

ADDRESS

Monuments, memorials and the mystique of empire: the immortalisation of Cecil Rhodes in the twentieth century

The Rhodes Commemoration Lecture delivered on the occasion of the centenary of Rhodes' death, 26 March 2002.

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Today marks what is actually the third Rhodes centenary. The second centenary was in 1970 – the hundredth anniversary of Rhodes' arrival in Natal from England. That centenary was the occasion for the first Rhodes Commemoration Lecture at Rhodes University – delivered by Sir Harry Oppenheimer. The first centenary in July 1953 – the hundredth anniversary of Rhodes' birth – was certainly the most grand and upbeat of the three, especially in the country then known as Southern Rhodesia. There was a spectacular Centenary Exhibition in Bulawayo, opened by the Queen Mother. 125,000 commemorative silver crowns carrying Rhodes' head were struck by the royal mint – the only occasion the royal mint had ever struck a coin with the head of a commoner.

Not surprisingly this third centenary – the hundredth anniversary of the day that Rhodes died – is a much more low-key affair. In 1953 it was still possible to celebrate the life of the arch-imperialist. Nearly fifty years later that is clearly no longer the case. However, nor can we allow the day to slip by unnoticed at the university named after him.

How then do I approach this lecture? I could easily do a demolition job on Rhodes. There is plenty of ammunition for that: his more unsavoury utterances, his aggressive colonialism, and some of his dubious business dealings. But that will not be the focus or thrust of this lecture. Nor do I propose to offer a dispassionate, even-handed biographical sketch. That would be dry and tedious. And it is not possible to be dispassionate about Rhodes. After all, even in his life-time Rhodes aroused extreme emotions: he was both revered and loathed.

So what I am going to do is to focus mainly not on Rhodes' life, but on his after-life. It is quite remarkable how Rhodes' name has lived on in the hundred years since his death. He achieved a quite extraordinary immortality, especially in the two former colonies named after him, in Cape Town and Kimberley, and

in Oxford. Indeed it seems quite likely that Rhodes carefully planned and choreographed his own immortalisation.

But first, for the benefit of those present who know only the name of Rhodes and very little about the historical figure, a brief outline of his life, in just a few sentences.

He was born in 1853 in the small Hertfordshire town of Bishop's Stortford, where his father was the Anglican vicar. In 1870, aged seventeen, he was sent to Natal, seemingly for health reasons, to join his brother Herbert who was cotton-farming in the Richmond area. About a year later he again followed his brother, this time to the diamond fields. There he would make his fortune and concoct grandiose ideas of imperial expansion. Elected to the Cape parliament in 1880 he used his political position and growing financial muscle to carry through his expansionist ambitions. During the 1880s he manoeuvred to secure a route through the present-day Northern Cape, North-West Province and Botswana towards the territory north of the Limpopo. In 1888 his agents secured a dubious concession from the Ndebele chief, Lobengula. On the strength of this he founded the British South Africa Company and organised the white colonisation of Mashonaland in 1890. By this time he had become extremely powerful. His De Beers Consolidated Company had secured a monopoly over the diamond industry in 1888; he had obtained a foothold in the gold-mining industry through the Gold Fields Company; and he had become Prime Minister of the Cape in 1890.

Rhodes, it seems, had become too powerful – a case of hubris. He began to resort to violence to achieve his political ends. In 1893 his BSA Company launched an aggressive invasion of Matabeleland, conquering the territory. At the end of 1895 Rhodes' right-hand man, Jameson, tried to repeat the success of 1893 by invading the Transvaal to overthrow Kruger. The Jameson Raid failed miserably. It was a fiasco. Rhodes was disgraced and resigned as Cape premier. He was finished politically, but he remained influential and kept his business interests alive. From the late 1890s his health deteriorated and he died, aged 48, in his beachfront cottage at Muizenberg on 26 March 1902.

