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## A Chronicle of the Pandemic: Hugh Gibson's Notes on the "Spanish Flu" of 1918

Słowa kluczowe: grypa „hiszpanka”, Hugh S. Gibson, pandemia, 1918 r., Woodrow Wilson, Herbert Hoover, plk Edward House

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### Introduction

In 2021, the COVID-19 virus has left many dead, countless ill and upended all aspects of life around the world. Everywhere people struggle with how to cope with the seemingly infinite difficulties presented by this pandemic. However, this is not the first time a disease of this magnitude has ravaged mankind. A historical perspective can offer insight, comfort and encouragement. Taking an up-close and personal look at the 1918 pandemic and experiencing one man's walk through the thick of things by examining his diaries reminds us that the problems of pandemic have been faced before – and have been overcome!

In spring 1918, Europe had already been at war for four long years when the "Spanish Flu" hit. Of course, the name "Spanish Flu" is a misnomer. The deadly influenza pandemic was caused by what we now know as the H1N1 influenza A virus. It first showed itself at a military training camp at Fort Riley, Kansas, in February 1918. As troops relocated during war time, it quickly spread to major US cities as well as the UK, France and Germany. Again due to wartime conditions, censors minimized the early reports. Neutral Spain published the most accurate updates available – hence the association with Spain.

The worst period of the Spanish Flu was the deadly second wave which began in late August 1918 and continued its non-stop destruction through the end of the year. Two more waves of lesser severity hit in 1919 and 1920. "La Grippe", as it



Il. 1. Hugh S. Gibson, 1919. Source: public domain

became known in French, ultimately infected a third of the world's population, with an estimated death toll of between 50 and 100 million. As with the current pandemic, the virus did not affect all people to the same degree. Experiences vary by geographic location, genetics, general health, and socio-economic status. Then, as now, it appeared that the elites (those whose prosopography assumes wealth, power, prominence or all of these) seem to fare better than others in terms of both staying healthy and rebounding quickly when illness struck. But that does not mean that death did not touch the elites or that illness, suffering, and loss are absent from their lives!

A unique window into the experiences some of the elites who directed the path of both WWI and the concurrent pandemic is offered here from the point of view of Hugh S. Gibson (1883–1954), a dashing young American diplomat. In March 1918, he was posted as Secretary to the U.S. Embassy in Paris with multiple and fascinating tasks which provided him a bird's eye view of the first and second waves of the Spanish Flu. How his colleagues dealt with, and suffered from, the virus was of constant concern for Gibson. Not only did he manage the alarming statistics coming from the battlefields, but he also nursed friends through bouts of illness and experienced the grippe personally. His story illuminates the very human experiences of some of the elite stars of 1918 – vignettes of suffering and death as well as diligence and dedication.

Gibson's diaries offer unique insight into the lives and experiences of his colleagues – some of which is new information to the existing biographies of well-known



Il. 2. Polish National Committee in Paris, 1918.

Sitting: Maurycy Zamoyski, Roman Dmowski, Erazm Piltz Standing: Stanisław Kozicki, Jan Emanuel Rozwadowski, Konstanty Skirmunt, Franciszek Fronczak, Władysław Sobański, Marian Seyda, Józef Wielowieyski.

Source: public domain

historical figures. His diaries also raise questions such as: How are elites affected by pandemics as opposed to the experience of the general population? How is their experience different from the more common experience? As a group, how did the 1918 elites of Gibson's acquaintance carry themselves through this ordeal? How was their work and the world-shaping decisions they made affected by the Spanish Flu and their ability, for the most part, to overcome it? What can those of us currently experiencing pandemic conditions learn from Gibson's experience? Very few, if any, published works address these questions, but Gibson's diaries give us an insider's view.

## Background

Before providing the details of Gibson's background and position in France, it is important to state how this author became aware of this material and its importance. In the process of researching for a graduate class, Gibson's diaries from a 1946 Famine Relief Survey trip with Herbert Hoover that took them around the world in about 90 days<sup>1</sup>. Deeply impressed by the range of Gibson's diplomatic

<sup>1</sup> The resulting paper is available on Academia. Vivian Reed, "Uncommon Diplomacy: Herbert Hoover's Quiet Impact on US-Argentine Relations", February 2017, [https://www.academia.edu/31545511/Uncommon\\_Diplomacy\\_Academia\\_Feb\\_2017](https://www.academia.edu/31545511/Uncommon_Diplomacy_Academia_Feb_2017).

experience and depth of understanding for a wide variety of issues around the post-WWII world, I sought out Hugh's son – Michael Francis Gibson (1929–2017).

At the time I met the scholarly and knowledgeable Michael in 2010, he had been working with his father's papers since inheriting them in 1954. He knew many of the people mentioned first hand and could offer unique insight into his father's experience. For the last seven years of his life, Michael not only gave permission to edit and publish Hugh's papers, but filled in the gaps of my knowledge about the world Hugh inhabited. Michael is the first hand source for my understanding of Hugh Gibson's relationships with the shining lights, or elites, of his day. For the purpose of this paper, the information Michael provided was indispensable. Just for one example, where Hugh mentioned "Frank", Michael positively identified Franklin Roosevelt – which certainly changes the way a century old text is interpreted.

Armed with Michael's identifications and explanations, I could then set about verifying the information Hugh recorded. In almost every case, the information lined up perfectly with what was available through other sources. What is presented here is Hugh's account of how he and his colleagues (often the top military and diplomatic leaders of the day) experienced the Spanish Flu. The quotes are from Hugh Gibson's diaries, which were published as *An American in Europe at War and Peace: Hugh Gibson's Chronicles, 1918–1919* (edited by Vivian Reed and Jochen Böhrer, Oldenbourg: DeGruyter, 2020). Hugh's recorded words are enhanced by Michael's information and my own research. With the stage of the research set, it's time to set the stage for Gibson's assignment in France and his subsequent experience with the Spanish Flu.

Hugh Gibson arrived in Paris in March 1918 as the diplomatic adviser to General John Pershing of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) in France. Gibson was also assigned as diplomatic advisor to G2 – American Intelligence Headquarters, where he worked closely with Generals Dennis Nolan and Ralph Van Deman. In addition, he was tasked to straighten out some of the more unfortunate impressions created by various independent agents of George Creel's Committee for Public Information.

As if that were not enough to keep a young diplomat busy, by summer 1918 Gibson was also appointed the official liaison between the US and both the Czech and Polish national committees.

Upon the Armistice of November 11, 1918, Gibson refocused his efforts from military/intelligence to humanitarian affairs as the diplomatic advisor of Herbert Hoover's American Relief Administration (ARA). In addition to representing the US to the Poles and the Czechs, he travelled east and assessed the situation facing Austrians, Italians, Hungarians, and Yugoslavians from political and economic, as well as humanitarian perspectives in January 1919.

As he moved in the world of politicians, spies, military personnel and intellectuals, Gibson's adventures are interspersed with encounters with what later became

known as the second wave of the Spanish Flu. For the purpose of this paper, the entries with specific reference to the flu have been extracted and examined. Notes are provided to guide the reader through Gibson's complex diplomatic involvements and personal relationships. Gibson's words are presented here in italics, with my own contributions in normal print.

Paris. Saturday, October 5, 1918

After lunch went over for Clarence [Gagnon] and spent a solid hour getting a taxi to take Clarence to the hospital. Finally got a decent driver and got Clarence dressed and into the cab. He seemed to be just on the verge of delirium and not at all sure either in his thoughts or movements. The old concierge was good and helpful and we got away easily.

Dr. Moore received us at the hospital and after one look at Clarence and feeling his pulse, called for a chair and had him carried upstairs. I waited while he made an examination. When he finally came downstairs he looked very grave and said that Clarence had an unusually bad case of flu with bronchial pneumonia to aggravate it"<sup>2</sup>.

Clarence A. Gagnon (1881–1942) was a Canadian painter whom Gibson befriended when both men were students in Paris, 1905–1907. Gibson's early diplomatic career took him to various localities in Latin American. As was to become his custom, he chronicled his adventures daily. An entertaining writer, Gibson thought to publish his Latin American adventures and approached his friend Gagnon about illustrating them<sup>3</sup>. These stories, and their illustrations, have yet to surface in archival records. Oddly enough, neither Gagnon's presence in Paris during WWI nor his experience with the Spanish Flu are mentioned in his readily available biographies<sup>4</sup>, making Gibson's diary a unique contribution to the body of knowledge about Gagnon. Gagnon's work can be seen at the National Gallery of Canada<sup>5</sup>.

