

外教社 英语专业文化方向课程系列

# 英国 社会与文化

# BRITAIN FOR LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

James O'Driscoll



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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.

# 01 Country and people

## Why is Britain 'Great'?

The origin of the adjective 'great' in the name Great Britain was not a piece of advertising (although modern politicians sometimes try to use it that way!). It was first used to distinguish it from the smaller area in France which is called 'Brittany' in modern English.



This is a book about Britain. But what exactly is Britain? And who are the British? The table below illustrates the problem. You might think that, in international sport, the situation would be simple – one country, one team. But you can see that this is definitely not the case with Britain. For each of the four sports or sporting events listed in the table, there are a different number of national teams which might be described as 'British'. This chapter describes how this situation has come about and explains the many names that are used when people talk about Britain.

## Geographically speaking

Lying off the north-west coast of Europe, there are two large islands and hundreds of much smaller ones. The largest island is called Great Britain. The other large one is called Ireland (Great Britain and Ireland). There is no agreement about what to call all of them together (Looking for a name).

## Politically speaking

In this geographical area there are two states. One of these governs most of the island of Ireland. This state is usually called The Republic of Ireland. It is also called 'Eire' (its Irish language name). Informally, it is referred to as just 'Ireland' or 'the Republic'.

The other state has authority over the rest of the area (the whole of Great Britain, the north-eastern area of Ireland and most of the smaller islands). This is the country that is the main subject of this book. Its official name is The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, but this is too long for practical purposes, so it is usually known by a shorter name. At the Eurovision Song Contest, at the United Nations and in the European parliament, for instance, it is referred to as 'the United Kingdom'. In everyday speech, this is often

## National teams in selected sports

|             | England           | Wales | Scotland | Northern Ireland | Republic of Ireland |
|-------------|-------------------|-------|----------|------------------|---------------------|
| Olympics    | Great Britain     |       |          |                  | Ireland             |
| Cricket     | England and Wales |       | Scotland | Ireland          |                     |
| Rugby union | England           | Wales | Scotland | Ireland          |                     |
| Football    | England           | Wales | Scotland | Northern Ireland | Republic of Ireland |

shortened to 'the UK' and in internet and email addresses it is '.uk'. In other contexts, it is referred to as 'Great Britain'. This, for example, is the name you hear when a medal winner steps onto the rostrum at the Olympic Games. The abbreviation 'GBP' (Great Britain Pounds) in international bank drafts is another example of the use of this name. In writing and speaking that is not especially formal or informal, the name 'Britain' is used. The normal everyday adjective, when talking about something to do with the UK, is 'British' (Why is Britain 'Great?').

### Great Britain and Ireland



### Looking for a name

It's not easy to keep geography and politics apart. Geographically speaking, it is clear that Great Britain, Ireland and all those smaller islands belong together. So you would think there would be a (single) name for them. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they were generally called 'The British Isles'. But most people in Ireland and some people in Britain regard this name as outdated because it calls to mind the time when Ireland was politically dominated by Britain.

So what can we call these islands? Among the names which have been used are 'The north-east Atlantic archipelago', 'The north-west European archipelago', 'IONA' (Islands of the North Atlantic) and simply 'The Isles'. But none of these has become widely accepted.

The most common term at present is 'Great Britain and Ireland'. But even this is not strictly correct. It is not correct geographically because it ignores all the smaller islands. And it is not correct politically because there are two small parts of the area on the maps which have special political arrangements. These are the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man, which are 'crown dependencies' and not officially part of the UK. Each has complete internal self-government, including its own parliament and its own tax system. Both are 'ruled' by a Lieutenant Governor appointed by the British government.

## The four nations

People often refer to Britain by another name. They call it 'England'. But this is not correct, and its use can make some people angry. England is only one of 'the four nations' in this part of the world. The others are Scotland, Wales, and Ireland. Their political unification was a gradual process that took several hundred years (see chapter 2). It was completed in 1800 when the Irish parliament was joined with the parliament for England, Scotland, and Wales in Westminster, so that the whole area became a single state – the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. However, in 1922, most of Ireland became a separate state (see chapter 12).

At one time, culture and lifestyle varied enormously across the four nations. The dominant culture of people in Ireland, Wales and Highland Scotland was Celtic; that of people in England and Lowland Scotland was Germanic. This difference was reflected in the languages they spoke. People in the Celtic areas spoke Celtic languages; people in the Germanic areas spoke Germanic dialects (including the one which has developed into modern English). The nations also tended to have different economic, social, and legal systems, and they were independent of each other.

### Some historical and poetic names

**Albion** is a word used by poets and songwriters to refer, in different contexts, to England or to Scotland or to Great Britain as a whole. It comes from a Celtic word and was an early Greek and Roman name for Great Britain. The Romans associated Great Britain with the Latin word 'albus', meaning white. The white chalk cliffs around Dover on the English south coast are the first land formations one sights when crossing the sea from the European mainland.

**Britannia** is the name that the Romans gave to their southern British province (which covered, approximately, the area of present-day England and Wales). It is also the name given to the female embodiment of Britain, always shown wearing a helmet and holding a trident (the symbol of power over the sea), hence the patriotic song which begins 'Rule Britannia, Britannia rule the waves'. The figure of Britannia has been on the reverse side of many British coins for more than 300 years.



### Other signs of national identity

**Briton** is a word used in official contexts and in writing to describe a citizen of the United Kingdom. 'Ancient Britons' is the name given to the people who lived in southern Britain before and during the Roman occupation (AD 43–410). Their heirs are thought to be the Welsh and their language has developed into the modern Welsh language.

