

Leonard Howell and the struggles that he fought

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Leonard Howell and his wife Tethen

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IN the 1930s, Jamaica was under the colonial rule of Britain, and the descendants of the slaves faced a tough and terrible life.

Subsequent to the Morant Bay Rebellion in 1865, the Government built prisons and the Bellevue asylum to lock away not only those who ran afoul of the law, but those who lashed out against the unbalanced social and economic order which saw a colour/class bias relegatory blacks to a landless, illiterate and marginalised sect.

Out of that quagmire rose a few courageous Jamaicans who resolutely fought to make black beautiful and uplift the minds of their brothers and sisters who had been suppressed by centuries of oppression.

One of those black men whose Leonard Percival Howell, who came face to face with his blackness while in Harlem, New York, where he met National Hero Marcus Garvey and enlisted in the Universal Negro Improvement Association.

Howell was born June 16, 1898, the first of 11 children to parents Charles Theophilus Howell and Clementina Bennett in Red Hills, Clarendon.

At age 13, Howell witnessed the murder of a woman by her boyfriend.

He refused to testify against the accused man who was represented by Jamaica's first black lawyer, the recently qualified JAG Smith, who was considered the poor man's barrister and champion of the black man in post-emancipation Jamaica.

The state was angered by the boy's stance and in order to avoid the persecution of his son, Howell's father, who was a major stakeholder in the Jamaica banana export industry, arranged to smuggle his son aboard a banana boat that left for America in 1912.

After spending 20 years travelling the world, Howell was imprisoned in the United States and deported to Jamaica. He then renewed ties with Garvey and after a few years started his own sect and embarked on a campaign to enlighten the disenfranchised blacks whom he believed should stop paying homage to a white God and taxes to an oppressive colonial regime.

Howell began preaching that Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia was the black messiah and urged black people to worship him as their God and King.

The coronation of Selassie in 1930 saw many world leaders in attendance, and the sons of King George V of England brought gifts and bowed before Selassie during the ceremony.

This gave Howell the ammunition he needed and he was quoted as saying:

"The Lion of Judah has broken the chain and we the black race are finally free. George V is no longer our king. George V sent his son to bow down to our new King Ras Tafari."

That and other statements led to Howell being charged with sedition.

He went on trial on March 13, 1934 and was successfully prosecuted by the same prosecutor, HM Radcliffe, whose case he had destroyed by refusing to testify against the man who killed his girlfriend as a boy.

He was sentenced to two years in prison, but the great public interest of his trial made him into a cult hero.

After his release from prison, Howell left Trinityville, St Thomas and purchased a property at East Queen Street in Kingston before relocating to a 500-acre property he bought in Sligoville, St Catherine and called it Pinnacle.

Howell is regarded as the founding father of the Rastafari faith and his following grew rapidly. Soon many skilled craftsmen and women, nurses and other professionals took up residence at Pinnacle, which was one of the first self sustaining communities in the island.

The residents planted a variety of ground provisions, including ganja, reared livestock, there was a school, a bakery and wells. The surplus crops would be sold to outsiders and many of the residents of Pinnacle were able to take care of their needs without depending on outside sources.

But the state would have none of it, and Howell and his followers were made to live a life of hell for daring to resist the social order.

According to Howell's son Monty, his father was targeted by the State and sent to prison or the asylum more times than he can remember.

"The situation in Jamaica at the time when a black man was thinking in the form of a black God and King, this was so outlandish that they branded him a mad man. He followed leaders before him who decided to stray from the colonial order, like Marcus (Garvey) and Bedward," the 74-year-old Howell said.

Alexander Bedward was a revivalist preacher who preached against the colonial masters and was convicted of sedition and committed to the asylum. Upon his release he continued his preaching and was rumoured to have declared he was the reincarnation of Jesus Christ and claimed he would ascend into heaven like Elijah.

He was said to have jumped off a high perch and fell to his death.

