

## HISTORIOGRAPHY OF SELECTED WORKS ON CECIL JOHN RHODES (1853–1902)

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### I

The historiography of Cecil John Rhodes may be divided into two broad categories: chauvinistic approval or utter vilification. In the Introduction to *Colossus of Southern Africa*, Lockhart and Woodhouse wrote: “Those who hated [Rhodes] most were those who knew him least, and those most admired and loved him were those who knew him best.”<sup>1</sup> The earlier works written soon after Rhodes’ death, and usually by his “intima[te]” friends, constitute the first group.<sup>2</sup> Later works written by historians and journalists largely constitute the second group. Generally speaking, the category into which a particular biography or history is placed has a strong correlation to the time it was written. Chronologically, these two groups divide at about 1945, when the last of Rhodes’s intimate companions died and the British Empire was beginning to be dismantled.

The earliest published biography of Cecil Rhodes was *Cecil Rhodes: His Political Life and Speeches, 1881-1900* published just two years before his death.<sup>3</sup> The work was published pseudonymously under the moniker “Vindex.” C.M. Woodhouse, in the “Notes on Sources” at the front of his book on Rhodes, identified Vindex as the Reverend F. Vershoyle.<sup>4</sup> Vershoyle

<sup>1</sup>J.G. Lockhart and C.M. Woodhouse, *Rhodes: the Colossus of Southern Africa*, (New York, 1963), 1.

<sup>2</sup>Lewis Michell, *The Life of the Right Honourable Cecil John Rhodes, 1853-1902* (2 vols: London, 1910), 1:vii.

<sup>3</sup>Vindex [F. Verschoyle]. *Cecil Rhodes: His Political Life and Speeches, 1881-1900* (London, 1900).

<sup>4</sup>Lockhart/Woodhouse, *Rhodes*, vii. Robert Rotberg identifies Vindex as the Rev. John Vershoyle. See Robert Rotberg and Miles F. Shore, *The Founder: Cecil Rhodes and the Pursuit of Power* (New York, 1988), 759.

was “deputy editor of the influential *Fortnightly Review* [and] was paid to remain loyal.”<sup>5</sup> No one should be surprised that the preface and the biographical introduction in the volume are complimentary, almost fawning. Nevertheless, the speeches are a valuable primary source in their own right, and deserve to be consulted by any biographer of Rhodes, or historian of Southern Africa.

Continuing in this vein, Sir Lewis Michell’s *The Life of the Right Honorable Cecil John Rhodes, 1853-1902*, Howard Hensman’s *Cecil Rhodes: a Study of a Career*, Philip Jourdan’s *Cecil Rhodes: His Private Life By His Private Secretary*, and Sir Thomas E. Fuller’s *The Right Honorable Cecil Rhodes: a Monograph and a Remembrance*, are of a type.<sup>6</sup> Each of these authors was an “intimate” of Cecil Rhodes and is essentially offering his personal views and experiences with him. Michell’s book, a two-volume work, was the first attempt at writing Rhodes’ life story from birth to death. Michell was conscious of his chauvinism and asked to be excused for it: “Personal affection on my part may unconsciously sway my judgment of the only great man with whom I have lived on terms of intimacy, but whatever the shortcomings of his Biographer, I am confident that posterity will not fail to appreciate the genius and essential worth of one of the greatest Englishmen of the Victorian era.”<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, Michell’s *Life* is the primary source—in the sense of being the first source—for Rhodes scholarship, and a primary source in its own right for the views of Michell on his friend Rhodes.

Hensman’s *Study of a Career* is chronologically the first book written about Rhodes, other than Vindex’s *Speeches*. *Study of a Career* has a publication date of 1902, makes no mention of Rhodes’ death and has a preface dated November, 1901, suggesting that Rhodes was still alive when Hensman wrote. Rather than a birth-to-death life history, Hensman’s book is truly a study of the “methods and character of one who . . . plays an important part in the history of the British Empire.”<sup>8</sup> *Study of a Career* is reminiscent of the sort of book one might find about the business success of Ted Turner or Donald Trump.

