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## “Rough Critical Winds”: Mis-Selling English Pastoral in H. E. Bates’s Larkin Novels, 1958–1970

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### ABSTRACT

The revival of interest in H. E. Bates has largely come without much attention being paid to his series of five novels featuring the Larkin family (1958–1970). The neglect is because of their populist and comic mode. Yet, study of the Larkin novels enables us to understand better the relationship between escapist tendencies and social relevance in twentieth-century pastoral, which is precisely the issue that has recently occupied critics of the regional novel. Pursuing the theme of mis-selling, this essay examines how the nostalgic effects that Bates constructs act as a commentary on the commodification of the pastoral that is made possible by new social realities and shifting geographies in post-war England. In the process the novels construct a pastoral resistant to rough critical winds that have dismissed them as sentimental or dishonourable. It argues that the novels test the limits of pastoral tenets, particularly distinctions embedded in physical space, contributing to discussions about modernity’s nostalgic blindspots.

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## Introduction

H. E. Bates’s Larkin family are back in adaptation for the small screen. In autumn 2022, ITV are showing the second series of *The Larkins*, directed by Simon Nye. The first series (2021) met with less than universal approval. The *Independent*’s Sean O’Grady linked it to the politics of Britain’s withdrawal from the European Union and, more generally, to mis-sold nostalgia. O’Grady describes *The Larkins* as

a sort of Brexit Television, set in a post-war green and pleasant England that never was and never will be, but for which so many feel an overwhelming nostalgia (and so much so that they’re prepared to vote in their millions for a better yesterday).<sup>1</sup>

The accusation that the adaptations of Bates’s novels, and by association the novels themselves, are the epitome of nostalgia, which in this case means a wistful desire for a particularly English brand of pastoralism, is not a new one. However, my focus in this essay is on the ways in which the five novels – *The Darling Buds of May* (1958), *A Breath of*

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<sup>1</sup>*Independent* (10 October 2021).

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*French Air* (1959), *When the Green Woods Laugh* (1960), *Oh! To Be in England* (1963) and *A Little of What You Fancy* (1970) – act as a nexus for discussions of the commodification and the politics of nostalgia rather than simply offering uncomplicated and sentimental escapism. It is my contention that many similar objections that have been raised about the idea of misappropriation or mis-selling in relation to the adaptations lie at the heart of the novels’ internal debates about pastoral as a literary genre, the function of nostalgia, collective memory and national identity at a time of apparently great social change.

Even as there has been a recent resuscitation of Bates’s reputation as a novelist, with important studies by Dominic Head (2010; 2017) and K. D. M. Snell (2017), it is the case that the Larkin novels have received limited mention in their accounts of regional fiction. Scholarly neglect is partly due to Bates’s comic mode in the Larkin stories, whereas his earlier realism fits more easily into critical interest in the serious regional novel. Neglect is also explained by the fact that the novels are too late to be considered “middlebrow” fiction, the study of which has, in any case, been dominated in recent years by attention to women’s writing, as we find in the work of Nicola Humble (2004) and Erica Brown (2013). Working-class fiction of the 1950s, such as that by Alan Sillitoe, David Storey and Barry Hines, largely moves from rural to urban settings and so the working-class Larkins are an outlier here too. There are few comparable novels of the period – Laurie Lee’s *Cider with Rosie* (1959) is an historical novel so doesn’t count. Head notes that it is “unwise to place too great a weight of interpretation on a popular comic novel”;<sup>2</sup> there is an open sense that the popular end of Bates’s output is trivial in comparison to his other rural writing. It is mostly just Larkin’ about.

Far from being incompatible with Head’s aim to reveal the complex factors that are involved in squaring the modernist, pastoral novel’s escapist drives with their “social relevance”,<sup>3</sup> the Larkin stories, never previously given scholarly attention as a quintet, reflect at length on this very topic. The focus is largely contemporary with Sidney “Pop” Larkin eschewing traditional rural labour as a source of his great wealth – as Alice Ferrebe remarks, the lifestyle of the Larkins “is far from organic”<sup>4</sup> – and modern consumerism replacing traditional “occupational community”<sup>5</sup> or links between wealth and the land. However, no one has so far examined in detail how these social factors develop across the novels and complicate ideas central to the construction of the pastoral in the twentieth century. We can do more to show how Bates opens a window onto the relationship of past, present and future in the experience of nostalgia in the post-war era that is akin to Svetlana Boym’s reading of nostalgia for a “past [which] is remade in the image of the present or a desired future”.<sup>6</sup> In the Larkin novels, “longings for rustic life” must negotiate how self-consciously modern signifiers, particularly new media and money, “affect the relationship between distance and intimacy that is at the core of nostalgic sentiment”.<sup>7</sup> This is particularly important for the pastoral of the regional novel, which traditionally depends on maintaining distinctions between “dimensions embedded in physical space”.<sup>8</sup> Rather than construct a nowhere place, Bates is at great pains to demonstrate

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<sup>2</sup>Head, *Modernity and the English Rural Novel*, 145.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>4</sup>Ferrebe, *Literature of the 1950s*, 164.

<sup>5</sup>Snell, *Spirits of Community*, 235.

<sup>6</sup>Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 354.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 346.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 77.

the social conditions that generate the world of the Larkins in the 1950s and 1960s. I will argue that the Larkin novels speak of the condition of England in ways that are embedded in contemporary ideas about class, rural and urban spaces, material culture and its operations within specific geographies even if they are framed by more generalised ideas about nostalgia for English country life. In so doing, I will show how they complicate nostalgia, in terms that mirror those of Boym.

It is also the case that the pastoral of the Larkin novels tests some of the ideas that have long been prevalent in approaches to the topic in literary criticism. For instance, it has been accepted by cultural commentators, from Leo Marx in the 1960s to Terry Gifford in the 1990s, that pastoral falls into, on the one hand, a “sentimental” or “dishonourable” tradition, which tends to overly romanticise the countryside, and, on the other, a “complex”<sup>9</sup> or “honourable” tradition, so-called because it reveals social hardship linked to working the land. As we will see, Bates avoids what could be called a cleft pastoral stick. When the narcotic haze of bucolic imagery is undercut, it is through satirical observations on the welfare state, the decline of the aristocracy and the rise of consumer and youth culture rather than depictions of sweat and toil. In this way, Bates plays against pastoral types to produce his social critique, which is hard to pin to “a single ideological position”.<sup>10</sup> It suggests what Gifford calls a “form of unresolved dialogue about the tensions”<sup>11</sup> within both post-war English society and the pastoral as a form.

While Bates’s earlier novels function largely as odes to the countryside and so risk accusations about naïve simplifications of rural life no matter the degree of realism, it is in the Larkin novels, despite or perhaps because of their frivolous and throwaway manner, that Bates makes his most original contribution to the genre of literary pastoral and his most pointed observations about modernity and its nostalgic blindspots. Laying out these issues for inspection rather than dismissing them because of the populist mode offers the opportunity to examine the potential for the existence of the pastoral in a self-consciously modern and commercial society. In what follows, I unpack the notion of mis-selling, using it to refer to false claims made about the pastoral but also to open up a broader discussion about pastoralism and economics that includes but is not confined to materialism. Even so, when it comes to the Larkins, we will find that just as often mis-selling explicitly applies to unscrupulous moneymaking.

## Trading in Nostalgia: H. E. Bates’s Larkins in Adaptation

It is beneficial to begin with the reception of the Larkins in adaptation because here many of the contradictions found in the novels are writ large though they pass unexamined. O’Grady, for example, raises a curious double objection to *The Larkins*: on the one hand he accuses the “brand” of trading in nostalgia for the nefarious purposes of comfort viewing in a post-Brexit context; on the other he attacks the adaptation for being a dodgy pastoral product in any case. There is incongruity in a production that indulges viewers’ desires to “escape their present” and the behaviour of the “Larkin

<sup>9</sup>Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 25. It is Terry Gifford who uses the word “dishonourable” (*Pastoral*, 148). We can take it that “complex” pastoral is presumably, therefore, honourable. On occasion, I will add these other labels to Marx’s as they help emphasise the salient issue.

