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FIRST FACTS FIRST. AN INTRODUCTORY GUIDE TO GREAT BRITAIN AND THE USA BY GRZEGORZ A. KLEPARSKI, WYDAWNICTWO WYŻSZEJ SZKOŁY PEDAGOGICZNEJ W RZESZOWIE, 2000. PP. 144. ISBN 83-7262-097-0

Students of English departments as well as applicants for these departments at Polish universities and Teacher Training Colleges will enjoy the fact that the new (second) edition of *First Facts First* (2000) by Grzegorz A. Kleparski came out. The first edition of the book was very popular among the readers who were interested not only in the English language, but also in the culture of both Great Britain and the USA. It was also highly appreciated by teachers as an indispensable handbook which provides prospective students of English philology with essential knowledge on these countries.

The following edition is a revised and extended version of the book *First Facts First* that came out in 1999. In the forward the author specifies the objective as well as the method applied in writing the book. The script is aimed at those people who not only want to study the English language, but they are also interested in getting acquainted with the rudimentary facts concerning the culture of both Great Britain and the USA. The author remarks that in the selection of the themes and material to be outlined in this book he was guided by the contents of earlier publications on this subject as well as the principle of his *individual common sense*. That subjects the issues covered to the author's own choice.

In the introductory chapter the author concentrates on three issues. The first is the explanation of the term *English speaking countries*, the second concerns the idea of the Commonwealth. Finally, in the third issue the author deals with the English language, namely its origins, transformations, influence on other languages as well as different varieties. The author in a clear and comprehensive way outlines the links joining Great Britain and the USA with other English speaking countries. The brief history of the English language is flavoured with interesting examples of language transformations. The choice of Great Britain and the USA as the only two examples of the English speaking countries which

are going to be the subjects of further description is justified with the size of the book. Nevertheless, the issues presented in the introduction let the readers understand the complexity of the subject, which raises their hopes for a similar publication on other English speaking countries such as e.g. Ireland, Canada and Australia.

In the book the author deals with the cultural patterns of Great Britain and the USA respectively. *Part One* is devoted to the United Kingdom. The reader will find here details on the location, geographical regions, landscape features, climate and the population of Great Britain. Clear and intelligible presentation is flavoured with some interesting details on various regions. Considering the popularity of the first edition of the book, one can hope that the financial means will allow for enriching the next edition with maps and illustrations, which would make the book more attractive. This remark however, should be directed at the editor rather than the author.

Next comes the history sketch in which the author in a brief but comprehensive way describes the most important events in the history of Great Britain from the settlement of the Celts 2500–3000 years ago to the present times. The reader will find here the description of the invasions of the British Isles, important battles, the establishment of the Church of England as well as the foundations of parliamentary democracy in Great Britain. The historical part is supplemented with a chapter devoted to British economy.

Those readers who are interested in tourism will enjoy reading the next section which deals with the places which are worth seeing in Britain. The author devotes a lot of attention to the capital of the country, London. But he also mentions several other places of interest in England, Scotland and Wales such as e.g. Oxford, Cambridge, Bath, Cardiff and Edinburgh. What deserves special attention is a vivid description of Scottish traditions which in the previous edition was pointed at in a footnote, while in this edition is included in the text. The choice of places to see is due to individual preferences of the author. Leaving out some tourist attractions such as e.g. Coventry, Warwick and York does not diminish the value of description which is extensive enough for the reader to get the impression of the great diversity of British countryside.

In the next section there are details on British administration, the Queen and the government. In this chapter the author briefly outlines the political system of England, Scotland and Wales. Here, the reader can find the text of the British anthem. The author also provides a brief characteristics of the conflict with Northern Ireland. However, considering the fact that this conflict is an important factor which determines the present nature of political relations in Great Britain, its description would deserve being shifted from a footnote to the main body of the text. The supplementary section refers to the system of education in Great Britain. Here, the author mentions the institutions of primary and secondary education as well as provides the classification of British universities.

In the following section the lovers of literature will find a comprehensive list of writers including poets and playwrights, which is supplied with a short description of their work and presentation of some titles. Special attention is given to the British finest playwright William Shakespeare. The author here presents the classification of Shakespeare's plays quoted after *The Hutchinson Encyclopaedia*, which is a novelty in this edition. The size of the script does not allow the author to mention all the writers who deserve attention. However, the selection of the names allows the reader to enjoy the great variety of British literature.

The next two chapters are devoted to the life in the U.K. and British traditions. Here, the reader will find details on most favourite British pastime, sports, customs as well as health and welfare system. In this edition more space has been devoted to popular British newspapers, which allows the reader to get an image of the British as a nation greatly concerned with the problems of contemporary world. *Part One* ends with a description of national holidays and traditions of the inhabitants of Great Britain.

Part Two of the book is devoted to the United States of America. In the first chapter dealing with the geographical location, climate and the population of the USA, the author points to the enormous variety which is characteristic of the States with regard to both the countryside, climactic zones as well as the inhabitants. It provides the reader with the impression of the country of immense ethnic and cultural diversity as well as unlimited possibilities. The author also points to the differences between British and American English, which is a significant piece of information for the prospective students of this language.

