Outside Buckingham Palace in London, a celebratory vision of the ‘British world’ is embodied in stone. On a central pedestal, a venerable Queen Victoria resides on her imperial throne, flanked by statues of Truth and Justice. A winged Victory, together with figures of Courage and Constancy, rises above, while the reverse of the pedestal displays Motherhood in the tender image of a seated woman – a youthful Victoria, perhaps? – sheltering three infants. Four bronze lions (a gift from New Zealand) stand guard at Victoria’s feet, alongside Naval and Military Power, in muscular yet effortless repose, and associated fountains and reservoirs. Across the water, some distance beyond, a series of concentric gates and allegorical statues by British sculptors depict imperial dominions. These outlying figures are all notably youthful, the Australia statues especially so. Animals accompanying each national child further emphasize the apparent rawness of the imperial offspring. Canada nurses a seal and a bulging net of fish, South Africa tackles an ostrich and monkey, West Africa escorts a cheetah and Australia coaxes a large ram and kangaroo. Such associations contrast with the stateliness and settled bearing of Victoria and her immediate companions, whom the callow youths presumably hope to emulate. Forever petrified as children, and positioned to face their ‘Mother Queen’, the dominions orbit the imperatrix.

The Victoria Memorial, completed in honour of the late Queen between 1902 and 1924, tells us a good deal about how Britain imagined its empire in an era of imperial power. Notions of core and periphery are prevalent; the imperial family is seen to exemplify a host of ideals; hierarchies of authority, age and deference suffuse the whole enterprise; whiteness is cherished. Adding flesh and bone to such imperial conceptions, this book is about the way childhood and youth were lived and constructed across the British world from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century. It aims to make a timely intervention into two strands of history hitherto seldom connected. First, the book expands understandings of the British world by considering the position within this global network of young subjects in the making. Second, it contributes to the history of childhood, which in
turn reveals much about broader social attitudes, institutions and transformations. In doing so, the study constitutes the first detailed history of the place of children and young people within the largest imperial system the world has known.

Children and young people, both British and Indigenous, both locally born and migrant, were central to the imperial project, burdened with its hopes and anxieties. Their experiences and the ways in which they were represented exemplify the processes through which ‘Britishness’ was expressed and contested across the globe. The cultural influence of the British world was expansive: even those countries not under Britain’s direct control were impacted by its imperial reach, ideologies and trading networks. Children and young people focused – and in some instances manipulated – the imperial practices generated by this exertion of authority and cultural power. Recipients of the decidedly mixed blessings of British rule, they were at once petty imperialists, migrant ‘pioneers’, active resisters and dispossessed victims. ‘Pawns of empire’ (in the phrase of literary scholar Rosalia Baena), young people found themselves in the front line of imperial undertakings, moving within parameters set for them by adults, yet often exerting a much greater degree of autonomy and agency than the analogy of the chessboard implies.

The ‘British world’, now interpreted beyond an outdated trope of centre and margin, refers to the imperial system built on mass migration from Britain to places such as Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, South Africa and beyond. It includes sites of formal and informal empire and those countries with a British majority as well as a substantial British minority among their citizens. This definition acknowledges that individuals living in locations as disparate as the West Indies, Singapore or Kenya may well have felt themselves to be part of what Tony Ballantyne has recently described as ‘the webs of empire’. Such a conception also recognizes that the British world was fluid and adaptable as well as nodal, relying on interconnections between settlers and across colonies and nations, usually (but by no means always) via the metropole. Britain influenced the British world, it has been argued, but it too was transformed by its colonies, absorbing their inflections and hosting their people (see Figure I.1).

The majority of chapters in this collection consider childhood and youth from the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. During this period, and especially between the 1880s and the 1950s, the British Empire reached its apex and the span of the British world was at its most extensive. At the peak of the British Empire’s geographical spread in 1922, it occupied over one-fifth of the earth’s surface. Children, Childhood and Youth in the British World complements and extends existing scholarship on this imperial world. Just as men and women experienced colonialism differently, diversity also characterized children’s experiences of living within the spheres of British influence. Relations of empire played out within the institutional