

Rhodes, race and the abuse of history

The Rhodes Must Fall campaign which divided Oxford was built on a misunderstanding of the past and a manipulation of the truth

BY NIGEL BIGGAR

I

So Rhodes, after all, will not fall. Shortly before last Christmas, Oriel College announced its intention to remove a plaque commemorating its controversial benefactor, and to stage a “listening exercise” about dismantling his statue, which overlooks Oxford’s High Street. Lobbied by the local manifestation of South Africa’s Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) movement, the college publicly repudiated Rhodes’s “colonialist” and “racist” views, claiming that they stand in “absolute contrast” to “the values of a modern university”, not least diversity and inclusion.

Seven weeks later, however, Oriel made a U-turn. In the last week of January and in the wake of an overwhelmingly hostile reaction in the press and from alumni, together with donors’ desertion, the college reversed its position. Instead of removing the plaque and the statue, it resolved merely to add an explanation of historical context. “The College believes”, it announced, “the recent debate has underlined that the continuing presence of these historical artefacts is an important reminder of the complexity of history and of the legacies of colonialism still felt today. By adding context, we can help draw attention to this history, do justice to the complexity of the debate, and be true to our educational mission.”

That is the right and reasonable stance to take, and the very good news is that Oriel College got there in the end. The bad news is that it nearly didn’t. And that fact bears some sober reflection. Why was it that the governing body of an Oxford college—replete with very highly educated and experienced adults—came so close to capitulating to the shouty zealotry of a small group of students?

Of course, if the proponents of RMF are correct about the past, if “imperialism” and “colonialism” were simply and grossly evil and Rhodes simply and grossly wicked, then the Fellows of Oriel should have capitulated. Whereas we ought to tolerate the public celebration of morally ambiguous heroes—those being the only kind available to us—we probably shouldn’t tolerate human manifestations of the Devil incarnate.

So are the student supporters of RMF correct? Have they got their history right? Was Cecil Rhodes diabolical?

II

The case against him is this. That he held black Africans in contempt as racially inferior; that he sought to abolish their voting rights in Cape Colony; that he supported racial segregation and laid the foundations of the policy of apartheid; that he promoted forced labour and reduced miners

in his diamond mines to slaves; that he invaded and stole the ancestral lands of the Ndebele; and that he promoted genocide against them (and the Afrikaners). In short, that Rhodes was South Africa’s Hitler.

