

Pastoral perfick

By Valentine Cunningham

The Best of H. E. Bates
634pp. Michael Joseph. £5.95.
0 7181 1943 6

The best of H. E. Bates? With so much to choose out of the cornucopia of a lifetime's fictional stuff—twenty-five novels, a score and more volumes of short stories—some devotees are bound to want to argue about that. No one, though, is very likely to dispute that what's here does include revealingly good examples of Bates's most characteristic work: there is, for instance, one of the Uncle Silas stories; there are stories such as "The Simple Life", about a smoothly urban woman's conversion to the country and to sex in the country; and "The Little Farm", about an illiterate farmer's short-lived affair with a woman who answers his advertisement for help; and there is *The Darling Bud of Map*, first of the ribald Larkins novels. And only the most argumentative of Bates-fanciers would want to question the inclusion of the novella *The Triple Echo* (1971), one of the finest of Bates's later returnings to wartime themes; *The Purple Plain*, first of the great trilogy of novels that he wrote in the 1940s about Far Eastern theatres of conflict in the Second World War; and, of course, *The Wind for France* (1944), with reason thought by many to be the best British novel of the war.

What H. E. Bates does best, and what this superb selection aptly shows him best at, is satisfying his cravings for pastoral. Repeatedly he proves the delights that attend life in the pastoral, and, of course, the garden enclosed, shut off from discontents and disturbances. Take for example, the eternal summer of memory, where time is forever suspended in a Huck Finn boyhood. The blessed in Bates's fiction cannot only recall when their "eyes were yellor", "yeller as a guinea", but—like Uncle Crow in "Great Uncle Crow"—they can actually re-create those times. A model of avuncular beneficence on a Dickensian line, nicely lubricated by doses from his "neck-oil", Uncle Crow conjures up, for Uncle Boy the entrancing edible components of his own blissful past: watercress ("He found the watercresses in the bucket, cold in the shadow of the little house"), "the egg, the egg" ("Now you put the egg on the plate there and eat it, but put your nose inside that there basin and see what's inside"), spring-water, boil the egg, salt to "frost" the egg, and slices of "thick brown bread", "pastyed" with "summy golden butter": all nature's goodness, in fact; handed to the lad on a golden plate. "But not on a gold plate?", he inquires. But yes, for "the sun was a gold plate in the sky".

This generous artfulness with the powerful components of idyll has become, of course, so much the desired effect of had novelists and devisers of television advertisements for brown bread and such that better writers tend now to shy away from it. Happily, H. E. Bates had got into the swing of Uncle Crow's business before the spy-writers (and, for that matter, the television adapters of his own stories, whose work does rather blur into the golden margarita-purveyors' material) could deter his relish for it. He likes nothing better than creating the isolated space, the place islanded from trouble and war, within whose calm precincts love can live, feelings of time-of can reign, and recollections of childish innocence are inevitable. Escaping through France by bicycle in *Fair Stood the Wind*, the flyer Franklin rode sometimes with his feet on the handbars, as he had done when a boy, and was very happy."

The grace of such moments can be afforded under varying circumstances, just as some circumstances can mock the absence of that grace even as they evoke it. Franklin "persuaded himself, for one moment" that the freight train journey towards the Spanish frontier "was a holiday"; condemned to trudge through nightmarishly hot wastes in *The Purple Plain*, the airman Forrester thought "the picture was of some holiday scene, with

slightly distorted differences, taken at the seaside". Happiness comes to Franklin when he is shut up in a will and hissed under a tarpaulin in a rowing boat. The farm in *The Triple Echo* "was one of those small half-lost farms that are cut off from the main roads in summer by dense barriers of beech and chestnut and repeatedly in winter for snow to keep her AWOL" man to herself. But mainly Bates's blessed moments come in the rural out-of-doors amidst the agricultural fruitfulness of summer and early autumn.