<sup>10</sup>Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, 4.

<sup>11</sup>Gifford, *Pastoral*, 11.

clan” who “are tax-dodging, filthy-rich, brash, vulgar, gluttonous, feral, greedy, sadistic, humblebragging, self-righteous, parasitic yobs who prey on all around them”.<sup>12</sup>

O’Grady is not alone in suffering a bout of cognitive dissonance. Reviews of earlier adaptations of the Larkin novels – which to date number the Hollywood film, *The Mating Game* (1959), its stage adaptation of the same year, the ITV series (1991–1993) and Nye’s adaptation – follow a similar path. In their review of the stage play of *The Mating Game* (1959), *The Times* saw the pastoral as knowing rather than naïve: the Larkins “do everything with gusto and regardless of expense”, exhibiting “a sincere love of the simple life with two television sets, a cocktail bar worthy of the Ritz, and a possible ducal Rolls-Royce”.<sup>13</sup> They associate financial reward with Pop’s loose morals. This is because the plot of *The Darling Buds of May* tells the story of Cedric “Charley” Charlton, a tax inspector sent by the British Inland Revenue to collect money from Pop. Charley is assimilated into the Larkin family, consisting of Pop, Ma, and their six children, his will weakened by exposure to a mixture of hedonism, the beauty of the English countryside and an infatuation with the eldest daughter, Mariette. Pop and Ma Larkin, believing the 17-year-old Mariette to be pregnant and needing to find her a husband see her seduction of Charley as a chance to kill two birds with one stone, setting up Mariette with a father for her child and neutering the Revenue. *The Times* differentiates and yet elects to ignore the inconsistencies between simple pleasures and guilty ones that concern how such pastoral is to be financed, concluding that it would be rude to critique, or even inspect, this problem too assertively:

Should a rough critical wind be allowed to arise and shake these buds? On all sides one heard that the play is “warm”; the escape from inhibitions is, one admits, the best sort of holiday. What, after all, is wrong with Mr. Bates’s gently anarchic, wish-fulfilling day dream?<sup>14</sup>

The reviewer is forgiving, even protective, of behaviour of which he would disapprove outside the ostensible pastoral context.

The 1990s ITV adaptation induced similar mental contortions in reviewers. *The Times* TV listings record, “[Pop Larkin] manages to keep a large family, a 20-acre Kent farm and a Rolls-Royce without apparently doing any work” and that “the series is beautifully photographed in a Kentish countryside permanently bathed in sunshine”.<sup>15</sup> Lynne Truss was exercised by the idea of audiences being indoctrinated into nostalgia for the countryside and English heritage airbrushed of any hardship – in this case because the scene in the first novel in which Ma butchers a pig is excluded. When she nevertheless observes the adaptation is “faithful to the books to an almost slavish degree”<sup>16</sup> she means faithful to an idea of English pastoral that bathes the countryside in sunshine and promotes an apparent absence of work but not wealth. The phenomenal success of the adaptation was exploited, and the nostalgia effect thoroughly commercialised, in the 1990s. Estate agents marketed property in Kent using Pop’s oft-repeated catchphrase, “Perfick”: on 8 May 1991, *The Times* carried an advertisement for “‘Just Perfick’ Pluckley in Kent”, boasting “unparalleled beautiful views across old Wealdon village &

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<sup>12</sup>*Independent* (10 October 2021).

<sup>13</sup>*The Times* (3 September 1959).

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup>*The Times* (6 April 1991).

<sup>16</sup>*The Times* (20 April 1991).

surrounding rural area, where the popular T.V. series ‘Darling Buds of May’ is filmed”. There is no acknowledgement that there is any discordance in the sale of “3 *new executive homes* in private cul-de-sac” [emphasis added].<sup>17</sup> To commemorate the 20th anniversary of the 1991 series, the Kent Film Office created “The Darling Buds of May Trail”. In 2012, Dana Huntley documented her trip to the filming locations for *British Heritage*. She notes the excess of leisure and pleasure that characterise the Larkin lifestyle would have been anachronistic “in rural postwar Britain just weaned off of food and clothing rationing”, although “it is easy to imagine the optimism, the neighborliness and the innocence of folks who smile easily, look constantly ahead and don’t much care what the fashions of the world think”.<sup>18</sup> Moral quandaries and nagging doubts about the price tag that comes with fleeing “the lure of the town’s formalities, temptations and rat race for the bucolic charms, rustic innocence and freedom of restraint in the Forest of Arden – or the Garden of England”<sup>19</sup> are downplayed.

The reception of the adaptations of the Larkin novels points us towards an unresolved dialogue about tensions in the portrayal of pastoral that are characterised by the haziness of the line between work and leisure, the imprecision surrounding the source of Pop Larkin’s wealth, the confluence of innocence and knowingness (in erotic terms and money matters) and misapprehensions about just how far escapist fantasy is really escapism. A common pattern is to disregard the way these issues combine to induce a discomfiting mixture of desire and guilt, which means alternately reproving and ignoring signs of modernity, the urban and patterns of commodification, by suggesting this is artistic licence or misrepresentation. How else does one account for O’Grady’s objections to being flogged a romanticised version of the English past whose protagonists behave so unromantically? Or reconcile Huntley’s image of country folk, careless or unwitting of fashion, with the knowledge of the Larkin clan’s conspicuous materialism? The effect is that, if the pastoral is often seen as a delicate world vulnerable to external forces, or rough critical winds that would write this off as nostalgic whimsy, the Larkin lifestyle exudes an oxymoronic solid evanescence or rugged fragility, its darling buds peculiarly resistant to the ordinary terms of pastoral critique. This effect can be accounted for by a sustained reading of the novels.

### Escape to the Country? *The Darling Buds of May*

Rather than seek to escape the complexity of social realities, I believe the Larkin novels subversively prefigure precisely the kind of awkward questions about desire and the commodification of pastoral outlined above. They do this by putting social reality in dialogue with longstanding assumptions about pastoral literature. The latter are best summarised by Gifford in his threefold definition of the pastoral. In the first instance, “pastoral refers to any literature that describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban”.<sup>20</sup> Second, the position commonly associated with Leo Marx, sees pastoral as a pejorative term for any literature celebrating country life shorn of “material reality” or “ecological concern”, where “the difference between the textual evidence and the

<sup>17</sup>*The Times* (8 May 1991).

<sup>18</sup>Huntley, “Follow the Trail of the Buds of May,” 34.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup>Gifford, *Pastoral*, 2.

economic reality would be judged to be too great by the criteria of social reality”.<sup>21</sup> Third, pastoral is a form of literature involving “some form of retreat and return, the fundamental pastoral movement, either within the text, or in the sense that the pastoral retreat ‘return[s]’ some insights relevant to the urban audience”.<sup>22</sup> What is notable about *The Darling Buds of May*, and the subsequent novels in the series, is that none of these thematic-formal components survive beyond the most cursory inspection.

Bates sets up a familiar pastoral plot, but soon departs from its recognisable tropes. To begin, Charley threatens the Larkin lifestyle in its lavish form and the prospects of the countryside more generally. The rough winds that might shake the pastoralism characterised by “fragrant rows of honeysuckle, the first wild pink roses and may”,<sup>23</sup> the imperilled “darling buds” invoked in the title, are therefore established as economic in nature. Pop is an intractable custodian of a rural backwater that features a cast of more vulnerable locals, including the threadbare Brigadier, the repressed spinster Edith Pilchester, the Miss Barnwells, who seem to subsist on fresh air, and George Bluff-Gore who can no longer afford to maintain his Georgian mansion. The incursions of the state in the form of the Revenue are kept at bay by Pop’s vagueness about the nature of his job and pleas of poverty: “‘Six kids to feed and clothe,’ Pop said. ‘This place to run. Fodder to buy. Wheat as dear as gold dust. Pig-food enough to frighten you to death’”.<sup>24</sup> Pop self-presents as a rival to the Starkadders of Stella Gibbons’s *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932).

