

## Frederick Giles Gibbs

Frederick (Fred) Giles Gibbs was born on 31 October 1866 in London. His parents were James and Mary Gibbs (nee Waine). The family had made plans to move to New Zealand but James' unexpected death meant that Mary made the voyage alone with her nine children. Just a few days out of Nelson in 1877 their ship, the Queen Bee, was wrecked on Farewell Spit and the family took to life rafts before being rescued along with the crew and other passengers.<sup>i</sup>

In Nelson, Fred attended Bishop's School and Nelson College before completing a degree at Canterbury College in 1899 and graduating with first class honours in English and Latin in 1890.<sup>ii</sup>

Returning to Nelson he spent three years as an assistant master at Nelson College before taking on the position as headmaster of Boys' Central School in 1894, remaining the position for 30 years.<sup>iii</sup>

Fred had a keen social conscience and was involved in many community activities and organisations. His passion for astronomy led to a friendship with philanthropist Thomas Cawthron and he acted for some years as Cawthron's assistant. When Cawthron died his will left instructions for the establishment of a scientific institute which was established in his name and Fred became a trust board member.<sup>iv</sup> He was a trustee and secretary to the Nelson School of Music,<sup>v</sup> a trustee of the Suter Art Gallery,<sup>vi</sup> a member of the Nelson Institute (and a passionate supporter of the institute's museum<sup>vii</sup>), lover of the outdoors and a keen tramper and botanist.<sup>viii</sup> He had many business interests (including gold, coal, and iron ore<sup>ix</sup>) and actively promoted Nelson as part of the Nelson Provincial Progress League.<sup>x</sup> Fred kept a weekly diary from 1883 until 1952, which during World War One recorded not only news from the front but also local events and news.<sup>xi</sup> He remained unmarried and died in 1953.

### 1914

On 3 August 1914 while out riding his new Douglas motorcycle in Dovedale, Fred heard that Germany had declared war on Russia. He recorded in his diary: *"Of course this awfully sudden outbreak of war monopolizes all thoughts. Austrian ultimatum to Servia about middle of week followed by Russian mobilization & on Sat evening by Germany declaring war against Russia. It is reported that France is already invaded. General European war seems inevitable & worldwide excitement & alarm prevails."*<sup>xii</sup>

On 6 August he recording the news that Britain, and consequently New Zealand, was at war with Germany: *"A week of terrible excitement & anxiety. On Tues. it was known that Germany had violated neutrality of Belgium. On Wed. afternoon after school on my way to Navy League meeting I learnt that England had declared war on Germany. Since then very little reliable news, but it seems certain that Belgium is making a magnificent resistance at Liege, that Holland had declared war against Germany, that Italy has refused to aid Germany & is more likely to come in with England & that there has been a naval fight in the North Sea but result in not yet disclosed. So far all seems going remarkably well, but of course these are only the first few days. Contingents from overseas Dominions offered & accepted, N.Z. to send 6 or 8,000 men... Anxiety re war naturally makes one feel disinclined for other things."*

Fred's diary entry of 16 August reads: *"War excitement at fever heat. Citizens' meeting at Council Chamber on Mon. Vesp[ers] at which I spoke. Over £2,000 subscribed in Nelson. I have been on Com'ee of management & have had to attend several meetings. Large numbers of men have volunteered for expeditionary force. 1400 left Wn. yesterday probably*

for Samoa. *Nelson's infantry contingent left for Chch yesterday morning. Mounted men will leave this week. Women very busy providing outfits – blankets, shirts, etc.*”

*“So far as we have been given news, the war has gone most favourably for us...German plans have clearly failed & unless things take a very strange turn I cannot think that the war will last long. A revolution in Germany seems a probable outcome... War news of course eagerly sought. I usually go to the Colonist office about midnight.”*

On 23 August Fred records: *“All interest centred in war & not much work done out of school hours but study of maps & articles bearing on subject”*. He continued noting in his diary the progress of the war, writing on 4 October that: *“Some scare in Nelson this week lest German cruiser should raid Nelson, but I have done best to ridicule idea”*.

While the war was on everyone's mind, Fred was also immersed in a battle for public access to the Maitai River and lands. Gibbs' access to swimming holes with his young pupils had been challenged by the Richardson family who lived in the Valley and he had taken the case up with the Nelson City Council, asserting the council should acquire the river and ....for a public reserve. He described his *“novel experience as an amateur lawyer”* on 18 October when he appeared before a Commission considering the case.

