

Oxford head resists 'rewriting history' over Rhodes statue

14 JAN 2016 ESTELLE SHIRBON

Inspired by the UCT protests, the "Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford" wants the colonialist's statue removed from their own university.



The chancellor of Oxford University has warned against rewriting history in his first public comments on a student campaign to remove a statue of 19th-century colonialist Cecil Rhodes from one of the university's colleges.

Inspired by protests at the University of Cape Town, which led to its statue of Rhodes being removed last April, the "Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford" campaign says the statue at Oriel College celebrates a brutal racist.

The dispute is one of a growing number of university controversies over issues of history and identity, often pitting freedom of speech arguments against demands for symbols deemed offensive by some students to be removed.

In the United States, southern campuses have been rocked by arguments over the confederate flag, while at Yale a row erupted when an academic pushed back against suggestions that students should self-censor Halloween costumes to avoid causing offence.

Chris Patten, Oxford's chancellor, spoke against removing the Rhodes statue in a speech widely reported on Wednesday.

“Our history is not a blank page on which we can write our own version of what it should have been, according to our contemporary views and prejudices,” he said.

A fervent imperialist and mining magnate, Rhodes was a central figure in Britain’s colonial project in southern Africa, giving his name to Rhodesia, present-day Zimbabwe, and founding the De Beers diamond empire.

A student at Oriel in his youth, Rhodes left the college money when he died, which helped fund the construction of the building where his statue stands in a niche on the facade.

The student campaigners see it as a “veneration” of a man who made his fortune from the exploitation of African miners, secured power through bloody imperial wars, and paved the way to apartheid with his beliefs and measures on racial segregation.

“(Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford) is NOT an attempt to ‘rewrite history’, but its opposite – a campaign to bring its uncomfortable truths to salience,” said Jack Kellam, a political theory student at Oxford, on Twitter after Patten’s speech.

The campaigners have also argued that the statue is a symbol of racist attitudes that black and ethnic minority students still encounter at Oxford today, and that removing it would demonstrate a commitment by the university to combat racism.

Rhodes scholars

The decision will be made by Oriel, one of 38 colleges that make up the university. It has announced steps to improve the representation and experience of students from minority backgrounds at the college, and will launch a six-month consultation on whether to pull down the statue.

Patten, whose role as chancellor is largely ceremonial, told BBC Radio 4 on Wednesday that Oxford should welcome debate on historical issues, no matter how uncomfortable, but that taking aim at physical monuments was the wrong way to go.

“Our cities are full of buildings that were built with the proceeds of activities, the slave trade and so on, which would nowadays be regarded as completely unacceptable,” he said.

He asked rhetorically what should be done about Trinity College in Cambridge, which was founded by King Henry VIII, who had two of his six wives executed.

Patten, a former Conservative politician and governor of Hong Kong, also said that Rhodes’ views on race and empire were “common to his time” and probably not very different from those of Britain’s World War Two hero Winston Churchill.

Rhodes endowed the famous scholarships that bear his name and that have allowed 8,000 students from countries around the world to study at Oxford over the past century. Patten said some Rhodes scholars had become campaigners against apartheid and for civil liberties.

The long list of prominent Rhodes scholars also includes Bill Clinton and former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott, who waded into the Oxford dispute in an email to British newspaper The Independent in December.

“The students of Oriel should be clear-eyed about Rhodes’ faults and failings but proud of his achievements,” he wrote, lamenting Rhodes’ ideas about race but referring to “the genius that led to the creation of the Rhodes scholarships”.

The student campaigners responded that invoking the scholarships was “a justification for the continued whitewashing of Rhodes’ violent, destructive legacy”.

