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The War Above the Trenches

WINGED VICTORY. By
V. M. Yeates. Preface by
Henry Williamson. (Cape.
25s.)

by H. E. Bates

"Winged Victory" first appeared in 1934, it be unacclaimed except by a discerning few, among whom were T. E. Lawrence ("admirable: admirable: admirable," he wrote) and Henry Williamson. It sold fewer than a thousand copies; and when very shortly afterwards, its young author died, a victim of war-strain and an illness technically known as Flying Sickness D, "the usual poet's sickness that had killed Keats Flecker, D. H. Lawrence Richard Jefferies," his death was almost unnoticed too.

Yet by the time a new war started, as Mr. Williamson tells us in his preface to this new edition of the book, copies of "Winged Victory" were being bought by bomber pilots or East Anglian airfields for as much as five pounds apiece and already the book had become for flying men especially, not only both a testament and a classic, but "one of the few books on war-flying that wasn't flannel."

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It was also on an East Anglian airfield, in 1941, that I lent a bomber pilot another book on flying that wasn't flannel, John Llewellyn Rhys's "England is my Village," and naturally never got it back again. I don't know if Yeates had read Rhys, or *vice versa*, but it seems to me that the two books Rhys's terse and vividly energetic volume of stories and Yeates's long chronicle of the old R.F.C. and its young pilots fighting with an astonishing collection of chicken coops, animated bird-cages and cats' cradles over France in the first world war have a great deal, equally in style, vigour, authenticity and final truth, in common. They are the real thing.

Not the least remarkable feature of "Winged Victory" is that, though written by a man mortally stricken by sickness, it contains not the briefest shadow of sickness, complaint or self-pity. In fact, it is, for all its culminating tragedy, a book full of humour.

The bouncing description of a Camel pilot shooting up a staff-car full of Allied red-tabs on a long naked French road and driving the distracted brass to desperate shelter in a wood; a tenderly funny sketch of an Oh-so-English boy ashamed of having chastely kissed a French girl and full of anguished resolution to tell his English fiancée about it ("I shall feel so rotten until she forgives me"); a succulent three-line description of the difference between French cows and English cows: these are the sort of things that continually give the veins of the book a strong, warm, buoyant flush of humanity.

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ABOVE all the bones on which the flesh of this fine book is built are absolutely sound. The descriptions of flying are everywhere excellent, often superb; the mechanical details, though sometimes long, never bore and are often funny too. ("Flying with their antiquated controls was a mixture of playing the harmonium, working the village pump and sculling a boat.") Combat, loneliness, fatigue, excitement, fear, comradeship, women, nerves, death: all are built into a full and vigorously authentic structure.

Yeates, it is clear, was first and last a poet. Instinct told him not to beat a savage drum. Even as he walks out of this book, war-shattered and virtually comradeless, it is the poet who has the final word, well-knowing that one tender description of his beloved Kentish fields will move us far more deeply and permanently than any bitter snarl. As indeed it does.