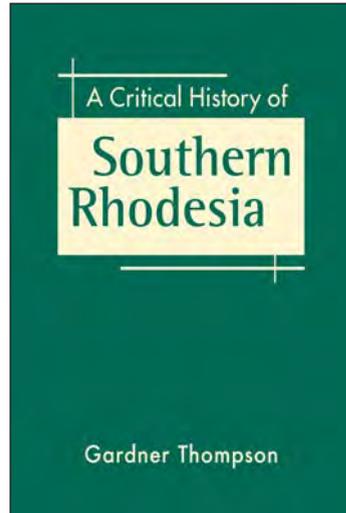


EXCERPTED FROM

A Critical History of Southern Rhodesia

Gardner Thompson

Copyright © 2024
ISBN: 978-1-68585-988-6 hc



LYNNE RIENNER PUBLISHERS

1800 30th Street, Suite 314
Boulder, CO 80301 USA
telephone 303.444.6684
fax 303.444.0824

This excerpt was downloaded from the
Lynne Rienner Publishers website
www.rienner.com

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	ix
1 Why a New History of Southern Rhodesia?	1
2 The Founding of Southern Rhodesia	9
3 The Settler Colony	17
4 Winds of Change	47
5 Liberal Dawn?	73
6 Turn to the Right	103
7 Cul-de-Sac	137
8 Legacy: Zimbabwe	169
9 Judging Empire	189
<i>Timeline</i>	221
<i>List of Acronyms</i>	223
<i>Sources</i>	225
<i>Index</i>	231
<i>About the Book</i>	245

1

Why a New History of Southern Rhodesia?

“THERE IS SOMETHING UNFORGETTABLE ABOUT A CAMP-FIRE at night under the clear, sparkling skies of Africa.” So wrote Judith Todd about her visit in 1964 to a barren, malaria-infested detention camp in Southern Rhodesia. This was Gonakudzingwa: “Where the banished ones sleep.” Her father, prime minister Garfield Todd, had lost power in 1958. The new premier, Ian Smith, had recently dispatched a number of dissident Africans to this remote place. Among them was Joshua Nkomo, former president of the banned African National Congress. There is perhaps no better picture than Todd’s of how, within half a dozen pivotal years, the Whites of this settler colony had taken a decisive fork in the road:

I thought as we sat there that night, how this place above all others illustrated the way in which the government mocks the values they use to justify the things they do to the people of Zimbabwe. The glowing fire picked out the faces of teachers and students, chiefs, scholars and businessmen, old men, young boys and women, evangelists and farmers—people who themselves represented the various facets of the Christian and the civilised standards Smith so endlessly talked about.”¹

* * *

This history of Southern Rhodesia is a response to three current interests in Britain and the United States.

Map 1.1 Southern Rhodesia (1890–1980)



Note: Southern Rhodesia in the context of modern Africa.

First, an understanding of the former colony’s history—especially the final two decades of reactionary White supremacist rule—throws light on the plight of twenty-first century Zimbabwe: on its spectacular descent “from breadbasket to basket-case”; on the personality and rule (up to 2017) of Robert Mugabe, widely demonized as an archetype of capricious postimperial African dictatorship (and of Emmerson Mnangagwa since then); and on the fate of Zimbabwe’s remaining White inhabitants, still regarded by many in Britain as “kith and kin.” Above all, this review of the country’s past shows how the strategic political/moral choice of direction made by the White settler regime in the late 1950s and early 1960s—to consolidate, rather than to dilute, a regime of racial domination—had consequences for subsequent generations in Zimbabwe. Rhodesia outlived other British African possessions by almost two decades of going it alone: years of political reaction which intensified racial division and led eventually to liberation war. As a result, this colonial impact was particularly damaging.

