Legacy of Cecil Rhodes at Oxford

United Kingdom

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Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

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Abstract

This paper examines the recent contestations surrounding Cecil Rhodes at the University of Oxford. It provides historical context for the controversies and a detailed chronology of events relating to the contestations, focusing on developments in Oxford as well as discussions in the broader media landscape. The report describes the wide range of positions taken up with regards to the legacy of Rhodes in Oxford and their implications for approaches to memorialisation. It shows that the contestations are far from resolved and continue to resonate far beyond the specific question of one statue on Oxford's High Street.

Introduction

Cecil Rhodes' legacy has been controversial from the beginning. In 1893, the radical MP Henry Labouchere condemned Rhodes' 'pernicious company' and his 'filibustering and massacring expeditions -- never in our times had anything so wicked been done in Africa'. When Rhodes received the honorary Doctorate of Civil Law in 1899, 92 academics voiced their protest and the two elected Proctors indicated that they would exercise their right of vetoing the award.[1] The writer G. K. Chesterton wrote that what Rhodes 'called his ideals were the dregs of a Darwinism that had already grown not only stagnant, but poisonous … it was exactly because he had no ideas to spread that he invoked slaughter, violated justice, and ruined republics.'[2] But early published accounts of Rhodes' life and work, written mostly by those who knew him personally, were largely

[1] J. Newsinger, 'Why Rhodes must fall,' Race & Class 58, no. 2 (2016): 70-78.

[2] Thomas Schaeper and Kathleen Schaeper, Rhodes Scholars: Oxford and the creation of an American elite (London: Berghahn, 1998), 9.

favourable.[3] The largely laudatory perception of Rhodes shifted over time; its gradual disappearance accompanied the end of the British Empire.[4] A number of critical appraisals appeared that found much at fault with the imperialist aggression and paternalism embodied by Rhodes.[5] Nonetheless, a considerable debate continued among scholars, biographers and journalists—the legacy of Rhodes did not have a singular trajectory.[6]

Rhodes Must Fall was launched as a campaign in South Africa with the disfiguration of Rhodes' statue on 9 March 2015 at the University of Cape Town (UCT). Signs of the movement began years before with growing anger among activists towards racial inequalities at the university, including the disproportionate number of white faculty members, the lack of effort to decolonise the curriculum, and general discontent about the lack of student housing as well as rising tuition fees. Colonial legacies, especially the legacy of Cecil Rhodes, became a focal point, and at the forefront were Rhodes' views on race. Discussions included reference to his many quotes on race and empire, including the following:

> Just fancy those parts that are at present inhabited by the most despicable specimens of human beings what an alteration there would be if they were brought under Anglo-Saxon influence…[7]
>
> At any rate, if the whites maintain their position as the supreme race, the day may come when we shall all be thankful that we have the natives in their proper place.[8]

After intensive deliberation, UCT removed the statue exactly one month after its disfiguration on 9 April 2015.

The campaign soon spread to Oxford University, where the name of Cecil Rhodes maintains a presence at his erstwhile College, Oriel, which features a statue of him on High Street, while the prestigious Rhodes Scholarships are administered at Rhodes House. By the end of 2015, Rhodes Must Fall Oxford (RMFO) was widely discussed not only among the university communities, but also in the national press. As Amia Srinivasan, a professor of philosophy at

[3] For example, see Herbert Baker, *Cecil Rhodes*, Chapter 1; Philip Jourdan, Cecil Rhodes. John Lane, 1911, Chapter 10; Vindex [F. Verschoyle], Cecil Rhodes: His Political Life and Speeches, 1881-1900, Preface and chapter 'The Native Question'.

[4] Richard McFarlane, "Historiography of Selected Works on Cecil John Rhodes (1853-1902)," *History in Africa* 34 (2007): 437-46.

[5] For example, see Brian Roberts, Flawed Colossus, 'L'envoi'; Anthony Thomas, Rhodes: The Race for Africa, Introduction.

[6] Peter Godwin, "Rhodes to Hell," Slate Magazine, January 11, 1998.; Richard Brown, "The Colossus - The Founder: Cecil Rhodes and the Pursuit of Power. By Robert Rotberg with the Collaboration of Miles F. Shore," *The Journal of African History* 31, no. 3 (1990): 499–502.

[7] John E. Flint, "Cecil Rhodes, 'Confession of Faith' (1877)," University of Pittsburgh, Boston: Little Brown, 1974.

[8] John Cecil Rhodes, "The Glen Grey Speech," (Cape House Parliament, July 30, 1894.)

Oxford and former Rhodes Scholar, reflected in the aftermath of RMFO,

> No one at Oxford, or anywhere else in the UK, talked much about Cecil Rhodes before the current protests began. Portraits and statues of dead white men are like air in Oxford, ubiquitous and generally unremarked. My only recollection of talking about Rhodes is toasting him ('To the founder!') at Rhodes House dinners. Other scholars would sometimes refer to him as 'Uncle Cecil'.[9]

While it does not appear entirely accurate that Rhodes' legacy was uncontested prior to RMFO, it is clear that the movement has moved discussions of colonial legacy to the forefront. The following sections provide an overview of the contestations that began in March 2015.

Timeline of the movement's crescendo: March 2015-June 2016

Rhodes Must Fall Oxford (RMFO) began soon after the disfiguration of Rhodes' statue at the University of Cape Town on 9 March 2015. On 19 March, two Oxford students, Annie Teriba and Bi Kwo, organised a 'Solidarity Action' in support of RMF UCT on the High Street in Oxford. According to the Facebook page for the event, 86 individuals attended. The images shown on Facebook suggest that it was a relatively small gathering, with no more than ten individuals in each photo taken with the solidarity banner.[10] On the next day, 20 March, the South African media stated that protests were reported in Oxford, and that Rhodes Must Fall had reached the University of Oxford.[11] Brian Kwoba, a co-founder of RMFO, reflected in retrospect that the group came to a realisation after the initial solidarity demonstration that Oxford also required a similar process of decolonisation.[12] According to one interview conducted with RMFO co-founder Ntokozo Qwabe in 2016, the RMF movement in Cape Town provided direct inspiration for RMFO, which "constructed their call for the removal of the Rhodes statue at Oriel College on similar demands made by students in Cape Town."[13]

