

Poet Laureate Remarks at Investiture Ceremony

King's House, 21 May 2014

I am deeply grateful for the honour bestowed on me. I am especially grateful to have been chosen in a process that required nominations from the general public. And I am happy that a great many persons have seemed to approve the selection. In the flow of good wishes, however, there has often been puzzlement. What will you be doing, actually? What is your remit?

I am to assist in the promotion of Jamaican poetry at home and abroad. I am to facilitate contact between Jamaican poets and our potential audiences, and help to increase and improve appreciation of Jamaican work.

I say “assist” and “help”; because there are of course a number of individuals and institutions already committed to doing these things. Prominent among them would be the Jamaica Cultural Development Commission, the National Library and our schools. There are poetry-related events such as the annual Poetry in Motion in Mandeville and the monthly meeting of the Poetry Society at the Edna Manley College. The Ministry of Tourism and Entertainment has declared that “Recognising and enhancing Jamaica’s cultural offerings form part of our ongoing initiative to diversify the tourism product.” It knows that Brand Jamaica must include achievement in cultural activities such as craft, food, literature, as well as music and sport. Some tourists have been attracted by events such as the Calabash Literary Festival (now once every two years) and newer programmes such as Arts in the Park. At home and abroad Brand Jamaica is promoted by the reputation of outstanding poets, such as Linton Kwesi Johnson, Olive Senior,

Edward Baugh, Lorna Goodison, Kwame Dawes, Earl McKenzie, Ralph Thompson, Mutabaruka, Jean Binta Breeze, Kei Miller and many others.

During my tenure I hope to involve some of the many poets whose work I admire.

I am keen to arrange for some of them to visit schools and colleges, as an activity not directly connected with preparing for exams. The poet would read for a short while – not more than ten or fifteen minutes – and then be involved in a dialogue, answering (or failing to answer) questions from the students. These sessions would aim to encourage enjoyment of poetry, free (insofar as possible) from the routine naming of literary devices.

I plan to arrange a few poetry readings of a more traditional kind, perhaps three per year, in different parts of the island. I am keen to arrange for poetry readings outside of Kingston, and it would be good if some of these events could be drawn to the attention of visitors as well as residents.

I hope to arrange some self-financing workshops for people who are already trying to write poems. Participants – not more than about ten per workshop – would be selected on the basis of submissions to the workshop leader, and asked to commit to a series of meetings – perhaps four or more.

I'll try to persuade some of the media houses to give more space and time to significant, well-crafted poems. Could there perhaps be a feature called, for example, "the Wednesday poem", which could be a focus for discussion in print or on the radio? If some of these are poems written before Independence the public would be reminded of, or introduced to, some early samples of our literary heritage. Most of these poems could, towards the end of the three-year tenure,

be included in an anthology which might also report some of the discussions generated.

I intend to help the National Library create a digital archive of Jamaican poets reading from their work. Poets will be invited to contribute; and there is older material to be explored (especially in the Library of the Spoken Word developed by the former Radio Education Unit at Mona).

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Our first Poet Laureate was “Tom Redcam” (Thomas Henry MacDermot). Of Irish and English descent, he was born in Clarendon in 1870 and spent much of his boyhood in Trelawny. He was a Jamaican patriot, who in 1904 started a publishing venture called The All Jamaica Library, to present “a literary embodiment of Jamaican subjects . . . all dealing directly with Jamaica and Jamaicans, and written by Jamaicans.” (*BBB*: Foreword) He was respected as a fair-minded journalist who helped to build the circulation of *The Jamaica Times*, and as a poet who encouraged other poets. In failing health he left for England in 1922, but the circle of his influence survived. The Jamaica Branch of the Poetry League planned to make him Poet Laureate on October 28, 1933, but he died in London on October 8. Tom Redcam’s *Orange Valley and Other Poems* was published by the Pioneer Press in 1951, with an Introduction by J.E. Clare McFarlane, President of the Poetry League.

Clare McFarlane, a black Jamaican, became Poet Laureate in 1953. He died in 1962, a prominent civil servant, the first Jamaican to become Financial Secretary. He described himself as “Poet and Social Philosopher” (*TJP* 153). His books include *Sex and Christianity* (1932), *Jamaica’s Crisis* (1937) and *The Challenge of*

Our Time (Essays and Addresses) (1945), and he wrote some long philosophical poems. He edited anthologies, *Voices from Summerland* (1929) and *A Treasury of Jamaican Poetry* (1949), and is the author of *A Literature in the Making* (1956), short studies of some Jamaican poets. His *Selected Shorter Poems* (1954) includes his best-known piece, "On National Vanity". It is a significant achievement.

