

Rebecca Gorlov has a BA in History and Politics from London University and an MPhil in Modern History from Oxford University. She is the Chief Operating Officer of the Rhodes Project.

In Pursuit of Greatness: The Ideal of the Rhodes Scholarship

Rebecca Gorlov

The 1992 election of Bill Clinton as 42nd President of the United States put a human face on a certain ideal of the Rhodes Scholar: multitasking, hardworking, ambitious and brilliantly networked, who uses his prodigious advantages to attain high office and fight the world's fight.¹ As one Scholar (USA 1990) told the Rhodes Project, "the Rhodes takes people who are Type A, highly intense and already laden with personal goals and aspirations, and then increases those exponentially." It took almost a century for Cecil Rhodes' vision of an English-speaking, elite society of vigorous future leaders to capture the most powerful office in the world. But was that just a lucky break? How well has the Rhodes Scholarship, in keeping with the wishes of its founder, fared in nurturing future world leaders?

Seeking Victorian Virtue

Cecil Rhodes wanted his Scholars to be young men "likely to esteem the performance of their public duties as [their] highest aim." Public service, that quintessential Victorian virtue, was his lodestar.² From the start, the public service ethos was expected to take the Scholars to the top. Oxford historian Richard Symonds observes that "Parkin [the Organising Secretary of the Rhodes Trust] had hoped that the Scholarship would turn out what he considered to be Oxford's highest product – 'Literary Statesmen' in the line of Gladstone, Salisbury, Rosebery, Bryce and Morley."³ As he also noted, "this hardly occurred," even in the earliest years of the Scholarship when Rhodes' ambitions for the Scholars fit easily into

¹ Rhodes' statement, in a private letter, that he hoped his Scholars would be "the best men for the world's fight" has been widely mis-quoted as a desire that Rhodes Scholars "fight 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.

² Rhodes' definition of public service was narrow – politics, government or the civil service – and could not escape the *noblesse oblige* that suffused both the British upper class and the Oxbridge-educated middle classes to which Rhodes himself belonged. However, the United States, South Africa and Germany, whose countrymen Rhodes chose to receive his Scholarship, did not have the same tradition – so it was a curiously English legacy that Rhodes bequeathed to his international brotherhood.

³ G.R. Parkin, *The Rhodes Scholarships* (London: Constable & Co., 1913), p. 212 as cited in R. Symonds, *Oxford and Empire: The Last Lost Cause* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), p. 167.

the ethos of the age.⁴ Some commentators indeed felt that Oxford's enervating manners were not an appropriate qualification for the hurly-burly of American and colonial politics and that the returning Scholars lacked 'punch,'"⁵ Symonds wrote. And as the 20th century progressed, the notion of selfless scholar-athletes striving for the public good seemed even more jarring, at least to some. William Plomer, a South African writer, found the notion ridiculous, and sinister:

This ideal 'scholar' of Rhodes this successful footballer and kindly litterateur, this dutiful hero and moral exhibitionist, this cricketing paragon of muscular Christianity, has none of the splendor of some Greek or Renaissance imagining, but a close relationship to some common types of upper-middle class Victorian manhood, the server of Mammon in the name of God, or the painfully earnest and misguided missionary....It seems to me that the ideal Rhodes Scholar would develop into a cold and truculent sahib with a thorough knowledge of ball-games⁶

Nevertheless, its explicit call to public service remains a defining feature of the Rhodes Scholarship, one that continues to imbue it with prestige — and to both inspire and irritate its recipients. Our survey of women Rhodes Scholars, for example, reveals that even 25 years after leaving Oxford, many still measure themselves against the expectation that they should fight the world's fight — and find themselves wanting. They (and many male Rhodes Scholars) feel as if the Scholarship was intended for other people, that they don't really belong, that some imagined inner circle of the truly deserving is inexorably climbing to positions of global leadership, while they, the quiet frauds, get on with less glittering lives. A modernized version of the "white man's burden" that Rhodes so enthusiastically embraced retains its ability to mesmerize — and repel — in a context he could hardly recognize.

⁴ Frank Aydelotte, *The Oxford Stamp and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1917), p. 47 as cited in R Symonds, p. 167.

⁵ Symonds, p. 167.

⁶ William Plomer, a South African writer, as quoted in B. Bamford, *The Substance: The Story of a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford* (Cape Town: R. Beerman Publishers, 1959), p. 127.