A next wave of protests emerged through the instigation of a debate at the Oxford Union.[14] The motion on 28 May 2015 was, 'This House believes Britain owes reparations to her former colonies,' which was carried by 185 to 56 votes. The debate itself was heated--one speaker compared Rhodes to

[9] Amia Srinivasan, "Under the Shadow of Rhodes," London Review of Books 38, no. 7 (March 31, 2016).
[10] Annie Olaloku, and Bi Ko, "#RHODESMUSTFALL Solidarity Action," Facebook, March 19, 2015.
[11] Raeesa, Pather, "#RhodesMustFall Reaches Oxford University," The Daily Vox, March 20, 2015.
[12] Emma Whitford, "Rhodes Must Fall," Inside Higher Ed, September 20, 2018.
[13] A. Kayum Ahmed, "#RhodesMustFall: Decolonization, Praxis and Disruption," *Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education* 9 (2017).
[14] The Oxford Union refers to the Oxford Union Society, a debating society founded in 1823.

Hitler in terms of racial ideology, whereas speakers on both sides accused the opposition of 'erasing history'.[15] RMFO was present at the debate in silent protest and then launched a public critique of the Union for serving a 'Colonial Comeback' cocktail after the debate. This event was publicised with a poster with an image of black hands in chains.[16] RMFO's original Facebook post on 29 May reads accordingly:

> So for Rhodes to truly fall Rhodes must first stand. Rhodes must be made to stand, revealed for what he really represents: the mutually productive culture of violence, racism, patriarchy and colonialism that to this day remains alive, aided and abetted by the University of Oxford, which continues to stand as an uncritical beneficiary of empire.[17]

On 1 June, the Oxford Union Governing Body passed a unanimous motion to acknowledge that the Union is institutionally racist.[18] In her retrospective piece in the London Review of Books, Amia Srinivasan provides further context for the Colonial Comeback cocktail at the Union:

> This wasn't an isolated incident. Two years ago a group of students at St Hugh's put on blackface to illustrate Jay-Z and Kanye West's 'Niggas in Paris' as part of a 'song titles'-themed bop. Only 3.9 per cent of Oxford's professors have a Black and Minority Ethnic background; even at Cambridge the figure is 6.4 per cent. Undergraduates can still complete a history degree without studying the non-European world. In a recent survey, 59.3 per cent of BME students reported feeling unwelcome at Oxford because of their race.[19]

According to the RMFO website, the movement addresses Oxford's colonial legacy on three levels: 1) the plague of colonial iconography, 2) reform of the Eurocentric curriculum, and 3) the underrepresentation of Black and minority ethnic (BME) among staff and students of the university. Anticipating the question of how iconography (or a single statue) fits within such a movement, the website clarifies that the movement's scope is about "more than a statue," though "we believe that statues and symbols matter; they are a means through which communities express their values".[20]

The protests went into hiatus as the academic year drew to a close and resumed in the 2015/16 year. A matriculation protest took place on 17 October, when red ribbons were

[15] Daniel Kodsi, "RMF Win Union Debate by Slim Margin," Cherwell, January 19, 2016.
[16] "'Colonial Comeback' Cocktail Controversy," The Poor Print, April 28, 2017.; Abby Young-Powell, "Oxford Union Accused of Racism for Sale of 'Colonial Comeback' Cocktail," The Guardian, May 29, 2015.
[17] "Rhodes Must Fall In Oxford," Facebook, May 28, 2015.
[18] Camilla Turner, "Oxford Union Admits It Is 'Institutionally Racist'," The Telegraph, June 1, 2015.
[19] Srinivasan, "Under the Shadow of Rhodes."
[20] RMF Oxford, "Our Aim," #RHODESMUSTFALL.

distributed to be worn with students' subfusc (academic gown). The red colour was intended to symbolise blood.[21] On 6 November, a petition was delivered by a group of protestors to Oriel College. The student newspaper Cherwell was told by protestors that "we protest because we are outraged at the continued existence of a statue that deifies someone who committed crimes against humanity."[22]

An online petition was launched on Change.org.[23] (As of September 2019, it solicited 2,865 supporters.) The petition states the belief that the statue at Oriel College amounts to glorification of Rhodes – "we find it deplorable that Oriel College continues to glorify an international criminal through its uncritical, deeply violent iconography"--and the belief that keeping the statue amounted to acquiescence with Rhodes' legacy--"as long as the statue remains, Oriel College and Oxford University continue to tacitly identify with Rhodes's values, and to maintain a toxic culture of domination and oppression." On the Change.org petition, signatories are provided a space to give reasons for signing. These reasons include:

> Some statues, by their commemoration of egregious persons (epitomising past evils whose effects and potency linger still) in public position of honour bear such a weight of significance against the humanity of fellow citizens that their public prominence is not tolerable but inappropriate. Like the Confederate Flag, Rhodes' statue in Oxford is one of them.
>
> The statue of Rhodes was pulled down at UCT but his shadow stretched over a much more vast distance than Cape Town or South Africa. To remove Rhodes' statue in Oxford would be bring the project of challenging the presence of colonial effigies in a more complete way and I give my unreserved support to that project.
>
> This iconoclast campaign is the kind of purification that is needed (in the imaginative realm) to adjust the mindset for more justice in the (real) world;
>
> I cannot feel comfortable at an institution which commends those who worked against my people. I do not want to pay money to an institution which disregards that.
>
> The statue to me represent a glorification of a man who caused suffering to black people.
>
> Yes, this man needs to be remembered. But he doesn't deserve to be venerated.
>
> Symbols of oppression, racism, murder and injustice shouldn't be on pedestals and honoured.
>
> The removal of the Rhodes statue, while only a symbolic action, would represent a concrete acknowledgement by the university of its discriminatory past. It ought to initiate an open dialogue

[21] George Hames, "Rhodes Must Fall Protests at Matriculation," Cherwell, October 24, 2015.
[22] Kim Darrah, "RMF to Protest at Oriel Following Rhodes Statue Petition," Cherwell, November 7, 2015.
[23] RMF Oxford, "Oriel College, Oxford University: Remove the Racist Statue of Rhodes Immediately," Change.org.

between the university board, faculty and students about how real change might be fostered.

