H.E. Bates and the rural community:

from cobbled gloom to the darling buds of May.

K.D.M. Snell

'Go with the stream, never battle against it'.[1]

'If I claim nothing else for myself as a writer I will not deny myself versatility'.[2]

Introduction

H E Bates was born in 1905 in Rushden (Northamptonshire), educated in nearby Kettering, and published his first book, *The Two Sisters*, in 1926. Thereafter, he rapidly gained a wide reputation for his stories about English rural life. During those inter-war years his output included *The Fallow Land* (1932), *The Poacher* (1935), *A House of Women* (1936), and *Spella Ho* (1938), which were largely set in his native Northamptonshire, and he also established himself as a master in the short story or novella genre. Those stories often eschewed plots and represented episodic pictures, cross-cut through experiences, capturing fine details, significances, mood and personality in everyday life. He thought the short story 'the most fascinating of all prose forms... perfectly suited to the expression and mood of this age... of unrest, disbelief and distrust'.[3] Its appeal to him lay in the fact that it could be more concentrated, pictorial and visionary than the novel.[4] As a male writer of that time, he was remarkable in his sympathetic efforts to depict women's points of view and experiences. He moved to the village of Little Chart in Kent in 1931, converting an old granary into a home,[5] accompanied by his wife Madge Cox and in due course four children, seemingly glad to escape the boot-and-shoe towns of his home county, although he remained attached to

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[1] H.E. Bates, *An Autobiography* (London, 2006), p. 514.

[2] *Ibid.,* p. 470.

[3] H.E. Bates, 'The writer explains', in *Country Tales: Collected Short Stories* (London, 1938), p. 10.

[4] Bates, *Autobiography*, p. 486, citing Elizabeth Bowen and the highly visual A.E. Coppard.

[5] H.E. Bates, 'Concerning authors' cottages', in J.W. Robertson Scott (ed.), *The Countryman Book* (London, 1948). As he explained to Joe Braddock, who had hovered shyly around their garden wall: 'We are only ordinary folk & don't keep servants & aren't snooty, & we like people to come in...My wife was scared at you with your hand on your bike thinking you were a travelling communist come to pot'. Northamptonshire Central Library (hereafter NCL), letters of H.E. Bates (letter 2, to Joe Braddock, 29.1.1935).

Higham Ferrers and its surrounding countryside. *My Uncle Silas* (a collection of short stories based on his relative Joseph Betts) appeared in 1939, and he returned to this popular character in some later work.

During the Second World War he was drafted into the RAF as a non-flying officer/ author, enjoying remarkable freedom under the auspices of RAF Public Relations, his brief being to write stories on air warfare. He did this under the pseudonym of Flying Officer 'X'. His conversations and experiences with fighter pilots and Stirling bomber crews over this period produced publications such as *The Greatest People in the World, and Other Stories* (1942), *How Sleep the Brave, and Other Stories* (1943), *Fair Stood the Wind for France* (1944) and *The Stories of Flying Officer 'X'* (1952). Other stories and novels such as *The Purple Plain* (1947) or *The Jacaranda Tree* (1949) were based upon short experience in India and Burma at the end of the war, where he was sent by RAF Public Relations.[6] The war-time themes continued in later writing, as for example with his evocation of the Battle of Britain and its pilots in *A Moment in Time* (1964). Yet after the war he is best known for further writing on rural England, usually on Northamptonshire or Kent, sometimes still set back in the inter-war period, such as *Love for Lydia* (1952) or *The Sleepless Moon* (1956), and for much more optimistic and up-beat stories featuring the Larkin family, such as *The Darling Buds of May* (1958), *A Breath of French Air* (1959), *When the Green Woods Laugh* (1960), or *Oh! To be in England* (1963), which were largely set in Kent. Another strand of writing could be classed as nature writing, such as *Through the Woods* (1936) or *Down the River* (1937).

A highly readable three-volume autobiography was published between 1969 and 1972, shortly before his death in 1974.[7] Bibliographical work is still under way to trace all his enormous literary output, but he wrote about 126 major works, at least 323 short stories and novellas, and a couple of hundred essays, articles, commentaries and introductions. He also wrote a limited amount of poetry, but confessed later that 'I never reckon I understand

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[6] I will not discuss these evocative and atmospheric 'eastern' novels (and related short stories) at any length here, for they were based upon limited experience; they do not strike me as knowledgeable of ex-patriat communities (unlike Somerset Maugham's or E.M. Forster's writing, which influenced them, or the later J.G. Farrell); and my interest here is in Bates as a novelist of English community and rural life.

[7] Archival material on H.E. Bates is very dispersed. Original papers, correspondence and other material are in Northamptonshire Central Library; Rushden Library; Northamptonshire County Record Office; The National Archives; Senate House Library, University of London; the British Library, London; Reading University Library; the King's School Canterbury; the John Rylands Library, Manchester; the West Yorkshire Archive Service, Bradford; the National Library of Scotland; Aberdeen University Library; the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center Library, University of Texas at Austin; the Beinecke Library, Yale University; the Lauinger Library, Georgetown University, Washington; the Huntington Library, California; and more is in family hands. Among his children were Jonathan Bates, the film sound editor (who died in 2008), and Richard Bates, the television producer (who produced the TV serialisation of *The Darling Buds of May* in 1991-3).

the mechanics of verse-making very well'.[8] Bates struggled for some years to make a living from his writing, being well aware of 'our extremely uncertain profession', as he put it to another author.[9] Yet he was immensely popular during much of his lifetime, and he has been extolled by authors as diverse as D.H. Lawrence, W. Somerset Maugham, Henry Miller and Graham Greene. The latter referred to him as Britain's successor to Chekhov, and he has also frequently been compared to Turgenev and Guy de Maupassant. One reviewer in 1988 extolled 'his exuberant power of physicality, of evoking settings with delicate intensity', adding that he has 'a capacity for imaginative sympathy that is almost miraculous'.[10] Recent discussion by Dominic Head sees him as quite radical and 'ground-breaking', a writer in whose work 'ideas of belonging and the needs of subsistence are seen repeatedly to be at odds', which will 'give him a new currency'.[11] Bates's work has been widely adapted subsequently into film and television serialisation, especially after his death in 1974, and it is probably through such films that he is best known today.[12]

He was, without doubt, one of the most significant twentieth-century English rural writers, perhaps eclipsed in some estimations only by the Powys brothers and D.H. Lawrence. Many of his plots have echoes of Hardy's novels – compare *The Feast of July* with *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* – even though he distanced himself from the allusive complexity and symbolism of Hardy's discursive prose styles: learning 'the near-fatal lesson of Hardy', and thereafter 'getting more atmosphere into ten words than Hardy...and his kind could often get into a page'.[13] Bates prided himself on an economy of style, which is notable in his short

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[8] NCL, letters of H.E. Bates (letter 46, to Joe Braddock, 15.1.1955).

[9] NCL, letters of H.E. Bates (letter 21, to Joe Braddock, 21.1.1940). He was active also in efforts to enhance sales and library proceeds to authors.

[10] B. Baker, 'H.E. Bates, storyteller', *The New Criterion*, 6 (March, 1988), p. 72, reviewing H.E. Bates, *A Month by the Lake & Other Stories* (New York, 1987).

[11] D. Head, 'Writing against the nostalgic grain: H.E. Bates in the 1950s', *Literature and History*, 19 (2010), pp. 5, 13.

[12] The key text on his life is his exceptional autobiography, originally published as three separately titled volumes: *The Vanished World* (1969), *The Blossoming World* (1971), and *The World in Ripeness* (1972), superbly illustrated with line drawings by John Ward; and these are now available as H.E. Bates, *An Autobiography* (London, 2006), (its drawings sadly unacknowledged there). See also D. Vannatta, *H.E. Bates* (Boston, 1983); D.R. Baldwin, *H.E. Bates: a Literary Life* (Ontario, 1987); P. Eads, *H.E. Bates: a Bibliographical Study* (London, 2007). An excellent guide to his works, the 'H.E. Bates Companion', is being authored by Paul Machlis at http://www.hebatescompanion.com (5.2.2010). Critical discussion of Bates is remarkably limited, literary critics so often concentrating on the 'big name' authors, a point stressed by D.A. Hughes, 'The eclipsing of V.S. Pritchett and H.E. Bates: a representative case of critical myopia', *Studies in Short Fiction*, 19:4 (1982), pp. iii-v. W. Allen, *The Short Story in English* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 262-7, has a few unperceptive thoughts on Bates.

[13] Bates, *Autobiography*, pp. 243, 277; see also his critical comments on Hardy in H.E. Bates, 'Thomas Hardy and Joseph Conrad', in D. Verschoyle (ed.), *The English Novelists: a Survey of the Novel by Twenty Contemporary Novelists* (London, 1936).

stories. Thackeray's dictum that 'the work of fiction contains more truth in solution than the work which purports to be all true' was one that Bates agreed with and wished to put into practice.[14] He shared the focus upon individuals and their contexts found in W. Somerset Maugham. But his writing had more social and gendered breadth, more sense of community or its absences, and much more appreciation of women's viewpoints and feelings – one early publisher reading a manuscript thought that this author (signing as H.E. Bates) must be a woman and replied 'Dear Miss Bates'.[15] Dennis Vannatta wrote that 'Bates's contribution is distinctive because it is sociological and historical as well as literary. Like Joyce, Lawrence, Faulkner, and Hardy in an earlier time, Bates captured the heart and soul of a locale and its people. Bates's Yoknapatawpha County was the English Midlands; and his novels, novellas, and short stories of life there…comprise a rich, colorful, living tapestry'.[16] His authorship is especially notable in covering a period of such intense change for the countryside, from 1925 till 1974.

My interest here is in his changing depictions of rural and small-town community life, from the occupational communities of farming and boot-and-shoe producing Northamptonshire, through the war, to his more bucolic and usually family-centred stories set in the post-war countryside. For his writing seems to epitomise a fundamental shift in focus, perhaps hinted at in the titles of his autobiographies, which may have wider significance: from fiction set in often struggling occupational communities that were already experiencing marked decline – being among the last literary representations they received – to tales of fighter or bomber squadron *camaraderie* and senses of community during the war, to stories extolling a bucolic and somewhat extended family life in which 'community' as hitherto represented was largely absent. It is time to assess this long literary career, which I do here as a social historian, and to ask whether its versatile shifts of emphasis represent changes that may have wider historical significance.

Themes, mood, detail

One of the clearest statements of literary purpose by Bates is in an unpublished letter to his close friend Joe Braddock. He was advising Braddock about a 60,000 word manuscript which that author had given him for comment. Bates wrote that:

> 'I miss the essence of fiction – the creation of fictitious characters outside the author himself, their creation so that I am interested in them, believe in them & become entertained or moved by them... The novel is no place for opinions. The reader can't

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[14] Bates, *Autobiography*, pp. 394-5, 419.

[15] W. DeAth, 'The quiet world of H.E. Bates's, *Illustrated London News*, 6898 (26.5.1973).

