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THOMAS WRIGHT'S EDINBURGH ALMANACK, 1733

JUDY PRESTON

AMONGST THE WEALTH of correspondence, papers and accounts held in the Duke of Beaufort's Muniments at Badminton House there is a rich seam of material relating to the family's association with Thomas Wright of Durham (1711–1786), mathematician, astronomer, tutor and landscape designer, which was to endure some forty years until his death.<sup>1</sup> The archive holds a number of engraved copperplates which provided the illustrations for some of Wright's published books on astronomy and architecture and amongst them, listed as 'Portrait of Wright aged 21', is the plate for his sheet almanac for the city of Edinburgh for 1733 (fig. 1).<sup>2</sup> This exquisite example of eighteenth-century engraving is a significant addition to the history of British almanacs, holds particular antiquarian interest for the city of Edinburgh and is a tribute to the resilience as much as the cosmological and aesthetic understanding of its creator, Thomas Wright.

The preferred method of measuring time has varied across civilisations: the calendar was of Roman origin, dividing time by the month; the ephemeris was of Greek origin, dividing time by the day; the almanac was roughly translated from the Arabic 'a calendar of the heavens'. By the modern age almanacs served to perpetuate belief in astrology, prophecy and phenomena occurring in nature, and in the mid seventeenth century the almanac was at the peak of its popularity in England, estimated to be purchased by a third of families, with annual sales at four hundred thousand.<sup>3</sup> In 1603 a monopolistic patent had been granted to the London guild of publishers and booksellers, the Worshipful Company of Stationers.<sup>4</sup>

In 1632 Charles I had granted a charter to Oxford to produce almanacs without prognostication and by the early eighteenth century, comparatively speaking, cosmology had been reduced to a minor undercurrent in Hanoverian society. However there were pockets of interest: the Zodiac Club at St John's

College, Cambridge, founded in 1725, based its constitution on astrology and the calculation of almanacs continued to give prominence to the phases of the moon, eclipses of the sun and the appearance of comets.<sup>5</sup> It was not until the late nineteenth century that the concept of the measurement of time became disconnected from a communal awareness of the cycles of nature or the activity of the planetary system.

In the eighteenth century it was not unusual for self-educated mathematicians to supplement their income by compiling almanacs. Thomas Wright's 'Early Journal' confirms that at the age of twelve he was 'much in love with Mathematicks' and used his leisure time 'close to study astronomy'; thus by Spring 1731 he had made himself 'master of all Astronomical Calculation, necessary to Comp[ute] an Ephemer[er]is'.<sup>6</sup> In the period during which he was to calculate the Edinburgh almanac Wright was also to publish a total eclipse of the moon, which took place on 20 November 1732 and the sun's eclipse in May 1733. He initially intended to calculate an almanac on the Oxford model based on the Durham meridian, which he began in October 1731, but it arrived in London too late for publication. However the Company of Stationers offered to produce an almanac in 1733 and to pay him an annual salary for the work undertaken provided he could find 500 subscribers. In the Spring of 1732 Wright designed a second almanac signing up 900 subscribers within a six week period. He again took it to London, where the Company now declared itself unwilling to print it lest it impact on the Oxford almanac. This placed Wright in a difficult position with his subscribers and he was to insist that the reasons for their refusal be placed in the Durham press.<sup>7</sup>

This delay placed Wright in financial straits but on making his way home he was given further monies in lieu of a subscription to his almanac which may have encouraged him to heed advice from an

