Coronation of George V looks, from a century later, like the peak of Empire ...  
the moment when subjects and liegemen of the Crown gathered from all over the earth.

His father’s funeral had been the gathering-place for European royalty.

George’s ceremony brought an outpouring from the farthest reaches of the globe.

Four dominions sent their emissaries.

Troops marched, from the Indian empire  
from West Africa and East Africa  
from Malaya and Ceylon  
from the Indies – West and East

Bearing the swords of spiritual and temporal justice were those great lions of Empire

Lord Roberts (“Bobs”)  
Lord Kitchener.

Hannoch Bartov, an Israeli diplomat, from land once occupied by British imperial troops, thought::
“That splendid hour looks to us today like a blind man’s masque
in a house on fire, not unlike the ironic opening
scene of *King Lear*.”

I. FIN DE SIECLE

A. CRASHING BOER

The Boer war was an imperial war. Soldiers came not just from England, but from
Canada and the Antipodes and India.

Think o’ the stories round the fire, the tales along the trek –
O’ Calgary an’ Wellin’ ton an’ Sydney an’ Quebec;
Of mine an’ farm, an’ ranch an’ run, an’ moose an’ caribou,
An’ parrots peckin’ lambs to death! Good-bye – good luck to you!

We’ve seen your ‘ome by word o’ mouth, we’ve watched your rivers shine,
We’ve ‘heard your bloomin’ forests blow of eucalyp’ and pine;
Your young, gay countries north and south, we feel we own ’em too,
For they was made by rank an’ file. Good bye – good luck to you!

– Rudyard Kipling

But the real feeling in England at the end of the war wasn’t Kipling’s — a warmer
fondness for the brotherhood of Empire.

It was uneasiness – at an England that found itself alone in a
Europe of enemies.

... an England whose splendid Navy and proud army had just barely managed to beat a bunch of clodhopping Dutch farmers, after three years of very dirty fighting

We will gather at the Bar
When we catch De Wet,
And kid ourselves we heroes are,
When we catch De Wet.
We catch him nearly ev’ry day,
Oh, have we no trump card to play?
Why, we shall all be old and grey
When we catch De Wet.²

Not that the streets echoed with curses against the war.

The trades unions and trades councils were almost all silent.

The Nonconformists only gave a scattering protest.

Who volunteered?

– the upper classes, for the sake of Empire

– the lower classes, for the sake of economic gain.

It wasn’t patriotism that did it.

So you were likelier to find a young clerk signing up than a young laborer.

How did workers feel about imperialism?

² Price, An Imperial War and the British Working Class, 240.
Most historians think that they were crazy about the Boer War.
   Rah-rah, wave the flag...

   Jingoism is the opiate of the working-class stiffness.

In fact, they went some of them one way, some another.

   In middle class institutions, sympathy for the Boers would cut you off from your friends and family.

   No middle class suburban meeting would tolerate a pro-Boer speaker.

   But in the trades unions, they were listened to fairly and quietly.

   After all, to workers the big issue of the day wasn’t imperialism.

   It was the working class’s need to rise and get more from society.

   They weren’t going to break the bonds of friendship and throw that away, for some silly little war.³

As for the Khaki election, the surprising thing isn’t that the pro-Boers won.

It’s how little they won.

19 pro-Boers lost their seats.

But in a dozen of them, it was an MP who stood a good chance of losing anyhow – a very shaky Liberal seat.

Six more were lost because the MP didn’t even run again.

52 supporters of the Boers survived into the next Parliament.

Mostly in small towns, with industrial base.

War fever touched the cities. It didn’t do much in the countryside.

If workers had really been pro-Empire, the Liberals wouldn’t have carried the seats the pro-Boers carried.⁴

**We Have Earned No End of a Lesson**

Some Englishmen saw the passion for empire fading.

Like the Earl of Meath, they had to give it a day all its own – Empire Day – not because folks at home cared so much, but because they were starting to care so little.

**Boy Scouts**

That’s also what lay behind Lord Robert Baden-Powell’s idea, after he got back from South Africa.

He wanted to train the next generation of empire-builders.

So he dressed them in the khaki uniforms that soldiers wore in the Boer War, plus bush hats and bandanas

---

And he taught them to be

Physically strong
Mentally awake
& morally straight –

the Boy Scouts!

(And as an afterthought, the Girl Guides).

They were taught the motto, “Do Our Best,” and, cutting it to the initials, would chant, “We’ll DOB, DOB, DOB.”