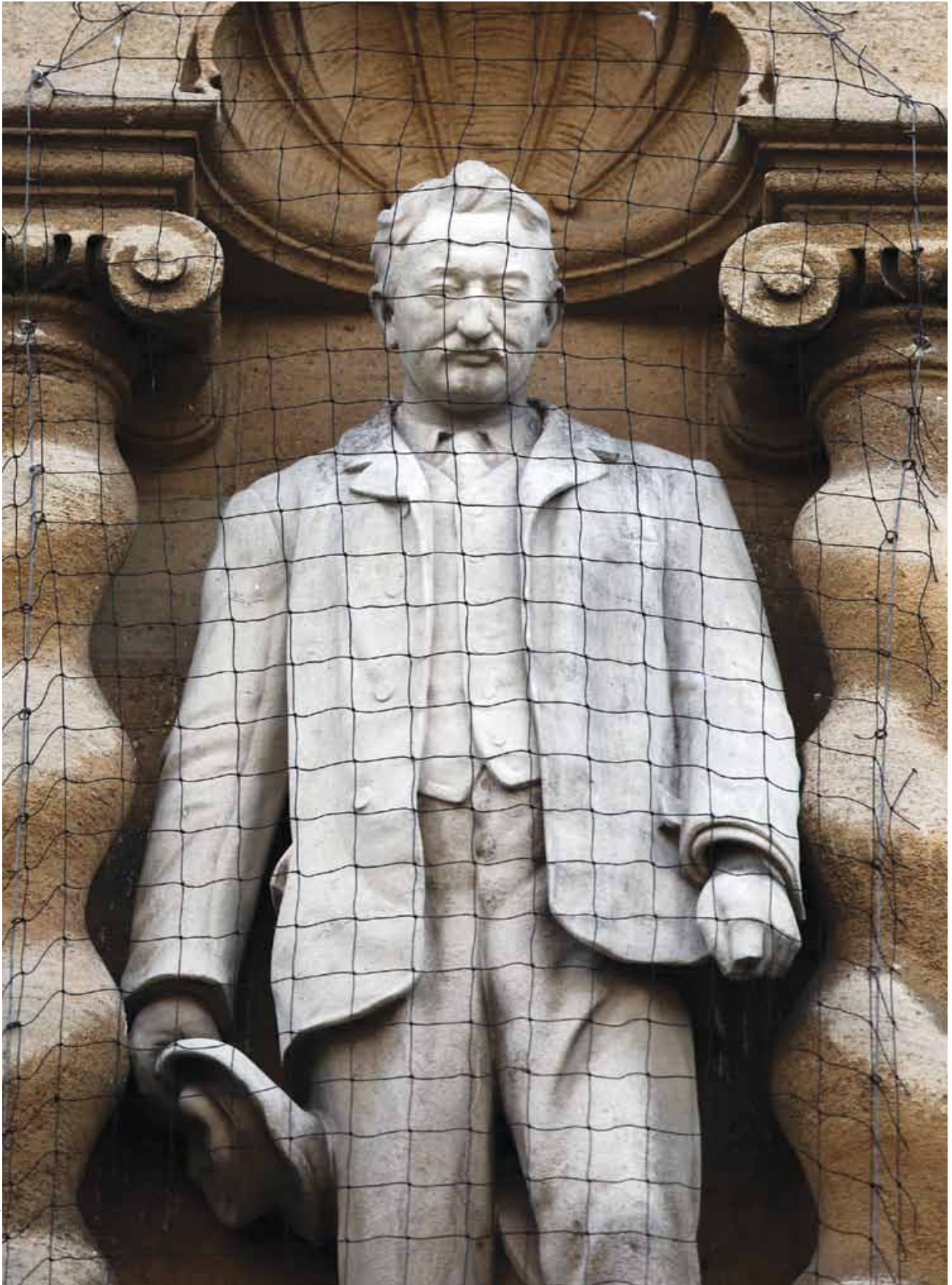
The supporting evidence is encapsulated in a quotation deployed by RMF in its petition to Oriel: “I prefer land to niggers . . . the natives are like children. They are just emerging from barbarism . . . one should kill as many niggers as possible.” This has been taken verbatim either from a 2010 essay or from a 2006 book review, from which the essay draws. The author of both is Adekeye Adebajo, a former Rhodes Scholar, who is now executive director of the Centre for Conflict Resolution in Cape Town.

If all (or much) of this were true, then Rhodes would surely deserve to fall from public grace. But it’s not. The “quotation” is, in fact, made up from three different quotations drawn from three different sources. The first has been lifted from an 1897 novel by Olive Schreiner, who oscillated violently between worshipping Rhodes and loathing him: it’s fiction. The second has been misleadingly torn from its proper context. And the third, as we shall see, is a mixture of distortion and fabrication.

III

It is true that in his so-called “Confession” of 1877 Rhodes did refer to parts of the world inhabited by “the most despicable specimens of human beings”. Insofar as the phrase “despicable specimens” implies the absolute denigration of all members of a human group, it is indefensibly racist. However, Rhodes wrote this when he was only 24 years old and young men often say reckless things that they later live to regret. Ntokozo Qwabe, the South African co-founder of the Oxford franchise of the Rhodes Must Fall campaign, recently hit the front pages of the press, when, in the wake of the November terrorist attacks on Paris, he declared “I do not stand with France,” implied a moral equivalence between France and Islamic State, and equated the French tricolour with the Nazi swastika. Qwabe, too, is 24 years old. At some point down the line he might well come to wish that he’d chosen his words more carefully.

