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Bates Country

A Memoir of H. E. Bates (1905–74)

I first knew ‘H.E.’ – no one, not even his wife, called him by his first name, which he did not like and, less still shortened to ‘Erb’, as at school – when I was living in Lincolnshire before the war. But, then, only through his books. He had published his first few novels – *The Two Sisters* in 1925 at the age of twenty, *Catherine Foster*, *The Fallow Land*, *The Poacher*, a collection of short stories *Day’s End* and an extended story *The House with the Apricot*, whilst I had just taken my first school job. The stories were set and soaked in the Northamptonshire countryside, H.E.’s native Nene valley, but his country characters, and the scents and sights and silences, easily transferred to my part of Lincolnshire and gave a new dimension to living there. The small town I lived in was not unlike Higham Ferrers, scene of *Catherine Foster*, next door to Rushden where Bates was born, almost plumb in the middle of England. Both were ‘pleasant little stone built towns’, with cobbled squares and splendid churches, overlooking serene pastures. One encountered also, around my town, Batesian characters, fishermen and field-women, recluses, eccentrics, dreamy girls and schoolmistresses, and, after reading him, invested them with Tchegovian significance. The county of ‘incest and idiocy’, with its

slow ways and slow-flowing rivers – the Nene reaches the sea in Lincolnshire – suddenly acquired romance.

At that time I had some whimsical notion of a writing career – on the strength of a short story or a stray verse published in the *Lincolnshire Echo* – and I also, as H.E. says of himself, ‘suffered from the chronic and ever increasing disease of reading’. I went on with Bates’s stories, as they came out, and with those of his contemporaries, A. E. Coppard, Malachi Whitaker, H. A. Manhood, Geraint Goodwin and others from Jonathan Cape’s stable. *Spella Ho* was an early landmark and, incidentally, H.E.’s first novel to be a commercial success instead of only a *succès d’estime*. Like Dickens’s Chesney Wold, which has a Batesian touch in its ‘broad terrace walk, twining among the balustrades of which, and lying heaped upon the vases, there was one great flush of roses’, *Spella Ho* evoked further Lincolnshire echoes. With it emerged one of the writer’s favourite themes, the great house. (The actual map reference of *Spella Ho* can be found in Northants, another county rich in great houses.)

When a new collection of Bates’s stories appeared, just before the outbreak of war, a school colleague, on my recommendation, borrowed it for weekend reading. It contained ‘The Mill’, a sensitive and moving story of child seduction, and, I think, ‘The Kimono’ – a title set by some magazine for a prize competition, which H.E. won – a very different story of seduction, with the roles reversed. ‘A bit spicy, aren’t they?’ was the comment with the book’s return. (It was a reaction to which, it seemed later, the writer was at some pains to live up to.) His character, Blanche, was ‘Like a pear, soft and full-juiced and overflowing with passion’ and, of course, under the kimono, had nothing on at all.

A year or so later I published my first book and, on the day that it came out, joined the RAF. After six months of AC2/GD and Pay Clerk U/T duties in Cambridgeshire, I was suddenly, on the strength of the book, transferred to a department of Air Ministry, Whitehall. There were four at first in my section of Public Relations: presently a fifth arrived – F/O H. E. Bates, and was given a desk next to mine. The office acted as duty base, but for periods we worked out, H.E. in particular. He had by now left his native Rushden ‘where the winters

always seemed to be of a gnawing chilling bitterness' and settled in the heart of Kent. My immediate job was to produce a Service anthology, later translated into Russian: H.E.'s to write feature stories for Royal Air Force publicity in this country and abroad. He spent time on Bomber and Fighter stations – moving and writing where and when he chose – and at one of them found himself billeted in a Sussex mansion, and so realized the long-standing ambition of 'one, who having been born in a small house, at times wanted to live in a large one'.

