



Newsinger, J. (2016) 'Why Rhodes must fall.' *Race & Class*, 58 (2), pp. 70-78.

Official URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0306396816657726>

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Why Rhodes Must Fall

The Rhodes Must Fall campaign has provoked more public discussion and debate on the rights and wrongs of the British Empire than any number of academic books and articles.¹ Even the *Sun* has been drawn into the discussion with its regular columnist Rod Liddle telling the paper's readers that he hoped to raise the funds to erect a statue of Rhodes, 'the liberator of Africa – in a prominent position in every UK university campus'. Every statue would carry 'one of my favourite quotes from the great man: "I contend that we are the finest race in the world and that the more of the world we inhabit, the better it is for the human race"'. These statues would be good for students because they 'would act as a counter-balance to the self-flagellating liberal bilge rammed down their throats by third-rate British academics'.²

Now regular readers of Liddle's column will, of course, know that he lives in an alternative Britain that is completely under the sway of the Far Left and in which people like him are a courageous, embattled minority persecuted for speaking the truth by the Political Correctness Brigade. In Britain, this particular brand of paranoid right-wing populism remains amusing rather than dangerous, at least, for the time being. In the real world, however, the British Empire has never been honestly called to account.

One of the most important responses to the demand that the Rhodes statue on Oriel College be taken down came from Baron Patten, the Chancellor of Oxford University. Even though he is a former Conservative government minister (he was in charge of implementing the poll tax) and a former Governor of Hong Kong, he actually chose *not* to defend the right of the British ruling class and their academic apparatchiks to celebrate the murderous exploits of the men who conquered the Empire by erecting statues in their honour. Rather than coming to the defence of Rhodes, a thief, killer and fraudster, he preferred to focus on the good the University had been able to do with the money he had left them, money which had helped the University 'gain a robust global standing'. Students should show some 'generosity of spirit'. Patten claimed that the demand to remove the statue was part of a general attack on Free Speech: in Oxford apparently even the stones speak! He urged campaigners to read Karl Popper's *The Open Society*, 'the most important book for any undergraduate', and if they still felt unable to embrace British traditions of toleration and fair play, then they should consider being educated elsewhere. He helpfully suggested China.³ When the wholly predictable decision not to remove the Rhodes statue was taken, more important than any principle of Free Speech was the fact that 'furious donors threatened to withdraw gifts and bequests worth more than £100 million'.⁴ As far as Free Speech at Oxford is concerned, money has always had the loudest voice.

Patten's intervention was, of course, completely disingenuous. Playing the Free Speech card was very much a politician's shabby 'three card trick', a clumsy attempt to distract attention from the 'achievements' of the man that Oxford University feels so deserving of being honoured. For the record, Cecil Rhodes took eight years (1873-81) getting his undergraduate degree, combining polo, fox-hunting and dining (he was a member of the Bullingdon Club and had a well-deserved reputation as a glutton) at Oxford with making money in South Africa where he was one of the founders of De Beers. There is precious little evidence of any actual studying during his occasional visits to Oxford. He did, however, compose his 'Confession of Faith' there in 1877. It is from this document that Rod Liddle took his 'favourite quote' although even he could not quite bring himself to quote Rhodes' sentiment in full: 'I contend that we are the finest race in the world and that the more of the world we inhabit the better it is for the human race. Just fancy those parts that are at present inhabited by the most despicable specimens of human beings what an alteration there would be if they were brought under Anglo-Saxon influence...I contend that every acre added to our territory means in the future birth to some more of the English race who otherwise would not be brought into existence'. Rhodes was and remained his whole life a proud advocate of *Lebensraum*. He raised the dreadful spectre of what if the French had colonised Australia instead of the British thereby depriving the world of millions of the British race! He particularly regretted the loss of the United States to the British Empire, believing that if only the colonists had been effectively conciliated, then the British Empire would today have a complete domination of the world. Indeed, he still hoped that the United States would rejoin the British Empire, something he considered 'probable'. And, of course, 'Africa is still lying ready for us it is our duty to take it. It is our duty to seize every opportunity of acquiring more territory and we should keep this one idea steadily before our eyes that more territory simply means more of the Anglo-Saxon race more of the best the most human, most honourable race the world possesses'.⁵ Although Rhodes never mastered grammar, he was already an accomplished master of British ruling class hypocrisy. And in this 'Confession', he went on to advocate the establishment of a secret Society of superior men who would work to advance the interests of his great Anglo-Saxon Empire: the Rhodes Scholarships were intended as way of furthering this project. Clearly Rhodes' claim to Oxford statuehood does not reside in any non-existent academic achievement. Instead, it resides in the great fortune he made by means of swindling, corruption, armed expropriation and the brutal exploitation of black workers and in the part he played in extending the boundaries of the British Empire. Indeed, as far as the swindling, corruption and exploitation is concerned, his biographers have, as one historian has pointed out, 'largely been content to bury dishonest dealings under the magical wand of imperialism'.⁶ What he is celebrated

