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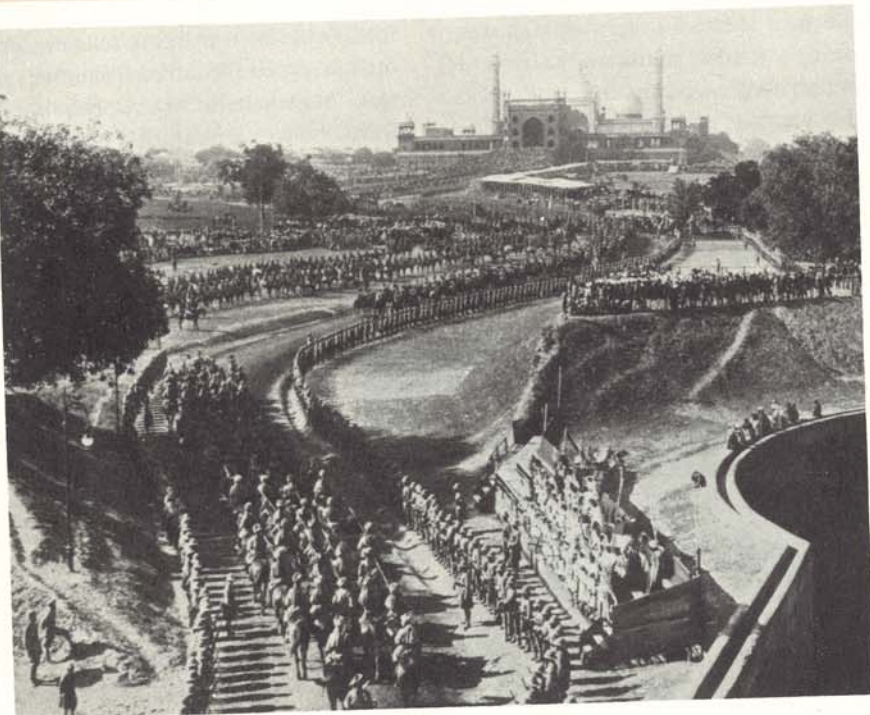
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High Noon for the Empire

In 1911, in Delhi, they staged a celebration that would have made Cecil B. De Mille blush

By DAVID F. PHILLIPS

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Indian subjects by the thousands prepare for Their Majesties' entrance to Delhi in 1911.

In 1911 in the old Mogul capital of Delhi, an extravaganza was held that can be called matchless. It was the coronation durbar of George V, king of England and emperor of India. Durbars—the gathering of chiefs to pay homage—were nothing new. Nawabs and samindars had held them for generations, and so had the British viceroys. In 1877, after Queen Victoria adopted the style and title of queen-empress of India, her viceroy, Lord Lytton, held a durbar in Delhi to proclaim her imperial sway. That durbar was the first imperial durbar, and the attendance of ruling princes from all over India was required. It was a very splendid occasion indeed.

When Edward VII succeeded his mother on the throne, another imperial

darbar was held, on New Year's Day, 1903. Known as Lord Curzon's durbar, it was a far more magnificent occasion than Lord Lytton's, for Lord Curzon was aware of the importance of pomp and spectacle in governing India. "You will never rule the East," he said in 1904, "except through the heart."

Six years later, George V ascended the throne. As duke of York and, later, Prince of Wales, he had traveled extensively and had a definite idea of the meaning of the imperial crown. He had been deeply impressed by his visit to India in 1905-06, and one of his first royal decisions was to return to India for a coronation durbar. The king believed his visit would "tend to allay unrest and, I am sorry to say, seditious spirit, which unfortunately exist in some parts of

India." The cabinet approved the plan, and it was formally announced in England and India on March 23, 1911:

... WHEREAS it is OUR wish and desire OURSELVES to make known to all OUR loving subjects within OUR Indian Dominions that the said Solemnity [George's coronation] has been so celebrated, and to call to OUR Presence OUR Governors, Lieutenant-Governors, and other of OUR Officers, the Princes, Chiefs, and Nobles of the Native States under OUR Protection, and the Representatives of all the Provinces of OUR Indian Empire;

