



James O'Driscoll

# BRITAIN

FOR LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

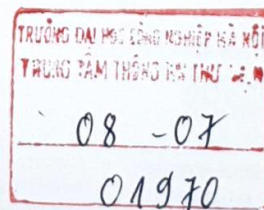


OXFORD

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# Introduction

## Who this book is for

This book is for learners of English who need to know more about Britain. It is for all people who recognize that a knowledge of British life is necessary to improve their understanding of the English language. It will be especially useful for students on British Studies courses and those who are studying British culture as part of their general English course.

How many times have you not fully understood a phrase in a British text and found that the dictionary does not help? How many times have you understood every word that a British person has said but not understood what he or she meant? In any society, writers and speakers often leave some things unsaid or unexplained because they assume that their readers or listeners have the same background knowledge that they have. You may have reached a high level of proficiency in English, but find British people hard to understand because you lack this background knowledge. This book aims to fill the gap so that, when you encounter British writers and speakers, you will be in the same position as an averagely educated British person.

Of course, it is impossible for you to put yourself in exactly the same position as natives of Britain. They have been sharing distinctly British experiences and influences ever since they were born. Therefore, this book also looks behind the details which every British person knows, so that you can get an insight into the British approach to life in general. In this respect, you have an advantage over many British people. You have knowledge and experience of another culture which you can compare with British culture and make your understanding of it sharper.

## What this book is about

This book contains all the basic information you need about British institutions and everyday life. But it has more than that. Throughout this book, particular attention is paid to the attitudes of British people. Knowledge of these is very important because they are what 'colour' the language used by British people. For example, to understand the word 'Catholic' as used in Britain, it is not enough to know its dictionary meaning; you also have to know something about the general place of religion in British people's minds, the different religious groups in the country, their reputations, and senses of identity (see chapter 13). Because these matters are so important, there are two chapters devoted entirely to them: one about how British people feel about themselves (chapter 4) and one about their attitudes to certain aspects of life in general (chapter 5).

After a short introductory chapter, there are five long chapters (2-6) which set the historical, geographical, attitudinal, and political scene. Then there are five short chapters (7-11) on the various political and legal institutions, followed by a chapter (12) on the British relationship with the rest of the world. The remaining chapters (13-23) describe all the other areas of British life, moving gradually from more 'collective' aspects, such as education and the economy, to more individual ones such as housing and food. But in all of these, attention is paid both to public structures and individual experience and habits.

All the pieces of information in this book are included for one or both of two possible reasons. Some of them, for example the mention of the Union Jack (see page 14), are there because they form part of a British person's general knowledge. But others, for example the description of the pairing system in Parliament (see page 74), are not so well-known. They are there to serve as an illustration of a more general point.

This book is not an encyclopaedia. Britain shares many characteristics with other countries. This book concentrates on what makes Britain different, with the emphasis on common knowledge rather than specialist knowledge; that is, on the things that most British people 'know'. These are the things that you need to know if you want to understand them.

## Using this book

In each chapter, there is a main text plus extra material in the margins and elsewhere, which is presented in various forms (tables, pictures, texts, etc.). You will sometimes find an invitation to refer to this extra material in the main text, indicated by the following style of text: *Why is Britain 'great'?*

As you read, remember that there are different kinds of information. For example, when you read (on page 11) that St. Andrew is the patron saint of Scotland, you are getting a definite fact. However, some of the most important aspects of a place cannot be described in terms of fact. For example, this book often refers to the importance of privacy in Britain. This is not a fact; it is only an interpretation of the facts. Of course, such comments have not been made lightly – and in most cases, other commentators on Britain have made the same ones. But it is always possible that another commentator, looking at the same set of facts, might arrive at a different conclusion.

At the end of each chapter there is a Questions section, intended to stimulate further thought and discussion, and usually a few Suggestions for further reading and other activities. But if you would like to spend more time studying and considering the aspects of British life described in each chapter, you will find the Workbook which accompanies this book very helpful. As well as exercises to help you consolidate your learning of British life and vocabulary, the workbook has extra texts for you to work with, so that you can widen your knowledge at the same time.

## A note on terminology

In this book, you will encounter the words 'state', 'country' and 'nation'. These are similar in meaning but are not used interchangeably. The word 'state' has a political meaning. It is used when referring to a unit of governmental authority. The word 'nation' is used when referring to English, Scottish, Welsh or Irish people and when the focus is on the sense of identity which these people feel. The word 'country' is used more generally, to refer to either Britain or one of its nations without specific allusion to either government or people.