

H. E. BATES

A Collector's Perspective

Richard Holroyd

I FIRST BECAME INTERESTED in the books of H. E. Bates when *Love for Lydia* was serialised on television in the 1970s. Each scene and character was painted in a way I found full of interest with the central character, Lydia, played by Mel Martin, a mesmerising blend of high spirits, innocence and sensuality. I rushed out to find the book and read it. It was some time later that I decided to collect the books of H. E. Bates. I had already started to collect another author, Ernest Raymond, and decided to add Bates to make my visits to bookshops more worthwhile. I read each book I acquired and soon found so much more to this author. He wrote a great variety of books, from his early rural novels, wartime stories, collections of short stories and novellas to his countryside essays and, totally out of character, the hugely successful 'Darling Buds of May' series of comic stories. I love them all, but perhaps best of all his early work, inspired by his childhood in Northamptonshire. These rural novels depict the hard lives of country families, struggling to make a living and to find some fulfilment from life. There is nothing sentimental about these stories and the characters are rarely lovable heroes or heroines. They do however come across as real, believable people with that mixture of harshness and beauty that is the countryside itself. Good examples are *Catherine Foster* (1929), *The Fallow Land* (1932) and *The Poacher* (1935).

In 1941 Bates served in the RAF with a commission to write stories about the men he would be serving with. He wrote two collections of short stories under the pseudonym 'Flying Officer X', *The Greatest People in the World* (1942) and *How Sleep the Brave* (1943), together with some full-length novels. *Fair Stood the Wind for France* (1944) and *The Purple Plain* (1947) brought him great success and were made into films. Perhaps it was coincidence, but this success happened after Bates took on a literary agent, Laurence

Pollinger, and changed his publisher from Jonathan Cape to Michael Joseph. He had met Joseph some years earlier and they took to each other instantly. They found they had many interests in common. Having found that Bates was then happy with his publishers, Joseph said 'Then we'll forget the matter. But if you ever should change your mind will you remember that, of all our young authors, it is you that I would like to publish most?'¹

Many critics regard the short story as Bates's best medium and throughout his life he was prolific in this genre. His first collection, *Day's End and Other Stories* was published in 1928. It was followed by *The Black Boxer: Tales* (1932), *The Woman who had Imagination* (1934), *Cut and Come Again* (1935), *Something Short and Sweet* (1937), *The Flying Goat* (1939) and many others. I loved reading these stories on the train to work. Each story engages your attention quickly and lifts you into its world. I found it necessary to pause a while after each story so as not to lose the effect it had built.

For book collectors like me the short stories have proved to be the most exciting in the search for rarities. Many single stories were published as signed limited editions by private presses like Golden Cockerel and Corvinus. In my early collecting days I remember seeing copies of *The Story Without an End* and *Sally Go Round the Moon* in a bookshop in Richmond, Yorkshire, while on holiday. Each was a signed limited edition published by the White Owl Press in 1932, limited to 130 and 150 copies respectively. They were priced at £50 each but my budget was more limited in those days so I let them pass. I later had to pay over £100 each to add these two items to my collection.

In 1990 Peter Eads, a retired policeman, wrote an excellent bibliographical study of H. E. Bates, published by St Paul's Bibliographies. It listed all the books, plays, pamphlets, short stories, essays, articles etc. This was extremely helpful to the collector, though it showed me I was still very far from completing my own collection. I learnt that some of the limited editions had been issued with different formats, bindings, papers etc., some limited to as few as fifteen

1. See the second volume of Bates's autobiography, *The Blossoming World* (London: Michael Joseph, 1971, p. 117).

copies. At first I tried to convince myself that I did not need all the variants, but collectors are completists and when one of the very scarce copies became available the temptation was too much. Soon my upper ceiling was raised to £100, then £200, then £500+.