While not all signatories directly addressed the way in which iconography in public space relates to historical injustice and ongoing contestations in society, many assented to the view that the statue maintained Rhodes' status as a figure of admiration. However, views on whether the statue should fall were far from unanimous. Cherwell's poll of 967 students, nearly 5% of the student body, found that 54% of students opted for 'remain', compared to 37% who preferred 'fall'. (48% of BME students thought the statue should fall, and 45% thought it should remain.)[24] As for the broader national context, according to a YouGov poll conducted after Rhodes Must Fall began in South Africa and immediately before the Union debate, 59% of British people said the Rhodes statue at Oriel should not be taken down – and 44% said 'we should be proud of British colonialism'.[25] A vote at the Oxford Union, on the other hand, had the result of 245 against 212, in favour of removing the statue.[26]

The principles behind removing Rhodes' statue from public space continued to be elaborated by student activists as the movement evolved. RMFO organiser Charlotte Ezaz stated on 30 October 2015 that spaces ought to evolve according to the social landscape they reflect.'[27] Student activists explicitly connected RMFO with Rhodes Must Fall in South Africa as well as other student movements in the USA and other regions of the world. In an article published on 1 December 2015, for example, Dalia Gebrial and Chi Chi Shi write of "a global moment of anti-racist student resistance," "a generation of self-realised young people of colour taking the experiences that have always been our reality, and commanding that the rest of the community recognise and take responsibility for the effacement and violence that has been historically seen as only our problem."[28]

Oriel College provided a response on 17 December 2015. (Unfortunately, its statement is no longer available on its website.) According to multiple sources, the College was involved in seeking consent from the City Council to

[24] Harry Gosling, "Majority of Oxford Students: Rhodes Should Stay," Cherwell, January 14, 2016.
[25] Wil Dahlgreen, "Rhodes Must Not Fall," YouGov, January 18, 2016.
[26] Kodsi, "RMF Win Union Debate by Slim Margin."
[27] Charlotte Ezaz, and The Rhodes Must Fall Communication Team, "Rhodes Is a Symbol of Racism in Oxford," The Oxford Student, October 30, 2015.
[28] Discoversociety, "The Violence of Liberalspeak: Eulogizing Cecil Rhodes, the 'Businessman' and 'Munificent Benefactor'," Discover Society, December 1, 2015.

remove objects with listed status.[29] The Oxford History site has reproduced the College's statement, which includes:

> In view of these complexities, the College has decided to launch a structured six-month listening exercise on the statue, running from early February 2016, seeking the views and ideas of students and staff of the College and the wider University, alumni, heritage bodies, Oxford City Council, residents of Oxford, and other members of the public, as we seek a positive way forward.[30]

Yet the six-month listening exercise was abruptly halted in January 2016. The College made a statement on 28 January that "the College's Governing Body has decided that the statue should remain in place, and that the College will seek to provide a clear historical context to explain why it is there".[31] One commentator remarked that the College "said it would hold a consultation over the Rhodes statue but then thought again when there were threats of funds being withdrawn."[32] According to a *Telegraph* article on 29 January, "furious donors threatened to withdraw gifts and bequests worth more than £100 million if it was taken down." The article reported that £1.5m of donations have already been cancelled and further consequences would be dire. The University, on the other hand, maintained that financial concerns were not primary. Yet Oriel's development director, Sean Power, said the college had received more than 400 letters (over 200 from alumni), with more than half being "outright condemnatory", and more than one in eight having indicated "that they intend to cease their financial support of the College".[33]

Although contestation in the media will be discussed in the next section, the particularly galvanizing statements made by Chris Patten, Chancellor of the University of Oxford, should be noted at this point. Patten addressed the issue of RMFO on Radio 4's *Today* on 13 January 2016. He expressed his incomprehension at the movement's aims and added, on the topic of Rhodes' legacy, that the Rhodes Scholarship had been endorsed by Nelson Mandela himself, who "regarded Rhodes and himself as having a common cause." He concluded that, "if people at a university aren't prepared to demonstrate the sort of generosity which Nelson Mandela

[29] Sean Coughlan, "Oxford College Considers Removing Rhodes Statue," BBC News, December 17, 2015.; Srinivasan, "Under the Shadow of Rhodes.; Elizabeth Redden, "Rhodes Will Stand," Inside Higher Ed, February 2, 2016.

[30] Stephanie Jenkins, "Oxford Inscriptions: Cecil Rhodes Statue on Rhodes Building," Oxford History,

[31] Oriel College, "Statement from Oriel College on 28th January 2016 ..." Oriel.ox.ac.uk, January 28, 2016.

[32] Ian Dunt, "The Rhodes Must Fall Movement Is Championing Free Speech," politics.co.uk, March 9, 2016.

[33] Javier Espinoza, "Cecil Rhodes Statue to Remain at Oxford University after Alumni Threaten to Withdraw Millions," *The Telegraph*, 29 Jan. 2016.; see also Harry Mount, "Finally! Oriel College Should Have Stood up to Rhodes Must Fall Long Ago," *The Telegraph*, 29 Jan. 2016.

showed towards Rhodes and towards history [...] then maybe they should think about being educated elsewhere."[34] These comments were reported in a *Guardian* article that appeared on the same day.[35]

On 18 January, the Junior Common Room (JCR) at University College voted to change the name of the 'Rhodes Computer Room' - a demand that was not granted.[36] On 24 January, the JCR of St Anne's College voted on a motion to oppose RMFO, which did not pass. The *Oxford Student* reported that there was significant disagreement among students, including differences between undergraduate and postgraduates.[37]
On 3 February, the Oxford University Student Union voted in favour of an emergency motion criticising Oriel's "failure to follow through on commitments made to students which primarily affect those in already marginalised and oppressed groups." In the days preceding the Student Union meeting, Oriel JCR and St Peter's college JCR had also voted in favour of similar motions.[38]

RMFO was also discussed by the Rhodes Trust and the community of Rhodes Scholars in Oxford. Many Rhodes Scholars signed a statement outlining that the Scholarship "does not buy silence" over Rhodes' legacy. Many of them were involved with Redress Rhodes, a campaign within the Rhodes Trust to examine measures of reparative justice.[39] According to Max Harris, a Rhodes Scholar,

