

H. E. BATES

as Rupert Croft-Cooke sees him

(Mr. Bates' new book of country life, "*The Country of White Clover*," is to be published next Monday, May 26, by Michael Joseph.)

WITH one reservation the story of H. E. Bates is the old-fashioned success story—from village boy to distinguished and best-selling writer. The one reservation is the fact that, although the distinction has been his since his first novel was published twenty-five years ago, he did not produce a best-seller until the war, so that he can never be more than a very moderately rich man. The Inspectors of Inland Revenue will see to that, as they will with all artists whose success has come since 1940.

Otherwise the story accords with precedent. It is one not only of natural talent, but of the right kind of ambition, of long, industrious effort, of patience and poverty and at last of sudden, almost overwhelming triumph. He is the only living writer to have achieved the distinction of being called by his initials, like G. K. Chesterton, or H. G. Wells, and the fact that his might stand for ambassadors or high-explosives does not deter his friends, for whom he is always "H.E." Only those strange people who study reference books about contemporaries know that they stand, normally enough, for Herbert Ernest.

In the South of England we are apt to think of all Northerners and Midlanders as townsmen and industrial workers. H. E. Bates



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was born in the small Northamptonshire town of Rushden, but by hereditary and natural inclination, he has never been anything but a countryman. And he has never wanted to follow any calling but that of a writer. Before he left school he quietly set about the job he had chosen, and before he was twenty had completed his first novel, *The Two Sisters*, which was published, with a preface by Edward Garnett, before he was twenty-one.

He always produced the impression of being committed, or perhaps dedicated, to special purposes, and this gave the rest of us little sympathy with him when we were all contributing our first bits and pieces to the short-lived highbrow reviews of those days. While we racketed about London and talked of what we were going to write, H.E. got down to it and began publishing the long series of short stories and novels which has continued till to-day. I don't think we liked him much for this virtuous assiduity. And when at the age of twenty-six he married a girl from a village near his home town and settled down to produce and bring up a family, I expect we called him bourgeois.

Not that it would have worried H.E., even if he had known it. He was far too concerned with the little cottage he had bought in an out-of-the-way Kentish village. Between him and his seventeen-year-old wife and their parents, they managed to get together enough furniture to make it habitable, and when they moved in, the top of the van was packed with boxes of the plants which Bates had been raising for their new home.

His next ten years will sound dull to those who expect a writer to starve, or die of consumption, or run away with another man's wife, but they were a time of almost incredible achievement, for, without ever reaching more than a small esoteric public with his books, he succeeded in keeping himself, his wife and the four children who were born to them, in making a garden and improving his house. To do this he scarcely missed a day at his desk, and wrote nature articles, reviews and countless short stories as well as several novels.

He had his more exotic longings though. His wife describes him as falling asleep in an armchair at night when at last he had stopped writing, with a pile of bulb catalogues on one side of him and a collection of travel agency leaflets on the other. His one abiding ambition was to travel, but it was not until the year before the war that he was able to get as far as Yugoslavia.

A year after the outbreak of war, he was given a commission in the R.A.F., his job being to write short stories. This must have been the first time in history that one of the fighting services employed a novelist in his own capacity—though there has never been any shortage of fiction in official reports! The results startled everyone, including H.E. himself, for the instantaneous and reverberating success of the Flying Officer X stories was as deafening as the explosion of a land-mine. What he had never achieved for his own profit, he had done as a uniformed officer whose sales did not benefit him directly.

It was only a beginning, though, since books under his own name, *Fair Stood the Wind for France* and *The Cruise of the Breadwinner*, so interpreted the spirit of fighting Britain that their sales ran into scores of thousands. He became one of the biggest sellers of our time. He was sent to the East, and the countries of India and Burma, which he had long wanted to see, so enchanted him that he says now that he never passes a day without thinking of them.

And the result? How does the Cinderella motif work out in real life? What was Dick Whittington like as Lord Mayor of London? It is all very right and cheering. H. E. Bates is a comfortable-looking paterfamilias with one grown-up and three teen-age children. And all his ambitions are being realised one after another. Instead of leaving the cottage and garden, into which so much work had gone during the lean years, he has beautified and enlarged both. For his front door he ordered a Queen Anne hooded porch in perfect keeping and period with the house as another man might order a new hat. For his walls he has at last been able to buy the pictures he has wanted since boyhood. A shining, black-tiled bathroom shimmers at the end of the passage. The garden is a lovable thing God wot. He entertains generously, but not pretentiously. He has not, in other words, launched out on a new life, but while continuing to live in his Kentish home has done all the things he wanted to do and planned to do one day. A lesson to the suddenly emancipated.

See him, then, coming home from a committee meeting of his local village cricket club, a stocky, sunburnt man whose bright silver-grey hair looks slightly absurd and irrelevant above a young, enthusiastic face. Still a keen gardener. Still an industrious writer who sits for fixed periods at his desk in the summer-house. Still looking for the perfect phrase which for the most part eludes every member of his calling. Still uneccentric. Still busy, happy and absorbed. The good boy of modern letters.