

WILFRID WILSON GIBSON

PEOPLE'S POET

A Critical and Biographical Study of W.W.Gibson

1878 - 1962

A Thesis Presented for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

at

THE UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE

February 1989

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(1878-1962)

A Critical and Biographical Study

SYNOPSIS

The scope of this dissertation embraces two elements. It sets out to be a chronological account of the life of the poet and also to offer an evaluative, critical account and judgement of each of his publications. By blending these two elements in each chapter I have tried to demonstrate my introductory view that the poet's autobiography is to be read both in the life story and in the poems.

The method of investigation of the life has depended almost entirely on the examination of primary sources. All of Gibson's own papers were destroyed by the time of his death and it seemed as though there was no material from which to build a biography. Gibson, however, was a prolific correspondent and by careful study of his letters, well saved by their recipients, I found the story of his life unfolding. The critical judgements are largely my own but I investigated some scant secondary material which included chapters in books, review articles, references in literary histories and other people's biographies which helped me to shape my opinions.

The ordering of the dissertation is entirely chronological, divided into chapters marking major or significant changes or moments in the poet's life and work. As a larger, simplifying and clarifying form of division I have distinguished three phases that mark off Gibson's periods of Romantic, Realist and finally Dialect and Lyric Poet.

I have concluded that Gibson, though now almost entirely neglected, deserves credit as a minor poet, much more than he has so far received:

for being the first Edwardian poet who pared his language of all post-romantic excess and wrote plainly; for being the instigator of the Realism in poetry which was proclaimed by the Georgian Realistic Revolt and for being the first poet of the Great War who wrote from the viewpoint of the common soldier, in plain language, and so being an important influence on the major war poets Sassoon, Rosenberg and Owen, who read him and who wrote after him. His clear, distinctive voice makes for a poetry of intrinsic merit and broad appeal.

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FOREWORD

The name of W. W. Gibson is usually confined to being one of a list of minor talents who figure in histories of twentieth century poetry. The interest he holds is generally limited to his representative significance as part of the undergrowth of early twentieth century poetry. He is in fact usually regarded as a minor Georgian.

Since the Great War some critical and academic study of his poetry has been attempted but no-one has so far produced any biographical account of him or attempted a coherent chronological study. The reason for this appears to be that nobody believed there were sufficient documents available for it to be possible. When I first began work and I wrote to Wilfrid Gibson's son, Mr Michael Gibson, he replied that he did not think such a study could be done as there were no papers extant.

The present study has grown from the barest details by a policy of 'seek and ye shall find'. I have found much more of Gibson's own correspondence than was thought possible and from this I have tried to re-construct his story. In doing so I have incurred many debts and would like to thank the following people some of whom helped in ways that they could not fully appreciate:

Mrs Olive Hogg, without whom this work could not have been done.

Professor R.K.R Thornton, who made me write.

Mr Michael Gibson.

Mr G.S. Sheppard of the Brotherton Library, University of Leeds.

Mr Philip Gibson, Wilfrid Gibson's nephew.

The Staffs of Newcastle University Library, Newcastle City Central Library and Newcastle Polytechnic Library.

The Staff of the Berg Collection, New York Public Library, U.S.A.

The Staff of the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

The Librarian of Somerville College, Oxford.

The Staff of the Northumberland County Record Office.

Dr Michael Halls, the Archivist, Kings's College, Cambridge.

Errors I have to acknowledge as my own and I can but hope that they do not amount to the registration of horror attested by Henry Sidgwick when dealing with his publisher about his *Outline of Ethics*:

Went up to London yesterday to see Macmillan about a stupid blunder in my outlines. I have represented a man whom I ought to have known all about - Sir James Mackintosh - as publishing a book in 1836, four years after he was dead! The cause of the blunder is simple carelessness - of a kind that now seems incredible.

Such carelessnesses as exist here I accept, incredulously, as my own.

ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE FOOTNOTES

The following abbreviations have been used: the name of the recipient of the correspondence has been shortened to the initials followed by the date. The full titles are as follows:

E.M. The correspondence to Edward Marsh, The Berg Collection,
The New York Public Library, U.S.A.

W. de la M. The correspondence to Walter de la Mare,
The Bodleian Library, Oxford.

P.W. The correspondence to Percy Withers, Somerville College,
Oxford.

D.U.R. The correspondence to Dorothy Una Ratcliffe,
The Brotherton Library, University of Leeds.

M.E. The correspondence to Maurice Browne,
The university of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, U.S.A.

NOTE

Many, but not all, of the poems written between 1905-1925 are quoted here in the form and using the punctuation of *The Collected Poems 1905-1925* which was published in 1926. For this volume Gibson revised and altered his work and amended the punctuation. 'Flannan Isle' offers a particular case in point. Elsewhere I have generally followed the available first editions, published in London.

INTRODUCTION

I first began this study of W. W. Gibson because I became interested in several of his poems met with in anthologies. Discovering that nothing had been written about him, realising that he had produced a great deal of verse and that he was once highly regarded, I pursued the subject until I had read all his work and tracked down as much as possible of his extant correspondence.

This study is an attempt to set down a coherent account of the life and work of a writer who enjoyed international acclaim, was published extensively in England and America for almost fifty years and who is now largely forgotten. Most of the biographical information that is usually offered about him is incorrect. For example in a widely available and popular anthology of the poetry of the Great War the biographical note on Gibson offers the following:

A social worker in the East End of London he [Gibson] was one of Rupert Brooke's closest friends [he] served in the ranks from 1914 but spent only a short time at the Front ... he, like Robert Service celebrated the private soldier.
(*Up the Line to Death, The War Poets 1914-1918*, Brian Gardner
Revised edition, 1976)

In this short extract there are three errors of fact and one of judgement. This is typical of most printed commentary on the poet and the interested inquirer will find very little accurate information readily available. The appearance of such mistakes calls into question the author's research methods. Were there unacknowledged sources available to him or were they all mere suppositions? In either case it reflects badly on the author. Failing to quote his sources or putting forward as facts information that is based only on hearsay is not good scholarship. In this thesis I am attempting to correct such mistakes using the evidence of Gibson's own correspondence.

What is most interesting is that the errors about Gibson's life and

experience seem to spring from the belief that his poetry is an accurate reflection of his experience. It is assumed that the poems document the life rather than that they are imaginative experiences. Gibson was not a social worker but he did spend short periods of time in Glasgow and London in rough conditions. His love for his fellows was the spring for poetry not for professional action. He was not in the army in 1914 and he never went to the Front. The very fact that such mistakes have been made is actually a tribute to his much underrated capacity to convey the truth of living experience in poems that are tellingly accurate and penetrating in the simplicity of their appeal.

Such incorrect biographical information also disguises a critical assumption. That assumption is that Gibson only warrants scant attention because he is not an artist and therefore not worthy of proper consideration. In fact, as I shall shew, Gibson was a highly conscious artist who wrote out of a deep sense of compassion for the ordinary person. He was a pioneer of the new, plain, brutal style coping with modern ugliness which came into English poetry in the first decade of the twentieth century and was adopted also by Masfield and Brooke. Equally Gibson was a pioneer in his war poetry when from as early as October 1914 he wrote plain lyrics which did not glorify war, did not take a heroic stand but shewed war as brutish and destructive of the best in men. The comparison with Robert Service made by the editor of *Up the Line to Death* is so inaccurate that it suggests incapacity to read either.

Gibson has not only suffered from inaccurate biographical accounts but his work continues to be neglected and scant acknowledgement is made of his distinctiveness and originality. I have made a case in this work for Gibson's importance as a poet of the Great War and yet in the widely influential volume *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry* the editor fails to include him. Neither in the lengthy introduction nor in the

poems selected does Gibson's name make the briefest appearance. Such neglect is incomprehensible particularly so when Gibson's poems express a political stance - the v~~a~~ry thing the editor emphasizes as his concern.

The reputation of a writer must ultimately rest upon his published work and not upon elements of his life but to some extent, I believe, his biography might help to explain his standing. Wilfrid Gibson was essentially a provincial English writer rather than a metropolitan one. He lived at a time when poetic reputations were made with an international educated public with work that was European and American in its range of reference like that of Eliot. Gibson's espousal of the local, the provincial and the dialectal, together with the quotidian modesty of his vision, indeed its domesticity, have conspired together to cheat him of his due regard both as a remarkable innovator as a poet of the common man and as the earliest poet of the Great War to concentrate on the sacrificial suffering of the men in the ranks.

Gibson himself said that his life was unremarkable and he discouraged biographical interest. Whilst his poems may be the distilled essence of his life they are not a daily, or yearly, record of events. This record I have pieced together from his extant letters and, fortunately, he was a prolific correspondent. But because the poems themselves are so important to his biography I believe it necessary to quote them at what might sometimes seem disproportionate length. It might also be observed that Gibson's writing is not of a kind that makes itself felt in a line or two and with narrative poems like 'Flannan Isle' or 'The Hood Seals' it is essential to quote the whole work. Besides, Gibson's work is now entirely out of print and knowledge of his poems is generally so slight that reference to a title or the offering of scant quotation would convey little or nothing.

When Walter de la Mare suggested that Gibson should write his

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THE CHIEF EVENTS IN THE LIFE OF W. W. GIBSON

- 1878 Born at 1, Battle Hill Terrace, Hexham, Northumberland.
- 1894-1899 Published in *The Hexham Courant* and *The Spectator*.
- 1901 Published *Urlyn the Harper*, his first volume.
- 1907 Settled briefly in Glasgow then returned to Hexham.
- 1910 *Daily Bread* was published.
- 1912 *Fires* was published. His father died. He left Hexham and moved to London.
- 1912-1913 He lodged at The Poetry Bookshop, 35 Devonshire Street.
- 1913 Married Geraldine Townshend, of Dublin.
- 1913-1915 Lived at 'The Old Nailshop', Greenway, Dymock, Gloucestershire.
- 1915 Published *Battle*
- 1915-1922 The family home was at 'Journey's End', West Malvern.
- 1916 The birth of his first child, Audrey Greenway Gibson.
- 1917-1919 War Service, Private Gibson, T/381907, loader and packer and sometime clerk, The Army Service Corps.
- 1918 The birth of his son, Michael Dana Gibson.
- 1920 The birth of his third child, Jocelyn Kielder Gibson.
- 1922 Moved to 'Coed-Mor', Saundersfoot, Tenby, South Wales.
Published *Krindlesyke*
- 1926 The family moved to 40, South View, Gowan Bank, Letchworth, Hertfordshire.
- 1933 Another move to 26, Nassington Road, Hampstead, London,
- 1938 The marriage of his elder daughter, Audrey.
Gibson and his wife move to 4, Ridge Hill, Golders Green.
- 1939 The death of Audrey.
- 1940 Gibson, his wife and grandson, Roland, move to East Hendred, Berkshire for the duration of the war.
- 1941-1944 Published four volumes of War Poems.
- 1945 They move again to 'Greenway', Sandown, Isle of Wight.
- 1950 His wife, Geraldine, died.
Published his last volume *Within Four Walls*
- 1950-1962 Lived in Surrey with his son, Michael and his family.
- 1962 Died at Virginia Water, Surrey.

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CHAPTER ONE

1878-1910

I was born on the second of October, 1878
at Hexham in Northumberland, and lived there
until 1912. I was educated at private schools and
travelled from time to time.'



Messrs Hunter.

25 FORE STREET
HEXHAM.

WILFRED GIBSON AGED 17 : APRIL 11TH 1896

The Gibson family had been long established in the Northumberland market-town of Hexham by the time that Wilfrid Wilson Gibson was born in 1878. The earliest recorded member of the family is John Gibson of the Westwood who, in 1547, was the possessor of land, estates and a ferry, or boat rake, at Kingshawpool on the River Tyne on the west side of the town. From the earliest, then, the Gibsons were businessmen and landowners. Wilfrid Gibson's father, John Pattison Gibson was born in January 1838 and grew up to practice the profession of chemist and druggist as had his father before him. In 1861 he married a Newcastle woman, Elizabeth Francis Judith Walton. They had five daughters and two sons. The eldest daughter, Elizabeth, was a poet and she influenced the youngest child, Wilfrid who was ten years her junior. The family lived in a rather grand house, 1 Battle Hill Terrace, close to the centre of Hexham, which with its pediments and bow windows added a Regency elegance to its early Victorian solidity. In addition to the family there were accommodated within the house three servants. There was a domestic housemaid aged 19 who hailed from the neighbouring parish of St John Lee, there was a cook aged 27 who was a local girl and a twenty-year-old nurse from Allendale.

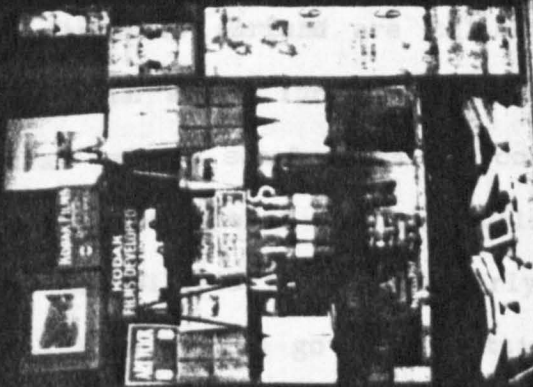
John Pattison Gibson, the head of this household, ran the family business of chemist and druggist in Fore Street in the centre of the town. He was very much a local man, familiar with the area in detail, member of the local militia, respected and comfortably off. He was also a photographer of international repute who had won prizes both in America and in the capitals of Europe for his distinguished work. Throughout his life he travelled extensively and his eye for scenery, for spirit of place and for a dramatic sense of history is well attested by his vast

CHEMISTS GIBSON & SON OPTICIANS

07071A

KODAK & SON
P.O.
KIP IN STOCK

POST CARDS
CHILD BOOKS



GIBSON & SON CHEMISTS

GIBSON & SON OPTICIANS

extant collection of photographic work.² His employment of one man and three assistants in his Fore Street shop must have left him time to follow his great passion and he was able to travel a great deal both locally and abroad. His photography, principally of Northumberland, brought him recognition and distinction but it was his younger son Wilfrid who brought some fame to the family name.

Wilfrid Wilson Gibson was born on 2nd October, 1878. He grew up in Hexham and attended various private schools until he was about sixteen years of age:

W.W.G. went to various private schools, presumably in or around Hexham, until he was about 15-16 years old after which, he used to say, his father did not bother as all the schools he sent his son to seemed to go bankrupt! ³

A most important influence in his early years was his sister, Elizabeth. Her poetry was first published by Elkin Mathews, before her brother's, in 1899. She was quite prolific from then until about 1912. Her books, *The Burden of Love*, *From a Cloister*, *A Flock of Dreams*, *Love's Fugitives* and *A Christmas Garland* are collections of largely religious poems. They are rather slight for modern taste and contemporary reviewers spoke of them as "simple song" which yet could "contain some fine lines." His sister's correspondence with and publication by London publishing houses meant that Wilfrid Gibson was early acquainted with publishing procedures and knew how to go about getting his work into print. He began to be published in magazines and by 1899 had submitted his first recorded manuscript, now lost, to a London publisher. On 30th September 1899 he despatched his play entitled *The Rousing of the King*, based on a selection of Arthurian legend, to T. Fisher Unwin. The reader's report of October of that year describes the play as "very youthful by a

man who is 'ambitious of writing' ". The report went on "we do not find in the style any particular excellence" and the reader recommended acceptance only on the basis of "commission or nothing ..for the play cannot possibly sell." ⁴ Many years later, reflecting on these formative years of his childhood and young manhood Gibson wrote to Walter de la Mare, his friend of many years. De La Mare had asked him why he did not write an autobiography and Gibson had replied:

As to autobiography everyone's experience is of course unique, and there is unusual stuff in my origins that, in the hands of a master, might produce something worthwhile - but a good deal of it I wouldn't feel quite happy about making use of even in the guise of fiction. ⁵

As to what this "unusual stuff" might have been we cannot know as no extant documents record it. The secrets of Gibson's early life, like the story of much of his later life remain inviolate. That was how he wished it to be; it was, he said, his verse that told the true and complete story:

It would seem to me that my essential autobiography is told in my verse already, for what it is worth. ⁶

And that was the way he really wanted the matter to be left. He was a quiet, self-effacing man who disliked publicity, although he needed it to make his living as a poet. He was a public figure who frequently gave readings of his work up and down the country and in America but he had no intention of providing posterity with much in the way of his private life. He destroyed all of his own private papers before his death and he was reluctant to write about his own past, as another remark he made to Walter de la Mare made clear:

To return to the question of autobiographyI think my real reluctance has its origin in the fact that I was born into an unhappy householdI could draw a family gallery of altogether unusual charactersbut don't feel it would be altogether playing the game (as the Western Brothers would say!). Don't jump to the conclusion that I was ill-used as a child, or had a really bad time of it - it was only that, humanly speaking, the atmosphere was all wrong. 7

Gibson's parents were middle-aged when he was born and he may have felt, as they grew older, that they did not represent his idea of married love.

In his play *On The Threshold* he has a character, Ellen, say feelingly:

My parents had been ever shrewd and harsh
As to each other they had never known
The tenderness of love; for they had wed
In wanton passion which had left them cold.

The lines leap from their context with a ring of conviction as indeed does Ellen's feeling that "I was a broken trinket, cast aside." A feeling of lovelessness was one that frequently emerged in Gibson's work before his own marriage. After he had met his wife it was as though he discovered love for the first time. He was by then thirty-five.

The essential story of his life may be pieced together from his verse and from what has survived of his correspondence with several friends and fellow writers from about 1908 onwards. In the earlier years this autobiography of the poems shews us a young man trying to become a poet in the accent and manner of his time but not of his own. His voice is generic rather than distinctive. By 1899 he was submitting poems to various weekly magazines such as *The Spectator*, to literary periodicals like *The Dome* and to the local newspaper, *The Hexham Courant*. In addition he was working on plays most of which like the one he submitted to T. Fisher-Unwin, *The Rousing of the King*, have been lost. The early work that remains has no individually distinctive note. The poems seem to be made of unfocused emotion dressed in borrowed late nineteenth century

clothes. His first published poem of any significance appeared in *The Spectator* for September 4th 1897. He was eighteen years old though the poem *Blind* hardly suggests, with its mannered style, the authorship of a young man:

BLIND

Blow, blow, O wind the clouds aside
That I may see the stars!
In heaven glimmers far and wide
The burnished shield of Mars;
And Jupiter and Venus ride
The night in glittering cars!

Blow, blow, O wind the clouds aside
That I may see the stars
Nay! God has flung His darkness wide
And set the unyielding bars;
And Day and Night, unheeded ride
The world in glittering cars!

The pages of *The Spectator* for that year contain a considerable quantity of verse, far more for example than one would find to-day in what remains a respected quality weekly magazine for the intelligent reader. Generally the vein of this verse is lacking in ore and is loaded with dross. The critics too, in the same pages, were aware that not all was well with poetry as the following review of Henry Newbolt's newly-published volume *Admirals All, and Other Verse* makes very clear:

A BUNDLE OF BALLADS

There is no surer sign of a tendency towards ossification in literature than the inability of the poets to produce a good ballad. When ballads and songs give place to sonnets and elegies we may be sure that poetry has little hold upon mankind at large, and has entered upon the academic stage - has left the street, the hillside or the ship's deck for the close dull atmosphere of the study.....It is therefore with the greatest possible pleasure that we notice the delightful little collection of ballads which Mr. Newbolt publishes under the title of *Admirals All*. Mr. Newbolt has done a notable thing. He has managed to write ballads full of ring and go, and full also of patriotic feeling, without imitating Mr. Rudyard Kipling. ^a

Apart from the readily admissible vitality of Imperial and Patriotic verse of this and Kipling's kind there is not evident in the representative selection of *The Spectator* verse in this year anything which has theme, or language to suggest that poetry is a medium for the necessary utterance of necessary concerns. It is concerned with very limited self-indulgent musings in a language sapped of vitality and encrusted with the dead diction of a finished romanticism.

Wilfrid Gibson's *Blind* is not unrepresentative. It is in accord with the 'approved manner' of the age and shews, for one so young, mature thought and ability to write in the conventional forms. But it

reflects convention more efficiently than it manages to express a truth.

This young boy-poet is assuming a voice and it is not wholly convincing. One's first impression gained from the heavily rhetorical style is of the worst kind of 'elocutionary' poem; to be recited with impassioned intonation but conveying little genuine feeling at all. By its highly exclamatory tone, evident in the punctuation, by its imperatives "Blow, blow", by its apostrophising "O wind" the poem suggests urgency and passion yet it really possesses neither. Its rhetoric is somewhat inert and ornamental. The inclusion of the planets, and the attribution of "the burnished shield" to Mars ineffectually draws attention to a mock-Chaucerian chivalrous age, possibly derived from William Morris's popularizations. The pseudo-dramatising capitalization of "Day and Night" intensifies and clarifies the poverty of invention. The use of the outmoded "cars" which even second-generation Romantic poets manage awkwardly emphasizes by its inappropriateness the nature and origin of Gibson's borrowed robes. However, of its type it is an assured

and controlled performance, managing to convey rhythmic urgency. The style with its mannered diction produces a theatrical posturing that with its dizzying effect temporarily suspends inquiry into what the poem means. In part it is about the poet's desire to see the stars on an otherwise cloudy night - a modest requirement which hardly merits the huffing and puffing that goes on here. But the title *Blind* directs us to another possibility: is the "I" of the poem a blind man? Is this a *cri de coeur* from someone who can never see daylight? With this interpretation the poem gains in power. Or is it not literal blindness but metaphoric poet's blindness; the need to see the real and essential world beyond the banks of cloud? Is it the poet's poem, a plea that the starry world of inspiration be opened up to him, a world obscured mostly by quotidian cloud? Here a neo-platonic search for the essence of truth hidden by the world's appearances deepens the poem's resonance.

In truth it seems unfair to burden a little lyric with too much analysis but the application of close reading makes plain the vagueness and weakness which stem from a language that is merely echoing, fuzzy and lacking in direction and crispness. Above all in such a poem we see Gibson aspiring to be a poet. He was to have no other ambition and he was to have no other profession throughout his long life of eighty-three years. Without the talent of Milton he was dedicated to be a poet as Milton was and he had the added misfortune to set out as a poet when the language and styles available to him were at a low ebb. Having assumed at the outset the readily available post-romantic, Tennysonian voice he would spend his next ten years learning to find a voice he could call his own. When he had done so, some fifteen or so years later, he recalled this period in a letter to Walter de la Mare. The specific occasion was

when, in 1913, he was making efforts to engage de la Mare in a scheme for publication of a new poetry series. Recollecting Elkin Mathews' *The Shilling Garland* series "of about fifteen years ago" he remarked that it was "on the whole rather a distinguished series for that benighted period" ⁹ So Gibson himself, having by that time, 1912, found a new poetic voice could recognise as readily as any later critic that he had begun as a poet at an unpropitious time. A similarly early uncollected poem is *A Shepherd* published in *The Dome* for 1899: ¹⁰

A SHEPHERD

My sheep in slumber lie,
Secure within the fold:
Lo! Night, across the sky,
Has loosed his flocks of gold.

With dull, unheeding sleep,
(My heart with hunger spent,)
A dreary track I keep
All day across the bent:

By night through fields of air,
Freed from my load of years,
Breathless, with flying hair,
I herd the wandering spheres!

This slight, lyric poem proclaiming no distinction, no individual voice is unremarkable in the pages of a magazine which subtitled itself: *An Illustrated Magazine and Review of Literature, Music, Architecture and the Graphic Arts*. The notion of dilettante-ism pervades it with a sense of Art as decoration of accomplishment despite significant contributions by Yeats and Symons. But from the evidence of the quality of much poetry being published it would seem that there was every encouragement for a young poet like Gibson to adopt a manner and style

that as *The Spectator* critic pointed out smacked more of the bookworm than of the life of men and women, that suggested ossification rather than spontaneity

When he left school Gibson's formal education was over. It seems that higher, University education was never considered as a possibility. He seems not to have gone into any paid employment either but remained at home in Hexham until about 1907 when he left for a while to live in Glasgow. Within a year he had, however, returned home. There he remained until he left permanently in 1912 when he went to London. His first contact with 'educated' and 'intellectual' circles came about then. In London he came under the influence of Harold Monro, Edward Marsh and their Cambridge friends and connections. But that was in the future. Until that time, so far as it may be safely asserted, Gibson was dependent for stimulus and for literary discovery and development on his own reading and on his family. A young poet in Hexham would have been, in those days, very much on his own, and presumably would have spent time avidly reading the work of his predecessors. Wordsworth and Tennyson in particular would surely have loomed large in a middle-class, literate household and Swinburne too, with his special Northumbrian connections, could well have influenced Gibson both by his choice of Arthurian subject and techniques of excited repetition of certain key words. There is a good deal of the influence of Swinburne, I believe, in the early poems up to 1908. This is hardly surprising for a number of very strong reasons. After the publication of *Atalanta in Calydon* in 1865 and in successive years Swinburne was not only chanted in the streets of Oxford but read throughout the country. His manner and his talkative power as a poet must have been most exciting to younger people as would be his subject matter,

sexuality and revolutionary politics. The appeal of Tennyson and Browning whilst not restricted to the older reader, was more to the mature mind. Swinburne was redolent of youth and it is his weakness that there he remained. For the last three decades of the nineteenth century, however, he was to have on many a freeing influence which was a liberation from the weightier and greater writers.

Additionally important in relation to Gibson might well have been Swinburne's Northumbrian origins and loyalties. This writer was a grandson of the Swinburne family long established at Capheaton and spent half-years of his boyhood and adolescence wandering about the fells and coastline of that magnificent county. In later life his feeling for the Northumbrian countryside and history persisted and he occasionally wrote in a Border dialect. On one occasion his biographers report, he recited *Laus Veneris* on Tynemouth sands for William Bell Scott. In his *Tristram of Lyonesse* he proclaimed that the Arthurian castle Joyous Garde was Northumbrian. Gibson, too, adopted this view.

It is not unlikely that in a good household such as the one Gibson grew up in Swinburne's poems became available. From them he could well have picked up characteristics which mark both his early and later poetry. Typical of the earlier influence would be the excited and breathless manner of telling a tale of 'high romance' and the interest in the Arthurian legends. The young man's concern for pallid knights and swollen-breasted damozels is also something common to Swinburne and Gibson but there is nothing in the work of Gibson like Swinburne's indulgence in the sweet pleasures of pain. This may very well have passed unnoticed. Indeed, of course, one can quite see how Swinburne's voluminousness could quite obscure the dark passions which preoccupy him.

More long-lasting an influence of Swinburne's may be seen in Gibson's addiction to music, to song as much as to sense and also to his constant use of repetition both of simple vowel or consonant sounds, of single words or of groups of words. Often, like Swinburne, he will repeat several lines in each verse throughout a whole poem merely to provide the continuing sensation of pleasure of pleasurable conceived lines. This is a prominent quality of Swinburne's and may be seen in a poem like *A Leave Taking*. Similarly there is in both poets a special fondness for a particular few words which receive a constant airing. For Swinburne "bright" and "light" recur, in Gibson "golden" and "lucent". Particularly is it so in his earlier work that it might be said of Gibson as it was said of Swinburne:

He kept a harem of words to which he was constant and absolutely faithful. Some he favoured more than others but he neglected none.¹¹

An established contemporary, Yeats, writing in the 1899 edition of *The Dome* could offer the young Gibson two possible ways ahead, ways out of the light vapid lyric vein in which he had begun. Yeats was arguing for poetry to be used in the service of drama and also for it to be closer to the language of the speech of the peasant, of ordinary folk: "the founders of the Irish Literary Theatre" , he argued, "believe good plays more possible in Ireland than in London" because legend and language were alive whereas in London "all the intellectual traditions gather to die." In the same volume, too, Arthur Symonds had published a dramatic piece in verse called *The Lover of the Queen of Sheba*. The pressures were present to guide Gibson towards dramatisation and towards local and legendary subjects.

After having been published piecemeal in magazines, journals and newspapers, Gibson had his first volume of verse published in 1902. He was 24 years old and his work appeared in book form, in London, from the distinguished publisher Elkin Mathews who had published his beloved "Nineties" poets. This first complete volume was entitled *Urlyn the Harper and Other Song* and it was the sixth in Mathews' special series called *The Vigo Cabinet of Literature*, named after the Vigo street office which he then occupied. The Arthurian, legendary ring of the title and its insistence upon song recall at once a pre-1890 sense of Tennysonian idyll and the contents of the volume confirm this, giving no sense of alertness to the currently fashionable concerns in the ninetyish-mode. Rather suprisingly the epigraph is taken from Nashe, and its extravagant energy rather curiously mocks the more effete contents of Gibson's volume:

Brightness falls from the air

Queens have died young and fair.

This epigraph is followed by a list of "Persons" indicating at the outset a preoccupation Gibson was to have throughout his life for verse drama or, rather, dramatic verse. The "Persons" are King Karlorn, Queen Eurylone and Urlyn himself, a triad that seems to offer a simple pattern for fulfilling dramatic conflict. The language that one encounters in the piece is however, to a modern ear, very undramatic: "Festal nights" and the need to "slake war thirst", references to "dewy hairs" and "shimmering raiment" confirm the sense of an exhausted romantic vocabulary which, uncombined with other gifts, cannot sustain much poetic energy. Similarly the control of syntax seems dictated by manneredness rather than any urgent need to express a felt experience:

Where the wood dove grieves above the pool
Hid shelters cool.

These 'songs' are dedicated not to battle, it is roundly asserted, but to 'Love' and there is a wide and vacuous posturing of the kind one may very reasonably expect from a young romantic writer:

Lord of Lords is Love
And King of Kings.

The title-poem, a ballad, makes an attempt at a strong narrative line but lack of experience and purpose plainly tell. The harper, Urlyn, has to compose a song for the young bride of the old King who is to return in triumph with her. We may well and justly sense a fairly close identity growing up between harper Urlyn and fledgeling poet Gibson, pondering on: "who is she that cometh" with "restless raiment" and "With the dawn upon her brow"? The answer is:

She whom thou hast seen in dream
In lonely moonlight wandering by
Shimmering grey sea.

By section III - a very rapid progress - Urlyn's heart is captivated with the young bride and in anguish he calls:

Quench thou the fire, O night
Beneath thy dewy hair

He must win the lady and we see something of Gibson's early belief in the power of poetry itself which like magic will enable him to triumph over circumstance; Urlyn believes he can stir the Queen by the passion of song and to this end he builds a throne "in the green wood":

I have builded a throne for my Dream
and in this cry nature and imagination are the means by which desire is to be fulfilled. They will bring him the desired lady

In shimmering raiment before me, throned,
White with a star on her brows.

To her he sings "Romances", naturally, of "Launcelot and Guinevere" and "Tristan and Iseult"; with an ear attuned to tragedy she asks for "Aucassin and Nicolette". But the lady is adamant and quite invincible. She is a "pale vision" like "midnight when the wan moon gleams" and despite the besieging of Urlyn - "each day I harp before her of another's love" she is adamant "as if carved in stone". But of course, the lady is affected, she has fallen in love with Urlyn but will not be unfaithful to the old King. At an encounter with Urlyn "lonely in a tower" at sunset she is engulfed by her conflict in what Gibson orchestrates as an emotional climax. The Queen has "white, yearning hands", her "breast heaved", her hair is "a cloudy tumult about her shoulders fair". She yearns for Death to come and relieve her infidelity of heart. In this clearly post-Keatsian scene we see the strong impulse of the young writer expressing itself in conventional literary images not in living realities of experience. The passion is, like that of the early Yeats, for fond imaginings not the feel of real life. Language and syntax conspire to protect the 'dream' from the hard firm touch of vivid expression.

By the final stanza the Queen is found:

At dawn they found her dead
and Urlyn goes into self-imposed exile, saying:

No more in vision lands I reap
Vague harvest
and away he goes to follow "the unknown star."

Clearly this is quite an ambitious piece for the young poet and he is here investing in it his earliest claim to story-telling and dramatic poetry. The other pieces in this first volume are not nearly so

ambitious but they reveal another side to Gibson's nature and artistic bent which will be a prominent later feature of his career. We can see this in the poem 'Faring South' a piece about a hind, a goat-herd and his flock passing through the streets of a market-town. Possibly an observed scene in Gibson's Hexham home, the sight of man and flock breathes for the observer a sense of open-ness and the elemental which is inimical to the town. As they go down the street man and goats look imprisoned:

Narrow ways of builded stone shut heavily on them.

With the lines "He remembers peaks against the sky" and "Northern ranges lone" Gibson provides the reader with the sense of a massy topography, challenging to man that is vastly different from those "narrow ways." A sense of the freedom and exhilaration of the natural world to which the downcast eyes of the town dweller are rarely uplifted, a feeling for freedom and escape from man's work makes its appearance and is to become for Gibson a dominant theme.

Another notable feature of this volume, so far as Gibson's development is concerned is the large number of poems here focussed on individuals. 'The Shepherd', 'The Ploughman', 'The Harvester', 'The Stone Breaker' and 'The Mower' are all portraits of rural characters with all their "gear, tackle and trim". Gibson's eye and feeling for these representations of ordinary life are striking and the sense is borne in on one that with these less ambitious, less literary, less derivative attempts at the straining for a 'poeticized' poetry his talent as a writer is given far greater scope. The following brief eight line portrait of a Mower may stand as representative for this aspect of Gibson's creativity:

THE MOWER

'Beneath the droop of willows tall and lithe
The mower moves with circle-sweeping scythe
'Mid hollow-snapping rushes, severed clean,
Which fall in outward raying spears of green.
His swaying body and the flashing blade
Swing on in rhythmic ease from shade to shade
Unstayed, unswerving, slaying without strife -
One chant of dauntless Life and Death in Life.

Apart from the portentousness that comes with the capitalized and hypostatized last line this is concretely-realised and has the aim of describing the man at his work rather than straining to see deeper meaning in the scene. In such portrayals it may be said that the writer is reproducing the observed image of direct life with less attempt than before to colour or transform into symbolism or metaphor.

This plainness suggests a link with the relatively new art that had such a prominent place in the Gibson household, that of photography. Gibson's father was a talented and skilled photographer of rural and regional scenes, who had an eye for what an earlier age might have called the picturesque and what for the Victorian photographer would be a selection from the observable data of life that could convincingly be offered as real, as actual without seeming to be composed with any of the artifice of the painter. For his photography J.P. Gibson enjoyed an international reputation throughout Europe and America and he received prizes and awards for his work, much of which endures as a fine documentation of north country life in the later nineteenth century. The art of photography had produced a striking effect on the practice of the visual arts because its reproductive power had put the transformatory power of imagination, the visual imagination, in a new light. Photography could reproduce the appearance of the

world exactly. What was clear and apparent to any observer's eye could be reproduced in a photograph. Whereas painting mediated the artist's impressions of his subject, the photograph recorded the precise image. In literature the late Victorian and Edwardian periods were the periods of the classic realist text, like *Middlemarch* (1872) for which readers and critics are persuaded effortlessly to the view that it is a "transparent window on reality" and hence a form of revealed 'Truth'. So photography could deliver a truth to experience, a genuineness, a true likeness that up to then had not been available. Similarly changes were beginning to take place in poetry. Whereas most poetry of the nineteenth century had a visionary character there was a striking change in the last quarter of the century.

James Thompson ('B.V.') published his remarkable and influential *City of Dreadful Night* in 1880. The so-called decadent writers of the eighteen-nineties had begun to face up to the truths for modern English people: the city, poverty, work, disease, hardship and alcohol. The poetry of Thompson, Johnson, Dowson, Davidson and others shews poets grappling uneasily with two contrary sources of poetry. On the one hand that which springs from imagination stimulated by reading in romantic poetry and so is self-consciously literary. On the other hand there is the source of poetry in the direct observation of experience, usually of modern city life, such as Davidson achieved in his *Thirty Bob a Week* (1894). As the colours of the painter are at a far remove from the plain images of photography, so, too, the colours of rhetoric are at a far remove from

plain speaking. The conflict of choice between the rhetoric of the imagination and the depiction of reality is a notable feature of many careers at the turn of the century and thereabouts; Yeats for example made a remarkable change between his early

period of being clad in the old embroidered coat of the weaver of dreams and "walking naked" by the time *Responsibilities* came out in 1914. Subsequently he went beyond nakedness into the "foul rag and bone shop of the heart" where he escaped from the appetite for fantasy, upon which fare "the heart grows brutal". His is perhaps the best example of a poet stripping his work of rhetoric to achieve a truer and more vital language. Later between 1915 and 1920 Pound and Eliot were instrumental in going even further in that they shifted the language of poetry into a new register entirely, into one in which only fragments of nineteenth century Tennysonian romanticism linger, as in Eliot's *Prufrock* with its "sea-girls" the imagery of "blown hair" (tresses?) and in verse like *La Figlia Che Piange* which carries a 'femme fatale' fearsomeness rare in Eliot's world of "gutters", "vacant lots", "sawdust restaurants" and "passageways". The confrontation with the experience of the modern world was partly facilitated by the Poundian directive towards "the hard, clear image" of which he spoke in his *Imagist Manifesto* though this was not always borne out by self-styled Imagists, like Hulme, a romantic in imagist clothes in his own poems but a classicist in all his discursive writing. F.S. Flint's verse carrying a clear line of direction for Eliot to follow, illustrates best of all the 'Imagist' power and newness. The clear distinction between the exhausted rhetoric and style - and indeed ideology - of the writers to be influenced by nineteenth century models and those who, having shuffled this off and become 'modernist' is very clearly represented in Yeats' development from being a poet of the Rhymers' Club to his major status by 1910 with *The Green Helmet and Other Poems*.

Like the earlier Yeats, Gibson too shared the subject matter, style and language of the writers of the nineties. Unlike Yeats, however, Gibson not only borrowed themes and language from those poets who were obsessed by loss and failure, such as Johnson and Dowson, but he was also able to learn from the more vigorous poets like Henley and Davidson who were confronting the world of hardship and poverty which they saw surrounding them.

In Gibson's early work there are clear similarities with Ernest Dowson. Dowson's preoccupation with subjects of loss and of unrequited love is very similar to what we have seen in Gibson's *Urlyn the Harper*. Similarly his language and vocabulary shew clear parallels in Gibson. Dowson's "the feast is finished and the lamps expire" (*Non Sum Qualis...*) might be from early Gibson. Emphasis in Dowson on "pale silence", "pale with the pallor of ivory" and on the moon - "Here in the silence under the wan moon" - matches what we have observed in Gibson. His "wan moon" owes a good deal to Dowson, and indeed to others of the decadents like Johnson. On the other hand John Davidson provided him with very different subject matter and style. Davidson's rugged ballads in vigorous language about the ordinary working people of the city presented a clear indication of how a writer might develop away from the indulgence in fantasies and become an analyst and recorder of the social life of the masses around him. Subjects like the poor clerk in *Thirty Bob a Week* and the use of common language provided a model for Gibson's growing desire to write about ordinary life in ordinary language. Davidson offered Gibson a way forward. Also Henley's *In Hospital* poems shewed that poets could tackle ugly, unpoetical themes.

Critical speculation is supported by the fact that we do know that Gibson read and felt strongly about the nineties poets: he made the following comments in a letter to Percy Withers on "the eclipse of the

poets of the nineties" who do not appear in de la Mare's anthology *Come Hither* :

No Symonds, Johnson, Davidson, Phillips, Gale, Le Gallienne, Watson, Dowson, Henley - but I wonder if these names ever meant as much to you as they did to me in my young days? They were the new poets of my youth and so a part of my youth.¹²

One is made conscious always in his early work of a sensibility but not a voice because the quality of the language lacks distinctiveness and suggests a highly derivative, 'poetical' quality. This is exhausted rather than vital, especially so when it is used in the service of a conventionally 'poetical' subject like the Arthurian-style, sub-Tennysonian material of *Urlyn the Harper*.

Gibson's second volume *The Queen's Vigil and Other Song* came out hard on the heels of his first and in the same year, 1902. This was the ninth volume in Mathews' Vigo Cabinet series. It was dedicated "To E.G." that is to Gibson's sister Elizabeth. This volume is offered in memory, as its title indicates, to the recently dead Queen and its notion of 'vigil' carries the sense of knightliness and chivalric duty with it. Such an attitude stems from a consciousness of the Victorian and Edwardian 'gentlemanly' role¹³ and from Gibson's assumption of this in his persona as a poet. One looks in vain in this volume for any sense of living experience,

The content is entirely 'literary' - in the bad sense - although clearly the title, for 1902, would offer a tantalizing purchase and as astute a businessman-publisher as Elkin Mathews¹⁴ would surely recognize in that alone a very saleable commodity in this very slender volume. Indeed he subsequently combined both *Urlyn* and *The Queen's Vigil* into one volume and re-issued them in the new format to meet considerable public demand.

At the same time that *The Queen's Vigil* was coming from the press poems of Gibson's were appearing in a whole range of magazines and periodicals. Between 1902 and 1903 he was published in *The Cornhill Magazine*, *MacMillan's Magazine*, *The Saturday Review*, *The Pilot*, *The Outlook*, *The Pall Mall Gazette*, *Country Life*, *The Week's Survey* and *The Broadsheet*. Subsequently he published verse also in *The Daily News*, *McClure's Magazine*, *The Fortnightly Review*, *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, *The Academy*, *The Living Age*, *The Yale Review* and *The Atlantic Monthly*.

For the Christmas market of 1903 some previously published items were collected, and added to, and the volume made out of them, dedicated "to Howard Pease" was entitled *The Golden Helm and Other Verse*,¹⁵ a title which alerts one to the continuing preoccupation with knightliness, service and derring-do with which the poet's career had begun. This volume is twice as large as its predecessors (132 pages) both of which had gone into a second edition, a rare distinction for the authors of the Cabinet series.

'The Torch' is the opening poem of this volume and is set in the Farne Islands. It is written in pentameters and its descriptive language is revealing of the origins of its inspiration; the use of hyphenated phrases like "white-faced", "storm-perilled", "jag-toothed" and "moon-enchanted" suggestive of Shelley and Keats - the romance of *St Agnes Eve* or the Ackrockeronian mountains - continues the flood of post-Romantic sentiment which for Gibson at this stage is inseparable from the idea of poetry.

The story of 'The Torch' concerns Oswald, a hermit living isolated on the Farne Islands off the Northumbrian coast in a remote time. Preoccupation with remote time or never-never land is apparently at this

stage inescapable. Equally inescapable is the suppressed but potent sexual sense of the poem, for Oswald discovers a walled-up woman's body bound to a spar. By his own peculiarly potent magic he restores her to life. This woman is Marna, a sea-earl's daughter and Oswald, thwarted in his religious asceticism, falls passionately in love with her; kneeling before the vigil shrine to the Virgin his lips can form only Marna's name! In some anguish he weeps; so does Marna: "she knew not why". Oswald now, having arrived at the crisis of his life chooses "Life"; he gives up God, he will not "go back to death" for Marna has "brought him life". He proclaims "I am one arisen from the grave" and he embraces Marna knowing that with passion he has discovered the truth of life for the first time. The immaturity of the feeling is heavily cloaked by its archaic language and setting.

Added to this interesting period depiction of sexual fantasy is the fact - which will not escape the eye of the Freudian or the student of much late nineteenth century European literature - that Marna is "cursed" so that she is very much a 'femme fatale' destroying the good man. The poem closes with a little touch of irony in that the sorority of "The Sisters of the Cross", from a neighbouring island, on their way to bringing Oswald his food, observe him busily engaged with Marna and conclude that it is with some "Seraph messenger of God"; an unconscious piece of humour that can only be looked on wryly.

A notable feature of the piece is its seascape scenes, full of natural detail and shewing Gibson's power of observation to good effect:

.....Yet, with calm voice, he spake:
"Even within this wilderness abides
Such beauty that, in your brief sojourn here,

Your soul shall starve not; all about you sweeps
 The ever-changing wonder of the sea;
 But if, too full of bitter memories,
 The bright waves darken, you may lift your eyes
 To watch the swooping gull; the flashing tern;
 The stately cormorant and the kittiwake -
 Most beautiful of all the island birds;
 Or, if your woman's heart should crave some grace
 More exquisite, see, frail bell-campions blow,
 As foam-flowers on the shallow, sandy turf.

Alongside that the inlaid artifice of the derived romantic description
 has to be placed:

.....the dreaming ocean lay
 In broad unshadowed sapphire ecstasy
 That glowed to noon through slow, uncounted hours
 and
 Upon black crags of alien seas unknown.

If the first suggests Tennyson, the second screams, indeed, the name
 of Keats. In fact the whole structure of the romance suggests a kind of
 Keatsian quality stemming from *St Agnes Eve* or *Endymion*: a lengthy poem,
 sensual and suppressedly carnal, set in a never-never land where desire
 is distant and guilty. Even so, despite its limitations the poem

displays a vigorous capacity for narrative. The blank verse
 pentameters are an ideal means for urging along a continuous narrative
 which, while it lacks depth and complexity of any kind is a good 'tale'
 and that is something for which Gibson's maturer talent is most notable.

In the same volume as 'The Torch' a poem like 'The Unknown Knight', a
 piece of six four-line stanzas rhyming regularly 'abab' filled with mock-
 mediaeval terminology: "portal /lackey / bridle / vigil" and lines like:
 "He strode without a word" and "An unknown rider came" conveys a sense of
 mystery, eeriness, that one associates closely, of course, with Gibson's
 contemporary Walter de la Mare: the eery strangeness of *The Traveller* and

The Listeners is a quality Gibson aims at too, not quite as effectively, and one can quite see why within a few years a modern sensibility like Ezra Pound's was crying aloud to "make it new". This sort of thing comes very tired and derivative from the page and is so lacking in all personality and individual interest because the convention of romance obliterates the poet's own voice.

For here with 'The Torch' and the 'Unknown Knight' we are in a world of empty posturing, of cliché and language drained of vitality.

Notably in *The Golden Helm* in addition to the poems, there are the rudimentary beginnings of Gibson's dramatic interests, 'The King's Death' and 'The Vision' are each sub-titled "A Playlet". In 'The King's Death' two slaves set out to murder their King and find that he is dead. They conclude that their thought has killed him. This fanciful little piece shews a skill of managing dramatic suspense and in its final line suggesting desolation is resonant with Tennysonian echo:

See, through the window stares the pitiless day

A line that surely shews an origin in *In Memoriam's*

On the bald street breaks the blank day

even if it does not shew Tennyson's technical control.

'The Vision' (a playlet) is a Christmas mystery concerning a hind or shepherd and his mother; the mother worships to "Mary, Queen of Heaven" and the son worships Guenevere. The setting is on "The Queen's Crags" a place where it is assumed that Arthur held his court. Here at the dawning of the twentieth century Gibson is playing out a conflict between Christian and Pagan.

The Nets of Love came out in 1905 as the twenty-eighth of the *Vigo Cabinet* series. It is a volume that is in most respects an advance on all

the work he had published so far. Whilst not being totally new in manner and tone there is a much greater measure of control and discipline evident in this volume and far fewer 'false notes' of the kind earlier noted which can make the modern reader squirm. The epigraph shews clearly enough that this is early Gibson work but there is an energy present which is distinctive:

I heard a harper sing
To the star-throned gods above:
"O starry weavers of man's fate,
Ye mock him ever clown and king:
Though he escape the toils of hate,
He cannot flee the nets of love"

The economy of the lines, the use of the two voices producing a simple dramatic interplay, the sharpness of the viewpoint that all human endeavour is mocked by the gods and the aphoristic or apothegmatic quality of the last two lines all help to suggest that feeling of energy and movement.

The volume contains twelve poems and a six-line prelude and it makes clear Gibson's careful and symmetrical planning of the arrangement of his volumes around a central theme or idea (in this case it is rural Northumberland). In 'The Lambing' we find plenty of local colour and feeling which make the poem appealing:

THE LAMING

Softly she slept in the night - her newborn bairn at her breast
A wee warm crinkled hand to the dimpling bosom pressed -
As I rose from her side to go, though sore was my heart to stay
To the ease of the labouring ewes that else would have died
before day.

Banking the peats on the hearth, I reached from the rafter-hook
My lanthorn and kindled the wick; and taking my plaid and my
crook,
I lifted the latch and turned once more to see if she slept;
And looked on the slumber of peace ere into the night I
stepped-

Into the swirling dark of the driving,blinding sleet,
And a world that seemed to sway and slip from under my feet
As if rocked in the wind that swept the starless roaring night,
Yet fumed in a fury vain at my lanthorn's shielded light.

Clean-drenched in the first wild gust I battled across the
garth
And passed through the clashing gate-the warm peat-glow of the
hearth
And the quiet of love in my breast, the craven voices to quell,
As I set my teeth to the wind and turned to the open fell.

Over the tussocky bent I strove till I reached the fold -
My brow like ice and my hands so numbed that they scarce could
hold
My crook or unloose the pen; but I heard a lamb's weak cries
As the gleam of my lanthorn lit the night of its newborn eyes.

Toiling and trembling I watched each young life struggle for
breath -
Fighting till dawn for my flock with the oldest of herdsmen,
death;
And glad was my heart when at last the stackyard again I
crossed,
And thought of the labour well-over with never a yeanning lost.

But as I came to the door of my home, drawing wearily nigh,
I heard with a boding heart a feeble whickering cry
Like a motherless yeanning's bleat; and I stood in the dawn's
grey light,
Afraid of I knew not what, sore spent with the toil of the
night.

Then setting a quaking hand to the latch, I opened the door,
And shaking the cold from my heart,I stumbled across the floor
To the bed where she lay so quiet, calm-bosomed, in dreamless
rest,
And the wailing baby clutched in vain at the lifeless breast.

I looked on the still white face, then sank with a cry by the
bed,
And knew that the hand of death had stricken my whole joy dead-
My flock, my world, and my heart - with my love at a single
blow;
And I cried "I,too,will die!" and it seemed that life ebbed low

And the shadow of death drew nigh; when I felt the touch on my
cheek
Of a little warm hand out-thrust, and I heard that wail so
weak;
And knowing that not for me yet was there ease from love or
strife,
I caught the babe to my breast and looked in the eyes of life.

Cold, isolation and desolation are all strikingly depicted in this poem. The use of trimeters here coupled with the caesura give a ballad metre in hexameter form that works to the poem's advantage and gives well the desired sense of Border remoteness and elemental living in a harsh landscape, aware to the full of life's fragility.

Metrical experimentation and variation are prominent. Hexameters in one poem, give way to iambic tetrameters alternating with trimeters in four-line stanzas with regular rhymes as in 'The Haymakers'. Here the basis of the composition is ballad metre which ties a folk content to folk form:

THE HAYMAKERS

Last night as in my bed awake
I fretted for the day
I heard the landrail's constant crake
Among the unmown hay;

And in my head the thought that burned
And parched my lips and throat
Was like a wheel of fire that turned
On that hot aching note.

But with the crowing of the cock
The hours of waiting passed,
And slowly a shrill-chiming clock
Struck out the night at last.

In this poem the night, the cry of the landrail (or corncrake), passion and King Lear's "wheel of fire" all suggest dark, elemental natural power in contrast with cock-crow, shrill clocks and dull, rather than brave, day.

In this volume of poetry there are also some rather fanciful pieces of which 'The Fool' is probably the weakest. This is very much a mock-mediaeval piece and is very tiresome with its parade of "torches",

"horns" and "spent logs smouldering in the hearthstone". Its definition of love which continues for twenty lines like this:

But love's a spate rock-bound that forms and frets;
A tossing beacon in a tempestuous night;
A mighty salmon tangled in the nets

is just the sort of thing that Harry Hotspur, that stern critic of "mewling poetry" would have castigated as "like the forced gait of a shuffling nag." It is in weak patches like these that we see Gibson's tendency to trade solely on feeling of a vague kind, unattached to any clear direction of thought. When he has a fit subject, and that comes when he encounters the reality of other people's experience, his verse talents can be used to much better effect. At this stage, however, he falls back very often on laments and lonelineses as here in 'The Fire':

Long, long I called your name in field and byre
And fold and shieling, over hill and dale;
Your heart heard not. With hands that never fail
I feed and feed the ever-failing fire.

Strengths there are here in vocabulary and rhythm in the first two lines but these give way to lines of little force where the poet seems to be feeling sorry for himself. When he forgets himself he is much more convincing, as here in 'The Lough':

Beyond the fell's far edge, the day
Fades slowly from my eager eyes;
And in the lough's cold waters grey
With rustling stir the dark reeds sway,
As up the ancient star-strewn way
I watch the lost-moon slowly rise

The loneliness and isolation is conveyed without his having to make us feel for him as he does in 'The Fire'.

'Roman's Leap' is another effective little piece, a genuine expression of feeling well-captured in a steady narrative movement:

ROMAN'S LEAP

They found you nigh the foot of Roman's Leap,
Deep-buried in the bracken's rustling gold,
Your arm beneath you bent, your brown face cold:
Yet all unheeding round you grazed your sheep.

They found you nigh the foot of Roman's Leap:
They laid you on a hurdle, bracken-strewn:
They bore you home beneath the waning moon,
With laboured breathing up the the craggy steep.

They found you nigh the foot of Roman's Leap:
Their whispering shadows darkened in the door:
Their griding[sic] hobnails crossed the sanded floor
As in with them the whole night seemed to sweep.

The effect is then ruined entirely when the last stanza rises to the echoing and empty line

Unloose thy clutch, O death, that I may weep.

Most fanciful is 'The Arrow' a poem in which the poet comes upon a woman who has been wounded with an arrow. He watches over her all night but she disappears at daybreak. He now has an 'arrow' in his breast that only death will remove. This poem by its reversion to the earlier style of his work emphasises even more the growing strengths that Gibson depicts in this *Nets of Love* volume.

Favourable reviews appeared of this volume at the time, most notably that of Edward Thomas:

Mr Gibson is in search of simplicity. He knows the North Country and he has a good eye and ear:

I see the peewit ride and wheel
Round them with creaking wings and slow
He knows something of love, from the poets and elsewhere.

There is, said Thomas, "more observation and truth in this than in his more ambitious work" and he offered the view that Gibson was a poet to watch - "his ease and sweetness should soon help him to good things." ¹⁶

Certainly it is clear that the volume as a whole is confident of its own ground; the poet is well acquainted with local geography and economy, with the peat fire and the curlew, the landrail, the peewit; he is an observer of the martin's "wheel and poise". The reader is persuaded of the strength of awareness of a place. Interestingly, when it came to going over his work in 1925 in preparation for the *Collected Poems* of 1926 the only pre-1907 poetry that Gibson included were pieces from *The Nets of Love*. The pieces are 'The Lambing', 'The Haymakers', 'The Fire', 'Roman's Leap' and 'The Arrow'. Gibson's own judgement on his earlier work is seen to be very much what the modern reader's tends to be. In the light of his maturer work Gibson clearly regarded much of his early work as less satisfactory. Much of the pleasure of these poems stems from the rural Northumbrian content which meant so much to Gibson although before long he was to leave the northern fells for the south of England, a loss he felt keenly for the rest of his long life. Before that move, which marked a change in his work, he published several more volumes, *Stonefolds* and *On The Threshold* in 1907 and *The Web of Life* in 1908, which marked a distinctive transition from *The Nets of Love*.

Gibson's next three collections - by now he was producing a volume annually - came from a new publisher, the Samurai Press, who had earlier published Elizabeth Gibson's work too. The reason why Gibson was to make this temporary switch from Elkin Mathews is a matter of conjecture but it must have been quite a significant decision for Gibson - or his publisher - to make. Whereas Elkin Mathews' printings

were extensive, running into thousands of copies at this period, and the circulation considerable, the Samurai Press was not only a new enterprise but was clearly a press specializing in finely-printed hand-done work with a more limited circulation. It was of course, attractive to Gibson because it was owned and run by Maurice Browne, a very distinctive, lively and thrusting personality of the time who it seemed might well readily advance Gibson's poetic career. Browne had chosen the title of his enterprise, Samurai, with some care. Deriving it from Wells's *Modern Utopia* he saw his authors as a warrior caste of idealists. Harold Monro - who later created the Poetry Bookshop - was a partner with Browne in the Samurai press, and was informed by the latter in a letter of 1906 that "the end for which we are all working is the ideal as expressed in and by poetry". Browne saw himself as a sort of latter-day Arnoldian arbiter of taste and judgement and he gave hope and encouragement to the developing Gibson. *The Stonefolds* was produced in five hundred hand-printed copies in 1907. In July of this year the Samurai Press also brought out another volume *On The Threshold* the endpiece of which informs us that

500 copies of this edition were printed by hand and published by the Samurai Press at Cranleigh, Nr Guildford and 4, New Turnstile, Holborn, London W.C. July MCMVII

During these early years Gibson was very low in funds. "I am very poor" he told Browne in 1907.¹⁷ He seems to have taken the view that he quite consciously rejected a possibility of earning a living and making money in order to devote himself to poetry: "I have very little money, having foregone all chances of moneymaking for the sake of being able to give all my time and thought to my work" he wrote to Browne.¹⁸

When the Samurai Press asked if he would take £10 worth of the volume on publication he assented but pointed out that it would "mean my doing without any holidays or new clothes next year!" It was his father who provided some financial aid ¹⁹ and helped to underwrite *The Web of Life*. Without his stepping in and saving the project it might never have been printed, and Gibson felt that he wanted to have a volume published that was "really representative" [Gibson's underlining] ²⁰ and he was pleased that eventually, the Samurai Press agreed to publish two volumes he submitted as a whole. At one stage they wished to bring out a selection but Gibson insisted that the volume had to be brought out intact: "I am very loth to split it up". ²¹ He felt this determination to preserve the coherence of his volume as it represented for him such a new start. He had come now, he said, "to think that bread and cheese is the only fare." ²² Once he had "devoured confectionery greedily," and he had, he said, "even tried my hand at making it myself". The lords and ladies, hermits and maidens which had made up the confectionery of the earlier poems now disappeared and shepherds and labourers both in towns and country were the bread and cheese. "*Stonefolds*" Gibson said "is the name of a shepherd's house I know; and as a title it seems to me to symbolise the spirit of the poems." ²³

The contents of *Stonefolds* are all dramas. At the outset it is important to make it clear that they are not theatrical, not apparently written with the theatre in mind at all. What is clearly to the forefront of Gibson's attention is the desire to give substance and body to his poetic sensibility by giving a characterization of life, particularly that of simple, rural folk which is offered as representative and expressive of the human condition as Gibson felt it basically to be; the

characters are shepherds, the settings are the fells of Northumberland and the Border area. Along with this feeling for the rural world goes a good deal of anguish about the hard life of those who have to suffer life in the industrial city. One senses in this not only experience on Gibson's part - although Gibson did not move to London until 1912 - but also a literary stance, which suggests not only the feeling for the natural world of Tennyson but, more importantly, the antagonism to the city and the indulgence in dream of Matthew Arnold. Gibson seems very firmly imbued with the sense of 'this strange disease of modern life', with its 'sick hurry' and certainly with the 'dividedness' which so preoccupied Arnold in *The Scholar Gypsy*. Sufficient for the moment to note that such are the characteristic themes and preoccupations of Gibson at this point of his career and at this moment their character is consonant with the late Victorian, *fin de siècle* sense of disillusion and exhaustion: they breathe Arnold, they echo 'the pavements grey' from which Innisfree seemed so far away to Yeats.

The desire to use dramatic form on Gibson's part indicates at this date no merely personal purpose but a consciousness of what was happening in metropolitan culture. Yeats must surely have presented a model for dramatic composition not only to Gibson but to others such as Abercrombie, Drinkwater, Masefield and Bottomley who composed dramas in the period. His work resulting in dramas like *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, *The Countess Cathleen* and *On Baile's Strand* was completed by 1906. Drama, not only for the Irish Stage Society and under Lady Gregory's patronage seemed to have a renewed vitality. It was Yeats who inspired Synge to look at peasant life in the west of Ireland and so come up with *The Playboy of the Western World*. Synge knew Masefield and persuaded him to

write verse; his *Tragedy of Nan* is dedicated "To W.B. Yeats". Not only was the older, established literary generation of Gibson's youth producing poetic drama but it seems that every writer of verse, and indeed prose - witness Henry James' urging to "dramatise, dramatise"²⁴ - was busy with poetic drama. And, perhaps, important above all else here Gibson had met and knew Yeats personally. The evidence is provided in his later account, written in 1944:

THE THREE POETS

To-day, in glancing through the Sunday paper,
I chanced upon the news, Sturge Moore had died -
Sturge Moore, the last of the three friends, whom I,
A country lad on holiday, first met
When Binyon strolled with him and Yeats together
Into a Holborn teashop, and beckoned me
To come and join them at their table - Binyon,
Grave-eyed and gentle; Yeats, with lank dark hair
And dark eyes flashing like the moonlit waters
Of some lone Irish lough; and Sturge Moore, faun-like,
With a long straggly beard of russet brown:
And I remember how I sat enthralled,
A raw lad listening to those poets talking -
Those poets in their thirties and the prime
Of their creative energy, discussing
Tolstoy's heretical 'What is Art'? - Yeats, pouring
A stream of scintillating eloquence
In his broad-vowelled brogue; and Sturge Moore, piping
Keen commentary; while, for the most part, Binyon
Sat silent, pondering like some Indian god
Rapt in calm introspective meditation.

Another dramatist, Stephen Phillips is probably the writer who was in his time most notable for his verse plays and who in our time is almost totally forgotten.

Between 1900 and 1903 Phillips had five plays in performance in London: *Paolo and Francesca*, *Herod*, *Ulysses*, *Nero* and *Faust*. A cousin of the distinguished Shakespearean actor, Sir Frank Benson, Phillips was regarded as a remarkably fine poet whose command of the language and its rhythms suggested him as "a second Tennyson".²⁵ Whereas Phillips had a real gift

for stagecraft, however, this was not a feature of most of those who attempted poetic drama at this time. Lawrence Binyon, a friend and correspondent of Gibson's, wrote a number of plays which are not unreasonably seen by the critic as monuments to Phillips so clearly do they follow his style and dramatic method. Both Binyon and Phillips had before them the striking presences of Hardy's *The Dynasts* (1904 - 1908) and John Davidson's *Testaments and Tragedies* (1901-1910). Davidson's dramas were often crude and violent and dealt, as Gibson's were to do, with raw, basic life. Neither Davidson nor Hardy were masters of stagecraft. Arthur Symons' plays, by contrast, are delicate, symbolic works of half-tones lacking theatrical robustness. Shaw's plays with their explicit political purpose and their realism offered less to the young poet-dramatist..

Clearly then, in 1907, a considerable amount of recent poetic drama was available to offer directions in which a young poet might go. This was a time of transition when there was as much desire to "make it new" on the part of young nascent 'Georgians' as there was to be within a year or two on the part of the iconoclastic Ezra Pound. Certainly it is evident that in this period Gibson was experimenting further in a form that might take him beyond the lyric and allow him to give voice to his own contending thoughts and to his sense of that sharply focused opposition of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, town-versus-country. It was this which became his dominant theme.

The social history of the age is dominated by that vast movement of rural population into the ever-swelling cities. This movement has been estimated by some historians to be one of desire on the part of the migrants, to others it has seemed rather a matter of little alternative.

Thomas Hardy viewed the social change rather differently; in his essay on *The Dorsetshire Labourer* he remarked:

The country people shewed a tendency to flow into the towns as water shews a tendency to flow upwards when forced.

That movement involving for so many the great tragedy of severance from their community roots, is deeply part of Gibson's consciousness at this time and it is not at all surprising that he, together with his contemporary John Drinkwater, has been referred to, though a little misleadingly, as a member of "the back to nature school". The same early writer on Gibson goes on to suggest at once both Gibson's strength and weakness in drama:

Gibson experimented sincerely in using the simplest material and the simplest technique in writing short poetic dramas about the life of the industrial and rustic worker. But sincerity in itself is not a saving grace and there is something limitedly Edwardian in his studied simplicity. The drama of simplicity is like revised Morris dancing, amusing as a recreation but with no possibilities as a modern art form. ²⁶

That limiting adjective Edwardian is, however, misplaced suggesting as it does a vogue, a modishness as of fashion. Gibson's achievement was not that at all. His little dramas are anything but modish and they proceed from an intense concern to express some true values in a shifting, changing world and to convey these feelingly to his hearers or readers. Like Yeats's drama Gibson's was designed for the small, picked audience and was, like Yeats's, to be a harmony of speech, voice and body which "can only pass to the mind of the lover of beauty in a small theatre or better still in a room in which none of the old associations of a theatre are around."²⁷ Essentially then it was closet drama and not stage drama. It was coterie culture.

'The Scar', for example, the first of the playlets in *Stonefolds* is about the relationship of a man and woman that is broken up by "passion". It depicts an agonising sense of the dreariness and dreadfulness of city life in a Gissing-like way, so very different from the rich world of the countryside and the "drumming of snipe" in the air. It is a sad, reflective piece in a minor key as are all the pieces in this volume. When the wife returns to the cottage on the fells she brings a month-old bairn with her and this is melodramatically revealed when she "flings back her shawl revealing a baby at her breast". To her

the city was a solitude; I lived
Alone in all that teeming throng of folk

It is a place of "stifling squalor" whereas the countryside is a place of greater wisdom than is fathomable:

hour by hour
I've listened to the singing of the burn
Until I had each tinkling note by heart.
Though I have lived my life among the hills
I'd never listened to a stream before.

The simplicity here is not of the Edwardian kind but successor to a Wordsworthian sense of the wisdom of nature which transcends man's trivial distractions in the city and in the man-made world. The persistent, enduring and supportive force of nature which comforts the man and woman in this play, together with its depictions of the agonies of city life suggest the world of Wordsworth's *Michael*. There the cottage of "the Evening Star" is a perfect and harmonious world where Man and Nature meet: the harmony is destroyed by the son's departure for and subsequent disappearance in the dreadful city. Gibson's evocation of the succour the country gives and the horrors the city bestows shew how much he is a traditional writer with a consciousness of nineteenth century

poetry. There is no influence of the French symbolists, no 'modernisms' suggest themselves at all. Edward Thomas's review was jaundiced and dismissive:

Mr. Wilfrid Wilson Gibson's gifts in verse-writing should be fairly well known by now. He has a romantic vocabulary, a sweetness, an energy also, and a genuine rustic breath from the north country, pasteurised, so to speak. But he grows more austere, and his "Stonefolds," one of three little plays in this volume, shows that he gains nothing by this austerity. He simply brings on to the stage an old shepherd, his wife, his erring daughter, and his nephew, a young shepherd who lives with him and once loved the daughter. It is lambing-time, and snowing and blowing hard; and there is the pathos of the old shepherd, complaining that he can no longer help in the lambing; of a dead lamb before the cottage fire, and beside it his daughter's new-born child. If actors and actresses were good it would make a charming picture.²⁸

Nonetheless, in spite of this cutting review, the volume was a considerable success both at home and in America where one critic noted particularly the emergence of Gibson's realism.²⁹ The Harvard scholar, Professor Phelps, who wrote enthusiastically about Gibson's later American tour, wrote that here was "pastoral poetry of a new and refreshing kind".³⁰ Recollecting those early days of the Samurai Press in his 1955 autobiography Maurice Browne recalled their heady excitement:

Tennyson was dethroned. He was smug, Victorian, a mental coward. Had he not, face to face with potential fact, whimpered like a baby: "If that were true, I would not stay"? Gibson was nominated to succeed him..... James Douglas, a now forgotten mandarin of criticism, attacked them [Gibson's poems] savagely; the poet and his publisher were delighted. In later years Gibson used to say that this was the turning-point of his poetic life. Gentle-voiced, gentle natured, unostentatious, he has never deviated from the path which those early playlets pointed ³¹.

On The Threshold is similar in content and form to *Stonefolds*. It comprises three dramas, 'Winter Dawn', 'The Ferry' and the title-piece, 'On The Threshold'. 'Winter Dawn' retains the archaic language of early Gibson but there is no such effeteness in the emotion which deals with

the wild hostility of nature on the remote Callersteads, a shepherd's cottage on the fells. The constant sense is one of struggle against adversity and strangeness which man has in nature. The play contains no feel for natural beauty but rather for natural hostility and menace; human life is blighted and the dominant theme of the play is that the family is cursed in some inexplicable way.

Of the other two pieces 'The Ferry', dealing with a ferryman who attempts to rescue a traveller from floodwaters, is a piece which gives an acute sense of the experience of loss of a loved one and 'On The Threshold' is most telling for its depiction of the miseries of city life:

Fire, wretchedness and want
That huddle in dark alleys.

January 1908 - strangely missing the Christmas market for verses - saw the publication, again by Samurai Press, of *The Web of Life, a Book of Poems*. Three hundred copies were hand printed and published at Cranleigh, Surrey. One poem, 'The Mushroom Gatherers', reveals the characteristic preoccupations and longings of the whole volume. It is an idyll of rural fantasy in which "a brown maiden", "her brown hands resting on her hips" moves "o'er pasture land and paddock" in company with the poet while "twilit dew splashed about our feet". Momentary comparison with Tolstoy's famous mushroom gathering scene in *Anna Karenina* or with Mickiewicz's poem on the same subject reveals how far Gibson is from success and how much he is in the grip of the posturing and fanciful manner of decadent romanticism. There are many references to "her heart" and "my heart"; to "heart's companioning"; there are filler phrases like "ever and anon"; strained description like "dew besprent" and borrowed, but in this context, curiously empty Biblical quotations

like "God made the day and saw that it was good". This may have seemed heady at the time but to a post-modern reader it presents a faded air indeed. Beneath the conventionality there is clearly perceptible the sense of thwarted feeling, subdued sexuality and vague longings. A line such as "she plucked the brittle domes with fingers deft", with its recourse to a much earlier poetic style, carries more significance for the buried life within it rather than for its curiously recherché poetic diction. The piece is an indulgence in Fancy. There is little sense of imagination and no vital power in the language. "This is the culmination of what critics call the earlier work of Mr Gibson, the "aristocratic" or the "romantic" style; in other words it is an outstanding volume of poetry in the conventional English forms and on the traditional themes" wrote one American critic.³²

'In the Forest' continues the preoccupation with knightliness so evident in the early volumes. Here a knight is returning from a campaign - "I have borne the brunt of spears". His heart is heavy and filled with fear; he "quail(s) before the doom to which I go". When we meet him he is travelling in the forest and the sound of "beech-mast crackling 'neath my horse's tread" gives a strange and eerie setting of the kind so loved by de la Mare and with which, as I have remarked, Gibson has so much affinity. We learn that the "doom" to which the knight goes is, of course, his own death:

The unknown death-plumed horror that, at last
From its old ambush in the heart of night
Leagued with long-thwarted perils of the past
Shall swoop down on me with unswerving flight.

It is this presentiment of extinction, rather melodramatically and unconvincingly presented that suggests the almost equally unconvincing tone of 'carpe diem' imperative:

Drink while ye may the light that fades so fast
O eyes that shall not see the morning light.

This is a poem that is mock-mediaeval, one which hints at insights and forebodings which it fails to present and which feeds on mysteries and half-felt impressions. If, as seems likely, the poem had its origin in some personal sense of foreboding or desperation - for there is a weight to the matter which the manner does not serve - then one can only wish it had emerged in modern dress rather than in its Arthurian fancy-clothes..

'A Lament for the Body' continues the preoccupation with death in its examination of the influences of "Time's fell hand" on the human body. There can be no doubting the suitability of the conception of this piece in its preoccupation with transience but technically it is a very lame production indeed, weak and archaic locutions such as "graveth" "setteth" "snappeth" "doth" "hath", excessive alliteration and banal rhyming together with the imprecisions and evasions of the point make it a poor thing for a poem on this theme, especially if one offered a comparison with, say, Hardy's 'I Look Into My Glass' or Larkin's 'The Old Fools' or 'Skin'. Of course one must consider that Gibson was to vouchsafe in his poem a transient metaphysical sense quite unavailable to the plain and unswerving Hardy and his later acolyte - for example, Gibson can conclude:

The soul, winning free when the breath and the body dis sever
Resumeth the raptures of youth that shall fail from her never
And seeketh her starry kin whose seraph-ways lighten earth's
gloom.

This poem like 'The Mushroom Gatherers' was excluded when Gibson published his *Collected Poems* eighteen years later.

'The Crown' is a poem he did retain into the *Collected Poems* and it is a far more vigorous piece than most of the others in *The Web of Life*. It deserves full quotation:

THE CROWN

To-morrow slowly bears to me the crown
Of all my days and deeds, from fortune wrung
With sword and smile, quick thrust and dallying tongue,
Hates masked with love and terror trampled down.
For not to me by right of ancient wrong
Does easy kingship fall from kingly sires;
No random throw of chance my life attires
In regal purple, but with labour long
Of desperate day and swift unslumbering night
I smiled and slew and jostled through the years,
Till one by one behind me fell my fears,
And one by one my foes were put to flight.
Now none withstands me, and I feel at last
The sceptre in my grasp, for when day comes,
And dawn is startled by the roll of drums,
My conquest, bruited on the herald's blast,
Shall hail me king through all the cowering lands:
To-morrow - yet to-night I may not sleep,
But like a robber through the guards I creep
Into the chamber where the great throne stands
To await the dawning majesty of day.
No sound is there, no light, save from the moon
Falls one dim ray to where at stroke of noon
My knees shall bend before him who shall lay
The gold crown on my brow, when I shall rise
To stoop no more and, throned on mailed power,
Shall sway the lands and peoples from that hour,
Unchallenged and a king in all men's eyes.

Yet dawn delays. Before the throne I kneel
To await the morrow's crown ... But who art thou
Who settest this cold circle on my brow
That grips my temples like a vice of steel?
Hark, hark! The drums! Yet terror chokes my breath;
I cannot rise; my limbs are turned to stone.
Oh, who art thou that sittest on my throne?

I am the king whom all men bow to - Death.

Despite obvious excesses and an over-excited posturing of a kind to be found elsewhere in the volume there is here an energy in the rhythm and a dramatic sweep to the story that makes it distinctive. The title and its association with Death marks this piece as perhaps being the subsequent inspiration for D.H. Lawrence ³³ whose famous essay *The Crown* suggests he might well have owed Gibson, whom he met and whom he read, an unacknowledged debt. ³⁴ In a brilliant and distinctive way Lawrence in this work develops the central idea that triumph, the culmination of life, the full consequence of development is Death; only things which are in the process of growing are truly living. It is very much the essential idea of Gibson's poem. This poem, originally published in *The English Review* to which Lawrence also contributed, pre-dates Lawrence's essay and stands as a pointer towards it.

For a young man of thirty this volume suggests a surprising degree of world-weariness, exhaustion and unhappiness. It is full of a sense of "surrender", death, hopelessness and disillusion. What Gibson does not manage to do, however, is to convince the reader that it is genuine, nor does he complete anything but an exercise in the well-established convention of the 'devouring time' or 'carpe diem' poem. What strikes one forcefully is a sense of a young writer without much experience or subject matter who is dwelling excessively on a muddle of feelings and transmuting them into the exhausted language of an earlier age. Hence one has the sense of empty imitation rather than vigorous personal expression.

As he writes of the bard in the poem in this volume entitled *Between the Songs* Gibson too

sings
Within a land of dreams
Where daylight never beams

But, on phantasmal streams
The moon of faery gleams

The archaic spelling of faery is one of many indications of the outdated medievalism of the piece.

A less depressing, larger vision emerges only from the simple poem 'On Carmel', which recalls his visit to the Holy Land, with his photographer father who travelled the world taking photographs. In it Gibson and his companion having climbed the mountain find "Our souls yet thrilled with light". His enlarged horizons bring a welcome expansion of the spirit and a freshness to the poetry:

ON CARMEL

Light-hearted with glad hours
In that old eastern land
We climbed the Hill of Flowers
Beyond the yellow strand.

In that unshadowed blue
We gazed until it seemed
To drench us through and through
With ecstasies undreamed,

From Carmel's blossoming height
We gazed through leagues of sun
To Hermon's snow-peak white
And desolate Lebanon.

Unsounding, foamless, cool
Beneath us lay the sea,
A dreaming jade-rimmed pool
Of lapis lazuli.

Till, bathed in living day,
Our souls yet thrilled with light
When over the wide bay
Clear-shadowed fell the night,

As on the sea's far rim
Unclouded sank the sun
And Hermon vast and dim,
Loomed over Lebanon.

The delight of the experience is strongly felt and conveyed most effectively in this well-controlled little piece. This powerful experience remained with Gibson; many years later, in 1932, he wrote to Dorothy Una Ratcliffe:

You are to set sail presently for Palestine and Syria. Just thirty years since I visited those coasts, but their fascination still holds me.³⁵

The critic of this volume who is most enthusiastic and whose remarks are most revealing is probably the American G.P.Dilla, who was so much a publicist of Gibson's work in America in the nineteen-twenties. The following comment strikes the present writer as a useful contribution to this discussion of Gibson's first phase:

The main difference between these poems and his well-known work is that these are nearly all metaphorical, brilliantly ornate and strikingly melodious, although no less sincere and intense than the later simple, less diffuse verses.³⁶

The work is indeed melodious; it is ornamented and rhetorical. Very much to the taste of the 1920's critic, I find it not so much to my taste and find the more astringent remarks of Edward Thomas in his review of *The Golden Helm* more applicable to this period of Gibson's work between 1902 and 1910:

Mr Gibson has in an exaggerated form the romanticism which is so common. His verse has usually the quality which one may condemn as very poetical. It has a strong flavour of saccharine and is usually a matter of words only. [my underlining]

and Thomas went on to conclude:

Mr Gibson is a very poetical versifier.³⁷

To many readers of Gibson's work earlier in the century his poems up to about 1910 were regarded as merely experiments. The views of one critic, writing in 1914 represent this general feeling well:

We shall not here consider his early work, because it is undoubtedly only a series of experiments in search of his true medium, which he found and matured later."[my underlining]³⁸

A similar opinion was tersely expressed by an American critic in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1913:

Mr Gibson's early poetry was intricate, decorative, exquisite, in a word, conventional. But the time came when he perceived that if his art was ever to be read it must concern itself directly with life.³⁹

Another critic noted in his article in the *Dial* in 1917 Gibson's "light, fluting bird-song" and his "romantic remoteness from reality."⁴⁰ Accordingly, having noted the severe limitation of his work Gibson began to turn to subjects of human suffering and extremity first bookishly, from legend in a piece like *Akra the Slave* and later, like Crabbe, from direct observation of life.

Akra the Slave dates originally from 1904 although it was not published until 1910. In most respects it bears the marks of a later work rather than an early one: it is vigorous and energetic in tone, has a fine economy of language despite its very rich verbal quality and it is wonderfully sustained in its narrative.

The epigraph to the piece gives us the clue to earlier composition; remembering that publication date is 1910 we read:

Six years ago I wrote this story down
While yet the light of Eastern skies
Was in my eyes.
And still my heart aglow with memories
Of sun-enraptured seas,
And that old sea-girt town,
Where down dark alleys of enchanted night
We stole
.....
Six years ago!
Ah! soon - too soon
Our tale, too, will be told:
And yet, and yet
From this old Eastern tale we know
Love's story never can grow old,
Till love, himself, forget.

1910

Gibson's travels in the east to which he refers in this epigraph had taken place in the spring of the year 1902. He travelled with his father and the journey took them to the eastern end of the Mediterranean as far as Port Said at which point they turned back and made for home.⁴¹ It was a seven-week cruise ⁴² and clearly it touched his imagination deeply. A number of pieces up to 1910 or thereabouts shew the influence of the experience but none more richly so than *Akra the Slave*. The piece is extraordinarily rich in description, capturing the exotic oriental, Babylonish colouring of the setting with a delicacy and directness of language in which there is no luxuriant excess at all. The narrative is handled in a very mature manner and is confident and vigorous. It recalls the dramatic-monologue style of Browning very clearly and it reflects too Browning's interest in tales from the Middle East like that of *Karshish the Physician* or *Rabbi Ben Ezra*. The vigour and energy that sweep the reader along in *Akra* are also redolent of Browning's forceful 'bread and cheese manner' that so amused Hopkins.

The story of *Akra* tells of a young man from a remote mountainous area between the Tigris and the Euphrates, in the very cradle of civilization, who is captured by Babylonish soldiers and taken back to Babylon and slavery. Knowing that he is cut off for ever from his "dim, blue, native hills" and chafing at his degradation he betrays a rebellious mood when he is led before the King of Babylon in the soldiers' parade of triumph. However, as his eyes fall upon the Queen he capitulates totally;

And with my eyes still set on the Queen's face
I answered:
 "I will serve".

Eventually rescued from his subjection as a crude labourer by his artistic skill, shewn when he

.....limned a young fawn, cropping

A bunch of tender, over-hanging leaves

he is at the Queen's command

.....set.....among the craftsmen
.....who so deftly limned

The hunts and battles for the palace walls

and he prospers. He becomes a celebrated carver in jade and lapis-lazuli making beautiful things that recall vividly the beauty of Yeats' artist fashioning work "to keep a drowsy Emperor awake". The exhaustive listing of semi-precious stones does, however, seriously threaten the previous seriousness but it is to be noted that it bears a very striking similarity to the boastful speech of Herod in Wilde's *Salome* - Gibson's debt to the 90's emerges again:

And, sometimes, I would carve in ruddy teak,
Or ivory from the Indian merchants brought,
Or in the rare, black basalt, little beasts
To please the idle fancies of the King;
Or model in wet clay, and cast in bronze,
Great bulls and lions for the palace courts;
Or carve him seals of lapis-lazuli,
Of jasper, amethyst and serpentine
Chalcedony, carnelian, chrysoprase,
Agate, sardonyx and chalcedonyx
Green jade and alabaster;
Or cut in stones that flaked and flickered
Like a glancing kingfisher.

Eventually he makes his masterpiece, a golden serpent for the Queen's hair and he is bidden, by the King, to give it to her himself. We thus witness the triumph of the artist:

And so, I went unto her, where she sat,
Among her singing maidens of the loom,
Weaving a silken web of Tyrian dye.
I laid the trinket at her feet, in silence:
And she arose and set it in her hair,
Whose living lustre far outshone
The cold dead metal I had fashioned,
As she stood before me, dreaming
In her robe of flaming blue;
Then looked a moment on me with kind eyes.
And though she spoke no word,
I turned, and fled, in trembling,
Before the light that shivered through me
And struck my soul with shuddering ecstasy:
And, still, through many days,
Although I did not look again
Upon those dreaming eyes,
Their visionary light
Within my soul, revealed eternity.

Art's permanence is blended with the great, yet temporal Royal power in a perfectly harmonious union..

Subsequently, however, Akra, by accident, transgresses. Having fallen asleep in the royal garden he wakes at a time when the Queen in supposed privacy bathes naked. Akra is condemned to death for having witnessed what is forbidden and the tale ends as he awaits execution:

Thus have the mortal years
Flowed onward to the perfect end.
This day of days,
That never night shall quench,
Nor darkness vanquish.

Akra's reflection on his experience is anything but sorrowful. He is triumphant. By his art he has, symbolically, won the Queen. He is thus, as an artist, a King. And he has the further knowledge to cheer his last hours that his art will out-last Babylon, as indeed will his tale. The texture and tone here, as well as the theme of sacrificial love, suggest the 90's mood. Gibson manages to convey powerfully his own sense that his art is also in the same way a triumph over time and that his words, like Horace's are 'aere perennius'. His story remains as does Akra's when the walls and gardens of Babylon are vanished; neither marble nor gilded monument will outlast his rhyme.

The story was not one known to me from any other source and so it came to me with great freshness and I felt throughout that Gibson's handling of the narrative was masterly and totally convincing. For a modern taste some of his vocabulary is a little precious but there are no false notes in this fine piece of forceful story telling. Whilst I would not agree entirely with Edward Thomas's reservations on the piece I find his general appraisal and endorsement of the piece very just:

Mr Gibson's *Akra the Slave* is the most interesting thing he has yet done. He has discarded the rich rhyming in which he was something of a master, and tries to tell a tale without the help either of rhyme or of regularly recurring rhythms. It is a fine story, and it has been honestly grappled with. We see, in fact, too much of the writing and feel too little of the story. The chief fault is an indescribable failure to give a consistent impression of actuality. Among the minor faults is the curious one of making the slave who tells the story continually aware of his own personal appearance. He speaks of

his own "tawny body" and in the following lines reveals the power of seeing himself from the banks while he was swimming:

And, as I swam for life,
Betwixt my thrusting heels,
Another spear that clove the crystal waters
Glanced underneath my body
And in the stream-bed quivered bolt-upright,
Caught in a cleft of rock

Was this first written as an ordinary narrative and not as a monologue? ⁴³

In answer to that question, with which Edward Thomas closed his review, I would suggest that that is, perhaps, what Gibson means by the opening of his epigraph, that he had first written a story and then put it in verse:

Six years ago I wrote the story down
While yet the light of Eastern skies
Was in my eyes

and that he worked on it very carefully indeed, crafting it into a Browningsque monologue carrying with it that sense of the dramatic which is a crucial feature of the Georgian manner, to which he became a fundamental contributor.

In *Akra* we see not only Gibson's fascination for the oriental tale but also themes characteristic of his earliest work: the sympathetic but inaccessible and hence cruel Queen, the wicked, tyrannical male figure of the King and the love-lorn young man who, whether he be jester, harper, troubadour or slave, is the type of the suffering, beauty-worshipping artist.

