

The Collected



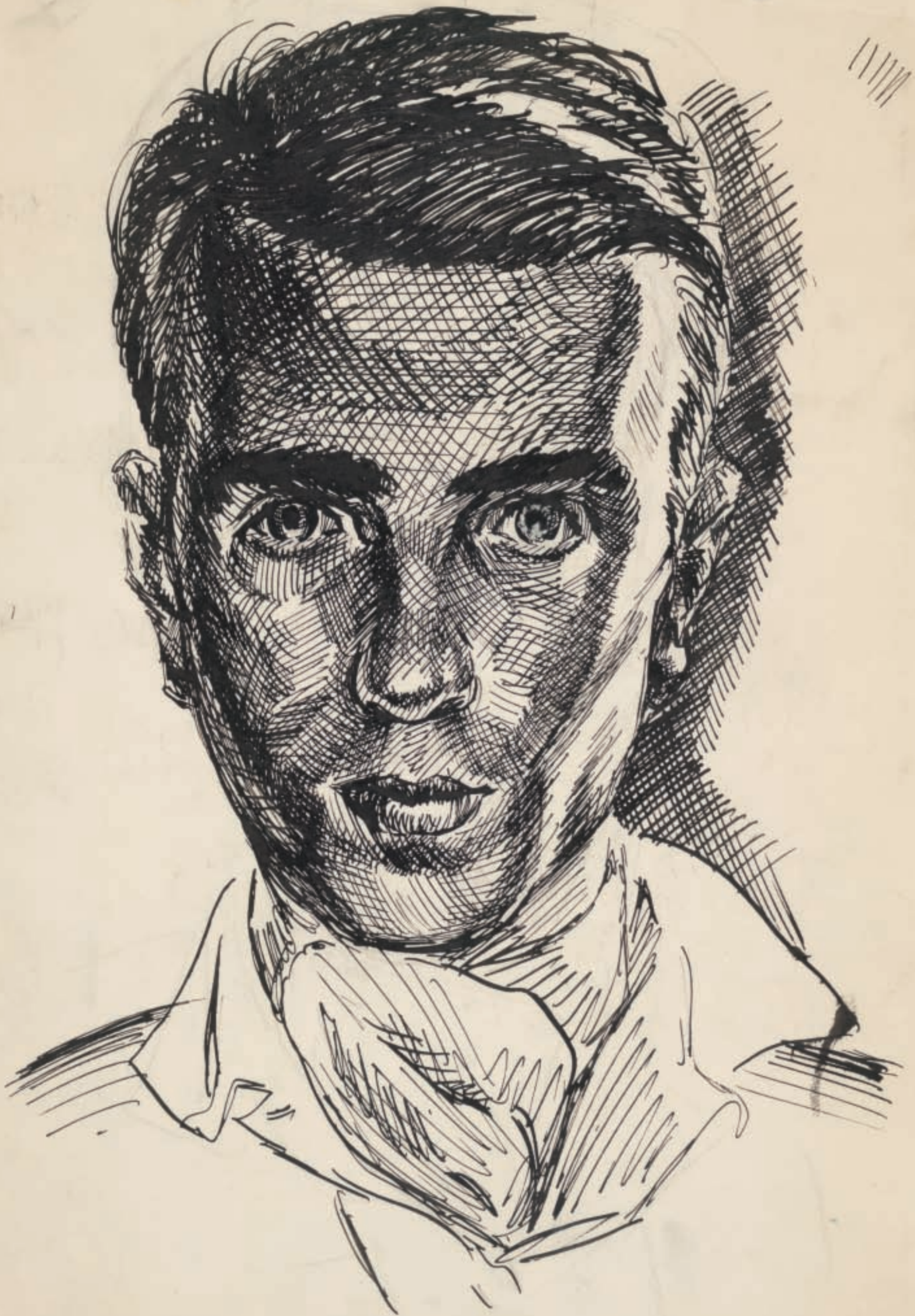
DOUG



MRIGHT



FLYING OFFICER DOUGLAS AUSTIN WRIGHT (above) circa 1942 to 1945.
SELF-PORTRAIT (opposite) circa late 1930s.





THE VIEW FROM WRIGHT'S WINDOW
2005 Mansfield street, Apartment #10, Montreal,
circa 1938-40.

