

A conservative takes root

H. E. BATES:
The Blossoming World
 181pp. Michael Joseph. £2.50.

The second volume of H. E. Bates's autobiography takes us from the day in January, 1926, when, at the age of twenty, he went to Jonathan Cape to discuss the publication of *The Two Sisters*, a first novel of such sensitivity that its author was thought to be a young lady, up to September, 1941, when Mr. Bates, author of more than 400 short stories, was recruited by the Air Ministry to become the internationally famous Flying Officer X. Like *The Vanishing World*, its delightful predecessor, *The Blossoming World* is the product of an artist deeply conscious of continuity: the continuity of places (the Northamptonshire of his birth and the Kent of his adoption), the continuity of literary tradition, his early masters and his later peers, even the continuity of business association which has led him in forty-five years to have only two publishers.

His is a conservative spirit, which delights in the enrichment of what he finds. The purchase of the Old Granary, Little Chart, near Ashford, and its conversion into a house with a large living room, four bedrooms, study, bathroom and kitchen, was accomplished in 1930 for the sum of £600. He has spent more than forty years there, enriching the house and garden with the pride of a good countryman. His experience in this volume is intensive, rather than extensive. He takes root, and when he makes a friendship, it is firm.

He quotes from what he has already written of Edward Garnett, who remained until death his literary guide, philosopher and friend, damning in his criticism, inspiring in his acclaim. He writes with as great a warmth of David and Ray Garnett, whose grand-sounding Hilton

Hall filled him with anticipations of grandeur until he saw it face to face; of Harriet Cohen, the beautiful pianist who had a tenderness for young writers; of Sir Rupert Hart-Davis, who provided for the younger Cape authors the sympathy and understanding which was lacking in Jonathan Cape and Bob Howard, and of his fellow short-story writers.

The fifteen years covered by this second volume were years as difficult for authors as for the working classes, employed or unemployed. Mr. Bates was one of the best, and certainly the most prolific of the short-story writers of that period. But he tells us that he never received more than £10 for a story. Twice he completed novels which were rejected. Of the failure of the second he writes:

The early conception of a novel or story depends, it often seems to me, on seeing it in the right key. Great geniuses in music often seem to make such choices in their art by some divine instinct. It is by no means so easy in literature, where there are no rules and no fixed set of keys, either minor or major, from which the writer can make his immediate or final choice. The composer knows more or less what something will sound like in C sharp minor or in F major. The writer has no way of knowing any such thing. He must invent his own key. If the key he selects is right then it is likely that his music and its themes will flow from it naturally. If the key he selects is wrong then he is likely to find himself in frustrations and troubles of every kind.

It is now my considered opinion that I chose the wrong key for this novel. In those days, Mr. Bates seemed to find it easier to choose keys for short stories than for novels. Investing two or three objects with symbolic power, he could show a world in a grain of sand and a heaven in a wild flower. The power of his novels was less concentrated. In *Spella Ho*, however, he struck lucky. It was taken by Little, Brown in Boston and he was offered \$5,000 for the

serial rights in *The Atlantic Monthly*. To cut it for serialization, he made his first visit to the United States, where, characteristically, Archibald Ogden, deputed to look after him, became a life-long friend, as a result of Mr. Bates's preference for seeing the Red Sox rather than Harvard.

Mr. Bates, luckily, was not a political writer. The disease which attacked many British writers of the 1930s (diagnosed by Stephen Spender in the lines "Who live under the shadow of a war/What can I do that matters?") did not undermine Mr. Bates's creative power until 1938, when he lectured his American friends on the inevitability of war in Europe. His second rejected novel came from his attempt to respond to this challenge. He had caught the creative impotence which had emasculated fellow writers earlier in the decade in the attempt to stem the tide of war with a rampart of words.

It is his, and our, gain that he was trapped so late in this gin of creative impotence. But even so he had the sense to stick to what he knew. He wrote *The Modern Short Story*, "as an exercise in personal distraction" which ended up as "a critical survey which has been in constant use in schools and universities ever since, on both sides of the Atlantic". He knew that he was not a thinker, an intellectual, but a writer, a man who responded imaginatively to any experience to which he was submitted. And so eventually did the Air Ministry trio who appointed him as writer in residence to the RAF and opened up the skies for him, in a way he promises to tell in volume three, *The World is Ripeness*.

The International Who's Who 1971-72 (1,823pp. Europa. £9.50) has a net increase of more than 800 names over the previous issue of this indispensable reference book.