

Biography of Dame Mary Eugenia Charles, DBE

By Gabriel Christian (DAAS)

Dame Mary Eugenia Charles, DBE was born on 15 May 1919 in the village of Pointe Michel, Parish of St. Luke, on the then British colony of Dominica.

Family Life

Her father was John Baptiste "JB" Charles a prominent local planter who specialized in the growing of limes and the export of raw limes and lime oil to the US and UK. Her mother Josephine Charles nee Delauney was a home maker, who also ran the family grocery in Roseau and managed a bakery in Pointe Michel. She was the last of four children. Two brothers Rennie and Lawrence studied medicine at Edinburgh University Scotland, and became medical doctors. During their early childhood Eugenia Charles claimed that they were all made to read *Up from Slavery* by notable African American educator and thinker, Booker T. Washington. She claimed that her father had corresponded with Booker T. Washington and noted African American scientist Dr. George Washington Carver who, as an innovative agriculture scientist devised a multiplicity of uses for the peanut. JB Charles was so taken with the work of Dr. Carver at Tuskegee Institute that he enrolled his oldest son Rennie there upon his completion of elementary school. After Rennie completed studies at Tuskegee, JB Charles sent him on to Morehouse College, Atlanta, Georgia, prior to enrolling him at the University Of Edinburgh School Of Medicine. Eugenia Charles recalls that her father insisted that Rennie send his old college text books to Dominica so that the rest of the family could study them. The Charles family belonged to the Roman Catholic Church and did much to donate funds toward the maintenance the Roman Catholic Cathedral. Her older sister, Jane, resisted her father's wishes that she also become a professional and instead taught as pre-initiate nun at the Roseau Convent High School and then entered convent in France to become a nun. She died of pneumonia in England in 1937 and is buried in Norwood, England.

JB Charles: Dame's Charles Father as Role Model

While Charles was part of what was considered the colored elite, her father JB Charles was a proud – but discrete – Pan Africanist and openly agitated for dominion status for the West Indies as an antidote to the tyranny of Crown Colony rule. Crown Colony rule was direct rule from London which gave little respect to the political rights, or economic disabilities of the inhabitants of the colony, with the Governor or Administrator ruling via a legislature dominated by his appointees. At that time the British colonies with dominion status were all majority white, such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand and accorded more political autonomy within the British Empire. To that end Eugenia Charles' father allied with distinguished local attorney Cecil A. Rawle and agitated for representative government under the slogan "No Taxation without Representation." JB Charles eventually and Rawle eventually won more rights for locals to be represented in Dominica's legislative council and JB Charles became a member of the legislature in the late 1920s. During that time Eugenia Charles recalls attending meetings with her father of the Universal Negro Improvement Association led by

Marcus Garvey. She related that her father was a discrete supporter of the UNI A and paid expenses for Garvey to visit Dominica in the 1930s. JB Charles also donated money to Ethiopia's fight against the Italian invasion of that country in 1935. One of Marcus Garvey's most prominent organizers for the UNI A in the Caribbean at that time was JB Charles' ally J.R. Ralph Casimir. Casimir, Rawle and JB Charles were organizers of the 1932 Dominica Conference, sometimes called the "West Indian Conference" which first proposed a federation of the British West Indies. West Indian political greats such as Captain Arthur Cipriani of Trinidad and T. A. Marryshow of Grenada attended that meeting. In 1940 JB Charles opened the first bank started by a local: The Dominica Cooperative Bank – or Penny Bank – to inculcate the principles of thrift and wise investment to the masses of Dominicans. He later was an invited guest at both the independence celebrations of Ghana and Nigeria. Mary Eugenia Charles was the child closest to her father and gives credit to him for most of her success in life.

Education & Professional Life

Eugenia attended the Convent High School, the island's only girls' secondary school, and became interested in law while working at the colonial magistrate's court. She attended the Grenada Convent under the tutelage of Mother Colomban and matriculated from there. During World War II she took a perilous journey by boat and air to attend the University of Toronto in Ontario, Canada before moving to the United Kingdom to attend the London School of Economics. While traveling through the United States she experienced the racial prejudice of the Jim Crow era firsthand; an experience which seared her memory for life. However, she resisted what she considered an idiotic policy and did not become racially embittered as a result of it. The more genteel nature of white society in Canada and the excellent treatment accorded her by her law school professors such as Bora Laskin and Jacob Finkelman left her with a balanced view on matters of racial prejudice and that not all whites were its purveyors. She was a member of the sorority Sigma Gamma Rho. She passed the bar in 1950, and returned to Dominica, where she became the island's first female lawyer, establishing a practice specializing in property law.

