

*John
Waddington-
Feather:
Christian,
teacher,
writer, priest*



John Waddington-Feather is an Anglican priest, a retired schoolmaster, a longstanding friend and supporter of ACT and a prolific author and poet. Six of his poems are included here, together with his thought-provoking short story, 'The Teachers'.

John's children's novel, *Quill's adventures in Grozzieland*, was nominated for the Carnegie Medal in 1989, and his verse-play, *Garlic Lane*, won the Burton Award in 1999. In 2002 he was awarded the American DeWitt Romig Prize for his poetry. He co-directs the imprint Feather Books and edited *The Poetry Church* poetry quarterly, which he founded fifteen years ago, till 2008. John was the first chairman of the J B Priestley Society.

Born in 1933 in Keighley, he attended Keighley Boys' Grammar School and graduated in English at Leeds University in 1954. After university, he

served in the Intelligence Corps, where he gained his wings as a paratrooper. A keen sportsman in his youth, he played rugby in both codes and won a county cap for Sussex. (Hence his 'Rugby football' article published in the Summer 2009 edition of *ACT Now*.)

Some years ago John swapped one beautiful county for another; he left his native Yorkshire and went to live in Shropshire. For the past 40 years he has lived in Shrewsbury where he has taught, and has ministered in the local prison.

The Quill Hedgehog novels are a series of children's environmental novels with animal characters. The first, *Quill's adventures in the great beyond*, was written in the 1960s as a protest against pollution and urbanisation of the countryside.

The Revd Detective Inspector Blake Hartley novels are set in spectacular Yorkshire Pennine country. The lead character is an Anglican non-stipendiary priest, who with his loyal Muslim sergeant, Ibrahim Khan, solves crime on their home patch of Keighworth, West Yorkshire.

Chance Child (Part One) is a romantic historical novel set in the West Riding and Prague between 1930 and 1945, covering events leading to the outbreak of war and the war itself. The novel contains strong emotional content and portrays a violent battle between members of the English

Starlings

Winter starlings speed across the sky,
gathering in number as the dusk draws near;
patterns of flight change, are lost,
then re-appear as by some arcane signal
they change their course.
They disappear a while behind the trees,
then suddenly whirl to sight their numbers
swollen to a black frenetic cloud
tearing through the air.
Again, again they come and go
as light diminishes; frantic, it seems,
to find a roost to rest, yet still scouring the sky,
when, like a bolt, they fall, scores of them
into the poplars, chatter and shriek a while
then fall dead silent right on cue.

And we like starlings wheel and start,
rise and fall through frenzied skies of life;
then silent sink to rest in gathering gloom
to await the dawn.

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And must it be?

And must it be that we are forced
to tread the gloomy road to blank oblivion?
To walk into the mist of death
and simply disappear?
Or walk the promised Way
in hope which kindles faith,
a Way which guides *our way*
in love and peace and fellowship with Christ?
We have the choice – God or no-God,
nothing in between.
If no-God, then oblivion;
if God, then hope and faith in Christ,
faith in an other-life,
which colours all our living here.

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class system, as well as their war against the Nazis. *Chance Child (Part Two)* covers events from 1945 to 1960.

Three plays by John Waddington-Feather are currently in print.

- *Garlic Lane* is a one-act humorous verse-play set in West Yorkshire in the 1950s. First produced at Leeds Civic Theatre in 1972, it was revised and given a rehearsed reading by Bingley Little Theatre in 1998. In 1999 it was awarded the Burton Prize and described by one critic as the best verse-play since *Under Milk Wood*. A recording of the play was made live at Bingley Little Theatre in 1998 and is available on compact disc.
- *Easy Street* is a humorous full-length verse-play set over a week in a West Yorkshire mill town, with the Seven Deadly Sins acting as Narrators introducing each day's action. It was first produced at Leeds Civic Theatre in the 1970s and subsequently revised.

- *The Lollipop Man* is a full-length play about the homeless and much else based on the author's experiences as chaplain in a night shelter and prison. It was staged in Yorkshire in autumn 2002 and published in 2003.

