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40 YEARS A WRITER

H. E. BATES, who is sixty this weekend, describes some of the hazards, and rewards, of earning a living by one's pen

ALTHOUGH I wrote my first novel in 1922, when I was 17, and began a second a year later, it was not until 1925 that the second of these two books, *The Two Sisters*, was accepted for publication by Jonathan Cape, after having been rejected by nine other publishers: so that I am now able to say, this year, that my career as a writer is 40 years old. *The Two Sisters*, whatever its faults, had at least one virtue not commonly found in most first novels: it was not autobiographical. On the contrary it was a work of exuberant, melancholy, not to say turbulent, imagination, peopled entirely by characters conjured up out of my wild young head, a fact that may well account for many readers having found it both difficult and obscure. In spite of this it is still in print and has in fact been in print, except for an inevitable short gap or two during the war, ever since, a fact that gives me rather more than a little satisfaction.

The princely sum of £25—and I use the word princely in no cynical sense—would by itself have been enough to inspire in me a fervent determination to make writing my career, but as it happened I had no option in the matter. In common with about three and a half million other people (grousers and grumblers about the hard times we live in today, please note!) I was unemployed. On this matter I was neither depressed nor bitter since it was, I fear, entirely my own fault. My competence at my job as a warehouse clerk was not in question; it was simply that I had written the two novels entirely in my employer's time—a state of affairs which obviously could not be tolerated indefinitely.

As my wages had been £2 a week, having risen by painful degrees from £1, I made the not unreasonable assumption that I could live for at least three months on *The Two Sisters'* advance, and even longer if I could possibly sell a few of the many short stories I had already written.

One thing my brief office training

H. E. Bates' home is in Kent—a county featured frequently in his writings. His new book of short stories, *The Wedding Party*, will be published by Michael Joseph later in the year

had taught me was how to do the simplest sort of book-keeping, and I now began to keep accounts. The earliest of these entries have, I fear, disappeared, but I still have those of a slightly later period, and presently the entries began to read something like this:

Everyman cheque	£6	8s 0d
Man. Guardian story	£3	3s 0d
Statesman review	£2	0s 0d
Newnes cheque	£14	3s 6d
Statesman review	£1	8s 6d
Reader	£1	1s 0d
Criterion story (T. S. Eliot)	£11	8s 0d
Balance at end of year	£34	15s 5d

Most, if not all, of these early achievements were entirely due to Edward Garnett, who had not only written a preface to *The Two Sisters* but in his own unselfish and indefatigable way had badgered editors such as Desmond McCarthy, Allan Monkhouse, Leonard Woolf, J. M. Murry and several others to look at my stories and sketches. Allan Monkhouse was, at that time, literary editor of the *Manchester Guardian* and conferred special distinction on that already distinguished newspaper by printing a short story on its back page every day. This was not only of enormous importance as an outlet for young short story writers but, since the stories had to be not more than 1,000 words in order to fit the column, the most rigorous kind of training too. To this day I believe that much of what I know of economy in words I owe to that back page of the *Guardian*, where every sentence of every story had to be pruned remorselessly.

TODAY the question I am most often asked is, I think, whether or not it is more difficult to make a career or earn a living as a writer in the Sixties than it was in the Twenties, and to this I always give the same answer: namely that it is always difficult, never, never easy. This fact was mercilessly rammed home to me by David Garnett in the summer of 1926, when I was already beginning to nurse grave doubts about the future and had rashly confessed to David that I was worried about what I should be living on in six months' time. In answer to this David at once delivered a fierce, salutary and much-needed lecture.

"Listen to me," he said and went on, in words to this effect (aspirants to the literary world please note that no single aspect of the circumstances has changed): "if you are going to be a writer you never will know what you'll be living on in six months' time. Your financial position, present or future, will always be uncertain. It may even be bad. You will never have a regular income. You will have no pension, no superannuation fund, no trade union, no guarantee of regular work, no rate for the job. You may not starve but it will be a devil of a hard road, and if you aren't prepared to face up to it you'd better go out and get yourself a nice cosy sheltered job somewhere." To this he might well have added Hemingway's words (except that Hemingway hadn't then written them) applicable particularly to those of us who were fiction: "And don't forget you are out there on your own. Nobody can help you."

