



*Translations from Armenian into English, 1991 to date*  
a study by Next Page Foundation in the framework of the Book Platform project

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## Introduction

The aim of present report is to outline the translation and reception of modern Armenian literature in the United Kingdom. Another side of this investigation is to see the trends of translation of Armenian language books and their publication in the UK.

We took into consideration books of Armenian authors writing in Armenian, and in rare cases the works of English-writing authors who live in Armenia and whose works are edited and published in the UK.

## "Golden age" of Armenian literature

Armenian literature dates back from 5<sup>th</sup> century AD, just immediately after the invention of the Armenian alphabet by Mesrop Mashtots. The old Armenian literature is one of the interesting and unique fields of the written culture in the world. Its sources date deeply back to the antiquity.

First books in Armenian language were the translation of the Bible from Syriac and Greek, translations of great philosophers and theologians as well as original works of Armenian authors. First original Armenian book was the biography of Mesrop Mashtots written by his pupil Koryun. Then follow historiographical works of Pavstos Buzand, Movses Khorenatsi, Eghishe, Ghazar Parpetsi. All of them provide rich material not only for historical events of Armenia but also for neighboring countries and nations. Among these historiographers stands out the great figure of Movses Khorenatsi who, analyzing more than 70 sources in different languages and epochs, wrote the complete history of Armenia from ancestor Hayk to his times. Many scholars have analyzed this prominent book and used it as an indispensable source of historical data. For instance, Movses Khorenatis gives the oldest recollection about Bulgarians. He used as a source the collection of Armenian bard songs, the heroic narrations about Armenian ancestors, forefathers and national legendary heroes, which were performed by the bards under the accompaniment of musical instruments.



5<sup>th</sup> century historiographer Eghishe wrote the history of Armenian rebellion against Persian king's policy to force Armenians to abandon Christianity and return to the Heathen worship of fire and other deities. By this Vardan Mamikonian (who led this struggle) and his followers have become a symbol of fair struggle and Armenian freedom-loving, celebrated saints of the Armenian Church. This history has played a great role as an unfading example of struggle for ideas during all future history of Armenia.

One of the first books written in 5<sup>th</sup> century (or translated from the Greek original of 4<sup>th</sup> century due to the lack of Armenian alphabet in 4<sup>th</sup> century) is the "History of Armenia" written by Agathangelos, which is dedicated to the history of conversion of Armenia to Christianity under the rule of king Trdates and by the efforts of Grigor Lusavorich (Gregory the Illuminator).

All these historiographical books were written in 5<sup>th</sup> century which is called the "golden era" of the Armenian literature. In the middle of 5<sup>th</sup> century, between 441-449 another great book was written by Eznik Koghbatsi; his book "The faults of heresies" is considered among the gems of Armenian literature.

This literary monuments are worthy of detailed description because, as we would show, they are among most interesting books for translation for foreign translators and publishers.

### **Further development of Armenian literature**

In the following centuries Armenian literature developed in various directions: theology, historiography, philosophy, grammar, rhetorics, mathematics, medicine etc. All the works, as original ones as well as the translated ones from other languages provide rich material for scientists in different areas.



## **A historical overview of translations from Armenian**

First translations from Armenian into other languages took place in the Middle Ages when Armenia had active relations with other Christian and non-Christian nations. There were translations into Greek in VIII century, translations into Georgian in XII-XIII centuries etc. After the invention of printing first translations from Armenian were undertaken by Mechitarist congregation members who published works of Armenian theologians in bilingual edition, Armenian and Latin.

It is noteworthy that the first English-Armenian dictionary was compiled in 1821 by joint effort of Lord Byron and abbot of Mechitarist congregation Harutyun Avgerian. In 1816, Byron visited Saint Lazarus Island in Venice, where he acquainted himself with Armenian culture with the help of the abbots belonging to the Mechitarist Order. With the help of Father H. Avgerian, he learned Armenian language, and attended many seminars about language and history. He wrote English Grammar and Armenian (Qerakanutyun angghikan yev hayeren) in 1817, and Armenian Grammar and English (Qerakanutyun hayeren yev angghikan) in 1819, where he included quotations from classical and modern Armenian. Intrigued by the language and its efficacy as a spoken tongue, Byron affirmed in his memoirs that "God spoke to the world in Armenian." Byron also participated in the compilation of the English-Armenian dictionary (Barraran angghieren yev hayeren, 1821) and wrote the preface in which he explained the relationship of the Armenians with and the oppression of the Turkish "pashas" and the Persian satraps, and their struggle of liberation. His two main translations are the Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians, two chapters of Movses Khorenatsi's History of Armenia and sections of Nerses of Lambron's Orations Soghomonyan, Soghomon A. «Բայրոն, Ջորջ Նոել Գորդոն» (Byron, George Noel Gordon). Soviet Armenian Encyclopedia Volume II. Yerevan, Armenian SSR: Armenian Academy of Sciences, 1976, pp. 266-267.]. He may be credited with the birth of Armenology and its propagation.



