

Elizabeth Carter and Thomas Wright

Elizabeth Carter, poet and translator, and Thomas Wright, mathematician, astronomer, landscape architect and visionary, had a long lasting and intimate friendship. Though almost nothing of their extensive personal correspondence survive an oblique view can be gained from Elizabeth Carter's correspondence with Catherine Talbot, also a close friend of Lady Anson, and from Wright's own journal of his early life – in spite of the fact he barely mentions her.



Elizabeth Carter was born in 1717, the daughter of a clergyman, Nicholas Carter, of Deal in Kent. She is known today as one of the first women writers to earn enough to live on independently through her work as a poet, and as the translator of Epictetus, the Stoic philosopher. Carter's translation became a surprise best seller, and from the 1750s she was the leading female intellectual of the "bluestocking" social circle led by Mrs Elizabeth Montagu. In 1769 there is a symbolic and climactic moment in the Greek Revival story when she, the bluestockings, and philosopher James Harris were all present at a celebratory concert in Thomas Anson's spectacular new London House, 15 St James Square, built and decorated by James "Athenian Stuart". By that time Wright had moved away into an orbit of his own.

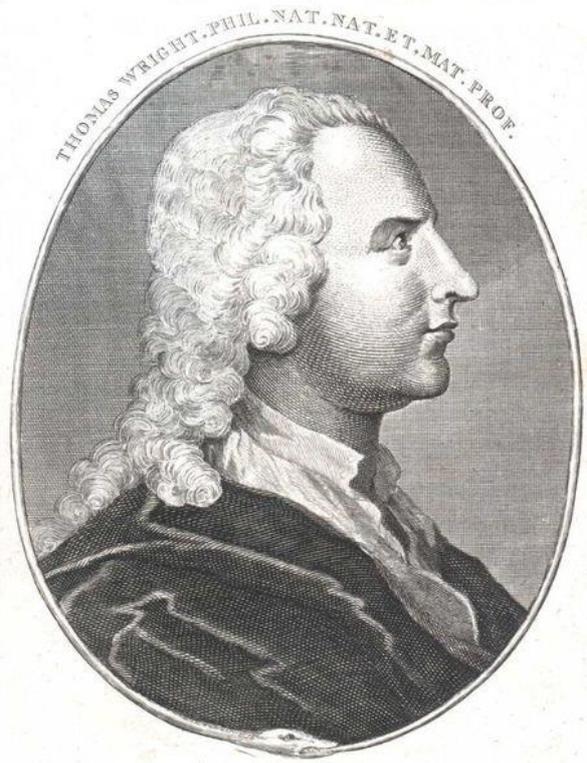
The journey from 1738 to 1769 is full of mysteries, but it is also illuminated with flashes of wit and comedy.

Thomas Wright, who was born in 1711, came from a quite different place and social background. He was the son of a yeoman carpenter in Durham who, by sheer force of personality, found his way into high society as a teacher of mathematical subjects to young ladies. He published practical works on navigation but his over-riding interest was astronomy and his own visionary cosmology. Throughout the 1740s he spent time in the country houses of his patrons in the summer and occasionally designed gardens and garden buildings. Around 1748 his career made a dramatic change. His architectural and landscape work became more significant and his philosophy became, intentionally by accident, more private and esoteric.

Their relationship began in 1738 when Elizabeth Carter was 21, and already known as a published poet, and Wright was 27. It is impossible to know when it ended, if it ever did. Wright kept a note of the amount of the correspondence he had written (not received) by 10th November 1766. By that date he had written 100 letters to her, a number only exceeded by letters to his principal patron after 1749, Norborne Berkeley, later Lord Botetourt.

Of this correspondence only one letter actually survives, as the first item in the correspondence of Elizabeth Carter and Catherine Talbot, edited by Carter's nephew Montagu Pennington. This is one of the great frustrations of historical research. When Pennington edited Carter's letters, to Talbot and to Mrs Montagu, it is possible that more of her correspondence from Wright existed, but none of the manuscripts of those letters, published or unpublished, has been found. Fortunately Wright plays a vital role in the Carter and Talbot correspondence as it was he who introduced them, thus beginning an important literary friendship which resulted in the famous translation of Epictetus.

