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WRITERS OF TO-DAY—5

GREAT ENJOYER

By RICHARD CHURCH

H. E. BATES, the novelist, and one of the most distinguished living masters of the art of the short story, was born in Northamptonshire in 1905. After leaving Kettering Grammar School he began to earn his living on a local newspaper. Apart from a short spell as a clerk in a warehouse, to which I will refer later, he has lived entirely by his pen.

That is a remarkable achievement, in this modern world. There are not many authors who can contrive to write books that are both fine works of art and earners of bread and butter. Usually, a writer has to augment his labours as a novelist, or poet, or biographer, by spells of journalism, or working for a publisher as adviser. Bates has been one of those few whose books have maintained them and their families. But in none of his novels has he dwindled into mere pot-boiling. He has written what he wanted to write, what he had to write, without compromise.

He is not an artist to compromise. A severe critic might even say that he is obstinate, self-concentrated in his work; liable to be quite ruthless when confronted by adverse criticism. And there has been plenty of that, because he is a successful writer. Popularity is anathema to the Higher Critics. Fecundity, too, is another thing that they suspect and recoil from. Bates enjoys both. Enjoys; that is the keyword. Bates is a great enjoyer; and that also is offensive to the Fastidious Noses of certain literary monitors.

AT the age of twenty, still in the provinces, Bates was discovered by Edward Garnett, the great and formidable publisher's reader who had made the reputation of many of the outstanding English writers of the 'nineties and the first two decades of the present century. He and his wife Constance, the translator of the Russian novelists, held their court, with their son David playing before the throne. Later, this David was to become an author and publisher of repute.

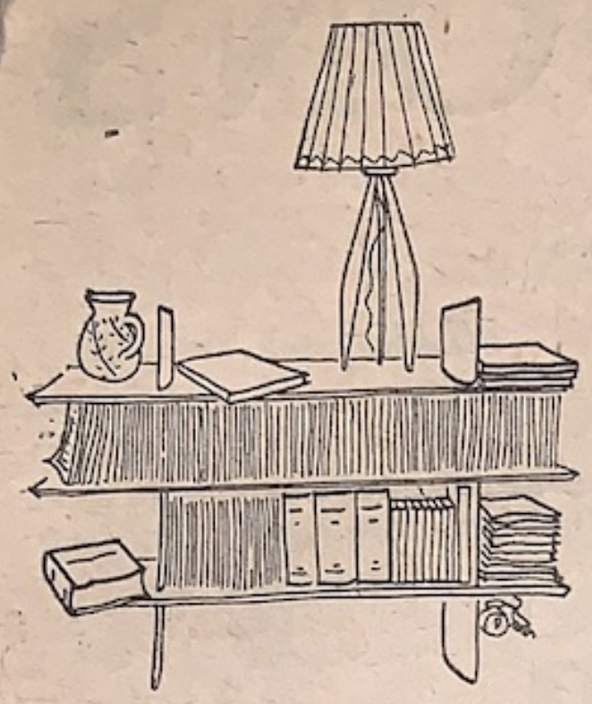
Doughty, Conrad, Galsworthy, Robert Frost, Edward Thomas; all were brought to eminence by Garnett's advocacy. Bates was his last discovery, before his death. He was a powerful man. In a short biographical study of him, written in grateful recollection, Bates says:

> Garnett was capable of penetrating the creative mind with the rarest insight and having penetrated it was capable also of recognizing, shaping, fostering and bringing to fruition its hidden potentialities. That is criticism: the criticism that is also creative; the criticism that brings the bud to flower.

