

Between Rhodes and Me:
Cecil Rhodes' Legacy is Robert Mugabe and Emmerson Mnangagwa

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The reinvigoration of the Rhodes Must Fall Movement in Oxford and the broader protests calling for the removal of statues of imperial and colonial leaders and slave traders around the world have raised the public profile of debates not only about the values of those men (and sometimes women) commemorated in bronze and stone, but also those socio-economic and political structures and institutions they help establish and now exemplify.

The recent debates over Cecil Rhodes' legacy is emblematic of these dynamics. For those who revered him, Rhodes was as a visionary, a pioneering entrepreneur, a state-builder and British imperial hero who funded one of the most prestigious scholarships in the world.

I am a recipient of that scholarship, and I also happen to be from Zimbabwe, formerly Southern Rhodesia, the colony founded by Cecil Rhodes. Before knowing who he was, or that I would hold a scholarship in his name, I played next to Cecil Rhodes' grave as a little girl; he is buried twenty minutes from my childhood home on top of a large rock formation at a UNESCO world heritage site sacred to the Ndebele people, Matopos Hills. My family would visit Matopos at least once a year and we would ritually climb up to the top of the rock, known as "world's view," for the beautiful view.

Over the years, I would come to know Rhodes more intimately. First while earning my bachelor's degree in Social Studies and African Studies while at Harvard, and then at Oxford while conducting my PhD (DPhil) research on the history of education and conflict in colonial Rhodesia and Zimbabwe. Shortly after joining the Rhodes Must Fall movement, I discovered an even more personal connection to Cecil John Rhodes. After taking a DNA test, I connected with a South African second-cousin once removed who had kept the history of the European side of our family. From her, I learned that Cecil John Rhodes, or CJR as people in the Rhodes' Trust refer to him, was personally responsible for sending my great-great grandmother, Catherine Le Roux, from Cape Town on one of the first trains to Bulawayo to take care of his lawyer's children. It was in Bulawayo that she met my great-grandfather, who was a stone mason working on the Victoria Falls bridge. Suffice it to say, without CJR, my life would have turned out very differently, and I probably would not be here to pen these reflections. But even knowing that CJR was responsible for the meeting of my great-great grandparents' and the endowment of my scholarship has not altered my opinion of him, based upon the historical research I have carried out over the course of my academic career.

Amidst the current discussions of legacy and imperialism, I have been disappointed that few have explored how CJR acquired his wealth beyond building a diamond mine and being at the helm of an imperialist dream. Both those who revere him (albeit admitting he was "a man of his time" to account for the vaguely-defined "injustices" of imperialism) and those to view him as the incarnation of an equally vaguely-defined racist, colonial evil miss the mark. The former give him too much credit without considering his profoundly injurious actions (decried even by his contemporaries), and the latter rarely examine the important details and far-reaching legacy of these actions.

In studying the history of Rhodesia, I have come to realize that Rhodes' legacy extends far beyond his scholarship or even the structure of the exploitative mining industry which continues to destroy the lives of so many in Southern Africa and around the world today. Rhodes' most direct legacy is, for me, is Robert Mugabe and more recently, Emmerson Mnangagwa. While few can deny that Zimbabwe's misfortunes are largely attributable to the failed leadership of the post-1980's independence ZANU PF party, they should not take all of the credit. The authoritarianism, violence, land seizures, ruinous extractive financial policies and laws that have run Zimbabwe into the ground were the structural foundations upon which Cecil John Rhodes and the British South African Company established the colony of Southern Rhodesia. Whereas CJR and the BSAC enacted these policies in order to enrich themselves, their fellow white settlers, and the British Empire at the expense of their black African subjects, the leadership of ZANU-PF have deployed similar measures to enrich themselves, party loyalists, and their business partners at the expense of the Zimbabwean people.

