

Rhodes University: Colonialism, Segregation and Apartheid, 1904-1970

Paul Maylam
Department of History
Rhodes University

This year of the university centenary is a time for celebration, but there is also a need to engage in critical self-reflection upon the university's past, present and future. This Colloquium can play a valuable role in offering a space for such reflection. A continuing critical engagement with issues surrounding the ethos, practice and functioning of Rhodes University (indeed, any university) is vital to the institution's well-being. For decades such engagement was constrained by the authoritarianism and repression exercised by successive apartheid governments. Today the main threat to critical academic discourse comes from the growing corporatisation and managerialism which are afflicting many universities around the world.

This paper is thus written in a critical vein – not with an aim to denigrate, nor as a kind of self-flagellation. It is produced in the spirit of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission – in the belief that disclosure about the university's past and an honest appraisal of its place in South African society can have a positive, liberating effect, and remind us always to be on guard against complacency.

What follows is not a history of Rhodes University, but rather a few reflections on some aspects of its history from 1904 until 1970. My starting-point is that Rhodes University, far from being the apolitical academy that it has often claimed to be, has been institutionally embedded in the politics of the country from the university's inception. It is true that research into the university's records reveals very little evidence at all of overt political involvement at the institutional level. The minutes of Council and Senate, for instance, show up an overwhelming concern with day-to-day academic and administrative matters. But more or less hidden within these records are some clues to the university's ideological and political leanings. Moreover, the silences can be equally revealing.

Today Rhodes University's harshest critics sometimes refer to it as a 'colonial institution'. If we look back at the founding of the university a century ago this label certainly carried meaning then. The university (or university college as it then was) was not founded simply as an institution of higher learning. It was also part of a great project – to bolster the British imperial connection.

After the South African War the British High Commissioner, Milner, strove to 'reconstruct' the war-torn country along 'English' lines. His anglicisation policy rested in part on the promotion of 'English-style' education. The estab-

lishment of a college of higher learning in the Eastern Cape fitted into this policy. Milner feared that a rising Dutch/Afrikaner cultural movement in the Western Cape would pose a threat to British supremacy. So Rhodes University College's 'cultural and political role', in the words of John Darwin, 'was unambiguous: it was designed to reward and consolidate the proverbial loyalty of the Eastern Province. But it was also meant to be the engine room of English cultural ascendancy in South Africa'.¹ This was made clear by the London secretary of the Rhodes Trust, Charles Boyd: the college, he wrote, was 'designed to extend and strengthen the Imperial idea in South Africa'.² The headmaster of Kingswood College expressed the same sentiment: 'I take it the Rhodes College is to imply Higher Education under the best of Imperial influences'.³ When the Cape Town secretary of the Rhodes Trust wrote to the British War Office appealing for the free grant of the Drostdy buildings, he too emphasised that the new college would strengthen the imperial idea in South Africa 'where so far the only decent University education to be had is at Stellenbosch, under influences notoriously anti-Imperialist'.⁴

The naming of the new institution clearly reflected the imperial connection. The original plan was not to name it after the empire-builder. In March 1903 the sub-committee set up to consider the founding of a college in Grahamstown proposed that the institution be called The Eastern Province University College. Four days later the sub-committee met again and came up with a revised twofold proposal – that the name be the Rhodes University College, *and* that the Rhodes Trust be approached with a view to obtaining a substantial grant.⁵ Clearly the proposed new name was put forward as a bargaining chip. How could the Rhodes Trust refuse such a request that would honour the name of the benefactor? It was a smart move, and it worked. The cause was helped by the election of Jameson, Rhodes's greatest ally and collaborator, as MP for Grahamstown in the Cape parliament early in 1904. Jameson was also on the board of the Rhodes Trust. His influence in securing the funding from the Trust for the college was considerable. So too was the influence of George Parkin, the first organising secretary of the Trust. He visited South Africa in 1903 and became convinced that 'the ideas of Mr Rhodes will be carried out better than in any other way by building up an institution of higher learning at Grahams-town'.⁶