A selection of letters to other correspondents has recently been found and published by Gwen Hampshire. The other important source is Thomas Wright's own "Early Journal", now in the British Library. This is a summary of his activities until 1746, when he set off on a journey to Ireland. It also has brief notes of other trips, publications, and lists of students. It has two supplements which may be meant to be interfiled – an account of his Irish trip of 1746-7 and a little known account of a summer holiday jaunt around England in 1750 – lost, but published in 1875.



It is absolutely characteristic of this particular investigation that the only complete lacuna, or gap in the record of Wright's life, is between July 1747 and June 1748 – exactly the period in which the rebuilding of Shugborough, including the follies, must have happened. In this same period Wright prepared his last and most important published astronomical work, "An Original Theory of the Universe". Where was he?

Wright was, in the best sense, an eccentric. His cosmology is original and only partly scientific. He was not a part of the Greek Revival on either artistic or philosophical grounds, but he is one of the most important people in this story, if only because it was he who introduced Carter to Talbot and, possibly, because of his mysterious connection with Shugborough. If more was known about his life between 1747 and 1749 he might be seen to knit all the principal players together, but there is no trace, in terms of written evidence, of any connection with Shugborough and Thomas Anson, and no trace of why, at that time, he abandoned his original social circle and moved to Stoke Gifford, near Bristol, with Norborne Berkeley.

The letters of Carter and Talbot, and Wright's own sketchy journal, bring these characters, and their world, to life.

Elizabeth Carter met Thomas Wright in early summer 1738. By then, at the age of 21, she had begun to live in London, probably at her uncle's town house. She was already well known as a writer. Her father had introduced her to the publisher Edward Cave, the proprietor of the "Gentleman's Magazine", and he had published her first poems, under the name "Eliza" when she was only 17. Her first volume of poetry was published by Cave in 1738, though most of these were not reprinted in her later collection.

She was most active as a translator – from a variety of languages, French, Italian, Latin or Greek. This was her particular skill. According to "The Cambridge History of English and American Literature in 18 Volumes (1907–21)."

"Though grammar was not, for her, an obstructive fetish in the acquirement of a new language, she yet had a cultivated eye for grammatical errors, and a fault that she had detected in a line of Homer "kept her awake at night." At another time, she disputed with archbishop Secker over the translation of two verses in Corinthians, and, after consulting the original, the archbishop was compelled to admit that "Madam Carter" was in the right."

(Archbishop Secker was Catherine Talbot's guardian.)

The intellectual brilliance does not mean she was a prig. All the evidence, letters and portraits, show that Elizabeth Carter was an extraordinarily attractive young woman – witty, fond of dancing and jokes, very attractive to men of all kinds, and, it seems, a big flirt herself.

Though she is often given the courtesy title “Mrs” she never married, though there were several opportunities to marry both desirable and undesirable men. It is hard to avoid the suspicion, from what is unsaid or unwritten, that there was a romantic relationship with Thomas Wright. Wright was a ladies' man, and notes at least one love affair in his Journal during the 1740s, but Elizabeth Carter had a special place. She was never one of his paying students and her name rarely appears. He never writes it in full, always abbreviating it, or avoiding it altogether.

At the time Carter met Wright she was suffering from the unwanted attentions of widower Thomas Birch who had pursued her far more than she could stand. This may be what she means by a reference to affairs in the first letter quoted below.

There are several ways in which she might have met Wright. He introduced her to other mathematicians and philosophers, including Dr Desaguliers, but she might have met him through Edward Cave. At this time she was translating Francesco Algarotti's “Sir Isaac Newton's Philosophy Explain'd for the Use of Ladies”, which was published in 1739 by Edward Cave.

Algarotti was philosopher and writer on the arts, including an important study of Opera. At the time Carter's translation of his simplified Newton was appearing he was in London, carrying on affairs with both Lady Mary Montagu, who wanted to go to Italy with him, and Lord Hervey. Hervey was notoriously bisexual, as evidently was Algarotti, but this was treated with amusement by society, and some satire from Alexander Pope. There is no evidence that Carter ever met Algarotti. Thomas Wright visited his father, the Earl of Bristol at Ickworth, Suffolk and taught his sister.

In spite of the specialist nature of the translation there are no signs that she knew mathematicians before this time. Wright may have been known to Edward Cave as a publisher. In 1738 Wright noted that he wrote “many things in the Publique Papers” and several letters from him appeared in the Gentleman's Magazine in the 1740s.

Wright had been in London for four or five years before he met Elizabeth Carter.