for is extending the British Empire, for his African conquests, which he in a very deliberate effort at achieving some sort of immortality, modestly named after himself: the Rhodesias.⁷

In 1889, Rhodes established the British South African Company (BSAC) with the intention of extending British control to the north. This method of Imperial rule had been discredited in the 1850s by the Great Indian Revolt that brought down the East India Company that had ruled India, but it had been reintroduced in 1886 by Gladstone when the Royal Niger Company was established to begin the exploitation of what was to become Nigeria. Colonisation by private companies was seen as an inexpensive method of Imperial expansion. Rhodes had the support of the Conservative government in 1889, proposing the colonisation of Matabeleland, the lands of the Ndebele, ostensibly by agreement with Lobengula, the Ndebele ruler. The actual intention was always to remove him and subject the population to white rule. As Rhodes himself put it: 'If we get Matabeleland we shall get the balance of Africa. I do not stop in my ideas at the Zambezi'. He thought that 'getting Matabeleland' might take as long as two and a half years, but found it very difficult to wait that long. At the end of the year, he was actually preparing to launch a surprise attack on Bulawayo to kill or capture Lobengula, and seize control of the country by means of a military coup de main. A mercenary force was raised with the leaders to be paid £150,000 and 110,000 acres of land each, but the British government discovered the plan and intervened to prevent such a transparently illegal and more important embarrassing act of aggression by a private company. As Rotberg observes, even if it had been successful, whether 'by stealth or butchery', the coup would have been 'a political and personal disaster' for Rhodes, a forerunner of the later 'Jameson Raid'. Fortunately for him, it remained secret. Instead, Rhodes was forced to play a longer game, persuading the unsuspecting Lobengula to allow settlers to cross his territory with the supposed intention of looking for gold in Mashonaland. A well-armed column of settlers and mercenaries was allowed to cross Matabeleland and established Fort Salisbury, giving Rhodes a foothold from which further expansion could be carried out. The overthrow of Lobengula was inevitable with Rhodes making quite clear to his lieutenants that he would 'never be able to work peaceably alongside the natives and that the sooner the brush is over the better'. What Rhodes described on one occasion as 'my hobby in Matabeleland' was to cost thousands of African lives.⁸

War came in October 1893 when the BSAC finally manufactured a suitable pretext for the invasion of Matabeleland. Rhodes promised each European volunteer 20 gold claims, a 6,000 acre farm and a share of the loot taken. Equipped with both machine guns and artillery, Rhodes' forces were able to carry out a succession of technological massacres, effortlessly butchering their massed opponents. Bulawayo was occupied on 4 November. Lobengula fled and later committed suicide rather than fall into British hands. While Rhodes proclaimed this a victory for the British Empire, he was determined

to keep what was to become Rhodesia out of the hands of the British government, administered for profit by the BSAC. He had no intention of allowing any sentimental British concern for the 'natives' to interfere with their ruthless despoliation. Such interference, he warned, was how 'the mother-country lost America'. He used his position as Prime Minister of Cape Colony to effectively keep the British government out of his affairs. It is worth remembering, of course, that this aggression took place when the Liberals not the Conservatives were in power and Gladstone was Prime Minister. Even though the Colonial Secretary, Lord Ripon considered outfits like the BSAC as 'not pleasant instruments of administration' and recommended the government take over the administration of Matabeleland, nothing was done.⁹ Indeed, Gladstone actually found himself defending Rhodes against his critics in the Commons.¹⁰ And Rhodes had, of course, actually given money, £5,000, to the Liberal Party, a donation he claimed was conditional on the Liberal government not withdrawing from Egypt.¹¹ In early 1895, the triumphant Rhodes visited Britain, where he was lionised by the rich and powerful, met with the Queen at Windsor and was appointed to the Privy Council by the Liberal government. He had after all added territory equal in extent to France, Spain, Belgium and the Netherlands to the Empire.¹²