June, July and August are Bates's particular months. He likes his fictions to be set and about when there's some chance of the day being the hottest one of the year. His pages gorge themselves on the sights and smells of peaches and apples, plums and strawberries, gooseberries and damsons. Wherever the fiction of Bates's pastoral is, he is zealously busy, touching and tasting and sniffing at things that grow—the yuccas in France, fragrant and lime and jasmine in Burma, the apples and pears that will remain forever English:

There was no break in the weather so that he and the girl the hot days, the dusk was smoky grey and the air was heavy and he could feel the sweat on the apples and pears that were still green and waxed, greasy and cented and twined with full ripeness. There were many trees of pears, one big and golden now, bending the long pear branches down so that they swung like ropes of solid yellow bells, and invisible in the green so that he and the girl trampled them underfoot. He went to pick them and eat them idly as he walked, thinking of Worcestershire where he had been ripe, too, in the late September weather, and he had eaten them often with their summery, juicy sweetness and the tartness of a black cherry.

Naturally, this abundance can on occasions seem overdone. We do not have to wait for the appearance of grapes or grape-juice ("It was partly sweet and very cool. Once he did not drink but let his lips sting in the glass, so that the coolness of it finally, and he lay down again, he let the wetness remain on the cracked dry skin") to start discerning the purple patch. But the lushness is always so that he and the girl live-savagely sometimes, as when Franklin picks them in country to cross a sugar beet field ("Going through will make a hell of a noise") or Forrester ekes out his water-supply by sucking pebbles ("He remembered Mrs Bartholomew's misadventure with an uncle, on a Suffolk farm, in harvest-time; and how in the August heat, in the dry eastern fields, the labourers had taught him to suck a pebble, to quench his thirst"). And the sprawling adjectives always sound convincingly precise.

Bates's eye always alights acutely on the object. The unseeing eyes of the imperceptive have, in fact, to be educated into the author's, the countryman's way of acute noticing. "Oh! no", Roger of "The Simple Life", a boy with "exceptionally bright" eyes, keeps correcting townie Mrs Bartholomew's misimpressions of marshland wildlife. And in their distinctly quiet way, Bates's adjectives prove continually as telling as Auden's best:

In the evening sun the shadow of the walnut tree lay on the dull stone house, darkening the grey frames of the windows that had not been painted for years. It lay across the surface of the pond crusted by duck-weed. It was heavy on rusted harrows lying deep in nettles by the barn, and on empty tarred dustbins made long ago of barrel staves, and on junk littered and forgotten under the broken roofs of faggot hovels. It seemed to subdue everything except one thing: Edna Johnson's light-yellow hair.

Bates is always working manifestly hard for the exact description. He will modify adjective by adjective. *Golden-pink, grey-green, green-pink, temp-purple, rosy-purple, green-white*: how these double-barrelled exquisites pile up. But his prose does not only accumulate its impressions, it keeps an confidently selecting, seeking out the sharpest of comparisons from the widest fields

of metaphorical possibility. Water lilies in "Great Uncle Crow" are "as big as china breakfast cups". There was so much ham in the rolls", in "The Major of Hussars", "that it hung over the side like pink spandrels' ears". In the heat of the *Purple Plain* a towel dries "to the unkindly roughness of a loafish hawk". Some poets have rested their main claim to distinction on being able to manoeuvre metaphor like that: but it is only a crowd of lesser poets who are crowded locker. Not that the power of metaphor is not, however, at the heart of Bates's pastoral. It is, for by it he keeps underscoring the force of his women as part of the natural world.

Bates is one of the most tenderly affectionate describers of desirable women in English literature (*tender, tenderly, tenderness* are, not surprisingly, among his most used vocables). He is a man who loves women of all sorts, and love to dress, as well as undress, women in all kinds of clothes. Bates is obsessed by cloth of every sort, especially cloth with a woman's body beneath it. But, noticeably, he does prefer his women dressed in green—the green skirt of Françoise in *Fair Stood*, the pale green blouse of Forrester's girl in *The Purple Plain*, the lime-green silk dress of Marjette in *The Darling Bud of Map*, the green of the Wild Cherry Tree. And these green-clad creatures become more beloved in the transformations wrought on them by Bates's metaphors. Like the fruits of the earth, they become good things to eat, their skin milky and creamy, their hair *coffee-brown*, their mouths plump as or like the strawberries they chew ("Mr Charlton looked up to see the lips of Marjette parted half in laughter, half in the act of biting into some glistening arc of lovely dark ripe flesh"). The eye of Françoise, open as she slept, "was like a black cherry held against her partly open fingers. Boorman's boorishness is evinced by his angry tipping up his wife's green dress; conversely, Mrs Boorman's idyllic love is evinced by the strange is enacted when she is discerned to be, as it were, an apricot. "It was suddenly he caught sight of the apricot dress."

