
Short Note:

Elizabeth West or Wast
(1676–1715)

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The *Memoirs or Spiritual Exercises of Elisabeth Wast* were first published in 1724 and had reached a fifth edition by 1733. They were being read at the Cambuslang revival in 1742,¹ and continued to be so into the nineteenth century. Since the 1760s, the usual spelling of Elizabeth's surname has been 'West'.

Little has been known about the background of Elizabeth Wast,² but with the digitising of Scottish records, information is far more readily accessible. The following facts have been gathered from the Scotlands People website,³ supplemented by the *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae* and other material previously available.

1. Parents and siblings

Elizabeth Wast (or Waist) was the daughter of James Waist, who was a baxter (baker), and Helene Mershall. They were married in Edinburgh on 22nd June 1671. They had five children of whom Elizabeth was the third. She was baptised on 3rd March 1676, and the others were William (baptised 13th June 1672), James (baptised 31st July 1674), Thomas (baptised 26th May

¹ K. E. Beebe (ed.), *The McCulloch Examinations of the Cambuslang Revival (1742)* (2 vols., Scottish History Society, Woodbridge, 2013), Vol. 1, p. 184; Vol. 2, p. 298.

² See, for example, her original entry in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004), by Roy Middleton. This is now being revised. Curiously, S. A. Allibone, *A Critical Dictionary of English Literature*, Vol. 3 (1876), p. 2651 gives her dates (somewhat erroneously) as 1672–1735, but notes (correctly) that she was married to Mr Brie (Bryce), minister of Saline. Online sources often erroneously describe her as 'Elizabeth West of County Durham'.

³ <https://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk>

1678), and Eupham (baptised 22nd April 1681). Of these, Eupham was buried on 14th January 1685, and one of William and James was buried on 12th January 1676.⁴ It would appear from her *Memoirs* that only one of her brothers was still alive by 1700.⁵ James, the father, died on 13th January 1700, and his wife Helene in September 1715, being buried in Greyfriars on 6th of the month.

2. Marriage to Gavin Weir (1709–1711)

The period covered in Elizabeth's *Memoirs, or Spiritual Exercises* is from about 1690, when she was fourteen, to April 1709 when she was thirty-three. In November 1708, she became a schoolmistress at the Edinburgh Trades Maiden Hospital.⁶ Her work was 'to teach the children to read, work stockings, lace, coloured and white seams, spinning, carding, washing and dressing of linens, dressing of meat, cleaning of house and all sorts of needlework and other ordinary household thrift, and, if she can, to teach also writing, arithmetic and the common parts of vocal music.'⁷ Her *Memoirs* relate various troubles that she had here, with the latest dated entry being 18th April 1709. On that day, she received an unexpected knock on her door. She was in great spiritual turmoil at the time, and she records:

I was thus pouring out my soul before him [Christ]; one comes and knocks on my door; and O but I had ill-will to be disturbed! But at length I opened. What their errand was, they did not tell me; but in a short time events proved that they were sent to me as an answer of prayer.⁸

On 30th June 1709, she was married, and it seems likely that the knock on the door was that of her suitor, who is otherwise not mentioned in the *Memoirs*.

Her husband's name was Mr Gavin Weir. He had graduated at Edinburgh University in 1679 and was an Edinburgh merchant. He was also a schoolmaster and was probably a visiting teacher at the Trades Maiden Hospital, but the early minutes of the Hospital have not survived to confirm this.⁹ He had been born in 1656, the seventh child of Gabriel Weir

⁴ H. Paton (ed.), *Register of Interments in the Greyfriars Burying-Ground, Edinburgh, 1658–1700* (Scottish Record Society, Edinburgh, 1902), p. 683.

⁵ E. Wast, *Memoirs, or Spiritual Exercises* (Edinburgh, 1724), pp. 115–117.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

⁷ E. S. Towill, 'The minutes of the Trades Maiden Hospital', *Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*, Vol. 28 (1953), pp. 1–47 (pp. 4–5).

⁸ *Memoirs, or Spiritual Exercises*, pp. 249–50.

⁹ Towill, 'The minutes of the Trades Maiden Hospital', p. 8.



Trades Maiden Hospital, Edinburgh.

