

What the British Think about...

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Articles

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London

What the British Think about Belarusian Language and Literature

Abstract

Britain is largely ignorant about Belarusian language and literature, having heard only of Minsk, Chernobyl and Lukashenka. Attempts to inform the public about this country began in the middle of the 20th century through the lectures and publications of the Anglo-Belarusian (then Byelorussian) Society. This limited success has been continued to the present day, with books, conferences and various meetings of the Society. Informing the wider public, however, is as challenging now as it was over half a century earlier.

Рэзюмэ

Што думаюць брытанцы пра беларускую мову і літаратуру

Вялікабрытанія, наогул, мала ведае пра Беларусь, акрамя Мінска, Чарнобыля і Лукашэнкі. У сярэдзіне XX стагоддзя Англа-Беларускае Таварыства намагалася даць інфармацыю брытанскай публіцы пра культуру гэтай краіны праз канферэнцыі, курсы лекцый, часопіс “Журнал беларускіх даследаванняў”, артыкулы і кніжкі. Такія намаганні робяцца да гэтых часоў, але поспехі – даволі сціплыя, як гэта было і 60 гадоў таму.

Belarus is not a well-known country in England, and I have often been asked where it is and whether Belarusian is a language or a dialect. This, incidentally, is a view held by many Russians, who extend their dialectal grasp also to Ukraine and, in extreme cases, Poland. In general British knowledge about Belarus is rather similar to that of the Arab carpet seller who, on learning that the speaker (Uladzimir Arloŭ) was Belarusian, exclaimed with a joyful pearly smile, ‘Minsk, Chernobyl. Lukash’enka!’ [*sic*] [Arloŭ 1998: 157].

An early attempt to acquaint the British with Belarusian culture was the founding of the Anglo-Belarusian Society in 1954 whose object was ‘the diffusion, interchange and publication of knowledge relating to the Belarusian people, their land, history and culture’. In early years, several British aristocrats and even members of parliament took an interest in Belarus and tried to speak about it in public forums. The Society’s heyday was from 1965 to 1984 when it held an annual course of six lectures on Belarusian topics (delivered by British and émigré Belarusian scholars). At this time there began to be published a scholarly and informative publication, “The Journal of Byelorussian Studies” from 1966 to

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1984, which was revived in a new series in 2013 as “The Journal of Belarusian Studies”, at first published in Belarusian and English, but since 2015 only in English.

During the second half of the 20th century the Society arranged a number of international seminars and conferences, with topics that included: Aleksandr Potebnia; Vaclaŭ Lastoŭski; Skaryna’s life and work; Janka Kupala and Jakub Kolas; the Biadulia and Harun centenary; the Belarusian diaspora; culture and politics in post-totalitarian society; Belarusian Nobel prize winners; and, most recently, in 2016, Belarusian studies in the 21st century.

In the 1960s and 1970s the late Fr Alexander Nadson organized a boarding school for the children of Belarusian émigrés in London, teaching them mathematics and Belarusian language, history and literature, whilst they studied other subjects at local English schools. A generation later, the children of more recent émigrés have the possibility of attending Belarusian lessons once a week and these classes are also available to non-Belarusians who have a particular reason for learning the language. The lessons are for beginners, rather than for those who have through circumstances neglected their native language, as in the excellent Mova Nanova movement in Miensk and other Belarusian cities.

Books are another way of trying to disseminate interest in Belarusian language, literature and history. Two major books about Belarusian history, particularly of the contemporary period, appeared in 2011 [Bennett 2011; Wilson 2011]; they should have drawn the attention of anglophone readers to a subject still insufficiently understood in England (and probably other countries too). Shirin Akiner published a groundbreaking book on the Belarusian Tatar manuscript in the British Museum [Akiner 2009]. Earlier she had produced a parallel text edition of Miniatures by Sakrat Janovič [Akiner 1984].

The present author has written one book about the formation of the Belarusian literary language [McMillin 1973] and five about Belarusian literature [McMillin 1977, 1999, 2002, 2010, 2015]. These books, though written in England, do not

take account of anglophone publications written and published in America, Canada and elsewhere, where the main interest in recent years has been in history and politics, émigré writing and memoirs; one exception will be mentioned below.

Almost certainly, the best way of familiarizing readers in England with Belarusian literature is through translations, but translation of foreign (and specifically Belarusian) texts is not nearly as widespread as it is, for instance, in Germany – one of the consequences not merely of narrow British chauvinism as of the immense extent of anglophone literature worldwide. With the death of Vera Rich in 2009 we lost perhaps the only truly talented translator of Belarusian poetry into English, and some of the best examples of her work were collected in 1971, although she continued working to the end of her life [Rich 1971]. In the present century Jim Dingley, translator of Arloŭ’s *Kraina Belarus’* (2003) [Arloŭ 2013], has also produced an excellent version of Natałka Babina’s novel *Rybin horad* (2007) [Babina 2013]. There are also two first-class translations of novels by Vasił Bykaŭ: *Sotnikaŭ* (1970) as *The Ordeal* [Bykaŭ 1972] and *Znak biady* (1982) as *Sign of Misfortune* (Bykaŭ 1990). The first book-length study of Bykaŭ’s work in English was made by the Canadian scholar Zina Gimpelevich [Gimpelevich 2005].

The Francis Skaryna Belarusian Library in north London (opened in) is a valuable source of information on all aspects of Belarus, including language and literature. In 2016 various elements of modernization were begun, including putting the Library into Wikipedia and beginning, at long last, work on an electronic catalogue.

At the present time the Anglo-Belarusian Society mainly concentrates on traditional events such as Kupalle, Mother Language Day and Kaliady. The aims of the Society are the same as they were half a century earlier, and attendance at meetings little different but the problems of bringing the culture of Belarus to a wider British public remains, despite all their/our efforts, as challenging as they ever were.

Вучэбна-метадычныя дапаможнікі па беларускай мове...

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Вольга Барысенка

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Вучэбна-метадычныя дапаможнікі па беларускай мове як замежнай. Дыяхранічны аспект

Рэзюмэ

У артыкуле праведзены аналіз вучэбна-метадычнай літаратуры па беларускай мове як замежнай. Першыя айчынныя выданні нельга назваць сапраўднымі падручнікамі: матэрыял у іх размешчаны ў акадэмічным парадку, адсутнічаюць камунікатыўныя практыкаванні. З 2000-х гадоў пачынаюць з'яўляцца дапаможнікі, прызначаныя для развіцця навыкаў і ўменняў беларускага вуснага маўлення. Сёння неабходна стварыць дзяржаўную паўзроўневую тыпавую праграму навучання беларускай мове як замежнай, адпаведную еўрапейскай сертыфікацыйнай сістэме ўзроўняў валодання замежнымі мовамі, на падставе чаго і магчыма распрацаваць сучасныя вучэбныя комплексы.

Abstract

Handbooks on Belarusian as a Foreign Language in a Diachronic Aspect

The article gives an overview of text-books devoted to Belarusian as a foreign language. They can not be fully regarded as textbooks because the material is presented in an academic manner and lacks the communicative approach. Since the year of 2000, several speech practice handbooks have been published. Today it is necessary to work out a national level-based model curriculum of Belarusian as a foreign language as required under the Common European Framework of Reference, which will give rise to modern textbooks.