How Writers Work

By LOUISE MORGAN

H. E. BATES: A Young Man Who Prefers the Country

"Everyman" readers will already have recognized in H. E. Bates not only a brilliant short story writer but a critic of shrewd discernment and uncompromising independence of judgment. At twenty-six he has earned distinction and is plainly one of the coming men of English letters

H. E. Bates in the garden of his house near Ashford, Kent

AN important thing to keep in mind about H. E. Bates is his youth. He is by far the youngest of our young novelists who count. He is only twenty-six, but he has published three full-length novels and three volumes of short stories; and for every novel he has sent to the publishers he has written another, for every short story two or three, and destroyed them. He has as yet offered us only a coin or two out of what promises to be an inexhaustible mint.

If you want to see him, you will have to take a rather awkward journey into the country, for he comes to town only once or twice a year, staying barely long enough to see his publisher and an editor or two, and wearing all the while a captive air as if he could hardly wait for the moment of escape from London.

You go to Ashford, in Kent, and from there you take a 'bus that rattles in every bone and squeaks in every nerve of its aged frame, but you hardly notice because it jerks you up such lovely hills and down into such beautiful valleys.

At the bottom of a peculiarly ravishing hillside it stops by cross-roads under a cathedral-dome of trees. A young man with no hat and a big briar stick is standing near the signpost.

You know him at once from his photographs, though he is slighter than you expected. His eyes are blue, his hair sand-colour with a curl in it. He smiles shyly, and warns you that you have a fair walk ahead. But with fragrant air in your town-polluted lungs and a twisty road billowing with April green, and a sky so soft and near that you feel with a good jump you could touch it, you don't mind how long the walk is.

"Well, then," he says, "we'll go a bit about and get back in time for a cup of tea. It really is lovely country."

So on you go, by a farm and an oast-house or two, under a long line of pines to a birch-wood dark red with breaking buds, with bluebells already breaking through the dead bracken, old gorse-bushes blossoming, stretches of primroses and the first pale anemones. The North Downs, thick with woods, lie beyond.

It is easy to understand why this young man with the strong stride and bronzed skin of the countryman should have written unsympathetically of *Magnolia Street* as he has in the review columns of this paper. No more different personalities could be imagined than his own and Louis Golding's. He is reserved, speaking only after thought, in the light voice of one whose words are of less account than the idea behind them; Louis Golding pours himself out in legions of sparkling phrases that outreach each other in high spirits and inconsequence until he stops for want of breath. Bates is of the soil, concerned with the peasant whose struggle is much the same to-day as it was in the time of Hesiod; Golding is the cosmopolitan, writing of the shopkeepers of Doomington—the peasants of the commercial age.

Even their hands are different. Bates' sensitive and mobile fingers are roughened with digging in the earth and carrying stones for his new wall; Golding's are less the hands of a worker than of an appraiser—they are soft urban hands accustomed to touching *décor*, fabrics, goblet-stems. These two human beings typify two sides of the creative impulse as far apart in spirit as the two sides of Magnolia Street.

It is easy to understand, too, once you have seen him, why Bates' reviewing is so unlike the typical reviewing of the day. He says just what he thinks of the work, and the considerations of back-scratching or venality, which weigh so heavily with the average reviewer, simply do not exist for him. Here is at least one man who stands courageously clear of the cliques and coteries, and always will do so.

At the moment he is completely absorbed in revising the new novel which he began in the late summer, hating the work, but sticking to it.

"Conrad's recipe was to write while you're hot, and correct in cold fits," he said. "Revisions are done weeks after, when you are thoroughly cold about it, and hating it. You hate your work when it's finished."

Then, as if unconsciously voicing his hatred, he added, "I couldn't get down to work this morning. My hands and feet were cold. You can't work if your blood stops in your feet!"

The heroine of his new novel is a woman, and the story carries her from youth to old age.

"The land is a character in the book, too," he said, "a different thing from what is meant by the earth. Country people mean a very special thing when they talk about the land. They work on the land. In a way it is the central idea of the book. Nothing survives except the land. It is a character much as the river was a character in *The Two Sisters*.

"I felt very happy about the beginning of this book. Often I go thrashing around the point instead of going straight for it. This time I got the tone of it at once. I was in the thick of it the moment I sat down to it, went shooting off and wrote the whole first chapter in one morning. Sometimes I wrote as much as 10,000 words a week. Perhaps it's because I've been wanting to write this for ten years, and it's slowly been working itself out."