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The same Mechitarist congregation carried out not only translations of Armenian literature, but also translation of other literatures, for instance, Turkish Proverbs translated into English. 1844.

Translations of Armenian materials took place not only in Venice, but also in other Armenian colonies. One of the first translations from Armenian into English was made in Madras, India. The book is "New Rules and Regulations of the Armenian Philanthropic Academy." 1834.

One of the first translations from Armenian into English published in Great Britain should be considered the following book: Armenia -- Kings and rulers - Genealogy, London, 1834: Oriental Translation Fund, translated from the Armenian into the Russian language by Lazar Kooznets; translated from the Russian into English, and compared with the original Armenian manuscript, by James Glen of Astrachan.

Another example of translation from Armenian into English through Russian is on Armenian Liturgy: The Liturgy of the Armenian Church, translated from the Russian version of Archbishop Argoutinsky Dolgorouky, 1850. Contributor: Richard White BLACKMORE

In this period again Mechitarist congregation in Venice continues to publish translations into English. Armenian popular songs / translated into English by Leo Alishan, 1852. This was the beginning of a new trend because before that main translations into English were about history or liturgy.

Very exceptional and peculiar in its class stands the book, published in Armenian populated city of Turkey, Smyrna (Descent of her Majesty Victoria Queen of England from the Arscid Kings of Armenia. Eng. and Arm., by S. VANANTETZI Mirza, Smyrna, 1866) both by its place of publication and by the topic. Smyrna was not a big city in

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Turkey, but had very developed Armenian cultural life with several newspapers, book printing houses, schools.

In 1877 the publications about Armenia become more frequent in all major European languages connected with the discussion of the Armenian question in San Stefano. Those were mainly original works by European scholars, and represented mainly maps, history of Armenia and political situation of Armenians in Turkey. These publications increased the interest to Armenian topics. However, that did not result in considerable increase in translations from Armenian but revolved mainly around politics. This was true in 1896 and in 1915 events of Armenian massacres in Turkey.

Two translations are known made by the British divine and orientalist Solomon Caesar Malan (The Life and Times of S. Gregory, the Illuminator, the Founder and Patron Saint of the Armenian Church, London, 1868) and (The Divine Liturgy of the Armenian Church of S. Gregory the Illuminator, London, 1870). As we see, historical and liturgical literature are again in the center of European scholars, and not only European scholars but in far away Calcutta (Melodies of the Holy Apostolic Church of Armenia. The Liturgy, as sung in ordinary, during Lent, and on Festivals. Written down in modern notation, and published by Amy Apcar. [The Liturgy, with a selection of Office hymns, etc. Translated by J. D. Melik- Beglar.] Arm. and Eng., 1897).

The end of 19th century was a period when systematic critical studies of Armenian language, history, liturgy started by efforts of European scholars. One of such works dedicated to a specific question of Armenian history is written in English by British orientalist Frederick Cornwallis CONYBEARE (The Key of Truth. A manual of the Paulician Church of Armenia. [Containing the Sacramentary and explanations of the Paulician doctrine.] The Armenian text edited and translated with illustrative documents and introduction by F. C. Conybeare. Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1898.)



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Another translated title of this period (Through the Storm: pictures of life in Armenia ... by Avetis NAZARBEK Translated by Mrs. L. M. Elton. With a prefatory note by F. York Powell, London : J. Murray, 1899.) focuses on the Armenian History and the policy of Turkey on the background of massacres of Armenians in 1896.

