

*Ann Olivarius is Chair and CEO of the Rhodes Project. She was elected as an American Rhodes Scholar in 1978. Ann practices as a lawyer in London, where she lives with her husband and three children.*

## **Second-Class Citizens? How Women Became Rhodes Scholars**

Dr. Ann Olivarius

The admission of women into the ranks of the Rhodes Scholarship — among the most prestigious of academic awards — was a thorny issue for the Rhodes Trust. Oxford, that stronghold of the traditional white male, had allowed women to sit university examinations and attend lectures (though not take degrees) since the second half of the nineteenth century; witnessed the opening of two women’s colleges as early as 1879 (two years before Rhodes’ own graduation); and officially accepted women as members of the University eligible for degrees in 1920. But the Rhodes Trust, constrained both by Rhodes’ will and its own conservatism, held out against the inclusion of women until the 1970s. By then the women’s movement had gathered strong momentum, demonstrating enough popular and institutional support to challenge even entrenched bastions of the status quo. This article presents a brief account of how the Rhodes Trust adapted to the forces of change, which in 1974 received a powerful boost from American anti-discrimination laws that threatened the future of the Scholarship in its biggest constituency. Although the admission of women was, in some measure, mandated by prevailing opinion, behind it lay a surprisingly complex trail of clever and dogged negotiation, balancing the demands of different constituencies.

This article will first explore the historical path and unsung players who paved the way for change. The second section, drawing in part on personal recollection, will trace the reception accorded to early women Scholars and then question how far the formal change in eligibility has marked a real change in the status of women. After over a century of striving, followed by the dizzy decades of apparent liberation and victory in the 1960s and 70s, is it really true, as some suggest, that women still do not achieve as much as men; that their inclusion in the Scholarship has somehow diluted the “incidence of [the recipients’ later] worldly success?”<sup>1</sup> Or that female success begins with a small “s” while male success deserves a capital “S?”<sup>2</sup> While some take this

---

<sup>1</sup> Philip Ziegler, *Legacy: Cecil Rhodes, the Rhodes Trust and Rhodes Scholarships* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 312.

<sup>2</sup> Ian Desai, “Sheldonian Keynote: Bonnie St. John.” Weblog. *30 Years of Women Rhodes Scholars*, 30 May – 1 June. 1 June 2008. Wordpress. 10 June 2008 <<http://rw30.wordpress.com/2008/06/01/sheldonian-keynote-bonnie-st-john>>.

point of view, I argue that to redefine success for women to give more weight to their so-called “different passions and challenges”<sup>3</sup> misses the point or worse. If women are said to be capable only of their own, separate kind of “success,” this simply reinforces the old stereotype of difference and implied inferiority. Recent publications, as well as opinions voiced by some former women Rhodes Scholars themselves, suggest that it will take the passing of yet more generations before society — including many women — accepts the evidence that women are as capable as men of achieving success with a capital “S,” and recognizes the demonstrated record of Success that many Rhodes women have already achieved.

### **The Place of Men in Cecil Rhodes’ Vision**

Rhodes could have included women in his Scholarship. There was precedent — Oxford already permitted women some access to its intellectual riches — but the weight of opinion and the disparity of treatment meted out to the women then in Oxford lent overwhelming support to Rhodes’ view that women had no place in his scheme. There was no notion then that they would de-value his elite — that is a modern accusation. To Rhodes and many of his era, women simply had no intellectual value. And perhaps Rhodes should not be slated too roundly for this. His was simply a lack of imagination to see beyond the accepted attitudes of his day. As one member of a Rhodes selection committee contended in the early 70s, Rhodes’ will “represents a mentality that has disappeared.”<sup>4</sup> Whether or not this mentality has really disappeared, or simply hunkered down, is a matter I later address.

One may regret that Rhodes was not at the forefront of fighting the world’s fight for women’s rights<sup>5</sup> — as one may regret many features of history — but this was not his battle. He chose rather to endorse colonialism and promote the supremacy of English-speaking males. He is roundly vilified for this today; a typical article dismisses him as a “rabid colonialist.”<sup>6</sup> Rhodes would not have disagreed. He would have been proud of the title. Many of his generation would have regarded his colonial aspirations as upstanding, and Rhodes’ pre-eminent success in

---

<sup>3</sup> See Ian Desai.

<sup>4</sup> Kate Pressman, “Women as Rhodes Scholars.” Letter to the Editor. *New York Times*. 29 December 1972, p. 24.

