

“Cecil Rhodes: A Man of His Times”

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Cecil John Rhodes was born into a world in which the major European powers were involved in a world wide land grab. Each European power was out for God, glory, and gold. Europe sought to bring the light of Christianity to the uncivilized world, the glory of claiming more land than their rivals, and the increased revenue of trade in new markets. Rhodes became a major leader in this land grab. Using today's standards it is easy to portray Rhodes as white-supremacist monster, but he was simply a man of his times. Cecil Rhodes incarnated many of the beliefs of the major powers of his day.

He was born the fifth son of the vicar of Bishop's Stortford in Hertfordshire, England in 1853. The young Rhodes disappointed his father by not becoming a clergyman. Rhodes was sent to join one of his elder brothers who was a cotton planter in Natal, South Africa. After the discovery of diamonds in South Africa he became a diamond speculator. By the time he was nineteen he had amassed a large fortune. Rhodes' newly found fortune allowed him to attend college at Oxford University. It is here where many of his opinions on Britain's destiny were formed. Rhodes set forth to, as he said, “paint the map red.” He wished for every part of the world to become one government under the control of the Anglo-Saxon people. Part of Rhodes' plan was to build a railway from “Cape to Cairo” in Africa. That is to bring under British control an entire North-South stretch of the African continent for the purposes of constructing a railway from the Cape of Good Hope—the southernmost point of Africa—to Cairo, Egypt in the north of Africa. Furthermore, Rhodes sought to retake the lost American

colonies. He thought all he would need to do is “show them what they lost.” Rhodes was not noted as an intellectual.

Sidney Low, a contemporary journalist of Rhodes, noted that Rhodes was not an original thinker, but instead took others ideas and sold them. She had this to say of her impression of Rhodes:

It seemed to me that Rhodes’ weakness was on the intellectual side. He was not a clear reckoner or close thinker. But rather—he himself admitted—a dreamer of dreams, vague, might, somewhat impalpable. Nor did it seem to me that he was the originator of ideas, but one who took up conceptions of others, expanded them, dwelt upon them, advertised them to the world in his grandiloquent fashion, made them his own (Sowards 143)

Rhodes was an unimpressive speaker his views; however, his energy and charm impressed many that heard him. Rhodes also enjoyed talking personally with others. It is said that many of Rhodes’ enemies would become his friends after talking to him. His charm even impressed the Matabele people—a tribe that he destroyed. They said to him, “You have come again and now all things are clear, we are your children (Sowards 150).”

In 1881 he entered the Cape Colony Parliament. At the same time he was still involved in diamond mining. From his initial success he was able to purchase other mining operations. Eventually his diamond operation known as De Beers Mining Company became the second largest diamond producing company. Through shrewd business deals that included manipulating the price of diamonds, Rhodes was able to receive on loan the funds needed to purchase his larger competitor. De Beers effectively became the world’s single producer of diamonds—a position that it still holds today. The

immense wealth that Rhodes amassed matched that of the so-called “robber barons” of the day. In many ways Rhodes was the greatest of the robber barons because he believed there was nothing that could not be bought with money and no one that could not be bribed.

Rhodes began his quest for northern Africa while in the Cape Colony parliament. In 1889, Rhodes entered negotiations with the Matabele people. When he found that support for his negotiations was not forthcoming from either Cape Town or London, he secured a charter from Queen Victoria for the British South Africa Company, and continued the negotiations himself. In the end of negotiations he became the sovereign of nearly all of the land north of the Cape Colony and south of the Zambezi River (Sowards 139).

As Langer stated in his “The Triumph of Imperialism,” the Englishman is born believing that he is the master of the world and most fit to lead. This would be a perfect characterization of Rhodes. In Rhodes’ 1877 “Confession of Faith,” he stated, “I contend that we are the finest race in the world and that the more of the world we inhabit the better it is for the human race.” Admittedly, this statement is very similar to statements by leaders such as Hitler; however, at the time in which this text was written this statement simply reflected the popular sentiment of most of the British people. There was already an idea in the British culture that they were superior and, as with other’s ideas Rhodes took this idea and expounded and dwelt on it. The other European powers would undoubtedly say the same of their particular nationality. If there is madness in this plan then it is not Cecil Rhodes who was a lone mad man, it is that entirety of European power was mad.

Rhodes applied the popular view of Darwinism that “dog eat dog,” the bigger dog consumes the smaller, to humanity. He believed that it was God’s will was that the more advanced races should displace or destroy the less advanced. Rhodes’ attitudes to the natives varied with the political wind. Rhodes was even once quoted as saying that the natives were no different from the Europeans; however, at other times he referred to the natives as children. The modern biographer Cloete states that all that was Nordic blonde was good to Rhodes. Cloete also states that for a relatively long amount of time, Rhodes was capable of being all things to all people. (Sowards 150) This helps to explain his contradictory statements about the natives. Rhodes was willing to co-operate with the natives and the Boers—descendants of Dutch settlers living in Africa. When dealing with Mahdi tribe, Rhodes sought not to conquer the natives, but to “square” with them—that is to pay them for their co-operation. Rhodes also negotiated with Lobengula, King of the Matabele, when he established Rhodesia (Sowards 139).

One of his dreams was to unite the British and the Boers to be united in the Cape Colony parliament. Rhodes sought to consolidate the British colonies and Boer states of South Africa into a nation. Not a nation independent of the British Empire, but another dominion of Britain similar to those created in Canada and Australia. Rhodes did not work to “Britainize” the Earth, but simply create one large state in a way similar to the United States in which separate entities—in this case the British colonies—was united under the ruler of one nation. (Sowards 143)

Rhodes downfall came when his role was discovered in a failed plot to overthrow the leader of the Boer republic of the Transvaal, Paul Kruger. Rhodes died at the age of 48 in 1902. He left over £3 million to Oxford University for the creation of the

Rhodes scholarship. Cecil Rhodes was a man of times; his views and actions reflected the views and actions of other actors in the international community at his time. J. Kelly Sowards best worded the role of Rhodes by saying, “Cecil Rhodes is the most obvious embodiment of nineteenth-century British colonialism. He exemplified all its economic rapacity and political ambition, its chauvinism and paternalism, its racism and bigotry. He also exemplified the untrammelled gospel of wealth (Sowards 140).”

Sowards, J. Kelly. *Makers of World History Volume II*. 1992. St. Martin's

Press: New York.