



Nauru Bulletin

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Centenary celebrations honouring first president

It is the 100th birth anniversary of Nauru's former president, the late Hammer DeRoburt

This year marks the 100th year anniversary of the birth of Nauru's founding father, Sir Hammer DeRoburt, GCMG, OBE.

A memorial church service was held on 5 October at the Orro Congregational Church. The service was attended by His Excellency President Russ Kun, Cabinet ministers, deputy ministers, the Australian High Commissioner Dr Helen Cheney and Taiwan Ambassador Dean Wang.

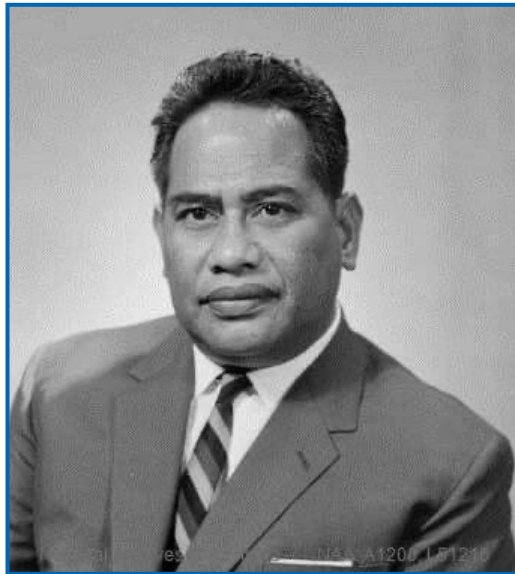
The service was led by Pastor Jessa Agadio and songs rendered by various church choirs and prayers by various groups including one by the great grandson of the late Hammer DeRoburt.

The service was followed by the laying of wreaths at the grave of the late president at Boe cemetery, and the first wreath set down by President Kun.

Born on 25 September 1922 in Nauru to DeRoburt and Eidumunang, the young DeRoburt was highly respected in his district of Boe that he was given the title of senior deacon of Boe Church.

His maternal grandfather Daimon, was Head Chief of Nauru from 1927 to 1930. DeRoburt himself was head chief from 1955 to 1992, and led the charge for Nauru's independence and subsequent control of its lucrative phosphate industry.

DeRoburt was a member of parliament for the Constituency of Boe and was president for most of the first 20 years of Nauru's independence - from 1968 to 1989, except for a 17-month hiatus from 1976 to 1978 then for three months in 1986. His presidency ended in August 1989 but remained a member for Boe until his passing.



Hammer DeRoburt was president for most of the first 20 years of Nauru's independence

He was appointed to the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 1966 and in 1982 was awarded an honorary knighthood by Queen Elizabeth II and elevated to the order of Knight Grand Cross (GCMG).

DeRoburt was educated at the Nauru Boys Secondary School and in the late 1930s attended the Geelong Junior Technical School in Victoria, Australia with several other boys sponsored by Australian boy scouts commissioner, Harold Hurst.

He later returned to Nauru and worked as a teacher from 1940-42, until he was exiled to Truk with 1,200 other Nauruans by the Japanese military occupation of Nauru during World War II (1943-45). He was one of the fewer than 800 that survived and returned to Nauru to a devastated, war-torn country.

In 1919 Nauru became a mandated

territory within the framework of the League of Nations under Australia, Great Britain and New Zealand with Australia as the administration, and the phosphate industry was taken over by the British Phosphate Commission (BPC).

After World War II, phosphate mining and administrative governance of Nauru under the BPC resumed from 1947 under the United Nations Trusteeship. Meanwhile the journey to independence was in motion.

DeRoburt returned to education taking on liaison and teaching roles, and in August 1950 married Lukale Harris at the London Missionary Society Church, Orro.

For Nauruans, rebuilding Nauru was top priority including for the Nauru Local Government Council (NLGC) that would be formed in 1955 to administer their affairs. DeRoburt was elected to the NLGC and later head chief.

As head chief and chair of the NLGC, he represented community demands to UN visiting missions from 1956 to 1965 and to Australian administrators.

In 1964 DeRoburt and the NLGC rejected an offer by Australia to relocate Nauruans to Curtis Island, off the Queensland coast. In spite of the damage caused by mining, they observed that Nauruans had a deep cultural commitment to their island; and that without landownership, there is no sense of citizenship.

Sir Hammer DeRoburt was one of the renowned leaders in the eventual fight for Nauru's independence, and was subsequently elected as the country's first president in January 1968.