However, if the threat to the Larkin lifestyle is well defined, it is far from clear what precisely it is that forms a resistance to it. Charley functions less as aggressor and more as the interpolated reader of pastoralism, challenged to decipher the status of Pop Larkin and the nature of his lifestyle. There can be no doubt that there is abundant evidence of traditional associations between husbandry, the land and sustainability: “Real Jersey”, Ma announces of the “heavy yellow cream” she offers Charley at dinner, “from our cow”.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, Pop combines “ecological concern” with concern for the future of the rural economy in lamenting the future of fruit picking in Kent. “How was it the strawberry lark was nearly over?” inquires Charley: “‘Disease,’ Pop said. ‘Sovereigns are finished. Climax is finished. Huxleys are finished. Soon there won’t be no strawberries nowhere ...’”<sup>26</sup> As Gifford argues, one of the repeated characteristics of pastoral is the “only-just-disappeared”<sup>27</sup> quality or the proximity to extinction – in auctioneering parlance this is the “going, going, gone” effect – that Pop parades. But *Cold Comfort Farm* is simultaneously *Liberty Hall*: “‘Have just what you fancy, Mister Charlton,’ Pop said. ‘If you don’t see it here, ask for it. Bottle o’ beer? Glass o’ sherry?’”<sup>28</sup> The abundance of the Larkins’ Sunday dinner promotes complex reactions in Charley “tortured by the odours of goose-flesh and sage-and-onions” but disturbed by “the uneasy notion”<sup>29</sup> that the goose he is eating had brushed against his legs under the kitchen table the day

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 1–2.

<sup>23</sup>Bates, *The Darling Buds of May*, 14. Hereafter *DBM*.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 18.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 17.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 32.

<sup>27</sup>Gifford, *Pastoral*, 81.

<sup>28</sup>*DBM*, 16.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 58.



before. The Larkins' livestock frequently find their way into the home: the land is conspicuously present.

The humour here is of the fish out of water, the naïve town-dweller, discomposed by the crude ways of the countryside but also the reality of living off the land. Charley's shudder is of the same variety as the one that prompts Truss's remark about the scene of Ma's butchery. In *The Darling Buds of May* it gives Pop "enormous pleasure"<sup>30</sup> to see his wife elbow-deep in offal. Pastoralism is an alternative to the urban on Gifford's terms in this reading because it emphasises liberty – in appetite but also sexuality. Following the Sunday dinner, Charley and Mariette head into the meadow where "she wondered what it would be like to make love to Mr Charlton in a buttercup field. She thought she could but try".<sup>31</sup> Charley gives himself up to sensory overload that contrasts with his ordinary working life:

"Look at that sky, Charley," Pop said and indicated with the tip of an unlighted cigar the exquisite expanse of all heaven, blue as flax-flower. "There's summat worth while for you. Perfick. Blimey, I wonder how you fellers can work in offices."

Mr Charlton was beginning to wonder too.<sup>32</sup>

The evidence of such moments supports the reading of the novel as "wish-fulfilment" in Lawrence Lerner's sense,<sup>33</sup> an example of "the paradisiacal Larkin world",<sup>34</sup> but the message about its constituent parts is mixed, alternatively over- and under-sold by Pop in misleading ways as he shifts from displays of abundance to protestations of penury.

If this still follows a regular pastoral course, the capacity to inhabit a pastoral duality suggests that wish-fulfilment is embedded within contextually specific economic and social factors. To an extent, as Snell notes, this is because Bates demonstrates the Larkins "are not *escaping* from anything, beyond the sentiments of proscriptive community".<sup>35</sup> The jokes depend on registering that Pop outdoes the urban on its own terms. Hence, Charley's bewilderment as interpolated reader of the pastoral results from a series of juxtapositions that, like his questions about Pop's income, are "difficult to frame".<sup>36</sup> Ma's appearance with a huge bag of pineapples belies Pop's pronouncements about the cost of living. Charley's senses are assaulted on all sides by the Larkins' full engagement with commodities, including multiple television sets and the gaudy cocktail cabinet in the shape of a galleon that Ma proudly announces cost £180. Ma cooks in a "brand new aluminium pan"<sup>37</sup> and discusses purchasing a deep freeze. Mariette enthuses about her "new super-foam mattress"<sup>38</sup> and Pop later purchases a motor boat to go with his Rolls-Royce. The idea that Bates represents a world turned away from modern fashions, as Huntley claims, is palpably untrue, emphasised by the plot to seduce Charley as Ma and Mariette discuss dresses, perfume and tactics: "Put some of my

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 81.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 60.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 61.

<sup>33</sup>Loughrey, *The Pastoral Mode*, 154.

<sup>34</sup>DBM, 61.

<sup>35</sup>Snell, *Spirits of Community*, 235.

<sup>36</sup>DBM, 18.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 27.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 30.



Goya on,' Ma said. 'The gardenia. Or else the Chanel'".<sup>39</sup> Charley is undone by the fashion-conscious teenager masquerading as the simple country girl rather than by the country girl, sexually liberated by her distance from social norms.

All this is done in a casual manner as though entirely natural, but that is precisely the nature of the blurred pastoral vision which naturalises the artificial and puts a high price on pastoral even as it appears to come easily. Snell's observation that the Larkins are not escaping but embracing materialism can be taken a step further if the Larkins' consumerism is seen in the light of Bates's disengagement from Gifford's three pastoral hallmarks outlined above. First, there is a lack of clarity over what kind of pastoral idyll is being set against the antagonist of the modern world with the suggestion that there is little or no contrast between urban and country life. Second, Bates gives an indisputable "material reality" that, even as it exhibits little or no hardship, cannot be accused of idealisation or sentimentalism. Third, the lack of contrast between rural and urban spaces means there cannot therefore be any "return" that would offer an enlightened critique of capitalism and modernity. *The Darling Buds of May* is pastoral literature that offers no internal return for Charley, who marries Mariette and remains with the Larkins at the end of the plot, but it likewise functions by disputing the idea of any sort of "retreat" in the first place.

The impossibility of taking pastoral retreat at face value also emphasises that the politics of the novel – Bates is commonly viewed as endorsing a conservative backlash against the new, post-war socialism – are harder to pin to a particular ideological position than it might appear. Bates targets the attitudes of the New Left to materialism, particularly Richard Hoggart's concerns expressed in *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) for the loss of working-class cultural traditions through what would later be called a process of "dumbing down". Hoggart is concerned about "material improvements", particularly television, which "can be used so as to incline the body of working-people to accept a mean form of materialism as a social philosophy".<sup>40</sup> The Larkins, described as "pallid, eyeless ghoul"<sup>41</sup> watching the television, embody Hoggart's worst fears. Yet criticism of social reformers does not equate to wholehearted conservatism. When Pop convinces Charley to take advantage of the "National Elf lark"<sup>42</sup> and take paid sick leave in order to remain in the country and avoid returning to work, it is the benefit cheat who is romanticised rather than the landowner. Skiving is widespread, as Dr Legrave later makes clear: "Trouble is it's a nice evening. By now my waiting-room'll be jam-packed as a cinema with Lolla showing".<sup>43</sup> Pop is a poor advocate of conservative values as he alternatively performs the role of active and unwitting agent in the kind of changes that endanger the traditions of the countryside. His solution to Bluff-Gore's destitution is to purchase the stately home, Gore Court, and pull it down for scrap. Even the idea that Pop represents a subservient attitude when faced with the literary knowledge of Charley is hard to reconcile with the fact that Charley's talents are harnessed to serve the ends of Pop throughout the novels. More instructive than the fact Pop can't write, is the scene

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 27.

<sup>40</sup>Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, 264.

<sup>41</sup>DBM, 17.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 63.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 82.

in which the family play cards, and the taxman is baffled by Pop's head for figures and rapid calculations.

