

# '101 Selected Poems' from a poet of 102

## 101 SELECTED POEMS



Jawdat R. Haydar

**Jim Quilty**  
Daily Star staff

BEIRUT: "My years waxed old and my shoulders began / To sway like a sparrow hawk in the air / That's the natural destiny of man / Who wears out in the waste of Time un'ware."

These are the whimsical opening lines of "Old Age," one of Jawdat Haidar's "101 Selected Poems" (2006). They are all the more poignant for the fact that the poet is himself 102 years old.

Haidar belongs to a long tradition of Lebanese poets who compose in English. The line extends back to the early 20th century and includes the *mahjar* writers Gibran Khalil Gibran, Amin Rihani and Mikhail Naimy. Haidar was himself inspired by the *mahjar* and this collection includes poems dedicated to Gibran and Naimy.

Over his long life, Haidar has won international renown from a wide variety of patrons, from Pope John XXIII to the Arab League – which named him "Prince of Poets." The French awarded him the Medal la Croix de Grand Officier, and

his work also won him Lebanon's Gold Medal of Merit and the Order of the Cedars.

Haidar would be a significant figure even without the awards.

Jawdat Haidar was born in Baalbek into a large extended family of wealthy landlords, which, late in Ottoman era, produced a generation of Arabist rebels and intellectuals.

When he was still a child, the Ottoman administration deported his immediate family to Anatolia in return for their efforts to challenge Istanbul's rule in the region – deportations that were the subject of Fairouz's well-known film "Safar Balik."

"In those days the Haidars were among the wealthiest and most important families," says Beirut poet Rabih Haidar. "While the conservative branch of the family was one of those running Lebanon, the younger generation – Jawdat's age and slightly older – were Arabist revolutionaries, later politicians.

"The family was based in Lebanon but there were Haidars scattered all over the Arab world, involved in administrations in Syria, Iraq and Algeria. Jawdat's brother Rus-

toum was an important minister under King Abdullah in Iraq."

Jawdat Haidar has said that he first learned English from British soldiers who were then stationed in Baalbek. He later graduated from International College, one of Beirut's English-language high schools. After a sojourn in France, he attended North Texas State University, returning to Lebanon in 1928 with a degree in education.

### || 'For the last decade or so he has been obsessed with global peace'

Over the next 50 years he worked in the oil industry, trade and agriculture and dabbled in Lebanese parliamentary politics. After an adult life of writing in English, Haidar began writing Arabic poetry in the wake of his wife's death in 1982.

"He [is] quite an impressive figure, both intellectually and physically," recalls Rabih Haidar. "He didn't start pub-

lishing until quite late in life. His first book came out in 1980, the same year as my own."

Jawdat Haidar now has four books of poetry to his name. "Voices" (1980) was, like "101 Selected Poems," published in the U.S. "Echoes" (1986) and "Shadows" (1999) were both published in Lebanon.

His poem "Baalbek and the Ruins" (included in "101 Selected Poems") is part of the public school baccalaureate curriculum.

In addition to his writing Haidar has been an active member of the country's cultural community. He organized the return of the statue of poet Khalil Moutran to Baalbek. He also founded a group called "Oasis of Literature in the Bekaa," which, it has been said, was instrumental in bringing poetry back to post-war Lebanon.

"For the last decade or so of his life he [has been] obsessed with global peace and environmental matters," says his granddaughter Khatoun Haidar. "He's been terribly concerned with the dialogue between civilizations. When he went to America it was still the

home of the free, you see. He's been distressed about everything that's been happening in the last few years."

The selecting editor of "101 Selected Poems" was American University of Beirut creative writing professor Jayson Iwen. He has noted that Haidar's style reflects influences from the Romantic, Victorian and Modern periods – as reflected in titles like "In Memory of Wordsworth," "Rome and John Keats," "Shelley" and "Lord Byron."

That style moves from pastoral lyricism to "gritty vernacular." In addition to the odes and lyrics that are his preferred styles, Iwen has included a number of untitled "dream narratives."

"101 Selected Poems" moves from the lyrical to the nostalgic to the topical. The collection is well worth a look for anyone intrigued by Lebanon's long cosmopolitan history and the cultural production it aroused.

**Jawdat Haidar** "101 Selected Poems," selected by Jayson Iwen, is published by Vantage Press.