That is the barest of outlines of Rhodes' life – a life that has aroused enormous interest among later generations, so much so that there are more biographies of Rhodes – far more – than there are of any other figure in southern African history. In 1973 the historian, Lord Blake, delivered the fourth Rhodes Commemoration Lecture at this university. In his lecture Blake referred to the 1963 Lockhart and Woodhouse biography of Rhodes as 'the most authoritative' yet, and went on to say that he could not 'see anyone profitably essaying the same task for many years to come'. How wrong he was. Six more full biographies of Rhodes, and three short biographies have been published since Lockhart and Woodhouse, as well as five other books in which Rhodes is a central figure. The fascination with Rhodes is endless. Between 1897 and 1996 well over thirty biographies of Rhodes have appeared, including eight foreign

language works. The longest period between the publication of different biographies has been no more than nine years. In two particularly prolific phases five biographies were published between 1910 and 1913, and seven between 1933 and 1936. Four appeared in 1933 alone. Add to this numerous articles and essays about Rhodes; eight novels in which he features, from F.R. Statham's *Mr Magnus*, published in 1896, to Anne Harries' *Manly Pursuits*, which appeared in 1999. Add also a few plays, a 1936 movie – called 'Rhodes of Africa', and the more recent big-budget TV series.

Why this fascination with Rhodes? How has he fared with his biographers? I will try to address these two questions together. There are three main categories of biography. First, there is the hagiography; then there are the critical studies; and lastly there are the biographies that present an intermediate, mildly critical view.

Until the 1930s the hagiographers held sway. Most of the early biographers were former associates, acolytes, admirers of Rhodes; men like Michell, Rhodes' banker, his former secretaries, Jourdan and le Sueur, and his architect, Baker. They were naturally concerned to represent their hero as favourably as possible. So they portrayed Rhodes as a visionary, a man driven by his ideals, and by a sense of duty and service towards Britain and southern Africa, an utterly selfless man who cared not at all for his own aggrandisement, nor for personal wealth, valuing money only as a means to realising his ideals. They saw Rhodes as a thinker and a man of action able to realise his objectives through his drive and charisma. The hagiographers laid the foundation for the heroic image of Rhodes – an image that came to be increasingly challenged but has still managed to survive, at least in some quarters, into the twenty-first century.

The first critical biographies of Rhodes began to appear from the 1930s. J.E.S. Green was the first to challenge the image of Rhodes the visionary: 'he was essentially a big-business man', wrote Green, 'and like all big-business men he was out for big money'. This theme would be developed later, in the 1970s and 1980s, by historians like Phimister and Turrell who argued that Rhodes was first and foremost a capitalist who used political power and engaged in imperialist ventures to further his ultimate aim – the pursuit of profit, a pursuit sometimes characterised by unscrupulous, manipulative financial dealings. Then too the critical historians (and I count myself among them) have trawled through his speeches to expose his attitude to Africans – which was at best paternalist, at worst crudely racist. More recently Anthony Thomas, who made the TV mini-series on Rhodes, has described him as a pioneer of apartheid.

The third view of Rhodes – the intermediate position – is not wholly admiring, is mildly critical, but generally apologetic. One line of defence has been to describe Rhodes as 'a man of his time'. So Lord Blake in his 1973 lecture argued that Rhodes should be judged 'in his own historical context'. A prob-

lematic argument, I think. Yes, historians must have empathy and be finely attuned to context, but showing too much empathy can lead to the exoneration of just about any historical figure.

The most comprehensive biography of Rhodes, by Rotberg, published in 1988, falls into this intermediate category, being both critical and apologetic. Rotberg's biography differs from the others in that he adopts a psychohistorical approach to Rhodes. Drawing upon the expertise of a psychiatrist, Rotberg argues that Rhodes, during infancy, enjoyed especially strong empathy and unconditional love from his mother. This gave him a strong sense of self-belief, enabling him to go through life relatively free of shame and guilt.

