

# The Best Artist You Don't Know

## Revealing the work of unknown artist genius David Wright

by David A. Roach

With the comic strip now in its second century as an art form, thanks to countless collections, magazines, encyclopedias and histories, we have a pretty clear picture of the medium's high points. Surely even the most blinkered fan will at least have heard of *Little Nemo*, *Flash Gordon*, *Krazy Kat*, *Terry and the Pirates*, or *Peanuts*, and if not, at least the material is out there to put him right. But imagine for a moment the possibility that there might have been a strip that somehow slipped through the net, that was never collected, and whose sole appearance in a history book was some thirty years ago. Incredibly, that is the fate that has befallen the sublime British newspaper strip *Carol Day* and its creator David Wright. *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 it never had existed.



David Wright was born in 1912 into something of an artistic dynasty. Both parents were artists and the family, somewhat fancifully, was thought to be descended from the legendary 18th century painter Joseph Wright of Derby. As with so many boys growing up in the 1920s and '30s, Wright was fascinated by America, particularly its cars, movies and jazz, all of which must have seemed impossibly glamorous and sophisticated compared to drab old England. With little interest in formal education, Wright left school at a young age and started work in a London art studio where he followed in his mother's footsteps by specializing in fashion illustration.

When war broke out, Wright's lack of formal education, and fascination with cars, meant he was elected to the role of a driving instructor rather than the heroic R.A.F. pilot he had wanted to be. With time on his hands, he approached the Rogers Art Agency with his portfolio, hoping to secure a few assignments to draw cars or airplanes. However, Rogers was more interested in his fashion artwork and could see how his talent for drawing women might be turned into something altogether more profitable, and so, David Wright, pin-up artist, was born. His first pin-up appeared as a loose insert in 1941 in *The Sketch* magazine and it created an immediate sensation.

During the war, Wright was in many ways Britain's equivalent of America's Alberto Vargas and his pin-ups adorned barrack rooms and bedroom walls up and down the country. In fact, it has been suggested that the Army kept him in Britain, out of active combat, because they realized how important his pin-ups were to the

country's morale. Unlike Vargas, Wright preferred to use a brush rather than an airbrush and his illustrations were notably more "painterly" and less slick than his contemporaries. He was lucky to have an excellent model in his young wife Esmé (though in later life she was known to be somewhat ambivalent about having posed for him) and his girls have distinctively gamine yet sultry looks to them. Like Vargas, Wright's girls were seductive but rarely nude and he clothed them in all manner of fancifully see-through concoctions. But as the war ended and the country settled into years of rationing and austerity, there was a notable turning away from frivolity and, by the late '40s, Wright's pin-ups had disappeared from *The Sketch*.

Following this, he initially accepted pin-up assignments from the digest-sized *Men Only* magazine but gradually he moved into advertising to supplement his income. One of his principal clients was the drink giant Schweppes for whom he painted, inevitably, suave and seductive young ladies but he was soon to abandon

pin-ups for a rather unexpected new direction. While Britain had produced vast numbers of comics before the war, it was not until the early '50s that adventure strips began to emerge in any number, and an explosion of new titles hit the stands. Wright's agents, Rogers, were among the main suppliers of talent to the major publishing house and it seemed likely they appalled him with the notion of drawing comic strips. With little or no adventure strip tradition in the country, the publishers were desperate to recruit talent (which explains the vast number of Spanish and Italian artists who started their careers in Britain) and often recruited established illustrators like T. Heath Robinson, Septimus Scott and H.M. Brock, despite their lack of experience with the medium. Like them, Wright was free to try his luck and a new comic artist was born.

Wright's first strip, starring Kit Carson, appeared in *Cowboy Picture Library* #56 (July 1952), and was well-drawn, if a bit rough around the edges. But it was to be another year before he tried his hand again. "Judy" debuted in March 1953 in the weekly magazine *Titbits* (which, despite its title, was a slightly down-market family publication) and was a half-page strip written by Peter Meriton. Wright painted his final *Men Only* pin-up in 1954 and the slack was taken up with a second comic strip, "Jo," written by John Dormer, in *The Empire News*. Both strips were transparent excuses to draw leggy girls in exotic locales, but were none the worse for that. Their restrictive formats meant that he had little room to explore storytelling techniques or innovative compositions but they revealed a

Above: David Wright's *Carol Day* is a forgotten treasure of comic strip art. Courtesy of David A. Roach. ©2002 the respective copyright holder.