Paris. Saturday, October 5, 1918

A little after noon a story came thru from Switzerland to say that Germany had made an appeal to the President at the instigation of Turkey for a general armistice with a view to discussion of terms. The censorship had stopped it and forbidden publication but later in the afternoon the news was confirmed and the govt. decided to release it for publication tomorrow morning. The mot d'ordre was passed out that this was merely a political trick to usher in Max of Baden with the proper setting and rally to his support the discontented elements.

<sup>2</sup> Hugh Gibson, *An American in Europe at War and Peace: Hugh Gibson's Chronicles, 1918–1919*, eds. Vivian Reed, Jochen Böhrer (Oldenbourg: DeGruyter, 2020), 354.

<sup>3</sup> Information about Gibson's schooling and friendship with Gagnon courtesy of Michael Francis Gibson.

<sup>4</sup> Albert H. Robson, *Clarence A. Gagnon* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1945); "Clarence Alphonse Gagnon", Prabook (<https://prabook.com/web/clarence.gagnon/2512330>). Accessed 10/28/2021.

<sup>5</sup> "Clarence Gagnon", National Gallery of Canada, <https://www.gallery.ca/collection/artist/clarence-gagnon>. Accessed 10/28/2021.

I telephoned the news to the Ambassador and put in a call for GHQ but did not get thru. [...] Feeling very groggy with the flu so took a hot bath and got early to bed after setting back the clock for the end of summer time<sup>6</sup>.

Max of Baden (1867–1929) was the heir apparent to the throne of the Grand Duchy of Baden. On October 3, 1918, Kaiser Wilhelm I appointed Max as Chancellor of the German Reichstag. Max hoped to unite a war-weary Germany behind him and played a pivotal role in moving Germany from the old regime into a parliamentary government. At Max's instigation, US President Wilson received a request from the German Reichstag requesting an armistice based on his Fourteen Points on October 4. Given the lack of unity within Germany and the hostility of the French and British, Max chose to make his request through the US Embassy in Switzerland, where Gibson had close personal connections with Hugh Wilson (introduced below) and Ernest Schelling. Schelling, a life-long friend of Gibson's, was an American musician who served as Assistant Military Attaché at the Embassy in Berne – and he was a spy<sup>7</sup>.

President Wilson responded to the armistice request cautiously, with a list of preconditions including German democratization, withdrawal from all occupied lands, and a total cessation of U-boat attacks. This triggered further disunity within the German leadership, and the armistice was not declared until the fateful day of November 11, 1918<sup>8</sup>.

A few details are notable in this diary entry. First, Gibson received this news personally through his sources in Switzerland, and then informed Ambassador William Sharp (1859–1922). It is also noteworthy in the midst of the ongoing negotiations between October 4 and November 11, Max of Baden was seriously ill with the Spanish Flu<sup>9</sup>. Finally, Gibson records at the end of this entry that he was ill himself by the end of the day.

Paris. Tuesday, October 22, 1918

With the morning papers came the memo from Benes. I settled down to thump out my own telegrams, only to learn that my typewriter would not work as Stetson had

<sup>6</sup> *An American in Europe at War and Peace*, 354.

<sup>7</sup> Information about the espionage adventures of Ernest Schelling courtesy of Michael Francis Gibson. This is supported by the documents contained in the "Schelling (Ernest) papers" at the Hoover Institution Archives, <https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/c86h4fvn/?query=Ernest+Schelling>. Accessed 10/28/2021.

<sup>8</sup> For concise discussions of the armistice correspondence, see Patrick J. Kiger "Why World War I Ended with an Armistice Instead of a Surrender", History Channel, November 8, 2018, <https://www.history.com/news/world-war-i-armistice-germany-allies> and "How Peace Came in 1918" (CQ Researcher), <https://library.cqpress.com/cqresearcher/document.php?id=cqresrre1944031600>. Accessed 10/28/2021.

<sup>9</sup> This detail is from an undisputed claim within Max of Baden's biography on Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prince\\_Maximilian\\_of\\_Baden](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prince_Maximilian_of_Baden). Although not verified elsewhere, it is likely true. Accessed 10/28/2021.

knocked it over last night and put it on the fritz. Reaching the chancery I found that my stenographer had chosen this time to have the flu<sup>10</sup>.

Edvard Beneš (1884–1948) was Secretary of the Czechoslovak National Council in Paris 1916–1918<sup>11</sup>. In September 1918, Gibson was appointed as the official US liaison to this group as well as the Polish National Committee as both worked for independence for their nations. Beneš kept in close touch with Gibson, supplying him with statistics, plans and drafts of materials to be presented to the Peace Commission. Gibson, with the full support and authority of the U.S. State Department, supplied advice as to what might garner American support and how to document their progress<sup>12</sup>.

John Batterson Stetson, Jr. (1884–1952) volunteered for military duty in 1917, was an aviation instructor in France, and remained on active duty until 1920. Part of his duty brought him to the US Embassy in Paris. During his time, he and Gibson not only worked together but shared a hard-to-procure flat. Later both would serve as US Ambassadors to Poland – Gibson 1919–1924 and Stetson 1925–1930. And yes, John Jr. was the son of the famous western hat maker!<sup>13</sup>

Paris. Saturday, October 26, 1918

Woke up groggy with the flu but staggered down to the chancery to see whether I would be needed in connection with Col. House and the other visiting firemen. Nothing happened all morning and I let them alone as I knew they would be overrun with people who thought they had urgent business with them; and furthermore they knew that they could call me if I was wanted<sup>14</sup>.

Edward Mandell House (1858 –1938) was an American diplomat, and an advisor to President Woodrow Wilson. He was known by the nickname the “Colonel” although he had performed no military service. He never held public office but was Wilson’s chief advisor on European politics and diplomacy both during World War I and the Paris Peace Conference.

<sup>10</sup> *An American in Europe*, 370.

<sup>11</sup> Zbyněk Zeman, *The Life of Edvard Beneš 1884–1948: Czechoslovakia in Peace and War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> Hugh Gibson is the primary source of his own involvement with the Czech National Committee in 1918. Once aware of his involvement, it became possible to find evidence at the Department of State’s Office of the Historian. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1918Supp01v01/d845>. Accessed 10/28/2021. According to diplomatic protocol, US Ambassador Sharp officially signed and received correspondence from the State Department. However, Gibson was tasked with handling all correspondence between the Czechs and various members of the US diplomatic corps. It was Gibson who authored the telegrams (specific to Czechoslovakia and in 1918–1919) recorded in the official archives of US Foreign Relations.

<sup>13</sup> “JOHN B. STETSON JR., EX-DIPLOMAT, DIES; Minister to Poland in 1925–29, Air Captain in World War I –Hat Manufacturer’s Son”, *The New York Times*, (November 16, 1952). Accessed 10/28/2021.

<sup>14</sup> *An American in Europe*, 373.

House played a major role in developing Wilson's famous Fourteen Points and shaping wartime diplomacy. He strongly supported the Czechoslovak and Polish national movements and was instrumental in choosing Gibson as the official US representative to both<sup>15</sup>. During the winter of 1919, Gibson's good standing with the State Department and the favor he had curried with House led Wilson to appoint him as the first US Minister to Poland in April 1919<sup>16</sup>.

On March 26, 1919, as he awaited his next appointment, Gibson penned a tribute to House:

Ode to Colonel House  
 Wholly unquotable  
     Always ungoatable  
 Secretly notable  
     Silence's Spouse.  
 Darkly inscrutable  
  
     Quite irrefutable  
 Nobly immutable  
     Edward M. House<sup>17</sup>

Paris. Sunday, October 27, 1918

Woke up with a good start of flu so took it easy – went down to the chancery before lunch and found little to do.

There was a telegram from Osuský (sent through the Minister at Berne) to say that Staněk and the other Czechs had arrived from Vienna and were anxious to see Benes. I wrote a note to Strimpl giving him the text of the message and then went my way<sup>18</sup>.

Gibson, as the official US liaison with the Czechoslovak National Committee in Paris, was the natural person to receive this telegram from Geneva via the American Legation in Bern. Osuský announced that František Staněk, a leader of the Czechoslovak National Movement in Paris, had arrived in Geneva for the purpose of bringing together the domestic and exiled Czech leaders. The men who met Staněk in Geneva were Karel Kramář, Edvard Beneš, Štefan Osuský, Václav J. Klobáček, Gustav Habrman – Czech leaders from Prague. At noon the next day, independence from the Austro-Hungarian Empire was declared. October 28, 1918 became Czechoslovakian Independence Day<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> Charles E. Neu, *Colonel House: A Biography of Woodrow Wilson's Silent Partner* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>16</sup> Vivian Reed, et al., *An American in Warsaw: Selected Writings of Hugh S. Gibson, US Minister to Poland, 1919–1924* (Rochester, New York: University of Rochester Press, 2018).