Rotberg's interpretation is rather unconvincing. Indeed, the biographies of Rhodes, judged collectively, constitute an unimpressive corpus of work. There is a great deal of rehashing and recycling from one work to another. One is struck much more by the quantity of the biographies than their quality.

Rhodes' immortality has rested less on books, and much more on monuments, memorials and the ubiquity of his name. Listen to the words of the historian, Richard Wood, reflecting on the life of a white boy growing up in what was Rhodesia:

Such a boy ... would possibly attend a school named 'Cecil John Rhodes', would go to a senior school and would be placed into Rhodes House, would look forward to the mid-winter holidays which were called 'Rhodes and Founders'; would, if he was lucky, be taken for holidays to Rhodes Hotel on Rhodes Estate and when he was not on holiday would possibly walk down Rhodes Avenue into town and draw money from the Rhodes Building Society and spend an afternoon watching a film at the Rhodes Cinema in the town. Rhodes' likeness would have been imprinted in his mind. He would pick up a bank note and holding it to the sun would see Rhodes' face imprinted in the note. He would walk down the main streets in the major cities and would see Rhodes' statue towering down from its pedestal ... The image was so firmly ingrained that Rhodes assumed almost God-like proportions in his young mind ...

Maybe that has some resonance for anybody here who grew up in the former Rhodesia 30 or 40 years ago.

In South Africa nowhere is Rhodes more commemorated than in Cape Town, where he lived for much of his life. One can walk through the Cape Town Gardens and encounter a large statue of Rhodes, then heading towards the city centre pass by the Rhodes Building. A walk down the main steps at UCT would bring one to another statue of Rhodes. Then one could drive along Rhodes Avenue before taking a turn-off up to the Rhodes Memorial.

In Oxford one can walk along High Street and come to another Rhodes Building, which is part of Oriel College, Rhodes' old college. High up on the front of the Rhodes Building is a statue of Rhodes; beneath his feet are statues of two lesser mortals, King Edward VII and George V. While I was at Oxford last year I worked in the Rhodes House Library, and I gave a seminar in a series convened by the Rhodes Professor of Race Relations, attended by Rhodes

scholars. There used to be a Rhodes Memorial Lecture at Oxford – one of these was delivered by Einstein.

How is it that Rhodes has become so immortalised? A look at some of the key monuments and memorial sites will provide clues. But first a few words about Rhodes' funeral – an event that certainly enhanced the Rhodes mystique. The laying to rest of Rhodes was spread out over two weeks following his death on 26 March. First there was a public lying-in-state at his Groote Schuur house, the first day of which was Good Friday. Then another in the Cape House of Assembly. There would be four funeral services, one at Groote Schuur, one at the Cape Town Cathedral, one in Bulawayo, and the final burial service at the grave in the Matopos. There was a week between the Cape Town Cathedral service and the final burial, as the coffin was taken slowly by train from Cape Town to Bulawayo, stopping at many points along the way. At Kimberley 15 000 mourners filed past. On 10 April the coffin was taken on a gun-carriage along a road hurriedly constructed for the occasion, to the grave in the Matopos. On the same day a memorial service was held at St Paul's Cathedral in London.

The funeral was more befitting royalty than a commoner. And its duration was such that it magnified both the historical figure and the memory of Rhodes. It was also a funeral marked by paradox. I refer to the Ndebele participation in the burial ceremony – this less than nine years after Rhodes' British South Africa Company had aggressively invaded and conquered the Ndebele kingdom. Ndebele indunas and their followers, even some who had fought against the Company in 1893, filed past the grave, paying homage to Rhodes.