The conception of the poem carries a latter-day element of the "fair, cruel maid" of the Elizabethans together with the Shakespearean sense of the transforming power of art and its permanence. Gibson offers no inkling of anything so self-conscious as imitation or pastiche but a genuine sense of the triumph of art. His presentation is somewhat bookish but there is a strong awareness of human frailty and mutability communicated to the reader.

Whilst not denying that Edward Thomas makes just criticism of the poem it needs to be remembered that he did not care for Gibson's work very much and had been a long-standing critic of it. He wrote to Gordon Bottomley in 1914 saying: "Gibson and I are too conscious of what we used to think of one another, I like his later work, but temperately." 44

Looked at in the whole context of Gibson's output what is most striking about *Akra*, however, is that it marks as complete a break from some of the more excessive indulgencies of his earlier mode as does *Daily Bread*, his next volume, in its even more distinctive way. Gibson was not only developing his skills as a poet, he was transforming himself into a new kind of poet altogether. In 1910 he stripped off all his borrowed robes and, dressed in the plainest of linguistic clothes, he became the first poet to explore extensively the lives of the urban poor. It is the year 1910, therefore, which marks the decisive close to Gibson's first poetic phase. He had turned himself from being an heir of the decadence and romanticism of the nineteenth century to being a begetter of realism. For many critics and readers Gibson was henceforth to be regarded as the first, and often foremost, Urban poet.

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

1. From a letter of Gibson's, written to the American critic, G.P.Dilla and quoted in the article 'The Development of Wilfrid Wilson Gibson's Poetic Art', *The Sewanee Review*, 30 (1922) 39-56 (p.39).
2. This collection is housed at the Northumberland County Record Office, Gosforth, Newcastle upon Tyne.
3. Letter to the author from Michael Gibson, the son of W.W.Gibson. 17th November 1984.
4. The Reader's report for T. Fisher Unwin, The Berg Collection, New York Public Library.
5. W. de la M. 10.11.34.
6. Ibid.
7. W. de la M. 14.11.34.
8. 'A Bundle of Ballads', *The Spectator*, 79 (1897) 823-4.
9. W. de la M. 27.3.13.
10. *The Dome*, An Illustrated Magazine and Reviews of Literature, Music, Architecture and the Graphic Arts, (New Series) 5, Nov/Dec 1899.
11. Edward Thomas, *Swinburne* (London, 1911) p.94.
12. P.W. 4.1.24.
13. Mark Girouard, *Return to Camelot* (London, 1979) *passim*.
14. A man of some cultivation and discernment who saw himself as something of a patron and guardian of literature. He published *The Yellow Book* and Yeats' *Wind Among the Reeds*. He also published work by Lionel Johnson, Masfield, Newbolt, Joyce and in 1909 Pound's *Personae*. Further information on Mathews can be found in *Ezra Pound's Kensington* by P. Hutchinson (London, 1965)
15. Howard Pease lived at Otterburn Tower in Otterburn, Northumberland. He was editor of the *Northern Counties Magazine* and a prolific author of Border tales and versions of local legends. The *Northern Counties Magazine* ran into four editions between October 1900 and September 1901. Gibson is there represented by ten poems
16. Edward Thomas, 'The Red Book' of Newspaper Cuttings, Cardiff University Library 30.8.05.
17. M.B. 27.2.07.
18. M.B. 15.6.07.
19. M.B. 3.6.07.
20. M.B. March (no date) 1907.
21. M.B. 21.3.07.
22. M.B. 28.4.07.
23. M.B. 8.4.07.
24. Henry James, *The Art of the Novel* (London and New York, 1934) pp 241-266.
25. P. Thouless, *Modern Poetic Drama* (Oxford, 1934) p.197 et seq
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid, quoting Yeats.
28. Edward Thomas, 'The Red Book', 1908 (no other date available.)
29. See footnote 1.
30. Professor Phelps, *The Advance of English Poetry in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1918) p.99.
31. Maurice Browne *Too Late to Lament* (London, 1955) p. 64.
32. See footnote 1.
33. D.H.Lawrence, *Phoenix* (London, 1963) pp. 365-415.
34. *The Collected Letters of D.H.Lawrence* Edited by Boulton and Zytaruk, Volumes I and II (Cambridge, 1979 and 1982) p.118; p.192.

35. D.U.R. 15.12.32.
36. See footnote 1.
37. Edward Thomas, 'The Red Book', 26.11.03.
38. Martin Armstrong, 'Recent English Poetry', *Fortnightly Review* (New Series) 95 (1914) 498-512.
39. Robert Shafer, 'Two of the Newest Poets', *Atlantic Monthly*, 3 (1913) 489-495.
40. W.A. Bradley, 'Wilfrid Wilson Gibson', *The Dial*, 62 (1917) 223-226.
41. D.U.R. 2.1.34.
42. D.U.R. 18.3.35.
43. Edward Thomas, 'The Red Book', article entitled 'Daily Chronicler', 9.8.11.
44. Edward Thomas to Gordon Bottomley, 22nd May, 1914. From the book edited by R. George Thomas, *Letters of Edward Thomas to Gordon Bottomley* (London, 1968) p. 233.

CHAPTER TWO

1910-1912

A new force in English letters

The reader who approaches Gibson's work chronologically must come with surprise on *Daily Bread*. The imitative voice of the early volumes has disappeared entirely and it is the voice of a realist which speaks out at us. The earlier themes of dream and vision are gone and in their place the themes are common and contemporary. The language of the self-conscious 'artist' is stripped away and the style is bare and simple. It is as though Gibson were new-born as a poet with this volume or, at least, he had "got down off his stilts."³ What had happened to cause this

remarkable change? We know that in 1907 he left his home in Hexham for a period and went to live in Glasgow.⁴ He lived in a city garret on a small private income from his father while he tried to make for himself a career as a freelance writer. On an undated postcard from Glasgow to John Drinkwater he spoke of spending "a long night with detectives in the slums". (John Drinkwater, *Discovery*, London, 1932, p.213) Drinkwater concluded from this that Gibson was a newspaper reporter and that he had been "forced by necessity to take journalistic employment". (ibid) There is, however, no evidence to support this; it is more likely that Gibson was going about collecting copy for his poems. Robert Ross has argued that the Glasgow experience was the seminal one for Gibson and that his transformation from being a poet of 'romance' to becoming a poet of the commonplace suffering of ordinary life was its immediate consequence:

Suddenly and inexplicably [my italics] around 1907, Gibson did an about-face and turned to the lowly, the poor and the oppressed for his poetic themes, the result was *The Stonefolds* (1907) and *Daily Bread* (1910) ⁵

It is certainly true that the signs of a change of heart are evident in the work as early as 1907 for *The Stonefolds*, whilst dealing entirely with rural life, concentrates exclusively on the hardships of the rural poor. *The Web of Life* (1908) however, merely continued to deal with earlier themes as it was a collection of earlier pieces prepared ready for the press at the same time as *The Stonefolds*. But *Daily Bread* was a truly remarkable departure. For the first time there had appeared on the Edwardian literary scene a poet whose major theme was the urban

proletariat and who was to be compared immediately with both Crabbe and with the painter Millet as the celebrant of low life. It seems probable that during his stay in Scotland Gibson moved in political circles. We know that in 1908, in Edinburgh, Gibson and his sister Elizabeth met Hugh MacDiarmid, who was then a student member of the Independent Labour Party.*

It appears that after 1908, if not indeed before, Gibson's creative imagination began to be dominated by people in the contemporary world. He gave up his earlier romantic figures of knights, kings and hermits and embraced the marginal and dispossessed, the poor both in town and country. His rural poor manage to eke out a subsistence living either by land or sea; they are crofters, shepherds or fishermen. Worse off than them by far are the urban poor whom Gibson depicts in grim tenements herded together in squalid and unhealthy conditions. Their miserable lives are presented as almost without relief from misery. They are the people that the sociologist Seebohm Rowntree described in York in the 1890's:

Rowntree's study of York, a city which was neither a 'black spot' nor particularly prosperous, was based on a particularly rigorous definition of poverty. Describing his 'poverty line' as a 'standard of bare subsistence rather than living', he depicted what it entailed:

A family living upon the scale allowed for in this estimate must never spend a penny on railway fare or omnibus. They must never go into the country unless they walk. They must never purchase a halfpenny newspaper or spend a penny to buy a ticket for a popular concert. They must write no letters to absent children, for they cannot afford to pay the postage. They must never contribute anything to their church or chapel, or give any help to a neighbour which costs them money. They cannot save, nor can they join sick clubs or trade unions, because they cannot pay the necessary subscriptions. The children must have no pocket money for dolls, marbles or sweets. The father must smoke no tobacco, and must drink no beer. The mother must never buy any pretty clothes for herself or for her children, the character of the family wardrobe, as for the family diet, being governed by the regulation, 'Nothing must be bought but that which is absolutely necessary for the maintenance of physical health, and what is bought must be of the plainest and most economical description.' Should a child fall ill, it must be attended by the parish doctor; should it die, it must be buried by the parish. Finally, the wage-earner must never be absent from his work for a single day ... If any

of these conditions are broken, the extra expenditure involved is met, and can only be met, by limiting the diet; or, in other words, by sacrificing physical efficiency ⁶.

Gibson, too, has a sociological quality and this was referred to by the Reverend John Haynes Holmes in an article published in 1917 in praise of Gibson's great skill:

What Charles Booth did in volumes of statistics for London, Gibson does in a few lines of simple verse for city and rural slums. And he presents not merely outward material facts, but inward spiritual reactions upon these facts. For Gibson is a man who sees reality, and adds to this the magic art of making others see ⁷.

The condition of this urban proletariat is presented by Gibson in what today might seem exaggerated or melodramatic style. But it does, however, accord very well with accounts like Rowntree's or Booth's or the report of a government committee on 'Physical Deterioration' compiled in 1904. This had come about as a consequence of army recruiting for the Boer War: 40% of those who took the 'King's Shilling' between 1897 and 1902 were rejected as medically or physically unfit. In urban areas such as Leeds and Sheffield the figure was as high as 60%. Furthermore what may seem in Gibson's tales of the poor to be an excessive preoccupation with death among adults and children is very easily reconciled with the historical facts which show that mortality was as common in 1900 as in the Hungry Forties of the previous century. Glasgow above all cities in Britain, reported the *Glasgow Herald* in 1903, contained "the lowest depths of wretchedness and poverty in the Empire."

Gibson's claim therefore as an historian of his time is significant but it is also a limiting factor because his efforts to chronicle the external world severely restrict any attempt to develop his own vision. There is no poet of the period who has so photographically reflected those years between 1910 and 1914 when the conception of a 'Liberal England' was reduced to ashes, but though he shews us an image of the

times he fails to develop far beyond the purely representational.

This is one of the chief reasons why his work is limited to minor status.

The cause of Gibson's emergence as a re-constructed poet may well have partly been due to his Glasgow experiences for there he met with harsh city life for the first time. Gibson himself, however, was characteristically unsure and evasive about the point in a conversation he had with Ross many years later. He was by then seventy-seven years of age and, self-confessedly forgetful:

In an interview in the Spring of 1955 Mr Gibson assured me that though he recognized it, he had no explanation for the sudden shift in his verse around 1907. That he lived on a very small private income in a garret in Glasgow - and therefore was in daily contact with the kinds of people who were to become the subjects of his verse - may have had some effect upon the shift. But Mr Gibson could recall no conscious 'influence' at work upon him at this time. ⁸

Ross was gathering material for his study of the Georgians and he was anxious to try and establish the moment at which Georgian realism first

became evident. Those who subscribed to the early Marsh anthologies were, as Ross shews, considered to be realists: "Poetic realism, or truth to life, was the one feature which distinguished *Georgian Poetry* I and II from other contemporary anthologies and which gave the Georgians their most nearly unique hallmark." (Ross, *The Georgian Revolt*, p.146) But it was not, however, at all clear when the 'realistic revolt' actually began.

If one dates Gibson's realistic phase as beginning between the years 1907 and 1910 then one must conclude that he is as original as Masfield and Brooke and that his innovations were contemporary with theirs.. There is even evidence to suggest that Gibson's change of heart and of direction began much earlier than has been thought. In 1907 he could say that *The Stonefolds* was "the fruit of my labours during the last four years" ⁹ and he regarded it "as on the whole, an advance on anything I have yet published." ¹⁰ In the same year he said he wanted people "to get accustomed to poetry without frills." ¹¹ In 1910 he wrote to Lascelles Abercrombie, whom he had not yet met, from his home in Hexham, the following most revealing letter which confirms

for us his early conversion to writing about immediate experience rather than fanciful daydreams:

I became more and more strongly convinced that it is the business of a poet to make poetry out of the life of his own day, and I have not written any verse for four or five years that has not sprung from contemporary circumstances (though I have considerable arrears of more-or-less archaic stuff still to publish!) It isn't easy work, as one has to perform the office that time has already performed for the stock poetical themes, by clearing away all the unessential material: and when it is done, it so [sic] horribly uncertain whether anything has been achieved or not I am very proud of a testimony I have just received from a Scots friend, a factory hand in Edinburgh. He writes:

"I suppose one must be a worker with his hands to truly understand and appreciate the plays [Gibson's plays]... they have gripped me as no other work of the kind has ever done ... I live, think, eat and sleep in the middle of it all. I know it is true, and I could scream aloud in pain at the horror of it all".

He is a consumptive lad broken by "the damned wisdom of the wheels" ¹²

Hence I would argue that the usual claim that it was Brooke who began the realistic movement among Edwardians with *Channel Passage* and *Menelaus and Helen* both in 1911, is a misconception. Graham Martin, for example, argues that it was "the influence of Rupert Brooke" which underpinned "the ethos of the initial Georgian anthologies" ¹³ but Brooke's volume *Poems* of 1911 did not go nearly as far as Gibson's *Daily Bread* had previously done in 1910. Similarly Robert Ross, in pointing the significance of Brooke's influence in the following passage, neglects to consider Gibson's claims as the earliest of the 'realists':

Everybody was talking about *Channel Passage* and *Menelaus and Helen*: the younger people admired him for daring to write a sonnet about seasickness and to describe so cynically and realistically the old age of Helen and Menelaus, but, on the whole, even those who admired him were inclined to be shocked, many indeed were frankly annoyed at his bad taste and at the way in which, with arrogant undergraduate bravado, for so they considered it, he deliberately set out to flout long-cherished poetic conventions. ¹⁴

It is perhaps hardly surprising that no writer on the period has so far considered Gibson's significance as the facts of Gibson's case are not

generally available. It becomes clear, then, from the evidence that has been quoted from his letters (pp 59/60) that Gibson was, between 1903 and 1910, primarily concerned to strip down the language of poetry in order to produce bare statements of observation and comment on the ugly poverty-ridden world about him. As I have shewn he said that he had once admired, and tried to write in, a more florid style but that his appetite for "confectionery" (p.33) was now at an end. He valued "bread and cheese", (ibid) and was "clearing away all the unessential material (p.60). Here then was a poet who from 1903 was a leader of the 'realistic revolt' against the manner and rhetoric of late Victorian poetry. In this Gibson precedes Brooke and Masefield. He could see in Davidson and Henley precursors who made poetry out of the unpoetic (pp 20/21) and they, with their plain language offered the alternative to the confectionery he had sickened of. Gibson was a pioneer in this sort of poetry. Already the novel in the hands of Gissing, Mark Rutherford and Arthur Morrison had focused on poverty and urban life. Before Gibson such themes were only touched on in poetry.

What Gibson had begun was to be picked up and followed by many poets in England and, in America, by Robert Frost who saw Gibson as a master before he outgrew him in stature. As soon as Frost arrived in England he called on Gibson in London. Gibson's reputation as the author of *Daily Bread* and as a frequent contributor to Ford Madox Ford's *English Review* - widely distributed in American eastern cities - was sufficient to make Frost seek him out. Later, when Frost made his second visit to England Gibson recorded the original encounter in the poem 'The First Meeting'.¹⁶

Though Gibson's change of direction had begun earlier on it was not until the appearance of *Daily Bread* that it was plainly to be seen, and this collection was widely acclaimed as a new kind of poetry. It was

plain and true. It was shorn of adornment. It was felt to be modern in subject and method. Gibson was seen as the new socialistic, humanitarian observer of the mass-society of the industrialized western world. He was the outstanding radical poet at a moment when most poets were ideologically committed to the status quo and when most readers of poetry belonged very definitely to the classes rather than the masses. The literary hegemony of the day had scarcely admitted the poor into its domain for serious consideration. The poor were perhaps comic as are Kipling's soldiers or ridiculous like Eliot's almost contemporary housemaids with their "damp souls". Gibson celebrates the poor.

Gibson saw himself as not simply the poet of the poor, not simply as a new poet but as very definitely a Modern poet. Certainly the description of Gibson as Modern could not last for long but at this moment in 1910 he saw himself bearing a banner he could no longer lay claim to by the time the Great War began. Writing to Maurice Browne in 1910 he asked eagerly "Are you lecturing at all on Modern Poetry [sic caps]?" This he felt was in his interests for, he said, "it does seem to need a propaganda work" ¹⁷ He clearly felt that he was Modern before he was out-moderned by the Moderns. *Daily Bread* marks off a new aspect of Gibson entirely and in the *Prelude* the sense he gives of being a modern poet, of the new "first waking from oblivion" in which he hears "the life-song of humanity" is striking testament to his new departure as a poet. There is, in the sense of dedication and poetic purpose, a strong Wordsworthian strain:

As one, at midnight wakened by the call
Of golden plovers in their seaward flight,
Who lies and listens as the clear notes fall
Through tingling quiet of the frosty night,
Who lies and listens as the wild notes fail,
And then, in fancy following the flock,
Fares over slumbering hill and dreaming dale,
Until he hears the surf on reef and rock
Break thundering, and all sense of self is drowned
Within the mightier music of the deep,
And he no more recalls the piping sound
That startled him from dull undreaming sleep -

So I, first waking from oblivion, heard,
With heart that kindled to the call of song,
The voice of young life fluting like a bird,
And echoed that wild piping till, ere long,
Lured onward by that happy singing-flight,
I caught the stormy summons of the sea
Through whose unresting conflict day and night
Surges the dauntless human harmony.

The carefully rhymed pentameters structured into two sections with first the lengthy simile beginning "As one ... " and then the comparative metaphoric statements, beginning "So I...." comprise a clear, deeply-felt statement of a transition of feeling from a state in which the poet was attuned to "young life" and innocence, to a maturer state in which he came to hear "the dauntless human harmony" and so discovers experience. It is a weighty, serious statement and its weight and seriousness are enhanced by the measured tone, the weighty pentameters and the extended comparison. That comparison is an impressive one. In it the poet compares the growth of his mind from fanciful preoccupations to his weighty theme as being like that great flight of the birds from calm land to stormy sea. We follow his mind from source to ocean tide, from the first moment of awareness of hearing the bird's song to the fullness of experience when the notes are lost in a mightier music. The passage is as important to him as is Wordsworth's transition from "thoughtless youth" to an awareness of "the still sad music of humanity" in *Tintern Abbey*. Indeed the whole idea of the discovery of human misery is not only Wordsworthian but characteristically Romantic. What distinguishes Gibson as a 'modern' poet is that he has awakened to consciousness of social class and deprivation. The Prelude - Gibson actually uses this Wordsworthian word - marks a farewell to the character of the poet who had made the poems up to *The Web of Life*. Now his poetic character is being fashioned to the making of more disturbed, living, contemporary harmonies although his phrasing remains consciously poetic.

The dramas are all written in an irregular, unrhymed iambic metre, carefully chosen. He realized, he said,

that it is a poet's business to make poetry out of the life of his own day ...In *Daily Bread* I [discarded] conventional blank verse for a measure more dramatic and more expressive of the rhythm of emotion and the natural cadence of speech. ¹⁰

In order to achieve such natural cadences he originally chopped his lines up into rough, uneven lines to convey the sense of broken existences. *
Later he broke with the idea and so brought out a fifth, English, edition which was in orthodox blank verse.

The first piece in *Daily Bread* is 'The House of Candles' and it shews above all the new plain language which Gibson had found. The weakness of the piece is in its ineffective dramatisation and in its raising of the subject of human suffering without being able to cope with it. However, the plain diction and the urgency of the speaking voice of the dying woman, Grizel Stark, whose woes have been an illegitimate child and a life of poverty, are very well managed and leave a mark on the reader's mind:

When first I left my home
To hide my shame from friendly eyes, and came
Into this countryside, thinking to bear
The pangs and burden of my misery
More easily among strangers, my heart was black,
Against - but even now why should I utter
The name that once was all in all to me?
And that black month before the boy was born
I brooded on my bitter wrong, and nursed
Hate in my bosom till there was no room
For any other feeling in my heart.
Ah, shut your ears if you would hear no more -
For I must speak out all. Your brow is smooth;
I think you could not hate; and few have known
Such hate as mine.

.....
But when I came in from the fields today,
Tewed by the sun that beat upon my brain
Till it seemed a bit of battered white-hot metal
On the aching anvil of my neck - too trashed
Almost to lift the latch or cross the door-sill,
I couldn't eat or sup, just having list
To light my candles before I dropped asleep
In the chair beside the hearth. How long I slept
I cannot tell. I wakened with a start,
Quaking with fear as though a hand of ice

* Maurice Browne, 'The Poetry of W.W. Gibson', *Poetry Review*, 1 (part 1) (January, 1912) 18.

Had clutched my breast, to find the room in darkness,
The candle guttered out. So long since I'd dared to look
On utter night - and now I gazed
Into my own heart, eaten by hate as hollow
And black as a blasted tree, fearing to breathe.
Then very quietly, for the first time
Since I had been forsaken, the thought of him
Came into my heart without a breath of hate:
The icy clutch was loosened from my bosom,
And pity stole like light into my breast;
And, as I wondered whence the glory sprang,
My little baby stood before me laughing
With outstretched arms and happy kindling eyes,
His little body filled with living light:
And as I stooped to clasp him to my breast
I fell .. and knew no more ... till I saw you there.

The dramatic monologue here suggests a method perhaps adapted from Browning with its distinctive voice telling its own tale. Grizel is a woman who has suffered throughout her life and she tells her tale with strong feeling and energy. The emphasis in the first part of the quotation on "shame" and "pangs" on blackness and "hate" makes us feel her misery at her social stigma in bearing an illegitimate child. Gibson's management of the passion and the speaking voice is able to convince the reader of the genuineness of the experience and this is partly accomplished by the use of parenthetical breaks from the narrative such as

but even now why should I utter
The name that once was all in all to me?

The second part of the quotation shews how good Gibson is at managing to create a wholly different mood when this woman, sitting in the darkness and emerging from sleep, suddenly experiences the onset of pity and love in her mind. The power of love is suddenly seen to transform misery and woe and to uplift the woman and remove hate from her heart. Gibson's capacity to dream as a poet is here turned to a new, very practical power in that the dream-vision of the woman's love for the man and for the child, the "living light" utterly overrides her suffering. Such a triumph

of love found a ready response among his readers and he was quickly taken up by Christians and Socialists alike who saw him as a spokesman for their views. Later, when in London, according to the Reverend John Holmes, he was sought out by clerics and rabbis from England and America, who saw him as a "seer and prophet." ¹⁹ Holmes himself, a canon of the Episcopal Church in America even went as far as to say:

A new poet of the people has risen up among us. The story of the soul is written as plainly in *Daily Bread* as in *The Divine Comedy* and in *Paradise Lost*. ²⁰

Soon after their publication the poems of *Daily Bread* were read aloud in a Birmingham church. ²¹ The theme of the common man is continued in other pieces from *Daily Bread*. 'On The Road', deals with the plight of the unemployed rural labourer and its companion pieces, 'The Betrothed' and 'The Family's Pride', are set among fisher-folk. The former deals with fishermen's wives awaiting their spouses' return from deep-sea fishing, while in the latter, the boat called *The Family's Pride* has gone down with all hands and the women are grieving for their men. These tales suggest Victorian narrative paintings.

In another piece, 'The Firstborn', a child dies whilst his father is at sea. Touchingly the father recalls the day that the boy was born:

Do you remember, wife, when he was born
Two years ago, how I was out at sea?
My anxious heart was filled with fear for you
And hankered to be home. The wind and tide
Were dead against us, but my will was strong;
And when at last I saw our chosen signal,
A snow-white kerchief by the chimney-stack,
Waving me welcome with the news that you
Were safely through, wife, and a son was born,
My heart leapt like a fish - and mad for home,
Crazy to run the boat against all hazards,
Though other signals warned us from the shore.
What did I care! My mates were daft with fear,
And cried out we'd be dashed on the Devil's Tooth,
But more they feared my eyes - my eyes that saw
Your signal fluttering welcome; and we rode in
Against the odds of wind and wave; and folk
Ran down to greet us as though snatched from death ...
Though I didn't heed them as I leapt ashore,
And ran to you who'd come through peril too,

And won safe into harbour. Then I saw
Our little son, who snuggled to your breast,
And nestled in my heart.

The very plain language coupled with the simple structural method of linking the events in parallel form with conjunctions makes this the convincing utterance of an unlettered man. At the same time there is a clear growth in Gibson's capacity to establish a dramatic character. The speaker is articulate in a realistic way, giving an impression of strength and sturdiness.

Book I of *Daily Bread* is composed of dramas of the sufferings of rural and maritime life. Book II shifts its concerns to the modern city. In 'The Garret' a woman arrives in the slums from "the hill country" after her mother's death and in search of her long-lost sweetheart: she explains in the following speech, the events that led to her arrival:

Mother died last week - last Monday night:
She went off terribly sudden at the end.
I'd just been telling her Sally Pigg's new hat
Had red and yellow roses, and must have cost
A pretty penny. "Trust them Piggs," she said
"To squander their last farthing on fine feathers."
"Roses, not feather," I was saying, when she
Sat up and gave a gasp, and she was gone
Before I reached the bedside; and I was left
With no one else to turn to : and when you went
Hard on a year ago to look for work
You said you'd come again for me some day.
I waited for you, but you never came:
And when my mother died I had no home -
Gey queer to find your home gone in a night,
To waken in the bed you've always slept in
And realise you'll lie in it no more -
And so I thought ... But happen I did wrong
To come to you like this: yet you - you said ...
And still you didn't come, and only wrote
One letter to me, lad, in all that time.
Why did you never come for me? You said
You'd come ...

Her former sweetheart's story is the pitiful one of exclusion from his own home, the need to "seek my fortune among strangers" as "a stranger among strangers" and his subsequent misery in the city. There he is a victim of unemployment and consequent starvation:

ISAAC "If a man toil not, neither shall he eat" -
Sounds just, it does, when you're in work and full;
But when there's not a stroke of work to get,
And you see many who have never worked,
Who've never done a hand's turn in their lives,
Rich and full-fed and happy, while old men starve
Because work fails them things look different somehow.

ADAH Yet folk seem kind.

ISAAC Kind? Ay, you know the sort
That cannot bear to hear a bunny squeal,
So looses a poor man's dinner from the snare,
And goes home, praising God, to eat his own?
I've not been seeking charity, but work.
Life isn't over easy at the best
For us poor country folk at any time;
It's not all beer and skittles, yet at the worst,
Up before cockcrow, labouring till dark,
We somehow scrape along on hard-won earnings;
For while there's work there's hope; but when work fails
And not the ghost of a job

Isaac laments his suffering, agonisingly:

You must go away from here.
For here men starve - ay, men and women starve;
And famished people are ill folk to live with.
Such sights I've seen - I didn't think Hell could hold
Such sights, and God knows Morton wasn't Heaven
Or our folk angels: but here, where hundreds hunger,
And wander shelterless at night, or sleep
Under arches or on cold benches wrapped
In soaking fog... here... here is Hell .. Go! Go!

Gibson's depiction of the city streets at night, drawn presumably from
his Glasgow experience, is eerie and weird:

ISAAC Oh, if you'd seen the faces round the stall -
The hungry faces in the flare of naphtha -
Eyes glaring from the shadows greedily,
And cold blue lips drinking the very steam
Of the coffee with a relish as I passed by.

ADAH And you had naught for them?

ISAAC To one poor girl
I gave a penny of your money, Adah -
A bairn almost, and naught but skin and bone,
And, oh, such eyes! I little thought I'd come
To see that look in any bairn's eyes - yet
When the body starves, the best of us are weak,
And little blame to such as she ...

The starkness of such poverty is not a familiar experience to us now in
our city streets as it may have been in 1910 but Isaac's anguish at
seeing such hunger has force enough to carry his observations from the

street. The utter blankness and anonymity of the hungry faces round the coffee stall contrasts strikingly with the warmth of his pity especially as it is localised in the tenderness of the dialect word 'bairn'.

'The Furnace' deals with a blast-furnace worker who has been terribly burned in an industrial accident. In his delirium he cries out his obsession with his hopeless daily task:

I feed and feed and feed it,
And yet it's never full,

In his delirium he regresses to his childhood gazing at the domestic fire and the forming of his first idea of his adult work:

I love to watch the fire:
And when I am a man
I'll mind a furnace, mother,
And feed it all day long
And watch it blaze
And listen to its roaring.
Look, mother, do you see the little flame
Running right down into that deep red hollow,
And waving me to follow after?
I'd like to follow him
And run right down -
Right down that golden lane
Among the dancing flames,
And dance with them.
Ah, there he is,
And laughing at me,
And waving his red cap ...
And dancing ... dancing...

The simple, childlike construction of the verse, dependent on the repeated use of "and" to string the thoughts together in the simplest way, creates the enthusiasm and excitement which belongs to childish imaginings. It is made to sound hopelessly imaginary in the context of the very potent misery of the adult reality in which the man is dehumanized by his labour.

'The Night Shift', the piece in the collection most commented-upon by early reviewers, is a poem that combines Gibson's visionary, mysterious qualities, seen to best advantage in *Fires* and his basic realism. A woman

who has given birth to a son 'sees' in a vision - that is a prognostication of the truth - her husband's death in the coal mine:

Ah God, the darkness is ablaze ...
And falling, falling ...
Rocks are falling -
Great, black, dripping rocks ...
And I am falling ...
And there's some one tapping
As though he would be in.
Why don't you let him in ?
It 's Robert wants
To see his son ...
Can you not hear a tapping, tapping,
Like the tapping of a pick?
Tap tap....
But it grows fainter
Now I cannot hear it.
The darkness has come down on me -

The effect of horror produced by the recurrent tapping of the rescuers' pickaxes struck one reviewer as "reminiscent of and not incomparable with the knocking on the gate in *Macbeth*, it is appalling and sublime." ²² Another reviewer, Darrell Figgis, in the periodical *The Nineteenth Century*, said that this piece was "the strangest of them all." ²³ This second section of *Daily Bread* was completed by 1908 and he said so in a letter to Maurice Browne on 30th July, 1909. Gibson's embrace on realism in poetry is remarkably and impressively assured for one who started his poetic career at such a remove from it. The remarkable thing is that he so eschews all 'poetry', seeming to wish to avoid it as much as others of his period wished to embrace it. Not only is the language stripped bare but there are no recognizable verse forms at all. Indeed Figgis was of the opinion that Gibson wrote the pieces in blank verse and then subsequently cut them up into short staccato lines. ²⁴ The evidence points to the reverse being true.*

Mary Sturgeon's study of Gibson written in 1916 heaped much praise on his experiments and reveals the degree to which he was valued by an academic critic for his capacity to innovate:

The curious structure of the verse is apparent at a glance - the irregular pattern, the extreme variation in the length of the line, the absence of rhyme and the strange metrical

* G.P.Dilla, 'Wilfrid Gibson', *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 26 (1927) 85.

effects. It is a new musical instrument, having little outward resemblance to the grace and dignity of regular forms. Its unfamiliarity may displease the eye and ear at first, but it is not long before we perceive the design which controls its apparent waywardness, and recognize its fitness to express the life that the poet has chosen to depict. For it suggests, as no rhyme or regular measure could, the ruggedness of this existence and the characteristic utterance of its people. No symmetrical verse, with its sense of something complete, precise and clear, could convey such an impression as this - of speech struggling against natural reticence to express the turmoil of thought and emotion in an untrained mind. Mr Gibson has invented a metrical form which admirably produces that effect, without condescending to a crude realism. He has made the worker articulate, supplying just the coherence and lucidity which art demands, but preserving, in this irregular outline, in the plain diction and simple phrasing, an acute sense of reality. ²⁵

Miss Sturgeon's comments offer a tribute to Gibson's style which seemed to her new and unfamiliar, even as late as 1916. She acknowledges its fitness to its purpose, that of expressing the feelings of the otherwise inarticulate worker and she is clearly impressed by Gibson's capacity to create "an acute sense of reality." We know that this was not lightly won but had been Gibson's aim and endeavour since as early as 1903 and was fully achieved by 1910.

For Gibson ordinary folk had their own 'romance' and in piece after piece in *Daily Bread* he gives us the moments of drama in the lives of unremarkable people as though they were more remarkable than anything one might imagine. There is something almost Blakean in his concern to take the furnace worker, the miner, the beggar, the orphan for his subject matter. For Gibson too the commonplace life was touched with the radiance of the created soul as were Blake's chimney-sweeps, charity children, pensioners and nurses. The preliminary epigraph captures that Blakean spirit in its shewing that beyond the mere bread of life and daily labour there is the transforming power of love, and that beyond bitterness and sorrow there is a sense of something to be treasured:

All life moving to one measure -
Daily bread, daily bread -
Bread of life and bread of labour,

Bread of bitterness and sorrow,
Hand-to-mouth and no to-morrow,
Dearth for housemate, death for neighbour ...

"Yet when all the babes are fed,
Love, are there not crumbs to treasure?"

The third volume of *Daily Bread* was completed in 1910 and takes the realism further in that there is less romance, less of the fanciful in these pieces than there was in earlier pieces like 'The Furnace' and 'The Night Shift'. 'Mates', 'Agatha Steel', 'The Operation', 'The Call', 'The Wound', 'Summer - Dawn' and 'Holiday' make up this volume and they are stark items indeed with no concessions to any received idea of either 'poetry' or of 'entertainment' nor yet of 'delight'. It would seem that Gibson has set out to teach, to instruct his reader but not by delighting him. The plainness and directness, the uncompromising grimness and the unrelenting hardship carry the ring of an almost political oratory or harangue that is determined to shew the comfortable world the appalling states of life in which the mass of folk live. And yet, as an anonymous American reviewer noted "they are notably free from the hoarse note of the agitator and the passion of the labour reformer." 26

'Mates' is a very economical telling of a familiar enough pit-village circumstance. A young man, Martin Aynsley, has been in an accident in the mine in which his father and brothers had already lost their lives. Martin was saved by his mate, Nick Dodd. Now Martin is about to be married to Grace Hardy and she tries, with his mother's connivance, to make him give up his pitman's work. In a speech proclaiming his own dignity as a working man Martin makes it plain that this is impossible:

As sure as death. I cannot leave the pit:
My father died, and I must die, a pitman.
You surely wouldn't have me chuck the work
I was born and bred to, and throw over my mates,
The lads I went to school with - lads I've had
Such games and larks with ? Not too many left ...
But all there are went through that night with me:
Before that night, happen I might have left them:
But now, how could I ? Nay, I'll take my chance.

The choice he is being asked to make is between his mate at work and his mate to be, Grace. Nick Dodd's whistle is heard, obtruding into the debate:

He always whistles for me
At Jackson's Corner, and we go to work
Together.

The whistle recalls how Nick had saved his life and in a finely controlled and sustained piece Gibson achieves the expression of the ordinary plain-man's experience:

'Twas Nick alone who dragged me from the death
That overtook my father and my brothers;
He didn't leave me in the lurch. Shall I
Forsake him now, lass? At the first alarm
He sought me, and together we made back
Along the main seam in the pitchy dark
Before the chokedamp, till it gained on us,
And I was overcome and dropped to die,
When Nicholas picked me up and carried me
Half-senseless in his arms - at every step
Stumbling and staggering over dead and dying -
Along the stifling galleries, though he,
Himself, could scarcely struggle against the damp.
He bore me into safety, and kept the spark
Of life in me till we were rescued.

Martin has to be true to both his 'mates' and so he cannot choose between them: playing on the use of the word choose he says "I choose him - And you!" The stage-direction then has him taking her in his arms. Grace has to acquiesce and she does so with resignation. In the pit village, after all, it is the man who earns the daily bread and so the man who calls the tune.

The reader not only has a strong sense given him of the texture of working-class life, of loyalties and responsibilities but by the author's sensitive choice of the plainest language and his handling of the depth of feeling in the miner, he produces a wholehearted sense of support for the labouring man. It is often claimed that when the Tsar Alexander II read Turgenev's short pieces on the Russian peasantry in *Sketches from a*

Hunter's Album he was moved to his great reform of liberating the serfs. In pieces like 'Mates' Gibson has similar capacity to move the hearts of those who do not know labouring life at first hand.

Equally at home in depicting the lives and worries of women, in 'Agatha Steel' Gibson deals with a daughter who comes home again after a failed marriage in which the husband has abused her, spent most of his time "in drink" and finally left her for his mistress. Returning home after years of absence, without any communication at all, before the days of telephones, and being unable to write, she finds her mother has re-married:

AGATHA: You married him -
 And knowing he was never steady ?
ZILLAH: Well,
 Life is a lonely thing without a man,
 And no one caring a wag of the tongue for you.

The lot of women, their suffering and hardship is the subject and we see that the necessity to work hard at daily labour destroys and degrades their good natures. No moral is drawn but the implication is that it is the harsh and unrelenting social world that is responsible for misery, not the human heart in itself. Gibson is no Dostoyevskyan.

In 'The Operation' it is again the plight of a woman that is the subject. After years of physical suffering she discovers that she has cancer, the great taboo disease, and must undergo a surgical operation. There is an equation made between the woman suffering from a clinical condition and also suffering, representatively for the poor at large, from a diseased society:

Folk every day go through
As much and more ...

In its simple homeliness and truthful observation, this undramatically asserts the cankered condition of the world that is the poet's burden.

'Agatha Steel' and 'The Operation' are both set in grim, urban tenement buildings as is 'The Wound' which deals with the subject which

we would nowadays refer to as "wife-battering". The wife of a ship's riveter is visibly physically beaten-up but denies she has been attacked. Her husband is killed at work when, in an onset of remorse for what he has done and which his wife loyally denies, he loses his concentration and falls from the sling or cradle on which he stands high up on the side of the ship to which he is riveting steel plates. The blame for this commonplace family tragedy is not placed on the individuals' natures in any way. The man is not a bully nor is he wicked. The blame is put on the social and economic conditions in which they have to live hard, miserable, depressing and exhausting lives. Far from having ennobling power, as much Victorian assertion claimed, work is seen to degrade and destroy people's good natures.

This appalling consequence of the indignity of labour and the diabolic gospel of work is insisted upon with greater poignancy and compulsion in 'Holiday'. In a tenement block a girl is dying; she is a victim of work:

..... we're always at it, all day long
Year in, year out, until it drives us dizzy

Her hands move in neurotic simulation of her daily task in the brush making factory:

She's tending the machine and slipping in
The brush backs, as we do the livelong day,
Day after day, and every blessed day

Here is the daily round, the common task which furnish nothing but misery in the need to earn daily bread. The daily toil is relentless, except for one day, this day of 'Holiday', which is here recollected as the one happy day of the year when the now dying girl danced all the day:

And last year she was dancing
The livelong day - was dancing in the sun;
And there was no one who could dance with her;
I don't know where she picked up half the steps -
There seemed to be no end to them, as though
She made them up as she went on; they seemed
To come to her as easily as walking,
She danced and danced.

BETTY Or is it Kit and Kate, the twins? For sure
They should be twice too much for you.

LABAN Folk say
That such a bonnie pair was never seen
In the countryside.

BETTY There's just the baby left.
Poor little mite, so you're the one too many!

LABAN Come, lass, enough of teasing: you know well
I was only talking; and I'm ready now
For work.

BETTY The kettle's boiling.

In 'Summer Dawn' Gibson balances the bleakness of the squalid tenement settings by the freer, though nonetheless hard world of nature. Nevertheless the statement remains essentially the same: the poet's concern is not to write poetry, it is to show the age its own face. Gibson proclaims indirectly here what Owen years later asserted as his business: "Above all I am not concerned with poetry."²⁷ Both were escaping from the Tennysonian, Victorian legacy. The horrors of the world in which Gibson and Owen found themselves had no frame of reference in the great poetry of the past and they had to stamp out a language themselves. Gibson in *Daily Bread* was going through a great struggle to find adequate expression for his experience of the modern city and there was small help in the poets whom he had, as a young man, earlier followed. Owen, too, had to overcome his legacy and he came to realize what a gulf separated his experience from the world he found in Tennyson:

Tennyson it seems was always a great child. So should I have
been, but for Beaumont-Hamel²⁸

Quite unlike Owen, of course, and in such different circumstances, Gibson nowhere in *Daily Bread* is impassioned nor is he sensuous. His watch word throughout is simplicity and he lets the 'dramas' speak for themselves as the form naturally insists on doing. The choice of dramatic form was thus a good one for him in that he could be the passive mediator of what he saw. What Gibson does by his use of dramatic presentation is to present a

record of his observations of the social world and to let that speak for itself. There is no employment of that Secondary Imagination that "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates" by which Coleridge distinguished the great poet. Gibson is thus the documentarist that his material needed for its clearest, historical, expression. That was why he became known at the time as "the Millet of poets"; ^{as} he presented the hard life as it was. As Millet celebrated the poor labourer so did Gibson; as Millet was an artist who was bounded by his age and limited in range and imaginative vision so was Gibson. Their art was without imaginative range and power but it had its own distinctive validity and appeal. Neither artist moralizes or preaches but portrays man and his social condition as it is. Gibson's purpose is to depict plainly what he sees. Whilst he understands and sympathizes with his characters each one is presented poised in its own individuality and given with a detachment that the dramatic form serves to enhance. The danger of such an approach to poetry is that it makes the development of original creative expression a much more difficult task.

Maurice Browne, who became Gibson's great champion in America, so enthusiastically received *Daily Bread* in his 1912 article in *Poetry Review* that it seemed impossible to doubt anything but a brilliant future for him:

.....whatever these dramas of Gibson may be, whether they are art or not - and, after all, an opinion is only an opinion - they are admirably complete in themselves, superbly direct and objective, magnificently restrained, and intensely poignant; and since they are on the one hand a new thing and no standard exists whereby to assess them, and since, on the other, they deal convincingly with actuality, they are, therefore, also incommensurably great. It is not difficult to think their form abominable; it is possible perhaps (but, one would imagine, highly difficult) to dislike them immensely, but their force, their virility, and, in the word's exact meaning, their excellence, are above dispute; and it is beyond any reader's power to foretell the scope and magnitude of the influence - and the influence for good - which they will exert on the

future of English poetry, including not the least important part of it, that which Gibson himself has still to write.³⁰

In America reviewers were equally laudatory and they saw at once that Gibson's subject matter was the material of the future before the Futurists began their propaganda. In New York, *The Bookman* reviewer pointed out that "as the world becomes more industrialized, the poets will more and more find their themes in the mines and the shops."³¹ For another reviewer Gibson was the fulfilment of Walt Whitman's prediction of "the coming of a new order of poets - the poets of modern democracy."³² The reviewer of *The Outlook* was able to make comparisons with Hardy and with Wordsworth. Gibson's future looked more assured in America than in England and *The Boston Transcript* took the view that:

there are very few poets living to-day who may be as confident of their future as Mr Gibson and the reason of his sincerity lies in the fact that he possesses the humility of high achievement.³³

Gibson was delighted with the reception and wrote to Browne:

I have just had two ripping notices of *Daily Bread* from Boston and from New York and heard that the Rev, Washington Gladden is giving readings of my work in Colombus, Ohio.³⁴

The sales were excellent, both of the London edition of 1910 and the New York edition of 1912 and so, hardly surprisingly the volume went into a second edition in 1913.

At the same time that *Daily Bread* was thus creating a stir Gibson's play *Womenkind* was being acted by small companies and was finding audiences in various towns in England. It was put on in Australia by the Literary Theatre company in Adelaide; in the United States it was presented in New York City and Chicago:

Womenkind has been played many times at the Neighbourhood Theatre, New York and was produced in Chicago at the Little Theatre by Mr Maurice Browne.³⁵

Where *Daily Bread* had caught attention for its concern with the lives of the wretched in industrial society and thus showed common cause with an

increasingly widespread sense of Christian socialism, *Womenkind* caught attention for its portrayal of woman's revolt and established common cause with the ardent, if minority, sense of feminism in the age. The play caught, as *The Athenaeum* reviewer was quick to point out

that new solidarity among women which coming centuries will recognise as a marked feature of this [century] but which many contemporaries still fail to perceive. ³⁶

Such all round public successes must have provided a very considerable encouragement for Gibson to continue to pursue similar material. He seemed now to have overcome his addiction to chivalric themes and archaic diction. He was embracing the new age in his own way, registering Morrisian concern for the simple worlds of the rural poor and the urban proletariat seen with the humanitarian and reforming eyes of socialist conscience. This art was not to be dilettante, not to be self-regarding, not to be indulgent towards personal 'visions'. It was to be art with purpose and design on the reader or hearer; to open hearts to suffering. It was to be humanitarian and plainly political. As one reviewer of Gibson's work put it:

The Social Conscience is awake, and we know that for us and for our children happiness and more important, well-being are things impossible, so long as one other member of our species suffers from the sins of our social order, which prevent the establishment of the Republic of the Future: we have accepted the gospel of personal responsibility. ³⁷

Gibson had broken entirely new ground with these poems and he had done it with success. His work met with considerable acclaim and *Daily Bread* proved to be so popular that by 1916 five editions had been printed. In his opinion his art had achieved new heights and he wrote to Browne:

To my thinking there is more art in one of these pieces than in the whole of *The Web of Life* and the earlier work put together. ³⁸

He had found a new and very distinctive voice.

Fires (1912)

"Gibson's best book" 33

Fires which came out in three slim volumes in 1912 soon sold out its first edition of 1,000 copies. The second edition, in one volume seems surprisingly to have been somewhat delayed and was not published until 1915 when the war had removed it from the sphere of immediate interest.

The volume marks a very distinctive development of the tone and consciousness established in *Daily Bread*. There was the same rejection of Tennysonian dress, the same presence of a voice that plainly set out to be a poet of the common people of the modern city. Shocked out of his early pastoral and beautiful world of the Northern countryside he had come face to face with the kind of urban squalor and disease that some 90's poets had confronted and that Eliot depicted in his imagistic *Preludes* and in the modern desolations in *Frufrack* and *Portrait of a Lady*. Gibson, quite unlike Eliot, was touched with love and compassion for people and he set about turning his gift for verse into a depiction of their lives, their hardships and their little victories over time and adversity. Gibson recognised his privileged position. He enjoyed a private income and did no regular paid work. His awareness of the gulf that lay between his lot and that of the mass of humanity was suitably given dramatic, or diegetic form. In these 'argument' pieces he confronted his consciousness as a conflict of interests. With *Fires* he had arrived at a new consciousness and could assert with his epigraph his new ideology. "Snug in my easy chair" revealed how conscious he was that his world of imaginative reverie - and he is perhaps here dismissing what he felt to be paltry about some of his earlier efforts - was made possible only by the masses of the anonymous labouring poor. He depends on the heat and warmth which is generated by the coal produced by a sweating miner:

I shut my eyes to heat and light,
And saw, in sudden night,
Crouched in the dripping dark,
With steaming shoulders stark,
The man who hews the coal to feed my fire.

Thus Gibson saw lying beneath the visible and the external world which is the poet's first and most immediate subject, a hidden world, well hidden from the leisured class of the time, of sweated labour that makes sweet life possible. Like Wells he could see the Morlocks below ground who made the sweet life of the ineffectual surface Eloi possible. Honesty became his cardinal concern and the epigraph was, in a way, a declaration by Gibson of his full consciousness of the hard realities of modern life for the dispossessed. No more would he move among the fantasies of Urlyn, of monks, legends or Queens' vigils. Vagueness went and hard-edged definiteness came in. Eighteen out of twenty-one poems in *Fires* have the precision of the definite article in their title: 'The Store', 'The Wife', 'The Machine' and so on. The epigraph provided, then, an article of faith:

Snug in my easy chair,
I stirred the fire to flame.
Fantastically fair
The flickering fancies came,
Born of heart's desire -
Amber woodlands streaming;
Topaz islands dreaming;
Sunshine-spilling wines;
Crystal-lighted caverns
Of Golconda's mines;
Summers, unreturning;
Passion's crater yearning;
Troy, the ever-burning;
Shelley's lustral pyre;
Dragon-eyes unsleeping;
Witches' cauldrons leaping;
Golden galleys sweeping
Out of sea-walled Tyre -
Fancies fugitive and fair
Flashed with singing through the air
Till, dazzled by the drowsy glare,
I shut my eyes to heat and light,
And saw in sudden night,
Crouched in the dripping dark

With steaming shoulders stark,
The man who hews the coal to feed my fire

.He had "fed the heart on Fantasy"; his language as it was demonstrated here had been drawn from "Shelley's lustral pyre". That language was done with. He here abjured it and turned, profitably, to the truths of labour and hardship. *Fires* was in every respect a considerable achievement for its period: it was distinctive, it was assured and it carried an assertive sense of Georgian realism and yet it was also strongly infused by Gibson's distinctively 'fanciful' imaginative capacities. It was a volume which was concerned to portray people, working people of the cities in particular, and as a sort of leitmotiv there was the ever-present treatment of a world far from the city's strife and 'angst' which belonged to an almost forgotten past and was strange and mysterious. Poems like 'The Machine' and 'The Shop' admirably illustrated the 'citified' world, the fallen, insidious world that Melville portrayed by the 'citified' Claggart in *Billy Budd*, while pieces like 'Flannan Isle' and 'Red Fox' illustrated the remote, mysterious world of coast and country far away from "the strange disease of modern life." The poems in this volume presented a specific, exclusive and definitive picture of reality. There was a definiteness conferring the precision of the actual, asserting that these were real scenes drawn from the everyday world that the poet had observed. Just as a photographer records in a picture the existence of something external to himself, not created by him but touched with his own emotion and sensibility so Gibson was doing the same things in these poems. His impulse was to record graphically and in so doing all his language was subordinated to the primary requirement of capturing 'the object as in itself it really is'. Gibson's achievement was remarkable and his originality and influence on his contemporaries must be acknowledged. He

was clearly establishing his own 'realistic revolt' and was a significant forerunner of the Georgian movement of which he became a founder member. For him to capture this world of common life he had to disavow his early prosody and adopt, as Sturgeon's remarks shew (pp.70/71) an anti-prosody.

Gibson's pictorial sense of his enterprise in *Fires* was proclaimed explicitly by his dedication of the volume: "To George Clausen. A Tribute." Clausen was a painter of considerable distinction at this period and his subjects were, like Gibson's, representations which shewed the poetry of rural life and the hardships of the modern industrial world. Both dealt in similar, but in almost Hardy-esque manner with 'the short and simple annals of the poor' that Gray had first begun to speak of in verse. From Gray onwards this subject had proved to be of continuing interest notably in Wordsworth with his impoverished Cumbrian states-man and marginal characters and of course in Crabbe with a host of characters from the Suffolk parishes. Indeed it was common for critics to think of Gibson as a latter-day Crabbe: "he is a modern and a greater Crabbe " wrote R.L. Mégros in his study of this period. ⁴⁰ And Herbert Palmer in his highly idiosyncratic account of post-Victorian poetry takes the same view. ⁴¹ Nowadays few would uphold this elevated view of Gibson but it was clear that at the time of the first world war this capacity for observation, for recording, and his social concern were not common and that he was without peer in this respect. Even Edward Thomas, by no means an enthusiast for Gibson's work and indeed severely critical of much of it, was moved to consider the first poem of the volume, 'The Stone' as prizeworthy when it was first published in *Monro's Poetry Review* during 1912. Monro had chosen a panel of judges to deliberate on the best poem of the year, a rather characteristic piece of Monrovia semi-journalistic circulation-boosting

and popularizing of the poetry boom of those years when the audience was extensive and seemed ever-increasing. The panel of judges included Henry Newbolt, Ernest Rhys, Victor Plarr, Edward Marsh, T.E.Hulme, Monro himself and Edward Thomas; Thomas's view, carefully and delicately discriminating, was as follows:

I like de la Mare's and Davies's best , I admire Sturge Moore's effort. But Gibson's is the most interesting. ⁴²

The verdict of a "decided majority" went in the long run to Rupert Brooke for *Grantchester* and he received the £30 prize. Nonetheless it is easy to see why Thomas found Gibson's piece so distinctive. The narrative tells of a quarryman who is killed at work:

A flash, a shock
A rumbling fall ...
And, broken 'neath the broken rock
A lifeless heap with face of clay
And still as any stone he lay

The request for a carved head-stone to mark the dead man's grave, carved with his name is made by his woman who watches night after night, by candle-light as the sculptor/carver works. At length when the work is done

She breathed his name; and, with a sigh,
Passed slowly through the open door

and that is the end of her. Mysteriously, inexplicably she dies and the poem concludes with the work of the sculptor/carver:

Next night I laboured late, alone,
To cut her name too on the stone.

Such plainness of language excited critical attention: "Not a word of that could be altered were one talking plainest prose", wrote an American reviewer in ecstatic reception. ⁴³ "It is," she went on "the sort of thing which Matthew Arnold had in mind when he praised the line:

This was a work for both; but now, my son,
It is a work for me

as more characteristic of Wordsworth than the reverberating harmonies of the great Ode."

The poem creates a sense of ordinary life touched at all points by mystery, strangeness and sudden, violent death. For many contemporary critics and reviewers the achievement was a remarkable one especially for the vigour and clean-ness of the writing. In the opinion of the same American reviewer:

We forget the poetic phrases which have intervened since Wordsworth's day; we listen to the same poetic strain that told us of Michael, sang to us of Lucy ... in [Gibson] the modern proletariat finds its spokesman. ⁴⁴

Readers were urged to see in Gibson not only the plain powers of Wordsworth but also the powers of conjuring mystery which Coleridge had possessed. This indeed is an observable quality of the much-anthologized piece from *Fires* called 'Flannan Isle':

*Though three men dwell on Flannan Isle
To keep the lamp alight,
As we steered under the lee we caught
No glimmer through the night.*

A passing ship at dawn had brought
The news, and quickly we set sail
To find out what strange thing might ail
The keepers of the deep-sea light.

The winter day broke blue and bright
With glancing sun and glancing spray
While o'er the swell our boat made way,
As gallant as a gull in flight.

But as we neared the lonely Isle
And looked up at the naked height,
And saw the lighthouse towering white
With blinded lantern that all night
Had never shot a spark
Of comfort through the dark,
So ghostly in the cold sunlight
It seemed that we were struck the while
With wonder all too dread for words.
And, as into the tiny creek
We stole, beneath the hanging crag
We saw three queer black ugly birds -
Too big by far in my belief
For cormorant or shag -
Like seamen sitting bolt-upright
Upon a half-tide reef:

But as we neared they plunged from sight
Without a sound or spirt of white.

And still too mazed to speak,
We landed and made fast the boat
And climbed the track in single file,
Each wishing he were safe afloat
On any sea, however far,
So it be far from Flannan Isle:
And still we seemed to climb and climb
As though we'd lost all count of time
And so must climb for evermore;
Yet all too soon we reached the door -
The black sun-blistered lighthouse door
That gaped for us ajar.

As on the threshold for a spell
We paused, we seemed to breathe the smell
Of lime wash and of tar,
Familiar as our daily breath,
As though, 'twere some strange scent of death;
And so yet wondering side by side
We stood a moment still tongue-tied,
And each with black foreboding eyed
The door ere we should fling it wide
To leave the sunlight for the gloom:
Till, plucking courage up, at last
Hard on each other's heels we passed
Into the living-room.

Yet as we crowded through the door
We only saw a table spread
For dinner, meat and cheese and bread,
But all untouched and no one there;
As though when they sat down to eat,
Ere they could even taste,
Alarm had come and they in haste
Had risen and left the bread and meat,
For at the table-head a chair
Lay tumbled on the floor.

We listened, but we only heard
The feeble cheeping of a bird
That starved upon its perch;
And, listening still, without a word
We set about our hopeless search.
We hunted high, we hunted low,
And soon ransacked the empty house:
Then o'er the Island to and fro
We ranged, to listen and to look
In every cranny, cleft or nook
That might have hid a bird or mouse:
But though we searched from shore to shore
We found no sign in any place,
And soon again stood face to face
Before the gaping door,
And stole into the room once more
As frightened children steal.

Ay, though we hunted high and low
And hunted everywhere,
Of the three men's fate we found no trace
Of any kind in any place
But a door ajar and an untouched meal
And an overtoppled chair.

And as we listened in the gloom
Of that forsaken living-room -
A chill clutch on our breath -
We thought how ill-chance came to all
Who kept the Flannan Light,
And how the rock had been the death
Of many a likely lad -
How six had come to a sudden end
And three had gone stark mad,
And one, whom we'd all known as friend,
Had leapt from the lantern one still night
And fallen dead by the lighthouse wall -
And long we thought
On the three we sought,
And on what might yet befall.

Like curs a glance has brought to heel
We listened, flinching there,
And looked and looked on the untouched meal
And the overtoppled chair.

We seemed to stand for an endless while,
Though still no word was said,
Three men alive on Flannan Isle
Who thought on three men dead. ⁴⁵

It is hardly surprising that a poem of this quality has, between 1920 and 1960 been so much anthologized. Gibson's considerable poetic skill is evident in both his inventive power and his control of the narrative, in the control of his cadences and in his sustained deployment of rhyme and rhythm.

The story has all the appearance of being a legendary one and the subject of folk mythology. but the incident on Flannan Isle was an actual occurrence. Hugh MacDiarmid when writing about the islands off the coast of Scotland commented on "the many poems that were evoked by the occurrence at Flannan Isles." ⁴⁶ Gibson, however, in a letter to Dorothy Ratcliffe some time later expressed surprise at MacDiarmid's comment and said that "I have never come across any but my own." ⁴⁷

The Flannan Isles are seven uninhabited isles of the Outer Hebrides (50°16' N; 6°38' W). The northermost isle has a lighthouse from which three keepers disappeared at the end of 1900. Gibson himself may well have first encountered the story in *The Times* report published on December 28th. In about three column inches on page nine , headed "Loss of A Lighthouse Staff" the facts are given:

Intimation has been received by the Northern Lighthouse Board, Edinburgh of the loss of a lighthouse staff of the Flannan Island lighthouse....On Wednesday... it was found that the three men last on duty had disappeared, leaving no trace behind. It is supposed that James Murcat, Thomas Marshall and Donald McArthur were swept away during the storm of last week, either when attempting to save a crane, or when trying to render assistance to some vessel in distress.....No similar incident has ever happened in the history of the Lighthouse Board and it is fortunate that it did not result in disaster to any passing vessel.

Further details about this incident are provided by Francis Thompson in a much more recent account of the Islands:

On 15 December 1900, the steamer *Archer*, bound from Philadelphia to Leith, passed within a few miles of the island group. Though the black masses of the islands were clearly visible in the moonlight, there was no beam from the lantern on Eilean Mor. The skipper of the *Archer* reported his discovery when he made landing at Oban. A message was sent to the Northern Lighthouse Board relief ship, *Hesperus*, which was anchored in Little Loch Roag.....

When the *Hesperus*. reached the Flannans she signalled her arrival by whistle, then by rocket. From her position at the east landing she could see the lighthouse buildings. But there was no flag signal from the flagstaff, nor were there the normal signs of activity which usually accompanied the arrival of the ship. A boat was lowered and a party went shore.....
...In a mounting fit of alarm, the party, which included Joseph Moore, a relief keeper, climbed up the concrete steps and ran up over the inclined path over the brow of the cliff to the lighthouse. There was an uncanny silence which was accentuated when they entered the living-room. The fire was dead. The clock had stopped. On the table lay a meal which had never even been touched. There was cold meat, pickles and a dish of potatoes. An overturned chair lay a silent witness on the floor.....

It will never be known for certain just what happened. One can in these matters come only as close to the truth as the human imagination will allow. But the mystery still remains

unsolved, like a haunting, unexorcised cloud hovering over the Seven Hunters. One cannot visit Eilean Mor, look far-down at the heaving, white-capped waves beneath and not feel that little bit unnerved at something which lies just outside the pale of human knowledge and understanding. ⁴⁸

This was very much the kind of mysterious subject that attracted Coleridge and one can recognise the indebtedness that Gibson had to him, and not only to the spirit of *The Ancient Mariner* but also to the rhythms of *Christabel* and *Kubla Khan*. The use of the eight-syllabled line, with occasional interruptions of its pattern by the dropping of a syllable, provides an excellent strategy of sound pattern for a strange tale since regularity, the delight derived from the ballad measure, is broken abruptly with a feeling of surprise, when a syllable is omitted. The rhyme scheme too aids the sense of the poem's meaning by using rhyme words that occur as couplets chiming together with words of the same rhyme that interrupt later couplets, as

We listened, but we only heard
The feeble cheeping of a bird
That starved upon its perch;
And, listening still, without a word
We set about our hopeless search.

Here the word 'word' both harmonizes with the first couplet and breaks up the second couplet. There is thus both a satisfaction to the ear in the rhyme's chime and a dissonance to the ear in its interruption. The conflict between these two responses of the ear or of the ear of the imagination when the poem is silently read, aids in sustaining the mystery of the narrative. The way in which the poem shifts both in its rhythms and rhymes between variations on traditional forms gives it much of its precipitousness and poetic excitement. The capturing of the Isle itself with its 'towering lighthouse' and its 'hanging crag' is most successful as is the description of the mysteriously empty room with its untouched meal and upturned chair which the visitors found at the lighthouse. There is not one bit of unnecessary matter in the poem and

the narrative is kept tight and provides constant suspense. It cannot be claimed as a 'great poem' as any comparison with Coleridge's work makes clear at once, but it is a very good poem of the ballad type and would not look out of place alongside some of the Border Ballads composed by Gibson's anonymous Border precursors. It is also noticeable that there is nothing of the whimsy that could easily inhabit a piece of this kind when done by a twentieth century poet and which does perhaps mar and limit some of de la Mare's work in this vein such as *The Listeners*.

Gibson shewed equal competence in dealing with the disturbing dimensions of commonplace reality in the little drama called 'The Wife'. This is an ingenious dramatic story which opens with a man and wife sleeping. She wakes from a dream in which her husband has died and sees him sleeping beside her peacefully. She sleeps again, she re-awakes: a bird is at the window "with wings of white". She lets it in and mysteriously and puzzlingly it flies to her husband, circling him three times. Meanwhile moonlight flooding into the room made him seem to be an apparition, all silver and

.....turned to silver his gold hair
And paled like death his ruddy face.

The next morning news is brought of the death of Phoebe Wright in childbirth. The effect upon her husband is enough to make it clear he is her lover and so the unborn child's father; subsequently the wife sees the husband putting flowers on the freshly-dug grave. As an act of love she continues the practice - which obviously has the effect of delighting her husband that someone keeps Phoebe's memory green. Soon the wife dies and at the burial the straying eye of the widowed husband catches sight of the flowers on Phoebe's grave: they are dead. He knows at once that it was his wife who kept sweet and alive the memory of his beloved. Thus is

revealed one of life's little ironies. This strange, Hardy-esque poem is a feelingful expression of that aphorism of Dumas fils that "the chains of marriage are so heavy it takes two to bear them, and sometimes three", though there is nothing of that sort of clever wit in the simple, rural, sad tale. It is a tale notable for its verbal economy; it is a tight, well-constructed narrative and its prevailing tone is that of Wordsworthian seriousness, gravity and simplicity. Gibson's contemporary, Darrell Figgis, noted as remarkable the obviously poetical symbol of the woman's soul in the form of a white bird and he felt that this "gives a memorable beauty to the tale". It was remarkable in particular because, as Figgis acutely observed but without intending it as other than critical, Gibson was "obsessed with the fear of being 'poetical'. A metaphor is suspect long before it reaches the threshold of his house." Without recognising that Gibson had deliberately pruned his style, without recognising the photographic, reproductive, impulse behind his new manner of composition, Figgis made it clear that Gibson did indeed offer "a plain unvarnished tale." ⁴⁹ Others found the whole thing extraordinarily fanciful and that appealed to some whilst to others it did not. Unsurprisingly de la Mare liked it a good deal whilst Robert Frost thought it "the one blot in a good book." ⁵⁰ In writing to de la Mare much later, Gibson said he was delighted that he liked 'The Wife' and that he himself "had always been inclined to think rather well of it." ⁵¹

PAGES 93 and 94 DELETED

PAGE 95 FOLLOWS

Footnotes 52 and 53 also deleted

At this point in 1912 Gibson manifests a clear anger towards a compliant society which whilst it pretends to 'liberal' sympathies knows nothing of the harsh reality which dominates the life of the masses in liberalism's despite. Indeed, as ^{his poem} 'The Machine' says, the truth of social reality is obscured by ignorance:

For people who spend money without stint
And, while they're paying down their liberal gold
Guess little what is bought and what is sold.

"What is sold" is the labour and life of the anonymous worker, slave to the machine, whose life is blighted in every respect by wearying labour; even his love for the sight of nature's fruits, in fruiterers' windows, and his love for learning, glimpsed in booksellers' windows only, are turned into nightmarish experience because the very colours recall his enslavement in the colour print shop. This wretched product of modernity meets a girl from "some far Northern Isle" who comes to town to work:

in a stuffy office all day long
In shiny ledgers, with a splitting head
She added dazzling figures till they danced.

We need to respond here to Gibson's sense of the dreadfulness of life in the modern city; the feeling here that to have been forced out of a

remote northern isle into work in London is to be viewed as a disaster not totally unlike what befalls Wordsworth's figure of Luke in *Michael*. The town as a place of loneliness, hard labour and few rewards is perhaps very much a literary convention from the time of Cowper onwards. Gibson's poem dramatizes this well-established town and country division and reveals that it is only the balm of rural life that can heal the hurt mind of the urban denizen. The young woman's description of the lovely world of northern simplicity and domesticity frees the man's soul from its capture by the machine.

And as she talked he saw the sea-light glint
In her dark eyes - and then the sleek machine
Lost hold on him at last and ceased to print:
And in his eyes there sprang a kindred light
As hand in hand they wandered through the night.

He is saved from destruction by the health of rural sanity and love. This dramatization of a traditional and continuing dilemma of the industrial age has a clarity and simplicity, a directness and power of feeling in it which makes it accessible and comprehensible to those readers that Gibson so earnestly desired, the poor, inarticulate working class.

Similar in its general theme is 'The Shop' which takes as its subject a Cornish family who have moved up to London and find themselves displaced in the vast urban sprawl of the city. The poem contains a beautiful depiction of the rich abundant power of the produce of the country amidst the town's impoverishment when the wife and sick son of the shopkeeper, convalescent in Cornwall, send home to London a box of primroses:

Next night as I went in I caught
A strange fresh smell. The postman had just brought
A precious box from Cornwall, and the shop
Was lit with primroses that lay atop
A Cornish pasty and a pot of cream;
And as with gentle hands the father lifted

The flowers his little son had plucked for him
He stood a moment in a far-off dream,
As though in glad remembrances he drifted
On Western seas, and as his eyes grew dim
He stooped and buried them in deep sweet bloom;
Till, hearing once again the poor child's cough
He served her hurriedly and sent her off
Quite happily with thin hands filled with flowers.
And as I followed to the street the gloom
Was starred with primroses, and many hours
The strange shy flickering surprise
Of that child's keen enchanted eyes
Lit up my heart and brightened my dull room.

A too exclusive attention to 'social poetry', to the urban world which was so much made into his characteristic subject matter of this time, must not be allowed to overshadow what I think is Gibson's equally striking and adept handling of natural themes from observation and from fantasy. He has, throughout, an ability to write about flowers, hollows, woodlands, glens and natural phenomena in relation to feelings that are passionate and steeped in sexuality which call to mind the early D.H. Lawrence. Gibson had met Lawrence in London and had also visited him in Italy while staying at Fiascherino in November 1913. Lawrence, for his part, was deeply fond of Gibson as the following letter witnesses:

I love Gibson still more than Abercrombie - perhaps because I know him better. But I think Gibson is one of the clearest and most lovable personalities that I know. ⁵⁴

Both were contributors to *The English Review* edited by Ford Madox Ford during this period. Lawrence read Gibson's work in *Georgian Poetry* and elsewhere and had much fellow-feeling for him. Indeed one of the most telling pieces in *Fires* on a natural subject, where the idea of killing a fox is interwoven with jealous sexual desire, must surely have been a poem that Lawrence absorbed and which may well have influenced the origin of his famous story *The Fox*. The tale of two girl-friends whose unnatural relationship is broken down by the dynamic effects on the main character, March, by first the fox himself and then the man, Henry Grenfell who, in her imagination, shares the fox's erotic attributes, is implicitly

presented in Gibson's poem of 1912 which pre-dates Lawrence's tale by six years at least:

RED FOX

I hated him... his beard was red...
Red fox, red thief! Ah God, that she -
She with the proud and lifted head
That never stooped to glance at me -
So fair and fancy-free, should wed
A slinking dog-fox such as he!

Was it last night I hated him?
Last night? It seems an age ago ...
At whiles my mind comes over dim
As if God's breath ... yet ever slow
And dull, too dull I ...Limb from limb
Last night I could have torn him, so!

My lonely bed was fire and ice.
I could not sleep. I could not lie.
I shut my hot eyes once or twice...
And saw a red fox slinking by -
A red dog-fox that turned back thrice
To mock me with a merry eye.

And so I rose to pace the floor ...
And ere I knew my clothes were on ...
And as I stood outside the door
Cold in the summer moonlight shone
The gleaming barrel ... and no more
I feared the fox, for fear was gone.

The best of friends, I said must part ...
The best of friends must part, I said;
And like the creaking of a cart
The words went wheeling through my head -
The best of friends ... and in my heart
Red fox already lying dead!

I took the trackway through the wood.
Red fox had sought a woodland den
When she .. when she... But 'twas not good
To think on her too much just then...
The woman must beware, who stood
Between two stark and fearless men.

The pathway took a sudden turn...
And in a trice my steps were stayed.
Before me in the moonlight fern
A young dog-fox and vixen played
With their red cubs beside the burn...
And I stood trembling and afraid.

They frolicked in the warm moonlight -
A scuffling heap of heads and heels...
A rascal rush, a playful bite,
A scuttling brush and frightened squeals ...

A flash of teeth ... a show of fight ...
Then lively as a bunch of eels.

Once more they gambolled in the brake
And tumbled headlong in the stream,
Then scrambled, gasping, out to shake
Their sleek wet furry coats agleam...
I watched them, fearful and awake...
I watched them, hateless and adream.

The dog-fox gave a bark, and then
All ran to him, and full of pride
He took the trackway up the glen,
His family trotting by his side,
The young cubs nosing up the glen
With trailing brushes, sleepy-eyed.

And then it seems I must have slept -
Dropt dead-asleep, dropt dead-outworn.
I wakened as the first gleam crept
Among the fern, and it was morn...
God's eye about their house had kept
Good watch the night her son was born.

That poem of 1912 is, so far as I am aware, never anthologized and is almost totally unknown now. The similarity of its mood, its violence and its intermingling of human with vulpine to Lawrence's tale, written in 1918/19 and published in 1922, cannot pass without remark. To claim it as a direct source would be too crude, but to see it as the kind of striking and very original work that could stimulate an imagination like Lawrence's seems perfectly reasonable. Lawrence not only knew and liked Gibson as a man but regarded him as a fellow-artist and so it is entirely likely that he read Gibson's volumes as they appeared from the press. I believe Lawrence was able to make a response to Gibson's poem of a kind that confirms the poem's quality and power. Certainly Lawrence's story uses precisely the same elements - man, women, fox, sexual power and feeling - as Gibson's poem does. In the light of this it is hard to grasp why Edward Thomas should have found it "unintelligible".

Considerable enthusiasm and interest from reviewers and critics met both the individual volumes of *Fires* as they appeared at one shilling each from Elkin Mathews' press and the subsequent bound volume, elegant

in beige buckram with gilt lettering. The least flattering and most acerbic response was that of Edward Thomas. Without overlooking Gibson's defects Thomas's review articles pointed out what he felt to be the most important development: the casting off of the ornamentation that had falsified Gibson's earlier work and his "forging of a poetic method" which could embrace ordinariness. Thomas reviewed the first volume of *Fires* in March, 1912 and the two subsequent volumes in September, 1912. Whilst he could see what Gibson had achieved Thomas had the acuity of critical vision, lacking in other contemporary critics, to see what weaknesses there were which diminished Gibson's stature.

Ten years ago Mr Gibson was writing plays in which the characters were three kings named Garland, Ario and Ashalorn, and also "sea-voices, wave voices and wind-voices", the scene being "a rock in the midst of the North Sea, whereon the three kings, bound naked by conquering sea-rovers, have been left to perish." ss

From this ironic characterization of Gibson's early work Thomas moved swiftly to place the new work and to be severe on its shortcomings as poetry:

But now he writes very differently. To use the words of a favourable critic of his *Daily Bread* he has "forged a poetic method which is capable of managing, without violence, and with the constant achievement of beauty, the every-day laborious existence of those who are engaged in common trades.".....
.....Mr Gibson himself hardly ever intervenes. If he seeks poetry, he expects life to bring it to him.....In his way of telling a story things seem almost poetical intrusions. At the end of the book we have the feeling that, after all, he has merely been embellishing what would have been far more effective as pieces of rough prose, extracts from a diary, or even a newspaper. The verse has added nothing except unreality perhaps, not even brevity. The attempt may be interesting when it has travelled farther; at present it is disappointing. ss

One must remember that Thomas was writing as the paid reviewer of a popular daily newspaper and also that he was an aspiring writer who had as yet published no poetry at all. Thomas wrote that *Fires* Books II and III contained "very solid poetry" but he felt that whilst the stories were interesting Gibson's use of the language was inept: "Not once,"

wrote Thomas, "does he relieve me from the state of wondering when the words are going to be significant." This is trenchant, incisive criticism, though Thomas does seem often to be deliberately deaf to Gibson's virtues. His finding 'The Hare' and 'Red Fox', "unintelligible" seems to me perverse and wilful in its desire to be dismissive. On the other hand if it is a genuine judgement it is surely sadly mistaken. Thomas is, I believe, unduly harsh in his strictures on Gibson's qualities.

Another critic, Martin Armstrong was much more positive. He agreed that Gibson's work was mature by 1912 and noted that

his poetry is full of a deep, simple humanity. His country-people seem, in their simplicity, embodiments of the moors and hills on which they live; there is the atmosphere of a great tradition about them. ^{ss}

Armstrong saw none of the weaknesses and inadequacies that Thomas had exposed and he bears striking testimony to Gibson's power to move the reader:

His men and women acquire a deeper pathos and a maturer humanity in these larger settings and the settings themselves - some of them descriptions of hill cottages or of moors at night or under blinding snowstorms - remain in the mind with the vividness of an actual experience; for this is the sort of thing which Gibson can do admirably. ^{ss}

Armstrong, being a fellow Northumbrian, knew the territory Gibson described here at first hand. American readers concurred with Armstrong's view and the volume did very well there. According to one academic critic and scholar "many readers consider *Fires* to be Mr Gibson's greatest achievement." ^{ss} It was hardly surprising that Americans welcomed and applauded his work. In his concern with social oppression and his feeling for the wretched of the earth Gibson spoke with the very accent of American democracy. His work was about the ordinary man and it could be read by the ordinary man. The fanciful poet of Arthurian legend that he had once aspired to be had entirely disappeared. In its place stood a

modern realist, a poet of common life. Gibson had brought into poetry the accent of common life and the keen response to his work was as much moral as it was literary.

Gibson's transformation into the poet of the urban and rural poor was to make him a writer of international consequence and significance. *Fires* had established him before the reading public as an outstanding, modern poet. Henry Newbolt, looking back at Gibson's early career from 1927, remarked, perceptively and correctly, that "Gibson's powers were fully developed by 1912".⁶¹ The two years between 1910 and 1912 had brought his work before a wider public and he was on the brink of extensive recognition. He would never again appear to have so much promise.

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

1. Maurice Browne, 'The Poetry of W. W. Gibson', *Poetry Review*, 1, (January, 1912) 14-18.
2. The Prelude to *Daily Bread*.
3. Yeats' Preface to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936) p. xi
4. Gibson's stay in Glasgow is mentioned in *The Georgian Revolt* by R. H. Ross. (London, 1967) Mr Michael Gibson confirmed that it had taken place in a letter to the present Author but he was unable to give any further details about the stay.
5. *ibid* p.50
6. John Stevenson, *British Society 1914-1945* (London, 1984) pp. 40-41
7. Reverend John Holmes, 'Wilfrid Wilson Gibson: Poet of Tenement and Trench' *The Survey*, 37 (1917) 409-410.
8. See footnote 4. This quotation is the footnote to p.50.
9. M.B. 23.1.07.
10. M.B. February (no date) 1907.
11. M.B. 12.5.07.
12. A letter to Lascelles Abercrombie 13.7.10. The Berg Collection, New York Public Library.
13. Graham Martin, 'English Poetry in 1912', Open University Publication The course in Twentieth Century Poetry, 1975, p.31.
14. see footnote 4, (R.H.Ross, *The Georgian Revolt*) p.114.
15. P.W. 4.1.24.
16. L. Thompson, *Robert Frost* (London, 1964) p. 439.
17. M.B. 12.12.10.
18. see footnote 1: this extract from a letter of Gibson's to Browne was quoted in this article.
19. see footnote 7.
20. *ibid*.
21. M.B. 30.8.10.
22. see footnote 1. (Maurice Browne, 'The Poetry of W.W.Gibson') 16.
23. Darrell Figgis 'Some Recent Poetry' *The Nineteenth Century*, 75 (1914) p. 186 et seq.
24. *ibid*.
25. M. C. Sturgeon, *Contemporary English Poetry* (London, 1916) pp. 87-107.
26. From *The Outlook*, New York, 1911. This was quoted on the paper cover of *Fires* when it was published in 1912.
27. From the preface to Wilfred Owen's *Collected Poems*, edited by C. Day Lewis (London, 1963) p.31.
28. A letter from Wilfred Owen to his mother. Letter 538 in *Wilfred Owen: Collected Letters*, edited by Harold Owen and John Bell (London, 1967).
29. G. P. Dilla, 'Wilfrid Gibson', *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 26 (1927) 24.
30. see footnote 1.
31. *The Bookman*, New York, March 1912.
32. *The Twentieth Century*, New York, 1910.
33. *The Boston Transcript*, 28th July, 1910.
34. M.B. 12.3.12.
35. G.P.Dilla, 'The Development of Wilfrid Wilson Gibson's Poetic Art', *Sewanee Review*, 30 (1922) 45.
36. *ibid*.
37. see footnote 1 (Maurice Browne, 'The Poetry of W.W.Gibson') 17.
38. M.B. 30.3.12.

39. Herbert Palmer, *Post-Victorian Poetry* (London, 1938) pp. 138-9.
40. R. L. Mægros, *Modern English Poetry 1882-1932* (London, 1933) p. 229.
41. see footnote 39.
42. William Cooke, *Edward Thomas: A Critical Biography* (London, 1970) pp. 65-66.
43. Vida D. Scudder, 'Masefield and Gibson: A Renaissance in Social Poetry', *The Survey* 31 (March, 1914) 707-709.
44. *ibid.*
45. The text used here follows that of the *Collected Poems*, first published in 1925. The punctuation differs in many places from other editions as Gibson revised the poems carefully for inclusion in this volume.
46. Hugh MacDiarmid *The Islands of Scotland, Hebrides, Orkneys and Shetlands*. (London, 1939) p. 56.
47. D. U. R. 2.3.44.
48. Francis Thompson, *St Kilda and Other Scottish Islands* (London, 1963) pp. 169-170.
49. see footnote 23.
50. W. de la M. 10.7.22.
51. *ibid.*

FOOTNOTES 52 and 53 DELETED

54. Boulton and Zytaruk (ed.), *Collected Letters of D.H. Lawrence*, Volume II (Cambridge, 1982) p. 119-120.
55. *The London Daily News* Edward Thomas, 'The Red Book' 9.3.12.
56. *ibid.*
57. *ibid.*, 5.9.12.
58. Martin Armstrong, 'Recent English Poetry' *Fortnightly Review* (New Series) 95 (1914) 498-512.
59. *ibid.*
60. G.P. Dilla, 'The Development of Wilfrid Wilson Gibson's Poetic Art', *Sewanee Review*, 30 (1922) 45.
61. Henry Newbolt, *New Paths on Helicon*, (London, 1927) p. 381.

CHAPTER THREE

1912-1915

In 1912 I went to live in London: but when I married, in 1913, I settled again in the country this time in the West of England.'

1912 has some claim to be Gibson's *annus mirabilis*. *Daily Bread* had established his reputation on both sides of the Atlantic but *Fires* enhanced it even further so that in 1912 he received attention from the critics and the public the like of which he had not before experienced. It was the year, too, that he left his provincial home for good and went to join those with whose names he is now forever linked in literary history. With nine volumes of verse and a volume of verse plays to his credit Gibson now had something as solid as a name and a reputation with which to launch his career as a poet of international repute. From the quiet backwater of Hexham and the wide Northumberland countryside he plunged into the centre of pre-war metropolitan literary life. From a world where few shared his interests he went in 1912 to London to be accounted a poet and an equal by Marsh, Brooke, Abercrombie, Middleton Murry and Lawrence. In 1907 he had written from Hexham:

I have so few friends who are interested.²

and on another occasion:

I am so unaccustomed to having my work taken seriously. Most of my friends look upon my versifying as a not-unamiable weakness on my part.³

But from the time he stepped from the train at King's Cross Station in 1912 he was to be among people who were very interested and who took literary work very seriously.

His first contact in London was with John Middleton Murry and Katherine Mansfield. He had been sending poems in to Murry's journal *Rhythm* and had received much encouragement. When he decided to go to London it was Murry he asked to help him. Murry sought out lodgings for him and it was Katherine Mansfield who met him from the train. Together they showed him as much of the town as a golden sovereign could buy, and introduced him to Edward Marsh. It was Murry who subsequently gave an amusing and informative account of Gibson's arrival;

.....Wilfrid Gibsonasked us to find a cheap room for him:....Then we discovered that that particular house in Guilford Street was disreputable, and hunted for another. We found it just in time, for Wilfrid was on his way. We were, indeed still negotiating with the landlord, when Wilfrid's train was due at King's Cross. So Katherine jumped into a taxi in time to catch him on the platform, and take him to the room where I was waiting with the garrulous high-Victorian landlord. When we gathered in his room to clinch the agreement, his remark was memorable: 'You wonder to see so many photographs of the same woman in my room? She was my wife - a dipsomaniac, you know.' Then we took Wilfrid off to our flat in the Gray's Inn Road for tea. Afterwards, discovering that I had a whole golden sovereign in my pocket, I proposed a taxi-ride all over Hampstead and Highgate, to show Wilfrid the haunts of the poets. There was precious little of my sovereign left at the end. It must have given Wilfrid a false idea of our affluence.....We quickly introduced Wilfrid to Eddieand Eddie took to him as naturally as we had done, for his singular integrity ⁴.

Marsh soon introduced Gibson to Rupert Brooke and others and so he stepped at once into the charmed circle of the gilded youth of pre-war literary and artistically fashionable London. Soon the friendship with Brooke, a joy to them both, was rapidly developing and it was to have the most far-reaching importance both socially and financially. The first occasion of their meeting is recounted by Brooke's biographer:

On arrival at Raymond Buildings he [Brooke] found Marsh wanting to take him out again. The wood-yard at King's Cross was ablaze. They ran out and hailed a cab, and on the way picked up Wilfrid Gibson, the young poet from the north on a first visit to London. An immense throng had gathered at the fire, and so as to prevent themselves from being jostled apart in the crush, the three of them linked hands, swaying in the press of people with a great light wagging across their faces. It was Brooke's first meeting with one of the three poets who became his heirs.⁵

Four years

later, when Brooke was dead, Gibson was to publish a poem *To Edward Marsh* which recollected their first meeting:

TO EDWARD MARSH

(In Memory of Rupert Brooke)

The night we saw the stacks of timber blaze
To terrible golden fury, young and strong
He watched between us with dream-dazzled gaze
Aflame and burning like a god of song,
As we together stood against the throng
Drawn from the midnight of the city ways.

To-night the world about us is ablaze
And he is dead, is dead....Yet, young and strong,
He watches with us still with deathless gaze
Aflame and burning like a god of song,
As we together stand against the throng
Drawn from the bottomless midnight of hell's ways.