<sup>5</sup> This language comes from Rhodes’ statement, in a private letter, that those he hoped for as his Scholars would be “the best men for the world’s fight.” See Lord Elton, “The Rhodes Trust: A retrospect.” *The First Fifty Years of The Rhodes Trust and The Rhodes Scholarships 1903-1953*, Ed. Lord Elton (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1955), p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Winerip. “How to Win a Rhodes.” *New York Times*. 12 January 2003.

having a nation named after him the crowning glory of an imperialist career. Today, of course, his attitude and actions in riding rough-shod over the black African population and laying the foundations of apartheid are viewed as unacceptable. But this does not make him a monster, or even perhaps an object of contempt. How many world leaders of today will be judged by historians a century from now to have thrown themselves flamboyantly into wrong causes? At least, unlike many who have made a fortune on the backs of others, Cecil Rhodes left a legacy which ought to go some way towards redeeming his past. Through the Scholarships and the abstract ideals that they embody, he has left the means for others – women and men of various nations and races – to fight the world’s fight on behalf of causes he might well have abhorred.

The male-ness of the Rhodes Scholarship was entrenched in the terminology of Rhodes’ will which established the Rhodes Trust and defined the award. The male pronoun is ubiquitous throughout, but lest there remain any doubt as to the intended recipients of his largesse, Rhodes also required Trustees to select applicants with regard to their “qualities of manhood” and “success in manly outdoor sports.”<sup>7</sup> His exclusion of women was thus explicit. He did not even want his Scholars married, at least not during their time at Oxford, as he believed that the “consideration of babies and other domestic agenda generally destroys higher thought.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Agitation for Change**

Calls for change in the eligibility criteria to permit women to compete for the Scholarship came soon after women were admitted to full status at Oxford in 1920, by officials of two leading women’s colleges.<sup>9</sup> But as Philip Ziegler, the Trust’s official historian, notes in his book *Legacy*: “Both [colleges] were ignored, and could safely be so.”<sup>10</sup> There was no appetite for change within the Rhodes Trust. By the 1960s, however, the climate was different. Whether the Rhodes Trustees and the Warden of Rhodes House liked it or not – and *Legacy* states that at least Sir Edgar Williams, the Warden at the time, “unequivocally” did not – they realized that the call for change “was not going to go away.”<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Ziegler, p. 341.

<sup>8</sup> J. Flint, *Cecil Rhodes* (London: Hutchinson, 1976), p. 218.

<sup>9</sup> Ziegler, p. 219.

<sup>10</sup> Ziegler, p. 219.

<sup>11</sup> Ziegler, p. 219.

Those who preferred the status quo could take comfort in the considerable institutional obstacles littering the path to women's admission. Not only did Rhodes' will explicitly exclude women, but it had been enshrined in an Act of Parliament. The question of admitting women did arise at the Trustees' meeting in June 1968,<sup>12</sup> but another drag anchor came from the structure of Oxford itself, which unlike comparable American campuses that were going co-ed in large numbers, was still a largely male preserve. The 31 colleges were segregated by gender: with 26 accepting men, and only five, women.<sup>13</sup> With Oxford thus offering five times as many places to men as to women, it is not surprising that the women's colleges were reluctant to allocate much sought-after places to female Rhodes Scholars, when they were already forced to turn away scores of qualified British applicants.

The Warden also professed concern for the women's welfare in the company of boisterous men "with all the muscular jokes which they would have to endure."<sup>14</sup> On the basis of these reservations, the Trustees felt it sufficient to throw a sop to the agitators by instituting a visiting "Rhodes Fellowship" for a female postdoctoral candidate to attend one of the women's colleges as a research fellow. Although still denied access to the Scholarship, the first female Rhodes Fellow, Susan Kippax (1969), amply demonstrated the qualities of courage and protection of the weak sought in male Scholars when, within half an hour of her selection interview, she rescued a drowning man from the River Cherwell!<sup>15</sup>

The gesture inherent in establishing the visiting fellowships appeared to be too little too late for those demanding change. In the U.S., over the previous decade, the civil rights and feminist movements had effected major changes in public policy and discrimination laws. The time was ripe, by the early 1970s, for this issue to be raised again, with more vigor and sophistication.

---

<sup>12</sup> Anthony Kenny, "The Rhodes Trust and its Administration," *The History of the Rhodes Trust*. Ed. Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 66.

<sup>13</sup> In 1974, Brasenose, Hertford, Jesus, St Catherine's and Wadham opened to women. All other former men's colleges followed suit in 1979 except for Rhodes' former college, Oriel, which became, in 1984, the last to admit women.

<sup>14</sup> Ziegler, p. 219.

<sup>15</sup> Anthony Kenny, p. 66.

