

PAINTING WITH WORDS

Likened to a 'Renoir of the typewriter', H. E. Bates used words with the panache of a painter to shape and colour England's landscapes.

I went off one evening and bought myself the thickest quarto writing pad, in pale blue, that I could find.' On this, the 17-year-old Bates wrote his first novel, a very substantial 150,000 words. A friend's reaction to the manuscript, and Bates' own cooler judgement, condemned it, and 'I buried the blue bundle of words away in a drawer, like a creature still-born.' This was by no means the last piece of writing that he discarded or destroyed. But unlike most aspiring authors, Bates had finished his novel, so confirming the strength and authenticity of his 'passionate, single-minded desire, to be a writer'.

Over the next 50 years he would publish hundreds of works of fiction, as well as a handful of plays, books on the

English countryside, a study of the modern short story, and three volumes of autobiography full of insights into the writer's craft.

LITERARY MENTOR

Bates considered himself 'frigidly self-critical'. He also accepted, and learned by, the criticism of Edward Garnett, a publisher's reader whose past literary discoveries had included D. H. Lawrence, Joseph Conrad and John Galsworthy. After putting aside his first novel, Bates wrote a second, *The Two Sisters* (1926), which Garnett recommended his firm, Jonathan Cape, to accept. After a first meeting in which Bates was 'hypnotised and terrified by this enormous and grizzly figure', Garnett helped the unsophisti-

cated young writer to place his work with London magazines, and became his severe but encouraging mentor. For years afterwards he admonished Bates for his 'facile side', but also told him, 'If you can write like this you need have no fear for the future.' The relationship was vital to Bates' artistic development, as he makes clear in his affectionate and respectful memoir of Garnett.

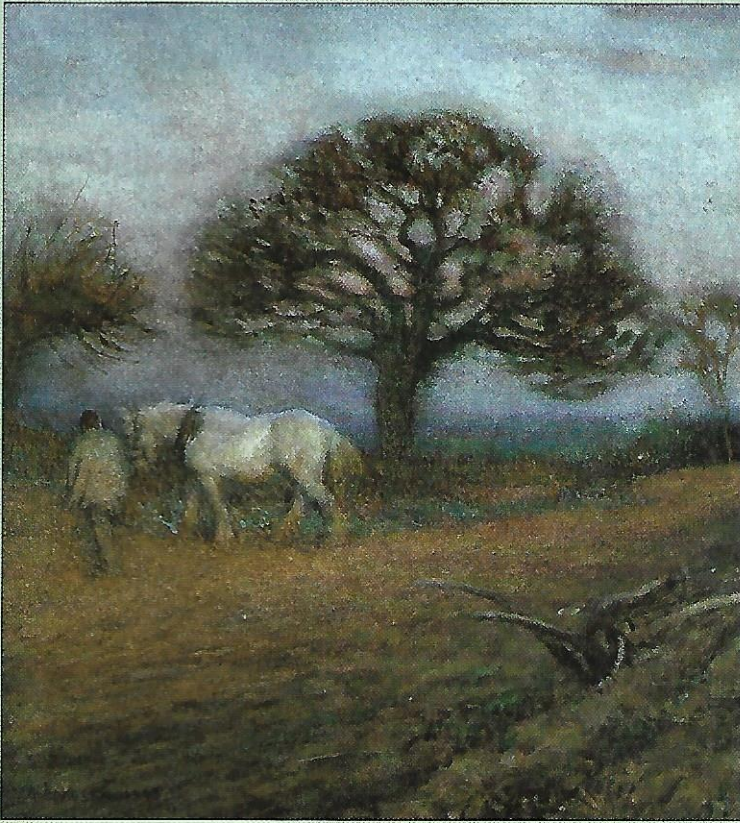
Over the next few years Bates established himself as a regional novelist, writing mainly about his native Nene Valley in books such as *The Fallow Land* and *The Poacher*. He made an even stronger reputation as a short-story writer. In this genre, Bates excelled through his mastery of precise and concentrated writing of the sort recommended by Edward Garnett. Bates spoke of the short story as his 'first love' and acknowledged that he had been influenced not only by older masters such as Chekhov, but also by the spare, direct,

The English countryside

(below) Revelling in descriptions of English country life, Bates drew on childhood memories where "every morning was golden".