The
Collected
**DOUG
WRIGHT**
CANADA'S MASTER
CARTOONIST



1949 TO 1962

**EDITED BY SETH
& BRAD MACKAY
DESIGNED BY SETH**

**DRAWN & QUARTERLY
MONTREAL**



This large and very polished full page strip is quite likely part of a package of sample comics which Wright sent down to the U.S. syndicates in the early 1950s.

INTRODUCTION

by LYNN JOHNSTON

{ Creator of the internationally
syndicated comic strip
FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE }

When the paper came, my dad was the first to read the comics. He didn't just read them, he studied them and encouraged me to do the same. He was particularly fond of comic art that had structure and substance and the kind of subtle wit that brought the reader into the gag the way a storyteller tells a tale. Len Norris of the *Vancouver Sun* was one of his favorites, Doug Wright was another. When the *Star Weekly* came, he would turn to *Doug Wright's Family* and smile. "This is truly an art form," he told me. "It's not a cartoon as much as it's illustrated comic thought. This is comedy in its highest form. It's a performance, and a good performer involves the audience."

Doug Wright had the ability to draw extremely well and to time a situation with precision. His image sequences always had just enough information, just enough expression and just enough slapstick to make them truly believable and therefore truly funny. We identified with every situation from all points of view. There were no perpetual heroes, no perpetual villains, just real people living together, dealing with everyday concerns. *Doug Wright's Family* was everyone's family...or we wished it was!!

He was smart, vulnerable, thoughtful, conscientious, observant, happy and kind. That was a given. He could not have done the work he did if he had not been profoundly sensitive and able to see things from another's point of view. His gentle and caring depiction of family life endeared his characters to everyone—and perhaps taught some parents to be just a bit more tolerant, to laugh at themselves a little more.

If he was an unwitting teacher of parenting skills, he was also a teacher of art. My Dad made me aware of Doug Wright's attention to detail. If he drew a truck, it looked like a real truck! If he drew an office building, it had an architectural design and perfect perspective. He researched his material which takes time and discipline!

In my room, I had a desk and all the drawing supplies a kid could want. I loved to draw and I really loved to draw funny stuff. If I could make someone laugh, it was heaven. Drawing alone isn't enough to fulfill an aspiring cartoonist, much less an insatiable audience, and so the business of learning how to do comic art in sequence was something I wanted desperately to do. Having no schools or tutors at the time, someone with the same loose screws as I had went to the most obvious resources and studied the work of those we admired most. I joined my father at the kitchen table and mulled over the expressions on the faces of the *Katzenjammer Kids*, the simply outlined images in *Miss Peach* and laughed out loud at the way Len Norris drew policemen's feet (they always curled over the curb on the sidewalk). When the *Star Weekly* came, we two critics would turn to *Doug Wright's Family* and learn. I don't think I'd have had the basics needed to do a syndicated comic strip had it not been for Doug Wright. What he taught me was to think of the art as a performance. Pay attention to detail. Take the time to research everything from body language to backgrounds. See things from all of the characters' points of view. Don't overdo a gag, let the audience participate and get it for themselves. Be believable. Use your skills to do the best you can do at all times! Be consistent and be humble. Without humility, creativity like this cannot happen.

Sadly, it was after Doug's death that I had the privilege of communicating with his family. I would have liked to tell him how much his work meant to me. That he read and enjoyed *For Better or For Worse* was a joy. It's nice to know that one of my most respected teachers was pleased with my work!

LYNN



MR. WRIGHT

BY BRAD MACKAY

{ “[NIPPER] was conceived by
accident and born every week
in agony.” —Greg Clark }

If you grew up in Canada during the 1960s or 1970s, then you likely need little introduction to Doug Wright or his masterpiece of Canadian cartooning, *Doug Wright's Family*. Created on the cusp of the 1950s under its birth name Nipper, the semi-autobiographical strip epitomized the competing joys and agonies of family life for millions of readers, and earned Wright a reputation as Canada's equivalent to Charles Schulz.

Like his American counterpart, Wright became an undeniable part of the cultural fabric of his country. *Doug Wright's Family* served as the inspiration for a generation of young Canadian cartoonists, including *For Better or For Worse's* Lynn Johnston, *Cerebus's* Dave Sim, Chester Brown (whose first published work at the age of 11, was an homage to *Doug Wright's Family*) and Guelph, Ontario's Seth—who was the driving force behind the very book you now hold in your hands.

