

## **Ian Mitchell's Empire-related BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS**

29 – *Cecil Rhodes*  
(22 December 2018)

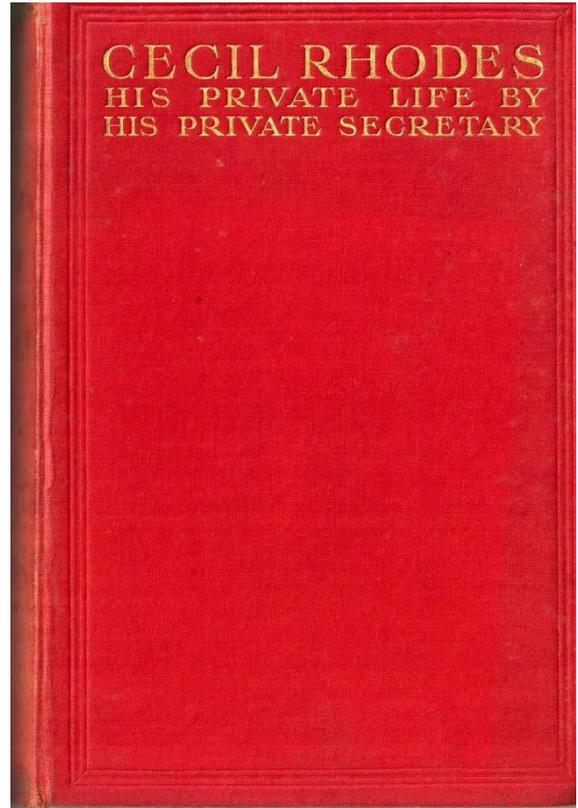
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### **CECIL RHODES – His Private Life by His Private Secretary**

**Author:** Philip Jourdan

**Publisher:** The Bodley Head & Maskew Miller, 1911  
(available on Amazon, [click on cover image for link](#))

**Descriptor:** The last seven years of Rhodes's life as seen by his dutiful secretary, who shared his master's love of Empire but without thinking it necessary to justify what was to both of them obvious.



**Rus&RoL relevance:** Stark illustration of the difference between an invading society organised largely on the basis of CONTRACT and a pre-existing one which depended entirely on STATUS.

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**Reason to read:** Cecil Rhodes is a much-maligned figure these days. This book reveals the positive face of the man, on a personal as well as a political level, by someone who admired him, and who was sympathetic to his general aim. That aim was essentially benevolent, given the wider social assumptions of his time. It was to expand the British Empire until it embraced so much of the world that it was the preponderant power, which would make large-scale war impossible. He wanted to draw both the United States and Germany into his scheme, which is why the Rhodes Scholarships—the world's first student exchange programme—were originally offered to Empire students only, but were expanded to include applicants from those two countries as well.

The “wider social assumptions of the time” included the idea that men like Rhodes could make a contractual agreement with “barbarous” peoples in order to make their countries safe for investment, capitalism and economic growth. “It was his great ambition to develop the resources of Rhodesia... [In London] he had to convince level-headed businessmen—the best in the world—of the possibilities of Rhodesia and that the expenditure of so much money [£10 million, in 1898—several billion today—for railway development alone] would be a sound investment. But Rhodes did it.” (p. 63) “Rhodesia was a new country and had to be placed on a self-supporting basis; it had to be populated [*sic*]; the revenue had to be balanced with the expenditure; a proper administration had to be organised; new laws had to be made.” (p. 65) This was imperialism by CONTRACT, rather than by the exercise of military aggression,

as happened in much of American, Australia, Central Asia, the Belgian Congo, etc., where the STATUS of the imperial power was buttressed by bloodshed.

Jourdan comments that Rhodes “was essentially an Imperialist in the widest and truest sense of the word, and he expounded Imperialism before the word was understood in the British Empire. At the present day [i.e. 1911] we are all proud to call ourselves Imperialists, but it was Rhodes who inspired the sentiment... In the eighties he practically went down on his knees to the British Government, begging them to annex Bechuanaland; and today we all praise him and honour his name for having added Rhodesia, a beautiful and most promising possession, to the British Empire.” (p. 213) Though the word “empire” is ancient, we tend to forget that “Imperialism” was a coinage of the 1880s.

