

*The British Centre for Literary Translation**Duncan Large*

W.G. Sebald did not spend much time translating the work of others, but he was nonetheless greatly interested in the art of literary translation.¹ He had close personal friendships with a number of translators – foremost among them Michael Hamburger, whom he nominated for an honorary doctorate at the University of East Anglia (SM 346–348) – and worked closely with translators of his own work, especially his English translators Michael Hulse and Anthea Bell.² Ulrich von Bülow describes how ‘he worked over his translators’ manuscripts so extensively [...] as to be considered a co-translator at the very least’ (SM 255). The most lasting testament to Sebald’s ‘militant dedication to the art and practice of literary translation’³ – and one of the most significant aspects of his legacy *tout court* – is the British Centre for Literary Translation (BCLT), which he founded at UEA in 1989.

Founding and Funding the BCLT

By the late 1980s Sebald was in his mid-forties, and his career as a university academic was reaching its high point. In recognition of his prolific publishing of academic articles throughout the 1970s and 1980s he was promoted in quick succession to Senior Lecturer in October 1985, Reader in October 1987 and finally, in October 1988, to Professor of European Literature (SM 632–635).

The security of establishing his academic position allowed him to devote his energies in two new directions. Firstly, he could turn his attention more to developing his own writing: a few weeks before his promotion to professor came into effect, his first book-length literary work was published in late summer 1988, the long poem *Nach der Natur* (*After Nature*), and this was followed eighteen months later by his second, the prose fiction *Schwindel. Gefühle*. (*Vertigo*) in March 1990. The other new direction

was to follow through on a plan he had been formulating already for a number of years, to establish a translation centre at UEA.

Sebald founded BCLT in the spring of 1989 with a grant from the Arts Council of Great Britain. BCLT was unlike anything that existed in the UK at the time, and from the beginning its outlook was thoroughly international: it was to be 'British' not in the sense of a national as opposed to a regional centre, but rather as a UK equivalent of existing European models. This was acknowledged by the Arts Council in its annual report for 1989: 'We were also able to support the establishment of a British Centre for Literary Translation, based on models which have been successfully launched in France and West Germany.'⁴ (The references here are, respectively, to the Collège International des Traducteurs Littéraires, founded in 1987 at Arles in southern France, and the Europäisches Übersetzer-Kollegium Nordrhein-Westfalen (European College of Translators) in Straelen, West Germany, which was founded in 1978 by Elmar Tophoven and Klaus Birkenhauer as the first literary translators' college worldwide.)

Sebald visited the latter in April 1988 (SM 634), and Birkenhauer paid a return visit to UEA at the end of May 1989 to effectively baptize Straelen's new British equivalent.⁵ It took a little while for BCLT's branding to take hold: earlier in May, Sebald's colleagues Christopher Smith and Holger Klein had organized 'The Second Bite: A Conference on Translations and on Re-Translations' which was described as 'under the aegis of the BCCLA [British Comparative Literature Association] and the University of East Anglia Centre for Literary Translation',⁶ but by July 1989 Sebald was advertising residential bursaries for translators in the *Times Literary Supplement* (TLS) on behalf of 'The British Centre for Literary Translation, newly established at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, with the support of the Arts Council of Great Britain'.⁷

The TLS advertisement, one of the first published appearances of the BCLT name, is notable in a number of respects. First, it gives a sense of the remit of the fledgling Centre and of Sebald's understanding of the field of 'literary translation'. The advert continued: 'The British Centre for Literary Translation [...] is offering bursaries for translators engaged in projects of a literary or scholarly nature who wish to avail themselves of the University's excellent library and other resources.' It demonstrates, in other words (and not surprisingly, given the hybrid nature of his own literary writing), that Sebald's understanding of 'literary translation' exceeded the confines of a narrow definition of *belles-lettres* and included the full range of humanistic endeavour.

Second, the reference to ‘projects of a [. . .] scholarly nature’ was at the same time also a recognition that BCLT was from the outset a branch of the University of East Anglia, and its distinctive appeal would remain the interface between the literary translation profession and academia. In the case of UEA, moreover, ‘academia’ offered its own distinctive blend combining literary scholarship, the teaching of creative writing (UEA is home to the UK’s longest-standing creative writing programme, founded by Malcolm Bradbury in 1970) and, subsequently, the training of literary translators (an MA in Literary Translation was set up in October 1993 by Sebald’s colleague Jean Boase-Beier).

