A. E. Coppard & H. E. Bates

The Little Farm Country Matters Love for Lydia

If Herbert Ernest Bates had not been twenty-seven years younger than his mentor, A. E. Coppard, the two of them could have set up a firm: Coppard & Bates, Purveyors of Rural Life. Both were born poor, both were engrossed by a region of the English countryside and settled in it, both shunned the social traffic of the successful writer, and both lived modestly till the end of their days, in what Bates called "country self-sufficiency." And both, therefore, came to be taken at their own valuation, as minor practitioners of the short story on rural themes. Today, like most writers half a century or so from the time and place they wrote about, they exist in that limbo that is perilous for the reputation of authors both great and small; they are just too far from our daily lives to provoke vivid recognition, not far enough to be rescued as fascinating antiques. Yet their stories—those of Bates especially—take such a grip on unchanging themes—first love, betrayal, self-righteousness, stoicism in adversity—that they appear to write, though in a fading idiom, with absolute sureness about country and provincial life of any time.

Alfred Edgar Coppard was born in Kent, in 1879, to a chambermaid and a tubercular father, a tailor, whose death left the nine-year-old boy destitute and at the end of all the formal education he was to have. For the next twenty years, he padded though an interminable variety of menial jobs—errand boy, warehouse boy, grocery clerk—including some so alien to our century that they sound like low-character occupations in an Elizabethan comedy: one was "street vendor of paraffin."

From boyhood on, he retained two passions. He begged or borrowed every book in sight, and when he wasn't bent over them indoors he was outdoors running on the South Downs. For ten years, indeed, he was a professional sprinter in various parts of the country and soaked up the juices of the landscape and the people who lived on it. In his thirtieth year, he got a job as an accountant in an ironworks in, of all places, Oxford. That may sound improbable to an intending tourist, but when, early in the century, factories began to smoke in the countryside of Southern England, Oxford failed to act on the foresight of Cambridge, which passed a local ordinance forbidding industry to come closer than eleven miles. On the contrary, the Oxford that Coppard knew had printing and ironworks, in 1912 an automobile factory, and very shortly was a center of the steel and electrical engineering industries. But the university was there too, and in the evenings Coppard fell in with undergraduate literary types, with Aldous Huxley and L. A. G. Strong and Richard Hughes.

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Unlike other poor-boy authors, he was not put out by this exposure to the upper and upper-middle classes. He looked on them neither as enemies nor as people he ought to pretend to know about. He remained a sympathetic outsider, preserved from sycophancy by striking good looks, a strong sardonic vein, and a flourish of cranky opinions. Thomas Hardy remained his favorite novelist and Thackeray his abomination.

He had a long struggle getting published. His first stories came out when he was in his early forties, but once he left Oxford and retreated for good to the country, he acquired a small and faithful readership, possibly more cynical than the wider audience for Bates, since Coppard, even in a real and fictional world dominated by conservative provincial types, by farmers linked to the fortune of their crops, by the intrigue and gossip of a market town, did not mask his proclaimed identity as "a socialist and a materialist, with an instinctive dislike of parsons, policemen and military." He may have mellowed toward the end (he died at seventy-nine in 1957) but not sufficiently to recant his ideal of conduct: "To do unto others what ought to have been done unto them long ago."

Bates's early life is almost a predestined copy of Coppard's though nothing like so bleak for so long. He was born in Northamptonshire, in 1905, in the harsh countryside that fringes the Midlands' industrial towns. His father was

Above: Peter Firth, Penelope Wilton (standing), and Claire Sutcliffe in Coppard's "Sullen Sisters." Opposite: Bates's "Breeze Anstey" (top) featured Morag Hood and Meg Wynn Owen. In "An Aspidistra in Babylon," Carolyn Courage is the lover of retired officer (Jeremy Brett).

a shoemaker with the single hobby of walking with his young son, winter and summer, through the motorless roads, the towpaths, the blackberry hedges, the small woods. "Out of this unprepossessing midland earth," Bates wrote, "sprang all my feelings and love of the countryside." He took a free place at a grammar school, left it at sixteen, became a newspaper reporter and loathed it. He went into a warehouse as a packer, evidently a lazy packer and a quick one, for he boasted that he often had most of the day left to write short stories on the company time. When he was twenty he was unemployed, on relief, and hawking a novel round London. Nine publishers turned it down, and the tenth gave him the undreamed-of advance of twenty-five pounds.

During his early twenties, his publisher's reader, Edward Garnett, told him his stuff was "Thomas Hardy with water" and made him destroy or rewrite and rewrite. He found himself in the early 1930s retired to a cottage and in the next forty-odd years put out seventy volumes of fiction and essays. (In the Second World War, he broke away for the duration from "country self-sufficiency," was commissioned as an official army writer, became a squadron leader in the Royal Air Force, and, under the pseudonym of Flying Officer X, wrote his only best-seller, *Fair Stood the Wind for France,* the story of a bomber pilot brought down in France and saved by the local country people.)

The longest of his stories to be dramatized for television (in twelve episodes) was *Love for Lydia,* a chronicle of the fortunes of a small factory town planted in farming country in the Midlands, and of the effect on its middle-class mores of the arrival of the young heiress to a factory fortune. A languid, taunting girl, Lydia is always just ahead of her neighbors in acquiring the nervous sophistication of the 1920s, its fads and frivolities, but Bates, a romantic puritan, plots for her a doom, through tuberculosis, that parallels the decay of the town as it moves out of the era of wonderful nonsense into the despair of the great Depression. It is a slow, bitter, relentless tale, Hardy with gall and wormwood, but Bates's sympathy for even the most feckless characters is unwavering. Henry Miller, an unlikely convert to stories so grave and placid, thought of Bates as his favorite writer of fiction and has put his finger on three qualities most characteristic of him: "An uncanny insight into women; an extraordinary eye for the physical world; and a strong belief that the supreme mark of the hero is the ability to endure pain."

Most of the time, in Bates, we are in the presence, as somebody else said, of people "to whom pleasure and tragedy are homely things: the heart adapts—and copes."