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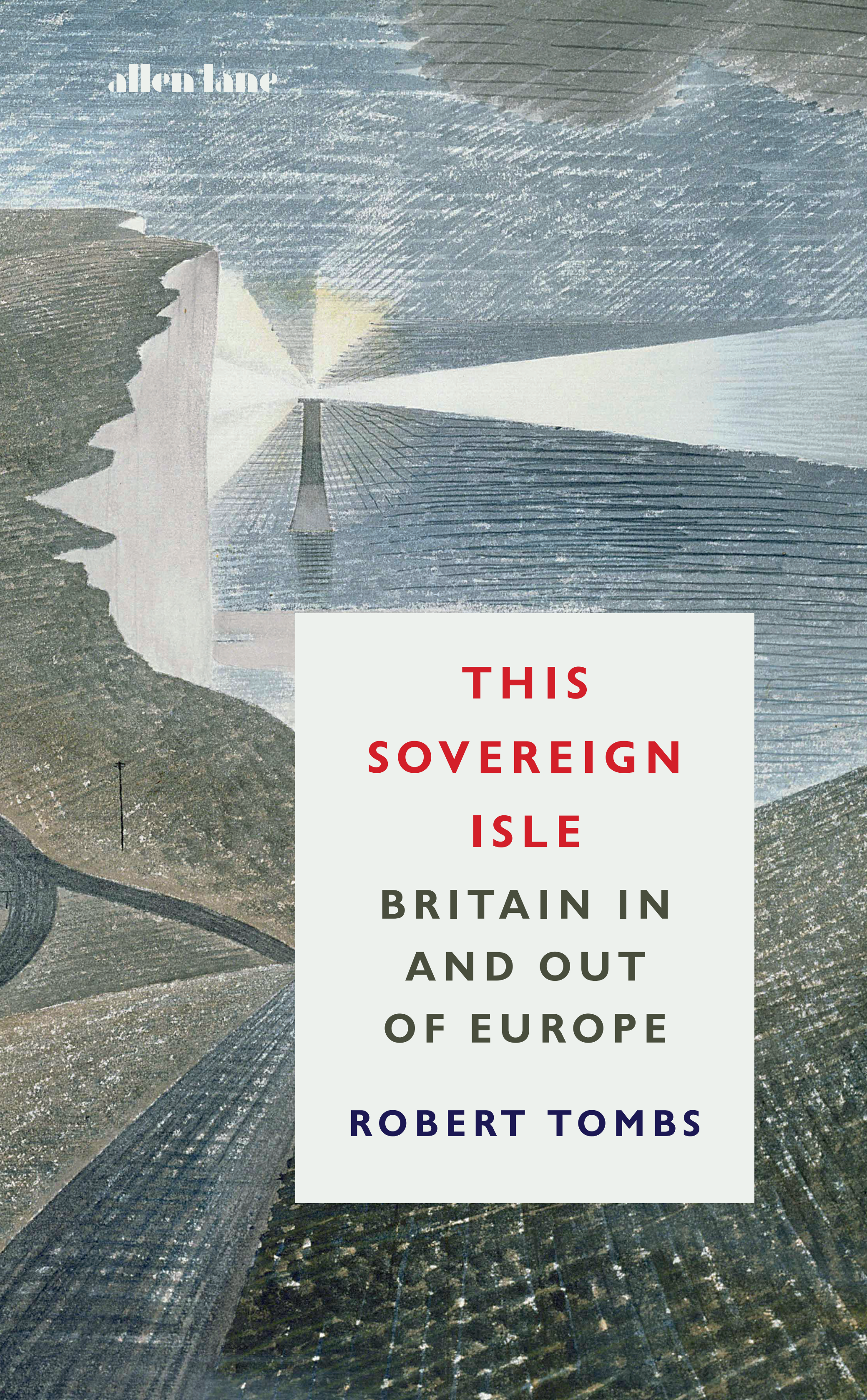

THIS SOVEREIGN ISLE

BRITAIN IN AND OUT OF EUROPE

ROBERT TOMBS

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Preface: Why This Book?