In 1902 and 1908 three translations into English are known to be published in Leipzig, which, of course, had circulation in Great Britain. They were about the Armenian Church melodies. The ecclesiastical theme that was one of the dominant ones among translations into English found its way not only in translations of old manuscripts and liturgical texts but also in a translation of a newly written and published book about the Armenian Church (Maghakia Ormanian, The church of Armenia / trans. G. Marcar Gregory, Mowbray and Co., London, 1912.). The book was originally written in 1911 in French but very soon has been translated back into Armenian and then into English. The author, a well educated in Rome archbishop of the Armenian Church wrote it in a modern language and with modern readers in his mind. The book was published several times until now, including in Armenia by Ankyunacar Press in 2011.

### **Modern Armenian literature**

Modern Armenian literature starts from the work of Khachatur Abovian's work "Wounds of Armenia". He was followed by other bright writers as Mikayel Nalbandian, Perch Proshian, Muracan, Nar Dos, Raffi and others. Among these names several works of Raffi have been translated into English and Published in the UK recently.

All these listed writers lived in 19<sup>th</sup> century. The beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the rise of new giants of Armenian literature: Hovannes Toumanian, Vahan Terian, Eghishe Charents and others.

Armenian literature in Soviet period also had some brilliant representatives like poets Hovhannes Shiraz, Avetik Isahakian, Hamo Sahian, Paroyr Sevak, and prosers Derenik Demirchian, Stepan Zorian, Aksel Bakunts and others.

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Patriotic theme was one of the dominant themes both among prosers and poets. Derenik Demirchian wrote a historical novel about the struggle of Armenians in 5<sup>th</sup> century for freedom and this novel played its role in encouraging Armenians in their struggle against fascism during WWII.

Some poets and writers fell victims of Stalin regime for their progressive views during dark years of totalitarian persecution of 1930s. Others were repressed. But nevertheless Armenian literature had great names even during this difficult period and up to the end of Soviet rule.

### **Translations into English during Soviet period (1920-1991)**

Establishment of Soviet rule in Armenia started a new period in the cultural life. And it had reflections also on the translations of Armenian cultural heritage into other languages.

One has to underline a specific feature of this period. The translations from languages of nations of Soviet Union into other languages were carried out mainly through Russian and published in central Soviet publishing houses. This was a policy of the state and Armenian language was not an exception from this rule. But in the first decades of Soviet rule there were no such translations from Armenian or they were extremely scarce. In later period we see many albums of manuscripts, published in English by Moscow and Leningrad publishing houses, where portions of translations from Armenian text were included.

Due to this policy very few translations from Armenian have been published in the UK. And most of them were again historical monuments or the scientific works, which contained the works of Armenian historiographers.



Another feature of this period is gradually increasing active involvement of the USA in this translation process. After WWII several Armenological chairs were established in a range of US and UK Universities, which were supported partly or fully by Armenian benefactors, one of them being Galoust Gulbenkian Foundation. In the UK such a chair was established in Oxford University and Robert W. Thomson was Calouste Gulbenkian Professor of Armenian Studies at Oxford University.

## **Armenian literature after the Karabagh movement and Independence 1988-**

A new period for Armenian nation started in 1988 with the Karabagh movement, the movement for freedom and self-determination of Karabagh. It is noteworthy that among intellectuals who led the Karabagh movement there were two writers, one of them was Vazgen Sarkissian and another was Vano Siradegian. With the proclamation of independence these persons became prominent political figures. The first became the Minister of Defence, the second became the Minister of Internal affairs. The beginning of new Armenian statehood was very difficult: the economic collapse, which was a common hardship for all post Soviet states, was aggravated by the Karabagh war of 1992-94. After the armistice of 1994, the economic situation in the country started to normalize. The literary life had a chance to revive. But it had a new great challenge. The whole nation and found itself in a completely new economic, political, psychological situation. This utter upheaval was necessary to evaluate, understand. This was a major challenge that was met by the new generation of Armenian writers and literary critics. And quite naturally new names began to appear in the literary stage of Armenia: Ruben Hovsepyan, Levon Khechoyan, Hovhannes Grigoryan, Armen Shekoyan etc.

## **Armenian translations in the UK market**

In this study we did not take into account the works of British Armenian or American Armenian authors writing on Armenian topics. These are mainly scholars working on Armenian history. They publish their works with British publishing houses in the



discourse of general discussion of questions of Armenian and non-Armenian history. Another area where British Armenian and American Armenian authors publish directly in English is Armenian Genocide: these works include documentary testimonies of genocide, as well as memoirs of survivors.

Though we do not study works of Armenian authors, writing in English, we should note that the organizations, which support these publications, do support also translations from Armenian and both classes of publications are in the general scope of these organizations. Moreover, these organizations carry out translations and publications in the USA and the UK.

