THE AGE LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

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A PRIMITIVE STATE

SOCIAL EXPERIMENT IN YUCATAN

IF THE GULF OF MEXICO CAN BE IMAGINED AS THE SPACE BETWEEN THE OUTSTRETCHED thumb and forefinger of the left hand, Yucatan, the most backward of the 28 United States of Mexico, is at the tip of the rather short thumb.

By D.L.D.

Washed by the waters of the Mexican Gulf to the west and north, by those of the Gulf of Honduras to the east, and cut off by jungle and swamp from the mainland to the south, the Yucatan Peninsula has an island quality which has encouraged its half million or so people to develop a life and consciousness of their own.

It was its comparative isolation which caused the revolution, which began in the northern states in 1911, to be late in reaching Yucatan. Twenty-five years ago the land was owned largely by a comparatively few wealthy Spanish families and the remainder of the people—Maya Indians and mestizos—were in a state of virtual slavery, peones on the huge henequen plantations.

The revolution has removed the distinction of landowner and peon writes Miss Lilo Linke in "Magic Yucatan" (Hutchinson). Rich and poor remain but men have ceased to be slaves and the wealthy have learned to complain.

Robbed!

Miss Linke's host in Merida, the capital, was a former landowner who complained bitterly of the way in which he had been robbed of his plantations of henequen, the cactus from which the coarse sisal fibre is obtained. But he still owned the plant in which the fibre was extracted from the pulpy leaves.

"Because they didn't know how to run the machines, those primitives," he told Miss Linke, "they still need me to teach them a thing or two."

Now the land is vested in the Government and the plantations are run by co-operatives, although the workers can obtain what is virtually a freehold ownership of a small allotment. Miss Linke found the plantations well kept and flourishing, the estate buildings, rarely visited homes of the former landowners, decaying peacefully under a 20-years' layer of dust.

For the most part the Spaniards, still wealthy but eating into their capital, are living in the past, mourning in their Merida palaces the days of absolute overlordship over the plantations and the peones.

But the former peones live for the future, the future of their children rather than of themselves. Everywhere Miss Linke found the emphasis on education, with illiteracy gradually being overcome.

A Maya Indian village, in Yucatan, where the natives are still in a very primitive state.

In El Progreso, Yucatan's port, the two biggest unions each maintain a school. Teachers' salaries are paid by the Federal Government but the unions provide books, buildings and furniture. The offices of the Dockworkers' Union are in the school building the union owns and the pride of its members in the pupils and their hope for the future are great.

"These men have one thing in common," says Miss Linke, "ambition for the future for their children. Any worker to whom I talked would end the conversation by throwing back his shoulders and saying, 'I want my son to have a better life than I.' And that did not simply mean an easier life. They thought of books, of art, unsoiled clothes, travel, of all the fine and delicate things that civilisation offers to the educated, and which are so far beyond the reach of their own rough hands."

But in the jungle it is different. Here the Indians live primitively, squeezing a poor livelihood from the zapote trees of the forest, which provide chicle for American chewing-gum factories.

To the 300 or so villages in which these jungle dwellers are congregated the Federal Government has sent cultural missions—teachers, agriculturists, engineers, nurses and craftsmen. But it is a slow process, in which the rewards are few and far between.

Miss Linke spent some time with one of the cultural missions. She was horrified at the sanitary conditions, or lack of them—at the pigs which slept beneath their owners' hammocks in the rickety stick and clay houses and scavenged in the common village latrine.

How to Educate

She taxed the leader of the mission with failing in his duty in not immediately remedying these disgusting conditions.

"If you want to educate people, it's fatal to interfere with their customs too arbitrarily," he said. "You have to proceed with method. Their chief problem here is water. That's why we are helping them to build a large tank and instal a motor pump. As soon as they are ready and in use we can take the next step. They love flowers. So we'll say, 'Why don't you lay out a little park round the tank?' That'll appeal to them. We supply the seeds and the expert advice, they'll do the work. Of course, the pigs will pull out the young plants and trample them down. So when they complain of that we'll say, 'Why don't you lock the pigs up?' When they give the obvious answer, we shall say, 'Improve your crops. With the same amount of work you can harvest five, six times as much as now. We will show you how.' Now do you understand?"

