

A Few Months of Infinity

A Moment in Time, by H. E. Bates (Farrar, Straus. 248 pp. \$4.50), looks back on the Battle of Britain and the young men in blue who would never be old. Eric Moon was a wartime member of the RAF.

By ERIC MOON

THE MOMENT in time that H. E. Bates has chosen to recall in this novel is that long interval of tragedy and heroism, now nearly a quarter of a century away, that the history books record as the Battle of Britain.

Elizabeth Cartwright and her grandmother, late survivors of the landed-gentry world of quiet elegance, find that world swept suddenly away as their 300-year-old family home is taken over by the Royal Air Force for an officers' mess. The grandmother—by far the most convincing character in the book—deals with, indeed dominates, the situation with her blend of salty humor, dogged courage, and natural wisdom. But Elizabeth, a sheltered nineteen, is whirled unprepared into the vortex of the madly death-gay world of young men in blue who would never be old. In a few lunatic months she grows up all too painfully fast, whizzing through hero-worship, recklessness, first love, marriage, and a close acquaintance with death, disaster, anguish, and bitterness—to a final

cloudy glimmering that this really isn't life but only a compressed interval in it.

Bates, a wartime Squadron Leader, knows his RAF, and his young pilots speak the authentic, incomprehensible language, full of "wizard prangs" and "good shows" and "bad types." But the sophomoric idiom, the heavy British understatement, and even the frequent reminders of daily deaths by the dozen are not enough to capture the heroism, the tragedy, or the spirit of Churchill's gallant few. They emerge in Bates's pages sounding and looking like refugees from a boys' adventure magazine.

A long time ago, Bates wrote some fine novels and short stories of rural England, somewhat in the Hardy manner but without the master's depth and passion. From those he careered downhill to larking with the Larkins in a series of rural farces. But even these latter had the merit of a certain earthy humor.

Now he has reverted to the style and content of his wartime "Flying Officer X" stories, which were never among his best work but which, then, had topical appeal. *A Moment in Time*, however, is no more than a romantic, sentimental episode from the past. It does nothing to interpret that past or give it real meaning for the reader of today who was not there. Even with Bates's fluency, style, and readability, nostalgia is not enough. We must continue to mourn the absence of those qualities that made him one of the most interesting British writers of the Thirties and Forties.

The Cosmos in a Kitchen

Bright Day, Dark Runner, by George Cuomo (Doubleday. 421 pp. \$5.95), the self-told tale of an itinerant artist-cook, displays "the ease with which life can deal its ironic blows." Edward Hickman Brown is a free-lance writer and critic.

By EDWARD HICKMAN BROWN

IF THE popular notion that it is the second novel which separates the real writers from the dabblers and also-rans is valid, welcome George Cuomo to the select group. *Bright Day, Dark Runner* is a rambling and unorthodox book, larger than life and wacky on the surface, but serious and thoughtful at the core.

It is the self-told tale of J.I. Le Blanche, wandering artist-cook, the implacable foe of restaurant managers and food supervisors, absolute dictator of the kitchen, both guru and supreme example to young, aspiring culinary artists, and constant searcher after the meaning of life and its relationships and loves and hungers and deprivations.

In short, pointed chapters he tells of the events during a summer spent as first chef at The Mariner, a fashionable Cape Cod resort hotel, pausing from time to time to bring the reader up to date on his own previous history. This interweaving of the hilarious adventures of The Mariner's hired help and paying guests with the grim tragedy of Le

Blanche's childhood and young manhood is sustained throughout the book. And it succeeds in creating a rounded, flesh-and-blood character, a compassionate and reasonable man who has achieved these qualities only by surviving the sufferings, hatreds, and conflicts of his own past.

Some years ago the British play *The Kitchen* (later made into an excellent film) clearly illustrated the dramatic possibilities of the insular domain of chefs, dishwashers, waiters, and waitresses. The Mariner's resort world, though broader, is sketched as vividly and serves as a wonderful backdrop for the author's examination of both the humorous and the tragic in that journey through the years we call a lifetime. In relating Le Blanche's peculiar parental history, the awful ending of his marriage, and his later relationship with his son, the ease with which life can deal its ironic blows is clearly shown. No respecter of institutional illusions, George Cuomo makes incisive judgments on such diverse facets of the American way of life as patriotism, unconscious prejudice, and eating habits.

This is by no means a perfect book. It is loosely organized, and the spacing of the flashbacks could probably have been improved. Also, Le Blanche is too frequently allowed to make self-conscious references to his own recording of the story. But these are minor faults; ultimately the novel succeeds in much more than the presentation of its major father/son guilt theme. This is in no



—Mark Gerson (Pix).

H. E. Bates—"nostalgia."