<sup>17</sup> *An American in Warsaw: Selected Writings of Hugh S. Gibson, US Minister to Poland 1919–1924* (Rochester, New York: University of Rochester Press, 2018), 25.

<sup>18</sup> *An American in Europe*, 376.

<sup>19</sup> "The Birth of Czechoslovakia, 101 Years Ago", Prague Morning, October 28, 2019, <https://www.praguemorning.cz/the-birth-of-czechoslovakia-101-years-ago/>; "The Meaning



Štefan Osuský (1889–1973) was a Slovak lawyer, diplomat and academician. After studying in the US for ten years, he earned a JD degree in Chicago. During his American sojourn, he was active in expatriate organizations and returned to Europe as vice-president of the Slovak League. Between 1917 and 1918, he was the director of a Czecho-Slovak news agency in Geneva which brought him into contact with the American Legation in Switzerland. Later he served as Czech representative to the UK, secretary-general of the Czecho-Slovak delegation at the Paris Peace Conference, and Ambassador to France 1921–1939<sup>20</sup>.

Paris. Monday, October 28, 1918

A long afternoon devoted to doing my own typing in the absence of Miss Bennet who took one look at the large supply of work I had set out for her and then went home with a temperature. And after getting everything arranged it developed that the courier could not go till tomorrow night as the day trains have been taken of “because of the flu”<sup>21</sup>.

In the fall of 1918, humanity was shocked by the deadly second wave of the Spanish Flu. It was more infectious, caused harsher symptoms faster, and was even more deadly than the current COVID-19. This was particularly true because it targeted young persons in their prime rather than the elderly and health-compromised persons as does COVID-19<sup>22</sup>.

Communications in 1918 were not what we enjoy today. While we are inundated by news flashes and sound bites, Gibson and all the world’s leaders had to wait hours or days for information, responses or orders. Telephone service was new and rudimentary. Telegrams were more reliable but still took time and/or passed through many hands. Because security was paramount, couriers were often employed to physically deliver sensitive information to specific persons.

Part of Gibson’s job in Paris was managing information. This included diplomatic, military and intelligence matters. The Silver Greyhounds<sup>23</sup> were established

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of Czech Independence”, Radio Prague International, October 28, 2013, <https://www.radio.cz/en/section/special/the-meaning-of-czech-independence-day>; “National Holiday 28<sup>th</sup> October”, Government Information Centre, ICV, April 11, 2009, <https://icv.vlada.cz/en/media-centrum/tema/national-holiday-28th-october-63822/tmplid-676/>; Marek Junek, “Foundation of Czechoslovakia”, National Museum of Prague, <https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/foundation-of-czechoslovakia-national-museum-prague/kgLCJvQpMS8GIw?hl=en>. Accessed 10/28/2021.

<sup>20</sup> Blanka Pasternak, *Register of the Štefan Osuský papers* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Library and Archives),

[https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/kt5p30142c/entire\\_text/](https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/kt5p30142c/entire_text/). Accessed 10/28/2021.

<sup>21</sup> *An American in Europe*, 375.

<sup>22</sup> Alan Mozes, “Four Lessons From the 1918 Spanish Flu Pandemic”, WebMD, April 20, 2020, <https://www.webmd.com/lung/news/20200420/four-lessons-from-the-1918-spanish-flu-pandemic#1>. Accessed 10/28/2021.

<sup>23</sup> Vince Crawley, “U.S. Diplomatic Couriers: A Historic Timeline”, *Foreign Service Journal* (2019), <https://www.afsa.org/us-diplomatic-couriers-historic-timeline>. Accessed 10/28/2021.

by General John Pershing in March 1918 and utilized by Gibson on many occasions, including this one. After the Armistice of November 11, 1918 the Silver Greyhounds were incorporated into the State Department and continued moving diplomatic pouches throughout Europe throughout the Paris Peace Conference (which Gibson would attend in person on June 28, 1919).

The strongest wave of influenza hit Americans during the battle of Meuse-Argonne, September 26 – November 11. Hospital trains were designed to help meet the need of caring for injured and ill servicemen. On certain days, like this one, other train traffic (and sometime the train cars themselves) were commandeered to evacuate persons to safe zones<sup>24</sup>.

Paris. Saturday, November 2, 1918

A morning of misery with the flu. Had about made up my mind to go home to bed when Walter Lippmann telephoned from Col. House to say that there were some things they wanted me to do and asked me to stay on during the afternoon<sup>25</sup>.

Walter Lippmann (1889–1974) was then a captain in the US Army serving in the intelligence section of the AEF headquarters in France. He and Gibson worked closely together. As the war was grinding toward the armistice, Lippmann was assigned to Edward House, special adviser to President Woodrow Wilson, and attached to the American Commission to Negotiate Peace. Lippmann was one of the founders of THE NEW REPUBLIC magazine. He was later credited for coining the phrase “cold war” with his book of the same name in 1947<sup>26</sup>. He went on to serve in several official capacities and with two Pulitzer Prizes (1958 and 1961)<sup>27</sup>.

Paris. Sunday, November 3, 1918

Got up late and spent most of the day fighting off the flu. Martin Egan came in a little after noon and stayed on till just before dinner... [H]e does not go in much for the idea of a League of Nations, but that if it must be we should have a National League and a Bush League which can contribute members as they become worthy<sup>28</sup>.

Martin Egan (1872–1938) was an American newspaperman who negotiated with the Japanese Government to help the Associated Press achieve an outstanding “beat” on the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905). Between 1910 and 1938, Egan was associated with JP Morgan and Co. He interrupted this tenure to serve as one

<sup>24</sup> “Brief Histories of Combat Divisions”, U.S. Army Medical Department, July 21, 2009, [https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/war\\_losses\\_usa/2014-10-08](https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/war_losses_usa/2014-10-08). Accessed 10/28/2021.

<sup>25</sup> *An American in Europe*, 379.

<sup>26</sup> Walter Lippmann, *The Cold War: A Study in U.S. Foreign Policy* (London: Harper Press, 1947).

<sup>27</sup> Ronald Steel, *Walter Lippmann and the American Century* (London: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>28</sup> *An American in Europe*, 381.

of General Pershing's top civilian advisers for public relations and propaganda during 1918, bringing him into close association with Hugh Gibson<sup>29</sup>.

By the end of October 1918, Egan had dubbed Gibson as "Yougo Gibson", a nod to his assignment as Liaison to both the Polish and Czech National Committees<sup>30</sup>.

Paris. Saturday, November 9, 1918

A quiet day cleaning up messes and getting ready to enjoy news when it does come. Spent the morning dictating accumulated correspondence to a real stenographer who came to work for me yesterday.

The morning papers are full of news of disorders in Germany, riots at Kiel and Hamburg and Cuxhaven. The Republic seems to be declared at Munich, the Minister has resigned in Württemberg and hades is popping all over the ex-Empire [...].

The TIMES announces the death of Tom Hinckley who was here last week and went to London for a few days leave. He was feeling splendidly when here and nobody could have guessed that he would be snuffed out in this way.

Late in the afternoon word came in that the Kaiser had abdicated, the Kronprinz abandoning his claims to the throne and Max of Baden being placed in the position of Regent<sup>31</sup>.

November 1918 was revolutionary in Germany. In Kiel, the sailors in the German Navy mutinied rather than face a potential suicide mission of a final attack when the war was all but over<sup>32</sup>. In Hamburg, food was in such short supply that angry crowds of hungry people stormed bakeries leading to a harsh crackdown by civil authorities. The revolts quickly spread around the nation<sup>33</sup>.

Thomas Hinckley (1888–1918) was a Foreign Service officer who had served in San Salvador, Vienna, Madrid and Rome (1912–1918). His papers are kept at Georgetown University Archives along with the papers of his family, many of whom also served in the Foreign Service. He was just thirty years old when struck down by "purple death" – another name for the influenza of 1918. It began much like any other flu, but with a deadly twist of lung disease which often killed the victim – sometimes within mere hours<sup>34</sup>.

<sup>29</sup> John Maxwell Hamilton, *Manipulation the Masses: Woodrow Wilson and the Birth of American Propaganda* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2020); "Martin Egan", Find a Grave Memorial, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/116595951/martin-egan>. Accessed 10/28/2021.

<sup>30</sup> *An American in Europe*, 377.

<sup>31</sup> *An American in Europe*, 388.

<sup>32</sup> "The Sailors who Brought the German Empire Down", *The Local* (October 30, 2015), <https://www.thelocal.de/20151030/the-sailors-who-brought-down-the-german-empire/>. Accessed 10/28/2021.

