

Priscilla Bird, (H.E.'s maternal grandmother)

(1857-1923)

Priscilla appears at the end of the biographical novella, *Alexander*, and as 'Aunt Nancy' in *The Place Where Shady Lay*. In the latter a boy is helping his aunt wrap bunches of violets to sell on his uncle's fruit and vegetable cart.

In the essay, *In a Cowslip's Bell I lie*, H.E. remembers his grandmother taking him with her to collect basketfuls of cowslips to make cowslip wine.

In *A Feast of Memories* H.E. remembers Christmas Days spent at his grandparents house with what seemed an endless feast of food: rich roast beef, fowl, plum puddings, trifles, jams, jellies, cakes and honeycomb, followed later by cold meats and succulent pork pies. The Lucas's always struggled to make a living. In *Mary Fennell-a memory* Mary remembers Priscilla leaving a single stack of corn in the family's fields for as long as she possibly could in an attempt to glean every last ear of corn for the family before any public gleaning could take place, and a feast like this would have been scrimped and saved for all year.

Priscilla was born in Souldrop, one of 10 brothers and sisters. *After the fashion of her day she went out, as a young girl, to service, one result of which was that she cooked superbly, another that her household was always scrupulously, miraculously clean*'.¹ After her marriage to George Lucas she worked as a shoe closer. The wooden soled overshoes, called pattens, which she wore to protect her feet from the mud and cold, wet floor were donated to Rushden Museum. H.E. was very close to his paternal grandparents, staying overnight with them in Higham as often as he could, helping them on the small-holding and, in later years, the family's fruit and vegetable round.

H.E. remembered Priscilla particularly fondly for her wonderful cooking: *'No one was ever better named than Priscilla Bird. She looked indeed for ever like a bird: perhaps most aptly a wren, tiny, quick, bright-eyed, sharp, indefatigable. Whenever I remember her I smell baking bread, roasting beef, soapsuds, starch, beeswax and hot irons*'.² Priscilla also helped on the small-holding and, as was custom in the village, carried their mid-day meal up to the fields where the men were working:

¹ *Vanished World*

² *Vanished World*

'Just before half past twelve we always started to look down the road for the little figure of my grandmother, bringing up the dinner baskets. Our dinner in the harvest-field was always hot; none of your makeshift lumps of dough with onions stuffed into them: a dish known as a Bedfordshire Clanger; no lumps of cold bacon and bread, no plain bread and cheese, no sandwiches. In one basket would repose a steak-and-kidney pie, perhaps a rabbit pie, or a beef pudding, together with basins of new potatoes, carrots, peas or beans: all wrapped in clean white napkins. In the other there would be, perhaps, an apple pie or, what I myself loved best of all, a pie of a small yellow local plum of extraordinarily good flavour and rather squarish in shape and touched with a faint blush of crimson, very like an apricot. Always indefatigable, my grandmother was back at half past four; this time with one basket and a big blue can of tea. She always baked her own bread, which we ate with dark red plum or damson jam and after-wards there was perhaps dough-cake, a bread with currants and sultanas in it, and another great favourite of mine, caraway cake, which my grandmother baked exquisitely'.³

³ The Vanished World