Besides, Rhodes’s early, arguably racist reference deserves to be weighed against all the other things that he said and did. From first to last, he had a record of good relations with individual Africans. His premier biographer, Robert Rotberg, who is generally critical of his subject, writes that “as a young man he had related directly and well to unlettered Zulu. Throughout his life he remained sympathetic and responsive to the needs of individual persons of colour.” Not your stereotypical racist, then. ▶



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The statue of Cecil Rhodes overlooking the High Street, Oxford: Oriel College eventually refused to bow to pressure to remove it

It's also true that Rhodes saw the British as civilised and Africans as not. But he had some good reason to think that. After all, whether in terms of science or technology or communications or commerce or liberal political life, late-19th-century Britain was streets ahead of any indigenous southern African society.

And in important respects British civilisation was morally superior, too. Just as we 21st-century moderns react with moral indignation against forced marriage, the honour-killing of women, capital punishment without fair trial, militaristic society, slavery, and the wicked cruelty of despots, so our Victorian Christian forebears railed against the abominable practices of the Zulu and Ndebele.

Yes, Rhodes thought that black Africans were generally inferior, but in terms of cultural development, not biology. He believed that they could become civilised. This is important, because if one regards a people as biologically inferior and incapable of development, then that's a reason to exclude them permanently from participation in their own government. But that wasn't how Rhodes saw things. In a speech of 1894 he made this quite clear, when he said: "Now, I say the natives are children. They are just emerging from barbarism. They have human minds . . . We ought to do something for the minds and the brains that the Almighty has given them. I do not believe that they are different from ourselves." (Note what Dr Adebajo chose not to include in the second part of his composite quotation.)

Because he believed in the possibility of African cultural development, Rhodes never sought to overturn the remarkably liberal, colour-blind franchise that had existed in Cape Colony since 1853. And when in 1899 the Cape government proposed legislation that would have disenfranchised most natives, Rhodes protested, arguing that he had "always differentiated between the raw barbarians and the civilised natives" and that the vote should be extended to Africans under the principle of "equal rights to every civilised man south of the Zambesi". The previous year, when asked to clarify what he meant by "civilised man", he had added "a man, white or black . . . who has sufficient education to write his name, has some property, or works. In fact, is not a loafer."

Rhodes' critics retort with a contrary proof-text, his statement 11 years earlier that "the Native is to be treated like a child and denied the franchise". But then he was referring to uncivilised Africans who lived under communal land tenure and so did not meet the property condition for the vote. The full quotation is this: "We have got to treat the natives, where they are in a state of barbarism, in a different way to ourselves. We are to be lords over them. These are my politics on native affairs, and these are the politics of South Africa. Treat the natives as a subject people as long as they continue in a state of barbarism and communal tenure . . . The native is to be treated as a child and denied the franchise."

Rhodes's view echoes that of J.S. Mill, the great patriarch of Victorian liberalism, who, during the American Civil War, proved himself one of the most uncompromising and outspoken critics of slavery in the American South. Nevertheless, in the opening chapter of his classic 1859 treatise, *On Liberty*, he wrote: "Those who are still in a state to require being taken care of by others, must be protected against their own actions as well as against external injury . . . Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement, and the means justified by actually effecting that end".

Such a view is almost unspeakable now. Here in the early 21st century, reference to other human beings as "barbarians" is commonly regarded as intolerably "racist" (unless the objects

'Rhodes thought that black Africans were generally inferior, but in terms of cultural development, not biology'

of description are our medieval forebears or members of Islamic State). Four or five generations ago, however, "barbarism" and "civilisation" were respectable, technical terms. So, for

example, in *Ancient Society* (1877), Lewis H. Morgan, a pioneer of scientific anthropology, developed a theory of human progress that divides into three stages: "savagery", "barbarism", and "civilisation". Morgan's "barbarism" roughly corresponds to what we now call the pre-historic Bronze and Iron Ages.

Talk about "barbarians" or "children", who aren't yet grown-up enough to cast a vote, may seem patronising to us, but it wasn't expressive of biological racism. Indeed, it was effectively applied to white Britons in the United Kingdom, where, throughout the 1890s only 28 per cent of the adult (21+) population were regarded by the law as fit to vote.

