WRITING TO ORDER

The Development of H. E. Bates

By John Rowland

THE WAR HAS brought to many imaginative artists in all the arts a new problem, which has, I think, never before been so acutely presented. There have, of course, been occasions on which a painter, a musician, or a poet has been asked to produce a work of art in support of a special philosophical political or religious position; but a total war of that kind which we now know so well necessarily involves the artist in common with the miner, the carpenter, and the engineer.

And this is not merely the old, old problem of the opposing claims of propaganda and art. Any reader who studies the work of H. E. Bates and of "Flying Officer X" will be able to see the curious dilemma in which the ever-increasing activities of the State now appear to be placing the artist. I think that Bates is a wholly typical example of the kind of thing which is now causing considerable heart-searching among a large number of artists of all the arts, and a few minutes spent in considering his work and its development will not be wasted.

Let me recall first of all the salient points of his pre-war career. He first reached the public through a book called *The Two Sisters*, which appeared in 1926 with an introduction by that indefatigable discoverer, Edward Garnett. This novel, written when its author was only eighteen, presented the reader with a curious picture of two women and of their differing development. It was written in a style of almost precious distinction, and its dreamy solemn atmosphere was a major achievement for an immature writer. Later its author became known more as a short-story writer than as a novelist, though in such novels as *The Poacher* and *The Fallow Land* he showed that *The Two Sisters* was no mere flash in the pan.

In the early 'thirties Bates, though considerably younger, took his place with L. A. G. Strong, A. E. Coppard, T. F. Powys, Rhys Davies, and a few other distinguished names, as one of the leading practitioners of the short story in Great Britain, and in his book, *The Modern Short Story*, published in 1941, he set the seal on his accomplishment with one of the most interesting critical studies of that difficult art form that recent years have brought. Here (one would have thought) was the beginning of a career which was to bring distinction and ever greater fame; here was the most interesting and promising young man in English literature. I will not say that he was due to become the English Tchehov, for Bates has always insisted that he has not been a mere product of that Russian genius. But I am sure that if twenty literary critics of 1939 had been asked who, among the younger generation, was most likely to achieve first-class honours in the school of posterity, nineteen of them would have answered "H. E. Bates."

All that may be assumed, and it says much for the perspicacity of the Air Ministry that, when Bates joined the R.A.F., they realised his value, and gave him the job of writing those imaginative sketches of the boys of the Bomber Command, which appeared under the title *The Greatest People in the World*.

I must admit that when I learned that "Flying Officer X" was no other than H. E. Bates, I looked forward to this little book of short stories with eager anticipation. Bates had, apparently, ceased writing fiction for some time, and I thought that now, at last, we should be enabled to see what a first-class artist makes of material which is chosen for him.

Speaking in general, imaginative writers have found it very difficult to write to order. In Nazi Germany and in Communist Russia alike, the work of art has been very rare; the work of good journalism, masquerading as art, has become the rule. No longer do we get books like *War and Peace*; increasingly we get books like *The Fall of Paris*; and something like that appears to have happened to Bates.

If we compare one of his pre-war stories, say *Death of Uncle Silas*, with one of the war-time tales, say *The Young Man from Kalgoorie*, we are conscious of a catastrophic fall in standards. Technically the excellences are as great as ever, but there is a curious contraction in vitality and humanity, a feeling that, though the pre-war Bates deliberately wrote, in the main, of the people of a small part of rural England, and the war-time Bates writes of the men who have come from all over the Empire, yet, in its broader, more human aspects, the work of the pre-war Bates was far more generously inclined towards the world.

And there is another, even more surprising aspect of the change that has overcome him. The inter-war years were (as far as our best literature was concerned) years of reaction against all kinds of sentimentality. Aldous Huxley, the Powys brothers, Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence—all the idols of the intellectual world of the 'twenties and early 'thirties—were anti-sentimentalists. And Bates was quite certainly one of that company. His prose was exquisite, his observation meticulous. But never once did he venture anywhere near the abyss of sentimentalism which lies so perilously in the path of the short-story writer. Never once did he compromise with those standards of the commercial magazine which brings in such abundant returns in money (if not in standing) to the able short-story writer. But *The Greatest People in the World* (the very title is sentimental) shows more than a streak of that rather dangerous sentimentalisation which is so easy for the imaginative writer when he is describing the work of men whose lives are lived in circumstances of sudden alertness and vivid alarm.

Now, I do not for one moment suggest that Bates himself is conscious of this change in his general approach to his job as a writer of short stories. Still less do I suggest that he has deliberately attempted to sentimentalise the life of Bomber Command; but I do suggest that he presents an example of a new tendency in literature which we should study. In these days a number of our more able writers necessarily occupy official positions in the various Ministries and in the B.B.C. As such official historians and recorders of various aspects of the war effort, they have to write to order. If they are merely writing accounts of facts, the difficulties of sentimentality and of hardness of heart—contradictory, but often existing in the same man—will not worry them. But if they are asked to write stories, to paint pictures, or to compose music on some theme connected with the national effort, they will have to be exceedingly skilful to steer clear of these two twin evils. Bates has, as yet, been only faintly touched by them; but anyone who compares *The Greatest People in the World* with *Thirty Tales* will be able to see the insidious approach of a new limitation.

My final thought must be: is this unavoidable? Can the true artist, whether his medium be paint or sound, or merely words, work only in an atmosphere of complete freedom? Can the fact that his theme is chosen for him limit him in such a way that his artistic ability gradually evaporates? I will confess that I am not quite sure what is the answer to those questions, but I am sure that anyone who studies the development of Bates, now and in the future, will be better able to answer them than he who knows nothing of such things.

I have taken Bates as an example, largely because I have always been an admirer of his writing, and also because his work is readily accessible to a wide circle of readers. But I know that anyone who has by him a number of copies of *New Writing*, *Modern Reading*, and similar collections of recent imaginative literature, would be able to apply the principles of criticism with which I have here been concerned to other writers of our day. The war has presented writers with many problems, and I am not at all sure that this is not the most acute of them all.

THE FUNK-HOLE

By G. A. Squires

MR. PONDERBY FIRST came to Hernfleet in August, 1939. He and his wife evacuated themselves from Burwich—our county town—which was considered a safe "reception" town at that time; at any rate, it was half full of London children in those days—they were pouring in at the rate of five hundred a day.

Mr. Ponderby and and his wife took the "week-enders'" cottage in Mill Lane—for the duration. We none of us quite cottoned to him from the first. For one thing, he was a wholesale fruit and vegetable merchant in a