

LOOKING BACK IN CANDOUR

By REBECCA WEST

Midnight Oil BY V. S. PRITCHETT. Chatto, £2.25.

The Blossoming World BY H. E. BATES. Michael Joseph, £2.50.

BETWEEN 40 and 50 years ago two young men, not known to each other, changed themselves, by taking thought, from passionate readers to persistent writers. Now, by coincidence, they have simultaneously described the process, in what is for each of them the second volume of his autobiography.

The authors could hardly be less alike, but both are candid. V. S. Pritchett, in *Midnight Oil*, gives away the secret that has won him his position as a short-story writer. His strong point is his mastery of the dialogue uttered by people who feel the classic emotions but who are unable to express these in classic form, by reason of some deprivation. They are ill-educated, or cracked, or simply overcome; but the thing gets itself said, the experience is shared in a new and idiosyncratic phrase.

The early part of "Midnight Oil" shows how the youthful Mr. Pritchett trained his ear to catch these self-revelations. With great spirit he emigrated to Paris when he was still a boy, to pick up his living by odd jobs; and there he was attentive to the self-revelations made by expatriate eccentrics and lonely Frenchmen—so lonely that they had time for the foreigners who were his companions.

He was not so good at watching them. His descriptions of people's appearances are too uniformly stylised in the manner of the Phiz illustrations to Dickens. But he has been a virtuosic listener, and a patient one, waiting for the valuable clue.

One of his friends was a German-American painter, a fatigued bore and a graceless lout, given to goading the English boy with the heavy-handed anti-British clichés of that age, which made mock of lords and made the boast, which could not have been more ill-founded, that there were no class differences in the United States. But one day, "with awe and almost affection," he said to the infant Pritchett: "Hold it. You just said an epigram."

What a wealth of good nature lies behind that remark, what humble adoration for the things of the mind, how beautiful a capacity for admiration! One is not surprised that he gave Mr. Pritchett the introduction which set him on the first stage of his literary journey.

Some of the later parts of the book raise doubts regarding Mr. Pritchett's credibility. He de-

picts himself in this volume (as he did in its predecessor, "A Cab at the Door") as the embarrassed but amused child of zany parents, and sometimes it seems as if he has seen himself in this image all his life and for that reason exaggerates the zany quality of men and institutions. But when one comes to his brief but pregnant account of the *New Statesman* 45 years ago, one recognises his respect for facts.

It was like that, this curious organisation which sprang up around, and in spite of, Clifford Sharp; the editor whom Sidney and Beatrice Webb, surely the silliest couple in Christendom, had so mysteriously appointed, in spite of the fact that he was a natural for Fascism, a cause to which he later gave his all.

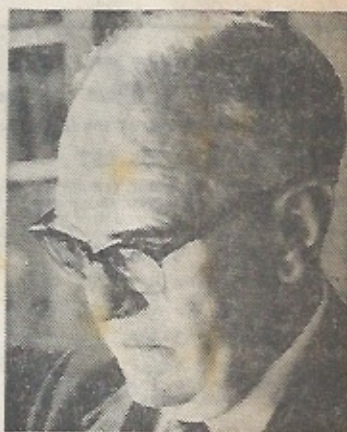
Sharp was, as Mr. Pritchett conveys, a Neanderthal alcoholic, untouched by civilisation, but Mr. Pritchett is not so accurate about the literary editor, Desmond McCarthy. It is untrue that he failed to visit the office for months. He visited it often, though not at hours relevant to the production of the paper, or to such appointments as he made with his contributors.

This was partly because he was governed by a curious fantasy about time, which made him feel that if he had made an engagement for noon on Thursday, he had gone half way to fulfilling the obligation if he sat in his office ready for the interview at six on Wednesday. It was also because, though an honest and often self-sacrificing worker for causes, he was almost wholly preoccupied by his friendships with the more intellectual members of the aristocracy.

Sitting on the terrace and looking down at the great park, he and a group of idealistic peers would work out the most morally elevated terms on which the Irish question could be settled, while, in Great Windmill Street, the editor was deep in sleep, trying to approximate to a sober condition in order that he might dine with Lady Oxford, who had a perverse appetite for his society.

Many of us found our conception of schizophrenia widened and deepened by working for a Socialist paper which had difficulty in going to press because its editor and literary editor attached paramount importance to their obligation to dine with peeresses. Perhaps Mr. Pritchett is right about the world's eccentricity.

H. E. Bates has called his volume *The Blossoming World*,



V. S. PRITCHETT
Mastery of dialogue.



H. E. BATES
Botanical luxuriance of style.

an appropriate title, considering the botanical luxuriance of his talent. He has not so much a style as green fingers, and his books have "habit," as the nurserymen say, rather than formal construction.

He is the most unequal of writers. But in his good years he observed material which escapes others (as in "The Purple Land") and he shows an unfashionable philosophical courage in his refusal to pretend that life is impossible to bear because it is hard to bear.

In his novels this sometimes works, and sometimes it does not. But in his autobiography it appears to have produced agreeable manifestations in his personal life. He had a pleasant way of responding warmly to people who, often flying in the face of circumstance, cast themselves for the traditional romantic roles in an unromantic age.

Harriet Cohen, the pianist, as an exquisitely beautiful young girl, loved to behave as if crowds still mobbed beautiful young women musicians and took the horses out of the shafts and dragged the carriage back to the hotel.

All that was over: taking out the ignition key leads to nothing. But Harriet did her best by picturesque actions in a picturesque setting, and the ungenerous were sour, but Mr. Bates was a grateful audience; as he was to Edward Garnett in his rôle, never to some of us convincing, of a guide to young writers. This is an endearing volume.