

# NEW NOVELS TO READ

DON'T often have a chance to write about the art of the short story, because it is outside my province on this weekly page; but I cannot resist the opportunity offered by Mr. H. E. Bates, who has chosen thirty tales from five volumes of his work, and prefaced them with a provocative foreword.

As a writer he is a combination of two main forces—sensitivity and combativeness. He can be minute, tender, caressive. He can be brutal, sensual, and offhand. Between these two extremes lies a territory of character and personality capable of rare variation and surprise. I do not hesitate to say that he is the finest artist of his kind writing in English to-day. He is to be classed with Somerset Maugham, D. H. Lawrence, and V. S. Pritchett,

## Reviews by RICHARD CHURCH

three masters in the art of the short story. So what he has to say in his preface about his art and himself is important.

He says that he began, at the age of nineteen, by writing with facility. Edward Garnett, who was the first to notice his promise, warned him about it. Garnett was a great warner. He warned me too, and I profited accordingly. For he was invariably right. With Mr. Bates, the beginning was easy, which is a condition not uncommon with the artist who is to go a long way. Themes tumbled out of him, he says, and story after story was written "easily, quickly, and light-heartedly, often between breakfast and lunch." But in this work he was "groping his way towards becoming a conscious writer; in my later stories I had become one." You see that he does not hesitate to claim his conquests. He is matter-of-fact about this self-knowledge and does not disguise it with false modesty. For to claim "consciousness" is a big claim. It involves that "knowing thyself" which is the portal through which every human activity must pass if it is to reach its goal. Poet, moralist, man of affairs, scholar; all must "know themselves" before they are really capable masters in their own spheres.

Mr. Bates is such a master. But there is a price to pay for mastery, as for everything else worth having. The man, and the artist, who is fully conscious of what he is doing, has had to a certain extent to sever himself from his world. He has had even to sever himself from himself, objectifying his own personality and making it part of the material upon which his monstrous discipline is exercised. The result brings mastery, but it also brings subsidiary effects; an aloofness, a hardness, and sometimes even a quality of arrogance or appearance of arrogance. And these are qualities which can have a toxic effect upon the master. They become a Fifth Column, and through them his hard-won independence is suddenly broken and once more he finds that all is to do again; that after all, his "consciousness" is no longer complete.

I believe that is where Mr. Bates stands to-day. Reviewing his last two novels here, I pointed out how he has become obsessed in his work by sexual excitations, which threatened to give the relationships between his men and women a farmyard sameness. This has been deliberate, and probably necessary, for it is obvious that he has been frightened of that former sensitiveness and facility against which Garnett warned him. He says that "I saw that I had the choice either of repeating myself in a series of charming episodes which I could produce as easily as breathing, or of consciously trying to widen my range of sympathy and develop myself."

You need only turn to a story called *The Kimono* or to *The Mill* in this collection of *Country Tales* (Cape, 7s. 6d.) to see how he has made his choice and how he has mastered the conflict. These two stories are strong in the same way as Tolstoy's *Powers of Darkness* is strong. The sensitiveness in the writer's nature is dragooned. The process is that of the soldier who suspects himself of cowardice and forces himself to take the utmost risks in battle. It is a step towards fuller consciousness. But it is also a strain, and creates tension in the soul. And that is in itself a bondage which warns the artist that final consciousness is not yet his. It never will be; it never can be, this side the grave. Otherwise life would have no purpose and death

no revelation. To have achieved the final self-knowledge, the final mastery, even six hours before one's death, would mean six hours of boredom, six hours wasted.

But this is metaphysics, not criticism of the short story. It is due to Mr. Bates's *Preface*, and his provocative claim that the short story is to his mind "in every way a finer means of expression of our age of unrest, disbelief, and distrust than either the novel or poetry." Here is a statement that our readers may well have something to write to the Editor about. I hope they will.

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The novels of Miss Richmal Crompton are always interesting because of her scrupulous sense of shape, and her utilization of her own restrictions. In this she is a disciple of Jane Austen. In *Steffan Green* (Macmillan, 7s. 6d.) she presents a small community living on and around a village green. At the Castle lives an old dowager, a martinet of the Victorian school, who is bringing up two granddaughters rigidly. Though they have reached the sweethearting age, she never lets them go out without a chaperon. Now that seems rather an anachronism. Indeed, as one goes on with enjoyment through the story, one is struck frequently by the author's weakness in this matter of the sense of time. Thus she talks of a man getting drunk in the pub before six o'clock! And there is a certain clumsiness in the manipulation of the sequence of events throughout the story.



Miss Richmal Crompton.

Those events are exciting enough. A young woman who has just divorced her husband seeks seclusion by taking a cottage on the green. She has come here, as it were, to lick her wounds. Instead, she is caught up, through the intervention of the interesting wife of the vicar, in the activities of the village, and makes friends with her next-door neighbours, a young Bloomsbury couple down here for the benefit of their baby, whom they profess to loathe, but whom in fact they adore. A most original pair. And there is also a Mrs. Webb, an exaggerated example of the possessive mother. The characters throughout tend to be stiffened by this typification. But with all that, the author shows sagacity in her estimates of human nature, as where the vicar says to his wife, "I suppose that it's one of the mistakes of youth to think that freedom exists. Actually, there's no such thing. I believe that the only really free man in the world is a lunatic. The older one grows the more one realizes that perfect freedom, if it existed, would be a horrible thing. It's a man's ties—his loyalties, his responsibilities, his affections—that give him any reality he has." And the book, with its complications of story, is an illustration of that truth.

## To choose from . . .

"The Fire and the Wood," by R. C. Hutchinson (Cassell, 9s. 6d.).

"So Perish the Roses," by Neil Bell (Collins, 9s. 6d.).

"Embezzled Heaven," by Franz Werfel (Hamish Hamilton, 8s. 6d.).

"Country Tales," by H. E. Bates (Cape, 7s. 6d.).

"What Happened Next," by Dame Ethel Smyth (Longmans, 15s.).

"Look to the Land," by Lord Northbourne (Dent, 7s. 6d.).

"Island Years," by Dr. F. Fraser Darling (Bell, 10s. 6d.).