Marsh's flat at Raymond Buildings was the London base for Brooke and all his associates. Soon Gibson and Marsh were on very friendly terms indeed: "my dear Eddie" became the customary form of address in letters and the tone became very affable and eager. Marsh was obviously very welcoming and generous to young Gibson and treated him with some style in the manner of a generous patron. Meals, theatrical outings, use of his flat, money, contacts and introductions were all at various times supplied by Marsh. In August 1912 Gibson wrote to Marsh from 41 Doughty St accepting a dinner invitation;⁶ ten days later he went to see *Hindle Wakes* with Marsh.⁷ In October he was "deeply grateful for your thought of me."⁸ Towards the end of the year he wrote to Marsh of his money troubles:

I have just heard two days ago that my prospective income of £90 a year has already dwindled to £20 a year! I must try and get a bit more reviewing.⁹

He went on to add that he had been offered a small income supplement by the offer of a job sub-editing *Rhythm* at £1 a week.

By March 1913 he wrote to Marsh in a thankful manner of "the discipline of a regular job"¹⁰ and it is pretty clear from this letter that Marsh has fixed for him some permanent employment. In fact Marsh had

provided Murry with the pound note with which to pay Gibson each week. Gibson did not know this, until twenty years later.

Gibson's early period of life in London was not entirely trouble-free and rose-strewn. Not only did he have to manage on a very modest income but also he appears to have suffered quite a bit at the time from severe pain; he was "threatened with erysipelas" and had neck trouble: "my neck has been playing the devil again" and he said that his illness was accounted for by the medical practitioner he consulted as being due to "inadequate feeding". He went on to say that he hoped "things will look up as far as money and sales of books are concerned".¹¹ Clearly, too, from this letter, Marsh had offered him the opportunity to move into his own rooms at Raymond Buildings at Marsh's expense. This offer was not taken up but very soon, by late November, he wrote to Marsh notifying a change of address - a momentous one for him. His postcard of 9th November 1912 reads simply "change of address: 35 Devonshire Street." He had taken a room at The Poetry Bookshop, which might seem the perfect address for the aspiring writer. The letter of Henri Gaudier-Brzeska of 14th November 1912 to his mistress Sophie gives a good sense of what Gibson's simple lodging was like:

I went with Marsh to see Gibson - he isn't at all the sort of chap I thought he was, but much more sympathetic. All the poets have joined together to hire a big house near the British Museum, where they live and work, and have underneath it a shop where they sell poetry by the pound and talk to the intellectuals. Some of them have huge, vast rooms, while those like Gibson have only a tiny hole. He is boxed in a room, over the door of which is written 'In case of fire, access to the roof through this room'. I have asked him to come and see me some day, so that I can see what sort of fellow he is. Marsh thinks he is very talented.¹²

Gibson's lodgings were described also by another visitor, the American cleric J.H.Holmes, as "in a dingy tenement building ... three flights up ... in a dirty slum street, in the far east end of London."¹³ As a stranger to London, Holmes confuses East Bloomsbury with the East End.



The Poetry Bookshop, 35 Devonshire Street, Theobald's Road,
London, W.C. (Drawing by Joanna C. Webb based on con-
temporary engravings)

W.W. GIBSON'S LODGING (1912) WAS IN THE ATTIC

The correspondence with Marsh gives us a good idea of the kind of vitality and excitement which belonged to metropolitan literary life and in which Gibson now was able to share. From being a lonely poet on the fringe of everything he was now a writer amidst his peers at the centre of activity. Years later Gibson was to say:

In Hexham there was no-one to talk to - in London it was all talk. I had to get away.¹⁴

"Perhaps we may see you at Hulme's"¹⁵ he wrote in October 1912, and in the same month: "Last night I found an urgent telegram from Brooke and I am going to Cambridge tomorrow."¹⁶ Two days later this was followed by a postcard from Grantchester: "I am glad to realize one of my dreams at last by seeing a poet at work. I have so often wondered how it was done."¹⁷ Further comments suggest that he was somewhat amazed at what appeared to be Brooke's less than romantic methods of composition which suggest, though Gibson did not say so, more the journalist than the 'vates' that Gibson obviously, romantically, had anticipated. Brooke nonetheless remained one of his favourite writers. Indeed as a recent writer has noted:

Gibson shared his [Brooke's] aim of writing more realistically, of breaking through the veil of dreamy second-hand romanticism that was characteristic of so many of their immediate poetic predecessors.¹⁸

Brooke had established a reputation as a 'realist'* with his *Channel Crossing* and his *Menelaus and Helen* poems, in which vomit and wrinkled old age had been presented, to the disgust of many who thought poetry should be 'beautiful'. The friendship between the two poets flourished: "Rupert telephoned me ... says Masfield wants me to go for a weekend", so not only Brooke but Masfield too was interested in Gibson. Masfield was a poet Gibson admired and it gladdened him to think that he was admired in return. So too with Abercrombie and Davies:

* "...the first concern was for truth to life, the quality which, for want of a more precise term, one is compelled to call realism." Ross, *The Georgian Revolt* (London, 1967) p.47.

Four poets whose work interests me most, Abercrombie, Masfield, Brooke and Davies think well of me.¹⁹

And not only was Gibson mixing with poets themselves but with those who were their friends: "I dined with Geoffrey Keynes and Catherine Cox the other night " and "I am off to Trevelyan's for Sunday." Geoffrey Keynes, doctor, Cambridge friend of Brooke - and later Grand Old Man renowned for his work on Blake - Catherine Cox, Brooke's much spoken-of girl friend and R.C.Trevelyan, scion of the Northumbrian landowners and brother of G.M.Trevelyan, would represent an illustrious company for the very starry-eyed young man that Gibson presents himself as in his correspondence.

Maurice Browne, Gibson's former correspondent and publisher, who had brought out Gibson's volumes for the Samurai Press, was also a periodic London acquaintance at this time. Browne had already begun to establish himself as a poet and 'man of the theatre' in America and was to be a very influential force in the American Little Theatre movement. During 1912 he had Gibson's plays *The Ferry* and *Womenkind* performed in New York. On one of his visits to London Browne fell easily into the company of the literati:

After the visit to the Russian Ballet Miss van Volkenburg, my sister, Monro, Gibson and myself adjourned to the Poetry Bookshop where in the old Georgian house in the murderous slum, during the next hour, intellectual and near-intellectual London gathered.²⁰

In his roll-call of the company of the elect he numbered Gibson:

Granville Barker, Henry Ainley, Lillah McCarthy, Basil Dean, ...Harold Monro...Wilfrid Gibson: in fact all the loveliest people in London: that is to say in the world before the war.²¹

Though Gibson was now moving in very elect circles his personal circumstances were indeed humble. He was in receipt of a small allowance and he continued to live in very modest lodgings.

In late 1912 and in 1913 Gibson visited Abercrombie too and wrote to Marsh from 'The Gallows', Abercrombie's house in Gloucestershire, very excitedly that "I sleep in a black rafted room under the thatch". He was deeply attracted to the remote and beautiful area of Dymock and was soon to go and live there. Abercrombie had been at school at Malvern and knew the country well and loved it. Also the leading light for many of the younger poets, like Gibson, was Masfield who came himself from Ledbury, a lovely market town close by. Before very long this quiet countryside of Dymock became a sort of poet's haven and it was there that Gibson was to set up his first home with his bride. Eventually Brooke too was to join them in Gloucestershire but at this point he left for his tour of America and on the night before his departure Marsh gave a dinner party for him on the 22nd May 1913 which Gibson attended together with Geoffrey Keynes and Middleton Murry.

When Gibson went to the Poetry Bookshop, he met a young girl from Dublin, Geraldine Townshend who was a secretary to Harold Monro. The first meeting is recounted in the poem 'The Stair' where he tells how "on a flight of London stairs" he first met Miss Townshend:

THE STAIR

Dear, when you climbed the icy Matterhorn,
Or braved the crouching green-eyed jungle-night -
With heart exultant in the sheer white light
Of the snow-peak or cowering forlorn
In the old Indian darkness terror-torn,
Had you no inkling on that crystal height,
Or in the shuddering gloom, how on a flight
Of London stairs we'd meet one winter's morn?

And when we met, dear, did you realise
That as I waited, watching you descend,
Glad in the sunlight of your eyes and hair,
And you the first time looked into my eyes,
Your wanderings were done, and on that stair
I too, O Love, had reached the journey's end?

This was the journey's end of a lovers' meeting and Geraldine Townshend shortly became Mrs Gibson. In October 1913 he wrote to Marsh from 'The

Gallows', without earlier mentioning the girl's name at all: "I wonder if it'll be news to you that I'm betrothed to Geraldine Townshend."²² It was obviously a whirl-wind courtship and the announcement implies that surprise will be in order as the whole thing was startlingly sudden. He goes on: "Gerald was here (at 'The Gallows') for the weekend and we're already looking out for a cottage." Gibson's happiness is full and unforced; it speaks for itself:

Gerald and I have everything in common. O Eddy I more happy
that I can tell you [sic]
with love
yours
Wilfrid 23

By December he and Geraldine had travelled to Dublin, her home and had been married. On December 11th he wrote to Marsh:

Everything went off perfectly at Dublin - and O Eddy I am so
happy
Thine
W 24

The rather more experienced and vigorous D.H. Lawrence was, characteristically, more amused. In his letter to Marsh of 29th October 1913 he says:

I must write to Gibson. What an absolutely perfect husband he should make! I think I remember seeing Miss Townsend[sic] in the Poetry Bookshop - rather lovable and still, one of those women that make a perfect background. They ought to be happy as birds in a quiet wood. But probably I have got hold of quite the wrong woman and that Miss Townsend is a Walküre. 'Twould be a pity.²⁵

In fact Miss Townshend came from a comfortable middle-class Irish family from Dublin where her father, Charles Uniacke Townshend was a land agent. She was an adventurous woman who had travelled abroad including a visit to Switzerland where she had climbed the Matterhorn. A person of considerable independence, she had attended Newnham College, Cambridge for three years though she did not graduate as in those days women at Cambridge University were not awarded degrees at all. When Gibson met her she was earning her living as a secretary. Edward Marsh described her as "very intelligent and as good as gold." He said she was "a supreme housekeeper" and "a very nice woman." She and Gibson, he said, were "flawlessly happy" though he noted that Geraldine, in his view, was "without physical charm." *

At the same time Gibson's literary affairs seemed to be prospering too and the future looked as though it held many bright promises. His poem 'Flannan Isle' was to be published again in Quiller-Couch's

* C. Hassall, *Edward Marsh* (London, 1959) p.268.

Oxford Book of Victorian Verse, an excellent shop-window for him. Then there was the prosperity of his dramatic efforts: "I have achieved the giddiest heights - the Halls!" he writes with a tongue-in-cheek mockery of the slightly vulgar world of actual theatrical production which he clearly did not much envisage when he wrote his 'plays':

The Scottish Players are to run *Womenkind* [1910] for a week at the Glasgow Alhambra in December. Last year *Mates* [out of *Daily Bread*] was produced in Glasgow by the Beltane Society. ²⁶

The period since his arrival in London had been exceptional - he was now "one of the most popular and highly praised versifiers on either side of the Atlantic".²⁷ Furthermore, as Robert Frost's biographer claims "there was competition between Frost and Gibson for the epithet 'Poet of the People'".²⁸

In January he went up to Glasgow to see the production and wrote to Marsh saying "*Womenkind* went wonderfully well and was seen by some 2000 people during the week."²⁹ A week or so later he writes to correct his erroneous figure of attendance and put a much more attractive face on the matter:

The Hall holds 1400two performances a night.... and matinees Wednesday and Saturday 14 performances in all19,600 people in all! ³⁰

At this time he was working on *Bloodybush Edge* and by the end of April 1912 had finished the third draft and is proud to use the adjective 'Georgian' in praise of it:

I don't know about its being poetry but it's Georgian^{*} at all events. ³¹

He doesn't tell us precisely what he thought that might mean; it is certainly for him a term of credit and worthiness though; it is the banner and slogan of the progressive and reformed. Arrangements with Abercrombie had gone ahead too for the new Georgian magazine, *New Numbers* projected for 1913: "*New Numbers* is on the stocks" and circulars are to be sent out by Marsh who was asked "will you stand the stamps as we're so

* See appendix for discussion of the term Georgian.

hard up?"! Ready cash seems to have been a perennial problem - Gibson even saying on one occasion that he's sending a post card (&d stamp) because he and Brooke couldn't manage a ld stamp between them for a letter! Nevertheless rail journeys seem to have been undertaken quite readily and in the period between 1st November and his marriage he spent about four weeks in Italy, near Florence where he met Lawrence:

The other day, suddenly descended upon us Lascelles Abercrombie and W.W.Gibson and Trevelyan and a man called Waterfield. We were at a peasant wedding at a house on the bay, dressed in our best clothes in honour of the bride, and having an awfully good time: Gibson is a really lovable fellow - so is Trevelyan - and Abercrombie one of the sharpest men I have ever met. But it was so queer, to leave the feast and descend into the thin atmosphere of a little group of cultured Englishman[sic] ³²

From Flascherino Gibson wrote a post-card to Marsh:

Dear Marsh

I'm too much out of breath to say any more - but it's horrible that you're not coming for Christmas. Here we are

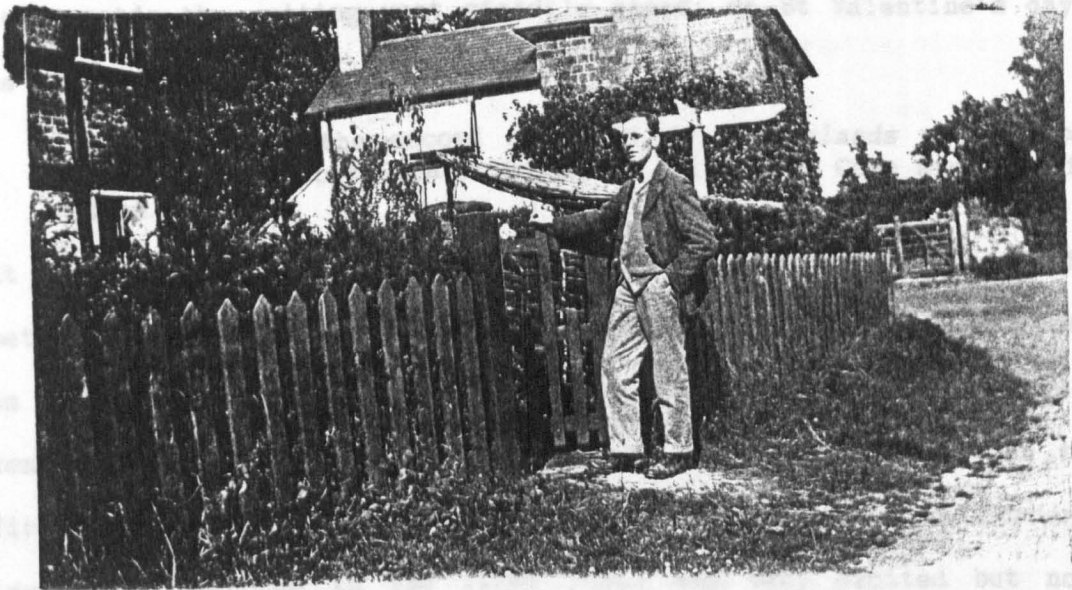
After his own signature, Wilfrid, there followed all the others: Lascelles A., R.C.Trevelyan, Catherine Abercrombie, D.H.Lawrence and, when the ink-pen ran out, finally, in pencil, Freda Lawrence.³³

By January 21st 1914 Gibson and his wife had found a cottage at Greenway, near Ledbury , not far from the Abercrombie home 'The Gallows'. The house was called 'The Old Nailshop' and it is, Gibson said, "a tiny cottage and we live here very simply." ³⁴ A rural idyll had begun and they were now far away from the literary jealousies that had begun to flare up in connection with Monro. On an undated postcard to Marsh, sent at the end of October 1913, Gibson had written regarding Marsh's query about his accommodation: "I don't want to go to the Poetry Bookshop"³⁵ and soon afterwards he wrote astonishingly forcefully and seemingly with strong provocation:

Monro is a swine. He's shewn himself up in his true colours about *New Numbers*. He even went so far as to suggest to Gerald that I had "got hold of her" for the sake of using her experience with *Poetry and Drama* [Monro's journal] against him. Isn't he an incredible cur? However I wrote to him and told him



THE OLD NAILSHOP, GREENWAY, DYMOCK, GLOUCESTERSHIRE



W.W.G. AT THE OLD NAILSHOP, DYMOCK C. 1914-15



MRS GIBSON AND W.W.G., THE OLD NAILSHOP C. 1914-15.

precisely what I thought of him in general and in particular:
and he's had the grace to apologize to Gerald.³⁶

We learn that when Marsh had visited Geraldine in the Poetry Bookshop she steered him quickly off the subject of *New Numbers* in an embarrassed way as "Monro's female was in the shop." [Alida Klementaski, who subsequently became Mrs Monro] Relations between Gibson and Monro were never really repaired and Monro was distinctly cold towards Gibson in his subsequent critical appraisal, as in *Some Contemporary Poets*.¹³²

Far away from this sort of atmosphere in the Herefordshire countryside the writing went steadily ahead: on St Valentine's day 1914 he wrote to Marsh:

Just finished the second draft of my *Borderlands* poem *Hoops*.
Queer stuff - but Gerald thinks it all right. Come and hear it
soon.³⁷

At this stage Gibson appears from his correspondence to be divided between work on his own poems, subsequently to be published in September as *Thoroughfares* and *Borderlands*, about which he does not glow with confidence and the work on *New Numbers*. Gibson's contribution to the first issue was *Bloodybush Edge* which later appeared in *Borderlands*. Lawrence's response to the first issue was very excited but not all approving:

I don't care for Lascelles in *New Numbers*, Wilfrid is jolly
good.³⁸

Part of the problem with the publication of *New Numbers* was clearly the gathering of the material. Gibson himself was producing plentifully but there is evidence to suggest that Brooke was in fact - despite Gibson's early elation about watching a poet at work - a very tardy supplier of poems. At this time Brooke was doing a lot of travelling and had a busy social life. References to Brooke in Gibson's correspondence give the impression that he was far from being single-minded about his work.

For the projected second volume Gibson complains "we have only

one page [of Rupert] so far."³⁹ and soon afterwards, "I think you must let us have all he sends you if he's to make an adequate show in the next numbers and earn his share of the profits." ⁴⁰ By the first of April 1914 the first volume was doing very well and went into a second edition; the reception by the reviewers seems to have been mixed according to Gibson's references. The distinguished Professor of English, C.H. Herford had reviewed it for the *Manchester Guardian*: "a very long (but very Professorial) review."⁴¹ J.C. Squire on the other hand has made himself very unpopular by his remarks in *The New Weekly*: "I haven't seen *The New Weekly*" wrote Gibson, "but we thought Squire's remarks sheer insolence. That thing [i.e. Squire] patronising Lascelles." ⁴² In an earlier letter Gibson in his new role as magazine editor has the energy and confidence to lash out at a fellow editor, again J.C. Squire:

Squire must have become infected with that deadly editorial disease Funk which accounts for the dullness of the whole British Press. Every editor says " I like such and such a thing but the public wouldn't stand for it" when all the time the public is surfeited with the stuff the editors think it likes: and is longing for something more heady.⁴³

About this there is a bit of the kind of nip and attack that Lawrence could do so well himself; it is not a marked characteristic of Gibson's style and manner, though as a matter of fact he can be quite pointed from time to time about his fellow writers, especially de la Mare with whom he was later to have a very close friendship: "de la Mare's is a slight and uncertain gift" and "when he [de la Mare] writes a poem it is the rarest essence of poetry - but he usually misses." ⁴⁴

At this time Gibson and de la Mare did not get on at all well and he knew this. He wrote to de la Mare: "I am aware that you are not in sympathy with my own work" but he felt that by 1915 de la Mare's was very acceptable poetic company. "For my part", he somewhat toadily went on to

say, "I would be hugely proud to appear in your company"⁴⁵. Later, during the war, Gibson and de la Mare were to become much closer.

Lawrence's response to the second volume of *New Numbers* was disappointing

I can't write to Wilfrid ... I have never seen him to a worse advantage than in this⁴⁶

Lawrence had admired Gibson till then and was a keen reader of his work..The poems he so disliked were 'The Greeting', 'On Hampstead Heath', 'The Ice', 'The Gorse', 'The Tram' and 'A Catch for Singing'.

Gibson was in a buoyant mood at this time and not without reason.. He was at the peak of his career so far, he was being published regularly, he had many friends and was newly married. Georgian poetry was flourishing, it seemed. The windows had been opened and the stale air of late Victorian closed and shuttered rooms like those of Tennyson's *Mariana* , *Locksley Hall* and *Tithonus*, was blown away. The healthy vigour, as it seemed, of the new open-air, rural, down to earth anti-rhetorical Georgianism had put the Victorian age to flight. Not only for Gibson but for all of those contributing to *New Numbers* and the Poetry Bookshop's *Georgian Poetry* it must have seemed the blissful dawn of a new age in English Poetry. Indeed so successful was *Georgian Poetry* that even those who saw themselves as modernists of a different order - Pound, Eliot and Hulme - planned a post-Georgian anthology for those who were left out of *Georgian Poetry*. To Gibson and Abercrombie, who were the nucleus of the movement, it must have seemed a remarkable moment as Dymock their new-found spiritual home, became the destination of others too. In March 1914 Gibson announced that Frost had arrived; by the end of April "Thomas [Edward Thomas] has taken lodgings near him for a week." By August 1914 "the Frosts (six of them!) are going to live with the Abercrombies."⁴⁷ Rupert Brooke was there to stay with Gibson in July and

appears to have made a favourable impression all round; particularly striking is Gibson's remark "he has grown up!" suggesting that Brooke had seemed earlier to be very immature.⁴⁸ In August 1914 Dymock must have seemed to be the perfect place for a poet to be. In what is one of his last prose pieces Edward Thomas recorded exactly what it meant to him:

It was a part of the country I had never known before, ... But now I was here for the third time since the year began... Here I had the consummation of Midsummer, the weather radiant and fresh, yet hot and rainless, the white and the pink wild roses, the growing bracken, the last and best of the songs, blackbird's, blackcap's. Now it was August, and again no rain fell for many days; the harvest was a good one, and after standing long in the sun it was gathered in and put in ricks in the sun, to the contentment of men and rooks. All day the rooks in the wheat-fields were cawing a deep sweet caw, in alternating choirs or all together,...

Three meadows away lived a friend, and once or twice or three times a day I used to cross the meadows, the gate, and the two stiles ... There, at another stile, the path ceased ... The little house of whitened bricks and black timbers lay a few yards up the road ...

How easy it was to spend a morning or afternoon in walking over to this house, stopping to talk to whoever was about for a few minutes, and then strolling with my friend, nearly regardless of footpaths, in a long loop, so as to end either at his house or my lodging. It was mostly orchard and grass, gently up and down,....

If talk dwindled in the traversing of a big field, the pause at gate or stile braced it again. Often we prolonged the pause, whether we actually sat or not, and we talked - of flowers, childhood, Shakespeare, women, England, the war - or we looked at a far horizon....

Whatever road or lane we took, once in every quarter of a mile we came to a farmhouse ... under the trees stood a thatched cottage, sending up a thin blue smoke against the foliage, and casting a faint light out from one square window and open door. It was cheerful and mysterious too, No man of any nation accustomed to houses but must have longed for his home at the sight, or have suffered for lacking one, or have dreamed that this was it...

It seemed to me that either I had never loved England, or I had loved it foolishly, aesthetically, like a slave, not having realized it was not mine unless I were willing and prepared to die rather than leave it as Belgian women and old men and children had left their country. Something I had omitted. Something, I felt, had to be done before I could look again composedly at English landscape⁴⁹

At the time of the greatest expansiveness of Gibson's spirit, at the time of what seemed to be the beginning of new possibilities in English

writing, when, to those involved, there was as strong a sense as Pound had that they were 'making it new', the great cataclysm of the century began with the mobilization of Austria and Germany. War was declared on August 4th 1914; nothing could be the same again and the rural idyll of 'The Dymock Poets' was doomed. "I cannot think of anything but war just now" ⁵⁰ says Gibson, in what is not simply a matter of regret and opposition but of basic economics. The war meant great financial hardship:

I find it quite impossible to settle to anything ... lots of poems to write but cannot tackle them just now. And there's no reviewing to be done. ⁵¹

Reviewing of course was bread and butter for these writers who rarely even enjoyed the privileges of a later generation of writers who could also get jobs teaching their subject or holding classes in 'creative writing'. Reviewing was generally regarded as drudgery and apparently Gibson hated it ⁵² but it promised release from possibly worse jobs, like being a bank clerk. Abercrombie, too, was affected, worse so than Gibson:

Poor Lascelles had word from his mainstay, *The Manchester Guardian* that they would have no more reviewing while the war was on. I cannot see what is to become of them. He was absolutely dependent on reviewing. ⁵³

For Gibson and his wife things were a little brighter:

We should be able to hold out a year or two by cutting expenses to the barest possible ⁵⁴

Abercrombie's wife "urges him to go harvesting but he simply hasn't the strength for that kind of work." And Gibson evidently meant stringent economy to begin at once: "I've started digging" he writes and "beer and cigarettes have gone already." ⁵⁵ Anxiety about Brooke has a touching quality given his eventual fate:

I am relieved to know Rupert is still in England. Don't let him leave .. such people as Rupert must run no risks. ⁵⁶

It was, of course, Marsh who later secured Brooke a posting in the Naval Division which led to the Mediterranean expedition from which he never returned.

Meanwhile Gibson's work went on and the end of September 1914 saw the publication of *Borderlands* and *Thoroughfares*. "My books are to be out on Monday - still-born I'm afraid"⁵⁷ he writes gloomily and then, after the reviews have appeared, when the gloom is confirmed, his fear seemed to have proved true:

My books have fallen very flat. They've had nothing but slatings so far - (by the Thomas, de la Mare group who always despised me!) and I haven't even had a nice letter about them, except from Lascelles.⁵⁸

Edward Thomas was merely continuing the critical attitude he had always held since his earliest newspaper reviews of Gibson's work. As early as 1902 Thomas had placed Gibson with some finality:

He seems to us to be nearly a perfect minor poet, without the intellectual equipment for originality but with much grace of manner, melody of numbers, and clearness as well as opulence of fancy.⁵⁹

By "slating" Gibson with his review of *Borderlands* and *Thoroughfares* Thomas was keeping up the barrage without recognizing that Gibson had actually shewn originality and had cast off grace, melody and opulence of fancy. Some reviewers, however, were more acutely aware of Gibson's transformation. Filson Young, for example, writing in *T.P.'s Weekly* recognised Gibson's development and his adoption of a more vigorous, plain language.

The case of W.W.G. is an interesting one ... growing in strength and mastery and genuine poetic feeling. He is a much better poet than he was six years ago ... he uses an easy and wide vocabulary, something like that of Masfield and seems to search for the plain, everyday word, and to prefer even slang to anything that may seem mannered or unnatural.⁶¹

The reviewer of *The Nation* was equally generous and enthusiastic. He argued that Gibson had established his own manner and was entirely independent of any "influence." His manner and style were thought to be "the most distinctive which we shall find in the English poetry of the day." *Daily Bread* was seen as "a declaration of independence" and in it Gibson had moved at once from the "less daring adventures" of *Stonefolds* to become the poet who "carried out a revolution." What was liked particularly was the presence of the immediacy of life in the poems; the reviewer admired the fact that he got his "inspiration from life", that "human nature itself is the metaphysic of his art". Life was made to be imaginative and convincing in the poems whilst Gibson's phrasing was felt to be "singularly right and honest" shewing a "determination to say just what is needed and no more."⁶²

The bond with Abercrombie at this time remained very strong though later they were to drift apart as the war affected their lives. Even at this stage of the late autumn of the first year of the war, *New Numbers*, the project which had begun with such panache and excitement on behalf of all concerned, was to fall an early victim after four issues. In a letter of gloomy rambling Gibson wrote:

Did I tell you that we're stopping *New Numbers* after this year?
We're delaying No 4 in the hope of getting something more from
Rupert⁶³

Evidently Brooke still continued to be erratic in supplying poems which were requested and was, as his letters of the period indicate, having a high time in company with London society women like Lady Diana Manners. The earlier numbers of the magazine had proved to be a considerable success with the public and Gibson wrote: "Our *New Numbers* profits are now well over £100 - and fresh orders every day".⁶⁴ And at last Rupert Brooke, while busily attempting to enlist in the King's service, seems to

have turned his attention to his work; under the spur of patriotic feeling he was producing his "1914" sonnets:

A note from Rupert this morning saying he's sending more sonnets for *New Numbers* ⁶⁵

These poems claimed an audience at once and looking at the fourth volume of *New Numbers* now, more than seventy years later, one can see clearly an appeal in them that is quite lacking in all the other contributions. The patriotism - and much else - may be facile but the writer has gusto and is inspired in a way which tells upon the reader - indeed has told upon generations less accustomed to the ironic mode than our own. No wonder Marsh was so congratulatory and Gibson so pleased - "No 4 was good ... And Rupert's sonnets well worth waiting for." ⁶⁶ So proud of the achievement were Abercrombie and Gibson that they at once acceded to Marsh's suggestion to send a copy to the Master:

We sent a copy of No 4 to Henry James with your compliments by return post yesterday. ⁶⁷

It all must have seemed at that point a fine achievement and, though war clouds loomed, no cloud hung over the deep country round Dymock where the editors planned their work and in the evening drank local Hereford cider in an untroubled world.

Their peaceful world was shattered by the news that arrived of Brooke's death at sea in the eastern Mediterranean. This was a bitter blow to a generation; it has indeed, despite the restraint of admiration for Brooke which more recently people have come to learn, been a blow felt by many up to the present time. It will continue to be marked as such, this destruction of a youthful talent, for succeeding generations. For Gibson, who was very friendly with Brooke - Brooke's letters testify to this as much as do Gibson's - it was possibly the first, worst blow he had ever suffered. On the day after Brooke's death he sent a telegram to Marsh which reads simply: "Love to you dearest Eddie". The point of the

telegram appears to be lost unless we conjecture that Marsh, employed at The Admiralty, had received a telegraphic message from the ship on which Brooke had died and had wired Gibson with the news and that Gibson, virtually speechless, could only wire the five words he did as an affirmation of friendship in a moment of crisis. Brooke certainly meant a great deal to him from the time they first met. And when Brooke had gone away to join the Naval Division en route for the Dardanelles Gibson wrote:

I had a note from Mrs Brooke [Brooke's mother] the other day, telling me Rupert had gone. He's always in my mind⁶⁹

The two men had taken to each other very quickly and in late 1912 Brooke wrote to Ka Cox:

If ever you're in London and meet Wilfrid Gibson be nice to him. He's the only nice person in London... one keeps looking after him.⁶⁹

Repeatedly in his letters Brooke refers to this "niceness" of Gibson's character and personality stressing his "loveableness" and "charm": "He's the most lovable and simple person in the world"⁷⁰ and "Is Wilfrid as nice as ever?"⁷¹ and again "Gibson is the most simple and charming and good-hearted of people in the world."⁷² So fond was he of Gibson that he coined an affectionate 'portmanteau' form of his name - Wibson. He and 'Wibson' were to join forces evidently to shake up the slightly musty establishment of King's College, Cambridge where Brooke had held his fellowship. They were to brighten academic life by bringing in some of the creative impulse which Brooke had and which had been developed in him by his travels in America, the South Seas and in the rural England of the Georgian poets:

Wibson and I are going to give lectures on 'Poetry' at King's College.⁷³

he jokingly proposed in the spirit of 'épater l'académie'! Not only was it Gibson's character that Brooke so highly esteemed but he is equally

full of praise for his poetic work: "Wilfrid's poem on Solway Firth is awfully good " ⁷⁴ and he refers to the *New Numbers* proposal as very much in his favour as he is the least of the trio in his view:

Gibson, Abercrombie and others ... better than I ⁷⁵

Certainly they were more established with the public and better known than the newcomer who was soon to be celebrated as a prize-winning poet for *Grantchester*, but at this time he was right to say:

My public is smaller than any of theirs ⁷⁶

and so he was pleased to ride up on their coat-tails. His affirmation of their standing is clear:

Abercrombie and Gibson can write. ⁷⁷

Brooke was also very much attracted to the rural idyll of Gloucestershire that Gibson was so in love with and he evidently knew of their plans at Dymock from the beginning when Abercrombie made the first move by leaving his job in Liverpool with *The Liverpool Daily Post* and moving into 'The Gallows' at Dymock. "Abercrombie has chucked Liverpool" Brooke wrote in May 1913 ⁷⁸ and then a short while later "Gibson has gone to live in the country near Abercrombie." ⁷⁹ Before long he takes off in his car "to see Gibson in Gloucestershire." ⁸⁰ He likes Gibson's cottage, 'The Old Nailshop' but finds:

Abercrombie's is the most beautiful you can imagine: black-beamed and rose-covered. And a porch where one drinks great mugs of cider and looks at fields of poppies in the corn - a life that makes London a very foolish affair. ⁸¹

For all that, Brooke was nevertheless very much a metropolitan and addicted to the high social life; for him poetry could be written while dressing for dinner, but for Gibson it was a life-time's dedication. There was nothing else outside writing and reviewing, apart from his private life which was so rich to him in his marriage, though he was well-known to be poor in purse:

I hear Wilfrid Gibson is going to get married, I hope to goodness his young woman has some money ²²

Brooke wrote in a letter from America. At much the same time Brooke continually laments his own bachelor status and, it is clear from his letters, longed to be married himself; that was not to be. The news of his untimely death, before he had taken part in any action whatsoever, and caused by blood-poisoning, was received by Gibson as a terrible shock. He wrote to Marsh on the Saturday following the despatch of his telegram:

O Eddie it's too terrible I cannot realise at all yet what it means. I wrote the enclosed lines the other day when Rupert had been much in my mind - and now!

Eddie you know my heart is with you, and with his poor mother at this time.

I cannot write more just now. I cannot realize

Yours

W

23

The lines enclosed were:

To the Memory of Rupert Brooke

He's gone
I do not understand
I only know
That as he turned to go
And waved his hand
In his young eyes a sudden glory shone
And I was dazzled by a sunset glow,
And he was gone.

23rd April, 1915.

These lines form the epigraph to his collection *Friends* (1916). Their poignancy arises from the fact that they were written as a memory of Brooke's departure from Dymock not on his death.

Clearly the whole of Gibson's heart and mind at this time were absorbed by the loss of Brooke:

I cannot think of anything else. As Gerald's sister says "his death seems to concentrate all the horrors of the war." I see him all day as I saw him that first night with his face lit up by the glow of the fire - you remember?²⁴

On the following day Gibson wrote in equally anguished mood to his friend

Percy Withers:

It is too too terrible about Rupert Brooke. I have been able to think of nothing else since I heard on Saturday morning - such waste! Such waste! His death seems to concentrate all the horrors of the war.⁸⁵

Yet he could see too that Brooke's fate had in it something of a 'natural', desired apotheosis for he went on to say

But he really felt about it [the war] what he says in the sonnets....⁸⁶

In his usual methodical and business-like way Gibson went on to deal with the financial implications affecting Brooke's estate:

You will let us know where to send his share of *New Numbers* profits won't you ... my mind is in such confusion. I had a letter from his mother this morning.⁸⁷

Gibson had no knowledge at this stage that he was one of Brooke's legatees and beneficiaries. What is so striking is his regard for the young man and his talent. Indeed Brooke certainly struck his contemporaries in a way that we perhaps now find difficult to credit. What seems to us perhaps fulsome and smacking too much of the 'gorgeous' Georgianism such as Roy Campbell or J.B.Morton amusingly and irreverently ridicule comes off the pages of Gibson's letters as genuine, unabashed expressions of true feeling:

Yes, Eddie, he was "the most perfect being of our time." When I was with him I used to wonder and wonder - is it possible that this radiant creature can really care for me? - and I still wonder when I think of how often he came to me or sent for me during those London days! And it is good to think of the days I had with him at Grantchester.⁸⁸

He goes on to say how a poem that Abercrombie had written about Brooke is "glorious" - "it does give some of the glow and radiance - the light that never was on sea or land..." "I always thought of him as one of the Sons of the Morning."⁸⁹ From what one can judge the attraction must have been

one of opposites, it is hard to imagine two more different personalities: Gibson seems very much the owl to Brooke's nightingale.

With Brooke's death the significance of *New Numbers* took a new turn. There, in No 4, were the poems that fired a nation, poems that were seen as perfect expressions of patriotism, poems that appealed to a very large public and 'popularized' poetry in a remarkable way. They were an important part of that astonishing outburst of poetry which the war produced.

Gibson's impulse was for the publication, at once, of a volume of Brooke's poems. It is plain to see that the response was immediate on Gibson's part and that his first thought was for a memorial to Brooke; only later did he come to see that demand would be enormous. On the 2nd May 1915 he wrote to Marsh:

I must speak of a matter of some urgency. I suppose a book of Rupert's poems will be issued as soon as possible²⁰.

This was partly necessitated in his view because *New Numbers* had been such a success and that demand could not be satisfied:

There are only 30 complete sets of *New Numbers* left now which will go in a few days.²¹

In order to reach a wider public Brooke's sonnets had to be brought out separately:

The sets of *New Numbers* are almost exhausted now; and it would be a pity if there was no form in which the sonnets could be had at a moment when there are so many people needing them. So it will be well to get out the book with all possible speed, don't you think?²²

Just over a week later "the book" was "in hand" and Marsh was supervising it and preparing the famous Memoir which was to preface it. Meanwhile the sets of *New Numbers* were all gone, "with the exceptions of a few odd copies of 1,2 and 3" - he could not have guessed more accurately that the book "should have a good chance when it comes out." In fact this volume came to have, indeed continues to have, the most astonishing sales. In

the meantime it was *New Numbers* which attracted all the predictable appeal and fascination consequent upon something so touching to people of the time as Brooke's death. Gibson proposed to Marsh that Henry James should have a complete set sent to him as a kind of Brooke memento:

Do you think we might send Nos 1,2 and 3 (as from Rupert) to Henry James so that he will have a complete set?³³

Moreover, it was not only as a memento that the copies had value. The clear-sighted commercial mind of Harold Monroe made it clear to the less practical minds of Abercrombie and Gibson that they should capitalize on their success:

Monro wrote to implore us to print another edition of No 4. Of course we declined.³⁴

No explanation or suggestion of why they declined is offered but what seems to suggest itself to the careful reader is an admirable scrupulousness in not wishing too nakedly to cash in on the posthumous success of their much-lamented friend. A book of his poems printed as a memorial would, naturally, be a different matter entirely. Less scrupulousness could certainly have meant an astonishing and unbelievable windfall for the editors as the 'black-market' price boomed to eight times its original figure which had been half-a-crown³⁵

We've been selling the few copies of the 1st edition left (of No 1 only) at £1 each!³⁶

Thus it was 'with an auspicious and a dropping eye' that Brooke's death came to be felt after the first awful shock which Gibson records. Brooke had quite genuinely been very dear to him and he to Brooke. Gibson's grief for his friend was desolating and genuine; he continued mentioning Brooke for years afterwards in his private correspondence and even in the midst of other concerns would make an aside concerning Brooke with a phrase like this one:

it is a relief to know the dear lad wasn't in agony long.³⁷

The dropping eye is plainly evident everywhere but it is, perhaps not surprisingly, considering the relative penury of both Gibson and Abercrombie, the auspicious eye which gleams more. Not only was Brooke's work a commodity with an enormous demand which asked to be capitalized upon but Brooke had named Gibson and Abercrombie, together with de la Mare as his beneficiaries. The news of this very important feature in Gibson's financial life does not become clear in his letters to Marsh until about a month after news of the young man's death. On May 23rd, 1915 Gibson wrote to Marsh saying that he had received a "distressing" letter from Mrs Brooke. There is no explanation why it should be so but, presumably Mrs Brooke must have had to tell Gibson that she herself had received no mention in her son's will and that his money was to be divided between his three fellow poets. Gibson then goes on to say:

It's terrible thinking what it means ... and yet it's so good to have this token of his love and his belief in my poems.

This presumably, must refer to the legacy. Still on the subject of money the letter continues with reference to the disposal of money due to Brooke for his share of *New Numbers* profits about which Gibson says

I am willing to forego my portion of Rupert's share (about £50) in favour of de la Mare.

There seems to have been, though this is but conjectural, some misunderstanding emanating from Brooke's mother's account of his will. It looks rather as if she was under the impression that John Drinkwater was to be a beneficiary together with Gibson and Abercrombie thus excluding de la Mare. Hence Gibson's offer to yield up a 'token' to de la Mare. Subsequently, however, it became clear that the will did not include Drinkwater and that de la Mare had been remembered. In a letter Ivor Gurney, without disclosing his sources, said that the sums were large:

"Gibson, Abercrombie and de la Mare .. have had £2,000 each! That's why Gibson has not died, and his family."==The truth was rather

different from these fanciful accounts but no less glittering in its financial promise. The will itself was not a legal document but was expressed in a letter dated March 19th 1914 which was returned to Mrs Brooke with Brooke's box of clothes after his death. The original letter is now missing but Brooke's biographer gives the following account:

All monies after his debts were paid were to go to the three men whom he now named as his heirs: Wilfrid Gibson, Lascelles Abercrombie and Walter de la Mare. The capital of his allowance from her was to be distributed among them, and at her death she was asked "to leave some of the money you would have left to me, to these three." His reason was "If I can set them free, to any extent, to write the poetry and plays and books they want to, my death will bring more gain than loss." He then appointed Edward Marsh as his literary executor.

.....
Each received £166-19-8 as the first instalment of an inheritance that was materially to affect their lives, so considerable were the royalties on the poems throughout the years to come. ⁹⁹

Brooke also made the same intention clear in a letter to Marsh of 1914:

Give my love to the *New Numbers* folk ... I've tried to arrange that some money should go to Wilfrid and Lascelles and de la Mare (John [Drinkwater] is childless) to help them to write good stuff, instead of me¹⁰⁰

Money was, of course, a crucial matter at any time for these writers but since the outbreak of the war its absence dominated their lives. Abercrombie was particularly affected, for a variety of reasons, and he was also particularly proud and unwilling to take 'charity'. Ways had to be found for both Mrs Brooke and Marsh to "smuggle sums into Abercrombie's deposit account anonymously."¹⁰¹ When this was done Abercrombie was very puzzled as to how his credit seemed to grow and Gibson noted that "the Abercrombies have been trying to trace the unknown donor of £25."¹⁰² In many ways he appears to have been a most unworldly, chaotic sort of man. Gibson even remarks on the occasion when a cheque had gone astray and that Lascelles had thrown it in the waste-paper basket and on occasions Gibson could be quite caustic about Abercrombie's "unbusiness like" handling of his affairs, not answering letters, not

acknowledging receipt of money and so on. They were, nevertheless, very good friends. Before long, however, they were to be separated by the exigencies of the war.

Under the stimulus provided by the success of Brooke's poems, perhaps, Gibson himself was continuing to write but in a form that he had not used for a long time:

I've taken to writing sonnets - my first lapse for twenty years
or so.¹⁹³

Marsh had been sent some examples of his recent work, some of it stemming from a walking tour he had taken that summer down the Wye Valley and along the Cotswold Hills returning to Greenway via Tewkesbury.

It is clear that Marsh was not really very impressed by the pieces and clearly too had some precise notion of what should constitute a sonnet's theme and structural pattern and he told Gibson so. What emerges from Gibson's reply was striking evidence of his naiveté and simplicity as a writer as though he were quite incapable of bringing an analytical frame of mind to his work. He suggests rather the simplicity of poetry coming "as naturally as the leaves to a tree" without any shaping power of thought. This may be one of the fundamental deficiencies of Gibson's stature as a poet, marking him down as a simple recorder of observed experience and a story-teller using the whims of fancy rather than the fire of imagination. Even so the suggestion implied by Marsh that certain themes might be illegitimate - "bastard" is the word used - suggests a rigidity of critical view which would be unhelpful to anyone trying to be innovative at all. In his reply to Marsh Gibson cannot apparently see beyond his limitation:

I quite agree with your generalizations about *The Sonnet* and I am quite willing to admit perhaps that some of these may not have that inevitable one-and-indivisibleness of theme and structure which the true sonnet should have, but as you do not specify very clearly which are to your mind the bastard themes, I cannot express agreement or disagreement with your contentions. I only know that these themes which had been

wandering round unattached in my head for a long time suddenly married themselves.¹⁰⁴

The sense of inadequacy before criticism was also accompanied by a distinctive sense of 'hauteur' and irritation which springs from the formal phrases, cool, detached and distant in what was, after all, a letter to a friend. And even being able to see faults in his work did not confer on Gibson the power to correct them:

it's the devil trying to get rid of anything once it gets into a poem¹⁰⁵

he wrote just as he was contemplating the publication of his next volume *Battle* which was to appear on the 28th September 1915. He was buoyant about the prospect of its doing well:

Mathews [Elkin Mathews, publisher] says orders are coming in strong which is cheering.¹⁰⁶

When he received his advance copy he wrote to Mathews to say.

I am delighted with its appearance and very grateful indeed for the trouble you have taken ¹⁰⁷

This optimism regarding his next volume was, however, somewhat compromised by the recognized struggle that some of his earlier work was having in finding a ready readership or even a warm reviewer:

Mathews hasn't managed to sell quite 250 of either of my books (i.e. *Borderlands* and *Thoroughfares*) in the twelve months. I cannot help thinking *Borderlands* is a jolly good book, but not a single reviewer except Lascelles and Monro (!) [sic] seemed to see it!¹⁰⁸

Some of this gloom spills over into his letter to Marsh of the 2nd October, his birthday, which takes its tone from the glum opening remark "37 today!" and, surprisingly, proceeds to forecast "Poor little *Battle* won't have any chance of a sale just now I'm afraid." ¹⁰⁹ Part of his unease stems from the sense he has of utter inferiority to the standard he believed Brooke had set and he maintains that "the poems will never be worthy of Rupert."¹¹⁰ His concern in writing a species of poetry that might be popular and readily accessible to the 'trench reader' and the

common citizen is evident from his reply to Marsh's letter recounting news of a friend at the Western Front who had carried Gibson's volume in his pocket:

I was very much interested in hearing how *Battle* struck your friend. I had heard nothing from the Front about it ... I am most anxious for these poems to get at people ... quite apart from considerations of money or notoriety''''

The enthusiasm here is tempered by the disappointment that rises in him when Marsh later suggests that another informant has suggested that Gibson is simply 'on the make' and that as war poems are 'selling' he writes them. He wrote to Marsh:

I was most interested in what you told me of G.G.'s remarks about *Battle* because I was afraid people might take that view of it and I hesitated about publishing it for that reason, and also because I thought people might think I was just making copy of the bloody business [i.e. war]. But the poems just came to me and they would not be kept back.¹¹²

The volume comprises twenty-five short lyric pieces, some of them rather slight, which purport to come from the lips of that typical British soldier of the line, Tommy Atkins. Almost all the poems are in the first person and they deal with simple quotidian matters: waiting for action, eating, reminiscence of family and home, personal suffering and remorse, being wounded, comrades, remembered farm occupations "down in Gloucestershire" - all moments of minor-key significance in a life that is representative of the unknown, unnamed soldier. The best perhaps is the one that is so frequently anthologized as an example of realism on the Western Front and it is called 'Breakfast':

We ate¹¹³ our breakfast lying on our backs
Because the shells were screeching overhead.
I bet a rasher to a loaf of bread
That Hull United would beat Halifax
When Jimmy Stainthorpe played full-back instead
Of Billy Bradford. Ginger raised his head
And cursed, and took the bet, and dropt back dead.
We ate our breakfast lying on our backs
Because the shells were screeching overhead.

The poem works through juxtaposing the commonplace and ordinary world of breakfast eating and football match talk with the startlingly different world of war and death; the contrast is itself the comment. In very many studies and anthologies of the poets of the Great War the fact has been consistently overlooked that this poem was originally published in the periodical *The Nation* as early as 17th October 1914.* It is a poem that contains no sentiment and no patriotism. That was truly remarkable for its date. Only J.R.Wilson in his article 'Wilfrid Gibson and the War' in *Four Decades of Poetry, 1890-1930* and Hibberd and Onions in their book *Poetry of the Great War* have given due recognition to Gibson's early production of war poetry in a style that is more characteristic of later war poets in its anti-heroic stance and sympathy for the suffering ranks.

Gibson was a pioneer with his war poems as much as he had been in his *Daily Bread* period.

It is sometimes assumed that because Gibson's portrayal of soldiers is so accurate that he was a serving soldier himself. We know that at the beginning of the war that was not the case. What is of interest here is that just as with 'Flannan Isle' the newspaper reporting of an incident gave Gibson the impetus for writing 'Breakfast'. On October 17th, 1914 *The Nation* printed two Gibson poems: 'Under Fire' and 'The Messages'. When the former poem appeared in the volume *Battle* it had been re-titled 'Breakfast' but the original title gives us a crucial piece of evidence in establishing the probable source of the poem. In *The Nation* of October 3rd, 1914, exactly a fortnight before the appearance of Gibson's poems, there was an article on "The Tommy", giving a Gordon Highlander's account of the fighting and signed from the pen of "an ordinary soldier":

When I got my wound in the leg it was because I got too excited in arguing with wee Geordie Ferris, of our company, about Queens.Park Rangers and their changes this season. One of my chums was hit when he stood up to light a cigarette under fire.

* *The Nation*, 16 (1914) 65.

It would appear that Gibson not merely read this account, but he imitated its tone and content, using the same words "under fire" for his title. He adapted the disparate elements of the soldier's report and brought them together as one event placed in a tightly rhymed form of rondeau. He emphasizes alliterative linkages to give his poem force: Queen's Park Rangers is changed to Hull and Halifax, Billy Bradford is the footballer and breakfast, backs, bet and bread all extend the pattern.

The other poem that appeared with 'Breakfast' was 'The Messages'. This catches the poignancy of the veteran who has returned from the trenches with his mind turned. He is obsessed by his fellow soldiers' deaths and their dying messages which he cannot remember. Such messages were so much a feature of the first world war when often whole battalions of men came from the same town or district. To anyone who has talked to survivors of Flanders, or recalls seeing the hunched figures in wheel chairs or on spinal carriages, such as I can remember in the grounds of the Turner Memorial Home in Liverpool which backed on to the yard of the school I attended, the anonymity, the isolation, loneliness and incomprehension of war are tellingly caught in this poem:

THE MESSAGES

*I cannot quite remember ... There were five
Dropt dead beside me in the trench - and three
Whispered their dying messages to me*

*Back from the trenches, more dead than alive,
Stone-deaf and dazed and with a broken knee
He hobbled slowly, muttering vacantly -*

*I cannot quite remember ... There were five
Dropt dead beside me in the trench - and three
Whispered their dying messages to me*

*Their friends are waiting, wondering how they thrive -
Waiting a word in silence patiently*
But what they said or who their friends may be

*I cannot quite remember ... There were five
Dropt dead beside me in the trench - and three
Whispered their dying messages to me....*

The feebleness of memory, the inability of the speaker to do what he was charged with makes us aware of the overwhelming destruction and the helplessness of the men against the war which was wiping them out.

Another poem, 'Before Action' in both mood and rhythm owes a debt to Housman. The theme of rustic happiness 'beneath the Malvern Hills' foregone and the prospect of death to come by next year is very much in the spirit of *A Shropshire Lad* if not quite with its technical competence:

BEFORE ACTION

I sit beside the brazier's glow
And, drowsing in the heat,
I dream of daffodils that blow
And lambs that frisk and bleat -

Black lambs that frolic in the snow
Among the daffodils
In a far orchard that I know
Beneath the Malvern Hills.

Next year the daffodils will blow
And lambs will frisk and bleat,
But I'll not feel the brazier's glow,
Nor any cold or heat.

Entirely characteristic of Gibson's method of personative, self-dramatising verse this piece typically works by the contrast of now and next year and compares with Housman *A Shropshire Lad*, poems XVII and XVIII. There are no heroics, no anger; a sort of resignation and acceptance of suffering and hardship. So too, Gibson presents the suffering of civilian victims of the war in Europe in 'Salvage:

So suddenly her life
Had crashed about that grey old country wife,
Naked she stood and gazed
Bewildered while her home about her blazed.

New-widowed and bereft
Of her five sons, she clung to what was left,
Still hugging all she'd got -
A toy gun and a copper coffee-pot.

The economy of presentation of the modern phenomenon of the homeless refugee in a war-torn world seems to have all the simplicity, directness

and truthfulness of a photograph, but in fact makes a deliberate mark by juxtaposing the hugeness of the experience of war against the simple and banal personal truths of the individual. And he is speaking mostly for the rural poor, for people from homes like that of Ivor Gurney and the thousands of young soldiers from a still largely rural England. 'The Question' and 'Mangel Wurzels' illustrate this well:

THE QUESTION

I wonder if the old cow died or not?
Gey bad she was the night I left, and sick.
Dick reckoned she would mend. He knows a lot -
At least he fancies so himself, does Dick.

Dick knows a lot: but happen I did wrong
To leave the cow to him and come away.
Over and over like a silly song
These words keep humming in my head all day -

And all I think of as I face the foe
And take my lucky chance of being shot
Is this - that, if I'm hit, I'll never know
Till Doomsday if the old cow died or not.

'The Question' was first published in April 1915* and the voice of the soldier worrying more about home affairs than the war reflects an innocence and naïveté that was short lived.

'Mangel-Wurzels' works by using simple grammatical structures and repetitions of word and phrase which help to enforce on the reader the simplicity of feeling of the speaker:

MANGEL-WURZELS

Last year I was hoeing,
Hoeing mangel-wurzels,
Hoeing mangel-wurzels all day in the sun,
Hoeing for the squire
Down in Gloucestershire,
Willy-nilly till the sweaty job was done.

Now I'm in the 'wurzels,
In the mangel-wurzels,
All day in the 'wurzels 'neath the Belgian sun:
But among this little lot
It's a different job I've got -
For you don't hoe mangel-wurzels with a gun.

The final line here gives the poem considerable force and points us forward to the anger and sharpness we find in Sassoon. The feelings of the young soldier home on leave in 'Blighty' are captured simply and economically in 'Back':

BACK

They ask me where I've been
And what I've done and seen.
But what can I reply
Who know it wasn't I,
But some one just like me,
Who went across the sea
And with my head and hands
Killed men in foreign lands
Though I must bear the blame,
Because he bore my name.

The horror of the maiming and wounding, the experience of the soldier's real physical and mental sufferings and pains are caught, not in any high style, but plainly and vividly by the co-ordinate clauses and end-stopped lines. Such telling plainness is equally present in 'Deaf':

DEAF

This day last year I heard the curlew calling
By Hallypike,
And the clear tinkle of hill-waters falling
Down slack and syke.

But now I cannot hear the shrapnel's screaming,
The screech of shells;
And if again I see the blue lough gleaming
Among the fells,

Unheard of me will be the curlew's calling
By Hallypike,
And the clear tinkle of hill-waters falling
Down slack and syke.

The contrast between the lost peace of home and the horror of the front is given an echoing melancholy ring by the lengthened rhythms and the slow present participles of this piece. The next two poems, whilst similar in thematic contrast are brief, punchy and bitter:

MAD

Neck-deep in mud
He moved and raved -
He who had braved
The field of blood -
And as a lad
Just out of school
Yelled - April fool!
And laughed like mad.

IN THE AMBULANCE

Two rows of cabbages,
Two of curly-greens
Two rows of early peas,
Two of kidney-beans.

That's what he keeps muttering,
Making such a song,
Keeping the other chaps awake
The whole night long.

Both his legs are shot away,
And his head is light,
So he keeps on muttering
All the blessed night

Two rows of cabbages,
Two of curly-greens,
Two rows of early peas,
Two of kidney-beans.

Again in this last poem* we have the basic pattern , or method, of simple juxtaposition of then and now, of being at the front and back home in 'Blighty', presented with an ironic twist. The verse form, pastoral and naïve, heightens the sense of war's enormity.

As an after-piece to *Battle* Gibson appended a piece which he dated 1914/1915 indicating the clear sense of shock and dazedness which turned day into night that was brought about by the outbreak of international hostilities;

THE QUIET

I could not understand the sudden quiet -
The sudden darkness, in the crash of fight,
The din and glare of day quenched in a twinkling
In utter starless night.

I lay an age and idly gazed at nothing
Half-puzzled that I couldn't lift my head;
And then somehow I knew that I was lying
Among the other dead

(1914-1915)

* First published in *The Nation*, 17 (1915) 574.

The poem is both about the death of a man in action and about the author's own sense of the extinction of the light of life which glowed before 1914 and the coming of the death of the spirit which was his lot afterwards.

Gibson's war poems need to be placed clearly in the context of the two major attitudes that are widely regarded as dividing the poetry of the Great War: (i) the heroic attitude and stance - Brooke, Grenfell, Hodgson 1914-1915/6 and (ii) the 'realistic' presentation, unheroic and appalling, the truths derived from experience - Sassoon, Rosenberg, Owen 1916-1919. In between these two diametrically opposed attitudes there are a variety of other 'stances' trying to come to terms with the new experiences. What is so striking about the poems that Gibson published in *Battle* is that they are so remarkably different from those of his immediate contemporary and close friend, Rupert Brooke. Where Brooke represents the heroic and patriotic attitude, what we might characterise as the Dulce et Decorum stance, Gibson is at once attuned to the accurate reporting of the unpleasant experience of warfare with its sharp juxtapositions of life and death, its squalor and its comradesly suffering and misery. After its brave start the experience of the war lapsed into stalemate and heroic celebrations of war's glories were soon overtaken by the recording, pictorial, photographic and verbal of the appalling realities of trench warfare. In painting, C.R.W. Nevison was recording the actualities of war; his work was exhibited in London in 1916 and he was employed as an official War Artist during 1917. In verse the realist writer that Gibson had transformed himself into in a few brief years between 1907 and 1915 came into his own.

Gibson's portraits of the war are photographic, precise and exact; they have no pretensions. There is no accusation, recrimination, anger or argument of the kind that Owen by 1918 - and being a very different poet - was driven to, with his Preface and his view that above all he was "not

concerned with poetry" - the poetry was to be found "in the pity". Gibson's concern is not so much with 'poetry' -he had given that up by the time of *Daily Bread* - but with the suffering of the ordinary soldier. 'Poetry' as conceived in his early youth was gone for good. The nightmarish quality of the modern world brought 'the horror: the horror'. Gibson's poetry with its straight, factual, brief documentary reporting of incident and place seems to give a plain, unvarnished response to the nightmare. Amongst Gibson's anonymous men dying wounded, larking, joking, breakfasting, nattering, footballing, and endlessly waiting for action or hoping for a 'blighty' were not only those who perished and found their graves in Flanders but those who went on to live the nightmare into their civilian lives; men like David Jones and Ivor Gurney, whose later lives were much overshadowed by the horrors they had witnessed. The poems at times seem almost artless in their innocent naiveté but their very artlessness disguises a critical attitude to the sufferings that the conduct of the war entailed. He shews a striking capacity to feel as the common man and to express the common soldier's feelings. It is all the more remarkable that not only, as I have been at pains to shew, are these poems as early as October 1914 and April 1915 but that Gibson never served in France and never saw front line service at all. An anonymous reviewer in *The Survey* said that the inspiration for the poems came from "talk with wounded soldiers" which "gave him [Gibson] the feeling that the excitement in trench life makes many men assume this attitude of mind" ¹¹⁴ i.e. the unheroic and sardonic attitude that Gibson records in his poems. This may be so but he clearly made use of published accounts in addition to very good effect.

Battle sold in very considerable numbers, being by 1916 into its third thousand printing. The appetite for poetry had grown since the outbreak of the war in an atmosphere where feelings ran so high that poetry alone could provide adequate expression for them. Not only was it selling well on the popular market but also it was "well thought of".¹¹⁵ Abercrombie, reviewing it for *Quarterly Review* spoke of Gibson's "exceptional art" and how Gibson, unlike the more common militaristic celebrations of euphoric excitement over war, was "extremely objective" was "not patriotic - but simply and broadly human". He was dealing marvellously well, said Abercrombie, with "the sensations of soldiers in the midst of the actual experiences of modern warfare" which, he went on to observe "is not beautiful and Mr Gibson does not try to gloss it in the usual way by underlining the heroism and endurance it evokes". But clearly Gibson's very basic, real-experience-as-it-is-felt-by-the-most-ordinary-soldier approach, produced for a reader as critical and intellectual as Abercrombie, a striking effect for he notes especially in these pieces "a profoundly implied emotion."¹¹⁶

Admittedly Abercrombie had special reason to praise his friend but other contemporary reviews were equally laudatory. *The Nation* in which many of the *Battle* poems were first published and which, two years later was publishing Owen's work, spoke of Gibson's "extraordinary poems" and the manner in which "they pierce us with flashing understanding of what the war is and means ... what the war is in itself, as a grisly multitudinous whole."^{*} *The Nation's* stance as an advanced, intellectual and radical weekly was well served by the view Gibson gave of the waste and vileness of war. H.W. Massingham the *Nation's* editor was highly critical of the conduct of the Imperial General Staff during the war and urged peace by negotiation, thus bringing upon himself the charge of being 'pro-German.' Poems like Gibson's that were simple, direct,

* *The Nation*, 18 (1916) 584.

forceful and based on what seemed the immediacy of personal experience and spoke of the horror of the Western Front were a perfect poetic vehicle for the editorial 'line'. Moreover Gibson was giving voice to these feelings in a metropolitan journal in an as yet unrivalled manner. His poems pre-date Sassoon's which first appeared in the *Cambridge Magazine* between November 1916 and April 1917 and did not gain wide currency until May 1917 with the publication of *The Old Huntsman* by Heinemann. Such feelings as Gibson gave expression to were entirely a matter of imaginative capacity, stimulated considerably by the effect upon him of the deaths of friends. Sassoon had certainly read Gibson's work and commented favourably upon it.¹¹⁷ The review in *The Nation* was full of praise for his writings: "Mr Gibson's *Battle* is one of the most remarkable results the war has had in literature." *

Equally laudatory was *The Athenaeum*: "with the exception of Brooke's five sonnets 1914", *Battle* was the only English volume of poems "about the war so far for which anyone would venture to predict a future." More guarded than *The Nation* as one would expect from its political stance *The Times* was still full of praise: "Mr Gibson speaks for the perplexed soldier under orders" said their reviewer who found "sympathy, poignancy and irony throughout." *Battle* was also reviewed in the *Times Literary Supplement* under the title of "An Ironist of the Trenches". The reviewer noted the book's "unusual qualities of sincerity and naturalness illumined by flashes of strange penetrating vision." He went on to notice, and by repetition of phrase revealed that he was *The Times* reviewer: "Gibson speaks for the perplexed soldier under orders, and, doing so, illustrates the other side of the medal". At one shilling a copy and with such recommendations it was no wonder that *Battle* was doing so well in its sales, bringing to the civilians at home a vivid sense of the distant war.

* see footnote on p.143.

Not only was the book popular with English readers and soldiers on the Western Front but it was well received in America too. There the critic and scholar W.C. Phelps writing in New York in 1918 spoke of *Battle* as Gibson's "most original contribution to modern poetry..... The ideas expressed here can be found in no other war poet; they are idiosyncratic to the highest degree."¹¹⁹ In America Gibson was seen, says Phelps, as "the poet of the people... of grim realism"; his subject matter was "the short and simple annals of the poor".¹¹⁹ Amidst this widespread acclaim the only dissenting voice to be raised was, according to Gibson, that of Edmund Gosse who "I am told considers the poems immoral."¹²⁰ Other people, however, had different opinions as can be seen from this extract from an undated letter to Marsh from Isaac Rosenberg:

Gibson's *Battle* was sent to me and delighted me. It is as good as Degas. In a way it seems a contradiction that a thinker should take a low plane as he does there instead of the more complex and sensitive personality of a poet in such a situation. Most who have written as poets have been very unreal and it is for this reason, their naturalness, I think Gibson's [war poems] so fine.¹²¹

Sassoon had read Gibson's work and thought highly of it. We know that Marsh had sent Sassoon a copy of *Battle* as soon as it was published. In a letter, much later, Gibson recalls what Sassoon actually told him:

Sassoon once said to me that the *Battle* rhymes were the first poems to deal with the actualities of the 1914 conflict: and Marsh sent copies of *Battle* on its publication to him and to other poets at the front, some time before they began to record their own experiences.¹²²

What Sassoon told Vivian de Sola Pinto also carries with it more than a hint of debt to Gibson:

He expounded what to me at that time was a kind of new gospel: poetry must grow out of the realities of the human condition. Plain, direct language must be used and all inversions and archaisms must be avoided.¹²³

Not only Sassoon but also Ivor Gurney and Wilfred Owen were known to have read Gibson. In a list of eighteen "Books read at Scarborough, December 1917"¹²⁴ which Owen compiled there appears Gibson's *Battle*. Indeed, it is just possible that Gibson and Owen had met at the Poetry Bookshop meetings for Owen did attend them when on leave and had spent a fortnight living at 21 Devonshire St in November 1915. By then, however, Gibson had married and was living far away in Dymock.

In fact *Battle* marks a new departure in the poetry of the First World War. No-one had achieved this tone but Gibson. He was the first to publish a volume which celebrated the common soldier and presented the bizarre absurdity of what was being done to him, whereas other 'Georgians' turned their backs on the war and wrote about the lost peace. In the thirties one critic, Herbert Palmer, gave Gibson the acknowledgement that was his due. In *Post-Victorian Poetry* (1938) Palmer gives Gibson credit for being one of the "chief technical influences" on those who succeeded him.

On the very day of publication of *Battle* Gibson had embarked upon a sequence of poems which he wished to call *Friends* - "which I mean to dedicate to Rupert's memory."¹²⁵ That memory continued to bulk large in Gibson's mind and it was swelled of course as more and more friends and contemporaries went off on active service, like Brooke, never to return. In June he had been busily enquiring, persistently so, about the fate of Denis Browne, a friend he and Marsh had in common. He too was to be numbered in the poems along with Marsh. In October 1915 Gibson said "I'm thinking of publishing *Friends*, the little book dedicated to Rupert, in the Spring."¹²⁶ He was right, perhaps, when he said "the poems will never be worthy of Rupert"; certainly they could never, would never, command the vast popular attention that Brooke's poems did at this time, indeed have done ever since. It was thus with almost an audible gasp that Gibson

wrote to Marsh:

Emery Walker tells me that more than 20,000 copies of 1914 have been sold! ¹²⁷

Gibson would never achieve a popularity like that. The four linked sonnets in *Friends* called *Rupert Brooke* revealed clearly how much adulation Gibson gave, quite unreservedly both to the man and the poet. They are memorials and though telling in their context would have little significance as poetry standing alone. The interest they have is almost entirely biographical and historical.

The volume found its way into the trenches of the front line and was being read by Ivor Gurney and other 'Gloucestershire Lads' under fire. Gurney spoke very enthusiastically of the volume in a letter home:

Friends is with me, and is as a friend. I love the book and have written to Gibson saying so. He is a man who would be well worth meeting! ¹²⁸

The volume had been sent to him by his own very dear friend, Marion Scott. In his letter to her of November 21st 1917, he says, in fine tribute "Thank you so much for *Friends*, for I love that book". At home the book was equally well received. Walter de la Mare reviewed it for *The Times Literary Supplement* in a manner that Gibson thought "most generous". ¹²⁹

The epigraph to the volume is that brief lyric that Gibson had so eerily just composed, recalling Brooke's farewell visit to the Old Nailshop, when he almost immediately learned of Brooke's death. The *Friends* volume is not only dedicated "To the Memory of Rupert Brooke" but is also indebted to Brooke's manner and style too. The sonnets, 1914, had been Brooke's memorial and Gibson chose the sonnet form for two-thirds of the poems in this volume. Four of them concern Brooke directly

as their subject. They record a richly sentimentalized friendship captured in an imagery which is ornamental, and aspires towards an Elizabethan, Shakespearean range encompassing "tumult of red stars", "cold constellation", "golden sky", "kindled to gold your throat and brow and hair", "golden head", "sudden April" and "summer revelry". All this had been "quenched" for

....now beyond earth's farthest hills you fare
Song-crowned, immortal, sometimes it seems to me
That if I listen very quietly
Perhaps I'll hear your footsteps on the stair
And see you, standing with your angel air,
Fresh from the uplands of eternity.

Gibson returned again and again to such ornamented language recalling the golden days before the war we must, I think, take as being far from empty clichéd extravagance but a genuine feeling for a perfect world which had been lost. For Gibson summer was done, "the bee had quit the clover" and his mind was temporarily obsessed by "Lethean poppies shrivelling ashen grey". Hence the interpretation we must make of the heavy, perhaps relentless use of the word "gold/golden" is that it is not, pace Geoffrey Hill,¹³⁰ simply mindless employment of empty 'poetic diction' but is the state from which life is presented as having fallen: the golden age is done and the age of iron has come. The poem *August 1914* by Isaac Rosenberg makes that point very plainly:

Three lives hath one life -
Iron, honey, gold.
The gold, the honey gone
Left is the hard and cold.

Iron are our lives
Molten right through our youth.

For Gibson the iron age had come. The golden age died with Brooke on 23rd April, 1915; that was why he dated his epigraph so precisely.

Another piece from this collection is the poem 'Tenants', a sonnet, which describes the poet and his wife returning to look at the house in which they had lived for a year as 'tenants'. Now they are strangers who no longer belong there, they have become members of the 'procession of ghosts' who have lived there and all that was real has dissolved as though in a dream. The sleeping house in the brilliant moonlight intensifies the dream-like strangeness and the sestet releases the poem's power in its recognition that poet and lover are but one pair in a long procession of ghosts whose love was, like theirs, more temporary than they had thought in life:

Suddenly out of dark and leafy ways
We came upon the little house asleep
In cold blind stillness, shadowless and deep,
In the white magic of the full moon-blaze:
Strangers without the gate we stood agaze,
Fearful to break the quiet and to creep
Into the house that had been ours to keep
Through a long year of happy nights and days.

So unfamiliar in the white moon-gleam,
So old and ghostly like a house of dream
It seemed, that over us there stole the dread
That, even as we watched it side by side,
The ghosts of lovers, who had lived and died
Within its walls, were sleeping in our bed.

Another sonnet which conveys the poet's feeling of life's evanescence is 'Sea Change':

Wind-flicked and ruddy her young body glowed
In sunny shallows, splashing them to spray;
But when on rippled silver sand she lay,
And over her the little green waves flowed,
Coldly translucent and moon-coloured showed
Her frail young beauty, as if rapt away
From all the light and laughter of the day
To some twilit, forlorn sea-god's abode.

Again into the sun with happy cry
She leapt alive and sparkling from the sea,
Sprinkling white spray against the hot blue sky,
A laughing girl..... and yet I see her lie
Under a deeper tide eternally
In cold moon-coloured immortality.

The title of 'Sea Change' implies a Shakespearean sense of time's transforming power. Youth, joy and innocence are seen by the poet's long vision as merely transient and he imagines the child's eventual death. Such sombre reflections are characteristic of Gibson's poetic persona. Within a few months of publication of this poem Gibson's own first child was born and the poem takes on some added poignancy when we learn of the fate of that child.

Lascelles Abercrombie, the best of his friends, is memorialized in 'Trees'. At night, out of doors round a fire, the poet reading aloud beneath a tree builds from verse an imaginary tree, the "tree of mighty girth" - poetry and imagination:

The flames half lit the cavernous mystery
Of the over-arching elm that loomed profound
And mountainous above us, from the ground
Soaring to midnight stars majestically,
As, under the shelter of that ageless tree
In a rapt dreaming circle we lay around
The crackling faggots, listening to the sound
Of old words moving in new harmony.

And as you read before our wondering eyes
Arose another tree of mighty girth,
Crested with stars though rooted to the earth,
Its heavy-foliaged branches lit with gleams
Of ruddy firelight and the light of dreams,
Soaring immortal to eternal skies.

The octet provides the photographic representation of the scene, plainly and simply, though more poetically than the *Battle* pieces, while the sestet given an almost Blake-like scale to the mighty vision of 'Poetry'.

'Oblivion' owes a clear debt in content and style to Shelley's 'Ozymandias' and presents very simply two images of oblivion: the desert that surrounds the pyramid in blazing white light is as much an oblivion as the blackness of death:

Near the great pyramid, unshadowed, white,
With apex piercing the white noonday blaze,
Swathed in white robes beneath the blinding rays
Lie sleeping Bedouins drenched in hot white light.

MARRIAGE

Going my way of old,
Contented more or less,
I dreamt not life could hold
Such happiness.

I dreamt not that love's way
Could keep the golden height
Day after happy day,
Night after night.

And here is an example of their simple fulfilled life:

.....we're lying
Quietly under the thatch, in a silvery light

The lines provide a personal testament and that is perhaps their weakness. They testify to an emotion without containing one.

Moonlight is a recurrent feature of the poems and whilst it is part of the poetic 'stock' of nineteenth century romanticism it is fair to Gibson to recognize that he is not simply using the stock, but is acutely aware of the light of the moon as one living in very remote countryside with no artificial lighting for many miles, would have been in 1916. His home was in deep country and his sense of the night extremely strong. The strangeness of the outside world against the familiar comfort of 'indoors', of furnishings and candle-light is always present in Gibson and in the four sonnet sequence 'Home' he celebrates his domesticity in a characteristically Georgian way. A little like the idea behind Auden's much later *About the House*, these poems celebrate being at home and they follow the stages of an evening at home - first there is the poet's 'Return' with an affirmation of all that he holds dear:

RETURN

Under the brown bird-haunted eaves of thatch
The hollyhocks in crimson glory burned
Against black timbers and old rosy brick,
And over the green door in clusters thick
Hung tangled passion-flowers when we returned
To our own threshold, and with hand on latch
We stood a moment in the sunset gleam
And looked upon our home as in a dream.

Rapt in a golden glow of still delight,
Together on the threshold in the sun
We stood, rejoicing that we two had won
To this deep golden peace ere day was done,
That over gloomy plain and storm-swept height
We two, O Love, had won to home ere night.

These lines are full of clichés of domestic happiness, yet for Gibson they were all realities and ones in which he took enormous pleasure. Next the candles are lit and the poem turns on the I/Thou of the man and wife: he is outside, feeling "strange loneliness" until she calls him in. For every realism here, there is a poeticism:

CANDLE-LIGHT

Where through the open window I could see
The supper-table in the golden light
Of tall white candles - brasses glinting bright
On the black gleaming board, and crockery
Coloured like gardens of old Araby -
In your blue gown against the walls of white
You stood adream, and in the starry night
I felt strange loneliness steal over me.

You stood with eyes upon the candle-flame
That kindled your thick hair to burnished gold
As in a golden spell that seemed to hold
My heart's love rapt from me for evermore...
And then you stirred, and, opening the door,
Into the starry night you breathed my name.

In the poem 'Firelight' the couple within the house are surrounded with complete happiness. In contrast, outside the wind and sleet rage making their comfort indoors seem all the more pleasant. A common enough feeling but like Cowper, with whom he was never compared, Gibson can turn minor matters of ordinary domestic life into sincerely felt and competent verse in a way which Crabbe, with whom he often has been compared, overlooked:

Against the curtained casement wind and sleet
Rattle and thresh, while snug by our own fire
In dear companionship that naught may tire
We sit - you listening, sewing in your seat,
Half-dreaming in the glow of light and heat,
I reading some old tale of love's desire
That swept on gold wings to disaster dire,
Then sprang re-orient from black defeat.

I close the book, and louder yet the storm
Threshes without. Your busy hands are still,
And on your face and hair the light is warm
As we sit gazing on the coals' red gleam
In a gold glow of happiness, and dream
Diviner dreams the years shall yet fulfil.

In the last of this group of four sonnets, 'Midnight' the poet's disturbed imaginings, "the unearthly terror", are calmed by his wife and "all fear spent", they find peace again. The contrasts holding the pieces in tension are clearly defined: I and thou; he and she; storm and calm; indoors and outdoors, fear and joy. Characteristic of Gibson throughout his career is this sort of binary opposition between contrasting ideas and feelings. They are simple, sensuous and passionate pieces in a delicate, minor key, but they are romanticized and are over-dependent on the flat vocabulary of "dream" and "gleam". Instead of affirming domestic enrichments they suggest domestic complacencies.

There is one poem in the volume that is outstanding for many people because of its familiarity: 'The Ice Cart'. I first encountered it in an anthology at school, as a fourth former; many other people have told me they know it by heart. It is a much-anthologized piece and illustrates two of Gibson's strengths as poet, narrative and fancy. It is a good little story: the office clerk in the hot city in midsummer, gazing through his window on to the "intolerable street" watching the ice-man, in those far-off days before refrigeration, humping ice blocks and then dreaming himself into an 'ice fantasy' out of which he is startled only by the sudden crack of the whip as the carter moves off to his next call:

THE ICE CART

Perched on my city office-stool
I watched with envy while a cool
And lucky carter handled ice ...
And I was wandering in a trice
Far from that grey and grimy heat

Of that intolerable street
 O'er sapphire berg and emerald floe
 Beneath the still cold ruby glow
 Of everlasting Polar night,
 Bewildered by the queer half-light,
 Until I stumbled unawares
 Upon a creek where big white bears
 Plunged headlong down with flourished heels
 And floundered after shining seals
 Through shivering seas of blinding blue.
 And, as I watched them, ere I knew
 I'd stripped and I was swimming too
 Among the seal-pack, young and hale,
 And thrusting on with threshing tail,
 With twist and twirl and sudden leap
 Through crackling ice and salty deep,
 Diving and doubling with my kind
 Until at last we left behind
 Those big white blundering bulks of death,
 And lay at length with panting breath
 Upon a far untravelled floe
 Beneath a gentle drift of snow -
 Snow drifting gently fine and white
 Out of the endless Polar night,
 Falling and falling evermore
 Upon that far untravelled shore
 Till I was buried fathoms deep
 Beneath that cold white drifting sleep -
 Sleep drifting deep,
 Deep drifting sleep ...

The carter cracked a sudden whip:
 I clutched my stool with startled grip,
 Awakening to the grimy heat
 Of that intolerable street

The contrast between the street life, the commonplace activities of daily life and the dreaming life of the mind, the transforming power of imagination, is a familiar one in Gibson's work from his earliest poems. The ordinary, drab city street provides the opportunity to leap into the conjuring of a world of rich fantasy and of "thrilling regions of thick-ribb'd ice". It is these two elements taken together, mundane life and the fantasy of imagination, which make the poem pleasing. but, once Gibson has left reality behind the fantasy itself becomes merely sentimental and vacuous. It is a familiar technique of other poets also, notably Yeats in

The Lake Isle of Innisfree. This simple effective dream-fantasy that has a wide appeal to all sorts and conditions of readers is something which Gibson worked to achieve and does very well. *The Ice Cart* was first published on March 13th, 1915 (*The Nation*, 16, 749.) over a year before its appearance in the volume, by when Gibson had revised the punctuation.

Finally the sonnet 'Gold' reminds us of Gibson's period of residence at the Poetry Bookshop in Devonshire Street. The poem has a goldsmith beating gold in a room below, whilst the poet works in his garret on his poetry. All day both men work but at night the poet dreams that he is beating gold to make his bread:

All day the mallet thudded, far below
My garret, in an old ramshackle shed
Where, ceaselessly, with stiffly nodding head
And rigid motions ever to and fro,
A figure like a puppet in a show
Before the window moved till day was dead,
Beating out gold to earn his daily bread,
Beating out thin fine gold-leaf blow on blow.

And I within my garret all day long
To that unceasing thudding tuned my song,
Beating out golden words in tune and time
To that dull thudding, rhyme on golden rhyme:
But in my dreams all night in that dark shed
With aching arms I beat fine gold for bread.

This is a tightly constructed poem; it is simple and plain with no false steps or excessively ornamental language. What might seem fanciful about its subject is at once dispelled by the recollection that next door to the Poetry Bookshop was a goldbeater's workshop where "from early morning to evening the thud-thud of the goldbeating hammers was an undercurrent to our lives".¹³¹

Friends is a collection of poems that is full of variety, feeling, deep personal emotion and response to a world which is communicated simply and appealingly. It was no wonder it made so many friends. Gibson

was not, however, at this stage exclusively absorbed in the celebration of friends and of his home. He was busily involved with his 'dramas', with efforts to 'join up' and with preparations for the birth of his first child. In spite of the disruptions of the war, Gibson's personal affairs flourished. He seemed to have a rich home life and a happy marriage and, above all, he had made a name for himself as a poet. In serving the cause of the poor in poetry he enjoyed a reputation in Britain and America. Now, in war, he turned to serve the cause of the front line soldier and he was determined to become a soldier himself.

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

1. From a letter of Gibson's written to G.P.Dilla and quoted in 'The Development of Wilfrid Wilson Gibson's Poetic Art', *Sewanee Review*, 30 (1922) 39.
2. M.B. 22.2.07.
3. M.B. 8.7.07.
4. Christopher Hassall, *Edward Marsh: A Biography* (London, 1959), pp 215-6
5. Christopher Hassall, *Rupert Brooke: A Biography* (London, 1964) pp. 359-360
6. E.M. 3.8.12.
7. E.M. 13.8.12.
8. E.M. 6.10.12.
9. E.M. undated, but the probable date determined by its position in the sequence of letters.
10. E.M. 17.3.13.
11. E.M. 21.10.12.
12. H.S.Ede, *A Life of Henri Gaudier-Brzeska* (London, 1930) p.112
13. Reverend J.H.Holmes, 'Wilfrid Wilson Gibson: Poet of Tenement and Trench', *The Survey*, 37 (1917) 409-410.
14. An interview given to the *Daily Express*, 'Wilfrid Gibson - Poet of the Wild Countryside', May 4th 1931.
15. E.M. 6.10.12.
16. E.M. 15.10.12.
17. E.M. 17.10.12.
18. John Lehmann, *Rupert Brooke: His Life and Legend* (London 1980) p. 60
19. E.M. 19.3.13.
20. Maurice Browne, *Recollections of Rupert Brooke* (Chicago, 1920) p. 27
21. *ibid.*
22. E.M. 12.10.13.
23. E.M. *ibid*
24. E.M. 11.12.13.
25. Boulton and Zytaruk (ed.) *Collected Letters of D.H.Lawrence*, Volume II (Cambridge, 1982) p.92.
26. E.M. October (no actual date) 1912.
27. Lawrance Thompson, *Robert Frost: The Early Years*. (London, 1967) p. 438
28. *ibid.* p. 598
29. E.M. 14.1.13.
30. E.M. 23.1.13.
31. E.M. 19.3.13.
32. see footnote 25, (*The Letters of D.H.Lawrence*) p.118.
33. E.M. a postcard 23.11.13.
34. W. de la M. 17.8.15.
35. E.M. end of October 1913.
36. E.M. 7.11.13.
37. E.M. 14.2.14.
38. see footnote 25, (*The Letters of D.H.Lawrence*) pp.154-5.
39. E.M. 22.3.14.
40. E.M. 3.4.14.
41. E.M. 28.3.14.
42. E.M. 24.3.14.
43. E.M. 14.2.14.
44. E.M. 21.1.13.
45. W. de la M. 10.8.15.
46. see footnote 25, (*The Letters of D.H.Lawrence*) p.176.
47. E.M. 4.8.14. This may have been because of their 'alien' status in time of war. They were soon to return to America.
48. E.M. 1.7.14.
49. Edward Thomas 'This England', *The Nation*, 16 (1913) 170-171.
50. E.M. 4.8.14.
51. E.M. 16.8.14.
52. A letter from Gibson's son, Michael Gibson, to the author, 1981.

53. E.M. 16.8.14.
54. *ibid.*
55. E.M. 23.8.14.
56. *ibid.*
57. E.M. 24.9.14.
58. E.M. 12.11.14.
- footnote deleted
60. Edward Thomas, 'The Red Book', A review of *The Golden Helm*, 5.12.02.
61. Filson Young *T.P.'s Weekly*, May 29th 1914.
62. 'Explorations', *The Nation*, 16 (1914) 418-420.
63. E.M. 12.11.14.
64. E.M. undated, December 1914.
65. E.M. 14.12.14.
66. E.M. 26.3.15.
67. *ibid.*
68. *ibid.*
69. Sir Geoffrey Keynes, *The Collected Letters of Rupert Brooke*,
(London, 1968) p.428
70. *ibid.* p.499 71. *ibid.* p.534 72. *ibid.* p.581
73. *ibid.* p.540 74. *ibid.* p.454 75. *ibid.* p.428
76. *ibid.* p.484 77. *ibid.* p.597 78. *ibid.* p.460
79. *ibid.* p.499 80. *ibid.* p.597 81. *ibid.* p.598
82. *ibid.* p.562
83. E.M. no date, Saturday, April 1915.
84. E.M. 27.4.15.
85. P.W. 28.4.15.
86. *ibid.*
87. see 84
88. E.M. 2.5.15.
89. *ibid.*
90. *ibid.*
91. *ibid.*
92. *ibid.*
93. E.M. 12.5.15.
94. *ibid.*
95. Half-a-crown is equivalent to 12½ new pence.
96. E.M. 13.5.15.
97. E.M. 6.5.15.
98. *The War Letters of Ivor Gurney* edited by R.K.R.Thornton
(Manchester/Ashington, 1983) p.232
99. see footnote 5 (Christopher Hassall, *Rupert Brooke: A Biography*) p.517.
100. *ibid.* p.519
101. E.M. 16.7.15.
102. *ibid.*
103. E.M. 12.8.15.
104. E.M. 27.8.15.
105. E.M. 5.9.15.
106. E.M. 15.9.15.
107. Gibson's letter to Elkin Mathews 8.8.15. The Berg Collection
New York Public Library.
108. E.M. 12.9.15.
109. E.M. 2.10.15.
110. E.M. 7 10.15.
111. E.M. 7.11.15.
112. E.M. 4.12.15.
113. The word was 'eat' in the original publication in *The Nation* but was
changed to 'ate' in the *Collected Poems* 1926.