NOW WE do, by this OUR Royal Proclamation, declare OUR Royal intention to hold at Delhi on the twelfth day of December, one thousand nine hundred and eleven, an Imperial Durbar for the purpose of making known the said Solemnity of OUR Coronation: and WE do hereby charge and command OUR Right trusty and well-beloved Counsellor Charles, Baron Hardinge of Penshurst, OUR Viceroy and Governor-General of India, to take all necessary measures in that behalf. . . .

God save the King-Emperor.

King George had originally intended to crown himself at Delhi. Traditionally, kings are crowned by prelates, but emperors are kings of kings and crown themselves. It was pointed out, however, that this would set an unfortunate precedent. King George was emperor of India by law; therefore, no Indian coronation was required. If George was crowned separately in India, it would confuse the constitutional issue; and conceivably, each succeeding monarch of England might have to journey to Delhi to be crowned before being accepted as the legitimate ruler.

Moreover, since the king was emperor of India only by virtue of being king of England, a second coronation would necessitate a full-dress Church of England consecration service presided over by the archbishop of Canterbury (or so said the archbishop). Since it would be foolish to perform a Christian church service in Hindu-Moslem India—hardly the way to bring the king's Indian subjects closer to him—the whole idea was dropped.

But something was needed, and a compromise was reached: instead of crowning himself emperor, the king would appear, surrounded by imperial pomp and pageantry, and announce that he was already emperor by virtue of

his coronation in England. The king would, moreover, appear at the durbar wearing the crown.

But which crown? The crown of India is the crown of England, but absolutely no one, not even the king, is allowed to take the crown out of the realm. A new crown would have to be made, and the question arose as to who should pay for it. The king was unwilling to pay for it himself; in any case, that would hardly have been seemly. It was still less appropriate for the money to come from the British treasury. Another suggestion, that it be paid for out of subscriptions raised in British India, was immediately vetoed on the grounds that it would be undignified for the king "to send round to collect money" for his own crown, and that it would be a catastrophe if the subscription failed to raise the required amount. It was finally decided that the crown would be paid for out of Indian government revenue.

But what should be done with the crown after the durbar was over? The original idea was to leave it in India, but a physical symbol of Indian sovereignty was a dangerous thing to have lying around; should it be stolen, there might be a real crisis of legitimacy. So the decision was made: the king would take the crown with him to India, wear it there, and bring it back to England to be placed in the Tower of London.

The king and queen left Buckingham Palace on the morning of November 11, 1911. They rode in an open landau through the streets of London to Victoria Station, where a "brilliant throng of the highest in the land" was present to see them off. At Portsmouth they boarded the newest and finest ship of the P&O, the H.M.S. *Medina*, which had been taken over by the Admiralty as a royal yacht.

After ceremonial visits at Gibraltar, Port Said, and Aden, the *Medina* arrived in Bombay on December 2 at the head of a squadron of four enormous cruisers. All the ships in the harbor flew a full complement of flags; the emperor's ship, in token of His Majesty's presence on board, carried the Admiralty flag at the fore, the royal standard at the main, and the Union Jack at the mizzen.

When the *Medina* dropped anchor, an imperial salute of 101 guns was fired; there would be many more of them over the next month. The governor-general came on board, as did other dignitaries of high estate. There was much saluting and piping, and many uniforms and flags and bands and helmet plumes.