Above: Another Carol Day strip by David Wright, which appeared daily in London's Daily Mail newspaper. Courtesy of David A. Roach. ©2002 the respective copyright holder.

consummate drawing ability and a loose and lively approach to rendering. In late 1956, *Titbits* began reprinting lavishly painted black-&-white strips by the Italian artist Walter Molino and early the very next year Wright quit "Judy" for a new serial, "Danger Treads Softly," which was also painted. "Danger Treads Softly" was ostensibly a thriller though since the strip's heroine was a fashion model, its emphasis was very much on cheesecake, yet again. Visually however it was gorgeous with an impressionistic softness quite reminiscent of Gene Colan's wash work for Warren a decade later. Wright returned to "Judy" in June 1957, but he quickly abandoned this, since by this point he had already entered the big leagues. He had become a newspaper strip artist.

*Carol Day* premiered in the Sept. 10, 1956 edition of *The Daily Mail*, one of the country's biggest papers, and it's safe to say Britain had never seen its like before. British newspapers had been running comic strips for decades by this point but the serious strip had very much been in the minority. Early features like Jack Monk's *Buck Ryan* (which first appeared in 1937) and Steven Dowling's *Garth* (from '43), were extraordinarily crude and it wasn't until *The Mail* began running Alex Raymond's masterful *Rip Kirby* that British artists grasped quite what the medium was capable of. Another important development was the emergence of strips like Norman Pett's *Jane* and Arthur Ferrier's *Film Fannie* in the '30s, which were little more than vehicles for pretty girls, often naked pretty girls (a tradition that still survives in some British tabloids).

Meanwhile, in the States, throughout the '50s and '60s, a new kind of comic strip was emerging. Firstly, with Stan Drake's *The Heart of Juliet Jones*, and subsequently with Leonard Starr's *On Stage* and Alex Kotsky's *Apartment 3-G*. These were very well drawn, dramatic, sophisticated soap opera features, and *Carol Day* was in many ways Britain's response to this. Carol herself was a fashion model (with a wealthy uncle) who was endlessly searching for love but never quite finding the perfect man. Within this framework, Wright, with scripts from Peter Meriton, was able to explore all manner of subjects and locales, from high society to the darkest slums, and even the supernatural. What elevated the feature from the ordinary to the spectacular was Wright's art which was truly extraordinary. By this

point, he had mastered the medium and continuity and composition were now assured and inventive while his rendering was utterly unique.

His drawing had the relaxed, intuitive grasp of body language of a Raymond or a Drake but he used his brush and pen in the painterly style of much earlier illustrators such as Charles Dana Gibson and James Montgomery Flagg. Wright barely penciled his strips, merely drawing enough so that he could see where the figures and settings should go. Once that was established, he swept in with great swathes of black brush strokes, delineating features, forms and shadows. Finally he would ass layer upon layer of dense pen strokes, oppressively dark cross-hatching for the backgrounds and delicate, sketchy, explorative lines for faces, folds and foliage. He avoided outlines if he possibly could, preferring to play tones and surfaces off each other in an energetic collision of shadow, texture and light.

*Carol Day* has been interpreted as a slightly sinister, macabre feature largely because of its oppressively cross-hatched dark artwork and Wright himself was apparently a rather somber, almost melancholy figure. While he adored art and was almost incapable of doing anything less than his best work, he harbored a strong sense that comics were somehow beneath him. Despite his obvious understanding of the highly complex mechanisms of comics, his opinion of them was low. This was most clearly demonstrated by his fascination with Fredric Wertham's notorious anti-comic book tract, *Seduction of the Innocent*. One of his three sons, Nicky Wright, was infatuated with American comic books (in fact, in later life, he became a noted contributor to *Comic Book Marketplace*), particularly ECs, and had amassed a sizeable collection. After reading Wertham's dire warnings of impending juvenile delinquency, Wright took the offending titles out into his back garden and set fire to them! That an artist of Wright's talents and obvious intelligence could fail to see any kinship with EC's stars is almost beyond belief but clearly he did not.

His ambivalence towards comics extended to his contacts with his fellow artists, which were almost nonexistent with the sole exception of a close friendship with Tony Weare, the artist of *Matt Marriott* (who, years later, would also draw an episode of "V for Vendetta"). However, while he rarely looked at other strips, he was

Below: Yet another example of David Wright's artistry. From DAR's personal collection. Courtesy of David A. Roach. ©2002 the respective copyright holder.



an avid reader of magazines, such as *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Life* and *Collier's*, and would clip and file vast numbers of photos for future reference and would admire the artwork from the likes of Rockwell, Briggs and Cornwell. So, with the exception of Alex Raymond and Al Williamson, both of whom he rated highly, Wright's development as a comics artist was, so to speak, hermetically sealed in total isolation. With little outside influence, he developed an entirely personal way of drawing comic strips, particularly in his line work.

