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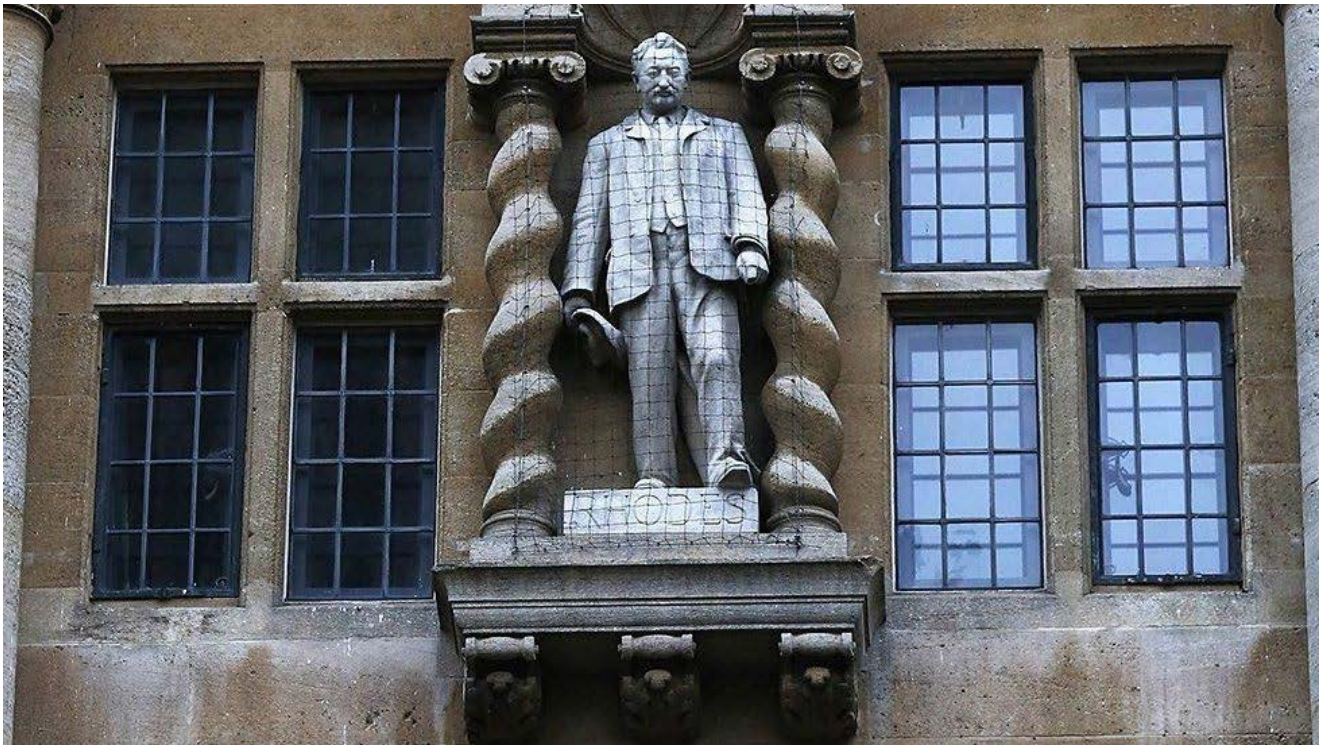
Rhodes Must Fall: The Legacy of Cecil Rhodes in the University of Oxford



Cecil Rhodes at the top of the Rhodes Building, Oriel College, Oxford

On 9 June 2020, more than a thousand people gathered in central Oxford demanding that Oriel College remove the statue of imperialist and mining magnate, Cecil Rhodes. Congregating in defiance of the Covid-19 pandemic, protesters drew renewed attention to the long-standing struggle to decolonise education and tackle institutional racism at British and South African universities. They also knelt with fists raised for over nine minutes in tribute to George Floyd, a man whose recent murder at the hands of Minneapolis police marked only the latest atrocity in a long history of racialised violence in the United States. Amid the local and global reckonings over race and racism taking place in the wake of Covid-19 and Floyd's murder, the 2020 Rhodes Must Fall protest marked the latest iteration in a fight to remove Rhodes from campuses that began over five years earlier.[1]