And if Rhodes could be patronising towards Africans when he called them "children", he was racially indiscriminate in his attitude. In 1899 he also referred to the Fellows of Oriel College as "children" (in financial affairs), when he stipulated that they should consult trustees about managing his benefaction.

If Rhodes was a racist, he would not have enjoyed cordial relations with individual Africans, he would not have regarded them as capable of civilisation, and he would not have supported their right to vote at all. Nor would he have stipulated in his final will of July 1899 that the scholarships that would famously bear his name should be awarded without regard for "race". And yet he did all these things.

Some biographers assert that by the word "race" in his will Rhodes had in mind the distinction, not between white and black, but rather between British and Afrikaner. For sure, it was the conflict between the latter that preoccupied him for most of his life. However, in 1896 two things happened to change his focus. First, his involvement in the abortive coup d'état in the Transvaal—the infamous Jameson Raid—destroyed his credibility in the eyes of the Afrikaners, and with it any possibility of playing conciliator between them and the British. Second, after he had made peace with the Ndebele later in the same year, he told a companion that prosperity in southern Africa depended on establishing "complete confidence between the white and black races", and he vowed to make building it one of his main aims. After 1896, therefore, Rhodes was much more conscious of the conflict between whites and blacks. That's one reason to think that the word "race" in his will doesn't refer simply to the distinction between British and Afrikaner.

There are two further reasons. One is that the July 1899 will was drafted in England, where the word "race" refers to ethnicity in general, and, without explicit qualification, cannot possibly be understood to refer to Afrikaner ethnicity in particular.

The other reason is that this is how the first Rhodes Trustees understood the word. In 1907 the question of awarding a Rhodes Scholarship to an African American arose. Some Trustees were averse, fearing that white Scholars from the southern states of the USA would not appreciate being presented with a black confrère. Nevertheless, the Trustees felt bound by the terms of Rhodes's will not to permit colour to disqualify a candidate. So it came about that, within five years of Rhodes's death, an African American became a Rhodes Scholar.

IV

What about the charge that Rhodes laid the foundation of the policy of apartheid, which was pursued by the National Party's government in South Africa shortly after the end of the Second World War? In 1894 Rhodes introduced the controversial Glen Grey Bill to the Cape parliament. The bill did not bar Africans from obtaining the vote, but it did change the qualifications for the franchise in certain areas, rul-



The first black Rhodes Scholar: Alain Leroy Locke in 1907

ing out the possession of land. For those who couldn't qualify, it offered, as a substitute form of political representation, district councils in charge of local government.

Why? To enable Africans to be given individual tenure of land, without producing a sudden and massive increase in African voters, before they had been sufficiently civilised to exercise the responsibilities of a citizen: "I would compare the natives generally, with regard to European civilisation, to fellow-tribesmen of the Druids . . . We say that the natives are in a sense citizens, but not altogether citizens—they are still children."

Was this a forerunner of apartheid? Only in a very attenuated sense. Whatever blame should attach to Rhodes for the post-war policies of the National Party can only be remote, since between his experiment at Glen Grey in 1894 and the National Party's policy from 1948 stands over a half a century of responsible decisions by other moral agents. Others could have decided differently. That they didn't, cannot be blamed on Rhodes.

More particularly, the post-Second World War policy of apartheid was based on biological racism and a consequent radical cultural relativism, according to which, in the words of the private secretary of the National Party's Prime Minister in 1952, "these differences [between Bantu or black South African on the one hand, and European on the other] are permanent and not man-made". Hence the justification of permanently 'separate development'. In contrast, as we have seen, Rhodes was not a biological racist and believed in the possibility of black Africans becoming civilised: "They are just emerging from barbarism . . . I do not believe that they are different from ourselves".