[16] Vannatta, *H.E. Bates*, pp. 130-1.

> wait while you deliver a homily on Keats. It simply can't be done... It isn't fictitious enough... you write like a painter, which is as it ought to be. The colour on the page is firm and delicate. You can smell the countryside... you're a poet & shouldn't be writing novels... Any writer needs to get a quarter of million words off his chest now & then just for the sake of hearing something. If I had anything to do with your salvation as a writer I'd send you out... & make you write something about the first person you saw. I'd make you project yourself into the lives of outside people, & all the time write & write & write. If you're to be a writer of fiction, Joe, you must do it. It's people, people all the time, & you're the worm that must nose under their skin & eat into their minds & suck their blood & find out what they are & what they're made of. I hope this isn't preaching. It isn't meant to be. It's just my honest feelings about the whole business'.[17]

His interest in people could hardly be more firmly expressed. It comes also in the final words of his 'The writer explains' (his introduction to *Country Tales*), where he stresses his 'passionate interest in human lives'.[18] As he commented on the work of the American writer, Katherine Anne Porter, 'This girl can create aristocrats or farm-hands at will, & so should any novelist, more or less'.[19] This sensitive interest in people, linked to his capture of *mood* through accompanying detail, makes him intriguing to social historians. The meaning of detail is paramount in Bates. He even criticised his work by saying that 'in the early stories... I showed a dangerous appetite for sucking the significance out of trivialities – dangerous because it came to me so easily and naturally that it threatened to become a habit'.[20] He felt then that this limited his scope as a writer and constrained his development of literary characters.

These personal and social priorities were coupled with contrasts in sensitivity between characters, alert judgements of beauty, and an ability to visualise like a painter, which have led some to comment on 'the pictorial simplicity' of his prose, on his 'prose-pictures'.[21] We have seen him comment above on how Joe Braddock wrote 'like a painter, which is as it ought to be. The colour...is firm and delicate'. So often people's judgements of others tell one more about themselves. Bates would often seem like a poet writing novels. It was rightly said

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[17] NCL, letters of H.E. Bates (letter 19, to Joe Braddock, 28.10.1939).

[18] Bates, 'The writer explains, p. 10.

[19] NCL, letters of H.E. Bates (letter 16, to Joe Braddock, 10.6.1939). Bates is referring here to three novellas of Katherine Anne Porter, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (New York, 1939).

[20] Bates, 'The writer explains', p. 8.

[21] R. Howe, 'A tribute to H.E. Bates's, *Northamptonshire & Bedfordshire Life* (March, 1974).

in an obituary that 'he wrote with a precise felicity… [as] a prose poet'.[22] He commented in one of his letters about his *The Flying Goat* (1939) that 'It's true that there is a return to lyricism & tenderness in it'.[23] This was a man striving to escape ugliness, an intricate and subtle watercolourist of exceptional personal empathy.

Prominent among his themes are the meaning of love, the milieux in which it might flourish, what happens when it is rebuffed or never experienced, and the related issues of personal isolation and community. The contexts for much of his writing were the countryside and the boot and shoe towns of Northamptonshire, and the developing edges between them: the edges of the poacher,[24] the property speculator, the garage mechanic. The urban for Bates is constantly intruding upon the rural, which is often semi-rural as a result.[25] In Bates the accounts of this land and its small-town societies are needed as constraining fields and walls for the interplay of affections and the exploration of relationships. His frequent bleak imagery of this countryside reciprocates the thwarted, partial or unfulfilled relationships that so often occur in his writing on the inter-war years. He was then the novelist of unreciprocated affections, of love offered yet unreturned, of missed fulfilment. 'Women wilted, like flowers, from lack of attentive nourishment'.[26] Their bicycles have slow punctures.[27] His characters hope for stability and permanence, but usually fail to find it. They offer or receive the emotional security of night-time lorry drivers, caravan dwellers, drunken huntsmen,[28] or itinerant salesmen. All too frequently they regard each other like indifferent or opportunistic strangers in greasy cafés. This is a land of emotionally thwarted domestic servants and ruthlessly calculative, miserly small farmers. Indeed, the two often connect.

If one were to pick a characteristic season for Bates, when he writes on inter-war Northamptonshire, it would be the late autumn or winter. Many of his characters seem to fit that prospect-less and hollow season, for they are frequently hardened, insensitive, callous,

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[22] 'Obituary: Mr H.E. Bates, Novelist and Writer of Short Stories', *The Times* (30.1.1974), p. 16, col. E.

[23] NCL, letters of H.E. Bates (letter 17, to Joe Braddock, 10.7.1939).

[24] H.E. Bates, *The Poacher* (1935, London, 1984).

[25] H.E. Bates, 'The Daffodil Sky', in *The Daffodil Sky and Other Stories* (1955, Harmondsworth, 1959).

[26] H.E. Bates, *The Sleepless Moon* (London, 1957), p. 241.

[27] H.E. Bates, 'The Ox', in *Seven by Five* (1963, Harmondsworth, 1977). Bates's women are often vulnerable, indeed, they are victims of the most extreme violence in his novel set in India after Partition, *The Scarlet Sword* (1950, Harmondsworth, 1974).

[28] See H.E. Bates, *Through the Woods: the English Woodland – April to April* (1936, London, 1995), pp. 104-7, for scathing accounts of the hunt, in which huntsmen are labelled as 'whores' and 'belchers'.

romantically deprived and niggardly in what they offer others. This is markedly apparent in works like *The Sleepless Moon* – that bleak novel of shallow lower-middle class life and marital disappointment, where the purchase of a gramophone by a man for his wife is a substitute for a sex life. Such characterisation is present also in the ironically named *Dulcima*,[29] or in many of Bates's short stories.[30] If there *is* a community out there, it seems to bring little hope or fulfilment to such people, who are so ill-suited for human warmth and affection, or whose hopes for love flounder in the meanness of their lives.

Allied to this one finds in Bates's inter-war writing a recurrent imagery that brings to mind the moods of some of G.K. Chesterton's writing – 'the sadness of things out of their time'[31] – of pathways to old decaying houses, dark roads, slushy mud, cold ice-skaters, winter weather. These are seasons that induce rheumatic fever or slow declines into tuberculosis. An accompanying theme, appropriately, is that of hopeful escape: from these south midland landscapes and their squabbling boot-and-shoe towns, from 'maungy' chapel deacons and their miserable Methodism – and so to London, to the war, or further afield to the Alps, Yugoslavia, the Far East, to Pacific islands. Most of these were settings of other writing by him. This was Bates's own biographical trajectory, one that he relished,[32] and it is followed by many others in his fiction. As Bates wrote of one character who becomes a mountain climber: 'he graduated from what is sometimes called a centrist. His world enlarged.'[33] This writing of escape seems a corollary of what I discuss below.

The urban 'occupational community'

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[29] H.E. Bates, *Dulcima* (1953, Harmondsworth, 1977). (Dulcimer: sweet, soft, gentle; or cf. the folk music instrument, with its elliptical body and usually three strings plucked with a goose quill).

[30] Stories such as 'The Park', in *Country Tales*, with its hollow empty house as a symbol of a marriage; 'The Ox'; 'The Flame', in *Seven by Five*; 'The Wild Cherry Tree', in *The Wild Cherry Tree* (1968, Harmondsworth, 1973); 'The Mill', or 'The house with the apricot', in *Country Tales*.

[31] Bates, *Through the Woods*, p. 114.

[32] His pleasure at different landscapes and people is well shown in his correspondence, for example from Yugoslavia: 'You should certainly come here. A magnificent coast, with oranges & lemons, mimosa & irises now all going strong. But inland – entirely different. Barbaric, bitter hills, with Turkish-fezzed peasants getting a living off an ass, an ox, & two square yards of earth & subsisting on what looks like goat-flesh from some year B.C. A fascinating country. Very warm here now. Pitilessly hot, I think, in summer. Ever H.E.B.' NCL, letters of H.E. Bates (letter 10, postcard to Joe Braddock, 7.11.1938?). Or consider this letter to Joe and Muriel Braddock: 'Madge & I are home after our long trip – West Indies, San Francisco (a living city, a sort of Pacific Paris) Honolulu, (such girls as you never saw, on land or sea) Fiji, (superb men, Muriel) Samoa (more & still superb men), Tahiti (girls again – easy come, easy go, Joe!)'. NCL, letters of H.E. Bates (letter 43, 29.4.1954).

[33] H.E. Bates, 'The snow line', in *Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal and Other Stories* (1961, Harmondsworth, 1962), p. 190.

Bates was brought up in Rushden in Northamptonshire, a county strongly associated (along with Leicestershire) with the boot and shoe trade. This was 'a town built around a single industry'.[34] His work probably includes the best representations in fiction of that trade and its working communities, its structures and the people who were associated with it. The trade was partially an 'putting-out' one, which in his life-time combined small factory or warehouse work with the putting-out of many work processes to operatives in their own homes or ancillary domestic workshops. Small factories were often located in between rows of terraced houses. Such a nineteenth-century structure flourished well into the twentieth century, and its environments comprised an occupational community in the sense that there was such dense and inter-linked participation in the trade, following the movements of incipient products. The class differences, roles of women and children, seasonal work, housing, workshops, inter-war hardships and related issues were a focus for important fiction by Bates, and his writing helps to elucidate the nature of such an occupational community. The industry later changed radically, being liable to many closures and take-overs after 1945. There was rationalisation of production and increased mechanisation of all processes – many of which previously took place in home workshops, such as cutting, tacking, sewing and stitching – and changes in materials away from leather, which resulted in the net loss of many footwear jobs.[35]

As Bates describes it in his *Autobiography* or *The Feast of July*, this was an intimately experienced urban 'community', in which the knowledge local people have about each other is seemingly almost complete.[36] His fictional accounts tend to focus upon one family, but show its ingestion within an entire industrial system of out-work. The environment is permeated with the smell and sounds of boot and shoe manufacture: the acrid greasy-sharp smoke of leather burning, the workshops with 'their rolls of kip and calf and belly-leather and

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[34] Bates, *Autobiography*, p. 202. This trade was overwhelmingly centred in Northamptonshire and Leicestershire. On the boot and shoe industry in Northamptonshire, see H. Rydberg, 'The location of the English shoe industry', *Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography*, 47 (1965); P.R. Mounfield, *The Footwear Industry of the East Midlands* (Nottingham, 1967); R.A. Church, 'Labour supply and innovation, 1800-1860: the boot and shoe industry', *Business History*, 12 (1970); R.L. Greenall, 'The history of boot and shoemaking at Long Buckby', *Northamptonshire Past and Present*, 5 (1977); R.L. Greenall, *A History of Northamptonshire* (London, 1979); D. Kirby, *Northampton Remembers Boot and Shoe* (Northampton, 1988); C. Brown, *Northampton, 1835-1985: Shoe Town, New Town* (Chichester, 1990); M. Palmer and P. Neaverson, *Industrial Landscapes of the East Midlands* (Chichester, 1992); K. Morrison, *Built to Last: the Buildings of the Northamptonshire Boot and Shoe Industry* (London, 2004); D.A. Holmes, *Development of the East Midlands Boot and Shoe Industry in a National Perspective, 1815-1914* (unpub. PhD, University of Leicester, 2007). On women's work in this industry, see E. Abbott, 'Women in industry: the manufacture of boots and shoes', *American Jnl. of Sociology*, 15 (1909); and on its street cultures see J. Seabrook, *The Unprivileged* (London, 1967).

