

# The quiet world of H. E. Bates

by Wilfred De'Ath



JAMES HOLMES

H. E. Bates, a fastidious story writer, has in his sixties reached a new audience through the recent television series *Country Matters*.

His own life in the countryside is described here, and his plan, despite ill health, to start a new book.

Herbert Ernest Bates was born, the eldest of three children, in Rusden, Northants, on May 16,

week, twice as much as he had earned as a reporter. Already (since the age of 14) he had begun

lunch was at the Etoile where the menu was written in that indecipherable purple French scrawl, as

helped him to refine and develop his style.

It was Garnett's son David who





Whisky smoke.

OBR1/A



H. E. Bates, a fastidious story writer, has in his sixties reached a new audience through the recent television series *Country Matters*.

His own life in the countryside is described here, and his plan, despite ill health, to start a new book.

Herbert Ernest Bates was born, the eldest of three children, in Rushden, Northants, on May 16, 1905. His father travelled in boots and shoes and he describes his family as "humble but proud", like many families of that time and place. His wife Madge was born in the nearby borough of Higham Ferrers and, although they weren't to meet until 1925 when he was 20, he can recall seeing her being rescued as a babe in arms from a local fire when he was only five.

Bates was educated at the Grammar School, Kettering, and subsequently went to work as a reporter on the *Northampton Chronicle*. He loathed journalism. "That I was a bad reporter is indisputable," he writes in the first volume of his autobiography *The Vanished World* (1969): the trivia of provincial journalism, lists of wedding guests and the details of the bridesmaids' dresses, bored him to distraction and he left the newspaper to take a job in a warehouse at a wage of £1 a

week, twice as much as he had earned as a reporter. Already (since the age of 14) he had begun to compose the short stories that were to make him famous.

His clerking job in the warehouse was not arduous, very often he would complete the work by 9.30 am and spend the rest of the day writing. Thus he completed his first novel *The Two Sisters*, every word of which was written in the firm's time. It started doing the publishers' rounds in 1925, about the time he met Madge, and was eventually accepted by Jonathan Cape whose chief reader, Edward Garnett, thought he discerned a unique talent. Cape's letter accepting the novel and offering an advance of £25 ("A fortune in those days") addressed him as "Dear Miss Bates" because they didn't believe that a work of such sensitivity could possibly be that of a man.

Bates came to London to have lunch with Edward Garnett. "I was a real country bumpkin. The

lunch was at the Etoile where the menu was written in that indecipherable purple French scrawl, as it still is today, and I couldn't read a word of it so I said to Garnett, 'I'll have the same as you.' In fact I found him rather overwhelming."

Overwhelming or not, Garnett took Bates under his wing from then on, subjecting his work to the fiercest criticism imaginable. Two whole novels and dozens of short stories ended up in the wastepaper basket. Garnett would call his early novels "terrible", "Hardy with water", "cursed with generalities", driving the young author into the deepest depressions, at times to the very brink of suicide. But Garnett also knew how and when to pull him back; he wanted to see the real H. E. Bates, not a diluted version of Thomas Hardy, coming through. And he got his way. Today Bates admits that he owes everything to Edward Garnett: when he died, in 1938, Bates lost an invaluable sparring partner who, more than anybody, had

helped him to refine and develop his style.

It was Garnett's son David who, in a famous review, was to compare a typical H. E. Bates story to a Renoir painting: "His sensitivity to beauty and to character is astonishing; it is, I think, greater than the sensibility of any other living English writer; and because of it, his work always reminds me of the painting of Renoir. His best stories have the extreme delicacy and tenderness of Renoir's painting and do not impress by their strength so much as by their fragility."

Bates's early stories (there are, altogether, about 600 of his short stories extant) depict with fidelity, sometimes with cruelty and austerity, English life in the midlands, particularly around Northampton, in the 1920s. Like some of the later stories, they are often built round a strong female character who seduces and dominates a younger, weaker male: Bates denies that this theme is



## The quiet world of H. E. Bates

autobiographical but will admit to "the spider and the fly" view of the male/female relationship: that the poor innocent male thinks he is dominant but isn't, and that the female is far more wily than he gives her credit for. Bates's son, Richard, believes that his father's mother as well as his wife of 40 years, Madge, would both conform to this picture of a *dominant* personality, although not necessarily a strong one: "An ideal wife for a writer," he says.