After unsuccessful and foolhardy attempts to set himself up as teacher Wright had the good luck to meet Richard Lumley, 2nd Earl of Scarbrough at the home of Rev. Daniel Newcombe in Durham. Wright must have made a remarkably strong impression of Scarbrough, apparently a very serious minded man, as he brought Wright to London and introduced him to the Lords of the Admiralty. Wright mentions Sir Charles Wager and Sir Thomas Franklin. They gave their support for the publication of Wright's Pannauticon, a navigational system. This was in 1734 when Wright was only 23.

Lord Scarbrough obtained permission for a dedication to the King and recommended him to the 9th Earl of Pembroke. Through Lord Baltimore, another Admiralty Lord, Wright was introduced to Frederick Prince of Wales.

In 1735 the Earl of Pembroke became his patron and Wright was given the use of his library and had visits to Wilton. He also met the antiquary Roger Gale, who Wright calls his best friend in London. Pembroke and Gale were both associates of William Stukeley and this must be where Wright's interest in ancient antiquities, and in Druids in particular, comes from.

In the same year he was unsuccessfully proposed to the Royal Society by Roger Gale, Dr Desaguliers and R M Massey. Desaguliers was a leading scientist and colleague of Newton (who had died in 1727) and also the most influential figure in Freemasonry. Thomas Wright has been wrongly identified as a member of Desaguliers' masonic lodge, the Horn Lodge, but that was the scientific instrument maker of the same name, as the dates of masonic membership are too early to be the astronomer.

These contacts led him into a network of aristocratic families. The publisher and cartographer John Senex introduced him to the Duke of Kent, their daughter Jemima, her family at Wrest Park, and her cousin Lord Limerick. Another important contact was Alan Brodrick, 2nd Earl of Middleton, of Peper Harow, Surrey. (The editor of the Early Journal in 1951 confuses Lord Middleton with Lord Middleton). Wright taught Middleton's daughters and, in turn his nephew, the Earl of Essex.

Alan Brodrick was, of course, Thomas Anson's traveling companion in Padua in 1724.

To Mrs Underdown

St Johns Gate

June 23 1738

I have lately met with much pleasure in the acquaintance of Mr Wright a great mathematician & a very ingenious and good natured Man. He has introduced me to Dr Desaguliers & I have two or 3 times been at his House which is the strangest looking place I ever beheld & appears very much like the Abode of a Wizard. The Company that frequents it is equally singular consisting chiefly of a set of queer looking people called Philosophers. It would require a History to tell you all I saw and heard there for everybody contributed something to the general Entertainment. Tis well if amongst all these conjurors I do not turn Witch tho' I believe you will think I have no great capacity that way. However I must be upon my guard in another Affair and take Care of my Heart for it would be a terrible thing to have it caught in a Circle or Triangle. Well I can bring out no more a sign that I am stupid for I am in a Situation that might otherwise inspire me, listning to the pretty Poetical music that the Wind makes in the neighboring Trees in Cave's Garden. (1)

Carter wrote many letters to Mrs Underdown, a friend in Kent, and they are usually written for the sake of writing a letter rather than to pass on up to the minute news. Some letters are simply about writing, or not writing, letters. She is being disingenuous here. She says she met "lately" with Mr Wright, but implies a very recent meeting, which cannot be true. Wright was out of London for the Summer season, which would mean he would have left well before the hot weather of June. He stayed with "the Honourable Mr Cowper" at Oxford for a week, then he crossed country to Bedfordshire to spend six weeks at Wrest Park, the home of the Marchioness Grey, daughter of the Duke of Kent. Lady Grey was one of Wright's most important friends and Wrest became a regular home from home. Lady Grey married Philip Yorke, son of Chancellor Hardwicke and sister of Elizabeth Yorke, later Anson, in 1741.

The Hon. Spencer Cowper was, independently, a friend of both Wright and Carter. Cowper's mother was Mary Clavering, of Chopwell, County Durham and Cowper became Dean of Durham in 1746. Before that he was Rector of Fordham in Kent where he knew the Carter family. Spencer Cowper may have been the means of introducing Wright to Carter. Whether this is so or not he was a point of contact that brought their worlds closer together.

Another sign that Carter knew Wright well before her letter to Mrs Underdown is her poem "While clear the night", written in honour of Wright and published in the Gentleman's Magazine in the same month, June 1738.

