12 May 1991 / Profile: A second bloom for Pop: H E Bates: The Larkin books were scorned as the work of a good writer gone soft. Sebastian Faulks shares the last laugh with their late creator

By SEBASTIAN FAULKS

THE DARLING Buds of May, the Yorkshire Television adaptation of the novels of H E Bates, reaches its triumphant conclusion tonight. Bates would be pleased. 'There is something of myself in Pop Larkin,' he wrote: 'a passionate Englishman, a profound lover of Nature, of the sounds and sights of the countryside, of colour, flowers and things sensual; a hatred of pomp, pretension and humbug; a lover of children and family life; an occasional breaker of rules, a flouter of conventions.' But while Bates liked the stories, his admirers regarded them as at best an indulgence and at worst an embarrassment, coming from a man whom Graham Greene had thought the equal of Chekhov.

The Larkin family, and Bates's affection for them, probably constitute his greatest 'flouting of convention'. He liked to call himself an angry young man and describe himself as irreverent, but there is little evidence of these qualities in his life. A profile of him in The Sketch magazine in 1952 described him as: 'busy, happy and absorbed. The good boy of modern letters.'

What that description omits is Bates's pride that he should have become a man of letters at all. He was born into a family of cobblers in the town of Rushden in Northamptonshire in 1905. Working class for generations, the Bateses were nevertheless proud of their respectability. H E's father, for instance, unlike his colleagues, shaved every day; the family was in local parlance 'a notch above a tapper'.

The young H E (he didn't like to be called Herbert or Ernest) was a precocious and sensitive child. He was set to work apart from his classmates at the village school, and won a free place at Kettering Grammar School in 1916. He disliked the headmaster and had a low view of the staff, quickly seeing that the best men were at the Western Front. Bates's sense of grievance was transformed one morning by the arrival of a badly wounded infantry officer who had come to teach English. Edmund Kirby, the son of a farmer, did for Bates what countless schoolteachers have done for nascent writers: after one lesson with Kirby in 1919, H E believed his destiny was set.

There was a brief stint on the local paper, which he disliked, and a spell at a shoe warehouse, from which he was made redundant (he preferred the word 'sacked'). After that it was Bates's boast that he made his living only by writing; and it is worth remembering how difficult the task he had set himself must have seemed.

It was not as if he set out to be 'popular' either. His models for the short story were Turgenev, Chekhov and Maupassant. Luckily, his abilities were as quick to form as his ambitions. His first book, The Two Sisters, was published by Jonathan Cape when Bates was only 20. He found a mentor at Cape in Edward Garnett, who guided his early career, sometimes with harsh criticism. Bates had no delusions; he knew the size of the task he had set himself and accepted Garnett's criticisms because he knew Garnett was as serious about writing as he was.

Bates valued above all his ability to create characters. He was contemptuous of D H Lawrence who, he thought, used himself as the main character in all his books. This seemed to Bates a dereliction of the writer's first duty: to make something new, albeit from the materials of observed life. He abhorred Henry James, whom he considered unforgivably boring. Tolstoy's work was too long: in The Red Badge of Courage Stephen Crane had, in Bates's view, written War and Peace to a reasonable length.

It was probably in his short stories that Bates's best work was done. In The Novel Now Anthony Burgess wrote: 'Despite his fine novels, he has so rare a talent for the short story that one resents his working in the larger form.' The Times's obituarist agreed: 'It is on the . . . stories collected in the volumes The Woman who had Imagination, Cut and Come Again, Something Short and Sweet, The Flying Goat, and The Beauty of the Dead that his reputation will largely rest.' The latest of these volumes was published in 1940, before Bates had become famous.

Bates's son Richard confirms that he saw himself primarily as a short- story

writer; Bates told him he would not have written so many novels if he had not had four children to support.

To make a living from writing was a remarkable feat. Bates was not only gifted and determined, but also had a profound intelligence. He bought paintings, mostly minor Impressionists, from London salerooms at bargain prices. He was an orderly and prolific writer who set himself regular hours. At the same time, he underwent periods of despair and gastric pain, brought on by nervous indigestion and anxiety. While supremely punctilious and professional, he suffered all the fears and despairs of the creative mind.

