In the opening scenes of the 1999 film Mansfield Park, the young Fanny Price hears terrible wailing coming from an offshore ship during her coach journey to her new home at Mansfield Park. She is soon informed that the noise comes from the “black cargo” on board. This is the first of several references to slavery in this film, despite the fact that Jane Austen’s 1814 novel on which the film was based makes only a single passing mention of slavery. The film’s adaptation of the novel is the consequence, at least in part, of the claim strenuously made in recent scholarship that an imperial ethos thoroughly pervaded British national culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In his vigorous and argumentative book, The Absent Minded Imperialists: What the British Really Thought About Empire, Bernard Porter puts this claim to the test and finds it wanting. Porter argues that no single monolithic national culture was “steeped,” “saturated,” or “imbribated” in imperialism, as some scholars would have it. Britain was a complex and divided society, with cleavages along class, religious, and political lines. He further insists that the empire was so vast, varied, and distant that there was no single, unitary “imperial culture” that shaped British society and thought.

Porter supports these arguments by assessing in detail how visible and important the empire was in British culture during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He insists that before the 1880s, only a very small proportion of the population had any direct experience with the empire overseas. Based on an examination of countless periodicals, government publications, memoirs, school textbooks, novels, poems, paintings, and musical pieces from the period—noted and documented in abundance—Porter argues that the majority of the population knew very little about the empire. References to Britain’s overseas empire rarely appeared in the newspapers and did not fea-
ture prominently in art, literature, or music. Most history textbooks ignored the empire completely and did not even mention India. At least one of those that did was scathing about the East India Company, describing it as “a band of ‘robbers,’ trampling perfectly good native governments under foot out of pure ‘avarice.’” Porter persuasively shows that the British Empire was truly acquired in “a fit of absence of mind,” as Sir John Seeley complained in The Expansion of Britain in 1883.

Indeed, throughout the history of the empire, most Britons were either ignorant of the empire or indifferent to it. There was no pervasive or unitary “imperial culture” in which the nation was saturated. Porter complains that recent scholars of the British Empire, such as John Mackenzie, Edward Said, Catherine Hall, and Antoinette Burton have everywhere asserted, but nowhere demonstrated, the existence of such an “imperial culture.” He establishes, in fact, that there is very little evidence for asserting that such a culture ever existed. Frederic Leighton’s sculpture Athlete Wrestling with a Python (ca. 1874), for example, might have embodied, as Alison Smith contends, “the British empire keeping corrupt forces at bay,” but, as Porter writes, there is “no evidence to suggest that this was ever Leighton’s intention, or the way the piece was interpreted by its contemporary audience.” Porter’s arguments contradict many of the claims of the late Edward Said, whose works Orientalism (1978) and Culture and Imperialism (1993) have done so much to determine recent scholarly approaches to the British Empire.

Contrary to the claim that an “imperial culture” in Britain impelled its overseas expansion, Porter concludes from his study that “empires arise for mainly material reasons.” The British Empire “made no great material demands on most people, at least none that they were aware of, and did not need their support or even interest. All that was required was a minimum of apathy.” According to Porter, “once empires have arisen, almost any cultural trait or ideology can be harnessed to support or excuse them.” Moreover, “these traits and ideologies were homegrown, arising out of domestic discourses, and owing almost nothing to the fact of Britain’s expansion into the world.”

The Absent Minded Imperialists presents lessons not only for historians of the British empire but also for future historians of the present period of U.S. expansion abroad. If the U.S. does indeed possess an empire, as Niall Ferguson has recently argued, it remains to be determined precisely why it arose and also the extent to which its continued existence is a consequence of domestic apathy. Whether or not U.S. national culture, if there is indeed such a thing, is “imperial,” and to what extent it has been shaped by U.S. expansion abroad, are open questions.
Although Porter constantly discusses “British” expansion and culture, “What the English really thought about empire” might have been a more accurate subtitle for this book, since Porter does not often discuss what the Scottish, Welsh, or Irish thought about the empire in any detail. He admits, however, that had he done so, his conclusions might have been somewhat different. Exactly how different is an important question that remains to be answered.

Porter clearly shows that recent scholarship on the cultural history of the British Empire has been mired in a number of assumptions that lack rigorous empirical support. Those familiar with it will also know that this scholarship has achieved some notoriety for the difficulty of its presentation. There is no difficult modern jargon in this book, however. Porter writes clearly, felicitously, and often wittily. His conclusions are measured and carefully argued, and the evidence for them is abundantly documented. The Absent Minded Imperialists is an important addition to serious scholarship on the history of the British Empire.