H. E. Bates

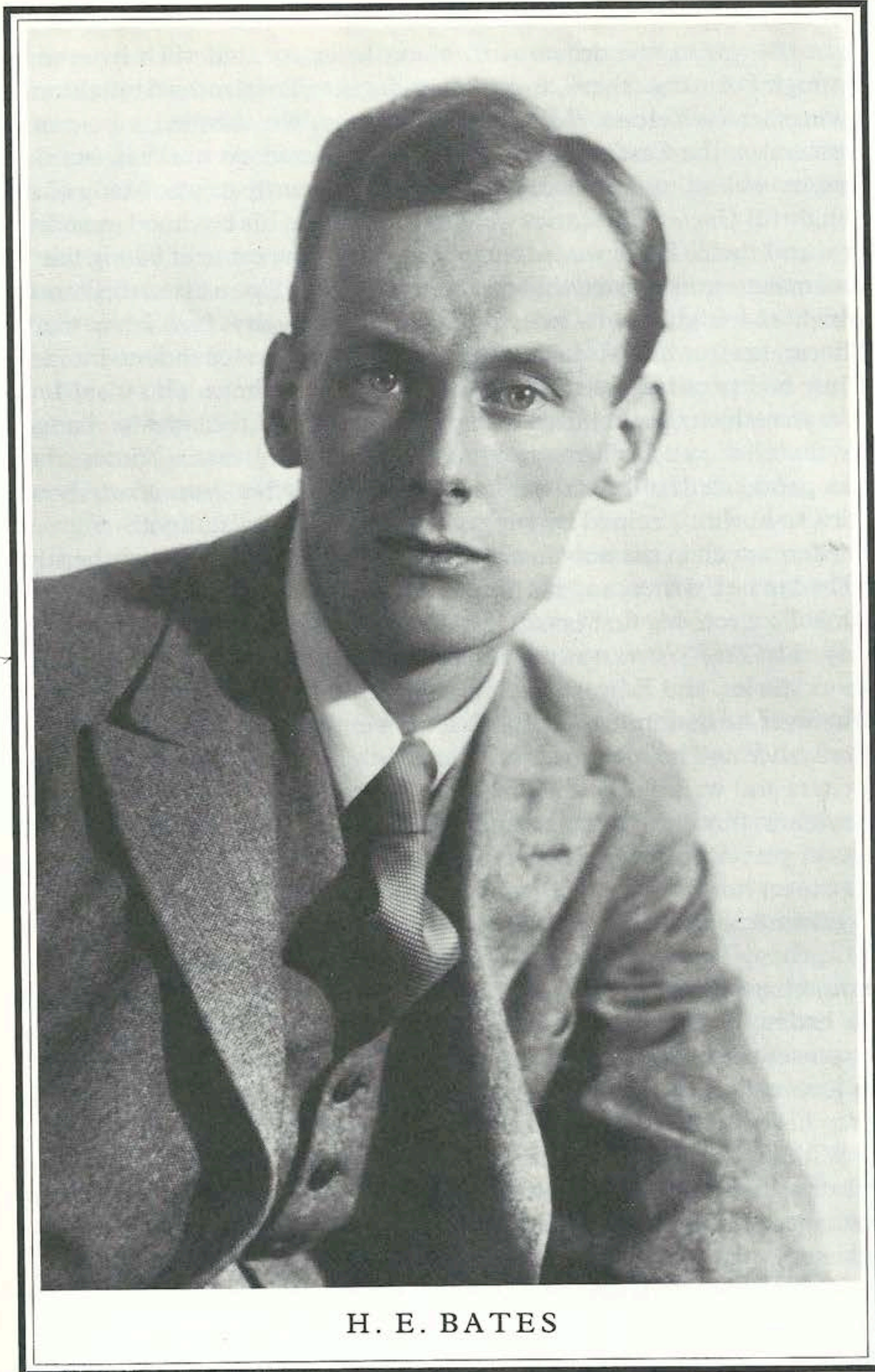
After reading the manuscript of a novel called *The Two Sisters*, Edward wrote a letter to Miss Bates to say that he had recommended it to Jonathan Cape for publication, and would like to discuss the book with its author. He was surprised to learn that it was the work of a young man.

Bates has described being taken to lunch at the Étoile in Charlotte Street by Jonathan Cape and Wren Howard, and his feelings of astonishment and awe when Edward appeared, leaning on his stick, swathed in scarves and carrying a basket full of his weekly purchases made in the market and delicatessen shops in Brewer Street. To the eyes of youth, he looked a clumsy dancing bear. A mistake, for though age made some movements clumsy, Edward could juggle three eggs at once.

My wife, Ray, and I had recently bought Hilton Hall, between Huntingdon and Cambridge. It was then a cold, sparsely furnished house. Built about 1610, it has great dignity and charm, though it has only eight rooms and additions. Bates lived not far off, at Rushden in the valley of the Nene, so Edward suggested that I should invite him over to stay a night. Bates (who, like H. G. Wells, concealed the name of Herbert under his initials) accepted and proved to be a slightly-built young man with fair hair, blue eyes and a rosebud complexion. Suitably dressed, he could have impersonated a pretty and talented Miss Bates anywhere. Actually he was a keen soccer player and cricketer.