What the BCLT’s advertisement for residential translator bursaries in 1989 also demonstrates, is that in line with his European models Sebald’s first priority with BCLT would be bringing visiting translators to UEA and providing a conducive atmosphere to promote high-quality literary translation work. As literary editor Bill Swainson put it: ‘Initially, BCLT offered 4-week bursaries for translators translating from any European language into any other European language, and provided accommodation, the use of a library and, perhaps most important of all, a community of fellow translators and academics.’⁸

The first translator in residence was Michael Wynne-Ellis, who came from Helsinki to spend the first half of August 1989 in Norwich, translating nineteenth-century Finnish dramatist Aleksis Kivi’s comedy *Nummisuutarit* (*The Village Cobblers*). There were three other visiting translators in 1989, but the scheme really took off in 1990 with at least eighteen visitors. Resident translators were given accommodation on campus and looked after by the German Sector Secretary, Beryl Ranwell.⁹

Sebald served as Director of BCLT for five years, with Ranwell as BCLT Secretary. In the early years Sebald threw himself into fundraising. Uwe Schütte comments:

Setting up the centre involved numerous trips to London to obtain funding for bursaries and staff, not to mention endless meetings with university officials who needed to be convinced of the inherent value of such a decidedly unprofitable enterprise. After the centre was successfully established, Sebald’s role was to ensure its financial stability – something that would prove to be a constant struggle and meant endless fishing for external funding.¹⁰

Sebald’s efforts in this regard certainly bore fruit. Initial funding from the Arts Council in 1989 was relatively modest, although the £3,115 awarded was still the highest of the twenty-three grants made from its recently

established fund for translations.¹¹ In successive years, Arts Council funding increased to £14,000 (1990–1991), £49,470 (1991–1992) and £50,000 (1992–1993), and from 1993–1994 the Arts Council agreed to support BCLT on an annual basis, initially at £50,000.¹² Furthermore, already by 1991 Sebald had secured funding for BCLT not just from the Arts Council but also the British Council, European Commission and Council of Europe among other sources.¹³

Sebald's colleague Christopher Smith recalled: 'Despite some frustrations, [he] clearly enjoyed the business of setting up the BCLT from 1989 onwards, dealing directly with UEA's Vice-Chancellor [Derek Burke] and the Arts Council, and then maintaining the Centre as something of a private fief.'¹⁴ Sebald also gathered a small team round him as the operation of the Centre intensified and diversified. His former colleague Richard Sheppard lists the 'supporting cast' of colleagues who worked with Sebald at the BCLT in the early years, in addition to Ranwell: 'George Hyde is Deputy Director and Adam Czerniawski first Translator in Residence; Czerniawski later becomes Associate Director; Anthony Vivis becomes Translator in Residence (1992–1993)' (SM 635). The work of the Centre was also overseen by an Advisory Panel.

BCLT's Aims and Activities under Sebald's Leadership

Sebald's broad goals in setting up BCLT are summarized by Schütte: 'The BCLT was an idealistic enterprise, an attempt to accord more recognition to the undervalued profession of literary translation as well as a contribution to cultural exchange between an often isolationist Britain and the rest of the world.'¹⁵ In its early years the Centre hosted dozens of visiting translators working on their own projects, but BCLT also initiated a number of its own activities, as detailed in this description from 1991:

Among the Centre's main aims are the provision of bursaries for literary translators both from the UK and from abroad; organizing conferences and seminars on aspects of translation; creating a resource centre for literary translators; collecting data relevant to the business of translation.¹⁶

In the service of the latter two goals Sebald recruited a BCLT Research Secretary, Jeanne Sheriff, who worked one day per week for three years from July 1991. Sheriff wrote to a range of publishers asking for a) information on their translators for a database of translators in the UK; b) information on their fiction translations for a bibliography of translations published in the UK and the USA since 1970; c) copies of all translations already published

and published in future for a 'Library of Translations'. Over three decades the 'Library of Translations' became the BCLT Library which currently runs to several thousand volumes; the *Directory of Literary Translators* was the most significant of BCLT's early projects and an important contribution to raising the profile of translators in the UK.

