

William Beinart, “Appendix A: Historical Appendix to the Report of the Oriel College Commission on the Rhodes Statue and Diversity within the College”, in *Oriel College, Report of a Commission of Inquiry Established by Oriel College, Oxford into Issues Associated with Memorials to Cecil Rhodes* (Oxford: Oriel College, 2021):

A critical response

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1. In a concluding summary of his view, Professor Beinart states that Cecil Rhodes was “directly responsible for racial segregation, violence, conquest and land appropriation as well as exploitative relationships in the mining companies that he controlled” (p. 120). While some of this is true, most of it is either misleading or morally simplistic.

THE BLACK FRANCHISE AND ‘SEGREGATION’

2. Quoting an 1887 speech, William Beinart makes much of Rhodes’ declared intention that Africans should be “a subject race” (pp. 99, 100). However, he overlooks the crucial qualification that Rhodes made: “Treat the natives as a subject people *as long as they continue in a state of barbarism and communal tenure*” (ibid., p. 100; my emphasis). The clear implication is that Rhodes considered black Africans equally capable of cultural development, only temporarily subordinate, and not naturally or biologically inferior.

3. As Beinart points out, Rhodes did support two pieces of legislation that tightened the conditions of eligibility for the franchise in such a way as to reduce the number of African voters—one in 1887 and one in 1892 (pp. 99-100). However, Beinart hints that this was a political compromise to appease the Afrikaner Bond, which it was, and concedes that Rhodes did not reject black enfranchisement on principle: he was “not opposed to a small measure of representation in the central colonial legislature for black people” (ibid., pp. 100-1). Rhodes was mainly concerned to reconcile the Afrikaner majority with British rule in South Africa. So was Sir Alfred Milner, High Commissioner from 1897-1901, since, without Afrikaner acquiescence, progress in elevating the status of black Africans would be virtually impossible.

4. Beinart reports that Rhodes first deployed the slogan of ‘equal rights for every civilised man south of the Zambesi’ in 1896-7 with reference only to members of the white working class in Cape Town. Nevertheless, it remains true that in 1898, when asked to clarify what he meant by ‘civilised man’ in the previous year, he replied, “a man, white or black who has sufficient education to write his name, has some property, or works. In fact, is not a loafer”.¹

¹ Robert I. Rotberg, *The Founder. Cecil Rhodes and the Pursuit of Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 611.

5. Certainly, Milner took Rhodes' words at face value. In a speech he gave at the Drill Hall, Johannesburg, on 31 March 1904, he bravely declared that, regarding 'the colour question', he was "in the opinion of the vast majority of the people in this room, a heretic on the subject ... and an unrepentant heretic.... I continue to hold the view that we got off the right lines in this matter when we threw over the principle of Mr Rhodes—equal rights for all civilised men". Nevertheless, he was "prepared to rely for the return to the true path *upon a gradual change in the opinion of the [white] people of South Africa*".²

6. Notwithstanding the fact that blacks, like whites, in Cape Colony had to meet certain conditions before they could acquire the right to vote, the assumption prevailed that the natives could become fit to vote, given time to develop.³ Thus, when the Cape government proposed a bill in 1899 that would have disenfranchised most natives, Cecil 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".⁴

RACIALLY SEGREGATIONIST COMPOUNDS?

7. In 1885, at Rhodes' Kimberley mines, unskilled Africans on short, three-month contracts were required to be confined in compounds, in order to stop them leaving in breach of contract, smuggling diamonds out, and gaining access to enervating alcohol. Other, more skilled, less transitory African workers were housed in accommodation of their own construction, with more or less help from the mining companies.⁵ The discriminating criterion, therefore, was not race, but skill, length of contract, and reliability. Even though he acknowledges that they were not imposed on all African workers, Beinart describes the compounds as "racially restrictive" (pp. 99, 103). That is a misleading description.

² John Marlowe, *Milner, Apostle of Empire* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1976), pp. 153-4. The emphasis is mine.

