

A Hundred Years of Pauline and C. R. (Dick) Hensman

Robini Hensman



The birth anniversaries of Pauline Hensman (née Swan) and Dick Hensman occurred over the course of the past year. This attempt to provide an overview of their life and times will inevitably suffer from gaps, since neither they nor most of their contemporaries are alive. It will, therefore, have to draw on the imperfect memories of their children and younger friends, who would have to rely on hearsay for the parts of their lives from which they were absent. Nevertheless, the main events and themes of their lives emerge quite clearly.

Early Years

Pauline Beatrice Swan was born on 1 December 1922 in Colombo. Her father James Swan had worked his way up from the lowest grade to become a foreman in the railway workshop at Maradana, and the family lived in quarters allocated to the workers. Despite being from the Burgher community, which had European ancestry and was considered to be close to the British, he – like other ‘natives’ – was barred from being promoted to a higher post than foreman. From him, she seems to have

inherited a sympathy for workers' struggles and hostility to British rule, because among her most vivid childhood memories was the tramway strike of 1929, which was supported by the railway workers.

Her mother Erin looked after the household and cared for Pauline, her elder sister Rosine, and younger brother Edward. Their income covered only basic necessities, and Pauline had memories of creeping through the fence with Rosine and Edward to get to the office of the workshop in order to dance and sing to the amused clerical staff in return for paper and pencils. Erin always helped neighbours in whatever way she could; her support for a neighbour suffering domestic violence from her husband almost had a fatal outcome when the man broke into their home and attacked Erin with a knife. Pauline had the courage and presence of mind to bite the man so hard that he was forced to back off, thus saving her mother's life. She inherited from Erin a strong belief in gender justice as well as a love of children.

Tragedy struck while the children were still in school, when their father developed throat cancer and died after a period of dreadful suffering which traumatised the entire family. Erin had to move out of the railway quarters and began living in Bambalapitiya with her children and sister Gladys. Her meagre pension had to be supplemented by the work both women did as seamstresses. Pauline completed her schooling and went on to get a degree at the Colombo campus of the University of Ceylon.

Charles Richard Jeevaratnam Hensman was born on 17 March 1923 in Nallur, Jaffna, to Noah Thirunesan Hensman and his wife Louise. When he was a small boy, his father was recruited as a supervisor in a plantation in Malaya and the family moved there. Noah was good at his job and was promoted to become the *de facto* manager although the top manager had to be British. But he was also a male chauvinist who wanted a stay-at-home wife. Louise, an extraordinarily courageous woman, had trained as a nurse and wanted to work as one. So, she left him and went to stay with her sister Mercy and brother-in-law Navam, who were already living in Malaya. She unofficially adopted an older boy, Peter Raymond, and paid for his education in return for his help in caring for Dick when she was at work, for example on night shifts. As he grew up, Dick had other companions too – his girl cousins, who were more like sisters.

Louise was opposed to British rule, but the Japanese occupation seemed worse. In the middle of the war, Dick made the journey to Colombo to pursue his higher education. Joining the university somewhat later than

Pauline, he got involved with the Student Christian Movement (SCM), which was affiliated to the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) and dedicated to motivating students to work for social justice and sustainable development. In order to do so, they needed a good understanding of economic and political systems and processes, and the SCM ran seminars and other activities to provide this. The connection remained a strong one even after Dick got his degree. In the meantime, he had to support himself, and did so by providing tuition to schoolchildren. One of them was Edward Swan, whose family attended the same church in Bambalapitiya that he went to. And that was how he met Pauline.

Drawn together by their shared love of literature and belief in what would come to be called Christian socialism or liberation theology – faith in a God who wants followers to struggle against class, caste, gender, ethnic, religious, national, and all other forms of oppression, and to work for a world ruled by justice, freedom, equality, and love – they fell in love with each other and decided to get married. However, relatives on both sides had objections to this inter-racial marriage. Dick's family in Malaya disapproved so strongly that they sent Navam to talk to Erin and persuade her not to allow Pauline to go ahead with it. Paradoxically, that had the opposite effect on Erin, who told him that Pauline made her own decisions and she had no control over them. When Dick got to know what happened, he was furious with his family, as they no doubt knew he would be! Fortunately, both sides reconciled themselves to the match, and the wedding took place on 10 April 1947.

