

Notes from a Small Island

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Before setting off with his family to relocate from their North Yorkshire home to America, Bill Bryson takes one last trip around his surrogate home, Britain. His goal is to discover what makes the British who they are? Also why he fell in love with this quirky independent island in the first place.

He recalls when he first arrived in Dover in 1973 and throughout the book he inserts witty reminiscences and observations of the Britain he found then and the Britain of today.

On his trip he uses public transport, buses, coaches and trains for as much as he can. Only once does he use a hire car, but this results in mishap and unintentional comedy in imitable Bryson style.

The usual observations are made on the general public and as usual hotel staff are given merciless scrutiny often leading to sarcastic remarks. The book is refreshing thanks to the author's unique perspective as a transplanted American who has lived here for twenty years.

Bryson is concerned about our seeming disdain for our heritage as he notes with dismay at the destruction and disregard for old buildings that are replaced by ugly tower blocks or shopping centres. He makes plenty of interesting and valid points against a backdrop of a journey that as usual is coloured with plenty of mishaps and incident.

Another of his concerns is the cloning of High Streets in every town and city in the country. These fears are expressed not in a lecturing or preachy way but as a person who has genuine affection for this country and its uniqueness. He celebrates the quintessentially British ways and customs and fears they are gradually being eroded.

His enthusiasm and curiosity are infectious as he candidly explores a country that packs in so much diversity, culture and history into such a small area. This is Britain seen through his eyes in all its forms and makes for a refreshing and revealing read.

The conclusion he seems to draw is that Britain has inevitably changed but still retains its own individual character. The book is an enjoyable compelling and enlightening account as he holds the microscope up to us. You will laugh and shake your head in bewilderment and want to read it again and again which is the highest compliment you can pay a book.