But why did an Empire confident of itself need to worry about where the next generation of empire-builders would come from?

**Kipling after *Kim***

The real proof of a change in mood and tone was Rudyard Kipling himself.

He loved England because it was great.

His poetry marched to the beat of the Empire.

But something in the new century seemed badly off-key.

It was as if something great and good had gone out of the British character –

as if they were degenerating ...
showing themselves unworthy of the future that Empire had promised.

Kipling’s poetry after 1900 is shot through with anger, bitterness, malice

A lot of the humor has drained away.

It gets hectoring, reproving, shrill, even paranoid.

He no longer was the voice of Empire.

He was a baying hound of Tory reaction.

B. Farewell, Victoria

The old Queen had outlived them all.
Only three kings before her got to their jubilee.

By 1887 she’d outlived one of them – Edward III.

After 1893, she’d outlasted all but her crazy grandfather, George.

But in 1897, she even passed his sixty-year record.\(^5\)

Something went out of the Empire when the old Queen died.

63 years and then some, she had ruled England.

Most of her subjects couldn’t imagine an Empire without her.

But she was more than Queen; for 25 years, she had been Empress of India – a role that she played to the hilt

... the Widow of Windsor turned into the Great White Queen.

It was never all pageantry.

Victoria really cared about her charges, and wanted them treated with kindness.

Her attendant in her old age was Munshi, an Indian clerk.

Even in her eighties, she would spend long hours every day looking over dispatches from India and the colonies

Viceroy's got lectures on how they should win their subjects’ love, and not just their respect.

vulgarity of the Colonial Agents.

**Edward the Caresser**

Her successor, Edward VII, was a charming man, in his way –

but his way was the Continental manner.

You could imagine him at the Champs Elysee
or strutting his yacht in the Mediterranean

But it was unimaginable that it would dock anywhere east of Suez, when he was king.

At heart, he was the most European king that England had known since the Georges.

No place in his palace for the elephant tusks that an African chief sent in tribute each year. They were sent to London to be auctioned off.

Victoria’s Indian attendants were given other jobs or sent home again.

Not for him the Indian curries that Indian cooks made the Great White Queen.

They just don’t go with good champagne and crepes suzettes.

And the magnificent palace with its Durbar room, built by Rudyard Kipling’s papa, the King turned into a convalescent home for wounded imperial officers.

Empires were fine things, but.....
II. “PAX” PEAKS?

A. WIDER STILL AND WIDER SHALL THY Bounds Be Set?

Thoughtful people saw British power slipping.

There no longer was a Pax Britannica.

Instead, they had nightmares of Germans, goose-stepping the globe.

– there were best-sellers about how the German army took London bayonetting women and kids, of course

(The Germans translated it, and it sold like hot-cakes there, too, because they cut out the ending, where the English people rise up and kick the Germans out).

– people saw mysterious airships floating over British towns at night

– penny newspapers warned of 6,500 spies in Britain’s midst

– MP’s knew for a fact that 66,000 members of the German Army reserve already were living near London

. . . . and how about the thousands of rifles the Germans had hidden in a cellar of a bank in Charing Cross?

---

6 William Le Queux wrote the story for the DAILY MAIL. The practical design was drawn up by Lord Roberts, “Bobs”. Roberts figured out where the invasion would take place and designed it all. But there was a difficulty: the towns he picked didn’t read THE DAILY MAIL – and so where would the draw be, circulation-wise? Nowhere! So the place for the invasion had to be changed to towns that wouldn’t make any sense for a successful invasion – but would sell papers.

7 The invasion scare didn’t jitter P. G. Wodehouse He wrote his own parody of
The Economic Also-Ran?

As it happens, Britain wasn’t really as weak as all that.

Yes, its manufactured exports were finding it a tougher sell in overseas markets.

In South America, consumers who used to buy Lancashire cotton goods bought Italian ones.

Manchester consumed just about all the raw cotton in the world in 1800.

As late as 1870, it used as much as America and Europe put together.

But by the 1890s, America used more. Europe used more.

By 1900, Lancashire used no more than one bale in six.

It couldn’t sell its cloth in China.

It couldn’t sell its yarn to Germany.  

it, SWOOP! or HOW CLARENCE SAVED ENGLAND. In it, Germans invade Essex, the Russians land at Yarmouth, the Mad Mullah takes over Portsmouth, the Swiss Navy seizes Lyme Regis, China shows up in Wales, Monaco invaded Auchtermuchty, and Moroccan robbers pour into Brighton.