From Marriage to Flight

Dick and Pauline were teaching at Dharmarajah College, Kandy, for some time after getting married, but moved to Colombo before the birth of their first child, Rohini, in August 1948. Erin had converted her garage into a bedroom for them, and they stayed there until after the birth of their second child – Lakshman James, better known as Jimmy or Jim – in March 1950. By then this temporary shelter was becoming rather cramped, so they rented a small house in Mount Lavinia, at that time little more than a fishing village with no running water or sewage connections and frequent power cuts. After retirement, Louise came to stay with them. Pauline found herself providing advice and treatment for minor medical problems and tuition for children in the neighbourhood, all *gratis*. Menike was employed to help look after the children, especially Jim, when their parents were at work, and quickly became part of their extended non-biological family, as did her son Nimal.

After a few short-term teaching jobs, Pauline settled down at Bishop's College and Dick at St. Thomas's College (Mount Lavinia), both teaching English to older children, especially Advanced Level students. Their teaching methods are best described by their former students. Here is an extract from a tribute by Rukmini Attygalle, née Samarakkody:

I first came to know Pauline at age 15, at Bishop's College, when she was my English teacher. Before I came to her class, I was perhaps the worst student in English because my spelling was atrocious. The previous teacher took pleasure in ridiculing my spelling. She would read my essay, stopping at each misspelt word, and ask those who knew the correct spelling to put their hands up. All the hands would go up and I would sit there at the back of the class feeling ever so foolish. As the teacher deducted marks for wrong spelling, I never got more than four marks out of ten! I used to dread the English classes, and I absolutely hated the subject.

I remember very well my first English lesson with Pauline. She gave us each a sheet of paper with a short extract from Christopher Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*, and gave us a short synopsis of the poem. She asked us to read the extract carefully – several times if necessary – and write down what we thought of it. This was our first attempt at critical evaluation. I found this extract strangely fascinating. I wrote my essay – of course with my habitual wrong spelling.

The next day Pauline came into the classroom carrying our exercise books. She kept three books on her desk and handed out the rest. Since I did not get my book back, I knew what I was in for. I was glad that there were two others besides me to face the music.

Then she said that although a few of us had not quite understood the poem, she was generally pleased with our submissions. She was particularly impressed with three essays, and she was going to read them to the class. The one she happened to pick up first was mine. It was a strange experience – from being at the bottom of the class, and the subject of ridicule, to be told that your essay was one of the best was really incredible!

When I got my book back, of course I saw all the spelling mistakes underlined in red, and the correct spellings written down at the bottom of the page. But I also saw interspersed here and there several ticks with "good" written beside them. She hadn't deducted marks for bad spelling and had given me eight out of ten! That was a real boost to my confidence.

Pauline never ridiculed a child in front of the class. She was always tactful and encouraging. If she found that a student had a problem, she would discuss it privately. She was rather strict of course. She would simply give marching orders to anyone who tried to disrupt her class. She was a person who showed respect to others, and this included her students. And of course, in return, we all respected her

immensely. What was very valuable to me personally was that she taught me to respect myself.

Pauline used English literature as a vehicle through which to teach us about life itself. By discussing and analysing characters and situations that appeared in fiction, she taught us what is important in life and what is not. She did not believe in spoon feeding. She asked us questions continually, and by doing so she made us think for ourselves.

As adolescents we were at an impressionable age. We soon learned that wealth, power, physical beauty, outward appearances, etc. were in themselves not important. What really mattered in life were honesty, justice, consideration for others, love, and compassion. She awakened in us a social consciousness. She made us think about the less advantaged, the under-dog. She inculcated in us a sound sense of values which has helped us in life. As a student I looked up to her as a mentor.

No female member in my family had been to university, and in keeping with this tradition, I was not expected to go either. Pauline was most unhappy when she learned this. Together with a couple of other teachers, she persuaded my mother to let me go on to higher education. I am very grateful that she enabled me to go to university.