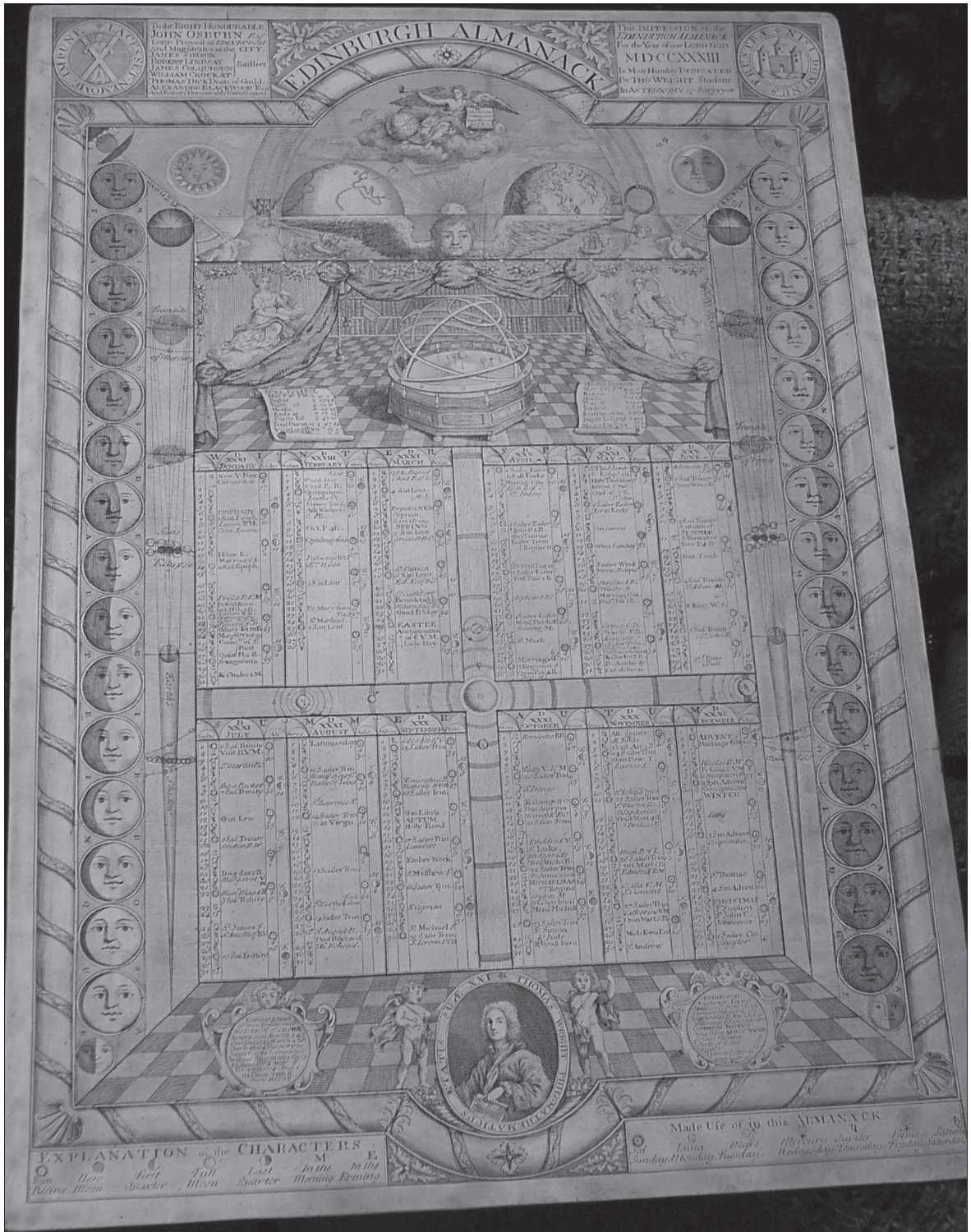


Fig.1. Copperplate for Thomas Wright's 1733 Edinburgh Almanack (image reversed). (All images of Almanac courtesy of His Grace The Duke of Beaufort.)



Fig. 2. Detail from Wright's 1733 Edinburgh Almanack.