Boorman seemed to her love "usually to be wearing a hat in fact she wore a myth". The staff of Bates's pastoral is, like that of all pastoral, a mythic, pre-lapsarian business; and that can never be sustained entire because our arts are all more or less fallen ones. In the case of Bates, a 1930s author who kept on writing into the 1970s, the Fall repeated itself many times. The *entree d'oeuvres* his writing grew up in threatened borders across which, in 1939, the world was violently shoved into yet more slaughter. And after the war, there descended a wintry greyness (as Bates perceives it) of socialism and taxation and the accelerated ruination of the land by petrol-driven machines, transistorised vulgarity, and barbarians in their weekend cottages. All of which, however, Bates also bravely acknowledges, sternly facing his gentle mythologies with the harder realities of our times.

So his fine pastoral enclaves keep being smashed apart. Sophie swims among the water-lilies, on a hot summer's day in "The Four Beauties", but drowns shortly after. All too soon the Military Police winkle "The Triple Echo" a deserting soldier out of his farm hide-away and, with mixed feelings, his beloved shoots him and his captor dead. Like Blare in *The Purple Plain*, Françoise's father commits a messy suicide ("the cushion, the revolver and the head were one: a mess of brilliant and bloody confusion"). Emmett, the crooked milkman of "The Little Farm", drives out the farmer's girlfriend with threats and cajolings. Blissfulness, in other words, it keeps an confidently selecting, seeking out the sharpest of comparisons from the widest fields

of metaphorical possibility. Water lilies in "Great Uncle Crow" are "as big as china breakfast cups". There was so much ham in the rolls", in "The Major of Hussars", "that it hung over the side like pink spandrels' ears". In the heat of the *Purple Plain* a towel dries "to the unkindly roughness of a loafish hawk". Some poets have rested their main claim to distinction on being able to manoeuvre metaphor like that: but it is only a crowd of lesser poets who are crowded locker. Not that the power of metaphor is not, however, at the heart of Bates's pastoral. It is, for by it he keeps underscoring the force of his women as part of the natural world.

Bates is one of the most tenderly affectionate describers of desirable women in English literature (*tender, tenderly, tenderness* are, not surprisingly, among his most used vocables). He is a man who loves women of all sorts, and love to dress, as well as undress, women in all kinds of clothes. Bates is obsessed by cloth of every sort, especially cloth with a woman's body beneath it. But, noticeably, he does prefer his women dressed in green—the green skirt of Françoise in *Fair Stood*, the pale green blouse of Forrester's girl in *The Purple Plain*, the lime-green silk dress of Marjette in *The Darling Bud of Map*, the green of the Wild Cherry Tree. And these green-clad creatures become more beloved in the transformations wrought on them by Bates's metaphors. Like the fruits of the earth, they become good things to eat, their skin milky and creamy, their hair *coffee-brown*, their mouths plump as or like the strawberries they chew ("Mr Charlton looked up to see the lips of Marjette parted half in laughter, half in the act of biting into some glistening arc of lovely dark ripe flesh"). The eye of Françoise, open as she slept, "was like a black cherry held against her partly open fingers. Boorman's boorishness is evinced by his angry tipping up his wife's green dress; conversely, Mrs Boorman's idyllic love is evinced by the strange is enacted when she is discerned to be, as it were, an apricot. "It was suddenly he caught sight of the apricot dress."

Boorman seemed to her love "usually to be wearing a hat in fact she wore a myth". The staff of Bates's pastoral is, like that of all pastoral, a mythic, pre-lapsarian business; and that can never be sustained entire because our arts are all more or less fallen ones. In the case of Bates, a 1930s author who kept on writing into the 1970s, the Fall repeated itself many times. The *entree d'oeuvres* his writing grew up in threatened borders across which, in 1939, the world was violently shoved into yet more slaughter. And after the war, there descended a wintry greyness (as Bates perceives it) of socialism and taxation and the accelerated ruination of the land by petrol-driven machines, transistorised vulgarity, and barbarians in their weekend cottages. All of which, however, Bates also bravely acknowledges, sternly facing his gentle mythologies with the harder realities of our times.

