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THE RATE FOR THE JOB

By H. E. BATES

[A young author writing to the Society of Authors remarks: "Is there not a matter of real importance for the profession in this general question of literary work done for a public department? The tendency of public departments to call on authors and journalists to write pamphlets and booklets giving information to the public about what particular departments are doing, popularising particular services or aspects of local and national governments, seeking public co-operation in various schemes, and so on, is increasing and will probably go on increasing after the war. It seems to me that a completely new class of professional relationship is coming into being for authors in this respect, a relationship between the author and some public department which will give him a fairly free hand, will have very little notion as to how he ought to be paid, will not employ authors often enough to acquire guiding experience and will be most accustomed to doing business on semi-contract terms with specifications. To a public department, an author is simply a man who is called in to do a job, rather like a very refined—or not so very refined—version of the man who comes to mend the typewriter or the heating apparatus. He is taken to a surprisingly liberal extent at his own estimate in the matter of the value of what he does, though, if the department is left to itself, it is liable to price his wares much too low. Much the same considerations will apply to authors given jobs by firms, political parties and other organisations.]

"Can the Society of Authors not begin to develop a policy with regard to this new class of professional relationship? The difficulty, of course, is that each case is different and involves special considerations; and the Society can deal only with fairly tangible general principles. I feel that it is not so much a problem of exact definition of rates of pay, but rather of inventing some sort of way in which it can be conveyed in a general sense to people who have no experience of the matter, that literary work really is as slow and laborious and highly specialised as it is, that fairly high rates of payment for the produce of such work, when surrendered outright, are no swindle, and that the author is a much rarer kind of specialist than the surgeon or the barrister and should not be paid less generously. I think it is not a matter of precise negotiations but of creating a proper tone and atmosphere, and of representing authorship as, to some extent, an organised and self-conscious profession and not merely unorganised casual labour."

The Committee of Management of the Society of Authors is in general agreement with the writer of the letter. In the article which follows Squadron-Leader H. E. Bates is expressing only his personal views and other authors are invited to do the same in the form of letters, a representative selection from which it is hoped to publish in our next issue.—Ed., *The Author*.]

WHAT the young author has described as "The tendency of public departments to call on authors and journalists to write pamphlets and booklets giving information to the public about what departments are doing" is by no means new. I remember more than twenty years ago, when I was seventeen or eighteen, applying for the job of public relations writer in a large firm of north-country engineers on the sole recommendation that I had written fifty bad poems and an almost equally bad novel and a half. Happily, unsuccessful though that application was, I still remember a feeling of dry sickness at having lost a job worth £400 or £500 a year. Long before the war also London Transport was using in its publicity work both writers and artists of reputation and at rates which were generously above those paid for the middles of literary weeklies: though that, of course, is not necessarily saying much. In these days too it was sometimes the practice of well-known car firms to pay writers to drive their product across the alps, bogs and primitive byways of Europe and subsequently take the publicity from whatever articles or books were written about them. Didn't Citroën finance an entire expedition across Turkestan, Persia and Afghanistan simply in order to test a particular model and publicize it in what,

I seem to recall, was an excellent book about the journey? And I have before me at this moment a series of fourteen wood engravings of Robert Gibbings, writer as well as artist, published by the Golden Cockerel Press and "presented with the compliments of the Orient line." As for composers, it must be more than ten years since Bliss wrote the music for the film of *The Shape of Things to Come*, since when such composers as Vaughan Williams, William Walton and Benjamin Britten have done work of the same kind. It would not seem, therefore, that a relationship between a public company and an artist (*i.e.* author, painter and composer) is at all new. But undoubtedly it is a relationship that is increasing.