## Popular Pressure – Both Sides of the Pond

1972 saw the passing of Title IX of the Education Act<sup>16</sup> in the United States which prohibits gender discrimination in federally funded educational programs. The same year, the Women’s Equity Action League challenged the legality of the Scholarships in a press release. And Grant Crandall, a U.S. Rhodes Scholar, resigned his Scholarship in protest against its exclusion of women worldwide and the virtual exclusion of blacks from the selection procedures of South Africa and Rhodesia (present day Zambia and Zimbabwe). Crandall was critical of the ideal that envisaged the Rhodes Scholarship as “the pinnacle of enlightened educational achievement.” He felt, as he wrote in his resignation letter, that a more accurate description would be “the means by which [the] individual career possibilities of a privileged few are furthered.”<sup>17</sup> Although open to the charge of hypocrisy – Crandall apparently resigned his Scholarship only after receiving his final stipendiary payment – his stand reflected the atmosphere of protest surrounding the Scholarship at the time.<sup>18</sup>

Also in 1972, Eileen Lach, a senior with an A-grade average from the University of Minnesota applied for the Rhodes Scholarship. Lach had studied international relations, was active in politics, and might have stood a chance in the rigorous application process, but was turned away without interview. With the support of the Minnesota Civil Liberties Union, she then filed a lawsuit against the University of Minnesota to force the University and all other institutions of higher learning within the state to withdraw from the Rhodes Scholarship program. “... [In] a rational world these sorts of discriminations are absurd,” said Lach.<sup>19</sup>

The following autumn, 1973, women applied to the Rhodes Scholarship from Yale University, LaSalle College (in Pennsylvania), and the University of Oklahoma. The Harvard Fellowship Committee not only endorsed three Radcliffe seniors for the Scholarship, it sent their nominations to every state secretary in the United States – even though candidates were permitted to apply only in either their state of residence or education – so as to make the issue even more public. According to *The Harvard Crimson*, the U.S. Office of Civil Rights was prepared to recommend that the Rhodes Trustees alter the terms of the Scholarship, “[b]ut only

<sup>16</sup> “Title IX, Education Amendments.” 20 *U.S.Code*, §§ 1681-1688 (1972).

<sup>17</sup> “A Good Man for the World’s Fight.” *Washington Post*. 4 May 1972, p. 26.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with William J. Barber, Middletown, Connecticut. 22 April 2008.

<sup>19</sup> “Official for Rhodes Prize Rejects Female Applicant.” *Harvard Crimson*. 18 November 1972. The suit was dismissed June 27, 1977 – the year after women became eligible to apply.

if enough women apply for the Rhodes, and are endorsed by their colleges, can the Office pursue their case.”<sup>20</sup> At Oxford, Rhodes Scholars organized a petition which called for the admission of women. Rhodes Scholars, past and present, wrote letters of protest to the American Secretary of the Rhodes Trust, William Barber. Even the British Ambassador to Washington, Lord Cromer, joined the fray, warning the Trustees that complaints of discrimination on the grounds of sex “tend nowadays to assume great stridency.”<sup>21</sup>

The Trustees, however, were not free simply to elect to change the terms of the Trust. They were bound by the founder’s intentions, which were all too clear. But this legal impotence did not save the Trust from the charge that it was deliberately obstructing social change. In an editorial published on October 10, 1973, *The Harvard Crimson* chastised Barber for his “timid stand [which held] . . . that American institutions, as beneficiaries of the trust fund, have no right to challenge the requirements set by the founder...”<sup>22</sup> This, according to Barber’s critics, was a poor substitution of manners for morals.

These critics did not know of the strenuous efforts Barber and others were making behind the scenes to change the Trust’s terms. Indeed Barber’s success depended on disassociating himself from the more liberal and militant views abounding in the U.S. He took the criticism on the chin, while quietly seeking a solution.

### **Amending the Trust**

The power to change Cecil Rhodes’ selection criteria did not rest with American institutions, with Barber, or even with the Trustees themselves. Since Rhodes’ will had been embodied in an Act of Parliament following the Second World War, only Parliament could legally alter the terms of the Scholarship competition.

The Trustees had previously tried to force a change in the Trust through the courts. In 1970, they petitioned to change the allocation of four South African Scholarships so that they could be offered to candidates who were not graduates of the four all-white schools specified in the will, but this had been rejected as a subversion of the founder’s intent. There was no hope then that they could alter Rhodes’ clear intention to exclude women. The only expedient

---

<sup>20</sup> “Editorial: Rhodes Scholarships.” *Harvard Crimson*. 10 October 1973.

<sup>21</sup> Kenny, p. 67.

<sup>22</sup> “Editorial: Rhodes Scholarships.”

would be the promotion and passing of a private bill through Parliament, and the Trustees were advised that they could not undertake this measure themselves because it would be unlawful to use trust funds to overturn the founder's intent.<sup>23</sup>

### **Two Competing Strategies**

Although the Trust was governed by English law, the pre-eminent place of the Rhodes program in the U.S. meant that much of the impetus for change came from abroad. If the Scholarships could not be awarded in the largest constituency because the Trust's terms conflicted with American anti-discrimination law, the Trustees in England would be given a powerful incentive to change those terms.

The passage of Title IX which decreed, "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or subjected to discrimination under an education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance," provided a basis on which a campaign to alter the law enshrining Rhodes' will could be mounted. On its face, Title IX had no application to the Rhodes program since it was funded privately without Federal financial assistance. But in early 1974, the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare ("HEW") drafted guidelines banning universities from promoting private scholarship programs that were limited to members of one sex. According to Barber, "the language had been formulated with the Rhodes Scholarships as the specific target."<sup>24</sup> As a result, any university that endorsed a candidate, publicized or distributed information about the Rhodes Scholarship, offered support to the application process, or conducted selection interviews on campus risked losing its entire package of federal funding. Under these guidelines, Barber, a professor at Wesleyan University, who carried out his Rhodes duties from his office, could conceivably jeopardize all of Wesleyan's federal funding.

