

Wilfrid Wilson Gibson – Northumberland's People's Poet

*Heatherland and bentland,
Black land and white,
God bring me to Northumberland,
The land of my delight.*

*Land of singing waters,
And words from off the sea,
God bring me to Northumberland,
The land where I would be.*

*Heatherland and bentland,
And valley rich with corn,
God bring me to Northumberland,
The land where I was born.*

[Northumberland, from Whin by Wilfrid Wilson Gibson](#)
[Click To Tweet](#)



Whin was an 1918 anthology by poet Wilfrid Wilson Gibson, formed mainly of poems relating to places in Northumberland. He was Northumberland-born – in Hexham on 2 October 1878 – and lived locally until in his thirties. His first work was published aged just 18, in *The Spectator* magazine.

From the first years of the twentieth century, he wrote poems in a realist style about ordinary people in ordinary language. He was in the vanguard of this approach and his straightforward writing told stories of life among the working class and poor of both the countryside and the city.

A contemporary review in the *Times Literary Supplement* summed up his writing: “He is in close touch with the simple, elementary feelings of humanity; and by associating these with pathetic, peculiar, or heroic incidents in the lives of working folk he achieves truth and poignancy by what seems only to be faithful description.”

His *Daily Bread* of 1910 employed such straightforward style and gained popularity with some three printings.

Gibson maintained this approach during the First World War, imagining front-line realities to write from the viewpoint of ordinary soldiers rather than officers. His book of war poetry, *Battle*, has been credited as an influence on the more well known Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg, Robert Graves and Wilfred Owen. One review of the time commented “Under the impact of the greatest crisis in history, he has been not stunned to silence or babbling song, but awakened to understanding and sober speech, and thereby has proved his genius.”

*He'd even have his joke
While we were sitting tight,
And so he needs must poke
His silly head in sight
To whisper some new jest*

*Chortling. But as he spoke
A rifle cracked...
And now God knows when I shall hear the rest!*
“The Joke”, from *Battle*

This understanding of ‘the heartbreak in the heart of things’ has caused some to dub Gibson as Northumberland’s [“People’s Poet”](#).

Another poem in *Whin* was inspired by Black Stichel hill near Hepple. Gibson’s friend Ivor Gurney set it to music and it has been recorded by several performers including the English operatic baritone Roderick Williams.

* As quoted in *Walks from Wooler*, W Ford Robertson, 1926
Pic: Mike Quinn [[CC BY-SA 2.0](#)], [via Wikimedia Commons](#)