What is new of course is the tendency of the armed services, and also of such temporary services as Civil Defence, W.V.S., Women's Land Army and the N.F.S., to enlist writers as writers purely and not as washers up of dishes or scrubbers of floors. To take the example of Mr. William Samson writing a pamphlet on the N.F.S. on the blitzes of London; of Mr. Hilary St. George Saunders employed by the Air Ministry to write pamphlets on Bomber Command and Coastal Command: and of Miss Sackville West writing about the land girls. My own case goes even further than

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these. In 1941 I walked into the Air Ministry and asked with great scepticism if they could use a writer and was staggered and delighted to be told Yes. The Air Ministry of those days went one further, and said they could use a short story writer. I was accordingly commissioned, given my training in the regulation way, and have never been quite the same man since. I was in fact the first State short story writer, if that isn't too pompous a name, and my job for the better part of two years was to live with and write about the crews of the R.A.F. In these two years I wrote enough stories to fill two volumes, each of which subsequently sold, in English alone, something like a quarter of a million copies. From the proceeds of these works, both serially and in volume form, I got nothing in the shape of fees or royalties and of course did not expect anything. The fact that I had written books which sold a quarter of a million copies did not give me financial privileges over and above the men who fought in the air and were paid like me on the basis of rank and not on a commission basis of how many bombs they dropped or how many aircraft they shot down. Taking the pay of a junior commissioned officer at about £400 or £500 a year, it is easy to see that the Treasury in my case were well rewarded. But I too was well rewarded, if not financially; for a writer's dividends are not only in cash, but in the privilege of experience and in what the experience, whatever it is, finally does to him. For my part I found the exhilaration of living with men of action was something that could not, and never can be assessed in material terms. There was no room here for what the young author calls an "exact definition of rates of pay."

The war was quite young then, and since then we have been overwhelmed, if in fact not oppressed, by many pamphlets. There is scarcely an official department that has not written a pamphlet, is not contemplating writing a pamphlet, or does not wish it could find something to write a pamphlet about. All this has caused an increase in the numbers of those people who "always wanted to write" and have now, unhappily, had their chance. It has also opened up, as the young author points out, new possibilities for the future. The man who now fancies himself as a tremendous dog because he has crammed more clichés to the square inch than anyone else in the official pamphlet of what the gas-pipe workers of Edgware did in the blitz of 1940-41 will not easily be kept down. When the great blunt axe of Whitehall descends he will be free to exercise his talents in pamphlets on anything from dog-biscuits to baby-teats: subjects in fact not to be despised and on which any writer of quality could build a whole treatise on sociology. These possibilities are infinite. We are still to be offered the official story of Britain's Train Announcers, Naafi (*Salute to Naafi*), the Whitehall charladies (*The Great Mrs. Mop*), the Glasshouse (for which that name is enough) and Workers' Playtime.

The tendency for organisations of all kinds to seek publicity has become both desperate and pathetic. No longer is a job or a service considered honour enough in itself. It must have publicity. And the petulance of those who do not receive it when their rivals or co-operators do receive it has to be experienced to be believed.

It is quite possible, then, that the young author is right in drawing attention to "this new class of professional relationship." If the desire for publicity is there—and you now see glass-factories, engineering works and coal-mines publicizing by name, history and photograph individual workers in three or four national dailies a week—then it would seem very likely that public corporations and companies will have to recognise it. In destroying the anonymity of workers, by naming them specifically in national newspapers or by bringing them to the microphone to sing *Land of Hope and Glory* as it was never sung before on land or sea, you give an entirely new class of people the taste of what it is like to be publicly applauded and talked about. It is quite likely therefore that when war is over the idea of a factory broadcast programme may well become an institution, broadcast from commercial European stations, that will publicize the products of the factory by getting the works dance-band to play and the office girl to sing; though Heaven help and guide us if it should. It may well be that factories and companies, now forced to remain anonymous and keep the story of their products quiet, will wish to publicize themselves more and more through the written, the spoken and the singing word.

This is in fact already happening. At least one writer of official pamphlets has to my knowledge already contracted himself to write the war-time history of a well-known make of car. And it is pretty certain that he will be lavishly and intelligently treated. Where he goes others are bound to follow. The many aircraft companies of the country have had interesting and perhaps exciting experiences of which I have no doubt they will wish the public to hear. The air-lines of the future will be able to offer even more enticing opportunities to the writer than the Citroën Company in the Orient line did in peace-time. The author who can persuade the first airline operating to Singapore, Sumatra or Shanghai to let him travel in the first plane and write the story will find golden and exciting material in his hands.