H.E.'s desk was less occupied than most: when he came in there was always a perceptible stir. 'Himself again, by all that's wonderful! Where have you been, old boy, to get that tan?' Among us pale denizens of 'Writer Command' sweltering in shirt sleeves on Air Ministry's top floor gallery, H.E. would come in with face and sturdy, cricketer's forearms brown as a berry, to produce, for the Wingco's oversight, a couple of 'powerful pieces' written in his summerhouse down at 'The Granary'. With a wink and teasing remark 'Let's see the colour of your legs, Mary,' at the overworked civilian typist and, if she failed to respond, the follow-up 'What *she* needs is a good, warm bed' he would then settle down to proof-reading. Or, turning to me, 'Any phone calls from M. of I.? Anything urgent on your plate just now? Could you look over these galleys with me?' Then, as one o'clock approached, 'Come and lunch with me at the Garrick?' (H.E. relished his newly-found expansive style, recalling the not-long-past impecunious days when he would jump at Graham Greene's invitation to join him at The Salisbury, St Martin's Lane, for a one-and-nine-penny lunch.) The appeal of the vivid, country blue eyes was hard to resist, but it was tantamount, one felt over the wine, to an invitation to join his future *dramatis personae* – as several of us did.

At about half past three, when the rest of the gallery had still three or more hours to swelter there, H.E. would casually assume his hat and with 'Some work that won't wait' to the Wingco, push off back to 'The Granary'. He could always tell, he said, when a story was going well and must be kept going – his right leg began to twitch. It seemed to twitch pretty regularly just before the mid-afternoon train. But, whenever he came, H.E. brought with him a welcome breath of

country air and, now and again, a propitiatory basket of peaches from his own trees. And that gift of imagination, with the blind pressure it imposed, could also be a curse.

One day, when he had popped into the office to see Wingco, H.E. came back to his desk in a blaze of excitement. He had collected his best half dozen stories of the RAF and they were to be published in sixpenny paperback (Guild Books) for the Services and in hard-back Air Force blue covers for himself, under the pseudonym 'Flying Officer X'. (The nom-de-plume proved farcical – 'my imprint was on every word'.) And, he then burst out, 'Guess what? First printing will be of 100,000 copies!' For a writer whose first ten years had brought a reputation, but precious few of the fruits, it was a stupendous breakthrough. Signing my copy of this first collection *The Greatest People in the World*, H.E. added in his precise, spidery hand, 'From one earthy potato to another.' He believed in roots, a stable country background, home and family, and recognized perhaps a similar realism.

'You are a scholar, aren't you?' he began on a later occasion – I had gone through Cambridge, he had not, tended to dwell on the fact but 'did not regret the omission' – 'now tell me – who said this?' He proceeded to quote 'Fair stood the wind for France / When we our sails advance.' Somewhat at random, I suggested 'Henry V – Shakespeare.' 'You see,' said H.E., imparting the impression that university degrees do not necessarily constitute education, 'not your Henry at all, but Michael Drayton'. He enjoyed teasing his readers with story titles from Tennyson or Waller or William Collins, and sly snippets from Chaucer, Donne, Shakespeare, not always ascribed, perhaps to prove his point.

Drayton, as we soon realized, provided the title for his first wide success – the RAF escape story set in occupied France that was translated into many languages. In it H.E. described, at some length, the amputation, by a French doctor in conditions of dangerous secrecy, of an injured English pilot's arm. He was to take pride in the fact that admirers of the book 'marvelled that I possessed both *my* arms', in the belief that such power of description was not possible unless based on personal experience. A later admirer, Henry Miller,

has pointed out Bates's obsession with pain, pain stretched to the breaking point, usually in connection with heroic behaviour, and it would not be difficult to find other instances – for example, in *The Purple Plain*. What underlay it, in fact, probably *was* personal. From schooldays H.E. had to endure with increasing misery abdominal pains – ‘pain that not only tortured me by day, but kept me agonisingly awake at night’. With creative pressure, the gnawing ache was sure to come on. About this time it had become a scourge and a curse, which he had to fight hard to control.

