



CECIL RHODES STATUE

Oxford, England, United Kingdom

51.7524282, -1.2538104



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Executive Summary

In 2015, the student organisation Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford was established to protest against the statue of British imperialist Cecil Rhodes at Oriel College. The initial two-year campaign led to promises from Oriel to contextualise the monument, which ultimately went unfulfilled. The campaign was reignited in June 2020 following the death of George Floyd and, in response, Oriel College announced its desire to remove the statue. However, the introduction by the Government of a 'retain and explain' policy made this impossible. Oriel College's decision to contextualise the statute with a small 'information sign' has been dismissed as 'woefully inadequate' by activists.

Introduction

On March 9, 2015, Rhodes Must Fall launched as a campaign to remove a statue of the British imperialist from the University of Cape Town. Just days later, Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford (RMFO) was created in solidarity, with students demanding that a statue of Rhodes in Oriel College also be removed. Initially a two-year long protest which resulted in unfulfilled promises from Oriel College to contextualise the monument; RMFO was reignited following the death of George Floyd in May 2020. A 1,000-strong protest on June 9 2020 led to Oriel College stating its desire to remove the statue but simultaneously establishing an Independent Commission to make recommendations - once more delaying the decision-making process. By the time the Commission reported in April 2021, Boris Johnson's government had weighed in, stoking the culture war with their 'retain and explain' bill - which allowed removal in only the 'most exceptional circumstances'. Instead, Oriel College agreed to contextualise its Rhodes monuments - which also included a plaque on King Edward Street. However, the introduction in October 2021 of small 'information signs' was dismissed by RMFO as trivialising the 'pain and suffering' caused by Rhodes. Oriel College insists that the signs are temporary and that more 'comprehensive and permanent' contextualisation will replace them, but as of March 2023 this is yet to materialise.

Background

Cecil Rhodes

Cecil Rhodes, 1853-1902, was a British imperialist, who made a fortune mining diamonds in Southern Africa and, from 1890-96, served as Prime Minister of the Cape Colony. On his death, the majority of his estate was left to establish the Rhodes Trust, which was intended to fund scholarships for students at the University of Oxford from Germany, the United States, and the British Empire. Established in 1902, it is the oldest graduate scholarship in the world; former Rhodes Scholars include heads of state - such as US President Bill Clinton - and Nobel Prize winners. In addition, Rhodes also left £100,000 - the equivalent of over £15,725,000 today - to his old college, Oriel.¹ The money was designated for a new building, which was erected between 1909-11, its design incorporated a statue of Rhodes.

Cecil Rhodes' belief in the supremacy of the 'English race' and commitment to the expansion of the British Empire ensured that his legacy was 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.² In 1912, the writer G. K. Chesterton wrote that

¹ Oriel College, "The Rhodes Legacy," *Oriel College*, no date.

² John Newsinger, "Why Rhodes Must Fall," *Race & Class* 58, no. 2 (2016): 70-78.

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'.³ Whilst early published accounts of Rhodes' life and work, written mostly by those who knew him personally, were largely favourable, the laudatory perception of Rhodes has shifted over time - its gradual disappearance accompanying the end of the British Empire.⁴ A number of critical appraisals appeared in the late twentieth-century that found much at fault with the imperialist aggression and paternalism embodied by Rhodes. Nonetheless, a considerable debate continues among scholars, biographers and journalists - the legacy of Rhodes has not had a singular trajectory.

Rhodes Must Fall

Rhodes Must Fall was launched as a campaign in South Africa with the disfiguration of Rhodes' statue on March 9 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, such as:

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...⁵

After intensive deliberation, the University of Cape Town removed the statue exactly one month after its disfiguration, on April 9 2015.

History of the Contestation

Rhodes Must Fall soon spread to Oxford University. By the end of 2015, Rhodes Must Fall Oxford (RMFO) was widely discussed, not only within the university community, but also by the national press. Amia Srinivasan, a professor of philosophy at Oxford and a former Rhodes Scholar, suggests that this was the first time Rhodes' legacy was debated:

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

³ Thomas J. Schaeper and Kathleen Schaeper, *Rhodes Scholars: Oxford and the creation of an American Elite*. London: Berghahn, 1998, p. 9.

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

⁵ John E. Flint, "*Cecil Rhodes, 'Confession of Faith' (1877)*," Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1974.

founder!') at Rhodes House dinners. Other scholars would sometimes refer to him as 'Uncle Cecil'.⁶

While it does not appear entirely accurate that Rhodes' legacy was uncontested prior to RMFO - he was a controversial figure even in the late nineteenth-century - it is clear that the movement had moved discussions of the University's complicity in colonialism to the forefront.

First Phase of the Contestation: Academic Year 2014-15

On March 19 2015, two Oxford students, Annie Teriba and Bi Kwo, organised a 'Solidarity Action' in support of the University of Cape Town's #RhodesMustFall movement. According to the Facebook page for the event, 86 individuals attended, although images show no more than ten posing with the solidarity banner.⁷ On March 20, the South African media stated that Rhodes Must Fall had reached the University of Oxford.⁸ Brian Kwoba and Ntokozo Qwabe, co-founders of RMFO, reflected in retrospect that that the group came to a realisation after the initial solidarity demonstration that Oxford required a similar process of decolonisation to UCT, and they: 'constructed their call for the removal of the Rhodes statue at Oriel College on similar demands made by students in Cape Town'.⁹

The Rhodes Must Fall Oxford movement aimed to address Oxford's colonial legacy on three levels: the plague of colonial iconography; reform of the Eurocentric curriculum; and the underrepresentation of Black and minority ethnic (BME) among staff and students of the university. Anticipating the question of how iconography fitted within such a movement, RMFO clarified that the movement's scope was about 'more than a statue', though: 'we believe that statues and symbols matter; they are a means through which communities express their values'.¹⁰

The next wave of protests emerged through the instigation of a debate at the Oxford Union. The motion on May 28 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 Hitler in terms of racial ideology, and speakers on both sides accused the opposition of 'erasing history'.¹¹ RMFO was present at the debate in silent protest, and afterwards launched a public critique of the Union for serving a 'Colonial Comeback' cocktail at the debate - stating on a Facebook post:

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

⁶ Amia Srinivasan, "Under the Shadow of Rhodes," *London Review of Books* 38, no. 7 (March 31, 2016).

