

Remembering Sir Howard Cooke

Former Governor General Sir Howard Felix Hanlan Cooke died Friday afternoon at the age of 98. Born on November 13, 1915, in the community of Goodwill in St James, Cooke was installed as Governor General of Jamaica at King's House on Thursday, August 1, 1991.

However, his work in the public sector started long before, from the days when Norman Manley's groundbreaking Jamaica Welfare took shape in 1937.

At the age of 21, Cooke, fresh out of a triumphal studentship at The Mico Teacher Training College, could not resist the call for self-sacrificing recruits to go into the Jamaican hinterland to give children the gift of learning. Cooke regarded Norman Washington Manley as a great mentor and considered it a privilege to share in Manley's vision of dedicated service in the bushes, to lift Jamaica out of the quagmire of colonial deprivation and into a future primarily of our own making. He told Laura Tanna in a December 2001 Gleaner interview: "The greatest inspiration came to me when I was closely related to Norman Manley ... His genius was in telling our people how to build communities. He made me feel that no nation can develop unless you develop the communities. He truly believed in an egalitarian approach to society... He was aware that at the end of the day there would be differences in production and where people would reach, but he felt that you should give everybody a chance." Cooke said, "I support the idea of getting children into school at the earliest time, and making sure that for a period, you provide serious education, teaching them not only how to read and write, but their responsibility in living." Howard Cooke was very comfortable with the motto of Jamaica Welfare, "We are out to build a new Jamaica with Christ as our pioneer." Declining offers to teach in the capital city, following a brief stint as teacher at his alma mater and at Mico Practising School, he participated, through Jamaica Welfare, in the establishment of community centres and community associations in Portland and St James. He was very proud of the fact that the education policy-makers of the day, on their inspection visits, were impressed by the teaching methods of himself and Edith Dalton James and sought to replicate those methods all over Jamaica. Versatile A prolific educator, Cooke was a teacher for 23 years; headmaster of Belle Castle All-Age School, Port Antonio Upper School and Montego Bay Boys' School; a prominent member and for some time, president of the Jamaica Union of Teachers (JUT). In addition to this, he was also school choirmaster, scout leader, captain of the county of Cornwall cricket team, and member of the football teams of Mico College, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), Portland and St James. In more recent years, he was secretary and local chairman of the St James Cultural Committee, a senior elder and lay preacher of the United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands. An engaging storyteller with a phenomenal memory and a vast collection of noteworthy stories, he was also a strong supporter of Jamaica's cultural heritage and served as a member of the Jamaica Cultural Development Commission (JCDC) and as a judge of JCDC Festival competitions. Cooke was also an insurance executive of Standard Life Insurance Company, Jamaica Mutual Life Insurance Company and ALICO. But most remarkable was his recruitment, representing the JUT, as the youngest member - at 22 - of the nascent People's National Party's (PNP) 21-member steering committee and the 7-member committee that drafted the Party's first constitution for its September 1938 launch. His distinguished constitutional committee colleagues at the time were Norman Manley, Chairman; O.T. Fairclough, Secretary; H.P. Jacobs; Noel Nethersole; Reverend O.G. Penso and W.G. McFarlane. Young Cooke served humbly, ardently, efficiently and loyally as a member of the PNP's National Executive, initially for two decades spanning such momentous events as the advent of universal adult suffrage, four parliamentary general elections, nationwide local government elections, constitutional advances to internal self-government and a national commitment to membership of a West Indies Federation. His first stellar moment came in the federal election on March 25, 1958, when - on the ticket of the PNP spawned West Indies Federal Labour Party (WIFLP) - he was elected as member of Parliament for the parish of St James Sir Howard & Lady Cooke It had been a very long time since Cooke persuaded fellow teacher Ivy Sylvia Lucille Tai to join him in his sacrificial social work in the late 1930s and in holy matrimony on July 22, 1939. The young couple produced two highly accomplished sons and an outstanding daughter, all benefiting greatly from exemplary family upbringing As Governor-General, Sir Howard Cooke climaxed his many honours and awards by being conferred with the Order of the Nation and Knight Grand Cross of the Most Distinguished Order of St Michael and St George and, later, Knight Grand Cross of the Royal Victorian Order. He and Lady Cooke transformed King's House into a home where the humblest Jamaican felt a sense of belonging. The Governor General and First Lady cultivated Jamaican fruits, vegetables and ground provisions and tended livestock on the land at King's House. With the work of their own hands and by the sweat of their brows, they fed their family, staff, guests and visitors. Already celebrated in the naming of Howard Cooke Boulevard and the thriving Howard Cooke Primary School, the former governor general was honoured further by the naming of the Montego Bay-based Howard Cooke Campus of the International University of the Caribbean, of which he was chancellor. Source: Jamaica Gleaner