Second, recent years have seen renewed discussion of empire in general—sparked by events, campaigns, and arguments on both sides of

the Atlantic. Weighty evidence-based volumes have also contributed. Priyamvada Gopal's 2019 *Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent* and Nigel Biggar's 2023 *Colonialism: A Moral Reckoning* represent two competing, and incompatible, assessments. Discussion has been hindered by generalizations rendered suspect by the subject's very complexity. Yet, in his classic critique of belief in laws of history, Karl Popper implored us to recognize that "history is characterised by its interest in actual, singular, or specific events, rather than in laws and generalisations."²² What follows is indeed a study of singular and specific events—albeit a study that closes by offering a means of making value judgments on any period of the past.

This British colony covered an area of Central Africa that was half as large again as Great Britain, its notional imperial ruler, between 1890 and 1980 (later as simply Rhodesia). It was just one of the forty or so territories, diverse in size and character, that were defined and appropriated across Africa by European powers scrambling for raw materials and markets—and for strategic purposes, too—in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Here in Southern Rhodesia, we encounter full-blooded colonialism: a White settler colony, as distinct from a protectorate such as Uganda, where the British administered with a relative lightness of touch and where settlers were all but unknown. This case study offers material for further informed discussion of imperialism. For this reason, its primary focus is on the territory's Europeans: what they did, why they did it, and what were the consequences. This is not to imply that Africans were passive, let alone mere victims. Within the colonial framework, they were makers of their own choices and agents of their own destiny.

This was not slavery—that age had largely passed—but a history of Southern Rhodesia under White control can highlight relations between European rulers (never more than 5 percent of the population) and the Africans they ruled, as well as examine the extent to which attitudes and forms of racial interaction changed over time. Understandably, more academic attention has been paid to the African politics of this era (before and after 1980) than to the nature and lasting significance of ninety years of White minority rule. Forty years on, it is time for a fresh consideration of yesterday's men.

Third, this book proposes a framework for making fair judgments about the past, and past historical figures. I thus consider not only judgment by outcome—such as the impact of White rule on what followed—but also judgment by values. Chapter 9 provides a template for answering a general nagging question of our time, while concentrating on the

specific case of the Whites in Rhodesia: How may we, now, reasonably make moral judgments about colonialism—and colonists—then?

* * *

Two “great men” are most closely associated with the late nineteenth-century burst of British enterprise in Central Africa and the colony’s origins. David Livingstone, a medical missionary and explorer, died in 1873. Cecil Rhodes, an immensely wealthy businessman and political zealot, died in 1902. Yet these two may be regarded as the influential advocates of two lasting, contrasting, future roles for Europeans—and for race relations—in Southern Rhodesia. Livingstone’s vision arose from what he saw as the needs of Africans, while Rhodes’s vision was founded on the interests of his fellow Europeans. Livingstone was famed for the respect in which he held the Africans whom he came across, and for his regard for them as human beings of equal standing under God. He had explored the area some decades before Rhodes’s pioneer settlers arrived. On his travels, he came across the slave trade. He wrote of its horrors and argued that it could be ended only by a European presence. He advocated commerce, Christianity, and civilization. Rhodes, however, while subscribing to “the three C’s,” repeatedly professed the superiority of his own race and the benefit of others being ruled by Anglo-Saxons.

Personifying the spirits of their age, Rhodes and Livingstone had much in common. Neither person doubted that Africans would profit from British rule, and Rhodes no more questioned the benefits of “civilization” than Livingstone had done when he saw its absence firsthand. Even so, the first decades of the twentieth century may be viewed as a time when two traditions, those associated with Livingstone and with Rhodes, competed for mastery in Southern Rhodesia. Though this was a period of considerable consensus among Europeans in the colony regarding the acceptability of imperialism, there were some indications of the open disputation that was to come. Unsurprisingly, most of the first White colonists and later generations saw themselves as successors of Rhodes. Yet, there was always a minority of liberals moved by a more Livingstonian tradition.