Fig. 3. Detail from Wright's 1733 Edinburgh Almanack.

unnamed source to attempt publication in Scotland.<sup>8</sup> Wright's Journal provides increasingly brief details of his activities and whereabouts and where the month or season is ascribed it cannot be considered as wholly reliable.<sup>9</sup> We learn that, against his father's will but aided by his mother and sister, Wright resolved to travel to Edinburgh from the family home in Byers Green, County Durham, and duly set off on foot in September 1732 via Morpeth and Berwick upon Tweed. He records that he knew no-one in Edinburgh but had a letter of introduction to Allan Ramsey (*sic*) from a Mr Brson (*sic*) of Newcastle.<sup>10</sup> Wright entered into a contract with Richard Cooper to engrave and print the almanac at a cost of fifteen pounds.<sup>11</sup> The work was to be completed six weeks from commencement on 5 October and a supply of stamped paper was ordered from the Stamp Office in London.<sup>12</sup> Wright records that he was sent the names of a further 36 subscribers by Lord Elphinstone but despite this positive development he says Cooper proved 'dilatatory' and by January very few copies were ready.<sup>13</sup> Wright travelled to Sunderland to collect subscription monies, borrowing Cooper's horse, at the engraver's insistence, who doubtless reckoned this would ensure Wright's return. Many subscribers refused to pay because of the delay and Wright was left with insufficient funds to discharge his debt to Cooper. It was agreed that the account would be cleared if Wright were to produce a new almanac for the following year, again to be engraved by Cooper. In February 1733 Wright calculated and dispatched another almanac for Edinburgh, received an acknowledgement of receipt and assumed this would discharge the principal debt together with a few small local bills outstanding.<sup>14</sup> Ominously Wright's Journal records that he did not receive written confirmation of the balance or discharge of the account, and in the autumn of 1736, some three

years later, Wright was arrested in London where he now lived: 'by order of Mr Cooper; is kept in custody 6 hours; is bail'd but oblig'd to pay ye unjust demand'.<sup>15</sup>

The copperplate, headed 'Edinburgh Almanack', measures 20.5 by 14.25 inches. It bears two coats of arms. The one in the top left corner has the Scottish national motto '*Nemo me impune lacessit*' (no one injures me with impunity). Adjacent is a tablet listing key figures in the Edinburgh establishment: the Lord Provost, the Right Honourable John Osburn Esq.; the Magistrates of the City, James Simson, Robert Lindsay, James Colquhoun, William Crockat, also designated as 'Baillies'; Thomas Dick, Dean of Guild, Alexander Blackwood and the 'Rest of ye Honourable Town Council' (fig. 2). The coat of arms in the top right hand corner, granted to the city by the Lord Lyon King of Arms in 1732, is adjacent to an inscription dedicating the Edinburgh Almanack calculated by 'Tho. Wright Student in Astronomy & Surveyor' (fig. 3). The engraving of Wright aged 21 in a central cartouche at the foot of the design is a welcome addition to the other known portrait, in mid life, engraved by Paul Fourdrinier, both portraits bearing the appellation '*philomathematicus*', a lover of learning (fig. 4).<sup>16</sup> Wright's portrait is flanked by two further cartouches, also framed by cherubim, containing 'Dates of Accession of the Kings and Queens of Britain since the Union of Crowns' and 'Edinburgh Exchequer Terms and Common Notes MDCCXXIII' (fig. 5).

The central section of the design has four seasonal quartiles superimposed over the concentric rings of a planetary system. At the foot a key is provided in 'Explanation of the Characters Made Use of in this Almanack' to denote 'Sun Rising, New Moon, First Quarter, Full Moon, Last Quarter, Morning and Evening' and the days of the week are listed with