It rapidly caused Bates to flower. He had begun to write his first novel, *The Two Sisters*, when he

H. E. Bates. "He inhabits a converted tithe-barn which he has filled with French Impressionist pictures."

THE "FLYING OFFICER X" STORIES SOLD IN MILLIONS



was eighteen, during office hours at the warehouse. He describes the process :

My procedure had been to arrive at eight-thirty in the morning, get through the entire day's work by nine-thirty, and then begin writing. I was sustained in this subversive routine by a frenzied enthusiasm of my own and by the motherly attentions of a certain endearing Mrs. Fountain, who owned the house next door. Mrs. Fountain had pear trees in the garden and plums on the wall, and I have an idea that she thought the young man in the warehouse, with his long lean face and look of dyspeptic dreaminess, was in some danger of being overworked. To that end she was always popping in. She popped in with cups of tea and pieces of bread and cheese at mid-morning ; with tea and toast or tea and cakes in the afternoon ; and with pears or plums as their season came. She was inexhaustible in her fussy, motherly, gossipy kindliness, and she probably saved me from an early death through burning the candle at both ends.

During this initial tutelage, or ministration, a letter came addressed to "Miss Bates" from the publishing house of Jonathan Cape. The young author had sent his first novel to try its luck there. That was the beginning of a career. We have not yet seen the end, for Bates is still under fifty, still in full spate, and still developing fresh facets of his creative vitality.

NOT much more need be said about his life, for in fact the lives of most writers are uneventful. Most of their time is spent between sleeping and writing. Their work gets between them and the adventure of personal experience. They have to live by proxy. That is why they are sometimes disappointing to meet, and why their wives (or husbands), friends and relations find them somewhat intangible and unsatisfactory as companions and sharers of the ups and downs of life.

So after recording that H. E. Bates has remained an incorrigible countryman, and has settled, surrounded by a remarkably happy family, not in his native county but in the heart of the Kentish Weald, where he inhabits a converted tithe-barn which he has filled with French Impressionist pictures and pieces of furniture and objets d'art, all chosen with flawless good taste (his sense of craft, of good handiwork, amounts to genius) ; after this brief physical reference I will turn to his work. The work is the man, though I must not forget the gardener. His garden is like his prose : well planned, clean, nurtured, and, in effect, rich and astonishingly beautiful.

After the first interview with Garnett at the publisher's office Bates delivered himself up to a rigorous monitorship that became a gruelling discipline. It abased his pride, the pride of the self-taught beginner working in isolation. From that isolation Bates went to his university ; and that university was Edward Garnett. Chapters were taken to pieces, soaked in acid comment, and the surviving shreds re-woven. Short stories were analysed. Bates says :

During all this time Garnett was doing for me that incomparable, rare and wonderful kind of service that Flaubert did for Maupassant. The youth from the country, happiest in the country, despising literary coteries and ideologies and schools, essentially an intuitive and sensuous and not a thinking writer, was being carefully shaped, guided and nursed by the man of experience and sophistication from whom not all the cynicism and ingratitude of the literary world had taken the humanity and enthusiasm of new discovery.

THUS Bates learned the craft of writing, developing from an enthusiastic novice into a quiet, pursuivant professional author. Since those days of apprenticeship he has published over forty books ; collections of short stories (a form in which he is an outstanding master in our language), novels, and books about the countryside. All are obtainable to-day in the Evensford uniform edition of his works, published by Cape and Michael Joseph.

This dedicated life was interrupted during the war by national service of a distinctive kind. Bates joined the R.A.F. and was directed to write short stories that should both celebrate and perpetuate the job done by our flying men. The tales he wrote under the name of "Flying Officer X" sold several millions of copies in two volumes.

This work took him out to India and Burma, an experience recollected in two later novels, *The Purple Plain* and *The Jacaranda Tree*. It was a violent upheaval in the level life of a contemplative man given somewhat to reclusiveness. The violence has served to bring out an element of sensuality (Maupassant-like) in his nature, acting as a catalytic agent to purge him of a fascination for the "red in tooth and claw" aspect of Nature.

IN the second of these two exotic books there is a description of a car falling over a cliff during the flight of English residents from Burma. The doors are sealed by the crash, with the dead bodies inside. Then the vultures come down, and we are made to watch them craving, insinuating their way in. I think I have never read anything quite so horrifying. Yet this was written by a poet who has described two children playing under a hawthorn tree in Maytime bloom, his prose almond-fragrant, dusted with pollen and the unself-conscious grace of every infant gesture.