But even from the outset, the burden was a peculiar one to impose on young men simply because they shared two years at Oxford. On what realistic basis were they expected to forge careers comparable to the political giants of the Victorian age? What was the magic Rhodes expected them to imbibe? And is such magic still available to modern Scholars, justifying the expectations of leadership placed upon them? If not, the Scholarship may perversely be setting its recipients up for a word seldom associated with them: failure.

The Rhodes Vision: Mingling with an Oxonian Elite

Cecil Rhodes intended that his Scholars, fortified by the best education England had to offer, should go home and spread the values they had absorbed. This, he hoped, would lead to greater international understanding and remove any threat of war among the world's three greatest powers: the United Kingdom, the United States and Germany. It strikes the modern reader as hopelessly naïve to presume that a few young men could be hoped to have so great an impact on the fate of nations. Nevertheless, it was Rhodes' ambition — and in his day, perhaps in this respect not altogether different from our own, if one wanted to associate with men who were likely to end up in positions of power and authority, then Oxford — which did indeed churn out many who came to dominate the affairs of the world's greatest empire— was the place to find them.

As Joseph Soares has suggested: “One could say that Oxford was Britain's candidate training school for its officer corps.”⁷ Throughout British history more senior politicians and civil servants have been educated at Oxford than at any other university, including Cambridge. Oxford numbers 25 prime ministers among its former members, a record barely matched by its nearest institutional competitor, Eton, which claims 19. About 50 percent of hereditary peers during the nineteenth century had been educated there, not to mention large numbers of MPs and civil servants. It has been estimated that as many as a third of the graduates of some Oxford colleges were employed in the Civil Service in the nineteenth century.

⁷ Joseph A. Soares, *The Decline of Privilege: The Modernization of Oxford University* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 5.

Biography after biography has noted Rhodes' appreciation of the predominance of Oxford men in the public sphere.⁸ And when he went up to Oxford in the 1870s, he seized the opportunities it afforded to mix with the future great and good by joining two of the most exclusive dining clubs, the Bullingdon and Vincent's, where he made friendships which were to prove instrumental in later life. There has been a tendency to label this brand of networking as quite sinister, the very root of Britain's pervasive class distinctions; in reality, it was more likely a symptom than the cause.

The American historian Carol Quigley claimed in *The Anglo-American Establishment* that the Rhodes Scholarship went beyond this kind of elite club and was instead an actual secret society intimately bound up with the English governing class. Rhodes had explicitly proposed creating such a brotherhood in his first will; entitled "Confession of Faith," it was written when he was 24. Quigley did not believe that this "Confession" was the youthful folly others have dismissed it as — he saw it as being brought to fruition in the form of the Rhodes Scholarships: "The Scholarships were merely a façade to conceal the secret society, or, more accurately, they were to be one of the instruments by which the members of the secret society could carry out his purpose."⁹ But no evidence for this has ever been adduced. Quigley's only real "proof" was that Rhodes never suggested that he had recanted his earlier views. The institution Rhodes created was not a secret brotherhood, but a mechanism for future members of the elite to mix, a kind of supercharged dining club such as those he found so valuable at Oxford.

From Privilege to Meritocracy

When Rhodes died there were only a dozen universities in England, of which the non-Oxbridge institutions had been in existence for less than 80 years. In an age when less than four percent of the population went to university at all, Oxford was comparatively more elite than is true today. But it was an elite defined not mainly by brains but by money and family. Over two-thirds of the undergraduate student body were gentlemen-commoners — a privileged class of student able to avoid the demanding Scholarship examination simply because they could afford to pay the higher fees incurred. The admissions process had no other defined criteria. Of course

⁸ Among the better-known of these biographies are: Anthony Thomas, *Rhodes* (London: BBC Books, 1996), p. 103; and also, Robert Rotberg, *The Founder: Cecil Rhodes and the Pursuit of Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 90.

⁹ Carroll Quigley, *The Anglo-American Establishment: From Rhodes to Cliveden* (New York: Books in Focus, 1981), p. 33.

there were scholarly undergraduates, but there were also, in rather larger numbers, young men whose primary concerns were far removed from the library and lecture rooms: the future captains of Empire. The degree of privilege enjoyed by these men is demonstrated by the indifference of many towards the degree they took. Forty percent of undergraduates before the First World War left with pass degrees (the lowest possible) or no degree at all. By the 1930s, this number still hovered around the 25 percent mark. Clearly these students were not attending the university with any serious interest in studying. But it was precisely because Oxford was good at producing virile leaders that Rhodes considered an Oxford education the apotheosis of all he admired.