> 'Our neighbours across the Channel, being made for free trade by the maritime character of their economic life, cannot possibly agree sincerely to shut themselves up behind a continental tariff wall.'
>
> Charles de Gaulle, 1970[1]

If anyone ever asks me what I did during the great lockdown, the answer will be that I wrote this book. My intention had been to start on a history of monotheism, but, as with many others, my plans were altered by Brexit. I am old enough to have voted in the 1975 referendum (to stay), and although I was always suspicious of the ambitions and pretensions of European federalists, the EU seemed a fact of life, like the weather. After writing *The English and Their History* (to which this book is in some ways an appendix), I was occasionally asked to comment on and try to explain British political developments, including for foreign readers. Before the 2016 referendum, I predicted in an American journal that David Cameron would negotiate a compromise that would enable the UK to remain a member of the EU. After some hesitation, I voted Leave in 2016, and I recall two things that influenced that decision. One was an open meeting in Cambridge at which I asked the panel whether it might be better to stay in the EU for the time being, and leave if or when its problems became worse; and the reply by Dr Chris Bickerton (an expert on EU affairs) was that the decision was now – there might not be a second chance. The second, days before the vote, was dinner at a friend's house with the Nobel Prize-winning economist Kenneth Arrow, who had publicly opposed Brexit. I asked him whether leaving the EU meant economic disaster. He replied, 'No, there will need to be some adjustment, but certainly no disaster.' Had he said the opposite, I might have voted to Remain.

Although a piece I wrote in 2017 explaining Brexit to the readers of *Le Monde* elicited a rather splenetic letter of denunciation signed by seventy-four colleagues – something of a badge of honour – I was still more a commentator than an advocate. One reason this changed was the disdainful attitude of Remainers, both prominent and obscure: I remember a fellow guest at a party in Cambridge telling me that she had finally understood why people voted Leave because her gardener and cleaning lady had explained it. When it became clear that influential groups were trying to neutralize or overturn the referendum result, I was convinced that this was potentially disastrous. I cannot quite recall the circumstances that led a tiny group of academics, myself included, to set up a website towards the end of 2017 called Briefings for Brexit, but I do remember the motive: to ensure that economic analyses contesting the prevailing anti-Brexit orthodoxy could be made public. This was my first ever venture into politics. If it has perhaps cooled a few acquaintanceships, it has made many friendships.

This book is an offshoot of that activity. It is a history: not neutral, but I trust rational and I hope fair. I am a historian of France (and, by marriage, a citizen of the Republic), and have spent most of my career writing and teaching about European history. This book reflects that background. Though primarily concerned with the well-being and future of Britain, I am also concerned for Europe, with which I have many close ties; indeed, the future of Europe and its peoples now worries me more than that of Britain.

Why take a historical approach, rather than simply analysing the political forces and economic interests of the present day? Because our relationship with Europe, our internal divisions, the EU's evolution and its present travails can only fully be understood as the interplay of many different beliefs about the past. These beliefs create conflicting understandings of the present, diverging expectations of the future, and divided loyalties and identities. The past, if carefully interrogated, helps to explain what is happening; but no outcome is predetermined by history. The past shapes our ideas and has created the circumstances in which we find ourselves, but it does not dictate how the story continues. Those who claim that history is on their side are abusing it: and the abuse of history is one of mankind's oldest cultural endeavours.

I ended the final chapter of *The English and Their History* by quoting G. K. Chesterton – 'But we are the people of England; and we have not spoken yet' – and I added that 'No one had the faintest idea what they might say.' This book attempts to explain what they have now said, and why. By retracing the long history of these islands' relationships with their close Continent and the wider world, and then examining the more recent history of our illusions and disillusions concerning the 'European project', I am not suggesting that any choice was or is inevitable: indeed, I argue the opposite. The turbulence of the last few years has stemmed from the uncertainty of the outcome. Societies, like individuals, are doomed to choose their futures – an unforgiving but exhilarating fate.