"Had you made notes on it?"

"I used to take a lot of notes, but I found that when the time came I never had any use for them. So I don't take notes now."

"How did you write your first book?"

"I was working in a warehouse at thirty bob a week. I had a certain amount of time on my hands, and it was autumn. Autumn is the best time of the year for working, I think. I had the book done before Christmas. I rewrote it after Christmas. I was seventeen. That particular book never got published, and the MS. is destroyed with a lot of others. I chucked it because I thought it was no good. I've always been super-critical."

"Were you encouraged to go on?"

"Not much. My family were suspicious—rightly so, perhaps. I was never given much sympathy until my first cheque came. Then I was regarded as not quite so impractical, after all. I was even allowed a 'room of my own' to write in. That was being very broad-minded, for my people were simple, country people, and there was no literary tradition in the family."

"Did it take you long to work out your technique?"

"I was always experimenting. I am still experimenting. The texture or pattern of each

story is a thing in itself, quite different from any other. Like water, each story finds its own level. You also have a different rhythm for each story. That's what often holds me up: I have to be certain of the rhythm before I begin. It must change with the atmosphere or tempo of each tale. I find myself almost always swinging to the minor note. I don't know why."

"Do you know how a story is going to end before you begin it?"

"At first the whole thing seems clear before me. Later on it is not so clear. Well, there is a certain amount of blind guesswork about it. Someone once said that a certain quality of stupidity was a good thing in a writer. I believe that the more you rely on your instincts the surer you are. Take Lawrence, for instance. Whenever he preached he became self-conscious, and he was more like a Salvation Army man holding forth at a street corner than an artist. But when he trusted to his instincts he was all right."

"Is writing easy for you?"

"Never. If you're putting yourself into it, it's bound to wear you down in the end. Writing is like running a race. It's never easy, and towards the end you have to pull on your reserves and make a final, desperate effort."

"Do you keep at it pretty steadily?"

"Arnold Bennett once said a wise thing more or less to this effect: 'If only young writers would work more regularly, and leave off while they were still hungry to write, it would be a good deal better for them in the long run.' I write every morning from nine until lunch. Occasionally in the afternoon. Never in the evening, and never will, God being my help! You ought to learn to save yourself for the next day."

"When you've finished a novel, do you stop work for a while?"

"You must, because the more you write the more you find to write about. Ideas germinate ideas. In the thick of a novel, writing 2,000 words a day, I get ideas for a dozen short stories in a morning. You can't keep it up. So you stop working, and stop getting ideas."

"Can you indicate in any way how ideas come to you?"

"I'm afraid it's not a conscious process. I've gone to bed without the speck of an idea in my head, and the next morning I've sat down and written a whole story out before lunch. On the other hand, I've worked for months and months and months on a situation without knowing how to resolve it. There's a missing link somewhere. Then suddenly it all falls together, I don't know how."

"Character is, of course, very important to you."

"I identify myself with my characters—too much so sometimes. I remember when I was ten years old going into the barn with the farm-hands. The boy became an old man himself, spitting like an old man, using an old man's words. When I describe a man mowing in a field I feel I am the man mowing. At the same time I always try to remain absolutely detached, never to intrude my own opinions or make any personal comment. I think I am succeeding gradually in doing this. I am becoming more tolerant without losing warmth and intensity.

"I've had some rather extraordinary experiences by the way with some of my characters, especially those in the short stories. I've actually seen some of the characters in real life *after* I had described them in a story. In *The Tinker's Donkey* the man has a bright blue scarf and he's bow-legged. Next day after writing the story I met on the road that very man, bow legs and blue scarf and all. Even more remarkable was the woman in *Blossoms* who wanted her son to be a singer. I used to see her taking her son to school occasionally, and finally, knowing nothing more about her, I wrote her story in *Blossoms*. A week after its appearance I discovered that all I had imagined about her life and the boy's was true. An odd business! which I don't attempt to explain at all."

We had by now come out on a small common which was edged by remarkably tall, finely grown trees. There was no sign of life except for a young girl in a print frock leaning over a gate.

"That's my wife," he said. "And that's our granary."

