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"'Tis not the grapes of hanaan that repay,  
But the high faith that failed not on the way"

Class A. Term Mary Walker, & George Secondary School  
Bristol,  
The Imperial Conference, Past, Present and Future.

Introduction to the Commonwealth and the Dominions.

The reasons for the growth of the Imperial Conference.

The Conference and its work until the last Great War.

The influence of the Great War on Empire affairs.

Ireland gains her Dominion Status.

Dominion Status officially recorded in 1926.

The results of the Statute of Westminster.

Progress made at Ottawa.

Economical distress and recovery.

Problems of Defence, past, present, and future.

The effect of the Commonwealth on the future of the world.  
Conclusion.

"Here and here did England help me, - how can I help  
England?" say,

Whose turns as I, this evening, turn to God to  
praise and pray.

In such a spirit of humility, does Browning show us  
the sense of even greater partnership between the members of  
the British Commonwealth, which has still to be achieved.  
How has this amazing union of nations come into existence?  
How have the nations kept in agreement with one another? and  
many other such questions can be asked; but each will  
always include the development of the colonies into self-  
governing Dominions, and the growth of their independence.

After the middle of the last century a wave  
of pessimism swept over England, concerning the self-governing

colonies. The last remnants of material profits from them seemed to vanish, as first the Navigation Acts were repealed and later the special privileges given to colonial goods in the home market were abolished. To add weight to the descending scale the threat of impending wars, made the cost of the Imperial garrisons a heavier burden. The colonies from their standpoint resented interference in their newly gained responsibility. However even after 1867, when the Dominion of Canada was inaugurated, the Governor General still exercised some power under the Colonial Office, independently of Canadian officials, - Imperial troops were still kept there and the Canadian militia were under Imperial officers; in fact the Dominion had no international status and no voice in foreign affairs. When the Dominion of Canada was two years old, a colonial conference was suggested by the Royal Colonial Society. The proposal was badly received by the Colonial Office, although its intention was to afford an opportunity for discussion of problems of common interest.

Although this attempt at co-operation failed the seed had been sown from which a grand harvest was to be reaped. The first shoot showed when in celebration of the Jubilee of Queen Victoria, representatives of all types of colony, met in London. This opportunity was taken by the British ministers to consult them on matters of general concern. The main topic discussed was the question of Imperial Defence, resulting in Great Britain assuming responsibility for the Pacific Ocean. After this first step forward, for over twenty years discussions were restricted for the most part to such matters as cable communications, defence and preferential tariffs. Although these efforts to unite the Empire in a preferential tariff system were of little avail, because of the Free Trade of the United Kingdom. At the fourth

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of these conferences in 1902, after the Boer War, more definite attempts were made in favour of Imperial preference, and Canada demanded that Great Britain should adopt it.

In 1907 the conference decided that in future it should be designated "Imperial Conference"; that its president should be the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, rather than the Secretary of State for the Colonies, and that it should meet every four years. The British Prime Minister, the Secretary of State for the Dominions and the Prime Ministers of the Dominions constitute the membership of the Imperial Conference, with other members of the Commonwealth governments and the Governor of India. Although the decisions of the conference have no legal effect, they are always highly regarded by the respective governments; their authoritative character being derived from the fact that it is a conference of all the governments of ~~all~~ the Commonwealth. Therefore the participating governments, though under no legal obligation, are expected to do their utmost to give effect to the policies decided upon. Due to the triennial parliaments of Australia and New Zealand, any resulting reversal of policy is accepted as inevitable in the Commonwealth system of free co-operation. In that the "conference is in no sense an Imperial cabinet, for it is responsible to no parliament, and is invested with no executive authority whatever," this remarkable gathering is unique in the world's history. It shows that in matters affecting the Empire as a whole the British Dominions have as much say in the government, as has the Mother Country.