⁷ Annie Olaloku, and Bi Ko, "#RHODESMUSTFALL Solidarity Action," *Facebook*, March 19, 2015.

⁸ Raeesa Pather, "#RhodesMustFall Reaches Oxford University," *The Daily Vox*, March 20, 2015.

⁹ A. Kayum Ahmed, "#RhodesMustFall: Decolonization, Praxis and Disruption," *Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education* 9 (2017).

¹⁰ Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford, "Our Aim," *Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford*, no date.

¹¹ Daniel Kodsi, "RMF Win Union Debate by Slim Margin," *Cherwell*, January 19, 2016.

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.¹²

On June 1, the Oxford Union Governing Body passed a unanimous motion to acknowledge that the Union was institutionally racist.¹³

First Phase of the Contestation: Academic Year 2015-16

The academic year began with a matriculation protest on October 17 2015. Red ribbons were distributed to students to be worn instead of the traditional black, intended to: 'represent the blood of families in Southern Africa affected by the actions of colonialists such as Cecil Rhodes'.¹⁴ A change.org petition, titled: 'Oriel College, Oxford University: Remove the racist statue of Rhodes immediately', was subsequently launched.¹⁵ The petition argued that the statue at Oriel amounted to the glorification of Rhodes and that keeping it was an acquiescence of his legacy:

We find it deplorable that Oriel College continues to glorify an international criminal through its uncritical, deeply violent iconography. 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... The removal of this statute would be a welcome first step in the University's attempt to redress the ways in which it has been an active beneficiary of empire.¹⁶

The petition garnered over 1,000 signatures by November 6 - overall it gained 2,851 supporters before closing - when it was delivered by a group of protesters to Oriel College. The Facebook page for the event - 'PROTEST: DEMAND THAT OXFORD UNIVERSITY REMOVE RACIST CECIL RHODES STATUE' - suggests that 530 people attended. The organisers, determined not to be ignored by the College, asked those attending to come armed with: 'whistles, drums, pots, pans, wooden spoons and your loudest chanting voice'.¹⁷ The protest garnered an international reaction, including an article, 'Oxford Students Want Statue of Cecil Rhodes Removed', in the New York Times. A gofundme to: 'help fund the costs of our campaign for decolonisation' was also established, raising £421 before closing.¹⁸

The principles behind removing Rhodes' statue from public space continued to be elaborated by student activists as the movement evolved. In an article published on December 1 2015, RMFO organisers, Dalia Gebrial and Chi Chi Shi, wrote of: 'a global moment of anti-racist

¹² Rhodes Must Fall In Oxford, *Facebook*, May 28, 2015.

¹³ Camilla Turner, "Oxford Union Admits It Is 'Institutionally Racist'," *The Telegraph*, June 1, 2015.

¹⁴ George Hames, "Rhodes Must Fall Protests at Matriculation," *Cherwell*, October 24, 2015.

¹⁵ Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford, "Oriel College, Oxford University: Remove the Racist Statue of Rhodes Immediately," *Change.org*, 2015.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford, "PROTEST: DEMAND THAT OXFORD UNIVERSITY REMOVE RACIST CECIL RHODES STATUE," *Facebook*, November 6, 2015.

¹⁸ Chi Chi Shi, "RHODES MUST FALL IN OXFORD," *GoFundMe*, October 29, 2015.

student resistance'.¹⁹ As Hilary term started, controversy began surrounding the role of Rhodes scholars within the RMFO movement - which had been described by opponents as hypocritical. In response, 198 Rhodes scholars signed a statement written by Redress Rhodes - a group of Rhodes scholars who call for critical engagement with his legacy - which stated that: 'this scholarship does not buy our silence', and argued that:

There is no hypocrisy in being a recipient of a Rhodes scholarship and being publicly critical of Cecil Rhodes and his legacy - a legacy that continues to alienate, silence, exclude and dehumanise in unacceptable ways. There is no clause that binds us to find 'the good' in Rhodes' character, nor to sanitise the imperialist, colonial agenda he propagated.²⁰

Redress Rhodes was also instrumental in the decision by Charles Conn, Warden of Rhodes House, not to offer an unqualified toast to 'The Founder' at the 2016 annual dinner for Rhodes Scholars - celebrated as 'history made' by RMFO.²¹

Protest activity continued throughout 2016: on January 18, the Junior Common Room (JCR) at University College voted to change the name of the 'Rhodes Computer Room' - a demand that was not granted.²² On January 19, the Oxford Union hosted its first event of the term, a panel discussion entitled: 'Must Rhodes Fall?'. At the conclusion of the debate members exiting the chamber voted with their feet, the result was a 245 to 212 victory for Rhodes Must Fall.²³ On March 9 2016, RMFO organised an alternative walking tour through Oxford for a one hundred-strong crowd, highlighting the troubled histories of physical space; as the march passed the statue of Rhodes, shouts grew louder as students called 'Rhodes must fall, take it down!'.²⁴ At the gates of All Souls College - whose Codrington Library is named after a slave owner - students held up a sheet, painted with the words: 'All white souls, no black minds'.²⁵ On Oxford's Open Day, June 30, two RMFO protesters, Oluwafemi Nylander and Ntozoko Sbo Qwabe, stood shirtless outside Oriel College, with: 'I prefer land to n*****' and 'All Slaves College' written in red paint on their chests.²⁶

First Phase of the Contestation: Backlash

Whilst RMFO activists received significant national and global coverage for their campaign, views amongst the student body on whether the statue should fall were far from unanimous. A January 2016 poll conducted by Cherwell - Oxford's student newspaper - of 967 students, found that 54 per cent thought the statue should 'remain', compared to 37 per cent who felt it

¹⁹ Discoversociety, "The Violence of Liberalspeak: Eulogizing Cecil Rhodes, the 'Businessman' and 'Munificent Benefactor!'," *Discover Society*, December 1, 2015.

²⁰ Nadia Khomami, "Oxford Scholars Reject Hypocrisy Claims amid Row over Cecil Rhodes Statue," *The Guardian*, 13 January 2016.