In the transforming wake of World War II, these two strands came into sharper contrast and sustained a debate among Southern Rhodesia’s settler rulers. My focus will thus be on the 1950s. Large numbers of new White immigrants arrived from Britain and South Africa. Growing numbers of Africans found employment in the expanding White economy.

Many of these became politicized, partly in response to the creation of the Central African Federation (CAF) in 1953 as a superstructure for sustaining White rule across the region. In Southern Rhodesia, with imperialism coming under attack from many quarters and the Cold War dominating international relations, it became clear during the 1950s that the White minority had to make a choice—moral as much as political—as to the course they wanted to take. The settler society and state that had emerged over the previous half-century was beginning to look unsustainable. An emergent middle class of educated Africans, who were in part products of the White man's "civilizing" mission and were aroused by political developments elsewhere in Africa, asked more insistently than previously for their admission into the White man's world and the opportunity to share in its future as equals.

It is therefore natural to see the 1950s primarily as the decade of rising African nationalism. To be sure, rural as well as urban Africans did much to shape the debate among Whites and to influence its outcome. But to understand what happened, we must examine those in power in government and dynamics and arguments within the dominant White minority. The defining feature of Southern Rhodesia was White privilege; consequently, political dialogue regarding the future was dominated by issues of race. Settlers with conservative views were now challenged by liberal Europeans who acknowledged the African case and, to an extent, spoke on their behalf. The latter proposed a shift in political direction, in which the colony's Africans would gradually advance through the removal of social discrimination, and their leaders would become engaged in a multiracial political partnership. In short, one option was to suppress emergent African nationalism—to retain White racial supremacy—and the other was to respond to African aspirations, promote African advancement, and seek a multiracial future through dialogue and accommodation.

A range of contemporaries wrote analyses at the time or memoirs later, providing us with a rich seam of source material, including Southern Rhodesians, both European and African, and outsiders, mostly academics and journalists who observed the unfolding situation. This raises the question: Do we see a problematical situation more clearly from inside or outside? Conservative Rhodesians insisted throughout the period of White minority rule that only they could see things clearly, and that the views of outsiders were skewed by ignorance and prejudice. Expressing a then widely held view among Whites, Roy Welensky (second prime minister of the CAF) once admonished his critics, saying, "You must give us credit for knowing the African a little better than

people in London.”³ Rejecting that self-serving view, the academic Philip Mason, a visitor who knew the self-governing colony well, argued in 1958 that “no-one who has not made his home in a country can understand it; true, but it is also true that no-one can understand a country [which] he *has* made his home.”⁴ Surely Doris Lessing was right to value both perspectives, while putting more faith, in the end, in that of the experienced outsider. She wrote: “To understand a place like Rhodesia, it is no good looking coolly from the outside. You have to experience the paranoia, the adolescent sentimentality, the neurosis. Experience—*then* retreat into a cool look from outside.”⁵

Lessing brought a Marxist’s eye to her analysis of Southern Rhodesia. This approach to the study of history famously eschews value judgments, guided as it is by the fundamental view that human history unfolds according to laws pertaining to class struggle. To this extent, Marxist philosophy is amoral: people behave in the only ways open to them, given their class interests. This, however, is not a theoretical straitjacket for which non-Marxists have much sympathy, and it is most interesting to note that Lessing could not stop herself from breaking free of it. “I am bored with my own contradictions,” she wrote in 1957, adding:

If, as a Marxist, I say certain kinds of people are bound to behave in a certain kind of way, according to the type of society they live in, or what part of that society they are, then there should be nothing emotional about this; it is certainly no theme for moral indignation. One can and should be morally indignant about the form of society, but not about the behaviour of the people in it. Yet these comfort-loving, pleasure-satiated white settlers make me angry and disgusted. And the way the Africans are forced to live makes me angry and miserable because of the waste and stupidity of it.⁶