The imposition of BSAC rule was accompanied by wholesale land seizure, the confiscation of cattle, the rape of African women, and the imposition of forced labour as the 'native' population were put to work for their new white masters. The man Rhodes appointed chief native commissioner in Mashonaland, John Brabant, actually had Africans flogged for the impertinence of wearing boots! Needless to say, this was one of the least of his crimes. For Rhodes, however, the victory did not bring the financial benefits that he hoped for: there was no great gold find. He now turned his attention to the Boer republics and determined on an invasion of the Transvaal. The plan was to stage a British settler rebellion against Boer rule, which would be the pretext for invasion by an armed force to be led by Rhodes' right-hand man, Leander Starr Jameson. By now a Conservative government was in office at Westminster and the Colonial Office was very much a party to the conspiracy. A letter was prepared by the conspirators calling for British intervention because 'Thousands of unarmed men, women and children of our race will be at the mercy of well-armed Boers'. The letter was left undated with a blank space for Jameson to fill in once the rebellion had actually taken place! There was no rebellion, but Jameson, at the head of some 500 men, invaded anyway at the end of December 1895. They were defeated and rounded up after five days, surrendering on 2 January 1896. Rhodes involvement in such a transparent criminal conspiracy that was moreover unsuccessful did his reputation immense damage. The Kruger government eventually commuted the sentences of death for the leaders and imprisonment for the rest to fines and they were released after Rhodes had paid up. The Jameson Raid 'cost him in money some £400,000'.¹³

The Jameson fiasco also provided the opportunity for the Ndebele and the Shona to revolt, threatening to undo the conquest of the Rhodesias. Even if unsuccessful, the revolts might have provoked a British government takeover which Rhodes would have regarded as a disaster. One of Rhodes' men, Frederick Selous made a remarkably contemporary complaint about the revolts: 'We Europeans make the mistake of thinking that, when we free a tribe of savages from what we consider a most oppressive and tyrannical form of government...we ought to earn their gratitude...we invariably fail to do so'.¹⁴ From Rhodesia in the 1890s to Afghanistan and Iraq today, this is the Imperial lament: liberated 'natives' always remain ungrateful! 1896-97 saw the effective reconquest of Matabeleland and Mashonaland with Rhodes variously ordering his men to 'do the most harm you can to the natives around you', 'kill all you can' and 'Wipe them all out...everything black'. He was actually forced into negotiations with the Ndebele who put up a fierce resistance, fighting an irregular war on this occasion that went some way to countering British firepower. Instead of suicidal massed frontal attacks on British machine guns, as Rhodes complained, 'Our difficulty now is that the natives have disappeared'.¹⁵ The revolts, the first Chimurenga, were nevertheless crushed and white rule was fastened on the country.¹⁶ The Rhodesias were to remain under the control of the BSAC until 1923-24.

One argument put forward against the Rhodes Must Fall campaign is that it is wrong to judge him by the standards of today because he was a man of a different time with different values. His vicious racism, for example, can be excused as being merely of his time. Indeed, Baron Patten helpfully makes the point that if one condemns Rhodes' racism, one would also have to condemn Winston Churchill's. The voices of the victims go completely unheard of course. Even so, there is a problem with this argument because Rhodes was very actively condemned and opposed at the very time he committed his crimes by people from across the political spectrum in Britain. The Radical MP, Henry Labouchere, for example, in 1893, condemned Rhodes' 'pernicious company' and his 'filibustering and massacring expeditions' in the Commons. He savaged Rhodes as 'the head of a shady gang of financiers who forced on a war' and 'conducted it on the principle that "godless heathens" ought to be mowed down with Maxim guns...in order that a rotten Company might be saved from immediate bankruptcy'. According to Labouchere, 'never in our times had anything so wicked been done in Africa'.¹⁷ Even the *Economist* and the *Spectator*, both staunchly Conservative in sympathy, joined in the condemnation with John St Loe Strachey making clear that while he 'was always so ardent a supporter of the British Empire and of the Imperial spirit, I was not one of those people who thought that the mere word "Imperialism" would cover a multitude of sins'. As far as Strachey was concerned, Rhodes 'bought policies as other men bought pictures', showering shares 'on "useful" politicians at home and in South Africa'. The *Economist* was completely opposed to the activities of