1. Set in a Silver Sea

> 'Notwithstanding we are insulars, we are either by our political or commercial interest connected with every power in Europe.'
>
> The Earl of Bute, secretary of state, 1762[1]

Geography comes before history. Islands cannot have the same history as continental plains. The United Kingdom is a European country, but not the same kind of European country as Germany, Poland, or Hungary. The close Continent is the mass towards which these islands gravitate, but which they rarely join. For most of the 150 centuries during which they have been inhabited, the mainland constituted their only connection. From across the narrow seas came opportunity and danger, civilization and barbarism. Seen from the other direction, the islands were – when they registered at all – places of mystery and oddity, on the edge, literally and culturally.

When they enter the record in the third century BC, it is through Continental eyes, those of explorers and traders venturing to the limits of the known world. Islanders no doubt ventured to the mainland, but made no mark on its written history. The next thirteen centuries saw a succession of invasions and conquests. The Romans, first under Julius Caesar, came, went and returned in AD 43 to stay. Our earliest national myth is Boadicea's bloody rebellion. Most of the archipelago was forcibly attached for three centuries to what became Latin Christian civilization, which left an indelible mark.

Yet that mark was almost effaced by peoples from the North, part of a great migration from beyond the empire – the 'barbarian invasions' – that shattered the Roman world and colonized its fragments. The islands were too remote to attract land invaders from the east, such as the Goths, Lombards and Franks, who eventually became the rulers of Iberia, Italy and Gaul. Instead, sea-borne raiders came. Warrior castes of 'Angles, Saxons and Jutes' (as Bede called them) transformed the culture of most of the islands, largely destroying or displacing Christianity, Latin, indigenous languages, and urban society and trade. For a time, they wrenched the islands towards the pagan cultures of the North. By the seventh century there were five main language groups, and the lowland areas were divided between several unstable kingdoms. Yet, remarkably, during the worst period of civilizational collapse and invasion, it was in the far reaches of the west and north of the islands that fragments of Christian culture survived and were cherished.

Here we see the primordial fact about the islands' history. Shakespeare's 'silver sea' is both highway and defence: mostly highway, sometimes defence. The sea is a natural barrier, by definition, but one that is easy to cross – unlike, for example, a great mountain range such as the Alps. Unless it is defended, the sea offers an open road. Hence, insularity had to be won the hard way,[2] and has only been secure during the last 250 years, sealed by Nelson at Trafalgar in 1805 – Hitler in 1940 quickly realized invasion was impossible. Until Nelson's time, the islands' history was one of innumerable raids and invasions, at least nine of which since the Norman Conquest have overthrown governments.[3]

The paganized, Germanized islands were eventually drawn back into the orbit of Rome and Gaul. Re-Christianization began when the Roman monk Augustine arrived in Kent in 597. The kingdom of Northumbria became a renowned Christian cultural hub. Educational centres such as York, Jarrow and Lindisfarne provided teachers and missionaries: Bede of Jarrow and Alcuin of York had European reputations. King Offa of Mercia was on cordial terms with the Frankish Emperor Charlemagne, who had managed by the early ninth century to re-create a semblance of the Roman Empire in the west. The Anglo-Saxons, fighting back against incessant Viking invasions between 793 and 937, which destroyed most of their kingdoms, managed to consolidate power in the south, in the kingdom of the West Saxons – Wessex. Alfred 'the Great' (who became king in 871) and his son and grandson, Edward and Æthelstan, became the first rulers, indeed the creators, of the kingdom of the English.

