

BASSNETT, S. *Studying British Cultures. An Introduction*. London: Routledge. 1997. (xxvii + 202 pp), ISBN: 0-415-111440-3 (Pb)

Studying British Cultures is a collection of essays by recognized experts, providing an overview of the complex field of what constitutes British Cultural Studies today. Since all the contributors share the idea that culture is a plurality of discourses, this work presents an interdisciplinary approach to the subject.

After a brief introduction by the editor, the essays are divided into two sections. Those in the first part deal with general aspects, defining what cultural studies are, and relating these studies to educational principles, and the combination of language, literature and culture. Those in the second part deal with specific aspects of British cultures, examining Scottish, Welsh, Irish and West Indian contributions, and the final essay analyses the significance of Shakespearean quotations in modern usage. The Bibliography section at the end of the book contains all the works cited, in addition to other useful publications, and there is a short but comprehensive index where the reader will be able to find references to varied topics.

In her introduction to this collection of papers, Ms Bassnett underlines that successful communication can only take place where there is adequate awareness of the cultural context within which a language is used. The author also explains that British (Cultural) Studies has developed along two parallel axes: the kind of knowledge offered to non-native speakers of English, and which is intimately connected to the study of the English language, and the other line of thought which has grown up within literary studies, and which emphasizes the products of culture, with different types of discourse analysis. This branch of studies is common to both native and non-native speakers of English.

The first essay, by Anthony Easthope, is entitled *But what is Cultural Studies?* It examines the origins of Cultural Studies, tracing their development from Culturalism, through Structuralism to Post-Structuralism and Cultural Materialism. The author proposes moving forward from isolated and elitist literary studies to integrated Cultural Studies. This involves changing methods, setting aside the formalist concern for a study of the text «in itself», and the search for its hidden greatness, since literature requires understanding in context.

In *Facts and meanings in British Cultural Studies*, Alan Durant offers suggestions for sources of cultural data, such as interaction with natives, personal testimonies, visits, the media, social rituals and customs, social institutions, surveys and statistics, as well as the interpretation of other social manifestations including architectural styles, fashion, and hobbies. The author claims that it is necessary to engage actively with these sources of information and to interrogate them, since he believes that emphasis needs to be placed on discussion and comparison with one's own culture, at least as much as on mere presentation of facts.

Christopher Brumfit explores the educational background to the growing interest in British Studies, and deals with the content and theoretical basis of such courses, their impartiality (or lack of it), and the teacher's role as mediator. In his essay entitled *British Studies: an educational perspective*, he refers to the requirements of the British National Curriculum, introduced by the Education Act of 1988, and the needs of the

students resident in Britain and in full-time compulsory education. The author emphasizes that a learner's knowledge about his own culture is a prerequisite for understanding a foreign culture, and that British Studies must be conceived as a comparative activity.

British cultures may be studied by native or non-native speakers but there are fundamental differences between the two perspectives. In the case of the non-native, language can act as a barrier to comprehension, and in the next essay, entitled *Cultural Studies and foreign language teaching*, Michael Byram proposes a model of language learner competence with respect to cultural learning. This author pursues similar issues related to the topics of language, culture and students' perceptions of foreign communities in other essays published earlier (Byram 1991, Byram 1993, Byram and Zarate 1994). Here he points out that though there are developed theories of foreign language acquisition which take into account factors such as age, interests and level of competence, a similar concern with theories of cultural learning is only just beginning to emerge, and that the teacher must be aware that "understanding", "tolerance" and "empathy" presuppose a psychological readiness in learners which may depend on age, social factors or exposure to foreign languages and cultures. Foreign language learners need "cultural awareness", enabling them to anticipate cross-cultural communication problems, but this acquired skill involves a reflexive questioning of learners' values and beliefs about their own culture.

The last essay of Part One deals with the relationship between teaching modern British fiction and British Cultural Studies. David Punter asks if we are to speak of teaching fiction in the *context* of British Cultural Studies, or if we should speak of teaching fiction as an *aid* to the more general study of British culture. In the title of the essay, *Fictional maps of Britain*, the author refers to the preconceived ideas, or maps, carried in our minds and which may influence the design and teaching of a course in literature (in this case post-war British fiction). He advises the teacher to choose the texts and method carefully so as to encourage cultural comparison and to present a varied set of pictures of Britain, the necessary context for the comprehension of the literature studied.

Part Two begins with an essay entitled *Dedefining Scotland*, by Robert Crawford. This chapter is particularly appropriate reading in the light of the recent referendum on devolution in Scotland (September 1997). The author begins by pointing out that though modern Scotland is a nation, it is not a state. It has to put up with the insensitive attitudes of some London-based institutions, but Scotland has no intention of lapsing into mere regional status, since it enjoys a high international profile. To underline this point he cites numerous Scottish contributions to learning in the fields of literature, medicine, science and technology. He then comments on some of the more interesting developments in Scottish Studies, drawing attention to recent works on Scotland's history, culture and traditions. Scottish Studies are now offered as degree courses at several Scottish universities, and the author sees this developing cultural awareness as an intellectual infrastructure for the cultural life of a future Scotland with democratic control of its own affairs. In view of the positive result of the devolution referendum, it is hoped that this will be the case.