Since these conferences have been meeting at gradually lessening intervals, the scope of discussion has widened. Proposals have sometimes been made to give these conferences a constitutional status, and their decisions a binding effect, fortunately without result. For the

United, especially the Dominions feared that such a formal power might endanger each member's control over its own internal affairs, especially in the matter of finance. Thus the conferences have been regarded as purely advisory, keeping all the rulers of this widely scattered Empire in touch with one another's views. They have served to remove misunderstandings usually due to ignorance, and to suggest means of co-operation which no member of the Commonwealth need accept unless its own legislation approves.

This may seem a beautiful theoretical unity, but doubts may creep in, regarding its practical powers. However in 1911, with the alarming Dread Naught scheme, and the increasing German naval power, a conference was called. The Committee of Imperial Defence held secret discussions, and Sir J. Ward of New Zealand proposed an Imperial Parliament for defence in war and threatening dangers. Again the Dominions strongly objected, wishing to keep their autonomy, however it was decided that Great Britain should keep her colonies and Dominions fully informed about foreign affairs.

So it was that this threat of danger, brought the Empire into a much closer relationship than hitherto, and with the outbreak of war, in spite of the fact that Germany expected all British colonies to revolt, the spirit of loyal affection kept the self governing Dominions true to their Imperial Mother. In return for this tremendous effort to aid Britain, the British Government was pledged to give her Dominions a still larger place in the government of the empire, even to a voice in deciding the general outlines of its foreign policy and questions involving peace and war. So another conference was held in 1917 at the critical time before the last round up. To show that the increasing power of the Dominions was not merely empty talk, the Dominion Prime Ministers attended the War Cabinet and gave some useful assistance. It was at this Imperial War

Conference that Imperial preference was accepted by all parties including Great Britain, and it was decided that as soon as possible after the cessation of hostilities a special Imperial Conference should be held to deal with the question of the future constitutional relations with the self-governing parts of the Empire.

The Dominions and India were represented at the Peace Conference in 1918, through the British Empire Delegation, as well as their own rights. The Treaties were ratified and signed by the King in respect of each of the Dominions and of India. Thus the tremendous step had been taken, from which there was no turning back - independent representation at the Peace Conference, separate signature and ratification of the Treaties, and separate membership of the League of Nations. The Dominions had now entered the international society, and thus had attained an equal status with one another and with the United Kingdom in the British Commonwealth of Nations; and the position of India, who had also entered the League, although not self-governing, was recognised. Further liberty was given when in 1920 a proposal for a Canadian Minister in Washington was accepted, although no Canadian Minister was actually appointed until 1926.

Since the Imperial Conferences afford the principal opportunities for personal consultation between the prime ministers of the Commonwealth, they are seen to mark the stages in its evolution. Its work has been to provide the initiative to create new institutions, or to overhaul the old ones in accordance with further constitutional development, and to advise certain principles in the sphere of foreign policy. An outstanding example of the importance of its decisions on contemporary problems of foreign affairs, was the result of the Conference held in 1921, when on the insistence of

Mr. Meighen, the Canadian Prime Minister, supported by General Smuts, the Anglo-Japanese Alliance was denounced.

Further result of this conference, went in favour of Ireland. It was felt that no longer could her demand for autonomy go unsatisfied, yet Great Britain had no desire to part with her completely. However in 1922 the Irish Free State was founded with an equality of status with that of the other Dominions. Thus it was that at the conference of 1923 the Irish Free State was represented for the first time.

For various reasons, the special Imperial Conference on the constitutional relations, anticipated by the Imperial War Conference of 1917 was postponed. However in 1926 conditions combined to make it desirable to settle certain constitutional questions. The committee of the conference under Lord Balfour, made a careful study of the problems of Imperial relations. The present relations of the self-governing parts of the Empire with one another were defined in a formal report for the first time: "They are autonomous communities within the British Empire, equal in status, in no way subordinate to one another in any aspect of their Domestic or External affairs, though united by a common allegiance to the Crown, and freely associated as members of the British Commonwealth of Nations." Every Dominion now became the ruler of its own fate, and was not under any compulsion on any matter. So we find Dominion Status defined in the past, and at present, but not perhaps finally; for happily there is no finality in our living and growing constitution. There is nothing new in this definition; still less anything revolutionary; - it merely sums up existing facts. The report suggested further that any survivals of worn out customs which seemed to attach a "badge of inferiority" on the dominions, should be removed. The Governor-General for example, should act for the future purely as a

constitutional rules, not also as an agent of Downing Street. More over the custom of the Dominions in sending agents to represent their views in London should be reciprocated and equal legislative powers, it was advised, should be given to the Dominions in matters hitherto reserved to the Imperial Parliament. The committee then proposed that questions concerning the operation of Dominion legislation and the subject of Merchant Shipping Laws should be referred to conferences of experts.

