

## Introduction

A social historian looking back at 1958 could find several signs and portents of the kind of country Britain, and more particularly England, was about to become. There were changes in the air, though anyone sniffing that air (as I did as a thirteen-year-old) could not have said with any certainty what the specific changes foretold. Addressing a meeting in Bedford the year before, Harold Macmillan had said, 'Let us be frank about it: most of our people have never had it so good', and the prime minister's words seemed generally true. Rationing had ended, unemployment was low, Britain's calamitous Suez campaign was fading as a source of shame, political division and petrol shortages. The phrase 'post-war' was beginning to mean not austerity but luxury – down our particular street (this was in Scotland) a few neighbours had television sets and one or two were thought to have fridges and washing machines. On the other hand, nobody had a car and for most people a telephone call still meant a trip to a red-painted kiosk where pennies were pushed into a slot after a voice from the exchange said, 'Insert your money in the box now please, caller.' Life, then, had changed a little but not dramatically. Coal warmed the house as it had warmed our grandparents' houses, the trains on the embankment still left grey whorls of steam and smoke in their wake, and, though you could hear Elvis on a café jukebox, Perry Como's 'Magic Moments' was the dinky little melody that filled the living room. We were betwixt and between. The portents – as they turned out to be – happened far away. In 1958, racial disturbances broke out in Nottingham and Nottingham Hill; parking meters appeared in Mayfair; eight miles

of exceptionally wide road were opened to bypass the Lancashire town of Preston. All were unprecedented events, but it would have needed the blessing of second sight to construe from them that within a few decades Britain would become, among other things, a multiracial society addicted to cars, with a social geography defined by its motorways.

*The Darling Buds of May* was first published that year and became an instant success – a best-seller that was translated into many languages, quickly inspired a Hollywood film (though *The Mating Game* transposed the setting from Kent to rural Maryland) and had its readers hungering for more Larkin family adventures, which the author duly provided in the four sequels that appeared over the next dozen years. The Larkins became a phenomenon. What was it about them? The reader in 1958 discovered that there were eight: Pop Larkin, the sprightly junk dealer and farmer who said ‘Perfick!’ a lot because nearly everything nearly always was; Ma Larkin, the kind of generous sexual giantess that Fellini had still to put on to the screen; and the six Larkin children headed by the gorgeous Mariette, who was never any better than she should be. As their creator H. E. Bates wrote in his three-volume autobiography, ‘The entire family is gargantuan of appetite, unenslaved by conventions, blissfully happy.’ When *The Darling Buds* became a popular television series in Britain in the 1990s, a sun-dappled nostalgia for an England-that-never-was could explain the Larkins’ hold on our imagination. In 1958, their appeal had been different. ‘The Larkins’ secret,’ Bates wrote, ‘is in fact that they live as many of us would like to live if only we had the guts and nerve to flout the conventions.’ Open-air eating, open-air drinking, open-air love: the Larkins grab these pleasures of an English summer in the spirit of *carpe diem* which, according to Bates, is the ‘very antithesis of the Welfare State’.

He was never a political writer. What the ‘Welfare State’ meant to him, as it did to many other middle-class people in

the first ten to twenty years after the war, were the regulations and restrictions introduced by Attlee's Labour government and never undone by its successors. Many of these rules were intended to benefit the people as a whole, and often did (and do). The National Health Service, free school milk, old age pensions, the protection of the countryside from city sprawl: all depended on the creation and policing of rules. But for Bates and many others in an English tradition that regarded the state with suspicion, rules cramped the national character and drained the country of individual spontaneity and eccentricity. 'Welfare State' was shorthand for the government intrusion that Bates believed had subdued the population. To some extent, therefore, the comedy of the Larkins is subversive. According to the author, a key to the book's success abroad (among 'colonials and Americans' as he still felt free to write in 1972) was its 'wanton, Chaucerian joys, its flouting of conventions and the Welfare State'. He believed it had punctured the idea of the English as a race of 'cold stuffed-shirts'.

At home, the book had other attractions. Bates wrote that the Larkins could be read on two levels: 'purely for the sheer joy of their enviable way of life, but also as a reflection on the revolution that had overtaken post-war England, a revolution that had nowhere been so marked as in the English countryside.' Before the war, he remembered in 1972, many farm workers didn't own even a bicycle, while mousetrap cheese, fat bacon, paraffin and boiled sweets would be the most you'd find in a village shop. Now cars buzzed down country lanes and grocers' deep-freezes held scampi, smoked salmon and 'exotics of every kind'. The Larkins, when they first appeared, were on the cusp of this new age of plenty, though it would be a mistake to think of their feasting as a realistic representation of a dietary trend. Rationing (another government intrusion in the cause of health and equity) had ended only a few years before, and most readers in 1958