²¹ Rhodes Must Fall In Oxford, *Facebook*, June 20, 2015.

²² Javier Espinoza, "Students Demand Cecil Rhodes Name to Be Removed from Computer Room at Oxford University," *The Telegraph*, January, 18 2016.

²³ Megan Izzo, "Rhodes Falls at the Oxford Union," *The Oxford Student*, January 23, 2016.

²⁴ Jessica Elgot, "'Take It down!': Rhodes Must Fall Campaign Marches through Oxford," *The Guardian*, March 9, 2016.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Ellen Peirson-Hagger, "Rhodes Must Fall Campaigners Demonstrate Outside Oriel Open Day," *Cherwell*, July 1, 2016.

should 'fall'.²⁷ Amongst BME students, 48 per cent opted for 'fall' and 45 per cent for 'remain'. As for the broader national context, a YouGov poll, also conducted in 2016, found that 59 per cent felt that the statue at Oriel should not be taken down, and only 11 per cent felt that it should be removed.²⁸

At the turn of the year, Rhodes Must Fall became a nationwide debate. On December 19 2015, Conservative MP Bernard Jenkin voiced an often-rehearsed argument against RMFO 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 to.²⁹

Further debate questioned RMFO's focus on iconography as a means of addressing wider social and historical injustice. For example, writing in the Guardian on January 4 2016, Dena Latif - a student at Oriel College - expressed her belief that: 'by focusing firmly on the colonial past, the #RhodesMustFall campaign missed an opportunity to highlight the entrenchment of inequality at Oxford'.³⁰ She continued:

There are bigger fish to fry. Taking down the statue wouldn't undo the fact that less than 4% of Oxford's professors are 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.³¹

Additionally, on January 11 2016, Kenan Malik argued that RMFO:

is not so much the product of a great social movement as a substitute for one... 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.³²

But the biggest intervention came on January 13 2016, when Chris Patten - Chancellor of the University of Oxford - addressed the issue on Radio 4's Today. The last Governor of Hong Kong, 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, who:

²⁷ Harry Gosling, "Majority of Oxford Students: Rhodes Should Stay," *Cherwell*, January 14, 2016.

²⁸ Will Dahlgreen, "Rhodes Must Not Fall," *YouGov*, January 18, 2016.

²⁹ Jonathan Dimpleby, "Any Questions?," *BBC*, December 18, 2015.

³⁰ Dena Latif, "Racism at Oxford Goes Deeper Than the Statue of Cecil Rhodes. So What's the Point in Ditching it?," *The Guardian*, January 4, 2016.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Kenan Malik, "The Cecil Rhodes statue is not the problem," *Aljazeera*, January 11, 2016.

'regarded Rhodes and himself as having a common cause.'³³ His argument concluded with the suggestion that:

if people at a university aren't prepared to demonstrate the sort of generosity which Nelson Mandela showed towards Rhodes and towards history... then maybe they should think about being educated elsewhere.³⁴

First Phase of the Contestation: Academic Year 2016-17

On December 2 2016, RMFO protesters once again gathered outside of Oriel College; chants of 'get up, get down, there's a decon movement in this town' and 'de-de-decolonise' rang out.³⁵ Campaigners demanded Oriel 'name their price', as they presented a cheque to the college.³⁶ An open letter from RMFO was also read out:

Your actions reflect a broader context of embedded prejudice, white supremacy and institutional indifference at the University of Oxford... You are just an example of the university's institutional racism: you marginalise, ignore, and actively undermine the voices of particular racial groups as you stuff your pockets with their money and pay lip service to an empty agenda of diversity.³⁷

The focus on financial donors followed RMFO's claims - explored in the following section - that Oriel College decided against removing the Rhode's statue after donors threatened to withdraw funds.³⁸

Also on December 2, Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford announced a second 'interlocking' action - a social media campaign centred on the hashtag #everydaycolonialism. As RMFO explained in a Facebook post:

Colonialism was always more than a military project. It was a project of ideas: of upholding the supremacy of colonisers. And that project remains alive and well, not least in Oxford. This social media campaign spotlights that pernicious project, and asks people to share their evidence of it.³⁹

In the days and weeks after its launch, almost 100 tweets and around 50 Facebook posts showed support for the campaign by using the hashtag. RMFO also brought this action to the streets of Oxford, displaying posters which showcased examples of 'everyday colonialism' at Oxford, such as: 'more Etonians than black students' and 'only 6% of faculty are BME'.⁴⁰

RMFO also staged a protest at the annual May Day celebrations at Magdalen College on May 1 2017, the protesters draped sheets on the college's gates which read 'Rhodes Stands You

³³ Natasha Turner, "Lord Patten Speaks out in Rhodes Debate," *Times Higher Education*, January 13, 2016.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Jack Hunter, "Rhodes Must Fall Return to Protest Outside Oriel," *Cherwell*, December 2, 2016.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Rhodes Must Fall In Oxford, *Facebook*, December 2, 2016.

⁴⁰ Rhodes Must Fall Oxford, *Twitter*, December 2, 2016.

Sing'.⁴¹ A Facebook post from RMFO read: 'Mayday at Magdalen took an unexpected turn, sweet songs and genocide all on the same street'.⁴² This was to be the last Rhodes Must Fall protest of the first wave of campaigning for the removal of Rhodes' statue, which had begun in March 2015 and spanned three academic years.