*WHILE clear the night, and ev'ry thought serene,
Let Fancy wander o'er the solemn scene:
And, wing'd by active Contemplation, rise
Amidst the radiant wonders of the skies.
Here, Cassiopeia fills a lucid throne,
There blaze the splendors of the Northern crown:
While their slow car the cold Triones roll
O'er the pale countries of the frozen pole,
Whose faithful beams conduct the wand'ring ship
Through the wide desert of the pathless deep.
Throughout the Galaxy's extended line,
Unnumber'd orbs in gay confusion shine:*

*Where ev'ry star that gilds the gloom of night
 With the faint tremblings of a distant light,
 Perhaps illumines some system of its own
 With the strong influence of a radiant sun.
 Plac'd on the verge, which Titan's realm confines,
 The slow revolving orb of Saturn shines ;
 Where the bright pow'r whose near approaching ray
 Gilds our gay climates with the blaze of day,
 On those dark regions glimmers from afar,
 With the pale lustre of a twinkling star.
 While, glowing with unmitigated day,
 The nearer planets roll their rapid way.
 Let stupid atheists boast th' atomic dance,
 And call these beauteous worlds the work of chance:
 But nobler minds, from guilt and passion free,
 Where Truth unclouded darts her heav'nly ray,
 Or on the earth, or in th' ethereal road,
 Survey the footsteps of a ruling GOD :
 Sole LORD of Nature's universal frame,
 Thro' endless years unchangeably the same:
 Whose presence, unconfin'd by time or place,
 Fills all the vast immensity of space. •*

*He saw while matter yet a Chaos lay:
 The shapeless Chaos own'd his potent sway.
 His single fiat form'd th' amazing whole,
 And taught the new-born planets where to roll:
 With wise direction curv'd their steady course,
 Imprest the central and projectile force,
 Lest in one mass their orbs confus'd should run,
 Drawn by th' attractive virtue of the sun,
 Or quit th' harmonious round, and wildly stray
 Beyond the limits of his genial ray.
 To thee, Endymion, I devote my song;
 To minds like thee, these subjects best belong;
 Whose curious thoughts with active freedom soar,
 And trace the wonders of creating pow'r.
 For this, some nobler pen Shall speak thy fame;
 But let the Muse indulge a gentler theme,
 While pleas'd she tells thy more engaging part,
 Thy social temper and diffusive heart.
 Unless these charms their soft'ning aid bestow,
 Science turns Pride, and Wit a common foe.*

Wright was Endymion, and was called that in a later letter. The original version included lines directly mentioning Wright and Desaguliers:

All view the happy talents with delight,

That form a Desaguliers and a Wright.

This is not the product of a casual or very brief acquaintance. The poem begins with a typically learned paraphrase from Virgil's *Georgics* but it is inspired by Wright's cosmology, not by Wright as a teacher of mathematics and navigation. Elizabeth Carter's relationship with Wright, from this poem of 1738 to the last recorded meeting with him exactly ten years later, was concerned with his personal and very visionary ideas.

Wright, from the start, had been guided by his own vision of the universe. Under 1729 (aged 18) he notes:

"Reflecting almost upon every object, conceive may find Ideas of ye Deaty and Creation."

Wright's quest was to produce an explanation of the universe which had a place for God at the centre, but which allowed for infinite numbers of solar systems. Carter's poem recognises this aspect of Wright's cosmology:

*"Where ev'ry star that gilds the gloom of night
With the faint tremblings of a distant light,
Perhaps illumines some system of its own
With the strong influence of a radiant sun."*

Wright's first written explanation of his cosmology was, he claims, written in 1734

"the author being then 22 years old."

"The Elements of Existence or a Theory of the Universe" was in existence the year Wright came to London. It proposes a similar pattern to his 1750 "An Original Theory" (written or sketched by 1748) but has no astronomical or mathematical calculations. It is a purely religious scheme, centering the universe on "The Eye of Providence" and imagining multiple universes nearer to or farther from the centre. Souls may be sent to better or worse places for rewards or punishments. In 1736 he had produced a "Section of the Creation 16 feet long" as an illustration.

This seems very naïve, but throughout Wright's various versions of this idea (up till his "Second Thoughts, written after his retirement) it is as if he is struggling for the language to explain a clear vision. Somehow all universes must share a common centre. Two hundred years later he may have explained it as a multiverse, independent world stemming from a common source. Even his later Utopian fantasy "The Fortunate Isles" is a vision of an ideal civilisation, a druidic world whose city reflects his distinctive cosmology.