From Scotland the reader moves on to Wales, to be guided through *Cymru or Wales? Explorations in a divided sensibility*, by Katie Gramich. The author begins

by examining what she has found to be a dual sensibility characterizing the inhabitants of Wales. She recalls the political test of divided identity which took place in 1979, with the Devolution Referendum in Wales, which received a resounding “no” vote from the Welsh. (We should add that a second referendum took place in September 1997, with a marginally positive result for Welsh devolution.) Ms Gramich gives examples of duality or division in Welsh cultural and political life, such as the conflict between the Anglo-Welsh inhabitants of the Valleys and those who live in the mainly Welsh-speaking area (*Y Fro Gymraeg*). We are told there appears to be less hostility towards the Welsh-speaker than twenty years ago, although there are still areas where the language is regarded by many as something quite alien. The author states that dualism seems to pervade Welsh culture (north versus south, Welsh versus English, town versus country, etc.), but she suggests that the reason this binary model is still so strong in Wales is that “it is still a colonized country, subject to imperialist ways of thinking”.

In the next chapter Sabina Sharkey offers *A view of the present state of Irish Studies*. Until the 1980s these studies were absorbed in the teaching of Irish language (*An Gaeilge*) and literature. Nowadays there is a more multidisciplinary approach as a result of contemporary developments in critical and cultural studies. In the light of growing interest for Irish culture, Ms Sharkey warns against stereotyping, and against making lists of outstanding Irish personalities to “prove” how clever the Irish are. (In this aspect she differs from Robert Crawford who gives us a list of prominent Scottish figures.) She also points out that Irish society is extremely diverse, influenced by colonialism, religious questions, legislation, social change, gender issues and the Northern Ireland perspective. She believes that culture may be studied through the historically specific interrelating of identity factors, and recommends investigating the complex relationship between Ireland and Britain as part of Irish Studies.

David Dabydeen’s interesting essay on *Teaching West Indian literature in Britain* begins by correcting a common superficial view held by white Europeans that West Indian culture is “cool, hip and sub-cultural”. He also laments the fact that for the moment Caribbean Studies is a “marginal and tokenistic” field of study within the Western academy. More specifically, the author explains that if the teaching of Caribbean literature is to be successful, the teacher must abandon Western critical theory as being inappropriate to an understanding of West Indian literature. He suggests that what must be analyzed is a set of propositions about the history and culture of the region, derived from the body of creative writing itself. The criteria for literary judgement should be based on the works themselves and not, as Dabydeen says, “from Plato and his footnoters”. He proposes a reconceptualization of the nature of West Indian-ness. Instead of continuing to focus on the ways in which Britain made an impact on the economy, social and kinship institutions and psyche of African slaves, the author believes that more attention should be paid to the creative impact of African languages, philosophies and cultural practices on the day-to-day lives of white masters. Furthermore, the author suggests that Caribbeanists in the Western world know very little about Amerindian languages, oral and written expressions, myths, religions, art, music, diet, or gender relations, and that they are still very timid external observers of the region. Another neglected aspect of Caribbean Studies is the cultural contribution of Asian immigrants to the region. When these Amerindian and Asian

influences on Caribbean culture are recognized and studied in depth, it will become obvious that West Indian people are not merely creatures of Britain, forged by British cultural values, thus dispelling the myth about the “crumbling of *native* cultures before Britain’s superior imperial might”.

The last chapter, *Shakespeare in quotations*, is an analysis of the use references to the National Bard in the media. John Drakakis comes to the conclusion that today Shakespeare is “a collage of familiar quotations, fragments whose relation to any coherent aesthetic principle is both problematical and irremediably ironical”. Shakespeare is a “cultural icon”, quoted and misquoted, disintegrated, satirized, and appropriated by diverse entities, according to necessity. The author gives an example of how Shakespearean analogies and/or quotations can be used to justify, thematize or even hide the truth behind a sociopolitical reality such as the downfall of Margaret Thatcher. He also gives examples of how advertising can almost rewrite tragedies, with the line “Wherefore art thou, Romeo?” being used to promote a “lonely hearts club”, with the implication that if the couple in question had used its services, their tragic dilemma would have been avoided. Similarly, television comedy parodies well-known fragments of Shakespearean drama, and the ultimate reappropriation of the National Bard takes place, according to the author, in *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*, in which the alien Gorkon asserts: “You’ve not experienced Shakespeare until you’ve read him in the original Klingon”. Although this may sound unorthodox and undesirable to many readers, I rather agree with the author, who believes that the fragmentation of what was once a Shakespeare *canon*, and its dispersal across a range of cultural productions, serves to reach those excluded until now from the sphere of «high culture», and to demystify the process of civilization itself.

Studying British Cultures is certainly worthwhile introductory reading. Though the authors of the essays have contrasting views on how to study culture, or cultures, the unifying principle behind them is the need to define Britishness and the question of cultural identity. I have found it thought-provoking, and useful as a stimulus to opening up wider horizons on the curriculum.

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