So, posthumously, Rhodes would give his money and his name to the new college – even though Rhodes had had little association with the Eastern Cape during his life-time. In the early 1890s he had wanted to found a university, but in the Western Cape. His plan was to build it on his Groote Schuur estate, and to fund it with profits from the worker canteens at the Kimberley diamond mines. According to Herbert Baker, Rhodes's architect and close friend, Rhodes used to joke that 'he meant to build the University out of the Kaffir's stomach'.⁷ The plan was conceived at a time when Rhodes was trying to foster closer relations between English and Dutch at the Cape: he hoped that English and Dutch

students would study together at the new university (Rhodes's conception was thus different from the idea underlying the founding of Rhodes University College – that it serve as a counter to Dutch/Afrikaner culture). Rhodes's scheme fell away because of opposition from the largely Dutch Victoria College in Stellenbosch, which thought its own interests would be damaged by Rhodes's proposed university. Eventually, though, fifteen or so years after Rhodes's death, the University of Cape Town would be built in an area of the Grootte Schuur estate donated by the Rhodes Trust.

In the years after its founding Rhodes University College's connection with the British Empire continued to be cemented in symbolic ways. In 1907 the college authorities set about establishing a 'Founder's day'. One professor suggested that this should coincide with Empire Day, 24 May. Eventually the choice of day was entrusted to Jameson. He proposed 12 September, the day (in 1890) on which the white pioneers had hoisted the Union Jack at Fort Salisbury. The proposal was accepted by Senate and Council, thereby linking the founding of the university to the colonisation of Southern Rhodesia.⁸ Founder's Day has nothing to do with the founding of Rhodes University.

In the early 1920s key figures were continuing to see Rhodes University College as an important centre of British imperial influence. One such figure was Milner, a board member of the Rhodes Trust since its inception in 1902, and chair of the Trust from 1917 to 1925. During his term as chair he was still stressing the role of the college, and Grahamstown's private schools, as a bulwark against Afrikaner nationalism.⁹

How, therefore, would Rhodes be affected by the accession to power in 1924 of Hertzog's Pact government, dominated by the National Party? Might the university become a site of contestation between Afrikaner nationalism and the British imperial ideal? The answer would seem to be, not at all. One of Hertzog's primary objectives during his premiership was to promote and strengthen racial segregation, particularly at the political and territorial level. He did not, though, try to impose segregation on universities, allowing each institution to decide on its own student admission policy.¹⁰

The Rhodes authorities failed to take advantage of this freedom, preferring to adopt a segregationist policy in keeping with both Hertzog's own thinking and the white supremacist ideology of the time. In 1933 Professor Dingemans, one of the four founding professors, proposed that an Indian student be admitted to Rhodes. The proposal was firmly rejected by Council, which resolved, with no votes against, 'that Rhodes University College is not in a position to agree to the admission of non-Europeans as resident or non-resident students'.¹¹

Almost thirty years after its founding Rhodes was entrenching itself as a segregated university. This admissions policy seems to have gone unchallenged for fourteen years. In 1947 a motion was put to Council to rescind the 1933 resolution. Although this motion was passed 14-4, the new admissions

policy adopted hardly represented a radical break with the past. It was resolved (in a 12-6 vote) 'that the Council, on the recommendation of the Senate, may consider applications for admission from Non-European graduates in exceptional circumstances'.¹² It was also agreed that such students be required to live in 'approved lodgings' (which I take to mean segregated accommodation).¹³ A few weeks later Senate requested that black students be admitted to the January 1948 summer school. But Council again reiterated that admission be restricted to 'non-European graduates'.¹⁴

Rhodes was clearly expressing and conforming to the segregationist ideology and practice that characterised the established social and political order in South Africa during the first half of the twentieth century. This is further illustrated by the introduction into the university curriculum, in 1939, of a course entitled 'Administration of Child Races, with special reference to South Africa'.¹⁵ It is important to stress that the university authorities chose to operate as a segregated university when it was not legally bound to do so, long before the enactment of obligatory segregation in 1959.

