

Interview Date:	07-08-2020	Interviewer:	Tom Crowley
Interviewee:	Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford	Organisation:	Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford
Position:	N/A		

Interview Between Tom Crowley (University of Cambridge) and Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford. 07-08-2020.

Tom Crowley 0:01

Okay, so we're recording now. So, this is Tom Crowley from University of Cambridge speaking to Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford on the seventh of August 2020. And I'm going to start with our first question, which is: could you tell us a little bit about the history and formation of your organisation?

Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford 0:28

So, the history starts with students at the University of Oxford, who'd formed a kind of pan-African discussion group just to talk about their experiences of being in Oxford. And I guess discussions about anti-Black racism on the campus very, very soon afterwards the Rhodes Must Fall campaign began at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. And that was what inspired the movement to begin in 2015 in Oxford, Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford. Yes, so it was 2015 it began with calls for the statue to be removed and the demands made on the University, All Souls College and Rhodes House, Rhodes Trust. And then yeah, I guess, after the listening exercise stopped at Oriel College, the movement kind of stopped and then was started up again after the statue of Colston was taken down in Bristol.

Tom Crowley 1:44

Thank you very much. So, the next question is: how has Black Lives Matter, movement and protests of this summer, influenced your plans going forward?

Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford 2:06

I think a lot of the influence of Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford, actually comes from Rhodes Must Fall in South Africa. I think that the Black Lives Matter movement was just that it provided an environment where Rhodes Must Fall could start again and receive the amount of support that it did. But I think going forward, Black Lives Matter and Rhodes Must Fall have quite similar goals. And something I would like to say is that if Black Lives Matter then Rhodes should fall, and then it's just, you know, the fight for the dignity and the preservation of Black lives, um, goes hand in hand with what kind of people are

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Transcribed by: Tom Crowley

Participant permissions to record given



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The Summer 2020 Debate on How Britain Commemorates Its Past



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celebrated in particular community's views. And so, I guess the influence lies in— just the call for Black lives to matter means that we need to take into consideration what Black people are exposed to and how their histories are erased by the kinds of monuments we put up or we preserve.

Tom Crowley 3:17

Great, thank you. Yes, the next question isn't really relevant. You've kind of covered it. So, yeah, question after it's the same kind of thing, but it's about the pulling down of the Colston statue in Bristol. How has that influenced your plans or how's that kind of influenced I guess your activism? How have you felt the experience of Colston coming down?

Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford 3:51

I mean, Colston coming down was a big push for the movement to be started again this year. So, it was until— I think it was about two or three days after the Colston statue came down that the protest was held. And so, it was immediately after that people started to organise for that to happen. And I guess it's just started a conversation around statues and commemorating people. That's been really helpful to the discussion in Oxford, and helped to kind of, I guess, garner lots of support and solidarity across the country. Yeah, although Oxford is very— I guess, quite a different context than the one in Bristol. So, um, yeah, I think a lot of the influence lies in being the push to get this started, to get the conversation going again, and to try and get the statue down.

Tom Crowley 5:05

Thanks very much. Um, yeah, so the next question is about the website Topple the Racists, which has had some influence in this country. Have you engaged that website at all? Or has that had any influence on your activities?

Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford 5:29

No, I don't recall us really— I think someone might have brought it to our attention, but I don't think we really engaged with it much. People have emailed us directly to talk about what kinds of actions that they're taking for whatever— renaming of schools, taking down of statues in the UK and in other countries like Canada. So, yeah, the website itself, we haven't really engaged much with, but in terms of other people seeking to take the same kind of action in different parts of the country, we've just had people directly reach out to us.

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Tom Crowley 6:13

Great, thank you. Um, and then this is the final question. And I guess the background to it is that, yeah, so it's the Cambridge Heritage Research Centre carrying out this research. So, you know, we do research and we're kind of interested in I guess, trying to do as effective and meaningful research as possible. So, if you guys could kind of commission research to help with your work, particularly in terms of the impact of the legacy of slavery and colonialism in the UK or particularly in the case of Oxford is there anything that you would be interested in commissioning research to investigate?

Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford 7:10

This isn't I mean, this isn't something we've spoken about. So, I don't know if I can answer as someone representing Rhodes Must Fall, um, I can answer in a personal capacity from my experience of being involved. But I don't know if that's what—

Tom Crowley 7:29

Well I mean people have been speaking in their— so previously I've introduced interviews by saying— the people haven't been anonymous— and saying, obviously, you're speaking in your professional capacity, but of course, that's also going to be influenced by your personal perspective. So, if you felt comfortable, you could say, "just as a member of Rhodes Must Fall" and then give your perspective.

Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford 7:55

Yeah, so I guess in my own personal perspective it would be— um, I guess, something that people don't know, and I don't know if we know the full extent of the kinds of histories that are represented in the cities and towns, etc. So, I think just the kind of research that I would want to know is what are these things really, and what's the history behind them. And of course, I think that whatever comes out of that research. If it turns out that it's, you know, all kind of proceeds from slavery, and that kind of history, that it should all be put in a museum for people to learn about. And also research the kind of details, the impact that these kinds of histories have had on Black and Minority Ethnic people. So, I know people have done this already, but, you know, stuff on reparations— Yeah, just the impacts of especially British history has had on people all over the world. And information about what's around us in the towns and cities that we live in.

Tom Crowley 9:30

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Great, thank you. Um, this question wasn't on the questions I sent you. It's just occurred to me, so, yeah, you don't have to answer it, but have you um— yeah, with Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford, do you have a plan for what would happen to the statue? Now that the College has agreed that it will come down or is it in the College's care still? Is your agenda just the fact that it is removed, or— its afterlife is kind of interesting as well I guess.

Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford 10:00

I think the College has not agreed for the statue to come down. And I suppose that's the kind of perspective that many people have, because that's how it was reported, but they haven't. And they've said that the Commission of Inquiry has kind of a full range of options about what should happen with the statue, which makes me think that it's staying. This is part of those options. But um, yeah, so we actually don't know whether it's going to come down. But yeah, well, I mean, we just want these things to be properly contextualised. And so, it depends on what people— I mean, I hope this is part of the Commission's investigation is to find out what people want to happen— I mean, the democratic choice and if that's people who say, we want it to be in this museum with the full details of who this person is and why the statue exists, yeah, that's fine. And there's also the plaque on King Edward Street that we feel should have kind of an added text that explains the history behind that. And then, of course, there's also all— I mean, the broad aim of the movement is decolonization. And that doesn't end with the statue. So, there is this discussion about curriculum as well, and some community issues which are very much linked to Black Lives Matter in the UK and Oxford specifically. Does that answer your question? Sorry.

Tom Crowley 11:38

Yes, very good answer. Thank you.

Yeah, sorry I'm slightly going off piste— So, yeah, so I guess some people are concerned that statues can kind of— the issue of statues can almost take the momentum out of a movement. And you talking about your wider decolonization agenda particularly within Oxford just brought that to mind. Do you think that's a risk? That the statue could somehow— that the issue over the statue could almost get in the way of your wider agenda?

Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford 12:26

I think they occurred when people try to reduce the movement down to it just being a statue. I think we've really tried to broaden the conversation. I think particularly in the sit ins and teach ins that we held over the summer, going around the University and talking about particular contested sites to show that it's not just the statue at Oriel College, but it's All Souls College and the statue of Codrington, but also the scholarship that they have, it's the Rhodes Trust. And it's about how many people— I mean, where the money comes from, and who they're giving that money to. And it's about— we went to *This interview was recorded for the project 'Recording Decisions and Actions connected with Claims for the Removal/Protection of Statues in UK Civic Spaces' carried out between June and September 2020 by the Cambridge Heritage Research Centre (CHRC) and funded by the University of Cambridge School of Humanities and Social Science, the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, the Vice Chancellor's Office and CHRC.*

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Magdalen College and spoke about the history of the land there and the fact that they bought that site on the graves of Jewish people who were persecuted. And at some point, we'd like to hold a symposium on decolonizing the curriculum. So we've, I think, made sure that what we speak about touches on many different things and not just the statue to emphasise that this isn't about just Cecil Rhodes but it's about pretty much the entire City of Oxford and what goes on in the community and in the University as well.

Tom Crowley 13:51

Yeah, that's a very interesting answer. Yeah, I won't say that much. Um, is there anything, while we're still recording, is there anything else that you think it's important to add for the record?

Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford 14:13

I don't think so. I think I just want to, I guess emphasise the history of the movement and its links to the South African movement and the fact that it was a movement that was started by Black women and Queer folk. Yeah, it's quite important because I feel like it's something that's missed quite a lot and contributes to the tradition of erasing histories and movements in the Global South. And so, while Black Lives Matter is an important part of the movement and I think it's important to acknowledge [recording interrupted].

Tom Crowley 16:06

Sorry. Um, yes. Was that everything that you wanted to add?

Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford 16:25

Yeah I think so.

Tom Crowley 16:25

Okay, I'll stop the recording now.

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