³ The assumption prevailed in that the qualified franchise was not withdrawn from black Africans before South Africa acquired the status of a dominion in 1910 and, with it, effective independence in domestic policy. Up until then the Afrikaner Bond sought on several occasions to restrict the black franchise—with limited success, according to Farai Nyika and Johan Fourie ("Black Disenfranchisement in the Cape Colony, c. 1887—1909: Challenging the Numbers", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 46/3 [2020])—but they never sought simply to abolish it. In 1936 the South African Parliament passed the Representation of Natives Act, which removed black voters in the Cape from the common voters' roll and placed them on a separate roll, allowing them to elect only three members to the House of Assembly. The Act also provided for four indirectly elected white Senators to represent black people all over the country. Qualified coloured voters in the Cape remained on the common roll. In 1959 the Promotion of Bantu Self-Government Act turned traditional tribal lands into eight independent African states or 'Bantustans' and abolished the right of black Africans to vote in elections to the South African Parliament. In 1968 the [Separate Representation of Voters Amendment Act](#) abolished the remaining parliamentary representation for coloured people. In 1970 the Black Homeland Citizenship Act assigned Africans citizenship of their Bantustan, while removing their citizenship of South Africa.

⁴ Rotberg, *The Founder*, p. 618. The proposed legislation referred to here was the 1899 Parliamentary Registration Law Amendment bill. While it is true that, in promoting what would become the 1894 Glen Grey Act, Rhodes supported a certain disenfranchisement of black Africans, he did so, not for racist reasons, but as a political compromise designed to promote reconciliation between Briton and Afrikaner.

⁵ C. Van Onselen, *Chibaro: African Mine Labour in Southern Rhodesia, 1900-1933* (London: 1975), p. 36.

THE 1890 'INVASION' OF THE NDEBELE KINGDOM

8. Beinart's case against Rhodes rests heavily on his view that the BSAC's entry into Ndebele territory in 1890 was "an armed invasion" that resulted in "violent conquest" (pp. 103, 105, 118). That is also a misleading description, since the truth is altogether muddier.

9. In 1888 Charles Rudd, acting on behalf of Rhodes's British South Africa Company (BSAC), secured from the Ndebele king, Lobengula, a signed concession granting the exclusive right to mine for minerals in Mashonaland, which lay on the periphery of his realm. In return, Lobengula would receive a monthly payment of £100 in perpetuity, 1,000 Martini Henry breech-loading rifles, and 100,000 rounds of ammunition, which would help him resist Boer incursions from the Transvaal Republic. Ndebele rule over Mashonaland provided little in the way of public goods, consisting instead in the constant, destabilising threat of raiding parties aimed at abducting Shona men into military service, together with the extraction of tribute on pain of summary retribution. If ever there was a pure example of predatory colonial economics, this was it.

10. There is some evidence that Rudd may have been less than scrupulous in explaining to Lobengula what was intended by the agreement. While the written text had been translated and explained several times, there is testimony from a missionary-interpreter that Rudd, desperate to secure the king's consent, added a set of verbal assurances "that they would not bring more than 10 white men to work in his country, that they would not dig anywhere near towns, etc., and that they and their people would abide by the laws of his country and in fact be his people".⁶ If that is so, what Rudd promised—at least about the number of white immigrants—was not kept. It is, therefore, possible that the king was deceived on this point, as he later claimed to have been. However, quite how decisive Rudd's alleged verbal qualifications were in gaining his consent, we do not know. What we do know is that Lobengula was no fool and had had long experience of signing concessions to white men. Moreover, he was under siege by competing pressures—from the Boers, the Portuguese, the British, and some of his own people who were urging him to authorise the annihilation of the whites. So, it might be that he *did* know what he was doing when he signed the 'Rudd Concession', but, under pressure from one quarter or another, subsequently got cold feet and reneged on it. Whatever the cause, Lobengula later repudiated what he had put his hand to.

11. Nevertheless, Rhodes's men, cautiously skirting around the edges of the Ndebele heartland, began to exploit the concession anyway and Lobengula tolerated their intrusion, because he did not want war. Nor did Rhodes. However, three years later, in July 1893, violence broke out after the white settlers of Salisbury woke up one morning to find their Shona servants being slaughtered on their doorsteps by a punitive Ndebele raiding party. Only then did Rhodes conclude that Lobengula had to be subdued by force. In this way, the BSAC came to rule the territory of what would become Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) by means of conquest. But the conquest was provoked by a violent Ndebele raiding expedition *three years after* the BSAC's ambiguous ingress, which Lobengula had tolerated.

⁶ Arthur Keppel-Jones, *Rhodes and Rhodesia: The White Conquest of Zimbabwe, 1884–1902* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1983), p. 77.

12. Moreover, *pace* Adekaye Adebajo, the territory that the BSAC conquered was hardly ‘ancestral’.⁷ The lands occupied by the Ndebele in the 1890s they themselves had seized by conquest about fifty years before, having broken off from the militaristic Zulu empire and migrated westward to found their own “militarised state”, scattering other African peoples before them.⁸ The Shona, whose lands they occupied, were reduced to the status of vassals, subject to indiscriminate torture, slaughter, and laying waste 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”.⁹ If the Ndebele had some moral right to the territory they ruled, it was based neither on their possession since time immemorial nor on the beneficence of their rule.