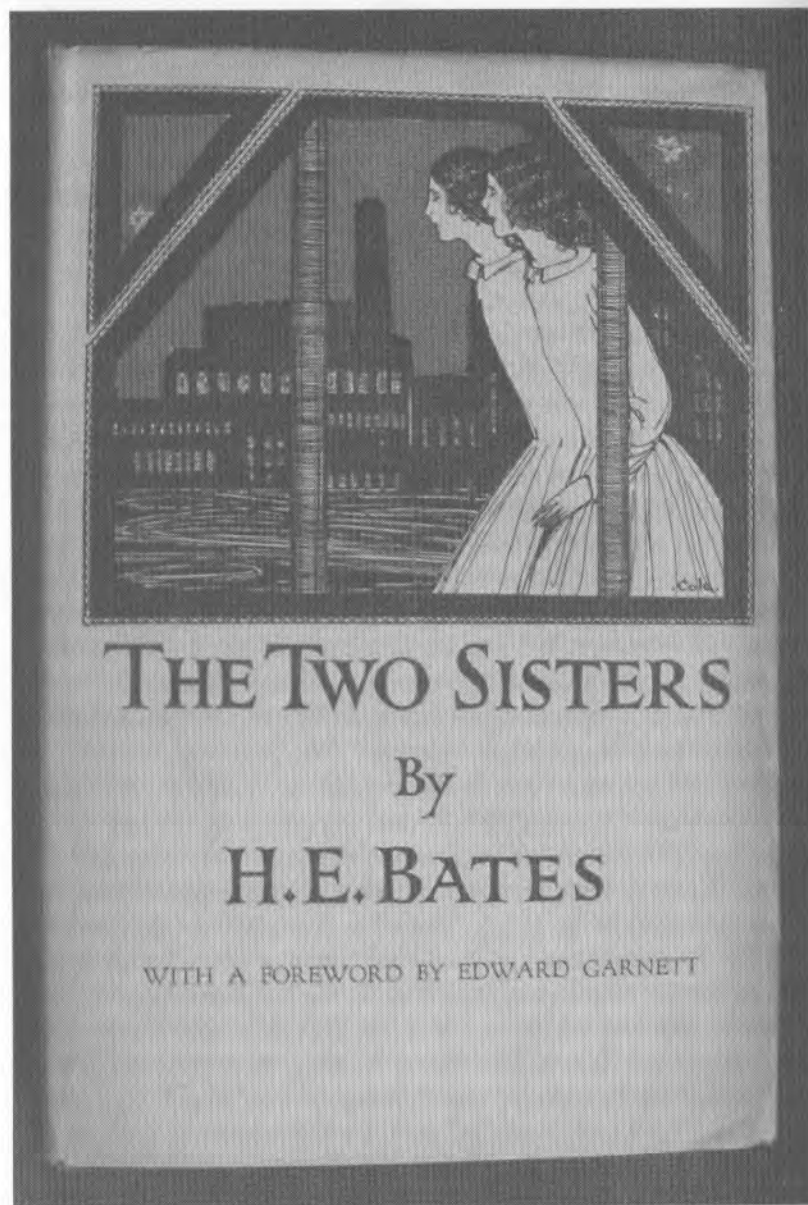
Bates's first published work was a play, *The Last Bread*, issued by the Labour Publishing Company in 1926. It is a slim paper-bound book of twenty pages. The copy in my collection is inscribed by Bates 'Warning from H. E. Bates. I can't think why you have bought this dreadful work; and still more I can't think why I wrote it'. He followed it with one of his best books, *The Two Sisters*. (see page [36]). Interestingly, the publishers, Jonathan Cape, wrote to him as 'Miss Bates', perhaps assuming that only a woman could have written so perceptively about the central female characters. His next two novels, *Catherine Foster* (1929) and *Charlotte's Row* (1931) were, in addition to the trade versions, published in signed limited editions of 50 and 100 copies respectively. The limited *Catherine Foster* was bound in green buckram but I acquired a few years ago a copy bound in blue and inscribed by Bates 'I have seen only one other copy in blue and that I have myself. The rest are in green, and not, I think half as charming as this. And so I give it my blessing!' The limited *Charlotte's Row* is a beautifully-bound book in quarter brown leather with marbled sides and gilt lettering.

In 1927 two stories, *The Spring Song* and *In View of the Fact That*, were published together by E. Archer in paper wrappers and in two formats, both signed and numbered. One was of 100 copies and the other of just 25. Interestingly, this is the only signed limited edition also published in the U.S.A., limited to fifty and ten copies respectively. Two years later, in 1929, a collection of short stories, *Seven Tales and Alexander*, was published by the Scholartis Press. It was limited to 1,000 copies but only the first fifty were signed and numbered and these had a different binding. *Mrs Esmond's Life* was published by E. Lahr in 1931. 300 copies were bound in yellow buckram with just twenty in black. I was fortunate to find one of these black-bound rarities early in my collecting. There is a further large paper edition of 50 copies bound in green with a page of the original manuscript bound in.