At the same time, Nelson was experiencing a draught, which Fred frequently comments on his diary. On 6 December, he noted heavy rain had filled the weir and reservoir, while also recording that the New Zealand Expeditionary Force had arrived in Egypt *“to defend the Turks and for completion of training”*.

On 13 December Fred recorded the results of the general election, in which he acted as a scrutineer. *“Results not yet known as votes of Exped. Force will not be counted till Tues, but [sitting Nelson MP Thomas] Field seems safe & [Prime Minister William] Massey will probably have very small majority.”*

## **1915**

In his role as secretary of the Nelson School of Music, Fred noted on 24 January 1915 that he had had to answer letters in the *Colonist* newspaper directed against Herr Julius Lemmer, the school's German born principal. A couple of weeks later he recorded a visit to Wellington where he met up with Lemmer, who had just arrived back in the country from an extended visit to Europe and Great Britain.

On 7 February he wrote: *“No important war news, except engagement on Suez Canal in which two Nelson men wounded, & Germany's declaration of submarine blockade of Britain”*. Although it was not yet known locally, it was in this 'engagement' that the New Zealand Expeditionary Force suffered its first active casualty of the war, Ngatimoti man William Ham. Fred's battle with the Richardsons over public access to the Maitai River continued and he noted on 14 February that the [Nelson City] *“Council has given Mrs Richardson notice to move fence by Denne's Hole within one week”*. Despite the rain just before Christmas, the drought continued its hold on the region and Fred noted on 21 February that a *“large fire ran over S[outhern] side of Zig Zag [Centre of New Zealand Hill] this afternoon.”* Fortunately the last week of February brought several days of *“quiet warm rain”*, breaking the drought.

It was in last week of February that Fred first mentioned the Dardanelles, noting the English and French fleets were making good progress there. On 25 April he recorded as always the previous week's activities, unaware of the serious loss of life of New Zealand servicemen about to occur in the Dardanelles as the ANZAC Gallipoli campaign began. However, his diary entry dated 16 May recorded: *“War getting very fierce. Terrific fighting on all fronts. At Dardanelles N.Z. casualties already about 800 & full lists not yet to hand.”*

In the middle of July Fred delightedly recorded his surprise that an informal poll of city ratepayers resulted in a three to one majority in favour of the Nelson City Council acquiring Denne's Hole, Big Hole & Recreation Reserve in the Maitai Valley as a public reserve. They were vested in the council in March the following year.

In August Fred attended the Gala Day for the Sick and Wounded Fund. *"Boys assembled at 9.45 & marched to Trafalgar St. Procession passed between our lines & we then joined in. Best procession I have ever seen, many of the displays being excellent. We marched down nearly to Park & then dismissed. I helped with races, which nobody looked at. Gambling shows & produce stalls did a roaring business. About 8000 on ground."*

Fred often commented on the deaths of soldiers he knew or had taught. On 15 August he recorded the *"deep sorrow in the town at the news Captain Jas. Houlker had been killed on 7 August"*. This was followed by his exultant entry on 22 August that there was *"great joy in town Mon a.m. when it was known that Houlker was only wounded and not killed"*.

Fred was philanthropist Thomas Cawthron's assistant and advisor and he recorded the old man's death in his entry of 10 October, noting Cawthron had *"left his money to establish a science and industrial centre but none for observatory."* Fred, a keen amateur astronomer, had been working for several years to get an observatory in the city and was close to achieving this when Cawthron died without formalising his arrangement to fund it.

On 24 October Fred noted his attendance at a farewell to more than 100 reinforcements on the Church Steps, noting that *"a drunken trooper – Wilson – made a speech attacking [Julius] Lemmer"* and that Lemmer's son, Adolph, had registered for service the same week.

The experiences of those who had fought at Gallipoli were referred to a number of times in Fred's diary, including on 21 November when he recorded he had met with one called Aldridge and *"had long yarns with him re his experiences at Anzac"*. Just after Christmas he wrote that *"Boor came around and showed his Anzac photos and told us his experiences"*.

## 1916

Fred Gibbs was a keen outdoorsman and frequently took tramping trips around the province. However, over the summer school holidays of 1915-1916 his trips took on a new focus – that of getting fit for possible war service. He recorded on 30 January: *"Holidays now practically over. As a war economy stayed mostly in Nelson; & in case of age limit for recruits being extended have taken tramps to get fit."*

In April Fred was concerned at a growing scarlet fever epidemic which was sweeping through city schools and of outbreaks of chicken pox, measles, mumps and whooping cough. He wrote on 9 April that he had finally had to close Tasman Street School. A week later he wrote that numbers at Central School were rapidly falling as pupils fell ill and that: *"On Monday & Tuesday we disinfected Tasman St. school, washing down floors, dipping desks & then fumigating with formalin sprayer."* Such was his preoccupation with the health and wellbeing of his schools and pupils that the first ever service to commemorate the Gallipoli landings on what was to become known as Anzac Day did not rate a mention in his diary. Instead he wrote that he had spent the day cleaning out cupboards at school.