private colonial companies such as the BSAC, indeed the BSAC was 'the most effective object lesson which could be imagined as to the danger in our day of mixing up pecuniary adventure and politics'. As far as Strachey and the *Spectator* were concerned Rhodes was 'an arch-corrupter'.¹⁸ For the writer G K Chesterton, what Rhodes 'called his ideals were the dregs of Darwinism which had already grown not only stagnant but poisonous...it was exactly because he had no ideas to spread that he invoked slaughter, violated justice, and ruined republics'.¹⁹ Olive Schreiner, a friend of Eleanor Marx, wrote a devastating fictional indictment of the suppression of the revolts of 1896-97, *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland*, which sold out when it was first published in 1897. It did not pull its punches. The book reproduced the photograph of an African hanging from a tree in Bulawayo, surrounded by smiling young white men. And according to her protagonist, Peter Halket, Rhodes was 'death on niggers...he'll keep their noses to the grindstone...he's going to parcel them out and make them work on our lands whether they like it or not – just as good as having slaves'. He goes on : 'We don't come out here to work...we've come here to make money, and how are we to make it, unless you get niggers to work for you...they say if we had the British Government here and you were thrashing a nigger and something happened, there'd be an investigation, and all that sort of thing. But with Cecil, it's all right, you can do what you like with the niggers'.²⁰ She hoped somewhat optimistically that the book might break 'the nightmare power which Rhodes has exercised over the country'.²¹ As she remarked, 'men like Rhodes hate all believers in truth and freedom'.²² And, of course, the Marxist Left bitterly opposed Rhodes and his works.

What is perhaps more surprising is that there was even opposition to Rhodes among Oxford academics at this time. Rhodes had been awarded an honorary Doctorate of Civil Law in 1892, but only chose to receive it in 1899. Ninety two academics protested against giving such an award to an international criminal in a letter to the Vice Chancellor and the two elected Proctors indicated that they would exercise their right of vetoing the award at the actual ceremony. In the event, the opposition collapsed when Lord Kitchener, who was to receive the same award, made clear he would refuse his if Rhodes' was vetoed. Among the other recipients that day was Lord Elgin, whose grandfather had stolen the Marbles, whose father had occupied Beijing to force the opium trade on the Chinese and who had himself presided over the great famine of 1896-97, one of Mike Davis's 'Late Victorian Holocausts', as Viceroy of India and who went on to become Liberal Colonial Secretary in 1905.²³

The award seems to have determined Rhodes on making Oxford one of his chosen instruments for immortality and furthering the cause of Imperial expansion and consolidation. Rhodes made Oriel College a major beneficiary of his will, leaving £100,000 to go towards the erection of a new building, Rhodes House, and to supporting the fellows, with £10,000 earmarked for maintaining 'the dignity

and comfort of the High Table'.²⁴ The College responded to this transparent bribe with the infamous statue, a number of portraits, a Rhodes Fellowship in Modern History, annual Rhodes Memorial Lectures and an annual Rhodes dinner at which the assembled academics enthusiastically toasted this fraudster, thief and killer, their benefactor. Indeed, according to Richard Symonds, no one 'has more memorials in Oxford than Cecil Rhodes'.²⁵ Most important, of course, was the Rhodes Trust and the Rhodes Scholarships. In his will, Rhodes specified that two scholarships were to be awarded to every US state together with another twenty for 'colonials', three for Canada, six for Australia, five for South Africa, three for Rhodesia and one each for New Zealand, Jamaica and Bermuda, and five for Imperial Germany. He actually specified that candidates should be marked out of ten with four marks available for scholarship, two for 'brutality' which the trustees understandably changed to manly sports, two for tact and leadership and two for 'unctuous rectitude'.²⁶ The scholarships were, as far as Rhodes was concerned, to be awarded to only white men, with women and other races excluded. According to his will, the American scholarships were 'to encourage and foster an appreciation of the advantages which I implicitly believe will result from the union of the English-speaking peoples throughout the world'.²⁷ And as Philip Ziegler puts it: 'The fact that Rhodes awarded the United States so many more Scholarships than were given to all the colonies put together showed how much importance he still attached to the Anglo-American partnership. He never wholly abandoned the hope that the United States might one day rejoin the Empire. He...was even prepared to accept the possibility that the balance of power might someday shift so far that Washington rather than London would become the seat of government'.²⁸ And so it came to pass. Indeed, the Chancellor of Oxford University, Baron Patten no less, has actually celebrated the fact that he has lived his life 'as a pretty enthusiastic citizen of America's undeclared empire'.²⁹

¹ The Rhodes Must Fall campaign at Oxford University, inspired by the campaign in South Africa, has been campaigning for the removal of the statue of Cecil Rhodes at Oriel College as part of a more general and long overdue de-colonisation of Oxford University. As I write this (9 March) students in Oxford are holding a 'Mass March for Decolonisation' as part of the continuing campaign.

