

Chance encounter near Sintra

Aletta Stevens

At the end of the long driveway, the white house with the red shutters waited. The holiday property website had delivered its promise. Inside, the hall flowed into a spacious lounge, with bookshelves ascending both walls. An elegant wooden desk, with vintage pedestal globe, stood within arm's reach of glass doors to the front lawn. A light breeze touched the long, white curtains. Instantly, I felt at home.

To my surprise, the books proved to be not in Portuguese but English. What was more, in between works of English literature and histories of Asia were volumes in different editions by the same author, from old hardbacks with dustjackets to modern paperbacks. Bookcases had shelves dedicated to multiple copies of one title, and brown paper parcels torn open at the corner, as if to check what was inside – one marked 'From Oxford University Press'. This Portuguese house had once been the home of an English writer.

A chat with the caretaker revealed that this author – Austin Coates – had spent the last five years of his life in the house, and died here in 1997. Her son, who had known Coates as a neighbour, had bought the house on his death and then moved away. I wandered into the bedroom downstairs, with its dark oak furniture and double bed with wooden posts. Why would an English writer choose to live here, in a quiet village in the mountains west of Lisbon? The clues were all in the books.

Austin Coates's involvement with the Far East began when he landed in India with RAF Intelligence in 1944. His work took him to Burma, Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, and after the war he joined the colonial civil service. His book, *Myself a Mandarin*, is a record of his time as Assistant Colonial Secretary and Special Magistrate in Hong Kong. And just an hour's ferry ride from Hong Kong was a place that must have prompted the purchase of this house: Macau, a Portuguese colony. Coates devoted no less than three books to it: *Macao and the British 1637–1842*, *A Macao Narrative*, and *City of Broken Promises*.

I pulled down a collection of poetry from a shelf. Inside was a colour snap. From the upstairs window, framed by the red shutters and pink bougainvillea, an elderly Austin Coates was looking straight at me, his left middle finger inside a book, as if he had just been called to the window. Would he think my curiosity intrusive?

Coates was still working full-time when his first

non-fiction title, *Invitation to an Eastern Feast*, was published in 1953. Six years later, having transferred to Sarawak as Chinese Affairs Officer, his first novel came out, *The Road*. He then took a momentous decision: to become a full-time writer. It was now 1962 and Coates was 40 years old. From a new home in Hong Kong he travelled around South-East Asia, writing prodigiously on subjects relating to Asia and the Pacific, and being published by, amongst others, Hutchinson, Heinemann and Routledge & Kegan Paul. His biography of José Rizal, the 19th-century Philippine nationalist and polymath, was highly acclaimed.

I opened *Islands of the South* to read what Austin Coates had to say about Indonesia, the country of my birth. Having just had my first non-fiction book published, it was an inspiration to learn how Coates had forged a writing career later in life. On occasion, he returned to England, as was confirmed by a cutting from the *Hucknall Dispatch*, remembering him and his father, the classical composer Eric Coates (1886–1957).

On the back of a dustjacket, a black and white photo of the author in jacket and tie, greying, suave, but with a sadness in his eyes. In another picture, younger, dark hair, white shirt and tie, smoking, sophisticated. I now recognised him in the framed drawing on the lounge wall of a young man in toga-style drapes, reading a book. Finally, his father's autobiography, *Suite in Four Movements*, contained pictures of Austin as a young boy with his mother, and impressions of his English childhood. I had discovered a life in reverse.

Now it all made sense. The Indian statuettes on the mantelpiece, the Chinese prints on the wall, the wicker baskets and batik tablecloths – these were testimony to a long love affair with the Orient. Mixed in with English furniture, Portuguese pottery and records of his father's music, it was a true meeting of East and West, a fusion that reminded me of my own Dutch-Indonesian upbringing. And to ensure a living connection with the East, Coates had brought with him a companion of Vietnamese origin: Yim, the young man who looked after him and was often seen with a small bird on his shoulder. A visiting card inserted in one of the books confirmed the address: Austin Coates, Rua das Horas de Paz 17, Colares, 2710 Sintra.

To keep an oeuvre and an author's personal possessions in situ is a declaration of love and respect, for the spirit of Austin Coates the working writer lives on in this house. Perhaps that is one kind of legacy we as authors would be pleased to have. ●

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