

MR. H. E. BATES

THE POACHER. By H. E. BATES. (Cape. 7s. 6d. net.)

The author of "The Poacher," it was affirmed in these columns less than a year ago (March 1, 1934), must be deemed to stand in the front rank of living English writers under thirty. It might have been at once more caecid and no less precise to have declared him frankly and without further qualification the occupant of a place of his own among our contemporary novelists and short-story writers of whatever age, though neither in justice to him nor in deference to plain fact must the matter of his relative youth be entirely overlooked. If Mr. Bates should write no more, still something of his, if only a handful of short stories, would stand as a contribution to current literature unique in its own kind.

To suggest this assurance in his short stories above his novels is not to diminish the latter in the least, at any rate so far as his later work is concerned. He is, from whatever cause, a primarily lyrical writer, and his impulse has so far found its purest though not necessarily its fullest expression in his briefer fictions. His total qualities may nevertheless be as well or better studied in his maturer novels, and perhaps nowhere so aptly as in his newest and maturest story "The Poacher." It is in almost all respects a highly typical piece of its author's work, as fresh and in parts as moving as anything he has written, but with no surprises. It is the history of a poacher from his youth in the early 'eighties until after the War, the span practically of "The Fallow Land." The setting is the same as in all Mr. Bates's novels and most of his other work, the valley country of Eastern Northamptonshire. But, again as in all his work, neither period nor topography is intrusive. The reader is made to realize the past from the most incidental remarks or passing details of costume; similarly, while some of the descriptions (especially of the countryside) are beautiful in their precision, principally the book is a study of a man. Luke Bishop may draw his early fecklessness from a feckless environment, but his country longings are bred in the bone. Buck Bishop, piecemeal shoemaker and the most skilful of poachers, is his father and hero, and their night expeditions together are the bright adventures of his youth. These adventures and Buck in his role as trainer of young running or boxing hopefuls are described at some length with a fine vigour and freshness. So too, is Luke's flight from a dead keeper, pursued by police but taking refuge on a remote farm, where he finds a wife with whom he returns home to set up as a smallholder on the edge of the town. Thenceforward comes an increasing foreshortening of events. Two or three years have occupied nearly two hundred pages, the next forty will fill barely a hundred more. Their story is one of Luke's growing loneliness—his strong-willed wife developing her own career and moving apart from him, his daughters learning to despise him. Only with his son-in-law Walter and presently his grandson Edward has he any community of spirit; and even this is frowned upon by the womenfolk who see him but as bringing disgrace upon the family by a recrudescence of his old habits leading him to prison and thereby to dis-possession of all that still makes his life worth living.

It is all, as a whole, admirably told, with vivacity, spontaneity of incident, sensitiveness in understanding, clear character-portrayal and consistent power of evocation. Everything, in the telling, appears adequate and natural. A living relation is established between the characters in the very tones as well as the terms of their dialogue. They are all, even Luke, objectively viewed, and what is not beside the point, they are also all simple characters, instinctive rather than intellectual creatures, and none ever more than momentarily self-conscious. They live in moods and scenes, which is, save for brief linking passages, the story's mode of progression.

These are the common qualities of the bulk of Mr. Bates's stories and novels. From what is said of "The Poacher" both the merits and limitations of the rest of his work should be deducible. It is not to be blinked that he is, in his published work, a limited writer. The simplicity of his characters has been noted, as has been too their detachment from period and place. Countrymen close to the soil, artless girls or domestic women, children—these are his favourite and most convincing types, beings of small horizons for whom the death of a mare or the fall of a tree at the bottom of the garden is more than they will ever read in the newspapers. Even his town-dwellers in the slum of "Charlotte's Row" are instinctive countryfolk at heart, cheated of their heritage by forces they do not and in the main make no effort to understand. Mr. Bates has never drawn a fully conscious man, or even, persuasively, a markedly educated one. In the result the modern world, as such, can scarcely be said to exist in his pages. His world is in the main hardly more than a narrow strip of lovely South Midland countryside, set with some pleasant villages and an ugly town or two. To this one can add, from the short stories, but the briefest glimpse or two of a detestable London and again of an idyllic Rhineland. Politics, even the War, are matters heard afar off. All these things are limitations—they are not necessarily defects. Whether they are or are not the latter, must depend upon their origin in strength or weakness. It would be quite plausible to urge their birth directly from an unwavering poetic instinct for essentials, to argue that Mr. Bates

writes of common men because he is concerned with the most universal emotions, and deliberately avoids the quality of contemporaneity because he would not obscure the unchanging issues of birth and love and death, the ceaseless pattern of mortality, by interweaving with them the irrelevant because passing preoccupations of this year or that. Men and women are born, and live their lives, and grow old and die; their true analogue is not the counting of the office calendar but rather the eternal recurrence of the seasons from winter to winter, each cycle beginning anew as if those before had never been.

