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Cotswold Childhood

LAURIE LEE was born and brought up in the Cotswolds during the early twenties, the youngest but one of a family of eight. The father, a dandyish easy-goer with his mind on higher things, notably and not surprisingly the Civil Service, left the mother when her youngest but one was three, obligingly leaving behind him five children born of an earlier wedlock. These the mother, "a buffoon, extravagant and romantic," even more obligingly brought up.

The times were not unnaturally difficult and rough, not to say wild. The family seems to have subsisted largely on a diet of baked cabbage, potatoes, tea and a particularly monotonous daily issue of lentil stew. Hunger was never appeased; it was merely lightly suppressed.

Of the eight children who struggled like raging young wolves over the stew-pot, the girls were "generous, indulgent, warm-blooded and dotty"; one brother was "handsome, bony and secretive" and clever with his hands; another brilliant; a third a solitary creature, at times with "the radi-

CIDER WITH ROSIE. By Laurie Lee. (Hogarth Press. 18s.)

By H. E. BATES

ance of a saint, at others the blank watchfulness of an insect." Laurie, it is clear, was already the poet in embryo.

But the key to this life, lived as it was in a backwater of semi-feudalism, racked with superstition dottier than the Lee sisters, is the mother. Clearly it is from her, at first "a beautiful woman, strong, bounteous, but with a gravity of breeding," later merely a worn, bent drudge with the flesh of generosity gnawed from her by the insatiable dogs of hunger, that Laurie Lee inherits the qualities that give his recollections such a beautiful, barmy air of almost picaresque levity.

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NO hint of bitterness appears ever to have been dropped by the mother; none occurs to Mr. Lee. The hardships of childhood, grievous though they may have been, are merely a rollicking joke

to be remembered, chewed over and relished with irrepressible buoyancy.

Not surprisingly, in consequence, the book shows no hint of regret for the passing of the things of long ago; this poet, whose prose is quick and bright as a snake, holds no inquest on departed carriers' carts, candlelight, oil lamps or village school-teachers setting him to write poems on any one of the following subjects: "A Kitten. Fairies. My Holidays. An Old Tinker." It's finished; it's all gone; and who cares? Certainly, I think, not Mr. Lee.

The result is a gay, impatient, jaunty and in parts slightly mocking book: a prose poem that flashes and winks like a prism. The brilliance of even the earliest recollections is telescopic, the view never out of focus. In fact diffusion of any kind, sentimental or otherwise, is intolerable to Mr. Lee who, however much other writers may use the still, small voice to relate their childhood recollections, is certainly not going to let his come out with a whimper.