Can anything save England? Yes! One Boy Scout, all by himself, named Clarence.

And yes, its old industrial dominance was gone.

In 1860 it made 20% of the world’s manufactured goods.

... not bad, for 2% of the population

It produced as much as ever. But it was a smaller share of the whole.
America industrialized.
Germany industrialized.

Around 1900, they caught up with England.

The advantage of an early start faded away.

Worse, England found itself fettered to outdated technology and working practices.

By 1914, England made about 13% of the world’s manufactured goods;
By 1928, ten percent.

Germany made 15% and 12% respectively.

America made 32% and 39.3%.

**No managerial revolution**

Most of its manufacturers were little family firms.
They didn’t raise their money by selling stock.

They did it from their own personal bank-accounts.

---

And they didn’t borrow to re-tool, or offer shares. They used what profits they had.

There was no managerial revolution there, no complicated administrative structuring.

If you want a very elaborate, specializing kind of management system... if you want mass production of standardized goods –

go to Germany! Go to America!

**Technical training**

You want good technical schools, for the next, more sophisticated stage in industrialization?

You want the kind of skills needed in the work-force for chemicals, say?

Germany had ‘em. English schools didn’t. Technical education wasn’t the field for gentlemen.

It’s an omen of things to come.

Look at 18 year olds in Germany in 1976: about fifty percent were in technical and vocational education.

And Britain? 5.7%\(^1\)

German managers were picked for their technical know-how. English ones for their “leadership” qualities!

**R & D**

Or how about research and development labs?

Most of the top firms in Germany had one.
So did most American firms by the 1920s.

In Britain? No more than one firm in every five.

But as a financial presence, Britain was stronger than ever.

It was expanding.
Nowhere could compare with it, down to 1914.

**Out (of Europe) Like a Lion, In Like a Lamb**

These are the facts:

In 19th century world, Britain never was a superpower.

It was one among many great powers.
It may have been one of the greatest, but not the very greatest.

In Europe, it was not a leading power, when decisions were made.

Continental states treated it with contempt in local matters.

If there’d been a great war, now ... then its industrial might would have made it an ally worth having.

But there WASN’t a great war. And in peace, what Britain thought mattered very little.
Power isn’t what potential strength you have.

It’s what strength you TAP, not what strength you might tap.

It isn’t industrial might. Up to 1914, industrial capacity was pretty much irrelevant to British power. And for the most part, Britain didn’t pay for a military presence as much as it could have or might have – it didn’t tap its industrial and capital capacity the way it might have, till the 1890s. ¹¹

Why did its navy dominate the seas?

Because no other country TRIED TO CHALLENGE IT.

For their purposes, they didn’t NEED a navy. Britannia ruled the waves only as long as no other state wanted to harness its potential maritime power.

British power didn’t come from being stronger than European states.

It came from being stronger than states OUTSIDE of Europe.

It came from having a worldwide empire, where there WERE people it could beat and dictate to.

A world power? Yes. A European power? Only some of the time.

  On the Yangtse, Britain could get its way. Not on the Rhine.

And always, its strength rested on this: keeping Europe and the world separate.

  When there was a threat in both, Britain always had a rough time...


By the end of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, though, the situation had changed.

Two European states had world power status.
So did two states outside Europe – Japan and US.

Meantime, in some areas, like Latin America, British power – and all European power – was on the decline.

Britain’s industrial superiority vanished.

And for the first time, European nations challenged Britain at sea.

From 1870 to 1900, the material base of British power went into a steep \textit{relative} decline, its worst in history.\footnote{Ferris, “‘The Greatest Power on Earth’: Great Britain in the 1920s,” 734.}

\textbf{Twilight of the God?}

Yet in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, Britain was a stronger world power than ever.

Its influence on Europe had never been greater.

Its alliance with France and Russia was courted.

Its ability to set the terms of a deal were better than ever before.
Instead of being a sign of decline, the ententes were proof of British strength.

For the first time in history, Britain would have some control over British and Russian policy.

The ententes didn’t come at a time of weakness.

They came after Fashoda – and a French backdown.

They came after Russia lost the war with Japan.

Both of them had abandoned an aggressively expansionist policy.\textsuperscript{14}

It wasn’t German \textit{power} that made England join an entente.

That might have proven that England saw itself in decline, against growing power.

It was German \textit{policy} that did it.

A discovery that Germany really was a danger to counter.

And the policy that mattered wasn’t what Germany did in the colonies. It was what Germany was doing in Europe.

