Praise for Walter Fuller

Winnington’s highly readable and carefully researched biography rescues from historical neglect both an intelligent, creative, versatile, and appealing figure, the well-connected yet self-effacing Walter Fuller, and his no-less-remarkable sisters. It also sheds fascinating light on a surprising variety of networks – those of student politics, journalism, theatre, musical performance, peace activism, socialist campaigning, and radio broadcasting – on both sides of the Atlantic during the first three decades of the twentieth century.

Martin Ceadel, Professor of Politics, University of Oxford

Walter Fuller, though too little known today, left an indelible mark on the twentieth-century Atlantic world. We are fortunate indeed to have Peter Winnington’s biography.

John Fabian Witt
Allen H. Duffy Class of 1960 Professor of Law, Yale Law School
Walter Fuller
the man who had ideas

G. Peter Winnington

The Letterworth Press
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Not in a lifetime could I have carried out this research without Google’s search engine and the detailed finding aids to archived documents that libraries that have posted on the internet. (Britain lags behind both in preserving such documents and publishing indexes to them. More than once I was obliged to travel to England, or pay someone on the spot, simply to con-

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Further images relevant to this book, and most of Walter Fuller’s signed writings, will be found on the dedicated page of the publisher’s website

http://www.TheLetterworthPress.org/WalterFuller/index.html
sult an index or a list.) I am also grateful to the persons and institutions who have generously shared family histories, letters, and photographs by posting them on the net.

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* One English library sent me a batch of photocopies so pale that at first I took them for blank paper. They refused to make a second attempt at copying them. ‘The originals are in pencil,’ they protested, as though copying machines could not be adjusted for contrast. Nor would they agree to a refund when I invoked the Sale of Goods Act, unreadable copies being clearly not ‘fit for purpose’. That said, I should mention the kind librarian in Portsmouth who used his mobile phone to photograph documents that he was otherwise unable to copy.
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Introduction

One cannot place one’s hand on what Walter Fuller did; but one cherishes deeply all that he was; and one knows that deeds and achievements scatter like dust, whilst such a life leaves a permanent trace on every person it has touched.¹ New Republic

Walter Fuller’s life went largely unrecorded; his name is unknown today. Yet what he did helped shape the world we live in. So this biography attempts to tell the story of his life, gathering up some of that long-dispersed dust, recording his deeds and achievements, and tracing some of the people he touched, in order to cherish anew all that he was.

His first achievement came at the end of his university studies: in 1904, he convened the first national assembly of British student councils, a stepping-stone on the road to the National Union of Students. In 1911, after editing periodicals in London for several years, he took three of his sisters to sing folksongs in New York, launching the revival that was to transform popular music in the twentieth century. When the Great War broke out in Europe, Americans looked on aghast. Numerous peace groups sought to prevent their country from joining the conflict. Walter supported them by introducing anti-war songs for his sisters to sing – the modern protest song – and by conceiving in 1916 a large anti-war exhibition that was shown in New York and other cities around the Union. In so doing, he pioneered in the art of propaganda. He edited small periodicals that denounced the suppression of civil rights and the appalling treatment of conscientious objectors.