The independence of the Dominions was furthered by the Statute of Westminster in 1931, when the Dominion governments were on an equality with the Home Parliament; the sole bond linking them, being the <sup>sovereignty</sup> ~~sovereignty~~ to the King, whose title became in 1927 "George VI, by the grace of God, of Great Britain, Ireland and the British Dominions beyond the seas King, Defender of the Faith, Emperor of India". The moment the King steps on to the soil of any one of the Dominions, he takes up the position of their King leaving his own Dominion ministers. Yet it might have been wiser if the Statute of Westminster had been a little more definite and made the British Empire indissoluble; at present its future is veiled. The subjects of this Commonwealth are held together, not by compacts of governments but by the affections and antecedents of millions of people.

When the conference met in 1932 at Ottawa its members had to fight the crisis which had come not only to the Commonwealth, but to the whole world, and they knew that their decisions would influence the economic prospects of all peoples of the world. The main interest was to bring the new protectionist policy of Great Britain into a fellowship with her Dominions and colonies, by giving preference to their commerce. The moves made at this conference were purely economical defence against a protectionist world. We find the Dominions impressing the necessity for this, upon Great Britain at every previous conference, and in 1932

they get the reward of half a century's agitation. Most of the colonies agreed to this plan, for a sheltered market was provided for tobacco from Nyasaland, sugar from Mauritius and the West Indies. Objections were raised from Ceylon and Malaya, but on the other hand Palestine went so far as to plead for preference for the United States, that her oranges might have a safe market. It was decided that while Imperial Preference would effectively shelter such produce as meat, canned fruit, dried fruit, tobacco, wine, and dairy produce, such commodities as wheat, and wool have a surplus that would be unprotected and find better markets in the outside world. It was gradually discovered that, especially in Australia and Great Britain, harm was forthcoming from this preferential system. Most of Australia's wool had to go to foreign markets where they the farmers suffered protectionist tariffs, and they also had to put up with the retaliation of the embittered nations towards the Imperial Preference. The wool growers felt restless under their burden, while they saw the wine, fruit and dairy farmers prospering under the system and feeling nothing of the foreign antagonism. On the other hand, with all the preferences and concessions, the Imperial market was not large enough for Great Britain to utilise all of her industrial energy.

Thus it was that in 1938 Australia and Great Britain decided that although they would assist each other in every possible way with preferential advantage, they could not risk jeopardising their foreign markets, when the Imperial Market failed to satisfy the energies of the people. So the self-sufficiency in the Empire was put aside for world trade once more.

The other main feature of discussion at these conferences is defence. In 1937 when the Empire's statesmen were all gathered together in London for the coronation of King George VI the problems of Imperial defence were

well to the fore, and it was agreed that the Dominions should do more than they had done in the past to share the tremendous burden of imperial defence. The real bulwark of the ~~empire~~ empire is the British Navy, and the immense cost of its maintenance was borne almost entirely by the body of taxpayers in the homeland. The words used in the Articles of War passed in parliament in 1749, applied very well to the subject of that conference. "It is upon the Navy, that under the providence of God, the wealth, prosperity, and the peace of these islands and of the Empire do mainly depend." For without the aid of ships, sailors and the sea, there would be no patches of red on coloured maps, to indicate where the Union Jack has been planted. The Imperial Defence Conferences of 1909 and 1911 formed plans for the land and sea forces of each part of the Empire, so that they might be combined into one Imperial Force. In 1923 a similar plan was agreed upon with regard to the air forces, although naturally uniformity in the type of aircraft and weapon used, would be ridiculous, with the rapid discoveries which are being made. This conference also advised that each part of the Commonwealth should bear the primary responsibility for its own local defence, and that adequate provision should be made, of naval bases and fuel depots, to safeguard the maritime communication of the Empire. It was decided that the minimum naval force should equal the strength of foreign naval power. The routes to the East were described as vital to the Empire, and such routes as through the Mediterranean to the Red Sea, and through the Indian Ocean, must be well defended. The sense and justice of these points were reaffirmed in the conference of 1926, when more fuelling stations were advised for the increasing air force.