Barber was skeptical of the legitimacy of this guideline, which seemed to extend the reach of the law beyond Congress' intent; but when he tried to suggest as much to those in HEW, his legal concerns were given short shrift. Barber realized then that "[t]he HEW lawyers were on

---

<sup>23</sup> William J. Barber, "A Footnote to the Social History of the 1970s: the Opening of the Rhodes Scholarships to Women." *American Oxonian* 2 (2000), p. 138.

<sup>24</sup> Barber, p. 138.

a crusade.”<sup>25</sup> The word of the law would be molded by the governing administration to suit its own policy. If he did not find a creative way of complying with this policy, or persuading HEW to temper it, they would seek a “symbolic scalp to wave.”<sup>26</sup>

Barber’s scope for maneuver was restricted since change could only be brought about in the U.K. But he faced the prospect that the U.S. Scholarships might have to be suspended if change could not be brought about fast enough to satisfy the demands of HEW. A possible solution came in the form of a White Paper on sex discrimination which was being drafted by the new Labour government in Britain. Although the focus of this legislation was employment-related, the Trustees saw an opportunity to attach an amendment to the bill that would allow, but not force, trustees of educational charities — when bound by single-sex proscriptions — to voluntarily adapt their trusts in line with equal opportunities legislation. Barber was concerned that this strategy — an effective solution to the threat posed by Title IX and the HEW guidelines and to the underlying injustice faced by women — might be scuppered if Parliament got wind of HEW’s crusade. He feared British parliamentarians would not respond favorably to what they might perceive as “bullying” by American bureaucrats.<sup>27</sup>

With this in mind, Barber wrote to the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, Caspar Weinberger, informing him that the aspects of the Rhodes Scholarship to which HEW objected were controlled by British Parliament, and advising him against any action which might be misconstrued abroad as a “legislative directive” from the U.S. Barber was concerned that some of the underlying tensions might make news.<sup>28</sup> Rhodes House had already received a call from Henry Brandon, then the Washington correspondent for *The Sunday Times*, to say he planned to write a story about how the Rhodes Trust was being held hostage by American feminists. This was exactly the sort of publicity the Trust wanted to avoid; in the event, further revelations about the Watergate scandal then occupied Brandon as well as the rest of the news media, and the article was never written.<sup>29</sup>

By early spring, 1974, Barber had yet to receive a response from HEW; still, a decision

---

<sup>25</sup> Barber, p. 139.

<sup>26</sup> Barber, p. 139.

<sup>27</sup> Barber interview.

<sup>28</sup> Barber interview.

<sup>29</sup> Barber, p. 141.

had to be made regarding the next round of Scholarship applications. With limited options before him — the Rhodes program would either have to sever all ties with American universities so as not to risk their federal funding or suspend the American scholarships completely — Barber prepared to advise the Trustees to suspend the Scholarships.<sup>30</sup> If the program continued “underground,” somehow separated from the American universities that had previously been deeply involved with it, he feared that this would be interpreted as a rejection of feminist concerns and would also perpetrate another injustice — for although students from elite institutions would know of the Rhodes Scholarships from word of mouth, students from smaller colleges and state institutions would be less disposed to apply.<sup>31</sup>

The response from HEW arrived “an hour” before Barber was to board a plane for his meeting with the Trustees in London.<sup>32</sup> It was vague and inconclusive but it did promise “a reasonable solution.”<sup>33</sup> Two months later, HEW published its proposed regulations; instead of the problematic guidelines relating to “private programs,” a new provision had been inserted specifically exempting scholarships established under a foreign will or trust. This allowed the Rhodes Scholarship to continue as is — but it did not address the underlying problem of gender discrimination.

This was tackled soon after, in December 1975, when Parliament passed the Equal Opportunities Bill, along with the Trustees’ amendment. The amendment was proposed in the House of Lords by Lord Crowther-Hunt, the Minister for Education, who remarked, “It is a longstanding principle of charity law that so far as is practicable the wishes of the donor should be respected by law. Education is, however, an area in which it is important that the law should reflect social change.”<sup>34</sup> Crowther-Hunt, an historian, Fellow and Lecturer in Politics at Exeter College, Oxford, was not noted as a vocal advocate for feminism but took his ministerial responsibilities earnestly, and seems to have been motivated by a keen sense of duty to do what he perceived to be right according to the thinking of the day.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Barber interview.

<sup>31</sup> Barber interview.

<sup>32</sup> Barber interview.

<sup>33</sup> Barber, p. 142.

<sup>34</sup> HL Deb. 17 July 1975, vol. 362, c 1412.

