the British Isles, and later across the globe” (5).

This article concentrates on this end of the dyad, namely the results that translations from English achieved in terms of cultural dissemination, by considering the measures taken by the British Council (Coombs; Donaldson; van Kessel) and the Ministry of Information (Donaldson; Holman; McLaine; Willcox) to facilitate translations of British works in Continental Europe during and after WWII. Specifically, between 1943 and 1947 both the British Council and the Ministry of Information (Central Office of Information from 1946) dealt directly with translation rights in British works to be published in Italy. This activity is