This, says Miss Linke, was the best five-year plan she had ever heard.

Everywhere the authoress went she found an almost adolescent enthusiasm for the social experiments being carried out—the new hospital buildings, the irrigation schemes, the different crops and methods of agriculture, and, above all, for education.

It was an enthusiasm based not on nationalistic fervor or doctrinaire fanaticism but rather on a deep sense of human dignity and a desire for community betterment. She found no class consciousness, except among the dispossessed landlords.

Looking over a kindergarten attended by the children of the poorest people in Merida Miss Linke expressed astonishment that it should be so well equipped. "We want them to grow up without envy of the rich ones," she was told.

It expressed in a few words the attitude of a whole people.

A village schoolmaster.

Climbing a zapote tree which yields chicle for American chewing-gum factories.

Emergence of a Best Seller

CAREER OF H. E. BATES

THERE IS PROBABLY NO MORE INTERESTING STUDY IN THE CURRENT English literary scene than the development over the last 25 years or so of an undistinguished Midlands youth into, first, a writer of realistic and powerful country tales in the Coppard manner and, later, Britain's most successful post-war novelist.

By J.H.

With a record of half a dozen best-sellers in as many years, the now 45-year-old Herbert Ernest Bates has fulfilled the promise that critic Edward Garnett first detected in him when he was in his teens.

A clerk in a leather factory, young Bates had started writing short stories almost as soon as he left school. Both the elder Garnett and his son David came across some of these in periodicals, and they helped him bring out his first published volume, "Day's End and Other Stories," in 1928.

David Garnett was so impressed he thereupon announced:—"There is no living English author of whose future I feel more confident."

With so evident a talent and such valuable encouragement, H. E. Bates, as he is now known to myriads of readers, could not help but become a professional author. He threw up his job and devoted himself so completely to turning out stories and novels that the bibliography of his published works now lists more than 40 books.

Such a tally may be rather surprising to those readers who have come to know him only through his two very successful recent novels of Burma in wartime — "The Purple Plain" and "The Jacaranda Tree."

"Prose Poems"

They may be even further surprised to learn that there are a number of people who insist that his stark, sensual and sometimes unforgettable short stories of prewar vintage (called by Richard Church "prose poems redolent of the hedgerow flowers, the English scene, the pastoral mood") are superior to the smooth, dramatic and colorful best sellers he is now producing.

The war changed H. E. Bates as it changed few other writers. Commissioned as an officer in the R.A.F. in 1941, he was given the task of living among bomber crews, and describing their experiences in the form of short stories. Published under the pseudonym of "Flying Officer X," these were propaganda in a unique garb, and sold to the extent of several million copies.

What he saw matured Bates and gave him a social and ethical consciousness that is still dictating what he shall write. His last novel, "Dear Life" (Michael Joseph), was a short tale of juvenile delinquency. In it critics detected for the first time a tendency (due to a striving for clarity and vigor, and thus, perhaps, a too ruthless pruning) towards mere reportage.

Current Successes

But actually this was evident even in one of the first of his current crop of successes, "The Cruise of the Breadwinner," published in 1946. Therein occurred a passage that has been quoted as an example of his skilful powers of description. It reads as follows:—

"The boy lay there staring insanitely at this thing that lay on the deck. It was like a shapeless bundle of sea-blue cloth tied about the middle with lengths of slate-crimson rubber hose. It was some time before the boy brought himself to understand that this bundle had once been Jimmy, and that the tangle of hose was all that remained of the guts of the gunner-engineer."

H. E. BATES.

Can anyone honestly say that is any better than fair average quality reporting? Quentin Reynolds, Ernie Pyle, Ira Wolfert and a dozen others were turning out reams of similar, although factual, stuff during the war. Could any of them, however, produce those lyrical, symbolic and emotional gems of the short story writer's art that Bates was once content to give us?

To those who admired "The Purple Plain" and "The Jacaranda Tree," as most of us could not help doing, but saw a falling off in "Dear Life," a perusal, or a reperusal, is recommended of his earlier stories and novels.