<sup>33</sup> David Bilton, *Images of War: The German Army on the Western Front, 1917–1918* (Barnsley–South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword Books, 2007).

<sup>34</sup> "Hinckley, Thomas", *Register of the Department of State* (December 23, 1918): 122, <https://books.google.com/books?id=oM8KAAAAIAAJ&pg=PA122&lpg=PA122&dq=thomas+hinckley+1918+vienna&source=bl&ots=SEePTplNDw&sig=ACfU3U0woVUPQwLg7c2OGVhp2y>

Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm “Willy” (1882–1952) was the eldest son of Kaiser Wilhelm II. Between 1914 and 1916 he commanded Germany’s 5<sup>th</sup> Army. Along with Max of Baden, he argued in favor of Germany’s pursuit of peace, unsuccessfully. His reign collapsed with the German Empire on November 9, 1918. Willy abdicated along with his father, the emperor, and fled to the Netherlands. With a dramatic flare, he chose to return to Germany on November 9, 1923. Upon the mistaken idea that Hitler might restore the monarchy, Willy lent his early support to the Nazi party. However, his support was withdrawn upon the murder of former Chancellor Kurt von Schleicher, his friend, on June 30, 1934. After WWII, Willy was captured and interned as a war criminal<sup>35</sup>.

Armistice Day, Paris. Monday, November 11, 1918

The armistice was signed at five this morning and went into effect at 11. Foch came to town during the morning and spent a good part of the day at the Ministry of War but was not in evidence. The terms were not made public until after Clemenceau had announced them in the Chamber during a scene of historic enthusiasm. Word began to get round during the morning that the signature was an accomplished fact and before long all work had been stopped so that people could celebrate. Flags came blossoming out on all houses and groups of people went parading the streets singing and cheering for Clemenceau and anything else that occurred to them at the moment<sup>36</sup>.

At the height of the devastating second wave of the Spanish Flu came Armistice Day. The Armistice went into effect at the poetic moment of 11<sup>th</sup> hour of the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the 11<sup>th</sup> month of 1918. However, thousands of men died that between when the deal was signed at 5 am on that fateful day and the effective time of 11 am. The AEF on the Western Front alone lost more than 3,500 men. It is estimated that as many as 11,000 men died that morning on the battle fields or from the Flu<sup>37</sup>.

In America, Armistice Day was celebrated every year until 1954 when President Eisenhower changed the name to Veterans Day to include those who served in World War II and the Korean War. Today, Americans still honor all veterans

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<sup>35</sup> “Ex-Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm, Born May 6 1882. Eldest Son of Former Kaiser Wilhelm II and Heir Apparent to the Throne until He Abdicated, December 1, 1918”, Library of Congress, World Digital Library. <https://www.wdl.org/en/item/19322/>; “Wilhelm Kronprinz von Preussen”, *The Prussian Machine*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20180617035117/http://prussianmachine.com/aok/fwkronprinz.htm>. Accessed 10/28/2021.

<sup>36</sup> *An American in Europe*, 390.

<sup>37</sup> Joseph E. Persico, “Nov. 11, 1919: Wasted Lives on Armistice Day”, *Army Times* (November 9, 2017), <https://www.armytimes.com/veterans/salute-veterans/2017/11/10/nov-11-1918-wasted-lives-on-armistice-day/>.

on November 11<sup>38</sup>. Around the world, it is common to observe two minutes of silence at 11 am every November 11<sup>th</sup>. In Poland, November 11 is also celebrated as Polish Independence Day<sup>39</sup>.

Paris. Wednesday, November 13, 1918

Arthur Page laid up with a touch of flu and spent the day in bed. He has sent his resignation to James and is ready to go home in the course of the next few weeks<sup>40</sup>.

Arthur Wilson Page (1883–1960) was the son of Walter Hines Page, US Ambassador to the UK 1913–1918. He became acquainted with Gibson in 1916 when Gibson was assigned to London to work under Walter. A friendship was born that lasted a lifetime.

After graduating from Harvard College in 1905, Arthur Page worked in his father's publishing company, Doubleday, Page & Co. He edited for several magazines, becoming the editor for *The World's Work* (a monthly edition published between 1900 and 1932 covering business practices in world politics) in 1913. In 1916, Arthur became Vice President of Doubleday, taking on new editorial and management tasks, as well as continuing as editor of *World's Work*. Doubleday is the publisher of several of Hugh Gibson's works, including the first: *A Journal from Our Legation in Belgium* (1917)<sup>41</sup>.

In 1918, Arthur took a leave of absence from Doubleday in order to serve with the intelligence staff of the AEF in Europe. This brought him to Paris, and back into close contact with Hugh Gibson. In fact, they shared an apartment for a time – as well as an unknown amount of intelligence work<sup>42</sup>. After recovering from his bout of the Spanish Flu, Arthur returned to the publishing world through the end of 1926.

Arthur Page was best known for his public relations work with AT&T (1927–1946). When he began, AT&T had largely negative press coverage. Under Page's guidance, changes in business practices and new ways of disseminating information drastically improved public perception of the telecommunications giant. Page promoted the concept that the responsibility of such a large corporation imposed an unusual moral obligation on management to serve their customers well<sup>43</sup>.

<sup>38</sup> Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs, "History of Veterans Day", U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, <https://www.va.gov/opa/vetsday/vetdayhistory.asp>. Accessed 10/28/2021.

<sup>39</sup> Marek Kepa, "Why Does Poland Celebrate Independence Day on 11<sup>th</sup> November?", Culture.pl (November 5, 2018), <https://culture.pl/en/article/why-does-poland-celebrate-independence-day-on-11th-november>. Accessed 10/28/2021.

<sup>40</sup> *An American in Europe*, 392.

<sup>41</sup> Hugh Gibson, *A Journal from Our Legation in Belgium* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1917). Doubleday also published Gibson's *Belgium* (1939); *The Road to Foreign Policy* (1944); *The Ciano Diaries: 1939–1943* (1946); *The Goebbels Diaries: 1942–1943* (1948) as well as *The Problems of Lasting Peace* (1942) which Gibson co-authored with Herbert Hoover.

<sup>42</sup> *An American in Europe*, 346–402.

<sup>43</sup> Noel L. Griese, *Arthur W. Page: Publisher, Public Relations Pioneer, Patriot* (Atlanta: Anvil Publishers, Inc., 2001); "About Page", Arthur W. Page Society, 2020, <https://page.org/site/about>;

Paris. Monday, November 18, 1918

At noon went over to see Colonel House who said the Department had approved the idea of establishing an intelligence service in Central Europe. He wants to suggest now that Hoover and I lay the basis for the system and that I remain at the end of the trip at HQ in Vienna to oversee the work of the various agents sent in to gather information. He asked me to talk the matter over with Joe Grew who is laid up in bed with the flu and draw a cable for him to sign. [...] Went down to the Ritz to see Joe and found him groggy with flu. He agreed with enthusiasm to the idea of my handling the other end of the intelligence and we drew up a telegram for the Colonel<sup>44</sup>.

When the US entered WWI in 1917, the Allies warned the AEF that protection against sabotage, subversion and enemy spying were critical. The Corps of Intelligence Police was born and surged to 418 agents by January 1918. Altogether, they investigated 3,706 cases and “neutralized 229 suspected enemy agents through conviction, internment or expulsion from the war zone”. They also compiled a centralized file of over 160,000 names for cross-checking purposes and provided security for traveling VIP’s<sup>45</sup>.

In command was Gibson’s friend, G2 General Dennis Nolan, who worked very hard to recruit Gibson into their ranks. Although he never donned a uniform, Gibson worked closely with him throughout the war and into the activities of the ARA. His work, like that of many other, has gone unrecognized – due primarily to the secret nature of the work and Gibson’s modest nature.

Dennis E. Nolan (1872–1956) graduated from West Point in 1896 and fought under General John Pershing in the Philippines during the Spanish American War. After teaching history at West Point in 1902–1903, Nolan was recruited to serve in the intelligence section of the General Staff in Washington. In 1917, General Pershing selected him to be the new intelligence chief in Europe – a task which meant building a critical organization from virtually nothing. He did it well, earning the title of “Father of American Military Intelligence” from James J. Cooke<sup>46</sup>. Gibson met Nolan early in his assignment to Paris, in March 1918. The two saw eye to eye on a number of critical issues, and a fast friendship was born<sup>47</sup>.

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“Pioneer – Arthur Page”, The Museum of Public Relations, <https://www.prmuseum.org/pioneer-arthur-page>. Accessed 10/28/2021.

<sup>44</sup> *An American in Europe*, 399.