would have been smacking their lips at the amount of delicious food and drink the Larkins manage to put away. *The Darling Buds* opens with the family eating ice-creams – ‘the largest vanilla, chocolate and raspberry super-bumpers’ – which they follow swiftly with crisps, fish and chips, iced buns, more ice-cream, fresh pineapple, chocolate biscuits, tomato ketchup, raspberry and strawberry jams, sardines, Guinness and Jersey cream. Not in that strict order and not mixed together – though Pop does add a blob of ketchup to a piece of iced bun he needs to ‘finish up’ – but still an extraordinarily rich catalogue to find in a novel’s first few pages. Even the landscape is succulent: apples, pears, plums, strawberries and cherries grow in the fields. The novel proceeds meal by delicious meal – Ma cooks up kippers, roast goose and pork, eggs, sausages, ‘a deep dish of fat and buttery asparagus’ – so that, even today, it would take a strong-willed reader to get more than half-way through the book and resist a visit to the fridge. Pa, meanwhile, mixes brain-numbing cocktails that turn their drinkers amorous and then into stumbling wrecks.

The Larkins come close to being a cartoon – a rustic version of the Giles family who were then at the peak of their fame in the *Daily Express* – but Bates isn’t at heart a satirist. Satire needs a moral viewpoint. A different kind of writer would have put a bigger curl in his lip at Pop’s galleon-shaped cocktail bar or the fact that he’d read only one book (*A Guide to Better Drinking*) or the television set that never gets turned off. New money, which is what the Larkins have (and want more of), is one of satire’s traditional targets. But Bates never frowns at the Larkins’ vulgarity, at the over-eating that has made Ma grow ‘large as a buffalo’ and made Pop such an unstoppable burper and belcher. They’re getting what they can out of life, and why not? The moral enemy, in so far as *The Darling Buds* has one, is ‘respectability’ in the various shapes of the gymkhana club

committee and the Inland Revenue.

The Larkins love life far, far more than they hate its difficulties. They love, in particular, the sights and sounds of the English countryside and the taste and texture of good food. Pop Larkin may be a slob with his ketchup-soaked bun and a rogue with his income tax returns, but he's also an aesthete: 'Soon, while Ma drank Guinness and Pop spoke passionately again of nightingales, bluebells that clothed the copses, "fick as carpets, ficker in fact", and how soon it would be the great time of the year, the time he loved most, the time of strawberry fields and cherries everywhere, Mr Charlton [the tax inspector] found himself with a twin on each knee, dipping white fingers of bread and butter into delicious craters of warm golden egg-yolk.'

This combination of food and the natural landscape had always mattered a great deal to Bates, and in his books he was never scared to make (as it were) a meal of them. By his own account, he owed his love of both to his maternal grandfather, who became a smallholder in Northamptonshire in the years before the First World War and regularly took H.E. to help him in his fields and farmyard. In the first volume of his autobiography, *The Vanished World*, he writes that this 'afforded me the foundation on which all the joys of my childhood, together with all my feeling and love of the countryside, is based'. They would share their lunch in a harvest-field: 'In one basket would repose a steak and kidney pie, perhaps a rabbit pie, or a beef pudding, together with basins of new potatoes, carrots, peas or beans: all wrapped in clean white napkins.' Refreshed, the boy would notice 'flowering yellow drifts of coltsfoot . . . celestial choirs of skylarks, the pink-pink of chaffinches, kestrels hovering ready for the kill'.

Of course, entire generations in Britain – and in continental Europe – came to see their pre-1914 civilisation as an idyll, a golden age. Bates wasn't unusual in that. ('Every morning was golden,' he writes of his days at the smallholding before

war broke out.) *The Darling Buds of May*, however, isn't a eulogy but a comic novel that celebrates the here and now, and the 'here' in the equation is the county of Kent, the so-called 'Garden of England', where in 1931 Bates and his young bride set up home in a converted granary and lived out the rest of their lives. Both were from Northamptonshire, where Herbert Ernest Bates was born in 1905 in a small industrial town that made boots and shoes. Both sides of his family worked in the trade, and he grew up in an atmosphere of hushed respectability broken by factory hooters and Non-conformist hymns. There he learned to write – he never seems to have doubted that he was destined to be a writer. A novel, not his first, was accepted for publication by Jonathan Cape in London when he was only twenty, and he was soon in demand as a writer of short stories and columns for newspapers and literary magazines. He read widely and his work showed the influence of writers that might be thought outside the usual range of a young man from a workaday factory town who'd left school at sixteen and gone straight to work for the local newspaper. He was attracted by authors such as the Russian Turgenev and the Americans Stephen Crane and Sherwood Anderson – 'painterly' writers (his word) who sometimes wrote with poetic imagery and established scenes sparsely and quickly so that (again in his words) they often said more by what they left out than by what they left in. By the 1930s he was ranked high among young English writers – another of his generation, Graham Greene, compared him to Chekhov – and one marked out by his preoccupation with rural life in a society that was growing steadily urban. The rural life that Bates wrote about, however, isn't the version that appears towards the end of his career in the *The Darling Buds of May*. Instead, he reached back to the scenes and people of his Northamptonshire childhood, before war and time had transformed them, and lorry pull-ins lined the A6.