It is no easy task, for many of them are, of course, out of print. Before the war he wrote seven novels and at least a dozen collections of short stories; but it is predicted that once you start to follow their trail you will not desist until you have read them all.

Bates once said that the short story is "in every way a finer means of expression of our age of unrest, disbelief and distrust than either the novel or poetry." Such a statement is naturally debatable; but in the case of his own writing the short story does seem to be the best means of conveying mood and feeling, for which he has a natural and almost unequalled talent.

A Danger

With the novel there is a danger that he will shortly be seduced into the facile sentimentality, perhaps even bathos, that is found in the pages of the American "slick" magazines. He is not, I think, predominantly a storyteller. His forte is not plot, even though he has skilfully crammed incident upon dramatic incident in his Burmese narratives.

Instead, he is, and will probably be best remembered as, the master of the illuminated moment, the Chekhovian incident, that is more memorable when it is presented within the limits of a few thousand words of sensitive, but passionate and always interest-sustaining, prose.

H. E. Bates lives with his wife and four children in a snug, converted barn at Little Chart, in Kent. Like most old practitioners of the craft, he writes easily and quickly, and to a schedule.

Like few other living writers, he is able to respond to, and recreate, the atmosphere of flowers, fields, woods and streams, the very serenity and poignancy of nature itself. It is there, I feel, where he will rediscover and, ultimately, return to his true sphere.

A cherry orchard in blossom in Kent.

SO LIFE MOOCHES ON!

Retrospective View of C. J. Dennis

THE ERECTION, AT HIS BIRTHPLACE IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA, OF A monument to the memory of C. J. Dennis will awaken a sympathetic vibration in the hearts of that vast multitude of appreciative admirers whose ears are pleasantly haunted by his lilting melodies. Himself a pendulum, swinging incessantly betwixt a smile and a tear, he carries us all with him into whichever realm he plunges.

By F.W.B.

It is in line with the imposing traditions of the older lands that the literary annals of Australia should be adorned by a magnetic figure whose dazzling brilliance, human tenderness and exuberant humor are thrown into relief by frailties that evoke alike our pity and our affection.

A dozen years have now passed since he slipped away from us. How, one wonders, is his unique craftsmanship standing the test of time? His was an extraordinary career; and, as a consequence, he struck a note that was distinctively and exclusively his own. The "Sentimental Bloke" was modelled on nothing, and nothing could possibly be modelled on it.

When the poet died, at the age of 62, Mr. J. A. Lyons, then Prime Minister, referred to him as the Robert Burns of Australia, whilst, long before that time, some of the most eminent critics had saluted him as a master of his craft.

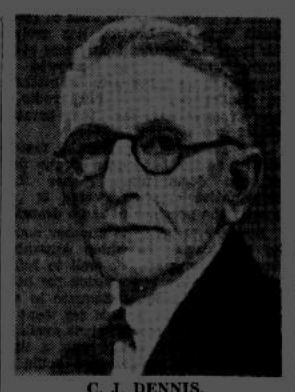
Tributes

The sheets of his masterpiece were scarcely off the press when Mr. H. G. Wells wrote the publishers a letter of enthusiastic congratulation. That most fastidious judge, Mr. E. V. Lucas, confessed that he was a little bewildered at finding Australian slang set to music with such superb skill; but he added that the general effect was so moving as to be positively embarrassing; and, since he hated to be seen with moist eyes, he declined to hear the stanzas recited. John Masefield, the King's Laureate, greeted Dennis as a true poet, and, during his visit to Australia, spent some delightful hours as his guest.

Born at a typical up-country inn at Auburn, in South Australia, and moving, whilst still very young, to another inn at Laura, Dennis early acquired the art of expressing vigorous thought in tuneful verse. Possessing a delicate ear for music and a discriminating eye for beauty, he developed an uncanny appreciation of the value and sweetness of words. Like Robert Service, his Canadian contemporary, with whom he had much in common, he was deeply indebted to the maiden aunts who listened with encouraging pride to his prentice ventures in poesy.

Passing from beneath their doting authority, Dennis spent his mature youth and early manhood in drifting from place to place and from occupation to occupation, groping with blind hands for the glittering but elusive destiny that seemed to lure him on.