114. An anonymous reviewer in *The Survey* January 27th 1917 p.496
It is quite possible that this person was the Reverend J.H.Holmes
who had written another review of Gibson's work only a short time
before (January 6th) Gibson was actually in America at this time.
115. see footnote 98 (*The War Letters of Ivor Gurney*) p.232.
116. L.Abercrombie, 'The War and the Poets', *The Quarterly Review*, 224 (1915) 395-414.
117. S. Sassoon, *Diaries 1915-1918* ed. R. Hart-Davis (London, 1983) p.129
118. W.L.Phelps, *The Advance of English Poetry in the Twentieth Century*,
(New York, 1918) p.107
119. *ibid.* p.114
120. P.W. 6.12.15.
121. An undated letter from Isaac Rosenberg to Edward Marsh,
The Berg Collection, New York Public Library.
122. D.U.R. 20.4.42.
123. *Sassoon's Long Journey*, edited by P.Fussell, (London, 1983) p.159
124. Jon Stallworthy, *Wilfred Owen: A Biography* (London, 1974) p.242n.
125. E.M. 28.9.15.
126. E.M. 15.10.15.
127. E.M. 10.10.15.
128. see footnote 98 (*The War Letters of Ivor Gurney*) p. 130.
129. W. de la M. 7.4.16.
130. Geoffrey Hill: The F.W.Bateson Memorial Lecture 'Gurney's 'Hobby''
reproduced in *Essays in Criticism*, 34 (April 1984),
97-128 (p.107)
131. Alida Monro, from a B.B.C. talk in 1955 and quoted by Joy Grant in
Harold Monro and the Poetry Bookshop (London, 1969) p.76
132. H. Monro, *Some Contemporary Poets* (London, 1920) pp. 119/122.

CHAPTER FOUR

November 1915 to 1919

War Years and War Service

The war had now been going on for over a year and looked like being a prolonged affair which had not been expected at its outbreak. The pressure was on men, more and more, to serve with the colours. Throughout the war, campaigns of advertising and popular movements like the 'white-feather'-giving that attempted to expose suspected malingerers or cowards, together with the use of military parades in towns and cities throughout the land, exerted a force on the over-age and the unfit as much as on the eligible to 'go'. Slogans such as "Your country needs you", "Kitchener Wants You", "Women of England! Do your duty! Send your man Today to join our Glorious Army", "Women of Britain Say GO" exhorted the mass of men. The deaths of friends, the news in letters home also put pressure on them and Gibson evidently felt this keenly. Many poets enlisted at once: Brooke, Julian Grenfell, Charles Sorley, Noel Hodgson and others like Francis Ledwidge, known to Gibson, had gone. Many were now dead. Others, familiar names of the Dymock period, had moved on. Robert Frost had returned to the United States of America in February 1915, Edward Thomas had joined up in the Artists' Rifles in June 1915. Gibson felt that he too should be making shift to serve his country and he set about this purposefully according to his letters to Marsh. Not that he ever shewed quite the passion for service Edward Thomas did. When asked by Eleanor Farjeon what he thought he was fighting for, Thomas stooped, picked up a handful of earth and said "literally this."

Gibson's first announcement of his intention to volunteer came in a postcard to Marsh:

I'm trying to enlist but I have to go back to Gloucester next week for a further examination'

A week later he wrote with the latest news:

I was rejected by the Army doctor yesterday, much to my amazement.²

In a letter to Walter de la Mare he wrote explaining that all his attempts to enlist were fruitless. "They won't even have me in the reserve!" he complained.³ He was not to be put off however and he had his wife's clear support for he says that she is "splendid" about his plans for enlistment. Within days of his rejection he has "made another application at the Recruiting Office" ⁴ despite the fact that his own private doctor told him that he wouldn't even survive the training! Abercrombie too was offering himself for service but on rejection decided at once, being unable to afford to continue living in Gloucestershire, to return to Liverpool, where he had earlier worked as a journalist, and embark on munitions work in a factory. Gibson persisted with his intention to be in the army and, in January 1916, as the need for men resulted in a lowering of standards for recruitment he once again presented himself for a medical:

Since the sight restriction has been shelved I have offered again, but was rejected as altogether unfit.⁵

The army doctor's conclusions are not at all surprising in view of the evidence of Gibson's day to day general health which emerges from his correspondence with Marsh, and indeed with other correspondents at a later date. For example only a week after this January medical for the forces he tells Marsh:

I have been under the doctor for six months and on a diet of meat and eggs.⁶

Furthermore he had been ordered by the doctor to spend half of each day in bed. This may reflect on the oddity of medical practice and the curiosity of treatment in those days but it also shews that Gibson was far from fit and well. He suffered frequent "aches and pains" and was generally plagued with what he later refers to as "fibrositis". This seems to be a sort of generic all-purpose term to describe any debilitating muscular ache and reading the correspondence carefully there

is the occasional sense to be picked up of its being more than a little psychosomatic. Robust in health he never was but in spirit he clearly made up for this deficiency. In April he described himself as having no energy at all but he was still busy with all sorts of projects for his work and soon contemplating the possibility of a tour to the United States. The amount of work he did, however, was apparently negligible and he scourged himself verbally many times.

On the 23rd April 1916 the Abercrombies came to say goodbye. The Dymock idyll was over for them and he was reclaimed by the city from which he had fled:

It seems as if the uprooting of the elms [an earlier reference had been to equinoctial gales] of The Gallows and Greenway have been symbolical! The Abercrombies paid us a farewell visit yesterday. Catherine and the children follow Lascelles to Liverpool on 1st May ... we shall have to move soon to a house where there is at least the possibility of accommodating a servant if need be.⁷

The need for the servant, which now sounds so archaic, arose because they were expecting their first child in mid-May. In a middle-class household a wife with a young child would be expected to have, indeed would need to have, a lot of help in the absence of household appliances and at a time when a husband was not expected to help with the chores.

At that time domestic service was still pretty commonplace and only began to cease being part of a world-taken-for-granted when the war had enlarged the opportunities for untrained, uneducated working women. Apart from service, Gibson's requirements for a new house to accommodate the new baby were clear and precise as he put them in a letter to Percy Withers; he needed he said:

a cottage of three or four bedrooms, at not more than £30 rent [per annum] ... bracing countryside ... neighbours interested in poetry ...[and] we should like heather too: but that may be impossible.⁸

Two prime needs, felt throughout his life, are alluded to there in his need for literary fellowship and a countryside like his native Northumberland. For much of his life he was denied both.

The baby arrived on May 31st and Gibson's letters and poems shew how ecstatic he was about it. It had evidently been a difficult birth but he wrote "This new happiness that has come to us is most wonderful of all" and in a post-script "O Eddie it's so amazing to be a father."⁹ The baby was to be christened Audrey Greenway - celebrating both her rural origin by association with Shakespeare's Arden and their country home - and Marsh was to be the godfather. Their happiness was obviously remarkable and the future looked fair for them even if they were on the brink of much change.

Two poems, very simple and full of heartfelt warmth, convey to us the ecstatic response of Gibson to fatherhood:

TO AUDREY

A crocus brimmed with morning light,
Burning clean and amber clear,
Single on the wet black mould -

So to me you come, who hold
Heaven in your heart, my dear,
Every morning out of night.

ONE-DAY-OLD (A.G.G.)

Baby asleep on my arm,
Would that my heart could enfold you,
Cherish you, shelter you, hold you
Ever from harm.

Born in a season of strife,
When warring with fire and with thunder
Men wantonly shatter asunder
All that was life -

Into a world full of death
You come with a gift for the living
Of quiet grey eyes and a giving
Of innocent breath.

Baby asleep on my arm,
Would that my heart could enfold you,
Cherish you, shelter you, hold you
Ever from harm.
1916.

So preoccupied was Gibson with the new arrival and making arrangements for the proposed American tour that his work was driven into the background:

I haven't written a line of verse for nine months - though we have achieved a perfect poem in Audrey.

and again:

The arrangements for my American tour go ahead and I am being advertised (in company with George Moore!) as a "special attraction."¹⁰

Most of the poems that Gibson did manage to write during this wartime period make it abundantly clear how much he depended for his inspiration on a direct evocation of friends, family, home, small quotidian experiences, reverie and romance. What he has no trace of at all is the kind of 'impersonal' poetry that from 1909 onwards had begun to be more important and Gibson's simple poetic credo was soon overshadowed. Both the tenets of Imagism proclaimed by Ezra Pound and the notion of the decadence of Romanticism that Hulme preached, requiring a new, simpler poetry, were very similar to what Gibson had independently been developing between 1903 and 1908. He had given up his earlier style and he faced the modern world with a bare directness of statement. The art of poetry, however, was moving in new directions and the Modernism of Pound and Eliot was to outdate and hence debase the currency of the Georgian writers and the principles on which they had based their claims to significance. These 'principles' were set out by Marsh¹¹ in part, and by Monro¹² though it is clear that there was no doctrine as thoroughgoing and inclusive as that set out by Herbert Palmer, a pre-

second world war critic in his fourteen "certainties and half-certainties" of Georgianism!'³

As the 'modernist' writers found themselves and their voices became stronger so the pre-modernists like the Georgians were to be consigned to the minor ranks of literature. Gibson showed no consciousness, in the available correspondence, of what was happening and clearly he heartily disliked what he called the "Pound crowd". On the occasion of the publication of *The Catholic Anthology* in October 1915, he had a few revealing words to say to Marsh. He had received a cheque from Marsh for *Georgian Poetry I* proceeds and wrote in reply:

Georgian Poetry is a wonder! And Georgian Poetry II sounds promising. I see Mathews announced a rival - Catholic Poetry 1914-1915 - a bad title, as most people will take it to mean Roman Catholic. I believe its mostly confined to American poetry (the Pound crowd I expect). ¹⁴

This was the anthology which was to startle received taste with the inclusion of Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* and it was called Catholic in the spirit of claiming Universality, perhaps as a distinct banner to proclaim its distaste for Georgian parochialism.

Gibson was formed by the nineteenth century, by the naïveties of Georgian simplicity; he had no ear at all for the modern although, like Eliot in his *Preludes* and elsewhere he saw the squalor, the dirt, the streets, the 'broken fingernails of dirty hands'. What he did was to note it documentarily and to express compassion for those in it. Eliot went further. Out of the images of urban life Eliot depicted 'the horror' of twentieth century living and was well on his way to a vision of the sordid, the putrescent and the desolate which would culminate in the achieved fulfilment of *The Waste Land*. Eliot had gifts beyond Gibson's compass altogether, he also read more extensively and differently. Gibson seems to have been entirely insular, so for him no Baudelaire, Laforgue or Corbière or Rimbaud. Nor yet philosophy nor yet the strength to be

found in pre-Romantics. Gibson was not educated at all in the way that Eliot was, that Pound was. No comparison of the two poets is intended - a comparison would be utterly pointless. What is a matter of interest at the time of the publication of *The Catholic Anthology* is that a new poet was arriving with startling gifts and he could not be recognized as such by one like Gibson who, though he regarded himself as a poet, did not regard himself as a literary critic or an intellectual. Indeed, Gibson evidently could not see at all that poetry to be distinctive and 'great' in the twentieth century had to depart in a more radical way than he had achieved by his technique of stripping the language. Gibson's poetry described suffering but could not cope with the ugliness and horror of the modern world as Eliot did in *The Waste Land*. Where

Eliot saw that modern poetry had to be difficult Gibson, unfortunately for his fame, and his own satisfaction, persisted in being simple. He had made efforts to break with the style of the immediate past but he remained only on the brink of the modern. He appeared, however, to be unaware of this and for years was obsessed by the fact that reviews were not always complimentary and his sales were poor. He was lauded between 1910 and 1914 but after the war interest in his work declined and he was thereafter given less attention by serious critics. An intelligent mind like Edward Thomas's had seen very early on what was wrong and he knew much of that what Gibson was doing was no longer valid. The world had changed. Poetry had changed too. And plain, unadorned language of common life was not going to do this time as the necessary revitalisation of a language gone dead. A poet who, like Gibson, continued to write on ordinary subjects in 'language such as men do use' and in dialect too could only be consigning himself to obscurity. At the time, however, it did not look like that at all. As the future shape of literary history between the first world war and the second was settling down it looked to many as

though Gibson's prolific, common-sense, no-nonsense, plain-man's poems were the thing of the future. The Tennysonian music had vanished, the world-weariness of the decadents had lost its appeal, nationalism and the large emotional gesture had been crushed by 1916. Eliot's role was not yet at all clear, nor yet was Hardy's. In the unsettled state of contending literary energies Gibson's looked distinctive, had wide appeal and perhaps seemed very much better than later generations were to find it.

The year 1916 was a difficult one for Gibson and his poor health did not help. He had to restrict himself to a somewhat stringent diet of two quarts of milk a day and nothing else during February. Then in March he was operated on for removal of a diseased appendix. His efforts to do what he clearly felt was the right thing, to 'join up' and serve his country, were constantly thwarted by his poor health resulting in the refusal of medical boards even to consider him. In the meantime, however, there was the comforting reality of the money coming in from Rupert Brooke's estate:

Isn't too wonderful [sic] how Rupert's money has come to us at this time in our "most need" 's

And even though he felt totally without energy and "down",¹⁶ there were the attractive possibilities of his proposed visit to America to enliven his spirit. This was clearly a most wonderful prospect for the man who, only four years earlier, had 'made' London. To be going to America was to be enjoying international acclaim. So far as one can gather from the correspondence to Marsh the eventual offer to go to America came about in this way: Marsh had been approached by someone from Yale University to arrange for some English poets to go as visiting lecturers. In early May 1916 Marsh wrote to Gibson about this idea and proposed that Gibson should go to Yale "to lecture there." Gibson's reply characteristically

self-deprecating and generously deferential towards the friend to whom he always referred as the 'remarkable intellect' was as follows:

Of course Lascelles is the one who could, and ought to do it - but he won't be able to get away from his ammunition work; and, quite apart from the fact that I couldn't lecture, I expect my reading tour will have to be postponed [because of call-up] ... what about de la Mare? He's over military age, and there should be no objection to his leaving the country'⁷

An undated letter shortly afterwards reveals that Drinkwater, Gibson's close friend, was also likely to go to America and that Gibson's visit was now firmly fixed and being advertised by an agent and publicist,

J. B. Pond, of New York:

I do hope de la Mare will be able to go. But your remark that "There is a possibility of John" [Drinkwater] puzzles me entirely. I thought that no-one of military age was allowed to leave the country! ... I see I am starred as "a special attraction" with George Moore in Pond's itinerary for 1917.¹⁸

In part, of course, Gibson thought Drinkwater his inferior. He could not abide the latter's war poetry in which, he said, the war seemed to be presented "as a sort of irritating interruption of his piping."¹⁹ Gibson was equally critical of Drinkwater's volume *Olton Pools* in which he saw the poet "stepping down off his pedestal to be naïve". In sum, he said, "I don't think he's a poet, at least he never moves me in the way I expect a poet to move me."²⁰

By July the arrangements for the tour were finalised and Gibson was beginning to have all the symptoms of stage fright and cold feet about what began to seem an excessively ambitious enterprise:

The prospect of America is already becoming alarming now that it has become a matter of definite engagements - to read to the Phillips Academy (a girls' school, I suspect) Andover, Mass. on such a date; to the Womans's Club, Springfield, Ill. on such a date, and to dine with the Executive Board of the Browning Society, Philadelphia, Pa. on such a date. I hear that "Mr Stork desires to entertain Mr Gibson at his home for the night! (I wonder if we shall feed out of long-necked pitchers)"²¹

Gibson finds himself hoping that the tour will be postponed though as always he writes that "the money will be useful". What he chiefly

regrets, as a very domesticated soul in these years of early marriage, is that he will miss so terribly his wife and child. He tells Marsh that he and Geraldine "haven't been parted for 24 hours in three years."²² Even so the kind of money that was offered was sufficient to overcome hesitations and doubts. In contrast with the markedly parsimonious treatment he received from the English Association which invited him to Glasgow to read only for expenses paid, the fee from some of his American readings was \$150 with a percentage agreed to the agent.

The only stumbling-block to departure now was the possible call-up which, as the war wore on, sought out more and more older, less-fit men. Also there was Gibson's continuing desire to be a volunteer. No coward he, mindful of Brooke's sacrifice, the deaths of friends and the continuing dismal wail of conflict across the channel, Gibson meant to serve. On the 18th August he went before the medical board at Bristol and was "finally rejected.....so it seems that I might as well go to America after all next January" ²³ and he goes on to enquire of Marsh about passport procedures and so on: the unworldly poet very much dependent upon the practical man of affairs to organise his departure for him.

Before the American visit there was to be a move away from Greenway, Dymock where so much of Gibson's imagination was lodged and was to remain so for many years afterwards; those rich years of 1913-1914-1915 could never be improved upon and long after those hours were recalled as golden ones in his life. The problem with Dymock had been its climate; it had, said Gibson, "never suited any of us."²⁴ He was "sad to leave the Old Nailshop" but the new house to which they were soon to move was higher and healthier - "1000 feet up on the shoulder of Worcester beacon." In the age of Elgar what better coign of vantage could a poet have? Certainly its bracing air was what Gibson felt he could do with:

It will be sad to leave this little house, but it will be good to feel really awake sometimes. I am always half asleep here.²⁵

The stimulus the move provided resulted in his finishing a number of poems and then "good news from the front set me going - and my *Livelihood* book is practically complete now."²⁶ He did not expect publication, however, till "after the war" and was not at all sanguine about his poetry at this stage - always a self-doubter he was riddled with doubt at this time. The work of his contemporaries, though, struck him as being equally lacking:

I do hope the Georgian poets are not going to fizzle. Stephen's, Lawrence's and Davies's last books seem to me almost as poor as Gibson's.²⁷

The view of the poverty of the Georgians that he noted here was subsequently to become the established viewpoint and whilst Gibson evidently recognized it, he was quite unable to change his direction and escape from the now out-dated and surpassed mould of respectable versifying. His responses to Masfield's new volume of *Sonnets and Poems* (1916) are sharply critical and quite tartly expressed:

I liked a great deal of Masfield's *Sonnets and Poems*; but what terrible lapses and what shameless rhyming! He has no literary conscience and too much moral conscience. I wished he'd got you to go through those poems with a blue pencil before publication. But there are lovely lines and there's a fine ardour running through the book.²⁸

Masfield's robustness and gusto in facing up to the world with a bolder language than Gibson could master might have provided an energy that was profitable; shying away from Masfield was a bit like retreating from life with its robust forms. Though Masfield is not always robust and the 'rhymster' element in him gives justice to Gibson's comments.

He had learned by October that *Livelihood* was to be published in time to sell on his American tour and that it would also be published by Macmillan in England.²⁹ This pleased him greatly and with the prospect of an increased income, greater fame and the pride of a new address,

Journey's End, West Malvern, he became almost exclusively preoccupied with his American tour. Tangling with the bureaucracy was the first problem he encountered and he recorded that getting out of England was "like trying to get out of Russia."³⁰ Another irritation was to be his agent's "razzamatazz" style of publicizing his literary lions - "in his shameless prospectus of my tour Pond says that I was "perhaps the most intimate friend of Rupert Brooke"!" To Marsh, of course, sensitively considering his and Brooke's friendship, Gibson was naturally anxious to disavow the claim and so went on to say "I needn't tell you, Eddie, I gave him no warrant for such a statement." There were misgivings about it all and he feels "It's a crazy business altogether - I wonder I ever undertook it ...Public entertaining is clean out of my line."³¹ He even spoke of the whole thing as a "nightmare". Nonetheless it all went ahead. The family were to go and stay with Bob Trevelyan [R.C.Trevelyan, brother to G.M.Trevelyan] at his house "The Shiffolds". Gibson was to sail from Liverpool on the 23rd December on the Cunard vessel Tuscania. "My address will be care of J.B.Pond, 4th Avenue, New York City" he wrote to Marsh in what was to be the last letter until the correspondence was renewed again on his return in late July 1917 and he reported "I had a wonderful time."³²

While in America he was so preoccupied both with "huge audiences" and with travelling about that he wrote very few letters and those mainly to his wife. These have all been destroyed but Geraldine passed on a few pieces of information from them to other people:

...he is having a tremendous welcome everywhere...very successful but it's very strenuous and tiring.³³

Gibson's American visit was also referred to in a letter from Gordon Bottomley to Edward Thomas written in March 1917:

Mrs Gibson and the baby are staying at 'The Shiffolds' while Wilfred is in America, so I hear a good deal of news of him. He

seems to be having a good deal of success with his readings of his own poems.³⁴

This was Gibson's own account of things, of course, but one wonders how successful a performer he actually was in the light of a report of his previous attempts at reading his own poetry at the Poetry Bookshop:

Wilfrid Gibson murdered his work by reading it at great length in a monotone.³⁵

It is difficult to give a detailed account of Gibson's tour as there are very few sources available, but he certainly carried out speaking engagements and readings in New York city and in the mid-west and Chicago. During the tour he was keep so busily engaged and so fêted that he found little time to write letters home.

The Professor of English at Yale University, W.L. Phelps, wrote that "Gibson and de la Mare received homage everywhere [in America]".³⁶ In New York City he was handsomely accommodated in a fine brownstone house on the Upper West side in West 90th Street adjacent to Central Park. Whilst in New York he met Padraic Colum who wrote an article on him for *The New Republic* stressing Gibson's 'Jacobin' qualities and Gibson wrote a number of poems which convey his experience and memories with the simplicity and directness for which he was then being fêted. They are his imaginative snapshots and reflective post-cards recording his journey:

IN FIFTH AVENUE

A negro in a dandy livery
Of blue and silver, dangling from one hand
A rose-emblazoned bandbox jauntily,
With conscious smile of gold and ivory
He ambles down the side-walk

And I see
Him naked in a steamy forest-land
Of dense green swamp beneath a dripping tree,
Crouched for the spring and grinning greedily.

Gibson's contemporaries would probably have been unoffended by a lyric like this but for a modern reader the naïveté and innocent racism ruin the poem. Poems written on Staten Island, in Indiana and on Lake Michigan

all carry the same burden, that in these locations Gibson is a stranger and so his thoughts wander from the place in question. He cannot keep his eye on the object for long, but springs from it into memory and a longing for home or, as in the first poem, into sympathy for the soldiers in the front line:

ON STATEN ISLAND: 1917

Out of the bosky glen into the still summer night
Fluttering, twinkling, sparkling, light upon fairy light,
The fireflies dance and glance in an endless flickering flight.

And over the still grey Narrows, stabbing the silvery haze,
The flaring festal lights of Coney Island blaze
Where men and women dance in a razzling dazzling daze.

And, sitting in silence under the dark unrustling trees,
We think of the lads who crouch in trenches overseas
With eyes that stare all night on other lights than these.

IN INDIANA

Snow on the hills and stars in a crystal sky
Around me the golden leagues of the prairie lie
Under the blaze of July:

And my heart turns home to the hills in their wintry white
As I saw them last on that last December night
Lustrous in cold starlight -

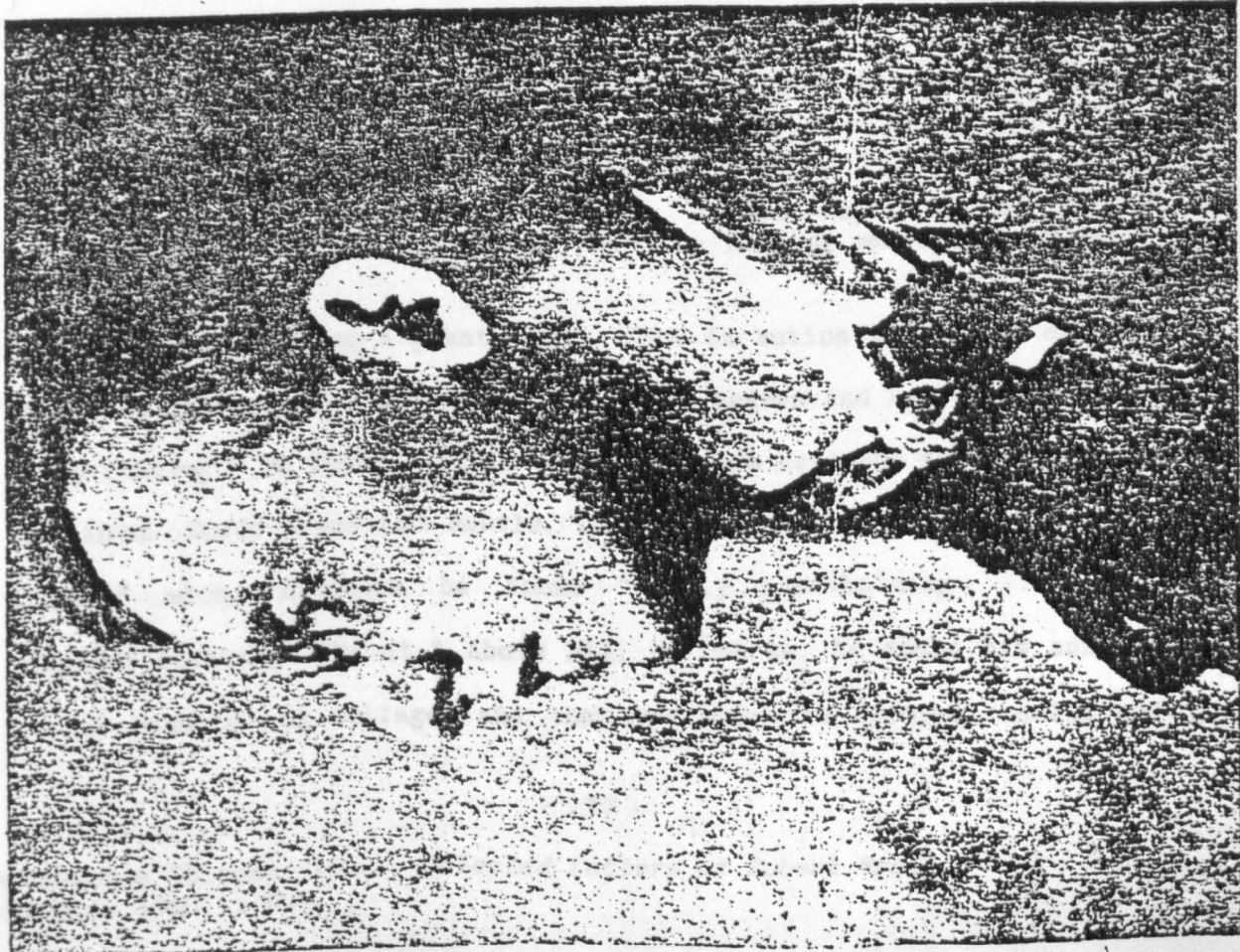
To the hills of my heart that are far over land and sea,
And the snug little house on the Beacon where I would be,
That is all-in-all to me.

So, under the glare of July,
While around me the aching leagues of the prairie lie,
I long for the snow on the hills and the stars in a crystal
sky.

BY LAKE MICHIGAN

As out of intricate wintry woods to-night
Through white dunes suddenly on the starlit lake
I came, and saw the windy waters break,
Frothing along the sand, beneath the light
Of far steel furnaces whose ruddy flare
Was mingled with the glitter of stars, once more
Among the ghostly dunes of that far shore
I knew the desolation of despair.

Though I by day and night unceasingly
Hunger for you and for the hills of home,
Yet that heart-breaking beauty of starry foam
And rosy fire to livelier agony
Shivered my courage - till in dreams you came
And filled my heart with stars and rosy flame.



"Advice to a young & ambitious author"?

Book as now prepared, but let time
& reconsideration test every syllable
before publication.

List all good wishes for success,

Lilipud Lillan O'Brien.

NEIGHBOURS

Characteristic advice on a signed
presentation copy of Neighbours (1920)
The firm hand is typical of all but
his very last letters. The author mentioned.
remains anonymous. The book is in the
possession of Professor R. K. R. Thornton
of Birmingham University.

Another place that Gibson visited during his American tour was the city of Chicago. Here he confounded the erudition of the University professors of English by replying to their complex questions on his metrical ideas that he did not understand the technicalities of metre. He simply composed as his own rhythms dictated. Such naïveté astounded the academicians just as Gibson's own shy presence surprised Americans who were expecting a 'celebrity'. Even so he was well-received everywhere. He was also handsomely rewarded. Indeed he was rather better rewarded than Robert Frost was when they both appeared as readers for the Browning Society in Philadelphia. After the reading both of them were put up for the night at the house of a poet whose wife put them into a double bedroom. When they were alone Gibson anxiously quizzed Frost as to how much he had been paid. Frost was a little irked to find that Gibson had received twice as much as he had.³⁷ Frost and Gibson had rather cooled towards each other since the Dymock days, when Frost could say: "the important thing to us is that we are near Gibson".* Now, three years later, he thought Gibson's performance before the Chicago academics, for he shared the platform, was quietly comic.³⁸

One of the few surviving American letters was written to Percy Withers from 2970 Ellis Avenue, Chicago. In this he explains that he found it very difficult to settle to letter writing

while I am gallivanting around. I had hoped to do any correspondence on the train - but the jolting makes that quite impossible.³⁹

He is, he says "having a great time". Once in action in America and with "good and appreciative audiences" his fears thawed and he "began quite to enjoy reading." He found that in America he was renowned as the author of two works: *Daily Bread* and *Battle*. These works had made for him "so many friends" whose kindness he found "simply overwhelmingI never imagined anything like it." Above all, of course, he found his admirers in the schools and colleges and that was where he enjoyed reading most

* Lawrance Thompson (ed.), *Selected Letters of Robert Frost* (London, 1965) p.124.

although he read also to many other interested 'general readers.' Gibson's reception carried with it something of the veneration accorded to a social thinker or social prophet. The Reverend Holmes' article in *The Survey* was published to coincide with Gibson's arrival in America; it is a laudatory account of his poetic power and his social thought:

Wonderful is the skill with which, through selection of incident, character and speech, the poet has revealed the truth about the dull routine of life in the home, and labor in the mine and mill. And not merely the truth, but the beauty also! For behind the commonplace is shown the heroic and sublime. In all he makes us see, is the light of poetry; in all he makes us hear, the call of prophecy. ⁴⁰

Another canon of the American Church acclaimed the publication of *Daily Bread* in these words:

A new poet of the people has risen up among us. The story of the soul is written as plainly in *Daily Bread* as in *The Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost*.⁴¹

Such a fanciful flight is hardly to to-day's taste but it does reveal that Gibson's newness met with astonishing reader-reception in America. Wherever he spoke and read there were great crowds. It was not only for the Reverend Holmes that his verse was to have transformative powers, nor yet only for literature lovers but for those concerned with social justice and with America's entry into the war with the purpose of securing world peace:

The arrival in and tour through this country of such a man as Mr Gibson is an occasion of great moment. Lovers of literature will be quick to do him honor. But let not these outdo the leaders of social change and the seekers after an end to war, for whom this man is at once seer and prophet. ⁴²

His first contract with J.B.Pond was completed by March 1917 and he should have returned home. He stayed on to complete another tour, however, as there was adequate demand for this and also because to return to England would have meant crossing the Atlantic Ocean at an especially dangerous time. German U-boat activities there had been dangerous throughout the war and had culminated in the tragedy of the S.S. Lusitania

going down in May 1915. The outrage which this incident caused led to a temporary German naval instruction not to sink neutral ships. This was rescinded in 1916, however, and losses in the summer were so great that the British Admiralty was faced with a very serious problem. For a time they even rejected the historically well-founded policy of convoying, in which trading vessels were shepherded by destroyers. This policy actually did defeat the enterprise of the U-boats, of which the Germans had too few anyway.

As a consequence of the great dangers at sea at this time Gibson had promised his wife "not to attempt to cross just yet".⁴³ This general danger was at the same time complicated by the fact that America itself was on the brink of entry into the European war and indeed as a result of the decoding of the Zimmerman telegram, in which the German Foreign Minister summoned Mexico to ally with Germany and attack the United States, America declared war on Germany on April 6th 1917.⁴⁴ This event enlarged the dangers of the Atlantic crossing, of course, and so Gibson did not finally leave until he sailed on the White Star Line's S.S. Baltic in July 1917. That journey is recalled in

TROOPSHIP: MID-ATLANTIC
(S.S. Baltic, July 1917)

Dark waters into crystalline brilliance break
About the keel as, through the moonless night,
The dark ship moves in its own moving lake
Of phosphorescent cold moon-coloured light;
And to the clear horizon all around
Drift pools of fiery beryl flashing bright,
As though unquenchably burning cold and white
A million moons in the night of waters drowned.

And staring at the magic with eyes adream
That never till now have looked upon the sea,
Boys from the Middle West lounge listlessly
In the unlanthorned darkness, boys who go,
Beckoned by some unchallengeable dream,
To unknown lands to fight an unknown foe.

The quality of this piece is above the average, perhaps because of the pressure of feeling or the successful blending of the dream with ordinariness.. Back in England Gibson wrote a letter to Percy Withers in late July giving an account of those "nervous" days at sea:

We had a nervous twelve days of it, crossing. We were not attacked, however, and the Germans missed one of the fattest prizes that has ever crossed the Atlantic, we had 1800 troops on board, two major generals and their staffs, guns for Russia, and a cargo of wheat, cotton, silver etc.. worth \$9,000,000. Yet we were only convoyed for three days out of the twelve.⁴⁵

Once back again in England Gibson immediately informed the military authorities and awaited, yet again, medical re-examination. Whilst awaiting orders he busied himself in writing songs - "quite a lot". After a year in which he had written no verse at all "it was a great relief to be rhyming again."⁴⁶ Marsh at this time was back, re-united, with Winston Churchill who had returned to the Admiralty after his absence since the Dardanelles campaign of 1915. Marsh told Gibson in early 1917 that a new volume of Georgian Poetry was on the way and was to include a lot of new, younger poets. This, clearly, was not entirely to Gibson's liking though he very reasonably saw that younger talents must be cultivated. Marsh's news provoked in Gibson a rather self-pitying concern for and recognition of his increasing years; he was a rather elderly thirty-nine, "I feel at least 49 instead of 39" and saw himself as "an old fogey" in this letter which shews how one generation of writers was being replaced by another, how Gibson, the "disciple" of Rupert Brooke as they had called him in America, was now perhaps as dated as Brooke had become:

....it's splendid to hear of the new poets, of course we old fogeys must make way for them and give them elbow room. I am afraid I don't know their work as well as I ought. I know books by Squire, Freeman and Graves and I have seen interesting stray poems by Sassoon. I have read a review of Nichols's book. Turner I don't know even by name!⁴⁷

The work of Owen, the greatest innovator of the war poets, was still to come but already the poetic style was changing among English poets under

the pressure of the experience of the horrors of war and the pressure of the new American poets. To most of this new experience Gibson seems to be immune. At 39 his tastes and mental habits seem very firmly fixed.

He wished to be represented in the next *Georgian Poetry* by something "characteristic - a poem from *Livelihood* - say 'Between the Lines'" but he recognized that his day for inclusion was passing, "I quite understand that this is the young man's show."⁴⁸ He remained eager to see the new volume but was depressed by the fact that Squire, Massingham and de la Mare had been disparaging about his work in published essays. He abjures Marsh to be candid and open about his reactions and it is clear that Marsh liked neither *Livelihood* nor the shorter poems.

Gibson's nervous unease about Marsh's possible views of his poetry are made clear by the kind of thing he often urges upon him:

Please, Eddie, never hesitate to say what you think of my work - even if your estimate agrees with Jack Squire's and young Massingham's.⁴⁹

Gibson seemed uncertain about his poetic output and direction and he had confided this, before his American journey, to his friend Percy Withers, who had expressed some dissatisfaction with *Livelihood*. Having had his criticisms commented upon Withers had apparently become "reconciled" to the poems though Gibson agreed "your doubts are my doubts". He went on to shew how he saw his artistic career at a turning point:

As I think I told you I knew I had come to a stage when I must reconsider the whole question of my art - and, if possible, make a fresh start. So, for that reason, I welcome this definite break [the trip to America] but, of course, I don't know that it will have an invigorating effect upon my work. I may be getting too old for fresh starts.⁵⁰

Not that he foresaw any great development for he could see clearly what his own status as a poet was:

You mustn't expect too much! I long ago settled in my own mind that I could never be a great poet - but I still have hopes of one day being a little poet. And if a little poet has done one

poem that really matters to you and has written nothing without sincerity - I don't think he should be "a fallen idol"! ⁵¹

It is not surprising that so many of Gibson's correspondents disliked his latest publication *Livelihood*. The volume was subtitled *Dramatic Reveries* but the pieces are too much reverie or meditation and too little dramatic. In part they mark a return to the earlier manner of *Daily Bread*, that of lengthy monologue. During the intervening period, however, his work had become more lyrical, briefer and more pointed. *Livelihood* sets out to record the kind of life led by "men and women I have known" and in the epigraph "To A.", that is to his daughter, Audrey, he describes the book as being one from which she might hear

These men and women talking to themselves.

And so find out how they faced life and earned,
As you must earn one day, a livelihood,
And how in spite of everything they learned
To take their luck through life and find it good.

The various characters - miner, orchestral instrumentalist, plate-layer, drover, doctor - never come alive and are overlaid by excessive elaboration. The most successful pieces are fragments of description such as that in 'The Drove Road':

'Twas going to snow - 'twas snowing! Curse his luck!
And fifteen mile to travel. Here was he
With nothing but an empty pipe to suck,
And half a flask of rum - but that would be
More welcome later on. He'd had a drink
Before he left, and that would keep him warm
A tidy while; and 'twould be good to think
He'd something to fall back on if the storm
Should come to much. You never knew with snow.
A sup of rain he didn't mind at all,
But snow was different with so far to go -
Full fifteen mile, and not a house of call.
Ay, snow was quite another story, quite -
Snow on the fell-tops with a north-east wind
Behind it, blowing steadily with a bite
That made you feel that you were stark and skinned.

Good, plain, accurate description here brings the scene quickly to the reader's mind. Such a piece stands out well and invites selection.

Similarly the unusual description of an aerial battle on the Western Front in 'Between the Lines' depicts the scene vividly:

Far away

A sound of firing ... Up there in the sky
Big dragon-flies hung hovering ... Snowballs burst
About them

Flies and snowballs! With a cry
He crouched to watch the airmen pass - the first
That he'd seen under fire. Lord, that was pluck -
Shells bursting all about them - and what nerve!
They took their chance and trusted to their luck.
At such a dizzy height to dip and swerve,
Dodging the shell-fire

Hell! but one was hit,
And tumbling like a pigeon plump

Thank Heaven,

It righted and then turned, and after it
The whole flock followed safe - four, five, six, seven,
Yes, they were all there safe. He hoped they'd win
Back to their lines in safety: they deserved,
Even if they were Germans ... 'Twas no sin
To wish them luck. Think how that beggar swerved
Just in the nick of time!

It is essentially journalistic or photographic verse, good at catching a scene but lacking in real feeling. It may be the only Great War description of an aerial 'dogfight' in verse. Quite probably, as with other war poems, Gibson relied on newspaper accounts to provide him with stimulus.

Gibson's own life was about to change for the worse. As I have said, he was untiring in making himself available to the Army medical board and perpetually eager to serve. Finally on Thursday, October 18th 1917 he dashed off a quick post-card to Marsh:

Accepted. 'B' Garrison duty abroad. I don't know when I shall
be called up.

Evidently call-up was delayed almost three months so the army was not exactly eager for Gibson's soldiering despite the great shortage of men. On 23rd January 1918 he proudly announced his new style:

381907 PTE W.W.GIBSON

But after all his efforts to join the Army, Gibson was to become disillusioned with it very quickly. It did not prove to be the worthwhile

venture he had hoped or imagined it would be. He worked as a clerk in Sydenham and had to have a "sleeping-out pass" to join his family who were living in lodgings nearby. Translated into the Army Service Corps Motor Transport Division where, apparently, he was taught to drive - a considerable feat performed by the Army according to his son ⁵² - Gibson found out the truth of Army life:

"I never imagined that life in the Army could be so hideously squalid" ⁵³

To Eddie Marsh he wrote:

Everything is stolen in the Army. I have hardly any possessions left and no end of parcels and letters haven't reached me. ⁵⁴

A letter written from his home in Malvern when he was on leave says starkly "I return to Hell to-morrow." ⁵⁵ He was to continue to call it Hell until his demobilization. During his service he worked both as a clerk and as a packer and loader of military vehicles.

There were, as usual, the more worthwhile preoccupations of the literary life and in particular his volume *Whin* which had just been published (1918) by MacMillan. *Whin* is a volume devoted to praise of Northumberland: it was called *Hill Tracks* in America where it was received enthusiastically. Reviewing the volume for the *Bookman* Arthur Waugh claimed that "in Gibson we have come to recognize a modern of the moderns" ⁵⁶ 'Yeavinger Bell' with its "bare impressionism" is described as "modern":

YEAVINGER BELL

Just to see the rain
Sweeping over Yeavinger Bell
Once again!
Just to see again,
Light break over Yeavinger Bell
After rain.

Vaugh also regarded as remarkable Gibson's capacity to alternate this bare directness of utterance with "folk legends and ballad lines like:

Utterly at variance with this enthusiastic review was the reception of *Whin* in England. The verdict of the reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement* of 14th January, 1918 must have had a crushing effect on the very depressed soldier. The volume was spoken of as "light-weight" and the reviewer said:

Mr Gibson is a considerable poet, with a considerable public. They and he need to realize the emptiness of this new volume; both are in a measure responsible for it. People who never read a poem more than once may not discover what has happened since he wrote 'The Hare' and 'Hoops' but effort and discovery have drained out of what was always a light soil. In one of these poems a child speaks to the skeleton of its father dancing in the wind on a gibbet:-

You taught me many a cunning thing,
But never taught me to dance and sing;
Yet I must do whatever you do,
So when you dance I must dance, too.

The first two lines may suggest profound thought, but the last two, like the rest of the poem, are so cheap that they remove every notion of passion or power from the mind.

We who are left, how shall we look again
Happily on the sun, or feel the rain,
Without remembering how they who went
Ungrudgingly, and spent
Their all for us, loved, too, the sun and rain?

A bird among the rain-wet lilac sings -
But we, how shall we turn to little things
And listen to the birds and winds and streams
Made holy by their dreams,
Nor feel the heart-break in the heart of things?

This is the best and last poem in the book, that to which these censures least apply. Obviously there are books of Swinburne's verse which deserved almost as harsh a welcome, and lesser names on the roll of fame may have produced even emptier books; if they and their admirers escaped, it was because they inspired reviewers with less hope that they were nevertheless equal to profiting by collision with the truth.

The unsympathetic reviewer gives very little sense at all of the really attractive qualities possessed by *Whin*. It is quite unreasonable to dismiss these fifty or so lyrics so carelessly. The volume was put together around August 1917 and it is clearly intended to represent a

celebration of Gibson's return home after his American journey. The epigraph is explicit:

.....
Since wandering's done -
Glad as the gold of the whin
Is my heart, home again.

Not only was Gibson home from his travels, he was returning in his imagination to the home of his early life. Most of the poems are about places, in particular Northumberland and the Border. Some, like 'Ambulance Train' document his response to the continuing casualties of war. By far the most dominant element and the most powerful imaginative yearning goes into the Northumbrian pieces. These frequently combine a sense of the wild, open moorland with some snatch of old story or mystery as in 'Skirlnaked':

O came you by Skirlnaked
When you came o'er the moor?
And did you see an old man
Standing at the door?
And did you see an old man
Glowering at the door?

O came you by Skirlnaked
When you came o'er the moor?
And did you hear a young bride weep
Behind the fast-shut door?
And did you hear a young bride greet
Behind the fast-shut door?

Here Gibson returns, after his preoccupation with industrial, urban life, to his early concerns but with a changed, spare style making full use of dialect speech. It was a territory he was to continue to explore and develop till the end of his writing life. It may be that the reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement* failed to find poetry of great quality here. But he also failed to discern a very real intensity of feeling in the celebration of landscape known well and deeply loved. One person who did prove to be extremely enthusiastic about *Whin* was Ivor Gurney, who wrote Gibson a "kind letter" ⁵⁷ and was setting some of the poems to music. Other items of correspondence in the Gloucester Archive show how

much enthusiasm Gurney had for Gibson's art.

Gibson's work in the Army had no glamour about it at all and to him it was utterly wretched. He had, he wrote to Marsh "a clerking job in the Medical Card Registry - very tedious and very exacting." He saw however, its convenience and he talks like an 'old sweat' rather than the novice he was when he tells of the job's virtues:

But clerking in the army in spite of the long hours has many advantages such as missing drills, parades and most tom-fooleries. ^{5a}

He decided that whilst he was to be involved with these "tom-fooleries" that his wife, who had a little earlier lost the sight of one eye in a fall and was "expecting another little Gibson at the end of May", should leave for Ireland to be with "her own people." In this way she would have the necessary care and attention of her relatives, something he could not provide in war-time Sydenham and also it would be safer: "it would be better for her to be outside the air-radius"^{5a} he joked, a little lamely.

Although he continued to find time for reading - he "liked Graves and Sassoon's books very much indeed" - he felt really quite out of touch with his own kind, indeed his own self:

I, 381907 Pte. Gibson W.W. seem to have lost touch with Wilfrid Wilson Gibson and it is difficult to believe at times he ever existed. ^{5a}

Such a lot had happened since those idyllic years of his pre-war success to detach him from his own sense of himself that whenever opportunity offered he would indulge himself in recollection of the golden days of memory. From those free, spacious days to the days of being, as he was at one stage, clerk to the Anti-Gas officer, was a miserable descent. On receiving the first printed copy of Marsh's *Memoir of Brooke*, he wrote in thanks:

It brought back vividly those tempestuous days at Greenway when you came to us and wrote it at the Old Nailshop and read to us in the evening what you had written during the day. Of course it brought back a great deal also - memories of the old incredible days before the war: and it made me realize more

keenly than ever that Rupert, who had so much from life died without having the best thing that life has to offer.⁶¹

He refers to marriage, children and domesticity: the Gibson ideal. He was a great home lover and family man. He was jubilant when On May 31st 1918 he could announce:

Michael Dana Gibson, born at Ivanhoe, Lansdowne Road, Dublin, - splendid boy doing well.

Dana meant 'strength of the oak' and on June 4th he wrote that "the baby shews every sign of living up to his second name." Strength was not something that Gibson possessed at all, indeed he had even been re-graded downwards since his entry into the Army, he was now BII and the clerking job meant that he

spent the days marking men, even up to the age of 50 and eleven months "fit for overseas and the East" and detailing them for inoculation and vaccination.⁶²

In September he said that since had had joined up he had felt himself to be in "What Conrad calls the "moral solitude".⁶³ Towards the end of the year, by November 1918 his duties had deteriorated to being those of a loader and packer - at times loading lorries with manure or shells. The work was utterly loathsome to him and he could only think of some way of getting release from it as soon as possible. Some intimation of the forthcoming armistice must have reached his unit, or perhaps Marsh had informed him of what was likely to happen because he wrote to Marsh on 7th November 1918 in a mood of desperation and anxiety, requesting him to try and pull strings to get his friend and protégé out of the ranks as soon as possible

I'm almost too dazed by the News to realize just what it means except in its personal and selfish aspects. I don't know what the demobilization plans are - but it apparently will take ages to demobilize and the A.S.C. will be kept to the last. It mightn't be patriotic, but I can only contemplate with cold horror the idea of staying on in the Army for months and months after the war is over. I'm just mad to get home and crazy to get on with my own work. I have never yet tried to "work" anything, but if you have any influence I have no compunction

in asking you to exert it on my behalf, once the war is over, if its means I'll get an earlier release from Hell.

These are my particulars: T/381907 Pte. Gibson W.W., Packer and Loader, attached to A.S. (M.T. Depot Sydenham) Category B II and marked Home Service. As you know I'm married and have two children. My age, 40. Help me Eddie if you can.⁶⁴

Gibson had tried very hard to get himself accepted by the Army Medical Board and one can but conclude that he had absolutely no conception at all of what Army life was like. He must have had before him the memories of the men of 1914 and the powerful sense that he must serve the 'patria' as they had done. The reality was packing and loading: it was shovelling manure: it was Sydenham. Almost the only escape from this miserable period of service was his weekly visits to de la Mare who lived nearby. He later recalled these Saturday evenings as "oases in the desert."⁶⁵

Gibson now had to put as much effort into getting out of the Army as he had put into joining up. The degree to which the Army had depressed his spirits and the degree to which he valued his Marsh contacts, together with the fear he had that the hell might be perpetuated in overseas service, are all evident in the next letter to Marsh, thanking him for his hospitality:

You cannot ever conceive what last night meant to me - back in the old world for a few hours! Though I was so dull and inarticulate I was enjoying every moment intensely, and almost forgot that I was a rat in a trap! They are now mobbing clerks from here for substitution in Mesopotamia!⁶⁶

In addition to the letters of 1917-1918 which recount so tellingly the miseries of Army life the set of poems which Gibson included in the *Collected Poems* in 1926 called *In Khaki* shew how he cast his ordinary daily experiences as a medical officer's clerk and as a transport assistant into verse that was intended simply as a record of that experience.* In every respect the pieces are plain and are implicitly addressed to the plain reader; there is no attempt to put on finer robes or to take imaginative flights about what he witnessed and felt. He

* The poem, 'The Fatigue', published in 1938 in *Coming and Going*, suggests that Gibson accidentally missed being drafted to France because he was absent from camp, loading manure.

offered a true, extraordinarily accurate record of the ordinary. His skill is that of the documentarist of the experience but, as with Owen, the common soldier is transformed into an image of Christ by the imagination:

THE CONSCRIPT

Indifferent, flippant, earnest, but all bored,
The doctors sit in the glare of electric light
Watching the endless stream of naked white
Bodies of men for whom their hasty award
Means life or death maybe, or the living death
Of mangled limbs, blind eyes, or a darkened brain;
And the chairman, as his monocle falls again,
Pronounces each doom with easy indifferent breath.

Then suddenly I shudder as I see
A young man stand before them wearily,
Cadaverous as one already dead;
But still they stare untroubled as he stands
With arms outstretched and drooping thorn-crowned head,
The nail-marks glowing in his feet and hands

The octet here is straight out of Henley. The medical setting, the grimness and the realism report the experience accurately. It is the sestet which spoils the poem in its characteristically Gibsonian attempt to overlay his reportage by portentousness. A better poem because of the absence of the enforcing of 'significance' is 'Long Tom':

LONG TOM

He talked of Delhi brothels half the night,
Quaking with fever; and then, dragging tight
The frowsy blankets to his chattering chin,
Cursed for an hour because they were so thin
And nothing would keep out that gnawing cold -
Scarce forty years of age, and yet so old,
Haggard and worn with burning eyes set deep -
Until at last he cursed himself asleep.

Before I'd shut my eyes reveille came;
And as I dressed by the one candle-flame
The mellow golden light fell on his face
Still sleeping, touching it to tender grace,
Rounding the features life had scarred so deep,
Till youth came back to him in quiet sleep:
And then what women saw in him I knew
And why they'd love him all his brief life through.

Private Gibson's clerical work included recording the demise of fellow soldiers, an unpleasant experience that he wishes to shrink from:

THE CHART

Drawing red lines on a chart
With diligent ruler and pen,
Keeping a record of men,
Numbers and names in black ink -
Numbers and names that were men...

With diligent ruler and pen
Drawing red lines on a chart -
Would you not break, O my heart,
If you stopped but a moment to think!

And in 'Medical Officer's Clerk' he wants to forget reality rather than remember it. He would rather, like the boy in 'The Ice Cart', escape into fantasy, memory or the past leaving behind the current moment which he finds so loathsome:

MEDICAL OFFICER'S CLERK

Let me forget these sordid histories,
These callous records of obscene disease,
This world of scabies and of syphilis
Wherein I drudge until my whole world is
Besotted by the sodden atmosphere ...

Let me remember Venus dawning clear
Through beryl seas of air, a crystal flame -
Glistening as from the cold salt wave she came,
Over the far and ghostly hills of Wales,
Dwindling in darkness as the twilight fails ...

Let me recall the singing and the shine
Of the clear amber waters of the Tyne,
Pouring from peaty uplands of black moss
Over grey boulders where the salmon toss
Wet curving silver bodies in the air,
Scrambling in shoals to comb the salmon-stair
Over the roaring weir

Let me again

In that huge, clanking, and eternal train
Over the prairies of Dakota go -
League after league of level stainless snow
Stretching unbroken under the low sky,
World without end to all eternity,
Until desire and dream and all delight
Drowse to oblivion in a timeless white
Unundulating wilderness

Or let me sail

Again up the blue Bosphorus within hail
Of many-fountained gardens of the rose,
Where bloom on bloom the summer burns and glows,
By minarets that soar like lily-blooms
About the shimmering white mushroom domes
Of marble mosques in groves of cypresses ...

Till I remember no more histories
Of horror, or in drudgery and fret
Of endless days no longer quite forget
The stars and singing waters and the snow,
And how the roses of Arabia blow.

The reality of the medical officer's clerk recording "obscene diseases" is unbearable and it is memory - of Wales, of the Tyne valley, of Dakota, of the Bosphorus - transformed by the language of poetry, which is his fulfilment. He disdains the "sordid histories" and seeks the transforming talisman of "the rose of Arabia." For once Gibson is not writing about the humble worker as object; he himself is the humble worker, the subject, and his escape from that plight is by means of a rich language, betokened by "beryl" and "amber" and a desire for "drowsing to oblivion." This, perhaps, throws a curious light on his *Daily Bread* testimony which argues that in waking from oblivion, in embracing the rôle of poet of the urban poor he had to give up his earlier ornate language and use the plainest language of everyman. There comes a time, however, when plain language is not enough. 'Medical Officer's Clerk' unconsciously reveals the necessity for rich poetry when life is drudgery. It shows the severe limitations Gibson imposed upon himself when he embraced plain words.

Gibson's jubilation at the announcement of the Armistice could not be more heartfelt. Sassoon wrote that "suddenly everyone burst out singing" providing a line that captured the great and mighty release of feeling felt by the people at large. Gibson's more prosaic post-card saying simply on November 11th:

O Eddie, it's over ! ! ! !

captured his flood of release. It was some time yet, however, before he was to be released from the service, and there was much gnashing of teeth over his labours:

Dearest Eddie: How good of you to move so immediately! it cannot be too soon. My job here seems likely to come to an end this week - and I'd likely be drafted abroad - or at least stuck into a new job - and the lowering of my category does not

preclude my being put again to the loading of manure or even shells! If I don't get away soon I don't quite see what I am to live on the next few years - as I have written nothing - and it takes so long for any poems to bring a cash return.⁶⁷

Amidst these woes he was also "starved for friends", feels his wits are "woolly", that his brains have deteriorated and that his faculties for literature especially have atrophied: "here I am, forty years of age and no achievement."⁶⁸ Gibson does tend to complain a good deal about money and health in his correspondence but from time to time, as here, the sense of personal disappointment is more potent.. And it might well seem that this condition was over and beyond what the Army itself might be blamed for. At forty, perhaps, Gibson was not only past the peak of his fame but of his poetic capacities. And it was poetry for which he had lived. His dedication to follow the Muse was necessarily partly supplanted from now on by dedication to his family. Apart from these two purposes in his life he had none other. He was not a man of any religious beliefs and seems to have adopted a modish agnosticism which would be entirely characteristic of the intelligent, thoughtful layman of the period. For the middle classes 'modern life' or the twentieth century, meant the rejection of the old-fashioned, the Victorian, the conforming and restricting habits whether they were in dress, faith or morals. The watchword was 'free thinking'. Of such it seems that Gibson's spiritual attitudes were composed. Before the birth of his son Michael he wrote to his friend, Percy Withers, asking him if he would consent to be "god-father to the next little Gibson." Withers declined this request and was at some pains to point out that this must not be construed as a flouting of the obligations of friendship. His refusal was entirely the consequence of his non-belief in the Christian religion and therefore his inability to fulfil the traditional role of the god-father which was, and is, instructor in the catechism and nurturer of spiritual awareness.

Gibson himself was in exactly the same position as Withers on this matter; he did not believe, yet he proposed to keep to the traditional form of things by having his child baptized. In his reply to Withers' polite and apologetic refusal to be part of an empty ceremony, Gibson explained his own slightly awkward and irresolute feelings on the matter - hardly different from the feelings of most people who do not practice but certainly do not reject and cannot quite relinquish a sense of spiritual grace attendant on the merely mortal. He first of all, apologetically, wrote that he wondered if his friend would think him "entirely conscienceless" because he was subscribing to a practice in which he did not believe. His explanation for the proposed baptism was as follows:

When Audrey was born we considered the matter came to the conclusion that, as it is the custom to christen children, and as there is always the chance that the child of agnostic parents may turn out to be *conventionally theological* we thought *it could do no harm* [my italics] to christen her ... she might one day be very unhappy on discovering that she had not been christened like other children.⁶³

In urging Withers' merest assent he even said that there was no necessity to "attend the ceremony" as Gibson himself would "stand proxy". Gibson seems to have had no personal religious needs and seems not to have sought spiritual comfort himself, even when he was desperately miserable as he was throughout his period of military service.

Gibson's persistence in lobbying Marsh's aid to release him from his Army life did not abate. Marsh certainly, despite some suggestion to the contrary, did have influential connections in high places. Gibson's Christmas 1918 greeting to Marsh contains the following:

About four weeks ago I heard that the W.O. had been making enquiries about me, and I thought the door of the trap was opening, but nothing further has happened an energetic American friend who has come over with Wilson [President Woodrow Wilson] and is seeing all sorts of important people has rashly volunteered to try for my release!

A somewhat large hint to Marsh to spur his tardy efforts it would seem. Soon, in the New Year, the tone of Gibson's request changes to a wheedling one:

I don't want to be a beastly nuisance to you but I wonder if you could possibly find out if your application for me was definitely turned down by the War Office? This uncertainty seems to be driving me crazy ... I suppose all this seems rather indecent to you - but it is difficult to preserve any sense of decency in the Army - and my nerves are all to bits.⁷⁰

By January 27th 1919 he was released and wrote jubilantly:

Dear Eddie: At last, all at home together again! I suspect that it was your original application that ultimately did the trick

The letter went on to say how he had collected his family from Ireland where they had been evacuated and after twenty-four hours of travelling by car, boat and train they had arrived home at, appropriately, "Journey's End, West Malvern." Obviously happy and extremely thankful for his release from 'hell', Gibson attempted to flatter Marsh by addressing him as if he were a distant deity with the capacity to bestow ben~~is~~^{itions} on his supplicants:

And now you too are in the War Office; and sit, I suppose serene and unapproachable, in a shrine, occult, withheld, untrod whose lamps are stirred continually by prayers sent up by poets and other patriots eager for demobilization! ⁷¹

The tone of that cannot but strike the reader as calculating and self-regarding and, even if tongue-in-check, hardly a man-to-man thing to say. Perhaps the exuberant verbosity may be forgiven by a man who was glad it was time to begin anew and look for new directions. A letter to de la Mare expresses more vigourously the massive relief he felt in being 'demobbed':

that obscure existence of the last fifteen months is already just a nightmare - and I am once more clothed and in my right mind. One by one I am picking up the threads of my old life.⁷²

His old friend, Abercrombie, had become an academic and started a new life having been appointed as lecturer in English at Liverpool

University. This seemed to Gibson an ideal solution - "I rejoice that he should have a job that should leave him leisure to do his own work"⁷³ though he felt that he was denied such a simple solution to his own difficulties: "I feel I have to get readjusted to a new world and begin all over again."⁷⁴

In planning to "begin all over again" he was, in effect, ending his pact of 1907-1908 with the ordinary working man of the modern city. He had come to the close of his second distinctive phase and for the next twenty years he was to be preoccupied with Northumbrian plays in dialect and lyric and narrative pieces on rural and maritime themes. The moment in which he had felt the temper of the age had passed. His third phase of writing had more limited appeal to a coterie taste.

FOOTNOTES FOR CHAPTER FOUR

1. E.M. 3.11.15.
2. E.M. 10.11.15.
3. W. de la M. 17.11.15.
4. E.M. undated but between 10.11.15. and 13.11.15.
5. E.M. 21.1.16.
6. E.M. 25.1.16.
7. E.M. 24.4.16.
8. P.W. 24.4.16.
9. E.M. 7.6.16.
10. E.M. 25.6.16.
11. In the prefaces to the five volumes of *Georgian Poetry*.
12. H. Monro, 'The Future of Poetry', *Poetry Review*, 1, No. 1 (1912) 498-500
13. Herbert Palmer, *Post-Victorian Poetry* (London, 1938) pp. 76-8.
14. E.M. 15.10.15.
15. E.M. 4.4.16.
16. E.M. 24.4.16.
17. E.M. 11.5.16.
18. E.M. undated but May/June 1916
19. P.W. 11.12.16.
20. *ibid.*
21. E.M. 19.7.16.
22. *ibid.*
23. E.M. 20.8.16.
24. *ibid.*
25. E.M. 23.8.16.
26. *ibid.*
27. *ibid.*
28. E.M. 4.10.16.
29. E.M. 12.12.16. *Livelihood* was published on 5th January 1917.
30. E.M. 10.10.16.
31. E.M. 12.12.16.
32. E.M. 27.7.17.
33. Letter from Geraldine Gibson to Marsh, 11.2.17.
34. A letter from Bottomley to Thomas from *Letters of Edward Thomas to Gordon Bottomley* edited by R. George Thomas (London, 1968) p. 281
This is the only letter from Bottomley to Thomas that has survived.
35. Joy Grant, *Harold Monro and the Poetry Bookshop* (London, 1969) p. 82
36. W.C. Phelps, *The Advance of English Poetry in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1918) p. 96.
37. Elizabeth S. Sergeant, *Robert Frost - Trial by Existence* (New York, 1960) p. 240
38. Lawrance Thompson, *Robert Frost, The Years of Triumph 1915-1938* (London, 1971) pp 117-118
39. P.W. 12.3.17.
40. Reverend J.H. Holmes, *The Survey*, 37 (1917) 409-10.
41. Canon Cheyne quoted in the above article.
42. see footnote 40.
43. P.W. 12.3.17.
44. Historical data from Norman Stone, *Europe Transformed 1878-1919* (London, 1983) pp 355-356.
45. P.W. 25.7.17.
46. E.M. 3.8.17.
47. E.M. 1.8.17.
48. *ibid.*
49. E.M. 23.8.17.
50. P.W. 12.3.17.

51. *ibid.*
52. Letter from Michael Gibson to the Author, 1983.
53. P.W. undated.
54. E.M. undated, but probably early in 1918.
55. E.M. undated, but probably early in 1918.
56. Arthur Waugh, A Review of Gibson's *Whin*, *The Bookman*, 54 (1918) 16.
57. The Gurney Archives GA 74,57 Gloucester County Record Office
The letter is dated 27.12.20.
58. E.M. 9.3.18.
59. *ibid.*
60. *ibid.*
61. E.M. undated but some time in May 1918.
62. E.M. undated but May/June 1918.
63. P.W. 26.9.18.
64. E.M. 7.11.18.
65. W. de la M. 10.10.21.
66. E.M. a postcard 14.11.18.
67. E.M. 19.11.18.
68. E.M. 26.11.18.
69. P.W. 24.1.18.
70. E.M. 3.1.19.
71. E.M. 27.1.19.
72. W. de la M. 31.1.19.
73. E.M. 27.1.19.
74. *ibid.*

CHAPTER FIVE

1919 - 1924

If I'm only patient a little longer I'll be able
to carry out some quite big schemes. '

After Gibson's demobilisation from the army at the beginning of 1919 it must have been with a sense of relief and anticipation that he was able to start writing again. He began with eagerness:

I've been having a good time writing, the best spell I've had for years - making songs and sonnets, I don't know if they're much good but it's fun to be at work again.²

Not surprisingly to begin with he was physically weak and so produced only short pieces of work. In a letter to Percy Withers in February 1919 he said that he still felt "the shadow of the prison bars".³ He seems to have been very run down and prey to depression. He also suffered from lumbago and his eyes erupted in styes. As his physical state improved he was able to start work on revising *Womenkind* and incorporating it into the longer work *Krindlesyke*, although this was a long-term project and he had no immediate plans for its publication. Indeed, he indicated his intention of not publishing anything until Christmas 1920 as

so many people tell me they are sick to death of the incessant trickle of little books of verse.⁴

This comment of Gibson's would seem to suggest a decline in enthusiasm among the public for volumes of poetry. According to Ivor Gurney, it was the war which had made poetry pay and certainly the appetite for verse and the volume of verse written bear witness to the public interest in heroic and populist poetry stimulated by national crisis. But poetry was about to undergo a major transformation - poetry in the modern world was now to be difficult and unpopular, as Eliot clearly saw. Within two years of Gibson's remark *The Waste Land* transformed the literary landscape and made clear the minor status of the Georgian mode.

In this period immediately after the war Gibson was trying to re-establish himself, but he seems to have been particularly unsettled and unsure of his direction. Would he continue along 'Georgian' lines or would he develop in different ways? At first he seemed to remain faithful

to the Georgian idea, expressing to Marsh his anxiety to be included in the forthcoming edition of *Georgian Poetry*. On May 29th 1919 he wrote telling Marsh that he was much relieved to be in the newly published volume. As yet his enthusiasm for Georgianism had not waned. Yet within six or seven months he was writing to Percy Withers expressing disillusionment

the whole movement shows signs of petrification
and
the last *Georgian* was a cul de sac wasn't it? ⁵

With Withers he could, perhaps, be freer of his opinions than he could with Marsh on whom he was extremely dependent for criticism and guidance in his writing.

Gibson was not only dissatisfied with Georgianism at this time but he was also uncertain what forms to use in his writing. Still under the influence of Brooke, and the trauma of his death, Gibson frequently adopted the sonnet and lyric form. In March of 1919 he went to Rugby to hear a lecture by J.C.Squire on Brooke and he wrote to Marsh:

I've two new "Rupert" sonnets to show you.⁶

He was constantly writing sonnets particularly with reference to Brooke and his death. This is illustrated by the following extract from a letter to Marsh:

the earlier [sonnets] say nothing of the manner of his death and little of his poetry and I would like to have a word about them... I had no idea you liked the first Rupert sonnets as much as you now appear to have done! I am afraid I always interpret silence as disapproval! - and I am always ready to believe that people don't care tuppence for anything I do, and only pretend to care, to please me.⁷

In response to a challenge by Marsh that he needed "to do something more ambitious" he agreed that he'd "love to do something on a bigger scale" but as yet had "not got over the interruption of the war." ⁸ Marsh's prodding led him to a closer self-examination as shown by this extract:

I may not keep all these sonnets but each of them is an exact record of the sensations of an actual moment when I experienced the simultaneous but contrasting sensations. You see my mind nearly always works that way, as I explained in the second 'Chambers' and - though I am aware that all this is no reason why you or anyone else would accept the poems - 1916 and the first 'Chambers' are two of the truest things - that is the truest expressions - of myself I've ever written.⁹

The sonnet, he was arguing, expressive of contrasting states, suited his mental operation at the time of writing, that of holding disparate notions at one moment. This is the basis of the poem 'Chambers' which is part of the collection *Neighbours*:

The labyrinthine corridors of my mind
Between dead, lightless, many-chambered walls
In endless mazes of confusion wind;
And only now and again a live ray falls,
Touching the secret spring of some hid door
With magic, and flings open some unknown
Chamber of light wherein there dwells alone
Beauty and terror never glimpsed before.

Could but that ray through all the chambers glow
Once and for ever till my mind should burn
One sun-like sphere of still celestial light!
But only rarely, opening out of turn,
Two neighbouring doors spring wide at once and show
Beauty and terror together in the night.

It was not long, however, before Gibson was trying to discard the sonnet and he wrote to Marsh:

I don't suppose that I shall ever write another sonnet! At all events the work I am on at present could hardly be more different in kind.¹⁰

By the end of 1920 he was pleased to announce that his new work contained "no sonnets, thank goodness."¹¹ Gibson saw that there was a need to change, to progress to new forms and yet that worried him:

.....isn't it rather unreasonable to expect too infinite a variety from any artist and doesn't too easy a versatility smack of insincerity? ²

Gibson's own reflections on the general nature of his art at this time shew pernickety rather than perceptive qualities:

...why won't people realize that poetry is an art as well as an inspiration and that even if poems can be written without much forethought, they should never be published without afterthought? I have just been reading the complete Masefield and it drives me mad to think of the good stuff stultified through sheer lack of artistic conscience.¹³

Quite what Gibson conceived artistic conscience to be is by no means clear. His own handwritten "Advice to a young & ambitious author" (see illustration*) insists on inspiration being tempered by labour. Through the glimmer of self-analysis in 'Chambers' it would seem that his labyrinthine mind, confused and dark, was not open to the light of clear thought. Readily Gibson fastened on to words like 'secret', 'magic' and 'unknown'. He fed himself on fantasies; these were his incantations, his formulae for verses. He merely strained after effect when he tried for introspection; it was as though he was attempting to draw on talent that simply was not there. His real talent was lyric and narrative 'dramatic' verse yet he seemed to strive again and again after something else:

if I'm only patient a little longer I'd be able to carry out some quite big schemes! ¹⁴

What was it he had in mind and did he have an inflated sense of his own modest gift? Whether or not he had anything further to give that was original was now in doubt but what he had already accomplished was unquestionable.

Throughout this period Gibson was very dependent upon the opinions of Marsh, who may not always have been quite the influence that Gibson needed. Clearly Marsh's ready comments on his work must have seemed at the time to be a great boon. Marsh was quite forthcoming on what he regarded as Gibson's weaknesses and there was in his replies from time to time a prickly defensiveness when Marsh had been less than enthusiastic. Marsh was, however, extraordinarily conservative in his literary opinions. He was a Cambridge classicist, a double-first who had firm views about form and a marked distaste for *vers libre* and the

* see illustration in front of p.177.

'modernists'. He was nigglingly critical but offered no positive suggestions. His animadversions on Gibson's poems had no fruitful influence of the kind that Eliot was given by Pound.

Marsh was not the only friend to whom Gibson turned for advice about his poetry but the dilemma of choosing between the critical opinions advanced by different people is pointedly made:

I shall probably scrap many of the poems but there is a difficulty about scrapping them on the advice of friends in that friends disagree so much as to which poems shall be scrapped! Lascelles, for instance, picked out, as some of my best, poems which you had advised me to discard - 'Hands', 'The Chariot' and 'The Conscript' for instance! ¹⁵

His dependency on Marsh's judgements nonetheless remained:

I shall be most grateful for any further criticisms you care to make ¹⁶
and

I want you to help me to make my next book one of my best. ¹⁷

Gibson obviously felt very much indebted to Marsh and was constantly reminded of the good fortune that he had brought him not only through the use of his famous 'murder money' ¹⁸ to finance *Georgian Poetry* but also through the introduction to Brooke which brought him such enduring financial aid. The letters are filled with acknowledgements for cheques received, obviously some for considerable sums judging by the tone:

Thanks for the cheque. George I is a wonder. ¹⁹

Fortunatus's purse was nothing to it! We have now managed to invest the whole of the Rupert money in War Loan, so it will produce quite a nice little income. ²⁰

It really is incredible! I couldn't have believed that the sales could still be so high - but I expect the decline will be very rapid now. ²¹

.....at mid-day the noble cheque came, very unexpectedly. All thanks! ²²

Another cheque! ... it's quite incredible that the royalties should keep up like this. ²³

The miraculous draft of fishes was nothing to it. How does it go on? You're quite sure no-one is funding the fund? ²⁴

From the proceeds of the Brooke legacy Gibson received £2,012 between October 1915 and April 1919 alone.²⁵ Yet again, much later, in thanking Marsh for his cheque he is so unbelieving he says:

everybody must already have six copies of Brooke's poems²⁶

Gibson's own sales by contrast were getting poorer and in October 1919 he reported that they had "dropped to 2000". He had, he said, "hardly sold anything in England or America according to my latest accounts." ²⁷ His royalties for a year were a mere £20, yet he said in the same letter that his share of the Rupert Brooke sales for that half year stood at £222. Hardly surprisingly, such payments attracted the attentions of the Inland Revenue Department and de la Mare's experience made Gibson very wary about their interests:

de la Mare has had a claim for over £480 I've heard nothing from the I.R. people yet. I've written a letter as you suggested.²⁸

What had happened was that Mrs Brooke had not declared the income on the sales of her son's poetry assuming that as the money went to the beneficiaries they would pay, or at least assuming that she was not liable for tax on the sum. The Tax Inspector eventually asked for this sum to be declared by her and since this put her into the super-tax bracket it was a matter of considerable concern. Each of the beneficiaries then had to pay their share. The matter was evidently not resolved for some time but what is interesting is the sum Gibson was required to pay:

It seems as if the Rupert Brooke income-tax business is through at last and that the I.R. has got its cheque (for £388-13-1). But for your intervention I suppose it could have come to £500 odd.²⁹

Such attentions from the Inland Revenue reveal how profitable poetry could be. As well as thanking Marsh for money, many of Gibson's letters contain invitations to him to come and stay at Malvern with the family. In

fact Marsh never actually made such a visit despite plans to do so. Gibson offered various blandishments to attract Marsh but there were plainly serious drawbacks to domestic comforts. The countryside was the main attraction for the visitor:

This country can be very lovely in early October. I hope we have weather as delicious as it is at the moment [mid-September] - though broken weather is really the most beautiful - for there are many walks I'd like to take you.³⁰

Marsh, of course, was a very busy civil servant but he might have felt somewhat put-off by the rather cold comfort that the household offered:

You must be prepared for an ugly little house with no bathroom, and for very plain fare.³¹

and

We welcome you on Monday..you had better put in as many baths as possible where you are - as I am afraid with the rationing business that daily baths are impossible here; and I seem to remember that you don't go in for cold baths ³²

Luckily for Marsh a rail strike meant he was unable to get a train and so he had to cancel at the last minute. Part of Gibson's anxiety that Marsh should visit was so that he would see Audrey, his god-daughter before she grew up:

Just to ask if there's any hope of your coming to us before your god-daughter has her hair up and lets down - no! women don't let down their skirts nowadays.³³

There was to be the final addition to the family, Gibson proudly announced, in June of 1920 and "so you'll have to send enough love next time to share among five."³⁴ In the next month Gibson was able to tell Marsh that "Gerald and Jocelyn Kielder are both doing well" ³⁵ but some weeks later the health of the new baby was giving rise to a great deal of concern. Two doctors in Malvern

did not locate the seat of the trouble [underlining sic: Gibson's pun as the baby had inflammation of the bowels] ³⁶

A special journey had to be made to London to consult a specialist. The cause of the problem was

due to having been stuffed by the nurse in the Home [nursing home] where she was born to keep her quiet between meals

the poor mite has had two months of acute agony due to that blockhead nurse's wickedness.³⁷

There is plenty of evidence in the letters of the poor state of general health which the family was often in and not a little of this sort of iatrogenic disorder pointing to some rather poor doctoring. During this forced trip to London the family stayed with Marsh, who loaned rooms for the three of them. As usual Gibson was deeply indebted to his patron and indeed one wonders how he would have managed at all without Marsh's always generous help. In some respects Gibson seemed to regard Marsh as a father-figure and hardly took a step, or made a decision, without telling him about it.

The major piece of work that was occupying Gibson at this time was the revision of the drama *Womenkind* and its continuation into the larger work *Krindlesyke*. He wrote to Marsh that he was working on "new lyrics - all about the countryside I wandered over as a boy".³⁸ More specifically he reports to Marsh that:

I'm re-writing *Womenkind* which was only the bones of a play before ³⁹
and shortly afterwards
I'm absorbed in the re-writing of *Womenkind*. I think it is going well ... that it will be my best thing...⁴⁰

He also wrote to de la Mare at this time about the progress of his work:

.... re-writing an old play and enjoying myself hugely over it.⁴¹

This piece of work registers a turning back by Gibson to his roots - to Northumberland and to scenes familiar from his early life. His love of this part of the country was reflected in the second name of his youngest child - Kielder, a great forest near the Scottish border. Not only was Gibson returning to a northern setting but also to a new preoccupation with the life of the rural poor and with local dialect. He begins to use this freely, breaking away from his standard English diction. It is at

this juncture, then, with his concentration on rural life, on his Northumbrian past and on Northumbrian dialect that Gibson embarked on the third distinctive phase of his writing life.

The first version of *Womenkind* was originally published in 1912 and it was played to a public audience by the Pilgrim Players on February 24th of that year. When Gibson revised it, he enlarged the piece adding dialect words and then went on to develop the story further. *Womenkind* became merely the first part of a much longer story, *Krindlesyke*. This consists of two parts, 'Phoebe Barrasford' (the extended *Womenkind*) and 'Bell Haggard'. The whole play is set at Krindlesyke, a lonely cottage on the fells and there are five speaking characters in the first part - Father, Mother, Son and Son's bride, all Barrasfords and one outsider, Judith Ellershaw and her baby. She is obviously, though it is never stated, the son's cast-off mistress. The play begins with the old couple Ezra and Eliza awaiting their son Jim's return from his wedding with Phoebe. The talk is Hardy-esque rustic, of recollected youth, the old days and happiness gone by. Judith's arrival presents the problem of the cast-off mistress: she is now supporting a child, she is homeless and quite wretched. She has merely called at the old people's for refreshment and is unaware that the new bride is about to arrive. When she learns that they are due to return she makes to go but as she does so the door opens to admit Jim and Phoebe. In the embarrassing encounter in which the bridegroom is shewn up to be unfeeling and hopeless, the bride seizes the initiative and, sympathising totally with Judith Ellershaw's plight she leaves the cottage for ever, arm in arm with the wronged woman. The sisterhood relationship triumphs and the male dominance is routed - it sounds very modern! In point of fact, of course, it is a play about the emancipation of women which is dependent on suffrage movements of the time. In dramatizing women's relations Gibson was quite clearly

opportunist and the play had some following among the 'liberated' and the political women's groups. As a play it is quite undistinguished and there are no 'sallets in the lines.' The content and the style are indebted to the Yeatsian, Lady Gregory, mode but are not perhaps very good examples of it.

It is interesting to compare the original version with the later edition after Gibson had extended the text and added the dialect words. The 1912 version comes first:

EZRA My wits just failed me, once ..
The day I married ...
And Jim's away to wed, is he ?
I thought he'd gone for turnips.
He might, at least, have told his dad ...
Though, now I come to think of it,
I do remember hearing something ..
It's Judith Ellershaw that he's to marry.
ELIZA No! No! You're dull, indeed!
It's Phoebe Martin Jim's to marry.
EZRA Who's Phoebe Martin?
I know naught of her.
ELIZA And I know little, either.
She's only been here, once .
And now, she'll be here, always.
I'll find it strange, at first,
To have another woman in the house.
But, I must needs get used to it.
Your mother, doubtless, found it strange
To have me here, at first ...
And it's been long enough in coming.
Perhaps, that makes it harder

And now the 1920 version for comparison:

EZRA My wits just failed me once, the day I married:
But you're an early-riser, and your tongue
Is always up before you, and with an edge
Unblunted by the dewfall, and as busy
As a scythe in the grass at Lammass. So Jim's away
To wed, is he, the limb? I thought he'd gone
For swedes; though now I mind some babblement
About a wedding: but nowadays words tumble
Through my old head like turnips through a slicer;
And naught I ken who the bowdykite's to wed -
Some bletherskite he's picked up in a ditch,
Some fond fligary flirtigig, clarty-fine,
Who'll turn a slattern shrew and a cap-river
Within a week, if I ken aught of Jim:
Unless ... Nay, sure, 'twas Judith Ellershaw ...
ELIZA No, no; you're dull indeed. It's Phoebe Martin.
EZRA Who's Phoebe Martin? I ken naught of her.

ELIZA And I but little.

EZRA Some trappings tatterwallops,
I'll warrant. Well, these days the lads are like
The young cock-grouse who doesn't consult his dad
Before he mates. In my - yet, come to think,
I didn't say overmuch. My dad and mammy
Scarce kenned her name when I sprung my bride on them -
Just loosed on them a gisseypig out of a poke
They'd heard no squeak of. They'd to thole my choice,
Lump it or like it. I'd the upper hand then,
And well they kenned their master. No tawse to chide
Nor apron strings to hold young Ezra then:
His turn had come, and he was cock of the midden;
And no young cockerel's hustled him from it yet,
For all their crowing. The blind old bird's still game.
They've never had his spirit, the young cheepers,
Not one; and Jim's the lave of the clutch; and he
Will never lord it at Krindlesyke till I'm straked..
But this what's-her-name the gaby's bringing...

ELIZA Phoebe.

EZRA A posical name - I never heard the like.
She'll be a flighty faggit, mark my words.

ELIZA She's only been here once before; and now
She'll be here all the time. I'll find it strange
With another woman in the house - needs must
Get used to it. Your mother found it strange
Likely .. It's my turn now, and long in coming
Perhaps that makes it harder.

Whilst a formal comparison of the passages is hardly necessary it is clear that apart from the extending and enlarging of the material and the increased range of reference to the various human activities going on at Krindlesyke, apart that is from content, the most notable change is the substitution of northern dialect for standard vocabulary, while similitudes become more striking and more plentiful:

But you're an early-riser, and your tongue
Is always up before you
.....and as busy
As a scythe in the grass at Lammas.

This is an addition which adds vitality and richness which is entirely missing in the original version. Words like 'fligary flirtigig', 'clarty-fine', 'trappings tatterwallops' and 'gisseypig' provide vigour and energy to the language for which no parallel exists in the earlier version. In every way the new *Krindlesyke* makes a considerable advance in invention

and in powers of composition. Gibson commented on his use of words to Marsh:

It may be added that, while *Krindlesyke* is not in dialect, it has been flavoured with a sprinkling of local words.....words in the vernacular to give it atmosphere.⁴²

The 'sprinkling' is, in fact, a pretty generous one and the effect of the 'flavouring' is, perhaps, like putting too much pepper in the soup. Yet the additions, thick-strewn though they are, are all as it were appliqué, attached to the surface, not embodying the syntax and the meaning.

Gibson was anxious that his readers should not be put off by the use of the dialect words and so a prefatory note was put in:

Though *Krindlesyke* was not conceived with a view to stage-production, the author reserves the acting rights.

It may be added that, while the work is not written in dialect, a number of local words have outcropped in the course of the dialogue; but as these are for the most part words expressive of emotion, rather than words conveying information, the sense of them should be easily gathered even by the South-country reader. - W.G.

The largest section of Gibson's readers would have been in London and southern England and he was most anxious that they should not be put off by the language. Such a careful tailoring of his work to make it acceptable suggests a severe limitation on the writer who is producing a linguistic contrivance rather than an utterance which is the only proper one for his thought and his subject matter. An uneasiness about the register and vocabulary of language goes along with some split of identity and purpose in the writer as well as with the problem of not having an audience which shares his knowledge and experience. If the poet is both hesitant about his language and has no shared understanding for his utterance, if his imagination is severed from the 'dialect of the tribe' he risks becoming merely a fabricator, a pasticheur. One could wish that Gibson had had the confidence in the dialect of the border which MacDiarmid had, at about the same time. His confidence really lay in

his narrative and his capacity to make 'drama' out of narrative because he had already succeeded so well with the original *Womenkind*. That 'play' had been performed and admired; large audiences had seen it and Gibson had established himself by it as a man who was on the side of the progressive movement, the women's suffrage movement and modern 'freedom'. After all the play had shewn 'male domination' at its worst in old Ezra and his son Jim who made their women suffer. At the end of the play Phoebe, Jim's new wife and Judith, his cast-off mistress walk out from Jim's cottage on the fell in as resounding a manner as Nora slamming the door in *A Doll's House*.