Rhodes' grave in the Matopos would become in the twentieth century both a place of pilgrimage and a site of controversy. Rhodes himself had chosen his own burial site in 1896 while out riding in the Matopos. After his health deteriorated in 1897 he frequently reiterated his wish: 'Lay me there', he would say; 'my Rhodesians will like it: they have never bitten me'. Rhodes was well aware that Mzilikazi, the founding king of the Ndebele, was buried in a cave nearby. Rhodes once said, 'I admire the imagination of Umzilagazi. There he lies, a conqueror alone, watching over the land that he had won. When I die, I mean to be buried there ...'. So the two conquerors, the two founders, Mzilikazi and Rhodes, would lie not far apart, atop the mountain, each at once interred and enthroned.

In his will Rhodes prescribed the words that were to be on the brass plaque covering the grave: 'Here lie the remains of Cecil John Rhodes'. Nothing else – no birth-place, no date of birth, no date of death. The normal inscriptions were superfluous. Rhodes was placing himself beyond time and declaring himself immortal.

The grave enhanced the mystique of Rhodes. In the twentieth century it became a place of pilgrimage, a venerated site. Every new settler arriving in Rhodesia was expected to travel to the grave to pay homage to the 'founder'. Each year a memorial service was held at the site on the Sunday closest to the

anniversary of Rhodes' death. Other colonial heroes were buried there – Jameson, for instance, in 1920, 'in death as in life, at the right-hand of Rhodes'.

However, the grave would also become a site of contradiction and controversy. For some decades local Africans were not bothered by the grave. Indeed, after the funeral Rhodes' brother, Frank, entrusted the care of the grave to leading Ndebele indunas, who promised that they would keep their sacred trust. This they did – for many years the grave was watched over by an Ndebele guardian. The siting of Rhodes' grave close to Mzilikazi's tomb, far from being incongruous, was a cause for celebration among Ndebele cultural nationalists who, as late as the 1940s and 1950s, were happy to twin the two burial sites. These cultural nationalists argued that the annual ceremonies at Rhodes' grave proved that Europeans also engaged in ancestor worship. As late as 1953 Ndebele chiefs participated in a ceremony at the grave as part of the centenary commemoration of Rhodes' birth.

Rhodes, though, would not be left to rest in peace for all time. By the 1960s, as the African nationalist movement became more militant, so did attitudes towards the grave change. In 1961 one nationalist leader told a meeting that he would dig up the grave and send it to England as Rhodes had stolen the country from Africans. The nationalist leader went by the name of Robert Mugabe. In the early 1960s there was a petrol bomb attack on the grave.

Today the grave remains in place, but it is still a site of controversy. A campaign for its removal built up in the late 1990s, led by a self-styled 'war veteran', Lawrence 'Warlord' Chakaredza (now deceased). Chakaredza went on a tour of the United Kingdom telling people that 'Rhodes's remains will be fed to the crocodiles of the Zambezi river if somebody does not collect them'. But still the grave has had its defenders among local Ndebele. It was a tourist attraction and thus a source of income for local people. Rhodes had ceased to be venerated, had lost much of his symbolic significance, but he was still of some commercial value.

Although the grave remains, the ghost of Rhodes has been largely exorcised in Zimbabwe since independence. Statues of Rhodes were promptly removed from central sites in Bulawayo and Harare in 1980. Street names were changed. Soon after independence one ZANU-PF MP told parliament that all pictures of figures like Rhodes should be moved into a 'museum of oppression', going on to say that he did not agree with the view of Dr Nkrumah that the only good imperialist was a dead one, 'because even beyond the grave men such as Rhodes exerted an evil influence'. Further testimony to Rhodes' immortality.

In South Africa, even in the post-apartheid era, Rhodes has fared rather better than he did in Zimbabwe. Nowhere in the country is Rhodes more commemorated than in Cape Town. There is to be found the most grandiose of all the monuments to Rhodes, the Rhodes Memorial, set in the foothills of Table Mountain. The original proposal, put forward by Earl Grey, had been for a massive statue of Rhodes, modelled on the Statue of Liberty, to be erected on Signal

Hill – what would have been an extraordinary landmark, a monstrosity, indelibly stamped on the beautiful city skyline. This Cape Town was to be spared. Instead it got the Rhodes Memorial designed by the imperial architect, Herbert Baker, formally opened in 1912.