In the following chapters, sympathy will be detected with Lessing and the small band of Whites in Southern Rhodesia whose progressive standpoint in the 1950s reflected the nobler aspirations of that postwar generation. The historian Robert Blake declared a similar interest toward the end of his magisterial *History of Rhodesia*, which he completed in 1977 while the liberation war raged and the destiny of Rhodesia remained unknown. The concluding sentences, which display a nuanced tolerance of empire, deserve to be quoted at length:

Cecil Rhodes and his successors managed against all the odds to build up a flourishing colony in which the standard of living for Africans as well as Europeans improved out of all recognition. It is

sad that the multi-racialism which genuinely inspired some of the makers of Rhodesia should have ended in a bleak and seemingly irreconcilable confrontation between black and white—sad but not perhaps wholly surprising.⁷

However, even in the Rhodesian Front (RF) period, Blake could add: “Although Ian Smith has regularly won every European seat, a solid core of 20 to 25 per cent of the electorate has consistently voted against him. . . . Their hope of a multi-racial society is not likely to be realised, but their aim was neither foolish nor ignoble.” It would be the RF whose aims could be described as both foolish and ignoble. Blake concluded with a forecast:

The historian of Zimbabwe in the year 2000 will probably forget their existence or, if he remembers it, sneer at their political ineffectiveness. . . . It would be a pity, however, to disregard those who tried to soften the acerbity of conflict and to provide some bridge between the polarised extremes towards which race relations have been moving.⁸

But those relatively liberal Whites who recognized the legitimacy of African aspirations, and who proposed a progressively close political association in Southern Rhodesia of the European minority and African majority, will not be forgotten or sneered at here.

* * *

In the pages that follow, Chapter 2 examines Cecil Rhodes, the man who founded the colony and inspired many generations of settlers, though he died in 1902. This short portrait of Cecil Rhodes helps to contextualize the history of Southern Rhodesia that is the focus of this book.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the first half century or so of settler rule: how it was established, the nature of European society, the range of African responses, and the institutionalized segregation of the races.

Chapter 4 highlights changes in the global context brought about by World War II. It examines the changing postwar nature of Southern Rhodesian society, White and Black, and the significance for the colony of the 1953 establishment of the CAF.

Chapter 5 focuses on the premiership of Garfield Todd at a time of challenging developments in African society and deepening divisions among Europeans: a schism that led to the defeat of those who represented the Livingstonian tradition by those who considered themselves to represent the path of Rhodes.

Chapter 6 asks why, between 1958 and 1962 and continually thereafter, most Whites chose to continue racial discrimination and to limit African advancement; and how Ian Smith and the diehards of his RF illegally came to declare Rhodesia independent of Britain.

Chapter 7 moves beyond 1965, examining the rhetoric and realities of illegal RF rule following Rhodesia's Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI), the consolidation of White privilege within the colony, spasmodic searches for a settlement with Britain, and the gathering intensity of a liberation war. It concludes by weighing the factors that led to a conference of all interested parties at Lancaster House in London toward the end of 1979.

Chapter 8 assesses the consequences of that preceding settler rule for Zimbabwe from 1980 onward. The argument here is that while previous exercises elsewhere in decolonization had been problematical, the legacy in Zimbabwe was especially damaging. The RF years had harmed the country—if not beyond repair, then beyond the capacity of Robert Mugabe's successor government to make good.

Chapter 9 introduces a framework for making value judgments about people in the past. This is applied, primarily, to the generations of Whites who settled and governed Southern Rhodesia between 1890 and 1980—especially those in power in the 1960s and 1970s—though it also considers the reputation of Cecil Rhodes as its founder.

Notes

1. Todd, *Rhodesia*, 84.
2. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, 143.
3. Quoted in Keatley, *The Politics of Partnership*, 473.
4. Mason, *The Birth of a Dilemma*, 9. Italics in original.
5. Lessing, *Going Home*, 238. Italics added.
6. Lessing, *Going Home*, 129.
7. Blake, *A History of Rhodesia*, 411.
8. Blake, *A History of Rhodesia*, 411.