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and Susanna Lockheart, and was thus twenty years older than Elizabeth Wast. He was a widower, having been married many years previously – probably in 1679 – to Elizabeth Brand. They had had two children, Susanna and Jean, with Jean dying in 1697, and Susanna probably dying young as well.

Gavin and Elizabeth Wast also had two children: Gavin, who was baptised on 5th October 1710, and Benjamin who was baptised on 12th July 1712. By this time Gavin senior had already died, being buried on 14th November 1711, so that Benjamin's baptism occurred eight months after his father's death – presumably the reason why he was given the name Benjamin (Genesis 35:18).

3. Marriage to John Bryce (1713–1715)

On 28th September 1713, Elizabeth was married again, this time to John Bryce (b. 1677), possibly from Dunblane. Bryce had been chaplain to Alexander Brodie of Lethen, near Auldearn, and had been licensed by the Presbytery of Forres on 24th July 1711. He too may have been a visiting teacher at the Trades Maiden Hospital.¹⁰ They had one child, Elizabeth, baptised in Edinburgh on 18th July 1714, but Elizabeth Wast died on 28th February 1715 at the age of thirty-eight and was buried the

¹⁰ Ibid.

next day in Greyfriars. Her little boy Benjamin died four months later, on 20th June 1715.

On 8th February 1716, her widowed husband John Bryce became minister of Saline, Fife in succession to the eminent Patrick Plenderleath. Bryce remarried, on 24th December 1716, to Margaret Kerr, widow of the Edinburgh goldsmith Thomas Kerr (married 12th July 1694), but there is no record of any further children. Bryce died on 27th January 1731 and was buried in Saline where his gravestone survives. His daughter Elizabeth, mentioned above, married David Dempster of Wester Newton Rires on 6th December 1734 and had at least four children (William, Gavin, Margaret, and Johanna).

4. Her son Gavin Weir

Meanwhile, it is likely that Elizabeth Wast's son by her first marriage, Gavin Weir – now an orphan – was brought up in the Saline manse. The combination 'Gavin Weir' is not common, and he was presumably the Gavin Weir who, on 14th February 1750, married Mary Wardlaw in the parish of Saline but died in June 1753. The parish of Saline borders on the parish of Carnock, and it is likely, therefore, that he was also the 'preacher at Newbiggings, parish of Carnock' named Gavin Weir whose testament was recorded at the Stirling Commissary Court on 15th January 1754.

Newbiggings was the summer home of John Erskine of Carnock (d. 1768), the famous Scottish jurist, whose son John Erskine (1721–1803) was minister of Greyfriars, Edinburgh. Thomas Gillespie, minister of Carnock, had been deposed by the General Assembly in 1752 but continued taking services in Carnock until the winter of 1752 when he moved his congregation to nearby Dunfermline. John Erskine of Greyfriars was very friendly with Gillespie but whether his father shared his support for Gillespie is not clear. Depending on that, Gavin Weir could either have been taking services for the Established Church (with Gillespie still occupying the manse), or for some group of people in Carnock who supported Gillespie but were unable to travel to Dunfermline.

Provisional list of extant editions of her book

1724 Edinburgh, 271 pages.

1727 Edinburgh, 228 pages. This describes itself as the 3rd edition.

1733 Glasgow. This describes itself as the 5th edition.

1733 Edinburgh: Lumisden and Robertson, 266 pages.

1766 Glasgow: John Bryce, 180 pages.

1769 Glasgow.

1787 Newry: D. Carpenter, 184 pages.

1798 Edinburgh: Printed for the booksellers, 180 pages.

1807 Edinburgh: Ogle and Allardice, 218 pages.

1817 Exeter (NH): C. Norris. The first American edition. 282 pages.

1831(?) title-page missing, 424 pages. This was a revised edition. The title-page is now lost but the date is supplied from a note made thirty years ago.

1836 Aberdeen: G. King, 281 pages.

1840 Edinburgh: Gall & Inglis, 287 pages.

1843 Aberdeen: G. King, 287 pages.

The book was also translated into Dutch as early as 1729,¹¹ and there were further Dutch editions in 1743 and 1873, and others as well. Almost all the British editions are very rare.

¹¹ Elisabeth Wast, *Zoet en bitter, licht en duisternis, op den weg na de hemel, tot haar eige en anderer bestiering opgetekend in den loop van haar verborgen leven met Godt* (Utrecht: Anthony Hofmans, 1729), 312 pages.