Jourdan’s *Private Life* is an exception to the rule that no man is a hero to his valet; Rhodes was a hero to Jourdan. In the introduction, Jourdan wrote that he “felt it a duty to my late chief to spare no effort which would in any

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 279-80.

<sup>6</sup>Howard Hensman, *Cecil Rhodes: a Study of a Career* (New York, 1902); Philip Jourdan, *Cecil Rhodes: His Private Life By His Private Secretary* (London, 1909); Thomas E. Fuller, *The Right Honourable Cecil Rhodes: a Monograph and a Remembrance* (London, 1910).

<sup>7</sup>Michell, *Life*, 1:vii.

<sup>8</sup>Hensman, *Cecil Rhodes*, vii. Note that Hensman used the present tense.

way help to disabuse the public mind of the erroneous impressions which had gained currency concerning [Rhodes].”<sup>9</sup> Jourdan gives readers the best picture of all the authors of Rhodes the Man. He brings up interesting personal details such as Rhodes’ love of books and history.<sup>10</sup> However, his *Private Life* doesn’t go anywhere; rather it is a collection of private reminiscences and anecdotes, although an interesting and useful source document.

Fuller’s book, by the author’s own admission, does not make an attempt “to give any detailed account of Mr. Rhodes’ life from childhood upwards.”<sup>11</sup> Rather, Fuller wrote “a personal narrative of [Rhodes’] life and work, as they were associated with [Fuller’s].”<sup>12</sup> Although Fuller denies being Rhodes’ Boswell, this is exactly what he does.<sup>13</sup> Reading *Monograph and a Remembrance*, one gets the impression of a grandfather telling about his dead friend.<sup>14</sup>

Four other books of the personal reminiscence-type are Gordon LeSueur’s *Cecil Rhodes: the Man and His Work*; Vere Stent’s *A Personal Record of Some Incidents in the Life of Cecil Rhodes*; Sir Herbert Baker’s *Cecil Rhodes, By His Architect*; and James G. McDonald’s *Rhodes: a Life, and Rhodes: a Heritage*.<sup>15</sup> LeSueur, like Jourdan, was a private secretary to Rhodes, but unlike *His Private Life*, *Cecil Rhodes* is a birth-to-death life story, although the book is still full of personal reminiscences, and the dialogue was reconstructed from the author’s own memory. Stent’s *A Personal Record* concerns just one event in the conquest of Rhodesia, the Great Indaba, a meeting between Rhodes and the chiefs of the Ndebele in 1896.

Baker’s *Cecil Rhodes* has the distinction of being published in two editions, the first in 1934 and the second in 1938. Baker was Rhodes’ architect and his biography deals with Rhodes as a patron of the arts and shares Rhodes “philosophy of life and his thoughts on architecture, the sister arts and their relation to men and nature.”<sup>16</sup> There is no difference between the two editions other than a new preface that makes reference to “another memorial to Cecil Rhodes.”<sup>17</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Jourdan, *Cecil Rhodes*, 7.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>11</sup>Fuller, *Cecil Rhodes*, vii.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 1-3.

<sup>14</sup>Fuller was born in 1831 and died in 1910, the same year that *Monograph and a Remembrance* was published.

<sup>15</sup>Gordon Le Sueur, *Cecil Rhodes: the Man and His Work* (London, 1913); Vere Stent, *A Personal Record of Some Incidents in the Life of Cecil Rhodes* (Cape Town, 1925); Herbert Baker, *Cecil Rhodes, by His Architect* (London, 1934, 2d ed. Freeport, NY, 1938); J.G. McDonald, *Rhodes: a Life* (London, 1927); *idem.*, *Rhodes: a Heritage* (London, 1943).

<sup>16</sup>Baker, *Cecil Rhodes*, 8.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*/1938, xi.