Hoggart focused his ethnographic study on urban South Yorkshire, but his anatomy of the working class foregrounds nearly all of the aspects that define the Larkins, including mottos such as "living and letting live"<sup>44</sup> and "a little of what y' fancy does y' good"<sup>45</sup> – the creed of Ma Larkin – "freedom of a vast Vanity Fair of shouting indulgences", devotion to new magazines called "glossies" and "bitty, promiscuous sexual experience" amongst adolescents.<sup>46</sup> The shame of "living in sin"<sup>47</sup> is precisely what Ma bristles at when Charley discovers she and Pop never married. Bates's rural location is far removed from Leeds and Sheffield, yet the echoes underline the key fact that, in *The Darling Buds of May*, it is not the belief that the materialism of the city threatens to corrupt the countryside which is paramount, but that there persists a feeling that the city has not been left behind at all. A breakdown of the thematic-formal components of pastoral arises from spatio-temporal overlaps that Boym sees as the distinctive quality of twentieth-century nostalgia. It is this which makes possible Pop's economic exploitation and produces nostalgic blindspots. If rural locations often function, as Ian Baucom argues, as "identity-preserving, identity-enchanting, and identity-transforming ... places in which England can locate and secure its identity",<sup>48</sup> then Bates divorces the enchantment and transformation from the preservation and unsettles the idea of the country locale far from the madding crowd.

On one level Pop undoes Charley's power by isolating him from the city: "No eight o'clock bus now ... They knocked it off soon after petrol rationing started".<sup>49</sup> But while Charley frets that he must walk "eight miles"<sup>50</sup> home (he eventually succumbs to the invitation to stay the night), it is the proximity of town and country that is, instead, everywhere emphasised. Distance is measured not by foot but by car, as indicated by the twins who sell wild flowers at the roadside to passing motorists. Inverting polarities, Pop is stunned to learn that Charley doesn't own a car. Pop buys his Rolls-Royce from Colonel Forbes, who is "only down week-ends".<sup>51</sup> Riding to strawberry picking in the back of Pop's truck, Charley worries "it would be terrible to be seen by any of the chaps", "perhaps someone from the office".<sup>52</sup> The land and the office occupy the same perceptual space. The feature of the Rolls-Royce that most delights Pop is the dual horn; "smooth as honey" for the city and a "peremptory, urgent snarl"<sup>53</sup> for the country, it makes audible proximity rather than distance. Pop's junk yard symbolises the way in which rural and urban signifiers are indistinguishable:

Standing in the evening sunlight, gazing across the pile of junk, the nettles, the rusting hovels, and the scratching, dusty hens, Pop sighed loudly and with such content that the

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<sup>44</sup>Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, 79.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, 145, 109, 84.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>48</sup>Baucom, *Out of Place*, 19.

<sup>49</sup>*DBM*, 30.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, 49.

sound seemed to travel with perfect definition across the surrounding fields of buttercups and may.<sup>54</sup>

Man-made junk is set in propinquity to nature: Bates connects things that pastoral traditionally presents as separate categories.

Unable to distinguish between “distance and intimacy”, as Boym has it, Charley finds it hard to frame the presence of urban signifiers within a world that allegedly offers an escape route from commerce. The trick whereby modernity is mis-sold as a more wholesome past reaches its crescendo on the strawberry-picking day. Fruit-picking is not about proximity to the land but to commercial markets. This is made clear when Pop introduces the idea: “At strawberries alone, with a big family, you could earn fifteen pounds a day”.<sup>55</sup> Charley’s first impression of the fields is of an agrarian idyll, with “all kinds of women ... together with children, bending and laughing in the long strawberry rows ... It was a very pleasant, peaceful, pastoral scene”.<sup>56</sup> This is disrupted when he is recruited to weighing and totalling the baskets and falls victim to two confidence tricksters, Poll and Lil, who exploit his incapacity to keep pace with the task. The machinations of the women reveal economic undercurrents that complicate boundaries between work, leisure and wealth. Signs of graft, the staple of Marx’s “complex”, honourable pastoral tradition, are here a performance for the urban spectator that come with a price. Poll and Lil ham up their endeavours: “Sweat – I can feel it running down my back ... Runs off you like water”.<sup>57</sup> When they cadge Charley for a loan – “Came out without a bean this morning,” Poll explained. “Too early for the damn Post Office. Else we’d have got the kids’ allowances’.”<sup>58</sup> – the country is depicted as consuming the town: “the two bare-chested women watched him, though he did not know it, like two brown, hungry, calculating old dogs watching a bone”.<sup>59</sup> Here, in little, Bates shows the commercialisation of nostalgia in operation, and the larger economic picture wherein reward is not about work but about making things work. Poll and Lil commercially exploit the idea of the countryside just as the twins’ flower stall sells an idea of an idyll as much as flowers. The irony of the tax man unable to decode these economic messages is enforced by Charley’s encounter with Pauline Jackson who attempts to seduce him in the counting tent before offering him a ride on her Vespa motorcycle: “Where on earth did these people get their money from? Mr Charlton started thinking”.<sup>60</sup> The pastoral Bates paints is not one that displays the struggle of rural life, where livings are eked out against the odds, but neither is it one that evades material reality for a false idyll. The idyll is precisely one that harnesses economic and materiality reality and so brushes off the Marxist argument about the sanitisation of work. In the same moment, the complaint that the Larkins do not represent the times falls apart.

Bates responds to new social and economic circumstances in 1950s Britain just as Pop and the Polls and Lils exploit those social realities. That does not mean that the present is simply endorsed against the past. As the Brigadier remarks about the Larkins’ indulgence,

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<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, 74.

it is “rather lacking in decency”.<sup>61</sup> What is evident is that something new is constructed that explains how Bates’s pastoral, like Pop’s enterprise, stands strong against rough critical winds. Bates sidesteps accusations that his pastoral avoids dealing with “material reality” by demystifying the idea of the countryside as a place remote from urban centres. The greatest irony of the commercial underpinnings of the strawberry picking is the fact that Pop is elsewhere: “He had had a very good day doing a big lark in scrap that showed six hundred per cent with not a very great deal of trouble”.<sup>62</sup> Close to the pastoral strawberry fields, Pop trades. At the level of description, Bates reinforces the impression that city and country share the same perceptual space: Poll laughs “in a voice like a street-trader selling mackerel”<sup>63</sup> and, when Mariette and Pauline fight in the field for the affections of Mr Charlton, the imagery, unlike equivalent scenes in Hardy, impresses urban signifiers: “One of the white cats was Pauline Jackson; the other was Mariette. Like cats too they were howling in the unrestricted animal voices that belong to dark roof tops”.<sup>64</sup>

The answer to Charley’s question about the origin of Pauline Jackson’s money is given in the following chapter in the depiction of Edith Pilchester’s dilapidated cottage. She laments that she can no longer hire help to run the house: “Now all of them had gone ... Everybody went out to work in the fields at strawberry-picking, cherry-picking ... or at the canning-factories in the town, earning mountains more money than they knew what to do with”.<sup>65</sup> Agriculture and industry are locked together. The rural labour force has gone, but not in the sense of sentimental pastoral such as William Wordsworth’s “Michael” (1800) or Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Deserted Village* (1770), because the likes of Pauline Jackson, Poll and Lil, are, in fact, still there. What this signifies is that the country has, to all intents and purposes, become the town. To re-emphasise the central point of my argument, there is no “return”, in Gifford’s terms, because there is no “retreat”; there is no “implicit” contrast between the country and the urban, even if there is often an “explicit” contrast that invokes and performs pastoral myths. There is little sense in *The Darling Buds of May* that Bates offers a natural retreat from where it is possible to “affirm an alternative subjectivity to hegemonic versions of Englishness” because he depicts rural life’s “entanglement”<sup>66</sup> with commerce and the urban as inherent to its continued existence.

