Happy memories

H. E. BATES: *The Vanished World.* 189pp. Michael Joseph. £2 10s.

Many years ago, Wystan Auden remarked that to write one's autobiography is, for a writer, to live on capital. But, having published sixty-five volumes in the course of forty-four years, H. E. Bates may be assumed to have invested his experience to its full imaginative extent. Now, at the age of sixty-four, he is looking back to examine what provided the soil and climate for his novels and short stories, his inheritance and what he made of it.

The Vanished World is the first volume taking him from birth (wrapped like David Copperfield in a caul) to the annus mirabilis, 1925, when at the age of twenty he received a letter from Jonathan Cape accepting his first novel, *The Two Sisters,* addressed to Miss Bates. As the title of the first volume implies, it is the revocation of a way of life rather than the author's own, though he cannot help recalling that vanished world with the vision of his own childhood and youth.

The men in those early years were more important than the women. If his paternal grandfather had done the right thing by his paternal grandmother, his name would have been, like the author of *Sons and Lovers,* Herbert Lawrence. As it was, Mr. Lawrence, the proprietor of a Northamptonshire boot factory, never acknowledged his grandson and H. E. Bates grew up with the maternal side of his parents: a grandfather who was one of the last great bespoke shoemakers, whose largest order was for Little Tich and his smallest for a midget dancer. When bespoke shoemaking packed up, this grandfather started a small-holding on back-breaking clay soil, while his son-in-law, Bates père, laboured miserably, thriftily, and Wesleyan methodistically in a Rushden boot factory.

Mr. Bates acknowledges his debt to his grandfather for his easy companionship, his unreligious joy in life, and to his upright father with his small library and reverence for learning. Both of them contributed to his upbringing, the father more by sacrifice and the grandfather more by opening up secrets of nature denied to other children in a small town that was nevertheless industrial.

Few children can have been given such a sense of the past as Mr. Bates was by the gnomic utterances of his grandfather, who "would pull up the horse and say with solemn and mysterious emphasis: 'Masterpiece of man. Ploughboy. Used to scare the crows down there'". The masterpiece of man was Archbishop Chichele, who had like Bates's grandfather started life as a ploughboy in that field. "It was not for some considerable time that I discovered that some six hundred years separated the two local plough-boys."

This wonderful spanning of time gave Mr. Bates the sense of tradition and Englishness, reinforced by being born in the very centre of the island. It must also have enlarged the areas of possibility. If Chichele went to the see of Canterbury, where could not H. E. Bates go? His grandfather hoped he would be a Minister of the Crown, his father a minister of God.

Bates, though naturally a bright boy, took little interest in anything but sport and art at his grammar school until, at the end of the First World War, instead of a schoolmistress he had as English teacher a veteran called Edward Kirby, who said: "Write me an essay on Shakespeare. I mean from your own point of view. Don't tell me he was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1564. I already know that."

It was the first time he had been asked to do something in his own way and when he had done it, he knew that he was going to be a writer. Many writers have felt a similar sudden sense of vocation, almost as a visitation of the Holy Spirit. Where Mr. Bates's vocation differed, if he is to be believed, is that it was a translation of his love of painting into words. Colour became language. Whereas many writers of fiction believe that they are finding in their work a truth beneath appearance, Mr. Bates thought, and still thinks, that by the exercise of imagination he has made up lies that are truer than ordinary truth.

This is the clue to both the strength and weakness of his writing. He is a lyricist in prose, whose short stories at their best have the perfection of Richard Lovelace or Thomas Herrick. Among the discoveries of his youth he includes Turgenev's *Sportsman's Sketches,* but *Fathers and Children, Rudin* or *On the Eve* seem to have made no impression on him, because he is less an explorer of the human situation than a painter of the human scene. And how excellently he can depict!

It is the coachbuilder and his art that I most vividly recall. The essence of it all is as remote from our jet-driven world as the chariot-making yards of Rome or Baalbeck [*sic*], where the underground stables are huge and expansive enough to contain a fleet of a thousand buses.

But here, in this quiet, sycamore-shaded yard and street, there were neither chariots nor buses, but only everyday vehicles of both great beauty and utility, all built lightly but for strength, spokes and shafts and rails all varnished and fined down until they looked not unlike the moulded and twisted sticks of rock—spit-rock, we always called it from the habit of its makers of spitting on their hands as they pulled at the malleable ropes of sugar—we bought at feasts and fairs. Traps, buggies, milk-floats, brakes, butchers' carts, bakers' carts, wagons, wagonettes, landaus, cabs, flies, carriages of ultra elegance: all were there, finished, half-finished, shining with paint and varnish, drying in the sun. No other craft, I suppose, ever contributed so much elegance and colour to the streets of this century as that of the coach-builder. Red, blue, yellow, green, gold, black and even white: the dashing vehicles, still chariot-like, still had the streets as their own. The careering traps, drawn by high-steppers, the comforting beer-barrel buggies drawn by Shetlands, the vast brewers' drays, the double horse delivery trucks, the charging milk-floats glistening with churns of brass and silver finish and those gracious landaus and wagonettes in which, according to class and income, you rode out to relish the summer air.

Like many a painter, Mr. Bates has his favourite colours: "That the golden days with my grandfather must have been interspersed with dark and dismal ones I have no doubt; but I find it hard to recall." His selective memories are happy and *The Vanished World* is full of "the smell of wood-smoke, the scent of bluebells, cowslips, primroses and the Maiden's Blush, the Turk's Cape lily and the voices of nightingales". Some readers may find these images pour too readily from the author's pen, his country landscapes more reminiscent of Pre-Raphaelite painting than nature; but others will love *The Vanished World* the more for its preternatural lushness.

A flaw is the author's turning sexagenarianally aside at intervals to lambast the youth of today for preferring drugs to street games or John Osborne for not calling his play "Look Back in Self-Pity". A little more thought and less testiness would have suggested revision. And when *The Vanished World* goes into its next impression, Mr. Bates might like to correct pages 158-9. James Hilton published *Lost Horizon* in 1933 before, not after, writing *Goodbye, Mr. Chips.* Though it was well reviewed, it did not go into a second impression until after it won the Hawthornden Prize in 1934. *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* was published in 1934 and was written deliberately to make the money which Hilton thought that *Lost Horizon* should have earned.