[35] J.C.H. Hurd, 'Science, technology and local industries', in N. Pye (ed.), *Leicester and its Region* (Leicester, 1972), pp. 410-13; R.J. Clark, *Cost Control in the Boot and Shoe Industry* (London, 1950).

[36] H.E. Bates, *The Feast of July* (1954, London, 2006), p. 16. Or see H.E. Bates, *Charlotte's Row* (1931, Harmondsworth, 1987), for further descriptions of a small boot and shoe manufacturing town.

the untidy mess of tins and sprigs and eyelets and brass-tacks and wax-end',[37] the smell of glue-pots, the tapping and hammering sounds of the workers – but also the significance of silence: 'By January the chimneys of the little back-yard shops were mostly smokeless; there was no longer a chorus of tapping. The noise of hand-trucks running through dry streets on bare iron wheels was, except on Mondays, a skeleton echo.'[38] Unemployment brought desolation, aggravated ill health, the eating of 'bread-and-scrat', with '"Folks moonlight-flitting every night and young chaps off on tramp, workhouse to workhouse."'[39] He wrote of the inter-war 'demoralising blight of short-time, vain hope and utter idleness, war veterans wandering lamely from house to house pushing or carrying baskets of shoelaces, polishes, brushes, cheap underwear, buttons, dusters, safety pins'.[40] More normally, 'In a town like Evensford everybody was rigidly governed by factory hours and the sound of factory hooters'.[41] There were the 'long columns of working-class mackintoshes floating down a street that was like a dreary black canal'.[42]

Such a town had its respectable and disreputable ends: 'You could not go lower than Gas Street. The end of the respectable world was Gas Street'.[43] In his story 'Let's Play Soldiers', an account of childhood fighting and mimicry of soldiers at the Western Front, Bates described a slum leather-factory area he called 'The Pit': 'a terrible place', with its fearsome reputation and neighbouring squabbles, and its 'little one-story hovels with sacks at their windows, the horrible squat brick prisons of outdoor privies and a few dirty flags of shirt on a washing line.'[44] The houses in these boot-and-shoe towns are connected via a network of hand trucks on iron wheels, as goods move between factories and neighbouring houses for working. The sounds of such trucks are a characteristic of the town. 'Each house possessed a little low iron-wheeled truck...there were two constant sounds...the clack of truck-wheels running to and from the factories in the streets outside, and the hammering of shoemakers working from day-break and on into the night, by the light of little tin oil-lamps, in the dark windowed shops all along the row'.[45] Much of the town is structured around the passage of these trucks, between factories and home workshops. According to Bates, there is

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[37] Bates, *Feast of July*, p. 48.

[38] *Ibid.,* p. 96.

[39] *Ibid.,* p. 58.

[40] Bates, *Autobiography*, p. 203.

[41] 'Love in a Wych-Elm', in Bates, *Seven by Five*, p. 351; Bates, *Autobiography*, p. 202.

[42] H.E. Bates, 'A Christmas Song', in *Seven by Five*, p. 209.

[43] Bates, 'Love in a Wych-Elm', in *Seven by Five*, p. 358.

[44] H.E. Bates, 'Let's Play Soldiers', in *Seven by Five*, pp. 364-6.

[45] Bates, *Feast of July*, p. 24.

little to attract in these physical townscapes, with their views 'across wet granite sets, streaming on rainy days with yellow stains of horse-dung and rainbow gleams of spilled oil'.[46] These are grey smoky towns,[47] 'benighted holes',[48] with 'low shabby defiles.'[49] This is a language of town description that some urban community historians are uncomfortable with. Yet it comes from Bates' direct experience, and it is a depictive genre variously replicated for many other urban occupational communities, associated with mining, metal working, textiles, ship-building, copper smelting, and so on.

It was often the role of the girls to compete for boot-and-shoe out-work, hanging around factories jostling each other in competitive hope, trying to obtain the 'uppers' to take home. 'She hated the scrubby windy little town of high asphalt causeways and yellow alley-ways where she ran like a beggar with a truck'.[50] They even travelled long distances across country in search of such work.[51] The resulting rheumatic fever from such a lengthy walk through wintry countryside kills one character in *The Feast of July*. The shoemakers' lives are concentrated around the search for employment, which they call 'occasioning', that is, work-hunting: 'touting, begging, hoping, hanging in alley-ways and about the doors of factories for whatever they would throw out to her'.[52] Family life occurs against this backdrop, within the yearly factory rhythm of activity, being completely infused by the boot and shoe trade. This pattern of industrial labour is broken mainly by the harvest, when the boot and shoe-making families headed to the fields for a different kind of work.[53] Bates explicitly states in *The Poacher* that harvest work and gleaning 'brought together' the family, that it was a family work affair – while many shoemakers engage in it, he seems not to describe it as work that unites or organises a wider community in the fields.

Whenever he returned to the 'many soulless, hideous red-brick scars' of his Northamptonshire valley, Bates wrote about its culture, 'I was aware of entering some totally

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[46] 'The Snow Line', in *Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal*, p. 191.

[47] Bates, *Sleepless Moon*, p. 164.

[48] *Ibid.,* p. 174.

[49] Bates, *Feast of July*, p. 35.

[50] Bates, *Feast of July*, p. 105.

[51] *Ibid.,* pp. 98, 100

[52] Bates, *Feast of July*, p. 104. Bates's father was a shoe-maker, and travelling boot and shoe salesman. DeAth, 'The quiet world of H.E. Bates's; G. Smith, 'Bates's rural idyll', *Chronicle and Echo* (8.7.2006), p. 17, NCL, Local Studies Centre, Autobiographical Cutting File.

[53] H.E. Bate, *The Poacher* (1935, London, 1989), p. 58; Bates, *Feast of July*, pp. 76-95; Bates, *Autobiography*, pp. 48-51.

negative wasteland'.[54] 'Nobody had a scrap of superior feeling' in his fictional Orlingford; '"nobody in a one-eyed town like this knows Brahms from a tin of baking powder."'[55] Methodism was a main cultural form, often glimpsed in Bates's novels, and intensely disliked in his *Autobiography*,[56] – a denomination that infused Sunday with a repetitively tedious discipline akin to the work ethic of the factory and its out-putting system. Ben Wainwright, the family head in *The Feast of July*, spends two or three hours every Saturday afternoon polishing the plain altar brass of the chapel, as 'a kind of working penance'.[57] Methodism seems to have been important in the further sense that its networks and inferences of repute could foster the supply of work.

This account by Bates, which I have distilled from representative parts of his writing, is a regional variation of occupational-community description that social historians often rely on. It is a heightened version of it, by a man who disliked what he described, whose authorial and (autobiographically outlined) views are often tied unproblematically to fictional narrative, and it covers a classic occupational community. It clearly raises issues of judgement and historical assessment. In the work of some writers such an environment is presented in the romanticised guise of what Raphael Samuel termed 'industrial or urban pastoral':[58] a nostalgic hankering after a form of urban 'community' now usually lost to us, given Britain's de-industrialisation. Vivid counterparts exist in the documentation and fictional recreations of mining, ship-building, the cotton and woollen industries, hosiery, the potteries, and many other industries. All of these occupational communities have been retrospectively subject to possibly mythic recreations by historians and novelists, who have felt themselves alternately moved by childhood nostalgia, work processes, integrated communities, or solidarity among the workers. In some cases, authorial recollection (or posturing memory) among historians openly informs their writing.

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[54] Bates, *Autobiography*, pp. 217, 305.

[55] Bates, *Sleepless Moon*, pp. 172, 175, 265.

[56] Bates, *Autobiography*, pp. 56-60; see also *Feast of July*, pp. 26-7, on the repetitive nature of the Methodist services, and the tramping between villages with 'Methodist rain-soaked fervour'. His accounts of Anglican clergy could be equally scathing: e.g. in his 'Oh! Sweeter than the Berry', in *The Song of the Wren* (1972, Harmondsworth, 1974), pp. 121-8, with its description of the Rev. H. Sloane Arrowsmith: 'The old suet-head...typical parsonic twittery...like a pall-bearer suffering from acute dyspepsia... [his voice] grated, both on the nerves and on the teeth...[a] dark cadaverous figure...[with his] bloody silly language...[who has] "gone and mucked about with the Lord's Prayer...murdered the doxology...[with] that appalling modern version of the New Testament [which] reads like a batch of Urban Council Minutes from the backwoods somewhere"'. Or see the account of 'the Reverend Frog-face…as damned old humbug' in H.E. Bates, *Oh! To Be in England* (1963, Harmondsworth, 1966), p. 23.

[57] Bates, *Feast of July*, p. 126.

[58] Raphael Samuel, personal communication (2.12.1991). For discussion of nostalgia in Bates, see Head, 'Writing against the nostalgic grain'.

Yet Bates's representation has nothing of the 'urban pastoral' about it. According to him, this is a very dismal environment indeed. It is marked by intense competition between workers and families, and the setting is sometimes dangerous, and certainly precarious and depressing, dank, smell-ridden and acrid with leather burning. These Northamptonshire boot and shoe towns are apparently grim in and to every sense. In Bates's representations, they are not cooperative in their ethos. Families are quick to cast opportunistic aspersions upon each other, and they compete and struggle against each other, both for limited work and for reputations. Upon hearing of work in a certain place, the immediate thought is '"Don't let Mitchy see you. Mitchy'll be off if he gits mind on it..." The rivalry of Mitchy, always mean, that winter seemed to become sharp and desperate. Mitchell became a sinister shadow recognizable at long distances by the thin-legged run...He pushed, too, a truck that was unlike most others: a truck of basket-work, on two low back wheels and a third still lower one, at the front, like a castor...paddling himself forward with one leg and then coasting with iron whistlings and clattering down the hills. It was this sound that pursued Nell as she gasped across and up the valley, desperate for work, that winter.'[59] Indeed, families struggle within themselves too, as with the three Wainwright brothers who compete, sometimes violently, for Bella, the young woman who, bedraggled and ill after having miscarried, comes by chance to their family in search of another man who she hopes to kill. Open violence is common: '"This is a rough town, the man said. "Everybody knows that. It's always been rough. You can't come into this town 'ithout somebody starts fighting. That's shoemakers all over – fighting, don't wanta let nobody else live, always fighting –".[60] Are such accounts hateful or true, exaggerated or warranted? Whatever one's verdict, Bates should be well to the fore in retrospective debates assessing Britain's urban occupational communities, for he was a novelist with very determined ideas indeed about how the Northamptonshire boot-and-shoe communities should be judged.