Sir David Murray The Heart of the Day/Fine Art Photographic Library



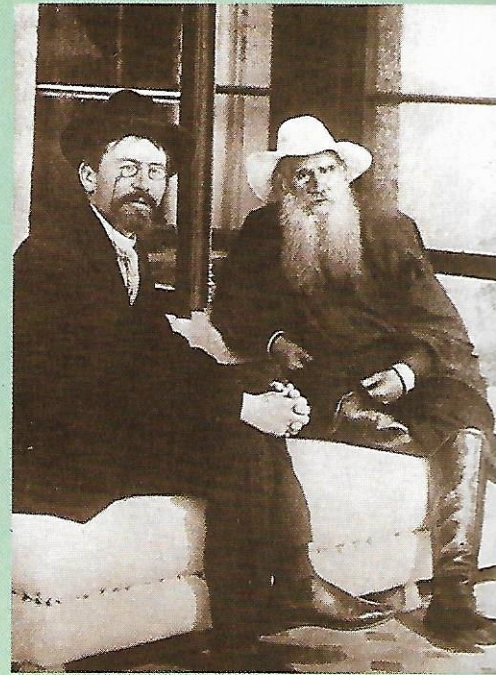
George Clausen: The Cart Horse/Fine Art Photographic

Harsh reality

The bleaker side of rural life (left) emerged in books such as The Fallow Land. Nature was not always hospitable to the lonely farmer.

Russian masters

(right) Bates turned to writers such as Chekhov and Tolstoy (with white hat) for inspiration. But at times the 'inspiration' was too direct, and his editor, Edward Garnett, chastised Bates about a passage clearly plagiarized from Tolstoy.



pictorial style of his own contemporary, Ernest Hemingway.

Bates held that 'writing is just as much a graphic art as painting or drawing', and in his own work he aimed to depict 'scene and place and people vividly, in pictures, leaving out explanations, letting only essentials do the work'.

Although he was a passionate observer,

H. E. Bates believed that, for the writer of fiction, imagination was more important than facts: '... fiction is an exercise in the art of telling lies . . . The writer without imagination, or the ability to invent, is not a writer of fiction at all.' For a writer of this sort, a hint – rather than a history – sets the creative process working.

'The genesis of novels and stories . . .

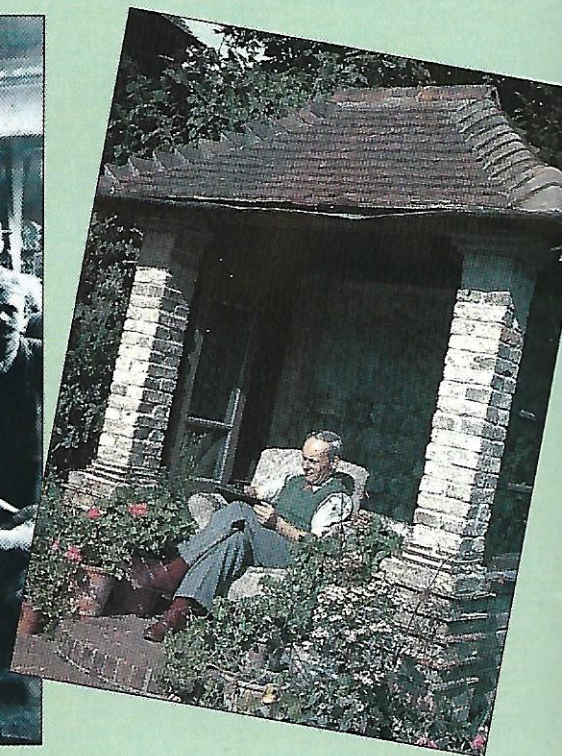
often stems from the simplest, most fleeting of moments. A word, a glance, a face are, more often than not, enough'. *The Two Sisters* was suggested by a single event – a light glimpsed in the window of a strange, shadowy room. But the creative moment more often occurred when

