



bservation

J Rowan Henry: What's in a name

By Barbara Arrindell

First a road. Now a building. We may never forget his name but do we know the man, John Rowan Henry?

In 1975, Tim Hector wrote, *"He was a star sportsman, a soldier, an officer, eminent lawyer, respected politician and unrivalled publisher. He was wealthy, but he did not have the bourgeoisie's insatiable greed for possessions and wealth. Nor did he have the West Indian middle class hunger for status and honorific positions."*

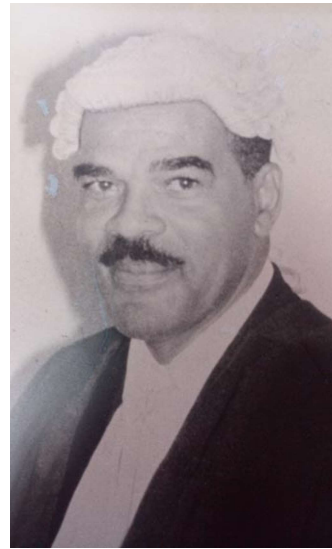
His only grandchild, Melany Henry, remembers her grandfather as someone who *"always praised more than he criticised, and wanted to encourage all Antiguan and Barbudans to a better life, hence his involvement not only in law, but in tourism, aviation, politics and journalism."*

Information on J Rowan Henry, the man, is hard to find online because the man has been overshadowed by the road that bears his name. But, who was he? What did he do? Why should we tell our children about him, and why is he slowly slipping from the consciousness of the nation?

For those who remember him, many start their story at the point where his life ended. They remember that he was murdered. His wife Gwendolyn Margetson

Henry was also killed perhaps moments or minutes before him. Hours later, a man who had worked as his gardener, walked into the St John's police station with a blood soaked cutlass in a Heineken box and confessed to killing Rowan Henry. It is said that he refused to speak about what he had done or why he had done it, ever again.

John Rowan Henry, born on October 22 1914, was the third of his mother's eight children. Samuel and Ethel raised their family on the corner of Long and Thames Street in St. John's. Theirs was a devout Methodist household. Rowan attended the St John's Boy School and then went on to become a pole vault champion at the Antigua Grammar School. When the Second World War broke out, Henry answered the call to serve King and Country, as part of the 37th Air Squadron of the Royal Air Force. He was a radio operator and gunner who rose to the rank of lieutenant, a great accomplishment for a black man from one of Britain's little colonies. The squadron was made up of almost exclusively Caribbean men and he was paired with Errol Barrow, who would later become Prime Minister of Barbados. Henry was part of missions that flew over North Africa, Italy and the Middle East.



The young war hero attended the Inns of Court in England. He then came home and was admitted to the Bar on the 7th June 1948, becoming the 85th lawyer to be allowed to practice here. Three years later on 1st December 1951, he purchased the two story property on Church Street which has recently been named in his honour. Upstairs he established Eaton Chambers. Some years later in 1956, the downstairs area became the printery for his newspaper *The Anvil*. Musgrave Edwards was the editor.

In the early 1950s, like many others interested in governance, he was affiliated with the Antigua Labour Party. That didn't work out very well and he would spend the next twenty years opposing the ALP until just before his death.

By the mid-1950s, J Rowan Henry had changed the face of politics in Antigua. At a time when no one dared oppose the VC Bird regime, Rowan dared to do so. He established the Antigua National Party and contested the elections under that banner, winning 12.5% of the popular vote, but not securing a single seat. The party disbanded shortly after their defeat and Rowan advanced some of his other

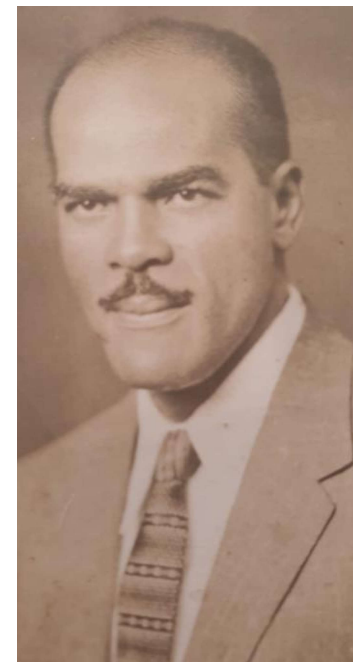
interests.

He petitioned the Royal Navy on behalf of a newly formed group that was working towards the redevelopment of the Naval Dockyard at English Harbour. He was demanding that the British support the restoration project.