Further, in the late 19th century many who are now regarded as paragons of humanity had doubts about whether black citizens could be culturally compatible with white ones. Abraham Lincoln is rightly lauded for emancipating African-American slaves during the US Civil War and entrenching their freedom

legally by initiating the passage of the 13th Amendment of the US Constitution. The former slave and leading abolitionist, Frederick Douglass, wrote of him that he was the first great man in the United States with whom he had conversed and "who in no single instance reminded me of the difference between himself and myself, of the difference of color". Nevertheless, almost to the end of his life, Lincoln—together with every leading member of his cabinet—doubted that the freed slaves could be integrated into white society, and favoured their being shipped to Africa or to South America to set up a colony of their own there. In other words, he supported a policy of separate development—or, to sharpen the point, segregation or apartheid.

Further still, if Rhodes is to be blamed for post-war apartheid he must also be credited with early support of the African National Congress (ANC). In 1897 he gave financial backing to a newspaper, *Izwi Labantu*, that was the voice-piece of one of several black African political associations, which were the forerunners of the ANC.

V

Did Rhodes promote forced labour and reduce miners in his diamond mines to the status of slaves? In his first year in southern Africa, 1870-71, while farming cotton in Natal, Rhodes learned that treating his labour force well was good for business, especially where the demand for labour outstripped supply. As a consequence he became a generous and popular employer, and Africans came from considerable distances to work for him. In the late 1890s he set up experimental fruit farms and at one of these he built a model village, complete with school and church, for his workers. Maybe in between he forgot his early lesson about the benefits of treating labour well, but, given that securing enough of it for his mines was a chronic problem, it would have been oddly counter-productive.

It is true that in 1894 Rhodes's Glen Grey Bill did propose to levy a tax of 10s on any African who had not worked outside his district during the previous 12 months. The rationale was this: before the imposition of white rule over native peoples, young African men had been employed mainly as warriors. By suppressing inter-tribal war, white government had robbed them of their traditional employment and rendered them redundant. As a consequence, many had turned to alcohol. Therefore, Rhodes asserted, "It is our duty as a Government to remove these poor children from this life of sloth and laziness and to give them some gentle stimulus to come forth and find out the dignity of labour." Certainly, the tone is patronising and, no doubt, the stimulus was sharper in fact than Rhodes let on. What's more, economic interest most probably featured among his unspoken motives—given the persistent problem of the under-supply of labour. Nevertheless, the problem of the enforced and debilitating unemployment of large numbers of young black African men was a real one, to which Rhodes was offering a practical solution. While that solution involved the application of a certain pressure in the form of a financial incentive, it still fell some way short of "forced labour". It's also noteworthy that Rhodes proposed to spend the proceeds of the tax on "industrial schools" for training Africans.

When critics charge Rhodes with reducing his workers to the status of slaves, what they probably have most in mind is the "compound system" in his diamond mines. From 1885 Africans who worked in the mines at Kimberley were required by their contracts to be confined in compounds throughout their three-month term of employment, to stop them smuggling diamonds out and to control their enervating access to alcohol. While this arrangement was restrictive and irksome, it was contractual and the conditions inside the compounds were remarkably decent—according to two witnesses, one a physician, in 1885 and 1895. Slavery it was not. ▶



Post-colonial campus: Last April, campaigners were successful in pressuring the University of Cape Town to remove a statue of Rhodes

VI

As for the alleged invasion of “ancestral lands” (the phrase is Adebajo’s) in what became southern Rhodesia, it wasn’t exactly an invasion and they weren’t exactly ancestral. The lands occupied by the Ndebele in the 1880s they themselves had seized by ruthless conquest two generations before, having broken off from the aggressive Zulu empire to found their own. The defeated Shona were reduced to the status of vassals, subject to indiscriminate torture and slaughter upon failure to pay tribute. On entering a Shona village shortly after its punishment by the Ndebele, one missionary reported: “Fastened to the ground was a row of bodies, men and women, who had been pegged down and left to the sun’s scorching by day and cold dews by night, left to the tender mercies of the pestering flies and ravenous beasts.” By what legal or moral right the Ndebele ruled this territory it is not obvious.

