

NEW INTRODUCTION.

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Part environmental manifesto, part poetry collection, part *Walden*-inspired ode to the Allegheny wilderness, the 1860 book *Lichen Tufts, from the Alleghenies* defies easy classification. The same can be said for its author. In some ways, Elizabeth C. Wright was a woman ahead of her time: a professional scientist, teacher, lecturer, and activist for gender and racial equality and social justice; an independent and intellectual woman who did not follow the expected path for a woman to marry young, raise a family, and devote herself to a domestic life. In other ways, Wright's life and writing reflect the circumstances and environments of her upbringing, education, and political and social networks in western New York and beyond. She was indeed the perfect candidate to author the first known book-length treatise on nature written by a US woman. Wright's world was one of incredible social turmoil and change, spiritual and cultural awakenings, and a new sense of urgency around the intertwining issues of environmental and social consciousness. The beauty and wisdom contained in *Lichen Tufts*, and the remarkable life story of its author, are more relevant today than ever.

Lichen Tufts consists of four essays about nature followed by forty eclectic poems. The first essay, "Into the Woods," documents a camping trip in the vicinity of the present-day Allegany State Park and Seneca Nation territory, which the author took with a group of friends and mentors from her recent alma mater, Alfred University. The group of like-minded adventurers and nature lovers included a radically progressive young faculty couple, Jonathan and Abigail Allen, and three recent students and graduates (the cohort is discussed in detail in the afterword, written by Alfred University archivist Laurie Lounsberry Meehan). Taken on its own, "Into the Woods" narrates an exciting and remarkably modern-sounding adventure shared by a group of energetic, idealistic, and progressive young men and women. As the opening essay of

Lichen Tufts, it also serves as a practical, real-life basis for the philosophical discussions throughout the rest of the book. Not surprisingly, the idea of women camping out in the wilderness was met with resistance, but throughout the essays of *Lichen Tufts*, Wright develops a feminist response to the restrictions placed on women's physical and intellectual lives. Wright rejoices in the collective feeling of liberation experienced by her camping party: "It was utterly delightful to let ourselves loose, and live freely; to have no rules for coming in or going out, for rising up or sitting down; to be emancipated from the bondage of the ceremonial law, and do what pleased us best, was paradisiacal enough."¹ Drawing upon her education in natural science and philosophy, a rare background for a woman of her day, Wright expresses a transcendentalist appreciation for the natural world. "Into the Woods" highlights the ways in which her camping party broke free from gender roles and other social conventions, with the men in her party cooking meals and the women trading their conventional attire for practical hiking clothes and learning how to shoot a gun.

While clearly aligned with the transcendentalist movement, Wright's passion for the natural world and social justice can be traced back to her roots in a tightly knit, multigenerational Quaker family that lived on the border of New York and Pennsylvania.² Wright's grandparents, Robert and Elizabeth Clendenon, were missionaries at the Quaker-run Tunesassa school for the Seneca Nation in Cattaraugus County, New York. The Clendenons' daughters and their spouses stayed close to home, raising their families in a closely knit extended family. Abigail Clendenon and Asahel Wright, Elizabeth Wright's parents, were married in the Ceres, Pennsylvania, home of Abigail's sister Hannah and her husband John King on August 10, 1825. While the family lived too far from the nearest Quaker meetings to participate actively in their faith (and Abigail married a non-Quaker), they nevertheless continued to abide by Quaker values. Elizabeth Clendenon Wright was born in December 1826 in Ceres, and she and her sisters, Lydia Ellen and Sarah Ann, grew up in close proximity to their maternal grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. The multigenerational family nurtured women's education and voice, religious faith, an appreciation for the natural world, and a passionate dedication to social justice and peace. For all of their otherwise progressive values and practices, the Clendenons' work as missionaries with the people of the Seneca Nation reflects

1 Elizabeth C. Wright, *Lichen Tufts, from the Alleghanies* (New York: M. Doolady, 1860), 17.

2 The biographical research about Wright is from Emily E. VanDette, "Elizabeth C. Wright," *Legacy: A Journal of American Woman Writers* 37. no.2 (2021).

