ONE BY ONE

by DAVID PRYCE-JONES

Seven by Five, by H. E. Bates; preface by Henry Miller; Michael Joseph; 25s.

In a book about the short story published some twenty years ago, H. E. Bates wrote, "A story must, so to speak, be weighed in the hands, to a fine and intuitive test," and if this is done successfully, a writer will achieve a "balanced perfection." I have, so to speak, been weighing Mr. Bates' own stories in my hands, and the test is certainly an intuitive one. Each story gives a promise of development, of matter, of being *about* something, but with few exceptions each story disintegrates, puffs away into the air like the little breezes at evening which Mr. Bates is fond of describing. Yet each story works up a brief accretion, and the reader is left pursing his lips, or thinking "Huh" to himself. After the weighing, this is perhaps the intuitive test.

The unfortunate result of the "balanced perfection" as far as Mr. Bates' stories are concerned, is that it leaves no impression in the mind. Each story is readable and self-contained and quite unmemorable. That private "Huh" sweeps plot and character back into Mr. Bates' pages and leaves nothing but impressions, faint and fleeting. For Mr. Bates is a surface writer, and if there are depths implicit anywhere in his work, he prefers to leave them alone, and because of this turning away from his subject matter, or even laziness, to use a ruder word, Mr. Bates is not a professional writer in the best sense. He is a magazine writer instead, but of his kind, able and responsive. In another sense too Mr. Bates is not a professional writer: he does not care about the handling of words. Women are all too often maddening, a big range of things are delicate or dazzling, people are always turning suddenly to look away.

The stories in this collection fall into a few clear categories. There are the tales of the countryside, full of rustics with scythes or a skill at tickling fish, and serving girls who dumbly consent to their masters' wishes. In some ways these are the best, for they have acquired a period charm. What was once probably honest reporting now seems nostalgic. The only story with any dubious connotation belongs to this group: an idyllic life shared by two farm girls is broken up by the arrival of a boy-friend from India. (Mr. Bates is a very proper writer, although to his credit, not pulpit-proper.)

Then there are the tales of small-town life, generally set in a place called Evensford. The best of these has the title *Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal,* and is about a charlady caught at a chi-chi party. This leads to the third kind of story, which is the epitome of the mild, negative English view of class. A major or a colonel is slightly above or below his station; a wife is worrying whether the grand guests will come to her party; a tipsy squire clings to his heritage. Again, one of these stores, *The Evoluation of Saxby,* has a little edge to raise it above the general level, although marred by insistence on a symbol, in this case an umbrella.

Finally there are the lyrical stories, which are about a seduction, whether bitter or sweet. Mr. Bates usually sets these out of doors or on beaches, or if in towns then at the height of summer. A man is alone, nearly always in a hotel or hired room, meets a girl whose clothes fall apart to reveal the maddening sight which sends the blood pumping into his throat and—the reader can turn to *The Kimono, Across the Bay, The Enchantress.*

The curio of the book is Mr. Henry Miller's preface. Who could have prophesied that the author of *Sexus* or *The Rosy Crucifixion* would have admired Mr. Bates' writing, since picking it up a year ago at a writer's conference in Formentor? In it Henry Miller finds an obsession with pain, the enduring of which "goes beyond the point of the heroic," and also "a full, robust humour, often bawdy, which I must confess the British writer seems to have lost in the last few centuries." Here is a cat who has put a heavy leaden bell around his own throat.