This excellent book should be required reading for all those interested in the inter-relationship of the various parts of the United Kingdom and Ireland, not just in the past, but also in the present. The book is based on the author’s Ford Lectures to the University of Oxford in 1998, with an added chapter. Davies takes as his subject the expansion and decline of English power and influence over the rest of the British Isles in the two and a half centuries after 1093, a year which marked the death of Malcolm Canmore king of Scots and Rhys ap Tewdwr, king of South Wales, and was far more significant for the Celtic-speaking peoples than 1066. He argues that the events of the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries are crucial to an understanding of why the British Isles have remained divided into four separate societies. The nature of English expansion and English perceptions of the other peoples with whom they shared the islands militated against the type of accommodation, tolerance of difference and flexibility which might have led to a truly united kingdom. This period, which saw the most sustained contact between England and her Celtic neighbours, also witnessed the birth of a powerful sense of English identity, uniqueness, and superiority to other cultures. Even at the highpoint of English power c.1300, when Edward I exercised effective political power over almost all of the British Isles, he remained king of England and lord of Ireland, not king of Britain. As an English chronicler was to comment thirty years later, Merlin’s prophecy that a new Arthur would arise as king of Britain had not come true.

There is not room to cover all the insights offered in this book, so only a few will be highlighted. Of particular interest to readers of this journal is the discussion of Scotland. As the only other regnal kingdom in the British Isles, it is used by Davies to provide an interesting comparison to English expansionist policies. He contrasts the extension of English power over Wales and Ireland, with the extension of Scottish royal authority over the west of what is now Scotland. He argues that the Scottish model, which allowed for tolerance of local traditions and culture was in the end more successful than the English one,
which required conformity to English models of society, economy and government. He also points out the paradox that Scotland, the only region of the British Isles not to be conquered, was the area which became the most Anglicised in terms of governance, law, and society. This leaves the reader to wonder if Anglicisation is far more likely to be accepted when it is not imposed as a result of conquest.

The conflict and lack of understanding between English society and those of the rest of the British Isles is especially well-brought out in Chapter 5, “‘Sweet civility’ and ‘barbarous rudeness’”, which traces the development of English perceptions of the other peoples of the Isles. In a discussion which will resonate with readers familiar with the history of other empires, Davies shows how English expansionism was justified as bringing “civilization” to “backward peoples”. The descriptions of native societies by English writers stressed the barbarity of their practices and beliefs. (Such attitudes were not confined to English commentators, as the fourteenth-century Scottish historian John of Fordun’s comments on Highland society make clear).

Civilization as defined in English terms, and indeed more specifically in southern and eastern English terms, involved the rule of centrally-administered law and order, the accumulation of wealth especially in terms of land so that one had a stake in peace, the development of trade and permanent settlements. The gap with kin-based societies, where cattle and people were the main source of power, and war a way of life for the elite, was huge and ultimately unbridgeable. As a result, English expansionism resulted in an intermediate zone of English settlement in Wales and Ireland, with communities isolated from the native society surrounding them. From the late thirteenth century, the differences between these communities and the societies surrounding them would be enshrined in laws which separated English and Welsh and English and Irish.

Of particular value to historians from national historiography traditions is the book’s demonstration of the new insights which can be gained from looking at the British Isles as a whole. Here Davies follows in the tradition pioneered by Robin Frame in his study of the medieval British aristocracy. For example, the impact of the great expansion of English settlement can only be fully understood when it is looked at as a pan-British
phenomenon. This approach allows Davies to make a convincing case that it was English settlers, even more than English lordship or military power, which were the backbone of English expansionism and whose legacy would be the most long-lasting in the history of the islands. In chapter 3, Davies suggests a new way of looking at the Isles, with three zones of power, a southern one dominated by England, a northern one dominated by lowland Scotland, and a third western zone centred on the Irish Sea, where dominance would be sought by both England and Scotland.

The focus of the book is on the rise of English expansionism and its failure to lead to a high kingship of Britain which would incorporate all peoples under its rule. The decline of this expansionism from c.1300 is treated rather more briefly in chapter 7, “The Ebb Tide of the English Empire, 1304-43”, which is the shortest in the book. The end date of 1343 puzzled this reader, who was relieved to find that it had no particular significance, apart from being 250 years after the start of the period, and the year the Black Prince was made Prince of Wales. The processes which Davies examines in this book cannot be assigned precise dates, and the choice of 1343 rather nicely underlines this point.

Fittingly, given the topic of this book, the title of the Ford Lectures in English History has now been changed to the Ford Lectures in British History. The First English Empire is an outstanding example of how a “British” approach, as opposed to a four nations approach, can deepen our understanding of the history of the Atlantic Archipelago.

Elizabeth Ewan
University of Guelph