Next to schoolmasters, whose arbitrary ways and punishments had bruised his early sensitivity, and, he wrote later, interviews with school inspectors in war-time Ministries, H.E. confessed to a dislike and mistrust of Methodists – and of that scion of Methodists, Kipling. His father had been a pretty unyielding example of the creed. Ironically, for one who shared Auden's feeling that ‘if invited to dine with a company representing all trades and professions, the schoolmaster is the last person one would want to sit next to’, H.E. asked *me*, during the gestation of another novel, for some useful book on the history of Methodism. He could not know, for certain, that in my background also there figured ‘those iron shepherds of their sheep’, even if there had been little chance of my becoming ‘locked in the uncompromising strait-jacket of Methodism’, as he almost was. ‘Never had much sense of humour, Bates’, said his old schoolmaster – the one who woke him from his natural apathy and lethargy at Kettering Grammar School, and with a sweep and whirl brought Keats, Shelley, Drayton, Shirley, Herrick, Lovelace, Milton, Chaucer, Tennyson out in a great jumbled jewel; but, it seems, in his provoking, teasing way, H.E. had.

An excitement, which he had scarcely anticipated when putting his roots down in Kent and creating from an old barn and rough pasture a beautiful house and garden, was the flying bomb. During the summer of 1944 H.E. came in week by week with hair-raising accounts of the hideous racket and flaring exhausts of V1's flying low over his very roof. As RAF fighter squadrons were deployed to counter this impersonal, evil machine, his part of the Kentish countryside became the graveyard of the ‘doodle-bug’. More than three thousand were

intercepted and fell there within a few weeks. One landed on the top of the church tower in his village, destroying something unique, a Protestant church with a Roman Catholic chapel within its walls. Towards the end H.E. had the satisfaction of being sent to Picardy and the Pas de Calais, to produce an on-the-spot report about the V1s' launching sites and to 'smell France, the real France' for the first time – as well as liberated Paris. It all confirmed, he said, his descriptions in *Fair Stood the Wind*, largely done from imagination, and Thackeray's dictum that 'the work of fiction contains more truth in solution than the work which purports to be all true'.

Some little time before this the Wingco had been promoted Group Captain and posted to S.E. Asia. Our new Wingco now asked H.E. if he would go there too, for a short period, in spite of his health. (An X-ray had revealed 'duodenal diverticulum'). He would be based in Calcutta, go over to write some pieces about Burma, and possibly find time to enjoy some sport with 'Groupie', another keen fly-fisherman.

He left in February 1945, excited at the prospect of a new field to explore. About the same time I was sent off to Belgium and Holland. When I returned there was a note on my desk, marked 'personal', from H.E. Could I possibly extract from the file copies of the half dozen 'powerful pieces' he had sent in from Calcutta and smuggle them out to the 'Granary'. There was something on his plate that was making his right leg twitch again. As he later wrote 'I could scarcely wait to get my hands on a white virgin ream of paper and begin to set down my version of the Burma scene'. The product of this, which trebled the success of *Fair Stood the Wind* I recognized a year or two later when *The Purple Plain* appeared. Its atmosphere, it seemed, had been absorbed not only with the eyes, but through the very pores of the writer's skin – all in under two months.

This turned out to be H.E.'s last demand, to my desk. That summer, at forty, he was demobbed. Others went soon after: I lingered on, after VJ day the surviving F/Lt. notionally in charge of the section. He returned once, when Wingco, and a few from other sections of PR being bowler-hatted, threw a leaving party. Among the crowd of beaming, bibulous faces, the roaring songs, cuddled WAAF's, flowing punch – and Wingco swopping hats with the office

char to do 'Knees up Mother Brown' – H.E. appeared briefly with his wife. He was as jaunty and jocular as ever, but it seemed, already, less of a celebrant than a storer-up of impressions.