First Phase of the Contestation: Academic Year 2017-18

On August 15 2018, RMFO published a book, 'Rhodes Must Fall: The Struggle to Decolonise the Racist Heart of Empire'. Divided into three parts, the anthology focused firstly: 'on the voices of RMFO itself, including voices from the events, actions, and artistic expressions of the movement'; before turning to sister movements working to decolonise education in Britain; finally, they feature global perspectives on Rhodes Must Fall.⁴³ Writing in the introduction, the editors - Roseanne Chantiluke, Brian Kwoba and Athinangamso Nkopo - hoped that: 'these perspectives will empower, encourage and enlighten you through reflection on the many ways that we might resist the grip of empire in our communities today'.⁴⁴ Reviews described the book as 'essential reading' for anyone interested in decolonisation.⁴⁵

Second Phase of the Contestation: Academic Year 2019-20

After the 2017 May Day protest, Rhodes Must Fall Oxford entered into a period of inactivity - no campaigns occurred for the next three years. However, RMFO was reignited when Black Lives Matter protests erupted across the world after the death of George Floyd in May 2020 - particularly inspirational for RMFO was the toppling of the statue of slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol, on June 7 2020. As Rhodes Must Fall organiser, Femi Nylander, explained:

What happened in Bristol is the catalyst for this protest... We're seeing a global surge against anti-blackness which has allowed us to rejuvenate that debate. It's what we saw with Colston - it was Black Lives Matter who took down that statue of a slave owner. We're reaffirming our demands to Oxford that they should themselves take this down as a matter of principle and matter of urgency.⁴⁶

On June 8 2020, Liberal Democrat MP for Oxford West, Layla Moran, lent her support to RMFO, tweeting that: 'Oriel College must take down the statue of Rhodes, a white supremacist who does not represent the values of Oxford in 2020'.⁴⁷ On June 9, more than 1,000 protesters gathered outside Oriel College to demand the removal of the statue of Cecil Rhodes; despite the presence of riot police on the roof of the college, the protest remained peaceful, and there were: 'cheers as a police officer briefly took a knee in the crowd'.⁴⁸ Later

⁴¹ Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford, *Facebook*, May 1, 2017.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Brian Kwoba, Roseanne Chantiluke, Athinangamso Nkopo (eds), *Rhodes Must Fall: The Struggle to Decolonise the Racist Heart of Empire*, London: Zed Books, 2018, p.xxi.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.xxii.

⁴⁵ Priyamvada Gopal, "Media Reviews," *Waterstones*, no date.

⁴⁶ Aamna Mohdin, "Fall of Bristol's Colston Statue Revives Rhodes Campaign in Oxford," *The Guardian*, June 8, 2020.

⁴⁷ Layla Moran, *Twitter*, June 8, 2020.

⁴⁸ Aamna Mohdin, "Protesters Rally in Oxford for Removal of Cecil Rhodes Statue," *The Guardian*, June 9, 2020.

that day, RMFO also released a list of seventeen demands, including: ‘the immediate removal of the statue of Cecil Rhodes overlooking the High Street, and the plaque celebrating Rhodes on King Edward Street’ and: ‘the immediate change of the name of the ‘Rhodes’ Scholarship and of ‘Rhodes’ House’, as well as the establishment of multiple ‘reparatory’ scholarships.⁴⁹ RMFO also demanded that the University of Oxford issue an ‘institutional apology for, and retraction of, Chancellor Patten’s statement that students who problematise colonial iconography should “think about studying elsewhere”’.⁵⁰ Also on June 9, the Leader of Oxford City Council, Susan Brown, published a statement in support for the Rhodes Must Fall campaign, stating:

It would be better for the statue to be replaced in a museum, such as the Ashmolean or the Museum of Oxford to ensure this noteworthy piece of the story of our city isn’t lost to history... I have today written to Oriel College to invite them to apply for planning permission to remove the statue... as a City Council we are keen to work with Oriel to help them find the right balance between the laws that protect our historic buildings and the moral obligation to reflect on the malign symbolism of this statue.⁵¹

On June 12, the warden of St Antony’s College, Professor Roger Goodman, became the first head of a college to support the RMFO movement, stating his support for the proposal of Oxford City Council to relocate the statue to a museum.⁵²

On June 26, RMFO staged the first event of its ‘Freedom Summer’ series: a protest and open mic forum in Oriel Square, to: ‘demand IMMEDIATE action’ from Oriel College.⁵³ ‘Freedom Summer’ continued with a series of talks staged outside controversial buildings in Oxford throughout July: on July 3, RMFO held an event outside Pitt Rivers Museum on: ‘museum practices, repatriation and restitution’ with community organiser and activist, Pat Green, professor of Contemporary Archaeology and curator at Pitt Rivers, Dan Hicks, and director of Pitt Rivers and Uncomfortable Oxford, Laura van Broekhoven.⁵⁴ On July 10, a series of conversations on the themes of ‘snobbery, meritocracy and their impact on inequality’ were held at Magdalen Botanical Gardens, and on July 17 talks on ‘empowerment, global protest and decolonial artistic movements’ were staged outside All Souls College.⁵⁵ An event also took place outside Rhodes House.

Second Phase of the Contestation: Academic Year 2020-21

As the Covid-19 pandemic continued, RMFO deployed unique forms of protest, including a ‘Dance Protest’ released on YouTube on December 9 2020, in order to:

⁴⁹ Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford, *Facebook*, June 9, 2020.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Susan Brown, “Statement on Rhodes statue,” *Oxford City Council*, June 9, 2020.

⁵² Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford, *Facebook*, June 12, 2020.

⁵³ Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford, *Facebook*, June 23, 2020.

⁵⁴ Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford, *Facebook*, July 2, 2020.

⁵⁵ Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford, *Facebook*, July 7, 2020.

commemorate International Human Rights Day 2020 by rearticulating the demands of those who gathered throughout the summer, with their masks and protest signs, to demand that the University finally reconcile its colonial history and uncritical veneration of one of Africa's most dominant imperialists, Cecil Rhodes.⁵⁶

The video was made in solidarity with other causes, such as 'Free Kurdistan', 'Justice for Tamils', 'Help for Yemen' and 'Black Lives Matter' - it received 1,500 views. Additionally, on March 9 2021, RMFO began an email campaign, encouraging supporters to email Oriel College and tell them that Rhodes Must Fall because: 'genocidal criminals should not be vindicated'.⁵⁷

On the anniversary of George Floyd's death, May 25 2021, RMFO staged a protest which met in Bonn Square and marched to Oriel College. They also released a statement, in collaboration with the Oxford Coalition of Black Communities and Communities of Colour, which argued that ongoing culture wars surrounding contested histories in public spaces constituted a 'genocide':

This so called culture war has never been a war - it has always been a genocide: a genocide benefiting white supremacy. Such white supremacy is embodied in the figure of Cecil Rhodes, whose statue has now been actively protected by Oriel College.⁵⁸