<sup>35</sup> Interviews with Lord Crowther-Hunt, Oxford. October–December 1978.

During the debate Lord Blake, a Rhodes Trustee, outlined the difficulties the Rhodes Trust had encountered in its previous attempts to overturn this element of Rhodes' will. He assured peers that the Trust would be the first charitable body to take advantage of the new legislation.<sup>36</sup>

The amendment was adopted without even going to a vote. Now previously single-sex educational charities could voluntarily petition the Secretary of State for Education and Science for permission to extend the grants to suitable candidates of either sex. Contrary to the suggestion in some areas of the U.S. press, the Rhodes Scholarships were not finally altered because of legal compulsion but at the choice and insistence of the Trust.<sup>37</sup> Having orchestrated the inclusion of this provision in the Act, the Rhodes Trustees were indeed the first to take advantage of it, by petitioning the Secretary of State, Shirley (now Baroness) Williams, for permission to include women in the Scholarship program. The petition process usually took about six months, but Barber could not wait that long.<sup>38</sup> If the Scholarship were to continue without any period of suspension, he had to take the decision to go ahead with the selection process for the following year's Scholars in the confidence that the petition to alter the terms of the Trust would be granted.

It was a courageous step. The selection committees proceeded on the basis that women were now eligible to apply for the Scholarship in 1976, for admission to Oxford in 1977. An unexpectedly large cohort of women was selected. Had the petition not been granted, Barber would have had a lot of explaining to do.<sup>39</sup> But Barber felt able to take this risk because of his confidence in Shirley Williams to carry through this measure.<sup>40</sup> Barber was brave, and a natural leader. He also made the right decision. In the winter of 1976, the Secretary of State struck out the word "manly" from Rhodes' selection criteria thus opening the Scholarship to women.

### **Women Join the 'Club'**

Initially, selection committees were not quite certain what sort of women they were looking for to round out the class of 1977. Michael S. Race, the Secretary for the Massachusetts

---

<sup>36</sup> HL Deb. 17 July 1975, vol. 362, cc 1414-5.

<sup>37</sup> Barber interview.

<sup>38</sup> Barber interview.

<sup>39</sup> Barber interview.

<sup>40</sup> Barber interview.

Rhodes selection committee, himself a former Rhodes Scholar, was more than a little vague in his description of the ideal candidate who he suggested should have “a good head, an active life in some important respect, a social role of some importance in some area, some evidence of achievement in other areas besides academics,” and of course be “honorable, compassionate, and principled.”<sup>41</sup>

Equally befuddled was the public reception given to the new women Scholars. When Maura Abeln (USA 1978), one of only five students in her high school year to go to college, won the Scholarship, it was recounted in her local newspaper under the headline, “Dumb Blonde Wins Rhodes Scholarship.”<sup>42</sup> The first year, when 24 women (out of 72 total Scholars) were selected worldwide, *The New York Times* focused on the women’s athletic prowess,<sup>43</sup> and also discussed their hostess skills, dating life and attire. While noting some had concerns about unhealthy British food, this had the benefit, according to the *Times*, that the women were “going to get thin.”<sup>44</sup> But the new Scholars’ experience of Oxford life was full of reminders that simply winning a previously all-male scholarship did not mean sexism had ended. Several were denied access to showers (though they were allowed baths) because, as one dean explained, “Ladies do not take showers.”<sup>45</sup>

### A Personal Perspective

I recall my own Rhodes interviews in the 1970s, in which layers of subtle differences in the reception accorded to male and female candidates gave the overall impression of an institution being dragged into the modern world by a few right-minded leaders, like Barber, at the top. Thus, women were offered soft drinks at the important pre-interview cocktail party I attended at Princeton, integral to the selection process, while men were offered alcohol. Women were asked what they would do if they headed up the Department of Health, Education and Welfare; men were asked about running the State Department. These matters may be dismissed

---

<sup>41</sup> Gay Seidman, “The Long and Grinding Rhodes,” *Harvard Crimson*. 24 October 1975.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted by R.W. Apple Jr, “Rhodes Scholarship Women Adjust to Life at Oxford,” *New York Times*. 30 October 1977, p. 425.

<sup>43</sup> A. Muscatine, “U.S. Letterwomen at Oxford,” *New York Times*, 30 October 1977. Sports, p. C6.

<sup>44</sup> R. W. Apple.

<sup>45</sup> William Borders, “Another Bastion Falls to Women: Oxford; Women at Oxford,” *New York Times*. 11 November 1979. Education, p. 1.

as insignificant teething problems, natural to any new process. But they set up an atmosphere of disparity that was hard to miss. More obvious in this regard was my conversation with a member of the selection committee, Malcolm Forbes Sr., who put his arm around my shoulder, pulled me in close, and suggested that one day I would help a lucky guy become a U.S. Senator. When I responded that I would prefer to be the Senator myself rather than his wife, he said with irritation: “Yes, that’s what we don’t understand about you.”<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless women were selected for the Scholarship, and not just in token numbers. In the first year, 13 women and 19 men from the U.S. won the Scholarship.<sup>47</sup> In some years, for example 1994 and 1995, there were actually more women selected from the U.S. than men.<sup>48</sup> Generally, however, the average female uptake of the Scholarship in the U.S. has been around 35 percent.<sup>49</sup> Against this it may be noted that the general population of students in Oxford has long been at parity; and since 1982, there have been more bachelors degrees awarded to women than to men in the U.S.