Rural isolation or occupational community?

The meaning and effectiveness of rural 'community' in the inter-war period has yet to be debated by those concerned with the quality of life in the past. In some literary representations contemporary with Bates, the English village emerges with an intimately known organisation and a complex interplay of personalities. One thinks, among countless examples, of the village of 'Folly Down' in T.F. Powys, *Mr Weston's Good Wine*, with levels of personal knowledge and aspersion to rival Dylan Thomas' *Under Milk Wood*.[61]

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[59] Bates, *Feast of July*, pp. 97-8.

[60] Bates, *Feast of July*, p. 40.

[61] D. Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: a Play for Voices* (1954, London, 1986).

'Everything that happens is known in a village'.[62] In Powys' imaginative, ironic and whimsical world of simplified action, characterisation and speech, people are intensely observed both by themselves and by Mr Weston, who, allegorically, is God. Houses are described, the lay-out of the village is carefully assessed.[63] To sell his 'good wine' Mr Weston needs to know his customers. He has to '"pry so deeply into all the tittle-tattle"'; he needs to know all their '"hidden desires and wishes...their passions and indulgences, all their likes and dislikes, all their sorrows and joys...We have to pry as deeply as we can into their past manners and customs, and discover also in what direction their future wishes may go"'.[64] People's credit, loves, sites of seduction, drinking preferences, idiosyncrasies and views on God are talked about on the hill overlooking the village, as Mr Weston and Michael consider how they might engage villagers to live in a world of '"noble intoxication"'.[65] This is highly allegorical fiction, musing on good and evil, feeling for subjugated women, reconstructing a village in unexpected terms, a novel that is complex in multiple meanings, with inter-textual references that range from the Bible to Freud. It is far from realist or naturalistic representation, and nor is it 'modernist' in method, for complex use of allegory long precedes modernism. This novel's allegory, irony and use of literary precursors take one back to the Bible, to Chaucer, to John Bunyan in the 1670s, to Jane Austen's *Emma* (whence its title), while parodying earlier moral notions of the English village. Even so, T.F. Powys' Folly Down (based upon East Chaldon, Dorset, where he lived) is a very intimately known 1920s village indeed, opened to close scrutiny like a Stanley Spencer painting, as a community of mutually relating people.

No doubt Pop Larkin and Uncle Silas (of whom more anon) would have approved of Mr Weston's ostensible mission; and Bates wrote to Joe Braddock that 'we shall drink your health in true Silasian fashion, in mouthfuls of good wine'.[66] Yet Bates is entirely different to Powys, or more modernist writers, in his portrayal of the village and its farmsteads. While Bates could write like a prose poet, he had not 'a poet's fancy, that will at any moment create out of the imagination a new world'.[67] While his literary influences are evident, he eschews textual reference to other authors. His pre-1958 rural writing is a form of countryside realism. For him fiction expressed in cool and restrained language, using a clear graphic approach that was vivid in pictorial simplicity, picking up on casual, unsuspecting words and events, was a way of uncovering deeper truths and realities, in which 'events were implied rather than

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[62] T.F. Powys, *Mr Weston's Good Wine* (1927, Harmondsworth, 1976), p. 130.

[63] *Ibid.,* pp. 50-4.

[64] *Ibid.,* pp. 40-1.

[65] *Ibid.,* p. 40.

[66] NCL, letters of H.E. Bates (letter 39, to Joe Braddock, 31.1.1948).

[67] Powys, *Mr Weston's Good Wine*, p. 26.

chronicled',[68] in which significance was clear and unambiguous. With this philosophy of writing, Bates was certainly trying to display social and personal truths as he sensed them, and he felt that his approach to fiction communicated most effectively, and brought him closer to subjects and readers than any documentary writer, or indeed many modernist writers.

It is thus of much interest that one does *not* find Bates presenting a closely interactive community in his rural writing – on the contrary, he repeatedly refers to 'awful country isolation', in such language or terms.[69] This was a condition that afflicted his characters regardless of their class or gender. He wrote of the house of one farm woman: 'Exposed and isolated, the wind striking at it from all quarters, it seemed to have no part with the surrounding landscape. Empty ploughed lands, in winter time, stretched away on all sides in wet steel curves'. The woman is as isolated as her house, 'fretful and almost desperate in an anxiety to establish a world beyond her own', frugally saving money as her only possible salvation. 'To her the money was like a huge and irreplaceable section of her life. It was part of herself, bone and flesh, blood and sweat. Nothing could replace it. Nothing, she knew with absolute finality, could mean so much'. She becomes almost dream-like, oblivious to the people around her. Money here is a substitute for wider human relations, as in *Silas Marner*, and when she loses it the tale ends in total isolation.[70]

In *The Fallow Land*, Bates wrote about how 'The farm was lonely; from Sunday to Sunday hardly anyone came up the road and she looked to the child to fill that emptiness. Emptiness!'[71] The isolation of farms in novels like this is a frequent theme in inter-war literature, affecting both genders. There are many examples in the wider rural genre, such as *Joseph and his Brethren*, *The Lonely Plough*, *Starvecrow Farm*, *Crag's Foot Farm*, *Joanna Godden*, and this was an isolation that lent itself to the characterisation in *Cold Comfort Farm*.[72] It is a feature that seems strongly to downgrade the significance of 'community' in the countryside. Bruno Shadbolt, at the end of Bates's novel *Spella Ho*, 'experienced a feeling of the acutest loneliness. It seemed like the sudden concentration of years of loneliness. He was a man without friends; he had seen and known that for a long time, but

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[68] Bates, *Autobiography*, pp. 302, 321, 380, 384, 392, 435, 486.

[69] Bates, 'Daffodil Sky', p. 36. Or consider the farm loneliness of Mrs Charlesworth in H.E. Bates, *The Triple Echo* (London, 1970); or of Angela Jefferson in 'The house with the apricot', in *Country Tales*, pp. 266, 271.

[70] Bates, 'The Ox', in *Seven by Five*, pp. 133, 135, 145.

[71] H.E. Bates, *The Fallow Land* (1932, London, 2006), p. 80.

[72] S.J. Weyman, *Starvecrow Farm* (1911, London, 1922); M.E. Lambe, *Crag's Foot Farm: a Novel of Leicestershire* (London, 1931); C. Holme, *The Lonely Plough* (1914, Oxford, 1933); S. Kaye-Smith, *Joanna Godden* (London, 1921); H.W. Freeman, *Joseph and his Brethren* (1928, London, 1955); S. Gibbons, *Cold Comfort Farm* (London, 1932).

now he felt it. He felt it with a sudden sharp despair that was almost terror.' We last glimpse him standing alone on his terrace, 'solitary, diminutive', merging into the great house that he has fought for.[73]

At the other end of the social spectrum, 'the man who loved squirrels' 'liked it better in the wood, alone, in the company of birds and squirrels, working away in his own time, in his own solitude'.[74] In this case, unusually in Bates's fiction, solitude is voluntary. Such solitude is also a theme in Bates's Nature writing, with Nature serving as a surrogate for community,[75] as indeed it was for writers such as Richard Jefferies, W.H. Hudson or Henry Williamson. Bates was interested in loners: the poacher, the solitary drinker, the night walker, the coastal cliff trekker, the gamekeeper. Most commonly, however, such solitude is enforced and unwillingly *suffered* as loneliness, often arched by 'the strange stillness of the silent land'.[76] It is frequently the insecure and unacknowledged loneliness of women. In his pre-1950s writing, Bates is perhaps unrivalled in Britain as the novelist of loneliness. It is a loneliness that bemoans the lack of community, or the total failure of a supposed community to be emotionally worthwhile or meaningful to the characters described. It is a loneliness that sometimes tries to substitute other things for community – money, a great house, a woman's sons, animals, nature, travel – and yet in Bates's non-humorous writing these substitutions almost always fail. It is only with his later shift to overt humour and satire, with the Larkins from 1958, that a vacuous and personally isolating rural community finds a budding standby in the extended family. By then Bates had to some extent side-stepped his themes of loneliness and unfulfilling community, and was interpreting the all-consuming family as their historical replacement.

The countryside was, for most of Bates's writing, one of people abandoning the land, and of rural industries in decline. The First World War had witnessed men taken away from agriculture, 'and gradually a strange silence and solitude settled over the fields'.[77] The inter-war period continued as a time of rural exodus and depopulation, and work on the land declined throughout. This emphasis was by no means invariable in rural fiction. For example, Adrian Bell in *Corduroy* had enthusiastically described the opposite trajectory: 'Farming, to my mind, was...a symbol of escape...I was flying from the threat of an office job...the year

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[73] H.E. Bates, *Spella Ho* (London, 1938), pp. 412-4.

[74] 'The Man Who Loved Squirrels', in *Song of the Wren*, p. 79. Or see the opening of Bates, 'The Mower', in *Seven by Five*, p. 23, contextualising the story: 'A farm boy was riding down a deserted meadow-lane.'

[75] The best example is Bates, *Through the Woods*.

[76] *Ibid*., p. 120.

[77] Bates, *The Poacher*, p. 203.

was 1920'.[78] Yet just as Bates shows people departing without regrets from the boot and shoe towns (even leaving the entire country), as in his story 'The Snow Line',[79] so he also makes this a theme in most of his pre-1958 rural writing. 'Then, after another look at the field, they slushed out of the gate and down the road and away, clutching scythe and bag, like two figures setting out on a pilgrimage to nowhere at all'.[80] The English countryside is frequently described as redundant, economically useless. 'The land's no good to me. I'd get shot of it to-morrow if I could', says Jess Mortimer in *The Fallow Land*.[81] And the woman he courts, whose struggles are the main theme of the novel, is a servant in a nearby country house which has 'a silence and odour...like...a museum. It was like death... [its rooms had] an odour of lifelessness and damp darkness'; it was a place where nobody ever calls.[82] There may be community of sorts in the boot and shoe towns, and Bates is surely showing a working community in his depictions there, however unpleasant and grimy he thinks it is. But it seems lacking in the countryside – where his imagery is all so often of desolation and isolation. It emerges into view as a supposedly cooperative affair on rare occasions, as for example during the funeral of Mrs Mortimer in *The Fallow Land*, when 'the house was full of mourners and strangers in black...a black crowd of people shuffled behind [the bier] and another crowd of women who dared not go into the farm stood by the gate and wept and whispered behind their handkerchiefs. The procession shuffled slowly down into the village'.[83] Even here, it is worth noting, the people are 'strangers in black', their conversation muffled into handkerchiefs, some of them daring not to go into the farm. This representation is of a stifled, hushed, emotionally stagnant and largely ineffective 'community', one that scarcely warrants that word. It is not clear what label could replace 'community' to describe the motley, lonely cast-offs that Bates so often shows us.

