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Frank Lloyd Wright versus America

The 1930s

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Ephemera? Wright has said of Ocotillo: “I never grieve long now that some work of mine has met its end; *has had short life* [he emphasized], even though it happens that a better one cannot take its place, consoled by the thought that any *design* has far-reaching effect, today, because our machine so easily gives it, as a design, to the mind’s eye of all.” In his autobiography Wright noted incorrectly that Ocotillo “was published in German magazines two months after it was finished” (he saw it in the magazine *Die Form* of Berlin, not two months after but in July 1930).²¹ And so he was pleased that the Camp would prevail “in some graphic thought-form”—a nice terminology. “It will be gone soon,” he said, “modest illustration of a great theme, in passing.”²²

In keeping with European practice Wright prepared a manifesto to accompany the text of the article on Ocotillo in *Die Form*, which he sent to its author H. de Fries, who had been editor of a book on Wright published in 1926 entitled *Frank Lloyd Wright*. Perhaps it was written at de Fries’s request; anyway the manifesto followed the style of its European predecessors with short, punchy, one-line statements, usually a paragraph each. Some of Wright’s were nice truisms or explosive challenges to orthodoxy, which, of course, was one purpose of such manifestos. For instance, in Wright’s case:

A good word in architecture is “clean.” Another is “integral,” still another “plastic”—one more, “quiet.”

Architecture is the scientific-art of making structure express ideas.

Architecture is the triumph of human imagination over materials and methods and men. Man in possession of his earth.²³

Many of these truisms were printed on the endsheets of his book *Modern Architecture* of 1931.

Ocotillo Camp’s spiritual revelations and architectural form were immediate and *catalytic* predecessors to the Fellowship and therefore to his ideas for Broadacre City. Wright, his wife and daughters, his six or seven draftsmen,²⁴ and visitors on occasion would sit about the fire on their acropolis where Wright would play the role of sage, mentor, even guru—if not priest. Perhaps his draftsmen were not too different from students? he similar to a master? And nearby, in contrast to the brown ragged Arizona desert, Wright noticed a long green field of alfalfa that defined one edge of a large cattle ranch. It was called Broad Acre.²⁵

3 Trilogy: Wright, Gutheim, Hitchcock

In retrospect Wright very publicly said that “having nothing to build at a very bad time in my life, I did put a good deal of myself, too much probably, in AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY.”¹ Events related to his marriages were frankly presented, at least to his reckoning, as were his views about other matters

and issues including architecture of course. There seem to have been a number of reasons for embarking on his autobiography. Among them were those that prompt other autobiographers: an ego that believes other people would be interested in oneself; an attempt to set records straight; a need to explain past actions and responses; a desire to philosophize; a belief that one's views are correct; and in Wright's case, as previously suggested, an attempt to sort events of the twenties so he might come to better understand them. (In late 1929 he learned that Miriam Wright was "utterly insane," to use his words, and had but a few weeks to live.)² As well, if there was to be a renaissance of the Wright career then it was important to remind his public that he had rebounded and was ready to accept any and all invitations.

In his autobiography Wright thanked Olgivanna for suggesting he begin the work; that he said was back in 1925. He wrote eagerly for a few months, more or less, then set it aside as a result of the continuing harassments accompanying his divorce from Miriam Noel. Wright said that he began writing again in 1927, but it seems more likely that he began his autobiography sometime in 1928. Anyway, he wrote sporadically until sometime in 1931 when the manuscript went to the printers, to be published as *An Autobiography* in 1932. It proved to be his most popular book and, perhaps, one of the most popular autobiographies published in America. It was produced by Longmans, Green and Company, the New York office of the Longmans publishing house of London. Why Wright approached Longmans, Green is not apparent but coincidence and collaboration offer one suggestion. During 1929 and 1930 Sheldon Cheney and Wright corresponded principally about Cheney's book *The New World Architecture*. Wright was impressed by Cheney and helped and counseled as he might. When published in 1930 by Longmans, Green, Wright told Cheney that the book was "a fine work"—that he was "a good craftsman."³ Perhaps the production of this book persuaded Wright to approach the publisher. While the suggestion is somewhat an aside, the relationship of Cheney and Wright is not.