Their Majesties left the *Medina* in the royal launch, while the guns of the harbor presented yet another imperial salute. The launch passed through a line of Bombay patrol boats, which saluted with raised oars, and finally it reached the pier. The emperor, wearing the white uniform of an admiral of the fleet, the ribbon of the Star of India, and the stars of the Orders of the Garter and the Indian Empire, ascended the steps and was greeted by the governor-general in the white dress uniform (and helmet plumes) of the Indian political service. This took place in the so-called Gateway to India, a giant pavilion constructed for the occasion with a high dome and golden minarets and an archway modeled after the ones used by the conquering kings of Assyria. After the greeting, the emperor proceeded to the throne pavilion along a red carpet—past lines of British and Indian troops in full dress, between rows of white columns each surmounted by a golden lion, and past a huge flagstaff with the royal standard. Attendants carried the red-and-gold *chattr* (imperial state umbrella) and the *suraj-mukhi* (imperial fan bearing the face of the sun), signaling the progress of the sovereign among all the white uniforms.

The throne pavilion was white and gold, with a canopy of royal blue silk. The thrones, of gilded teakwood nine

feet high bearing the royal arms, the imperial crown, the Star of India, the lion and the unicorn, and other emblems of royal and imperial state, faced an amphitheatre seating three thousand people. Everywhere there were soldiers and people and flowers, silks and flags and colors of every description. A loyal address was offered, and presented in an elaborate silver casket. The emperor made his response. Then carriages were brought up, and the state progress through Bombay began. Three days of festivities followed, and finally, on December 5, the emperor boarded a train for Delhi.

The state entry into Delhi was intended to be a spectacular show, and it was. On the morning of December 7 the imperial train arrived in Salimgarh, an ancient fortress incorporated into the palace of Shah Jahan. The emperor stepped off, the royal standard rose above the Delhi gate of the fort, and the guns began another 101-gun imperial salute: first, 34 guns, then a *feu de joie* fired in sequence by the troops lining each side of the five-mile procession route to the imperial pavilion, then 33 more guns and another ten-mile *feu de joie*, and finally 34 more guns, another *feu de joie*, and the national anthem. The emperor had arrived.

A colorful pavilion with golden chairs of state had been erected below the red walls of Shah Jahan's palace. On the six-hundred-foot-long platform were the governor-general and other dignitaries in full uniform; the steps were lined by lancers, members of the Company of Gentlemen at Arms and the Royal Company of Archers, whom His Imperial Majesty had especially requested to be present. There were more

soldiers, detachments from dozens of British and Indian units, and then two heralds in tabards bearing the royal coat of arms, one British (with a golden scepter) and one Indian (with a gold and ebony baton). They were seated on white horses, as were twenty-four trumpeters, dressed in cloth of gold, with banderoles of the royal arms on their silver trumpets (the drummer was on a black horse, with his white and gold drums carried on either side).



King George and Queen Mary accept the adulation of the masses at a huge garden party in Shah Jahan's palace in Delhi's Red Fort.

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The British trumpeters wore silver helmets; the Indians wore puggrees of pure gold.

The ruling princes and officials of the empire were received formally by the emperor and empress. Then on to another great pavilion where, on golden thrones surrounded by *chattr*s, *suraj-mukhis*, *morchals* (gold-encased peacock feathers), and *chanwars* (gold-handled yak tails), Their Majesties accepted the reverence of the massed rulers of India.

Time then for the state entry along a five-mile route lined with soldiers of every description in uniforms of every color. First there came the governors of the eight provinces of British India: the chief commissioner of the Central Provinces; the lieutenant-governors of the United Provinces, of Eastern Bengal and Assam, of Burma, Bengal, and the Punjab; and the governors of Madras and Bombay. They were followed by army units and high-ranking officers of His Imperial Majesty's Indian army. Then came heralds and state trumpeters, more army units, the military household of the emperor (including two maharajahs and one nawab), the governor-general's bodyguard (the senior unit of the Indian army, formed for Lord Hastings in 1777), the household cavalry, Life Guards, and Horse Guards, the commander in chief, the duke of Teck, and the personal staff of the emperor.