an assimilation agenda connected to historical patterns of dominance and erasure of Native American communities and culture. While boarding schools like Tunesassa may have been intended initially as a benevolent means of helping Native American communities adapt to Euro-American culture, they became a main tool in the US government's forced assimilation program in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The autobiographical work "The School Days of an Indian Girl," written in 1900 by Zitkala-Sa (Lakota Sioux), provides a compelling firsthand account of the author's traumatic boarding school experience. The legacy of her grandparents' missionary mindset manifests in Wright's writing about her encounters with Seneca people in "Into the Woods," especially in her approving commentary about the "advantages of true civilization" for the Senecas. Even while advocating for and aiding oppressed people, activists and missionaries often contributed to the normalization of ideas responsible for generations of trauma and cultural loss.

The destructive effects of their assimilationist missionary work notwithstanding, the Quakers were among the most radical activists in the campaign to end slavery. Wright's immediate and extended family played an active role in the antislavery cause, and they lived their day-to-day lives in accordance with their beliefs. They participated in the free-produce movement, tapping maple trees and boycotting sugar and other goods produced by slave labor, and they provided shelter and aid to fugitives from slavery. The home of Elizabeth Wright's maternal aunt and uncle Hannah and John King, where Wright and her sisters surely spent a lot of time during their childhood, was a key "station" in the Underground Railroad. The children of the Wrights and Kings were clearly impacted by their upbringing in an environment of radical, fearless antislavery activism. The daughter of the Kings, Mary, married a like-minded abolitionist, John S. Mann, and the couple established Underground Railroad stations in their home and in Mary's bookstore in Coudersport, Pennsylvania. Elizabeth and her sister Lydia Ellen (often referred to as "Ellen" by family and friends) were close to their cousin Mary King Mann throughout their entire lives, and Ellen even lived with the Manns in their Coudersport home for several years. Carrying on with the activism modeled by their parents, the women worked together on multiple areas of social reform and public service. They contributed tirelessly to the temperance campaign, founded a public library, worked for educational reform, and, of course, contributed to efforts to abolish slavery. In addition to reinforcing Wright's interests in education and social justice, this collaborative family network also encouraged women's participation in public issues.

The importance of education was a constant theme throughout Wright's life. As a teacher in the first public school in Keating, Pennsylvania, founded in 1858, she served on the boards of local teachers associations and helped shape policy and curriculum and broaden access to public education. She was joined in this work by her sister Ellen and their Coudersport cousins, the Manns. In addition to the influence of her family network, Wright found ideal role models and a progressive example of equitable education at Alfred. The young faculty couple Jonathan and Abigail Allen, who would become Wright's life-long friends, were dedicated to creating an inclusive coeducational environment, where women were trained in areas typically reserved for men, such as the sciences and public speaking. The Allens were also feminists who fought for women's equal pay and voting rights, and they were radical abolitionists and environmentalists. In addition to finding kindred spirits in the Allens, Wright felt perfectly at home at Alfred, where the overall atmosphere and curriculum were ahead of its time, and it surely influenced her own philosophy and commitment as an educator throughout the rest of her life. The afterword describes the climate and personalities of Wright's Alfred network in detail.

Growing up on the New York-Pennsylvania border in Ceres and educated at Alfred, Wright was undoubtedly influenced by the spiritual fervor and social radicalism that characterized the "Burned Over District" of western New York. Along with religious revivalism and the formation of Spiritualism and other experiments, the region between Albany and Buffalo was a hotbed of radical reform campaigns for temperance, abolitionism, and women's rights. Wright, like many progressive-minded, educated women of her day, played an active role in all of those movements. Unlike most of her female peers at the time, though, Wright was trained in public speaking at Alfred, which equipped her to become a prominent speaker in the temperance lecture circuit. At a time when women were still barred from speaking in venues throughout much of the country, Wright's presence on the stage was a novelty, and she took advantage of the opportunity to spread the message against the sale and consumption of alcohol to her fascinated audiences. In 1857, she became one of the first women to be nominated to an executive position in the American Temperance Union, a significant achievement given the usual barriers against women's full participation in such organizations. Because of the correlation between alcoholism and domestic violence, temperance was considered a "women's issue." Women who fought to ban or restrict the sale and consumption of alcohol often saw that campaign as their only course of action to prevent domestic violence, during a time when women were denied the right to vote and other basic rights of citizenship. When a woman married, she gave up much of her legal