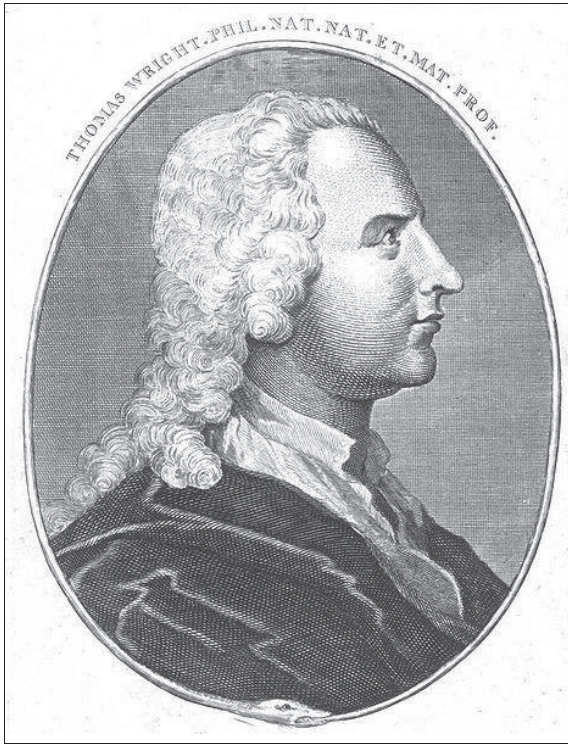


Fig. 4. Portrait of Thomas Wright, engraved by Paul Fourdrinier, *Gentleman's Magazine*, January 1793. (Courtesy of Special Collections, University of Bristol.)

an associated heavenly body or Roman deity. Information ephemeric-style is noted against most dates and includes eclipses, Saints' days, dates of legal terms and Church holidays. The borders of sheet almanacs were traditionally used to carry additional information and Wright has incorporated an inner border which to the left depicts the 'Transit of Mercury' and a solar eclipse and the 'Transit of Venus' to the right. An outer border depicts the phases of the sun to the left and those of the moon to

the right. Above the calendar section a room interior is depicted festooned with fabric which shields the watchful presence of the deities, Venus and Mercury, seated to the left and right respectively (fig. 6).<sup>17</sup> The rear wall is lined with bookshelves and in the foreground displayed on an octagonal base is a grand orrery, a three dimensional clockwork model of how celestial bodies orbited the sun in the solar system.<sup>18</sup>

To the left of the orrery a scroll lists the time and duration of the sun's eclipse due on 2 May and to the right, a scroll details the moon's eclipse on 17 May. At the apex of the design an angel's banner unfurls to read '*Calendarium Britannicum Anno Mundi 5682*', based on the calendar dating from the biblical Creation of the World. Wright, in common with other eighteenth-century figures involved in the study of cosmology, had to reconcile new discoveries with traditional religious belief which held that the sun and stars were the accepted abode of God.<sup>19</sup> The inclusion of this date in such a prominent place in the design indicates that Wright's belief in the Creation was only enhanced by his growing awareness of the wonders of the Universe.

Wright has been described as an enthusiastic Freemason and is listed as a subscriber to Wellins Calcott's seminal book on the subject.<sup>20</sup> Cooper too was a Mason and was to play a prominent part in the revival of the Lodge Canongate Kilwinning in Edinburgh in 1735.<sup>21</sup> There is no evidence that Wright attended masonic ceremonies in Edinburgh but he says that through Allan Ramsay, a prominent Freemason, he was soon making social acquaintance in Edinburgh: 'During his stay, meet with many Friends. Allen Ramsey as Master of the Play House gave him tickets for ye Season. Se (*sic*) Fifteen different Plays perform'd.'<sup>22</sup> The design of the almanac is permeated with symbolism relating



Fig. 5. Detail from Wright's 1733 Edinburgh Almanack.

to Freemasonry.<sup>23</sup> The proscenium space has the chequered floor found in masonic lodges linking back to the Mosaic Pavement of King Solomon's Temple, the multiplicity of squares referring to the uncertainty of life and the instability of matters terrestrial and thereby an oblique reference to the trials undertaken by initiates. The variations of life's fortunes are also illustrated by two vignettes showing ships at the mercy of the prevailing winds. The presence of a scientific instrument in the room reflects the commonplace practice in lodges, which served to demonstrate and disseminate new scientific information: in the 1720s it was estimated that 45 percent of Royal Society fellows were Freemasons.<sup>24</sup> The room interior could be viewed as a masonic adytum, or 'secret impenetrable chamber', since it has the capacity to be screened by the curtain, which is secured by a cord and four tassels: this is commonly featured on tracing boards, the cord sometimes being referred to as a 'cable tow' and the four tassels representing the four Cardinal Virtues of Prudence, Fortitude, Temperance and Justice, the bonds of affection uniting the Brethren. The whole design is framed by a spiral or twisted column associated with the Temple and each corner of the frame is adorned with a scallop shell, part of the emblems of the Masonic Knights Templar. Watching benignly over the almanac's whole is a creature possibly representing the all-seeing Eye of the Creator, beneath whose wings