But where was the emperor? He was

Illustrated London News, JANUARY 25, 1903



An exotically garbed chief of Burma makes his obeisance before the emperor and empress. Virtually every prince, potentate, and nawab of India—including the eight splendidly arrayed rulers below—appeared at the ceremony and did homage to the British monarchs.

there, of course, in the uniform of a field marshal, but no one saw him. The empress, with her coach-and-six, her postilions and two state umbrellas and *suraj-mukhi*, was visible and obvious. But the emperor went unnoticed, and the crowd decided he wasn't there. He should, of course, have ridden an elephant. Lord Curzon had ridden one at the durbar of 1903; the Moguls had ridden elephants; and an Indian state elephant, painted and gilded and wearing a caparison of velvet and pearls and bearing an opulent howdah surmounted by a red-and-gold umbrella, is not likely to be overlooked. But the emperor had refused to ride an elephant because he wanted to be as close as possible to the people. He achieved that goal so successfully that he was mistaken for just

another general, and the dramatic center of the procession fell a bit flat.

Not all was lost, however, since there was much more of the procession to be seen. After the empress and more coaches, and the Imperial Cadet Corps and more army units, came the princes and feudatories.

Every ruling prince of the Indian Empire was present (except those attending the emperor and the nawab of Tonk, who was sick). There were 161 of them in all—each with his *chanwars* and *morchals* and flabella and mace bearers and bodyguards in chain-and-mail armor and riflemen with their ancient matchlocks and state

swords and state umbrellas and drums and trumpets and battle axes and banners and every other symbol of power and sovereignty that hundreds of years of Asian history had devised.

The maharajah of Patiala, for example, was preceded by ten horses caparisoned in gold and silver. Then came halberdiers with *suraj-mukhis*, *chobdars* with gold and silver batons, horse-borne drums warning of the approach of the maharajah, a banner of state presented to him by Queen Victoria, and finally, the maharajah in a gold and silver coach escorted by a detachment of the Patiala Imperial Service Lancers. The nawab of Bahawalpur brought camels. Shan chiefs brought a hundred retainers in Chinese costume bearing spears, umbrellas, dahs, and

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ceremonial weapons. The maharajah of Orchha had a gold and silver palanquin and bearers carrying water from the Ganges. The rajah of Chamba had a detachment of Gaddi, local shepherd tribesmen playing native instruments. The maharajah of Sikkim brought warriors whose hair was braided about their waists. The sawbwa of Hsipaw wore a gold hat shaped like a pagoda. The maharajah of Travancore wore a robe of purple velvet edged with gold and a jeweled turban with bird-of-paradise plumes. And so it went, for 161 rulers and their retinues—all of them riding in the train of the emperor of India.

The emperor arrived at the imperial pavilion preceded by the customary artillery salvos, fanfares from the silver trumpets of the state trumpeters, and, at the moment of his actual arrival, the national anthem. The vice president of the legislative council approached the dais between two imperial mace bearers and presented an obsequious address of welcome. The emperor responded with a statement of his own. There were cheers, more fanfares, the national anthem again, and then the emperor descended to his camp.

The imperial encampment was a gigantic complex, a tent city that housed a quarter of a million people, not only in safety but in many cases splendor. It covered forty-five square miles, more than twice the area of Manhattan.

There were 475 separate camps—the emperor's camp alone covered 72 acres, had more than two thousand tents within its boundaries, and housed 2,140 people. The size of the other camps

depended on the rank of the chief involved; those of the native princes were limited to 10,000 to 25,000 square yards each and housed from 100 to 500 attendants. Military camps varied according to the size of the detachments billeted there, but they too were substantial. In addition there were the camps of the provincial governors, camps for the governor-general and other dignitaries, and camps for the police, the Foreign Office, and the massed bands. There were stables, a central post office, railways, a market—everything necessary to support an instant imperial capital of 250,000 people.

A few statistics will illustrate the extent and complexity of the encampment. Forty-four miles of railway line were constructed, as well as a freight yard, 64 level crossings, 14 bridges, 29 fully equipped railway stations, 29 miles of siding, 10 miles of narrow-gauge railway with 19 small stations. Within four days 190 special trains and 256 regular trains converged on the imperial encampment; 75,000,000 pounds of goods and 100,000 parcels were delivered.

