

## **ANTOINE, Robert, C.B.E.**

Avec la disparition de Robert Antoine, notre Société perd un de ses membres les plus éminents. De nombreuses fois élu à la Présidence, il s'était particulièrement dévoué à remettre en état les livres de la Bibliothèque et à organiser la rénovation des portraits de nos présidents.

Avec la permission du Directeur de PROSI et de l'auteur, nous reproduisons ici l'obituaire de Robert Antoine par Dr. John Rhys Williams paru dans le numéro 33 d'octobre 1996.

The unexpected death of Robert Antoine on 19 September 1996 leaves a void in agricultural circles and a profound sense of loss among his many colleagues and associates. In the field of agricultural science in particular, he will be remembered above all for his unique ability to inspire and guide not only his subordinates but also his peers.

The achievements of Robert Antoine during his formative years were indicative of things to come. Thus, he obtained the Gold Medal in Science at the Royal College, Curepipe, was laureate at the College of Agriculture, Reduit, and gained a First Class Honours degree in Botany at the Imperial College, London. His sharp mind marked him out for senior posts from the outset and on his return to Mauritius in 1951, after final studies in Agriculture at Cambridge University, he was appointed Assistant Plant Pathologist and later Senior Agricultural Officer at the then Department of Agriculture. In 1955, he was offered the post of Plant Pathologist at the newly created Mauritius Sugar Industry Research Institute (MSIRI), and as such did pioneering work on several diseases of sugar cane, in particular, gumming disease, which was then of major importance to the sugar industry. His success with this problem led him to be designated Mauritian of the Year by L'Express newspaper in 1966. During this period, he also played a substantial role in the virtual eradication of Fiji disease of sugar cane in Madagascar, thereby reducing the danger, it constituted to the Mauritian sugar industry. On the departure of Dr Paul Octave Wiehe as Director of MSIRI in 1968, Robert Antoine was the obvious choice as his successor and he quickly gained the respect of his staff and the sugar industry at large. As Director, he adroitly steered and expanded the research activities of the MSIRI and strove, with success, to maintain its freedom of action from external influences. On retirement in 1980, he left a research institute that was a highly effective organisation with a world reputation as a centre of excellence.

Robert Antoine's retirement was, however, purely nominal. He was immediately claimed for other functions where his expertise and ability to organise were at a premium. His activities now became astonishing in their diversity and reflected the confidence that others placed in him.

From 1980 to 1992 he sat on the Executive Council of the ISSCT, first as a Member and finally, for three years, as its President. The esteem with which he was held in the world's sugar cane producing countries was endorsed by his election as General Vice-Chairman of the ISSCT Congress in Cuba in 1983 and again in Brazil in 1989. Nearer home, he was appointed Director of the Regional Sugarcane Training Centre for Africa in 1980 when this organisation was created and sited in Reduit, following an agreement between the UNDP and the Mauritius Government. But this was not all, the Mauritius Government also entrusted him with heavy responsibilities in the Mauritius Sugar Authority, the Food and Agricultural Research Council, the Standards Bureau, the Mauritius Research Council, the University of Mauritius and the Prime Minister's Derocking Scheme.

This record is indeed impressive and it is true to say that Robert Antoine succeeded in these varied activities by his savoir-faire, intellectual brilliance and approachability. Those who knew him best would no doubt agree that despite his earlier substantial scientific work, the metier in which he excelled was the management of science and technology, where he displayed to the full his ability to assimilate available information, judge astutely and act decisively.

**JOHN RHYS WILLIAMS**

*This obituary was first published by PROSI the Sugar Industry Magazine. With their permission and that of the author, The Royal Society of Arts and Sciences of Mauritius reproduced this obituary in its own Proceedings Vol VI, 1996. It must be added that Robert Antoine throughout his life had been an active member of the RSAS, being its president nine times within sixteen years.*

## **Source**

Extrait des *Proceedings de la Royal Society of Arts and Science*, Volume VI, 1996.