As Fred recorded on 11 June that the Battle of Jutland had ended in an *"undoubted British victory"* he commented also on the *"tremendous sensation"* caused by news of Lord Kitchener's death. He said the Silver Bullet Cannonade (a patriotic fundraiser) was starting in Nelson for the benefit of the Sick and Wounded Fund *"but I am standing aloof as it is such a childish method"*.

On 2 July, Fred went up to see the Old People's Home by Nelson Hospital being burnt down. "Great blaze," he wrote, "no water."

At the end of the month flooding caused a lot of damage in the Maitai, and Fred wrote that floodwaters had washed away bridges at Hanby Park and Pole Ford and destroyed sections of road near Smith's [Ford]. There was also a "great slip on Rocks Road." But on 1 October more flooding was recorded in his diary in capital letters: "Another BIG FLOOD, even worse than previous one of a few weeks ago".

The large number of deaths at the Somme reported in local newspapers were noted several times in Fred's diary. On 1 October he wrote: "Very heavy casualty lists coming through. About 200 killed & 500 wounded in last night's paper alone."

Fred's ongoing battle with the Richardsons over public access to the Maitai spilled over into physical force in December. On 10 December he wrote that two days earlier he "had adventure up the Maitai with Mrs Richardson & her 2 girls... Got cut over left eye, at top of nose & on back of head. 10 hits altogether. The finally withdrew & after washing away blood we came home. Saw Serg't Barrett & yesterday put case into hands of Richmond Fell."

## 1917

On 11 Feb Fred recorded the court outcome of his fracas with Mrs Richardson in which "Mrs & Miss R'n gave evidence & were both most malicious & insulting, making us all roar with laughter but of course ruining her chances of success. Decision given on Fri. at 12. £25 damages & costs. This quite satisfactory."

As the war dragged on, more and more Nelson men missing, wounded or killed in action are listed in Fred's diary entries. "22 April, Jack Cock, who, after being wounded a 2nd time, became an airman, is missing." (He was eventually reported as killed.) On 30 September he wrote he was "much grieved to learn that Thomas Hall, that splendid collector of beetles, etc, was killed on action on 20 Aug."

Fred took some of his pupils to the Anzac Day Service on the Church Steps "but on seeing programme of 6 speeches went up Grampians with kerosene fire stick & with assistance of several boys set fire to gorse near track all the way down."

Patriotic fundraisers occupied much of his and his pupils' time. In the middle of September he reported that Saturday was Daffodil Day. "Had to go to school early to start off sellers of button holes. Did some corrections. P.M. had to go to Park to help with races at ceremony of crowning queen, etc. Fine day & great crowd. Over £4,000 made for Lady Liverpool Fund."

On 23 September Fred wrote about the rescue of the crew of the shipwrecked *Port Kembla*. "Great excitement on Tues. P.M. over news that crew of ship wreck being brought to Nelson by *Regulus*. Went down to Port at 4.30 to see them. Great crowd. Boat blown up by internal explosion when near Cape Farewell. Evidently I.W.W. [Industrial Workers of the World<sup>xiii</sup>] work."

## 1918

The toll the long drawn out war was having on the community was evident in Fred's entry of 31 March: "During early part of week especially anxiety re war caused great anxiety & depression making most of us sleep badly but news last few days more reassuring" and 14 April: "An awful week. Anxiety re war news especially last 3 days quite dreadful, making many of us feel quite ill."