Yet, unlike Schulz, in the years since Wright's death in 1983 his vast body of work has slowly—and excruciatingly—slipped into something of a cultural blind spot, where it has sat alongside a Who's Who of late, great Canadian cartoonists. Thankfully, the recent emergence of comics as a paid-in-full member of the cultural canon has helped shine some light on the history of Canadian cartooning, one in which Wright played a major role.

A self-taught workhorse of an artist, Wright was renowned among other professional cartoonists for his expert draughtsmanship and spooky eye for detail¹. These talents were well-exercised over the course of three decades and some 1,664 strips; each one revealing another aspect of a family ruled (and roiled) by two rambunctious and perpetually bald boys.

A family portrait served in weekly installments, *Doug Wright's Family* was a singular comics creation: sweet and unwavering in its honesty, it presented the parent-child relationship, with all of its pain and suffering intact. By confronting the realities of family life without flinching, Wright provided a much welcome counter-weight to the traditional family strip, which plied sentiment and raw sap for easy laughs. While *Family Circus* and *Dennis the Menace* (both of which *Nipper* predated) were tugging at your heartstrings, Wright was busy dowsing the dark side of parenting in an attempt to answer the question all parents eventually end up asking themselves—“Why?”

His approach was deceptively simple. In Wright's work kids acted like kids, in all their uncensored, amoral glory. Whether they were wreaking abuse on the family pet, pouring cigarette butts into their dozing father's mouth or idly throwing rocks on unsuspecting adults², Wright presented the casual brutalities of childhood as an essential (and undeniable) fact of life, and his readers loved him for it. Of course, there were many heart-warming moments during the strip's 32 years—the best of which are included in this volume—but thanks to their proximity to the less-than-sweet, they typically came across as charming rather than cheap.

Wright's hard-earned skills and compulsive candor helped propel him to the upper echelon of Canadian cartooning in relatively short order. By the mid-1950s, *Nipper* was a household name, and Wright, with his wry grin and laconic humour, was a natural fit for the emerging media age, making regular TV appearances and appearing in celebrity endorsements. Yet, surprisingly, if it was up to Wright, *Nipper* would never have existed. Though it was destined to become his most enduring creation, *Nipper* began as an accident; a creative blunder that the then 30-year-old bachelor was quick to disown—even after it became a runaway success.

1.) Wright's ability to fill his work with minute telling details—from toasters and mailboxes to magazine racks and stairway railings—without cluttering up the composition, earned him the admiration and respect of other cartoonists. “He had an amazing way of making every line count,” cartoonist Ben Wicks said in an obituary of Wright. “Nothing was ever wasted.” Like musicians who can play any song by ear, Wright was gifted with the ability to draw anything he saw. His eldest son, Bill, summed it up nicely in an interview, “He just had something magic. Whatever he saw came out of his pen.”

2.) I included this example to the effectiveness of Wright's dark art. During my research for this essay I was surprised to come across one strip, reproduced on the cover of a 1971 collection, that shows the two cartoon boys raining rocks over a river's ledge at a rest stop while their Dad smiles approvingly. When it's revealed that the rocks have been hitting two enraged fishermen below, the laughing boys flee to their car while their gob-smacked father is left to handle the situation. In the 30-odd years since I first witnessed this strip, I had come to believe that the cruel anecdote had actually taken place in my own family, with me and my older brother in the roles of the remorseless boys. A sure sign as any of Doug Wright's formidable powers as a cartoonist.





PHYLLIS SANFORD AND DOUG WRIGHT (engaged but not yet married) in Wright's office in the Sun Life Building, Montreal, 1952.

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MARGERY AUSTIN WRIGHT and DOUGLAS AUSTIN WRIGHT, circa 1920.

Douglas Austin Wright was born in Dover, England on August 11, 1917, the first of two children to Marguerite Archibald and Alan Wright. His father, an Oxford-educated civil servant, spent his early 20s working in the Federated Malay States (present day Malaysia), where he rose to the position of First Class Magistrate, the British Commonwealth equivalent of a justice of the peace. When war broke out in Europe he requested a leave of absence and returned home to enlist in the British Army. As a 2nd Lieutenant in the East Surrey Regiment, Alan served throughout France before he was wounded in battle in the summer of 1916. He was sent to recuperate in Dover, a chief embarkation point for British troops. During his convalescence he met Maugeurite ("Rita") Archibald, a woman from a well-to-do family. Born and raised in London, Rita had attended a finishing school in Brussels, and was also a talented pianist, trained by the celebrated performer and instructor, Max Pirani (who, years later, would establish the esteemed Music Teachers' College at the University of Western Ontario).

