

Classic Poetry Series

Humbert Wolfe
- poems -

Publication Date:
2012

Publisher:
Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

Humbert Wolfe(5 January 1885 – 5 January 1940)

Humbert Wolfe CB CBE, was an Italian-born English poet, man of letters and civil servant, from a Jewish family background, his father being a German Jew (Martin Wolff) and his mother an Italian Jew (Consuela, née Terraccini).

He was one of the most popular authors of the 1920s. He is now remembered for his epigram:

*You cannot hope
to bribe or twist,
thank God! the
British journalist.*

*But, seeing what
the man will do
unbribed, there's
no occasion to.*

He was also a translator of [Heinrich Heine](http://www.poemhunter.com/heinrich-heine/), Edmond Fleg (1874-1963) and Eugene Heltai. A Christian convert, he remained very aware of his Jewish heritage.

His career was in the Civil Service, beginning in the Board of Trade and then in the Ministry of Labour. By 1940 he had a position of high responsibility. His work was recognised with a CBE and then a CB.

Wolfe's verses have been set to music by a number of composers, including Gustav Holst in his 12 Humbert Wolfe Settings, Op. 48 (1929).

He had a long-term affair with the novelist Pamela Frankau, while remaining married.

He died on his 55th birthday.

A Thrush In The Trenches

Suddenly he sang across the trenches,
vivid in the fleeting hush
as a star-shell through the smashed black branches,
a more than English thrush.

Suddenly he sang, and those who listened
nor moved nor wondered, but
heard, all bewitched, the sweet unhastened
crystal Magnificat.

One crouched, a muddied rifle clasping,
and one filled grenade,
but little cared they, while he went lisping
the one cleat tune he had.

Paused horror, hate and Hell a moment,
(you could almost hear the sigh)
and still he sang to them, and so went
(suddenly) singing by.

Humbert Wolfe

Epigram: British Journalist

You cannot hope to bribe or twist
(thank God!) the British journalist.
But, seeing what the man will do
unbribed, there's no occasion to.

Humbert Wolfe

Excerpts From

SPEKE

THE children play
at hide and seek
about the monument
to Speke.
And why should the dead
explorer mind
who has nothing to seek
and nothing to find?

QUEEN VICTORIA

Queen Victoria's
statue is
the work of her
daughter Beatrice.
The shape's all wrong
and the crown don't fit,
But -- bless her old heart! --
she was proud of it.

TAIL-PIECE

'Out! All out!'
Harsh echoes blow
from far. With wandering steps
and slow
once again their
garden leave
little Adam,
little Eve.

Humbert Wolfe

Give me the wings

Give me the wings, magician! So their tune
Mix with the silver trumpets of the Moon,
And, beyond music mounting, clean outrun
The golden diapason of the sun.

There is a secret that the birds are learning
Where the long lanes in heaven have a turning
And no man yet has followed: therefore these
Laugh hauntingly across our usual seas.

I'll not be mocked by curlews in the sky;
Give me the wings, magician, or I die.

Humbert Wolfe

Green Candles

'There's someone at the door,' said gold candlestick:

'Let her in quick, let her in quick!'

'There is a small hand groping at the handle.

Why don't you turn it?' asked green candle.

'Don't go, don't go,' said the Hepplewhite chair,

'Lest you find a strange lady there.'

'Yes, stay where you are,' whispered the white wall:

'There is nobody there at all.'

'I know her little foot,' grey carpet said:

'Who but I should know her light tread?'

'She shall come in,' answered the open door,

'And not,' said the room, 'go out any more.'

Humbert Wolfe

Requiem: The Soldier

Down some cold field in a world outspoken
the young men are walking together, slim and tall,
and though they laugh to one another, silence is not broken;
there is no sound however clear they call.

They are speaking together of what they loved in vain here,
but the air is too thin to carry the things they say.
They were young and golden, but they came on pain here,
and their youth is age now, their gold is grey.

Yet their hearts are not changed, and they cry to one another,
'What have they done with the lives we laid aside?
Are they young with our youth, gold with our gold, my brother?
Do they smile in the face of death, because we died?'

Down some cold field in a world uncharted
the young seek each other with questioning eyes.
They question each other, the young, the golden hearted,
of the world that they were robbed of in their quiet paradise.

I do not ask God's purpose. He gave me the sword,
and though merely to wield it is itself the lie
against the light, at the bidding of my Lord,
where all the rest bear witness, I'll deny.
And I remember Peter's high reward,
and say of soldiers, when I hear cocks cry,
'As your dear lives ('twas all you might afford)
you laid aside, I lay my sainthood by.'
There are in heaven other archangels,
bright friends of God, who build where Michael destroys,
in music, or in beauty, lute players.
I wield the sword; and though I ask nought else
of God, I pray to Him: 'But these were boys,
and died. Be gentle, God, to soldiers.'

Humbert Wolfe

The Grey Squirrel

Like a small grey
coffee-pot,
sits the squirrel.
He is not

all he should be,
kills by dozens
trees, and eats
his red-brown cousins.

The keeper on the
other hand,
who shot him, is
a Christian, and

loves his enemies,
which shows
the squirrel was not
one of those.

Humbert Wolfe

The Thought

I will not write a poem for you,
because a poem, even the loveliest,
can only do what words can do -
stir the air, and dwindle, and be at rest.

Nor will I hold you with my hands, because
the bones of my hands on yours would press,
and you'd say after, 'Mortal was,
and crumbling, that lover's tenderness.'

But I will hold you in a thought without moving
spirit or desire or will
for I know no other way of loving,
that endures when the heart is still.

Humbert Wolfe