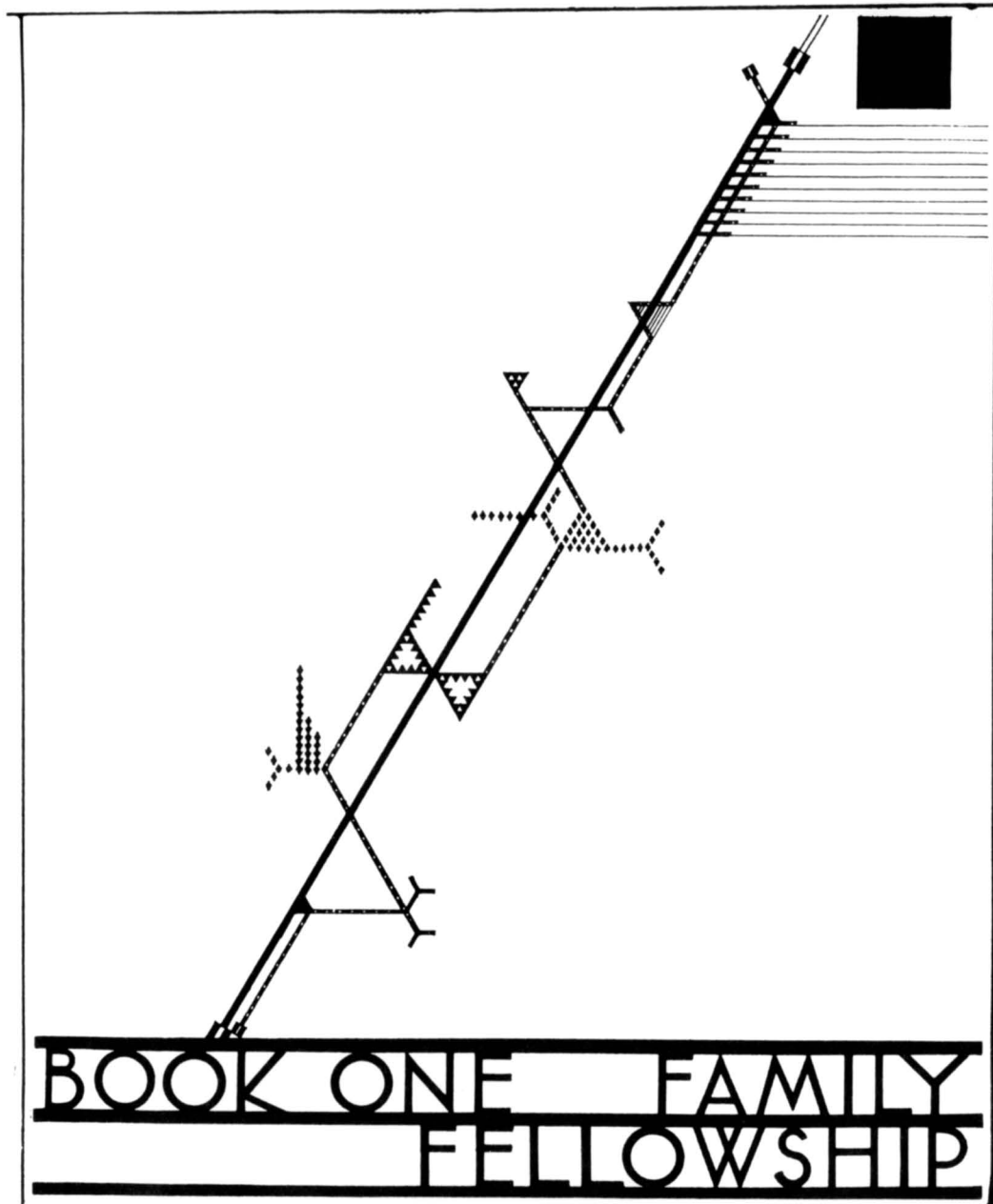
The first printing of the autobiography was as a "limited autograph edition" (at \$10.00) and a trade edition (\$6.00) released 30 March. It was reprinted in 1933 in a limp cloth edition and again with boards in 1938. These last two were trade editions. Interestingly, records suggest that Wright published the book at his own expense.⁴ Conversely, Wright told a client Dr. Norman Guthrie, that he received a "substantial cash-advance" for two parts or sections of the book as early as February 1931.⁵ (These were then called "Generation to Generation" and "Family, Fraternity, Freedom," but in final form became part of other sections.) It is not difficult to accept either proposition; in any case the Longmans imprint was secured mainly for advertising and distribution purposes.⁶