<sup>45</sup> Lori S. Tagg, “Intelligence ‘police’ established in WWI American Expeditionary Forces”, US Army (September 21, 2017), [https://www.army.mil/article/194191/intelligence\\_police\\_established\\_in\\_wwi\\_american\\_expeditionary\\_forces](https://www.army.mil/article/194191/intelligence_police_established_in_wwi_american_expeditionary_forces).

<sup>46</sup> James J. Cooke, “Brigadier General Nolan”, in *General Pershing and His Generals: Command and Staff in the AEF* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 1997), [http://www.worldwar1.com/dbc/nolan\\_dennis.htm](http://www.worldwar1.com/dbc/nolan_dennis.htm). Accessed 10/28/2021

<sup>47</sup> *An American in Europe*, 42 and on.

Joseph Grew (1880–1965) was an American diplomat who was acting chief of the State Department Division of Western European Affairs 1917–1919 and secretary of the American Peace Commission in Paris 1919–1920. Grew is best remembered as Ambassador to Japan 1932–1941, where he was interned after Pearl Harbor<sup>48</sup>.

Indicative of their close friendship (and Gibson’s wry sense of humor) is this little entry in Gibson’s diary from April 10:

I went home to lunch with Joe Grew to see the children who have just arrived from America. They are a good lot and enjoyed being named THE BIG FOUR. The name fits and besides, think of the standing one gets by going about Paris talking casually about lunching and dining with the Big Four<sup>49</sup>.

Gibson and Grew worked closely together for the rest of their lives.

Paris. Tuesday, November 19, 1918

Walter [Lippmann] came home to lunch with me. Arthur [Page] was up for lunch in the dining room. Merz was discharged cured after lunch and Walter took his place to get cured of an incipient case of flu<sup>50</sup>.

Charles Merz (1893–1977) was an American journalist dedicated to the American ideal of democracy. After graduating from Yale in 1915, he worked for *Harper’s Weekly* before becoming the Washington correspondent for the *New Republic* in 1916. During the US involvement with the war, Merz worked in military intelligence, bringing him into Gibson’s sphere of influence. It was Merz and Walter Lippmann who compiled the press coverage survey of the Russian Revolution in 1917 in which they were very critical of the *New York Times* coverage of the events<sup>51</sup>.

Later, in 1931, Merz went to work for the *New York Times*, serving as editor from 1938–1961. His editorials were strongly opposed to the activities of Senator Joseph McCarthy<sup>52</sup>.

During the shattering second wave of the Spanish Flu, Merz fell ill and was hospitalized in November. By the time he was well enough to be discharged, Lippmann was ill enough to be admitted. And so the flu spread.

<sup>48</sup> Joseph C. Grew, *Turbulent Era: A Diplomatic Record of Forty Years 1904–1945* (Maplewood, NJ: Hammond and Hammond, 1953).

<sup>49</sup> *An American in Europe*, 636.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, 401.

<sup>51</sup> See Merz and Lippmann, “A Test of the News”, *The New Republic, Supplement*, Vol. XXIII, Part II, No. 296 (August 4, 1920), <https://archive.org/details/LippmannMerzATestoftheNews>. Accessed 10/28/2021.

<sup>52</sup> “Charles Merz, Editor of the New York Times, 1938–1961”, Sandusky Library, Sandusky Ohio (February 25, 2017), <http://sanduskyhistory.blogspot.com/2017/02/charles-merz-editor-of-new-york-times.html>. Accessed 10/28/2021.

Paris. Sunday, December 1, 1918

I got up this morning to learn the sad news that Willard Straight had died in the night of pneumonia. He had a long pull but even his magnificent strength was not enough to bring him through. His poor wife is on the other side of the water and could not come over. Walter Lippmann, Martin Egan and Mrs. [Florence] Harriman did everything that could be done but he was delirious for over a week and there was little hope<sup>53</sup>.

Willard D. Straight (1880–1918) led a full, if shortened by the flu, life. After being orphaned at age 10, Straight graduated from Cornell University College of Architecture in 1901. In 1911, he married Dorothy Whitney Elmhirst (1887–1968), a member of the prominent Whitney family. Three children were born in 1912, 1914 and 1916 respectively<sup>54</sup>. Straight's first job took him to China where he ended up working as a correspondent for Reuters from Korea during the Russo-Japanese War (1904). He served in various Consul roles in Korea, Cuba, and China before going to work for J.P. Morgan & Co.

When the US entered the war in 1917, Straight joined up serving as a major on the General Staff, AEF. At first, his task was to direct the government insurance program for American soldiers in Europe for which he received a Distinguished Service Medal in July 1918 for his capable administration of the War Risk Bureau, which handled insurance issues for the entire AEF<sup>55</sup>.

By November, Straight was attached to French General Foch's office and worked closely with Walter Lippmann on intelligence issues. Straight quickly earned the approval of top American officials like Norman Davis, chairman of the American Red Cross, and Edward House, special adviser to President Wilson. House soon recruited Straight as a senior member of the planning committee for the American Commission to Negotiate Peace in Paris as the war ground to a halt<sup>56</sup>.

Two weeks after the Armistice of November 11<sup>th</sup>, Straight was desperately ill with the flu. Complications ensued and pneumonia developed. He died on December 1, 1918. His youngest child was just two years old<sup>57</sup>.

After Willard's untimely death, Dorothy honored him by building a student union in his name on the campus of Cornell University. Willard Straight Hall opened in 1925 – one of the first student unions in the country. It still serves the

<sup>53</sup> *An American in Europe*, 420.

<sup>54</sup> "The Willard Dickerman Straight Papers", CalPoly University Library, Pomona, California, <https://www.cpp.edu/~library/special-collections/WillardDStraight.shtml>. Accessed 10/28/2021.

<sup>55</sup> "Maj Willard Dickerman Straight", Find-a-Grave Memorial, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/55952045/willard-dickerman-straight>. Accessed 10/28/2021.

<sup>56</sup> Margaret MacMillan, *Paris 1919: Six Months that Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2003); Arthur Walworth, *Wilson and His Peacemakers: American Diplomacy at the Paris Peace Conference, 1919* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1986).

<sup>57</sup> Herbert Croly, *Willard Straight* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1924).



students of Cornell today, with the second floor devoted to Student Support and Diversity Education<sup>58</sup>.

After the Armistice of November 11, Gibson was reassigned from his role as diplomatic liaison to General Pershing to be (as he desired) the diplomatic liaison to Herbert Hoover and the Food Administration. At the same time, Hoover's Food Administration grew to include feeding the whole of Europe and creating the most effective relief organization in history – the American Relief Administration (ARA). Gibson quickly became an indispensable asset.

Herbert C. Hoover (1874–1964) served as the 31<sup>st</sup> President of the United States from 1929–1933. Orphaned at age 8, he went on to become part of the first class at Stanford University. After earning a degree in mining engineering and marrying his school sweetheart, Lou Henry, Herbert set out on a very successful mining career. He began his public service career by answering the plea of the Belgians to coordinate relief for their country which faced German occupation in August 1914<sup>59</sup>. Gibson, then second in command at the US Legation in Brussels, was asked to accompany the Belgian delegation to London to present the case to Hoover. The two men found much to admire in each other, and they worked together in service to humanity for the next 40 years<sup>60</sup>. It was Gibson's diary of Hoover's 1946 Famine Relief Survey trip that sparked this author's interest in both men's service to humanity.

Paris. Tuesday, December 3

This had been a sad day. We laid Willard Straight away among the soldiers in the plot of ground we have taken at Suresne on a hillside overlooking Paris. The funeral party was small, just the people Mrs. Harriman asked. There were all the old 1718 H Street crowd<sup>61</sup> who could be here, McCoy, Sterling and Joe Grew. Jim Logan could not get here and Jim Wadsworth had not been heard from since Willard died. Also Mr. Stettinius, Martin Egan, Warwick Greene, Bentley Mott, General Johnson, Peter Bowditch. [...] It was a ghastly business to lay away such a man, just coming into his full usefulness and it was a badly depressed crowd that came back to Paris<sup>62</sup>.

<sup>58</sup> "Cornell Housing", Cornell University, <https://scl.cornell.edu/residential-life/housing/community-centers/willard-straight-hall-student-union/willard-straight-hall>. Accessed 10/28/2021.

<sup>59</sup> "Herbert Hoover", The White House, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/presidents/herbert-hoover/>; George H. Nash, *The Life of Herbert Hoover: The Humanitarian, 1914–1917* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1988); *idem*, *The Life of Herbert Hoover: The Master of Emergencies, 1918–1918* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1996).

