

The Hauntingly Beautiful *Carol Day*...and the Journey of the Strip's Art from Great Britain to the United States



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Carol Day #425, Problem Child storyline
from the collection of Jeff Singh (with his permission)



The first *Carol Day* strip I ever actually held in my hands...it was mesmerizing. The delicacy of the line work and the atmosphere Wright creates in these scenes of a young girl lost in the London fog are unforgettable. I certainly would not forget it, as I launched a search for something akin to what I saw that night for my own collection.

With Friends Like This...

Evil has a name. And that name is Jeff Singh.

He is the heartless SOB that introduced me to David Wright and the British comic strip, *Carol Day*. If he is the one telling you the story, he'll act innocent about his role in my demise. But, he is the original comic art equivalent of a drug dealer. He provided a small taste of something really special...knowing I would certainly become a full-blown addict.

To be clear, I've had a ton of fun exploring the world of *Carol Day* and the art of David Wright. And, in reality, I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to Jeff (one among many – he's been such a supportive friend and a tremendous source of comic OA history and information).

But, Mr. Singh set a hook in me at a gathering of comic OA collectors at a post-C2E2 dinner at Club Lago here in Chicago about 4-5 years ago. While enjoying a great meal, Jeff produced a portfolio of samples from his collection. In typical Jeff fashion, it was a broad array of comic, illustration and strip art. While a small sample from his voluminous collection, he had some stunning examples – among them some gorgeous strips. Jeff and I had conversed for some time about my enjoyment of the strips that he would periodically post in his CAF gallery, but I had never seen anything in person – in fact, even though we had corresponded many times via e-mail, that evening was only the second time I had met Jeff...and certainly the first time that we had spent significant personal time together while sharing a meal.

Anyway, while flipping through his collection, he pulled out the 425th strip from the *Carol Day* storyline, Problem Child (the image of which appears on the preceding page). I was stunned. I had seen the piece when he posted it in his CAF gallery – and thought it was beautiful at the time. But, there was no way to appreciate Wright's skill and craft without seeing the piece in person – the attention to every detail, the delicacy of his every line, his ability to create mood and evoke emotion in such a small space. I was almost confused that someone as gifted as he was completely unknown to me.

I held the piece in my hands and asked Jeff about it for the remainder of dinner – Wright's background, his creation of the strip, it's run, etc. Jeff fielded every question...and was likely worried that I was about to knock him over the head with a blunt object at any moment and run away with the strip given how enthralled I was. But, I left dinner with two objectives – first, to get myself up the learning curve of who David Wright and his creation, *Carol Day*, were, and two, once I was up the learning curve, to find myself an example as beautiful as the one I had just held in my hands.

The Search

My search for *Carol Day* examples is not the point of this article – and I certainly won't spend time explaining to the likes of this periodical's audience the mania of an OA search. But, the search is what ultimately led me to some new relationships along the way and a deep desire to understand how the original art from the strip only so recently made its way into the hands of collectors.

The search itself can be summarized as me being continuously a day late and a dollar short on a limited amount of public auctions and the periodical quasi-public sales by a handful of collectors. The main challenge for me was to understand exactly what I wanted within the context of a broad body of work covering a good chunk of an artist's life. With over 3,300 strips, among which approximately 2,800 had made their way to the United States, what were the stories, time periods, characters, etc. that I should focus on? Jeff was a great help every step of the way, but I generally lacked my usual aggressiveness as I was reading the strip and trying to understand where I wanted to focus.

It was not until I had gotten through a reading of most of the strips, gotten an understanding of most of the general progression of stories and plot lines and perused almost every strip posted on CAF that I went on the offensive. And that led me to a very nice guy who I had never met before – notwithstanding significant time in his CAF gallery – Mark Howland.

I won't bore you with the details, but I had become intensely focused on the sequence of strips he had in his collection from the Lance Hallam storyline, strips #109-115. To me, they were evocative of what I had seen and felt holding the #425 in my hands earlier with Jeff. Each panel had a level of skill and craft that seemed to tell its own individual story. For some reason, I also figured that Mark also might be more willing to part with a strip from a sequence – a presumption that now does not make a lot of sense to me in retrospect as the current owner of those same strips. But, it's safe to say that Mark was incredibly gracious – our dialogue evolved from trying to pry something loose from the sequence to prying a portion of it...to him agreeing to sell the whole thing to me. Along the way, we discussed other areas of focus for each of us, how we might integrate trade into the process, etc. – it was a very candid and transparent dialogue between two collectors that was incredibly enjoyable. The end result? I purchased the whole sequence from him.