I mentioned earlier the two White Owl Press publications, *Sally Go Round the Moon* and *The Story Without an End and the Country Doctor*. Each was published in a trade edition together with two signed limited editions. These were limited to 130 and 150 copies respectively, with numbers 1–21 and 1–25 printed on hand-made paper and bound in yellow and orange vellum. The latter also had a sheet of the original manuscript of 'The Country Doctor' inserted. I found that even the trade edition of *Sally Go Round the Moon* had further interest when I found a copy with a variant binding and collation. I contacted Peter Eads but he had no knowledge of this.

I also contacted Peter about another book I had acquired – a copy of *A Threshing Day* (1931). In his bibliography he lists two limited editions, one of 300 copies bound in blue buckram, the other of twenty-five copies bound in parchment and printed on Japanese vellum. My copy of the latter is numbered A26 which made me doubt the number of copies. Amongst other signed limited editions are *The Hessian Prisoner* (1930), *The Tree* (1930), *The Black Boxer* (1932) and *The Duet* (1935). The last, unusually, came with a dust-wrapper. Much later, in 1952, a limited edition of 100 copies of *The Country of White Clover* was produced.

In 1935 Bates wrote a lovely book, *Flowers and Faces*, which was published by the Golden Cockerel Press with wood-engravings by John Nash. Peter Eads lists two versions, with 326 copies in all. Most are bound in quarter green morocco with marbled cloth sides, but a very limited edition of just six was printed on vellum. I last saw a copy sell at auction for £1,600 and now wish I had tried to buy it. When will another come along? I discovered a third version of the book when I acquired a Golden Cockerel prospectus. It mentioned that some copies had been bound in full leather. I subsequently acquired a copy and found that sixty had been bound in this way. Two other books by Bates were published by Golden Cockerel: *A German Idyll* (1932), limited to 307 copies and illustrated by Lynton Lamb, and *The House with the Apricot and Two Other Tales* (1933), limited to 300 copies with wood-engravings by Agnes Miller Parker. The additional attraction of the illustrations in these two books has undoubtedly increased their appeal to collectors. Agnes Miller Parker



Dust-jacket of *The Two Sisters* (1926) (original printed in black, brown and blue on cream paper)

also illustrated two highly respected and loved books of country essays by Bates, *Through the Woods* (1936) and *Down the River* (1937). Each has recently been reprinted, fifty years after they first appeared. There is also a 1987 edition of the latter with illustrations by Peter Partington.

Among the stars in my Bates collection are copies of the very scarce signed limited editions published by the Corvinus Press, *I am not Myself* (1939, see opposite) and *The Beauty of the Dead and One Other Short Story* (1941). Thirty-five copies of the former were printed in hand-set 18-point Corvinus Light type on a parchment paper made by Batchelor. They were bound in quarter green morocco with fine cream linen boards patterned in brown and olive green. There were just twenty copies of the latter, set in 13-point Times New Roman and printed on a blue 'Thistlebloom' paper made in America. Copies were bound in quarter dark blue buckram with blue paper sides patterned with the Corvinus Press device. Both are truly wonderfully-produced books.

Whilst Bates's early books were often set in the Northamptonshire countryside of his childhood, he is often referred to as a Kentish author. He and his family moved to Little Chart in Kent following his marriage in 1931, and there he converted a granary into a comfortable home. The immense popularity of the 'Darling Buds of May' books, both when they first appeared in the late 1950s and perhaps even more so following the television series starring David Jason, Pam Ferris and Catherine Zeta-Jones, was something of a surprise to many who knew his works. Whilst there is humour in the characterisations within some of his short stories, the *Darling Buds of May* was an inspiration. The principal character, Pop Larkin, is a lovable rogue with strong family values but a disregard of most laws and, of course, the Inland Revenue. In all, the family appeared in five novels, the others being, *A Breath of French Air*, *When the Green Woods Laugh*, *A Little of what You Fancy* and *O to be in England*. It is a sign of a good writer and of Bates's versatility that 1950s comedy can be so popular today.

