

Michael Ratcliffe

# Happiness to command

## THE VANISHED WORLD

BY H. E. BATES

(Michael Joseph 50s)

*The Vanished World* is the best thing H. E. Bates has given us in a long while—a beginning to autobiography virtually free of that overflushed sensuality which has flawed much of his more recent fiction. It is diminished only by sadly petulant swipes at the present day and by John Ward's pleasant drawings whose delicacy is quite irrelevant to the red-blooded text. The light shed by Bates's remembering may be golden, but it is sharp and clear for all that.

He was born in the red-brick leather country of Northamptonshire, land of the Nene and the Ouse and poor John Clare. In Rushden, in fact, a dim and undistinguished product of the later Industrial Revolution. Maternal grandfather made boots for Little Tich and then, in middle life, jacked it all in for five acres of tough, intractable English farmland on which he proceeded to sweat out the rest of his life. Paternal grandfather swanned off to Menton from time to time, then to Australia for good.. Father was

a gentle Methodist: Sunday could entail up to six sessions of worship and rarely less than four ("until hungry bellies rattled"). Young Bates, as you would expect from his fiction, gloried most in the harvest summers, "the massive suns", the fruit, the woods and the river banks. He was dull with books—until the Armistice released the male survivors for teaching once again:

If it is possible to change human vision, or at least to waken it by the stimulus or even shock of a single experience, then this is a perfect example of it. I do not think I am putting it to highly or too fancifully to say that in one morning in the autumn of 1919 I not only grew up; I grew into what I was to be. . . . "Write me", the young infantry officer said to us, "an essay on Shakespeare. I mean from your own point of view. Don't tell me he was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1564. I already know that. Don't tell me either that he wrote *Macbeth* or *The Merchant of Venice*. I already know that, too".

The spark caught, flared: encouraged by his passionate first love, Con, by discovery of Milton, the Authorised Version and the work of Stephen Crane, he began poems, a novel, stories. Declining Cambridge, he left

school, proved a disastrous asset to the *Northampton Chronicle* (due to an unwillingness to "ferret" among the people of Wellingborough) and an almost equal failure as clerk in a leather warehouse. He was sacked both times and went on the dole (1925). But in the warehouse he had written *The Two Sisters* and that, quite soon, was published. He was 20, had met his future wife, and there, for the moment, we leave him.

The evocation is precise and commanding; the characters ring across the years. There is no sadness, and little regret, for the passing of these scenes and these people, for they are remembered with humour and great love. It is, in fact, a marvellously happy book, the refined work of a man whose celebration of England must surely be relished by a far larger audience than he imagines. He has no need to alienate himself so crossly within his vanished world. The pleasure and value of such a memoir lies less in its ancient customs than in its basic responses and those of *The Vanished World* remain vigorous and applicably alive today.