

Laura Beatty: Introduction to *Through the Woods* (Little Toller, 2012)
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INTRODUCTION

Laura Beatty

‘THERE IS’, Bates muses at the end of *Through the Woods*, ‘some precious quality brought about by the close gathering together of trees into a wood that defies analysis.’

So what is it? What makes a wood? More precisely, since the actual woods of Bates’ acquaintance are very different from each other, what do such distinct places have to do with ‘The English Woodland’ of his subtitle? One is the compromised wood of his childhood in Northamptonshire, a ‘paradise of primroses’ through which the roar of passing trains smashes at regular intervals, and the other is the soft chestnut wood of his choosing, where the light falls on quiet and whose trees stand in pools of bluebells. How, or even why, would you reconcile such difference? What do we mean by that potent, recognisable generic that we so often invoke, and to which you can apply the definite article with such confidence, the woodland that all of us carry around in our heads? Because woods are very deep in our consciousness; they are our place of forage and shelter but also our place of trial and growth and horror at ourselves or of others, our resource and our repository. They are the place that both our food and our stories come from.

These are the questions that *Through the Woods* revolves, quietly and at the back of its mind, as it climbs the slow spiral of a year, from April to April. What are woods in themselves and what are they to us?

You won’t for instance, Bates is clear, get a wood just by planting

a series of trees, and in particular you won't get one by planting the same type of tree. 'There must be,' he says, 'all kinds of trees, all kinds of flowers and creatures, a conflicting and yet harmonious pooling of life.' That is Bates' recipe, variety and conflict and harmony.

When he was a child, Bates wanted for a while to be a painter. He had a box of oil paints and took lessons from a lady on the other side of the street, producing with great enthusiasm pictures of 'horrific badness'. Later, when he discovered writing, he maintained that it was 'as much a graphic art as drawing'. 'Words,' he said, 'were themselves 'a form of paint'. And that is, at face value, how his writing works. It is vividly descriptive, to the point where Bates is sure enough of his art to lay out his word-wood before us and simply invite us in. 'The wood is not far from the house. . . . We might as well go straight down to it.'

If we follow him we find a wood that we can see and taste and smell, that closes over our heads with its loose canopy and its slim trunks and its patterns of light closely observed and reconstructed, a wood full of slow change, of a procession of leaves and flowers, rustling with the footfall of unseen creatures. The present tense observations have the immediate, just noticed feel of a real walk in a real wood, the slightly tranced, leisurely noticing of sudden tricks of light. Honeysuckle is 'unbuttoning among the wood ridings'; in summer there are canopies of 'sun-metallic leaves'; in winter it is fallen leaves that are conjured up, the chestnut like 'ragged scraps of fawn paper', the beech 'like copper shavings', poplar and sycamore 'flat and slippery yellow fish'. And without their leaves, oaks are 'leather-budded' and the elm has 'little fluffy French knots of dark pink wool securely sewn on the jagged branches'.

In fact Bates didn't have the time to follow the year round as he wrote. The book was commissioned just after he had started contributing to the *Spectator* in 1935, and came out in 1936. In

only a couple of cases the chapters are re-workings of those articles. Otherwise everything that looks like careful observation, 'nature writing', is in fact done from memory, from a painterly susceptibility to the look of things, practised subconsciously and for long enough to become deep knowledge.

When he realised he wasn't going to be a painter, Bates became a novelist. It wasn't just that his paintings were bad, they probably weren't. It was that words were better at doing what he wanted to do. He had too many different things to say for the medium of paint.

Bates was born in Rushden, in Northamptonshire in 1905, a county short on woods then, and even shorter now. His father worked in the shoe factory across the street and his grandfather, a hand-stitching cobbler by trade who couldn't face church and couldn't face factory work, took up the offer of a smallholding on a particularly intractable piece of clayland that lay at the edge of the growing town, and worked that instead. There was no trap, no form of transport apart from an old wheelbarrow. There were no farm buildings, just the great flat field, so Bates' father and grandfather had to make the piggery, the sheds, the stable and the barn themselves on Saturday mornings when the factory was closed.