Bates loved his garden in the county known as the 'Garden of England' and this love is reflected in a number of serious gardening

I AM NOT MYSELF



H. E. BATES

Title-page of *I am not Myself* (1939) (reduced from
280 × 190 mm, device by Berthold Wolpe)

books. *The Seasons and the Gardener* (1940) was written for children with illustrations by C. F. Tunnicliffe. *Flower Gardening* (1950) is a slim booklet illustrated by Joan Hassall. Towards the end of his career he wrote *A Love of Flowers* (1971) and *A Fountain of Flowers* (1974). *In the Heart of the Country* (1942) is another book illustrated by Tunnicliffe. It is a favourite of mine with its picture of Kent oast houses on the dust-wrapper.

Two unusual books in any Bates collection are *The Tinkers of Elstow* (1946) and *Fawley Achievement* (1951). The former is the story of the Royal Ordnance factory during the Second World War. The first edition is bound in full dark blue calf in a limited issue of 300 copies, each numbered and signed by both Bates and the illustrator, Randolph Schwabe. There is also a trade edition in maroon cloth. *Fawley Achievement* is one of the hardest to find. It has paper covers and is quarto in size. It took me many years to find a copy.

To a collector the breadth, volume and scarcity of Bates's output present a massive challenge. Some of his most popular books can easily be found in first edition for under £20. Many of his early books, however, are very hard to find in dust-wrappers and command prices in excess of £100. I started my collection twenty years ago by searching in second-hand bookshops and at book fairs before enlisting the help of a specialist book dealer. The latter helped me find many of the scarcer items. All this, of course, was before the coming of the Internet, which provides much easier access for book collectors. When I took early retirement last year I used the knowledge I had acquired as a collector to develop a little book-dealing business with, naturally, H. E. Bates as a main interest. I would advise any collector starting up to determine a budget for book purchases and to aim for books in at least very good condition. By using the Internet you can acquire books quickly and assess relative values, but it is not as much fun as finding a book you have been searching for on a bookseller's shelf.

There are so many rarities in the Bates canon to stimulate the collector's interest. Four Christmas cards carry poems by Bates and are highly sought after. *Song For December* (1928) was signed by Bates in a limited edition of 150 copies. *Christmas 1930* comes in at least

four different formats to excite the collector further. *Holly and Sallow* (1931) was printed in a signed limited edition of 100 copies, folded into six pages from a single sheet. *Christmas 1949* was not a limited edition, but I have yet to see a copy.

During the five years Peter Eads spent researching his bibliography he learned that Bates and a group of friends had hoped to publish a collected edition of his poetry in 'a handsome limited edition'. In 1990 Peter achieved this ambition when he published *Give Them Their Life* in an edition of 1,000 copies, each signed by Eads, Bates's son Richard (who provided a foreword) and the calligrapher and illustrator Lynne Evans.

Bates's autobiography covers three books, *The Vanished World* (1969), *The Blossoming World* (1971) and *The World in Ripeness* (1972). He mentions in passing that some of the manuscripts of his early short stories were sold to collectors. I will always remember the day I walked into a London bookshop and the proprietor said, 'I have something here for the H. E. Bates collector who has everything'. It was the manuscript of the short story 'Nina'. It was in a contemporary brown folder within a slipcase that had lettered in gilt on the front cover 'Unpublished Story - Nina - By H. E. Bates' and 'MSS: H. E. Bates' on the spine. This story was subsequently published in the collection *Day's End* (1928). I am delighted to have these twelve pages of lined paper, heavily corrected, in the hand of this great writer. I later acquired two further manuscripts. One is 'An Autobiographical Note' of 1939 which I think must have been for the collection *Under Thirty*, published by Rich and Cowan in that year. The other is of a poem 'Ode to Midsummer 1973', written not long before his death in January 1974.

These would be gems in any collection, but the collector must decide how far to go - the hundreds of articles and short stories in periodicals and collections, signed copies of every book, American editions with their attractive dust-wrappers and sometimes different titles? At least collectors of H. E. Bates will rarely reach that anticlimax of having everything. I remember walking along the banks of the Seine in Paris some years ago, glancing at the book stalls, when the picture on the cover of a wartime publication caught my



Front wrapper of *Frères d'Armes* ([1945])
(original printed in monochrome and yellow)

eye. It was entitled *Frères d'Armes* and was a French language edition of *There's Freedom in the Air*, written anonymously by Bates in 1944. For just 30 Francs I had a Bates item that few collectors knew existed. Perhaps there are still others out there ...