> The Warden of Rhodes House, Charles Conn, has been open to this debate, and recently decided not to offer an unqualified toast to 'The Founder', Cecil Rhodes, in an annual dinner for Rhodes Scholars after discussions with Redress Rhodes [...] In the same way that the Confederate flag says something about states in America that fly it, in the same way that rainbow-tinted Facebook profile pictures say something about who we are and who we want to be - so too symbols and statues in Oxford say something about what the university is and what it aspires to be.[40]

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[34] Natasha Turner, "Lord Patten Speaks out in Rhodes Debate," *Times Higher Education*, 13 January 2016.
[35] Damien Gayle, and Nadia Khomami, "Cecil Rhodes Statue Row: Chris Patten Tells Students to Embrace Freedom of Thought," *The Guardian*, 13 January 2016.
[36] Javier Espinoza, "Students Demand Cecil Rhodes Name to Be Removed from Computer Room at Oxford University," *The Telegraph*, 18 January 2016.
[37] Amaka Opara, "St Anne's JCR Vote against Rhodes Must Not Fall Motion," *The Oxford Student*, 27 Jan. 2016.; Javier Espinoza, "Oxford College Divided over Support for Rhodes Must Fall Movement," *The Telegraph*, 27 January 2016.
[38] Megan Izzo, "OUSU Condemns Oriel over Rhodes Statue," *The Oxford Student*, 6 Feb. 2016.
[39] Nadia Khomami, "Oxford Scholars Reject Hypocrisy Claims amid Row over Cecil Rhodes Statue," *The Guardian*, 13 January 2016.
[40] Max Harris, "Why Symbols Matter: The Case for the Rhodes Must Fall Movement in Oxford," *Huffpost,* 24 July 2016.

Rhodes Must Fall publicly stated that the "repudiation" of the Founder's toast was "history made."[41]

Although RMFO did not achieve the concrete aim of removing the statue, and could not ensure that the six month listening period was maintained, the movement continued to express its position throughout the academic year. On March 9, RMFO organised alternative walking tours through Oxford to highlight the troubled histories of the physical space. A *Guardian* article reported that Chris Patten's name drew loud booing from the students. One physics undergraduate at Magdalen College, Jordan Rose, commented: "He has the audacity to tell me, as a direct descendant of African-Caribbeans, that I should go elsewhere. I was the top student in my class. I didn't work so hard to be told to go somewhere else, just because I want to challenge and decolonise the university."[42] On Oxford's Open Day on 30 June, RMFO protestors stood shirtless outside Oriel College.[43] During the next academic year, on 2 December 2016, another protest was staged, one year after Oriel's original announcement of the listening exercise.[44]

Contestation in the media

Due to the highly public profile RMFO received in the British press, this section focuses specifically on the way in which the contestation evolved in the media.

In a 2016 article published in *Public Art Dialogue,* Brenda Schmahmann summarised the key point reiterated by those demanding the removal of Rhodes' statue: "for many the retention of the sculpture signified continued tolerance for, indeed allegiance to, the values for which he stood."[45] Discussions of the role of iconography took place across student publications in Oxford. Oriel College's student newspaper, *The Poor Print*, published an editorial that made the statement:

> Every protest needs a symbol. And without the intense response to the potential removal of this historical artefact, we would not have had this debate on a collegiate, campus, national, and even international level. In Oxford of all places, where institutional inertia is not easily overcome, it may be that the kind of reforms needed to make this university more open and more reflective of the world in which we

[41] "Rhodes Must Fall In Oxford," Facebook, https://www.facebook.com/RhodesMustFallOxford/.

[42] Jessica Elgot, "'Take It down!': Rhodes Must Fall Campaign Marches through Oxford," The Guardian, March 9, 2016.

[43] Ellen Peirson-Hagger, "Rhodes Must Fall Campaigners Demonstrate Outside Oriel Open Day." Cherwell, July 1, 2016.

[44] Jack Hunter, "Rhodes Must Fall Return to Protest Outside Oriel," Cherwell, December 2, 2016.

[45] Schmahmann, Brenda. "The Fall of Rhodes: The Removal of a Sculpture from the University of Cape Town," Public Art Dialogue, 6:1, 90-115, DOI: 10.1080/21502552.2016.1149391

> actually live can indeed only be brought about by these great fiery turbines of protests raising awareness and powering discourse.[46]

Some students were confused by the fact that Rhodes' legacy was at all contested, as the following voice suggests:

> I had just moved to Oxford from one of the most ethnically diverse areas of the UK, so I could not understand why there would be any resistance to taking down the statue of a renowned slaver.[47]

A backlash ensued that focused on RMFO as an attempt to erase history. Anthony Lemon wrote in *The Round Table*--famous as erstwhile Imperial mouthpiece--that "their actions are uncomfortably close to those of regimes that burn books or to Isis and the Taliban who destroy archaeological sites in the Middle East."[48] R. W. Johnson, former Rhodes Scholar and noted commentator, directly compared RMFO to "what Al Qaeda and Isis are doing in places like Mali when destroying statues." He countered that "I think you have got to respect history."[49] Brendan O'Neill, of a very different political stance, similarly wrote that:

> What ISIS and the Oxford lot share in common is a Year Zero attitude, a desire to rewrite history. It's a deeply authoritarian instinct: not merely to discuss the past and challenge its events and ideas, but to cleanse all remnants of it from the present. It's cultural cleansing, disguised as an Islamic duty by ISIS and as radical anti-racism by Oxford students.[50]

The argument that the movement did not respect history was voiced by prominent members of the international community, including FW de Klerk and Tony Abbott.[51] This sentiment was perceived to be sufficiently mainstream to be noted even by John Simpson, the world affairs editor of BBC News.[52] A post appeared on the *Catholic Herald* stating that

> the custom of damnatio memoriae is something we associate, not accidentally either, with tyrannies: Caracalla was a tyrant, and so was Henry VIII. Stalin loved to have his enemies erased from history, and he was the greatest of tyrants. Hitler wanted the Jews to be erased. The desire to have Rhodes removed from history springs from a tyrannical political correctness that denies that Rhodes did anything good, and that any celebration of his memory can be justified. [...] Cecil Rhodes, for better or

[46] The Poor Print, "In Defence of Protest – Editorial," The Poor Print, February 19, 2016.
[47] Flo Ward, "Set in Stone: How Oxford's Buildings Uphold Elitism," The Isis, July 11, 2018.
[48] Anthony Lemon, (2016) 'Rhodes Must Fall': The Dangers of Re-writing History, The Round Table, 105:2, 217-219, DOI: 10.1080/00358533.2016.1154669
[49] Javier Espinoza, "'Rhodesgate': Campaign to Remove Rhodes Statue 'Is like Isil's Destruction of Antiques', Says Oxford Don," The Telegraph, December 22, 2015.
[50] Brendan O'Neill, "Oxford Undergraduates and the ISIS School of Art Criticism," Newsweek, 8 February, 2015.
[51] Neil Johnston, "Removing Statue of Rhodes would be folly, says de Klerk," Sunday Times, December 26, 2015.
[52] John Simpson, "'Rhodes must fall,' chants the crowd. But bringing down an imperialist's statue won't change the past," NewStatesman, 26 November, 2015.