Other books by the author include:

- *Visions in the Winter Dark*, which contains translations of three early Anglo-Saxon Christian poems with an introduction for newcomers to Anglo-Saxon verse by Walter Nash.
- *Yorkshire Dialect*, which is a comprehensive survey of the origins of English dialects and a selection of Yorkshire dialect literature from the 8th century poet Caedmon to the present.
- *Times and Seasons*, which is a collection of hymns and songs by David Grundy and John Waddington-Feather.

John writes ... *I settled in gentle countryside five miles south of the county town, Shrewsbury, in a place called Old Coppice. As its name suggests I live surrounded by trees, mainly silver birch trees. Half a mile away*

Summer Scene

The land waxes fat,
and deep the woodland pigeons
croak their calls;
swallows skim the trees
and higher still the shrieking swifts
sift out the air of flies;
the hedges buzz with scent,
with dog-rose and sweet honeysuckle;
and somewhere far away
a cuckoo sings her final song
before she flies away.

Summer's here at last!

Its blue skies thrive,
its meadows and its ploughlands
lush the near-ripe fields,
and all's aglow with sunshine
near to heaven –
and so am I!

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Lyth Hill Walk

Martins fleck the sky above the Lyth,
And one keen-eyed kestrel combs
The gorse and bramble rough for food;
Higher still two buzzards sword the air
With piercing cries, quartering their land
For carrion and prey.

Beyond, across the valley, Caradoc and Wrekin
Hold their watch, just as millennia ago
They saw the legions march the road
To Viroconium; and later still saw Norman overlords
Dot the waste with mottes
To guard their new-won realm.

Ancient, these blue hills in the haze
Harmonise with farms and woods below,
Co-ordinate an age-old beauty
Which is Shropshire's own;
And though I walk this way a thousand times,
That sudden vista from Old Coppice road
Will never fail to thrill.

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on the crest of the little rise behind us is an exceptional escarpment called Lyth Hill; a conservation area which overlooks magnificent views.

Across the valley below lies another range of hills which includes some of the oldest hills in Britain: Wenlock Edge, the Wrekin, Caer Caradoc, Lawley Hill. Swing round another few degrees and you view the Stretton Hills and Long Mynd. In the far distance lies Clew Hill and on a clear day hints of the Malvern Hills, Elgar Country. But closer at hand is countryside made famous by the poet, A E Houseman, and the Shropshire novelist, Mary Webb, whose old home lies a stone's throw from my own beneath the Lyth.

Recently, my ego was boosted when the county authority decided to replace the old topography stone on the crest of the Lyth. It's a large boulder which has embedded in it a tablet describing all the points of interest which can be seen from the Lyth, all the hills I've mentioned above.

These details will be on the new topography rock with the addition of two poems: one by Mary Webb

describing the flora on the Lyth, and another by myself. It came as a great surprise to be told that the committee responsible for the topography stone had chosen my poem in which I've tried to capture the thrill I have each time I walk the Lyth, the sudden coming upon the breath-taking view as you leave the little lane which leads to it.

In summer the countryside is ablaze with colour. Lush green meadows sprinkled with crimson poppies, hedgerows alive with wild roses, golden cornfields blazing in the sun, all surrounded by hills blued in the quivering light.

And on a tablet of stone on the crest of Lyth hill, alongside Mary Webb's poem will be my own and my name inscribed on stone. After my initial reaction of delight, a more sober one took its place. Now that I've reached my three score and sixteen years, I suspect that the next time my name appears on stone, I'll be under it!

Spring 2009

The trees lift up their homage-arms on high,
Drinking in the sun, feeling their way
To Spring. Sap-rise surges everywhere,
Greening the pregnant fields again for Summer's
Fruit; and waxing full, the round buds gently
Nudge their way to leaf; open shyly
Coaxed by the wooing sun. All life
Pulsates: flowers bloom, birds sing, hares leap –
And this old poet writes verse!

