

Reproduced by kind permission of Evensford Productions Limited and Pollinger Limited. Copyright c Evensford Productions Limited, 1969.

Round the library bush

by H. E. Bates

H. E. Bates, the novelist and short story writer who has published more than 50 books, takes up the argument over Public Lending Right which was stimulated by Michael Holroyd's article in the *Saturday Review* last month. He finds that, while the present situation is "utterly outrageous", the authors themselves are not above reproach.

"Had your holiday yet, Mr. Bates? Sorry, silly of me to ask. Of course for you writer chaps it's all one long holiday."

Ludicrous though this scrap of conversation may sound it is nevertheless part of one I had some few years ago with a businessman travelling to the City, bowler-hatted, umbrella-ed, carnationed and pin-striped, by the 9.20 a.m. train. He was, as I remember it, in shipping. His ships sailed the seven seas; he had never to be aboard one of them in order to make his money.

"What I meant, of course, really, was that you can please yourself when you do it. No office, no business, no clocking-in and all that. Own boss—take your work away with you and do it anywhere, I mean. Wonderful life—must say you're jolly lucky."

All true, of course: no boss, no business, no business hours, no clocking-in; do the work when you like, where you like, how you like. Lake Garda, Sicily, the Grecian Isles, Corsica, the Costa Brava, Brighton, Tahiti, Paris, the Outer Hebrides—words can be put on paper anywhere, at any time, in the course of one long holiday.

No business? True: yet for income tax purposes we writer chaps are assessed as a one-man business—the business we haven't got. When I say that we haven't a business I mean that we haven't a business in the sense that a manufacturer of soap, beer, boots and shoes, paper, cosmetics or ice-cream has a business. In other words we cannot put it on to the market in the form of shares; we cannot suddenly say we are tired of it and sell it as a going concern; if we feel ill or bored or barren both of will and ideas we cannot walk out and let someone else run it for us. Above all we have nothing to leave, except our copyrights, when we die.

It is fair to say, I think, that there are few professions of which the public is more ignorant or ill-informed than that of the writer. The general picture of the writer would seem to be that of a figure solitary, musing, dream-possessed, somehow conjuring ideas out of thin air or, in Donne's words, making "dreams truths; and fables histories". It occurs to few who read books, I think, that writing is in fact, first and last, a physical act, and a pretty hard one at that. Like the act of love, it has no meaning until the final physical moment of consummation is complete.

All the dreaming in the world will not make "dreams truths" until the physical act—in the case of the writer with pen and paper, of the painter with brush, paint and canvas—is accomplished. Eliot's words "we must learn to sit still" have always seemed to me among the silliest. Sitting still, for both writer and artist, is not enough. It is essential, again in Donne's great words "not to dream all my dreams—let's act the rest".

And having acted the rest, often at great physical cost, sometimes with hardship, frequently under the lash of criticism, always with uncertainty, knowing that we shall in the end reap not a single straw by way of pension or one ear of corn in what political jargon now calls "redundancy payment", what happens to the things we have created? They become, of course, the materials of big business (I have an American publishing friend who is honest enough to call it The Industry), the big business of publishing. By publishing I mean not just the publishing of books, but that of newspapers, periodicals, magazines and the rest: the stuff of which commercial empires have been made and are still being made.

We, the writers (as I pointed out in a recent letter to *The Times*), are the beginnings of it all. The publishing of books alone accounts yearly for a turnover of more than £100m., of which about £35m. comes from exports. What dizzy figures flow from the endless daily production line of newspapers, magazines and periodicals it is impossible to guess.

Though we in this country are not the greatest buyers of books in the world, a distinction that probably belongs to the Swedes, we are certainly among its heaviest



borrowers. No less than 550 million books are borrowed annually from the so-called free public libraries of this country, which themselves number between 30,000 and 40,000. These libraries are in turn a gigantic sacred cow, in the covetous protection of which socialists, amazingly aided by librarians of all people, gather like holy herdsmen, fearful that evil influences may cause the teats to dry. (I have once wondered if sacred cows give more milk, or better milk, than ordinary cows, or if it is merely milk richer in cream or capable of making cheese with bigger holes in it. Perhaps that is not, now I come to think of it, an unfair description of socialism: cheese with bigger holes in it.)

That authors should contribute to this huge supply of sacred milk by providing, at a nominal royalty, books each of which may be lent out 100, 200, or even 500 times without charge to the public or a farthing of reward for the author, is a situation utterly outrageous. Yet to get the situation remedied in favour of the author would seem to be comparable with trying to push the cow, teats and all, down a mole-run.

The idea of a Public Lending Right, first put forward nearly 20 years ago by John Brophy, the novelist, would seem to be sane, just and simple. In its present, revised form Private Libraries Association, (agreed to by the Society of Authors, the Publishers' Association, and the Arts Council) would ensure that for each book publicly borrowed the author would receive a minute sum, the cost of which would fall neither on the borrower nor the ratepayer but would be borne by the Government at the cost of a mere £2m. a year. In certain quarters this is considered to be no less outrageous than the free lending of books itself appears to others. Yet it is of course by no means the first desirable innovation to be dourly and blindly resisted by those whose interest is the end well served by it.

Paperbacks form the most revolutionary change in the dissemination of books in this country, yet it would be easier to sell striptease in the City Temple to the Lord's Day Observance Society than it was to induce booksellers to sell paperbacks in the 1930s. Stubborn as battalions of mules, booksellers not only resisted the introduction of paperbacks with every breath and muscle but even refused to stock them in the shop itself when introduction became at last inevitable. Paperbacks, like members blackballed by a club, were allowed to be seen only on trays in the porch outside the bookshop.

