

Rhodes wasn't a racist — academic leads fightback over Oxford statue



The Rhodes statue at Oxford Alamy

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A leading Oxford academic has defended the legacy of Cecil Rhodes, saying that he was prejudiced but not racist and that students seeking to remove his statue were no better than him. In response to Oriel College's decision to remove a plaque and consider taking down a statue of Rhodes after a campaign against him, Nigel Biggar, a theology professor at the university, said that Oriel College was no better than Rhodes.

“No doubt the fellows of Oriel College also believe in modernity and progress. Maybe that's why they've rushed to judgment about a Victorian magnate and decided before they've listened — because they're unwilling to expose their 'progressive' assumptions about alien people to critical reflection,” he said. “Just like Rhodes.”

He said that the case against Rhodes — that he held black Africans in contempt as racially inferior; that he sought to abolish their voting rights in Cape Colony; that he employed slave labour in his diamond mines; that he invaded the ancestral lands of the Ndebele; and that he advocated their genocidal slaughter — was “not true”.

Students from the Rhodes Must Fall movement have said that the statue does not reflect the “inclusive culture” of the university.

Writing in *The Times*, Professor Biggar says that Rhodes has a “record of cordial, even generous relations with individual Africans... Rhodes thought that black Africans were generally inferior but in terms of cultural development, not biology. He believed they could become civilised.”

Ntokozo Qwabe, a Rhodes scholar originally from South Africa who is leading the campaign to remove the statue, has been criticised on social media and accused of “disgraceful hypocrisy” for accepting funding from the trust. Facebook users had told him to “give back your [Rhodes] scholarship and remove the chip off your shoulder”.

Mr Qwabe said that it was “unacceptable to glorify” figures such as Rhodes but that it was correct to accept funds since it was “never his [Rhodes] money”.

Writing in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Professor Mary Beard, the historian, encouraged “ethnic minority students” to “look up at Rhodes and friends with a cheery and self-confident sense of unbatterability — much as I find myself looking up at the statues of all those hundreds of men in history who would vehemently have objected to women having the vote, let alone the kind of job I have.”

Another Rhodes scholar, Max Harris, said that there needed to be “debate about the name of the scholarship” and suggested naming the programme after John McCall MacBain, who donated £75 million to the Rhodes Trust.

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Carduelis

1 hour ago

The article by Prof. Biggar is correct. Rhodes was not a racist.

Reading the words to his trust deed Rhodes specifically directed that there 'should be no discrimination on grounds of race or religion in choosing the scholars'. He believed that any man irrespective of colour who bothered to educate himself, worked hard and contributed to society should be enfranchised; liberal thinking for his day.

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Dr Calum MacInnes

9 hours ago

Let us all revise history and abolish anything found objectionable. It would make life so much more happy and secure for everyone.

Wait a minute, what happens when different groups decide to abolish each other's history!

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Paddy Briggs

10 hours ago

Rhodes was a racist, and Racism was the norm of his times. His world was a world in which racial differences led to institutionalised racism and few thought it anything other than the norm. The British Empire was based and run on the premise that Colonialism was not just legitimate but a better form of Governance. Read "Passage to India" if you doubt that racism was at its heart. The point about all this was that the racism was rarely challenged. Was there much challenge at the time to Rhodes?

I think it is petty and unworthy to remove Rhodes statue or to rename the Scholarship. If you do that I doubt that there are any major figures of those times whose statues you would not also have to remove because their then behaviour did not conform to the mores of today.

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