James G. McDonald was moved to write two books about Rhodes. McDonald's earlier book, *Life*, is a birth-to-death life history told by a contemporary from yet another point of view. *Heritage* should be read as an addendum or postscript to *Life*. McDonald's "aim and purpose" for writing the second book was to "trace the results of Rhodes' work for humanity and especially for the British race."<sup>18</sup> McDonald died the same year *Heritage* was published; it was the last book written by one of Rhodes' close acquaintances.<sup>19</sup>

The chauvinism in these biographies is obvious. Baker, the architect, summed up the state of Rhodes' historiography as written by those who knew him:

Biographies, therefore, even those written by men who were most intimate with him, have not revealed all sides of his full and complex nature. Thus to Thomas Fuller, a retired Nonconformist Minister and Liberal politician, he was in the main a hero; to Lewis Michell the banker, financier and business man; to McDonald, his companion and agent in Rhodesia, pioneer and creator of a new civilization and the chieftain, feared and beloved, of the native races; to Jourdan, his devoted secretary, master and friend. To another spoilt secretary, LeSueur, with a valet mind, who served him only in his declining years, he was but little of a hero at all.<sup>20</sup>

These biographies are constantly cited by all subsequent scholars studying Rhodes. They are primary sources in their own right, but must be used with caution and balanced with information from archival and other materials.

## II

Because Rhodes was such an important figure in his day, he features prominently in the memoirs of contemporaries. These works provide a second opinion to the fawning chauvinism of works by Rhodes' friends. Not surprisingly, Paul Kruger, President of the South African Republic until 1902, offers a contrary view of Rhodes in his memoirs.<sup>21</sup> Kruger describes Rhodes as "one of the most unscrupulous characters that has ever existed" and "the curse of South Africa."<sup>22</sup> Sir Lionel Phillips, another contemporary, thought

<sup>18</sup>McDonald, *Heritage*, 7.

<sup>19</sup>Sir James Gordon McDonald died in 1943.

<sup>20</sup>Baker, *Cecil Rhodes*/1938, 5.

<sup>21</sup>Paul Kruger, *Memoirs of Paul Kruger* (New York, 1902).

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 192.

Rhodes “highly complex . . . cynical and contemptuous . . . blunt to rudeness,” and generally agrees with Kruger that Rhodes believed “the end justifies the means.”<sup>23</sup> Phillips believes that Rhodes’ “biographers have not done full justice to the originality of his mind, nor more than justice to his greatness and patriotism.”<sup>24</sup>

The first biography of Cecil Rhodes to be written by a stranger is Basil Williams’ *Cecil Rhodes*.<sup>25</sup> The book is not documented and is of limited utility because of that. According to Woodhouse, Williams had at least limited access to Rhodes’ personal papers, but for some reason did not make full use of them.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, John Flint wrote that “[Basil Williams’] notes for the work, preserved in Rhodes House, Oxford, demonstrate the careful and exhaustive research that went into it.”<sup>27</sup> This book, while not chauvinistic, is still very favorable to Rhodes.

After Williams’ *Cecil Rhodes*, many other biographies appeared. Among these are Sarah Gertrude Millin’s *Rhodes*, André Maurois’ *Cecil Rhodes*, and John Flint’s *Cecil Rhodes*.<sup>28</sup> Millin marks a shift away from chauvinistic treatment toward vilification, making the case that Rhodes was a social Darwinist.<sup>29</sup> André Maurois’ *Cecil Rhodes* was originally published in French. Inasmuch as nearly all biographies of Cecil Rhodes are written by Britons or (former) colonials, Maurois’ French perspective is refreshing. Further, Maurois provides a very brief history of Southern Africa to place Rhodes in context. Unfortunately, Maurois relies mostly on the work of Williams, McDonald, and Michell. Fortunately, he “made great use” of “numerous articles . . . published in French magazines between 1870 and 1900 on the discovery of diamond mines and on early life on Kimberley.”<sup>30</sup>

John Flint’s *Cecil Rhodes* is scholarly, yet concise. It has an excellent historiographical essay as a introduction, a superb bibliographical essay, and a chapter entitled, “Rhodes in the Twentieth Century.” This chapter more than any other similar chapter in any other book shows Rhodes’ continuing influence. According to Flint, Rhodes inspired both Marxists (including V.I. Lenin) and Nazis.<sup>31</sup>

The first biography of Rhodes to make extensive use of Rhodes’ personal papers was J.G. Lockhart and C.M. Woodhouse’s *Cecil Rhodes: the Colos-*

<sup>23</sup>Lionel Phillips, *Some Reminiscences* (London, n.d.), 141.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Basil Williams, *Cecil Rhodes* (London, 1921).