Wright notes in his journal under Summer 1738:

"Studed an Explanation of his Theory of Existence."

This note comes just under his note of his visit to Spencer Cowper in Oxford and it must be that it was these ideas that he was discussing with Elizabeth Carter at the time she wrote her poem.

What did this clergyman's daughter think? On the whole she seems to be amused by Wright's ideas.

Wright had kept up his contact with the Earl of Scarbrough over the five years since had first been brought to London. In 1739 Wright's journal notes that he "gave private lesson to the Earl of Scarbrough" which shows that he did keep in touch with his first patron over the five years since he first arrived in London. Was this a lecture on "The Elements of Existence?" Who else might have been there? Or was it completely private?

It may be purely coincidental but Lord Scarbrough had a strong connection with Thomas Anson. He had called Anson "the only friend I value in the world" a few days before he committed suicide on January 28th 1740.

There is no mention of Scarbrough's death in Wright's Journal.

By December 1740 Wright was giving private lectures the Duchess of Kent, her daughters the Marchioness Grey and Mary Grey, Miss Talbot, Hnble Miss Cornwallis and Miss Hervey. (Miss Hervey was almost certainly the daughter of Lord Hervey, Algarotti's lover.)

Catherine Talbot was the closest female friend of Elizabeth Yorke, Lady Anson from 1748, and a close friend of Jemima, Marchioness Grey. She regularly stayed with Jemima and Philip Yorke at Wrest Park, and at Moor Park with Lord and Lady Anson. She was five years younger than Carter, born in 1722, and her relationship with Wright was different, a paying student rather than a personal friend.

As her father died when she four Catherine was brought up by his friend Thomas Secker, at this time Bishop of Oxford. She lived in summer at Cuddesdon, the Bishop's Palace and lived in London in the winter at the Deanery of St Paul's. Curiously she had spent her early life in Durham at the Secker's home at Houghton-le-Spring, so this may be a reason why Wright felt closer to Catherine Talbot than to his other pupils. Her

friendship with Lady Anson have started in 1741 when Elizabeth Yorke married Talbot's childhood friend Jemima Grey, but it is likely these families knew each other earlier.

Elizabeth Carter became aware of the beautiful and clever Talbot for some time. In 1738 Talbot had written Carter an anonymous letter in May 1738, presumably praising her as a poet. As this is only a month before Carter mentions Wright in her letter to Mrs Underdown it seems likely that Wright already knew both of them in May and had, perhaps, given Miss Talbot the address of Miss Carter.

By November 1738 is still intrigued by her correspondent:

To Mrs Underdown

London 14 November 1738

"We were both mistaken in our Idea of my...unknown Correspondent, for she is neither tall nor formal, but short & very merry. I have not yet seen her but got this Account from a young Scholar at Deptford who is very well acquainted with her, but I know neither her Name nor Place of Abode yet, tho' I guess at both."

A strange courtship ritual went on for several years. By 1741 Elizabeth Carter knew who Miss Talbot was but was till not conversing, but writing a phrase from one of Talbot's letters to her on a fan and dropping it by Miss Talbot in Church. This would have been in London.

On January 3rd 1741 she calls it a "whimsical pursuit":

"The whole Affair is a perfect Romance...My heroine whom to keep up the romantic Stile I shall call Musidora is as impatient as myself if I am rightly informed by the person who is the Mercury between us two goddesses."

Thomas Wright was the Mercury. The first letter, or part of a letter, in the Carter/ Talbot letters is the only surviving fragment of his large correspondence with Carter:

Mr Wright to Mrs Carter

January 14th 1741.

Dear madam,

*Miss Talbot is as desirous of seeing you, and as impatient as you can possibly be of seeing her; but when I shall be able to procure your interview, the Lord knows! for Miss Harvey is * is almost dying for a sight of her, i. e. in company, but could never yet attain it. I have given your service to her, and she begs her's may be returned. I shall hope to see you soon. Next week I shall be settled in my lodgings, and shall have something to entertain you with, &c. &c. &c*

She wrote back to him – the only fragment existing of a letter from Carter to Wright:

MRS. CARTER TO MR. WRIGHT.

Jan. 28, 1741.

