



Cecil John Rhodes (1853-1902)

Cecil Rhodes was born in 1853, the son of a clergyman. In 1871 he was sent by his father to join his elder brother and forge a career in Africa.

After a brief period cotton farming, Rhodes followed the rush to the recently discovered Kimberley diamond fields. These, which were worked by numerous small claims holders both African and European, formed the centre of Cape diamond mining. To forge profitable enterprises, Rhodes and other entrepreneurs began to buy out the smaller holders. Early commercial success enabled Rhodes to fulfil his ambition to study at Oxford, where he was admitted to Oriel College in 1873 and took his degree in 1881. He returned to Africa where, by 1885, his mining company, De Beers, had become the largest firm in the region.

Rhodes's activities in Africa, and the vision of empire that he represented, were controversial in his lifetime, and debate has continued throughout the intervening century in public opinion and academic historiography. This brief account seeks to explain something of why Rhodes and his views were and are controversial.

Once small claim holders had been bought out by larger mining companies, those who continued to work for them were forced to accept what are now recognized as exploitative forms of employment [1]. De Beers pioneered the construction of 'closed compounds', where migrant labourers were racially segregated and locked in for the duration of their contracts [2]. In 1881 Rhodes entered Cape politics as an MP, and from 1890-96 was Prime Minister of the Cape Colony. In 1889 the British government under Lord Salisbury awarded Rhodes a charter for a British South Africa Company (BSAC) to expand British interests into south-central Africa. The company's trust deed empowered it to acquire, in these territories, 'all or any rights interests authorities jurisdictions and powers of any kind or nature whatever, including powers necessary for the purposes of government and the preservation of public order' and to use these powers for the purposes of the Company [3]. In practice, the exercise of authority often involved force (as, for instance, against the Ndebele in 1893) [4].

Rhodes was a pragmatic politician. His treatment of educated or powerful Africans, whose support he needed, could be cordial, and he financed a newspaper for a largely black readership [5]. His government also passed the Franchise and Ballot Act (1892) which, by raising the property qualification for voters and introducing a literacy test, excluded most Africans from the franchise.

By the 1890s Rhodes was one of the most powerful men in the British empire [6]. In 1899 Oxford University awarded him an honorary doctorate of law. At dinner in Oriel after receiving his doctorate, Rhodes heard of the college's then poor financial situation and offered to leave it £100,000 in his will [7]. £40,000 of this was to finance the construction of a new building on the High Street; the rest was to support the endowment of Fellowships and other college expenses. The building was completed in 1911 and decorated with a number of statues, including one of Rhodes himself. The bulk of Rhodes's fortune was willed to the establishment of the Rhodes Trust and its programme of scholarships for students from Germany, the USA, and the then British colonies.

After his death, Rhodes's life and legacy continued to divide opinion. Alfred Mosely, a diamond merchant and friend of Rhodes, gained permission from the College to erect a plaque to him on the house in King Edward Street where Rhodes had lived in 1881. Enthusiasm for Rhodes was not universal, however: an alumnus of Oriel wrote of the proposed new building that he 'could have wished it were not Rhodes's statue that should appear above the gate into the High. I am not in love with the "Imperial" spirit' [8].

The nature and coherence of Rhodes's thinking have been much debated and cannot easily be summarized. In some respects he can be compared with other nineteenth-century men of wealth and ambition in the colonial world and the USA. He shared with many others of his time theories of cultural evolution according to which most Africans were not yet ready for equal treatment with Europeans [9]. He became a staunch imperialist and in his 'Confession' of 1877 wrote 'I contend that [the British] are the finest race in the world and that the more of the world we inhabit the better it is for the human race...' [10]. He established the Rhodes Scholarships, however, on the basis that 'no student shall be qualified or disqualified for election ... on account of race or religious opinions' [11]. Rhodes was a businessman and a political deal-maker who prosecuted wars in pursuit of his goals. He held late-Victorian ideals of public service, institution-building, and the importance of an educated ruling class.

Rhodes died in 1902 near Cape Town.

More about Cecil John Rhodes: [Oxford Dictionary of National Biography](#)

- [1] William H. Worger, *South Africa's City of Diamonds: Mine Workers and Monopoly Capitalism in Kimberley, 1867-1895* (Yale UP, 1987), p.108; Charles Feinstein, *An Economic History of South Africa* (CUP, 2005), pp. 62-6.
- [2] Robert Vicat Turrell, *Capital and Labour on the Kimberley Diamond Fields 1871-1890* (CUP, 1987), pp. 25-9, 94-9; Marks and Trapido, 'Rhodes, Cecil John', p. 596.
- [3] Charter of the BSAC, clause 3. For the full text of the Charter see e.g. www.sahistory.org.za.
- [4] Marks and Trapido, 'Rhodes, Cecil John', p. 595.
- [5] The *Izwi la Bantu*: Marks and Trapido, 'Rhodes, Cecil John', p. 601-2.
- [6] The background to the bequest is described by Ernest Nicholson, 'Hawkins, Monro, and University Reform', in Jeremy Catto (ed.), *Oriel College: A History* (OUP, 2013), pp. 438-9. The following outline of Rhodes's life is based on the biography by Shula Marks and Stanley Trapido in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (OUP, 2004), vol. 46, pp. 592-603 (available at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/35731>) supplemented by other materials, and advice from several leading historians of southern Africa.
- [7] Jeremy Catto ed., *Oriel College: A History*. Oxford: OUP, 2013, pp. 438-9.
- [8] Oriel College Archives, S.H. Scott to Provost Phelps, 10 May 1906.
- [9] Marks and Trapido, 'Rhodes, Cecil John', p. 599.
- [10] Rhodes, 'Confession of Faith', 1877, cited in John E. Flint, *Cecil Rhodes* (Little Brown, 1974), pp. 248-52.
- [11] *Wills and Codicils of the Rt. Hon. Cecil John Rhodes* (OUP, 1929), p. 12.



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