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Gerry Gent

There was in Florida a guy called Gerry Gent,
a rabid Atheist, whose one intent
in life it was to scupper Christmas, Easter,
Pentecost and all religious feasts
which Christians celebrate throughout the year.
That done, he'd have a go at Jews and queer
their pitch, stopping Pesach, Yom Kippur;
next, the Muslims and their Id-ul-Fur;
then the Sikhs, the Buddhists and Hindus –
the lot he'd ban and make a jinjus
of all Godly practices and rites.
He did for Christmas in old Golden Heights,
a little township on the western coast
which brought in Winterfest, and made the boast
it never favoured any church or sect –
it was, in truth, Politically Correct
in every walk and part of civic life;
there was no bias, never any hint of strife
in Golden Heights; democracy the keynote
of its call as elsewhere in the States; one vote
one person, freedom of speech and liberty-

and Gerry Gent cried all of these to
cite discrimination 'gainst *his* creed
of Atheism. He even went to court to plead
that all religious Days and Feasts be banned.
Since Atheists had no such day, he claimed,
nor should Christians and their ilk.
His lawyer spoke most passionately, no milk
and water sopiness was his, but fire
and brimstone words he poured before the judge.
His Honour sat unmoved and wouldn't budge;
'Case dismissed!' he said. The lawyer asked him why,
protesting Atheists had no Public Holiday.
'You're wrong,' declared the judge. 'Read where
it states: "The fool says in his heart there
is no God." Psalm 14. Quite clear.
I'll read it loud in court for all to hear;
and there you'll find much else is writ for fools
like Mr Gent. I cannot bend the rules
and I pass judgement, better or for worse –
henceforth the Atheists' Holiday is April First!

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The Teachers

Ustaz Mahmoud was a quiet gentle man, a scholar and retired Professor of Islamic Law from the University. He was devout Muslim and, of course, well read in the Qur'an and Islamic Scriptures. As a result he had a sect of loyal followers, both men and women. Yet, though he was so mild and gentle, saintly, he was passionate about justice; and when the General declared his version of Shari'a Law in a Country where more than half the population was Christian, he opposed it fiercely and found himself in prison as a result.

To impose Islamic Law and beliefs on non-Muslims went against everything Mahmoud believed in and had taught. 'There are many roads to Allah among the sincerely religious,' he once said, 'for Allah has made it so. For Muslims the way is through His holy prophet, Mohammed, may his name be blessed. For Christians that way is through Jesus Christ, and for the Jews through Moses and the Law. No man must impose his beliefs on others. Faith comes from the heart, from experiencing Allah, honouring Him and living in peace with all.'

To impose Islamic Law and beliefs on non-Muslims went against everything Mahmoud believed in and had taught

Mahmoud was outspoken against the imposition of Shari'ah and that rankled the radical foreigners. In fact, all the evils of the Country had come from abroad: the secret police, armaments – and corruption in high places, which bled the country dry. The General and his ineffectual officials lived in luxury, propped up by the army. Around them millions lived in poverty and

were dying from the greatest famine in years to ravage the Country.

Ustaz Mahmoud had many followers in the University and elsewhere. They lived a simple pious life, meeting secretly in prayer and singing psalms, secret because the General had banned their sect and his police were hunting them down. Indeed, the General's police arrested anyone who contradicted him. He had his own football team and woe betide any team which beat it. It finished season after season unbeaten at the top of the league.

He was already in his early fifties when Jack Pedwar volunteered to teach in the Country. In England education was in upheaval as the old Grammar Schools were replaced with large comprehensives. A lifelong Grammar School master, Jack Pedwar was not happy in the new system; in fact it depressed him so much he was near a break-down and was offered early retirement, which he took. When he recovered he began looking for jobs in an educational paper; now he could begin planning his own life and work in a system he believed in. Though he was ordained, he didn't feel called to parish ministry. He was a born teacher, but he helped in his parish church and also in the local prison.

He fancied a spell of teaching English as a foreign language in one of the well paid colleges overseas: Switzerland, the south of France, Italy, Greece, with long holidays and a place in the sun where his wife could join him. His family were grown up and he'd only his wife and himself to care about now.

His eye skimmed the Overseas Jobs page. There they were, all those plum jobs abroad he dreamed about ... till he saw a small advertisement at the bottom of the page: 'Teachers urgently needed for Africa. Only the dedicated need apply.' Something within him responded and on impulse he applied for the job despite his wife's

reservations. His reason told him he'd be too old (and he hoped his reason was right!), for it was for the young, the newly graduated; not middle-aged, old-fashioned teachers like him.

Before he knew it he'd been called for an interview in London, got the job despite his age and was sent on a course to learn basic Arabic and familiarise himself with the way of life he was about to enter – a very different way of life he was to discover; a way of life in which Jack Pedwar found his real self.

