

7. Cecil Rhodes – Enigmatic and Misunderstood

Prosperity, Power & Philosophy

A recurring image of Cecil Rhodes is pursuit of extravagant wealth and narrow British interests that reflected the spirit of the age. But that is to misunderstand the man, his ambitions and grand vision that had much to do with civilizing societies in a world of Empire.

Loved or feared, wrote William T. Stead of Pall Mall Gazette fame, the name of Cecil Rhodes towered over contemporaries, one of the foremost names of his day. In equal measure he inspired loyalty and friendship but provoked dread and hate. A complex person, Rhodes was imbued with charisma, when he chose, but was blunt, acerbic and cynical at times. Similar to a prism he presented different faces, contextual to subject, person, urgency and own mood.

Son a vicar, known for ten minute sermons, Cecil John Rhodes was born in 1853 at Bishop's Stortford in Hertfordshire. Educated at the local grammar school from 1861 to 1869 his health broke down and at 17 he left England for South Africa. He yearned for an Oxford degree and studied Ancient History & Philosophy at Oriel College, Oxford, spasmodically for eight years from 1873 to 1881 with study periods punctuated by long absences in South Africa.

Rhodes sketched out his ideas when only 24, contending, "we are the first race in the world" and "the more of the world we inhabit the better it is for the human race." His grand vision was of a John Bull stereotype of energy, labour and enterprise, acting in the best interests of humanity, with Britain and the English Language at the epicentre. Rhodes wished to avoid war but foresaw that major conflict might arise, embroiling much of the world.

In often intense conversations, newspaper editor W. T. Stead was impressed with Rhodes' ideas for federation, expansion and consolidation of the Empire, and duty to the world. In an eloquent article he described Rhodes as an amalgam of Puritan, Emperor of ancient Rome and Cromwell acolyte. This was stirring stuff and eager readers of the Pall Mall Gazette loved it.

He intended to join his brother in Natal to grow cotton but Herbert was now more interested in diamond prospecting. Discovery of diamonds in the Orange Free State led to the brothers abandoning a cotton plantation. They lodged a claim at Colesburg Kopje, Kimberley and late 1871 Herbert handed this over for an unfazed Cecil to run.

By 1873 Kimberley, population of 43,000 of whom 13,000 were white, was fast becoming the second largest town in Southern Africa. In the market square was a jumble of tents, canvas framed houses and wagons where diggers, diamond merchants, tradesmen and merchants jostled for business. Adjoining this was Main Street, chock full of stores, vibrant bars and canteens. A set of scales, magnifying glass, persuasive tongue and wallet were tools for the trade. At night, gambling and prostitution flourished. So did squabbles fuelled by liquor.

Rhodes was persistent, patient and resilient in staking out claims with a careful assessment made of possible yields. Most days he was seated on an upturned bucket, immersed in his beloved classics. His trusted ally was Charles Rudd, Harrow and Cambridge educated. They consolidated their small claims and set up the De Beers Mining Company in 1880. Rhodes soon bought out the rival Barnato Mining Company in Kimberley.

Rhodes said to artist, Norma Garstin, "it's not about money; it's the game I like" – the idea, planning, the chase, scent of victory and squaring opponents. Everyone had their price, as when faced with an election opponent. "What does he do?" The reply was he farms and sells

produce to which Rhodes retorted, "Buy a thousand sacks of mealies (sweet corn) from him." He had won! Every person had their price. So did nations as Rhodes knew full well.

Diamond fever struck again in 1881. Joint-stock companies in make-shift offices in Ebdon Street, Kimberley, were besieged by every profession and trade, all desperate to speculate. Such was the frenzy, some stock traded at premiums nearly 300% over asset values. In the clamour, eager investors paid scant attention to the validity of claims and scams were rife.

Rhodes was implicated in selling his shares in other companies and buying them back when returns failed to materialise or if a company went under. The boom built on credit, speculation and thin air would crash with a crescendo. Rhodes and Rudd weathered the storm as they had anticipated well and covered their tracks carefully.

After election to Barkly West, near Kimberley, in 1881 Cecil Rhodes took his seat in the Cape Legislature a year later, retaining it for life. He rubbed shoulders with Sir Hercules Robinson, later High Commissioner for South Africa, and a useful link to further his business interests and those of associates. A burning intent, pursued with ruthless determination, was gaining complete control of diamond mining operations in Kimberley.

Massive investment of capital was required. Step forward German born financier Alfred Beit whose enormous wealth and financial acumen were essential. Better still, his preoccupation was a generous return on his investment. Thanks to Beit, doors opened to other investors and patronage of the Rothschilds. High echelons of political life were involved too, including 4th Earl Grey and Joseph Chamberlain, Colonial Secretary in the Salisbury government.