Many historians have found the habits of these studiously non-academic Oxford men — with whom Rhodes sympathized — to be remarkable. But Rhodes famously observed that those who did well at Oxford did not always shine in later life, and the view that Oxford’s prestige actually derived from its value to those who eschewed bookishness for more vigorous pursuits was not unusual. Lord David Cecil, for example, speaking to a parliamentary committee, remarked that many who had been weak students grew to become very “distinguished people,” precisely because they did not strive for “Firsts in their final exams.” He continued:

*We now run the danger of choosing nothing but safe examinees who, after they leave Oxford, will follow a useful and undistinguished career as teachers and minor civil servants. As a result the importance and value of Oxford will be diminished.*¹⁰

Thus, the requirement to demonstrate academic excellence to win the award was, in fact, a marked difference between the Scholars Rhodes’ fortune brought to Oxford and the men he had known there. They may have possessed many other qualities, but the key attribute for acceptance to the Scholarship has always been a distinguished scholarly record at their home university. At Oxford they may have been able to coast a little (for most of the 20th century the majority read for a second BA rather than research degrees), but they could not count on whatever elite polish they acquired in Britain guaranteeing a comfortable berth back home.

Another reason why Rhodes Scholars may not have played a leadership role in their own countries analogous to that of Victorian-era Oxford graduates in Britain is, of course, the

¹⁰ Lord David Cecil quoted in the Commission of Inquiry 1965b: 35. *Evidence: Part Four: Individuals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), quoted in Soares, p. 83.

tiny size of the group by comparison. Oxford currently has 15,000 students; the 200 Rhodes Scholars who are in residence at any one time clearly represent only a very small fraction of the student body. It is misconceived to judge their exploits against those of a much larger group. Moreover, Britain, as center of empire, could give its graduates unique scope of action. By the end of the First World War, the British Empire covered almost a quarter of the globe and governed a quarter of its population. Thus, men who entered into government-related fields could find that their work affected the lives of people across the world, even if they themselves rarely spent time outside the United Kingdom. Others were able to have a more direct influence through working overseas as administrators in the Indian Civil Service and in other postings throughout the Empire, for which there was high demand.

Within decades, however, the Empire disappeared and Britain found her standing reduced among the ranks of great powers, diminishing the possible influence of Oxford men, and undercutting a central premise of Rhodes' vision — that it would be valuable for world peace for the elites of other leading countries to know the British. Indeed, Rhodes' dream that his Scholars could help ensure peace among Britain, Germany and the United States was snuffed out within scarcely more than a decade, by the carnage of the First World War. Although the Scholarship was extended to former British colonies and her dominions, none of these ranked as a world power; even if they had, the number of Scholarships that they received (for many countries, just one or two) was far lower than the 32 bestowed on the United States.

Since the Second World War, Oxford's resemblance to the incubator of leadership known by Rhodes has faded. Its dominance in British (and postcolonial) political life remained remarkably constant, but the nature of education offered, the students who received it, and the political institutions into which they moved all changed. After 1945, wealthy young men who lagged academically were rejected in favor of the bright sons of middle and working class families. Undergraduates who were sons of peers began to go elsewhere. Between the 1950s and the late 1960s, the proportion of eldest sons of peers — those who would inherit their father's seat in the House of Lords — attending Oxbridge colleges had fallen from 50 to 20 percent.¹¹ The real triumph for meritocracy was the abolition of the university's practice of holding separate entrance procedures for gentlemen-commoners. Their status was abolished in 1962 and a universal entrance exam was established. In just a few decades, the great factory for

¹¹ Soares, p. 9.

future members of the British establishment was overhauled to draw its raw materials not from the already wealthy and aristocratic but the intellectually able. The elite it produced was thus much more meritocratic, though this transition has been obscured by the fact that Oxford maintained its position in producing the elite as its graduates continued to hold a uniquely disproportionate share of public offices.¹² This relationship only began to unravel following the election of the Labour governments of the 1960s and 1970s and has been in gradual decline since.

