

## NEW NOVELS

- The Beauty of the Dead.** By H. E. BATES.  
*Cape. 7s. 6d.*
- Welsh Short Stories.** Selected by GLYN JONES. *Penguin Books. 6d.*
- The Parents Left Alone.** By T. O. BEACHCROFT. *Lane. 7s. 6d.*
- The Battlers.** By KYLIE TENNANT. *Gollancz. 9s. 6d.*

Everyone who has had connections with the book trade knows that books of short stories are infallible worst-sellers. The people who come into lending libraries in search of "a nice book" almost invariably declare that they "don't like short stories." Questioned as to their reasons, they usually allege sheer mental laziness. It is too much trouble, they say, to make the acquaintance of a fresh set of characters with each story; they like a long book which they can "get into" and which demands no thought whatever after the first few pages. This explanation is perhaps valid so far as it goes, but if that were all the unpopularity of the short story might be no more than an instance of the worthlessness of majority opinion, like the almost universal preference for crumpets as against muffins. But it is a fact that people who are not afraid of mental effort also dislike short stories, that in any highbrow magazine the short story, if any, is the item one's eye skips as automatically as it skips the advertisements, and that in the nearly twenty years since Lawrence published *England my England* very little has been written in this line that has even seemed worth reprinting. Something has gone wrong with this *genre*, in which the Anglo-Saxon races once seemed to be especially gifted. It is worth trying to indicate the reasons.

I have in front of me three collections of short stories. *The Parents Left Alone* is at a lower level than the other two, but all three have the distinguishing marks that one has come to expect in any English short story that is not specifically a "thriller." The first of these is a sort of flatness and greyness, something that is perhaps best described as *low pressure*. One would expect a short story to be more lyrical and highly-coloured than a novel, just as one expects the hundred yards to be run at a faster speed than the mile, but in fact almost all contemporary short stories are remarkable for their avoidance of emotional high-lights and for being written in a deliberately "unsophisticated," oversimplified style, the "and then he went on and came to another place" manner of writing. This tiresome affectation of childishness is particularly marked in the Welsh short stories, and most of all in those translated from the Welsh. The other peculiarity of modern short stories is that nothing ever happens in them. Whatever else they are, they must never be stories. There is no vulgar "plot," no denouement, no surprise at the end. However significantly they may hint in the first page or two that some vast event is about to happen, one starts them with the same expectation of being cheated as when one goes into a sideshow at a fair. It is a certainty that the mermaid will turn out to be a stuffed dugong and the Tattooed Lady will not take all her clothes off. Nearly always the formula is the same: a pointless little sketch about fundamentally uninteresting people, written in short flat sentences and ending on a vague query. "Mrs. Whitaker parted the lace curtains above the geranium. The car was disappearing into the far distance." "You're a good kid," he whispered. Their lips met. But Maisie was thinking that they'd have to pawn Danny's dinner suit if the rent was to be paid this week." There seems to be a sort of cult of pointlessness and indefiniteness, quite possibly covering, in many cases, a mere inability to construct a "plot." The spirit of Katherine Mansfield

seems to brood over most short stories of the past twenty years, though her own work is almost forgotten.

But now consider for a moment the short stories, English and American, of earlier periods. Naturally everyone's list of "the best" stories would vary, but I think the following list would be accepted as a very good one: *The Premature Burial* (Poe), *A Little Dinner at Timmins's* (Thackeray), *The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburgh* (Mark Twain), *Baa Baa, Black Sheep* (Kipling), *The End of the Tether* (Conrad), *A Slip Under the Microscope* (H. G. Wells), *The Dead* (James Joyce), *England my England* and *The Fox* (D. H. Lawrence), *Rain* (W. Somerset Maugham). These stories are very different from one another, but they are still more different from the neutral-tinted, eventless kind of story in which Mr. H. E. Bates excels. Of the ten tales in this list, two are wild burlesque, one a shocker, one a hair-raiser, and two are tear-jerkers. Most of them do not despise the old-fashioned "plot"—*The Fox*, for instance, has a plot that could have been used by Edgar Wallace—and some of them are too long to be printed in any contemporary magazine. Several of them ramble away from their subject in a way that would now be considered unpardonable, and all of them have a sort of gusto, an air of having been written by men who did not care whether their stories stopped at a thousand words or swelled into full-sized novels. Moreover they were all written by men who were either completely sure of their public or who took financial failure for granted, and none of them is much less than twenty years old. One can perhaps conclude that the present is an exceptionally unfortunate period for the short story. It is a form suited to more spacious times, when spirits are higher, money more plentiful, magazines fatter and leisured readers more numerous.

Of the kind of short story that I have been unfavourably criticising, Mr. H. E. Bates is a competent producer, probably the most competent we have. You can see all his strength and weakness in the first story in his book, which is probably the best. It is about an old cabinet-maker with an artistic passion for furniture who is letting his wife die slowly of neglect on a diet of weak tea and cold rice pudding. The wife has a passion for china, to match her husband's passion for furniture. As she lies dying in her unwarmed bedroom he is downstairs at work on her coffin, and making a lovely job of it. It is his way of loving her; she understands that, and protests as strongly as he against the idea of bringing in proper medical assistance. The story ends with the woman's death and her husband's decision to line her grave with the porcelain tiles that she used to be so fond of. That is all—no story, properly speaking, only "atmosphere" and "character interest." The other pieces in the book are similar, though one, about a girl who marries a man with a wooden leg, chiefly out of pity, is somewhat more like a story than the rest. The Welsh stories are by a dozen different hands, but they are curiously alike, with the usual Welsh local colour (the corpse motif is well to the fore), except for one story by Dylan Thomas, who is only by origin a Welshman and is untinted by nationalist sentiment. Mr. Beachcroft's stories are simply an attempt to do at a "popular" level (the old lady discusses the ups and downs of life over her pint of stout, etc., etc.) the same thing as Mr. Bates does with a touch of distinction. Probably they are not worse than the contemporary average. But oh! for the days of O. Henry and W. W. Jacobs, when even the most banal story had a beginning, a middle and an end and a surprise in the last paragraph was not considered too horribly vulgar.

*The Battlers* is a very long novel about Australia, a description which makes it sound much duller than it is. Even a really bad novel about Australia might be acceptable if it gave a truthful picture of local conditions, but *The Battlers* is not a bad novel. It is clumsily written, perhaps, and spoilt in places by a feminine coyness about bad language, but it is sincere in feeling all through, and about all its subject-matter is new and extremely interesting. It is about a class of people whom hardly anyone in England can ever have heard of, the Australian rural unemployed, the families who travel to and from in ramshackle buggies and caravans, stealing sheep from the farmers and occasionally eking out their dole with odd jobs at sheep-shearing or fruit-picking. Effectively they are tramps, but, since they are in a richer and more democratic country, far less abject and poverty-stricken than their opposite numbers in England. They have many of the characteristics of nomads—the love of fighting and tendency to drunkenness, the hatred of authority and contempt for the settled agriculturist. The author claims that they represent the true Australian type and that they are coming more and more to resemble the aborigines, with whom they apparently mix and intermarry to some extent. What she unfortunately does not tell us is what proportion of the Australian population these spirited outcasts represent. But this is a novel well worth reading; were there a few more of the same quality our ignorance of the Dominions would not be so deep as it is. GEORGE ORWELL

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