There were also 2,832 miles of telephone line and 1,000 miles of telegraph line; a main post office with 25 substations in which 700 people handled 5,250,000 pieces of mail; six major hospitals and a dispensary, and a veterinary hospital for the thousands and thousands of animals. There were 52 miles of water mains and 65 miles of distribution pipes to provide three million gallons of water a day for people, and half a million gallons an hour for the animals. A

dairy with 2,000 milch cows and 500 workers produced 550,000 pounds of milk, 60,000 pounds of butter, and 12,000 pounds of cream during the nine-day stay. Animals in the encampment consumed almost two billion pounds of fodder. There was a market subject to rigid sanitary regulations, established in an attempt to control both contamination and prices, and native bazaars in every camp. And so on and so on. With or without the elephant, no one could fault the imperial style of George's encampment.

Their Majesties arrived at the camp on December 7, 1911, five days before the durbar. The intervening time was fully occupied. Each of the ruling chiefs was received by the emperor in the throne room of his pavilion. Those chiefs entitled to a return visit were visited by the governor-general. The empress received the ladies of high estate, and was presented, in true imperial fashion, with jewels. There was a state church service, an elaborate presentation of colors, a polo tournament, and much entertaining and dining and receiving.

The durbar itself, on Tuesday, December 12, 1911, was held in a gigantic amphitheatre. Public stands formed a vast semicircle in front and stands for the princes and notables formed a smaller semicircle behind. A series of narrowing platforms stood in the center of this vast area. The first was an octagonal platform 200 feet across. The second platform was of marble 81 feet square and 7 feet high, decorated with lotuses, a balustrade, and a turret at each corner. The third was also of white marble, and



ORCHHA



MAHARAJA OF BUNDI



NAWAB OF BAHAWALPUR



MAHARAJAH OF BIKANER



BEGUM OF BHOPAL

the fourth, 21 feet square, was covered with cloth of gold. Above that was the fifth platform, 8 feet square and a full 15 feet above the ground. On a golden carpet sat the two gilded imperial thrones. Suspended over the thrones was a rich red-and-gold canopy; the roof of the pavilion was bordered with crimson and gold velvet and bore five domes, all of gold. A causeway connected this pavilion to a much lower one, the homage pavilion.

The public stands were packed with thousands of people dressed in all manner of styles and colors. The stands of the princes and notables were also full: the first row was reserved for chiefs rating salutes of fifteen guns and more, the second row for those rating fewer than fifteen guns, and the third row for those chieftains who rated no guns at all. Everywhere there were soldiers, approximately fifty thousand in all, and massed bands of more than sixteen hundred musicians.

The veterans entered and marched to their assigned seats to the strains of "See, the Conquering Hero Comes." Then everyone rose, and the band played "Auld Lang Syne." A bugler announced the entry of the governor-general's procession. The band played the march from *Scipio*. Twenty minutes passed, and then the vanguard of the imperial procession appeared. Army units were first, as always, and then the governor-general's bodyguard, members of the household cavalry, and the imperial carriage, drawn by four bay horses. The emperor and empress wore their purple, gold, and ermine imperial robes of state (the emperor's robe was eighteen feet long). The emperor wore

his crown, set with enormous sapphires, rubies, emeralds, and hundreds of sparkling diamonds. More military units followed.

When the imperial carriage entered the amphitheatre, a 101-gun salute began. The carriage proceeded slowly along one side of the public stands. As it passed, the troops presented arms and lowered their colors to the dust. At the foot of the homage pavilion, the emperor and empress descended from the carriage. The members of the household cavalry took up their positions on the outer sides of the homage pavilion, where the governor-general waited at the foot of the steps.