In 2014, after completing his master's degree at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in South Africa, Ntokozo Qwabe won a Rhodes scholarship to study a Bachelor of Civil Law (BCL) degree at Keble College, University of Oxford. Qwabe arrived in Oxford amid growing calls for the removal of the statue of Rhodes back home. UCT students argued that Rhodes's monument embodied the pervasive white privilege at the university, and that tackling those problems required removing his oppressive figure from campus. On 9 March 2015, students accelerated their demands for change. Political science student Chumani Maxwele hurled excrement at Rhodes's statue. Others occupied UCT offices and posted

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the hashtag #RhodesMustFall to publicise their campaign on Twitter. One month later, UCT removed Rhodes's statue from campus, inaugurating the Rhodes Must Fall movement.

The decapitated bust of Cecil Rhodes in Cape Town, July 2015

Although Rhodes fell in Cape Town, he remained standing at the University of Oxford. The abundance of tributes to Rhodes at the university may have surprised South African students arriving in Oxford, left wondering why Cecil Rhodes still enjoyed such an outsized public representation at one of the world's oldest and most prestigious universities. Moreover, with Oxford's own issues of institutional racism rooted in colonialism and slavery, South African students questioned why the many monuments to Rhodes did not provoke anger among Oxford's staff and student body. After demanding that Rhodes fall in Cape Town, and asking, why not in Oxford, Qwabe brought the anti-colonialist movement to his new university.

Beginning in the autumn term of 2015, Oxford's newly created Rhodes Must Fall movement mounted a sustained campaign not only to remove Cecil Rhodes's statue from central Oxford but also to address wider, systemic racial problems within its curricula and the culture across the university. Student activists mounted protests, courted national attention in the media and inspired heated debate about the nature of the university. But for every argument the students put forward to remove Cecil Rhodes from his prominent position facing the University Church, the Governing Body in Oriel College responded with another rationale to keep him up. Time passed, and not only did Rhodes not fall but he seemed to become more stable. By 2019, the student movement appeared to have petered out.

Campaigners did not have to wait long before the world events of 2020 reignited the anti-colonial movement. Around the world, thousands of people took to the streets to demand that officials remove oppressive symbols and statues reifying past atrocities. Amid this global struggle for racial justice, the campaign to tear Cecil Rhodes from his pedestal in central Oxford found new life.

The University of Oxford's visibility in contemporary debates over colonialism, apartheid and slavery mirrors the central role that the university played in lending intellectual support to Britain's imperial quest for worldwide hegemony in the 19th century. In the age of "New Imperialism", the period in which European nations, the United States and Japan all competed for overseas territorial expansion in order to acquire new markets and "civilise the world", Oxford served as the intellectual heart of the British Empire. Young men travelled to Oxford and acquired their desire and means to colonise other countries. Cecil Rhodes was like many of his generation in wanting to make their fortunes in the colonies, but it was in Oxford that they learned to justify their ambitions.

When Cecil Rhodes joined the University to read Law in 1873, he stood out less for his racism than for his lack of academic talent. As an advocate of white supremacy, Rhodes's politics aligned closely with many of his Oxford tutors and peers. Cecil Rhodes first realised and articulated his life-long mission to expand the British Empire as an undergraduate at the university. To this day, Cecil Rhodes lives on in Oxford through the buildings and institutions that bear his name and image.

Imperial spires

Sickness plagued Cecil John Rhodes's early life. Born in 1853 as the fifth son of Reverend Francis William and his wife, Louisa, Rhodes grew up in Bishop's Stortford, Hertfordshire. In 1870, aged 17, Rhodes's parents sent him to southern Africa to join his older brother, Herbert, hoping the warm climate might cure his asthma and other ailments. Francis and Louisa also hoped their son, who was neither clever nor ambitious, might acquire a career and financial stability abroad. At least in the latter, their plan bore fruit.

