

Opinion **Education**

## Cecil Rhodes' statue will gaze down at another kind of scholar

The new global scholarships that are open to everyone are a century in the making

**ANN OLIVARIUS**



The statue of Cecil Rhodes on the facade of Oriel College in Oxford © Reuters  
Ann Olivarius 7 HOURS AGO

When Cecil Rhodes bequeathed his scholarships to Oxford university in the early 20th century, women and minorities did not figure in his plan. So this week's launch of a global Rhodes scholarship, open to students from anywhere in the world, is as welcome as was last month's appointment of the first female warden of Rhodes House, which administers the programme. Both announcements have been more than a century in the making.

The imperial ambitions of the Rhodes scholarship, intended to develop a cadre of high-achieving Anglo-Saxons to stand at the helm of the British empire, may have faded, but not so its proverbial charge to generations of scholars "to fight the world's fight". This call has inspired [presidents and prime ministers](#), UN ambassadors and Nasa scientists, Pulitzer and Man Booker prize winners — even executives at Google, Facebook, and the Girl Scouts.

But, like the empire it was intended to sustain, the scholarship was slow to recognise that [diversity](#) did not mean low standards. Rhodes himself specified that only "male students" could bear his legacy. "I am in no sense a woman-hater," the arch-imperialist wrote, but "the consideration of babies and other domestic agenda generally destroys higher thought."

The question of black scholars was prickly from the start. Rhodes barred consideration of “race” in making selections. But he used the term, as did many Englishmen in his day, to refer to different European nationalities. The president of the University of North Carolina summed up the prevailing wisdom in 1904: “A man of the coloured race would be of little to no value . . . a wasted opportunity.”

## **At the reception, the men were offered scotch, women received soft drinks**

The first black Rhodes scholar, Alain LeRoy Locke, was selected from the US in 1907. But the brilliant Harvard student, who later became a noted philosopher and Harlem Renaissance figure, was so appallingly shunned at Oxford that he completed his studies elsewhere. More than half a century passed before another African-American was chosen. South

Africa didn't send its first black student until the 1970s.

It took years of legal wrangling and an act of parliament to finally allow female scholars in 1977 — the year I applied in New Jersey. At the interviews, the men were asked what they would do if they became secretary of state; women's topics were confined to health, education and welfare. At the reception the night before, the men were offered scotch, women received soft drinks.

I was turned down. Afterwards, the head of the selection committee, media mogul Malcolm Forbes, put his arm around me and walked me outside to offer some consolation. “Don't worry,” he said, “You can make some man senator some day!” I gave the only answer possible under the circumstances: “But Malcolm, what if I want to be senator someday?” He stopped walking: “Dammit, that's what we couldn't understand about you!”

The next year, I was chosen. It was a different selection committee.

Old attitudes took time to shift. I arrived at Oxford excited to discuss my ideas for a DPhil thesis in economics with my assigned supervisor. At our first meeting, he dismissed my interests entirely, and then invited me to go away with him for the weekend. After huge ructions, I was assigned a new supervisor, who said I wasn't worth his time because I would likely go back to America and have babies. Most of my female colleagues had similar experiences — and some of them far worse. Yet most of us also loved being at Oxford and valued the rare opportunity we were given.

Often, our experiences as scholars shaped our careers. In my legal practice, I have successfully represented many women who have suffered discrimination at work, universities and, recently, as a result of revenge pornography. I was part of the lawsuit against Yale University, my undergraduate alma mater, that established the illegality of sexual harassment on [college campuses](#). I also advised Nelson Mandela who — not incidentally — agreed to the naming of the Mandela Rhodes Scholarship, which now trains the next generation of African leaders.

A few years ago, student activists in South Africa and at Oxford called for the toppling of statues of [Cecil Rhodes](#). Some were felled; others remain.

I think Mandela would have wanted those statues to remain precisely so that Rhodes, immobile in his marble, would have to gaze down at the new warden of Rhodes House, Dr Elizabeth Kiss — someone whose qualities as a scholar and leader would have made her an exemplary choice at any time in the past 100 years — as well as at the global scholars, who are proof that fighting the world's fight is something the whole world can do.

*The writer is founder of the law firm McAllister Olivarius and was a 1978 Rhodes scholar*

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