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Nauru was the first country Australia sponsored for independence.

Political independence from Australia and the Trusteeship had a greater and significant meaning for Nauruans. This included the right to control the phosphate industry that was under the complete power of the BPC as Nauruans received a pittance in royalties for their own phosphate.

The terms of the independence settlement included that Nauru purchase the phosphate mine from the BPC for \$21 million. Nauru's phosphate industry was officially handed over to Nauru on 1 July 1970 and renamed Nauru Phosphate Corporation.

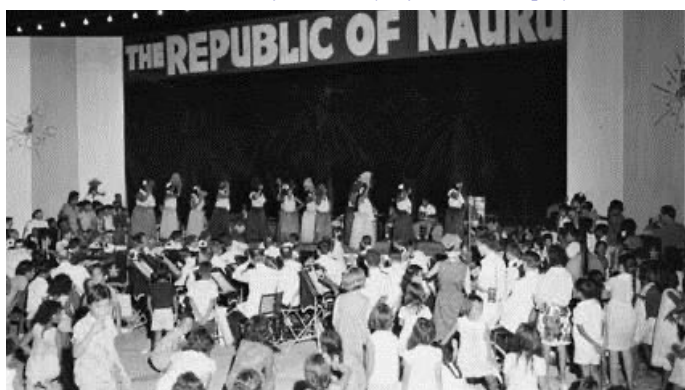
Achieving independence and control of the phosphate mine, DeRoburt reinstated urgent negotiations for rehabilitation of worked-out lands. He pursued the matter of rehabilitation that former head chief Timothy Detudamo, Raymond Gadabu and other Nauruan leaders had long posed to the BPC and Australia as administering authority.

DeRoburt saw the BPC's interests in the mining profits conflicted with its obligations to the Nauruan people and saw the mined out lands, made inaccessible and unusable, was vital to support the future needs of Nauru's expanding population.



(Top) President Hammer DeRoburt (R) receives the first Nauru flag on the eve of Nauru's Independence Day 1968 from Mr DJ Carter (NZ), the Hon C.E Barnes MP (Australian Minister for Territories), and Sir Charles Johnston KCMG (UK).

(Bottom) Open air stage for the Nauruan concert on Independence Eve, the concert followed by a fireworks display.



In 1989 DeRoburt instituted legal proceedings against Australia in the International Court of Justice in The Hague on behalf of the Nauruan people for compensation for environmental damages caused by mining.

Although ill, he travelled with Nauru's legal advisors to address the court in November 1991. The parties settled in September 1993, a year after his death, before a determination by the court, Australia paying Nauru \$A107 million.

Described as a man who was soft spoken, a tough negotiator and charismatic he was ultimately the architect of attaining Nauru's independence, making it the third Pacific island nation to gain independence after Samoa and the Cook Islands.

DeRoburt was president when Nauru and six other Pacific Island nations including Australia and New Zealand founded the South Pacific Forum in 1971, now the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF).

He was chancellor of the University of the South Pacific from 1974 to 1976 and was accorded an honorary doctorate at the end of his term.

On 15 July 1992, at the age of 69, DeRoburt passed away in Melbourne, Australia while undergoing medical treatment. He was accorded a state funeral and laid to rest at the Boe Cemetery.

His birth date, 25 September, is designated Nauru's National Youth Day and a weeklong youth program is organised annually to celebrate the event •

** Excerpts from various works including by Nancy Pollock*



President DeRoburt and Buraro Detudamo who served as the Minister Assisting the President during DeRoburt's presidency





(Top) At Nauru's airport the day after Independence Day 1968, Head Chief Hammer DeRoburt and Mrs DeRoburt wave goodbye to the last of the island's administrators, Brigadier L. D. King.

(Top) President DeRoburt and Madam DeRoburt receive HM Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip as they arrive at the Aiwo boat harbour for the Royal Visit, 21 October 1982. [PC: Nauru Philately]

(Bottom) Signing of the Nauruan independence agreement, Parliament House, Canberra 1967. Seated far right is Hammer DeRoburt who later becomes the first president.

(Centre) L-R: Raymond Gadabu, Hammer DeRoburt, and James Ategan Bop

(Bottom) Memorial service commemorating the 100th anniversary of the birth date of the late former President DeRoburt, 5 October.

[BW photos courtesy of Australian National Archives]

The Nauru Bulletin is a fortnightly publication of the Government of the Republic of Nauru.

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