

Remarks by the Hon. Dr. Wykeham McNeill
Minister of Tourism & Entertainment
at the Investiture of the Poet Laureate of Jamaica
King's House, Wednesday, May 21, 2014

SALUTATIONS:

- Your Excellencies, the Most Honourable Sir Patrick Allen, Governor-General and the Most Honourable Lady Allen
- Mr. Andrew Holness, Leader of the Opposition
- The Hon. Damion Crawford, Minister of State in the Ministry of Tourism and Entertainment
- Members of the Diplomatic Corps
- Poet Laureate of Jamaica, Professor, Mervyn Morris
- Members of the media, other distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, good evening.

In the creative language of writers, today can truly be regarded as a red letter day in Jamaica's cultural history, the significance of which will not be lost on those who understand and appreciate the immense value of the written and spoken word.

It is wonderful to be here today for the official installation of eminent academic and renowned poet, Professor Mervyn Morris as Poet Laureate of Jamaica. The first person to hold this distinguished title in over 60 years.

The title of Poet Laureate is bestowed by a government on a resident poet who has achieved excellence among his or her peers and whose work is significant in contemporary society. And what a fitting literary ambassador we have in our newly-appointed Poet Laureate.

His literary genius manifests feeling, affection and respect and his vast resume as a poet has carved a noteworthy imprint on both the local and regional literary landscapes.

There is an interesting history of Poets Laureate, which bears great significance on our activities here today. The post of Poet Laureate was created with the seeming purpose to praise Kings and Queens in poetry and celebrate a country's accomplishments and events in poetry. As a result, the Poet Laureate is often a distinguished published poet, hence the use of the laurel as a symbol of honour.

We all may have read Geoffrey Chaucer [*Canterbury Tales*] who was paid with a wine allowance during the 14th century for his duties as Poet Laureate. Nevertheless it is Ben Jonson who history recalls as the first English Poet Laureate having received a pension by James I in 1616. It took another fifty-two years (1668) for the Poet Laureate to be attached to an actual office with duties: to write verses commemorating royal and national occasions.

Here in Jamaica Thomas MacDermot, otherwise known as Tom Redcam, was posthumously named Jamaica's first Poet Laureate for the period 1910-1933 by the Poetry League of Jamaica.

Let us fast forward twenty years later to April 17, 1953, where at a civic function at the Ward Theatre in downtown Kingston, John Ebenezer Clare McFarlane was declared Jamaica's second Poet Laureate by the Poetry League of Jamaica. McFarlane, was himself a member of the Poetry League, and the fact that both Poets Laureate were members of the League caused some criticism among literary scholars. Incidentally, the Poetry League was a branch of the Empire Poetry League which was founded in 1917.

Since then we have had other great poets being elevated to this esteemed position. Claude McKay, noted for his pivotal role in the Harlem Renaissance and a contemporary of Langston Hughes, was considered Jamaica's unofficial Poet Laureate for the 1933 – 1953 period.

Our beloved Louise Bennett-Coverley, like Claude McKay, stands proudly among our literary giants and is a Poet Laureate in my book.

There was a time when we were required to memorise poems. Every school child knew by heart poems such as *Nature* by HD Carberry, *Song of the Banana Man* by Evan Jones, *Mary Dry Foot Bwoy* and *Colonization in Reverse* among others. The latter poems written in Louise Bennett's rhythmic style, made poetry accessible to the ordinary man. She wrote in our vernacular – *patois* - and this tradition of 'reciting a recitation' which Miss Lou so fondly encouraged, is one of our literary traditions.

Over the years many individuals have championed the cause for the investiture of a Poet Laureate. Many on the other hand have even questioned it. Nevertheless it is important to have such persons in our society to help to develop our art forms and promote the recognition of the literary arts, while helping to celebrate the accomplishments of our nation.

We in tourism think this is an important programme which will showcase our literary arts to the world. A few years ago the Jamaica Tourist Board spearheaded a campaign called 'Genius of Jamaica' where we celebrated giants in our musical, social and cultural history. It was a programme that made Jamaicans wherever they lived proud because it presented persons past and present whom the public knew little of, but who made stellar contributions to our society. Similarly, this programme is a celebration of genius, literary genius.

This Poet Laureate programme came about as a result of great collaboration. The Entertainment Advisory Board has for years championed the cause and has worked with the Ministry of Youth and Culture to bring it to fruition.

Now that the programme is fully established it will be housed in the National Library, which will be the Secretariat, as is the case in many other countries.

I want to take this opportunity to commend my Minister of State, The Hon. Damion Crawford; National Librarian, Mrs. Winsome Hudson, and Justine Henzell, Chair of the Entertainment Advisory Board's Sub-Committee on Literary Arts, on a job well done. Special thanks also to the other members of the hardworking team that has made this programme possible.

I am pleased that many Jamaicans, including several of our other notable poets, believe that Professor Morris has been executing the duties of Poet Laureate for decades, so this appointment now makes it official.

We look forward to great things from this programme. It is already bringing Jamaica great recognition as Professor Morris will appear at this year's staging of the Calabash International Literary Festival later this month. He has been invited by the Bristol Poetry Institute at the University of Bristol, in the UK, to speak at the Bristol Festival of Literature in October.

We are positive that this is but the first of many such opportunities where you will get the chance to spread our culture overseas.

Once again Professor, we congratulate you on this most deserved national honour, which recognizes your immense talent and exceptional accomplishments. We wish you success as you continue your extraordinary work as mentor, supporter and promoter of the spoken word.

Thank you.