Diplomatic history, quipped G. M. Young, is simply the ‘record of what one clerk said to another.’ When it was first published thirty years ago, Paul Kennedy’s *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism* should have put an end to this hackneyed witticism. Kennedy’s account, with his extraordinary research in over sixty documentary collections, is indeed the record of what hundreds of clerks, ministers, politicians, bankers and editors said to each other in both London and Berlin. *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism* is not simply an examination of the machinations of the Foreign Office and the *Auswärtiges Amt*. Instead, it is a remarkably full accounting of the economic, social, and political changes in both Britain and Germany in the fifty-four year period before Great War. Kennedy’s work, however, is far more than a catalogue of characters or an index of change comparing Great Power statistics. The great achievement of *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism* is to treat domestic trends not as a distinct sphere separate from foreign relations, but rather to consider the internal and the external indivisible.

Any book that ends with the outbreak of the First World War necessarily forfeits the right to a suspenseful narrative. But the looming event too often draws authors into the trap of historical inevitability. Kennedy strongly resists this urge, careful never to suggest that any one event (until 1914) made an Anglo-German war a certainty. In a carefully organized text that balances narrative and analysis, Kennedy provides a detailed history of the shifting and complex views that British and German politicians, ministries, newspapers, and social organizations held of each other.

An examination of the 1860s provides no evidence that London or Berlin expected a conflict between their two states, but a hint that Britain was increasingly “touchy” about its place in the world. (26). The 1870s, an even less eventful period for the relationship, suggests that both sides – Gladstone and Disraeli, von Moltke and Bismarck – avoided dogmatic approaches to the Anglo-German relationship and saw potential benefit in using the other. Throughout these two decades, Kennedy writes, the possibility of an Anglo-German war went unimagined. Yet beneath the relative calm of
diplomatic relations, large changes in the relative economic power of both countries created irritants in the relationship and allowed war to become conceivable. (36)

The effects of the Great Depression of the late 19th Century spilled outside of the realm of economics and are critical to Kennedy’s examination. Although more pronounced in Germany, both countries suffered from “uncertainties, suspicions and demands” as a result of economic flux. A “virtual revolution” in Germany ended prospects of viable liberalism caused a further rift between the countries: Germany was now more than ever easily vilified as authoritarian, and Britons of any party were pilloried by the Germans as hopelessly liberal. A more tangible outcome of the depression, however, was an increasing German desire for colonial expansion (55-58, 167). In his analysis, Kennedy makes clear that the struggle for colonies was not a key determinant in the souring relationship; what it provided, however, was increased official irritation between the two capitals. Even worse, colonial expansion engendered a new breed of pressure groups that were increasingly conservative, imperialist, and chauvinistic. (102, 178) While these ‘gaps’ between British and German interests in the 1890s did not necessitate future conflict, they lessened the likelihood of the two states becoming closer friends.

By the 1890s, the colonial pressure groups, aided by jingoistic pressmen, were powerful enough to have real political impact in both countries. (214) In Germany, this public opinion was manipulated and husbanded by Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, anxious for money to build his new battle fleet. The Kaiser, even more thoroughly, sought to harness this rabid imperialism with his the image of the monarchy and to equate success in external policy with the strength of the monarchy. (209-214) Of course, the Kaiser’s equation has a negative corollary, and it is painfully obvious in Kennedy’s account that cooperating with the imperialistic pressure groups was akin to riding a tiger; only with hindsight do we know both men ended up inside. Kennedy rightly considers the actions of Tirpitz, von Bülow and the Kaiser as particularly clumsy and obtuse, often amplifying a message of German aggressiveness beyond their own convictions.

But even if some the German chauvinism was chutzpah, it did not go unnoticed in 1890s Britain and emerged in sharp relief during the Boer War at the turn of the century. For Britons, the anti-British German press and the strong language of Weltpolitik
emanating from Berlin were not weighed simply in the abstract. Instead, they fit within a larger and more frightening trend: the last decades of the century had been times of “global embarrassment” for Britain due to relative decline in colonial, naval and economic measures. (265) For a number of reasons, some quite unrelated to Germany, Britain was increasingly fearful of its world position, and was willing to make significant changes in its approach to its international policy.

For Kennedy, the developments of a changing Anglo-German relationship and a changing distribution of global power are both essential to the story. But each was made far more significant by their confluence. The increasingly belligerent noises emanating from Berlin coincided with a British sensitivity to anything that sounded like a threat to relative strength. Nothing, for London, was more telling of German intentions than its accelerated capital ship program. “The real reasons for the British estrangement from Germany in the years before 1914,” writes Kennedy, “lay in the North Sea and along the river Meuse.” (415) It was in this context that the reader must consider the fateful decisions taken in the first decades of the 20th century. And by the turn of the century, an Anglo-German war was conceivable in both capitals. (221,251) With Russia badly mauled in 1905, Britain became increasingly concerned that France might become dependent on Germany. This was unacceptable to the British press and officialdom: Whitehall cast aside its policy of isolation to “rediscover” London’s traditional continental balance-of-power strategy and eventually the “continental commitment.” (278, 426) As the preponderant power on the continent, and the one who’s European conquest would worst affect Britain, Germany was the first of the King’s enemies.

As might be evident from the above representation, and as Kennedy freely admits, more than 400 pages of *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism* is a deep study in the historical art of “splitting.” This strategy is part of Kennedy’s program to counter “sweeping generalizations and comparisons” made by contemporaries and later historians about the antagonism and the outbreak of war. (435) And this lengthy scrutiny is not, most definitely, the result of Kennedy’s inability to write succinctly. For in the final pages, Kennedy demonstrates that while a master of research and synthesis, he is also a master of concision. Carefully but quickly, Kennedy boils down his research in a
“lumping process” to discern the overall “balance of forces” in each country and their role in generating antagonism.

Long before 1914, Kennedy concludes, the “balance of forces” in both London and Berlin had come to define and perceive their “national interests” in terms that were mutually exclusive. It was the perception of a clash of interests, writes Kennedy, that was the decisive element in the antagonism, and this perception was shaped not only by strategic considerations but also by the press, pressure groups, and differences in political ideology. (410) Ultimately, nevertheless, the competing interests were the “manifestations of the relative shift in the economic power of these two countries between 1860 and 1914.” (410) “The most profound cause,” to reiterate, “was economic.” (464) The increase in Germany’s economic power and goals caused it to buck the global status quo, while Britain was willing to try its utmost to preserve it. This is rather grand “lumping,” of course, but “lumping” made possible by so much attention to detail in the balance of the book. Lumping” and “splitting” in one text enables Kennedy to draw a manageable conclusion from details that many would consider unmanageable; at the same time, his carefully nuanced narrative is the antidote to those would argue his elevation of economic causes as too terse an explanation for the events of over half a decade and their culmination in total war.