While no information exists about Alan and Rita's first meeting, it's clear their mutual attraction was sudden and strong: they married only a few months later. After his recovery, Alan was promoted to Battalion Bombing Officer, a post that required he remain in England. The newlyweds wasted little time starting a family, with their first child being born the following summer—about 12 months after their wedding. Sadly, the young family didn't have much time to spend together. When Doug was just two months' old his father was further promoted—this time to full Lieutenant—and sent back into battle.

Alan Wright spent the next year fighting in Italy and France before he was killed in combat near the Belgian city of Ypres on Sept. 4, 1918, just two weeks after his son's first birthday and two months before armistice. In the weeks before his death, Alan Wright's mind was clearly preoccupied with his first-born. He wrote a letter on August 8 (three days before his birthday) in which he wishes to Doug a happy "first anniversary" from "a dugout 2 ft. 6 x 3 ft. 6 x 10 ft. which smells of mould and stale air and rocks unpleasantly whenever a shell bursts within a hundred yards." A heart-breaking mix of sentiment and stoicism, the senior Wright's final letter offers up a series of life lessons to a son he feared he would never see again:

"Don't pull dog's tails, stroke cats the wrong way, catch bees on the window pane, or run after chickens

when their mother is about, as all these creatures have a nasty way of resenting undue familiarity."

"[Do] Live at peace with your neighbours, because Law is a rogue and a thief and War is the devil. Learn to love beauty and don't be put off with imitations...Be a man always and a great man some day, and if Daddy doesn't come home be a comfort and a pride to the best little mother in the world."

"May the sufferings of your parents smooth the way of life for you, my boy, and may you never know the horrors of civilized warfare."

With nearly one million Britons killed during the First World War and more than 1.5 million wounded, the Wrights were by no means alone in their grief. Still, the cruel timing of Alan's death must have weighed heavily. Rita was now faced with raising not only her young son by herself, but she was also two months pregnant with their second child; a daughter, Margaret Austin Wright, born the following spring. Despite her circumstances, she didn't seek out a new husband (indeed, she would never re-marry) and seemed to have committed herself to providing as normal an upbringing as possible for her children.

Thanks to an army pension and support from her family and in-laws, Rita managed to set up a comfortable life for her young family in London. Her brother Ernie, a disabled bachelor, even stepped in as something of a father figure for Doug and Marge. The efforts were apparently not in vain. Family photos depict the pair as happy and care-free: both dressed as Indians battling each other with feather dusters; Marge smirking in a USS Malay sailor's cap; Doug dressed as a bobby mugging for the camera; and the entire family sunning themselves on the beaches at Eastbourne and Felpham, popular seaside resort towns. In fact, it's difficult to deduce what effect—if any—growing up without a father had on the adult Wright.

Of course it's unlikely that he retained any memories of his dad—a presumption that's supported by a close reading of Wright's personal journals, which contain no mention of Alan Wright. In addition, according to his wife and sons, Wright never discussed his father, or his death, with any of them. The only evidence that does exist is intriguing—if entirely circumstantial. Wright kept a stack of photos of his father (posing proudly with his infant son) in his personal



THIS PAGE: various “snaps” from the seemingly bucolic childhood of the Wright children, circa mid-1920s.





A FEW WORDS FROM THE DESIGNER

This book (and its eventual companion volume) is the culmination of about twenty years of collecting and studying Doug Wright. Even though I read his work in childhood I have to admit I pretty much forgot all about him in my late teens and early twenties. It wasn't until sometime around the end of the 1980s when I chanced upon a couple of battered issues of the *Canadian* magazine in a junk shop and saw again the old familiar bald heads of his characters that my interest in his work was rekindled. It was at that point that I recalled how much I had enjoyed *Doug Wright's Family* as a boy and I determined to find more examples of his comic strip.