The Kimberley mine, also known as the Big Hole, 2005

After a long journey, Rhodes arrived in Durban, then part of the British colony of Natal in south-eastern Africa, with only the money that his aunt, Sophia Peacock, had sent him to live off. He spent the year unsuccessfully growing cotton in Natal's Umkomazi valley. In 1871, Rhodes followed his brother, Herbert, north to the region of Kimberley in the Northern Cape Province. Many others flocked to Kimberley – an area recently brought under British rule – chasing rumours of diamond mines. Discovered in the nearby Vaal River in 1867, the diamonds buried deep within Kimberley's blue soil contained untapped opportunities for wealth which the young Rhodes quickly pursued.

Rhodes made his fortune at Kimberley. Individuals who rushed early to the mines established diggers' committees to allocate mining claims in the region, assigning to each digger one or two claims. Due to the difficulties of digging diamonds individually on a large scale, small claimholders started merging into larger ones. People purchased or rented equipment to groups of miners for digging, moving dirt, and pumping water; seeing an opportunity for profit, Rhodes began renting such pumping equipment to miners. He reinvested the money earned from equipment rental in acquiring claims; he became business partners with London-born businessman, Charles D. Rudd. Together, they began buying up the claims of small diamond mining operators in the Kimberley area.[2]

After early financial success, Rhodes decided to return to England to study Law at Oriel College, Oxford, leaving his diamond interests in the care of Rudd.[3] Rhodes completed his degree on an unofficial part-time basis between 1873 and 1881, returning frequently to Kimberley to supervise his mining enterprise.

During this time, Rhodes and Rudd continued to prosper financially in southern Africa. In 1874, Richard Southey, Lieutenant-Governor of the newly proclaimed British Crown Colony of Kimberley, lifted the two-claim limit on mining holdings, driving Rhodes and Rudd to buy up as many claims as possible. In 1888, the businessmen secured financial backing from the Rothschild family, enabling them to amalgamate competing diamond companies into a single organisation dedicated to managing the mines. They named it the De Beers Mining Company.[4] With £200,000 of capital, De Beers, with Rhodes as secretary, owned the largest interest in the mine. By the 1890s, De Beers controlled more than ninety percent of the world's diamond production.[5]

While Rhodes made his fortune mining the diamond fields of Kimberley, he acquired his imperial calling at the University of Oxford. Rhodes joined the university as the incoming Disraeli administration called for increased British expansion overseas.[6] Students gathered regularly at the Oxford Union to debate Britain's role in the world, against the backdrop of growing national jingoist sentiment. In 1870, John Ruskin delivered his inaugural address as Slade Professor of Fine Art at the Sheldonian Theatre on Broad Street, in which he called on Britain to "found colonies as fast and as far as she is able, formed of her most energetic and worthiest men".[7] The text of Ruskin's lecture became one of Rhodes's most cherished possessions.[8] Professors inspired and fostered their students' convictions. Benjamin Jowett, master of Balliol College 1870-93, preached his desire to "inoculate" the world with Balliol men and "govern the world through my pupils".[9]

The imperial fervour at Oxford rubbed off on Rhodes. As an undergraduate, he resolved to dedicate his life to bringing the governance of the world under British rule, including painting the map of Africa "British Red".[10] In 1877, he wrote a "Confession of Faith", the first of eight wills drafted in his lifetime. The Confession articulated Rhodes's desire to establish "a Church for the extension of the British Empire". "The object to which I intend to devote my life," wrote Rhodes, "is the defence and extension of the British Empire." The Confession makes clear Ruskin's ideological influence on Rhodes. Like Ruskin, Rhodes expressed his wish for the "Anglo-Saxon race" to settle parts of the world "inhabited by the

most despicable specimens of human beings". He similarly articulated England's "duty" to "seize every opportunity of acquiring more territory", including recovering the United States.[11] Now, Rhodes sought to increase his wealth not only for wealth's sake, but to extend the racist and exploitative hand of British imperialism. Rhodes's eight years at Oxford focused his vision and added an ideological dimension to his expanding business interests.