autonomy and control over her property and finances, and women were often denied custody of their children in the case of divorce, even if her husband was violent. The subordinate and dependent legal status of married women made them especially vulnerable to the effects of a husband's alcoholism, so an increasing number of women were motivated to participate in the grassroots temperance movement.

Women's participation—and perhaps, ironically, their exclusion—from the temperance campaign contributed to the momentum of the women's rights and suffrage movements at the time. Rural communities throughout western and central New York saw a surge of activism and support for the temperance cause, and while women worked at the ground level for the “crusade,” as it was termed, they were typically excluded from the organizational infrastructure of the movement. That exclusion, combined with the growing realization that the only real recourse for women to protect themselves and their children was by acquiring legal autonomy and the right to vote, reinforced the crossover between the temperance and women's rights campaigns. A turning point in this history was the Whole World's Temperance Convention, held at the Metropolitan Hall in New York City in September 1853. In a dramatic display of opposition to women's participation, the men leading the convention refused to include the female delegates in attendance (including Susan B. Anthony and Lucy Stone). While a small number of men vocally supported the women and protested their expulsion from the convention, the majority objected to the women's participation and drowned out the voices of the women who attempted to speak. In making their case for removing the women from the convention, the men quoted scripture, charged the women delegates with “outraging the proprieties of [their] sex,” and “referred to ‘*women in breeches*’ as a disgrace to their sex.”³ The exclusion of women from the convention served as a catalyst for the women's rights movement. The following month (October 1853), at a women's rights convention held in Cleveland, Ohio, the women discussed at length the unjust treatment several of their fellow activists had encountered at the event they dubbed the “Half World's Convention” in New York (because only half of the population was represented). Elizabeth C. Wright attended the women's rights convention in Cleveland and spoke in favor of a diplomatic approach to collaborating with like-minded temperance men. Like many progressive women of the era, she worked for multiple social reform causes while navigating the misogynistic biases against women's participation in public issues. Wright's

3 *Whole World's Temperance Convention, Lucy Stone, and National American Woman Suffrage Association Collection* (New York: Fowlers and Wells, 1853), 8.

nomination to an executive position for the American Temperance Union in 1857 represented an important milestone for women and a step toward women being accepted and acknowledged for their social reform service.

Contributing to the temperance cause empowered many women to extend their public participation in social reform to the most urgent issue of the day, the abolition of slavery. For Wright, her childhood upbringing, exposure to the radical atmosphere of the Burned Over District, and her unusually progressive education at Alfred combined for a remarkable set of influences on her abolitionist stance. Even among other antislavery activists, Wright was as outspoken and radical as they came. In December 1853, Wright attended a meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society, along with such prominent abolitionist leaders as William Lloyd Garrison, Sojourner Truth, and Lucretia Mott. Wright's voice appears in multiple places in the proceedings of the meeting, including her poem "A Word to the Weary," which she later included in *Lichen Tufts*. Written as an occasional poem for the twenty-year anniversary of the American Anti-Slavery Society's founding, the poem offers a message of encouragement and hope to the activists who had fought for decades to end slavery. In addition to reading her poem, Wright gave impromptu remarks and engaged in a debate with a man in attendance at the meeting about the role of individual moral responsibility in the perpetuation of slavery. She argued, among other points, that everyone was morally accountable for slavery, and "there was a great and terrible responsibility resting upon all who allowed those heavy burden to be borne by others which they would not allow themselves to touch with their little fingers."⁴ Wright's belief in the moral responsibility of abolitionism, and her self-possession in debating statements made by a man in a public meeting, both stem from the progressive atmosphere of her abolitionist family that encouraged women's public participation and voice. By including her antislavery poem "A Word to the Weary" in *Lichen Tufts* alongside her nature writing, Wright suggests the intersections of environmentalism and social justice and encourages her readers to persist in their consciousness and advocacy for both.