The young author speaks of "merely unorganised casual labour." But isn't most writing done like that? Isn't the fact that it is casual, the fact that it is happily unorganised, part of its charm? God forbid that writers should ever find themselves on the Burnham scale. As I see it, part of the horror of being on the staff of great public companies, official departments and an organisation like the B.B.C., is that your life instantly becomes fixed down by the thousand and one hideous

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...tion, pension and that most stultifying of all forms of
...communal sacrifice, the Superannuation Scheme. There
...can be no more hideous prospect in authorship than
...the author on the staff." The author, as the young
...author indicates, is a casual specialist, not a regular.
...He should be called in and then, in good time, be kicked
...out. He should be entirely autocratic about the time,
...the place and the speed at which he works, and he should
...ask for rates of pay that are appropriate to companies
...whose profits are often so vast that they welcome him
...as a pleasant opportunity of getting rid of some of them
...in order that he will make their products so much better

known that they will make even more. I see nothing
degrading or unprofessional in this. On the contrary
it seems to me to offer happier and fuller reward than
writing reviews of other peoples' books at two guineas
a time for periodicals which are all too often petty and
pernicious hot-beds of malice. The plumber plumbs;
the builder builds; the writer writes: all have the
common virtue of being workers working with hand and
brain and getting paid, according to skill and achieve-
ment, for the job. But because that happens to be true,
and because peace is going to let loose amateur writers
by the score, don't let us have a Writers' Trade Union
yet. Nor Union rates of pay.

AMERICAN BOOKS AND AUTHORS IN WARTIME

By ALBERT RICE LEVENTHAL

THE manager of a New York bookstore was asked
recently how business was these days.

"We open the doors at nine," he replied,
"and jump out of the way."

This little tale amply illustrates the state of blissful
prosperity which has engulfed American authors and
publishers in the wartime years. In the spring of
1942, the book business was good. In the fall of that
year it was excellent. By the summer of 1943, it had
become phenomenal. By midyear 1944, helped
along by enormous purchases by Army, Navy and
Government agencies, it had soared wildly off into the
empyrean—to an annual volume far, far in excess of
anything the publishing profession had ever known or
dreamed of.

"But I thought paper and other materials were
rationed," the British reader may exclaim at this
point. They are. But only to a degree, as will be
seen later, that brings a small bitter smile to the face
of the English publisher whose allotment may be (and
probably has been) cut to the vanishing point.

The unprecedented demand for books in the
United States has resulted in a topsy-turvy, but happily
bewildering, situation. Authors of first novels who,
just two or three years back, might have looked forward
to a total sale of four or five thousand copies, now find
first printings of 25,000 copies sold out before publica-
tion. Publishers have disposed of, at full prices,
accumulations of slow moving or stagnant stock dating
into the dim past. Writers of short stories for magazines
have sold, at higher prices than ever before, many
years' backlog of stories that were heretofore unsold
and unwanted. While the total number of titles
published annually has steadily declined—from five

to fifteen per cent. each year—the total number of
books sold has jumped astronomically. To cite just
one case: in 1941 the average run-of-the-mill mystery
story sold around 3,000 copies. To-day almost any
mystery published will sell 6,000 to 15,000 copies.

As to best-sellers; they have zoomed off into the
stratosphere. *I Never Left Home*, by Bob Hope, sold
more than a million and a half copies in four months.
Forever Amber, a recently published first novel by
Kathleen Winsor—a bawdy, somewhat amateurish
chronicle of Restoration days—which was greeted with
howls of derision by most critics, had an advance sale
of around 100,000 copies and then promptly began to
sell at a rate of 5,000 additional copies a day. *The
Robe*, by Lloyd Douglas; Betty Smith's *A Tree
Grows in Brooklyn*; *Kings Row*, by Henry Bellamann
—these and a number of other wartime best sellers
—have already, in all editions, crossed the million mark.

Perhaps an even more striking illustration is a little
story dating back to 1933. At that time, when the
writer of this article entered the publishing business,
he was told wistfully by Richard L. Simon: "You
should have been with us back in 1929. You won't
believe this, but at that time we had three titles each
selling over a thousand copies a week *at the same time*."
The other day the writer checked recent sales figures
with three middling sized publishers. In the week just
ended, one of these firms had seventeen titles which
had crossed the thousand mark, another had fourteen,
a third had eight.

It is not too difficult to account for the current
boom in books. The principal reason can be found
in shortages in other lines of consumer goods. With
an annual national income more than double that of