On 13 March 1888 the De Beers Consolidated Mines Company was formed with Rhodes, Beit and Barnato on the board. Within a year Rhodes controlled the entire South African diamond mining industry - and 90% of world production.

Formation of the British South Africa Company

In 1886, gold was discovered at Witwatersrand near Johannesburg in the Transvaal. Within a year Rhodes had created Consolidated Gold Fields of South Africa. Rumours persisted of gold north of the Transvaal in Mashonaland and Matabeleland, home of the Shona and fearsome Ndebele, led by unpredictable King Lobengula. John Moffat, missionary son of Robert and brother in law of David Livingstone, had impeccable credentials and he was sent out by the Exploring Company to smooth the path for an agreement with Lobengula for mining rights.

This was a springboard to set up a trading company backed by, not only wealthy financiers and investors, but crucially the British Government and Queen via her role as head of the Privy Council. This would give it legitimacy, prestige, influence – and independence.

A draft Charter presented to both Houses of Parliament in March 1898 talked of promoting trade, commerce, civilization and good governance. 'Concessions' comprising agreements, grants and treaties would considerably improve the "condition of natives," advance civilization and suppress the slave trade. The focus was north of British Bechuanaland and north and west of the South African Republic, outside Portuguese dominions, primarily: Barotseland and Matabeleland & Mashonaland, later Northern and Southern Rhodesia respectively.

A Royal Charter of Incorporation was placed before the Privy Council on 14 October 1889 for approval in principle, prior to ratification at the Court of Balmoral the following day. Protocol required formal agreement by the Privy Council and granting of the Charter by Her Majesty on their advice. All seven directors of the British South Africa Company were present to witness a historic day including the Duke of Abercorn as chairman and the Duke of Fife as his deputy.

The basis of its operations was the negotiation and acquisition of concessions and agreements "without prejudice to those already negotiated by chiefs and tribes." Clause three appeared innocuous, entitling the Company to "acquire by concessions, agreements or treaty all or any rights, interests, powers and jurisdictions of any kind and nature" with the important inclusion of "public order, lands and property." Clause fourteen gave an indication of the portents: "Careful regard was to be had (inter alia) to the laws and customs of any class or tribe or nation, especially the possession, transfer and disposition of lands and goods." Warning signals were clear, to those able to comprehend the legal terminology and spot loopholes.

In July 1890, nine months after endorsement of the B.S.A.C., Cecil Rhodes was elected Prime Minister of Cape Colony. Soon he created a wedge between Kruger and Cape Afrikaners over a planned railway from Transvaal to Mozambique on the east coast. Rhodes dispatched his most trusted friend, the unpredictable Dr Leander Starr Jameson, to Bulawayo with orders to construct a road through Ndebele land. Armed pioneers were dispatched, forts built in Shona country and the Union Flag hoisted in Fort Salisbury (now Harare) on 12 September 1890.

Some felt Jameson, whilst full of bright ideas and energy, was an incompetent leader and they were to be proved right five years later. The Company was overstretched financially and the rich pickings anticipated in Mashonaland and Matabeleland, had not materialised. Over-optimism on mineral quality and total yield was exacerbated by greed and hype.

The speech Rhodes gave to the Company on 18 January 1895 addressed fundamental issues. Referring to north of the Zambezi, he said all land and minerals belonged to the Company, except Nyasaland. No such land concession had been agreed. Rhodes insisted cost of upkeep would not fall on all on HM Treasury, expecting in return minimal Government interference. For Rhodes his 'Suez Canal' was intact from Bechuanaland to Matabeleland and Mashonaland.

Now at the height of his powers, in February 1895 Rhodes was admitted to the Privy Council. Soon, the shadow of the ill-fated Jameson Raid undermined the imperious position of Rhodes, haunting him for the rest of his life and wrecking his dream. Not just badly planned, risky and impetuous but a fiasco. Afflicted by heart trouble and unable to gain Kruger's consent to a federal government for the Cape, Rhodes in secret gave his support for an Uitlander (non-Dutch) uprising in Johannesburg with complaints of heavy taxation and lack of voting rights.

On 27 December 1895 Jameson crossed into the Transvaal with an armed force. Meeting fierce resistance he was defeated near Krugersdorp. Rhodes, admitting to the raid, resigned as Prime Minister of Cape Colony on 6th January 1896. A Select Committee of the Cape Parliament absolved Rhodes but the action itself was condemned. On 15th July 1897 a House of Commons Select Committee found him guilty of 'grave breaches of duty' as Prime Minister of the Cape and de facto manager of the British South Africa Company.