Nevertheless, in 1888 Rhodes secured a signed concession from the Ndebele chieftain, Lobengula, which permitted the British South Africa Company to mine for gold in the farther reaches of his territory. Since Rhodes’s men didn’t care to explain all that was intended by the document, Lobengula didn’t fully understand what he was signing. When its meaning did become clear to him, he repudiated it. But Rhodes’s men, deliberately skirting the land of the Ndebele proper, began to exploit the concession anyway. If this was an invasion, it was a subtle and ambiguous one and Lobengula tolerated it.

Rhodes did not seek war, and Lobengula went to great lengths to avoid it. Nevertheless, it eventually broke out in July 1893, after the white settlers of Victoria woke up one morning to find their Shona servants being massacred on their doorsteps by a punitive Ndebele raiding party. In the ensuing conflict, the settlers

prevailed, aided by their liberal use of Maxim guns. Rhodes then returned to the Cape, negligently entrusting the administration of the territory to his buccaneering friend, Leander Jameson.

Three years later, after suffering appalling abuse at the arbitrary hands of the Company’s men, the Ndebele and the Shona both rose in rebellion. Rhodes hurried back from the Cape and got stuck in to suppressing the rebels. This, the so-called Second Matabele War, came to an end when Rhodes and five companions ventured unarmed into hostile territory and parleyed with the rebels for several days. Rotberg, who regards this as his subject’s finest hour, describes the scene: “Although the Africans were armed, and most of the whites exceedingly nervous, Rhodes appeared casual, even crossing from the white side of the gathering to the African side, and sitting with them and taking their part.”

In the course of the negotiations, he learned about the natives’ humiliations and realised that the white settlers had brought down retribution upon their own heads. The settlers and the imperial authorities wanted the rebels’ unconditional surrender, but Rhodes, knowing this would provoke them to take up arms again, resisted, responding, “If necessary tell the Secretary of State that I am prepared to go and live in the Matopos [hills] with the rebels.” Instead, he promised to reform the administration, which moved the leading Ndebele chief to call him “*Umlamulanmkunzi*” (“The bull who separates the two fighting bulls”), that is, “Peacemaker”. Rhodes also realised that he’d made a major mistake in allowing his subordinates to carve up the territory for themselves, and as a token of his intention to put things right again he bought back 100,000 acres of prime farming land and gave a large portion of it to the Ndebele. Later that year he resolved to make the building of trust between white and black part of his work.

To summarise this tangled history by talking of “Rhodes stealing ancestral lands from Africans” hardly does justice to its moral complexity.

VII

One of the main grounds of the charge that Rhodes was South Africa’s Hitler belongs to this chapter of his life. The allegation is that he once said, “One should kill as many niggers as possible.” The earliest source for this, however, is Dr Adebajo’s review of Paul Maylam’s biography of Rhodes in the *Times Literary Supplement* (28 July 2006). Maylam’s book doesn’t report it. Nor do any of the other several dozen biographies of Rhodes.

A similar quotation—though ad hoc rather than general in form and lacking the word “niggers”—does appear in Gordon Le Sueur’s 1913 biography, which Maylam cites. The setting is the 1896 Matabele War. The Company’s men have just discovered that the Ndebele are about to launch another attack, shortly after losing a previous battle. On asking how many of the enemy had been killed in the first encounter, Rhodes is told that very few had been, since they’d thrown down their arms and begged for mercy. Then Rhodes (reportedly) responds, “Well, you should not spare them. You should kill all you can, as it serves as a lesson to them when they talk things over at their fires at night.” In other words, “Next time don’t give quarter, but kill all you can. Otherwise, they’ll only come back to attack again.”

Whatever moral evaluation one makes of this advice—given on the battlefield of a conflict undisciplined by any international laws of war—it is a world removed from a recommendation of a general policy of genocide aimed at black Africans. Therefore the allegation that Rhodes said, “One should kill as many niggers as possible,” is a false claim, which appears to be based on a sexed-up version of Le Sueur’s report—a version that has been completely abstracted from its historical context and to which the word “niggers” has been added.

