

## TO STAND AND STARE

**Down the River.** By H. E. BATES. With eighty-three wood-engravings by AGNES MILLER PARKER. *Gollancz.* 10s. 6d.

The best way to review this book would be by quotation, and the reproduction of a few of the wood-cuts. I know of no other way. But this would be shirking. It is the reviewer's job to come between author and reader with some sort of analysis and synthesis, nicely balanced processes and short-cut sciences, so that the reader knows beforehand where he is going and what he will see.

That would spoil his pleasure in H. E. Bates's work. This poet, both in his short stories and his nature essays, is what might be called a garrulist. His virtue is a conversational one, and his genius or main-spring is in his habit of rambling on, one idea and picture leading out of another, and every one fully savoured and flavoured. What a taster the man is. He has a palate like John Keats, and a tongue like him too. He is always "bursting joy's grape against his palate fine." And the reader catches the juice.

It is not that Mr. Bates comes with profound wisdom and knowledge of humanity. In fact, I often find him peevish, shrew-tempered, and inclined to scold when contradicted. I recall his sudden outbreak against gamekeepers in his companion-book to the present volume, *Through the Woods*. He was no doubt right about the malignancy of the gamekeeper, but in making so much of his defiance he somewhat over-balanced the proportions of the artistic mood of the book. He is like W. H. Hudson in that. Hudson, for all his greatness, was sometimes an inhuman, cold-

tempered and cantankerous old monster. And at the same time he was always right. But he spoiled his case against his opponents. Perhaps this self-betrayal by temper was due to the innocence and naivety which come from much solitude. I remember, for example, his outbreak about Chichester and its inhabitants; and on another occasion his denunciation of dogs.

Well, Mr. Bates can be like that too. In his new book, he lets out against a correspondent in a "reactionary country paper." Notice how he loads the dice. "This gentleman, incensed that I should attack the destruction of many interesting and lovely native creatures for the sake of preserving the alien pheasant, reminded me that the law of nature is 'Kill or be killed,' and had I ever heard of the nasty business of a stoat attacking a rabbit? He was proud to inform me that he had seen this occurrence once. I could not inform him then, but I do inform him now that I have seen that occurrence many times. But what of it?" Yes, what of it, and what do Mr. Bates's admirers care about his bickerings with gamekeepers and the country gentlemen who write to the local papers?

One hesitates to ask him, however, to try and eliminate this element from his work. In spite of his marvellous achievement, he is still at an early stage of his development, and it would be a dangerous thing for him to eliminate even his peevishness and touchiness, since they are likely to be better utilised later on.

Meanwhile, I am content to put up with these outbursts, especially as I agree with the motives for them. I would put up with a great deal more minor aggravation from a writer who gives me such constant delight. I believe it is no exaggeration to say to-day of him that he is one of the most sensitive, direct, and subtle prose-writers amongst English naturalists. And already he has learned, or rather nature has endowed him, to flavour his work with a personal quality of freshness, candour, and what I can only call *approachableness*. These unique elements come from that garbality which I have already mentioned. They bind the reader in a peculiar sort of tête-à-tête way to him, and make his moods, sensations and observations important and acceptable.

Perhaps the most outstanding quality in his work is its demonstration of the joys and values of idleness. That is an uncommon gift to-day, in an age of frenzied nerves and social and political

febrility. It is not that Mr. Bates ignores the present state of the world. Indeed, he says here that he wishes "sometimes, that the laws of England could be framed, for a change, behind the walls of a madhouse." A characteristic bit of shrillness.

From this gift for idleness springs most of his ability and material. He describes a little bridge where he did all that was worth while to a child. "There also, winter and summer, but in summer most, I lay or sat or stood and did what is the best of all things to do by the side of water—nothing at all. I would lie and absorb, unconsciously, the heart of summer, the great depth of July heat, the small sounds of water, the click of insects, the monotonous phrases of yellow-hammers uttered as though in a dream, the chimes from the church on the little hill above, the drowsy scent of water-mint and earth and sun that was like an anaesthetic." And again, he describes a walk with his grandfather. "For every five minutes of progression, we had, I think, ten of standing and staring. We stopped for anything, a crop of wheat rising to ear, a kingfisher, a magpie, a host of butterflies, a sound, a change of light. . . . We stopped to turn a stone of queer shape, to pick it up and feel it and wonder. We lingered to praise and criticise. We stopped—as though it were ever necessary—to rest, to look about us, to take stock, to spit, to make water. We stopped for the sheer simple luxurious pleasure of stopping."

All that stopping may explain why Mr. Bates, now a grown-up with a rare gift of expression at his command, has such a fund of remembered riches to draw upon, such minute detail that his word-paintings rival the lovely wood-cuts of his illustrator, Miss Parker, such permeations of his early nature that now he is able, or perhaps does so in spite of his conscious effort, to soak his prose in the sap of earth. Every paragraph offers at least one phrase which is inevitable. He speaks in his opening page of "herons flapping with a kind of gaunt grandeur." He speaks of a brook that "made scarcely any sound at all; only that tinkling-linking, almost gently metallic, almost singing sound as it curdled on stones in shallow places."

So one could go on, finding examples of the fully sensed word, loaded with ore; or the whole paragraph in which atmosphere and tangibility are conjured up with a skill not comparable to that of Jefferies or Hudson, because it is solely the skill of Mr. Bates, already an artist unique and sufficient in himself. I cannot give examples of Miss Miller's work, but fortunately she is so well known that the reader who wants to get this book, for leisurely reading and savouring, will be sure in advance that he is in for some delightful moments.

RICHARD CHURCH