

Cherishing the British Empire and the Statue of Cecil Rhodes

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Image: Cecil Rhodes

“The university and its students should prefer improving today’s orthodoxies to imposing them on our forebears.” – Tony Abbott, former PM of Australia *The Independent*, Dec 23, 2015

Attitudes to imperialism vary with their ages. In their first, and purest form, they assume it to be necessary, a burden (white was the dominant colour over the last two centuries) that takes the form of the “gift” of civilization. Then, things cool off. Anti-imperial leagues develop. Critiques come to the fore. Running an empire is not necessarily such a good idea, least of all for those very subjects whose name it is policed in.

Tony Abbott, the knifed and deposed former Australian prime minister, was a product of that empire. The British imperium, for him, transmuted the world from barbaric base metal into the solid gold of civilization.

It is all the same rhetorical baggage that drives post-colonial historians and writers to focused indignation: the rule of law, liberal institutions, protection of property. To that end, empire builders are to be cherished, not reviled. They are not to be seen as plunderers so much as givers.

One of those figures is Cecil Rhodes, whose spirit must have awoken from a slumber with the news that his statue in Oxford University’s Oriel College, along with a plaque – would be removed. “Remember that you are an Englishman,” he famously said, “and have consequently won the first prize in the lottery of life.”

The 2,300 signatures of the Must Go Oxford campaign were of different opinion. The student campaigners claim that this Rhodes tribute “violates the university’s declared aim of fostering an inclusive culture which promotes equality.”[1]

Rhodes, whose name ended up being given to a state he did much to create, was so interested in the empire building project he became its caricature, brushing aside opposition, and misreading his enemies. His miscalculation over Boer resistance in South Africa proved costly.

When the earth had reached a point when terrestrial empires could go no further, Rhodes would lament that limitation, bound, as he was, to the planet. “To think of these stars that you see overhead at night, these vast worlds which we can never reach. I could annex the planets if I could; I often think of that. It makes me sad to see them so clear and yet so far.”

When Rhodes died in March 1902, *The Guardian* editorialised that, “The judgment of history will, we fear, be that he did more than any Englishman of his time to lower the reputation and to impair the strength and compromise the future of the Empire.”[2] This type of man was demagogic, manipulatively cunning, a capacity “which makes men do either good or evil on a great scale.” According to the editors, he democratised modern political intrigue; he frightened or excited populaces, and misled them when necessary.

Any one with an iota of sense would know that Rhodes Scholarships, the very direct legacy left by the empire builder, are distinctly based on rigging lotteries, rather than letting them function. Selection of candidates is based on imitation, not novelty: former Rhodes Scholars are less total book worms than the essence of the Commonwealth man.

As the Rhodes testament outlined, the scholarship would create “a Secret Society, the true aim and object whereof shall be for the extension of British rule throughout the world” with the “perfecting of a system of emigration from the United Kingdom, and for colonisation by British subjects of all lands where the means of livelihood are attainable by energy, labour and enterprise”.

This, at least, was their origin, and while deviations from the norm do and have happened, the establishment principle of this “secret society” remains important for selection committees. It is one of functioning elites: once there, make sure that everything is controlled to the extent possible. The colonising motif is never far away.

Abbott should know: he was a member of this society, and graduated from Oxford in 1983. And he ticked all the boxes of Rhodes’ vision: he could muster a few lines when needed, take to the sporting fields when required and be a good institution man when asked.

His response to the proposed removal of the Rhodes statue cannot be anything else other than a defence of Britain’s greatest empire builder. Removing the reminder, suggested Abbott would “substitute moral vanity for fair-minded enquiry.”

The various comments, which found their way into *The Independent*, provide an ample illustration about what Abbott means by such fair-minded enquiry. “The university should remember that its mission is not to reflect fashion but to seek truth and that means striving to understand before rushing to judge.”

Legacy is everything in this. Yes, Rhodes was not a good egg when it came to fighting racism. In truth, he was quite open to its tendencies, laying the ground work for racial regimes in the South Africa he loved stomping in. His death, observed the *Guardian*, “offers a tragic warning to the practitioners of narrowly materialistic statecraft.”

The obituary’s observation about Rhodes is a fine warning for Abbott himself, a creature of that very narrow variant of materialistic statecraft. His own time as prime minister was demagogic, divisive and dismissive. But Abbott prefers a neat little twist: the Rhodes Scholarships that came from the pocket of good generous Cecil did much to fund those who opposed racism. Good eggs can come from imperfect ones.

Abbott might seem crass in his views, but the issue is far more a case of understanding what lies behind the statue. The Rhodes legacy is an imperial one, and not having his reminder around could give the rather false impression about how empire was built. We need those dirty reminders, and there are few better places to have them than Oriel

College, though others suggest a museum.

To that end, the contemporary *Guardian* editorial takes a slightly different position on Rhodes from that in 1902, lauding the engagement of the Rhodes Trust with Nelson Mandela Foundation to fund joint Mandela Rhodes scholarships in 2003 and engage with the “Redress Rhodes” movement. “It is better to have the issue out in the open than to pretend it is mere posturing about symbols.”[3]

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Notes:

[1]

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/oxford-university-risks-damaging-its-standing-if-is-pulls-down-cecil-rhodes-statue-warns-tony-abbott-a6784536.html>

[2]

<http://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/from-the-archive-blog/2011/may/19/guardian190-cecil-rhodes-obituary>

[3]

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/dec/22/the-guardian-view-on-cecil-rhodes-legacy-the-empire-strikes-back-good>

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