He had a vision for tourism development and established a hotel on the Runaway Bay stretch and owned the Antigua Sugar Mill Hotel.

But party politics and journalism called to him again. In 1968 he bought the established but foreign-owned Antigua Star Newspaper. Although Henry contributed articles, he welcomed all ideas and gave the Walter-led Progressive Labour Movement (PLM) open access to the paper, even though he made it clear that he did not agree with their philosophy. Unable to endorse or support either the ruling ALP or the newly-formed PLM, Henry formed The Antigua People's Party. He contested the St John's City East seat and lost again.

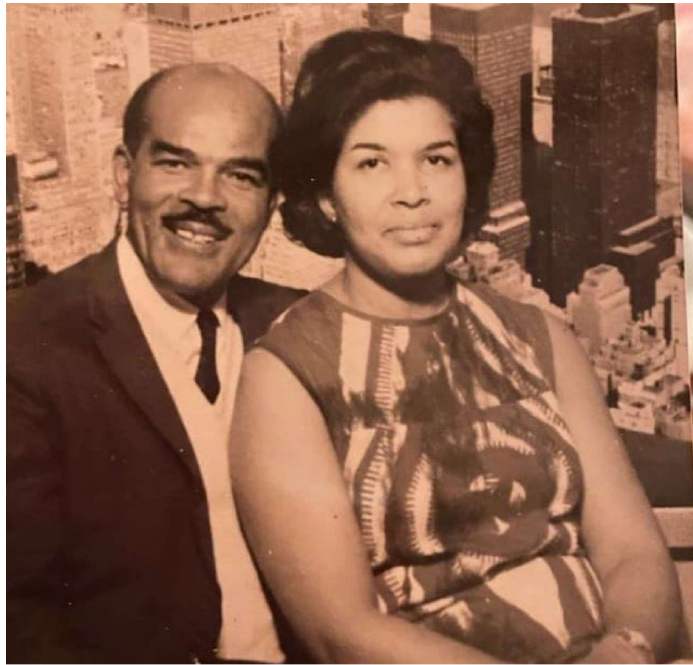
J Rowan Henry was one of the founders of The Antigua Printing and Publishing (APP) Company which



was established in 1971. APP produced yet another of his newspapers, the Antigua Times. Bridgette Harris was the editor of that paper. That same year, the government of the day amended the Newspaper Registration Act and Rowan Henry filed a case against the Attorney General, stating that the amendments deprived citizens of their constitutional right to freedom of expression. The Newspaper Registration (Amendment) Act No. 8 of 1971 stated that no person should publish or cause to publish a newspaper in Antigua unless a licence was first obtained from the Cabinet. Gerald Watt served as the Attorney General for the PLM administration during that period. The case made its way through the local court system and ended up at the Privy Council.

On the morning of June 25 1975, approximately one month after the Privy Council decision was handed down, John Rowan Henry QC was dead. His wife Gwendolyn had been hacked to death minutes before him.

Forty-eight years later, his niece Louise Henry, still remembers the first phone call from the police asking if she knew where her uncle was. She remembers the second call telling her that she needed to come to his home. She remembers stopping at Jardine's Court first. *"If they were trying to find Uncle Rowan, I was sure that he was at Jardine's court chatting and laughing with friends. I was going to tell him to come with me as there was something going on at his house."* She remembers arriving at the scene. She remembers looking up and seeing her toddler-aged cousins at the window with their grandmother. She remembers Keith Edwards' horse and



buggy transporting both caskets, side by side, from Straffie's Funeral Home. She can still hear the wailing of the people who lined Long Street. She remembers the fourteen men who lifted the caskets from Long Street, the street where he grew up, into the Cathedral of St John the Divine. Her uncle, always laughing, always ready to

share a humorous moment; her uncle who always had time for his nieces and nephews when they arrived uninvited to his office, and who never spoke to them as though they were children, even when they were, was gone.

She remembers the speedy trial of the man who had confessed. She remem-

bers the whispers and the doubts and eventually the near silence that lasted for years.

What really happened, and why?

"Those were strange times in Antigua," said someone who all these years later would prefer not to go on record. *"You couldn't convince most Antiguan's that there wasn't more to this horrific murder than was known."*

J Rowan Henry spent almost 61 years on earth and devoted most of it to the development of this nation. At the time of his death, he left behind three sons, Ronald, Jonathan and Gregory, and a granddaughter Melany. Melany now has two daughters. Together, Melany, Ava and Zara remain, as what family members believe would have been seen by Rowan, the man, as his most treasured legacy.

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