While Wright regards the natural world as universally liberating, she highlights the particular importance of women turning to nature for a sense of freedom and empowerment. After describing in "Into the Woods" the ways in which her own camping party discarded the rules for the genders (for instance with Alfred professor and future president Jonathan Allen cooking for the group),

4 *Proceedings of the American Anti-Slavery Society, at Its Second Decade, Held in the City of Philadelphia, Dec.3d, 4th, and 5th, 1853* (New York: American A. S. Society, 1854), 36.

Wright weaves the link between environmentalism and women's equality throughout the remaining essays of *Lichen Tufts*. She addresses deficiencies in women's education and restrictive fashion codes and urges her readers to adopt the "nature cure" for mind and body as an antidote to harmful gender norms. An activist involved in all of the major progressive reform movements of her day, Wright was devoted to universal enfranchisement for all men and women. In 1869, in the midst of a major rift in the US suffrage movement, Wright's role in a couple of pivotal events reveals her stance as a feminist and equal rights activist. Social reformers who fought for women's suffrage were divided over the Fifteenth Amendment, which granted voting rights to all men regardless of race but excluded women. Wright was very likely the "Elizabeth Wright" listed as the representative from Texas (where she was living for a brief time) at a May 1869 convention of the American Equal Rights Association, a group focused on universal equality and suffrage for African Americans and women.⁵ At this convention, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony announced that they were splitting from the organization and from the campaign for universal suffrage. Stanton, Anthony, and like-minded feminists withheld their support for the Fifteenth Amendment, because they objected to the prioritization of voting rights for African American men before women. They formed an organization devoted strictly to women's suffrage, the National Woman's Suffrage Association (NWSA); meanwhile, the activists on the other side of that rift formed a separate women's suffrage organization, the American Woman's Suffrage Association (AWSA), which supported the Fifteenth Amendment and strategically fought for women's suffrage amendments at the state level. The AWSA's organizational convention, held in Cleveland on November 24–25, 1869, listed Elizabeth C. Wright as the vice president from Texas. It is highly likely, given records of Wright's move from Paris, Texas, to Kansas in November 1869, that this is the same Elizabeth C. Wright who wrote *Lichen Tufts*.⁶ Given her radical voice as an abolitionist, it makes sense that Wright aligned herself with the organization that focused on intersecting forms of oppression and fought for the rights and enfranchisement of all people.

While actively contributing to social justice campaigns, Wright also continued her work as a natural scientist. Her *Putnam's Magazine* (October 1869) article, "Something About Fungi," highlights the value and methodology of

5 "American Equal Rights Association," *New-York Tribune*, 13 May 13, 1869, 5.

6 The likelihood that the Elizabeth Wright listed at the first AWSA convention is the same Wright who wrote *Lichen Tufts* is also noted by Jessica Brannon-Wranosky, *Southern Promise and Necessity: Texas, Regional Identity, and the National Woman Suffrage Movement, 1868–1920* (PhD diss., University of North Texas, 2020), 36–37, note 27.

her main area of expertise, mycology, a branch of botany that she felt was especially important given the plentiful native fungi species in the United States. In November 1869, after her brief time living in Texas, Wright moved to Kansas, where she continued her work as a botanist and teacher while starting a new chapter as a homesteader. She laid claim to an eighty-acre plot in Marshall County, Kansas, and, in keeping with the environmental ethic she outlined in *Lichen Tufts*, she immersed herself in the local natural environment of her new home region. Findings from Wright's field research appeared in major pioneering catalogs of native plant species in Kansas in the 1870s. Around this time, Wright also recruited Lyman Jewell, a fellow teacher (and former student) from Keating to join her in Kansas. Jewell claimed the eighty-acre lot next to Wright's, and they were married in February 1876. Characteristically defying social rules for women, Wright married late in life to a man twenty years her junior, and it appears that her marriage to Jewell may have been polyamorous.⁷