The decay of the gentry

Nor is a sense of rural community enhanced in any way by the ruling classes, or what remains of them and their habitations. 'The slump was grim and stubborn; estates everywhere were breaking up,' both in Northamptonshire and Kent where Bates lived from 1931. 'It's

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[78] A. Bell, *Corduroy* (1930, London, 1946), p. 5.

[79] H.E. Bates, 'The Snow Line', in *Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal, and Other Stories* (1961, Harmondsworth, 1962).

[80] H.E. Bates, 'Cloudburst', in *Country Tales*, p. 333.

[81] Bates, *Fallow Land*, p. 34.

[82] *Ibid*., pp. 37-8, 44.

[83] *Ibid*., p. 69.

absolutely dog eats dog.'[84] In his story 'A Girl Called Peter', Bates depicts an old rural mansion as full of dry rot and moss, uninhabited, a relic of the past.[85] An alcoholic ill-looking captain in a decaying house, flying any old flag, who cannot afford to heat his house, whose views from it are obstructed, whose old neighbours have gone, who can hardly climb a hill, stands for a decaying moribund class in 'The Flag'.[86] Or one thinks of the colonel in 'Where the Cloud Breaks': totally out of touch with the times, unable to tell what day it is.[87] In 'The Woman who had Imagination', a man is introduced 'in an old panama hat, a yellowish alpaca suit and a faded green bow, beaming with smiles and gestures of aristocratic idiocy'.[88] The Castle Hanwick estate, in 'The Blue Feather', is said to have '"gone to rack and ruin", you couldn't see the place for briars and nettles. Like a damn jungle everywhere."' The owner was a hideous bed-ridden woman of perverted mind, clearly insane: '"God A'mighty," he said, and I thought he gave a shiver. "There she sat. Like a white toad."'[89] And then there was her brother Sir John Featherstone: '"Tall man, terrible thin and bent over at the top, like a parson a-prayin'. Very holler-chested, with a gruet Adam's apple like a pump handle stickin' out over one o' them high starched collars...like a blood'ound out o' sorts."' It is Uncle Silas, the labouring man, who passes these final judgements. 'The place has been sold up now and they keep idiots there, or prisoners without bars,'[90] which presumably indicates historical continuity. Pop Larkin offers to buy Sir George Bluff-Gore's ancestral great house, to demolish it for junk and sell on its artefacts. Sir George then had to 'go and live in a stable. They were the aristocracy, of course, these people'.[91] The landed family in *Love for Lydia* are isolated, adulterous, exploitative of poorer women, frittering their time away in dance parties by the river Nene (into which one of them falls and dies), and their significance to local

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[84] H.E. Bates, 'The Grass God', in *The Nature of Love* (1953, Harmondsworth, 1984), pp. 76, 86. The 'dog eats dog' phrase is repeated later in the thoughts of Sir George Bluff-Gore, on his decaying mansion, in H.E. Bates, *The Darling Buds of May* (1958, London, 1970), p. 133. On the break-up of estates in inter-war Kent, see A. Nicolson, *Sissinghurst: an Unfinished History* (London, 2008), 243-9, and pp. 26-7 on the mid twentieth-century decline of mixed farms and of hop-growing in that county.

[85] H.E. Bates, 'A Girl Called Peter', in *Colonel Julian and Other Stories* (1951, Harmondsworth, 1955).

[86] H.E. Bates, 'The Flag', in *Colonel Julian*.

[87] H.E. Bates, 'Where the Cloud Breaks', in *Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal*, pp. 123-4.

[88] H.E. Bates, 'The Woman who had Imagination', in *Country Tales*, p. 85.

[89] H.E. Bates, 'The Blue Feather', in *Sugar for the Horse*, p. 44.

[90] Bates, 'The Blue Feather', pp. 37-42.

[91] H.E. Bates, A Breath of French Air (1959, Harmondsworth, 1962), p. 14; H.E. Bates, *The Darling Buds of May* (1958, London, 1970), pp. 132-4.

people is fading fast. '"There soon won't be any people like us"'.[92] Their girls are 'coming to the end of lost races against gaiety'.[93] The burial of the last of Evensford's aristocracy is sordid, largely unattended, passing 'through a smoky December silence of factory streets to a cemetery shabby with wet chrysanthemums... Behind the tones of the burial service came a continuous cough, hard and harsh, of factory engines, and above the flowers a smell of leather hung in the air'.[94] Lydia's physical decline caused by tuberculosis parallels the decline of the Aspen house, which she then rejects herself. Ties across class, the possibilities of new lines of social affection, are crucial for such people, for Bates seems to believe that the erstwhile ruling classes of the countryside have little other prospect. As for the gentry or landed elites providing community leadership – as they certainly had often done hitherto – such an idea is not contemplated in any of Bates's writing. Most of his characters would have found any such idea very droll.

The new rich or other rural incomers seem unpromising. Bates depicts *nouveaux riches* as pretentious, embarrassing, crude, making jokes at the butcher's wife in 'Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal'.[95] The mind of one of Bates's resentful estate owners trawls through recent arrivals, finds them wanting and reveals his own attitudes to the village: 'At heart he really detested the village...It was nothing more than a gossip shop. And the little crust of society: the milkless wife of the retired naval fellow, commander or something; the dithering lunatic doctor, surgeon or whatever he was; and the horrible people who came to retire: dreary suburban-minded wretched people of no standing... There was a retired schoolmaster too, a real Bolshevik, an out-and-outer; and a solicitor fellow, a counsel or something, who came at week-ends and poached such fishing as there was...They were all divided into factions; they were all like horrible little weevils, feeding and boring away at everything with their trivial, insidious, killing gossip.' And as for his estate, it has been ruined by the war: 'Concrete tank bays, half ruined huts, old army kitchens and brick ovens blackened by fire, all overgrown by thick new nettles'. And now they faced 'the paltry rations of the brave new time'.[96]

Bates repeatedly attacked what he thought was the peeping, censorious, gossipy nature of small Northamptonshire village and town life, whether this was from the perspective of such a failing estate owner, or the small shopkeeper class of *The Sleepless Moon*, or from the viewpoint of 'Uncle Silas'. These criticisms – and some readers will find

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[92] H.E. Bates, *Love for Lydia*, p. 255.

[93] *Ibid*., p. 256.

[94] *Ibid*., p. 285. Rushden, Bates's home town (just west of Wellingborough), is called Evensford in his writing.

[95] H.E. Bates, 'Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal', in *Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal*.

[96] H.E. Bates, 'The Grass God', in *The Nature of Love*, pp. 73-4.

them unduly embittered and misanthropic – seem especially marked in his writing set in the 1920s and '30s, when so often he shows the damaging results of gossip. By comparison, Pop Larkin and other characters of a later era seem relatively indifferent to gossip, even to revel in it with indifference. Earlier, however, 'In a little town like Orlingford people were always over-fond of talking'.[97] The class-sneering, cold-shouldering of people, the intolerance of outsiders or of maimed soldiers from the First World War, the failure of people to relate open-mindedly and tolerantly towards each other, are all targets of his writing. In *The Sleepless Moon* – one of Bates's most damningly judgemental of novels – the gossiping dressmaker of the dismal town (based upon Higham Ferrers), with her iron foot and with pins in her mouth, is symptomatic with her calculating natter and its devastating effects upon the lives of others.[98]

Uncle Silas

Bates was a novelist of greatly contrasted moods. His writing could be despairing on social conditions and relations; it could be tragic or inspirational on bomber pilots. It could also be rich in humour. 'My Uncle Silas', one of Bates's most popular characters, stands in a line of rural characterisation that might include figures such as Frederick Grover (alias George Bettesworth),[99] Lucy Bettesworth,[100] and other ageing representatives of labouring life in the nineteenth-century English countryside. Indeed, this is a tradition of representation that could take us back to Falstaff. They are often comically represented, as initially with George Sturt's interest in Frederick Grover: 'He was something of a comic character in my eyes', or so it was for a while, as 'I had not as yet seen in him much more than his garrulous and good-tempered quaintness'... 'Soon, however, came hints of a life far from comic under the odd exterior', and those 'hints' were all the more obvious in the hardships faced by Lucy his wife.[101] There are sedate touches here of the depiction of 'Silas', who in Bates's writing

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[97] Bates, *Sleepless Moon*, p. 199.

[98] *Ibid*., p. 308.

[99] G. Sturt, *The Bettesworth Book* (1901, Firle, Sussex, 1978), a character whose conversations were 'practical, technical, racy with anecdotes and grim fun', p. 8.

[100] G. Bourne [Sturt], *Lucy Bettesworth* (1913, London, 1918).

[101] Sturt, *Bettesworth Book*, p. 3.

was a character based upon Joseph Betts, husband of his grandmother's sister, a man born back in the 1840s, 'and, among other things, the biggest reprobate who ever lived'.[102]

Silas' own stories are often dubious or suspected inventions, and part of Bates's play with the reader's credibility has to do with the open question of the reliability of Silas as narrator. The reader constantly has to ask: in what sense is Silas genuine; can he be so; what do his attitudes and anecdotes stand for in social and historical terms? In the Silas stories, we see 'community' represented humorously, as an arena within which (or against which) Silas operates and enjoys himself. As in most humour, the realities underpinning it are serious, so much so that the humour is one of the few ways in which they can be handled. This is a work-based, expressive, bucolic, baudy, anti-Puritan, independent, purportedly self-made world, and like the cowslip, sloe, or rosehip ingredients of Silas' wine it comes from the surrounding countryside. Silas is independently quick to make up words to depict others – 'maungy' (a mean, moody, miserable man) – and he describes them with facility and surety. His view of Methodism is summed up in his laconic description of a cook: '"Gal named Em Pack...Bit miserable. Chapel."'[103] There is deference, but it is cleverly exploited by Silas to ends other than heartfelt social respect; for this is a character who seems to know his betters better than they know themselves; and he is able, through his cunning, to make them endorse or behave like himself, and enjoy that, without their realising it.[104] In 'The Foxes', Silas is reprimanded for drinking by the 'Rev. Frog-Face': '"Marning, marning!" Voice like some old yoe a-lambin"'. Yet when this old ewe asks Silas to catch foxes, the fox-like Silas outwits and tricks the parson into providing him with much more drink. '"Jist shows you what born fools parsons are... Adn't got twopennorth 'o split peas in 'is 'ead"'.[105] It is characteristic of Bates that he could write of such social interactions from contrasting standpoints, for elsewhere Mr Fitzgerald, one of his embittered landowners, complains about: 'a feeling of treachery behind the politeness, the kow-towing, the touched hat'.[106]

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[102] H.E. Bates, *Through the Woods*, p. 24. Another influence may be Guy de Maupassant, 'My Uncle Jules', reprinted in Maupassant, *Selected Short Stories* (Harmondsworth, 1972), a similarly named figure thought disreputable by the rest of his family. Bates included Maupassant among the authors 'at whose feet...I had long been religiously worshipping' (*Autobiography*, pp. 208, 473), partly for Maupassant's short-story or novella innovations, and he must also have relished his sexual candour, eye for hypocrisy, and sympathy for ill-used women.