Here is an extract from a tribute to Dick by Thiru Kandiah:

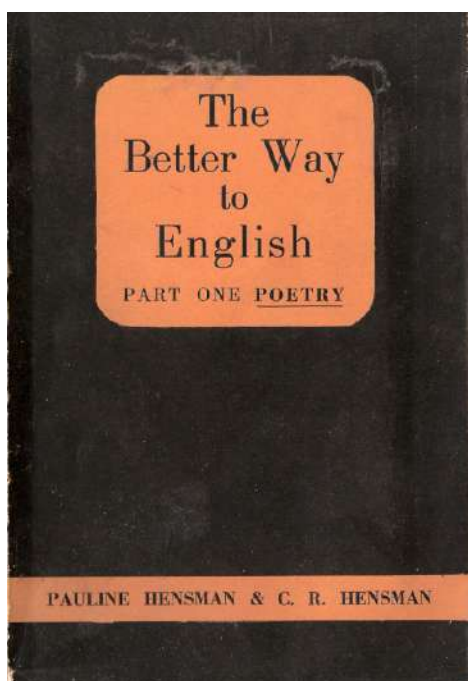
I first met Mr. Hensman when he taught me English Literature in the university entrance classes at St. Thomas' College, Mt. Lavinia (1954). No doubt all of us human beings, as we move into life from the uncertainties of our beginnings, are fortunate to encounter people who, by the positive influence they exert on our lives, set us on the way to whom we might eventually become at our best. But, in the case of those of us who are the most fortunate, among the people we meet thus is someone who is so special, so very rare, that as he or she grows into our lives, the encounter takes on far deeper and more fulfilling layers of meaning. To me, Mr. Hensman was one such person.

My parents had told me that according to my horoscope I was going to be a lawyer; and, as far as I was concerned, that was all there was to it – lawyer I was going to be. I am now 70, and law is yet as remote from me as it was when my horoscope was cast around the time of my birth.

And that is because Mr. Hensman changed all that, irrevocably. For some reason, he felt that I had potential to be something other than the nondescript and unpromising person I appeared destined to be, and took me in hand, encouraging me with my English studies. He never tried to dissuade me from doing law; he had too much respect for the individual and his/her mind and commitments ever to interfere gratuitously in such matters. But when one day he found out what I had been planning to study in university, he asked me, in a kindly, completely non-coercive way, to consider whether it might not be useful to think of doing something more general in the way of studies *before* I went into a narrower specialty.

So much did I, like my fellow students, respect and admire him as a teacher that all he had to do was to ask the question, and my mind was immediately made up – I was going to do English. During the rest of the period he taught me in school, he greatly encouraged my interest in this subject to which he knew by then I had committed myself. And so, English Studies became what the rest of my studies and my professional work have been all about. My entire academic and professional career has, then, been something that I owe to him.

Several points stand out. By contrast with dominant South Asian traditions, which demand that pupils respect their teachers but not *vice versa*, Pauline and Dick respected their pupils and indeed taught them self-respect and self-confidence. Their teaching method was the opposite of rote-learning, constantly asking their students to think critically. Their lessons went beyond the classroom into the wider world, introducing pupils to universal moral values. And they gently encouraged their students to discover a self-fulfilling pathway for themselves rather than having their lives determined by gender or horoscopes. It is no surprise that many of these former pupils – among the best-known being Yasmine Gooneratne and Senake Bandaranayake – became lifelong friends of Pauline and Dick, who also tried to popularise their teaching methods by working on and publishing a two-part book entitled *The Better Way to English*.



Teaching was Pauline's calling, her preferred way of making the world a more just and humane place, but Dick needed a wider canvas. Both fervently supported anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles worldwide, but finding a pathway to democracy and social justice was an additional task.

This is what led Dick to inaugurate the Community Institute. It was defined as “an independent, non-profit, non-partisan organisation” with its “membership open to persons normally resident in Ceylon who are committed to its objectives, irrespective of nationality, community, religion, language or political affiliations”. Its objectives were “To initiate and stimulate discussion and research with a view to understanding and discovering solutions for basic political, economic, social and cultural problems, with particular reference to Ceylon ... To provide an opportunity for the mutual confrontation of political and social ideologies, policies and attitudes, so that sectarian approaches may be replaced by a fuller understanding of the needs and the interests of the whole community. To organise a library and publish a journal; to arrange seminars and lectures, ... to publish educational works in Sinhalese, Tamil and English.”

It is worth looking closely at this description, because it suggests a reason why Dick and Pauline, despite expressing strong anti-capitalist sentiments and having volumes by Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, and Isaac Deutscher on their bookshelves, were not in the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), at that time affiliated to the Fourth International: scepticism that any party had enough contact with the diverse working people of the country or sufficient knowledge of their economic, political, social, and cultural problems to be able to tackle them effectively. Carrying out research and bringing together different views, Dick thought, would allow a fuller understanding to emerge.

