A maestro looks back

'The world of my childhood has vanished,' says H. E. Bates

David Depledge

TRY to think of a contemporary writer more clearly associated with the English countryside than H. E. Bates and you'll find it difficult. In the considerable body of his novels and short stories, and in particular with the Uncle Silas stories and the relatively recent Larkin novels, his essentially miniaturist's eye has fixed the English countryside in our own eyes with a marvellous exactness and richness.

So to meet him in London for a pre-lunch drink in the West End seemed a slightly unnatural experience, particularly on a miserable rainy day, when visions of shimmering cornfields and vast landscapes were pretty remote. He had suggested a meeting place in St. James, a further incongruity. The bar he has chosen is in a particularly modern hotel, out of character with St. James and its clubs, a bar where the prices are as high as the pile and the plush is deep but which turns out to be a surprisingly private place to talk.

Standing near the bar's entrance, in the foyer, you see him arrive. Raincoated, and apparently a little disgruntled. He hasn't changed very much since Mark Gerson took the picture which adorned the jacket of Penguin's late 1950s editions of his work. There is another surprise. One had somehow expected to see a fresh-complexioned man. Mr. Bates is deeply tanned.

The rain is a nuisance to him. It deprives him of the pleasure he takes in walking about the streets of London, he says. He prefers to walk in London rather than near his home. 'There's too much traffic in the country these days. It's too dangerous to walk.'

You settle either side of a corner table. Drinks are ordered, H. E. Bates having had merely to ask for his 'usual'. Talk takes in his recent book; his feelings about present-day reviewing ('too gimmicky'); his early days as a writer (he started when he was 17, had his first novel out at 21, after it had previously been to nine other houses); his idyllic life in Kent, in spite of the traffic; and, eventually, to the work he is engaged on at the moment, and the work he has planned.

It is now 42 writing-packed years since that first novel appeared, but H. E. Bates still has a demanding programme immediately ahead of him. There are two short stories on his desk at the moment, he says; and he is about to start work on a two or possibly three volume autobiography, a work which ought to be seized on as eagerly as the recent and very successful autobiography of that other master of the English short story, V. S. Pritchett.

There are interesting similarities in the early work of the two men, incidentally. For Pritchett's office in the leather factory, for instance, substitute Bates' work in a warehouse in Rushden. He was able to work during business hours, and that was one reason why he preferred being in the warehouse to working on a local newspaper, which he also tried. 'I liked the warehouse because it gave me a fair amount of free time.'

About the autobiography he says, smilingly: 'I've had to put up with some opposition to the idea from my family. They say that no one writes his life story until he's out of ideas. But in spite of them I'm ready to start on it pretty soon.'

The first volume is already planned, then. 'Actual writing, though, will have to wait until I've got my desk a little clearer . . . It's a curious thing, but as one gets older one has less time, not more.' What he means is that he has new interests like grandchildren to divert him. He muses that H. G. Wells developed a habit of waking in the middle of the night to get on with his work.

One big factor in his decision to turn to an autobiography seems to have been his feeling for the countryside of his childhood and the life that was led there. 'The world of my childhood has vanished and one must try to record it, before it is too late.' The second volume will deal with his emergence as a writer and the effect on him of the last war:

'It is interesting to speculate about what one would have done if there had been no war. Would one have continued to live in the country and write stories about country people? I don't know.'

In fact, what happened to him as a

H. E. BATES: One of the great masters of the English short story, he came from a country background in Northamptonshire. He and his wife moved to Kent shortly after their marriage in 1931. *They converted an old barn as their home, and have lived there ever since. His latest book was 'The Four Beauties', a novella collection published by Michael Joseph in April.*

result of the war was that with the 'Flying Officer X' stories and novels like the very popular *The Purple Plain* he temporarily left the English countryside behind him. At the time, some of his admirers seemed to resent this. He didn't worry too much about their point of view. 'I could hardly ignore what I saw during the war, and in any case I think it is a good thing for a writer to do a variety of things.'

Some short story lovers resented it when he created the Larkin family, too, but nowadays most of his correspondence is about the Larkins. Most people claim that they know the Larkins personally. 'Overseas people get the Larkins in proper perspective, because they don't have to try to place the Larkin books in relation to my early work.'