This was the beginning of what Bates called 'my love and feeling for the English countryside.' It was 'out of this very ordinary, unprepossessing piece of Midland earth,' he remembers later, that there sprang up 'a paradise that remains to this day, utterly unblemished, a joy forever.'

In fact Bates' upbringing, like his writing on closer inspection, was a curious mix. He played games with the other children, on the manhole covers and round the lamp posts of the street where he lived. On weekday evenings after school they would all be out, between the dismal, brick-built terraces of Rushden, with the clang and smoke and dirt of a newly industrialised town around them.

Then at weekends and in the holidays he lived a different life. He would be wheeled in a wheelbarrow to his grandfather's plot on summer mornings, to spend the day working the land and listening and 'pretending not to listen' to the gypsies and the rivermen and the other smallholders, until 'the accent and look and feeling and colour of country people and things' were pressed on his mind 'with imperishable indelibility'.

Or he was taken for longer walks by his father, crossing the county border into the Bedfordshire woods, woods that 'etched' themselves on his childish mind, 'with such imperishable clarity that I can still see and smell the bluebells, the honeysuckle . . . the sheer concentrated fragrance of summer leaf and sap.'

If the countryside was what pressed itself indelibly, 'etched' itself on his mind (they are both visual arts metaphors), still the town was where he lived. As a result he grew up with both influences held side by side and in balance. Added to which, he had chapel and school and his father's severe Methodism in one ear and he had the woods and fields and his grandfather's heresies in the other. And as he grew, so the contradictory influences multiplied and increased.

At sixteen, unable to afford to take up his place at Cambridge, Bates was working in a shoe factory warehouse. All day, when he wasn't either cleaning the outside privy or making inventories of 'bags of grindings, sprigs, nails, rivets . . . and sacks of powdered glue', he was reading Chekov and Turgenev and writing his first novel, until he got the sack. At night he walked miles alone, looking in at lighted windows and making stories. Prisoned in work and desperate, he came to hate the Midlands, the flat and sullen fields, the 'scabby, jumped-up, chapel-cum-villa towns' of his childhood. He married his Rushden sweetheart and together they left and chose Kent instead, for its softness, for its folds, for its great wooded rounds.

So Kent is where the wood of *Through the Woods* is still to be found, just below the village of Little Chart Forstal. It lies in the angle of a lane running down from Bates' house, ankle deep in sweet chestnut litter and with its main path still closed for the preservation of the pheasant and its trees on the far side still contemplating their reflections in the waters of a stream.

Looking back at it coming into leaf at the end of the first chapter, 'There is something about it,' he says 'that makes it the best wood I know.' But then he corrects himself. It is only 'almost the best wood. For me, there is one better, though I never go to it now.'

The best wood is in the rejected Midlands, a wood that as a child Bates would be taken over the border into Bedfordshire to visit, a day's excursion in a pony and trap. It was the first wood he knew, 'a paradise of a million primroses' and at other times of the year full of nightingales, butterfly orchids and the 'little fiery scarlet hearts' of wild strawberries. Characteristically it was a wood below a railway cutting, so already compromised and contradictory. Through it, every five minutes the sound of the train would smash, 'a strange exhilarating sound, a mad roar . . . echoing against a thousand branches.'

After the train, in reward, there would be a silence that was all the more intense for the interruption, 'unearthly in its quietness'. And this is why it is the better of the two woods. It isn't just the quiet that is unearthly; it is the whole wood, reconstructed as it is from memory, a hundred miles or more and a childhood away. Here something important and unseen was at work. Wandering alone away from the safety of his uncle's garden, the six-year-old Bates would surrender to the powerful spirit of the wood. It was a 'dark and in some way exhilarating drug' whose effect was hypnotic, and which he says he craved. He talks of being put into a dream and on coming out again, of a spell being broken. 'To a child,' he says as he

closes the chapter, a wood has something about it 'that is not quite real. It belongs very nearly to the world of mystery.'