Some might point to mitigating factors. The cautious admissions policy was defended at the time on the grounds that Rhodes did not want to draw students away from Fort Hare.¹⁶ Moreover, Rhodes was not alone in its discriminatory practice among universities in the English-speaking world. Wits and UCT admitted very few black students in the 1930s: in 1937 Wits had ten such students, UCT forty.¹⁷ Earlier in the century most universities in the USA practised racial discrimination. For some years after World War One Princeton totally excluded black students, and Harvard, Yale and Columbia restricted their intake of blacks (as well as Jews and Catholics).¹⁸

It was in the 1950s and 1960s that Rhodes really lagged behind the other so-called 'open' universities in South Africa – so much so that one can scarcely describe Rhodes as an 'open' university at that time. Between 1947 and 1959 there were fifteen applications from black graduates for admission to Rhodes. Of these, three were accepted.¹⁹ Moreover there is evidence of a disturbing institutional acquiescence towards apartheid. In 1954 the university awarded an honorary doctorate to the Minister of Education, J.H. Viljoen. The previous year Viljoen had shown himself to be an eager proponent of university apartheid during a parliamentary debate.²⁰

During the mid-1950s it was becoming apparent that the NP government was going to introduce a policy of university apartheid. In anticipation of this, voices of opposition were heard, particularly from UCT and Wits (which by 1957 had, between them, about 500 students of colour on their campuses). In 1956 the councils of both UCT and Wits passed resolutions stating their principled opposition to academic segregation. Early in 1957 there were mass meetings of staff, students and convocation at UCT and Wits, with the passing of resolutions against university apartheid. Deputations from the councils and senates of UCT, Wits and Natal met with the Minister of Education and pleaded

with him not to proceed with the legislation. Petitions, carrying thousands of signatures, were also submitted to parliament by UCT and Wits in opposition to the impending university bill. There followed in mid-1957 protest marches by staff and students of Wits and UCT.²¹

Where was Rhodes University amidst all this activity? Mostly absent and largely silent. Before 1959 the university did not join any deputations, nor did it organise petitions or protest marches, as far as I can ascertain. There is, though, a letter from the Registrar to the Department of Education, dated February 1957. This states the university's objections to the proposed alterations, without any consultation, to the Rhodes University Act of 1949, and to the plan to detach Fort Hare from Rhodes. The letter does not convey any strong, principled opposition to university segregation²² – which Rhodes was in no position to convey as it was still essentially a segregated university. At this time Rhodes could not count itself among the open universities.

Two years later, in 1959, as university apartheid was being enacted in parliament, Rhodes offered a rather more robust institutional response. On graduation day in April over 1000 members of the university community – including the vice-chancellor, council and senate members, staff and students – participated in a protest march against the so-called Extension of Universities Bill and the Fort Hare Transfer Bill. The vice-chancellor, Dr Alty, used the occasion to voice the university's position in an address to the gathering. He stressed that this was not a political protest. His main objection to the bills was that they eroded university autonomy. Universities should have the right to decide for themselves who to admit as students. 'In our university', he went on, 'we have, for our own reasons, admitted relatively few non-Europeans, but none the less, we are jealous of our right to decide these matters for ourselves'.²³ Even a student like Hugh Lewin (who would later spend seven years in jail for sabotage activities) could write a letter to *Rhodeo* stating that opposition to the bills did not imply support for university integration, which was 'impractical' at that time.²⁴ My (albeit limited) research suggests that Rhodes's institutional response in 1959 did not really challenge university apartheid.

Rhodes's official stance was apolitical. It is better described as acquiescent and accommodating towards the apartheid state. Three episodes in the 1960s bear this out. First, in 1962 the university awarded an honorary doctorate to the state president, C.R. Swart. As Minister of Justice from 1948 through the 1950s Swart had been responsible for the repression of opposition organisations (which had not yet resorted to armed struggle). By honouring Swart the university was tacitly endorsing his repressive actions. The award evoked protest from many members of the university community – which the university authorities did their best to suppress. Letters of protest were sent to *Rhodeo*, but Alty pressured the editor not to publish them. Senate passed a motion, by 28 votes to 6, deploring the action of staff members who had publically dissociated themselves from the award of the degree.²⁵ When Swart