Rhodes's rise (and fall)

Cecil Rhodes's imperial aspirations took him beyond the realm of economics and into public life. In March 1881, he stood in Cape Town's parliamentary election, winning the rural constituency seat of Barkly West, for which he depended on support from Boers long dominant in southern Africa.

Rhodes joined the Cape Parliament hoping to unite the separate states of southern Africa – including previously Boer-controlled, independent republics, such as the Orange Free State and the South African Republic, otherwise known as the Transvaal Republic, and territories under British jurisdiction, such as Cape Town – to create a British, white-dominated South Africa. Rhodes's aspirations in southern Africa brought him into competition with Germany, Portugal and the Boers who similarly "scrambled" for territories on the continent. Rhodes also wanted to extend British control to northern Africa, hoping to secure further mineral wealth, facilitate communications across the continent and promote white settlement. In particular, he worked to colonise northern territories before the Boer president of the Transvaal Republic, Paul Kruger, did so.[12]

Cecil Rhodes also coveted the Transvaal region for its gold fields. In June 1884, explorer Jan Gerrit Bantjes discovered a gold reef in the Transvaal's Witwatersrand region. With global economic markets reliant on the gold standard, word of the lucrative precious metal quickly triggered a rush to the mines. When the news of gold reached Rhodes, he likewise travelled from Kimberley to buy the first batch of Witwatersrand gold for £3,000. In 1887, Rhodes and Rudd established a new company, the Goldfields of South Africa, to mine the deep gold deposits of the Witwatersrand. In 1892, after consolidating three other South African mining companies, the Goldfields of South Africa became the Consolidated Goldfields of South Africa Ltd, listed on the London Stock Exchange.[13]

The gold-rich northern territories of Mashonaland and Matabeleland similarly attracted the interest of European settlers. Sceptical of their intentions, the ruler of Matabele, King Lobengula, regularly turned away those who approached him for mining concessions. While he doubted the intention of the miners, King Lobengula trusted missionaries. In 1888, Rhodes and Rudd exploited this situation, convincing the king to sign a treaty of friendship essentially granting the businessmen exclusive mineral rights through John Moffat, a trusted missionary. The treaty, named the Rudd Concession in recognition of Rudd's role in the agreement, gave the men carte blanche to pursue the economical exploitation of Matabeleland.

With the treaty in hand, Rhodes approached the British government for a charter granting a new company, named the British South African Company, the green light not only to mine but also to occupy Matabele and Mashonaland on behalf of and with the consent of the British crown. The government granted the charter in October 1889. With no northern limit, Rhodes hoped to use the gold fields of Mashonaland to fund the settlement of other areas of central Africa such as Nyasaland (present-day Malawi), and to facilitate his ambition of building a railway linking the colonies from Cape to Cairo. Rhodes was not particularly popular among members of the British establishment; but political figures viewed his extension of empire as too successful to challenge.[14] Through the British South African Company, Rhodes intended to use private means to exercise imperial expansion.

In June 1890, Rhodes and the British South African Company deployed a group of around five hundred white settlers, known as the Pioneer Column, to seize Matabeleland and Mashonaland. The column marched from the southern region of Bechuanaland north into Matabeleland and then onto Mashonaland, where they established a fort named after the British prime minister, Robert Salisbury. The company increased their efforts to colonise the region one year later, when colonialist Harry Johnson took over the administration of Nyasaland as commissioner of the British government and an employee of the British South African Company. The company named the territory Rhodesia in tribute to Rhodes, and ruled it into the early 1920s, when the imperial British government assumed control, until the area became modern Zimbabwe.

Not satisfied with engineering the occupation of Mashonaland and Matabeleland, Rhodes also sought to increase his own political power. In 1890, he became Prime Minister of the Cape of Good Hope Colony

and laid the foundation of the South African apartheid system of the 20th century. Seeking to appease the Afrikaner constituents in his electoral district, Rhodes passed the Franchise Ballot Act of 1892 which tripled the wealth requirement for voting, effectively barring Black citizens from participating in elections. He then engineered the Glen Grey Act of 1894, which distributed small, non-transferable tracts of land to Black individuals, which only the eldest son could inherit. This rule forced younger men to seek work at white-owned mines and plantations, no doubt of benefit to Rhodes's personal mining pursuits in Kimberley and the Transvaal.[15] In his diamond mines, Rhodes reduced the wages and cut the hours of Black workers, segregating them from white workers and requiring them to carry passes.[16] Through these measures, Rhodes's government instigated the first formal restrictions on the political and economic rights of the Cape of Good Hope's Black citizens.