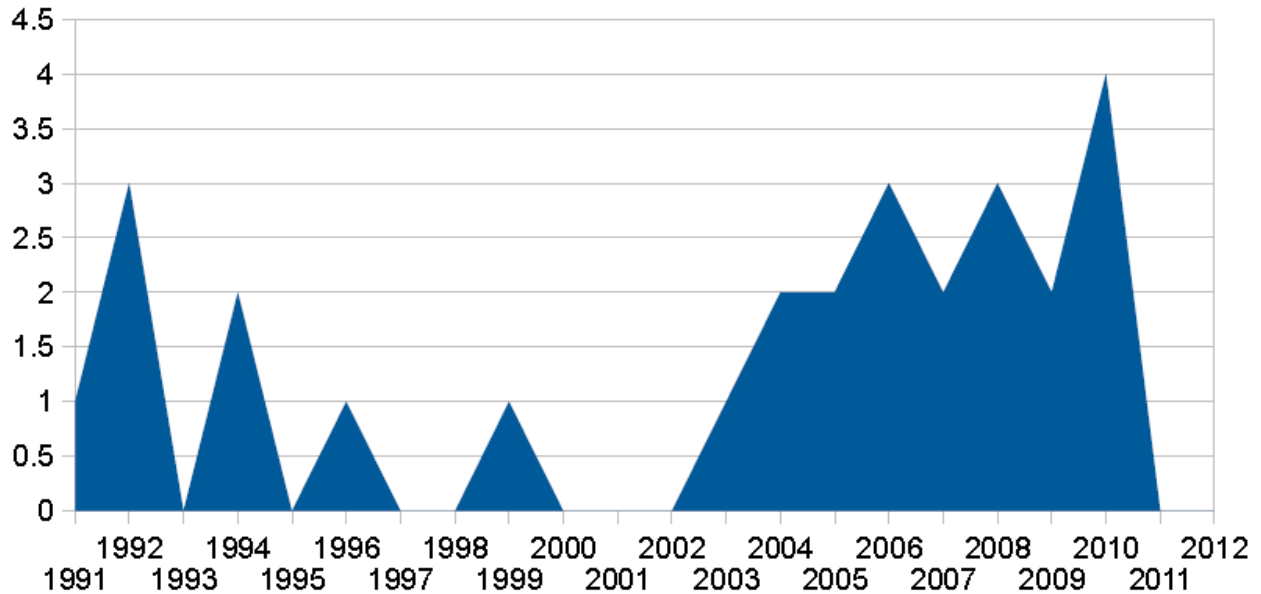
First, most prolific organization among them is Gomidas Institute based in the USA. It sponsors publications both in the USA and the UK. In UK the publications are carried out by publishing house Taderon Press. From 27 translated titles of the period 1991-2012 15 titles are published by either Gomidas Institute or Taderon Press.

Another organization, which was based in London, was Mashtots Press after the name of the inventor of the Armenian alphabet Mesrop Mashtots. But it seems that its main activity fell in the seventies of 20<sup>th</sup> century when they published 6 titles. During the period in question of our study only one title is known, which is published in 1994.

