

INTRODUCTION

My first meeting with H. E. Bates was when I invited him to come over from the valley of the Nen to the valley of the Ouse, and during his visit I asked him to plant a lime tree. Though I was not then aware of it, nothing could have been more appropriate, for Bates is an enthusiastic gardener and has a lucky hand: all his plants grow luxuriantly and flower magnificently. So the lime he planted has flourished and flung out its branches, which in winter are tipped with fat wine-coloured buds that burst out into a light cloak of heart-shaped leaves in spring, while the rich clusters of honey-coloured, honey-scented blossoms follow at the beginning of summer. If the small white petals were broken cappings of wax and the depths of the flowers were cells of honey, the bees could not work in them more eagerly: there is such a buzz round the young lime that a hive seems to be swarming into it.

To my mind, Bates is very like the tree he planted: he writes easily and grows in importance every year, like the young tree that is going to take the place of an old decaying elm, and his stories have the sweet scent and the summer freshness of the lime blossom.

There are all kinds of individual beauty in literature; every writer who is worth anything at all has his own scent, which perfumes his stories and which people mistakenly call his style; though his style may vary according to the nature of his subject the scent remains the same. Thus one writer will smell of the village shop, of groceries, sawdust, soap and blue packets of sugar, another of the stacks of peat drying on a desolate moorland, a third of the crypt, full of caps and coats, in a boys' school.

Nothing is more foolish than to praise one good writer at the expense of another, or a greater waste of time than to try to arrange artists in order of merit. Thus, though I believe that Bates is undervalued by most critics, I shall not try to

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exalt him by depreciating others. I will only say that for me the characteristic odour of his stories is that of lime blossom on a fresh summer's morning, and that I can't think of anything more agreeable, or more delightful.

This collection of his stories has been chosen by himself from his already published work, and it begins with what I consider to be his masterpiece: 'Alexander.' That story appears to me to have a dewy freshness, not only of the subject but of the author's perceptions. It is a memory of childhood—or perhaps I should say that it is constructed out of memories of childhood, and though such reminiscences are the most vivid things in literature 'Alexander' can take its place with the most famous. Undoubtedly the boy in the cart is Bates, and the little pony, swishing its long tail, must have travelled one of the roads I know well, over that bit of country which is as lovely as Bates describes, by Yelden with its romantic Castle Hill to Newton Bromswold or Melchbourne. Somewhere on the edge of those woods you must go to look for the cottage with goats and geese grazing outside it where Annie Fell lived, and farther east, near Pertenhall, or even as far as Kimbolton, you can look for the green lawns, the decaying orchard and garden, where the Old Tit lived alone with her seven bitches and her white cat.

You will find the scene of many of the stories here in that bit of country on the east bank of the Nen, and it was in that river, of course, that the two old men, Will and Matthew, set their lines for eels one summer night. That story 'Fishing' could hardly be shorter and could hardly be slighter, but it is a complete and perfect little work of art, full of humour and containing a profound reflection on human life. Its subject and the music of its last line: 'But along the river-path nobody comes,' give it something of the quality of one of Waley's translations of Po-Chui-I.

I have not asked Bates, but it is more than likely that this was intentional, for it is impossible to read many of his stories

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without being reminded of other writers. Indeed, there is hardly a single story in which there is not a subtle reference to one of his favourite authors: to Tchehov, Turgenev, Tolstoy, Conrad, or Stephen Crane. If you have a good ear, you will catch a number of such allusions, for Bates has read a great deal, and never hesitates to adopt and adapt another man's methods for his own purposes. One of the things which strikes me, as a writer, most about Bates is that he seems to know and understand by instinct exactly what other writers are trying to do. This is one of the rarest qualities in an author, who is usually far too occupied by his own attempts to give a moment's attention to other people's efforts. Bates is thus, I believe, more conscious of his intentions, and more aware of what he is doing, than most writers. His one serious fault is that he is not as sensitive to words as he might be: a verbal clumsiness often mars a page which is otherwise aesthetically perfect. But there are signs that he is becoming increasingly sensitive in this direction. His conception of a story is very rarely, perhaps never, at fault.

That is not to say that his work is not unequal. It inevitably must be, for he is prolific of little things, since he has a lucky hand with the pen as well as with the trowel, and everything that he touches comes to something. That is a particularly happy disposition for the writer of short stories, it is, indeed, what makes him one. Tchehov was such a writer; sketches and short tales simply poured from his pen, and when we judge him we think of only his best work. The same standards must be applied to Bates, and you cannot do better, I think, than judge him from this volume of stories. But when you have judged him as a writer of short stories, remember that he has also several novels to his credit. The best of these, in my opinion, is *The Fallow Land*, a novel of an English farm which has an extraordinary solidity. And unlike so many novels about country people the characters are individuals: they are not mere types whose stolid stockish-

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ness masquerades as strength. Not all his novels have this rare quality—for individuals are rare in modern novels—but there are intensely living people also in his novel *Charlotte's Row*. And there is no living English writer of whose future work I feel more confident. It is not that I do not think that Bates may write another bad book or even a very bad book. But I feel that both his best and his worst work are still exercises, as all the works of an artist must be who is developing his powers. I do not anticipate great works of astonishing originality, for, to tell the truth, great originality is not the distinguishing feature of any of Bates's work. His great merit is his astonishing sensibility. His subjects are not new, nor are we shown them in an unfamiliar lighting, which can alter the aspect of ordinary things. What he succeeds in doing is to show them more clearly, more delicately and more tenderly than they have ever been shown before. There have been many painters with such a gift, but very few writers. Thus one can get an emotion from such an extremely simple story as 'Blossoms,' where Francie takes her stupid little son to school on the back of her bicycle, which is very rare in literature, but which is to be found in the work of many painters. There is something about that story in particular which reminds me of Renoir.

This collection, then, will enable many readers to form a better idea of the work of a particularly charming writer, but it will not, I am glad to say, permit them to pass a final judgment. While Bates is alive that will have to undergo continual and, I believe, an ever more favourable revision. There will be more blossoms on the lime next year, and more still the year after.

DAVID GARNETT.