A Life in Politics

In 1968 after years of letter writing against what she saw as the mistakes of the Dominica Labour Party led by Edward Oliver LeBlanc, Mary Eugenia Charles was elected leader of the new Dominica Party (DFP). The DFP's early leaders included Phyllis Shand Allfrey who had been a founder of the Labour Party; Anthony Agar; Royal Air Force Pilot Officer and Black History scholar Edward Scobie (Darymple) and Elkin Henry. She was elected to the House of Assembly in 1970 and became Opposition Leader in 1975. She continued serving after Dominica gained full independence from British rule in 1978.

In 1979 Charles became a leading member of the Committee of National Salvation (CNS); a grouping of opposition groups and civic organizations, which sought the resignation of Prime Minister Patrick John after troops under his control, shot at demonstrators outside Parliament on May 29, 1979. It was the killing of demonstrator Phillip Timothy and the wounding of about a dozen others who had been peacefully agitating against passage of two bills, widely perceived as repressive, which led to the

downfall of Prime Minister John. An interim government led by the Dominica Labour Party leader Oliver J. Seraphine – which included two DFP members (Brian Alleyne and Charles Maynard) – was formed to steer the island to general elections in 1980. On August 29, 1979, the island was struck by Hurricane David; the strongest recorded storm in Caribbean history up to that time. Amidst much devastation on the island Mary Eugenia Charles immersed herself in relief efforts. Her DFP swept the 1980 elections, the party's first electoral victory. She additionally served as Dominica's Foreign Minister from 1980 to 1990, and also served as chairperson of the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS).

In 1981 she faced two attempted coups d'état. That year Frederick Newton, commander of the Military of Dominica, organized an attack on the police headquarters in Roseau, resulting in the death of a police officer. Newton and five other soldiers were found guilty in the attack and sentenced to death in 1983. The five accomplices' sentences were later commuted to life in prison, and Newton was executed in 1986. Also in 1981, a group of Canadian and American mercenaries, mostly affiliated with white supremacist and Ku Klux Klan groups, planned a coup to restore former Prime Minister Patrick John to power. The attempt, which the conspirators codenamed Operation Red Dog, was thwarted by American federal agents in New Orleans, Louisiana, and was soon facetiously dubbed the "Bayou of Pigs" after the failed Bay of Pigs Invasion.

Charles became more widely known to the outside world for her role in the lead-up to the United States Invasion of Grenada. In the wake of the arrest and execution of Grenadian Prime Minister Maurice Bishop, Charles, then serving as chair of the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States, appealed to the United States, Jamaica, and Barbados for intervention. On the morning of October 25, 1983 she stood next to US president Ronald Reagan at the White House and announced the invasion to the world. To the end of her days she insisted that she acted to save further loss of life on Grenada and saw her actions as a rescue mission with American help. She denied being a puppet of the United States of America and always pointed to the fact that the Grenadians on the ground overwhelmingly supported her actions.

Charles and her party were considered conservative by Caribbean standards. However, many of her policies appeared centrist or even leftist by American standards; for instance she did support some social welfare programs. Other issues that were important to her were anti-corruption measures and individual freedom. For her uncompromising stance on this and other issues, she became known as the "Iron Lady of the Caribbean" (after the original "Iron Lady", Margaret Thatcher). Even her political detractors were complimentary of the fact that she was never accused of corruption in political office; nor did she exhibit any mark of ostentatious living. Her personal modesty and thrifty management of the island's resources became legendary over time and are fondly remembered. Public perception of her integrity in office remains, to this day, of the highest order.

Her popularity declined during her third term, and she announced her retirement in 1995. The DFP subsequently lost the 1995 elections. After retiring, she undertook speaking engagements in the United States and elsewhere, and became involved in former US President Jimmy Carter's Carter Center, which promotes human rights and

observes elections. She was awarded several honorary degrees by US based Universities and helped set up a Center for Women Studies at Harvard. While taking up studies and doing part-time lectures in international relations at the John Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), she was awarded the Order of the Caribbean Community by the Caribbean Community of Nations CARICOM.

Charles never married nor had children, which often made her the object of disrespectful political invective in what was a male-dominated society. In 1991 she was made a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire by Queen Elizabeth II. She was Dominica's first, and to date only, female prime minister. She was also the first female Prime Minister in the history of the Western hemisphere in her own right - and the first black female head of state in modern history.

On 30 August 2005, Charles was taken to a hospital in Fort-de-France, Martinique, for hip replacement surgery and died from a pulmonary embolism on 6 September, aged 86.