the Earth is depicted in two hemispheres, one celestial and one terrestrial, which in Freemasonry represented indicators of the universal claims of the Craft, and here frame the rising Sun, replete with human features. To the right of the hemispheres is the hermetic symbol of a *serpens candorescens*, or *ouroboros*, the snake devouring its tail to represent the eternal self-regenerating cycle of nature and in this context, the eternal nature of the Universe; this is balanced to the left by a winged hourglass reflecting the transitory nature of life. The days listed in the ephemeris section of the calendar include St John the Baptist and St John the Evangelist, two key patron saints in masonic iconography and the Common Notes lists the 'Golden Number 5', a possible reference to the Pythagorean fascination for the number 5 and significant in masonic symbolism, and the 'Domin Letter G', which is commonly found in masonic imagery and is generally thought an abbreviation alluding either to 'Geometry' or to 'God' (fig. 5).

Of course, the qualities of this copperplate can be appreciated without any reference to the iconography outlined above. However the interest and attraction of Freemasonry amongst many significant figures of the Enlightenment requires us to consider its influence in any evaluation of certain aspects of architectural and cultural history, and the development of influential masonic lodges in Edinburgh in the early 1730s supports the likely intention of masonic allusion in the design.<sup>25</sup>

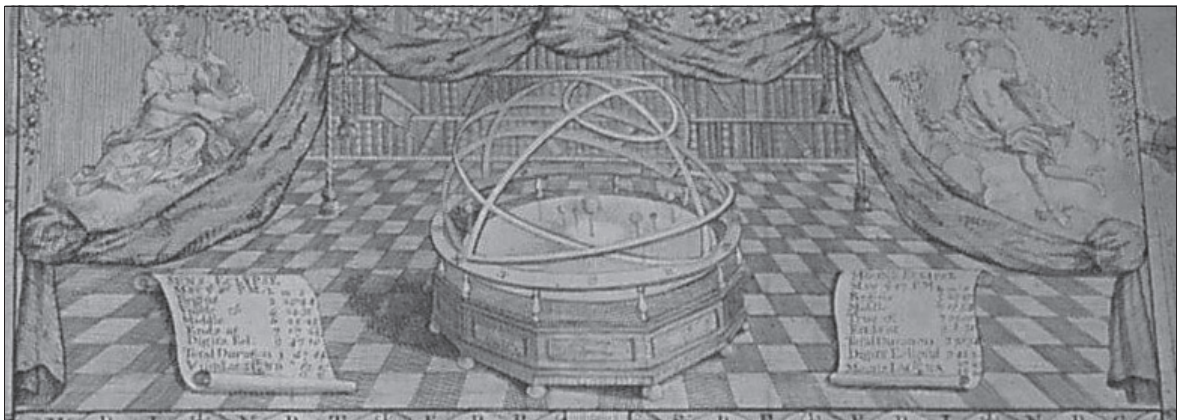


Fig. 6. Detail from Wright's 1733 Edinburgh Almanack.