The development of air power since the War has profoundly affected the problem of Imperial Defence. It has made Home Defence very necessary thus leaving distant parts of the Empire unprotected. To keep our air forces overseas, however small, means that adequate air bases, with their

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essential ground organisation, material, provisions and maintenance must all be provided, but by whom? This is an outstanding problem to be faced in the working out of Commonwealth Defence.

Again while these machines were rapidly being made, the factories doing <sup>over</sup> this work must have the necessary materials, so in the economic problem, more and more raw materials will have to be considered, as well as food which until now has been the main factor. This war has served to display the decreasing ability in modern warfare of the United Kingdom in protecting or providing defence for the Empire. This was especially the case in the Pacific area; and partly explains the Dominions urge to provide local defence. The vague arrangements for Imperial Defence may at the close of the present war, quicken into definite terms. At the beginning of this war the most definite term of defence was in the Simonstown agreement where the United Kingdom provided the navy and South Africa provided the base and shore defences. In future the Dominions may consider autonomy in matters of defence as essential: India in particular may tend to move in this direction as its self-government develops. It is most important, I think, that the Commonwealth should be definite about its foreign policy, that the pace of defence may be regulated by that factor.

Thus the Imperial Conference holds the provides the machinery for consultation, whereby the practical union of the Commonwealth is able to run smoothly. The discussions clear away all obstacles to economic, military and political co-operation. This is made more obvious today by the urgent necessity of co-operation against the common enemy.

We remember the picture of little Walter Raleigh listening to a sailor telling wonderful stories of his adventures on the Spanish Main; on the boy's face is the reflection of his dreams of the vast, glorious England, far over the seas which would grow and grow through

centuries. It has grown up new; our race has spread itself all over the world. It has grown so fast that a Federation of the British Dominions with the United Kingdom has ceased to be a practical policy; for as each Dominion grows older, its own individuality becomes apparent, and it is therefore more conscious of a separate nationalhood. This feeling of separation is strongest in the Boers and French Canadians. Yet why is the Commonwealth so closely bound together? What sanction keeps them together? There is no formal sanction to keep them together, when all parts are so free; free, indeed, to have the association tomorrow if they so desire. There can be no compelling force, short of civil war, which was tried once and is never likely to be tried again. Since then the policy of trust and confidence has been used; the faith which as Elgin says "when it is sincere is always catching." All the members of this Commonwealth have something to give one another and something to take; the Canadian gives courage and energy, the South African gives hints in wise and sane methods of political compromise, and the United Kingdom provides a home to which even French Canadians and Dutch South Africans turn with affection. "We are learning through this our Commonwealth that however violent our differences may be, they can and must be solved without recourse to the futility of war." We are learning instinctively to see the best side rather than the worst side of our sister Dominions - this spirit should help us to unite the world of the future in some such union. So let us join with Burns and say,

"You of an independent mind,  
With soul resolved, with soul resigned:  
Prepared Power's proudest frown to brave,  
Who wilt not be, nor have, a slave,  
Virtue alone who dost revere,  
Thy own reproach alone dost fear -  
Approach this shrine and worship here."

Books I have consulted.

The British Empire. - The Royal Institute of International Affairs.

Argument of Empire - W. K. Hancock.

The British Commonwealth of Nations. - H. Duncan Hall.

Federal and Unified Constitutions - A. P. Newton

Problems of Greater Britain - Sir Charles Dilke

The English People Overseas - A. W. Tilley.