

Introduction

Cecil John Rhodes remains one of the most controversial figures in the history of English imperialism. Rhodes accumulated immense wealth as a diamond magnate in South Africa, founding the infamous De Beers Consolidated Mines, and served as prime minister of the Cape Colony from 1890-96. As a colonial statesman, Rhodes promoted policies that deprived Africans of their land rights, forcing many to become migrant labourers.¹ Rhodes' chauvinism, racism, and imperialist desires to colonise Africa have made him a despised figure by many, leading to contentious debates about statues and memorials to the businessman and political leader. The high profile removal of his statue at the University of Cape Town (UCT) after intense protests and demonstrations by students and faculty sparked a global movement striving to decolonise education. This case study takes an inside look into the #Rhodesmustfall movement at UCT.

Background

Cecil John Rhodes was perhaps the most iconic figurehead of British Colonial endeavours in South Africa. He accumulated immense wealth through founding the De Beers Group of Companies, a mining conglomerate that amassed great wealth from the diamond trade. Aside from his involvement in the diamond trade, Rhodes gained infamy as prime minister of the Cape Colony, where he enacted a series of discriminatory policies which restricted African land ownership, voting rights and coerced Africans into exploitative wage labour to fuel the mining industry.²

Rhodes is perhaps best remembered for his adamant dedication to the extension of the British Empire, embodied in his 'Cape to Cairo' Railway Project, which aimed to connect South Africa to Egypt and consolidate British interests and colonies across the continent. Rhodes's expansionist hopes were based on his belief in Anglo-Saxon superiority and his desire to civilise the 'uncivilised' world.³ Citing divine providence, the noble virtues of Englishmen, and the areas of the world inhabited, in his words, 'by the most despicable specimen of human beings', Rhodes' imperialist vision was underpinned by deeply entrenched racism and prejudice. Indeed, his commitment to colonialism was made clear in his own writings in which he stated: 'I contend that we are the first 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.'⁴

The costs of these imperial conquests are now well known and well publicised. Subsequently, the contemporary presence of numerous statues commemorating Rhodes in public space, especially in South Africa, has become deeply controversial in light of his strong association with racism and colonialism.

¹ South African History Online, "Cecil John Rhodes," South African History Online, 2020.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Amit Chaudhuri, "The real meaning of Rhodes Must Fall," *Guardian*, 16 March, 2016

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Rhodes' brutal imperialist legacy and racist worldview have prompted much discussion about how he should be remembered and how societies should deal with artefacts and objects that bear his name or honour his legacy. One such statue was located at UCT.

UCT has an intimate relationship with Rhodes. The land on which 'Upper Campus' is built was bequeathed to the university on behalf of Rhodes in 1928--land claimed by the British--and it is here that the controversial statue was prominently displayed directly in the centre of the campus (Figure 1).⁵ The bronze statue of Rhodes was sculpted by British artist Marian Walgate, it is 1.5 times life-size statue, styled in the pose of Rodin's 'The Thinker'.⁶ The statue depicts Rhodes seated, holding in one hand a map, symbolizing his imperial dreams for Africa and depicts Rhodes gazing out on the landscape below the hills.

The statue is located on the main square of the university campus and was first unveiled in 1934 at a formal ceremony which included a performance by the Cape Town Philharmonic Orchestra and a speech by the Earl of Clarendon.⁷ The statue was an ode to Rhodes Imperial dreams, facing east in the representation of Britain's 'northwards Imperial aspirations' the plinth of the statue was inscribed with Kipling's poem: I dream my dream by rock and heath and pine of empire to the northward ay, one land from lion's head to line.⁸



Figure 1: "Close up of the Rhodes Statue" Image by Ian Barbour via Flickr CC BY 2.0

A reference to Rhodes' goal of a unified British Empire stemming from Cape Town to Cairo. In its application for removal, UCT described the decision to commission the statue 'an accident of history', explaining that it was only paid out of the remaining funds left over from the construction of the nearby Rhodes Memorial and only relocated to Upper Campus due to the widening of the road below the rugby fields where the statue was originally located in the 1960s.⁹ While the statue may have been 'accidental' its overt homage to imperialism and glorification of Rhodes caused it to come under contestation throughout its lifespan, often becoming the centrepiece of various student protests throughout the years. Predating the #Rhodesmustfall movement.

⁵ Amanda Castro and Angela Tate, "Rhodes Fallen: Student Activism in Post-Apartheid South Africa," *History in the Making* 10, no.11 (2017): 202.

⁶ Britta Timm Knudsen and Casper Andersen, "Affective politics and colonial heritage, Rhodes Must Fall at UCT and Oxford," *International Journal of Heritage* 25, no.3 (2019): 242.

⁷ Ibid., 234.

⁸ Nicholas Coetzer, "An Imperial Axis, Counter-memorials, and the Double Bind: The Rise and Fall of Rhodes at the University of Cape Town," *Arq* 24, no. 1 (2020): 73.

⁹ Ashley Lillie, "Heritage Statement on Behalf of UCT," *University of Cape Town Property and Services*, August 28, 2015.