Wright's openness to an unconventional marriage could reflect some of the subversive ideas of the Free Love movement, which promoted freely chosen love as an alternative to the legal and economic bonds that defined traditional marriage. There is no evidence to suggest that Wright was an adherent to the Free Love movement, but it was a popular set of ideas in the Burned Over District and may have influenced Wright's generally open-minded attitude about her marriage. Given this movement's intersections with other areas of progressive culture that can be traced in Wright's life and writing, it bears consideration as a relevant context. With its focus on empowering people to make decisions freely about sexual relationships, family planning, and birth control, Free Love was regarded by many feminists of the day as a path to women's liberation from patriarchal marriage laws. The movement's most famous spokesperson was Victoria Woodhull, best known as the first female candidate for US president (nominated by the Equal Rights Party in 1872). In addition to being a radical feminist and Free Love advocate, Woodhull also practiced Spiritualism and belonged to the largest Spiritualist community in the world, Lily Dale, New York. Spiritualism, founded in western New York in 1848, was based on the belief in an afterlife and the ability of the dead (spirits) to communicate with the living, usually through a medium and during séances. More than a set of religious beliefs, Spiritualism reflected the Burned Over District's radical culture and progressive values. The movement appealed to social justice activists, and it empowered women as leaders and mediums. Lily Dale, which

7 Details about Wright and Jewell's marriage are included in Jewell's journals, which are transcribed and contained in a binder of family diaries and papers, "The History of the Lyman Jewell Family," Marshall County Historical Society, Marysville, KS.

still exists today as a thriving community of practicing spiritualists, hosted suffrage meetings and lecturers, including such prominent suffragists as Susan B. Anthony, Anna Shaw, and Carrie Chapman Catt. Radical young Quakers were especially drawn to the movement, as it combined religious devotion with social reform activism and comported with their progressive ideas about women's roles in society. All of this said, it's not surprising that Elizabeth C. Wright and her husband, Lyman Jewell, were receptive to the practices of Spiritualism and participated in séances, nor that they had an unconventional marriage.⁸

Lichen Tufts is brimming with the radical philosophical, social, and religious experiments from the New York-Pennsylvania border region of Wright's childhood, education, and early professional life. At the same time, Wright's nature writing and philosophical reflections are connected to a national intellectual tradition. In shining a light on the beauty of her beloved Allegheny wilderness, Wright draws upon the American transcendentalists' passion for environmental consciousness, liberating sense of deliberate living, and spiritual communion with the natural world. Explicitly aligning her own nature treatise to Henry David Thoreau's, in "Into the Woods," Wright recalls carrying along her copy of *Walden* and reading passages aloud to her camping party. As Daniel Patterson has noted, it is "undoubtedly the first time that a fellow nature writer pays tribute to the project of cultural change that shapes Walden."⁹ In the essays of *Lichen Tufts*, Wright outlines an environmental ethic that highlights the far-reaching benefits of an intimate acquaintance with the natural world, especially in one's home region. She makes a compelling, transcendentalist case for the liberating effects of nature on a person's character and philosophical outlook in "The Nature Cure—for the Mind": "As soon as you begin to enter into the arcana of nature, you feel the shackles of outward customs grow loose, and the liveries of many servitudes drop off, as a bird moults its feathers. Nothing is done suddenly, for Nature has plenty of time—all the time there is—and is never in a hurry" (91). With echoes of Emerson's philosophy of self-reliance, Wright proposes that such an immersive encounter with the natural world is the key to an elevated consciousness, unburdened by the prejudices and opinions of others and freed from the restraints of social and intellectual conformity: "Other men's opinions of you are now of less import to you than your own. You respect yourself—you approve yourself, therefore you can afford to be censured

8 Elizabeth (Wright) and Lyman Jewells' participation in Spiritualism and séances is described in "The History of the Lyman Jewell Family," 67.