[103] H.E. Bates, 'The Blue Feather', in *Sugar for the Horse* (1957, London, 1959), p. 41. Bates wrote with appreciation of 'an unconscious protest against the Puritanical poison in the English blood' in his 'Preface' to *My Uncle Silas* (1939, London, 2001), p. 10.

[104] On Silas' mimicking play with his social superiors' attitudes, see 'Silas the Good', in *My Uncle Silas* (1939, London, 2001).

[105] Bates, 'The Foxes', in *Sugar for the Horse*, pp. 50-1, 58.

[106] Bates, 'The Grass God', in *The Nature of Love*, p. 69.

The characterisation of the Silas stories is heightened, colourful and picaresque, and Bates argued that 'To those who find these stories too Rabelaisian, far-fetched or robust, my reply would be that, as pictures of English country life, they are in reality understated'.[107] Silas' friends, for example, have names like Tig Flawn, Tupman Jarvis, Slob Johnson, Fiddler Bollard, Ponto Pack – with their connotations of gypsy horse dealers or Cockney fairground hustlers. Silas's exploits conjoin with the sub-world of gossip; they need that gossip to gain their notoriety; and their exaggeration at that level warrants Silas' own enhancement of them: Silas is literally playing a game with scandalous hearsay. Thus he takes Queenie White – a 'maungy' man's wife – to the seaside for a fortnight: '"All the old tits wur a-twitterin' an' a-gossipin' an' a-maunderin' about it fer years. Couldn't stop talkin' about it. Loved it. Couldn't forget it. Just their drop."'[108]

These are, at their most serious level, stories about the decline of earlier material forms of country life and the humour and attitudes that (Bates believes) went with them. Silas dies. His nephew later returns to his cottage.

> 'As I went up the lane to the house I looked for the old sign of things: smoke rising from the chimney; the old summer bird-scares, age-green hats on sticks and inside-out umbrellas and twirling shuttlecocks; scarecrows made up of old legs of Silas's pants and bell-bottomed trousers and the housekeeper's ancient hat and chemises; the ladder in the late apple trees; the bonfire filling the garden and the spinney and the fields with smoke that hung in sweet-smelling clouds under the pines and the golden cherry leaves. I listened for the cluck of Silas's hens and the grunting and rooting of the solitary sow he had always kept in the black sty under the elderberries at the garden end'.[109]

Yet all is quiet, and transformed. The garden gate and fence are repaired and painted a sepulchral white. The lovely apple and cherry trees have been chopped down and are merely stumps. The roses have been sawn down. The garden is empty. The prim new owner has a white face too, 'a pasty, town white', and regards visitors as liars and tricksters. Her husband is a teetotaller. Apparently the previous owner was 'an awful old man'. The air inside is now dead, having lost its smells of old tea and earth and wine and geraniums. The stale odours of new French-polished furniture have replaced that. It had all the correctitude of a showroom in a furniture shop: 'There was something ice-cold about its parsimonious respectability'.[110]

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[107] H.E. Bates, 'Preface', in *My Uncle Silas* (1939, London, 2001), p. 11.

[108] H.E. Bates, 'Queenie White', in *Sugar for the Horse* (1957, London, 1959), p. 34.

[109] H.E. Bates, 'The Return', in *My Uncle Silas*, p. 176.

[110] *Ibid*., p. 181.To similar effect, see the account of the wholesale businessman's 'professional, orderly, impeccable, shorn and bloodless' garden and villa of 'correctest detail' in H.E. Bates, 'The World Upside Down', in *The Wild Cherry Tree*, p. 77.

Apparently Silas's housekeeper has already visited and, in tears at what she has seen, asked for the old bath in which she used to bathe Silas. The new owner sent her away: '"I could see she was either drunk or wrong in the head"'. His nephew walks away thinking of 'that tart and irascible house-keeper...all broken up and stupefied, weeping her heart out for something nobody would ever understand'.[111]

The community of RAF pilots

Bates felt much frustration during the early part of the war. He wrote to Joe Braddock: 'The war remains (a) a bore, (b) a bloody swindle. The budget is (a) iniquitous (b) a bloody swindle. I am confined to reviewing & a sort of melancholy contemplation of the writer I once was'.[112] In Kent he and his family were, as he reported, on the front line: 'Now blacked out, fortified & in the centre of a new theatre of potential war. So God knows if you'll ever get there [Cairo]. Anyway it doesn't matter. By August we'll all be finished, as I see it, anyway'.[113] In early September 1940 he wrote: 'News from the front line, where the battles are now terrifically fierce & planes pop down like pheasants at a local shoot... Madge saw six planes down on Sunday morning... I was fishing all the week. Ironical to sit pulling the roach out of the water while the Spitfires pulled the Jerries out of the sky'.[114] At the end of that month he was saying how 'Survival is now the important thing. London has really been knocked hard, & yet half continues to carry on with the same clumsy stoicism…For some curious reason the effect of London is emotionally a blank – you just stare at buildings smashed down, cross the street & go on. No emotion, no indignation. It is a new phenomenon. An awful sense of stupefaction of the conscience. I suppose its either that or go barmy'.[115] And then by November: 'I fear dark, dark days are coming'.[116]

Yet an important role was soon found for him. Bates was drafted into RAF Public Relations as a short story writer. The aim was to show the RAF to the public not as statistics, but as real people, and Bates was given considerable freedom as an artist for this purpose. As he put it, the proposition was that 'figures...mean nothing, but that a pilot with a pint of beer in his hand and a popsie in bed can illuminate the troubled business of war in a way that will

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[111] Bates, 'The Return', pp. 189-190.

[112] NCL, letters of H.E. Bates (letter 18, to Joe Braddock, 27.9.1939).

[113] NCL, letters of H.E. Bates (letter 23, to Joe and Muriel Braddock, 16.5.1940).

[114] NCL, letters of H.E. Bates (letter 24, to Joe and Muriel Braddock, 5.9.1940).

[115] NCL, letters of H.E. Bates (letter 25, to Joe and Muriel Braddock, 30.9.1940).

[116] NCL, letters of H.E. Bates (letter 27, to Joe Braddock, 25.11.1940).

bring war and its participants vividly, excitedly, even painfully alive'.[117] Bates seems to have discovered in the RAF a sense of community and of shared purpose that took him by surprise and eclipsed anything he had known hitherto. This was the comradeship of small groups of men on a fenland or other aerodrome. Bates was based at Oakington in Cambridgeshire, and later at Tangmere near Chichester. In one sense, it was odd to have found a sense of community at these places: for the RAF comprised a bewildering array of nationalities and men, from all parts of the Empire, brought together for a relatively short period. In some cases, this was for a very brief period indeed as so many in Bomber Command were killed or taken prisoner: 'there were some deeply dark days on that often fog-shrouded fenland that winter'.[118] For much of Bates's experience at Oakington they often comprised the crews and support teams of Stirling bombers, and later on he was with Hurricane squadrons. The crews had come from all over the world: Holland, France, Poland, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, Africa, the West Indies, Lithuania, Indo-China, Tahiti, Switzerland, the USA, Czechoslovakia, as well as the countries of the British Isles.[119] All of them 'belong to us.'[120] 'What we were doing was a new experience in the world. Until our time no one had ever been on fire in the air. Until our time there had never been so many people to hear of such things and then to forget them again'.[121]

United in their endeavour, they formed a community of the air, with their own language and mutual understandings, their own stress and shared risks, their mutual 'great trust and admiration and affection'.[122] They had their own ideas of honour and sacrifice, their own 'very personal' or shared hatreds of an enemy who had, in many cases, killed their families or taken over their countries.[123] In Bates's cameos of aerial warfare these veterans of

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[117] Bates, *Autobiography*, p. 361.

[118] Bates, *Autobiography*, p. 384. In September 1940, Oakington passed to No. 3 Group and became the base for the first Stirling squadron, No. 7. There were 258 operational losses of bombers flying from this airfield: 113 Stirlings, 93 Lancasters, 36 Mosquitos and 16 Wellingtons. See http://www.raf.mod.uk/bombercommand/s102.html (6.7.2010). Some Spitfires were also based there as part of the No. 3 Photographic Reconnaissance Unit. For the context of this warfare, see C. Webster and N. Frankland, *The Strategic Air Offensive Against Germany, 1939-1945*, 4 vols (London, 1961); A.J. Levine, *The Strategic Bombing of Germany, 1940-1945* (London, 1992); R. Overy, *Bomber Command, 1939-1945* (London, 1997); K. Wilson, *Men of Air: the Doomed Youth of Bomber Command* (London, 2007).

[119] H.E. Bates, 'The Disinherited', in *The Stories of Flying Officer 'X'* (1952, London, 1965), pp. 92-3. Much of Bates's RAF experience also went into his *A Moment in Time* (1964, Harmondsworth, 1969), and, most famously, his *Fair Stood the Wind for France* (1944, London, 2005).

[120] Bates, 'The Disinherited', p. 93.

[121] H.E. Bates, 'How Sleep the Brave', in *The Stories of Flying Officer 'X'*, p. 83.

[122] Bates, *Fair Stood the Wind*, p. 100.

[123] H.E. Bates, 'Yours in the Earth', in *The Stories of Flying Officer 'X'*, p. 100.

young age spoke ‘the odd, boyish, sometimes silly service language that came out of their exclusive world, for nobody else to understand. Behind this language, you could take refuge from the fear and reality of the business’. ‘Wizard: the word had grown crusts on it’.[124] They talked of their Mae Wests, the vis, airscrews, cough-drops, popsies, tough tits, pieces of cake; they carried their rabbit-feet and other mascots.[125] They felt like the young pilot from Kalgoorlie, ‘that he had something damnable and cruel and hideous to wipe out from his conception of what was a decent life on earth. Every time he went up something was vindicated’.[126] And behind such a man lurked the colonial communities backing the war effort, who in his case had initially tried to keep the war a secret from him, and who then, upon his return to western Australia, comprised ‘the largest gathering of folks anyone had ever seen on the farm...everyone from thirty miles around and one or two people from fifty miles away... At night they sang hymns and old songs in the drawing-room round the piano, and they slept in round beds on the floor’.[127]

These men looked down upon the rural farms and inhabitants whose problems Bates had hitherto described, and, whatever Bates’s earlier verdicts, the airmen seem to have seen these as communities looking up at them. One pilot described by Bates came from Somerset, from a family home ‘bound to earth, lighted by that cheap paraffin lamp which they carried from room to room’. His parents had been killed by a loose bomb landing on their farm.

> ‘He roared over fields and woods and roads and over the little dusty blue towns and over remote farms where he could even see the hens feeding and scuttling in the dark winter grass. He came so low once that for a second or so he saw people in the fields. For an instant he saw a man and woman working. They raised flat, astonished faces to look at the great ‘plane overhead... They might have been old or young, he could not tell; they lifted their heads and in a second were cut off by the speed of the ‘plane. But in this second, as he saw them transfixed on the earth below him and before the speed of the ‘plane cut them off forever, he remembered his own people. He remembered them as they lived, simple and sacrificing, living only for him, and he saw them alive again, the same simple people, the same humble, faithful, eternal people, giving always and giving everything: the greatest people in the world’.[128]

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[124] Bates, *Fair Stood the Wind*, pp. 100, 119.