In 1931 Bates and his wife moved into an old granary at Little Chart in Kent: "Our granary stood in what seemed to be a wasteland of giant dock and thistle and grass grown yellow with summer," he writes in *The Blossoming World*, the second volume of autobiography. "Nowhere was there to be seen the remotest sign of the garden I dreamed of. All this had still to be created and fought for." The product of the last 42 years has been not only a beautiful garden but literally hundreds of superb stories and novels set amidst the rich farmland of Kent, reflecting the changing social attitudes of the 1950s and 60s with as much accuracy as he had once pictured the landscape of Northamptonshire.

To some fastidious critics, like Angus Wilson, Bates in some way "sold out" when he moved to Kent and particularly when, after the war, he invented the Larkins, the appalling Cockney family who came to live in the country and are the heroes of such later novels as *The Darling Buds of May* (1958), *A Breath of French Air* (1959), *When the Green Woods Laugh* (1960), *Oh! to be in England* (1963) and *A Little of What You Fancy*. These books, the suggestion is, were written purely to make money, a deliberate attempt on the part of

short stories, and he eventually became a Squadron Leader, a fact of which he remains proud. The products of these war years were a best-seller, *Fair Stood the Wind For France* (1944), the story of the pilot of a Wellington bomber brought down over France who manages to escape back to his Squadron with the help of the local inhabitants ("I wanted to extract from this, if possible, the beauty, the pride, the courage and, if the word is not now too suspect, the patriotism of the young of two civilized countries, determined that they would in no circumstances be slaves to an oppressor"), as well as the intensely moving *Flying Officer X* stories which set out, with exquisite pictorial simplicity, what it was actually like to be a bomber or fighter pilot stationed in Cambridgeshire, or Sussex, or wherever, during that crucial period in our history:

"November rain falls harshly on the clean tarmac, and the wind, turning suddenly, lifts sprays of yellow elm leaves over the black hangers . . ."

Later in the war Bates visited India, Burma and Japan with the RAF: fairly short trips in each case, but the impact of these countries on his imagination was enormous. He went on to produce three novels, *The Purple Plain* (1947), *The Jacaranda Tree* (1949) and *The Scarlet Sword* (1951), out of this experience and these probably represent his finest achievement as an author; they are the books in which his talent came to full ripeness and which turned him into an international figure who has been translated into 16 languages. Nothing he has written since has had the same impact.

H. E. Bates has never been rich. When he moved with his wife to Kent in the 1930s they lived in what might be called country self-sufficiency: "Every penny we had, with the exception of some £20, was sunk into the house, and the

patience of youth has been replaced by something less volatile in middle age."

Even when, after the war, things improved for the Bateses, his son can recall no ostentation in their lives. He never, says Richard, owned a large car or a boat or ate in expensive restaurants: "Of course, as a child one simply accepts the situation as it is, but I was never conscious that my father ever wrote for money apart from the odd book review or a short story specially commissioned by a women's magazine. It seemed to me that he always wrote exactly what he wanted to write. He was a happy man, an ebullient, optimistic character and a very hard worker. I only once remember him briefly depressed and that was when MGM made a shocking film, *The Mating Game*, out of *The Darling Buds of May*."

H. E. Bates resolutely refuses to see himself as a literary or intellectual figure: "I simply never think about it. I was very puzzled indeed some years ago when one of my books was put on the syllabus for the GCE Ordinary level. A young girl of 16 whom we happened to know and who was taking the exam that year came to talk to me about it and put some of the questions and I didn't know what she was going on about. Academics always tend to look for things that aren't there, don't they?"

He is very much the unconscious artist who lets a book construct itself in his head (perhaps while he's doing his beloved garden) and makes few notes before he starts writing. He read the great novelists as a young man, of course, but has never felt the lack of a university education or the need to be part of any literary set or scene: "I loathe literary cliques above all things," he told me. He's always deliberately kept himself apart from the mainstream of English letters, if there is such a thing. His son could recall only one other

this particular fence H. E. Bates would stand: he is the "leaver-outer" *par excellence*, a prose writer who distils his words like a poet, just as a musician distils notes or a painter paint. He firmly believes that the hallmark of a great writer is to be found in what he *doesn't* say: refinement, simplicity, getting rid of a lot of jumbled-up nonsense—these are the important things. If he has become a great "popular" writer it is not so much intentional as because of this very simplicity and because he is an emotional writer rather than an intellectual one.