"Sir,

I do not know whether you ought to congratulate me upon my good success last Sunday, for what have I gained by it? only a new addition to my impatience, which really was very strong before, but is now out of all bounds of moderation. Miss Talbot is absolutely my passion; I think of her all day, dream of her all night, and one way or other introduce her into every subject I talk of. You say she has a quarrel against my fan sticks; give me the pleasure, if you can, of knowing she had no objection to the paper. You will see her tomorrow (a happiness I envy you much more than all your possessions in the skies.) Pray make her a thousand compliments and apologies for my haunting her in the manner I have done, and still intend to do, though I am afraid she will think me as troublesome as an evil genius, a species of beings she

never could be acquainted with before. Is there no possibility of my conversing with Miss Talbot except in dumb show through my fan sticks? Is she absolutely inaccessible? I cannot long support this playing Pyramus and Thisbe. Must I never hope for a nearer view till I meet her glittering among the stars in a future state of being? I could dwell on this subject for ever, but must descend from the stars and Miss Talbot, wretch as you are, to you, and in the language of mere mortals acquaint you that I left my name at your door this evening.

“If your conjurorship's worship is not engaged to-morrow in the afternoon, Mrs. Rooke bids me tell you, she desires your company to hold a consultation upon the screen, and hopes you will bring half the stars in the firmament along with you to fix upon it, not forgetting the sun, moon, and other planets. As this affair is of the utmost consequence, Mrs. Rooke would not trust it to the Special-General post, but has sent an express to take your answer.”

This again, like the 1738 poem, shows Carter's playful immersion in Wright's esoteric cosmology. When she speaks of her “glittering among the stars in a future state of being” she is probably thinking of Wright's system, developed by 1748 at least, of multiple heavens on alternative universes rather than an angelic state. Miss Rooke's screen could have been a kind of visual aid of the universe. It was at Miss Rooke's that Carter and Talbot finally met.

Wright visited Elizabeth Carter in Kent in the summer, though in his Journal he carefully writes “stay three weeks with Rev Dr Carter. Saw Dover etc.” He had previously been staying with Lord Midleton at “Peper Havra” (Peper Harow) in Surrey.

MRS. CARTER TO Miss TALBOT.

Deal, August 16th, 1741.

Madam,

As I heard Mr. Wright mention his design of writing to you, I could not resist the temptation of taking that opportunity to torment you with a melancholy proof how much you are the subject of my thoughts. I am afraid this Letter has begun under the influence of some very dull planet, for it has cost me at least half an hour's laborious study to compose the Introduction. I believe you will the sooner pardon the present trouble I give you, when you know that if I do not satisfy my present inclination in writing, it is very probable I may haunt you, for I have drawn Mr. Wright into the scheme of a romantic voyage to the Goodwin sands, where it is one to a hundred I may be drowned, and you will readily compound for the impertinence of a Letter, rather than run the hazard of being surprized by a posthumous visit.

However, if this should happen to be the case, I promise to accost you in the most agreeable manner possible, in the dress and attitude of Mrs. Howe's ethereal beings, or, (what would make me appear to still greater advantage) like one of your own beautiful ideas put into form. I could sooth my imagination into the most pleasing dream possible with this delusion, and after all I am not sure whether the whole expedition may prove any thing else, for a lady who has tried all arguments in vain to divert me from the undertaking, has I am afraid practised her wicked arts with better success upon the philosopher, for I think he seems a little staggered; and though to comfort him under the apprehensions of sinking, I have given the most poetical description of submarine marine palaces, coral groves, and the conversation of sea nymphs, he seems to retain a very prominent affection for terra firma. We have all made our epitaphs, which are really very curious pieces, and will tend much to the edification of the public. In all elements, and in all states, I am, &c.

Romantic, in this case, is the poetic, picturesque, sense.

The description of an undersea world is strangely reminiscent of Wright's own descriptions of other worlds in his “Original Theory”:

“Here a groupe of worlds....perhaps upon a common sea and fill'd with Grottoes and romantick Caves.”

Wright may well have feared a sea voyage. In his Early Journal he made several sea trips between the north and south of England which ran into storms and says the sea disagreed with him.

Wright spent the winter of 1741-2 with the Duke of Kent's family, including the newly married Marchioness Grey. This is not clear from his own journal:

“Come to London all this Winter Season Past days together with dining with a Nobleman. Taught ye Marchioness Grey, Lady Sophia Grey, Miss Cornwallis, Miss Townshend.”

The comment about the nobleman is typically cryptic.

Miss TALBOT TO MRS. CARTER.
Jan. 7th, 1742.