In business and politics, control of the Transvaal Republic continued to elude Rhodes and the British. Soon, a plot developed to take the Transvaal out of Boer control. British workers in the area, known as Uitlanders, resented their treatment at the hands of Boer leaders; they formed a National Union demanding improved conditions, with Rhodes's other brother, Frank, at the helm. Rhodes's close friend and British colonial administrator, Leander Starr Jameson, began formulating a plot to mobilise the Uitlanders and trigger an uprising against Boer leader, Paul Kruger – a plan which Rhodes and British colonial secretary, Joseph Chamberlain, tacitly supported.

When the time came to act, the National Union held back, and Rhodes and Chamberlin assumed that Jameson had called the insurrection off. But Jameson had different ideas: on 29 December 1895, he went ahead with the raid without the support of the National Union. He invaded the Transvaal with only the assistance of his company troops, all of whom the Boers either captured or killed. The failed Jameson raid humiliated the British government. Rhodes resigned as Prime Minister of Cape Town in disgrace and stood down as director of the British South African Company.

The Jameson raid marked Rhodes's fall from power and coincided with his deteriorating health. Now, left with only his wealth, Rhodes turned his attention to securing his legacy. In 1891, he spoke of his desire "to be living after my death".[17] When Rhodes died in 1902, Oxford University granted him his wish.

Rhodes's imperial legacy

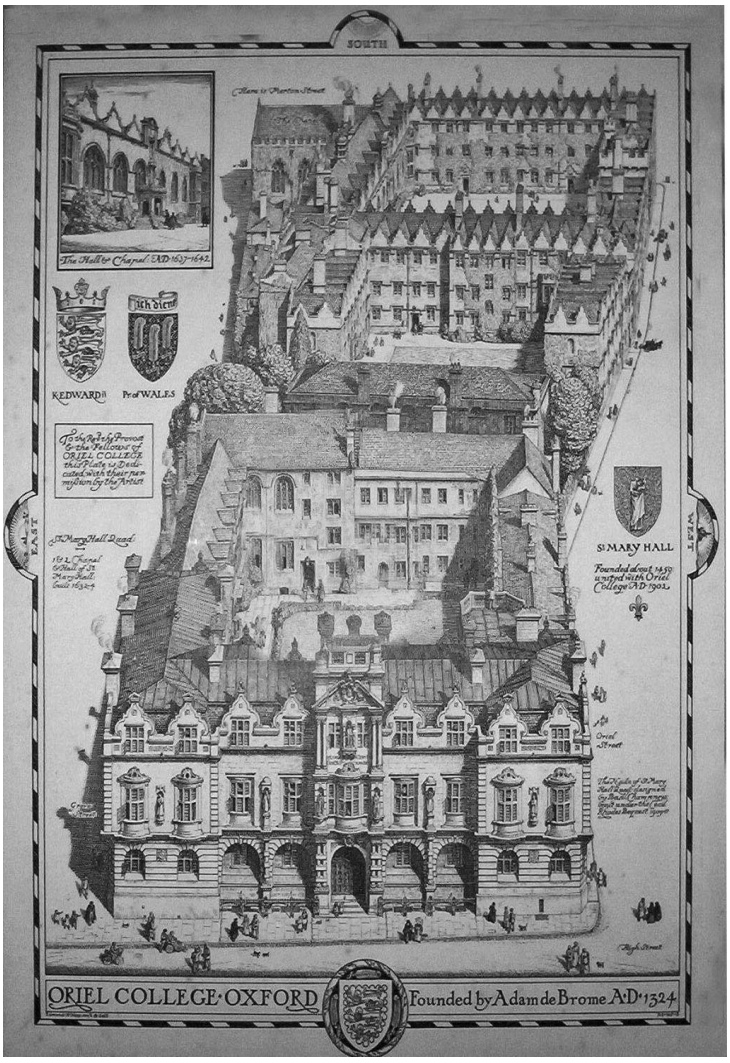
Over the course of his life, Rhodes drafted a total of eight wills articulating what to do with his fortune upon his death, with no children to inherit it. Rhodes spent his life obsessing over this question, writing the first will at the age of eighteen and the last at forty-six. Each of the wills articulated his belief in the superiority of English-speaking white "races", and their duty to lead the world. In addition to further colonisation – Rhodes intended any excess income from his estate to encourage further British settlement of Africa – he also desired to bring the United States and other countries under British rule as members of a federal empire. Rhodes's vision for achieving this goal evolved with each iteration, but his desire to perpetuate Anglo supremacy remained constant throughout.[18]