Towards a better society

The ultimate ambition of Rhodes was expansion of British ideals, culture and thinking so that Britain would rule the world from Africa to South America and Holy Land to China and Japan, with recovery of the United States. With a sweep of his hand, countries and entire continents would become colonies. The notion of a red line from the Cape to Cairo was his goal but later in life he modified his ideal to that of spread of the English Language.

William T. Stead frequently observed Rhodes deep in thought, often with several subjects on his mind. He recalled Rhodes mentioning that whilst at Oxford he was greatly impressed by a saying of Aristotle in having one aim in life, sufficiently stretching and lofty to justify spending

your entire life trying to reach it. Rhodes rejected wealth alone, seeing men around him who didn't know how to use their vast accumulated finances.

He was not greatly enthused by politics either, other than to gain influence and power, and thought if life was to have a worthwhile goal it must involve people and the future. If a God existed, Rhodes concluded, then God was perfecting the human race by means of natural selection. Pursuing this Darwinian theme, it was the English who followed the highest ideals of justice, liberty and peace.

In 1891 Rhodes accepted an invitation by the Salvation Army's head, General William Booth to Hadleigh, curious to learn about this new and innovative farm colony overlooking the Thames Estuary. Predictably, he asked a blizzard of questions, deeply interested in how the farm was operated and financed and how best to improve profitability. Both were reformers, Rhodes insisted. Whilst he was trying to breathe new life into countries, the General was attempting to invigorate those who had abandoned Christianity, or fallen by the wayside.

William's son Bramwell, writing in the *War Cry* on 5 April 1902, said very few outside Christian and philanthropic circles impressed him more. Rhodes commented that whilst their objects differed, they were complementary. "You are set on filling the world with the knowledge of the Gospel. My ruling purpose is the extension of the British Empire." He thought prayer had its uses but more as a task list reminder, "a sort of timetable to bring to our mind the duties of the day and our responsibilities."

As Stead put it, Rhodes' gospel was of evolution, the survival of the fittest and progress by natural selection. For Rhodes, the English speaking race was by far better placed to inculcate these virtues and by so doing would aim to eradicate slavery that, in spite of the giant efforts of Wilberforce and others, still persisted. He concluded, "If there is a God, I think what He would like me to do is to paint as much of the map (of Africa) British red as possible - and extend the influence of the English-speaking race."

Rhodes delved into the philosophy of Aristotle. "Virtue is the highest activity of the soul, living for the highest object in a perfect life." A favoured author of Rhodes was Edward Gibbon. The first of six volumes on *The History of the Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire* appeared in 1776, the same year as Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*. A close second to Gibbon for Rhodes was Marcus Aurelius. A dog-eared pocket book edition of *Thomas à Kempis*, scored with numerous pencil marks, accompanied Rhodes on his travels according to Stead.

Rhodes' health continued to decline. He returned to his modest home at Muizenburg on the Cape coast as his pride and joy Groote Schuur was too rambling and inconvenient. He died on 26th May 1902 of heart disease, wearied too by his endeavours.

A historical perspective of Rhodes

So what does history make of Cecil Rhodes: selfless idealist, man of vision, a power obsessed oligarch, megalomaniac even, a social architect albeit Darwinian, a well-intentioned rogue or perhaps all of these and more?

William T. Stead verged on the euphoric. Rhodes' architect Herbert Baker said his energies were concentrated solely on a noble vision with scant thought given to self-recognition but opponents were ganging up. G. K. Chesterton said his major crimes were not dissimilar to Cromwell, making huge mistakes in the pursuit of firm ideals. His grand designs were "no more than the dregs of Darwinism as the weakest went to the wall," dismissing Imperialistic ambitions, he said, "Any Cockney clerk in Streatham could have spread all these as Rhodes

had no ideas to spread," resorting to violence and slaughter and meeting out his own form of justice. This was an extremely harsh judgement but was it accurate?

Historian John Galbraith, et al, felt Chesterton had overstated his indictment of Rhodes but his many admirers may have overstated his virtues. Was there an epiphany moment? Did study at Oxford, rubbing shoulders with academics and deep thinkers, shape his views and listening to John Ruskin? He was influenced by Ruskin and may have been by two generals - Gordon and Booth. He enjoyed their company immensely and respected their views. Like them he was determined to go his own way. For many, he was a chameleon who may have seen one side only. Rhodes related discussion to the subject matter, geared to the person, and the purpose. In that sense all may have thought they knew him well.

