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## Oxford Debates Legacy of Controversial Alumnus Cecil Rhodes

Some want to remove memorials to Rhodes, while others say that risks setting a dangerous precedent



The statue of Cecil Rhodes is seen on the facade of Oriel College in Oxford. *PHOTO: REUTERS*

By **ALEXIS FLYNN**

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LONDON—Oxford University's storied debating society sparred Tuesday over whether or not to venerate Cecil Rhodes, whose controversial legacy is at the center of an escalating spat between students and faculty.

The row divides those who want to remove memorials to Rhodes, a colonial-era businessman and Oxford alumnus who bequeathed his fortune to set up the famous scholarship that still bears his name, and those who say expunging such figures on the

basis of political correctness risks setting a dangerous precedent.

Student protesters are demanding that Oriel College, one of Oxford's constituent colleges, remove a statue of Rhodes. And, undergraduates at University College, where Bill Clinton studied as a Rhodes scholar, have voted to rename the Rhodes computer room.

But some faculty members and distinguished alumni disagree. They say expunging traces of Rhodes would be an illiberal act in itself. Leaders at Oxford say Rhodes, whose endowment provides for 89 international students to attend the university each year, should be appraised as a historical figure, and not judged by today's standards.

A recent poll by Cherwell, the university's newspaper, found 54% of Oxford students were in favor of keeping the Oriel edifice.

The decision on the statue and the computer room name lies with the faculty of the two colleges.

Rhodes, an avowed imperialist, studied at Oriel College in the 1870s. His investments in South Africa yielded large returns and helped establish industry and infrastructure, but also set about embedding racial segregation and policies that would evolve into the apartheid system that was eventually dismantled in 1994.

The current spat grew out of a similar campaign in South Africa, where students at the University of Cape Town brought about the removal of a 100-year old statue of Rhodes in April.

The movement, dubbed Rhodes Must Fall, has gained traction among Oxford students, some of whom have come from South Africa as Rhodes scholars.

Spearheading the campaign at Oxford is South African Ntokozo Qwabe, himself a Rhodes scholar. Mr. Qwabe says he is fighting a moral battle to redress the wrongs of colonialism.

"Rhodes did not have a scholarship. It was never his money. All that he looted must absolutely be returned immediately," said Mr. Qwabe in a December post on his Facebook page.

In Tuesday's debate, Mr. Qwabe spoke in favor of removing the statue of Rhodes. Among those arguing against the motion were Oxford theology professor Nigel Biggar and lawyer Sophia Cannon.

"Rhodes does not deserve glorification," said Mr. Qwabe, who admitted he had previously compared the colonial leader to Adolf Hitler.

Addressing a packed audience in the main hall of the Oxford Union, the two sides traded rhetorical ripostes.

“In Britain, our statues are welded to our history,” said Ms. Canon.

Chris Patten, the last British governor of Hong Kong who is now the university’s chancellor, said the controversy mirrored the calls for “safe spaces” by students in the U.S., where lecturers at universities including Harvard and Yale have faced demands that they scrub difficult or controversial material for fear of offending their sensibilities.

“If people at our university aren’t prepared to show the generosity of spirit which Nelson Mandela showed toward Rhodes and toward history...then maybe they should think about being educated elsewhere,” said Mr. Patten, speaking in an interview broadcast by the BBC on Thursday.

Among high-profile alumni who have intervened in the debate is Tony Abbott, the former prime minister of Australia, who studied on a Rhodes scholarship in the 1980s. “Oxford would damage its standing as a great university if it were to substitute moral vanity for fair-minded enquiry,” said Mr. Abbott in a letter to the Independent newspaper published in December.

As the audience filtered out of the Oxford Union on Tuesday night, confirmation came that Mr. Qwabe and Rhodes Must Fall had landed the most telling verbal blows on the night.

“The Ayes have it, by 245 to 212,” said a spokesman for the debating society.

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