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## NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 For further detail of Wright's contribution to eighteenth-century landscape which followed on earlier recognition gained in the sphere of cosmology and astronomy see H. M. Colvin, *A Dictionary of British Architects 1600-1840*, 4th edn (Yale 2008), pp. 1167–1169.
- 2 Badminton Muniments, FmK 1210.8.1.
- 3 For a more detailed context of the history and development of the English almanac see Bernard Capp, *Astrology and the Popular Press; English Almanacs 1500–1800* (London 1979) and Maureen Perkins, *Visions of the Future: Almanacs, Time, and Cultural Change 1775–1870* (Oxford 1996).
- 4 The London guild controlled the production and distribution of almanacs and generated revenue through their supply of stamped paper which was 1d per sheet at the time of the 1710 Revenue Act and had quadrupled to 4d by 1781. The issue of unstamped almanacs was an imprisonable offence and the guild was renowned for actively protecting its position.
- 5 Richard Mead (1673–1754), President of the Royal Society, defended the influence of the sun and the moon on the human body. Newton and Halley shared a belief in comets as instruments of divine intervention and William Whiston (1667–1752), a noted astronomer and astro-theologian, wrote that 'downfalls [were] ushered in, and sometimes in part occasioned [by] eclipses immediately beforehand: sometimes in a natural and sometimes in a supernatural way'. In 1753 Moore's almanac referred to the impending return of a comet according to Halley's table of periodicity and was confident it would produce dramatic upheavals.
- 6 Edward Hughes, 'The Early Journal of Thomas Wright of Durham', *Annals of Science*, 7/1 (28 March 1951), pp. 1–24, pp. 3 and 7 respectively. Hughes re-edited Wright's journal manuscript: British Library, Add. MSS 15627, originally written in the first person, later partially (and rather confusingly) edited into the third person. Hughes' transcription will be used throughout.
- 7 Hughes, 'Early Journal', p. 7.
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp. 8–13.
- 9 Later journal entries equate to an itinerary rather than a diary, which leads to the conclusion that they were recorded at intervals as time permitted in an increasingly frenetic schedule of visits to the estates of Wright's patrons. The account of the Edinburgh sojourn at least includes a sprinkling of names, which are all included in this article, as are the scant details of his experiences while staying in the city.
- 10 Allan Ramsay Senior (1686–1758), bookseller, theatre owner and poet: for biographical note see *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (ODNB, Oxford 2004).
- 11 Richard Cooper Senior (1701–1764), engraver. According to Dr Joe Rock's website devoted to Cooper (<http://sites.google.com/site/richardcooperengraver/home/richard-cooper-s-edinburgh-properties>) Cooper came to Edinburgh from London in 1725 but 'until 1735 his address in the city is unknown'. Wright's Journal notes that Ramsay recommended lodgings in the High Street and a note in the margin states that he 'Lodg with ye Graver': Hughes, 'Early Journal', p. 9. Rock is not convinced that Cooper could have undertaken the engraving and printing of such a large plate in Edinburgh at this time, and thinks it is more likely that he acted as middleman and arranged for it to be engraved in London – and hence perhaps the delays. Nevertheless Wright again refers to Cooper as the engraver some months later: Hughes, 'Early Journal', p. 9. (Wright's collected manuscripts include an undated list of names and addresses of a number of London-based craftsmen and tradesmen, including engravers and copperplate printers, indicating he was used to dealing directly with engravers: Newcastle City Library, Wright MSS, vol. 7, p. 21.)
- 12 Hughes, 'Early Journal', p. 9.
- 13 There is no record of how many sheets were printed and none are known to have survived.
- 14 Hughes, 'Early Journal', p. 10. A marginal note says of Cooper that 'He proves a Rogue'.
- 15 *Ibid.*, pp. 6 and 13. Bail was met by Dr Gowland, a future parliamentary candidate for Durham, and John Senex, the globe maker for whom Wright had recently completed a commission. We must assume the matter was settled satisfactorily since the copperplate, like Wright, migrated to Badminton, Gloucestershire.
- 16 The mid-life portrait appeared only once in Wright's lifetime in his *Clavis Coelestis, Being the Explication of a Diagram Entitled A Synopsis of the Universe: The Visible World Epitomized* (London 1742). Another variation (see fig. 4) appeared, posthumously, in an article in the *Gentleman's Magazine* (January 1793) by George Allan (1736–1800), to whom the portrait has been attributed, but without archival confirmation. Given the quality of the portrait and Wright's enforced leisure time in Edinburgh it is interesting to reflect that Ramsay's son, Allan Ramsay Junior (1713–1784), portrait painter, had returned to Edinburgh in 1732 after studying in London with the Swedish portrait painter Hans Hysing, and set up as a portrait painter in Castlehill (for Ramsay Junior see *ODNB*). In any event 'my Dear Father's Picture' was a valued item listed in the 1788 will of Wright's natural daughter, Elizabeth: Durham University Library Special Collections, GB-033-WA, Wrightiana, reference no. 13. Its present whereabouts is unknown.
- 17 In the 18th century the phases of the moon and in particular the full moon was 'a common date for gatherings ... in a way that seems incomprehensible today, with a very different relationship to the natural rhythms of light and darkness': Jenny Uglow, *The Lunar Men: The Friends who made the Future, 1730–1810* (London 2002), p. 264. Venus was not due in transit until 1761 so its inclusion here is unexplained, although the association of Venus and Mercury represents a natural harmony in the solar system.
- 18 An influential model had been built in the early eighteenth century for Charles Boyle, fourth Earl of Orrery, after whom the instrument was named. Whereas Wright is correctly listed as an optical instrument maker (E. G. R. Taylor, *Mathematical Practitioners of Hanoverian England, 1714–1840*, Cambridge 1966, p. 195) he should not be confused with Thomas Wright (c. 1686–1767), mathematical instrument maker to George Prince of Wales, and again later, when George II. He made such extensive modifications to the orrery in 1733 that the