\textbf{The Risk Fleet}

Germany’s building of the Risk Fleet wasn’t a leap for greater power.

It was a confession of failure – that England couldn’t be written off any more as irrelevant to European affairs.

Something had to be done to counter them.

And that something would be to match their navy.

Where, just before the Great War, did she stand as a naval power?

First, and by a long distance.

Overstretched? The truth is, by the 1910s, for the first time, Britain was able to use military power, drawn from its empire, to act as a power – not just on sea, but on land – on the Continent.

Never in the 19th century had that been possible. ¹⁵

Yet the weakened grasp was visible, and maybe most visible from abroad.

See it from Australia’s shores.

In 1905, for the first time, an Asian power beats a European one. Japan defeats Russia, in the grab for empire on the northern shores of China.

From then on, Japan is a real military and naval menace.

And where is the British fleet? There should be more of it than before – the Antipodes need more protection.

Instead, there was less.

Faced with the threat of a German fleet, England called its battleships home, out of eastern waters.

It depended on something a lot less formidable: a scrap of paper, the Anglo-Japanese Alliance.

But paper burns.

Alliances break. Where’s the protection that Australia needs?\(^{16}\)

III. ON THEIR OWN

A. THE ARMING OF THE DOMINIONS

It was an omen of changing shapes of world power in 1907 when the American Great White Fleet took its trip around the world. A good will tour, supposedly.

But everyone knew who it was meant to impress: Japan.

And everyone knew that without it, Australia was unprotected.

When it got to Australia, it got a hero’s welcome.

The courts called a full week holiday.

Businesses let their workers go home.

Aussies from the outback flooded into Sydney and Melbourne to yell and cheer for the Americans.

The Cardinal announced that Catholics didn’t have to go without meat next Friday, because there were so many people in town, it’d be impossible to find enough fish for those who needed it.

As the ships steamed into harbor in Sydney, half a million people were there to greet them.

.... not counting the folks in ferryboats, tugs and yachts, launches and schooners and coasters.

Fireworks – stands – illuminations – shop displays.

It isn’t just that they love us everywhere we go.

It was like a courting ritual of a kid looking for somebody to adopt him.¹⁷

¹⁷R. M. Younger, *Australia and the Australians: A New Concise History* (New York: Humanities Press, 1970) 443. And not everybody was captivated. The poet Bernard O’Dowd described the ships as “a wan array of
What’s more, not by coincidence, Australia now started building a fleet all its own.

Australians would have to defend themselves.

Nobody else in the Empire could be counted on to do it.

Even before the Naval Defence Act passed in 1910, the Government was building destroyers, light cruisers, and submarines.

Australia also started its own army, a citizen force.

All men 12 to 26 had to take out some time for military training.

They weren’t army, exactly; the army was volunteers.

But they had to be got ready.

And set up their own Royal Military College, to train officers.18

At almost exactly the same time, Canada started its own Navy

.. cruisers and destroyers, mostly

If Britain needed them, they were for the imperial Admiralty


to use as it would.

But unless there was a big war, Canada would control them, with no say from Whitehall.

The Conservatives wanted something much more colonial.

They would build three big battleships.

... and GIVE them to England to use.

Canada chose the first way, not the second. That’s significant.

But the offer the Conservatives wanted to make has its own message: on its own, England no longer could do the job of ruling the waves.

It would need help – like the kids supporting aging parents.¹⁹

B. THE GATES ARE MINE TO CLOSE

There were other tokens that the white colonies were going their own way.

a) consolidation

In 1901, the different colonies in Australia joined in one dominion under one government.

¹⁹ As it turned out, by the time the war had begun, Canada hadn’t built any destroyers and hadn’t built any capital ships and hadn’t built any cruisers. It had made a few training vessels. The rest were still in the works. See Donald Creighton, *The Story of Canada*, 208.
They built a totally new capital, and with no English name – no Adelaide or Melbourne or Brisbane:

Canberra

[you may think it’s a silly name. But think of the alternatives Australians offered:

Venus
Labourall
Labour City
Wheatwoolgold
Sydmeladperbrisho

[made from the names of all the capitals of the provinces:
SYDney
MELbourne
ADelaide
PERth
BRISbane
HObart]

Paxedwardus] 20

(And is it significant that the architect they chose, to do the plans wasn’t English? He came from Chicago) 21

They felt so good that they actually created their own empire, by taking over British New Guinea, and making it their special business!