The crucial difference between the two versions, the reliance on dialect words, proceeds I believe from the consequences of the ideas of Robert Frost whose belief in the power of 'speech sounds' in poetry was so crucially influential on the poetry of Edward Thomas and on the ideas of other contemporaries, including Abercrombie. In February 1914 Abercrombie published a pamphlet called *Poetry and Contemporary Speech* which clearly shews the fruits of his long cider-filled evenings with Frost at Little Iddens and The Gallows and, indeed, with Thomas who visited at various periods. The language debate was much in the air and Gibson was not to be left out of it. Since 1910 he had tried to reproduce the speech of unlettered people and he had consistently pruned and controlled his rhetoric in his pre-war publications. His efforts, however, were not always successful and the voices often came out in the same way, without proper dramatic differentiation. The idea of fastening on to the use of contemporary speech must have seemed a very valuable one indeed; completely encouraged by Frost's capacity to do this, amply illustrated in *North of Boston*, Gibson set out to attempt to achieve the same. Not only had he spent much time with Frost in 1913-1914, but, long

after that, he continued to admire Frost's work as he shews in a letter to Mrs Osborne:

I am glad that you are enjoying Frost. It is extraordinarily individual work; and though not quite so simple as it seems on the surface it is very refreshing after the over-subtle and too subjective sophistications of much modern stuff.⁴³

Gibson never lost an opportunity to attack "much modern stuff" believing that poetry should speak plainly to a 'common reader' rather than to the learned or the precious. Frost's ideas were seminal among the Dymock writers. They clarified a great deal of the difficulty that was felt in finding expression that broke away from the older rhetorical styles of the Victorians and the Aesthetes. Their search was for a simple language - that was a Georgian tenet - for a language that was to be like life. Historically there was example for this in Wordsworth's attack on eighteenth century poetic diction. The Preface to *The Lyrical Ballads* offered much that was needed for the writers of this new age, the twentieth century, but it did not offer a method as to how this language of common life was to be achieved. Frost did offer that and Edward Thomas enlarged upon it in his expository writing and by adapting it to his own poetry. One example will suffice at this stage to show how important Thomas saw Frost's contribution to the language of poetry to be. In a letter to Frost he said:

You really should start doing a book on speech and literature, or you will find me mistaking your ideas for mine, and doing it myself. You can't prevent me from making use of them: I do so daily and want to begin over again with them and wring all the necks of my rhetoric - the geese. However my 'Pater' would show you I have got on to the scent already. ⁴⁴

Frost did not write such a book, nor did Thomas but the significance of their reflections on the subject and their reaction against the ideas that had been promulgated by Pater and influenced a whole generation of poets would bear closer scrutiny. In *Krindlesyke* Gibson attempts to reproduce the sentence sound of ordinary speech which Thomas and Frost

felt to be so important. He departs from standard English and from beautiful expression. His preference is for north country peasant's vocabulary and savage encounters. This feel for common language, common life and the common reader puts Gibson at one with Frost and Thomas.

The second part of *Krindlesyke* was originally and provisionally called 'Peter's Woman',⁴⁵ but it eventually came to be entitled 'Bell Haggard' and it is divided into three parts corresponding to the conventional act divisions of a play for the stage although Gibson did not prepare the piece as a play script in the way he later did with *Between Fairs*. Book I of the play, 'Phoebe Barrasford', had left the epic story of the lonely steading of Krindlesyke at the point where Jim Barrasford's wife, Phoebe and his mistress Judith Ellershaw had walked out on him, leaving him alone with the aged parents Eliza and Ezra. The story is now picked up at a later unspecified year on midsummer morning. The old Barrasford couple are arguing, querulously with each other about Jim's departure with the family savings, which he has robbed from the 'kist' beneath the bed. As they debate Jim's treachery Eliza, getting up and going to the door of the cottage sees something which causes her to re-enter the 'ben' or inner bedroom where she collapses. Peter Barrasford, the elder son enters. He had left home many years ago and is now a wandering tramp. It is the sight of him that causes his mother to collapse and then die. Peter explains how as a child he was beaten by his father:

Easy on !

Peter's no lad to take a leathering now
Your time's come round for breeches down, old boy:
But don't get scared, for I'm no walloper -
Too like hard work! My son's a clean white skin:
He's never skiled, as you made me. By gox,
You gave me gip! My back still bears the stripes
Of the loundering I got the night I left.
But I bear no malice, you old gas-of bones:
And where's the satisfaction in committing
Assault and battery on a blasted scarecrow?

Peter is followed into the house by his 'woman' (not wife) Bell Haggard, a tinker woman, a 'gypsy queen' and she is with Michael, her son by Peter. She really is a splendid creation and she is the heroine of the whole piece. She hates the Barrasfords and all they stand for: Barrasford blood she says is "sheep's blood" and indeed the family are literally sheep-tenders, whereas Haggard blood is "wild", 'gypsy', "royal", she is "blood royal". She is a character very like a low-life version of Shakespeare's Cleopatra, both gypsy and royal; she is "very termagant". Passionate, outspoken and full of poetry she towers over the whole piece.

Peter explains that he has come to take, that is steal, his proper inheritance from his skinflint father's savings. He does not know that the 'kist' is now empty but when he goes from the 'but' into the 'ben' he finds his mother dead, the 'kist' broken and a scribbled note left by his younger brother, Jim. Left with a dead woman and a blind old man the very anti-domestic Bell, in a spirit of high responsibility and self-sacrifice, decides to domesticate herself to Krindlesyke life. In a fine speech she explains her feelings:

Michael, my son,
You've got your way: and you're to be a herd.
You never took to horseflesh like a Haggard:
Yet your mother must do her best for you. A mattress
Under a roof; and sheep to keep you busy -
That's what you're fashioned for - not bracken-beds
In fellside ditches underneath the stars,
And sharing potluck by the roadside fire.
Well, every man must follow his own bent,
Even though some woman's wried to let him do it:
So I must bide within this whitewashed gaol,
For ever scrubbing flagstones and washing dishes
And darning hose and making meals for men,
Half-suffocated by the stink of sheep,
Till you find a lass to your mind; and set me free
To take the road again - if I'm not too dodderly
For gallivanting, as most folks are by the time
They've done their duty by others. Who'd have dreamt
I'd make a model mother after all?
It seems as though a woman can't escape
Once she has any truck with men. But carties!
Something's gone topsy-turvy with creation
When the cuckoo's turned domestic, and starts to rear
The young house-sparrow.

In this first part of the play the action moves very surely and economically towards its climax. It is varied and well put together although it is, for drama, extremely static. It really comprises characters who make speeches rather than interact with each other. The life that is in it is very much the consequence of the dialect words. There are also striking bits of generalised reflections about life such as "every woman's lonely in her heart" which give a maturity and understanding about common life and its simple annals which is heart-warming.

The second part jumps forward by fifteen years and at the opening we are provided with a very realistic setting of the scene in the manner of Ibsen or Shaw:

An October afternoon, fifteen years later. There is no one in the room; and the door stands open, showing a wide expanse of fell, golden in the low sunshine. A figure is seen approaching along the cart-track: and JUDITH ELLERSHAW, neatly dressed in black, appears at the door, and stands, undecided, on the threshold. She knocks several times, but no one answers; so she steps in and seats herself on a chair near the door. Presently a sound of singing is heard without; and BELL HAGGARD is seen, coming over the bent, a flame-coloured kerchief about her head, her skirt kilted to the knee, and her arms full of withered bracken. She enters, humming, but stops with a start on seeing JUDITH; drops the bracken; whips off her kerchief, and lets down her skirt; and so appears as an ordinary cottage-wife.

The action of the previous years is simply reported to the audience: Peter has cleared off, Ezra has died and his death is described in a manner that is both comic and macabre

BELL: And he so wried and geyzened
The undertakers couldn't strake him rightly.
Even when they'd nailed him down, and we were watching
By candle-light the night before the funeral,
Mid-nodding, Michael and I, just as the clock
Struck twelve there was a crack that brought us to
Bolt-upright as the coffin-lid flew off,
And old granddaddy sat up in his shroud.

Bell has continued to keep house. Michael, her son, has found a girl for himself in Bellingham and it is revealed to the audience, but so far

withheld from him, that this girl is the daughter of Judith Ellershaw and his uncle Jim. In its preoccupation with epic and dynastic aspects of family life there is a clear attempt to write the poor man's version of family feuds in the way that the Greek classical dramatists had done with noble families, like the house of Atreus.

A lengthy sequence of the play is taken up with contrasting the two ways of life and the philosophies of life of Judith and Bell: wild and natural gypsy freedom (Bell) and cheerful, cosy domesticity (Judith). Bell yearns for the peat fire, wind and storm, for spices and pepper, Judith yearns for a roof, a grate, for scrag on Sundays and cold mutton on weekdays. The contrast is a recurrent one in Gibson between romantic yearning and realistic acceptance. The two characters are indeed representative of Gibson's own character. Bell is dominant throughout and antipathy to four walls produces tirades that find no match in Judith. Bell's character and philosophy of life are fully developed in the play. Her spirit is expansive and, like one of Tolstoy's wise peasants, such as Platon Karatyev, for example, she sees man's life as a brief interval of awareness in which it is best to live in a natural way, taking delight in being alive and not allowing trivial things to come to control, shape or "clobber life out to a shape no-one recognizes." After a vituperative attack on Men, Bell then announces that the bridal pair are both grandchildren to Ezra in a fine, vehement passage:

I'm to be
The dear old grannie in the ingle-neuk,
And hide my grizzled wisps in a mutch with frills?
Nay, God forbid! I'm no tame pussy-cat
To snuggle on a corner of the settle
With one eye open for a chance-thrown titbit
While the good housewife goes about her duties -
Me! lapping with blinking eyes and possing paws
The saucer of skim-milk that young skinflint spares me,
And purring when her darlings pull my tail -
Great-grandchildren, too, to Ezra on both sides.

Ay, you may gape like a pair of guddled brandling;
But that old bull-trout's grandsire to you both,
And a double dose of his blue blood will run
In the veins of your small fry - if fish have veins.

They are surprised to find that having met as strangers they are actually cousins but Bell is exuberant about it and now that they have "settled down" she can return to her gypsy life "her duty all ended." She prepares to leave:

Son, you say
Your're master here: well, that's for Ruth to settle:
I'll be elsewhere. I've never knuckled down
To any man; and I'll be coffin-cold
Before I brook a master: so good-night
And pleasant dreams, and a long family
Of curly lambkins bleating round the board.

Then with mock incantations and pretending to be a witch Bell leaves and takes off into the bracken as an owl hoots overhead. Judith Ellershaw steps out from the 'ben' to join a surprised Michael and Ruth and this ends the second part.

Bell is a fine, bold creation and the portrayal is sustained throughout the play. She functions as the complete opposite to the personality of Judith Ellershaw. Bell's vigorous, free, adventurous and independent nature are expressive of that side of Gibson's artistic leaning towards free, untrammelled and unfenced existence. He had a continuing and persistent fascination for 'free' people in a natural state which contrasts with his equally strong leaning towards domesticity, family affections and ordered life. For him Imagination was entirely separated from the realities of existence and in the case of Bell we see a character of imagination who is out of place in a merely hum-drum reality. Bell's view of life may be perhaps what Gibson admired or even wished for but certainly never experienced:

It's all a rough-and-tumble
Of accidents, from the accident of birth
To the last accident that lays us out -
A go-as-you-please, and the devil take the hindmost.
It's luck that counts, and an easy seat in the saddle:

Better to break your neck at the first ditch
Than waste the day in seeking gates to slip through.

Bell's nature is wild and unbroken; she is forceful, energetic and sharp-tongued and her speech on age with its "experience ages and decays" philosophy is splendidly turned:

You can speak
With all the cock-a-whoop of ignorance;
For you're too young to dare to doubt your wisdom
It's a wise man, or a fool, can speak for himself,
Let alone for others, in this haphazard life.
But give me a young fool rather than an old -
A plucky plunger than a canny crone
Who's old enough to ken she doesn't ken.
You're right; for doubting is a kind of dotage:
Experience ages and decays; while folk
Who never doubt themselves die young - at ninety.
Age never yet brought gumption to a ninny;
And you cannot reckon up a stranger's wits
By counting his bare patches and grey hairs:
It's seldom sense that makes a bald head shine;
And I'm not partial to Methuselahs.
Keep your coxsureness while you can: too soon
Time plucks the feathers off you, and you lie
Naked and skewered, with not a cock-a-doodle
Or flap of the wings to warm your heart again.

There is a strong energetic rhythm established here which is intensified by the tension it has with the theme which is of the inevitability of death and decay. The urgency of the voice is thus sharpened as it rages against the idea of the dying light. It is curious too how forcefully is put the essentially negative and passive idea of life being haphazard and uninfluenced by human action. It is, of course, Gibson's own view put into Bell's mouth.

The third and last part of the play moves the action ahead a further six years, Judith Ellershaw nurses her grandchild alone when her former 'man', Jim Barrasford returns, ragged and aged. He has come home but Judith refuses to have him in the house. They quarrel and whilst they are doing so Bell Haggard appears and watches critically; she knows about Jim's guilty secret - the robbery of his father's savings. Bell persuades Jim that witches pursue him and are seeking retribution for some crime.

After planning a tryst with Judith and proposing they "take to the roads together " Jim leaves the cottage. Bell leaves also but returns almost at once: she says she has fallen, has cracked her head open on a rock and she soon becomes unconscious and dies. If this were so it would make but a feeble ending to the drama especially for the demise of so vivid a character. But clearly, we are made to see that Bell has been mortally attacked by the wretched and outcast Jim. She says she has fallen but she enters with her dress "torn and dishevelled" and in her half-conscious ramblings before she dies, reveals the truth:

Where am I? Judith, is that you?
How did I come here, honey? But now I mind -
I fell He must have hidden in the heather
To trip me up He kicked me as I lay -
The harrygad!

But she at once hides this revelation:

Nay! What am I saying?
I stumbled, Judith - you must stick to that,
Whatever they may say ... I stumbled, Judith
.....
But, mind you, Judith,
I stumbled; and I hurt my side in falling;
Whatever they may say, you stick to that;
Swear that I told you that upon my oath -
So help me God and all, my Bible-oath.

Her noble purpose is to stop the blood-feud of the Barrasfords and leave in peace the now established little family of Barrasford-Haggard, the wild and the tame, in their lonely steading at Krindlesyke. As Bell dies with images of fire on her lips the little family return to their home and are puzzled by the "ellerish yelling" of the owls, the significance of which they cannot understand.

The play closes with the two grandchildren's contrasting ambitions, Ralph who "like dad" wants to be a shepherd and Nicholas, who loves horses and wants to ride in a circus. He is thus a true grandson of Bell Haggard. In their opposing ambitions the children represent the continuity of conflict between gypsy life and settled, pastoral life,

between wildness and sobriety. The play ends with this conflict poised to begin again and we can only guess at whether it is this which produced the subsequent end of the Barrasford fortune leaving behind the "bleak stone walls" which the Prelude depicted at the outset in a manner very close to Wordsworth and in particular to the depiction of the ruined sheep-fold in his poem *Michael*.

KRINDLESYKE
PRELUDE

Four bleak stone walls, an eaveless bleak stone roof,
Like a squared block of native crag it stands
Hunched on skirlnaked windy fells aloof:
Yet was it built by patient human hands -
Hands, that have long been dust, chiselled each stone
And bedded it secure; and from the square
Squat chimney-stack, hither and thither blown,
The reek of human fires still floats in air
And perishes, as life on life burns through.
Square-set and stark to every blast that blows
It bears the brunt of time, withstands anew
Wildfires of tempest and league-scouring snows,
Dour and unshaken by any mortal doom,
Timeless, unstirred by any mortal dream:
And ghosts of reivers gather in the gloom
About it muttering when the lych-owls scream.

Krindlesyke is a scarcely actable piece nowadays, its manner and style would be merely quaint. When it was first published it received a great deal of praise from Abercrombie and others. Particularly noted were the vigour and energy of its dialect vocabulary which represents Gibson's attempt to find a language that could be both true to life and true to art, so that art might speak to all men. It was a forlorn hope. The people's poet was trying to use the people's language but rough Northumbrian peasant speech was not compatible with the language of literature in the 1920's. In the complex class society that England had become literary language was, in many notable cases, becoming separated from the common language. There were exceptions, of course, but the language of modern poetry was increasingly becoming more learned and its

appeal lay in its mandarin style and inter-textual content. There was little future for the simplicity and naiveté of work like *Krindlesyke*. Gibson was harking back, perhaps with the Irish Revival of verse drama in mind, in his study of 'marginal' people and rustic scenes. The drama in England was moving in quite a different direction and there was small interest in *Krindlesyke*, *Spadeadam Waste* and *Winter's Stob*. Northumberland and its 'culture' were of little interest to metropolitan arbiters of taste.

Krindlesyke is the longest and most ambitious single piece of work produced by Gibson. Composition of this play must have begun in about the winter of 1919. In September 1919 Gibson wrote to Marsh saying

I wish I had more work ready to show you - but though many plots for plays are in my head, they don't come out until they are ready.⁴⁶

By January 1920 he could write:

I'm so absorbed in some new dramatic poems that I find it difficult to detach my mind at the moment.⁴⁷

It is clear that by March he had made a draft and sent it to Marsh for comments and was now sitting on the work, rather disconsolately, probably as a consequence of Marsh's strictures:

I've not yet tackled the revising of *Krindlesyke*. I agree in the abstract with most of your criticisms - but I cannot just bring myself even to read the thing through! Perhaps a day will come⁴⁸

Gibson was easily wounded and needed constant reassurance about his work and, besides, he was at this stage busy

preparing for the press the book of short poems - *Neighbours* - which Macmillan is to publish in September.⁴⁹

With that out of the way he could turn his attention again to weightier matters:

.....now that it is all fixed up (on both sides of the Atlantic) I hope to settle down to work on a bigger scale.⁵⁰

To de la Mare he wrote rather more intimately and hence freely and rather gave the impression that *Neighbours* was something of a pot boiler:

I am publishing a hotch-potch of short rhyme in the autumn: but I'm not reprinting all those "coterie" jingles.⁵¹

In the same letter he recalls those blissfully escapist Saturdays when he got away from his army billet to see de la Mare:

Do I remember the Khaki Saturdays! Not 'arf! ... they were as stars on a pitch night.⁵²

Work went on over a period of nearly three years, during which Gibson decided to move from Malvern to Wales. In August 1921 the family had taken their holiday at Carmarthen Bay; it was an amazing year for weather and they had a splendid time. This was the summer when Eliot was writing *The Waste Land*: it was a burning summer, the land was parched and a system of rocket-firing was attempted in London to try and produce rain. Gibson had never experienced this kind of holiday before and he wrote to Percy Withers saying:

I never had the charm of anything of the sort as a child.....enchanted summer sea.[He became a] lotus eater⁵³

In his letter of August 14th to Marsh we can envisage exactly what Gibson meant by "the blaze". The importance of the letter, however, is that it shews once again the value of Brooke's bequest with which they could buy a house:

All goes well with us. We, luckily, took our holiday in Carmarthen Bay, in July, and had the full benefit of the blaze. And when we were there, we found just the little house to fit us; and as we couldn't rent it we bought it with Rupert's money. The house we are in here is impossibly uncomfortable and inconvenient (no bath-room, only one sitting room etc..) and we only took it as a makeshift originally: but there is no chance of getting anything else here. And anyway we were finding life here too suburban. So, when we saw an admirably-arranged little house in a delightful situation on the top of a hill overlooking an oakwood, through which seven minutes brings you to a beautiful little cove, lovely sands and stretches of heather, bracken and gorse along the cliff tops: and when we thought how the children would have the full advantages there of country and seaside- well we jumped at it. The name Coed-y-Mor just describes it - the wood by the sea we don't get

possession till March ... our house is about two miles from Tenby.⁵⁴

Gibson had dearly loved the Malvern Hills and the Worcester Beacon territory. His letters were full of references to the scenery at all times of the year: tobogganing with Audrey in deep snow, the hillsides covered with the flame of foxgloves, delicious autumn sunshine, the woods turning colour and magnificent sunsets. His poem 'Worcester Beacon' is an exhilarated expression of that feeling that is ever present in his letters. In the poem it is winter and it is the delight of bright sun, crystalline ice and eager air which stirs and spurs his inspiration., Winter provides a "white ecstasy" which intensifies the lovers' passion for each other:

When every spur of whin's a spike of ice
Each grassy tussock bristling blades of steel,
Each withered bracken-frond a rare device
Of sparkling crystal crackling under-heel
With brittle tinkling, then it is the time,
O Love, to leave the chilly hearth and climb
The sunlit Beacon, where the live airs blow
Along the clean wave-edge of drifted snow.

Love, let us go
And scale the ridge: I long to see you there
Breathing the eager air
With cheeks aglow,
The sunlight on your hair:
O Love, I long to share
With you a moment the white ecstasy
And crystal silence of eternity.

The family actually made the move a little earlier than originally anticipated, at the end of 1921. In his letters to de la Mare, Gibson describes the advantages of the move:

We're revelling in our world of country and sea-side⁵⁵

and a few months later:

..the country [is] not so spectacular as West Malvern .. we are more charmed with it and feel more at home here .. the beauty of the place is more intimate.⁵⁶

But in the same letter Gibson makes a revealing comment, which could be of some significance in connection with his work:

I expect you will find me more yokel-minded and hidebound than ever.⁵⁷

Gibson also comments that he has no library of his own, indeed he cannot even afford to buy books for the children. Thus he was now living a long way from his literary friends, quite cut off, except by letter, from their stimulus and without access to new ideas. And this was at a time when he was trying to break new ground and consolidate his position as an important figure in poetry circles. The London scene was now dominated by J.C. Squire and the Squirearchy who were carrying off the literary prizes. The newly founded Hawthornden Prize went in 1919 to Shanks, in 1920 to John Freeman, both younger contemporaries. Gibson never disguised in his correspondence his complete distaste for "the Squire-Shanks school". The success of *Krindlesyke* was thus extremely important to him and during the period that he was working on it he was keen to receive advice from his friends, even though this sometimes made him very despondent if they were critical of his efforts. The following extracts from letters convey very well the mingled quality of creative pleasure and desperation that he always seemed to suffer from when contemplating the success of his work. To start with he was getting on quite well:

.....been very happy working on *Krindlesyke*...day after day, for over a month. I feel that I am really writing for the first time in my life.⁵⁸

Then while the family were away on holiday in Wales in the summer of 1921 he did not work at all for a month and dare not even look at the drafts for fear that they had "turned to moonshine!"⁵⁹ But he was able to get going again and was able to write to de la Mare:

I pretty well finished *Krindlesyke* before we left Malvern. Lascelles, who has seen a copy, is enthusiastic, and Freeman who came to us for two nights, survived the reading aloud of it - and it takes between three and four hours to declaim! If you can face a typed copy I'd like to have your verdict on it - but I hesitate to launch it on anyone who hasn't asked for it, without warning as to its bulk. Gordon [Bottomley] has the copy at this moment.⁶⁰

When I got back *Krindlesyke* from Gordon [Bottomley] I decided to entirely re-write it, mainly with a view to reducing its bulk. I have been at work on it nearly four weeks, but it will still occupy me some months but I should like to have your opinion of the revised version... I've only done about three short poems since *Neighbours*.⁶¹

He was greatly pleased when he heard from Marsh that he largely approved of the new work:

Dearest Eddie: I'd meant to work this morning - but how can I when I'm over the moon with delight at your liking my *Krindlesyke*? I no sooner pack it off for anyone to read than I am consumed by desolating misgivings; and this last week I have been torturing myself with the picture of a kindly but embarrassed Eddie racking his brains for something nice to let me down easily with. So you man imagine my relief! I can't tell you how glad I am that you like the thing. And I think I may begin to feel reassured about it now - Lascelles, Gordon, Percy Withers, C.H. Herford and John Freeman - have all been as enthusiastic about it - though they saw it before the final draft - so there is a considerable body of very varied critical opinion in favour of my work.....

I agree with your objections (the point about Michael is a vital one) but I'm amazed they should be so few. I was only saying yesterday to Gerald that I expected to have to re-write the whole book when I got it back with your remarks. As to the language, it's nothing to what I could do, if I liked! Indeed I modified it considerably in making the final draft: but the poem isn't really written in dialect. I have only made use of a sprinkling of words in the vernacular to give it atmosphere. And I think a glossary would be a mistake! I loathe glossaries myself and as most of the words I've used are words expressing emotion rather than words conveying information I should think their drift at all events is sufficiently obvious. Besides there are no exact equivalents for these words in the colourless and restricted dialect of Oxford and Cambridge. [Note: no exclamation mark!] But I may put up a note of warning nevertheless

I suppose it will fall as flat as its predecessors ... Anyway it's been great fun writing it. It's to be out in the Autumn, in the hope that somebody will buy a copy for a Christmas present!⁶²

The pessimistic prediction for the success of the new piece was also expressed in a letter of about the same time to de la Mare:

My new book is to be published in the Autumn - three years work on it - but the result?⁶³

The result was not as badly received as Gibson had anticipated - indeed the comments from various quarters were generally complimentary. Reviewing the work under the heading of 'A Peasant Chronicle' the

reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1922 saw Krindlesyke as a "notable achievement of the sympathetic imagination" and generally approved of Gibson's design and technique. The problem, he felt, was the difficulty of sustaining a chronicle of peasant life in verse throughout. He correctly concluded that the attempt to do this has its longeurs. Certainly it is true that we realize that people such as those depicted would normally not have the sustained power of language that characters in a drama have to possess and so making normally inexpressive persons express themselves means that the poet has to obtrude his own language more than he ordinarily might. The reviewer therefore suggested that the "pedestrian lapses" of the verse might have been avoided by the periodic use of prose, as Shakespeare often did for low-life characterization. That suggestion, of course, ignored the point that Gibson much preferred to write poetry rather than prose although he was a prolific letter-writer and wrote review articles when necessary.

That consideration apart the reviewer gave his wholehearted asseveration to Gibson's standing as a poet. Establishing the demarcation lines of the battle of the poetic books in 1922 he said:

The fashion in poetry and criticism at the moment tends, perhaps, to favour unduly ingenious artistry at the expense of the sympathetic faculty. And yet the poet of deep and self-forgetful feeling, even if his instrument is at times faulty, must, we venture to think, survive when mannered muses are forgotten.

Then, he asserted, Mr Gibson is such a poet who will survive:

He has the pity and the humility of one who knows life in its abiding simplicity, who has learnt of Nature her lore of passion and patience. It is his distinction to belong to the school of Wordsworth in an age which is generally too clever, hasty, and conscious to wait upon "the still sad music of humanity."⁶⁴

And with some sense of triumph he gave his view that the work marked a return to the spirit of *Fires* and *Daily Bread*. This reviewer, then, inflicted no damage on the poet and placed him confidently as an enduring

talent. Looked upon more than 60 years later that review does not appear to have been on the side of history, for Gibson's status as a poet has deteriorated rather than been enhanced over the years.

There were other complimentary reactions also - Lascelles Abercrombie was to call it "brilliant", Marsh approved of it and passed a copy to Sybil Thorndike who wrote "a delightful letter" to Gibson; she had, he learned, read and re-read the play trying to see if she could produce it. In January of 1924, as a result of Marsh's intercession, *Krindlesyke* was accepted for production by Basil Dean, a distinguished actor-director who:

chose good contemporary authors - Galsworthy, Masfield, Lonsdale - and had a sensitive feeling for poetry and spectacle and romantic theatre. James Elroy Flecker's *Hassan*, Dean's most cherished project, looked very handsome.⁶⁵

There is no evidence that Dean's plan to produce Gibson's work was fulfilled but Gibson himself took a great interest in contemporary stage productions and rejoiced at the success of *Hassan* which he went up to London to see together with his sister, Frances. On another evening on his visit to London in February 1924 he saw a production of Congreve's *The Way of the World* in company with Marsh. It would have been immensely gratifying to him when Sybil Thorndike asked him to provide an acting edition of *Krindlesyke* but as had happened in the past, he feared the business of being entangled with the practical matters of working in and for the theatre but he was determined to try:

Sybil Thorndike wants me to do an acting version of *Krindlesyke*. I don't know that it will be possible, but I mean to have a try ... I think for this purpose I should drop Book I out and transfer any necessary information to the opening of Book II and so make a three act play centred around Bell Haggard.⁶⁶

In spite of his apparent enthusiasm for such a project, there are no further references in his correspondence to these plans and the schemes appear to have been dropped.

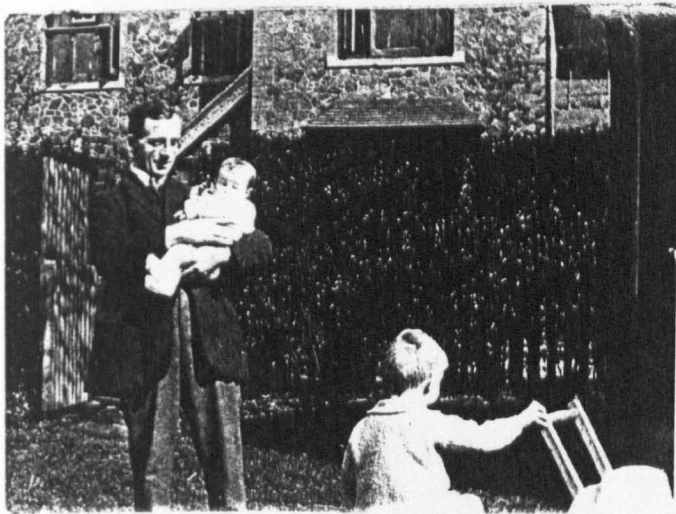
Thomas Hardy also had taken an interest in the play and wrote to Gibson to say so. Gibson's reply was fulsome: "to learn that the book has interested you makes me a proud man." ⁶⁷ Hardy had suggested that a copy should be despatched to the Laureate, Robert Bridges as he would be interested in the vocabulary.

With *Krindlesyke* Gibson had tried to re-model his poetic career. It may have been the trauma of his experiences as an army private or it may have been that his interest in the common life of the city and the common life of the people there had began to wane, or some combination of these, which caused him to turn back to rural Northumberland and to the use of its vocabulary. It looked like a new beginning. *Krindlesyke* was well received by his friends and by the reviewers. It looked as though he had weaned himself away from the sonnet and begun to achieve something grander. Gibson nonetheless retained his customary sense of pre-publication despondency although he was cheered up by the praise he received. It looked as though his post-war career might be as successful as the pre-war one.

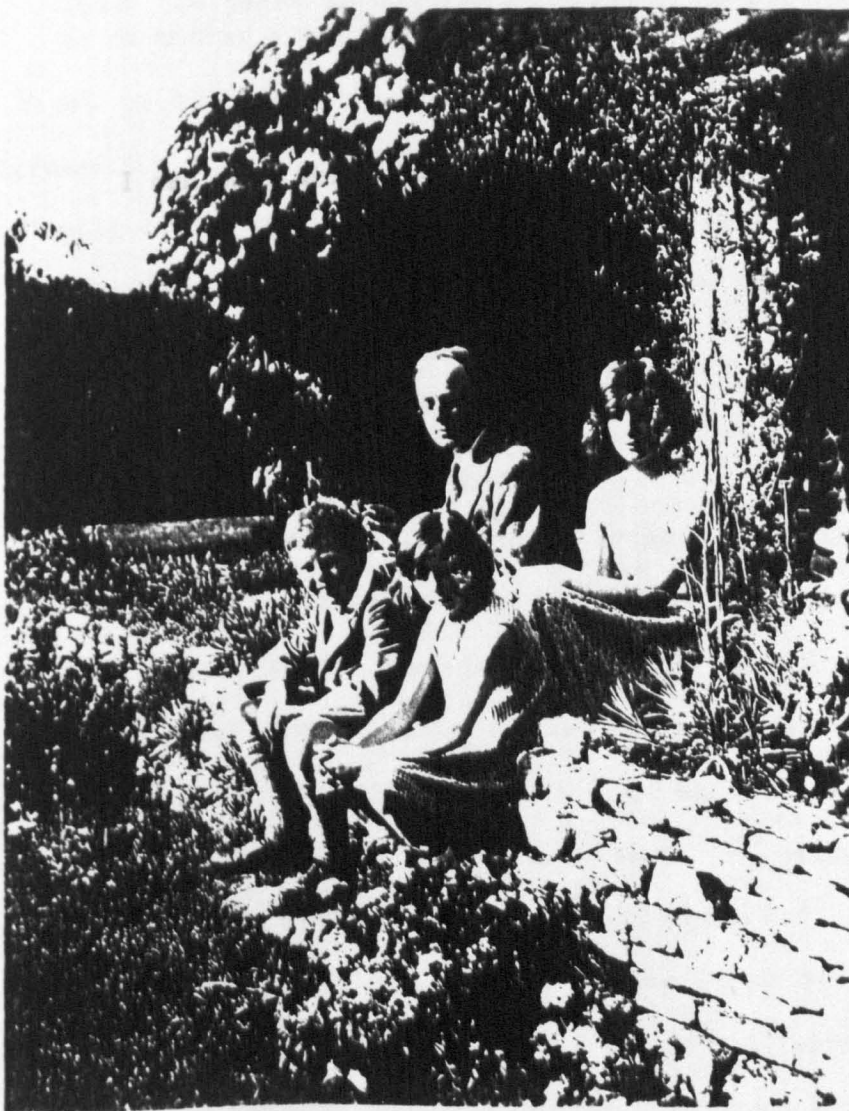
FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER FIVE

1. E.M. 29.5.19.
2. E.M. 17.3.19.
3. P.W. 3.2.19.
4. E.M. undated, January, 1919.
5. P.W. 7.12.19.
6. E.M. 17.3.19.
7. E.M. 6.4.19.
8. E.M. 10.4.19.
9. E.M. 12.4.19.
10. E.M. 23.6.19.
11. E.M. Christmas 1920.
12. E.M. 23.6.19.
13. E.M. 29.5.19.
14. E.M. *ibid.*
15. E.M. 23.6.19.
16. E.M. 2.7.19.
17. E.M. 5.7.19.
18. Marsh's inheritance which funded his 'Georgian' enterprise was partly derived from the state compensation paid to his family. This was for the murder of his forbear, the Prime Minister, Spencer Perceval who was shot whilst in the lobby of the House of Commons in 1812. Perceval had died instantly in the arms of James Stephen, the father of Sir Leslie Stephen. James Stephen, a member of the Clapham sect, subsequently visited the assassin in goal to pray with him. The sum of compensation paid by the state, suitably invested, continued to provide the largesse to enable Marsh to be the generous patron that he was.
19. E.M. 15.8.19.
20. E.M. 22.8.19.
21. E.M. 9.10.19.
22. E.M. 1.3.20.
23. E.M. 28.4.20.
24. E.M. 21.9.22.
25. P.W. 23.7.19.
26. E.M. 18.3.24.
27. P.W. 18.10.19.
28. E.M. 21.1.20.
29. E.M. 14.8.21.
30. E.M. 17.9.19.
31. E.M. *ibid.*
32. E.M. 24.9.19.
33. E.M. 1.3.20.
34. E.M. 28.4.20.
35. E.M. 11.7.20.
36. E.M. 6.9.20.
37. *ibid.*
38. E.M. undated in June 1919.
39. E.M. a postcard 4.6.19.
40. E.M. 15.6.19.
41. V. de la M. 22.6.19.
42. E.M. 7.3.22.

43. Mrs Osborne, Christmas 1931. Newcastle Central Library.
44. A letter from Edward Thomas to Robert Frost, quoted in
Edward Thomas Selected Poems and Prose, edited by Wright
(Penguin, 1981) p.286.
45. P.W. 14.8.20.
46. E.M. 17.9.19.
47. E.M. 21.1.20.
48. E.M. 1.3.20.
49. *ibid.*
50. *ibid.*
51. W. de la M. 23.6.20.
52. *ibid.*
53. P.W. 10.7.21.
54. E.M. 14.8.21.
55. W. de la M. 25.2.22.
56. W. de la M. 18.5.22.
57. *ibid.*
58. P.W. 6.2.21.
59. P.W. 29.7.21.
60. E.M. 7 12.21.
61. E.M. 16.1.21.
62. E.M. 7.3.22.
63. W. de la M. 5.3.22.
64. 'Peasant Chronicle', *Times Literary Supplement*, October 5th 1922, p.627.
65. E.M. 6.1.24.
66. E.M. 12.2.24
67. Letter from Gibson to Thomas Hardy, 27th July, 1922.
Dorchester County Museum



W.W.G., JOCELYN, MICHAEL : WEST MALVERN C. 1920



W.W.G., MICHAEL, JOCELYN, AUDREY : LETCHWORTH DAYS C. 1930

CHAPTER SIX

1924-1929

I can only write the kind of poems that come to me '

During the period that Gibson was working on *Krindlesyke*, it was not his sole preoccupation. He brought out a new edition of *Daily Bread* in January 1923 but this contained no major revisions and no new pieces were included in it. Thus even while working on something new Gibson was still looking back and revisiting areas of his imagination already well-trodden. He knew that in a sense his career had made a beginning but had not developed as he had hoped:

Here I am nearly forty-five, with no positive achievement to my name.

The stages of his career appeared to him as plainly as they do to the reader:

About ten years ago, after a long and hard struggle, I seemed to be making a few friends for myself and my work.²

He fixed on 1912 and his arrival in London and its consequences as a watershed in his life. Now he had reached another watershed, he was developing something quite new but did the vein he had committed himself to mining have adequate reserves? Even before *Krindlesyke* was published he was already working on the next drama:

I am now in the thick of tackling a new drama, to which *Krindlesyke* is mere child's play. Wish me luck! Even if I don't win through it's a great game.³

He went on to suggest that Marsh might bring the new work to Basil Dean's notice or to Sybil Thorndike's as "she might like some of these shorter things".⁴ She seemed to have demurred at the length of *Krindlesyke*. The new work, *Kestrel Edge*, containing five plays was due out on January 15th 1924 and was actually published two days earlier. A copy was sent to Basil Dean who gave Macmillan's "leave to announce that he is contemplating the production of 'Lovers Leap'".⁵ It was this work 'Lover's Leap' which Gibson claimed is "my first deliberate attempt at writing for the stage"⁶ and he thought that Sybil Thorndike might be well disposed to it. She was currently playing in Gordon Bottomley's new play,

Gruach, at the Playhouse. The general excitement over the possibilities of his new work was heavily counter-balanced by Gibson's gloominess about the reception of his work by critics and the public:

I doubt if anything will make a book of mine go ⁷
he wrote to Marsh on the day *Kestrel Edge* appeared and then, two months later, the absence of any response from the critical and reviewing world led him to the following humorous remark:

Kestrel Edge just tripped over Macmillan's doorstep as it came out and is now as dead as Angus at the foot of Lover's Leap.⁸

The comparison is a reference to the fate of a character in the volume. Gibson's gloom in his art and in his life, especially at the time of parturition, of publication, was suffocating. *Kestrel Edge* must be seen as an attempt to mine further the vein of 'rich ore' he seemed to have struck in *Krindlesyke* if his friends and favourable critics were to be believed. His purpose was, essentially, to try to make dramatic capital out of dialect and the lives of rustic folk. His great feeling for nature, for the elemental wildness of the northern fellsides, for human passion, directed him towards the violent passions of humble people and he found a ready model in *Wuthering Heights*, for which he had, he told de la Mare, a great love. The 'playlets' that make up *Kestrel Edge* are, however, largely failures because they are so brief that they allow space neither for the development of an action that is significant and arresting nor for character that is anything other than rudimentary and sketchy. Most are barely begun before they are over whilst the exceptions to this generalization, 'Lover's Leap' and the eponymous 'Kestrel Edge' suffer from the opposite flaw of being far too prolix and overdeveloped on an essentially melodramatic subject. The remaining three, shorter, pieces 'Red Rowan', 'Blackadder' and 'Winter's Stob', all of which are the names of Northumbrian border 'steadings' or farms, are called,

collectively, by Gibson 'Gangrels'. This obsolete dialect word means wanderers or tramps. These pieces are set in the vicinity of the Border town of Yetholm and feature horse-copers, travelling and camping folk, tramps and drovers but apart from the splendid titles and the promising settings there is nothing in the pieces to command attention.

'Lover's Leap' is far more compelling and although it is not of a saga-scale, like *Krindlesyke*, it has a design which suggests that Gibson was attempting something very ambitious: a drama with, behind it, the clear presence of the genius of Emily Brontë. The story is that of the Earnshaws who live at Windwhistle, a border farmstead: "a grey, lone, outby, God-forsaken neuk". The old mother, Rachel Earnshaw, is a figure, though a lesser one, in the mould of Bell Haggard, the heroine of *Krindlesyke* and she knows men and their ways. The young wife of Angus Earnshaw, Lucy is a somewhat dainty miss - "a pretty puling poppet with airs and graces" - and quite inadequate to his "hot blood", indeed says, Rachel

few
Have zest enough to satisfy the hunger
Of life that burns the body of a man

It is the arrival of two sisters, Esther and Adah, servants hired at the May term-day hiring by Angus which precipitates the action. Angus pursues Esther, his brother Alec pursues Adah. Adah, however, desires Angus and Esther rejects him in what is a curiously broken chiasmic organization of the plot. The characters 'circle' each other with a good deal of verbal 'flyting' until the dénouement which has Esther and Angus meeting on the high, beetling crag called Lover's Leap which overhangs a moorland lough. She pushes him over the crag and he drowns. In order to escape being brought to justice, she follows her thwarted seducer into the waters of the lough. The tale is melodramatic and being on a much smaller scale than *Krindlesyke* has no opportunity to build its effects and make them

convincing. Thus the reader has a sense of absurdity which verges on the kind of rural earnestness of Mary Webb in *Precious Bane* or indeed in the parody of the genre in *Cold Comfort Farm*.

The debts which Gibson owed to *Wuthering Heights* go beyond the use of the Earnshaw name and embrace the sense of the wild, untutored passions of people driven by powerful sexuality such as Emily Brontë shews with Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw. The mood of wild nature, set against the tame meekness of life as seen by Lucy and Alec in the play is very like the contrast between that of the Heights and Thrushcross Grange in *Wuthering Heights*. Hardy too is owed something in that the murder of the pursuing Angus by Esther is not unlike Tess's murder of Alec d'Urberville and whilst there is nothing in the piece anywhere as good as anything in Hardy the sense of brooding nature and dark human passions is akin to his. Indeed the setting, at Windwhistle, was an unconscious borrowing from Hardy as Gibson acknowledged in a somewhat unctuous letter of reply to Hardy's charge of plagiarism:

Dear Mr Hardy: The coincidence of the two houses bearing the same name does not seem to me nearly so odd as the fact that I should have forgotten that you had already made use of that name - and in one of my favourite poems! I trust that you will forgive me, and believe that the apparent plagiarism was due to inadvertance. Should a second edition of my book be called for, I should be glad to change the name of my farmstead, if you should think it desirable: though it may not be worthwhile, seeing that your Windwhistle will be perched securely on the peak of Parnassus long after mine has sunk into the bogs of oblivion! "

'Kestrel Edge' is a tale of revenge murder set at the farmstead of a big sheep farm on a bitter November night. Old man Angerton, thought to have been shot in an accident is discovered to have been killed deliberately by a jealous lover of his wife. In Scene I his son decides to avenge him but in Scene II the son Reuben comes to see vengeance as pointless and his action is prevented simply because of what he saw when he got to the little cottage at Burnshawgate:

REUBEN: Nay, Gideon, hear me out. The blinds were up:
And, as I paused a moment on the threshold,
I saw into the room. It looked so warm
And bright and cosy there, out of the wind -
So safe: and I, out in the wind and snow,
With cold death in my hand

GIDEON: The curse of God is on you.

REUBEN: Nay, you'll never understand:
But hear me out: I haven't much to tell.
I looked, and saw him, standing by the fire,
Unconscious, while

GIDEON: Alone? Oh, Reuben, say
He was alone! Mother's upstairs - you're sure?

REUBEN: You dare to think that she .. He was alone
And gazing into the fire with smiling eyes:
And as I watched him there, it seemed so crazy -
First, father, standing upright in his pride,
And Robert, creeping up to lay him low;
Then Robert, standing upright in his pride
Of life, and I , , , when in a few short years
We'll all be lying low enough, without ...

GIDEON: You saw him standing - and you did not fire?

REUBEN: My God, you never thought I meant to do it
Without his knowing? You fancied I'd sneak up
To a man's house, and shoot him from behind?

GIDEON: Well, I don't understand: but you've not done it.
Whatever you meant to do.

REUBEN: I haven't done it.
I couldn't call him out, somehow: it seemed
So crazy - he and I should stand out there,
Facing each other in the falling snow,
That one might stretch the other stiff and stark,
When anyway ... and that could never end it.
If I had fallen...

The widowed mother, Naomi, plans to emigrate to Canada with Robert Ellershaw, her husband's "murderer". She believes they fought a duel for her love and that she is rightfully the prize of the victor, Ellershaw. Gideon leaves with a gun. In the final scene, Scene III, Naomi's lament and confession of the power of her love depicts suppressed passion bursting out and Gibson's imaginative use of the metaphor of the damped-down furnace, which explodes into life without her will, captures it exactly:

And then Robert came.
Until he came, I thought I'd turned to ice,
And never would feel anything again:
And then he came to Burnshawgate. We met:
And I felt the fire I'd thought I'd smothered dead
Leap up to meet his fire. We loved - but you,

You'll never understand: you haven't loved:
And I'd not loved till then.

After a hard life of relentless poverty and spiritlessness she felt she was about "to live for the first time." But this never happens because Gideon, God's servant, shoots the lover :

He chose me out
To be His instrument of wrath

and pitches the body into Black Mire Moss. Reuben, in order to save his brother from a murder charge leaves the stage and shoots himself and thus gives the appearance of a fight between him and his mother's lover which ended in death. My own view of *Kestrel Edge* is contradicted sharply by at least one of the earliest readers. Miss Dilla in *The South Atlantic Quarterly* in 1927 considered the pieces to be "marvellously intense, brilliantly finished poetic plays."¹⁰ Such fulsome praise exaggerates the qualities of these dramas and it would be hard to imagine that anyone but an enthusiast will turn to these pieces ever again. Certainly they show little poetic capacity. In my view Gibson is here trying to repeat the sort of thing he did in *Krindlesyke*. It is as though he now had a formula for passionate conflict in a rural setting and was determined to repeat it. The hollowness of the enterprise is intensified by the dramatic form because the formulaic, almost threadbare, content is exposed in the attempt to dramatise it.

The *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer recognised the deficiencies at once and saw that after the monumental dignity that was in *Krindlesyke*, despite some of its 'dead' patches, Gibson's work had declined. In his view Gibson fails with these 1924 plays in every respect: the themes being crude and the characters unreal, for they "strut and rant and whine as no rustic ever did." The "Gangrels" he saw as "a tissue of vituperative repartee ... of no artistic significance." He warned the author to note that "Dialect does not make drama." Above

all, as he said, in these pieces there was no heightening power of imagination such as Gibson's earlier work had promised. It was necessary, therefore, that he should return "from superficial naturalism to those deep feelings which he once invoked."¹¹

By the end of 1924 Gibson was feeling exhausted by his work and frustrated by the general absence of much critical response to it. He felt his age and he felt that he belonged to the older generation of poets and that they had been overtaken. Interestingly enough he seems not to have been of the opinion that it was Eliot and 'modernism' that had overtaken his generation but rather the Squire-archy including Freeman and Shanks, as well as J.C.Squire, who were coming into increasing prominence. Eliot was not remarked upon by Gibson at all. Only one dismissive mention of "the Pound crowd"¹² occurs in the available correspondence, although what is made continually clear is that he doesn't like much "modern stuff" as he calls it. He never wavered in his adherence to the view that poetry should be simple, plain and clear. He had no sense that modern poetry must needs be difficult.

Despite his enthusiasms and raised hopes *Krindlesyke* and *Kestrel Edge*, on which his post-war hopes were built, had not made much of a showing and he seemed trapped in a manner that he could not escape and which was no longer acceptable. To cap it all Marsh now turned on him and made it abundantly plain that he did not care for the latest publication. Gibson replied:

Your general criticism is not helpful for the reason that I can only write the kind of poems that come to me....¹³

A perfectly acceptable and justified viewpoint coming not only from a poet who was increasingly aware of his limitations but one who recognized that poetry cannot be 'willed' as any attempt to do so produces falsity. The point was made clear by Philip Larkin: when he was told by a reader

who was somewhat disapproving "Mr Larkin, I don't like your poems"; Larkin replied "I don't particularly like them myself but they are the only ones I can write." In Gibson's case Marsh had obviously made a similar error; it was no good chiding the poet for doing the only thing he could do, for failing to be better. It would be as vain to ask someone to be witty. Gibson thanked him for "the friendly frankness of [his] verdict" but felt:

disappointed. I have so little self-confidence ... it will take me a little time to recover my wind.¹⁴

The effect of this slap in the face from Marsh seems, in a sense, to have driven him back on himself making him regress to his earlier subjects and modes. He was then busying himself with very much slighter lyrics which later went into the volumes *I Heard a Sailor*, published in 1925 and *The Golden Room* published in 1928.

I Heard a Sailor is a collection of ballad and lyric pieces. The ballads generally have a robust vigour that derives from their relationship to traditional models, as in the following example:

NED NIXON AND HIS MAGGIE

*Will you come with me, Maggie, to Stagshaw Bank Fair?
Come with you where - come with you where?
Do you fancy a lass has naught better to do
Than to go gallivanting, Ned Nixon, with you?*

*If you come with me, Maggie, I'll buy you a ring.
You'll do no such thing - you'll do no such thing.
Do you fancy I'd let my lad squander his pence
On tokens and trinkets and such-like nonsense?*

*Come, Maggie, come, Maggie, we're only once young!
Now hold your fool's tongue - now hold your fool's tongue!
If we're only young once it behoves us to be
A common-sense couple and act cannily.*

*Time enough, Maggie, for sense when we're old.
Does copper turn gold - does copper turn gold,
Or a guff turn wiseacre at three-score-and-ten?
Anyhow, I'm for taking no chances with men.*

*Then must I go lonesome to Stagshaw Bank Fair?
What do I care - what do I care?
But if you go lonesome I'd have you to know
It's lonesome the rest of your life you will go.*

This light folk ballad has a swing and a swagger, it goes with confidence and gusto. The reader feels the assurance of the poet's voice sustaining the easy rhythm of a catchy tune. The virtue of the piece lies in its simplicity. The lyric poems try for something deeper and deal with love or sudden death or what Hardy calls 'moments of vision'. These pieces do not come off well. Typically 'At The Pit-Head' starts strikingly enough but is incapable of being sustained and it fizzles out:

AT THE PIT-HEAD

Black was his face
With the dust of the pit,
But bright as hot coals
His eyes burned in it.

The first time I felt
His gaze fixed on me,
And wondering turned
Half-frightened to see

The fire of his heart
That paled the sunshine
Blazing out of the eyes
That looked into mine,

Till an answering flame
In my bosom was lit
By those eyes burning out
From the mirk of the pit.

As the poem closes it comes to seem weak and pointless. Occasionally the lyrical impulse suggests Hardy and Housman but the mention of those two names serves only to make plain the gulf that lies between them and Gibson. Where they add to the simplicity of their themes and subjects by a complexity of attitude and feeling, where they make a deep response, Gibson remains both simple in his theme and simple in his attitude to it. Gibson's treatment is reductive and his personal and lyrical impulse remains just an impulse; he does not reflect upon it in order to develop it. It is, as the *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer noted "unsupported by fundamental brain work."¹⁵ Hence he is only superficial. When, as in the ballads, he deals with the great shared commonplaces of life, the



traditional experience of generations of people, his expression grasps the general significance only. Thus his simplicity as a writer is both his strength and his weakness. For Gibson, complexity of thought resulted in sterility:

ONE POET -

Losing himself within himself, he wanders
In the dark labyrinth of his mind so long
That the great epic which he ever ponders
Cannot escape in song.

whereas his impulsive use of quotidian themes was productive:

AND ANOTHER

Not only from his own, but from the lives
Of all, his song draws nurture, and survives:
And never shall his powers know eclipse
Till death grows envious of those singing lips.

As a consequence of his dependence on impulse Gibson tended to rework old themes and during this period more 'Rupert' poems were being written. He wanted to put a dedicatory "To E.M." on the top of one poem suggesting that he wanted to come into line with the Georgian ringmaster again. Marsh apparently was quite approving of the quality now and said so and Gibson was happy that they were reconciled. At this point there came the culmination of all his earlier work, the publication, by Macmillan, of the first English edition of the *Collected Poems*. This was being negotiated during 1924 and 1925 and was ready to go to the publishers by the end of that year, though Gibson shewed little pleasure in the prospect:

My *Collected Poems* are straked [sic] ¹⁶ and shrouded at last
and ready for the tomb ¹⁷

he pronounced, as gloomily as ever, though the gloom may well have been cover for apprehension. Then, more promisingly, the letter turns eagerly to saying "So I can turn to new work."

Now that he was a poet not only with many published volumes to his name and a readership in Britain and America but also had had his *Collected Poems* published, Gibson was at the apogee of his career so far

as his public standing was concerned. His publisher had shown great confidence in him, he was sought as a reviewer by *The Observer* newspaper and Abercrombie was singing his praises in his public and academic addresses on the poetry platform and at the lectern. Gibson was very much aware of his good fortune and ready to acknowledge it:

Yes, Macmillan and Garvin [editor of the *Observer*] and Lascelles among them have done me proud; and I feel I must set to work to write some real poetry now, if only to justify them.¹⁸

As a consequence of the plaudits and 'puffs' he was receiving from so many quarters Gibson could report that Macmillan's "say that the book is going well" ¹⁹ and by the end of 1926 that the first edition of *Collected Poems* was "nearly exhausted".²⁰ He received a very gratifying and lengthy review from Richard Church in *The Spectator*. "Gibson moves the heart of the reader, and carries him away from literature to life" said Church. He went on to speak of Gibson's "extraordinarily alert and vivid sympathy" and paid him the compliment of being a careful craftsman in his work, being able, said Church "to express his moods in carefully wrought verse" which carried with it "a suggestion of Hardy, Wordsworth and Burns yet imitating none of them". Giving particular attention to what he thought of as Gibson's distinctiveness of language Richard Church discerningly noted that:

he is constantly experimental within his particular emotional experience, and picks over the language with infinite care, specially delighted when he can snatch a choice dialect idiom or a fat-sounding rustic note.²¹

Not that Church was by any means kind to Gibson's limitations. He saw that his poetry had a narrowness to it largely because of its domestic preoccupations. Whilst he looked out on to a wider world, said Church, he did not share in it. In a sense the limitation that Church diagnoses is Blake's judgement on the limitation of those "who see with not through

the eye." Nonetheless, even with that powerful reservation the remainder of Church's review cannot but be read as discerning and justified praise:

Browsing through the fruit of twenty years the critic is forced to observe that Mr Gibson has a singular uniformity of approach to life. Nor does it develop as he journeys through time he is possessed by a brooding bard-like singleness of passion for mate, nest and fledgling, and he looks out on the world always with that responsibility in the back of his mind. As a poet of domestic life ... it makes him matchless. He "sings the home" and the world as the external opponent of the home. He sings of it with a depth and poignancy that wring the heart ... He looks out on the religious and philosophic worlds - most adventurous and least domestic of all - he looks, but he does not share. Then we discover that his genius is nearly always an impulsive one, acting upon the report of his eyes, rather than upon the full testament of his five senses drawn up by reason. We find that his poems are pictorial.

For Church, Gibson's *Collected Poems* were, he said, the work of "so fine, so noble and so sincere an artist." Church was not a personal friend of Gibson's and his praise for this volume gives us some idea of Gibson's true standing amongst his peers at the peak of his achievement.

Another indication of Gibson's widespread reputation at this time was provided by the publication in 1926 of a volume now rarely to be found even in the dustiest corners of second-hand book shops. This was called *Sixty-Three Poems of W.W. Gibson* and the poems had been "selected for use in schools and colleges". Its editor was Edward A. Parker, then Professor of English at Wilson College, Bombay, India. This book came as a great surprise to Gibson who could hardly understand that his reputation had appeared to have acquired a particular significance in the Indian sub-continent. He wrote, giving news of Macmillan's intentions, to Percy Withers saying that it was:

Such an odd thing! Macmillans are preparing a selection of my poems for use in Indian colleges and for sale exclusively in India! ²²

Professor Parker's laudatory introduction to his selection still makes interesting reading and carries with it a broad, free sense of what poetry meant to the common reader who enjoyed Gibson in those days.

In Parker's opinion Gibson demonstrated dramatic qualities and complete originality.

"Mr Gibson's genius is essentially dramatic"

Parker began boldly and went on to shew how Gibson was able to make the experience of England, of English life and the English countryside 'live' in his verses and plays. Biography was given very close examination in relation to topography and Parker was anxious to point out how Northumberland, with its distinctive and contrasting areas of Upper Tyne representing the county or 'shire' natural world, and of Lower Tyne representing the industrial city, the seaport and the coast, provided Gibson from the beginning with a varied and contrasting 'field of inspiration'. This, argued Professor Parker, not only enabled him to have an eye for the beauty and fascination of rural and maritime things but also for the "sawdust restaurants and oyster shells..... the streets that follow like a tedious argument" that we meet with in the 'ultra-modern' verse of Eliot. Professor Parker notes too how Gibson's "characters" are all marginal men: thieves, tinkers, travellers, ^{itinerant} workmen, the shifting mass of poor unidentified souls of the modern world. In this, of course, Gibson was very much in the English Fabian tradition stemming from the Liberal and left leanings of the influential late nineteenth century coteries like 'The Souls' and the Morrisite intellectuals. The taking on of the marginal life of society was in part a criticism of society and Gibson, like Davies the tramp poet, by bringing poor life into verse shewed up the sham of much high life and provided a critical stand-point from which to take a radical view. Unlike Davies, though, Gibson never lived a 'marginal' life but was always very 'respectable'. Professor Parker, in his introduction, gave an ample sense of not only how much Gibson's imagination was topographically nurtured but also that it was indeed imaginative projection and not experience; he lived, said Parker,

"an unremarkable life" and so his imaginative qualities are thus seen as all the more impressive.

Professor Parker was also quite clear - as any informed reader must soon be - about the relationship in which Gibson stood to his inheritance. In distinguishing the lyrical output from the dramatic he argued that broadly speaking the lyrical Gibson emerged from the Shelley-Tennyson-Swinburne tradition and that the dramatic was from the Browning-Abercrombie line. It is hardly necessary to say that Gibson's lyric grace was scarcely equal to that of his predecessors and it needs to be said that Gibson's dramas have a content which owes more to Wordsworth than to Browning in their preoccupation with rural life and that they have none of Browning's sardonic wit or monologue flair for catching the real ringing tone or an individual voice like Blougram or Sludge.

The interest of this selection of Gibson's verse remains, however, in that it shews that within fifteen years of his becoming a 'metropolitan' writer Gibson was being taught in the schools and colleges of the Empire and being praised effusively by a Professor whose book was probably read by large numbers of students.

It would seem, therefore, that at this stage of Gibson's life with such standing and with money continuing to flow in from Brooke's estate, that the future, both for reputation and domestic comfort, looked assured.

We felt certain ... that the Brooke-fund would have shrunk to vanishing point: and lo and behold! it's bigger than last year! Of course the longer this miracle lasts the more miraculous it is, but amazement get exhausted

he wrote in November 1926.²³ Yet another year later it is the same story: "Many thanks for the Brooke cheque - as incredible as ever." ²⁴ And with this letter was enclosed a signed receipt for £111-9-7. At the same time the *Collected Poems* continued to sell so well - by October 1927 it was

into its second thousand - that Macmillan held back the publication of a new book, *The Golden Room*, until the Autumn of 1928. Much to Gibson's surprise even the rough manuscripts were considered to be important enough to have value and he sold them to Sir Edward Brotherton for £50.

During all this activity of writing and publishing the Gibson family had still been living by the sea at Coed-y-Mor in Pembrokeshire, but there was growing dissatisfaction with the inadequate schools available for the children in the immediate vicinity of their house, so moving was once again a necessity. In the early summer of 1926 he wrote to Marsh:

Don't think we will be here much longer .. we have reluctantly come to the conclusion that the little school we have been trying for Audrey and Michael at Tenby is too unenlightened and that we must move to a place where there is a really good day school within easy reach.

We have had a very happy five years here and it has been splendid for the children who have been rampagiously well all the time. For many reasons we shall be sorry to leave, but I fancy the move will be a very good thing for the parents. We are really too far from our friends here - too much cut-off from all intellectual intercourse. I expect the change will be good for my work too ... I don't believe we shall ever have such a nice home again.²⁵

The whole family had obviously been extremely happy in their house by the sea but the idyllic peace of the period in Wales was now to become a memory. Their time in this place is celebrated in the following poem, though sentimentality as usual calls out the 'poetic' language such as "beryl" or "innocency":

BY CARMARTHEN BAY

Behold the happy three,
Wading knee-deep through windy hyacinths
Against a beryl sea!

Dearest, if only we
Might hold them ever thus in idleness
Of April innocence! Ah no! not so, not so!
Rather, 'Tis our exceeding happiness
To watch our children grow -

Springing and burgeoning
In the sweet light of heaven, or storm-beset,
Still bravely flourishing;

Gaining from winter's stress
No less than from the idle summertide's
Full golden blessedness;

And as, in love with life,
They swiftly grow to man - or womanhood,
Even more ours, dear wife -

Even more surely ours
Shall be their wise young hearts, than when they played,
Flower-like, among the flowers:

While still, in memory,
Three happy children among hyacinths
Shall frolic by the sea.

The stay at Saundersfoot was a very happy one and clearly Gibson was reluctant to leave. Had it not been for the necessity of getting the best education for his children he might have stayed on. However that may be, the immediate business of departure triggered off a great deal of writing and he told Marsh "I had a fine spell of writing just before leaving Saundersfoot."²⁶ Gibson wrote his first letter to Marsh from his new address in Letchworth, Hertfordshire in June 1926.

Letchworth, the earliest of the modern idea of the garden cities, was a new town and was built on new ideas. Fabian socialism, freedom of the new woman, experimental education, the outdoor life, vegetarian diet were all characteristic of the new way of life that was to be nourished by the new design for town living. The Letchworths of England were to be a reproach to the old cities that had spawned slums. For Gibson the new idea of the town-life that was to be the creation of artists rather than capitalists and tradespeople must have been attractive. He was the poet who had responded to the poor and suffering human wreckage created by the industrial machine, by the war machine and by the economic depression of the twenties. A man of sensitivity who loved art, had socialist leanings, was concerned with the quality of life would quite properly be attracted to the garden city. And above all, a most pressing need, he had children to educate. Three children were in need of schooling and in Letchworth there was a school, St Christopher's, run by a distinguished teacher,

St. Harris, and owned by the Thompsons. Harris, in a newspaper interview in 1931 Gibson said that

"We live here because of our children... Let's look at the house... it's a parambulator."

The interviewer

described it as

an exquisite

room...

all angles

looks every

It is interesting

to have a great

view - and

converts both

into a trailer

and his friend

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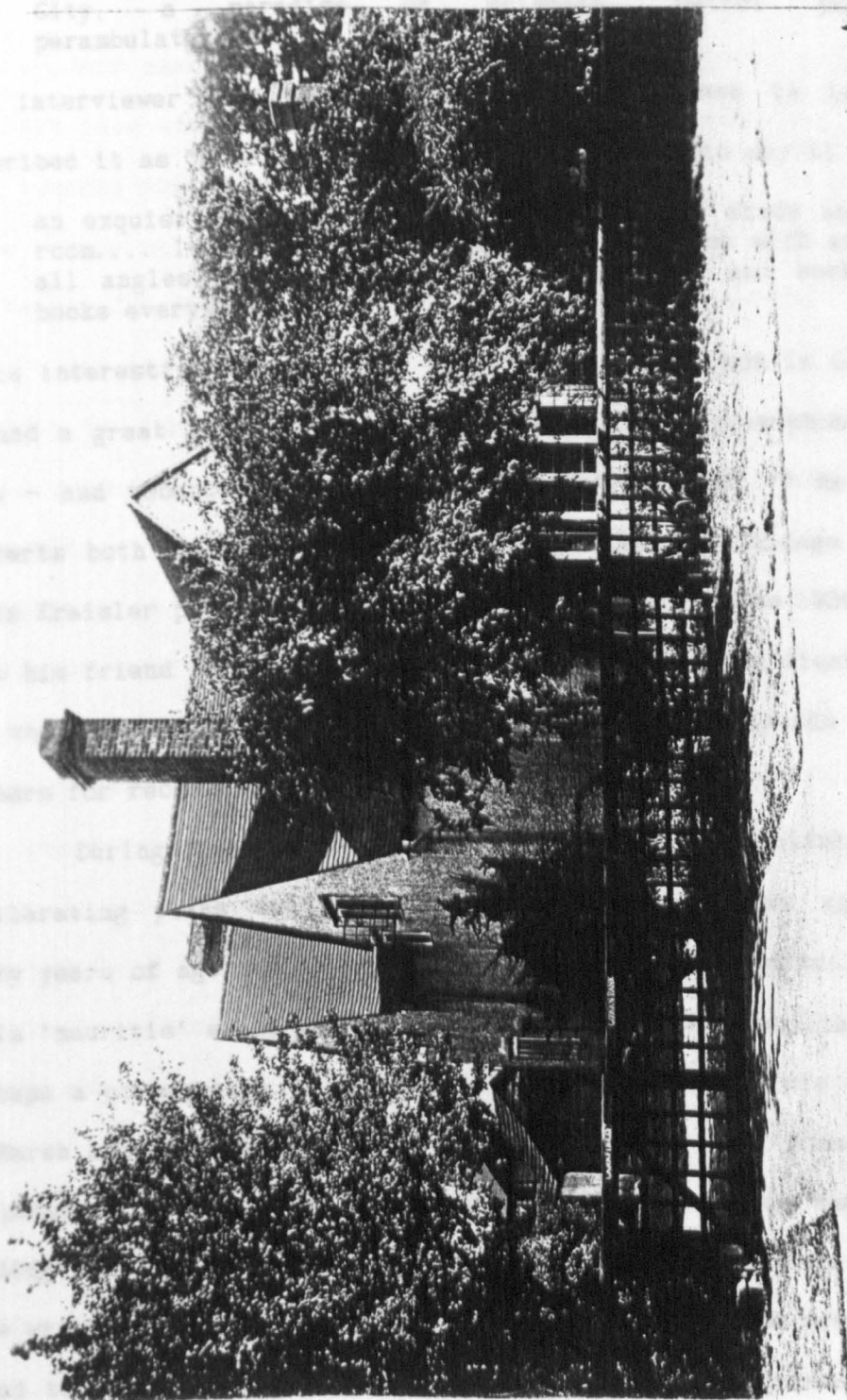
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THE HOUSE AT CROWAN BANK, LETCHWORTH : GIBSON'S HOME 4/26 - 1933

Mr Harris, and owned by the Theosophical Educational Trust. In a newspaper interview in 1931 Gibson said that

"We live here because of our children..... Letchworth Garden City, a paradise of primness, petrol pumps and perambulators."²⁷

The interviewer must have visited Gibson's house in Letchworth and described it as "a prim little house" but went on to say it contained:

an exquisitely furnished bedroom ... a tiny study and a music room.... It is a true poet's house, this, shot with sunlight at all angles, decorated in exquisite shades, and books, books, books everywhere.

It is interesting to note that there was a music room in Gibson's house. He had a great love of music and had acquired a gramophone and he used this - and tobacco - to "induce the creative mood".²⁸ He had attended concerts both in England and America. In 1917 in Chicago he had heard Fritz Kreisler play Bach and cherished the memory. From 1926 he was lucky that his friend Percy Withers, who was a doctor and so financially better off than Gibson, sent him records as presents. His thanks were given to Withers for recordings of Beethoven, Mozart and Bach.

During the Letchworth years Gibson's work alternated between exhilarating plans and disappointing results. He was now approaching fifty years of age and apart from his continued susceptibility to what he calls 'neuritis' seems to have been in rather better health at this time, perhaps a consequence of his greater prosperity. He wrote optimistically to Marsh about two pieces of new work: one was a new "comedy (or farce?) in prose called *Between Fairs* and the other, the one Macmillan's were holding back to the Autumn of 1928, was *The Golden Room*, "the poems I have written since those in the *Collected*". The play he proposed "to send round to actors and managers to try and secure its production." In the same letter he asked Marsh to help him:

would you hand some on to some of your managerial friends.²⁹

Marsh read the play and suggested some alterations which Gibson assented to very readily for as he confessed he had

the greatest difficulty in judging what would tell in the theatre.³⁰

One wonders exactly why it was that Gibson was trying his hand at prose at this late stage of his career. His reputation and inclination were in and towards poetry though as his career had taken off he had been offered more reviewing and prose criticism and appreciation such as the pieces he wrote for *The Bookman* periodical on Hardy and on Rossetti.

Between Fairs, then, is his sole prose drama. In this work his ability for imaginative prose seems very restricted indeed. It is written as a play-text with performance in mind and so has complete stage directions. This was not normally Gibson's habit. The setting is a fairground in the north country near a small market town and the characters are a rich and varied bunch of performers reflecting Gibson's interest in oddities, marginal characters, freaks, 'drop-outs' and tramps. They include a lion-tamer, a clown, a sword-swallower, a coconut-shy stall-holder, a half-breed cowboy from America, a boxer, a circus rider, a slack-wire walker and finally, a pedestrian couple, the Piggs, who come from the neighbouring town and who in their bourgeois dullness are the antithesis of the circus-folk. Throughout the play there is an energy and a vitality in Gibson's feel for these people which shows that his real sympathies lie with the show people much as do Dickens's with Sleary's Horse-Riding Circus folk in *Hard Times*. In the play the Pigg values inadequately confront the entertainers' values in just the same manner and spirit in which Dickens's Mr Gradgrind confronts Mr Sleary.

The two main characters are Blackjack, the lion-tamer and his woman, Aggie. These two are the only fully realized people in the play and to some extent they manage to redeem it from banality. As in many of

Gibson's pieces it is the woman who is the stronger of the two personalities. There are many similarities between Aggie and Bell Haggard - they both have the same independent spirit and vitality and they both despise the state of marriage and domesticity. There is also the character of Tiny, a half-breed cowboy from America; he is quite a refreshing piece of characterisation and is plainly a figure that Gibson imagined as a consequence of his American travels in 1917.

The story centres on the fiery relationship between Blackjack and Aggie but there are many twists in the plot, impersonations and changes of partner during the action. At one point the cowboy, Tiny declares his love for Aggie and asks her to escape from Blackjack and go to America with him:

AGGIE Come with you - where ?

TINY Linoleumville, N.J.

AGGIE And where the deuce is that?

TINY You've not heard of Linoleumville, the town where I was raised? Some burg it is, you bet, kid; and I'll take you right there, sure.

AGGIE America? I've always had a fancy to travel, and see the Wild West.

TINY Gosh! Do you think Linoleumville's a ranch, or what? Wild West is well enough on the posters, kid, to guy the boobs; but you won't catch this cuss going among the roughnecks at Hollywood, sure ! Linoleumville is rather less wild than west - about five thousand miles short of both, I guess. But you'll travel some with me, sure; and if you're game kid, I'll take you to Coney Island. Circuses and fairs! You can't even guess what a circus means, Aggie, unless you 've been to Coney. Sure, life's just one eternal movey [sic] there, like heaven.

AGGIE I cannot go.

TINY Just listen till I'm through, kid. I've got the whole tour fixed. When I go down to water the horses this evening, you can ride your own mare down, as you've often done before, and I'll make darned sure nobody else comes with us; and when we reach the river we'll nip off, the two of us, and ride for

AGGIE What ! and leave the other horses?

TINY Sure, they can go to hell, for all that I care!

AGGIE Shame on you, Tiny!

TINY Gee! Do you fancy we can take the whole darned circus with us, kid?

AGGIE Nay - but to leave them loose!

TINY They will take some catching, and that will help us, sure.

AGGIE We'd be overtaken.

TINY And who can overtake Six-shooter Sid and the lady
Bronco-buster, once they've started? And they'll have to miss
us first and then catch their mounts.
AGGIE But we cannot ride to America.
TINY Sure, kid, we can't. We'd only ride as far as the next
burg to muss the trail; and then turn the gees [sic] loose, and
board the cars for Liverpool.

In the end Aggie and Blackjack are reconciled but not married.

The play is lively, has plenty of incident and a variety of
colourful characters. Its language is simple and peasant-like and is
quite serviceable for its purpose though a little leaden and lifeless at
times. For a first try at a prose play it is creditable but Gibson gave
himself little opportunity to develop a skill for this sort of minor
drama. The fascination with people outside 'respectable society' is
striking as is Gibson's feel for the open-air, gipsy life and the
irregularities of human behaviour. He who led, it seems, an exemplary
life of domestic harmony was imaginatively fascinated by the exact
opposite of these things and his memory of travelling people from his
younger days in Hexham and the surrounding areas like Stagshaw and its
famous fair, stayed potently with him throughout his life.

The other publication to appear in 1928 was the collection of verse
entitled *The Golden Room*. A year before, in October 1927, Gibson had
written to de la Mare asking for permission to dedicate the volume to him
and his wife, Elfrida. This volume of lyric verse containing no dramatic
pieces at all, is quite distinctive among all Gibson's work. The quality
it exhibits most strikingly is a tone and manner and a choice of subject
which suggests the strong influence of Hardy. There is no attempt to be
concerned with the urban poor, no attempt to use dialect, no distinctive
concern for rural or Northumbrian themes such as had preoccupied him for
so long. The volume's title poem is a celebration of the past and the
'golden room' is the room at the Old Nailshop at Dymock in 1914. Gathered
together there are Abercrombie, Robert Frost, Edward Thomas and Gibson

himself. The poem is a piece of recording of literary history and its interest stems largely from that. It shows how much that high point of his poetic life meant to Gibson. Once again we find him insisting on a 'golden time', not as a hackneyed phrase but as though it were a true representation of a lost age. He felt, most deeply, that there had indeed been an age of gold up to the Great War and that now it had passed and life was being lived in its shadow, in an age of iron:

THE GOLDEN ROOM

Do you remember that still summer evening
When, in the cosy cream-washed living-room
Of the Old Nailshop, we all talked and laughed -
Our neighbours from The Gallows, Catherine
And Lascelles Abercrombie; Rupert Brooke;
Eleanor and Robert Frost, living a while
At Little Iddens, who'd brought over with them
Helen and Edward Thomas? In the lamplight
We talked and laughed; but, for the most part, listened
While Robert Frost kept on and on and on,
In his slow New England fashion, for our delight,
Holding us with shrewd turns and racy quips,
And the rare twinkle of his grave blue eyes?

We sat there in the lamplight, while the day
Died from rose-latticed casements, and the plovers
Called over the low meadows, till the owls
Answered them from the elms, we sat and talked -
Now, a quick flash from Abercrombie; now,
A murmured dry half-heard aside from Thomas;
Now, a clear laughing word from Brooke; and then
Again Frost's rich and ripe philosophy,
That had the body and tang of good draught-cider,
And poured as clear a stream.

'Twas in July
Of nineteen-fourteen that we sat and talked:
Then August brought the war, and scattered us.
Now, on the crest of an Aegean isle,
Brooke sleeps, and dreams of England: Thomas lies
'Neath Vimy Ridge, where he, among his fellows,
Died, just as life had touched his lips to song.

And nigh as ruthlessly has life divided
Us who survive; for Abercrombie toils
In a black Northern town, beneath the glower
Of hanging smoke; and in America
Frost farms once more; and, far from The Old Nailshop,
We sojourn by the Western sea.

And yet,
Was it for nothing that the little room,
All golden in the lamplight, thrilled with golden
Laughter from hearts of friends that summer night?
Darkness has fallen on it; and the shadow
May never more be lifted from the hearts
That went through those black years of war, and live

And still, whenever men and women gather
For talk and laughter on a summer night,
Shall not that lamp rekindle; and the room
Glow once again alive with light and laughter;
And, like a singing star in time's abyss,
Burn golden-hearted through oblivion?

The interest of the poem is largely confined to the student of Gibson but there is also the interest of a document of literary history depicting a 1914 generation as though they were presented in a photograph. In it Gibson's plain, simple recording style provides a representation of what it felt like to be in that room with his fellow poets at a moment when they were on the brink of dispersal. Gibson's talent was less than some of those present but it has caught the transient moment so important to them all. That may be a lesser art but it is a valid one. In it he was as John Freeman noted in his review of *The Golden Room*:

without imitators ... and without rivals in his particular mode. He is one of the most prolific of writers and one of the most realistic.³¹

Freeman's view of Gibson was that it was very easy to misjudge him because he was so genuine and because he did not borrow from 'foreign fashions', did not have a great intellectual appeal and was austere rather than sensual but that he was the most genuine of poets. Freeman went on:

If you wish to sneer, these poems are but a kind of reporting with sober head-lines but if you do not wish to sneer but to understand you will say that these poems at their best are truly original and real poetry.... It is a reproach to criticism that this great body of poetry is so little understood.³²

Then, referring in particular to *The Golden Room and Other Poems* he pointed out that "there are so many excellent pieces" that selection of

examples was difficult. He offered some examples, however, of which the first, he said, was "a perfect lyric":

CHESTERHOLM

If a Roman ghost should come
To the haughs of Chesterholm
Where, turf-hid from human eyes,
Ruined Vindolanda lies,
Would he grieve to think how she
Lost her world-wide mastery,
Grieve to think how fallen Rome
Lost her world, and Chesterholm?

In this volume Gibson's subjects are extensive and varied. They include poems on social concerns and the work people do - "democratic vistas" are what Freeman cautiously calls them. 'The Last Shift', 'The Broken Chain' and 'The Fantail Pigeons' illustrate this preoccupation. There are also small moments of Hardyesque insight such as is clearly the inspiration behind 'The Pipe', 'The Bearers', 'The Rash Word' and 'House to Let'. Other poems such as 'The Stell' present the view that life and history are meaningless. Particularly so is rural life in which the harshness of the elements mocks the transience of the merely human. This view of the bleak and desolate human lot is depicted in 'Deserted', 'The Crowberries' and 'The Old Wife'. Contrasted with these there are moments of happiness, indeed ecstasy, recorded in the joyous pieces like 'Within The Roofless Steading', 'The Valley Voices' and 'The Eternal Eden'. There are other Gibsonian interests too, the sea, mystery and magic, riddles and games all finding place in the kaleidoscope of his verses making for variety and wide appeal. Dominant, however, is the sombre tone which he had surely learned from Hardy. Freeman commented that the poem 'Beaumont's Close' was similar in spirit to Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*, but it is really much closer to Hardy's Mellstock Churchyard piece called 'Friends Beyond'. Another of the poems from this collection, 'The Wind and the Rain' owes an obvious debt to Hardy's 'During Wind and Rain' in particular and Hardy's 'tone' in general:

THE WIND AND THE RAIN

Roman, Roman, what do you here?
Your great Wall is fallen this many a year -
Fallen, fallen, the Roman Wall;
And green grow the bent and the moss over all.

The wind and the rain have tumbled down
What the foeman left of tower and town.
Well and truly you builded your Wall,
But the wind and the rain are the masters of all:
Bravely you builded: but all in vain
Man builds against the wind and the rain:
The raking wind and the seeping rain,
Whatever man builds, unbuild again.
Man builds in vain, for the wind and the wet,
The water that saps and the airs that fret,
His pride of towers will overset.

Man builds: but all must fall as the Wall
You builded, O Roman, to breast the squall:
The wide-flung ramparts and cities tall
Must fall as the Wall - yea, all must fall,
And the tempest ride over the ruins of all:
For the wind and the rain are the masters of all.

This is nowhere as good as Hardy, it is true, but it bears the stamp of Hardy in almost every line. Gibson could not indeed escape Hardy's influence, for Hardy was the acknowledged 'great poet' in his lifetime as critical reviews and essays of the period bear out. Also Gibson had corresponded with Hardy and had written reviews of his work. In one such review, after Hardy's death, Gibson wrote:

To me it would seem impossible for anyone who had taken up a book of Hardy's poems to have put it down again without having read it through.²²

The Golden Room was not a profitable venture but it had brought favourable notices, and it established a family joke. Since one reviewer said that the poems consistently showed "a high level of achievement" the family now called Gibson the "high level poet."

By the end of this decade Gibson's publishing record was impressive and his standing in the literary world, both at home and abroad, seemed secure. His name was familiar to readers of poetry and to enthusiasts of amateur drama groups; he was known to students and teachers in schools

and colleges and he was also known to readers of quality newspapers like *The Manchester Guardian* and *The Observer* for his reviewer's contributions on a range of literature both of specialist and general interest. I have spoken to elderly people who vividly remember when they were college students, in the period between the wars, being brought up by English tutors on a lot of Gibson's verse and at the same time being aware of his status as a national newspaper reviewer.

It seems somewhat ironic, then, that at the very time that he acquired the nickname the "high-level poet" that his work was beginning to decline. In saying that he could only write the kind of poems that came to him he was not merely saying what all poets perforce must say, but he was acknowledging his total dependence on the impulse of song. He was also acknowledging that he could not influence his development and that there was a drying up of the well-springs.

SUPPLEMENT TO "THE BOOKMAN,"
CHRISTMAS, 1928.

1. E. A. 17 12.24.

2. E. A. 1. 1.23.

3. E. A. 14.10.23.

4. E. A. 25.9.23.

5. E. A. 12.1.24.

6. E. A. 6.1.24.

7. E. A. 13.1.24.

8. E. A. 18.1.24.

9. Letter to

County

10. E. A. 1. 1.24.

11. E. A. 1. 1.24.

12. E. A. 1. 1.24.

13. E. A. 1. 1.24.

14. E. A. 1. 1.24.

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59. E. A. 1. 1.24.

60. E. A. 1. 1.24.



W.W.G. : A PENCIL DRAWING FROM "THE BOOKMAN" CHRISTMAS 1928.

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER SIX

1. E.M. 17.12.24.
2. P.W. 1.9.23.
3. E.M. 14.10.22.
4. E.M. 25.9.23.
5. E.M. 13.1.24.
6. E.M. 6.1.24.
7. E.M. 13.1.24.
8. E.M. 18.3.24.
9. Letter from Gibson to Thomas Hardy: January 16th, 1924.
County Museum, Dorchester.
10. G.P.Dilla, 'Wilfrid Gibson', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 26 (1927) pp.83-88.
11. 'Rustic Realism', *Times Literary Supplement*, February 114th 1924, p.92.
12. E.M. 15.10.15.
13. see footnote 1.
14. *ibid.*
15. 'Mr Gibson's Poetry', *Times Literary Supplement*, December 24th 1925, p.896.
16. The word 'strake' can refer to the planking of a boat. (See Eliot's *Marina*) The *Oxford English Dictionary* also has the meaning of 'a wooden box with open ends. Gibson's use means either laid-out or confined, as used in 'Bell Haggard': (see page 216 of this thesis.)
17. E.M. 21.10.25.
18. E.M. 22.11.26.
19. *ibid.*
20. E.M. 27. 12.26.
21. Richard Church. A review of Gibson's 'Collected Poems', *The Spectator* 137 (1926) 918.
22. P.W. 21.11.24.
23. E.M. 22.11.26.
24. E.M. 8.12.27.
25. E.M. 1.5.26.
26. E.M. 23.9.26.
27. Interview by R. Stephen Williams for the *Daily Express*, (op. cit. p.159
28. *ibid.* footnote 14.)
29. E.M. 24.5.28.
30. E.M. 20.6.28.
31. John Freeman, 'Wilfrid Gibson - Poet', *The Bookman*, 78 (1928) pp.171-174.
In a letter to John Freeman (6.12.28) Gibson thanked him profusely for this article and said he was "rather amazed that you found so much to praise." In the same letter his own assessment of *Between Fairs* seems fair and just:- "As to *Between Fairs*, I hesitated for years as to whether I should publish it or not: and no sooner was it in book form than I regretted it; and I have been trying to keep it dark from friends! Prose drama is not my medium. Forgive the indiscretion." New York Public Library.
32. John Freeman, 'Wilfrid Gibson - Poet' op. cit.
33. Wilfrid Gibson, 'Hardy's Last Poems', *The Bookman*, 78 (1928) pp. 107-108.

CHAPTER SEVEN

1929-1939

A Decade of Disappointment

By 1929 Gibson was something of a survivor of a literary generation that had perished. He was now over fifty years old and his commitment since the end of the war had been primarily to his family and only secondarily to his writing career. Both his age and his isolation from the literary world for twelve years, in Wales and Hertfordshire, made him feel more and more cut off from what was happening in poetry. He felt out of sympathy with the newer, younger generation of writers. He felt he belonged to an older tradition and he disliked all manifestations of 'modernism'. He no longer had the support and stimulus of a group of friends and his poetic personality wilted without the fervent encouragement of others.