> for worse, is one of us. We had better deal with that.

A set of voices expressed concern that condemning the negative aspects of Rhodes' legacy need not overshadow the other dimensions of his role in history. An *Independent* editorial stated that "this concerted effort to remove his likeness from university campuses, and to bury the positive aspects of his legacy along with the problematic facts of our colonial history, is deeply damaging."[53]

Other voices intervened on the issue of free speech, in the context of campus discussions on hate speech and no-platforming. One of the most prominent voices in this debate was Chris Patten himself, when he wrote on 22 February 2016 that

> in the United States and the United Kingdom, some students and teachers now seek to constrain argument and debate. They contend that people should not be exposed to ideas with which they strongly disagree. Moreover, they argue that history should be rewritten to expunge the names (though not the endowments) of those who fail to pass today's tests of political correctness. [54]

At the same time, a *Guardian* article reported that André Dallas, then a second year Oxford student and RMFO member, responded that the movement "has always been the opposite of no-platforming; we have in fact actively called for the platforming of Rhodes, his legacy and his victims in seminar rooms, history books and the curriculum."[55]

Further discussion concerned the strategic use of focusing on iconography as a means of addressing wider social and historical injustice. Kenan Malik wrote in *Al Jazeera* that, while statues have been the focus of struggle in addressing the past, RMFO "is not so much the product of a great social movement as a substitute for one," and "turning a statue of Cecil Rhodes into an invented psychological trauma, or demanding that it be removed as an act of decolonisation, will neither change the way that people look upon the past nor challenge the injustices of the present."[56] Trevor Philips, former head of the Commission for Racial Equality, wrote in *The Telegraph* that

> Perhaps the students who support this campaign might take a moment to google 'Auschwitz' to see a complete justification for the preservation of all

[53] IndyVoices, "Cecil Rhodes row: Some of Oxford's more naïve students need to grow up," Independent, 23 December, 2015.
[54] Chris, Patten. "The Closing of the Academic Mind," Project Syndicate, 22 February, 2016.
[55] Damien Gayle and Nadia Khomami, "Cecil Rhodes Statue row: Christ Patten tells students to embrace freedom of thought," The Guardian, January 13, 2016.
[56] Kenan Malik, "The Cecil Rhodes statue is not the problem," Aljazeera, 11 January, 2016.

> aspects of the historical record, however grim.[57]

Dena Latif, a student at Oriel College, wrote an op-ed in *The Guardian*, expressing the belief that "by focusing firmly on the colonial past, the #RhodesMustFall campaign missed an opportunity to highlight the entrenchment of inequality at Oxford." She continues

> There are bigger fish to fry. Taking down the statue wouldn't undo the fact that less than 4% of Oxford's professors are of black and ethnic minority origin. It wouldn't change the mindset of the students who found it amusing in my third week here to bellow lyrics from The Lion King at me as I walked along the river. It wouldn't make college seem any less white, and it wouldn't make Oxford more accessible.[58]

On the other hand, in defense of RMFO, Omar Khan, director of the Runnymede Trust, wrote that the movement is concerned with a wider point than statues: "racism and colonialism are deeply embedded in Britain's history, and not just in terms of African enslavement or Enoch Powell's 'rivers of blood' speech."[59]

This discussion took place within Oxford as well as in the press. Within a single department, that of International Development, different voices could be heard.

Associate Professor Jörg Friedrichs criticised "the elevation of victimhood to the level of celebratory virtue":

> One can build an entire (and quite lucrative) career on victimhood, internalising "reverse honour" as part of one's personal identity. Activism in the RMF campaign may be a good preparation for becoming a diversity officer, just like other extracurricular activities can prepare a student for other professional careers.[60]

Another Associate Professor, Simukai Chigudu, pointed out on the other hand that:

> Far from erasure, this is about free speech in its truest form: it is about pluralising and complicating the ways in which knowledge is produced, disseminated and granted legitimacy. Following Said, it seems to me that as scholars we all share an intellectual obligation to push this endeavour forward.[61]

While most criticisms of RMFO concerned the validity of specifically removing Rhodes' statue as a redress for historical injustice, other opinions directly addressed perceived ambiguities within Rhodes' legacy. Will Hutton, well known on the British left

[57] Lexi Finnegan, "Trevor Phillips Criticizes Rhodes Must Fall Campaign," The Telegraph, January 2, 2016.

[58] Dena Latif, "Racism at Oxford goes deeper than the statue of Cecil Rhodes. So what's the point in ditching it?" The Guardian, 4 January, 2016.

[59] Lester Holloway, "#RhodesMustFall: A movement for Historical and Contemporary Recognition of Racial Injustice (part 1)," Runnymede Trust, 24 December, 2015.

[60] Jorg Friedrichs, "Rhodes Must Fall: From dignity to honour values," Oxford Department of International Development.