The first issue of the journal *Community*, with Dick as editor, came out in April 1954. Two subsequent issues were: *The Role of the Western-educated Elite* and *National Planning: Schools for the Nation*. Wishing to concentrate on the Institute, Dick resigned from his teaching post, spending some time on a fellowship at Yale and lecturing part-time after returning. Pauline and a circle of friends and comrades contributed to the work, and subscribers helped to fund the magazine.

When the Official Language Act (1956) made Sinhala the only official language and peaceful Tamil protesters were attacked by mobs with the complicity of the police,

Dick and Pauline decided to stay on and fight. But the anti-Tamil pogroms of 1958 changed all that. As the violence spread, their friends knew how vulnerable they were as an isolated Tamil family in an almost exclusively Sinhalese neighbourhood. On the morning of 27 May, they received an offer of shelter at the home of Yasmine's parents, but Pauline and Dick refused to go. Instead, as Menike insisted that they leave because mobs were heading that way, they packed off Louise, Rohini, and Jimmy with a Sinhalese neighbour in a taxi to Erin's place and started making Molotov cocktails to defend themselves. Frantic, Menike threatened to take her own life unless they abandoned their mad plan, and finally convinced them to accept Yasmine's parents' offer and a lift from another Sinhalese neighbour to get there.

Pauline and Dick were shaken by the thought that their children's lives had been in danger. When they were reunited with the children, it was in an apartment in Kollupitiya, and when they next went to Mount Lavinia, it was to pack up their belongings. Soon they were heading by ship to London. Louise had joined the exodus of Tamils from the South to Jaffna.

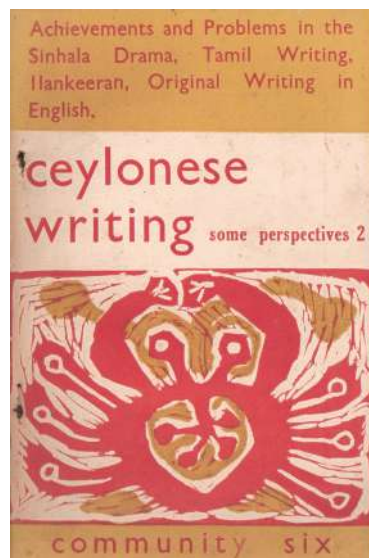
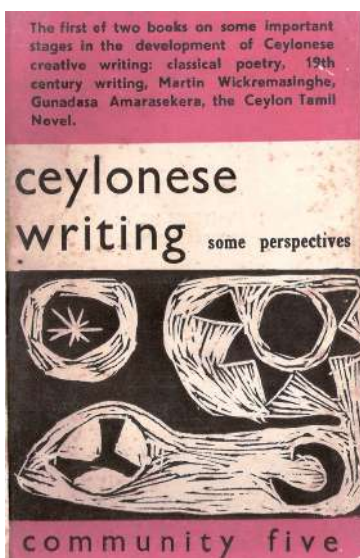
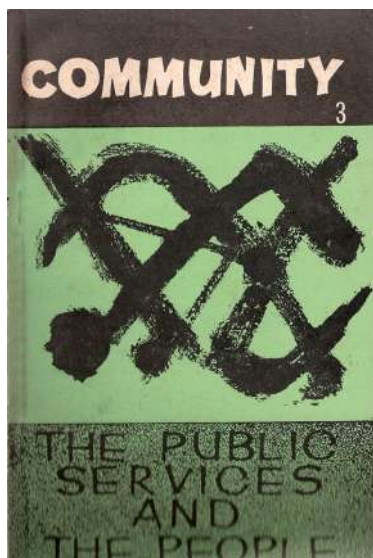
Back and Forth

Once they had found a landlord willing to rent out a flat to them, Pauline and Dick started looking for employment. Pauline, after working as a supply teacher, found a permanent post at a girls' grammar school in East London, at that time attended mainly by white working-class children. Dick got a job at Church House, the headquarters of the Church of England, researching and advising the church about what was happening in the Third World.