**Caledonia, Cambria and Hibernia** were the Roman names for Scotland, Wales and Ireland respectively. The words are commonly used today in scholarly classifications (for example, the type of English used in Ireland is sometimes called 'Hiberno-English' and there is a division of geological time known as 'the Cambrian period') and for the names of organizations (for example, 'Glasgow Caledonian' University).

**Erin** is a poetic name for Ireland. **The Emerald Isle** is another way of referring to Ireland, evoking the lush greenery of its countryside.

**John Bull** (see below) is a fictional character who is supposed to personify Englishness and certain English virtues. (He can be compared to Uncle Sam in the USA.) He appears in hundreds of nineteenth century cartoons. Today, somebody dressed as him often appears at football or rugby matches when England are playing. His appearance is typical of an eighteenth century country gentleman, evoking an idyllic rural past (see chapter 5).



Today, these differences have become blurred, but they have not completely disappeared. Although there is only one government for the whole of Britain, and everybody gets the same passport regardless of where in Britain they live, many aspects of government are organized separately (and sometimes differently) in the four parts of the United Kingdom. Moreover, Welsh, Scottish and Irish people feel their identity very strongly. That is why they have separate teams in many kinds of international sport.

**Other tokens of national identity**

The following are also associated by British people with one or more of the four nations.

**Surnames**

The prefix 'Mac' or 'Mc' (such as McCall, MacCarthy, MacDonald) is Scottish or Irish. The prefix 'O' (as in O'Brien, O'Connor) is Irish. A large number of surnames (for example, Evans, Jones, Morgan, Price, Williams) suggest Welsh origin. The most common surname in both England and Scotland is 'Smith'.

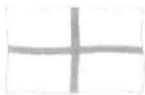




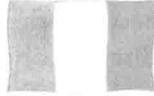

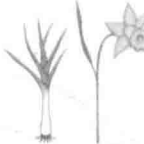






**First names for men**

The Scottish of 'John' is 'Ian' and its Irish form is 'Sean', although all three names are common throughout Britain. Outside their own countries, there are also nicknames for Irish, Scottish and Welsh men. For instance, Scottish men are sometimes known and addressed as 'Jock', Irishmen are called 'Paddy' or 'Mick' and Welshmen as 'Dai' or 'Taffy'. If the person using one of these names is not a friend, and especially if it is used in the plural (e.g. 'Micks'), it can sound insulting.

**Clothes**

The kilt, a skirt with a tartan pattern worn by men, is a very well-known symbol of Scottishness (though it is hardly ever worn in everyday life).

**Identifying symbols of the four nations**

|                           | England   | Wales   | Scotland  | Ireland   |
|---------------------------|---|---|---|---|
| <b>Flag</b>               |    |    |    |    |
|                           | St. George's Cross  | Dragon of Cadwallader   | St. Andrew's Cross  | St. Patrick's Cross   |
|                           |   |   |  |  |
|                           |   |   | Lion Rampant  | Republic of Ireland   |
| <b>Plant</b>              |  |  |  |  |
|                           | rose  | leek/daffodil <sup>1</sup>  | thistle   | shamrock  |
| <b>Colour<sup>2</sup></b> |  |  |  |  |
| <b>Patron saint</b>       | St. George  | St. David   | St. Andrew  | St. Patrick   |
| <b>Saint's day</b>        | 23 April  | 1 March   | 30 November   | 17 March  |

**Characteristics**

There are certain stereotypes of national character which are well known in Britain. For instance, the Irish are supposed to be great talkers, the Scots have a reputation for being careful with money and the Welsh are renowned for their singing ability. These are, of course, only caricatures and not reliable descriptions of individual people from these countries. Nevertheless, they indicate some slight differences in the value attached to certain kinds of behaviour in these countries.

<sup>1</sup> there is some disagreement among Welsh people as to which is the real national plant, but the leek is the most well-known

<sup>2</sup> as typically worn by sports teams of the different nations



## Populations in 2006



These figures are estimates provided by the Office for National Statistics (England and Wales), the General Register Office for Scotland and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. In the twenty-first century, the total population of Britain has risen by about a quarter of a million each year.

## The dominance of England

There is, perhaps, an excuse for the people who use the word 'England' when they mean 'Britain'. It cannot be denied that the dominant culture of Britain today is specifically English. The system of politics that is used in all four nations today is of English origin, and English is the main language of all four nations. Many aspects of everyday life are organized according to English custom and practice. But the political unification of Britain was not achieved by mutual agreement. On the contrary, it happened because England was able to assert her economic and military power over the other three nations (see chapter 2).

Today, English domination can be detected in the way in which various aspects of British public life are described. For example, the supply of money in Britain is controlled by the Bank of England (there is no such thing as a 'Bank of Britain'). Another example is the name of the present monarch. She is universally known as 'Elizabeth II', even though Scotland and Northern Ireland have never had an 'Elizabeth I'. (Elizabeth I of England and Wales ruled from 1553 to 1603). The common use of the term 'Anglo' is a further indication. (The Angles were a Germanic tribe who settled in England in the fifth century. The word 'England' is derived from their name.) When newspapers and the television news talk about 'Anglo-American relations', they are talking about relations between the governments of Britain and the USA (and not just England and the USA).

In addition, there is a tendency in the names of publications and organizations to portray England as the norm and other parts of Britain as special cases. Thus there is a specialist newspaper called

## Musical instruments

The harp is an emblem of both Wales and Ireland. Bagpipes are regarded as distinctively Scottish, although a smaller type is also used in traditional Irish music.

(Right) A harp.

(Far right) A Scottish bagpipe.