THE ORIGINS OF THE 1893 WAR

13. In his account of what happened in July 1893, Beinart tells us that “a sizeable Ndebele army moved eastward in order to assert authority over Shona communities who were living on or near settler farms around Salisbury. They did not threaten white settlers, but they did disrupt labour supplies and captured a limited amount of cattle. Jameson warned them to leave, which they did not” (p. 106). This description is coy. It overlooks the fact that ‘asserting authority’ in this case involved the killing of Shona within sight of the settlers, which, together with the refusal of the Ndebele to leave, surely gave the British good reason to *feel* threatened. It also fails to mention that, in approaching the white settlements, the Ndebele army was defying Lobengula, which implies that he had lost control of at least a significant portion of his own people. In that case, had Rhodes negotiated with him, as Beinart thinks he should have done (*ibid.*, p. 106), it is doubtful that Lobengula would have been able to keep his side of any peace agreement.

THE MEANS OF WAR

14. Beinart tells us that Rhodes “had no scruples about the violence used” (p. 123). He is particularly disturbed by the BSAC’s “unbridled use ... of the Maxim gun”, especially the fact that it was used “only by one side” (pp. 99, 106, 107). This implies that he thinks that fairness in war requires the opposing sides to be equal in strength. That, however, is a recipe for endless war, since it is only when one side overpowers the other that the fighting will stop. The ultimate aim of military endeavour is to make the enemy lose the will to fight, and that is achieved by overwhelming them. No one can doubt that the Ndebele would have used Maxim guns liberally, if they had had them.

15. Several other features of the BSAC’s military tactics in the war of 1896-7 also disturb Beinart: the ‘scorched earth’ policy, the shooting of enemy soldiers in flight, and the

⁷ Adekaye Adebajo, “Why Price is wrong over Rhodes”, *South African Sunday Independent*, 29 March 2015. He made the same claim four years earlier in “Mandela and Rhodes, Africa’s saint and sinner”, *Independent Online*, 26 July 2011.

⁸ The phrase “militarised state” is Beinart’s own (p. 106).

⁹ W. A. Elliot, *Gold from Quartz* (London Missionary Society, 1910), p. 81.

exploding of dynamite in caves where women and children were known to be hiding (ibid., pp. 99, 105, 111, 112, 114, 115).

- First, the burning of villages and the destruction of grain stores may have been justified by military necessity, in that they deprived enemy troops of support and sustenance. A similar policy was adopted by the British Army against the Boers in the Second Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902.
- Second, enemy soldiers who flee have not surrendered, and if their flight is successful, they will live to fight another day. Therefore, it is morally permissible to shoot enemy soldiers who are retreating, but who have not laid down their arms. Unfortunately, in conflicts such as those of 1893 and 1896-7, where the opponents represent very alien cultures and where there is no commonly recognised international law, there are no commonly recognised conventions for signalling and accepting surrender and sufficient trust to warrant the taking of risks is absent. Beinart himself tells us that “[i]mperial authorities tried to offer a qualified form of amnesty but it was clearly not trusted (or known)” (ibid., p. 112).
- Third, it is clear from Beinart’s own account that the explosion of dynamite in caves was a last resort and not intended to slaughter civilians. He tells us that those hiding included “armed men”; that at Intaba zikaMambo and Marandellas, when attempts were made to ‘smoke out’ the occupants, women and children who gave themselves up were not harmed; that dynamite was used on one occasion only when a chief responded to an invitation to surrender by killing two policemen, and on another only after the attempt at ‘smoking out’ had failed.

THE BSAC’S RULE AND THE APPROPRIATION OF LAND

16. The BSAC’s rule over the Ndebele and the Shona from 1893-6 was undoubtedly oppressive. Rhodes had delegated the running of the Company’s rule to Leander Starr Jameson, while he himself was absent in Cape Town or London. Nevertheless, the ultimate responsibility lay with Rhodes, who was culpable, at least, of negligence.

17. The uprising against the BSAC began in March 1896, when Ndebele attacked African ‘Native Police’ and settlers around Bulawayo, killing between 155 and 211 whites, in including between 23 and 27 women and children. Beinart comments: “This evidence suggests that some constraint was shown [by the Ndebele]” (p. 110). It may do, but only if we know that the low number of women and children killed represents the presence of merciful will rather than the lack of murderous opportunity. Beinart does not show us what the number means.