Not all these plans came to fruition, of course. In September 1989 Geoffrey Kingscott reported: 'The British Centre for Literary Translation which has recently been founded at the University of East Anglia is considering undertaking research on lexicographic work for translators, and the idea of a multilingual thesaurus has already been mooted as a possible project.'¹⁷ Under Sebald's (technophobic) management BCLT was never going to emerge as a centre for research into translation and the computer, although Duncan Large's research has moved BCLT in this direction more recently.¹⁸

Significant BCLT events in the early years included a symposium on 'Shakespeare in German / Shakespeare auf Deutsch' organized by Holger Klein in December 1990, a substantial series of seminars on 'Writing in the Shadow of the Shoah' spanning two years 1990–1992 (SM 187–188), and in December 1992 the European Writers' Forum. Swainson describes the latter as 'perhaps the highpoint of BCLT's public-facing work in its early years': 'The writers, who read their work and spoke in the discussions that December weekend, were Marie Cardinal, Cees Nooteboom, Lars Gustafsson, Jaan Kaplinski, Gianni Celati, Julian Ríos, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Ryszard Kapuściński and Max Sebald himself.'¹⁹ Swainson omits to mention that the European Writers' Forum also featured a host of leading translators, including Peter Bush (eventually one of Sebald's successors as BCLT Director), Czerniawski, Hamburger, Suzanne Jill Levine, Antonia Lloyd-Jones and Christopher Middleton (SM 190).

All this activity and grant capture did not go unappreciated within the university. Confirming internal funding for the translator database project in April 1992, Sebald's Dean of School commented: 'The British Centre for Literary Translation is perhaps the most successful applied humanities venture the university has known.'²⁰ Sebald was able to capitalize on the goodwill that he had accrued within the university the following year, when his concern for the broader welfare of translators came to the fore. In 1993 he heard of the plight of Croatian translator and academic Mario Suško, a former BCLT translation bursary holder who was caught up in the siege of Sarajevo. Sebald successfully arranged internal funding for Suško to return to UEA with his family on a year-long visiting fellowship with

free accommodation, and he launched a public appeal for additional funds which led to *The Sunday Times* paying for Suško's transport to the UK.

By 1994 Sebald's reputation as a writer had grown so substantial (especially after the publication of *Die Ausgewanderten* (*The Emigrants*) in September 1992) that he needed to step down as BCLT Director. The last major initiative Sebald undertook on behalf of BCLT before stepping down was to inaugurate an annual public lecture series, known initially as the St Jerome Lecture. The first of these was given by George Steiner, doyen of British translation studies, on 26 April 1994 at UEA's Sainsbury Centre for the Visual Arts.²¹

Sebald's Legacy at BCLT

Sebald handed over the reins of the day-to-day running of BCLT on the appointment of a new Director (Terry Hale) and Administrator (Christine Wilson), who both started work in April 1994. Sebald left BCLT in good health, both financially (it was still offering twenty-five translator bursaries per year) and culturally. Even after stepping down as Director, he continued as a member of the BCLT Advisory Board, and his association with the Centre continued until his death.

In March 1995, Sebald took part in a meeting at the Goethe-Institut in London, organized by BCLT, to discuss recognition of literary translation as a research activity by the forthcoming Research Assessment Exercise in UK higher education (SM 642). In the late 1990s he tried in vain to persuade the university to acquire for BCLT a dedicated home in the shape of Earlham Lodge, a Grade II listed building near the student village.²² Sebald attended the inaugural BCLT Summer School in 2000, then shortly before his death, in late September 2001, he gave the St Jerome Lecture in London.²³

Sebald's successor as BCLT Director, Terry Hale, would go on to inaugurate in his own ways: he liaised with the Charles Wallace India Trust (CWIT) to establish an annual visiting translator fellowship in 1996, which recently celebrated a quarter century of bringing Indian translators to Norwich. Hale also placed an emphasis on the acquisition of translator archives, which now form the core of the Literary Translation collection in the British Archive for Contemporary Writing, based at the UEA Library. Hale was succeeded in January 1998 by Peter Bush, who introduced the annual Summer School in 2000 and brought *In Other Words*, the journal of the Translators Association, to BCLT. Bush was succeeded in March 2004 by Amanda Hopkinson, Hopkinson in January 2010 by

Valerie Henitiuk, then in July 2014 the current head of BCLT, Duncan Large, took over.