On arrival in Oxford, I knew things were going to be challenging, perhaps more so than for men in my Rhodes class, when I met my prospective DPhil supervisor, whose work I had admired. He outlined the next book he was planning to write, told me the chapters in it my DPhil would comprise (with beginning, middle, end, conclusion and viewpoint already determined by him), and suggested I should go away with him for the weekend. I requested another supervisor and, after a struggle, was given one, though I was told this was a black mark against me and that as an American, and a woman, I had best learn to fit in with Oxford ways. I was heartened about the possibility of a good relationship with my new supervisor as I waited in his anteroom for our first meeting; it was clear that he and another new DPhil student (a male) were having a long and chummy meeting over several glasses of sherry. When it was my turn, however, no sherry was offered. My new supervisor told me he thought I was a waste of his time because as an American woman I was going to move away, have babies and bring him no accolades in British academe. At this point I was stuck with him. Almost every female DPhil student I met at Oxford, no matter her nationality, had her own story of similar slights and hurdles.

---

<sup>46</sup> I did not get the Scholarship that year, 1977, and largely because of this encounter decided to reapply in 1978 from the state of my university rather than my birth.

<sup>47</sup> Ralph Evans (Ed.) *Register of Rhodes Scholars 1903-1995*. (Oxford: Information Press Ltd., 1996), pp. 371-77.

<sup>48</sup> Evans, pp. 475-82.

<sup>49</sup> See Evans. This figure is based on the number of Rhodes Scholars from the U.S. in the years 1977-95.

Rhodes House itself was sometimes a challenge for its new crop of women. Among the many matters that niggled my peer group was the mandatory use of the title “Miss” by Rhodes House to address us, while men were given the gravitas and conjugal anonymity of a “Mr.” Soon a petition was drawn up and signed, simply requesting that Rhodes House permit the women who wished to use “Ms.” to do so. Sir Edgar Williams, then Warden, was opposed, but invited us to a meeting to discuss the matter which seemed promising; and at this one we were indeed given sherry. But then something happened that I suspect would not have happened in a meeting of Rhodes men. Sir Edgar’s wife, Lady Williams, came into the meeting to give her own opinion. It amounted to a reprimand. She scolded us for making a fuss. Now that we were here, she said, we were supposed to “behave.”

### **The Place of Women within the Rhodes Trust Today**

One would hope that by 2008 the idea of women’s equality would have become unremarkable in the world of Rhodes Scholarships. But this is perhaps not unequivocally true. Various factors suggest that women still occupy a second class position within the Rhodes Trust.

For example, control of the Rhodes Trust has not changed substantially since the 1970s. In reviewing Ziegler’s *Legacy*, Vernon Bogdanor, Professor of Government at the University of Oxford, notes that “the Warden and the trustees are still chosen by a self-appointed oligarchy that appears to make its own rules.”<sup>50</sup> Under these unwritten “rules” women are readily employed as staff, while only two women currently serve as Trustees (out of 11) and there has never been a female Warden.

It may be argued that the contributions of many women working behind the scenes — Wardens’ wives and other staff members — have frequently been overlooked. Before she passed away from cancer, Amy Gerson, estranged wife of the current American Secretary, Elliot Gerson, lamented that although she had given substantial time and energy to the Rhodes Trust — throwing lavish parties, hosting the Warden for weeks at her house, as well as other Rhodes Scholars — she received not one letter of sympathy after receiving her terminal diagnosis, a diagnosis of which Rhodes House was aware.<sup>51</sup>

Perhaps it is natural then that the Trust should not invite constructive criticism of its

---

<sup>50</sup> Vernon Bogdanor, “Linking Oxford with the World,” *Spectator*. 21 May 2008. Vernon Bogdanor reviews Philip Ziegler’s *Legacy: Cecil Rhodes, The Rhodes Trust and Rhodes Scholarships*.

<sup>51</sup> Amy Gerson. Telephone conversation. 12 November 2006.

attitude towards women. While opening its library to researchers from the Rhodes Project and according it a gracious level of interest, Rhodes House has been unwilling to cooperate fully with the Rhodes Project — an independent survey organized by one former woman Rhodes Scholar into the lives of other women Scholars over whose findings the Trust would naturally have limited control. One might wonder whether the Trust has reason to be defensive.