***Main talking points:***

1. Rhodes took over what became Rhodesia by *negotiating* with the successor of Lobengula, who had fled after the Matabele War of 1893-4. Jourdan calls his uncrowned successor as chief “old Babiaan”—“bobbejaan” is Afrikaans for baboon—and describes how Rhodes waited patiently for him to come out of the “hiding place” to do business. This was the era of the “unequal treaties” in China, and Rhodes’s treaty with the Matabele was pretty unequal too. But it was not imposed by force, at least not beyond the fact that the Matabele had recently been comprehensively defeated in war. However, it was a lot less unequal than the settlement imposed on Germany at Versailles 25 years later. Rhodes could have ignored the vanquished tribe and simply moved into Matabeleland to start prospecting for gold and other minerals, but he preferred to rely on at least a form of CONTRACT. One reason for this was that he would have had to have paid for the war himself as “it was very unlikely that the Imperial Government would undertake operations against the Matabele on their own account, which meant that Rhodesia, the country which bore his name, and which was very dear to him, would be abandoned and would revert to barbarism again. He felt convinced that the only thing to do was to try to persuade the Matabele chiefs to come out of the hills to see him and induce them to come to terms.” (p. 36) “And so it came about that Babiaan, after having partaken freely of Mr Rhodes’s hospitality for about a fortnight and after having satisfied himself that he had nothing to fear readily consented to send a messenger to his indunas advising them to come out of their fastness to see the white men... After many weeks they had all been so see Mr Rhodes. Each chief usually stayed for a few days, then returned to talk over matter wss with his people. When in Mr Rhodes’s view the time was ripe a big Indaba was arranged at which all the chiefs were present. Several heads of cattle and sheep were killed for the occasions. Two or three meetings were held, and eventually peace was concluded. These meetings were intensely interesting.” (p. 38) Rhodes “sat day after day throughout the heat of the day talking to the chiefs and cracking jokes with them, until we were tired to death of the sight of them. But his patience and perseverance gained him the day... Mr Rhodes’s physical strength and powers of endurance were phenomenal at this time.” (pp. 40,1)
2. So what did Jourdan think “barbarism” amounted to? Some years later, after settlement of the country had begun, “Mr Rhodes decided to stay at Government House. This was built on the site where Lobengula, the last King of the Matabele, had his kraal, and within a few paces from the tree where the all-powerful monarch ordered those of his subjects who had incurred his

displeasure, and who, *in his opinion*, had deserved capital punishment, to be hanged. When the tree was first pointed out to me I could not help feeling cold shivers creeping down my back.” (p. 144, emphasis added) That was arbitrary justice, which British law was supposed not to be. The ability to kill anyone who, in your *opinion*, has displeased you is fundamental to the prestige necessary to remain on top of a society organised on the lines of pure STATUS. Rhodes’s aim was to eliminate routine violence and theft, and the price of that was an end to the traditional life of the Matabele. That depended, like its equivalent amongst the Highland clans in the period between the fall of the Lordship of the Isles and the imposition of civil reforms after Culloden, on the chief having the power of “pit and gallows” over all his followers. Both societies were organised almost exclusively for war. The entire adult male population was under arms to facilitate cattle reiving. That is a wasteful use of manpower. It reduces economic life to a question of forcible asset transfer. Production in Matabeleland was the responsibility of the women, who had to grow the mealies, milk the cows, etc. The potential for productivity growth in such a system were close to nil. The result was that the society was poor and technologically backward. It could not defend itself against invaders from richer, more advanced ones.

***Thought(s) provoked:*** The question that arises from this is what alternative there might have been. If Rhodes had not taken over Rhodesia, the Germans, Portuguese or Belgians, all of whom were expanding in sub-Saharan Africa at the time, would most likely have done so. Whatever Rhodes’s other sins, he committed nothing remotely comparable to the German genocide of the Hereros in South-West Africa—Hermann Goering’s father was the Governor there at the time—or the Belgians, whose polices in the Congo were arguably the most savage and racist of any colonial power anywhere, ever, Genghis Khan not excluded. The great Imperialist had his faults, but he was, at bottom a constructive individual who wanted to build an economy based on production rather than theft. The enormous numbers of Matabele who attended his funeral, quite voluntarily, at World’s View in the Matopos in 1902 suggests that many of his new subjects preferred his rule to that of their previous chiefs.