Like all paradises this one is lost. As he says, 'I never go there now.' Part of the reason for this is that the woods of childhood no longer exist. Even if it hadn't been grubbed up in favour of the logistics parks so beloved of the Midlands, returning as an adult would mean looking at it with different eyes. So it is lost temporally and geographically, because he grew up and left childhood, because he chose Kent over the Midlands. And it is lost most of all because it was never fully grasped.

There is a ghost that haunts these woods where we first feel fear and temptation in equal measure. Flickering at us between the trees, it is 'the distillation of another and more lovely world', somewhere just over there, that existed either in a time before, or not at all, but that we sense, or imagine, or see gestured in the world of the wood, but that is inaccessible to us and therefore permanently lost.

Bates lived through a time of extraordinary change. 'In the early thirties,' he points out, 'not a single farm worker in my village had a car, many not even a bicycle.' By the seventies even cottages would have four or five cars and the village shop that used to sell string and boiled sweets and paraffin and fat bacon had a freezer 'dispensing scampi, smoked salmon, spaghetti bolognese and exotics of every kind.'

Growing up almost under the skin of the land, as he did part of the time, with the rest spent in the town, often with his head in a book, Bates couldn't help asking himself continually what to do with man in the landscape. Is he master or creature, creator or destroyer? Is there some way that he could or should be, or is it all hopeless? In fact, nothing in his writing is ever hopeless. Pop Larkin's philosophy, 'the need to go with the stream, never to battle against it', is also by his own admission Bates'. He can write in *Down the River*, the

companion volume to *Through the Woods*, of the 'privilege' of taking part 'in every act which went towards making the bread I ate.' With nostalgia he can list the procedures, many of which were lost or replaced in his own life time, the drilling, hoeing, rolling, sheaving, binding, shocking, carrying, stacking, threshing, sacking, milling, running for the yeast, before he could taste the bread, 'sweet, dark . . . very nearly the colour of the earth which had grown it.' But he can also argue for the increased mechanisation of the countryside, for improved communications, for better wages and living conditions for the rural poor, for the closer communion of town and country and even for the birth of the 'town countryman', increasingly the only countryman left to us now only half a century or so later.

Acceptance of what look like irreconcilable differences is something that Bates absorbed from his own upbringing and from the natural world that lay about him, very early on. It deeply characterises his writing. The destruction of Chelveston woods to make a disastrous airstrip in the Second World War is 'ruthless murder' but it is also, and in preface, 'necessary'. That is not to say he doesn't have preferences, or state them openly. In fact he is frank about them. He would cheerfully change the 'near useless wonders', the jets and televisions and space craft of the modern world, for the bloodshot eye of his old uncle and the smell of woodsmoke and the woodland flowers.

Every so often another anthology of 'Nature writing' is produced, and Bates is pretty much guaranteed to have a chapter or two to himself. He wasn't really a Nature writer. He was what might be called a Natural writer. He was a novelist whose craft was learnt through rigorous effort and through reading but whose perceptions are like those of the birds and animals he describes, quick, innate and part of a habit, as it is described in the *Autobiography*, of 'thinking through the pores of my skin'. His observations are natural in the

strictest sense. They are not those of an outsider with a notebook, who conscientiously records the appearance of bud and leaf and flower. They are those of someone who belongs. He doesn't need to record detail. He knows it.

Similarly his habits of writing are natural in more than their subject matter. They instinctively reflect the nature of the English landscape and its climate. It is easy to overlook how embedded his writing is in the landscape that produced it. Bates' starting point, often stated, is that man, while being responsible largely, if not in some places entirely, for the form that the landscape has taken, is also inalienably of it.

What John Berger was later to call the landscape's 'address', Bates takes as a given. That is, in Berger's words, 'the way a landscape's character determines the imagination of those born there.' So, for Bates, born within reach of a river valley, 'not in it, nor above it' but able as he put it, to stand 'on flat but raised ground' and to look across and around on all sides, the result was, that 'we saw things squarely, at a proper distance, on a proper plane, in a proper perspective. And that gave us perhaps, in that district, the sturdy independence for which we were noted.'

