

ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY
THE MOST HON. SIR PATRICK ALLEN ON, GCMG, CD
FOR THE INVESTITURE CEREMONY OF POET LAUREATE
PROF (Em.) The HONOURABLE MERVYN MORRIS OM

MAY 21, 2014

Thank you, Ms Ellington.

Hon. Wykeham McNeil, Minister of Tourism and Entertainment

Hon. Members of Cabinet

Your Excellencies, Members of the Diplomatic Corps

Poet Laureate, Prof the Hon. Mervyn Morris, Mrs. Morris and family

Mrs. Winsome Hudson, National Librarian

Members of the Poet Laureate Selection Committee

Mr. Kingsley Cooper, Chairman of the Entertainment Advisory Board

Rev. Dr. Stephen Jennings

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

A very good evening to all of you who are helping to make history at King's House today! Together we are met to formalize the designation of Professor the Honourable Mervyn Morris as Jamaica's first officially proclaimed Poet Laureate. I am pleased that the history of this Hall which has been the site of so many significant events is now being enriched by this momentous investiture ceremony.

If these walls could talk, they would tell tales:

- of honour and service;
- of vision and challenge;
- of joyous celebration and motivation to excellence!

We would hear tales of colonial days when most of us could only have entered in liveries of butlers and maids. The evenings of poesy echoed by these walls would be of Alfred Lord Tennyson, British Poet Laureate of his time, or Kipling and Keats.

Tonight, however, we carve our own tales in these walls. Let them declare to future generations how in this one act, we paid tribute to the immortals of Jamaican poetry: from Tom Redcam, J. E. Clare McFarlane, Claude McKay and George Campbell through to the Hon. Louise Bennett-Coverley. We honour today's poets, whether expressed in Standard English or Jamaican, from Prof Edward Baugh, Prof Mervyn Morris and Lorna Goodison to Mutabaruka.

I am glad that we have re-instituted this office of Poet Laureate! As I listened to the Citation read earlier by Mrs. Winsome Hudson, I could not help but feel a sense of anticipation that our poets of yesteryear will be rescued from the accumulated dust of old anthologies.

Let our people old and young appreciate:

- the continuing freshness of McKay's "Flameheart";
- the prophetic insight of Tom Redcam's "Cuba",
- the cynical truth of J. E. Clare McFarlane's "On National Vanity",
- or the absolute linguistic beauty of Vivian Virtue's description of a spider's web which with sun-lit raindrops "hung as lambent as a star/ Unutterably frail and fine".

Yes! Let us glow with pride in the memory of the many Jamaican poets on whose strong shoulders our Poet Laureate stands this evening.

My dream is that Prof Morris will not only help our people to understand and appreciate the work of existing poets, but he will also encourage that spark of creativity which bubbles in so many of our youth.

I do not ignore the fact that many see no value in poetry which they think is just for romantic folk. Some might wonder why the time this evening could not have been spent hammering out a bi-partisan agreement for resolving national challenges. After all, they might think, poets contribute nothing to the resolution of our problems. They might even cite WB Yeats who was asked to write a war poem during World War 1 and wrote instead:

*I think it better that in times like these
A poet's mouth be silent, for in truth
We have no gift to set a statesman right.*

Yeats seemed to have lost the conviction of Percy Bysshe Shelley who about three centuries ago declared:

Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.

Somewhere between the two stands the truth, which is perhaps more in line with US poet Sam Hamill's definition of Poets as "the conscience of our culture".

Back in the days when I first listened to the beautiful, expressive poetry of "Redemption Song", I marvelled at the way that Bob Marley had given new life to the wisdom of National Hero, the Rt. Excellent Marcus Mosiah Garvey.

Today, we still cry out for people to free their minds from the baggage which enslaves. We still urge them to open themselves to the opportunities for the achievement of the success which they dare to envision.

Consider also the powerful words of Peter Tosh's song "Equal Rights and Justice" with a sentiment which remains a clarion call for many social activists all over the world. Garnett Silk also demonstrated excellent poetic skills in his social commentary lyrics, such as the "Cry of my People".

I have deliberately cited musicians who were renowned for their well-crafted lyrics, because our young people, and perhaps even some older ones, relate more easily to musicians than to poets. They might have neither time for, nor interest in poetry and do not stop to think about the reason some of these songs endure. It is not just the rhythm which matters!

Prof Edward Baugh, whom I'm very pleased to see in the audience, and our Poet Laureate have activated the Muse in many of our younger poets. Both of you must find it very satisfying that several of your students are published poets, among whom is Ann-Margaret Lim. Thank you, Ann-Margaret for having composed and read that brilliant Ode to your mentor.

I do not have her gift, but I know how to appreciate good poetry and so I shall borrow from Claude McKay's verse "**To A Poet**". He could very well have been speaking about our Poet Laureate:

The people will not bear you down the street,

Dancing to the strong rhythm of your words...

*But the rare lonely spirits, even mine,
Who love the immortal music of all days,
Will see the glory of your trailing line,
The bedded beauty of your haunting lays.*

Prof Morris, I wish you a successful and satisfying tenure not only measured by a numerous fan club, but in the quality of your impact.

I now have the pleasure of inviting you to come forward to be invested.