When Charley is taken by Mariette to listen to nightingales in the wood, he cannot “believe that the yard of nettles and junk, Pop’s beautiful, incredible paradise, lay only a hundred yards away”.<sup>67</sup> The question Charley confronts is not really “what” but “where”. Tellingly, Bates is unclear when it comes to actual geography. Pauline Jackson offers Charley a ride back to Fordington which does not exist in Kent. He recalls seeing Mariette ride horses at Newchurch, which does. So too does Barfield. It is a bit like Hardy’s Wessex, but not entirely. What Bates gives us is a fluid territory, but one that evokes an actual contemporary landscape as much as the generalised, perhaps mythical, Weald referenced in Huntley’s review of the Pluckley tourist trail. It

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 55–6.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 78.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 69.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 75.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 79.

<sup>66</sup>McCarthy, *Green Modernism*, 4.

<sup>67</sup>DBM, 23.

is worth noting, for example, that Pluckley lies close to the route of the M20 motorway near to Ashford and that in 1957, as Bates worked on *The Darling Buds of May* at his home in Little Chart, its beginnings were laid when work on the Ashford bypass was completed. Far from uphold the frequently circulated view that Bates writes a 1950s that could not and did not exist and so must be escapist, it is through careful depiction of the shifting landscape, in which Pop harnesses the financial power of the urban centre, that he shows the Larkins are not *unreal* or unimaginable even if they don't struggle for a living. Pop's lesson to Charley is that if you want the rural life of ease then someone has to pay for it (which is not the same as to say someone has to work for it). And if you can pay for it, you might as well have the other things a consumer society has to offer. As Snell puts it, the Larkins "are engaging more fully with everything that has become available around them".<sup>68</sup> The phrasing, "around them", is well chosen as it reminds us that Bates writes from a period of changing relationships between town and country that suggest something akin to David Clarke's argument for a "commodification of the countryside as a space of leisure"<sup>69</sup> in the early twentieth century with Pop Larkin as purveyor.

The clue to Bates's thinking about mistaken responses to place might be found in Ma's pregnancy at the end of the novel as she discusses baby names, deciding that if she has twins they will be called Rosalind and Orlando, "out of that play they saw on television the other night".<sup>70</sup> It is notable how few overt literary references exist in the Larkin series, beyond their titles. It is therefore more notable that the one Shakespearean intertext is *As You Like It* (c.1599), a play about the discovery of Duke Senior's alternative court in exile in the Forest of Arden. Encountering the court or the urban within the countryside complicates the notion of an escape to the country, suggesting Bates's allusion is purposefully chosen. It presents what Boym terms "double exposure, or a superimposition of two images"<sup>71</sup> to which the nostalgic is susceptible. In *The Darling Buds of May*, Bates pivots away from the wistful and poignant rural stories with which he had made his name to pull off a confidence trick equivalent to those of Pop Larkin by using the pastoral mode to express a deep nostalgia for modernity and to depict a conservatism that embraces the new rather than the old. Pastoral is mis-sold for the urban audience represented by Charley who learns to appreciate that this all comes at a price. Bates addresses the pastoral as a mode of writing, its sentimental and complex aspects, and the desirability but impossibility of separating them because the impression of the former is made possible because of the latter even as the latter trades on the associations of the former.

## A Place in the Sun: The Larkin Sequels

The comic muse gave Bates a commercially winning formula, but that does not mean the Larkin novels offer nothing to a student of pastoralism; as I have argued, they pinpoint a new way of squaring the pastoral novel's escapist drives with its social relevance. In the sequels that follow *The Darling Buds of May*, which occupy my focus for the remainder of this essay, Bates developed the character of Pop as both canny operative in purveying

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<sup>68</sup>Snell, *Spirits of Community*, 235.

<sup>69</sup>Clarke, *The Consumer Society*, 111.

<sup>70</sup>DBM, 113.

<sup>71</sup>Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xiv.

pastoral and unwitting beneficiary of a changing rural economy and social circumstances that became the paradigm of twentieth-century nostalgia.

*A Breath of French Air* is the exception that proves the rule, the only one of the Larkin novels not set in Kent, as Bates sends the Larkin family on a holiday to Brittany in North-east France. The architecture of the plot works differently to the threat-and-resistance model seen in *The Darling Buds of May* as the Larkins become aliens abroad. With Charley fully assimilated into the Larkin lifestyle his importance as witness to Pop and the family fades to be replaced by the French hotel owner Mademoiselle Dupont. *A Breath of French Air* descends to plenty of crude humour about culture clashes and package holidays as Pop struggles to adjust to French customs and cuisine in St Pierre le Port. There is an element of cultural stereotyping in Pop's transfer of English customs abroad. Pop's vulgar manners and brazen flirtation initially upset Mademoiselle Dupont, but the jokes come at the expense of the Larkins and English parochialism as much as French cosmopolitanism. Tensions are eventually resolved as Mademoiselle Dupont falls for Pop's charm and Ma decides their new baby will be called Oscar Septimus Dupont Larkin.

The theme of culture clash and the notion of the little Englander abroad is the foil for Bates's elaboration on his real theme which is the contradictions of Pop's lifestyle and the uncertainty that surrounds the English values he supposedly embodies. Nostalgia operates through collusion in a fictional conservatism unfounded in actual experience of, and ideas about, England that generate a series of blindspots that can be indulged only if they are paid for. In this case, two nostalgic motifs intersect. The first involves the romanticising of the past, as Charley recommends the Hôtel Beau Rivage which he remembers from childhood holidays, rhapsodising the "little train" that runs up the coast, "that beach, that warm sea".<sup>72</sup> These reminiscences do not reflect the current holiday, as Mariette mostly sunbathes and flirts with French youths until Charley gets drunk and drags her off to see the train. The second motif is much closer to the origin of the word which, as Thomas Dodman reminds us, first referred to a clinical disease in the seventeenth century, discerned in the longing of Swiss soldiers to return home from war. Combining the Ancient Greek *nostos* (homecoming) and *algos* (pain or longing), nostalgia was a "disposition to desire what we no longer have".<sup>73</sup> The French setting gives Bates ample chance to play similar tricks to those seen in *The Darling Buds of May* in working his account of a thoroughly modern family into the basic dynamic of feeling longing for home.

In this case the distance denied to the operations of pastoral in *The Darling Buds of May* is automatically given through the French setting. Pop is linked through his tastes to old England – "roast beef and Yorkshire"<sup>74</sup> – and new: "Wonderful thing, Pop remarked, telly. He missed it on holiday. It learnt you something all the time".<sup>75</sup> Even so, as with *The Darling Buds of May*, it is not the Larkins so much as the characters around them who tie themselves in nostalgic knots when it comes to notions of national pride. Bates pursues a theme of mistaken identity, initially suggested in *The Darling Buds of May* by Pop's purchase of the Rolls-Royce with a ducal monogram. Here it is part of what Ferrebe calls "a faintly anarchic sense of the instability of once-reliable markers of

<sup>72</sup>Bates, *A Breath of French Air*, 124. Hereafter *BFA*.

<sup>73</sup>Dodman, *What Nostalgia Was*, 2.

<sup>74</sup>*BFA*, 125.

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*, 189.

rank”.<sup>76</sup> With the family having disrupted the other guests, Mademoiselle Dupont is persuaded not to eject the Larkins from the hotel by a combination of Pop’s sexual magnetism and the Rolls-Royce in the car park. Pop explains he purchased it from “Some duke or other ... Feller I bought it from wasn’t sure”,<sup>77</sup> but Mademoiselle Dupont hears only the beginning of the sentence. The frisson of excitement that Pop might be “an English milord”<sup>78</sup> is made doubly potent by her own fantasies of role playing the part of Ma when Pop reveals they are unmarried.

