

# Oxford guide to British and American culture for learners of English

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First published in 1999, the *Oxford Guide to British and American Culture, for Learners of English* has now been released in a completely revised edition. Aimed at Upper-Intermediate to Advanced level students learning English in Britain or the United States, it contains 10,000 entries, numerous illustrations, maps and other material covering a wide range of topics which have been selected to meet the interests of those travelling, studying, working and learning about British and American life. It seems an ideal book to recommend to learners of English setting out for one or other of the countries that have given us the two international standards of the language. It appears to be just the thing to pop in a backpack for when you need to know who Bulldog Drummond was or the titles of Eddie Murphy's films.

The main entries have been designed to provide basic information on what the blurb lists as 'the rich, the famous and the infamous, history, legends, festivals, music, food, shopping and attitudes'. There are facts and figures, quotations from the famous, lists of important books and a bibliography for further reading. Donald Duck is just below the Domesday Book, and Mickey Mouse comes next to Microsoft. Then there are what Oxford calls the derivative entries or special notes, on topics such as birthdays, capital punishment, greetings cards or toys and games. There are lots more. These draw diverse material together. In the middle of the book, there is a brightly presented section on history and institutions in Britain and the USA. It's all been thoughtfully done, with definitions, highlighting, cross references and so on. Yes, you should take it with you.

The problem with this sort of book is that the worthy panel that supervises its assembly probably can't ever get it really right, despite the resources of an enormous data bank from Oxford's reference book publishing and what must be an army of editors. Come to think of it, who is the editor? We aren't told. Anyway, these are some of the things I found. The entry on Captain Cook omits to name the *Endeavour*, his most famous ship. That's given somewhere else, where it may not be discovered at the same time or even later. You don't read this type of book from page to page, remember. The entry on the *Dictionary of National Biography*, which is, oops, one of Oxford's own books, is incorrect. It does not contain only 'the life stories of famous British people'.

There's space for Tokyo Rose, the American woman who broadcast propaganda for the Japanese during World War II but not for Lord Haw-Haw, the nickname given to William Joyce, the Irishman who broadcast for Hitler. The entry on Singapore fails to mention that its collapse in 1941 was the biggest defeat in British military history. The Internet makes it but not its inventor, Tim Berners-Lee. There are lots of bigs – Big Bang, big daddy and so on, seventeen in all – but no Big Oil, which has created some of the biggest problems in American industrial history and beyond. Rolf Harris, Barry Humphreys, Clive James and Kylie Minogue get a bat but not Peter Porter, arguably the most important of the post-war Australian expatriates in London. That's enough, but I do have a biggish list.

Even if there were no issues of inclusion or exclusion, the problem with alphabetical listing of people and factual information is that it is reductive and creates the impression that a Mars Bar wrapper is as important as the *Mona Lisa* or even more so. Marilyn Monroe gets more space than T.S. Eliot, and the entry on Adrian Mole is about twice as long as that for *Lyrical Ballads*, one of the most important books in the history of English poetry. The format is dull and there are not enough special notes. There should be a list of them on the contents page. The section in the middle on British and American history and institutions is nearer the mark, but the format of the book fights against itself. Some things seem to have an extensive coverage, such as nursery rhymes, yet popular culture, along with folk culture and fashion, all of real interest to young learners of the language, are not given special treatment in notes. Folk culture is not referred to in the extract on culture from the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* which precedes the title page. There are plenty of themes for which you have to work hard to gain a sense of the subject, yet Oxford claims in the blurb that the *Guide* 'gives you an insight into what's important in both countries today'. The learners they have in mind should have been given much more assistance.

Somehow this book fails to create an impression of the excitement of the times, of the Swinging Sixties in London, of the protests made by students against entrenched power in the institutions that affected them, of anti-war movements and so on. Language is given coverage in different ways but again the excitement of change does not come to the fore. Where is there a list of fifty important words from the last half century with reference to the conditions that have created them? If ever there was a book that needed to be funky, like a mobile phone, this is it. It should be neuro fuzzy, whatever that means, like my washing machine. It should go *swish, swish*, not *thud, thud*. It should have little coloured lights that go *ping, ping*, something. Did they road test it with backpackers, hand it out at Heathrow or New York and then follow it up? Or did they decide that they knew what was best for their readers and put it together like one of those new models the car companies throw together from

their giant spare parts bin? As a book it's up there with medicine, more rain than you think you need, parking tickets and other things that our betters consider are good for us. Oxford should think again. I challenge them to produce a copy as tattered as a well-travelled *Lonely Planet*.