It was shortly after completing the deal that I inquired as to how much he knew about the history of the art itself. Namely, how did the art from a British strip make its way here in what appeared to be such volume?

For the answer to such questions, Mark told me there were three people I really needed to talk to – fantasy artist Doug Beekman and two collector-dealers, Thomas Ward & Roger Clark.

Carol Day #109-115, Lance Hallam story line

So, here they are. After a long wait – and many near misses – these were the first *Carol Day* strips I was able to procure for my collection. It was an incredible way to start!





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We Hold These Truths...

So, before I dive into the people and timing of the strips making their way to the U.S., I think it best to describe where they were and what had been going on prior to that process starting. The following is the quasi-triangulated history as I know it.

David Wright had three sons – Patrick Wright, Paul Wright and Nicki Wright. David Wright came from a painting family. Both of his parents were artists and they liked to trace the dynasty way back...and they certainly could. Art was certainly in the genes of the Wright boys.

Like his father, Patrick would focus on comics. He'd wanted to take over *Carol Day* after his father's death (and was turned down) and ended up working for a number of British comics, including a stint on *Modesty Blaise*. Paul would become a well-regarded marine painter. And, Nicki Wright – more inclined to the art of music; he was a rock n' roll guy – would eventually come to America and take some Carol Day stories and scrapbooks with him when he did. Nicki is deceased now – but interestingly, he lived in the United States during the last years of his life. Patrick is still alive to the knowledge of early collectors - although no one has had contact with him for the last three years.

Anyway, at the same time U.S. collectors were just starting to make inquiries about the existence, location and availability of *Carol Day* strips, Patrick Wright was working to get the original art returned to his family. The art was in the hands of the University of Kent in Canterbury, UK. It's unclear as to how and why the University had the art in its possession, but the collectors who pursued it assume the situation was much like the University of Syracuse, OSU or other major university collections here in the States.

Patrick was procuring the art with the intent to sell it – he was having serious health problems at the time (throat cancer) and that fueled the need to get the art back and to market it. Patrick's additional motivation was the general irritation that someone else had the art in his or her possession. He felt it belonged to the family and it was theirs to do with as they saw fit. At the time, the University had approximately 2,800 of the total 3,305 strips in their possession. The balance of the strips was in the hands of private collectors. Those strips in the hands of private collectors generally got there via Nicki Wright (a model for some of the characters in the strip). Nicki got into some financial trouble and somehow got a hold of and sold pieces in his father's possession. From what *did not* make it to the States, it would appear he sold strips from later stories and those that featured Andy Warhol.

Either way, it's incredibly serendipitous that collectors were seeking the art at almost the exact time that the Wright family was looking to regain control of it. But, that serendipity aside, one of those collectors had been familiar with David Wright for quite some time... decades, in fact.

So, where does it all start? It starts in the 1960's with a young kid named Doug Beekman.

Doug Beekman

In the mid-60s, artist Doug Beekman was a young kid perusing a general second hand store in Ohio looking for...whatever. He was a kid - he never knew what might pop up at this place. As people cleaned out their attics, all sorts of things would pop up - pulps, old comics, etc. One day he stumbled on a stack of Sunday supplement magazines called *American Weekly*. Some of them had pin up covers by an artist named David Wright. As he



went through them, he found others that had galleries of girlie art by the same artist. His work was stunning. Even at that age, Doug knew who pin-up artists such as Vargas & Petty were – and had at least been exposed to the art of Elvgren, so knew Wright was a different artist. He was totally baffled that Wright wasn't just as famous.

Fast-forward ten years and Doug was a young fantasy illustrator living in NYC. He started a subscription to a weekly comic strip publication called *The Menomonee Falls Gazette*. They ran a lot of American adventure strip art, but also an Australian feature and several British strips that he wasn't familiar with. One week they published several days of features that were not

part of their usual line up – titles like *Matt Marriott & Carol Day* (as a side note, David Wright and *Matt Marriott's* creator, Tony Weare, had a close relationship - Wright did some work on Weare's *Matt Marriott* strip and Weare did some work on *Carol Day*; Weare was even featured as a character in three of the *Carol Day* stories - the title character in Adam Boone and again as Boone in *Mystery Man* and *Mr. Boker*).