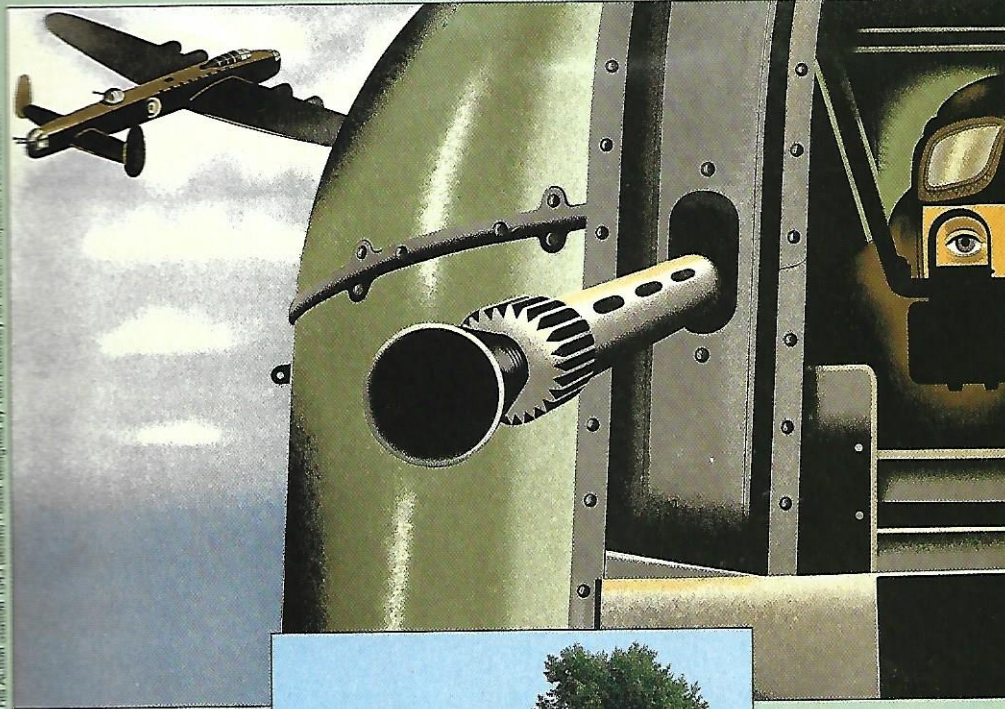
Art and craft

Bates grew up amid "the distant pungent odours of leather and shoemakers' shops", and many of his fictional characters were based on urban craftsmen (below left). His own work was often done in his summer house (below).



Northampton Museum and Art Gallery

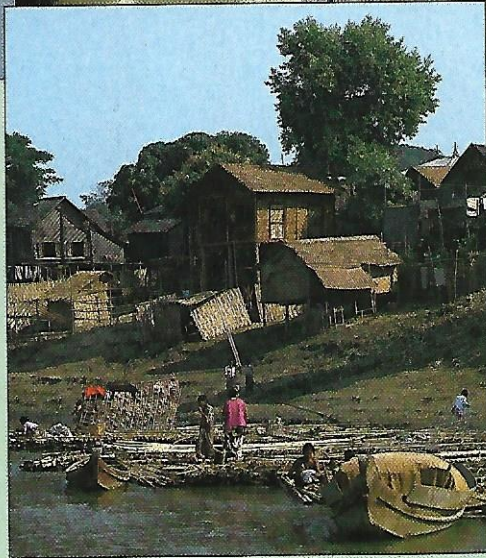




His Action Station 1941 (detail) Poster designed by Tom Eckersley for the GPO Imperial War Museum

War heroics

Writing under the pseudonym 'Flying Officer X', Bates created some of his most popular stories about the exploits of World War II servicemen (above). A visit to Burma in 1945 (right) fired him "so that the words came out as if driven by a blowtorch."



Making movies

The film director David Lean (below, left) bought the rights to *Fair Stood the Wind for France*, *The Cruise of the Breadwinner* and *The Purple Plain*. The admiration was mutual and Bates commented that "the story writer could learn much from the cinema."