Between the two descriptions lies a range of literary consciousness that is a reflection of a nature deeper than Bates himself knows, and which he has still to explore more fully. The cruelty, the lust, in his work is always direct, fierce and impersonal. As an element in his novels, that singleness of force, like fire or drought, or the life-urge itself, can overlay the development of personal character, and bring a sort of desert levelness to the drama of human contacts.

Restrained within the bounds of some civil fabric, such as his English rural society, which he knows so intimately and with such detail, it has a latent authority and propelling power comparable to Hardy's sense of Destiny in the Wessex Novels. Thus used, it emphasizes his character as a man, making it crusty, idiosyncratic, directed in taste and appetite. Without it, his extreme sensibility and nervous tension would have made him incapable of building up his own universe of people and place. He would have remained a poetic personality, lucid enough in verbal expression, but desultory in pursuit of every momentary impression.

Those critics who have grumbled about his work, calling it often crude and monotonous both in theme and treatment, must realize that they cannot have it both ways. Without this physical emphasis, exaggerated by his nervous reaction from the violent spectacle of wartime experiences, Bates would have produced work without sufficient salt. The fact is that much of his genius resides in this element of sensuousness. He thinks through the pores of his skin, rather than cerebrally (as he has discovered in that reference to his being "intuitive and sensuous and not a thinking writer").

So did John Keats, with whom I would compare him frequently, because of the very construction of his phrases. Both poets, for indeed Bates is in essence a poet, live in their chosen words, every epithet a drop of their hearts' blood, every rhythm a physical gesture. Keats said that as a poet he could not watch the sparrows without hopping among them on the gravel path. Bates is there, too, close to the ground, eager and hungry with the feathered bullies, no longer a human sitting in his study pen in hand.

THIS dionysiac genius is what distinguishes his work, especially when it is concerned with the traffic of Nature. Not even the febrile sensibility of Richard Jefferies, heightened by disease, can more massively present the texture of the countryside : the clouds, the soil, the fur and foliage, the passage of sun, moon and stars over the heavens, the sultry combustion of rotting leaves round the cool bulbs of next year's jonquils.

But it does more than that. It brings to the presentation of human nature a primitive sympathy that at times can stage a drama almost unbearable in its tenderness and desperation. *A House of Women*, published in 1936, and which I believe to be [illegible] of his most successful and representative novels, is rich in these two dominant strations of his central genius, sensuous prodigality. The tale is [illegible] of work, the dogged and obsessive determination of a countrywoman to carry on the running of a farm when all menfolk are either disabled or dead.

The fight with Nature, and against the tides of economic vagary, is waged without a let-up. But all the time Nature intrudes with perfume, a rhythm cism of daily phenomena of [illegible] happenings and presentations, and the fragrance of it makes the human oblation into a religious sacrifice. Look at this description of the farm-house where this primitive drama is staged :

The house stood at the extreme opposite end of the farm-yard, cut off by a [illegible] wall from the muck-heaps and barns and hen-houses and the orchard where many generations of colts and calves had worn the trunks of apple and plum and pear to the smoothness of saddle-leather by the rubbing of their soft necks. The house, too, like the barns and the wall, was [illegible] built, the roof beams here and there knuckled up under the earth-coloured tiles like the ribs of a starved horse, the stones themselves freckled with lichen patterns of green and buttercup.

In an age where intellect is so often removed from the root of things, the unique mental attack upon a criticism of life, as Bates does it through his craft-attuned senses, is something to be welcomed because of its simplicity and its consequent strength. There is something of universal grasp in it. That is why Bates's books have been translated into fifteen languages, and are read and savoured by people of all degrees of education and opinion.

Next week's study will be of Phyllis Bentley, by Winifred Williams.

SONGS OF OLD LONDON

Oh, St James's is a lovely place
'Tis better than the city
For there are belles and beaux
And everything that's pretty
Henry Carey