As summer progressed, RMFO continued to stage other small events, such as 'Reclaiming Oxford' on June 12 - 'a day of speakers, art, music and radical education while reclaiming public space for liberation!'.⁵⁹ However, the most significant event of the summer was the announcement, reported on June 10, that 150 Oxford lecturers would refuse to participate in 'discretionary' teaching activities or recruitment and assessment processes at Oriel College - as well as boycotting seminars and conferences - over its refusal to remove the Rhodes Statue. In a statement, the academics argued:

The collegiate university can only effectively and credibly work to eradicate racism and address the ongoing effects of colonialism today if all the colleges do so. Oriel College's decision not to remove the statue of Cecil Rhodes undermines us all... Faced with Oriel's stubborn attachment to a statue that glorifies colonialism and the wealth it produced for the college, we feel we have no choice but to withdraw all discretionary work and goodwill collaborations.⁶⁰

Despite core teaching not being affected by the boycott, Downing Street weighed in and suggested that students should be entitled to compensation if they were adversely affected - the latest intervention by a government which had welcomed Oriel's decision to keep the statue. Oxford's vice-chancellor, Louise Richardson, also criticised the academics, stating that

⁵⁶ RMF in Oxford, "Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford - Dance Protest," *YouTube*, December 9 2020.

⁵⁷ Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford, *Facebook*, March 9, 2021.

⁵⁸ Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford, *Facebook*, May 25, 2021.

⁵⁹ Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford, *Facebook*, June 10, 2021.

⁶⁰ Kevin Rawlinson and Peter Walker, "No 10 suggests Oxford students hit by Rhodes boycott should be compensated," *The Guardian*, June 10, 2021.

she was 'deeply disappointed' by their actions.⁶¹ The announcement of the boycott also caused a furore in the national media, with the *Spectator* quick to point out the alleged hypocrisy of some co-signatories, who themselves held positions named after imperialists.⁶² A few, for example, were Leverhulme early career fellows or visiting professors; William Lever was an advocate for the expansion of the British Empire who availed of the Belgian system of forced labour in the Belgian Congo. The academics, however, were not wedded to the concept that Rhodes Must Fall, as Robert Gildea, a professor of modern history and co-signatory, explained:

One of the options offered by the commission was to retain and contextualise so, if the college put up a notice explaining who Cecil Rhodes was, that would be fine... If the college put a placard around his neck at lunchtime today saying 'sorry', that would also be fine. Antony Gormley has suggested that the statue simply be turned the other way and face the wall, that would also be a very interesting idea.⁶³

The threatened boycott by academics marked the last serious contestation over the legacy of Rhodes at Oxford, the following section will explore the steps taken by Oriel College in response to the RMFO's six-year campaign.

Decision-Making Processes

Academic Year 2015-16

Oriel College provided a response to RMFO's petition, 'Oriel College, Oxford University: Remove the racist statue of Rhodes immediately' - handed to the College during a protest on November 6 2015 - on December 17 2015. The statement announced that Oriel would launch a 'structured six-month listening exercise on the statue' from early February 2016, arguing that because the statue is listed, its future: 'cannot be resolved quickly'.⁶⁴ But, the College did announce that:

We are starting the process of consultation with Oxford City Council this week in advance of submitting a formal application for consent to remove the Rhodes plaque on No. 6 King Edward Street, an Oriel-owned property. This plaque was erected in 1906 by a private individual. Its wording is a political tribute, and the College believes its continuing display on Oriel property is inconsistent with our principles. The plaque is not listed but consent is required for its removal because it is within a conservation area.⁶⁵

Moira Wallace, Provost of Oriel, sent a letter to Oxford City Council requesting consent for the removal of the plaque on the 17th.⁶⁶ The same day, the City Council replied stating that:

⁶¹ Quoted in *Ibid.*

⁶² Steerpikie, "Meet the academics behind the Rhodes boycott," *The Spectator*, June 11, 2021.

⁶³ Quoted in Kevin Rawlinson and Peter Walker, "No 10 suggests Oxford students hit by Rhodes boycott should be compensated," *The Guardian*, June 10, 2021.

⁶⁴ Oriel College, "We Will Remove Rhodes Plaque if We Can," *politicsweb*, December 17, 2015.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Moira Wallace, "The Cecil Rhodes Plaque on Commerical Premises at 6 King Edward Street: Request for Consent to its Removal," *Oriel College*, December 17, 2015.

'it is not considered that its removal would constitute substantial demolition in a conservation area... and therefore planning permission for its removal would not be required'.⁶⁷ However, on the 18th, national media reported that attempts by Oriel College to remove the plaque would be blocked by planning regulations. Quoted in the Times, Julian Munby, of Oxford Archaeology, said that the statue was 'integral' to the design of the building and therefore: 'I don't see why Historic England would agree to it'.⁶⁸ The article suggested that if the removal were rejected by the council, the legal fees of an appeal could reach into the six figures.

Despite Oriel College's public commitment to remove the Rhodes Plaque on King Edward Street, just days after Oriel's statement, an 'unidentified woman' submitted a listing application for the plaque.⁶⁹ According to records obtained by the Guardian - and reported in June 2020 - 'within weeks', Oriel's treasurer, Wilf Stephenson, backed the application and lobbied Historic England to list the memorial, arguing that Rhodes was: 'one of the greatest educational philanthropists of modern times'.⁷⁰ Apparently, Historic England also supported plans to protect the plaque; in an email to colleagues, Dr. Roger Bowdler - the then-director of listing - outlined their strategy as to: 'wait for the Rhodes... flak to reduce [then...] accompany it with some pro-African listings' in order to counteract potential PR damage - he wrote: 'Now there's a challenge - put your thinking cap on! Apparently there is a bust of Mandela on the South Bank for starters...'.⁷¹ Later in 2016, Historic England drafted advice that the plaque should be listed for reasons of historic interest - 'Rhodes is a figure of international significance, whose life and work impacted fundamentally on the story of British Imperialism in southern Africa' - artistic interest and rarity.⁷² However, they never submitted the advice.



