Voice from the grave

RHODES’ GHOST: BOOK USES HIS STORY TO TELL HISTORY OF ZAMBEZIA

His inner story, thoughts revealed in historical biography.

Citizen reporter

Cecil Rhodes, the founder of Rhodesia, was the most-written about figure of the Victorian late 19th century.

He founded the bequest for Rhodes Scholars at Oxford University in his Last Will, from which over 8,000 scholars worldwide have been beneficiaries.

Many of them rose to prominence in world affairs.

For decades Rhodes was rightly memorialised by a statue displayed in the street outside Oriel College, Oxford. Oriel College’s governors have voted to launch an “independent commission of inquiry” into the issues about the statue, and have “expressed their wish to remove the statue”.

Many in Oxford and elsewhere consider this an unwise act of anti-history.

Rhodes has been vilified by the #RhodesMustFall movement, certain academics and in protests at Oxford and many other universities. Memorials and statues of Rhodes were removed from Harare and Bulawayo by Robert Mugabe in July 1980, following Zimbabwe’s Independence – and from the University of Cape Town in 2015.

The Rhodes Memorial in Cape Town, has been defaced seven times in the last few years. The head on the statue there was decapitated this year.

In literature, arts, satire, poetry, film and documentaries, Rhodes has been often castigated by prominent biographers, writers, historians, politicians and the media commentariat.

Many “post-modernists” assert a litany of claims about Rhodes’ sins of omission and commission. Rhodes’ life, acts and thoughts, as well as achievements, have been questioned and often condemned. These claims and theses are answered in Rhodes’ Ghost: The Conquest of Zambezia.

Mark Twain wrote that Rhodes was “an Archangel with wings to half the world, Satan with a tail to the other half”.

Rhodes was denounced by Vladimir Lenin and John A. Hobson, but praised by Queen Victoria and Lord Salisbury, among many luminaries of that epoch and others since.

The initiatives taken by Rhodes ended backward feudalism in Zambezia to bring modernity and economic progress to Rhodesia, a state that lasted 90 years – the longest recorded in Africa – and the “Jewel of Africa” then inherited by Zimbabwe.

Nelson Mandela created the Mandela-Rhodes Foundation in an association and twinning with Rhodes’ heritage in Cape Town in 2003. He said: “We are meeting here with the memories, if not the ghost of ... Cecil Rhodes tangibly present ... it is reassuring ... to know that after all these centuries there are moments and occasions when men like ... Rhodes are remembered for posterity.”

When Rhodes funded the Pioneer Column to Fort Salisbury in Mashonaland in 1890, he followed on with seven epic journeys into Rhodesia, from 1891 to 1901. He deemed in his “Last Will” to be buried there as a “Rhodesian”.

He thwarted the designs of Paul Kruger’s Transvaal Republic and Afrikaners to take control of Zambezia, and so equally halted Portuguese intrusions, including Prazeros slavers, and threatening German interests.

Little appreciated that several Rhodes’ initiatives halted slaving and rampant predation on Zambezia’s Great Plateau, which had been conducted for well over 50 years, as practiced by the predatory Ndebele societies of Mzilikazi and Lobengula.

The raids of Ndebele warriors enslaved many Shona clans, slaughtered tens of thousands, stole their cattle and abducted women, and impoverished their fragmented patriarchal societies.

Meticulously researched, Rhodes’ Ghost uses Rhodes’ voice to tell the long durée history of Zambezia, from the San of eons ago to the founding of Rhodesia in 1890. The book draws on detailed research, a voluminous bibliography and a century of historiography, about Zambezia and Rhodes’ thoughts, ideas and acts.

Rhodes’ life and primary legacy are laid bare in the most comprehensive record ever penned. Rhodes’ Ghost provides a nuanced defence of Rhodes, with needed correction to the revisionist critiques that have long pervaded history and biography.

This is the most up-to-date interpretation of the vast literature that relates to one of the most prominent late 19th Victorian and early 20th century figures of world significance.

Rhodes’ inner story and thoughts are revealed in this unique “historical autobiograpy” by Duncan Clarke, who was born in Salisbury, Rhodesia, in 1948. He has published acclaimed books on Africa – including Africa: Crude Continent and Africa’s Future – on the economics of Rhodesia and Zimbabwe.