

Foreword

Tiny, cosmopolitan Lebanon has produced at least three poets of international standing, who have written in English: Ameen Rihani, Mikhail Naimy, and Khalil Gibran. All three emigrated to the United States as young men, and though they immersed themselves in the culture of the New World, they retained a love for their native land, recalling its mountains and streams, its orange groves and banana plantations and, of course, the famous cedars, in many of their writings. Mindful of the successive civilizations that have swept through the land, conquerors and conquered, all three writers were keenly aware of the passage of time, recognizing that though man might build and man might destroy, the land endured.

Following in this Libano-American tradition is Jawdat Haydar, born in Lebanon's Bekaa in 1906. Jawdat Haydar was first educated at the Syrian Protestant College (now the American University of Beirut) and later in France, and then in the United States, where he received degrees from North Texas State Teachers' College and Texas A. & M.

After returning to Lebanon, Jawdat Haydar became principal of the Universal College at Aley, and then went to Palestine to assume the directorship of the Najah National School in Nablus, being appointed, also, to the Higher Board of Education.

Then, in 1932, he joined the Iraq Petroleum Company, as Assistant Employment Officer in Syria. He then passed on to several other positions in the company, and at the time of his retirement in 1960, was Industrial Relations Advisor. Already, in 1950, he had been awarded the Lebanese Gold Medal of Merit.

After IPC he ran a car sales company, and after that he returned to the Bekaa to try his hand at farming. While Jawdat Haydar recognizes that farming has its rewards, he admits they are not financial, and so it is hardly surprising that he came back to Beirut, where he now works in the plastics industry.

Like the poems of Rihani, Naimy and Gibran, Haydar's reveal a philosophical quietude, an appreciation of the mystical life, which in no way undercuts their links with physical reality. Haydar's poetry is not escapist; rather it is committed and concerned, but in no way partisan. How could it be, coming from a man who has tried everything, and seen so much! He may write of Texas or Palestine, of Napoleon or De Gaulle, but in each case his concern is less with these places and people as they are, than their importance in relation to civilization and humanity.

Haydar's poetry reveals a catholicity of caste, not only in its wide range of subjects and themes, but also in terms of the writers who have left their influence on it. One can hear echoes of Tennyson, the down-to-earth plainness of Robert Frost, while in some of his more recent compositions, one can recognize a sympathy for modernism.

Yet, for all their associations with the poetry of other writers, Haydar's poems speak out with a distinctive voice. Behind the words we can sense the mind of a moral, committed man, a man who has watched life go by—and certainly enjoyed it—but who has also reflected on it. Not content merely with enjoying, he has sought to understand. He does not seem to like everything he sees, but rarely does he allow passionate outrage override his philosophical temperament. It is a civilized voice that one hears in his writings, and while his characteristic modesty would never allow him to covet the laurels which successive generations have awarded his better known, fellow Lebanese, Khalil Gibran, he can take pride in the fact that amid a turbulent and noisy world, he has created in his poetry an oasis of sanity. And this is something that few can lay claim to.