

# Poachers and Seal Hunters

**The Poacher**, by H. E. Bates. London: Jonathan Cape. 7s. 6d. New York: Macmillan. \$2.50.

**The Seals**, by Monk Gibbon. London: Cape. 7s. 6d.

**S**MOOTH AND BEAUTIFUL PROSE is the distinguishing feature of Mr. Bates's new book. I use the word "book" rather than



H. E. BATES

"novel" because I believe Mr. Bates is not really a novelist. He can evoke the country scene superbly; the description of Luke, the Poacher's son, standing in the rain by a flooded river, instinctively looking for fish, but aware of the keeper lurking behind a hawthorn bush, sets the rhythm and sentiment for the rest of the tale.

That is the first of a series of scenes—they are scarcely even episodes—of which the book is made up. Through these scenes are communicated the feeling and being of the pure countryside. There is no earthy, growth-of-the-soil element. Spring blossoms delicately, the young corn miraculously appears, summer brings its warm meadows of hay, winter a dark silence and snow. The bare trees are full of stars, the country is deserted and the air is quiet. There are wild creatures, rabbits and birds, and there are the farm-yard hens, sheep, pigs and horses, but they are less entities than parts of a poetic pattern.

There is poverty, there are tragic happenings, and there is the thin, wavering line of country lives, but none of these things is colored by passion. It is the background, foreground and middle-distance to his characters in which Mr. Bates delights, the turn of the seasons and the external events forced on the characters by nature. There are few emotions. The Poacher's two aristocratic gypsy sisters, who ap-

pear briefly at the beginning and who suggest vivid promise, reappear only when time and circumstance have dulled and coarsened them. The pattern is, I think, all-important, and it has the cold beauty of a starlit night in winter rather than the warm, emotional development one expects to find in a novel.

Poverty follows hard on Luke's efforts to subdue the land. Married to a characterless wife, who took kindly to the new ideas brought by increasing industry and education, he found that suburban respectability and the poaching instinct were poor companions. As an old man Luke was solitary and an exile from his home.

Mr. Monk Gibbon has received high praise from "AE"—the letter is on the dust cover of "The Seals"—for the distinction of his prose. The ease of his writing, his imagery and choice of subject, suggest superficially a comparison with the work of H. E. Bates. He writes in a poetic strain and he achieves some good descriptions of coastal scenery in northwest Ireland. Unlike Mr. Bates, he has telescoped the time element, he introduces the country gentleman admirably, and he fails to present with any conviction the peasants and sailors of the neighborhood. Woven into the narrative are the threads of his private philosophical and mystical beliefs. Readers who do not ask for their descriptive passages neat may enjoy this. Others who would prefer to read about the grace and the supple skill of those inquisitive, melancholy and delightful creatures, the seals, without having to follow the unraveling of Mr. Monk Gibbon's mental knitting, easily may be provoked.

Mr. Monk Gibbon makes a sentimental appeal to his readers by describing a group of seals: they might have been "fellow souls brooding on the mystery of infinity. Or rather it is not infinity but life, birth, death and their common mystery that they meditate on; all the sadness and significance of life with ephemeral joy of warm summer days and equally ephemeral pain of icy blasts and lashed rocks in winter."

I think this early appeal to sentimentality is what makes his later descriptions of seal hunting so shocking. To make animals appear human and then to destroy them either for sport or necessity is harrowing. To destroy them may be necessary for the purpose of preserving fish; to write about such destruction may be the work of the artist; to sentimentalize introduces an entirely false note. E. M. V.