The General and his ineffectual officials lived in luxury

Within the month he was in Africa, stepping off the plane at the City airport into blistering heat. The air was thick with silt, the light blinded him and the heat swept over him in waves. Never had he experienced such heat.

Along with fifty other teachers all much younger than himself and full of idealism and enthusiasm, he was bussed into another world, the Third World. The culture shock was intense. The hotel they lodged him in was called El Shark, 'the East', in Arabic, but the conditions were nearer its English spelling. It was dirty, cheap and seedy, and there Jack picked up his first bout of dysentery.

Flies were everywhere and lean, mangy cats jumped on the tables greedily to eat remnants of food. Nothing was wasted. It was a time of famine. As he lay on his bed, in between bolting to the Arab loo, Jack wondered why on earth he'd volunteered to teach there. Weak and shaking he watched a termite burrowing slowly inside the plasterwork up the

crumbling wall. At intervals, the odd rat scurried across his room from a hole somewhere in the opposite wall and darted into the passage through the open door. He stayed there a week till he was found lodgings in an Arab house in the suburbs, a cycle ride from the University.

Teachers urgently needed for Africa. Only the dedicated need apply

Jack worked in the English Language Support Unit (ELSU) helping science undergraduates with their command of English. His new lodgings and place of work were Paradise after that week in El Shark. He was lucky to be appointed to the University. The rest of the teachers he'd flown out with were trucked to all parts of the Country: to townships in the desert in the west and north, or to the port many miles to the east, a day's journey at least. In time, some were sent home early ill and one died in a cholera outbreak.

The City was surrounded by desert, which crept through the suburbs into the very centre. Sand and silt were everywhere. When a sand-storm was unleashed the sun was blotted out and street-lights (such as were still working) were switched on. Life came to a standstill till the storm had passed: nomads travelling through the City halted just where they were and sheltered behind their crouched camels; all traffic ceased and wrappings were hastily thrown over engine bonnets and shutters were hurriedly pulled down over windows, few of which were glazed in the village where Jack lodged.

The land was barren except alongside the River where farmers tilled strips of irrigated earth. The country's lifeline, the River ran its entire length, entering from the mountains in the south and running through it to the Country north before winding through a delta to the Sea.

Adding to the daily grind of life was the Famine. There had been no rain for seven years and no crops that year in areas away from the River. Thousands trekked across the desert trying to reach the City from bordering Countries and outlying

regions. The military kept them at bay fearing cholera and typhoid, forcing them into makeshift Camps ringing the City five miles or more into the desert. There they huddled in their miserable shelters made from whatever they could lay their hands on, fed by international charities which brought in food, medicines and blankets.

When he'd settled in, Jack employed two houseboys from the Camps: the only way they could leave was with work permits. The elder was Hassan, in his forties and old by the standards of the Country; the younger was Mohammed. Hassan had been a merchant from a neighbouring Country east. He'd run foul of the Communist regime there and fled. Mohammed also had fled the regime while studying at college. On top of this, they were fugitives from famine raging across the region and had survived the long march across the desert. Thousands hadn't.

Ustaz Mahmoud continued his fearless preaching even from prison. The General promised him, and his followers imprisoned with him, that they'd be freed if they'd only recant and agree to Shari'ah Law. They refused. So nightly on television the General appeared attacking Mahmoud, bleating about how good Shari'ah was for the Country, while all the while unrest was simmering among the populace at large and opposition to him was coming to a head in the University. Jack had unwittingly walked into an impending revolution!

His colleagues were a mixed bunch: of different faiths, different nationalities and different religions. The Head of ELSU was Doctor Ellen, an Egyptian Coptic Christian. Next in line was Andreas, a Greek Orthodox Christian. Then came Abdallah, a black American convert to Islam and an ardent follower of Ustaz Mahmoud. Jack shared a desk with a Muslim, Hamsah, the first-born son of a powerful Sheik's first wife. He had four others. Educated in India, Hamsah was at once westernised and traditional. He rarely used a knife and fork when he

Jack soon settled into his new routine, teaching English to undergraduates

ate: usually his fingers, and out of the University he dressed like an Arab. He and Jack became firm friends. Then there was the secretary, Kavita, a Hindu, whose father was a professor at the University. Finally there were Mustafa, the middle-aged fat gaffir, who oversaw the office and tended the little garden outside in between sending Mabek, the young Dinka office-boy, on countless messages to various parts of the University because the telephones didn't work. Mabek was jet black and came from the tribal south. Tall and lean he was related to the Masai over the border. So Jack's new colleagues were a very mixed bunch, who grew closer as the tension rose on the campus and beyond; grew into a family. Very different from the dispirited unhappy staff-room he'd left behind in England.

