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H. E. BATES'S WAR STORIES

BY JOSEPH BRADDOCK

FEW people who follow contemporary literature would, I think, either deny that H. E. Bates is one of the finest living writers we have, or that his career as a story-teller has been remarkable. Since Edward Garnett first discovered his genius at the age of eighteen and beginning with a novel, *The Two Sisters*, of great charm and poetic sensibility, he has gone on pouring out a fecund stream of short stories, novels, and country essays, as well as giving us a book of criticism on the modern short story and a successful war play, *The Day of Glory*.

Mr. Bates has always been a prolific writer, with a varied and expanding range of subject matter. Averaging more than a book a year, it is hardly surprising if his work has not uniformly kept to his own highest level; but there is perhaps another reason than his wealth of output for this. He has never stopped experimenting. Commendably unwilling merely to repeat his past successes, he has ever looked for fresh artistic worlds to conquer; and in order to break new ground has occasionally been obliged to retreat, *reculer pour mieux sauter*, as I believe he did in *Spella Ho*, for example, a book useful possibly less for its intrinsic merits than for what the experience of writing it enabled its author later to do.

How fine are some of the pre-war tales of the English countryside, in opulence of observation, in delicacy, sometimes in almost sensual, naked strength—*The Poacher*, *The Ox*, *A Threshing Day for Esther*, *The Mill*, *The Bridge*, *The Bride Comes to Evensford*, to choose at random, besides those exquisite prose poems of only a few pages, like *Death In Spring*, *A Flower Piece*, *Fishing!* In top form H. E. Bates challenges comparison with

the best, with Maupassant, Hemingway, and D. H. Lawrence. Then there is his comic Muse. Surely *My Uncle Silas*, the exploits of that extra-vital, delicious old rural reprobate, is already a minor classic, for Silas himself is in the main line of English comic characters, through Falstaff and Tony Lumpkin.

But the war came and everything changed. In the R.A.F., as "Flying Officer X", Bates wrote admirably of what he had absorbed of the hourly endurance and heroism of the crews of bombers and fighters in *The Greatest People in the World* and *How Sleep the Brave*, moving, restrained stories subsequently reprinted together under the title of *Something In The Air*. He was deeply affected by what he had seen. Later, his experience, his indignation at war's stark crazy inhumanity flowed over into his play, and much of his compassion also into his romantic novel of escape, *Fair Stood the Wind for France*, simply but beautifully told, with a new enhanced tenderness in the love story. For here he had expressed, among other things, the plight of a whole generation of young people caught up in the impersonal machine of war. He had been to Burma; but before the two Burmese novels, *The Purple Plain* and his latest *The Jacaranda Tree** just published, came a magnificent long short story, *The Cruise of the Breadwinner*, which I unhesitatingly claim as a masterpiece of his creative imagination, ghastly in its realistic picture of the machine-gunning of a small patrol fishing-boat, yet because of its spirit of youth and indomitableness likely to rank with the greatest of English sea stories.

The Purple Plain is a fine book, convincing, moving, and exciting, though perhaps divided into imperfectly fused parts. The love of the

* *The Jacaranda Tree*, by H. E. Bates. Michael Joseph. 9s. 6d.

hero for an educated Burmese girl is lyrically treated; there are the themes of horror—the unexpected bombing of a Burmese village—and again of escape. Mr. Bates's war experience has changed him as a writer, maturing him suddenly and transforming his style from its earlier sensuous quality to, at times, a shocking starkness, a stripped incisive prose. It has enabled him also to project service relationships with the appropriate idiom nearly perfectly, whether between men and men or men and nurses.

While *The Purple Plain*—at any rate the first half—gave me the impression of growing naturally, organically like a tree, *The Jacaranda Tree* (confirmed by a second reading) alas, felt somehow too contrived and made me think absurdly of a bird-cage from which the bird is missing. The heat, the physical, menacing, extreme beauty of Burma have driven deeply into Mr. Bates's soul, and these he reproduces with verve and with every device of the born story-teller to hold our excitement to the end. Yet there seems something lacking.

The tale is of two car-loads of incompatible, for the most part rather tawdry, people trying to escape north to India before the threat of Japanese invasion in 1942. They are led by Paterson, the manager of a rice mill, accompanied by his boy, Tuesday, and Nadia, his lovely Burmese mistress. There is a Major Brain and a Eurasian nurse who turn back and with the "batty" Mrs. Betteson—a most striking, successful character—save their souls. The other characters (four of them die in circumstances of horror) are presented firmly but are perhaps too close to colonial types and drawn each on a single plane. Although Mr. Bates's preoccupation with more, and new, characters represents certainly his continued development as a writer, neither his theme nor his treatment of these near-conventional people seem sufficiently important to add to his stature as a thinker. Not that a great writer need be a thinker in the sense that

Huxley, far less Lawrence (thinking with the blood) are thinkers, but only that we require to feel *implicit* behind the work his comprehensive philosophy of life. Mauriac could be an example. The weakness of an agnostic point of view for the novelist is, perhaps, that it diminishes the importance of the individual: unless his characters are very sympathetically, or deeply, drawn, the reader may begin to stop caring what happens to them.

Nevertheless, if *The Jacaranda Tree* disappoints in the least, it is only when against the highest standards. To say that Mr. Bates has not yet written a *Nostramo*, neither at all detracts from his new book's lavish merits, nor says that he will not do so.

MR. PRESIDENT, by Maurice Ashley.
Jonathan Cape. 21s.

Of all the offices in modern democratic States none offers so glittering a prize, so lonely an eminence or so heavy a burden as the Presidency of the United States. So remarkable an office, so curiously conferred, has long had a fascination for foreign observers, and Mr. Ashley, a historian distinguished for his penetrating studies of that most nearly presidential of all British epochs, the Cromwellian Protectorate, is the latest to fall beneath its spell. "Attracted", as he says, "by the extraordinary institution of the Presidency, I have ventured to recall and repeat a part of the American story by summarizing the lives of six American Presidents who, it seems to me, are among the fascinating figures of history." Through this medium, semi-biographical, semi-institutional, he has sought to convey what he calls his "discovery of America", made when in 1944 he set foot in the United States for the first time as a military intelligence officer.

The medium Mr. Ashley has chosen is both inviting and somewhat recalcitrant. [Even though great men, *pace* Lord Bryce, are often chosen President, their incidence has been rather uneven