Figure 1: "Cecil John Rhodes plaque, 6 King Edward Street, Oxford" Image by Monceau

Whilst this was going on behind closed doors, on January 28 2016 Oriel College abruptly cancelled the six-month listening exercise. In a statement, they wrote: 'the College's

⁶⁷ Patsy Dell, "Removal of Rhodes Plaque, Front Facade 6 King Edward Street Oxford," *Oxford City Council*, December 17, 2015.

⁶⁸ Neil Johnston and Greg Hurst, "Rhodes Statue is Protected by Planning Rules," *The Times*, January 9, 2016.

⁶⁹ Alex Waygood and Jim Waterson, "Oxford College Officials Backed Plans to Protect Rhodes Memorial," *The Guardian*, June 12, 2020.

⁷⁰ Wilf Stephenson, "Cecil Rhodes Memorial Plaque, 6 King Edward Street, Oxford," February 10, 2016.

⁷¹ Alex Waygood and Jim Waterson, "Oxford College Officials Backed Plans to Protect Rhodes Memorial," *The Guardian*, June 12, 2020.

⁷² Historic England, "Case Name: Cecil Rhodes Memorial Plaque, 6 King Edwards Street, Oxford," *Historic England*, August 23, 2016.

Governing Body has decided that the statue should remain in place... the College will seek to provide a clear historical context to explain why it is there'.⁷³ It has been suggested that Oriel 'thought again' about holding a consultation when 'there were threats of funds being withdrawn'.⁷⁴ According to a Telegraph article, published on January 29, 'furious donors threatened to withdraw gifts and bequests worth more than £100 million if it was taken down'; the article reported that £1,500,000 of donations had already been cancelled.⁷⁵ Oriel's development director, Sean Power, claimed that 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'.⁷⁶ Nonetheless, the University maintained that financial concerns were not the primary reason for its u-turn on the statue; indeed, if the Guardian's reporting is to be believed, it never seriously intended to remove either the statue or the plaque in the first place.

On February 3, 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'.⁷⁷ In the days preceding the Student Union meeting both Oriel and St Peter's JCRs also voted in favour of similar motions.

Academic Year 2016-17

Following Oriel College's January 2016 decision not to remove the Rhodes statue, on January 14 2017 the college held two meetings - one for Oriel alumni and one for staff and current College members - on how to contextualise the statue. The purpose of the meetings was, therefore, not to discuss whether the statue or the King Edward Street plaque should stay nor to arrive at a singular 'Oriel view', rather to explore how the complexities of Rhodes's legacy could be recognised. 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.⁷⁸

Despite these meetings, Oriel College took no tangible action to contextualise the Rhodes statue and plaque within the 2016-17 academic year. However, progress towards decolonising the curriculum - one of the three pillars of RMFO - was made in 2017, with the announcement that history students would now have to pass an exam on non-British or

⁷³ Oriel College, "Statement from Oriel College on 28th January 2016 Regarding the College's Decision Concerning the Rhodes Statue." *Oriel College*, January 28, 2016.

⁷⁴ Ian Dunt, "The Rhodes Must Fall Movement Is Championing Free Speech," *politics.co.uk*, March 9, 2016.

⁷⁵ Javier Espinoza, "Cecil Rhodes Statue to Remain at Oxford University after Alumni Threaten to Withdraw Millions," *The Telegraph*, January 29, 2016.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Megan Izzo, "OUSU Condemns Oriel over Rhodes Statue," *The Oxford Student*, February, 6 2016.

⁷⁸ Alex Waygood, "Putting Rhodes in his place." *The Poor Print*, April 28, 2017.

European history to complete their degree. An opinion piece in the Guardian, published on May 30 2017, addressed the reforms:

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.⁷⁹

Academic Year 2017-18

In Michaelmas term, Oxford's All Souls College - which had also been targeted by RMFO - announced attempts to address the legacy of slavery that had helped to enrich the College for centuries; most specifically, the bequest left by Christopher Codrington - a slave owner, elected to All Souls in 1690 - of £10,000 upon his death in 1710, which was used to establish the Codrington Library. On November 10, the college launched an annual scholarship scheme for black or mixed black graduate students from the Caribbean. The All Souls Hugh Springer Graduate Scholarship - named after Hugh Springer, the first general secretary of the Barbados Workers' Union and Barbados' fourth governor-general - now funds the studies of three students per year. All Souls also announced that a five-year grant of £100,000 would be given to Codrington College - an Anglican theological college in St. John, Barbados. Shreya Lakhmi, a student activist at Oxford, described All Souls' actions as: 'small steps in the right direction... Other colleges should look at this and take note'.⁸⁰ Additionally, on December 20 2017, All Souls announced it would install a memorial tablet outside of the Codrington Library with the text: 'In memory of those who worked in slavery on the Codrington Plantations in the West Indies'. In its planning application to Oxford City Council, the College stated that the plaque is intended to: 'serve as a reminder [that...] Codrington's wealth was derived in large part from estates which were dependent on slave labour'.⁸¹

On June 28 2018, Historic England finally sent its advice on whether to list the Rhodes plaque on King Edward Street to the Government. The two-year delay was accounted for due to: 'the sensitive context of contested heritage', and the listing application therefore requiring: 'particularly robust and assured handling'.⁸² Historic England's recommendation, on balance, was to not list the plaque; although its reasoning focused on the aesthetics of the plaque - 'not of high aesthetic or sculptural merit' - and its location - 'His habitation at 6 King Edward

⁷⁹ Kehinde Andrews, "It's a dangerous fiction that one exam will decolonise Oxford's history degrees," *The Guardian*, May 30, 2017.

⁸⁰ Richard Adams, "Oxford college to launch scholarship in attempt to address slavery legacy," *The Guardian*, November 10, 2017.

⁸¹ Naomi Packer, "All Souls plans plaque to mark donor's slavery links," *Cherwell*, December 23, 2017.

⁸² Historic England Advisory Committee, "Cecil Rhodes Plaque, Oxford: Listing Assessment," *Historic England*, June 28, 2018.

