

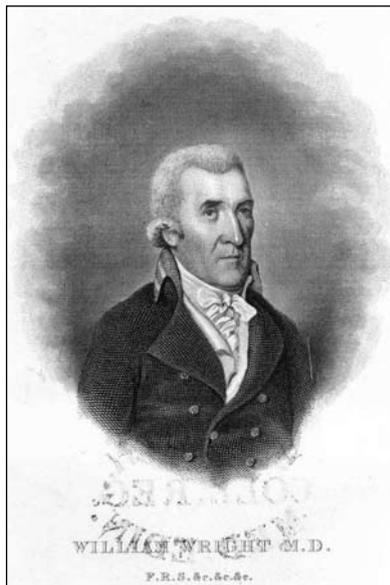
William Wright (1735–1819)

Like many great men associated with the College, William Wright was both a physician and botanist, but, unlike his peers, he had more adventures. Born and schooled in Crieff, Perthshire, he was apprenticed to a Falkirk surgeon, George Dennistoun, at the age of 17. In 1756 he attended the University of Edinburgh and the following year sailed to Greenland as a ship's surgeon on a whaler.

In January 1758 Wright presented himself for examination at the Surgeons' Hall in Edinburgh and was subsequently appointed surgeon's mate on a Royal Navy warship. He saw action at the Île de Rhé, Gibraltar and de la Clue and shared the prize money of the HMS *Raisonnable*, on which Horatio Nelson later began his naval career. While his ship was having a refit, Wright submitted himself for re-examination at Surgeons' Hall before his promotion to the HMS *Danae*.

Between 1759 and 1760 he worked ashore in hospitals at Port Royal and St Pierre, continuing his studies of scurvy – which he attributed to dirt, drink and bad food – before being paid off and returning home in 1763. Already qualified as a surgeon, he graduated MD in absentia at St Andrews.

In 1764, Wright set off for Jamaica, intending to set up in practice there, but there were already too many doctors. He became an assistant to one and six months later joined a former classmate on a sugar plantation 150 miles from Kingston, investing their savings in slaves. In 1771 they built a new house, Orange Hill, where Wright started his major botanical studies. He identified and classified 760 species, sending many live specimens to Kew and dried ones to Joseph Banks. In 1774 he was appointed Surgeon-General of Jamaica and reported a native species of cinchona.



Engraving of William Wright by WH Lizars from a miniature by John Caldwell.

While travelling back to England in 1777 he 'caught a malignant fever from a seaman' which he self-treated with douches of cold sea water – something he had previously used in patients with tetanus.

In London he furthered his knowledge of obstetrics, botany and medicine and made many influential friends. Back in Edinburgh he attended lectures by William Cullen, Alexander Monro secundus and Joseph Black and became, with them, one of the founding members of the Edinburgh Philosophical Society (later the Royal Society of Edinburgh).

By 1779 he was on his travels again, this time as Regimental Surgeon to the Jamaica Regiment (an appointment procured for him by Banks). He sailed from Portsmouth in what today would be called a convoy of 55 unarmed vessels protected by three Royal Navy warships. All of them were captured by the combined French and Spanish fleets. Wright was made a prisoner, put ashore at Cadiz and made to walk to Guadalete in southern Spain. Here his clinical skills became

apparent and he treated locals and even some nuns before the Spanish authorities felt that he and his companions should be moved across the border to Portugal. En route the prisoners escaped, stole a boat and reached Faro, where they took a freighter which arrived in Falmouth just before Christmas 1780.

In 1782 Wright sailed for Jamaica with what was left of his regiment, only to find that Admiral Rodney had been victorious against the French and the troops were no longer needed. Once there, he tried to replace the encyclopaedic botanical works he had lost in the wars and captivity. He returned to Perthshire in 1785 to regain his health and moved to Edinburgh a year later. Although he was nominated for Hope's Chair of Botany he refused to stand against Daniel Rutherford and instead tutored students and corresponded with no less than 260 academic acquaintances.

Wright went to the West Indies one more time, as physician to an expedition led by Ralph Abercromby. For two years, until 1798, he practised medicine and pursued his botanical work in Barbados, cataloguing plants and listing the medical conditions he encountered. Afterwards, Edinburgh became his base, with annual tours of the West Highlands. In 1801 Wright was made a Fellow of the RCPE, only three years before he became its President.

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Further reading

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- Banks J, Wright W. Description of the Jesuits bark tree of Jamaica and the Caribbees. *Phil Trans R Soc Lond* 1777; 67:504–6. doi:10.1098/rstl.1777.0028
- Wright W, Brocklesby R. Description and use of the cabbage-bark tree of Jamaica. *Phil Trans R Soc Lond* 1777; 67:507–12. doi:10.1098/rstl.1777.0029