If booksellers, librarians, and politicians, can all, in their various ways, be obtuse, I am bound to confess that I sometimes find authors, by and large, hardly less so. As a class they are amazingly indolent in the pursuit and protection of their own interests. In no other profession do the participants so readily devour their own kind.

To many of them success is something not quite nice; professional and professionalism, in their vocabulary, are nasty words—"of course Mr. X is a good professional" (meaning he is a slick cad who has come as near to taking bribes as makes no matter); "Mr. Y's novel will of course appeal to the library readers", exactly which library is never stated—public, bookshop, the London, Harrods, the British Museum, the club in St. James's, the tobacconist's round the corner, the county—the implica-

tion being that people who borrow books from libraries are congenital morons and only people who buy them are intellectually blessed); "Mr. Z's half-hour television play has all the ingredients of a women's magazine story" (the inference being that all women are dumb clucks but that those who have the effrontery to read magazines designed largely for their diversion, there being thousands and thousands of them in every language in the world with the possible exception of Eskimo, are even dumb-clucker than the rest. Women in Britain, of course, are used to such snob skulduggery from their males and bear their burden with a smile.

While authors consume themselves and their own with such narrow relish they nevertheless remain, if not their own worst enemies at least their own worst advocates. They rarely, if ever, speak as one voice. Like puppies quarrelling behind monastic walls as to which naughty one has had the lack of decency to work hard to get the biggest piece of dog biscuit, they are largely content to ignore that fact that beyond the walls a positive army of other trades and professions makes a living, and often a fat one, from what authors produce.

While they themselves remain very largely unorganized, with no one to lobby for them, no pressure group to press for them, no Performing Right Society to be watchdog for their interests, they look inately on while those for whom they provide the bread of existence belong to unions, chapels and societies which see to it that not only are butter and jam spread nice and thick on the bread but even Camembert, smoked salmon and caviare, too.

The masochistic pleasures of starving in a garret—an affliction commensurate with genius of course—never appealed to Joseph Conrad (nor to me, I may say), but I confess I have sometimes had the cynicism to believe that many of our kind think of it, like the literary alcoholic's early death, as the writer's crowning glory.

Why, admirably equipped as we are to expound in the advocacy of our cause, are we largely so mute? Ours is the most articulate of all the arts. Painters, it is often forgotten, do not even need to be able to read or write in order to enrich their canvases; composers really need learn no other calligraphy than that of crotchets and quavers; one wonders sometimes if the architects of the Parthenon or the noble towers of Baalbek could read and write. But we, the articulate, pursuing the art that is the supreme confection of all the arts—words being music, architecture, paint and reason all

Continued on page 21

Continued from P.17

in one—rarely speak up for ourselves.

Why? Too much fag? Really not quite the done thing, concerning ourselves with material things? Rather crummy and smelly and mercenary down there in the market place? We must not be cads, even if all the others are? Just as there was a coarseness in nineteenth-century imperialism that aroused a blanched revulsion in both artists and writers so it seems to me that even today there is, for many writers, a tendency to regard writing for reward as something not quite nice, a contagion to be devoutly resisted. They would really rather be

thought of as amateurs the discreet country retreat, the eighteenth-century cosy curacy, the ivory tower, the shaded Cambridge lawn, "the fugitive and cloistered virtue". It was Winston Churchill who said that "patriotism and art mix as little as oil and water" and he might have said it just as truthfully of writers and the market place. Earthly success and the "immortal garland" are quite incompatible; you really cannot eat your cake on earth and have it on Parnassus too.

Anyone reading this who also read my letter to *The Times* on February 21 may wonder why I plead passionately for greater financial rewards for the writer's profession while at the same time condemning Miss Jennie Lee's

apparently generous and evidently well-intentioned exercise in distributing largesse to authors as "both stupid and dangerous". I do not apologize for those words; indeed I now repeat them for the following reasons. The scheme put into practice by Miss Lee, who is I have no doubt as warm a supporter of the arts as she is said to be, is stupid simply because literature cannot be created in this way. It simply is not possible to promote literature merely by the drop of a hat containing 30 pieces of silver.

We are the possessors of the greatest, richest literature the world has ever seen but that literature was not written by men and women hanging about, cap in hand, at the back doors of govern-

ment offices waiting for government doles or state-blessed charity. It was written by people who wanted passionately, above all else, come hell or high water, to write or bust.

That is one reason why I condemn the scheme of handouts; I condemn it in the second place because it appears to me to offer unlimited dangers. Miss Lee's largesse is an ill-advised step on the slippery slope of state-subsidized literature, which in turn leads to state-inspired literature and in turn to state-enforced literature and in turn to writers who are afraid to write or who write only what they are paid to write. The literary boot-lickers, the literary party-liners, the committed pals of the author of *Quiet Flows the*

Don are all waiting round the corner. Oh yes, I know it cannot happen here; it never can until it does. The gangsterism of Chicago and the casinos could not happen here either; but now it has.

It is through P.L.A., therefore, that Miss Lee should set about seeing that authors get their just rewards: rewards for work done, not largesse for work that may never be done. It may surprise and even hurt her to know that a good deal of her largesse has already done little except to swell the profits of the distillers, but it does not, I confess, surprise me. Having been a self-supporting writer for more than 40 years, wholly dedicated to the literary cause, "come hell or high water", I am, however, philosophical

enough to echo here some words of Miss Lee's late illustrious husband. Nye Bevan, in answer to repeated passionate pleas on behalf of the writer put to him by Hilary St. George Saunders, then librarian of the House of Commons and always a great champion of the writer's cause, unintentionally let out a great truth about our much-misused and precarious profession. "You know, Hilary", he said, "the fact of the matter is that whatever we did for you writers you'd still go on writing."

In other words, as one of my small grand-daughters used to say when she went off to the "free" library every Thursday with her mother—"here we go round the library bush".