[61] Simukai Chigudu, "In defence of Rhodes must fall and the struggle for recognition at Oxford," Oxford Department of International Development, 3 March 2016.

and Principal of Hertford College, Oxford, wrote in the context of Jacob Zuma's corruption that:

> What stands between South Africa and wholly unaccountable despotism are the legacy institutions of Empire – courts, rule of law, free press, freedom of association and expression [...] If that happens, racist Rhodes – as Mandela, if not his followers, would have acknowledged – will have played his part in the story as much as corrupt Zuma.[62]

On 19 December 2015, Conservative MP Bernard Jenkin voiced an often-rehearsed argument against the movement on BBC Radio 4's 'Any Questions?':

> "If we start doing this in our own country, where does it end?! I mean outside the House of Lords, for example, and the House of Commons, we've got a statue of Cromwell! Now I don't think I subscribe to his values – or what about Charles the 1st? Perhaps we should take down his statue … Winston Churchill also has a statue in Parliament Square. I don't think a lot of people would subscribe to the views that he held too." [63]

The strategy of *reductio ad absurdum* appeared in the international coverage as well, for example, in the American media:

> Who is next? Evelyn Waugh, a racist and brilliant writer, the author of such novels as Black Mischief? The blustering Kingsley Amis? Or Jane Austen, perhaps the greatest master of English prose, for alluding to colonialism and the British slave trade in Mansfield Park?[64]

Further contestation took place on the issue of whether the colonial legacies of the British Empire were applicable to the present. Some voices highlighted the persistence of such legacies, such as David Priestland (Professor at Oxford), who stated that:

> The lesson for Britain is that parts of the past are not dead and symbols matter. And we too need to confront our imperial and racist past more openly and consistently, for the sake of both good international relations and social harmony at home.[65]

A *Guardian* op-ed further highlighted the international dimensions of commemorating Rhodes, stating that such figures of imperial history may be integral to perceptions of Britain:

> How long before, on a state visit to London perhaps, a Narendra Modi or a Xi Jinping condemns the memorialisation of figures such as General Napier or the 8th Earl of Elgin – Victorian figures whose worst crimes, like those of Rhodes, are largely forgotten in Britain but remembered in

[62] Will Hutton, "Cecil Rhodes was a racist, but you can't readily expunge him from history." The Guardian, 20 December, 2015.

[63] Jonathan Dimbleby, "Any Questions?" BBC, December 18, 2015.

[64] Jacob Heilbrunn, "Political Correctness Over Cecil Rhodes Invades Oxford University," The National Interest, December 18, 2015.

[65] David Priestland, "The University of Cape Town is right to remove its Cecil Rhodes statue," The Guardian, April 13, 2015.

> Delhi and Beijing – and with growing clarity?[66]

Douglas Murray, in contrast, wrote in *The Spectator* that:

> the claim that modern-day Oxford University is 'racist' is so obviously untrue that it can only have been claimed by people pressing for some blackmail advantage or higher cash offer.[67]

Beyond those making a claim concerning the ambiguity of historical legacy, a minority of voices directly sought to claim that Rhodes and/or the British empire could or should be defended in certain senses. Nigel Biggar, Regius Professor of Moral Theology at the University of Oxford, made the specific claim that 'Rhodes was no racist,' including at an Oxford Union debate of January 2016.[68] He made the specific addition that Rhodes was 'a prodigious entrepreneur, who used his wealth for public purposes.' (Biggar's own "Ethics and Empire" research project has received vocal opposition from Oxford University faculty.[69]) Rod Liddle wrote to tell readers of *The Sun* that "to raise the funds to erect a statue of Rhodes, 'the liberator of Africa – in a prominent position in every UK university campus'.[70]

A specific sentiment against the movement grew as student activism gained traction in the popular press. On 3 November 2015, an article in *The Times* warned that Oriel "would be foolish to engage with the insatiable student cult of identity politics. Rhodes must stand." On 18 December of the same year, Daniel Hannan wrote in *The Telegraph* of "an Oxonian mob, using the same cretinous #RhodesMustFall hashtag" and "utter imbecility". Tony Abbott, former Prime Minister of Australia and Rhodes Scholar, warned that Oxford's reputation would be damaged if it "were to substitute moral vanity for fair-minded enquiry." Brendan O'Neill, a commentator associated with Living Marxism, wrote of a "gang of spoilt Oxford brats" who indulged in a cult of victimhood.

Further to the right-wing, websites such as Breitbart saw even more extreme treatment of RMFO and a defense of Cecil Rhodes. One blog post by James Delingpole on Rhodes, 'British Imperial Hero,' was titled "Titled Mud Huts v Western Civilization: Why

[66] David Olusoga, "Topple the Cecil Rhodes statue? Better to rebrand him a war criminal," The Guardian, January 7, 2016.
[67] Douglas Murray, "An adult has finally intervened in the childish Cecil Rhodes debate," The Spectator, 13 January, 2016.
[68] Nigel Biggar, "Message to students: Rhodes was no racist," The Sunday Times, December 22, 2015.
[69] David Iliff, "Ethics and empire: an open letter from Oxford scholars," The Conversation, December 19, 2017.
[70] Newsinger, J. Why Rhodes Must Fall/ Race & Class 2016 Institute of Race Relations, Vol. 58(2): 70–78

#Rhodesmustfall Must Fail."[71] Another post included mention of a counter-movement, #Rhodesmustrise, and the following statement:

> The idea is to build in the middle of Africa a gigantic golden statue of the mighty British imperial hero Cecil Rhodes – a really big one, about four miles high, so that Kilimanjaro doesn't get in the way – to remind all the locals for miles around what a complete and utter toilet their malarial, tsetse flyblown continent would have been if it hadn't been for all the 19th century explorers, miners and pioneers and nation builders and District Commissioners in their white pith helmets who brought them civilisation, the rule of law and economic progress.[72]

Subsequent discussion in the media included contestation on the issue of voice--who gets to speak on behalf of perceived historical injustice? For example, *Guardian* columnist Andrew Anthony cast doubt on Chris Patten's role in mediating the contestation:

> But Patten, the former Tory cabinet minister, former governor of Hong Kong and chairman of the BBC, is a privileged white man and, in the current debate about acceptable speech and images, that is problematic. [...] How can Patten, with all his social advantages, tell a South African from KwaZulu-Natal that his feelings are not paramount in relation to the statue of a man who was at the forefront of Britain's imperial march across Africa?[73]

A similar concern was raised by Jan-David Franke in *The Oxford Student*, who raised the suspicion that Patten's "experience with colonial rule" disposes him to be dismissive of "the movement's substantial claims about the legacy of controversial imperialist Cecil Rhodes."[74]

Apart from backlash from conservative political positions, RMFO was also challenged from voices that perceived it as too conservative. *The Socialist Review* called for it to extend the critique of colonialism to issues of class, to constitute 'a challenge to the privilege, hierarchy, and reproduction of class society that Oxford represents.'[75] An article on the World Socialist Website stated that the movement was too conservative, focussing on the biography of RMFO co-founder Sizwe Mpofu-Walsh, son of Dali Mpofu, national chairperson of the Economic Freedom Fighters:

> Mpofu's biography matches those of the other privileged, conservative figures who have been promoted as the leaders of the student movement, with the specific goal of channeling anger

[71] James Delingpole, "Mud huts v western civilization: why #RhodesMustFall must fail," Breitbart, 24 December 2015.