Rhodes originally planned to establish a clandestine society modelled on the secret societies of the Jesuits and Freemasons to carry out his vision. Over time, he came to view not secret societies but education as the best means for moulding the world to his will. Obsessed with the University of Oxford's imperial standing and reputation as one of the world's oldest and most prestigious universities, this seemed the natural institution through which to execute his plan.

In his seventh will of 1893, Rhodes inscribed his intention to put £3 million towards launching a new Oxford scholarship programme for students from South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and elsewhere in the British Empire. The will outlined his objective for the scholarship programme: "the education of young colonists at one of the Universities in Great Britain is of great advantage to them for giving breadth to their views, for their instruction in life and manners, and for instilling into their minds the advantages to the colonies as well as to England of the retention of the unity of the Empire". Through his so-called "Colonial Scholarships", Rhodes intended to fund the education of the next generation of young colonists.

Rhodes's friend, the anti-war activist and editor W. T. Stead, edited and executed his eighth and final will of 1899.[19] This "last will and testament" established four criteria against which to judge candidates when awarding the prizes: first, scholastic attainment; second, success in "manly" outdoor sports; third, concern for others; and, finally, exhibition of character and leadership. Scholars would come from across the globe:

two from each state of the United States and twenty "colonials," including three from Canada, six from Australia, five from South Africa, three from Rhodesia, and one each from New Zealand, Bermuda and Jamaica. An admirer of Kaiser Wilhelm II, Rhodes also made Germans eligible to apply. He left no doubt as to the intended gender balance of the scholars, explicitly excluding women from the competition. In contrast, Rhodes stated that judges should disqualify no students on the basis of race or religion. It is likely that by race, Rhodes meant nationality, as he often used the terms interchangeably. While Rhodes left the wording around the racial identities of the scholars ambiguous, his deep commitment to white supremacy left little doubt of his intention that scholarships go to white men. He established the Rhodes Trust and placed it in the hands of prominent, like-minded figures – such as the imperialist and educator, Sir George Parkin, and former British Prime Minister, Archibald Primrose, fifth Earl of Rosebery – with the experience and reputation to execute his vision.[20]



The Rhodes Building at Oriel College (foreground), 1919

Throughout the 20th century, a gap emerged between the intended and actual award of Rhodes scholarships. Breaking the mould of the Rhodes scholar as a young white man, in 1907, writer Alain Locke from Philadelphia became the first Black student to attend the University of Oxford through the scholarship programme. British-Jamaican cultural theorist Stuart Hall followed him after more than forty years in 1951, along with African American writer John Edgar Wideman and politician John Stanley Sanders in 1963.[21] After the UK passed the Sex Discrimination Act in 1975, banning discrimination in education on the basis of gender, women became eligible for the Rhodes scholarship in 1977. During this time, the stated aim of the scholarship programme evolved from educating future colonialists to forging "bonds of mutual understanding and fellowship for the betterment of mankind".[22] The Rhodes Trust is the oldest and arguably most prominent postgraduate scholarship programme in the world and has an extraordinary legacy, given Rhodes's life and work: Rhodes scholars now have diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, and are often Cecil Rhodes's most vociferous critics.