The isolation extended to his home life as well. Wright's sole break from the endless stints at the drawing board was to observe moths in his sizeable garden which he would happily do for hours. In fact, such was his expertise that a new species of moth was named after him once and it is perhaps true to say that he felt more a part of zoological circles than artistic ones. One of the contemporary criticisms of *Carol Day* was that it appeared somewhat old fashioned which, bearing in mind Wright's somewhat secluded existence is perhaps not entirely surprising. Wright was intensely aware of politics and world affairs but had little interest in current trends or fads, and indeed even the strip's line work itself harkened back to an earlier age. Ironically though, it is these very same anachronistic qualities that give the feature such a timeless quality now. *Carol Day* inhabits a nebulous, post-War England that never was, filled with crumbling manses, flowing gowns and vintage cars (all exquisitely rendered, of course).

Another unusual aspect of the strip was the extraordinary amount of work that went into each story. *The Daily Mail* would

Unfortunately, under Innes, the strip lasted only a few months before it was replaced by *Tiffany Jones*, which had been recently made homeless after *The Daily Sketch* (*The Mail's* sister paper) went under. *Tiffany Jones*, by Jenny Butterworth and Pat Tournet, was resolutely contemporary and reflected the frivolity and optimism of swinging London. It was everything *Carol Day* was not but ironically it has aged rather more badly than Wright's "old fashioned" strip.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of *Carol Day* is how, since its cancellation, it has almost disappeared completely, with no collections or serializations anywhere in the world or, at least, none that I'm aware of. Yet at its height, the strip was immensely popular as was made all too clear when Carol lost her much-valued virginity. Though far from being a libertarian, Wright was something of a free thinker where sex was concerned and was frustrated by the conservative mores of *The Daily Mail*. So it was that Carol consummated her affair, with a married man no less, between panels, in the most discrete manner possible; in one shot they were embracing with the sun setting behind them, in the next they were reading the papers over breakfast. As the hundreds of letters of protest from a nation of maiden aunts, spinsters and octogenarians flooded in, Wright and the paper, possibly for the first time, grasped just how popular the strip was and quite how many people cared deeply about the character (and, more to the point, how highly they prized her chastity!).

A quarter of a century later, that readership has either forgotten or died out and, with the exception of an occasional mention from celebrity fans such as Brian Bolland and David Lloyd, it is as if the strip never happened. Patrick Wright for his part returned to comics



periodically hire models and shoot literally hundreds of photos of them in all sorts of poses which would then be sent down to Wright as reference. The artist would then use them as characters in the latest story although Carol and her uncle were always entirely the products of his imagination. He enjoyed using friends and celebrities as models as well; Tony Weave became a regular member of the cast and Burl Ives and the British heavyweight boxer Henry Cooper also appeared in the feature.

After Peter Meriton left the strip, Wright's brother-in-law, Raymond Little took over the writing in what was to prove a rather tempestuous collaboration. Wright and Little would face each other across the room, Wright chain-smoking and listening to jazz, Little hammering away at the typewriter. By all accounts, Wright had strong views on how the strip should be written and did not always agree with where Little was taking it, so the opportunity for conflict was always present. After Little's sudden death in the '60s, Wright's agent, Jack Wall, put in a (very) short tenure as his replacement before Wright decided he could do the job better on his own.

But bad health was to plague Wright and in 1967, another of his sons, Patrick, was drafted in on pencils (though, since Wright was so forceful in his inking, few noticed the difference). Tragically, Wright died in May of that year, leaving barely three weeks' worth of strips left to run. He was only 53, a tragically young age and with surely many years of beautiful artistry ahead of him. Patrick had planned to continue the strip himself but at his father's funeral the agency told him that Kenneth Innes, his father's replacement on "Judy" some 10 years earlier, was to be the new artist.

in the mid-'70s, drawing for *Commando* and *2000 A.D.* before becoming a successful cartoonist. His brother Nicky became a successful photographer, mixing with the music business glitterati of '60s London like the Rolling Stones, before moving to the States. He never lost his love of the medium and a book of his writings on Golden Age comics was recently published (posthumously, sadly). But there is an interesting coda to this story that might just mean that *Carol Day*—and David Wright—won't be forgotten after all.

The artwork still exists. All of it. Sometime after Wright's death, the entire run of *Carol Day* was lent out to the University of Kent at Canterbury. But now the family intends to take it back. That is over 3,000 originals of some of the most gorgeous comic strip artwork ever drawn. Over the years, sadly, some pages have been sold, primarily in two lots it is believed; one box of about 100 strips surfaced in a London comic shop in the early '80s where they were mostly bought by other artists, and more recently at an auction house where a number of originals were sold but the current whereabouts are unknown. However, the vast majority of the strip is still intact and it is hoped that somehow a publisher can be found so that the feature finally gets the recognition it deserves. Noted collector Terry Parker is in the process of putting together a book of Wright's wartime pin-ups so perhaps now, some three decades after his death, David Wright's talents can finally be recognized.

Above: *Carol Day* by David Wright. Courtesy of David A. Roach. ©2002 the respective copyright holder.

[With thanks to Patrick Wright and Terry Parker for their help with biographical details.—D.A.R.]