Other than that brief week in the *Gazette*, neither *Carol Day* nor *Matt Marriott* had ever been published in the States to the best of Doug's knowledge. While intrigued, researching the features was difficult. But, in the 1990's, things changed with the advent of the Internet. It made the search for and availability of comic strip OA much easier. Once he became plugged into eBay, a handful of dailies from both features became available from private collectors and he snatched them up as soon as they appeared.

Sometime around late 2006-early 2007, Doug bought a few *Rusty Riley* dailies from collector Thomas Ward. According to Doug, he directed Ward to his CAF gallery and his posted *Carol Days*. Ward was taken with what he saw and decided to dig further into researching the strip, its creator and where its original art could be found. Within a couple of months, Ward found David Wright's two sons, Patrick and Paul.

According to Doug, had he found the Wright sons first, he says there would be a set of high end *Carol Day* books in print right now. This had been a dream of Doug ever since he'd become aware of the strip's existence. He'd intended to purchase the entirety of the art from the family, make high res scans of it all and go into print, either by himself or through Charles Pelto at Classic Comics Press, who was willing to publish the feature. Instead, because Ward went public with the Wright's contact information, Doug ended up competing with other buyers to obtain the art. But, acquire he did – in between he & Ward, they would eventually have well over 600 of the strips in their ownership or pass through their hands. Doug's description of the absolute thrill of opening the packages of art when they arrived can make you feel like it is happening in real time. The art was long out of print and unseen by anyone outside the Wright family for decades – to be holding some of the best and earliest examples in his hands was an indescribable thrill that few collectors have the chance to experience.

To Doug, the fact that David Wright ever produced a comic strip at all is amazing. In his view, the man was an outstanding illustrator whose skills cut across a broad range of subjects and styles. It's not as if Wright were a young inexperienced guy who didn't have chops at the beginning of *Carol Day* and then got better. Rather, he was a 44 year-old highly accomplished illustrator who took on a comic strip. And, according to his son Patrick, he was subject to depression and that this state of mind became more pronounced in the feature the closer we get to the end.

He was also a master of so many subjects that would have brought him high illustration fees here in the States - travel art, cars, planes, etc., and his pin up and fashion art were exceptional. Having an artist with that skill set involved with a comic strip is something that never would have happened in the U.S. (interestingly, Doug has noticed that *Carol Day* never goes horseback riding, which is an odd thing in a story that often takes place in large British estates. He assumes that is attributable to the fact that David Wright likely did not like drawing horses - which may have been key to the Wright/Weare friendship. They each excelled at the thing the other disliked drawing.) Top end illustrators in the 1950s never came near comic strips here...they were too busy doing very expensive art for calendars, women's magazines, advertising and movie posters. In England at the time, the market for such work was smaller and the potential fees lower.

Against that lower fee environment, Wright was the beneficiary of the British adventure comic strip industry taking off in the 1950's. The import of Alex Raymond's *Rip Kirby* to Great Britain was a huge boost to such explosion and drove the major British newspapers to want their own characters. Both *Carol Day* and *Matt Marriott* were created in the mid-50s in that environment.

Interestingly, according to Wright's sons, William Randolph Hearst attempted on a number of occasions to recruit Wright and get him to come to the States. David Wright always declined. Although had that occurred, it wouldn't be up to a fantasy artist and a handful of comic art collectors and dealers to make his wonderful art known to the American public five decades later. But, coming full circle, Hearst was the publisher of *American Weekly*, the magazine that Doug had first seen David Wright's art in as a child.



Another stunning example of David Wright's pin-up capabilities. This one is from the 1950's and done in pastel. Courtesy of Doug Beekman.

Thomas Ward

Thomas Ward was initially introduced to *Carol Day* after seeing the dailies in Doug Beekman's CAF gallery. Roger Clark had also noted in his CAF "Want List" that he was looking for early *Carol Days*. In conjunction with some inbound inquiries from other collectors looking for *Carol Day* information and finding some additional late example *Carol Days* on the website of The Book Palace of London, Ward began to seriously dig into the history of the strip and the location of its art.

Thomas was curious as to why there wasn't any earlier *Carol Days* in anyone's collection. He started investigating, looking on the Internet and discovering that the Michigan State Library had several pages of reprints. He contacted them on July 27, 2007. Their prompt response was as follows -

Dear Mr. Ward:

We would prefer not to copy the whole bunch of pages, because we do not own the copyright for these strips. We could copy a few pages for you.

These strips came from Nicky Wright, who has since died. He had been trying to get Kitchen Sink Press to print a Carol Day collection. Another brother works as an artist in British comics, but I don't know his name, sorry!