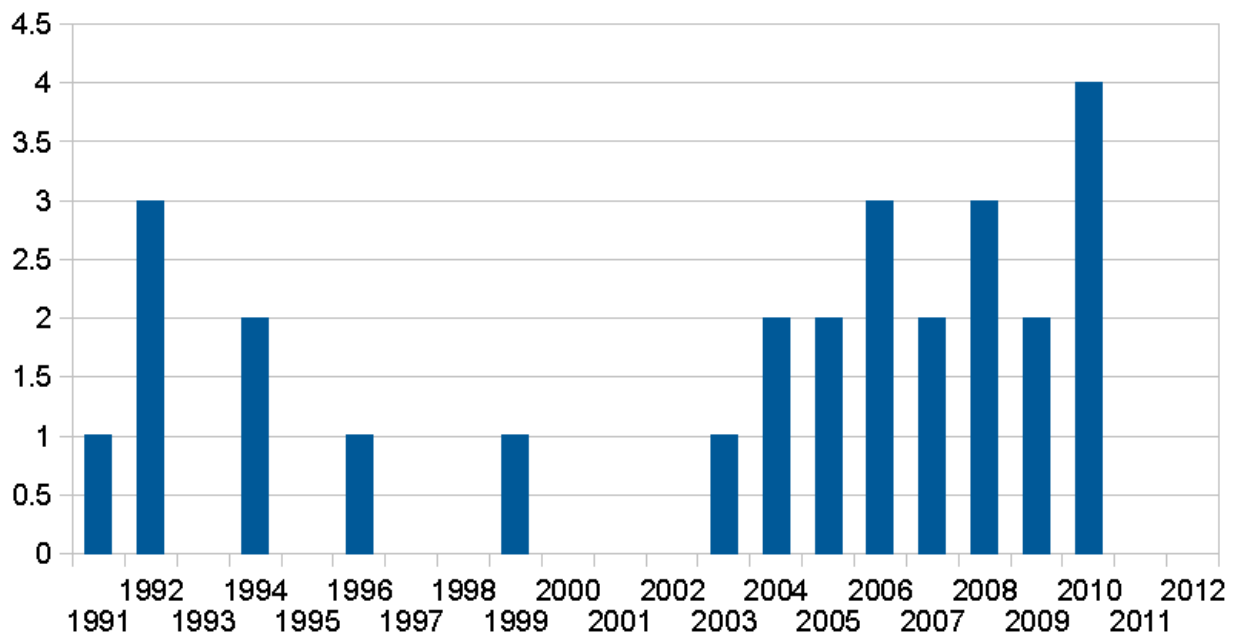
And we have to note also Karekin I Theological and Armenological Studies Series, which seems to be committed to publish works of the late catholicos of All Armenians Karekin I (1995-1999). We have one publication from this publisher.



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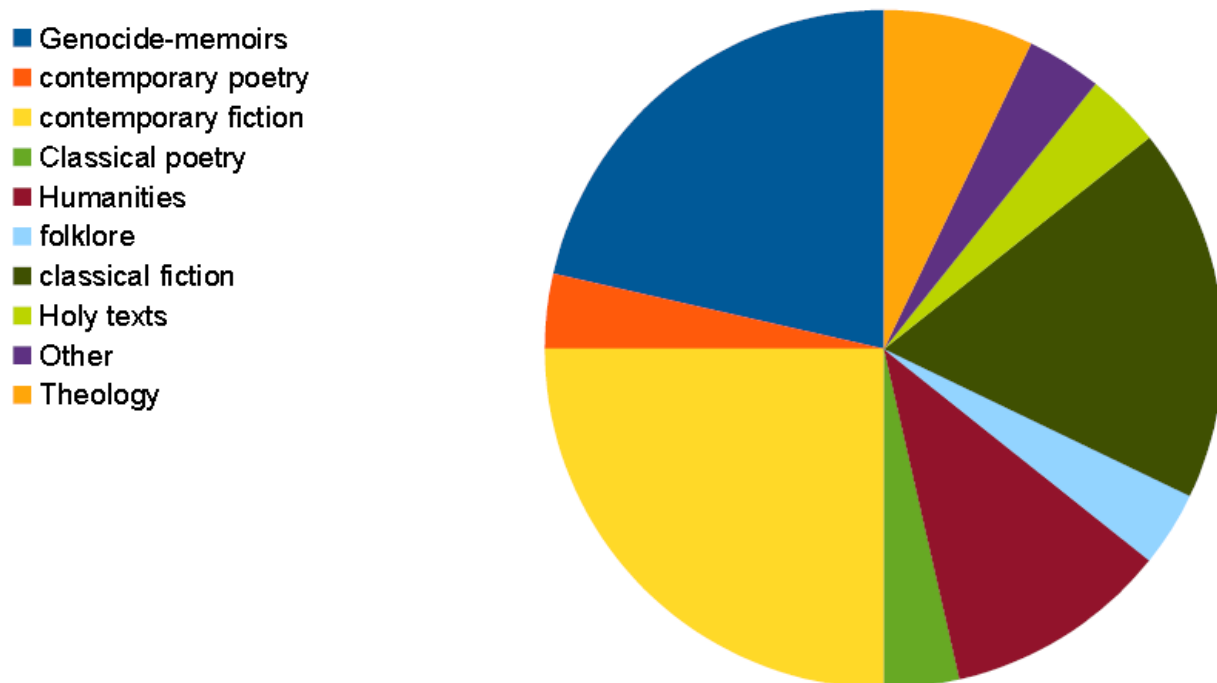
One can see from the chart that publishing of translations into English have steady rise up to 2010. The absence of books in 2011 and 2012 we attribute to the lack of information about those books. Most probably they still are not included in bibliographic lists and databases.