9 Daniel Patterson, "'I commend you to Allegany underbrush': The Subversive Place-made Self in Elizabeth C. Wright's Treatise on Nature, *Lichen Tufts*," *Legacy* 17, no. 1 (2000): 33.

for what is best and bravest in you—you can afford to be misunderstood” (92). For Wright, the risks and rewards of nonconformity were particularly high for women of her era. Wright spends much of *Lichen Tufts* outlining both the bleak consequences of gender codes on women’s health and education as well as the particular value in women turning to the natural world for liberation. Wright’s feminist vision for environmental consciousness as a path to resisting the patriarchy especially aligns with transcendentalist author Margaret Fuller. Based on her journey to the Great Lakes and Niagara Falls, Fuller’s travelogue *Summer on the Lakes, in 1843* is an important precursor to Wright’s *Lichen Tufts*, as it features early ecofeminist commentary on the impact of rapid industrialization in a patriarchal society.

Wright’s work, especially her unapologetically radical abolitionist stance, is also reminiscent of the prominent abolitionist and author Lydia Maria Child. A beloved novelist and children’s author, Child’s career suffered a blow in 1833, when she published the book *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans*, in which she argued for the immediate emancipation and enfranchisement of enslaved people. Instead of being deterred by the severe condemnation of her abolitionist writing, Child became a leader in the movement, serving as editor of the weekly newspaper the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*. Much like Child, Wright fearlessly broke society’s codes for women, publicly expressing her radical views and fighting for the rights of the oppressed. Indeed, as much as Wright is exceptional for defying restrictive, gender-based norms and rules, she is also representative of the countless women of her era who refused to be silenced or excluded from the public sphere. Wright’s voice is a reminder that, long before they were granted the right to vote, women’s voices were indispensable to public policy and social justice reform.

In her work as a natural scientist, like many women occupying spaces traditionally reserved for men, Wright did the double duty of contributing to her field while also advocating for reforms that would enable more women to participate in them. While it may seem like a digression from her camping narrative, her lengthy critique of sentimental “language of flowers” books in “Into the Woods” exposes the popular books that were marketed to girls and often took the place of rigorous and valid botany reading. Wright was especially concerned about the typically paltry science education received by girls because she believed a deep knowledge of the natural world is vital for self-elevation and liberation and, in turn, beneficial to society as a whole. This and other tenets of Wright’s environmentalism are the most enduring and prescient aspects of her life’s work and philosophy, while one aspect of her nature treatise was outdated almost immediately upon its publication. As Patterson points out, Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* was published in 1859, just before *Lichen Tufts* and before the Darwinian theory of evolution was well known and

established in the science world and beyond. As a result, Wright's theory of nature reflects the widely held creationist understanding of the natural world, that plant and animal species were fixed by God. But, as Patterson makes clear, that belief is just one part of a complex and forward-minded theory of nature: "She spoke during the last days of special creationism, yet her textual representation of nature clearly reveals that she was moving toward an ecological understanding of the nonhuman environment."¹⁰ Wright's nature treatise is a passionate argument for the far-reaching benefits of an immersive, conscious relationship with nature. *Lichen Tufts* is a plea on behalf of the natural world as well as for humanity, as Wright believed in the reciprocal rewards of environmental stewardship. With the modern-day turn to the natural world as a site of concern and advocacy—as well as a site for personal lifestyle elevation and even aesthetic inspiration (the growing popularity of the Norwegian concept *friluftsliv* comes to mind)—the wisdom of her ideas about the "nature cure" and the urgency of environmental awareness are remarkably relevant today. Over a century and a half since the publication of her prescient writing, what would Wright say to a reader today seeking physical and mental wellness, mindfulness, and a respite from the pressures and distractions of society? Her advice is simple and as timely as ever: "Go to Grass.' It will do you good."

10 Patterson, "'I commend you,'" 3.