On 21 April Fred reported the death of Adolph, the son of his friend and the principal of the Nelson School of Music, Julius Lemmer, for whom the anti-German campaign had stepped up. *"Another sad week. On Monday morning news reached Lemmers that Adolph had died of wounds on 6th inst. Both of them were frightfully cut up – almost distracted & could see no one that day except Mrs Hampson who was very good to them. War news serious but more hopeful. We have lost Messines ridge, Pashchendaele, Neuve Englise, Bailiul, Theteren & other places but are making good resistance."*

Fred continued his work for various patriotic fundraisers including a Returned Soldiers Luncheon and the Italian Red Cross Day, both of which he wrote about on 11 August. *"Big rush for me. Went down early to arrange tables at Prov'l Hall. Had to rush round for milk which had gone astray; then there was no wood & I got Thorpe to drive me to Central School to get supply from wood shed. Too busy to attend meeting (anniversary of war) at Church Steps. W. Lock & I acted as masters of ceremony at luncheon. Provision made for about 250 but we were crowded out."*

In September Fred reported the war news was better with Germany *"retiring at most places from Ypres to Saisons & in some places very rapidly. We have captured Mt Kemmel, Baillleul, Riencourt (near Ineant), Bapaume, Combles, Nesle, Mayon & Juvigny. The interesting question now where the enemy intend to make a stand. They are evidently short of artillery & aeroplanes."*

Unfortunately as the war began drawing to a close, the influenza epidemic sweeping the world arrived in the country. Fred noted on 3 November that *"influenza also very prevalent – has almost paralysed business in Auckland."*

The news that Austria had capitulated and the expectation that Germany would do so soon had Nelson in a state of fevered excitement as Fred recorded on 10 November. *"On Mon at midday word came thro' of Austria's capitulation. The usual rejoicings. Half holiday & meeting at Church Steps at 3. Band & tin can procession in the evening to which I went for a time. After the church steps meeting there was a meeting to make arrangements for bigger demonstration on Germany's surrender, & further sub com'ee meetings."*

*"On Thurs. at 10 to 12 we were assured that Germany had caved in, so I gave out provisional notice but rumour arose from a jest of Snodgrass's & we went on with school as usual. On Friday at 9.10, however, an unofficial extra from New York gave circumstantial account of capitulation, but though many of us protested at accepting anything unofficial, town went mad & meeting of thanksgiving was held at Church Steps at 11. Threatening rain held off till afternoon. Great disgust when it was made clear that the rejoicing was premature."*

He went on to report that the influenza epidemic was *"most serious throughout much of NZ and esp'ly in Auckland. A light form pretty prevalent in Nelson but the Kakap put in here on Friday with the more serious form. A good many children away from school..."*

News of Germany's capitulation was recorded by Fred on 17 November. He had been making final arrangements at his side schools for the expected celebrations when he was advised all schools were to be closed because of the influenza epidemic. *"Tues. went down to school at 9 to send away any children who might turn up & just at 9 bells, etc, began ringing & guns firing to announce Germany's acceptance of armistice terms. Went round town to make sure of news. Watched firing of small brass cannon in Trafalgar St. At 11 great meeting at Church Steps. Knapp had a few of his girls together, but I had no boys in consequence of notice. I was alongside Rev'd Patchett during meeting. All rest of day crowds paraded streets singing patriotic songs & speechifying."*

*"In evening great procession chiefly of motor cars. Mother & party went round in Mrs Sutton's car. Finished up at Church Steps. Fire alarm for gorse on Mount Street. Singing & speechifying till midnight. Huge crowds, well behaved, though a few got drunk. Lucky that hotels close at 6. Wednesday - In A.M. religious service at Church Steps not largely attended. I did not go but went to Park to see about arrangements for the afternoon. "At 1.30 schools fell in – boys at Central, Brook & Tasman in Nile St. We marched to Trafalgar St & with other schools lined Trafalgar St. on both sides from Hardy to Bridge St. Procession passed through & we then went to Trafalgar Park. Massed up in front of stand from which Snodgrass addressed children. Then divided into big boys, big girls & small children & had races for an hour & a half. At 4 went to asphalt & had refreshments, but ran out of drinks before boys were supplied. Wilkes's pony buck jumping caused some excitement.*

*"After tea another great procession like previous evenings went to Park. Great bonfire in which effigies of Kaiser, Crown Prince & Tirpitz were burnt. Fireworks & more singing. I moved about & yarned with many, especially Clegg."*

Amidst the excitement the war was over, authorities continued to deal with the influenza epidemic. Fred attended a public meeting about it and was appointed to an assistance committee. *"Epidemic now serious even in Nelson, though not many deaths so far. But in many families all are down at one time & outside helpers are needed. 70 deaths in the N.Z. camps from influenzas this week. Sid thinks inhalation chambers largely responsible."*

He meanwhile commented on the "pretty drastic" Armistice terms Germany had to agree to. "Germany seems to have got rid of all its kings, etc. & to be a collection of republics. People evidently on verge of starvation."

