

STENNETT, ENRICO ALPHONSO (Henry, Ricky) (1926 - 2011), race relations activist, businessman, dancer

Name: Enrico Alphonso Stennett
Date of birth: 1926
Date of death: 2011
Spouse: Margaret Stennett (née Stone)
Spouse: Mary Ann Stennett (née Knowles)
Child: Robert Anthony Stennett
Child: Paul Raymond Stennett
Parent: Lilian Stennett
Gender: Male
Occupation: race relations activist, businessman, dancer
Area of activity: Politics, Government and Political Movements; Business and Industry; Performing Arts
Author: Audrey West

Enrico Stennett was born on 9 October 1926 in Mount Carey, near Montego Bay, Jamaica. His white Jamaican mother Lilian Stennett was rejected by most of her Jamaican plantation-holding family for having children with black Jamaican fathers. Family records and narratives are uncertain, but extracted from autobiographical details and Jamaican National Archives, Enrico appears to be the last of her seven children: Daphne May Stennett (1914-1915); Percival Joseph Stennett (b. 1919); Rupert Wesley Stennett (b. 1922); Carlton (black Jamaican father Carlton Gordon); Louise Mercedes Stennett (b. 1923); May Stennett (b. 1925). However, Enrico also mentions a younger brother Ronald in his autobiography. Enrico's father died before his son was born, and is unnamed on his birth certificate. Enrico dedicates his autobiography to his Aunt Rose (Crockett), who showed him love and care after his mother abandoned him to other relatives at six months old. The family setting signals Enrico's conflict of heritage. He was socialized to identify as white and superior to 'coloured people' in Jamaica, although he experienced onslaughts from both sides for being 'mixed race'.

Stennett arrived in the UK in 1947 as a stowaway on the *Empire Windrush* before her larger group of legitimate passengers in 1948. He planned to train as a lawyer. Stennett considered the UK his family's legacy and was shocked at the physical devastation of post-war Britain. He was even more surprised to find he was marginalised as a 'coloured' man in the UK, after knowing the privileges of 'high brown' status in Jamaica. His experience of the two-edged sword of racism in Jamaica and the UK fired his passion to eradicate that disease at home and internationally. He recognised his African identity and swiftly joined the League for Coloured People, the Coloured Workers' Association of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, trade unions and the labour movement.

Throughout his career, Stennett specialised in the fields of education, law, and criminal justice. He was educated to high standards in various Jamaican private and state schools and expected to advance his education in the UK. Ever a pragmatist, he studied building and cabinet making at Shoreditch Technical College soon after arrival in the UK when he found casual work in that profession. Alongside his political activism, Enrico was also an entrepreneur. His various interests included establishing boarding houses for new migrants and setting up restaurants based on his professional expertise in the building trade. He was a member of trade unions for these professions.

Enrico Stennett and Margaret Stone (1923-1972) married in 1950 and finally divorced in 1960, due to his neglect of the family. They had two children: Robert Anthony and Paul Raymond.

In 1950, along with wife Margaret and Jewish friend Stanley Freeman, he founded the Cosmopolitan Social Society to provide social, housing, and legal support for Africans and West Indians newly arrived in the UK. The following year, together with colleagues Mr E. Brewer and Mr W. Longmore who both gained senior positions in independent Ghana and Nigeria, Stennett set up the African League, a social and political organisation to promote better work, life and independence status for West Indians and Africans in Britain and internationally.

Shaken by the racially motivated murder of the Antiguan carpenter Kelso Cochrane in Notting Hill in 1959, Stennett spoke daily for ten years at Hyde Park Speaker's Corner to ensure that the public heard of the experiences of Black people in the UK and further afield. Within historical and contemporary contexts, he presented social, political and ethical issues, including anti-colonial practice, anti-racism, liberation and independence for African colonies. He only stopped the regular soap box practice after he set up the monthly *African Voice*, known as the first printed UK-based Black newspaper, that continued until Claudia Jones started the more widely circulated *West Indian World* newspaper. He was chairman of the Somali Movement in the East End of London, also publishing the *Somali Voice*. He was a member of the Campaign against Racial Discrimination (forerunner to the Commission for Racial Equality).

Stennett lived and worked across the UK: in London and the Southeast, the West Midlands and Wales. His political interventions included representing and supporting young black people against police and state harassment. After his retirement he founded the National Confederation of African and Caribbean Organisations, based in the West Midlands. Stennett won awards for his outstanding work in community relations, including a Millennium Award.

In 1986 the BBC presented the short documentary *Mr Magic Feet* about Enrico Stennett. He had gained fame in some UK cities and suburbs for sharing his enjoyment and expertise in ballroom and jive dancing. Enrico found an ideal partner in Mary Ann Knowles, (1953-2018) also light-footed on the dance floor. They married in 1974, two years after his first wife's death.

In 1995 Enrico and Mary moved to north Wales away from the stress arising from assaults and abuse he suffered from his race equality work in Wolverhampton. They initially set up a hotel business which eventually failed. In 2006 they sold their Welsh home and relocated to Jamaica. Three years later, their experience of relentless marginalization and exploitation forced them to leave Jamaica, and they returned to live in Penmaenmawr, Gwynedd, where the landscape reminded Enrico of Jamaica. He continued his race relations campaigning work there with the North Wales Race Equality Network. Enrico Stennett died on 7 July 2011 following a long battle with kidney disease, and was buried at Llanrhos Lawn Cemetery, Llandudno.

Stennett did not agree with the concept of racial differences, or the language that accompanied these. He preferred to reference a person's permanent place of residence for their identity. Both his wives were 'White British.' In the 2001 Census, Stennett described his ethnic identity as 'Citizen of the United Kingdom.' He defended this saying that 'Citizen is a powerful term to be understood in the context of "subject of the crown"' and went on to elaborate what this status conferred. Although he worked closely with the race relations industry, Stennett was also highly critical of its structure. He felt that it usually reinforced hierarchies of officers within it rather than help the communities they were supposed to serve, thereby perpetuating racism.

In his autobiography *Buckra Massa Pickney*, Stennett documents his personal and collective experience of damaging and complex racial hierarchies within Jamaica and the UK following transatlantic enslavement and colonialism, along with his resolve to combat this oppression at local and global levels. His campaigning voice achieved successes despite persistent adversity. In 2018 he was celebrated as one of Race Council Cymru's 100 Icons of Black Wales.

Author

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