A brief history of the founding of Rhodesia is in order here to substantiate this claim. Beginning in 1898, Rhodes defrauded the then ruler of the area, King Lobengula by making him sign a land agreement which Lobengula, being illiterate, believed only granted the BSAC very limited mining rights ("the right to dig one hole in which ten men could fit"); the agreement actually gave Rhodes exclusive rights to a much larger territory. Lobengula wrote to the British Colonial Office shortly thereafter explaining that he unequivocally rejected the document which was signed under false pretenses. The Colonial Office rejected Lobengula's request, and the crown accepted the fraudulently-obtained document and drew up a Royal Charter in October 1889, officially naming CJR the Queen's representative shortly thereafter. In September 1890, a pioneer of soldiers and settlers founded Fort Salisbury (today's Harare) and began prospecting toward what remained of Ndebele territory. Rhodes would defraud Lobengula again by sending agents pretending to be anti-BSAC traders, in order to extract the Lippert Concession, which gave the BSAC further land rights in the area of Mashonaland.

In addition to these fraudulent concessions, the British South Africa Company attempted to provoke King Lobengula to attack through a number of means (convincing chiefs and villages to stop paying taxes, encouraging cattle raiders, harassing villages etc.) in order to have a pretext or the full military conquest of the kingdom. In 1893, the BSAC got their pretext for war when the Mhari of Bere (a tributary group) had, according to Lobengula's sources, stolen Ndebele cattle. Lobengula sent a punitive force to retrieve the cattle and punish the clan and had sent word to Jameson, the BSAC representative, that the white settlers would not be harmed in the expedition. However, Jameson, who had been building up an army, an attack on Lobengula's forces at their weakest position en route, and after defeating them, moved on to attack every significant Ndebele residential area and decimated the structures and population. Lobengula burned down his settlement Bulawayo, fled north and disappeared. After the battle of 1893, the BSAC opened up both Matabeleland and Mashonaland to prospectors and pioneers who joined the army in cattle raids and widespread looting of the local populace.

The BSAC continued to forcefully annex land so that by 1895, one thousand and seventy farms, over ten thousand square miles, were marked exclusively for white ownership. In order to force people into the new colonial economy, the BSAC instituted a hut tax, charging an in-coin tax for every man, woman and child. Since the Africans in the region traditionally used a different system of currency, the tax forced them to sell their cattle, land, and other

possessions and work for colonial missionaries and settlers in order to pay the tax. The colonial government employed “native policemen” as tax collectors, authorizing them to use violence and imprisonment to enforce this tax, which amounted to a forced conscription into the colonial economy and further looting of the local populace.

But capturing land through fraud and force and imposing taxes to press the population into economic subservience was only the beginning. Like other colonial economies, that of Rhodesia was set up to extract resources and wealth from the colony and its African subjects in order to enrich the British homeland and white British citizens and settlers. In order to train workers for service in this extractive colonial economy, and to legitimate the racially-stratified state, Africans were educated in missionary and state schools that explicitly taught white supremacist ideologies, very much in lines with CJR’s own thinking, as he wrote in his 1877 “Confession of Faith”:

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, look again at the extra employment a new country added to our dominions gives. 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. Added to this the absorption of the greater portion of the world under our rule simply means the end of all wars.... Why should we not form a secret society with but one object the furtherance of the British Empire and the bringing of the whole uncivilized world under British rule....

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 honorable race the world possesses.... For fear that death might cut me off before the time for attempting its development I leave all my worldly goods in trust... to try to form such a Society with such an object.¹

¹ John E. Flint, *Cecil Rhodes* (Boston: Little Brown, 1974), 248-52. The first clause of Rhodes 1877 will read, “To and for the establishment, promotion and development of a Secret Society, the true aim and object whereof shall be for the extension of British rule throughout the world, the perfecting of a system of emigration from the United Kingdom, and of colonisation by British subjects of all lands where the means of livelihood are attainable by energy, labour and enterprise, and especially the occupation by British settlers of the entire Continent of Africa, the Holy Land, the Valley of the Euphrates, the Islands of Cyprus and Candia, the whole of South America, the Islands of the Pacific not heretofore possessed by Great Britain, the whole of the Malay Archipelago, the seaboard of China and Japan, the ultimate recovery of the United States of America as an integral part of the British Empire, the inauguration of a system of Colonial representation in the Imperial Parliament which may tend to weld together the disjointed members of the Empire and, finally, the foundation of so great a Power as to render wars impossible and promote the best interests of humanity.”

Incidentally, the idea of this society would evolve into the Rhodes Scholarships and the Rhodes Trust.