From the photographs on this page one may see what has been done with the old granary. It remains intact, but windows and rooms have been fitted in so as to use the fine old beams to the best advantage. The work was finished last summer in time for the wedding. Since then, Bates has been working hard making the garden, and has among other things built a very neat fence and gate out of chestnut-faggots which were once the foundation of a haystack.

His study is a tiny corner room. It has a wood fire, an easy chair, a writing table, and bookshelves. Near the fireplace stands what might be a woodbox. It is crammed full of MSS.

We had tea in the long, sunny living-room. Mrs. Bates seemed to have produced it by conjuring, so unobtrusively did it appear. There it suddenly was, on a small table drawn up near the log fire. There were hot muffins, hot scones and currant cake, all made by herself, and the tea was perfectly brewed. Bright chintzes fluttered at the casement-windows, flowers glowed against the age-darkened granary beams, and the intervals of talk were filled with the hum of burning wood and the songs of thrushes and warblers.

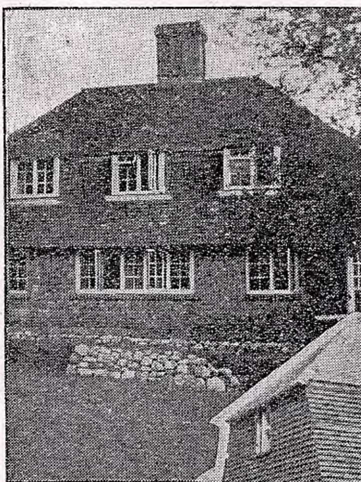
"Wood is frightfully cheap here," he said. "So we burn heaps of it. Good oak is only 8s. a cord. A willow log smoulders all day and you get no heat from it. There's no life in it. Last week we had an oak log that burned all night and was afire the next morning. We had a fire for breakfast."

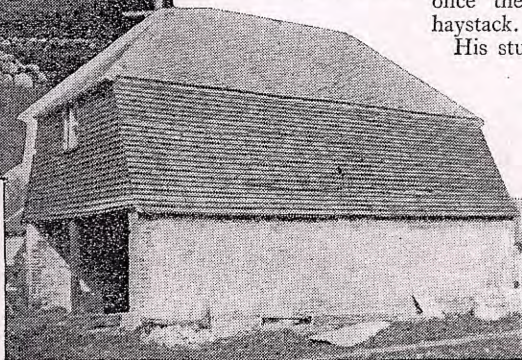
Within the ingle-nook on a low table was a pile of flower catalogues.

"That's the kind of thing I go off the deep end about," he said. "It's my favourite kind of reading. I'm mad about Alpine gardening. One of these days I shall give up writing novels, and give all my time instead to publishing obscure little treatises on the *Shortia Galacifolia*, or the *Lewisia Hooperi*! That's what I shall probably end up by doing, grubbing about with Chinese primroses, an old, old man."

But while he is obviously enchanted with his garden and his granary and all the things which a quiet deep-rooted life has to offer him, one feels he is at the same time strangely detached from it all.

Countryman he may be, but he is artist first, and one becomes aware even during a brief visit of a ruthless urgency in the gaze of his blue eyes that see far beyond the comforts and beauties of the day. There is what D. H. Lawrence would have called a "hard core" in him that yields to nothing, not even the eternal land.





Here is the old granary which Mr. Bates converted into a house last summer. Rooms were planned not to interfere with the fine old beams.

A Grain of Sand

THIS strange and splendid place,
This globe of giant lands and soundless seas
Is but a speck, they say, in stellar space,
A grain of sand in stark immensities.
Yet stolidly we stand
All undismayed upon our grain of sand:
We wage unwearying strife
With winds that walk beyond the bounds of life;
We harness hidden, elemental powers
And make their music ours.

Our world and we
Are wondrous as the farthest mystery:
We cannot trace on the celestial plan
Aught of such loveliness as here we see
Where, in the dew-filled lamp of twilight glows
The cool flame of a rose:
Were all the stars strung on a single rope
Their circle could not span
The dream dominions in the mind of man,
Nor could their fires outburn the eternal spark
Of wistful, human hope
That flickers on when faith and love lie dead
And overhead
Is steel bound silence and abysmal dark.
The heavens, they say, hold wonders without end
Beyond our puny power to comprehend,
Yet stolidly we stand
All undismayed upon our grain of sand.

C. A. MUNRO