<sup>26</sup>Lockhart/Woodhouse, *Cecil Rhodes*, ix. Michell also had access to Rhodes’ papers.

<sup>27</sup>John Flint, *Cecil Rhodes* (Boston, 1974), 254.

<sup>28</sup>Sarah Gertrude Millin, *Rhodes* (London, 1952); André Maurois, *Cecil Rhodes*, trans. Rohan Wadham (London, 1953); Flint, *Cecil Rhodes*.

<sup>29</sup>Millin, *Rhodes*, 30-31.

<sup>30</sup>Maurois, *Cecil Rhodes*, 142.

<sup>31</sup>Flint, *Cecil Rhodes*, 228-29, 232-35.

sus of Southern Africa.<sup>32</sup> Alas, *Colossus of Southern Africa* offers no “startling revelations.”<sup>33</sup> Lockhart and Woodhouse suggest that their portrait of Rhodes is “a little sharper in focus and detail” and claim to find “rational motives for [Rhodes’] actions in place of the mystical vision or unscrupulous cynicism that have sometimes been used to explain everything.”<sup>34</sup> Although criticized by Flint for being “eulogistic” and being “weak in its assessment of Rhodes’ financial affairs and motivations, and mak[ing] very little use of British Colonial Office documents, which contain much evidence critical of Rhodes and his activities,” it is a solid piece of scholarship.<sup>35</sup>

Brian Roberts’ *Cecil Rhodes: Flawed Colossus* is the first biography of Rhodes published after the fall of Rhodesia and the founding of Zimbabwe.<sup>36</sup> Its subtitle is an obvious reference to the earlier book by Lockhart and Woodhouse. *Flawed Colossus* takes a more psycho-historical approach to Rhodes’ life than previous biographies did. Roberts presents Rhodes as a man “[w]ith his personality unresolved, [who] used the British Empire as an emotional outlet.”<sup>37</sup> Roberts views the death of Rhodes’ friend Neville Pickering in 1886 as a life-altering event. Roberts wrote:

Men approaching middle-age cannot change their personalities: they can only, at most, come to terms with life and so reveal their hidden or suppressed characteristics. But, for Rhodes, this process may well have been influenced by Pickering’s death.<sup>38</sup>

Roberts also discusses Rhodes’ alleged homosexuality and misogyny.<sup>39</sup> Roberts’ *Cecil Rhodes and the Princess* deals with these last two subjects.<sup>40</sup> The princess in this book’s title refers to Catherine Radziwill, a Russian-German princess who pursued a romantic relationship with Rhodes in 1899 so ardently that she would be considered a stalker by today’s standards. *Cecil Rhodes and the Princess* is the first book to explore Rhodes’ sexuality and his relationships with men and with women.

Anthony Thomas’s *Rhodes: the Race for Africa* is the latest word in the vilification camp of biographies.<sup>41</sup> Thomas is a South African journalist

<sup>32</sup>Lockhart/Woodhouse, *Rhodes*, 1.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Flint, *Cecil Rhodes*, 254.

<sup>36</sup>Brian Roberts, *Cecil Rhodes: Flawed Colossus* (New York, 1987).

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 27.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 122.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 203-06.

<sup>40</sup>Brian Roberts, *Cecil Rhodes and the Princess* (Philadelphia, 1969).