Spectrum

pseudonym 'Flying Officer X' gave Bates his first great popular success. The tacit ban servicemen observed on talking about their deeds meant that Bates was drawing his inspiration from mere hints and clues. This admirably suited his talent for making great imaginative leaps from the smallest factual suggestion.

War, though it was a drain on his time, did nothing to dampen his creative imagination. Half of *Fair Stood the Wind for France*, the book that made him famous, was written in a fortnight, before a return to war work reduced him to finishing it in odd moments of leisure. The same working pattern arose on his visit to India and Burma, when he wrote *The Jacaranda Tree* (1949), *The Purple Plain* and *The Scarlet Sword*. 'Some of the white heat of Burma got into my blood as I wrote, so that the words came out as if driven by a blowtorch,' he recalled later.

MASTER OF THE NOVELLA

Eventually, Bates returned to the Nene Valley with *Love for Lydia*. It again sprang from a fusion of images – the sight of 'a strikingly beautiful young girl in a black cloak lined with scarlet', and a youthful visit to a local mansion, Rushden Hall. But it is also a rare autobiographical excursion into Bates' own adolescent feelings and impulses. His subsequent works were mainly novellas – short novels or long short stories – of which Bates became an acknowledged master. Works as varied and different as the Larkin books and *The Triple Echo* (1970) demonstrated that only death could still H. E. Bates' creative flow.

two unrelated experiences fused in Bates' mind. A junkheap which he passed on the edge of a bluebell wood and the sight of a vulgar family eating enormous ice creams meshed into *The Darling Buds of May*. His novel of the war in Burma, *The Purple Plain* (1947), was suggested by a 'single visit to a Burmese village and a post-demob conversation at Uxbridge in which an acquaintance casually mentioned a certain fighter pilot: "Remarkable type. Had more gongs than anyone I ever knew. And got them all for trying to kill himself."'

It was only during World War II, after 20 years of writing fiction, that H. E. Bates became a household name. Until then he had been forced to write rural-life journalism to make ends meet, and had never been paid as much as £10 for a short story. He had gained a commission in the RAF as a short-story writer, and ironically, the stories he wrote under the



WORKS · IN OUTLINE

One of the most prolific of modern writers, H. E. Bates is widely thought of as a novelist of English country life. Yet his novels and stories ranged over a vast variety of subjects, venturing into exotic locations and into every aspect of human emotions.

Charlotte's Row (1931) is set against a background of industrial squalor. *Fair Stood the Wind for*

CHARLOTTE'S ROW

1931

Masher Jonathan works in a brickyard (right) and lives with his shrill, avaricious, shopkeeper wife in Charlotte's Row, a street in a big industrial town. Among its other inhabitants is Masher's friend, Quintus Jabez Harper, "a healthy black-haired giant" of 50 who lords it over his family with a certain drunken grandeur. Nearby, a young boy, Adam, lives with his grandmother. Squalor and poverty oppress them all.

Despite his urban line of work, Masher has a deep love of the countryside, which he teaches in turn to Quintus' daughter Pauline, a factory worker. Eventually they run away together. The enraged Quintus assaults Masher's wife and goes to prison for it.

Meanwhile, Adam is sent out to work for a baker for a shilling a week, only to be brutally beaten for stealing a loaf. When Quintus leaves prison, he finds great changes have been wrought in his little domestic empire.

France (1944) has often been called the best novel written about World War II. *The Scarlet Sword* (1950) draws on Bates' experiences in the East, while, in totally different vein, the bawdy, rumbustious Larkin family of *The Darling Buds of May* (1958) are brilliant comic creations. Spare and superb in its

craftsmanship, *The Triple Echo* (1970) is a late masterpiece.

Writer Henry Miller asserts, 'no matter how much one is made to suffer, one closes his books with a lasting sensation of beauty. And this sense of beauty . . . is evoked by the author's unswerving acceptance of life.' He also pays tribute to Bates' 'clean and healthy, and absolutely infectious' humour.