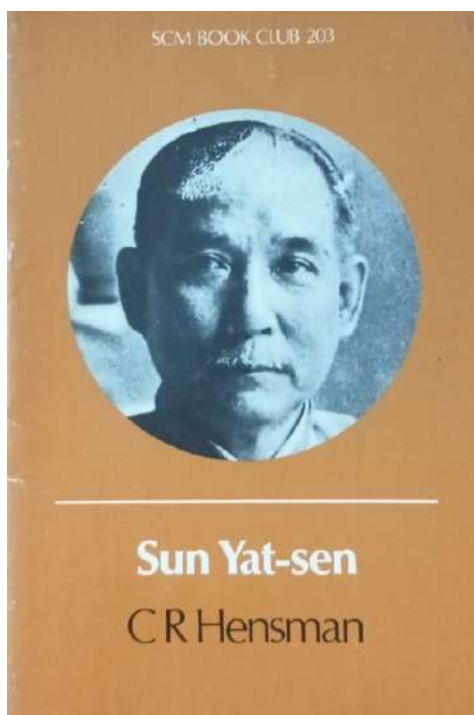
But they still craved to return to Ceylon; and when they found that the country was not in immediate danger of descending into civil strife, Dick tried to raise funding for his pet project ... and succeeded! In 1961, after a journey in the opposite direction, they used the two-year grant to rent a much bigger house in 1st Chapel Lane, Wellawatte, and restart activities of the 'Community Institute', including the publication of *Community*.

The space was large enough for proper meetings, and heated debates over economic, political, and social policies often extended late into the night. Some of these issues found their way into the journal, which also placed a great deal of emphasis on culture. Thus, the first issue of *Community* to come out after their return to Ceylon was titled *The Public Services and the People*, while the next two issues were devoted to *Ceylonese Writing* in Sinhala, Tamil, and English. Nor were the issues taken up purely domestic; international speakers addressed some of the meetings, and the discussion of bureaucracy drew on the experiences of other countries. It was a period of vibrant activity.

On 5 April 1962 their third child, Savitri, was born. It was not essential for Pauline to return to work, but she continued to teach on a part-time basis out of choice, with Menike, Dick, and Rohini helping to care for the new baby. When the two-year period of the grant expired, Dick had saved enough money to continue working from a smaller place for another year. In 1964, when that ran out and there was no prospect of another grant, he decided to go back to Britain on his own because he needed a bank loan to pay for the rest of the family to follow.



This time perhaps Pauline would have preferred to stay, but gamely fitted in with his plans. After some temporary work, eventually she got a new job teaching primary schoolchildren with special educational needs: a completely new field for her, yet she did so well that she had the children coming to her during lunch breaks begging for extra classes! Dick got employed as a producer in the BBC World Service. It was a prestigious job that satisfied his interest in world affairs, yet he resigned from it in the wake of the 1967 war in which Israel expelled 300,000 Palestinians from their homes and occupied the whole of Palestine, the Sinai Peninsula, and Golan Heights, feeling unable to abide by the BBC's notion of impartiality in reporting on these events.



From that time onwards, Pauline was the primary breadwinner, while Dick focused on writing. *China: Yellow Peril? Red Hope?* (1968) was inspired by the fear of an impending military attack on China by the US, where racist smears combined with anti-communist rhetoric was being used aggressively in the context of China's support for Vietnam in the war. Dick argued that the Chinese revolution was a purely national one, aimed at obtaining freedom from both foreign domination and regressive domestic forces; but then and later there was a failure (shared by Pauline) to acknowledge the lack of democracy under the new regime, its departure from the goal he described as being articulated by Sun

Yat-sen in his book of that title (1971). *From Gandhi to Guevara: The Polemics of Revolt* (1969) was an edited collection of writings giving voice to a wide variety of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist activists; *Rich Against Poor: The Reality of Aid* (1971) was an exposure of how developed countries used "aid" to exploit and gain control over Third World countries in a process he characterised as "anti-development".

Return to Sri Lanka

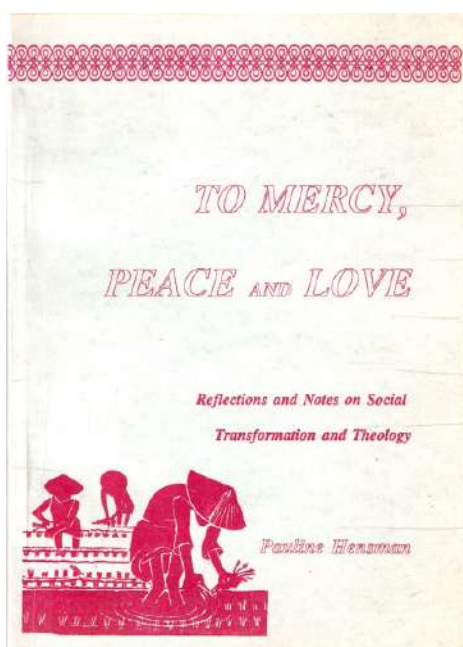
Dick and Pauline never gave up their Sri Lankan citizenship and always intended to return when it was practical to do so. In 1979 they made an exploratory visit, and in 1981, Pauline took early retirement and used the *ex-gratia* payment she received to build a house in their old neighbourhood in Mount Lavinia: the first time they ever owned a home. They stayed with friends while it was being constructed, and in December 1982 hosted a get-together of their children and grandchildren even while Sri Lanka was descending into State terror and civil war. Other close friends and their extended non-biological family were happy to have them back.

