In recent years, the topic of future war literature, that being science fiction literature with a focus on wars to come, has become increasingly popular. English literature scholars, historians, and defence personnel have all taken turns employing the genre in various way. Their explorations include efforts to have a deeper understanding of attitudes toward war; to consider the utility of future thinking in preparing the mind for solving defence problems; and, to better understand the relationship between fictional writing, war scares, and defence policy. It is to the third area that David Morgan-Owen turns.

In “Scares, Panics, and Strategy,” Morgan-Owen uses invasion as a lens to explore “…the ways in which the growth of mass politics from the 1870s onwards affected the discussion and formation of strategy in Britain” (443). Several scholars have examined how and why individuals in this period employed invasion scenarios to advocate for a particular future (or defence policy). Now, with Morgan-Owen’s insightful contribution, historians have a better understanding of the relationship between strategy formulation and public opinion.

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including “the separation between governmental decision-making and popular pressure” (447). There are several strengths to both Morgan-Owen’s argument and approach.

First, in examining this relationship Morgan-Owen helpfully contextualizes the work of the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID), a body established in 1904 to investigating Britain’s military strategy. Morgan-Owen demonstrates how the CID’s unwillingness to share findings with the wider public in turn limited its impact on public opinion. While this is not the first investigation of the CID’s role in invasion scenarios during the Edwardian period, Morgan-Owen offers a different perspective of the relationship between the CID and public opinion. Typically other historians have examined how the CID was pressured to investigate the possibility of a German invasion of the British isles during a 1909 invasion scare, whereas Morgan-Owen considers how the CID influenced public opinion (or not).³

Second, Morgan-Owen carefully crafts his argument by distinguishing between ‘public opinion’ (a ‘relatively narrow stratum of society’) and ‘the masses’ (450). This is an important distinction for a study of this nature and builds on his earlier work on this topic.⁴ By taking a nuanced approach, he challenges historians to go beyond drawing a causal relationship between invasion scares and the shaping of defence policy (one that relies on the perceived impact of public opinion on politicians). He considers how “…a closer examination of the role of invasion narratives in contemporary politics does not support the notion that dramatizing the threat of invasion was a valuable electoral strategy” (446). Morgan-Owen supports this claim with evidence from Unionist campaigning providing an example of an exciting way to approach this topic matter.

Third, while historians have examined motivations behind these scare scenarios, Morgan-Owen makes the important and astute observation that “(e)ven if public discussion succeeded in highlighting a particular vulnerability or concern to the Cabinet, there was no guarantee of what policy response might be forthcoming” (448). He makes a strong case that raising and gaining attention for a particular defence issue was one thing, but that working to an effective outcome was something altogether different. In doing so he demonstrates the British government’s real concern over the potential of both a public ‘panic’ and a potential German attack on British shores (452).

Fourth, in the article’s greatest contribution to contemporary literature on the topic, he establishes how politicians’ perspectives of public opinion actually “…limited the parameters within which the two services, or the CID, could effectively shape strategy” (453). The examples he uses—such as the building of battle cruisers as qualitative strength for the fleet and how Erskine Childers’ fictional account of a potential German invasion of Britain (Riddle of the Sands) highlighted the need for a naval base in the North Sea—makes for a convincing argument.³ His use of nostalgic memoirs (from the post-1914 period) of figures such as Vice-Admiral Philip Colomb and Charles à Court Repington also works well.

The author brings a fresh perspective to this topic by successfully demonstrating how the consensus on public opinion limited the defence environment in which the British Army and Navy operated. The key point here is that “(t)his had a series of follow-on implications for British strategic planning, and contributed to some of the principal tensions that occupied defence planners before 1914” (456). Through this approach, he demonstrates the ways in which a public understanding of war mattered, a subject that has alluded many historians.

Fifth, for those interested in the glorification of the offensive military strategy and its prominence in military thinking prior to the First World War (the cult of the offensive), Morgan-Owen offers insight into the

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³ McCrae, Strategy and Science Fiction; Morris, The Scaremonger; Ryan, “The Invasion Controversy”.
relationship between liberal ideology and military thought. He argues that liberal ideology was compatible
with militaristic measures, and that liberal ideology held a place in military thought (457).

The article does not offer significant information about the motivation behind these invasion scenarios, nor
details about invasion literature. Morgan-Owen also understandably leaves the impact that British concepts of
race, national efficiency, and social Darwinism had on defence policy to others. Overall, this article takes a
well-trodden subject matter and offers something new by unpacking the complicated relationship between
mass politics and defence policy.

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6 W.J. Reader, *At Duty’s Call: A Study in Obsolete Patriotism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988);