[72] James Delingpole,. "The ugly true story of #RhodesMustFall: Oxford University's answer to #BlackLivesMatter," Breitbart, 23 December 2015.

[73] Andrew Anthony, "Is free speech in British universities under threat?" The Observer, 24 January 2016.

[74] Jan-David Franke, "Chancellor Patten Compares Rhodes Must Fall Movement to Chinese Government," The Oxford Student, 3 March 2016.

[75] Barry Conway, "Rhodes must fall – and the rest," Socialist Review, February 2016.

> along racial lines—claiming that by increasing the number of blacks in privileged positions the problems of capitalist society will be resolved.[76]

Coverage in the media also included comparison to historical contestation in other parts of the world. *The Guardian* View, published on 22 December 2015, highlighted the contrast between "Germany's tradition of facing its past and Britain's frequent evasions", which underscores "the many ways in which the empire is part of the formation of modern Britain." Another *Guardian* editorial of 26 December 2016 discussed the negotiations between Germany and Namibia about the genocide beginning in 1904, as well as the special exhibition at the German History Museum on Germany's colonial past, while "it is impossible to imagine either thing happening in Britain."[77] In *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Christopher Phelps, associate professor of American studies at the University of Nottingham, specifically addressed the connection of RMFO to Black Lives Matter in the US.[78] An article by Amit Chaudhuri on 16 March 2016 noted on the swift removal of the statue in Cape Town versus Oxford University's resistance to doing the same, before developing a sustained reflection on what the author perceives as a retreat of Britain's "multicultural past and present" from collective identity.[79]

The legacies of RMFO continue today--these will be discussed in the next section. Reflection on the movement took place among Oxford's students, as well as its senior academics and administrators. Timothy Garton Ash, Professor at Oxford University, made the following reflection:

> The demand that touches me most personally is for "decolonisation of curriculum" and, more broadly, for Britain to face up to its colonial past. My grandfather was a member of the Indian civil service, the small band of men who governed India under the British empire. I have spent much time studying the way countries such as Germany face up to difficult pasts, whether fascist or communist. Only recently did I start wondering whether there was not a little facing up to be done in my own family.
>
> So thank you, Rhodes Must Fall, for violating my safe space.[80]

Louise Richardson, Vice-Chancellor of the University, stated on 16 January 2016 that:

> What's positive about this whole Rhodes Must Fall movement is that it's drawing attention to our history. (…) We

[76] Joan Smith and G. T. Maqhubela, "The origins of the Oxford University 'Rhodes Must Fall' Campaign," World Socialist Web Site, 10 February 2016.
[77] "The Guardian view on the colonial past: a German lesson for Britain." The Guardian, 26 December, 2016.
[78] Christopher Phelps, "Removing Racist Symbols Isn't a Denial of History," The Chronicle, 8 January 2016.
[79] Amit Chaudhuri, "The real meaning of Rhodes Must Fall," The Guardian, 16 March 2016.
[80] Timothy Garton Ash, "Rhodes hasn't fallen, but the protesters are making me rethink Britain's past," The Guardian, 4 March 2016.

> need to confront our history, we can't pretend it didn't happen and I think if this encourages students to go to the Bodleian [library] and look at the archives of the Rhodes period, there are some fabulous archives there both about colonialism and about the contemporary anti-Rhodes movement when he was alive.[81]

Continued contestation

Although the campaign did not achieve the concrete aim of removing the statue and met with significant backlash in the popular media, discussions continued and increased in the aftermath of RMFO. Beginning at Oriel College, a special report 'The Myth of Rhodes' published in April 2017 reveals that a series of meetings and forums were held to respond to Rhodes' legacy. Without raising the question of whether the statue would be removed (which Oriel no longer questioned), a meeting took place on 14 January 2017 to explore ways of recognising the complexity of Rhodes's legacy. Various suggestions were made, including:

> a clarifying plaque (perhaps supplemented online); a series of lectures/exhibitions; or indeed an artistic installation to visually compete with the statue, either on the High Street or in Third Quad. All are being considered by Oriel's Rhodes Working Group; the Governing Body will likely adopt some combination of the above.[82]

Particular attention to iconography has been given, unsurprisingly, by individuals working in museums. This is especially noteworthy because the collections of Pitt Rivers Museum were called 'Rhodes-like products of colonial plunder' by RMFO co-founder Brian Kwoba.[83] Dan Hicks, a professor of archaeologyo at Oxford and a curator at Pitt Rivers Museum, has highlighted the museum as a space to take on the challenge of "decolonising the curriculum."[84] According to student newspaper Cherwell, Laura van Broekhoven, Director of Pitt Rivers Museum, says she started her directorship "with an agenda of decolonising", when "Rhodes Must Fall was still at its height, and the museum had been tweeted about as 'One of the most violent spaces in Oxford'". New to Oxford, she was surprised that the University "did not always seem sure of how to engage with the conversation", despite decolonisation movements going on in many parts of Europe and the US at the time.[85]

In 2017, she noted to a group of anthropologists that further work

[81] Gonzalo Vi, "Oxford's New Vice-Chancellor Looks beyond Rhodes Row," Financial Times, January 16, 2016.
[82] Aidan Chivers, "The Myth of Rhodes: Editoriel." The Poor Print, April 28, 2017.
[83] Brian Kwoba, "Rhodes must fall, here and now," Cherwell, 12 June 2015.
[84] Dan Hicks, "Here's why you should care about the scrapping of A-level anthropology," The Conversation, 31 October, 2016.
[85] Bertie Harrison-Broninski, "The Pitt Rivers must face its dark past," Cherwell, 29 April 2018.

would be needed to translate practices of collecting and curating for the public at the front end of the museum.[86]