Street was short... and not linked to any particular contemporary achievement or action' - rather than Rhodes' contested legacy.⁸³

Academic Year 2019-20

On February 11 2020, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport took a final decision to not list the Rhodes plaque on King Edward Street - over four years after the listing application was submitted.⁸⁴

Yet, in the wake of Black Lives Matter protests in the spring of 2020, contestation over the Rhodes statue was reignited once more. On June 17 2020, Oriel College's Governing Body voted in favour of removing the Rhodes memorials. However, the College qualified this stated intention, by saying:

the High Street Building and its statue are Grade II* listed, the plaque in King Edward Street is in a conservation area, and there would be significant challenges to overcome in order to gain permission to remove them.⁸⁵

Whilst the Grade II* listing of the statue would present challenges for its removal, Oriel College knew that, as things currently stood, there were not 'significant challenges to overcome' regarding the plaque on King Edward Street because Oxford City Council had informed the College in December 2015 that: 'planning permission for its removal would not be required'.⁸⁶ The Governing Body's decision to: 'set up an Independent Commission of Inquiry to look into the Rhodes legacy and to consider the actions available to it in relation to this legacy' further delayed the College's decision-making process.⁸⁷

Academic Year 2020-21

In November 2020, All Souls College's Governing Body announced that their library would no longer be named 'the Codrington Library' - it is now known simply as All Souls College Library. However, the governing body did stop short of removing the statue of Codrington from the library, instead the college stated that they would:

[seek to] investigate further forms of memorialisation and contextualisation within the library, which will draw attention to the presence of enslaved people on the Codrington plantations, and will express the College's abhorrence of slavery.⁸⁸

Later in the academic year - June 2021 - All Souls also agreed further initiatives, including: a £1,000,000 donation over ten years to the University of Oxford's new Black Academic Futures programme; more financial support for Codrington College; an annual lecture on the

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Heritage Gateway, "Decision Summary," *Heritage Gateway*, February 11, 2020.

⁸⁵ Oriel College, "The Rhodes Legacy," *Oriel College*, no date.

⁸⁶ Patsy Dell, "Removal of Rhodes Plaque, Front Facade 6 King Edward Street Oxford," December 17, 2015.

⁸⁷ Oriel College, "The Rhodes Legacy," *Oriel College*, no date.

⁸⁸ Amelia Wood, "All Souls College Change Codrington Library Name, but Keep Statue of Slaveholder," *Cherwell*, November 20, 2020.

'modern Atlantic world'; and a programme of visiting fellowships and travel grants for Caribbean researchers.⁸⁹ In addition, it announced that the library anteroom would become a: 'zone for contextualisation', where three digital displays provide information on: the Codrington statue and its context, religion and the founding of Codrington College, and the Codrington family in Antigua and Barbuda.⁹⁰ In the library itself, All Souls stated that the statue would also be 'contextualised' by further digital displays either side of the statue and by technology which enables the projection of words and images, such as the names of enslaved persons and the map of the Codrington Plantation onto the statue itself.⁹¹

In April 2021, the Rhodes Commission - led by Carole Souter CBE - submitted its advisory report. Whilst a majority of Commission members: 'supported the expressed wish of the Governing Body to move [the Rhodes' statue]', the Commission was unanimous in its support for contextualisation:

The need to contextualise... the memorials is widely agreed, including by Historic England and the Secretary of State... Substantial, serious contextualisation of the memorials should be introduced by the College as soon as possible. It is regrettable that this did not follow the Governing Body's statements concerning the memorials in 2015 and 2016. It is vital that it should do so now.⁹²

The Commission also outlined how emerging Government policy in relation to historic monuments would provide new obstacles to removing both the statue and the plaque. On September 22 2020, Oliver Dowden, the Secretary of State for Culture, outlined in a letter to cultural institutions and the Charity Commission - to which Oriel College as a charity is ultimately answerable - that: 'the Government does not support the removal of statues or other similar objects'.⁹³ Additionally, on January 17 2021, Communities Secretary, Robert Jenrick, announced the Government's new 'retain and explain' policy: the removal of any historic statue - whether listed or not - would now require planning permission or listed building consent, stating specifically that: 'The new rules will also apply to unlisted historic plaques'.⁹⁴ The legislation would give the Communities Secretary the final say, meaning monuments would only be removed: 'in the most exceptional circumstances'.⁹⁵

On May 20 2021, the Governing Body released its response to the Commission's report:

The Commission backed the College's original wish... to remove the statue, whilst acknowledging the complex challenges and costs presented by its removal in terms of heritage and planning consent. The Governing Body has carefully considered the regulatory and financial challenges, including the expected time frame for removal, which could run into

⁸⁹ All Souls College, "The Codrington Legacy," *All Souls College*, no date.

⁹⁰ All Souls College, "All Souls College and the Codrington Legacy," *All Souls College*, June 15, 2021.

⁹¹ All Souls College, "Names_Map_Will_STATUE_PANEL.pdf," *All Souls College*, no date.

⁹² Independent Commission, "Report of a Commission of Inquiry Established by Oriel College, Oxford into Issues Associated with Memorials to Cecil Rhodes," April 2021.

⁹³ Oliver Dowden, "Letter from Culture Secretary on HM Government position on contested heritage," *Gov.uk*, September 28, 2020.

⁹⁴ Robert Jenrick, "New Legal Protection for England's Heritage," *Gov.uk*, January 17, 2021.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

years with no certainty of outcome, together with the total cost of removal. In light of the considerable obstacles to removal, Oriel's Governing Body has decided not to begin the legal process for relocation of the memorials.⁹⁶

Instead, the Governing Body announced that it would focus on contextualising the College's relationship with Rhodes, immediately accepting multiple recommendations of the Commission, including to arrange an annual lecture and an annual student prize for work on a topic related to colonialism; the inaugural Rex Nettleford Lecture and Essay Competition - named after a Jamaican scholar and former student at Oriel College - was staged on May 20 2022. The Governing Body also agreed to:

Commission a virtual exhibition to provide an arena for contextualisation and explanation of the Rhodes legacy and... Undertake to contextualise the Rhodes legacy and memorials, including both physical elements at the site and virtual resources.⁹⁷

In light of Oriel College's renewed commitment to contextualising the Rhodes statue and plaque, sculptor Antony Gormley - in an interview with the Financial Times - proposed that the statue should be turned to face the wall, as: 'an acknowledgement of collective shame'.⁹⁸ Inspired by Gormley, local artist Chris A Weitz suggested that Oriel College could fit a slave collar onto the statue of Cecil Rhodes, in order to: 'change the meaning and the context'.⁹⁹ Additionally, Professor Robert Gildea - one of the academics boycotting Oriel College - suggested that the College could: 'put a placard around his neck... saying 'sorry''.¹⁰⁰