Gibson's reputation, however, at the beginning of the decade was a considerable one and acknowledgement of this came in June 1930 when he was awarded an Honorary Master of Arts Degree by the University of Durham. The degree was conferred on him at Armstrong College, the Newcastle college of Durham University, which subsequently became King's College and then Newcastle University. At the same degree congregation Eleanor Rathbone, the Liverpool philanthropist, was also awarded an honorary degree. The association in the minds of the awarding committee between poet of the working class and philanthropist of the urban poor in Liverpool is clear. It is curious that this recognition of his work is never mentioned in any of his extant correspondence

Another interesting view of Gibson as the poet of the working class is provided by a chapter in a book published in Leipzig, Germany in 1932. Now that his work was being studied in schools and colleges his role as an educator, as a social poet and as a force in the increasing thrust of democratic socialism, became established. His work was seen as a powerful imaginative weapon for socialism. The chapter, entitled 'Poetry Conceived with the Soul of the Worker', was written by Eva Walraf and was

a detailed analysis of the various elements of social concern expressed in *Daily Bread*. Walraf distinguishes Gibson's capacities to illuminate the characters of working people and his ability to depict their relationships with wives and with workmates. Above all she shews how Gibson was busy doing something remarkable in his time in depicting the way in which work and social pressures formed, shaped and generally destroyed the human personality by its relentless demands on poor flesh and blood. This is a poetry, not of protest of the kind that we have become used to since 1916 but of social compassion. Walraf's view was that Gibson uniquely

descended into the depths of life to that class of human beings which are so often regarded as if they did not belong to the human community. His feeling of solidarity helped him to a loving understanding of the working class mentality. He came to them like a friend and shared their joys and sufferings. He looked into the workman's soul with realistic perception. He revealed its beauty to the daylight. ¹

Gibson is credited by Walraf with depicting the worker as noble and virtuous in a way that no other writer had done. What Gibson was doing at this time was to bring into imaginative literature a vivid and fresh sense of the working people about whom Ruskin and Morris had written more discursively and theoretically. The form and manner in which he did this, Walraf argues, were ideally suited to the content and gave it a complete sense of "naturalism".

The loose mobile structure of the blank verse enabled the poet to give the impression of everyday conversation and terms to give the language of the people a natural mould for expression. The naturalness and closeness to the people is increased by the frequent use of local idioms mainly from the dialect of the northern counties. ²

For this German scholar and critic Gibson's ideological significance as the apologist for "that great community" of the working class puts him into a context rather different from the way he was seen in England. In the context of German socialist thought Gibson could be interpreted as a

powerful influence. In England it was not so much the ideological significance of his work that caused remark but rather his sympathy for the poor 'who are always with us'. Gibson himself, no doubt, never set out to be a propagandist. His instinct was to be on the side of the poor and some critics, like Walraf, saw this as a political commitment. For them his work easily became that of "a soldier in the liberation war of humanity" to adopt Heine's phrase.³

During this decade of his life Gibson's activities became more varied because he needed to earn more money and his poetry alone did not produce sufficient income. Not only did he write reviews of poetry and novels for *The Manchester Guardian* and *The Observer* but also he was much in demand for public readings of his own poetry and he spent a great deal of time travelling throughout the British Isles. What with earning his living by reading, reviewing and, later in the decade, extensive lecturing on English literature it is perhaps astonishing that he actually managed to publish four volumes of his own verse. Unfortunately none of these volumes, with the possible exception of the last one, *Coming and Going* increased his reputation with the critics. The first to appear, in 1930, was *Hazards*. It was dedicated to Robert and Elinor Frost, so recalling a continued inspiration from that golden year of 1913-1914. It is, I think, one of Gibson's most successful volumes in the period between the wars. It is divided into six sub-sections as follows: 'The Windy Night', 'The Basket of Eggs', 'Look in Your Heart', 'Aftermath', 'Poet', 'Beware!' and finally, 'Hazards'. As these titles suggest the volume is a collocation of pieces composed at different times and in different moods. It will be best to examine the contents of each section before moving towards some general critical assessment of the whole. The unifying feature of the volume is the pervading sense of chance and uncertainty in life and hence the title.

The poems of 'The Windy Night' are almost all built on simple binary oppositions. From his earliest work this characteristic attitude of mind and pattern of composition had been evident and here it is complete. A few examples will illustrate this. 'The Peonies' is a poem that contrasts the bloodless pallor of a corpse with the bright peony flowers that stand by the bedside. Life and colour are used to define the lifelessness and pallor of the dead man. 'On The Quay' has a mill-girl gazing on "salt-encrusted venturers of the whale's playground" (a curious piece of poetic diction and use of the kenning for such a usually plain writer) and thus contrasts confinement with freedom. In 'Earthbound' the poet is in an aeroplane looking down on his fellow man; he is a Gulliver looking on Lilliput. Then he picks out his own house below him and "with one desire his anxious heart was fraught / To be with his own kind on earth again." This characteristic feature of Gibson's technique from his earliest poems became at times almost his stock-in-trade. The following pair of couplets illustrate this sense of opposed elements, first from 'The Answer':

*Give us security! to life we cry
And would you then have death before you die?*

and then 'The Indomitable':

*Even as the body fails him and he dies
Life, at all hazards! Still man's spirit cries*

Another piece from this section, 'Beauty', on the theme of transience seems to suggest that Gibson is both casting about for subjects and uneasy with them when he has found them:

BEAUTY

*She's just what I was at her age, they say;
For I was reckoned bonnie in my day,
Though you might scarcely think it now, said she -
And no one turns a head to look at me.*

*I glanced at her and found it hard to see
The lithe young sapling in the old gnarled tree,
To find the daughter's birch-like suppleness
In that gaunt body with its clumsy dress,
So stiff and angular I couldn't trace,*

As she went hobbling about the place,
One line or gesture of the young girl's grace.

Yet, as I looked into that wizened face,
With its worn features and its anxious eyes,
Grave and unsmiling, seeking to surprise
A gleam of her lost loveliness, I saw
Beauty that filled my heart with deeper awe
Than any laughing girlish liveliness
May waken, and I forgot the clumsy dress
And awkward limbs; and stood there marvelling
Before the beauty age alone can bring,
The Autumn beauty that outflames the Spring
In those whose life has been an offering
Burnt in the lustral fires of suffering.

This poem looks at the poetic convention of the transitory glories of the flesh in a slightly unusual way: those who have suffered in life are seen to have a beauty in age which they could never have in youth. An unusual view but it is one that does not work very effectively partly, at least, because of the tritely repetitive rhyme schemes. The last five lines with the weak 'ing' rhyme do not serve the piece well at all. Indeed the poem reads very much like a willed poem as though he were anxious to empty his sense of compassion but could not quite find an adequate subject in which to do so.

The second section, 'The Basket of Eggs', is made up of a longer dramatic narrative which reverts to the much earlier style and tone of *Akra the Slave*, while the section which follows, 'Look Into Your Heart' is very much more personal and celebrates his fiftieth birthday as well as some other melancholy reflections:

A FIFTIETH BIRTHDAY

I am not old while yet in me
The edge of expectation is undulled,
While in my heart, for every hope annulled,
A new hope quickens instantly.

Keen, as the blade that scythes the sedge
This gold October morning my delight;
And it would seem that till the fall of night
Life still may keep a cutting edge.

Here the ageing poet in the vigour and tenseness of his verse carries an adequate sense of his own vigour and optimism in faring forward come what may. Another poem from this section manages to make concrete the nebulous feelings attendant on the sense of failure:

IN AFTER YEARS

My dears,
In after years
If you should think of me,
Recollect not too bitterly
Some momentary fretfulness or brood
On harsh words uttered in an angry mood;
But in your charity
Remember that your father, even as you,
Trying to hold his own in life's affairs,
Had dreams and disappointments and despairs -
(Though he found rapture in the conflict too -
Ay, and such happiness as falls to few!)
And keep in mind the truth
That, even in the bitterest hours he knew,
Trying to reconcile
His heart to failure, 'twas the thought of you
In all the eager promise of your youth
That ever made the struggle well worth while.

This might be any father to his children. The hesitancy and uncertainty of the middle-aged man, who feels himself unequal to the responsibilities and burdens of his life, has an unfortunate way sometimes, as here, of modulating into self-pity. There is, however, a touching delicacy of feeling in these last two pieces and the plain style and common vocabulary make them expressive of general human experience.

Another poem, 'Reunion' has an interest largely for historical reasons in that it deals with his association with Robert Frost and so it has value as an historical document, but not, I think, as a poem:

REUNION

Without, the October chestnuts' still gold flame;
Within, the lively flicker of the logs
Of the first Autumn fire, as once again
We sit beside the hearth - the four of us
Who once were nine, and by another hearth
Than that we knew of old in Gloucestershire
Before war overwhelmed our world and scattered,
As sparks before the wind, our little circle
Of friendly spirits broadcast

Fourteen years
Of silence lie between us - fourteen years
The windy wilderness of the Atlantic
Has severed us with wave on wandering wave
Of ever-changing changelessness; and we,
Over whom time's waves have washed, and who are left
Changed to the world and to each other's eyes
Maybe - are we, too, not unchanged at heart?

Disastrous years have had their way with us:
Terrors and desolations and distresses,
That put a sudden period to our youth
Just when our powers were ripening, left us aged
Before our time: yet now we sit at peace
Talking once more together, as we talked
With Abercrombie, Brooke and Thomas then
Of the old craft of words.

We talk of words,
And pause, and talk again, and pause; and they
Are with us in the silences, our friends,
The absent living and the living dead

The hour of parting nears: and soon once more
The windy wilderness of the Atlantic
Will separate us, for how long, who knows?

Yet, though we meet no more, what wave shall ever
Divide old friends whose faith is Solomon's,
Singing defiance of the many waters?

The next section of the book, 'Aftermath', deals with the living and maimed veterans of the war and contains some pieces never reproduced in anthologies and almost totally unknown, but which shew Gibson continuing to experiment with the plain-man's experience of war. 'The Glorious Dead' is an example of Gibson continuing to do what he had done in 1914/1915 and what Sassoon did better thereafter. But by continuing to publish poems on this subject in 1930 Gibson was simply repeating himself, perhaps unable to find new directions:

THE GLORIOUS DEAD

He talked about "the glorious dead,"
And how we always should remember them;
And then she turned on him and said -
*If you mean Willie, Dick and Jem,
The living lads they took from me
To blow to pieces with artillery -
Much good to them 'twill do
To be remembered by the likes of you;
And as for "glorious memory,"
What's that, think you, to me*

*When out of sleep I start up in my bed
Remembering my little lads are dead?*

In the eponymous and final section of *Hazards*, three poems, 'The Encounter', 'So Early in the Morning' and 'The Latin Inscription' display not only Gibson's descriptive and lyrical qualities but also, in portraying a Latinist who scorned the vulgar tongue, a sharp satiric edge. Three other pieces on circus folk, 'The Human Cannonball', 'The Living Pendulum' and 'The Accident' remind us of Gibson's fascination throughout his life with those who escape the trammels of ordered society. Although he continued to live a quiet, unexceptionable, domestic and blameless life, his imagination continued to be stirred by the risk, the daring and the danger inherent in the lives of those who performed a more dramatic role whether they were entertainers, gypsies, tramps or simply those who were so poor, that their hold on life itself was insecure. It was the very 'hazardousness' of existence which appealed deeply to his imagination and he continually demonstrated in his poetry a sense of the randomness of everything in human life.

Hazards is a varied volume with many strengths. Gibson has noticeably gained in depth, power and assertiveness of voice. It is in outlook both Hardy-esque and Wordsworthian in its chronicling of the simple lives of ordinary people but it is also a very distinctive voice that speaks to us. It is Gibson's own voice, modest, reflective, kindly, using simple forms of simple language in a clear effort to make himself plain to readers of every class and background. It is a quiet voice but an insistent one, that carries with it a deep sense of life's vagaries, of life's purposelessness, a sense that no great destiny awaits mankind but that mankind's affair is essentially "to grasp the nettle" and fulfil life's demands, whatever they may be, as they occur.

Gibson's efforts fell upon very stony ground, however, and he morosely recorded in January 1931 that the volume was "not noticed by one London daily" and, in those periodicals where it was mentioned, it was, he said "dismissed with a line or two of sneering disparagement."⁴ His disappointment and bitterness about the reception of *Hazards* was actually a little premature, however, as in March the *Times Literary Supplement* gave him a lengthy and very balanced review indeed. The anonymous reviewer noted that in his opinion *Hazards* did not represent a deepening of Gibson's powers nor did it shew much new development. I would quarrel with this in that I think the volume shows Gibson doing the same things he had done before but with greater assurance; hence there is a deepening and development of characteristic, well-tried themes and subjects. There is no new departure. What the reviewer went on to note was that Gibson was lacking in "intensity of mind and heart" and that "his mind very easily descends to the commonplace when not absorbed in interpreting the mystery of some humble life of which he has had an immediate experience."⁵ This is a just estimate for Gibson is indeed frequently commonplace but that is the risk he takes for being the celebrant of the common.

Despite his reservations, the burden of the reviewer's complaint was that Gibson should have been more selective in his published verse and should have been prepared to discard more of the items that were less worthy of his established name. When so much of it displayed telling qualities of pity, courage, humour, pathos and irony, when so much of it was emotionally and imaginatively tensed and accurate the disappointment lay in the fact he did not censor enough of his weaker creations: "There is indeed," concluded the reviewer "enough of the "still, sad music of humanity", truly and distinctively rendered in his volume to make us wish that he had selected its contents more rigorously."

Gibson's melancholy view of the reception of *Hazards* was equalled only by his melancholy view of his own declining powers: "I never seem to be able to write more than a dozen lines or so nowadays."⁶ He found himself hoping that the sale of his earlier poems, on which his reputation had been made, would keep him before the public's attention and so make him some money:

Benn has just brought out a sixpenny selection ... Augustan Poets series which I hope the public will buy in large quantities.⁷

Gibson seemed to have little expectation of this happening and his worst fears seemed to be confirmed during succeeding months and years:

I could wish that my always modest sales had not dropt [sic] to zero ⁸

In the early part of 1932 Gibson published another short collection in pamphlet form entitled *Highland Dawn*. On March 1st of that year Gibson wrote to Mrs Mabel Osborne to tell her that

a little booklet of eight of my poems is to be issued almost immediately: I'll send you a copy when it is out; and I am to have a volume - *Islands* - out with Macmillan in the Autumn.⁹

The "little booklet" was *Highland Dawn* which was hand-set by Alberta Vickridge at Beamsley House, Bradford. The title poem has many of the characteristics of the much earlier *Nets of Love* pieces, comprising two five-line stanzas using regular rhymes:

I watched a stag that snuffed the kindling air,
A golden eagle gliding in the light;
Then, glancing up the brae, I saw you there,
The wind of morning rippling through your hair,
And bade farewell to night.

The stag sped up the mountain out of sight;
The eagle dwindled in the dazzling blue;
But fleeter yet my happy heart took flight
From the last valley-shadows of the night
To lose itself in you.

'Hear You Nothing in the Glen?' with its title reminiscent of Auden is a very vigorous and compelling short ballad piece; it is very clean-cut and entirely without fanciful ornament as shown by this extract:

Hear you nothing in the glen
Save the singing of the waters
When the light of day is failing -
No low sound of women weeping,
No lament of wives and daughters
Over mounds of heroes sleeping,
Ghostly wives and ghostly daughters
To the pibroch's ghostly wailing
Keening for the slaughtered clan,
Women bowed in unavailing
Sorrow, since the world began,
Mourning for the sons of men?

When the light of day is failing
Hear you nothing in the glen
Save the singing of the waters?

More spare again is what I think is a fine little piece on the subject of
an eagle swooping on and killing a stag:

THE SWOOPING WINGS

Suddenly, as I crouched low on a ledge
For shelter as a hailstorm raked the crag,
An eagle swooped, the gust of his descent
Fanning me as he passed, and smote a stag
That unaware belled on the precipice edge
A blinding blow with his death-dealing wing,
And toppled him from his precarious perch
Where he had stood exultant, challenging
The stags of all the earth in royal pride,
And sent him hurtling down the mountain-side,
Helplessly crashing through the silver birch;
Then, swerving to recover poise, once more
Swooped on his mangled victim, lying spent
Among the boulders of the Atlantic shore,
Soused in the spindrift of the flowing tide.
The squall ceased; and the wet walls of the pass
In instant sunshine gleamed like burnished glass:
But still I huddled there with sobbing breath,
My soul still shaken by the winnowing
Of the down-rushing of the wings of death.

The precision of the narrative account and the convincing detail here
suggests that this was a poem built out of the experience of the scene,
unlike Tennyson's 'Eagle' which is all art.

The coming of winter - northern winter whose onset can be hard on
summer's traces - after a brief autumnal phase of purple and gold
(heather and bracken) is depicted in 'The First Flake' which shows the
snow coming "shrouding in one white sheet November's glories." As he

often does Gibson contrasts the harshness of nature in one poem with another, in which we see a more benign, comfortable, acceptably Georgian world of man in harmony with his surroundings. Thus 'The Little Croft' is the reverse of 'The First Flake':

THE LITTLE CROFT

Sheer from the mountain-shoulder to the foam
Of the salt tide the slashing torrent falls,
And to the seaman slowly making home
Clear through the wash of waves its loved voice calls

Calls to his heart, and as he sways aloft
Fraping the slatting topsail with a will,
His eyes already seek the little croft
In a green pocket of the craggy hill

Another poem, 'Eagles and Isles' is characteristically Gibson with its emphasis on escape from the modern world and it belongs to that considerable genre of pieces depicting the perfect pleasures of the mind set against the harsh "scrannel pipes" of ordinary life:

.....even where the traffic roars and sings
With senses stunned and beaten deaf and blind,
My soul withdraws into itself and seeks
The peaks and isles and eagles of the mind.

For many years Gibson was able to live the withdrawn life which he speaks of here by being able to live in Northumberland, in Gloucestershire and in Letchworth Garden City. Not very long after the publication of *Highland Dawn* Gibson moved back into London "where the traffic roars and sings" and to tread the "pavements grey" where his diminishing income could be supplemented by reviewing work from Fleet Street and by the rents of lodgers or as he more politely put it "P.G.s".

The brightest social prospect in Gibson's life during the 1930's was his friendship with Dorothy Una Ratcliffe (D.U.R.). Mrs Ratcliffe, a wealthy woman with a home at Roundhay Hall, Leeds and another one in Westmorland at Temple Sowerby, came to know Gibson through Lascelles Abercrombie who, since 1922, had held a chair of English Literature at

Leeds University. Mrs Ratcliffe was both a patron of Leeds University and a great enthusiast for modern poetry. She met and admired Abercrombie and he in turn put her in touch with Gibson. An authoress of travel books and plays in Yorkshire dialect, Mrs Ratcliffe was also a keen patroness of literature. The first exchange of letters between her and Gibson took place in 1927 but the friendship did not develop until the thirties. A common interest for them was, of course, dialect and Gibson was recognised as a master of verse dialect. Dorothy Una Ratcliffe kept all of Gibson's correspondence addressed to her and she had it very carefully mounted and bound and put in the possession of Leeds University Library, where it first became available to readers in 1983. Theirs was a valuable friendship that was sustained for nearly thirty years until Gibson was no longer able to keep up the correspondence in advanced old age.

Mrs Ratcliffe was a passionate advocate of poetry and was anxious to sponsor and help the work of poets. Gibson, with what would have then seemed a very secure reputation, would have been for her a man of some considerable fame and importance and one who merited all her support and admiration. She became his benefactress in a number of ways, providing friendship and encouragement, particularly during his frequent periods of disillusionment. She provided money when it was badly needed; she was able to promote the poetry he produced and help further establish his status in the literary and, as increasingly one began to merge into the other, academic circles in which she moved. Above all, perhaps, she was able to offer Gibson some liberation from domesticity. Travel had always been a passion of Gibson's from the days of his childhood when he had accompanied his father on photographic expeditions. Now, in middle age, to be a prisoner of a care-worn domestic round did not really suit his temperament and he must have found it stifling to his imaginative interests. Mrs Ratcliffe was a very wealthy woman and she owned her own

sea-going yacht. Thus Mrs Ratcliffe was a friend to be prized and he always wrote to her in enthusiastic and adulatory manner. The correspondence began very formally with Gibson addressing his letters to "Dear Mrs Ratcliffe" and concerning himself with literary matters: "my plays do not come out" he said, and he had "numberless plots but write only short lyrics."¹⁰ Soon, however, he was more personal in complaining of attacks of neuritis, worrying about "the cares of the family" and envying Mrs Ratcliffe's proximity at Temple Sowerby to the "fells and dales where some of the happiest days of my youth were spent."¹¹ One senses very much the complaint of a trapped man looking for an exit.

Early in the correspondence the first sea-going trip in the Ratcliffe yacht, 'Sea Swallow' was proposed and an expedition to the Hebrides had been undertaken in 1929. In the thirties many more trips were to follow. In 1932, he was to sail over 1000 miles of the Gulf of Bothnia along the Swedish coast. Such ventures were valuable outlets to Gibson and were much appreciated as they helped to dispel the melancholy to which he was prone. At the very suggestion of a sea voyage he said "my thoughts run into verse at the prospect" and he put in the rhythmic aside

Mull was astern, Rum on the Port
Egg on the starboard bow! ¹²

At a low period in his life the opportunities for travel which Mrs Ratcliffe gave him produced a freshening of the spirit and new dreams for him to work into poetry.

The collection *Islands*, which was dedicated to Dorothy Una Ratcliffe, was published in the autumn of 1932. It includes some poems written much earlier though all are in the lyric manner and there are no dramas in this volume. The work is divided into four sections: 'Adventure', 'Traffic', (which is the biggest section), 'Sails' and

'Coronach'. A separate section reprints the poems of *Highland Dawn* with some additions.

The poems in the first section, 'Adventure', are all based on Gibson's various travels, some with Mrs Ratcliffe and others from earlier years. The opening piece expresses clearly the thrill and excitement felt at the beginning of a voyage:

THE BLUE-PETER

The day has come for sailing; and at last
The brisk blue-peter flutters at the mast.
Too long beneath the mountains we have lain
While winds and waters called to us in vain:
Too long the inn has held us, and too long
Our ears have hearkened to the tavern-song.
The time has come to quit the company
Of those who dread the isolating sea,
Who, slumbering through night-watches, spend their days
Carcousing in the ingle's drowsy blaze:
For what are they to us who are the sons
Of tempest, in whose veins the salt tide runs,
Whose pulses answer to the ebb and flow
Of all the seas that travel to and fro,
Whose feet have trod the tilting deck from birth
And stumble only on the stable earth,
Whose eyes can pierce the spindrift of the night
And blunder blindfold in the tavern light,
Whose hearts must ever in the throng and press
Ache with intolerable loneliness
Shut in by walls as in an airless grave,
Whose home is the unwalled unraftered wave,
Who each within himself can only find
In solitude the comrade to his mind,
And only in the lone sea-watch can be
At ease at length in his own company.

The brisk blue-peter beckons; and at last
Our souls shall ride full-sailed before the blast
Into the perilous security
Of strife with the uncompromising sea.

In this piece Gibson gives us a sense of bluster, of vigour and energy. The poem drives forward confidently making us conscious of a sense of purpose and dynamic force in the poet's search.

In 'Before the Wind' he gives a pen-portrait of D.U.R. aboard her boat:

Aboard her craft once more, she breathed the air
 Of hard-won freedom: standing by to take
 Her trick at the helm, she watched green-water break
 Over the bow; and, as she took the wheel,
 Thrilled to its tug and wrench and the mate's "Take care
 She doesn't gybe!" and thrilled again to feel
 The exultant sea-lift as the slicing keel
 Cut clean the flaking foamheads - body and mind
 Braced, mettled and strung tensely as the taut
 Mainsheet, to keep the ship before the wind

 Her soul alive. Clear-eyed, with tossing hair
 And lifted brow, she breathed the sharp salt air,
 Nerved to an urgency that held her mind
 Steady on even keel, and proud to find
 Her seamanship sufficing still to keep
 Through the blind smother and welter of the deep
 The cutter running well before the wind.

She is idealized and, like her poet, she comes into her own when in the
 presence of "elemental strife". The "freedom" that both attain at sea is
 more precious to them than anything else.

The section entitled 'Traffic' is an altogether gloomier group of
 poems, the dominant theme of which is death and when it is not of death
 it is of the touching poignant bravery of life's dance on the verge of
 death. An example will shew the prevailing mood:

THE TELEPHONE

The shrill bell sings
 Through the silent house
 And scares to its hole
 A venturing mouse.

But no other ear
 Pays head to the call;
 And the form on the bed
 Never troubles at all -

For nothing at all
 To the form on the bed
 Is the unknown who tries
 To ring up the dead.

This piece is almost banal but the effect one senses that is striven for
 is the kind of effect Hardy gets from similar material in so many poems.
 Gibson, however, cannot command Hardy's sense of plangency. Gibson is neat
 but provokes no feeling beyond appreciation of his own dexterity.

Hardy's poems which had been published throughout the century, had exerted a powerful influence on many younger writers and Gibson was almost reverential in his admiration as is abundantly clear from the few surviving letters which he wrote to Hardy between 1919 and 1924 when he was engaged on *Krindlesyke*. Poems like 'The Cow', 'The Shifted Chair' and 'The Appointment' are very reminiscent of the fragments of earlier types of dramatized pieces like those in *Stonefolds* or *Daily Bread*. The section 'Traffic' seems to suggest, by its title, commonplaceness, daily traffic in contrast with the excitement and greater vitality of 'Adventure', the rarer more sought-after Gibson mood.

The third section of the collection, 'Sails' is a simpler grouping; it is a celebration of the boat 'Sea Swallow' and of places, 'The Outer Isles', 'Loch Shildaig', 'Skye', 'Gairloch' and 'Scur-nan-Gilleann'. 'At Sea' provides a glimpse of a spirit freed from the petty concerns of paying guests, income and the reviewing with which Gibson's life was increasingly plagued during this time:

AT SEA

Only the wash of waves and creak
Of timbers as awake I lie
And watch the starry patch of sky
Through the companion ... Oh, that I
On that last night of all may be
Still sailing in a ship at sea;
And even as I sink, too weak
To turn my heavy head or speak,
May I still hear the wash and creak
And see the starry sky!

The title of the last section, 'Coronach', is a Gaelic word meaning funeral lament and the poems it contains hark back to the 1914 war-time days, including such titles as 'In No Man's Land' and 'Died of Wounds'. There are also poems remembering dead friends.

Perhaps the best piece of all in this group, with its elegiac wistfulness is the poem 'Are There No Other Isles?'. When he puts this question he asks, in effect, if there is an alternative to being "caught in the sensual music". But his imagination proffers only a "havenless eternity". The "questing", the sailing and the journeying have no meaning. They are but ends in themselves:

ARE THERE NO OTHER ISLES?

Are there no other isles beyond
The waters of the west?
If we set sail with questing keel
At sundown towards the dying gleam
Shall not another dawn reveal
The unknown islands of our dream,
The summer isles of rest?
Are there no other isles beyond
The waters of the west?

Through wastes of windy dark must we
Venture in endless quest,
Through everduring midnight sail
A havenless eternity.
And in no virgin dayspring hail
Over a yet unvoyaged sea
The inviolable crest
Of dream-familiar isles beyond
The waters of the west?

Dominating this whole collection is a darkness of spirit and a gloominess of mind which was not readily going to engage the declining public for poetry in general. This was a difficult period for Gibson personally and the poetry in *Islands* reflects a man contriving to compose verse but having no pressing matter to engage with as he had in his best period between 1908 and 1916. Altogether the poems of *Islands* are a very mixed bag. All are in a minor key and not one that is really memorable or

likely to be picked out for an anthology. Gibson is merely keeping his hand in, versifying regularly, at this period and he is, of course, repeating himself endlessly. The reviewers were quick to notice this and they could see at once that the qualities on which Gibson had established a reputation - his spikiness and hard-edged presentation of the lives of the poor, his capacities for reportage - had now evaporated. His realism and his deep sense of fellow-feeling for suffering humanity had gone and he was now producing a too-personal poetry of delicate musing that became thin and repetitive. An American reviewer who had been an enthusiast for the *Collected Poems* sounded a correct but disturbing note when he remarked that Gibson

has done some notable work in his time, but I should rather go back to his poetic-dramatics in *Daily Bread* or to his *Thoroughfares* of 1914.¹³

The reviewer concluded that it was difficult to pick out anything that was really quotable and it was sad but true to say that Gibson's edge had gone and his lyricism was faded.

The anonymous reviewer of the *Times Literary Supplement* was a little kinder managing to praise poems as "affective", "compelling" and "delightful". He recognized, however, the essential part - that Gibson was by now losing most of his intensity. The reviewer noted that

No modern poet has dealt more faithfully or sympathetically with the province of ordinary human life, which to the understanding eye discloses much that is not ordinary, so many dramas that are rich in unadvertised heroism and pathos.¹⁴

But now Gibson was simply exploiting this pathos "as a habit". No longer did his experience have any really felt intensity.

The verdict one would have to pass on most of the pieces in *Islands* is that they have some lyrical appeal but that they are slight and unmemorable.

Throughout this period the letters to Edward Marsh became almost exclusively concerned with money and domestic anxieties. From Letchworth in 1931 and 1932 he wrote to Marsh repeatedly in the following vein:

Every cheque that comes is smaller, if it comes at all!¹⁵

We have come to the sad conclusion that we must try and sell our nice house and get some pokey little hole to live in, if we can!¹⁶

At this stage he was even considering having recourse to a special fund, set up by Lord Gisboro [sic] "offering help to parents in straitened circumstances with their children's education." ¹⁷ The Marsh correspondence records repeatedly, however, the continuing brightness of the money received from Rupert Brooke's estate:

The Rupert cheque is still incredibly big!¹⁸

In 1932 Sidgwick and Jackson, Brooke's publishers, failed to pay out the royalties and Gibson's anxiety in his letter to Marsh was clear:

Has the miracle failed to function at last? I don't like asking, but we can't help feeling anxious, with all other sources of income failing.¹⁹

As a consequence he wrote to Sidgwick and Jackson and asked for his share in the royalties. Sidgwick offended him deeply by the inconsiderate nature of his reply and he told Marsh:

For unmitigated impertinence Sidgwick's letter would be hard to beat. I was not asking for a favour - an "accommodation", but for money that is overdue. I do wish that the books could be taken out of the hands of this one-horse firm and things put on a real business footing. You will understand my concern about the state of affairs when I tell you that the Rupert money is the mainstay of our income - and this year looks like being the only one left.²⁰

What was clear enough was that as memory of the Great War receded and as the age of Appeasement drew on, interest in Brooke's poetry was declining; Sidgwick was anxious about sales which he told Gibson "might drop dead at any time."²¹ Sidgwick was thus being cautious about paying out regular royalties and was trying, it seems, to put payment on to a longer-term

basis, thus spreading the jam a little more thinly. For Gibson, although he had done so well since 1915 out of the estate and had also received £1,000 from Mrs Brooke, Rupert's mother, in her will, the prospect of a diminution in its supporting power as he was about to move to London, was dire and he told Marsh:

the precise position is that we are moving house with £40 in the bank! ²²

"Rupert's miraculous benefaction" ²³ was the basis of the family finances and there can be no doubt that money (or the lack of it) was a major problem in Gibson's life. But the suspicion creeps in when reading the correspondence that he was obsessively mean and always pleaded poverty.

The Gibson family had originally gone to live in Letchworth because of the educational needs of the children. These had now largely been fulfilled as both Audrey, at 17, and Michael, at 15, were about to leave school. It was also important for Gibson's finances and professional standing that he should be closer to Fleet Street from where he obtained his reviewing work, thus the plan was to move to a house in Hampstead. At one stage the proposed move had to be postponed for a few weeks but in thanking Marsh for some money (whether this was a gift or not is unclear)

Gibson wrote in an undated letter of the summer of 1933:

We go to Hampstead about 8th August. We have got a house near Parliament Hill and are going to try and earn a living there by taking P.G.'s ²⁴

He went on to say:

Audrey leaves school this term... is going to teach junior German at a school in Surrey... and is to be coached in the hope of getting a scholarship to Bedford College. ²⁵

They had no sooner moved to Hampstead than "the wiring of the house was condemned by the Borough Council" ²⁶ and they suffered weeks of upheaval while it was renewed. Gibson was now in the same position as Edward Thomas had been up to the time of his enlistment in the Artists' Rifles in 1915, that of being dependent for a regular income on reviewing work.

This was to take its toll upon his energies and his capacity for further original work. At first, however, there was little enough reviewing available. In January 1933 he wrote that he "could not get any reviewing to do" ²⁷ but with the move to Hampstead he was able to get round the newspaper editors' offices and the next year he wrote "I have a big batch of books to do for *The Observer*". ²⁸

It was in April 1934 that Gibson had written to Mrs Ratcliffe to inform her that a new collection was about to be published: "I have just fixed up with Macmillan about the publication of *Fuel*." ²⁹ Like many other collections, this volume is divided into several sections each with a different title and one of the sections, *Ernshaw*, is a short drama. The sections are as follows: 'Fuel', 'Balmoral Buildings', 'Landfalls', 'Ernshaw' and 'The Schooner'. The first section is concerned with pieces that reflect Gibson's observations on the use of 'fuel' in the modern world and so mines, steel mills, are loci for considering the burning of energy to create more energy as in 'The Bridge' and 'The Ponies'. Nature too, as in 'The Cost', is regarded as a source of energy:

Relentlessly
Life feeds on life and out of destruction springs
The April flame

'The Poem' is quite different in that its concern is with the act of writing itself, about making the poems, but Gibson extends his literal use of 'fuel' to make it a metaphor; now imagination's fuel is burned to kindle the poem's life. As steel is rolled from mills by workers so the poet-worker rolls out his poem by imagination's energies. Another little piece, 'The Crocuses', dealing with a pit-man and his flower garden is delicately beautiful and reminiscent of the imagination of Lawrence in 'Odour of Chrysanthemums' or 'Daughters of the Vicar'. The title poem 'Fuel' concerns itself with the passage from a golden age to the age of steel. This use of a tension between a golden past before the war and the

modern times of work and of mass sorrow in an industrial desert is, as observed elsewhere, a recurrent sense present in Gibson's work in the twenties and thirties and it has striking similarities with Lawrence's own views about the 'deadness' and dreariness of 'modern' England. Gibson was well aware of his own shortcomings and limitations as a writer and begged the reader remember his "poor brittle wit".

'Balmoral Buildings', a title which combines royal residence and tenement building in its own compounding suggestion of the majesty of the poor, is a sequence of blank verse monologues. Browningsque in form, they embody the voices of the poor in a city tenement so that the voices have none of Browning's bombast but are crushed, tentative and long-suffering. They are the voices of "the low", "the damp-souled housemaids", those with "short square fingers stuffing pipes", those "in shirtsleeves". Where Eliot views such people in a detached, superior manner Gibson views them with love and compassion. The chief subjects about which his people are concerned are poverty and death. In 'His Turn' the poet captures in the voice of the speaker of the monologue a nicely detached yet concerned and mordant note as she reflects upon the coffin of the man who worked as an undertaker being taken out of the buildings:

That bumping? It's the coffin going down -
A sound you soon get used to in the Buildings:
Yet I was scared, too, the first time I heard it -
A little lass, I must have fallen asleep
On that wet winter afternoon. I wakened
On the mattress in the corner in the dark,
Alone; and through the gurgling of rain-water,
I heard that solemn bumping; and was scared -
I hardly know what of: but it's enough
For any child to know that it is scared -
Knowing what of makes little difference
One way or other - hardly knew, yet knew
After a fashion, knew 'twas something wrong -
And that it wasn't just the wooden box
Of a girl going out to service made that bumping:
And I wasn't so far out - at least, it seems
That something's wrong somewhere with life that ends
In being packed up, cold, in a deal box,
And bundled down the stairs by grunting strangers
Who always seem to find the missing step.

Queer that, the jolt, for him, if he could know!
I fancy he'd be aching in his coffin
To warn them of it - knew the stairs so well -
Himself had helped to bear so many down,
Even before he came to live, or die, here.
Chief bearer to Melchizedecs he was,
Until he got too crippled with rheumatics -
A good six-footer, slender as a poker,
The very figure for a funeral;
But like a poker, mighty little use
Once it is bent and cannot do its job:

Just the scrapheap, that's all, for twisted pokers.
Yet, all the same, it seems they've done him proud,
Melchizedecs, and given him a turn-out
Would have rejoiced his heart, if he could know.
Even as a corpse, you'd think he might feel flattered
To have such silver fittings on his hearse!

Simple and accessible to the general reader though it is the poem has a good deal of ingenuity in its economical depiction of the poverty of the tenement, in the shifting uncertainty of "hardly knew, yet knew after a fashion, knew ... " which modulates into the certainty of the bleak knowledge of "the wooden box". Not only is there successful art in that but there is a telling ingenuity in the detail of the missing step. And Gibson makes the most of it for not only did the coffin bearers stumble on it and jolt the coffin but he adds the touch that the speaker fancies the corpse might have ached "to warn them of it", if he could have known. Equally successful is the way in which he makes his faux-naïf speaker reflect that the dead man would be flattered that his employers gave him such a good funeral. Putting 'His Turn' alongside Philip Larkin's 'Next Please', a highly literary version of the same theme, emphasises Gibson's virtue of simplicity and his awareness of a plain, ordinary reader unlike Larkin's assumed reader who is cultivated.

That persistent sense in Gibson that he is putting plain, ordinary tales in the mouths of plain, humble speakers to be heard by equally ordinary, non-specialist readers is what makes 'Bank Holiday' interesting. Nonetheless, the way in which the poem is tied to the

particular speaker and envisaged reader makes for severe limitation in the range of its appeal. Like journalism, it dates very quickly:

BANK HOLIDAY

Early they started on their motor-bike,
(Ay, second-hand, but glittering like new,
Such spit and polish he had spent on it!)
She, riding pillion in her sleeveless green,
He, fresh as paint in a sleeveless yellow shirt,
Looking as happy as they ought to be,
Laughing and calling out good-bye to all.

*I never did hold with them motor-bikes -
Just stink and racket! Gives me palpitation,
That popping - and the two of them so thoughtless,
Waking up all the Buildings with their shouting
And laughing and backfiring at that hour,
And on a holiday!*

One moment, here,
The morning sun on the tossing black and gold
Of those young hatless heads - then, in a flash,
They weren't ! I never heard where they were bound for;
Likely enough they scarcely knew themselves:
At their age, you care little where you're going:
It's who you're going with that really matters:
They went together - that was all they knew,
And all the knowledge they needed. Yet I know
Where they have gone; for I've been there myself -
Not by myself: you cannot go alone-
Only one day there in the whole of life;
Yet that day seemed a lifetime in itself.
Of course we couldn't go as fast or far
As they will: no one dreamt of motors then ...

*I never did hold with them motor-bikes -
And as for going off like that half-naked ...*

Yet, all the same, we got there - anything
On wheels will take you there, except a hearse...

Talking of hearses, I don't hold with motors...

And, worse luck, bring you back - with no return
For the unlucky ones. But they're all right -
It's not the first time they've been there together;
And they may go again, for they're still young,
Though only once I went. You cannot find it
Alone; and I have been alone since then.
I'd walk till my feet gave out, if only I
Could reach it now: but when you're old and lonely
You can't get back to Eden. Yet I was lucky:
I had my day - and have - a day that seemed
A lifetime in itself- I had my day.

What place? It hasn't any special name -
Just anywhere far from Balmoral Buildings
Where you're together. You can't go alone.

The speaking voice here assumes at once the animation and intimacy that imply an interested reader. There is a story to be told and there is a commentary to be made on it. The aged speaker is identified by the degree of criticism of modern new-fangledness and by the pressing awareness of death. The reader is held or buttonholed by the continued insistence of the voice. The need to escape from the gloom and depressing surroundings of Balmoral buildings is the pressing concern and above all to recover a little of 'Eden'. To rediscover something of the hope and beauty of life which the world of Balmoral Buildings can only deny. The young couple of whom the aged gossip speaks are depicted as full of life, vigour and action. Mounted on a shining motorbike, laughing and looking happy they make their escape from the urban prison. Young and hatless, they are carefree and easy-going whereas the narrator is crabbed with hostility and disapproval of their noise, their machine and it would seem, life generally. Yet there creeps in slowly the reminiscence from youth that the speaker too, once, had gone on a day-out, a Bank-Holiday jaunt that had proved paradisaical and a memory to be nurtured in the catalogue of tedious years. The speaker recognizes the validity and significance of such a brief snatching of happiness and for a moment the hardness of crabbed age softens with remembered pleasure. The poignance of the recollection is established by the growing realization that the speaker is not only old but is alone and of course it is implied, unloved. For her only the hearse awaits.

It is equally appropriate to invoke a comparison with Philip Larkin here as it was with 'His Turn' and 'Next Please'. The latter with its powerful presentation of life's "armada of promises" out of which only one, "a black-sailed unfamiliar" which draws in its wake "a huge and

birdless silence", is thematically equivalent to 'Bank Holiday'. Whereas the later poet is highly literary, metaphoric and uses the register of educated English the older poet is plain, seeks out familiar speech patterns and is attempting a basic communication with a common reader. The assumption of the character of the reader indeed almost seems to dominate the character and composition of the poem.

'Landfalls', the next section of the collection, are all sea-pieces inspired by voyages on Mrs Ratcliffe's yacht; they deal with storms at sea, fog and arrivals at new places. They are among the slightest pieces in the volume and generally I think they are examples of jottings in verse, rather than shaped or achieved poems.

Many years before, in a letter to Walter de la Mare, Gibson had said: "I share your adoration of *Wuthering Heights*" ³⁰ and it will be recalled from the previous chapter how Gibson's play 'Lover's Leap' utilized the Earnshaw name from that novel. The same book was again Gibson's inspiration when writing *Ernshaw* which seems to borrow both name (slightly modified) and locale from the Brontë source. To this piece more than to any other piece of Gibson's dramatic invention may be applied Coleridge's stricture against Wordsworth's supposed practice and argued theory of the 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*:

In a poem, still more a lyric poem [and he suggests, particularly dramatic poetry] it is not possible to imitate truly a dull and garrulous discourse without repeating the effects of dullness and garrulity.³¹

The fallacy of imitative form is plain to see in 'Ernshaw' which is a play about love, about social relations and in nowise sets its people in an elemental state of nature. Gibson did not excel in this theme. Bitterness, ill-temper, wildness, nature could all come within his scope with varying degrees of success. Love, however, eluded him and it does so here. *Ernshaw* is set four years after the end of the Great War, in which

Ann, the heroine, believes she has lost her husband, Andrew, who is reported as missing. As the years have passed he is presumed by Ann to be dead. She is now "mistress of Ernshaw" and has taken a new husband, Richard. The play opens with a dialogue between Ann and Susan, mother to the missing or dead Andrew. Susan accuses Ann of inconstancy in not awaiting her husband's return. Susan believes he is alive and claims to have seen him in a dream-vision. Susan's antipathy to Ann, to current 'goings-on' at Ernshaw reaches its height in an accusation that Richard and Ann's young niece Nelly are lovers. When Richard and Nelly appear, coming into the house from the dairy where they have spent the day, there is a suggestion of their freshness, vitality and playfulness - a suggestion that they could be lovers. When the evening comes on Ann feels unwell, complains of the summer heat, and of her heart condition. She leaves and goes to her room. At once, we have:

NELLY: Richard, Ann knows!

The triangular relationship is revealed to us in a quick, economical and dramatically effective way with its assured use of stichomythia and aposiopesis:

RICHARD: (slowly) Knows what? What's there to know?

NELLY: Nothing ... you're right - there's nothing.

RICHARD: Nothing?

NELLY: Nothing.

RICHARD: Then why do you say she knows?

NELLY: I mean she thinks

RICHARD: Thinks? Well, and what

NELLY: She thinks that we

RICHARD: Thinks, Nelly?

NELLY: Oh, I can't say it, Richard! She thinks.... she thinks.....

RICHARD: Ann thinks that we ... You don't mean.....
God in Heaven

She thinks that we .. And it's the truth she thinks!

I never realised till now - but you,
You knew?

NELLY: I knew.

RICHARD: Nelly!

NELLY: O Richard, Richard!

RICHARD: I didn't understand.....

NELLY: What can we do!

I never meant ... I couldn't help ...

RICHARD: Of course
 I knew I liked you, Nelly: but I, but I -
 I didn't understand, not what it meant -
 I should have known: I'm not a boy - and yet,
 Not till this moment ... I hadn't realised
 I cared for you that way ... It came over me
 All of a sudden - and, by God, it's true!
 To think Ann knew before I knew myself!
 But you may be mistaken.

NELLY: There's no mistake.

RICHARD: I don't mean that - I mean about Ann knowing.
 How could she know before I knew myself?
 She mustn't

NELLY: Richard, Ann knows, and it will kill her.

Nelly decides she must leave as she cannot bear that Ann should know the truth. This is but one weak element in a generally weak construction. One immediately asks: is Nelly, then, satisfied as long as Ann does not know the truth? Are we meant to see that she enjoys deceit? Clearly not; it is merely a matter that exigencies of plot development mean that the moral and ethical issues can be left to be fudged. At the very dramatic moment when Richard announces in the off-stage scullery "If you go, I go too" he is overheard by Ann, who, in a dreadfully lame piece of dramatic contrivance, has appeared centre stage in order to collect her watch from the mantleshef. She exits hurriedly, dropping the watch and leaving the previously shut door ajar. Now they know she knows they know.

Part two sets Ann in the dairy applying herself vigorously to churning the butter. This activity as she has willed it, produces a heart attack and she drops to the floor. She is dead. The cliff-hanger close, reminiscent of the primitive structure of the early cinema, poses the question of what will happen next to the guilty pair? Part three: one year later! Now married the couple have just returned to Ernshaw from their honeymoon. Nelly is consumed with guilt and announces that she cannot stay at Ernshaw a moment longer: the 'presence' of the dead woman, for whose death she blames herself, haunts her:

NELLY: O Richard, Richard, I see her everywhere!
 RICHARD: See - Ann?

NELLY: I see her and hear her everywhere!
 Last night, when you were lying like a log,
 I heard her steal downstairs a dozen times -
 Heard her ! - nay, felt her going down, as though,
 Step after step, she trod upon my heart:
 And then the working of the churn, I heard it,
 Rumbling and rattling through the quiet house.
 I tried to shut my ears, but still I caught it,
 The rumble and splash, and then the flap when butter
 Is coming nicely - through the night it sounded,
 That ghostly rumble and flapping, till at last
 I felt I couldn't lie there listening
 Another instant: I just had to rise,
 Though I knew nobody - nobody was down stairs,
 And the old churn just rumbled in my head.
 I took the candle, but didn't strike a match
 Till I got outside the bedroom, not to rouse you.
 I felt a cold draught stirring through my hair,
 Yet the candle-flame burned steadily, and I
 Could scarcely get my breath as I went down.
 I knew that there was nobody downstairs -
 I knew - yet hardly dared to lift the latch
 And open the door: and when I looked in here,
 Wondering because the churn had suddenly stopped,
 And all was quiet as death - when I looked in,
 I saw her.....

RICHARD: Saw her!

NELLY: Sitting on that chair.
 Her eyes were on the fire: and then she spoke:
 I couldn't catch a word, for she just muttered;
 Then rose unsteadily, and, stretching up
 To the airer for an apron, overstrained
 Herself and fell: and then... and then...
 (Nelly breaks down)

RICHARD: Hush, lass!
 'Twas just your fancy: you were overwrought.

Nelly's plight is that she loves Richard but cannot bear to stay at Ernshaw and so if he were not " T'maister " all would, surprisingly, be well. Fortunately old Susan enters at this moment to announce that the 'missing' Andrew has returned. He, therefore, re-assumes the mastery of the farm and the couple rejoice that they are set free from bondage to their past. The conclusion to this 'play', that is not a comedy, is the classic comedy closure of happiness and wreathed smiles. It is a simple, melodramatic play that is lifted by the tangy vitality of the Northumbrian dialect which raised some of the *Kestrel Edge* pieces ten years earlier. Also Gibson's love of mystery and feel for the strange

'presence' of the dead are felt here to the full. After 'Ernshaw', however, Gibson wrote no more dramas until his very last publication of *Within Four Walls* in 1950. It was as though he had begun to recognise that despite his liking for the form there were insuperable weaknesses in his technique and in particular his capacity for plot development.

The last section of the collection, 'The Schooner', is rather misnamed for by far the best pieces in it are inspired by the war's 'aftermath' as people commonly used to refer to it. 'For Valour', 'Armistice Day' and 'Telling the Mother' (visitors' day at the Hospital for disabled soldiers) have the distinctive quality and compelling simplicity and feeling to which Gibson first gave expression in *Battle* in 1915.

The volume as a whole is less lively and less vigorous than its predecessor, *Hazards*. The poet is really repeating himself and one is conscious of a lack of real direction. The reviewers, generally, were not kind and Gibson said that "infallible young men proclaim it poisonously bad - when they condescend to notice it at all."³² He felt himself that it was "a scrubby little book" particularly so as Macmillan produced it "in small type to be uniform with the proposed second edition of the *Collected Poems*."³³ This Gibson felt was a really cheapjack, shoddy thing to do. He felt that Macmillan was:

a publisher who doesn't care a hang whether you sell or not
.....and does so little to let people know [advertise] that I
find even my best friends who have been on the look-out are
unaware the book has been published.

What he felt to be the cavalier attitude of his publisher Gibson saw as a denial to the author of his basic necessities:

It doesn't matter to a rich firm like Macmillan's; but the few
pounds the book might earn would make all the difference to me.
[my underlining] ³⁴

Friends, however, remained loyal and enthusiastically supported his work:

My presentation copies have brought me some good letters - Lascelles [Abercrombie], de la Mare and Eddie Marsh are quite enthusiastic about the little book.³⁵

In America the volume was favourably received and the reviews tended to be encouraging and appreciative like this one which seems to have as strong a sense of his neglect as Gibson had himself:

I notice that this writer, who started as one of the Georgian poets, has now dropped his middle name of Wilson for literary purposes. Mr Gibson is the author of a surprising number of volumes containing many lyrics and narratives. His poems of the twenty years from 1905 to 1925 have been collected. I think it notable that he still writes so interestingly. He has always been the verse-reporter of the lives of ordinary human beings. In this respect he has followed in the Wordsworthian tradition, though his style has little in common with Wordsworth's. I remember hearing one of his first books, many years ago, highly praised by George Middleton, the American playwright. Gibson's reputation has been long established and *Fuel* cannot be said to enhance it in any way, though it is, as I say - an interesting book, and workmanlike. It has not the keen bite and originality of some of the poems in his *Borderlands* and *Thoroughfares*, which is the book of his I like best. But it seems amazing to me when I learn that he now is having a difficult enough time making a living and, along with most of the Georgians, fairly well forgotten in England. That this should come to pass in the case of a man of his attainments is certainly not as it should be. If the poets of the proletariat and their admirers but knew it, Gibson has sung the proletariat for years with deep sympathy and impressive sincerity. He has also tried his hand at plays. He has written of the life of his time with unsentimental realism. His apothegms also are pungent. Here is one from his most recent book:

Fools of the jest which God
Plays ever and again,
We, who thought old men odd,
Are now the odd old men.

Within the last several years your humble servant has felt that sometimes quite keenly. For he is nearing fifty and Gibson may be slightly older. We say to ourselves, "That isn't really old" but we know in our hearts that a certain wildfire has vanished from existence. I shouldn't say that it makes us exactly down-hearted but perhaps it teaches us to know our place.³⁶

French academics appeared to show some interest too and Gibson received correspondence from a number of French readers who had perhaps been introduced to his work in R.L. Mégroz's work on modern poetry. The most persuasive French critical attention came from an article on *Fuel*:

On ne saurait dire que ce nouveau recueil déçoit les espoirs qu'ont pu faire naître les oeuvres précédentes de Mr Wilfrid Gibson; mais il est loin de les satisfaire. L'auteur y poursuit

avec ténacité son effort pour extraire de la vie populaire la poésie qu'elle enferme; mais cet effort à la longue paraît assez monotone, et l'accoutumance en amoindrit le succès.

.....
Mr Lascelles Abercrombie voyait récemment en l'oeuvre de Mr Gibson "one of the most individual achievements in recent English poetry." Certains pourront trouver le compliment insuffisant, d'autres le juger excessif. Si l'on nous permet d'accentuer la nuance qui sépare "individuel" d' "original" nous retiendrons volontiers l'intention élogieuse de cette formule pour nous y associer, avec modération.³⁷

Professor Digeon's review captures just that sense of Gibson's capacities, strengths and excesses which I would endorse. The strengths, potent enough at the time of composition, have not endured well in changed climates of taste and the weaknesses which Digeon notes have become rather more obtrusive. Part of the problem stems from the appeal to popular taste because such tastes change very rapidly. In looking to impress his contemporary readers with his mastery of their idiom and manner Gibson was to sacrifice the possibility of future readers with a changed idiom.

As reviewing took its toll between 1934 and 1938 Gibson had no work published except a slight pamphlet of a few poems recalling the Hebridean journey of 1929 on the 'Sea Swallow' with Mrs Ratcliffe. He was so preoccupied with the sense of failure at this time that poetry which for him stemmed from exultant moods and deeply-felt responses seemed to be quite beyond the range of his low spirits. There were other factors too which contributed to this state of mind and their combined effect was to prevent him writing.

The sense Gibson had of having been swept aside, cast out into oblivion as a poet emerges quite strongly in his letters throughout this period of his life. Immediately after *Fuel* came out he wrote to Marsh to say he was in "post-publication dumps" and that he regarded himself as

so definitely a back-number these days, when the only mode is the pursuit of the inexpressible by the inarticulate.³⁸

Here he has a smack at Eliot and the Moderns whom he so disliked but the Wildean sprightliness of the original remark is replaced by a sourness expressive of Gibson's woeful mood. He resented very much the criticism made of his work by arrogant young poets and complained to Mrs Ratcliffe about

their assumption that they are the first poets who have been....they constantly accuse their predecessors of insincerity because their mood is not the mood of the moment. ³⁹

Gibson often felt about reviewers what he had said about a *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer a few years earlier:

...he has never got within miles of what I am trying to do. ⁴⁰

The views of the younger writers, however, seemed to be representative of the general public as sales of Gibson's work went down and down. He complained that on a visit to Bumpus's London Bookshop - "the chief bookseller in England" -

the only books of mine they have on the shelves are left-over copies of *Borderlands* and *Hazards*, not even a copy of the *Collected*,

In the same letter of 1935 to Mrs Ratcliffe he went on:

I can be quite philosophical about it from the literary point of view but that does not help at all from the economic point of view. The notion that one or two rhymes may survive, does nothing to relieve present embarrassments. ⁴¹

Not only were Gibson's sales slumping badly but now to make matters worse, the Brooke money began to dry up also. The hesitancies shewn by Sidgwick in 1930 about future sales now became clear as by 1935 the country's mood was so totally changed. Gibson's plight was made very clear in this letter to Mrs Ratcliffe in January, 1935:

When my Autumn accounts came I found that the sale of the 'Collected' volume had fallen lower than ever and that my last book [*Islands*] in spite of the magnificent send-off you gave it, was much my worst seller. Then *Fuel* appeared, and never even started to sell! But, what is more financially serious to us, is that at long last the Rupert Brooke books have begun to slump badly. ⁴²

What Gibson had feared would happen had now done so - he could no longer rely on money from the sale of Brooke's work. Instead he would have to build up much more his alternative sources of income, as indeed, he had already started to do in anticipation of this time:

The Observer is giving me a fair amount of work. I'd a cheque for a whole £10 last month and it is necessary for the 'Rupert Brooke' income has dropt [sic] considerably this year.⁴³

Soon he became quite adept at "turning out an *Observer* review at lightning speed"⁴⁴ when pressure was upon him to meet a deadline. Not that he appeared at any time to be other than extraordinarily conscientious: in a letter to Mrs Ratcliffe he told her he had done a review of the late John Freeman's letters in a day:

I only got the book yesterday morning and I had to post the review today.⁴⁵

And on another occasion:

A review book turned up on Thursday evening and I had to have the notice in by Friday noon! And I read the book through.⁴⁶

By the beginning of 1936 Gibson was feeling the strain and he felt:

altogether empty and played outI feel as if there were a spring broken inside me.⁴⁷

At the root of his worries there was his anxiety about his status as a poet and his inability to produce much verse at that time:

I don't want to go numb. And I seem already to have gone dumb.....If I could only scrap all I have done and start afresh. Glad as I am to get odds and ends of reviewing to do to earn a few guineas I don't want to be mainly a reviewer. ⁴⁸

It was no wonder that he saw in Vachel Lindsay's suicide a reflection of something very close to his own state of mind and circumstance:

....his [Lindsay's] sales had slumped; and he was middle-aged and with a family to support. I suppose his failure seemed more desperate to him as he was a sort of evangelist of poetry and had hoped to re-create America by preaching its gospel....Oh! how well I know what he was feeling....how difficult it is to reconcile oneself to failure.⁴⁹

In spite of his dislike of the reviewing work he seemed to be glad to be taken on by the *Manchester Guardian* on a more regular basis than before:

The *Manchester Guardian* is reorganising its reviewing and has engaged me to do a regularly fortnightly column on new novels. I cannot express my relief at the prospect of having regular work. I have done a fair amount for the *Guardian* in times past ... it will mean reading five novels a fortnight; but I daresay I will survive. Please let me have any ideas you have about the art of fiction in general.⁵⁰

A rather desperate request from a poet who had no aspirations to novel writing himself but the work was set about carefully and diligently:

I have just finished my first article on fiction for the M.G. These omnibus articles are the devil. You have no space to let yourself go about any book and the transitions from one book to another are not easy to manage gracefully. And, of course, you only get paid for the amount you write, not the amount you read and it does take a conscientious bloke like me some time to get through half-a-dozen novels. However it is good to have some regular work. I have done a good deal for the *Observer* too lately⁵¹

It was hoped that the income from this work, small though it was at three guineas a fortnight, would dispense with the need to have paying guests, "who get on the nerves of the whole family."⁵² However, after doing two fortnightly batches no third batch arrived as "the *Manchester Guardian* says there are not enough worthwhile novels to go round."⁵³ Fortunately Gibson's disquiet was soon mollified by a letter from the editor who promised that "he fully intended the job to be regular in future"⁵⁴ and by the continuance of work for the Sunday press:

I have just polished off seven books for *The Observer*.⁵⁵

Apart from his reviewing work for newspapers Gibson was also undertaking quite a variety of other activities in order to supplement his income. He worked for the London County Council, giving a series of lectures at evening classes:

I have done the Tennyson lecture and now must tackle the re-reading of the whole of Browning. And, of course, I am carrying on the novel reading all the time. This mightn't sound much to you, but with my limited mental equipment, I find it quite a strain.⁵⁶

Ten days later a post-card to Mrs Ratcliffe reveals he has to "assess in one article the Collected Poems of four poets" and he looks on that,

very properly, as "a ghastly responsibility." ⁵⁷ Whilst in August he found himself "exhausted by reading 1400 pages of Browning in double columns" and, having attended the Oxford verse speaking festival, he was also "exhausted by a week's listening to the competitors from 9.30 a.m. each day." ⁵⁸ This was an age when verse-speaking was very popular and between that and readings Gibson divided a great deal of his time.

In August 1936 Gibson was commissioned to write five thousand words on contemporary English poetry for a Canadian University Quarterly*, a task he hardly relished. In it he struck a characteristically plain man's note. He surveyed the contemporary poetic scene in a generally balanced and judicious manner. He argued against the use of the word 'modern' for recent poetry believing that it suggested a "false antagonism between Tradition and Experiment in verse". His praise of Yeats was unstinting, both for his earlier and later work but his dislike for Eliot was abundantly plain and he found "something a little dry and dessicated about Mr Eliot's work as a whole". The poet he picked on as most rewarding of the younger men was Auden whom he described as "well worth wrestling with". This was a bit of criticism that showed wide sympathies, clear-sighted opinions and a generous impulse for praise where he genuinely believed it to be true.

By September, having completed these tasks and delivered the Browning lecture he was, he wrote "up to my neck in Swinburne and Arnold for the third lecture" ⁵⁹ It was small wonder that he could say by the end of the year:

I haven't written a line of verse for over a year. ⁶⁰

The pace and quantity of all these different activities were taking their toll, however, and Gibson was aware that it was work inimical to his true vocation and could see what was happening to his poetry as a consequence:

I must have dealt with at least 130 novels in a twelvemonth.
Not a line of verse for well over a year now, and little enough

*University of Toronto Quarterly VI, 1. (October, 1936)

in the preceeding eighteen months. I don't know if its the result of the novels; but I seem utterly detached from anything to do with poetry; and when I had to prepare a reading of my poems to give at King's College the other day, I could hardly bear to make up a programme.⁶¹

This complaint was repeated again and again:

My brains are doped with novel reading ... its always something of a conjuring trick - producing something out of a vacuum. And meanwhile my knack of verse writing seems to have finally failed me.⁶²

For six months in 1937 he got no work at all from *The Observer* but the *Manchester Guardian* work continued to come in but with apparently grave consequences for his creative capacities:

The novels would seem to have finished off my little bout of rhyme writing⁶³
I had hoped that "song would again awake" ... but I, alas am dumber than a fish.⁶⁴

By the end of the year the mounting desperation of his remarks upon this subject became a *cri de coeur*

.....having to grind out columns when you have nothing on earth to say is utterly destructive of the creative faculty
oh for some leisure to possess my own soul enough to meditate the possibility of a poem.⁶⁵

Another aspect of Gibson's life at this time which caused him much unhappiness was his lack of contact with his 'rural muse', the Northumbrian countryside from which he had drawn inspiration for so much of his poetry. His lament for 'the north country' was a *leitmotiv* of his correspondence in these years and as he was expressing himself less in verse at this time this feeling finds its way into almost every available letter. As early as 1928 it appeared in his correspondence with Mrs Ratcliffe: "I am homesick for the North."⁶⁶ In 1929 he went to Newcastle to give a public reading but it was not the city he was anxious to see: "It will be wonderful to get a glimpse of the fells again"⁶⁷ he wrote. The sense of being cut off from feeding roots grew more strong and more insistent during the next decade:

I've seen so little of my own North Country (sic, capitals) (which, of course, included Yorkshire - all Northumbria) these many years.⁶⁸

There were occasions when he did return briefly to his beloved North Country and was able to indulge his passion for long walks. He wrote to de la Mare in May 1935, when he was staying at Laverton, near Ripon, during a reading tour, saying that "I did a sixteen miles walk over the moors the other day."⁶⁹ Referring to a book, *The Shadow on the Hills* by Nancy Price, in which he observes its limitations Gibson acidly comments "what do they know of sheep-kind who only South Downs know"⁷⁰ and then goes on to celebrate the dark northern Herdwick sheep of the Fells. This was the voice of a man who had lost the country of his heart and the consequence for his art was inevitable. Equally he had lost at this period his appetite for writing about urban life which had made him so celebrated in the pre-war years. On an occasion when Mrs Ratcliffe said she had been walking in Teviotdale, the lonely border valley, Gibson replied "I used to know all that countryside like my own heart."⁷¹ From this simple statement it would not be too much to draw the conclusion that both knowledge and heart were much diminished by his long absence, and he continued to be in a dispirited frame of mind regarding his own work. He wrote almost despairingly to de la Mare in midsummer 1937 to say:

since my small sales have dwindled to nothing and no editor will look at my verse I have felt a slackening of the impulse ... the faculty of expression seems to have left me. It may return: it has often taken long leaves before, but never quite such a long one.⁷²

Whilst he was so preoccupied with his declining reputation and the slackening of his poetic impulses his wife Geraldine bore all the brunt of the domestic worries and the care of the family.

Although the amount of Gibson's published work diminished during this period, he still had a reputation as a 'north country poet' and was asked to read his work for the B.B.C. Even this did not please him -

broadcasting was an experience he heartily loathed. Writing to de la Mare about his experience of recording his poems with an actor named Robertson, he made Broadcasting House seem a most unattractive place:

the whole place is run like a factory - and yet there was a queer sensation of nightmare about the experience, going through an endless succession of silent swing doors, past innumerable secret chambers to reach the allotted studio, and then sitting reading, apparently in entire privacy, and yet with a sensation of countless eavesdroppers.⁷³

At this period in his life Gibson seemed to find very little to please him. His letters were nearly always full of grumbles about things that got in the way of his writing poetry. Reviewing, broadcasting, any other activity but his writing, he regarded as a nuisance. We have to remember that he felt himself to be a dedicated poet and when we realize what a sense of sterility had fallen on him in the nineteen-thirties it is hardly surprising that he felt anguished and complaining about everything which distracted him even more from his elusive muse.

Mercifully there were one or two aspects of Gibson's life that were a source of pleasure and inspiration to him and the best of all for him were his travels with Mrs Ratcliffe on her yacht 'Sea Swallow'. In June 1936 Gibson spent a week sailing among the islands of the Hebrides and found, he reported to de la Mare,

that it was hard to leave Jura with its cloudy Bens and green machair, and red deer, and wild swans, and kingcups, and curlews calling all day long.⁷⁴

Another very important thing that gave him great pleasure was the company of his friends and fellow-writers. Writing from Epwell Mill in Oxfordshire where he stayed with Percy Withers in the summer of 1936 he wrote that it was a delight to meet "so many friends, Binyon, Lascelles, Masefield, L.A.G. Strong, Austin Clarke, Richard Church."⁷⁵ These friends were all poets, indeed that was almost the crucial matter of friendship to Gibson: that it should be based on a fellowship of the

consciousness of poetry. Presumably the intensity of those friendships of 1912-1915 had meant that ever after he longed for community with other poets but was doomed to be an increasingly lonely and neglected figure. At Christmas 1936 he looked forward, then, eagerly to attending a memorial meeting for Edward Thomas at which he would see de la Mare and to whom he wrote "I love seeing a poet or two now and again."⁷⁶ In the same letter he went on to show the deep sense of his own exclusion by saying that poets inhabited a "world from which I am now an exile, if indeed, I ever was a true inhabitant." ⁷⁷ At the Oxford Poetry Festival again, the following summer, he looked forward to meeting "Bax, Binyon, Clarke, Church, Vita Sackville-West, Strong, T.S.Eliot and Eddy Marsh" and was surprised to find that he made a new friend:

I fell utterly for a new one, W.H.Auden. He was perfectly charming to me. ⁷⁸

He had already praised Auden's poetry in his article the year before and he was now delighted to meet the man himself. This visit to Oxford and the meeting with so many of his peers must have acted as a wonderful stimulus on Gibson's creativity, and he reported to de la Mare, at the end of August that he was having "the best spell of rhyme-writing I've had for years."⁷⁹ Of such social life is creativity made, as Gibson himself realized by saying "it seems as if our talks had released the spate."⁸⁰ Added to this burst of creativity was the pleasure of another trip in the Autumn to Temple Sowerby to stay with Mrs Ratcliffe. He was in the country of his heart once more:

in the high fell country of the Westmorland, Cumberland, Yorkshire and Durham borders - the austere regions of heather and bent and grey stone-dikes that appeals to me more than any other.⁸¹

And yet here, even here, "dumbness has fallen on me again" ⁸² he wrote despairingly to de la Mare. Later in the year Auden called at Gibson's Hampstead house and proposed a north country walking tour:

Auden dropt [sic] in the other morning - on his way to hire clothes for his interview at Buckingham Palace; and we talked mainly about Northumberland. He wants me to have a week's tramp with him over the fells next year, if he returns safely from China.⁸³

However, in a later letter Gibson saw that this proposed trip was a bit unrealistic:

I fancy 60 would have some difficulty keeping pace, mentally and physically with 30." ⁸⁴

He was particularly pleased by Auden's knowledge of the area:

Auden seems to know the North very thoroughly. He especially mentioned Blanchland." ⁸⁵

Auden, of course, was a rising star in the firmament as was Stevie Smith and Clifford Dymont both of whom Gibson met at this time and by whom he was clearly impressed.

He was also often in company with the members of the Sitwell family and reported of Edith Sitwell after one occasion in which he had dinner with her:

What seem to be affectations in her writing are perfectly natural to her. Extravagant and eccentric things there may be but they are a sincere expression of an oddly idiosyncratic view of life. She is certainly a genius if somewhat an unbalanced one.⁸⁶

In the summer of 1938 Gibson went on a motoring tour with his friend Campbell Mitchell-Cotts. To be out on the road in the spirit of Masfield's *Tewkesbury Road* was a great delight to him and bucked up his spirits considerably. Both men stayed at Renishaw Hall near Doncaster, as the guest of Osbert Sitwell and, together with the Sitwells, they subsequently travelled to North Wales to stay with the Clough Williams-Ellises in their "Italian village" ⁸⁷ as he described the little folly town of Portmeirion in Merionethshire.

It was a happy summer for Gibson and much of his gloominess was dispelled by the welcome holiday. The Sitwells readily strike one as being fitting and likely company for Wilfrid Gibson whereas Elinor Glyn

certainly does not. Yet in an amusing anecdote, he recounted to Mrs Ratcliffe how Elinor Glyn, doyenne of the chaise longue, allied herself with him and her art with his. The occasion was a luncheon party at the outset of which Elinor Glyn and Lady Oxford had

a feud which they carried on at the luncheon table ...[which had] a priceless sequel. When Lady Oxford left, they all began discussing her rather adversely; and I remarked "still, she has a wonderful zest." When Elinor Glyn replied "Yes, but only for the things of this world; but you and I, Mr Gibson, have our dreams...." So you see, I have found my true affinity!

While round the cocktail bar
Society cackles and screams
Elinor Glyn and I
We have our dreams. 33

Although Gibson was amused at having an unexpected affinity with a popular female romantic novelist she was quite accurate in recognising in him a "dreamer of dreams".

After suffering so much depression during the last few years it was hardly surprising that Gibson did not expect that his next publication *Coming and Going* would do any better than the previous ones. He wrote to Mrs Ratcliffe to say that:

Coming and Going was to be dropped into Oblivion on 9th June. There is not much hope for it when even de la Mare's new book has received hardly any reviews. 33

Coming and Going was, however, reviewed very favourably by de la Mare himself in the September issue of the *London Mercury*. 30 He was a good and loyal friend to the man who, in 1914, had been rather dismissive of him. Gibson himself had not seen the review when he was telephoned by his friend Mitchell-Cotts his companion of the summer motoring tour:

Campbell rang me and read out to me that marvellous review over the telephone. I'm thrilled to the marrow. 31

Three days later he was able to write more fully to de la Mare complimenting him on the quality of his reviewing and the level of his discernment in hitting eagerly on those very things of his own that Gibson liked best:

the article reads as if you had enjoyed doing it! In itself it is a beautiful bit of work, and you found in my verse just the qualities I value and hardly dared to hope were present. ⁹²

De la Mare complimented Gibson without reserve on his observation, on his exact and arresting "terms" like "Arctic iceflows, grey with walruses"; "Schnapps-brilliant sunshine"; "with blue eyes lightless in his blank white face". He praised Gibson's imagination, narrative gift and his colloquiality which he found as convincing as "anything of Thomas Hardy's". He said that Gibson's mind was "devoted to poetry" and that he was a "most vigilant craftsman." It was small wonder that Gibson was so utterly delighted with this "beautiful bit of work", as he called it, which de la Mare so generously wrote. Gibson was incensed, however, with the press, Oxford University,* which at the moment when such a review might have stimulated sales, had no bound copies available to meet demand. Notable enough now to be published by a distinguished imprint Gibson, or perhaps it was poetry, was evidently considered too uncertain of sales to be bound up in quantity.

Coming and Going in fact adds very little to our sense of Gibson's creative development at this period. The despair and frustration he was experiencing as an artist scarcely appears in these pieces. "Most of the poems" he wrote to Mrs Ratcliffe, "are the work of three or four years ago" and he went on to say "not that this matters, except to me: I've already turned out more verse than people can stand from me." ⁹³ In a similarly depressed state he wrote to Marsh on this occasion and said:

Nowadays... for such outmoded writers as W.G. publishing is little more than an alternative to the waste-paper basket all the people who used to buy my books are dead, or at any rate, are dead to me. ⁹⁴

Marsh however, a trusty friend was able to cheer him up and make him "feel a swell poet again, instead of a down-at-heel hack reviewer" ⁹⁵ when he congratulated Gibson on his latest pieces in manuscript.

* Gibson had been published by Macmillan since 1917. There is no reference in his extant correspondence to this switch to Oxford University Press. According to his son, Michael Gibson, Macmillan broke with Gibson and he was upset by this. I am grateful to Dominic Hibberd for this information.

The volume takes its title from the epigraph "And men coming and going on the earth" which is quoted from the final line of Brooke's 1913 sonnet *Clouds*. The range of subject matter and styles are as wide as one has learned to expect from his earlier work but there is a heavy concentration on certain subjects: the sea features, perhaps principally, in the first and last sections, whilst in them and in the middle section the apparently diverse range of pieces is almost unified by the concern in each to dwell on loneliness, isolation and death. The prevailing philosophy of the volume is really of resignation and acceptance. The earth, nature, man even are all embraced by Gibson's mind as beautiful and compelling but fleeting. In this they are like the clouds of Brooke's poem which resemble "the Dead" who "do not die" but ride the calm mid-heaven watching men "coming and going on the earth." Only the amber of a poem can capture for him the sense of hope and permanence. When he says in the final poem:

So many voyages, and all in vain!
For us, no landfall on the Fortunate Isles

it is clear that his strongest sense is that his spirit is prevented from fulfilment and its desire, whatever that might be and that his attitude to life's voyages is simply to "fare forward, voyager" stoically. As so often in Gibson, life is presented as a struggle, usually against overwhelming odds. It is as though he felt powerfully that the social and natural worlds were filled with forces tending toward destruction and so the world was to be presented as a fearful place where man was not at home but where he glimpsed entrancing moments of beauty. In what was a hard and miserable existence Caliban on the enchanted island had moments in which the clouds opened and in which his ears were filled with delightful sounds. He is a poet, too, perhaps indeed the archetype of the poet. As Caliban is menaced by fear of his master so Gibson is menaced by

fear of the world 's dominion, by kings, wars and politics which threaten in the poems such as 'Spain 1937', 'An Old Man's Coronation', 'Coronation Night'; he is fearful of the strange and inexplicable mysteries like those of 'Flannan Isle' in 'The Rescue', 'The Hood Seals', 'Landing at Night' and 'The Caretaker'; but he is also ecstatically delighted by the world's beauties in 'Jura', 'He Sees Her Everywhere', 'Eden' and 'Theirs Still.....'

'The Haul' is the poem that most clearly and directly expresses life's struggle. In the catch of the herring in the seine net the poet sees his metaphor for existence as the fish vainly struggle to elude the manacing predators of the ocean only to fall prey to man:

The shivering silver torrent of live fish
Pours from the seine into the shadowy hold
As molten metal into a deep mould;
And fitfully the bodies quiver and swish
In frosty moonlight till the crisping cold
Freezes them brittle and lifeless, and they lie,
Ice-crystalled moon-flakes under the clear sky -

Netted and lifted in the unseen seine
Even as they arrowed through the moon-shot sea,
A herd of herring harried ruthlessly
By the pursuing porpoise-school, in vain
They strained the clutching meshes desperately,
Yet could not rid them of the strangling snare
That drew them, gasping, into killing air -

Ice-crystalled moon-flakes, never more to glide
And glance through living waters with the herd,
Darting from danger of the diving bird
Or gaping dolphin, never through the tide
Again to flash and flicker, undeterred
By peril in the instant urgent strife
Of eager death-eluding, which is life.

The sight of the herring fleets off the west coast of Scotland gathering in their catch would have been familiar enough to Gibson on his sailing expeditions. From that simple observation he builds his poem into a meditative, reflective expression of a very bleak view of life as a matter of "death-eluding." Gibson presents the natural world here as entirely predatory. The shoal of fish, here finally caught by man, have

been "harried ruthlessly" in their own element by porpoises. They have been pursued by the "diving bird" and the "gaping dolphin". All in vain they have now ended up in the ice-filled hold of the trawler where "the crisping cold / Freezes them brittle and lifeless." By extension the inevitability of extinction which is the lot of the fish is the lot of man, for this "urgent process", this "eager death-eluding" is life. The poem suggests no hope, no comfort in the contemplation of nature. Gibson appears to have had no religious sense at all and unlike Wordsworth, with whom he shares an affinity in respect of his simplicity and his appeal to ordinary folk, he has no sense of the natural world as comforting or restoring the mind of man. In this poem the experience of life is exciting while it is lived, for the fish "glide / And glance", they dart, they "flash and flicker." There is a delight in energy and movement which the poet catches but it is all "in vain." Necessity drives life on straight into some form of extinction. Gibson's conclusion, without any hope, gives a stark view of life.

The poem is technically accomplished in its shift from the present moment, established by the present and present continuous forms of the verbs, in the first stanza into the dominant past tense of the second stanza in which the action occurs. At the same time the second stanza retains with its participial usage of "strangling" and "gasping" a continuous sense in which porpoise eternally and unrelentingly pursue herring. The third stanza, which reflects on the experience, uses its infinitives and its participles to enforce the sense of recurrent, continuing action not bound to time. The effect is to produce a sense of nature's voraciousness. Whether such a stark idea is well-served by the lavish alliterative and assonantal diction, indeed whether it is well-served by this diction at all, I am less sure. There is a sense in which the very symmetry, order, pattern that is produced by well-chosen words

in strict metrical form with very regular rhyme-schemes denies the kind of starkness which it is purposed to create. The work of art affirms while the artist is struggling to deny.

In the sonnet 'He Sees Her Everywhere' in which a visionary woman dominates the mind of the poet and he finds that everything in nature calls her to mind, there is a 'Yeatsian' hint, or echo, in the tumbling energy of the imagery and in the strength of voice though the "amber lights and lustres" represent Gibson's characteristic colourings:

He sees her everywhere, though she has gone
Beyond the sight of eyes - the wet sea-tangle
Has amber lights and lustres of her hair;
The dazzling of dancing waters, the sun-spangle
Of morning-tides, her brightness; the wild-swan
Sea-mirrored, her grace and poise in its wave-riding;
The gannet, dropping sheerly from the air,
Instant to seize the arrowing gleam that burns
In the dark tide, her eager spirit's daring
To seize the glancing moment; the seal that turns
Dark eyes on him, beside his currach gliding,
Looks on him with her eyes at the hour of parting.

The 'woman' is plainly his inspiration and though her beauty is evident in all his delighting in the beauty of the sea she herself, his Muse surely, eludes him.

Some of the poems in this volume call up the preoccupations of much earlier years. For example 'Mediterranean Diver' with its jewelled diction - "beryl sea", "green lucency", "glaucous night" and "burns to clear amber" recalls the richer language of *Akra the Slave*. 'The White Dust', on the other hand, is reminiscent of the epigraph to *Fires*, "snug in my easy chair", in which the poet was grateful for the workman who "hewed the coal to feed my fire." Here in 'The White Dust' he contrasts the leisured life of the poet lived in his "comfortable room" with the harsh life of the pitman who risks his life daily at his job. An underground explosion, "fathoms beneath my comfortable room" kills six men and the poet "unguessing", as he says, is

merely irritated by the fresh white plaster dust that comes from a crack in his ceiling as a consequence.

'Coronation Night', commemorating the coronation of King George VI in 1937, also harks back in its theme. It recalls 'The Crown' (1908) in its idea that fulfilment is death since completeness can have no growth or purpose. The King must die because he has achieved his fulfilment and there is nowhere for him to go. In Gibson's poem a very sour note is struck for what is normally thought of as a joyous occasion:

He dreamt that night he sat alone
In the dark Abbey on the throne,
Sceptre in hand and crown on head,
Himself, forgotten as the dead:
When, shade on shade, with eyes of awe
And fear-clutched flinching heart he saw
The earlier kings in ghostly file
Silently gliding up the aisle.
Uncrowned, unsceptred, towards him came
Cold kings with faces of cold flame;
And one by one before him bowed
Each phantom in its smouldering shroud:
In grim obeisance gesturing
With mock homage, each dead king
Knelt; and then rose before the throne,
A shroudless naked man of bone;
And, turning with a lipless smile,
Shivered to dust in the dark aisle.

In eighteen lines of couplets he insists on the idea that the King is out-kinged by Death, that he must go down and he holds no promise in him. This bleak view was hardly common and certainly unlikely to be popular. It is perhaps of small surprise that it was turned down for publication by the Editor of the *New Statesman* to whom it was submitted together with two other, equally bleak pieces, 'Kings' and 'An Old Man's Coronation'. These are not the only pieces which deal with the old shrouded figure of death. As de la Mare noted in his appreciative review, Death "shifts and shuffles pretty actively through these pages." He noted, lamentingly that "the Georgians are growing old." Gibson, indeed, was growing old and dwelt increasingly on the gloominess of life.

Death of a more commonplace kind provides Gibson with his subject for the punningly titled 'On the Last Bus' in which an old man is discovered to be dead by the bus conductor who comes to collect his fare:

The tired conductor climbs the swaying stair
And pauses by the only passenger,
Who crouches with drooped head and does not stir
When wearily he asks him for his fare.
'Fare, please!' once more he mutters patiently,
And then more sharply 'Fare, please!' - yet that heap
Of ragged clothes moves not, as though deep sleep
Holds the old man unconscious. Testily
The tired conductor grasps those shoulders hunched,
Meaning to shake some sense into that old
And sleepy head: but, as he looses hold,
The bundle, slipping from the seat, lies bunched
And lifeless at his feet: and cold eyes stare,
As the old battered bowler rolls aside,
Into his startled face; and he, wide-eyed,
Looks down into that white face lying there -
That face, so wrinkled, pitiful and old,
And yet, somehow familiar ... The bus sways;
And still he stands there in a dreaming daze,
Murmuring 'Fare, please!' to that crumpled cold
And quiet passenger on his last trip:
And as they reach the end of the last stage
Still stares in his own face in its old age,
Clutching his ticket-punch with trembling grip.

Gibson confronts here the problem of dramatizing adequately the dramatic nature of an event that occurs in a commonplace setting. The detail of the incident, the realistic, documentary handling are quite telling but the poet's concern, his attempt to feel for his subject, comes to seem overdone and draws attention to itself rather like an excessively self-conscious piece of behaviour would do. The consequence is that there is a sense of awkwardness and embarrassment for the reader.

Death is sharply contrasted with life in 'The Willow Pool' in what is very like a Blakean dichotomy between Innocence and Experience, though without Blake's superb technical control. In 'The Willow Pool' the children bathe happily by day but by night an adult wades in to commit suicide: where innocence finds joy, experience finds only despair:

THE WILLOW POOL

All day the boys
With splash and shout
Dart in and out
The Willow Pool,
Shattering its cool
Quicksilver gleam
With dip and dive,
Full of the fun
Of being alive:
Then, tired of noise,
Bask in the sun
Five minutes, then
With laugh and scream
Plunge in again.
So, in and out,
And out and in,
With lively din
They leap like trout;
And all the day
The waters flash
As frisk limbs splash
Their deeps to spray;
Till, one by one,
Worn out with play,
At set of sun
Each sleepy-head
Creeps home to bed.
But as the grey
Mist-woven shades
Settle to sleep
The Willow Pool,
A dark form slinks
Towards it, and wades
To its mid-deep;
And, weighted, sinks
In slumber cool:
And bubbles rise
Awhile, then cease,
Over the bed
Of one who lies
Full of the peace
Of being dead.

Blakean does seem to me the most apposite comparison for both the manner and the matter here. The simplicity of the manner of the *Songs of Innocence* with their loving and naïve depictions of the activities of children, as exemplified in, say, 'The Echoing Green', is present in the first twenty-seven lines. A sense of energy, vitality and sheer joyous exuberance builds up from word, idea, sound and rhythm. At the end of the

day comes the dark and at line twenty-eight, with "But . . .", the poem changes mood and tone entirely. The shift is like that from a song of 'Innocence' to one of 'Experience'. Like the dark night that comes in Blake's 'Nurses's Song' in *Songs of Experience* the dark which Gibson brings us into is fearful and destructive. The pool that was in daylight, for innocent youths, a delight is at dark, for the suicide, a means of extinction. The lines dealing with the suicide retain the same metre, which helps to keep a certain naïveté in the tone of the narrator, as though he did not understand or could not comprehend the contrast, but the greater gravity is established by change of pace in the language. "Dive", "fun" and "plunge" give way to "slinks", "wades", "weighted" and "lies" and so light-heartedness dissolves and gloominess takes its place. Here Gibson shows again his technical accomplishment which was so admired by de la Mare.

For many of the other pieces in this volume the sea was the inspiration and it is clear from the number of them that the opportunity to sail with Dorothy Ratcliffe had provided Gibson with much of his 'afflatus' at a time when little else could do so. 'Sea-slumber', 'North-Sea Fog', 'Landing at Night', 'The Rescue' and 'Milk for the Ship' are all distinctive and tight poems drawing upon sea-going experiences and the last of these pieces, about love at first sight, was felt by de la Mare to be "a little master piece". The poem, drawn from an incident when Gibson was sailing among the Swedish skerries in the Baltic, has two great virtues: its power to sustain a narrative and its power to create telling character-vignettes of boy and girl. Gibson the story-teller and Gibson the dramatist come together effectively here and, for once in this volume, the result has a buoyancy and vitality that makes for the kind of delight de la Mare experienced. He was hugely, and I believe rightly, congratulatory in his comments on Gibson's sea-pieces: "the sea" he

said, was a "lifelong sweetheart of his" and he continued "He knows her, heart and soul, in her every mood and humour and perilous caprice."⁹⁶ In his opinion the sea poems are the most vivid and direct, the most realistic and romantic in the whole volume. He does not single out 'The Hood Seals' for praise, but in my opinion this is one of the best of the narrative marine pieces. Its great strength lies in its story about the violence of the experience of a seal-cull; the strength of the story and of the risky adventures imparts an energy to the language, an energy Gibson was beginning to lose:

The ice-blink quivered in the sky: I smelt
The smell of ice, and in my marrow felt
The chill of the floe's approaching days before
We set out, sealing, from the Island shore,
First of the wooden walls that sealing-Spring
Out from the harbour of St. John's, to bring
In hulls of oak and greenheart a rich spoil
Of harp and hood sculps, fat with blubber-oil:
And when we sailed the ice was still unseen
Even from the truck-slung barrel where the keen
Eyes of the scunner strained for the first sight
Of the southward-drifting icefield, vast and white,
That brought for us our harvest of hair-seal.