<sup>60</sup> Gibson, *A Journal From Our Legation in Belgium*; Jeffrey B. Miller, *Yanks Behind the Lines: How the Commission for Relief in Belgium Saved Millions from Starvation During World War I* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowan & Littlefield, 2020).

<sup>61</sup> 1718 H Street was a residence in Washington, D.C. rented by a group of bachelors setting out in diplomatic, political or military careers in 1907. 1728 H Street became known to be the home to "The Family". As these men married and moved, they kept in close touch. Key members included Hugh Gibson, Basil Miles and Charles Evans Hughes, as well as those mentioned above as attending Straight's funeral. The house at 1718 H Street was sold in 1954, the year Gibson died, and the group disbanded. See *An American in Europe*, 423.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibidem*.

As the war ended, peace delegations rushed to Paris to take part in the great conference that would redefine the world. Living and working space was at a premium, if it could be found at all. One of the first tasks Gibson was asked to tackle was finding both office and living space for Hoover and his team. On the same day as Straight's funeral, December 3, Gibson secured a large house on Rue de Lubeck and undertook the task of remodeling it to their needs and setting up household<sup>63</sup>.

Paris. Monday, December 9, 1918

A cussed day of rows and ructions and petty errands that use up the strength and the temper and don't get you anywhere.

This morning we went up to the house all filled up with ideas that we were on the home stretch and that we would be tucked away under its roof by nightfall. Instead we found that practically the entire troop of workmen had deserted, that the expensive housekeep had chosen this moment to have the flu and that even the house agent who had undertaken to see that things were ready had taken to his bed with the same ailment. [...] I felt like the Emperor of Germany with my Empire crumbling over my head<sup>64</sup>.

As you can imagine, it was no easy task to find housing and office space to facilitate an ever enlarging and ever revolving team of persons. Then, as now, a pandemic created unexpected and often frustrating situations!

Paris. Friday, December 13, 1918

Dr. Taylor back from Berne with the news that Hugh Wilson is seriously ill with flu. I do hope that nothing will happen to him as he is the sort we cannot afford to do without at this time<sup>65</sup>.

This tiny entry from Gibson's diary introduces two important figures and demonstrates yet again the severe nature of the Spanish Flu.

Dr. Alonzo Englebert Taylor (1871–1949) was an American professor of physiologic chemistry (now known as Biochemistry) at the University of Pennsylvania 1910–1921. He served as the representative secretary of the War Trade Board 1917–1919. He was the director of the Food Research Institute at Stanford University 1921–1936<sup>66</sup>.

Taylor accompanied Gibson on an investigative trip throughout Central and Eastern Europe in December 1918 and January 1919. His mission was to professionally assess food needs in the vanquished and little known areas. Gibson's

<sup>63</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibidem*, 434.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 438.

<sup>66</sup> Aparna Mukherjee, "Register of the Alonzo Englebert Taylor Papers, 1911–1943", Hoover Institution Library and Archives, [https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/tf1g5001mv/entire\\_text/](https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/tf1g5001mv/entire_text/). Accessed 10/28/2021.

mission was to assist Taylor with the diplomatic aspect of his work and learn as much as possible about the political situation in each area. Gibson's work included relief issues, all kinds requests to be forwarded to the Paris Peace Commissioners, private meetings with top officials in each newly created country, and dealing with critical intelligence matters<sup>67</sup>. As they traveled together, Gibson developed a nickname for Taylor: "professor of fizzology"!

Hugh Robert Wilson (1885–1946) was an American diplomat, was posted as Secretary of the US Legation in Bern, Switzerland, first stop on Gibson's and Taylor's trip. Before they arrived in late December, Wilson had been gravely ill with flu-induced pneumonia and all feared for his life.

Fortunately Wilson recovered, and went on to serve another twenty years. Most notably he was Chief of Current Information for the State Department in Washington, DC (1924–1927), Ambassador to Switzerland (1927–1937), and Ambassador to Germany during the suspenseful year 1938. After his retirement, Wilson worked for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) during World War II (1941–1945)<sup>68</sup>. In 1961, Wilson's son, Hugh R. Wilson, Jr. published his father's story<sup>69</sup>.

For Hugh Gibson, the second half of December 1918 was a flurry of activity between setting up Hoover's operation in Paris and preparing for a monumental assignment. On December 22, Gibson set out, along with several other members of Hoover's team (Dr. Taylor, Col. William Grove, Robert Loree, and a few others)<sup>70</sup> for points east. They comprised one of the first parties of Americans who would visit and assess the needs in Czechoslovakia, Austria, Poland, Yugoslavia, and Hungary. Food requirements were of paramount importance, but assessing the state of railroads, coal production, and political upheaval was also critical. All along the way, they found evidence of the Spanish Flu.

Hotel U Černého Koně, Prague. Tuesday, January 7, 1919

Guiffrida, our Italian colleague, has fallen ill of the gripe and has had to go to a hospital so that he cannot go back to Vienna with us tonight. He has a high fever and we are uneasy about him. His colleague Obleight we left ill of the same sickness in the hotel in Vienna when we came here so there is now no Italian representative with us<sup>71</sup>.

Throughout January 1919, Gibson continued his adventurous fact-finding mission to the lands formerly belonging to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. His mission

<sup>67</sup> *An American in Europe*, 211–651.

<sup>68</sup> "Hugh Robert Wilson, II", Prabook, [https://prabook.com/web/hugh.wilson\\_ii/3761758](https://prabook.com/web/hugh.wilson_ii/3761758). Accessed 10/28/2021.

<sup>69</sup> Hugh R. Wilson, Jr., *A Career Diplomat: The Third Chapter, the Third Reich* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1960).

<sup>70</sup> *An American in Europe*, 451. Biographical information for the men not highlighted here is included in that volume.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibidem*, 482.

was trifold. As stated above, he was the diplomatic adviser to Hoover's ARA which now undertook to feed all of Europe. In addition, Gibson remained the official liaison between the US and the new national governments of both Poland and Czechoslovakia. Finally, he had been tasked to explore possible frameworks for a political intelligence organization based in Vienna<sup>72</sup>.

Gibson worked with the several interallied commissions under the umbrella of the "Hoover Commission", mandated by the Supreme Council in Paris. During the war, Hoover's commission undertook the "study, distribution and control of the food supply of the world". After the Armistice of November 11, 1918, it became necessary to also feed people in German and Austro-Hungarian lands, and this assignment was added to Hoover's (and therefore Gibson's) responsibilities. The victorious Allies each provided food experts to help. Giuffrida, Italy's representative, was soon struck down by "the grippe", another name for the Spanish Flu.

Vincenzo Giuffrida (1878–1940) was an Italian politician who was put in charge of food supply during war-time Italy and who developed a series of services to help manage the war economy. He went on to become one of the central figures of the new technocracy in Italy<sup>73</sup>.

Gibson's journey continued throughout the month of January 1919. His impressions of hunger in Austria, coal disputes in Czechoslovakia, revolution in Hungary, and Italian/Slav discord in Fiume make fascinating reading<sup>74</sup>. Gibson and party returned to Paris on February 1, 1919, "more dead than alive, but glad it's no worse"<sup>75</sup>.

Upon his arrival back in Paris, Gibson was surprised to learn that the French Government had made him a chevalier of the French Legion of Honor. This is equivalent to knighthood, and rarely awarded to foreigners. His medal now resides in his collection at the Hoover Institution Archives<sup>76</sup>.

During the third wave of the Spanish Flu (late winter into early spring 1919) Gibson accompanied Hoover to Brussels on February 9, 1919<sup>77</sup>. There he had the opportunity to reunite with old friends from his first sojourn in Brussels in 1914–1915. When the Germans invaded Belgium in August 1914, Gibson had a front row seat as the Secretary of the US Legation in Brussels<sup>78</sup>. Two striking figures stand out in this reunion: the Belgian King and the Spanish Ambassador to Belgium.

King Albert I of the Belgians (1875–1953) counted Gibson among his few friends after meeting in a cabbage field under artillery fire. King Albert and Queen

<sup>72</sup> See *ibidem*, 42, 76–77, 374, 395, 399–401, 410.

<sup>73</sup> Nicola De Ianni, "Giuffrida, Vincenzo", *Biographical Dictionary of Italians*, Vol. 56 (2001), [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/vincenzo-giuffrida\\_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/vincenzo-giuffrida_(Dizionario-Biografico)/). Accessed 10/28/2021.

<sup>74</sup> *An American in Europe*, 451–543.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibidem*, 543.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibidem*, 544.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibidem*, 551–554.

<sup>78</sup> Gibson, *A Journal From Our Legation in Belgium*.

