

## PREFACE BY HENRY MILLER

It was only a little over a year ago that I came across H. E. Bates' work; up until then I had never even heard his name, strange as this may sound. I blush now when I read that he is the author of forty or more books, has been translated into a dozen or more languages, and that 'his reputation in America, Australia and New Zealand equals, and in some cases surpasses, that in his own country.'

Perhaps I would never have heard of him had I not been laid up with chills and fever in the Hotel Formentor, Mallorca, where I was quartered during the Formentor Conference. Having nothing to read I asked a friend to go to the bookstore in the lobby and select something light, gay, amusing for me. My friend returned with a copy of *A Breath of French Air*. He said nothing about knowing the author until some days later when I told him how much I had enjoyed the book. A little later, at some airport, I picked up *The Darling Buds of May* and *Fair Stood the Wind for France*. The last named impressed me deeply and made me wonder why I had never heard of the author. It struck me as being the only good novel I had read about World War II.

In a way Mr Bates is the very opposite of what I look for in an author. There is certainly little relation between his manner of writing and that of Celine or Blaise Cendrars, my favourites among contemporary writers. (Both dead now, alas.) On the other hand, I do find a kinship between Bates and Jean Giono, whose work I adore. I ought to add - like whom I wish I could write.

One of the great joys for a writer is to find a fellow writer who, because he is so different, captivates and enchants him. To find a writer whose work he will read even if he is warned that it is not one of the author's best.

In general I must confess that I seldom fall for the work of a popular writer. Had I lived in Dickens' time, for example, I doubt that I would have been one of his devoted readers. As for the successful writers of our own time there is hardly one

I can think of off hand whom I have any desire to read. It demands an effort for me to read a modern novel, and an even greater one to read a short story. I make exception for the short stories of J. B. Singer, the Yiddish writer. And Mr Bates is supremely a novelist and short-story writer. He is, moreover, a rather conventional one.

After all that has been written about this author it seems rather unimportant that I add my tribute to him. Certainly he needs no further words of praise, and praise, I am afraid, is all I can summon. I assume that the reason I have been requested to write this preface to his collected short stories is because the coupling of our two names will seem highly incongruous both to Mr Bates' readers and my own. I know that I have a reputation for being highly critical of, perhaps even unfair to British authors. On the other hand, it should not be overlooked that the one author (still alive) for whom I have an undying admiration is John Cowper Powys, and that I regard his novel, *A Glastonbury Romance*, as the greatest novel in the English language.

If Mr Bates were a painter I think I could express my views about his work much better. Last night I lay awake trying to pick out the painter with whom I sought to identify his writing. No single painter whose work I know seemed suitable. I thought of Renoir and Bonnard, of Breughel the elder and others. I think that if I were to find one it would be a Flemish painter. The reason is obvious.

Whether it be the short story or the novel, Mr Bates always finds time for lengthy descriptions of nature, descriptions which in the hands of a lesser writer would seem boring or out of place. He dwells long and lovingly on things which years ago would have driven me mad. I mean such things as flowers, plants, trees, birds, sea, sky, everything in short which meets the eye and which the unskilled writer uses as so much window dressing. Indeed, it is not only the unskilled writer who is guilty of mis-handling description. Some of the greatest novelists of the past were flagrantly guilty of doing just this, and more particularly British writers. With Mr Bates this fault has been made into a virtue. The reader falls upon these lengthy passages like a man athirst.

There is another virtue which goes hand in hand with the

above-mentioned one, and that is the author's feeling for women. His women are always females first and foremost. That is to say, they are fully sexed: they have all the charm, the loveliness, the attraction of the flowers he knows so well. With a few deft strokes – like a painter again – we are given their peculiar grace, character and utter femininity. Not all of them, naturally, for he can also render the other kind of woman just as tellingly.

And then there is *this* element which crops up again and again, I find – an obsession with pain. Pain stretched to the breaking point, pain prolonged beyond all seeming endurance. This element is usually called forth in connection with heroic behaviour. Perhaps it is the supreme mark of the hero, this ability to endure pain. With Mr Bates I feel that it goes beyond the point of the heroic; it carries us into some other dimension. Pain takes on the aspects of space and time, a continuum or perpetuum which one finally questions no longer.

But no matter how much one is made to suffer, one closes his books with a lasting sensation of beauty. And this sense of beauty, it seems to me, is evoked by the author's unswerving acceptance of life. It is this which makes his flowers, trees, birds, skies, whatever it be, different from those of other writers. They are not merely decorative, they are not showily dramatic: they exist, along with his characters, his thoughts, his observations, in a plenum which is spiritual as well as physical.

There is one other quality which must endear him to every reader and that is his sense of humour. It is a full, robust humour, often bawdy, which I must confess the British writer seems to have lost in the last few centuries. It is never a nasty humour, so common to American writers. It is clean and healthy, and absolutely infectious.

What surprises me most about this man's work is the fact that only one or two of his books have been made into films. Despite the abundance of descriptive passages which I spoke of, there is drama in all his work. Drama and dialogue. Good, natural dialogue which, if transferred to the screen, would need no adaptation.

I realise at this point that I have said little or nothing about the short stories themselves. Aside from a few very short ones I find them all absorbing. Meanwhile I look forward with great relish to eating my way through the thirty odd books of his

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which I have yet to read, especially those containing his novellas, a form which clearly suits him best, as it did one of my first idols, Knut Hamsun. But I am sure that whatever Mr Bates gives us will always please me.

HENRY MILLER

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