² The *Sun* 31 December 2015. In the same column Liddle argued that Tory MP Oliver Letwin had a point back in the 1980s when he argued that there was no point in the government giving money to black communities because they would only spend it on 'the disco and drug trade'. Apparently right-thinking people are too scared to utter such truths today for fear of 'the howling mob of the Left'. Liddle is also an associate editor of and a columnist for the *Spectator*.

³ *Daily Telegraph* 13 January 2016

⁴ *Daily Telegraph* 29 January 2016

⁵ John Flint, *Cecil Rhodes* (New York, Little Brown and Co, 1974) pp 248-252. According to Flint, Rhodes ideas on good governance 'in many ways anticipated fascism...he would have been at home in a one-party corporate state. He disliked the concept of an opposition'. (p 160)

⁶ Robert Vient Turrell, *Capital and Labour on the Kimberley Diamond Fields 1871-1890*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009) ,p121

⁷ He hoped his name would live on for 4,000 years. See Paul Maylam, *The Cult of Rhodes*, (David Philip, 2005) p 12

⁸ Robert Rotberg, *The Founder: Cecil Rhodes and the Pursuit of Power*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press,1988), pp 256, 291, 293, 295

⁹ Flint, op cit, p 152

¹⁰ Gladstone was, of course, the greatest of nineteenth century British hypocrites. In 1879-80, he had campaigned against Tory Imperial adventures but once in office he proceeded to invade and occupy Egypt. See John Newsinger, *The Blood Never Dried: A People's History of the British Empire*, (London, Bookmarks,2010), pp 92-104

¹¹ Rhodes had also given money, £10,000, to Parnell in 1888 with a view to both ensuring that a Home Rule Ireland remained part of the Empire and that Home Rule MPs did not interfere with the awarding of a charter to the BSAC.

¹² The Nineteenth Century volume of the prestigious *Oxford History of the British Empire* is, of course, resolutely uncritical of Rhodes empire building. Just for the record the Rhodes Trust contributed £150,000 to the publication of the four volumes and the Nineteenth Century volume was edited by Andrew Porter, the *Rhodes* Professor of Imperial History at King's College. London.

¹³ Flint, op cit, p 200

¹⁴ Philip Mason, *The Birth of a Dilemma: The Conquest and Settlement of Rhodesia*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press,1958), p 192

¹⁵ Rotberg, op cit, pp 557-562

¹⁶ The classic account remains T O Ranger's *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia 1896-7*, (London, Heinemann, 1967),but see also his *Writing Revolt: An Engagement with African Nationalism 1957-67* (London, James Currey, 2013)

¹⁷ R J Hind, *Henry Labouchere and the British Empire*, (London, Athlone Press, 1972), pp 20-24.

¹⁸ Ruth Dudley Edwards, *The Pursuit of Reason: The Economist 1843-1993*, (London, Hamish Hamilton, 1993), p 415-416; John St.Loe Strachey, *The Adventure of Living*, (New York, Putnam's 1922), pp301-303. Strachey edited the *Spectator* at this time as well as writing for the *Economist*. Needless to say, he would have wiped the likes of Rod Liddle off his shoe.

¹⁹ Thomas and Kathleen Schaeper, *Rhodes Scholars: Oxford and the Creation of an American Elite*, (London, Berghahn, 1998), p9

²⁰ Ruth First and Ann Scott, *Olive Schreiner*, (London, The Women's Press,1989), p 228.

²¹ Maylam, op cit, p 87

²² S C Cronwright-Schreiner, *The Letters of Olive Schreiner 1876-1920*, (London, T Fisher Unwin, 1924), p 251

²³ See Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Nino Famines and the Making of the Third World*, (London, Verso, 2002).

²⁴ Maylam, op cit, p 72

²⁵ Richard Symonds, *Oxford and Empire*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991), p 161

²⁶ Symonds, op cit, p 164

²⁷ Flint,op cit, p238

²⁸ Philip Ziegler, *Legacy: Cecil Rhodes, the Rhodes Trust and Rhodes Scholarships*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2008), p16

²⁹ Chris Patten, *Not Quite the Diplomat: Home Truths about World Affairs* (London, Allen Lane,2003) p2