

TEACHER AND PUPIL

H. E. BATES: *Edward Garnett*. Max Parrish. 6s.

Edward Garnett, son of Richard Garnett, husband of Constance Garnett, and father of David Garnett, was born in 1868 and died in 1937. He had been the friend and mentor of some distinguished writers, notably Conrad and Galsworthy, and when, in 1921, he was engaged by the newly founded firm of Jonathan Cape as a reader, he had exceptional ability, experience and prestige. His life proved that the work of a literary adviser, although unattended by public recognition or notable financial rewards, can be creative as well as discriminating. It happened that Garnett's devotion to literature was unaccompanied by any outstanding talent for writing, and he gave himself to the service, and the training, of other writers.

Mr. H. E. Bates, in the early stages of his literary career, submitted a manuscript to the firm of Jonathan Cape and was lucky enough to find himself being coached by Garnett. He has now had the happy idea of commemorating their association. It would perhaps have been better to indicate this in the title, or in a subtitle, since the little book is as much about himself as about his trainer. Mr. Bates's portrait-sketch of Garnett is lively and lifelike. He conveys a true impression of Garnett's physical presence and habit, and of his performance as literary mentor to a much younger man; and he gives a fresh and candid account of that young man's ordeal.

The ordeal began early in 1926, when Mr. Bates, a tenderfoot from the Midlands, came up to luncheon in a London restaurant with his prospective publishers. The party was joined by "a semi-patriarchal, semi-dialectical figure in a floppy cloak-like overcoat" who had "grey jowl-like cheeks that quivered ponderously like the gills of an ancient turkey." Spectacles with thick lenses made this person look "quite frightening," and he "staggered about for some moments like a great bear unable to recall the steps of a dance he had just begun." This is not caricature, but a fine feat of word-painting. Later, in the Garnett phronteristics at Oxted

and Pond Place, and by correspondence, Mr. Bates received an important part of his literary education, much kindness and entertainment, and detailed literary advice and help. He does not always err on the side of modesty, but any possible objection that he has unduly obtruded himself into what is ostensibly a portrait of Edward Garnett can be met by commending his courage in reproducing some of Garnett's harsher charges against him—for example, of facility, padding, insensitiveness, and plagiarism. These charges were in any case outweighed by Garnett's pleasure in fostering Mr. Bates's talents.

Mr. Bates calls himself "an intuitive and sensuous and not a thinking writer." It certainly appears that the precision with which, at his best, he describes what his senses perceive tends to diminish when he writes more generally. He seems unduly troubled about what he calls "coteries," and speaks of treachery, cynicism and ingratitude in "modern literary society." Nothing could be better than the "sensuous" choice of words with which he evokes Garnett as "that puffy, asthmatical, glinting bear," but a more thinking writer might have been more cautious in portraying Garnett as so legendary a hero. It is imprecise, for instance, to say that Garnett read "scores of manuscripts" each week. That would have been impossible, and even if possible would have been unnecessary.

Then, is it "unquestionable" that during the whole of his long career as a reader Garnett's instinct and judgment never failed him? In fact he had his blind spots, and some of his swans were only geese. Furthermore, it is ineffect to represent him as having been a kind of dictator in the firm of Jonathan Cape, and to do so is hardly fair to the firm. A publisher's reader, however inspired, only serves his employers in an advisory capacity, and Garnett's employers have not been devoid of initiative, judgment or that flair without which a publisher can hardly succeed. Yet when all this has been said Mr. Bates must be allowed to have written a valuable, entertaining and grateful account of his friendship with an exceptional man of letters.