Elisabeth were one of Belgium's most beloved royal couples, and remained close to Gibson for the rest of their lives. After meeting the crown prince in 1914, Gibson supported future King Leopold III (1901–1983) during the controversial World War II years<sup>79</sup>.

Leopold and his wife, Astrid, had a son, Baudouin, about the same time as Michael Francis Gibson was born to Hugh and Ynes Gibson. The boys were brought up as friends since babyhood. At King Leopold III's request, Hugh Gibson helped to train Baudouin in diplomacy in 1948 before abdicating the throne to his son<sup>80</sup>. Prince Baudouin (1930–1993) reigned as King Baudouin of the Belgians from 1951 to 1993. King Baudouin remained friends with Michael Francis Gibson (Hugh's son) for the rest of his life.

Rodrigo de Saavedra y Vincent Villalobar, 11<sup>th</sup> Marques de Villalobar (1864–1926), was born in Madrid with a myriad of physical deformities which he learned to overcome with a series of prostheses and other helping contraptions. However, he refused to be limited by these difficulties and trained as a diplomat. He served in Paris, London, Washington DC, and Lisbon before being appointed as extraordinary envoy and plenipotentiary to the Spanish Legation in Brussels in 1913. Upon Gibson's arrival there in June 1914, the two diplomats became fast friends. As the war began, they found themselves the last hold outs of neutral nations in Brussels and had many an adventure fighting for the rights of persons under their care<sup>81</sup>. Later Villalobar served as Gibson's best man at his wedding to Ynes Reyntiens February 27, 1922<sup>82</sup>.

Paris. Friday, February 21, 1919

Another Mr. Micawber day which I am finishing up in bed trying to decide whether I have the gumption to get up or whether I shall lie me down and enjoy a little grippe [flu]. If there were more things which had to be done at once I should undoubtedly decide to stay on my feet, but for the next few days I can see nothing to do but wait for something to turn up<sup>83</sup>.

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<sup>79</sup> Gibson, *A Journal From Our Legation in Belgium*. Much of this information came in private correspondence between the author and Michael Francis Gibson, 2009–2017. Also see Ercasto R. Arango, *Leopold III and the Belgian Royal Question* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1961); Robert Goffin, *Was Leopold a Traitor?* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1941); Roger Keyes, *Outrageous Fortune: King Leopold III of the Belgians* (London: Tom Donovan Publishing, LTD, 1990); Joseph P. Kennedy, James M. Landis, *The Surrender of King Leopold* (New York: Joseph P. Kennedy Foundation, 1950)

<sup>80</sup> Yves du Parc Locmaria, *Au Roi – biographie du comte Gatien de Parc Locmaria* (Bruxelles: Office Généalogique et Héraldique de Belgique, 2005). This volume contains the record of Prince Baudouin's tutor, Gatien du Parc, who accompanied him during his time under Gibson's tutelage.

<sup>81</sup> Gibson, *A Journal from our Legation in Belgium*.

<sup>82</sup> *An American in Warsaw*, 393.

<sup>83</sup> *An American in Europe*, 565. For more on Villalobar, see the Spanish Wikipedia article at [http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marqu%C3%A9s\\_de\\_Villalobar](http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marqu%C3%A9s_de_Villalobar). Accessed 10/28/2021.

Wilkins Micawber was a character in *David Copperfield* by Charles Dickens (1850). This optimistic clerk had the belief that “something would turn up”<sup>84</sup>.

During the twenty intervening days, Gibson kept busy while waiting for word of his next assignment. There was a general assumption that he would be appointed as Minister to Czechoslovakia – that is, if the US Congress approved the funding of new legations to Prague and Warsaw. There were several attempts to pass the necessary legislation, but eventually it went through. Meanwhile, rather than choosing to “lie me down and enjoy a little gripe”, Gibson prowled around the halls of power in Paris, watchful for wherever he could be of service or, like Micawber, whatever might turn up. And things of interest turned up right on cue.

As Hoover struggled to get relief operations up and running, Gibson had ample opportunity to get acquainted with his able young assistant, Lewis Strauss. At age 23, Strauss volunteered to serve without pay as Hoover assistant and made himself invaluable to the ARA<sup>85</sup>.

Lewis Strauss (1896–1974) was an American businessman and naval officer. As reports of the abuse of Jews in Eastern Europe poured into Paris during the months just after the Armistice, Strauss, as a Jewish American, was helpful in promoting unbiased assessment of incoming intelligence and providing equitable relief<sup>86</sup>. Later in 1929, Strauss became a full partner in Kuhn, Loeb & Co in New York while serving on the American Jewish Committee. When World War II erupted in 1939, he again worked with Hoover and Gibson to bring relief to suffering Europeans. In 1947, President Truman appointed Strauss as one of the first five Commissioners of the Atomic Energy Commission. Gibson and Strauss remained fast friends for the rest of their lives<sup>87</sup>.

Paris. Sunday, March 16, 1919

I lunched with the Bliss’s – just the two of them and had a really good time. They have both been laid up most of the winter with touches of the flu but are now on the upgrade-

Robert Woods Bliss (1875–1962) was an American diplomat, well known as an art collector, philanthropist, and co-founder of the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection<sup>88</sup>. After graduating from Harvard in 1900, he married Mildred Barnes in 1908. As a diplomat, Bliss served in Venice, St. Petersburg, Brussels, and Buenos Aires before the Great War. He was a secretary at the Embassy in Paris

<sup>84</sup> “Mr. Micawber”, LitCharts, <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-copperfield/characters/mr-micawber>. Accessed 10/28/2021.

<sup>85</sup> Herbert Hoover, *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover: Years of Adventure 1874–1920* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1951).

<sup>86</sup> *An American in Warsaw*, 112.

<sup>87</sup> “Lewis Straus”, Atomic Heritage Foundation, <https://www.atomicheritage.org/profile/lewis-s Strauss>. Accessed 10/28/2021.

<sup>88</sup> “Robert Woods Bliss (1872–1962)”, Dumbarton Oaks, <https://www.doaks.org/resources/bliss-tyler-correspondence/annotations/robert-woods-bliss>. Accessed 10/28/2021.

1912–1916 and Counselor 1916–1919. It was in this capacity that he worked with Gibson during his tenure in Paris, 1918–1919<sup>89</sup>. Later he served in the State Department in Washington and as Ambassador to Sweden (1923–1927) and Argentina (1927–1933)<sup>90</sup>.

When not dealing with the flu during their time in Paris, “Bob” and Mildred actively supported Allied troops in France by donating 23 ambulances to the American Field Ambulance Service and equipping the central Parisian depot for the “Service de Distribution Americaine”. They also began their soon-to-be impressive collection of art. While serving in Washington after the war, they purchased Dumbarton Oaks and renovated it to accommodate their art and develop both a museum and research library.

Although he retired in 1933, Bliss returned to service during World War II, serving under consecutive Secretaries of Stated Cordell Hull (1944) and Edward Stettinius (1944–45). The Dumbarton Oaks Conference (summer and fall 1944) hosted delegations from Britain, the Soviet Union, China and the US. The outcome was the charter for the United Nations which was adopted in San Francisco in 1945<sup>91</sup>.

Paris. Friday, April 4, 1919

The President [Woodrow Wilson] is laid up with a cold today and people seem to be worrying for fear it will turn into flu. It would be a calamity to have him incapacitated now with so many vitally important things that only he can decide. It gives me the shivers to think of it<sup>92</sup>.

The thought of President Wilson having the flu gave the whole world the shivers! As it turned out, of course, Wilson did indeed have a debilitating case of the flu. There are several details here which turn out to be of interest.

First was Gibson’s source of information. The evening before this entry, Gibson attended a dinner and theater with Wilson’s personal physician Rear Admiral Cary Travers Grayson (1878–1938) with whom he was acquainted through various friends high in the diplomat circles in Paris<sup>93</sup>.

By 1904, Grayson held two MD degrees as well as a doctorate in Pharmacy. He served as naval surgeon on the presidential yacht, the *Mayflower*, under Theodore Roosevelt and William Taft<sup>94</sup>. Grayson met Woodrow Wilson shortly after his

<sup>89</sup> *Register of the Department of State* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1919), 87–88, <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=7zowAQAAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&output=reader&hl=en&pg=GBS.PA87>. Accessed 10/28/2021.

<sup>90</sup> “Robert Woods Bliss (1872–1962)”, Department of State, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/people/bliss-robert-woods>. Accessed 10/28/2021.

<sup>91</sup> Dumbarton Oaks, <https://www.doaks.org/>. Accessed 10/28/2021.

<sup>92</sup> *An American in Europe*, 628.