Jack had unwittingly walked into an impending revolution!

Jack soon settled into his new routine, teaching English to undergraduates with only a piece of chalk and a blackboard. No sophisticated teaching-aids here and unlike England, he was listened to intently and thanked by his students each day as they left the lecture theatre. English teachers were at a premium and they knew it. Teachers were treated with great respect by the population at large as the bearers of knowledge and high standards of living to the next generation. Their role was akin to the imams and priests.

He also picked up a second job quite by chance at a school run by Italian nuns in the Roman Catholic Cathedral precincts. Their English teacher had suddenly resigned, leaving the fifth year high and dry in the middle of their leaving-exam course. Jack was approached and agreed to help them. So there he was, an Anglican priest, teaching English to Muslim and Christian girls in an Italian Roman Catholic school. Being an Italian speaker, he also coached the nun who taught science. And it was while cycling to the school he first met Moses, a deaf-mute who lived close by the Cathedral.

When petrol ran out, the serious rioting and looting began

Moses had his pitch right next to the Cathedral. His home was simply a niche in a wall across the alley from the school. His entire possessions were stored in a hole in that wall by which he slept each night wrapped in his tattered blanket. Moses was in his twenties I guess; of medium height, but well built compared with many of his fellow Countrymen. He was also intelligent, as Jack Pedwar discovered the longer he got to know him. Despite the famine raging then he had enough to eat: the good nuns made sure of that. There was sufficient food in the Capital, which was why so many refugees headed for it, trekking hundreds of miles across the great desert to get there – if they were lucky.

Moses never begged. He picked up the odd job here and there in the City, working in the souks and returning each night to his pitch. Sometimes he was there when Jack left the school to go back to the University. Then, he'd stop and chat with Moses as an unspoken friendship developed between them. Neither spoke the other's language, but they communicated well by signs and facial expressions. When they'd done, Jack would mount his bicycle and ride off, Moses holding his saddle and jogging beside him till they reached the University, where Moses would wave goodbye and run back. It was as if the mute was making sure he'd got back safely, and Jack was glad he did this as the tension in the City mounted and violent mobs began to appear on the streets. As the violence began to increase, Moses, by deftly manipulating the saddle, would direct Jack back safely through back streets and alleys to avoid the riots.

The weeks went by and the violence grew. Mahmoud and his followers became the focus of the growing unrest against the General. His corrupt government fuelled the crisis. When petrol ran out, the serious rioting and looting began. Food could no longer be brought into the City by road. Of course, it was still flown in to the

luxury hotels in town where foreigners lived and the General entertained his guests – and where the hungry and dying lay round the high security fences outside.

The heat and disease began to take their toll on Jack. It was inevitable given the conditions he lived in in his Arab village. He picked up dysentery again and a mild form of hepatitis. The heat overpowered him and he'd lay for hours under his mosquito net sweating profusely as his body tried to cope. Yet he grimly carried on teaching and, as the political situation became graver, the more closely knit the staff at ELSU became. Moses began staying on at the office after a time, sipping the tea given him before returning to his pitch.

Then came the day when Ustaz Mahmoud was paraded before the cameras on television in a show trial. Again he and his followers were offered freedom if they'd recant. The General and Mahmoud stood face to face, the General almost pleading with him, for he knew what would inevitably follow if Mahmoud stood firm. Like King Herod before him, faced with the same problem, the General knew he would have to execute the Ustaz to save face and, when Mahmoud was hanged, the Country was plunged into civil war.

He watched with horror as Mahmoud mounted the scaffold

A Christian Colonel in the army from the south mutinied and took his troops into the bush to fight the General and supporters of Shari'ah. His resistance led to a bitter civil war which went on long after the General fled the Country. Riots began on the University campus and the secret police moved in. Abdullah was arrested and thrown in prison along with many other students and staff. And finally Jack himself had to flee when he went into a lecture and found: 'Death to the Unbeliever! Death to the Imam Nazrin!' scrawled on the blackboard. The extremists were onto him.