FAIR STOOD THE WIND FOR FRANCE

1944

Returning from a bombing mission (left) John Franklin is forced to crash-land his Wellington bomber in occupied France. He is badly wounded, but his four-man crew carry him across country until they are taken in and given refuge by a girl who lives with her family in a quiet mill. Forged identity passes are obtained for the crew, who leave in pairs for England. But Franklin has to be left behind while his arm is amputated and he recuperates from the operation. The military situation in the locality becomes increasingly serious, with Germans taking and executing hostages. But Franklin and the girl, Françoise, have fallen in love. She decides to leave with him.

They cross to the relative safety of unoccupied (Vichy) France and make their way to Marseilles. There Franklin meets up again with one of his crew members, the erratic O'Connor. When the threesome try to reach Spain by rail, O'Connor's recklessness puts everything at risk . . .



THE SCARLET SWORD

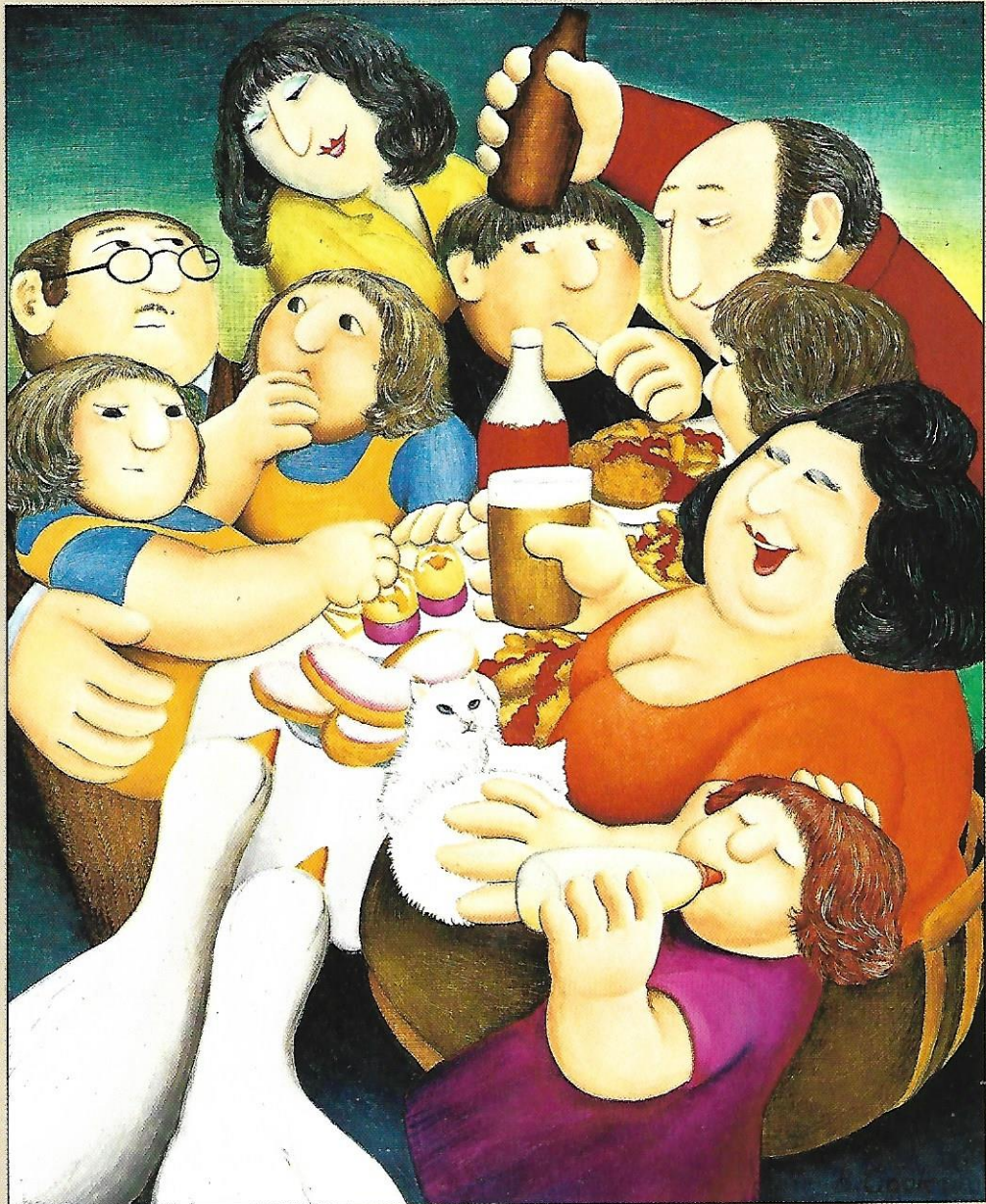
1950

Set amid the turmoil and upheaval of the Partition of India (above), this is one of Bates' most exciting novels. Crane, a world-weary foreign correspondent, puts up at a Catholic mission in Kashmir. Here he meets Father Anstey and Father Simpson; McAlister, a Glaswegian nurse; an Indian 'dancer'; and two English families, the Mathiesons and the Maxedts. But the mission is soon overrun by Sikh and Hindu refugees, hotly pursued by ferocious Pathan tribesmen who storm the buildings. A night of terror follows before some kind of order is restored. The survivors remain in danger, however, both from the Pathans and from Indian planes which strafe the buildings day after day. Beset in this way, Crane inopportunely falls in love, Colonel Mathieson begins to crack, and Father Simpson displays unexpected qualities.

THE DARLING BUDS OF MAY

1958

This is the world's introduction to the Larkins (right) – sly, sharp Pop to whom everything is 'Perfick!', mountainous Ma 'almost two yards wide', and their six children. They live in amoral, overfed, rural bliss, complete with Rolls Royce and motor-boat thanks to Pop's junk dealing and other activities within the "black economy". Even the pregnancy of beautiful Mariette, who "hasn't made up her mind" about the father's identity, is accepted with equanimity. When Cedric Charlton, a proper young man from the Inland Revenue, visits in pursuance of his duty, he is effortlessly bamboozled, mesmerized by Mariette, and absorbed into the family. After hilarious adventures among the fruit-pickers and at a gymkhana in Pop's meadow, a marriage and a baby are imminent – but for whom?