Are the Larkins forgotten now? 'Oh, no. I'm very fond of them and I'm always toying with the idea of a new Larkin novel, but for the moment my programme is to alternate work on the autobiography and further 'serious' work.

Why did some readers regret the Larkins? 'Because, the surface was lightweight, they felt that the whole thing was froth,' H. E. Bates explains. 'They haven't listened to Mozart. It's what you are that shows through.'

The rain had not stopped and urban England was still unpleasant when one o'clock approached. H. E. Bates hunched his shoulders against the weather and walked off to his lunch appointment, leaving behind him an indication of the tenacity and thoroughness of his supreme craftsmanship:

'One of the stories in *The Four Beauties*—it's called *The Simple Life*—took me 15 years to get right. And something that has to be remembered is that for every half-dozen stories I have had published, two or three are lying in a drawer unfinished, or rejected; and I have rejected half a dozen novels too. There are always two people at work—the one who does the writing and the one who tells you when you have gone wrong.'

H. E. Bates doesn't normally read reviews ('After 40 years you find that the good cancel out the bad') but he did see two pieces on *The Four Beauties*. With astonishment rather than anger in his voice he said: 'One of these included an accusation that I'd said too much in too few words. I thought that was what the short story was about!'

A crisis every week-end

Claud Cockburn—the man whose duplicated news-sheet made rumour into news

James Drawbell

PATRICIA COCKBURN
The Years of the Week. Macdonald, 42*s.*

TO all of us who were newspaper editors, foreign correspondents, business tycoons, politicians on the make, or just secret agents, this book by the wife of Claud Cockburn will bring back vividly what she describes as 'those grisly and claustrophobic 'thirties'. And I hope that a few million other people, not so closely connected with these alleged corridors of power, will find their way to it.

In the year 1933, that year of bitterest frustration when Hitler came to power, Claud Cockburn—outrageous product of Berkhampstead School and Oxford—started a weekly newsletter (sustained by subscriptions) called *The Week*. He described it himself as 'unquestionably the nastiest-looking bit of work that ever dropped on to a breakfast table'.

It consisted of three folios cyclostyled on both sides in mud-brown ink on khaki foolscap duplicating paper. But what it contained was dynamite. Philip Toynbee said of it: 'This small monstrosity was one of the half-dozen British publications most often quoted in the press of the entire world.' And Cyril Connolly wrote of its 'equation of rumour with fact' as the factor which made *The Week* an intoxicating newspaper.

'Written for the knowing,' he said, 'by those in the know, it was genuinely diabolical in the sense that it never put anything past its opponents. Motive was peeled from motive, betrayal found under betrayal, bribe upon bribe, and always in the august and persuasive language of *The Times*.'

Claud Cockburn had worked for *The Times*; he had lived in Europe and America for nearly seven years; he had seen news-sheets in Washington and Berlin, and there had been admirable English news-sheets in the 18th century. 'He would explain to friends,' Patricia Cockburn reveals now, 'that since, in his view, the big newspapers were all rotted with stupidity, or else actively wicked, the thing to do was to collect a few pounds and start a news-sheet that would let some air in.'

His intention was serious and dedicated; he would edit and almost entirely write each issue; but the manner in which the sheet was born makes for hilarious reading. Patricia Cockburn was not present at the actual birth, but she has captured now the atmosphere—and the man, whom later she married: 'The dingy gloom of the stairs gave the place a suitably conspiratorial air. The office was low-ceilinged and grubby in a comfortable sort of way. It was filled with cheerful assistants (mostly upaid, I discovered) who were struggling to make the ancient Gestetner duplicating machine work. Claud wasn't there, though he should have been. Then came a hurried clumping of feet on the stairs. A heavily-built man seemed to be pounding up them at speed, and then throwing himself against the door as though he expected it was locked and he had to burst it open. But Claud, now rushing in, turned out to be the reverse of burly. At first sight of him I was reminded rather of one of those rag-dolls with unnaturally elongated arms and legs dangling, though in this case the