After the war was over, he made New York’s Freeman ‘the best written and most brilliantly edited of the weeklies of protest,’ characterized by its ‘wit and vigor and lucidity.’² Then he returned to England, where he was recruited in the mid-1920s by the fledgling BBC for his ideas about the potential of broadcasting. There he developed the concept of the corporate image, which has had a lasting impact on how the BBC is perceived through-
out the world. After a brief stint directing the London (2LO) and Daventry (5XX) stations, he was chosen to edit the BBC’s flagship publication, Radio Times, to which he gave a form that lasted fifty years. These achievements went generally unrecognized, largely because Walter maintained a low profile throughout his life. His obituary in The Times makes little mention of his years in the United States. Instead, it underlines how Walter Fuller belonged to the days of anonymous journalism. Few men can have handled more of the writings of others and, in his editorial capacity, have exercised more influence upon the ideas that the public receive, and yet have remained personally so little known. People who themselves were engaged in creative work of all sorts – writing, painting, designing, education, and all such forms of endeavour – knew him and respected the keen interest and comprehension that he possessed for all their spheres of activity, but he himself never published a book, and his own name hardly ever appeared in print. And when his name did appear in print, he seems to have told almost no one, so that his work colleagues and even his family remained unaware of his writing. While researching this book, I identified him as ‘John Wessex’, the author of A Masque of the Seasons (1911), and tracked down letters and articles that he contributed to periodicals. They proved too numerous for an appendix, so they are posted separately on the website that accompanies this book, http://www.TheLetterworthPress.org/WalterFuller/index.html. Seeking what Walter Fuller wrote or edited has resulted in some surprises. One closely kept secret concerns the periodical, Four Lights, which was issued during 1917 by the New York branch of the Woman’s Peace Party. Until now it has been celebrated as a exceptional magazine written and edited entirely by women. I have come to the iconoclastic conclusion that it was actually edited – and largely written – by Walter Fuller. Besides modesty, Walter had another reason for not trumpeting his name. Throughout WWI, when he was living in the United States, he was a peace activist. From the moment that country entered the war, his activities were branded as sedition or treason; he risked a heavy fine and long years in prison. Yet he discreetly imported from Britain something that Americans have come to prize very highly: the concept of civil liberties. Ever since then, it has been – along with the older notion of civil rights – the most important principle for the protection of US citizens. It is upheld by the American Civil Liberties Union, which Walter’s wife Crystal Eastman created with Roger Baldwin. The need for it today is as great as ever. The sub-title of this book – ‘the man who had ideas’ – suggests another reason why Walter’s name has remained unknown. Ideas carry no signature; once they are passed on, the identity of their originator is lost. Walter was ‘always brimming with ideas, pulling them forth like newborn rabbits from his hat,’ and he shared them liberally. ‘I suffer from ideas,’ he complained. One of his sisters noticed that his forehead even seemed to bulge with them. And he invariably had them well in advance of his time. Walter got on well with people, and they found him kind, loyal, tender, generous (to a fault), and witty. For Llewellyn Powys, ‘he had a heart of pure gold.’ (Has any other editor ever been qualified like this by one of his authors?) He was good at bringing people together. He introduced Van Wyck Brooks to Lewis Mumford, and the resulting literary friendship spanned four decades. He introduced the photographer Francis Bruguère to Lance Sieveking, the script editor and writer of the unique high modernist radio play, Kaleidoscope (1928), and they collaborated on avant garde art works. Walter’s personal qualities – and his ideas – captivated Crystal Eastman, a leading pacifist-feminist-socialist lawyer of the day in America – she co-authored the Equal Rights Amendment, for example. Her colourful reputation has overshadowed Walter’s. When the history books mention him, he is identified simply as her second husband, a poet, or an artist. Although he sometimes penned a little ditty to entertain his sisters,* he was by no means a poet. Nor did he draw or paint – but he had the soul and creative imagination of an artist. Along with altruism, the words that characterize his life are imagination and enthusiasm. This biography brings him out of the shadows. Walter’s life was intimately linked with the lives of his four younger sisters. He was their confidant, counsellor, coach, and critic, and for several years, during which he directed their singing in the United States, he was financially responsible for them. His philosophy contributed to their outlook on life, and the fifty-year stage career of his third sister, Rosalind, was one of its fruits. So in this account their stories are intermingled with his. Telling these stories brings in a great many other people; a profusion of famous and not so famous figures – artists, writers, poets, actors, editors, and

* Crossing the Atlantic in January 1913 with three of his sisters, Walter added a verse to John Masefield’s famous poem, ‘Cargoes’:

Great German liners, ploughing the Atlantic,
Caring less than nothing for the rough sea rollers;
With a cargo of millionaires, stewards,
Emigrants, European riff-raff, and four sick Fullers.
musicians – flit across the pages. Rest assured, though: if a person receives more than passing notice, you can be certain that they will return later in the book, revealing unfamiliar (and sometimes previously unrecorded) aspects of their lives. President Woodrow Wilson makes several personal appearances, along with his wife and daughters. The Right Honourable the Earl Russell never plays a leading part in the story, yet he manages to look in (as plain Bertrand Russell) in almost every chapter. Among the less famous names there is Jessie Holliday, whose portraits of leading socialists hang in the National Portrait Gallery in London, and her friend Kathleen Wheeler, the English sculptress who portrayed famous people and famous horses with equal skill. Here you will find more about them than in any other book. You will also discover that for many years the most respectable Sir Norman Angell, winner of the 1932 Nobel Peace Prize, enjoyed sex with Walter’s sister Rosalind and denied it – ‘cross my heart’ – in his autobiography. Scott Fitzgerald had an affair with her during his engagement to Zelda; in fact, she inspired him with the story that financed his wedding. Here too you will learn how John Barrymore, playing Hamlet on Broadway, communicated to Ophelia that he wanted to make love with her after the show. And on it goes: Virginia Woolf mis-spells a person’s name; T.S. Eliot gets stuck in the mud; Charlie Chaplin plays charades; and Cecil Sharp discovers three ‘ludicrously lovely’ girls – Walter’s sisters, of course – who can sing folksongs better than anyone else.

All these people link up in hitherto unsuspected ways. For instance, in 1918 Bertrand Russell encouraged Rosalind to practise free love. Soon afterwards she was enjoying sex with the man who twelve years later fathered two children by Russell’s wife Dora, precipitating their scandalous divorce. At the heart of this fascinating network of interconnected relationships, we find Walter and his sisters.

The many books, letters, archival documents and manuscripts† that I consulted are listed at the end of the book. Additional information is placed at the foot of the page, to be read or not, as you please.

Mauborget, March 2014

* She adopted it as her way of life: ‘free love is better than marriage,’ she told The Times in 1968.

† Unpublished documents have been left largely as written, rather than editorially improved. In quotations, the original British or American spelling has been retained, so both forms will be found. (Walter sometimes used US spellings in his letters to Crystal.)