Barman, solicitor's clerk, journalist, and what not, he was everything by turns and nothing long. An excellent mixer, singing a good song, enjoying a tempting meal and loving a hearty jest, he never lacked companions.



C. J. DENNIS.

It was during these years of gipsying that he acquired habits that he afterwards deplored, and that eventually brought him, sad and sorry, to the mountain home of Mr. and Mrs. J. G. Roberts, of Kallista, whose hospitality restored his self-respect, captured his heart and gave to the world a poet of renown. Mr. and Mrs. Roberts did for C. J. Dennis what, a generation earlier, Mr. and Mrs. Meynell had done for Francis Thompson.

His work deserves to live. In "dipping his lid" to C. J. Dennis by contributing a foreword to the "Sentimental Bloke," Henry Lawson strikes a note of warning. The book, he says, is very brilliant. Let the reader beware, however, lest its brilliance—brilliance of conception, brilliance of humor and brilliance of pathos—should blind him to something still deeper.

What is that deeper something? At first blush there would seem to be no parallel between Dennis and Dante. The "Sentimental Bloke" does not belong to the same world as the Divine Comedy. Yet Ruskin sums up the Divine Comedy as Dante's love-poem to Beatrice; a song of praise for her watch over his soul. "She saves him from destruction," Ruskin continues. "He is eternally going astray in despair. She comes to his help, and, throughout the ascents of Paradise, leads him from star to star." The words exactly describe Dennis's poem. The love of Doreen saved Bill from his baser self, lifted his life to a loftier plane and made a new man of him.

The poem opens dismally. Belonging to the lowest stratum of Melbourne life, Bill has spent most of his time in drinking, gambling and fighting among the purlieus of Little Bourke and Little Lonsdale Streets. He is, however, sick to death of the whole thing.

But why has he so suddenly come to loathe the life that he had so recently loved? Obviously, something must have caused this recoil. It has. On a perfect spring morning he has seen Doreen. At first she will have nothing to do with him. He speaks; but, with a toss of her pretty head and a swish of her skirt, she passes on her queenly way, leaving Bill writhing in the very dust. Yet he loves her all the more for her refusal to make herself cheap.

On this slender but exquisitely human foundation, Dennis rears his philosophy of life. Bill has to choose between his old ways and—Doreen.

Fer 'er sweet sake I've gone and chucked it clean;
The pubs and schools, an' all that leery game.
Fer when a bloke 'as come to know Doreen,
It ain't the same.
There's 'igher things, she sez, for blokes to do;
An' I am 'arf believin' that it's true.

Ashamed

Just once, two months after their wedding, Bill meets some of his old cronies, slips back into his former courses and turns his steps homeward in the early morning in a condition in which he is ashamed to present himself to Doreen. She puts him to bed, and, a few hours later, tiptoes into the room with tears in her eyes and, in her hands, a basin of beef-tea—

Beef-tea! She treats me like a hinvalced!
Me! that 'ad caused 'er lovin' 'eart to bleed,
It 'urt me worse than naggin' fer a week!
'Er! 'oo 'ad right to turn dead sour on me,
Fergives like that, an' feeds me wif beef-tea . . .
I tries to speak;
An' then—I ain't ashamed o' wot I did—
I 'ides me face . . . an' blubbers like a kid.

In his brief but excellent biography of Dennis, Mr. A. H. Chisholm tells us that this episode is really autobiographical, being based on the welcome extended to Dennis by Mrs. Roberts after one of his unhappy lapses.

Like Dante, Dennis chants the victory of Love Triumphant. These are the last lines in the book—

An' I am rich, becos me eyes 'ave seen
The lovelight in the eyes of my Doreen;
An' I am blest becos me feet 'ave trod
A land 'oo's fields reflect the smile o' God.
Sittin' at ev'nin' in this sunset-land,
Wiv 'Er in all the world to 'old me 'and,
A son to bear me name when I am gone . . .
Livin' an' lovin'—so life mooches on.