I was planting some lime trees on the boundary of the orchard, and Bates came and held the tree upright like a lance, while I shovelled earth round the roots and then stamped it down all round, before shovelling some more and stamping that down.

Shyness disappears when men are working together, and there could have been no better introduction. Ray was attracted by him and he liked her. Bates's visit had been a success, though our house was cold and bare, and Bates's unwarmed bedroom must have been icy. The friendship, thus begun, prospered.



H. E. BATES

In the spring we drove over, along lanes scented with hawthorn, through beautiful (then), forgotten villages—Toseland—Stoughton—Swineshead—Yeldon. After meeting Bates, we climbed a sugarloaf eminence—the Castle Mound, to have our picnic. At our feet, beside a stream, was a tiny inn, once kept by Bates's grandparents. Many of his delightful *Uncle Silas* stories were to spring from his boyhood memories of it and them. Bates was proud of his family: he came of a long line of shoemakers and boasted that one of his uncles still possessed the lasts on which the high boots for Marlborough's cavalry had been made. Shoemakers in the Midlands have always been independent-minded. They had persistently returned Bradlaugh, an atheist who would not take an oath on the Bible, to Parliament, until at last the law was changed so that he could affirm and take his seat. In earlier times their independence had given rise to the proverb, 'the shoemaker should stick to his last', coined by supporters of the Establishment.

After a spell in the boot factory, Bates had explained to his father that he had to be a writer, and his father had agreed to support him for a year while he wrote his first book. If he failed, he would go back to the factory. *The Two Sisters* was the result of his father's faith. He was writing short stories, and Edward, acting as unpaid literary agent, placed them wherever he had influence. Bates soon went down to The Cearne, and Constance and he took to each other. With Edward, Bates talked about writers and writing. With Constance the talk was as knowledgeable—but about flowers. For this remarkable young man was not only a keen soccer player but he had found time to read very widely and to become an expert horticulturist.

Edward discovered to his delight that Bates had read a lot of Turgenev, Tchehov's stories, Conrad . . . in fact the authors which he would have made him read, if he had not done so of his own initiative. He had his own opinions and stuck to them, though he looked like a bud on one of the rose-bushes he was pruning for Constance. She fell rather in love with him, Edward worried about his career and how he could keep his head above water and find time to write.

With his encouragement Bates left Rushden and came to London. A job was needed, and Edward persuaded John Wilson, the canny manager of Bumpus's bookshop in Oxford Street, to take Bates on as an assistant.

John was an old friend of Edward's, but he was a business-man, and after a little while he told him that Bates was not earning his salary and that he would never make a shopman. But he agreed to keep him on if

Edward paid Bates's wages, which he did until enough came in from the stories for him to give up the job. I believe Bates never knew of this transaction, of which Wilson told me after Edward's death.

Even if Bates spent much of his working hours reading the stock instead of doing up brown-paper parcels, I think Bumpus did not have a bad bargain.

Bates had been writing some very good stories when one evening I found Edward greatly perturbed. Bates had written a story, taken lock, stock and barrel from one of Tolstoy's. And when Edward had given him a lecture, Bates had defended himself and had not appeared to realise that his action was criminal. Edward proceeded to a more severe lecture telling him that he would be ruined if such a plagiarism were detected. Some writers are extraordinarily receptive, but Bates was not a slavish imitator, and this lapse was the only one of its kind. I never read the offending story and can only judge it by its effect upon Edward, and by an acknowledgement of the affair Bates made to me many years later.

Bates spent a year over a second novel of 150,000 words long which Edward described as 'Hardy and water', 'unreal'; it was 'facile, flowing, over-expressive, long-winded, romantic and cynical', 'half-baked and there was no question of publishing it'.

However, in spite of this, Edward did not give up faith in Bates's talent. Soon afterwards he was praising two short stories: 'I don't see anything to criticise in either.'

In 1931 Bates married a girl with whom he was in love at Rushden and greatly daring bought an old granary at Little Chart in Kent. Madge was the perfect wife for him. She is strong, enjoys life and was ready to embark confidently on the adventures which lay before them both.

Bates is a master of the short story, and the novella, as he called the longer ones. He has a sharp, clear vision of character showing itself in a situation, and can completely convince the reader. His novels are inferior. This, I think, is because he had not the power of sustaining a narrative. There is a wide gap between the revelation of a character in a situation and the architectural construction of a novel.

After Edward's death in 1937, I worked as one of Jonathan Cape's readers and inherited Bates. He was already an established writer of short stories—but at that time novels sold better, and perhaps this was the reason that he wrote *Spella Ho*. I had a long hard fight over it. I knew, perhaps even better than Edward would have done, what was wrong, for I had become entangled in writing a long novel which would not come right and which I finally abandoned. So I told Bates that large

parts of *Spella Ho* must be rewritten. A week or two later, the manuscript returned, rewritten, but with the same faults. And though the book was eventually published by Cape in 1938, the faults remain.