[125] A ‘Glossary of RAF slang’ appears in H.E. Bates, *There’s Something in the Air* (New York, 1943). Bates’s own private letters can share such language, as e.g. to Joe Braddock: ‘The odds are sure tough on you, buddy, but nuts!... Attaboy!’. NCL, letters of H.E. Bates (letter 9, to Joe Braddock, 21.1.1938). Compare the RAF/WAAF language of [B. Rutter, comp.], *From Betty with Love: a Love Story of the Second World War* (Exeter, 1985), and its glossary of RAF terms, p. 144.

[126] Bates, ‘The Young Man from Kalgoorlie’, in *The Stories of Flying Officer ‘X’*, p. 24.

[127] *Ibid.,* p. 22.

[128] Bates, ‘The Greatest People in the World’, in *The Stories of Flying Officer ‘X’*, pp. 51, 55.

This was a new language for Bates, far removed from his idiom hitherto, a sentimental domestic patriotism that may seem cloying or mawkish today, but it conveyed wartime emotions and had great appeal. Its pictorial imagery – the flat astonished faces raised upwards amid the farmyard hens – might have come from a painting by Stanley Spencer, another commissioned wartime artist. Yet Bates experienced with some awe the sense of purpose of these squadrons. This was new to a writer who had hitherto seen little that was valid in community life – it brought to his writing an awareness and appreciation of community as shared endeavour. Whether the squadron was in preparation, in action, or its men in a dinghy after being shot down, or tramping through occupied France after crash landing, Bates dwelt on how they cooperated and shared danger. Even little details mattered in this regard, for Bates was never one to miss the meaning of detail. 'From setting our watches together we got a sense of unity'.[129] Franklin, the Wellington bomber pilot in *Fair Stood the Wind for France*, 'felt keenly...their inter-dependence, profound and clear and inexpressibly tense, and the trust he had in them'.[130] As Bates later wrote in his most violent novel, set in India after Partition, 'It was exactly as he remembered it once with a squadron of fighter pilots: all the physical heartiness, underlined by fear of death, all the jolly exultation in little things, above the ache in the bone'.[131] And as the war progressed, and successes occurred more regularly, he wrote of how

> 'It was one of those periods in a station when the unity and life of a good squadron becomes too strong to become a local thing, compressed within itself, meaning something only to a few people. It breaks out, and spreading, warm and energetic and fluid, becomes a large thing, meaning something to many people...The squadron was good and proud and knew itself... They had found each other...all of us felt it there...a squadron which is at the crest of things'.[132]

Yet this feeling was short-lived, this community melted away. 'And finally it was time to say good-bye...the sergeant pilots fondled the busts of each other's Mae Wests and said heavy farewells'.[133] A year later, Bates returned to the pub which the squadron had frequented, and the landlord no longer recognised him. '"Fancy me forgettin'." He looked up at me with eyes large and tender with regret. We shook hands. "But you know, sir, they come

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[129] H.E. Bates, 'How Sleep the Brave', in *The Stories of Flying Officer 'X'* (1952, London, 1965), p. 79; Bates, *Fair Stood the Wind*, p. 7.

[130] *Ibid*., p. 33.

[131] H.E. Bates, *The Scarlet Sword* (1950, Harmondsworth, 1974), pp. 42-3. Violence is a theme closer to home in H.E. Bates, *Dear Life* (London, 1950), set in post-war London, and certainly one of his bleakest novels.

[132] H.E. Bates, 'There's Something in the Air', in *The Stories of Flying Officer 'X'*, pp. 104, 107.

[133] *Ibid.,* pp. 104, 107.

an' go. That's the truth. They come and go."'[134] The community of the squadron had scattered globally, from its small fenland base. In such a society, so mobilised, whether for peacetime or war production, 'community' is potentially intense yet in fact fleeting and changeable, easily forgotten, as temporary as people sheltering in a subway, on a platform where in peacetime they briefly came together merely to disperse. The 'community' of such a squadron was an accentuated metaphor for a much wider modern experience.

The Larkins: an extended family replaces community?

The decline of a needed working relation with garden and land, with resources to hand that lend themselves to versatile uses in different jobs, of property that is of productive value rather than inhabited as a statement of taste – these are themes in Bates's writing. One recalls another Silas, Silas Marner, using the resources around him in his home-based weaving.[135] Bates's Uncle Silas makes the most of what he stores near him, and we have seen how any humour in Bates's writing disappears when he shows how Silas' cottage loses its fruitful meaning and immediate productivity, as it is taken over by new owners. These concerns over changing material life were shared by other writers on the mid twentieth-century countryside, such as H.J. Massingham.[136] It is no surprise then, that in his depictions of rural life after the Second World War, most notably in the stories about the Larkin family, Bates dwelt so lovingly upon the beauty of clutter or 'rubbish', the accoutrements of farmsteads, the litter of household surroundings, whether as relics of the past, or as items of utility to families. The charm of discarded clutter, whether useful or not, was a thread that connected the Larkins to Silas. So were the hedonistic drink and sex-fond proclivities of people determined to extract as much pleasure as possible from life. '"Mek the most on it while you can, boy," [Silas] said. "Mek the most on it while you can,"'[137] an injunction that the Larkins would certainly have endorsed.

Yet the emphases of Bates's stories set in the post-war Kentish countryside were in most respects remarkably different from the themes he had handled hitherto. Some critics thought that Bates, into this period, had 'nothing new to say', or even (in the words of Angus

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[134] H.E. Bates, 'The Bell, in *The Stories of Flying Officer 'X'*, p. 109.

[135] G. Eliot, *Silas Marner* (London, 1861).

[136] For example, H.J. Massingham, *An Englishman's Year* (London, 1948), pp. 125-30. (Bates published alongside Massingham in H.E. Bates *et al*, *The English Countryside* (London, 1951), and shared many concerns with him). Slightly earlier, G. Sturt, *The Journals of George Sturt, 1890-1927* (Cambridge, 1967), vol. 1, p. 245, stressed villagers' 'true interest...in Work, especially in work on their gardens, in their crops, and in the management of their grounds'; G. Sturt, *The Bettesworth Book* (1901, Firle, Sussex, 1978), pp. 257-8.

[137] Bates, 'Queenie White', in *Sugar for the Horse*, p. 35.

Wilson) that he had 'sold out', but such judgements seem to me completely incorrect.[138] The Larkins stories and novels are remarkably prescient and adapted to the changed circumstances of 1950s and '60s England, and are intensely interesting as a result. Bates now developed a stream of 'comic' writing that should also be read as a cutting satire on social trends in consumption and familial individualism. He wrote of his earlier novels – mentioning *The Fallow Land*, *The Poacher*, and *A House of Women* – that these were 'in a sense, historical novels, portions of a world that has vanished... the Second World War revolutionised the countryside as nothing, not even railways, had done before'.[139] The changes in Bates's writing were now, yet again, a manifestation of his stated 'own philosophy: to go with the stream, never to battle against it'.[140] However one judges that politically,[141] it seems to be the key to what makes him so reflective of the different eras in which he wrote, and thus so versatile as an author. On the one hand, the Larkin stories are materially effusive, glorying in abundance and ways to consume it, a stark contrast to the H.E. Bates who had hitherto been a writer exploring hardship, poverty, and the unfulfilled material and emotional hopes of women. On the other hand, the Larkin stories are divorced from any real sense of occupational community, either agricultural or industrial, and their focus is overwhelmingly upon one large (unmarried) family and its pleasurable activities, outings and consuming tastes. Bates had yet again surely moved with the times.

'The Larkins' secret is in fact that they live as many of us would like to live if only we had the guts and nerve to flout the conventions'.[142] There was something of himself in Pop Larkin, Bates wrote: 'a passionate Englishman, a profound love of the nature, of the sounds and sights of the countryside, of colour, flowers and things sensual; a hatred of pomp, pretension and humbug; a lover of children and family life; an occasional breaker of rules, a flouter of convention.'[143] Some have written of the Larkin family as escapist whimsy, on their

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[138] Vannatta, *H.E. Bates*, p. 129; DeAth, 'The quiet world of H.E. Bates's, citing Angus Wilson.

[139] Bates, *Autobiography*, p. 271.

[140] Bates, *Autobiography*, p. 514.

[141] Bates adapted his writing in response to social change, yet seems not to have 'gone with the stream' politically in post-war Britain. His political views appear sceptical of welfare legislation and 'the straitjacket of the State', and Pop Larkin's tax avoidance and declarations about 'the National Elf lark' seem to reflect Bates's own politics in his *Autobiography*, e.g. pp. 272, 274-5, 284, 512.

[142] *Ibid*., p. 512.

[143] *Ibid*., p. 514. His widow Madge said that much of her husband went into this character: R. Supple, 'Author Pop's the question', *Chronicle and Echo* (25.8.1995), NCL, Local Studies Centre, Autobiographical Cutting File. For H.E. Bates, 'Pop is not one person but 10, met or observed over a span of years and finally welded, purely by imagination, into a living credible whole'. R. Horner, 'Pop Larkin: the facts of fiction', *Daily Telegraph* (8.4.1991), p. 15; 'essentially they are two very different men'.

television serialisation as a 'mood of escapist abandon'.[144] Certainly the popularity of that serialisation by Yorkshire Television, produced by Bates's son Richard, was extraordinary: the audience grew to over twenty million people.[145] Yet within the longer span of Bates's *writing* this sort of description seems misplaced. The Larkins are not *escaping* from anything: on the contrary, they are engaging more fully with everything that has become available around them, and having the nerve to do so fully, even while the reader wonders in surprise about the means of livelihood that enable them to do so. This family – and it is the all-consuming *family* that is now the overwhelming emphasis, not community or a hope for it – can be read on two planes: on the one hand for their enjoyment of an enviable life, but also, Bates wrote, 'as a reflection on the revolution that had overtaken post-war England', a revolution that was especially marked in the countryside. Standards of living had increased dramatically. 'In the early thirties not a single farm worker in my village had a car, many not even a bicycle; today many have two cars, many a cottage inhabited by a family displays four, five, even six cars; few village shops sold anything but mouse-trap cheese, fat bacon, candles, paraffin, tart oranges and boiled sweets; today every one has its deep freeze dispensing scampi, smoked salmon, spaghetti Bolognese and exotics of every kind...Ma and Pop unashamedly enjoyed their love and champagne and Primrose her seduction by flesh and poetry in the fields'.[146]

Bates's writing set before 1939 had depicted material culture and living conditions in many grim ways. Some features of this have been seen in his writing on the boot and shoe towns and surrounding out-putting villages. In 'An Aspidistra in Babylon', set in 1921, he wrote of the 'stuffy little boarding-house, the smell of frying fish and bacon…curtains of green chenille, antimacassars, and brass pots of aspidistra'.[147] Like George Orwell, his inter-war writing often dwelt upon threadbare upholstery and dusty geraniums, the intractability of the gas mantle, the struggle to afford a new dress, the humdrum interiors of lower-middle class life. One is truly in a different world with the Larkins of the late 1950s; indeed, one is constantly astonished by abundance and an eagerness to consume it. The village post office has become much more fully stocked, including with foreign items. 'Vast sums' are paid out as child allowances, at least that is what it seems to a Miss Pilchester.[148] Rural folk want the

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[144] *Daily Telegraph* (11.5.1991), p. 7.

