

## The Life and Legacy of Cecil Rhodes

Written by Robert Calderisi (Quebec & St Peter's 1968) who is writing a new biography of Cecil Rhodes.

### Life

Cecil John Rhodes was born on July 5<sup>th</sup> 1853 in Bishop's Stortford (Hertfordshire). Although he was already showing signs of what was to be a lifelong illness, at the age of 17, he joined his elder brother Herbert in South Africa, first on a cotton farm in Natal, then in the diamond fields of Kimberley. He cut a strange figure in that rough environment, reading Aristotle, Marcus Aurelius, and Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* in his spare time, while showing the imagination and mettle of a born entrepreneur. Soon, word spread about "Rhodes's luck" and people were not referring to the older brother. At 20, he returned to England to begin his undergraduate studies at Oxford but interrupted them after only one term to return to Kimberley. When he received his B.A. seven years later, he was already a wealthy man and Member of Parliament in the Cape Colony.

By the age of 37, he had created De Beers, a company that controlled 90 percent of the world's diamond production, headed another major mining firm (Consolidated Gold Fields), managed the British South Africa Company – which the British government had authorized to "settle" large areas of central and southern Africa – and was prime minister of the Cape Colony. In the last twelve years of his life, Rhodes added what is now Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Malawi (750,000 square miles) to the British Empire. Like the US "robber barons" of his day (Rockefeller, Carnegie, Vanderbilt, Morgan) Rhodes was ambitious, hard-driving, and sometimes ruthless. But he was kind and generous to his friends, helpful to those in need, and a philanthropist the whole of his life.

Following his first heart attack at the age of 19, he sensed that he would not live long. "Everything is too short," he said once. "From the cradle to the grave, what is it? Three days at the seaside." That sense of mortality made him reckless at times and contributed to his political downfall. In December 1895, an invasion of the Transvaal Republic that he had planned secretly with his close associate Dr. Jameson went awry and he was forced to step down as prime minister. The "Jameson Raid" was intended to relieve the plight of the English community of Johannesburg and hasten the creation of a South African federation. Instead, it added to the tensions that led, four years later, to the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902).

Admirers and critics have highlighted two remarkable moments in his life: his two-month vigil at the deathbed of his friend Neville Pickering in 1886, during which Rhodes forfeited gold claims eventually worth £250 million, and the peace talks he conducted unarmed in the open countryside with the Ndebele leaders at the risk of his own life in 1896.

He died, surrounded by his closest friends, at his seaside cottage at Muizenberg outside Cape Town on March 26<sup>th</sup> 1902, at the age of 48.

## Legacy

Rhodes knew that his record would be debated. In fact, even in his day, he faced controversy, mainly because of the Jameson Raid, but also from a small number of anti-imperialists, who were as lonely as the prophets of climate change would be in the 1970s and 1980s. Although he did more than anyone else to expand the British Empire, it was not for personal gain – as he had already earned his fortune in the diamond and goldfields of South Africa – but because he genuinely believed that the spreading of British influence would benefit everyone. He was dishonest in pursuing that goal – for example, he tried to convince the Ndebele leader Lobengula that all he wanted was to explore for minerals on his land – but he was consistent in the belief that his ultimate aim was right.

“You must be an Imperialist,” he told a friend, “not from mere lust of dominion or pride of race, but because you believe the Empire is the best available instrument for diffusing the principles of Justice, Liberty, and Peace throughout the world. When Imperialism involves the perpetration of Injustice, the suppression of Freedom and the waging of wars other than those of self-defence, the true Rhodesian must cease to be an Imperialist.” But he knew that his methods had been rough and hoped that he would be judged, not by the settled standards of Victorian England, but by those of the buccaneering Elizabethan age, which he thought were more appropriate to the African frontier.

In recent years, he has been called a “white supremacist”, charged with “genocide”, and regarded as the “architect” of *apartheid*. Some have even likened him to Hitler and Stalin. But these are exaggerations, which are difficult to support with historical evidence. In contrast to many of his contemporaries, Rhodes did not believe in any inherent genetic difference between peoples; instead, he saw English values as superior because of a favourable history, including four hundred years of Roman occupation. He was proud of his relations with Africans, enjoyed their company, and believed that with proper education and example they could govern themselves.

Although he made shameful concessions to Afrikaner opinion on African voting rights, it seems that he was changing his views on that subject in his last two years. Far from wanting to commit mass murder, he saved the Ndebele people from starvation in late 1896, following an outbreak of cattle disease, by giving them £6 million from his own pocket to buy corn. When the British government insisted on arresting and executing “rebel” leaders that year, Rhodes vowed to live with the Ndebele if the peace settlement that he had negotiated with them was not respected. He got his way.

Looking at the same facts, reasonable people can come to very different conclusions about Rhodes’s life and legacy. But, even now, his broader aims – a united South Africa and greater cooperation among the most powerful political forces in the world to promote prosperity and “perpetual peace” – appear worthwhile. The Rhodes Scholarships, which were the chief

instrument of that vision, have allowed more than 8,000 young leaders to hone their skills and expand their outlook to help solve global issues or serve their own countries and communities. In turn, the Scholarships have inspired other philanthropists to fund learning and research to improve the well-being of humanity.