As the emperor and empress finally mounted the steps, the royal standard was unfurled, the troops presented arms, and the national anthem was played. The emperor and empress ascended the steps, turned, bowed to the assembled company, and sat down on their golden chairs of state. The pages of honor, in varied coats of white and gold adorned with diamond badges and jeweled daggers, arranged themselves gracefully on the steps. Disposed in various positions behind them were the royal entourage and the symbols of George's imperial dominion. The emperor commanded the master of ceremonies to open the *darbar*. There were flourishes and drum rolls, and then the emperor and empress rose from their seats. The one hundred thousand people present rose, too, and the emperor began to speak in a high, clear voice:

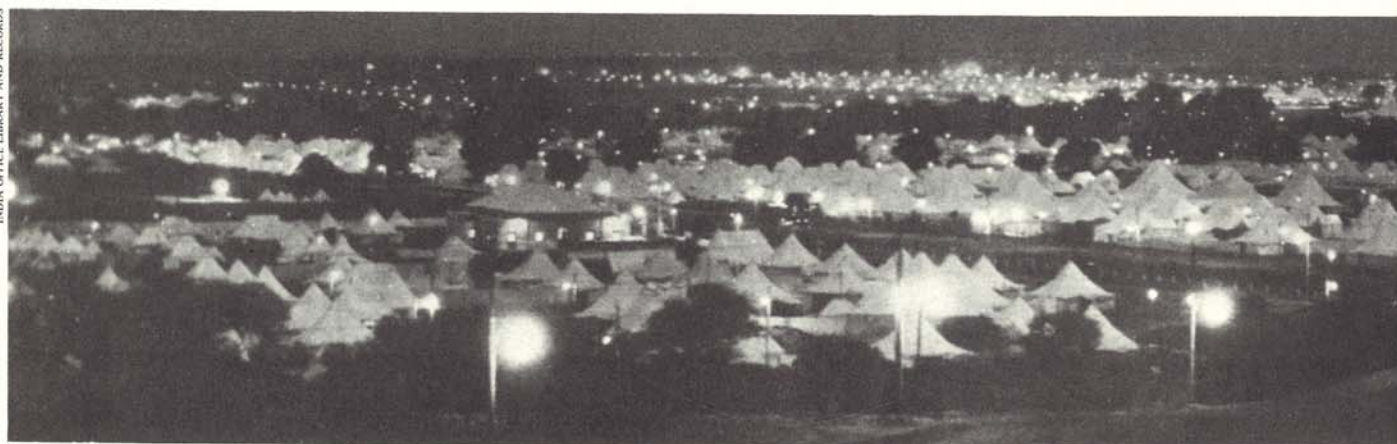
It is with genuine feelings of thankfulness and satisfaction that I stand here today among you. . . . It is a sincere pleasure and gratification to myself and the Queen-

Empress to behold this vast assemblage and in it my Governors and trusty officials, my great Princes, the representatives of the peoples, and deputations from the military forces of my Indian dominions. I shall receive in person with heartfelt satisfaction the homage and allegiance which they loyally desire to render. I am deeply impressed with the thought that a spirit of sympathy and affectionate goodwill unites Princes and people with me on this historic occasion. . . . To all present, feudatories and subjects, I tender our loving greeting.

The emperor and empress then resumed their seats, and the homage began. First the governor-general approached the throne and kissed the emperor's hand. Then came the executive council, the ruling princes, the judiciary of Bengal, in robes and wigs, the legislative council of India, and the governors of each of the eight divisions of British India, attended by members of their councils, their judiciaries, and ruling princes of their areas.

Homage was done in various forms according to custom. The maharajah Holkar of Indore, for example, simply bowed, but the maharajah of Jaipur laid his sword on the steps of the throne and salaamed to the emperor and empress in turn. The maharajah of Panna kept his sword in his left hand, but salaamed with his right; the nawab of Janjira did the same, but did it three times. And so it went for forty-five minutes, while the 335 representatives of the peoples of India made obeisance to the sovereignty of the emperor and his consort and the band played suitably stately marches from European operas.