On 25 July 1983, a discussion of what to do about the situation had been organised at the Kollupitiya residence of Sanmugathasan of the Ceylon Communist Party (pro-Peking), but when Dick and Pauline turned up in the morning, the three of them were the only ones there. Some instinct made them walk back home along the beach, so they escaped the gruesome bloodshed taking place on Galle Road. Their home was saved by a bureaucratic delay in registration of the property in their name, but Pauline insisted that Dick go to stay with Savitri at their London home for his safety.

While there, he completed *Sri Lanka: The Holocaust and After* (1984) under the pseudonym L. Piyadasa, one of the first publications to document the evidence that the deadly pogroms were State-sponsored. The analysis was continued in a sequel, *Sri Lanka: The Unfinished Quest for Peace* (1987), published following the Indo-Lanka Accord of 1987, and both rejected Tamil Eelam as a solution to the ongoing war.

Dick soon returned, and their home became a venue for resistance to an increasingly totalitarian State. But they also supported the extraordinary work of University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna), which combined analysis with documenting human rights violations by all parties, including the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Meanwhile Pauline resumed her neighbourhood healthcare and teaching role, using innovative materials and methods for teaching English as a Second Language to children and adults.

Dick worked on his historical, theological, and philosophical writings: *Agenda for the Poor: Claiming Their Inheritance* (1990), and *New Beginnings: The Ordering and Designing of the Realm of Freedom, Volume 1: Captivity* (1992), in which he tackled not only issues of national liberation and social justice – but also lesbian and gay rights, to which he and Pauline had been introduced when Savitri came out to them as a lesbian – and protection of the environment. Dick mastered computers and the internet as he continued his research, including extensive work on Volume 2 of *New Beginnings*, which was never completed. He also collected previously unpublished writings in *The Remaking of Humanity* (2000). Pauline, by contrast, did not even type, writing out her articles and talks in her beautiful handwriting, so Dick collected, typed, and got them published as a collection entitled *To Mercy, Peace and Love: Reflections and Notes on Social Transformation and Theology* (1993).



Three themes emerge from these writings. One is the belief that God inspires people of all faiths and none, provided they are struggling for truth, justice, peace, and

love. The second is the inextricable connection between spirituality and action in the pursuit of these goals. And the third is the belief that the role of revolutionaries is to equip the poor and oppressed to rule, rather than take power on their behalf.

The Last Years

Rohini, who had settled in India, often stayed with them for extended periods of time and they sometimes visited her and her family there. They also travelled to Britain, spending time with Savi and her partner Vijayatara, Jim's family, and later their grandchildren's families. On one of these visits in 2006, Pauline contracted a hospital infection which almost killed her. After she recovered, although physiotherapy and her own determination enabled her to walk with a frame, she needed day-and-night care, and Dick was her primary carer. The stress and loss of sleep took a toll on his health; he developed atrial fibrillation, resulting in several mini-strokes and then a massive stroke for which he was hospitalised. Unable to speak, he nonetheless conveyed his anxiety that Pauline should be cared for in his absence before slipping into unconsciousness. He died peacefully on 9 July 2008.

Pauline was inconsolable, bemoaning the fact that she did not have any condition which would take her off rapidly. When she was hospitalised with pneumonia in May 2010 and efforts to treat her failed, she insisted on being taken home to the room she had shared with Dick for so long, and died peacefully on the 21st. They had arguments like any couple, but their love for each other never ended. As Anne Abayasekara wrote in a moving tribute, "Pauline and Dick. Dick and Pauline. You couldn't think of one without the other. They were held in high esteem and affection by Sri Lankans of every community, creed and class." Their legacy lives on in the many people they have influenced around the world.

Robini Hensman is a writer, independent scholar, and activist living in India. She has researched and published on labour rights, feminism, minority rights, globalisation, and democracy movements. Some of her writing is available at <https://robinihensman.blogspot.com/>