My mother had always liked the strip as well—but she had referred to it as NIPPER, which struck me as odd since there was never any indication that either of the boys had a name—let alone the name NIPPER. It was only later, after I began digging backward that I discovered the earlier incarnation of the strip and the source of this name. And this journey was not an easy one. Although it took little effort to discover that the strip had appeared in *Weekend* magazine before *Canadian* (both were newspaper insert magazines) I really had no idea just when it had begun and exactly when it had changed publications. Unlike American comic strips, which have been somewhat documented over the last few decades, there weren't any standard reference works to turn to for help on these matters. Canadian cartooning was a subject that had been almost entirely ignored or forgotten. Some interest had been shown to the comic book artists who worked in Canada during WWII but practically nothing had been written on the newspaper and magazine cartoonists. I knew it would come down to collecting. I would simply have to find as many copies of these old magazines as possible and track down the history of Wright's work. And that is primarily what I did for the next 15 years or so. This meant a great deal of scrounging about. It was all hit and miss. Sometimes I would find a box of old *Weekend* magazines at a paper show or sometimes a great pile in the back of a Goodwill or Salvation Army. Once, Book Brothers of London, Ontario opened a back room up to me where I found hundreds of issues. These were the rare finds, though. Mostly it was a matter of coming across them one or two at a time. In retrospect, I'm amazed I was able to find so many of the strips. I amassed hundreds of issues and slowly got a grounding in Wright's work. Now, had this been an American comic strip this could have been a much simpler task. At the same time a good friend of mine, Joe Matt, decided to collect the entire run of Frank King's brilliant *Gasoline Alley* strip. He was able to tap into an American collectors' market for clipped newspaper strips and in a span of a few years (and thousands of dollars) was able to assemble an almost complete run of King's forty years of publication. This was impossible with Wright. By the time I started looking for his work his name was already falling into obscurity and even the handful of old paper dealers working here in Canada had little knowledge of him. This seemed a sad state of affairs—I felt Wright was an important Canadian artist and I began to suspect that I was the only person interested in him. I worried that if someone didn't collect his work it would be lost forever. Even then, I knew that someday a book would have to be published and I would need to have the strips on hand for that book.

Little did I realize that while I was desperately searching out these old faded magazines, a virtually complete record of his work was sitting in the National Archives in Ottawa waiting to be catalogued. It would be a long time until I found out about that though—just a few years ago, actually. In a way, it's a good thing I didn't know about them because the long journey to find those strips gave me a deeper understanding of his work. Coming across them one by one I studied them slower. Getting to understand just how his work had evolved and changed. I can recall how surprised I was when I continued to find strips going back, past the sixties, and into the 1950s. I had no idea the strip was that old. Again, how amazed I was at finding a NIPPER strip from 1948!! Just how far back did it go? (1948, it turned out).

Somewhere along the way I discovered other strips he'd worked on: 30 years of *Juniper Junction...*, *Wheels*, *Cynthia*, *Ticky tacky Township*. I also unearthed stunning example after stunning example of magazine illustrations from a long career as a commercial artist. These turned out to be just the tip of an iceberg. He did a tremendous amount of commercial work. In the end, I discovered that Wright had had a long and very prolific career as a cartoonist. So much work and shockingly—so little of it recalled today.

During these years I'd also been studying and collecting other Canadian cartoonists as well. James Simpkins, Jimmie Frise, Walter Ball, Peter Whalley, George Feyer and others. They all had two things in common with Wright:

- 1.) They had produced a fascinating body of work.
- 2.) They were largely forgotten.

It seemed obvious to me that these artists, along with Doug Wright (and Quebec cartoonist Albert Chartier) would make a marvelous book. Something that would open the eyes of the Canadian public to the overlooked pop culture history of their own country. I knew that I was capable of hunting out old papers and I figured I could put such a book together but I also understood that rooting out the stories of these artists—actually talking to people—was not my strong point. I would need some help there. That's when I invited Brad Mackay into the project. I'd only briefly met Brad, but I knew he was a journalist and that he was good with people and I knew he loved comics. I invited him over to talk about the project and as I shared the work of these artists with him I could see his forgotten connection to Wright resurfacing just as it had with me. Without Brad this book would be a much poorer volume—lacking the insight into an artist's work that comes only from a detailed study of their life. Brad went out there and found the facts

TOP LEFT: Cover of one of Wright's many scrapbooks.