Conceptions of what Jamaican poetry is, and what it can be, have evolved, and are evolving still. Language is a central, though not the only, element in the evolution. As Dahlia Harris put it recently, speaking on behalf of Minister Hanna: we hope for "poetry driven by a freedom to speak of ourselves . . . through forms, content and language . . . more reflective of who we are as a people."

Adolphe Roberts tells us Tom Redcam "urged the young who came under his influence to be as native as they felt it in them to be, both in manner and matter." (SGJ 91). Receptive to the range of Jamaican language, Redcam occasionally tried "dialect" (Jamaican Creole). A poem called "A Market Basket in the Car" begins: "Why? doan't I pay me car-fare? / Tuppence – same fe we two? / What you da mek up you face for? / You tink I is frighten fe you?" (OV 28) Clare McFarlane, though he acknowledged merit in dialect poems by Claude McKay, questioned the potential of the language: "Dialect," he wrote, "is a 'broken tongue' with which it is impossible to build an edifice of verse possessing the perfect symmetry of finished art." (LM 84) The Poetry League never invited Louise Bennett to their meetings, and McFarlane doesn't mention her in *A Literature in the Making*. Which is surprising; since some comments he makes about McKay's dialect poems might equally be applied to Louise Bennett's: McKay, he says, "has caught up

within his verse the spontaneous humour and infectious laughter of his people; he reflects their ability to make jest of their own dilemmas.” (*LM* 84)

Louise Bennett is crucially important. Her achievement cleared the way for a range of talents which came later – not only dub poets and the writers of reggae or dancehall lyrics, not only writers who often perform, but the whole army of Jamaican, indeed Caribbean, writers. She did not resist or generally oppose the use of English. She helped us recognize that literary achievement is possible in whatever language people speak.

Before Louise Bennett freed us up, might I have thought of rhyming “in-between” and “in”? A passage in “Advisory” (*IBT* 26) runs:

Remind them you’re committed
to the line
that saying what you feel
is fine,

positive or negative
or in-between.

Don’t let anybody
lock you in.

Before Louise Bennett freed us up, might I have acknowledged a distinction between “sufferers” (that is, people who suffer) and “sufferas” (that is, Jamaican poor people, a usage dominant in the 1970s)?

And then the revolution. Black
and loud the horns of anger blew
against the long oppression; sufferers
cast off the precious values of the few. (*IBT* 64)

Without the influence of Louise Bennett, might I who wrote “The day my father died, / I could not cry; / My mother cried, / Not I” (66) have written (*IBT* 75):

but agents of de owners-dem
is harder now to sight—
plenty busha doan ride horse
an’ some doan t’ink dem white. ?

Like many Jamaican poets – Ralph Thompson, Lorna Goodison, Olive Senior, Eddie Baugh, Kei Miller, Christine Craig, Opal Palmer Adisa, Winsome Minott, Tanya Shirley, Ann Margaret Lim and others – I write poems in international English, poems in Jamaican Creole and some that are a mixture.

As with the language, so with the attitudes that poems represent. A poet laureate is still a poet, trying to be true to feeling. Some poems may be unsuitable for national occasions, but will be written nevertheless. Some poems attempted on request may not be really happening.

And sometimes a poem will emerge which has engaged the poet and has expressed emotions nationally shared:

ANSWERING A QUESTION
(for Usain Bolt)

Greatness
is to false-start
an to feel di world
stop dead

Mi draw mi shirt off
leave di track
an watch di race
in shock

Greatness is to look inside
di failure
try mi best
to swallow up di pain

Greatness is
to get mi head to settle
on di nex event

run right dis time
an hear di stadium
goh wild

Mervyn Morris

References

- J.E. Clare McFarlane, *A Literature in the Making*
(Kingston: Pioneer Press, 1956).
- J.E. Clare McFarlane ed., *A Treasury of Jamaican Poetry*
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- Mervyn Morris, *I been there, sort of: New and Selected Poems*
(Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2006).
- Tom Redcam, *Becka's Buckra Baby*
(Kingston: Times Printery, 1905).
- Tom Redcam, *Orange Valley and Other Poems*
(Kingston: Pioneer Press, 1951).
- Adolphe Roberts, *Six Great Jamaicans: Biographical Sketches*
(Kingston: Pioneer Press, 1952)