Role reversals abound as Mademoiselle Dupont asks Pop to regale her with an account of “your house in England. Your *château*”.<sup>79</sup> Pop’s junk yard stands in contrast to Gore Court which we are informed Sir George Bluff-Gore has now sold to Pop “for demolition”.<sup>80</sup> Mademoiselle Dupont comes to the conclusion “that the English were to some extent eccentric. All the lower classes tried to behave like aristocracy; all the aristocracy tried to behave like workmen ... The women dressed in thick imperishable sacks called tweeds”.<sup>81</sup> Her willingness to invest in a fantasy of Pop as landed gent stands in strange contrast to this insight. The arrival of the fashionable Larkin women at dinner on the first night – Mariette, “in a beautiful sleeveless low-cut dress of emerald green”, and Ma wearing “plenty of Chanel No.5”<sup>82</sup> – ought to blow the illusion apart on the terms of such national stereotypes.

Mademoiselle Dupont’s wistful daydreams of a lost English past persist in the face of incontrovertible evidence that Pop’s money is new. Pop is unconcerned that the French holiday might cost “a pretty penny”<sup>83</sup> having been trading in army surplus “consisting of all sorts of unlikely things like tins of beetroot in vinegar, rat-traps, body belts, brass collar studs, gherkins in mustard, rubber shoe heels, and bottles of caper sauce”.<sup>84</sup> Realising that the bill is increasing, Pop cuts a deal with a French fisherman for the gherkins: “It would show about three hundred per cent if it came off”.<sup>85</sup> The idea that this “would help keep the pot boiling”<sup>86</sup> is comically juxtaposed with Pop’s lavish expenditure on champagne that fuels Mademoiselle Dupont’s belief that Pop is an aristocrat. It is a dream of wish-fulfilment born out of nostalgia for a past that is remade in the image of the present. Mademoiselle Dupont is flattered when Pop recognises her perfume, but this leads her to reflect on a curiously mixed man “who seemed so unlike the English of tradition”, and yet possessed “the secret of a key through the scents of flowers to events and places long-distant, forgotten, and even lost”.<sup>87</sup> The simultaneity of Pop’s links to and separation from an idea of a better past is set in economic context once again as he repeats his wrecking-ball tactics on Gore Court in giving advice to Mademoiselle Dupont to modernise her business, add an elevator and hot and cold water in

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<sup>76</sup>Ferrebe, *Literature of the 1950s*, 164.

<sup>77</sup>*BFA*, 157.

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>79</sup>*Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>80</sup>*Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>81</sup>*Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>82</sup>*Ibid.*, 142–3.

<sup>83</sup>*Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>84</sup>*Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>85</sup>*Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>86</sup>*Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>87</sup>*Ibid.*, 161.



bedrooms. “That was the spirit, Pop said ... Pull ‘em down. Start afresh”.<sup>88</sup> The repeated irony is that Pop’s role as envoy for a lost past is based upon the willingness to embrace social change and move with the times rather than against them. In this case, the geographical distance makes the same point as *The Darling Buds of May* but in a different way.

It is Ma who directs readers to the novel’s function as a commentary on human susceptibility to nostalgia despite evidence of its illusory quality. She gives a pop psychology account to Pop of Charley’s hankering to return to France and ride on the little train he remembered so fondly and his anger when Mariette didn’t share this desire: “It stands for something he’s lost. Or else something he’s never had. Not sure which ... It’s psychology,’ Ma said. ‘You hear a lot about it on telly’”.<sup>89</sup> Ma’s diagnosis repeats Dodman’s definition of nostalgia as the desire for “what we no longer have” and provides commentary on Mademoiselle Dupont as the interpolated reader of English pastoral tradition.

The Larkins are made a focus for escapist fantasies through which Bates offers satirical commentary on the operations of nostalgia. He spins crafty accounts of the way that “nostalgia inhibits characters, authors, and readers from gaining greater knowledge about the worlds they inhabit”.<sup>90</sup> But Bates’s mode is not aggressive satire that pulls the whole edifice down, perhaps reflected in *When the Green Woods Laugh* by his decision to make mis-selling, in the form of Pop’s alternative plans for Gore Court, the overt plotline. This time Pop plays the role of estate agent to the arriviste London stockbroker, Mr Jerebohm, and his wife, Pinkie, searching for the ideal rural retreat. The novel is the most troubling in terms of its underlying values as Pop is put on trial for indecent assault having engineered a clinch with Pinkie when helping her disembark from a rowing boat, but the primary themes are pastoral staples: work and idleness, escape or retreat and wish-fulfilment built upon environmental indeterminacy.

However, these staples continue to give the lie to the overt split of the urban and the countryside. In order to sell the mansion, Pop exploits and vends a pastoral that, by the 1960s, is already gone as though it is only just vanishing. Repeating the trick played on Charley, he shifts between enthusing about the riches of the countryside and his own poverty, the Rolls-Royce hurriedly explained away: “Took it for a small debt ... Knocks like a cracked teapot. You’d get more out of a mule and a milk float. Still, the best I can afford”.<sup>91</sup> Despite his claims to be forewarned about the devious ways of the house-agent – “crooks and liars”<sup>92</sup> – and his pride in the fact that he has never been sold any “pups”<sup>93</sup> as a stockbroker, Mr Jerebohm nonetheless succumbs to the pastoral myth. Pop makes a sales pitch for the Garden of England while Mr Jerebohm fantasises about rural pursuits including hunting parties, woods replete with game and rivers stocked with trout. This is despite the fact that Gore Court, whilst built on a grand scale, is run-down and in manifest need of expensive renovation. If the stained glass and impressive wood panelling tell a story of past grandeur, the damp and dingy kitchens are a better indication of the prospective problems the Jerebohms are to face: “A vast

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<sup>88</sup>Ibid., 216.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid., 188.

<sup>90</sup>Su, *Ethics and Nostalgia*, 8.

<sup>91</sup>Bates, *When the Green Woods Laugh*, 236. Hereafter WGWL.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid., 238.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., 239.

funereal dungeon opened up, half-dark, its windows overgrown with rampant elderberry trees. The air was drugged with mould”.<sup>94</sup> Pop sets the typical pastoral clock ticking by announcing that he has already had an offer for the panelling from the “demolition rats”<sup>95</sup> leaving Pinkie aghast and forcing Mr Jerebohm into a quick deal of seventeen thousand pounds. Pop’s outlay was only seven. He uses some of the money to build a heated swimming pool for Ma and Mariette.

On the question of hired help – “In London that, of course, was the great problem”<sup>96</sup> – even Pop feels a pang of guilt. In pastoral terms, Kent and London are a “double exposure” rather than separate places: “he recalled the constant eager race of village women to get to the rich pastures of strawberry fields, cherry orchards, and hop gardens and all the rest, where families cleaned up sixty or seventy pounds a week, tax free”.<sup>97</sup> The problems of the city are those of the country too. This was a topic previously broached in *The Darling Buds of May* when Charley queries the tax implications of working cash-in-hand: “all these Cockneys coming down for the hops. Strictly, in law, they ought to pay tax on that”.<sup>98</sup> Pinkie’s labour problems in the city are indistinguishable from those she will face in the country and exist for precisely the same social reasons. The sustainability of gracious living that depends on an economic system that generates a master and servant class faces an identical threat regardless of location. This is underlined by Pop’s pricked conscience at the thought “of farm labourers who ran about in cars or mounted on splendid, glistening, highly expensive motor-bikes and of how his friend the Brigadier couldn’t get a boy to clean his shoes”.<sup>99</sup>

Despite his misgivings, Pop exploits his role as simple “yokel”<sup>100</sup> in the estimation of the self-satisfied banker to manipulate him into restocking his woods with pheasants to be ready for the hunting season. Bates gives his clearest articulation yet of the Larkins’ uncoupling of work and wealth. Pop sits in a deckchair in his garden sipping beer, shooting the pheasants as they fly over his land to roost in the bluebell wood while Mr Jerebohm forks out for them. This is a variation on the theme of living off the land that Pop achieves through commercial shrewdness rather than any affinity with the countryside as such. The commentary on his actions are, as we often find, ideologically unfixed; as the Brigadier puts it, “It really was a bit beyond the pale. By Jove it really was. Even for Larkin”.<sup>101</sup> What Bates shows is that there are ways of making money in the country that don’t involve the dignity or indignities of labour as traditionally conceived and so he presents an economic reality that stands the test of the social reality because its subject is the present and not nostalgia for the past which is exploited and then disabused as the Jerebohms end up with cold comfort, living in a drafty mansion, unable to get assistance, and feeling the full effects of “the great country swindle”.<sup>102</sup>

The Larkin novels work as commentaries on the lineaments and traditions of pastoralism because outsiders like Charley, Mademoiselle Dupont and the Jerebohms bear

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<sup>94</sup>Ibid., 245.