- model shown in this engraving was afterwards referred to as Thomas Wright's Grand Orrery and captured in a drawing entitled 'Grand Orrery by Thomas Wright, London, 1715-1728' (see Image No. 10415882: <http://www.ssplprints.com/image/130346/unattributed-grand-orrery-by-thomas-wright-london-1715-1728>). Descriptions were advertised in the local press, e.g. *Daily Post*, 8 June and 24 November, and *London Evening Post*, 10 December 1730 (I am indebted to Dr Joe Rock for these references) and the similarity to the copperplate model is clear.
- 19 See the *Cambridge Illustrated History of Astronomy* (1997), ed. Michael Hoskins, pp. 226-231.
  - 20 Paul Elliott and Stephen Daniels, 'The "School of true, useful and universal Science"? Freemasonry, Natural Philosophy and Scientific Culture in eighteenth-century England', *Journal of the History of Science*, 39/2 (2006), pp. 211-230, p. 223; Wellins Calcott, *A Candid Disquisition of the Principles and Practices of the Most Ancient and Honourable Society of Free and Accepted Masons together with some Strictures on the Origin, Nature and Design of that Institution* (London 1771).
  - 21 Joe Rock, 'Richard Cooper Senior (c. 1696-1764) and his Properties in Edinburgh', *Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*, NS 6 (2005), pp. 11-23. The new Lodge was built on ground immediately adjoining Cooper's own property.
  - 21 Hughes, 'Early Journal', p. 9. This was in contrast to his lack of acquaintance initially. Wright was to dedicate a number of his inventions to Dr John Theophilus Desaguliers (1688-1744), Curator of Experiments at the Royal Society and Grand Master of the Premier Lodge of England in 1721: Hughes, 'Early Journal', pp. 12, 13. Desaguliers visited Edinburgh in 1721 and met Allan Ramsay, who addressed a poem to him to mark the occasion: David Stevenson, *The First Freemasons: Scotland's Early Lodges and their Members*, 2nd edn (Grand Lodge of Scotland, Edinburgh 2001), pp. 209-210.
  - 23 For the masonic symbolism discussed below see the Glossary of Terms in James Stevens Curl, *The Art and Architecture of Freemasonry: An Introductory Study* (New York 2002), pp. 232-246.
  - 24 Elliott and Daniels, 'Freemasonry', p. 213.
  - 25 Curl, *Art and Architecture of Freemasonry*, pp. 8-10.