His protracted and rather extraordinarily public divorce always made headlines. That may be another reason why he included so much of the affair—it had a certain soap-opera attraction of which he was well aware—beyond the personal value of writing as a catharsis. Shortly after his return from Moscow Wright approved a dramatically pruned version of the Longmans, Green edition that appeared in the September 1937 issue of the *Readers' Digest* entitled “Building against Doomsday.” That condensation and the 1938 reprint, surely not financed by Wright, indicate the successful renewal of popular interest in him. They corresponded with the publication of his documents about Broadacres (1935 through 1938), his buildings for Johnson Wax in Racine, Wisconsin (beginning 1938), the Kaufmann Fallingwater house (also beginning in 1938), a full issue of the January 1938 *Architectural Forum* devoted to Wright’s life and current work, as well as many promotions for the Taliesin Fellowship (1933 onward), and bits and pieces extracted from his autobiography and published from time to time in all variety of press.

On its release the autobiography received some special attention. The following appeared in part of an article in *Publishers Weekly*: “Not only did Mr. Wright write the book, and design it, but he has drawn architectural scale drawings for a series of window displays to feature it. The displays are worked out in accordance with Mr. Wright’s architectural theories. There are plans for four different displays, some large and complex, some small and simple.” A large red square dominated the schemes. The drawings were to be furnished to certain book shops throughout America. So far as the *Weekly* knew these were the “first ‘signed’ window displays to have been used in the book business.”⁷ The displays were copyright by Longmans, Green and it was said that they were to be shown in Philadelphia, Boston, New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago. (Probably because Longmans holds the copyright, the designs do not appear in any chronologies of Wright’s work.) The article illustrated the design of one of the three-dimensional displays, one face of which contained a boldy lettered advertisement: FIRST EDITION SIX DOLLARS. AUTOGRAPHED . . . SEVENTY ILLUSTRATIONS.

Soon after the release of the 1938 reprint, around mid-1939, Wright began negotiating with Charles Duell of the newly formed publishing house of Duell, Sloan and Pearce. Apparently the idea for a second edition was Wright’s, and to the suggestion Duell wrote, “tell me what you think and what you wish.”⁸ By October 1939 Duell and Wright had agreed to a publication. Why Wright did not continue with Longmans, Green is unknown but rights were transferred from the previous to the new publisher by November. One of Duell’s editors, Max Putzel, was charged with making Wright’s text, old and new, comprehensible. Wright wanted the 1932 version slightly revised, or

3.1 Graphics possibly by Wright for Book 1 of the 1932 autobiography. The buckram cover had a similar design. The interpretation might be as follows. From childhood and over the years leading to maturity there were many diversions (temptations?) each explored then put aside, while other influences were absorbed; the child reached adulthood by maintaining a single philosophy (ambition?) symbolized by the straight dark single line, which always controlled psychology and reactions. Personal success and professionalism were finally attained, symbolized by the red square in the highest position. Reproduction courtesy and © 1932 the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation.



edited by himself. He also wanted to add about seventy thousand words supposedly to cover developments since 1932. The two parties also agreed that maybe two or three years after initial publication the book might be given to a reprint publisher for a cheap edition (\$1.00 a copy retail was mentioned) and Blue Ribbon Books was suggested by Duell.⁹ Such an edition never eventuated, probably because it was unnecessary for book sales were quite adequate. The contract between Duell and Wright was signed in January 1940.¹⁰

Putzel labored studiously editing Wright's old text, attempting to put it into acceptable language. He questioned words and meanings, offered thoughts on structure and content, and much more. In general Wright was not too cooperative and usually refused cuts; and the architect was very slow in supplying Putzel with material. By mid-1941 only portions of the manuscript were finalized. However, the autobiography was not the only book being orchestrated by Wright and Duell: there were two others and their enterprise ran parallel with the autobiography.