These words sank into my consciousness like a blazing dagger, and the mark of them has remained there ever since. Not that even in my lowest moments of doubt had I the remotest intention of getting a job; in fact I was determined, in my youthful obstinacy, that I never would get a job and—except for a period of a few weeks when that most admirable of booksellers, John Wilson, gave me the chance of working, again at Edward Garnett's instigation, in the children's department at Bumpus—I never did. From then I was working as a writer and was able to reward Wilson's kindness, or partly at least, with a little children's book, *The Seekers*, now something of a rarity.

Somewhere about this time there was, happily, a new sign in the financial sky. In an age of insanity, when book collectors were paying prices ludicrously removed from all reality for first editions that largely had no collecting value at all, a few discerning collectors were sensibly buying manuscripts of young contemporary writers, an example now being vigorously followed by the great universities of America, in whose bulging archives students can forage among original scripts, both finished and unfinished, published and rejected, and try to chart the labyrinthine passages of the creative writer's mind.

Most of these collectors, both English and American, were people of modest means who could not afford more than two or three pounds for a short MS, but who nevertheless thought it more rewarding to possess an original piece in a writer's own hand rather than a so-called first edition which might well be one of fifteen hundred copies. But one at least of these collectors was rich. Louis Sterling, having reversed the usual trans-Atlantic drift by being born poor in New York and making his fortune in London, had both discernment and taste and moreover, unlike many who rise to the top, loved books. To his already vast collection of editions and MSS of the classics (the catalogue of them runs to something over 600 pages) he now began to add MSS of contemporary writers, including myself. His great collection, well housed and cared for, now reposes in the library of London University, to which he bequeathed it.

BUT, welcome though the sales of MSS were, they were in fact about the only extra financial fillip a writer of my day could hope for. In the Twenties there were no paper-backs (the very thought of them filled all booksellers with horror), no book societies, no book clubs, no Atlantic awards, no television; radio was in its infancy and the makers of films hardly ever looked in the direction of serious writers.

Even a writer of the calibre of Graham Greene lived, as most of us did, very much hand-to-mouth, and I well remember going to have lunch with him as late as the mid Thirties, to be greeted with the gleeful news that he had finally discovered a place where we could eat for 1s 9d. We duly re-

Sales figures for the English version of *The Purple Plain*, topped 1,093,000. It has been translated into every major language and several Far Eastern dialects: the Rank film version, made in Burma in 1954, starred Gregory Peck, *left*

As a young writer in the '20s, Bates worked hard; lived from hand to mouth. But his war-time stories, *The Greatest People in the World*, sold a million

paired to The Salisbury in St. Martin's Lane and there fed bountifully on soup, a massive portion of boiled beef, and the most excellent cheese and celery. Even lunch at the Café Royal, at the heady figure of 3s 6d, was beyond us both at that time: at any rate it was beyond me.

The struggle therefore, as David Garnett had rightly predicted, was a constant and precarious one and you never knew from one month to another whether it would turn sharply for the worse or better. I myself slaved daily like a black, often writing a story before lunch, sometimes another after lunch and then a review or an article in the evening. Nothing like a regular stipend of any sort ever came my way until, some time later, I took on the reviewing of fiction for *The Morning Post*, a task which had at last some steadying influence on the finances. Yet today I am constantly being assured by young writers that "they can't make a go of it" without extra-mural activities of some kind, a state of things which, as I see it, automatically reduces the business of writing to a part-time affair.