came to receive his degree he was greeted with prolonged two-minute applause.²⁶

The second episode occurred five years later. In July 1967 the annual congress of the multi-racial National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) was held on the Rhodes campus. Three months before the congress the university council had agreed that segregated accommodation for black delegates be provided on campus – men staying in Livingstone House and women in Piet Retief House.²⁷ In June, about ten days before the congress, Council changed its mind. Fresh legal opinion had suggested that it would ‘probably’ not be legal for the university to accommodate black delegates in residences. The vice-principal, Dr Rennie, reported to Council that ‘every care is being taken to ensure that Rhodes does not transgress the law in any particular’. The Minister of Community Development had not only refused permission to accommodate black delegates, but had also prohibited mixed social events. Accordingly a mixed tea party to welcome delegates would not take place. Council entrusted the matter to the vice-principal (who was acting vice-chancellor in the absence of Dr Hyslop).²⁸

The prohibition was imposed, forcing African students to find township accommodation, while other ‘delegates of colour’ were put up in private homes.²⁹ The decision reflected the extreme caution of the university authorities – it is hard to believe that there would have been any legal repercussions had the April decision not been overturned. However the university’s stance would have significant political consequences. The events surrounding the 1967 NUSAS congress represented an important moment in the growth of the black consciousness movement. Steve Biko, one of the delegates, was dismayed by the reaction of white NUSAS delegates to the ban. He believed that the NUSAS executive, knowing in advance of the ban, should have made alternative arrangements. He therefore proposed at the congress that proceedings be suspended. Rejection of his motion left Biko hurt and angry. He became deeply disillusioned with NUSAS’s multi-racialism and set about planning a separate organisation, SASO (the South African Students Organisation), for black students.³⁰ The action of the Rhodes authorities may well have triggered the founding of the black consciousness movement in South Africa.

The third episode – the controversy surrounding the non-appointment of Basil Moore in 1969 – caused some upheaval within the university. In December 1968, Senate confirmed the recommendation of a selection committee that Basil Moore be appointed to a temporary lectureship in Systematic Theology in 1969. This recommendation was overruled by Council on the same day. In March 1969, Senate, by a vote of 30-2, reaffirmed its recommendation that Moore be appointed. Again, the following month, Council overturned the recommendation. Council’s actions provoked a set of protests. In May a student body meeting resolved that Council be requested to reveal its reasons for not appointing Moore. When Council refused to do this

another student body meeting, on 31 July, resolved that students would assemble in the quad in the afternoon of the following day when a Council meeting would be taking place – to await Council’s response to a request that SRC representatives be allowed to address the Council meeting on the matter. When this was also refused there followed a sit-in in the Council chamber. This resulted in the eight-week rustication of thirteen students and the dismissal of a temporary lecturer in Politics, David Tucker.³¹

What was this episode (outlined here very sketchily) all about? And what does it reveal about the thinking of university management at the time? Basil Moore had been SRC president at Rhodes in 1962, and a part-time lecturer in theology at the university from 1965 to 1968. In 1967 he had also become the first president of the University Christian Movement (UCM), having been one of the driving forces behind the establishment of the organisation. The UCM had been founded after the more established Student Christian Association had resolved to conform to apartheid by dividing itself into ethnic/racial units. It may have been viewed as radical at the time, but the UCM was essentially a non-racial, non-violent organisation concerned to reflect in a Christian way on social, political and theological issues.

The Rhodes Council’s stance in the Basil Moore affair was very much in tune with the repressive, reactionary line of the apartheid state at the time. A memorandum by the vice-chancellor, Dr Hyslop, submitted to Council in February 1969, gives an indication of the kind of thinking that must have determined Council’s veto. In this memorandum he expressed the fear that the UCM would be a vehicle for both the American Black Power movement and the international ‘student power’ movement. He was convinced that the recent unrest in overseas universities had resulted from the close interaction and cooperation between small numbers of staff members and militant students. The UCM was one such body that brought together staff and students. Moore’s appointment therefore would be a threat to the university.³² Little did Hyslop realise that the non-appointment of Moore would lead to the kind of unrest that he feared. Not only was this case poorly handled by university management, but it also reflected the innate conservatism, even paranoia, that afflicted them at the time.