Recently Granada Television adapted some of his and A. E. Coppard's short stories with outstanding success for a series called *Country Matters*. At least three of these distinguished productions, *The Little Farm*, *The Ring of Truth* and *The Four Beauties*, were among the most beautiful ever seen on television screens in this country. "The key to their success was that they were all done on location," says Bates, "although I was surprised at some of the choices. They seemed to me to be going for the most difficult stories they could find." His son Richard, himself a television producer, adds: "They were beautiful, but of course they were films as opposed to TV drama: quite a different thing." There wasn't much money involved, but it was a nice boost for H. E. Bates at a time when he badly needed it.

Bates lives quietly in the country now — perhaps too quietly. Throughout his life he has never been too fit and there is a tendency towards hypochondria: the third part of his autobiography *The World in Ripeness*, a rather disappointing, over-priced volume which fairly reeks of self-satisfaction in places, has much to tell of abdominal pains which were finally cured by a major operation when he was 45. He was very ill again just after last Christmas (this time

# Letter from

by Margaret Laing

In this first of an occasional series preoccupations in what is now on

The competition to see Napoleon when he was on board the *Bellerophon* in Plymouth Sound in 1815 was so great that many people rushed down from London and paid £60 to be rowed out. Boats bobbed about him; gentlemen saluted, and ladies waved their handkerchiefs, still as unaware as Napoleon himself that their government was to send him to St Helena. With a not unnatural onrush of politeness, Napoleon responded by asking Captain Maitland which were the ladies, and which the common folk, since they were all so well dressed that he could not distinguish them.

Napoleon's plans for a united states of Europe have now been given a new direction by the Common Market, and France today is one of the most prosperous countries in Europe. It is still possibly easier to distinguish class here than in England, but not means. Peasant millionaires, detected by their buyers alone it seems, live on in their vineyards in old dungarees. The bourgeoisie, less hard hit by direct taxation than the English middle-class, face the high cost of living with no change of expression. They leave it to the Americans (distressed by an 18½ per cent devaluation in just over a year) and the British to lament loudly when they pay 9 francs (about 80 floating pence) at the launderette, and, sometimes, to serve soup as the main course at dinner parties instead of, as in so many French households, as the first of several courses—

other stories. But price, as is once luxurious of the fees cares to want to pleasure, encourage para tops is slow



the second volume of autobiography. "Nowhere was there to be seen the remotest sign of the garden I dreamed of. All this had still to be created and fought for." The product of the last 42 years has been not only a beautiful garden but literally hundreds of superb stories and novels set amidst the rich farmland of Kent, reflecting the changing social attitudes of the 1950s and 60s with as much accuracy as he had once pictured the landscape of Northamptonshire.

To some fastidious critics, like Angus Wilson, Bates in some way "sold out" when he moved to Kent and particularly when, after the war, he invented the Larkins, the appalling Cockney family who came to live in the country and are the heroes of such later novels as *The Darling Buds of May* (1958), *A Breath of French Air* (1959), *When the Green Woods Laugh* (1960), *Oh! to be in England* (1963) and *A Little of What You Fancy*. These books, the suggestion is, were written purely to make money, a deliberate attempt on the part of Bates to turn himself into a "popular" writer.

That there is an element of self-indulgence in the Larkins books is beyond dispute. There is a good deal of H. E. Bates himself in Pop Larkin, a passionate Englishman, a profound lover of Nature, of the sounds and sights of the countryside, of colour, flowers and things sensual; a hater of pomp, pretension and humbug; a lover of children and family life; an occasional breaker of rules, a flouter of conventions. Yet, curiously, these books have been far less successful, even in financial terms, than some of his earlier works.

Like other gifted writers before him, notably Siegfried Sassoon, H. E. Bates found his true fulfilment as an artist with the coming of the war. He was the first writer ever to be commissioned into the Armed Forces, in this case the RAF, solely in order to produce

history: "November rain falls harshly on the clean tarmac, and the wind, turning suddenly, lifts sprays of yellow elm leaves over the black hangers . . ."