Twenty years later, hearing by chance that he lay flat on his back with a sudden illness, able to see nothing of the world outside except the sky and the tops of bare trees, I sent a cheery, colourful postcard to 'The Granary' from Thessaloniki, whilst I was on *my* February way, by road, to India. . . .

'He had a particularly clear and clean vision. He saw the objects and characters of a familiar small town with the eyes of childhood, the ordinary houses and trees and fruit and people with the freshness and brightness of Cèzanne.' This statement characterizes Bates's early period as a writer. It might well have been written about him, though in fact, it was written about an American, whom he regarded as one of his masters, Sherwood Anderson and the stories in *Winesburgh, Ohio* (1919). It is not so much that there is revealed, in these stories of Bates, the fantasy which lies round almost any corner in the English countryside, but that, like Anderson, he is able to isolate everyday features and characters of country life, harsh, odd or amiable, and illuminate some inner drama or deeper meaning in them against a seen-and-felt background of the land, in all its seasons. His youthful sensibility gives an illusion of vague profundity to circumstances in the lives of mowers, barge-folk, fishermen and fuel-gatherers, a shepherd, a baker's wife, a school-teacher, an idiot, that the ordinary observer would indifferently pass by. Place and mood seem effortlessly interfused.

The writing, in a story like *The Dove*, is reticent in style, true and tender in feeling, and opens on to both the bird's and the child's world. *The Ox*, by contrast personalizes stubborn endurance: *Spring Song* arrests and transmits dreamlike impressions of youth and youth's infatuations, ending on the note: 'Next moment I saw soberly and calmly, that for me the significance and magic of a woman's beauty must likewise lie in a single impression of a face beneath an umbrella in the gloom of a storm.' It might be a detail from Renoir's 'Les Parapluies' and, indeed, Bates in his treatment of later themes, invited comparisons with Renoir.

The early novels, *The Fallow Land*, *The Poacher*, *Spella Ho*, *A House of Women*, set in his native Midland soil, evoke in addition to the ‘useful toil, homely joys and destiny obscure’ of his protagonists or the ironic rise to grandeur of one, Bruno Shadbolt, from starveling to owner of the great house Spella Ho, a fresh awareness of the habits and life style of a world that has vanished. Between the two World Wars the countryside of Great Britain underwent its greatest and swiftest revolution. From its bondage, the traditional long-accepted bondage of a narrow, toil-worn, simple life, though lived in surroundings which a Hudson or an Edward Thomas invested with lyrical beauty, it was released, after the coming of the combustion engine, by use of the private car, the public bus and by steady replacement of the horse by the tractor. The closed community of rural areas was opened up: countryfolk no longer dwelt apart, in semi-solitude amid slow working rhythms; townspeople no longer recognized only their own urban patterns of conduct. At weekends and on holidays each now had easy access to the other’s world: town life and country life, rural and urban interests, began to be intermingled. Whether all the results of this revolution have been welcome or not, one consequence is that these early books of Bates have become, in effect, historical novels.

Bates had seen the older England at first hand, imbibed its lore from his maternal grandfather, a shoemaker, and others, and with pen and eye trained on the best naturalists’ models – including the Turgenev of *A Sportsman’s Sketches* – set it down. Bates country – where perhaps ‘rare, ghost-like, fragile, milk-green winged’ orchids occur in silent spinneys a shade too regularly or ‘yellowhammers chip with monotony at the heart of summer afternoons’ too predictably, offers an almost idyllic, if implacable setting, for the passionate attachments, the misalliances, illusions and humours of his simplistic characters.

The other country which Bates made his own is very different. Nor was it entered so readily. He had joined the RAF with an assured reputation as a writer and at first, during three months on a Bomber Command station in Cambridgeshire, found ease of response to his professional ‘eavesdropping’. But the mess of a Fighter Command

station in Sussex brought him, artistically, near to despair. Australians, New Zealanders, South Africans all were aloof, impenetrable, suspicious. 'Nowhere could I detect a keyhole, still less a key that would grant me entrance into a world containing stories.' Eventually the breakthrough came with a night-fighter pilot, more akin and sympathetic through experiences that bombers shared. Once the key was found, Bates's mastery of his material proceeded apace. (Subsequently he wrote an official pamphlet 'The Night Battle of Britain' – unpublished).