When it was over, the emperor and



A panoramic view of the encampment at Delhi: "The spectacle presented at night by the camp area . . . was remarkable and very beautiful."

empress rose and walked hand in hand around the base of the throne platform. They ascended the twenty-six steps to the summit and stood there for a moment before their golden thrones. They were now in the center of the amphitheatre, fifteen feet in the air, silhouetted against the Indian sky. It was a highly charged moment, and one whose significance could hardly be misunderstood. Then they were seated, and the trumpeters of the massed bands issued a trumpet blast to summon the heralds. The heralds entered on white horses. At the command of the emperor, the Delhi herald stood in his stirrups and read, from the satin scroll printed in gold, a proclamation assuring George's Indian subjects of "the deep affection with which WE regard OUR Indian Empire, the welfare and prosperity of which are and ever will be OUR constant concern." The assistant herald then read the same proclamation in Urdu. More trumpet fanfare. The national anthem was played by the sixteen hundred musicians in the massed bands. A hundred thousand people rose; fifty thousand troops presented arms. Thirty-four salvos of artillery from the north, a ten-mile *feu de joie*, six bars of the national anthem, 33 more salvos from the west, another *feu de joie*, six more bars of the national anthem, 34 more salvos from the east, another *feu de joie*, and the whole anthem once more.

Then more trumpet flourishes, and the Delhi herald called for three cheers for the emperor. Cheers were given. The assistant Delhi herald called for three cheers for the empress. Cheers were given. Their Majesties returned to the homage pavilion. More fanfares. Exit

heralds. End of durbar . . . almost. The emperor rose again and spoke:

We are pleased to announce to our people that . . . We have decided upon the transfer of the Seat of the Government of India from Calcutta to the ancient Capital of Delhi, and simultaneously, and as a consequence of that transfer, the creation at as early a date as possible of a Governorship for the Presidency of Bengal, of a new Lieutenant-Governorship in Council administering the areas of Behar, Chota Nagpur and Orissa, and of a Chief Commissionership of Assam, with such administrative changes and redistribution of boundaries as our Governor-General in Council, with the approval of our Secretary of State for India in Council, may in due course determine.

These announcements were quite unexpected. The moving of the capital had an important impact on the politics and society of India—of Calcutta society in particular—and required that a new city be built at Delhi. The new administrative divisions reversed the unpopular partition of Bengal made by Lord Curzon. It was a highly dramatic moment.

With that, the master of ceremonies was commanded to close the durbar. Everyone rose again. The national anthem was played, and the procession descended from the pavilion. It proceeded around the other side of the semicircle of the public stands and out of the amphitheatre in precisely symmetrical fashion. Exit the emperor, exit the governor-general, exit the notables.

Then the people poured down from the stands and did the nonviolent Indian equivalent of tearing up the goal posts. They prostrated themselves before the thrones and rubbed their heads with the

earth the emperor had trod upon; they reached up to touch the fringes of the carpets on which the emperor had stood. And then one hundred thousand people passed silently before the empty throne of the emperor of India.

And that was the coronation durbar of 1911. It is difficult to evaluate its effects. In historical terms, they were small. There was some increase in loyalty to the raj and some diminution of "unrest and sedition"; those who knew him said the effect on King George himself was profound. But he is gone now, and so is the raj.

The most important thing about the durbar is that we remember it. If there was a high noon of empire, it was December 12, 1911. In a few years that high sun would be eclipsed by World War I, and from then on nothing would be the same. There would be only two more emperors of India: one was not even crowned, and the second was deposed after yet another war. The overseas empire has been reduced to a mixed and miscellaneous collection of islands and a great many glorious and misunderstood memories. England itself is in desperate straits, and glorious memories do not serve to heat the house or feed the children. But to those who take pleasure in the details of great ceremonies, who are amazed by the trappings of personal sovereignty, and who care about the history of the British Empire, the durbar of 1911 has a certain old snapshot, bitter-sweet quality. It was the best of all possible durbars and it was the last.

David F. Phillips currently teaches in Taiwan. This article was adapted from a longer, unpublished work on the durbar.



utiful, the twinkling lines of myriad lights stretching far in all directions, and producing the effect of some enormous pattern arranged on a symmetric scheme."