

WIZARD WAR

H. E. BATES: *A Moment in Time*. 248pp. Michael Joseph. 21s.

An attractive, uncomplicated girl of nineteen is the narrator in Mr. Bates's new novel. The time is 1940. England was never more lovely, the earth more bountiful. "The weather was wizard, as it was to be all summer . . . being young and alive and loved was the wizardest thing of all." Mr. Bates, from the heights of his present euphoria, turns the Battle of Britain into a gay summer frolic in a pastoral setting.

The young narrator does not tax him unduly. She is not the most imaginative of girls and her intelligence and literary abilities are no more than average. When the family house is requisitioned by the R.A.F. she falls understandably for the first man she sees with large moustaches. He is subsequently burned and mutilated to such an extent that weaklings faint on sight of him, but he remains a good friend and his gaiety is in no way impaired. The young lady marries his friend Splodge, who has "heartbreakingly", or sometimes just "painfully", young eyes. His death plunges her into mourning. But it has been clear from the start that the farmer's son she has known all her life has been standing by, prepared to wait for the happy ending.

Mr. Bates recalls with relish the air force slang, some of which has entered the language, though not perhaps to enrich it. It was an irrelevant, essentially exclusive, school-

boy's private language, aspiring neither to aptness nor to euphemism. It contributes something to the air of unreality that pervades the novel. "Bought it" or "gone for a Burton", are very odd ways of describing death: "had it", by comparison, is tersely to the point. The summer of 1940 was no doubt unreal to those who went through it, but the task of a novelist almost twenty-five years later is to see beneath the surface and make it less unreal—rather than to allow his nostalgia to make it more so. Those who were not there will have a strange idea of what these heroes and what that summer's anxieties were like. By evoking them in these cloyingly pastoral terms, with the "fresh, gay young gods" and the laughing girls in their flying skirts and pink brassieres, Mr. Bates relies almost entirely for his deeper effects on the honourable stock-responses of those for whom mention of *The Few* and *Our Finest Hour* can catch at every heartstring. Young people, who may share his faith in gaiety, could be told more about that bountiful summer. The nineteen-year-old girl is now a mature woman after all.

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