



Rhodes — the rest of the story

We haven't finished yet with the dramatic, fast-paced, narrative that swirled around Cecil Rhodes in the decade after 1890, when the diamond magnate and co-founder of De Beers was named prime minister of the Cape Colony. I can't help thinking Donald Trump would have been impressed by his swashbuckling ways, rhetorical flights and flourishes. Here is Rhodes' vision of white supremacy, 1890 style: "I contend that we are the first race in the world, and that the more of the world we inhabit the better it is for the human race. I contend that every acre added to our territory means the birth of more of the English race who otherwise would not be brought into existence."¹

Enough of such racialist claptrap. Let's have some action! There was plenty of it between 1890 and 1896. Rhodes and his land-hungry cohorts set their sights on the temperate and fertile region that is today Zimbabwe, believing it was also rich in gold and other precious minerals. At the time it was the kingdom of Lobengula, whose Ndebele tribesmen had escaped the furies of Zulu King Shaka decades earlier. Lobengula was imposing, ruthless and smart — smart enough to know he could not beat the British. He had seen Shaka's descendants under Cetshwayo mowed down at Ulundi in 1879. Meanwhile, German and Portuguese agents were clamoring for "concessions" to impinge on Lobengula's kingdom. Rhodes' team led by Charles Rudd made a persuasive case, aided by the legal talents of one Rochfort Maguire, a pal of Rhodes' from Oxford. The men promised to leave the king alone to rule his land, while "protecting" him from Boer trekkers, other imperial powers and hostile tribes.



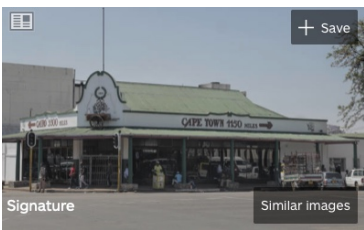
Lobengula, who I don't believe was ever on a stamp

The Rudd Concession of 1888 was a trick, but it worked — for a while. In 1890, Rhodes led a column of irregulars to Salisbury, in the heart of the Ndebele kingdom. The Pioneer Column would be feted in yearly commemorations as the founders of Rhodesia.

It didn't take long for Lobengula to realize he had been duped. Stung by Rhodes' trickery, egged on by his *impis* eager to wash their spears, he reluctantly acquiesced in an attack. The First Mashonaland War in 1893 was a rout: The short assagai spears of the Ndebele and Shona warriors were no match for Britain's rapid-firing Maxim guns. Whites decimated Blacks, suffering few casualties themselves. Lobengula set fire to his Royal Kraal at Bulawayo and fled, with this lament to his people: "Now you be joyful because here are your future rulers — the white people are coming now. I didn't want to fight with them ...". Soon he would be dead, possibly a suicide by poison. When Rhodes' contingent arrived in Bulawayo, historians record, all they found was a pair of



These images of turn-of-the-century Bulawayo feature its late-Victorian buildings and wide boulevard. Note the Rhodes statue. Bottom left is the Cape to Cairo Cafe, echoing Rhodes' fantasy of British dominion.



white traders playing cards on the roof of a store in the blackened ruins of the town.

Within months, a remarkable city began to rise from the ashes. Author Thomas Pakenham describes Bulawayo as “a colonial parody of a British suburb, red brick and gabled, with tree-lined streets 120 feet wide, broad enough (according to legend), for Rhodes to turn a full span of oxen.” Pakenham continues: “Its amenities included banks, hotels, golf club, turf club, cricket club, roller-skating rink and a hall for amateur theatricals.” Rhodes would move to Bulawayo in 1896 and spend most of his final years there.

Fascinating as this may be,

it's time to circle back to stamps. First there is more history to share, so let's compress.

Leander Starr Jameson was a Rhodes lieutenant, leader of the bloody campaign that defeated Lobengula in 1893. He was a true believer in the expansionist cause, and a determined foe of the Boers. By 1895 he had persuaded Rhodes that the ambitions of the Boers of Transvaal needed to be curbed. Both men detested Paul Kruger, the wily bewhiskered leader of ZAR/Transvaal. Without authorization from London, Rhodes and Jameson launched an attack on Boer settlements that was quickly put down. The Jameson Raid was a deep embarrassment to Britain, sent Jameson to prison (he was soon pardoned) and cost Rhodes the prime minister's job in Capetown. Moreover, the recklessness of the raiders exposed their vulnerability, which emboldened the restive Ndebele to mount a new attack. The Second Mashonaland War of 1896 has been called Africa's first colonial uprising. Once again, the carnage was mostly one-sided: Ndebele, then Shona. British troops got in on the slaughter, including a young Robert Baden-Powell, later to found the Boy Scouts. When Rhodes arrived in Bulawayo to negotiate a settlement with surviving Ndebele chiefs, he was unarmed — a gesture that further burnished his legacy, as the stamp at right demonstrates.

Within four years, the British and the Boers were at arms. By then Jameson had been completely



Jameson



rehabilitated after his earlier attack on the Boers. He went on to serve four years as prime minister of the Cape Colony. As for Rhodes, he was never out of the picture. Though booted from office and forced off the board of the British South Africa Company, he still called the shots from Bulawayo, where he built a home in 1897. Soon back in control of the BSAC, he was doing just fine. During the Boer wars he made a theatrical dash to besieged Kimberly and pressured imperial forces to relieve the siege there, at Ladysmith and Mafeking (where Baden-Powell rose to fame). His company contributed water and refrigeration facilities, constructed fortifications, and manufactured an [armoured train](#), shells and a one-off gun named [Long Cecil](#).

In 1902 Rhodes' heart gave out and he died, not yet 59. He never married, explaining that "I have too much work on my hands" to be a dutiful husband. He certainly was devoted to his private secretary, Neville Pickering (to say nothing of Rochfort Maguire), but let's leave it at that. The vicar's son had done exceedingly well for himself, and did what he thought was best for his country.

Last question: Why didn't Rhodesia join the Cape Colony as part of the Union of South Africa in 1910, along with Natal and the Boer republics of ZAR/Transvaal and Orange Free State? The main reason is that white Rhodesian settlers resisted Boers and Brits alike, and were fierce defenders of their "responsible government" (home rule). Cecil Rhodes had advocated for a "Cape to Cairo" British mandate, but by 1910 he was eight years dead, and so was his dream. To the north, including what would become Nyasaland, there was Anglo resistance to the Boers as well as to the southerners who insisted on a color bar. In Rhodesia, the settlers embraced white supremacy while also rebuffing British hegemony and collaboration with the Boers. In any event, pastoral Rhodesia was not a particularly desirable asset in 1910. In ensuing decades, Rhodesians would keep their distance from both London and Pretoria.



TO BE CONTINUED