<sup>95</sup>Ibid., 250.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid., 244.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid., 245.

<sup>98</sup>*DBM*, 77.

<sup>99</sup>*WGWL*, 245.

<sup>100</sup>Ibid., 243.

<sup>101</sup>Ibid., 255.

<sup>102</sup>Ibid., 286.

witness, and sometimes fall victim, to subtle or overt patterns of economic exploitation that are a result of indistinct spatio-temporal alignment. In *Oh! To Be in England*, the threat is twofold and elaborates on earlier components that provide the illusion that the countryside is a backwater. The first antagonist is the “lady-killer” Captain Broadbent, who mistakes the air of liberty amongst the women at Pop’s swimming pool party for sexual invitation and ends up being tipped into the boating lake by the lubricious Jasmine Brown: Bates blurs the lines between old ideas about pastoral eroticism and new ones of urban sexual permissiveness. The second threat brought by the 1960s is less easily combatted as the villages of the Weald are menaced by a group of teddy boys, two of whom attack Pop, the Brigadier and Miss Pilchester at a fair, and a young girl caught stealing from the Larkins’ outhouses. For the first time in the sequence of novels, Pop is depicted as out of step with the times, as Bates develops a streak of true conservatism in the character in his response to the social changes he otherwise embraces. Youth culture invades the village fair in aggressive fashion, but the messages about the urban and the rural are still mixed. On his way to do “a little deal about cats’ meat”,<sup>103</sup> Pop and the others stop at The Lamb and Flag pub where the traditional English fair is run by Pop’s old friend “Fruity” Pears. It shows the same evidence of hard times as Gore Court: “There wasn’t even any music coming from the roundabout, which went round and round in silent procession”. “Another little bit of old England gone, Pop thought”,<sup>104</sup> and this seems confirmed when the teddy boys threaten Pop with a razor blade and then crack Fruity’s head with the butt of a fairground rifle leaving him hospitalised.

The sudden irruption of violence seems to fit clearly with the idea that, as in sentimental pastoral tradition, the countryside needs protection from the threat of the urban. Bates makes a further symbolic dash into the field of English nostalgia through the character of Edith Pilchester, as the unassuming spinster flies into a rage, lobbing coconuts from the shy at the youths until they are forced to retreat. She has also been making woad like the “Ancient Britons”,<sup>105</sup> and plays the part of latter-day Boadicea, launching a symbolic defence of old England. Yet this drama does not divert from the primary reason for the neglect of the English fairground, which is due to the fact, as Fruity admits, that he “Can’t compete with telly”.<sup>106</sup> Where Pop was previously both custodian and destructive agent of the country house, he is likewise in the vanguard of the demise of the fair. His solution, as so often, is to buy it. Pop sets up the fairground in his meadow because “He wanted to save it for himself. Very like, in a few years, you wouldn’t see no more fairs”.<sup>107</sup> It is an example of Pop’s function as unwitting rather than knowing bringer of change, where his own blindspot to modernity stands out. In its new position in the meadow, the fair becomes a souvenir to memorialise the past, retained by the agent of change who can afford to purchase it and so abstract it from its economic function and generate the nostalgic feelings about it that feed the notions of retreating English customs on which his financial success has so often been seen to depend.

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<sup>103</sup>Bates, *Oh! To be in England*, 373. Hereafter *OTBE*.

<sup>104</sup>*Ibid.*, 377.

<sup>105</sup>*Ibid.*, 373.

<sup>106</sup>*Ibid.*, 377.

<sup>107</sup>*Ibid.*, 383.

The presence of the teddy boys at the fair and the girl in “black leather jacket” with a “bee-hive”<sup>108</sup> hairdo, who also brandishes a razor blade and slashes the tyres of the Rolls, seems incongruous. Yet, the explanation is clear, as Pop drives Mademoiselle Dupont, invited to England to be godmother to the Larkin children, across Kent from the ferry: “England, here urban, there pastoral, here downland, there a forest of television aerials, glided in its odd entrancing mixture of scenes and styles past the window of the Rolls”.<sup>109</sup> When Ma learns that they cannot legally use fire-arms against intruders, she asks “Where in the name of all the saints are we supposed to be? England? I sometimes begin to doubt it”,<sup>110</sup> turning around the question that the Larkins themselves pose to consumers of the pastoral. It is a question of “where” as much as “what”, raised in relation to shifting times, values and even the ground under their feet, indicated, for example, in the Brigadier’s irritation about “that damned common market”.<sup>111</sup> There is no endorsement of this little Englander view in evidence and the Brigadier’s opinions seem particularly backward in the context of the Larkins’ inclusive bonhomie. Nevertheless, the chinks in Pop’s previously impregnable armour mean the tolerance of change if it brings remuneration is curbed and feels somewhat altered in comparison with what was true of *The Darling Buds of May*. It seems significant that the teddy boys are eventually overthrown by the surprising boxing talents of the new vicar, the Rev. Candy. The obvious conclusion that harmony is restored and modern youth culture cast out from the Larkins’ idyll is far from straightforward given the fact the clergyman’s talents were honed, as he reveals, during the three years he spent working in a parish in the East End of London, doing “welfare work. Youth clubs and that sort of thing. Rather toughish sometimes”.<sup>112</sup> The Rev. Candy’s scene of triumph is merely a recurrence of his experiences in the city.

The ultimate threat to the pastoral idyll is death and, in the final instalment of the Larkin series, *A Little of What You Fancy*, Pop faces his biggest challenge so far as he suffers a heart attack. Ma’s cure is “a little of what you fancy”,<sup>113</sup> but even her earthy authority, that is uncontested in the earlier novels, is silenced by medical forces. With much of the novel set around Pop’s sickbed, there is more opportunity for reflection and Bates returns to many previous themes. These include: commentary on the Larkins’ materialism, this time from Pop’s nurse – “She supposed it was true that money would buy anything – with one exception: manners”;<sup>114</sup> the ease with which Pop has been able to outwit the “Piccadilly farmers”<sup>115</sup> like Mr Jerebohm by mis-selling the pastoral: “even Pop, sometimes, thought it wasn’t quite fair. It was daylight robbery”;<sup>116</sup> and, most evidently, the mixed signifiers of radical and conservative Englishness as Pop and Ma are at their least sympathetic with more overtly racist elements and jarring prudish concerns about the media’s representation of sex than in the previous books. There is outright

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<sup>108</sup>Ibid., 404.

<sup>109</sup>Ibid., 387.

<sup>110</sup>Ibid., 412.

<sup>111</sup>Ibid., 372.

<sup>112</sup>Ibid., 357.

<sup>113</sup>Bates, *A Little of What You Fancy*, 582. Hereafter ALWYF.

<sup>114</sup>Ibid., 483.

<sup>115</sup>WGWL, 248.

<sup>116</sup>ALWYF, 494.

hypocrisy in Ma's criticism of status symbols, or "*status quo* symbols",<sup>117</sup> for the masses. The hedonism feels somewhat jaded, overshadowed partly by the cloud of Pop's illness, but coarsening attitudes and expressions seem to make Nurse Soper's judgements justifiable.