***Incidental interest:*** Much the most surprising part of the narrative, apart from the negotiations with the Matabele, is the story of how, when the Boer War broke out, Rhodes immediately left for Kimberly, which was the headquarters of his “cash cow”, De Beers Consolidated Diamond Mines. The town was soon besieged by the Boers and Rhodes’s active and inventive ways of devising means of defence, and of protecting the women and children by sending them to safety down the mines, reveals him as a very resourceful and physically courageous man.

Then there is the extraordinary story of the weird, vicious and malevolent **Princess Radziwill**. After separating from her drunken and violent Polish husband she emigrated to South African and tried first to befriend, then marry, then defraud, and finally destroy Cecil Rhodes, in a fit of pique at being spurned by him. Jourdan, as private secretary, was the gate-keeper who had to hold this vixen at bay over a period of years. She reappears continuously throughout this story, finally seeming to contribute to Rhodes’s untimely death, at 48 (in 1902), from a heart condition that he had suffered from since childhood (which was why he went out to Africa in the first place), but which she aggravated by forcing him into court to defend himself against her lies about him.

**Surprising points:** People, again:

1. In 1899, Rhodes went to Berlin to see **Kaiser Wilhelm II**. “One account gave that the Kaiser said he wished he had ‘a Rhodes’ as one of his subjects. This I quite believed. The Kaiser is a man of strong character, determination, and possessing an iron will, and when he met Rhodes he immediately realised that he was facing a great man with strong individuality, a man after his own heart, whose qualities he fully appreciated. Mr Rhodes was delighted with his interview with the Emperor, and he in turn expressed himself in terms of the highest admiration of the Kaiser.” (p. 70) This visit took place just six months before the outbreak of the Boer War. Jourdan was on holiday in Egypt with another of Rhodes’s staff at the time. “We both voted it the most interesting country we had ever visited.” (p. 69)
2. While shooting grouse at Rannoch Lodge in 1901, Rhodes’s party had a string of visitors, including **Winston Churchill**. Rhodes “was very much entertained by Mr Churchill’s ready wit and clever conversation, and he listened intently to his views on the political questions of the day. He admired his intellectual qualities which, together with his dash and ‘go’, he said must inevitably bring him to the front.” (p. 256) As this happened before Churchill had even got into parliament—and the account was written in 1910, long before he became a really major public figure—this seems to me significant.
3. One of Rhodes’s greatest friends was **Rudyard Kipling**. He built a house for him on the slopes of Table Mountain near his estate at Groote Schuur, which Kipling used frequently. “By this generous thought Mr Rhodes has indirectly benefited South Africa, as we have the advantage of having this distinguished author constantly with us.” (p. 193)

**Style:** Readable and personal, but occasionally a little sycophantic

**Publishing quality:** High, with many interesting photographs.

**Smile(s):** None: I don’t think Victorian private secretaries were accustomed to “chaffing”, though we are told Rhodes did a lot of that.

**Author:** So far as I am aware, Philp Jourdan’s name is one that has been lost to history. We learn only that he grew up in the Western Cape. He seems to have come from the old Cape Dutch community, which Rhodes, who had no interest in luxury, admired for its steadiness and austerity.



**Overall recommendation level:** HIGHER THAN YOU MIGHT EXPECT

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**About the reviewer:** Ian Mitchell is the author of four books, including [Isles of the West](#) and [The Justice Factory](#). He is writing a comparative study of Russian and Western constitutional history to be called *Russia and the Rule of Law*—hence the “Rus&RoL Relevance” section at the top. He can be contacted at: [ianbookrec@gmail.com](mailto:ianbookrec@gmail.com). For other reviews in this series, see [Ian Mitchell’s Book Recommendations](#).