

Foreword

Although Bates' novels, after *Fair Stood the Wind for France* in 1944, were often bestsellers, it was as a short story writer that he truly excelled. Interestingly here the story 'Time Expired' rehearses a misandrist, sadistic lesbian Irish nurse (Miss Burke) whom Bates would wheel out again in his novel *The Purple Plain*; but the story is entirely satisfying in itself. Now we can measure his growth as a short-story writer.

'Harvest', from 1927, when Bates was still a struggling unknown writer, evokes the pregnancy of an un-named mother of four, in terms that are faintly menacing, and full of wonderful atmosphere. The harvest of the title refers to autumn plenitude, to the new baby, and to the fact that actions have consequences. Yet Bates, unlike DH Lawrence, never bullies the reader with a moral which, if he has one, he is likely to lose in his own lyricism.

'The Gleaner' is personification as much as portrait. Here Bates captures a way of life going back to Ruth who is described gathering grain in the Old Testament. Bates observed grinding poverty in rural Northamptonshire during his childhood through and after the Great War. His gleaner, struggling to carry her heavy load of victuals, is the last of her breed. Yet the old ways of life died hard. And so perhaps 'Old' and 'The Plough' explore archetypes, as does 'The Ferry' with its wonderful rendering of apocalyptic Fenland flooding which has driven the landlady in the tale to religious madness.

In 'The Bath', published in 1934 but set earlier, Bates evokes the strange atmosphere in the countryside of Weimar Germany, with occupying British troops (who left four years earlier) fraternizing with defeated Germans, and all uniting in their love of creature comforts. Probably the 'British troops' in this story are based on Bates and his friends, who made a trip to Germany in the late 1920s (Charles Lahr the German

bookseller and Rhys Davies were among the party), recounted in the novella *The Hessian Prisoner* and in his *Autobiography*.

He is good at awkward, complex, tense relationships ('Cut and Come Again'), as at shock-endings ('The Case of Miss Lomas') in which the person you did not expect to, dies; as on alienation and estrangement ('Château Bougainvillaea', 'I am not Myself'). 'Shot Actress—Full story' concerns press-sensationalism, but renders the costs of this in entirely individual and believable terms.

In a study he first published on *The Modern Short Story* during the war, Bates compared the short story to cinema. Both stand outside tradition, are free, and both can use small vivid details to convey emotion. Indeed Bates's method is strikingly cinematic – which is to say, rendered visually immediate and alive – and it is unsurprising that so much of his work has been adapted for film and television, not just for example *Uncle Silas*, but also the riotously successful adaptations of *The Darling Buds of May*.

From impersonal birds-eye view to close focus, a number of these stories show you a whole world that looks at first impersonally romantic or exotic, only to move in the end towards disenchantment. The Arnolds in 'I am not Myself' live more grandly than the narrator, and have at first sight the glamour of wealth, until their daughter appears to be a fabulator, and very possibly unhinged.

Similarly in 'Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal', the protagonist, who delivers meat to the owner of a grand country house during the austere years after the war comes slowly to see how sterile and bitchy this world is. The gentrified world in 'A Christmas Song' is bullying and philistine, while 'The Evolution of Saxby' presents a couple who restore these houses in order to sell on, and are seen to lack moral substance.

In the comic Larkin novels HE Bates showed considerable sympathy for the old gentry (or New Poor), emerging as they

did into a harsher post-war world of death duties and high taxation. Little of that is shown here. The title story, 'Love in a Wych Elm', concerns a family who present themselves as To the manor born, so that the narrator admires their apparent scope and ease and confidence. The interest of the tale, however, lies elsewhere, in the romances of childhood itself and in the countryside which Bates so loved, where 'a sense of honeyed rotten quietness spread under the lurching trees' shut in by the boundary line of tapering wych elms.

Bates was a modest man, apparently content with the gift of being able to 'put the English countryside down on paper'. His parents were chapel-going Northamptonshire cobblers who, in true Midlands fashion, ate pudding before the main course. Leather-workers were famously independent-minded and HE Bates was blessed (and also limited) by being a son of this Little England who, despite having good writer-friends and liking to eat well at the Caprice, had no time for literary London, and remained an outsider. His stories show that this a not a bad vantage from which to write if, like Bates, you happen to be richly gifted too.

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