And so, day after day, with thrusting keel
The ship bore north through buffeting short seas
That sluiced the decks, till spray began to freeze
Our beards to glass and stiffen stay and shroud
With ice one night as, under driving cloud
That, blinding, baffled the chink-seeking moon,
We steamed: but dawn came, clear-horizoned; and soon
The masthead-lookout gave the welcome cry -
'Ice! Ice!' - and every northward-staring eye
Glimpsed glimmering level and glittering hummock and
Kindling already in the dawn's red fire. (spire
And then from nowhere fog swirled suddenly
Like giant swathes of gossamer over the sea;
And with the fog the snow came, hard and dry,
Driving down on us from the unseen sky.
Yet still we battled slowly towards the floe
Through mist and blizzard, cloaked with clogging snow,
Northward and ever northward till we felt
The steel-shod cutwater crash into a belt
Of rafting pans and growlers; and so we knew
We neared the whelping-ice we must cut through,
The stout ship standing up to strain and stress,
Till we should reach the innermost recess,
Its secret white heart, whose security
From shark and narwhal or prowling enemy
The timid harp-seals seek year after year,

Trusting in peace their tender young to rear,
The blubber-padded whitecoats that supply
The richest oil for soap, and so must die!

Day after day through that ice-cluttered sea
We steamed through flurry and smother steadily;
And, as we pushed on blindly, we could feel
Half-sunken growlers gride along the keel
And slob-ice graze the beam and butt the bow
That crunched through bobbing hunks and chunks that now
Closed on us, crowding and jostling; and then the snow
Stopped suddenly; and we saw the great main-floe
Right on us; and the fog began to clear
So we could take our bearings and then steer
For a free channel through the mounded ice
Into its heart where, gripped as in a vice
By the main-ridge pressure, our wooden walls might crush
Like matchboard on us. So, on through sish and slush
And slob we steamed 'twixt ice-walls, till at last
A hummock barred our passage and jammed us fast
As the cut froze in astern. We leapt to the floe
With poles, ice-saws and chisels; and, numb and slow,
We cut and thrust and tugged, with a hawser lashed
To the bollards, till the hummock in splinters crashed
About the butting bow; and free again
We sailed awhile until we thrust in vain
Against a huger hummock that blocked our course,
For all our butting and cutting; and we'd to force
And blast our way through it with dynamite.

So, on into the floe by day and night,
Butting and blasting, in blizzard and fog and bright
White blinding spells of sunshine, we pierced our way .
Until at last at the red end of a day
Of crazing killing cold we grinned to see
That we had reached the harp-seal rookery,
The crowded main-patch, upon which we burst
Through a great hummock, proud to get there first.

And on that waste of whelping-ice all night
Neath shivering spears and quivering crowns of light,
Purple and green, and sweeping swords of white,
Where the aurora blazing over us hung,
The barking harp-seals with their bawling young
Kept up a clamour: and I could not sleep,
But sought the deck again and again to peep
At the silly scrambling puppies playing there
So happily under that fantastic flare;
And watched them from the glassy deck alone
Until the cold, icing me to the bone,
Drove me below

At the glint of dawn began
The slaughter of the innocents, each man
As in a frenzy of murder, clubbing dead
The plump whitecoats whose frightened parents fled,
Showing no fight, just scrambling frantically
Before us, flapping and barking helplessly.

And I, too, young and heedless, and half-crazed
With cold and that nightmare passage, ran and raised
My gaff to strike; and saw black baby eyes
Looking up at me, fearless, with no surprise
In their dark stare... I struck ... then heard a shout...
And, dizzy and half-sick I turned about,
To see my messmates, running before a herd
Of the huge fighting hoods that, anger-stirred
By the slaughter, from behind a hummock surged,
Through fellow-feeling for their seal-kind urged
To the rescue of the timid harps.....

Astare

I stood and waited, stunned and frozen there:
And the great bull was on me in a trice
Roaring... I struck at him... slipped on the ice ...
And knew no more

Though seemingly the ship
Was nipped and crushed to touchwood in the grip
Of suddenly-rafting ice... at least no more
Was heard of her... and it seems my comrades bore
My senseless body back across the floe,
Struggling and blundering through the baffling snow,
Till, one by one, done in by cold, they fell
In fatal frost-sleep on that field of hell...
Yet I, though how, it seems, I'll never know,
Was rescued from that death-trap of the floe...
Happen another ship's crew...

But the fear

Of that huge hood-seal lunging - though quite clear
I can recall each instant of that dread
Hell-passage through the ice - strikes my heart dead,
Again and yet again, when I would think ...
Striving to take a hold on life, I sink
Under that ferocious onslaught

And night and day,

Retracing and retracing its blind way
Through fog and blizzard, my numb soul struggles, until
I stand once more with gaff upraised to kill.....

The strength of this poem comes from the narrative power that Gibson could generate so well. His feeling for the seals and his powerful sense of the ugliness of the cull in which the helpless seals are cruelly clubbed is well supported by the tone and vigour of the narrative. The artistic truthfulness of the poem is unquestionable, it seems to me, right up until the transition from the plural subject (we) to the singular subject (I). That truthfulness suddenly departs with the poet's entry into the narrative as "I" because he is now breaking the thread of narrative and entering the poem in a self-dramatising, posing manner.

This is out of place and cannot be sustained effectively. When he tells us that he does not know anything about how his rescue was effected he ducks a crucial dramatic moment entirely. Sensing this weakness he tries to overcome it in his successive "But" and "And....." verse paragraphs. The method does not work at all well. So, whilst 'The Hood Seals' is strong in its narrative, convincing in its presentation of a seafaring narrator who knows the technical vocabulary of his trade when he speaks of "the scunner", "the truck-slung barrel", "the steel-shod cutwater", "rafting pans" and "slob-ice", it breaks down when it lapses into melodramatic, self-dramatising unbelievable heroics, though a sense of mystery still remains. Gibson's subject, his impulse and his narrative skill combine splendidly but he betrays a lack of skill in the purposeful management of his poem, in keeping it within narrative control. Gibson seems suddenly, in this poem, to betray his deeply felt intelligent attitude towards his subject, to betray his poem by a lapse into schoolboy heroics. To believe that such a conventional style, such a crude intrusion, could enhance his poem, almost implies a doubt as to whether he appreciated what he had achieved by the superior, narrative, part.

Another piece from this volume that de la Mare thought very highly of was one in which Gibson recollected the experience of twenty years earlier, 'The Fatigue'. He complimented it by saying that he found its sardonic grin at the poet's earlier self, PRIVATE GIBSON M.T. 381907, delightfully done. As we know de la Mare had known Gibson since before the Great War and they had been on first name terms since 1918. During the twenties and thirties they had been close friends and so, knowing him so well, it was no empty praise he bestowed when he said that Gibson's great virtue was that he had remained faithful and true to his poetic self, that self which is in "every poet, every imaginative writer

his own individual region." This, said de la Mare, was a "precious tribute." The reviewer for *The Times Literary Supplement* also found much to admire in *Coming and Going*. Particularly he remarked Gibson's undimmed narrative skill and his capacity to "invoke the mystery of simple things" and, with a curious closeness to de la Mare's words and quoting of Wordsworth, he observed Gibson's continued sensitivity to "the still sad music of humanity."²⁷ Gibson, himself, quoted Wordsworth in one of the pieces in *Coming and Going*. This poem illustrates precisely his emotions during this period of his life, when disappointment rather than joy predominated:

EXPERIENCE

If age bring wisdom, even I
Should have some sense before I die:
Yet, growing old, I do not find
Years 'bring the philosophic mind'.
Sharper than in my earliest years
My heart's beset with hopes and fears;
More keenly disappointment stings;
And I keep on expecting things.

He was still hoping to achieve something really distinctive in poetry. Disappointed he may have been, but he was certainly not giving up.

Coming and Going, in spite of its warm reception from distinguished reviewers, did not make money. There is no evidence that it sold well and shortly it, and its concerns, were eclipsed by the outbreak of war. Getting on towards a half-century later these poems are of rather less interest than they would, perhaps, have been to Gibson's contemporaries. The sense is inescapable that whilst the poems are accurate expressions of felt experience, and whilst their technical competence is undeniable, they do lack the robustness of compelling conviction and the verbal energy to make them very much more than poems in a minor key. Even so it must be said that in the half-century that has passed since their publication the usual causes of a fading poetic reputation, unfamiliar language or out-moded assumptions or merely historical subject matter do not apply. The

minor key is plain, audible and readily accessible to all who can take pleasure in the paradox of such verse: a penny plain, natural usage of language set into a complexity of metre and rhyme. For Gibson the closest similitude for poetry was in sailing; poetry was the barque on which the mind journeyed from the "narrow kyles" to the full ocean and the journey was for him its own reward:

SEA-FORTUNE

So many voyages, and all in vain!
For us, no landfall of the Fortunate Isles:
And yet the old sea-hunger the heart beguiles;
The Atlantic draws us from the narrow kyles,
And we up anchor again.

Fortune enough for us to see day break
Over unknown tides, who live but when we feel
The ship aquiver with life from truck to keel,
Whose hands are only happy at the wheel,
Who sail for sailing's sake!

This is as complete a sense as he ever achieved in verse of what his letters so often suggest: that it was in the imaginative enterprise of poetry that he truly lived and for which he lived. His true happiness was "at the wheel". When he was writing he felt alive. When he was not writing he felt dull, bored and as though he were dead.

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W.G. AT THE WHEEL OF MR RATCLIFFE'S YACHT 'SEA SWALLOW'

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER SEVEN

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CHAPTER EIGHT

1939 - 1949

"These Distracted Times" '

As international relations between England and Germany were deteriorating towards the end of the nineteen-thirties, a happier connection was made between the two countries when Gibson's elder daughter, Audrey, married Georg Gaston Albrecht Hübsch, a native of Dresden. The wedding took place in June 1937 after a whirlwind romance to which the Gibsons had made no objection, even though they knew very little about 'Ali' Hübsch. Audrey had met him during her travels in Austria and Gibson described him in a letter to Mrs Ratcliffe as an impoverished nobleman. In August 1938, fourteen months later, the Gibsons' first grandchild, Roland was born. With characteristic gloominess Gibson recorded "his arrival in this dubious world".² The phrase has almost a hint of prophecy about it, as well it might considering what the last year of the decade was to bring to Gibson personally and to the world as a whole..

In September 1938 Gibson and his wife decided to sell the house in Hampstead which had caused them so much expense and which was now too big for their requirements. They realised £1200 from the sale and moved to a much smaller house at 4, Ridge Hill, Golders Green where they had decided to retire. There were to be no more paying guests to worry about, the family was becoming grown-up and independent so Wilfrid and Geraldine were, they thought, about to have a quiet life. In July 1939 Michael Gibson sailed for America for a holiday and Jocelyn went to Austria to stay with her married sister, Audrey.

It was in August of 1939 that personal tragedy struck Gibson and his family. Audrey, her husband and baby son and Jocelyn were on holiday in the Italian Tyrol when, on the night of August 7th, an avalanche fell on the villa where they were staying and partly demolished it. The baby escaped unharmed, Audrey's husband also survived as did Jocelyn but Audrey, the darling Audrey who was all Gibson's first delight, was swept

away and killed. It was to Gibson "a nightmare from which there is no waking".³ Gibson and his wife not only had this terrible grief to contend with but also uncertainty over the future of their grandchild. In the first instance they went to Italy and brought the child home to England while the father sorted out the aftermath of Audrey's death. The suggestion was that he should bring up the child in Germany but as war seemed every day more likely, this was not viewed favourably. It was doubtful if he alone would have been able to look after a young baby but eventually he came to England with the intention of taking Roland with him back to Germany. The last time Hübsch had been in England was in October 1938 when he and Audrey had fled to Germany because it looked as though the threatened war would be declared and he, being a German, would be interned or imprisoned. Now that he was back in England again some rapid decisions had to be taken. He had to decide whether to stay in England or return to Germany and, if he did return, was he to take the boy with him? In the event he flew back to Germany on September 1st 1939 having got "the last available seat on the last plane" ⁴ and left the grandchild in the Gibsons' care. "Life is still a nightmare" Gibson wrote to Mrs Ratcliffe at the beginning of September 1939.⁵ In addition to all that had happened, his elder sister, Elizabeth was dying in Letchworth. After her popular successes with her pietistic poetry in the first decade of the century, she had married Thomas Kelly Cheyne, an Oxford don. She had been Gibson's mentor and had encouraged all his earliest attempts in poetry and she had influence in shaping his ambitions as a poet. Now on the eve of another world war Gibson's personal life was filled with grief and anxiety.

War was actually declared on September 3rd 1939 and the Gibson family had to adjust to the new circumstances. As a temporary measure little Roland, now fourteen months old, was 'boarded out' in Berkshire

with a young family. Michael Gibson went to Cheltenham where he was to study for the Air Force and Jocelyn was evacuated to Glasgow with the firm for which she worked. After a mere ten months at their Golders Green house Gibson and his wife moved again, this time "to a chauffeur's cottage in Berkshire - for the child's sake and safety."⁶ In November 1939 they settled in at Southernwood Cottage, East Hendred, Wantage, Berkshire. Gibson described East Hendred as "a charming little village with a good motorcarless road up on to the Downs."⁷ but it was not its charm that had caused them to go there but rather its comfortable distance from London and the presence in this village of another couple whose daughter had been killed with Audrey in the tragic avalanche accident. East Hendred was thus a safe haven, a place of fellowship in sorrow for the Gibsons and a peaceful, rural atmosphere for the 'orphaned' grandchild Roland to grow up in.

The first attraction of cottage and countryside were soon to wear thin, however, as the inadequacy of accommodation and place became clear. The "chauffeur's cottage" was rather small and poky. Not much happened at East Hendred and the society was very limited for someone who thrived on good company and literary talk. Gibson found local people boorish and he was regarded by them with considerable suspicion. Soon enough the gossip spread around that Gibson was a spy. He did not belong, he was obviously a withdrawn, lonely figure. He was a mystery, an enigma to his neighbours. Above all it was known that he had German connections. It was concluded he must be a spy. The temperament of rural England had changed little since Coleridge had been reported as a spy by a local officer in the Nether Stowey area who had overheard him talking, during the Napoleonic wars, of 'Spy-Nozy'. Being unfamiliar with the work of Spinoza himself the officer concluded that Coleridge was part of a spy ring in league with the French. Writers, who appear not to have a

recognizable job of work, and who are strangers in the area where they have chosen to live naturally attract a measure of suspicion and curiosity. In the First World War Lawrence and Frieda were reported as spies in Cornwall and consequently subjected to police investigation. Exactly the same thing happened to Gibson. His one great pleasure had always been in country walks. At East Hendred he would walk up on to the Downs and stroll about without any apparent reason or purpose. The strange unemployed gentleman who paced the Downs on a route which took in a full view of an aerodrome soon attracted suspicions. The police were notified and they duly watched the lonely poet on his innocent walk. In a letter to Marsh he described what happened and his own feelings about it; it is a letter in which the discomfort of being under suspicion is modified by the comic nature of Gibson's own naïveté:

My encounter with the detective had something of a comedy opening. I had just spotted an unfamiliar flower by the roadside and was stooping down to investigate when I was conscious that a car had drawn up beside me. I glanced up to see a young man regarding me with silent intentness; but, as I did not recognise him and he didn't speak I resumed my examination of the plant. When I next looked up he was still there: so, being a little embarrassed by this silent scrutiny, I stepped forward and asked him if he knew the name of the flower! ⁸

Not only was he trailed and interrogated but, as he told Percy Withers, he had to "fill in a declaration, something similar to that required of aliens." ⁹ After some questioning "the police had no shadow of a doubt of his entire innocence" ¹⁰ and the unpleasant business was, officially, at an end. This did not stop the local children from taunting him:

When I was returning from my walk on Sunday I was followed by children yelling "German spy" ... the children are the voices of their parents. ¹¹

Naturally Gibson felt very ill at ease about this and sought police help; it was promised that they would do what they could to see he was not molested and a friend got the schoolmaster in the village to speak to the children. He went on to say:

It is so difficult to convince the ignorant and uneducated on such a matter, as their minds are impervious to reason. We felt inclined to leave: but the inspector said his advice was that we should stay, and that I should carry on my walks over the downs as usual. But it isn't easy when you feel that the very hares and partridges are eyeing you with distrust!'¹²

Although Gibson was seen to cut a curious figure in the district there were actually even more curious figures like the very aged lady who approached him one day and remarked

"I hear you are a poet: then I suppose you know our cousin Alfred?" In telling this story in a letter to de la Mare, Gibson said "I was 14 when Tennyson died" and that he felt, as a consequence of meeting this relative of Tennyson's that he was "like some prehistoric animal who has been unlucky enough to outlive the golden prime." '¹³

The years spent in Berkshire were to be difficult ones for several reasons. The isolation, the privations of the war, financial worries, poor health, continuing family problems and the constant worry about writing made for a very limiting existence. In this quiet life only occasionally interrupted by some casual bombing and on some occasions bursts of aerial machine-gun fire overhead, Gibson continued to write about the experiences of the moment as they might be seen by ordinary people. He wrote to de la Mare complaining of lack of mental energy and said he felt in addition to his own difficulties that

the present anarchic condition of poetry adds to my confusion;
and makes one feel utterly lost..... '¹⁴

As usual, Gibson found it necessary to neglect his poetry writing in order to bring in more money from reviewing. He was still receiving payments of the royalties from Rupert Brooke's work and, hardly surprising given the renewed hostilities and national danger, he reported that "the Rupert Brooke sales are just incredible."¹⁵ By contrast in January 1942 he told de la Mare that his own royalties for the previous year amounted in total to £4. So he had to continue with his 'backwork'

even though the payments from this had been reduced in line with the limited space available for the reviews. On one occasion he was required to review nine books of verse in three hundred words for *The Manchester Guardian* and on another, to review briefly within six days, five novels including one of seven-hundred pages. This was laborious work and, because of space-restriction, brought him in a mere £2 a month instead of the pre-war six guineas. He complained bitterly that this work was a punishment for his youthful habits in aspiring to be a poet:

....a sort of punishment on me for my presumption in thinking I might even be a poet: I aspired to ride Pegasus in my youth and here I am in my sixty-third year, condemned to be a mere literary hack. ¹⁶

Some of the pleasures of life had to go - cigarettes had been given up, temporarily, in 1915 as the first war impinged on his finances and once again in January 1941 Gibson wrote to Mrs Ratcliffe to say that

cigarettes have soared in price so that they have long been out of reach of my purse: and I have missed them much in these nerve-shattering times, especially when I settle down to work. ¹⁷

Mrs Ratcliffe tried to press him into going to stay with her at her Temple Sowerby Manor in Westmorland but he feared to go away "in case we are bombed."¹⁸ His one idea, according to his wife, was that they should "stick together." There was some bombing in the area and Gibson's nervous apprehension was probably quite justified at that time although his wife was a little impatient of it. Clearly, judging by their separate letters of this time to Mrs Ratcliffe it was their habit to try and protect or shelter one another from their real motives so that they did not make each other over-anxious. Though Gibson was clearly a bit fed-up and would have liked to "escape" a while he felt he could not. His wife felt he ought to go on holiday though she knew why he wouldn't. When he wrote to Mrs Ratcliffe it was as though he thought his wife didn't really know the reason for his decision:

I doubt if she stressed the real reason why I couldn't go North just now... it would mean leaving her entirely alone at home at night in the cottage.... if she were ill ... or Roly [grandson] were ill....[there would be] no-one to help.¹⁹

Such caution was all very natural at a time of war's alarms although Mrs Gibson seems to have been more than capable of looking after herself. She cycled twenty miles some days carrying out her 'war-work' and getting in the shopping. Gibson himself was so anxious to keep an eye on things at home that even if he went into Oxford by bus, which was an hour's journey, he took the earliest bus back again. Although he felt that it was his wife who "was so much shaken up by Audrey's tragic death" ²⁰ it obviously deeply affected him too. And on top of all that there was the threat now of a German invasion of the south coast of England.

From Gibson's correspondence during these war-time years one learns how depressing, limiting and confining the whole period was. It was difficult to go very far, for services on buses and trains were not good; it was difficult to get a seat on public transport - indeed if he wished to have a seat from East Hendred into Oxford on the bus he had to go to Wantage (in the opposite direction) to the terminus. By the time the bus got to East Hendred road junction it was full up. The taken-for-granted things like paper and envelopes were difficult to come by; Mrs Gibson was delighted with a "rabbit-puff"²¹ sent by Mrs Ratcliffe - presumably a piece of rabbit fur for a powder-puff. A haversack and some cigarettes were received with great excitement and presents of books and money were like manna from heaven. These things brightened up difficult times when there was for the Gibsons little society in their isolated cottage and they seldom saw old friends. Confined to their cottage world they both began to feel "deadly dull" ²² and shut in. Added to this was Gibson's great discomfort brought on by prolonged attacks of dermatitis which meant that he was confined to his room for over two months, August and

September, in 1941. He refers to himself as "a prisoner" and gives an account of himself as being in "at times excruciating discomfort."²³ He had "many nights little or no sleep" ²⁴ and had to be treated by having his "neck and face smeared in thick ointment like a lady undergoing a beauty treatment."²⁵ Doctors seemed to have very little influence on the problem the origin of which was assumed to be nervous disorder and it recurred from time to time. After the war when he went to stay at Temple Sowerby Manor he had to order supplies of lotion in large quantities from a Penrith chemist to await his arrival. With this he had to anoint his whole body. When it all started, in 1941, it was irritating in more ways than one because it caused maximum discomfort, maximum inhibition and yet it was, he said a "comparatively superficial affliction." ²⁶ Even so it prevented him enjoying "what should be the simple pleasures of life, such as going to bed, going for a walk, having a bath or sitting by the fire."²⁷ As a consequence he had not had a "decent night's rest for over three months" ²⁸ and so he was having a very trying time and felt himself imprisoned. He was "crazy for a breath of the sea" ²⁹ and so Mrs Ratcliffe suggested a move to a cottage she owned on the Solway Firth. This he declined because it was far too remote a place in which a car would be essential and, more importantly no doubt, he felt that "the sea retires too far at low tide and it is not a rugged coast." ³⁰ It was not at all like "that glorious coast I was once so familiar with", that of Northumberland, of which he was reminded by Mrs Ratcliffe's account of her summer camping at St Abb's although he was amazed that "anyone is allowed to camp there just now within sight of the sea."³¹ Perhaps she exaggerated the sight of the sea for effect or perhaps coastal defences were not quite so stringent in the Border area.

There were, however, one or two events of a more pleasant nature at this time. On the 24th April 1941 Gibson told Mrs Ratcliffe that there

were two good pieces of news - that Jocelyn was to marry and that the Oxford University Press had just accepted "my little book of war rhymes."³² On the 23rd May he was able to say that Jocelyn was to be married on June 7th in Cheltenham but it was delayed a little until June 24th. Jocelyn, twenty-one on the day before, looked "lovely and distinguished(!)"³³ and all seemed to be well. The marriage, however, did not last for very long. Just over two years later Gibson was to write to Mrs Ratcliffe to say that Jocelyn had left her husband, that they had "always loathed him" and that he was "an unspeakable bounder " who "sought to drag her down to his own sordid level." ³⁴ It was later discovered that the man was also a bigamist and so Jocelyn had to get him prosecuted in order to free herself.³⁵

"My little book of war rhymes" was in fact the volume entitled *The Alert*. and its publication gave Gibson a great deal of excitement. It came out on 23rd October 1941, his sixty-third birthday. When he received his pre-publication copy he was quite pleasantly surprised as it was "not too bad for a war publication; but the paper is poor stuff."³⁶ He did not expect that the press would advertise his book as he never saw a single advertisement for *Coming and Going* and indeed, this proved the case. This was surprising as a poet, whose response to the experience of the Great War had been so distinctive, so seminal and so well-received, continuing to publish into the Second World War was unusual. It might have been thought that Oxford University Press might have made something of this which would have boosted their sales but they appear not to have done so. The volume was dedicated to his friend Campbell Mitchell-Cotts, his companion of the summer touring holiday of 1938.

The pieces in *The Alert* can be grouped roughly into two kinds: the smaller portion, and the less effective, including 'The Lightship', 'The Kiel Canal' and 'Baltic Night: A Memory', which were the product of

experience before the war, and the bulk of the poems, far more successful, which deal with the experiences of wartime.

'Baltic Night' carries the Gibson sense of strangeness and mystery but it is a poem that has little direction or purpose. Neither a narrative nor an effective lyric about a clear, definable experience, it seems to rely for its effect on a certain vague impressionism:

Down through the silent empty streets of Kiel
Between dark sleeping warehouses we steal
Until we come to the deserted quay,
Ablaze with light; and quietly
Unhitch the dinghy's painter; and with oars
Dripping with phosphorescence glide
Into the radiant mystery
Of the unruffled Baltic tide,
Tranced by the witchery
Of the full moon, a visionary sea
Of white flame lapping legendary shores:
And, shipping sculls, we let the little boat
Drift through the dazzle till the lucency
Drenches our bodies, sluicing them of all
Gross earthly substance; and we seem to float -
Like disembodied spirits, free
Of mortal cares, escaped beyond recall
From human tribulations - in a white
Eternity of light.

The movement of the verse, like that of the boat on the tide, is free and stately. The poem has a rhythm and control that would not suggest minor poetry. Indeed in its technique and in its capture of a visionary moment, a 'spot in time', it suggests some of the power of Wordsworth. What power there is, however, is severely curtailed by the absence of force and pressure in conveying what should be, probably was, a powerful personal feeling. We are left with a vague collective sense of being "tranced by witchery" and being disembodied spirits as all worldly objects dissolve leaving a mystical experience of buoyancy, "free of mortal cares." What we do nonetheless feel strongly is the Gibsonian yearning for freedom, for which sailing is an analogue and the relishing of light amid war-time blackout. The bulk of the verse in this volume escapes those criticisms that 'Baltic Night' invites; while most of it is not outstanding, it is

sharp, clear well-captured testimony of living experience. It is without flourish, without self-dramatizing and provides tight, telling documentary experience of people living during that war, both in civilian and service life. The oppressive darkness of war-time is recalled by 'Black-Out'. Even in remote country a cottage light conforms to government requirement. To show a light was a punishable offence and so the light that had "cheered belated wayfarers" had to be extinguished:

BLACK-OUT

Time out of mind the friendly cottage-light
Set on the fell's high shoulder through the night
Has cheered belated wayfarers - its gleam
In rainy dark or glimpsed through threshing snow
Solacing them with home-thoughts and the dream
Of rest at last beside their own hearth's glow.

But now no longer shines the lonely light,
And comfortless they travel through blind night.

That immediately recognizable feeling of the absence of the comfort of a gleam of light glowing from cottage or farmhouse when one is on the fells in the dark or in bad weather is easily and succinctly employed as the precise analogy for the experience of the war as not only darkness but, by Gibson's use of the transferred epithet, as blindness too. The simple opposition of light and dark allied with cheerfulness and gloominess continued to be a favoured Gibson antithesis and it works very well without comment or mention, as his exact parallel in metaphor for his doleful feelings now that war-time has plunged Europe into dark night.

'The Knitters' is a little top-heavy, because it introduces the lugubrious shadow 'Fate' knitting but in its attempt to depict the humbler side of war it captures a common experience and understanding:

THE KNITTERS

Through the long sleepless hours she sits
With restless fingers knitting steadily
A woollen helmet for her son
To keep him warm when his battalion
Goes oversea -
A woollen helmet! - and yet all that she

Can do for him now that all else is done:
And as her needles twinkle in the light
Throughout the night
Behind her on the wall a shadow knits
Remorselessly.

Another poem in this volume, 'The Pig' captures very well the plight of that second world-war phenomenon, the 'evacuee':

THE PIG

The city-urchin to the country new,
Unlatched the cottage-door and wondering stept
Into a marvellous world of glistening dew.

After those nights of terror, he had slept
Safe in unbroken slumber in the still
Queer quiet of the country; and had leapt

Lightly from bed when he had caught the shrill
Crowing of cockerels at the distant grange
That basked in early sunshine on the hill.

He paused a moment, staring at the strange
Green world of growing things, still half in fear
To think that life so suddenly could change;

And for an instant almost longed to hear
The hum of traffic and to feel his feet
On the familiar pavement: but as the clear

Breath of the morning filled his lungs, a sweet
Solace of healing through his body flowed;
And he forgot the dead bomb-shattered street

That once was home to him: and then he glowed
With sudden wild delight, and shut the door
To chase a pig that waddled down the road;
And felt he'd never been alive before.

All the newness and freshness of a new departure, a new experience in life is well captured here. The boy's difficulty in adjusting to the country and then in the last stanza the melting of resistance of feeling when he abandons himself in the chasing of the pig, fills the poem with the conviction of genuine feeling. After his unhappy experiences in the bombed town he "shuts the door" on his past and discovers a delight in a simple childish pleasure. The terza rima form is managed skilfully and

moves the poem briskly along and the symbolic use of the cottage door is managed simply and unfussily.

Another piece that employs a rural scene is 'The Shepherd' which is particularly successful in expressing Gibson's contrasting attitudes. The contrast here is very marked between the shepherd's gentle care and the ominous horror of a bomber 'plane:

THE SHEPHERD

Within a wattled cote on the Ridgeway Down
Tending his labouring ewes by the faint light
Of his horn-lantern, through the cloudy night
The shepherd hears high overhead a flight
Of raiders making for some Western town.

Shielding the light within his coat, he stands
For a brief idle moment harkening
To that deep drone of death upon the wing;
Then turns to his own business, to bring
Innocent life to birth with tender hands.

Despite the drama of war ordinary life goes on in its "doggy way" as Auden puts it in *Musée des Beaux Arts*, and the common shepherd bears the symbolic light. Tenderness, innocence, goodness in an age-old, symbolic care for sheep is made, without any doubt, to seem a triumph of the human spirit over mere power and mere destructiveness that is embodied in the depersonalized, hidden aeroplanes rumoured by their noise which is "the drone of death". In contrast with this death, and the massive forces which are propelling it, the shepherd's trade is practised with simple, vulnerable equipment, with wattled cote, horn lantern, and tender hands. The poem establishes that vulnerability and also its enduring values, intensifying the two brief mentions of the foreboding that the aeroplanes bring.

The intimacy, the warmth and the strong sense of the significance of simplicity in a world of huge, impersonal forces of meaningless destruction which is in 'The Shepherd' is also present in another piece,

'The Abbey Tower' - the Abbey referred to being, of course, Hexham Abbey which Gibson knew so well:

THE ABBEY TOWER

As, wounded, on the Libyan sand he lies,
The broad embattled tower
Familiar to his eyes
From childhood's earliest hour,
Dispelling the cold gloom
Above him seems to rise
Kindled by sunset, all about it flying
Jackdaws with gilded wing and burnished plume:
And in his ears as he is dying
Their homely cawing and the old careless chimes
Recall the innocent days
Of war-unshadowed times;
And once again with other boys he plays
Happily on the green slopes of the Sele
In the late sunset-light
While from the Abbey tower resounds the peal
Of ringers practising on Thursday night.

The importance of memory, of place, of associations in human life and of homeliness are all clearly focused upon and by contrast so too is the sense of the absurdity and wastefulness of a young Hexham man lying wounded and dying in a far-off desert. It is the same absurdity that befalls Hardy's Drummer Hodge, prized away from his Dorset home to be buried at the other end of the earth in a "kopje-crest".

Another war-time phenomenon, now vanished, was the telegram-boy whose arrival at a door everyone feared. This comes alive to us very vividly in the following poem:

THE WHISTLING BOY

The whistling boy on his red cycle spins
Merrily down the slope
Towards the cottage - in his leather pouch
A yellow envelope:
And hearing that shrill whistling and the slurr
Of swift tyres recklessly
Braked at full speed, the woman at the door
Awaits him bodingly:
Then scanning the curt wire that he has brought
Wonders chance should employ
As the unchallengeable messenger
A careless whistling boy.

The specific concrete presentation of detail here, "the red cycle ... leather pouch... yellow envelope ... swift tyres" is both historically accurate and artistically precise and sharp and the poem balances against each other the careless insouciance of the messenger, the unchallengeable messenger of death, with the gravity of the woman who "Awaits him bodingly". And, as so often in Gibson's mind, it is 'chance' that rules affairs. He does not make a great deal of the matter, he is not angered by it, he does not produce a resounding phrase, like Hardy's "crass casualty" but he dwells continually on the recognition that life is all mere chance. He manages to do this again and again with considerable and impressive gravitas whilst never letting his eye stray from the myriad detail of ordinary daily life. It is the same "haphazardry" that uproots young lives and takes them away on their fearful journey in the following poem:

THE HOODED LORRIES

Nightlong the lorries rumble down the road -
The hooded lorries, each with its packed load
Of young lives from their home and kindred torn
And towards the battle through the darkness borne -
Young lives uprooted from their native soil
By war, and wrested from their useful toil
And happy play and all familiar ties
To serve their country under foreign skies
In unknown continents beyond the sea
And take their chance in war's haphazardry -
They, who in their own island-home had thought
To spend their days, by world-disaster caught
And rushed into the conflict to defend
Their birthright even to the luckless end

Nightlong the lorries rumble down the road -
The hooded lorries, each with its packed load ...

Above all there emerges from these poems of the early days of the war a sense of madness about all human affairs. Innocent children are made into fleeing refugees, menaced, on their transatlantic liner, by submarines from the depths below and by aerial bombing from above:

Over a sea that ripples with the sheen
Of watered satin under the serene
Blue heavens the liner keeps upon her way

Westward; and on her decks the children play
At prisoners-base and hop-scotch, happily
Forgetful of what even now may be
Slinking towards them under the sleek sea,
Or what may hurtle out of the bland sky;
With innocent laughter and light-hearted cry
Rejoicing in the light of the young day.

The sense that innocence and goodness are about to be extinguished is well served by the creation of stillness and simplicity towards which menace "slinks" and "hurtles". In 'Passengers' the occupants of the war-time train sit in "vague blue light", that special, dim war-time lighting on public transport, as though they were "wraiths" not human at all. 'Over the Air', one of the few sonnet based poems in the volume - the form is too regular for the dissonant experiences he is writing about - intensifies the absurdity into some terrible wilfulness that is both blind and blundering and set on a course of catastrophe. A world wholly unlike the "clear consent" of the instruments that transmit the immortal harmony of the Fifth Symphony:

OVER THE AIR

An orchestra somewhere in Germany
Plays the Fifth Symphony as though no war
Were devastating Europe, still intent
To honour music though disaster loom:
And as we listen in our cottage room
The charm of instruments in clear consent
Steals through the throbbing of the planes of doom.

Over the air, through which the fighters fly
To clash in battle under the cold stars,
Immortal music surges wave on wave
From land to land at mortal enmity,
As though it sought in healing harmony
To bind men's hearts in concord and to save
A blind world blundering to catastrophe.

Throughout his work Gibson's skill at depicting natural history reveals him as an intimate observer of animals and birds. In 'The Sentry' it is the depiction of the otter that is an observation which suddenly lifts the poem into life as the young sentry on duty in the desert remembers home:

THE SENTRY

Green !

If he could but refresh his tingling eyes
On green fields under rainy English skies...
Could watch the roach and pike in Harker's Pool
Beneath the overhanging willows dart
From stone to stone or through the Summer day
With noses pointing upstream gently sway
With flicking tails and quivering fins, until
Suddenly a big boulder seemed to part
In two, and soundlessly an otter slid
Into the pool without a ripple, when
They'd vanish like live lightning out of ken;
And he could only guess where they were hid...

Gibson can be at his best when he is engaging with the Northumbrian landscape, and his passages dealing with sights and sounds of Hexham, often clearly conjured from boyhood memories, are obviously of special interest. His meditation in 'In Hexham Abbey' on the "calamitous times" through which he is living, and on the more ecstatic times through which the mediaeval builders of the Abbey had lived are, though, disappointing. The concreteness of the setting is achieved well enough but the thought in the poet's mind, the degree of his thinking is vague and limp. To say that the mediaeval builders' imagination was "heaven-entranced", that they possessed "adoring ecstasy" is little more than generalised cliché. It is too vague to carry, to make an effect on, the reader. Also the conclusion of the meditation, that "Man, the destroyer, is Man, the builder, too" is far too self-satisfied, too smug, indeed its wiseacre posture of following a buried Shakespearean reference with a platitude diminishes the whole effect:

IN HEXHAM ABBEY

Like spirits resurrected from the tomb
We step from the dark slype's low-vaulted gloom
Into the transepts' soaring radiancy
Where from the lancets of the clerestory
Noon-sunshine streaming charged the pale sandstone
Of wall and pillar with a golden tone
Rich as the colour of the rock, fresh-hewn
From sheer Northumbrian hillsides to the tune
Of clinking hammer and chisel, in the days
When the aspiring spirit in life's praise
Scared in exultant fabrics of delight -

Earth-quarried stuff exalted to the height
Of man's imagination, heaven-entranced.

And, as with eager footsteps we advanced
Through the South Transept with enraptured eyes,
From off our hearts fell the perplexities
Of these calamitous times; and we forgot
Awhile the warring of nations and the lot
Of the battalioned youngsters doomed to march
Into annihilation - pier and arch
Springing in sunshine seeming still inspired
With the adoring ecstasy that fired
Those early craftsmen: and we recalled how man,
Builder and breaker since the world began
Betrayed by frailties of the mortal flesh,
Is yet a phoenix soul that springs afresh
Resilient to the imperishable gleam
Out of the self-wrought havoc of his dream,
From devastation fashioning anew
His vision; and that to his best self true
Man, the destroyer, is Man, the builder, too.

Technically adroit the couplets keep a tight rein on the matter, preventing any dissolution into vagueness. The thought limps, however, in a commonplace way and really lapses into a cliché of hope with its affirming of "Man, the builder". It is remarkable that again and again, as here, Gibson adopts a cheerful, optimistic Browning-esque affirmation in the face of struggle, as a theme in poetry. In life he tended to be a terrible complainer.

As in previously quoted pieces, the unifying feature of the whole of *The Alert* lies in its contrasting of a state of innocence, whether it be in childhood or an earlier age or simply 'before the war' with a state of experience and woe which is that of having full consciousness in an age that is essentially barbarous. In one of the best pieces, 'What's There to Fear', the pain of experience is such that death is a condition to be welcomed, for in it one would be "lapt":

What's there to fear - when every night more thankfully
I turn to slumber from the agony
Of this bedevilled world to seek in sleep
Oblivion sound and deep;
And rouse each morning more reluctantly
Only to face again
Desperate suspense and dire contingency
In a world shattering to calamity

Before the shock-troop onset of insane
And suicidal tyranny
Battering and trampling into misery
The weak and helpless till the world shall be
One vast morass of blood and tears wherein
Must founder all humanity -
What's there to fear, should I,
Cheated in life of all I sought to win,
One dawn indifferent to the chill daybreak.
Having at last attained security,
Lapt in the ultimate oblivion lie
And never wake?

If only Gibson had attained more of that personal urgency in a line like

Cheated in life of all I sought to win,

he might have become a greater poet.

Having received no publicity before the publication of *The Alert*, Gibson did not expect much encouragement from the critics who, he said, were "almost all exclusively modernistic in their sympathies."³⁷ Most of them he felt were "nowadays only interested in the cacophonous and confused in verse."³⁸ In the event he was to be pleasantly surprised. He had appreciative letters from Lawrence Binyon, Bottomley, George Rostrevor Hamilton, Oliver Elton, Eddie Marsh and Percy Withers who all did much to reassure him. The fine review he was given in the *Times Literary Supplement* he said was "well worth waiting for".³⁹ For the anonymous reviewer Gibson was a distinguished poet:

A second war has increased the intensity of this distinguished poet's dramatic vision.....we see in these deeply etched, unadorned but powerfully imagined episodes the individual man with a soul of his own, faithful, enduring, waiting wistfully for the renewal of life and the works of peace.⁴⁰

Above all, the book was selling very well, and by March 1942 the first thousand had sold out and it was going into a second impression. The poems were popular and were re-printed in newspapers, read on the B.B.C. and used in films. Some of them appeared in *The Sunday Times* and some in local papers such as *The Cumberland and Westmorland Herald* to which Gibson referred in a letter: "I was amused to see a North Country Raider

had lifted my cattle."⁴¹ For the B.B.C., L.A.G.Strong read selections for his 'Empire Broadcasts' and he also wrote a piece on Gibson for a periodical called *The Books of Today* in which he said:

It is more than time the general public woke up to realize what a rare poet we have in Wilfrid Gibson his pictures stay in the mind with the tenacity of those little northern trees which no wind can tear out: they have the quiet steady colours of those northern walls of loose stone that mark field from moor.⁴²

In 1944 the Ministry of Information made use of some pieces from *The Alert* in its publications and used some in a ministry propaganda film designed to boost morale in the country.⁴³ All in all Gibson was much relieved and proud to say that "the success of *The Alert* has been very reassuring."⁴⁴ He rejoiced that "my brother and sister poets have certainly been enthusiastic about it."⁴⁵ Good reviews were written by de la Mare and by de Selincourt in *The Manchester Guardian*: Gibson also received " a lovely letter from Edith Sitwell"⁴⁶ and an old American admirer Dr Dilla, by then Professor of English at Kansas Univeristy, sent a cheque for seventeen copies and announced she had written to two hundred and twenty friends and former pupils advising them to buy *The Alert* for Christmas presents. The only problem which beset the book was getting supplies into the bookshops. Gibson reported that his sister had ordered

two copies from the chief bookshop in Newcastle and after waiting three weeks was told that the book was out of print at the publishers which of course was sheerest nonsense.⁴⁷

In the same letter he said that he had written to the publishers and had learned that "the shop people just hadn't troubled to order it."

Although Gibson had been encouraged and reassured by the reception of *The Alert* he continued to find the process of writing difficult and to be aware of his own shortcomings. At Christmas 1942 he wrote to de la Mare saying that he felt "bottled up" and "empty of all ideas" but yet he said in the same letter "I keep on writing."⁴⁸ Gibson thought that

he saw clearly his own severe limitations as a writer and these, he believed, lay not with his feelings nor with his skill at the craft of turning a verse but that his inadequacy was the deeper one of language. He felt he had, he said to de la Mare

a fumbling talent...[that]... must do the best it can while the really potent and plangent words hover tantalizingly just out of reach. My own trouble is the limitations of my personal vocabulary; and I am always struggling to enlarge it. ⁴⁹

It is difficult to say how much store one should set by such a remark but it is to say the least a curious view to come from a writer who had once believed that his art was properly expressed by the stripped, bare language of *Daily Bread*. While the poet must have his word-hoard his poetry does not depend on vocabulary, particularly not in the sense that there are necessary words lying, like the best blackberries, just out of reach. It may have been that the remark was simply prompted because he felt unequal to de la Mare's own greater range and skill rather than as a considered expression of his own 'poetic' but nonetheless it does reveal that fundamental conflict in Gibson between the poet who at once espoused Wordsworthian plainness and yet constantly reached for finery. He was still constantly seeking a diction that he thought of as pure but which was rooted in the eighties and the nineties of the previous century. Despite his earlier avowals to be writing for the working man and his espousal of the plainest English he went to great pains over detail when preparing a collection for publication:

the same epithet in two adjacent poems, though it seems the only possible one when each poem is considered separately will be inclined to clash when the pieces are brought into juxtaposition, and some substitution must be found. ⁵⁰

And so he laboured long and hard over revisions to the point where he found the poems ceasing to have meaning for him and conferring no pleasure. He did not like the monotony induced by repetition of favoured words though he loved words such as "beryl" and "lucent" towards which

his imagination always groped even when his subjects or themes were of the plainest kind. Nor did he like his tendency towards monotonous rhymes and he was ready to castigate Swinburne for what he noticed as very similar defects.

It is a sad spectacle to contemplate a poet who feels that the language at his command is inadequate to his needs; it is a plight next to being tongueless. His struggle towards expression had, we must allow, been a long one. He had had to fight to overcome his first 'language', that of the late Victorian imitation romantic, he had established a plain tongue when that was what was felt to be required and he lived on into an age when the language of poetry had changed in ways he could not follow. He could and did, however, remain true to his own self after about 1907, when "he came down off his stilts", right up until the close of his writing career. He never again wore the borrowed robes of his earliest work. His remaining true to the personal, the plain, the commonplace in his own experience, is amply demonstrated by the poems in *The Alert*

During this period of the war Gibson's stock continued high with the scholars. In 1941 and in 1944 two very respectable and authoritative academic works were published in which he was given serious and intelligent critical appraisal. The first of these pieces, in 1941, was contained in *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature* ⁵¹ by the distinguished Cambridge Professor George Sampson. He devoted a half-page to Gibson whereas to Edward Thomas he gave only a brief mention within eight lines. Gibson, he wrote, had all of Masefield's "uncompromising quality". He had followed, Sampson noted, "the example rather than the pattern" of Wordsworth by which he presumably meant that Gibson took common life as his subject but in an urban setting rather more commonly than in a rural one. The similarity to Crabbe which many earlier commentators had adduced, was dismissed by Sampson who argued,

correctly, that Crabbe was "born to older ideals of diction" than Wordsworth and was "a poet of long, diffused narration." Sampson went on to lavish praise on Gibson, describing him as "blunt, concise and almost brutally abrupt in utterance." "His best passages", said Sampson, "are in the lyrical, not in the narrative manner" and he believed that "from Gibson's verse a collection of intensely original lyrics could be made." In Sampson's view Gibson was "not in any sense a dramatist" although he found *Krindlesyke* and *Kestrel Edge* to be "ambitious.". Above all he was attracted by Gibson's powerful and individual manner which "disdains soft utterance aimed at popular applause." While complimenting Gibson on his being "incapable of false versifying" he noted to his disadvantage that his chief defect was his "restriction of range." With this assessment of his work Gibson was pleased.

The second piece, produced rather later in 1944, was the work of Professors Grierson and Smith and was entitled *A Critical History of English Poetry*.⁵² They praised Gibson's "noble plainness" which they said had the strength and density which gave his poetry a quality "like granite." They saw that whilst Gibson had no mystical qualities at all he was capable of conferring a sense of mystery on the commonplace. 'Flannan Isle' was singled out for its "authentic thrill of the unknown." All in all they regarded Gibson's work as being "the most substantial of the Edwardians." Such praise was dear to him at a very dark hour. If he no longer could command wide popular appeal at least he continued to have the stature of an established poet among literary critics.

1942 had started out very well as far as Gibson's work was concerned. In January he enjoyed "a long and fruitful bout of rhyming which has lasted since Christmas."⁵³ This went on well into February and he regarded it as the best spell of rhyming he had had for ages. Out of this he picked a selection of material to make up a volume and in April began

to consider its publication under the title *Challenge*. All these poems, it should be said, were based on imaginative experience and not actual experience; though, as Gibson said, one was as authentic as the other - "after all Shakespeare so far as we know did not commit a murder and yet he wrote *Macbeth*!"⁵⁴ In defending this power of the imagined he recalled in the same letter, of April 20th 1942, how Siegfried Sassoon had paid tribute to the important influence exercised by Gibson's poems of the Great War which Sassoon had read in *Battle*. Sassoon, it will be recalled (p.145) had said that Gibson's poems "were the first poems to deal with the actualities of the 1914 conflict." The power of Gibson's imagination demonstrated in these poems was so convincing that many commentators and anthologists have asserted, and continue to assert, that he served on the western front. As has been made clear, he did not do so. In the second world war, too, he was remote from any action, although he was in the local Fire Guard as a part-time volunteer, and his poems 'came to him', as he so often said, as imaginings. There were periods, though, when there was drought in his imaginative faculty and then

[I] not only feel as if I couldn't frame a sentence but as if I had never done so in my life. And as for poetry - what have such as I to do with rhyming!⁵⁵

At such moments he was fed-up with everything but especially with the fact that he was "stuck in this charming but wholly unsatisfying country[sidel for the duration". Both he and his wife "pine for a bolder and more austere beauty ...[for]... mountains and the sea."⁵⁷ "Our hearts ache for the North." ⁵⁸.

Challenge was accepted by the Oxford University Press in June and in July he received the agreement. On the 3rd of December 1942 it was published and was very successful. It brought him "wonderful letters from fellow poets" ⁵⁹ good reviews and very healthy sales. By May of the

following year, within six months of publication, it had almost exhausted its second edition. Particularly gratifying to Gibson was the fact that he "had several appreciative letters from airmen in Tunisia about my war poems." ⁶⁰. The best of his reviews was in the *Times Literary Supplement* which spoke of the evidence of his "deep-rooted humanity" which had come into its own after the years of "clever disillusion" in which his verse had fallen out of favour. The reviewer seemed to share Auden's sense of the decade as "low [and] dishonest." Now everyone, he said was ready to listen to the laureate of 'sacrifice', 'suffering' and quiet heroism', to the story of "man's recurrent struggle with primeval night."⁶¹. Gibson's characteristic compassion and irony shewed, he said, that no modern poet reminded readers more constantly than Gibson that "human life in its simplest, humblest level, in its affections, pains and losses, is never trivial."⁶² The widespread enthusiasm for the new volume is quite understandable in the context of the time. Gibson was dealing with the material that dominated the day and he gave voice to the emotions stirred up in every heart. This is not to say that Gibson's work was at its best nor that he was as good as he had been in dealing with the same subject during the Great War. The *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer did, in addition to his praises, point out that Gibson's hand was rather underplayed. Too many of the pieces, he remarked "are composed too much of sentiment and bare statement." At the much greater distance from which a present-day reader sees the poems such grounds for criticism are perhaps even more apparent.

Challenge is the briefest of the volumes Gibson published during the Second World War. His sole stimulus at this time was a correspondence with and occasional visit to Lawrence Binyon. It was to Binyon, whose lines on the fallen of the Great War are perhaps better known than anybody's, that Gibson dedicated the volume. The quality of the pieces,

it must be said, is disappointing. Frequently a poem will start well but finish badly. There is a lack of impetus, a lack of vitality that would keep the impetus of the opening alive. It is as though the desire to turn experience into writing is still present but there is an indifference in the writer's capacity to sustain any writing. This is clear from the following poem:

WINGS

Skein after skein of swan and wedge on wedge
Of mallard, teal and widgeon streak the sky,
Flying the Arctic Winter; and from a ledge
Of crag the sentry on the North Sea's edge
Sights them as in suspense he anxiously
Keeps watch for the invading enemy -
Winged, too; and now rejoices he can hear
No thrumming of death's engines drawing near
To rend the starry peace with flame and strife;
But, through the frosty tension throbbing clear,
Only the beating of the wings of life.

The power of the invention is felt in the contrasting of the migrant birds with the anxiously-awaited enemy aeroplanes but the expression of the sentry's feelings is forced and lifeless. The next piece, 'The Barley Mow', is similarly a limited success. The scene in the pub is well realised but one cannot help feeling that the introduction of the absent fighting men is contrived.

THE BARLEY MOW

Snug on the settles of the Barley Mow
The village elders in the warmth and light
Over their glasses gossip, while the night
Against the blacked-out casement slashes snow
In gust on gust of fury - relishing
In ancient bones the pleasant tingling glow,
They gossip; and yet every now and then
They pause, embarrassed, as though pondering,
While icy silence on the taproom falls,
Some curious lack; and only vaguely know
Their old hearts tarry in the intervals,
For the light laughter and the bantering
Of the absent voices of the younger men.

On the other hand 'At Edge of the Dark' has a tightness and an economy to it:

AT EDGE OF THE DARK

At edge of the dark he would pass by the gate
On his way up the loaning, and never came late;
And he ay waved to me as I stood in the door
At edge of the dark ... But he passes no more;
And though for his footfall I ever must hark
My heart hungers sorest at edge of the dark;
And if ever at all he should come back to me,
With steps heard alone in my heart, it will be
At edge of the dark.

The falling emphasis placed on the phrase "edge of the dark" together with its ambiguity and suggestiveness make this one of the more striking poems in the volume. Rather more in the much earlier manner of *Daily Bread* which had brought him so much acclaim, 'In the Factory' contrasts the drudgery of work with the joy of play in a manner that Gibson frequently used:

In the aching cold glare of acetylene
Daylong she minds her masterful machine;
And hears through all the clatter, clank and whirr
Voices of other day recalling her -
Voices of children on the village-green
Playing at rounders, and the smack of ball
On bat; and then one voice above them all
Crying "Run, Peggy, run!" as, with flushed face,
She races round the green to reach the base -
A voice that cries again "Well done! Well done!"
As Luke stands laughing, gold-haired in the sun -
"Run, Peggy, run!"
"Well done! Well done!" He calls once more to her
While, steadfast 'mid the clatter, clank and whirr,
Daylong she minds her masterful machine
In the aching cold glare of acetylene.

Other pieces like 'The Cigarette' and 'The Broken Tread' with their shuffling prolixity and flatness illustrate the very worst aspect of Gibson's determination to attempt to wring verse out of the commonplace which appears to be imbued with significance. The enterprise does not work at all:

THE BROKEN TREAD

He'd always sworn 'twould be the death of him -
The broken tread that tripped him on the stairs;
And then, sore-bothered by the day's affairs,
Always forgot to get a piece of wood
To make it good -

Always forgot ... And other troubles came
To fill his mind and take him oversea:
And now it matters naught to him, where he,
From his old home-stair far enough, lies dead -
That broken tread -

Naught; though already with a slip of wood
Another tenant kneels to make it good.

THE CIGARETTE

The morning that he died
He begged of them to let
Him smoke a cigarette -
Just one, before they tied
The blinding bandage tight
And shut out his life's light:
And, as they roughly set
It 'twixt his lips and struck
A match to kindle it,
He wished them better luck
Than his; and, as it lit,
With relishing slow gust
Drew in the smoke and then
Let it drift out again;
And while, a silent spell
He watched it quietly rise
Before his musing eyes,
It seemed that his life, too,
Was wafted to the blue
Of the untroubled skies,
And he, already dead
Before the cigarette,
Smoked out, a dead butt, fell
In the deep Summer dust -
The dust, where presently
His body, too, must lie:
And now, as they tugged tight
The bandage round his head
And shut him in the night
That, weary of the fight,
His soul had long desired,
Before a shot was fired,
Emptied of all regret,
His heart already knew
The worst that death could do.

All the characters depicted in these poems are from common life. They are all men who are sad, dispirited, jaded and suffering under the miseries of war but none of them has a distinctive individual voice as did his first world-war soldiers. Gibson no longer had the touch or feel for current vernacular speech and had to rely solely on reporting indirectly

the feelings and experiences of his 'personae'. This makes for a very much weakened, inferior verse. When he attempts to be ironic the effect is now banal because he is so reductive as in, for example 'Crashed on the Rocks':

Crashed on the rocks and stark against the sky
A wrecked ship, shattered like an empty shell -
But under what far sea the drowned crew lie
No man can tell.

Though splintered strakes are littered on the strand,
Still faintly glimmers on the battered stern
Its name, traced fairly by a loving hand -
"The Happy Return".

And another example: 'The Bull':

Into the paddock from his parachute
The alien airman dropt and, still half-dazed,
He failed to notice the old bull that grazed
A dozen yards away, until the brute,
Startled to anger by such insolence,
With frothing muzzle lifted suddenly
Let out a bellow and, crashing through the fence,
Charged head-down at his country's enemy.

Gibson's invention now produces only stock phrases from a mind that turns only on cliches. Boys are always described as "larky", nights as "long" and encompassing "vigils" that are "lone". Tides, invariably, "surge". Eyes are "rapt", hands are "sunburnt". Dead poetic diction and lamentable attempts at kennings produce writing in which a tank is "a battle-chariot" and aircraft firing at ground targets become "Death's pinions" which "swoop and zoom". The poet's afflatus is slight but there are occasions when suggestions of a more commanding power begin to shape themselves. In 'The Tank' which has for its core a horrid image of its occupants frozen to death inside it when the machine becomes disabled in a tank-trap, the image is convincing yet the execution, in lifeless and archaic diction, and the pitiful rhyming are inadequate. The tank characterized as "a battle chariot" and the snow as "white soft billows"

are quite inadequate and bespeak the language of newspaper clippings in which it is possible these pieces had their origins.

Many of the pieces in *Challenge* indeed give the sense that what Gibson is doing in verse is trying to keep himself alive and sentient in a difficult, barbarous time. It is as though things in the world are not quite real to him until he has pinned them down in a verse. Hence every little event is elaborated into a significance which it cannot sustain. The poem 'And Yet Again' is clearly a confessional piece, a 'prayer' to be open and sentient:

O heart, although again and yet again
The tidings of the agony
By others in these desperate days endured
Should lacerate you, may you never be
By evil custom calloused and inured
To the recurrence of brutality:
Better to feel each separate stab of pain
And in sharp anguish die
A thousand deaths, than slowly petrify
To selfish cold insensibility!

The production of the poems in this volume is a registering of "each separate stab of pain." It is a personal need, like keeping a diary of feelings, which has come to supervene over a proper sense of artistic creativity. By this time, now that he was so much older, Gibson was that much more cut off from the experience of the modern soldier in what was a very different kind of war from that of his friends in 1914. The vividness of the voices of his Great War soldiers never find expression in this later period.

As a result of all the attention that his recent work had received, Gibson was able to write in an unusually cheerful tone, saying that he felt "quite bucked up " and was busy writing "new verse night and day."⁶³ The manuscripts of his last two volumes were bought by Mrs Ratcliffe for the Leeds University archive and he received £10 each for them. Also there was encouraging news of his work of the twenties coming to life

again. His play 'Lover's Leap' which had appeared in *Kestrel Edge* in 1924 was to be acted in July 1942 at Newcastle Drama Festival and in a series of entertainments for the armed forces. It had been accepted originally by Basil Dean for his London Playbox theatre but never produced. Now, nearly twenty years later, it was to make its first appearance. Apparently the production was, according to Gibson, a great success⁶⁴ and he was pleased to receive royalty fees for the performance.

Throughout 1942 Gibson had lamented the absence of company and meetings with his own kind. Only once, in August, had he gone over to Streatley to visit Lawrence Binyon and he said he was "delighted to be once more with people who value the things that have meant everything to me".⁶⁵ Apart from that, and five minutes with de la Mare, half-an-hour with Charles Williams, the reader of poetry for Oxford University Press, he had "no talk with any of [his] writing friends."⁶⁶ The success of *The Alert* and *Challenge*, however, seemed to have the effect of bringing him back into literary circles and early in 1943 he was invited to read his work, together with other poets reading theirs, in aid of the French in Britain at the Aeolian Hall. He was pleased to take part but was extremely nervous, particularly about the rehearsal:

I dread the rehearsal even more than the actual performance, because it will mean reading my low-brow stuff before that select circle of high-brow writers.⁶⁷

Throughout his life Gibson had taken a pride in his purpose of writing to be understood by ordinary folk. Indeed he disdained those who did not make poetry comprehensible. His remark then, while exhibiting a natural nervousness is also slightly proud and defiant in its lowness of brow. When it came to the performance, however, he apparently read rather better than some of the others although, as we know, he was not renowned for being a good verse speaker. He was quick to censure those who did not make much of an effort; although the Aeolian Hall was full, he said,

"some poets read only to themselves but Masfield, the Sitwells, Bottomley, Vita Sackville-West, and , I gather, Gibson got their stuff across."⁶⁸ In the interval he was introduced to the Queen and they "talked about Northumberland which she knows well."⁶⁹ Then, to his apparent surprise, after the event was over he not only met T.S.Eliot and Masfield but "I even got past [their] reserve and had most interesting conversations with them."⁷⁰ Gibson was never very keen on Eliot's work and thought it so obscure that it was unintelligible. He felt too, that modernism generally was "a backwater, and that the main current of English poetry is lucidity."⁷¹ He was thus extremely surprised to discover in his conversations with Eliot that "[he] is as much baffled by the work of the younger generation as I am."⁷² Not that Gibson condemned the new young writers like Michael Roberts and Charles Madge out of hand. He read their work and said

I want to understand and appreciate what they are after ...[but]....younger writers' [work] makes me feel old and out of date.⁷³

Throughout this year he was working on the poems which were to make up the volume *The Searchlights* and he had some despairing moments with them, saying on one occasion: "At the moment I find the poems quite unreadable."⁷⁴ This seems to have been his usual experience with work nearing completion and so he was well-adjusted to its depressing effects:

This usually happens when work is ready for the press.... it comes to seem entirely meaningless! But I trust readers coming to it fresh may find something in it.⁷⁵

He passed the final proofs of the new book on August 8th 1943, sold the manuscript to the Leeds University Library for £10 and was able to tell Mrs Ratcliffe that the book was out in the autumn. According to his own account it brought him "an enthusiastic response" ⁷⁶ from many writers including admirers like Edith Sitwell, Richard Church and Eddie Marsh who found that "the level is so high that I can't pick out any of the pieces

to like better than the rest!"⁷⁷ Quoting this to Mrs Ratcliffe Gibson was obviously proud but asked her to forgive his "selfish swagger."⁷⁸ The "swagger" was short-lived however, for a month or two later he seemed to think that sales had been "an absolute flop."⁷⁹ In the long-run, however, his anxieties were allayed by the knowledge that by mid-March 1944 he had sold 1,000 copies.

Like those of *The Alert* and *Challenge* the poems of *The Searchlights* are sudden, momentary reflections on incidents that are all about or related to the war. The major differences between it and the earlier volumes is that the poems in *The Searchlights* are lengthier and more sustained, they try to be narrative rather than lyrics and some readers have felt that they achieve a fuller effect than is managed in the shorter pieces. What he avoids here, as he does so often, is an over-intense emotion and he relies on accuracy of observation in an almost documentary manner. 'The Omen', for example, describes the thoughts and feelings of a rear-gunner in an aeroplane that is engaged on an operation over Italy. The mind and heart of the man are captured, the contrast between his normal life of home, hearth, wife and children and his service life of "leaving the tarmac with impatient roar." High up in the sky his mind drifts from the mission he is engaged upon and there flashes upon his inward eye a vision of the peace and comfort of home. This is the omen of the title, which he sees as being a vouchsafe of his return. The structure of the poem, built on the contrast between earthly comfort and aerial danger, between remembered happiness and present fear, is absolutely characteristic of Gibson's earliest poetic method. The 'story' of the poem is plain and relatively commonplace and so he continues to identify with common experience as he had done since 1908. What he does not attempt, either in this poem or in any of the others in *The Searchlights* is direct speech by his personae, as he had done in many of

his earlier works and, particularly, in his poems of the Great War, in *Battle*. In some respects this is a loss because the immediacy of the speaking voice of the common soldier gives *Battle* its authenticity. No doubt Gibson no longer felt as he had at the time of the Great War that he could confidently render rural and working-class speech. In *The Searchlights* there is, though, an advantage to the poet speaking in his own true voice of feeling in that he does not hand his poem over to a 'common man' but can maintain the verbal artifice expected of a poet.

The poems of *The Searchlights* deal with the experience of the war in all its theatres; in the air, at sea, among soldiers watching on the coasts. They cover both the Home Front and the pursuit of the enemy in the desert, in the North Sea, in the air, in Greece and on the Eastern Front. The title poem, 'The Searchlights' is an imagined reverie of a woman munitions worker, trying to sleep fitfully while searchlights pierce the night sky. Exhausted by her work she looks out on the night sky where the searchlights weave "Fantastic patterns in the sky" and thinks about her man aboard a fuel tanker, far away on a dangerous sea "within whose depth sharklike the U-boats glide." Like all the poems in the volume this one is complex in its patterning of rhythms and rhymes but

simple in content and meaning:

THE SEARCHLIGHTS

After her long shift in the factory
Exhausted by the gruelling heat and din,
Ready for bed, she switches off the light
And draws the blackout curtains, to let in
The Summer airs: then stands spellbound, to see
The searchlights sweep the star-encrusted night
With wheeling rays that, over the dark town
Describing each its zenith-ranging arc,
Cross and recross, weaving incessantly
Fantastic patterns in the sky, that seem
The occult silver symbols of some strange
Unhuman and celestial mystery.

And, by her attic window that looks far
Over the silent spaces of the park,
With elbows on the sill she crouches down

To watch the slowly-swivelled beams that range
The heavens, unmindful of their sinister
Significance, held in a quiet dream
By the cold fascination of the bright
Blades that outflash the brightest burning star,
Moving in ceremonial ritual
Of beauty that brings healing to her mind,
Which but a moment since had seemed to her
In its fatigue to reel in dizzy blind
And utter helplessness. Now she forgets
For a brief blest oblivious interval
The factory's ceaseless racket and the frets
And worries of the daytime, when she stands,
Her body all one ache, and her deft hands,
Minding her tyrannous machine, must move
Machinelike in an everlasting round
Of automatic action, that still lets
Her fancy in distracted frenzy rove
The hazard-haunted spaces of the sea,
Where, in a tanker, bearing in its hold
A freight of high-flash petrol, over a tide
Within whose depth sharklike the U-boats glide,
And under the constant menace of a sky
Through which the dread dive-bombers hawklike fly,
Steve, even now, maybe, sails homewardbound:
Until her heart with him in one fierce flare
Consumes to ash, one instant, and the next,
Is plunged into the green devouring cold
Depth of the ocean.

But, as the freshening air
Of midnight breathes on her flushed aching brow
With soothing solace, into her soul, perplexed
Beyond endurance by the world's distress
And harrassed by the hazards that beset
Their innocent love on every hand, there steals
A sense of beauty in the terror, as now
She watches a broad ray that, even yet
Brighter, serenely sweeps the starry sky,
Dazzling her drowsy sight, and gradually
She droops in slumber's kind forgetfulness.

The personality of the poet is here subsumed entirely into that of the woman whose thoughts, feelings and reflections he depicts. So successful is he in creating the sense of tiredness, anxiety and longings of the woman, so successful in living the experience she has that the reader does not at first recognize how thoroughly characteristic of its author the poem is. Phrases such as "star-encrystalled light", "wheeling rays", "zenith-ranging arc" and "occult silver symbols" are hardly the vocabulary of an exhausted factory worker of the period. The sense too of

mystery, "celestial mystery", and puzzlement at the world and its strangeness is characteristically that of the poet of 'Flannan Isle' which places man in the centre of a strange unresolved mystery. 'The Searchlights' using the "bright blades" of the searchlight beams is an attempt to lighten that mystery and to bring healing to the mind that is exhausted by the "ceaseless racket" that the factory worker endures in a world that is maniacal. Gibson is on old and familiar ground with this subject for once again he is dealing with the poor, urban, oppressed worker whose heart is heavy and who has little prospect of happiness and fulfilment. Though he is writing a war poem in 'The Searchlights' he is also, as he was in *Daily Bread* exposing the ugly and destructive nature of twentieth century technology which wearies and destroys man and woman and grinds down all their aspirations. It was for this recognition and the telling expression of it that Gibson had won such acclaim from religious leaders before 1914. In 'The Searchlights' the "innocent love" of the woman and her distant sea-going lover is threatened by the world's hazards to the point of destruction. The air and the sea are filled with menace towards the homeward-bound sailor with his cargo of "high-flash petrol" in a fully realized way. The style has a plainness together with a specific and scientific exactness in naming things precisely, like "high-flash petrol" and "zenith-ranging arc" which produces a convincingly realistic sense. It also has a broad imaginative sweep as it ranges over land, sea and sky, which lifts the reader's mind from the realities to the sense of over-arching strangeness and mystery. To some extent there is a contradiction in this duality, as though an Edward Hopper painting were framed by a rainbow.

Other poems in this collection such as 'The Last Hoop' in which a wounded soldier recalls his days as a circus artist, 'The Abbey Clock' recalling Hexham and 'The Last Shift' dealing with the depressing

monotony of factory life, all show Gibson as continuing faithful to themes that had occupied him throughout his life. He was continuing to be faithful to what he knew of the "foul rag and bone shop of the heart" although, as 'The Recluse' shews, he felt that one side of his nature was withering away into cynical isolation and "he felt no desire to join the fight." But when the character in the poem sees rescue workers labouring to free people trapped in the ruins of bombed houses his spirit rises to the occasion and he too, "seized a spade". This piece is the only one in this volume that is 'in propria persona', albeit third person rather than being 'in persona'. The influence, indeed borrowing, from Hardy is plain to see in the similitude of the trees, beginning in the thirteenth line, which is clearly derived from the poem 'In A Wood' which appeared in the *Wessex Poems* in 1898:

THE RECLUSE

Disgust at the folly of his fellowmen,
Their selfishness and levity, had fired
At first his youthful heart to anger. Then,
As the years passed and he grew bitter and old,
Cheated of all it fervently desired,
His heart within his breast turned hard and cold
And, calloused in austere indifference,
From commerce with his fellows he retired
Within himself: and in his house that stood
Hid in the fastness of an ancient wood
He dwelt alone: and only issued thence
Now and again to buy necessities -
Content with the companionship of trees
That, though in the struggle for existence each
Contended with his neighbours, beech with beech,
Thrusting out roots and branches for more space
To spread themselves, unlike the human race,
In an unconscious undeliberate
Selfishness lived, rejecting no ideal
Of love and knowing neither scorn nor hate.

Thus, when on some unwelcome errand he
Must venture into town, it seemed to him
The folk who thronged the noisy thoroughfares
With silly smirking faces, or, dour and grim,
Led by illusion or obsessed with cares,
Lived out their whole existence in an unreal
And topsy-turvy world of fantasy:
And, with relief, to their futility
He left them, and returned to live at ease

With the unharrying, unimpassioned trees.

So, even when he chanced to hear that war
Had broken out, it only seemed one more
Instance of man's outrageous lunacy;
And he resolved to take no part, but leave
Them in their foolish frenzy to the blind
And witless work of murdering their own kind;
And though his sleep was broken in the night
By aircraft ranging with peace-shattering flight,
Above his woodland home, while he must grieve
To think man's war should violate the fair
Virginal innocence of the free air,
He still felt no desire to join the fight.

Yet, when one dusk he saw the heavens flare
With a pulsating flush of angry light,
And from the distant town heard thud on thud
Of bombs exploding, suddenly his cold blood
Was fired with a strange restlessness. So, ere day,
Still half-reluctantly, he took his way
Towards the city. But, even when he came
Into those streets destroyed by blast and flame,
He still felt something of his old scorn, to see
How man to man brought ruin and misery.
And then his eyes were drawn towards a crowd
About a shattered house, where in a cloud
Of smoke and dust men toiled with fire-scorched hair
And blackened faces - toiled, as in despair
Of rescuing the trapt family who lay
Helpless beneath the rafters and the rubble
Of their crashed home. And, looking on those drawn
And haggard faces in the light of dawn,
His heart was suddenly shaken by a trouble
Of fiery compassion as he gazed;
And, on an instant impulse, undismayed
By the risk of walls collapsing, from a dazed
Exhausted labourer he seized a spade.

Here the theme of "man's outrageous lunacy" which violates and pollutes the beauty of the natural world is treated in a lengthy discursive manner, like a discourse. There is no impressionistic or imagistic, no 'modernist' tendency apparent at all. Gibson with his expository manner, his verses beginning "Thus", "So", "Yet" sounds more like a minor eighteenth century poet. There is a classic sense for order and precision in expression. A reader accustomed to modernist and post-modernist poetry is likely to find this sort of thing dull and unappealing as poetry. But the appreciation of Gibson's virtues is again beginning to be

evident with the advent of disillusion with modernism. The virtues are plainly there in the control of narrative, the picturing of the scenes, the management of the verse and the purity of diction. They are pre-modern virtues, suggesting eighteenth century writers such as Cowper or Goldsmith.

The only traceable review of *The Searchlights* appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement*. "A sympathetic muse such as Mr Gibson's is seldom highly concentrated" said the writer, adding that Gibson needed "space to build up a picture and diffuse feeling through it."⁸⁰ Therefore, the reviewer concluded, it is the longer pieces which are the most successful. By and large this is true, and certainly a comparison of the relative merits of the two other volumes of the war with this one shews this, with its emphasis on the longer poem, to be the best. The poetic method employed, in the opinion of the anonymous reveiwer of the *Times Literary Supplement* was that of Wordsworth as evidenced in 'The Reverie of Poor Susan' though without its lyrical intensity. The comparison is a fitting one for as well as drawing attention to the method of contrast between lost rural happiness and present urban misery it points to the eighteenth century technical qualities which I have suggested are present in Gibson too. The tendency for Gibson's style to lapse into a shuffling prosiness does not go unnoticed by the reviewer and may readily be seen in an example like this:

ON THE ACROPOLIS

He had always hoped to see Greece and to stand
Among the ruins of the Acropolis
And look afar to fabled Salamis,
And watch the Aegean washing on the strand
Of the Homeric legendary coast:
And here he was at last! Yet, little he
Had guessed that with a rifle he should be
Crouched among blocks of marble, while a host
Of bombers swarming overhead lunged down
Death and destruction on his land of dream;
And like a raging devastation stream
In spate the Huns swept on from town to town

He had always hoped to see Greece and explore
The battlefields of freedom, and to look
On the actual scenes that, brooding over his book,
He had envisaged many times before
Through his imagination in the light
Of poetry. And now life's irony
Had realised his vision mockingly
And rushed him to his land of dream, to fight,
While the hordes of barbarism menaced all
Its chiselled beauty, blasting with bomb and shell
The marble columns about him; and freedom fell
Stricken and bleeding: and he, too, must fall
In hopeless battle

Louder yet the roar
Closed down on him; and something pierced his brow
With fire

He had always hoped to see

And now

He knew that he should leave Greece never more.

Trying to depict the horrors of war from the worm's eye view carried, of course, a penalty with it and too often the attempt to compass the imagined feelings of ordinary man and women caught in the maelstrom of war results in condescension to them and a grotesque diminution of the poet's art. The melodramatic assertion of the conclusion to the above piece is destructive of the whole thing. In verse of this kind the distinction between managing to carry it off and falling flat on your face is not very sharp.

Throughout 1943 Gibson had also been carrying on with attempts to get *Coldknuckles* into a final shape. By August he had completed a fourth draft and the poem was then 2400 lines long. He was quite unclear as to whether it was any good or not and could not pass judgement on it. By September 11th he had done another four drafts and he wrote excitedly: "I have just finished the eighth draft of *Coldknuckles* and Gerald read it last night and pronounced it 'very good'."³ He found fresh invention very difficult at this stage but was pleased to be working on a long work especially one that took him away from the miseries of the war and the constantly dispiriting public news of which he was so acutely conscious.

Mrs Gibson had since the autumn of 1942 been "full-up with war work"⁸² and ran a very successful village savings group. She cycled on two days a week to Didcot, six miles each way, to assist at the Citizens' Advice Bureau and she also was local assistant to the area emergency food-controller for whom apparently she had to do all the organising as he was a very old man. Looking after a young child and he who described himself as "an aged husband" must have more than "kept her busy"⁸³ as Gibson put it. He himself kept continually at work on his verse and on the necessary 'hackwork' which was as burdensome to him as ever. "I have been reading novels steadily for the last three days" he wrote in August 1942 and without suggesting he received any profit or pleasure at all he says he feels "as if I were drugged."⁸⁴ If fiction had little to offer him as a study of human kind he evidently had no shortage of instruction from East Hendred society which he said "taught us a great deal about human nature" but unfortunately this proved to be almost entirely "dreadfully disillusioning."⁸⁵ Far more re-assuring at this time was the renewed success attending work which he had completed long before. The Adelphi Players of Ilkley put on the first production of *Kestrel Edge* that summer taking it on tour throughout Scotland and the Hebrides and their programme notes are in no doubt about Gibson's importance for "he needs no introduction has long held an honoured position among contemporary British poets." Nor yet in doubt about his play which was said to be "a perfect example of tragedy in the classic tradition ... it embodies all the inevitability, the fatality, the pity and terror of the tragic situation."⁸⁶ The copy of the programme proclaiming all this was carefully preserved by Mrs Ratcliffe and included among Gibson's voluminous correspondence. The many productions of the play brought him in a nice little royalty. Also the little play *Ernshaw* was to be put "on the road"⁸⁷ with another company, The Compass Players, with Maurice

Browne as producer. A new volume of verse, *The Outpost* was under consideration by Oxford University Press and was only held up by their desperate lack of paper. By June 1944 it was at last in the press and was published on December 14th. Also, in June, T.S.Eliot had written to him "to say that his firm, Faber, would like to publish a volume of selections from my work in their Sesame Series."²⁸ This subsequently came out as *Solway Ford and Other Poems* (1945) As if all that were not enough his *Collected Poems* sold "better than it has done for ages" and he was having "the best spell of writing ... for years". He had drafted four plays and a fifth was already begun; no wonder he could say, "I feel quite bucked."²⁹

The Outpost came out a little late to do very much in the way of Christmas sales he felt and he was disappointed that it was "printed on wretched paper "³⁰ although he realised that he was lucky to have it printed at all at a time of increased shortages and economies. This volume was the last of his war output and was dedicated to his Irish contemporary Conal O'Riordan. The best of Gibson's war verse had already been produced in the first three volumes and this one is not up to their standard. "The faults we have remarked in earlier collections of Mr Gibson's war-time verses are more continuously evident in this concluding volume of the series" wrote the *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer.³¹ The chief fault he diagnosed as "mere statement of fact", so much so that the author's imaginative implication is too slight to lift the poems "out of the rut of the obvious". Two poems, 'The Calvary' and 'The Stack of Straw' were cited to exemplify both "the obvious" and a "mechanical play on coincidence":

THE CALVARY

He lifts his eyes, to see
Upon the craggy height
The tortured figure, crudely carved in wood,
That in the sunset-light
Seems now to stream with freshly-flowing blood:

When, even as he gazes, a stray shell
Shatters the calvary.

THE STACK OF STRAW

On his last leave, though he was tired,
He had turned to with the rest and helped to build
The stack of straw; and, in his battle-dress,
Forked the dry rustling gold and packed it tight -
The stack of straw that, on the very night
When he was killed,
Patrolling the far Libyan wilderness,
Went up, self-fired,
In a wild blaze of furious heat and light.

These are examples of the poorest pieces where the verse plods heavily and woodenly and has only the baldest kind of appeal. These are willed pieces that are lifeless. So too is the next poem with its laboured irony:

FUEL

The unwanted poet's works, in sheets unbound,
Stacked in a London warehouse, quire on quire,
At least did something to increase the blaze,
Even though they had failed to set the Thames on fire.

Another poem 'The Wedding Ring' again illustrates the worst of this volume with its horribly contrived and totally unacceptable coincidence and pseudo-solemnity:

THE WEDDING RING

The ring slipped from her finger suddenly
As she was drawing water from the well;
And, as down the dark shaft it fell,
Her heart fell with it - and she knew that he,
Her husband, fighting in far Italy,
Had dropped in death that instant; and their life
As man and wife,
Caught in the casual chances of the war,
Had vanished with the ring for evermore.

The limp grip of the thin language is inadequate to the emotion required of the reader in response to the poet's purpose. "Her heart fell" is banal; to say her husband "Had dropped in death that instant" is ludicrous. In other poems bombs are said to be "plumping down" which is

sheer inaccuracy of expression, Death is spoken of as "the new C.O." which is bizarre.

Even so there is, in other pieces, still plenty of evidence of Gibson's sympathies for people in humble conditions of life, for the workers, the fighting men and their women, mothers and wives who suffer their loss in the war. Poems such as 'Cassino' with its simple polarity between the "foreign word", Cassino, and the homely word "Kielder" work quite effectively in their simple way:

Until his death, she had never even heard
The name of that old town in Italy:
But now for ever that strange foreign word
For her is coupled in his memory

With Kielder, where her lover first drew breath,
And little thought to leave his North Tyne home,
And in outlandish mountains meet his death,
Battling with Germans on the road to Rome.

Yet now, since, sailing to the Southern coast,
He has fallen in the hazard of the war,
Her heart must flit with his uneasy ghost
'Twixt Kielder and Cassino evermore.

There is one poem, however, that to me is hauntingly beautiful:

DESERT NIGHT

What do you see as you pace the night
To and fro
On sentry-go?
The full moon trancing with light
Cheviot silvered with snow!

What do you smell as you pace the night
On sentry-beat
With burning feet?
Redesdale in morning light
Foaming with meadowsweet!

What do you hear as you pace the night
Of breathless fear
With straining ear?
The roar of the frothing white
Lasher of Otterburn weir!

It is so hauntingly beautiful because it breathes Gibson's feel for the land he knew best, what he called "the land of his heart". The poem's

poignancy derives from the sharp contrast between the present in which the sentry suffers loneliness, fear and discomfiture and a recollected, lost world of beauty and fecundity which was home. The pity for Gibson and his creativity was that he should have ever left Northumberland. For it was there that he felt his spirit belonged among the fells and valleys where he had spent his first thirty years. It is that spirit which informs 'The Waters of the Tyne': unfortunately the success in the depiction of scenery is not paralleled with success in realizing the "dark dreams" and "frantic fears" which are prominently mentioned but fail to materialize:

THE WATERS OF THE TYNE

When last he watched the waters of the Tyne
With a boy's heart fulfilling its delight
In the tumultuous singing and the shine
Of choral hillborn waters, amber-bright
How little he
Imagined through what spates of misery,
Crashing in swirling horror day and night,
His soul must plunge in the ensuing years -
How little his heart conceived what cruelty,
Latent within the world's heart even then,
Should shatter in an hour the ecstasy
Of living, while his frenzied fellowmen,
Hag-ridden by dark dreams and frantic fears,
Lured on to self-destruction, headlong hurled,
In a blind fury wrecking their own world!

Yet, still the amber water of the Tyne
Greeted the day with singing and with shine

As the words come off the page in this poem they flow without end-stopping through fifteen lines. The rush of the language enacts the "tumultuous" movement of the waters of the river in spate. The description of the waters with which the poem opens is rapidly turned into metaphor when the poet's soul goes through spates, swirls and plunges and is shattered by its experiences of life. The poem has a tightness of control and a strong presence of a sense of force in nature which drives everything before it which makes it a fitting expression of the dark agonies of war-time. The "dark dreams" and "frantic fears"

regrettably lie a little inertly on the page and the poet gives no sense of the nature of these experiences, being content to name them. It is from the neglect of those areas of potential imaginative richness that the poem suffers. Whilst the skill with which the mind of man and external nature, the river itself, are blended is impressive there is an absence of exploring depths which keeps the poetry in a minor key. But Gibson goes well beyond scenic description here into a state of consciousness that he would have done well to explore. At this point he almost invariably draws back to firm ground as he had done earlier in a poem like *Chambers* where he began to explore "the labyrinthine corridors of my mind". He seemed to recognize an area of imaginative life which he drew back from in need of security and solidity.

In 'The Blind Man' the weight of bitterness is well sustained by the deft lyrical impulse to make an economic and pithy poem. The play between sightless eyes, light, sight and stone-blind hearts gives some verbal vitality to the poem and war's absurdity, as 'seen' by the blind man, strikes home to one forcefully and sharply:

THE BLIND MAN

Beneath collapsing skies,
Half-stunned, with sightless eyes,
Awhile he stands;
Then seeks with groping hands
And numbly-fumbling feet
To find a safe retreat
From smashing bomb and shell -
Puzzled that men with sight
Whose eyes were blest with light
Should turn the world to hell;
And that their hearts should be
Stone-blind with treachery.

Everywhere in these pieces is evidence of the homely, simple details of life which, in his hey-day, were regarded as the most appealing features of Gibson's poems. To these homespun virtues he remained faithful throughout his long writing life. It may be that such determination to be

readily accessible cost him his readership simply because the kind of reader to which it used to appeal, the unlettered general reader, has, since the Second World War, taken less interest in poetry. In attempting to make poetry so ordinary and in attempting to make it appeal to ordinary people Gibson embarked on two lost causes. It must be remembered that the simplicity Gibson had striven for in 1910 had been regarded as 'modern' or *avant garde* at that time but by 1944 it was no more than simplicity itself.

1944 had been a busy, productive year but both Gibson and his wife were worn out. He felt by December that he was "very tired of [himself] and all [his] works."³² His wife's letters show that he was deep in his work and that she couldn't stand another year living in the "crampt(sic) and inconvenient quarters"³³ at East Hendred. The sea beckoned and they finally decided, for their own and for the little grandson's sake to move to the Isle of Wight which they did in April 1945. Gibson's son Michael had been married in 1944 so with all his own children scattered there was a household of just three of them for the next few years. They were glad to leave East Hendred which had come to seem a bit of an incarceration and isolation for four years of war-time life, in what Gibson described as a "crampt and dark Berkshire cottage."³⁴ They settled on the Isle of Wight at Sandown where they had space, a beach, the sea and a school for Roland to attend. They called their home 'Greenway' in recollection of the Dymock years and of their house 'The Old Nailshop' at Greenway in Gloucestershire where they had been so happy that even their daughter Audrey had been named Audrey Greenway Gibson. In this new home Gibson continued to busy himself with writing and with melancholy reflections on the tarnishing of earlier happinesses. Recollecting the between-the-wars family life at Coed-Mor he was to say that they were "happy times in

Pembrokeshire when, fortunately, it was not too late to see what lay
in store for our three little ones before they were born.