<sup>93</sup> April 3, 1919, *ibidem*.

<sup>94</sup> “Cary Travers Grayson, Rear Admiral, United States Navy”, Arlington Cemetery, <http://www.arlingtoncemetery.net/cgrayson.htm>. Accessed 10/28/2021.

inauguration in March 1913. The two became close friends, and Grayson remained at Wilson's side until his death in 1924<sup>95</sup>.

Wilson came down with a particularly virulent case of the Flu with a high fever and such violent fits of coughing that breathing was almost impossible. At the beginning of the illness, about the time he talked to Gibson, Grayson even considered poison as a diagnosis. Soon enough, the truth became obvious<sup>96</sup>.

By the end of April, Grayson wrote: "These past two weeks have certainly been strenuous days for me. The President was suddenly taken violently sick with influenza at a time when the whole of civilization seemed to be in the balance"<sup>97</sup>.

The second item of interest was the censorship regarding Wilson's illness. By April 1919, Wilson had come to embody the hopes of the whole world for national self-determination and democratic government. BUT the treaties making it so were not yet ironed out, signed or ratified. A perceived weakness in Wilson could have weakened the hand of Allied negotiators and derailed the peace process ongoing in Paris. So, Grayson, on behalf of the Wilson administration, announced that the President was suffering from mild cold brought on by chilly Paris weather<sup>98</sup>.

There was a war-time precedent for downplaying the illness of leaders in favor of keeping up morale. Shortly before the Armistice of November 11, 1918, British Prime Minister David Lloyd George came down with the Flu<sup>99</sup>. Despite the fact that he was in bed for nine critical days and forced to rely on a respirator, his condition was hidden to protect the morale of the British and Allied war effort. France's Prime Minister, George Clémenceau, and General John Pershing also suffered from a milder cases of the Flu<sup>100</sup> – as well as losing troops faster to the pandemic than to enemy bullets!<sup>101</sup>

<sup>95</sup> See Cary T. Grayson, *Woodrow Wilson: An Intimate Memoir* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960).

<sup>96</sup> Meilan Solly, "What Happened when Woodrow Wilson Came Down with the 1918 Flu?", *Smithsonian Magazine* (October 2, 2020), <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/what-happened-when-woodrow-wilson-came-down-1918-flu-180975972/>. Accessed 10/28/2021.

<sup>97</sup> Sarah Fling, "Spanish Influenza in the President's Neighborhood", The White House Historical Association, <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/spanish-influenza-in-the-presidents-neighborhood>; Michael Alison Chandler, "A President's Illness Kept Under Wraps: Woodrow Wilson's Deteriorating Health Detailed in Doctor's Correspondence", <https://www.woodrowwilson.org/president>. Accessed 10/28/2021.

<sup>98</sup> Fling, "Spanish Influenza in the President's Neighborhood".

<sup>99</sup> Mark Honigsbaum, "Spanish Flu: The Killer that Still Stalks Us, 100 Years On", *The Guardian* (September 9, 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/09/spanish-flu-pandemic-centenary-first-world-war>. Accessed 10/28/2021.

<sup>100</sup> "1918 Spanish Flu Pandemic", <https://www.moaf.org/exhibits/pandemics/spanish-flu-1918>. Accessed 10/28/2021

<sup>101</sup> Dwight Jon Zimmerman, "The Other Enemy in WWI: The U.S. Navy vs. the 1918 Spanish Flu", Defense Media Network (November 15, 2020), <https://www.defensemedianetwork.com/stories/the-other-enemy-in-world-war-i-the-u-s-navy-vs-the-1918-spanish-flu/>; Eric Durr, "Worldwide Flu Outbreak Killed 45,000 American Soldiers during World War I", U.S. Army, <https://www.army.mil/>



The third interesting thing to note was the long-term effect the Flu on Wilson, the US and all of Europe. The Peace Conference was nearly derailed by Wilson's inability to attend for a time, and unpredictable semi-delusional outbursts<sup>102</sup>. The conference did complete its work, for better or worse, and the Treaty of Versailles was duly signed on June 28, 1919. Gibson, by then US Ambassador to Poland, attended as an invited guest of the American delegation<sup>103</sup>.

## Conclusions

As Gibson's diaries have shown, the Spanish Flu left its imprint on the lives of everyone during its duration. The diaries have also given us a unique window into the impact of the pandemic on the prosopographic subgroup we have entitled as "elites". For the purposes of this paper, elites have been defined more as notables than as wealthy, powerful or famous.

Although Gibson himself was not born into an elite family, his life and his work earned him a place among them. Born in Los Angeles as a descendent of pioneers, missionaries, Indian affairs advocates and teachers, he developed a sense of justice and humanitarian service early on. Life in service to others is what Gibson expected from himself – and what he looked for in those he chose to call friends. Given this worldview, it is not altogether surprising that Gibson's diary is full of stories of leaders behaving in conscientious ways or enduring suffering stoically. But it is surprising to have this record from over a century ago document the experiences of a group who tend to keep their suffering private.

At least for Gibson's particular subset of elites, we have seen adversity in the form of the Spanish Flu afflict them as much as it did other subgroups of people. The elites of WWI may have generally enjoyed better health care and nutrition and safer living conditions than much of the rest of humanity. Those features of an "elite" life tended to allow persons to enjoy their "prime" for a longer period of time. In the face of the Spanish Flu, this became a liability as well as an advantage. As a matter of fact, because the nature of the H1N1 influenza A was to target young persons in their prime, the elites were sometimes at increased risk.

Another striking feature of the vignettes Gibson's diaries offer is the way this particular group of elites handled the crises of the Spanish Flu. Most were stoic, minimizing their misery and returning to work as fast as possible (sometimes even before it might have been wise). It is difficult to determine from our current

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article/210420/worldwide\_flu\_outbreak\_killed\_45000\_american\_soldiers\_during\_world\_war\_i. Accessed 10/28/2021.

<sup>102</sup> Steve Coll, "Woodrow Wilson's Case of the Flu, and How Pandemics Change History", *The New Yorker* (April 16, 2020), <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/woodrow-wilsons-case-of-the-flu-and-how-pandemics-change-history>. Accessed 10/28/2021.

<sup>103</sup> *An American In Warsaw*, 113–114.

perspective whether this was due entirely to the good nature of Gibson and his colleagues or if the extreme circumstances of war forced dedication in the face of illness. Most likely, the truth is some combination of the two.

For those of us today who are dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic as best we can, what does Gibson's record offer in the way of insight or encouragement? Given the sheer volume of works concerning the Spanish Flu that are appearing daily in the academic and public media, it appears that many people are taking some comfort from the fact that humanity has survived pandemics before. The world, and the lives of many, have been shaken but the normality of life always reasserts itself. Rather than grim statistics, Gibson offers real life examples of persons walking, day to day, through the crises. In addition, by sharing the stories of how his colleagues each handled their own crises, Gibson offers hope that the elites of our day might show the same dedication.

And what can be said for the elites of our day? Although social media and "news" sources are full of information about our leaders and their lives, we cannot not know the real suffering (or lack of suffering) nor the effect of their behavior until it becomes history. Until then, we can take courage and inspiration from the records of people like Hugh Gibson and his colleagues. Adversity strikes everyone – what you do with it is up to you. As Gibson said in August 1918: "It's a great life if you don't weaken"<sup>104</sup>.

Vivian Reed

### **A Chronicle of the Pandemic: Hugh Gibson's Notes on the "Spanish Flu" of 1918**

Hugh Gibson (1883–1954) was a young American diplomat who had a knack for landing in the thick of the action. During the pandemic of 1918, he found himself in Paris tasked with advising General John Pershing on diplomatic matters, straightening out the morass of American propaganda in Europe, and collaborating with military intelligence. To this was added the role of official US liaison to the Polish and Czech national committees. His multiple tasks were carried out against the backdrop of the dramatic last six months of the Great War. The Armistice of November 1918 arrived on the heels of the deadly second wave of the "Spanish Flu". Gibson then turned his attention from military matters to humanitarian aid for all of Europe as diplomatic adviser to Herbert Hoover's American Relief Administration. Throughout the tumultuous year from spring 1918 to spring 1919, Gibson experienced the Spanish Flu from multiple angles: military, diplomatic, international, refugee, care-giver, and a personal bout with the flu. Using excerpts from *An American in Europe at War and Peace: Hugh Gibson's Chronicles, 1918–1919* (edited by Vivian Reed and Jochen Böhrer, DeGruyter Oldenbourg, Fall 2020), this article traces Gibson's fascinating journey through a historic pandemic.

<sup>104</sup> *An American in Europe*, 301 and portrait quote.