A second ground for likening Rhodes to Hitler lies in his alleged responsibility for the “concentration camps” that the British employed during the South African War of 1899–1902. This claim is false, too, for three reasons. First, beyond the fact that large numbers of people died in them, these camps have nothing in common with their Nazi namesakes of the Thirties and Forties. Following Spanish practice in Cuba in 1898, the British military commander, Herbert Kitchener, introduced “concentration camps” to South Africa in the summer of 1900. These were designed to isolate Boer guerrillas and rob them of support by concentrating the rural civilian population in camps, as well as to protect surrendered Boers from the revenge of their comrades.

Second, while it is true that about 25,000 whites and the same number of blacks perished in the camps due to poor conditions, this wasn’t the result of a deliberate policy of genocide, but rather of the culpable negligence of the British army’s administration. After causing a scandal back in Britain and provoking two inquiries, reforms were implemented and the mortality rate declined dramatically from an annual average of 344 per thousand in October 1901 to 69 by the war’s end in May 1902.

And third, there is no evidence whatsoever that Rhodes had anything to do with this military policy.

VIII

Cecil Rhodes was no Hitler. But nor, of course, was he a St Francis. Convinced that the extension of British rule was commensurate with human progress, Rhodes was disposed to let his lofty ends justify recourse to dubious means, both in business and in politics.

Moreover, as a typical entrepreneur he was an impatient man, who preferred founding things to managing them: hence his culpably negligent delegation of the administration of Matabeleland in 1893–96. And his impatience sometimes made him a reckless gambler, most notoriously in his support for the fateful “Jameson Raid”.

Further still, for most of his life (until 1896) Rhodes’s overriding concern was the reconciliation of Afrikaner and Briton within the British Empire. This was an entirely reasonable concern, since tension between them had broken out into open war in 1880 and would do so again in 1899. However, since one of the bones of contention was Afrikaner ill-treatment of black Africans, the price of reconciliation—at least in the short term—was the compromise of native interests. And this Rhodes was willing to pay, arguably, too often.

On the other hand, to his credit, although Rhodes succeeded in becoming extraordinarily rich while still a young man, he wasn’t fixated on wealth for its own sake. He didn’t use it to feather his own nest or that of his kin. He tended to live quite frugally and didn’t build himself multiple palaces. He wanted money in order to give him the power to realise his political purposes—namely, the economic development of southern Africa and the reconciliation of its warring parts within the British Empire. He used his riches and his power for public, not private, ends. If only the same could always be said of her current rulers, South Africa today would be a much happier place.

What’s more, Rhodes’s achievement in developing southern Africa’s economy was prodigious: in addition to helping establish the diamond and gold industries, and reforming the banking system, he was assiduous in promoting progressive agriculture, establishing fruit farms, and extending railway and telegraphic communications.

Finally, his colour-blind scholarship scheme has become the most famous and prestigious educational programme of its kind, creating a global community of public leaders with a common root in one of the Western world’s leading sites of higher learning.

IX

RMF is seriously wrong about Rhodes, and so about the history of the British empire in South Africa. Indeed, it is evident that its proponents really don’t care about historical truth or about doing justice to the dead (if they’re white); they care rather to exploit prevalent prejudices and doubts about the imperial past, in order to manipulate the tender consciences of liberal dons and thereby garner political power in the present—power perhaps to reorient curricula in a less Western direction, but power also to play Radical Crusader on centre-stage.

And yet Oriel came very close to letting them get away with it. Why that was, only the members of its Governing Body know. We can only speculate. It may be that some Fellows shared the students’ ideological zeal, absolutely convinced that “imperialism” and “colonialism” are synonymous with racist contempt and the grave violation of human rights, and that Rhodes, being an avowed imperialist, was surely guilty of both.

Perhaps others, less dogmatically trammelled, were nevertheless caught in the headlights of ideological abstractions such as “imperialism”, “colonialism”, and “racism”—all of them heavy-laden with negative moral evaluations—which cannot currently be interrogated in public without attracting instant outrage and considerable risk to one’s moral reputation.

However, the actual, morally complicated history of Cecil Rhodes suggests that we need to take that risk and step away from the headlights. For it indicates that “racism” is not what some people tell us it is, that empire isn’t invariably “imperialist”, and that its “victims” aren’t always—simply—victims. ■