On 24 November Fred recorded that he had devoted his time to the epidemic and had *"been given a good deal to do, esp. Friday – carrying medicines, soup, puddings, picking lemons, chopping wood, etc. We had a Vigilance Com'ee (?) Friday evening re steamers, etc. On the whole a very broken week. Epidemic seems better but still very bad & causing heavy death rate. Dr Pollen, Val Tennant, Geo. MacMalion's only son, Short the tailor, & a great many other we know slightly."*

By the end of the first week of December he recorded the epidemic was abating rapidly and things were almost back to normal. *"Most places, including pubs. & the library, opened again."*

## **1919**

Friday 25 April 1919 was the first Anzac Day since the end of the war but Fred recorded he did not go to the service on the Church Steps that day. However, the war was still foremost in people's minds as negotiations towards a formal peace treaty continued at Versailles in France and on 25 May he took his school pupils to see the movie *"Surrender of German Fleet"* at the Empire Theatre.

The official proclamation of peace came on 1 July and was received in New Zealand on 3 July. Fred recorded that at midday on the 3<sup>rd</sup> the Boys and Girls Central Schools and Nelson College and Nelson College for Girls marched to the Church Steps and heard the King's Peace Proclamation read on the Church Steps.

Official peace celebrations took place later in the month and on the 27<sup>th</sup> Fred wrote that his pupils had been very busy getting ready for it. *"On Thurs. took S.6 to Tech'l School & nailed 2000 flags on sticks. Very busy all this week re preparations for Peace Celebrations. Sat. up early & went to Haven Rd to make final arrangements for country children's arrangements.*

*At 9.30 all fell in at School & we marched to Trafalgar St. where we & about 200 country children & the Catholic children lined the street while the procession passed through.*

*“The children then moved up to the foot of the Church Steps where the new police were very dilatory in making room for them but finally we all got packed in. Speeches by Snodgrass, Field & Sadlier with singing of patriotic songs & the release of balloons. All went off well tho. speeches too long. Dismissed children to their own homes for dinner.*

*“At 1.30 town schools fell in beyond Park Gates & marched in to form 3 sides of square round lorry. Snodgrass & Pettit gave address & Townsend & some of his C.J. friends tried to conduct the singing in the absence of the band with ludicrous results, always getting pitch too high or too low in spite of my coaching with tuning fork while time went all to pot as Townsend did not know how to beat time. Dispersed to asphalt to learn places & put down flags & then had races – very good fun indeed till 3.25. At 3.25 we went back to asphalt in assigned places & gave children bags containing food & sweets, an apple & a bottle of lemonade.”*

Fred Gibbs continued much of his community work until his death. In 1922 he was unanimously elected a trustee of the newly opened Cawthron Institute,<sup>xiv</sup> although he retired from teaching at the end of 1923.<sup>xv</sup> In 1934 the institute made him the honorary curator of the Atkinson Observatory which had been donated by the Atkinson family.<sup>xvi</sup> He retired from the Nelson School of Music Trust Board in 1951 after 56 years as a trustee,<sup>xvii</sup> and died at his Collingwood Street home on 16 January 1953, aged 86.

The Nelson Provincial Museum is privileged to hold an extensive collection of publications, archives and photographs pertaining to F.G.Gibbs.

*The researched Biography was compiled by Karen Stade, Nelson Provincial Museum, in 2014.*

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<sup>i</sup> Shonadh Mann, F.G. Gibbs, His Influence on the Social History of Nelson 1890-1950, Nelson: Nelson Historical Society, 1977, pp.6-12.

<sup>ii</sup> Mann, pp.14-21.

<sup>iii</sup> Mann, pp.22-26.

<sup>iv</sup> Mann, p.98.

<sup>v</sup> Mann, pp.140-163.

<sup>vi</sup> Mann, pp.122-139.

<sup>vii</sup> Mann, pp.102-121.

<sup>viii</sup> Mann, pp.42-61.

<sup>ix</sup> Mann, pp.62-81.

<sup>x</sup> Mann, p.63.

<sup>xi</sup> F.G. Gibbs diaries 1883-1952. Nelson Provincial Museum: AG85 / 593.

<sup>xii</sup> All diary entries from F.G. Gibbs diaries 1914-1919, Nelson Provincial Museum: AG85 / 593.

<sup>xiii</sup> [http://www.iww.org/history/resolutions/Convention\\_war\\_1916](http://www.iww.org/history/resolutions/Convention_war_1916)

<sup>xiv</sup> Mann, p.98.

<sup>xv</sup> Mann, p.39.

<sup>xvi</sup> Mann, p.100.

<sup>xvii</sup> Mann, p.162.