It was a fine place to write about, but no longer, Bates



decided, a fine place to live: a 'totally negative wasteland' was his verdict on Northamptonshire when he came home from visits to his publisher in London or weekends with his literary mentor and promoter, Edward Garnett, at his house in Kent. An enchantment with southern England had begun long before, when he was taken on seaside holidays by his parents to resorts on the Channel coast and saw a rich landscape from the train window that made the plain of the east Midlands 'look about as appetising as a slice of stale bread'. In Kent, by contrast, he felt that he was breathing 'something compound of champagne and the sea . . . an air that was not merely pure, but paradisiacal, distilled'. And so, aged twenty-six, he bought an old granary in the Weald for £600 and never lived in Northamptonshire again, though it supplied the setting for most of his English stories until he sat down to write *The Darling Buds*. Recognising the paradox, he wrote that although 'the great beauty and variation of the Kent countryside . . . inspired me to rhapsodic love for it, it had also succeeded in making me see with a clearer, far more objective vision the native Midland land I had left . . .' In other words, like many other writers (John Buchan, R. L. Stevenson and Arnold Bennett are three that come to mind) he lived in the south and wrote about places to the north.

Not everything about Kent pleased him. Compared to his homeland, he found the level of political consciousness of the natives pitifully low: 'I do not much care for the word yokel, but this, more or less, is what we found . . .' He and his wife established a garden – Bates was a passionate and knowledgeable gardener – and raised four children and invited interesting people down for the weekend. But he could still be fairly described as a struggling writer who needed to supplement his small book royalties with journalism, sometimes turning out three pieces a day 'until my hands trembled and I could scarcely see straight'. The Second World War, which arrived in Kent with vapour trails

overhead, came as his salvation. As the result of a commission by the RAF to publicise the exploits and heroism of its aircrew, he wrote stories under the pseudonym 'Flying Officer X' and a novel, *Fair Stood the Wind for France*, which made him a household name. He was now a commercial as well as a critical success. By the time he reached the age of fifty, in 1955, he had every reason to be content with his life and career, apart, of course, from the ever-present concern among all writers of how long it would last and what he would write about next.

He saw the family that became the Larkins in 1957, at a village in apple-orchard country twenty-five miles to the east of his home near Ashford. His wife had popped in to a shop. As he waited for her in his car, he noticed a ramshackle lorry that had recently been painted 'a violent electric blue'. What happened next provided the start of this, his most popular book, and he thought the moment worth recording in his third volume of memoirs, *The World in Ripeness*. 'Two or three minutes later there came out of the shop, in high spirits, a remarkable family: father a perky, sprightly character with dark sideburnings [*sic*], Ma a youngish handsome woman of enormous girth, wearing a bright salmon jumper and shaking with laughter like a jelly, and six children, the eldest of them a beautiful dark-haired girl of twenty or so. All were sucking at colossal multi-coloured ice creams and at the same time crunching potato crisps. As they piled into the lorry there was an air of gay and uninhibited abandon . . . the whole scene might have come out of Merrie England.' Bates had already been nursing the idea of a rural junkyard he'd seen as the setting of a new story. Now he'd found a family to people it. 'Next morning, in a fever of laughter and excitement, I set the family going . . .'

H. E. Bates died in 1974, four years after his last Larkin novel was published. The 1960s had happened and uncon-



ventional behaviour was no longer so rare, or to a man of Bates's ultimately conservative temperament perhaps not quite so endearing. Even so, it seems unlikely that he could have foreseen the dramatic social change that lay just over the horizon. Today everything that the Larkins once advertised so invitingly is now seen as a problematic part of the national character. Their gorging, their obesity, their binge-drinking, their belching, their tax cheating, their absent-minded television watching, their easy indulgence of teenage single motherhood: the Larkin list has been rolled out across England and their children are everywhere. Bates wrote, remember, that they lived 'as many of us would like to live if only we had the guts and nerve to flout the conventions'. And the conventions have largely disappeared.

It may be odd to think of this funny, sweet novel as prescient, which was neither its intention then nor the reason to read it now. But in its own modest way it prefigured how our world would turn out much more accurately than Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

IAN JACK

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