

Matilda Bird, (H.E.'s maternal great-aunt).

(1859-1951)

H.E. wrote at length about Matilda in the essay *Country Pub* and sketches of her appear in several stories and novels, notably *The Sleepless Moon*, *The Poacher* and *Aunt Tibby*.

Matilda was a younger sister to H.E.'s grandmother, Priscilla. She married Benjamin Waters and together they kept The Chequers pub in Yelden. When Benjamin Waters died in 1922 Matilda ran the pub on her own: '*her pub tables*' wrote H.E. in *Flowers and Faces* '*were scrubbed until they looked like scoured stone; her bar gleamed like an altar*'.

In later life 'Aunt Til' as she was known in the family, was rather a daunting and severe character, but to the young H.E. she was another wonderful source of stories and he loved to walk over to Yelden to listen to her talk about the family and the old days.

In *Through the Woods* he wrote of her: '*I see her dressed in perpetual black: not the black of crêpe or mourning, but a kind of rook's black, shining and silken, the black of authority and austerity. She is a sturdy, stocky woman, with a face of apple red intersected by many little veins of darker red and purple. She seems to be forever frowning in reprimand. In reality she is smiling, not so much with her mouth, as with her eyes. They are bright grey eyes and are framed in an infinite network of little creases and wrinkles. And she cannot keep her mouth still. It twitches. It is as though she would like to laugh but will not, as though she has schooled herself, as the landlady, not to make a public exhibition even of an emotion like laughter*'.