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FIRST FACTS FIRST (ABOUT GREAT BRITAIN AND THE USA) BY GRZEGORZ A. KLEPARSKI, NKJO-CHEŁM-PUBLISHERS, 1999. PP. 167. ISBN 83-911683-0-1

First Facts First, as its author stated in his 'Introductory Word', is intended as a textbook for those who aim to study English Philology. Therefore, the following remarks are meant to provide at least a partial answer to the question of how well *First Facts First* is likely to serve its main goal.

It goes without saying that mastering a foreign language requires the learner to study the target language culture as well. Hence, if learners wish to make their linguistic knowledge complete they need to scrutinise many materials related to the target language culture. For this reason, language teachers emphasise the importance of using authentic materials as well as publications on Anglo-Saxon culture in teaching English.

Clearly, a lot has been written on British and American culture, in fact, very comprehensible and in-depth studies of a wide range of aspects of Britain and the USA have been offered by Bromhead (1985), McDowall (1993), Diniejko (1985), O'Driscoll (1997), to mention but a few. However, these and other similar publications usually attempt to present masses of essential facts as well as detailed extra information alongside the main text, often in the form of charts and graphs, extracts from popular fiction and newspapers. The merits of these and other publications of this type are unquestionable, as they seem to answer virtually all kinds of questions that one might ever formulate. On the other hand, it is possible to come across publications which are utterly unsuitable for the level of language competence of secondary school learners. The authors of these publications (see, for example Laird (1987), Birdsall and Florin (1992)) present information in an unintelligible way, using complex syntactic structures and sophisticated vocabulary items. Yet, very few books tend to give a concise and plain presentation of facts that, in turn, would match the proficiency level of a secondary school learner. The reviewed *First Facts First*, in contrast, seems to take into account the consideration mentioned above.

What is more, the title under review differs greatly from what has been published on the Polish book market, in that it provides the reader with fundamental information about the culture of Great Britain and the USA that should naturally come first, as the author rightly admits. *First Facts First* produces the impression that it may be recommended to those who seek a comprehensible, condensed, lucid and easy to follow publication on Anglo-Saxon culture. Besides, the intended reader should benefit from *First Facts First* due to its adequate language and appropriate selection of issues.

The main body of *First Facts First* consists of three main sections, the first of which presents the most important facts about Great Britain; the second offers the presentation of the most essential issues pertaining to the United States of America. The third section entitled *Test Your Culture (Self-Study)* contains five exemplary multiple choice tests of varying difficulty. The epilogue and references follow the main body.

The book under examination, as noted in the ‘Introductory Word’, makes no attempt at presenting a detailed description of culture of the English-speaking countries but it covers a first-hand knowledge of the area providing the prospective reader with selective but up-to-date information. It is noteworthy that each section is accompanied by the appended footnotes, which offer relevant and absorbing details related to the discussed issues.

In addition, what adds to the value of the book is its excellent organisation. All the basic points are pigeonholed in clear-cut sections and their main entries are highlighted by means of bold type. It is certain that such an arrangement of the material enables the reader to identify rudimentary or intended information without any effort.

It is also worth pointing out that apart from the essential facts, the author discusses a great number of minor issues that might be of great interest to the reader. This includes the author’s discussion on the differences between British and American English – a subject matter frequently ignored by other publications on culture. Another interesting point is the author’s outline on the nature of language change, language borrowings and vocabulary adoptions.

Moreover, it is also crucial that the book deals with the question of British and American literature. The author reveals a substantial overview of the most outstanding authors and their works in British and American literature. These sections that abound in names, dates and titles, undoubtedly form an adequate and clear source of reference. Thus learners, particularly those intending to study English, would find these sections absolutely indispensable for further analysis in the field of literature.

First Facts First requires careful attention due to its effort in presenting the most remarkable American inventors and inventions that changed the world. The value of these sections is highlighted, as the mentioned issue is often neglected in similar publications on culture.

The book provides the reader with a survey of places well-worth seeing in Great Britain and the USA. It is only regrettable that while discussing these landmarks, *First Facts First* fails to present any information about places worth seeing in Northern Ireland.

Among the various issues discussed in the book under review, one may have the impression that subjects like art, religion, music and judicial systems are left out. One could speculate that at least a rough outline of these issues mentioned above would have made the book under discussion complete.

First Facts First pays particular attention to show life, traditions and national holidays in Britain and the USA, respectively. Moreover, it gives a glimpse of the most popular celebrations, specifies their dates and explains their nature. One would only hope to find Christmas under the heading 'National Holidays in the USA'.

As mentioned before, other publications on British and American culture very often present information in the form of charts, maps, graphs. *First Facts First* supplies the reader with two sketchy maps: one depicts the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland while the other displays the United States of America. It is a pity that the latter is far from being adequate, as it does not mark Alaska and Hawaii. Hence, the map is of a limited and misleading value, to put it mildly. Unfortunately, there are some errors and typos in the reviewed book, for example, *A long civil war, known as the War of the Roses, between the House of Lancaster (whose emblem was a white rose), and the House of York (whose emblem was a red rose), lasted from 1455 to 1485* (see page 20), which is the other way round.

The provision of visual stimuli is one of the things which one clearly misses in the book under review. Nevertheless, this deficiency is compensated by the multiple-choice tests given at the end of the handbook. Due to these sample tests, numerous questions posed in the book may be re-examined and reviewed by the learners on their own. Apart from the exemplary self-study tests, the final section of the book offers weights and measurement tables. Undoubtedly, readers will find this section extremely practical as conversion always causes problems to anyone studying English.

Having read the first and second parts of the book, the reader is, somewhat unexpectedly, confronted with three essays which are loosely related to the rest of the book as they display some personal perceptions on Polish, British and American culture of three individual people. Certainly, their value lies in the gripping presentation of some noticeable cross-cultural differences.

The book ends with an epilogue and reference list. The latter gives the impression of clarity and accuracy. This also refers to the language and style of this book. In addition to the skilful organisation of material, the carefully chosen vocabulary items and the grammatical structures, the book's major advantage is what the author had hoped to achieve, namely, *First Facts First* seems to have

met its goal. Clearly, that publication will help those who intend to learn fundamental facts about Anglo-Saxon countries at most Polish educational institutions.

What is more, the book under review may be viewed not only as a handbook on Anglo-Saxon culture but also as a practical source of reference on language use. In particular the 'Introductory Word', skilfully written, is coupled with a Polish translation. Consequently, such a device serves two main goals: primarily, it introduces the readers to the content of the book; secondly, it provides them with a perfect example of a skilful translation, for instance, *Undoubtedly, any attempt to qualify the answer 'About 20 million' as imprecise verges on a Monty Python-type/sense of humour* and its Polish equivalent *Nazwanie nieściśłą odpowiedzi 'Okolo 20 milionów' zakrawa na żart rodem z 'Rejsu' M. Piwowskiego*, certainly supports the opinion expressed above.

All in all, the successful selection of the most rudimentary information that should be studied first allows any student to assume that they will benefit from reading *First Facts First*. It is to be hoped that the second edition of *First Facts First* would provide a better version of the book published in 1999. Likewise, the readers will certainly be looking forward to *Next Facts Next* announced in the preface of *First Facts First*.

References

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