
H.E. BATES—AN INTRODUCTION

The sixties were not a bad time for the British. The prime minister Harold Macmillan told them on television, with an Edwardian snarl, that they had never had it so good. It was the era of the Beatles, the miniskirt, the sexual scandal which dislodged the politician Profumo, the first James Bond films, and a general air of sybaritism and self-satisfaction (it was soon blown away). Even writers, who do not usually do well, were doing well. But the atmosphere of monied ease which some writers showed was partly due to subventions from the Arts Council. One lady novelist who received a sum of money from that body said that she needed it desperately: "I have to go to Lord's to watch cricket in the afternoons, and, not writing, I have to have a subsidy." There were some of us who growled at this. It seemed that these governmental hand-outs went to the idle who should continue that gentlemanly tradition of not producing very much—best exemplified by E.M. Forster and T.S. Eliot and (ladylike) Virginia Woolf. Writers who wrote for a living and, of necessity, wrote much, who never debased themselves by begging for money from the State and lived on earnings from the open literary market seemed to be looked down upon. Herbert Ernest Bates was one of these, and I was another.

I wrote a long letter to the *Times Literary Supplement* denouncing idle writers confirmed in their idleness by State subsidies, and Bates wrote another. He alleged that much of this money went straight into the pockets of the brewers and distillers. He was denounced for his denunciation. But, as he said to me, he had worked hard at writing all his life and seen little reward for it. He recognised a spiritual kinship with the great Edwardians—H.G. Wells, Chesterton, Belloc, Arnold Bennett—who were proud of their industry and scorned to ask favours. He never received any literary prizes. When, with his sequence about the Larkin family, beginning with

The Darling Buds of May, he found a popular audience, the reviewers tried to belittle him. This, however, was difficult. He wrote too well, even at a popular level. He attained mastery of the novel, novella and short story forms early, and he never lost his touch. He died too young, at sixty-nine, and he still had much to do.

Bates was born in 1905 and thus belongs to the generation which produced Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene and Anthony Powell. He was perhaps luckier than they in gaining encouragement early, for it was Edward Garnett (of whom Bates wrote a study in 1950) who promoted the publication of his first novel *The Two Sisters* when Bates was only twenty-one. Garnett was publisher's reader for several successive firms and, though his taste was not always sure—he failed dismally to appreciate the genius of James Joyce—he pushed the work of Conrad, D.H. Lawrence, Forster, Dorothy Richardson and W.H. Hudson. His patronage of the young Bates enabled an author born to prolificity to start being prolific early.

Some fiction writers are naturally novelists, others naturally short-story writers. V.S. Pritchett, perhaps England's greatest contemporary master of the short story, has never really succeeded with the novel, and the same may be said of William Sansom. The distinction of Bates is that he has been equally masterful with both forms. The short-story volumes—*The Woman Who Had Imagination* (1934), *The Flying Goat* (1939) and *The Beauty of the Dead* (1940)—match the novels *The Fallow Land* (1932) and *Love for Lydia* (1952) for skill in psychological penetration and spare style that has a greater resonance than appears on the surface. When Graham Greene called Bates an English Chekhov he was paying a tribute that is made to too many short-story writers. It meant that he was good, serious, accomplished. It is to the credit of a government department that it was willing to harness this artistic skill to the national effort in World War II.

There have always been war artists and war chroniclers, but never before had there been a war short-story writer. Bates, as Flying Officer X, brought his sharp eye and his sharper compassion to the activities of the Royal Air Force, showing what was going on in the minds of the flyers, their doubts, fears, sufferings, successes. And not only the flyers but their sweethearts and families. It was not

patriotic writing of the kind that the Great Patriotic War produced in Soviet Russia; it was low-keyed as to sentiment, far from flag-waving, essentially human and quietly compassionate. "It's Just the Way It Is," in this volume, is a good example. Narrative style is pared to nothing; everything is left to dialogue; it may well be too subfusc a piece of writing to please Americans brought up in a more ebullient tradition, but it represents what a lot of British writing of the period was like. Paradoxically, it owes something to Hemingway. I remember seeing a brief film made from it when I was a soldier during the war—one of the short movies put out by the Ministry of Information to precede the main feature. I was deeply moved, and I'm moved again when I re-read the story.

What ought to strike the newcomer to Bates's short stories is the variety of tone, the manner in which the vocabulary expands or contracts to fit the subject, and the faultless ear for human speech. In that nothing much seems to happen—only a nuance of change in relationships, a minimal modification of attitude—Bates is seen clearly to be in the tradition of Chekhov, to whom one ought to add the Joyce of *Dubliners*. The O. Henry tradition of the twist in the tail is not here; rather what we have is what Joyce called the epiphany—the showing forth of some small human truth in rather drab and ordinary human circumstances. "She stood staring at all this for some time longer. She had forgotten her shoes and now she dared not go back for them. Her eyes were big and colourless. One of her small stony lips was held tight right above the other and it might have been that she wished, after all, that she too was dead." That is the end of "Death and the Cherry Tree." Just a wish, not even that—just the possibility of a wish, a velleity. It's enough.

As a British writer of fiction myself, though totally unskilled in the short story and all the readier to admire those who succeed in a flimsy but difficult form, I am naturally pleased to be presiding over the introduction to the American public of a fellow-Briton in danger of neglect. It may be that writers who do not attain thorough mastery of literary forms are the most suitable subjects for critical reappraisal or academic promotion—writers who are ambiguous, or whose imperfections may really be cunning symbolism. Writers who succeed in what they are doing but do not suggest any new technical or psychological paths tend to be ignored in the

colleges. The good read is not enough for some readers. I would never suggest that Bates opened up new territory, but he achieved such sovereignty of what literary land he inherited that he deserves the homage of our uncomplicated enjoyment. I hope that this small selection (for which I thank America) will lead readers to his larger works—such novels as *Fair Stood the Wind for France*, and such novellas as those which honour a simple English family. Bates's affection for ordinary people is one of his shining virtues. But he himself, as I knew, and as this compilation should make clear, was, is, far from ordinary.

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Anthony Burgess