Naturally, however, the Trust has been ready to open its archives to a historian under its own commission. Ziegler's history of the Trust, which is beautifully written and wittily punctuated by anecdote and analysis, shares the charge of any "official" history, that it is written from information provided by its commissioner and at the commissioner's behest. Thus, notwithstanding Ziegler's scholarly integrity, one reviewer noted that "characters tend to appear in their best clothes and on their best behaviour."<sup>52</sup>

Despite the generally uncontroversial nature of the book, Ziegler seems to have sparked debate by making some sweeping statements about women Rhodes Scholars. In one he states that "the advent of women [to the Scholarships] . . . has reduced the incidence of worldly success."<sup>53</sup> His basis for this conclusion is drawn from a measure used by Ted Youn and Karen Arnold in their study of Rhodes Scholars<sup>54</sup> which notes that more male Scholars appear in *Who's Who*. While admitting that such mention is not "an essential corollary of worldly success," Ziegler, and presumably his commissioning masters, appear to accept it as such. For Ziegler then goes on to theorize that although the female Scholars perform as well or better than their male peers while at Oxford "[f]or some reason they fail to build upon this foundation in later life," noting that "[d]riving ambition is far from being a uniquely masculine attribute, but it does not so often appear to be so dominant in the female."<sup>55</sup>

There is no evidence offered that this is true, other than the somewhat self-selecting list in *Who's Who*, and an anecdote that Ziegler recounts of a former woman Scholar being met with "tumultuous" applause on the occasion of her stating that she had given up her career for her

---

<sup>52</sup> See Vernon Bogdanor.

<sup>53</sup> Ziegler, p. 312.

<sup>54</sup> Karen Arnold & Ted Youn. "Generating leaders in an Age of Diversity: Fifty Years of American Rhodes Scholars, 1 March 2008." School of Education, Boston College, p. 11.

<sup>55</sup> Ziegler, p. 312.

children.<sup>56</sup> These statements have engendered amazement among a number of readers, myself included, who perhaps naively thought them to be out of date.<sup>57</sup> And yet, Ziegler's general quality of enlightened common sense and his ability to highlight otherwise-overlooked inconsistencies — for instance, he reports that while "54 percent of U.S. students are women, the proportion of female applicants for Rhodes Scholarships is about one in three"<sup>58</sup> — makes such unquestioned assumptions stand out. They display a pre-existing outlook that he seems to assume others will share. And indeed the statements withstood editorial scrutiny and remain part of the official history of the Rhodes Trust.

### **The Place of Female Rhodes Scholars Today**

Apparently, then, we must still ask: are women Rhodes Scholars inherently less suited to achieving success than their male counterparts?

One look at the biographies and current positions of female Rhodes Scholars gives a very different picture from the one presented fleetingly in the Rhodes Trust's official history. Far from eschewing the fast lane, many women Scholars do indeed demonstrate a driving ambition to be at the forefront of their fields. And these fields cover the whole gamut of human endeavor. Thus there are lawyers pursuing mainstream careers in leading law firms; or as general counsel in global Fortune 500 companies; or on the bench. There are pioneers in granular physics and genetics; urban planners and architectural theorists; researchers in medicine and biology; White House advisors, and advisors to royalty and to the stars, playwrights, directors and producers; professors of history and other disciplines. There are anchors of news desks and leading lights in the media; critics on social and political issues, as well as poets and novelists. There are those in the heart of politics and activists and even a few revolutionaries. There are distinguished economists and bankers. The list goes on. In short, there are women Rhodes Scholars established in as many areas as men Rhodes Scholars. Our Findings Report will describe this in detail. And the women have achieved these positions against the continual refrain that they have less ambition than men and are

---

<sup>56</sup> Ziegler, p. 312.

<sup>57</sup> Leana Wen. "A Controversial 'Legacy.'" Weblog. *30 Years of Women Rhodes Scholars, 30 May – 1 June, 2008*. 29 May 2008. Wordpress. 10 June 2008 <<http://re30.wordpress.com/2008/05/29/a-controversial-legacy>>.

<sup>58</sup> Ziegler, p. 312.

hampered by the “almost impossible demands of combining conscientious motherhood with a full-time job.”<sup>59</sup>

One might even say that they have achieved more. Compared to the first 30 years of male Rhodes Scholars, no lack of ambition or accomplishment is in any way evident; and of course even the oldest women Rhodes Scholars are now only in their early fifties, just entering the usual period of peak performance in many fields. In addition, while a not insignificant number of male Rhodes Scholars have gotten into serious trouble — lost their bar licenses, been charged with crimes and SEC violations and using charitable funds for their own purposes<sup>60</sup> — our research has not unearthed any women Scholars who have committed similar lapses.

And it is not that women have abandoned the notion of raising a family and are simply career-focused. Ziegler is right about this. Most of the women Rhodes Scholars surveyed by the Rhodes Project have children, and in quiet moments they will discuss how there are too few hours in the day. But this is not a uniquely feminine concern. Any man with driving ambition would likewise complain that time is too short. That is the nature of ambition — the continued striving towards advancement. The point that Ziegler and many seem to miss is that women do care about their families and do spend time with them, just as they care about community issues and global politics, but this is not uniformly, or even in most cases, to the detriment of their career. You might expect it to be so, but that is not how the evidence falls. It might be noted that men have always been allowed to show interest in politics, sports and matters of social concern and receive praise for spending time with their children, without it being suggested they are automatically less ambitious in their careers.