In late August 1939, when war appeared inevitable, I was invited to join the staff of the Director of Intelligence at the Air Ministry and was commissioned as a Flight-Lieutenant. My first duty was to concoct, with Hector Bolitho, a weekly news-sheet to entertain the enlisted men of the R.A.F. Our styles were different. Hector would write about how our Sovereign George VI had taken his wings as a pilot, the rank he held and the medals he was entitled to wear. All very loyal—but which called forth a comment from our Security Officer, Colonel Chambers, 'The aircrews don't want stuff written by a housemaid in Buck House.' I had read in a newspaper that owing to shortage of petrol there were plans to collect and bottle methane gas from sewage farms. I put in this item with the comment: 'During the war, private cars will go by shits and farts.' To my indignation this was cut out as too coarse a joke for our aircraftsmen, so I reproduce it here.

Plans were afoot to employ other writers, who would publicise the R.A.F. instead of trying to entertain its personnel. At that moment I received a letter from Bates asking me if there was any sort of job in the R.A.F. which he was qualified to do. He was obviously the man who would write impressions of the different branches of the air service better than anyone. Although I was suspected of trying to find a cushy job for an old friend, I got Bates into the R.A.F. with the help of Nerney, the Librarian of the R.A.F. who saw that Bates might be the writer they wanted. Getting Bates that job was the most valuable service I did while I was in the Air Ministry.

The stories that he wrote as 'Flying Officer X', *The Greatest People in the World* and *How Sleep the Brave*, were the first result. They were followed by a novel, *Fair Stood the Wind for France*. They were best-sellers on a huge scale. Later Bates was sent out to Burma, an experience which led to his writing *The Purple Plain* and *The Jacaranda Tree*. These novels were best-sellers on the large scale. I thought them fakes, but I rejoiced that Bates and Madge and their sons would be rich people, able to live as they liked and to travel whenever they wished. But I concluded that Bates as a real writer was finished, just as Galsworthy had been. Success is fatal. To my astonishment, Bates went back to writing short stories—as good or better than those he had written in his youth. It seemed miraculous. Indeed it was miraculous. Success on that scale is like selling one's soul to the Devil—but to get the best of both

worlds—to touch pitch and not be defiled: that is the rarest thing in literature.

Bates was a very prolific author: he lists 24 novels, 20 volumes of short stories, nine volumes of essays and one of drama, one volume of criticism, two of autobiography, two for children and two as 'Flying Officer X': altogether 61 volumes omitting collections of already published work—all written between 1925 and 1971.

Bates used his relative wealth to transform The Granary on the green at Little Chart into a lovely place with a most beautiful garden full of flowers and with an excellent vegetable one at the side.

He had an eye for pictures and picked up some charming ones at Christie's and Sotheby's from under the noses of the dealers. He liked the Impressionists and had several very good paintings by some of the little known men.

He was a gourmet, and one was given good food and good wine in his house, and in London was invited to lunch at the Caprice restaurant.

He and Madge were fond of travel and particularly of Switzerland. The frail, but muscular, rosebud young man grew stout. There was physically a likeness to H. G. Wells, but the blue eyes were milder. He was an altogether quieter man who was content to enjoy life and not to worry too much about it. Moreover his gifts were very different. He had not had the scientific training which enabled H. G. Wells to foresee the changes which were upon us, he was not a propagandist ready to make hasty judgements. Instead he accepted the world as he saw it, he understood women better than any man writing through the middle half of this century. But both men had the same robust sense of humour. *Mr Polly* and *The Darling Buds of May* belong to the same world. They are amusing but not important.

Bates was as uneven as he was prolific—but artists are judged by their best work, and his short stories rank with those of any writer of our time.

Few men have had a wider range of literary friends than David Garnett. For instance he was an intimate friend of D. H. Lawrence, and also knew T. E. Lawrence, meeting each man through his father, Edward Garnett. He was indeed fortunate in his parents. Thanks to them he came to know older writers such as Joseph Conrad. W. H. Hudson, Edward Thomas and John Galsworthy. The great figures of Bloomsbury, Forster, Virginia Woolf, Strachey and Keynes, were all friends. He knew George Moore and H. G. Wells, and younger writers such as H. E. Bates, T. H. White and Carson McCullers.

Each portrait consists of a vivid character-sketch and memoir drawn from what the author calls 'memories as solid as cobblestones, some fragmented and perhaps distorted, all embedded in the clay of my own personality and prejudices'. It generally concludes with a perceptive critique of the writer as a creative artist.

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The author is a novelist distinguished by his understanding of men and women and his knowledge of a creative writer's art. Nowhere has he displayed these two qualities better than in his book.

Jacket photograph: Chris Smith: Camera Press

Macmillan
ISBN 0 333 25613 1
£9.95 *net*

David Garnett was born in 1892. He has written eighteen novels, the first of which, *Lady into Fox,* won both the Hawthornden and the James Tait Black prizes. He has also written three volumes of autobiography and a number of short stories, and has edited the letters of T. E. Lawrence, T. H. White and Dora Carrington as well as the novels of Thomas Love Peacock. His novel, *The Sailor's Return,* has recently been made into an impressive full-length film.