He'd seen the execution of Mahmoud while crossing the bridge near the prison

on his way to the University. The arch of the bridge over the river gave him an unbroken view into the prison yard where a rent-a-mob gathered screaming for Mahmoud's blood. He watched with horror as Mahmoud mounted the scaffold, a frail old man, railed at by the crowd. He stood with dignity as the noose was placed around his neck, then in a moment it was all over and his body was carried off by a helicopter to be dumped in the desert and eaten by dogs. The General wanted no martyr's burial, yet by killing the Ustaz he sealed his own fate. The riots turned into whole-scale revolution and the army moved into the streets. So did the secret police.

After witnessing Mahmoud's execution, Jack Pedwar hurried to the University which was in turmoil like the rest of the City. Following the threat on the blackboard, his name was placed on a hit-list. Many of the dissidents were his friends and he was targeted by the police and others.

Hamsah was the first to meet him at the office and said he must go into hiding at once. He had relatives, dealers in the desert north of the City where he could hide up till they could get him out of the Country; but first he had to get Jack to his relatives. The streets were full of rioters and if he fell foul of them anything could happen. So Hamsah told Jack to go straight to the Cathedral where he'd be met and taken to safety in the desert.

He'd almost reached the Cathedral when it happened. As Jack turned a corner, a mob, out of control, came rampaging down the road. It was out to beat up anyone it came across and didn't like. Jack's white face and European dress stood out a mile and they were onto him immediately, screaming for his blood.

He turned and fled, running into the network of alleys leading from the road. The mob followed. Jack staggered on till he entered a blind alley and leaned against a broken door gasping for breath. Just as he thought the game was up, the creaking door opened and Moses peered out, frantically signalling for him to come inside. He'd followed Jack, seen where he was going then caught up with him there. Jack stumbled through the door, and as his eyes got used to the half-light inside,

he found himself surrounded by pale, ravaged faces – lepers!

He'd seen the lepers in the City come out after sunset when it became cooler. During the day they hid up, sheltering from the heat outside, but came the evening they emerged into the streets and souks to beg. He was in a leper-house surrounded by lepers of all ages and both sexes, who stood around him examining him closely in silence. The mob outside gathered round the door and hammered on it. An old leper more disfigured than the rest opened it. The mob drew back at once in horror and left double-quick.

Moses took Jack into a back room and gave him a sorely needed drink; and when the mob had gone, he gestured for Jack to follow him back to the Cathedral. He followed Moses to the Cathedral, where a very worried Hamsah was waiting for him.

he found himself surrounded by pale, ravaged faces – lepers!

There they were sheltered by the nuns till the mobs had left the streets, then Hamsah and Jack set out for the village north of the City where Hamsah's kin had their tents. They were full-blooded Beda Arabs who traded across the desert from the port in the east to the Countries of west Africa.

It was the last time Jack saw Moses and his colleagues at the University, for a week later he was spirited to the airport by night and flown out on the last flight before the airport was closed. A month later the General was toppled and also flew out to live happily ever after on the

wealth he'd salted away during his years in power.

Abdullah and Mahmoud's followers were released from jail and continued living peacefully and prayerfully as was their way. Moses joined Mabek at ELSU and in time became the gaffir there when Mustafa retired, moving onto the campus into a small one-roomed dwelling by the gates. Teaching resumed at the University and the Revd Jack Pedwar became chaplain of a small prep school for the remainder of his career where he spiced up his Divinity lessons with tales of his adventures abroad. Later he tried his hand at writing, not without some success, and perhaps one day he'll return to Africa where he discovered his real self.

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Ustaz = professor, teacher

Gaffir = caretaker, janitor

Souk = market place

Imam Nazrin = Christian priest

Feather's Miscellany 3

by John Waddington-Feather

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In October, Feather Books are publishing the third number of John Waddington-Feather's annual *Feather's Miscellany*. The new number, almost 200 pages, contains a collection of *The Keighworth Chronicles* short stories, poetry, essays and hymns written during 2009.

Copies are available at £9.99 \$20 a copy (postage paid) from Feather Books or any bookseller.

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