On what then do Ziegler and by extension the Rhodes Trust base their assumptions? It is not clear. But perhaps they, like Cecil Rhodes, should not be slated too roundly. For it seems that these traditional attitudes remain widely held throughout society and also in the Rhodes community. A high ranking Rhodes official told me over dinner several years ago, that he thought many women scholars owed their selection in part to their looks, and that there was not one Rhodes woman who had made as much money or achieved as much in business or on the national stage as the men. Matters of appearance aside, our findings do not

---

<sup>59</sup> Ziegler, p. 312.

<sup>60</sup> Even the current American Secretary, Elliot Gerson, was charged by New York authorities with assault and child endangerment when he was divorcing his terminally-ill, third wife Amy. According to the *New York Post*, the charges were later dropped. See Richard Johnson, “Hated, Dead Ex Worth \$20m,” *New York Post*, 29 September 2007, p. 6.

support these views.

Similar traditional assumptions might be said to have informed the planning of a recent reunion of women Rhodes Scholars in Oxford. The gathering of some of these keenly intelligent and high-achieving women provided a rare chance for them to engage each other in analysis and debate on issues of topics of public concern as well as their own life experiences. But this opportunity, it might be said, was in some measure dissipated by a disproportionate focus on personal anecdote about the panelists' experience as women. Although interesting and touching on one level, this structure seemed to lend weight to the view that women naturally tend toward the emotive and sympathetic, avoiding the serious business of analyzing world events. One could argue that it played entirely into the hands of even an inadvertent critic, like Ziegler, who described a previous such reunion in the following terms: "Woman after woman spoke about her successes, her failures, her problems, her aspirations."<sup>61</sup> At the 100th anniversary reunion of Rhodes Scholars in Oxford in 2003, open to women and men, there was a much wider variety of panels, including ones that covered history, communications, sports, the environment and museums; not one discussed personal matters. Similarly, during the celebration of the Mandela Rhodes Foundation in Cape Town the preceding year, discussion focussed on these broader issues such as education, health, democracy, society and business. I had hoped and expected at the women's reunion that when a multi-disciplinary group of such stature had taken time out of busy schedules to meet together, more time would have been given to discuss matters of interest beyond the personal. This would have been more in keeping with the memory and ideals of Cecil Rhodes, from whose generosity all of the women present had benefited.

Furthermore, the choice of keynote speaker at this reunion was indicative. The address was offered by a former Rhodes Scholar, Bonnie St. John (USA 1986), who has risen above past sufferings to achieve success on the inspirational speaking circuit. Her resilience is deeply admirable, but her core argument was that women's success should be measured by a standard different from men's, one that takes account of their "uniqueness" and that they "have a different path" from men imbued with their "own passions and challenges."<sup>62</sup>

St. John does not intend feminine success to be treated as less valuable than the success of

---

<sup>61</sup> Ziegler, p. 312.

<sup>62</sup> See Ian Desai.

men — quite the opposite — but I fear that when one seeks to inspire women to employ a different standard for themselves, in recognition of a collective handicap their sex imposes, the obvious inference will be drawn. As Nadine Baudot-Trajtenberg (Canada 1978) observed in response to St. John’s speech, the whole purpose of Rhodes’ benefaction was:

*Success with a capital S, not the type of success that needs explaining, defining, refining or interpreted, the type that you recognize instantly, that you see walking down the street, that makes heads turn, that makes the media go up into high gear, the one that dreams are made of....That’s the person Rhodes wanted as a Rhodes Scholar. So when we dared apply for the Rhodes Scholarship, we all had in mind the ‘big S success,’ whether we admitted it to ourselves or not.<sup>63</sup>*

Surely it is uncontroversial to suggest that if success needs re-definition, greater equality would be achieved if the norms of success were defined alike for men and women.

These incidents simply show that the world of Rhodes Scholars is still uneasy with the idea of, even the definition of, female success. Women have long been told that they have less ambition than men. They have striven over the last century to prove that this is not true; and that they are every bit as capable as men of shaping the world in which we all live, not just from the hearth and the rearing of good citizens but from the top. Yet even now, a full generation on from the first admission of women to the Rhodes Scholarship, after many of these Scholars have secured places of power and authority outside the home, their achievements and abilities are being overlooked; either by the Rhodes Trust itself, whose official representatives continue to pronounce that the women Scholars are not high achievers; or, it seems, even by some of the women themselves.

---

<sup>63</sup> Nadine Baudot-Trajtenberg. Business Panel. 30 Years of Women Rhodes Scholars: A Weekend of Celebration, Reflection and Conversation. Oxford. 1 June 2008.