I sent you many compliments by Mr. Wright, but if I had not been impertinent enough to make him open his Letter again, I believe you would never have had them. I had the pleasure of spending part of November and December in the same family with him, and often enquired about the time he passed in Kent, which he talked of as one that was equal to all I could imagine of it. Poor man, the time he spent at Windsor was the latter part of it embittered by a loss which he seemed touched by very deeply, and his melancholy air made me reflect on your moonlight walks.

Wright was in mourning for his mother who had died in November.

In 1742 Wright was offered a post by the Czarina of Russia. Perhaps put off by his fear of sailing he asked for £500 a year rather than the offered £200.

Miss TALBOT TO MRS. CARTER.
London, Feb. 28, 1743.

I do not know whether Mr. Wright, amidst all his late negotiations, has had any leisure to give you an account of them; but I believe that he is not a little glad that her Czarian Majesty has made him such moderate offers only for coming to trace out triangles and circles amidst the snows of Russia as he may with a safe conscience, and with great confidence refuse: he has accordingly refused them, and I hope he will never have reason to repent it.

Elizabeth Carter wrote back in April, when Wright was staying again with Lord Middleton.

MRS. CARTER TO Miss TALBOT.
Deal, April 16, 1743

Mr. Wright had given me no account of his negociations when I received your's: I have since had one from .himself, which I for some time looked over with great veneration, and most profound ignorance, imagining it had been wrote in Coptic characters; till at length I happily discovered the name name of Miss Talbot, certain magic syllables that cast a more than lustre over the more than Egyptian darkness of a manuscript, which it would have been impossible for me to read without their assistance, and with it, I believe, I might defy any language or any scrawl, that is, or is not in use upon the face of the whole earth to puzzle me.

Anyone who has tried to read Wright's unpublished manuscripts will sympathise with Elizabeth's difficulties.

In 1745 Catherine Talbot spent a long holiday at Wrest Park with Jemima Grey and Philip Yorke. Wright had regularly stayed there, though not this particular summer.

Miss TALBOT TO Miss. CARTER.
Cuddesden, June 18, 1745.

To be sure you must often have heard Mr. Wright talk in high strains of Wrest Gardens, and if you were acquainted with the possessor of them I should not need many words to persuade you how happy I was there. While people are in a state of enchantment they are not used to be good for much, and therefore you will not wonder if I indulged myself in perfect idleness, and left all my correspondents to amuse themselves, with their own speculations, perfectly uninterrupted by any line from me....At present every bird is a companion, every field a gay place; but summer, alas has wings, and these gay fields will be as bleak before I leave them, as they were when I last parted from them. “

This summer Jemima Grey and Elizabeth Yorke had been copying pictures. Elizabeth Yorke copied a picture of Dante which she is holding in her portrait by Hudson at Shugborough.

Miss Talbot writes:

*“Goupy made me begin with a pen and ink, because as those faults cannot •
be easily effaced it naturally makes one more careful.”*

This implies that the artist Joseph Goupy was at Wrest acting as a tutor. Goupy later designed House of Confucius at Kew Gardens.

Though Miss Talbot says she had “undertaken to learn perspective of Mr Wright” this may refer to the coming winter as he may not have been at Wrest that summer, though he was invited. His Journal mysteriously says:

“June - Went to Muffits for 5 weeks or 6 weeks. Rec(over)d.”

Muffits was the home of Miss Townshend, daughter of Charles Viscount Townshend (“Turnip Townshend”), and later married to Edward Cornwallis, brother to Earl Cornwallis, and groom of the bedchamber to the King.

In July he visited the Earl of Essex at Cassiobury, the Duchess of Kent, Jemima Grey’s Grandmother, at Old Windsor, and then to Lord Middleton at Peper Harow. Elizabeth Carter did not know where he was:

MRS. CARTER TO Miss TALBOT.
Canterbury, Aug. I, 1745.

“I have heard nothing from Mr. Wright for time immemorial, so belike he may be taking a trip to the moon. Adieu. I am in a violent hurry (not to go after him but) to dress for a horse-race and an assembly.”

In June 1745 he had noted that he “made an agreeable acquaint’ce with Miss Rowd., Miss Mordant etc. Wrote something in verse.” This may have something to do with Miss Carter’s next mention of him:

MRS. CARTER TO Miss TALBOT.
Canterbury, Aug. 8, 1745.