<sup>41</sup>Anthony Thomas, *Rhodes: the Race for Africa* (New York, 1996).

who was exiled during the last years of the apartheid regime and who dedicated *The Race for Africa* to Nelson Mandela. Thomas views Rhodes as a “giant, who towered above his contemporaries.”<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, Thomas believed that Rhodes “squandered a great opportunity,” and looked back on Rhodes’ career with “a sense of tragedy and loss.”<sup>43</sup>

The most comprehensive and scholarly biography of Rhodes to date is Robert I. Rotberg and Miles F. Shore’s *The Founder: Cecil Rhodes and the Pursuit of Power*.<sup>44</sup> *Pursuit of Power* is well-written and easily read, as well as exhaustively researched and well documented. The authors set their task to be writing “a biography of Rhodes adequate for historians of Africa or of imperialism and a biography in its own right.”<sup>45</sup> And they have succeeded. *Pursuit of Power* is a psychohistory written by a uniquely qualified team. Rotberg is a “historian and political analyst of Africa” and Shore a “professor of psychiatry, practicing psychoanalytic clinician, and public administrator.”<sup>46</sup> Rotberg wrote that “[t]he blending of two disciplines, two approaches to data, and two different styles of work, enhanced what has become *The Founder*.”<sup>47</sup> Rotberg and Shore used the library at Rhodes House, Oxford University, as had several biographers before them, notably Williams, and Lockhart and Woodhouse, but, in addition, Rotberg and Shore used the archives and records in the National Library of Scotland, the Scottish Record Office, the National Archives of Zimbabwe, South African archives, the South African Library, the University of Cape Town, the University of the Witwatersrand, and De Beers Consolidated, Ltd., among many others.<sup>48</sup>

Stuart Cloete’s *Against These Three: a Biography of Paul Kruger, Cecil Rhodes, and Lobengula Last King of the Matabele* is a parallel triple biography of these three men.<sup>49</sup> Cloete observed that each of them “represented a different culture, race, ethic, and ideal” and “no one of them could be reconciled with either of the other.”<sup>50</sup> He presents them as archetype of “three cultures—the ancient barbaric, the religious pioneer, and the modern industrial.”<sup>51</sup> Cloete’s view of Rhodes is one of vilification: “Modern Fascism

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 347.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 348-49.

<sup>44</sup>Rotberg/Shore, *Founder* (New York, 1988).

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., vii.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., ix.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., xi.

<sup>49</sup>Stuart Cloete, *Against These Three: a Biography of Paul Kruger, Cecil Rhodes, and Lobengula, Last King of the Matabele* (Boston, 1945).

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 4.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 5.

could, indeed, be said to have begun with Cecil Rhodes.”<sup>52</sup> Kruger and Lobengula are viewed much more favorably.<sup>53</sup>

### III

All of these biographies, whether chauvinistic-approval or utter-vilification, have much more in common than not. All of them document the life of Cecil John Rhodes and his place in British and African history. All of these biographers, except for Rotberg and Shore in *The Founder* and Roberts in *Flawed Colossus*, use an empiricist approach. All of these biographers have relied on more or less the same primary source documents, but have come to radically different conclusions.

Cecil John Rhodes was as integral a participant in southern African and British imperial history as George Washington or Abraham Lincoln are in their respective eras in United States history. Thus most histories of South Africa covering the last decades of the nineteenth century are contributions to the historiography of Cecil Rhodes. For example, J.L. McCracken’s *The Cape Parliament, 1854-1910*, is a history of the parliament of the Cape Colony as an institution.<sup>54</sup> However, Cecil Rhodes so dominated the parliament during his political career that Cape Parliament is in part a political history of Rhodes himself. It is particularly useful in understanding the alliance between Rhodes and Jan Hofmyer, leader of the Afrikaners; and the political machinations leading to the passage of legislation which disfranchised non-Europeans and laid the foundations for apartheid.<sup>55</sup>

The British South Africa Company was “the corporate extension of the drive and ambition of Cecil John Rhodes.” and the historiography of the Company must be included in the historiography of Rhodes.<sup>56</sup> Like the biographies of Rhodes himself, the histories of the British South Africa Company mirror the chauvinistic-approval and utter-vilification dichotomy. Hugh Marshall Hole’s *The Making of Rhodesia* describes Rhodes in one of his most successful and audacious schemes, the making of two colonies named for himself.<sup>57</sup> *Making of Rhodesia* was written in 1926, when imperialism was still a good thing, and is extremely chauvinistic. Nevertheless, it is valuable as a near-contemporary account of Rhodes’ activities north of the Limpopo.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 321, see also *ibid.*, 401-03.

<sup>53</sup>As to Kruger, see *ibid.*, 402.

