

*The Vanished World* is the first volume of H. E. Bates's autobiography, a deeply nostalgic account of his childhood in the neighbourhood of the Nene and Ouse valleys (abounding in village names such as Newton Blossomville and, alas, tuberculosis), with his shoemaker grandfather who inspired in him his deep love of the countryside, and his honest, upright, nonconformist father. Like Miss Bagnold, his ambition lay from an early age in one direction only, helped by the appalling alternative, the boot factory:

I used to go to this dark, ugly, dreary, noisome, thunderous bedlam of industry with a sense of dread: not dread, I think, of its sheer drabness, its stench of leather and gas-light or its racket of presses and whining scream of machines, but a terrible dread at the half-conscious notion that one day I too might have to work in it.

To him, too, success came quickly but without, it would seem, much mellowing

effect. The second half of the book is sadly pugnacious and humourless. 'I run a mile from intellectual swank words such as "esoteric" and "proliferate"'. Oh dear! Poor old 'esoteric': such a *useful* adjective! Content to misspell Harold Nicolson's name, he takes sideswipes at Shakespeare (*The Tempest* is 'that messy last infirmity of a noble mind'), Henry James ('that most elephantine of bores'), *Women in Love* ('grossly overpraised') and *War and Peace*. Poverty denied him Cambridge and leads him on to the following bizarre statement:

I like to think that Renoir, Sisley, Cézanne, and Toulouse-Lautrec went to neither Oxford nor Cambridge, Winchester nor Eton.

Of course they didn't, but wouldn't it have been fun if they *had* ('I want to see Toulouse-Lautrec in my study immediately after prayers.').