

# City's poet refuses to sugar coat history of Redpath

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## FULL TEXT

Poets aren't always easy party guests. They tend to insist on telling uncomfortable truths.

The Redpath Sugar company found that out the hard way this week when a poem it commissioned to mark its 60th anniversary on Toronto's waterfront was deemed ill-suited to the festive celebrations.

The company, by way of the city's cultural programmers, had asked Toronto's poet laureate, Albert (A.F.) Moritz, to write a poem for the anniversary. He loved the idea, submitted his work this week and was scheduled to read it at Saturday's Doors Open event at Redpath's factory on Queens Quay.

But on Thursday morning, Moritz received word that his poem was dropped from the schedule. His poem, which addresses the less savoury parts of the sugar industry's history, was "not celebratory enough," he was told.

Moritz said he isn't sure what exactly the company didn't like, but he figures it was probably the stuff about slavery and the sugar industry's other historical injustices.

"The poem is about the totality of the industrial system, including the sugar production system from plantation to candy bar," he said in a phone interview. "So the creation of the plantation system with the consequent destruction of the previous Indigenous ways of life and so forth. It's not tremendously dark. It's not a thumping social protest poem against slavery or anything like that, but it distinctly has those elements in it. So my guess is that's what they didn't like."

A spokesperson for Redpath Sugar confirmed Moritz's poem was dropped from Saturday's event. "It is a beautiful poem that reflects upon the history of sugar and we hope to showcase it in the context of our museum where we highlight the deep roots and traditions of the sugar industry," Nancy Gavin wrote in an email to the Star.

"However, the event this weekend is focused on celebrating Redpath's history on Toronto's waterfront and our contributions to the City of Toronto, which the City will recognize with a presentation." Gavin said Moritz was still welcome to attend Saturday's event.

Sally Han, who manages cultural partnerships for Toronto, said the city asked Moritz to write the poem on Redpath's behalf. "Our understanding is that the organizers of the celebration event decided that they found the tone and some of the content of the poem too dark and not in keeping with their celebrations," Han said in a statement, describing Moritz's poem as "an exceptionally beautiful and thoughtful work."

Han said it's "entirely within the prerogative" of Redpath Sugar to decide what it wants to include in its celebrations. "Artists have a function and role in society to remember our collective histories, to speak truth, and to celebrate human accomplishment within the larger currents of history, time and place."

Moritz, who has written several commissioned poems, said he has never had one disinvited like this before, but he doesn't feel censored. He likened the situation to a couple not wanting something read at their wedding. "It's their event," he said. "You can't object to that."

Moritz's poem, which is titled "The Current of the Sugar," is written in the form of a glosa, which takes four lines from an admired poem and uses them as the last lines in a new four-stanza poem. The four lines Moritz uses are from a poem written in 1858 by John Redpath, Redpath Sugar's founder.

Moritz, who wasn't paid for writing the poem but saw it as part of his job as poet laureate, was excited about the assignment, in part, because industry and the industrial system have long been a focus of his work.

"I thought this poem request was right up my alley," he said. "It would bring out themes and knowledge that have been important to me as a person and my work as a poet for years."

Although he is disappointed by the company's decision, he said he is still grateful for the assignment, calling it "a kind of gift."

"I don't regret writing the poem at all just because Redpath doesn't want it," he said. "What this assignment did is evoke something in me and give me a chance to say it. It wasn't artificial in any way."

The lord gave us a beauteous flower  
To cherish for a day,  
And in the morn his angel sent  
To take our flower away.

-John Redpath

Down a shady lane through the sugar cane, the good  
old song tells us, a burly bum came hiking,  
singing of the land of honey. In the sun,  
the canes were arrowing far above his head,  
the white-shining flags, proud horsetails, each one made  
of thousands of flowers, each flower with its single seed,  
preparing the sugar of next year - our dower  
we never earned. Given for no reason from the earth,  
and beautiful. So that the cane could never be  
only a grass for humans to see and devour,  
wisely the lord gave us a beautiful flower.  
Soon the cutters would have to come to the fields,  
bent, with heavy knives felling the shade,  
cutting stems into even lengths, bundling, stacking,  
discarding the flowers, then in the sweat of their brows  
returning from the brutal beautiful sun  
in the cooler evening, the greatening dark, their children  
seeming to merge into night. And in this way,  
the old life in forests and on shores almost gone,  
the people lived, in mighty despair could laugh and pray,  
and the earth still had them to cherish for a day.  
I've seen the sugar in port before the lading  
being washed to exorcise the impure, the molasses  
that otherwise would settle to wormwood tar.  
We've seen the great bulk carrier in glassy or heavy seas,  
stolidly coming. In Youngstown once in the furnace  
we saw iron for her hull still only liquid fire.  
Our daughters were born and died, and in our mourning  
we went back to the office or the line,  
to the mill, now our whole world, our blessing, our warning.  
The lord saw, and sent his angel in the morning.  
One day by Sugar Beach the Solina docked -  
home port Nassau, under flag of the Bahamas, the heaven  
of the sugar cane. Was she the angel? - Solina,  
sunlight in the eastern wind, floating castle of steel.  
A towering loader stabbed its green beak down her hold,

swivelled ... into the factory bays poured torrents  
of raw grains. The whole current of the sugar lay  
there in our seeing, from sunburst panicle to marzipan rosette,  
the world-stream where all will drink health every day ...  
if the lord is not to take our flower away.

CAPTION: Poet laureate Albert (A.F.) Moritz was commissioned to write a poem for Redpath Sugar's waterfront anniversary and was supposed to read it at today's Open Doors event. Brendan Kennedy Toronto Star

CREDIT: Brendan Kennedy Investigative Reporter

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