The landscape is in part its people and vice versa. Bates is always sharply observant of locality. On the particular character of the Midlands, he notes that it is 'a county of ugly and bastard speech, of stout independence, of stone and pasture.' Here the people and their character and the shape of the land they inhabit and the way that they speak, are all jumbled together as though none were more significant than any other, as though all were perfectly valid ways of describing a particular place.

When describing the Kentish woods for instance, Bates doesn't hesitate to use language imported from the Midlands if he needs it. Sheep pens in winter are 'dreary with sludder'. Pheasants fly away

with 'flacking wings'. It is obvious in both cases what he means but a flacker in particular is a very precise Northants word. It is a piece of card pushed into the spokes of a bicycle wheel to make a noise. Even lulled among the chestnut woods of Kent 'the ripe, rough, Midland vernacular' comes to his mind because it is part of him. His connection with the landscape, both past and present, is lively, naturally complex in the truest sense.

And England is a complex place. It is small. Its fields and hedges and stone walls and woods are all man-made, so it can't help but absorb and reflect human emotion and endeavour. Its climate is fickle, its tricks of light always referring back or forward to other times. It is deeply and essentially nostalgic. Unashamed and old-fashioned nostalgia is one of the most noticeable features of Bates' writing, to the modern reader, and this too is a reflection – a reflection both of what he sees before him and of what he feels within, of a mood shared between them, bred as he is out of the landscape he describes.

Towards the end of *Through the Woods* there is a long passage called 'Winter Spring'. It is an intense evocation of light imprisoned in raindrops on a dull day. 'This extraordinary stillness and suspense creates a strange feeling of melancholy. Much has been written of the joy of spring, but very little of its melancholy. Yet the earliest sense of spring, coming with the first light cold evenings of February, or with the weak sunlight of flowerless January afternoons or with those periods of mild suspense in December, is filled with an indefinable sadness. It is one of the oddest and sometimes one of the most charming characteristics of English weather that at times one season borrows complete days from another . . . And it may be that these milky days of winter, which seem borrowed from April, are automatically filled with the sadness of things out of their time.' It is as though the landscape too has a memory, can spend days out of

season lost in its own dreams of renewal.

We have a horror of nostalgia now. We think it better conscientiously to concentrate on the concrete rather than the emotional or the purely aesthetic, to talk about working the land, to exhume vocabularies that refer to dead skills, wooding or peat cutting or drowning of water meadows, as if the knowledge of these things will somehow jump-start our connection with the lost landscape. But if we called nostalgia, 'home-sickness' which is what it really is (*nostos*, a return home; *algos*, pain or grief) would we be less ashamed to confess to it? Home is where we grew up and where we belong. Home is what produces us. It is ourselves in the end. It may be that nostalgia over landscape is healthier than its opposite.

In an essay called 'Overture to Summer', Bates goes even further. Considering the part that weeds and wild flowers play in the lives of men and animals he reaches the conclusion that life without weeds would be 'economically and aesthetically' poorer, 'perhaps even dislocated'. Nowadays 'dislocation' is something of a buzz-word. Finding it in writing of the 1930s and '40s is strangely disorienting. It has the dizzy feel of anachronism. We use it now to mean separation from place but what it most commonly means is to put out of joint, to dislocate a limb from the body it belongs to. And that is how close Bates means us to understand man's connection with the landscape to be. Without recognising our position in the landscape, without reaching an accommodation with it at its fullest and most diverse, we will become like disjointed limbs, sick and useless.

It is a position he shares with W.H. Hudson, a writer he particularly admired. There is a brief tribute to him in Bates' *Autobiography*, at the end of which Bates includes a quotation from Hudson himself, a passage that Bates describes as 'Biblical'. It goes like this, 'The blue sky, the brown soil beneath, the grass, the trees, the animals, the wind, the rain, and stars are never strange to me; for I am in, and of,

and am one with them; and my flesh and the soil are one, and the heat in my blood and in the sunshine are one, and the winds and the tempests and the passions are one.'

