

# Books of the Times

By CHARLES POORE

HEMINGWAY once said that courage was the ability to show grace under pressure. You can apply that definition in peace or in war, or in the desperate combination of both that so many people of our day have had to endure, with or without grace—people such as those in H. E. Bates' beautifully written and skillfully planned new novel, "The Jacaranda Tree."\*



H. E. Bates

There were eleven of them, all told, at the start. One was Paterson, a maverick young Englishman who generally preferred the Burmese people to his own. Another was a beautiful and devoted native girl. A couple of couples—the colonial patrician Portmans and the colonial plebeian Bettasons—make six. Then there was Brain, the retired major, and old Mrs. McNairn and her perpetually eligible daughter, and the na-

The wide world over, there have always been colonies of people who on purpose or by lazy chance stayed pretty much aloof from the lives of the natives around them.

You do not really need to go to Burma or the Heart of Darkness to find them—you can find authentic examples, possibly, within areas considerably nearer New York. Think what a commotion there would be if all the villagers in America suddenly decided to throw the week-enders and the summer visitors out of their countryside.

In Burma's exotic setting it is all no more and no less real. Mr. Bates' background is full of jungles and temple bells, but the people in his foreground are usually far from exotic. They have depressingly recognizable tendencies to split up into cliques and causes, to pass on the knocks they have received from those above them to those who are below.

One of the slighter mysteries of Mr. Bates' novel is how he ever managed to find a group of people who apparently had so little use for tobacco. There's less nicotine in this book than in any we have read for a long time. In the aftermath of an accident, for example, when one of them needs very badly to make a fire; she does not look around much for matches—she just uses her eyeglasses to focus the rays of the dependably scorching Burmese sun, just as Mr. Bates focuses each character's capacity for grace, or the absence of it, in their journey's days of wrath.

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## —Quotation Marks—

On skepticism, from "Human Knowledge," by Bertrand Russell (Simon & Schuster): "Skepticism, while logically impeccable, is psychologically impossible, and there is an element of frivolous insincerity in any philosophy which pretends to accept it."

On reading, from "The Theory of American Literature," by Howard Mumford Jones (Cornell): "As a reader I think that books are made for men, not men for books; that we read for direct pleasure, for simple statement; and that except in university reviews the human animal takes the printed page calmly and not as a problem in casuistry."

On gullibility, from "Three Thousand Years of Espionage," by Kurt Singer (Prentice-Hall): "Most gullible of all groups which the Cominform taps for information is the native-born fellow-traveler. This segment of the population is composed of people taken in by Communist slogans about 'democracy'; of people deluded by the fantastic reports of human progress in Russia and affiliated countries; of liberals, humanitarians and do-gooders who are impelled by their impatience with social progress in America, and of intellectuals—the Allan Nunn Mays—who should know better but believe the great dream of the commonwealth of man they see in the Communist system justifies the betrayal of their own land and people."

tive girl's younger brother, and Miss Allison, the Eurasian forever suspended between two worlds.

That's the lot, and Mr. Bates does minor wonders with them, showing how each showed—or lacked—fortitude in the historic retreat from Burma. On that rough road to India some died, some turned back, some got across the final symbolic bridge. After you have read the opening chapters of their angry and perilous odyssey you might try guessing ahead of time how each will come out. Your reviewer tried that, and was spectacularly wrong in all instances, first to last.

## Plays Fair With Reader

Yet Mr. Bates is not at any point trying to trick you, really—though there might be a faint, unworthy suspicion of that when he seems to be setting the stage for a standard-brand liaison. (One of those in which you feel pretty certain that you'll encounter that tired but deathless line: "We can't just go on like this—something's bound to happen.") In general, he plays fair, all the way.

Without moralizing, he shows one aspect of the decline and fall of empire in the latitudes of Kipling and of Maugham. A number of these people had spent the better part of their lives in Burma, supporting the white man's burden until it was removed from their shoulders as violently as their ancestors had assumed it. And no one enjoys running for his life, no matter where he lives.

All this is by now a fairly antique theme, but Mr. Bates brings a fresh satiric talent to it, tempered with compassion and understanding.

\*THE JACARANDA TREE. By H. E. Bates. 299 pages. Little, Brown. \$2.75.