Sited on Rhodes' original Groote Schuur estate, the Memorial comprises three main parts. At the back, the highest point, is a Greek-style temple, fronted with columns. Inside the temple there is a bust of Rhodes in a contemplative pose. Wide stone steps lead down to the statue, 'Physical Energy', created by the Victorian artist, George Watts. On each side of the steps are four bronze lions, the work of the sculptor, J.M. Swan, who also made the bust of Rhodes.

In his overall design Baker aimed to express both thought, embodied in the contemplative pose of the bust, and action, manifested in Watts' statue. The lions were designed to express 'qualities of calm and reserved strength and power'. As a tribute to Rhodes the Memorial was skilfully conceived. It reflected both Rhodes' liking for classical architecture and his feeling for Table Mountain. Rhodes would have been delighted with the Memorial. It would surely have satisfied his yearning for immortality. Its prominent site and high visibility gives Rhodes an enormous, looming presence over Cape Town. It is a thoroughly imperial monument, embodying a conjunction of architecture and empire-building. In Watts' statue the rider, reining in his horse, peers into the distance. And like so many of the statues of Rhodes he faces northeast – the gaze of the empire-builder seeking further opportunities for colonisation on the road to Cairo.

Watts' statue has its own interesting history. There were actually three castings of the statue. Watts spent twenty years creating it. The first casting was completed in 1904, the year Watts died. The original plan was that this statue should be transported to southern Africa and erected near Rhodes' grave in the Matopos. This did not happen – the logistics of transporting it up into the Matopos proved impossible. But it did happen in somebody's imagination – the person who designed the book-plate for the library of the Consolidated Gold Fields Company. This book-plate comprises a picture of Watts' statue superimposed upon the grave in the Matopos. So the actual statue ended up at the Rhodes Memorial.

The second statue now stands in Kensington Gardens in London. This was Watts' gift to the nation. The third replica was cast in 1957 for the British South Africa Company and was unveiled in Lusaka in 1960 by the Queen Mother. When Zambia became independent a few years later the statue, so symbolic of colonialism, was removed and taken to the Department of Antiquities in what was then Salisbury. I understand that in the 1980s there were attempts to have this third replica brought to the Rhodes University campus. That did not happen, but we do see the statue all over Grahamstown, on Rhodes University stickers on the backs of cars.

In the decades after its opening the Rhodes Memorial became another place of pilgrimage, albeit not on the scale of the Matopos grave. But today the Memorial has lost much of its symbolic significance. Visitors would probably now go there more for the spectacular view than to pay homage to Rhodes. But the memorial has survived largely unscathed, although I understand that not so long ago a tin of red paint was thrown over Rhodes' bust.

The ghost of Rhodes has not haunted post-apartheid South Africa as much as it has post-independence Zimbabwe, where Rhodes has been more obviously a symbol of colonialism. In South Africa in recent years the main targets have been the symbols of apartheid and those Afrikaner nationalist figures deemed to bear the main responsibility for it – so we see the gradual eradication of names like Verwoerd and Vorster. Rhodes' symbolic presence has remained largely untouched.

What does the memory of Rhodes mean today? How should we be remembering him? A few concluding thoughts.