In March 1940 Frederick Gutheim confessed to Wright that one of his fondest hopes was to see the architect's wisdom, as the New Englander put it, "made available to the thousands of readers who would otherwise be put off by the technical nature of some of the material, or the difficulty of laying on hands" (presumably he meant visiting the buildings). He believed that a compilation of Wright's writings would make a "suitable companion volume to the Autobiography," a belief perhaps engendered by Duell. In fact Duell mentioned to Wright that Gutheim had spoken to him about such a compilation. For reasons not explained Wright had shown Gutheim some manuscript material as early as 1930.¹¹ Gutheim's proposal appealed to Wright and discussions began during the spring of 1940.¹² But as to Gutheim's participation in the book Wright was not sure. He told Duell that he had given no encouragement to Gutheim, who took "too much for granted." Wright believed that Gutheim was associated with "the left wingers" and would like the credit of a fling in the master's own house in order to promote "his own views which are decidedly to the left." Further, Wright did not consider Gutheim "of sufficient calibre" to write about the architect's work or verbalized thoughts, in an introduction or preface: Wright was, however, willing to "wait and see."¹³ Duell neutrally professed to understand both men, Gutheim defended his liberality, and soon Wright acquiesced.

Gutheim began studying the Wright documents and related material in the summer of 1940 in preparation for a book to be called "Frank Lloyd Wright on Architecture."¹⁴ As might be expected things did not proceed smoothly; the final denouement was the book's preface by Gutheim that incensed Wright. In February 1941 the "master" sent the publisher a telegram demanding that

book production stop immediately or that Duell “strike out” Gutheim’s preface.¹⁵ A follow-up letter put the case: Gutheim’s preface “*firmly*,” asserted Wright, stated that “The New Architecture proceeded from Gropius and Le Corbusier and that I have been influenced by it.” If this assertion was within Gutheim’s original preface then he most certainly did not present facts that were available for all to read in works by, for instance, Douglas Haskell or Lewis Mumford in the late 1920s. Wright found Gutheim’s statement “gratuitous, false, and confusing” and he could see no reason why his “granary should have that rat in it.” And then Wright wanted to know why prefaces seemed to be a place to air some “meanly controversial opinion” at the author’s expense.¹⁶ In the event, Gutheim changed the preface. (His original letter to Wright proposing the book stated that his manuscript “would naturally” need Wright’s approval.) The book was released during 1941. The fact that much of the material reprinted in the book had been tampered with in one manner or another probably can be attributed to both Gutheim and Wright.

Gutheim’s idea for a companion to the autobiography, one that placed before Wright’s public his writings on all kinds of subjects in letters, articles, reviews—previously published or not—may have suggested to Wright the desirability of yet another companion, one about his architecture—photographs, drawings, dates, or whatever. Apparently this proposal was also put to Duell, who agreed to publish this book also. In 1940 and apparently out of the blue, so to speak, Wright asked Henry-Russell Hitchcock to prepare such a book. Hitchcock’s close relationship with academia and northeastern society (partially a result of his training at Harvard University’s Fogg Museum) and his ability to publish widely in what might be described as the important magazines of his society may have swayed Wright’s decision. Or perhaps Wright was attempting to get the influential young art historian on side after a decade of confrontation. Certainly eight years earlier, in 1932, Wright was not happy with Hitchcock’s views nor those of most other historians and critics; exceptions were Haskell and Mumford.