21 He was Walter Burley Griffin, and he got it by winning a worldwide contest. See Russel Ward, Australia.
Canada already was a Dominion. But in 1905 it created two new prairie provinces, Saskatchewan and Alberta.

For the first time, it had states, stretching sea to sea.

b) railroad-building.

Till now, Britain had called the pace.

But Australia and Canada set about binding themselves together with new railroads, coast to coast.

Canada had one transcontinental.

But in the early 1900s it built two more.

For Canada, that meant a lot more than we might think.

The big prospect till then was that trade would go north-south, not east-west.

The United States would fetter in Canada with tentacles of steel.

Its prairie wheat already was spilling south to St. Paul, and getting ground in the mills of Minneapolis.
Why shouldn’t British Columbia’s trade go out by Seattle – or San Francisco?

What could be more natural than Montreal linking to Manhattan?

But now the railroads Canada built made sure that Canadian trade would go up the St. Lawrence and out to Europe on its own.

In Australia, the railroad built to the west wasn’t just a capital investment.

It made a lousy capital investment, if it comes to that.

Most of the stations were in desert so dry that – unlike American whistlestops – they never sprouted towns around them.

Many appeared on the map, and only on the map. They made a bigger ink-spot than they cast a shadow.

No, the real reason was political: to create One Australia.

Western Australia didn’t want to join the Dominion.

The railroad was built as a bribe to change its mind.
c) tariffs

Moreover, Canada and Australia both broke with the free-trade Empire.

Canada slapped high tariffs on the manufactured goods from the United States, to make sure that her people would buy British.

... and when in 1911, the Government worked out a trade deal, opening Canada’s markets to American factory goods, and opening America to Canadian eggs and corn and wheat –

the Canadian voters threw them out on their ear.

Australia put through a protective tariff, so that English goods couldn’t undersell the goods at home.

Canada for the first time actually started making treaties for herself, and set up her own State Department ...

a Department of External Affairs, it was called.

And how did England feel about all this action?

Not, we can be sure, the way the Soviet Union would have felt about a satellite setting off on its own.
In fact, there was a certain amount of pride that the Dominions were
grown up enough to learn to drive by themselves.

As Rudyard Kipling wrote, praising the Canada that set up its own trade
policy:

A Nation spoke to a Nation
A Queen sent word to a Throne:
Daughter am I in my mother’s house,
But mistress in my own.
The gates are mine to open,
As the gates are mine to close,
And I set my house in order,
Said our Lady of the Snows.

– Rudyard Kipling

And when it came to imperial defense, the folks in Whitehall welcomed
any help they could get.

They knew that alone, Britons couldn’t really rule the waves.

They would NEED the Dominions arming, to take care of
their own coasts.

They had always known that they hadn’t troops enough to fight a
major war.

If New Zealand wanted to set up a draft, that was
fine.
If Australia did so, even better.

There wasn’t anything conspiratorial about it.

Britain hoped that troops used to defend the Antipodes might be the basis for an imperial army anywhere in the world.

They even talked about creating one big Imperial Army, run from London.

A Pan-Britannic Militia, drafted everywhere, and serving everywhere.

What they couldn’t do was get it off paper and into practice.

The Dominions were willing to give millions for defense – but not a man in tribute.

They were not about to let their hands get tied by some commitment to contribute men to an “imperial reserve,” ordered into service from London.

The most England could do was coordinate them.

– set up an Imperial General Staff.

It would try to make soldiers’ drill in each of the Dominions the same

see that they were armed with the same
kind of weapons

see that they had the same kind of unit structure

so that if they were offered to England in a major war, there wouldn’t be complete chaos.

– Australia’s defense ministers drew up plans to mobilize manpower if there was a war, and discussed going with the New Zealanders in a joint expeditionary force, to help each other.

But from the first, there was a distinction:

– nobody said that Canada or Australia or New Zealand had to give a single man to imperial wars

It’s like having a fire extinguisher. A smart household plans for fires, and has one.

But that doesn’t mean it is required to use it.

And it doesn’t mean that it has to start a fire, so it can be used.

– and while the Dominions drafted men to defend their own shores, all troops going overseas were to be volunteers.22

22 The best and healthiest article about this is Craig Wilcox, “Relinquishing the Past: John Mordike’s An Army for a Nation,” Australian Journal of Politics and History, 40 (1993): 52-65. The leading conspiracy theorist, of how a “national” Australian defense was hijacked and secretly turned into the feeding-trough for imperial war