However, that claim has been refuted by black historians who claim the colonial masters spread the rumour to sully his name in an attempt to erase his memory from the black population.

Between 1941 and 1954, the police raided Pinnacle as a matter of course.

Each time the police would seize cash banked in the community that amounted to thousands of pounds, a fortune in those days, claiming it was the proceeds of the sale of ganja, which Howell openly expressed his disgust with the persecution of the herb.

"The raids were too many to remember. There was an article that said Mrs Bedward had an infant hanging on to her skirt tail. That was me. The police would just come and arrest people for nothing. They said they had to get us off the land at Pinnacle. They even sent a 70-year-old woman to prison for ganja," he said.

Howell said that as a teenager he, along with a younger brother and about 60 other children from the community were arrested on trumped-up charges.

"They came to Pinnacle for my father but he was not there. He gave me and my brother wrist watches, one a Bulova and the other a Rolex. They asked us for the receipt for the watches and we told them we were children our father gave them to us. They took us to the Spanish Town station but they could not put us in a cell so they kept us in the yard with about 60 other children. They told my father that if he did not come up with a certain amount of money they would put one pound of ganja on my name and a pound of ganja on brother. My father had four vehicles and they took them away," Howell said.

He also recalled the police coming to raid Pinnacle and confiscating 3,000 pounds (a small fortune in the 1940s) and destroying his father's personal documents, including proof of ownership of Pinnacle.

So much did the authorities detest Howell that even when his wife died he was accused of murdering her.

"Howell has now been released. As on perusing the depositions I found that according to the medical evidence it was impossible to specify the cause of Mrs Howell's death and therefore to say that either her husband or anyone else had murdered her. I had no alternative but to enter a nolle," a statement from the Attorney General dated April 4, 1944 stated.

Howell was known to walk the streets of the Corporate Area and St Catherine and other parishes, giving money to the poor and children.

He was arrested, beaten and imprisoned more than 50 times but always returned to live in Pinnacle upon his release from prison.

But in 1954, the State would launch a major offensive against the Pinnacle community, which resulted in many of his followers being imprisoned while others were left homeless.

"In the early morning we heard a loud banging on the door. When we opened it, it was the police who had come up the hill to the house. The main body went to East Avenue where most of the people lived and they gathered up a lot of people. They put the people out on the streets with only a few personal belongings. It was sickening. The people had done nothing and now they had nowhere to live as the police were burning down their homes," he said.

The cops reportedly burned down hundreds of houses including Howell's and chased the people off the land. Many were sent to prison on ganja charges and the raid in 1954 resulted in the displacement of many of Howell's followers who went to live in various parts of the island including St Thomas, Clarendon and the West Kingston in area known as 'Dungle' or 'Back-a-Wall' from which they would be eventually chased and a development built which is now known as Tivoli Gardens.

Monty Howell said that even when he became an adult, he was persecuted for his Rastafari lifestyle.

"I was riding my bike from Spanish Town to Kingston when upon reaching the Ferry Police Station a policeman signalled me to stop and said he heard I was smuggling ganja to Kingston so I should come into the guard room so he could search me. I refused and I started the bike and he shut it off and grabbed the key. I saw I was getting nowhere with him so I ripped open my shirt and dropped my pants right there. I cried. He look at me and let me go. I left Jamaica in the 1950s because of the persecution," Howell said.

Howell lived at Pinnacle until 1956 when, tired of the persecution, he relocated near Tredegar Park.

But even when he was in the winter of his years, Howell was still attacked by those who disagreed with his afrocentric view.

In 1980 at 81 years of age, Howell was attacked by an angry mob at his home in Tredegar Park. The mob wanted to cut out his tongue and beat and slashed him mercilessly as he fought for his life.

He was saved by persons in the community who heard his cries and managed to subdue his attackers.

Howell then left Tredegar Park and lived at the Sheraton Hotel for another year before he died of a heart attack.

"He did not recover from the mobbing. That is what killed him," his son said.

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