Yet, that effect appears purposeful rather than a result of familiarity breeding contempt or Bates running out of ideas as he brings the theme of the novels full circle, returning to the issue of the mis-sold pastoral. Recuperating, it emerges that Pop has been shielded from the news that his farmstead and junk yard face demolition as a man from the Ministry of Transport, the ghost of the Inland Revenue, arrives to announce that a new road for the Channel Tunnel will be built straight through Pop's land. Where the roads previously enabled trade, they now epitomise the destruction of the land. The Miss Barnwells enlist Pop in what they call "Our Great Cause",<sup>118</sup> with lots of impassioned rhetoric about sovereignty, because he has the means to help and because to them he "stood for England: the green and pleasant land".<sup>119</sup> Pop does stand for celebration of nature, but what it means to stand for England more broadly is even less settled, and the narrative's ideological position on the nationalist spirit is perhaps less fixed than ever.

Once again, the issue at stake is that the nature of the countryside alliance which mounts this rearguard action is less clearly settled than that of its antagonist. The civil servant, Mr Harrington, arrives at a dinner party held for the QC Sir John Furlington-Snow, invited to give his advice in support of the "Cause". Harrington is given the same treatment as Charley, and feels similarly "bewitched and embalmed"<sup>120</sup> by the Larkins' hospitality, but he has more clarity of vision and immediately wonders to himself "Where *did* it all come from? The lavish living, the vintage port, the burgundy, the expensive taste combined with ghastly taste".<sup>121</sup> He voices the question that lies at the heart of the perplexity of spatial responses to the Larkins: "Why bother? Why such defence of a very ordinary, ramshackle, sloppy, almost derelict dump of a place as this?"<sup>122</sup> But there is a twist in the tail and at this point Bates appears to crack his biggest joke, akin to that of the revelation at the end of *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) that Jack Worthing, having invented a fictional alias called Ernest, turns out to have had that name all along. Edith Pilchester announces that she has discovered that Pop's junk yard and house, firmly established as symbols of the disposable commercialisation of modern life at its most vulgar, stands on a site of national importance, namely a consecrated place where pilgrims once stopped on the way to Canterbury. Pop's jumble of scrap and livestock, the epitome of indulgence and poor taste, turns out to be a relic of English heritage that demands protection.

Or does it? Even now, in a trick that seems more fitting to a postmodern novel than to the English pastoral tradition, Bates gives his reader what amounts to a double ending which stands as a final commentary on the idea of the shifting territory of pastoral on which its potential commodification, and therefore survival, subtends. As Sir John

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<sup>117</sup>*Ibid.*, 520.

<sup>118</sup>*Ibid.*, 537.

<sup>119</sup>*Ibid.*, 527.

<sup>120</sup>*Ibid.*, 570.

<sup>121</sup>*Ibid.*, 575–6.

<sup>122</sup>*Ibid.*, 574.

explains, whether Pop's house really stands on sacred land does not matter so long as enough people, or the right people, can be convinced that it does. He announces the best way to protect the land is through "Jarndyce and Jarndyce"<sup>123</sup> or the delays of the courts of appeal. A bribe might help too and Pop's excellent vintage port – it is "mighty scarce nowadays"<sup>124</sup> and so a final example of the "going, going, gone" dimension – promises to help smooth over the situation. The fact that Pop has repurchased Gore Court from the Jerebohms and sold it on again to the Department of Education as a base for horticultural research, which promises to provoke a squabble with the Department of Transport, adds to the confusion of the status of the land. Sir John asks Edith to relate the story of "the band of pilgrims that had been slaughtered even as they prayed and drank at the Holy Well",<sup>125</sup> but its veracity is left unproven. What is important is that it cannot be disproved. The characters are linked to a past that demands conservation from rough critical winds but that may very well never have existed in the first place. All that's left to defend is the present. As pastoral, the product may be a "pup", but if it is one that Pop can flog then all he needs is willing buyers.

## Conclusion

H. E. Bates's Larkin novels have largely been dismissed as trivial and unworthy of scholarly attention. This has led to the quirk that the reception of the adaptations has tended to reproduce the very debates with which Bates engaged about the place of the pastoral in twentieth-century literature and its role in demonstrating intersections between nostalgia, class, place and economics. In his objection to Nye's adaptation, O'Grady draws attention to the juxtaposition of means – the commercial imperative – and ends – escapism – criticising both, but without noting that one appears irreconcilable with the other. In fact, Bates spends five novels exploring and explaining their *inter*-relationship as the grounds for understanding pastoral's enduring appeal. Bates's comic pastoral is a case in which "the present is 'nostalgized' by the aesthetics of the past".<sup>126</sup>

More than this, through the lens of English pastoralism, Bates demonstrates the operations of nostalgia in a series of observers of the Larkin family – from Charley and Made-moiselle Dupont, to the Jerebohms and even insiders such as the Brigadier and the Miss Barnwells – which readdresses the key preoccupations of critics of post-war English pastoral literature. At the heart of the matter lies the theme of mis-selling, which I have focused on because it reveals the intersections of nostalgic pastoralism and modernity (it is just possible to see Pop standing as a proxy for Bates himself, purveyor of pastoral "Pop" culture). In-keeping with the materialism on display, Pop's commodification of the pastoral depends on cheating the touchstones of its traditions laid out by Gifford: in particular, Bates interlaces sentimental and complex pastoral signifiers where one can only exist because of the economic underpinnings of the other. It also depends on embracing rather than fighting off new social realities concerning work, leisure and shifting geographies that involve a greater porosity between traditionally urban and rural spaces, which

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<sup>123</sup>*Ibid.*, 562.

<sup>124</sup>*Ibid.*, 569.

<sup>125</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup>Niemayer, *Media and Nostalgia*, 13.

thwart the “fundamental pastoral movement” of retreat and return, blurring dimensions of physical space as Boym sets out. There is no perspective outside the “nostalgized” present. In this way, Bates produces a version of English pastoral that might withstand rough critical winds because there is no discordance between the textual evidence and economic reality when judged against social reality. The narrative position on the Larkins is never fixed and, indeed, if nothing is really sanctified, neither is the pastoral desacralized.

The longstanding popular complaint that Pop Larkin is improbable, and the novels therefore escapist because unrealistic in an historical sense, falls down if one follows the evidence that answers Charley’s naïve question: “Where on earth did these people get their money from?” There is a difference between naïve pastoral and naïve observers or even consumers of pastoral. Bates writes a version of rural England that highlights the latter. According to Naumann Naqvi, in the nineteenth century, “the English were thought to be invulnerable to this debilitating [nostalgia] because of their commercial spirit”.<sup>127</sup> In the Larkin novels, nostalgia appears to be the English disease. Yet, this raises a strange sense in which Pop, and those others willing to embrace new economic and social realities including the breakdown of distinctions between urban and rural life, are themselves a throwback to old ideas about the English as resistant – or wise – to nostalgia. The punchline to this running joke is that here the commercial spirit actually resists the nostalgic treatment of English pastoral by putting it up for sale.

It is notable that in what remains one of the most influential documents on the subject of English pastoral, the introduction to *The Penguin Book of English Pastoral Verse* (1974), John Barrell and John Bull make the claim that by the end of the nineteenth century, pastoral could no longer exist in English literature. The reason for their claim was that pastoral’s existence depended on the urban and the rural being separate spaces, the latter geographically, but also economically and conceptually, distinct from the former. This allows for true retreat and return. Modern population sprawl had made this impossible. Their focus is poetry and there is no occasion to mention Bates, but is it possible that their time of writing in the early 1970s is as important to what they say as their view of the late nineteenth century? The volume was published at a time when the Larkin novels had become one of the foremost versions of English pastoral in public consciousness – a series of novels that appear to be coming at the same point but from a different perspective in which pastoral’s existence depends upon embracing the economic possibilities of shifting terrain. The shared focus is enough to indicate that Bates’s Larkin novels deserve greater attention than they have so far received. They go a long way to explaining their continued popularity in adaptation, but also offer insight into the operations of pastoral, particularly the relationship between its escapist drives and potential for commercial success. As this essay has proposed, they should not be overlooked in the growing reassessment of Bates’s work.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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<sup>127</sup>Naqvi, *The Nostalgic Subject*, 23.



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