

**BBC1  
AUTUMN SEASON**

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# RadioTimes



## Regency buck

Peter Egan plays the 'Prince Regent', heir to a kingdom, in BBC1's new eight-part dramatisation of his life and loves. Inside: the royal affair with Mrs Fitzherbert



**Love Story –  
A Moment in Time  
Tuesday, Thursday  
BBC1**

H. E. Bates is probably best-known for his tales of country people, their loves and hardships – reflecting a structured way of life, which, sadly, Bates felt, came to an end with the Second World War. But Bates also wrote with uncompromising realism about the horrors of war, and, as late as the 1960s, used it as the background for his novel 'A Moment in Time' – the story of a young girl who falls in love with a Pilot Officer – dramatised in four parts over the next two weeks as the first 'Love Story' in a new drama series. Here SIMON BLOW visits Little Chart in Kent, where H. E. Bates's widow Madge talks to him about her husband

**H.E. Bates  
in love  
and war**

IT IS RARE that a writer finds himself the perfect niche in wartime. But, however tough the situation, most writers have, somehow, found a way of using it for their own creativity. Out of the last war came, notably, Henry Green's *Caught*, Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, Graham Greene's *The Ministry of Fear* and not least the Air Force stories of H. E. Bates and his novel, *Fair Stood the Wind for France*. But of these writers it was H. E. Bates who was fortunate enough to find the perfect niche.

When war was declared in September 1939, H. E. Bates was living the pastoral existence he had always preferred. Ten years before, he had moved to Little Chart, a tranquil Kent hamlet made up of a broad village green, a handful of houses and uninterrupted acres of farmland. It held all that Bates, countryman and traditionalist, could want from life. From his own converted barn spread miles of sleepy Kent meadows. Then, in the summer of 1940, following the uneasy months of the 'phony'

war, came the Battle of Britain. Placed in the vortex of it, H. E. Bates became an eyewitness to the first, most devastating onslaught of that war to be fought over British soil.

Enlistment into the RAF had begun with a call to heroics, but the Air Ministry soon realised that truth was more important, and H. E. Bates was commissioned into the RAF with the specific charge to write stories that told the grim background of the battle in the air. Bates's job was to get the fighter teams to talk after a campaign, and this was not easy since, once debriefing was done, all they wanted was rest. But, with a special drink allowance from the Ministry, H. E. Bates would take them out, start them talking and break down their reserve. Most of them were not much more than 20, and Bates, at 35, was thought old, so they called him 'Grandad'. But 'Grandad' did well, and drew out of them enough to make several volumes of stories published under the pseudonym of 'Flying Officer X'. The stories were read and admired, and as an offshoot of this wartime work he wrote the widely-praised *Fair Stood the Wind for France*. Later, in the 60s, he returned to the war and wrote *A Moment in Time*.

What impressed Bates as he made friends with the men and heard their tales was the length of their endurance. Day after day comrades lost comrades, or were burnt and maimed out of all recognition and yet, over it all, these men put on a happy-go-lucky cheerfulness. It was this duality of horror and the brave face that Bates markedly recorded, and that he should have coupled these aspects was perhaps typical of the man. Today, Madge Bates, his widow, says that H. E. – as his family call him – was an optimist. It was an optimism derived from pleasure in simple things: trees, bird-song and flowers, or the smile on another's face.

Since Bates's death in 1974, Madge Bates has continued to live at Little Chart and when I went to see her she told me how H. E. liked to write out-of-doors. I was shown the small, wooden pavilion where H. E. would sit and write looking out to his garden and the great turkey oaks beyond, that signified England to him. It was here that he wrote his ➤➤➤ 8



The flowers of youth and first love preserved in 'A Moment in Time'



## BBC 1 AUTUMN SEASON



*icer Miles Bannister, known as Splodge (Robin Davies), and Elizabeth Cartwright (Alison Elliott) in H. E. Bates's wartime romance*



6 ← Ma and Pa Larkin novels, and it was here too that Bates wrote many of his Air Force stories. Often he would be granted leave to return to Little Chart specially to write. He always found it difficult to write away from home.

One is tempted to think that the need for an idyll to write against could have a detrimental effect on a novelist's work, but too many of Bates's stories and novels disprove this. He could be uncompromising in his realism, and *A Moment in Time* has no shirking of sadness. A lot of it, Mrs Bates says, is a true account. There was a girl, like Elizabeth in the book, who fell in love and married a young pilot one day, only to hear of his death the next. But, of course, it was no isolated case; it happened all the time.

*A Moment in Time* tells of

the collapse of much that was dearest to Bates. There is the requisition of the big house, foreshadowing its demise; the brutal severance of youthful love; and the calm flow of a recognisable social order replaced by uncertainty. Hope lies in the resilience of youth, and in the tenderness of their love. 'He was always moved by the love of young people,' Mrs Bates recalls, 'and in particular if it was hard come by.' With its mixture of innocence, resilience and courage, *A Moment in Time* is Bates writing at his most instinctive.

The Second World War was a kind of ideal testing ground to H. E. Bates, and it was doubtless a reason why he reverted to it as late as the 60s for this love story. But he used it again too because, creatively, the war continued to disturb

him long after it was over. It had done away with the unspoken country values that were security to him. Most of the large houses and their estates around Little Chart have gone now, and Bates had lived for that muted, timeless exchange that spoke manor house, farms, labourers and village. He needed a society where he knew precisely where each foot was going.

So how did H. E. Bates, old-style patriot and countryman, cope in a changed, less agreeable world? Before his death he must have known that the world to which he was committed could never come back. 'He put a blanket over it all, to an extent,' Madge Bates replied. Her reply shed light on the Larkin novels. From his writing bower H. E. Bates had constructed his fantasy of

Cockney wit and extroverts living above the law in a rustic junkyard to replace that piece in his imagination which he knew to be dead. 'He liked to think of himself as a bit of a Pop Larkin,' Madge Bates said.

But at Little Chart it is also easy to appreciate how the worst aspects of modern life could be ignored with indifference. The large houses in the neighbourhood may have gone, but the village green and its dotted houses built of Kentish stone remain. Madge Bates can still take the same walks that her husband wrote into his books, and it seemed right that to the end he had held his values. Resilience was as strong in Bates as in his characters; an attitude he had once summed up by a line from D. H. Lawrence - 'Look! We have come through!' ●