Academic Year 2021-22

On October 11 2021, Oriel College installed an explanatory plaque underneath the Rhodes Statue. The plaque reads:

This building was constructed by Oriel College in 1909-11 with money left in the will of Cecil John Rhodes (1853-1902), a former student of the college. The college commissioned a series of statues to front the building which included Rhodes at the top. Rhodes, a committed British colonialist, obtained his fortune through exploitation of minerals, land, and peoples of southern Africa. Some of his activities led to great loss of life and attracted criticism in his day and ever since. In recent years, the statue has become a focus for public debate on racism and the legacy of colonialism. In June 2020, Oriel College declared its wish to remove the statue but is not doing so following legal and regulatory advice.¹⁰¹

Whilst some academics, including David Abulafia - emeritus professor of Mediterranean history at Cambridge and a member of the History Reclaimed campaign - complained that

⁹⁶ Oriel College, "Decisions Made by the College Following the Completion of the Independent Commission into Cecil Rhodes and Related Issues," *Oriel College*, May 20, 2021.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Alex Barker, "Turn Rhodes statue to face wall in shame, says Antony Gormley," *Financial Times*, May 28, 2021.

⁹⁹ Sophie Perry, "Cecil Rhodes Statue Should Wear 'Slave Collar', Local Artist Says," *Oxford Mail*, July 27, 2021.

¹⁰⁰ Kevin Rawlinson and Peter Walker, "No 10 suggests Oxford students hit by Rhodes boycott should be compensated," *The Guardian*, June 10, 2021.

¹⁰¹ Jamie Grierson and Damien Gayle, "Oxford College Installs Plaque Calling Cecil Rhodes a 'Committed Colonialist,'" *The Guardian*, October 11, 2021.

the plaque was not balanced or measured and portrayed Rhodes: ‘as some sort of devil incarnate’, others felt that the plaque did not go far enough. For example, Oxford City Councillor Shaista Aziz, who was a member of Oriel’s Independent Commission, called the plaque:

“amateurish” and “woefully inadequate” [adding...] that the sign does “nothing to address the legacy of Cecil Rhodes, a loud, proud white supremacist, colonialist and slave owner and a deeply controversial figure of his time”.¹⁰²

On October 12, RMFO released its response to the plaque on social media:

Rhodes has not fallen. Rhodes has gotten a little sign. We have decided that this recent development does not even deserve a full statement from Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford. This sign trivialises the pain and suffering Rhodes caused. It also downplays our demands. Oriel College CAN remove this statue, they choose not to!¹⁰³

According to Oriel College, the ‘information signs’ placed beneath the Rhodes monuments are part of a ‘temporary contextualisation’, with a ‘more comprehensive and permanent response’ following ‘in due course’.¹⁰⁴ However, as of March 2023 the ‘temporary’ contextualisations remain and there is no information on when the ‘permanent’ response will be delivered.

On July 29 2022, controversy surrounding Rhodes’ legacy was stoked once again when Nadine Dorries, Secretary of State for Culture, overrode Historic England’s 2018 judgement and granted listed status to the Rhodes plaque on King Edward Street. Dorries argued that the plaque deserved protecting because Rhodes was: ‘[a] nationally and internationally important individual’, despite Historic England arguing that his legacy was already ‘well represented on the list’.¹⁰⁵ Academics accused the government of deliberately stoking culture wars, particularly because its own ‘retain and explain’ policy already prevented the plaque from being removed. Kim Wagner, professor of imperial history at Queen Mary University of London, stated:

Cecil Rhodes has become a rallying point for imperiophiliacs, and the slogan to ‘retain and explain’ is just part of the ongoing effort to whitewash his legacy and that of the empire more generally.¹⁰⁶

Hannah Woods, author of ‘Rule, Nostalgia: A Backwards History of Britain’, added that:

It is deeply depressing that amid our current culture wars we seem even less capable of critique than Britain’s 19th-century imperialists themselves, [it is ironic that...] Rhodes enjoys

¹⁰² Livia Gershon, “Why a New Plaque Next to Oxford’s Cecil Rhodes Statue is So Controversial,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, October 13, 2021.

¹⁰³ Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford, *Facebook*, October 12, 2021.

¹⁰⁴ Oriel College, “The Rhodes Legacy,” *Oriel College*, no date.

¹⁰⁵ Rachel Hall, “Nadine Dorries Grants Listed Status to Cecil Rhodes Plaque at Oxford College,” *The Guardian*, July 29, 2022.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

more favourable coverage in sections of the British media today than he did during his own lifetime.¹⁰⁷

Academic Year 2024-25

Recently, Oxford's Oriel College has reaffirmed its decision to retain the statue of Cecil Rhodes despite ongoing calls for its removal. Instead, the college will launch a new exhibition to contextualise Rhodes's legacy within colonial history. Central to this initiative is a sculpture by a Zimbabwean artist selected through a competition organised in partnership with the Oxford Zimbabwe Arts Partnership.¹⁰⁸ This new artwork seeks to symbolise resilience and inspire dialogue on the lasting impact of colonialism. The exhibition marks the latest effort by Oriel to engage with Rhodes's controversial legacy while maintaining the statue in place.

Summary and Conclusions

The contestations generated by the Rhodes monuments attest to the symbolic power of public memorialisation. A statue 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.

As the contestation over Rhodes grew, what began as a student-led grassroots movement transformed into a nationwide debate, ultimately influencing government policy with the introduction of 'retain and explain'. In seeking to explain how six years of protest and debate resulted only in the introduction of a small 'information sign', Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford serves as the case study for understanding the contested dynamics of decision-making on 'historic heritage' in the United Kingdom.

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¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Lettice Bromovsky, "Rhodes won't fall: Statue of empire-builder Cecil will stay as Oxford college orders new sculpture from Zimbabwean artist and plans exhibition to 'explore the legacy of colonialism'," *Daily Mail*, February 5, 2025.

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About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. 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.

About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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