It must be conceded that in the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s many historians and observers had difficulty evaluating Wright’s architecture and its historical position. There was, for instance, Fiske Kimball’s analysis in 1928 in what was one of the first monographic histories of American architecture (a fact that fairly measures the extent of Europhilism even then dominant). Kimball placed Wright in a chapter nearly alone, called “Counter-Currents,” more or less as a midwest aberration linked to Sullivan: “A single figure of genius emerged in the generation after Sullivan: Frank Lloyd Wright. . . .” Kimball supplied some erroneous information and introduced Wright’s now-familiar works and his followers and persuasion in Europe, only to conclude that “the

influence of his ideas here [in America] is indirect.”¹⁷ Wright’s response was as might be expected. “I am heartily sick of the historical falsifying of the real course of ideas in the Architecture of our Country. . . . I am still smarting from Fiske Kimball’s well-meant obituary.”¹⁸

Also in 1928 Hitchcock had given Wright a historical position, if in a somewhat back-handed manner and without substantiation: “the next generation after H. H. Richardson were more important,” wrote Hitchcock, listing Louis Sullivan, Charles Eiffel in France, P. J. H. Cuypers in Holland, and Otto Wagner in Austria. It was from those men that “definite lines of artistic descent” could be traced to “the first great masters of the New Tradition.” One master was Wright, “a prophet no longer quite without honor in his own country.”¹⁹ However, much as Kimball had done, in 1932 Hitchcock cast Wright aside in notes to the New York Museum of Modern Art’s “Modern Architects” exhibition. Hitchcock said quite simply that the “day of the lone pioneer is past,” that there were “others besides Wright to lead the way toward the future.”²⁰

Heresy.

Wright responded by asserting that he was obviously still present and producing, if not much architecture at least many provocative theories and ideas. He also outspokenly disassociated himself from the internationalists. Hitchcock was not finding favor with the Wright camp.

Then again in 1934 Hitchcock said it was a “time for quiet assimilation and thoughtful development of the International Style,” which he thought “a boon for American architecture.”²¹ This model was rationalized in the 1920s, defined by Gropius in 1925, Hilberseimer in 1927 (and others), acknowledged by Cheney in 1930, and codified with much pomp by Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Hitchcock, and Philip Johnson in the Museum of Modern Art’s 1932 catalogue and in Hitchcock and Johnson’s book of the same year, *The International Style*, where their points of codification read much like chapter titles for Heinrich Wölfflin’s book *The Sense of Form in Art*. Why Wright was included in the exhibition is not clear. His designs tended to jar with what was to have been a concise presentation of the European model. Perhaps Lewis Mumford (who organized the housing section of the exhibition) suggested, even urged Wright’s inclusion.

Mumford’s own views of Wright’s importance to the cause of American architecture were both sensitive and historically correct at all times, but especially during those transitional years around 1930. His book *The Brown Decades* perceptively analyzed Wright’s role in American historical terms as well as European. Mumford defined one aspect of that role: “At the very time when the archaic note of colonialism was being emphasized by the fashionable architect [in post-World War I America] Wright was showing his respect for the actual landscape and the actual problems

of his day and locality.”²² Earlier, Mumford had challenged Hitchcock’s analysis of Wright in a 1929 review of a pamphlet by Hitchcock published by Cahiers d’Art. Mumford’s review (see Appendix A) was a most revealing, carefully structured, and perceptive document that set out problems of objectivity, Europhilism, and precision.

Over the years Wright needled Hitchcock about his too academic stance (New England connoisseurship), too art-historical notions and, within Wright’s understanding, distorted views from the political left. In fact, in a letter of 1937 Wright told Hitchcock that his movement in “the direction of an organic architecture has suffered a terrible set back from the exploitations of the left wing of which you are a camp follower.”²³ Wright did not say Hitchcock was a “member” or “fellow traveller,” but selected the term a “camp follower.” In June 1938, after accepting an invitation to visit Hitchcock, Wright confessed that his letter of 1937 was perhaps hasty and “unnecessarily unkind.”²⁴ A month later Wright was recommended for an honorary Master of Arts degree from Wesleyan University for which Wright thanked Hitchcock.²⁵ When it was finally published, Hitchcock dedicated the book *In the Nature of Materials* to Wesleyan University as the “first American institution to recognize the genius of Frank Lloyd Wright with academic honors.” During 1938 Hitchcock was a professor at the Connecticut university. It was all very tidy, and Hitchcock was apparently already on side.