Each of Sebald's successors has taken BCLT in new directions, but a surprising amount of the original impetus and vision behind Sebald's BCLT remains. BCLT has continued to be funded by Arts Council England, now (since 2015) via a collaboration agreement with the National Centre for Writing (also in Norwich), which partners with BCLT on a wide variety of initiatives such as the annual Summer School. Sebald's initial focus on hosting visiting translators is now less pronounced, as BCLT's primary role is now as a research centre, but the Centre continues to host visiting Indian translators under the CWIT scheme and, since 2021, has funded two further three-month translation residencies annually. BCLT was a founder member of RECIT, the European Network of International Literary Translation Centres set up in 2000, and it continues to play a leading role in the organization with current BCLT Manager Anna Goode serving as its Secretary since 2017. The PhD in Literary Translation which Sebald tried unsuccessfully to introduce was later approved and now forms part of UEA's suite of 'creative-critical' PhDs.²⁴

The St Jerome Lecture was renamed the Sebald Lecture in 2003 to commemorate BCLT's illustrious founder, and it continues to be given annually by a prominent cultural figure. Over the years, these have included Margaret Atwood, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Carlos Fuentes, Seamus Heaney, Arundhati Roy and Susan Sontag. Most have at least referred to Sebald's own work during their lecture, and in one notable case the 2009–2010 Sebald Lecture was entirely devoted to its namesake.²⁵ A volume of Sebald Lectures, edited by former BCLT National Programme Director Daniel Hahn, is forthcoming in the series Routledge Studies in Literary Translation which is co-edited by Duncan Large.

For someone who was not himself a very prolific translator, Sebald showed a true dedication to promoting literary translation through BCLT. He was not a natural administrator or founder of institutions, but BCLT proved the great exception to this rule. BCLT has outlived him by over two decades (and counting) and represents an important legacy by means of which he continues to help translators, to enrich the intellectual life of UEA, and to represent a beacon of internationalism in the barren post-Brexit cultural landscape of the UK.

Notes

1. J Catling et al., Among Translators: W.G. Sebald and Translation, in: *In Other Words* 38 (2011), pp. 111–120.
2. M Hulse, Englishing Max (SM 95–208) and A Bell, Translating W.G. Sebald: With and Without the Author (SM 209–215).
3. S Rahmani, Words, Not Bombs: W.G. Sebald and the Global Valences of the Critical, in: *Boundary 2* 47:3 (2020), pp. 1–20 (16).
4. *Arts Council: 44th Annual Report and Accounts, 1988–89* (London: Arts Council, 1989), p. 17.
5. Handwritten note in BCLT archive, UEA.
6. Printed flyer in BCLT archive.
7. *The Times Literary Supplement* 4504 (1989), p. 836.
8. B Swainson, Excitement and Possibility, in: D Large et al. (eds.), *My BCLT: Celebrating 30 Years of the British Centre for Literary Translation* (Norwich: BCLT, 2019), pp. 8–10 (8).
9. On Ranwell's role, cf. C Angier, *Speak, Silence: In Search of W.G. Sebald* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), p. 336.
10. U Schütte, *W.G. Sebald* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018), pp. 26–27.
11. *Arts Council: 45th Annual Report and Accounts, 1989–90* (London: Arts Council, 1990), p. 68.
12. Cf. Arts Council annual reports 46 (1990–1991), p. 64; 47 (1991–1992), p. 64; 48 (1992–1993), p. 67; 49 (1993–1994), pp. 18, 69.
13. Advertisement for appointment of an Administrator, 1991 (BCLT archive).
14. C Smith, W.G. 'Max' Sebald as I Knew Him: A Memoir, in: *Journal of European Studies* 41:3–4 (2011), pp. 255–265 (262).
15. Schütte, *Sebald*, p. 26.
16. Letter to publishers, BCLT archive.
17. G Kingscott, *Applications of Machine Translation: Study for the Commission of the European Communities* (Nottingham: Praetorius, 1989), p. 47.
18. D Large, Could Google Translate Shakespeare?, in: *In Other Words* 52 (2018/19), pp. 79–94.
19. Swainson, Excitement and Possibility, p. 8.
20. Funding application, BCLT archive.
21. Subsequently published as G Steiner, An Exact Art, in: *No Passion Spent: Essays, 1978–1996* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996), pp. 267–289.
22. C Wilson, Working with Max at BCLT, in: Catling et al. (eds.), *Among Translators*, p. 115.
23. St. Jerome Lecture 2001: W.G. Sebald in Conversation with Maya Jaggi and Anthea Bell, in: *In Other Words* 21 (2003), pp. 5–18.
24. Schütte, *Sebald*, p. 27.
25. W Self, Absent Jews and Invisible Executioners: W.G. Sebald and the Holocaust, in: *In Other Words* 35 (2010), pp. 60–76.