So his fine pastoral enclaves keep being smashed apart. Sophie swims among the water-lilies, on a hot summer's day in "The Four Beauties", but drowns shortly after. All too soon the Military Police winkle "The Triple Echo" a deserting soldier out of his farm hide-away and, with mixed feelings, his beloved shoots him and his captor dead. Like Blare in *The Purple Plain*, Françoise's father commits a messy suicide ("the cushion, the revolver and the head were one: a mess of brilliant and bloody confusion"). Emmett, the crooked milkman of "The Little Farm", drives out the farmer's girlfriend with threats and cajolings. Blissfulness, in other words, it keeps an confidently selecting, seeking out the sharpest of comparisons from the widest fields

tapped the genuine Keatsian intensities. After all, Keats himself was a noisy Cockney (sensationalist, not unkind then. And though the burping and the frank chat-about bowels, not to mention the menu chez Larkin—ice-cream, with jam and chips, ice-buns with tomato-sauce and lurid cocktails—might turn the better-bred stomach. "Pop", "Perfick", as he surveys his Paradise Garden and anticipates the fruit-picking, the June strawberries, the July cherries, the August apples and plums and pears, the September hops, seems just the right verdict.

Much against the prevailing odds, whether there are perturbing modern violences or loud Larkin uncouthness, the quiet strains of Bates's preferred rural world are continued. Bates is always paying tribute to survivors who cling fiercely to life—that crowd of women who trekked north to escape the Japs in *The Purple Plain*, or Forrester in the same novel who toughly carries the burned Carrington back to civilization ("I aware of a fierce kind of affection for the very livingness of the boy"). And despite everything working to the contrary, Bates makes trust and comradeship, love and tenderness—for which no one has a more delicate touch than he; the repeated silent scenes where male lovers softly touch or kiss the naked breasts of their female beloveds never fail to compel—makes these delicate scenes feature as well as worthwhile survivors. It amounts, of course, to a faith in the common humanity of ordinary people, "the little people" that *Fair Stood* "National Eff" is up for, the inhabitants of the "little" farms that lefty Franklin has to come acceptingly down among. It's a belief, too, in the importance of keeping up the humane tasks of the traditional novel. It is no accident that the lovers' long run to safety in *Fair Stood* the *Wind* should remind one so piercingly of Pip and Magwitch trying to escape by boat in *Great Expectations*—that journey where their love emerges triumphantly as they hold hands at last—not that when O'Connor performs his final act of self-sacrifice at the end of the same Bates novel he should be turning himself so movingly into a convincing latter-day Sidney Carton.

Turner Studies

HIS ART AND EPOCH

1775-1851

Edited by Eric Shanes

Published by The Mallord Press in association with the Tate Gallery

Number One now available

Contents:

'Turner and the Sea' by Luke Herrmann 'Turner and Yorkshire' by Evelyn Joll and other articles, book-reviews, and 'Pictures in Focus'.

This twice-yearly journal is devoted to the art of J. M. W. Turner and his contemporaries. It will publish commissioned material as well as articles and essays that have only appeared previously abroad. In addition, much historic material will also be reprinted. The journal will be produced to the highest art-historical and production standards with copious notes and illustrations.

Size: 64 pages per issue

Price: £6.00 per year (two issues) including p. & p.; overseas rate £16.00 or £8.00.

Subscriptions to: 40 Leytze Road, London W3 8AW.

Books in Progress

The Books in Progress register (formerly administered by National Book League) is an information service open to writers currently working on non-fiction works, including academic research.

★ Writers already working on a book or piece of research are invited to register their subject.

★ Writers considering a topic can make an enquiry in order to find out what work, if any, is being done in their particular field.

Further information and Registration and Enquiry Forms are available from Sally Hanson (reference 02), Arts Council Literature Department, 9 Long Acre, London WC2E 9LH.

Arts Council
OF GREAT BRITAIN