“I must tell you that pour surcroit d'ignorance I have received a Letter from Mr. Wright, of which I do not understand a word. To excuse my own dullness, I am apt to believe the poor man's head is turned, as he seems to insinuate he has lately fallen in love, which, as I have read in several books, is very apt to turn people's heads. Be this as it will, I know not what to make of his Letter, only that upon the whole, it was charitably intended for my reformation; but this I need in so many instances that 'tis impossible to find out what folks mean when they talk in general. I have wrote to him in great haste for an exact catalogue of my errors, and have borrowed a larum against it comes, that it may wake me every morn at five o'clock, that I may endeavour to amend them.”

Or does it mean, as the letter is “intended for my reformation” that Wright has realised he is in love with Elizabeth? Some dramatic personal events were happening to Wright. Under September he wrote:

“Thought himself Inger'd by one of his friends and resolv'd to break off the acquaintance.”

Whether or not there was another woman involved Thomas Wright spent Christmas in Kent with Rev Spencer Cowper, and with Miss Townsend and Miss Mordant. He mysteriously notes:

“serve a valuable friend Miss Carte.”

The abbreviation is typical of his partial self censorship.

Miss TALBOT TO MRS. CARTER.
Cuddesden, Dec. 30, 1745.

If you see Mr. Wright, pray give my compliments to him. I hope it will scarce be a month before I see him myself in town.

MRS. CARTER TO Miss TALBOT.
Canterbury, Jan. 6, 1745.

I delivered your compliments to Mr. Wright when Miss Hall and I went to wait on Mr. Cowper. Miss Townsend draws most charmingly, better than Mr. Wright; but there is a Miss Mordant, who, for a study of two or three days, has made a most surprizing progress, at which I am half mad.

Carter is not telling the whole story to Catherine Talbot. What did Wright mean by “serve a valuable friend.” This is the last mention of Wright in Carter’s letters for three years.

Wright’s Early Journal ends with his trip to Ireland, or rather a brief provisional trip before his long tour. His relationship with Elizabeth Carter is lost in the shadows from this point on.

Miss TALBOT TO MRS. CARTER.
Brompton, May 2, 1746.

“I could not find leisure to write to you, no not so much as to enquire the meaning of one part of your Letter, which gave me great uneasiness, where you mentioned some distress you had been in, and which was not yet over, without explaining what it was. Mr. Wright tells me it was your sister’s illness, I hope she is now perfectly well again, though I fear you have not yet recovered your spirits O yes, but to be sure you have, for’ since writing the last sentence, I have received a Letter from you, dear Miss Carter, that is an evident proof of your seeing the world, and every thing in it, with the gayest view imaginable.”

In May Wright went to Cassiobury (the Earl of Essex) for 2 week and

“resolv’d upon a strong invitation to go to Ireland and set out for Parkgate: waited 6 days for wind and at last arriv’d safe at Dublin where he liv’d a fortnight and saw all the chief places (of) Intrest

June – Landed in England June 16th 10 Morning.”

Miss TALBOT TO MRS. CARTER.
Cuddesden, June 21, 1746.

“The person who told me you had been in low spirits was Mr. Wright, who to avoid the consequences of your displeasure is embarked for Ireland.”

Wright spent several months in Ireland researching his book of Irish antiquities, Louthiana, to be published in 1748.

After his return his life changed. He somehow found a new patron, Norborne Berkeley, and he spent a large part of his time at Stoke Park, near Bristol, planting a picturesque landscape and rebuilding the house. He broke off with most of his earlier patrons. During this mysterious period there is one more mention of Wright, staying at Elizabeth Carter’s uncle’s at Enfield, by which time he had, perhaps, finished his work at Shugborough and planned his “Original Theory.” But other than that his life, and his relationship with Elizabeth Carter, becomes more and more mysterious.

Did they still correspond? There is one later mention of him in a letter to Talbot, simply as the person who should be thanked for introducing them, but perhaps Carter had already begun to avoid telling the full story, and if there was still any relationship between Wright and Talbot it was not Miss Talbot’s business.

<http://books.google.co.uk/books?output=text&id=aPokAAAAMAAJ&dq=elizabeth+carter+anson&pg=PR1&lpq=PR1&q=wright>

(1) Elizabeth Carter 1717-1806. An Edition of Some Unpublished Letters. Edited by Gwen Hampshire, University of Delaware Press, 2005

(2) A Series of Letters Between Mrs. Elizabeth Carter and Miss Catherine Talbot ...

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