The field lay rough and fallow, without a furrow turned. It looked to him just as it had looked in his father's time, as though it had never been touched, the same old field difficult to plough and worse to reap, never worth the trouble of seed or harvest.

Some such vision does undoubtedly lie at the root of all Mr. Bates's writing. It is the frame of his picture of life, obvious in the very schemes of "The Poacher" and "The Fallow Land" and some of the short stories from "Day's End" forward, and implicit in many more. In "The Two Sisters" the river which may be said to bring life and love to Tessie and Jenny brings cheating death also. In Catherine Foster it is under the direct shadow of death that Catherine's "longing for escape, for something beautiful and different in life," unrestrainedly bursts her bonds and plunges her into her affair with her husband's brother which is the book's main incident; while in "Charlotte's Row" the connexion is less obvious it is undoubtedly present. The death of young Adam's grandmother and Pauline's return to the slum seem more than coincident; they are, in a deep sense, identical. The bird of life has fluttered against the bars of its cage, but there is no escape.

It is a tragic vision of existence, but also a humanizing one. We meet a thousand men upon the road to Death and they all are our brothers. Mr. Bates recognizes the tragedy, but acquiesces, finding beauty at once in its universality and inevitability. Sometimes, it may be felt, especially in relation to his earlier work, the acquiescence is too easy; the suspicion arises that he has not himself faced imaginatively the situation into which he thrusts his characters. The beauty, too, is not always devoid of the taint of facility, having on occasion an air of being draped about rather than derived from the essential conception. One finds something of both these defects in, for example, the last chapter of "The Two Sisters." But just as they are most prevalent in the earlier work, so one feels them to be in the main the probably passing weaknesses of an inevitable immaturity. There is, in the later writing, short stories and novels alike, a notable increase in imaginative austerity; there is in that superb little study, "The Gleaner," scarcely a superfluous word or image. Even more striking has been the development of character; the ultimate test of imaginative reality in any form of fiction. It is a long step from the shadowy figures shifting at their author's whim across the blurred word-tapestry of "The Two Sisters" to the clear-cut autonomous individuals of "The Poacher," and it is a most hopeful sign that each book between has marked an evident pace forward. The development is only less apparent in the short stories; there was, to say no more, no Uncle Silas in either the "Day's End" or "The Black Boxer" volume, nor more than a first intimation of him in the Alexander story of "Seven Tales and Alexander."

Mr. Bates's basic intuition, we have intimated, is tragic, but also human. By very reason of his knowledge, his sense of the brightness and activity and even humour of life is heightened. His tales may sometimes be sad—they are seldom gloomy. They can be—and it is a vein he seems to work increasingly—really funny without losing, as farce does, human reality. There is in "The Poacher" no lack of lively scenes—the opening eviction, Buck Bishop and the woman at the inn, Buck as trainer, Luke and his aunt, Luke and the farmer Thompson, and presently Luke and his grandson. None of these is specifically comedic, but the salt of a living humour born of clash of character is in each one. In some of his best short stories—"The Lily," "The Woman Who Had Imagination," that oddly pleasing trifle "Innocence"—the comedy is one of the conditions of their moving beauty.

In the past nine years Mr. Bates has published as many volumes; and he is not yet thirty. Clearly he stands scarcely more than at the beginning of what promises to be a highly productive career. His progress so far has been steady, his prospect never so bright as to-day. He remains, in the sense we have sought to define, a limited writer, but whether that be a matter of conscious or instinctive choice his roots are in sound soil, his inspiration is authentic. He may in the course of time and growth discover the necessity to transcend those limitations, to turn from lyric to what may be called by contrast epic expression, and to more complicated, if not more final, fields of interest. There are signs in "The Poacher" that he will not lack at least some of the needful capacities, either social understanding (see pages 240 and 241) or power of construction, for the book is, though we think oddly, yet accurately proportioned. If he can grow thus, in his own good time his future development should prove even more remarkable than his past has been.

Dent's announcements for February include an anthology entitled "Out-of-Doors" with Jefferys, compiled by Eric Fitch Diglish. The volume forms an addition to the editor's "Open-Air Library."