LOWER LEFT: Interior of studio log book (1960–1980).

ABOVE: Interior of scrapbook.

BELOW: The Doug Wright Award for excellence in Canadian cartooning.

and made the connections. Without Brad's forthright journalist's moxie I doubt whether I could have gained the Wright family's trust and unflagging assistance. And thank goodness we did get their help. For in coming in contact with Doug's widow, Phyllis, and his three sons, Bill, Jim, and Ken, we discovered both the amazing storehouse of works donated to the National Archives and the personal treasure trove of Wright's art and records which the family still retains. I was more than happy to set aside my comparatively meager Wright archive when this cornucopia presented itself. This windfall allowed us to make this book the one that he deserved.

By a miracle it turned out that Doug kept scrupulous records of his work—decades worth of scrapbooks filled with clipped and glued strips and illustrations. Logbooks of his daily activities in the studio and literally stacks of his original art. A staggering El Dorado of paper to a collector like myself. The biggest problem in assembling this book (and the next) is what to leave out.

That earlier book I mentioned about Wright and the other cartoonists (to be titled *The Gang of Seven*) was put on the backburner. Not simply because the Wright book became a priority but also because it turned out that Canadian book publishers were a lot less eager to publish such a project than I figured. After a few rejections I realized that not everyone saw these cartoonists as such obviously important cultural figures as I did. Fortunately, at this point Chris Oliveros entered the story. Chris had been my own publisher for more than a decade—I'd introduced him to Wright's work years earlier and he had become a genuine enthusiast about it. If anyone said, let's do a book about Doug Wright, it was Chris. At every step of the way in the creation of these books Chris has been the person making it happen. He never balked at the cost or the effort required to assemble them. He's remained steadfast in his support and editorial assistance.

The most important aspect, I suppose, of any artist's work is the personal vision that is revealed in it. Doug Wright's record of his world, his thoughts and feelings are here for you to see. Perhaps though, not in the clear way that a diarist or a novelist or a fine artist's work might communicate. The cartoonists of Wright's era worked in commercial forms and their vision was usually subsumed by the restraints of the marketplace. A lot of commercial cartoonists said very little about themselves in their work. I don't believe this is the case with Doug Wright. I think his life's work is an excellent record of the man and the times he lived in. But much like his strip, it is a quiet record. It grows in sophistication also. NIPPER, over the course of this first volume, transforms from a rather typical precocious-tot strip into the beginnings of something much subtler. It is in the next volume that we really see the full flowering of Wright's approach to the family. Much of these early strips are still "gags." However, by the end of this book you can see his focus turning from the joke to the small incident. This unsentimental focus on the tiny events of daily life are what make *Doug Wright's Family* (the eventual title of the strip) one of the most unique comic strips in cartooning history.

And there is one last windmill I must tilt at. Wright, and those other Canadian cartoonists mentioned earlier, deserve credit for their role in the shaping of our modern Canadian identity. It is an almost entirely neglected fact that these artists, who worked mostly in the middle of the 20th century, had an instrumental role in taking the moldy old 19th century images of Canada and making them modern. They recast all those Mounties and trappers and habitants into contemporary (for that era), streamlined icons. It's the kind of thing, done in plain sight, that no one thinks to notice. The Canadian pop culture images that we know so well today were largely reshaped in those times. Images which had once served a wilderness culture were recontextualized with humour and machine-age drawing styles for a Canada that was turning largely urban and suburban. You can almost chart Canada's transformation from the rural to the urban in a flow chart from Jimmie Frise to Doug Wright to Peter Whalley. Admittedly, the modernizing of these popular images wasn't the work of these artists alone—but they did have a very vital and sadly unrecognized role in it. Something that should be of real interest to Canadians. The other important aspect of Wright and his contemporaries was that they showed Canadians to themselves at a time when the American media was playing a greater and greater role here. Even today it is refreshing, almost startling, to look at Wright's work and see how CANADIAN everything is. It has a ring of familiarity we are not used to seeing in cartoons.

I mention these things because I'd like to see Wright get his due. It's wonderful work and it honestly doesn't need anyone to speak for it. But I can't help myself. I have derived a great deal of pleasure looking at Wright's art—one cartoonist to another—and I am humbled to be allowed to put it out into the world again.

SETH, 2009

