

# Hat-trick author

by DUDLEY BARKER

The quiet countryman who writes best-sellers made the most of his wartime postings: two "hits" and now a third

WHEN *The Jacaranda Tree* is published in January, H. E. Bates will have pulled off a literary hat-trick. For the third time running, he has written a novel and had it chosen by the Book Society as the best of the month. It is a distinction which few other authors could equal. In hard cash it means a sum which would have sounded fantastic to the young Bates who once found writing so unremunerative that he had to go on the dole.

Today, Bates is one of the most significant and successful of English writers. The gleaming prizes that go to the successful author—wealth, leisure, esteem—fall monotonously into the lap of the slightly built, fair-haired, quiet-voiced man of forty-three.

His problem now is not how to sell, but whom to sell to. Film companies urge him to write scripts and, as he once cheerfully told me: "I sting them for a good fat sum." American magazines pay him fabulous prices: for one long-short story, £1,750.

Whenever he publishes a novel, the world hurries along to buy it. Of the two most recently published, each has sold more than half a million copies in England and America, and has been translated into many foreign languages.

His books have not only brought him a fortune but have earned hundreds of dollars for this country. As a one-man export business, Bates ranks high.

Yet there was nothing in his birth or the surroundings of his boyhood to give promise of this great literary career. His grandfather was a farm labourer, his father an executive in a leather factory. The boy went first to a village school in his native Northamptonshire, then to the grammar school at Kettering.

## Failed at First

There seemed no reason at all why he should decide while still a lad that he had the ability, and the strength, to make his living from literature. Indeed, his first attempts were a failure. He became a junior reporter on a country newspaper, disliked it, and gave it up in favour of a clerkship in a warehouse.

But he still meant to live by writing. In his leisure from clerking he continued to write. Wisely, he wrote about ordinary people in the villages and small towns he had known all his life.

Success was slow in coming. It was his short stories, in particular, that brought him a name and a living. They were still the same sort of stories: stories of unpretentious people, stories for the most part of the midland and southern counties of England which Bates knows as a man knows his back garden.

If you want advice on a country pub in which to laze away a weekend, or a farmhouse to which to take the family for a week's holiday, ask Bates. He knows them all. He seems to have been to them all.

He himself settled down in the village of Little Chart, in Kent, in a lovely

house made from an old Kent barn. When he was twenty-six he married Marjorie Helen Cox, and they have four children—two sons and two daughters—who went off to the village school just as Bates had done. In the house at Little Chart he centred his life on his family. And around it he made the garden which has always been his pride.

That was H. E. Bates at the beginning of the war—an author of distinction and ever-growing reputation, a happy family man and, I suppose, a comfortably prosperous one. Yet, in his work, he lacked something—a horizon wider than that of a country town.

Like so many millions of others, he found it in the war.

The Royal Air Force was the first of the fighting Services to realize that words can be weapons of war almost as powerful as bombs. So the R.A.F. commissioned a few writers and sent them out to write about the air war.

Then came an idea of genius. There were some things that could not be described in bulletins, news stories or articles. From all these the spirit of the fighting men was somehow missing. Could it be captured in fiction? If it could, the propaganda value of that fiction would be immense, unreckonable.

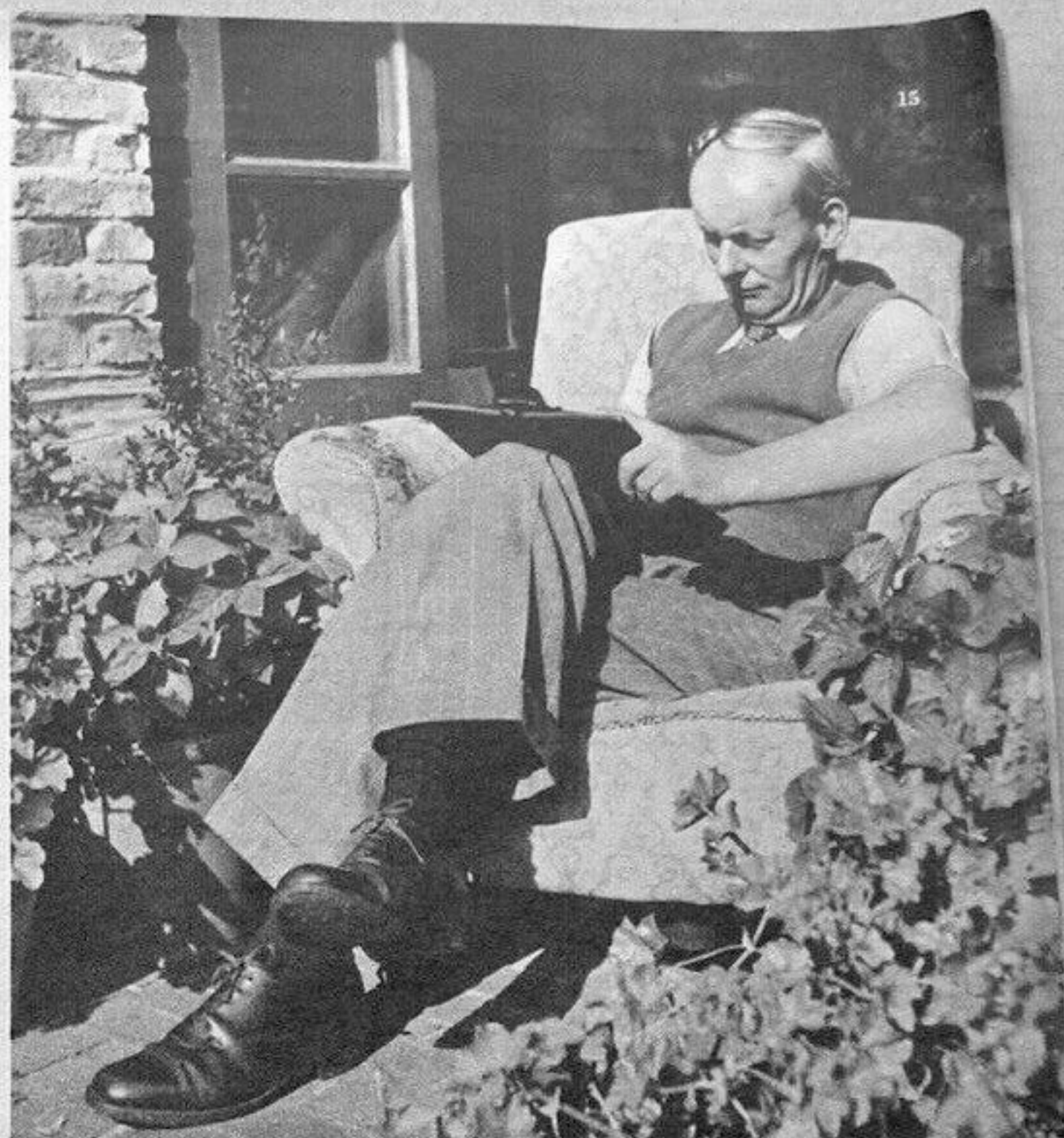
So in 1941 Bates was made an R.A.F. officer and sent to live on bomber stations. He was told: "Write short stories about what you see."