Despite Zimbabwe gaining independence in 1980, one can easily trace the post-independence laws and political and economic structures of authoritarian resource extraction to the very foundations of the state. Robert Mugabe and Emmerson Mnangagwa merely deployed the same tactics and structures of militarism, state seizure of land and property, corruption, and exploitation to enrich their class of ZANU-PF loyalists, whereas CJR and the BSAC created these structures to enrich their class of white European settlers and citizens of the British Empire. However, due to changes in the global economy and technology, the average Zimbabwean is perhaps even more expendable today that she was to the BSAC.

In Zimbabwe, Rhodes' and Ian Smith's thin rhetoric of "The White Man's Burden" to bring the benighted Africans into the light of civilization was replaced by Robert Mugabe and Emmerson' Mnangagwa's equally thin leftist and "anti-imperialist" rhetoric—both forms of propaganda mask remarkably similar regimes of corrupt and violent exploitation. Indeed, the latter was constructed on the foundations of the former. The main difference was that the explicitly racial hierarchy of Rhodesia was better at compartmentalizing, hiding, and routinizing the exploitation and violence from which the state's prosperity was derived (by localizing it within the Black and Colored underclasses), whereas the post-independence government, which has done away with a *de jure* racial hierarchy,² has been less successful in their efforts to sustain these extractive economies and hide the violent political repression necessary to maintain them.³

Moreover, while Rhodes was very much a "man of his times," lauded for his success and wealth, many of his contemporaries recoiled in horror from the brutality and ruthlessness that characterized the pursuit of his vision as running contrary to the competing Victorian ethical notions of "fair-play," "decency," and "Christian charity." In an 1897 letter, the white South African author, and one-time admirer of Rhodes, Olive Schreiner wrote, "We fight Rhodes because he means so much of oppression, injustice, & moral degradation to South Africa; - but if he passed away tomorrow there still remains the terrible fact that something in our society has formed the matrix which has fed, nourished, built up such a man!"⁴

While Rhodes' own words clearly outline the disdain in which he held Africans and his imperial, white supremacist ambitions, it is his exceptional actions that have cemented his considerable legacy. With great ingenuity, determination, and the devil's own luck, Rhodes literally stole large swathes of land through deception, fraud, and violence, instigated battles that became massacres in order to acquire greater wealth and power, and created a powerful monopoly and state which relied on racial oppression, violent repression, and natural resource extraction in order to build his empire. While an impressive feat for a megalomaniac, the crumbs that fell from that legacy, including this scholarship, are far from what I would consider a legacy to be celebrated.

² While the *de jure* racial hierarchy of Rhodesia was overturned, *de facto* racial divisions of class, wealth, and education remain entrenched in Zimbabwean society.

³ Another important difference is that Rhodesia was explicitly part of an imperial project to put the labor and land of Africans in the service of white Englishmen in the metropole and throughout the empire, while the "project" of the Zimbabwean ruling classes seems much more narrow and "self-serving."

⁴ Richard Rive (ed.), *Olive Schreiner Letters, Vol. 1: 1871-1899* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988), 308.

Nor do I believe his legacy should be erased; rather, I believe that, in the words of Ida B. Wells “the best way to right wrongs is to shine the light of truth upon them.” We should know and not forget where the money that now funds the Rhodes scholarship came from, and the heavy price of human lives at which this prestige was bought. Far more important to me than whether or not a statue of Rhodes stands or falls, is that Rhodes scholars and Oxford students know and reckon with the reality of Rhodes’ legacy in a serious way, so that we (especially those of us from Southern Africa) can begin to redress in concrete, political, material, and psychological terms, the harmful legacy of CJR.

Given these opinions, I have often been asked why I would accept a scholarship in his name. The answer I give is two-fold: firstly, the money Rhodes’ made to fund the scholarship came from my region and my ancestors, and so in the words of Fanon, “We do not tremble with gratitude. Quite the contrary; we say to ourselves: ‘It’s a just reparation which will be paid to us.’” Secondly, in accepting this scholarship and studying history as part of my DPhil in Comparative International Education Policy, I hope to do my part to begin to cut through the hagiographic haze on the one hand, and uninformed rage on the other, to better understand and unravel the painful legacy of Cecil John Rhodes that has continued to haunt my country, and so many others like it.