

# Tai, Aston George (1926–2019)

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## DYHANN BUDDOO-FLETCHER

Dyhann Buddoo-Fletcher, B.A. (Northern Caribbean University, Mandeville, Jamaica), is the administrative assistant to the president of the East Jamaica Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. She is actively involved in the communication department of the church in Jamaica and has written news stories published in local newspapers as well as various Adventist websites and periodicals.

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Aston George Tai was a noted Adventist businessman and philanthropist in Jamaica.

## Early Life

Aston George Tai's father, William Augustus Tai, migrated to St. Mary, Jamaica, from Canton, China,<sup>1</sup> after the abolition of slavery and during a time when Great Britain was encouraging the migration of Chinese to its Caribbean islands in order to build the economy with indentured laborers.<sup>2</sup> William Tai, however, was an independent laborer who worked as a shopkeeper. On a trip to Glengoffe, St. Catherine, he met Adella Dixon, a farmer, whom he married. Their son, Aston George Tai, was born on March 8, 1926. He was the third child of his mother and the sixth of his father's seven children.<sup>3</sup> His sister, Ivey Sylvia Lucille Tai, was the wife of the former Governor General of Jamaica, Sir Howard Cooke.<sup>4</sup>

## Education and Life Training

Aston Tai was raised by his mother and stepfather, David Anglin, in Glengoffe, where he attended the Glengoffe Primary School. At the age of 9, Tai was trained by his cousin's husband, Sam Lique, who nurtured him in the trade of shopkeeping. Shortly thereafter, his uncle Ernest Tai-Chung, invited him to stay with him. Here Tai continued to sharpen his business skills in his uncle's shop. It was noted that in order to make up for his height, Tai had to stand on a wooden crate to properly attend to customers over the counter. Tai's business knowledge caught the eye of Reverend Getfield's wife, another family friend who saw the need for Tai to widen his experience. She found him a job with the Lyn-ha-gun Brothers Wholesale Supermarket in a community called Maggoty located in the parish of St. Elizabeth, Jamaica. His quick wit and astute business skills landed Tai at the head office of the Lyn-ha-gun Brothers Wholesale Supermarket in Black River, St. Elizabeth, as a shopkeeper. He spent four years with them until, at the age of 23, he journeyed to Kingston to start a new life. He stayed with Mrs. Getfield's sister, Ms. Woung, while working at G. M. DaCosta Wholesale on Princess Street in downtown Kingston.<sup>5</sup>

## Marriage

In 1949, on an eventful trip to the famous Dunn's River Falls located in St. Ann, Jamaica, 23-year-old Tai met 18-year-old Novelette Henry. At the time, Novelette was in high school. She graduated from Kingsway High School and furthered her studies at Rupert Harriot's Strathmore Commercial School in Kingston. Following graduation, she was employed as a stenographer at Diamond Iron Works on Spanish Town Road, Kingston. In 1952, at the Birds Hill Seventh-day Adventist church in Clarendon, Aston and Novelette were married. They became the parents of four children: Carol, Beverley, Karlene, and Courtney.<sup>6</sup>

## Career Launch

In the mid-1950s, Aston and Novelette Tai, with their small savings, bought a grocery shop on West Road and White Street Corner in Trench Town, Kingston. Jamaica's young reggae king, Bob Marley, and his friends would stop to assist them with stocking goods; collect their buns, cheese, and box juices before continuing their journey into Trench Town. Though small, the little Tai board shop gave its neighboring larger and established supermarket much competition. The little grocery shop was constantly filled with customers, who at times had to poke their way through to be served. On Saturday nights, customers had to be pushed out before the Tais could lock the door. The Tais would return early on Sunday mornings. Though it was illegal to open a shop on a Sunday, the windows were kept open for fresh air and became another avenue for sales. Ivan, Novelette's brother who slept at the back of the shop, suffered much during the early morning disturbances. But, for the young couple, business was booming.<sup>7</sup>

## Business Growth

The profits from the shop were used to purchase a truck in 1957. Delivery fees proved difficult to collect, so Tai decided he would no longer be the middleman, but instead, he would go into the sawmill business. He purchased the trees from the bushing, cut it up at the sawmill, and would sell lumber directly to two local businesses: Evans on Spanish Town Road and Dukenney located on Hagley Park Road. They were the sole wooden crate manufacturers in Jamaica. Tai soon monopolized the wooden crate industry in Jamaica when he purchased first the Evans company and then the Dukenney along with three empty lots facing the Hagley Park Seventh-day Adventist church in Kingston. In addition, on Gretna Geen Road in Kingston, he purchased nine lots.

In 1976, Tai landed another deal when he purchased Jag Clarke Stationary Company, manufacturers of the Hummingbird exercise book in Jamaica. It is now called Jag Clarke Paper Company.<sup>8</sup>

## Baptism and Church Life

Though he regularly attended church with his wife, it was not until 1967 that Tai and his ten-year-old, son Courtney were baptized by A. D. Laing at the Hagley Park Seventh-day Adventist church. Tai was never anxious for a church position; however, he was a strong supporter of the church's welfare and community services. He

gave approximately thirty years of service as a member of the church board; the finance and planning committee, the building committee; Member of the Hagley Park Seventh-day Adventist Preparatory School Board Committee.

He was instrumental in the relocation and building of the Hagley Park Adventist church and the renovation of the Hagley Park Seventh-day Adventist Preparatory School, which he adopted.<sup>9</sup>

## Other Accomplishments

In 2005, Tai was commissioned a justice of the peace for St. Thomas and served on various boards including the Jamaica Chamber of Commerce, the National Religious Media Commission (Love 101), the West Indies Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, the Andrews Memorial Hospital, the Master Printers Association, and the Yallahs Community Development Committee.

For his successful work as an entrepreneur, philanthropist, and businessman, in 1998 Tai was awarded the Badge of Honour for Meritorious Service from the Government of Jamaica.

Tai's philanthropic activities included, but were not limited to, significant donations to institutions through the Tai Wing of the Andrews Memorial Hospital and the Aston and Novelette Tai Business and Skills Centre at Northern Caribbean University (NCU) in Mandeville, which houses the NCU-owned Hilltop Hotel, a supermarket, a restaurant, a copy center, and the NCU bookshop. Central Jamaica Conference, Camp Verley; the Portmore Seventh-day Adventist Church; Hagley Park Seventh-day Adventist Church and Preparatory School; the Kingsway high and the Yallahs United Football Club.

Besides his contributions to institutions, Tai and his wife supported hundreds of students from elementary to tertiary level who could not have made it through school without their help from the elementary to the tertiary level.

On August 14, 2005, Tai and his wife were conferred with honorary Doctor of Laws degrees during the university's graduation service for their support to the institution and Jamaica.<sup>10</sup>

Tai, passed away on Saturday, April 20, 2019, in Weston, Florida, after a protracted illness. He was 93.

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### SOURCES

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## NOTES

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3. Novelette Tai, interview by author.
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9. Juliet Scott, former Principal of Hagley Park Seventh-day Adventist Preparatory School, interview by author.
10. Nigel Coke, "Adventists Mourns the Passing of Aston Tai," *Jamaica Gleaner*, April 24, 2019, accessed March 2, 2022, <https://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/news/20190424/adventists-mourn-passing-aston-tai>.

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