

Reproduced by kind permission of Evensford Productions Limited and
Pollinger Limited. Copyright © Evensford Productions Limited, 1963.

Richard Church at 70

A BIRTHDAY TRIBUTE BY H. E. BATES

RICHARD CHURCH celebrates his seventieth birthday next Wednesday. Neither he nor I can be now absolutely sure when we first met, but it was certainly some time in the early Thirties when he himself had just retired from the Civil Service and shortly after I, with what must have appeared to others a rashness bordering on lunacy, had decided to leave my native Northamptonshire and set up house in Kent on a bank balance of, about minus ten pounds. Richard had lately read a little story of mine, "A Flower Piece," which had appeared in *The New Statesman*, and because of it he very much wanted to meet me.

We have been friends ever since.

At that time he had a flat in Lincoln's Inn and a cottage in Essex and was working as publisher's reader. As always, he worked like a black—he is the most conscientious and painstaking author I know—reading, advising, writing reviews, articles, poems, novels and essays: all of it, I fear, rather to the detriment of his health. And I think it may well have been my dismay at his fragile appearance—yet fragile though he may look, his fibres are in reality tough—that made me, every time we met, sing the praises of the rich acres of Kent as opposed to the cold clay of Essex.

Whether, in fact, my enthu-

siasm for this beautiful Wealden countryside did influence him or not I can't now be sure, but at any rate he came, in 1939, to live in Kent, fifteen miles away from me, in a splendidly converted oasthouse surrounded by cherry trees. The change was a good one. Kent warmed his heart, as it already had done mine, improved his health and gave him fresh horizons. Many of his books and much of his verse express his great love of it and, though London and lecture platforms make heavy calls on him, his square of Kentish earth is, I think, the thing that really grips him.

HE IS a very unselfish man—nor has he ever written a mean or perfunctory line in his life—and in his twenty-odd years as a publisher's reader he helped or discovered many new writers, among them Clifford Dymont, Dylan Thomas, Mrs. Robert Henry and Edwin Muir. Some of them were truly grateful, and some, I fear, were not; but it is typical of his nature that he merely says of all this: "I don't think any of them were either very grateful or very ungrateful. Authors always believe that what good fortune comes to them is their due, while bad fortune is due to someone else."

If material success had come in proportion to his output and industry he would now be a wealthy man. Alas, he is not, though he has collected a good share of honours on the way. He is in fact the only author I know who has been awarded a prize for each of the fields in which he works; namely the "Femina Vie Heureuse Prize" for his pre-war novel *The Porch*, the William Foyle Poetry Prize for his verse and *THE SUNDAY TIMES* £1,000 prize for that wholly admirable autobiography of his, *Over the Bridge*.

HIS OWN good fortune came, in fact, rather late in life. Not for him the rocket boom that nowadays puts some young writers into moon space almost before the ink is dry on their manuscripts. He came up, as they say, the hard way. This too he treats philosophically. And that brings me finally, in fact, to what he is: a philosophical, humorous, kindly, industrious, sensitive, un vindictive man and above all a poet. There is not a hard grain in his nature. And I like to ponder, from time to time, on some of the things I have in common with him: a love of literature, music and painting, a loathing of sham, pretensions, literary snobs, literary cliques and literary hunters and hangers-on and above all a great affection for England and for these Kentish fields of ours.



Richard Church

... and his new novel

PRINCE ALBERT. By Richard Church. (Heinemann, 18s.)

WE LOOK to Richard Church for tenderness, a touch of the pastoral. In *Prince Albert*, set on a farm in the estuary lands of Kent, he unfolds his story as if unbearably hurt by its implications, and although his prose is restrained and at crucial moments says too little, the book is distinguished by his compassion and by an almost saintly indulgence towards his characters. As always he serves us quiet entertainment, without show or style, but with the efficiency of an old-fashioned butler.

His heroine is an infant girl, and his theme is the havoc a small precocious child can wreak on a world of nice but none too

intelligent adults. Mr Church has at heart the predicament of simple people entangled in workaday issues that could, at a childish touch, spill into tragedy. They almost do. The grown-ups are frightened of instinct. But the little girl works by it and practically causes a miscarriage, a nervous breakdown, a broken heart, a gaol sentence and a wrecked engagement. These crises are neatly averted by the plot, as the estuary floodwaters rise to bring the book to a fine climax.

Mr Church is a novelist who recognises the influence of weather in human affairs. Apart from gentle humour and some pleasing undertones, his new book gives us the hottest and most lyrical summer we have had for some time.

DAVID HUGHES