After receiving that email he was able to do more investigating and came up with Patrick Wright as the artist that worked in British comics. Amazingly, he was able to somehow track down his email and promptly wrote to him on July 27 – the same day!

Dear Mr. Wright,

I am a big fan of your father's work and I also collect original comic strip artwork as well. I was wondering if you have any Carol Day originals you would like to sell, or know of anyone that I could purchase from.

I have seen the originals from Book Palace but was looking for something somewhat earlier, something from the 1950's. Any information regarding this subject would be most appreciative. Like I said I am a big fan of your father's work and would love to frame and cover my walls with Carol Days!

Sincerely yours,

Thomas Ward

Patrick Wright responded as follows...

Dear Thomas Ward,

Thank you for your kind message. I'm pleased to note your enthusiasm for my late father's work on Carol Day. I can confirm I am in possession of nearly the entire run of Carol Day strips - all of which are in fine to very good condition.

I agree the early work is the most interesting, and in my opinion represents a high spot in the art of the strip cartoon.

I am presently looking for a buyer for the entire Carol Day archive. There are approximately 2000 CS10 boards. I would hope to realize something in the region of £xxxxx (£xxx per board) for the collection. Because of the weight and bulk of this collection I will pay for shipping costs. However, should you want to buy 10 or more boards I would consider selling them @ xxx per board. I am not prepared to sell less than 10 boards.

It may be of interest to you to learn there is a growing interest in David Wright's work, and that a book about his life and work is near completion. David's pin-up work is to be merchandized in the autumn. I'm afraid I don't have any of the pin-up and advertising work.

I trust the above helps, and will look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards,

Patrick Wright

Now mind you, Thomas was only looking for a few pieces of artwork - maybe 10-20 at most. He truly was just looking for something to frame and put up on his walls. At the time he was a small collector, 2-3 thousand dollars was his maximum budget for the year. For the next several weeks, Wright would send him e-mails with pictures that he would take with his camera of the strips. The first 3 were *Carol Day* #5,6 & 7 - he thought they were nice, but it was the next sequence that really blew Thomas away - *Carol Day* #109-115 (what an unbelievable coincidence). Thomas though those were the epitome of the entire series and struggled to put in words how beautiful and atmospheric. To him, they had a certain film noir feel about it. The letter from Patrick Wright accompanying them read as follows -

Dear Thomas,

I've sent off another 7 pages to you. These are in sequence. I will send you another page from the same sequence to make up two sets of 4 for your framing requirements.

These are from days 109 - 115 and fall outside your ambition to have pages from the first three months of DW's work. However, I think these are interesting pages as they show his interest in settings and his attention to detail. My father was heavily influenced by American film noir (and indeed most things American) and I think this is evident in his compositions; one of his favourite films was Crossfire.

I would like you to consider some of the pages from the late 1950s when I think some of his best work was done, and I will send you some emails of pages I think are especially strong. As DW progressed with Carol over the ten years he worked on it, the themes became darker but were countered by delightful landscapes. There is a wonderful set with a boxing sequence that I'd like you to consider.

You may be interested to note that DW took absolute control over the strips - even to the point of insisting that he personally did all the lettering; he hated others tampering with the pages. When he became ill in the final years I helped him with the pencil work on the pages.

As for payment; yes, I do have a PayPal account, but would prefer a good old-fashioned dollar cheque.

I will sort out some more of the best of the early work and send them through tomorrow.

Kindest regards,

Patrick Wright

The strips would obviously make their way from Thomas, to collector Mark Howland...and then, thankfully, to me (it was certainly a thrill to have received the record of Thomas Ward's correspondence with Patrick Wright so many years ago about that sequence). Thomas would gather a good chunk of other strips from the series while corresponding with Wright and let other collectors know that he had found the family and the trove of *Carol Day* art. One of those 'other collectors' was Roger Clark.

Roger Clark

Roger Clark's entry point (like many collectors at that time) to the world of *Carol Day* was a March 2002 article in *Comic Book Artist Magazine* (issue 18) by David Roach entitled "The Best Artist You Don't Know: Revealing the Work of Unknown Artist Genius David Wright". Roach wrote an amazing article with the help of David's son, Patrick, and collector Terry Parker (who was working on collecting Wright's wartime pin-ups into a book). His feelings on David Wright and *Carol Day* are encapsulated in his sentence from the article – '*Carol Day* ran for over ten years, from 1956 to 1967, in the *Daily Mail*, garnered a fanatical following, appeared in 22 countries, and then quietly disappeared as if had never existed'. Roach may not have known it, but he had effectively recruited the tenacious Roger Clark into the effort to bring the strip back to the prominence it deserved.