The aim, in all these RAF stories, was clear and where possible, pictorial simplicity. The manner of telling, sparse, ironical, understated, matches the style of newly-forged men of action. The men behind the action, not the actions in themselves, are his subject. The stories tell less of heroic achievement than of the backgrounds, boredom, strain, bursts of gaiety, sense of disaster and of inevitable death, which never made the front page. *The Young Man from Kalgoorlie* puts the score right for the man who once 'knew least about the war in all Australia'. The long title story in *How Sleep the Brave* displays Bates's extraordinary powers of integrating his sensibilities with those of his imagined, or projected, characters. The dialogue, like RAF slang, is allusive, laconic and no doubt owes something to Hemingway, the Hemingway of *Men Without Women* (1928), under whose spell Bates had come during the 'thirties.

With these stories plot, often thin with Bates, did not count: the reading public knew enough already about the drama of events. Atmosphere, feeling, tension, were what mattered. The same applies to the novels *The Purple Plain*, *The Jacaranda Tree* and a novella *The Cruise of the Breadwinner*. An air-crash in the jungle and 'walk out', the retreat from Burma, a rickety fishing-boat in the English Channel picking up aircrew, German and English, release powers of expressing and protracting agonising dilemmas of experience, mingled with terror and suffering, to or beyond breaking point. Bates's dramatis personae are, as it were, under an arc-light, about to undergo an operation, naked, transfixed and utterly helpless.

The explosive experience of what he had now seen of the terrain of India and central Burma fired his imagination for *The Purple Plain*.

As happens with many Englishmen, the unrealized idea of India had been long dormant, from the time of writing *Catherine Foster* with its dark, vivacious heroine born in Bombay. An unforgettable vividness of scene suffuses this book, 'written in white-hot heat', with its images of the cumbersome Indian bullock-cart and the child riding on the bundles or crouched on the shafts, its half-stoical, half-frightened eyes having in them all the mute and wonderful fatalism of the East, as Forrester carries through the moon-lit jungle the crash-injured Carrington: 'He was the bullock, ageless and lumbering and primeval and without destination and Carrington was the child in the cart, older than time'. Burmese Anna, with the scarlet frangipani flowers that stand for immortality in her hair, 'realises' Catherine Foster. With the other two books Bates demonstrated once again that imagination, on its own, can triumph: and in Patterson, the phlegmatic desperately enduring bridge-builder in *The Jacaranda Tree* he created a figure of our time to match Kipling's Findlayson, C. E. This group of stories and novels, including *The Scarlet Sword*, also encapsulates an historic phase and succeeds in conveying its tone and mood, despite some overwriting and overdone minor characters.

The third evocation of 'Bates country' is another matter. After returning for two more novels to Northamptonshire – the same quiet streets of Higham Ferrers, chestnut-lined square and great house (Rushden Hall) figure in *Love for Lydia* and *The Sleepless Moon* as in *Catherine Foster* he swung away, first from the novel form to short stories and novellas, then to exploit a vein of which the earlier, earthy, lecherous and comic, 'Uncle Silas' stories gave a retrospective hint.

The novellas, grouped in *The Nature of Love* and *The Triple Echo*, are in their different ways, as striking examples of mastery of this form's notorious difficulty as is *The Cruise of The Bread-winner* or his first attempt in *The Bride comes to Evensford*. The short stories draw upon a wider range of scene and character, derived from Bates's increased opportunities and appetite for travel. Northern Italy, Tahiti, Provence, Assam, New Hampshire, take the place of the woods and cowslip fields and riverside paths of the Nene Valley. Details are touched in with a painter's skill, 'little cream clustered

towns melting like spent candles into the water, pink and pale yellow oleanders blooming below the vine', a skill cultivated on A. E. Coppard's advice that a story should be built up, like a film, to achieve a sharp pictorial impact. Explanations are left out, events are implied, symbolic images do the work. Such a story as *The Flag* – with its flabby, wheezy, fuddled Captain in the half-empty great house, his cool, aloof wife and dark strong gardener in the conservatory, where a big scarlet and pink and black amaryllis blooms fierily, while on the tower a flag curls intermittently in the strengthless puffs of air – rather crudely exemplifies the type. Themes change little: characters have aged.