But if Bates is nostalgic he is also robust. There is nothing pious or mealy-mouthed about his ability to embrace the nature of the world. He enjoys its contradictions. He never pulls his punches about his own background for instance. 'Plebeian by birth and upbringing' as he calls himself, he says he has a 'habit of looking at things in a cockeyed way.' He upholds poaching. He condemns hunting unless the fox be substituted for a 'milk-maddened cow'. He hates gamekeepers and one in particular 'with a good, simple, hot-blooded hatred.' There are good things about the town and there are bad things about the country and if life is impossibly mixed and various, still it is all one and you are part of it, joined to it as closely as a limb is joined to a body. It is possible to dislike your knees or your ankles but you have in the end to accept that they are your own.

Nostalgia for the worlds that are lost is always balanced by optimism. Bates was actively interested in progress and reform. He tried, as he put it, 'to look at the country as a whole, as an inseparable part of the whole English way of life, and not as a life separated and fenced off.' He believed in agriculture as something 'creative' and beneficial, especially to 'millions who never take part in it.' He was robustly optimistic in the face of change, even when those changes were mourned by him for their private preciousness. Our affections are linked 'to the little things', he wrote. 'Are they merely the tender trivialities of one man's recollection or are they eternal things?' And in poignant reply to his own question, 'Don't ask me,' he says, 'They are very dear to me and I am frightened of the answer.' It is a characteristically clear-eyed perception.

So it is alright to be nostalgic. It is just not alright to hold on, to decry change, because change is in the nature of things. And in the

end, if all the 'tender trivialities' go and we are really homeless then at least there will be the woods and fields of memory. And maybe these fusions of the real and the ideal are where we really keep our selves. Maybe this consummation of contradictions is at the heart of it, however fleeting. So standing in his wood at bud-break, in the rain, Bates describes the rain intensifying the colour of the buds and the buds colouring the rain, until the separate identities of the two seem confused, subsumed as they are in some newer and bigger unity. He watches while 'the whole woodside gleams with the liquid passionate glow of multitudinous rain-drenched branches' until the buds 'become glorified'. It is what he would have called a 'Biblical' passage, light and water and wood transfigured in 'passionate' combination.

Only in memory or on paper can these fleeting things, tricks of light, days out of season, lost traditions of work or play, lost places, the woods full of orchids, the 'paradises of primroses' be fixed. But it is these intangibles that are powerful to us, the world of mystery for the child in the train-shaken wood, the memories of the man of another county, the illusion or promise of something better, different, more permanent, that keep us going.

This is what writing can do. It can make of these complex and impossible things, something coherent, something fixed that is solid enough to nurse and uphold us whatever we have lost or destroyed. It can give us a place we can walk into at the author's invitation, a place where there will be 'all kinds of trees, all kinds of flowers and creatures, a conflicting and yet harmonious pooling of life.' A wood.

That is Bates' answer to his own question. This is what 'the English woodland' is, a triumphant amalgam of real with ideal, the solid with the evanescent, the presence of Kent and the memory of Bedfordshire, described in the language of Northamptonshire. It is

a collection of lives, imagined, remembered and real, all coexisting, each separate and distinct and often warring, sometimes killing or crowding, but that put all together, pool into one. Variety and conflict mysteriously producing harmony.

Abstracted like that, it makes a pretty good recipe for society as a whole. The perfect illusory paradise of our dreams. But it could just as well be a recipe for Bates himself, for his strong and contradictory character and for the writing to which he dedicated his life and which so closely reflected not just his own nature but the nature of the landscape that he loved. Deceptively effortless, literary and earthy, imaginary and intently observed, painterly and full of sound. Real, ideal, optimistic, nostalgic. Accepting of the way things are.

Or just natural.

Laura Beatty
Salcey Forest, 2011