The result was probably the most brilliant single piece of propaganda of the war. Under the assumed name of "Flying Officer X," Bates produced a series of short stories about the air crews of the R.A.F.—not about their daring deeds, but about the men themselves, how they thought, how they endured.

His main theme, in particular, was their endurance, the nobility of the single human being in all the horror and futility of war. He was writing about tough young men, in tough situations. But he did not use the "tough" style of some modern novels. He wrote so simply, with such a sense of the dignity of man, that his descriptions of hardship were intensely moving to read.

Midway through the war he took an example of this favourite theme—a bomber crew, forced down in France with the pilot wounded, making their way on foot to freedom—and he made a novel of it. *Fair Stood the Wind for France* came out in 1944. It flared across Britain and America with its message that, in all the ponderous and mammoth business of war, it is still the integrity and staunchness of the individual that matters.

Soon after it was published, the



Pad on knee, he sat in his garden, recalling the intensity of Burma

R.A.F. sent Bates to Burma, possibly with the idea that he might do something to dispel the belief that the war out there was being waged exclusively by Errol Flynn.

When he came back he said to me: "I heard the most wonderful 'walk-back' story out there. It's too big altogether for a short story. Perhaps one day I can develop the idea into something longer."

## One Man's Courage

The war ended. Bates went back to live quietly with his family at Little Chart. Every morning, with a pad of paper on his knee, he sat in his garden recalling the intensity of Burma. *The Purple Plain*, his Burma war novel, was the result.

The Book Society chose it here, the Literary Guild in America. Within a few months, more than half a million people had bought this story of the courage and endurance of one man in the midst of the hugely impersonal war.

*The Purple Plain* consolidated Bates's position, both artistic and financial. From now on, a new Bates novel is a literary event; its sales will be numbered not in thousands or hundreds of thousands, but in half millions. Yet all this fame and fortune seems to have had curiously little effect upon the man himself. I say "seems" because Bates is a difficult man to know.

He is warm-hearted and unaffected. He would never dream of posing as the

distinguished man of letters which, in fact, he is. But there is a sort of aloofness, perhaps solitariness, about him. During the several years in which I have had his acquaintance, I cannot recall hearing anybody call him Herbert or Ernest (much less Bert or Ernie). When "Bates" is a bit too formal his friends mostly compromise and call him "H.E."

Yet it would be quite unfair to picture him as a recluse or as standoffish. His whole life, outside his writing, is deliberately ordinary, as are his pleasures: gardening, fishing, looking at pictures and, above all, family life.

The two characteristics which, I think, set him a little apart from others are those true signs of a countrybred man, simplicity and stubbornness. When you first meet Bates it is an easy mistake to think him a quiet, almost timid, little man who could be bullied into submission. Later you discover that, once he has decided to do something, nothing ever deflects him.

Perhaps that is why he recognizes in others the virtues of that same stubbornness which, raised to its highest plane and set against an epic background, has provided the theme of his two preceding novels. Perhaps that is why he brought back from Burma one more story which he has had to tell before he could turn his mind back to the English scene.

That story is *The Jacaranda Tree*, already chosen by the Book Society as its book of the month for January. It is another story of endurance and faith in human values in the midst of calamity, though this time it deals not with fighting men, but with civilians. It is the third of the series of great novels which began with *Fair Stood the Wind for France* and continued with *The Purple Plain*. I have no doubt that, while the author goes on quietly gardening in Kent, his publishers are preparing half a million copies of this one, too.

*H. E. Bates's forthcoming novel, "The Jacaranda Tree," Book Society choice for January, is to appear exclusively as a serial story in John Bull. Look out for the opening chapters NEXT WEEK*