Armed with knowledge of the strip, Roger went looking for examples. Like other collectors, he had some early success on eBay and would buy other examples from The Book Palace in London. After posting his examples, Roger became aware of Thomas Ward. Amazingly, Roger Clark has never met Thomas Ward. He's done business with him over the years, knows that Ward got into the strip via Doug Beekman, etc. - but he's never physically met him.

Roger also knows that, once introduced to the strip, Ward was interested in procuring some of the art. Ward reached out to Patrick Wright at the exact time that Patrick was getting the art returned to him from the University of Kent. Once he reached his own spending limit, he gave additional names to Patrick to sell more of the art. That is what led to Roger being introduced to Patrick Wright.

Before making further introductions, Ward purchased about 150 of the strips from Wright; he ended up with 30-40 of the best ones plus the bulk of the Problem Child storyline. At about the same time, Doug Beekman purchased Caribbean Captive and about 85% of Shadow of Suspicion. Ward & Beekman would eventually initially own almost 650 of the strips with Beekman owning somewhere in the range of ¼ to ½ of the first 18 storylines.

Roger would eventually buy most of Ward's strips. At the high point, Roger had more than 2,500 of the 2,800 strips that made their way to the States. Initially, his work with Wright on procuring strips was a slow process. Wright was initially picking things out one at a time. Roger got him to do larger deals to expedite the process – he would tell Wright, 'pick 100 of the best and I will send you a check'. But even that proved to be slow. Roger would eventually tell Wright, 'I will buy it all!' From Roger's own telling, it was a bold move for him – he & his wife were in an interim rental property while waiting to move to a new home. At the exact same time, he sent a massive wire to Patrick Wright. How he somehow convinced his wife to do this is a separate story, but the wire was sent.

Initially, there was no response confirming that the wire had been received – and Wright was not responding to e-mails. Roger was in a panic, but finally tracked Wright's house down via phone and got his wife. She let him know that the wire had been received and

that Wright was having trouble with e-mails! Ironically, he would never actually speak with Wright...only his wife.

When the bulk shipment arrived, seeing it all was an incredible experience for someone who loved the strip. Per Roger, "The strip changes over time – Wright's art matures. As in life, Carol's experiences impact her, change her and sometimes harden her. Her persona and her physical appearance change as the years go on in the strip." David Wright's art evolved over the course of the strip - it's a pet peeve of many serious *Carol Day* collectors that everyone generally likes the beginning of the story and the later parts of the story are looked down upon artistically in comparison. But, Roger has literally seen them all – and, similar to David Wright's son, Patrick – Roger thinks the artistic high point (both art & story) of the strip was with the Jack Slingsby storyline.

Having seen so much of the strips in person, I had to ask Roger what his favorite stories were. For both art & story, Roger thinks Lance Hallam, Face Value & Emergency are his favorites. For art, he thinks Jack Slingsby is his favorite. I also asked him to pick his top-10 individual strips. In Jack Slingsby, he says there are 2-3 alone from that story that would fall into his top-10.

We also talked about pieces that have passed through him that he regrets – and he stated that he does his best not to lament such pieces. He recognizes that he has been incredibly fortunate to have so many pieces pass through his collection. But...he can certainly think of one. Charles Logan #41.

There are also a few pieces that he has never seen – including some from one of his favorite stories, Lance Hallam. And, no one has ever seen the first strip. When he first received the batches of art from Patrick Wright, a good portion of the strips he was missing were from the last 3-4 stories in the run. Among the missing were many of the strips featuring the Andy Warhol character, which he assumes were among those procured and sold by Nicki Wright to individual collectors many years before.

SOME FINAL MUSINGS...

Well...that was certainly fun. But, it was not possible without the contributions and sharing of experience by Doug, Thomas & Roger. I am extremely grateful to each of them.

Each gentleman had his own interactions and dialogue with Patrick Wright. While generally extremely consistent, each brought pieces of information unique to their experience – and I've tried to piece it all together here for your enjoyment. Hope you liked it!

For reference, in addition to the Comic Book Marketplace article I referenced in the Roger Clark section of this article, I would also direct you to the second issue of *Illustrators Magazine*, published by The Book Palace of London. Within it is an article entitled, 'My Affair With Carol Day: Roger Clark Confesses All!', by none other than...Roger Clark!