C. J. Dennis has rested for twelve years in his grave at Box Hill; but Australia can ill afford to let him die.

Books of the Day

The Laying of a Ghost: A Tasmanian's Essays

ONE WINTER EVENING IN 1826, JUST OUTSIDE THE FARMING centre of Campbelltown near Sydney, John Farley, described as "a quiet and respectable man" and "a sober, respected special constable," noticed a ghost sitting on a sliprail at the bottom of Farley's paddock. The story opens "Fisher's Ghost and Other Essays" by L. A. Triebel (Melbourne: Cheshire).

Farley recognised the ghost as that of Frederick James George Fisher. He watched the ghost get down off the sliprail and make towards the nearby creek. Farley said, and did, nothing about it.

Fisher had been a man of some small property in the Campbelltown district. He had owned a farm, where he employed an overseer, one George Worrell. He had planned to open a store, and while the store was building he had put up at Worrell's cottage, which was near the store site.

Then Fisher disappeared and Worrell took possession of Fisher's property, and began action to establish a legal right to it. Fisher, Worrell said, had secretly left the colony for England, to escape a charge of forgery to be brought against him by one Nathaniel Boon.

But as the weeks passed, Worrell was noticed to be making use of Fisher's various belongings as if they were his own. Worrell seemed to be taking things a little for granted. People began to whisper about possible foul play. Then Farley told the police what he had "seen" on the sliprail.

Tracked

Two troopers and two blacktrackers took a look at the spot where Farley said the ghost had appeared. On the sliprail they are said to have found "probable bloodstains." They "tracked" the ghost to swampy ground near the creek. There, under some inches of mud, they found a body, severely battered about the head and face, which they assumed to be Fisher's.

Motive and opportunity pointed to Worrell, who was arrested. The inquest followed, but none could with certainty identify the battered corpse from the swamp. At Worrell's trial Fisher could well have been still alive, a fugitive from a charge of forgery.

Nathaniel Boon was called, as witness for the prosecution. He proved a hostile witness, and was then called for the defence. For the defence, however, he proved worse than hostile. His kiss was death. The forged document, it soon seemed clear, was written not by Fisher, but by Boon. Boon was even brought to declare that the body at the inquest had indeed been that of Fisher.

Worrell was found guilty. On purely circumstantial evidence, without appeal, without delay, he was hanged the following February.

What happened to Farley? The official notes of the trial do not mention him. But nearly 70 years later Mr. James Norton, M.L.C., told Farley's story in a Sydney paper. From farming, Farley branched out into carrying, then into supplying grain on Government contract, and at last into the law itself, in a capacity then open to talents, that of lay "legal adviser."

And he married a "respectable, conscientious . . . good-natured . . . fine and charming girl" named Margaret who, in England, had been sentenced to be hanged for the theft of a roll of rose-colored satin, a crime of which she was so obviously innocent, and indeed morally incapable, that, after she had lain six weeks in the condemned cell awaiting execution, her sentence was commuted, as an act of gracious clemency, to transportation for the term of her natural life.

"History does not record how the two met," writes Professor Triebel, "but it is obvious that Mr. Norton (sen.) must have acted as mediator." When John Farley died in 1841, Margaret inherited a number of parcels of town real estate, and completed what Professor Triebel describes as "one of the most beautiful rose-colored romances of the early colonial days" by engaging in the hotel business.

Literary Topics

The rest of "Fisher's Ghost and Other Essays" consists of 43 articles, reviews and causeries, chiefly on literary topics, of which some first appeared in leading British periodicals, and many were first printed in "The Age" Literary Supplement. They testify to Professor Triebel's scholarship and enjoyment, and capacity to impart his enjoyment in the literatures and languages of several nations. Nine pieces are on European literatures. Five are on points of language.

A dozen or so are on right Australian topics: Three have Tasmanian subjects; three are on the essays of Professor Walter Murdoch, who supplies a Foreword, and whose spirit appears on many pages throughout the book; and two are about one of Professor Triebel's special subjects, the Melbourne-born authoress, "Henry Handel Richardson," whose husband, the late Professor J. G. Richardson, was Professor Triebel's colleague and friend at London University. But as like as not, when a new book hits Hobart, Professor Triebel will reach down an old one.