'Englalond' became a wealthy and respected, though peripheral, part of the Latin world, and its king was recognized as the leading ruler of the islands in 'an informal maritime empire',[4] in which the northern and western parts remained divided into predatory and unstable polities. The empire of Charlemagne was partly a model for the English kingdom. However, the final great upheavals were about to take place, the last aftershocks of the centuries of 'barbarian invasions'. First, in 1016, Knut of Denmark (King Canute) conquered England, making it during his lifetime part of a North Sea empire with Denmark and Norway. After his death, independence was restored during the lifetime of Edward the Confessor until the most famous year in British history, 1066. Another Scandinavian invasion was crushed at Stamford Bridge in September, ending for good the long period when the islands were primarily in a northern orbit. Only nineteen days later, William 'the Conqueror' defeated the English army at Hastings, killed King Harold, assumed the English crown, and forcibly created a new and different European connection with the powerful and autonomous dukedom of Normandy, and hence with France.

Thus began a new epoch in the history of the islands which lasted four centuries. It had profound effects throughout England and beyond. A new warrior class – at first about 8,000 men – annihilated the Anglo-Saxon nobility and almost monopolized power and wealth. They were part of what has been called a Frankish 'aristocratic diaspora' from the now fragmented Carolingian empire, which seized new domains from England to Palestine.[5] By 1350, twelve of the fifteen monarchies of the Latin world were ruled by descendants of the Franks.

English language, literature, art and architecture were ruthlessly eliminated. English lost its position as Europe's richest written vernacular, though its writers used their skills to create the first written literature in French. Power and wealth were concentrated in fewer hands, and the dominance of the king increased. The Anglo-Saxon kingdom had been rich, powerful and efficiently governed, with limited external ambitions. Post-Conquest monarchs kept its institutions and developed a Common Law, so-called as it applied to all throughout the country. They extended their power into the turbulent lands later called Wales, Ireland and Scotland, even though Scotland, under a Normanized aristocracy, remained politically independent – as of course to a considerable extent it still is. They used England's wealth for their own purposes of European power politics. Several (the last being Henry VIII) even fantasized about becoming Holy Roman Emperor, and made frequent promises (rarely fulfilled) to join Crusades against the Muslim powers in the Mediterranean; but from those epic struggles the faraway islanders generally kept clear.

On and off from 1170 to 1453, the French-speaking kings of England, who controlled first Normandy and later the huge duchy of Aquitaine, engaged in repeated struggles with the kings of France, up to half of whose nominal domains at times they controlled. The French, whenever they could, used the Scots, the Welsh and, later, the Irish against the English, and continued to do so as late as the 1790s. (Some might suspect they are trying again today.) In 1338 Edward III escalated the conflict by claiming the Crown of France – a claim maintained in practice until the 1540s, when Henry VIII made the last attempt to realize it, and symbolically until 1800. The English nearly succeeded after the victory of Agincourt in 1415, when Henry V of England was accepted as the heir to the throne of France. But they finally lost at the battle of Castillon in 1453. That disaster precipitated the ‘Wars of the Roses’ among the English royal dynasty and signalled a new epoch in European geopolitics. The idea of a unique relationship with France has surfaced repeatedly, whether as enemy or as ally. France is the only country since 1066 with which England or Britain has three times considered formal union: in the 1420s, in 1940, and in 1956.

During the four centuries following the Norman Conquest, England was a strong peripheral power, but never at the centre of European affairs politically or culturally. At different times, France, northern Italy and Germany were the focus of power and culture (as reflected, for example, in the French and Italian influences in the works of Chaucer and Shakespeare).

But not the British Isles. They, and particularly England, were suppliers of raw materials and purchasers of luxury goods. England was closely linked with the Low Countries and their wealthy textile industry, which used English wool. It was in Antwerp in 1338 that the claim to the French Crown was first proclaimed. The Low Countries' connection is another of the islands' long-term links with the Continent, and at times it became the most important – most crucially because it is from there that England can be most easily invaded. Protecting the Low Countries from a hostile takeover is something the islanders repeatedly fought for, most recently in 1793, 1914 and 1940.

Dramatic change came during the reigns of Henry VIII, Mary I and Elizabeth I, when England, and later Scotland and Wales, but – fatefully – not Ireland, underwent religious Reformation. The jurisdiction of the Papacy in England was explicitly rejected. The Act in Restraint of Appeals (1533) is often quoted: 'This realm of England is an empire' – that is, a fully independent sovereign. The Reformation led to more than a century of devastation across Europe, and split Latin Christendom permanently. The cultural and political divisions are still tangible across the Continent and in these islands too, where political loyalties still dimly (in Ireland not so dimly) shadow religious lines.