The outbreak of war at once brought a return of insecurity and fresh dilemmas. My four children were all under eight and the outlook, as I remember it, seemed a pretty dismal one. Nor were my feelings of deep frustration by any means improved when, having applied for a commission in the RAF, I was turned down. This led me, not long afterwards, to turn my thoughts towards the Ministry of Information—without, I confess, very much heart. But eventually, armed by a letter of introduction from Graham Greene, I duly presented myself there for an interview, the nature of the proceedings being rather upset by the fact that the interviewer was promptly called away to a long distance telephone call, so that I was left to the mercies, if that is the right word, of a sort of overgrown office boy, with whom I had conversation that went something like this:

"What kind of work do you do, Mr. Bates?"

"I write."

"What sort of things do you write?"

"Books."

"You mean you've actually written books? Have any been published?"

"Quite a number."

"You mean you've actually had books published by a publisher?—"

"Good morning," I said.

WHETHER echo of my indignation subsequently reached the ears of Cecil Day Lewis, who was himself at the MoI at that time, I wouldn't know, but presently he was inviting me to write brief commentaries on some of the excellent portraits of Battle of Britain pilots done by Eric Kennington. This in turn led to a totally unexpected and astonishing turn of fortune. Through the medium of David Garnett I was told that if I cared to present myself at the Air Ministry I was more than likely to hear of a proposition that might interest me.

I duly presented myself at King Charles Street, there to be confronted with Hilary St. George Saunders, then deputy librarian of the House of Commons, Harald Peake and John Nerney, who put to me the astonishing proposal that I should be commissioned into the RAF, at Flight-Lieutenant level, simply and solely as a short story writer. Such a proposition had never been entertained by any of the armed services before and I was at once filled with honour, confusion and dismay. When I eventually recovered enough to point out that this scheme contained

certain elements of madness, in that there was no guarantee that even if I were commissioned I could necessarily produce stories. I was assured that on the contrary officialdom had the greatest faith in me. When I further pointed out that I couldn't under any circumstances write short stories at a Whitehall office desk and that I must have the widest possible freedom, I was assured that the widest possible freedom would, in fact, be mine.

So it came about that I went up to Oakington, near Cambridge, duly commissioned, with orders to stay there for two or three days, "just to sort of spy out the land, old boy." I in fact stayed there, among the clumsy giant Stirlings and their painfully young and weary crews, for three months, writing no less than 25 stories, half of which appeared some time later as *The Greatest People in the World*, under the pseudonym of Flying Officer X, an occasion marked by a summons from my C.O., who informed me, to my utter astonishment, that "They're going to print 100,000 copies of your book, old boy." They did, in fact, eventually print a million or so.

My whole-hearted dedication to these stories is no doubt proof that there is a strong streak of sheer cussedness in me which resolutely refuses to accept that writing can be a part-time affair, but I firmly believe that it must not and cannot be. I hesitate to use the word dedication in case it may sound to the young like a note of piety, but to my mind the struggle for creative expression is so strenuous and vast in its demands, both physical and emotional, as to preclude any thought of expending imaginative energy in any other form. For me there are no half measures. It is all or nothing, win or lose.

Fiction, as Mr. Angus Wilson recently and quite rightly declared, is magic. It is also a mystery and one, my 40 years of writing tells me, not to be treated lightly. The processes of imagination are not merely complex and mysterious; they are also so profound, demanding and exhausting that they cannot, I think, be treated casually. The path of art, as Edward Garnett wrote in his preface to *The Two Sisters* four decades ago, is endlessly difficult: and so it always will be.

"Oh! you're so lucky," is probably the most repeated remark a writer gets made to him, to be followed inevitably by "you can work when you like and where you like. You've got no boss. Nobody to push you around. No clock to watch. What a marvellous life." It is indeed a marvellous life and 40 years have not diminished by one iota my great love of it. But there are times when I cannot help wondering who is the real leader of the two characters that I certainly am: the man who writes the words or the man who does the bossing, keeping up a standard of discipline beside which the admonitions of sergeant majors are as the soft songs of lute-players.

On the whole I think I go for the second fellow: he is the tartar who has really kept me at it so long. ◻

Next week we publish a new story by H. E. Bates—The Winter Sound