Later in the war Bates visited India, Burma and Japan with the RAF: fairly short trips in each case, but the impact of these countries on his imagination was enormous. He went on to produce three novels, *The Purple Plain* (1947), *The Jacaranda Tree* (1949) and *The Scarlet Sword* (1951), out of this experience and these probably represent his finest achievement as an author; they are the books in which his talent came to full ripeness and which turned him into an international figure who has been translated into 16 languages. Nothing he has written since has had the same impact.

H. E. Bates has never been rich. When he moved with his wife to Kent in the 1930s they lived in what might be called country self-sufficiency: "Every penny we had, with the exception of some £20, was sunk into the house, and the problem was how to survive while Madge attacked the house and its domestic affairs and I the garden. The result was that we lived on £2 a week. Fortunately food was very cheap, but at the same time there was nothing to eat as yet from the garden. Once or twice a week a travelling greengrocer called in on us, carrying his produce in an old-fashioned covered cart, not unlike a small replica of those prairie wagons you see in Western films."

"It's said that Chekhov who, like me, was a great lover of flowers, wanted to turn the whole world into a garden. So did I, but with the difference that I wanted to do it, if possible, overnight. As a young man I cannot flatter myself that I was exactly patient, but the fact that I still haven't finished that garden after 40 years of toil and thought on it perhaps goes some way to proving that the im-

H. E. Bates resolutely refuses to see himself as a literary or intellectual figure: "I simply never think about it. I was very puzzled indeed some years ago when one of my books was put on the syllabus for the GCE Ordinary level. A young girl of 16 whom we happened to know and who was taking the exam that year came to talk to me about it and put some of the questions and I didn't know what she was going on about. Academics always tend to look for things that aren't there, don't they?"

He is very much the unconscious artist who lets a book construct itself in his head (perhaps while he's doing his beloved garden) and makes few notes before he starts writing. He read the great novelists as a young man, of course, but has never felt the lack of a university education or the need to be part of any literary set or scene: "I loathe literary cliques above all things," he told me. He's always deliberately kept himself apart from the mainstream of English letters, if there is such a thing. His son could recall only one other writer, appropriately Richard Church, coming to their house when he was a boy. Bates draws most of his acquaintance from country people and is interested neither in politics nor, despite his Chapel background, in religion. "I hate the humbug and popery of religion," he says, "and I'm a patriot only in an emotional, not a political, sense."

A famous literary argument of the 1930s between F. Scott Fitzgerald and Thomas Wolfe, the author of *Look Homeward, Angel* debated the relative merits of "putting in" and "leaving out" for a novelist. Great writers, Wolfe insisted, were "putter-inners" as well as "leaver-outers", and Shakespeare, Cervantes and Dostojevsky would be remembered for what they put in just as long as Flaubert and Fitzgerald would be remembered for what they left out. There is no doubt on which side of

among the most beautiful seen on television screens in country. "The key to their success was that they were all done in one location," says Bates, "although I was surprised at some of their choices. They seemed to me to be going for the most difficult situations they could find." His son Richard himself a television producer, says: "They were beautiful, but of course they were films as opposed to drama: quite a different thing. There wasn't much money invested, but it was a nice boost for H. E. Bates at a time when he badly needed it.

Bates lives quietly in the country now — perhaps too quietly. Throughout his life he has been too fit and there is a tendency towards hypochondria; the theme of part of his autobiography *World in Ripeness*, a rather disappointing, over-priced volume which fairly reeks of self-satisfaction in places, has much to tell of abdominal pains which were finally cured by a major operation when he was 45. He was very ill again just after last Christmas (this time it was depression) and had to go to Madeira, one of his favourite spots, to recover. He's since retired, too old to garden very actively and a bit cut off. But cut off from what? From activity perhaps. It is good to hear that he is trying to clear his desk to start work on a new book. For a writer there should be no substitute as retirement. And why not better to write than in the silence of the English countryside?

"I remember also the moment of silence of it, especially in the summer, when the grand spruce choruses of birds have died away. There are still times, when I come home from London or from some noisy journey by road or train in the air, when that silence says more than 1,000 orchestrated chords, marvellously evocative that it achieves a state of embalmed silence so deep that it often takes me a day or two to get used to it." ●