This technique, plus emphasis on character and atmosphere, is shared by V. S. Pritchett, whose writing career paralleled that of Bates. Both had non-conformist backgrounds, left school at sixteen, experienced the leather trade – H. E. was briefly a boot warehouse clerk – launched, after a first book in their twenties, into writing for a living, and both chose to live in the country.

Pritchett's puritan tradition informs many of his stories, set in suburban, lower middle class, or in foreign backgrounds more often than rural; his sharp ironic realism finds issue in comedy and he is unfailingly a vivid, richly various 'performer'. By contrast Bates's strength lies in basic uniformity, wholly natural absorption in rural life and character, lyric feeling, and tragic awareness in response to human experience. Both writers, in their maturity, begin to appear in their stories, à la Maugham or Conrad, with an effect of immediacy.

All his later stories have Bates's imprint – impressionistic style and visual images from the natural world, repetitive, but vivid and memorable. From girls' breasts like hard-pointed lemons, women's busts like full-blown poppy heads, or, less kindly, melon-like, white and hard, the reader's attention is switched to hard-drinking post-war gentry with ears like purple cabbage or a pair of (*bête noire*) parsons, 'resembling two pieces of scraped shin-bone with a little beef left on'. Schoolteachers look like 'moths, brown moths, brown-haired, brown-eyed, placid, innocuous, soft' and so do dear, dotty old ladies 'big, resting pink moths' and dhoti-clad Indians 'lazy, brown-and-white

moths'. Flowers, Bates's – and Tchegov's – speciality come in everywhere, from forced white lilac and glossy pittosporum to counterpoint the satire in 'Country Society', to the wild, ghost-green orchids 'like greeny-white butterflies' and pink, wild cyclamen 'like small rosy butterflies' in 'The Enchantress'. The hand that 'paints the words rather than writing them' is now a little relaxed. Seldom more so than in his last novel vein – that of the Larkin saga.

After several otiose tilts in the direction of modern 'society' and notes of disenchantment at new denizens of the great house, with dialogue almost limited to 'most awfully decent', 'how too shame-making', 'most frightfully nice', 'how absolutely ghastly' et al., and some stories presenting slightly crazy personae to show up the real craziness of the world in general, Bates turns back to the vernacular. Not the old bedrock Midland one now, but the cockneyfied one of Kent. His developed love of the south country and his reneged-Methodist relish of life that flouts rules and conventions finds outlet in a rumbustious series of novels. *The Darling Buds of May*, featuring Pop, Ma, Primrose and Mariette Larkin in their free and lusty attitudes to living, was perhaps because of its fulsomeness, an instant success, a blow in the midriff against the constrictions of the Welfare State and its minions. *A Breath of French Air*, *When the Green Woods Laugh*, *Oh, to be in England*, *A Little of What you Fancy* quickly followed and delineated new Bates country for countless admirers.

In Pop Larkin Bates professed to see himself – a passionate Englishman, profound lover of nature and wine, hater of pomp, pretension and humbug. I recognize those qualities in him, but for my part, choose to remember the delicate story *I am not myself* (1939), the dispassionate tenderness of *The Beauty of the Dead*, and *The Darling Buds of March*, before his talent become so full blown. The latter is one of the exquisitely observant essays collected in *Through the Woods* (1936) with its writing exactly matched in texture by the velvety wood-engravings of Agnes Miller Parker.