But the Reformation did not separate the islands from the Continent. For two centuries, it drew them more deeply in as allies or enemies of the great European Powers, the Habsburg Empire and France, and as defenders of the Protestant cause.[6] The cautious Elizabeth I gave financial or military support to Protestant rebels in Scotland, France and the Netherlands in the 1580s. The Spanish Armada failed in 1588 to transport an invading Spanish army from the Netherlands to England. Elizabeth was herself offered the crown of the newly independent Dutch provinces, which she prudently declined. When the Stuart king of Scotland, James VI, became king of England in 1603, a complex chapter of accidents began in which the islands descended into the bloodiest of the many civil wars in their history, which the eminent historian John Morrill has called 'the last of the European wars of religion'. An important element was disagreement about European policy: 'Puritans' wanted to join an anti-Catholic crusade. During a brief period of republican religious dictatorship, Oliver Cromwell failed to bring about a British-Dutch Protestant republic and then embarked on wars against both the Dutch and the Catholic Spanish. The restored Stuarts favoured Catholicism and closeness to the rising power of Louis XIV's France. The turbulence these policies caused ended in England and Wales – though not in Scotland or Ireland – when James II was deposed and the Three Crowns of England, Scotland and Ireland were jointly assumed in 1688 by the Calvinist ruler of the Netherlands, William of Orange, and his Protestant Stuart wife, Mary II.

This 'Glorious Revolution' was epoch-making politically, and it also introduced modern agricultural and financial methods from Holland. It did so at the cost of dragging the Three Kingdoms into an interminable series of wars against hegemonic France as an ally of the Dutch. The islands, thought a contemporary, had become 'the Cittadel . . . of Europe, where the Keys of her Libertys are deposited'.[7] After William's death in 1702, and then that of Queen Anne in 1714, the nearest Protestant heir to the throne, the electoral prince of Hanover, became King George I. This further added to Britain's

Continental commitments by linking it with a German state and giving it a stake in central European politics.

The deadly conflict with France – five of the eight bloodiest wars in world history[8] – has aptly been called 'the Second Hundred Years War', and it did not end until the victory of Waterloo in 1815. The consequences for Britain, Europe and indeed the world can hardly be overstated. The need for wartime unity led to political and religious compromise, the Bill of Rights (1689), the consolidation of the parliamentary system and the Union of England, Wales, Scotland (1707) and eventually Ireland (1800). The need for credit led to the emergence of the City of London as the world's main financial centre. The need for revenue to finance war led to the forceful pursuit of overseas markets and colonies. The new United Kingdom was rapidly transformed from 'European laughing stock to global great power',[9] and (roughly between 1750 and 1850) it became the first coal-powered industrial society.

Determining the proper international strategy for the United Kingdom aggravated the eighteenth-century political division between Whig and Tory. The Whigs, supporters of the 1688 Revolution and of the Protestant Succession of the Hanoverians, supported active involvement in European politics. The Tories, largely on grounds of cost, supported what was called a 'blue-water policy' of overseas trade and maritime power. Parallels with the present day have often been drawn.

Extra-European horizons opened for Britain, really for the first time. From the fifteenth century onward, Europe's chequered relations with the wider world had been pioneered by Portugal, Spain and Holland. England had lagged, merely acquiring Bombay and Tangier as part of Charles II's

Portuguese wife's dowry, grabbing a few Caribbean islands, and establishing agricultural settlements in North America, overshadowed by the French in Canada and Louisiana. Scotland had almost bankrupted itself by a colonial adventure in Central America in the 1690s – one of the reasons for embracing union with England. During the next century, Britain became a major participant in the 'triangular' Atlantic slave trade, supplying goods to African rulers in exchange for slaves, shipping the slaves to Spanish, French and Portuguese colonies and to their own, and then bringing back sugar and other tropical products to Europe. Spilling over from the struggles in Europe, a series of wars during the 1740s, 50s and 60s gradually made British power predominant in India and North America at the expense of the French, culminating in the Seven Years War (1756–63), which Churchill called the real first world war. The French got their revenge by helping thirteen of the American colonies to independence in the early 1780s, but Britain kept its quasi-monopoly of American trade. Thus was decided the future of the West and the world balance of power well into the twentieth century.