"Count in hundreds and thousands, not dozens" he insisted. He oversaw three quarters of a million square miles. His Inyanga farm in what is now Zimbabwe was 100,000 acres and fruit trees at Groote Schurr were planted in batches of 150,000. Rhodes was charming when it suited. Flora Shaw (later Lady Lugard) was entranced and Violet Cecil, Lord Salisbury's daughter, most impressed, noting his attention to detail. So was novelist Olive Schreiner. She modified her opinion later, saying: "not only far too powerful but too large even to go through the gates of hell."

Earl Grey, aware of Rhodes' faults, genuinely liked him. So did some opponents. Lord Milner put his finger on the pulse. "All men are ruled by foibles and Rhodes' foible is size." Many men have strong egos and may indulge in self-delusion at times and this applied to Rhodes. A claim is the cause of Rhodes was not Great Britain, or the worldwide spread of the English language or even justice, peace and liberty, but Rhodes himself.

This appears an unfair indictment. It is to misunderstand an entrepreneur, visionary, idealist and achiever, entirely self-driven and committed to an Aristotelian goal. Whether and how far his goal changed is still debated. Although a visionary, he was a man for the moment and the grand occasion with a ruthless determination to succeed.

Rhodes' wills illustrate precision in ensuring his wishes were fulfilled. In his sixth and final will he bequeathed £100,000, free of duty, to Oriel College, with 40% allocated for new College buildings. An equal allocation of 40% was earmarked to plug a hole in College revenues that would otherwise "impoverish Fellowships, the lifeblood for academic attainment and success." The sum of £10,000 was reserved for Fellows at the 'High Table' for their dignity and comfort with the balance of £10,000 for maintaining College buildings. Rhodes concern was for the status of Oxford to maintain its historic associations with the famous and worthy from Walter Raleigh and Cardinal Newman to Dr Arnold and John Keble.

As a lover of classics, and a great admirer of a first rate education, Rhodes both cherished and treasured his B.A. and Masters awarded some years later as was tradition. In 1890 an honorary degree of DCL (Doctor of Civil Law) was conferred Oxford University on Rhodes, still busy extending friendships and influence from Rudyard Kipling to Kaiser Wilhelm II. Yet scholastic achievement alone was insufficient. It had to be combined with a sense of destiny, duty and purpose, coupled with practical application. Rhodes was by nature a doer.

His most significant and enduring contribution was reserved for the award of scholarships at Oxford, with emphasis on educating young colonists to give breadth in their understanding of what Rhodes termed life and manners. It was in January 1895 that Rhodes first mooted the idea of founding scholarships open to British colonies. He wanted others to experience the academic atmosphere of an Oxford education, ambience of imposing buildings, banter and camaraderie and a world renowned University steeped in a rich history.

For Rhodes, a good education was "rubbing shoulders with every kind of individual and class on absolutely equal terms." His concern was that if allowances were insufficient, the contact these men had would be restricted to others of limited financial means. His greatest fear was that students would not obtain the full benefit and breadth of a uniquely Oxford education.

Scholarships were to be set at £300 per annum for any Oxford College for three consecutive academic years. Colonial places were parcelled up on the basis of meticulous allocation. Of the 60 places available, South Africa was given 24, Australasia 21, Canada 6, Atlantic Islands 6 and West Indies 3. With slide rule precision, Rhodes calculated white and black populations at over 13 million. The USA, with a population many times larger, had 100 places. Germany, with English compulsory in schools, was allocated 15 places.

Student selection criteria were precise: scholastic achievement, a fondness for competitive sport, display of qualities of manhood, truth, courage and devotion, a genuine sympathy for the protection of the weak, and kindly and unselfish fellowship.

In the ensuing lively discussion, Rhode, to laughter, jotted down personal qualities attaching. He insisted no student was to be qualified or disqualified on account of race or religion. He was not enamoured with classroom swots, poring over Latin and Greek, instead emphasising personal qualities. He allocated 40% to 'Brutality' (strength of character, conviction and courage), Leadership 40% and Unctuous Rectitude (moral correctness) 20%.

Such altruistic intentions are hardly in keeping with a ruthless entrepreneur, prepared to ride roughshod over humanity according to many, but without doubt he possessed a resolute streak. Those willing to put their heads above the parapet take the flak as well as the credit, measured by their foibles and failures as much as by their successes.

There has been extensive speculation whether Cecil Rhodes was homosexual but as historians contend this is not a helpful line of enquiry and there is no evidence he was. His not having sexual relations with women does not imply the corollary. Admiration, attraction, affection and adulation can result from a deep understanding of a person. Rhodes did have an inner circle of friends, sometimes called his secret society. Close friends were trusted implicitly and possessed unquestioned loyalty, a value highly prized as his official correspondence testifies.

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