Wright’s idea in 1941 for the new book illustrating his architectural works, as put to Hitchcock, “was to record and explain the Museum of Modern Art Exhibit” of Wright’s work that had been mounted the previous year.²⁶ In March 1941 Hitchcock formally agreed to the proposal and by return mail Wright said that he was “delighted” with Hitchcock’s enthusiasm for the “opus.” Wright believed the book would be “worthy” of them both. “I knew you could do it,” said Wright, “as no one also could.”²⁷ They met in May to prepare notes and sort drawings and photographs. Apprentice Edgar Tafel remembered that he and fellow Fellow Bob Mosher “were detailed to find drawings from the files.” Tafel’s next comment is important, at least for architectural historians and biographers: “Mr. Wright constantly changed the dates on drawings.”²⁸ By June Hitchcock wanted a much larger and more comprehensive book. He also wanted to break away from the proposed trilogy. Wright blamed Duell in part for Hitchcock’s notions, which Wright interpreted as an attempt at personal aggrandizement. He wrote to the publisher saying in part that “Russell” ignored the job Wright had given him, that he had gone “his way regardless,” that he wanted a “horse-face format,” all in all destroying—and that was his word—the idea of the “triptych” volumes. “To hell with that,” said Wright; Hitchcock should follow the agreement “or get out.” Wright added that he was “more suspicious of this young academic whiskers than I was of ‘Polly’ Fritz” (i.e., Gutheim).²⁹ Wright made

the point that the visual material for the book preempted another volume he was planning, “the writing already writ.”³⁰ Format, photograph selection, and layout were other difficulties never adequately resolved to Wright’s liking. As late as December 1941 Wright’s concern was expressed about the photographs: “the buildings should wear their natural dress and countenance, not be left naked to shiver in the cold and dreary.” As far as he was concerned “a hash” had been made of his material and some “of the best” had been omitted.³¹ Royalties were another problem finally satisfied by Hitchcock, Wright, and Duell after some hassles in the months of 1941. *In the Nature of Materials* was released in 1942.

It is obvious from the text and various captions, as from the history of the book outlined here, that Wright was equally involved. Hitchcock recognized this fact not on the title page but in the acknowledgments where he admitted that Wright was “almost” a coauthor: it was also close to a disclaimer.

From 24 January to 3 March 1940 an exhibition of Wright’s architecture had been held at the Institute of Modern Art in Boston. A supplement to that exhibition was the Institute’s publication *Frank Lloyd Wright: A Pictorial Record of Architectural Progress*. It is obvious that this show was increased in size to form the Museum of Modern Art exhibition of 1940–41. It is also obvious that the Boston Institute’s book was the predecessor to and inspiration for *In the Nature of Materials*. In early 1941 Hitchcock reviewed the Wright exhibition at MoMA in a style typical of his pendant wanderings. As well, he mentioned that the book *In the Nature* was under way and apologized for the inadequate presentation of Wright in MoMA’s 1932 exhibition for which Hitchcock wrote the catalogue text related to Wright. (Hitchcock’s excuse for the inadequacies suggest it was probably his own text for which he was apologetic.)³²

Openly and publicly, in fact on the back of the dust jacket to the 1943 edition of his autobiography, Wright made two points. First, that the “writings gathered by Fritz Gutheim for ON ARCHITECTURE” formed the “first book in the three-volume series, on my work.” And second, that the exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York contained “the best I’ve built from 1893 to 1940 and at last it was put in order by able Henry-Russell Hitchcock. His opinions on architecture I have distrusted as being far too academic, but since it is safer to trust one’s point of view to one’s enemies than to one’s friends, I asked him to record the show.” Wright seems still to have been irritated by Hitchcock’s rather pristine nonarchitectural view of architecture and his distortion if not misunderstanding of Wright’s historical role. Having committed himself to the two books that were to be prepared by others, Wright found it difficult to extract himself from obligations not only to

Duell but to himself. In spite of the fact that he did not get his way on many issues or disagreed with much that had been inserted or ignored by Gutheim and Hitchcock, he could see the value of these books to his career; to the spread of his philosophy concerning architecture, cities, and America; and to his immortality, so to speak.