<sup>54</sup>J.L. McCracken, *The Cape Parliament, 1854-1910* (Oxford, 1967).

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 62-120.

<sup>56</sup>John S. Galbraith, *Crown and Charter: the Early Years of the British South Africa Company* (Berkeley, 1974), ix.

<sup>57</sup>Hugh Marshall Hole, *The Making of Rhodesia* (London, 1926).



A better, more scholarly work is John S. Galbraith's *The Crown and the Charter: the Early Years of the British South Africa Company*.<sup>58</sup> *Crown and the Charter* "devote[s] considerable attention to Rhodes."<sup>59</sup> However, Galbraith also describes the "environment within which the company operated, the interrelationships between Rhodes and the London board, and the interplay between the company's directors and the imperial government."<sup>60</sup> *Crown and the Charter* is of the utter-vilification type; Galbraith views Rhodes as the principal villain, but also apportions plenty of blame to the British government and to Rhodes' London directors. This book has a much more extensive bibliography and footnotes than *Making of Rhodesia*.

Robert Blake's *A History of Rhodesia* published in 1978 is effectively a complete history of Rhodesia, inasmuch as Rhodesia became Zimbabwe in 1980.<sup>61</sup> Unlike the previous two examples, *History of Rhodesia* covers a period extending well beyond the life of Cecil Rhodes; nevertheless, the first 154 pages of this book discuss Rhodes within a larger context of European imperialism in Africa. Finally, Arthur Keppel-Jones's *Rhodes and Rhodesia: the White Conquest of Zimbabwe, 1884–1902* draws together the utter-vilification school of Rhodes scholarship and the history of Rhodesia/Zimbabwe.<sup>62</sup> As the subtitle suggests, Keppel-Jones uses a racial approach and sees nothing good about the foundation of Rhodesia. Nevertheless, the book is meticulously researched and well-documented. Keppel-Jones (sadly) admits that the sources upon which he relies are exclusively prepared by Europeans, and laments the lack of an African voice.<sup>63</sup> The book also includes a very useful glossary of African, Afrikaans, Dutch, and South African English terms, and of colonial place names with their modern counterparts.<sup>64</sup>

The approach used in these broader histories places Rhodes in historical context better than either the single subject biography or even in a parallel biography. These broader histories generally use a structural approach, and place Rhodes in the contexts in which he lived and worked.

#### IV

Barring the discovery of some previously unknown trove of documents, there probably are not any surprises to left to learn in the life of Cecil John

<sup>58</sup>Galbraith, *Crown and Charter*.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, x.

<sup>61</sup>Robert Blake, *A History of Rhodesia* (New York, 1978).

<sup>62</sup>Arthur Keppel-Jones, *Rhodes and Rhodesia: the White Conquest of Zimbabwe, 1884–1902* (Kingston, 1983).

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, 637–38.

Rhodes. Rotberg and Shore's *Founder* provides the definitive birth-to-death life story of Rhodes for our generation. Further work can still be done by scholars examining specific aspects of Rhodes' life, such as his financial dealings, in greater detail. Flint, for instance, suggests this would be a profitable area of research.<sup>65</sup> Approaches other than psychological could also be profitable to research. For example, a legal history of Rhodes and the British South Africa Company might yield insights into the development of legal institutions and structures in South Africa, Zimbabwe, and the British Empire generally.

Parallel biographies of Rhodes and some of his contemporaries, modeled after Choete's *Against These Three*, might yield insights into Rhodes' numerous interpersonal relationships. For example, a parallel biography of Rhodes and Leopold II of Belgium could disclose interesting similarities and differences between the two arch-imperialists' motives, means, and opportunities. Rhodes is associated with imperialism, the most destructive political movement of the nineteenth century and died just as the twentieth century was beginning; therefore a further exploration of Rhodes' influence on communism and fascism, as suggested by Cloete and Flint, might provide some insight into the two most destructive political movements of the twentieth century. It might also provide some insight into the political problems of twenty-first century Africa, especially Zimbabwe.

<sup>65</sup>Flint, *Cecil Rhodes*, 254.