In 1931 he married Madge (Marjorie) Cox, a Rushden girl with 'the best legs in town'. They moved to Kent, where they converted a granary in a small village. They had four children, of whom the eldest, Richard, became a television producer and was responsible for The Darling Buds of May. He recalls: 'H E was very much a family man. He loved having his family round him for Sunday lunch. We were very strictly brought up. Although he had rejected Methodism there was much of its strong moral outlook in what he taught us.'

Bates was at first shocked by the backwardness of the Kent villagers. He called them 'a withdrawn, dark, ungiving people, insular, defensive . . . distrustful of all intruders, hard to make friends with'. The Larkin idyll took time to germinate. First there was the Second World War, in which Bates was commissioned into the RAF with a remarkable brief: to write short stories. This he did, achieving popular success under the name 'Flying Officer X'. In many ways the war made him. He was sent to Burma, which gave him the background for The Purple Plain, and he used his time with the aircrews to gather material for Fair Stood the Wind for France, considered by many to be the finest novel of the war.

BY 1945 Bates was famous. He moved his books, for reasons not made clear in his memoirs, from Cape to Michael Joseph. Victor Morrison, who later worked for the firm, remembers 'a countryman, not a clubbable man. He had no great charisma, but was throughly professional. He was very friendly, though I was slightly in awe of him. He was proud of having come from such an ordinary background.' Edmund Fisher, who knew Bates well in his later years with the firm, says: 'He was a genuine original. Dead straight, replied to every letter by return, not an arse-licker, but he never missed a trick. I never met anybody with more natural intelligence.'

The letters in the Bates file at Michael Joseph show a shy, English hand. 'Dear Miss Lonsdale Cooper, I said that I would meet the BBC television people on Tuesday in order to discuss taking part in a programme about writers etc; but I have since had second thoughts on the matter and I wonder therefore if you would be good enough to cancel the appointment for me. . .' He preferred gardening (his begonias are still spoken of in awe) to giving interviews. He was also keen on cricket (he bought and presented a green for cricket to his village) and football: he recalled scoring eight goals for his school when only 14.

Then there was sex. Bates was devoted to Madge. According to his son Richard: 'His sensuality was tied to his love of nature. He viewed it as part of the same drive. He understood women very well. He wrote more about their passions and emotions, not about sex.' Yet even such a connoisseur as Henry Miller was moved to admiration: 'His women are always females first and foremost. That is to say, they are fully sexed: they have all the charm, the loveliness, the attraction of the flowers he knows so well.'

After the war Bates met the film director David Lean, who sent him to Tahiti. The trip resulted in a pallid travelogue, not the exotic scripts Lean had hoped for. In fact it seemed to focus Bates's mind more sharply on England, and then on Kent. One day he saw a rumbustious family leaving a pub . . . another day, he glimpsed a rural junkyard. Suddenly a Kentish family, instead of being some primitive throwback, were a symbol of the old England he had begun to hanker after. The Larkins were born. The books gave him pleasure to write, and in Richard's view they gave expression to a humorous side of H E that was absent from his other work. H E was sufficiently confident of his literary reputation not to mind the critical derision that greeted the Larkin books.

They also made money. Not, in Richard's words, tens of millions, but enough to make Bates liable to supertax. For him there was no question of exile, but he did form a company, Evensford Productions Ltd. His widow Madge, who still lives in the same Kentish village, owns half, and Richard and his

brother Jonathan own 25 per cent each. The company files are unforthcoming about exactly how much the books and films have made. MGM made a feature film of The Darling Buds of May in 1958, though to Bates's disgust they hired Debbie Reynolds and Tony Randall, set it in California and renamed it The Mating Game.

It is fitting that the Larkins have achieved such great popularity on television. The books are not typical of Bates, but they display an essential part of his character. On the one hand there is a slightly buttoned-up, pained, super-professional man going down to his summer-house to write. On the other is the man who claims to be rebellious, angry, unconventional. The Larkin books in some way provide the key. In their excess of crudeness and sentimentality they hint at everything Bates controlled and channelled to make the transition from cobbler's son to writer in the line of Maupassant and Chekhov. Who would grudge him some self-indulgence?