[145] J. Dalingpole, 'Pop's the tops for 18 million', *Daily Telegraph* (11.5.1991), p. 7; J. Gaskell, 'Business blooms for Darling Buds of May', *Sunday Telegraph* (12.5.1991).

[146] Bates, *Autobiography*, p. 514; and to similar effect see H.E. Bates, *Oh! To Be in England* (1963, Harmondsworth, 1966), pp. 136-7; H.E. Bates, *When the Green Woods Laugh* (London, 1960), p. 171, on scampi, asparagus and veal cutlets 'at the village shop nowadays. It was part of the rural revolution'.

[147] H.E. Bates, 'An Aspidistra in Babylon', in *The Grapes of Paradise: Eight Novellas* (1957, Harmondsworth, 1974), p. 165.

[148] H.E. Bates, *A Little of What You Fancy* (1970, Harmondsworth 1973), pp. 32-3.

new commodities and complain when they are absent. Children are admonished: 'Now bleedin' be quiet or else…If you don't shut your gob you won't have no scampi'.[149] And the Larkins are at an even higher plane than this, with their tin trunks stuffed with money, and their items of conspicuous consumption like the Rolls Royce and champagne. They eat 'massive breakfasts' submerged under seas of tomato ketchup; colossal quantities of ice-cream, icy buns, chocolate biscuits, fish and chips, and the like are consumed;[150] and their glass and chromium cocktail cabinet is 'shaped like an elaborate glass and silver ship… Spanish galleon… "Cost us a hundred and eighty…with the extra sets of goblets. The brandy lot…And the silver bits for hot punch and all that"'.[151] '"Perfick"'. Ma Larkin quivers like a colossal jelly; every time one breast goes into the bra the other comes out – Bates is percipient and anticipatory in ways that seem remarkable for 1958-1963 – but even he seems not to have anticipated obesity being plumped forward as a major issue thirty years later. A visiting road planner contemplates with astonishment their 'lavish living, the vintage port, the expensive burgundy, the expensive taste combined with ghastly taste, the flamboyance and the vulgarity'.[152] Small wonder then that Pop Larkin spends the duration of Bates's interestingly titled novel *A Little of What You Fancy* petulantly and parsimoniously recovering from a copulation-induced heart attack, in hopes that he can then resume hugely indulgent consumption of drink, food and sex where he left off.[153] These hopes are, happily, fulfilled on the final page.[154] The title of this novel is both an English understatement, given the consumption involved, as well as alluding to Marie Lloyd's music hall song of pre-1922 days, whose original title's ending 'does you good' – whatever its meanings for Marie Lloyd and her audiences – has now come to be omitted by Bates. One is left smiling at his quiet acknowledgement of the effects of social change. And within the English literary traditions of pastoral, all this is certainly a new development.

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[149] *Ibid*., p. 34.

[150] Bates, *Darling Buds of May*, pp. 16, 83.

[151] *Ibid*., pp. 43-4.

[152] Bates, *A Little of What You Fancy*, p. 176.

[153] Small wonder also that the producer Richard Bates and Yorkshire Television held off serialising the fifth Larkin novel, in which this heart attack is the central theme. Given the popularity of this money-spinning television series, one can understand why Richard Bates said that 'It makes sense to hold off that final book for as long as possible'. J. Dalingpole, 'Pop's the tops for 18 million', *Daily Telegraph* (11.5.1991), p. 7.

[154] For historical and economic discussion of these post-war consumption issues, see A. Offer, *The Challenge of Affluence: Self-control and Well-being in the United States and Britain since 1950* (Oxford, 2006).

John Betjeman wrote in a 1958 review of Bates's emerging Larkin fiction that 'I cannot help feeling that tragedy and disaster lie below its surface'.[155] The dialectic between comedy and tragedy was obvious. This happy abundance, for all the larking merriment and heart disease it causes the Larkin family – and for all its stress upon the individualistic unwed family as the consuming and living unit – seems to bring a vacuum in senses of community, and to induce levels of personal isolation that supply Bates with at least some continuities from his earlier rural writing. Varied discourses of comedy, ironic pastoral, personal alienation from community, and social critique, are all apparent. Alienation is clear in Bates's characterisation, especially that of his women. Miss Pilchester's 'only really conscious impression was being alone. The village street was utterly deserted. The whole place was like something stricken, itself dead, with not a soul in sight'.[156] The pub landlord contemplates women drinking: 'That was largely the trouble with women in the country [he thinks]. Frustrated and lonely, they got at it in secret and then didn't know when to stop'.[157] The Larkin family have a social circle of about six people, a few of whom live in London.[158] Convention, whatever that is, should now be ignored and openly flouted as a sign of one's individualism. Community norms seem absent. Nobody has the time to organise anything.[159] When the Larkins have a party, half of their 'guests' – 'odd acquaintances' – are uninvited or unknown.[160] If there is any 'community' here at all, and one doubts that, it is neither a village community nor an occupational community of the kind whose inadequacies were explored by Bates in novels like *The Feast of July*.

Many in the village are treated opportunistically or with contempt. 'The gentry, Pop Larkin thinks, are 'really half-dopes'; and, contrary to some of their historically wistful penchants, Larkin 'couldn't for the life of him' think of any worthwhile aspects of social or architectural life 'other than material' ones.[161] He is eager to demolish their old mansions. There are rural incomers, 'a new kind of country gent', who had 'invaded the countryside… with one avowed intention: namely that of shooting pheasants…all too frequently [they] shot each other as well... This new passion for having a place in the country had brought so many mugs out of hiding that even Pop, sometimes, thought it wasn't quite fair. It was daylight

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[155] J. Betjeman, review in the *Daily Telegraph*, cited in J. Dalingpole, 'Pop's the tops for 18 million', *Daily Telegraph* (11.5.1991), p. 7.

[156] Bates, *A Little of What You Fancy*, p. 35.

[157] Bates, *A Little of What You Fancy*, pp. 38-9. 'Mother's little helpers' were of course being discussed in many forms by this date.

[158] *Ibid.,* pp. 67, 151.

[159] Bates, *Darling Buds of May*, pp. 130-1.

[160] *Ibid.,* p. 141.

[161] *Ibid.,* p. 134.

robbery. It was cruel to take their money'.[162] The place is littered with 'stockbroker chaps who played at farming'.[163] 'You made it in the city and lost it on the land. The countryside had never been so full of ragged-trousered brokers – what he called the Piccadilly farmers – pouring their money down the furrows'.[164] Other 'foreigners' 'used the country as a mere convenience'. A physics professor, in Miss Pilchester's view, 'did not belong. His cottage was a mere weekend bolt-hole for escape from London and the exhausting routine of teaching physics to long-haired and unwashed students'.[165] 'He buzzed in and out of the countryside as and when it suited him, a nuisance, impermanent, contributing nothing. Such people didn't… belong to the countryside. They were nothing more than fleeting parasites…looked on…with both suspicion and contempt'.[166] There is nothing new in such village scorn of outsiders,[167] but around the Larkins there is a greater than ever abundance of such people, and a signal failure of them to cohere into any kind of known community.

The Larkin philosophy is unperturbed: one manipulates such people to make money, to consume more, and if one has heart attacks 'The National Elf lark' sorts things out for you. H.E. Bates had once again moved adeptly with the times, into the era of "You've never had it so good". He was now breaking in a striking way from many of his earlier preoccupations. It is remarkable that he did this at that time. Always adapting his fiction to social history, as early as 1958 he was touching upon social, economic and public-health themes that were to be salient for the next fifty and more years. Community hardly exists. It's the family that matters, and its consumption. Well, Ma Larkin thinks, as her husband lies in bed upstairs after his heart attack, they

> 'had three television sets, including the new colour one, a Rolls-Royce, a Jaguar, and an estate car just for running about in, a washing machine, a washing-up machine and a spin drier, a deep freeze that was too big to go into the kitchen and had consequently to stand in one of the out-houses, three ponies for the children to ride, a heated swimming pool, the new French bar, a private cinema...with nice plush seats and a fridge so that everybody could have ice creams...a nice boat and a nice boat-house to

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[162] Bates, *A Little of What You Fancy*, p. 79. (Of course, there was nothing 'new' in a 'passion for having a place in the country', and this was a relatively prosperous time for farmers).

[163] Bates, *Darling Buds of May*, p. 133.

[164] H.E. Bates, *When the Green Woods Laugh* (London, 1960), pp. 41, 50.

[165] Bates, *A Little of What You Fancy*, p. 29. Bates uses the term 'foreigner' here in the older rural sense, i.e. a person not from the locality or parish.

[166] Bates, *A Little of What You Fancy*, pp. 29-32.

[167] K.D.M. Snell, *Parish and Belonging: Community, Identity and Welfare in England and Wales, 1700-1950* (Cambridge, 2006), ch. 2: 'The culture of local xenophobia'.

> put it in, and above all plenty to eat and drink. You couldn't say they lacked for very much'.[168]

'Ma couldn't grumble'. Maybe Pop Larkin would continue to say: 'Perfick'.

So much for social comment. Perhaps this was Bates's resurgent Methodist upbringing and earlier experiences, now so changed, still affecting both his self-discipline and social judgement. A strong part of him had rebelled against that background: criticising a lugubrious and interfering Methodism; writing in depressing terms about the boot and shoe communities and the inter-war farming communities; or, much more humorously, cooking up personalities like Uncle Silas or Pop and Ma Larkin. These anti-conventionalist retorts to his past assist his versatility of theme and characterisation. The Larkins are a social warning, yet also a relieved cheery endorsement of later abundant life. This shines through in a personally illuminating letter from Bates, both depressed and joyful. Here he is writing to his old friends Joe and Muriel Braddock,[169] a few years before his death in 1974:

> 'I'm glad the Larkins amused you. That, of course, is what they are for & I am glad to note, in the few reviews I have so far seen, that this thought is echoed – i.e. that people are getting just a bit tired of all the dreary codswollop that has made the 60s so depressing. Anyway it cheers me to know that Ma & Pop have acted like restorative medicine to many, many people...
>
> England looks so wonderful at the moment. One could almost weep at what I call "the green sweetness of life".
>
> Love to you all
>
> H.E. '

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[168] Bates, *A Little of What You Fancy*, pp. 110-111.

[169] NCL, letters of H.E. Bates (letter 69, to Joe Braddock, 22.5.1970).