H. E. Bates

An Intimate Study of the Author and his Work

by

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IT is scarcely eight years since H. E. Bates began to publish the novels and short stories which have won him such merited repute as one of the finest contemporary imaginative artists. During that brief period he has found time to publish four novels : "The Two Sisters" (1926), "Catherine Foster" (1929), "Charlotte's Row" (1931), and "The Fallow Land" (1932), and four collections of short stories : "Day's End" (1928), "Seven Tales and Alexander" (1929), "The Black Boxer" (1932), and "The Woman Who Had Imagination" (1933). Many of his short stories have been published separately in limited editions, which are now valued collectors' items, and he has made a selection of his own short stories, entitled "Thirty Stories" (1934).

His stories, for the most part, flower from a lyric impulse, and he has recently pointed out in an article that the form of the short story as it has developed during the past generation offers a rich opportunity for the lyric poet who wishes to relate his own sharpened insight to the life of his time. It has seemed fitting, therefore, that Mr. Bates should be represented in this series by one of his more lyrical short stories. "Time" and "The Gleaner" are deservedly favourites, but "A Flower Piece" has been chosen for representation here because it not only mirrors a lyrically apprehended landscape but also reflects philosophically the author's attitude toward life.

Mr. Bates is often preoccupied by the contrast between the ideal and the real and by that middle ground where the two insensibly merge. In "A Flower Piece" he has chosen to mirror the contrast through the minds of two children who reflect both innocently and therefore all the more

faithfully. In other stories, such as "Sally Go Round the Moon" and "The Story Without an End," his presentation is much more direct and naturalistic.

The atmosphere of his stories is very delicately rendered. He has been compared justly enough by David Garnett to Renoir, and it is true that his method is that of a painter to whom texture means everything. For Mr. Bates the eternal background of human life is landscape, preferably the sky, and he sets his human figures against a sky by which they may be measured. His earlier work showed the influence of Stephen Crane and Turgenev, and to some degree of Chekhov. He has outgrown these influences long ago, and is now influencing many other writers in his turn. No one, however, has succeeded in capturing the same elusive beauty as Mr. Bates and in rendering it in such flexible English prose. His novels mark a considerable achievement, but in the short story he has crossed a new frontier.

Mr. Bates recently wrote "that the short story was the most flexible of all prose forms, that it could be anything from a prose-poem without a plot or character to an analysis of the most complex human emotions, that it could deal with any subject under the sun, from the death of a horse to a young girl's first love affair." It is this sense of the short story's flexibility which has fascinated this prose poet. He is continually making discoveries. The best discoveries are usually made at home, and it is surely at home that Mr. Bates discovered Uncle Silas. Uncle Silas appears in several of his stories, and when "The Death of Uncle Silas" was published a short time ago, many writers as well as readers were moved to write to Mr. Bates and lament his untimely end. Since then Uncle Silas appears to have discovered a new lease of life.

Mr. Bates is not only interested in writing short stories. He eagerly encourages new writers. Nothing is more refreshing than the alert enthusiasm he brings to the editorial luncheons of our publication when we think we have discovered a fine new story writer. At present he is enthusiastic about Douglas Boyd, that true poet whose first short stories were brought to me by their author a few months ago. Now Mr. Boyd's talent is singularly akin to that of Mr. Bates, and such disinterested recognition as the latter has shown is rare among our contemporaries.

Equally generous was his championship of the late Dorothy Edwards, whose brilliant stories found little favour with editors. He shares with David Garnett the credit of encouraging her.

As a critic of the short story he is never swayed by reputation. He judges each story on its merits. He is perhaps more severe on established writers who are his equals than on new writers. He seeks to hold them always to the highest point of their previous achievement. This frequently calls for courage. His judgment is always that of a poet, and I have sometimes lamented that Mr. Bates has not chosen to express himself in poetry. L. A. G. Strong and A. E. Coppard write short stories from a lyrical impulse, but they write fine poetry as well. The implicit poetry of Mr. Bates has hitherto eschewed verse, yet I can conceive of no more authentic lyric poet.