



Cecil Rhodes.

## Rhodes, Cecil (1853-1902)

by Linda Rapp

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Cecil Rhodes, one of nineteenth-century Britain's most ambitious imperialists, made an immense fortune through mining operations in southern Africa and also played an important but controversial role in the politics of the region. Throughout his adult life, he conducted romantic friendships with younger male associates.

Cecil John Rhodes, born July 5, 1853 in Bishop's Stortford, Hertfordshire, England, was the fifth of the nine sons of vicar Francis William Rhodes and Louisa Peacock Rhodes. He also had two sisters. Rhodes was always devoted to his warm-hearted mother but had a more distant, although not antagonistic, relationship with his aloof father.

As a youth Rhodes nurtured ambitions of becoming a barrister, but he left school at sixteen to join his older brother Herbert Rhodes in Africa in 1870. Although Africa quickly became Rhodes' home, he traveled back and forth to England to complete his education. He began his fitful career at Oxford in 1873 and finally received his bachelor's degree in 1881.

Rhodes had not enjoyed the most robust of health as a child. When his brother invited him to come to his cotton farm in Natal, the family doctor suggested that the change of climate might be beneficial.

The Rhodes brothers soon abandoned cotton to pursue gold and diamonds, which had recently been discovered in South Africa. Through successful speculation in gold mine and diamond claims Rhodes became wealthy. He began the De Beers Mining Company in 1880 and founded Gold Fields of South Africa Ltd. in 1887.

In 1888, Rhodes arranged a merger of De Beers Mining Company with that of his principal business rival. The trust deed for the resulting company, De Beers Consolidated Mines, gave Rhodes the power to annex and administer territory, thus extending the British empire, a cause dear to his heart.

Rhodes aspired to political as well as financial power. He ran successfully for election to the Cape Parliament in 1881 and remained a member for the rest of his life. He had ambitions of expanding the territory of the British Empire, as well as of the mining concessions of his own companies.

In 1889 Rhodes secured a very favorable charter for his British South Africa Company that gave him control of the lands that would become Rhodesia, thwarting Dutch, German, and Portuguese attempts to gain the territory. The indigenous people of the region rebelled in 1893 against concessions made by the king, but the revolt was rapidly crushed.

Rhodes was chosen prime minister of the Cape in 1890. He undertook ambitious projects--bank reform, expansion of the rail system, improvements in agriculture, and promoting the creation of a university in Cape Town. He also, however, introduced literacy requirements that disenfranchised many native Africans.

Rhodes was a larger-than-life figure in South African politics. Determined and powerful, he pursued his political goals with energy and, more often than not, success until the end of 1895, when he attempted to foment an uprising by British settlers against the Boers in the Transvaal. He used his mining company to send arms and troops, led by Sir Leander Jameson, to Johannesburg to support the revolt. The settlers, however, failed to rebel, and the "Jameson raid" turned into a fiasco. As a result Rhodes resigned as premier the following January.

Shortly thereafter his health declined. Respiratory and heart problems took their toll, and Rhodes died in Muizenberg on March 26, 1902. In his will he left a generous bequest establishing the scholarships at Oxford that bear his name and for which he is now best known.

Rhodes never married, nor apparently even considered taking a wife. His contemporaries noted that he favored the company of young men. GLBTQ rights activist Harry Hay recalled that when he came out as a gay man to his mother and wondered how his late father would have reacted to this acknowledgment, her reply was simply, "Your father knew Cecil Rhodes."

Despite Mrs. Hay's clear evaluation, Rhodes would most likely have seen himself differently; the terms and categories now used to denote sexual orientation were not current in his lifetime.

Rhodes was most comfortable in homosocial settings. He created such an environment in his home, employing male cooks and servants. Once he achieved prosperity he was always attended by a valet, "usually a younger man of no particular training to whom Rhodes had taken a fancy," according to biographer Robert I. Rotberg.

Of special importance in Rhodes' life was Neville Pickering, whom he hired in 1881 as secretary of the De Beers Mining Company. The two soon developed what Graham Bower, the imperial secretary in Cape Town, described as an "absolutely lover-like friendship." Rhodes and Pickering lived together for four years beginning in 1882. In October of that year Rhodes revised his will, making Pickering his sole heir.

When Pickering developed a severe infection after a riding accident in 1884, Rhodes nursed him through the crisis. Pickering's health remained fragile, however.

Rhodes was at one of his gold fields in 1886 when word reached him that Pickering was near death. Unable to get a seat in a coach, Rhodes made the fifteen-hour, 300-mile journey home riding on mailbags on top of the vehicle.

Completely indifferent to pressing business matters, Rhodes remained steadfastly at Pickering's side for several weeks until his beloved friend died in his arms.

Those in attendance at Pickering's funeral were shocked by the normally staid Rhodes' unrestrained display of grief. From that day forward Rhodes never again set foot in the house that he and Pickering had happily shared.

Rhodes later shared similar--if somewhat less intense--friendships with other younger men. Among these were his secretaries Harry Currey and Philip Jourdan. When Currey announced his intention to marry, Rhodes broke off their friendship.

Since neither Rhodes nor any of the men with whom he was associated left accounts of their personal relationships, it is impossible to say how Rhodes would have identified himself. It is not clear whether Rhodes' intense emotional relationships with men were physically consummated. As Robert Aldrich observes, "The bonds between Rhodes and his protégés may have been fully fledged sexual unions, unconsummated love or romantic friendships."

Rotberg speculates that Rhodes was "at least an emotional if not a practicing homosexual." Certainly, many people who were acquainted with him, such as Mrs. Hay, believed Rhodes to be homophile in his romantic attachments.

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