18. The reasons for the revolt were several. One was the seizure of a large portion of native cattle by white settlers after the 1893 war, thus depriving Africans of much of their main source of food (ibid., pp. 105, 108). Another was a devastating outbreak of rinderpest and the consequent policy of slaughtering infected herds, which the natives misperceived as spiteful (ibid., p. 109). And a third was the conduct of the ‘Native Police’, who tended to come from African peoples incorporated into the Ndebele state and accorded the lowest social status (ibid., pp. 109, 110), and who were often brutal in collecting taxes and mustering forced labour.

19. Toward the end of the conflict in 1896, Rhodes and five companions ventured unarmed into hostile territory and parlayed with the rebels face-to-face for several days. Robert 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 BSAC's 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 had made a serious mistake in encouraging his subordinates to seize control of the territory, without waiting for imperial authorisation from London, in 1893. As a token of his intention to put things right, he bought back 100,000 acres of prime farming land and invited the Ndebele rebels to occupy large parts of it in perpetuity, on condition that residents work on his farms for three months of each year. Thousands of natives took his offer up.¹⁰ Later that year he resolved to make the building of trust between white and black part of his work.¹¹ Tragically, he did not have much time to come through on his promise, since he died six years later. But he did have time enough to stipulate in his final will of July 1899 that the scholarships that would famously bear his name should be awarded without regard for 'race'.¹²

20. Unfortunately, Rhodes' experiment in combining a regular supply of labour to white farmers with long-term security of land for blacks was not adopted by other white landowners, and Rhodes' own verbal guarantee of land-security did not long survive his death in 1902. In 1903, the Chief Native Commissioner's attempts to establish a stronger

¹⁰ Terence Ranger, *Voices from the Rocks. Nature, Culture, and History in the Matopos Hills of Zimbabwe* (Oxford: James Currey, 1999), pp. 79-86.

¹¹ Rotberg, *The Founder*, pp. 570, 573.

¹² This is a controversial point. 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. Certainly, 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 that one of his main aims. After 1896, therefore, Rhodes was much more conscious of the conflict between whites and blacks. That is one reason to think that the word 'race' in his will does not 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' referred 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' will not to permit colour to disqualify a candidate. So, it came about that, within five years of Rhodes' death, the first African American became a Rhodes Scholar.

basis for African rights on Rhodes' estate failed, and by 1911 Africans were being evicted on a large scale.¹³

CONCLUSION

21. Rhodes did support a measure of segregation at the level of local government, but as a provisional political compromise aimed at appeasing the Afrikaner Bond. Since he believed in the equal capacity of black Africans to develop culturally, he continued to support the colour-blind franchise in respect of the Cape parliament. When, in 1899, the Cape government proposed a bill that would have disenfranchised most Africans, Rhodes opposed it.

22. The criteria for requiring confinement in a compound at the Kimberley mines were those of skill, length of contract, and reliability. The fact that some Africans were not subject to the requirement shows that race was not the criterion.

23. The BSAC's initial entry into Mashonaland was not a conquest. The conquest came about three years later in response to a violent Ndebele raiding expedition.

24. The conflicts of 1893 and 1896-7 were fought between two peoples of widely differing cultures, subject to no agreed conventions of war. In such conditions, trust was bound to be absent and with it the ground that would warrant the taking of risks in reducing casualties. Moreover, the use of overwhelming fire-power and the shooting of enemy soldiers in flight was morally permissible. And from what Beinart reports, the dynamiting of caves appears to have been a last resort, proportionate, and discriminate (that is, not intending harm to civilians).

25. Rhodes was culpably negligent in permitting the BSAC's rule over the Ndebele and the Shona between 1893 and 1896 to be so oppressive, and so he must bear indirect responsibility for the African uprising in 1896—although not for its chosen means. During the peace negotiations in late 1896, he listened to the rebels, acknowledged the BSAC's oppressiveness, promised to rectify it, and fulfilled his promise by providing the Africans with land over which their tenure would be secure. He subsequently delivered himself of the conviction that the future prosperity of southern Africa rested on building "complete confidence between the two [white and black] races" and declared that "henceforth I shall make that part of my work".¹⁴

26. The subtle and morally mixed truth about Cecil Rhodes is not done justice by Professor Beinart's final judgement.

¹³ Ranger, *Voices from the Rocks*, pp. 88-97.

¹⁴ Rotberg, *The Founder*, p. 573.