Founded as a university to promote ‘Englishness’ and further the British imperial project, Rhodes University for the first sixty-five years of its existence operated within, and conformed to, a social and political order based on racial discrimination. The university has generally projected an apolitical image. However an ostensibly apolitical stance can be seen as political in that it often implies acquiescence and tacit acceptance of the status quo. This, I argue, has been the case with Rhodes during these years – revealed in its discriminatory admissions policy, its readiness to award honorary doctorates to prominent apartheid politicians, its excessive caution in handling residential arrangements at the 1967 NUSAS congress, and its reactionary stance during the 1969 Basil Moore crisis. These tendencies and episodes suggest institutional

complicity in the South African racial order, rather than opposition to it. This needs to be acknowledged, but it must also be recognised that within the university community during these decades there have been individuals – staff and students – who have spoken out and acted against the discrimination and exploitation that have been so much part of South African history in the twentieth century.

Notes

1. John Darwin, 'The Rhodes Trust in the Age of Empire' in Anthony Kenny (ed.), *The History of the Rhodes Trust 1902-1999*, (Oxford, 2001), p.496.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. R.F. Currey, *Rhodes University 1904-1970*, (Grahamstown, 1970), p.12.
5. Minutes of the sub-committee meetings, 5, 9 March 1903. Cory Library MS.16 911/1.
6. Currey, Rhodes University, pp.8-9.
7. Herbert Baker, *Cecil Rhodes: By his Architect*, (London, 1934), p.48.
8. Rhodes University College Senate Minutes, 19 June, 7 August, 11 September 1907. Cory Library MS.17 504, vol 1, 1904-07. See also *The Rhodian*, vol.1, no.3, August 1908. I am grateful to Mike Berning for these references.
9. Darwin, 'The Rhodes Trust', pp.497-98.
10. Bruce K. Murray, *Wits: The Early Years*, (Johannesburg, 1982), pp.298-99.
11. Minutes of Council, 21 April 1933. Cory Library MS.17 244/1, vol.VII.
12. Minutes of Council, 18 April 1947. Cory Library MS.17 244/4, vol.X.
13. Ibid.
14. Minutes of Council, 20 June 1947. Cory Library MS.17 244/4, vol.X.
15. Michael G. Whisson, *Interesting Times 1954-2004*, (Grahamstown, 2004), p.9.
16. David Welsh, 'Some Political and Social Determinants of the Academic Environment', in Hendrik W. van der Merwe and David Welsh (eds.), *Student Perspectives on South Africa*, (Cape Town, 1972), p.22.
17. Murray, *Wits: The Early Years*, pp.316-17.
18. Ibid., pp.299-300.
19. Welsh, 'Political and Social Determinants', p.22.
20. M.A. Beale, 'The evolution of the policy of university apartheid', in *The Societies of Southern Africa in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, vol.18, (London, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, 1992), p.83.
21. D.H. Makobe, 'Apartheid and the University College of Fort Hare', unpublished honours dissertation, Rhodes University, 1994, pp.66-69.
22. Registrar to Secretary for Education, Arts and Science, 23 February 1957. Minutes of Council. Cory Library MS.17 498/3, vol.XIII, p.98.

23. *Grocott's Daily Mail*, 6 April 1959.
24. *Rhodeo*, 3 April 1959.
25. Minutes of Senate, 21 August and 23 August 1962. Cory Library MS.17 504, vol.XIV, 1961-63.
26. *Rhodeo*, 12 September 1962.
27. Minutes of Council, 14 April 1967. Cory Library MS.17 498, vol.XV, 1965-68.
28. Minutes of Council, 23 June 1967. Cory Library MS.17 498, vol.XV, 1965-68.
29. *Rhodeo*, 23 July 1967.
30. Xolela Mangcu, 'The quest for an African identity, thirty seven years on', (Rhodes University centenary lecture, 2004), pp.1-2.
31. *Rhodeo*, 31 July and 7 August 1969. Minutes of Council, 18 April and 14 August 1969, Cory Library MS.17 498, vol.XVI.
32. 'Report by the Vice-Chancellor on Student Disturbances during his absence in Australia', 6 February 1969. Council Minutes. Cory Library MS.17 498, vol.XVI, 1968-70.