Decolonising the curriculum, one of the three pillars of RMFO, continues to be discussed. In an article on 30 May 2017, Kehinde Andrews addressed curricular reforms:

> Starting in the new academic year, history students at Oxford University will have to pass an exam on "non-British and non-European history" to complete their degree. The university has been quick to dismiss any connection between this move and the campaigns to decolonise academia that have swept across British universities in general and Oxford in particular. But make no mistake, this change is the fruit of Rhodes Must Fall, which sought to remove the legacy of colonialist Cecil Rhodes at Oxford, and the wider Why is my curriculum white? campaign.[87]

Oxford University announced in 2016 that, following its Race Equality Summit of 2014 (which included the aim of diversifying the curriculum as part of "racial and cultural diversity in academic practice"), a Race and Curriculum initiative would be launched, including a lecture series that included speakers Homi Bhaba, Ruth Simmons and Hilary Beckles.[88] In the spring of 2016, the University created the 'Working Group on Oxford University and Colonialism', chaired by Kalypso Nicolaïdis and Laura van Broekhoven, to 'help mediate a conversation between all constituencies of the University on issues related to Oxford's colonial legacies.'[89] A further project, Uncomfortable Oxford, launched under the auspices of Oxford's humanities research centre, offers tours to the public that highlight Oxford's "uncomfortable legacies in the built environment."[90] While it is difficult to precisely measure the impact of RMFO on these subsequent developments, it is safe to assume that RMFO is now firmly lodged as a reference point for these projects.

The legacy of RMFO has also taken shape within the Rhodes Trust. Charles Conn, Warden of Rhodes House during the events of 2015-16, wrote an Occasional Piece for the Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation, which outlined principles and frameworks for making evaluative decisions for iconography. The piece concluded with the acknowledgment that "one of the most difficult questions in this whole business of assessing historical legacies is who decides on

[86] Larua Van Broekhoven, "Connecting and Reconnecting the Pitt Rivers Museum. Earning Trust, Building Relevance," Pitt Rivers Museum.
[87] Kehinde Andrews, "It's a dangerous fiction that one exam will decolonise Oxford's history degrees," The Guardian, 30 May 2017.
[88] "Equality and Diversity," University of Oxford.
[89] "Working Group on Oxford University and Colonialism," Kalypso Nicolaidis.; Gould, Ryan. "Oxford to confront colonial past in £20,000 project." Cherwell, 19 April 2018.
[90] Uncomfortable Oxford. "What is Uncomfortable Oxford."

which legacies are addressed and what actions are taken."[91] Elizabeth Kiss, the current Warden of Rhodes House, stated on a visit to Australia in March 2019 that the Rhodes Trust welcomed debate on Rhodes' legacy. "We are not in the business of sanctifying him as a person," she said, adding that "sometimes some of the black African Rhodes Scholars will say, 'perhaps our best revenge is that we are Rhodes Scholars.'"[92]

Conclusion

As academic Lawrence Goldman notes, RMFO has become "the *locus classicus* for recent debates over these questions" of memorialisation in universities, museums and other public institutions.[93] It has been seen in conjunction with a number of other 'fallist' movements, including GandhiMustFall, FeesMustFall, and LeopoldMustFall.[94] Similar campaigns have been active at Cambridge University and Bristol.[95] The contestations generated in recent years attests to the symbolic power of public memorialisation. A statue, unknown to most pedestrians below, can serve as a focal point for much broader discussions on social and economic inequality, epistemic authority, and historical injustice. Yet the misunderstandings and controversies over approaching past injustice also reveal the difficulties of crafting an approach that integrates the wrongs of the past with the shifting demands of the present.

It has become apparent that the contestations surrounding RMFO concern contemporary developments in British higher education and politics. The strategies and arguments employed in RMFO have been carried over to fundamental debates about decolonising the curriculum—and even decolonising the university.[96] Some of these debates have also intersected

[91] Charles R. Conn, "Thinking About Historical Legacie: Looking for Just Principles and Processes," Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation, June 2018.

[92] Jordan Baker, "Our best revenge': the Rhodes Scholars transforming a legacy," Sydney Morning Herald, 2 April 2019.

[93] Goldman, L. "We have been here before: 'Rhodes Must Fall' in historical context," in Pellew and Goldman, eds., *Dethroning historical reputations: universities, museums and the commemoration of benefactors,* School of Advanced Study, University of London, Institute of Historical Research, p.125.

[94] CIGH Exeter, "Leopold Must Fall," Imperial and Global Forum, 28 June 2016.

[95] Sally Weale, "Benin bronze row: Cambridge college removes cockerel," The Guardian, 8 March 2016.; Harry Yorke, "Students Inspired by Rhodes Must Fall Campaign Demand Bristol University Change Name of Wills Tower over 'Slave Trade' Links," The Telegraph, March 28, 2017.

[96] Charles, Elizabeth (2019) Decolonizing the curriculum, Insights 32 (1), p. 24.; Minto Felix and Judy Friedberg, "To decolonise the curriculum, we have to decolonise ourselves," Wonkhe, 4 August, 2019.; "Decolonising the Curriculum: Challenges and Opportunities for Teaching and Learning." British Educational Research Association, 6 March 2020.; James Muldoon, "Academics: it's time to get behind decolonising the curriculum," The Guardian, 20 March 2019.; Bhambra, Gurminder K., Kerem Nisancioglu, and Dalia Gebrial. Decolonizing the university, 1-37.

with the dimensions of political memory in public conversations on Brexit.[97]

Questions of memory and memorialisation inevitably bring up shifting dynamics of decision-making. Who gets to remember? How do individuals and groups decide upon an approach to memorialisation? These dynamics pertain to all actors who have been described in this report—activists, Oxford college and university administration, and the informal narratives put forward in the media. In this sense, RMFO serves as a useful case study for understanding the contested dynamics of decision-making and for reflection on structuring public conversation that is conducive to addressing historical justice.

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[97] Duncan Bell, "The Anglosphere: new enthusiasm for an old dream," Prospect Magazine, 19 January 2017.; Gurminder K. Bhambra, "Brexit, Empire, and Decolonization," History Workshop, 19 December 2018.; Ward, Stuart, and Astrid Rasch, eds. Embers of empire in Brexit Britain. Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. 111-120.

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