In addition to contributing £3 million to his eponymous scholarship, Rhodes also bequeathed £100,000 to Oriel College, Oxford with specific instructions to erect a new building bearing his name and image. Oriel complied: the Governing Body designed and erected the Rhodes Building between 1909 and 1911 to house their undergraduates and fellows of the college. A statue of Rhodes with hat in hand was erected above the building's central doorway: level with the statue of St Mary cradling Jesus that tops the University Church of St Mary the Virgin across the street. Below him, to his left and right, are statues of King George V and King Edward VII. The Rhodes Building, which placed the colonist above mortal kings and equal to saints, continues to loom large over Oxford's High Street, although the figure of Rhodes himself is relatively small. A plaque dedicated to Rhodes is found adjacent to Oriel College on King Edward Street, and another down the road in the Examination Schools. Two busts and a portrait of Rhodes also hang in Rhodes House on South Parks Road. The University of Oxford has more memorials dedicated to Cecil John Rhodes than any other figure dead or alive.[23]

The prevalence of images and symbols to Rhodes and Rhodesia at the University of Oxford call into question why the Rhodes Must Fall movement targeted Oriel College and its statue of Rhodes in its efforts to address racial inequality at the university. Other colonial symbols around the city, such as the Rhodesian

Eagle on top of Rhodes House, Rhodes House itself, and even the name of the Rhodes scholarships, have largely evaded criticism and controversy.

In 1961, psychiatrist and political philosopher Frantz Fanon described the history of colonialism as a "world of statues".[24] Fanon's call to end that violent history through the dismantling of colonial statues has become a rallying cry for those who have organised to confront the ongoing legacies of slavery, colonialism and apartheid in recent years. As cities erect statues to emphasise, often without context and therefore uncritically, the role of individuals in shaping large historical events and processes, campaigns have argued that addressing those legacies must also involve confronting – either through contextualisation or removal – the statues of those who represent them. For institutional racism and white privilege to end, Rhodes must fall.

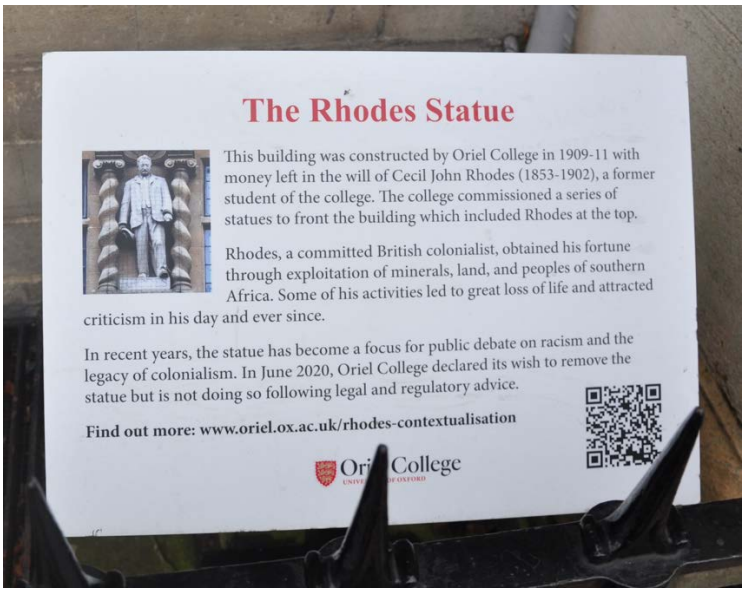
The Rhodes Must Fall movement also raises the question of how to deal with legacies of violence, exploitation and enslavement on a larger scale. British universities have only recently begun acknowledging the extensive ways in which academic institutions have benefited from the transatlantic slave trade. As is the case with the universities of Cambridge, Glasgow, Bristol and other prominent educational institutions around the UK, slave money permeates the endowments and buildings of the University of Oxford. The different ways in which institutions grapple with their legacies prompt us to ask why some statues fall while others remain unscathed.