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Another feature of translations, which one can see from the first glance, is the diversity of genres. Here are traditional genre of historiography, theology, published mainly by scholarly publishers, as Oxford University or Liverpool University Press. We can see also other British publishing houses like Clarendon press that has shown interest in purely scientific texts. But we can see the evident rise of non-scientific literature as fiction, poetry, memoirs etc. This is mainly published by diaspora-supported organizations and publishing houses. Nevertheless, the fact that they are published by in the UK makes them accessible for the British society and augments the interest in Armenian literature and Armenian culture.



### Structure of translated books from Armenian into English

The amount of books that we have in our bibliography allows us to make preliminary statistical analysis of the genres of the translated books. In the pie-chart above one can see that though many genres are represented, nevertheless three of them dominate:



contemporary fiction, genocide-memoirs and classical fiction. The fourth genre is humanities, which is a traditional trend, which comes from the past.

One can see that recent years marked a new interesting trend towards contemporary fiction, which did not exist before. Though these publications are mainly carried out by diaspora-supported publications, we think that they are not only for promotional purposes but they take into account the demand among readers.

When analyzing the potential market for these published books, it is necessary to understand that these publications are addressed both to diaspora and native British readership.

### **Policy and support for translations**

Until recently translations from Armenian into English were supported mainly by either scientific organizations like Oxford or Liverpool Universities or by NGOs like Gomidas Institute in cooperation with Taderon Press.

But in recent years the Ministry of Culture of Republic of Armenia has opened an opportunity for foreign publishers to apply for the support for translation and partly for publication costs <http://www.mincult.am>. The translations are supported on a competitive basis, which takes place once a year. Applications should be submitted before 1 August, and final decisions are taken in mid October. Usually the grant gives a possibility to publish the book not later than December of the next year, i.e. 12 months.

Another possibility is to apply to [Gulbenkian Foundation](#). Its priorities are:

- To promote the preservation of Armenian culture and language and the strengthening of the Armenian Diaspora
- To disseminate the Armenian literary heritage



There are UK publishing houses that have interest in Armenian topics such as Curzon Press. Armenian topics are included as a branch in a larger Caucasian studies. Works of Armenian scientists should be eligible for publication through this publishing house.

The same could be said about Bennet & Blum, which recently have published several works of an Armenian scientist Gabriel Soutanian. Though he writes English and therefore his books are not included in our bibliography, well translated scholarly books about Armenian history may be interesting for this publishing house.

## Translators

The problem of specialist translators has many options of solution. One group of translators comprise scholars like Robert W. Thomson. He is retired but his chair is occupied by Prof. Lindt.

Another group of translators is grouped around Gomidas Institute and Taderon Press. These are Agop J. Hacikyan, David Kherdian, Donald Abcarian, Ara Melkonian, Ara Sarafian, Nairi Hakhverdi, Aram Ohanian. Among these translators Aram Ohanian and is from Armenia. Nevertheless there are other experienced translators from Armenia, including those who are native English speakers. One should note among them Tom Samuelian who has translated Grigor Narekatsi's Lamentations into English, which was published in Armenia. Another one is Artashes Emin.

## Conclusions and recommendations

As we have seen in this analysis, translations from Armenian into English have a rich history of nearly 200 years dating from 1821 with translations of George Byron. The British reader became aware first about theological and liturgical literature, then about historical literary monuments. This process was somehow interrupted during Soviet rule 1920-1990. After independence of Armenia, the process of translations from Armenian continued mainly in the same tradition with a significant shift to the fiction in recent



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years. We think that this is a promising trend and it should be supported by those who want to represent Armenian literature in the UK market.

On the other hand, traditional genres like genocide memories and scholarly investigations remain interesting for the UK market and this should be enriched by translations of the works of the Armenian scholars, who work in Armenia. In from this aspect Oxford University and Liverpool University publishing houses seem to be perspective. Similarly, Curzon Press and Bennet & Bloom show interest in historical and analytic investigations.

The large medieval Armenian literature still remains mainly unknown to the UK readership. There is a difficulty in this area as medieval Armenian literature is mainly in Old Armenian, and there are few translators who have enough qualification in this area. However we think that carefully chosen titles with faithful translation and editing might open a second breath in this traditional area of Armenian-English translations.

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