

A MONTH BY THE LAKE AND OTHER STORIES, by H. E. Bates.

Introduction by Anthony Burgess. New York: New Directions, 1987. x + 209 pp. \$17.95 cloth; \$8.95 paper.

An English reviewer writing in 1957 commented, "A society should be formed to see that H. E. Bates gets his due." Unfortunately, neither the reviewer nor anyone else followed through on that suggestion, with the result that Bates is still ignored by the British establishment and is little known in America.

Much to its credit, New Directions has issued the first of at least three planned volumes of Bates's short stories and novellas in its attractive "Revived Modern Classics" series. Probably no society to see that Bates gets his due will spring up, but perhaps more American readers will be won over to the cause of one of Britain's best story writers of the century.

There are seventeen stories in this collection spanning the years 1926-1972, but these dates are deceptive. In fact, eleven of the selections are from the decade 1951-1961, leaving only six to be divided among the rest of Bates's prolific career. His most fruitful period, the 1930's, is represented by a single story, "Time" (1934), and while it is highly characteristic of one type of Batesian story, it is a far cry from such masterpieces as "The Ox" (1939) and "The Mill" (1935). Nevertheless, no writer wants to be remembered solely for a handful of old chestnuts, and in this respect the present volume calls attention to a period when the British short story seemed in decline, even though Bates was still producing outstanding work.

Much of that work is here. "The Cowslip Field," for example, is as rich and beautiful a tone poem as Bates ever wrote, employing in a coil of hair what Burgess rightly refers to as Bates's "cunning symbolism." By contrast, "Elaine" is pared to essentials, working entirely by suggestion, sharp description, and dialogue. It typifies Bates's ability to make resonant fiction from the slightest materials. "The Evolution of Saxby" contains one of Bates's most memorable characters—a man who wants nothing more than a stable home but who is denied this by a wife whose career is buying, decorating, and reselling houses. As a representative of the anxious fifties, Saxby is a triumph; we could laugh at his neurotic defenses were he not so sympathetically drawn. "Country Society" combines quiet social satire with a wistful tale of adolescent innocence and middle-aged longing.

The editors were right to include a novella, for Bates excelled in this genre, especially during the fifties. One might wish that a more striking example had been selected, but "A Month By the Lake" exhibits many of Bates's best qualities—sure pacing, talent for sketching character, and control of tone. The theme, too, is typically Batesian, as two middle-aged and lonely people drop their pretenses and confront their growing mutual attraction. The mellowness of such stories accounts for much of their charm.

No ideal collection of Bates's stories yet exists, but this one has the advantage of providing a wide range of lengths and types, including two excellent examples of Bates's work as official short story writer for the Royal Air Force during World War II. The quiet strength, heroism, and patriotism of "Sergeant Carmichael" and "It's Just the Way It Is" contrast sharply with Rambo's histrionics.

Those yet unacquainted with Bates's work should pick up this attractive anthology, and teachers of modern fiction at last have an accessible and inexpensive collection of Bates's material for their classes. *New Directions* is to be congratulated for reviving Bates for American readers, who can anticipate another two such treats in the months to come.

Behrend College

DEAN BALDWIN