During the first five or six decades of the twentieth century, as long as the British Empire survived, the business of commemorating Rhodes was taken seriously by empire-minded people. But in the past forty years, since decolonisation, the cult of Rhodes has waned. And yet the name lives on. There are two main, related reasons for this. First, money: Rhodes' bequest. Rhodes' remarkable, continuing presence in Oxford is very largely due to the money he left the university, and to the scholarship scheme. The Rhodes Trust, the body that has administered his estate, came to be based in Oxford. And over almost 100 years more than 6000 Rhodes scholars, from all over the world, have studied at Oxford. This leads directly into my second point. Rhodes has increasingly become a brand-name. The attachment of the name to the scholarships and to the renowned university of Oxford gives it connotations of excellence and prestige. When, in the 1990s, a former Rhodes scholar became US president those connotations were enhanced. Naomi Klein, in her book *No Logo*, argues that brands and designer labels have in many ways become more important than, and divorced from, the actual products themselves. So has the brand-name of Rhodes become increasingly separated from the historical figure of Rhodes. It is interesting that when in 1994 there was a debate in Senate about changing the name of Rhodes University, nobody as far as I know defended the name on the grounds that Rhodes was a heroic figure. The case for the defence rested on the brand-value of the name.

A few final words on Rhodes, as I have said little about him as a historical actor. In many respects he was an enigmatic, paradoxical figure. Perhaps that is why none of the thirty or so biographers have really been able to fathom him. On the one hand he was the supreme agent of both an aggressive, masculine, expansionist colonialism and a rather crude cultural chauvinism. He rode roughshod over African chiefdoms that stood in his way, and showed little respect for African culture. Yet he was capable of sensitivity, deep loyalty, and

great affection to those around him. He was almost certainly homosexual, but in keeping with the codes and mores of his time, he probably suppressed or denied this orientation.

Rhodes has often been portrayed as a great visionary. I prefer to see him as an opportunist. He did have visions, but some of them were nothing more than boyish fantasies, such as wanting to reannex the United States to Britain, and many were not realised in his life-time. He was certainly no intellectual – it has often been said that Rhodes would never have won a Rhodes scholarship. He achieved his successes more by seizing opportunities, taking risks, winning round influential people, resorting to manoeuvring and machination.

A couple of years ago one of my students wrote in an exam one of those statements that at first glance you would think should be consigned straight into a book of howlers. He wrote, 'Rhodes made a fortune, doing no work'. Perhaps the student was trying to say that Rhodes was a nineteenth century 'casino capitalist'? Certainly Rhodes was adept at getting others to do his dirty work for him. And he did make a fortune, leaving an estate worth about £5 million, £50,000 of which went as an initial sum towards the founding of this university.

In the many biographies I have seen Rhodes compared with many of the supposedly 'great men' of history, most commonly with Caesar, Cromwell and Napoleon, but also with Alexander, Nero, Clive and Hastings, Bismarck and Hitler. In recent decades historians have, thankfully, abandoned 'the great man approach' to history. And, like many other historians, in examining Rhodes' career I can find little to acclaim or admire.

And yet he achieved this remarkable immortality. One of the very few people in history to have had a country named after him – not one but two. Then there are the statues and memorials, the names of buildings and streets. There is even a grass named after him, Rhodes grass.

A hundred years ago Rhodes, in being buried in the Matopos, was 'twinned' with Mzilikazi the founder of the Ndebele Kingdom that Rhodes' BSA Company conquered. Almost exactly a hundred years later Rhodes is now being twinned with Nelson Mandela, with the creation of the Mandela-Rhodes Foundation, a partnership between the Rhodes Trust and the Mandela Foundation. Another paradox? A coalition of two very different men – or perhaps a combination of Rhodes' financial might and Mandela's generosity of spirit. It is certainly a combination that would have delighted Rhodes because it gives legitimacy to his name and ensures its perpetuation at a time when his reputation is at a low.

We distance ourselves from the political thuggery and land-grabbing of Robert Mugabe, but we must not forget that Cecil Rhodes was also a land-grabber, inclined to be high-handed in the exercise of power, and ready to resort to violence to achieve his political ends. We can be critical of a cosy pan-African solidarity which exonerates corrupt dictators, but we are also chal-

lenged to look critically at the record of British colonialism in Africa – a colonialism whose supreme representative was Cecil John Rhodes.