The meritocratic impulse working its way through postwar Oxford also changed the Rhodes Scholarship away from the supercharged club Rhodes had envisaged. In the decades following its inception, Scholars were encouraged to read for a second BA and so they were taught with undergraduates from their colleges, with whom they also mixed, competed athletically and befriended. However, their particular entry requirements meant that the Scholars were older than their school-leaver peers. Gradually, Scholars started to opt for research degrees. By 1966, those taking undergraduate degrees were outnumbered for the first time by those taking master's or doctoral degrees, and the numbers have continued to rise in the years since.¹³ Rhodes Scholars have found themselves to be slightly at odds with the predominantly English, more youthful undergraduates and thus have been more tempted to mix with fellow post-graduates — who are largely drawn from outside the U.K. Scholars interviewed by the Rhodes Project have frequently commented on the benefits of making friends among students from across the world whilst at Oxford. This is not quite what Rhodes had in mind when he called for greater understanding between nations, though it may be more relevant to the international times we now live in.

¹² Oxbridge dominance is frequently recognized but not the fact that Oxford graduates who have gone into government service have tended to outnumber their Cambridge counterparts by two to one. Between 1900 and 1985, of the 972 government ministers with a university education, 455 were at Oxford and 276 at Cambridge. Of eleven prime ministers counting back from Tony Blair [elected 1997], eight were undergraduates at Oxford, and none at Cambridge. Oxford has enjoyed a similar lead in Parliament more generally. On average between 1951 and 1970, 48 percent of Conservative MPs and 30 percent of Labour members who had been educated to tertiary level came from Oxford, while the respective figures for Cambridge are 34 and 14 percent. From David Butler, "Electors and Elected" in *British Social Trends Since 1900*, Ed. A.H. Halsey (London: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 319-20, and W.L. Guttsman, "The British Political Elite and the Class Structure" in *Elites and Power in British Society*. Ed. P. Stanworth & A. Giddens (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 35, as cited in Soares, p. 5.

¹³ Anthony Kenny, "The Rhodes Trust and its Administration" *The History of the Rhodes Trust*, Ed. Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 61-2.

Born to Fail?

Brian Bamford, himself a former Rhodes Scholar (South Africa 1951), suggested that maybe Rhodes' emphasis was in the wrong direction altogether:

In a world wracked by ignorance and prejudice it is surely an essential good that different men should be brought together in a wise and neutral place. That was the vision of Rhodes, and nothing he did in his lifetime can vitiate it. And if that was not the vision, who shall say that the Scholars have not fulfilled it? Peace and goodwill do not come in only from a Cabinet Minister, or a Supreme Court judge, or a Bishop, but they come in slowly and almost imperceptibly, like the tide, whenever a man in his relations with his fellow-men brings to bear the qualities of understanding and tolerance. The world has perhaps had enough of the men who set out to influence its thought, and perhaps not enough of men who make admirable husbands and fathers of families.¹⁴

The idea that Cecil Rhodes would have wanted his fortune to nurture family men shows that at least one of his Scholars developed at Oxford an admirably creative mind. Rhodes clearly sought a brotherhood of world leaders. By its nature that was unachievable even at the apogee of Empire. As Sir Carleton Allen, former Warden of Rhodes House, observed:

It is true that a large number of Rhodes Scholars, perhaps the majority have not become persons of definite eminence; but how could it be otherwise? No system of selection which human ingenuity could devise could ever pick out from a large number of young students a body of infallible "winners;" for the excellent reason that men of true light and leading will always be a minority in the world. The selection of a Rhodes Scholar, based largely upon promise, is always something of a speculation.¹⁵

As the world has become more complex and meritocratic, the notion of a brotherhood of world leaders, self-selected by its previous members, has become not only unachievable but repellent. For an international group of power-brokers to be formed today at such a young age

¹⁴ Bamford, p. 131.

¹⁵ C.K. Allen, *Forty Years of the Rhodes Scholarships* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1944), p. 19.

— at one of the world’s oldest educational establishments, no less — comes across at worst as a conspiracist’s fantasy, and at best, as a pretty terrifying prospect. Though a wonderful academic award, the prospect of the Rhodes Scholars as a group exhibiting the sort of power their founder had hoped for is, to modern sensibilities, elitist to the point of ridicule.

The views Rhodes held about education, duty and class were bound up in the ideas of his time, and did not work as he hoped even then. In our democratic age, we are glad to let his money be spent on educating intelligent people of promise in many areas — not only not expecting Rhodes Scholars to conquer the world, but relieved that they will not.