London born, Professor Triebel occupies the chair of Modern Languages in the University of Tasmania. His recreations, according to "Who's Who," are walking, broadcasting, journalism. So his interests and opinions are, only naturally, eclectic; nowhere, in Professor Murdoch's words, does he "trouble us with subtle or fine-spun statements of critical theory"; while his style is diverse, sometimes discursive, sometimes summary, vivacious more often than vivid, far indeed from pedantic, better at noting qualities than at narrating events, always very amiable, indeed.

University of Tasmania, Hobart, with Mt. Wellington in the background.

Evolution of a Mood: Scouring the Libraries

A GOOD ANTHOLOGIST REMINDS US OF THE child who, at meal times, arranges the titbits round the edge of his plate to be devoured in one last flurry of ecstasy when all the less appetising fare has been consumed.

But, at one important point, the analogy breaks down. For while the child, like little Jack Horner, consumes his deferred dainties in rapturous solitude, the anthologist passes round the plate for the delectation of all those whose tastes coincide with his own.

This is particularly true in the case of Victor Gollancz, who has spent his life in developing a certain appetite—or, as he would say, a certain mood—and who, having scoured the libraries of the world to intensify that mood and bring it to perfection, now favors us with the choicest passages that he has discovered in that voluminous literature in the hope that he may communicate to us the mood that he himself finds so felicitous. He has entitled his unusual volume "A Year of Grace: —Passages Chosen and Arranged to Express a Mood About God and Man," by Victor Gollancz. It is published by himself at Covent Garden, London.

"A Year of Grace" serves most of us pretty much as a beautifully colored scenic film serves us. There are on the face of the earth, thousands of outlandish but wonderfully attractive areas that few of us can hope to visit. It is enjoyable and instructive to relax in a comfortable chair and to see the charms of these inaccessible territories pass picturesquely before us.

Vast Tracts

In the gratification of his peculiar appetite (or mood) Gollancz has plunged into vast and silent tracts of literature, the very names of which are unfamiliar to the man in the street. He has studied the sacred books of all the great religions; he has penetrated the minds of the most abstruse philosophies; he has familiarised himself with the songs of bards of whom few of us had previously heard.

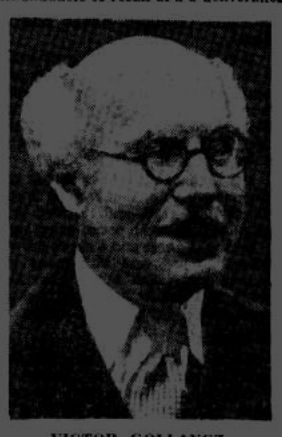
The ancient and the modern, the Occidental and the Oriental, the severely prosaic and the cynically poetical are all grist to his mill. Moved by his mood, he culls the choicest gems from the writings of the world's twilight, arranges them in a colorful mosaic with some of the most striking passages that were written yesterday, or the day before, and, by a wizardry of his own, blends them into a composite and organic whole.

For, in his foreword, Gollancz as good as says that his anthology is, to all intents and purposes, an autobiography. The dominant factor in the selection of the passages has been his own mood. That mood took complete possession of him, he tells us, when, as a very small boy, he sniffed the mellow air and sang for joy among the late autumn leaves of a narrow London garden.

Precious as Gold

"Now," he says, "when I am fifty-seven, the dust and stones of the street are still, by God's grace, as precious as gold to me; the corn is still orient and immortal wheat; and what my heart whispered on its first awaking, that, and nothing other, my heart whispers still."

One year in his life was specially crucial. It brought him a horror that he shudders to recall and a deliverance that appeared both miraculous and sublime. That year is the year that gives the book its title: "A Year of Grace."



VICTOR GOLLANCZ.

During that memorable year, Gollancz's mood was his comfort and support. It led him to an understanding of God and his fellow men that, he feels, could have come to him in no other way.

Allowing his mood to dictate his selection of excerpts and their arrangement in these pages, he designs this anthology as the mystical record of his soul's secret pilgrimage.

The relationship between passage and passage is not so much verbal as spiritual. He asks us to read the anthology continuously, beginning at the first page and persisting to the last; and he assures us that, by so doing, we shall not only catch his mood and understand his personal experience, but we shall be infected by that mood, and, by means of it, enter into an understanding of the love of God and the brotherhood of men that would otherwise have been impossible.