



THE SHORT-TERM FELLOW WHO WOULD
NOT/COULD NOT GO AWAY
JOHN CARSON

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I came to the Wiko at the very beginning of September, like many of the other Fellows, to improve my sketchy German and to find my place in the Wiko ecology. The lessons helped (thanks Eva), and I improved a bit, though I didn’t practice enough after that initial push to really consolidate what I had learned. But my presence at the Wiko in early September was a bit anomalous: I was technically a short-term Fellow who would only be “official” in January, but who was already there on their doorstep, asking about an office and a computer

and, well, everything else that goes with the scholarly life at the Wiko. Truth be told, I had what might be termed a split appointment, with part of my time and funding from the Wiko and part from the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science. But the Wiko – a generous institution if ever there was one – agreed to let me have an office from the start and to join in all the activities available to any other Fellow. It helped that I was part of a group, the Quantification group, the largest workgroup the Wiko had ever sponsored. There were eight of us (nine if you counted Raine Daston, a Permanent Fellow whose boundless energy allowed her to be a regular at our weekly meetings). We were meant to work together, if in that highly individualistic way that humanities and social science folk tend to adopt, and so it could be argued that my presence from the start made sense.

I was anomalous in another way as well: I did not live at the Wiko, but instead commuted in from Schöneberg, sometimes by S-Bahn and sometimes by bike. I didn't mind; well, not too much. Grunewald certainly had the biggest villas I had ever seen in Berlin, but it felt a bit removed from the rest of the city. Coming from Ann Arbor, it was nice to have more of an urban feel to daily life, and having some distance between work and home has its advantages as well. Not living at the Wiko, though, did mean I missed out (or escaped, some would say) some of the camp-like experience of life there. Evening events, excursions for dinner or on weekends, late night revelry after the Thursday dinners, all were taking place, I knew, but rarely were they much a part of my life there, save as echoes still resonating the next day or week. It felt a little strange, not being so intimately a part of the social whirl, but I was in Berlin with my wife and a four-year-old, and so under any conditions my opportunities to socialize would have been limited. Besides, there were still plenty of occasions on which I was able to enjoy the company of comrades old and new, and the intellectual life of the Wiko took place mostly during the day anyway, at the weekly colloquia and the lunches, as well as in the group meetings and, of course, the daily stare-down in the office with my computer screen.

There is probably not much that I can say about my experience at the Wiko that hasn't already been said many times and much more eloquently in the collection of these year-books. I felt privileged and extraordinarily lucky to be there. I quickly pushed the world of class preparation, grading, committee meetings, endless student queries, and all of the other trappings of modern, hyper-busy university life away and deleted university e-mails with reckless abandon until the summer finally brought them crashing back in. In many regards, that may have been the most wonderful gift that the Wiko provided – the opportunity to have a different rhythm to life and to remember that sociability is essential

for a healthy mind and spirit. There were also the colloquia. For me, one of the high points of my Wiko experience was the chance it afforded me, week in and week out, to hear talks often in areas far removed from my own. Not that I loved, or even understood, everything that I heard. But each came with its own kind of passion, and most made me think and wonder and ponder, which is still to me one of the greatest joys of the academic life. Like a number of the humanists, I took particular pleasure in the talks by the life scientists. Though interdisciplinarity is a mantra at Michigan, my chances to listen to, or even better to sit down and talk with, a practicing scientist are rather limited. So it was fun to get a glimpse into their world and to learn about cancer cells and flocks of birds and cooperation as well as competition, and so on. Did these talks change my own intellectual practice? Probably not. But I hope they helped me appreciate even more the richness and complexities of the phenomena I explore and to be reminded about just how many ways there are to try to make sense of what we are collectively investigating.

What precisely did I do with my time? I am still pondering that question, I must admit. Luca invited us all to abandon our avowed projects and to take up a secret one, if we were so inclined. I don't know that many accepted his invitation, though at times I wondered if I should have. Instead, I plowed back into a project I've been fighting with for some time, my attempt to understand the development of the category of unsoundness of mind (*non compos mentis*) in Anglo-American civil law and medical jurisprudence during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. There wasn't much quantification involved – none, to be exact – prompting Luca to wonder at the quantification group's capacious ability to include even someone not really doing quantification (though, don't worry Luca, I remain intensely interested in numbers and what they can and cannot do). The allure of the story of unsoundness of mind was, for me, twofold. On the one hand, it forced legal and medical experts into an uneasy and never very satisfactory alliance of sorts, as they sought to manage rival knowledge claims over the disputed territory of mental soundness. Unsoundness was first and foremost a legal category, and yet was acknowledged by all to refer to a state of mind, and thus was a condition about which those proclaiming some expertise in mental medicine felt a right, if not a duty, to speak. On the other hand, unsoundness served as a site of contestation, not only between law and medicine, but also among different narratives describing a person's behaviors and the meaning or madness underlying them among various family members fighting over an inheritance or contesting a marriage, between ideologies of individual liberty and communal responsibility, and between patriarchal versus paternalist visions of male authority.

Because unsoundness was most typically glossed as a question about the ability to manage one's affairs, the term entangled the medical, the legal, the economic, the social, the political, and the personal. In other words, adjudications over a person's soundness were one place where a host of competing visions came together and where the courts were expected to come to some sort of resolution, however tied to the particulars of the situation this might prove to be. All the elements are there, I think, for a compelling story, but figuring out precisely how to tease them apart and put them into a comprehensible analytical frame has proven elusive. And so I spent too much time pondering and not enough simply writing. Some small pieces got finished, and one large article sent off, but two others remain in tatters, pulled apart but not yet put back together in a way that gets to the heart of the story. As for the big picture, in which individual life histories become parts of legal/medical/social/economic dramas, and where courts bifurcate the citizenry into the sound and unsound, with different destinies for each, well, that remains too poorly sketched in. If only I had another six months.

In the end, like I'm sure virtually all the Fellows, I am intensely grateful to the Wiko for the chance to explore and contemplate and to be stimulated by the company of so many engaging members of the community, be they Fellows, partners, children, staff, or visitors. Time spent with old friends – Ted, Mary, Wendy, Bruce, Jahnavi – was precious, and the chance to get to know so many new and smart and warmhearted people a great luxury. I still expect to walk into my office and see Emmanuel's smiling face, or to hear about Tong's latest photo shoot, or to be amazed by Andrea's ability to turn accounting into something fascinating. I know that somewhere right now Yuri is preparing to ask the last, and most searching, question at some talk, and Kathleen is giving an amazing introduction of a speaker, and Pippa is transfixing a viewer with her exquisite giraffe bones. Jenna and Peter, Felix, Janina, Yair, Nina, Laurenz, Athena and Carlo, William, Baber, Natasha, Gunther, Kasia, Pierre-Laurent, Cheikh, and the list goes on of Fellows who helped make Wiko life such a rich and diverse experience. I would be utterly remiss if I did not mention the music – what a treat to have such wonderful performers in so intimate a setting. As for the institution itself, perhaps the best compliment I can give is that one rarely noticed how well it operated. Books appeared almost as soon as you asked for them; food and on Thursday evenings drink were pleasurable and in abundance. Nothing seemed to ever fluster Vera, and Lena could always be counted on to smile or laugh, no matter what the request. In sum, Luca and Thorsten and Reinhart have done a splendid job and set just the right tone for the Wiko, deftly mixing the collegial and the intellectual. If only they didn't make us leave.