The islands attained a cultural prominence in Europe that they had never before enjoyed. In the 1720s, there began a lengthy vogue for their literature, fashions, ideas and institutions. Shakespeare (via French translation) became a name known across Europe, along with Isaac Newton, John Locke and, later, David Hume, Daniel Defoe and Adam Smith. For the first time, people began to learn the language, including even the king of France, Louis XVI. This reflected Britain's new wealth and military success, which culminated in the defeat of Napoleon. The Romantic period saw English and Scottish literature and art attain European status. The English language began to be used internationally. British political institutions were widely emulated: two-chamber parliaments, parliamentary control of the budget, ministerial responsibility, party organization, press freedom. British sports became the newest form of sociability, first for the upper classes and then the new urban masses on every continent.

These fundamental changes inevitably altered the United Kingdom's security strategy and its view of the world. For much of the Middle Ages, English and Scottish policy had revolved round English territorial possessions in France, with the Scots periodically members of an 'Auld Alliance' (1295) with the French. The Reformation changed the game: England and then Great Britain (as James VI and I called his kingdoms) felt that their security and basic liberties required them to resist the Continental hegemony of new Catholic powers, first the sprawling Habsburg Empire (Spain and Spanish America, much of Italy, much of Germany, and the Netherlands), and then Louis XIV's France. The new strategy was to aid those resisting these superpowers with money, ships and even troops, and to use diplomatic efforts to encourage coalitions against the hegemon.

Despite being among the smaller and weaker European states from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century, the British had advantages. Their island position gave a degree of protection as long as they could muster the naval strength to dominate the Channel and the North Sea – far from self-evident, as the French came uncomfortably close to invading England in 1715, 1745, 1779 and 1804, and were repeatedly able to land small forces in Scotland, Ireland and Wales. Britain's growing domestic economy and overseas trade, harnessed by a notably efficient taxation and credit system, gave it the money to fight, to subsidize less solvent allies, and eventually to build up its naval strength to a level of absolute superiority: ‘the largest, longest, most complex and expensive project ever undertaken by the British state and society.’[10] This strategy culminated in the wars against Revolutionary and Napoleonic France. Britain took part in seven coalitions against France between 1793 and 1815, and by the end was subsidizing the war effort of all its allies, including Prussia, Austria, Russia, Spain and Portugal. This gave the United Kingdom the ability to influence the post-war development of Europe as one of its guaranteeing powers: its aim was to preserve European peace after 1815 by co-operation among the Great Powers, marking a new and more peaceful phase in the history of the Continent.

During the nineteenth century, Britain’s involvement with the world beyond Europe accelerated. Its empire, in which the Scots and Irish were particularly active, continued to grow. Eventually (if briefly) it covered a quarter of the globe, made possible by the widespread fluidity and fragility of existing political systems. The islands’ population boomed, largely because wider prosperity meant earlier marriage: despite mass emigration, it doubled between 1811 and 1891. More food had to be imported, as did raw materials for the new industries that sustained living standards. Sir Robert Peel, prime minister between 1841 and 1846, regarded this as inevitable: he thought one ‘might on moral and social grounds prefer cornfields to cotton factories [but] our lot is cast, and we cannot recede’.[11] From the 1840s (under the pressure of a Europe-wide food shortage, devastating in Ireland) Britain adopted a policy of free trade, both as an economic necessity and as an idealistic mission to bring global peace and prosperity. The world entered the first age of globalization, centred on Britain’s