In the section concerning American history the reader will find a detailed description of important historical events from the settlement of first colonists to the contemporary times including e.g. the War of Independence, the Civil War and the Cold War. The author mentions the most famous politicians and statesmen who made their names in the history of the country. This section is enlarged with a brief description of American economy.

The next section is devoted to some places of interest with New York and Washington being described in a separate chapter. The author not only characterises various metropolises with regard to their values for tourism, but also mentions some interesting facts pertaining to American culture, music, film and religion, which incites the readers' interest and tempts more inquisitive readers to extend their knowledge on these subjects.

In the following section the author supplies the information provided in the chapter on American history with more contemporary facts concerning political system as well as the presentation of citizens' rights and duties outlined in the American Constitution. The author discusses the division of power which is an essential feature of democracy. A list of presidents who were respective heads of

American government requires special attention. Also, one can find here the texts of the American anthem as well as the *Pledge to the Flag*.

In the section devoted to American literature the reader will find a list of the most distinguished representatives of the main literary trends together with a brief presentation of their work. Just like in a similar section on British literature, in this section the author was bound to make a choice as to the names and titles mentioned. However, it is worth noticing that this edition was supplemented with the name of Nathaniel Hawthorne, a great representative of American symbolism.

The following section of the book deals with life in the United States. The reader will find here an interesting description of various aspects of life in the United States, ways of earning and spending money, customs and traditions and favourite food. From a vivid description the reader draws an image of a typical American, who devotes most of his time to work and money-making, but who also is concerned with his health and fitness and enjoys effective ways of spending his free time, such as sports and other pleasures including good food. *Part Two* of the book ends with an interesting description of legendary American heroes and most famous inventions.

The following section of the book deserves special attention as it appears for the first time in this edition. It consists of three appendices. *Appendix 1* entitled “Anglo-American Tidbits” is addressed at those who are inclined to read about some anecdotes rather than study a plain list of facts. Here, one can find out e.g. from whom king Henry VIII contracted venereal disease and where the name teddy bear comes from. A list of proverbs included in *Appendix 2* is an indispensable prompt for candidates for English departments as proverbs often occur in entrance examination tests. *Appendix 3*, which contains a weights and measures table, was already included in the previous edition of the book.

In the following section of the book one can find three essays written by representatives of British, American and Polish cultures which contain their personal observations on respective cultures. The idea of including such observations in the book makes the readers aware of considerable cultural differences between Poland and Great Britain as well as Poland and the USA, which let them look at our culture from certain distance. It also adds a personal element to the following publication and thus gets the reader closer to the notion of culture, which is not only a plain list of facts and names, but also consists of people who create it.

Part Three of the book includes multiple choice tests based on the material provided in the book. Five original tests have been supplied with four new ones added in this edition, which proves immense popularity of this method of testing one’s knowledge. The key is included so that the readers could check themselves how much they have learned from the book. There are various forms of testing one’s knowledge from a plain multiple choice to providing the reader with an

opportunity to supply his/her own answer. Testing one's performance is an invaluable method of checking whether the information contained in the book was conveyed to the reader. It is also a perfect way of preparing oneself for entrance exams for English departments.

In the forward to the book the author pointed out that in his choice of information he was guided by his own common sense. Therefore, the critical remarks below should be considered from the point of view of a prospective student of English philology who requires comprehensive knowledge on the subject. The list of fields of art which are covered in the book is not complete as the author fails to include painting and sculpture, which together with other fine arts contribute to the culture of a given nation. Also, the author does not provide enough information on music, both classical and popular. The author briefly points to the origins of jazz in America, but referring to this field calls up an association with such names as George Gershwin, Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington, which made the name for American jazz in the world, which however, are not mentioned by the author. Architecture is another field which could be presented in more detail. The subject is briefly outlined in the sections dealing with places to see. Also, the name of Christopher Wren is mentioned, who is the most distinguished, but not the only representative of this field. The reader would also like to find more information about film and theatre. The author mentions some names of contemporary British and American playwrights, but he does not provide sufficient information on contemporary theatre, especially famous musicals performed in Broadway, which constitute an integral part of contemporary American art. He refers to Hollywood as the main centre of motion-picture and television industry. However, mentioning the Oscar award incites the reader's interest in the names of people who received it. Nevertheless, one must understand that the size of the script imposes restrictions on the fields of art to be covered by the author.

The above remarks do not in any way diminish the cognitive value of the book, which is a crucial introduction to the subject of British and American culture. The value of the book can be greatly appreciated by both the students and applicants for English departments in Poland, who receive an indispensable handbook based on reliable sources. In general, the book is well-written, in a very clear and comprehensible language, which allows the reader to absorb information easily. Minor typos and spelling mistakes do not in any way divert the reader from the content. Therefore, considering numerous values of the book it is worth recommending not only to prospective students of English, but also to anyone eager to get acquainted with the culture of Great Britain and the USA.