SEVEN BY FIVE

1963

In a little hotel overlooking the sea (right), Harris and Madame Dupont meet, and an Anglo-French love affair blossoms despite the shadows of the recent war and the necessary deceptions of the present: *Across the Bay* is just one in this collection of 35 short stories representing 35 years of Bates' writing life (1926-61). The settings range from Tahiti, where, in *Mrs Eglantine*, the title character drinks her breakfast every morning at the hotel bar, to 'Evensford', the fictionalized version of Bates' birthplace and the setting used for *Lydia*.

In *The Enchantress*, Bertha, a girl from the Evensford slums, finds an easy path through life thanks to her chameleon-like adaptation to men's requirements. In other stories, a man emerges from long imprisonment for committing a crime of passion, only to blunder into a similar situation (*The Daffodil Sky*); and an 83-year-old ex-Indian Army colonel struggles to understand a group of young World War II flyers, wondering what has happened to one who has "bought it" (been killed) (*Colonel Julian*).



THE TRIPLE ECHO

1971

The solitude of Alice Charlsworth is broken by Barton, a fair-haired, blue-eyed soldier stationed near her remote hill farm (left). Her husband is a prisoner-of-war of the Japanese, and 27-year-old Alice is left running the farm by herself. A chance encounter with Barton reveals him to be a farm boy at heart who hates the army. After he and Alice become lovers, he deserts.

Alice keeps him in seclusion in her house, passing him off as her sister when she has to explain the presence of another person on the farm. This disguise becomes increasingly convincing as Barton's hair grows longer and he adapts to his role with disconcerting completeness. Tension mounts when he attracts the amorous attentions of a local sergeant. To Alice's fury, he even agrees to go with the sergeant to a Christmas dance. Two days later the sergeant returns, this time in his role as a military policeman, intent on taking Barton away. But it is Alice who puts an unexpected end to this curious variation on the 'eternal triangle'.

