H. E. BATES

A Moment of Time. Michael Joseph, 21s., published September 7.

THE SUMMER of 1940, the beginning of the Battle of Britain, what better time than now, just 24 years later, to evoke the memory of those poignant, yet unreal days? Perhaps it is unreasonable to expect this to be one of the great war novels, yet the niggle remains that it *could* have been.

Bates, however, has chosen to soften the scene, setting it in a corner of his beloved Kent countryside, and showing it through the eyes of a young girl, Elizabeth, who in her own way grows up alongside the young pilots from the nearby airfield. At first her home is requisitioned, but still war seems a long way away, a dashing romantic affair, peopled by gay young men with a new language. And there is still butter and eggs from the farm. Life is not too different.

Then as the shadow draws nearer, the pace hots up and the men drop out, one by one. War in the orchards, thick with fruit, is now a reality, that can send a German plane spinning to disaster, emptying its pilot into a quiet field, bloodied, torn and blackened, to move in the last agonising death throes circled by his enemies. Awakening at last from her torpor, Elizabeth plunges into war and into a brief immature marriage snatched between endless sorties that leave her husband beyond ordinary exhaustion.

Within its limitations this is indeed a moving novel that has captured the spirit and the knife-edge moods of the time, but it rarely soars above the level of a beautifully written magazine story.