

Cecil J. Rhodes: African Colossus

Among the colorful figures who played oversized roles in the British imperial project in southern, central and east Africa were William Mackinnon, Henry Johnston, Lord Ripon, Sir Hercules Robinson, Alfred Sharpe, Leander Starr Jameson, Lord Delamere, Rochfort Maguire, Joseph Chamberlain and Baron Lugard — set against tribal leaders like Msiri, Mwanga and Lobengula. All of these deserve mention and some will return later in the narrative.

One man stands alone, for better or worse: Cecil John Rhodes. He was a man of contradictions and controversy, a brainy eccentric driven in equal measure by entrepreneurship and ideological fervor. His charisma, boldness and ambition made him at once intolerable and indispensable. How many others have had countries named after them?

Rhodes was a combination of Teddy Roosevelt, P.T. Barnum and Jubilee Jim Fisk. He nearly cornered the diamond market, amassed another fortune in gold, and not-so-nearly fulfilled his dream of establishing global British rule (he even wanted the American colonies back!) The benevolent goal of that expansionist project, he avowed, was “to hereafter render wars impossible and promote the best interests of humanity.”

A sickly lad, son of a vicar, Rhodes was sent from Hertfordshire to Capetown, South Africa at age 17 to improve his health. A year later, in 1871, the eager young roustabout was involved in the diamond business in Kimberly. He rose quickly, acquiring mines, assuming a dominant role in the trade. During this time he also managed to spend eight years as an undergraduate at Oxford, studying Latin and ancient history. He entered Parliament in Capetown in 1881 and in 1888, founded DeBeers. In 1890 he was elevated to prime minister of the Cape Colony. He promoted the northward expansion of the British empire, envisioning a vast swath of Africa under the control of the queen — “from Cape to Cairo.”

Described as shy and solemn when he was a young man, Rhodes would grow animated when elaborating on his schemes, delivering short bursts in a squeaky voice. (Didn't TR have a squeaky voice, too?) Some were not impressed. A Colonial Office mandarin dismissed him as “grotesque, impulsive,



Africa from Cairo to the Cape
(according to Cecil Rhodes)



schoolboyish, humorous and almost clownish.” Rhodes was “not to be regarded as a serious person.”

Rhodes acted decisively to disenfranchise Blacks, who had limited voting rights in the Cape since 1853. He backed legislation limiting Black property ownership and tripling the wealth requirement to vote. This endeared him to Boers, Afrikaners and other settlers who shared his racist views.



Pause a moment, though, to consider the Rhodes Scholarship. Endowed by Rhodes, who died of congenital heart disease in 1902, it is the world’s oldest graduate scholarship. Among Rhodes scholars are prime ministers of Malta, Australia and Canada, as well as former U.S. president Bill Clinton. In making his bequest, Rhodes offered this typically quirky tribute to his beloved university: “Wherever you turn your eye — except in science — an Oxford man is at the top.”

In his will, the politician/magnate/benefactor stipulated that Rhodes Scholarships should be awarded without regard for “race.”

Rhodes held racist views, and was not shy on the subject. “The native is to be treated as a child and denied the franchise,” he said. “We must adopt a system of despotism ... in our relations with the barbarism of South Africa.”

Peter Godwin, a Zimbabwean scholar, proposes a semi-exculpatory treatment of Rhodes’ racist views. “Rhodes and the white pioneers in southern Africa did behave despicably by today’s standards,” writes Godwin, “but no worse than the white settlers in North America, South America, and Australia, and in some senses better ...”

Better? “... considering that the genocide of the natives in Africa was less complete,” Godwin continues, noting that “the former African colonies are now ruled by indigenous peoples, unlike the Americas and the Antipodes, most of whose aboriginal natives were all but exterminated.”

How do you like that? A defense of racist British imperialism as less genocidal than American manifest destiny!



A tale of three statues. The first (left) is an engraved illustration on a five shilling stamp from Rhodesia and Nyasaland (1959), featuring a statue of Cecil Rhodes in downtown Bulawayo. The middle picture shows a similar scene (it’s always fun to compared the real-life subject to an engraved version on a stamp, isn’t it?) At right is the same scene, post-independence, after the Rhodes statue was removed to a museum and replaced by a likeness of Joshua Nkomo. Once a bitter rival of Zimbabwe’s autocratic ruler Robert Mugabe, Nkomo by this time was safely dead.

TO BE CONTINUED