The legacy of Cecil Rhodes

As a directionless young man, Cecil Rhodes travelled to South Africa seeking his fortune and a cause to which to dedicate his life. He found the former digging in the diamond fields of Kimberley and mining gold in the Transvaal; the latter he acquired closer to home, as an undergraduate reading law at the University of Oxford.

In the late 19th century, the University of Oxford first made and then reified British imperialists like Cecil Rhodes. Grounded in a form of humanist thought that championed white supremacy, the students and staff alike espoused pseudo-academic justifications for British colonial expansion overseas. Rhodes adopted the spirit of the New Imperialism prevalent at the university, adding an ideological dimension to his pursuit of wealth and power. Under the banner of the British Empire, he exploited the natural resources of southern Africa and profited from the labour of Black miners whose rights and access to land he restricted: the modern apartheid system was his true legacy.

In May 2021, crowds again took to the High Street of Oxford to challenge the decision by Oriel College's Trustees to retain Rhodes's statue, combined with demonstrations marking the one-year anniversary of George Floyd's death in America. Yet the question of what to do with Rhodes's statue continues to generate a wide national debate over how a country reluctant to confront its violent past should deal with monuments that celebrate its colonial history.



Of course, the possible options appear infinite. The Governing Body of Oriel College could simply remove the statue from its perch facing the University Church that Oriel also administers. A protester could scale the façade and decapitate Rhodes, borrowing the tactics of protesters in Cape Town. Or Rhodes might also suffer the fate of the 17th-century slave trader, Edward Colston, whose statue the residents of Bristol tore down and threw in the river in 2020. Or, perhaps, as sculptor Anthony Gormley has suggested, Oriel could simply turn Rhodes to face the wall behind him, forever symbolising his shame. And yet, Cecil Rhodes still looms over the façade of Oriel College, defiant in his persistence.

In October 2021, after the protesters forced Oriel's Governing Body back to the negotiating table, the college conceded that it finally needed to act. They installed a small sign, behind a spiked iron fence on the ground below the statue of Cecil Rhodes, describing Rhodes as a "committed British colonialist" who obtained his fortune through the "exploitation of the minerals, land, and peoples of southern Africa. Some of his activities led to great loss of life and attracted criticism in his day and ever since."25 The notice said that the college had "declared its wish to remove the statue but is not doing so following legal and regulatory advice". The jury is still out on whether this acknowledgement, albeit brief, of Rhodes's life and work will satisfy future campaigners; or whether the next generation of students will continue to chafe at passing under the outstretched (Oxford) brogues of the imperialist Cecil Rhodes.

Endnotes

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[5] Thomas J. Schaeper and Kathleen Schaeper, *Rhodes Scholars, Oxford, and the Creation of an American Elite* (New York: Berghahn Books), 7.

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[11] Cecil Rhodes, "Confession of Faith", 1877, appendix to John Flint, *Cecil Rhodes* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1974), 248-9, 250.

[12] Rotberg, *The Founder*, 173.

[13] Robert Porter, *The Rise and Decline of a British Mining House, 1926-1988* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2020), 5.

[14] Schaeper and Schaeper, *Rhodes Scholars*, 12.

[15] Richard Bouch, "Glen Grey before Cecil Rhodes: How a Crisis of Local Colonial Authority Led to the Glen Grey Act of 1894", *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 27:1 (1993), 1-2.

[16] Schaeper and Schaeper, *Rhodes Scholars*, 11.

[17] Schaeper and Schaeper, *Rhodes Scholars*, 17.

[18] Rotberg, *The Founder*, 668.

[19] Barbara Harlow, *The Scramble for Africa* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 477.

[20] Symonds, *Oxford and Empire*, 165.

[21] For more on Stuart Hall's experience as a Rhodes scholar, see Stuart Hall with Bill Schwarz, *Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Islands* (London: Penguin, 2017).

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[25] Jamie Grierson and Damien Gayle, "Oxford college installs plaque calling Cecil Rhodes a 'committed colonialist'", *Guardian*, 11 October 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/oct/11/oxford-college-installs-plaque-calling-cecil-rhodes-a-committed-colonialist