Through all the problems of the books edited by Gutheim and Hitchcock, the *first* proposal put by Wright to Duell, that of the autobiography, remained in pieces in galley or manuscript form for a year after *In the Nature of Materials* was released. Finally the anticipated second and enlarged edition of *An Autobiography* was launched in 1943. A chapter about Broadacre City had been rejected by Duell who probably sensed that Wright might never stop writing about himself. The first edition was self-aggrandizing; this second edition tended to be hubristic. It exposed the culmination of Wright's personality during the 1930s.

Of the many reviews of both the 1932 and 1943 editions perhaps the most perceptive yet charming, if there is such a criteria for a book review, was that by Sheldon Cheney in *The Saturday Review of Literature* in 1932. Here are some extracts:

America's most creative rebel sets down, somewhere within the confused beauty of this book, the comment that "man's struggle to illumine creation is another tragedy." . . . But the undercurrent of tragedy is not in any failure of the writer to illumine creation, it is revealed in the situation of an original and prophetic artist—and a man attempting to be truly free—struggling against the drag of orthodoxy and ignorance in a shopkeeping and belly-filling civilization. . . . It is the vague "they" of the architectural profession and of the conformist public: the cultured importers of alien architectural knick-knacks, actively hostile to creative innovation, and the "moral" public that feeds its passion for a standard respectability upon sensational "news" reports of non-conformist living. "They" have made for tragedy in Wright's life. . . . But there is hope for mankind in this: the creative rebel rises in the end, with indomitable spirit, with sense of humor about his own wayside failures, with integrity unimpaired, painting a clear picture of the Utopian society that may yet be, if Truth prevail. . . . It not only is the story of a man, bravely and beautifully told; rather it illumines an art in an incomparable way, from the creator's consciousness. It also is a revelation of the sicknesses of civilization.³³

The autobiography had a good longevity. The first printing of the first edition was probably of about 500 copies; the 1933 and 1938 reprints of no more than 2,000 each. The first printing of the 1943 edition was a run of probably 3,000, but by September 1962 it had gone through an eighth printing. By far the largest printing was that of March 1957 which was selected by the

United States Information Service as “one of a collection of 350 books about the United States of America” sent to many city, state, or public libraries in many countries of the world. For example, almost all copies in Australian libraries are of the 1943 edition donated by the Carnegie Corporation in 1957 through the USIS.

Interestingly a far more useful reset production of the second edition was published in London by Faber and Faber with a contract signed as early as November 1943. The first printing of 3,000 copies was in September 1945 (with Hyperion Press), a second impression in 1946, and a third of 2,000 copies on 20 March 1947 (without Hyperion). It was more useful because of size (octavo), format, the type selected, and especially for the inclusion of many photographs of family and buildings. (These illustrations may have been allowed, so to speak, since the book *In the Nature of Materials* with its many pictures was not published in Britain.) The Faber edition did not go out of print until May 1959.³⁴ Perhaps 30,000 copies of the various editions of the autobiography had been sold by about 1960. A new edition of *In the Nature of Materials* was planned as early as 1951 and in that year Wright gave Bruno Zevi “full authority” for an Italian translation of the autobiography of 1943.³⁵ If one includes French and Italian (*Io e L’Architettura*) editions of 1955, another 4,000 or so might be added by 1970. Indeed, Wright’s second coming can be declared successful if measured only by the sales of his autobiography.

All of the above emphasizes that beginning around 1930, in Wright’s mind it was important to gain some good, solid public attention of virtually any sort. If his friends had not bailed him out with Wright Inc. he would have been nearly destitute save for the farm (actually inherited from his mother’s family) that he called Taliesin. Their financial assistance had to be repaid; he needed work. But architectural commissions were not forthcoming, at least not immediately. Therefore he had to find other means to obtain money. Royalties earned from writing were important and continued to be so for two decades; so too giving speeches. Since he charged for the loan of his artifacts, there was good publicity if little money in exhibitions. And there was the Taliesin Fellowship.

4 Fellowship

For decades Wright had thought about establishing a school presumably under his guidance and tutelage. In 1900 he spoke of the need for an “experiment station,” inferring some kind of crafts school. In 1908 and 1910 he wrote that a design center was needed, and now and then the idea inserted itself into a text at the proper moment. Finally in 1928, free of a rather hateful ex-wife, able