Recognizing Saint Lucia’s Conservation Heroes

“The narrow eyes of spirit-illiterate men, squinted almost shut from scrutinizing watermarks on dollar bills have never read what Earth wrote here. This island, 238 pages of illuminated manuscript was written in a language they have never learned.” These are the passionate words of poet and educator, Kendal Hippolyte from his recent work, Island Poem an ode, to conscious, conservation-focused development of Saint Lucia’s heritage and patrimony, which he recited at a recent tribute by the Saint Lucia National Trust to Sir Julian R Hunte, and one of its most long-standing members and well-known historian, Dr Gregor Williams.

These words were indeed fitting as they reflect a refrain echoing around Saint Lucia of the need to celebrate our own; our history; our culture; our heroes. In this spirit, the Saint Lucia National Trust celebrated Earth Day 2022 with a break from the traditional Sòlèy Lévé and Sòlèy Kouché gatherings, instead opting for a small but powerful plaque unveiling ceremony to honour these two men.

Director of the Trust, Mrs. Jeannine Compton-Antoine, in her opening remarks, recounting how the Trust came into being, quoted from a letter Sir Julian wrote in 1973, to the then Premier of Saint Lucia, John Compton. He was expressing disappointment that the Parliament hadn’t passed the National Trust Act. It reads, “I have no doubt that as Premier you are very interested in this matter and could therefore ask you to please ensure that the Saint Lucia National Trust is brought into being. The members of the Steering Committee and I pledge our continued support and cooperation in bringing this matter to successful conclusion.” Mrs. Compton-Antoine continued, “And we are here today and we see the successful conclusion; the National Trust Act was enacted in 1975 through the persistence of persons like Julian Hunte.”

Sir Julian recounted to the gathering that the formation of the Trust was galvanised by the imminent plans for Pigeon Island and the Causeway to become a place where luxury homes would be built. But he, together with the late Robert Devaux, convinced Premier Compton that the nation’s patrimony should not be discarded in the name of development, stating, “What is development if everything that you stand for, or that you should stand for, just disappears into the unknown?”

To the nation’s enduring benefit, Premier Compton acceded to this call and set up the National Trust steering committee in 1970. This Committee worked assiduously to ensure the formation of the Saint Lucia National Trust a few years later, in 1975.
Sir Julian became the Trust’s first Chairperson, serving for 16 years, guiding the organization in these formative years as it set out to carry out the immense task of ensuring the conservation of our natural and historic places. Sir Julian is, of course, much better known for his role in politics, but few know of his contribution to the nation, through the Saint Lucia Archaeological and Historical Society and the Saint Lucia National Trust—one that ensures future generations’ rights and enjoyment of the island’s natural and historic heritage.

Dr Gregor Williams, the second honouree of the 2022 Earth Day celebrations, following in the footsteps of Sir Julian, also served for many years as Chairperson of the Trust and often represented the interests of the Trust’s sister organization, the Saint Lucia Archaeological and Historical Society. But beyond those official roles, he inspired and educated members, staff and council alike, to learn—and tell—the lesser-known stories of our history; those that told of the ancestors of today’s Saint Lucians, who fought fiercely for the island and for freedom. Dr Williams fought many a modern battle to establish practices and policies that recognized Saint Lucia’s heritage as valuable and foundational to Saint Lucia’s national development.

Both these esteemed gentlemen have played a critical role in the preservation of our culture, history and natural heritage and have continued to advocate for the teaching of Saint Lucian history in schools. The have both lamented that Saint Lucia does not have national museum and expressed hope that the leaders of today will hear their call and ensure that, in the not-too-distant future, a national museum could be established in Saint Lucia where historical collections could be displayed to inspire and educate all.

Hon. Kenson Casimir, Parliamentary Representative for Gros Islet, also addressed the gathering, recounting his own experience growing up knowing both honourees, but noting that he had not been aware of the work they both did in this regard. He commended the Trust for taking the initiative to start to share the histories of those who have contributed to the island and confirmed to all present, “that this government is committed to the cause of the Saint Lucian National Trust. I sit with a group of men and women that understand what the Saint Lucia National Trust means to Saint Lucia.”

The Saint Lucia National Trust will continue this celebration and each Earth Day, will now include the commemoration of one or two of these unsung heroes, to create what will become a wall of conservation heroes of Saint Lucia. The team is working to gather broader profiles on the work of these heroes, within the Trust and beyond, to ensure current and future generations can benefit from knowing and understanding the work that has gone into ensuring Saint Lucia’s heritage and patrimony are valued and conserved for the benefit of all.

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