Despite its unashamedly commercial nature, the Outpost
proved to be very successful. In the winter of 1940 Gibson
received a letter from the publisher telling him that the volume was
almost sold out and that a reprint was being prepared. Altogether his
work stimulated by the war had proved to be successful with the reviewers
and the public, but the publisher had decided to discontinue it.



At that stage we do not learn from any of the contributors what they had
have decided to put the book in a series of 12 volumes, each of 100 pages
pressing on hand or at least to be ready to be published as soon as they
had come to in the story. It was in fact the only one of the series
references to progress in the book was in the introduction in 1948. The
volume is undoubtedly a masterpiece of style and technique. Technically
it is remarkably well written and well organized. It is not easy to
avoid banality and dogmatism in a book of this kind, but the authors
for over seventy pages of the book, and they do it with a grace and to manage

Mrs Gibson, W.W.G., DAUGHTER-IN-LAW 'JEE', SANDOWN I.O.W. C. 1948

Pembrokeshire when, fortunately, Gerald and I could not foresee what lay in store for our three little ones playing on the beach."³⁵

Despite its unenthusiastic reception by some critics, *The Outpost* proved to be very successful in its sales and early in 1945 Gibson received a letter from Sir Humphrey Milford to say that the volume was almost sold out and that a re-print was being prepared. Altogether his work stimulated by the war had proved to be successful with the reviewers and the public, but this did little to alleviate Gibson's persistent and recurrent nagging uneasiness about his work's reception by the 'high-brow' reviewers, most of whom he felt were very "snooty about my rhymes."³⁶ Nonetheless he kept on with his work. By early 1946 he had completed *Coldknuckles* and it was accepted for publication by Frederick Muller in February of that year, although it was not actually published until 1947. He had originally started on this work as long ago as 1921 when he had told de la Mare "I've already set out, quite unexpectedly on a new venture, a narrative poem called *Coldknuckles*."³⁷ It was a venture that was quite unexpected because he had not long begun to settle after his disrupting experience as a common soldier and all that he had published since leaving the army had been short lyrics. *Coldknuckles* was evidently meant to be ambitious. Whatever went wrong with the project at that stage we do not learn from any of his correspondence but Gibson must have decided to put the piece in a drawer until he had nothing more pressing on hand or at least until he could resolve the likely impasse he had come to in the story. However it may be, there are only occasional references to progress on this poem until its publication in 1947. The volume is undedicated, contains no preface and no epigraph. Technically it is remarkably assured and very well controlled. It is not easy to avoid banality and doggerel in a poem largely in octosyllabic couplets for over seventy pages or to sustain a story in that form and to manage

to keep the reader's interest in the plot and its outcome. It is not by genius of invention that Gibson achieves his desired aim but by sheer technical efficiency and skill in craftsmanship and that is no light matter. The model for the poem is Wordsworth, the Wordsworth of *Lyrical Ballads* and in particular of the style of 'The Idiot Boy' and 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill.' The purpose of *Coldknuckles* is to tell a plain tale, ingeniously plainly. There is nothing attempted of the greater inwardness and complexity of 'Michael', a plain enough tale but wrought into a metal far from plain as it issues from deeper concerns. We must not look for that sort of quality in *Coldknuckles*. If we do, then we would dismiss it at once. It is a skilled versifier's achievement and it would in happier, 'pre-electric' times, serve readily "to hold children from play and old men from the chimney corner." Indeed given its topographical interest it could, one imagines, readily do that nowadays in Hexhamshire. Gibson's imagination began in fact with a particular place, a particular house which he knew in Northumberland and which was called 'Coldknuckles'.

The story is essentially that of a journey in which a young boy travels from boyhood loneliness to adult fulfilment and happiness. This journey of experience begins in an actual journey which the boy, Isaac Bell, makes home from school on a night in late autumn. He has to travel from his school in Hexham to his simple cottage home:

The two-roomed cottage, but and ben
Where with his mother, Ellen Bell
He dwelt, perched high on Caller Fell

This is a journey of nearly six miles and it holds its moments of fear for the lad on a dark night. He particularly fears passing a gaunt and ruined church with its gloomy graveyard where

A crop of nettles rank
Nurturing with rain-rotted bones
The weeds that swarmed the cracked headstones

and where:

.....nettle, darnel, dock and rush
Thistle and sprawling bramble bush
Flourishing fat on that sour sod
Had buried the grim house of God
Whose half-sunk weather-perished stones
Crumbled above man's crumbling bones.
Yet the first nippy night would show
Those tombstones naked, row on row
Above the nettles stricken black

The "fat" weeds, the "nippy" air and the collapsed gravestones provide a telling picture of a desolate cemetery which chills to the bone the travelling boy.

As he makes his way up the fell-road, presumably towards Slaley, he meets the train of caravans of a travelling circus heading towards Hexham to put on its show. The tattooed, handsome and bohemian 'gangrel' or wanderer who addresses the lad is, it turns out by lame coincidence, his natural father. The narrator now lets his reader know that the mother Ellen Bell was 'wronged' by Cold Steel, as he calls himself. She was just one of his women, but for her 'sin' polite society has ostracized her, hence her lonely moorland life with her fatherless son. Cold Steel or Abraham, is proud and pleased to acknowledge Isaac Bell as one of his bastards. Profligate and polyphiloprogenitive, he is at once idolized by the boy.

After this meeting, home seems to Isaac more drab and miserable than ever. His mother worn out by ten hours work a day stone picking in the fields is too exhausted to bother with food for the boy. He lies down to sleep and thinks about his newly-discovered father:

A father still alive. No lad
Not one of all his schoolmates had
A dad the like of thou! - with eyes
Blue as the steel of frosty skies

The boy is now filled with revulsion at the prospect of his destined future trade as a shepherd boy and he "hankered to live with horses." He decides to run away from home and join the circus and the passage in

which he makes his way back to Hexham has got pace and variety in it that suggest the excitement of his new purpose, especially, of course, to anyone who knows the place:

Then, in a daze, down Causey Hill
From Yarridge dropt; and, dreaming still,
Through Hencotes trudged, and by the Sele
And Church Flags, clinking 'neath his heel,
Reached the stall-crowded market place;
And, crossing it with lagging pace,
As from the embattled Abbey Tower
The bell boomed out the noonday hour,
Down steep Bull Bank, came to the Tyne.
Then, with a gush, the song and shine,
The roaring and the white froth-gleam
Of the rain-swollen tawny stream,
Whose spate of waters, ridge on ridge
Through spanning arches of the bridge
Swirled crashing, charged his heart anew
With courage as he slowly drew
Towards Tyne Green; and saw the wide
Haugh set about on every side
With horseless caravans - and then
A husky bunch of hefty men,
Led by his father, hoisting high
The big-top's king-post to the sky

He has hardly been long re-united with his father when his mother appears in pursuit of him. Abraham, however, is a match for her in verbal abuse and drives her away - the verse form changes appropriately:

.....And, shrinking from the glare
Of his marrow-piercing lion-tamer stare,
Ellen obeyed, as Abe snapped clinchingly
"My testy termagant, attend to me!
If we could try the trick of Solomon
Then we might, each of us, have half a son;
But, as we cannot split him, you may as well
Be hiking back again to your own hell."
And, while he spoke, Isaac saw with surprise
Something like admiration fire her eyes,
As Ellen looked at Cold Steel: then the grey
Eyes clouded as, downcast, she turned away
With a low sobbing moan: and, failed, she went
Blindly by crowding caravan and tent,
Stumbling into the cauldride winter gloam
Without him, traiking towards her lonely home.

The author of *Womenkind* and *Krindlesyke* cannot forbear at this point to insert an authorial intrusion and to say:

..... for men must have their way
At all costs though the woman's left to pay

That ends Part One. Part Two is filled with action and plot: the circus negro, jealous of Abraham and Isaac, lets the lion out of its cage. It goes for Isaac but Abraham sacrifices himself to its wrath and saves Isaac. God has no part in these proceedings at all as He never does in Gibson's imaginative universe. Then, in dreams, Isaac realizes he is in love with Kit, the circus bareback rider:

Then he woke
As daylight streamed into the van -
A lad, no longer, but, a man.

Part Two is thus brought to a rapid close after only three sequences whereas Part One is much longer with eight sequences.

Part Three, the final part, begins with a splendid piece of lyrical description:

Through the cold crystal of the April sky
Great clouds, like clipper ships, from out the west
Swept, capping rushy slack and craggy crest
With swift blue shadows as they billowed by

This is the fine brave day when Isaac goes to call on Kit in her father's gloomy black coffin-like caravan. He is a terrifying figure, a Calvinistic 'bible-puncher' but he is out for the day preaching to casual passers-by in Hexham market place. Isaac finds that to keep his daughter under his firm control the father has bound her by two straps to her bunk:

.....her arms were tightly bound
Against her sides by a broad belt; and he
Now noticed yet another strap around
Her ankles was drawn tight.

Isaac wants to confront the tyrannous father with his crime against the girl and with his own love for her. She is anxious to hurry the lad away from her father's wrath but he won't leave unless

When I leave, you leave with me

Help comes from Jim, the trapeze artist, who agrees to lure the old man away for a day while the pair of lovers escape. However the old man,

suspicious as ever, determines to return before they will have had time to get very far and Jim can only stop him by trying to knock him unconscious. The old man falls dead and the escapees are temporarily suspects. Their journey up the Pennines from 'Castle haugh' where the circus was performing when they left is described:

They crossed the fell, until they struck a road
Running due north; when, side by side, they strode
With steady pace, determined that by night
They'd be some twenty miles upon their flight
Towards Coldknuckles.

Also described is their capture by the police, their return for questioning and, finally, their restoration to happy, contented life as shepherd and shepherdess on the fell-side farm after the mother's death. The lure of the circus is seen as mere tinsel, 'real life' is lived in the humble fell-side cottage; now happiness is achieved:

Now Isaac's hand unsnecked the rattling door
And, springing up Kit saw him smiling there,
With the wet dripping from his glistening hair
And sleet-soused plaid on to the sanded floor.

Kit then prepares his 'bait' for him so that he could return to the 'stell' or sheepfold to watch over his flocks at this lambing-time:

And now Kit filled for him a can of tea
To take out to the bield^{ss} with him, and cut
Thick slices of bread and cheese, that, in the hut,
He'd not go hungry; while he patiently
Awaited through the night, alert to aid
The ewes in labour, helping them to bring
New life to birth and ease their suffering.

The journey which the boy began at the beginning of the poem, heading homewards is thus brought to fulfilment. He is now home, at the place where he started from, and he knows it for the first time. He has passed through the phase of his hunger for excitement, for horses rather than sheep, for the circus rather than the fell, for the braggart and the gypsy rather than for the humble shepherd's life. His quest has made him realize that natural simplicity and humility is to be valued far above

the superficial glamour and magic of the circus. This is actually shown to produce a great deal of misery. Sambo, the unhappy Negro, groans "the goddam rain, Jesus Christ, the goddam rain", as they tour dispiritedly from town to town in dismal weather and young Kit, bullied by her father is made utterly wretched.

This story represents the symbolic journey of Gibson's imagination. As a young man he was addicted to the magic and the tinsel of fine language. As he grew up so he stripped his work to basic elements and truths. He had spent his life, his whole life, as a member of a literary 'circus' and to do so he deserted his native fells. As he grew older he regretted this more and more. His letters shew how much he was homesick for Northumberland and the epilogue to *Krindlesyke* shews how he even felt guilty that he was a mere scribbler, a mere "tradesman" in "only barren bleating words" while his forbears had kept real flocks of sheep. For that he actually asked forgiveness.

It looks very much as though when the enterprise of *Coldknuckles* was begun in 1921 it had some similar direction to *Krindlesyke* and was to be a saga of cottage life, and that Gibson could see no way of developing it or resolving it. As late as 1946 he was to say as much in a letter to Dorothy Ratcliffe:

.....The tale began dictating itself just after I'd finished *Krindlesyke* and then suddenly switched off; incomplete; and didn't switch on again until twenty years after! 22

Krindlesyke leaves the reader with a neutral view of the rival validity and significance of either the shepherd life or the circus life: the battle between their rival values is unresolved. By the time Gibson was approaching his seventieth year (1948) that imaginative conflict was resolved. The circus, as it is in *Coldknuckles* and its folk, are largely a sham. Man's truth is to be found in harmony with nature. The story thus ends with an uncompromising picture of domestic harmony of the very

simplest kind. It is almost Gibson's farewell to his art. There is no conflict left in him, only celebration. Out of his quarrel with himself he had indeed made his poetry. Now there was no longer a quarrel. Like so many men he now knew that the life his ambition had led him to only seemed to be better than the life of his forbears and he looked back to an image of the Northumbrian fellsides in the nineteenth century with an aching heart.

In *Coldknuckles* he kept to the use of that smattering of dialect vocabulary which gave such spice to *Krindlesyke* and which gave him the authentic tones of the county he first knew. A mother is spoken of as having "a hettle tongue and a skelping hand"; the dark night has "No glist nor glimmer /all the way", it is "a wild wanchancy night". Horses' tack is described as

Pranked with half-moons of looking glass
Jarbled with raindrops ...

A flighty woman is a "lightskirt bitch". A lame horse has a "hirpling hoof". All these rich, largely unknown English words are full of an energy and vigour which the standard image of language of Gibson's day had lost. The language for much literature was a class language of polite society. The vigorous language of the dialect was almost totally excluded from use in literature except for its comic potentiality as in Tennyson's 'Northern Farmer' or in Kipling's caricature people. Gibson's ear for it was as acute as Synge's was but alas for him he had no Yeats, no equivalent of the Irish movement, to take him completely and fruitfully back to his roots.

Coldknuckles did not bring much of a response when it was brought out. De la Mare said privately in a letter that he had enjoyed the first ten pages which were as far as he had got at the moment of writing in June 1947. Gibson gratefully replied he was

much encouraged that the first 10 pages of *Coldknuckles* had aroused your interest.¹⁰⁰

The Times Literary Supplement review was extremely cool, detached and stand-offish. Noting that the poem "has an interest" but not specifying quite what that interest might be, the anonymous author uninformatively remarked that it was a "long story of circus life in rough-hewn couplets."¹⁰¹ As it is only in part about circus life and that not the greater part it looks rather as though the reading had been a trifle perfunctory and uninterested. Evidently the rough-hewn couplets failed to engage much of the reviewer's sense of rhythm for he felt that the whole thing "should have been written in prose." The same point has been observed, equally fatuously, of Wordsworth's poetry. In fact the rhythms and rhymes, the patterning of the whole piece are integral to its success and there are some fine moments of action and description. Not least successful is Gibson's still evident capacity to create strangeness and mystery, as in some of the dream sequences in the poem. In one of these, which occurs when Isaac and his girl Kit are on their flight to the north country, he dreams that a terrible fate has befallen Jim, his friend. It is actually a prognostication of reality, as dream sequences usually are in Gibson's work, because Jim, in flight from the accidental crime he has committed in causing Kit's father's death has fallen into a peat bog and it is this vision which troubles Isaac's sleep:

He had seemed
To stand upon a naked moor alone
Beside an old rain-pitted sarsen stone,
When he with apprehensive eyes had seen
A figure plodging towards him through the green
Thick sluther of the moss
.....
With the sweat streaming from anguished brow
Bogged in the mire waistdeep, Jim seemed to stand
Before him

This is serviceable enough versification, compact and concise, rooted in good prose. The claims one makes are not for great poetry but for a

poetry that is simple and clear and works very well to a sympathetic ear. That was all that Gibson had sought to do throughout his life. He saw himself as the singer of a song not as a man of any intellectual capacity at all. And for him, as for Hardy "any little old song" would serve his end. At a time when his stock had fallen so low it was not possible for this old song, *Coldknuckles* to revive it. The dispiriting critical reception given to it was alleviated to some extent, however, by the kind remarks in letters from personal friends and at least a little praise from Eliot. Not only de la Mare liked what he had read. Marsh thought it "most vivid".¹⁰² Masefield liked the opening, Richard Church compared it with Coleridge's 'Christabel' (a not unreasonable observation considering Gibson's capacity to make the ordinary seem strange) and he saw it as "so valuable an addition to the English narrative poem."¹⁰³ He went on to add that the piece was "so vigorous, so inspired with a close imaginative contact throughout." Church thought that the piece was worthy both as drama and as poetry. "The story is dramatic and it never breaks but above all the pure poetry of the whole is most impressive."¹⁰⁴

T.S. Eliot also wrote to Gibson about *Coldknuckles* but this was only to turn it down for publication. Even so he remarked that it was "a very gripping and exciting plot." Eliot felt that Gibson had perhaps made his greatest error by letting his story fall into two parts, the story of Isaac's growth and the story of Isaac and Kit which meant compressing and reducing each of the parts and so skimping on each. Despite what he saw as weakness of construction Eliot felt, though, that the poem "is continually interesting which is always very much the exception nowadays in a narrative poem of any length."¹⁰⁵ He felt unable, however, to accept the work for Faber because sales would be so small on account of the fact, said Eliot, that "the public capable of the duration of attention necessary to read a narrative poem is small."¹⁰⁶ That marks an important

change in taste for in the nineteenth century a main preoccupation of poetry was with story. In the twentieth century that had declined.

The war years had been productive ones for Gibson. From 1941 to 1944 he had published a book of verse each year. The end of the war brought, however, a loss of impetus and even the work he did complete, *Coldknuckles*, was, as we have already seen, a re-vamping of earlier work. Two reasons may be adduced for this. In the first place, Gibson was a poet who, throughout his life, responded to the pressures of the events and circumstances of the day. The war provided just such a stimulus to this elderly man whom we can readily picture listening to his radio or reading his newspapers and being stirred by the distractedness of the times. In the second place, in the years immediately following the war Gibson's life was dominated by the family squabble over the future of his grandson, Roland.

Now that the war was over the German father, Ali Hübsch, was attempting to get to England to claim his child and take him back home. The Gibsons, quite naturally, did not want to let the child go and also they did not consider their son-in-law as at all 'suitable' to bring up the child properly. Consequently there were prolonged legal problems and the child was made a ward of court in the Chancery Division. In the few remaining letters of Mrs Gibson to Dorothy Ratcliffe we gain a far more detailed account of what went on than ever Wilfrid Gibson provides. Mrs Gibson, as always, was the very eminently practical member of the partnership. Mrs Ratcliffe had recognized this long before when she and Lord Brotherton had visited Gibson at Letchworth. On that occasion they had bought a manuscript from him to put in the Leeds University modern archive collection for £50. Lord Brotherton handed over the cheque to Mrs Gibson instinctively recognizing a business woman's superiority to her dreaming husband.

In the matter of attempting to secure the best future for Roland it was Geraldine who initiated everything. She had been pestered by letters from her son-in-law, Ali Hübsch, since the end of the war. He wanted to come to England and take Roland with him to Germany. The Gibsons did not think this was in Roland's best interests. They did not trust Hübsch because his proposals for Roland's future were often contradictory and seemed very vague and ill-founded. Hübsch was considered also to be dishonest and unreliable. In his first year of marriage to Audrey he had borrowed £150 from his mother-in-law and had never mentioned the debt again. The fact that he was German which had not mattered to the Gibsons before the war now mattered a great deal. The revelations that came out about the Nazi conduct of German society shocked English people even more than the business of the fighting had done and Germans were considered by the average English person to be monsters. How was it possible then for the Gibsons to deliver over their nine-year-old grandson to a man who was a stranger, a German and of dubious character? Indeed how was it possible for them ever to tell a child that he was the son of a German when he had grown up to think of Germans as the enemy?

This great dilemma for the Gibsons was crystallized when in early February of 1948 the British Authorities got in touch with them to say that Ali Hübsch, living in Frankfurt in the American zone, had written to say that he was the Gibsons' son-in-law and that they had possession of his son. He wished, said the Authorities, to apply for a special permit to come to England to claim the boy and to take him to South America. The Gibsons did not know whether the Authorities would or would not grant their son-in-law the necessary visa. They feared that he might arrive by surprise at any time, so they therefore had contingency plans ready:

If Ali turns up without warning we have timetable and money ready, hidden in the hall and Wilfrid will slip away, pick up Roly at school in Ryde and take him to London.¹⁰⁷

An alternative plan was that Mrs Ratcliffe would take the boy into hiding either at Temple Sowerby or with some country people in the Borders. It was still a matter of discussion as to who should go with the boy and who should "stay to face Ali",¹⁰⁸ but at all costs Geraldine was determined "to keep the whole business from the child."¹⁰⁹ Throughout early 1948 she battled on by letter and telephone and by making trips to solicitors in London to secure Roland's future. "I could face a fight in the courts" she wrote to Mrs Ratcliffe, "but I couldn't face Roly's having his world pulled about his ears."¹¹⁰ From Geraldine's standpoint it certainly looked as if that is exactly what would happen. The erratic activities of her son-in-law strengthened her resolve as each piece of fresh news arrived about him. When he was remarried to a Rumanian woman Geraldine wrote to Mrs Ratcliffe in an exasperated and determined tone:

By the way, Ali has married a Rumanian now. So the picture is a small English schoolboy taken suddenly to South America by unknown German papa and Rumanian step-mama. I may be insular but it shakes me.¹¹¹

The next step made by Hübsch was to apply to the Court of Chancery in London making a claim to take his son. The case was rushed ahead, surprisingly, but the Master of Chancery decreed that he could not take the child without Chancery Court's permission and that was withheld, nor could he see the child without permission of the court. This meant that their fears of a sudden 'snatch' by the father were allayed. This was an occasion when Chancery Court's delaying powers might be regarded, for once, as a blessing. The court did suggest that the usual procedure in such cases was for a summons to be served on the claiming father that he should appear before the court with his charge. The drawback of the procedure was that it brought the matter to a potentially closer conclusion for, if Hübsch were summonsed, he then could claim he had to go to England and the necessary visa, which was at present denied, would

have to be issued. Thus he could, possibly, sweep down at any time on the Gibson ménage and carry off the child in his predatory claws. However, for the moment, Chancery Court's decision gave the Gibsons a temporary peace of mind. This lasted from May through to September when they heard that the Home Office had granted Hübsch a visa to enter Britain. The autumn of that year was thus spent in a state of acute anxiety that the undesired man might appear at any minute. Mrs Gibson felt unable to go out much in case Wilfrid was left to handle the man alone and they were ready at any minute to whisk the child away at the back door if the father appeared at the front. They both agreed that the child should be protected from the truth. They lived, said Gibson, in February 1949 in "such intolerable suspense."

In May 1949 the case again came before a Chancery judge but the father did not appear for the hearing. The judge, to the Gibsons' amazement, took the father's side in the matter and stressed his rights. He ordered that the boy should be told the truth about his parentage at once. It was only when the father's letters were read aloud in court by counsel that the judge was visibly shaken. He did not like the sound of the man, he said, and required that he should come before him for questioning. He refused permission for the boy to go to Germany and ordered that he should stay for the time being in the grandparents' care. He would not, however, give them legal custody and they remained as temporary guardians until the boy left school at fifteen.

The perpetual threat of the son-in-law's arrival on their doorstep had made life very difficult and nerve-wracking. According to Mrs Gibson, who certainly bore the brunt of the whole affair, Wilfrid was "badly shaken by it all." Never a practical man he was now feeling old and tired and quite dejected about his work. Even before the problem of Roland's future had reached the law courts, the war and its aftermath, together

with other personal problems had proved too much for Gibson. His dermatitis broke out again and his wife felt that she would "go mental" with having to manage "Wilfrid [who] is still an invalid ...[and] all the housework.." Wilfrid, apparently, was "difficult to dig out of his hole"''² and he felt in the midst of dreadful depression. So for Easter 1947 Gibson went off to stay with Mrs Ratcliffe at Temple Sowerby Manor in Westmorland whilst Mrs Gibson went, with the grandson, to Ireland to visit her family. In writing to Mrs Ratcliffe to make arrangements for his visit Gibson managed to sound the note of a lost and feeble child: all his medicines had to be arranged for him in advance and he even had to ask for a route and instructions for travelling to be supplied.

In contrast with the man who had, in the nineteen-thirties, dashed eagerly all over the kingdom to give readings Gibson was now much enfeebled. The ten years from his daughter's death to the final settlement of her child's future had been harrowing ones. There was not, now, much to look forward to.

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER EIGHT

1. P.W. 12.9.40.
2. D.U.R. 8.8.38.
3. Mrs Osborne 18.8.39.
4. D.U.R. 1.9.39.
5. D.U.R. 6.10.39.
6. W. de la M. 18.12.39.
7. *ibid.*
8. E.M. 5.6.40.
9. P.W. 30.6.40.
10. E.M. 21.5.40.
11. *ibid.*
12. *ibid.*
13. W. de la M. 9.7.40.
14. W. de la M. 11.3.41.
15. W. de la M. 4.11.41.
16. D.U.R. 9.2.41.
17. D.U.R. 3.1.41.
18. Mrs Gibson to D.U.R. 8.1.41.
19. D.U.R. 15.1.41.
20. *ibid.*
21. D.U.R. 25.2.41.
22. D.U.R. 9.2.41.
23. D.U.R. 6.8.41.
24. *ibid.*
25. *ibid.*
26. D.U.R. 30.10.41.
27. *ibid.*
28. D.U.R. 16.10.41.
29. D.U.R. 24.8.41.
30. D.U.R. 10.9.41.
31. see footnote 29.
32. D.U.R. 24.4.41.
33. D.U.R. 24.6.41.
34. D.U.R. 8.8.43.
35. D.U.R. 16.4.46.
36. D.U.R. 22.9.41.
37. D.U.R. 5.10.41.
38. see footnote 28.
39. D.U.R. 10.2.42.
40. 'Mr Gibson's War Poems', *Times Literary Supplement*, January 31st 1942, p.57.
41. D.U.R. 3.6.41.
42. D.U.R. 11.4.42.
43. D.U.R. 13.9.44.
44. see footnote 42.
45. D.U.R. 26.11.41.
46. *ibid.*
47. D.U.R. 30.10.41.
48. W. de la M. Christmas 1942.
49. W. de la M. 14.7.42.
50. *ibid.*

51. George Sampson, *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature* (Cambridge, 1941) p.1017.
52. H.J.C. Grierson and J.C. Smith, *A Critical History of English Poetry* (London, 1944) p. 504.
53. D.U.R. a postcard 22.1.42.
54. D.U.R. 20.4.42.
55. *ibid.*
56. D.U.R. 27.6.42.
57. *ibid.*
58. D.U.R. 7.8.42.
59. D.U.R. 11.12.42.
60. D.U.R. 15.5.43.
61. 'People's Poet', *Times Literary Supplement*, January 16th 1943, p.32.
62. *ibid.*
63. D.U.R. a postcard 32.11.42.
64. see footnote 58.
65. D.U.R. 11.8.42.
66. *ibid.*
67. D.U.R. 10.4.43.
68. D.U.R. 29.4.43.
69. *ibid.*
70. *ibid.*
71. D.U.R. 3.6.41.
72. see footnote 68.
73. D.U.R. 9.3.43.
74. D.U.R. 22.5.43.
75. *ibid.*
76. D.U.R. 18.11.43.
77. *ibid.*
78. *ibid.*
79. D.U.R. 20.1.44.
80. 'War's Maelstrom', *Times Literary Supplement*, January 1st 1944, p.10.
81. D.U.R. 11.9.43.
82. D.U.R. 25.10.42.
83. *ibid.*
84. D.U.R. 17.8.42.
85. D.U.R. 28.4.44.
86. D.U.R. undated but some time in 1944.
87. D.U.R. 14.1.44.
88. D.U.R. 24.7.44.
89. D.U.R. 7.11.44.
90. D.U.R. 14.12.44.
91. 'Poems of Compassion', *Times Literary Supplement*, January 27th 1945, p.46.
92. see footnote 90.
93. Mrs Gibson to D.U.R. 27.12.44
94. D.U.R. 24.4.45.
95. W. de la M. 29.3.46.
96. D.U.R. 13.12.45.
97. W. de la M. 10.10.21.
98. 'Bield' - a dialect word meaning a shelter for a man as opposed to 'stell', a shelter for animals.
99. D.U.R. 20.10.46.
100. W. de la M. 21.6.47.

- 101 'Coldknuckles', *Times Literary Supplement*, July 5th 1947, p.339.
102. Letter from Marsh to Gibson, The Brotherton Library.
103. Letter from Church to Gibson, March 1947, The Brotherton Library.
104. *ibid.*
105. Letter from T.S.Eliot to Gibson, 21.1.46., The Brotherton Library.
106. *ibid.*
107. D.U.R. 10.2.48.
108. D.U.R. 9.2.48.
109. see footnote 107.
110. see footnote 108.
111. *ibid.*
112. Mrs Gibson to D.U.R. March 1947.

CHAPTER NINE

1949-1962

'Living in an Ever-diminishing Circle' '

The last thirteen years of Wilfrid Gibson's life by no means set a crown on his lifetime's efforts. They were marked by decline, distress and disappointment. He was to suffer money worries, further bereavement and publishers' rejections.

Throughout the post-war period Gibson's financial anxieties became more acute and he had great difficulty in finding a publisher to take his work. Mrs Ratcliffe suggested that he might sell his manuscripts to American University Libraries who were hungrily buying up all sorts of ephemera. Towards such things Gibson had a very honourable, old-fashioned view. He had been approached before the war by a representative of Buffalo University asking for manuscripts but, Gibson said, "his notions of providing for students copies of poems in the making failed to appeal to me."² To Gibson such an enterprise and such a way of making a little money seemed decidedly unacceptable. As indeed did so much of the world that he was then living in. His persistent lament was that his career was over:

What a changed world this is! From the age of 29 to 60 I never had the least difficulty in getting a book published. During the past eleven years it has not been so easy, and now apparently, the climax.³

The climax was that Frank Muller, who had taken *Coldknuckles* had just rejected the latest manuscript, *Within Four Walls*. Muller thought the book was excellent of its kind but that it was not marketable in the post-war world. The poetry that was published Gibson thought to be generally incomprehensible and usually lacked any qualities of rhyme and rhythm at all. He tried to read Day-Lewis but found him meaningless. Increasingly, like the legendary don, when a new book came out he read an old one. He read Shakespeare, Milton, Keats, Shelley and Hopkins. He constantly went through Quiller-Couch's *Oxford Book of Victorian Verse* and quarreled with what he thought a bad selection. He continued to

revise his own unprinted rhymes and he prepared a new collection of narrative pieces entitled *Border Boyhood* for the press. This was never published and the manuscript has disappeared, as has all of Gibson's unpublished work which he reckoned to amount to about as much again as he had published. He never slackened off in his writing life and usually aimed to work at writing for some part of every one of the seven days of the week. Above all else during the last decade of his writing life Gibson suffered from his isolation from literary companionship. He was a prolific letter-writer probably because this was his substitute for first-hand companionship. His isolation was so felt by Mrs Ratcliffe in his letters to her that she felt she had to 'dream up' some correspondents for him as Hugh MacDiarmid recounts in his intellectual autobiography:

My recollections of W.W.Gibson go back to about 1908 when I met him and his sister in Edinburgh, and I was glad to write to him towards the end of his life at the insistence of the Yorkshire dialect poetess, Dorothy Una Ratcliffe (Mrs McGregor Phillips), who had told me that he was lonely, ill, and in very poor circumstances. He was very pleased to receive my letters.⁴

No doubt Gibson was pleased to communicate with a writer who could do such fine lyrics as MacDiarmid had done in *Sangshaw* but his temperament was hardly akin to MacDiarmid's. Gibson could never have written a sentence like the last one in the above quotation. His loneliness and isolation grew and he never again recovered his old spirits. As his son put it in a letter to me:

I think the problem in later life was that W.W.G. shut himself more and more away, living in what one might call an ever-diminishing circle, both physically and mentally. The result seemed to be that there was no renewal of inspiration from outside and his work became repetitive. He certainly was never diverted away from his work by anything else.⁵

His last publication *Within Four Walls* was brought out by Fortune Press in 1950. Looking at this publication, the work of an author who had been writing for half a century, one might very well wonder that anything

worthwhile had preceded it. The five brief dramas that comprise the volume are thin dialect plays with generally poor characterization, inadequate motivation and unbelievable twists and turns of circumstance. They are all very wooden, undramatic and quite unstageable. Gibson, as we know, had great difficulty in getting a publisher to take them and it was only after much searching about that he got the Fortune Press, better known for publishing the earliest work of Philip Larkin, to accept the book and then under terms that required him to pay part of the cost and also to take a portion of the copies himself. This he felt he could not afford to do but his patroness once again came to his rescue. She took responsibility for all the financial obligation incurred and she bought one hundred copies. Naturally, when the book came out in 1950 it was dedicated "To Dorothy Una Ratcliffe." Though the quality of the work is uninteresting and will not bear very much detailed discussion what does remain of interest, and is characteristic of Gibson's style, is the nature of the structure and themes of these plays. The structural paradigm is that of intricate familial and extra-familial relationships of Border people and the theme is in the always preferred rivalry between impassioned imagining and dull experience.

The first of the five plays is 'The Rescue'. It is set in a lighthouse on the North-East coast of England. A light-keeper awaits the relief-duty man who will come and take over from his assistant who is going on leave. When he arrives the relief-man turns out to be the first love of the elderly keeper's young wife. Her sense of romantic love is re-kindled by Angus Cairn's arrival. They try to escape together in a boat but in bad weather the boat is wrecked as they try to embark. Shortly after a freighter goes on the rocks and in the attempt to rescue the crew the old husband is drowned. The lovers are thus together at last, but bound in guilt. The thematic interest is in the contrasting of

true passion with dull custom: the passion and the poetry of life are brought alive again in one in whom they seemed dead. The structural pattern of the play lies in its triangular conflict of wills and energies.

'The Millrace' is very similar in its structural and thematic patterns but this time the setting is on a lonely Northumberland farm, The Ash. The respectable, puritan, churchgoing farmer has a son who is a secret poacher. He kills a gamekeeper and the underkeeper has incriminating evidence that will put a noose round the boy's neck. The price of his silence is the lad's fiancée's hand. The two lovers escape by plunging into the millrace. Quite apart from the obvious debt it owes to Ibsen, whose Rebecca West and Pastor Rosmer similarly commit suicide, the play does not have any dramatic quality. It is lame, awkward and slightly embarrassing to read, having hardly even the "thick-ankled grace" with which Tennyson doubtfully complimented Wordsworth.

'Feud', set in an old Border pele tower, emerges from the world of the Border ballads. The Armstrongs, settled for centuries at Birkdale Pele are the ancient, sworn enemies of the Elliots of the Cairn. This enmity has existed since the times of the Border rieviers when

Night by night the dales of Rede and Tyne
As byres went up in flames, rang with the slogans -
"An Armstrong! An Armstrong! - An Elliot! An Elliot!"

The settled traditional way of the Armstrongs is broken, at the opening of the play by the marriage of the eldest son, John to a beautiful Elliot girl whom he has met at Hexham Hiring Fair. The husband turns out to be boorish and brutal, merely marrying the Elliot girl to subjugate her. John's bookish brother Philip, crippled from injuries sustained in a hunting accident, one who is

always reading
Till his mind's rotted to a rubbish-heap
Of wasted paper sodden with sick notions

falls in love with Helen Elliot, who is beginning to be made wretched by her husband. The bookish cripple and the beauty bear a resemblance to Scott's portrayal of Rashleigh Osbaldistone and Diana Vernon. Perhaps not a matter of accident, as the setting for the Osbaldistone estate is in exactly the same area as Birkdale pele. The portrait of the tyrannical, jealous husband, John, has some life about it. Gibson is able to make him scornful and cynical as he had made Bell Haggard and several others in *Krindlesyke*. John Armstrong's scorn vents itself to good effect on poets:

Poet - I've a scorn
For all the printed piffle that you read -
The stuff that you call poetry; the sort
Of balderdash we had to learn at school
That I could never keep in mind;

There is no development of this chief character, however, as Gibson hurries towards a predictable dénouement in which the wife is killed while interposing herself between the two quarreling males. Thus an Armstrong has again killed an Elliot and the blood-feud, this time by accident, is renewed. The subject has Aeschylean possibilities but Gibson has no tragic capacities at all. The play is low-level folk drama with low sentiments.

'Heritage' tells the story of a woman who has brought up her two children after her husband has been hanged for murder. The play begins twenty years after the hanging. The woman has brought up her children in a simple, spartan manner in a place where their past is unknown. Both son and daughter are about to marry when a figure from the past, Noah Leach, turns up. He is an admirer of the mother from the old days and he blackmails her into marriage as she fears he will expose her secret. The secret comes out and the son, realizing he is the son of a murderer, sets out to take vengeance on Noah Leach. It is a poor, padded-out piece which lacks the dynamics of drama altogether. The guilty secret, the broken parentage, the past coming back to haunt the present are all Victorian,

far more like George Eliot in *Silas Marner* or in the Raffles episode of *Middlemarch* than they are like drama in the 1950's.

The last of the five pieces, 'Across the Threshold', is a more vigorous piece, more convincing in its confrontation of two different social worlds. Set on a remote farm on the North-East coast, near St Abb's Head, the piece is about the impact on a traditional, puritan household of the survivors of a wrecked freighter, the "Helen Bell" bound from Hull to Edinburgh. The three survivors - a mate, a temporary seaman who is really an acrobat working his passage to Scotland and a woman passenger are saved by Ellen who is like Grace Darling in her act of courage. Ellen falls in love with the acrobat and her brother with the woman passenger. The father is outraged, has a heart attack and dies. The play ends without accomplishing any resolution. The only noteworthy feature is a characteristic Gibsonian debate between the relative merits of the thrilling circus life and the respectable but dull farm life and some good bits of homespun philosophizing are put into the mouth of the old man, Ephraim:

Well, you
Seem bent on turning Crag Head into an orphanage
And sanatorium for the world's lost lambs.
You've a soft heart - too soft by far, I'd reckon,
If you're set on pitting yourself against the luck
Of life and trying to keep clear of troubles;
Though even hard hearts cannot dodge mischances.
Still, if you'd only think about yourself
Sometimes

You can do nothing
But let things take their course. If you attempt
To intervene, you'll, likely, bring about
The very thing you're trying to prevent,
Increased a thousand-fold. You'll dam the burn
To save the cabbage-patch; and find you've swamped
The pastures and the farmstead.

.....
You cannot tell -
That's all I've learned from life; - you cannot tell:
And usually, it's what we dread the most
That never happens; and we waste ourselves
All to no purpose, nursing apprehensions
And suckling nightmares.

Ephraim's peasant wisdom alleviates a little the general fustian quality of the dialogue and the tedious plotting.

It has to be said that these late plays are a disappointment after the vigour and vitality of speech that Gibson had commanded in his earlier dramatic work like *Krindlesyke*. They emerge from a man who has little left to write about and is now obsessed with his lost past. Obsessed with the wilds of Northumberland from which he was cut off, with a recollected dialect which he had lost and with querulous family life from which he had escaped in 1912.

The only real demand for Gibson's work in this period came from editors of anthologies particularly for use in schools. The poetry reading public had declined but the study of poetry in schools and colleges had increased. In one year, 1951, Gibson said he had had

applications this year from many editors - three in India, one in Australia, one in Ceylon, one in New Zealand, two in the U.S.A., one in Canada, one in South Africa and three in England.

These were all for school anthologies

and so the poor children will not be able to quite avoid me.⁶

The B.B.C. offered to consider some of his plays for broadcasting, but after his earlier experiences of a recording studio he was loath to accept. In a state of considerable depression about it all he was on the point of declining when Geraldine told him that if he did not get on with it she would "walk out." He took up the offer.

Geraldine was clearly at the end of her tether - she had had a hard married life with a lot of worry about finance. She had brought up three children, coped with financial crises, kept house and taken in lodgers. Throughout the war she had worked very hard, brought up her grandson and had fought an exhausting legal battle on his behalf. She had had indifferent health for years and frequently complained of exhaustion. In June 1950 she fell ill with pneumonia and soon went into a coma. The

doctors gave her only a day or two to live and she died without regaining consciousness. Her son Michael broke the news to Mrs Ratcliffe saying "the real trouble was utter and complete exhaustion so that there was not enough strength to fight back."⁷ Now Gibson, whom she had described in one of her last letters as being "wretched, depressed and unable to make any effort to fight",⁸ was left alone with his young grandson. In September he sold the house at Sandown and, together with his son and his son's wife, bought a large house near Weybridge in Surrey. Gibson appears not to have been entirely happy with this arrangement but, at the same time, he hardly appears to have had the ability to manage on his own. He had always a strong tendency to bemoan his fate and one sometimes wonders, impatiently, if he would have been satisfied with anything short of universal acclaim as a poet. He complained constantly in his letters that "nothing pleasant happens here",⁹ that he "feels dull and bored",¹⁰ that his daughter-in-law was uncommunicative and often, he felt, made it clear that he was not wanted. He often spoke to no-one all day and he was either given his meals in his own room or went, on occasions, to the local hotel. An important factor which conditioned his personal unhappiness during these years especially was, as he told Mrs Ratcliffe, the lack of recognition of his work. This neglect he suffered "pained him greatly."¹¹

The member of the family that Gibson got on best with was young Roland but he was now away at boarding school in Canterbury. By the time he was fifteen he was ready to leave school and his future had to be considered. Now that the strong will of Geraldine was no longer an influence, now that Wilfrid could not afford to support the boy and Michael had his own family to think about some alternative had to be found. Finally, in 1953, Roland went to Canada for good, to join his father, the feared and disliked German. Not that he was the only one of

their childrens' partners that the Gibsons disliked. In a letter to Mrs Ratcliffe Gibson said, of his late wife, "that the results of her three childrens' marriages made her inclined to commit suicide."¹² It was, she had apparently said, the worry of these that had worn her out. She was also increasingly troubled by her deteriorating relationship with her son, Michael: "Gerald was absolutely devoted to Michael but in the last years she was appalled by his apparent indifference to her."¹³ Perhaps the parents doted too much on their children to allow them to go their own way easily.

Now a widower, living in his son's house, Gibson felt ill-at-ease. He wanted to be in the north country and even thought of running away to go and live in lodgings in the Borders. He who loved the open land of Northumberland and thought nothing of walking twenty miles a day was now "cabined, cribbed and confined." He was unhappy in what he called "the dull south"; he was unhappy as a lodger in his son's home. He was visited only by biographers like Christopher Hassall who drew on Gibsons' memories of Brooke and of Marsh and by scholars like Robert Ross who found him very helpful and ready to recall the far-off days of his success. It was in these memories that Gibson increasingly lived. The modern world felt alien to him: "What a world it is we have to live in" he wrote and lamented that he "little fancied [he] should have a miserable old age." ¹⁴ One of these visitors, Christopher Hassall, was prevailed upon by Gibson to believe that he was in a state of penury. Consequently Hassall made representations to ensure that Gibson was given an award of £200 from the Royal Literary Fund in 1954. Gibson's account of his poverty was, according to his son, quite untrue and the whole matter proved very embarrassing. The award was not made as it was not necessary, but Gibson was quite obsessional about money. An award that

was actually made, however, was an annuity of £100 from the Society of Authors.

From this time Gibson slowly began to decline and by 1955 he refers to himself as "an old idiot" who cannot even remember things that had been important to him. In a letter to Percy Withers' daughter he said:

I wrote the first two books of verse I ever got published in a French cathedral ... taken by an artist friend who was making a painting of one of the cathedrals. While he worked I wrote but in the defective mind of old age I cannot recall the name of the cathedral. '5

In that year the efforts of de la Mare to gain a Civil List Pension for his old friend were rewarded and Gibson was pleased with Her Majesty's Government's recognition of his life-time's devotion to his art.

Gibson had been something of a creaking gate all his life as far as his physical health was concerned but while this remained quite good, first his hearing and then his mind began to deteriorate. He could no longer use the telephone because of his deafness. If he went out he got lost. He did odd things like, on being given a cigarette, trying to chew it; he scratched the surfaces of objects such as glass ash-trays, with his penknife and then preceeded to lick them. He became difficult and when advancing senile dementia made it impossible for his family to cope he went into the care of an elderly and decent body who ran a private nursing home where he had generally to be treated like a child and, apparently, was happy to accept such treatment. He no longer knew anybody and he could hardly write; he no longer could recall the names of birds and flowers. Mrs Ratcliffe's last sad meeting with him was at the Cadogan Hotel in London in 1958, when Gibson was brought up for the day. She recorded the occasion as her farewell:

This afternoon, Michael Gibson and his wife motored Wilfrid Gibson (his father) to our hotel. They arrived at 3-30. My husband and I went down to greet them in the lounge. Several days ago I had 'phoned Michael and suggested that they should all come to luncheon. Michael said he did not think his father was up to it, but that he might manage tea. When we saw them,

Wilfrid got up from an armchair and we all shook hands. He looked physically well- perhaps thinner - the same outdoor complexion, but his gaze was a little vague, and Mrs Michael said, "He doesn't remember you", so I turned to him and said, "Hullo, Wilfrid, you know who I am"? He replied in a friendly way, "No, I don't, but my mind is so feeble these days I don't remember anyone."

We all sat down, and I said, "Well, I am Dorothy Una", and, indicating my husband, "And this is A.V.". He replied, "I forget everything these days." After a short conversation with Michael and his wife, cigarettes were passed round. Wilfrid readily took one, and Mrs Michael said it was not safe to leave matches near him. Then she added that the considerate people (Colonel and Mrs Robertson) with whom he boarded had told them that they could not be responsible for Wilfrid any longer. Naturally, both Michael and his wife were anxious. Wilfrid did not seem to hear these remarks, and Mrs Michael continued, "He doesn't take in anything now." Michael said that even on short walks at Weybridge his father got lost and had to be brought back to the Robertson's house by the police.

We all had tea together, and when the waiter brought the trays Wilfrid got out his purse. Michael said gently, "We don't have to pay, because we are guests." Wilfrid put his purse away and enjoyed the tea, the sandwiches and especially the brightly-coloured cakes.

After tea he told us that though he had worked with words all his life and began writing poems in his teens, today he forgot the meaning of the simplest words and had to look them up in the dictionary. A.V. said genially that he was fortunate to have a dictionary, and that all of us had to look up the meaning of some words some times. Wilfrid smiled at A.V. He stooped a little as he sat in a big armchair. He did not want to take off his brown overcoat and brown scarf and kept his hat beside him.

..... when we saw them into their car, Wilfrid sat at the back, and as Michael got into the driver's seat Wilfrid looked at A.V. and me, smiled and waved. Then Mrs Michael called to me from the window, and remarked, "He has just said to me, "Aren't they nice people!" Before they got into the car I kissed Mrs Michael good-bye, and Michael turned to me, kissed me affectionately and thanked me for all I had done for his father. At that moment Michael reminded me of the little boy I had taught to handle the dinghy in the Kyles of Lochalsh who, in Portree Harbour, efficiently made up his bunk in the main cabin in 'SEA SWALLOW' so that breakfast could be served at 8 a.m., and who then went over to Wilfrid (in a confusion of sheets and blankets) and loudly whispered, "Oh! Daddy, you had better leave it to me".

As Michael drove away, we stood and watched them. Wilfrid raised his hat, Mrs Michael waved. I felt it was a sad farewell, and was thankful for Geraldine's sake that she did not have the sorrow of seeing Wilfrid so changed.¹⁶

After that the rest was made up of silent days in a Surrey nursing home where he received the full-time care he needed. He was denied what he had longed for, a return to his beloved north of England:

It is odd how circumstance after circumstance has tied me to the South of England, when I long to live in the North.¹⁷

At the age of eighty-three, as the flourish of spring came on the old poet died at Virginia Water in 1962. Generous tributes in *The Times*, *The Guardian* and the *New York Times* set the seal on a long, fruitful creative life. Both for its general survey and its tribute *The Times* obituary is well worth full quotation:

MR WILFRID GIBSON

TRENCHANT POET OF THE POOR

Mr Wilfrid Gibson, the poet, died in a Surrey nursing home on Saturday at the age of 83.

Wilfrid Wilson Gibson known in his later years as Wilfrid Gibson, was a native of Northumbria, born at Hexham, near Newcastle, on October 2nd 1878. He was educated privately, and while still a youth in the north country he made his first serious attempts at verse writing. Two early volumes, *Urlyn the Harper* and *The Queen's Vigil*, which William Lyon Phelps, the American critic, thought "worth keeping as a curiosity" were published before Gibson found his true scope. It had nothing to do with the ancient legends, peopled by romantic heroes and heroines, which were the stuff of that youthful work. He turned to the poor people of his own observation, living in a humble setting, the slum, the mine, the factory, the field.

Before he was 20 he had been printed in *The Spectator*: a collection of pastoral "plays" entitled *Stonefolds* and published in 1907 was his first volume of any importance: but *Daily Bread* three years later, made him known as "the poet of the inarticulate poor". He had not discarded his technique: he adapted it to the rhythm of a life that had stirred him deeply. But there were critics who questioned whether his chief characteristics, colloquialism and symbolism, could go together. The 18 short verse-plays in *Daily Bread* made an appeal, all the same, one of them especially. A crippled boy keeps his mother company while she sits stitching endlessly for bread, and the great crane outside the window, swinging monstrous weights through the sky, becomes an obsession as he watches it day after day. Half-crazed in a nightmare he sees it swooping down on him, grasping his bed as he lies there, and swinging him above the sleeping slum, among the blazing stars.

GEORGIAN ANTHOLOGIES

Workless men, starving wives, and stunted children - these are the tragic heroes and heroines of Gibson's maturity. Elemental passions dominate the scene, simple in his expression of them, powerfully idiomatic, making a healthful contribution to the poetry of the pre-war era. In a contemporary tribute John Freeman wrote that "he is without imitators and almost without rivals in his poetic mode." Edward Thomas and

Robert Frost came nearest, although Gibson was less reflective, more trenchant.

Sir Edward Marsh included him in the famous Georgian anthologies, and after his marriage in London, he moved to Gloucestershire, maintaining the friendships made at "Eddie" Marsh's chambers in Gray's Inn - a shrine for the Georgian poets - and before the bombs fell he was one of a group who founded the short-lived poetry magazine, *New Numbers*. They included Lascelles Abercrombie, Rupert Brooke, and John Drinkwater, and when Rupert Brooke died in the First World War Gibson and Abercrombie, with Walter de la Mare, were his joint beneficiaries. American enthusiasm for the dead soldier-poet was reflected in an invitation to Gibson as a poet-lecturer and his U.S.A. tour in 1917 was successful and prolonged. The Macmillan Company of New York published in that same year Gibson's *Collected Poems*, a compliment which was not repeated over here until 1926.

PLAYS IN VERSE

In the 10 years since 1907 Gibson had published 10 volumes, mostly of narrative or dramatic verse. Always his impulse led him to attempt plays in verse. *Hoops*, a one-act melodrama, was staged at a war-charity *matinée* at His Majesty's in 1916, together with Gordon Bottomley's *King Lear's Wife* and Brooke's *Lithuania*; and *Krindlesyke* of similar type (1922) was followed by *Kestrel Edge and Other Plays* in 1924.

Rupert Brooke's wish that his death might bring more gain than loss to his beneficiaries came true in one sense: Gibson was enabled to write even more confidently, with a steady output, and his tally of books eventually reached more than 30. He omitted the second of his three names - Brooke had telescoped them to "Wibson" - and his titles were no longer "staccato". *Fires, Borderland, Thoroughfares, Battle, Friends, Livelihood, Whin, Home and Neighbours* were succeeded in 1925 and thereafter at regular intervals by *I Heard a Sailor Singing, The Golden Room, Coming and Going, The Alert, Solway Ford, Coldknuckles* and *Within Four Walls*, his last work, published in 1950, when he was 72.

He is survived by a son and a daughter. ¹²

The *Guardian* obituarist was careful to point out the importance of Gibson's "genuine" talent:

Gibson was pre-eminently a poet of human nature. There is no subtlety of introspection in his work, nor philosophic reflexion: his poetry meditates neither on himself nor on his world. There is almost as little in it of sensuous experience. Humanity was what he worked in; and nothing could be more genuine than the poetry he made of human nature. ¹³

Amongst other observations the writer acknowledged what I believe to be the case, that it was his home county of Northumberland which had shaped Gibson's mind. Whilst he recognized, quite properly, that *Krindlesyke* was

Gibson's masterpiece he perhaps overstated its significance by saying that it was "one of the greatest poems of his generation, massively designed and extraordinarily vigorous." By 1962 *Krindlesyke* had become a forgotten poem. So too had Gibson's *Collected Poems* which Macmillan had published in the same livery as their editions of Wordsworth, Arnold, Tennyson and Christina Rossetti, which suggested an endurance that was to be denied by time. At Gibson's death the *Collected Poems* had long been out of print.

Gibson was a late survivor from another era and whilst many had forgotten him he was still remembered by many. A letter to him, dated the 13th of October 1951, from Dora Yates of Liverpool University claimed:

there is always a 'run' on the works of our leading North Country poet and your *Collected Poems*, *Battle*, *Daily Bread*, *Fires*, *Hazards*, *Islands* are in great demand among our students and staff.²⁰

Gibson too thought of himself as "an old North-country rhymmer" which was the way he described himself in a letter of 1950 to Hexham's County Librarian.²¹ For John Betjeman he remained "that excellent poet Wilfrid Gibson, whom Bowra, Rex Warner and I read in our youth."²²

In an article he had written for *The Bookman* thirty years earlier in 1932 Gibson had said with reference to John Freeman "It is no mean thing to have been a poet to any of the people, any of the time." Although Gibson himself seems now to be numbered among the forgotten poets what he achieved as a poet of the people was no mean thing. And, further, to be thought to be an "excellent poet" by another poet of the distinction and originality of Betjeman is no mean epitaph.

The final chapter of Gibson's life had not been a happy one but we are reminded by it of his powers of stoic endurance. He never gave up. He had by 1962 spent nearly seventy years writing verse honestly and sincerely in the belief that his destiny was to be a poet. Aware of his

own limitations, he had achieved some scruple of fame in his lifetime. He was read by his fellow poets many of whom proved greater and more enduring than he. He was honoured by his obituarists. He had made a contribution, small though it might be, to the changing styles of poetry in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Though his name now appears in the historical account as only one in a list that reads like a Georgian cricket eleven, his contribution was distinctive and original. He is a minor poet who, though neglected, is not forgotten. Indeed there are signs of a renewal of interest in his work which may well lead to some deserved reassessment of his achievement.

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER NINE

1. Michael Gibson (son) in a letter to the author 1984
2. D.U.R. 1.3.48.
3. D.U.R. 3.10.49.
4. Hugh MacDiarmid *The Company I've Kept* (London, 1966) p. 192
5. see footnote 1.
6. D.U.R. undated but in July 1951.
7. Michael Gibson to D.U.R. 4.6.50.
8. Mrs Gibson to D.U.R. 27.12.49.
9. D.U.R. 11.8.52.
10. D.U.R. 22.8.52.
11. From D.U.R.'s account of her last meeting with W.W.G. on 9.3.58.
12. D.U.R. 25.8.52.
13. *ibid.*
14. D.U.R. 10.3.51.
15. A letter to P.W.'s daughter 20.12.55. (Percy Withers collection).
16. D.U.R.'s account of her last meeting with W.W.G., Brotherton Library.
17. D.U.R. a postcard 5.9.51.
18. *The Times*, May 28th, 1962, p. 14
19. *The Guardian*, May 28th, 1962, p. 7
20. A letter to W.W.G. from Dora Yates: Brotherton Library Collection. 13th October, 1951.
21. A letter from W.W.G. to the Hexham County Librarian, 26.6.50. Hexham Public Library Collection.
22. John Betjeman, 'City and Suburban', *The Spectator*, 194 (1955) 701-2

CONCLUSION

Gibson's status to-day is that of a minor poet of whom very little is recorded and whose works are seldom read. He has a secure place, however, in some period anthologies and in the history of twentieth century poetry. He is usually given space in anthologies of poetry of the Great War, though not by any means a fair enough shewing. He appears in selections of Georgian poetry and Philip Larkin included a generous selection in his *Oxford Book of Twentieth Century Verse*. In histories of the period and in many studies of individual, better-known poets he frequently merits mention. He has not then been totally forgotten and neglected but survives as part of the undergrowth of twentieth century literature.

I have distinguished a number of distinct phases on Gibson's career each of which was productive but not all of which were of equal distinction. The first phase was that of the apprentice poet which included a little juvenilia published in newspapers and magazines and proceeded into the quite accomplished early volumes up to 1908 executed in the manner of late Victorian romanticism and preoccupied with loneliness, religious hermits, pseudo-Arthurianism and self-indulgent emotion. The work of that first phase is entirely imitative and strikes the alert reader as period pastiche. It reveals not a fresh poetic voice

but rather the learned mannerism of the received manner of the day. This was a poetic which leaned heavily towards 'poesy', one that was highly debilitating and which I have ascribed in part to the deadening influence of, in particular, Walter Pater whose significance for the poets of the *Décadence* is clear. Equally clear, indeed claimed by Gibson, is the significance for him of the poets of the Nineties whom he loved in his youth: Symonds, Johnson, Davidson, le Gallienne, Yeats and Dowson.

After 1908 Gibson's career undergoes what appears to be a complete

volte face. The romantic posturing goes, the rhetoric disappears and in its place is born the poet of the poor with a style pared-down to basic utterances unadorned by metaphor, indeed felt by some at the time to be scarcely poetry. This change of subject and of style was defended passionately by Gibson as representing a dedication to the unlettered common man. He wanted to proclaim the plight of the common man and he wanted to be understood by the common man. Like Owen, whose desire was that no soldier should be able to say 'no compris' of his poems, Gibson wanted to be comprehended by the mass. It may well be that because he so directed his work to a now defunct but very specific readership that it suffered as a consequence.

Gibson's dedication of his poetic enterprise to the poor continued throughout the Great War and many of the poems of that period are well-known, though more of them deserve to be better-known. It was in this period that Gibson seemed often to be at his best. He is succinct, full of feeling, good at catching common speech and he tells the toll of war with truth and accuracy and entirely without sentiment. Even the earliest pieces dating from October 1914 are in the voices of the ranks and there is no officer-class poetry written by him at all. The pieces about the war based on his own experience belong only to 1918 and 1919 and are about his very humble clerical duties.

Once demobilized and returned to his work he took up a more personal note in his lyric verse whilst his attempts at drama were mostly written in Northumbrian dialect. He was not good at creating character, however, nor was he good at managing plot; it was the feast of language, the rich dialectal words, that attracted him most of all. This was an inadequate basis on which to write drama. His lyrical poetry grew out of his daily family life and he turned verses on homely subjects of ordinary life in

peace and war up to 1945.

Undoubtedly the period of his greatest success and significance was between 1908 and 1920. Before that he was an imitator who had not found his voice, after that he failed to find strength and distinctiveness of voice that could secure him a reputation and significance. He had a long decline in which he tended to live more and more in the past. He was troubled with domestic difficulties and it was only occasionally as with *Coming and Going* in 1938 and the volumes written during the second world war that he once again captured a little public attention.

His connection with Rupert Brooke, with Edward Marsh, and with a number of Georgian writers has assured him a place in the margins of literary history but except for the enthusiast or the reader native to Northumberland his work has not had any revival of interest. Nevertheless Gibson remains a substantial poet whose reduced significance is largely the consequence of the triumph of "the Pound crowd" which he thoroughly disliked and which created a more sophisticated audience for poetry than the one which Gibson appealed to. After all, the aesthetic that Gibson embraces is that of a primitivist or minimalist. He avoids complex syntax and learned vocabulary; he uses no neologisms; no terminology is imported from branches of learning; he has neither Latinisms nor classical references; he touches on neither religious nor philosophical topics. His one recurrent vision is that of a conflict between a calm ordered world and a disruptive force which smashes its serenity. In the war poems this is an obvious theme but in his 'social' poems too, the lives of his workers, his flower-sellers, his labourers and his gypsies, are always broken up by forces both social and economic with which they cannot cope. His theme then is the frailty of order; it is of the thinness of the protective shield that everybody erects against the forceful inroads made in people's lives by poverty, disease, pain, age and death. Gibson's

tenderness of mind proceeds from his full awareness of the vulnerability of all nature. That is the basis of his 'vision' and it is the strength of his verse. The audience of the ordinary man and woman for whom Gibson wrote diminished between the wars and without a sense of his audience Gibson lost direction and purpose. He became more and more isolated and fed off memory and the trivia of personal feeling. He had had his moment, though, and unlikely as it may nowadays sound it had been possible in 1912 to balance his name against Tennyson's in the assertion that one age was out and the time had come to begin anew:

"Tennyson is dead, Gibson has taken his place."

That proclamation of Maurice Browne's in 1912 seems most extravagant now. Time has elevated Tennyson and almost obliterated Wilfrid Gibson. Nevertheless I have sought to establish here my opinion that his work, though unfairly neglected, has considerable interest and has yet to be fully recognized and evaluated. His clear, simple and readily understood poems will continue to guarantee him a place in the anthologies of the century. Philip Larkin's selection of Gibson's verse in his *Oxford Book of Twentieth Century Verse* is a clear pointer here and future anthologists surely cannot disregard Larkin's approval. There is too a case to be made out for the way in which Larkin himself in his verse, very like Gibson, embraces the ordinary and the commonplace. What is astonishing is the almost total critical neglect which Gibson has suffered. Dismissed by Pritchard (*) he is totally ignored by the editor of the widely influential *Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*. Such neglect is disgraceful and falsifies the account of the way in which English poetry developed during the Great War.

Wilfrid Gibson's output shews him to be a poet of quality and importance and whilst he may be a poet of minor significance he is a poet of whose significance we must take account.

APPENDIX

Was Gibson, then, a Georgian?

Gibson is usually defined or described by critics and historians of poetry as a Georgian. The term is frequently and loosely a term of abuse and its application raises several questions. What does it mean to be a Georgian? Did Gibson think of himself as a Georgian? Is the term an adequate description of the character of Gibson's work as a whole? Is it, indeed, clear what we mean by the term Georgian? We must first remember that it has not always meant the same thing.

The term Georgian was originally used to describe writing of the Hanoverian period, the period of the four Georges. It was Rupert Brooke who re-minted the term Georgian for those writers who came together under Edward Marsh's patronage in 1912 to produce the first *Georgian Poetry* anthology. George V was the new king and Georgianism was to be the new poetry marking the death of Victorianism, the end of Edwardianism. The Georgians were to be clear, straightforward, vigorous, fresh-air poets. So many of their photographs shew their lineaments - clean-shaven with open-neck shirts and on a country walk. Marsh's prefatory note to *Georgian Poetry I* expressed the belief that "English poetry is now once again putting on a new strength and beauty". Here then was the essence of the matter: newness, strength and simplicity and always a pursuit of the beautiful. Wilfrid Gibson was proud and delighted to be recruited to the Georgian cause and attended the founding luncheon party at Marsh's rooms on September 20th 1912. Not all those present agreed that the name 'Georgian' was the best but it was finally settled on, *faute de mieux*.

Within a short while Gibson was to say of his poem 'Bloodybush Edge': "I don't know about its being poetry but it's Georgian at all events." He did not enlarge upon precisely what he meant by that. The whole business was exciting and as my chapters on Gibson's life between 1912 and 1916

shew, the sense of being one of a group, of being at what seemed to be the cutting edge of modern literature, gave him an incalculable stimulus and confidence in his work.

Not everyone, however, thought the Georgian scene so appealing. Pound and Eliot did not. Amy Lowell took a rather jaundiced view of a literary evening at Harold Monro's Poetry Bookshop shortly after war had been declared:

A month ago I toiled up the narrow stairs of a little outhouse behind the Poetry Bookshop, and in an atmosphere of overwhelming sentimentality, listened to Mr Rupert Brooke whispering his poems. To himself, it seemed, as nobody else could hear him. It was all artificial and precious. One longed to shout, to chuck up one's hat in the street when one got outside; anything, to show that one was not quite a mummy, yet. Now, I could weep for those poor, silly people. After all they were happy; the world they lived in was secure. Today this horrible thing has fallen upon them, and not for fifty years, say those who know, can Europe recover herself and continue her development. Was the world too "precious", did it need these violent realities to keep its vitality alive? History may have something to say about that; we who are here can only see the pity and waste of it.²

Eliot called Georgianism "a bypath of poetry" and he found it lacking in any passion, "only in something harder can great passion be expressed".³ The movement began to be parodied as early as 1917. Writers such as E.V. Knox, Osbert Sitwell and, notably, Roy Campbell in *Georgiad* ridiculed and satirized the Georgians and their works. Middleton Murry found it "impossible to be serious about them, the more stupid of them supply the matter for a good laugh; the more clever the stuff of a more recondite amazement."⁴ Eliot renewed his attack in *The Dial* in 1921: "there is in contemporary English literature a very great deal which I cordially detest"⁵.

By 1926 the movement was over and was being looked on retrospectively. Edward Shanks, himself a Neo-Georgian, produced an informative and precise account of the Georgian movement in an article entitled 'The New Poetry 1911-1925' for the *Quarterly Review* in 1926.⁶ In this he shewed

how the epithet "revolutionary" had been "freely applied to the Georgians" after 1912 because they "attempted to return to reality.". They were, however, Shanks agreed, very distinct individuals and by no means a school.

A different view was that of Graves and Riding in their acute summary of the unifying characteristics of the movement:

Georgianism was an English dead movement contemporary with Imagism and politically affiliated with the then dominant Liberal party. Although not so highly organized, it had a great vogue between the years 1912 and 1918 and was articulate chiefly upon questions of style. The Georgians' general recommendations were the discarding of archaistic diction such as 'thee' and 'thou' and 'floweret' and 'when'er' and of poetical constructions such as 'winter drear' and 'host on armed host' and of pomposities generally. It was also understood that, in reaction to Victorianism, their verse should avoid all formally religious, philosophic or improving themes; and all sad, wicked, cafe-table themes in reaction to the 'nineties. Georgian poetry was to be English but not aggressively imperialistic; pantheistic rather than atheistic; and as simple as a child's reading book. These recommendations resulted in a poetry which could be praised rather for what it was not than for what it was. Eventually Georgianism became principally concerned with Nature and love and leisure and old age and childhood and animals and sleep and similar uncontroversial subjects.⁷

All the characteristic preoccupations asserted here do indeed apply to Gibson. He was proud to profess himself a Georgian. He was not alone. Wilfred Owen too had been proud to be numbered among them. Robert Graves was proud to be published in *Georgian Poetry IV*. Gibson, in his letters, often asserted that whether or not his work was good he could not judge but it was certainly, he believed, Georgian. In 1932 he wrote an article recalling, 20 years later, his first involvement with Marsh's movement. For ten years at least, he agreed, the term 'Georgian' had been regarded as "the badge of infamy by the more vocal of our successors". For him the term Georgian had become "a meaningless but surely harmless label." Originally, we recall, he had eagerly proclaimed himself a Georgian - without being explicit as to what he meant. The Georgians, he now

thought, were by no means "a closed company" and he catalogued the names of contributors to shew how much diversity they possessed: "Turner, Squire, Sassoon, Rosenberg, Nichols, Graves, Freeman, Baring, Asquith, Brett Young, Moulton, Pellow, Shanks, Shove, Armstrong, Blunden, Hughes, Prewett, Quennell, Sackville-West".² Gibson was, however, very innocent about the reality of rivalries between literary factions - the Modernists like Eliot and Pound loathed the Georgians. By the late 1930's vituperation and propaganda in the war of the Georgians and the Modernists had abated and subsequent discussion of the Georgians became more analytic and academic. The first full analysis they received was by the eccentric poet, critic and teacher, Herbert Palmer. His account, written in 1938, is full, unashamedly partisan but devastatingly simple. He did not think that there was anything wrong with Georgian poetry *per se*. Their error was not in weakness but in exclusivity. As the Georgians huddled together they, foolishly, allowed the unpleasant and hostile Moderns too much *lebensraum*.

Whatever you may say of poetry escapism should not dwindle into exclusivism otherwise you end up by creating a sort of vacuum into which all sorts of *unpleasant hostile forces* [my italics] may rush.³

One can see the blandishments of this view taken by a Georgian partisan but it is surely cock-eyed. To believe that Modernism, Eliot and Pound, merely filled a vacuum is a hardly tenable explanation, clung to by its author to justify his instinctive dislike. Palmer's liking for Georgian poetry is unparalleled for he considers that the Georgians "aimed at perfection, at pure poetry." Though he could see, indeed could hardly avoid seeing, that the Georgians did not achieve major poetry, and this he admitted, he felt they rose "to a prominent platform just below it - that is, pure poetry, something quite distinct from minor poetry." This put them, in his estimation, on a very high level for pure poetry was a

poetry of negations for earthly concerns and the first-rate in Art was, to Palmer, a matter of escape. It was an "escape from odious realities into the kingdom of dreams, into the kingdom of fairyland, into the light of heaven." The Georgian approach to this condition of fulfilment was, Palmer believed, rooted in fourteen "certainties and half-certainties" about their practice which shewed what they wished to avoid, that is, their negations which freed them and released them, unbound into pure poetry. Palmer's fourteen points are as follows:

1. Very little nostalgia and no wild yearning.
2. Everywhere restraint in the diction.
3. Avoidance of poetic licence ... these poets aimed at naturalness.
4. Avoidance of all hackneyed Victorian rhythms.
5. No carnal influences due to French poetry.
6. Avoidance of the queer, the bizarre, the difficult, the obscure and the vernacular.
7. Avoidance of the phrase, of any strongly coloured or aggressive group of words.
8. Avoidance of symbolism... something anti-Biblical about characteristic G.P.
9. Avoidance of strictly Christian themes.
10. Avoidance of natural and patriotic themes.
11. Avoidance of both rhetoric and rhapsody.
12. Avoidance of plangent and crashing rhythms.
13. Avoidance of all verbal cheapness and facility.
14. Emphasis on Nature, upon Country Life.

These observations contain some half-truths. One is tempted to say in the presence of so much avoidance that were they true, Georgian Poetry would have but one feature, the fourteenth, and that it had avoided so much that it could contain, as a consequence, very little. The anti-Georgians would concur wholeheartedly, no doubt, but even they would need to agree that Georgian Poetry did set out to be different and therefore had to reject, or 'avoid' so much that had gone before. Therein, perhaps, may be said to lie their grave weakness. They threw out so much that they left themselves very little with which to rebuild a new poetic except an ideal of freshness and an appeal to *l'homme moyen sensuel*. Palmer does not attempt to engage discussion on this level at all, so positive is he of the Georgian achievement. He believed, he said, that the first Georgian

Anthology was, next to Palgrave's "the most important and influential Anthology ever published." No praise for the Georgians is higher. Palmer's argument shewed no hesitation at all in finding the Georgian enterprise worthy and admirable at most points. He even has a quarrel with the notion that there is a uniform Georgian quality but maintains there are two distinct phases: the first Georgian Revolt which featured the work of Brooke, Drinkwater, Abercrombie, Gibson and Masefield and the second Georgian Revolt which was co-terminous with the rule of J.C. Squire and his followers, the Squirearchy. For Palmer these two 'generations' of revolt were as fixed, definite and significant as the already historically well-established two generations of the Romantic Revolt, 1798-1820. The main difference, for Palmer, was that the splendours of this twentieth century Georgian revolt against decadence and against patriotic imperialism and Victorian sententiousness were so quickly eclipsed by a totally alien force; by what he called "the beginnings of the Modernist racket."

Palmer's point of view of course was very similar to that of Gibson but his standing as an academic must have been seriously impugned by the biassed nature of his views. His violently anti-Modernist position did not differ from Gibson's dismissive references to "the Pound crowd" and the "over-subtle sophistications of much modern stuff" but Gibson never set up shop as critic or scholarly historian. He could garner his prejudices. Such views as Palmer held make him look, in the context of scholarship, eccentric. Yet, of course, we need to remind ourselves, that we look back to the earlier years of the century's poetry from the other side of the valley of conformity, from the mountain range of the Modern on which Eliot and Pound are peaks. It would pay us to look carefully once again at that far landscape with a more temperate, less erratic, guide.

The most recent, thorough and splendidly readable study has been that of the American scholar, Robert H. Ross. First published in 1965, *The Georgian Revolt* offers the best account of the Georgian enterprise. In what is the fullest, fairest and most scholarly work on the subject Ross shews clearly that there is no justification for the obloquy that has been heaped on the Georgians. He sees that the Georgian enterprise was a reaction against the lifelessness of the spirit which was characteristic of the *fin de siècle* mood. The fact that it was possessed of "spiritual euphoria, a sense of vitality, anti-Victorianism, realism and freedom of poetic diction",¹⁰ though not uniquely so, gave it a wide appeal. Thus it seemed that Marsh's prefatory words to *Georgian Poetry*, Volume 1, were prophetic: that English poetry had put on "a new strength and beauty". Indeed, after some woe-begone years the Georgians, said Ross, ensured that "English poetry regained for a few brief years the joy of living."¹¹ The optimism and vitality that belonged to the years prior to the Great War were, and had to be, temporary phenomena. As Ross says, the "hall-mark of the Georgian poet was his vitality, the sense of buoyancy and optimism which he carried over into his poetry".¹² That could not survive the war, nor the anxieties of its aftermath.

Much of the disdain that is directed upon Georgianism stems from ignorance of the facts. For example, in a recent study of Frost by W.H. Pritchard¹³ I found Gibson's 'Solway Ford' being dismissed as the work of a Georgian poet who lived in Gloucestershire, who knew nothing of the Solway Firth and even less of the class of waggoners who feature in the poem. As Gibson was a northerner who knew the Solway very well and as he was a writer who devoted much of his work to the chronicling of the lives of working people, this statement about him is entirely erroneous. Of course it clearly proceeds from the simple syllogism: Georgianism is bad, Gibson was a Georgian, ergo Gibson has to be bad too.

To view the matter in a balanced way, without prejudice, it is fair to say that to be a Georgian was not to be entirely without merit. The movement was vigorous, revolutionary and popular. Gibson was happy to belong to it at the outset of 1912 and 1913 but he later felt that the movement weakened and that the descriptive term Georgian diminished and demeaned his work. It is also important to remember that his poetic career extended over a long period both before and after the Georgian movement. A valuable summing-up of the whole problem surrounding the appellation of the term appears in Richard Church's essay of 1968:

The poets contributing to the anthologies were in fact wholly unlike each other and made no unified impact upon cultural taste and aesthetic principles. Their individual qualities alone brought them before the public who had grown self-conscious before the posing gestures of the decadents surviving from the vast army of the Victorian Romantics and the literary outriders of the pre-Raphaelites.¹⁴

Some of Gibson's work may be called Georgian; some of it, it must be said, shews the "distinctive qualities" to which Church draws attention. Some of Gibson's best work, however, has an urban focus which has never been thought to be characteristic of the Georgian mode. No doubt, however, literary historians will long find it convenient, though their persistence will remain somewhat misleading, to call Gibson a Georgian poet. In so doing it will, no doubt, be felt that both historical and evaluative justice are served. No close enquirer will, however, feel quite satisfied with such an easy conclusion for whilst it is at least in part acceptable to speak of Gibson as a Georgian between 1910 and 1918 the term cannot be applied to the remaining forty years of his writing life. So long as the word Georgian retains its imprecision it will be necessary to treat its application to Wilfrid Gibson with some caution and qualification. A danger of the present time is that the term Georgian too readily implies condemnation.

FOOTNOTES TO THE APPENDIX

1. E.M. 27.4.13.
2. Amy Lowell, 'A Letter from London', *The Little Review*, (October.1914) p.6.
3. T.S.Eliot, 'Reflections on Contemporary Poetry', *The Egoist*, IV (September 1917) p.118.
4. J. Middleton Murry, *Aspects of Literature* (London, 1920) p.141.
5. T.S.Eliot 'Prolegomena to Poetry' *The Dial*, LXX (April 1921) 449-453.
6. E. Shanks, 'The New Poetry', *The Quarterly Review*, 246 (1926) 145 et seq. (1926)
7. Graves and Riding *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (London,1927) p.112-3.
8. W.W.Gibson, 'The "Georgian Poets"', *The Bookman*, 82 (1932) pp.280-2.
9. Herbert Palmer, *Post-Victorian Poetry* (London,1965) p.209.
10. R.H. Ross, *The Georgian Revolt* (London,1965) p. 257.
11. *ibid.* p. 259
12. *ibid.*
13. W.H. Pritchard, *Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered* (New York,1984) pp. 85-86.
14. Richard Church, *Speaking Aloud* (London,1968). p.130

APPENDIX II

Gibson As Reviewer

Gibson's reviewing work for *The Observer* was not a regular weekly assignment but in the years between 1934 and 1938 he contributed a wide range of signed reviews. On some occasions he dealt solely with works of non-fiction, on other occasions he considered a batch of newly published novels. In the edition of *The Observer* for August 5th 1934 he reviewed *Sweden: The Land and The People*. Characteristically, whilst praising Sweden as "that lucent and immaculate country where a sense of beauty is the inspiration of social efficiency", he remarked on contemporary England as "his own harassed and hopeless homeland". Such a remark carries on by different means the social criticism for which so much of his poetry had been well-received. Similarly, when on September 9th 1934, he reviewed a survey of the economic and social conditions in the coalfields of Britain entitled *Coal and Men*, the sympathies that he had shewn in the introductory poem to *Fires* (1912) and to the suffering workers in that volume, and in *Daily Bread* (1910) appeared yet again. Some force of personal feeling lies behind remarks such as: "it is difficult for me to conceive of anything worse than the dismal horror of some of the pit villages I myself have seen in Durham." This feeling is backed by experience:

Crawling along through the black puddles of a four-foot drift
and crouching beside the hewers in their stifling black holes,
only the other day, how I longed to have some of the smug
critics and glib condemners of the working class beside me.

Apart from his social concerns his interests in travel, sailing and fishing appeared in other reviews for *The Observer* and occasionally it is of interest to see how his reading for review provided the source for his poetry. Reviewing *The Wooden Walls Among the Ice Floes* by Major Greene, October 7th 1934, he was very harsh on "the amateur flamboyancy of the

writing" but was fascinated by the matter which included descriptions of an expedition entailing the culling of Hood Seals. The expert nomenclature and knowledge of Major Greene was used to great profit by Gibson in the poem *The Hood Seals*. (see pp. 319-21) In reviews like this one there is ample evidence of Gibson's good ear for specialised vocabulary and his excellent eye for natural history. "I can be happy in the company of any true river lover" he remarked reviewing three books on rivers and fishing. (December 6th 1936) He felt at home in the natural world; he did not feel at home in what he called "the mechanized world" and modern urban life. Reviewing an autobiography, *A Parson's Daughter* by Muriel Parsloe, he remarked:

the craze for self-exploitation has gone so far that even the patient reviewer has wearied of being asked to share these shy making intimacies.¹

A love of the modesty of nature shines through all his reviewing work.

For its reviewers of fiction *The Observer* had the services of Gerald Gould , L.P.Hartley, Humbert Wolfe and Frank Swinnerton. There were occasions, however, when Gibson was their major novel reviewer of the week. January 17th 1937 he reviewed six novels - all now largely forgotten - in the course of which he displayed something of his love for Dickens and, in a cogent remark, some good critical sense. In taking an author to task for calling Dickens an example of "the single hero school of novelists" he remarked:

Dickens's real interest would seem to lie in tracing the apparently fortuitous interrelation of a number of casually associated groups of people..... essentially stories of groups rather than individuals.

What we see in Gibson's reviewing work for *The Observer* is considerable versatility. He reviewed novels, biographies, autobiographies, books on travel, natural history, economic and social

affairs and, on one occasion, December 13th 1936, a review of sixteen children's books.

For the *Manchester Guardian* his brief was rather different. He was taken on as a novel reviewer on a regular fortnightly basis in early 1936. Other reviewers on the "Books of the Day" page were Ivor Brown, H.B.Charlton, Gilbert Murray, J. Dover Wilson, H.W.Nevinson and Harold Brighouse, the playwright, with whom Gibson alternated. In each contribution he would review at most five novels and occasionally just one. Generally it was the characters and the plots that absorbed his attention but the poet in him spoke out when he took J.S.Collis to task:

[he is] not a very sensitive writer....who has little feeling for the nuances of words.... his style lacks the true narrative fluency.²

Gibson did not enjoy reading the French comedy *Clochmerle* and remarked that "nothing is so peculiarly national as a sense of humour." He went on:

British humbug as I am, I found myself intolerably bored by this sort of thing It was my jaw, rather than my sense of decorum, that suffered as I yawned my way through the four hundred or so page of *Clochmerle*.³

Pain of a different kind came out in his casual reflection on genius when he mentions "those whom fate has damned with a half-gift, the man of talent". (September 5th 1936) Similarly, when taking issue with an author who believed patronage to be stifling, Gibson remarked "for the more humble-minded there must have been some compensation." He was clearly thinking of his own case.

Generally he cared little for lengthy books believing, as he said that "the prime function of art is the elimination of the inessential." (*Manchester Guardian*, October 13th 1936) That remark was prefatory to his review of Margaret Mitchell's mammoth novel *Gone With The Wind*, newly published and given to Gibson for review. In a most favourable account of the subsequent best-seller he reported that the novel had "held him

absorbed throughout". The main reason he gave, and one entirely characteristic of him , was that "her people are really alive." On this occasion at least he found length was not torture. He remarked that often it was difficult to account for the vogue of the long novel and, especially, that "the busy reviewer may regard with a baleful eye the mammoth tomes that burden his table". *Gone With The Wind*, however, seems to have provided him with a pleasure he seldom found in this necessary labour of reviewing. It was a chore sometimes painful, always heartily disliked. It was essentially done for money and he believed it had a withering effect on his creative talent. Certainly it took up a great deal of his time and what with that and his domestic cares he felt that his faculty for writing poetry was being destroyed.

Between March 1936 and March 1937 he believed, as he wrote to Dorothy Ratcliffe⁴, that he had reviewed at least 130 novels but had not written a line of verse. Very occasionally, the evidence shews that his reading could provide excellent source material for his poetry but most of the time the work was unrewarding and destructive of his calling.

FOOTNOTES TO APPENDIX II

1. *The Observer*, April 7th 1935.
2. *The Manchester Guardian*, May 12th 1936.
3. *The Manchester Guardian*, July 21st 1936.
4. D.U.R. 12.3.37.

BIBLIOGRAPHY I

Works by W. W. Gibson in chronological order

(Published in London unless otherwise stated)

- | | | |
|------|---|---|
| 1902 | <i>Urlyn the Harper</i> | (Vigo Cabinet Series, Elkin Mathews, No 6) |
| 1902 | <i>Song</i> (A broadsheet) | (No 7 of 12 broadsheets, Elkin Mathews) |
| 1902 | <i>Mountain Lovers</i>
(A broadsheet) | (No 8 of 12 broadsheets, Elkin Mathews) |
| 1902 | <i>The Queen's Vigil</i> | (Vigo Cabinet Series, Elkin Mathews, No 9) |
| 1903 | <i>The Golden Helm</i> | (Elkin Mathews) |
| 1905 | <i>The Nets of Love</i> | (Vigo Cabinet Series, Elkin Mathews, No 28) |
| 1907 | <i>Stonefolds</i> | (Cranleigh and London, Samurai Press) |
| 1907 | <i>On the Threshold</i> | (Cranleigh, Samurai Press) |
| 1908 | <i>The Web of Life</i> | (Cranleigh, Samurai Press) |
| 1910 | <i>Akra the Slave</i> | (Elkin Mathews) |
| 1910 | <i>Daily Bread</i> | (Elkin Mathews, London) |
| 1912 | <i>Daily Bread</i> | (Elkin Mathews, New York) |
| 1912 | <i>Fires</i>
(Three volumes in paperback) | (Elkin Mathews) |
| 1912 | <i>Womenkind</i>
(a play in one act) | (Pilgrim Players Series, No 4, David Nutt) |
| 1913 | <i>Daily Bread</i>
(2nd edition) | (Elkin Mathews) |
| 1914 | <i>Borderlands</i> | (Elkin Mathews) |
| 1914 | <i>Thoroughfares</i> | (Elkin Mathews) |
| 1915 | <i>Battle</i>
<i>Fires</i> (One volume, hardbound) | (Elkin Mathews) |
| 1916 | <i>Stonefolds</i>
(2nd edition) | (Elkin Mathews) |
| 1916 | <i>Friends</i> | (Elkin Mathews) |
| 1917 | <i>Livelihood</i> | (Macmillan) |
| 1917 | <i>Poems 1904 - 1917</i> | (Macmillan, New York) |
| 1918 | <i>Whin</i> | (Macmillan) |

- 1919 *Twenty-three selected poems* (Athenaeum Literature Department,
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1920-1928

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County Museum, Dorchester: 4 letters written to Thomas Hardy

Gloucester Record Office: 2 letters written to Ivor Gurney

The University of Michigan 94 letters written to Maurice Browne
Ann Arbor, Michigan, U.S.A.

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