

'H. E.' BATES

Herbert Ernest Bates, known even within his own family as 'H.E.', was born in Rushden on 16 May 1905. Robert Lusty, writing in the Dictionary of National Biography, stresses Bates' quiet and reflective personality, his love of country walks, nature study and gardens but when we turn to the introduction of his autobiography, 'The Vanished World', and read about his childhood years in Rushden, we can see that his early years must, at times, have been very hard.

Childhood Memories

His parents, grandparents and family friends all worked in the boot and shoe industry and he lived in a comparatively poor and rough part of the town. He describes the street in which he lived as '... wholly of brick, not all red but ranging from plain white at the southern, more respectable end to a shade of dreary dreadful puce-blue at the other. There were two boot factories in that street and two more within sight of his house. His memories of Rushden in the first decade of the 20th century was of boot factories, bakehouses (few of the cottages had proper ovens) and chapels all woven in amongst the houses, with the pattern occasionally broken by a beer-house or sweet shop. As with many autobiographies, the author allows his mind to wander, and selects those aspects of his life which to him or her seem most interesting or relevant. Bates' own memories, backed up, he writes, by old photographs, bring to life the men who worked in the factories, with their long black cut-away jackets, their bowler hats or flat, almost peakless caps, boots on their feet, mufflers round their throats. At work their clothes were protected by long white aprons.

As a small boy he carried his father's tea into the factory. At that time the buildings were about 20 years old and he describes them as being three-storied, made of brick with heavy wooden front doors and windows made of thick, opaque glass. He went to school well before his fifth birthday and this must have come as a shock to the quiet little boy. His playmates in the street had filled his head with the horrors to be expected both within the school-room and the playground. When the dreaded day at last arrived, he put on a 'gigantic tantrum' only to be thwarted by the arrival of his step-grandmother. She completely ignored his protests, caught hold of his ear, and unceremoniously dragged him along the two streets between the safety of home and the unknown but easily imagined horrors of school, pulled him up the steps and deposited him inside the door of the local infant school. As so often happens, his

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terrors were unfounded and after the first few weeks he was accepted by the unruly bunch of children and quickly learnt to read and write. Children's clothes, children's games, the struggle that some of their neighbours had in keeping the children clean, in dirty cottages which were lucky to have even cold taps in the kitchen, all these memories of his childhood in Rushden flitted through his mind as he sat in faraway Kent, putting together the first chapters of his autobiography. When he was 11, he moved on from the local school to Kettering Grammar School, having been awarded a free place.

His Love Of The Countryside

Bates was not a man whose autobiography would contain chapters of grateful memories concerning his old school and his schoolmasters. He credited his education and the two great loves of his life, books and the countryside (three if you include gardening), to his father and grandfather. His maternal grandfather, George William Lucas, was a highly skilled boot maker, in the days before machines were in general use, and lived at Higham Ferrers. As a young boy, Bates often visited him and there was a deep sympathy and affection between them. When the grandfather had been a young boy, he had worked as ploughboy on a farm and during the long and distressing period of unemployment, before the first World War, he left the boot industry and set up as a smallholder on five acres of land.

So, at the age of about five, Bates began to gain direct experience, not only of country life but also of the hard daily work of a smallholder, with too much work for one man and not enough land to make it economically possible to take on another. On those days when the weather was unsuitable for farm work, the old man and the young boy would set off with the pony and trap and explore the countryside of Northamptonshire and across the county boundary into Bedfordshire. So the young H. E. Bates grew up in an ambivalent world of dark and industrial streets on the one hand and the open, unspoiled countryside of the early 20th century on the other.

His father, who had had no choice but to spend his life within the world of boot making, had turned for consolation to music, books and country walks. As soon as his first-born son was old enough he took him out on ever-longer walks, unconsciously teaching him about the wonders of the countryside. Even before most people would have considered his son old enough, he almost, without thinking, taught him to read. While the boy was still very young he was encouraged to read the wide range of books on his father's book shelves.

He Begins To Write

Although Bates ended his years at Kettering Grammar School with

good examination results he did not go on to further education. The one schoolmaster who made a serious impression on him was the English master, who joined the school when Bates was just 14. 'Write' he said '... from your own point of view'. Bates did just that, and knew that from then on it would be only a matter of time before he became an author. His headmaster suggested to his father that they should apply for a scholarship to Cambridge University but this was at a time when a scholarship would cover little more than tuition and a few books. Without a second thought Bates turned down the opportunity but he was sorry when his father then insisted that he should leave school and the world of books. However, his father was also adamant that he should avoid work of any sort in the boot industry and allowed him to wait for the right opportunity to come along. Meanwhile he earned his keep on his grandfather's farm. Just before his seventeenth birthday he applied for, and got, the position of junior assistant reporter on the Northampton Chronicle. The salary was ten shillings a week. Like all cub reporters, the most trivial, most boring and most time-consuming jobs eventually ended up on his desk. He accepted them all, he was writing and supporting himself – just, but the work was made intolerable by the editor and his alcoholic friends.

Rushden Hall

One gloomy evening, just as it was getting dark, he was sent to research a story at the Elizabethan mansion on the edge of the town, known as Rushden Hall. Writing his autobiography, more than 40 years later, he could remember the two great wooden gates, the big iron-handled bell-pull and the never-ending drive leading up to the front door. Entering the hall was like stepping into a refrigerator. Confused by the extreme cold the teenage boy, from the back streets of the industrial town, stood in the doorway trying to come to terms with the vast, wood-panelled hall and its numerous doors, draped in dark wine-coloured curtains. The details of the rest of that visit were soon forgotten, only his first view of the hall was etched on his memory.

Love For Lydia

A few weeks later, he was out on another story, when he saw a young, dark-haired and vivacious girl sitting alone in the back of an expensive car. She had to be going to The Hall and the memory of the smart car and expensively dressed young lady, against the background of the smoke-blackened buildings, was also filed away. It wasn't long before he left the newspaper office and unpleasant editor but sometime around 1950, nearly 20 years after leaving Rushden, he was mentally back in his home town. He wrote about a town with 10 chapels and 50 boot factories, a father who was a man of gentle and unargumentative temperament who loved music and an editor who 'looked like one of

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those model porkers, fat and pinkish, squatting on his hind-legs with an advertisement for sausages in its lap . . .'. He added a girl with 'long coils of black hair that fell across her shoulders, so that she seemed to be wearing a hood'. She was in a car and he could only see part of her face and her raised coat collar; she was travelling to an old house with a hall where a draught of east wind, clear as a knife, whipped under the door.

These memories, knitted together, form the opening pages of his well-known book, *Love For Lydia*. However, this was far from being his first successful novel.

The Author

Soon after leaving the newspaper office he became a clerk, a position which left him with a great deal of free time. He was soon writing again with great enthusiasm, persevered and in 1926 soon after his twenty-first birthday, his first novel, 'The Two Sisters', was published. He married in 1931 and moved to Kent. During the war he was a Flight Lieutenant and at one time worked in Public Relations at the Air Ministry; this led to a series of novels based on the experiences of himself and his friends. Although his stories were pure fiction and his well-known characters grew as they went along into likeable heroes and loveable rogues, many people reading the *Uncle Silas* series can recognise places along the Northamptonshire/Bedfordshire borders, while others, reading 'The Darling Buds of May', can recognise places in Kent.

He was awarded the C.B.E. in 1973 and died on 29 January 1974.